

Abigail's Journey:

A Sequel to Journey of the Heart

A Love Story

by Judith Bronte

Abigail Johannes wasn't interested in romance. Jake Murphy couldn't stand physical contact. They were perfect for each other.

New beginnings aren't easy, but no one knows that better than Jake Murphy. When he rents the Johanneses' empty yellow house in Three Mile Bay, he struggles to overcome a painful past and begin a new life outside the prison walls he had known for so long.

Abigail Johanneses' future is secure-- or so she had thought. With the prospect of marriage to a childhood friend and the opportunity to attend college, her life seems already determined. Then the new neighbor arrives, and Abby finds she must learn compassion. As she befriends Jake, she wonders where her future really lies.

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Chapter One

A New Journey Begins

"All thy children shall be taught of the LORD; and great shall be the peace of thy children."
~ Isaiah 54:13 ~

Eleven years after John and Izumi Johanneses' journey of the heart, their daughter, Abigail, was now poised to set off on a journey of her own. At eighteen, Abigail was the image of her mother. She had Izumi's deep blue eyes and raven black hair. However, unlike Izumi, Abigail had a loving and secure childhood, so her temperament was considerably more confident than her mother's ever was. It was proof of the loving atmosphere that John and Izumi had cultivated in their nineteen years of marriage.

John and Izumi's love for each other, tended by God's loving hand, had only grown stronger and deeper through the years. Their happily-ever-after love, was playing out in simple, everyday life, proving that romance doesn't end after the "I do's"; when two people become one, it's only the beginning of the story-- not the end.

"John!" laughed Izumi, running from the living room, "Stop it!"

John chased his wife into the kitchen and caught her by the waist. From her bedroom, Abigail could hear the playful laughter coming from the kitchen. The teenager rolled her eyes. When were her parents going to act like adults?

Abigail's graduation had just taken place a week earlier. Both parents had proudly attended the ceremony, each taking enough photographs and video footage of her graduation to embarrass even the most devoted child. Now that she had completed high school, her parents expected her to go to a Christian college. Abigail, however, was unsure if college was in her future. She had long planned to continue her education, but when it actually came time, Abigail was unsure. Much to the annoyance of John, she couldn't explain her feelings. Abigail didn't know it, but the Holy Spirit had given her a small still voice that told her to wait.

With a sigh, Abigail tossed her year book into a box, along with the memorabilia her parents had accumulated of her graduation, and unceremoniously shoved it beneath her bed. She needed to think.

Never one to need an excuse to go fishing, Abigail grabbed her fly rod. After donning her fishing waistcoat, sunglasses, and favorite green baseball cap, she stepped outside and walked down to the shoreline, which was less than half a mile from her front door. A cool lake breeze played in

her hair as she took off her sandals and waded into the fresh water of Three Mile Bay. Even though the constant breezes frequently played with her fly line, Abigail reminded herself that at least it kept the mosquitos away. The warm June sun had also enticed others outside to do some fishing-- mostly tourists who wanted to spend their vacation at one of the largest freshwater bays in the world.

Abigail loved the waterfront house that her great grandparents had left her mother, and she loved Three Mile Bay, in Upstate New York. But, most of all, she loved to fly fish! She could often be found on the beach, standing knee deep in water, her fly rod in one hand, her slack line in the other, all the while her lips moving to the music her iPod afforded. To Abigail, this was the closest thing to heaven on earth.

While John's ancestors had been boat builders and fishermen by trade, the fishing gene had bypassed him altogether, and gone straight to his daughter. Izumi could not understand the attraction her only child had to the pastime, but like a good mother, she was happy that Abigail was happy.

The fishing gene in Abigail had had some help, however, in the form of Terry Davis, John's long time friend and Abigail's unofficial uncle. Terry had taught her the basics of fly fishing, and had instilled in her a healthy respect for the rugged beauty of her surroundings.

"God's creation is a wonderful thing, Abby," Terry would often say. "Just think, He only took six days to create all this!"

While Abigail's interest had made her popular with the boys, most girls her own age had a difficult time relating to a girl who could talk for hours on end about fly lures. Because of this, Abigail's closest female friend was her own mother.

Today, Abigail, or Abby, as most people called her, found a different solace in her fishing than usual. She needed to relax and do some serious thinking. Her education wasn't the only thing confronting her. Tyler Greene, a boy she had known her entire life, was going to take her out that evening. Abby's womanly intuition had guessed that he was about to ask her to marry him.

"Dad would love that," she thought, aloud.

"Abby!" called Izumi from the house screen door, "Tyler is going to be here soon! Shouldn't you be getting ready?"

"Just five more minutes!" negotiated Abby, flicking her line to a new spot in the water, where she thought she saw some activity.

"Tyler is a good man," reasoned Abby. "He's a Christian, comes from a solid family, is reasonably good looking, and has a promising future. Why, then, don't I love him? What's *wrong* with me?"

As these troubling thoughts flooded her mind, a gentle breeze from heaven whispered in her ear, "Wait."

The minutes flew by, and now it was John's voice calling to her across the beach,

"Abby! Tyler is here!"

"I'm coming!" shouted Abby, reeling in her line.

She put on her sandals and walked back to the house, her fishing pole casually swung across one shoulder.

"Are you ready?" greeted Tyler, coming out to meet her.

"Sorry, Tyler," answered Abby, "I know I'm late. Just give me ten minutes."

"All right," allowed Tyler, "but don't drag your feet. Dad's expecting us to be there on time!"

Tyler's father had generously invited them to an "interesting" lecture about the importance of meaningful fiscal reform in the banking industry. Except for the imminent marriage proposal from Tyler, it looked to be a dull night out.

Ten minutes later, Abby was ready. The early evening sky was already changing hues as she and Tyler got into the car and drove away.

"I think he's going to ask her, tonight!" John exclaimed to Izumi, as they walked back inside from seeing the couple off.

"How do you know that?" asked Izumi, startled by this news.

"Didn't you see how Tyler kept nervously checking his pocket, as if he was making sure the ring was still there?" asked John.

"No, I didn't," replied Izumi.

"You don't sound as though you approve," observed John, recognizing a look of cautious hesitation in his mate.

"In the past, I've thought Abby and Tyler would make a perfect match, but, now..." Izumi paused. "What makes you so sure Tyler's the one for our Abby?" asked Izumi.

"Well," replied John, "everything points to him. They've known each other all their lives, they're both Christians, and all four of their parents want this to happen!" he added with a triumphant smile. John drew Izumi close to him. "I know they'll be as happy as we are, Little Dove."

Izumi returned her husband's loving kiss, but something inside her wanted to run after Tyler's car and stop him from proposing.

"Abby's education and future husband are already laid out for her," said John. "All she has to do is go out and meet it."

Just then, there was a knock on the front door of the Johannes home. When John answered it, he was greeted by Sheriff Peterson.

"Sorry to intrude on your evening, John," said Sheriff Peterson, "but I was wondering if I could have a word with you outside."

"Is Abby all right?" asked Izumi, suddenly becoming concerned.

"As far as I know, Ma'am," smiled the Sheriff. "This is about another matter, altogether."

John put on his jacket, kissed Izumi, and stepped outside with the Sheriff.

"What is it, Henry?" asked John, puzzled by his friend's strange behavior.

"Do you remember hearing me talk of Richard Doyle?" asked the Sheriff.

"The warden of the state penitentiary in Watertown?" replied John.

"The very one, Sir," affirmed Henry. "Well, Richard, I mean Dick, called me up yesterday and told me about this inmate he's been helping for about two years. His name is Jake Murphy and he's going to be paroled early next week. Jake doesn't have anyone on the outside, so Dick has been trying to find him a job and a place to stay." Here the Sheriff hesitated, as if trying to choose his words carefully.

John stiffened, sensing something hard was about to be asked of him.

"The thing is," continued Henry, "with a record like Jake's, he doesn't stand a chance on the outside, without someone to kind of help him along. That's where I come in. So far, I've been able to find him a job as a janitor at the Old Mill Camp Ground, but I haven't been able to find him any place to stay. I was wondering if Jake might be able to rent the little yellow house from you-- you know, the one you used to live in before you married."

"What was Jake convicted of?" asked John.

"Second-degree murder."

"It's out of the question!" exclaimed John. "I can't have someone like that living right next to us!"

"Well, now," said the Sheriff, "I can understand that-- I really can. But this is what you might call, a *special* circumstance."

Then the Sheriff began to relate the history of Jake, or the amount that Warden Doyle had told him of, and how Jake and the prison warden had become friends.

Beginning at the tender age of four, Jake Murphy's father raped and tortured his son. The Sheriff didn't give any more detail on that point, for he didn't know any more. At twelve, Jake ran away from home and lived with his grandmother. When Jake turned fifteen, he returned to his father's house, and waited outside in the bushes for him to come home. Jake was carrying a sharp kitchen knife from his grandmother's house. You see, he intended to kill his father.

When the father returned home and found his son there, a fight of words and fists ensued, which at last resulted in the death of Mr. Murphy. According to Jake, he had changed his mind at the last moment, and had only finally struck out at his father to save his own life. The District Attorney, however, didn't see it that way. Because the knife had come from Jake's grandmother's house, and not his father's, the District Attorney argued that this was evidence of premeditated murder. Jake's attorney argued that it had been self-defense. The D.A. said there was a witness-- an old woman across the street who saw the whole thing. When it was proved in the D.A.'s office that her eyesight wasn't everything she had said it was, the D.A. offered Jake a plea-bargain of second-degree murder, instead of the first degree charge that he had originally wanted. Seeing little choice, Jake accepted. He was tried as an adult and sentenced to sixteen years in an adult state penitentiary.

"John," continued the Sheriff, "seven years into his sentence, Jake attempted suicide. Soon after, Dick became warden. He took an interest in Jake and witnessed to him. When he accepted

Christ, Dick said there was a noticeable change in him. Now I come to the present. Jake's been in the state penitentiary for nine years, and he's up for parole. Since Dick was willing to recommend his release, they're going to let him out on parole next Monday. Like I said before, I was able to find him a job as a janitor at the Old Mill Camp Ground, but for the life of me, I just can't find anyone willing to rent an ex-con a place to stay. Three Mile Bay is determined *not* to help Jake Murphy, and that's a fact! John, if you could see your way to let him rent the little yellow house, it surely would help."

John sighed heavily. After hearing the story, he had to admit that it *did* sound like a special circumstance.

"I have to talk it over with Izumi," said John. "If you'll wait here, Henry, I think we can give you an answer, shortly."

John went inside the house and related the sad story to his wife.

"Jake reminds me of someone we know," observed Izumi, thoughtfully.

"I know, I thought of Terry, also," agreed John. "Though, Terry never had it *that* bad. Thank God!"

"That's because God made the two of you friends," smiled Izumi, lovingly. "It's all right with me, John. I think, though, that we need to keep him away from our Abby, until we're sure of his character. Christian or not, he's been in an adult state penitentiary for nine years."

"I agree," affirmed John.

After the couple prayed and asked God to bless them and the guest that He had so Providentially placed in their way to help, John went outside and told Henry their decision.

Upon hearing the news, the Sheriff clapped John on the back.

"Now, what do you want for rent?" asked the Sheriff.

"Henry, we're not in this for the money," smiled John.

"No more than I," grinned the Sheriff. "But, I don't think it's wise to outright give him the rent for free. The idea is to make him independent-- if not in fact, then in technicality. How about ten dollars a week? Though, I know rent for a nice little house like that would go for considerably more."

"That's fine with me," replied John. "We'll get it ready for him. I'll have to turn on the gas and electricity, and make sure the major appliances are working."

"I'm sure he'll appreciate it," said the Sheriff.

"You said Jake was fifteen when he was incarcerated?" asked John, thoughtfully. "Plus nine years in prison... that makes him about twenty-four, doesn't it?"

"I believe it does," replied the Sheriff. "Why do you ask?"

"Izumi and I aren't comfortable with the idea of letting Jake be around our Abby-- at least, not immediately."

"I'll make sure Jake understands," said the Sheriff. "I almost forgot, there is one thing you should know."

"What's that?" asked John.

"Jake doesn't like to be touched," related the Sheriff. "Dick says he's just getting used to shaking hands, but it's possible he could act a little violent to any other physical contact."

"I see," said John, gravely.

"Don't get me wrong," said the Sheriff. "Jake doesn't have a history of violence... except for the one conviction, of course. What I *mean* is, he isn't a trouble maker. And, he'll be going to therapy two times a week. If he doesn't attend, it'll be in violation of his parole, and he *could* be sent back to prison. I realize it's asking a lot, but does your offer still stand?"

With an uneasy groan, John shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"Our Abby's going to be engaged soon," he reasoned. "So, she won't be around the house as much in the future. Terry will be back from the business trip in Hong Kong, early next week. Since he and I work from home, Izumi won't be by herself. After taking everything into consideration, I suppose it's still all right for him to come. But, Henry, I want you to tell him, that if he does *anything* to threaten or hurt my family, so help me, I'll turn him out of that house, myself!"

"I'll make sure Jake understands," repeated the Sheriff, turning to leave. "All he needs is a chance, John."

"I'm willing to give him one," said John.

"God bless you folks for your willingness," said the Sheriff, shaking John's hand and getting back into his pickup, for he had made this errand while on his own time, and not while he was on duty.

Just as the Sheriff's vehicle was pulling away, Tyler's car drove up to the Johannes house. He got out and opened Abby's door for her.

"Did you two have a good time, tonight?" greeted John, expectantly.

Abby got out of the car and walked to where her father stood. She turned and waved good-bye to Tyler, as if asking him not to hang around. Taking the hint, Tyler got back into his car and drove away.

"Well," smiled John, "do you have anything to tell your father?"

"How did you know that Tyler proposed?" asked Abby, in astonishment.

John hurried his daughter into the house.

"Izumi! He did it! Tyler asked Abby to marry him!" cried John, happily.

Izumi came into the room with a sober face.

"Just wait till I call Terry!" said John, running to the telephone.

"You'd better put down the phone, Dear," warned Izumi. "I think you're a little premature."

"What do you mean?" asked John, the telephone receiver still in his hand.

"Look at her face," advised Izumi.

For the first time since she had come home, John took a good look into Abby's face. Her subdued demeanor made his heart fall to his toes.

"You didn't accept him, did you?" asked John.

"I told Tyler I had to think about it," replied Abby, quietly.

John hung up the phone. Izumi walked over to her daughter and lovingly put her arms around her. Seeing his two girls side by side, John had to smile, in spite of his disappointment. They looked so much alike.

"Well," he sighed, "at least you didn't turn him down. But, I don't understand, why do you need to think about it?"

"Please, Dad," asked Abby, "give me time to think. I need to know my own heart better."

Abby turned to go to her room.

"Sweetheart," said Izumi, touching Abby's hand, "don't marry him if you don't love him."

Prayerfully, Abby went to bed. She remembered the frankness in Tyler's face when he asked her to become his wife. Her heart had skipped a beat, when he had said the words, "I love you."

"But," she wondered to herself, "do I love *him*?"

"Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts... and lead me."
~ Psalms 139:23, 24 ~

"The curse of the LORD is in the house of the wicked: but he blesseth the habitation of the just."
~ Proverbs 3:33 ~

Chapter Two

Jake

"I [the Lord] was a stranger, and ye took Me in... I was in prison, and ye came unto Me... Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me."

~ Matthew 25:35, 36, 40 ~

The next morning, Abby woke up to the sound of activity coming from the kitchen. Groggily, she turned over in bed and squinted at the clock on her nightstand. Seeing that she had slept in, Abby put on her robe and went to the kitchen.

There, she found John holding a medium sized cardboard box, while Izumi was collecting things to stick into it.

"Plates, cups, utensils, paper towels," said Izumi, verbalizing her list out loud. "Shampoo, toilet paper, soap... am I missing anything, Dear?" she asked John.

"You have everything in here but the kitchen sink," he laughed.

"I just want to make sure he'll have everything he needs," remarked Izumi, seriously.

"*Who'll* have everything he needs?" asked Abby with a yawn.

"Good morning, Sweetheart," greeted John, shifting his load to the other arm. "Your mother and I are letting someone rent the little yellow house."

"But," protested Abby, now fully wide awake, "I thought you said I could turn it into a studio!"

"Someone else needs the house more than you do," said Izumi. "Maybe you could set up your easel in the living room," she suggested.

"I suppose so," sighed Abby, disappointedly. "Who am I losing out to?" she inquired, fixing herself a bowl of cereal.

"His name is Jake Murphy," said John. "When he arrives here next Monday, your Mom and I want you to leave him alone."

"Why?" asked Abby, munching her cereal.

"Jake has spent the last nine years in the state penitentiary," answered John, soberly.

Abby choked on her breakfast.

"You mean, an *ex-convict*?" she exclaimed, disbelievingly.

"He'll be out on parole," explained Izumi, placing a handful of clean dishcloths into the box.

"What did he do... rob a bank?" asked Abby.

"He killed his father," replied John.

Abby sank into a kitchen chair and buried her face in her hands. She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"You're going to let a murderer rent our sweet little yellow house?!" she cried.

"To be fair, it sounded like it was self-defense," added John.

"And Sheriff Peterson said that Jake became a Christian while in prison," said Izumi, consolingly.

"Mom," argued Abby, "that kind of person will say *anything* to get out!"

"Hold on, Abby," said John, putting the box down on the table. "You don't know this man. Give him a chance to prove himself before calling him a liar. The Sheriff said Jake was raped and tortured from the age of four to twelve. Not many people have given him a chance, but this family will! After your mother and I have gotten to know him, we expect you to treat him like you would want to be treated."

"Raped *and* tortured?" repeated Abby, with a shudder. "He sounds creepy!"

"What did I just tell you?" asked John, patiently.

"I'll be nice to him, Dad," replied Abby, reluctantly. "I hope for your sake, he doesn't turn out to be a faker."

"For my sake," answered John, "I hope so, too."

"I've never met anyone who was tortured," mused Abby. She was about to wonder *how* Jake was tortured, but suddenly changed her mind. She didn't want to know. The whole thing made her feel uncomfortable. The little yellow house wasn't far from their own house. To have a man like that, living right next door to them-- the very thought troubled Abby.

"We're going over to get the house ready for Jake," said Izumi, putting a pan into the box. "Do you want to come?"

Abby hesitated. Her parents were too kind for their own good; someone had to look out for them.

"Sure," said Abby.

The key turned in the door of the little yellow house. John swung open the door and brushed aside the cobwebs.

"It's been a long time," said Izumi, following John and Abby inside.

"If I remember correctly," said John, thoughtfully, "Abby was two when we moved to the other house."

"It seems like it was only yesterday," sighed Izumi, accepting a hug from her husband. "Remember how Abby loved to sit by that window and watch the bay?"

"And when I picked her up, she would coo like a little dove," reminisced John.

"Okay, okay," groaned Abby, "after you're both done going down memory lane, we *do* have work to do."

"I also remember," sighed John with a small groan of his own, "how our Abby always fidgeted and wanted to be put down when you tried to hug her."

"I couldn't cuddle her, unless she was worn out," smiled Izumi.

The floors were swept and mopped; the windows were washed and the faded curtains were replaced with new handmade ones Izumi had sewn. The carpets were vacuumed and the bathroom was completely scrubbed clean. John and Izumi's old bedroom was to be Jake's room. Abby put clean sheets on the bed and set a pile of comforters in the closet, for in the winter, Three Mile Bay averaged a low of 8.2 degrees. However, it was June, and Abby hoped that their "guest" wasn't going to stay long enough to need the winter blankets.

The utilities were turned on, and the appliances were found to still be in working order. All old personal belongings were packed into boxes and put into storage. After John repaired the swing in the enclosed porch, he and Izumi sat down on it to take a small rest.

"I remember," mused John, an arm around his wife, "sitting here after I had taken you home that second night. When I saw my Little Dove come running up to the house, I knew I was going to marry you."

He kissed Izumi as they nestled together, the swing creaking as they gently rocked back and forth.

"Don't you two ever stop?" laughed Abby, coming out of the house and into the enclosed porch where her parents were hiding.

"Just wait until you and Tyler are married," replied John, "*then* you'll sing a different tune."

Abby wrinkled her nose in aversion at the thought.

"The tulips in front of the porch died a long time ago," she pointed out, trying to change the subject.

"I loved those flowers," sighed Izumi, leaning her head on John's shoulder.

"I have an idea," suggested John, with a twinkle in his eye, "why don't we go down to the nursery and pick up some tulips-- you know, white and yellow ones, like we used to have."

"I don't think the ex-con will care about flowers," laughed Abby.

"They're not for *him*, but for your *mother*," replied John, patiently.

"A thick bed of tulips," remembered Izumi. "Just like the old days! If I caught the breeze just right, I could smell them from my bedroom window."

"I have that room now," commented Abby.

"That's right, Sweetheart," smiled Izumi.

The Johannes family went to the nursery and bought up every full-grown white and yellow tulip they had. With tender loving care, the flower bed was soon restored to its original glory.

No matter how hard Abby dreaded Monday, it finally came. John and Izumi were excited about the prospect of their new neighbor, while Abby shook her head; they were obviously deluded people-- inviting a total stranger with a criminal record into the house next to theirs. What *were* they thinking?

"What time is he supposed to arrive?" asked Izumi, after she had cleared away the breakfast dishes.

"Henry said he'll bring Jake over as soon as his bus comes in," answered John. "I'd guess about late afternoon. What's all that noise coming from the living room?" he asked.

"Abby is setting up her studio," replied Izumi. "Remember, we told her that she could use the living room, since we gave the little house to Jake?"

"Oh, yeah," muttered John, wondering how much of the living room Abby was going to take up with her art supplies.

"Mom," called Abby from the next room, "where do you want me to put the coffee table?"

John let out an involuntary groan.

"This is our Abby's future career we're talking about," reminded Izumi.

"I'll put it in Jake's living room," volunteered John with a loving smile.

He carried the unwanted object to the little yellow house. By the time he came back, John found the living room had been transformed into an art studio. Abby had moved the couch that sat in front of the large bay window, and had set up her old easel there. The couch was now at the other end of the room, along with John's bookcase and Izumi's lighthouse lamp that Terry had given her for Christmas several years ago.

"Hi, Dad," smiled Abby, as John passed through the room, looking a little bewildered.

He shook his head and returned to the kitchen where Izumi was placing a pan of homemade cake into the oven.

"That'll taste good," smiled John.

"It's for our new neighbor," replied Izumi.

"I'm sure he'll like it," he sighed. "Well, I'm going to the office and catch up on some work before Terry arrives, tomorrow."

John and Terry's office was a converted bedroom down the main hall of the Johanneses' house. The two men had taken a lot of ribbing about the fact they worked from home. Their independent contractor computer consulting business had expanded over the years into developing software for bank systems and large corporations. Because of this, John and Terry often took turns flying to locations all over the world, to help set up the software and to train people in using it. As a matter of fact, John had first met Izumi while on a business trip to Japan. Now, Terry was in Hong Kong, counting down the days till he could return home to Three Mile Bay.

Abby sat down on her stool in front of the easel and began to sketch out a scene onto her canvas. Natural light shone through the window behind her, as she etched out the fluid lines of a heron. She gazed at the canvas, and then tossed aside her pencil. Abby was too distracted to concentrate on her work.

She glanced up at the clock. It wasn't even ten yet. Don't misunderstand, Abby wasn't eager for Jake to come, for she was as set against him as at the first. However, all of her preconceived notions of who ex-convicts were and what they were like, had not stopped her from being curious. As the minutes ticked by, she became restless. After she had eaten lunch, Abby donned her fishing gear and went outside to her favorite fishing spot to get her mind off of Jake.

She cast her line gently onto the water, without making any splashes that would scare away her quarry, and looked off into the horizon thoughtfully. Abby thought over what Tyler had told her when he met her at church on Sunday.

"Don't forget, I'm still waiting for my answer," he had said.

The sincere look in his eyes had confused Abby.

"Tyler can be so compelling, when he *wants* to be," sighed Abby, with a small laugh.

She expertly cast her fly line over her shoulder, while tugging at the slack at the appropriate time, to give her line more forward thrust-- a maneuver anglers call double hauling. After her fly landed several feet in front of her, Abby reeled in a little to tighten her line.

"It's getting rough," she observed to herself, seeing whitecaps breaking on the water in the distance.

A strong gust of wind blew into her mouth, temporarily robbing Abby of her breath. The gale began to pull at her long black hair, whipping it into her face. Just then, her line tugged as a smallmouth bass took the hook!

"Easy there," muttered Abby, adjusting the tension on her fly line.

Abby gently pulled on the line, nudging the fish in her direction. Slowly but deliberately, she reeled him in and scooped him up into her net. Abby deftly grabbed the fish, a wooden handle with a metal head, and swiftly dealt the fish a blow over the eyes, stunning it so it wouldn't feel anything when she finished it off with her knife.

All the while, the water was becoming more restless. As she finished cleaning her catch, a torrent of rain descended on the bay, pelting Abby with hard droplets of water. Collecting her gear, she made her way to the house just as the Sheriff's squad car pulled up. The window rolled down and Sheriff Peterson's familiar voice greeted her.

"I see you've had success, even in this weather," he said, seeing the cleaned fish she had wrapped in newspaper.

Abby grinned confidently.

"I don't discourage easily," she laughed.

"Tell your parents I've brought Jake," instructed the Sheriff.

Abby nodded and disappeared inside the house, not getting any glimpse of their new neighbor.

"Leave it to Abby to go fishing in weather like this," chuckled the Sheriff, rolling back up his car window.

"Who's she?" asked Jake.

"Who? Abby?" asked the Sheriff. "That was John and Izumi Johanneses' daughter-- the ones who are letting you rent their yellow house. Now remember, be *polite*," repeated the Sheriff. "They're good Christian folks."

"I'll remember," replied Jake, with a sharpness that he hadn't intended.

Years of prison life had molded his speech into what others would term, defiant. Even when that wasn't what he was feeling, his words came out the same way.

"Mom!" exclaimed Abby, breathlessly running into the kitchen where Izumi was preparing dinner.

"Abby!" Izumi cried in dismay, "how many times do I have to remind you to wipe your feet off before coming inside? Just look at my floor!"

"Sorry, Mom," said Abby, seeing the puddles she had tracked into the house. "It's raining outside."

"And yet, you still caught your fish," sighed Izumi, seeing the folded newspaper in her hand. Then she noticed Abby's clothes. "Sweetheart, you're soaking wet!"

"Mom," repeated Abby, "the Sheriff's out front with Jake!"

"I'll go tell your father," said Izumi, immediately taking off her apron and going to the office down the hall.

Abby stood there, stupidly dripping more water onto the floor, until her parents came down the hall and went to the front door.

"Sweetheart, go change into dry clothes," instructed Izumi, before John opened the door.

"But," protested Abby, "I want to see what he looks like!"

"Now!" ordered John.

Disappointed, Abby went to her room. From her bedroom, she heard the front door opening, and her parents asking the two to come inside from the rain. Abby could hear her parents company manners, as they exchanged hellos, and talked about the weather with Sheriff Peterson.

"Yeah," said John, "the jet stream is playing with our perfect weather. Summer is usually the quietest time of the year."

"That's a fact," agreed the Sheriff. "Well, if it's all right with you folks, I'd like to take Jake to the yellow house and get him settled in."

"I'll go with you," volunteered John. "I've had the utilities turned on..." here the voices trailed off until Abby heard the front door close, indicating that the men had left. Abby stuck her head out. Izumi was walking back to the kitchen.

"Well?" asked Abby, buttoning her blouse. "What was he like?"

"He barely said two words together, Sweetheart," replied Izumi. "From the little I saw of him, he seemed nice."

"I still think this wasn't a good idea," warned Abby.

"If Jake doesn't work out, you can tell everybody, 'I told you so,'" replied Izumi. "Although, I know you won't find any pleasure in saying it. Oh, my! I completely forgot to give Jake the housewarming cake I made for him."

"I'll take it over," volunteered Abby.

"Your father and I don't want you around Jake until we're more sure of his character," answered Izumi. "John can take it over to him, later."

Abby grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl on the kitchen table and returned to her easel in the living room. The rain continued to beat on the window pane, filtering Abby's natural light. Intent on carrying on with her work, she opened a tube of acrylic, her favorite painting medium, and mixed it with another color with her blending knife. As she glanced out the window, Abby caught sight of a small orange-red glow coming from inside the enclosed porch of the little yellow house. Curious, Abby set down her mixing knife and watched the small light go up and down, as if someone was smoking a cigarette.

"Sheriff Peterson doesn't smoke," muttered Abby. "That must be Jake."

After a few more puffs of smoke, Jake returned inside. Abby still hadn't gotten a good look at him. She had just returned to her painting, when John came through the door, dripping rain from his parka.

"Sweetheart," asked John, "would you please get me a towel?"

Abby got up from her stool and brought back a dry towel from the bathroom.

"Thanks," he said, taking it from her and drying off the puddle he had made on the floor. "It's really coming down outside."

Izumi entered the living room and stood beside Abby, both silently waiting to hear what, if anything, had happened.

"Well," began John, recognizing the girls' quiet plea for news, "that young man is going to have a hard time ahead of him."

"Why do you say that?" asked Izumi.

"Let me sit down first and take off my shoes," said John, going to the couch and pulling off his boots.

Abby returned to her art stool, while Izumi sat down next to her husband on the couch.

"God help those who are alone in this world," prayed John out loud. He leaned back and put an arm around his wife. "When I shook hands with Jake, I don't know if you noticed it Izumi, but I could feel his hand trembling, as if it took everything in him not to let go. And every time I looked at him squarely in the eyes, he'd turn away from me. Jake treated Henry the same way, so I guess it's nothing personal."

John paused thoughtfully before continuing.

"Jake had ONE bag-- all of his earthly possessions in one duffel bag. Henry and I went about the house, showing him where everything was at, and he could only nod, and mumble 'thank you.' At one point, Jake started shaking so much, that he had to go out on the porch and light up a cigarette. I tell you," predicted John, sadly, "if he lasts one month in Three Mile Bay, I'd be surprised."

Abby frowned, and returned to her painting. True, she wasn't exactly rooting for Jake, but she hated to hear the sounds of defeat even before the battle had begun.

"He that endureth to the end shall be saved."

~ Matthew 10:22 ~

"Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and He shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD."

~ Psalms 27:14 ~

Chapter Three

Old and New Friends

"A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother."

~ Proverbs 18:24 ~

Jake didn't come out of his house until it was time for him to walk to work at the Old Mill Camp Ground a few miles down the main road. Abby had wanted to watch from her bedroom window, to try and get a glimpse of his face as he went by, but Jake had surprised her by getting an early start, so she had missed him altogether.

Abby soon forgot the newcomer, however, for today was the day when Terry was to return from the Hong Kong business trip. The Johannes family drove down to the Watertown International Airport and greeted Terry as he walked toward them with his suitcases.

"Hi, John!" Terry exclaimed, shaking his best friend's hand, and then hugging him warmly.

"It's good to have you back, Terry!" said John. "Did you have a good flight?"

"Yup, but my arms sure got tired!" Terry laughed, wearily. "Have you been holding down the fort while I've been gone, Izzy?" he asked, giving Izumi a hug as well.

"The house hasn't been the same without you," smiled Izumi.

"Yeah," teased Abby, "it's been *quieter!*"

"Oh, it has, has it?!" exclaimed Terry, taking the brim of Abby's cap and playfully pulling it down over her eyes. "Catch any good fish lately?"

As the family walked out to the car, Abby related to Terry a near encounter with a large pike a few days back. Then, she suddenly remembered that she had news to tell.

"Uncle Terry," informed Abby, as they drove back to Three Mile Bay, "you'll never guess what Dad and Mom did! They rented our little yellow house to an ex-con from the state penitentiary!"

"When did his happen?" asked Terry, sitting up in surprise.

"He arrived yesterday," said Izumi. "His name is Jake Murphy, and he's a professing Christian."

"Can he fish?" was Terry's next question.

"I don't know," laughed John. Terry *would* think to ask that!

"That's not all," continued Abby, "he was in prison for second-degree murder for killing his father! Sheriff Peterson says Jake was raped and tortured by his father when he was a little boy."

Upon hearing this, Terry's face fell. He himself, had been raped by his step-father when he was a boy.

John gave Abby a disapproving look.

"Are you going to tell everyone, that?" asked John.

"It's only Uncle Terry," replied Abby.

"I don't mind you telling Terry," admonished John, "but, you've told at least three others, as well. I wish you would show more compassion, Abigail. How would you like it, if you had been the one who was raped, and someone went around informing others of the fact?"

Abby was quiet. She felt a small pang of guilt, but Jake *had* been convicted of second-degree murder! It wasn't as if he were innocent, or merely a victim like Uncle Terry!

"Does he have anyone on the outside?" asked Terry, gravely.

"No one but the warden of the prison," answered John, glancing in the rear view mirror at his friend. "Sheriff Peterson is his parole officer, and he's trying to help the young man as best as he can."

"Do you think he'll make it?" asked Terry, his voice betraying a great deal of concern.

"I honestly don't know," sighed John. "But, from what I saw of him yesterday, it doesn't look very likely."

Terry was silent. He stared out the window thoughtfully. By the time they arrived back from the airport, it was nearing lunch. John took Terry's bags inside. Even though Terry had an apartment in Chaumont, he lived most of the time in the Johanneses' guest room-- a perpetually welcome and much loved member of the family.

Izumi went to prepare the noon meal, leaving Terry and Abby outside to talk.

"How's my little fishing buddy?" asked Terry, seeing that Abby still hadn't gotten over her father's lecture.

"Is there something wrong with me?" asked Abby, on the brink of frustration. "I'm *trying* to be compassionate, but Jake DID kill his father! I know Dad says it sounded like self defense, but how does Dad know? I mean, they don't put people in prison for simply defending themselves!"

"Abby, come here," said Terry, placing a caring hand on her shoulder. "I couldn't love you more if you were my own daughter-- I hope you know that. Aside from God sending us His only begotten Son, the greatest privilege of my life has been to be a part of your family. If I had never met your father when I was a boy, *I* might be the one living in the little yellow house right now-- fresh from prison, with not a living soul to call a friend. Jake must make it on the outside, or he'll be sent back to prison. He has to work toward a future, all the while fighting a past that *must* be very painful. Jake is going to need all the prayer and understanding that we can give him. If he is TRYING, and it sounds as though he is, then we should endeavor to have more compassion on him. It reminds me of a verse in Jude: 'And of some have compassion, making a difference.' Do you understand what I'm saying, Abby?"

"I think so," replied the young woman, her voice more subdued than before.

"*That's* my girl," said Terry, kissing the top of her head.

He went inside to unpack, leaving Abby to contemplate what he had just told her. The thought that her Uncle Terry could easily have been in Jake's position *did* help Abby relate to the newcomer-- even though she had yet to meet him. Though Abby felt a degree of guilt, she wasn't ready to throw out the welcome mat, just yet. To her, everyone seemed to be taking it for granted that Jake was a sincere Christian, and not someone who was just trying to get out of prison by making the claim. However, John and Terry had not spoken on deaf ears, for Abby was now willing to give Jake a chance to prove his character before passing judgment on his present integrity.

"Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them."

~ Matthew 7:20 ~

After lunch, Abby went to her easel and resumed work on her painting.

"So, you're taking over the living room," remarked Terry, entering the room with a small ornately wrapped package in his hand. "Is this what you intend to do, instead of attending college?"

"You know I've always wanted to pursue art," reminded Abby, eyeing the package.

It was John and Terry's tradition to bring Abby a gift from abroad, and while she had quite outgrown the childish clamor associated with her "surprise," the expectation of a present upon a business trip homecoming was still there.

"You were more fun when you were little," sighed Terry, tossing her the parcel and sitting down on the couch. "I remember the days when the first thing out of your mouth was, 'What'd you get me?'"

"You don't have to get me anything, Uncle Terry. I'm a big girl now," laughed Abby, unwrapping the box. "The fact that you got home safely, is present enough!"

She opened the small box to find a delicate silver ring with a green, heart shaped stone, inset into the band.

"It's jade," said Terry. "Think of it as a little piece of my heart."

"Uncle Terry, it's beautiful," said Abby, getting up to kiss his cheek.

"My little fishing buddy is grown up," he sighed, a little sadly.

"Did you tell him about Tyler?" asked John, coming into the room.

Abby gave a small groan, and returned to her easel.

"What *about* Tyler?" asked Terry, sensing a secret.

"He asked her to marry him," informed John, grinning ear to ear.

"Well, well, it's about time!" exclaimed Terry, jumping to his feet. "Abby, you're a one for secrets! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I told Tyler I'd have to think about it," explained Abby, picking up her paintbrush.

"What's to think about?" puzzled Terry.

"Oh!" exclaimed Abby, "you sound just like Dad!"

"And what's wrong with *that*?" asked John.

"Well, you'd better make up your mind, soon," advised Terry. "He's not going to wait around forever for an answer. I don't understand you, Abby. I've always thought you two would get married."

"Just because we've known each other all our lives, doesn't mean we *have* to marry," replied Abby, defensively.

"We just want you to be happy, Sweetheart," said John.

"I AM happy!" maintained Abby, tossing aside her paintbrush. "I think I'll go fishing, now."

Out on the shoreline, Abby cast her line into the water, while the cool bay breeze fanned her face, soothing her emotions. Soon, she heard footsteps behind her. Abby knew it was Terry, for he ALWAYS came after her.

"I know you just want me to be happy," she began. "I'm just not sure I want to spend the rest of my life with someone I don't think I love. When Tyler looks into my eyes, I don't feel anything. Shouldn't I feel something, Uncle Terr--" Abby gasped in surprise.

She turned, expecting to see Terry standing behind her. Instead, Abby saw a young man, in his mid twenties, smoking a cigarette while watching her fly fish. He was a little under average height, had short brown hair, and a striking youthful face. (Some men, no matter how old they become, still have a young face, and this stranger was no exception.) As their gaze met, Abby could feel herself getting lost in those brown, expressive eyes. He stood frozen, unable to loosen himself from her lovely face. It was truly a white-flag moment.

"Hello," said Abby, breaking the silence.

Her words brought him back to earth.

"Are you from that house?" asked the stranger, pointing with his head to the Johannes home.

"Yes, I am," replied Abby.

"Thought so," he muttered, dropping his cigarette onto the ground and stamping it out with his foot.

Without another word, the man walked off. To Abby's shock, he went inside the little yellow house!

"*That* is our ex-con?!" she exclaimed under her breath. "Wow."

Abby turned back to the bay and executed a flawless double haul with her fly rod, landing the fly onto the water, a hundred and thirty-nine feet before her. She was marveling over their chance meeting, when suddenly, a horrifying thought came to her.

"He must have heard *every* word I said!" she exclaimed.

Mortified, Abby reeled in her line, and returned to the house. Upon hearing her come through the door, John and Terry came out of the office down the hall to talk to her.

"We're sorry," apologized John. "We don't want to pressure you into making the wrong decision."

"I just met our new neighbor," announced Abby, smiling.

"I told you to leave him alone," sighed John.

"How was I to know it was Jake?" replied Abby. "I don't think he knew who I was, either, because after he asked me if I belonged to this house, he walked off."

"What did he say?" asked Terry, curiously.

"That was about it," answered Abby. "It's more what he *heard*, than anything else. A short time after I went out to the shoreline, I heard footsteps behind me. I thought it was you, Uncle Terry, so I started talking about how I wasn't sure I wanted to marry Tyler-- and he heard *every word!*" She groaned in embarrassment.

"Then what did he say?" asked Terry.

"Nothing. We just stared at each other. Dad, you never told me he was *cute!*" said Abby, going to her room to put away her fishing rod.

John was less than pleased. While he wanted Abby to be nice to Jake, he wasn't sure he wanted them to become friends. Jake had a hard time ahead of him, and it wasn't a comforting thought to John, that Abby might be dragged through it all. Terry recognized the apprehensive look on

his friend's face. While a part of him wanted Jake to have a friend, Terry was also having the same concern.

Despite her attraction, Abby still wasn't ready to approve of Jake. For the next few days, she warily watched him from her bedroom window, as he walked back and forth from work.

Endeavoring to stay away from the Johannes girl, as the Sheriff had said to, Jake kept a wide berth around her whenever he happened to pass her on the beach. He never looked in her direction, or said anything more to her. After all, no pretty face was worth being sent back to prison for.

This was the way it went, until Friday morning, when John and Izumi had a discussion, and the subject of Jake came up.

"I don't see what we're waiting for," Izumi was saying. "He's been going to work everyday, and he's stayed away from Abby, as you asked him to. I think we should have the cookout tomorrow, and invite him to come."

"What if they become friends?" asked John, in a concerned voice.

"We knew that was a possibility when we said he could live in the yellow house," reminded Izumi. "After all, most of our Abby's friends are men. Just watch, sooner or later, she'll turn him into another 'fishing buddy'-- or at least, she'll try to!"

"Just treat him as part of the family?" asked John. "You realize, that's what we're doing by inviting him to come, tomorrow. The cookout is supposed to be a *family* celebration."

"Do you have the heart to barbecue outside and have a good time in front of the yellow house, knowing that he's *not* invited?" asked Izumi, getting out of bed and putting on her robe.

John got out of bed and tenderly drew his arms about Izumi's waist.

"Tomorrow is going to be a special day," he smiled.

"No matter what, don't let Terry worm it out of you," warned Izumi.

"He's going to know *something* is up," said John, nuzzling her neck.

"I mean it!" she laughed. "If you tell Terry, everyone else will know five minutes later!"

"I'll call it a 'spontaneous family gathering,'" he joked.

"Please be serious," asked Izumi.

"I won't tell Terry," acquiesced John, who hated keeping anything important from his friend.

"A family cookout, tomorrow?" repeated Terry in surprise, when John casually made the announcement at the breakfast table that morning.

"Sorry Dad, I have a date with Tyler, tomorrow," said Abby.

"You'll just have to cancel it," replied John, firmly. "This is more important. In fact, why don't you invite Tyler to the cookout?" he suggested.

Abby winced. She didn't want an audience present, for what she had to say to Tyler.

"Couldn't we postpone the party?" she requested.

"I'm afraid not, Sweetheart," said Izumi, pouring herself a cup of tea.

"Hummm," said Terry, thoughtfully. "A short notice, *important* family gathering... hummmm."

John tried to ignore his friend's curious looks.

"We're going to invite Jake," said John, trying to change the subject slightly.

"I thought you didn't want him around me," reminded Abby, finishing her cereal.

"I think it's safe to call that off," replied John. "I still expect you to be on your best behavior, though."

"Best behavior? Aren't I always?" she laughed.

"You know what I mean," said John. "Your mind is often on the tip of your tongue."

"He means you're often too blunt," said Terry, with a wink.

"Dad," pointed out Abby, "if Jake is as fragile as you say he is, then how did he survive nine years in the penitentiary? Besides, if I say something I shouldn't, Uncle Terry can wrestle me to the ground!"

"Don't think I won't!" chuckled Terry, jokingly.

"Mom," asked Abby, getting up to deposit her bowl into the kitchen sink, "may I skip doing the dishes, this morning? I know it's my turn, but I need to change the oil in my jeep."

"Very well," sighed Izumi, "but at least remember to get into your old clothes, *before* you get covered with grease. Honestly, you treat that vehicle better than the fish in your bedroom aquarium."

"Thanks, Mom!" said Abby, going to her room to change.

"Is she still getting good mileage?" inquired Terry, sipping his coffee.

"For all the good money we paid, it should," replied John, dryly.

Abby's jeep was parked in the small garage behind the little yellow house, for the main house garage was crowded with John and Terry's cars. Abby loved the fact that she had her own space, small though it was. She unlocked the door and got out the car creeper.

Inside the little yellow house, Jake could hear Abby banging around in the garage. After checking the time, Jake put on his jacket, for it was time to start his walk to work. As he passed the open garage doors, Jake heard Abby's activity come to a stop. Resisting the urge to look in her direction, he started down the main road.

Now that he was gone, Abby resumed her work on the jeep. Her vehicle was dark green, and had two bucket seats, with two more in the back that folded down for extra cargo space. During the sunny months, Abby enjoyed the open roof, while during the winter months, she put on the hard top. Attached to the jeep's roof frame, was a fiberglass double ended canoe. Except during wintertime, the canoe went everywhere with her. Whenever she had the opportunity, she would go down to the water, unstrap her canoe, and paddle out to a likely spot to do some fishing. Everyone in Three Mile Bay knew Abby's vehicle by the canoe on top.

The jeep was Abby's prized possession, (except for her favorite fly rod, of course). Two years ago, for her sixteenth birthday, her parents and Terry had chipped in, bringing her savings to the amount she needed to buy a car. John had wanted a more practical vehicle for his daughter--something more domestic. But Abby knew what she wanted. This jeep could go anywhere she wanted to be, all the while hauling a canoe. What more could she ask for?

"Abby!" called her mother's voice. "The marina called! They want you down there right away!"

"Okay, Mom!" she called back, reinserting the dipstick into the transmission under the hood.

Abby hurried inside to change. She worked part-time as a translator at the marina, translating for Japanese tourists, as well as French speaking Canadians, who had come down from Canada to do some fishing.

At the marina, the general manager led her to a small family of French-Canadians who needed a translator.

"Bonjour!" greeted Abby. "Je suis votre traductrice."

She spent the day helping them understand their guide, and watched bemused as their fly casting instructor tried to teach the father how to properly cast a fly. It was a few minutes after five o' clock in the late afternoon, when Abby started her drive back home. When she saw Jake walking home from work, she decided to act like a friend and offer him a lift. After tooting her horn twice, Abby pulled up alongside him.

"Want a ride home?" she asked, pleasantly.

"No!" he replied, gruffly.

Abby shrugged, and drove off. She glanced in the rear view mirror, and shook her head.

"He doesn't seem fragile, to me!" she thought to herself.

Early Saturday afternoon, Abby and Terry went fishing to catch some bass and pike for the cookout. Abby took up her favorite place on the shoreline, while Terry went further down the beach to try the fish there. It was a beautiful, clear summer day-- perfect for a day out of doors. This large stretch of beach was private property, having been in Izumi's family for several generations. The only ones allowed on it were friends, and those fortunate enough to be invited. Because of this, no matter how far into tourist season it was, the Johanneses and their guests could always enjoy an undisturbed time on the waterfront.

John busily set up the large copper basin firepit on the beach, near to the picnic table, while his wife was in the kitchen, preparing the hamburger patties and hot dogs that he would later grill over the firepit.

Terry quit fishing after landing one smallmouth bass, while Abby, who enjoyed the pastime more than he, carefully played her line, expertly flicking her fly from spot to spot on the water, testing each location for fish activity.

While Abby fished, John went to the little yellow house, and knocked on Jake's front door.

"Yes?" said Jake, opening the door a crack.

"We're going to have a cookout this afternoon, and you're invited," said John.

Jake hesitated. Sensing that he was searching for an excuse *not* to come, John continued,

"My friend, Terry, is back from Hong Kong-- that's him sitting near the picnic table, and my daughter, Abigail, is fishing for our lunch. I'd like very much for you to meet them."

John was his landlord, and Jake wasn't about to risk losing a place to stay, simply because he was more comfortable remaining behind closed doors. Reluctantly, he followed John to where Terry was watching Abby fly fish.

"Terry," introduced John, "this is Jake."

Terry looked up with a friendly smile and shook hands with their new neighbor. From Jake's reluctance to shake his hand, and by the nervous way he had of extricating it as soon as possible from the other person's grasp, Terry could understand why John didn't think he would last very long outside of prison walls. There was a marked look of distrust on Jake's face and posturing, as if he expected danger at any time, and at any moment.

Even now, as they listened to John talk about charcoal, Terry noticed the young man nervously look about himself, as one who knew he didn't fit into his surroundings. Jake drew his fingers to his mouth, as if holding a cigarette, and then, upon realizing that he wasn't smoking, quickly stuffed them back into his faded jean pockets, all the while searching for a way to escape John and Terry. Then Jake saw Abby, standing on the shore, rhythmically casting her fly line back and forth, creating graceful lines against the clear horizon.

"It's called 'fly fishing,'" explained Terry. "Beautiful, isn't it? When our Abby presents the fly, it's pure poetry. Would you like to see how it's done?"

Jake shook his head "no," but continued to watch.

"Come on," coaxed Terry, leading the guest toward Abby.

"Hold it, Abby!" called out Terry, halting Abby's casting, for she was using a hook, and it was not safe to come up behind an angler, unawares.

Abby adjusted her green cap, and patiently waited for them to pass so she could resume her casting. The wind was beginning to pick up a little, and, as it usually did, it began to tug at her long black hair. Not wanting it to get in her way, Abby took off her cap and rolled her hair into a bun, before placing the cap firmly back on her head. It was only then, that Abby realized that Terry was bringing Jake over to *her*!

"This is our Abby," introduced Terry.

Abby nodded her hello, and continued to play the slack line on her fly rod.

"Why don't you show Jake how to backcast?" suggested Terry.

Abby flashed Terry a what-are-you-trying-to-get-me-into glare and adjusted her cap once more.

"Have you ever fly fished?" she asked Jake.

When Jake gave her a blank stare, she realized that the question was a silly one. After all, there's not many chances to fly fish in prison.

"Here," said Abby, handing him her rod, "hold it this way."

Seeing that Jake had finally found something which seemed to interest him, Terry backed off and returned to John, who was intently watching the two young people.

"She's teaching him how to backcast," explained Terry, turning around to also watch. "It was good that you invited him, John."

John prayed he was doing the right thing. On the one hand, he wanted to help Jake; on the other hand, he wanted to protect his daughter. He asked God to guide his family in the way that they should go, and trusted to the Almighty's Providence.

"I [Jake] being in the way, the LORD led me to the house of my [landlord's] brethren."

~ Genesis 24:27 ~

"Is she teaching him how to fly fish?" asked a male voice.

John turned to see Tyler coming to meet him, but his eyes were on Abby and Jake.

"She's trying to," replied Terry.

"Glad you could come, Tyler," greeted John.

"Thanks for asking me," he replied.

The three men watched as Abby made forward and backward motions with her wrists, while Jake did his best to keep up with her.

"So, that's the ex-convict," muttered Tyler, with a heavy sigh. "Mr. Johannes, lately with Abby, I never know if I'm coming or going. Is *he* the reason why she's so uncertain?"

"They only just met, Tyler," replied John, hesitant to give more of an opinion based on his prejudice of wanting Abby to marry Tyler.

"Izzy's calling you," said Terry, getting John's attention. "I think it's time to start up the firepit."

Back on the beach, Jake tried one or two casts by himself. On the second cast, he was startled by a sudden jerk on the line! Not knowing what else to do, he promptly handed the fly rod to Abby.

"That's all right," said Abby, placing it back into Jake's hands. "You were the one holding the rod when the fish took the hook-- *you* should be the one to bring it in!"

But Jake flatly refused. It was too much pressure and excitement to also listen to her directions at the same time.

"All right," sighed Abby, accepting the fly rod from the nervous young man. "You're missing out, because this feels like a big one!" she exclaimed, trying to reel in her catch as quickly as possible. "Get the net!" she instructed.

Jake unhooked the net from Abby's belt, and waded out to the fish. With one fail swoop, he netted the catch.

"Keep it in the water!" she directed, taking out the priest to stun the fish.

When Abby went to the net, she was amazed to find a large pike-- larger than her line should have sustained. With the priest in hand, she whacked it over its eyes. Jake jumped back in shock, suddenly letting go of the net. However, Abby had a good grip on the net, so the pike remained

secure. Dazed, Jake waded ashore. Not heeding Jake's reaction, Abby unsheathed her knife, and promptly hacked off the pike's head.

Soon after, Abby heard a dull thud, and turned to find Jake lying unconscious on the shore! Thinking he was *surely* joking, she dragged the fish to dry ground to let the rest of the blood drain off.

"Okay," she laughed, "you can get up now. The joke's over!"

Jake, however, did not respond.

"Jake?" she said, nudging his still body with the toe of her boot. "Dad! Uncle Terry!" called out Abby, suddenly becoming alarmed.

Tyler and the two men came running, only to find Jake unconscious at Abby's feet.

"What did you *do* to him!" John shouted angrily at his daughter.

"I... I don't know!" stammered Abby, still in shock.

John rolled Jake onto his back.

"His heart's still beating," announced John, placing an ear to Jake's chest.

Suddenly, Jake let out a soft moan, and his eyes began to blink. He looked up to find everyone bent over him.

"Are you all right, Son?" asked John, in a concerned voice.

Jake struggled to his feet, trying to get away from the hovering crowd. He took a step or two, and then staggered backwards.

"You'd better sit down, until you find your legs," advised Terry.

"Please," implored Jake, in a low voice, "stay away from me-- just back off!"

"I'm sorry," apologized Abby. "I had no idea."

"Just leave me alone," he said weakly, trying to steady his breath.

According to his wishes, they left.

"Don't let it happen now, God. Please, not *now*," prayed Jake, silently.

In First Corinthians, it says, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but 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." As Jake appealed to heaven for help, a reassuring breeze blew in from off the bay, helping to steady his nerves. For now, this was his escape.

"What on *earth* did you do to that poor man?" demanded John of Abby, when they were out of Jake's earshot.

"I was only bleeding the pike," defended Abby.

"Were you paying attention to *his* needs?" asked John. "Did you give any thought that maybe, someone who has killed another human, might not react well to the sight of shed blood?"

Abby had to admit to herself, that when Jake had first expressed aversion to her stunning the fish and dropping the net in shock, that she hadn't paid attention to him at all. Abby was used to being around men who could handle themselves without being concerned that they were going to "break down." Around her fishing buddies, *Abby* was the weaker sex-- the one who always had to prove to herself and to the others that she could hold up her end of a fly rod.

"I'm sorry," was all she could manage to say.

Still a little angry, John returned to the house, leaving the others at the picnic table. They looked up the beach to where Jake was still recovering from his close encounter with Abby.

"Where were you, Uncle Terry?" sighed Abby. "I thought you were supposed to wrestle me to the ground."

"Guess I was sleeping on the job," replied Terry.

"I had no idea he was *this* fragile," she continued. "I guess I should have, though. You and Dad tried to warn me enough times."

"I have to admit," said Terry, watching Jake try to get to his feet, "you took me by surprise, Abby. I never thought you'd knock him out cold!"

"If he's *this* shaky, maybe they never should have let him out of prison," remarked Tyler.

Soon, John came from the house carrying a large platter of assorted uncooked meat, and took it to the firepit. Next, he lit the charcoal, and placed the grill over the flames. Abby wanted to go back and retrieve the pike that she had left draining on the shore, but she didn't have the courage to intrude on Jake's recovery. Just as she was resigning herself to this fact, someone handed John the pike in question. Abby looked up in surprise to see that it was Jake!

"Thank you," said John, calmly returning back to work without making a fuss over him.

For once, Abby decided to follow her father's example. Terry and Tyler awkwardly tried to acknowledge his presence, but wound up keeping silent, themselves. It had taken Jake every ounce of courage he had, to return to the cookout. This act of bravery did not go unnoticed by Abby. Soon, the atmosphere of a celebration slowly returned.

"That's sure going to taste good!" exclaimed Terry, as John placed the fish onto the grill. "I think I'll go get my camera, for the announcement!" he added, excitedly.

Abby did a puzzled double take. Announcement? What announcement?

"Dad," asked Abby, as John carefully grilled both sides of the pike, filling the air with the smell of mouthwatering fish, "what is Uncle Terry talking about?"

"I guess he knows me too well," chuckled John, under his breath. "Abby, would you tell your mother to come out here, please?"

The troubled look on Abby's face incited Tyler's curiosity.

"What's going on?" he whispered to her, as she walked back to the house.

"I don't know, yet," replied Abby, disappearing inside. "Mom!" she called to the kitchen, "Dad wants you to come!"

"Wait for *me*!" shouted Terry, rushing back with a camera he had just bought in Hong Kong.

"Will you carry the drinks, Abby?" requested Izumi, her hands full with the salad bowl and a stack of plates.

"Izzy, let me carry that out to the beach for you," said Terry, thoughtfully taking her load.

When Abby saw this, a familiar sensation came over her. Feeling as though she must surely be dreaming, she went to the kitchen and returned with cold pitchers of lemonade and ice tea.

"Let's go!" said Terry, leading the way outside.

Abby set both pitchers on the picnic table and sat down, burying her face in the palms of her hands.

"I don't believe it!" she groaned out loud.

"Believe what?" asked Tyler, as Jake listened nearby.

"My Mom is pregnant," she replied, in a hushed voice.

"If I could have everyone's attention for a moment," said John, as Izumi joyfully stood by his side, "Izumi and I have an announcement to make."

Upon hearing this, Terry snapped a picture with his camera.

"All right, Terry," laughed John, "you were the first to guess correctly. We're going to have a baby!"

Terry took one more picture and went to energetically congratulate the couple.

"I knew you still had it in you!" Terry jokingly over-exaggerated, slapping John on the back.

"Congratulations, Mom!" said Abby, coming over to Izumi, and giving her a warm hug. "When did you first find out?"

"Thursday," replied Izumi, excitedly. "It was so hard to keep it a secret, even for only two days, but we wanted to wait for the right time to break the news to everyone else!"

Even while Abby congratulated her parents, a feeling of sadness hovered over her. When she went back to the picnic table to rejoin the two young men, Jake politely congratulated her, relieved that he was no longer the central focus of attention.

"Don't congratulate us, yet," warned Abby, relating a little family history. "A few years back, Mom had a baby that was stillborn. When she delivered, the doctors placed the lifeless body into Mom's arms, and Dad took pictures." Abby sighed heavily. "They wanted me to hold her,

but I just couldn't. At the funeral, I remember thinking that I didn't know they made such tiny caskets. Mom took it really hard. She wasn't the same for a long time after."

"Maybe, this time," said Jake, "God will spare the child."

"It'll be all right," said Tyler, placing a comforting hand on hers.

It was meant as an act of consolation, but Abby involuntarily pulled her hand away from his. She hadn't meant to-- but her feelings weren't what they were supposed to be-- not for someone considering marriage. Seeing this, Tyler looked at her gravely. For a minute, their eyes met.

"Please, not now," she begged him, in a barely audible whisper.

"You're not going to say 'yes,' are you," he said, in a voice loud enough that Jake, (who was sitting behind him), could overhear.

Jake looked uncomfortable. After knowing what Abby had said days earlier about not being sure she loved Tyler, this was hardly a surprise to the ex-convict. The source of his discomfort, came in another form. Jake remembered the long gaze they had exchanged on the beach, and wondered if he was partly responsible for this painful break-up. It was not a thought he relished.

"I meant to tell you this evening," confessed Abby, trying to minimize the pain she was inflicting. "I'm *so* sorry, Tyler. I didn't mean to hurt you! You're a good friend."

"*Friend?!"* exclaimed Tyler, his voice rising so that everyone turned to see what was going on. "Is that *all* I mean to you?"

"I've tried Tyler, I honestly have, but I *don't* love you!" cried Abby, fighting back tears.

"Oh, no," sighed John. "She's turning him down."

Tyler got up from the picnic table and backed away from Abby.

"Don't you marry the first man that comes along," warned Tyler, looking directly at Jake, "because it's not over between us, Abby!"

"Please, *believe* me," said Abby, "I'm not going to change my mind!"

"Are you *sure*?" Tyler asked, pleadingly.

"I'm sure," she answered with a monumental gulp.

"I'll tell you what," said Tyler, trying to keep his composure, "I realize that you're under a lot of stress right now. I'll come by another time, and we'll talk. But, Abby, please don't shut the door on us, *completely*."

"I'll talk to you," replied Abby, "but I *won't* change my mind, Tyler."

Biting his lip, Tyler took one last warning look at Jake and left the waterfront. Abby felt numb.

"Sorry I ruined the celebration," said Abby, getting up from the picnic table. "If it's all right with you, Dad, I'm going to go fishing."

John nodded his consent, and Abby went to fetch her fly rod. On her way back, she hesitated as she passed Jake at the picnic table.

"I really *am* sorry about the pike," she apologized. "I seem to have a propensity to hurt my friends, today."

"I'm all right," shrugged Jake.

"That's good," said Abby.

Then she walked off to fish by herself. Abby cast her fly onto the fresh bay water and collapsed into bittersweet tears. She wept for the pain she had caused Tyler, a longtime friend; she wept for the baby sister that she never had the courage to hold; and she wept with joy for the new baby God was giving them. Gradually, the tears had a cleansing effect on her soul. With a heaven-turned face, Abby committed her family and friends into God's keeping.

Whatever the future held, she was determined to meet it, grounded in a faith stronger than herself.

"Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for He [Jesus] IS faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works."

~ Hebrews 10:22-24 ~

"Christ... whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end."

~ Hebrews 3:6 ~

Chapter Four

Just a Little Gentleness

"Ye endured a great fight of afflictions."

~ Hebrews 10:32 ~

God will "make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."

~ 1 Corinthians 10:13 ~

Abby wasn't very surprised when they didn't see Jake at church, the day after the cookout. He stayed tucked away in the little yellow house, not even coming out to be neighborly when Abby and Terry spent the late afternoon on the waterfront, tossing a Frisbee, and fly fishing together. Abby noticed Terry glancing back at the little yellow house every once in a while, as if willing the young man to come out.

"Uncle Terry!" cried Abby, when he absentmindedly cast his fly line directly into her casting path, causing a collision.

"Sorry," muttered Terry, wading out to the snarled mess of lines in the water.

"Why don't you go up to his door and ask him to come out?" suggested Abby, knowing the source of her uncle's preoccupation.

"It's just that I think I could help him," sighed Terry, looking back once more at Jake's house.

"Then do it, and get it over with!" said Abby, wanting Terry to return his attention to fly fishing.

Hesitantly, Terry handed his fly rod to Abby, and walked over to Jake's front door. Abby remained on the shore, watching Terry and fumbling with the tangled lines. After a minute or two, Jake answered the door, opening it only a crack.

"Hi!" greeted Terry, in the most friendly voice he could. "Abby and I are enjoying a nice Sunday afternoon on the beach! I was wondering if you might like to join us?"

Since Mr. Johannes wasn't the one who had made the invitation, Jake felt no compunction to accept. So with incivility that he didn't intend, the young man promptly declined, and shut the door.

Disappointed, Terry walked back to Abby, who by now, had given up trying to untie the lines.

Unsheathing her knife, Abby cut the floating lines and reeled in the remainder.

"He said 'no,'" related Terry, taking his rod back from Abby.

"I'm not surprised," said Abby, in a voice that gave Terry the impression she was glad Jake hadn't come out to join them.

"Didn't you *want* him to come?" asked Terry, a little surprised.

"Oh, I don't know," shrugged Abby. "If he wants to stay inside, I think we should leave him alone."

Terry frowned.

"Come on Uncle Terry, don't look at me like that," said Abby, sitting down on the ground to change her line.

"What's wrong?" inquired Terry, taking a seat beside her on the sand, and setting his own fly rod aside.

"It's just that he's so..." Abby paused, searching for the right word, "damaged," she finished. "For instance, did you ever notice he always wears long sleeved shirts?"

"No, I hadn't," replied Terry.

"Well, he does," said Abby. "And yesterday, I found out why. I was showing him how to cast, when his sleeve went back and I saw a long jagged scar on the underside of his wrist. He quickly pulled his shirt cuff back down to hide it, but not before I got a good look at it."

"You knew he had attempted suicide in prison," reminded Terry.

"I know, but it was so awful looking," shuddered Abby. "And before you tell me to be nice to him-- I was! I pretended not to notice the scar, and he seemed to be doing fine... up until the pike took his line."

"Oh, Abby," sighed Terry.

"I know, I should have been more careful," said Abby, tying a leader onto the end of her fly line.

"Wait until you get to know him better," reasoned Terry. "You'll be easier around him then."

"Uncle Terry, I don't *want* to know him better," confessed Abby, getting to her feet.

"Why?" pressed Terry.

"Because, he *scares* me!" exclaimed Abby.

"Why on earth should he scare you?" continued Terry with a puzzled look.

Abby hesitated.

"Maybe, it's different for you," mused Abby, "because you're a guy. But every time he looks at me, I see so much pain in his eyes that it frightens me. I can't explain it any better than that. Besides, after what happened yesterday, he's better off not knowing me any better. After a few days around me, they'd probably send him back to prison for a nervous breakdown!"

"I think you're selling yourself short," replied Terry, gathering up his fishing gear, "but no one's pushing you at him. If you don't want to be his friend, you don't have to be."

After a little more fishing, the two returned to the house.

Monday morning found Abby at home by herself. John and Terry had gone on a business errand into Watertown, and Izumi was away visiting a neighbor on the other side of Three Mile Bay. Abby had taken advantage of the quiet house, by resuming work on her painting. She had gotten half way through the heron's left leg, when the telephone interrupted her work.

"Hello?" she answered, placing the receiver between her right ear and shoulder to free her hand for the paintbrush.

"This is Nick at the Old Mill Camp Ground," said the caller. "I understand you people are letting Murphy rent your house."

"Yes, that's right," said Abby, a little surprised.

"Murphy's gone berserk," exclaimed Nick, "and he's hiding in the men's bathroom! He's scaring the guests-- not to mention me! If John doesn't get down here at once, and drag him out of there, I'm calling Sheriff Peterson!"

"My Dad isn't here right now," stalled Abby.

"Well, ONE of you better get down here," shouted Nick, "or I'm bringing in the Sheriff! The only reason I haven't yet, is because it will frighten away the campers!"

"I'm on my way," replied Abby, reluctantly.

She hurried on a jacket and shoes, and ran to the garage to get her jeep. The wind whipped through her hair as she made her way down the main street to the Old Mill Camp Ground, a few miles away. On the drive there, Abby could barely make out her own thoughts. She didn't want to come, but there was no one else.

When she pulled into the parking lot, Nick came out to meet her.

"He's in the men's restroom!" grumbled Nick.

As Nick led the way, a small crowd of curious people gathered in front of the restroom.

"How is he?" asked Abby, venturing a question.

"How should I know?" growled Nick. "No one's gone in there!"

"Oh no," Abby muttered to herself. "I get to be the first one!"

Gathering her courage, Abby knocked on the door. When no one answered, she slowly opened it and stepped inside. Against the far side of the restroom, she saw Jake sitting on the floor, his head leaning against the wall. Unsure what to do, Abby closed the door and watched him in silence.

"Leave me alone," Jake pleaded, wiping away the sweat from his face.

"Your boss called me," she explained in a soft voice.

"Go away," said Jake, weakly.

"What happened?"

"What does it matter?" he groaned, in a voice so low Abby could barely hear. "I've lost my job. They're going to send me back to prison."

Then, as if suddenly seized by the horror of the thought, Jake bent over and threw up onto the bathroom floor.

Repulsed, Abby took a step back. Then Jake did something that Abby was totally unprepared for-- he began to cry.

"Oh! God, *PLEASE* help me!" he wept, his head bowed down in great agony of spirit.

Abby numbly stood there, until Nick stuck his head inside and glared at her to hurry up. Indignant at his impatience, she quickly shut the door once more, and looked back to Jake. Huddled on the bathroom floor, Jake was like a little child with no one to look after him. He was so desperately alone, that even Abby could feel his pain. Then God reminded her that the young man wasn't alone after all, for *she* was there.

Going to a bathroom stall, Abby returned with a roll of toilet paper, and slowly cleaned up the mess Jake had made on the floor.

"You don't have to do that," said Jake. "I'm not your problem."

"I'm *making* you my problem," smiled Abby.

It was then that she noticed Jake had wet his pants. Embarrassed, Jake closed his eyes to escape Abby's gaze. Outside the bathroom door, she could hear the crowd of people getting louder.

"Can you get up?" asked Abby, flushing the last of the toilet paper down the toilet.

"I don't think so," replied Jake, struggling to get to his feet, but failing.

"Okay, I'm going to ask you a question, and I don't want you to take it the wrong way," warned Abby.

Jake looked at her expectantly.

"Are you wearing boxers or briefs?" she asked.

"Boxers," mumbled Jake.

"Good," said Abby. "Take off your pants."

Jake looked at her in horror.

"We don't have much time!" exclaimed Abby. "If I can't hurry up and get you out of here, Nick will call the Sheriff!"

Abby turned her back, and Jake obeyed. With his pants in hand, Abby went to the sink and drenched the article of clothing with water. Then she wrung them out as best as she could and handed the jeans back to Jake.

"Hurry up, and put them on!" she instructed.

As Jake did as he was told, Abby took off her jacket and went to the door.

"Nick," she said, seeing he was still out there with the others, "send them away. I can get Jake out of here, but please don't make him walk through all those people."

"All right," said Nick, "but I'm not giving you much more time!"

Abby closed the door and went back to Jake, who was now dressed and trying to get to his feet. When she reached out to assist him, Jake violently pulled back his arm.

"Take it easy!" she said, in surprise. "I was only trying to help."

"Don't touch me!" he warned, carefully standing up.

Abby took her jacket and draped it across Jake's left arm, so people couldn't as readily see that his pants were completely wet.

"Okay, let's go," she sighed, leading Jake out of the men's room.

"Well, it's about time," swore Nick when they appeared outside. "That's the last time I hire an ex-con!"

Still clutching her jacket, Jake followed Abby to the jeep. As the young man climbed into the vehicle, he noticed an overturned canoe perched on the roof bars. Abby got behind the wheel, and began the drive home.

"What happened back there?" she asked.

"A man approached me in the men's room while I was mopping the floor," related Jake.

"And?" continued Abby.

"And, nothing," he shrugged.

"*Something* happened," said Abby, thoughtfully. "Come on, Jake. After he approached you, then what?"

"NOTHING!" cried Jake, gripping Abby's jacket tightly in his hand.

"Okay, okay, don't fall apart," she sighed.

"Pull over," asked Jake.

"Why?"

"Just do it!" he pleaded.

Before the jeep had come to a complete stop on the side of the road, Jake quickly jumped out and crouched near some bushes to expel the last of the contents in his stomach. When he was finished, Jake sank weakly to the ground.

"You're getting your pants muddy," pointed out Abby from behind the wheel.

Jake remained motionless, until he looked up at her and asked a question.

"Why are you being nice to me?" he wondered out loud.

"Well," replied Abby, good-naturedly, "you don't have many others standing in line to help you."

Jake was taken aback by the directness of Abby's answer, but since she had no pretense or ulterior motive, he began to feel at ease around her. Not that he would let her touch him, for no one could do that, but Jake began to feel as though he could accept Abby's presence without feeling as though his body was under attack.

"Come on, get back in the jeep," said Abby. "I have to get home and start dinner."

Jake did as he was told.

"Maybe I can get you a job down at the marina where I work," suggested Abby.

Jake's face immediately looked hopeful.

"I can't promise you anything," warned Abby, "but I'll do my best."

"I'll take anything," replied Jake. "This doesn't mean I trust you, though."

The caution in his voice brought a smile to Abby's lips.

"Okay, I've been warned," she answered.

As she pulled up to the Johanneses' house, Terry came out to meet Abby; he was extremely surprised to see that Jake was in the jeep with her.

"Hello!" greeted Terry to his new neighbor.

Jake looked at him warily and then got out of the jeep. Without a single word, he headed back to the little yellow house.

"Hey! Buster!" whistled Abby, as he was walking away.

The young man stopped, and turned to face her.

"My jacket!" she shouted.

Jake tossed the jacket to her, and then quickly retreated to his house.

Terry looked at Abby with a disappointed shake of his head.

"*What?*" she asked.

"I thought I told you to be gentle with him!" he reminded her.

"I *was* gentle!" exclaimed Abby.

"Then why was that young man practically running away from you?" challenged Terry.

"Oh, that?" she asked. "Jake wasn't running from *me*-- he was running from YOU."

"*Me?*" repeated Terry, in surprise. "Whatever for?"

"I think it's because you're a man," reflected Abby. "Did you already start dinner, or am I still on tap?"

"I'm heating yesterday's leftovers," answered Terry. "How did you get him to talk to you?"

"When dinner is ready, could I take some over to Jake?" asked Abby, getting out of the jeep and cleaning off the seat Jake had been sitting on. "He's going to be very hungry tonight!"

Then Abby related the incident to Terry, who wanted to know every detail she could remember. Not trying to humiliate Jake behind his back, she didn't mention the fact that he had wet his pants, as well.

John, who had been listening in on the narrative, was glad that Abby had been there to help Jake. However, he continued to pray that his little girl wouldn't get hurt.

Before dinner that evening, Izumi covered a casserole dish with plastic wrap and handed it to Abby.

"Who's that for?" asked John.

"Abby is taking it over to Jake's house," answered Izumi, as their daughter went out the front door.

Going to the window, John watched as Abby walked to the little yellow house across the way.

When Abby knocked on Jake's front door, it cautiously opened a crack as its occupant peered outside.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I've brought you dinner," offered Abby, holding out the casserole to him. "It's leftovers, but they're good."

Jake opened his door a little more and accepted the food.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked Abby, testing her motives once again.

Abby looked behind her, and then back at Jake.

"Still no line," she replied. "I'll be back tomorrow, for the dish."

That same night, the Johanneses had an unexpected visitor.

"Abby! get in here!" called John, when he had answered the door.

It was Sheriff Peterson.

"I just learned from Jake that he was fired, today," announced the Sheriff, when Abby had joined them in the living room.

"That's right," said Abby, sitting down on the couch beside Izumi.

"He said you thought you might be able to get him a job at the marina," continued the Sheriff.

"That's what I told him," affirmed Abby.

"I hope you know how desperately Jake needs that job," informed the Sheriff.

"I think I understand," she responded.

"How much of today's incident did Jake tell you?" inquired the Sheriff.

"Only that some man approached him in the bathroom," replied Abby. "Admittedly, Jake was a little sketchy on the details."

"Even though he refuses to press charges," informed the Sheriff, "the man in the restroom has claimed that Jake approached *him* in a manner befitting a homosexual."

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Abby, resolutely.

"The man has a long record of lewd conduct in a public place, so I'm inclined to agree with you," answered the Sheriff.

"The poor guy!" exclaimed Terry. "After what Jake went through with his father, that must have been a terrifying experience."

"Abby," resumed the Sheriff, "Nick says you were the first one in the restroom after the man left. Is that true?"

"That's what Nick told me," Abby replied soberly.

"I don't want to alarm you folks with this next question, but I must ask it. Abby, did you see any evidence that a rape might have taken place in that restroom?" asked the Sheriff. "Was all of Jake's clothing intact? Did he look to you as though he may have been assaulted?"

"Rape!" exclaimed Terry.

"Please, let her answer," prompted the Sheriff.

"Jake was puking his guts out, and he had wet his pants," answered Abby. "But, he *was* fully dressed. I made him take off his pants so I could wet them down in the sink. Don't worry Dad, he was wearing boxers."

"Why didn't you tell me this when you first got home?" demanded John.

"I didn't want to embarrass Jake!" explained Abby. "He looked humiliated enough. I don't think anyone hurt him-- scared him, yes, but not rape."

"I *had* to ask," replied the Sheriff, looking very much relieved.

"What made you think he had been assaulted?" wondered Terry, sensing a deeper reason.

"With the man's record of lewd conduct, I had to be sure Jake was safe," answered the Sheriff, getting up from his chair. "I'm sorry if I frightened you folks. Oh, before I forget-- Dick, Jake's former prison warden, wants to come down and see how his parolee is doing. Dick also expressed a wish to meet and thank everyone here for helping out Jake."

"We'll be happy to meet him," answered John.

"Thank you, I'm sure he'll appreciate that," said Sheriff Peterson, walking to the front door to leave.

After the Sheriff left, Abby did the dishes and went to bed early. The night seemed to be passing normally, until midnight, when a loud crying sound woke Abby from her sleep. Drowsily, Abby got out of bed and put on her robe. Only then did she notice that the sound was coming from outside-- and not inside the house. With a frown, Abby went to her window and opened it. Just then, a loud frantic scream came from the little yellow house!

Immediately, Abby tore down the hall, nearly slamming into Terry and John as she passed them. As she raced across the beach to Jake's house, Abby could hear more heartrending screams

coming from the yellow house. By now, John and Terry were also running to the yellow house, and since their legs were longer, they reached the screened off porch before Abby. In all the excitement, John fumbled to get his copy of the house key into the doorknob.

"HURRY, Dad!" cried Abby, as more screams broke through the stillness of the night.

When Jake's front door finally swung open, John cautiously restrained his daughter from rushing inside, as she was about to do.

"Wait here," he instructed her.

John and Terry made their way down the hall to Jake's room and knocked on his bedroom door. Another wail of agony came from the closed room, causing Terry to tremble in his socks. John quickly opened the door, and found Jake lying on the Johanneses' old king-sized bed, his arms flailing and his voice crying out in grievous screams that tore at Terry's heart. While John went to Jake's bedside, Terry, who was unable to handle the torrent of pleas to "Get them off me!" left the bedroom and joined Abby, who was waiting in the living room.

"What's going on?" she cried.

"He's having a flashback!" explained Terry, plugging his ears with his fingers to block out the cries, for it was too much for him to endure. "I'm sorry, but I *can't* stay!"

Abby rushed into the bedroom, where John was unsuccessfully trying to help Jake as he had done for Terry so long ago, though this was more severe than anything John had ever seen.

"You're only making him worse!" argued Abby, dragging her father from the room. "He doesn't like men!"

"Then *you* go to him," said John.

"No way!" resisted Abby. "I don't know what to do!"

"Jake is reliving the past," John patiently explained, "so you must get him back to the *present*. Talk to him and reaffirm that his abuser isn't here. And above all-- BE GENTLE! This *isn't* one of your fishing buddies!"

As John was finishing his instructions, Izumi arrived. Standing by her husband's side, she watched what was going on.

Reluctantly, Abby climbed onto the large mattress, and knelt beside Jake so she could get in his line of sight.

"Jake! Can you hear me?" she asked.

"*Please*, guard, get him OFF!" wailed the young man.

"JAKE!" shouted Abby at the top of her lungs, in an attempt to get his attention. "It's me, Abby!"

"NO!" screamed Jake, still unaware of her presence.

"Come on Abby, you can do it," encouraged John from the bedroom doorway.

"Abby?" gasped Jake, his hands still clawing at the air. "*Help me!*"

"Open your eyes," she instructed him.

"They *are* open," he whimpered.

"No, they're shut," said Abby. "Come on, open your eyes."

With great difficulty, Jake finally opened his eyes. However, the screaming and pleas for help, continued.

"No one is hurting you," explained Abby in a calm, assuring voice. "Look, no one is here except for me and my parents."

"I can *feel* him!" he moaned, his plea ending in a frantic gasp for air.

"Then it's only your body remembering," reasoned Abby, recalling her father's instructions. "He is *NOT HERE*."

Focusing on Abby's face, Jake struggled to bring himself back to the present.

"He's not here," repeated Abby, soothingly.

Keeping his eyes intently focused on her face, Jake's breathing slowly began to calm down. Then, as before in the restroom, he leaned over the edge of the bed, and threw up on the floor.

Seeing a chance to be of some use, Izumi went to the bathroom and returned with some towels. As Izumi cleaned up the mess, Abby stayed with the young man, who's eyes never left her face for a single moment, for he was afraid to let her out of his sight.

"Did you wet the bed?" Abby whispered in his ear.

"Yes," replied Jake, his voice still very shaken.

"When you can get to your feet, go to the bathroom and change your clothes," she instructed him, noticing for the first time that he had worn his day clothes to bed. "Put the soiled ones outside the door, in the hall."

As Izumi worked at cleaning up the vomit on the floor, Jake struggled to his feet and did as he had been told. Abby removed the bed sheets and, together with Jake's wet clothes, placed them into the washing machine in the tiny room just off the kitchen.

Now that the screaming had subsided, Terry ventured back into the little yellow house and joined John, who was recovering in the kitchen.

"Thank you for never putting me through anything *that* bad," sighed John, gratefully.

"I'm sorry I wasn't any help," apologized Terry. "Did you have a really hard time with him?"

"I couldn't get near Jake, without him becoming worse," related John. "Abby was the one who calmed him down."

"I should have been there," said Terry, kicking himself for not being stronger. "I have an idea of what Jake's going through, and I could have spared Abby."

"Stop beating up on yourself," John assured his friend. "You would have had the same success as mine. You're a man, and apparently, Jake needed a woman. I'm so proud of our Abby. She did good."

When the cleanup on the bedroom floor was finished, Izumi joined the two men in the kitchen. John made room on his lap for her, and his wife readily accepted it. She leaned her head on John's shoulder and yawned. As the men talked, she drifted to sleep.

After getting dressed into dry clothes, Jake appeared from the bathroom and lingered at the bedroom door, while Abby cleaned the wet spot on his mattress.

"I can do that," he offered.

"No need," smiled Abby. "I'm almost finished. Are your nights always like this?"

"They're not usually this bad," replied Jake, looking awkwardly down the hall to where Abby's parents and Terry were waiting in the kitchen.

"There," she said, finishing the mattress, "all done."

Jake watched Abby as she remade his bed with clean sheets and made sure the room was in order.

"Your laundry is in the washing machine," said Abby, preparing to leave.

"Do you *have* to go?" Jake asked, wistfully.

"I have work tomorrow," replied Abby. "And I have to talk to my boss about getting you a job. Will you be all right by yourself?"

"I've made it this far," he shrugged.

"Okay then," said Abby, turning to go, "I'll see you when I see you."

Since Izumi had fallen asleep in John's arms, he gently carried her back to the house without waking her up. Terry and Abby followed, relieved that the night's ordeal was over.

The next morning, John found a spotless casserole dish on their front door step. Tucked inside the dish, was a sheet of drawing paper with a penciled sketch of a woman fly fishing.

"Look what I found when I was getting the morning paper," announced John, as he brought the dish into the kitchen.

Abby looked over her father's shoulder at the sketch.

"I didn't know Jake could *draw*!" she gasped in surprise.

"I think this was meant for you," said John, presenting Abby with the drawing.

"It looks as though you two have something in common," grinned Terry.

"I guess so," mused Abby, setting it aside to finish her cereal.

After breakfast, Abby took the picture to her room and set it beside her mirror. It was a rough sketch, but the woman in the drawing was obviously her.

An hour later, Abby opened the garage doors behind the little yellow house, and started her jeep. As she was pulling out of the driveway, she saw Izumi getting into her own car.

"Where are you going, Mom?" called out Abby, as she pulled up to her mother's window.

"I have a doctor's appointment," replied Izumi, honking her horn at John, who was still inside, to hurry up.

"Come on, Jake!" shouted Abby, honking her horn, as well.

"I'm coming!" said John, hurrying to his wife's car.

As they pulled away, Jake appeared from the little yellow house and climbed into the passenger side of Abby's jeep.

"Ready?" she asked, putting on her sunglasses.

"I guess so," he replied. "The casserole was good."

"So was the sketch," smiled Abby, as they drove off.

The Three Mile Bay Marina consisted of the Bayfront Restaurant, the Dockside Gift Shop, the Marina Tackle Store, (where fly fishing instructors gave lessons to beginners and experts alike), the Three Mile Bay Boat Rental and Supplies Store, The Boaters' Club, (where locals hung out), and the Marina Dock, which had several slips for berthing boats while their owners enjoyed themselves ashore.

Abby parked the jeep in the parking lot and took Jake to the Manager's office, where Terrence Dean ran the entire marina from behind his desk.

"Abby!" he greeted her. "I didn't call you in."

"I know," said Abby. "I wanted you to meet Jake Murphy. I was wondering if you had a job for him."

"Could you excuse us for a moment?" asked Terrence, taking Abby off to one side. "Is that the same Jake Murphy who was fired from the Old Mill Camp Ground, yesterday?"

"Yes," answered Abby, already knowing that by the sound of his voice, he was going to say "no." "I was going to tell you, but not in front of Jake."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Terrence, seriously. "I'm surprised you brought him here, Abby! You know the marina is a family destination! I can't have a murderer running around the grounds!"

"It was self-defense," said Abby.

"Whatever," continued Terrence, "I won't allow it!"

"Isn't there *anything* he could do?" asked Abby, out of desperation.

"Get him out of here," ordered Terrence.

Abby led Jake out of the office and back to the car.

"He said 'no,' didn't he?" asked Jake, disappointedly.

Just then, Terrence stuck his head out of his office window.

"Abby!" he called to her. "Japanese translator needed at the tackle shop!"

"I'll be right there!" she shouted. "Jake, I can't drive you back right now," she explained, turning to her friend.

"I'll wait," said Jake, going over to a picnic bench and sitting down.

"I could be several hours," warned Abby, handing him twenty dollars. "If I'm not back by lunch, go to the restaurant and have lunch on me."

Then she rushed off to the tackle shop where a Japanese couple was trying to understand their instructor. It was two in the afternoon when Abby was finally free to go. She walked back to the picnic table where she had left Jake, only to find him resting in the jeep, quietly watching the gulls overhead and sketching them on a drawing pad he had carried in his pocket.

"Sorry I took so long," apologized Abby, getting behind the wheel.

"I don't mind," replied Jake, still watching the sky and sketching.

"Where did you learn how to do that?" asked Abby, curiously.

"In prison," replied Jake, putting away the sketchpad.

"Listen, I know this guy who works at the tackle shop, and he sometimes hires someone to clean up his section of the dock after the fly fishing lessons. I'm going to go over and talk to him," suggested Abby, getting back out of the jeep.

"What about what your boss said?" asked Jake.

"The tackle shop is privately owned," said Abby. "The owner pays Terrence to send over translators, but that's all. I'll be right back."

Jake sighed heavily as he watched Abby walk away.

"PLEASE, God," he prayed, "don't let them send me back!"

The bell rang, as Abby opened the door of the Marina Tackle Store.

"Mr. Winkler?" asked Abby, approaching an old man sitting behind a desk with a lighted magnifying glass.

His hands moved slowly but surely, as he hand tied a custom fly for a customer who would pick it up later.

"Abby?" he smiled, looking up from his work. "Are you back, already? I'm afraid the Japanese couple already left."

"Yes, I know," answered Abby. "I'm here about a friend who needs a job," she explained.

"Where is this friend?" asked Mr. Winkler.

"He's sitting in my jeep," replied Abby. "Before you make up your mind, I must tell you that he's an ex-convict, who was sent to prison for killing his father, even though it was most probably self defense."

"'Most probably'?" repeated the old man.

"And," added Abby...

"There's more?" said Mr. Winkler, with raised eyebrows.

"Nick fired him yesterday because some pervert tried to take advantage of him in the men's room," she finished.

"Terrence already said 'no,' I take it?"

"Big time," Abby groaned in the affirmative.

"With all that's against this friend of yours-- you're still trying to help him?" asked the old man.

"Jake tries *so* hard," said Abby, with a hint of admiration in her voice. "If he can't get a job, they'll send him back to prison."

"So Jake is his name?" mused Mr. Winkler. "The name Jake originates from the name Jacob, or in the Hebrew, Yaakov, which means, 'the supplanter.' This Jake is young?" he inquired, carefully watching Abby's face.

"I guess so," shrugged Abby.

"Has he supplanted anyone in your life, yet?" asked the old man with a glimmer of knowing understanding in his eye.

"He's not Tyler's replacement, if that's what you mean," smiled Abby, knowing full well that it was.

"Ha!" laughed Mr. Winkler. "You and Tyler are too dissimilar. There's a saying, 'A bird may love a fish, but where would they make their home together?'"

"I'm *not* a fish," replied Abby.

"That remains to be seen," breathed the old man, examining the finished fly under the magnifying glass. "What do you think?"

"Mayfly larvae, right?" guessed Abby, expertly looking it over.

"Very good!" approved Mr. Winkler. "This Jake-- you like him? Of course you do, otherwise you wouldn't be here. Go, bring him in. Let's have a look at this Jake of yours."

When Jake saw Abby returning, he was prepared for more bad news.

"Mr. Winkler wants to meet you," announced Abby, hopefully.

She led Jake back to the tackle shop where the elderly man eyed him cautiously.

"So this is the young man you want me to take on?" mused Mr. Winkler to Abby. "I'll try him out. But, Jake, I want you to know that it's only because of this child. She's taking a chance on you, and I don't want you to let her down. You can start tomorrow."

"Thanks, Mr. Winkler!" cried Abby, kissing the old man's cheek.

"Tell your father I said congratulations on the new baby," said Jake's new boss, as the two left the store.

It wasn't until they reached the jeep that Jake fully realized that he had been given a second chance.

"I don't know how to thank you!" he said to Abby. "I would have *died* if I had to go back to prison!"

"Don't say that," said Abby, starting up the engine. "You can do anything God wants you to."

Jake was content to remain silent on the ride home. It felt good to have someone on his side, for once.

It was Saturday, and Jake had now been working at the tackle shop for over a week. Terrence voiced his disapproval over Mr. Winkler's new helper, but he could do little more than complain, since the tackle shop was a valuable source of revenue for the marina.

Izumi's visit to the doctor had resulted in an early warning that her pregnancy would likely be a difficult one, given her medical history. It was a source of constant prayer in the Johannes family.

The warm summer sun shone down on Abby as she cast her line into the bay, and settled into a gentle casting rhythm that drove fish wild to jump at her hookless fly, for she was not hunting at the moment, but practicing. She had been casting for several minutes, when Abby became aware that someone was watching her.

"Those were some pretty fancy moves!" greeted her admirer, eagerly stepping forward. "I've never seen such a graceful presentation!"

The balding man was in his late fifties and had a belly that showed he led a mostly sedentary lifestyle. Like Abby, he was wearing sunglasses, and expressed a more than passing interest in fly fishing. As the man talked about her casting, Sheriff Peterson joined them.

"Hi, Sheriff," said Abby in surprise. "Is this a business call?"

"No," said Sheriff Peterson. "I was just dropping off Dick to see Jake. Dick, this is the young lady I was telling you about."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," said Dick, holding out his hand in friendship to Abby. "I really appreciate what you've done for Jake."

"Dick was Jake's former warden," Sheriff Peterson explained to her.

"Oh, yes," remembered Abby, shaking his hand. "Dad told me you might arrive today. I think Jake is in his house. If you want, I'll go get him for you."

"If you don't mind," said Dick, "I'd like to talk to you, first."

"Me?" asked Abby, in surprise.

"Actually, I'm here at Jake's request. He wanted me to explain something to you," said Dick.

"I'll be heading back, Dick," said Sheriff Peterson. "Just give me a jingle when you're done here."

Abby was sober, and had quite forgotten the fish that were still occasionally tugging at her hookless fly.

"When I first met Jake," began Dick, "I saw him in the prison hospital. He had just attempted suicide, and had nearly succeeded. Jake had lost so much blood, that his heart stopped beating twice on the operating table. When he was in recovery, I witnessed to him, and had the great blessing of seeing him come to Jesus. He had a new beginning, but the past had taken a deep toll on him."

"What do you mean?" asked Abby.

"Have you ever heard of the term, 'prison rape'?" asked Dick, carefully.

Abby shook her head, "no." She didn't like the direction this conversation was going.

"It's when one inmate forces himself upon another," said Dick. "Unfortunately, it's commonplace in our prisons, and it's the ones who are young looking, small, or nonviolent offenders that become the most targeted. When Jake was first sent to prison, he was fifteen. At fifteen, Jake was small for his age, and even though he had been convicted of a violent offense, his small frame and youthful face made him a target from day one. For seven years, this went on, until Jake decided he couldn't take it any longer, and tried to take his own life. When he came to Christ, I placed him in solitary confinement for his own protection, and that is where he stayed for the last two years until his parole."

Abby looked out over the bay and sighed heavily. This answered a lot of questions she had concerning some of the statements Jake had made during his flashbacks.

"Why didn't he tell me this, *himself*?" she asked.

"He's too ashamed," replied Dick. "Jake has endured unspeakable acts of cruelty at the hands of other inmates, and it's very hard for him to talk about it. But, he wanted you to know about this part of his past, so he asked me to tell you."

"Why?" asked Abby, curiously. "I didn't have to know."

"I think this is Jake's way of warning you not to fall in love with him," the warden replied, candidly.

"Love?!" exclaimed Abby, in surprise. "Who said anything about *love*? I'm just trying to help him!"

"I'm only fulfilling my promise," said Dick, backing away.

"Please, wait a minute!" asked Abby. "Does Jake have AIDS?"

"Miraculously, he doesn't," answered Dick. "I know of others like Jake that are already dead or dying from the multitude of diseases they picked up after being raped in prison. But Jake has never tested positive for AIDS, or any other sexually transmitted disease."

"Uncle Terry says Jake suffers from flashbacks," continued Abby.

"Yes, I know," said Dick. "It's called PTSD-- post traumatic stress disorder."

"That's what Uncle Terry thought," she sighed. "Ever since the beginning, trying to be friends with Jake has been a daunting undertaking. He doesn't really trust me, you know."

"He's coming as close to it as I've seen in a long time," replied Dick. "Here's my phone number. If you want to talk to me, just call."

"Why are you going out of your way to help him?" wondered Abby.

"Why are *you*?" asked Dick.

"I'm trying to make a difference-- hopefully, for the better," she answered.

"As a prison warden, I see a lot of men who have given up trying to be 'the good guy,'" he reflected. "Jake is trying."

Dick went inside the little yellow house to talk to the parolee, who had been watching the entire time from a window, but could not hear what was being said.

An hour later, Jake appeared, smoking a cigarette and watching Abby cast, just as he had done on the day they first set eyes on each other.

"Do you hate me?" he wondered out loud. "I wouldn't blame you, if you did."

"Of course not!" exclaimed Abby, rather angrily. "*Never* ask me that, again."

She reeled in her line a little and executed another double haul, while Jake remained thoughtfully silent.

"Do you want to hold the fly rod for awhile?" she asked. "It's hookless."

Jake accepted the pole from Abby, and the two quietly watched the whitecaps in the bay, while the clouds lazily drifted overhead.

"Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."

~ Galations 6:2 ~

"The servant of the Lord must... be gentle unto all men."

~ 2 Timothy 2:24 ~

"And of some have compassion, making a difference."

~ Jude 22 ~

Chapter Five

When Someone Cares

"Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus."

~ Romans 15:5 ~

It was mid Sunday afternoon, and Jake hadn't shown up for church. In fact, besides work and the grocery store, he didn't venture from home at all. In the past few days, Jake was beginning to find a routine in daily life that had a calming effect on him. His job at the marina, while paying less than his last employment, was non-demanding, and didn't require him to interact with many people. Few noticed the quiet withdrawn man sweeping the docks, or doing odd jobs in the tackle shop.

But now it was Sunday, and John had noticed that Jake had yet to attend church even once.

"Why are you looking at *me*?" exclaimed Abby to her father. "I don't *know* why! It's not as though he tells me anything!"

"Then, what do you two talk about when you're fishing?" asked John, a little incredulously.

"I fish, and he watches," answered Abby with a shrug.

"Is that all?" asked Terry, who had been listening in.

"That's all," she replied.

But whether Jake and Abby were good friends, or not, John was counting on her to get him to church.

"Just because I helped him get a job, and sat with him during two flashbacks, doesn't mean we're close!" Abby later told Terry, that Sunday. "I don't know why Dad thinks we are!"

"Believe me," replied Terry, "your father is not trying to push you at him! I don't know if you're aware of this, but certain members of the community have been pressuring your Dad to turn Jake out of the little yellow house."

"Why?" asked Abby in surprise.

"Because, if Jake doesn't have a place to stay," explained Terry, "then he will be sent back to prison. They're just looking for any excuse to get him out of Three Mile Bay. You must remember that this area generates a lot of income through tourism, and they aren't eager to advertise the fact that someone like Jake lives here."

"But, that's not fair!" exclaimed Abby. "They're not even giving him a *chance* to make it!"

"Your father doesn't want Jake to fail, anymore than I do," sighed Terry. "But I think it's obvious that he isn't going to make it on his own-- and since he won't accept help from anyone else but you..." here, Terry paused.

"We're *not* close," repeated Abby with a dull groan.

"Just do your best," finished Terry. "If he goes back to prison, you *know* what will happen to him."

That thought sank Abby's heart.

After service that day, Abby knocked on the front door of the little yellow house. After waiting a minute or two for Jake to make up his mind whether he wanted to answer it or not, the door opened just enough for its occupant to look out.

"What do you want?" he asked in his gruff prison voice.

"You weren't in church today," observed Abby.

Jake was silent.

"Do you *ever* intend to come?" she asked.

Jake was still silent.

"Well?" pressed Abby.

"I can't," he mumbled.

"Why not?" she urged.

"I just can't," shrugged Jake, his eyes fixing on the bottom of the doorjamb.

"Look," said Abby, "I'm only trying to help you."

"I *can't* go to church!" he exclaimed, disappearing inside.

Since Jake had left the front door open, Abby took this as a sign that he wasn't *necessarily* turning her away.

"Why not?" repeated Abby, stepping inside.

Jake was standing in front of the couch in the living room, his hands shoved into his pockets, and his eyes steadily looking out the window at the bay.

"Because," Jake answered, in a barely audible voice, "I don't belong there."

"Nonsense!" she exclaimed.

Jake gave her a disbelieving glance, and shook his head in disagreement.

"You don't know me," he warned. "You don't know what I've had to do to stay alive. And if you did, you'd *know* that I don't belong with normal people."

For once, Abby was speechless. She brushed the hair back from her face, and was thoughtfully silent.

"No one is blaming you for surviving," responded Abby. "You did what you had to do."

"That's easy for you to say," replied Jake, turning his back to her. "You weren't there."

"Nothing about this is *easy*," sighed Abby. "Are you familiar with Deuteronomy twenty-two?"

Jake shook his head "no."

"Do you have a Bible handy?" she asked. "I can't quote the whole thing from memory."

Jake went to his bedroom for a moment and retrieved his Bible.

"Here," he said, handing the precious volume to her.

Then Jake returned to the window. As Abby opened the Bible, a few sheets of note paper fluttered to the floor, so she bent down and picked them up. But before she had a chance to look them over, Jake quickly plucked the paper from her hand.

"As I was saying," resumed Abby, paging through the Bible to the right passage, "in Deuteronomy, there's a chapter that talks about someone like you."

Jake looked at her skeptically. He didn't remember anything about rape being in the Bible.

"If a man find a betrothed damsel in the field," read Abby out loud, "and the man force her, and lie with her: then the man only that lay with her shall die: But unto the damsel thou shalt do nothing; there is in the damsel no sin worthy of death: for as when a man riseth against his neighbour, and slayeth him, even so is this matter: For he found her in the field, and the betrothed damsel cried, and there was none to save her."

"What does that have to do with me?" questioned Jake. "I'm not a woman."

"That's not the point," replied Abby. "Notice, God didn't say, 'Why didn't you kill yourself, before letting that man rape you?' No, she cried for help, but there wasn't anyone to save her, so she had to survive it. And for this, God didn't blame her."

By the look on Jake's face, Abby could see he was listening. Whatever he was feeling or thinking, Jake kept it to himself. Abby set the Bible onto the coffee table that John had removed from the Johannes house, because she had needed the room for her art studio. The memory of it caused Abby to smile. When she looked back to Jake, she caught him staring at her. He quickly looked back out the window.

"Well? Are you coming next Sunday, or not?" she pressed.

"I don't know," he replied. "They're going to point and ask questions, and I don't think I can handle that."

"Then, come to church with *us*," invited Abby.

Jake immediately resisted this idea. It would mean traveling in the same vehicle with John and Terry. They were men, and he couldn't stand to be around men more than he absolutely had to.

"All right," said Abby, altering the invitation slightly, "I have my own car. We'll go together. How about that? Once we get there, you can sit next to me in the pew, and you don't have to talk to anyone if you don't want to."

"Then, I'll come," he accepted, slowly.

"Good," replied Abby, turning to go. "Oh, I almost forgot, Mom invited you to lunch."

"I can't," declined Jake.

"I thought so," she smiled. "I'll bring the food to you."

With that, Abby left, closing the front door behind her. Sunday services were already over for the day, but next Sunday, The Good Shepherd congregation would get their first glimpse of the ex-convict.

Monday morning, Jake left for work early. It wasn't until three-thirty in the late afternoon, that Abby was finally called to the marina to act as an interpreter. When she arrived, Terrence, (her boss), directed Abby over to the Marina Tackle Store where a fly casting instructor was struggling to communicate with a young French-Canadian. Gary, the instructor, waved Abby over to them as Jake silently watched from a distance.

"Am I glad you're here," sighed Gary. "This guy insists he speaks English, but I barely understand him!"

"All right, calm down," laughed Abby, turning to face the customer. "Excusez-moi, puis-je vous aider? [Excuse me, may I help you?]"

"I speak English," replied the man with a thick French accent. He gave Gary a look of annoyance. "Je n'ai pas besoin de traducteur! [I don't need a translator!]"

"Very well," smiled Abby, not wanting to offend him by disagreeing. "Would you mind if I just stood over here and watch?"

The young man smiled at her, pleasantly.

"Où sont passées mes mnières? [Where are my manners?] Let me introduce myself," he said, extending his hand in friendship. "I am Pierre de Beauchamp."

"My name is Abby Johannes," she replied, shaking his hand.

"Oh! That man has no patience!" exclaimed Pierre.

"I'm trying to tell him that he's holding the rod all wrong!" explained Gary.

"Cela fait des années que je pêche de cette manière [I fish this way for many years]," debated Pierre, indignantly.

Though not knowing what Pierre had just said, Gary could hear the disagreement in his voice. Frustrated, the instructor threw up his hands in exasperation.

"May I see your cast, Pierre?" asked Abby, trying to diffuse the situation.

Seeing at last a chance to vindicate himself, Pierre smiled broadly. Holding his fly rod with both hands, he executed a clumsy maneuver that Abby would have never attempted-- especially in public! When Pierre had flailed his arms enough, he released the line, sending the fly a short distance away from the dock. Even Jake, who had seen Abby fly cast several times, knew that Pierre's technique was all wrong.

"C'est très gentil [It's very nice]," smiled Abby, trying hard to hide her amusement.

Gary, who had less patience with novices who thought they knew everything, glared at Abby. He considered her "interference" as horning in on HIS customer.

"Do you fly fish?" asked Pierre, politely offering the fly rod to Abby.

"Wait a minute," interjected Gary, "we're in the middle of a lesson, here."

"It is *over*," insisted Pierre, turning back to the pretty young woman with deep blue eyes.

In frustration, Gary stormed off, nearly knocking Jake over as he left.

"I apologize for his behavior," said Abby, politely accepting the fly rod from Pierre.

With grace and ease that Pierre had entirely lacked, Abby executed a perfect backcast. Though she had intentionally not beat Pierre's mark, the presentation of her cast greatly impressed him.

"Ah!" exclaimed Pierre. "You should be the teacher, and I should be your pupil!"

"It's no big deal," replied Abby, handing the fly rod back to him. "Well," she said, checking her watch, "since I'm not needed here, I have to get going."

"Un cadeau pour vous [A gift for you]," said Pierre, presenting her with a fifty dollar bill.

"You don't have to tip me," replied Abby, offering the money back to him. "I'm paid by the marina."

"No, no! I insist! Maybe, I see you again, someday?" he asked.

"Maybe," answered Abby, a little puzzled by his meaning. "Au revoir."

As she turned to leave, Abby noticed for the first time that Jake had been watching.

It had been no surprise to Jake that Pierre had liked Abby. She had that effect on a lot of men, and wasn't even aware of it.

"It's almost time to get off work," she observed. "Do you want a ride home?"

"All right," Jake replied, going inside to put away the broom.

Abby stuck in her head inside the store to say good-bye to Mr. Winkler before heading off.

"Gary isn't happy," announced the old man, coming to the door to speak with her.

"Maybe Gary should try smiling more," she responded.

"He says you stole his customer from him," related Mr. Winkler.

"How could I? I'm a translator, not an instructor!" she exclaimed, as Jake came out and stood beside her until she was ready to leave. "This has happened before, Mr. Winkler. Gary was unprofessional, and the customer walked."

"Do you think he should be fired, then?" asked the elderly man, curiously.

"That's not for me to say," answered Abby, backing off. "I'm only saying, that this has happened before."

"If I lose my main fly casting instructor, who will I get to replace him?" asked Mr. Winkler.

"Oh, no," replied Abby, recognizing a familiar look in his eyes. "I'm going to be an artist, remember?"

"If that's what you really want," he sighed, "but, remember this: you have a God-given gift. Don't hide it behind an easel!"

"I'll remember," assured Abby, as she and Jake began the walk to the parking lot.

When they reached the jeep, Abby discovered that she had a flat tire. Upon closer inspection, she realized that someone had slashed it with a knife.

"Gary," muttered Abby, under her breath.

Not willing to surrender to Gary's bitter spirit, Abby began to change the tire, while Jake watched on. One might think this ungallant of him, but the simple truth was, Jake didn't know how to drive-- let alone change a tire. Besides, Abby was perfectly capable, and even asked him to step aside while she worked. Through it all, her spirit was upbeat and undefeated. She "took joyfully the spoiling of [her] goods."

Even though Abby's face was becoming smudged with grease, Jake tried not to notice that her eyes were bright and sparkling, and that her cheeks were flushed with color; he tried to ignore her lilting laughter as she related some silly joke a fisherman had shared with her that very morning. As he tried not to notice, he silently wondered at the young woman with the seemingly ever buoyant spirit.

That evening, as Abby stood on the shoreline fly fishing, she heard the quiet footsteps of Jake, as he came to watch. In the past, fishing had been Abby's way of getting away from other people. But that had changed ever since Jake had come to live in the little yellow house. Now, to be alone, was to be alone with Jake somewhere in the near vicinity.

As Abby looked over her shoulder to direct her backcast, she noticed Jake sitting on the beach behind her, his form slightly shaking.

"Jake, are you all right?" she asked.

"Leave me alone," came his gruff reply.

"Excuse *me*," smiled Abby, "but I was here first."

When she heard no response, Abby set down her fly rod, and went over to the troubled man.

"Are you all right?" she repeated, sitting down beside him, but not close enough to make him uneasy.

"I wish I were normal," he sighed, trying hard to control his nervous tremors.

"Normal is highly overrated," chuckled Abby, taking off her jacket and placing it around his shoulders. "What's the matter? Having another flashback?"

"Not exactly," replied Jake, hanging on to a corner of her jacket. "I was just remembering something that happened when I was little."

Abby's ears perked up. It was rare for Jake to speak of his past. But when he continued no further, she exclaimed,

"Oh! You're not going to stop there, are you?"

"Are you really interested?" he asked in surprise.

"Moderately so," smiled Abby. "If you're willing to talk about it, I'm willing to listen. What were you just remembering?"

"I don't know how old I was," began Jake, "but I must have been very young, for I remember how large the slide in our backyard seemed to me at the time. The abuse had already started by then, and I remember one night, waking up crying because Dad had shoved something cold into my mouth. His face was inches from mine." Here, Jake shuddered and shifted uncomfortably. "It was my grandpa's German Lugar from World War II. Dad told me that if I didn't do exactly as he said, he would blow the back of my head off, because I was being 'disobedient' by fighting him in bed. I remember not believing Dad," mused Jake. "One night, when he came to me, I once again refused to obey. Without hesitation, he shoved the gun barrel into my mouth and pulled the trigger. When it didn't go off, I was very grateful to him."

"'Grateful'?" repeated Abby, incredulously. "Why should *you* be grateful to *him*?"

"Dad could have killed me, and he didn't," explained Jake.

"Did he threaten you often?" asked Abby.

"Often enough to keep me silent," replied Jake. "I've never told anyone this before, but I would always wet the bed when he raped me."

Abby was quiet. So that was why Jake frequently wet his pants when in a flashback. Abby was soon pulled from her thoughtful reverie, when she noticed that Jake's shoulders were trembling more violently and that his breathing was becoming heavier as the memory began to flood his body.

"No-- not again," Jake whimpered, his hands grasping the earth beside him.

"Try to relax," urged Abby, as she saw his body stiffen.

In an effort to relax, Jake lay back on the sand and looked up at the ever darkening sky above him. Mercifully, this flashback wasn't very strong. Soon, he could feel the memory depart, and was once again breathing freely.

"I'm sorry," apologized Abby, "I shouldn't have asked you to talk about it."

"So many stars," Jake observed, his voice filling with reverent awe.

Abby smiled.

"Have you ever heard the stars sing, or beheld a brilliant moon when it beams?" she recited.

"Is that from a poem?" wondered Jake, still lying on his back.

"Yes," answered Abby, "but it's not a very good one. I wrote it a long time ago."

For the first time since he had arrived in Three Mile Bay, Jake laughed. It wasn't strong or hearty laughter, but fragile and gentle-- like its originator.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"You are!" he exclaimed. "I can't imagine *you* writing poetry!"

In mock indignation, Abby tossed a handful of sand in his direction, and got to her feet.

"Wait," said Jake. "Finish it."

"And risk further humiliation?" chuckled Abby. "Never!"

"Please?"

This was the second time Jake had ever asked anything of her. The first, was when he asked her not to leave him after the flashback before last. Since Abby had not been able to grant the first request, she began to recite:

"Have you ever heard the stars sing;
Beheld a brilliant moon when it beams?
Or seen the gazelle leap for joy,
As if a tightly wound up toy?"

"I've seen clouds dancing with the breeze,
Kept in time by the directing trees.
Sunlight floods every fiber and pore,
As plants raise their heads to ask for more.

"Birds add their voice to the orchestration,
Playing every day, in every nation.
Have you ever heard the twinkling stars sing,
Praises and honor to an All-Wise King?"

"I like it," remarked Jake.

"I've got to go home before Dad sends out a search party," smiled Abby, going to pick up her fishing gear. "Are you all right now?"

"I guess so," replied Jake, handing her back the jacket she had draped over his shoulders.

After exchanging good nights, they parted ways.

The next day, when Abby was called to the marina, she wasn't surprised to find that Gary had been fired. Ralph, another employee at the store, stepped in to temporarily fill the position as main fly casting instructor until a more qualified person could be found. Though Ralph wasn't nearly as gifted or knowledgeable as Gary, he was much easier to get along with.

The week sped by, and Abby had entirely forgotten about Gary's dismissal-- that is, until the following Friday night.

Abby was quietly working on the computer in her room, as an evening rain shower pelted the glass window pane behind her. She glanced at the digital clock and sighed out loud. Jake had taken the bus into Chaumont for an appointment with his therapist-- the one he was required by his parole to see twice a week, or else be possibly sent back to prison. This happened every Tuesday and Friday. This time, however, Jake was taking longer to come back. The night was fast setting in, and there was still no sign of him.

"Mom," called out Abby, as she walked down the hall to her parents' bedroom. "Jake should have been back by now."

"What time does the last bus arrive?" asked Izumi, setting down the pregnancy book she had been reading on the bed.

"About fifteen minutes," replied Abby, impatiently shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

"Jake probably just decided to spend the day in Chaumont, instead of coming back on an earlier bus," proposed Izumi.

"I wish Dad and Uncle Terry were here," muttered Abby, checking the time on her parents' clock.

"They'll be home tomorrow," assured Izumi, for the two men were on a small business trip in Alexandria Bay to meet one of their clients.

Just then, a brilliant white flash of light lit up the bedroom curtain. Seconds later, it was followed by a rolling clap of thunder. Abby jumped in spite of herself.

"Do you want to sleep with me tonight?" asked the mother, seeing the apprehension in her daughter's face. "Do remember when you were three years old? You'd climb into bed with us whenever you had a bad dream."

"I haven't done that in a long time, Mom," resisted Abby, checking the time once more.

"Well," sighed Izumi, sadly, "there's room on the bed if you change your mind."

Abby paced back to her bedroom and sat down again in front of her computer.

"Why am I concerned?" she wondered to herself. "Jake's an adult. He knows what he's doing. He can take care of himse--" here Abby stopped short.

Another crack of thunder rattled her window pane. She pulled back the curtains and looked out. The last bus from Chaumont was now due. Abby kept vigil at the window until finally returning to her parents' room.

"Mom, I'm driving to Chaumont," she announced.

"What?" cried Izumi.

"He should have been on that bus," reasoned Abby, going back to her room to fetch a coat and the keys to her jeep.

"Maybe, the bus is just running late," Izumi reasoned. "Sweetheart, it's getting dark, and the roads will be wet!"

"Mom, Jake is several hours late! He should have been back well before dinner!" fought Abby, quickly kissing her Mom on the cheek and going to the front door.

"Wait!" called out Izumi. "You'll need this," she said, handing her daughter an umbrella. "Maybe, I should come with you."

"I can handle this," responded Abby, her voice full of confidence.

Izumi watched helplessly as Abby's form disappeared into the garage behind the little yellow house. The torrent of rain poured unceasingly from the heavens, pounding the garage roof so that Abby could barely hear herself think. She removed the canoe from her jeep, and put on the hard top. After starting the engine, the jeep pulled out of the garage. When Abby got out to close the garage doors, another flash of lightning lit up the night sky.

As she drove down the highway into Chaumont, the jeep's headlights shone brightly ahead, making the rainfall visible in the two beams of light. What had happened to Jake? Abby didn't know what to expect, or if she was simply overreacting to absolutely nothing. Of course, she much preferred the "absolutely nothing," but something deep in her heart, told her that Jake was in trouble.

The jeep sped along, until Abby noticed more and more vehicles on the road. It was unusual for this time of night, for rush hour traffic usually occurred earlier in the day. The traffic crept along, until it came to a complete stop. Abby nervously drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, anxious to get into Chaumont. Just then, she heard the loud blaring sound of an ambulance siren as it screamed by her vehicle, hurrying up the road in the one empty lane that had been sectioned off by orange cones.

"What's going on?" she muttered to herself.

Soon another ambulance whizzed by, quickly followed by two police cars. By now, the other motorists were also beginning to wonder what was happening. Through the swishing of her windshield wipers, Abby could see blurred red and blue flashes of light, less than half a mile up

the road. The thought came to her that maybe Jake's bus was stuck in traffic, just as she was now. But, the longer she sat there, the more nervous she became. What if... Abby didn't allow herself to finish the thought.

She looked to the side of the road. Yes, the terrain looked suitable enough for her jeep to drive on. Turning her wheel, Abby turned off onto the rugged, uneven ground beside the freeway. The jeep's wheels thumped and thudded, bumping Abby up and down in her seat, as she carefully made her way beside the highway. Motorists stared at her, some laughing at her ingenuity, while others cursed her for doing something that they wished they could do, themselves.

As Abby came closer to the flashing lights, she could make out the outline of a long bus, laying on its side in the pouring rain. She immediately came to a stop. Above the bus' front window, she read the destination, "Three Mile Bay." Abby felt sick. Jumping out of the jeep, she ran to a policeman who was busy trying to get the traffic moving.

"Excuse me?" she shouted, struggling to be heard over all the commotion.

The officer, however, was too distracted to notice her. There were paramedics from the fire department all over the place, bandaging the wounded, and administering first aid to the injured passengers of the bus. Abby frantically searched the faces to see if Jake was among them.

"Clear!" she heard someone shout. It was followed by a loud "Whap!" and then another, "Clear!"

Abby spun around. Emergency medical technicians were working on a man, lying on the ground. She moved a little closer, and suddenly realized that she knew him. It was Gary!

"Excuse me, Ma'am," said a firefighter, "but you can't be here. Please go back to your vehicle."

Abby numbly nodded, her eyes fixed on Gary's still body as she moved away from the wreck.

"My friend," she mumbled, "I think he's on the bus."

Abby struggled to remember Jake's last name, but couldn't. There was just too much going on for her to be able to think clearly.

When she reached her jeep, Abby made the decision to continue her drive to Chaumont. From what she had been able to see, Jake was not on the bus. On the other side of the wreck, the highway was clear, so Abby was able to once more get back onto the road.

When she finally reached Chaumont, Abby pulled into a gas station to get some directions, and to fill her tank.

"Yes, I know where Dr. Jacoby's office is," said the gas attendant. "Just go down this street to the stop sign, then turn right. Go straight ahead two blocks and make a left. His house is at the end of the street."

Considering Abby couldn't remember Jake's last name, she was amazed that she had been able to recall the name of his Christian therapist. As she drove down the street, Abby noticed that she was gripping the steering wheel so hard, that her knuckles were white. At last, she saw Dr. Jacoby's house, for it had a sign out front, indicating that the building also doubled as an office.

Abby parked the jeep and got out in the rain, for it was still coming down in buckets. Her coat was doing little to shed water, and in her concern over Jake, she forgot to use her mother's umbrella. Wiping the rain from her eyes, Abby splashed up the walk and rang the doorbell. She held her breath as the door opened.

"Yes, may I help you?" asked a white-haired man, wearing a brown knit sweater.

"Is Jake here?" she asked, her voice full of concern.

"Yes, he's in the dining room," replied Dr. Jacoby, opening the door so she could enter. "Are you by any chance, Abby?"

"Yeah, that's me," sighed Abby, wearily.

Dr. Jacoby led the drenched young woman into the dining room, where Jake was sitting at the table, enjoying a hot cup of coffee, and finishing the last of his apple pie.

"Look who just arrived!" announced the doctor, as they entered the room.

Jake looked up and was shocked to find Abby, tired and dripping water all over the polished wooden floor.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, confused by her presence.

"Where have you been?" she demanded.

Jake hunkered back in his chair.

"It's my fault," apologized Dr. Jacoby. "I was running behind in my schedule, and asked Jake if he wouldn't mind waiting until I finished with another one of my patients. Afterward, it was so late, I invited him to stay to dinner. I'm sorry if this has caused you any concern."

Abby stared a hole in Jake.

"I didn't think anyone would notice if I was late coming home," explained the ex-convict.

"You could have *called*," rejoined Abby. "I thought you might have been hurt, or bleeding on the side of the road, or something!"

"I'm sorry," apologized Jake.

"You'd better be," Abby replied with a sneeze.

"My, you're wet to the bone," observed Dr. Jacoby. "You can put on my robe, and change out of those wet clothes. I'll just put them in the dryer, and they'll be as good as new. What do you say?"

Abby sneezed again.

"Right," replied Dr. Jacoby, "this way to the bathroom. There's a robe on the back of the door."

A few minutes later, Abby came out wearing an oversized bathrobe while the therapist put her clothes into the dryer. Jake stood up as she entered the room and looked about her surroundings.

"Do you want some hot coffee?" he offered.

"No thanks," replied Abby, quickly locating an easy chair on the far side of the room.

Jake lingered by the table for awhile, and finally meandered over to where she was sitting.

"I'm really sorry," he apologized once more. "I didn't think you cared."

"I don't," she replied stoutly, though the smile on her face ruined the effect she was striving for. "Don't scare me like that, again. I was so sure you were in trouble. Do you know, that on my way here, I saw the last bus back to Three Mile Bay, on its side, in the middle of the freeway? I thought *you* were on it!" Abby took a moment to steady her voice, before continuing. "Gary was

on that bus. I don't think he made it," she reflected soberly. "If it *had* to happen to someone, I thank God it wasn't you."

"Abby," hesitated Jake, in a voice that sounded as though he were trying to warn her, "I'm not worth your concern."

Abby looked up at him in shock.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she demanded, her eyes flashing angrily at him. "Is this your way of saying you don't want to be my friend?"

"That's not what I meant," he interjected.

"Then what *do* you mean?" she asked, half shouting. "Am I supposed to believe that just because you've had a hard life, it somehow makes you unworthy or defective? Because if that's what you're selling, I'm *not* buying!"

Without another word, Jake returned to his chair at the table; he fingered the coffee mug and every once in a while, glanced in Abby's direction.

"Your clothes should be dry in half an hour," announced the therapist, as he entered the dining room. "Are you cold, Abby? It's much warmer on this side of the room. It's the heat register," he explained, pointing to the metal grate near Jake's feet. "Come, you can't be very warm over there," he insisted.

Reluctantly, Abby stood up from the easy chair and trundled herself across the room to the chair Dr. Jacoby had pulled out for her.

"I'm glad to finally meet you," said the doctor, smiling at Abby.

"He talks about me, does he?" asked Abby, referring to Jake.

Jake lowered his head and continued to play with his coffee mug.

"We talk about *many* things," said Dr. Jacoby. "Sometimes, the ones who are close to victims of torture and abuse, don't know how to cope with the trauma that their partner is enduring."

"I am NOT his partner," refuted Abby.

"Still, you *are* friends, aren't you?" pressed the therapist.

"The jury is still out on that one," she replied, a little disappointedly.

"Even so, you may find it helpful if you come and talk with me, and maybe I can help you better understand what Jake is going through," offered Dr. Jacoby.

At this, Jake jumped to his feet and stared at the therapist, his face betraying fear and uncertainty.

"Now Jake," said the man, "I thought we agreed that eventually, anyone close to you would be invited to talk to me, so that they could help you, and understand what is happening to themselves, as well. You're not the only one the abuse affects."

"No," whispered Jake, pacing back and forth beside the table like a caged animal. "Not her-- not Abby."

"Why not?" challenged Abby, who up until now, had been prepared to turn the invitation down.

"Because," replied Jake, not finishing the sentence.

"Because, what?" asked Dr. Jacoby.

"Because, she'll *hate* me!" answered Jake, speaking directly to his therapist.

"Why do you think she'll hate you?" asked the doctor.

"I know what I've done, and I hate *myself*," replied the young man.

"And what did you do," finished Dr. Jacoby, "but survive the circumstances in the only way you knew how. Jake, you know that nothing we talk about will ever be spoken to another, without your complete and entire agreement. You know this. I am only inviting your friend to talk about HER feelings, and how SHE is coping with your problems. Do I have your permission to do this?"

"I guess so," Jake slowly assented, sitting back down in his chair.

"Wait a minute," piped up Abby. "You two are talking as if I'm not here. I didn't say I would come."

"Why not?" asked Dr. Jacoby.

"I *have* all *my* marbles!" she exclaimed, half jokingly.

"And Jake doesn't?" asked the doctor.

"Well, he wouldn't be here, if he did, *would* he?" reasoned Abby.

"I thought you wanted to help Jake? He must mean something to you-- you drove all this way in the driving rain, because you thought he was in trouble," reminded Dr. Jacoby. "If that isn't the very definition of friendship, I don't know what is. Come, do this for your friend."

"Promise me," Abby requested of Jake, "that next time, you'll call me if you're going to be late? You don't have to tell me where you are or what you're doing-- just call me so I know you're all right."

"Okay," Jake softly replied.

"Then, I'll come," conceded Abby.

"Good, I'll go get your clothes out of the dryer," said the therapist.

"Mom is home by herself," explained Abby, checking the clock on the wall, after Dr. Jacoby had left the room. "Dad and Uncle Terry won't be back until tomorrow, so I want to get home as soon as possible. Will you be ready to go, after I get dressed?"

"Yes, I'll be ready," replied the young man, trying to bolster himself to ask her a question. "Abby, are you mad at me?"

"I was never really mad at you, Jake," she sighed. "You frightened me, that's all. I was certain that something bad had happened to you-- and it almost did. I'm so grateful that God stopped you from getting on that bus."

"It feels good," confessed Jake, with a half smile.

"What does?" wondered Abby.

"When someone cares," he replied.

Before leaving, Dr. Jacoby made a standing appointment with Abby to come every Tuesday, after his session with Jake was over. Then the therapist walked them out to the jeep with an umbrella, and waved good-bye as they drove off into the dark stormy night.

"Casting all your care upon Him [God]; for He careth for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world."

~ 1 Peter 5:7-9 ~

Chapter Six

The Trouble with Clouds

"Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."

~ Galatians 6:2 ~

When Abby woke up Saturday morning, she opened her bedroom window and looked out at the overcast morning sky. There was a hint of thunder in the distance, making it improbable that she would be able to do any fishing that day. Abby's eyes followed the horizon of the bay, until they rested on the little yellow house. When she remembered the conversation with Dr. Jacoby the night before, Abby frowned.

"How in the world did I get myself roped into seeing a psychiatrist?" she wondered out loud, and shook her head in disbelief.

After getting dressed, Abby went down the hall to her parents' room and found her mother still asleep in bed. Quietly, she went to the kitchen to fix breakfast.

"Great," she sighed gloomily, after finding the cereal box empty. "Guess I had better run to the store."

The supermarket wasn't far, so Abby decided to walk, instead of taking her jeep. Quietly closing the front door behind her so she wouldn't wake up Izumi, Abby made her way down the walk and to the main road. She glanced at the little yellow house as she passed it, wondering if Jake was awake, or not. Zipping up her parka to stay dry from the light morning drizzle, Abby walked down the side of the road to the supermarket.

Vacationers who had been expecting their stay to be warm and dry, shivered about in hot weather clothing, unprepared for this cool snap. Large pools of rainwater dotted the highway, leveling out the uneven road with shimmering mirrors of the gray sky overhead.

Just as the young woman was taking in all these observations, a clam unexpectedly plummeted to the ground directly in front of her. Abby looked skyward and was greeted by the cry of an angry bird, warning her away from his meal.

"A Herring gull," observed Abby, stepping aside so the bird could claim his meal.

She watched as the gray mantled gull swooped down and greedily ate the smashed contents of the shattered clamshell. Further up the road, Abby saw another gull, dropping a clam onto the

hard paved surface, trying to crack open its next meal. As the gull descended to eat its hard-fought breakfast, a car sped by, narrowly missing the bird. With a shiver, Abby inhaled the chilly air and resumed her walk.

Because it was early in the day, the supermarket was fairly empty. After Abby had found what she was looking for, she went to the checkout. To her annoyance, the cashier was Mrs. Kelsey, a local busybody.

"Good morning, Abby," greeted the woman, pleasantly. "How are your parents? I hear your mother is going to have a baby."

Before Abby had a chance to reply, the cashier glanced back to see a lone customer coming through the store doors.

"Here he comes again," announced Mrs. Kelsey.

"Who?" asked Abby, her eyes following Mrs. Kelsey's stare.

"That *man*," the cashier replied with disdain. "The one your father is renting his house to. Honestly, Abby, I think John should have his head examined for allowing a man like that, to live in our community. Did you know," she asked in a hushed whisper, "that he's a homosexual?"

"He isn't either," replied Abby, flatly.

"He comes from the Watertown State Penitentiary, doesn't he?" affirmed Mrs. Kelsey. "I heard that men go in straight, but come out homosexuals. Do you want this double-bagged?"

Abby paid the cashier, and was about to leave, when she added one more thing.

"Did you know," asked Mrs. Kelsey, "that all he ever eats is mushroom soup? Every Saturday morning, he checks out with a few bathroom items, and an armful of mushroom soup! What do you think of that? It *can't* be healthy!"

Abby only shrugged, and left before Mrs. Kelsey had another chance to bend her ear. As she walked home, it was with a somewhat heavy heart.

"He's done it to me, again," she chuckled, half jokingly. "Every time I'm up, he brings me down--one way or another!"

When Abby arrived back at the house, she found Izumi awake and sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of hot tea.

"Hi, Mom," greeted Abby. "We were out of cereal, so I went to the supermarket. Do you want me to fix you some?"

"Yes, thank you, Sweetheart," replied Izumi, a little wearily.

"You still look tired," observed Abby. "Maybe you should go back to bed."

"No, I'm all right," smiled Izumi, patiently. "I never sleep very well when your father's away."

"He'll be home this evening?" asked Abby.

"Maybe even sooner, if he can get away any earlier," she replied, watching Abby fill two bowls with cereal.

"Mom," wondered the young woman, "could I invite Jake over, today?"

"If you want to," answered Izumi. "That's right, he's never been in this house-- except once briefly in the living room. Why hasn't he come over any sooner?"

"Dad and Uncle Terry," answered Abby, understandingly.

"Oh, yes, I almost forgot," sighed Izumi. "Jake doesn't like men."

"It's no wonder," said Abby, "after everything men have done to him. Do you mind if I invite Jake over for breakfast? Mrs. Kelsey says he only eats mushroom soup, and I want to make sure he has a chance to see the house before the guys get back." Not waiting for Izumi to answer, Abby set off for Jake's house.

"*Mushroom soup?*" the mother wondered out loud.

Abby quickly walked to the little yellow house and knocked on the front door, but there was no answer. She waited a few moments more before trying again.

"Come on, Jake," she said, "open the door."

"No one's home," said a voice from behind.

Abby jumped in surprise. Jake was standing in back of her, holding a bulky grocery bag, (no doubt filled with cans of mushroom soup).

"Jake!" she exclaimed. "You scared me!"

"What do you want?" he asked in his gruff voice.

Taking the house keys from his pocket, he sidestepped her on the porch and opened the front door.

"I thought you'd like to come over for breakfast," asked Abby, a little hopefully.

"I can't," came the almost terse reply.

"Dad and Uncle Terry are away, and won't be home until lunch," she informed him.

Jake looked at her thoughtfully.

"It'll only be Mom and myself," coaxed Abby.

"I don't know," he hesitated. "I try not to leave this house if I don't absolutely have to. I never know when I might have a flashback."

"Mom will understand," smiled Abby. "Come on, you must be sick to death of mushroom soup by now!"

Jake glared at her angrily.

"You've been going through my things!" he cried. "The minute my back is turned... what'd you do, pick the door lock, or did Mr. Johannes give you the key?"

"Jake Murphy, that's not fair!" she exclaimed, placing her hands on her hips indignantly. "I've never set foot inside your precious house except when you were home, and even then, I didn't go snooping through your pantry-- if you even have one! The only reason I know about the mushroom soup is because a grocery cashier *told* me!"

Jake stared at her for a moment, and then turned away.

"I'm sorry," he muttered in a low voice.

A rumble of thunder rolled over the little yellow house causing Jake's frame to shudder.

"Come over after you've put away your soup," said Abby, stepping outside the enclosed porch.

"Isn't he coming?" asked Izumi, when Abby returned alone.

"Maybe," was the only reply Abby could give.

After she had eaten, Abby went to the living room window and looked out. Jake was standing a few feet away from their front door, his hands shoved into his pockets, and his back turned to the Johannes house.

"What are you looking at?" asked Izumi, coming to Abby's side. "What is Jake doing?"

"I think he's working up the courage to come in," sighed Abby.

"Well," mused Izumi, "he'd better hurry and make up his mind; the men might be back as soon as this afternoon."

When Abby went to the front door, Jake turned to see it open.

"Have you decided yet?" she asked.

Jake bowed his head and came inside.

"It's nice to see you again," smiled Izumi, pleasantly.

The young man uneasily shifted his weight to the other foot, and politely nodded at Mrs. Johannes. Feeling out of place inside his landlord's home, Jake blinked down at the carpet.

"If you'll excuse me," said Izumi, "I think I'll go lay down and get a little more rest. Sweetheart," she said, turning to her daughter, "would you do the breakfast dishes?"

"Sure, Mom," replied Abby, as her mother disappeared into the master bedroom.

Jake looked about the living room. The first thing to catch his eye was an easel near the large bay window. Seeing he was interested, Abby led him over to her makeshift art studio.

"I'm working on a great blue heron right now," she said, pulling the cover off the easel. "Have you eaten breakfast yet?"

Jake shook his head, "no."

"I'll be right back," she said, going to the kitchen.

The young man stood looking at the unfinished painting until Abby returned with his bowl of cereal.

"You're a better artist than I am," said Jake, after he had silently prayed over his food.

"Sometime, I'd like to see your sketches," said Abby.

"They're not much to look at," he replied, quickly drawing back into his shell.

"Come, I want to show you my aquarium," she offered, leading Jake down the hall to her room. "Are you all right Mom?" asked Abby, for her parents' door was open, and Abby could see Izumi sitting up in bed, reading a maternity book.

"I couldn't sleep," smiled the woman. "Remember to leave your door open when you have a guest in your bedroom," she reminded the eighteen year-old.

"No worries, Mom," replied Abby. "This way, Jake."

Jake stood in the doorway of Abby's room and looked around, still eating the bowl of cereal she had just given him. It was no surprise to discover that the bedroom contrasted Abby's personality. A comforter with a fish design draped the bed, while dark blue and purple curtains adorned the window; a desk in one corner of the room held a magnifying glass and accouterments similar to what Jake had seen on Mr. Winkler's fly tying table back at the tackle store, while another desk by the door had a personal computer on it. A chair with wheels allowed Abby to roll across the room from one desk to another, while spinning reels and miscellaneous fishing tackle could be found on shelves and atop her dresser, amongst makeup and hair brushes. Old paintings and sketches were stacked beneath the fly tying table, but of all this, the thing that fascinated Jake the most, was the aquarium.

"It's a one hundred and twenty-five gallon aquarium," Abby smiled proudly. "Since we live right next to a freshwater bay, I thought it might be fun to try saltwater, for a change."

Jake ventured inside the bedroom to get a closer look. The long aquarium was placed against the wall to the right of Abby's bed. Underneath the aquarium, were black pine cupboards, which

housed the pumps and supplies necessary to keep such a delicate ecosystem alive. On top, was a black pine canopy, which contained the aquarium's overhead lights.

"At night, I can fall asleep watching the fish," she said, smiling. "It's really beautiful when it's dark and the canopy lights are on. The whole room lights up with a soft shimmer. I love it!"

With that, she clicked on the aquarium lights so Jake could see the fish more easily. Brightly colored saltwater fish darted through tall plants and around dazzling coral. Jake was awed by the colors and the movement of the fish.

"What's that one?" he asked, pointing to a bright blue and black fish with a mostly yellow tail fin.

"That's a Regal tang," explained Abby. "It's one of my favorites. I love to watch their dorsal fins flatten when they gain speed. Look! That one's doing it right now!"

"Yes, I saw it!" exclaimed Jake, in fascination.

"What's that one called?" he inquired, pointing to another.

"It's an Emperor angelfish," said Abby, "and that blue and black striped one is a Koran angelfish. I only have three coral in there right now, but I intend to add a lot more in the future."

"How long have you had this?" Jake asked curiously.

"For three years now," replied Abby, going to her computer desk to sit down in the roly chair. "I had my first aquarium when I was nine, and I made the mistake of naming all the fish. When Doris died, I was heartbroken. Mom had quite a time calming me down! After that, they were all just, 'my fish.' Go ahead and sit down," she offered, seeing that Jake was getting tired of standing. "Whenever we have guests, they usually wind up sitting on the edge of my bed to watch the fish!"

When Jake sat down, he noticed that there were fish painted on the wall near the window.

"Oh, that," said Abby, when Jake brought her attention to it, "I was going to have a whole underwater scene with lots of coral running along the bottom of the wall, but I never got around to it."

On the dresser, Jake saw a photo frame with a picture of a younger Abby and a Japanese boy about her age.

"That's my best friend, Masato," said Abby. "He lives in Tokyo, Japan, where my Mom used to live. I haven't seen him in several years, but we email each other a lot. Maybe someday, he'll come to America, and you can meet him. You'd like Masato."

Jake wasn't so sure of that. The only men he trusted were the warden and his psychiatrist, and even then, he sometimes found it very difficult to let down his guard around them.

"This is the only picture I have of my Grandpa Yoichi," said Abby, showing him another framed photo. "The woman is Grandma Anna. They lived in Tokyo, too."

"Have you ever visited them in Japan?" asked Jake, finishing his cereal.

"No," replied Abby, "Grandma Anna died of cancer when I was little. Mom says she saw me when I was a baby, but I never met Grandpa Yoichi. He committed suicide before I was born."

At once, the young man quickly became somber.

"Why did he kill himself?" wondered Jake.

"It was because of gambling debts," explained Abby. "When Grandpa Yoichi was disinherited, he decided to jump off a bridge instead of facing his creditors. Anyway, after he died, Grandma Anna brought Mom to Three Mile Bay, because this is where Grandma Anna had grown up as a child. Anderson was her maiden name. Her parents lived in this house nearly their entire lives. I was told that they were good Christians."

Interested, Jake listened to Abby's brief narrative of her family's history.

"This is Mom and Dad on the day they got married," said Abby, bringing down another picture frame from her dresser. "Dad had first seen Mom at the airport in Tokyo. They kept running into each other on the journey to Three Mile Bay, so they got married two days after arriving!"

"It was a little longer than *that!*" exclaimed Izumi from the master bedroom down the hall.

"Okay," revised Abby, laughingly, "two and a *half* days! Jake, they only dated *once!*"

"It wasn't a date," refuted Izumi, "it was a Birthday lunch!"

"Mom had just turned eighteen," Abby explained in half a whisper.

"And we didn't get married because we kept 'running into each other'!" continued the mother.

Abby showed Jake another photo of her parents, together.

"Dad said that once he fell into Mom's blue eyes, he couldn't get out again!" continued Abby, in a voice loud enough that her Mom could easily overhear.

On this point, however, Izumi didn't contradict. It was true, John had said those very words.

Just then, someone knocked on the front door of the Johanneses' home.

"I'll get it!" Abby called out, quickly going down the hall to the living room.

After a minute or two, she came back to the bedroom and excitedly gathered her fishing gear. The clouds had unexpectedly parted, giving everyone the perfect opportunity to go outside before it clouded over again.

"It was just my fishing buddies, Mom!" called out Abby. "Jake, we're going to do some fly fishing. Want to come?"

Immediately, he shrank back.

"Do you want me to stay?" she asked.

"No, that's all right," replied Jake. "Go with your friends."

"Okay," said Abby, "but you can stay and watch the fish for as long as you want. See ya later, Mom!" she shouted, running down the hallway.

When the front door slammed shut, the house was suddenly quiet. All Jake could hear were the gentle sound of the bubbles from the aquarium air pump.

Abby spent the Saturday morning with her buddies, fly casting along the shore of her parents' private property. Her friends were from church, and ranged in age from teenagers to old men. Even though Abby was the only woman there, they treated her as one of the guys, for she was--almost.

"So, he's coming to church tomorrow?" asked Dr. Gregory, who was the local veterinarian.

"Yup," answered Abby, casting her line out a far distance from the shore.

"Say, that was a good one," remarked David, a young man about the same age as Jake. "Someday, I'll get a tape measure, and we'll record the distance of your longest cast."

"Does he fly fish?" continued Dr. Gregory.

"Nope," said Abby.

"Are you going to turn him into an angler?" laughed Mr. O'Shea, who had a prosperous law firm in Three Mile Bay.

"Why didn't you bring Jake out here, so we could meet him?" asked Dr. Gregory.

"I told you, he's skittish around men," repeated Abby.

"I'm going up the shore to wade out a piece," said Mr. O'Shea. "It's getting too crowded here."

"I think I'll go down shore," said another, until they finally were spread out evenly along the waterfront.

The only person missing from this gathering was Tyler, who still hadn't come to speak to Abby as he had said he would. Abby thought it was just as well.

Time went by quickly for Abby. In fact, she became so involved in her fishing, that she didn't even notice when John and Terry came home from their business trip from Alexandria Bay.

"Hey, little fishing buddy, catch anything today?" greeted Terry, coming to where she stood. He waved to some of the others and continued to watch Abby's line for any signs of a bite.

"When did you get back?" she smiled.

"Just now," Terry replied.

"Did everything go okay?" she inquired, reeling her line in a little.

"Yup," he answered a little absentmindedly. "Did you and Izzy do all right while we were gone?"

"Uh-huh," said Abby, only half listening. "Did you see the surface water break over there?"

"Maybe it's Ole Sequoia," laughed Terry, for that bass was supposed to be the smartest fish in the bay, successfully escaping one angler after another, leaving them only with tales of how they had almost landed the wily creature.

"It's gone now," said Abby, her attention returning to the conversation. "Did you get me anything?"

"I thought you were too old for surprises!" laughed Terry, pulling a small box from his pants pocket.

"I am, but you *always* get me a surprise," smiled Abby, accepting the package from him. "What is it?"

"I got that lure in a shop in Alexandria Bay," explained Terry, as she opened the small cardboard box.

"Wow!" exclaimed Abby. "I've never seen this pattern before! I can hardly wait to try it out!"

Just then, Abby heard her father's voice calling from the house.

"Abby!" shouted John, "get in here!"

"What did you do?" Terry asked in a surprised voice, for John sounded angry.

"Search me," shrugged Abby, handing her beloved fly rod to Terry. "Don't let it float away," she cautioned.

"That only happened once," pointed out Terry.

"*Today*, Abby!" shouted John.

By now, John had gotten the attention of every church angler on the shore. They turned to see what was going on, and called to Terry to ask if anything was wrong. Terry could only shrug, and wonder like the rest of them.

"What is it, Dad?" asked Abby, running to the house.

"Did you leave Jake in your bedroom?" John asked angrily.

"Yes, he wanted to watch the fish," explained Abby. "Why, is he still here?"

"He's in your room," informed John, folding his arms with a patient sigh.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Just go to him," ordered her father.

Abby went down the hall and through the open bedroom door.

"Jake?" she called, for she didn't see him, anywhere.

"Please," begged a voice from the corner of the room, "don't hurt me!"

Abby turned to see Jake huddled beside her fly tying desk, his arms wrapped around his head, as if expecting to be assaulted.

"Oh, Jake," sighed Abby, getting down on her knees in front of the ex-convict.

"Please," he begged once more, obviously caught up in one of his flashbacks.

"You're all right," she said in a calming voice. "No one is here but Abby."

"Abby," he whispered weakly, his arms beginning to relax a little.

"That's right, no one is hurting you," she consoled him, careful to maintain her distance.

Gradually, Jake came out of the flashback. Abby waited patiently, until he struggled to get to his feet.

"Maybe you should wait a little longer," she suggested, when his legs collapsed beneath him.

Jake nodded in agreement and leaned his head back against the wall.

"I hate being like this," he muttered. "I wish I could be like one of your fishing buddies out there, with not a care in the world."

Here, Abby laughed softly.

"You don't think they have any problems-- any crosses to bear?" she asked. "Dr. Gregory has had a string of health problems, and could only go back to his veterinary practice within the last

year; Mr. O'Shea, the lawyer, recently took in his sister from Illinois after her husband and daughter were killed in a car accident. I can't think of anything going on with David right now, but Tyler... well, you know about Tyler. The others all have their problems, Jake. We just have to do the best we can with what we've got. As the Bible says, 'He that endureth to the end shall be saved.' You can't give up-- none of us can."

It was then that Abby noticed Jake had wet his pants.

"I'll bring you some dry clothes," she volunteered, getting up from the floor. "Just close this door if you feel like it. I'll be right back."

"Abby?" he called after her.

"Yes?"

"Thanks," said Jake.

She smiled.

John stopped Abby in the living room and asked what was going on.

"It was just another flashback," she explained. "It wasn't a bad one. I've seen him go through worse."

"When Jake is *your* guest in this house," cautioned John, "he is *your* responsibility."

As Abby walked across the waterfront to the little yellow house to get some dry clothes for her friend, she had a sinking feeling that she was getting in over her head. Not only was Jake becoming more and more reliant upon her to help bring him out of his flashbacks, but so were the others.

Abby opened the door of Jake's house and stepped inside. It was the first time she had been there while he wasn't present. A sketchpad lay open on the coffee table; Abby resisted the urge to go take a look. Instead, she went down the hall to Jake's room. There, folded across the chair, were a pair of jeans. Abby grabbed these, some shorts, another pair of shoes, and made her way back to her parents' house.

When she returned to her bedroom, she found the door closed.

"Jake?" said Abby, knocking on the door. "I have your clothes."

The bedroom door cracked open, and she handed him the bundle.

"Put the pants and shoes you're wearing on my bathroom floor," she instructed him. "After they've been washed, I'll bring them over to your house."

Jake didn't say anything, but only nodded in assent. When Abby returned to the living room to wait, John and Izumi joined her.

"He's all right," repeated Abby. "I think Dad's return just caught him off guard, or something."

"Is he going home soon?" asked John.

"Are you trying to get rid of him, Dad?" asked Abby, half jokingly.

"Not exactly," John replied slowly. "He's sometimes a little hard to be around, but if you can take it, I suppose we can too."

Abby smiled wearily.

"Don't speak so loudly," warned Izumi. "He might hear you!"

When Jake didn't emerge from Abby's bedroom after several minutes, she went to go see if he was all right.

"Jake?" said Abby, knocking on the door. "Are you okay? Is it all right if I come in?"

"Yes, come in," came the reply.

Abby found him looking at the unfinished portion of her underwater mural on the wall.

"I could finish this for you," he offered.

"You don't have to do that," said Abby.

"No, I want to do something for you, after everything you've done for me," he replied. "I know I'm sometimes hard to be around."

"Jake," she asked, curiously, "did you just overhear my father in the living room?"

"Please, don't leave me, Abby!" he frantically begged. "I'll do anything to make it up to you-- I swear I will!"

"*Stop it!*" she cried, her voice rising into a shout. "Don't talk like that! You can do anything you have to-- whether I'm here or not! God doesn't give Christians more than they can take. That means He has a lot of confidence in you! You just have to have confidence in Him, that He knows what He's doing!"

Jake numbly sank down on the edge of her bed. Hearing the outburst, John came to the door to see what was the matter. Abby quickly shooed him away.

"I'm so tired of fighting it all the time," said the ex-convict. "You're right, I can get through this, with or without you. But," he added, "it's *so* much better *with* you."

"How did you ride through flashbacks in prison, or when you're by yourself at home?" she wondered.

"It doesn't end nearly as soon as when you're there to bring me out of it," replied Jake. "I don't blame you for wanting to get rid of me. But, you're the only good thing I've found on the outside [of prison]. Please, if I didn't bother you unless I *really* needed help, would I be less of a burden to you? I've asked God so many times for help, and it came in the form of you. I can't lose that!"

"Calm down," said Abby, sitting down in her chair. "I'm not going anywhere. Please, try to stop trembling. You've almost got me doing it!"

"Sorry," apologized Jake, gripping his hands together to keep from shaking.

"It's getting close to lunchtime," observed Abby, glancing at the clock. "Do you want to stay? I could bring your meal in here."

"I'll make it up to you," he said, gratefully.

"That's enough of that," sighed Abby, standing up. "Let's pretend that you're not so desperate, all right?"

Abby put Jake's wet clothing into a grocery bag so she could take it to the laundry room, which was located outside, near the back of the house.

When she reached the living room, her parents and Terry were waiting for an explanation.

"What was all that about?" asked John. "I actually heard you shout at Jake!"

"Everything's all right now," assured Abby, struggling to smile. "I had to bend his arm, but he decided to stay for lunch."

Izumi looked at John, who looked at Terry.

"Is that *all*?" asked Terry.

"He needs my help," explained Abby. "I'm doing the best I can. Now that the crisis has been averted, I have to go to the laundry room and put these in the washing machine."

"I guess that's that," sighed John, as she left the room.

Since the excitement seemed to be over, the two men began to relate to Izumi what had happened on their business trip, and how they had resolved the "anomalies," (a fancy word for bugs), in their client's network. Just as Izumi was about to ask a technical question, she was interrupted.

"Mom!" Abby shouted from the kitchen door. "Where's the laundry detergent?"

"It should be on the top shelf!" Izumi called back, from the living room.

A few moments later, Abby shouted,

"I don't see it!"

"Then I guess we're out, Sweetheart!" replied Izumi.

"We're running out of *everything*," sighed Abby. "Do you want me to go to the store now, or after lunch?" she shouted.

"Lunch will be running late," said Izumi, coming into the kitchen so she wouldn't have to shout across the house. "You might as well go now. And, while you're at it, pick up a dozen eggs, two loaves of bread, a quart of nonfat milk... here, just take the grocery list. Are you going to take you-know-who with you?"

"And risk having a repeat of this morning?" cried Abby. "Jake's coming with *me*!"

Abby pulled the jeep in front of the house and went inside.

"Jake," she announced, coming into the bedroom and grabbing her purse, "I have to go to the grocery store again. I'm taking you with me."

Jake, who had been watching the fish in Abby's large aquarium, immediately jumped up and was ready to go. As they passed through the living room, Terry and John smiled politely at Jake, but the young man kept his head down and stayed hard on Abby's heels.

As they got into the jeep, Dr. Gregory, who was still fishing with a few others on the waterfront, waved a friendly good-bye to Abby.

"That's Dr. Gregory," explained Abby, as they drove away. "By the looks of those gray clouds," she observed out loud, "it looks as if we're going to be in for another stormy night."

Now that it was nearing the noon hour, the supermarket parking lot was crowded to overflowing. As Abby parked the vehicle, Jake announced that he wasn't going inside.

"I can wait in the jeep," he insisted, pulling out a small sketchpad to keep occupied.

Abby looked up at the lowering sky. Since the hard top was on, Jake would stay dry if it started to rain again.

Inside the supermarket, Abby quickly did the shopping but wound up waiting fifteen minutes in line at the checkout. By the time she pushed her grocery cart outside, the sky was beginning to drizzle. When Jake saw her, he jumped out and helped put the grocery bags into the back of the jeep.

Just as they were climbing into the vehicle, a large splash of water hit the windshield.

"I was thinking," said Jake, on the return drive, "I could finish the seascape on your bedroom wall. You could sketch out what you wanted, and I could do the painting and detail work."

"You're not volunteering out of fear, are you?" asked Abby, cautiously.

"Please, let me try," pleaded Jake. "If I mess it up, you can paint over the work I did. I have to do *something* for you."

Abby glanced at his sincere, youthful face and groaned within herself.

"Okay," she sighed, "but don't do it because you're afraid I won't help you."

Relieved that he was going to repay her in some small way, Jake tried to breathe easier.

When they reached home, he carried in the bags of groceries for her, before once again retreating to Abby's bedroom.

"Dad," asked Abby, as John helped her and Izumi put away the groceries, "could Jake have one of your ties for church service tomorrow? I don't think he has one."

"Sure," said John, who already had more than he needed after last year's infusion of Father's Day gifts.

"Thanks," smiled his daughter, going to the master bedroom to dig through John's collection of neckties.

When she found one that would do, Abby tossed it onto Jake's lap as she passed the open bedroom door.

"It's for tomorrow," she explained.

When lunch was ready, Abby took Jake's plate to him. Sitting on the bed with his legs crossed, Jake prayed over the meal and began to eat. To his surprise, Abby pulled up the roly chair and ate with him. While she ate, Abby sketched out her underwater mural on a drawing pad, while Jake watched over her shoulder.

"I'd like the coral to look something like this," she said, quickly sketching out a design.

"I see," said Jake. "May I make a suggestion?"

Abby handed him the sketchpad and pencil.

"What if you did it this way, instead?" he asked, skillfully outlining two coral like the ones Abby had in her aquarium.

"You pick up fast, Jake," she smiled in admiration. "Yes, that *is* better."

Jake beamed, for she had approved of his idea. To anyone else, it would be a small thing, but to Jake, who was trying so hard to please Abby, it was a sign that she was accepting him into her world. The rest of the meal, they collaborated on the sketch, until at last, a complete design was laid out.

"When you're painting, you can refer to the fish in the aquarium," said Abby, "and I'll get some source photos for you on the others. I'll have to buy the paints on Monday, and move the fly tying desk over so you'll have room to work."

After lunch, Abby worked on her computer while Jake made a few detailed sketches of certain mural scenes in the sketchbook. Every few moments, he would stare at the aquarium for inspiration, and then return to his pad.

At intervals, John would walk by the open bedroom door to see what he could see-- both coming and going. It's not as though he didn't trust Abby or Jake, but the thought of a grown man in his daughter's room unnerved him a bit. Especially, one whom Abby had previously informed him was "cute."

That evening, Jake ate dinner at the Johanneses' house, safely insulated from John and Terry's presence in Abby's bedroom. The young man was fascinated with her aquarium, and could sit watching the fish for long periods at a time, if Abby let him. Outside, the rain which had threatened to come that afternoon, finally descended on Three Mile Bay, releasing a torrent of water from the dark skies.

While Abby worked at her fly tying table after dinner, Jake could hear the rain pounding on the roof overhead. He delighted in the thought that he was dry, warm, and safe in Abby's room. Safety is something we sometimes take for granted, especially at home; but growing up, Jake rarely had that feeling of security in his own house. Here in Abby's bedroom, he was more conscious of God's blessing of safety than he had ever experienced in his entire life.

"Safety is of the LORD."

~ Proverbs 21:31 ~

Later that night, when the household began to prepare for bed, Jake reluctantly went home.

"Go on," Abby had coaxed him. "I'll see you tomorrow morning."

Early Sunday, everyone started preparing for the day. For the first time since Abby could remember, she wouldn't be going to church in the same vehicle as her parents and Uncle Terry. It was an odd sensation for Abby, and it gave her the feeling as though she were somehow embarking on a path all her own.

Abby put on a pair of Sunday shoes and went out to the little garage to get the jeep. Unlike the day before, the sky was clear and brilliantly blue. John, Izumi, and Terry got into their car and drove away, with the expectation that Abby would soon follow.

"Jake!" she called, pulling the jeep up to the little house and getting out. "It's time to go!"

The door opened, and Jake stepped into the enclosed screen porch. He was dressed in his everyday clothes, and was holding the necktie she had given him the day before.

"Why aren't you ready?" she asked him.

"I'm *not* going," came the gruff reply.

"But, everyone is expecting you," she said, instantly regretting the words as soon as she had uttered them.

Jake quickly disappeared into the little yellow house.

"Come on, Jake! We don't have time for this right now," sighed Abby, going inside. "Jake? Where are you?"

"I'm not going!" he replied, coming from his room.

"Why not?" pressed Abby. "I didn't mean to imply that there's any pressure, simply because you're expected in church today."

"I'm NOT going!" repeated Jake, throwing the tie onto the coffee table.

"Take it easy," said Abby. "No one is going to force you to do *anything*. Now, what's the matter? You were ready last night. What changed your mind?"

"That tie," he said, pointing to the offending object on the coffee table, "it won't work!"

"Is that all?" she laughed. "I can teach you how to tie a simple necktie."

"And these clothes!" Jake exclaimed. "Do the others go to church dressed like this?"

"Some people come dressed casually," answered Abby.

"Not your father-- not Terry," pointed out Jake. "I saw them just now, and they were wearing suits!"

"What's the big deal?" asked Abby. "So you're not wearing a suit. Not *everyone* wears a suit to church!"

"Don't you understand?" asked Jake, wearily. "I'm a freak as it is. I don't belong there, and I *look* like I don't belong there."

"But, if you don't belong in a church," argued Abby, "then, where *do* you belong?"

"In prison," he muttered.

"Jake, I refuse to spend the entire Sunday morning debating with you," she warned, turning to leave. "I'd offer you one of Dad or Uncle Terry's suits, but you're a little smaller than they are, so they wouldn't fit. This tie and my promise that you won't have to face the others alone, are the only things I can give you. If it's not enough, then I'll have to go without you. What's it going to be, Jake?"

All the congregation had arrived and were seated in their pews, ready for the church service to begin. John nervously searched the faces to see if Abby and Jake were present.

"I still don't see them," he observed, craning his neck to get a better vantage.

"Don't hurt yourself," smiled Terry.

"They'll be here," assured Izumi.

"Maybe, they had a flat tire," wondered John.

"Abby can change a tire," reminded Terry.

"If they don't show up soon, I'm going back--" John suddenly stopped in mid sentence.

The front door opened, and Abby appeared with Jake following close behind. Smiling, she waved to her family, and took a seat near the back of the church, so Jake would feel more comfortable.

"I told you they would come," smiled Izumi, a little triumphantly.

Seeing this, John relaxed, and opened his song book as the congregation began singing, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Jake didn't sing, and Abby didn't urge him to. It was enough that he was here.

Every once in a while, someone would glance in Jake's direction, more out of curiosity than anything else. The ex-convict sat in the pew and stared at the open song book until it was time to stare at an open Bible.

When the service was over, everyone stood up and began to file outside. Dr. Gregory, who had been eager to meet Jake for some time, approached Abby and made a comment about the service.

"Yes, it *was* a good sermon," she agreed, recalling her promise that Jake wouldn't have to speak to anyone, if he didn't want to. "If you'll excuse us, we really have to get going. It's my turn to fix lunch, and if I'm late, Uncle Terry could get a headache."

True, it was a lame excuse, but it worked. Abby successfully extracted the young man from the building, and was hurrying him to the jeep, when Tyler called out. Abby turned, only to see him coming toward her.

"Could I talk to you for a moment?" asked Tyler, hinting that he didn't want an audience.

"Here, Jake," she said, handing him the car keys, "get in the jeep. I'll be there in a moment."

Jake nodded in compliance and glanced at Tyler, who was drawing Abby aside by the arm.

"I see you brought him to church," began Tyler in a disapproving tone. "You shouldn't have come together, Abby. People will think there's something going on between you two."

"There's nothing 'going on,' as you put it," refuted Abby. "Is this what you wanted to talk to me about?"

"No," he replied, calming down a little. "I wanted to see how you were. My feelings for you still haven't changed."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Abby, "because mine haven't, either."

"Abby," he pleaded, "I'm leaving for college at the end of August! It's the *same* college *you* were going to attend! I can't understand why you're throwing away your future like this!"

"I don't think I *am* throwing away my future, Tyler," she reasoned.

"Is it because of him?" asked Tyler, nodding toward the direction of the jeep.

"I know you're going to find this hard to believe," said Abby, struggling to explain, "but Jake's arrival only COINCIDED with my decision about us. He has nothing to do with this."

"Then," argued Tyler, "is it me? Is it something that I did, or didn't do? Tell me!"

"It isn't you," answered Abby, "it's ME. I don't love you. I'm afraid it's just that simple."

"What about college?" asked Tyler. "If you attended the same school, we could still see each other. Maybe, I could change your mind."

"Even if you *could* change my mind," said Abby, "you *can't* change my heart. You wouldn't want a wife who doesn't love you, would you?"

"I'm thinking," said Tyler, in mock hesitation. "No, I suppose I wouldn't-- not even if it *is* you."

"I'm sorry," she apologized.

"I hope you find what you're looking for," said Tyler.

"I'm not sure I'm looking for *anything*," replied Abby, "except an art career in wildlife and maybe something involving fly fishing."

"Well, I guess this is good-bye then," he said, holding out his hand. "I won't be coming over to your house before I leave for college."

"Good-bye, Tyler," said Abby, shaking his hand. "I think that's for the best."

The two parted ways, and Abby got into the jeep. She couldn't pretend that the conversation had had no effect on her, for Tyler had always been a good friend.

"Are you all right?" asked Jake, seeing that her face was pale.

"It's over," said Abby, putting the key into the ignition.

"I know I wasn't the reason you and Tyler broke up," said Jake, "but I hope I'm not responsible for your not getting back together."

"No," she replied, starting the engine, "it's not because of you."

Jake leaned back in his seat and sighed heavily.

"By the way," she suddenly remembered, "the next time you come to church, I can't scuttle you from the building as hurriedly as I did today. Eventually, you're going to have to shake someone's hand!"

"Okay," he replied, closing his eyes. "If you say so."

"Be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the LORD."
~ Psalms 31:24 ~

Chapter Seven

A Relationship of Mutual Dependence

"A man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps."

~ Proverbs 16:9 ~

Ever since Gary had been fired, the tackle shop had lacked a good, qualified fly casting instructor. Since Mr. Winkler was still unsuccessful in talking Abby into becoming accredited so she could take the job herself, he placed an advertisement in one of the popular fishing magazines, and received a response late in June.

"He's going to arrive next Monday," announced Mr. Winkler one late afternoon, when Abby had dropped by to pick Jake up from work.

"Who is?" asked Abby, only half listening. "Are you ready to go, Jake? Uncle Terry is cooking dinner tonight. For once, I have to ask you to sit at the table like the rest of us. Okay?"

Jake remained silent.

"His name is Dennis Beckman," continued Mr. Winkler, "and he's won the MRD Championship for two years straight."

"That's nice," replied Abby, getting the jeep keys out of her pocket. "Jake, you can't eat on the bed, indefinitely. You have to learn to be around Dad and Uncle Terry."

"His salary will be almost double what I paid Gary," informed Mr. Winkler, "but he'll be worth every penny."

"Uh-huh," replied Abby, still waiting for Jake to respond.

"I'm going to stay home, tonight," answered Jake.

"So you can eat by yourself?" sighed Abby. "Isn't that a steep price for avoiding my family?"

"Dennis is qualified to train others interested in becoming fly casting instructors," added Mr. Winkler.

"Who will?" asked Abby.

"Couldn't I eat in your room, like I've been doing?" pleaded Jake.

"*Dennis Beckman!*" answered Mr. Winkler. "Abigail Johannes, you haven't heard a word I've said!"

"Of course I have," said Abby, checking her watch. "We're going to be late for dinner, Jake."

"I said, I'm not coming," muttered the ex-con, putting the broom away and heading out the door.

"Then, what did I say?" tested the old man.

"Only that you're overpaying Dennis Beckman," replied Abby, "so he'll teach me to become a fly casting instructor."

"So, you think you know me as well as all that?" grinned Mr. Winkler. "Maybe you do, but Dennis could teach you a lot, young lady. He'd make an excellent instructor for you."

"I have to get running," smiled Abby. "Uncle Terry is expecting Jake and I to be on time."

"But, I thought Jake said he wasn't coming," Mr. Winkler frowned.

"He'll come," replied Abby, as she turned to leave.

"Give it some thought!" called out Mr. Winkler. "I still don't think you should hide your talent behind an easel!"

Outside, Jake was nowhere to be seen. With a patient sigh, Abby climbed into the jeep and caught up with him further down the main road. He was so intent on getting away from her, that Jake didn't even pause when Abby called out to him to stop.

"Slow down, will you?" pleaded Abby, as she jumped out of the vehicle and tried to keep up with his fast strides while on foot. "For pity's sake, I'm on *your* side, Jake!"

At this, the young man slowed down to a stop and took a deep breath.

"It's only Dad and Uncle Terry," Abby reasoned with him. "They're *not* going to hurt you. You do fine around Mr. Winkler. Are Dad and Uncle Terry so different?"

"Mr. Winkler is an old man," replied Jake, in a voice that betrayed just how uncomfortable he was feeling. "Mr. Johannes and Mr. Davis [Terry] are closer in age to..." Jake seemed too pained to say anything further.

"You know," reminded Abby, "Dr. Jacoby said that you must work at overcoming your aversion to men, whenever possible. Try to look at this as one of those opportunities."

"Are you going to do it?" he asked her, curiously.

"Do what?"

"Become an instructor," explained Jake, "like Mr. Winkler wants you to."

"I don't think so."

"But," said Jake, "he went to all the trouble to get Dennis Beckman for you."

"Mr. Winkler hired Dennis Beckman because he knows it will be good for business," concluded Abby. "Besides, you're changing the subject. My family doesn't mind you hanging around the house all the time, but they're getting a little uncomfortable about the fact that you always keep to my bedroom."

Jake kicked at the sidewalk with his foot.

"Jesus said he won't forsake you," reminded Abby. "You must be brave."

"I *have* been brave," he muttered.

"I remember a verse in Proverbs," encouraged Abby, "that goes something like this: 'The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous are bold as a lion.'"

"Will you be there?" asked Jake. "You've told me a hundred times that I can get along without you, but things are always easier when you're there, Abby."

The sincerity of this statement made Abby smile, in spite of herself. In many ways, Jake reminded her of a stray puppy, thirstily soaking in any drops of kindness, no matter how small.

"I'll be there," replied Abby, as they retraced their steps back to the jeep. "Just take one step at a time, Jake. I know you've been brave, but it can't stop there. Life requires a lot of courage-- even for us 'normal' ones."

When they reached the Johanneses' home, Jake followed Abby inside. He then made a move toward her room under the pretext of working on the mural, for he had begun to put the first brush strokes on the wall, after weeks of sketching and preparation.

"You can do that after dinner," said Abby motioning him into the kitchen where Terry was standing over a simmering pan on the stove.

"Glad you could come, Jake," Terry grinned broadly, for this was his first real opportunity to converse with the young man since his arrival in Three Mile Bay. "Would you set the table Abby? That's a good girl."

Jake stood awkwardly by the kitchen entrance, unsure what to do with himself.

"How was work?" asked Terry, pleasantly.

The question was directed at anyone who would answer, but Abby was the only one willing to talk.

"Mr. Winkler is bringing in a new guy to replace Gary," related Abby, putting the dinner plates on the table.

"What's his name?" asked Terry.

"I forget," answered Abby, now putting out the napkins.

"Dennis Beckman," answered someone in a low voice.

Terry and Abby looked up in surprise. It was Jake.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"His name is Dennis Beckman," he repeated.

Terry smiled at Abby, and then returned to his sauce.

"Only set three plates, Abby," instructed Terry. "Your parents are going out, tonight."

"You'd think that after being married nineteen years," sighed Abby, "they'd act more their age!"

"Age has nothing to do with it," smiled John, coming into the kitchen. "Terry, Izumi and I won't be back till late, so don't wait up for us. Oh, hi, Jake. I almost didn't see you standing there. I noticed you've started the mural in Abby's room."

Jake nodded in the affirmative, but remained silent.

"Well," sighed John, trying to remain positive, "at least you're in the kitchen. Abby, clean up the mess in the living room by the time we get home. I don't mind you using the room to do your painting in, but it's getting a little out of hand. I almost put my foot through one of your canvases."

"That's all right, they're blank," shrugged Abby.

"Blank or not, move them out of the walkway," ordered John.

"Yes, Sir," she sighed, leaving the kitchen.

Jake followed her into the living room where Abby began to clean up her makeshift art studio. He stopped in front of Abby's easel and looked at the painting of the heron she had been working on for the last few weeks.

"I just finished it, today. What do you think?" she inquired, curiously.

"It's very realistic," he remarked.

"It's supposed to be," replied Abby, slowly.

It was obvious to her that Jake was holding back something.

"What is it?" she asked. "What's wrong with the painting?"

"I don't know," he replied. "It's only..." Jake hesitated.

"Go on," coaxed Abby. "You're not going to hurt my feelings by telling the truth."

"It lacks something," he observed.

"Like what?" laughed Abby. "The heron isn't missing any limbs. That's an anatomically correct bird."

"It's not that," said Jake. "There's something missing. I can't put my finger on it, but it just doesn't feel right."

"'Feel right'?" she repeated, puzzled by his choice of words. "I don't understand."

"Never mind," said Jake, dismissing his comment. "It's better than anything I could have ever done."

Just then, Izumi entered the room, carrying an evening purse.

"Sweetheart, you're cleaning up your mess!" she smiled in approval.

"Dad said to," replied Abby, with a half smile.

"I see you've started painting the mural, Jake," commented Izumi. "I just walked by Abby's bedroom and saw the wall. It's a little exciting, isn't it? Abby's talked about finishing it for so long, that it's nice to see it actually going up!"

"It never seemed important enough," shrugged Abby. "Besides, I'm not going to launch an art career by painting fish on a wall no one hardly ever looks at, Mom!"

Jake suddenly lowered his head and pretended to have a reason to excuse himself from the room. Just then, John approached and draped Izumi's jacket around her shoulders.

"Okay," he said, "I've got my keys and wallet. Are you ready to leave, Little Dove?"

"Terry," called Izumi, as she and John prepared to step outside, "don't forget to lock up before bedtime!"

"Hey," said Terry, appearing from the kitchen wearing one of Izumi's aprons, "do I ever forget? Don't worry, I'll hold down the fort while you guys are gone!"

With a laughing grin from John, the married couple departed, closing the door behind them.

"So," asked Terry, turning to go back into the kitchen, "where did your guest go to?"

"I don't know," replied Abby, just now noticing that Jake wasn't in the living room with them.

"Well, you'd better find him," said Terry, "because dinner will be ready in a few minutes."

Abby had only one place to look in the house for Jake-- her room. As she came through the open bedroom door, she cried in dismay.

"Jake! What on earth are you doing?!" she asked, for he was wiping away all of his pencil marks that outlined where the mural would be, and what it would look like.

"I'm cleaning up the mess," replied Jake.

"This wasn't a mess!" refuted Abby. "It would have looked really good!"

"No, it wouldn't!" argued Jake.

"But," sighed Abby, "you've just erased all your work!"

"It's no big loss," he shrugged, tossing aside the rag he had used to clear the wall with.

"What's the matter, Jake?" she asked, for he had genuinely been excited about the project, up until now.

"Don't look so shaken, Abby," he said, seeing her concerned face. "I just have to find another way, that's all."

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"You were only letting me work on the mural, because you were trying to keep me busy," explained Jake. "I was only doing this because I thought you really wanted it. I have to find another way to pay you back."

"You don't owe me anything," said Abby.

"Yes, I do," contradicted Jake, gathering the paint cans and placing them in a neat pile in the corner of the room. "I lean on you like a cripple leans on a crutch. I put you to a lot of trouble, and someday, I'm going to pay you back for the inconvenience I've caused."

"Okay," sighed Abby, folding her arms, "what did I say that's making you act like this?"

Jake looked at her out of the corner of his eye and lowered his head.

"I have the distinct taste of socks in my mouth," said Abby, "because I think my foot was just there. Come on, Jake. Help me out. What did I say?"

"You said no one hardly ever looks at this wall," he replied in a quiet voice.

"And I hurt your feelings," she sighed. "I didn't mean it that way, Jake. Honestly, I didn't."

"I don't want to be *merely* kept busy!" he exclaimed in a burst of emotion. "I need to do something important! Tell me what to do, and I'll do it!"

"I confess," she admitted, "that the mural *was* intended to give you something to do. You're always struggling to forget the past, so I thought *something* was better than *nothing*."

"I know God put me on this earth for a reason," said Jake, "even if it's only to be a Christian, like it says in that verse, 'Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.' I suppose, I'm trying to find my place in life. You're right, something *is* better than nothing, but I was just hoping that the something meant more to you than it did."

"You're asking some pretty hard questions," said Abby. "I'm eighteen, and I'm trying to find *my own* place in this world. I don't know how you should spend the rest of your life, but, I'm pretty sure of this: you shouldn't spend it trying to pay me back. You keep insisting that you owe me something, and I keep trying to tell you that you owe me nothing. It's called, *friendship*."

"Abby! Jake!" called Terry from the kitchen. "Dinnertime!"

"Coming!" she called back.

This evening was a time of learning for Jake. He had spent fifteen of his twenty four years, at the hands of abusers. That's nearly two thirds of his entire life. The past wasn't something that would mysteriously vanish as though it had never happened, but things were changing for the better. He was truly beginning to understand the concept of friendship, for the first time in his life. Jake knew Abby cared what happened to him, and that she wanted to help him, but the why of it had always escaped him. For example, he had thought Warden Doyle had helped him, because that was somehow his job. Friendship based on the love of God, has the power to touch someone's life, with no expectation of returned favor. Now Jake understood.

"When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not... thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompence be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee."

~ Luke 14:12-14 ~

As Terry took off the apron, Abby and Jake sat down at the table.

"I hope you two are hungry," said Terry, "because I forgot John and Izzy weren't going to be here, so there's more than plenty to go around!"

After saying grace, the food was passed around the table. When the garlic bread came to Jake, a sad look crossed his face.

"What is it?" asked Abby, a little concerned that Jake might have another flashback episode.

"The smell of garlic made me remember something that I hadn't thought of in years," he replied, slowly.

Terry leaned forward in his chair, for this was the first time Jake had ever spoken about his past life in front of him.

"After my first year in prison," remembered Jake, "I was able to get a job in the kitchen, cleaning dishes and mopping the floor. Sometimes, I would help the cook prepare the meals. In return for this extra duty, he would give me something that I couldn't get anywhere else in the penitentiary."

"What was that?" asked Terry.

"In return for my added labor, the cook would give me all the garlic I could eat," said Jake.

"Garlic!" exclaimed Abby, in surprise.

"He would give me access to the sack of garlic, and let me eat all I could in the space of five minutes," he continued.

"You mean, you ate it raw?" said Terry.

"I didn't have any choice," replied Jake. "There wasn't time to cook it."

"But," asked Abby, "why ever would you want to eat raw garlic?"

Jake stared silently at his plate.

"I think I know," guessed Terry. "It kept the abusers away."

The young man looked up at him.

"How did you know?" he asked, in astonishment.

"I'm a survivor of abuse, too," explained Terry. "I was raped and beaten by my stepfather when I was a boy. Even though I never experienced prison rape, or the torture you must have endured, I do have an idea of what you're going through."

"But," said Jake, trying to reconcile this knowledge with his perception of Terry, "you're normal."

"You mean, I *look* normal," smiled Terry. "I found out a long time ago, that the only place you find normal in this life, is on a washing machine. Did the garlic trick work?"

"Most of the time," replied Jake. "But, when the others found out that the cook was helping me, they beat him up. After that, I was on my own again. Do you ever think of it?" he asked.

"You mean, have I forgotten the abuse?" asked Terry. "No, I'll never forget. But, God has shown me that I can live my life without having to dwell on those memories when they come-- and they *do* come."

"How do you handle the flashbacks?" asked Jake, quite forgetting his dinner.

"Well," answered Terry, "I don't think mine are as strong as yours. But, for me, I try to remember Psalm sixty-one, verses two and three: 'From the end of the earth will I cry unto Thee [God], when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the Rock that is higher than I. For Thou hast been a shelter for me, and a strong tower from the enemy.' I try to remember that God *has* delivered me from my abuser, and that He *will* deliver me from the memory of the abuse as well. It's easy to lose yourself in the pain when the memories come flooding back. That's the time my heart is overwhelmed, and that's the time I ask God to lead me to Higher Ground, so the waves won't overcome me. Do you know Who the Higher Ground is? It's Jesus, 'the Rock that is higher than I.' The answer to all our problems lies in the person of Christ. When I'm struggling with the past, I ask the Holy Spirit to remind me that Christ died to secure my soul for Himself. The pain I may feel, pales in comparison to what He suffered on the cross, for my sins."

"Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him that endured such contradiction of sinners against Himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds."

~ Hebrews 12:2, 3 ~

"May I ask," wondered Terry, seeing that Jake was intently listening, "can you always tell when a flashback is about to happen?"

"Most of the time," replied Jake, "but, sometimes, they come and I'm not aware of what's happening until I'm in the middle of it. That's usually when Abby saves my hide."

"The important thing is," advised Terry, "not to dwell on the memories when they come. Try really hard to think about something else, and it *will* eventually pass. It helps to have someone else pull you back to reality. I remember times when John did that for me. But, if you happen to be alone, don't be afraid-- trust God, and He will pull you back, Himself. You can count on it. God never forsakes His own. We've just got to cooperate with Him."

"How?" asked Jake.

"What I mean by cooperate," answered Terry, "is that the 'Father worketh hitherto, and I work.' Sometimes, we tie God's hands by doing things that aren't the most conducive to His helping us in a timely manner. In other words, we sometimes get in His way, so help comes later than sooner. Like clutching up, when you first realize you're having a flashback, instead of trying to relax. Clutching only made my flashbacks worse. Also, I noticed that slowly counting backwards from one hundred, sometimes helped. I suppose it will be different for everyone, but the key is to do everything you can to help the situation, so God will be able to do His part."

Abby took another bite of dinner, as her uncle continued.

"When we need it, God always sends us help," affirmed Terry. "We just have to have the good sense to recognize it, when it comes. I'm living proof of that. Sometimes, it's the Holy Spirit reminding us of a verse, and sometimes, it's a friend, shaking us back to reality. Look for the grace, and you'll find it!"

Jake was thoughtful. He hadn't known Terry's past, but it helped to talk to someone who had been there, himself. If Terry could overcome the memory of the abuse, then maybe, it was possible that he could as well. But, it was going to take faith and patience.

"We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us."

~ Romans 5:2-5 ~

After dinner, Jake and Abby washed the dishes, for Terry had done the work of preparing the meal.

"I'm going to the Hancock Gallery, tomorrow," said Abby, "to get Mrs. Woods to look at my heron painting. Hopefully, if she likes it, she'll take it on consignment."

"Why are we washing these dishes by hand?" asked Jake, pointing to the unused automatic dish washer.

"It's currently not working," whispered Abby. "We can afford a new one, but Dad and Uncle Terry haven't given up 'fiddling' with this one yet!"

"Oh," replied Jake, accepting another plate to be dried. "May I ask you a question?"

"Sure," said Abby, rinsing some silverware under the kitchen sink faucet.

"If your family can afford to send you to college, then why aren't you going?" he wondered.

"I found I wanted different things than I used to," answered Abby.

"Then, you *know* what you want?" asked Jake.

"Yes," laughed Abby, "pretty much."

"For instance?"

"Well," sighed Abby, trying to think, "I know I want an art career in wildlife. Maybe someday, I'll also do something with my interest in fly fishing, but for now, that's it."

"What about getting married and having a family of your own?" he asked.

"Now you're starting to sound like my Dad," groaned Abby, letting the water out of the sink.

"Do you think there's just one person that you're fated to be with?" he wondered.

"What's with the twenty questions?" laughed Abby.

"I'm serious," insisted Jake. "Such as your friend in Japan, Masato-- do you think he's your future?"

"Me? marry Masato? Really, where do you get these ideas?" said Abby, frowning.

"But, you told me he was your best friend," remembered Jake.

"My best *email* friend," rephrased Abby. "I meant, my best *email* friend. Besides, what's it to you who I marry, or don't marry?"

"Nothing," shrugged Jake. "I was just wondering."

"You can stop wondering," said Abby, folding the apron and putting it away. "I'm not marrying anyone, and I'm not on the verge of marrying anyone. I very well may *never* marry anyone. Could we change the subject now?"

Jake followed Abby back to her room where she sat down at her desk to finish some work on the computer.

"Leave the door open!" reminded Terry from the living room, where he was reading the newspaper.

"We will!" shouted back Abby.

"So," continued Jake, "you don't think you're *ever* going to get married?"

"What's with you, tonight?" she groaned. "First, you erase the mural, then you question Uncle Terry about flashbacks, and now you're quizzing me on my future marital status! Haven't you had enough for one evening?"

"I'm trying to think things through," said Jake, thoughtfully.

"Then, could you think a little quieter?" she requested. "I have work to do."

Jake sat down on the bed and stared at the aquarium while Abby tapped away at her keyboard. This continued for half an hour, until Jake broke the silence, once more.

"Abby," he wondered out loud, "would you ever marry somebody you *didn't* love?"

Abby swiveled around in her chair and stared at him.

"What kind of question is that?" she asked, with a frown.

"Would you?" he repeated.

"No," answered Abby, becoming perturbed that he was still thinking about it. "No, I wouldn't. I didn't love Tyler, and for that reason, I turned down his proposal. Why do you ask?"

"I was wondering," asked Jake, "if you had to love someone, that you married in name only?"

"Why would I do that?" asked Abby, puzzled by where Jake's line of questioning was headed. "Are you proposing to me, Jake?"

Jake folded his hands and stared at the floor.

"Would you have to love someone you married in name only?" he repeated.

"I don't know, Jake," said Abby, "I've never thought about it before."

"What if," he began slowly, "we got married in name only, and if either of us ever wanted out, we could have the marriage annulled."

Abby didn't quite know how to take this suggestion.

"If we don't love each other, what would be the point?" asked Abby.

"Because," explained Jake, "we could help each other. It would be a relationship of mutual dependence. I already depend on you, but I couldn't think of anything I could do for you... until now."

"What are you talking about?!" exclaimed Abby, more confused than ever.

Jake got up from the bed and walked into the living room with Abby on his heels.

"I'm talking about that," he answered, pointing to the painting sitting on Abby's easel.

"What's *wrong* with it?" asked Abby, placing her hands indignantly on her hips.

Terry dropped his paper and curiously watched the two.

"Something about this painting didn't feel right," explained Jake.

"There you go with 'feelings,' again," sighed Abby.

"Just let me finish," said Jake. "I couldn't put my finger on it until a few minutes ago. This painting lacks emotion. You did wonderful detail work, but there's absolutely no emotion anywhere on this canvas!"

"Excuse me!" said Abby, coming to her heron's defense. "Mom liked it, Dad liked it, and Uncle Terry... you said you liked it, right?"

"I thought it was beautiful," agreed Terry.

"That's because they're your family," said Jake, "and they're not looking with an objective eye. This is better than average for a hobbyist, but not for someone wanting to have a career in art."

"And I suppose you know all about it?" asked Abby.

"No," admitted Jake, "but I have eyes. This painting is just like the others stacked in your room-- beautiful detail but no heart."

"I disagree," she fought, insistently. "There's so much emotion on that canvas, it practically reeks of it!"

"Reeks is a good word for it," said Jake.

"Just this evening, you said it looked fine," reminded Abby.

"No," contradicted Jake, "I said it looked 'realistic.' There's a difference."

"But, that's the *point* of this painting, to be realistic," she argued.

"If that's your only objective," replied Jake, "then you're failing to see the bigger picture. This painting tells me nothing I don't already know! What are you trying to say with this work?"

"It's a bird standing in water," replied Abby, dryly. "What do you *want* it to say?"

"When I look at a painting, it's got to speak to me," answered Jake, taking out the small sketchpad he carried in his back hip pocket.

He began to quickly sketch out a heron. Abby looked over his shoulder.

"See what I mean?" he asked, thrusting the pad in front of her face.

The detail was no where near Abby's painting, but the way in which Jake had placed the heron in the water, the expression in its eyes, the soulful way it was spreading its wings as if wishing to grab hold of the sky, all told a story that hers did not.

"I've seen few paint as realistically as you," said Jake, "but, you're just looking with your eyes. You've got to see with your heart, as well."

Somberly, Abby held on to the pad and sat down next to Terry on the couch. She hadn't believed Jake until she had seen his sketch. The difference was startling. He had done more with much less.

"Hey," said Terry, looking over at Jake's drawing, "that's not bad!"

"You're always hiding your sketches from me," said Abby. "Could I see them now? I want to know if this is just a fluke, or are you really as good as you say you are?"

"Let's go," said Jake, getting his jacket from Abby's room.

Abby and Terry followed Jake across the way to the little yellow house. The house was dark until Jake snapped on the overhead lights.

"They're in my room," he said, leading them to the master bedroom.

Jake turned on the lamp and went to the closet. He pulled out several pads of spent drawing paper, some bound with twine, others filled with loose pages.

"That's my entire life's work, right there," he said, glancing at Abby nervously. "Even the things I've never shown anyone."

"Jake, you don't have to show us *everything*," said Terry.

"No," replied Abby, in a sober voice. "I want to see it all."

"But," reasoned Terry, "that's like looking at someone's diary, isn't it? Surely, there's no reason for this!"

"I think there *is*," said Abby, taking the first of the drawing pads to a chair in the corner of the room where she could sit under the lamp.

Jake pulled out a carton of cigarettes and lit one up. Terry could see his hands trembling, as he struggled to hold the lighter still.

"You're going to extremes to prove a point, aren't you?" asked Terry, in a troubled voice.

"It's all right, Mr. Davis," said Jake. "I want her to see my work."

Terry sat down on the bed while Jake nervously paced back and forth across the room.

Abby lifted the cover on the first drawing tablet. There were a few basic anatomical sketches of fingers, toes, and hands. The next few pages were of men's faces-- men who looked as though they had seen hard times.

"They're from one of my cell blocks," commented Jake, hovering over her shoulder.

Then Abby turned the page, and Jake nervously stepped back and took another puff of his cigarette. She looked up at him for an explanation.

"Sometimes," he said in an unsteady voice, "I'd do that at night, so it'd be harder to be molested."

"Abby," objected Terry, getting up and peering over the sketchpad to see what she was looking at, for it didn't sound like something he wanted his niece to see, "what's going on?! Why is he letting you do this?"

"I don't need to know everything about your past," Abby told Jake, "but, I *do* need to see your work, if I'm to consider your offer. Do you still want me to continue?"

Jake nodded in the affirmative.

"Then," she suggested, "why don't you wait outside?"

"Okay," he said, grabbing his cigarettes and leaving the room.

Soon after, Terry and Abby heard the front door close as he left the house.

"*What* offer?" insisted Terry.

"I'm not prepared to talk about it right now," said Abby. "If you don't mind, Uncle Terry, I would just like to look at these sketchpads and think."

Terry nervously looked at his watch. The drawing in question hadn't been graphic, but he still felt uneasy, all the same.

"I wish your parents would hurry up and get back," he muttered, taking a seat on the only other chair in the bedroom.

Abby slowly leafed through the illustrations, page by page. Some drawings were of Jake's fellow inmates, while others were of sky and trees, as seen through the razor wire of the prison grounds. Image after image of Jake's former life flashed before Abby's eyes. Some drawings were recollections of his childhood, while others came purely from his imagination. Some sketches were painful, some were hopeful, others were quiet observations-- but in all of them, Abby saw life through Jake's eyes. One picture haunted her the most. It was a self-portrait he had done of himself when he was seventeen, dating back two years after first arriving at the Watertown State Penitentiary. The stare of silent anguish in his eyes sent a shiver through Abby's frame. She would set it aside, only to come back to it again and again. Jake's features had matured some since then, but he still had the same boyish face that he had now.

Sketchpad after sketchpad passed through her hands, until at last, she was done. Terry had fallen asleep in his chair, so Abby quietly tiptoed from the room and went outside to search for Jake.

He wasn't difficult to find, for Jake was sitting on a bench at the Johanneses' picnic table, deep in thought. When he saw Abby's form appear from the screened porch of the little yellow house, the ex-convict froze. Abby walked over and sat down on the facing bench, while Jake nervously lit up another cigarette.

"I finished looking at your drawings," she announced. "They're very good."

"It doesn't matter," dismissed Jake, "it was a stupid idea. I don't know what got into me. I guess I just wanted to hang on to--" he stopped short of finishing the thought out loud.

"What *do* you want, Jake?" she wondered.

"When I talked to your uncle this evening, the thought flashed through my mind that I might not always be like this," he explained. "And if you had no reason to help me anymore, then I would lose a good friend-- one I'm very fond of."

"Are you fond of me, Jake?" asked Abby. "I didn't know that."

"You see," said Jake, "I can't have the same kind of relationship your parents have. I can't offer you physical intimacy. The only thing I'm capable of is friendship, and I can't think of anyone who I

want to share that with, more than you. I realize it sounds selfish of me, but when I thought I had something to offer you, I hoped it would make it a fair exchange. By the look on your face just now, you must think I'm crazy. One minute, I think it's possible, and the next... just forget I ever said anything."

"I have a problem, Jake," sighed Abby. "I *can't* forget it."

Jake looked at her disbelievingly.

"You don't mean to tell me, that you're *actually* contemplating it?" he asked, in a shocked voice.

"This goes deeper than a bunch of stilted paintings, or even a helping hand when your past overwhelms you," remarked Abby. "Your sketches told me that, tonight. But, I don't want you to take what I'm saying the wrong way. Jake, I'm not a sentimental or romantic person," she warned him. "You might as well know that right now. It's one of my biggest flaws, and I think that's one reason why my paintings lack the heart you say I don't have. I've been thinking, and if I say 'yes,' then I want to be sure that we have a clear understanding between us."

Jake was stunned silent.

"First of all," said Abby, "I don't love you-- at least, not the way my mother loves my father; I have parents that cuddle and coo at each other, and I'm here to tell you, that that's *not* going to happen with me-- which in your case, is probably a good thing. I do, however, feel a strong attachment to you. The fact that someone needs another, is a very alluring quality to any woman, so on that point I'm not very different than anyone else."

"But, do you need *me*?" wondered Jake.

"As someone who I could learn a lot from? Definitely. As a dear friend? I would have to say 'yes,'" confessed Abby. "Yes, I need a friend who understands me the way you seem to. We share a closeness that I've never had with anyone else, save my parents and Uncle Terry. Does that qualify us to get married? I don't know. Maybe this is the nearest that either one of us is ever going to get to love."

"Then, your answer is 'yes'?" asked Jake, his hand trembling as he inhaled another draft of tobacco.

"There's something else," continued Abby. "I don't think it's a good idea to plan on this arrangement being temporary. If I come over to your house every night, who's to say that something more isn't going on, but us? No, this marriage must be permanent."

"But," argued Jake, "I don't want to rob you of the chance to have a normal relationship with someone else."

"I wish you'd stop with this 'normal' business," sighed Abby. "I've already had a chance to marry someone who you would probably call 'normal,' and I turned him down."

"What about children?" he asked. "You realize that you could never have any."

"I know," smiled Abby. "I'm willing to die a childless virgin."

"Do you know what you're saying?" Jake asked, frankly.

"I understand," she answered, "that we'd be getting married out of mutual respect and friendship based on the love of God. We *do* share that, you know. If you weren't a Christian, I would never accept your proposal."

"Are you sure you want to take me on, Abby?" hesitated Jake. "Tyler hasn't gone off to college yet. You could still marry him. I'm sure he'd be a lot easier to get along with."

"I don't love, Tyler," replied Abby.

"But, you don't love me, either," reasoned Jake. "What's to stop you from leaving?"

"Okay, we must get something straight-- here and now," said Abby. "I know we don't love each other like a husband and wife, but if we don't at least trust each other, then we've got *nothing*. I don't marry every man that comes along. In fact, this is my first time, and with God's help, it will be my last time. I'm not marrying you until I find someone else to take your place. I'm in this for as long as we both shall live. Either you believe me, or you don't."

"I believe you," replied Jake in a dazed voice. "I never thought you'd say 'yes,' though."

"Then, why did you ask me?" wondered Abby.

"Because," he slowly explained, rolling the cigarette between his fingers, "as soon as I had the idea, I thought I'd better act on it. It's only a matter of time before another fishing buddy proposes to you, Abby."

"Well, whether anyone else would have or not, I've made my decision," she replied. "I have to warn you, however, that I'm no prize. I'm opinionated, sometimes called stubborn, I have the

talent of hurting you when I don't intend to, and as you pointed out, I don't put my heart on canvas."

"I can put up with you, if you can put up with me," answered Jake, in awe of what had just happened. "So, I guess we're getting married, then."

"I guess so," said Abby.

"I hope you still think this is a good idea, tomorrow morning," Jake said apprehensively, for he was struggling to believe that this was really happening to him.

"I forgot about Uncle Terry!" exclaimed Abby, getting up and going to the little yellow house. "I left him asleep in your room."

Jake followed her inside, and stopped her before they reached the master bedroom.

"Are you going to break the news to your family, tonight?" asked Jake, in a hushed voice.

"I was planning to," she replied.

"They're going to hate me," he nodded knowingly, already dreading their reaction.

"They'll be extremely surprised," she admitted, "but they won't hate you, Jake. If you want, you don't have to be present when I tell them."

"I'm not trying to run out on you," he resisted.

"I know you're not," smiled Abby. "I just think they'll take the news better, if it comes from me."

"If you say so," he breathed a sigh of relief.

Abby went into the bedroom and found Terry still fast asleep.

"Uncle Terry," she announced, nudging his foot with the toe of her shoe, "it's time to go home."

With a sudden start, Terry sat up straight in his chair in sleepy confusion.

"What happened?" he asked. "Why am I in John and Izzy's room?"

"We're in their old bedroom in the little yellow house, and now we're going home," explained Abby, coaxing him to his feet.

"Oh, now I remember," Terry yawned.

As the three made their way to the living room, Terry recalled what Abby had been doing when he dozed off.

"Have you finished looking at Jake's work?" he asked her.

"I looked at it," she replied, glancing at Jake with a hint of merriment in her eyes.

"And?" pressed Terry. "What did you think?"

"I think I can learn a lot from him," she replied.

Suspicious, Terry eyed her and Jake.

"There's something going on," he guessed. "What is it?"

"I'll tell you when Mom and Dad get home," smiled Abby. "Say 'good night' to Jake so we can leave."

"Okay," Terry hesitated, a little frightened by the apprehensive feeling in the pit of his stomach. His intuition was giving him warning signals, but Terry couldn't figure out why. "Good night, Jake."

"Good night," mumbled the young man.

Terry opened the front door and waited for Abby.

"Don't worry," she whispered to Jake, "I'll hold them off so they won't bother you until tomorrow. Try to get some sleep."

Jake smiled weakly at her. As Terry and Abby disappeared into the Johanneses' house across the way, Jake wondered how Abby was going to tell her family about their news. Even more, he wondered if they would try to put a stop to it.

"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."

~ Ecclesiastes 4:9, 10 ~

Chapter Eight
Unfamiliar Ground

"And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him."

~ Genesis 2:18 ~

As Abby shut the front door of the Johanneses' home, Terry folded his arms and repeated the question he had just asked earlier.

"What's going on?" he urged, his face unusually serious.

"I'd rather not tell you until Dad and Mom get home," replied Abby, checking the clock. "They should be back pretty soon."

Terry stared at her, uneasily. Upon the realization that she wasn't going to talk, he sat down on the living room couch and picked up the newspaper he had been reading earlier. After ten minutes, he tossed it aside, deep in quiet speculation.

Abby had gone to her room, surprised at how calm she was taking the whole thing. For someone who had just become engaged to be married, Abby was remarkably placid. There were no anthems, no fireworks, no rapturous plans about the future-- just the strange unfamiliar ground that this partnership promised to create. Instead of feeling joy, Abby was dealing with an altogether different emotion: dread. Even though her parents had not yet come home, she could already hear their opposition. Abby half wondered if she and Jake couldn't do better than to elope, as her parents had done.

As she contemplated this unlikely possibility, Abby heard the familiar sound of the family car pulling up outside the house. Gathering her courage, she went to the living room where Terry was pensively holding his breath. Both waited a few minutes, until at last, Abby looked out the bay window to see what was holding up her parents.

"Uncle Terry," she groaned, "they're kissing!"

"What do you want *me* to do about it?" he asked.

"Can't you break it up, or something?" she urged.

"What's going on with you and Jake?" pressed Terry, once more.

"Please," begged Abby, "not until Mom and Dad are present."

Terry opened the front door and cleared his throat, so the couple would know that they weren't alone.

"Terry!" said John in surprise, as the husband and wife came inside. "I thought you were going to turn in early!"

"Apparently," Terry sighed ominously, "a lot has happened while you were away."

"What's happened?" wondered Izumi, taking off her coat and handing it to John. "Abby, you're still awake, too? What's going on?"

The young woman was about to speak, when her father left to hang up their coats.

"Dad," called Abby, "could we have a family meeting, please?"

"Now?" wondered John, coming back to the living room. "Couldn't this wait until morning?"

"I suppose it could," replied Abby. "But then, I don't think I'd be able to get any sleep."

"That sounds serious," remarked John, sitting down on the couch beside Izumi. "Terry, do you know what this is about?"

"Search me," shrugged Terry. "But, I *do* know it has something to do with Jake."

"Jake?" wondered Izumi, out loud.

When all three looked to Abby for an explanation, she quietly marveled at her own collectiveness.

"Dad's right," she calmly began, "this is serious, but it's good news-- at least, I think so. Jake asked me to marry him, tonight."

Abby stopped and waited for their response. An odd silence pervaded the room. John half expected someone to jump out and say that it was only a joke, but when Abby's face remained steady, the reality of the announcement began to take hold.

"And what did you say?" asked John, becoming alarmed that she hadn't quickly added, "and I turned him down."

"I said 'yes,'" replied Abby.

Terry's mouth hung open in astonishment, while John put his head between his hands and groaned repeatedly. Izumi, however, was strangely quiet.

"That man has no right to come into our house," protested John, "and drag our little Abby into his personal hell! Who does he think he is?!"

"Abby, tell me you aren't really serious!" cried Terry, his speechlessness dissipating.

"Abby, Sweetheart," said John, trying to gently reason with her, "he has no future, except most probably to be sent back to prison. He's *not* going to make it on the outside!"

"You said he wouldn't last out the month," reminded Abby.

"Sweetheart," countered John, "it hasn't *BEEN* a month! I can't believe this is happening! Terry, we were only gone for *one* evening!"

"I know this happened on my watch," replied Terry, "but I thought Jake was safe! I mean, he won't even let *Abby* touch him! How could I have *possibly* seen this coming!"

"That's right," said John, his brows suddenly furrowing. "What about that Abby? Did Jake suddenly change his spots, or is there more you want to tell us?"

"I was waiting for things to die down a little, first," replied Abby, dreading the next bit of news.

"What else is there to tell us?" demanded John.

"Jake and I," explained Abby, "would be married in name only."

"Name only'?" repeated Izumi.

"Physical contact is abhorrent to him," reasoned the young woman. "It's because of all the abuse."

"But," sighed Terry, "what kind of life is that for two people who love each other?"

"That's the third thing I wanted to tell you," sighed Abby, saving the biggest bombshell for last.

"What now?" groaned John. "A wedding ceremony in prison?!"

"Jake and I don't love each other," she blurted.

Terry looked to John, and John looked to Izumi, who closed her eyes in disbelief.

"Tell me I'm dreaming," John pleaded with his wife. "Tell me that our daughter is just having a practical, albeit not very funny, joke!"

Izumi took John's hands and squeezed them, in an attempt to calm her husband.

"I thought you wouldn't marry Tyler," argued Terry, "because you said you didn't love him. I'm trying to understand your logic. It's inconceivable to me how you could turn down Tyler, but accept Jake!"

"I realize," began Abby, "that this is hard to understand. Tyler was expecting something from me that I could not give, and that was love. Jake, on the other hand, has no use for intimate love-- it's just something that is never going to happen. Tyler was in love with the idea of having a wife, and someone to be the mother of his future children. Tyler didn't need *me*, but Jake does. You know, when Jake is having a tough time, *I'm* the one who takes care of him. Dad, you said he isn't going to make it on the outside. Maybe you're right. Maybe, that's the reason why God sent him to Three Mile Bay. You've always said that God works by Providential leading. Like that verse says, 'I being in the way, the LORD led me.' I almost married Tyler, I almost went to college, but, I didn't. God was holding me back, and now I think I understand why. This is what I'm supposed to do."

"Can't you go on helping him, and keep things the way they are?" asked John. "Do you *have* to marry the guy?"

"Dad," reasoned Abby, "do you and Uncle Terry really want to sleep on Jake's couch, while I sit up with him at night? And what if you and Uncle Terry and Mom aren't around? Do I stay out of the little yellow house just because there's no one else around to say nothing happened? And then there's our art. Am I only supposed to be with him, if I can get one of my friends to hang out with us? If Jake and I only saw each other a few times a week, it probably wouldn't be a big deal, but I'm over at his house at all hours of the day and night, as you and Uncle Terry are well aware."

"But," resisted John, "I just think this is too extreme a measure. Sweetheart, you'd be tying yourself down to a man you don't love, who has nothing to give you except snippets of horror from his past."

"Jake *does* have a lot to offer," contradicted Abby with a smile. "He's a brilliant artist, Dad. He can teach me so much. You should have seen his sketches. It was as though I were looking into his very soul. There's so much more to Jake than the pain of his past."

"I'm happy that there's more to him than the flashbacks," said John, "but it's not enough, Abigail! You've got to love your husband, and he you, otherwise, it's just a-- "

"A marriage in name only," finished Abby.

"Izumi," said John, "talk to your daughter!"

"My daughter?" smiled the mother, her eyebrows raised.

"When she pulls something like this, she's *your* daughter!" replied John, lamely attempting a joke.

"Sweetheart," pressed Izumi, "the thing that bothers me the most about your announcement, is that you're telling us that you and Jake don't love each other."

"I know," sighed Abby, "but, I'm not you, Mom. I'm not a romantic. I don't get all melty inside at the idea of cuddling up with my husband, or necking on the front porch with the lights out. Mom, we're perfect for each other!"

Even though Izumi could recall that Abby was never big on hugs or demonstrations of affection, she resisted Abby's prejudice of what love looked like.

"Even though I don't love Jake," said Abby, "I *do* like him. He came from a hopeless place and yet he has hope. The fact that Jake is, is a miracle in and of itself. God gave him help, and he is holding onto it with all his might."

"Look," said John, "I'm not trying to make this guy's life hard or anything, but you can't marry an ex-convict! Everywhere you go, you would suffer the same shunning and the same social stigma that I'm sure he endures every day. I don't want to see that happen to you."

"I'm not afraid of what the world is going to say about me," Abby replied bravely.

"And another thing," continued John, "even though it's hard to see you with Jake when he's having a flashback, I've allowed it because there didn't seem to be any alternatives! I don't see how Jake found the nerve to ask you to do this for the rest of your life! Abby, think about it! You'd be enduring all these hardships for someone you don't even love!"

"Jake is my friend, Dad," answered Abby.

"But," rationalized Izumi, "you have a lot of male friends. Aside from the obvious, what makes Jake different than the others?"

"Well," hesitated Abby, searching for an example, "there's one thing that makes him different, and I've noticed this for awhile now. The other guys near my age will do stupid things to get your attention, and try to impress you with how masculine they are. Jake doesn't do that. When he looks at you, all you see is him. He doesn't presume to think that he's anything special, even though he is."

"Then why did he ask you to marry him?" insisted John.

"Because he had to," replied the young woman. "It wasn't presumption that made Jake ask me-- it was need. When he thought I might need him too, he proposed. He said we could help each other."

"You'll forgive me," sighed John, "if I hold to the opinion that *his* need is greater than yours."

"I agree with you, Dad," informed Abby, matter-of-factly. "No matter what Jake can or can't teach me, he *does* need me more than I need him. Even if my art career fails, and I have to do something else for a living, I want to go through with the arrangement. I *know* I can help him. If you and Mom and Uncle Terry agree, I'd like to talk to Jake's parole officer and psychiatrist about this, as soon as possible."

"Just hold on," cautioned John. "I don't want any of us to make hasty decisions."

"It's getting very late," observed Izumi, glancing at the living room clock. "I think we should sleep on it tonight, and resume the discussion, tomorrow."

"That's fine with me," said Abby, with a small yawn. "Oh, I almost forgot," she suddenly remembered, "did you hear that Mr. Winkler hired Dennis Beckman to be the main fly casting instructor at the tackle shop? He's supposed to be here next Monday. Well, I'm going to turn in. Good night, Mom, Dad, Uncle Terry!"

The three watched as Abby went to her room and calmly closed the door behind her.

"I think she's completely flipped," muttered Terry. "Our Abby just became engaged to an ex-convict-- one who was convicted of killing his father with a kitchen knife, mind you, and *she* talks about fly fishing!"

"This whole affair is pretty cold-blooded, if you ask me," argued John. "I can remember the night Izumi and I got married, and a marriage in name only was the furthest thing from our minds! Do you really believe that Jake Murphy is going to keep his hands off of our Abby?"

"He'll have the right, if she's his wife," reminded Izumi.

"You're taking this pretty calmly, yourself," observed John, turning to Izumi. "Somehow, I had the impression that you weren't overly surprised by Abby's announcement!"

"John," asked Izumi, "have you ever seen our Abby being gentle with any of her friends?"

"What kind of question is *that*?" wondered John.

"I mean it," pressed Izumi. "When was the last time you saw our Abby show compassion or gentleness to any of her friends?"

"There was the time David caught a fly on the back of his neck," recalled Terry. "Abby whipped out her knife and carved that sucker right out, in no time flat!"

"I confess," admitted John, "that nothing else comes to mind. That doesn't mean, however, that she has to marry the first man she feels sorry for!"

"She'll hear you," whispered Izumi, trying not to embroil the entire family in a debate so late at night.

"Maybe she *should* hear this!" exclaimed John. "I don't know why we even have to discuss this any further! She's too young to get married, in the first place!"

Terry cleared his throat, and shook his head in disagreement.

"I hate to burst in on your illusion," he said, "but Abby and Jake are the same ages as you and Izzy were, when you were married."

"That's not possible," debated John. "Why, Izumi was *much* older than Abby!"

"Sorry, Dear," smiled Izumi, contradicting her husband.

"You know," said Terry, "I just realized something else. The room Abby has right now, was the same room Izzy had when she first came to Three Mile Bay."

"Yeah, so?" asked John.

"Don't you get it?" asked Terry. "The window in that room faces the little yellow house-- the same house you and Izzy honeymooned in."

John stared at him, with a "Who's side are you on?" expression.

"I'm only trying to say," explained Terry, "that the house is hard to miss."

"What do you want me to do?" asked John. "Board over her bedroom window?"

"Jake IS a Christian," reminded Izumi.

"Yes," said John, "but look at him! He's not fit to support our Abby! I don't care if she *does* think he's cute! Who's going to pay the bills when he can't get a job because of his prison record? Our Abby-- that's who!"

"Yes," joked Terry, "and of course, they'll be knee-deep in children by then."

"What's that supposed to mean?" demanded John.

"Come on, John," reasoned Terry, "you know perfectly well that if there's no children to support, they're probably not going to be any worse off than they are right now!"

"Don't tell me," asked John, "that you're *for* this marriage?"

"I don't know," struggled Terry. "In a way, a part of me is happy for Jake. When he's not at work, he follows Abby around, everywhere."

Abby slept through the debate in the living room, even though, if she had been awake, she could have heard most of it from her room without much difficulty. However, it hadn't been for lack of interest; she understood that this was just their initial reaction. Tomorrow, she would get a better sense of their position.

It wasn't a great surprise to Abby, when she awoke the next morning, to learn that Dr. Jacoby and Sheriff Peterson, Jake's parole officer, had been invited to the house that Friday afternoon. John had called the marina, and requested Mr. Winkler to let Jake stay home from work that day, because of a "family emergency."

Abby learned of all this when she came to the breakfast table. Neither John nor Izumi, (or Terry, for that matter), would talk any further about Jake, until the others had arrived. She sat down and ate her breakfast, fully aware that though the others weren't staring directly at her, they were in spirit.

"You'd better call Jake, and tell him that Mr. Winkler has given him the day off," advised John, sipping his coffee.

"But, haven't you told him what's going on?" asked Abby, in surprise.

"No, we haven't," said John.

Abby stared at his face for a second, trying to read her father's expression. Was this a good or bad sign? It wasn't often that John and Izumi could stump their daughter, but this was one time when even Abby couldn't figure them out. To avoid her scrutiny, Terry rapidly ate his breakfast and ducked into the office, down the hall.

"Is it all right if I go over and talk to Jake, before they get here?" asked Abby. "I know I could call him, but he's probably pretty nervous right now."

John looked to Izumi, who nodded her head in assent.

"All right," sighed John.

Abby went to her room and put on her fishing gear. After grabbing a spare fly rod, she headed out the front door, while John shook his head in amazement.

"Look at that!" he sighed to Izumi. "She going fishing!"

Abby strolled across the way and opened the outside screen of the enclosed porch. After setting down the fishing rods, she knocked on the front door.

"It's me, Jake," she called.

The door opened and he stepped aside to let her in. Coughing, she hurried to open a window, for the room was filled with tobacco smoke.

"How can you stand it?" she choked, as the haze slowly began to dissolve.

Jake nervously watched her from across the room.

"Have you eaten, yet?" asked Abby, going to the kitchen.

"I'm not hungry," he muttered, looking more downcast than before. "You're calling it off," he surmised. "I thought so."

"Jake," asked Abby, "have I ever been engaged, before?"

"I don't think so," he replied, looking up at her with a little renewed hope.

"Then stop trying to read my mind," said Abby. "If this marriage doesn't take place, it won't be because of me."

"Then, you think your family will put a stop to it?" he asked, nervously inhaling another puff of his cigarette.

"Listen to me, carefully," said Abby, taking a seat across from his. "I've been thinking a lot about this, and I've come to a decision. I won't go against my family, if they refuse to give their consent. If we loved each other, then it might be different-- I don't know. But they're my family. They've invested a lot of love in me, and I can't let them down. I just want to prepare you for the possibility, so if it comes, you won't fall apart, or anything."

"I understand," said Jake. "I envy you. I wish I had a family that cared what happened to *me*."

With that, he lit another cigarette.

"Well, you might get your wish," warned Abby, with a smile, "so don't resign yourself to defeat, just yet! Come on, let's go fishing."

Outside, she led him to her favorite fishing spot, and prepared his fly rod.

"By the way," said Abby, trying to carefully select her words, "my family has decided to have a meeting about us, this afternoon."

Jake's startled face fearfully looked at her.

"Don't get nervous," calmed Abby, "but they've invited your parole officer and Dr. Jacoby."

"They're never going to say 'yes,' are they," he said, in dismay.

He handed the fishing rod to Abby, and was about to retreat back to the little yellow house, when Abby ran ahead of him and blocked his way.

"Jake Murphy!" exclaimed Abby. "You give up too easily! If you want me, then you're going to have to fight for me! I can't take on *my* family, *our* psychiatrist, and *your* parole officer, all at the same time! I'm willing to stand by you, but I can't do this alone! Deep down, I don't believe you really want to quit!"

Jake hung his head and remained silent. Then, he took the spare fly rod from her hands and returned to his spot on the shoreline. Seeing that the crisis had been averted, Abby went back to her fishing.

Back and forth, Abby's fly line moved gracefully through the air, before landing onto the glassy surface of the water, most times, without making a single splash. Jake, who still had yet to attain this skill, just stood there, stiffly holding onto the pole, while he watched Abby with admiration.

"Terry was right," he breathed to himself. "Pure poetry."

Back and forth, Abby let out more line each time, making her casts extend further and further into the blue water of Three Mile Bay. Jake reeled in his line and sat down to observe his friend. He pulled out a sketchpad from his back pocket and began to work.

The hours flew by, until at last, Abby heard the sound of a car door slamming shut. She put a hand over her eyes and looked back towards the Johanneses' home. Jake followed her gaze, and saw the familiar vehicles of Sheriff Peterson's squad car and Dr. Jacoby's minivan. A third man was also present. It was Jake's old prison warden, Dick Doyle.

"I didn't know *he* was coming," mused Abby.

The men stood afar off, looking at the two on the beach, until they were greeted by John and Terry. Jake stared back at his sketchpad, nervously.

"Are you okay?" asked Abby.

"I'll be all right," said Jake, putting away his drawings.

"Looks like they're going to have lunch with us," observed Abby, as she gathered their fishing gear.

Abby led the way back to her parents' house, while Jake followed from behind.

"Well, hello!" warmly greeted Warden Doyle, as the two came over to meet them. "I see you've been fly fishing! Good day for it! Jake," he exclaimed, "you're looking better than I've seen you in a long while!"

"Yes, Sir," said Jake, shaking his hand without being prompted. "How is Mrs. Doyle?"

"Very well, thank you," smiled the Warden, glancing at Abby and then back at Jake. "Henry [Sheriff Peterson] called me up, and said I should come. I'm told you and a certain young lady have big plans."

Jake's eyes dropped, and his smile quickly vanished.

"Are you going to be against me, too?" he asked the warden.

"Now, Jake," began Dr. Jacoby, "none of us are here *against* you. We're here to help decide what's best *for* you."

"That's right," agreed Sheriff Peterson. "Even if that decision may not be what you want to hear."

"Lunch is ready!" announced Izumi from the front door.

"Saved by the bell," smiled Abby. "We'll see you guys after lunch."

With that, she herded Jake off with her to the little yellow house.

"Aren't you going to eat with us?" called out John.

"So you can wear Jake down, over lunch?" laughed Abby. "I don't think so, Dad!"

The minute Jake reached the refuge of his little rented house, he dropped his fly rod onto the floor, and ran to the bathroom. Abby could hear him throwing up from the living room. When he reappeared, his face was white.

"Why don't you lay down on the couch while I fix lunch?" suggested Abby, going to the kitchen.

"They're not going to give their permission," commented Jake, stretching out on the couch.

"I have to confess that things are looking that way," replied Abby, taking two cans of mushroom soup from the cupboard, for there was no other food in the house. "I don't feel like soup, do you? Let's go out to eat," she suggested. "There's a great seafood restaurant near here. Come on, it'll be my treat!"

"But," hesitated Jake, who rarely went out in public, "what happens if I have a flashback in the restaurant?"

"Please, Jake?" begged Abby. "This could be the only good thing that happens all day!"

Jake looked into her deep blue eyes and couldn't say "no."

"We won't need to take the jeep," said Abby, as Jake got up from the couch. "We can easily walk the distance."

Since it was the noon hour, the restaurant was teeming with customers. Abby found a table near the window, and they ordered their lunch. Jake seemed uncomfortable, constantly shifting in his seat, and trying to avoid eye contact with the others.

"You'll like the fish here," said Abby, as she saw a waiter go past them with someone else's meal. "Everything on the menu was caught in the bay."

Just then, Abby recognized a face she knew, a few tables away from theirs.

"Oh, no," she groaned. "He saw me."

Jake looked over to see who she had referred to, and saw Tyler coming over to meet them.

"Abby," greeted Tyler, "is your family emergency over?"

"'Family emergency'?" repeated Abby. "Oh, *that* emergency. No, it's not over yet. How did you know?"

"It's a small town," reminded Tyler, in a concerned voice. "Is it your Mom? Is the baby all right?"

"It's not that kind of an emergency," assured Abby.

"Oh," said Tyler, looking over at Jake.

When the waitress came and served their food, Tyler excused himself.

"I've got to get back," he said. "I hope everything works out for you."

As Tyler left, Jake looked at Abby and shook his head, sadly.

"You're making a poor trade-- me for him," he remarked.

"But, I don't love him," said Abby.

"You don't love me, either," repeated Jake.

Abby looked up at him from over her drink.

"Are we going to have this conversation *every* day?" she asked, wearily.

They finished their lunch in relative silence, while the world around them bustled with the sounds of commerce. When they stepped outside, Abby and Jake walked home, taking the scenic route. It was a mild summer day, and the breeze coming in off the bay was cool. As they walked, Abby and Jake fell into easy conversation.

"Do you always want to live in Three Mile Bay?" asked Jake.

"I don't know," shrugged Abby. "I'm not chomping at the bit to leave, if that's what you mean. What made you choose this place, when you got out of prison?"

"I wasn't the one who chose," replied Jake. "Warden Doyle wanted to give me the best chance to make it on the outside that he could, and since he was good friends with Sheriff Peterson, he sent me here."

"If you had any place in the world to choose from," wondered Abby, "where would you live?"

"Here's pretty nice," said Jake, smiling.

"Don't you have any family?" she asked.

"I have a grandma," replied Jake. "She's in a nursing home."

Jake stopped walking. He looked at Abby, and then at the ground. His eyes traveled to the horizon, where the blue waves touched the sky.

"I hope they'll let us be together," he whispered softly.

"Jake," consoled Abby, "no matter what happens, I'll always be your friend."

Minutes later, when they reached home, Abby sighed when she saw the reception party.

"Looks like they've been waiting for us," she observed, as she and Jake made their way down the beach to where Terry and Dick [the warden] were enjoying the scenery.

"So," announced Terry, seeing the two approaching, "there you are! We've been looking for you guys! John!" shouted Terry up the beach, "I found them!"

"Where were you?" demanded John, when they reached the Johanneses' house.

"We went out to eat," explained Abby. "Sorry, I guess the time slipped away from us."

John looked at Jake and then back at his daughter.

"It's time," said John.

The group walked back to the house and Izumi invited everyone to sit in the living room for their meeting.

Since Jake didn't know where he should be, Abby placed him on her art stool next to the easel. She sat on a folding chair beside Jake, while everyone else either sat on the couch, or made use of the chairs John had brought in from their home office. All in all, eight people had gathered to talk about Jake and Abby.

"We're here today," began John, "because Jake has asked Abby to marry him, and she has accepted. This has come as a great shock to her family. [Izumi and Terry nod in agreement.] What makes this situation troubling, is the fact that these two people say they don't love each other, and that it will be a union in name only. Before we give Abby and Jake our decision, we would like to hear from the others. As Jake's warden, parole officer, and psychiatrist, we're hoping to get your opinion and even whether or not you approve. Henry," asked John, "as his parole officer, you must give your permission before Jake can get married-- is that correct?"

"Yes, that's true," affirmed the Sheriff.

"What would you need to make that kind of decision?" asked John.

"Well, for one thing," said Henry, "I'd need Dr. Jacoby's recommendation. I'd talk to others like Dick, and you folks, and of course, Abby. Dick, seeing as how you've known Jake the longest, why don't you start?"

"Is that all right with you, John?" asked Dick.

"Please," agreed John.

"Jake was twenty-one when I first met him," began Dick. "I think I've told you this story, Abby. I was new at the time, and eager to bring reform to the state penitentiary. I knew prison rape was routinely committed, but I didn't know just how bad it was. That's when I met Jake. A month before the attempt to take his own life, Jake had been assaulted very brutally by a cell mate who was serving a life term. After recovering from the attack, Jake slashed his wrists with broken shards from a mirror. He lost so much blood that twice, his heart stopped beating while the doctors were working on him."

"Jake," whispered Abby, "are you all right? You're looking pale."

"If this is what it's going to take," he whispered to her, "then I'll do it."

"If you need a break, let me know," said Abby, looking concerned. "I'm sorry, Mr. Doyle. Please, continue."

"Where was I?" paused Dick. "Oh, yes-- the operation. While he was recovering in the hospital, I had the chance to witness to Jake. He impressed me as someone who was searching for something-- I think it was hope. Jake was a drowning man, desperately looking for a lifeline. And he found it, when he found Christ. I can honestly say, that the day he came to Christ, I saw hope in his eyes for the first time! But, with this new beginning, came the necessity to endure the ongoing abuse from the others. I've never been able to get it out of Jake, but I think he was raped two more times before I was able to place him in solitary confinement, where he would stay for the next two years, before being paroled."

"Were the men who raped Jake, ever punished?" asked Izumi.

"Ma'am, you have to understand," said Dick, "that when one prisoner turns in another, it's a death sentence-- at least that's the way it is in the Watertown State Penitentiary. And if they don't kill you, you'll wish they had!"

"What's your opinion of Jake and Abby's engagement?" asked John.

The man grinned, and rubbed his balding forehead with the palm of his hand.

"I may not be the best person to ask," he smiled, "because I'm prejudiced. You see, I know Jake wants this very, very much. He wouldn't still be sitting here, if he didn't. It seems to me that he's made good friends with your daughter, and it's only natural that he would want to be with her. To own the truth, when Henry told me what was going on, it saddened me, because I knew you folks probably wouldn't let your daughter go through with it. I can understand your feelings-- I might feel the same if she were my daughter. After everything he's been through, I just hate to see him get hurt like this. For whatever it's worth, I'm in favor of the marriage."

Abby looked at Jake, who was staring at the floor, his body rigid.

"Are you all right?" she whispered, again.

"Don't you ever get tired of asking me that?" exclaimed Jake, in a troubled voice loud enough for the others to overhear.

"Only when you say you're all right, and I can plainly see that you're not," replied Abby.

"I'm *all right*!" he insisted, gripping the edge of the easel.

"Then breathe more slowly," instructed Abby. "You've got to relax, Jake."

Dr. Jacoby began to look apprehensive. He could see the impending signs of a flashback coming on.

"Jake," said Abby, smiling at him, "look at me."

Jake raised his head and looked into Abby's deep blue eyes, while beads of sweat ran down his face.

"You're all right," she said, gently. "'When my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the Rock that is higher than I.'"

It was Terry's verse, and the memory of it, was enough to calm Jake down.

"Thanks," he whispered, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Okay," said Abby, seeing that everyone had been watching, "we're ready to continue-- right, Jake?"

Jake nodded in agreement, and gathered his courage for the next round.

The room was silent, but finally, John found his voice.

"Dr. Jacoby, I suppose you're next," said John.

Abby held her breath. Dr. Jacoby's recommendation would heavily influence Sheriff Peterson's decision. And they wouldn't be able to marry, without the sheriff's permission.

"I must first say," began Dr. Jacoby, "that I am bound by psychiatrist-patient privileges, not to reveal any information about my patients to any third parties, without their prior consent. In this case, both Jake and Abby are my patients. I must, therefore, walk a careful line. You ask me what my opinion is. From the first, Abby has impressed me with her attachment to Jake. Not as a lover, but as a friend.

"I've been aware of the fact that Abby has successfully intercepted Jake's flashbacks, but this is the first time I've actually seen it for myself. Abby, I know from experience that it's not an easy thing to do, and I'm impressed! I wish I could do for my other patients, what you just did for Jake. Even so, my main concern is this: you and Jake say you don't love each other. Whether or not I believe this, isn't the point. You turned Tyler down because you didn't love him. This is common knowledge. What happens if you fall in love with your married-in-name-only-husband? How is Jake supposed to handle that?

"And Jake, what happens if you fall in love with your married-in-name-only-wife, and she doesn't love you? How is Abby supposed to deal with that?

"And," continued Dr. Jacoby, "I'll even go one further. What happens if you both fall in love with each other, and the torture and sexual abuse that Jake has endured in the past, gets in the way? What will you two be prepared to do about it, then?"

Abby was thoughtfully silent. She looked at Jake's pale face, and then back to Dr. Jacoby.

"I can only answer for myself," replied Abby, "but I'm prepared to do whatever it takes to make this relationship work. I don't know the answer to your questions, but I'm willing to give it everything I've got. I know this can work. It's not going to be easy-- no one has said it would be. But, as long as Jake and I are willing to work together to face whatever issues come up, then, with God's help, I'll think we'll be all right."

The room was still, until Jake spoke up.

"I don't know why she's willing to try," said Jake, in a brave voice. "God knows, if she only knew half the things I've done to stay alive, she wouldn't say that. Abby, I know you've said that my past doesn't matter, but it *does*. I'm sorry I've put you through all this, but my vote is 'no.'"

Dr. Jacoby was about to say something more, when Abby replied,

"You're sorry that you've put me 'through all this'?" she repeated, questioningly. "Through all *what*? Our friendship? If that's what you mean, then I don't accept it! Did you see me handcuffed to you, when you were having flashbacks? Was a gun pointed to my head when I accepted your proposal? Can you honestly tell me that any of this was against my will? If you want out, then fine. But never apologize to me for being you! I hate it when you do that, Jake! I just hate it!"

With that, Abby got up and ran outside, leaving the room completely still. Every nerve in Jake's being strained to go after Abby, but he struggled to keep his peace. Izumi whispered something into John's ear, and John nodded in agreement.

"Jake," said John, "why don't you go see if she's all right. I think we can take it from here."

"But," hesitated Jake, "you don't know what I've done, Mr. Johannes. You don't know me."

"I think I do," said John. "And even if I don't, Abby does. I trust her heart."

Jake sat there, unsure what was happening.

"You have my support, Jake," said Dr. Jacoby.

"And mine," said Sheriff Peterson.

"My vote is 'yes,'" said Terry. "God help you both. You're going to need it."

"She's yours, Jake," smiled Izumi.

With a burst of energy, the young man jumped up and ran out the front door.

"Don't look so sad, John," sighed Dick, happily. "You haven't lost a daughter, you've gained a son!"

Izumi wiped the tears from her eyes, and hugged her husband.

Outside, Jake searched the waterfront in vain for Abby. When he checked the little yellow house, he noticed that the fishing gear was missing. Jake grabbed his jacket and headed back outside. All that afternoon he searched, until he at last spotted her walking down the road back to her home.

"Where were you?" he demanded, his voice betraying how concerned he had become.

"I was fishing," replied Abby, surprised by his sudden demand for an explanation.

"I thought something had happened to you," he explained.

"Well, nothing happened," said Abby. "Are they gone yet?" she asked, referring to the meeting that had taken place in her parents' living room.

"The meeting is over, but I think everyone is still there," replied Jake.

"I wish they'd go home," sighed Abby. "Why are you still following me? Can't you leave me alone for awhile?"

"Abby?" asked Jake, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"What?" asked Abby, turning to face him.

"Abby, they said 'yes,'" related Jake.

"You wouldn't be kidding me, would you?" she asked.

"I swear, it's true," said Jake. "The vote was unanimous."

"Even Dad?" gasped Abby, in shock.

Jake smiled.

"What about *you*?" asked Abby. "If I remember correctly, your vote was 'no.'"

"It still is," replied Jake. "Just hear me out, Abby. If you still want to get married afterward, then I'll do it. But, I've got to try to warn you, first. I've never told anyone everything that's happened to me, simply because even I can't remember it all. Sometimes, bits and pieces come back to me, and sometimes, it's whole events. If I asked you to wait right here for me, would you do it?" he asked.

"I'll wait," said Abby.

Jake raced back into the Johanneses' house, and reappeared several minutes later with a blue folder in his hand.

"Dr. Jacoby didn't think I should do this," said Jake, "but I'd rather you found out now, instead of later."

"What is it?" she asked, accepting the folder from him.

"Don't open it right now," he pleaded, his hands shaking with trepidation.

"Jake," said Abby, "whatever is in here, I don't need to know."

"Yes, you do," said Jake. "It's my file. It's not complete, but my case history is there. I have only one thing to ask of you, and it's a small thing."

"What?" asked Abby.

"When you're done reading it," requested Jake, "if you hate me, please don't tell me!"

Then, Jake quickly walked back to his rented yellow house and wept. He had just given Abby the ammunition to kill their friendship. Dr. Jacoby had strongly warned against such an action, saying that it was too soon, and that Jake wasn't prepared for the fallout, afterward. When Jake insisted, they gathered in front of the living room window to watch Abby's reaction when he handed her the folder.

Abby slowly went up the walk to her parents' house, and found everyone staring at her.

"Have you read it, yet?" asked Dr. Jacoby, for the view from the living room window had been partly obstructed by his minivan parked in front of the house.

"No," said Abby, going to her room.

"If you don't mind," said the psychiatrist, "I'd like to stay around. I might be of some help, later this evening."

"Yes, yes, of course," said John, his face sober. "You all might as well stay for dinner-- that is, if you want to."

"I *would* like to see what happens to them," said Dick. "That boy's like my own son."

"I hate to be the first one to leave," smiled the sheriff, "but my wife will have half the police department out looking for me, if I'm not back in time for supper! When the kids want to get married, just have the justice of the peace call me at the office, or at home, and I'll vouch for them."

Inside the privacy of her room, Abby stared at the blue folder, trying to find the courage to open the cover.

"Please, God," she prayed, "don't let this change anything!"

With trembling fingers, Abby opened the folder. Inside, were things that Abby would never repeat to anyone else. Things so horrible, she felt as though they had been the products of a nightmarish imagination, and not the factual history of a very unfortunate man. Some things she could not bear to read, while others she sped through as quickly as possible, trying not to dwell on the pain that it must have caused on such a sensitive boy as Jake. Then there were the pictures. She learned that the slashes on his wrists were made by his fourth and last suicide attempt-- not his first. Abby thought she had gotten through the worst of it, when she saw a photo of Jake's back. Abby burst into tears and buried her face in the pillow to smother the heartrending cries. Izumi, however, had been waiting outside the door, and heard the sobs. She quickly opened the door, and embraced her daughter.

"How *could* they do that to him!" sobbed Abby, angrily. "Mom, there are bite scars on his back!"

Izumi held on tightly to her daughter.

"Abby," said Izumi, "you're a better woman than I am. Not many mothers can say that of their daughters. I admire and thank God for you. Jake is a blessed man to have you for a friend."

Abby wept into her mother's arms, while Dr. Jacoby hovered outside the door. When the tears came less frequent, Abby dried her face. Izumi knew that whatever had been in those files had to have been traumatic, for Abby rarely ever cried.

"May I come in?" asked Dr. Jacoby, cracking open the bedroom door and carefully peering inside.

"Yes," said Abby, as Izumi excused herself so the two could speak in private.

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked the psychiatrist.

"What's there to talk about?" asked Abby. "The animals who did this to Jake, or the pervert who sank his nails into Jake's leg?"

"It took a lot of courage to show you that file," he pointed out.

"Why did he have to show me this?" wondered Abby. "Is it because he blames himself for what happened?"

"When someone is abused," explained the doctor, "there is often a lot of guilt associated with the event. With victims such as Jake, their molesters often tell them things like, 'you really wanted it,' or accusations of that nature. Over time, they begin to believe it. Remember, Jake was four years old when his father first raped him. That's a lifetime of brainwashing to overcome."

"I'm just so *angry!*" exclaimed Abby.

"The next time you see Jake," said Dr. Jacoby, "be sure that he understands that it's not him you are angry at, but the abusers. And one other thing," he added, "remember this verse: 'Let not the sun go down upon your wrath.' Anger is a perfectly normal and just reaction to what you've just seen. But, don't let it consume you. Before you go to sleep tonight, let that anger go. God knows it's not healthy for us to keep that wrath inside of us overnight."

Abby slowly gathered the pages and photos and placed them back inside the folder.

"I'm going to return this to Jake," she said, getting up from the bed.

The living room went silent as Abby walked through the room, carrying the blue folder. Then, they watched her cross the way to the little yellow house.

"Jake!" called Abby, as she knocked on his door.

When there was no answer, Abby turned the handle and went inside. It was early evening, and the sun was just beginning to set in the western sky, shining a golden ray of sunset through the open window of the kitchen.

"Jake, where are you?" asked Abby, first searching the living room and then the kitchen.

She at last found him in his bedroom, sitting on the floor on the far side of the room, smoking a cigarette. He couldn't bring himself to look at her as she entered the room. In that moment of silence, she could feel the question coming.

"Don't ask me that," warned Abby, knowing full well what he was thinking.

Jake flashed his brown eyes at her and then stared back at the floor.

"Go ahead," he challenged her, "tell me it doesn't change anything."

"What's it supposed to change, Jake?" asked Abby, tossing the folder onto his lap. "Is it supposed to change the past? I'd change it for you, if I could, but I can't. All that's left is the present and the future. Those I *can* change, if you'll let me."

Exhausted from the emotional strain of the day, Jake buried his head and wept for joy. His shoulders shuddered with each sob, while Abby quietly watched from a distance. She had already shed her tears, and was determined to not show weakness in Jake's presence.

Abby looked through Jake's window and opened it, letting the cool breeze fill the room, while the lulling sound of the waves on the beach calmed his soul.

"What do you say, Jake?" asked Abby. "Does the partnership of Murphy and Johannes get your vote? What am I saying?" laughed Abby, suddenly remembering that she would lose her maiden name. "It would be Murphy and Murphy! Are we partners?"

"If you say so," replied Jake, wiping his face dry.

"Not a very inspiring response," mused Abby, "but at least it's a positive one. You had better go wash up, so we can go back to the others. I think they'd appreciate us being there, so they can celebrate the engagement."

"We owe them that much, and more," agreed Jake, getting to his feet.

"When do you want to get married?" asked Abby from the hall, as Jake went into the bathroom and shut the door.

She heard the faucet running as he washed his tear streaked face.

"Whatever you want, is all right with me," Jake finally replied, opening the bathroom door. "I've never done this sort of thing, before."

"Neither have I," smiled Abby, "but, my parents have. Did you know that they were our ages when they got married?"

Jake looked at her in surprise.

"No, I didn't," he answered.

"And," continued Abby, "now that I think about it, their first date took place at the same restaurant we had lunch in today. In fact, they were married that very evening. What would you say, if we went ahead and let history repeat itself? I think Mom would love it!"

"Whatever you say," replied Jake.

"When you have an actual opinion," laughed Abby, "you will let me in on it, won't you?"

When the newly engaged couple arrived back at the Johannes house, Dick stepped forward and heartily shook Jake's hand, while John, Izumi, and Terry, took turns hugging their Abby.

"Congratulations, Sweetheart," said Izumi, embracing her only daughter once more.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" asked John, seriously.

"Yes, Dad," answered Abby, "I'm sure."

"My little fishing buddy is all grown up," said the teary-eyed adopted uncle, giving her a hug. "I can hardly believe it-- our Abby is getting married!"

John pulled away from Izumi and approached Jake.

"Welcome to the family, Son," said John, stretching out his hand in friendship.

Jake mumbled, "Thank you, Mr. Johannes," and shook his hand. John could feel the tremors in the young man's unsteady handshake, and recalled his prediction that Jake wouldn't last a month on the outside. Silently, John prayed that he would be wrong.

"Mom?" asked Abby. "I was wondering if we could get married tonight-- you know, like you and Dad did."

For a moment, Izumi looked disappointed. She tried to picture a wedding held at their church, and Jake surrounded by people he didn't know, being the center of attention and curiosity. Then, Abby related to her mother the string of "Providential parallels" between herself and Jake, and her parents. When Izumi heard about the restaurant, she burst into tears and hugged Abby.

"It's perfect!" cried the mother, joyfully.

Izumi went to the kitchen and returned with a tray of refreshments, while John and Terry discussed an idea that Terry had just had.

"Is he still alive?" asked John, uncertainly.

Nineteen years ago, John and Izumi had used the justice of the peace who lived in a small room adjoining the tiny chapel near the Three Mile Bay cemetery. It was mainly a landmark that no one had the heart to remove. Also, it served as a handy place for couples to elope to, when their own church wasn't available, or they wanted to keep it a private ceremony.

"I don't even remember his name," said John. "He was pretty old, back then. It's been nineteen years, Terry. He's probably long gone by now."

Izumi followed Abby to her bedroom to pick out a dress for the wedding ceremony.

"You're not too disappointed, are you, Mom?" asked Abby, as she rummaged through her closet for a white dress.

"Sweetheart, you're making a mess!" sighed Izumi. "Let me do this. I admit, at the first, I was a little disappointed. But, I wouldn't want to put Jake through that kind of ordeal, and neither would your father."

Izumi pulled out a white dress that Abby hadn't worn in months, for she had the habit of getting especially light colored clothes dirty with her frequent visits down to the shore with her fly rod.

"What about you?" wondered Izumi. "Are you disappointed there's not going to be a formal wedding?"

"I don't know," shrugged Abby. "I've never given it much thought. Besides, you know I'm not romantic or sentimental like you."

"I know," smiled Izumi, remembering the squirming child who would never sit still for a hug.

Izumi sat down on Abby's bed and felt her belly.

"I'm already showing," she smiled to her daughter.

"When are you and Dad going to know if it's a girl or boy?" asked Abby.

"By the end of July, I think," recalled Izumi. "We're going in for an ultrasound next Monday, so pray everything goes all right."

"I will," said Abby, soberly.

"Go to my room, and get my jewelry box," instructed Izumi.

Puzzled, Abby did as she was told. When she returned, the teenager handed the box to her mother.

"There's a string of pearls I want you to have," said Izumi, rummaging through the box. "Here it is. Let me put them on you. There. Go look in the mirror. Oh," Izumi suddenly remembered, "you're going to need wedding rings."

The mother pulled out a small velvet lined box and opened the lid.

"Grandma and Grandpa Johanneses' wedding bands?" asked Abby, in surprise.

"They would have wanted you to have them," assured Izumi, handing the small box to Abby. "Grandpa and Grandma Johannes were godly people who loved each other very much. Your grandparents are watching you from heaven, right this moment. Abigail, I want to tell you something, and it's very important, so please pay attention."

"I will, Mom," said Abby, sitting down beside her on the bed.

"When you marry Jake, he will become a part of you," exhorted Izumi. "You, above anyone else in this world, will have the ability to hurt him, because he trusts you. I realize this will be a marriage in name only, but there's more to marriage than sex. Your father and I have been married for nineteen years, and I'm proud to say that he respects me, and values my opinion, even when his differs from mine. Remember to be patient, especially with someone as vulnerable as Jake. Be long-suffering and gentle. I know you have been, but there's still so many times, when I see you treat Jake like he were one of the guys. Be mindful of his weaknesses, and encourage him at all times. You'd be surprised how much of this applies to all married couples, and not just Jake. 'But the fruit of the Spirit is... longsuffering, [and] gentleness,'" quoted Izumi. "Like it says in Genesis, 'And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.' That's you, Sweetheart. Jake's help meet."

"I'll remember, Mom," promised Abby.

Izumi kissed her daughter and returned to the living room, where Dick was tying one of John's neckties on Jake.

"Is she almost ready?" asked Terry, recording the whole event on his digital camcorder.

"Almost," smiled Izumi, going to John's side.

"Here comes the bride!" announced Terry, aiming the camera at Abby.

"Oh, no!" the young woman exclaimed, "not the camera!"

"You say that now, Abby," laughed Terry, "but one of these days, you'll be glad you have these pictures! Go stand next to Jake!" he directed.

"Here are the rings for the ceremony," said Abby, handing the velvet box to him.

It was then that she noticed a strange look on Jake's face, as he watched Terry's camera pan the room. His fingers tightly gripped the box, and beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. Suddenly, Abby remembered something she had read in Jake's file, just a few hours ago.

"Abby," warned Dr. Jacoby, "you'd better get him out of it."

"I know," said Abby, waving to Terry to turn off the device. "It's off, Jake," she said, gently.

"You're losing him," observed Dr. Jacoby, as everyone backed away from Jake and Abby.

"Jake, look at me," she instructed him. "Come on, look at me. Who am I?"

"Abby?" Jake whimpered, incoherently. "Make him stop. *Please*, make him stop!"

"Your father isn't here," she assured him. "The camera is off, and you're safe. Try to relax-- you're all clutched up."

Jake slowly unclenched his hands, accidentally dropping the ring box to the floor. Abby bent down and picked it up.

"You'd better hold on to this," she smiled, handing it back to him. "Okay, Dad. Let's go."

John looked at his wife, and exhaled deeply.

"All right," he said. "The little chapel isn't far."

Terry put down the troublesome camcorder and pocketed his cell phone, (the one with a digital camera). In the dim of the fast approaching night, the wedding procession made its way down the road to a small winding path that led to the church. John knocked on the door, and a middle-aged man answered.

"Yes?" asked the man.

"My daughter," began John.

"Come this way," interrupted the man, not waiting for John to finish his explanation. "The bride needs to fill out these forms, and the groom, these forms. If either of you are on parole or probation, I'll need the permission of your parole officer, before I can proceed."

"Jake's parole officer is Sheriff Peterson," said Abby, handing him the phone number.

"I'll be right back," said the man, accepting the card from Abby.

"This place has changed," observed John, looking about the church, as Izumi settled down to help Abby fill out her stack of forms. Dick guided Jake through his set, and was not even half finished, when the man returned.

"The Sheriff said it's all right, so when the couple is ready, we'll start the ceremony. I'll be in my office until then."

As he left, Terry sat down on an empty pew. The inside of the church was lit up, contrasting the night that darkened the stained glass windows. Kernels of rice scattered about the floor, lonely remnants of the previous ceremony. There was a stale feeling in the air that made Terry feel disappointed. He sighed heavily and glanced at Dr. Jacoby, who looked as though he were feeling the same thing.

John took a seat near Terry.

"This isn't how I remembered the chapel at all," said John, sadly.

"As long as it's legal-- that's the important thing, right?" grinned Terry, trying to rally his friend's spirits.

"Poor Abby," sighed John. "I had hoped to make this more special, like the way it was with Izumi and me. I remember that night so well. I wish Abby could have had those kinds of memories."

"Just look at Jake," smiled Terry, showing John a photo on his cell's display screen. "The poor guy looks terrified."

"Look at Abby," observed John. "She's the picture of someone in control. What did you used to call her when she was little?"

"Little Miss Confident," laughed Terry. "I guess some things never change."

"I wish this church had been one of those things," mused John, getting up, for Izumi had motioned to him.

"We're done with the paperwork," announced his wife.

"Then," said John, "I'll go get the justice of the peace."

The man came out and placed Jake and Abby in front of him, with Dick as best man, and Izumi as the matron of honor. Terry sneaked in several pictures with his cell phone, while the man began the ceremony. To Izumi's disappointment, it wasn't the same vows that she and John had taken, nineteen years earlier. The vows made no mention of "love, honor, or obey," but instead made some weak reference to "mutual happiness."

After they exchanged rings, Jake and Abby were pronounced man and wife.

"You may now kiss the bride," the man announced.

"That's okay," Abby whispered to Jake. "Just shake my hand, and that will be enough."

Jake quickly shook her hand, and the deed was done. Terry snapped another picture, and the family walked home. As they neared the Johanneses' house, Jake stopped.

"Abby?" he asked. "Would you come with me for some ice cream?"

"Right now?" asked Abby, in surprise.

"Please?" he implored.

"Let me change first," she conceded, now realizing that he simply wanted to be with her.

When she reappeared, she found Jake waiting for her by the picnic table, while the other members of the wedding party silently watched on.

"You guys don't have to wait up for me," smiled Abby. "I'll be home before long."

"Take as long as you want, Mrs. Murphy," smiled John, a little incredulously. "You're a married woman, now."

When Abby returned late that night, she found Izumi waiting for her in the living room.

"I thought those days were over," remarked Abby, sitting down on the couch beside her mother.

"I don't suppose he..." Izumi left the sentence unfinished.

"No, Mom," smiled Abby, "he didn't. Should I expect to have that question, a lot?"

"We're your family, Sweetheart," said Izumi. "We're not trying to pry. You don't have to answer the question, in the future, if you don't want to. Did you and Jake get your ice cream?"

"Uh-huh," said Abby, relaxing back into the soft couch.

"I'm sorry it wasn't a better day for you, Abby," sighed Izumi, getting up, and covering her daughter with the comforter.

"Mom?" called Abby, as the mother was about to leave. "This *was* a good day."

Izumi smiled gratefully and climbed into bed beside John, while Abby spent her wedding night on the family's living room couch, dreaming of smallmouth bass and the delicate gold band on her left hand.

"And [Jake] said, Blessed be the LORD God... Who hath not left [me] destitute... of His mercy and His truth: I being in the way, the LORD led me to the house of my master's brethren."
~ Genesis 24:27 ~

Chapter Nine
A Family for Jake

"Thou, O God, didst send a plentiful rain, whereby Thou didst confirm Thine inheritance, when it was weary."

~ Psalm 68:9 ~

Abby woke up the night after her wedding, to find that she had fallen asleep on the living room couch. Upon hearing her parents' voices coming from the kitchen, Abby got up and went to go see why they were up so early on a Saturday morning.

"Well," said Izumi, greeting her daughter, "you finally woke up!"

"What do you mean, 'finally'?" yawned Abby, pouring herself a cup of coffee. "It's just after five! What are you guys doing up so early? Don't you know it's Saturday?"

"Well," answered John, "a lot has been happening. It's not everyday that your daughter gets married."

For a moment, Abby looked at him puzzled, and then suddenly remembered the wedding ceremony that had taken place just the night before.

"I almost thought that I had been dreaming," she mused.

"I realize," said John, "that it might be a little too soon to ask, but have you and Jake made any plans concerning the future?"

"Such as?" asked Abby, sitting down at the table with her parents.

"Are you going to move in with Jake?" wondered John.

"I'm not planning to," replied the teenager. "Why? Are you and Mom trying to get rid of me?" she laughed.

"*Absolutely not!*" said John, emphatically. "We'd love for you to live with us, for as long as you want to stay. I know you and Jake came to an agreement about the boundaries of your relationship, but your mother and I were wondering if Jake expects you to move into the little yellow house."

"I don't think that's going to happen," replied Abby, slowly. "I suppose I should talk to him about it, though."

"How are you and Jake fixed for money?" asked John, candidly. "I know he can't be making much down at the marina. You may earn more than he, but you have the jeep and art supplies to keep up, so you probably don't have very much left over after those expenses. If Jake needs money, we'd be happy to help in any way we can. I would have said this to his face, but I didn't know how he'd take it."

"Thanks, Dad," smiled Abby, gratefully, "but, I think we can make it on our own."

"Please, promise me that when you need money, you won't just try to tough it out in silence," begged Izumi, knowing the strong independence of her daughter. "We're your family, and we're always going to be here for you."

"Thanks, Mom," replied Abby, not quite sure how to take her parents' offer. "If we need your help, I promise to let you know. You guys don't sound very confident, though. I hope you realize that I'm *not* a child anymore."

"With Jake's criminal record," pointed out John, "he's going to have an extremely hard time finding a good job."

"No worries, Dad," smiled Abby, getting up from the table. "Jake and I will get by."

"Aren't you going to eat breakfast?" asked Izumi, seeing that Abby hadn't fixed her usual bowl of cereal.

"I'll eat later," said the young woman, disappearing into her room.

After Abby had finished changing clothes, she went to the supermarket and bought a few groceries that she knew Jake needed, since he couldn't easily afford them on his salary. Then, Abby went to the yellow house and knocked on the door. When there was no answer, she realized that he must still be asleep. Not to be deterred, Abby pulled out the spare house keys John had given her, and unlocked the door.

The small house was dark, for the curtains were still drawn. In the living room, Abby pulled aside the curtains her mother had made, and let the brilliant morning light stream into the room. Then she went to the kitchen, and began to make breakfast.

Back in Jake's room, the smell of buttered toast and hot coffee aroused him from sleep. Puzzled, he got out of bed and sleepily trudged down the small hallway to the kitchen. There, Jake found Abby cracking an egg into a skillet, and then taking a bite of toast. For a moment, he looked at her as though he were still asleep.

"I was just about to come and wake you up," said Abby, pouring a cup of coffee and handing it to the startled man. "Breakfast is almost ready."

"What are you doing here?" he asked, rather gruffly.

"I thought that was obvious," replied Abby, stirring the eggs in the skillet, so they wouldn't burn. "I'm fixing breakfast."

"How did you get in?" he demanded.

"I got the spare keys from Dad," she answered, her voice challenging his indignation. "Why? Should I have asked your permission before entering? I thought as your nearest relation, it entitled me to *some* degree of liberty."

"I don't like surprises," he muttered, taking a sip of the hot coffee.

"Sit down, while I get breakfast on the table," instructed Abby, as she turned the flame down under the eggs. "I hope you like your eggs scrambled."

Jake silently did as he was told.

"You don't look so good," she observed, scraping the eggs onto his plate.

"I had a hard night," he replied, in a low voice.

"If you needed me, you should have called," said Abby, sitting down at the table.

"I can't expect you to come over *every* night," he retorted.

Abby was silent for a moment. This made her think of something that John and Izumi had brought up, only that morning.

"My parents wanted to know if I was moving in with you," she announced, waiting to see his reaction.

Abby didn't have long to wait. A look of dread quickly crossed his face, and he started to turn pale white, right in front of her eyes.

"Don't get nervous," she assured him, seeing that he was obviously jumping to the wrong conclusion. "They were referring to your spare room-- not your bed."

At this, Jake relaxed a little, and nervously took another sip of coffee.

"Sorry," Abby apologized, "I didn't mean to scare you like that. Did you have a *very* bad night?"

"I've had worse," he mumbled.

"If I slept under the same roof as you, I might be able to help you more," she reasoned. "As it is, I can only come if I hear you screaming from my room across the way. Don't make up your mind right now, but it might be worth considering."

"There were many times," remembered Jake, his face still a bit shaken, "when I was sure I wouldn't last the night. After they were done with me, I'd crawl into a corner and shut my eyes as tightly as I could, and I'd make wishes that I knew would never come true. Somehow, the hoping for it made the pain more bearable. But when despair came, hope only made me feel worse."

"What did you wish for?" wondered Abby.

"I don't know," shrugged Jake, suddenly becoming quiet.

"Come on," she coaxed. "What did you wish for? I promise not to tell anyone."

"I wanted a home," he replied in a gentle voice. "Just somewhere I could stay without having to look over my shoulder all the time."

"What else?" she asked, curiously.

"I wanted a wife," he said, half under his breath. "Someone who belonged to just me."

The kitchen was silent for a moment, as Jake paused.

"Do you know what your Mom told me when they gave their consent?" he asked. "She said you were mine."

"Did she?" smiled Abby, with some amusement. "That sounds like Mom."

Abby didn't notice the hurt look in Jake's eyes as she gathered the dishes and put them into the sink.

"I can do that," he offered, taking the washcloth from her hand. "You made the meal, so let me do the dishes."

Abby sat back down and finished her glass of orange juice.

"Jake, my parents want you to know that if you need help, financial or otherwise, that they'll be more than happy to help," she said, relating their message.

"Why would they say that?" asked Jake, puzzled by this generosity.

"You're a part of the family now," she reminded him. "A family looks after each other."

This might not be a novel concept to you or me, but to Jake, who had never had much of a family, it was something he didn't take for granted. He hadn't expected Mr. or Mrs. Johannes to do very much for him, because no one had EVER done much for him, unless it was because they intended to use him, later on. However, Abby's parents didn't seem like that kind of people to him. Thoughtfully, Jake added dish soap and ran hot water into the sink, creating small mountains of soapy bubbles.

"They don't think I can take care of you," he concluded with a sigh.

Abby fought back the temptation to laugh. In her opinion, Jake could hardly take care of himself, let alone her.

"No," she disagreed. "I think they're afraid you won't be able to find a winter job. Since your job at the marina is seasonal, you'll be out of work at the end of fall. If you don't find another job, you'll be in danger of breaking your parole, and could be sent back to prison."

Jake hadn't considered that possibility before. He had been so elated to get the job at the marina in the first place, that the thought that it was only temporary, had escaped him completely. Each day was so much of a concentrated effort on Jake's part to hold on, that planning for the future was often beyond him. As the horror of being sent back to prison gripped him, the glass cup he had been drying, slipped from his hand and shattered onto the kitchen floor. With a cry of dismay, Jake bent down and rapidly began to gather the shards of glass with his bare hands.

Before Abby had a chance to warn him, Jake pulled his hand back, wincing in pain. In his haste to right the accident, he had cut himself on the razor sharp glass.

"You're bleeding," Abby said, trying to remain calm, for she remembered Jake's reaction to the last time he was confronted with blood.

Thinking quick, she grabbed his hand, and placed it under the running water of the faucet. At the sight of the red blood, Jake began to grow weak.

"It looks worse than it is," she comforted him. "It's only a small cut."

But, it wasn't the cut, or the pain that weakened Jake's knees. It was the memory of seeing his father sprawled on the ground, and the blood that pooled around his body as he lay there dying. Jake clenched his jaw as the mental picture of that day flooded his mind.

"Hey!" called Abby, moving in front of Jake, so she could make eye contact with him. "Start counting backwards from one hundred."

Slowly, he began to move his lips, "ninety-nine, ninety-eight..." and so on. As he counted, Abby went to the medicine cupboard in the bathroom, and retrieved the antiseptic that Izumi had left for their tenant.

"This is going to sting a little," she warned him, applying the ointment to the palm of his hand.

After the antiseptic, Abby was about to apply a bandage. Upon her touch, Jake quickly pulled his hand away from her.

"Here," she said, handing him the bandage, "*you* put it on. And next time, be more careful! That cut could have been much worse."

"I can't go back to prison," said Jake, numbly. "Please, God! Don't let them send me back!"

"Take it easy," said Abby, in a voice so confident that Jake marveled at her. "You'll find work. God hasn't deserted you."

She went to the pantry and returned with a broom and dustpan to sweep up the broken glass on the floor. Abby's presence had a soothing effect on him, and Jake realized more than ever, how much he had come to rely on her strength.

"Do you *want* to move into the other bedroom?" he wondered, brightening at the idea, but unsure if it was the best thing for *her*. "I don't want to be even more of a burden to you than I already am."

"Dr. Jacobs said that I shouldn't pressure you into anything, because your whole life has been about having no choice," replied Abby. "But, if you're willing, I *would* like to move in. It's the first time I've ever been on my own, and I'm kind of looking forward to it. I know this wouldn't exactly be on my own, but you know what I mean. I'd be moving out of my parents' house, even though they're just across the way."

"Being on your own isn't all it's cracked up to be," warned Jake, in a voice of experience. "I can't promise that I'll be of much help to you."

"I knew what I was getting into, when I married you," answered Abby.

"Then, I want to do this," said Jake.

"We could move my studio into this living room," proposed Abby, becoming excited with the prospect of moving. "Then we could work whenever we wanted, without getting in my family's way."

Abby walked to the spare bedroom that John and Terry had once used as their old office, and looked around.

"The hardest thing to move," she said, "will be my aquarium. I could fit it in here, but maybe we should put it in the living room, so you could enjoy it, as well."

"No," said Jake, remembering something Abby had once told him, "you like to watch it when you fall asleep at night. Keep it in your room."

As happy as Jake was about the prospect of Abby's move, he was still worried that he wouldn't be able to handle her near proximity, even though he was often with her at the Johanneses' house. This was going to be different. They would be living together, though sleeping in separate rooms.

"What if it doesn't work?" asked Jake, his face betraying uncertainty. "What if you get sick of me?"

"Then I go back home," replied Abby. "I know you're having second thoughts, but try to remain calm. If we respect each other's space, then I think this has a good chance of working. But, don't do this if you don't want to. I'm not trying to pressure you into anything."

"What if your parents say 'no'?" he worried.

"They won't," answered Abby. "We got married, Jake. This is OUR life, and OUR decision-- not my Mom and Dad's."

"I know we've gone over this before," said Jake, in a shaky voice, "but I need to make sure that you agree not to take this relationship into the bedroom."

"You're not afraid of me, are you Jake?" asked Abby, a little concerned. "You're bigger than me," she reminded him. "You may not feel like it, but you have the advantage. I promise, this is not some convoluted scheme to get into your bed. We're married now, and I believe it's a little unrealistic to think that we'll be living in separate houses for the rest of our lives."

Jake smiled warmly, lighting up his youthful face as though someone had turned a light on inside of him. For a moment, the thought crossed Abby's mind that she had never seen so handsome a face, nor so attractive a smile as Jake's. But, such thoughts tended to work against their agreement, so Abby quickly brushed it from her mind.

"We could set up your easel in the living room by the window," he proposed, "like the way it is in your house."

"And," added Abby, "we need to get you an easel as well. The living room will become our office. We could put my computer on a desk against the other wall, so you could use it too."

"Is your old bedroom as big as this one?" he asked, a little concerned that everything wouldn't fit.

"I think it's a little smaller," she replied, "but whether it is or not, we'll *make* it work. You know, now that I think about it, you've left this house pretty much as we prepared it for you. You could have moved the furniture around, and made the place suit you better, if you had wanted."

"I know," hesitated Jake, "but it's not *my* house. I didn't feel as though I had the right. I still don't. But, you can do what you want. I won't mind."

Abby looked at him out of the corner of her eye and decided not to comment on that last remark. Jake had never felt at home in Three Mile Bay, but she was hopeful that that would change with time.

"When do you want to make the move?" asked Jake, trying to hide his eagerness.

"Why not today?" asked Abby. "It's Saturday, and Dad and Uncle Terry could help. I'm going to go talk to them right now. Do you want to come with me?"

Jake hesitated. He was shy about approaching Mr. Johannes with the plan of moving his daughter out of her family's home, and into the rented home of an ex-convict. At the same time, he was excited to have Abby with him in *their own* home. And while the little yellow house had not felt like home to Jake, he already knew that wherever Abby was, would be home to him.

Without a word, Jake followed close behind Abby, back to the Johanneses' house. They found John at his computer in the office, taking care of a few minor business details while he still remembered what they were.

"Dad?" asked Abby, as the couple entered the home office. "Jake and I have talked it over, and we agree that it would be a good idea if I moved in with him. What do you think?"

John didn't seem surprised by the announcement, but looked thoughtfully from Abby and then to Jake.

"Are you sure you want her?" he asked Jake, with a tingle of mirth in his sobriety.

"Yes, Mr. Johannes," answered Jake, half expecting the father to yell at him for being so presumptuous as to think that he could take Abby away from her family, to go live with someone such as himself.

"Well," said John, "I won't be able to help you kids move next week, because your mother and I have a doctor's appointment on Monday, and Terry and I have a business trip to Vancouver that will last for about a week. If you're both sure you want to do this, then I suggest we move Abby's things over, today."

"Thanks, Dad!" exclaimed Abby, going to her room to start planning the move.

John got up to go find Terry, and related to him Abby and Jake's plan.

"She's moving into his house?" cried Terry, incredulously.

"We knew it would probably happen," said John. "They *are* married, after all."

"How in the world are they going to be able to hold to their bargain, if they live under the same roof?" sighed Terry.

"I don't know," said John. "But, if anyone can do it, I think those two can. There's no way Jake will *ever* let anyone get *that* close to him. You should have seen him a minute ago-- trembling like a leaf in a strong gust of wind. I think it's probably taking all the courage Jake has, to have Abby come and live with him, like this."

"God help them," sighed Terry, going to collect some boxes for the move.

Izumi and John had talked the night before, of the possibility of Abby's departure. And while they were half expecting it, Izumi was saddened to see her daughter leaving the nest. While Jake helped Abby pack her things into the boxes Terry had brought, Izumi went about the house, gathering essentials that she knew Abby and Jake would need.

"Mom," said Abby, when she finally understood what her mother was up to, "you don't have to do that."

"Let me do this for you," said Izumi, lovingly. "There's so many household things you don't have!"

Abby gave her mother a hug, and returned to the bedroom, where Terry and John were discussing how to move the aquarium.

"Abby," instructed John, "you're going to have to put the fish in bags, so we can empty out the water. There's no way we can move a full one hundred and twenty-five gallon aquarium!"

"We can't empty it out, *completely*," said Abby. "It'll change the salinity of the water too drastically. It wouldn't be good for the fish. And when I put the fish back in, the water must be the same temperature, otherwise they'll go into shock and die. This is a delicate process, Dad."

"Very well," sighed John, "do what you have to, but do it quickly. Terry and I only have this one day to help with the move, and there's no way Jake will be able to do this all by himself."

As Abby began working on the aquarium, the men started packing boxes and moving them to the other house. Jake gathered all of Abby's old paintings stacked beneath the fly tying table, and carried them over to the empty room in the little yellow house that was to be hers. When Jake returned, Abby was ready to move her little darlings into clear bags, using the same water that was in the tank to minimize the stress on the fish.

The small green aquarium net chased the little creatures about the tank, until finally scooping them up and into awaiting plastic bags. When the last startled fish was captured and gently secured, Abby placed the bags on a cookie tray Izumi had given her, and carried them over to their new home, across the way. When most of the water had been emptied, John and Jake lifted

the tank from the cupboard stand and set in on the floor. Next, they carried the black pine cupboard to the yellow house, while Terry brought the canopy. Then, they returned for the tank. Abby had emptied it beforehand of the gravel and coral, so it was light enough for two men to carry. John carefully lifted one end, and Jake took the other, while Terry steered them in the right direction with,

"Come forward... now more to my left-- I mean, your left! That's right!"

Slowly, Abby's aquarium was carried out of her parents' home, and into the little yellow house.

"Where do you want it, Sweetheart?" asked John, as the tank came to rest in the small hallway.

"Against that wall, so I can see it when I'm in bed," said Abby. "No, wait. Maybe over there, instead."

Izumi stepped forward and began to discuss the situation with her daughter.

"Oh no," groaned Terry, with a half smile directed at Jake. "Here it comes-- *the moving of the furniture*," he said, in an over-dramatic voice.

Jake looked at him, puzzled.

"Just wait, and you'll see," grinned John. "We're going to stand here, until the women make up their minds where to put everything!"

"Yeah," laughed Terry, "and when they *do* decide, you can be sure it won't be the last time!"

Izumi and Abby pointed and planned, rearranging imaginary furniture in every possible configuration, and doing everything but taking a poll of the men, before at last deciding where it all should go.

"Over there, against the wall," announced Izumi.

"And after all that, they decided on the same place as when they started," laughed Terry, as John and Jake carried the cupboard to the selected spot.

Then, they gingerly set the aquarium tank into place. The men went back to dismantle Abby's bed, while Izumi rested in a chair and watched as her daughter began to clean the aquarium and test the water for the right balances.

"This is a big day for you," Izumi mused sadly. "My baby is moving into her own home."

"I'm just a short walk away, Mom," laughed Abby. "You sound as though I'm moving to the other side of the moon!"

When the gravel had been vacuumed and the new water added, Abby gently released her pets back into their home.

"They'll be a little dazed at first," Abby explained, "until they get used to their new surroundings."

"How dazed are *you* feeling about all this?" wondered Izumi.

"Like my fish, I'll adjust," she replied, confidently. "It makes sense that I'd move out, Mom. Jake and I have to make our own life, together. Besides, he needs me here."

Just then, Jake came in with a large box of Abby's clothes.

"Where do you want it?" he asked.

"Just set it on the closet floor," she instructed him. "I'll put them away, later."

"The bed's coming over next," he said, disappearing back out the door.

"What are you going to tell people when they ask why you have separate rooms?" wondered Izumi. "You need to think about your answers, beforehand."

"I'll tell them the truth," said Abby. "That we're married in name only."

"And what are you going to say when they ask *why*?" pressed Izumi.

"I'll say..." the young woman hesitated, searching for the words that would make people understand her unique relationship with Jake. "How do I tell people that I'm doing this because he's my friend? I know it might sound corny, but it's just that simple. I have many friends, but only one who really needs me."

"Then," replied Izumi, "tell them *that*."

As Izumi finished speaking, John came in and set Abby's fly tying table, which had no legs, on top of her desk.

"I didn't realize you had so much stuff in that bedroom of yours," John remarked. "It's getting close to lunch, and there's several more boxes to bring over yet."

"Yeah," agreed Terry, as he carried in two cardboard containers, one stacked on top of the other. "When do we eat?"

"Give me a half hour," said Izumi, getting up from her chair with a little difficulty. "I don't remember being this big so soon with Abby or Grace."

Grace was the baby girl that had come into the world, stillborn. Every now and again, Izumi would refer to the baby as though she were still alive. In Izumi's heart, she always would be.

"Do you want me to help, Mom?" asked Abby.

"No," declined the mother, "you have enough work to do. I can handle lunch just fine. I'll let everyone know when it's ready."

John and Terry set up Abby's bedstead, and carried in her box spring and mattress. Jake brought over Abby's sheets and comforter, and carefully made her bed. The curtains she had had on her old bedroom window, did not fit this one, so they had to be set aside.

"This place is starting to look like your room, Abby," observed Jake, happily.

Then Izumi called the hardworking crew to lunch. Jake had been caught up in the spirit of teamwork, and as a result, had lost a little of his shyness around Abby's family. He still kept his distance, but didn't seem so threatened by John or Terry's presence. Abby quietly took note of this, and was thankful for this modest step of progress.

Izumi set out lunch on the table, and everyone helped themselves, buffet-style. After eating, Abby and Jake immediately set about moving her art studio to the living room in the yellow house. John and Terry, who were not as eager to get back to work, took their time finishing lunch.

"Look at them-- they're excited," observed Terry, as Abby and Jake left the house with her easel.

After the two men ate, they finished moving Abby into the little yellow house. All that remained was for her to put everything into its rightful place.

"Well," sighed John, as everyone stood in Abby's new bedroom, "that's the last of the boxes."

"Abby, I put more towels in the linen closet," said Izumi, "and gave you enough dishes and utensils that you could invite us over to dinner once in a while. I know you're not a very good cook, but I gave you some pots and pans, anyway. Remember to eat a balanced diet. I don't want you eating junk food every day, just because I'm not here to tell you what to do!"

"Mom!" laughed Abby, with a patient sigh, "I think I can manage!"

"I'll make you some new curtains for your room, so don't go and buy any," advised Izumi. "I put food in the refrigerator, so you won't have to be concerned about dinner. And remember to lock up at night, and keep the porch light on, because it discourages burglars."

"Dad," pleaded Abby, "would you take Mom home, before she starts telling me how to brush my teeth?!"

"Up and down," said Terry, playfully, "not side to side!"

"If you need anything-- anything at all," finished Izumi, "you just come home."

At the mention of the word "home," Izumi burst into tears.

"That's right," she cried, "*this* is your home, now!"

"Come on, Little Dove," said John, tenderly leading his wife back to their empty nest. "Let's give the kids some time to settle in."

Terry gave Abby a parting farewell hug, and then left the yellow house with John and Izumi.

Suddenly, it was quiet. Jake and Abby were alone together for the first time in their new home.

"Well," sighed Abby, "I'd better get back to work."

She went to her closet and began to hang up her clothes.

"Do you need any help?" offered Jake, unsure what to do with himself.

"No," she replied, "I can do the rest, myself."

"Okay," said Jake, turning to leave. "You know," he paused, "any guy in prison would trade places with me in a heartbeat. You're really blessed to have such a nice family."

"They're your family, too," she reminded him.

With a smile, Jake left Abby to organize her closet. It took her the rest of the afternoon to finish getting the bedroom in order. By the time she was ready to announce completion, Jake was preparing dinner.

"Is that mushroom soup I smell?" asked Abby, appearing from her room, and going to the kitchen where Jake was stirring soup in a small pan. "I thought Mom said she left dinner in the refrigerator?"

"She did," answered Jake. "When you're ready to eat, I'll heat it up for you."

"Aren't you going to have any?" she questioned him.

"It was meant for *you*," he declined. "I'm doing all right on soup."

"When Mom said to eat a balanced diet," informed Abby, "she just wasn't talking to me. She meant you, too."

"No," debated Jake, "she was talking to *you*."

"Why are you fighting me on this?" wondered Abby, curiously. "Do you really like mushroom soup *that* much?"

"Couldn't you just let it drop?" asked Jake, beginning to feel a little trapped.

"I'll let it drop, for now," sighed the young woman. "But, this conversation isn't over. I'm responsible for the way you eat, now."

She went to the refrigerator and got out the roast chicken Izumi had prepared. Jake sat down to the table with his soup, while Abby sat down to a savory chicken dinner.

"There's plenty here for both of us," she offered.

"No, thanks," said Jake, trying not to smell her food.

Abby prayed over her dinner, and then began to eat. She could tell Jake was hungry, and that the soup was not likely to fill his stomach.

"Why won't you eat what Mom made?" asked Abby, unable to keep silent any longer.

"Because," replied Jake, in a voice of embarrassment, "it's *your* food. I can't afford that balanced diet, she was talking about."

"But," reasoned Abby, "I can. I make enough money that we could afford a little better than watered down soup all the time."

"No," resisted Jake, "that's *your* money."

"I thought we were partners," she pointed out. "What's mine is yours. Everything I own or make, now belongs to you, as well."

Jake stared at her, incredulously.

"The jeep, computer, easel, aquarium, and even my fly rods-- I share it all with you," said Abby. "Dad and Mom share everything, so I don't see why we shouldn't. Although, I would appreciate it if you didn't leave the lines tangled after you go fishing. I hate finding a fly rod with knots."

"Abby," said Jake, "I'm not expecting anything from you, except to help me with my flashbacks. I didn't marry you for your jeep."

"I know that," she smiled. "Now, do you want a chicken leg, or not?"

"I shouldn't let you support me," resisted Jake.

"As long as you're doing your best," argued Abby, "then we're supporting each other."

She handed him a plate, and passed him the dinner Izumi had prepared. Jake ate in silence, marveling at Abby's willingness to share everything she had with him-- even her own family.

After dinner was over, and the dishes were cleared away, Abby went to the living room to set up the computer. It was placed on a desk in one corner of the room, next to the couch. Jake watched as she connected the cables and adjusted the monitor.

"I haven't checked my email all day," she sighed, "so my mailbox is sure to be full of spam."

Jake had never had a female roommate before, and didn't know how to act. Abby sensed he was nervous, and tried to break the uncomfortable silence, as much as she could.

"Masato emailed," she said, opening the message in her program. "I haven't told him that I got married, yet. Won't *that* be a surprise! He doesn't say very much, only that there's a new reel out, and that he'll let me know if it's worth getting, or not."

Just then, there was a knock on the front door.

"I'll get it," said Jake, jumping up from the couch.

"Hello!" greeted the visitor. "My name is Pat O'Shea. Is Abby home?"

"Mr. O'Shea!" welcomed Abby, coming over to greet one of her fishing buddies. "What a nice surprise! Won't you come in?"

"I hear that congratulations are in order," said Mr. O'Shea, giving her a hug. "Jake, you're a very fortunate man! If I was several years younger myself, I would have given you a run for your money!"

"How did you hear about it so soon?" wondered Abby, for to the best of her knowledge, no one in the family had told anyone yet.

"Your parents called me today," explained Mr. O'Shea, "and, as their lawyer, asked me to transfer the deed to this house, to you and Jake. John told me to bring it straight over, so here I am. This has been notarized, so it's completely official."

"*Dad and Mom are giving us the house?*" cried Abby, in complete shock.

"I'm just following directions," said Mr. O'Shea, with a laugh. "Congratulations, again! John mentioned something about it being a wedding gift."

As surprised as Abby was, Jake was several times more so. The deed not only had Abby's name on it, but *his* as well.

"I have to get going," said the lawyer, standing up to leave. "My sister is expecting me back for dinner, and I'm running a little late, as it is. Well, congratulations, and God bless you both!"

When the front door closed, Jake put his face in his hands, and tried to steady himself.

"Are you all right?" asked Abby, seeing how stunned he was by the gift.

"How can I ever repay them?" he stammered.

"They're not expecting to be repaid," replied Abby. "As soon as you're up to it, we need to go and thank them."

Jake slowly nodded, and followed Abby out the door to the Johanneses' house. Everyone was sitting in the living room with big grins on their faces.

"We saw Mr. O'Shea was just at *your house*," remarked John, emphasizing the "your house."

"Wow," sighed Abby, holding up the deed for everyone to see, "this is such a *huge* surprise! Thank you!"

With that, she went over and hugged her parents.

"We love you, Sweetheart," said Izumi, wiping the tears from her eyes. "We want you to be happy."

"I am, Mom," whispered Abby, giving her another hug. "I am!"

During all this, Jake hung back, somehow feeling out of place.

"Congratulations," said John, coming over to shake his hand.

"I don't know how I can ever thank you enough, Mr. Johannes," replied Jake, his voice unsteady but sincere. "It means a lot to me."

The father looked Jake straight in the eye.

"Take care of her," said John, firmly.

"I will, Mr. Johannes," promised the young man. "I give you my word."

"I trust you, Son," replied John, in a kind voice. "From now on, address us as 'Dad' and 'Mom.' 'Mr. and Mrs. Johannes' is too formal. You're a member of this family now."

Jake didn't know what to say. Calling someone "Dad" was something he hadn't done in years; he had never known his mother, and the idea of suddenly having two people by those names in his life, suddenly overwhelmed Jake, for he was starved for love. The genuineness of John and Izumi, made his own father's abuse, seem all the more despicable. So *this* is what family meant! Fathers DID take care of their children-- it just wasn't a rumor he had heard!

Then something happened that shocked everyone, including Abby. Jake broke down and wept. He stepped forward and embraced John, as a child going to his father's arms!

"There, there, Son," said John, comforting the young man, and holding him tenderly. "You're with family now."

Jake continued to sob, his shoulders heaving with bittersweet joy. John looked over Jake's shoulder at Izumi and then to Abby, who's mouth was hanging open in dumbfounded wonderment! Terry was quietly weeping for happiness, for he knew Jake had finally found a home and family of his own. Terry understood the importance of this, and thanked God for revealing it to Jake's heart.

As the sobs continued to come, all John could do was stand there, comforting Jake and patting him on the back with, "there, there." When at last, the tears subsided, John let go of Jake, and took a deep sigh of relief.

"Do you feel better?" he asked Jake, with a tender smile.

"Yes, Dad," replied the young man, smiling through his tear stained face. "Much better."

"Well," said Terry, drying his eyes, "this calls for a prayer of thanksgiving. Jake, why don't *you* do the honors?"

As confident as Jake was right now, he was still too shy to pray openly. Everyone bowed their heads, while John thanked God for bringing Jake into their midst. With this recent display of affection, everyone had thought that Jake would be ready to join hands during the prayer, but he resisted John's hand, and instead, stuffed them into his pockets. Only in the immense overflow of emotion, had he been able to momentarily overcome his great aversion to physical contact. Now that Jake was calming down, he was finding a new comfortable relationship with Abby's family, putting everyone more at ease than they had been before. Still, as happy as Abby was, she wondered why her Dad had been the one to break through to Jake-- and not herself.

After the prayer, Abby and Jake went home, each thinking entirely different thoughts.

"I'm going to turn in, now," announced Abby, locking the front door.

"Yeah, me too," replied Jake, hesitating a moment before parting. "Thank you for sharing your family with me, Abby."

"Good night, Jake," she smiled, as they went to their separate rooms.

"Let the righteous be glad; let them rejoice before God: yea, let them exceedingly rejoice. Sing unto God, sing praises to His Name... a Father of the fatherless... is God in His holy habitation. God setteth the solitary [Jake] in families: He bringeth out those which are bound with chains: but the rebellious dwell in a dry land."

~ Psalm 68:3-6 ~

Chapter Ten

Good Things Come In Threes

"The LORD is the portion of mine inheritance... Thou maintainest my lot. The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage."

~ Psalm 16:5, 6 ~

The next morning, Abby awoke to the sound of her parents' car leaving for some destination. Sleepily, she turned over in bed and got comfortable once more. Some time later, it gradually occurred to her that they had been on their way to church. In a cry of dismay, Abby jumped out of bed and got dressed.

"Jake!" she called, quickly walking down the hall and knocking on his bedroom door. "Jake! Get up! We're late for church!"

"I'm ready," said a voice from the living room.

Following the direction of the voice, Abby found Jake sitting on the couch, dressed for church.

"How long have you been up?" asked Abby in surprise.

"A few hours," he shrugged, closing his Bible.

"Why didn't you wake me up?" she demanded.

"I didn't know if I should," he hesitated a little awkwardly.

Abby looked at the time and groaned. By now, they were an hour late.

"Do you know what they're going to think?" asked Abby. "We're late for morning service, two days after our wedding night."

Suddenly, Jake understood. Abby saw his face turn red with embarrassment.

"My parents are going to tell everyone that we're married in name only," she said, getting her Bible, "but we sure aren't helping any. Come on, let's go."

A warm June sun shone overhead, as the jeep made its way down the road to church. Abby dreaded the looks they were going to get. She could tell from Jake's demeanor, that he was thinking the same thing.

By the time they reached the church parking lot, everyone had already gone inside. Abby found an empty space and parked the jeep. For a moment, Jake wanted to run away, but he braced himself and followed Abby into the large building. She found two seats at the back of the church and sat down, while they both tried to brave the glances and whispers that ensued.

It was difficult for her to pay attention to the sermon, for Abby was becoming very aware of the level of interest that her marriage had generated. For many, this morning was the first they had ever heard of any wedding, and many had been surprised, and even shocked, by Abby's choice of husband. The majority still considered Jake as a stranger; they had felt sorry for him because of his previous history, but since they didn't really know him, few were ready to trust Jake without reservation. Suddenly, Abby was aware that the minister had just said her name.

"And lastly," said the pastor, "I want to extend our very warm wishes and congratulations to the Johannes family, on the marriage of their daughter Abigail, to newcomer, Jake Murphy. We share in their happiness and ask God to bless their union with His love and grace. Let us pray."

Everyone bowed their heads while the minister prayed a blessing on Jake and Abby. The young woman took a peek at Jake, who was sitting beside her with his head bowed. She could see the strain on his face from being called attention to, though he was weathering it courageously.

When the service ended, people crowded around Abby and Jake, to wish the newlyweds well. For someone who strongly disliked shaking hands, Jake found himself doing it several times that day, as many of the Johanneses' friends and church members filed by and congratulated them. Abby would have spared Jake if she could, but she knew they were going to have to face these people, sooner or later. By now, it was generally known that they were married in name only, but no one was brave enough to mention it, except for Dr. Gregory, the local veterinary and one of Abby's oldest fishing buddies.

"Why didn't you have the wedding ceremony here?" gently scolded the middle-aged man. "Were you afraid we wouldn't come?"

"A small ceremony was the right thing for Jake and I," reasoned Abby, grasping for a polite excuse. "Besides, it was cozier than a big wedding."

"Abby, I know you better than that!" chuckled Dr. Gregory, good-naturedly. "You didn't want us butting in and asking a lot of questions."

Embarrassed by the accuracy of her friend's analysis, she blushed.

"You always *were* direct and to the point," replied Abby, as Dr. Gregory laughed and shook Jake's hand.

"After Abby talks you into fly fishing," he invited Jake, "we'd love to have another fishing buddy."

Jake said very little to anyone, making him even more of an enigma than before. When the congratulations were over, the couple went out to the jeep, with John, Izumi, and Terry following soon after.

"Sweetheart?" called Izumi, as Abby was getting behind the wheel. "Agatha has invited us and some others to lunch at her house today, to celebrate your marriage. She'll be expecting you both at half past noon. I'm going to stay behind, and help Agatha get ready."

"Couldn't we get out of it?" wondered Abby, not trying to appear ungrateful.

"Dear," replied Izumi patiently, "you were just married. None of our friends even had the opportunity to send you a card, let alone attend a ceremony! You must let them do *something*! If you don't come, it will only hurt their feelings."

"We'll be there," Abby agreed.

As they drove away, she glanced at Jake who remained quiet.

"You can handle lunch at Mrs. Hopkins' house, can't you?" she asked him. "She's one of Mom's closest friends."

"If I have an episode," Jake solemnly requested, "promise that you'll get me out of there."

"They're my friends," said Abby. "They'll understand."

"Promise me!" he insisted.

"Take it easy," responded Abby. "If you need to leave, I'll take you home. Just stay calm. This isn't meant to be a punishment!"

When they reached the little yellow house, Jake got out and went straight to his room, closing his bedroom door behind him. When it was time to leave, he reappeared, ready to face Mrs. Hopkins and the other guests.

Abby was surprised to find several acquaintances present at the luncheon, and wondered how Mrs. Hopkins had managed to feed so many people with such short notice. Izumi would later explain that several women had helped out, for everyone had wanted to show their support to the Johannes family.

As in church, Jake said very little and kept Abby in clear sight at all times. In many ways, she was his lifeline in this sea of strangers. Because of his silence, many nearly forgot he was present, except when remembering the occasion for their gathering, in the first place.

"He doesn't talk much, does he," commented Dr. Gregory to Terry, watching the young man from across the room.

"I feel sorry for him," sighed Terry, seeing the glass in Jake's hand slightly tremor. "Abby's taken on a big responsibility."

"Did I understand correctly," inquired Dr. Gregory, "that it's a marriage in name only. Is that really true?"

"It sure is," confirmed Terry.

"How are the rest of you taking it?" wondered the man. "I know if I had a daughter, and she came to me with a plan like that... well," he hesitated, "I think I would've discouraged her."

"I can understand that," conceded Terry. "Those two have a special friendship that the rest of us had a hard time figuring out. But our Abby wanted it this way, so we're supporting her decision."

"I don't want to pry," sighed Dr. Gregory. "I've never been married or had kids, but I've known Abby since she was knee-high to my hip waders, and she's almost like a daughter to me."

"I know the feeling," smiled Terry, patting Dr. Gregory on the back.

In the kitchen, Izumi was helping the women with the last of the preparations.

"I remember when Linda told me she was engaged," recalled Mrs. Frasier, taking the rolls from the oven. "You could have knocked me over with a feather-- I was *that* surprised!"

"How *are* Linda and Alan doing?" inquired Izumi.

"Just fine," replied the mother. "I'm going to visit them next month, and see my baby granddaughter for the first time! Izumi, you're never more aware of how much time has flown, until you've been told that you're going to be a grandmother! Just wait. You'll see what I mean!"

The other women gave Mrs. Frasier a warning look, and suddenly, Mrs. Frasier remembered.

"Dear," she apologized, "I completely forgot about Abby and Jake's... *situation*. Well, you have a baby on the way, so you must take comfort in that. I'll just take those rolls in for you."

"She meant well," said Mrs. Hopkins, after Mrs. Frasier had left the kitchen.

"I know," sighed Izumi.

"Speaking of the baby," said Mrs. Hopkins, "if John can't make the appointment to the obstetrician with you tomorrow, I'd be willing to go."

"Thank you, Agatha," smiled Izumi. "I don't think I could keep John away, if I wanted to! My belly is already showing a bit, and I need to make sure everything is all right. I don't remember showing this early with Abby or Grace, and it's concerning me a little."

"I'm keeping you and the baby in my prayers," said Mrs. Hopkins, giving Izumi a hug.

Jake passed the afternoon in silence and relative calm. He had no episodes, so Abby didn't have to rush him home, as she half expected to. When it was time to leave, Mrs. Hopkins presented Abby and Jake with an envelope, saying that it was from everyone at the church. Abby opened the envelope and found five, one hundred dollar bills tucked inside!

"Thank you!" exclaimed Abby, showing its contents to Jake, who was standing beside her. "This is very generous of you all."

"God bless you, both," said Dr. Gregory, while the others echoed similar wishes.

Afterward, the Johanneses left in their car, while Abby and Jake drove in her jeep. Since the hard top was off, the wind was free to whip around them, reviving the young man and giving him some much needed respite. It was the first time all day that he felt truly relaxed.

Once back home, Jake went to his room and closed the door, again leaving the rest of the house to Abby.

Monday morning, John and Izumi prepared to go to the obstetrician. After praying for good news from their doctor, the couple drove to Chaumont to keep their appointment. Dr. Elizabeth Williams entered the examining room and reviewed Izumi's medical history.

"I know I'm not showing very much," related Izumi, "but the fact I'm showing at all, this early in the pregnancy, concerns me."

"Let's have a closer look at the baby," said the doctor, preparing the expectant mother's belly for an ultrasound.

John watched the monitor screen as Dr. Williams moved the wand from one place to another, to see the development of the fetus.

"Is the baby all right?" asked Izumi, seeing that the doctor was remaining silent.

"Hold on," muttered the woman, carefully examining the images with an expert eye. Then a strange look crossed her face. "I know why you're showing so early," she smiled. "Look, I'll show you. Here's your baby's head. Over here, in this area, is another baby, and over to the right of the screen, is a third fetus. Izumi, you're carrying triplets!"

John opened his mouth in dumbfounded disbelief!

"Are you *sure*?" asked Izumi, stunned by the news.

Dr. Williams spent the next ten minutes, pointing out features on the three babies, so Izumi and John could see for themselves. John hugged his wife, who was crying tears of joy.

"*Triplets!*" exclaimed John, with a broad smile.

"Before you get too excited," cautioned Dr. Williams, "I should warn you that at such an early stage, one or more of the fetuses could be reabsorbed by Izumi's body. It's not uncommon with a multiples pregnancy."

Izumi grabbed John's hand for support. They had already endured the death of one child, and were hoping that God would spare these three.

"Izumi," continued the doctor, "your chart says that you're thirty-seven. Is that correct?"

"I turned thirty-seven just this June," answered Izumi, still clutching John's hand for comfort.

"This pregnancy was already going to be a difficult one," said Dr. Williams. "Given your age and past medical history, I think we should exercise all possible caution. Carrying triplets can be hard on a young woman, let alone one in her late thirties."

"What do you suggest?" asked Izumi.

"Several things, but namely, bed rest," replied the doctor. "I'd like to see you beginning bed rest sometime in mid August."

"You mean, she has to stay in bed for six months?" exclaimed John, not sure if he had heard her correctly.

"It's for the babies," reminded Dr. Williams. "When it becomes hard or tedious, just remember that you're doing it so the babies will have the greatest possible chance for survival. It's going to require a lot of support from every member of your family, but it IS for the best. I know I just warned you about the possible reabsorption of fetuses, but you might want to prepare the baby nursery before your period of bed rest begins. I don't want you moving around more than absolutely necessary. I'm talking about walking to the bathroom, and showering every other day."

Izumi was silent with raptures of joy, mingled with unspoken prayers of safety. Then the obstetrician discussed with the mother about other ways to safeguard her pregnancy. When it was over, John and Izumi walked back to their car in the parking lot, still numb from what they had just learned.

"Triplets," breathed John once more, as he fumbled for the car keys in his pocket. "I still can't believe it! Who would have ever thought that we'd have *triplets*! I can't think of anyone in my family who has had twins, let alone three all at the same time!"

John opened the car door for Izumi, and she got in.

"You hear about this kind of thing happening to other people," continued John, climbing behind the wheel, "and then out of the clear blue, it's suddenly happening to us! Triplets!"

Izumi let John talk on the way home, trying to listen to what he was saying, but frequently drifting into thoughts of her own. As thrilled as she was about this news, Izumi realized that it was going to be a test of not only patience, but their confidence in a God Who would not give them more than they could bear. Izumi remembered what had happened to Grace, their second child, and the funeral that she had struggled to attend. It had been a hard time for the Johannes family, but God had brought them through it.

As John continued to talk, he noticed that his wife was calm and thoughtful.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Aren't you happy?"

"Of course I'm happy," she replied. "This isn't going to be easy, John. I'm not a young girl, anymore. I'm going to need a lot of help from you and Terry. I'm glad Abby is living so nearby. When my bed rest starts, I won't be able to do the housework, or cook."

"Don't worry," smiled John. "We'll manage."

"And then there's the baby nursery," sighed Izumi. "Dr. Williams was right, we *do* need to get it ready before mid August. We can use Abby's old room. I guess it's Providential that she moved out when she did."

"I hadn't thought of that," reflected John.

"Let's not tell anyone about our news yet," suggested Izumi, "until we can get them all together at one time!"

Down at the marina, the tackle store was welcoming a new arrival of its own. Dennis Beckman, the new fly casting instructor and two time MRD champion, was beginning his first day on the job. Mr. Winkler showed him around the marina and introduced him to Jake, who did much of the menial work at the store. Dennis was twenty-six, two years older than Jake, and every bit the professional. He was entirely at home with a fly rod, and had an easygoing personality that put even the most nervous student at ease. His handsome features and single status would prove to be an attraction to many of the same unmarried women who had been too frightened by Jake's troubled past to consider him as husband material. But Dennis wouldn't meet with the same hesitation from the fairer sex of Three Mile Bay, for he was much easier to accept than Jake Murphy.

An hour before work ended, Dennis Beckman was reeling in the yards of extra line his last pupil had strewn on the docks, when he saw Jake sweeping up nearby.

"How long have you worked here?" asked Dennis, prepared to be friendly.

"A few weeks," replied Jake, in a gruff voice.

By Jake's body posturing and demeanor, Dennis could see that this man clearly did not trust him. Dennis wondered why. He hadn't done or said anything to Jake to warrant this kind of treatment, but he was still being mistrusted.

"So, you're new here, just like me," smiled Dennis. "Except for Mr. Winkler, I don't know anybody in town yet."

Jake remained silent and resumed his work.

"Is everyone in Three Mile Bay as friendly as you, or are you determined to be the exception?" asked Dennis, with a broad grin.

Realizing that he was being more gruff than he had intended, Jake let down his guard a little.

"I don't..." he hesitated, "I don't get along with people very well."

"Oh," replied Dennis, placing a fishing lure back into the tackle box. "I've got a room at the boarding house down the road. How about you?"

"I live near the beach," said Jake, tapping the broom against the edge of the dock to clear the stiff bristles of debris.

"The beach?!" exclaimed Dennis in surprise. "Pushing that broom must pay better than I thought!"

Not knowing how to answer, Jake didn't respond.

"That was a joke," explained Dennis, stepping forward and giving Jake a good-natured slap on the shoulder.

Unprepared for this sudden physical contact, Jake grabbed the broom and shoved Dennis backwards, pinning him against the wall of the tackle store.

"Don't *touch* me!" growled Jake, his eyes flaring angrily at the fly casting instructor.

"Easy, man!" exclaimed Dennis, frightened by this sudden outburst. "I didn't know!"

Just then, Jake heard footsteps coming up from behind him. He swerved around, only to find Abby staring at him with a bewildered look on her face.

"Calm down," she soothed him, taking a few steps forward and gently prying the broom from his hands. "Go get in the jeep."

"I-- I," Jake stammered, "I didn't mean to hurt him."

"It's all right," soothed Abby, "you didn't. We know you're sorry. Go get in the jeep, and wait for me there," she repeated firmly. "I'll take care of this."

Dennis watched as the young man slowly walked off.

"I'm sorry he scared you," apologized Abby, trying to smooth things over with this stranger. "You just surprised him. He doesn't like physical contact."

"They should hang a sign around his neck to warn people," muttered Dennis. "That guy's crazy!"

"Jake has his problems, but he's not crazy," said Abby.

"You could've fooled me," muttered Dennis, picking up his tackle box.

He was about to walk away, when Abby stopped him.

"Are you going to press charges?" she wondered.

"What do you mean?" asked Dennis.

"Jake is on parole," explained Abby. "If you press charges against him, he could go back to prison."

"Prison, huh? Maybe that's where he belongs," he replied, coldly.

"Jake was raped in prison," said Abby. "Would you send him back to that-- just for frightening you?"

"What are you, his guardian angel?" asked the man, noticing for the first time the deep pools of blue that were staring expectantly at him.

"Jake is my friend," replied Abby. "He also happens to be my husband."

"I see," sighed Dennis, his indignation dying down. "Well, you can go back to your husband, and tell him that Dennis Beckman won't press charges."

"You're Dennis Beckman?!" exclaimed Abby, in surprise. "I'm so happy to meet you! Mr. Winkler has told me a lot about you!"

"Are you Abby Johannes?" asked Dennis, with a smile. "I was told there was a crackerjack angler here that I just had to see for myself."

"It's Murphy now," laughed Abby. "I got married over the weekend."

"Congratulations," said the man, somewhat insincerely, for he had just met the groom.

"Jake takes getting used to, but he's harmless," she replied with a shrug. "After what he put you through, the least we can do is invite you to dinner. Do you have anything planned for tonight?"

"No, I don't have any plans," answered Dennis, "but I wouldn't want to impose. Since you and Jake are so newly married, you guys probably want to be by yourselves."

"Jake and I are married in name only," explained Abby, a little awkwardly. "It's really no imposition at all."

"Then, I'll come," he replied, intrigued by this beautiful young woman who had just married an ex-con who didn't like to be touched.

"Great!" said Abby. "Is pizza all right with you?"

"It's fine," shrugged Dennis.

After he had put away the fishing equipment and took his leave from Mr. Winkler, Dennis and Abby walked out to the jeep where Jake was waiting, quietly drawing on his small sketchpad.

"That's pretty good," complimented Dennis, looking over Jake's shoulder.

"I invited Dennis to dinner," announced Abby, as their guest climbed in the back seat. "We have to make a stop for pizza, and then we'll take it back to the house. It's so nice outside, maybe we could eat on the beach."

Jake pocketed his sketchpad and smiled weakly.

"Perhaps we could get in some fishing," suggested Dennis, hopefully.

"I never have to be asked twice to go fishing!" laughed Abby. "The bay is great for catching smallmouth bass. Sometimes, you might land a pike or two, but it's mostly smallmouth."

"What flies do the fish around here favor most?" inquired Dennis.

"Mayfly larvae are pretty standard," said Abby, "but the trick is selecting the right stage of larvae for the correct time of year. You'd be surprised what a difference that can make."

Then Dennis went into detail about his experience with largemouth bass and the lures that worked best. Jake only understood a quarter of what was said, but Abby seemed to know exactly what he was talking about. The two were deep in conversation when they arrived at their destination. Dennis excused himself to go use the restroom, while Abby and Jake went in to order.

"Jake, be nice," whispered Abby.

"Why did you have to invite him to *dinner*?" sighed the young man.

"Because," responded Abby, "he's being pleasant and he's not going to make trouble after what you did to him."

Jake folded his arms and sat down while Abby went to the counter and placed their order. Dennis reappeared and took a seat near Jake, careful to maintain his distance. When their pizza was ready, the three returned to the jeep and drove home.

To Abby's surprise, Terry ran up to the vehicle as soon as she pulled up to the little yellow house.

"What's wrong?" asked Abby.

"Nothing's wrong," Terry assured her. "Your parents have been waiting for you and Jake to get home. They have news and won't say a word until we're all together!"

Abby and Jake quickly got out, leaving Dennis in the jeep holding the pizzas.

"Here they are!" announced Terry, as the three entered the living room where John and Izumi were waiting.

Abby could see at a glance that this was good news, as Terry had predicted, for her parents were beaming smiles.

"Does this have anything to do with the doctor's appointment today?" asked Abby.

"Your father and I have something we want to tell you," smiled Izumi, excitedly. "Remember how I told you that I was concerned that I was showing so early? Well, Dr. Williams did an ultrasound, and she found out why!"

"Are you ready for this?" laughed John. "You guys might want to sit down first!"

"What is it?!" cried Terry, breathlessly.

"We're going to have TRIPLETS!" exclaimed John, almost shouting with joy.

Everyone's mouths dropped open in astonishment.

"Triplets!" exclaimed Abby, her eyes wide open in amazement.

"We're having *triplets!*" cried Terry, jumping up and down with unabashed delight. "Well done, Izzy!"

"Are you sure?" asked Abby, in a stunned voice.

"Dr. Williams counted three little babies, right here in your mother's belly," said John, patting Izumi lovingly. "The ultrasound was recorded, so the rest of you could see it," he grinned, popping in a video cassette and hitting play.

The family watched as three black forms surrounded by what looked like to Abby was gray static, moved and twitched ever so slightly.

"Are you sure those are babies?" asked Abby, squinting at the screen. "They look like three small kidneys, to me."

"Those are your future brothers, sisters, or all of the above," smiled John, bursting with gratitude. "Just look at what God has in store for us! Three on the production line, at *one* time!"

"You overachiever," laughed Terry, nudging John in the side with his elbow. "I knew twins might be possible, but I never imagined triplets!"

Jake watched in awe at the three nondescript forms on the television screen.

"Jake, you're going to be a brother-in-law!" cried Terry, beside himself with happiness.

Jake looked at him disbelievingly and then back at the screen. It was true. Abby was his wife, making him brother-in-law to the triplets. For someone who had hardly a relation in the world only a few days ago, Jake's kin were multiplying fast!

When the tape had been viewed two more times, John turned off the set.

"Are you two staying for dinner, Sweetheart?" asked Izumi, getting up to go fix the meal.

"Thanks anyway, Mom," replied Abby, "but Jake and I have company."

Suddenly, Abby cried in dismay.

"Jake! We forgot Dennis! He's still in the jeep!"

Abby ran outside, only to find Dennis sitting at the picnic table, watching the waves lap onto the shore.

"It sure is beautiful here," mused Dennis, handing her the unopened pizza boxes.

"I'm *so* sorry!" apologized Abby. "In all the excitement, I completely forgot you were out here!"

"That's all right," smiled Dennis. "Did something good happen?"

"I should say so!" laughed Abby. "My parents found out that Mom is pregnant with triplets!"

"Again, congratulations," said Dennis.

"Won't you come inside?" invited Abby.

Dennis got up and followed Abby into the Johanneses' home.

"Dad, Uncle Terry," introduced Abby, "this is Dennis Beckman, the new fly casting instructor at the marina."

Dennis shook hands with the men, while Izumi came in to greet their guest.

"And this is my Mom," said Abby, introducing him to Izumi.

"I hear congratulations are in order," smiled Dennis, shaking hands with the expectant mother. "My Mom had two sets of twins, and we ran her ragged! I wish you better success!"

"Thank you," replied Izumi. "You have a twin, then?"

"A twin sister," answered Dennis, accepting a seat on the couch. "I always wished I had a brother, so we could change places every once in a while like my other brothers did. Do you know what sex they are, yet?"

"No," replied John. "Not until late next month-- or so I'm told."

Izumi returned to the kitchen with Abby following.

"Kind of makes choosing names more challenging, doesn't it?" laughed Dennis. "You have to have three boy names, and three girl names. First come, first serve!"

"Honey, you know, he's right," said John, going to the kitchen to talk to Izumi.

"So," said Terry, "are you planning to stay in Three Mile Bay after the fishing season is over?"

"No," replied Dennis, "I'll probably just move on to another job-- at least for the winter. Come next year, who knows?"

"How was your day, Jake?" asked Terry, not trying to leave him out of the conversation.

"Fine," he answered in a quiet voice.

"That's good," smiled Terry. "John and I will be away on another business trip for the next few days, so we're counting on you to look after the women."

Jake looked at him in silent gratitude and smiled. Terry was trying very hard to make him feel like one of the family.

Just then, Abby bounded from the kitchen, still smiling over the news of the triplets.

"Mom has invited us to stay for dinner," she announced. "Is that all right with you guys?"

"Sure," answered Dennis.

"All right," replied Jake, pulling out his sketchpad to pass the time.

"Jake and Abby are artists," Terry explained to Dennis.

"At least, we're *trying* to be," sighed Abby, taking a seat beside Jake.

Jake promptly scooted away from her and continued to work on his tablet.

"Where do you come from, Dennis?" inquired Terry. "Do you have any family in these parts?"

"I grew up in Pittsburgh," replied the man. "Most of my brothers and sisters still live there."

"What made you choose Three Mile Bay?" wondered Terry.

"Mr. Winkler offered me a generous salary, but it was his description of a certain angler that finally hooked me. Mr. Winkler said he's never seen a more promising talent than Abigail Johannes. He's hoping I can talk her into becoming a fly casting instructor."

"Hear that, Abby?" grinned Terry.

"I keep telling Mr. Winkler that I'm not interested," insisted Abby. "Besides, I'm not as good as all that. He's a little prejudiced."

"You know," suggested Dennis, "if your art thing doesn't work out, teaching fly casting is a good way to make a living. Win a few tournaments to get your name out there, and then the job opportunities start opening up. It's something to think about. In the meanwhile, I'd really like to see what you've got."

"After dinner, we can do some fishing," replied Abby, with a shrug. "I hope you're not going to be sorry you came to Three Mile Bay."

"Dinner's ready!" announced Izumi, as everyone got up and filed into the kitchen.

After the meal was over, Abby went to her room to get her fishing gear. When she was greeted by her old empty bedroom, Abby suddenly remembered that she didn't live there, anymore.

John chuckled when she returned to the kitchen, empty-handed.

"We're going to turn it into a baby nursery," he informed her, casually.

At this news, Abby's face fell. No one at the table noticed it, except one. After explaining that she was going home to retrieve her fly rod, he watched her quickly leave the kitchen.

"Abby?" called out Jake, when she had reached the steps of the yellow house. "Are you all right?"

"I guess so," she replied, sadly. "Of course, the babies *should* have my old bedroom, but when Dad said that, I felt a little displaced. That spot in the house has always been mine."

"I understand," replied Jake. "If you ever need to move back to your parents' home, your room won't be there, anymore."

Abby wanted to deny the truth of his observation, but knew that she couldn't. The same thought had occurred to her, as well. But the realization of no longer having a place in her parents' house to fall back to, was only a minor concern to Abby; she was convinced that she had done the right thing by moving in with Jake-- or I should say, of the two young people, *she* had never regretted the decision. Fearing the worried look on his face just now, Abby promptly changed the subject.

"Do you want to come fishing with us?" she offered.

"No, I'll stay in the porch," said Jake, finding a place on the old swing and putting his feet up on the railing.

Abby went inside and soon reappeared with two fly rods and her tackle box. She walked down the beach to where Dennis and Terry were now waiting, while John and Izumi sat on a picnic bench to watch in the slowly fading light of the summer sky.

Dennis accepted the fly rod Abby handed him and selected a fly from the tackle box. Abby watched as Dennis flicked his rod back and then forward, expertly landing the fly onto the water of the bay.

Terry grinned at Abby, and walked over to John and Izumi.

"He's good," smiled Terry, "but our Abby is better!"

"Where's Jake?" asked Izumi, looking around for the young man.

"I don't know," muttered Terry. "I'll go find him."

When Terry approached the screened porch of the little yellow house, he could see Jake's form sitting on the swing.

"Mind if I join you?" asked Terry, opening the screen porch door.

Jake shrugged and moved to the other side, making more than enough room for Terry. From the porch, the two men watched Dennis and Abby on the beach.

"I've seen her do this a hundred times," Jake murmured softly.

Not trying to discourage him from talking, Terry remained quiet and listened with a small grin on his face.

"First, she selects her lure," anticipated Jake. "Thata girl," he smiled. "Now, put your hair back and adjust your cap."

Terry watched as Abby acted out Jake's predictions on the waterfront, almost as if he were telling her what to do.

"Put your face into the wind, and let the line go," he breathed quietly.

Abby made sure of the direction of the wind, and cast her fly onto the water, without making a single splash. She reeled in her line a little and looked at Dennis to see his reaction. By the big grin on his face, she could see he was pleased.

"How well can you control the placement of the fly?" he challenged her.

"What do you want as the target?" asked Abby.

Dennis looked about him for a likely marker.

"That rock, over there to your left," said Dennis. "Let's see you hit that."

Abby turned to face the dry land and cast her line before her, sailing the hookless fly straight to its mark.

"Once more," requested Dennis, "but this time, land it on the palm of my hand."

He took a few steps backward and held out his hand.

"Isn't this a little ridiculous?" asked Abby, beginning to feel silly.

"Just do it," urged Dennis. "I'm curious."

Abby cast her fly rod backward and then forward, landing the fly directly onto the outstretched palm of Dennis' hand. Instead of praising her, he remained thoughtfully silent.

"How far is your reach?" he asked.

"Excuse me?" said Abby, unsure of his meaning.

"What's the longest distance you've ever cast?" asked Dennis, intently serious.

"How should I know?" replied Abby. "I don't walk around with a tape measure!"

"Mr. Winkler said you're gifted," muttered Dennis, "let's see just how gifted you really are. Stand here and cast your fly as far out as you can onto the beach."

Abby did as she was told, executing a flawless double haul. Dennis immediately paced off the area, counting each step as he went. When he came back, his face was serious.

"Am I as good as Mr. Winkler said I was?" laughed Abby, jokingly.

"No," answered Dennis soberly. "You're better. Do you know how far you just cast?"

"I don't know," she shrugged. "Seventy feet?"

"That cast was at least one hundred and forty feet," he informed her.

Seeing that something serious was going on, the others joined Dennis and Abby.

"How'd she do?" asked John.

"Did you see her land the fly on my palm?" asked Dennis. "I can count the people that can do that on one hand," he said soberly. "And many of them are men. I've never met a woman who had so much control over her line. As for the distance..." Dennis paused for dramatic effect.

"One hundred and thirty something feet is the longest cast ever in the female division, and your daughter just bested that by ten feet! I don't know what kind of artist you are, Abby, but you're the best fly caster I've ever had the honor to meet!"

"We always knew she had a gift," said Terry, grinning widely.

Abby looked at Dennis skeptically. He was making a big deal over things she did every day. She reeled in her line, and went back to the water's edge, to do some REAL fishing.

"You've *got* to let me train you," pleaded Dennis. "With work, I think your cast could go even further!"

"What's the big deal about how far she can cast?" wondered Izumi.

Terry and John chuckled at Izumi's ignorance.

"The farther you can cast, and the greater the precision you have in placing the fly," explained Terry, "the likelier it is that you'll catch what you want! In other words, if Abby were out in the wild with only her fly rod and a lake, she would never go hungry!"

"That's a little unrealistic," interjected Abby with a patient sigh. She felt everyone was getting more excited over her skills, than was merited. "When the fish aren't biting, the fish aren't biting. You can't impress them with a tape measure!"

"No, but you *can* impress future clients," pressed Dennis. "Why, with an arm like that, they would come to *you*!"

"I'm flattered you like my casting," said Abby, "but I'm *not* interested in becoming an instructor!"

"Then you're wasting a God-given talent," warned Dennis, almost angrily.

"You don't know me!" retorted Abby. "I'm going to be an artist, and that's all there is to it!"

Seeing that she was unwilling to debate the subject any further, Dennis turned to go, but suddenly realized he didn't know the way back.

"I'll drive him home," volunteered Terry.

Disappointed that her new friend was leaving on such a disagreeable note, Abby gathered her fishing gear and walked back to the little yellow house.

As Jake followed her home, he felt certain that the sooner Dennis Beckman left Three Mile Bay, the better off Abby would be-- or at least, that's what he tried hard to make himself believe.

"A [woman] that hath friends must shew [herself] friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother."

~ Proverbs 18:24 ~

Chapter Eleven

Abby, the No-Heart Starving Artist

"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might."

~ Ecclesiastes 9:10 ~

Monday morning, Abby drove Jake to work and then returned home until she was called in to act as an interpreter. Jake had been quieter than usual that morning, for he had not wanted to bring up the disagreement that she and Dennis had had the evening before. With the little yellow house empty, Abby went to her parents' home to see off John and Terry, for they would be away on a business trip to Vancouver for about a week.

"You have my cell phone number," John told Izumi and Abby, while taking his suitcase to the front door. "If anything happens-- especially with the babies, just call me."

"Sweetheart," laughed Izumi, "I'm not due for several months yet!"

"I wish I wasn't leaving you by yourself," he sighed. "My wife is pregnant with triplets and I'm running off to Vancouver!"

"Abby and Jake will be just across the way," assured Izumi. "I'll be all right, John."

"Still," he reasoned, "I don't like you in this house by yourself."

"Mom could come and stay with us," offered Abby. "I'd volunteer to move back into the house for a few days, but that would mean moving my studio, and Jake and I have a lot of work to do."

"Are you sure?" asked Izumi. "Do you think Jake would mind?"

"Most of the time, he hides in his room anyway," shrugged Abby. "I don't think he'll care."

"Please do it, Little Dove," requested John. "I'd feel better."

"You could double up with me in my room, Mom," encouraged Abby.

"If you say it's all right, then I'd love to come," smiled Izumi, hugging her daughter lovingly. "But, only if I won't get in the way."

"Of course you will," smiled Abby, "but I want you to come, anyway!"

"John, if we don't get out of here, we're going to be late for our bus!" exclaimed Terry, coming into the living room with his computer laptop case and two suitcases. "If we miss the bus, then we're going to miss our flight!"

"God keep you and the kids safe," said John, kissing his wife good-bye. "I'll be back as soon as I can!"

"Have a good time!" Izumi called after them, as the men rushed out the door.

"I haven't been called in to work, yet," suggested Abby, while Izumi began to tidy the house, "so I could help you pack."

"Jake really hides in his room?" repeated Izumi, her attention suddenly returning to something the young woman had just said. "I thought the marriage was *his* idea."

"It was," shrugged Abby. "Dad wouldn't want you packing all by yourself," she reasoned. "We really need to get it done before I leave for work."

"I'll have to take the perishable things in the refrigerator with me," pointed out Izumi, "and I'd like to do the laundry before I go."

"Mom," sighed Abby, "we have a washing machine."

Abby helped her mother pack, and carried her suitcases across the way to the little yellow house. Next, came the perishable items from the refrigerator. Izumi hadn't told her daughter this, but she was half afraid the newlyweds weren't eating right, and this was her way of ensuring that they did-- at least, for as long as she was there.

"I'm putting your things in my room," said Abby, taking her mother to the bedroom.

Izumi hesitated for a moment and took a quick look into Jake's room at the end of the hall. The sparsely furnished bedroom was in stark contrast to Abby's cluttered and cozy room.

"I only have a single mattress," observed Abby, "so Jake and I will have to trade beds. I think he has one of your old mattresses."

Just then, the phone rang. It was the marina.

"They need a French translator," related Abby, grabbing her jeep keys.

"You go ahead," said Izumi, "I'll be fine."

"Jake and I have therapy after work," informed Abby, "so we probably won't be back until about seven. Dr. Jacoby is moving it up a day early, because he's taking a short vacation this week."

"Run along," urged Izumi.

The summer sun glinted brilliantly on Three Mile Bay as Abby drove to the marina. Gulls sailed overhead, while vacationers walked alongside the road-- many carrying fishing rods. Abby found a vacant parking space in the marina parking lot and headed straight for the tackle shop where her client was waiting.

"His name is Gustave Laurent," explained Mr. Winkler, meeting her at the main entrance, "and he doesn't speak a word of English. Dennis is out on the dock with him right now."

Jake, who was in the back of the store, watched as Abby walked out to the dock.

"No, that's all wrong!" the new fly instructor was saying. "Hold the line like this! *L i k e t h i s!*" he said slowly and in a loud voice.

"Unless he spontaneously learns English," interjected Abby, "I don't think that's going to help."

"*You're* the translator?!" Dennis exclaimed in astonishment, releasing his hold on Mr. Laurent's tangled line.

"Le monde est petit [It's a small world]," replied the young woman.

"Is there anything you *can't* do?" he smiled in admiration.

"I'll let you know," answered Abby, trying to resist the urge to smile in return, for she still hadn't gotten over their disagreement last night.

Upon hearing his native tongue, Mr. Laurent began rattling off mile-a-minute French that kept even Abby on her toes. When the fly casting lesson was over, she prepared to leave.

"I hope you're not holding anything against me for speaking up yesterday evening," said Dennis.

"Do you take it back?" asked Abby.

"Not a word of it," replied Dennis.

"Then I have nothing to say," she responded, going back into the tackle shop. "Jake, I invited Mom to stay with us while Dad and Uncle Terry are gone," she told him, as Dennis came in to put away his fishing gear.

"Okay," shrugged Jake.

"I'll see you at five, if I'm not here already," said Abby. "Remember, we have an appointment, today."

"I know," he replied, returning to his work.

At the appointed time, Abby picked up Jake and drove into Chaumont for their separate therapy sessions with Dr. Jacoby. When Abby pulled up to Dr. Jacoby's house, Jake got out, for his session was first. Not wanting to wait in the jeep, Abby visited an art gallery for half an hour and then returned for her round with the therapist.

"So," began the doctor, after Abby was seated in his home office, "how are you and Jake getting along?"

"Fine," replied Abby.

"How are you feeling about the marriage?" he asked, sitting back in his chair.

"It's a little weird," admitted Abby, "but I'm handling it."

"How do you think Jake is doing?" wondered the doctor.

"He hides from me a lot," she confessed, "but, I think that's mainly because he's just getting used to the idea of me living in the same house with him."

Dr. Jacoby leaned forward in his chair.

"You moved in with Jake?" he asked.

"I thought he already told you," replied Abby, a little surprised by Dr. Jacoby's reaction.

The therapist shook his head disappointedly.

"I knew Jake wasn't being very communicative with me," he sighed, "but, I *had* hoped we were further along than this."

"Lately, Jake avoids me whenever he can," continued Abby, "especially at home. I haven't told my parents this, but I sometimes wonder if it was such a good idea for me to move in. I'm not sure if I'm making things easier for him, or harder."

"Have you asked Jake how he feels about this?" wondered Dr. Jacoby.

"He'll never tell me to leave," she replied.

"Now that you two are sharing the same roof," advised the therapist, "you need to be aware of certain issues that might arise from your close proximity to each other. You both made a deal to keep the relationship platonic, so you must give each other enough space to be comfortable with that decision. If Jake continues to hide in his room, then I must recommend to his parole officer that you move out of the house."

"I understand," answered Abby.

When Abby went back out to the jeep, she found Jake working on his sketchpad. Before she got close enough to see what he had been working on, Jake tucked it into his pocket.

"What were you drawing?" she asked, curiously.

The young man reluctantly pulled the sketchpad out and handed it to her. It was a rough pencil outline of Dr. Jacoby's house.

"Why did you hide this from me?" she asked, tossing it back to him.

"I wasn't hiding it," muttered Jake, putting the sketchpad away.

"Before we got married, you let me see your drawings," she reminded him. "Why are you holding back all of a sudden?"

"I'm not holding back," he insisted. "I just like my privacy, that's all."

The drive to Three Mile Bay was quiet and uneventful. When they reached home, Jake made a beeline to his room without saying a single word to anyone.

"Is something wrong?" inquired Izumi, as Abby tossed her car keys onto the computer desk in the corner of the living room.

"I don't know," sighed Abby, plopping onto the couch beside her mother. "Dr. Jacoby says that if Jake continues to hide in his room, I'll have to move out."

"Is that what you want?" asked Izumi.

"You're beginning to sound like Dr. Jacoby," Abby smiled wearily. "No, I don't want to leave."

"Then, if I were you," advised Izumi, "I would do something about it."

"Such as?" wondered the young woman.

"Sweetheart," replied her mother, "you know him better than I do."

While Izumi started to fix a late dinner for the young couple, Abby went to her room. She removed the hairpins from her long silky mane, and let it gently fall down her back. After kicking off her shoes, Abby was about to shout down the hall to Jake's room to tell him that her mom was preparing supper, when something made her hesitate. Instead, she went to his door and softly knocked.

"Jake, it's Abby. May I come in?" she asked.

"All right," came the reluctant reply.

She found Jake on the bed, busying himself with a large sketchpad.

"I need to talk to you," said Abby, closing his door so they could have some privacy.

"Please, leave it open," he requested.

"Sure," replied Abby, reopening the bedroom door.

"What do you want to talk about?" Jake wondered a little nervously.

"Jake," she began, "are you happy that I moved in with you? Would you rather I leave?"

He stared down at his sketchpad.

"What makes you think I want you to go?" he asked.

"You always stay in your room," reasoned Abby, "and when you do come out, you often don't say anything unless you have to."

Jake bit his lip and sighed.

"I..." he hesitated, "I don't know... wait, that's wrong. I do know."

"You can tell me," she coaxed him. "What is it?"

"I don't know how I'm supposed to treat you," he finally admitted, his face blushing with embarrassment. "There, I said it. You can go tell your mom and have a good laugh."

"I would never laugh at you," she gently answered. "Treat me like your friend. I didn't marry you to be shut out of your life, okay?"

"Okay," he replied in a half whisper.

"Mom's fixing dinner, tonight," she informed him, "so you'd better start washing up." Then Abby went to the kitchen and set the table while Izumi prepared their supper at the stove.

"Is he all right?" she whispered to her daughter, for she knew that Abby had just come from Jake's room.

"He's all right," smiled Abby.

Before long, Jake appeared in the kitchen doorway, the subtle fragrant smell of hand soap still clinging to him.

"Jake," warmly greeted Izumi, "I wanted to thank you for sharing your home with me while John and Terry are away."

"That reminds me, Jake," remembered Abby, "I need your help switching mattresses with you, after dinner. Mom is going to double with me, and I only have a single. You don't mind, do you?"

"No," he shrugged.

"I didn't think you would," said Abby. "That old mattress of Mom and Dad's is pretty big. When Mom leaves, we can move it back, if you want."

"No, keep it," said Jake, sitting down at the table. "I don't need it."

Since Izumi had already eaten, the two ate their dinner while she sat in the living room and watched the evening news on television. After the meal was over, Abby prepared to do the dishes, when her mother shooed her from the kitchen.

"Come on, Jake," said the young woman, "let's go switch the beds."

The two dismantled both beds and carried the single to Jake's room and the king size to Abby's room. Then Abby gave him some sheets and bedding to fit his smaller mattress.

"Thanks for going along with this," said Abby, as Jake made his bed. "Could I ask you something? Why didn't you tell Dr. Jacoby that I had moved in with you?"

"You talked about me, today?" he asked in surprise.

"Among other things," smiled Abby. "You're not the only problem in my life."

"I was afraid he'd be against it," answered Jake, tucking the edge of the sheet under his mattress.

"He almost was," she informed him. "He said that if you didn't stop hiding in your room, then I'd have to move out."

Jake stared at her seriously.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I needed to know what your honest, unpressured opinion was," she explained.

"I want you here," he affirmed.

"I'm glad," smiled Abby. "I think we'll make a good team-- you and I. Tomorrow, I'd like to start working on some sketches and see what I can learn from you."

"Whatever you say," he replied, finishing the bed.

Late that night, Abby was fast asleep when she heard a low moan coming from Jake's room. Through the haze of sleep, it took her a little while to realize that this was the beginning of a flashback. Once she understood, however, Abby quickly went to Jake's bedside.

"Jake," she said, trying to get him to wake up, "you're having a bad dream."

The young man tossed in bed, the flashback gaining momentum with every passing second.

"Jake," she continued, endeavoring not to alarm him with an overly concerned voice, "wake up. Come on, wake up. It's Abby. Come on, Jake, open your eyes."

At this, Jake opened his eyes and stared at her.

"What happened?" he asked in a confused and dazed voice. "Is anything wrong? Why are you in my room?"

"What do you mean?" she asked. "You were having a nightmare, and moaning in your sleep."

Suddenly, Jake covered his eyes with his hands.

"I remember now," he mumbled.

"Do you need to change your sheets?" she asked.

"No," replied Jake, "it wasn't so bad this time. Thanks for waking me up, Abby."

"Are you going to be all right?" she wondered. "Is it okay for me to leave you by yourself?"

"I'm fine," he answered, his voice still a little shaky. "You can go."

As she turned to leave, Jake called her back.

"Abby?"

"Yes?" she replied. "What is it?"

"Could you leave the hallway light on?"

Leaving his door open and the hall light switched on, Abby returned to her room, and to a puzzled Izumi.

"He just had a bad dream," explained Abby, as she climbed beneath the covers. "I think I woke him up before it got too bad, but I need a better response time. He was still pretty shaken."

"If you had a baby monitor," suggested Izumi, "then you'd be able to hear him easier."

"That's not a bad idea," said Abby, suddenly brightening at the thought.

The next morning, Jake dressed and went to the kitchen, only to find Izumi making breakfast.

"Good morning!" Izumi greeted him cheerily.

"Where's Abby?" he asked.

"She went to run an errand," explained her mother. "Are you ready for breakfast?"

"Did Abby already eat?" asked Jake, sitting down at the table.

"She grabbed an apple and left, first thing this morning," answered Izumi. "You know how she is. Once Abby gets it in her mind to do something, she goes for it. Would you like some toast?"

"No thanks, Mrs. Johannes."

"I told you," reminded Izumi, "call me 'Mom.' No more of this 'Mrs. Johannes' business."

Just as Jake was finishing his breakfast, Abby triumphantly bounded through the front door with a shopping bag in hand.

"I found it, Mom!" she exclaimed happily, taking the parcel out to show Izumi.

Curious, Jake looked to see what Abby was holding.

"Isn't it a little early to start shopping for the babies?" he asked, upon seeing the object.

"This isn't for the triplets," smiled Abby. "It's for you. It's a baby monitor."

"I don't understand," hesitated Jake.

"If I can wake you up at the first audible sign of a flashback, then I think I can cut down on the severity of the episodes," she explained. "This was Mom's idea, actually. I'll put this monitor next to your bed, and the receiver in my room."

Jake skeptically eyed the lamb shaped baby monitor with its infantile pastel colors and oversized dials.

"You're not putting that thing in *my* room," he refused, pushing himself away from the kitchen table and getting to his feet.

"Why not?" argued Abby. "This is a perfectly good idea!"

"I don't need a baby monitor!" he exclaimed. "I'm not a child, Abby!"

"*Really?*" retorted Abby, all too soon losing her patience. "This is coming from a man who sleeps with the hallway light on!"

Stunned by her words, Jake's face quickly fell. He was too ashamed to even look her in the eye.

"You're right," he mumbled. "Put it where you want." The young man grabbed his jacket and quickly left the house.

"Jake, I'm sorry!" Abby cried after him, as the front door slammed shut. Helplessly, Abby looked to her mother.

"Abby," Izumi reproved her daughter, "a person like Jake requires a lot of patience and understanding. As Christians, we are to 'comfort the [fainthearted], support the weak, be patient toward all men. [1 Thessalonians 5:14]' That goes doubly so for Jake."

"Mom," grieved Abby, "I think I really hurt him."

"Then don't stand there like your feet are glued to the floor," advised Izumi. "Go talk to him, Abby."

With a contrite heart, Abby stepped onto the front porch as Jake's form quickly walked down the beach toward the small dock that was located near the end of the Johanneses' private property. When she finally caught up with him, Abby could see that his eyes were wet.

"What do you want?" he asked wearily.

"I came to apologize," stammered Abby. "I had absolutely no right to say that to you. Will you forgive me?"

Jake wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket and struggled to keep from bawling like a baby.

"I don't believe it," he sighed, shaking his head in disgust. "I thought I was pretty tough-skinned. I'd refuse to scream when I knew my father wanted me to, just to deny him the pleasure of knowing that he had hurt me. After everything I've been through-- to allow myself to feel like this, over one comment an eighteen year old makes!" Then Jake dropped to his knees, and wept.

"I'm sorry," Abby repented. "I have coming every terrible thing that you're thinking about me." As she turned to leave, Jake grabbed her by the sleeve.

"Don't go," he pleaded, wiping the tears away with the palm of his other hand. "You don't have to say anything, but please, don't leave me alone right now!"

As she sat down beside him on the dock, Abby's heart inwardly groaned. She felt guilty that she wasn't also in tears, but Jake was taking everything so very seriously, that it put the young woman on her guard.

"Abby, I forgive you," sniffed Jake. "I'll always forgive you."

"Oh, Jake," she sighed, "I pray you won't *have* to! 'Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips [Psalm 141:3]," Abby prayed out loud. "Thank you for forgiving me, Jake. Please don't think that I'm taking it for granted."

Slipping off her sandals, Abby swung her legs over the end of the pier, and dipped her feet into the cool water of Three Mile Bay.

"If you sit here long enough," she told him, "fish come up and nibble your toes."

Jake followed her example, and he soon had his feet in the water as well.

"Abby," he confided to her, "you're the best friend that I've ever had."

The sincerity of his voice left no room to doubt that he was speaking the truth.

"You're a better friend than I deserve," she replied.

Jake had hoped she would say, "And you're my best friend," but she hadn't. Instead, her face had changed from open frankness to one of gentle caution. Silently reproaching himself for such a juvenile remark as the one he had just voiced out loud, Jake prayed that she would soon forget it.

"What time is it?" asked Abby, swishing the water with her feet.

Jake checked his watch.

"It's almost eight," he replied.

"Oh, no!" cried Abby, jumping to her feet and grabbing her sandals. "You're late for work, Jake!"

After Abby drove the young man to the marina, she returned home and found her mother in the living room, studying a book about what to expect with a multiples pregnancy. Izumi set it aside when Abby joined her on the sofa, for the mother could easily see that there was a lot on her daughter's mind.

"Is everything all right between you and Jake?" asked Izumi.

"He forgave me," replied Abby. "I didn't deserve it, but he forgave me. You know, I could have called Dad or Uncle Terry a baby, and whether I meant it or not, they would've shrugged it off--but not Jake."

"Patience, Abby."

"When Jake started fighting me on the baby monitor idea," continued Abby, "I know I lost my patience and became frustrated. It's no excuse for sin, but, I mean, really, what's a lamb wearing a baby bib compared to those horrible flashbacks?!"

"Maybe," suggested Izumi, "we could make some kind of cover for the monitor. Or, you could take it back and get a different one."

"That's a good idea," answered Abby, "but that's not my point. Why did he take it so personally, Mom?"

"Abby," sighed Izumi, "surely, even *you* can see why. Jake is a grown man, and he has to sleep with the light on; he sometimes wets himself, he can't easily talk to other people, and he felt desperate enough to ask you to marry him in spite of all these problems. Jake is very aware of his shortcomings, and your making light of them only made him feel worse. I believe you already understand this."

"I suppose I do," sighed Abby. "I was just afraid that something else might be going on with him."

"Such as?" asked Izumi.

"I'm not sure, Mom," she answered. "I only know that I don't want him to get hurt."

"Then walk softly, Abby," warned the mother. "There's a saying, 'Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.'"

Soon after, Abby was called to the marina to translate for a group of Japanese tourists. After a long day of work, she and Jake drove home.

Before dinner, Abby walked Jake out to the picnic table, and handed him a large sketchpad.

"I want to try something," she explained. "Do you see that old boat over there? Draw it, and I'll do the same on my sketchpad. I want to see how much we differ in style."

Jake immediately set to work, while Abby carefully did the same. After ten minutes, she heard his fingers patiently drumming on the picnic table as he waited for her to complete her assignment.

"Are you finished, already?" she asked in surprise.

"You asked me to sketch the boat, not draw a photograph," he replied, quickly glancing at Abby's detailed drawing.

"It's very good," she sighed, comparing his sketchpad with hers.

"So is yours, Abby," he encouraged her. "In many ways, yours is better than mine. You just need to put yourself into your work. You get so obsessed with getting it 'right' that you forget to put your heart into it."

"I don't understand," she said.

"Look," explained Jake, "you drew the boat, and struggled to capture every single detail. I tried to portray the spirit of the object."

"I still don't understand," whimpered Abby.

"I ignored the less important details, and concentrated on the scarred hull, the weathered paint, the battered rudder. It's reduced to a skeleton of its former glory, and is now waiting to be broken up and washed out to sea. It's really sad, when you think about it. Now look at your sketch. You treated it as though it were a bowl of fruit!"

"The bay doesn't lead to the sea," corrected Abby. "It's part of Lake Ontario."

"You know what I mean," said Jake, handing her sketchpad back.

"Yeah, I know," muttered Abby. "I look at the boat and I see an eyesore. You look at the very same object, and you see the emotion of its situation."

"That's pretty much it," he confirmed.

"I'm not sensitive like that," said Abby, resuming her work on the drawing. "I don't look with my heart. That might make me a second-rate artist, but there it is. It's quite a revelation, actually. I never understood that about myself, until now."

"I could help you," he offered.

"Jake, what you have, you can't teach me," resisted Abby, tossing aside her sketchpad in dismay. "I can draw, but I can't tell a story with pictures the way you can. I once warned you that I'm not sentimental or romantic. This is the way I am, and there's not a thing I can do about it!"

"Now you know how I sometimes feel," sighed Jake. "Does this mean that our deal is off?" he wondered, trying hard not to sound as disappointed as he was feeling. "I was kind of counting on this to somehow make it up to you."

"I keep telling you that you don't owe me anything," replied Abby, getting up from the picnic table. "Our deal is still on. This just means I wasn't cut out to be an artist-- that's all. I hate accepting defeat, though!"

"Then why do it?" he asked. "Why give up now?"

"Because we have to *eat*," she answered with a practical voice. "I'd rather be an adequate fly casting instructor than a no-heart starving artist. It's no use fighting it, Jake. I've been struggling with this for a long time, and only until now is it finally making sense."

Abby walked off the beach, disappointed in this new discovery of her own shortcomings. When she reached the door of the little yellow house, she was startled to find that Jake had been following hard on her heels.

"Abby, is this my fault?" he asked her. "If you didn't have me to consider, would you still quit your art? Please, be honest with me."

"Whether you were in Three Mile Bay, or not," replied Abby, "I would still have to make a living. Cheer up, Jake. I haven't been sentenced to the salt mines! I'm going to teach fly fishing. This is not an entirely bad thing," she added with a smile.

"How did the drawing lesson go?" asked Izumi, as they entered the kitchen, while she put dinner on the table.

"I want to talk to Dennis, tonight," announced Abby. "I'm going to become a fly casting instructor."

"When did this happen?" inquired the mother, sitting down to the table with Abby and Jake.

"A few minutes ago," replied Abby. "Jake and I talked it over, and we think that this is for the best."

"Wait a minute," objected the young man, "*you* talked it over, and *you* decided to give up art-- not me. I don't want Mom to think that I had anything to do with your giving up a lifelong dream!"

"What makes you think it was lifelong?" exclaimed Abby.

"Are you trying to tell me that it wasn't?" he challenged her.

Abby opened her mouth to contradict him, but quickly closed it again.

"Okay," she admitted, "I'm disappointed! But even *I* can see the handwriting on the wall! I think this is what God wants me to do. Just look at the Providence of Dennis Beckman's arrival. It's obvious that God is trying to tell me something."

"Yeah," mumbled Jake under his breath, "to stay away from the marina!"

"Dennis is a nice guy," Abby reminded him.

"I suppose he is," conceded Jake, "but do you have to train with *him*?"

"What's wrong with that?" asked Abby.

"He smiles too much," frowned Jake.

"Is that *all* you have against him?"

"I guess so," he muttered.

"Then," Abby wondered, "*must* we have a big debate over this?"

"I won't stand in your way," replied the young man. "You're free to do what you feel is best."

Izumi looked at her daughter, her face betraying how bewildered she was by the whole conversation.

"Well," shrugged Abby, "at least we're communicating."

"Dr. Jacoby would approve," grinned Jake.

That evening, Abby drove to the boarding house where Dennis was staying. She found the instructor out on the front lawn, enjoying the company of a pretty young woman who was trying most unsuccessfully to execute a simple backcast.

"Well, well," smiled Dennis, as he saw her walking towards them, "did you come here to argue some more, or to give in?"

"To give in," answered Abby. "I didn't mean to interrupt anything important, though."

"I was just showing Florence how a backcast works," he explained. "Florence, this is Abigail Murphy."

"Hi, Flo," smiled Abby. "I didn't know *you* liked to fish."

"You never told me it was so fascinating, Abby," replied Florence, smiling coyly at Dennis.

"I can come back later," offered Abby.

"That's all right," replied Dennis. "Florence, maybe another time?"

"I'll look forward to it," smiled the woman, picking up her purse and disappearing down the sidewalk.

"What made you change your mind?" wondered Dennis, reeling in the fishing line Flo had strewn on the lawn. "I thought you were an 'artist.'"

"Not a very good one, I'm afraid," answered Abby. "If your offer to train me is still good, I'd like to take you up on it. I'll pay you, of course."

"I'd like to think about it for awhile," Dennis replied cautiously.

"All right," said Abby, a little surprised by his hesitation. "I'll see you later, then."

Abby climbed back into her jeep and was about to drive away, when Dennis approached her.

"You're truly serious about this?" he asked. "I mean, this isn't some kind of game to get even with me, is it?"

"I'm serious," insisted Abby.

"Good," said Dennis, giving her a resolute nod of his head. "Get out of the jeep."

He disappeared into the boarding house and soon returned with five colored rings. After measuring off the distances, he carefully laid them on the ground.

"Stand over there," he instructed her, pointing to his left.

Dennis prepared a fly rod and tied on a dry fly.

"In order to become a certified instructor," he began, "you need to score at least eighty-five points in one or more officially recognized fly casting events. There's a little more to it, but we won't go into details right now. All right. There are three rounds to the trout-fly accuracy event. The dry fly, wet fly, and the roll cast. You will be tested for timing, speed, and accuracy. Do you understand?"

"I think so," hesitated Abby, trying to keep up with Dennis' enthusiasm.

"By the way," he suddenly remembered, "how old are you?"

"Eighteen," she replied.

"To turn professional at eighteen isn't a small feat," he mused. "Anyway, back to the tournament. I told you about the three rounds. You have six minutes to complete the entire event. You get a demerit for each mistake you make. There are all kinds of demerits, but the most important ones have to do with accuracy. Let's begin working on the dry fly."

Abby and Dennis worked late into the evening, until there was no more daylight to practice by. When he noticed Abby beginning to favor her right shoulder, Dennis decided it was time to call it a day.

"I guess I worked you a little hard," he apologized. "Don't let me push you into an injury."

"Do you think I really have a shot at becoming certified?" she wondered, as she got behind the wheel of her vehicle to go home.

"I don't know if anyone can have a natural talent as pronounced as yours and say that hard work and practice had nothing to do with it," he confessed, "but you come pretty close."

"Thanks, Dennis," smiled Abby, greatly encouraged by his words.

"Could I ask a question?" he ventured. "How does Jake feel about you working with me?"

"He thinks you smile too much," replied Abby, starting up the jeep. "See you tomorrow!"

Dennis retrieved his target rings, gathered his fishing gear, and went inside.

When Abby returned home, she found Izumi sitting on the porch swing of the little yellow house.

"Well?" asked Izumi, expectantly. "What did Dennis say?"

"He not only agreed to train me, but he gave me my first taste of the trout-fly accuracy event. It's a lot more challenging than it looks!"

"The *what?*" asked Izumi. "I thought he was going to help you become an instructor."

"He is," said Abby, sitting down on the swing beside her mother. "I must score well, if I want to become certified. I have so much to learn! My roll cast leaves much to be desired."

"I'm sure you'll do fine," assured Izumi, patting her daughter's hand reassuringly.

"Where's Jake?" asked Abby. "You didn't have any trouble with him, did you?"

"Not a bit," replied Izumi. "I think he's already turned in."

Abby went into the house and tiptoed to Jake's room to check in on him. Since he had left the bedroom door half open, she quietly peered inside without making a sound. To her relief, Jake was peacefully asleep and undisturbed by any flashbacks. As she turned to leave, something caught her eye: on the nightstand beside his bed, stood the lamb shaped baby monitor.

"He [God] giveth His beloved [Jake] sleep."
~ Psalms 127:2 ~

Chapter Twelve

When Innocence is Betrayed

"The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel."

~ Proverbs 12:10 ~

While John and Terry were away on their business trip, Izumi didn't see much of Abby during her stay at the yellow house. After work every day, Abby practiced with Dennis, training for a tournament that he hoped she would be ready for in August. As Abby trained, Jake watched from the porch swing, while Izumi tried her best to keep him company.

The first of July brought the men back from Vancouver, where they had spent the past week training the staff of one of their client's law firms to use the custom software that John and Terry had designed for their specific needs. It had been more tedious than usual, and both were eager to get home. When the men arrived in Three Mile Bay, they were surprised to find Abby on the beach with Dennis, practicing her casts and training with the determination of one who was serious about what she was doing.

"How long has this been going on?" asked John, as he and Terry sat at the picnic table to watch.

"Almost a week now," replied Izumi, taking a seat beside her husband.

In the enclosed porch of the little house, John could see a solitary figure, sitting on the swing, watching the pair on the beach. John waved, and Jake came out to meet him.

"When did you get back?" greeted Jake, in a friendly voice.

"Not ten minutes ago," answered Terry. "I hear Abby's trying for certification."

"Yeah," sighed Jake with a half smile.

"Thanks for looking after things while we were away," said John. "I really appreciate it."

After one or two more exchanges, Jake returned to the porch.

"I feel sorry for him," mused Izumi, leaning her head on John's shoulder. "Abby's been so busy with Dennis lately, that she doesn't have time for Jake. When I moved out of their house this morning, I almost felt as though I were somehow abandoning him. I'll be glad when this training business is over."

"I think Jake feels the same way," remarked Terry, thoughtfully.

Down by the waterfront, Abby was trying to perfect her roll cast.

"Relax your wrist a little," directed Dennis. "You're tensing again, Abby!"

"I'm doing the best I can!" exclaimed Abby, trying to keep her patience.

After another clumsy effort, the fly casting instructor took the rod from her hands.

"Take five," he groaned, as Abby pulled her green baseball cap down over her eyes. "I keep telling you that there's nothing wrong with your roll cast. Why can't you believe me?"

"Then why do I keep messing it up?" she argued.

"Because you're not having fun," answered Dennis, simply. "Abby, when you start taking all of this too seriously, you lose all the grace and technique that makes you a standout in the first place. I'm not here to change you, only to hone the skills you already have. Go cool down."

Seeing that her father and uncle were watching with Izumi at the picnic table, Abby walked over and joined them.

"What went wrong?" asked Terry. "You were really struggling to get control of the line. It's not like you."

"I'm just tired," Abby sighed heavily. "It's good to have you guys back. Did everything go okay?"

"We've had better trips," smiled John.

"Sweetheart," suggested Izumi, "maybe you should take a few days off from training, and forget about fly fishing for awhile."

"That's easier said than done," said the young woman with a laugh. "Dennis has me entered in a tournament next month."

"So soon?" asked John. "Don't you need more time?"

"It's one of the last tournaments of the season," replied Abby, brushing her long hair away from her face.

Just then, Dennis came over and welcomed back John and Terry.

"I see you have our Abby hard at work," smiled Terry.

"She drives herself harder than I ever could," replied the man, setting Abby's tackle box on the table. "I keep trying to tell her that her roll cast is just fine, but Abby insists on reworking it over and over. I'm afraid she's going to pick up bad habits that will ruin her technique."

"It doesn't feel right," she answered him.

"That's because you're not following through with the backward motion," he informed her. "You know this. I've seen you do it dozens of times the right way, and now suddenly you're trying to change it. This is only a roll cast! It's not rocket science!"

"I'm the one who's going to be judged next month, not you," Abby pointed out. "I want it down perfectly."

"*I'm* the one who's qualified to tell you what the proper technique is!" exclaimed Dennis. "I make a living at this, remember?"

"So, how are things at the marina?" asked John, trying to break up the disagreement.

"A whole lot easier than here," laughed Dennis, shaking his head at Abby's determination to do things her way. "I don't know how Jake does it."

"Does what?" asked Abby.

"Manages to live with someone as decided as you," finished Dennis. "I'll see you tomorrow-- that is, if you're still in training."

"Believe it or not, I'm not trying to be difficult," she sighed. "You've been spending all your free time to prepare me for next month, and I appreciate it. I promise, I'll try to give in a little more often than I do now."

"I'll remind you of that promise," smiled Dennis, walking away with his fishing gear and target rings.

The training continued and the days flew by, until one day late in July when Abby saw a strange change in Jake.

She first noticed it a little after Jake had spent time reading his Bible, as he was in the habit of doing every morning. Jake had emerged from his room with a very troubled look on his face, and absolutely refused to tell Abby why. For about a week, Jake's behavior became increasingly distressed, even withdrawing from Abby's company when she fished. In the midst of all this unspoken anguish, Jake's nightmares steadily grew worse. Abby found herself running to his room sometimes as many as two times a night, to wake him from the dreaded flashbacks. Abby reminded God that if He could calm the waves with "Peace, be still," then He could also quiet the storm that was raging inside of Jake.

This went on for a week, until one Saturday morning, when Jake made an early bus trip to Chaumont to see Dr. Jacoby for an emergency session. The therapist was never one to turn away a patient in need, and was even a little gladdened that Jake was showing the symptoms of one who was finally willing to open up. From the minute the ex-convict stepped into his office, Dr. Jacoby knew something was weighing very heavily on Jake's mind.

"How have you been doing?" began Dr. Jacoby, with the same question he usually asked at the beginning of therapy.

Jake sat down on the couch and folded his hands together, his face alarmingly troubled and agitated.

"I'm getting worse," he anxiously confided.

"Why do you think that?" asked the therapist, leaning forward in his chair.

"She's never going to forgive me," said the young man, his voice trembling with emotion, "I know she won't."

"Who won't forgive you?" asked Dr. Jacoby. "Abby?"

"I'm not even sure if God can forgive me," he continued, burying his face in his hands. "Does God forgive all sins, or only some?"

"What are you talking about?" inquired the doctor. "What have you done that needs forgiving?"

"Don't you see it?" he cried, getting up in anguish. "Can't you see what I am?! It's tattooed all over me, and I can't get rid of it!"

"Sit down," instructed Dr. Jacoby, seeing that his patient was becoming more and more agitated. "Whatever is wrong, we'll handle it together. Calm down and breathe slowly. That's right. Do you want to start at the beginning?"

"I read a verse this morning," began Jake. "It's from First John, chapter three: 'Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God.' I don't think I have that confidence, and I don't know what to do!"

"What is your heart condemning you about?" asked the therapist, in a gentle voice.

Jake had been eager to tell someone in the hopes of ridding himself of the burden he was under, but when the moment was actually upon him, he became frightened. He got up from the couch and walked to the door, his hand ready on the doorknob. Jake wanted to leave, but a still small voice sounded in his heart, so that the young man slowly returned to his seat.

When Abby came back from her training session with Dennis that Saturday afternoon, she was surprised to find Jake and Dr. Jacoby waiting for her in the living room of the little yellow house. Both men stood up as she entered the room, and from their serious looks, Abby knew something was wrong.

"What is it?" she asked, dropping her tackle box and fly rod onto the floor by the front door. "Where have you been, Jake?"

"Abby," he began, his face flushed with shame, "I have to tell you something. You're going to hate me, but I *must* tell you."

Dr. Jacoby's usually placid face was wrinkled with sadness, as if something were about to happen which he was unable to prevent. Abby sank onto the couch, trying to brace herself for bad news, but nothing she could do would've prepare her for the shock that she was about to receive.

"My heart is pounding so hard, I can barely hear myself speak," mumbled Jake. "Abby, I didn't want to tell you this, but it's not fair to keep it from you. You deserve to know what I am."

Jake paused, and looked up at his beautiful friend.

"Abby, for most of my life, I've been gay."

The young woman opened her mouth in shock, unable to say a single word. She looked to Dr. Jacoby, who was waiting to see what her response would be. Abby stood up and then sat back

down. A flood of thoughts raced through her mind as she tried to understand what she had just been told.

"You tell me you're gay," stammered Abby, "but your file is filled with accounts of incest, prison rape, beatings, and unspeakable acts of cruelty that I can't even bear to think about. Are you trying to tell me that you were a *willing* accomplice to your own torture?!"

"Abby," said Jake, "you don't understand."

"Please," she argued, "just answer the question. Were you forced against your will, or not?"

"Yes," replied the man, obviously under a great deal of stress, "I was forced. But, what you don't understand is that when it was happening to me, I enjoyed it."

Abby saw the sincere look in his brown eyes, and realized that he was struggling to be completely honest with her. Something, however, didn't add up.

"Jake," said Abby, "I can't conceive how you could say such a thing! It doesn't make sense!"

"When they were forcing me to have sex, my body reacted to them!" argued Jake, his face flushed with the shame of those words.

For a moment, Abby didn't know how to respond. Then she was reminded by the Holy Spirit of something that even Dr. Jacoby had affirmed was a common occurrence.

"You know that Uncle Terry was also abused as a little boy," she recalled. "He never had it as bad as you, but it was hell just the same. Uncle Terry said that his stepfather often told him after he was abused, that he had wanted it. He said that by the way Uncle Terry had looked at his stepfather, or talked, or walked across the room, that he had even *asked* for it! Imagine telling that to a little boy-- that he had actually *wanted* and *asked* to be abused! Jake, I think you've been told a lie so many times, that a part of you believes it."

"But, I DID want it!" shouted Jake, jumping to his feet. "Can't you understand? I'm no good, Abby! I've even asked God to forgive me, but it *won't* work!"

"Of course it won't work," she argued. "That's because you're trying to repent of something you deep down know wasn't your fault! Sin has to have the ability to choose, otherwise it's not sin-- it's rape. God doesn't expect you to repent of something that wasn't your choice, in the first place."

"Abby, I'm gay," insisted Jake, his eyes leveling with hers.

"I find that very hard to believe," she replied.

Seeing that he wasn't yet convinced, Abby did something that shocked even Dr. Jacoby. She stood up and slapped Jake's face so hard, that it left a hand imprint on his cheek!

"Abby..." objected Dr. Jacoby.

"It's all right," said Jake, his face still stinging, "I deserve it."

"Did that hurt?" asked Abby, in a voice that told Jake she wasn't angry.

"A little," he admitted, "but I had it coming."

"It's only natural to feel pain when someone slaps you," she explained, "because that's the way God created you. To have felt pleasure against your will doesn't make you gay-- it makes you human."

Dr. Jacoby nodded his head in agreement. Jake stared thoughtfully at her. He had to admit that she was making sense.

"I can't believe we're talking about this," said Abby, "but I want to get it settled once and for all. Your conscience is bothering you because you think you're gay. Let me ask you a question: do you want to be around other men?"

"No, I don't," replied Jake, "because I'm afraid of what I might feel."

"Then this isn't about desire," concluded Abby, "it's about fear. You're afraid that you'll become what you hate, and that can't happen to you, if you don't let it. Sin was their choice, just as it is for me and for you. If you're clinging to God, and I have every reason to believe that you are, then you have nothing to fear. You're not gay, Jake," she sighed, "you're just... very confused."

The young man sat back down on the couch, thinking over what Abby had said.

"Dr. Jacoby tried to tell me the same thing, but I didn't really understand it until now," he said, his face deep in thought. "I always felt guilty, and yet when I tried to shed myself of that guilt, it made me angry. I don't have to apologize! I didn't *ask* to be beaten! I didn't ask for *any* of it! And yet, I heard those words so many times, 'You wanted it.' How could it *not* be true?"

"Abusers often try to manipulate their victims into sharing their guilt," explained Dr. Jacoby. "That, coupled with the threat of death or other bodily harm, is a very powerful weapon."

"Thank you, God," breathed Jake, the realization of it slowly sinking in. "About a week ago, I read a passage in Romans for the first time. 'Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet.' Those words, along with the rest of chapter one, would sink my heart every time I read it. How could I be right with God, when it says these things about me?"

"God wasn't talking about you," confirmed Abby.

The mental stress of the burden he had been carrying, slowly began to melt away. Jake remembered what Abby had said about sin, and that it had to be *his* choice, otherwise it wasn't sin after all. A big smile crossed his face, and he could feel the weight dropping from his heart. He saw his past in a whole new light-- the light of Truth. The Truth had set him free from the shackles of guilt that his abusers had bound him in, when he was just a small boy. How long had this fear tormented him, and how miraculous did it vanish, when God revealed the Truth to his heart! Jake knew God wasn't angry with him, and at that moment, he had the complete saving confidence of knowing that Christ's salvation truly belonged to him! No abuser could take that away from him-- it was HIS! There was *nothing* to separate him from the love of God, and it filled Jake with a joy and peace that flooded every pore of his being.

The peaceful look on Jake's face stunned Abby. Surely, Jake would have known better than to believe his tormentors, but she quickly reminded herself that from his childhood, Jake was repeatedly told that he was just as bad as the people that were hurting him. What an awful thing to do to any person, let alone to a child! What a cruel burden to place on innocence!

Jake went to the door and stepped outside, readily embracing the cool breeze that greeted him. Abby watched from the house as the ex-convict walked along the shore, smiling at the gulls gliding on the air currents above him.

"I've thought this before, but especially lately," mused Abby, "that God prepared the way for Jake, through Uncle Terry. Sometimes, I see a little of Uncle Terry in him, and it helps me to better understand Jake."

"It sounds like God, doesn't it?" grinned the therapist. "You're good for him, Abby. When I was driving Jake down here, I prayed to God you wouldn't take what Jake was going to tell you, the wrong way. I knew Jake was confused, but he was so busy beating himself up, that I couldn't get

through to him. The way you handled the situation today, validates my confidence in your judgment. He's a very blessed man."

Abby smiled gratefully.

"Well," Dr. Jacoby sighed contentedly, "I've got to get running. It's been a good day, Abigail!"

The elderly man went outside and got into his car, returning Jake's wave as he drove away.

A few minutes later, Jake returned to the house and found Abby at work on her easel in the living room. Though she had presently stopped trying to earn a living at being an artist, Abby had never given up the dream completely. However, her painting of the heron had become a running joke with Terry, for Abby continued to work on the poor creature, giving it highlights one day, and removing them the next. Foregrounds came and went, but the heron continued to remain its uninspired self.

"You're making it worse," Jake pointed out, in a helpful voice.

"It's a work in progress," defended Abby, knowing full well that he was right.

"When you're done with it, could I have it?" he requested.

"If you want it so much, take it," she sighed. "What do you want it for?"

Jake shrugged, and took the painting down from the easel.

"It's a little like your roll cast," he reflected.

"What is?" she asked.

"Your painting. When you take things too seriously, you start second guessing yourself," he answered, matter-of-factly.

"You think you know me as well as all that?" laughed Abby. "You were the one who said I couldn't put my heart on canvas."

"You still can't," smiled Jake, "but you're trying. As long as you don't give up, it'll come. If only you could paint like you fly fish!"

The young man went to his room and brought back a sketchbook. He placed it into Abby's hands and opened the cover. Inside were dozens of sketches, all of her at the edge of the shore with her fly rod.

"Just look at her," glowed Jake, "she's in full control. There's no apprehension or intimidation that what she's doing isn't true to form. That doesn't happen when she tries to be someone she's not."

"I never try to be anyone else," insisted Abby.

"That roll cast Dennis was so annoyed with you about-- you were trying to imitate the guy on television," said Jake, knowingly. "I watched that show with you, and you were trying to imitate him."

"Was I really doing that?" she sighed. "I wasn't aware of it. That sounds like me, though."

"Stop trying to be an 'artist,' and start being just you," said Jake. "I'd rather you be a tolerably good Abby, than a poor imitation of some famous dead guy."

Abby smiled at him and noticed that for the first time, Jake's gaze was more steady and confident than before.

"I'm going fishing," she announced, tossing aside the paint brush and locating her fly rod.

"But," said Jake, "you just put in time with Dennis. Aren't you tired?"

"I need to catch dinner," she answered, thankful for any excuse to go outside, for she was beginning to feel a little uncomfortable.

Abby made her way down the beach, and soon discovered that she wasn't alone. Jake had followed her out the door, and took a seat on the ground a few feet away, adding yet more images to his collection in the sketchbook. Abby gently flicked her line back and then forward, gracefully executing the roll cast that had eluded her during her practice sessions with Dennis. She glanced at Jake, who was smiling broadly.

A week later, Izumi woke up to the bedroom alarm clock that she had set to go off early that morning. John groaned that it was still much too early, but Izumi had something on her mind and persisted.

"Have you noticed anything different about Abby and Jake?" she asked her half awake husband.

"You mean AJ?" smiled John. "Terry says that wherever Abby goes, Jake is sure to follow."

"I can't quite put my finger on it," continued Izumi, "but there's something different."

"If you say so," yawned the man, rolling over to draw his wife close to him. "I know she's nervous about the tournament next month."

"Our Abby's been really working hard," agreed Izumi.

"Speaking of hard work," smiled John, "I hope your shopping list for the triplets is ready. We have to get the nursery outfitted before your bed rest begins in mid August."

"It's going to be quite a shopping spree, today," sighed Izumi, caressing John's hand.

"My Little Dove needs to make a nest for her hatchlings," he smiled, his gentle gray eyes gazing into hers.

"They seem happy together, don't you think?" continued Izumi, resuming her previous line of thought.

"I think AJ will be just fine," replied John, checking the clock. "If there are any wrinkles, they'll work it out. Every couple needs time to adjust to each other."

Later that morning, Terry showed up at the breakfast table outfitted for a long day at the stores.

"I'm wearing a comfortable pair of shoes," he informed them, nodding to his old sneakers, "loose shirt and jeans to allow for proper blood circulation, and a cell phone with sufficient video games to while away the hours spent in the checkout lines. Pass the syrup, please?"

"Good morning, everyone," greeted Abby, as she and Jake joined them at the table.

"We're having pancakes to ensure everyone has enough strength to make it through the day," joked Terry. "Are you ready for a solid day of baby nursery shopping?"

"I guess so," shrugged Jake.

"By the end of the day, you'll have cribs and diapers coming out of your ears!" laughed Terry.

"Oh no, Uncle Terry!" groaned Abby, spying his feet. "You're not actually going out in public wearing those stinky old running shoes, are you?"

"What's wrong with them?" asked Terry, in playful indignation. "They've got several more years of useful wear in them! Besides, they're extremely comfortable."

"They should be," teased Abby, "there's hardly anything holding them together!"

"Here's the game plan," said John, laying a map out on the kitchen table between the pancake platter and a pitcher of syrup. "Our first stop is Baby Bunting Bazaar, then The Baby Center, followed by The Baby Retail Outlet, Bouncin' Baby, Strollers Etc., and the Home Center."

"The Home Center?" asked Jake, with a grin.

"I know," laughed John, "it seems a little out of place on a day like this, but we need paint, wallpaper, carpeting, and light fixtures for the nursery. Abby, you and Jake take your jeep. Terry, you drive your pickup, and Little Dove and I will take the car. Lunch, dinner, and gas will be on me."

At this, Terry and AJ burst into peals of laughter.

"I meant," rephrased John, "that I'm paying for the *gasoline*!"

"Nice save, Dear," smiled Izumi, kissing her husband.

After breakfast, Jake helped Izumi clear away the dishes, while John and Terry put the camper shell on Terry's red pickup truck. Then they checked the oil on all three vehicles and made sure everything was in running order. When the baby crew was ready and assembled outside, John said a prayer asking God for success.

"I forgot my purse," declared Abby, quickly heading back to the yellow house. "I'll be back in a moment. Don't leave without me!"

"Jake, if she doesn't show up," Terry winked, "you can hitch a ride with me!"

When Abby had returned with her purse, the engines started and the small caravan of cars took to the road. John was the lead vehicle, with Terry next, and Abby last.

"They're nicknaming us AJ now," mused Abby, looking in the rear view mirror.

"I noticed," smiled Jake. "Do you mind it very much?"

"I suppose it's cute... in a way," she conceded, a little half-heartedly.

In the pickup, Terry turned on the radio and started humming the Christian tune that was playing. In the car ahead of him, Izumi was looking over her list, smiling radiantly like an expectant mother of triplets.

"I was thinking," said Jake, as the train of vehicles merged onto the freeway, "that maybe we could paint a mural in the baby nursery as a present."

"I think Mom would like that," agreed Abby. "Did you have any subject matter in mind?"

"Dad is always calling Mom 'Little Dove,'" said Jake, "so I thought a dove's nest might be a good idea. What do you think?"

"Dad would really enjoy that," said Abby. "Did you know that Dove is my middle name? When I was born, Dad said he had two doves. It sounds a little silly, doesn't it? I mean, Abigail Dove Murphy. Even with my maiden name, it doesn't sound any better. When I was little, I used to beg Dad and Mom to change my middle name because some of the kids at school were making fun of it."

"I'm glad they didn't," replied Jake. "I like it."

Baby Bunting Bazaar was in Watertown, and required a few miles of driving to get there. As the small caravan of vehicles pulled into the parking lot, they had to split up, for parking spaces were scarce, and everyone had to fend for themselves.

John, Izumi, Terry, and AJ, met at the entrance, and everyone went inside. Displays of baby cribs, bedding, car seats, strollers, and clothing filled the large store.

"Welcome to baby land," chuckled Terry, unjamming a grocery cart from the line of others.

"Not that I'm complaining," Jake whispered to Abby, "but why did we need to come?"

"I guess they just wanted the whole family to be here," she shrugged.

Izumi began piling stuff into the cart-- eighteen sleepers in various colors, several large bundles of disposable diapers, nine pacifiers, forty bottles, nine light weight blankets, three heavy blankets, twelve pairs of socks, six pairs of baby booties, six baby bibs, baby powder, and so many other necessities that Abby mentally lost track of it all. By the time they reached the checkout, everyone but Izumi was pushing a cart.

"No need to go anywhere else, right?" asked Terry, a little hopefully.

"Sorry," smiled Izumi.

"Are you starting a day care?" asked the woman at the cash register.

"Nope," grinned John. "We're having triplets!"

"Congratulations!" said the woman, beckoning for some help from her co-workers.

Four carts of baby supplies left the store and were packed into John's car and Abby's jeep.

"It's getting near lunchtime," said John, as Jake helped unload the last of the load into the jeep.
"Why don't we meet at the restaurant across the street?"

"Sounds good to me," said Terry, gathering the carts.

John and Izumi went ahead, while AJ waited for Terry.

"Are you doing all right?" inquired Abby, for Jake hadn't had any difficulty all day.

"I'm doing good," he grinned.

After Terry had returned the shopping carts, the three joined Izumi and John, who had already gotten a table at the restaurant.

"The next few stores will be the hardest," warned Izumi, as they ate their meal.

Terry cracked one joke after another, making it difficult for the others to finish eating. In spite of the long lines and endless waiting while Izumi made up her mind, Terry was enjoying himself. Come next January or early February, they were going to have three darling little babies! Three more Johanneses that Terry could enjoy their childhood with, that he could take fishing, and do all the things that had made Abby's childhood so special. As Abby watched her adopted uncle's joy, she knew her three new siblings would have the time of their life.

After lunch, everyone piled into their cars and hit the road. The Baby Center was next. Abby had wondered why her mother had said it was going to get harder, and ten minutes into the new store, she soon found out.

"I like this crib," said Izumi, "but they only have two in stock. It's just the right size, John."

They got back into their vehicles and went to the next store, which did not carry the brand of crib Izumi was looking for. However, she did find three car seats that she liked, so they were loaded into John's car, and off they went to the next store. To Izumi's delight, this store did have the exact style of crib she wanted in stock, but they only had one, and they needed three. John bought the single crib and went back to the second store, only to find that they had already sold one of the two cribs they had just admired. Terry laughed and shook his head wearily. The second crib was purchased, and it was off to Strollers Etc.

"This is the last store, and we still don't have much of the larger items on my list," sighed Izumi.

They made their way straight to the cribs, and to Izumi's gratitude, found a matching third in stock. John immediately secured it, and resumed the rest of their shopping. This store was the hardest of them all, for besides the crib, they had to buy three high chairs, a triplets stroller, an expandable barrier to keep more than one child in a safe play area, three swings, three different music mobiles for the cribs, maternity clothing for Izumi, and a large body pillow that would help support her during the long months of bed rest that lay ahead.

Even in all the flurry, Terry spotted three small matching teddy bears, and bought them as a present for the triplets. By the time they were finished, Terry's truck was filled to capacity, and the rest of it had to be split up between John's car and Abby's jeep.

Wearily, the group found the nearest restaurant and collapsed into the booth seats to eat dinner.

"Little Dove," said John, thankfully, "I'm so grateful we're doing this now, while you're able to move about. I can't imagine making all these decisions without you!"

"That was the last store, wasn't it?" asked Terry, once more.

"We still have the Home Center," said John, with a tired sigh.

"Will they be open by the time we get there?" wondered Abby, checking her watch.

With the store hours in question, everyone hurried to finish dinner, and got back into their cars.

Strangely enough, the Home Center came as a welcome change for the men, who had spent the entire day looking at maternity clothes, support garments, and baby cribs.

While the women picked out a pastel Noah's Ark themed wallpaper border to run along the top of the nursery wall, John bought the paint in the shade Izumi had requested.

"Since we don't know what sex the babies are," said Izumi, as she and her daughter strolled down the aisle of light fixtures, "I'm sticking with gender neutral colors."

"This lamp is nice," commented Abby, winding up the music key and listening to "Rock-a-Bye Baby."

Before too long, Jake found Abby and followed her around as he usually did. It was behavior such as this that had earned them the collective nickname, "AJ."

"As soon as we get home," groaned Abby, "I'm taking a long, hot bubble bath. My feet are killing me!"

"You should have worn comfortable shoes," grinned Terry, coming down the aisle to meet them. "Have you picked out a lamp, yet?"

"This one," replied Izumi, pointing to the one Abby had liked. "Are we done? Is John ready to check out?"

"I'll find him," volunteered Abby, as Jake trailed behind her.

"Those two," smiled Terry, watching AJ disappear around the end of the aisle. "You look really tired, Izzy. Maybe you should sit down for awhile."

He helped her to a chair that was on sale, and pushed the cart to where she was seated. Soon John and AJ joined them.

"Let's go home," said John, when he saw his wife's exhausted face.

They stood in line at the checkout one last time, and then piled into their packed vehicles.

The night sky was dark and clear as they drove back to Three Mile Bay. Abby sipped the last of her soft drink, and glanced at Jake who was sitting quietly in the passenger seat.

"You did really well today," she encouraged him. "You're making progress, Jake."

"God's been helping me," he agreed.

"I guess what I'm trying to say," continued Abby, "is that I'm proud of you. Dad predicted that you wouldn't last one month, and here it is, nearing the end of July, and you're still here."

"I owe you a lot, Abby," acknowledged the grateful man.

"Just thank God it's working out," she replied. "We've had some bumpy times, but I think we'll make it all right."

Jake leaned his head back and quietly watched Abby. Then he closed his eyes and thought of the mural they would paint for the nursery.

"That's right," said Abby, "get some sleep. I'll wake you when we get home."

Headlights sped past the jeep, casting shadows of light and darkness across Jake's relaxed form in the passenger seat. Abby smiled warmly when she glanced over and saw how peaceful Jake looked. He was her responsibility, and even though it sometimes weighed heavily on her shoulders, God's faithfulness was carrying them through. For Abby, moments like this made all the hardship worthwhile.

A full moon reflected on Three Mile Bay, as the jeep came to a stop in front of the Johanneses' house.

"Wake up, Jake," she said, gently. "We're home."

Jake opened his eyes, and sat blinking until he realized where he was.

"We have to carry all this stuff to the nursery," Abby explained, as they got out of the car. "Then, you can go to bed."

The five spent several minutes unloading the three vehicles and carrying the baby supplies to Abby's old bedroom. The crib boxes were neatly stacked against one wall, while the highchairs, swings, triplet stroller, car seats, clothing, diapers, and all kinds of baby necessities were stacked in large mounds on the floor. When it was done, the room looked very cluttered.

"We have a lot of work to do," John smiled wearily, as he shut the nursery door. "Praise the Lord, tomorrow is Sunday!"

In the living room, John and Izumi thanked everyone for their help.

"We couldn't have done it without you guys," said John. "Not in a *single* day!"

"I'm glad we could help," smiled Jake, while Abby hugged her parents good night.

As the young couple walked across the way to their home, the large brilliant moon hanging over the bay stopped Jake in his tracks.

"God's really outdone Himself, tonight," he breathed in awe. "Abby, I never knew life could be like this."

"Yes, it's very nice," she yawned, sleepily. "Could you use the bathroom first, so I can take my bubble bath?"

"Sure," replied Jake, tearing himself away from the heavenly moonlight.

Abby gathered her nightgown and bathrobe and waited in the living room for Jake to finish with the bathroom. When he appeared, she shook her head in disapproval.

"You need some pajamas," sighed Abby, for Jake was in the habit of wearing his shirt and jeans to bed. "Sweet dreams," she nodded to him, before closing the bathroom door behind her.

"Good night, Abby."

The young man lingered for a moment, and then went to his bedroom. The moon shone through his window, casting a silvery hue on everything within its reach. With a prayer that only he and God could hear, Jake looked up at the heavens.

"The LORD is good to all: and His tender mercies are over all His works. All Thy works shall praise thee, O LORD; and Thy saints shall bless thee. They shall speak of the glory of Thy kingdom, and talk of Thy power; To make known to the sons of men His mighty acts, and the glorious majesty of His kingdom.

"Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and Thy dominion endureth throughout all generations. The LORD upholdeth all that fall, and raiseth up all those that be bowed down."

~ Psalms 145:9-14 ~

Chapter Thirteen

The Test of Courage

"Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible."

~ 1 Corinthians 9:24-25 ~

"And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully."

~ 2 Timothy 2:5 ~

The clutter in the baby nursery largely remained untouched, for John and Terry figured they could do all the assembly and preparations that it would require, after Izumi's bed rest had begun.

As July came to a close, everyone's attention shifted to the fly casting tournament that was to take place on the first Saturday of August. Dennis and Abby had put in hours of practice to prepare her for the events she would have to face, and Abby was struggling more and more to remain as calm as she could. This was the last tournament of the season, and if she failed to become a certified instructor, then it would mean having to wait until next year before she could try again. Even Dennis hadn't qualified on his first time out, and warned her of the possibility that it might not happen this year. But the fly casting instructor was slow to make very many statements like that, for he knew Abby was more talented than he had been at her age.

Friday night, Abby lay awake in bed, unable to sleep. Tomorrow would be her first real step toward a new career-- one which she hoped would enable her to make a living. It was a fairly modest aspiration, but nevertheless, a big one for Abby. She had turned down a comfortable life with Tyler, declined to further her education by attending a Christian college, postponed indefinitely her attempts at becoming a professional artist, and now was only left with the option of becoming a fly casting instructor.

"Tyler for Jake," she mused to herself, staring at the bedroom ceiling, lost in thought. "College for fly fishing. If my life becomes one big failure, I'm never going to hear the end of it!" With a soft groan, Abby rolled over onto her side. "And yet, this is the direction that God has led me," she thought.

While she lay there contemplating her future, Abby heard a low mumble coming from the baby monitor in Jake's room. She got up and went to check on her friend, only to find him sleeping peacefully. Seeing that it had been a false alarm, Abby returned to her bedroom and climbed

into bed. If Jake could sleep through the night without incident, then anything was possible--including her new career.

"All things are possible to him that believeth," she prayed under her breath.

Abby shut her eyes and at last fell asleep. The chirp of crickets outside her window lasted well into the night, serenading the young woman with their courtship songs.

As the first rays of dawn shone through the curtains, Abby began to stir. Suddenly realizing what day it was, she hurried to dress herself and make her bed. Instead of going to the kitchen, Abby sat down at her fly tying table and read the Bible promises she had scrawled on the notes around her work area.

"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might," and a passage from Proverbs that read, "For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of His mouth cometh knowledge and understanding. He layeth up sound wisdom for the righteous."

After a heartfelt prayer to God, Abby set about to finish the dry fly she had been working on. It was to be a present for someone, and she wanted it to be special. Using a lighted magnifying glass, Abby worked over her gift, making sure to give careful attention to every detail.

"Today's the big day," she heard a man's voice say from behind her.

Abby looked up to see Jake standing in her bedroom doorway.

"You had another good night," she smiled, returning to her work.

"Are you nervous?" asked Jake, stepping inside and sitting down on the edge of her bed to watch.

"A little," shrugged Abby.

"Is that for the tournament?" he wondered, watching her labor over a delicate object with small feathers.

"No," explained Abby, "you have to use officially recognized flies for the tournament. I'm making this one especially for Dennis. I know I'm paying him, but he's sacrificed a lot to train me these past few weeks. Since he can't tie his own flies, I thought this would be a good way to say 'thank you.' What do you think?" she asked the young man, displaying the pattern before him. "Do you think he'll like it?"

Jake looked at it ignorantly. Fly fishing had mostly remained a mystery to him. Seeing the blank look on his face, Abby returned to her magnifying glass.

"You're the first guy I've ever been friends with, who didn't fly fish," she remarked, candidly.

"I'm sorry," he apologized.

"Don't be," answered Abby, looking up at her companion. "I like you, anyway."

Jake's boyishly handsome face broke into a wide grin that lasted all morning.

Dennis arrived just after breakfast, and he and Abby spent an hour checking over her fly fishing equipment in the living room, making sure everything was according to tournament regulations and in perfect readiness. (This was something that they would do throughout the day.) Trying to understand what the two were talking about, Jake patiently sat nearby and watched.

"Don't measure line by stripping it along your fly rod," he warned her. "It's not allowed. The only way you can measure the distance to your target, is by doing a few false casts and then letting it go at the right time. Remember, the idea is to test your ability to gauge distances while the fly is in the air, and not to measure it out using your rod as the ruler. But be careful, you can only have a set number of false casts in some events before you're penalized."

"I know," she nodded in understanding. "You've been over it with me a hundred times."

Just then, there was a knock on the front door. Jake answered it, and let John and Terry inside. The three men stood by, as Dennis continued.

"Don't be impatient to get to the next target," he said, making sure Abby was looking directly at him. "This is important, Abby. You can't retrieve your fly and move on to the next ring until the judge calls, 'Score.' You must wait, or you'll be demerited for an improper retrieve."

"I know," she sighed. "You've drilled it into me over and over."

"And you keep forgetting," insisted Dennis. "I mean it, Abby. You must be patient. I know the time will be running, but you must wait for the judge."

"I will," she assured her coach.

"Giving some last minute advice?" smiled John, as the two turned and noticed John and Terry in the room for the first time.

"I think I'd feel better if she were more nervous," answered Dennis.

"That's our Abby," laughed Terry, "Little Miss Confident!"

Abby smiled bravely, but knew in her heart that it wasn't true. Everyone was assuming that she was as confident as she appeared, simply because this was fly fishing. She had grown up with a fly rod in her hands and excelled at it. Terry, John, Izumi, and even Dennis, were expecting a lot of her, because she had displayed so much talent in the past.

As Izumi entered the house, Jake disappeared into Abby's room and returned with her favorite green baseball cap.

"You'll need this," he said, handing it to the young woman. For a moment, their eyes met. Abby saw the encouraging look on his face, and realized that Jake knew what she was feeling. "You won't fail," he smiled confidently. "Your guardian angel can fly fish, even if mine can't."

Abby returned Jake's smile.

John said a prayer asking for God to help their Abby, and then everyone split up. AJ and Dennis would take the jeep, while John would drive Izumi and Terry in their car.

Abby was glad she took the jeep's hardtop off. The summer wind whipped through her black mane, giving her a welcome distraction from the pressures of the tournament. She could almost forget that her entire career was riding on the performance she would give that day. Perhaps that was overemphasizing the importance of this one tournament, but Abby was serious in her determination to do the absolute best that she could. This wasn't about her competing against the others-- but her competing against herself.

The Upstate New York Fishing Depot was hosting this year's fly fishing tournament. It was a large impressive building located near a lake and surrounded with green fields and tall trees. Terry had taken her here many times as a child, both browsing over the lures and tackle like children in a toy store. Now Abby was here as an adult, ready to test her skill at the thing she had loved since childhood.

The crowded parking lot was overflowing with cars and RVs, so that Abby and her father had difficulty finding a place to park. The fishing depot was teeming with people that had traveled from around the country to watch the professionals and to check out the latest in fishing technology that the store was more than willing to sell them.

When the three got out of the jeep and went to the registration table to sign Abby in and to pay the registration fee, she soon realized how out of place she looked. The beautiful, slightly oriental-looking young woman with the brilliant blue eyes, was in great contrast to the mostly middle-aged to retiring Caucasian men that were participating in the various events. In comparison, there were few women, and even fewer who were Abby's age. In fact, from what she could tell, she was the youngest female in the ladies division.

As the line of people slowly filed past the registration table, a man greeted Dennis.

"Hey there!" cried the overweight stranger, coming to where they stood waiting in line. "I didn't know you were coming, Dennis! I would've dropped out, if I knew I was going to be up against *you!*"

"Actually," smiled Dennis, "I'm not here for me. I have a student who is trying to qualify to become an instructor."

"Well, well," laughed the man, looking Jake over. "I hope you don't have too bad of a first time out! I remember mine, and I can only say that I'm glad my wife didn't take pictures! Line was stripping from my reel like crazy, when a gust of wind came up and blew it straight back into my face. There I was, in front of the most talented casters in the world-- with line falling down around my ears! Most *humiliating* experience of my life! I hope you do better, young man!"

Dennis cleared his throat, and pointed his head in Abby's direction. The man's face suddenly became sober.

"*Really?*" he cried, trying to recover from his shock, for it wasn't his intention to make her feel out of place, even though she looked it. "I always encourage the fairer sex to give fly fishing a try. It makes for interesting conversation in the boat."

"Abby shows a great deal of potential," insisted Dennis.

The middle aged man stared at Dennis for a few moments, trying to figure out what he was up to. He looked Abby over and then turned to Dennis with a knowing laugh that annoyed Jake. Without another word, the overweight man walked off.

"Dennis, I hope you're not going to be sorry you came," sighed Abby. "I could've come by myself and not told anyone that you trained me."

"I'm not worried," Dennis grinned confidently.

After Abby's gear had been examined by officials to make sure that regulation guidelines were met, John and the others joined them near the entrance of the superstore.

"Abby," said Dennis, "your first event is in half an hour. It's fly distance casting, and it's just to give you a little experience before we go on to the accuracy events. This should be easy for you. Come on, I'll you set up on the grass over there so you can warm up."

Izumi took a seat at one of the picnic tables to rest as her daughter prepared herself. John sat down beside his wife, while Terry hung back and watched with Jake.

"Have you ever been to one of these things?" Jake asked him.

"No, never," replied Terry, stepping out of the way for a man carrying a long fly rod.

On the lawn, Abby did a few stretching exercises and then accepted her rod, which Dennis had been looking over one last time. Then the nervous instructor joined Terry and Jake.

"I feel as though I'm the one who's on trial, and not Abby," said Dennis with half a smile. "I've never coached anyone before-- not like this."

"If she fails," wondered Terry, "what will happen to you?"

"Nothing I can't recover from," smiled Dennis, in a hushed voice so Abby couldn't overhear. "I make my living by instructing others. If Abby doesn't do well, it will reflect on my skill as a teacher, and others will be slower to hire me as an instructor. Depending on how badly she performed, it would probably set back my career a bit. But, like I said, I'd recover. Don't repeat that to Abby, though. She has enough pressure to deal with right now."

Terry glanced soberly at Jake and then back to the green where their Abby was practicing her casts. John bought cold drinks for everyone at one of the concession stands, while Abby sat on the ground, making sure her flies were securely attached to the leaders. Dennis nervously paced near the picnic table with his cold drink, checking his watch every minute or two for their first event to start. Jake waited with the others until they heard a loudspeaker announce for the contestants of the fly distance casting event to assemble on the open grass field near the fishing depot.

Abby got to her feet, picked up her rod, and followed Dennis to the grass field where the other women in the event were gathering. Just as in the mens division, many of the women were middle-aged or elderly.

"Stay calm," instructed Dennis, as the competition began.

One woman after another was called to the casting box, (a white square painted on the grass), while people gathered around to watch. Since there were very few women entered in the event, the call "Open Box!" came sooner than Abby expected.

"You're up," said Dennis, taking a deep breath.

Abby made her way through the crowd and stepped into the casting box. A judge holding a clipboard stood close by, prepared to score her performance. The judge nodded to her to start, and Abby suddenly felt sick. What happened next was a blur to her, and it was over before she knew it. Abby looked at the judge, and then to Dennis, who's face was very somber. She looked out in the distance to see where her fly had landed, for she was being graded on distance-- an easy task for her. But to Abby's dismay, her cast had landed dismally close to where she stood. In fact, she had cast the shortest distance in the entire event. Her confidence shaken, Abby's next distances resulted in equally disappointing scores. The young woman was crushed. This should have been one of her best events-- one that she knew she excelled at.

"You're released from the box," said the judge.

Humiliated upon failing at something that normally came so easily to her, Abby passed through the crowd, not wanting to speak to anyone. People shook their heads, and some mumbled, "Better luck, next year, lady."

"Was it *that* bad?" Terry asked a very grave Dennis.

Dennis sighed and shook his head.

"I don't know what went wrong," he said, thoughtfully. "Where's Abby? Have you seen her?"

"Have either of you seen Jake?" asked John, as Izumi looked about the field for the two missing people.

Abby stormed to the parking lot and was about to climb into her jeep when she heard someone calling after her.

"Where are you going?" asked Jake, after he had caught up with her.

"What does it look like?" she snapped. "I'm going home."

Jake stared at her incredulously.

"You're *quitting*?" he asked. "Just like that? You're walking away?"

"I made a fool of myself," sulked Abby, fumbling in her pocket for the jeep keys. "I looked stupid, and I made Dennis look stupid. I *never* should have come!"

"I'm disappointed," admitted Jake, "but not in how far you could throw a little fly, or whatever that thing was. I'm disappointed in *you*, Abby." He leaned in towards her, searching her blue eyes. "Abby, I've come through hell on earth, and you refused to let me go. My troubles didn't make you run, but only made you fight harder. I've admired you... up until now. This isn't easy for me to say, especially to you, but I would fail you as a friend if I didn't say it. Abby, you're acting like a spoiled child who didn't get her way! Does everything come so easily for you that you're willing to sin over *this*?" It had greatly pained Jake to say those words. He took a step back, his eyes still intent on her face. "If you still want to go, then go. But, remember this: 'Endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please Him Who hath chosen him to be a soldier. And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully. [2 Timothy 2:3-5]'"

Abby bowed her head in shame and took the keys out of the ignition. Immediately, Jake breathed a sigh of relief. His hands were trembling so hard that he had to stuff them into his pockets to still them. He had risked the anger of someone he needed as badly as Abby, to reprove her of sin. His courage was not lost on the young woman.

"You're right," she repented, getting out of the jeep. "I'm sorry, Jake. I know better than to act like the world, when they lose. Please don't go into a flashback or anything. You straightened me out, so now you can relax."

"I'm all right," he insisted, pulling out a pack of cigarettes. His hands were shaking so much, however, that he had difficulty holding the lighter.

Just then, Dennis located them in the parking lot and waved to her to come. Jake followed Abby back to the tournament, content that he had finally been of some use to his dear friend.

"Where were you?" asked Dennis, as Abby walked up to her coach.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I was miserable and I know it. I lost my concentration for just one second, and the damage was done. I couldn't recover, and everything else just fell apart."

"We still have the fly accuracy and the plug accuracy events," said Dennis, trying to rally her spirits. "It's far from over, Abby. Just try to loosen up a little. Your form will come back."

During the next few events, Abby struggled to regain her shaken confidence, but still lacked the tightly focused concentration that she needed to perform well. After completing the plug accuracy events, Abby's scores were nothing special, but still qualifying for certification. Her lackluster performance had dampened Dennis' expectations, but he still hoped she would find her legs in time to show everyone just how gifted she really was. Abby's last chance in the tournament soon came.

Fly accuracy consisted of three different events: the dry fly, the trout fly, and the bass bug. Each event was designed to test the casting skills that one would need if they were fly fishing for real. As the first fly accuracy event drew close, Abby began to focus in on what she needed to do. Her face became determined and thoughtful, just as she always did back home when preparing to fly fish. Abby put on her green cap and pushed back her long hair, mentally steeling herself to face the water. When Jake saw the familiar routine, he knew this time would be different.

"Wait for the judge," said Dennis, unable to avoid giving her some last minute advice. "Don't retrieve your fly until he calls 'Score.' Place the fly gently. If it sinks..."

A loudspeaker suddenly interrupted Dennis with an announcement for the participants in the ladies division to gather at the casting platform on the lake for the dry fly event. John and Izumi waved to their daughter as she stepped forward when it was her turn. The fly accuracy events were popular with the crowd, and the shore was crowded with spectators who had come to see the skill of the contestants.

"You have eight minutes to complete two rounds," explained the judge, holding his clipboard in readiness. "You must complete each round in progressive target order. If you miss a target, you must recast the entire round. When you step onto the casting platform, your time will begin. Start when you're ready."

The nervous coach went to her awaiting family and explained to them what was going on.

"At the beginning," said Dennis, "you start out with one hundred points. For each target you miss, and each mistake you make, demerits are subtracted from your total. The idea is to complete the event with at least eighty-five points intact. If she goes lower than that, then it won't matter how well she does in the other two events, for she needs to score well in all three."

Abby looked out at the water. Five differently colored target rings were spread out before her, just as in practice back home in Three Mile Bay. As the young woman stepped onto the

platform, she remembered Jake, and the courage he had shown that day. She raised her rod and made a fluid back and forth, back and forth motion, measuring the distance from the target with each false cast. On her second backcast, Abby's line shot towards the first of the five target rings.

"Wait for the judge, Abby," Dennis pleaded under his breath.

"Score," said the judge, and she moved on to the next target.

As Abby cast each of the remaining targets, the crowd around the lake began to cheer at each successive hit.

"She's got good tight loops," Dennis observed to Jake, while the rest of her family moved in closer to hear their daughter's coach. "Thank the Lord, she's got her form back! *That's* the Abby I know! Look! So far, she's hit every target dead on! *Good girl!*"

The second round began, and Abby gracefully completed it with the skill of a veteran. As the last target was cast, the crowd broke into applause.

"What happened?" asked Jake, sensing that something good had just occurred.

Dennis smiled broadly and excitedly clapped Jake on the back, momentarily forgetting that the man didn't like to be touched.

"It's a perfect score!" cried the coach. "Abby scored a *perfect* hundred, her first time out!"

As the young woman made her way back, she was stopped and congratulated by several of the spectators and even some of the guys competing in the mens division.

"That was some beautiful fly casting," said an elderly gentleman, his voice betraying curiosity. "May I ask who your coach was?"

"Dennis Beckman," replied Abby, as her instructor picked his way through the crowd to get to her.

"Not bad, for your first tournament!" exclaimed Dennis.

"You should be proud of your student, Denny," said the elderly gentleman, who had flown in from Pittsburgh to attend the tournament. "She has promise."

Dennis looked at him in surprise and accepted the extended hand that the old man offered him.

"Thank you, Dad," said Dennis, gratefully. "I'm glad you could make it. I know how busy you are. Abby, this is my father, Archibald Beckman, one of the greatest fly casters in the world. Dad, this is the woman I was telling you about."

"Denny was right," said Mr. Beckman, "you have potential. Let's see what you do with the rest of your life."

"Thank you, Sir," said Abby, surprised at this new revelation of Dennis' heritage.

After the old gentleman walked away, Abby turned to Dennis as her family rushed forward to congratulate her.

"Dennis, you never told me Archibald Beckman was your *father!*" she exclaimed in shock, as Terry enthusiastically hugged her.

"Dad's a hard act to follow," replied Dennis.

"Abby, I'm so proud of you!" exclaimed Izumi, as both parents took turns hugging their daughter.

"It's not over," Dennis warned them. "Of all the events, the dry fly is the easiest. The hardest is still to come."

"I know," said Abby, soberly.

Jake was the only one who hadn't hugged her yet, and he wasn't likely to. The young man smiled at her proudly, and stepped back to let Dennis prepare her for the next event.

"Trout fly is up next," said Dennis, checking his watch. "We have an hour before you'll be called."

Even though he had gone over the three different rounds of the trout fly event with her before, Dennis worked hard to be sure Abby was ready.

While the two discussed their strategies, Terry took Jake into the large fishing depot to show him around. But Jake had no interest in the vast array of fly patterns available to the consumer, and the overcrowded superstore was beginning to make him feel more and more uncomfortable. He had been able to deal with the open crowds outside, but the packed, confined spaces of the store were another matter.

"I've heard Abby talk about this lure," said Terry, taking a small package from the rack to get a closer look.

People were shoving to get at the displays, and Jake and Terry were just two more bodies getting in the way. Unaware of Jake's difficulty, Terry continued to show him around.

"I think we should leave," said Jake, becoming more agitated by the minute.

"You go ahead," replied Terry. "I see some flies in the next aisle that Abby might be interested in. I'll meet you back with the others, later."

"All right," said Jake, trying find his way to the front doors.

Outside, Abby was ready for the trout fly accuracy event. Dennis hovered nearby, giving any last minute advice he could think of, while John and Izumi watched on. Then it was time.

"You're up," announced Dennis. "Stay focused on what you have to do."

Abby breathed deeply and took her place on the casting platform. She looked into the crowd for Jake and Terry, but was unable to see either of them.

"You have six minutes to complete the three rounds," began the judge. "The dry fly round is first, followed by the wet fly and roll cast rounds. Time will begin after the first fly has touched water. Start when you're ready."

Abby quickly searched the crowd one last time and then tried to focus on the task before her.

"You can do this," she told herself. "I can do all things, through Christ."

Abby adjusted her cap as she always did when preparing to face the water, and then executed her first cast. "Score," said the judge, and she was off to the next target. One by one, Abby found her target. "Score," said the judge, as Abby moved on to the wet fly round. "Score," he called, as Abby advanced to the next ring target. Since she was only allowed one false cast between targets, it required a good deal of concentration on Abby's part to not overshoot or fall short of the next ring. As she neared the roll cast round, (a difficult round for her), Abby heard a slight commotion coming from somewhere in the crowd. The judge leaned over and spoke to a woman who then went and requested that the noisy party please keep silent until the event was completed.

"But," argued Dennis in a whisper, "she's almost done! Abby hasn't made a single mistake, and if she keeps it up, she's going to have another perfect score! It's only a few minutes more!"

"I'll try again," offered Terry, who had just arrived with a store employee. "It was my fault in the first place. I should have taken better care of him."

"I'll go with you," said John. "Little Dove, stay here and tell Abby what happened when she's finished."

John followed Terry and the store employee back to the fishing depot. Confused shoppers stood about the entrance of the store, unsure what the disturbance was, for management was doing their best to keep it from them.

"He's over here," said the employee, leading the two men through the crowd and to the back of the store where several clothing racks were located.

Behind a large coat rack, John saw a man huddled against the wall, mumbling almost incoherently.

"Jake," said John in a gentle voice, "I've come to take you home."

"The Lord is my Shepherd," the young man repeated to himself over and over. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not fear."

Terry tried to help Jake to his feet, but he recoiled at the touch of Terry's hand.

"Please don't touch me," he begged. "The Lord is my Shepherd... I shall not fear. I'm not afraid... I'm not afraid."

Then Jake started counting backward from one hundred, struggling with the vivid images he saw in his mind. Jake could hear John's voice, but he was too busy trying to hold back the fear and panic that threatened to swallow him, to be able to respond.

Not comprehending what was really going on, John looked to Terry and shook his head.

"We've got to wait for Abby," he sighed.

"I'll go get her," said Terry. "The event should be over by now."

Before he could finish the sentence, Terry saw Abby running up to them, trying to catch her breath.

"What happened?" she cried.

Abby's heart sank when she saw her friend on the floor behind the coat rack. She knelt down beside Jake and tried to get a good look at his face.

"The Lord is my Shepherd," Jake repeated. "When my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the Rock that is higher than I."

Abby listened for a few moments and quickly realized that this was different than his previous flashbacks. Jake was actively fighting it, even though he believed that he really was being abused again.

"Abby's here," said the young woman, as Dennis and Izumi arrived on the scene. "Jake, open your eyes. It's all right. No one is hurting you."

"No, I can't stop," struggled Jake, clenching his fists tightly. "If I stop, it'll get worse!"

"It won't get worse," she assured him. "I promise, no one is hurting you. It's all right to open your eyes now."

The stabilizing sound of her voice slowly persuaded Jake that he was safe, and not being abused as all his senses had been telling him. Dennis had never seen this happen before, and watched soberly as Abby sat with Jake until he calmed down.

"I'm sorry," apologized Jake, when Abby noticed that he had wet himself. "This flashback wasn't as bad as the last one. I think I'm getting better."

Abby reached up and took one of the long trench coats Jake had been hiding under and put it around his shoulders to conceal his soiled pants.

"Dad," requested Abby, in a low voice so the other customers couldn't easily overhear, "would you take care of the cashier? We need the coat."

"No problem," said John. "Whatever you need."

"Jake, can you get to your feet?" asked Abby.

Jake struggled to stand as Abby got up and tried to steady him. Customers made way for them as the group slowly walked out of the store.

"Isn't that the one who just landed another perfect score?" Abby heard someone whisper. "Too bad."

Abby helped Jake to the parking lot and into the jeep. The others stood by, unsure what to do next.

"I'm taking him home," announced Abby.

Dennis wanted to fight her decision, but felt he had no right to stop her. After all, this *was* her husband-- no matter what odd agreement they might of had.

"No," resisted Jake, taking the keys from her hand. "I won't let you do it, Abby. I won't let you walk away because of me."

"I appreciate your concern," replied Abby, "but this is different. I'm not giving up. You are more important than any tournament. I can try again, next year."

"Please, Abby," he begged her. "Don't let me ruin this for you. You wanted it so much."

"You need to go home and rest," she insisted.

"I'll drive him back," volunteered John. "If Jake thinks he can do without you for a few hours, then maybe you should finish, Abby."

"I'll be all right," pressed the young man, his pale face pleading with her.

"Abby, it's up to you," said Terry.

Dennis bit his tongue. He had more to gain by her finishing, but withheld any comments, for he wasn't family.

"Okay, if that's what you want, Jake," sighed Abby. "Dad, please take him straight home and call Uncle Terry's cell phone the minute you get back," she requested.

"We'll take care of him," assured her father, as Jake climbed out of the jeep. "See you later, Sweetheart."

Praying that she had made the right decision, Abby watched while John and Izumi led Jake across the still crowded parking lot to where their car was located. Jake looked back at her before she lost sight of them as they disappeared behind several parked Rvs.

"I'm really sorry," apologized Terry. "He was with me in the store and wanted to leave. I left him alone. I should have been paying more attention. He hasn't had a serious flashback in a while, and I assumed... I don't know what I assumed."

"I wasn't expecting it either, Uncle Terry," said Abby, taking off her green baseball cap and staring at it. "Somehow, I don't think this was as much of a defeat as it looked."

"You won't be sorry that you stayed, Abby," said Dennis, finally interjecting his opinion into the conversation. "I don't think you realize what you just did back there. Do you know what everyone's talking about?"

"After the scene in the store, I can guess," she mused.

"Abby," Dennis continued in earnest, "they're saying you might be the first woman to ever gold medal in all three fly accuracy events with perfect scores! Only one man has ever done it-- let alone a *woman*!"

Abby was having difficulty rejoicing in the prospect of making fly casting history. The incident with Jake had broke her concentration, and she wasn't sure she could give the performance everyone was hoping for.

It was early evening, and none of them had even eaten lunch. Abby, Terry, and Dennis went to a nearby restaurant and ordered a quick meal. Abby had little appetite, for she was still thinking about Jake and what it all had meant. As Terry was starting into his hamburger, his cell phone rang. Terry answered it and handed it to Abby, who was sitting across from him at the table.

"Abby, it's Jake," said the caller. "We stopped at a gas station so I could call you. I didn't want to leave without wishing you success."

"Thank you, Jake," she answered, as Dennis and Terry tried to pretend that they couldn't overhear her half of the conversation. "No, I'm not angry with you," she replied to his question.

"Abby, it was different this time," said Jake, struggling to make her understand. "I know how it must look to you, but I *swear* it was different. The memories came back, but I wouldn't give in to the panic."

"I know," consoled Abby, for she had heard him recite the Scripture verses, as if his life had depended upon it.

"I didn't want you to think that I had given in," he explained, his voice strained with fatigue.

Abby knew Jake was making progress, but she had hoped that he was getting beyond the flashbacks-- at least, in such a public way. She hadn't enjoyed the looks people had given her as they left the store. But, even Christ had despised the shame on the cross, and yet He still endured it that we might have salvation.

"Looking unto Jesus... Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame."

~ Hebrews 12:2 ~

As this thought sounded in the depths of her heart, Abby could hear Jake's breathing as he waited for her to give him some kind of assurance that she hadn't thought the less of him for what had happened that day.

"It's all right," she assured him. "If anyone can see what you're going through, I can. Now go home and rest, because you know how flashbacks always wear you out. I'll be along as soon as I'm done here."

"Thank you for understanding, Abby," he replied gratefully.

After handing back the cell phone to Terry, Abby sighed and stared at her untouched lunch.

"You should eat," remarked Dennis, seeing her lack of appetite. "I realize you've been through a lot today, but you must focus on the job ahead of you. You still have one more event to pass. Forget setting the record. Just concentrate on doing your best."

"Coach, you're tough," she smiled wearily.

"All that training is going to pay off today," said Dennis, confidently. "Only remember to keep that fly nice and gentle on the last forward cast, or else it will sink like that poor woman who went after you."

"The next event is bass bug, remember?" Abby laughed. "At least cork floats easier than feathers! Speaking of flies, I have something for you," she said, pulling a small wooden box from her pocket and handing it to Dennis. He opened the box to find an expertly tied fly, in a unique

pattern he had never seen before. "You once asked what lures worked best on the smallmouth in Three Mile Bay," she said. "That's my secret weapon."

Dennis looked the fly over and shook his head in admiration.

"You're an amazing woman, Abby," he said, carefully closing the box. "Whatever the outcome of the last event is, it's been an honor to train you."

Abby didn't know how to answer him. It was a compliment she didn't feel she deserved.

After Terry had finished eating, the three returned to the tournament in time for Abby to warm up before the bass bug event.

People had crowded around the lake, curious to see if the pretty young woman could make history by scoring her third perfect score in the last of the fly accuracy events. Abby tried to ignore them, for it only served to add more pressure. As she prepared her rod, Dennis went over a few things with her.

"There'll be six targets," he began, "and the farthest one out will be approximately seventy feet. You'll have five minutes to complete two rounds. Don't let the time rattle you. If you make a mistake, accept it and move on."

Just then, the loudspeakers crackled, and Dennis looked at her nervously.

"I'm up," she said, taking a deep breath.

"One last thing," he added, as she made her way to the casting platform, "you are only allowed two false casts after the first target."

"You've already told me," smiled Abby, as the judge waited for him to leave so they could begin.

"Right," said Dennis. "I'll go now."

"Your time will start after your first cast," said the judge, when all was prepared. "You may begin."

As everyone watched, Abby stood at the ready. These people were about to find out what everyone in Three Mile Bay already knew. Swish, swish, Abby's fly line began the false backcasts, carefully letting out line with each motion to reach the first target. When she had figured the right distance, Abby sent the bass bug flying. It was a direct hit! "Score," said the judge. Oldtimers watched with admiration as she took each successive target with the poise and

confidence of someone who had tight control of her fly line, despite a light breeze coming in from the trees. Abby's accuracy was impressive, and her consistency was startling. But there were two more elements that made Abby's presentation of the fly even more of a wonder. Her loops were tight and graceful, and her rhythm was impeccable. She was the very picture of what all fly anglers strive for. In short, Abby was what Terry liked to call, "poetry in motion." She was truly a pleasure to watch.

Abby paid no attention to the spectators. She had improved her concentration from the previous events, and now felt perfectly at ease with the targets. As she completed the last one, Abby turned to look at Dennis. She hadn't missed a single colored ring. The crowd erupted into loud applause as the judge announced Abby's third consecutive perfect score for the day! Everyone stepped forward to congratulate her and Dennis. Terry hooted and hollered with the rest of them, not a bit surprised at what Abby had just done.

Afterward, all the winners from each event lined up to collect their prizes. When the Tournament Captain came to Abby, he smiled broadly.

"How long have you been fly fishing, Mrs. Murphy?" he wondered.

"Ever since I was old enough to hold a fly rod," she replied. "Uncle Terry tells everyone that I could cast before I could walk, but I suspect he was just teasing."

"After what I just saw," smiled the man, "it wouldn't surprise me if it were true!" As everyone applauded the victors, he placed three gold medals around Abby's neck-- one for each of the three fly accuracy events-- and then shook her hand.

When it was all over, Abby took the medals off and gave them to Terry, who examined them closely and announced that he would have them framed so she could display them on her wall.

Dennis received a lot of attention for his part in training Abby, but he was slow to take all the credit.

"She's as close to a natural as I've ever seen," he told them.

Abby took the victory in stride. She was now a certified fly casting instructor, and that was what mattered the most to her. That day, Abby heard some very flattering things, but she didn't take any of it to heart. When someone called her courageous, Abby wanted to laugh... but she didn't. She had seen courage that day, and it hadn't taken place at any casting platform. Jake had faced his worst fears, reliving them as if it had happened yesterday-- without giving into the terror that so eagerly awaited him. No judge with a clipboard could score that kind of courage.

During this, Abby remembered a passage from the Bible: "I am the LORD: that is My name: and My glory will I not give to another, neither My praise to graven images." (Isaiah 42:8) Whenever tempted with a prideful heart at her accomplishments, Abby remembered those words, for she knew that EVERY good gift came from *Him*. He had formed her and given her the talent that everyone was now admiring. All this really belonged to Him.

As the three piled into the jeep, Dennis was still recounting to Terry the last few targets and how he almost thought she wouldn't make the perfect score. Then he repeated the compliments Abby had received and the attention she was getting.

"You really made them sit up and take notice of you, Abby!" he exclaimed.

Dennis wasn't ready to be dropped off at the boarding house, but continued on with Terry and Abby to the Johanneses' home. The sun was just beginning to dip below the horizon as the jeep returned to its destination in Three Mile Bay. Terry and Dennis jumped out and ran into her parents' home, while Abby collected her fishing gear and went into the little yellow house.

Finding no one there, Abby walked to her room and set her things down on the floor. She checked her saltwater aquarium and fed the fish, glad for a little peace and quiet. After spending the day shoulder to shoulder in crowds, Abby was pleased to return to the tranquility of her room.

"Congratulations," said a voice.

Abby turned to find Jake standing in her bedroom doorway, as was his custom.

"I'm just relieved to be back home," she smiled wearily. "Are you all right? Have you had anymore trouble?"

"No, I'm fine," he replied. "Everyone's waiting for you at your parents' house. Your fishing buddies from church are there as well. We're all very proud of you, Abby."

She looked at him with those clear pools of blue that always made the young man weak at the knees. The bedroom pervaded with a warm feeling that made Abby strangely happy. She couldn't explain what it was, for after all, she didn't love Jake. And yet, there was something in that room that she couldn't put into words. Assuming that she was still feeling the highs of victory, Abby walked with Jake across the way to her parents' house, where her family and friends were ready to celebrate what God had done that day.

"In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him [Jesus] that loved us."
~ Romans 8:37 ~

For "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of Lights, with Whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning."
~ James 1:17 ~

Chapter Fourteen
A Black Tie Affair

"The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day."
~ Proverbs 4:18 ~

Abby's victory at the fly casting tournament created a mild sensation in the small community of Three Mile Bay. When Abby went to the marina on the Monday afterward, she was warmly greeted by Mr. Winkler's broad smile.

"What did I tell you?!" he exclaimed, shaking her hand and then accepting a hug. "You have a gift and a great career ahead of you!"

"I'd be satisfied to just make a living at it," Abby replied with a modest smile.

As Abby had predicted, the old man asked to see her three gold medals from the tournament. She pulled them out of her pocket and endured the I-told-you-so's that inevitably followed.

"Jake," asked Mr. Winkler, looking up from the medals to where the young man was working in the back room, "didn't I tell you our Abby had greatness in her?"

"Yes, Sir," smiled Jake, before going outside to sweep the dock.

"That young man," commented the shopkeeper, "is a hard worker. I'll be sorry to let him go after the season is over. I suppose money will become tight this winter. Maybe, you could go west for the winter months where the coming snows won't stop you from being an instructor."

"I will if I have to," replied Abby, "but, Mom will be confined to bed rest with the triplets, and is going to need all the support she can get. I'll save it as a last resort. Besides, I have a little time this year before the fishing season is out."

"That leads me to my news," smiled the old man, sitting Abby down in a chair near his fly tying table. "I was going to offer you a job here for the remainder of the season, but Jerry Nelson just stopped by to pick up a new reel, and he mentioned to me that you were being considered for their new fly casting program as nothing less than their main instructor. The yacht club would be a good opportunity for you, Abby."

"Mr. Nelson is considering *me*?" she asked in surprise.

Jerry Nelson was an influential man, operating the oldest, and therefore the largest, yacht club in all of Upstate New York. Unlike the Boaters' Club, where locals would hang out and swap stories, the yacht club was not open to the general public. Just to gain entrance into their clubhouse and exclusive docks, you had to be invited by another member.

"Why would they consider me?" she asked in puzzlement. "I don't know *anyone* there."

"You forget," smiled Mr. Winkler, patting her hand, "you are the first woman to ever gold medal in all three fly accuracy events with a perfect score. Be prepared to hear from Jerry."

"Thanks, Mr. Winkler," smiled the young woman, "but I'd be shocked if they picked me."

Abby didn't have long to wait. When she and Jake got home after work that day, she had a message on the answering machine from Jerry Nelson.

"I'd better return his call," she said, picking up the receiver as Jake listened, nearby.

"Hello, Mr. Nelson?" said Abby, tossing the jeep keys onto the coffee table.

"Mrs. Murphy," said the man in a pleasant voice, "I wanted to congratulate you on your recent victory! It's quite an accomplishment!"

"Thank you," replied Abby, politely.

"As you might already be aware," continued Mr. Nelson, "we are currently setting up a new fly casting program at the club. The members of the board, myself included, are considering you for the job of main fly casting instructor-- that is, if you're interested. I know Abe Winkler wants you, but you might find our salary more agreeable."

"I don't know what to say," hesitated Abby.

"If you're willing to consider the idea," offered Jerry, "the board of directors would like to extend an invitation to you and your husband, to attend the Commodore's Dinner, this Wednesday. It's a black tie affair and is held at the clubhouse. It'll give everyone a chance to get to know each other before making any final decisions. What do you say?"

"Thank you, we'd love to come," replied Abby, as Jake shuddered when he heard the "we" in her response.

After she hung up, Abby smiled widely.

"We are invited to a formal dinner party," she laughed in delight.

"Why did they invite *me*?" hesitated Jake. "I'm not the one being considered for the job. I can't even fly fish!"

"How would it look if they only invited the wife," explained Abby, "and not the husband as well? I've got to go tell Uncle Terry!"

Terry, however, wasn't as excited as Abby had thought he'd be.

"You're a good fly caster, Abby," he explained, "but you don't have any experience as an instructor yet. Be careful not to get your hopes too high."

"I understand," conceded Abby, "but the fact that they're even considering me, is encouraging."

"It is," smiled Terry. "When's the formal dinner being held?"

"This Wednesday," she replied.

"So soon?" asked Izumi, in surprise. "Why, that's the day after tomorrow!"

"I guess they're thinking that if you want the job badly enough," speculated John, "then you'll show up, no matter how short of a notice they give."

"They're right," smiled Abby.

Later that evening, Abby went through her closet, trying to find something suitable to wear for the dinner party. Jake sat cross-legged on her bed, sketching quietly, as always.

"I don't own anything so formal as an evening dress," she sighed, rejecting yet another outfit.

"Mom does, though." Abby poked her head out from the closet. "Are you listening to me, Jake?"

"Yeah," mumbled the young man, "you can't find anything to wear."

"I don't suppose," said Abby, hanging the garments back up in her closet, "that you happen to have a tuxedo in that duffel bag of yours, do you?"

"I don't have to wear a monkey suit, do I?" he asked, dropping his pencil in semi-horror.

"This is a formal black tie dinner," insisted Abby, "and they're *not* monkey suits! Don't worry, we'll rent one for the occasion."

Jake was grateful to the yacht club for the job opportunity they were considering Abby for, but he was uneasy. If this club was as exclusive as everyone had thought, then why would they hire someone whose spouse has a criminal record? For the most part, Abby had yet to be discriminated against because of her association with him, but Jake knew that it was only a matter of time before she would be. However, any misgivings that he had concerning the invitation, he tried to conceal from Abby. Jake knew he was from the wrong side of the tracks, but Abby wasn't. Her family was held in high regard in Three Mile Bay. Maybe, things would go all right for her, after all.

The next day, Abby drove Jake into Chaumont and parked the jeep in front of Pierre's Tuxedos-- a modestly small store with a large, grand sign out front. Jake reluctantly followed her inside, and let her do all the talking.

"What can I do for you?" asked the shopkeeper, resting a clipboard on the counter.

"We need a tuxedo for a formal dinner on Wednesday," replied Abby.

"That's short notice," sighed the male shopkeeper, looking Jake over. "It leaves little time for any alterations. Let's get your measurements and see if we have anything already in your size."

The shopkeeper picked up a cloth measuring tape and approached Jake. The young man took a wary step backward.

"He's just going to measure you," coaxed Abby. "It won't hurt," she added with a smile.

Jake held his breath and let the man do his job. It was all he could do to keep his composure, however, when the shopkeeper took his crotch measurement for the inside leg seam. Armed with these numbers, the man was able to locate a tuxedo very close to Jake's size.

"Try it on in the dressing room," he directed Jake.

With a sigh, the ex-convict did as he was told. When he came out a minute later, he was wearing the tuxedo over his everyday shirt.

"It's a good fit," nodded the shopkeeper. "The jacket needs a little alteration, but it will have to do."

To Jake's relief, Abby nodded in approval, freeing him to go change back into his everyday clothes.

"From time to time," informed the man, as they waited for Jake outside the dressing room, "I hire male models to wear my tuxedos for catalog and garment photos. They're the kind that make people think if you wear my merchandise, you'll look as good as this. Would Jake be interested in a modeling job?"

The young woman recalled Jake's reaction to cameras, and promptly declined.

After they were back in the jeep, they drove to Dr. Jacoby's house, for it was Tuesday, and both of them had separate sessions with the psychiatrist.

"That guy must have been desperate," reflected Jake, as the vehicle stopped outside of Dr. Jacoby's home office.

"You mean the tuxedo man?" asked Abby, removing the key from the ignition. "What makes you say that?"

"He wanted me to be a male model," answered Jake, getting out of the jeep. "Isn't that reason enough?"

"Your self-esteem must be pretty low," reflected Abby, taking a paperback out of the glove compartment to keep herself busy while Jake was inside. "Hasn't anyone ever told you that you're good-looking?"

"Not by anyone I ever cared about," he replied, closing the passenger door. "When someone is about to take advantage of you, they'll say anything."

"If I told you that you're handsome," asked Abby, "would you believe me?"

"I guess so," he conceded.

"Then," she replied evenly, finding her place in the book, "consider yourself told. You'd better get inside, or else you're going to be late."

Jake stared at her, for the comment had taken him a little off guard. If she was aware that he was looking at her, Abby didn't let it show, for her eyes never moved from the book she was reading. Slowly, the ex-convict stuffed his hands into his pockets and went inside.

When Jake's half hour was up, he waited in the jeep while Abby had her session. Afterward, the two drove back to Three Mile Bay in the early evening light, while wind whipped through Abby's black hair.

"I'll have to put the top on for tomorrow night," she said, "or my hair will be a wreck before we even reach the party."

As they pulled up in front of the little yellow house, Dennis greeted them from the porch swing.

"I was waiting for you guys to get back," he said, with a wide grin. "I hear congratulations are in order!"

"That's a little premature," laughed Abby, getting out and picking up the tuxedo box. "They haven't actually offered the job to me, yet."

"They will," replied Dennis, confidently. "They'd be crazy not to!"

"Do you want to stay for dinner?" invited Abby.

"I don't want to impose," hesitated Dennis, taking a sideways glance at Jake.

"Nonsense," replied Abby, as the small party went inside.

In the living room, Abby pressed the button on her answering machine and kicked off her shoes before going to her room to change out of her work clothes.

"Just make yourself at home," she called back to their guest.

Dennis took a seat on the couch while Jake picked up the shoes that Abby had left on the floor. Beep! went the answering machine, as it played back a message.

"Abby, are you there?" asked the voice on the machine. "It's Uncle Terry. Come over when you get home."

Even from her room, Abby heard the serious tone in his voice. Without a word, she quickly finished dressing and ran across the way to her parents' house, with Jake and Dennis in tow. Abby found her mother making dinner in the kitchen, while John and Terry were putting in some late hours in their office.

"What's the matter?" Abby asked Izumi in alarm. "What's going on?"

"Nothing's wrong," answered the woman, puzzled by her daughter's behavior.

Hearing the urgent sounding voices in the living room, John and Terry came from the office down the hallway.

"What's wrong?" asked the father.

"Uncle Terry left a message on my machine to come here after work," explained Abby. "It sounded urgent."

"I didn't mean to frighten you, Sweetheart," apologized Uncle Terry, suddenly realizing what all the excitement was about. "Your mother had a call from Mrs. Greene, today."

"Tyler's mom?" asked Abby. "What did she want?"

"Tyler will be leaving for college at the end of this month," related Izumi.

"Is that what all this fuss is about?" she laughed, as Jake took a seat nearby. "We've known this for months!"

"Mrs. Greene called to invite us to Tyler's wedding," Izumi soberly explained. "It's taking place before he leaves. She didn't have time to send out invitations, so she's calling everyone, instead."

The news stunned Abby. Her lighthearted smile vanished, while she tried to take in what her mother had just said. She could feel everyone in the room waiting to see what her reaction would be.

"Who is it?" asked Abby.

"Jane," answered her mother.

"Jane Parker?" repeated the young woman in surprise. "Miss I'll-never-touch-a-dead-fish-as-long-as-I-live, Parker? What is Tyler thinking! She can't even fly fish!"

"Abby, although Mrs. Greene didn't say it in as many words," continued Izumi, "I had the distinct impression that she didn't want you to attend the wedding."

"Not go?" asked Abby, still dazed. "Tyler and I have been good friends since we were little kids! Wouldn't my not coming only prove that there's still something between us?"

"Even so," advised Izumi, "it's what Mrs. Greene wants. I think it's best if you stayed away."

"Oh!" exclaimed Abby, angry at the whole situation. "Why did Tyler have to mess up a perfectly good friendship with love?"

"Love doesn't always ruin friendship," pointed out Izumi, wondering how Abby's last remark had made Jake feel.

"You can't prove that by me," groaned her daughter.

After the three returned to the yellow house, Abby went to the kitchen to start dinner. Jake saw that she had a lot on her mind, and made an unexpected offer.

"I'll fix dinner," he volunteered, taking the frying pan from her hand.

"What are you talking about?" asked Abby, incredulously. "You can't cook!"

"I used to work in the prison kitchen," he reminded her, shooing her from the room.

Unconvinced, Abby remained in the doorway, waiting for him to suddenly ask for help. Knowing that he was being tested, Jake grinned, and set to work. Terry had long joked that when Abby fixed eggs, they always had a crunchy quality to them. Even though Jake had never said a word about it, Abby was sure he had noticed. When Abby witnessed Jake expertly crack an egg with one hand, leaving no bits of eggshell in the bowl below, she gasped in amazement. This procedure Jake did a few more times, enjoying the surprised look on her face.

"Okay, okay," she laughed, "I get the point! You obviously know what you're doing. You sure kept it a secret, though!"

"You never asked," he grinned.

"Well," she replied, exasperated by the simplicity of his answer, "I never asked if you could walk on your hands, either!"

Abby watched a little while longer, and then went to the living room where Dennis was watching television from the sofa.

"Jake is going to fix dinner, tonight," she announced, flopping down on the couch and putting her socked feet up on the coffee table.

"I didn't know he could cook," replied Dennis in surprise.

"Neither did I," she confided.

When dinner was ready and everyone had sat down at the table to eat, Abby took the first bite while Jake awaited her verdict.

"It's not bad," she had to admit.

After dinner, Dennis went home, while Abby decided to do a little fly fishing before it became too dark outside. As usual, she soon heard Jake's soft footsteps behind her.

"Are you sorry Tyler's getting married?" he asked Abby, sitting down on the ground a few feet away.

"I guess not," she answered, backcasting her line into the bay. "I just hope he's not marrying Jane because he's on the rebound. I *am* surprised Tyler could do this so soon after our breakup, though. This is from a man who told me that he loved me, not three months ago!"

"You married someone else, first," reminded Jake.

"I know," replied Abby, "but I never told him that I was in love. That's the difference. Can men really be so fickle?"

"I hope you're not waiting for me to answer that," smiled Jake, working his pencil across the drawing tablet. "Turn your head this way for a moment, Abby."

"Don't you ever get tired of sketching the same subject, over and over?" she sighed, checking the end of her line to be sure she hadn't lost the fly.

"Not so far," he muttered.

Abby flicked her line back and forth, in the fading light of the evening.

"Just look at that crescent moon," observed Jake, turning his eyes upward. "It's as if God made a thumbnail mark in the sky, and it punched through to the other side of heaven."

"Jake, you're a romantic!" laughed Abby, reeling in a little line.

The next morning was Wednesday, the day of the dinner party at the yacht club. When AJ got home from work, one waited until the last minute before getting ready, while the other disappeared into the bathroom and didn't come out for what Jake considered to be a very long time. When he finally heard the sound of Abby going to her room to finish getting ready, he quickly ducked into the bathroom to shower and shave. He needed very little time to get into his rented tuxedo. By the time he got out, Abby was ready and waiting in the living room.

"I thought you'd *never* finish in there," she teased him. Then Abby looked him over, and smiled in approval. "You look handsome, Jake."

"I look like a waiter," he replied flatly, smiling in spite of himself. "You don't look bad, though." It was all the compliment Jake allowed himself to make. Abby was beautiful-- more beautiful than he had ever seen her, so that the young man dared not to look at her for very long. "I couldn't tie this thing," he said, the black bow tie still in hand.

"Let me," said Abby, taking it from him. As she worked, she was aware of Jake's gaze upon her. Abby looked up at him and he quickly averted his eyes. "I'm almost done," she said, tugging at the ends of the finished bow and then straightening it. "Are you ready to go?" she asked.

"I have to take my meds, first," replied Jake, disappearing into the kitchen where his prescription medication was kept in the cupboard.

Abby picked up the jeep keys and Jake soon joined her outside. Across the way, Terry was washing his pickup truck. When Terry saw them, he waved as they got into the jeep.

"AJ's all dressed up, tonight!" he shouted with a laugh, knowing very well where they were off to.

It was a short drive to the yacht club-- much too short to suit Jake. He looked at this evening as something to be survived, and not enjoyed. The parking lot was filled with expensive cars and well dressed people. Jake felt like a fish out of water, but he didn't look it. His good looks were well-trimmed in a tuxedo, causing more than one person to do a double take.

At the clubhouse door, a man was stationed to ensure that only members and invited guests could get inside.

"We're Mr. and Mrs. Murphy," she told the man. "We were invited by Mr. Nelson."

The man nodded and let them by. Inside the clubhouse, old pictures lined the walls of the main room-- many of them photos of former members on board their yachts-- while wooden shelves displayed miniature boats in small glass bottles. For such an exclusive club, the building was

surprisingly low key. While the chairs were well upholstered, the dimly polished wooden floor looked old and worn from decades of use.

People mingled while one or two waiters served the club members drinks on round trays. Abby scanned the room for anyone she knew, knowing beforehand that it wasn't very likely.

"Mrs. Abigail Murphy?" asked a man, approaching them. "I'm Jerry Nelson-- we spoke on the phone, Monday."

"It's very nice of you to invite us," replied Abby, shaking his hand. "This is my husband, Jake."

"We've heard a lot of good things about your wife from Abe," greeted Jerry, shaking Jake's hand.

For a minute, Jake wasn't sure who "Abe" was. Then he remembered that it was Mr. Winkler's first name, and smiled politely in return.

"I'd like you to meet some of our board members," requested Jerry, leading Abby over to a group of men and women.

As Abby was being introduced, Jake awkwardly hung back.

"Would you care for a drink, Sir?" asked one of the waiters, presenting a round serving tray.

"Sure, thanks," replied Jake. If he was busy holding a glass, Jake figured it would give his hands something to do. He also hoped that it would help hide the fact that he was so nervous.

"So, you're John's daughter," said one of the board members, shaking Abby's hand.

"Do you know my father?" asked the young woman in surprise.

"There's few in Three Mile Bay who haven't heard the Johannes name," replied the man with a kind smile.

Then Jerry showed Abby the pictures on the wall she had seen earlier. Halfway through his narrative of the history of the yacht club, dinner was ready.

The party was taken to the next room, where two large banquet tables were lined with modest linen tablecloths. To Abby, it seemed a little silly that everyone should dress up so formally, when the tables they were to sit at looked so drab and mundane. The napkins were folded very

strangely, and there was an overturned commodore's cap filled with sand, in the center of each table.

"It's tradition," whispered one of the wives, seeing Abby's puzzled face.

"Oh," smiled Abby, as though that had explained everything.

AJ found their places side by side at the long table, and were about to sit down, when Jerry proposed a toast to the Commodore. Apparently, this too, was tradition. The toast was a little lengthy, for Jerry didn't just talk about the current commodore of their yacht club, but also paid homage to the previous ones, as well. Just when it seemed like the toast would go on forever, Jerry finished so everyone could drink and sit down.

Abby soon noticed that there were two kinds of table talk: the women mainly discussed the food, or what everyone else was wearing, while the men debated over the fish they had caught, and the rough seas they had seen. Jake was interested in neither of these, so he tried to keep busy with his food and drink, so that few would have the chance to see that he didn't belong.

To the great surprise of Jerry and the other board members, they found Abby a surprisingly fresh face in the midst of their usual crowd; her opinions were informed, her conversation thoughtful, and her enthusiasm contagious. All in all, the men were well pleased with Abby. The women, however, were a tad more distant than their husbands.

As the next course was being served, Jake accepted yet another glass of whatever it was he had been drinking. It wasn't until dessert, that Abby first noticed Jake behaving oddly-- even for him.

The napkins had been uniquely folded, and Jake was unsuccessfully trying to reassemble his to its former state. When Abby saw this, she discreetly pulled it from his hands and gave him a stern look. Needing a new diversion, Jake began to play with the round cookies on his dessert plate, rolling them this way and that with his spoon. By now, more than one person was beginning to notice his antics.

"As I was saying," continued Jerry, doing his best to ignore Jake, "this roof was originally built in 1912, and then later..."

Abby tried as hard as she could to feign interest, for to do otherwise would have been impolite. She nodded and smiled, fitting in an "Oh, really?" or "I see," wherever appropriate. But as the evening wore on, Abby found it harder and harder not to notice the change taking place in Jake.

"That's funny," Jake was saying to a woman seated nearby, "I always find that one layer of plastic wrap is never enough. You pop it into the fridge, and it comes out days later, walking on its own power!" At this, he laughed heartily at his own joke. Then he put his elbow on the table, (a table manners no-no), and stared at Abby while she listened to Jerry.

"We used to have a fishing shed in the late 1800's," continued Jerry, very much absorbed in his own narration, "but a wave washed it out into the bay years later."

At this, Jake burst into uncontrollable peals of laughter. He laughed so hard that tears came to his eyes. Everyone in the room looked at each other and then at Jake.

"I think your husband has had a little too much to drink," observed Jerry, as Abby tried to calm Jake down.

"Jake doesn't drink," denied Abby, struggling to stop his continuous laughter.

"I hate to contradict you, Honey," spoke up one of the wives, "but he's been at it all evening!"

"I think we'd better leave," apologized Abby, extremely embarrassed by what was happening. The young woman tried to help Jake out of his chair, but quickly found that she couldn't do it alone. Jerry got up and took one arm while Abby took the other. Once in the parking lot, they helped the inebriated young man into Abby's jeep.

"I'm so sorry," she repeated once more, as Jerry fastened Jake's seat belt. "This has never happened before. Jake *never* drinks!"

"I was prepared to give him a chance," said Jerry in disdain, "even though he *is* white trash. You would do yourself a favor if you divorced him, Mrs. Murphy. He'll only hold you back."

"Jake is my friend," refuted Abby evenly, "and he's *not* trash."

Even though the job offer was no longer there, she didn't want it anymore. As Jerry rejoined the dinner party in the clubhouse, Abby looked at Jake and smiled in spite of the situation.

"Can't I take you *anywhere*?" she joked.

When they reached home a few minutes later, Jake's condition had further deteriorated. This greatly puzzled Abby, for he hadn't consumed any more alcohol.

Abby put one of Jake's arms around her shoulder, and to her surprise, he let her help him into the yellow house. To Abby's gratitude, her parents hadn't seen the sorry couple stumble inside, for Terry had taken them out to dinner that night, to commemorate Izumi's last day before her bed rest began.

With some difficulty, Abby led Jake to the living room sofa and let him collapse there. He was looking more intoxicated than ever, and his speech was becoming very slurred.

"How can you still be getting worse?" cried Abby in dismay.

As she went to the kitchen to get a glass of water for her companion, her eyes caught sight of the cupboard where Jake kept his medication. Out of curiosity, she opened the door and picked up one of the bottles. On the label, in small print, it read, "do not take with alcohol."

"Great!" Abby sighed glumly, for she remembered that he had taken his medication just before they left that evening. When she turned to go back to the living room, Abby was startled to find Jake standing directly behind her.

"Poor Abby," he said, seeing her unhappy face. "You probably wish you'd never married a bum like me."

"You're not a bum," she assured him, trying to get around Jake. He was uncomfortably close to her-- something which he *never* did. The young man, however, would not let her pass. "You've had a little too much to drink, and it's interacting with your medication," she explained.

"So beautiful," he breathed, reaching out to touch her face with his hand. Jake gazed intently into her eyes, this time allowing himself to linger as long as he wanted.

"Have a glass of water," she offered, trying to place the cup in his hand. "Now Jake," she warned him, as her friend became more serious in his gaze, "you're obviously not yourself right now. Why don't you sit down in the living room and I'll bring you some coffee?"

Jake, however, did not listen to her. Before she knew what was going on, he leaned forward and gently kissed her. It was just a small kiss, but it left both of them temporarily dazed.

"Now I *know* you're drunk," she said, retreating to the living room.

Jake followed her, and grabbed her by the hand. Abby quickly pulled it free from his grasp.

"The room is spinnnning," Jake suddenly announced, reeling where he stood. The ex-convict stumbled to his room and climbed onto the bed-- shoes and all.

With a sigh of relief, Abby followed him down the hallway.

"I don't think that's good for the tuxedo," she commented, a little hesitantly. "Jake? Can you hear me?"

When Abby saw that he was asleep, she went to her room and changed out of her borrowed evening dress and into a nightgown and robe. Abby fixed herself a cup of hot coffee, and worked at her fly tying table for the next hour. When she began to have trouble keeping her eyes open, she turned off the bedroom light and climbed into bed.

"What a strange day," she mused before falling asleep.

The young woman rarely ever had vivid dreams, but that night, she dreamt that someone was standing over her, and caressing her face. Suddenly, Abby opened her eyes. It wasn't a dream. From the light of the hall, she could see Jake by her bedside, reaching out to touch her face once more.

"I think you'd better go back to your room," she advised the young man.

Jake knelt down on the floor and kissed Abby. This time, it wasn't a small kiss. Trying to think clearly, Abby pushed him away. Her heart began to race as Jake closed the bedroom door. The aquarium light was off, making it impossible for her to see what was going on. In the darkness, she could hear him moving on the other side of the room.

"Jake?" she called to him. "What are you doing?" Suddenly, she felt the mattress give and realized that Jake was getting into bed with her. "Shouldn't we talk about this first?" she mumbled weakly, as he kissed her once more. With her resistance gone, Abby and Jake spent the night together as husband and wife. It was an odd honeymoon, but then again, they were no ordinary couple.

Hours later, Abby awoke from her sleep to find that Jake wasn't beside her. Groggily, she looked at the digital clock and saw that it was six in the morning. Abby climbed out of bed, wincing with soreness as she slowly walked down the hallway to Jake's room. Once there, she found that his door was ajar-- as was his habit, so Abby could easily get to him should he have a flashback in his sleep. The young woman peered inside and discovered Jake sound asleep in his own bed, oblivious to the morning light that was filtering into the room through the window. It was a

work day, and they were running late, but Abby decided to let him sleep a little longer, until she had breakfast ready.

Still feeling herself in a dream, Abby returned to her room and was about to make her bed when she found a blood stain on the sheets. She knew she wasn't in her period, and quickly realized why she was so sore. Abby remembered her father talking about the old Jewish custom of saving the bed sheets to prove that the bride had been a virgin on her wedding night. Suddenly, Abby was awake. The reality of what she and Jake had done the night before seemed all too real.

"What am I going to tell my parents?" she wondered out loud, wincing as she sat down on the bed. Abby tried to fight back the panic she was beginning to feel. The problem was, no declaration of love had been made by either of them the night before, but it *had been* implied--hadn't it? Abby quickly slipped her grandmother's wedding band onto her finger. Somehow, it made her feel better.

With the morning growing even later, Abby gingerly dressed herself and went to the kitchen to fix breakfast. After setting the flame under the scrambled eggs on the stove, Abby retrieved Jake's tuxedo from the floor of her room and laid it neatly across the chair in his bedroom. Then she tiptoed to his bed.

"Jake," Abby whispered, "it's time to get up."

The young man moaned and turned over, so that his still sleeping face was turned toward her. Abby gently blew on his face until Jake opened his eyes.

"Aaaaagh!" he shouted in surprise, suddenly knocking Abby backward, and onto the floor.

"What did you do that for?!" she cried, her bottom smarting from the fall.

"I'm sorry," apologized Jake, rubbing his forehead sleepily. "You startled me."

"I startled *you*?" she half laughed, getting up from the carpet.

"Wow," he groaned, "I have the worst headache in the world."

"That comes from drinking too many punch cocktails," she admonished him.

"Those things had *alcohol* in them?" he asked in surprise.

"Most definitely," affirmed Abby, her knowing smile hinting at something else.

Jake looked at her with a bewildered face.

"What?" he asked. "Oh, no," he groaned. "Tell me I didn't make a fool of myself and ruin your job offer."

"You know very well you made a fool of yourself, and yes, I did lose the job," she replied, playfully putting her hands on her hips. "But, as it turns out, I didn't want it, after all."

"Abby, I'm so sorry," he apologized to her. Suddenly, the young man realized that under his covers, he was naked! "*Where are my clothes?*" he asked in horror.

"Over there," answered Abby. "Don't worry, I'll iron it out before we take it back."

"Iron what out?" asked Jake, more than a little confused.

"The tuxedo, silly," laughed Abby. "Honestly, Jake, you're acting like you don't remember last night!"

"I *don't*," he moaned, rubbing his forehead once more.

"This isn't funny," said Abby, fighting the inclination to pass out on the floor.

"I remember sitting down at the table," he recalled slowly, "and those stupid napkins they put on our plates. Jerry was talking about something-- I think it was about his first boat..."

"And then?" pressed Abby. "What *else* do you remember?"

"Nothing," said Jake. "After that, it's a blank."

Stunned, Abby took a step backward. She heard a ringing sound in her ears and felt the blood drop from her head. Quickly, Abby located the chair and sat down, not caring that she was further wrinkling Jake's tuxedo, and put her head between her knees.

"Are you all right?" asked Jake in concern. He would have gotten out of bed to help, but since he had no clothes on, he remained where he was, carefully making sure that his covers were secure.

"I don't believe this," she said under her breath. "Are you trying to tell me that you don't remember *anything else* about last night?"

"What did I do?" he asked, seriously. "Did I hurt you?"

Abby looked up and saw the honesty in his face.

"No," she answered, trying to steady herself. "You didn't hurt me." Abby stood up and took a few deep breaths. Maybe, it would come back to him. "You didn't hurt me," she repeated, walking to his bedside, "but you bruised your forehead getting out of the jeep." Abby leaned forward to touch his forehead, but Jake pulled away from her, just as he had always done in the past. "I'd better check the eggs," she mumbled in a dazed voice.

Abby slowly walked to the kitchen, sore from the night that Jake didn't remember. She never felt like crying more than she did at that very moment.

Sensing that something was wrong, Jake hurriedly dressed and went to the kitchen. He found Abby staring at the crunchy eggs in the skillet, lost in thought.

"Are you mad at me?" he asked, his voice full of concern. "I know you really wanted that job."

"I wouldn't take it now, if they offered it to me on a silver platter," she replied, turning off the fire under the skillet.

"Then, what's wrong?" pressed Jake.

Abby looked at him sadly. She grabbed the kitchen hand towel and buried her face in it. Bewildered, Jake helplessly stood by and watched. He guessed that she was trying to shield him from the fact that deep down, she HAD wanted the job, but was trying not to make him feel any worse about it, then he already did.

"Do you want me to call the marina and tell them you're not coming in, today?" he offered, lamely trying to help.

"Yes, thank you," she nodded, dropping the small towel onto the countertop. "I'm going to soak in the bathtub for awhile. Are you finished with the bathroom?"

"I'm finished," he replied. "Aren't you going to eat?"

"I'm not hungry," she declined, turning to go.

"Abby," hesitated Jake, "could I ask you something? Last night, did I... did I undress myself?"

Abby saw the troubled look on his face and did her best to relieve his anxiety.

"Unless you smuggled someone else into the house," she tried to reply lightheartedly, "you undressed yourself."

Jake let out a deep sigh of relief.

Biting her lip, Abby quickly went into the bathroom and shut the door. She turned the bath water on and sank to the floor, smothering her face in a towel so Jake couldn't hear her cry. Stifling one heart-wrenching sob after another, Abby soon heard Terry's voice in the hall outside the door.

"Hey, little fishing buddy," he called to her through the door, "how did it go last night? Was it a success?"

Abby couldn't answer without betraying the fact that she had been crying. To her relief, she heard Jake lead Terry back to the living room, no doubt, to tell him that he had blown her chance at a good-paying job. Then, she heard footsteps outside her door once more.

"Abby," said Jake, "Terry's going to drive me in to work. Can I get you anything before I go?"

Knowing that she would cause alarm if she didn't respond, Abby replied,

"No."

That one word told Jake what Abby had been trying to hide: she was in the bathroom, crying.

"Do you want me to stay home?" he offered, struggling between guilt and concern.

"I'm fine," she replied. "Go to work, Jake."

Then Abby heard Terry's voice coming up the hallway.

"Are you all right in there, Sweetheart?" he asked. "There'll be other opportunities. The yacht club isn't the only place people fly fish."

"Would you both just leave me alone for awhile?" she pleaded.

Reluctantly, the men left.

When her tears finally subsided, Abby undressed and climbed into her bubble bath. She leaned her head back, and closed her eyes. The water felt good, and helped to relieve the soreness.

After having a good long soak in the bathtub, Abby returned to her room and took the sheets off her bed. She placed them into the washing machine, and walked across the way to her parents' house.

While John worked at his computer in the office, Izumi was lying on her left side in the master bedroom, struggling to keep her attention on the book she was reading.

"Hi," said Abby, coming into the bedroom to see her mother.

"I heard about the job," sighed Izumi. "Terry told us everything."

"Has the bed rest started?" inquired Abby, eager to change the subject.

"Today's the first day," said Izumi, a little nervously. "I haven't been here for two hours, and I already can't wait to get up! Abby, did you get much sleep last night?" asked the concerned mother. "You look tired."

"I am, a little," she admitted, wearily.

"Why don't you lay down here for awhile and get some rest?" suggested Izumi, prepared for Abby to turn it down, for her daughter was never a cuddler. To her surprise, Abby snuggled into her mother's arms. "This is a welcome change," smiled Izumi, stroking her daughter's hair into long smooth strands. "You don't know how often I wanted to do this, when you were little."

Abby drifted in and out of sleep, comforted by the near proximity of her mother. The young woman was still dealing with the reality of last night, and wasn't ready to talk to anyone about it yet-- not even Izumi.

Near lunchtime, Abby was awakened by the sound of her parents' hushed voices.

"You woke her up," Izumi sighed disappointedly, when she saw that Abby's eyes were open.

"Sorry, Sweetheart," apologized John, as he stood by the bedside to talk to his wife.

"I don't want you eating take-out because of my bed rest," Izumi insisted once more.

"But," protested John, "Terry and I don't have time to fix homemade meals everyday. We have to hold down full time jobs and keep house! At least, if we order take-out, it'll help save some time."

"I don't mind fast food once in a while," argued Izumi, "but I won't see my family living off of it for six months!"

John sighed and stared at the carpet, his eyebrows furrowed in thought.

"What about Jake?" suggested Abby, sitting up in bed. "I recently discovered that he can cook, and he cleans our house all the time."

"Jake already *has* a day job," declined John.

"He won't, when the season ends," replied Abby, for this had been a long standing concern with her friend.

"John!" exclaimed Izumi, happily. "Why not? This could be the winter job that he needs to stay out of prison! It would help out the kids!"

"It would help *us* out," chimed in Terry, coming into the room and readily approving the suggestion. "I'll chip in for his salary. It'd be worth it, John."

"Yes, it would be," admitted the father. "When you put it that way, it doesn't matter if he can really cook, or not."

"He can cook," affirmed Abby, knowingly.

"There's only one little problem," pointed out John. "The fishing season isn't over until the end of November. What are we supposed to do in the meantime? "

"If we hired Jake before the season ends," Izumi asked Abby, "do you think Mr. Winkler could spare him? He's been very kind to this family by giving Jake that job in the first place, and I don't want to insult him by taking his helper."

"I think he could spare him," answered Abby. "Jake's job at the tackle store isn't exactly essential. If you guys are really serious, I could talk to Mr. Winkler, later today."

"Then, you'd better do it," said John.

"Since it's lunchtime and Jake doesn't work here yet," said Terry, "we'd better grab some take-out. Hey, Abby!" he observed happily. "It's good to see you smiling again!"

Abby stayed with her parents and Uncle Terry for the rest of the day, until it was time to drive Jake home from work. When the young man saw her pull up in the jeep, he was relieved to find her in better spirits, than when he had left her that morning.

"My parents have a proposition for you," she announced. "Remember how you've been praying that God would give you a winter job? Well, I think He's answered. Mom has to have six months of bed rest until the triplets come, and Dad and Uncle Terry don't have time to run the house or cook meals. Interested?"

Jake grinned broadly. This *was* an answer to prayer!

"There's just one hitch," added Abby. "Mom and Dad could really use you right now, and not when the fishing season is over."

"Do you want me to talk to Mr. Winkler?" asked Jake, seeing where the conversation was heading. "He's still here."

"No," she replied, "I'll do it myself." Even while she spoke to Jake, Abby strained to see any sign of recognition in him, that hinted he remembered or might possibly remember some small detail about last night. To her utter disappointment, the ex-convict showed no such signs.

As she climbed out of the jeep, Jake saw Abby wince in pain.

"Are you hurt?" he asked in concern, thinking that it had been caused by her fall in his bedroom, earlier that day.

"I just need another long bath," she responded.

Inside the tackle shop, Abby found Mr. Winkler at his fly tying table, intent on his work. Understanding that a delicate process was going on, Abby waited for him to notice that she was there, so she wouldn't spoil his concentration until he was ready. After a few seconds, Mr. Winkler looked up and smiled sympathetically at her. "Dennis told me all about it," he sighed.

"Mr. Nelson actually suggested that I divorce Jake, because he's going to hold me back," related Abby. "After that, I didn't care if I got the job, or not." Then Abby related her parents' proposal to Mr. Winkler.

"Of course, he can go," replied the old man. "I have to admit, I'm going to miss that boy. But, maybe, I can still have one of the Murphys working here," he offered, looking up at her with raised eyebrows. "Dennis, of course, would be the main fly casting instructor, but there's still a few months left to the season. I know what you're making right now as a translator, and I can promise you at least double that."

"I have the sneaking suspicion that you're being too generous," hesitated Abby.

"Maybe I am," admitted Mr. Winkler with a kind smile, "but it's my store, and I can do what I please." Hearing this, Abby surprised the old man with a big hug.

"God bless you," she said, gratefully.

Upon reaching home, Jake hurried inside the little yellow house while Abby put the jeep in the garage for the night. She lingered in the garage for awhile, checking the engine oil, and making sure that the jeep was being kept in good operation. When she was finished, Abby went inside and kicked off her shoes. As she tossed the keys onto the coffee table, Jake appeared from the bathroom.

"Your bath water is ready," he announced, picking up her shoes from the floor. "Take as long as you want. When you get out, I'll have dinner waiting."

"Thanks," said Abby, in surprise. "You don't have to do that, Jake. I'm not mad at you."

"I believe you," he answered quietly. "Would you like pancakes, tonight?"

"What's the occasion?" she smiled, letting down her long hair.

"I just feel like it," he shrugged.

Going to her room to get her nightgown and robe so she could change after her long soak, Abby noticed that Jake had made her bed with the clean sheets that she had stuck into the wash earlier that morning.

With a resolute face, Abby went to the kitchen where her friend was mixing the pancake batter.

"What is it?" he asked.

Abby struggled within herself to tell him, but the words simply would not come. How could she tell a man that couldn't bear to be touched, that he had spent the night in bed with her, only

because he was intoxicated? And even worse, how could she explain why she had let him? The young woman was afraid what his reaction might be.

"Thanks for making my bed," she answered, leaving the kitchen. Abby promised herself that she would tell Jake at a later time-- but not today.

"There be three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not: The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid."

~ Proverbs 30:18, 19 ~

"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 ~

Chapter Fifteen

The Night that Changed Everything

"Can two walk together, except they be agreed?"

~ Amos 3:3 ~

The days passed, and Abby remained silent. Whenever she faced Jake to tell him what had happened, courage would quickly fail her, and she found herself talking about something else, instead. Abby was so diligent in showing a normal front, that few had little opportunity to suspect that anything was troubling her.

The one person Abby struggled to act the most unaffected around, however, was the one person who sensed something was wrong. Jake was now working at the Johanneses' house, keeping the home in running order, and preparing meals on a daily basis. Everyone agreed that he was doing a good job, and that things were going smoothly. One would think that his being around the Johanneses' meant that Jake saw Abby more often, but that was not the case. Abby had taken Mr. Winkler's offer to be a fly casting instructor at the tackle shop, even though she would be second fiddle to Dennis. The young woman was so intent on keeping busy, that she put in long hours at the marina, so that Jake only saw her when she arrived home late in the evening to eat dinner.

One evening, late in August, approximately two weeks after that fateful night, Abby came home from work later than usual, only to find Jake waiting up for her in the living room.

"How was work?" he asked, as Abby tossed her keys onto the coffee table and kicked off her shoes.

"All right, I guess," she shrugged, checking the answering machine. "How did things go with my parents? Did Uncle Terry give you a hard time?"

"He likes my cooking," responded Jake, once again sensing that Abby was trying to avoid something else. "Your dinner's in the fridge," he sighed, getting up to pick up her shoes.

As she ate her dinner, Jake stood in the doorway and watched. His arms were folded and his face was sober. After a few minutes of staring silence, Abby put down her fork and looked up at him.

"Are you just going to stand there?" she tried to smile lightheartedly. Slowly, Jake sat down at the table. "You know," she continued, "this chicken is really good. Sometime, I'll go fishing and see what you can do with bass."

"Are you feeling all right?" asked Jake. "Is Mr. Winkler overworking you?"

"No, he's a great boss," replied Abby, resuming her meal. "I know this wonderful recipe with lemon sauce. Uncle Terry once fixed it, and it was the best bass I've ever had."

"Is it something I did?" wondered Jake. "Are you angry with me?"

"What in the world makes you ask that?" she asked in surprise.

"I don't know," he shrugged, "I just thought I'd ask."

"I've never been able to get the recipe to work, myself," she continued, "but you probably wouldn't have any trouble. Really, Jake, this is pretty good."

"Thanks," he muttered, getting up. "Just leave the dishes in the sink. I'll take care of them later."

The next morning, before Abby had left the house for work, Jake disappeared without explanation. A little relieved that she wouldn't have to face him at breakfast, Abby ate the meal he had left for her.

A few minutes later, as Dennis Beckman was preparing to climb out of bed, he heard a knock at the door of the boarding house where he was staying.

"Just a minute!" Dennis called out, quickly jumping into a pair of jeans. He went to the door and was surprised to find Jake.

"May I come in?" asked Jake, more than a little nervous.

"Sure," replied Dennis, standing aside so his guest could enter. "Something must be terribly wrong, for you to be willing to step inside my room," he mused, only half joking. "What can I do for you?"

"I didn't mean to wake you up," hesitated Jake, seeing the untidy bed.

"You didn't," Dennis assured him with a friendly smile.

"Since you and Abby are such close friends," began Jake, "I thought... I thought, maybe, you could tell me what's bothering her. I've tried to pull it out of her, but she just won't talk to me."

Dennis saw the deeply concerned look on his face, and sighed.

"Look, Jake," answered Dennis, "Abby and I aren't that close. You're really speaking to the wrong person."

"But," reasoned the young man, "you two are always debating and talking. I thought you guys were best friends."

"Well, yes, we talk," admitted Dennis, searching the room for his shirt, "but about lures, reels-- you know, fishing stuff. She hardly ever mentions her personal life, so I don't go there. If something's up with Abby, she hasn't mentioned it to me. Jake, to be perfectly honest, I haven't noticed her acting any differently than usual."

"Thanks," said Jake, awkwardly excusing himself. "I'm sorry for bothering you."

"Hey," Dennis called after him as he was about to leave, "if there's anything I can do, let me know."

On the walk home, Jake thought over what Dennis had told him. On the one hand, he was elated that she and the handsome instructor weren't the best friends he had thought they were, but on the other hand, Jake was still at a loss for her strange behavior.

By the time Jake reached home, Abby had left for work-- at least, that's where he assumed she was.

Abby sat up and dressed herself, while the doctor looked over the chart he was holding in his hand.

"There's no doubt, Abby," replied the man.

"Are you absolutely sure?" she asked, still dazed by the prognosis.

"I see by your husband's record," said the doctor, "that he's been sexually active for most of his life. This is important for us to know, because it's possible that you could become affected by diseases that he came into contact with. I must say," he observed, continuing to flip through Jake's history, "this is one of the most comprehensive lists of STDs [sexually transmitted diseases] that I've ever seen, involving a patient who's not a prostitute. Now, the one here that stands out the most is HIV. Your husband was exposed to it numerous times, but it says here that he spent the last two years of prison time in solitary confinement. That means the incubation period for the virus to show up is well over. How long have you been married, again?"

"We were married in late June," replied Abby, "so that makes almost two months now."

"To the best of your knowledge, has he had sexual contact with anyone besides yourself, since he was released from prison?" inquired the doctor.

"If you knew Jake," replied Abby, "then you'd know how unnecessary that question is."

As the doctor finished the examination, Abby knew that nothing would ever be the same again. Afterward, the young woman climbed into her jeep and leaned back in her seat to collect her thoughts.

"What am I going to tell Jake?!" she exclaimed under her breath. Abby started up the engine and drove to the marina. As she pulled into the parking lot, it became clear to her what she must do.

"Is everything all right?" asked Mr. Winkler, seeing Abby's shaken face, when she entered the store.

Dennis came in from the docks and stopped short when he saw Abby.

"I know this is asking a lot," she said, "but I need the rest of the day off. Something's come up, and I need a little time to sort it out."

"Of course, of course," replied Mr. Winkler, more frightened by her demeanor than by the request itself. "You can have tomorrow off, as well."

"Abby, what's wrong?" asked Dennis. "Jake visited me this morning, and he said that he thought something was troubling you."

"Did he?" she asked, in a surprised voice.

"Abby, you don't look very well," observed Mr. Winkler over his spectacles. "Dennis, drive her home," he directed. "You get some rest, young lady."

"Thanks," she smiled, "but I can drive myself."

As Abby made her way home, a flood of thoughts surged through her head. For every thought she had, it always ended with, "What am I going to tell Jake?"

Terry was just going inside with the mail when he saw Abby pull up in front of the little yellow house across the way.

"Hey! Abby!" he shouted, coming to her vehicle. "What are you doing home so early? Did they get sick of you down there, and decide to throw you back for awhile?" he laughed good-naturedly. Then, he noticed her red eyes. "Have you been crying?"

"I just needed to take some time off," she shrugged, trying to play down the situation. "Is Jake home?" she asked, getting out of the jeep.

"He's starting lunch," Terry answered soberly. "Come inside and sit down," ordered her adopted uncle, guiding the young woman into her parents' house. "Jake, you'd better get in here!" shouted Terry, as he helped Abby sit down on the couch.

Jake and John came running, while Izumi called from her bed to ask what was going on. The young man's heart fell when he saw Abby's shaken appearance. Numbly, he stood by while John and Terry did their best to ascertain what the problem was.

"I'm all right," she kept insisting.

"Abigail," commanded John in his parenting voice, "I want to know what's going on."

"You can tell us *anything*," coaxed Terry.

"What's happening?" cried Izumi from the bedroom.

"We don't know, yet!" John called back to his wife.

"I'll tell you," assured Abby, "but I can't now. I have to talk to Jake first. Could I borrow him for awhile?"

The young man jumped at the sound of his name.

"Very well," sighed her father, "I suppose I can't treat you like a child anymore, but, Abby... the look on your face right now... I'm only glad your mother can't see it."

"See what?!" cried Izumi from the bedroom.

"You're giving everyone a bad scare, Abby," agreed Terry, as the young woman got up from the couch and went to the front door with Jake in tow.

Outside, AJ walked down the beach to the small dock at the end of their property. Even in the midst of this, Jake couldn't help but notice how the afternoon sun reflected in her eyes with such brilliance that he could hardly believe she was real.

"I have to tell you something," she began.

"I'm ready," said Jake, bracing himself for the worst.

"Not for this," replied Abby, brushing a wisp of long hair from her face, "I guarantee it."

"I'm here," he encouraged her. "You can tell me, Abby."

"Do you remember that night," she asked in a hesitant voice, "when you got drunk during the dinner party?"

"Not exactly," smiled Jake, "but go on."

"Well," paused Abby, "when we got home..."

"What?" he asked, with raised eyebrows.

"You kissed me in the kitchen," she replied. At once, Jake's face fell. "I pulled free, and you went to your room where you passed out," continued Abby. "But, later that night, you came to my room..." she stopped short of finishing her sentence. The young man's frame began to tremble. "You closed the door," said Abby, "undressed in the dark, and got into bed with me."

Jake quickly fumbled in his pocket for some cigarettes and lit one up.

"It *couldn't* have been me," he denied, his hand shaking as he drew the cigarette to his lips.

"After we had sex," she continued, "I fell asleep, and the next thing I remember is waking up and finding that you had already gone back to your room."

At this, Jake's legs gave out from beneath him, and he sank to the ground.

"What have I done?!" he cried in horror.

"Jake, you have to listen to me," said Abby, her voice on the brink of tears, "it *wasn't* your fault. You must believe that! You didn't do *anything* wrong." Abby sat down on the beach across from him, careful not to get too close.

"Please, tell me I didn't force you," he begged, still in a pale of horror.

"You didn't," she comforted him. "You could never hurt me."

"Abby, I'm sorry!" he exclaimed. "We had a deal, and I went back on it!"

"It wasn't your fault, Jake," repeated Abby, once more. "You were drunk-- I wasn't."

"Then, *why* did you let me?!" cried the young man.

"I've been dreading that question more than anything else you could ask me," she replied, taking a deep breath. "I don't know whether it was love or lust, but I remember reminding myself that we were *married*. You came to my bed, and you were so gentle, that I couldn't turn you away. I kept thinking, 'He's my husband.' I had no idea you weren't aware of your actions, Jake-- I swear I didn't!"

"I don't know what to say," replied the ex-convict, stunned with shock. "You let me lay with you out of pity. I don't know why that should surprise me, though. You've let me take advantage of you in every other way, so why not that as well? I'm sorry it happened, Abby. I really am. You know that I can't ever again be with you-- not like that."

"I know," she replied, quietly.

"I never wanted to hurt you," continued Jake, as his heart ached with grief. "It'll be harder for you now. Even though you don't love me, your body won't understand why I don't come to you again."

"Don't worry too much about it, Jake," replied Abby. "I take rejection well."

"That's good to hear," he muttered, disbelievingly. "Maybe, I should leave. I figured it might come one day, but I was just hoping that it wouldn't be so soon."

"Are you trying to walk out on me?!" she cried. "I thought we were partners-- Murphy and Murphy, remember?"

"You don't know what you're letting yourself in for, Abby," he resisted. "You'd come to resent me, and I don't think I could bear to let that happen."

"Jake," said Abby soberly, "there's more I have to tell you."

"After this, I can't think of a *single thing* that could shock me now," he sighed, shaking his head sadly.

"I'm pregnant," blurted Abby.

The very words knocked the cigarette from Jake's lips, as it tumbled to the sand. He stared at her incredulously, reeling from disbelief.

"Are you sure?" he stammered.

"Very sure," replied Abby. "The doctor said that since you were in solitary confinement for the last two years you were in prison, the incubation period for any sexually transmitted diseases to show up are over. That means I'm not in any danger of coming down with AIDS, or anything."

Jake looked at her and shook his head.

"You never should have let me," he muttered. "It's so dangerous for you, Abby."

"I'm fine," she assured him. "The only thing you gave me was a baby. I must confess, I didn't know someone could get pregnant after only one night. I'm really sorry, Jake. You had no say in this decision, so I don't blame you for being mad."

"Mad'?" he repeated, softly. "How could I *ever* be mad at you, when I owe you so much?" Jake looked at her and saw that she was trembling as well. "Are you scared?" he asked.

"I don't know if I can raise a baby on my own," she replied, trying to hold back the tears she felt welling up inside, "but I can't bring myself to put it up for adoption. Now that you know everything, if you want to leave, I'll understand."

"Abby," he said in a gentle voice, "I won't run out on you."

"Don't you want some time to think about it?" she asked.

"What's to think about?" he reasoned. "When we got married, I remember hearing, 'for better or for worse.' I'm not sure yet if this is better or worse, but I'm still here. For your sake, I'm sorry we spent that night together, Abby. I'm not sure if I should stay in the same house with you, or not."

"Stop worrying about me, Jake," she replied. "I always manage to land on my feet."

"Do you remember," he asked her, "that first time you talked to Dick?"

"You mean Warden Doyle?" replied Abby. "What about it?"

"I asked him to tell you about my past for a reason," he explained. "I didn't want you to fall in love with me."

"Who said anything about *love*?" she answered, trying to steady herself, for she was still trembling.

"I mean it, Abby," warned Jake. "Pity me, but don't love me."

"I hate it when you talk about yourself like that," she argued, getting up from the beach and brushing the sand from her clothes.

"I can never love you like you deserve," Jake cautioned her.

"Don't you think that things are complicated enough right now, without talking about hypothetical love?" she asked.

Jake got to his feet and stamped out the cigarette that had been smoldering on the sand.

"I suppose we'd better go tell them," he said in a voice of dread. "I saw Terry watching us from the window just now."

"You don't blame me for not putting the baby up for adoption, do you?" she asked, a little uncertainly.

"If it was my kid, I guess I'd want to keep it, too," replied the young man.

"What do you mean, 'if'!" she cried. "This IS your kid! Don't you believe me?"

"I'm sorry," he stammered, "it just came out that way. I believe you, Abby. It just doesn't *feel* like it's mine, yet. This is new and completely unexpected. It must be how Joseph felt when he first found out Mary was with child-- that is, before the angel and all."

"I can tell you right now, there aren't going to be any angels," affirmed Abby, "so you'd better start getting used to it! Don't you remember *anything* about that night?"

"Not a thing," he replied. "Are you sure it was me, Abby? Of course you are," he said, quickly answering his own question. "You never would've let someone who wasn't your husband into your bed. You must understand, I've never been with a woman before," he explained in a hushed voice. "All the others were men."

"I think I understand your doubt," she acknowledged. "The only thing I can tell you, is that I'm pregnant, and that you're the father. We were alone together for most of the night, so there's no one else who can back up my story!"

"Don't beat yourself up," he assured her, "I believe you."

The Bible says, "Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband [Jake] doth safely trust in her." (Proverbs 31:10, 11) It was no small act of trust for Jake to take Abby's word for something that he did not remember. And if that wasn't enough proof of how much he trusted her, Jake was even taking responsibility for the baby.

As AJ neared the house, Abby saw Terry quickly move away from the window. Her father and uncle met the couple in the living room, awaiting an explanation.

"Well?" pressed Terry.

"Before we start, let's all move into the bedroom so Little Dove can hear," suggested John, as the small party followed him down the hall to where Izumi was intently waiting.

"I'm all right, Mom," consoled Abby, seeing the concerned look on her mother's face. Jake nervously stood a few feet away from the young woman, pensively staring at the carpet in dread. It was to his credit that he didn't suddenly bolt from the room.

"Let's have it," sighed John.

"About two weeks ago," began Abby, glancing at Jake before continuing, "Jake and I went to the dinner party at the yacht club."

"This is *only* about the yacht club?!" exclaimed Terry, in surprise.

"Not exactly," hesitated Abby, clearing her voice. "It's what happened, afterward."

"Everyone knows what happened afterward," answered John. "You didn't get the job."

"Dear," spoke up Izumi, "I don't think that's what our Abby is trying to tell us."

"What then?" asked John, puzzled by what it all meant.

"Jake took some of his medication before we left for the club that evening," explained Abby, "and it interacted with the alcohol in his drink. He was so drunk, that he can't remember what happened after we got home."

"What, exactly, *did* happen?" her father asked gravely.

Abby quickly discovered that as hard as it had been to say the word "sex" in Jake's presence, it was even harder to utter it in front of her own parents.

"Jake and I... you know," she answered, in an embarrassed voice.

John stared at her and then at the young man standing quietly beside her.

"But, I thought he couldn't," hesitated John, wondering if she had actually meant what he had thought she meant.

"He *still* can't," answered Abby, "at least, not unless he's really drunk."

Jake was unable to lift his eyes to anyone in the room, while Abby did her best to explain the situation to her family. To his relief, she said little about any intimate details, only that "it happened."

"Well," said John, when Abby had finished, "I'm glad you kids told us. I appreciate your honesty."

"I guess we can't tell people that it's in name only, anymore," reflected Terry, trying hard not to smile, for he could plainly see how humiliated Jake looked.

Izumi remained thoughtfully quiet. Her mother's intuition told her that there was something else Abby wanted to tell them. Jake winced as he waited for the other shoe to fall.

"Before you guys leave," said Abby, "I have something else to tell you. I'm going to have a baby."

"We're *all* going to have a baby," laughed Terry, "three of them-- near the first of February, remember?"

"Actually," replied Abby, "this one will be due in May."

John's mouth fell open in surprise! Izumi's eyes became wet with tears of joy, while Terry clasped Abby in a large hug that was rapidly followed by John. Izumi reached out to Abby with open arms, and she quickly filled them.

"My baby's having a baby," whispered the mother, kissing Abby's cheek. "I'm so happy for you, Sweetheart! I have to admit, I thought this day would never come!"

John looked to Jake, who still hadn't fled the room yet.

"Congratulations, Son," he said in a subdued tone, offering his hand to the young man. "You've made us all very happy."

Jake was pleasantly surprised by everyone's reaction. There had been no tar, and no feathers-- only joy. No one had reprimanded him for getting "their Abby" pregnant, even though it *had* been unintentional. Jake slowly began to let his guard down, even smiling once or twice in response to all the congratulating that was going on.

Even in her joy, however, Izumi remembered that Abby had been unhappy earlier that day. The mother knew something more had transpired between her daughter and son-in-law, than Abby had let on.

"We're going to have *four* babies in the space of *four* months!" cried Terry in disbelief.

"The pitter patter of little feet is going to be *deafening*!" chuckled John.

"You know what this means, don't you?" grinned Terry to his best friend. "John, you're going to be a grandpa!"

"Little Dove," smiled John, "do you feel like a grandma, yet?"

"A 'grandma'!" repeated Izumi in happy amazement.

"This calls for a celebration!" declared Terry. "Jake, as the new expectant father in the family, you're free from fixing lunch, today! I'm going to get the best carry out in all of Three Mile Bay!"

Jake smiled and glanced at Abby, who was staying behind with her mother as the two men went to the living room to discuss which restaurant they should go to. As John and Terry left the house, Jake sat down on the floor, quietly listening as mother and daughter talked on the bed, a few feet away.

"Are you all right, Sweetheart?" asked Izumi. "Even if your father doesn't realize it yet, this must have been a difficult day for you. I hope you and Jake worked out whatever differences you had," she said, looking first to Abby and then to the ex-convict sitting nearby.

"What frightened me the most," admitted Abby, "was the fact that I might have to raise the baby on my own. When Jake said that he'd stand by me, I knew we could make it."

"Then, no declarations or promises were made that night?" inquired Izumi.

"No," answered the young woman.

"Then, why, Sweetheart?" asked her mother in concern. "Intimacy is not something that should be taken lightly."

"He wanted me so much, Mom," she replied softly. "I could feel it in his touch. I never knew it could be like that. It was as if we were one person, and not two anymore."

Jake closed his eyes, his heart wincing in agony as he heard those words. He desperately prayed that Abby would be able to put that night behind her. As Izumi hugged her daughter once more, she glimpsed the look of pain on Jake's face as he sat quietly on the floor against the wall.

"I'm so happy, Mom," contentedly sighed the young woman.

When the men arrived back from the restaurant, they brought the food straight into the bedroom, so Izumi could eat with everyone else. John pulled out a breakfast tray he and Izumi had been sharing meals on, and carefully set out her food. Terry sat down next to Jake on the floor, while Abby remained on the bed near her mother.

"There's not enough napkins," declared Terry, upon discovering that they were one short.

"I'll get it," volunteered Jake, quickly standing up to leave.

"This place makes the best cordon bleu in the world," remarked John, preparing to say a prayer before eating.

"Did you get enough croutons on your salad, Izzy?" asked Terry. "I think the chef gave me all of them."

Izumi, however, didn't hear what Terry had just asked. The minutes were ticking by and Jake hadn't returned. The mother saw her daughter's apprehensive face and wondered if it could be possible that Jake had left for good.

"Where's the new father?" laughed John. "We can't start without him!"

Unable to bear it a minute longer, Abby jumped up and went to the kitchen, praying that he would be there-- but he wasn't. With a lump in her throat, Abby started for the living room to go home and see if he was there. Just then, the front door opened, and Jake walked in, carrying napkins in one hand, and a case of soft drinks in the other.

"I thought we could make a contribution to the party," he smiled, holding up the cold drinks. "I hope they didn't wait up for me. Are you okay?" inquired Jake, just noticing that she looked shaken.

"I'm fine," she replied, trying to steady her nerves.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "Do you want me to get your Dad? or maybe Terry?"

"Go on to the party," refused Abby. "I'll be there in a minute."

"Okay," Jake said slowly. He walked down the hall and turned to watch her for a minute before disappearing into the bedroom.

"God," prayed Abby under her breath, "please, don't let him leave." Abby knew Jake would help support the baby. She wasn't afraid of that. He had given his word, and she knew he would keep it. But, she also realized that he could leave the house, and live elsewhere, if he thought he was causing her pain. Abby shuddered as she remembered the words she had told her mother, in his presence. "I can't let that happen, again," she rebuked herself. "He might take something the wrong way."

When Abby went to the bedroom, Jake was passing around extra napkins and cans of soft drinks.

"There you are, Abby!" exclaimed John. "Now that everyone's here, we can say grace!" Everyone joined hands, (except Abby and Jake), and bowed their heads while John asked for God's blessing on their ever-growing family. "Children are an heritage of the LORD," quoted John, "and the fruit of the womb is His reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate." (Psalm 127:3-5)

"Amen," said everyone in unison, as the prayer ended.

"I still have a few of your old baby things," Izumi told her daughter, as she unwrapped a plastic fork before starting in on her salad. "Most of it is pink though, so it won't do you much good if it's a boy."

"How are you both fixed for money?" inquired John, looking to Jake for an answer.

"You'll have to ask Abby," deferred the young man. "She handles all the finances."

"Babies aren't cheap, Abby," warned John. "If you need money, all you have to do is let us know. I don't want you suffering in silence, only because you're too stubborn to ask for help."

"Thanks to you guys, Jake has a good paying winter job," answered Abby, optimistically, "and my job at the marina, though seasonal, is actually the best salary I've ever made. If we save as much as we can, I think we'll be all right. Mom, I *will* be glad for my old baby clothes, though. If it's a girl, it'll come in handy."

"What are you hoping for?" asked Terry, grinning at Jake. "Do you want a girl or a boy?"

The baby's gender was the furthest thing from Jake's mind. The young man felt as though it were someone else's life that he was looking at, and not his own.

After the party, AJ walked across the way back to their little yellow house.

"Mom said we should eat at their house," related Jake, "that way, I won't have to fix two separate meals."

"We should contribute to the grocery bill, then," replied Abby.

"That's what I said, but your parents refused to take our money," answered Jake. "You know how they are when it comes to their daughter."

"They did it for you, too," she argued.

"I'm just along for the ride," smiled Jake, with a shake of his head.

That night, when the two parted ways to their own bedrooms, Abby sensed that her friend was uneasy. She had done her best to act like nothing had changed, but now that Jake knew everything, it was harder to pretend. Before bed, Abby worked at her fly tying table, finishing a lure that she had promised one of her students.

"Are you going to tell Dr. Jacoby, or do you want me to?" asked Jake, standing in her bedroom doorway.

"It's gallant of you to offer," replied Abby, turning in her chair to face Jake, "but I'll take responsibility for telling him." It was then, that Abby noticed Jake was standing outside her room, in the hall. In the past, it had been his custom to sit on her bed and sketch, while she worked. Things had changed from the "old" days, and it pained her to see it.

"Good night," he said, abruptly retreating to the security of his room.

Later that night, Abby was startled out of her sleep by the baby monitor on her nightstand.

"I'm coming, Jake," she breathed, hurrying down the hall to his room. However, when she got to his door, she discovered that it was locked. Inside, she could hear Jake's flashback steadily becoming worse. "Hold on!" she cried, racing to her room to find the bundle of house keys that John had given her when she moved in. Abby grabbed the keys and ran back to Jake's room, trying one key after another until the door finally opened.

On the bed, Jake was writhing in fits of delirium, his fists clutching the bed sheets beneath him.

"I'm here," said Abby, rushing to his side. "Jake, wake up. You're having a bad dream." The young man continued his invisible struggle, until at last, Abby was able to persuade him to open his eyes. Jake's face was wet with perspiration, and his breathing continued to come in big gulps. He stared intently at Abby, his fists still clenched. "Calm down," she directed him, using a clean handkerchief in the pocket of her robe to dry his face. At the touch of the cloth, Jake flinched. "It's all right," she soothed him, "I'm not touching you. See?" Jake closed his eyes and turned onto his side, crouching into a fetal position. Abby couldn't help comparing him to a child who had just endured a nightmare, and now only wanted to be comforted.

"It was so real," he breathed heavily, his frame still shuddering.

"I know," she replied softly. "You're safe now. Oh, Jake," she sighed sadly, "you need a hug, and I can't give you one. Wait a minute. I'll be right back." Abby disappeared for a moment, and returned with a large black teddy bear. "Uncle Terry gave this to me when I was two years old," she said, introducing the large, worn, stuffed animal to Jake.

"I don't want it," he refused, flatly.

"Her name is Daisy, and I expect you to take good care of her," insisted Abby, placing the teddy bear under the covers, beside him in bed. "Hold on to her, Jake. You'll feel better."

The effects of the flashback were still lingering, so Jake wrapped his arms around the soft animal and clenched his hands into its black fur. Abby stepped back as her friend buried his face into the old teddy bear for comfort.

"Please," he begged Abby, "don't tell anyone."

"I won't," she promised gently.

Unwilling to leave him alone just yet, Abby sat in a chair on the other side of the room and waited until his tightly clenched fists began to relax. By the time Jake had at last fallen asleep, his boyishly handsome face was resting against the worn bear that Abby had had since childhood.

"You're in good hands, Daisy," she silently whispered, tiptoeing from the room and returning to her empty bed. Jake hadn't had a night flashback in a while, and Abby guessed that it was because of her.

The next morning, Jake woke up to find that he had wet his bed sometime during the night. In secret, he took Daisy to the bathroom and carefully cleaned her off.

"I'm sorry," he apologized to the worn teddy bear.

Jake carried his soiled sheets to the washing machine, and left the house to start breakfast at the Johanneses' home. Not long afterward, Abby woke up and dressed for work. When she found that breakfast wasn't ready, she suddenly remembered that she and Jake were eating at her parents' house.

"Good morning," greeted Terry, as Abby came though the front door.

Abby went to the kitchen, and found Jake busily making a breakfast large enough for five adults. When he saw her, Jake gave Abby a small smile and returned to his work. It never ceased to

amaze the young woman how much at ease Jake seemed to be in front of a stove; he could manage several dishes with simultaneous ease-- something which Abby had never been able to do.

"Something smells good," said John, coming into the kitchen with Izumi's empty food tray.

John carefully arranged a single flower in a small vase, the Lifestyles section of the newspaper, and two glasses of orange juice, on the tray. When Jake had finished cooking, John added two plates, forks, and some napkins. With a wink to his daughter, John carried the tray back to their bedroom, where Izumi was waiting to eat breakfast with her husband.

"I don't know about you guys," joked Terry, hungrily sitting down at the table, "but I intend to gain at least five pounds from this meal!"

Jake served the remaining two, and, in the tradition of all good chefs, was the last to sit down to eat.

"You know, I was thinking," said Terry, munching a mouthful of pancake, "me and the guys could throw you a baby shower!"

"I don't know if that's such a good idea," hesitated Abby, for she could just imagine what kind of baby shower several men would be able to give.

"Why not?" asked Terry, loading his fork again. "You could get a lot of free stuff, eat cake... get a lot of free stuff..." he added again with a smile. "Come on, let your fishing buddies do this for you, huh? What do you say? Jake, you could handle the meal, couldn't you?"

"Sure," shrugged the young man. He smiled at Abby's protests, for he knew she wasn't going to win this one.

"I'm sure I could get Doc [Dr. Gregory, the local veterinary, and one of Abby's oldest fishing buddies, besides Terry] in on this," planned Terry. "Do you have anymore pancakes, Jake?"

After breakfast, Abby went to work, while Jake started vacuuming her parents' living room. At the marina, Abby found Mr. Winkler and Dennis, and quickly broke her news to them, so she could get any questions over with. Abby left out the details, only mentioning that she and Jake were going to have a baby.

"Well, well," smiled Mr. Winkler knowingly, "I knew you two would get around to it, one of these days!"

"Congratulations," said Dennis. "Everything is all right, then?"

"Yeah, it is," she answered, going out to the dock to prepare for her first student of the day.

"I guess everything is all right," shrugged Dennis to Mr. Winkler.

After lunch, John took Izumi to the obstetrician in Chaumont for one of her checkups. Today marked the first of her second trimester, and Izumi was in good spirits.

"Mrs. Johannes, the initial time of danger for your babies is over," declared Dr. Elizabeth Williams, as she scanned the ultrasound monitor. "If you remember, we were concerned that one or more of the babies would be reabsorbed, but you're thirteen weeks along, and that danger is over."

"Thank God for that!" exclaimed John, gratefully.

"I can tell you what sex these babies are," offered Dr. Williams, "that is, if you both want to know. Some couples prefer to wait until birth before finding out."

"We want to know," smiled Izumi, as John took her hand in his.

"Let's see," said the doctor, "this one is a girl, see? Let's see... congratulations, folks! They're *all* girls!"

"Heaven help us," John laughed happily, kissing his beaming wife. "Three more girls, Little Dove. Do you think we're up to it?"

"*Definitely*," smiled Izumi.

Abby didn't get home until late that evening, tired from a long day's work at the marina. As she came through her parents' front door to eat dinner, Terry greeted her with all smiles.

"Abby, you're going to have three baby sisters, come next February!" he cried happily.

"Three girls?" laughed Abby, incredulously. "Wow!"

"How was your day?" asked Jake, getting out her dinner from the oven where he had been keeping it warm.

"All right, I guess," she answered, sitting down at the table by herself, for the others had already eaten. To her bewilderment, however, Jake grabbed a plate and joined her.

"Haven't you had dinner, yet?" she asked in surprise, for it was nearly seven o'clock.

"I thought I'd wait for you," he shrugged, helping himself to some leftover lasagna. "You don't mind, do you?"

"I guess not," she replied, puzzled by this gesture.

"Dad eats with Mom whenever he can," reflected Jake. "He said it's important to keep in touch with your 'other half.'"

"That sounds like something Dad would say," smiled Abby, with a soft groan. "Am I your other half, Jake?" The ex-convict eyed her suspiciously. "Don't look at me like that," she laughed. "I'm not the one who waited to eat dinner until their 'other half' came home!"

"If it bothers you so much, I won't do it," replied Jake, getting up from the table to eat in the living room.

"Wait," called out Abby, with a heavy sigh. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, Jake! You know I'm not a romantic."

"I wasn't trying to be romantic," he explained, "I was *trying* to act like a team. If nothing else, that *is* what we are, aren't we?"

"You're right," conceded Abby. "I tell you Jake, just when I think I have you figured out, you go and pull something like this."

"What do you expect me to do?" he asked, sitting down at the table again. "The only time I ever see you anymore, is early in the morning, or late in the evening."

"And sometimes, in the middle of the night," she added, referring to his flashback the night before.

"Do you have to bring that up?" Jake asked pleadingly.

"*What?*" she challenged him. "You said you never see me, and I was only adding that you *do* see me more than just at mealtime."

"Do Mr. Winkler and Dennis really work you so hard?" he implored. "Must you spend *all* your time down there?"

Abby sighed and looked up at her friend.

"What do you want from me, Jake?"

"I don't want to be left out," he answered in a sincere voice. "This family is all I have, and you're a big part of that. I know things are different now, but we've been good friends in the past, haven't we?"

"Aren't you blowing this out of proportion?" she asked.

"Abby, I know when someone's trying to avoid me!" he cried, his voice finally rising above a low hush.

"What about *you*?" she retorted. "You won't come into my room anymore, but stay in the hall, like there was an invisible line you can't cross! And last night, when you had your flashback, I couldn't get inside any faster because *you* had locked your door! Who is trying to avoid who?!"

Upon hearing a disturbance, John found Abby and Jake involved in an argument in the kitchen. With his arrival, Jake quickly became silent, for this conversation was too private and personal to share in front of his father-in-law. Seeing that the young man was uncomfortable, John gave his daughter a warning look, and left the room.

"I can't talk here," said Jake, getting up from the table. "Could we go outside... please?"

AJ stepped out into the cool evening air and went out a little ways onto the beach, until they were far enough from the house to speak in private.

"Abby," began Jake, "I know we can't just go back to the way things were, but I think we can still be friends."

"If by that, you mean that you have to walk ten feet around me as though I had a catching disease, then no, I don't agree," she replied. "I don't know why you're being so skittish about it, Jake. *I'm* the one who remembers that night-- not you."

"Why do you think I'm so afraid?" he asked. "I know you know, and it terrifies me!"

"I don't want you to leave," she begged.

"I promised I wouldn't run out on you, and I won't," he repeated. "I'll help you raise the baby."

"I know you will," said Abby. "That is not what concerns me. Jake, I don't want you to go-- not just for the baby, but for *me*. The truth is, you're the dearest friend I've ever had. Sometimes, you know what I'm thinking, even before I do myself. Please, don't leave. I'll tape my mouth shut and never say another word, if you only won't go!"

"The house would be pretty quiet if you did that," replied Jake, cracking a smile. "If that's the way you really felt, then why didn't you tell me?"

"Because," replied Abby, "I was afraid you were going to think that I was falling in love, or some stupid thing like that, and I didn't want to scare you."

"Just the way you didn't want to scare me by letting on what happened that night?" asked Jake. "If you hadn't gotten pregnant, when were you going to tell me, Abby?"

"'Tomorrow' was the best answer I could come up with," she reasoned, weakly. "I'm not going to fall to pieces if you sit on my bed, Jake."

"I didn't want to make it any harder on you than it already was," he explained. "And, I have to admit, I was feeling a little threatened. I can't be there for you like other men. You made a poor deal when you married me."

"If I remember correctly," she smiled, "*you* were the one who proposed."

"I know," he sighed, "but you accepted, so which of us is the bigger fool?"

"At this point, it's a tossup," she conceded. "I don't want you to go."

"I don't want to leave," he answered.

"Then, what are we going to do?" wondered Abby.

"I'll make you a trade," proposed Jake. "I'll come into your room again, just as always, if you'll come home at five o' clock, and not work overtime."

"My bedroom won't make you too uneasy?" she asked.

"It has to be better than standing out here, arguing," he replied, dryly.

"We're not arguing," she insisted, "we're... discussing. What about locking your bedroom door? You need me too much, to do that. The longer it takes me to get in, the harder it will be for you to come out of your flashback. I promise not to let that night we slept together, ever repeat itself, without your full, unintoxicated consent. Please, trust me again."

"I won't lock the door," answered Jake.

"Then, I accept the trade," she replied.

"I hope I'm not doing wrong by you," he sighed. "Are you sure you don't want me to move out and find an apartment here in Three Mile Bay? We could still see each other-- sort of."

"Let's not start that again," she sighed. "I'm too hungry."

"Dinner *was* hot," laughed Jake, "but it isn't, anymore!"

"As long as it's still edible, I'm game," she replied. "Hey, did you hear we're going to have three girls?"

"I hope you don't mean us, *personally*," answered Jake. "Abby! Don't you ever wipe your feet before going inside? Just look at my floor!"

"God setteth the solitary in families: He bringeth out those which are bound with chains."
~ Psalms 68:6 ~

Chapter Sixteen

A Matter of Conscience

"This is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief... if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God."

~ 1 Peter 2:19, 20 ~

September began, and Terry was all smiles and secrets about the baby shower he was going to throw for Abby. The next few days promised to be happy ones, but clouds were looming on the horizon for the new family. It started a few days before the baby shower, when Abby returned home from work one day. As she climbed out of the jeep, she could see Warden Doyle talking to Jake on the beach in the distance, both engrossed in discussion.

"What's he doing here?" Abby wondered to her father.

"I don't know," replied John soberly. "Something's going on, that's for sure. He asked to see Jake, and they've been out there for over an hour now."

Abby watched the two men for a few minutes, and then went inside with John. She had been keeping her end of the deal she had made with Jake about not working overtime, and was home in time to eat dinner with the rest of the family.

"How was your day, Mom?" smiled Abby, coming into her parents' bedroom where Izumi was confined to bed rest.

"Don't ask," smiled Izumi, glumly. "I'm so tired of this bed! I keep reminding myself that it's for the girls, so I try to have more patience. Sometimes, it's hard, though. Did you know that Dick is here?"

"I saw him talking to Jake when I got back," replied Abby, glancing at the window to see if he was still there.

"They're not going to send him back to prison, are they?" wondered Izumi.

"As Jake's parole officer, Sheriff Peterson would be the one to make that decision-- not Warden Doyle," answered the young woman, knowingly. "Do you want anything before I leave? I'm going home to shower before dinner."

"No, I'm fine," replied Izumi, her face still betraying concern.

"It'll be all right, Mom," Abby smiled nonchalantly. "They're probably just catching up on prison news, or something."

As Abby left her parents' home and headed across the way to the yellow house, she put a hand to her eyes and looked off into the distance where the two men were still talking. Jake looked up and stared in her direction for a moment, their eyes briefly meeting. Then the ex-convict looked away and listened while Warden Doyle continued to talk.

Abby went into the small house and started her shower. Even through the sound of falling water and the closed bathroom door, she could hear Jake's voice in the living room, as he spoke to someone else. Wanting to know what was being said, Abby quickly shut off the water. Very soon after, the voices stopped; she heard the front door open and close, and then silence. With a shrug, the young woman turned on the water and finished her shower. After putting on her bathrobe, she opened the door and was surprised to find Jake sitting on the floor in the hall across from the bathroom door, smoking a cigarette. When he looked up at her, he quickly averted his eyes.

"What did Warden Doyle want?" she asked.

"I can't talk to you while you're dressed like that," muttered Jake, getting up and going to the living room.

In less than five minutes, Abby was ready and in the living room.

"What did he want?" she repeated, as Jake stared out the window onto the beach.

"Dick wants me to testify at a commission on prisoner abuse," replied Jake, exhaling another puff of tobacco.

"I don't understand," said Abby. "That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," sighed Jake, turning from the window to look at her. "You don't know how blessed you are, Abby," he smiled sadly. "You don't know the way things work out there, or else you'd understand."

"What's that supposed to mean?!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"Nothing, I guess," answered Jake, putting out his cigarette. "I've got to go start dinner."

"Wait a minute!" she cried. "What *else* did Dick want?"

"That was it," replied the ex-convict, closing the front door behind him as he left.

Puzzled, Abby put on her shoes and joined the others at her parents' house while Jake worked in the kitchen.

"Thank God, we were concerned for nothing," smiled John, as everyone settled in for another late summer evening on Three Mile Bay.

Unable to make anything more of it than she had been told, Abby ate dinner with her family and spent the rest of the evening on the beach, fly fishing. Late that night, however, at about midnight, Abby was awakened by the sound of soft footsteps at the foot of her bed. She opened her eyes, just in time to see Jake leaving her room. Still half asleep, Abby looked about and suddenly noticed that her old teddy bear, Daisy, was no longer there. Too sleepy to reason out why Jake needed her teddy bear again, Abby fell back to sleep.

The teddy incident, though small, seemed to underscore Jake's prevailing mood for the following week. Two days after Warden Doyle's visit, there was an article in the local paper that seemed to have everyone in Three Mile Bay talking. In it, the governor of the state accused the warden of the Watertown State Penitentiary of mismanagement. That warden was Richard Doyle. In the same article, Dick accused the governor of turning a blind eye to the underfunded, understaffed penitentiary, claiming that prisoner abuse was more prevalent than anyone wanted to admit. The ramifications of this political turbulence wasn't felt until days later.

Abby had just finished with a student at the tackle shop, and was getting some new line for her fly rod, when the small television on Mr. Winkler's desk interrupted the program with a breaking news story. Dennis and Mr. Winkler hurriedly called Abby over to the set.

"Something's happened at the Watertown State Penitentiary!" exclaimed Dennis.

"Prison officials have just confirmed," announced the reporter, "that at nine fifteen this morning, an inmate attacked two other prisoners, killing both of them, in what is being described as a 'horrific scene.' This comes days after Governor Smith accused the prison's warden, Richard Doyle, of 'gross mismanagement.' In a statement released only minutes ago, Governor Smith extended his condolences to the families of the slain inmates, and promised a full investigation."

"This means trouble for someone," predicted Mr. Winkler with a heavy sigh.

"Could this effect Jake?" wondered Dennis, looking to Abby for an answer.

"I don't see how it could," she replied, returning to her work with a somber face.

At lunch break that day, Abby went home instead of grabbing a bite to eat at the restaurant, and found Terry and Jake at the kitchen table, eating lunch at her parents' house.

"Abby!" cried Terry in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"Jake, did you hear what happened at the penitentiary, this morning?" asked Abby, her face full of concern.

"I heard," replied the young man, getting up to prepare a plate for her.

"And?" pressed Abby.

"And what?" asked Jake, setting her a place at the table.

"I don't know," shrugged Abby, beginning to feel a little silly. "I suppose if you're not concerned, then neither should I."

Jake looked at her for a moment and then sat back down at the table. Abby tried to ignore the foreboding she had in her heart, but it wouldn't go away.

The next day, everyone woke up to the headlines of the morning paper. In black letters, the newspaper announced the firing of Richard Doyle as warden of the Watertown State Penitentiary. It was a shock to everyone-- everyone that is, except Jake. He accepted the news with very little surprise. Though he hadn't said it, Abby could plainly see that her friend was troubled.

Late that same night, Abby heard Jake's footsteps outside her door, as he paced up and down the hallway, deep in thought. After an hour of this, Jake stopped at Abby's door and poked his head inside.

"Are you awake?" he whispered softly.

"Come in," yawned Abby, sleepily checking her clock.

"I know it's late," apologized Jake, "but I need to talk to you."

"I'm listening," she answered, trying to stifle another yawn and look wide awake.

"I've not been explaining things to you as much as I could have," he began, stepping inside the bedroom and sitting down in the chair at Abby's fly tying table, "because I didn't want you to be frightened. But, when Dick was fired as warden today, the situation changed. You need to know what I'm facing. Dick has been very vocal about prison rape, and is going to use me at the commission, as his example of someone who has turned his life around, in spite of what I've been through at the pen. Dick has rocked the political boat, and I could fall in with him. If I testify, and I later get sent back to the same prison, Dick won't be there to shield me from general population, as he has in the past by keeping me in solitary confinement. If the other inmates find out that I testified against them, which I'm sure they will, then it might not go very well with me. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Numbly, Abby nodded her head that she did.

"But," she reasoned, "if you testify, then the abusers will be punished, right?"

"This won't be a criminal trial," explained Jake. "The commission will hear my testimony, along with others, and hopefully, change policies so that prison rape won't be so common, anymore."

"But," whimpered Abby, "if you speak out, and no one is punished, then what will happen to *YOU* if you get sent back?!"

Jake was silent.

The young woman now realized the full implications of what he had been trying to tell her. In a heartbeat, Abby was wide awake. Every nerve in her body throbbed with dread. In the stillness, she could hear the low hum of her aquarium pump and the sound of crickets outside her window. How could those merry bugs chirp so happily, when her friend could be facing such a fate?

"I won't lie to you," Jake finally replied. "Sexual assault could be the least of my problems. The reason I'm telling you all this, is that if something happens to me, then you..." he paused, searching carefully for the right words. "I won't go through with it, if you don't want me to. You'd have to raise the baby alone, or at least, without me, so it's only fair that you should have the final say."

"Surely," she breathed, "you can't *still* be thinking of going through with this!"

"Abby, it's rare for a commission to come together about prisoner abuse," explained Jake. "There's a lot of influential people on this committee. They could have the power to influence others that are in a position to really make some big changes!"

"But," argued Abby in amazement, "you'd be risking your life for a bunch of criminals!"

"I was one of those criminals," he reminded her. "In many ways, I still am. No matter where I go, there are invisible bars around me all the time. I'm only free as long as I don't break parole. Abby, I know I'm asking an awful lot of you, but if I can save someone else from enduring the hell I've been through, then I have to at least *try*."

"How can you *be* so brave?" she gasped in dumbfounded wonderment.

"I'm *not* brave," denied Jake, shaking his head slowly. "I'm only trying to do the right thing. Please, tell me you understand."

"I'm trying," struggled Abby, half waiting for someone to awaken her from this bad dream. "Why should you take such a big risk for a bunch of felons, when they probably wouldn't do it for you?"

"That's beside the point," dismissed Jake. "I'm a felon, too. 'As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise,'" he added, quoting the Golden Rule in Luke chapter six, verse thirty-one.

"You're asking me for permission to go and get yourself raped or killed!" cried the young woman in dismay.

"Just think about it for awhile," he urged, getting up to leave.

"That's *NOT* going to help," retorted Abby, sliding back under her covers. "When is this commission thing, anyway?"

"Tuesday," he answered.

"The day after the baby shower," Abby observed under her breath.

The next day, the former warden was the talk of Upstate New York. The fact that he was to testify at the commission on prisoner abuse just days away, only made the publicity greater. As the weekend approached, Jake waited nervously for Abby's answer. By now, most everyone who knew AJ, was aware of the situation and had a general idea of the consequences of his testimony.

On the evening before Sunday, Abby went out to the shoreline to fly fish and to think. She had to have an answer by tomorrow morning, and Abby was having difficulty coming up with the one Jake wanted.

Swish, swish, Abby's fly line played back and forth against the evening sky, before landing gently on the surface of the water. A cool lake breeze played with her hair as the sun slowly sank in the west. Jake soon joined her, and stood quietly nearby. The young man stooped down and picked up a small flat stone, rolling it thoughtfully in his hand.

"Do you *really* believe this is the right thing to do?" she asked.

"I do," replied Jake, looking up at her and then out at the bay.

"I don't want you to go through with it, but I won't stop you," sighed Abby with a deep groan. "I don't believe God would ask you to do something like this, if no real good will be accomplished by it."

Jake stood up and skipped the stone across the glassy surface of the water.

"You think I'm doing all this for nothing, then?" he asked, sadly. "I want you to be happy that I'm doing the right thing, Abby."

"I've given you the answer you wanted to hear," she snapped, her deep blue eyes flashing angrily at him. "Don't ask me to be *happy* about it!"

Jake couldn't withstand the anger in her eyes, and quickly retreated inside. Frustrated and miserable over what she had just said, Abby fished until the sun went down. Unwilling to repent of her words, Abby went straight to her room, avoiding Jake as he watched her from the open bedroom door at the end of the hall. With a guilty conscience, she went to bed, but sleep refused to come. Outside her door, Abby could hear Jake pacing in the hall again. At last, he stepped inside her bedroom.

"Abby," he asked, "are you awake?" By the light of the aquarium, he could see that she was.

"What do you want?" she replied, hating the harsh sound of her own voice.

"Let not the sun go down upon your wrath," quoted Jake, his voice very much disturbed. "I can't let you go to sleep while we're still angry at each other."

Abby winced as she heard the words, "each other." She could hear the hurt in his voice, and knew that he wasn't angry with her, even though her quick temper had deserved it. The Scripture verse he quoted finished off the conviction, and Abby finally repented.

"I'm sorry," she told him, as the aquarium cast its watery ripples across the darkened room. "I'm having a really hard time with this decision, Jake," she confessed. "It's no excuse for me losing my patience, though."

"You don't really think that it's all for nothing, do you?" he asked.

Hesitant to answer, Abby rolled onto her side, facing away from the young man.

"Abby?" repeated Jake, going around to the other side of the bed to see if she was still awake or not.

With a sigh, Abby sat up in bed.

"To be honest, no, I don't think it will help," she answered. "How many commissions have there been in the past, and how many more do you think it's going to take until someone actually does something? And even if they *are* willing to take action, what can they do to prevent one inmate from raping another while the guard's back is turned?"

"But," sighed Jake with a heavy heart, as he sat down on the edge of the bed beside Abby, "I *have* to try. If everyone gives up, then nothing will EVER get done!"

"Let someone else do it," argued Abby. "You're the one who could be brutalized for telling the truth-- not the others! I don't see any of *them* taking such a risk!"

"There are people who are willing to lay it all on the line to do the right thing," said Jake, quite forgetting that he was sitting on Abby's bed while she was still in it.

"Name one!" challenged Abby.

"Dick!" answered Jake with a smile.

"After Dick testifies, could he be sent to prison to face retaliation without any protector?" pressed Abby. "Could *he* lose his *life* over this?"

"There's you," continued Jake. "I've never seen you shirk from anything that you felt was right. I think that the only reason why you're having such a hard time with this, is because you don't want to see me get hurt."

The simplicity and truth of his words, cut Abby to the quick. She turned onto her other side to avoid Jake and sighed.

"Do what you feel is right," she responded.

"But," pressed Jake, "you don't feel it will do any good."

"What difference does it make *what* I think?" she exclaimed.

"It matters," he replied quietly.

"It's three in the morning and we have to be at church in a few hours," said Abby. "Can't we finish this discussion, tomorrow?"

"Please," Jake begged her.

"What do you want from me?" cried Abby, jumping out of bed.

"I want agreement," he answered. "*Real* agreement."

"We've been talking for *hours* about this, and we still disagree," replied Abby.

"Could you put something else on?" requested Jake, suddenly looking down at the floor, for she was only dressed in her nightgown.

Abby put on her robe and went to the kitchen as Jake followed her down the hall. She grabbed a spoon and opened the freezer.

"Where's the chocolate fudge ripple?" she asked, searching the freezer for her favorite ice cream.

"It's behind the frozen lima beans," replied Jake. "You're not really going to eat ice cream at a time like this, are you?"

"I sure am," asserted Abby, opening the lid and sinking her spoon into the thick, sweet ice cream. "There's enough here for two," she offered, taking the entire carton to the living room. Abby settled onto the couch with her legs folded snugly beneath her. Not wanting to be left out, Jake

picked up a spoon and sat down on the opposite end of the couch. "You're not getting any of my ice cream way over there!" she laughed.

"Why are you doing this to me?" he asked with half a smile.

"Because I can!" laughed Abby. "Either get a longer spoon, or move closer." Reluctantly, Jake moved close enough to reach the carton of ice cream Abby was eating from. "I don't even want to *know* how many calories this will add to my weight," she sighed.

Jake smiled wistfully and retrieved another spoonful of ice cream.

"What were you thinking just now?" she inquired.

"Nothing much," shrugged Jake.

"I saw that look on your face," she laughed. "Tell me! What were you thinking?"

"I was just thinking what a good time I was having," he replied.

"You've *got* to be kidding!" she exclaimed with a laugh. "It's nearly four in the morning, we're having the longest argument we've ever had, and you're having a good time?!"

"Well," he hesitated, "not all of it was good, but right now isn't so bad, is it?"

"Except for the fact that I'm gaining weight as we speak, I suppose it isn't," she conceded. "You're really weird, Jake. You find contentment in the most ordinary things."

"Abby," he asked, "tell me that it's not all for nothing-- even if you don't really mean it."

"Oh, Jake," she sighed. "What happened to your 'real agreement'?"

"Please, Abby," he begged her. "*Tell me!*"

The young woman was silent for a few moments.

"I want agreement, Jake-- I really do," she answered. "Two people can't walk together, unless they agree. [Amos 3:3] When someone is trying to do the right thing," she slowly reasoned, "then nothing is ever in vain, even if God is the only One Who sees it. 'Then I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought, and in vain: yet surely my judgment is with the LORD, and my work with my God.' [Isaiah 49:4] This isn't coming easily, so I hope you

appreciate what I'm about to say. If you still have the courage to testify, then I will support your decision. God is the One Who works in us to will and to do of His good pleasure [Philippians 2:13]; if you are *this* persuaded that God wants you to testify, then I must believe that the conviction is coming from Him, and that it's not just something you want to do in spite of all the risks involved. I don't want you to get hurt again, Jake."

"I know," he said in a soft voice. "Thank you, Abby."

"Please, don't thank me," she sighed, stabbing her spoon into the ice cream and handing the container over to him. "If we're going to do this, it's going to be by promise. I'm going to find a few hundred safe-in-spite-of-the-enemy promises in my Bible. We're going to need all we can get!" With that, Abby went to her room.

Sunday morning, Abby slowly climbed out of bed and looked at herself in the mirror. Seeing the exhausted face peering back at her, she let out a small groan. After getting dressed, Abby found Jake in the living room, looking every bit as tired as she did. Both were nearly asleep on their feet.

"I'm not hungry, are you?" asked Jake, wondering if he should go prepare breakfast.

"No, let's skip it," she yawned, as they both headed out the front door.

Outside, Terry was getting into his pickup to go to church, for as long as Izumi was confined to bed rest, John decided to stay home with his wife and have their own service, because he didn't want to leave her by herself.

"Do you want to ride with us, Uncle Terry?" called out Abby.

"Sure!" smiled Terry, walking across the way and climbing into the back seat of Abby's jeep. "You guys look terrible," he observed. "Didn't you get any sleep?"

"Barely," yawned Abby, starting the engine. "Jake and I had an argument, and it lasted for most of the night."

"Was it about the commission?" guessed Terry, knowingly.

"Yes," answered Jake, "it was."

"Well," sighed the man, "none of us want to see you get hurt, Jake."

"I told him he could testify," announced Abby.

"I see," breathed Terry, soberly leaning back in his seat. "So, Dick's being fired hasn't changed anything?"

"Apparently not," replied Abby, as the jeep made its way down the main road.

At church, everyone knew what was going on. The papers had been full of Warden Doyle and Governor Smith's ongoing public fight over how bad prisoner abuse really was, so that no one could avoid hearing about it, even if they had tried. The fact that someone in their own church had been so cruelly abused, made the headlines hit closer to home than usual. As Jake took a seat in the pew beside Abby, he could feel their stares on every side.

Sheriff Peterson, who also attended the same church with his family, made his way down the aisle and stopped at AJ's pew.

"He's still going through with it," Terry replied, answering Sheriff Peterson's unspoken question.

The Sheriff looked at Jake and then to Abby.

"Could I stop by later today?" he asked, as the rest of the congregation took their seats for the service to begin.

"We'd appreciate that," answered Terry.

Jake heard a sigh escape Abby's lips as the Sheriff returned to his family.

With so little sleep the night before, Abby struggled to keep her eyes open during the service. Jake was awake, but just barely. As the preacher went on, the sound of his voice became a sleepy drone in Jake's ears. Before long, the room grew strangely dark, even though it was still morning. The next thing Jake knew, he felt a jab in his side from Abby's elbow.

"If *I* have to stay awake," she whispered in his ear, "then so do *you*!"

Jake opened his eyes wide, and tried to follow the sermon. After what seemed to him to be an extraordinarily long service, everyone got up, and began to file down the aisle. People stopped AJ and told them that they were praying for them both. It seemed a miracle to Jake that so many people were genuinely concerned for his welfare. Everyone knew that the young man had had a hard childhood, and that he had suffered much at the hands of other inmates, but the recent

publicity over the Watertown State Penitentiary had made people realize just how real it was. Abby, however, needed no such reminders, for she lived with the reality of it on a daily basis.

Wishes of "we're praying for you," and "God help you both," sprang from more than one person, as AJ made their way outside. Jake rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand, and climbed into the passenger side of the jeep as Terry lingered with the pastor for a minute or two before coming. Abby could see the strain on Jake's face as he leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

When Terry arrived, Abby started the vehicle and began the drive home. After they pulled up to the little yellow house, Jake got out and was about to go to the Johanneses' home to start lunch, when Abby stopped him.

"Uncle Terry," asked Abby, "could you and Dad handle lunch without Jake, this time?"

"No problem," replied Terry, as Jake yawned.

"Come on," said Abby, leading her friend into their house and to his room. "Lay down and get some rest. We'll eat lunch later. I'm too tired to eat right now, anyway."

"But Sheriff Peterson..." Jake resisted, wearily.

"He can visit with my parents," replied Abby, kicking off her shoes and heading to her own room. She climbed onto her bed and rapidly fell asleep.

In peaceful silence, the light on the floor traveled across the room, as the sun began to set in the western horizon. With a soft sigh, Abby awoke from her much needed rest. As she entered the hall and looked through Jake's open door, the young woman could see him curled up on his bed with Daisy, still fast asleep.

Abby made her way to the kitchen, and noticed through an open window, that Sheriff Peterson's pickup was parked beside the tulip bed in front of their house. Seeing no one in the vehicle, Abby correctly guessed that the Sheriff was at her parents' home across the way. Not having eaten in several hours, Abby started to prepare dinner. As the smell of a hot meal started to fill the house, Jake soon joined her in the kitchen.

"I was about to wake you up," said Abby, turning off the fire under a skillet. "Dinner's ready."

"Sheriff Peterson's pickup is out front," remarked Jake, sitting down to the table.

"I noticed," she sighed. "I'll give you one guess what they're talking about right now."

Not needing that one guess, AJ prayed over their food and ate dinner in silence, each occupied with their own thoughts. When dinner was over, Abby caught up on her email in the living room, while Jake sat on the couch and sketched. It wasn't until late that night, that Abby heard the pickup out front drive away.

The next morning, Terry knocked on their front door and reminded Jake that he had to get started on the food for the baby shower. It was Labor Day-- a fact that wasn't lost on Abby. This was obviously one of Terry's jokes, but it also meant that most everyone had the day off, so people could attend the baby shower in the middle of the day without missing work. Not willing that Jake should face her family by himself, Abby followed after the two and soon found herself in her parents' living room where John was helping to put up streamers with brightly colored balloons. The room looked very much like it did when she had her sixth birthday party, but Abby kept this observation to herself. Terry was trying to make this a special occasion, and she didn't want to make fun of his efforts.

"Hey, Mom," smiled Abby, coming into her parents' bedroom. "How's everything going?"

"I was just about to ask you the same thing," replied Izumi, with a motherly hug. "The hearing is tomorrow."

"I know, Mom," Abby patiently answered.

"Terry said that you're going to let him testify," continued Izumi.

"That's right," Abby replied with a small sigh.

Just then, John entered with some balloons for the bedroom. Abby used this interruption to escape her mother, but knew she couldn't put it off forever. When she joined Terry in the living room, he looked as though he wanted to talk as well, so the young woman quickly ducked into the kitchen where she soon got underfoot-- Jake's foot, that is.

"Ouch!" she cried, rubbing her small toe. "That hurt!"

"I told you to stay out of my way," smiled Jake, knowing that she was overplaying the pain so she could stay in the kitchen longer.

"Why can't I help?" she insisted once more.

"Because," reasoned Jake, "this party is for *you*."

"Out there," she said, gesturing to the living room, "it feels more like the commission before the commission. I think we're going to get some resistance from my family," she added in a hushed voice.

"I'm sorry I'm ruining the baby shower for you," apologized Jake.

"That's the most unnecessary apology I've ever received," Abby smiled warmly.

Before long, Abby heard the front door opening and Terry greeting someone. She peeked through the doorway and saw that it was Dr. Jacoby. Tucked beneath his arm was a present tied with soft yellow ribbon. Before Abby had a chance to tell Jake, Sheriff Peterson and Richard Doyle arrived with their wives.

Dick introduced his wife, Sara, to John and Terry, and then looked around for Jake.

"He's in the kitchen with Abby," answered John, knowingly.

Seeing the couple approaching the kitchen, Abby ran to the stove and tried to look busy. Just as Jake was about to ask her what she was doing, the Doyles appeared in the doorway.

"Jake!" exclaimed Dick, eagerly. "Congratulations on the baby!"

"Thank you, Sir," smiled Jake, wiping his hand on the apron he was wearing before shaking Dick's outstretched hand.

"I must say, I was surprised to hear the news," admitted Dick.

"Not as surprised as Jake was," said Abby, with a grin.

"Sara, this is the young lady I've been telling you about," said Dick, introducing his wife.

"I'm so happy to meet you," said Sara, surprising Abby with a big hug. "If there's anything we can ever do for you, just let us know."

"Thank you," replied Abby, a little unsure what that was supposed to mean.

"Heaven knows," added Sara, "I've seen more than one woman marry an inmate in the hopes of somehow reforming or saving him from himself. The stories I could tell you, would break your heart!"

"Jake was saved when I met him," answered Abby, "so I guess I have a head start."

Dick chuckled and took off his sunglasses. As Sheriff Peterson joined them, Sara excused herself and went to visit with Izumi and the Sheriff's wife.

"Jake, Abby, I'm going to need to talk to you both, later today," said the Sheriff, looking very strange without his uniform.

"Are we in trouble?" asked Abby.

"Not yet," replied the man, glaring hard at Dick before returning to the living room.

Just as Mr. Winkler, Dennis, and the rest of Abby's fishing buddies were arriving in droves, Dr. Jacoby joined AJ and Dick in the kitchen.

"Doc," laughed the former prison warden, "were you as surprised as the rest of us when you found out they were going to have a baby?"

"Not as surprised as when I heard Jake was going to testify," replied the psychiatrist, rather bluntly.

Dick shifted uncomfortably and excused himself from the kitchen.

"Don't blame Dick," pleaded Jake. "He's a good man."

"I'm sure he is," answered Dr. Jacoby with a kind smile. "We'll talk about it later."

As the psychiatrist went back to the party, Abby silently thought over what she had just heard, and wondered if she was doing the right thing. Before Jake could return to his work, the ladies emerged from Izumi's room and flocked to the kitchen, discharging the couple from their work.

"Let us take care of the food," smiled Sara. "This baby shower is as much for the new father as it is for the new mother!"

"I guess we'd better let them," smiled Abby with a shrug. When AJ entered the room, everyone looked up. "We were kicked out of the kitchen," she explained, as Terry offered them a seat on the couch.

Dr. Gregory, who had helped Terry plan the party, leaned forward and patted Abby's hand.

"When you were two years old," he reminisced, "I remember you running down the beach without a diaper, laughing and giggling all the way, unaware that you were dangerously close to the water. I was too far away to help, but your father wasn't. He scooped you up, and returned you to your frightened mother. You were never once afraid."

"Sounds as though I should have been," Abby smiled grimly.

Sara and Mrs. Peterson appeared from the kitchen and served the drinks that Jake had already prepared.

"Let's open presents," suggested Terry.

There were too many people for the party to move into Izumi's room, so John moved her bed beside the bedroom door, so she could watch.

"This is from your mother," smiled John, placing a large box trimmed with delicate bows and pastel baby shaped stickers. Abby smiled and looked up at Izumi who was beaming at her from down the hall.

The young woman opened the box to find an elaborate layette, complete with yellow baby sleepers, and tiny baby booties. Everything had been carefully packed into a large diaper bag by Izumi, and contained all the immediate necessities that Abby would need when the baby was born. Abby went to her mother and hugged her gratefully, while Jake picked up one of the small garments and curiously looked it over.

"It's so tiny," he observed.

At this, everyone in the room laughed.

"They don't stay that tiny for very long," chuckled Sheriff Peterson. "Right, John?"

When Abby returned, John's present was next.

"This is for both of you," said John, handing her an envelope. Inside, was a picture of a fireplace. "I've always intended to put a fireplace in that house, but I never got around to it. We have some pretty long winters around here, and they can be especially cold when you're sleeping alone."

"You can say that again!" exclaimed Terry. "At least John had Izzy! I was stuck on the living room couch to fend for myself!"

"I don't want that grandchild of mine to freeze this winter," said John, kissing Abby's cheek.

"Thanks, Dad," smiled Abby, showing Jake the picture of the fireplace.

"This is from me," grinned Terry, putting a box into Jake's hands. "It's for the father of the baby."

Surprised, Jake unwrapped the gift. Layered under all the wrapping paper and tape, he found a box with pictures of a camera all over it.

"It's a seven megapixel digital camera," explained Terry. "I was thinking you could use it for your artwork, and then turn it on the baby when it's born. You don't have to open it now," he added, remembering how Jake had reacted to the sight of a camera, the last time. "I'll show you how to work it, later."

Jake smiled politely and put the box aside. Dr. Gregory's gift was a plastic toy aquarium that played a lullaby when you wound it up; it came attached to a crib that was wheeled into the living room, already assembled. Sheriff Peterson and his wife gave the couple a stroller, while Dick and Sara surprised the expectant parents with handmade baby blankets that Sara herself had expertly embroidered with tiny forget-me-nots and baby's breath. Some of the younger members of Abby's fishing buddies had chipped in together and bought a car seat with brightly colored fish printed all over it. Dr. Jacoby's present was a baby lamp with a rotating lampshade that cast constellations on the walls and ceilings of the room it was in. Mr. Winkler hadn't known what to give, so Abby and Jake received a generous check from the elderly gentleman. Dennis' gift was a high chair, for he had checked with Terry, and that was the only thing no one else had promised yet.

When all the thank yous were made, the presents were piled into and around Dr. Gregory's baby crib. Soon after, the ladies got up and served lunch. As the party began to wind down, the talk inevitably turned to the commission that was to take place the very next day.

"I realize this may not be the best time to speak," began Sheriff Peterson, "but the hearing is tomorrow. I apologize to the Johanneses, however, as I told them last night, I can't just stand by and watch Dick pressure Jake into a dangerous situation."

At this, Dick became defensive.

"Do you think I want to see that young man get hurt?" he cried.

"Jake wouldn't be doing this, unless he felt he owed it to you," replied Sheriff Peterson, evenly. "Dr. Jacoby shares my opinion."

"I have done *nothing* to pressure Jake into testifying!" exclaimed Dick, rubbing his balding head with his left hand in agitation.

"My husband has only Jake's best interests at heart," defended Sara. "You must believe that!"

"Have you told Jake what a big risk he's taking?" inquired Dr. Jacoby, who up until now, had remained silent.

"I laid it out for the boy," answered Dick. "You can ask him-- I sugarcoated nothing."

"Please," begged Jake, "leave Dick alone! This was *my* decision!"

"Jake, I understand your loyalty to your former warden," John interposed, "but you must think about what's best for Abby."

"Dick, how could you put Jake into a situation like this?!" cried Terry. "You know how vulnerable he is!"

"My husband has done *nothing wrong*!" insisted Sara, getting out a handkerchief.

Emotions were running high, and Jake didn't know what to do. All of his friends were fighting with each other, and his hands began to tremble.

"Jake, you can't seriously go through with this," reasoned Sheriff Peterson. "You have to consider your wife and baby!"

"He has," spoke up Abby, in a steady but strained voice. "Before anyone says another word, everyone here should know that Jake and I have discussed this at length, and I support his decision."

"Abby," protested John, "you don't know what you're saying!"

"Yes, Dad, I do," she replied sadly. "I know all too well what could happen to Jake if he's sent back to prison. I've helped him through the nightmares, the flashbacks, and the pain. I'm here to tell you that it's not going to stop Jake from doing what he feels is the right thing to do. The rest of us may question if the risk involved is worth the amount of good it would actually do, but we

weren't the ones abused-- Jake was. He's doing this as a matter of conscience. Jake is trying to do the best he can, and I won't sit here and let anyone speak against him!"

The young man in question remained silent, but looked up at Abby with a big smile that made any lingering doubts in her heart quickly fly away.

"But, you and the baby..." resisted John.

"This baby we're all celebrating today, wasn't Jake's decision," she explained. "The rest of you may talk about unexpected pregnancies, but it's not because you can't go near your wife. That night was not Jake's choice. If I had to do it over again, I would have done things differently. It wasn't fair to Jake, and it wasn't fair to the baby."

"Jake is the father, and Jake has the responsibility to consider the good of his own family," insisted John.

"Don't you understand?" cried Abby. "He has endured so much of the guilt those animals have heaped upon him over the years, that he feels obligated to do this-- even if it's only to prove that he's *not* like them! Everyone here may say Jake isn't thinking about me and the baby, but he IS. He's doing the best he can for us," she repeated, her face flushed with color. "Change is never going to happen, unless someone has the courage to speak out against what's wrong."

The room was silent. Dr. Jacoby leaned forward and nodded to Abby in Jake's direction. The ex-convict's frame was visibly trembling.

"Are you all right?" whispered Abby.

"I need a smoke," he replied, getting up from the couch and stepping outside.

Abby looked pleadingly to her father.

"I think I understand now," sighed John, not exactly happy with the realization.

"We all want what's best for him," explained Terry. "It frightens us to think what could happen to him."

"I know," replied Abby. "It frightens me, too."

"I can understand why you people thought I may have pressured Jake into testifying," admitted Dick, his voice much calmer now. "I must confess, I wanted him to do it, but I did my level best

to explain the risks involved. I don't know if it makes any difference now, but the commission on prisoner abuse is one of the first really promising steps taking place that could actually impact the correctional system in a positive way."

"Jake looks up to you, Dick," warned Dr. Jacoby. "I hope you realize how much influence you have over him."

The women got up and went to the kitchen to start serving dessert. Grateful for an excuse to leave the men to finish their discussion, Abby went to Izumi, who had been silently witnessing the unfolding scene at the door of her bedroom. Izumi patted the bed and Abby climbed up to get a hug from her mother.

"You're a brave girl," said Izumi, clasping her daughter in her arms. "Safety comes from God. [Proverbs 21:31] Remember that."

"I will, Mom," promised Abby.

Just then, Mrs. Peterson walked up with two small dishes of ice cream and cake.

"This one is for you, Abby," smiled the Sheriff's wife, "and this is for that sweet man of yours."

"Wasn't he a sweetheart?" agreed Izumi.

"An absolute angel," replied the woman. "When you finished speaking on his behalf, Abby, I thought I would cry."

"Some of us, did," confessed Izumi, grabbing another tissue. "Did you see the way he smiled at our Abby? He was that proud of her. I don't know why I'm so happy. My son-in-law is going to make enemies, and my baby girl could pay the consequences for it-- God forbid!"

"We'll be all right, Mom," Abby assured her.

After receiving another hug from her mother, Abby passed through the living room where the men were still talking about the hearing, and ducked out the front door before they tried to involve her in their conversation. Outside, Abby found Jake standing near the shoreline, smoking a cigarette, his eyes fixed on a gull floating overhead.

"Here's your dessert," she offered.

Jake stamped out his cigarette, and took the plate from her hand.

"Are they still going at it?" he asked.

"Yes," smiled Abby, "but I think everyone's pretty much resigned themselves to the fact that you're testifying tomorrow."

Jake took a small bite of cake and then looked back at his friend.

"Thanks for standing up for me back there," he said gratefully. "I'm glad you understand why I have to do this."

Dr. Jacoby excused himself from the party, and joined AJ on the beach.

"Am I interrupting anything?" he asked, walking towards them.

"No," replied Abby.

"Too bad," smiled the therapist.

"Are you on our side, now?" she wondered.

"Now, Abigail," replied Dr. Jacoby, "this isn't about sides. I'm satisfied that no one has unduly pressured Jake into his decision. However, that doesn't mean I'm completely comfortable with it. But, this isn't my choice to make-- it's Jake's, and to an extent, yours. You both will have to live with the consequences resulting from the decisions you make, just like the rest of us do."

"Do you believe I'm doing the right thing?" asked Jake.

"What I believe," paused Dr. Jacoby, "is that you're trying to do the best you can to help others. I admire that, and won't try to talk you out of it. On the other hand, I don't want to encourage you, either. This must, and should be, *entirely* your choice."

"It is," Jake assured him.

"Well," smiled the doctor, "now that I'm this far, how about inviting me inside your home for a few minutes? I don't think I'm ready to jump back into the debate going on in your parents' living room, just yet."

The little yellow house was more than a building to Abby and Jake, it was a home. This was *Jake's* home, and Dr. Jacoby saw how at ease the young man was in these surroundings. He was relaxed,

calm, and even smiling-- everything the ex-convict hadn't been, upon his first arrival to their community.

"Where will you put the baby crib?" asked Dr. Jacoby, as they sat in the living room and sipped hot coffee.

"I don't know," hesitated Abby, "I hadn't given it much thought yet. I suppose we'll put it in my room."

"Did you ever have any children, Dr. Jacoby?" asked Jake.

"My wife passed away four years after we were married," replied the elderly man with a sad smile. "We never had any kids."

"You never remarried?" wondered Abby.

"She was my match," replied Dr. Jacoby, fondly. "After her, I never wanted anyone else. Maybe we should get back to the party now," he sighed. "Hopefully, things have settled down a little."

The three returned and found everyone in much calmer spirits than before. Nevertheless, the overall atmosphere was somber. Everyone from John and Izumi, to Dennis and Mr. Winkler, had an idea of the risk Jake was taking. No one knew it better, however, than Jake, himself.

As the party began to disband, Sheriff Peterson shook Jake's hand and looked him squarely in the eye.

"God help you, young man," was all he could say.

After the last car had pulled away, Abby looked at the new baby crib filled with all the gifts.

"Abby," called Izumi from down the hall, "bring me the diaper bag I gave you. I want to show you what's in it."

"Go on," coaxed Jake. "You don't have to clean the room-- I'll do it. Go spend some time with your Mom."

The next few hours, Abby and Izumi looked over the gifts everyone had given. Izumi was a treasure house of motherhood knowledge that Abby was only just beginning to tap into. Suddenly, all those gems of wisdom that Abby had heard in the past, were going to come in

handy. The new grandmother was glowing with excitement! Not only was she going to have triplets, but her daughter's due date was only a few months after hers!

When dinner was over, John and Terry helped AJ carry the baby gifts to the little yellow house, and stacked them in the middle of their small living room.

"I was thinking the fireplace could go there," proposed John, pointing to a bare wall with a sofa against it. "Of course," he added, "you both couldn't leave the fire going after you're asleep, but it could at least make the house cozy before bedtime. What do you think, kids?"

"It sounds great, Dad," smiled Abby, kissing her father's cheek.

"You're a good girl," he said, giving his daughter a hug. "What time does the hearing begin?"

"It starts at nine and lasts until about four in the afternoon," she answered. "But, Jake's testimony should only last a half hour."

"The sooner this is over with, the better," sighed Terry.

When the two men returned home, Jake helped Abby wheel the baby crib to her room.

"Where do you want it?" he asked.

"At the foot of my bed, I guess," shrugged Abby.

The young woman found it difficult to find room for all the baby things, so Jake put the highchair, stroller, and car seat in the corner of his own room.

"When I was a kid," remembered Abby, as Jake leaned the stroller against the wall, "I had a hamster named Gumdrop. I saved all my allowance and bought her a cage, an exercise wheel, and all kinds of toys for her to play with. Preparing for this baby somehow makes me feel as though I'm getting a *really big* pet."

"Whatever happened to Gumdrop?" asked Jake, picking up the shoes Abby had kicked off on her way back to her bedroom.

"Oh," came the reply, "I forgot to clean her cage, and she escaped."

Late that night, when Abby got up to use the bathroom, she saw the light on in Jake's room. Through the open door, she could see Jake sitting cross-legged on his bed with a notepad in front of him.

"What are you doing?" she yawned. "It's in the middle of the night."

"I'm writing down what I want to say at the hearing," he explained. "Did I wake you up?"

It was then that Abby noticed several wadded sheets of paper strewn on the floor around his bed.

"No," she replied, "I was just on my way to the bathroom."

Abby disappeared for a few minutes and checked in on him again, before going back to bed.

"Do you need any help?" she offered.

"No, these have to be my words," declined Jake.

"All right," yawned Abby. "Good night."

She shuffled sleepily to her bedroom and had no difficulty falling back to sleep.

By morning, Jake had finished preparing the testimony he would read at the hearing. One of Izumi's girlfriends came over to keep her company, while John and Terry would attend the commission that was being held in a vacant courtroom at the county courthouse. The men rode with Abby and Jake in her jeep, while the young man did his best to remain calm. As they pulled up to the courthouse, everyone noticed a news van from Watertown parked out front.

"Is this going to be televised?" asked Terry, in surprise.

"I have no idea," answered Abby, as she found an empty spot in the crowded parking lot.

Dick met the group at the front door, and led them down a long hall to the ever-crowding courtroom where the hearing would take place. Even though a courtroom was being used, this was not a legal proceeding, so no one was at the judge's bench. Instead, a long table was placed at the head of the room, where the Commissioners were seated in a row. In front of them were five chairs and a table with microphones on it, where the witnesses would give their testimony. In back of this, were rows of seats where people came to watch. Many of the people present were

reporters, while others were the witnesses themselves, waiting to be called upon to give their accounts.

Dick showed John, Terry, and Abby, to some empty seats, and then took Jake to the small table where they both sat down. The other witnesses took their places at the table and waited for the hearing to start. Nervously, Jake glanced back at Abby, who smiled bravely at him.

"If everyone could please be seated," began a man at the large table, "we can get these proceedings underway. Thank you." He cleared his throat. "I want to start off by stating that no matter what the crime is, no sentence in America has ever included the forcible sodomy of another individual as part of their punishment. The purpose of this commission is to gather accounts and testimony to get an idea of the scope and pervasiveness of prisoner abuse in our justice system. The members of this commission include former judges, activists, and experts in their respective fields. This morning, we're going to hear from five witnesses: Richard Doyle, Jake Murphy, Howard Graham, Maria Lopez, and Franklin Jones. Each witness will give their account, and then will answer questions by the Commissioners. Our first witness is Richard Doyle, former warden of the Watertown State Penitentiary. He has worked for more than thirty years in the New York Department of Corrections. You may begin, Mr. Doyle."

"Thank you," said Dick, putting on his glasses and looking over the prepared statement he would read from. "I'm grateful to be here today, and I pray that much good will come from this commission. As many of you here might already know, Governor Smith..." as Dick continued, Jake's attention slowly strayed.

Jake looked back again at Abby, who was seated across the room with John and Terry. After seeing that she was still there, he tried to turn his attention to Dick's testimony. Half an hour later, Jake suddenly heard his name. The moment was upon him.

"Our next witness is Jake Murphy," said the man at the long table. "When Mr. Murphy was fifteen, he killed his father and was sentenced to sixteen years for second-degree murder at the Watertown State Penitentiary for adults. After serving nine years of his sentence, Mr. Murphy was released on parole, and is here today to give his account of life behind prison bars. You may begin, Mr. Murphy."

The twenty-four year old man leaned forward in his chair and gingerly arranged the sheets of paper he had written the night before, on the table in front of him.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, "this isn't easy for me."

"That's all right," said the man, "you're doing fine."

"My name is Jake Kyle Murphy," began the ex-convict, taking a deep breath, "and I was an inmate at the Watertown State Penitentiary for nine years-- two of which were spent in solitary confinement for my own safety. During my incarceration, I was repeatedly..." here Jake hesitated. He looked back at Abby, and then whispered something to Dick, who was sitting beside him at the table.

"I'm sorry," apologized Dick, "but Jake would like to ask that Mrs. Abigail Murphy be escorted from the courtroom before he proceeds."

"Very well," said the man. "Would Mrs. Murphy please wait in the hall until her husband's testimony is over?"

Abby desperately wanted to fight it, but all eyes were upon her, and she didn't want to make a scene. Reluctantly, the young woman got up and went to the hall, as requested. She didn't think it was fair that her father and Uncle Terry could stay, while she had to leave! Annoyed, Abby looked through the small glass window in the courtroom door, but all she could see was the back of Jake's head. Unable to hear a word of what he was saying, Abby could only wait until it was over.

The minutes slowly ticked by. Thankfully, there were a few chairs in the hall, so Abby could rest her feet every once in a while before resuming her place at the small window in the courtroom door. From her vantage, she couldn't see her father or Uncle Terry, but she did see Sheriff Peterson sitting a few rows behind Jake. She tried to correlate the expressions on his face to what she knew of Jake's past history, but was unable to make anything out of it. Fifteen minutes went by and then twenty. Abby waited for the thirty minute mark, for she knew that that was the time allowed for each witness. To her utter disappointment, however, the thirty minutes came and went, and Jake's head was still moving as though he were speaking. With a loud groan, Abby sat down and tried to practice patience.

Just then, a middle-aged man past his forties, walked down the hall to where she sat. For some reason, he looked strangely familiar, but Abby couldn't understand why.

"Excuse me," asked the stranger, "is this where the commission on prisoner abuse is being held?"

"Yes, it is," she replied.

"I don't suppose you know if Jake Murphy has testified yet, do you?" he asked.

"As a matter of fact, he should be done any minute now," said Abby. "I'm sorry, but is it possible that we've met, before?"

"I don't think so," grinned the man broadly. "I'd remember a pretty face like yours, Missy."

Abby shuddered at his grin. She was glad when he went into the courtroom, and away from her.

Forty-five minutes after being banished to the hallway, someone finally came to the door and said that she could come back inside. As Abby returned to her seat beside John and Terry, Jake glanced back at her. Abby's heart sank when she saw his pale face. Obviously, he had had a tough time. Soberly, the young woman looked to her father and noticed that there were tears in his eyes. Terry, who was also visibly shaken, was struggling to keep his composure. Unable to ask any questions of her father without attracting anymore attention to herself than she had already created, Abby sat quietly in her seat and waited for the ordeal to end.

One by one, the other three witnesses read their testimonies before the Commissioners. At noon, the man at the long table announced that they would break for lunch, and resume afterward with the next set of witnesses. The courtroom stirred with the sound of talking people, as everyone prepared to leave for lunch. Abby got up and made her way to the witness table, where Jake was still sitting. John and Terry followed, but hung back so Abby could have a few moments with him first. Jake looked up at her and smiled wearily.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, "I couldn't do it with you listening."

"You're not trying to keep something from me, are you?" she asked, folding her arms indignantly.

"You've been through enough because of me," replied Jake, standing up and collecting his written testimony. "I didn't want you to have to hear this. Please, don't be angry."

"I'm not angry," she sighed, as her friend tried to steady his trembling hands.

Dick approached AJ with the man who had been presiding over the hearing.

"Mr. Murphy," said the man, "that was the most compelling account I've ever heard. I want to personally thank you for coming down here today and sharing it with us. I understand it was done with some risk involved, and I commend your courage."

"Thank you," replied Jake, shaking the hand that was offered him.

To Abby's surprise, the man also shook her hand before turning to leave. Dick momentarily forgot himself, and clapped Jake on the back.

"You did good, Jake," he smiled proudly.

"He doesn't need to be here for the second half of this hearing, does he?" asked Abby to the former warden.

"No," answered Dick, "Jake can go home now."

With a deep sigh of relief, Jake followed Abby out into the hall, while John and Terry lingered behind a few minutes to talk to Sheriff Peterson. As they waited for the two men, Abby recognized the stranger she had met in the hall, earlier that day. To her utter surprise, he approached Jake.

"Jake!" grinned the stranger. "For a minute there, I thought I had missed you!"

All at once, Jake's demeanor changed. He nervously glanced around the hall and then back at the stranger.

"What do you want?" he asked, gruffly.

"Now is that any way to talk to your favorite uncle?" grinned Mr. Murphy. "How have you been, boy? Long time, no see!"

"How did you find me?" demanded Jake, his hands balling into fists.

"I read your name in the paper, and came down here just as soon as I could," the uncle grinned broadly. "So, this is the little woman you got yourself hitched to, huh? She's a looker, Jake. Has he laid a finger on you yet, Missy?" he laughed loudly. "My nephew likes men, don't you boy?"

Immediately, Jake moved in front of Abby, using his body to shield her from his uncle.

"Get out of here," growled the ex-convict, in a low threatening voice. Even the tone of it made Abby shudder with dread. She had never heard Jake sound like *that*, before!

"Not until I do what I came here for," laughed Mr. Murphy. "What I got for you, is outside."

As the uncle turned to leave, Abby caught Jake by the sleeve.

"You're not going with him, are you?" she asked fearfully.

"It's all right," he assured her. "Stay here with your father. I'll be right back."

Before she could protest any further, Jake disappeared outside with his uncle.

"Who was that?" asked John, walking to where Abby stood.

"It was Jake's uncle," answered Abby, in an ominous voice. "I'm not waiting any longer. I have to see if he's okay."

"I'll go with you," said John, escorting his daughter down the hall.

Once in the parking lot, Abby saw Jake and his uncle talking beside an old pickup truck. The man shoved a large metal box into Jake's hands and then grinned.

"You got to get a little backbone into you, boy!" she heard the uncle say as she approached the men.

"I never want to see you, again!" shouted Jake, dropping the box and lunging at the man in rage.

"Jake!" cried Abby, almost afraid that he was going to harm his uncle. "Don't hurt him!"

Jake looked at Abby, his face flushed with anger. Seeing the fear in her eyes, Jake let the man go. With an impudent smirk, Mr. Murphy climbed into his vehicle and started the engine.

"Don't ever come here, again!" Jake shouted at the pickup as it pulled away. "Do you hear me? NEVER!"

Mr. Murphy gleefully honked his horn at Jake, and disappeared down the street.

Thankful that the man had gone, Abby ran to Jake's side to see if he was all right.

"Don't touch me, Abby!" warned Jake, his chest still heaving with adrenaline. "Back off! Just back off!"

Stunned, Abby took a few steps back, unsure what she should do.

"What was all that about?" asked John, arriving on the scene seconds after his daughter. "What did he want, Jake?"

Jake ran his hands through his loose brown hair and stared at the metal box on the ground.

"He wanted to give me my inheritance," muttered Jake, his eyes beginning to well up with tears. Dropping to his knees, Jake opened the box. To Abby's surprise, it was filled with photos. Curious, she stepped forward and bent over its contents to get a closer look. Realizing that there was only one way to satisfy her growing curiosity, Jake picked up a picture and shoved it into her hand, his eyes avoiding her questioning gaze.

Abby looked at the photo and gasped in shock. It was of a small naked boy lying on a bed, his arms and legs in a sexually suggestive pose. It was Jake. The look of resignation on the sweet child's face, made Abby break down into tears.

"Do you want to see the others?" he asked, his voice still biting with anger.

"No," she sobbed, "no more! Please, no more!"

The picture fell from her hand and fluttered to the ground, while John and Terry watched in silence.

"That's my inheritance!" exclaimed Jake, slamming the lid shut with a loud thud.

"How could your uncle do that to you?" she cried in horror.

"You think Uncle Eric took those?" retorted Jake, his brown eyes flashing at her. "That was my *father's* handiwork, Abby!"

Unable to hear any more, Abby covered her mouth in horror and ran to John, who immediately hugged his little girl. The sound of her heart-wrenching sobs filled Jake's ears. Suddenly, Jake realized how much he had frightened his friend.

"I-- I didn't mean to scare her," he apologized to John, as Abby continued to cry into his arms.

"I know you didn't, Son," replied her father.

"Abby?" asked Jake, reaching out to touch her hair but quickly withdrawing it. "I'm sorry. I'll burn the pictures-- you won't ever have to see a single one of them again. I-- I promise."

"I'll help you," offered Terry.

"Abby, please say something," begged Jake.

The young woman gathered her courage and slowly released herself from her father's safe arms. She felt ridiculous for behaving the way she had. She knew that Jake's father had done all kinds of terrible things to his son, but she had never seen it with her own eyes. The helpless child in the photo had changed that. Realizing that she wasn't as hardened to it all as she had previously thought, Abby quickly became grateful to Jake for shielding her from his testimony that day.

"I'm all right," she assured him, drying her eyes with a clean handkerchief. "Let's go home."

Terry picked up the metal box, and slid it into the back of the jeep. Unwilling to let Abby drive while she was still trying to keep from crying, John drove, his daughter sitting in the passenger seat beside him. Terry sat in the back with Jake, who was silently reproving himself for frightening his dear friend the way he had.

When they reached home, Terry got out the large copper basin firepit and set it up on the beach. Jake opened the metal box and dumped his inheritance into the firepit and doused the photos with lighter fluid. The young man took out a match and looked up at Abby, who was watching a few feet away with her father.

"Do it," she said, brushing a stray tear from her cheek.

Jake lit the match and tossed it onto the photos. Immediately, the contents of the firepit were engulfed in flames. With a heavy heart, the ex-convict stared into the fire, watching the flames consume the past that his uncle had said was his inheritance.

As the smoke ascended into the clear blue sky, Abby stepped forward and took her place beside Jake.

"Uncle Eric was wrong," Abby told him gently. "*God* is your inheritance, Jake." As the flames turned the pictures into black and gray ash, she quoted Psalm, chapter thirty-three, verse twelve: "Blessed is the... people whom [God] hath chosen for His own inheritance."

Jake smiled gratefully into the face of his beautiful friend and silently thanked God, Who had chosen him to be a part of this new family.

"I [Jake] looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me: refuge failed me; no man cared for my soul. I cried unto Thee, O LORD: I said, Thou art my refuge and my portion in the land of the living. Attend unto my cry; for I am brought very low:

deliver me from my persecutors; for they are stronger than I. Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise Thy name: the righteous shall compass me about; for Thou shalt deal bountifully with me."

~ Psalm 142: 4-7 ~

"God hath heard me; He hath attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, which hath not turned away my prayer, nor His mercy from me."

~ Psalm 66:19, 20 ~

"For Thou, O God, hast heard my vows: Thou hast given me the heritage of those that fear Thy name."

~ Psalm 61:5 ~

Chapter Seventeen
To Be Close to You

"They asked each other of their welfare; and they came into the tent."
~ Exodus 18:7 ~

The days following Jake's testimony at the commission were filled with a collective sigh of relief for Abby and her family. Jake had faced the board and walked away with a clean conscience that he had done his best to help the others still in prison. Life seemed to settle down a little as everyone's attention began to turn from the commission to the four babies that were due early next year.

Just as he and Abby had planned earlier, Jake began work on the mural in the triplets' room. Between meals and other household chores, the young man spent his spare time creating the dove's nest he had envisioned in his mind's eye. Day after day, a tender tribute to motherhood gradually unfolded on the nursery wall, skillfully portrayed by the artist's paintbrush. Whenever John or Terry happened to pass the open door, they would poke in their heads and admire Jake's handiwork.

One evening a few days before mid-September, Abby got home from work hours later than usual.

"There you are," said Terry, looking up from reading his book on the couch when she walked through her parents' front door. "I was beginning to think that you were going to stay at the marina all night," he joked.

"Sorry I'm late," Abby sighed wearily.

"You were missed at dinner," said John, momentarily muting the evening news on the television. "I think you know who I'm referring to."

"Did he have a flashback?" came Abby's immediate response.

"No," replied John, a little dismayed at his daughter's lack of perception, "that's not what I'm talking about. When someone you care about doesn't get home when they said they would, and doesn't bother to call, then certain people who are close to that individual tend to get a little concerned."

"Is that all?" she sighed in relief. "Really, Dad, you gave me a scare!"

"What do you think it did to Jake?" asked John. "Do you know what time it is, Abby?"

"Yeah, I know," she stammered, checking the living room clock. "It's nine o' clock. Ouch!" she exclaimed, "I didn't realize it was *that* late. That's a new record, even for me."

"Did you know he went down to the marina, on foot, to see if you were all right?" asked her father.

"Jake did that?" she smiled sheepishly. "I suppose I'd better go talk to him. Where is he?"

"In the nursery," replied John.

Abby made her way down the hall to her old bedroom. She found Jake standing on a ladder, intently working on the mural. Sensing someone's presence, he looked down to find Abby standing in the doorway.

"I heard you were looking for me," she said, attempting a smile.

"You promised to not work overtime," Jake said quietly.

"It wasn't overtime," explained Abby, examining the partially finished nest on the wall. "I got into a conversation with one of the guys down at the marina and we stopped by the restaurant to have some coffee and talk shop. I guess I lost track of the time."

With a sigh, Jake returned to his work.

"I'm sorry I didn't call," she apologized. "I should have."

Jake looked at her disappointedly and smiled in spite of his bruised feelings. It was difficult for him to be at odds with Abby for very long.

"Your dinner's in the oven," he told her with half a smile.

"Thanks for letting me off the hook so easily," she answered, turning to go to the kitchen. "Nice job on the mural, by the way."

After she ate, Abby went home and crawled into bed. She had had a long day, and was looking forward to bedtime more than she usually did. Minutes after her head hit the pillow, Abby was fast asleep. Quietly inside her womb, a new life was slowly taking shape.

Sometime the next morning, Abby was awakened from her rest by an odd noise.

"Hang on, I'm coming," she mumbled sleepily, thinking it was Jake and one of his flashbacks. As her eyes blinked open, however, Abby discovered him at the foot of her bed, holding a camera. "What are you doing?" she asked with a yawn.

"Terry showed me how to operate the digital camera he gave me at the baby shower," replied Jake, aiming the device at her and taking another picture of his half awake subject.

"I thought you didn't like cameras," she recalled.

"It's not as bad being behind the camera, as it is being in front of one," he shrugged. "Smile, Abby," coaxed Jake, taking aim at her once more.

"I hope you're going to erase those pictures," she frowned, suddenly realizing that he was documenting her unbrushed morning hair for posterity.

"Why? You look great," he smiled. "I was wondering," hesitated Jake, "if you're doing anything this evening?"

Abby eyed her handsome friend suspiciously.

"Why do you ask?" she questioned, for it sounded uncomfortably like someone about to ask her out on a date.

"I don't know," shrugged Jake, struggling to come off as nonchalantly as he could. "I thought maybe we could go somewhere."

"Whatever for?" asked Abby, more than a little puzzled.

"Because," answered Jake, his face brightening at the prospect, "because, the sun came up today... because, we're alive and we're going to have a baby... because, I'm happy and I feel like shouting! Don't you feel it, too, Abby?"

"I thought that's what the baby shower was for," she yawned sleepily.

"You're not getting the point," Jake sighed patiently. "I want to do something special with you-- as in *together*."

"What exactly is this 'special' thing you had in mind?" it suddenly occurred her to ask.

"I found some camping equipment in the garage," explained Jake, enthusiastically. "Dad said we could use it!"

"Wait a minute!" laughed Abby. "You want to go camping? Is that what this is all about? Jake, we can't take several days off to go on vacation! We both have work!"

"I wasn't thinking of days," proposed Jake, "just one night. We could set up camp above the high-water mark out on the beach this evening and put everything away in the morning. Oh, Abby, please say 'yes!'"

The boyish exuberance in his face was difficult for her to resist-- though she tried hard to. Abby was balancing on a tightrope between friendship and something she didn't even have a name for. Whatever it was, she sensed that it had the potential of forever altering the delicate relationship they now shared. If Abby wasn't very careful, she could easily picture Jake moving out of the yellow house and living elsewhere, simply because he was unable to cope with the physical intimacy that such a change in their relationship could bring. She knew he would leave, rather than cause her pain. If this scene ever came true, then Jake would be without the greatly needed help that Abby knew she was to him. Determined to never let this happen, the young woman purposed within herself to guard their friendship.

"Please?" continued Jake, his brown eyes flashing with anticipation. "I'll take care of everything, and you won't be inconvenienced in the slightest."

Seeing how much he wanted this, Abby cautiously yielded to the camp out.

"That's great!" exclaimed Jake, snapping another picture of her morning hair. "We'll have our dinner on the beach, so make sure you come straight home after work. Abby, look at the time!" he laughed. "You'd better get out of bed, or you're going to be late for work!" After one more picture, Jake left to go fix breakfast at the house across the way.

When Abby reached her parents' home, John was preparing Izumi's tray in the kitchen.

"I hear Jake talked you into a night out on the beach," he smiled at her.

"Yeah, I guess he did," replied Abby, not appreciating the tone of her father's voice. "It's no big deal, Dad, so you can stop with the smug smiles. That goes for you too, Uncle Terry."

"She's right!" exclaimed her uncle, sneaking a crisp strip of bacon from Jake's skillet. "Can't a couple spend a romantic night under the stars without the whole world getting excited?"

"Who said anything about *romance*!" exclaimed Abby, indignantly. "Really, Uncle Terry, you know better than that!"

"Careful, Terry," cautioned John, "or you might talk her out of Jake's camp out."

Abby frowned and glanced at the young man, who by now, was looking very embarrassed.

"I suppose you're right," backed off Terry, suddenly realizing how awkward he was making Jake feel. Terry didn't mind teasing Abby, because he knew that she could take it, but Jake was much more sensitive than his counterpart. "I hope you kids have a good time," he smiled, trying to lighten the situation. "Do you have any marshmallows, Jake? There's nothing better on a camp out than roasting marshmallows and wieners over an open fire."

"Have you ever gone camping, Son?" asked John, dropping a single tulip into Izumi's small vase on the tray.

"No, but I've always wanted to," replied Jake, relaxing a little now that the men had stopped teasing them.

"Well," said John, picking up the breakfast tray so he and his wife could eat together in their room, "Abby knows what to do. If you have any questions, just ask her. Make sure you two keep warm, tonight. It can get cool near the water after the sun goes down."

After breakfast, Abby stopped by her parents' room to see Izumi before heading off to work. When John took the tray back to the kitchen, Abby sat down on the bed next to her mother to talk.

"I hear you and Jake are going to spend the night on the beach," said Izumi, propping up some pillows for support.

"News travels fast," Abby observed glumly. "It's no big deal, Mom."

"I think it was sweet of Jake to think of it," smiled her mother.

"I suppose it was," shrugged Abby. "I don't know why we're doing it, though. Jake is acting like..." the young woman hesitated, "like a little boy who just found out that it's not raining, and now he can go outside and play."

"He didn't have much of a childhood," reminded her mother.

"That might explain it," sighed Abby. "I have to get running, Mom, or Mr. Winkler's going to call," she announced, getting up from the bed.

"Abby?" called Izumi, as her daughter was about to leave. "How does the mural in the triplets' room look? I've asked John to take a picture of it, but they all want me to wait until after it's finished before I see it."

"So do I," smiled Abby. "See ya, Mom."

As Abby got into her jeep, Jake waved to her from across the way.

"Don't forget!" he called to her.

Dennis looked up and smiled as the young woman entered the tackle store, ready for work.

"You've got a busy day ahead of you," he warned Abby. "Mr. York is scheduled for three-thirty, and he insisted on you as his instructor."

"But, he was here, yesterday," sighed Abby. "That man can talk a blue streak about fly fishing! What's worse, I get caught up in it! Dennis, would you do me a favor?"

"Sure," he shrugged. "What is it?"

"I promised Jake to be home on time, today," she explained. "If I get involved in another conservation with Mr. York, would you remind me of the time?"

"Sure thing," said Dennis, hanging up the appointment clipboard and heading outside with Abby to the dock where their first students of the day were already waiting.

As the morning wore on, Abby noticed a strange feeling coming over her. The sensation continued until about ten o' clock, when Dennis at last pulled Abby aside in concern.

"I hate to be the one to tell you this," he observed, "but you're looking a little pale. I'm not kidding, Abby, you should take a look at yourself in the mirror."

"I'm all right," she denied, trying to shrug it off.

"Do you want to cancel your next lesson?" he pressed.

"Whatever for?" retorted Abby. "It's probably only a stomach bug, or something."

"Bug nothing," disagreed Dennis with a smile. "You've got morning sickness, Abby. My twin sister was sick as a dog for three months straight when she had her first kid. I'd say you look about as bad as she did then!"

"Morning sickness?" she asked in surprise. "Is *that* what this is?"

"If you can't make it to the bathroom in time," laughed the head instructor, "just hang your head over the end of the dock!"

"Thanks a lot," she smiled greenly.

At lunchtime, Abby stopped by the Bayfront Restaurant and sat down to order lunch, as was her routine. The smell of food, however, soon turned her stomach, so that she hastily left and retreated to the dock until her lunch break was over. Mr. Winkler, who sometimes ate his meal on the empty dock, was surprised when Abby returned so soon.

"This morning sickness kind of came out of the blue," she confessed, sitting down on an overturned barrel as the old gentleman ate his meal.

"My mother always used to say," recalled Mr. Winkler in his mom's Yiddish accent, "'When one must, one can.' Take my word for it, when that child is placed into your arms for the first time, no sacrifice is too small."

"That reminds me," inquired Abby, "how's your granddaughter? Is she still studying medicine?"

"Susan is well," answered Mr. Winkler. "I don't like her living by herself in that big city, though. She should get a dog-- a big one with many teeth."

"I can't imagine living in New York City," remarked Abby. "I don't know how she does it. I mean, where would you possibly go to fly fish?"

"You can, in some places in Central Park," answered the old man. "That's where Susan goes. She says a lot of other people go there, too."

"No kidding?" asked Abby in surprise.

"You can't keep the fish there, but practice is practice," shrugged the old man.

After the lunch break was over, everyone went back to work. On schedule, Mr. York arrived for his casting lesson from Abby. True to form, she soon found herself in an engrossing debate with him concerning fly tying, and which techniques resulted in the most effective flies. Truth be told, Mr. York found Abby to be well-informed for one so young, and it pleased him to hear her viewpoints, even when his happened to differ. So involved was she in this discussion, that Abby nearly missed the warning from Dennis, who did everything to get her attention but throw his watch at her.

"I'm sorry," apologized Abby, excusing herself from the dock, "but I promised to get home on time, today."

"Of course," said Mr. York, suddenly realizing how late it was. "Could I make another appointment with you for tomorrow?"

"It's your money," shrugged Abby, gathering her fly rod and making her way to the parking lot.

As Abby started her jeep, clouds drifted past the sun, casting moving shadows upon the landscape. Abby turned on the radio and struggled to enjoy the music, but enjoyment refused to come. Her mind was busy with the camp out and Jake. Jake. His very name made her hot and cold in the same breath. Quickly shaking herself back to reality, Abby tried to follow the music once more. Just as she was about to pass the supermarket, an idea flashed through her head. Thinking she had enough time yet before she would be missed, Abby pulled into the parking lot and went inside.

After finding the aisle she wanted, Abby picked up a bag of marshmallows, a box of graham crackers, and a handful of milk chocolate bars. Berating herself that she must be as crazy as Jake, Abby went to the checkout and waited in line. It was then that she suddenly noticed a man in the next checkout, staring directly back at her with piercing eyes and a devious smile. Abby nearly jumped out of her skin when she recognized Jake's Uncle Eric!

"Well, well," he shouted to her, so that everyone in the next checkout line looked at Abby and then back at the loud man, "if it ain't the pretty little Missus! I gotta get these bags to my truck, but I'll see you outside!" added Uncle Eric with an unsettling grin.

Abby wished she had never seen the man, and hurriedly tried to think of some way to avoid him in the parking lot. After she had paid for her groceries, Abby went to the large glass doors of the supermarket and peered outside, searching the parking lot for Uncle Eric. When she caught glimpse of him standing by a light post, Abby ducked to the side of the door and waited for him

to leave. After several minutes, Uncle Eric checked his watch and was beginning to look very displeased. Abby bit her lip. How she wished Jake was with her!

Suddenly, someone unexpectedly tapped her on the shoulder. Startled, Abby spun around only to find her co-worker looking at her with a puzzled face.

"Dennis, you scared me!" she exclaimed.

"What are you doing?" asked Dennis. "Are you hiding from someone?"

"That man in the parking lot," pointed Abby, "the one beside the lamppost-- he's Jake's uncle. I ran into him in the checkout, and now he's waiting for me to come out of the store."

Dennis narrowed his eyes at the man and furrowed his brows in displeasure.

"Do you want me to go out there and tell him to buzz off?" he offered.

"No, don't do that," hesitated Abby. "I don't want to make trouble for Jake."

"Does he know which vehicle is yours?" inquired Dennis.

"No, I don't think so," she replied.

"Come on," said Dennis, temporarily forgetting why he had come to the supermarket.

He led Abby to the back of the store, and out the back exit.

"Give me your keys," directed Dennis, holding out his hand. "I'll bring the jeep over to you."

"Thanks, Dennis," said Abby, gratefully.

"If I had an uncle who looked as sinister as that, I'd want to hide from him, too," smiled Dennis, understandingly.

Only when Abby was safely on her way, did the fly casting instructor go back into the supermarket to do his shopping. Dennis had noted the marshmallows and graham in her grocery bag, and guessed that Abby and Jake had something special planned for that evening. He silently wondered how the couple were faring together, but kept the extent of his curiosity to himself.

When Abby finally reached the little yellow house, she breathed a grateful sigh of relief. She grabbed her bag of groceries and climbed from the jeep. As the young woman entered her parents' house, Abby could hear her father's voice talking to Jake in the kitchen about a memory he had of Abby's childhood. The two stopped when she entered the room.

"You're fifteen minutes late," Jake reprimanded her jokingly, as he stood at the stove and cooked.

"Sorry," she stammered, "I had to pick up a few things at the supermarket."

"Their dinner is almost ready, so I'll only be a little longer," Jake informed her, as Terry sauntered into the kitchen.

"You kids run along," declared Terry, taking the spatula from Jake's hand. "I can finish cooking this, myself."

"Oh, okay, thanks," replied Jake in surprise. "Are you ready, Abby?"

When she soberly looked at him, Jake knew something serious had happened.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Your uncle is in town," answered Abby, holding her breath to see what his reaction would be.

"Did he see you?" he asked, gravely.

"Yes," she replied. "Dennis was there, and he sneaked me out the rear exit. For all I know, Uncle Eric is still waiting for me in the parking lot."

"I'm calling Henry," declared John, resolutely.

"What can the Sheriff do?" asked Terry.

Just then, Izumi said something from the bedroom that no one could hear.

"I'll go to her," volunteered Abby, leaving the three men to talk.

"What's going on?" Izumi asked her daughter. When Abby told her what had happened at the supermarket, Izumi sighed heavily. "What's Jake going to do?"

"I don't know," replied Abby, shaking her head sadly.

"It'll be all right, Abby," comforted Jake, as he walked into the master bedroom. "What did you pick up at the store?" he asked, with a smile that told her he was trying to be brave.

"Just some things for the camp out," shrugged Abby, not much in the mood for small talk.

"Mom," explained Jake, "Uncle Eric won't hurt Abby. He's here because of me-- not her."

"Is he dangerous?" asked Izumi, frankly.

"No, he's never physically hurt me," replied Jake, shaking his head. "Uncle Eric may be a lot of things, but I don't believe he's dangerous. It's probably the only positive thing that I can say about him."

"Then, why is he here?" asked John, entering the room with Terry.

Jake looked at Abby.

"Because, he wants to punish me," he answered, knowingly.

"For what?" cried Abby.

"For killing his brother," replied Jake.

"He didn't look angry at you back at the courthouse," recalled Abby.

"That's not Uncle Eric's way," explained Jake, with a pained face. "When I killed my father, Uncle Eric told me that I was still his favorite nephew. But, in the next breath, he promised me that I would never find peace or happiness because of what I had done to his brother. I expect that when he saw Abby, Uncle Eric was afraid that his prediction wasn't going to come true." Jake looked wistfully at Abby and smiled faintly. "He was right to be concerned. I've never been happier in my entire life, than I am right now."

In spite of herself, Abby returned Jake's smile. She resented Uncle Eric's attempt to rob Jake of the refuge he had found in her family.

"I'm going to change for our camp out," she resolutely announced, before turning to leave.

"Do you think that's still a good idea?" Izumi wondered timidly. "Perhaps, you both should stay indoors until he leaves."

"Little Dove," smiled John, "that's hardly practical. These kids have to live their lives-- whether Uncle Eric is in town, or not."

"The beach is on private property," added Terry, folding his arms defiantly.

"She'll be with Jake," comforted John, sitting down on the bed beside his concerned wife.

But Abby didn't hear these consolations, for she was already halfway to the little yellow house by the time Jake caught up with her.

"Thank you," he smiled gratefully.

"What for?" she asked.

"For not letting him ruin our night," replied Jake, as Abby unlocked the front door with her set of house keys. "Hurry and change, so we can start building the campfire and eat dinner," he urged.

"Dinner!" Abby exclaimed hungrily, as she disappeared into her room. "I'm starved! For some idiotic reason, I had morning sickness and couldn't even eat lunch!"

"Really?" asked Jake in an upbeat voice.

"You don't have to sound happy about it," replied Abby, shutting her bedroom door while he remained in the hall.

"I wasn't happy that you couldn't eat," he explained through the door. "Mom gave me some of her pregnancy books, and I've been reading all about the process. Morning sickness is perfectly normal."

"I'm glad to hear it," muttered Abby, emerging from her bedroom.

"You can get morning sickness at any time of the day," he continued in a helpful voice, "not just in the morning. Sometimes, it can even last the entire pregnancy!"

"I could have done without hearing that, thank you," she smiled grimly.

"If you have any questions," volunteered Jake, "just ask. I'm on a chapter right now about pregnancy complications..."

"All right, Dr. Murphy," interrupted Abby with a laugh, "I get the idea!"

When Jake led Abby outside, she immediately set about to find a good camp site. To her utter surprise, her friend already knew the spot he wanted. In fact, he almost insisted on it. Near the far end of the beach, a good distance away from the small dock that jutted into the bay, Jake stooped down and began to gather wood for the campfire. Abby was perturbed with the location Jake had chosen, for it was the most private and secluded place on the entire beach. It was further away from the high-water mark than they needed to be, and it puzzled Abby. A nervous chill went through her entire body as she uneasily looked around. It wasn't fear of Uncle Eric that unsettled her: it was Jake.

"Do you want me to get the sleeping bags and tents from Dad's garage, now?" she volunteered, suddenly wanting to keep busy.

"No, I'll get it," said Jake. Restlessly, Abby folded her arms and sighed. "You could fish for our dinner, though," he suggested, seeing that she wanted something to do.

"You don't have to ask me twice to go fishing," Abby smiled.

As she ran back to the house to get a fly rod, Jake watched her and smiled to himself.

"That's Abby," he mused out loud. "After fishing at work all day long, you'd think she'd want to do something else when she got home!"

When Abby returned, she found a promising looking spot on the dock and gracefully cast her fly onto the surface of Three Mile Bay. While she worked to catch their dinner, Jake brought out the camping equipment and began to set it up on the beach, using John's old tattered outdoor manual to show him how. After several minutes of casting with little to show for it, Abby turned to see if Jake was making any progress on setting camp. What she saw, put a lump in her throat. Immediately, she dropped her fly rod and stomped over to where her friend was lighting the campfire.

"I see you managed to put up a tent," she commented, putting her hands on her hips.

"Yes," smiled the young man rather proudly. "It's harder than it looks!"

"Jake," pressed Abby, "where's the *other* one?"

"What other one?" he asked, innocuously.

"Don't be coy with *me*, Jake Murphy!" she exclaimed, indignantly. "You know perfectly well that there's *two* tents in Dad's garage!"

"Oh, *that* tent," Jake hesitated. "Abby, I thought we could share one, instead."

"Share one'?" she repeated incredulously.

"I brought *two* sleeping bags," he quickly pointed out. "It's not what you're thinking, Abby-- honestly, it isn't. If you're uncomfortable with the situation, I can go get the other tent right now. I only thought that since we were going to sleep in our day clothes and in separate sleeping bags, that it wouldn't be an issue."

"You *always* sleep in day clothes," she reminded him with a patient sigh.

"I know," he smiled, "but you don't."

"I'll only agree to this on one condition," she slowly conceded. "I reserve the right to kick you out of the tent any time I want to-- no questions asked."

"Okay," smiled Jake.

With a small groan, Abby returned to her fishing spot on the dock and soon discovered that he had followed her, as usual.

"Would you like to try a cast or two?" she offered. Jake quickly backed away and shook his head. "Come on," she coaxed, "I agreed to the tent. You owe me, Jake."

"I suppose, if you're going to put it that way," sighed Jake, reluctantly accepting Abby's fly rod. "I'm no good at this," he muttered, after executing a very awkward cast.

"That's because you're fighting the rod," explained Abby, in her knowing instructor voice. "Here, hold your wrist like this." Abby guided the fly rod while Jake held on to it, feeling the gentle motion that was so essential to good fly casting. "It's all in the timing," she explained. Jake looked up at her, and for a moment, their eyes locked. An alarm went off in Abby's head, and she quickly let go of the rod. "Please," she begged, lowering her eyes from his, "don't look at me like that."

"Thank you for the lesson," breathed Jake, soberly placing the fly rod back into her hands. "I think I've had enough fishing for one day."

"You'd better put up that other tent," sighed Abby.

With a sad nod, Jake went back for the second tent in the Johanneses' garage. Now Abby didn't feel like fishing, either. She picked up the one smallmouth bass she had managed to catch, and carefully cleaned it in the shallow water where Jake couldn't see it. By the time she returned to the fire, Jake had put up the second tent.

"I'm sorry, Abby," he said, apologetically. "I'm not trying to make this hard on you. You've been extremely patient with me-- more than I deserve."

Abby wanted to say something, but the words stuck in her throat. Instead, she turned to the gutted smallmouth and unceremoniously dropped it into the frying pan, letting it sizzle and sputter over the open fire.

"Could I ask you something?" wondered Jake, as the smell of seasoned fish began to fill the cool evening air. Abby sat down on a large piece of nearby driftwood and stared at the fire. "Do you remember," he asked, sitting down beside her, "how Dr. Jacoby said that we should always be honest and frank with each other about the deal we made?"

"I remember," she replied quietly.

"And that neither of us should act without the other's consent?" he added.

"Yes, Jake, I remember," sighed Abby, trying to keep her patience. "What of it?"

"I was wondering," he hesitated slowly, "if you would let me hold your hand."

The simplicity of the request caught Abby off guard. Jake had always given her a wide berth when it came to physical boundaries.

"I guess so," she shrugged, not trying to make the big deal over it that it was.

"Okay," said Jake, nervously taking in a deep breath.

For the space of several minutes, no one moved or said anything, until at last, Abby felt Jake's trembling hand take hold of hers. It wasn't a tender handclasp, but a firm tight grip, as if it was taking every nerve in his being to hold on. Unable to endure the pain any longer, Abby finally had to say something.

"Jake," she whimpered, "you're hurting me."

Alarmed, the young man quickly let go and got to his feet.

"I'm sorry!" he apologized.

"It's all right," she consoled him, rubbing her sore hand. "Nothing's broken."

Just then, Abby noticed that the fish she had put over the fire had turned into a dark black mass of burnt meat.

"There went our dinner," she groaned.

"You should have let *me* cook," smiled Jake.

"Have you ever made s'mores?" she asked, suddenly remembering to pull out the grocery bag she had brought.

"No," replied the ex-convict, resuming his seat beside her, "but I've heard of them."

"Poor man," sighed Abby, sadly. "First, you take a graham cracker-- open this box would you-- and place half a milk chocolate bar on it. Now, for the fun part." Abby bent down and picked up a small branch and pruned off its leaves and twigs, until she had a long, straight stick. "Uncle Terry uses one large marshmallow to a s'more, but I like it best with two. Put the marshmallows onto the end of the stick like this, and carefully toast it over the fire. See?"

With a boyish grin, Jake pruned down another stick and started on a s'more of his own.

"Uh-oh," he said, as the marshmallows quickly melted from his stick and fell into the fire.

"You're holding it too close to the flames," she explained. "See the way I'm doing it?" Jake grabbed another marshmallow and tried again, this time, with success. "Put the marshmallows on top of the chocolate and graham, and smash it down with another cracker," she directed.

The two laughed and made all the s'mores they could eat. When they had had their fill, Abby took a seat on the ground and leaned back against the driftwood they had been sitting on. Jake followed suit and soon both were enjoying the crackling of the fire and the lulling sound of waves as they broke on the shore. Slowly, Jake took her hand once more. This time, his grip was tight, but not painful.

"Let me know if I'm hurting you," he requested.

In a peaceful hush, the couple watched as the sun gradually dipped into the cool water of Three Mile Bay, extinguishing its heat in a blaze of orange, yellow, and purple, until at last surrendering to the blackness of the night. Clouds in the distance gently encircled the brilliant moon, refracting its light into a soft, pale halo. A damp breeze blew against Abby, and she shuddered, even though she was wearing a warm sweater.

"Are you cold?" asked Jake.

"A little," she confessed with a sleepy yawn. "Even summer nights can get chilly around here."

"I suppose you want to turn in," he sighed, a hint of disappointment sounding in his voice.

"I *do* have work tomorrow," replied Abby, realizing that Jake's firm grip on her hand was showing no signs of letting go. "Is my tent ready?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Jake, grasping her even tighter.

"You have to let me go, now," she said gently.

Reluctantly, Jake withdrew his hand and stuffed it into his pocket, his striking features bathed in shadow and light as the flames from the open campfire danced in the night breeze.

"I'm going to stay up awhile longer," he told her.

"Stay warm," said Abby, as she disappeared into her tent. Inside, she turned on the battery operated lantern that Terry had let them borrow. Jake could see her silhouette as she took off her sweater and climbed into the sleeping bag. "Good night," she called to him.

"Good night, Abby," he replied, as she clicked off the lantern. After spending a half hour by himself at the campfire, Jake went to his tent.

As the night wore on, the weather grew cold and blustery, making Abby suddenly wish for the down comforters back in her bedroom. Still blinking the sleep from her eyes, Abby fumbled for the sleeping bag zipper in the dark. From inside her tent, she could hear the waves crashing on the shore, telling her that a storm was probably coming.

"Dumb zipper," muttered Abby, wiggling the cold metal device back and forth. The more she tried to free herself, however, the more stuck the zipper became. Abby struggled to find the

lantern in the dark, but since she had already moved about so much to get free, her bearings were completely turned around, so that she was no longer even sure which direction the front of the tent was in. Hating to admit that she needed help with something so ridiculous as a stuck zipper, Abby waited until the last moment before she called Jake's name. When the sound of the waves and wind muffled her call, Abby repeated the plea once more. "Jake! I need you!"

"I'm coming!" she heard a voice quickly reply. Moments later, Abby saw the flap to her tent open and a form silhouetted against the night sky appeared. "What is it?" asked Jake. "Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not all right," she whimpered. "I'm cold, tired, there's a storm brewing outside, and I can't get this stupid zipper to work. I want to go home, Jake."

"All right," he answered, trying to keep Abby calm, for he could hear the weariness in her voice. "Where's the lantern?" he asked, fumbling about in the dark.

"I can't remember," came her response. "I think it was on my left, but I'm all turned around."

"I'll be back in a second," said Jake, momentarily leaving the tent. Soon, Abby felt something large and warm around her shoulders.

"What was that?" Abby cried in confusion, for she was unable to see what had just touched her in the dark of the tent.

"That was my sleeping bag so you won't freeze until I get you out of here," replied Jake in a calming voice. "I'm still trying to find the light."

"Thanks," she sighed in relief, now noticing that she was able to feel Jake's body warmth still clinging to his sleeping bag.

"Wait a minute," said Jake, suddenly remembering that his digital camera flashed whenever he took a picture. The young man quickly went back to his tent and returned with the camera Terry had given him at the baby shower. A bright flash of light blinded Abby as Jake snapped a picture. "I found it," he announced, quickly locating the lantern in the momentary brilliance. As Jake adjusted the brightness on the battery-operated lantern, the tent gradually lit up.

Now that he could see, Jake discovered Abby had entangled herself in her bedding, for she had struggled in her half awake consciousness to pull herself free from the mouth of the sleeping bag. The scene was comical, and it was all Jake could muster to refrain from laughing.

"I panicked a little," she confessed, in an embarrassed voice.

Jake cleared his throat and looked the situation over.

"Turn over a few times," he instructed, as Abby slowly unwound the bag from around her body. "Okay, you can stop now," he directed. "How on earth did you manage this? It's stuck fast!" he exclaimed in near-admiration, as he tugged at the zipper.

"It took some doing," Abby replied dryly.

Just then, they both heard a strange soft patter on the roof of the tent. Soon, it was followed by another and then another. Suddenly, a torrent of patters descended on the bay, and gusted into the tent through the open flap.

Abby cried in dismay as Jake quickly scrambled to fasten it shut. With a sigh, he sat down on the cold floor and blinked at her.

"What about my zipper?" she asked.

"I can't get it free without pliers," he replied.

"I don't suppose you have a pair somewhere in those pockets of yours, do you?" she smiled.

"Sorry, I'm fresh out," replied Jake, rubbing his arms to keep warm, for Abby had both the sleeping bags. "I was going to carry you home, but I can't in all this rain. We'd both be soaking wet by the time we got there."

"So," deduced Abby, "you plan on staying here until morning?"

"You're not going to send me out in that rain, are you?" asked Jake.

"Your tent is only a few feet away," she reminded him.

"But," he reasoned, "these are the only clothes I brought, and if I get them wet, I could catch pneumonia and die! You wouldn't want that on your conscience, would you?"

"I think you're being a tad overdramatic," Abby replied, as the sound of rain pounded the tent even harder. "Okay, you can stay," she sighed, seeing that everything was working against her. "I still have the right to throw you out anytime I want, though."

"You don't need to be so concerned," said Jake, seeing the apprehension on her face. "We sleep under the same roof all the time."

"That may be," she countered, "but not in the same room. Here, you're going to want your sleeping bag back," she said, tossing it over to her cold friend.

"But, you need this," resisted Jake.

"I wouldn't want you to catch pneumonia from the cold and die," she replied, dryly.

Jake grinned and climbed into his bedding.

"Now that there's two of us, the tent will warm up a little," he said hopefully.

"If you say so," yawned Abby, lying down and finding a comfortable position. Before long, her eyes were shut.

Jake lay down and gazed at her from his vantage across the small tent. Then he turned off the lantern and listened to the rain as it beat on the roof of their sturdy tent.

"Abby," he whispered, "are you awake?"

"I will be, if you keep talking," she replied, sleepily.

"I'm sorry I dragged you out here," he apologized.

"No, you're not," contradicted Abby, knowingly. "You're happy right now, even if you hate to admit it to me."

"You're right," confessed Jake, "I *am* happy. If I tell you something, do you promise not to tell anyone?" he asked.

"Okay," she answered, curiously, "I promise."

"It's easier to talk to you about some things in the dark," he mused, putting his hands under his head and staring up at the tent roof as it rained outside. "I envy your parents, Abby. They have an intimate relationship and are each other's best friend. Since I've been working with them, I've seen how they are together, and I wish... I wish we could be like that."

Abby was silent.

"We're going to have a *baby*," continued Jake, "and yet, when I'm with you sometimes, I feel as though you're a million miles away. You can remember something that I can't, and it's left a big hole between us."

"Jake," sighed Abby, "in your condition, it's probably for the best that you don't remember that night."

"I used to think so, too," he admitted. "But, it's as though..." he paused.

"As though a part of you is incomplete," Abby finished his thought.

"That's it!" he gasped in surprise. "How did you know?"

"Sometimes, I feel that way, myself," she confessed. "It's no use wishing that things are different than what they are, though," she concluded in a practical voice.

"I suppose not," he sighed wistfully. "Can I ask you something, Abby?"

"Only if it'll keep you quiet so I can go to sleep," she groaned softly. "Tomorrow is a workday, you know."

"After everything that's happened," wondered Jake, "are you sorry you didn't go with Tyler?"

"You're not going to start that again, are you?" she moaned.

"I mean it," he insisted. "Are you sorry?" As the waves crashed onto the beach far from their camp, Jake waited in silence for her response.

"No," she answered, without a tone of doubt or regret in her voice, "I'm not sorry I married you."

Jake reached out across the empty distance between them and tightly took hold of her hand. It was a small gesture, but it meant a lot to them both. With Jake still gripping her hand, Abby fell asleep, warm and happy. Outside, the waves and rain lasted through the night, much to the contentment of the couple snugly tucked away in their sleeping bags.

When morning came, Abby was awakened by the sound of footsteps outside their tent.

"Abby? Jake?" called a familiar voice.

"In here!" replied Abby, as she tried to free her hand from her still sleeping friend. "Jake," she said, nudging him, "let go of me. It's time to wake up!"

Just then, the tent flap opened and John's face appeared in the opening.

"Oh," he suddenly apologized, seeing Jake fast asleep on the other side of the tent from his daughter. "I thought you were alone, Abby. There are two tents out here..."

"It's all right," smiled Abby. "The zipper on my sleeping bag got stuck and Jake came over to help me, and then it started raining-- it's a long story."

"Too bad none of us thought to check the weather forecast, yesterday!" exclaimed John, giving Jake an odd glance as the young man woke up. Just then, he noticed the hold that Jake still had on his daughter's hand. It was the first time John had ever seen Jake touch Abby in any shape or fashion, (save for the handshake when they married).

"Jake, let go," requested Abby, prying herself from his grasp. "Oh!" she exclaimed, rubbing her sore red hand. "You have the grip of a vise!"

"That's going to leave a bruise," observed John.

"Dad, can you get me out of this thing?" asked Abby, tugging at the zipper on her sleeping bag.

"Don't do that," said John, "or you'll make it worse! I'll go get my pliers."

Jake rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and began to roll up his sleeping bag.

"Sorry about your hand," he apologized.

Just then, Terry stuck in his head.

"You were right, Jake," greeted Terry, "it was going to rain last night! I'm glad you both kept dry."

With mouth wide open, Abby looked to Jake, who suddenly had somewhere else he wanted to be.

"You'd *better* run, Buster!" she exclaimed, as Jake scrambled from the tent. "It's a good thing for you I'm stuck in this sleeping bag!"

"Honest," defended Jake, unable to keep from grinning, "the weatherman only said there was a 'slight chance' of rain!"

"But a better than slight chance of taking advantage of a situation!" she cried.

"I admit," reasoned Jake, "I thought it would probably rain, but so what?"

"So what?!" she exclaimed. "So this was all planned-- that's what!"

"Abigail," interjected Terry, "Jake didn't drag you out here against your will!"

"And," added Jake in his own defense, "you can't blame me for the timing of the rain or you getting your own sleeping bag zipper stuck. That was just pure Providence!"

"What's going on?" asked John, returning with the pliers.

"Abby found out that Jake knew it was probably going to rain," explained Terry.

"He did, huh?" smiled John at his embarrassed son-in-law. "I thought as much."

"Dad! Who's side are you on?" cried Abby from within the tent.

"Sweetheart, you married the man," replied John frankly, crawling inside to free the zipper. "Face it, Abby, Jake's a romantic at heart."

"Just wait until I get out of here!" she shouted, as her father forced the zipper free.

When Abby scrambled outside the tent, Jake quickly backed away, silently waiting for the worst. Instead of continuing their argument, however, Abby walked past him and straight for home.

"Go after her," Terry coaxed Jake. "I'll clean up here."

"Abby, wait!" cried Jake, jogging to catch up with her.

"I don't want to talk to you right now," she replied, walking at a fast clip towards the little yellow house on the beach.

"What did I do that was so wrong?" he asked.

"I suppose in Dad and Uncle Terry's eyes, you didn't do anything wrong," said Abby, "but, we made a deal, Jake. You and I promised not to fall in love with each other!"

At this, Jake suddenly stopped in his tracks. Abby turned to face him.

"I never said I loved you," he stammered.

"Then why all the trouble for the secluded spot on the beach, the one tent, the predicted rainstorm, if you weren't trying to plan a romantic evening that would force us to be together?" she reasoned.

"I only wanted to be close to you," replied Jake, shoving his hands into his pockets. "We walk around each other so often, I thought..."

"What did you think?" cried Abby. "That we would suddenly become 'normal' like Dad and Mom?"

"I don't know," shrugged Jake, lowering his eyes. "Please, don't be angry."

Abby brushed her long black hair away from her face and sighed heavily.

"We aren't my parents," she said, patiently. "We never will be. All we have is our friendship. It's all either of us are capable of, and I don't want to ruin it, do you?"

"No, I don't," answered Jake, quietly. "You're the best friend I've ever had."

"Now that that's settled," sighed Abby, "I have to go shower and change, or I'm going to be late for work."

"Does this mean I can't hold your hand, anymore?" he asked in troubled voice.

"Not if you're going to take it the wrong way," she warned him.

"I won't," promised Jake.

"Then, I guess it's all right," conceded Abby. "I'm glad that we can look so objectively at the situation."

"Very objectively," he muttered, with a small frown.

Jake watched in silence as Abby disappeared into the house, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

Already running a little late, Abby skipped breakfast, and drove to work, her mind still on Jake and the camp out. When she entered the tackle shop, Dennis showed her the appointment clipboard.

"And," he added, "Mr. York is coming today for another lesson."

"Doesn't that man have a life?!" cried Abby, as Mr. Winkler greeted them from across the store where he had been checking inventory.

"Abby!" exclaimed the old man, suddenly coming to her. "What happened to your left hand?"

The young woman looked down at her hand and winced. A large blue and purple bruise was already starting to show, where Jake had gripped it so tightly throughout the night before.

"Are those finger marks?" asked Dennis, coming over for a better look, himself.

"It's Jake," explained Abby.

"Is he hurting you?" asked Mr. Winkler in surprise.

"No, no," replied Abby, "Jake would never knowingly hurt me. It's not as bad as it looks, guys--really, it isn't. All he did was hold my hand."

"That poor man," mused Mr. Winkler, sympathetically. "The first time I shook hands with him, he struggled to hold on long enough to return a simple greeting. He's not a great deal better than that, now. I can only imagine what it took for him to hold on to you like that, Abby."

At five in the late afternoon, Abby drove home, having put in a full day at the marina. Even while her eager student, Mr. York, had talked about what usually interested her most, Jake had never been very far from her mind. Abby had found it hard to engross herself in fishing reels and bait, when her hair still smelled of tent mildew.

As her jeep pulled off the main road and approached the little house, she noticed the Sheriff's squad car and a police cruiser sitting in front of the tulip bed. Blue and red lights flashed against the late afternoon sky, immediately sending a warning to Abby's soul. This was no social call!

Quickly parking, Abby jumped from her jeep and raced to Deputy Casey, who was standing outside the yellow house, his hands on his hips.

"Casey," she exclaimed in alarm, "what's going on?!"

"Do you know where Jake is?" asked the Deputy in a sober voice. Even though he was a few years older than Abby, he had known her all his life, and had even attended the same high school with her. For years, he had been one of Abby's fishing buddies, and it cut him deeply that he should be at her house, looking for Jake. "This is serious, Abby. You'd better tell me if you know where he is, before anyone else gets hurt."

"What are you talking about?!" cried Abby, frightened by Casey's choice of words. "Where's Jake?" Not waiting another second, Abby ran into her parents' home. She found John and Terry talking to Sheriff Peterson, who was nodding and pointing to the little yellow house. To Abby's shock, her mother was sitting on the living room couch, her cheeks stained with tears.

"Someone, tell me what happened!" shouted Abby, her face blanched white with dread.

"Abby," began Sheriff Peterson, his face serious and drawn with concern, "do you know where Jake is?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?" she cried. "Isn't he here?"

"No, he isn't," replied the Sheriff.

"I told them Jake went to the grocery store," piped up Terry, "but they won't believe me!"

"We already checked the store, Terry, but he wasn't there," replied the Sheriff. "Abby, it's important that we find him. Do you know where he might have gone?"

"Why are you looking for Jake?" she asked. "What did he do?"

John groaned inwardly and went to his wife on the couch, while Terry nervously stood nearby.

"Today, at about four o' clock," related Sheriff Peterson, "the body of Eric Murphy was found on the northwest shore of Oneida Lake. Looks as though he was stabbed to death with a long knife."

The news stunned Abby. For a minute, she could neither speak nor think. It was as if the wind had been knocked out of her!

"And you think Jake did it?" she gasped in shock. "He couldn't! He wouldn't hurt *anyone!*"

"Abigail," said the Sheriff in a firm voice, "he *was* tried and convicted of killing his father with a kitchen knife. Eric was his father's brother. We don't have the murder weapon yet-- I have some divers on their way to search the bottom of the lake-- but I *must* find Jake. Do you know where he was, last night?"

"Yes, on the beach with me," answered Abby. "We camped out on the beach. You can ask my parents."

"Was Jake with you ALL night?" pressed Sheriff Peterson, grieved to have to question people that he had known for a lifetime.

"No, he wasn't," admitted Abby. "But, he was in his tent, before he came to mine."

"What time was that?" asked the Sheriff.

"I... I don't know," stammered Abby, trying desperately to remember. "Neither of us had a wrist watch or clock."

Just then, Abby heard someone shouting in front of the house. Everyone ran outside to find Deputy Casey taking Jake into custody.

"Assume the position!" barked Deputy Casey, as Jake spread his hands on the hood of the sheriff's squad car.

"Cuff him and read him his rights," ordered Sheriff Peterson with a heavy heart.

"NO!" Abby gasped in horror.

"You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law..." the words sounded like a dull drone in Jake's ears. Numbly, he searched the faces surrounding him, until he found Abby's frightened blue eyes staring back at him. As the Deputy continued, Jake gazed longingly at Abby, trying to memorize every feature of her face by heart. "Do you understand these rights as I have explained them to you?" finished Deputy Casey.

"Yes," mumbled Jake, as Sheriff Peterson helped the handcuffed young man into the back of the squad car.

"Where are you taking him?" cried Abby, frantically trying to maintain eye contact with Jake as he sat motionless in the back seat of the squad car.

"Abby," replied the Sheriff plainly, "unless he's cleared of these charges, Jake's going to be sent back to the Watertown State Penitentiary." He gravely looked at Abby's terrified face. "I'm sorry, but I *must* take him into custody. What I'm about to tell you, I tell you as a friend-- not as a Sheriff. Get a lawyer," he advised her. "Jake's going to need the best one you can find."

"The LORD trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence His soul hateth... for the righteous LORD loveth righteousness; His countenance doth behold the upright."
~ Psalm 11:5, 7 ~

"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 Eighteen

Just Breathe

"For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I [called] unto you with many tears; not that ye should be grieved, but that ye might know the love which I have more abundantly unto you."

~ 2 Corinthians 2:4 ~

After the squad car had pulled away with Jake handcuffed in the back seat, Abby's stunned mind reeled. Three investigators combed both houses, collecting evidence and taking everyone's statement. When they had finally left, Abby was frantic to know what to do next.

"I'm calling Pat," declared John. As he turned, he suddenly noticed for the first time that his wife was up and walking about outside. "Little Dove," he sighed, "you need to go back and lay down."

"But," resisted the mother, echoing her daughter's sentiments, "I need to do *something!*"

"Then pray," came his sober answer, as he helped his wife back inside the house.

"Don't worry," Terry tried to assure Abby in an unsteady voice, "Pat will know what to do."

Pat, or Mr. O'Shea, as Abby always called him, was the local attorney at law everyone turned to in Three Mile Bay for legal advice. The father wasted no time in reaching Pat, and quickly related to him the direness of Jake's situation.

"John," Pat hesitated with a heavy sigh, "I'm not a criminal lawyer. You need someone who practices that kind of law. Wait, I know this guy in Watertown... let me get his number for you."

While Mr. O'Shea searched his rolodex for the telephone number, Abby paced back and forth in the living room. The last time Abby had seen everyone's faces this grave, was when her unborn baby sister, Grace, had died.

Izumi lay down to rest on the nearby couch, unwilling to return to the bedroom just yet. This was a family crisis, and it was impossible for her to be where she couldn't hear what was going on.

"I can't believe this is happening," muttered Terry, trying to get out of Abby's way as she paced. "Abby," he asked, "did anyone see you both on the beach last night? Maybe, a witness could establish the fact that Jake was with you, and not somewhere else."

"We saw no one, Uncle Terry!" exclaimed Abby, fighting back panic. "Dad?" she asked, ceasing her pacing long enough to pull at her father's shirt sleeve. "I want to go see Jake."

"Just hold on," he replied firmly. "What was that, Pat? Could you repeat that number once more?"

"Uncle Terry, what time is it?" asked Abby.

"I don't know," Terry hesitated uncertainly, glancing up to check the clock. "It's almost eight. If we go down to the police station, (or wherever it is they're holding him), I don't know if they'll let us see Jake this late in the evening."

"I don't care," she replied in a determined voice. "They came and hauled away a perfectly innocent person! The least they can do is let us see him! Dad? Are you coming?"

"Stay where you are," ordered John, trying to keep his patience. There was a lot of stress in the air, and it was beginning to show in their voices. "Thanks for the number, Pat," continued John, "I'll call that attorney right away." While Abby stood with car keys in hand, John dialed the number of the man in Watertown that Pat had recommended. "Get on the extension in the kitchen, Abby," he directed, as a voice answered the phone.

Terry and Abby quickly ran to the kitchen, the uncle beating her to the telephone before her. He picked up the receiver and handed it to Abby, suddenly realizing that she had more of a need to hear the conversation than he did. Abby gratefully took the phone and listened with bated breath as her father spoke to the lawyer. Terry stood nearby, intently watching the reaction on her face, as if trying to discern whether there was any good news or not.

"They wouldn't have arrested your son-in-law, Mr. Johannes," the lawyer said in a serious voice, "unless they thought they had a strong case against him. They don't have a murder weapon though, so that's something in our favor. His previous history, however, will go strongly against him in court. There's little doubt of that."

"My daughter," continued John, "wants to go down and see Jake."

"Tonight?" asked the lawyer in surprise. "I don't think it's possible."

"Is it all right if she tries?" asked John.

"I'll tell you what," sighed the man, "I can meet you at the police department in a few minutes. Even at this late hour, there's an off chance that I could talk to the investigators and see how strong of a case they have against Jake."

"Thank you," said John in a grateful voice.

Forgetting that her uncle hadn't been able to hear what was said, Abby quickly hung up the kitchen telephone and started for the door.

"Well, what happened?" he cried.

"He's going to meet us down at the police department," related Abby in a hurried voice. "Dad, can we go now?"

"Who's going to meet us?" asked Terry, more than a little confused.

"Wait a minute, Sweetheart," said John in a forced, calm voice. He sat down next to Izumi on the couch and took her hand. "We need to pray, first." Abby took a patient sigh and bowed her head with everyone else while John asked God for deliverance. "Heavenly Father," he began, "we're in a lot of trouble right now. Jake is sitting somewhere, away from the people who care about him, and he's probably scared. Please, be with him and with the rest of us. We don't know what to do, 'but our eyes are upon Thee.'" (2 Chronicles 20:12)

When the prayer was over, Abby rushed out the front door, while John called a neighbor over, to stay with Izumi while they were gone. Terry quietly got into the back seat of the jeep, as Abby started the engine and pulled in front of her parents' home. Before too long, John appeared from the house and climbed into the passenger seat, up front beside his daughter.

No one said very much on the short drive into Chaumont, where the police department was located. Stray clouds littered the night sky, hiding the large, brilliant moon in fits of light and darkness upon the whim of the wind. As the family climbed out of Abby's jeep in front of the police station, a cool chill ominously hung about their shoulders, hinting the threat of an early winter.

The desk sergeant looked up as the three entered the station. Immediately recognizing John and Terry, he quickly guessed what they wanted.

"You can't see Jake, tonight," he informed them.

"I must know if he's all right," insisted Abby, as a stranger with a briefcase approached them.

"Mr. Johannes?" asked the middle-aged man, extending out his hand in a friendly manner. "I'm Peter Goldwyn-- you engaged me as your son-in-law's defense attorney."

"Mr. Goldwyn!" exclaimed John in relief, "I'm so thankful you could make it!"

"I'm trying to tell these folks," the desk sergeant addressed the lawyer, "that visiting hours were over at three this afternoon."

"I can't help it if you guys took Jake after visiting hours!" Abby cried indignantly.

"Mrs. Murphy," requested Peter, taking her aside by the arm, "you're not going to help your husband by making the police angry. They're only doing their job, isn't that right, Officer?" he smiled, turning again to the desk sergeant. "I realize it's late," he continued in a polite voice, "but is it possible that the investigators working the case are still around to speak to us?"

"They're putting in a late-nighter," soberly nodded the officer. "There's talk of someone confessing to the murder of Eric Murphy."

"Really?" asked Peter, his eyebrows raised in surprised interest.

"Who confessed?" cried Abby. "Who?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't know, Ma'am," shrugged the desk sergeant. "You folks go down that hall and turn right. Just follow the light and the smell of stale coffee."

"Thank you," smiled Peter, escorting Abby and her family down the hall.

In a medium sized room with dividers and desks, they found four homicide detectives bent over a computer monitor, while another was returning with a cup of coffee.

"Detective Fremont?" asked John, stepping toward the man with the coffee. "This is Peter Goldwyn, my son-in-law's attorney."

"I was just trying to get hold of you, Mr. Johannes," replied the detective, "but your wife informed me that you were already on your way down here."

"The desk sergeant said you might have a new suspect?" inquired Peter.

"That's correct," smiled Detective Freemont, rubbing his head with a small sigh of contentment. "That's what I wanted to call Mr. Johannes and his daughter about. Mrs. Murphy," he said, turning to Abby, "we just received a call from the Syracuse PD [police department]. About an hour ago, they took a pregnant woman into custody for selling cocaine to an undercover cop. When they searched her purse, the police found a bloody survival knife wrapped in newspaper." At this, the other detectives gathered around Detective Freemont, as he finished relating the story.

"When confronted with the knife, the woman confessed to killing Eric Murphy-- who it turns out was her boyfriend of two years. According to her, he had denied any responsibility for her unborn child. She followed Mr. Murphy to Three Mile Bay and took her chance at revenge when he was alone on the shore of Oneida Lake. By the blunt force it took to drive that knife into Mr. Murphy, I'd say his ex-girlfriend was more than a little upset."

"Then, all charges against my client are being dropped?" asked Peter.

"Yes, Sir," smiled Detective Freemont. "Jake will be released, tomorrow morning."

"Thank God!" cried Abby, shutting her eyes and silently offering the Lord a prayer of gratitude.

Terry grinned from ear to ear with joy, until he was sure that he had pulled every muscle in his face from smiling so hard.

"The others and I," continued Detective Freemont, "had decided to put in a little overtime on this case. When we took a closer look at the evidence, some things just didn't add up. I think it's safe to say, that even without this confession, Jake would have been released very soon."

"What do you mean?" asked John.

Abby felt as though she could finally breathe easy. She no longer cared about the so-called evidence that the police had collected from the two houses, for Jake was coming home! Abby already knew that her friend was innocent, and had needed no other evidence than that of his character to prove it. She was just grateful that the police finally had enough good sense to come to the same obvious conclusion!

"We were looking at the pictures Jake took the day of the murder," the detective explained to John and his family. "Each one is time and date stamped. From the beginning of the day, up until he zipped himself into his sleeping bag that night, Jake was taking pictures almost every other hour. There's pictures of a yacht in the far distance, some joggers out further down the beach on public land, and many shots of the sunset and clouds that gathered later that night. All of those

place the camera on your beach the night of the murder. However, the thing that convinced us that Jake had been the one to take the pictures, and not someone else, was the fact that his shadow was in several of the key photos taken before nightfall. After the sun went down, we can still confirm the identity of the photographer by the fact that pictures had been taken inside his tent; you could plainly see the bottom half of Jake's pants and bare feet. Those pictures were especially important, because they were time-stamped about the same time Eric Murphy was murdered. It was an impossibility for Jake to be in two places at the same time."

"Also," concluded another detective who had been silent up until now, "the coloring of the bruise on Mrs. Murphy's hand is consistent with her statement that he had held her hand from the time of the rain shower that night until morning."

"We were able to corroborate the time needed to leave such a bruise, by contacting a meteorological station in Three Mile Bay that was able to give us a precise time the rain started," explained Detective Freemont, taking a sip of coffee. "You and Mr. Davis [Terry] were able to establish the time you went out to their tent the next morning, so we know with a fair amount of certainty that Jake was with your daughter for the amount of time that he said he was, by the coloring of the bruise on her hand."

"Well," sighed John in gratitude, "I appreciate everyone's hard work. I can't tell you how relieved we are that it's over."

"There's no need to thank us, Mr. Johannes," declined Detective Freemont with a tired sigh. "We're just doing our job."

The family was about to leave, when Abby paused to ask the detectives one more important question.

"Do you happen to know if Jake was placed in a cell by himself?" she inquired.

"I believe Sheriff Peterson saw to that," replied Detective Freemont.

"Yes, he's in a single," joined in another detective, knowingly. "I saw him at the detention center today, and he was in a cell by himself."

"Thank you," she smiled in relief. Abby could go home and sleep tonight, knowing that Jake was at least safe.

A cold wind stung Abby's face as they stepped outside and walked back to the jeep. She was shocked at how fast the whole thing had been resolved, for just hours ago, their trouble had

seemed nearly insurmountable. Like a bad dream that had been interrupted upon waking up, Abby drove back to Three Mile Bay. The dread that had been hanging over her was now lifted, and it felt as though things could once again return to normal.

When they returned home, John and Terry related to Izumi what had happened, sometimes speaking at the same time in their eagerness to tell her the good news.

"I'm so happy for Jake, Sweetheart," said Izumi, joyfully hugging her daughter. "I'm glad it's over!"

"Me too," smiled Abby.

However relieved Abby was, she wasn't ready to start celebrating until Jake was back where he belonged. Abby had a very real concern that this recent event might have caused a setback in his recovery, and she was anxious to see how he had fared. When Abby came home to an empty house that night, she reminded herself that Jake would soon be back, and climbed into bed.

Early the next day, Abby raced to her parents' house across the way, and found everyone eating cold cereal, for Jake was the one who usually did the cooking.

"How soon can we leave?" asked Abby, for she was much too excited to eat breakfast. Today, she, her father, and Uncle Terry were going down to the detention center to bring Jake home.

"As soon as Agatha gets here, we can go," replied John, pouring himself a cup of hot coffee.

"I'm going to make sure that the car's ready," said Abby, refusing to wait around indoors.

Outside, Abby pulled her dark green jeep in front of her parents' house and checked the oil. It didn't need checking, but she had to get her mind off the nervous excitement she was feeling. Even a terrible bout of morning sickness could not dampen her determination to bring Jake home, for she knew that the sooner he returned, the better it would be for him.

"Good morning, Abby!" sounded a woman's warm greeting.

Abby poked her head out from under the jeep's hood and smiled at the middle aged woman standing at her parents' front door.

"Good morning, Mrs. Hopkins!" she called back. "Mom's in the bedroom!" Abby winced at the blatantly obvious remark she had just made, for that was where her mother was *supposed* to be. She was on bed rest, after all.

Mrs. Hopkins smiled and then entered the house, while Abby quickly tossed aside her rag and secured the hood of her jeep. After a few minutes, the men appeared and climbed into the vehicle.

"Let's go get him," smiled John.

That same morning, at his office in Chaumont, Sheriff Peterson was just receiving a call from the police station.

"Could you repeat that?" asked the Sheriff, not believing what his ears had just heard.

"Henry, I just found out that Jake Murphy's parole has been revoked," repeated the desk sergeant.

"On what grounds?!" shouted the Sheriff.

"I'm reading it right here," replied the sergeant. "It says he's being sent back because of a technical violation."

"What kind of a 'technical violation'? Does it say anything more explicit than that?" barked Henry.

Upon hearing the commotion, Deputy Casey stepped into the Sheriff's office.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Jake's being sent back on a technical violation of his parole!" replied the Sheriff, pounding his desk with a clenched fist.

"Henry," answered the desk sergeant, "it's because Jake was detained by the police. Evidently, that qualifies as a technical violation."

"But," reasoned Henry, "he was *completely* cleared of all charges!"

"You're talking to the wrong person," said the caller. "I'm only repeating what it says here on paper."

"Does it say where or when they're taking him?" sighed the Sheriff.

"As of right now, he's on his way to the Watertown State Pen," answered the desk sergeant. "I'm sorry, Henry. I know you were really pulling for this one."

The Sheriff hung up his phone and looked at the solemn Deputy standing before him. "Casey," he sighed heavily, "I've got to get down to the detention center, and break the news to Jake's family."

"Do you want me to come?" Casey half-heartedly volunteered. He didn't *want* to be there, but he felt as though he should offer.

"You and Abby are good friends-- right?" asked Henry.

"I guess so," hesitated Casey, sensing that he was about to be taken up on the offer. "We sometimes fish together, if that's what you mean."

"Then, it might help if you were there," sighed the Sheriff. "I tell ya, Casey, this just ain't right! That young man is going to be eaten alive! Everyone down there *knows* he testified at the commission! Don't think for a second, that they're going to let Jake Murphy forget it!" Then Henry quickly added, "Don't repeat what I just said to Abby or her family. Sometimes, I hate this job. I'd give my entire pension to skip today-- I really would. Come on, let's get down there, before they show up to take him home."

The air was cool, as Abby and the two men got out of the jeep and headed inside the county detention center. Before they had a chance to say a word to anyone, a woman approached Abby.

"Excuse me," she said politely, "are you Mrs. Murphy?"

"Yes, I am," replied Abby in surprise. "Is Jake ready?"

"Sheriff Peterson called and requested that you and your family wait in my office, until he arrives," said the woman. "Please, follow me."

The three looked at each other and followed the woman to her office, where they were asked to take a seat and wait for the Sheriff.

"They must need his signature, or something, in order to release Jake," guessed Terry.

"I hope he hurries," sighed Abby, eager to get Jake back home. "What time is it, Dad?"

"It's a little after eight," replied her father with a patient smile.

Ten minutes later, Sheriff Peterson arrived with Deputy Casey in tow.

"I'm sorry that I made you folks wait," apologized the Sheriff, as the three stood up expectantly when he entered the room. "I don't know how best to say this, but I have some bad news."

Casey stood behind the Sheriff and glanced at Abby with a somber face.

"What is it, Casey?" she asked.

"I'm sorry," was all the Deputy could reply.

"The parole board," began Sheriff Peterson, clearing his throat uncomfortably, "has revoked Jake's parole, because he was detained by the police, and they're calling it a technical violation. He's being shipped back to the pen, as we speak."

Abby looked to the Sheriff and then to Casey. Suddenly, she comprehended the reality of what had just been said.

"No," she whispered under her breath, collapsing back into the office chair.

"Abby?" asked John. "Are you all right? Look at me, Sweetheart. Terry, go get some water. I think she's about to faint!" Casey went in Terry's place, and soon returned with a paper cup of water. John put the cup to her lips but she pushed it away.

"You mean," asked Terry, incredulously, "he's being sent back to the same place that he testified against at the hearing?"

"I'm afraid so," answered the Sheriff.

"May I see him?" asked Abby in a shaky voice, straining within herself not to faint.

"I'm sorry, but not right now," gently replied Sheriff Peterson. "The Watertown State Penitentiary has visiting hours, and you must first be on a visiting list, before you can even go."

"How do I get on a visiting list?" inquired Abby.

"Sweetheart," suggested John, "maybe we should take you home."

"How do I get on a visiting list?" she repeated in a voice more determined than ever.

"Jake has to be the one to do it," replied the Sheriff.

"How do I get in touch with Jake?" she asked.

"He can't accept incoming calls," explained Henry, "but he can make outgoing calls. It's usually collect, because inmates often don't have the money to pay for it, themselves."

"Dad," announced Abby, getting up from the office chair, "I want to go home. I have to be there when Jake calls."

"I'm sorry, Abby," apologized the Sheriff, as the three started out the door. "If there's anything I can do..." his voice trailed off and ended in a heavy sigh.

Once in the parking lot, John tried to take the car keys from his daughter, but she refused to hand them over.

"I still know how to drive, Dad," resisted Abby, reeling a little where she stood, for she still felt faint.

Terry saw his opportunity and grabbed the jeep keys from her. Before she could try to get them back, he quickly tossed the keys to his friend.

"Sorry," apologized Terry, "but you're in no condition to drive right now."

"Whatever," she sighed wearily. "Let's just hurry up and get home."

When the jeep finally pulled up to the Johanneses' house, Abby jumped out and ran to her little home, while John went to tell Izumi what had happened. Terry followed Abby inside where he found her anxiously checking the answering machine.

"No messages," she sighed disappointedly, glancing at the clock. "I suppose he's still being processed."

"That makes sense," agreed Terry, looking about the living room.

"Why don't you go home, Uncle Terry?" she suggested. "I'll let you guys know the minute I hear from Jake."

"What about you?" he asked. "Shouldn't someone be with you right now?"

"I'm a big girl," Abby smiled bravely. "I'll be just fine. Mr. Winkler gave me the day off so I could spend it with Jake..." she paused a moment to stop herself from choking on the words. "I have the day off, so now I can sit by the phone and wait for his call," she finished carefully. "Besides, I can use this time to catch up on some flies I've been working on for the tackle shop."

Terry watched as Abby kicked off her shoes onto the living room floor and went to her room. When he peered through the open bedroom door, Terry found her hard at work over some new pattern she had designed. Seeing she was busy, Terry reluctantly left the little yellow house.

The second Abby heard the front door shut, she dropped her work and burst into tears. She had been brave all morning long, and was now free to let the tears come without anyone seeing. With heartrending sobs, Abby flung herself onto her bed and buried her face in the pillow.

Back home, John entered the master bedroom where Izumi was propped up with support pillows on the bed. He smiled sadly and crawled onto the mattress beside her. Then John told her the sad news about Jake.

"How's Abby taking all this?" wondered Izumi, as her husband tenderly put his arms around his very pregnant wife.

"Terry said she's working on some flies," replied John, thoughtfully.

"I don't want her to go through this alone," sighed Izumi, taking refuge in John's arms. "I think she should move back into her old room."

"I don't think she'll go for that," he hesitated. "You know our Abby, she's too independent to ask for help."

"That's why we should *make* her come," insisted the mother.

"'Make her'?" repeated John, with eyebrows raised. "Little Dove, Abby's a grown woman, and she's about to become a mother. I don't think we can make her do anything."

"But, she's our little girl," said Izumi, burying her face in John's comforting shoulder. "I don't want her to be alone right now."

"I'll see what I can do," agreed John.

Minute by minute, the day crept by, until everyone was beginning to think that Jake was unable to place any calls at all. In the early hours of the evening, the Johanneses' telephone finally rang.

"I'll get it!" shouted Terry, pouncing on the phone before John could reach it. The father waited to see who the caller was and quickly went to the kitchen phone when Terry excitedly announced, "It's Jake!"

"Is he all right?" was John's first question, when he picked up the receiver and heard nothing.

"I don't know," replied Terry, "I haven't talked to him yet. The operator just asked if I would accept a collect call from Jake Murphy, at the Watertown State Penitentiary, and I said 'yes.'"

Just then, John heard Jake's voice for the first time since he had been arrested the day before.

"Hello?" asked the young man.

"Hello, Jake?" said John. "It's me, Dad. Are you all right, Son?"

"Dad," began Jake, "I'm sorry for putting you through this."

"It's not your fault that the parole was revoked," replied John, waving frantically to Terry from the kitchen. Suddenly, Terry understood what John was trying to tell him, and ran out the front door to Abby's house.

"Jake's on the phone with your Dad, *right now!*" he gasped, bounding into Abby's bedroom without announcing himself.

Abby jumped up from her bed and raced back to her parents' house with Terry, snatching up the living room receiver. The uncle stood nearby, watching Abby and glancing every now and then to John, who was standing in the kitchen doorway with the extension.

"Please, don't tell Abby I called," she heard Jake say.

"Son," John was trying to reason, "she cares about you, and will want to know what going on."

"Jake?" interrupted Abby, "it's me. Are you all right? Are you safe?"

"Abby," he hesitated, as if the very sound of her name caused him great pain, "it's best if you forget about me-- at least, until it's all over."

"Please, Jake," she begged, "don't do this to me. I need to know what's happening to you."

There was silence as Jake struggled with himself to reply to his dear friend. Suddenly, a recorded message broke the stillness, and reminded Abby that she was speaking to an inmate from the penitentiary, and that their call could be recorded or monitored.

"Thank you for being my friend, Abby," he said in a painfully distant voice. "You don't know how much it's meant to me."

Before Abby could protest, he hung up. John looked soberly at his daughter who was still fighting the shock of what she had just heard.

"Well, what did he say?" asked Terry, for he had only been able to watch their expressions.

"He tried to tell me good-bye," replied Abby, still dazed by the call. "He's put me off before, but this time... I don't like the way his voice sounded. Dear God," she cried under her breath, "don't let me lose him-- not now!"

"Surely, he wouldn't take his own life," said John.

"What's going on?" asked Izumi, waddling into the living room.

"Little Dove," sighed John, going to his wife, "you need to stay in bed."

"But," she protested, "I can't hear anything from the bedroom."

"Then we'll come in there," said John, guiding Izumi back to the bed. "Abby, as I was saying-- surely, Jake wouldn't take his own life."

"He's tried it before," Abby replied. "Four times, as a matter of fact."

"As many as that?" asked Terry in surprise. "I didn't know that."

"But, it wasn't hopelessness that I heard in his voice," said Abby, recalling the sound of his words over and over in her mind. "No, it's something else. I don't want to say it out loud, but I think he's in a situation where the abuse is likely to happen again. Jake told me to forget him, only because he's trying to protect me from knowing what's going on." The young woman looked at her silent parents, who didn't know what to say. "For all I know," she continued, "he's already been abused. By the sound of his voice, it wouldn't surprise me. It wouldn't surprise me at all."

"Maybe, you're intuition is wrong," suggested Terry, unwilling to consider Abby's conclusion.

"I've heard that same tone in his voice when he's suffering flashbacks," replied Abby. Everyone was silent. The eighteen year old woman smoothed back her long hair and shook her head in desperation. "How are we going to get through this?" she cried, quickly brushing away the tears that came to her eyes. "I don't understand! How could God let this happen to Jake? He's tried so hard to overcome his past! It's not fair! Dad, it's *not fair!*"

"Abigail," replied John, wiping away his own tears, "the Judge of all the earth, ALWAYS does right. Remember Genesis, chapter eighteen, verse twenty-five? 'That be far from Thee [the LORD] to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from Thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?'"

"Dad," wept Abby, "please don't quote more Scripture right now! What does that have to do with me and Jake?"

"You're under a lot of stress," admonished John, "but I want you to seriously consider your stand before God right now, Abby. The Scripture has *everything* to do with what's going on in your lives. Your mother and I, along with your Uncle Terry, have tried to raise you in the nurture and admonition of God's word. Ever since you were old enough to understand that there was a God and that He was worthy to be obeyed, you've said that you were a Christian. I know this is the hardest thing you've ever had to do in your entire life, but you need to ask yourself if you really believe what you say you believe. Faith isn't something that you put in a jar and set on the shelf. If faith is no longer active, then it's not faith anymore, only a previously held belief. I've heard you tell Jake often enough to trust God's Providence, even when it seems as though all is lost--and he believed you. It seems as though God has seen best to test you two in ways I can only imagine. If Jake is being abused again, then he's going to need you now, more than ever. Don't fail your friend, and don't let God down. The Lord wouldn't have given this test, unless He knew you both could pass it.

"Remember First Corinthians ten, verse thirteen?" he continued, seeing that Abby was listening. "'There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but 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.' Did you hear that, Abby? God is faithful. You must hold on to that. Nothing in this life is certain, except God's faithfulness. I don't know what the Lord has planned for you and Jake, or why He's allowing this to happen, but I do know this: it WILL work out for your good. Romans chapter eight, verse twenty-eight comes to mind: 'And we know that ALL THINGS work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.' All things, Abby-- all things."

Abby nodded her head in agreement, and readily accepted the hugs her family offered. By the time she left her parents' house a few hours later, the moon had set over Three Mile Bay, casting

its silvery hues on everything it touched. Abby walked onto the beach and sat on the sand while the cold winds created whitecaps on the water in the distance.

"Lord," she prayed out loud, the tears once more streaming down her cheeks, "I don't see any possible good that can come from this situation, but I'm putting my faith in Your mercy; I don't know why You're letting this happen to Jake, but I'm placing my hope in Your all knowing wisdom; I don't know how Jake is going to pull through this, but I do know You are faithful. Help me, God!" she cried. "Help me to have faith! Help me to be the person Jake needs me to be, and the person You want me to be! Please, get him through this! Don't let him give up hope!"

The little yellow house never seemed more empty than it did that night. Abby curled up in her bed, struggling not to think about the fact that Jake wasn't in his room down the hall. The silent baby monitor stood on her nightstand, a painful reminder that where Jake was, she couldn't come to help. He could no longer awaken from the horror of his flashbacks, because, this time, his horror would be real. Abby fought to keep these thoughts pushed down, and rolled over onto her other side.

The house was so still! As she lay in her bed, Abby felt desperately alone. She was beginning to wish that she had taken up her parents' offer to let her move back. As despair slowly began to swallow her heart, Abby suddenly remembered the lifeline of promises that John had thrown to her earlier that night. "God is faithful," and "all things work together for good," resounded in her ears, and echoed in her heart. Soon, the despair parted, and Abby once again felt the comfort of the Holy Spirit, as she actively placed her faith in God's word. How true is Acts, chapter fourteen, verse twenty-two! "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God."

When the sun finally pushed up over the western horizon, Abby awakened from her sleep.

"Will he call today?" she wondered to herself. "Please, God, let him call!"

Abby went to her parents' home, and entered the kitchen where Terry was preparing breakfast.

"Has he called here?" she asked.

"No, sorry," replied Terry. "If he does call again, do you think it will be this number, or yours?"

"What do you mean, 'if'?" she replied. "He'll call. The list of people he can turn to is pretty short. When he *does* call, I'm not sure it will be to talk to me, though."

Just then, the Johanneses' phone rang. Abby quickly snatched up the receiver, only to find that it was Dr. Jacoby.

"When you didn't pick up at your house," said the therapist, "I figured you were at your parents'. Sheriff Peterson informed me of what happened yesterday. Has Jake attempted to make any contact with you?"

"He called my Dad, but hung up soon after I came to the phone," replied Abby. "Jake told me to forget about him until it's all over-- I believe those were his exact words. Then he thanked me for being his friend. Dr. Jacoby, I think he's being abused again."

"Will you be going to work, today?" asked the doctor, suddenly seeming to change the subject.

"I haven't called in yet, but I want to," answered the young woman. "Jake might try to contact Dad again, and I want to be here if he does."

"May I come down there and talk to you?" requested Dr. Jacoby. "It's about Jake."

"Why? What's going on?" she asked, suddenly sensing that he had some kind of bad news to break to her.

"Jake called me this morning," informed the doctor. "I'd like to tell you the rest in person. When would be the best time for me to come?"

"Right now," replied Abby, trying to fortify herself for what she was about to hear.

When she hung up the phone, Abby went to the master bedroom and told her parents about the phone call from Dr. Jacoby. It didn't sound good. Terry stood in the doorway, his face somber and thoughtful.

"I'd better tell Mr. Winkler that I won't be in to work today," she added, glancing at the time. "I think he'll understand."

Izumi sadly looked at her husband.

"It looks as though our Abby's instincts were right, after all," she said, wiping a few tears from her eyes. "That poor boy!"

Terry tried to coax Abby into eating something that morning, but she flatly refused. Abby had absolutely no appetite. She waited in her parents' living room, waiting for either the phone to ring, or for Dr. Jacoby's car to finally arrive.

After what seemed an eternity, the therapist reached Three Mile Bay, and got out of his vehicle. Abby quickly let him inside, and closed the front door behind him. John and Terry awkwardly stood nearby, unsure if they should leave or not.

"Jake called me this morning," began Dr. Jacoby, taking a seat across from Abby, "and he told me that he was placed in segregation, even though he informed one of the staff that he was at high risk for being assaulted."

"Segregation isn't good?" asked Terry, who couldn't refrain from asking.

"Only troublemakers are removed from general population and placed into segregation," explained Dr. Jacoby.

"Oh," breathed Terry. "I see."

"Please," pressed Abby, "what else did Jake say?"

Dr. Jacoby leveled his gaze at Abby, and took her hand.

"He was raped yesterday, Abigail."

Abby took in a deep breath, and nodded her head, knowingly.

"I thought as much," she replied, desperately trying to hold back the tears that she knew could so easily overtake her. "How badly was he hurt?"

"Understandably, Jake's pretty shaken right now, but there's no apparent injuries," answered Dr. Jacoby. John sank down onto the couch beside his daughter and put his hand on her shoulder. "Jake has reported the incident to the proper authorities, but he hasn't seen anyone yet. If they don't hurry and administer a rape kit, then the evidence might not be there later, and no action will be taken against the guilty involved. I'm afraid, the system works that way."

"Did he say anything else?" she asked, in a tremulous voice.

"Jake said he would try to call me again, sometime this evening," informed Dr. Jacoby. "Abby, he never mentioned you, or the fact that he had spoken to you earlier. My fear is that in attempting

to completely shield you from what's happening, he's only going to make his situation worse. He needs you, Abby. You often reach him, when I can't. He needs to hear you say that you understand, that you don't blame him for what happened, and that you are still his friend. However, before I can recommend you attempting to talk to him again, I must ask if you intend to stand by Jake, or not. I can't afford to have him face your rejection-- not under these circumstances, for he's much too vulnerable right now."

"I'll stand by him," replied Abby, not needing any time to think it over.

"John? Terry? Do you support Abby's decision?" asked Dr. Jacoby.

"Yes, we do," replied John, while Terry echoed the sentiments of his friend.

"Could I be there when Jake calls you, tonight?" requested Abby.

"I was hoping you'd ask," smiled the doctor, gently patting her hand. "However, I can't just put you on the phone. It must be Jake's decision to speak to you. I can't force him against his will. Abuse is about being robbed of the ability to choose. I think I've told you this, before."

"Numerous times," she smiled, weakly. "What happens if he refuses to talk to me? What then?"

"Let's just take one step at a time," answered Dr. Jacoby. "If he does talk to you, then I'm going to want to see you in my office twice a week, instead of once. You'll need the support of your family and friends to help you get through this. You must be understanding, patient, and long-suffering with Jake. I know sometimes you're like a bull in a china shop, but you must be careful, Abby. He's already tried to commit suicide once in prison. This time, however, he has his faith in God, and you. I think you already know that you're the most important person to him on the outside. Be gentle with him. Listen to what he has to say, and don't press him for things he wants to keep from you."

"I understand," replied Abby, with a patient sigh. "Dad kept telling me pretty much the same thing when Jake first got here."

"This time, I hope you'll do it," Terry softly joked.

At this, everyone smiled.

"Okay, then," said Dr. Jacoby, getting up to leave, "I'll expect you and whatever family members want to come, at four this afternoon. I don't know when Jake will call, so I'm afraid you'll have to wait at my house until he does."

"Terry and I will be there," said John, shaking the therapist's hand.

"I think Abby will be glad for your presence," replied Dr. Jacoby in hushed voice, "even if she won't necessarily admit it."

After the doctor left, the three went into the master bedroom and related to Izumi what had happened.

"We should be there at three, instead of four," finished Abby. "I don't want to risk missing Jake's call."

"Dove, I'll go see if Agatha [Mrs. Hopkins] is free to stay with you again," announced John, for Izumi had readily agreed that he and Terry should go, as well.

When Terry left the two women alone, Abby sat down on the edge of her mother's bed.

"Mom," she confided, "I'm so scared that I won't say the right thing to Jake!"

"I've never been in your situation," sighed the mother, "but I do have some advice. Whether you think it's best to take it or not, is entirely up to you."

"I'm listening," replied Abby, soberly.

"Let Jake know that he isn't alone," she advised her daughter, "and if you care about him, then tell him. Don't keep those precious words locked up inside your heart. Abby, I think Jake finally needs to hear you say them."

The young woman looked down at her still bruised hand, where Jake had left his mark on her skin. Was her mother right? If it *was* time to speak, what *were* her true feelings for Jake? After hugging Izumi, Abby got up and went outside to think.

The weather had turned slightly warm, and the wind had died down, making it perfect for fly fishing. Seeing an opportunity, she retrieved her rod and quickly found a good spot on the shoreline. Swish, swish, her line played against the gentle breeze coming off the water. Suddenly, she heard footsteps behind her. Out of habit, Abby turned, half expecting to find Jake, coming out to enjoy some time with her on the beach, even though he disliked fly fishing.

"Hi," greeted Dennis, walking over to where she stood. "I didn't know if you were taking visitors or not, so I thought I'd just wait out here for awhile in case you came out. I'm really sorry to hear

about Jake. I can't believe anyone would send him back to the same prison, after what he said at the commission."

"You were there?" exclaimed Abby in surprise.

"It was open to the public," he answered, "and I confess, I was curious."

"If you were there, then you heard more than I did," she sighed.

"He was only trying to protect you," reflected Dennis.

"I know," replied Abby, flicking her line back into the bay.

"Have you heard from him, yet?" he inquired. "If I'm overstepping myself, just let me know, and I'll shut up."

"No, it's all right," said Abby. "Jake called my father, yesterday."

Dennis glanced at his friend.

"He didn't want to talk to you," he guessed.

"How did you know that?" Abby gasped in surprise.

"I don't know," shrugged Dennis. "I suppose that's just the kind of guy Jake is. He'd rather bear it all himself, than hurt the woman he loves."

"Do you really think he loves me, Dennis?" she wondered out loud.

"Well, he married you, didn't he?" replied the fly casting instructor, checking his watch. "Woe, I gotta get running. My lunch break is over, and I've have double duty today. If you need anything, you'll call me, right? I'm serious-- new line, bait, anything at all!"

As Dennis walked off, Abby thought over what he had said. Could it be true? Was it possible that Jake might actually love her? Confused, Abby continued to cast her line into the water.

All of a sudden, she felt a hard yank and then the thrashing motion at the end of her line, as a smallmouth took the fly. Abby let out a little line as the bass started to run, only reeling it back after the fish was sufficiently played out. When she finally landed the smallmouth, Abby noticed that the bass had completely swallowed the fly, making it impossible for her to remove the hook

without killing it in the process. This was called being "gut hooked." As Abby prepared the fish to take inside, she reflected on the parallel between the bass she had just caught, and her life with Jake.

When Abby returned to her parents' house, Terry was making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch.

"I want you to eat this," he instructed her, placing a sandwich on a plate in front of her. "You haven't eaten anything all day, and you've got a big phone call coming up. You need to eat!"

Abby didn't have the strength to fight her uncle, so she sat down at the table and did as she was told. Afterward, she went to the living room and collapsed onto the couch. Abby was four weeks pregnant and more tired than she had cared to admit. When John saw that his daughter was finally getting some sleep, the house went about its business in hushed whispers, so they wouldn't wake her up.

"Abby," said a coaxing voice, a few hours later, "it's time to wake up. We have to get started, if we want to reach Dr. Jacoby's house by three o' clock." Abby blinked her eyes open and saw John standing over her.

"Just give me a minute," she said, getting up from the couch and disappearing for awhile into the bathroom.

"I'm glad she had some rest," Terry remarked to his friend. "Do you think Jake will talk to her?"

"I don't know," sighed John, his car keys in hand. "I pray to God he will."

"Mom?" said Abby, sticking her head into the master bedroom where Mrs. Hopkins was talking to her mother. "We're leaving now."

"Speak from your heart, Abigail," reminded Izumi. "I'll be praying for you both."

"Tell Jake the entire congregation is praying for him," added Mrs. Hopkins.

"Thank you," Abby smiled gratefully, "I will."

On this particular drive, John decided to take his own car, instead of cramming themselves into his daughter's four-by-four. John and Terry sat up front, while Abby sat in the back seat, busily trying to think out what she was going to say to her best friend.

John had never been to Dr. Jacoby's home office before, and it required some directions from Abby until he finally located the correct house. As the vehicle came to a stop, John looked in the rear view mirror at his little girl.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"No," she answered candidly, opening her car door and getting out.

The two men walked with Abby to the front door, where Dr. Jacoby readily accepted his guests.

"No, he hasn't called yet, so you've missed nothing," he quickly informed Abby, seeing that the question was on the very tip of her tongue. "I've canceled a few appointments, just to be sure that I could be there to take the call. Come, we can wait more comfortably in the living room."

Dr. Jacoby led the three into a modestly furnished room, and everyone sat down. The telephone was placed on a small glass table in the center of the room, and for awhile, everyone just stared at it.

"A watched pot never boils," observed Terry, after a few moments of silence.

"Have you thought over what you're going to tell Jake?" inquired the therapist.

"I don't know," hesitated Abby. "Mom said I should speak from my heart."

"That sounds like excellent advice," nodded Dr. Jacoby in approval.

The group sat in silence for a few minutes longer before the doorbell rang.

"Excuse me," said the doctor, getting up to answer his door.

Back in the living room, Terry had gotten up to get a better look at the ship painting on the wall, while John bravely smiled at his daughter, who was unsuccessfully trying to remain calm.

"Look who came!" exclaimed Dr. Jacoby, as he led Sheriff Peterson and Richard Doyle into the room.

"Is anything wrong?" cried Abby, sitting up in alarm.

"You know as much as we do at this point," Sheriff Peterson assured her. "Dick and I just wanted to be here-- that is, if it's all right with you. We're not trying to impose. We'd simply like to help, if at all possible."

"Abby," said Dick, cautiously approaching the young woman, "I understand if you don't want to be here-- *especially* after what's happened to Jake. Henry called me, but I wasn't sure if I should come." When Abby didn't turn him out of the house, Dick pulled up a chair and placed it across the room from her. "I can't tell you how sorry I am that I got Jake to testify at the commission," he continued. "I knew there was a chance that he could be sent back, but I didn't see it. All I saw was the opportunity to do some good. People tried to warn me that I was forcing Jake to testify, and, God forgive me, I should have listened. I blame myself, entirely."

Abby looked at Jake's former warden and saw the heartfelt grief in his face. This was the same man who had led Jake to the Lord, who had done his best to protect him in prison, and had given his support to their marriage when others were hesitant. Truly, Abby recalled him once saying that he loved Jake as a son. She knew Jake wouldn't have wanted her to hold anything against this good friend.

"You don't have to blame yourself for anything, Mr. Doyle," Abby comforted him. "You didn't talk Jake into doing anything that he didn't want to do."

Dick crossed the room and gave her a grateful hug before returning to his chair. As Sheriff Peterson located a seat in the ever crowding room, the doorbell rang once more.

"Excuse me," smiled Dr. Jacoby, as he went to answer the door.

"Now who?" Abby silently groaned within herself, for she suddenly realized that all these people could be present to hear what she had to say to Jake. Thankfully, the visitor was only a patient who had forgotten that his session with the therapist had been canceled.

"If Jake agrees to talk to Abby," said Dr. Jacoby, returning to the room, "then everyone must respect their privacy, while they try to work things out. Abby, when the time comes, you may use the phone in my office. The rest of us will wait out here. Is that all right with you?"

Abby smiled gratefully at the therapist and nodded her head in agreement. This was not a conversation that she wanted everyone to overhear.

Three o'clock turned into four, four into five, and still no call from Jake. Not a single person left-- even Sheriff Peterson stayed, and pensively waited for the telephone to ring. Just as Dr. Jacoby was about to get something for everyone to eat, it happened. The telephone rang.

"Everyone remain calm," instructed the therapist. Abby got up and watched as Dr. Jacoby picked up the receiver. "Yes," he replied, "I'll accept the charges."

Upon hearing this, Terry knew that Jake was on the other end.

"It's him," he whispered to John.

"I'm so glad you called, Jake," said Dr. Jacoby, in his composed, professional voice. "Have you had the rape kit, yet?"

"No," replied Jake, "no one has even examined me. I don't know what to do."

"Have you requested to be placed in safekeeping?" asked the therapist. The safekeeping wing of the prison is reserved for high risk inmates, such as former law enforcement, and people who are unable to protect themselves from the others. It wasn't perfect though, for normal inmates still came into contact with the ones in safekeeping, and the opportunities to be abused still existed. Even so, safekeeping was better than nothing.

"I filled out a grievance, like you suggested," replied Jake. "I won't hear if it comes through or not, for a few weeks."

"Jake," began Dr. Jacoby, "there's someone with me right now who would like very much to speak to you. Now, you don't have to talk to Abby if you don't want to, but I want you to think this over very carefully before you turn her away."

"I... I don't think I can do it," he stammered. "It hurts so much."

"Abby is your wife, and she cares about you," continued Dr. Jacoby. "If you won't do this for yourself, then do it for her."

"For her then," replied Jake, his voice laced with uncertainty.

"Abby," informed the therapist, placing his hand over the mouthpiece so Jake couldn't overhear, "he's agreed to talk to you. Go into my office and shut the door. Pick up the receiver on my desk, and I'll hang up."

Abby nervously glanced at her father, and then walked to Dr. Jacoby's office. After closing the door, she picked up the telephone receiver with a trembling hand.

"Jake?" she asked, sitting down in the big leather chair behind Dr. Jacoby's desk, "it's me, Abby."

"Hi, Abby," he answered in a low, quiet voice.

"You really scared me, yesterday," she began. "It sounded as though you were trying to say good-bye to me, Jake."

"I was," he replied. "You're better off without me, Abby. I don't want to let you go, but I have to. It wouldn't be fair of me to drag you through this. I have seven years of my sentence left to serve, so do yourself a favor, and forget about me."

"I caught a smallmouth bass, today," she interjected. "The fish had completely swallowed the fly, and it caught in its stomach. We call it being 'gut hooked.' The thing is, once a fish is gut hooked, you can't remove the hook without killing it. There's no catch and release for a fish like that, even if you wanted to."

"Okay," he hesitated, wondering what had prompted this bit of information.

"Jake, I'm gut hooked," she confessed. "If you release me, my body may not die, but my heart will."

"Abby, please don't do this," he begged, suddenly understanding where this discussion was leading.

"I have to," replied the young woman, wiping away the tears that were coming to her eyes. "Jake, I love you."

"Don't say that," he resisted. "You didn't mean it. Tell me you didn't mean it."

"I can't, because it's true!" cried Abby. "I love you!"

"Stop saying that!" he pleaded, his voice on the brink of tears. "Can't you see that I'm doing what's best for you?"

"Jake," she wept, "the only thing that's best for me, is *you*. Please, don't turn me away!"

"Do you know..." he hesitated, "do you know what happened to me, today?" Abby could hear the pain in his voice, as he struggled to form the words. "Three of them held me down, and they took turns."

"I still love you," she cried.

"Why?" asked Jake, his voice melting into tears. "How can you possibly love me after knowing that?"

"You had no choice," Abby reminded him, trying to contain her weeping long enough to get the words out. "All you did was survive. There's no shame in that."

By now, Jake couldn't speak as he uncontrollably sobbed into the telephone. The recorded message that Abby heard yesterday, once again announced that their conversation could be monitored.

"I love you, too," he finally managed to say.

"I never thought those words would sound so good," she confessed with a tear streaked smile. "Jake, I need you to make me a promise. Never give up hope. Whatever happens, always remember that God loves you. I love you, too. Promise me, promise me you'll never give up."

"I promise," he cried. He was weeping so loudly, that Abby could barely hear his voice over the telephone.

"Just breathe," she said in a voice so tender and loving, that Jake only wept the more. When he was finally able to listen, Abby asked if he would put her name on his visiting list.

"It's hard enough to hear your voice," resisted Jake. "I don't think I could bear to see you-- not in here-- not in this place."

Somehow, Abby managed to hide her disappointment. She remembered Dr. Jacoby's warning about not robbing her friend of his ability to say "no," by disregarding his wishes and insisting that he do what she wanted.

"Are you able to make a phone call every day?" she asked, hoping against hope that he wouldn't forbid this form of contact, as well.

"Yes, I can call you," he sniffed, fighting to subdue his emotions, for he knew they only had a limited time in which to talk, before their call would automatically be terminated. "I can't make any promises that I can get to the phone, though."

"If I come home from work on time, could you call me every day at five-thirty?" asked Abby.

"Yes, I could do that," replied Jake, drying his eyes on the sleeve of the orange clothing he had been issued. "But, you have an appointment with Dr. Jacoby on Tuesdays at five-thirty."

"You let me worry about that," said Abby. "It's a date, then. I'll be waiting by the phone at our home, at five-thirty. If you're able to, call me. You don't have to tell me anything that you don't want to, but if you need to tell me something-- anything-- I'll listen. I love you. Remember that, Jake. Nothing those animals can make you do, will ever change that."

"I'll remember," he sobbed, breaking down once more. "Oh, Abby! I wish I could come home!"

"So do I, Jake," she replied, the tears quickly returning to her eyes. "You'd probably still be sleeping in your own room, though!"

"I know," he wept, "but at least I could be closer to you than I am right now."

"As long as you love me," replied Abby, "then you'll always carry me in your heart. Two people can't get any closer to each other than that."

Just then, a recorded message announced that their time was over, giving them five minutes to hang up before terminating their call.

"I have to go," Jake announced, his voice sounding much more hopeful than at the first. "Do you really love me, Abby?"

"I really do," she answered. "And I'll repeat it as often as you need me to."

"Please, pray for me," requested Jake.

As he said these words, the phone went dead.

Outside the office, John could hear Abby's weeping become louder. Unable to remain where he was any longer, John hurriedly opened the door and embraced his heartsick daughter.

"It's all right, Sweetheart," he tried to soothe her. "Daddy's here."

"Blessed be God... Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them [Jake] which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God."

~ 2 Corinthians 1:3, 4 ~

"Comfort him [Jake], lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye [Abby] would confirm your love toward him."

~ 2 Corinthians 2:7, 8 ~

Chapter Nineteen

Wings of a Dove

"My heart is sore pained within me: and the terrors of death are fallen upon me. Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and horror hath overwhelmed me. And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest."

~ Psalm 55:4-6 ~

After Abby had talked to Jake on the telephone at Dr. Jacoby's place, John and Terry took her home. Even though everyone was dying of curiosity, none of the people who had gathered that day for the call, had enough boldness to ask what had been said. As John guided Abby's distraught, tear streaked face through the living room and back out to the car, no one needed to be told that she and Jake were having a difficult time.

Dr. Jacoby, whose job it was to see to both Abby and Jake, did manage one question to the young woman as John, Abby, and Terry were getting into the vehicle to drive home.

"Did Jake promise to speak with you again?" was the one burning question the therapist needed to know.

Abby nodded "yes."

Looking very much relieved, Dr. Jacoby returned to the others as the car pulled away.

After the short drive home, Abby got out of her father's vehicle and gently leaned into the cool breeze coming off Three Mile Bay. Summer was gradually giving way to Autumn, and she could feel it in the air. How much she had changed during these past few months! June had brought Jake to their small community; by July, Abby had befriended him, and they married; August had unexpectedly conceived the baby still forming in her womb; but, September was proving to be the hardest month of all in their short, three and a half month relationship. September had taken Jake from their little yellow house, and carried him away to a world that was foreign to Abby.

As she breathed in the early evening air, a strangely happy feeling crept into her heart. She remembered the sound of Jake's earnest voice when he told her, "I love you." I love you. Abby marveled at the power those three small words had on her heart! Even through the pain, she was remarkably happy! How could this be?

Deep in thought, Abby walked onto the beach while John and Terry watched from the distance.

"Should I go get her?" wondered Terry.

"No," replied John, shaking his head. "Let her alone for now. As much as we want to help, some things she has to work out for herself."

"What do you think Jake told her?" mused Terry, as they went inside to tell Izumi what little they knew.

Abby sat on the end of the dock and stared out over the water, the sky overhead graduating into soft hues of twilight. It was actually true-- she deeply loved the man that she had married in name only. Love hadn't come at first sight, nor had it come with the one night they shared together in bed. No, love had come more gradually than just one event or tender look; as Abby grew to understand Jake better, the greater her admiration of his character had drawn her to him.

No matter how diligently they had tried to keep love from their friendship, love had refused to be denied. With those three, small, still words, Abby felt closer to Jake than she ever had before. This was no cardboard love, but one being tried in the furnace of affliction. Abby only prayed that she would have the strength to withstand it.

Later that night, Abby confided in her mother. Both ladies spoke in hushes so the men in the living room wouldn't overhear, though Abby knew whatever she told her mom would be passed on to her father, and through him, to Terry.

"I'm so glad I told Jake that I loved him, Mom," sighed Abby. "You're right, he needed to hear me say it. You know, it's surprising, but I think I needed to hear me say it, as well."

"You've done a lot of growing up this summer," replied her mother, a little sadly. "I don't know what the coming months will hold, but I want you to know that your family is behind you, every step of the way. You don't have to go through this alone."

"You're not still trying to move me back into my old room, are you?" Abby correctly guessed.

"Did I say anything about your old room?" Izumi innocently smiled. "Did I mention that none of the baby furniture has been put up yet?"

"Mom," sighed Abby, "I *have* a home."

"Just for a few months?" pleaded Izumi. "It would make your father feel so much better."

"You mean, it would make *you* feel so much better," smiled Abby. "I'll think about it," she promised.

The next morning, Abby showed up for work at the tackle shop. Mr. Winkler offered to give her more time off, but Abby had insisted that she was ready to resume her job. Everyone who knew her, and what was happening to Jake, pretty much stayed away from the store. No one was trying to be rude, but they simply didn't know what to say or how to act around her. However, the people who came to be taught fly casting, were mostly from out-of-town, so Abby found no awkwardness with them.

As quitting time drew close at the end of the day, Dennis saw Abby anxiously eyeing the clock.

"Jake promised to call me at five-thirty," she explained.

"Go on," smiled Dennis, "I can finish putting everything away here. I don't know why I'm offering though, because you have plenty of time to get home for his call."

"Thanks!" she exclaimed, tossing him a small tin of bait one of the students had left behind.

Abby hurriedly drove home and raced to the telephone. Of course, she was twenty minutes too early, but this was only the second time that she had talked to Jake since he went away, and she was eager to hear his voice once again.

A few minutes before the half hour mark, John knocked on Abby's front door. After inquiring if she was all right and if she needed anything, John went home. By now, Abby knew that her mother had told him everything, and that probably even Terry knew that Jake was about to call any minute. She felt badly about not letting them in on this call, but Abby was a little embarrassed about discussing something so deeply personal in front of "the guys." That was her mom's department, and Abby had correctly trusted Izumi to relate the information, so she wouldn't have to.

Right on time, the telephone rang. It was him.

"Jake!" she cried, holding the receiver close. "How are you? Are you all right?"

"I'm beginning to notice," he replied with a smile in his voice, "that those are always the first two questions out of your mouth."

"I can't help it," she said, relieved to hear him sounding calm. "Oh, I forgot to tell you yesterday, but everyone in our church is praying for you."

"Please, tell them I appreciate it," relayed Jake.

"So," she asked, "*are* you all right? Have you had the rape kit yet? Have you seen any doctors?"

"I'm feeling better today," he replied. "It's been some time since... since I was forced," explained Jake, trying to choose his words very carefully in front of her. "I'm sorry I scared you so badly, yesterday. Try not to be too concerned about me, Abby. I've been in prison before. After a while, you learn to live with it."

"How can you possibly learn to live with abuse?" she cried, incredulously. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, however, Abby knew she had made a mistake. "I wasn't blaming you, Jake," she quickly tried to assure him.

"You know," he said, his voice sounding much less confident than a minute before, "I can forgive myself for surviving, but I don't know if I can live with the fact that I don't always fight them tooth and nail every time I'm approached. I've been in situations like this all my life-- nine years of them at this very prison-- but, ever since I've returned to the pen, it's been weighing more heavily on my mind than usual. Abby, I've come to a decision that you may not like to hear."

"What decision?" she bravely asked.

"The next time an inmate comes to me for sex," replied Jake, in a determined voice, "I'm going to fight him all the way."

"Jake," she hesitated, not liking the desperate way his voice had sounded, "I can't tell you what to do. This is your decision, but I don't want you to get *killed*! There are levels of resistance, and it's up to you to determine, in good conscience, what you're willing to allow in order to survive."

"I can't face you again, knowing that I gave in," he explained in a wavering voice.

"Jake," declared Abby, "unless you've told them point blank that you're doing it with your consent, then it's ALL rape-- no matter how much or how little you think it's safe to resist! Do you remember Deuteronomy twenty-two? Wait a minute, let me get my Bible." Jake waited for a few seconds, and then Abby returned. "'If a man find a betrothed damsel in the field,'" she read, "'and the man force her, and lie with her: then the man only that lay with her shall die: But unto the damsel thou shalt do nothing; there is in the damsel no sin worthy of death: for as when a

man riseth against his neighbour, and slayeth him, even so is this matter: For he found her in the field, and the betrothed damsel cried, and there was none to save her."

"I remember," replied Jake.

"She cried for help," said Abby, trying to steady her own voice, "but there wasn't anyone to save her. God didn't blame her for surviving the attack, or for not being able to defend herself. I know you're thinking that it's different because you're a man, but when someone is overpowered, there's nothing you can do about it. God didn't blame the girl, and all she did to save herself was to cry for help."

"I think I see what you're getting at," said Jake, thoughtfully.

"For every person who's assaulted," continued Abby, who had heard enough from Dr. Jacoby to talk for hours on the subject, "there are different situations and circumstances. You must be the one to decide what's best for your situation. I need you to know, that's there's no shame in yielding without a fight, in order to survive. Remember, all the Bible mentions about the girl, is that she cried for help. If you've done your best to get help, and it hasn't come, then I don't believe God will blame you for trying to protect yourself by not getting into a fistfight with your attackers."

"Do you know what you're saying, Abby?" he asked.

"Yes, I realize what I'm saying," she slowly answered. "I'm praying that you won't be abused again, but if for some reason God allows it..." she paused, "I won't blame you for walking away without a bunch of scars and bruises."

"Thank you, Abby," said Jake in an extremely grateful voice. "Thank you for understanding. Whenever I think about stuff like this to myself, I easily get confused. But, when I hear you reason it through, especially using God's word like that, it makes a lot of sense. No one has ever taken the time to explain it to me like that, before."

"Don't go looking for trouble," she advised, "but, if it comes, know that I support your decision. You're a good man, Jake. I know you'll do what you believe is right."

At this, she could hear Jake weep softly, though he was trying to hide it from her over the telephone.

Trying to hold back her own tears, Abby asked if he had seen a doctor yet, for she wanted to get as much information from him as she could before their time was up.

"No, I haven't seen a doctor yet," he replied, wiping the tears from his eyes and clearing his voice. "There's been no rape kit, either."

Abby wanted to say that she thought he was suffering retribution for testifying, but quickly checked herself. This call *could* be monitored and recorded, after all.

"Do you still love me?" he asked softly.

"With all my heart," she replied.

"Sometimes," he sighed wistfully, "I think I just imagined it. What I wouldn't give just to have one of our walks on the beach, right now! Oh, Abby, I miss you so much, it hurts!"

"I miss you, too," sighed the young woman. "Speaking of pain, I still have the bruise you left on my hand. It turned sort of blackish."

"I'm sorry," apologized Jake.

"I never thought I could love anyone as much as I love *you*," said Abby, in astonishment. "This isn't a sappy, romanticized love, but something much stronger and real than that. God sent you to Three Mile Bay for a reason, and you found me."

"Abby," asked Jake, a little timidly, "if I asked you something, would you do it, and not fight me on it?"

"That depends," she hesitated.

"I'm trying to face facts," he explained. "If I can't get paroled again, then our baby will be in elementary school by the time I get out of here. I have seven years left to my sentence. There's a saying around here that loved ones 'do time on the outside.' Abby, I don't want that to be the way you live. You have yourself to think about, and the baby to raise. Please, don't stop living your life."

"You're not trying to split up with me, are you?" she asked a little nervously.

"No," answered Jake, "I couldn't let go of you right now if I tried. I just don't want you to live the next seven years waiting to breathe again. As long as I know that God is still for me, and that my best friend will be there when I get out, then I can survive anything that I have to."

"I'm not only your friend, Jake," she answered, "I'm also your wife. I know I've skirted around those words in the past, but not anymore. You're my husband and the father of our child. When you've finished your sentence, your family will be waiting for you."

Just then, the phone went dead. They had been so engrossed in their conversation, that they had missed the five minute cutoff warning.

The weeks passed, and Abby had her phone call from Jake, every day. While time didn't speed by, it didn't crawl by, either. Abby had moved into her old bedroom for a few days, while the new gas fireplace that her parents had given as a baby shower gift, was installed. It needed no chimney, and had an impressive venting system that led outside. To John and Terry's curiosity, it was also equipped with a thermostat and a remote control. Even with all the technology, it still looked and acted like a normal fireplace-- albeit, a very *nice* fireplace. Abby had to admit that it was a very pleasing addition to the living room. Its white exterior sat elegantly against the living room wall, with its arched, black cast iron double doors, and brick lined interior.

Since it was the new toy in the neighborhood, the guys fiddled with the fireplace remote, adjusting and readjusting the height of the flames from all points in the living room, until the whole house was so warm that Abby had to go outside, just to cool off!

But Abby was unable to get caught up in John and Terry's enthusiasm. For the last few days, her women's intuition sensed trouble was brewing for her husband. Abby could hear it in Jake's voice, although nothing she could say would persuade him to speak of it.

One day in late October, over a month after Jake had been taken back to prison, things took a turn for the worse when Abby had a troubling phone call from him.

"Hello, Abby?" he greeted her.

Immediately, Abby was alarmed at how weak Jake sounded over the telephone.

"What's wrong?!" she cried.

"I'm all right," he tried to assure her with a small cough. "Let me hear your voice for awhile."

"Jake," she protested, "you're *not* well!"

"Please," he begged her, "just talk to me. Say anything-- tell me about work. Have you caught any good fish, lately?"

"I almost landed a pike, yesterday," she hesitated slowly. "I was practicing, so my fly was hookless, but the crazy thing wouldn't let go, until he was just feet from the bank."

"Have I told you how much I loved you, lately?" he asked, the sound of his voice troubling Abby even more than before.

"Not since yesterday," she whimpered, trying very hard to remain brave. "Are you able to see a doctor, Jake?"

"Nah," he shrugged. "Besides, I don't need one. Just keep talking to me, Abby."

"I went to the obstetrician," she informed him. "I'm ten weeks along and the doctor said that our baby--" Abby's narrative was suddenly interrupted by a loud gasp.

"Jake!" she cried in alarm. "What's wrong?"

"It's all right," he struggled to speak through the pain. "You said something about the baby. Is it healthy?"

"The baby is fine. It's *you* I'm concerned about," worried the young wife.

"Abby," he groaned, "I have to go now. I'll call you tomorrow, if I can. I love you."

"I love you, too," she replied, as he hung up the telephone.

It was the first time Jake had ever hung up before their time was over. Abby shuddered. There was so much pain in his voice! She knew something had to be terribly wrong!

"Dear Lord," she prayed in a heartrending sob, "deliver him out of that place! Even if he has to die to escape, *please, end his suffering!*"

Then Abby collapsed onto the couch and wept. She feared the unspoken trouble that Jake had been keeping from her for the past few days, was finally coming to a head. Unwilling to venture from the telephone, Abby stayed seated on the couch all evening, praying and crying in intervals. When she didn't show up for dinner, Terry arrived with a plate of food.

"What's wrong?" he asked, immediately recognizing the distress in her face, the second he stepped inside the house.

"It's getting worse for Jake," she explained through a thick curtain of tears. "Oh, Uncle Terry! I wish it were over! Why can't they leave him alone!"

Terry hugged Abby, and did his best to comfort her as John entered the yellow house, having heard what his daughter had just said.

"Tonight, I want you to sleep at our place," John told her. "I know this is your home, Sweetheart, but you need to be with family right now. I'll run the telephone line over, so you can still take his calls."

After Abby nodded her willingness, Terry and John started work on the telephone while she stood nearby until the move was over, in case Jake should call while she wasn't present.

When Abby's telephone had been rerouted across the way to her parents' house, she went to the master bedroom where Izumi was waiting for her, for John had told her what was going on.

"Come here, Sweetheart," said her mother, as Abby crawled onto the bed and entered the safe embrace that was offered her. For a long time, neither woman said a single word. With a sad sigh, John entered the room and tenderly looked at mother and daughter.

"Abby, the extra bed is still set up in the nursery from when you stayed with us the last time," he told her. "Terry is putting some fresh sheets and blankets on it, right now."

That night, Abby lay awake in bed, staring at the unfinished dove mural that Jake had started before he was taken back to prison. After several minutes of tracing her eyes over the delicate brushstrokes, Abby got out of bed. Dressed in her nightgown and armed with one of Jake's paintbrushes, Abby mixed some paint on his artist palette, and began where her husband had left off on one of the dove's wings. Abby hadn't painted in a long time, but she could feel the love that had moved Jake's brush, somehow moving hers, as well. She could almost feel his presence behind her, as she worked. It was a strange sensation that she couldn't explain.

On Abby worked, until the telephone from the little yellow house rang in her parents' living room, at about three in the morning. Immediately, she dropped the palette and rushed to the living room. The lights quickly came on in the other two bedrooms, as John and Terry sleepily walked down the hall in their pajamas.

"Mrs. Jake Murphy?" said a woman's voice over the telephone.

"Yes, that's me," said Abby, nervously.

"This is Mercy Memorial Hospital," said the woman. "I'm sorry, but your husband was airlifted here from the Watertown Prison Hospital an hour ago."

Then Abby asked a question that made the hair on John's neck stand on end.

"Is he still alive?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"Mrs. Murphy, your husband is in critical condition," answered the woman. "The doctors have been working on him for the last hour, but it's too soon to know if he'll pull through, or not."

"I'm on my way!" cried Abby, grief choking in her throat. When she hung up, John and Terry looked at her expectantly. "Jake's in the hospital," she explained, covering her mouth to stifle a cry of horror. "*Daddy, he's in critical condition!*"

John walked across the room and embraced his little girl. Unable to conceal his grief, Terry started sobbing like a baby.

Then John went to Izumi and related to her what little they knew of Jake's condition. As his wife wept, Abby dressed and hurried to put on her coat.

"Dad, I have to go to him," she announced, searching her coat-pocket for the keys to her jeep.

"I'll call Agatha," volunteered Terry, drying his eyes.

Within minutes, Mrs. Hopkins arrived in her nightgown and robe, with Mr. Hopkins in tow. After a few exchanges, Abby, John, and Terry climbed into the jeep and started off for Watertown.

As the cold October wind numbed Abby's face, she prayed that Jake wouldn't die before she had at least one last chance to see him. A part of her screamed to God to save his life, while the other half saw this as Jake's escape from the sexual abuse that he had been so bravely enduring. Confused and grief-stricken, Abby could only trust in God's wisdom.

It was still dark when they arrived at the Mercy Memorial Hospital in Watertown. The night sky was clear, revealing a full moon in the star-dotted expanse overhead. In her grief, Abby felt as though she could almost see heaven, peering down at her from the invisible beyond.

After the small group hurried inside, they quickly located the main desk and inquired what room Jake Murphy was in.

"I'm sorry," said the nurse, "but Mr. Murphy is still in the operating room. At present, I don't have any updates on his condition."

"May I see him when the operation is over?" Abby frantically pleaded.

"Mrs. Murphy," the nurse said in a sympathetic voice, "your husband is under guard by a Deputy from the Sheriff's office. I don't think you'll be permitted to see him, without some kind of pass. I'm afraid I don't know anything more than that. If you'll take a seat in the waiting room, I'll send the doctor over as soon as he comes out of surgery."

John and Terry led Abby to the waiting room and located a few empty seats. Even though it was so early in the morning, other people were also there, some looking worried and concerned, but everyone looking tired.

"I'm calling Dick," declared Terry, suddenly jumping to his feet as the thought occurred to him.

Within minutes, Jake's former warden came rushing into the waiting room, the small tuft of hair on his balding head still uncombed.

"Have you heard any more news, yet?" he asked breathlessly.

"No," answered John, as Abby quietly wept on her father's shoulder. "The nurse said we probably won't get to see Jake when he comes out of the operation, because he's under guard."

"Yes, that's probably true," confirmed Dick, knowingly. "It's regulation for the person requesting hospital visits to go down to the prison, and get a written permission from the Watch Commander. The permission must be presented to the guard, before anyone can visit a hospitalized inmate. Let me make a few calls," he said, checking his watch.

Dick went to the payphone while Abby silently petitioned God to let her see Jake, even if it was for the last time.

Not longer after, Dick returned with a hopeful face.

"I just talked to someone I know at the pen," he informed them. "I need to go down there and pick up the visit pass. I'll be back just as soon as I can. Hold tight, young lady."

Without another word, Dick ran from the hospital as fast as his legs would carry him.

Unable to sit still any longer, John got up and paced the length of the waiting room with Terry, while Abby remained seated where she was.

As she leaned back in her chair, Abby's tears suddenly stopped without explanation. She could feel Jake's presence, as if he were comforting her. It was the same unexplained sensation that she had had while painting the dove in the nursery, earlier that night. It was almost as if Jake were standing directly in front of her. In vain, Abby reached out and touched the space before her, grasping at the thin air with her fingers.

"Jake," she whispered under her breath, "if you need to go, then please go. You don't have to worry about me. I'll be fine. Let Jesus take you home, Sweetheart. I'll see you again in heaven."

Abby's tears came thick and fast, as she felt his presence fade away. When the doctor finally came from the operating room a half hour later, Abby felt certain that she already knew what he would tell them.

"Mr. Murphy is in fair condition," he announced.

Abby looked at the man in surprise! That's NOT what she had expected him to say!

Before continuing, the doctor ushered the family aside so they could speak more privately.

"I can't understand how this happened, but Mr. Murphy had two broken ribs *prior* to being assaulted tonight. When he was beaten, one of the ribs punctured a major artery to his heart, causing massive internal bleeding.

"I just finished operating on your husband, Mrs. Murphy," continued the doctor, turning to Abby, "and for awhile there, it was touch and go. The worst came about a half hour ago, when his heart stopped. Mr. Murphy was defibrillated, but there was absolutely no response. I can't explain it, but your husband suddenly came back to life on his own, just long enough for us to stabilize his vital signs. That man has a strong will to live," observed the doctor, with great admiration.

Upon hearing this, Abby melted into tears of gratitude, so that she could neither think nor string together two coherent words. Concerned that the pregnant woman was becoming overwrought, the doctor quickly checked her pulse. At his direction, a wheelchair was brought, and Abby was taken to an empty room.

"Just lay down for a little while and rest," instructed the doctor, as he helped her onto the bed.

"Go ahead, Sweetheart," urged John, coaxing her to recline on the bed and relax. "As soon as Dick comes back with the visit pass, I'll wake you up."

Terry took a nearby seat and cradled his face in the palms of his hands, while John walked to the doorway and leaned wearily against the doorjamb. It was very early in the morning, and Abby hadn't gotten any sleep yet. Having the great consolation that Jake was still alive, Abby collapsed into a sound rest.

When Abby awoke several hours later, she found her father nodding off in the chair Terry had been sitting in.

"Dad?" asked Abby, climbing down from the hospital bed. "Dad, wake up."

Upon hearing his name the second time, John roused himself.

"Sweetheart," he yawned, "I was beginning to think that you'd decided to sleep the entire day through! We tried to wake you, but you wouldn't budge."

"What time is it?" she asked, suddenly realizing that she had been asleep for much longer than she had originally intended.

"It's eleven o' clock," replied her father, getting up from his chair. "Come, let's get you something to eat. I've already had my lunch, so Terry is taking his turn in the cafeteria right now."

"Dad," inquired Abby, "how is Jake doing?"

"He's going to make it," assured John with a tired smile.

"Can I see him?" she asked, hopefully.

"Dick has your visit pass," answered her father. "But Abby," John gently explained, "Jake is so heavily sedated right now, the doctor says he probably won't recognize anyone. He's in a lot of pain, Sweetheart. Every breath he takes is extremely difficult."

"Could I see him now?" requested Abby.

"Eat something, first," ordered John, taking her by the arm and leading her down many corridors to the cafeteria. "We'll ask the doctor if you can see him, *after* you've gotten something into your stomach."

As the two entered the cafeteria, Terry looked up from his meal and smiled at them.

"Look who's wake," he greeted Abby, getting up and helping her into a chair at the table he was at. "I can't say very much for the meat loaf, but their brownies are good."

"I don't think I can eat right now," declined Abby, distracted by everything that was going on around her.

"I'll get you some brownies and a glass of milk," said John, in a firm voice.

Abby numbly nodded "yes," and her father disappeared into the rather lengthy lunch line to get her food.

"Have you seen Jake, Uncle Terry?" she wondered.

"I saw him," soberly replied her uncle. "The pass that Dick brought, enables two people at a time to see Jake for thirty minute intervals. I don't know how Dick managed it, but you can stay in there for as long as the hospital visiting hours permit."

"How did Jake look?" she ventured.

"Jake's been through a lot, Abby," Terry carefully explained. "On top of his two broken ribs, Jake's face is all swollen and bruised; he has a broken finger, and he suffered a dislocated shoulder. Abby, he's on so many painkillers that I don't think he's been conscious since before he was airlifted from the prison hospital."

Just then, John returned with Abby's milk and brownies.

"Dad," she protested, "I'm really not hungry."

"Eat," he ordered her. "Jake isn't going anywhere. Right now, the best thing you can do for him, is to keep your strength."

Reluctantly, Abby did as she was told. It took ages too long, but she finally managed to swallow the last of the over-sweet chocolate squares, and gulp down the glass of cold milk.

"I'll go ask the doctor if it's all right for you to see Jake, now," said John, getting up from the table.

Knowing the way, Terry took Abby down a long hall, to a closed door where Deputy Casey was standing guard.

"I'm really sorry about Jake," Casey apologized to his old fishing buddy.

"Do they know who did this to Jake?" she asked.

Casey looked embarrassed.

"I heard Jake was put into a cell with a convicted rapist who's serving three life sentences," he confided in a whisper. "That's off the record, though. It's only a rumor."

John soon returned with Dick and the go-ahead from Jake's doctor.

"Here's her visit pass," said Dick, handing the paper to Casey.

With a nod, Casey stepped aside and quietly opened the door for Abby.

"Do you want me to come?" offered John.

"No, Dad," resisted Abby, "I want to be alone with him for awhile."

Inside the hospital room, Abby saw someone she hadn't seen since he had been led away in handcuffs, over a month ago. As she first glimpsed the badly swollen face that Terry had tried to prepare her for, the young wife covered her mouth in horror. It was so disfigured, that Abby could hardly recognize her husband. Timidly, she closed the door, and quietly walked to Jake's bedside. His eyes were closed and his chest was slowly moving up and down. Even though he was unconscious, Abby could hear the pain as his body bravely fought for each anguishing breath.

"Jake," she whispered, "it's Abby."

When he showed no indication that he had heard her, Abby quietly placed a chair beside his bedside and watched him sleep.

"Jake," Abby murmured quietly, more to herself than to him, "I love you."

At the sound of those three powerful words, Jake's eyes suddenly opened.

When Abby looked up from her reverie, her gaze suddenly met his. He may have been unrecognizable, but those were the same brown eyes that Abby had known and loved so well! With tears streaming down her cheeks, she got up and bent over his swollen face.

"You're going to be all right," she smiled tenderly.

Abby started to caress him, but quickly withdrew her hand when she remembered his aversion to human touch.

"Abby," he whispered, in a barely audible voice. She put her ear to his lips, and listened as Jake painfully inhaled each breath to form the words, "I love you."

"I love you back," she smiled, wiping the happy tears from her eyes.

"I had to disobey you," he slowly continued, so that Abby had to put her ear to his lips in order to make out what he was struggling to say. "I couldn't do it."

"What couldn't you do?" she wondered, trying to keep from all-out weeping, for she was having a hard enough time understanding him, as it was.

"Go home with Jesus," came his labored reply.

Wide-eyed, Abby looked at him in astonishment!

"Then, it was you I felt in the waiting room!" she softly cried in surprise.

Jake smiled weakly at her. Abby desperately wanted to kiss him, but wisely refrained herself. As he took in another gulp of air, his face suddenly contorted in pain.

"Just breathe, Sweetheart," she gently coaxed.

Jake looked up at her one more time, and then passed out.

When Abby frantically cried for the doctor, he tried to explain that he had already given Jake all the painkillers that he could.

"I'm afraid Jake has many long months of recuperation ahead of him, Mrs. Murphy."

Abby looked longingly at her unconscious husband.

As the second visitor allowed in the hospital room, John stepped inside with the approval of Casey.

"Dad," Abby excitedly whispered to her father, "Jake spoke to me! He said he couldn't go with Jesus!"

John smiled sadly at his tired daughter. Surely, she was under too much strain. Realizing that he didn't understand, Abby kept the remainder of her joy to herself. She knew that Jake knew, and that was more than enough.

While John searched the dimly lit room for the second chair that he knew was around somewhere, the door opened, and Dick's excited face appeared.

"Could I trouble you both to step outside for a minute?" he asked in a loud whisper.

With a heavy sigh, Abby tore herself from Jake's bedside and followed her father into the hall.

"You won't *believe* who I just had a phone call from!" cried Dick, running a hand over his balding head. "Governor Smith!" he continued, not waiting for anyone to guess.

"Governor Smith'?" repeated John in surprise, as Terry and even Casey stepped forward to hear what was being said.

"Governor Smith called to pay his condolences to you and your family, Abby," he related, "and to inform you that the parole board has recommended that Jake's sentence be commuted to 'time served'! The governor is approving Jake's commutation, this very day!"

"I don't understand," replied Abby, struggling to comprehend his words. "What does that mean?"

"It means, Abby," said Dick, taking her hand and shaking it wildly, "that *Jake is a free man!* He won't have to go back to prison! In a few short hours, Jake will be as free as you and me!"

"Do you mean," asked Abby, more dazed than ever, "that Jake won't have to spend seven more years in that place?"

When the young woman saw Dick, John, Terry, and even Casey broadly grinning back at her, Mrs. Abigail Murphy passed out.

"He [God] hath looked down from the height of His sanctuary; from heaven did the LORD behold the earth; To hear the groaning of the prisoner; to loose those that are appointed to death; To declare the name of the LORD in Zion, and His praise in Jerusalem."

~ Psalm 102:19-21 ~

"If the Son [Jesus] therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."

~ John 8:36 ~

Chapter Twenty

Tears and Blessings

"Be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the LORD."

~ Psalm 31:24 ~

When Abby finally regained consciousness, she found herself on a hospital bed for the second time that day.

"You had quite a spill, young lady!" exclaimed Dick, as John hovered nearby with the other men. Abby winced as a nurse parted the young woman's hair with her fingers to get a good look at the scalp.

"Your skin's not broken," announced the nurse, "but you're going to have a good bump on your head for awhile."

"Are you feeling any better, Sweetheart?" asked John, stepping forward after the nurse had left.

"I think so," whimpered Abby, a little embarrassed that she had received such good news in this fashion.

"You should have seen yourself, Abby!" grinned Terry. "The second you realized what was going on, you became as stiff as a board and keeled right over! It was like watching a tree toppling over-- *timber!*" At this, Dick and Casey chuckled good-naturedly. After all the hard things that Jake had had to endure behind prison bars, he was actually going to be set free!

"Is it really true, Dad?" asked Abby, still a little dazed.

"It's true," he smiled, hugging his daughter in joy. "Praise God, it's true!"

It was too much. Hiding her face in her father's strong arms, Abby wept. Terry brushed away some tears of his own, and led Dick and Casey into the hospital hallway, so his adopted niece could recover in privacy.

"Abby's had a lot to endure," sighed Dick, sympathetically. "At least, the boy's getting out. We can thank God for that!"

"Amen," agreed Terry. "What happened, Dick? Why are they letting Jake go now? What happened to cause this change?"

"Governor Smith didn't actually come right out and say it," explained Dick, "but I think he was embarrassed that the star witness for the prisoner abuse hearing was beaten and raped by an inmate serving three life sentences, *after* he had testified against the penitentiary. Did you know that he's HIV positive?"

"Who, *Jake*?" asked Terry, wide-eyed with horror.

"No, the inmate," explained Dick. "What's his name again? It's on the tip of my tongue..."

"You mean, Alex Walters," finished Casey, folding his arms in disgust, for up until now, he had only thought it was rumor. "So it's true, then. They really *did* put Jake in there with that monster."

"Alex Walters?" breathed Terry in dread. "You mean the man everyone called the Bayside Rapist-- *that* Alex Walters?"

Many years before Abby was even born, much of Upstate New York had been plagued by a serial killer who had been nicknamed by the media as the "Bayside Rapist," because he left his lifeless victims floating in Henderson Bay, which was just south of Three Mile Bay. The brutality of this individual had captivated the newspaper headlines for five months, until Alex Walters was caught attempting to assault a woman in her own bed. She was only saved by her husband, who had just arrived home from a late night at the office. Alex Walters was sentenced to three consecutive life terms in prison, without the possibility of parole. Terry hadn't heard Alex Walters' name in years... until now.

"I think," said Dick, in a hushed, thoughtful voice, "that Governor Smith is running scared. It couldn't have happened at a worse time for him. This is election year, you know."

Terry collapsed into a nearby chair and buried his face in the palms of his hands.

After Abby had an hour to calm down, she pulled from her father's arms and insisted that she return to Jake's hospital room. As John led her out into the hall, he saw Terry's horrified face and immediately knew that there was some news to learn. He was about to ask his friend what it was, when Terry quickly shook his head while Abby had her back turned to him. Understanding that he didn't want to speak in front of Abby, John helped her locate Jake's room.

"Do you need me to stay?" asked the father, as Abby was about to step inside.

"No, I'm all right, Dad," she smiled bravely. "You can go."

"He probably isn't awake," pointed out John.

"I know," replied Abby, "but I want to be there when he opens his eyes again."

John tenderly kissed his little girl on the forehead and went back to find Terry.

Somehow, with the news of his freedom, Jake's dimly lit hospital room no longer seemed as sad as it had before. As Abby approached her husband's bedside, she noticed for the first time a thin, clear tube running beneath his nose.

"Nurse?" asked Abby, as a man entered the room to check a medication drip that ran from Jake's left arm. "What is that tube under his nose for?"

"That's for oxygen," explained the man in a hushed voice. "Mr. Murphy was having a little difficulty breathing."

"Oh," replied Abby, soberly.

The young woman pulled a chair beside Jake's bed and watched as his chest slowly moved up and down with each breath.

"Would you like me to open the venetian blinds so you can get a little light?" kindly offered the nurse.

Abby smiled thankfully, as the man went to the window and opened the blinds. The late afternoon sun filtered through the hospital window, and Abby could see tiny specks of dust float in the air and land on the white sheet that covered Jake's torso and legs. The peaceful stillness of the room slowly lulled her into a tired yawn. Folding her arms on Jake's mattress, Abby leaned her head down and sighed. The rustling leaves on a tree outside the window, cast their shadows onto the hospital floor. For several minutes, Abby stared at these moving shadows, and daydreamed of the time when Jake would come home. Before long, she fell asleep.

Through the stupor of a drug induced slumber and pain medications, Jake sensed Abby's presence and slowly opened his eyes. Since he was flat on his back, he couldn't see her from his vantage. Disappointed, Jake moved his right hand and grimaced. His shoulder felt as though it were on fire, and his hand throbbed with pain. Trying to maneuver his arm into a more comfortable position, Jake moved it once more, only to bump into something warm and silky on the bed beside him. Even through the pain, he was curious. Jake carefully moved his fingers over the soft object, until he realized that it was someone's hair that he was feeling. With great effort,

and not a little discomfort, Jake raised his head long enough to see Abby, half resting on his mattress. With a smile, he let his head fall back onto the pillow and sighed euphorically. She *was* here, after all!

A tear rolled down the side of his face and fell into his ear. It was quickly followed by another and another, until Jake was gasping in pain, for the tears wouldn't stop coming and his broken ribs made each sob extremely agonizing. Hearing these gasps, Abby woke up and found Jake weeping and writhing in pain at the same time.

"Jake," she told him, trying to keep her voice gentle and reassuring, "you've got to stop crying. You're only making things worse." She tried to comfort him by caressing his face, but Jake quickly pulled away from her touch. "Do you want to hold my hand?" she offered, hopefully. Jake adamantly shook his head "no," and closed his eyes.

Helplessly, Abby remained close to his bedside, unable to give her young husband any comfort than that of her presence.

When the tears finally stopped and the pain had settled down a little, Jake opened his eyes. His gaze traveled the room until he located his Abigail. As their eyes met, she smiled sadly.

Struggling to get enough breath into his lungs to form words, Jake moved his lips while his broken ribs did their best to make it as painful for him as possible. Seeing that he was trying to speak, Abby stood up and bent over his mouth to hear him better.

"You're going to be sorry I came back," he breathed softly.

"Don't say that," she scolded him, her blue eyes flashing indignantly at the injured young man. "One more word like that, and I'll go! I mean it, Jake Murphy! I'll walk right out that door!"

Jake knew she meant it and smiled faintly. Oh, how he loved her! He closed his eyes groggily, and just barely heard Abby's voice coaxing him back to consciousness.

"Can you hear me, Jake?" she asked. "I know they've got you on a lot of drugs right now, but I have something important to tell you."

Jake wet his lips and struggled to look at her with both eyes open.

"You don't know yet," he whispered.

Not knowing what on earth he was eluding to, Abby pressed on and told him the good news. To her utter amazement, Jake showed no signs of delight. "Don't you understand," she cried, "you're a *free* man!"

Jake shut his eyes as his face twisted in pain.

"Get the doctor," he requested.

Confused, Abby did as he asked. Thinking that he hadn't heard her through the medications he was on, Abby was about to try again when the doctor arrived.

"Tell her," Jake mumbled to the physician.

"Tell me what?" she asked, suddenly feeling uneasy.

"A short while ago," explained the doctor, "we learned that the last inmate to have sexual contact with your husband, has previously tested positive for HIV."

In a split second, Abby felt the room spin about her. Sinking helplessly into her chair, she looked at Jake's quiet face and then back to the doctor.

"Do you mean AIDS?" she asked.

"HIV is the virus that causes AIDS," he explained. "I'm going to put Jake on some antiviral drugs to slow down the progression of the virus, just in case he *is* infected."

"Then," whimpered Abby, "Jake might *not* have the virus?"

"From the extent of his injuries," sighed the doctor, trying to offer hope but remain realistic at the same time, "it's difficult to say. Jake was assaulted several times, and it's hard to determine which injuries came from which inmate. Even before Jake had been placed into the same cell as Alex Walters, your husband had suffered enough sexual related lacerations, that it's entirely possible for him to have been infected by the last inmate that he came into contact with."

Abby put her hands over her ears and tried to shut out the thoughts that came rushing in. The possibility that Jake could have HIV, was almost more than she could bear. She hadn't yet associated Alex Walters' name with the Bayside Rapist, so his name didn't instill the same dread in her as it had in Terry and John.

Suddenly, Abby became acutely aware that Jake was intently watching her reaction. Seeing that she was only causing him more anguish, the young woman took a deep breath and relaxed her posture. She didn't know how yet, but she had to believe that God was going to get them through this. A still small voice reminded her of a verse from Deuteronomy chapter seven, verse nine: "Know therefore that the LORD thy God, He is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love Him and keep His commandments to a thousand generations." The faithful God. Abby grabbed onto those words with all her heart.

"When will you know if Jake is HIV positive?" she asked, struggling with every nerve in her body to be brave in front of Jake.

"Normally, it would take three to six months," answered the doctor, "but your husband doesn't want to wait that long. While you were out of the room a little while ago, one of the orderlies told him about his sentence being commuted. It was then that Jake requested a viral load test."

"I don't understand," replied Abby, struggling to keep up.

"You see," explained the physician, "a viral load test looks for the virus itself and not the antibodies to the virus, as the standard tests do. Until Jake knows if he's infected or not, he couldn't have sexual intercourse with you for at least six months. A viral load test is much quicker, so you both wouldn't have to wait as long."

Upon hearing this, Abby looked to Jake in surprise.

Unable to withstand the situation, the poor man closed his eyes to escape.

"Will you recommend the test?" she asked, feeling a familiar hope stirring within her.

"Yes, I am," answered the doctor with a knowing smile. "I think that after all he's been through, this isn't an unreasonable request. However, Jake," he warned, turning to his patient, "make sure you give those ribs a good chance to heal, first. You'll be able to tell by the level of pain you're in, if sex is a good idea, or not."

After the doctor left, Abby turned to her young husband, who was still trying hard to avoid her questioning blue eyes.

"He's assuming a lot," Jake breathed slowly. "I never told him it was because of that, Abby."

"Take it easy," she assured him. "At least we'll soon know if you're infected."

Relieved that Abby wasn't going to press the question, Jake relaxed a little. In small, labored breaths, he began to relate some of his experience the day before.

"Walters kicked me in the ribs," recalled Jake. "I broke my finger when I tried to shield myself from his blows. Then he took my right arm and dragged me across the floor to his bed. The pain from my chest was so bad that I passed out, and he let me alone. When he came at me later that day, I couldn't fight him off. Abby, it was awful."

"Did you know," she informed him, wanting to see what his reaction would be, "that because of your history, the hospital has considered placing a suicide watch on you."

"They're crazy," smiled Jake. "I want to live too badly, to give up now. I hope I don't have HIV, Abby. I want to come home, but not like that." Here, Jake paused, trying to wait for the pain in his chest to subside before continuing. "Life is such a wonderful gift," he panted. Even though each breath had been agonizing, his desire to talk to Abby had been even greater. Now that the pain was coming on stronger than before, the young wife realized he needed to stop.

"That's enough talking for now," she instructed him, gently tucking a loose end of his white sheet back under the mattress. "Don't let this news get to you, Jake. The Bible says that all things work together for good, and I'm going to hold God to that promise. I'm like Jacob wrestling with the Angel-- I'm not going to let go until He blesses us."

"He already has," smiled Jake, now only half conscious from his medications.

"I'm waiting for the rest of it to come true," Abby said quietly, as the tired man stopped struggling against the drugs in his system and slipped back into sleep. When she was sure that he could no longer hear, she bent over him and gazed longingly at his swollen face. "I'll wait for you, Jake," she whispered. "I'll wait for as long as it takes. Only, don't take any longer than you need to, before you reach for me."

Abby sat down in the chair beside his bed and waited a few hours more before John appeared in the hospital doorway and asked if she were ready to eat dinner. Reluctantly, Abby went with her father. Jake wasn't awake, and she *was* hungry.

In the hospital cafeteria, Abby found Terry and Dick, intently talking to one another.

"Governor Smith called," Dick grinned to her. "The paperwork is through, and it's official-- Jake is a free man!"

With a weak smile, Abby sat down at their table. So much was happening in so short a time, that the finality of Jake's release almost seemed anticlimactic.

"Have you told Jake about his sentence being commuted?" asked John, as he set a dinner tray in front of his daughter.

"He already knew," replied Abby. "An orderly told him."

"Good news sure travels fast in this place," chuckled Terry.

"Did you hear that the man who did this to Jake was Alex Walters?" wondered Dick, in a sober voice.

"Yes, the doctor told me," replied Abby, starting in on a slice of cold meat loaf.

"Isn't that something?" sighed Terry in astonishment. "Who would've thought that anyone would put Jake into the same cell as the Bayside Rapist?"

Aghast, Abby looked up at her uncle. Suddenly, she found herself unable to swallow the meat loaf. After quickly taking a drink of water from her glass, Abby shook her head in disbelief.

"Alex Walters is the Bayside Rapist?!" she cried. "I thought the name sounded familiar, but I didn't know why until now. *Dear God, what were they thinking!*"

Dick remained silent, unwilling to speculate out loud why Jake had been placed into the same cell with such a violent sex offender. He quietly made a vow before God, that Jake's sacrifice would not be for nothing.

After the horror had a few minutes to sink in, Abby decided to let it go. She didn't want to waste her attention on the likes of Alex Walters, or expend precious energy on anger. Jake needed her too much.

When she had collected herself, Abby related to her father and the other two men, what the doctor had told her about Jake and his risk of having been infected with HIV. She told them about the viral load test, but decided at the last minute to leave out the reason *why* Jake's doctor had said he was prescribing it.

"It's in God's hands," sighed John, shaking his head wearily. He added an encouraging thought, but Abby didn't hear it. The high emotions of the day were beginning to take a toll on her. Even

though she had had some rest earlier, Abby still felt worn out and exhausted. The young woman half wanted to find a corner somewhere, and curl up to have a good cry.

When John saw that his daughter wasn't going to finish her dinner, they returned to Jake's room until visiting hours were over.

On the drive home, Abby comforted herself with the thought that Jake hadn't awakened since he fell asleep during their conversation that late afternoon. Abby was hopeful this meant he could pass the night undisturbed from physical, or emotional pain.

After the jeep pulled up to the Johanneses' home, John stopped the engine and took the keys from the ignition.

"Tonight, I think you should sleep in your old room," he said thoughtfully, handing the keys to his daughter.

Abby climbed out of the jeep and looked across the way to the little yellow house. The small building with the sad dark windows stared back at her, as if waiting for her to return to where she belonged.

"I'll be all right, Dad," she assured him. "I can manage on my own."

With a tired sigh, John followed Abby and Terry inside where they found Izumi and Mrs. Hopkins talking in the master bedroom, while Mr. Hopkins lay on the living room couch, sound asleep.

"How's my baby holding up?" asked Izumi, reaching out to give the young woman a great big hug. "Your father called every hour to keep me up to date on all the news," she sighed, "but, I wish I could have been there, just the same."

"My little sisters needed you to stay home," smiled Abby, tenderly touching Izumi's large belly.

"Abby, do you think Jake would be up to any visitors, tomorrow?" inquired Mrs. Hopkins, as her husband stirred from his nap in the living room and began to talk with John.

"I don't know how much good it'd do right now," hesitated Abby. "Jake's asleep most of the time. Before we left the hospital tonight, I learned that he's on a powerful sedative. The nurse said it was to keep Jake calm, but I think they just don't want to deal with his flashbacks. I can't say that I blame them. God only knows what Jake's going to be like when he comes home... *without* the powerful sedative that's keeping him so calm right now."

At this, Mrs. Hopkins was silent. She simply didn't know how to respond. Abby hadn't intended to unload the truth on her in such a blunt way, but the young woman was so tired, that her company manners were a little impaired.

"Tomorrow is just fine," Abby conceded, after seeing Mrs. Hopkins' disappointed face. This good friend of her mother's had stayed the entire day at the house so the men could be at the hospital. "Everyone's prayers have meant so much to Jake," said Abby gratefully. "If you really want to come, then I'm sure he'd like to thank you as best as he can. I just can't promise how awake he'll be, though."

Mrs. Hopkins gave Abby an understanding hug and dried the tears that were coming to her eyes.

After saying a parting farewell to Izumi, Mrs. Hopkins went to the living room where Mr. Hopkins and John were still talking.

Terry sat on the couch, only half listening to what the other two men were saying. He silently wondered how soon they were going to leave, so he could go to bed.

"Do you really think it's all right to visit Jake in the hospital, tomorrow?" whispered Mrs. Hopkins to John, before stepping out the door. "I know of others who would like to come as well, and show their support."

"I think Jake would appreciate that," smiled John. Then he thanked the couple once again for staying with Izumi that day.

When the front door finally closed, Terry wearily went to his room and shut the door behind him. Along with everyone else, he had had a *very* long day.

After shuffling through the mail on the kitchen counter, John went back to the master bedroom. To his surprise, he discovered that the same young lady who had declared to him just minutes earlier, that she could manage on her own, had crawled onto the large mattress and snuggled into his wife's arms. Tenderly cradling her daughter's sleeping form, Izumi looked up at her husband and smiled contentedly. Realizing that Abby needed her mother tonight, John ruffled his blonde hair, and smiled sleepily at the two women in his life.

"Looks like I'm going to be on the couch," he softly laughed.

When Abby awoke the next morning, she discovered that she had spent the entire night on her parents' bed. Since Izumi hadn't stirred yet, Abby tiptoed to the living room, only to find her

father fast asleep on the couch. After silently thanking John for his sacrifice, Abby quietly stepped outside into the late October air. She strolled onto the beach and looked out on Three Mile Bay, thankfully breathing in the rugged beauty of her surroundings. Just then, a cold breeze stung her nose and kissed her cheeks until they turned bright pink. As Abby pulled up the warm collar on her coat, her eyes spotted a lone gull soaring above the beach, searching for its next meal. The bird reminded Abby of Jake, and how he had enjoyed sketching those birds while she fished. With a longing sigh, Abby went into the little yellow house.

Abby didn't consider what day of the week it was, or her job down at the marina, for her mind was consumed with Jake and his care. Mr. Winkler certainly understood that she was under a lot of stress right now, and didn't think it strange at all when she didn't show up for work that day.

Wanting to get to the hospital for visiting hours as soon as she could, the young wife took a quick shower and changed into fresh clothes. After she dressed, Abby glanced around the untidy house and wondered how long she had to clean it, before Jake would be released from the hospital.

The housekeeping in the little yellow house had suffered greatly since Jake's departure. The carpets were in sore need of vacuuming, and absolutely everything needed to be dusted. Terry had even jokingly scrawled on one of the windows with his finger, "Clean me!" Abby's own bedroom looked as though someone had broken in and turned it upside down, for she hadn't tidied it in weeks. Jake's room, however, was as orderly and neat as the day he had left it. Until now, Abby hadn't realized how much she had come to rely on Jake to keep the house in running order. In his own quiet way, he had looked after her.

Abby walked down the small hallway and opened the door to his bedroom. Since Jake had went away, it had been too painful for her to be in there for very long. But now that she had the expectation of his soon return, she found comfort just standing in the middle of his room. The thought that he would soon be there, gave Abby much joy.

Knowing that she had to exercise some patience, Abby took a deep breath, for she still didn't know when Jake could come home from the hospital. Compared to the seven years she would've had to wait if his sentence hadn't been commuted, Abby knew that it was relatively soon... but *how* soon?

"I probably have plenty of time to clean up the house," she sighed to herself, not wanting to get her hopes up too high.

One thing that couldn't wait, however, was the large saltwater aquarium that stood against the wall of her bedroom. Abby tried to stay on top of its care, and made sure to check her aquatic

pets before leaving. Thankfully, there were no "floaters," and every brightly colored fish was present and accounted for. Content that she wasn't neglecting her little beauties, Abby walked out of the house, and locked up behind her.

Once back at her parents' home, Abby quickly fixed herself a bowl of cereal and gulped down a glass of orange juice. She was in such a hurry, that Terry was almost unable to stop her as she left the kitchen, heading for the front door.

"Hold up," he yawned, trying not to awaken his friend who was still asleep on the couch. "Aren't you going to wait for us?"

Abby looked at her uncle. To her dismay, Terry was still dressed in his pajamas, and his hair was uncombed. She knew that it would take him several minutes to get ready.

"I want to be there as soon as visiting hours start," she explained.

Just then, John opened his eyes and glanced at the living room clock.

"Isn't it a little early?" asked her father, having heard Abby's last comment. "They won't let you in until eight-thirty, Sweetheart. What are you going to do after you get there-- pace in the parking lot?"

Abby really had no idea, but she still wanted to leave. Seeing they were fighting a losing battle, the two men let her go.

"I wonder what the triplets are going to be like," mused Terry, as John got down a box of cereal from the cupboard. "I wonder if they're going to be anything like our Abby."

"God help us if they are," smiled John, wearily.

"By the way," asked Terry, curiously, "why were you on the couch?"

True to John's prediction, Abby arrived much too early and had to content herself with waiting in the parking lot. A few minutes before eight-thirty, she saw her father's car pull up.

"I know, I know," she laughed, walking to their vehicle as John and Terry got out, "you told me this would happen!"

"At least you're saving me the trouble of saying, 'I told you so!'" grinned John, putting an arm around his daughter as the three made their way inside the hospital.

To her delight, when Abby walked into Jake's room that morning, she discovered that he was just waking up.

The young man smiled broadly when he saw her.

"How was your night?" she asked, going straight to his bedside.

"I don't remember it," he whispered, carefully inhaling a painful gulp of air before speaking.

"That's good," Abby nodded to him encouragingly. She wanted to tell him that the powerful sedative was so he could rest without any flashbacks, but decided to hold her tongue. The less said about that, the better.

"How are you doing, Son?" John ventured, stepping forward with Terry at his side. Terry waved to him and smiled. "You know," said John, "I think your face is a little less swollen today, don't you think so, Abby?"

Abby looked back to Jake, while he awaited her verdict.

"I don't know," she smiled playfully, "it's hard to tell. This is pretty much the way he's *always* looked!"

At this, Jake started to laugh. However, his broken ribs quickly cut the laughter short, and he had to wait for a few minutes before the pain started to back off a little.

"I'm sorry," she apologized.

Jake smiled weakly at her, and for awhile, they just gazed at each other. Neither one said a word, for words were unnecessary. Jake hungrily drank in her deep blue eyes, and sighed longingly, despite the throbbing in his ribs. Deep down, Abby knew he was wishing that he could be normal.

"It's all right," she quietly assured him, touching the sheet a few inches from his hand. "We love each other. That's all that matters."

The ex-convict closed his eyes, and bit his bottom lip. This time, Abby knew it wasn't out of physical pain.

By now, John and Terry were beginning to feel like intruders. Just as they were about to wait in the hall, Abby noticed for the first time a large vase of yellow chrysanthemums and white daisies near Jake's bed.

"Who's this from?" she asked, picking a white printed card from the bouquet. "Dad," she called to him, "I think this is from one of your friends." Abby handed the card to her father, for she didn't personally know the sender, but was familiar with their name.

As John showed the card to Terry, an orderly carried in another vase of flowers and set it beside the first bouquet. It was soon followed by another, and yet another. As AJ wondered over this, Mr. and Mrs. Hopkins appeared in the hospital doorway, with a bouquet of their own.

"Hello," greeted Mrs. Hopkins, as she came forward to hug Abby. "We thought we'd stop by and see how Jake was doing!"

The couple awkwardly smiled at the prostrate young man with the swollen face. The Hopkins were good friends of the Johannes family, so they knew Jake and the circumstances of his past. Since Jake always had the tendency to quietly stick to Abby, many people didn't know him as well as one might have expected, given the closeness of the two families, for Agatha (Mrs. Hopkins) was one of Izumi's closest and dearest friends in Three Mile Bay.

"Thank you for praying for me," breathed Jake.

"We know you're in a lot of pain right now," replied Mr. Hopkins, "so you don't need to talk. Just hurry up and get better."

As John explained to the Hopkins the extent of Jake's injuries, two familiar faces appeared in the doorway. Sheriff Peterson and his wife stepped inside and were warmly greeted by everyone. When the Sheriff saw Jake's bruised face for the first time, he momentarily lost his composure. When words failed him, his wife interceded.

"We're so sorry for what happened to you, Jake," she said, apologetically. "We've been praying for you, and hope you'll get well very soon."

Sheriff Peterson left his wife, and went to Jake's bedside.

"I'm sorry, Son," he said, in his gruff but compassionate voice. "The system failed you. But, as long as there are people in this country who are willing to do the right thing, because it IS the right thing, then, well, I think there's still room for hope." Just then, Dick and his wife showed up. Sheriff Peterson looked up at them and then back to Jake. "As I said, I'm really sorry."

Jake lifted his head and breathed,

"I'm not. I'm not sorry I testified. Like you said, it was the right thing to do." After he said these words, Jake collapsed back onto his pillow. As his face twisted in pain, Abby straightened his sheet and watched him helplessly.

"There's too many visitors in here," announced a nurse, coming into the hospital room to give Jake more medication, for it was beginning to wear off.

"We were just leaving," said Mrs. Hopkins, giving Abby one last hug before she and her husband left. "Stay strong," she whispered to the young woman.

"We've already said our hellos," Sheriff Peterson said to Dick, "so you go ahead and stay. I'll see you in church, AJ!" And with that, the Peterson's left as well.

"Jake, I think you're looking a little better today," Dick said rather hopefully.

"When do you think Jake can come home?" Abby asked the nurse.

"If there's no complications," said the woman with a smile, "then the doctor says your husband can go home on the first of next month. He'll have to stay in bed until he's healed enough to move around, of course," she quickly added.

Abby beamed at Jake and sighed happily. He was coming home on the first of November! Even though he had heard the good news, Jake was succumbing to the effects of the drug, and was slipping into unconsciousness. He only smiled faintly before falling asleep. Abby was the last image he saw before closing his eyes, and the memory of her face would remain in his heart until he awoke.

At noon, Abby, John, and Terry went to the cafeteria to eat lunch. For the first time in a while, Abby needed no prompting to eat her meal. She was overjoyed at the prospect of taking Jake home, and had no problem finishing her food. On the cafeteria wall, she noticed a calendar and eagerly went to it, to count the number of days that were left in the month of October. One, two, three, four. There were four days until November first. Abby could hardly wait!

While Jake continued to sleep later that day, his doctor discussed with Abby and her family the release date that he had set for Jake. There were anti-inflammatory medications that needed to be continued, to help the mended artery to Jake's heart from becoming infected; there were also

many antiviral drugs that Jake would have to keep taking until the results from his HIV test came back; and then, finally, the doctor said something that Abby had been wondering, herself.

"When Jake goes home," he explained to Abby, "I won't be able to continue prescribing the sedative he's on right now-- it's just too strong. However, I *can* give him a much milder form of the drug, if he feels he needs it. It can only be taken once a day, so I would suggest saving it for the night hours, but that's only a suggestion."

Jake's coming home wouldn't mean that he was fine and healthy, only that the hospital thought he could do just as well at home, as he could there.

The next few days didn't pass fast enough for Abby. The swelling in Jake's face continued to improve, and his wife was slowly beginning to recognize his handsome features once more. She kept coming to the hospital as early as visiting hours allowed, and only left at the last possible moment.

When the morning of November first finally arrived, Abby could hardly contain herself. Today, Jake was coming home!

It was only after Abby had hurriedly dressed and went to the living room to locate the shoes she had kicked off from the night before, that she suddenly realized she had forgotten something important. The house. Its condition hadn't improved in the last few days, and she only had an hour to get it in order before it was time to go bring Jake home.

With one shoe off and one on, Abby quickly limped to the telephone and frantically called her old fishing buddy.

"Uncle Terry," she cried into the phone, "the house is a *disaster*! I can't let Jake come home and see this!"

"I offered to help you a few days ago," reminded her uncle, chuckling in spite of himself. "Okay, I'll come over. Maybe I can round up some more volunteers. Oh, Abigail! It's just like you to wait until the last possible moment, before getting something like this done!"

When the humiliated young housekeeper hung up the phone, she limped to the couch and put on her other shoe. Within minutes, Terry showed up with John, and the three started to clean the little yellow house from top to bottom. Just as Abby was getting out the vacuum cleaner in the living room, a third volunteer knocked on the front door.

"I heard you needed some help," grinned Dennis, looking at the unruly living room behind Abby.

"Thanks," she said in surprise, as he let himself inside, "but won't Mr. Winkler miss you at the marina?"

"On a Saturday?" laughed Dennis, taking off his coat. Seeing what needed to be done, he plugged in the vacuum cleaner and switched it on. Abby had been so preoccupied with the numerical day of the month, that she had lost track of the day of the week. "You've really missed Jake, haven't you?" observed the fly casting instructor over the whirring sound of the vacuum. "By the look of things, this house has missed him, too!"

While John hung up the clothing that was strewn throughout Abby's bedroom, Terry was finally able to erase the "Clean me!" he had scrawled on the window awhile back. As bad as the house was, Abby had saved the worst job for herself... the bathroom. She disappeared into the room and didn't emerge until every inch sparkled-- that is, as much as a bathroom can be expected to sparkle. After cleaning herself up after the bathroom, Abby put fresh sheets on Jake's bed and gave him some extra pillows to make him more comfortable.

As she took one last look about his bedroom, Abby smiled to herself. It was an odd room for someone like her husband. While the barren walls and stacks of spent drawing pads bound with twine reminded Abby of Jake, the high chair, stroller, and car seat from the baby shower that had been stacked into one corner of his room, showed that there was more to this man than just his past. There was the future. Abby hoped that those objects would remind him of that fact in the days ahead.

When the time drew near to drive to the hospital, Abby found herself more nervous than before.

"I'm all done here," announced John, straightening a throw pillow on the living room couch as he walked by.

"Same here," said Dennis, picking up his coat and preparing to leave.

"Thanks for helping out, Dennis," said Abby, gratefully. "Thank you, *everyone*," she added, after Terry had put away the mop and joined them in the living room.

"Are you coming with us to the hospital, Dennis?" asked Terry. "You're welcome to."

"I'm not sure if Jake would want that," hesitated Dennis. "I don't think he likes me very much."

"That's nonsense!" exclaimed Abby, picking up her car keys from the coffee table. "Jake likes you, Dennis. It's only that he sometimes has a hard time showing it."

"A *very* hard time," grinned the fly casting instructor. "It's all right, Abby. I'll stop by sometime later and say 'hello' then."

"Thanks again," said Abby as her friend stepped out the front door.

"Well," sighed John, smiling excitedly at his daughter, "I'd say we were ready."

The three got into Abby's jeep and started into Watertown. The jeep's hard top was on, so Jake would be sheltered from the cold on the drive home. Abby was so anxious, that she barely recognized her own thoughts. As the vehicle made its way down the road, she asked God to hide her nervousness from Jake, for he had enough to overcome without having to deal with her excited jitters.

When the young wife and her family reached Jake's hospital room, they found him lying on his back in bed, staring somewhat groggily up at the ceiling. Abby smiled happily when she saw that he was wearing his old clothes. While Jake was heavily sedated earlier that morning, an orderly had changed the patient out of his hospital gown, and into the long sleeve shirt and jeans that Abby had brought on a previous visit. That one change of clothes made him look more like the old Jake she knew.

"How are you feeling?" asked Abby, immediately going to his bedside.

"Fine, I guess," he replied, a little uncertainly. When John and Terry went into the hall to talk to the doctor for a moment, Jake made a confession to her. "I don't know why," he sighed, "but I'm nervous."

"So am I," she admitted. "Silly, isn't it? We're just going home. There's nothing at all to be nervous about."

Just then, a nurse brought in the wheelchair. With some help from the nurse, Jake very carefully sat up in bed. John and Terry watched, while Abby hovered nearby, ready to help if called upon.

"Do you want to take a moment before getting out of bed?" asked the nurse, seeing the sweat on Jake's face caused from the pain in his chest.

Determined not to let the pain get the best of him, the young man shook his head and slowly moved his legs to the edge of the bed. Jake bravely prepared to stand up. Knowing he would need help, the nurse assisted him to his feet. Abby brought the wheelchair as close to the bed as she could, so he wouldn't have to walk further than he needed. Jake looked at Abby for a moment and resolutely smiled. After he tested his legs for a few moments, Jake slowly made his way toward the wheelchair and sat down.

"Piece of cake," he panted under his breath.

The nurse reached for the wheelchair handles, but Abby beat her to it.

"That's all right," Abby insisted, taking control of the wheelchair, "I've got it."

As she wheeled Jake into the hall, the doctor met them.

"Here's the prescriptions you'll need," he said, handing Abby some paper. "Make sure you follow these directions, to the letter. Those antiviral drugs are serious stuff. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to call."

"I'll be careful," promised Abby, soberly.

"Jake, remember to take it easy," said the doctor, extending a friendly hand to say good-bye.

When Abby saw that Jake was unable to return the gesture, she interceded and shook the doctor's hand in his stead.

Then, Abby pushed Jake's wheelchair down the long hallways and out the main door. A rush of frigid air burst in on Jake, momentarily robbing him of his breath.

"I brought your coat," offered Abby. "Do you want to put it on?"

Knowing that moving his arms would only cause his ribs to hurt more, Jake shook his head, "no."

As they neared the jeep, Jake steeled himself to get out of the wheelchair.

"Do you need any help, Son?" asked John, after Abby had set the brakes on the chair so it wouldn't roll out from under him when he tried to stand up.

"No," mumbled the young man, as he carefully got to his feet. "I think I'm getting better at this."

Abby opened the passenger door up front, and Jake slowly climbed inside. An orderly who had escorted them to the parking lot, returned the chair to the hospital, while John and Terry got into the back of the jeep. Abby climbed behind the wheel and glanced at the nervous young man sitting across from her.

"Before we go home," said Abby, "I need to stop by the pharmacy to pick up the drugs your doctor prescribed. Is that all right with you, Jake?"

"As long as I don't have to get out of the car," he softly breathed.

It wasn't a long drive to the pharmacy, for it was only a few blocks from the hospital. When they arrived at their destination, Abby went inside while John and Terry stayed with Jake out in the jeep.

While Jake waited for her to return, he rested his head on the back of his seat and looked out the window. Just then, a small group of young people his age walked by, all dressed in warm coats, and obviously enjoying each other's company. As he fixed his eyes on this scene, a strange feeling came over him. For the first time in nine years, Jake was looking at the world through the eyes of a free man. He wondered how the outside world would treat him, now that he was no longer on parole. Jake imagined himself among those young people, laughing and talking as though he belonged in their surroundings; but, all too soon, they saw through his disguise, and he was exposed as the outcast and impostor that he was. With a heavy sigh that caused his chest to ache, Jake awakened from this painful reverie. A feeling of self-pity started to overtake him. If he wasn't one of "them," and never would be, what good was this new freedom he had gained?

As the ex-convict anguished over these thoughts, God's Holy Spirit brought to him the following passage from Matthew, chapter five: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy... Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

As Jake's heart began to glow with this fresh comfort from above, some of the promised blessing walked out the pharmacy door and climbed into the jeep, her beautiful face smiling at him the whole way.

"Let's go home," she sighed happily, as they started their journey back to Three Mile Bay.

"I [Jesus] will not leave you comfortless."
~ John 14:18 ~

Chapter Twenty-one

The First Snow of the Season

"He [God] giveth snow like wool: He scattereth the hoarfrost like ashes. He casteth forth His ice like morsels: who can stand before His cold? He sendeth out His word, and melteth them: He causeth His wind to blow."

~ Psalm 147:16-18 ~

As the jeep neared home, Abby glanced at her quiet passenger. She noticed that the nervous excitement in his face was starting to give way to weariness, for he could still feel the lingering effects of the hospital medications. Sedated with drugs and fatigue, the young man was becoming increasingly anxious to reach home so he could finally lay down and let the pain in his chest subside. Just as he began to think that he could wait no longer, Jake saw the small yellow house he called home, suddenly come into view.

"We're home," announced Abby, pulling the vehicle as close as she could to the front of the house. "Do you think you can make it to the front door, Jake? I'm afraid we don't have a wheelchair, like at the hospital."

"I just want to lay down," he softly breathed. Seeing Abby still looked concerned, he added, "I can make it."

John and Terry got out of the jeep and went to Jake's passenger door, ready to help in whatever way they could.

Mentally preparing himself for the pain that would follow, Jake carefully stepped out of the jeep, and weakly stood up in the bracing November air, his knees buckling ever so slightly beneath him. The ex-convict wasn't wearing the coat Abby had offered him earlier that morning, and he was beginning to regret it. The cold effortlessly penetrated his thin, long sleeved shirt, chilling him to his very core.

When Abby joined him on the other side of the vehicle, something small and white, gently floated to the ground. The snowflake was soon joined by its friend, and others quickly followed. Before long, the air was scattered with delicate bits of frosty white.

"What do you know," smiled John, looking up at the overcast sky. "It's the first snow of the season."

"Yeah," added Terry, "but it'll probably melt by tomorrow afternoon."

"Jake, let's get you inside," coaxed Abby. "I should have made you wear that coat. Your body has enough to overcome right now, without catching a cold."

Resisting help from anyone, Jake insisted on walking to the porch under his own power. Racing ahead of him, Abby unlocked the front door and swung it wide open.

"Head straight for your bedroom," she needlessly instructed Jake, walking ahead so she could turn down the blankets and make sure everything was perfectly ready for him.

Terry had been quite excited to show Jake the new fireplace and all its novelties, but he quickly realized that this was not the time. Jake was fading fast, and the sooner he went to bed, the better. Subduing his own excitement, Terry watched as John walked down the hall behind the young man, making sure that he was there to help, if called upon.

As the three men finally entered the bedroom at the end of the hall, Abby folded her arms and sighed.

"Jake," she informed him, "you can't stay in those jeans and shirt."

"But, I always sleep in day clothes," Jake weakly protested, sinking down onto the edge of his bed.

"Dad bought you some nice, long nightshirts," continued Abby, trying to sound upbeat. When Jake opened his mouth to resist, she went to his dresser and pulled out one of the white garments. "You can't bend over," she pointed out, "so this will make trips to the bathroom much easier for you. And unless you're ready for someone to help you in the bathroom, just stand in the shower when you need to clean yourself, all right?"

"If you say so," sighed Jake, for he had to admit that she was making sense. "Just let me lay down for awhile," he whispered, ready to recline that very instant. "I'm so tired, Abby."

"Oh, no you don't!" exclaimed his wife. "I want you to change into that nightshirt BEFORE those painkillers from the hospital wear off any more. Now, do you want me to help, or Dad and Uncle Terry?"

Even through his fatigue, Jake glowered at her defiantly.

"There's no use in looking at me like that," replied Abby, more adamant than before. "You know this must be done."

"I can do it myself," he mumbled, numbly reaching up to unbutton his shirt. After his fingers fumbled around for the first button, Abby knelt down and took over. She could feel Jake's eyes glaring down at her at this invasion into his physical privacy. Abby, however, was not to be deterred. She was determined to get him into the nightshirt before the powerful sedative from the hospital *completely* wore off; the young woman knew he was unable to do it on his own, and guessed that it would be much harder for anyone to get this close to him if he were fully awake. When the last button was undone, Abby took off Jake's shirt, and tossed it aside.

It was the first time she had seen the scar on his chest where the doctors had operated, but she wisely pretended not to notice it. Jake was feeling self-conscious enough, as it was.

Not losing a moment more, Abby slipped his head through the opening of the oversized nightshirt and carefully guided his arms into the generous sleeves. Under the circumstances, Jake thought he was taking this fairly well. However, when Abby went to unfasten his pants, the poor man protested.

"I've seen you in your boxers, before," she said, sliding his pants down beneath the nightshirt to keep his privacy.

Jake weakly looked up at John and Terry, who were both quietly standing nearby. He winced with stiffness as she lifted first one foot and then the other from his pant legs. Jake closed his eyes wearily. If everyone would only leave him alone so he could get some sleep. He was so tired.

"There, all done," sighed Abby, gathering his shirt and jeans and hanging them in the closet. (This was more respect than she showed her own clothing.) "The next time you use the bathroom, just leave your boxers on the floor," she instructed him, in a voice of authority. "You don't need underwear while you're in bed."

"It's a good thing for you that I'm tired," Jake muttered under his breath. Even as he said these words, his eyes started to close. "I never would've let you get away with that. No one takes off my pants, but *me*."

"Stop talking and lay down," replied Abby, fluffing his pillow one last time.

Seeing no need to resist this piece of advice, Jake stretched out on the bed and let Abby cover him with the warm blankets. A few minutes on his back, however, soon revealed a new problem.

"I can't breathe," he gasped, struggling to sit up while suffering more agonizing pain in the attempt. Quickly coming to his rescue, John helped Jake to sit up straight in bed. There was no

oxygen tube to help him breathe, as at the hospital, and Jake was beginning to panic through the fog of sedatives, pain, and fatigue. What would he do if he couldn't sleep?

"Maybe he can sleep sitting up," suggested John, as the young man wearily rested against him for support. "Stack the pillows behind his back, Abby." John cradled the ex-convict tenderly, and gave him a reassuring smile. "Take it easy, Son," comforted his father-in-law. "You're going to be all right. Just hold in there a little while longer."

Abby quickly gathered all the bed pillows she could find, and arranged them into a gentle incline behind Jake.

"Lean back," she coaxed her tired husband. "Is that better?"

When John lowered Jake onto the mountain of soft cushions, the young man cautiously took in a small breath of air.

"It's better," he whispered, very much relieved. Now that he could breathe, Jake wearily closed his eyes. It was still morning, and he had already had a long day.

Seeing that Jake was already falling asleep, Abby tucked him in once more and made sure that the baby monitor was on. Then, she and the other two men quietly left the bedroom so he could sleep in peace.

"Well," smiled Terry in a hushed voice as they regrouped in the kitchen, "he's home! Jake is *actually* home! If he were feeling a little better, we could throw a party!"

"What he needs now is rest and quiet," pointed out Abby, urging her uncle to speak in an even lower tone than he was. "I have to read the directions for the different medications that Jake's doctor prescribed," she continued, looking about for the white bag from the pharmacy. "Now, where did I put it?"

"Here it is," said Terry, handing the plastic bag to her. "Do you want any help with that?" he offered, after seeing the small bottles Abby had to sort through when she dumped them onto the table. "That's a lot of drugs for just one man!"

"Most of it is Jake's antiviral therapy for HIV," sighed Abby. "I have to make a schedule for when he has to take these drugs, and make sure he takes them on time. Thanks for the offer to help," she smiled wearily, "but I'm the one responsible for Jake, not you."

"All right then," sighed Terry, zipping up his coat to leave. "We'll leave you to it."

"If you need anything," admonished her father, "Terry and I are just across the way."

"And don't worry about food," added his friend. "I'll bring over some take-out at noon."

"Be sure you keep the house warm," said John, putting on his coat. "That fireplace is there for a reason. I want you to use it."

After the two had finally exhausted their last-minute advice, they went back to see how Izumi had fared with Mrs. Hopkins while they were away.

When Abby heard the front door close, she sighed contentedly. Everyone was gone, except for herself and Jake. Jake was home-- home where he belonged. There was no more danger of being sent back to prison, for he was now a free man. Abby smiled to herself. Well, maybe he wasn't *entirely* free. She tiptoed back to his room and watched Jake sleep from the half open door. He no longer belonged to the Watertown State Penitentiary anymore, but to *her*, and to her alone.

As the snow softly fell on the rooftop of the little yellow house, a feeling of hope descended on Three Mile Bay. Even people who didn't know of Jake and Abby, noticed it. Maybe it was because this was the first of November, and the holiday season was beginning to take hold with this first snow. Or, perhaps, it was simply because Abby's joy was so great, that it could not be contained within the four walls of their little yellow house; it *had* to spill outdoors and into the hearts of others. Whatever the cause, the people of Three Mile Bay were wearing smiles just a little bit bigger than they usually did that morning.

For several hours, Abby worked out Jake's medication regimen. She carefully read the instructions and wrote down the times and the amount of the drugs he was to take. By the time Terry arrived at the front door with lunch, Abby was just finishing her tedious task.

"Is he awake?" asked the uncle, setting two pizza boxes onto the kitchen table.

"Not yet," said Abby, putting away the last of the bottles into the cupboard. "If he doesn't wake up soon, he's going to be late for his next round of medications."

After Terry had returned to the house across the way, Abby went to Jake's room and peered through the open door. She found Jake in bed, peacefully watching the falling snow outside his bedroom window. When he noticed her standing in the doorway, the young man's face broke out into a warm smile.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, going to the window nearest his bed and opening the curtains all the way so he could better enjoy the view.

"Has it snowed since I was in prison?" he asked.

"No, you came home just in time for the first snow of the season," smiled Abby, getting out another warm blanket and setting it at the foot of his bed in case he became cold. "Uncle Terry brought over some lunch, and it's still hot. Would you like to eat now?"

"Okay," replied Jake, in a quiet voice. He looked back to the window, and a thought suddenly crossed his mind. "Abby?" he asked, as she was turning to leave.

"What is it?" she replied, going back to his bedside.

"Do you celebrate Christmas?" wondered Jake.

"Of course I do!" laughed Abby. "Doesn't everyone?"

"I never have," he answered, looking back at the window.

"Jake," she apologized, "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"You didn't," he smiled.

"I'd better go get your lunch," said Abby, seeing that her husband was still a little sleepy. "Try to stay awake," she requested.

In the kitchen, Abby carefully cut two slices of hot pizza into small bite sized pieces, to make it easier for Jake to eat. Then, she doled out the medication he was to take, and placed it on a tray beside a glass of orange juice with a straw in it. When the tray was ready, she carried it to Jake's room.

"Before you eat," she said, setting the tray over his lap, "you need to take your medication." Abby placed the pills into his mouth and then held up the straw so he could drink. "There's something I've been waiting to tell you," she smiled, sitting down in a chair near his bed while he started in on his lunch. "I was going to tell you over the phone while you were in prison, but Alex Walters... well, everything else followed so quickly, that I decided to wait until you came home before I told you the good news."

Jake looked at her curiously.

"What good news?" he asked.

Abby smiled, her blue eyes twinkling with excitement.

"My obstetrician says we're going to have a boy," she informed him, stealing a small bite of pizza from Jake's plate and popping it into her mouth. "What do you think about *that*? I haven't even told my parents yet, because I wanted you to be the first to know."

"A boy?" repeated Jake in astonishment. "I don't understand. Don't you people always have girls?"

"What do you mean by 'you people'?" exclaimed Abby with an indignant laugh.

"Your mom has had all girls," pointed out Jake, suddenly turning a little pale.

"We aren't my parents," she reminded him with a grin. "What's the matter, Jake? If I didn't know any better, I'd think you weren't happy."

"Are you sure it's a boy?" he asked. "Could it be some kind of mistake?"

"I don't get it," said Abby, in a troubled voice. "I thought you'd be overjoyed to know that you're going to have a son."

"Abby, you don't understand," explained Jake, his face betraying panic. For once, he was speaking louder than he should, and his broken ribs immediately rebelled at this oversight. "I can't have a son," he breathed in a low whisper. "Abby, I don't know how. I'd wind up hurting him the way my father hurt *me*! I can't..." Jake's voice trailed off.

"I think I understand now," sighed Abby. "Jake, you could no more hurt your son, then you could intentionally hurt me," she assured him. "It's just not in you. You're a good man, and you're going to be a good daddy."

"I grew up in terror of my father," whispered Jake, looking out the window at the silently falling snow. "When I grew older, I tried not to let him know how much I feared him, but he always knew. Oh, Abby!" Jake cried in a hushed voice. "How can I *possibly* know how to raise a son?"

"Do the best you can, and I'm sure God won't be disappointed," she said, trying her best to sound encouraging.

For a few minutes, Jake was silent, the remainder of his lunch sitting untouched before him.

"Aren't you going to eat any more?" she coaxed hopefully.

"I'm not hungry," he replied, wincing a little as he touched his still sore shoulder. "Abby," Jake muttered, his face turning as white as the sheets that covered him, "I think I have to..."

Before the young woman had a chance to ask what the matter was, Jake leaned forward and threw up onto the carpet beside his bed. Each heave caused wrenching pain, but Jake couldn't stop until it was completely over. Abby quickly disappeared and returned with a damp washcloth and cleaned his pale face.

"Abby," he whispered in renewed agony, "can I take something for this pain?"

"I'll be right back," she said, racing to the kitchen cabinet for his bottle of prescription painkiller. Abby placed a pill on his tongue and Jake swallowed it down with a gulp of orange juice. When the pain on his face started to ease, Abby began to clean up the mess on the floor.

"I'm sorry," he apologized.

"It's my fault," Abby reproached herself. "I shouldn't have brought up the subject of the baby when I did."

Even though he sorely wanted to talk to Abby, and to hear the sound of her voice, Jake had to close his eyes and rest.

Since he remained asleep for the remainder of the afternoon, Abby kept herself busy by working on the hand tied flies that she had promised Mr. Winkler for the tackle shop. She was about half way through her third pattern, when Abby heard a knock on the front door.

"Is Jake around?" smiled Dennis, as Abby let him inside. "I thought I'd drop by and say 'hello.'"

"I think Jake's asleep right now..." she hesitated.

"Well, in that case, I'll come back later," said Dennis, turning a little eagerly for the door.

"But I'll go see," she quickly added, disappearing down the hallway.

Dennis sighed and looked about the living room he had just helped to clean earlier that day. He had done a good job.

"He's awake," announced Abby, returning a minute later.

With a faint smile, Dennis took off his coat. He followed Abby to where her patient was snugly tucked in bed.

"Just thought I'd stop by to see how you're doing," greeted Dennis, awkwardly accepting the chair that Abby offered him.

Jake smiled politely at the intruder and glanced at the floor. Thankfully, Abby had cleaned up the mess he had made, earlier.

"Nice weather we're having," commented Dennis, desperately searching for something to say to the man. "It's still snowing a little, but I think it'll taper off before long."

A few moments of awkward silence followed.

"Hey, did Abby tell you about the emergency house cleaning we did this morning?" wondered Dennis, suddenly thinking of something interesting to talk about. When he glanced at Abby and saw the embarrassed look on her face, he suddenly realized that she had wanted to keep it from Jake. "Oops! Sorry, Abby," he apologized. "I didn't mean to spill the beans."

"House cleaning?" asked Jake, curious as to what he was talking about.

"You might as well go ahead and tell him," laughed Abby with a resigned sigh.

"Jake, you probably already know this," chuckled Dennis, leaning forward in his chair, "but you have married possibly the worst housekeeper in all of Upstate New York. You should have seen this place! I don't know how Abby lasted as long as she did without you!"

"Really?" asked Jake in surprise. The spotless condition of the house had convinced him that she had managed just fine without him.

"Dennis, I think you're over exaggerating things, just a *wee bit*," protested Abby, smiling even though it was at her expense.

"Good thing she's a better instructor than she is a housekeeper," laughed Dennis. "We're really looking forward to her coming back to work. Abby, you remember Mr. York, don't you? He keeps asking about you, and when you're going to return."

"Abby, when *are* you going back to work?" wondered Jake.

"As soon as you're well enough to stay at my parents' house while I'm away," she answered.

"Well, don't take too long," warned Dennis. "Bass season ends late this month."

"Are you still planning on leaving for the winter?" wondered Abby.

"There's no reason to stay," shrugged Dennis. "You can't fly fish in the snow."

"Tell me about it," sighed Abby.

"That reminds me," asked her friend, "do you have a job lined up after the tackle store closes for the winter?"

"No, I don't," admitted the young woman. "There's been so much happening with Jake lately, that I haven't been able to think about job opportunities very much."

"This probably was none of my business," grinned Dennis, "but I thought you'd most likely need a job, so I took it upon myself to post your resume on an Internet bulletin board. I received a promising response just before I came over to visit. Here, I printed it out for you." The fly casting instructor handed Abby a folded piece of paper, and quietly waited to see her reaction.

Abby looked it over and gasped in surprise.

"They want me to be a *writer*?" she asked, her blue eyes wide with wonderment.

"'Bassin' the Weeds' is a top-notch Internet publication that gets over a million page views every month," explained Dennis, "and has an added magazine circulation that's continuing to grow. It's one of the most popular fishing Internet publications around-- *especially* when it comes to fly fishing. Abby, they're looking for someone who knows a lot about fish, fly casting, fly tying, and is intelligent enough to teach others."

"They want *me* to write articles about fly fishing?" she asked.

"That, and moderate an Internet forum where people ask questions," said Dennis. "From what I hear, it can be a demanding job. But, the best part is, you can work from home. That, and you're getting your name out in front of potential clients who may want to hire you as an instructor in the future."

Abby looked over the website logo, and eyed Dennis suspiciously.

"This logo looks familiar," she mused. "Isn't Archibald Beckman the founder of this publication?"

"Dad started it," confessed Dennis, a little sheepishly, "but he doesn't run it anymore. You could say it's under new management."

"You're taking over the family business?" guessed Abby, with a smile. "Dennis, why on earth didn't you just come right out and say you were offering me a job?"

"I didn't want you to feel as though you had to take it, just because I was the one offering it," he hesitated. "However, I *did* post your resume on an Internet bulletin board. My job offer was the only one I bothered to print out, though..."

"Sooner or later, you knew I would figure out that you were running things," she laughed, "so why hide it, now?"

"Well, by then, I would have known if you really wanted the job or not," explained Dennis, glancing at Jake, who had remained absolutely silent. "Hey," he suggested, "I stopped by your parents' place on my way over, and Terry said you guys had pizza. Got any left?"

"Sure do," said Abby, taking the paper into the kitchen to reread it once more.

When Abby left the bedroom, Dennis looked to Jake.

"While she's gone," said her friend, "I think you and I need to have a talk."

"That's probably a good idea," admitted Jake.

"The main reason I was hiding my connection to the job offer," sighed Dennis, "was because I didn't want you to think I was pursuing your wife."

"I don't think that," denied Jake.

"I'm sorry I tried to keep it from you," apologized Dennis. "It was clumsy, but I didn't know how you would take it, if the offer came directly from me. I realize you've never liked me very much."

"I admit," confessed Jake, carefully inhaling each breath before speaking, "that I haven't been as friendly with you as I could have. When I see you with Abby..." he paused, searching for the

words that conveyed what he was feeling. "I sometimes wish that she and I had never slept together," confided Jake. "Dennis, I'm not the kind of man she deserves, and I know it."

The fly casting instructor was pleasantly shocked by Jake's candor, and decided to return the favor.

"Listen," said Dennis, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Abby wasn't overhearing their conversation, "I have always respected the fact that Abby is your wife. She has never indicated anything to me but friendship, and a genuine love of fly fishing," he explained, his face lighting up with enthusiasm for Abby's talent. "One day, she's going to be famous, and it will be an asset to have her name associated with my publication. Jake, this is a win-win situation for everyone concerned, and could be a big boost to her career. I know Abby can do this, and do it *well*. There's a lot of ideas I've been playing with, but I was thinking Abby could start off by doing a whole series about fly tying and then..."

"Dennis," interrupted Jake, with a patient smile, "I don't need to hear the details."

"How can you NOT be interested?" asked Dennis, who was completely caught up in his own excitement. "The science behind some of the fly patterns is extremely fascinating..."

"Dennis," grinned Jake, "the only time I ever care about fly fishing is when I'm standing next to Abby on the beach, and I can smell the perfume of her hair when the breeze caresses her face."

At this, the instructor paused, and stared at Jake.

"You and I really *are* different," he chuckled. "However, I don't see any conflict of interests here. Maybe, there's still room for us to be friends, after all?"

"There's room," conceded Jake.

Dennis offered his hand in friendship, but soon discovered that his new friend was unable to accept it.

"It's all right," shrugged Dennis, "I understand. By the way, what I said about her becoming famous-- I'd appreciate it if you just kept that between us. I don't want to make her nervous."

Just then, Abby entered the bedroom carrying one and a half boxes of cold pizza.

"What have you two been talking about?" asked Abby, for she had heard a murmur of voices from the kitchen, but was unable to make out what had been said.

"We've been talking about fly fishing," answered Jake, wincing a little as he moved his arm to a different position.

Abby looked at her young husband and laughed.

"Yeah, right," she said, shaking her head at the joke. "Dennis, before I can give you an answer about the job offer, I have to talk this over with Jake."

"If you want the job," said Jake, in a soft voice, "then take it. It's all right with me, Abby."

"It is?" she asked. "Great! See, Dennis? I told you that Jake likes you, he just has a hard time showing it."

The fly casting instructor flashed a grin at Jake and helped himself to some cold pizza after saying grace over the food. It was only an hour before they normally would have eaten dinner, so Abby returned with some napkins and soft drinks.

"Do you feel like eating dinner, Jake?" she asked, opening a can of soda and placing a straw in it for him.

"I'm hungry," he confessed, "but my stomach is still upset. I don't think I could keep anything down right now."

"But, you haven't eaten anything since the hospital," sighed Abby. "Here, maybe some soda will help settle your stomach. When you think you can handle food, let me know and I'll fix you something to eat."

"Do you want me to eat this in another room, Jake?" asked Dennis, already working on a second slice of pizza.

"No, it's all right," sighed the young man. "You can stay."

Disturbed that Jake was still suffering problems with an upset stomach, Abby halfheartedly nibbled at some pizza before setting it aside. Ironically, she was experiencing a little morning sickness, and didn't have much of an appetite, either.

"What painkiller is he on?" inquired Dennis, beginning to feel a little out of place, for he was the only one there who was eating.

"Xantol," answered the young woman, sipping her soda.

"That'd do it," related Dennis. "I once broke my arm, and the doctor put me on Xantol. For about two days, I couldn't keep a thing down. When I stopped taking the Xantol, my appetite returned. Those painkillers can really play a number on your stomach. That's probably Jake's problem."

"Jake, what about it?" she asked. "How badly do you want to eat?"

"I'm not *that* hungry," he breathed carefully, "at least, not yet. Maybe, I'll be a little braver, later."

"I've got to get something in your stomach," said Abby, "Xantol or not. Maybe chicken broth would do the trick. Let me see... the grocery store is still open. Would you both excuse me for a minute? I'm going to call Uncle Terry."

With that, Abby went to the living room to make a phone call. While she was busy, Dennis saw the mess that their impromptu meal had generated, and helped out by cleaning up the pizza boxes and napkins.

"I think I'd better get running," Dennis announced to Jake, after checking the time. "Thanks for dinner. I'm glad we had that talk."

"Thanks for giving her the job," replied Jake.

With a smile and a nod, Dennis went to the living room where Abby was giving a verbal grocery list to Terry over the telephone. Her guest waved good-bye, and then disappeared out the front door in a burst of frigid evening air.

Back in his room, Jake was trying to settle down into sleep, as he had done so easily the other times that day. Oddly enough, however, sleep wouldn't come. Suddenly, an old concern began to creep over him. The hospital had kept him so sedated, that he had never had much of a possibility of going into a flashback. But now, he could tell that whatever strong medication he had been on, was completely worn off. To Jake's dismay, he was feeling more wide awake now than he had in several days, and it frightened him.

"Well, that was a nice visit," announced Abby, entering the bedroom and closing the window curtains, for it was growing dark outside. "Praise the Lord, I'm going to have a job that lets me work from home this winter!" she smiled happily. "Jake, are you feeling all right? You look a little strange."

"I'm fine," he answered in a low voice. "I just want to get some rest."

"Okay," smiled Abby. "When Uncle Terry arrives with your groceries, I'll set them aside until you feel like trying food again. Before you go to sleep, though, you have some medications you need to take."

Abby went to the cupboard in the kitchen, and soon returned with some brightly colored pills and more soda.

"These are part of your antiviral regimen for HIV," explained Abby, placing the pills one by one on his tongue, as Jake swallowed them down with soda pop. "The doctor said I could give you one sedative a day," she offered. "It's nowhere near as powerful as the one you were on in the hospital, but it's better than nothing. Do you want it now?"

"Yes, I do," sighed Jake in relief. "I think I need to use the bathroom, first, though."

"All right," said Abby, trying to hide her nervousness from him. "How much help do you need from me?"

"I can make it on my own," replied the young man. If he had been perfectly honest with himself, he could have added, "I think." But Jake wasn't willing for Abby to touch him in any way, so this was something he had to do by himself.

With the speed of a desert tortoise, Jake got out of bed and made his way to the bathroom. He had stood up very rarely in the last few days, so he was still getting used to how much movement he could get away with, before it would send him into reeling pain.

Abby anxiously hovered nearby, only stopping when he shut the bathroom door in her face. After what seemed like an eternity, Jake reappeared, and slowly returned to his bed. When it was over, Abby could plainly see that he was relieved that he had been able to do it without her help.

"I'll take that sedative now," he requested.

"Do you want another Xantol, as well?" she asked.

After swallowing a very mild sedative and another painkiller, Jake settled back on his mountain of pillows and soon was able to fall asleep. Before leaving his room, Abby double-checked the baby monitor near his bed and left the door half open, as was her custom. Satisfied that she had made Jake as comfortable as she could, Abby went to the living room and used her computer until Terry arrived with the groceries later that night.

"You'd better keep warm, tonight," warned Terry, as he handed her the grocery bag. "The snow has stopped, but it's getting really cold out there."

"Thanks for going to the store for me, Uncle Terry," said Abby, kissing her uncle on the cheek.

"Call me if I can do anything else," smiled Terry. "Your Mom said to tell you 'good night.'"

When Terry had left, Abby set the grocery bag on the kitchen table and locked the front door. She could hear the wind starting to pick up outside the window, and was thankful that her uncle had already returned from his errand. With a tired yawn, Abby changed into her nightgown and climbed into bed. After a thankful prayer to God for bringing Jake home, the young woman soon fell asleep.

A few minutes after three in the morning, Abby was stirred from her slumber by a strange noise coming from the baby monitor. At first, she thought she had imagined it, but when she heard the noise again, Abby knew it was real. Immediately prepared for the worst, she grabbed her robe and raced to Jake's room down the hall.

"Jake?" she called out, bravely stepping inside his dark bedroom. As Abby went to his bedside, she stumbled over something soft on the floor. Half thinking it was some warm bodied animal that had somehow managed to get inside the house, Abby cried out in fright and rushed to turn on the overhead light.

What she found on the floor, however, was no animal. It was Jake. He was lying at the foot of the bed, gasping for air in his sleep, for he had difficulty breathing on his back. Abby quickly dropped to her knees and managed to sit him up, propping his head against her shoulder and letting his arms fall at his side. Gently, she dried the sweat on his forehead with the palm of her hand. This was unlike any flashback she had ever seen. In fact, Abby wasn't sure if this was a flashback, at all. Except for the labored breathing and a little sweat, he showed no signs of distress. Unsure what was going on, Abby decided to wake him up.

"Jake?" she prompted him. "Jake, wake up!"

"I'm awake," he muttered in a terse voice. "What do you want?"

"For starters," she smiled, "what are you doing on the floor?"

The ex-convict opened his eyes and stared up at her, his brow furrowed in thought.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, groggily.

"You're on the bedroom floor," Abby informed him.

Jake blinked his eyes several times and looked about the room. It was true. He was on the floor.

"I remember now," he yawned, "I was dreaming... it was about you, actually..." his voice trailed off in a sleepy daze. As he gradually came to, Jake realized he was propped up against Abby, and made a motion to stand up. However, his efforts were quickly cut short when his chest throbbed with more pain. Not accepting her offer of help, Jake slowly managed to get to his feet, wincing and gasping as he went.

When the man was finally upright, he was embarrassed to find a soiled spot on a sensitive area of his nightshirt.

Puzzled by his sudden awkwardness, Abby's inquisitive eyes searched his face for an explanation.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Did you wet yourself?"

"Not exactly," mumbled Jake, in a barely audible voice. "Do I have another nightshirt?"

Abby looked at the garment he was wearing, and for the first time, noticed the soiled spot. Suddenly, she realized what it meant. Not trying to embarrass him any more than she already had, the young wife went to his dresser and pulled out a clean nightshirt.

"Oh, Abby," sighed Jake, accepting the garment from her outstretched hand, "I wish I could be with you, in more than just my dreams."

"Do you think you were remembering that night?" she wondered out loud, trying to hide her hopefulness.

"No," replied Jake, shaking his head wearily. "It was no memory, Abby-- only wishful thinking. What did you give me before bed, anyway? I swear, one of those pills is messing with me. I've never had such a flood of vivid dreams in my life-- good ones, anyway. Ouch!" he winced, "I'm talking too much... my ribs are hurting again. Could you turn around for a minute so I can change?"

Abby did as he requested, and waited for the "all clear." When he discovered that he couldn't put his arms through the sleeves without some difficulty, he called on Abby, and she discreetly finished the job for him. This was much easier than getting him out of his shirt and jeans earlier

that day, for the oversized nightshirts made it relatively easy to change into without causing a great deal of added discomfort.

"Do you want me to leave so you can go back to sleep, now?" offered Abby, even though Jake didn't seem tired. As a matter of fact, he looked well rested from sleeping so much the previous day, and since the mild sedative had completely wore off by now, he was alert and fully awake. It was the most normal she had seen him since his recent time in prison.

"Don't go," the young man pleaded in a gentle voice. "I'm not ready for you to leave yet."

Upon hearing this, Abby smiled sadly. She hadn't quite known what to expect with Jake's return, but she was finding it surprisingly difficult in unexpected ways. Abby's yearning for him was stronger than she had anticipated, and it tugged at her heart, until she could feel a restless impatience welling up within her. Reluctantly, Abby struggled to push these feelings aside, and willed herself to move forward.

"Does it still hurt very much?" she asked, trying hard to change the subject.

"There's degrees of pain," Jake explained, softly breathing as he went. "When I talk too loudly, or move around too much, it's *extremely* painful. But, if I hold still for awhile, it gets a little better. I haven't really been brave enough to find this out, until now."

"If you're going to be up," wondered Abby, "do you want another painkiller?"

"No," he carefully explained, "it may hurt more, but I'm too hungry to swallow another appetite-killer. Do we have anything to eat?"

As Abby fixed him a light meal in the kitchen, Jake slowly made his way to the living room and gently sat down on the couch. Waiting for the pain in his chest to subside, he patiently leaned his head back and tried to relax.

"I'm heating up some chicken broth," announced Abby, coming into the somewhat dark room, and rubbing her arms to warm herself. "It's chilly in here!" she exclaimed.

Remembering what her father had told her, Abby picked up a small remote from the coffee table. Suddenly, the new fireplace came to life with tall, vivid flames, casting a cozy atmosphere to the room.

"Dad's baby shower gift," smiled Jake, for this was the first time he had seen it in person. "Let *me* try that remote, Abby."

With a sigh, Abby tossed him the remote and returned to the kitchen. If Jake was anything like her father and uncle, she knew what was coming next. At least the house could stand the added heat, anyway.

From his couch in the living room, Jake marveled at the ingenuity of the gas fireplace, and wondered how it managed to control the height of the flames with just a press of the remote button. The curious man would have gotten down on his hands and knees to get a closer look, but his broken ribs forbade it.

While Abby poured the broth into a large mug, she found it difficult to keep her robe on, for the house was beginning to heat up.

"Could you turn that thing down a little?" she shouted from the kitchen. "It's getting hot in here, Jake!"

"Sorry," came a low, muffled voice from the next room.

"Here's your soup," said Abby, silently resenting the romantic atmosphere of the living room as she brought him his mug. "Do you need anything else?"

"You're not going back to bed yet, are you?" he asked.

"Jake, it's after midnight," sighed Abby, in a tired voice. "Oh, I forgot to give you a straw with that broth."

"I don't need one," replied Jake. "Won't you stay with me for awhile, Abby?"

"What for?" she asked. "So you can spot your nightshirt again?" As soon as these words fell from her lips, Abby knew she had just delivered Jake a humiliating blow.

He dropped his head in shame, unable to speak or look up at her.

"Jake," she stammered, "I-- I can't believe I just said that! I'm sorry-- I really am. I didn't mean it."

"Yes, you did," he groaned heavily, resting the trembling mug on his knee. Jake waited for the pain in his chest to back off; the pain in his heart, however, was taking longer to go away.

"I'm sorry," repeated Abby, as tears started to wet her cheeks. "It's so hard for me to wait for you, Jake. I know it's no excuse for the hurtful thing I said, though. I must learn to exercise more patience."

Suddenly realizing what he was putting her through, Jake looked up at his beautiful wife. Even though his current state of health was holding him back from her, Jake knew it was a limited time only excuse. Months from now, he could easily imagine little else changing between them. Abby's confession that she was waiting for him, broke Jake's heart.

From the beginning, love was the one trap that Jake had hoped to avoid in this marriage. But prison had changed that, and her love had pulled him through unspeakable hell. It had been comparatively easy to say, "I love you," into a telephone, or through the stupor of sedatives, but to say it face to face to the woman he loved without the ability to even give her a simple hug-- Jake realized the unfair position he was placing Abby in.

"I had no right to come back," he apologized, hot tears stinging his brown eyes. "I thought we could go back to the way we were, but we can't. I'm so sorry, Abby. I never should have come back."

"Don't say that!" she wept, quickly going to his side and taking hold of his sleeve. "Don't *ever* say that, Jake! We're happy together, aren't we? Even if this is all we'll ever have, it'll be enough-- *I promise, it will!*"

Jake closed his eyes in torment, and pulled his arm free from her grasp.

"Please, leave me alone," he begged in a hushed voice.

"Do you forgive me?" she asked.

"Of course I do," breathed Jake. "Please, just go to bed, Abby."

Soberly, Abby got up from the couch and headed toward the hallway. After a few steps, she paused and looked back at Jake. The young man remained motionless on the couch, his eyes shut, deep in his own thoughts. With a heavy heart, Abby went to her room and closed the door. Dropping onto the bed, she wept into the pillow, trying unsuccessfully to smother the sounds of her anguish from Jake. She knew her husband had forgiven her, but this pain went much deeper than one cruel, careless remark. Jake already had so much to overcome in his life. Oh! why did *she* have to add to his troubles?

An hour and a half after Abby had cried herself to sleep, the front door of the little yellow house opened and then closed. As a solitary figure slowly climbed into an awaiting car, the snow began to fall from heaven, once more blanketing the ground with an icy mantle of white.

"I am my beloved's, and his desire *is* toward me."

~ Song of Solomon 7:10 ~

Chapter Twenty-two

A Time to Love

"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven... A time to weep, and a time to laugh... a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing... A time to love..."
~ Ecclesiastes 1: 4, 5, 8 ~

Mrs. Doyle apprehensively watched as her husband showed Jake to their guest room. Sara hadn't been overly happy with the prospect of inviting someone into her house who was possibly a carrier of HIV, but Dick had insisted. Her husband loved this young man almost like a son, and had eagerly jumped at the chance to help him in any way he could.

In his desperation, Jake had turned to the one man who had saved him before, when in the depths of hopelessness. Dick had been the one to bring Jake to the Lord, and it was to him that Jake had turned to once again.

As the former warden carefully helped Jake settle into the large guest room, he did his best to press for any information that could explain why he and Abby were suddenly having problems. Dick had been shocked to receive Jake's call that night, and wondered what could have possibly happened to make him leave the only real home he had ever known. Dick concluded that it *had* to be Abby's fault.

"Thanks for letting me stay," said Jake, climbing into the oversized bed, still wearing his nightshirt and clutching a bag of medications that contained the dosing regimen that Abby had created. "I'll be out of here as soon as I can."

"You're welcome as long as you want," replied Dick, with a sad shake of his head. "Don't worry, Son. It's common for young couples to have disagreements. She'll apologize-- you'll see."

"We didn't have a fight," whispered Jake, as Dick soberly stood beside the bed with his arms folded. "This isn't Abby's fault. Please, don't blame her."

"Won't you tell me what happened between you two?" implored Dick. "I might be able to help. I'm sure this is just one big misunderstanding. She loves you, I know she does!"

Heartbroken, Jake closed his eyes and tried to keep from breaking down in front of his old friend. With a heavy sigh, Dick left, shutting the bedroom door behind him so Jake could rest in quiet. Unfamiliar with Abby's custom of leaving the bedroom door half open, Dick had closed it

completely. It reminded the ex-convict of how truly alone he was without his Abby. In the darkness of the DoYLES' guest room, Jake wept.

Early that same Sunday morning, Abby woke up to a cold bedroom. Overnight, the temperatures had dropped below freezing, making the entire house unusually frigid. After quickly dressing into warm clothes, Abby walked down the hall to look in on Jake. To her surprise, his bed was empty. Thinking that he must have fallen asleep on the couch, she went to the living room. When Abby saw the empty sofa, she burst into tears.

"Jake!" she wept, covering her mouth in horror. Her long-standing fear had finally come true. Jake was gone, and it was because of her. Unwilling to accept the fact, Abby searched the rest of the house in vain. Just as she was about to check her parents' home, Abby noticed a small note on the kitchen table addressed to her. The young wife snatched up the small piece of paper and read each word carefully.

"Abby," wrote Jake's uneven scrawl, for a broken finger on his right hand was in a splint, "I am going to Dick's house. I'll be fine there, so you don't need to help. Please, don't tell anyone what we said." The note was simply signed, "Jake."

Abby read the note over and over, trying to glean anything out of it that she hadn't already. It didn't surprise her that Dick was the one Jake had turned to. But, it bothered her that from the few lines he had written, one entire sentence was devoted to asking her to stay away. At least, that's the way Abby had interpreted his words. After all, if Jake had wanted her around, he wouldn't have left. To her dismay, "I love you," was nowhere mentioned. Abby knew Jake loved her. She didn't need a piece of paper to prove it. Still, those three words would have gone a long way in assuring her that his absence was only a temporary one.

Abby dried her eyes. At least she knew where he was. This wasn't the same as when Jake was in prison. He was safe. He wasn't home with her, but he *was* safe. Safety was no small issue to Abby, and she was grateful that at least that part of their lives was over. Now all they had to do was move forward. But, how? How do you love a man when you have to keep a distance of a few feet between you at all times? How do you live like that on a daily basis, when all you want to do is put your arms around him? Abby wasn't sure. She abhorred the thought of living without Jake, but was unsure how to live WITH him. Abby sighed. Things were so much easier before love entered the picture!

Just then, Abby heard a knock on the front door. Before she could answer it, Terry stepped inside, all smiles and hugs.

"Well?" he asked, excitedly, "how's he doing this morning?" Before she could say a single word, her adopted uncle continued. "After church today, some of us want to come over and surprise Jake with a small welcome home party! Do you think he'd mind? We'll bring the food..." here Terry paused. He noticed Abby's sad eyes and tear streaked face. "What's the matter-- did he have a hard night?" inquired Terry. "More flashbacks?"

"Jake's gone," explained Abby, detesting the sound of the words as they left her mouth.

"What do you mean?" asked Terry, looking about the room, and then back to Abby. "Are you trying to tell me Jake *left*?!"

"He wrote a note," said Abby, handing Terry the small piece of paper, and waiting as he sped through its contents.

"Okay," he sighed patiently, "what happened?"

"I said something really terrible to Jake last night," she answered, completely ashamed of herself.

"What did you say?" asked Terry. "What could you have possibly said to make that poor man leave?"

"That's the thing he asked me not to tell," explained Abby, glad for a good excuse not to divulge such personal information-- even to someone as close as Terry.

"Are you going after him?" he asked, tossing the note onto the table and looking at her disappointedly.

"He asked me not to," said Abby.

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't," he retorted.

"You don't understand," cried Abby, "I *can't* go after him!"

"Why not?" insisted Terry. "You love him, don't you?"

"That's *why* I can't go," she answered, her eyes beginning to brim with tears all over again.

Terry looked at her thoughtfully.

"This is about sex," he guessed.

"How did you know?" she gasped in surprise.

"It's the only thing I can think of that would drive him from you," sighed Terry. "Tell me you didn't pressure him."

"I didn't," denied Abby, "at least, I don't think I did... maybe I did-- I don't know. But, it isn't just me. I know he's been having the same thoughts as I have. Last night, Jake had a dream..." Abby stopped, suddenly remembering his plea not to repeat what had happened between them. "Anyway," she sighed, "I know he wants me."

Groaning within himself, Terry sat down at the kitchen table across from Abby.

"I don't know why all this is surprising me," he sighed. "I guess I was just hoping that after everything you two had come through, things would somehow mend themselves on their own."

"I wish it were that simple," she replied, staring out the window at the softly falling snow.

"Abby, have you ever wondered why I've never married?" asked Terry.

"You never wanted to leave us," answered Abby with a smile. When Terry remained quiet, she looked at her uncle with curious eyes.

"In the past, I've considered the idea of getting married and starting my own family," he confessed, "but aside from the fact that I've never found the right woman, there was always a small fear in the back of my mind, that maybe I wouldn't be able to be intimate." Terry paused. He rarely talked about his childhood in front of Abby, for he hadn't wanted to burden a little girl with such things. That was no way for a child to grow up-- let alone his dear little fishing buddy.

"Go on," she encouraged him.

"Even after all these years," he finally continued, "I still remember what it feels like to be violated. The very idea that you could relive those feelings at such a private moment as when you're sharing yourself with the person you love-- it's a scary thought. I've never been tortured the way Jake has, or endured the scope of things he's had to survive, and this is how *I* feel. I can only imagine..." Terry's voice drifted off with a heavy sigh.

Abby was silent. Now, she was feeling miserable for Jake AND her uncle!

"Before you go feeling sorry for me," mused Terry, looking at her with a knowing smile, "I want you to understand, that I don't regret a single year I've spent in Three Mile Bay. John, Izzy, you-- you three *are* my family. Even Jake is a part of that now. Abby, I haven't missed out on life. I've watched you grow up into the beautiful, confident young woman you are today. I had a small hand in that."

"If you knew what I said to Jake," she sighed, "you wouldn't want to take any credit for raising me."

"I know my little fishing buddy," smiled Terry. "You'll do what's right."

"What if I don't know what that is?" she asked, in a doomed voice.

"Then ask God for wisdom," advised Terry. "As a survivor of abuse myself, I'd recommend huge doses of love and patience, with a generous helping of understanding on the side. Abby," he said tenderly, "as long as you and Jake don't give up on God or each other, then there's always room for hope. Many survivors are happily married, and have kids of their own. It happens all the time. Just try to keep in mind that people as severely traumatized as Jake, have a lot to overcome. Well," he sighed with a sad smile, "I don't know about you, but I need a hug."

At once, Abby gave her uncle a big hug. In many ways, he was like a second father to her-- always there when she needed a sympathetic shoulder to cry on, and ever encouraging her to follow after God. Now was no exception.

Then Abby remembered to tell Terry the good news about the baby. Suddenly, Terry's eyes grew as wide as saucers, and he smacked the table with the flat of his hand.

"A BOY!" he exclaimed. "Say, we haven't had one of those, yet! Well, well! Our little Abby is going to have a boy! Come next year, we're going to have a bumper crop of babies!" Terry laughed at the thought, and joyfully leaned back in his chair. "If I'm only finding out now, then I suppose you haven't told your parents, yet," he guessed.

"Not yet," replied Abby. "I wanted Jake to be the first to know."

"How did he take the news?" grinned Terry.

"I guess he was happy," shrugged Abby, a little sadly. "Jake is afraid he'll hurt our child the way his father hurt him."

"Give it some time, Sweetheart," consoled her uncle. Just then, Terry looked up at the time and frowned. "I'm going to be late for church," he observed. "John and Izzy were going to stay home anyway, and I suppose you'll want to remain by the phone in case Jake calls."

"I don't think he'll call," replied Abby, toying with Jake's note until the edges of the paper frayed. "But, I'll stay, just in case."

As Terry stood up to leave, Abby asked him not to tell anyone what had happened between her and Jake, for it might embarrass the young man.

"Tell them *what?*" cried Terry. "You never told me *anything!* I was the one who did all the talking!"

The days slipped by, and before Abby knew it, Thanksgiving was staring wide-eyed at her, with timid hopes of a family holiday, together. Dr. Jacoby had kept in touch with Abby, constantly encouraging her to give Jake time to work things out for himself. She shouldn't go against her husband's wishes by intruding on his recovery. This was one instance where the psychiatrist actually encouraged her to keep her distance. When Jake was ready to talk to them, he'd let them know.

Abby struggled to be patient, but it wasn't easy. However, she realized that if Jake was ever going to return home, it would have to be in his own time, and on his own terms. As much as she didn't want to, Abby knew she must wait.

Thanksgiving wasn't the only event that November heralded. In just days, bass season would end. This would signal the snowbird in Mr. Winkler to make his annual migration to Arizona where the winter climate would be decidedly warmer. It also meant that the tackle store would be closed over the long, cold months that lay ahead. If that wasn't enough, Dennis would also be leaving soon, for his contract with Mr. Winkler was nearly over. It wasn't like Abby to feel sorry for herself, but she was already devoid of Jake, now only to lose two more dear friends-- it was almost more than she could bear.

Abby wasn't the only one going through personal hardship. Izumi had ten more weeks to go, before undergoing a cesarean that would deliver her from the months of bed rest that she had been enduring. The doctor had warned that to wait any longer, might endanger the babies' survival. As Izumi's size steadily grew, so did the prayers of her family. The expectant mother's petite frame was beginning to strain under the stress of carrying three babies, and with her previous medical history, there was a very real danger that something could go wrong. This was a high-risk pregnancy, and never did Izumi feel that to be more true, than now.

Two days before Thanksgiving, Dr. Jacoby was called to the Doyles' house in Watertown. The snow had once again melted, but the weather forecast had predicted more of the white stuff for the next week, so these blue skies were fast coming to an end. As the psychiatrist drove to Watertown, he wondered why Jake had suddenly asked for him, after weeks of refusing to even speak on the telephone. However, his questions were soon answered when Dick met him at the front door.

"Did you hear?" the balding man cried excitedly.

"Hear what?" asked Dr. Jacoby, as Dick quickly ushered him inside.

"The test results came back!" Dick half shouted with joy. "Jake doesn't have HIV! His doctor called with the results only minutes ago!"

"Is that why Jake wants to see me?" inquired the psychiatrist, as the former warden led him upstairs to the guest room.

"I wouldn't be surprised," answered Dick. "Jake," he announced, opening the bedroom door, "Dr. Jacoby is here. I'll be downstairs, if you need anything." Grinning widely, Dick closed the door and went to go celebrate the good news with his wife.

On a small love seat beside the window, sat Jake, dressed in faded blue jeans and a long sleeved flannel shirt.

"You're looking healthy," approved Dr. Jacoby, sitting down on the edge of the bed facing his patient. "This rest has been doing you good."

"I'm sorry I didn't speak to you sooner," apologized Jake, now able to speak above a whisper without risking severe pain in his chest. "I guess I just wasn't ready."

"And now that you know you don't have HIV, you are?" asked Dr. Jacoby, raising his eyebrows knowingly. They both knew what they were talking about. Abby.

Jake stared down at the carpet for a moment and sighed.

"I don't want to lose her," he explained.

"Did Abby tell you that she would leave you, if you couldn't have sex with her?" asked the doctor.

"No, she would never say that," resisted Jake.

"But, you think she will if you can't?" he persisted.

"The night I left, Abby told me that she had been waiting for me," confided Jake. "I have to at least try."

"What about you?" asked Dr. Jacoby. "Do you want this, or is this entirely for Abby's sake?"

"I want it," replied Jake, rubbing his hands together, for the splint had come off his finger, and it was still a little stiff.

Dr. Jacoby sat thoughtfully for awhile, before continuing.

"How have your flashbacks been?" he inquired.

"I've managed," shrugged Jake. "I do better when I'm with her, though."

"If you're willing to take the next step," said Dr. Jacoby, "then I'll support your decision, and will help in any way I can. We've already discussed what needs to be done, for this to work."

"Would you explain it to her?" asked Jake, half pleading with the psychiatrist. "I couldn't face her-- I'd be too embarrassed. She'd probably laugh at me," he sighed, anxiously running his hands through his loose brown hair. "Besides, she's probably pretty mad at me by now."

"I'll go with you," replied Dr. Jacoby. "But, Abby needs to hear this from *you*. I'll explain where I can, but you have to face her."

Jake stared at the psychiatrist and groaned. He knew Dr. Jacoby was right.

When Abby came home from work that day, she found an unexpected surprise sitting on her parents' living room couch. Jake glanced up at her, and then quickly looked down at the floor, unable to confront her deep blue eyes. John had been talking to his son-in-law, but quickly stopped when his daughter entered the house.

"I guess I'd better get back to work," smiled John, standing up and excusing himself. "Terry is in the middle of a conference call with a client in Boston, so I'd better see how's he faring. We're all delighted about your test results, Jake," he added. "It's a true answer to prayer."

After her father left, Abby took off her coat and sat down across from the couch.

"Your doctor called me at work," she smiled. "It's really great news, Jake. I'm so happy for you!" Abby found it difficult to voice the relief and joy she was feeling, when Jake looked so nervous and uneasy. She was half afraid of showing too much emotion, lest she should scare him off.

All this time, the young man remained silent and rigid, his eyes fixed on the toes of his shoes.

"Abby," said Dr. Jacoby, "Jake has something he wants to ask you."

At the sound of these words, Jake audibly groaned and seriously eyed the front door, as if contemplating escape.

"What is it?" she asked, suddenly becoming even more concerned than she already was. "What's wrong?"

"I want to come home," said Jake, in a low voice.

In a sigh of great relief, Abby smiled. However, Jake couldn't see this, for he was alternately eyeing the toe of his shoe and the front door.

"I'm so glad to hear that," she replied, trying to steady her voice. "I was beginning to think you couldn't forgive me for what I said that night."

At this, Jake looked up in surprise.

"I said I forgave you," he replied. "Didn't you believe me?"

"I suppose I did," she admitted, "but you wouldn't talk to me, so how could I be sure?"

Jake was silent.

"There's something else Jake would like to ask you," pressed Dr. Jacoby, "isn't that right, Jake?"

The young man shot a look of dread to his psychiatrist, and then stared back down at his shoe.

"I guess so," he mumbled.

"Is there something else?" asked Abby, trying hard not to be impatient. She was dying of curiosity. What could he want to ask her that was so hard to say?

"Do you..." Jake paused, digging his fingers into the sofa cushion beneath him. "Do you still love me, Abby?" he asked, cautiously lifting his eyes to meet her gaze.

"What kind of a silly question is that?" she cried.

Biting his bottom lip, Jake quickly hung his head. The ex-convict was confused and embarrassed. Desperately fighting the impulse to flee, he braved her indignation and waited for an answer.

"Of course I do, Jake!" said Abby, fighting back tears. "*Do you have to ask?*"

"You once promised that you'd tell me every time I needed to hear it," said Jake, brushing aside a stray tear with the sleeve of his shirt. "I really need to hear it now, Abby."

Abby opened her mouth, but her emotions momentarily robbed her of her voice.

Jake looked up at her with hurt brown eyes. The thought suddenly flashed through him that maybe he was too late. Maybe her feelings toward him *had* changed, after all. A silent, frantic prayer sounded in his heart.

"I love you," she answered, each word sincerely coming from her heart. "When I look back at our time together, I realize that I've *always* loved you, even before I knew what to call it. I love you, Jake. If you have to ask me that question now, then I suppose I haven't been saying it often enough."

A big smile briefly flashed across his boyishly handsome face, but quickly vanished at the thought of the next question he had to ask her. God had answered his prayer, but now he needed heaven to answer another request. If Abby could only understand-- if only she would say "yes." Jake swallowed the bale of hay in his throat and began to speak.

"I can't promise that I'll ever be what you'd like me to be," he said, digging his fingers even deeper into the sofa, "but I want to try, if you'll let me."

Abby searched his face, unsure if he was really talking about what she thought he was talking about.

"Jake and I have discussed this possibility in the past," explained Dr. Jacoby, "and he has now decided that he's ready to begin the process."

Abby smiled grimly. Now she was *sure* they weren't talking about the same thing.

"The process'?" she repeated.

"The abuse Jake has experienced over his lifetime," continued Dr. Jacoby, "has made the sensation of human touch almost unbearable to him. To get over this, he needs to desensitize himself to touch-- *your* touch, to be more specific. If you agree to this, Jake will set a series of goals that could help lessen his psychological difficulties. This will occur in stages over a period of time, so your cooperation and patience will be essential to his progress. Jake alone will decide what the goals will be, and when he is ready to move on. He must not be pressured into intimacy before he feels he's ready. This will require a lot of understanding on your part, so if you have any objections, it's best to voice them now."

With a pensive face, Jake watched her out of the corner of his eye. He was feeling so unsure of himself, that he almost expected her to turn him down. Jake could only hope and pray that she would give him a chance to try.

"I think I understand," said Abby, thoughtfully. "Does this mean he'll eventually get over the whole touch thing?"

"Let's just take one step at a time," replied Dr. Jacoby. "If Jake can achieve a physical, intimate relationship with you, then no matter what other issues he may still have, I think we can safely call it a victory."

"So, that's why he's moving back in?" asked Abby. "To begin 'the process'?"

"Please, don't laugh at me," begged Jake.

"I'm not laughing at you," she sighed, quietly scolding herself for not being more sensitive in her choice of words. "I think this is a good thing, Jake. Even if it doesn't work, at least you'll be home."

"Then, you don't think it will work?" he asked in a disheartened voice.

Quickly, Abby clapped a hand over her mouth. She didn't seem capable of saying anything correctly, at the moment.

"Before I say something that we're both going to regret," she said, giving herself a few seconds of reprieve before shutting up once more, "just remember that I love you, Jake."

Jake smiled hopefully at the sound of those three precious words.

"Then," continued Dr. Jacoby, "you agree to try?"

Abby emphatically nodded her head in the affirmative. She only hoped that Jake hadn't suddenly changed his mind. She knew she had a propensity to disturb him with her offhand remarks, and prayed that God would teach her to be more sensitive with her *very* sensitive husband.

"Okay," replied Dr. Jacoby, smiling at the patient who was seated next to him on the couch. "She said 'yes,' Jake."

The ex-convict nervously returned the doctor's smile, and then chanced another glance in Abby's direction. Jake didn't know why he was so relieved, for he suddenly realized that he had only exchanged one set of concerns for another! To be truthful, Dr. Jacoby seemed to be the most optimistic person in the room. When Jake looked at Abby, he recognized the cautious, guarded look on her face, and realized that she wasn't very hopeful about "the process."

Just then, John made some excuse to enter the room. When he saw that the sensitive part of whatever discussion they were having was over, he stopped to talk to Dr. Jacoby. Hearing the all clear from his friend, Terry soon joined them. The only two that remained quiet were Abby and Jake. Abby tried to pretend that she was listening to what the men were saying, but her eyes continually to drifted back to Jake.

"Have you seen Mom, yet?" she asked him.

"No," he muttered, looking down at the toe of his shoe with renewed interest.

"I'll take you to her," said Abby. As she stood up, Jake noticed the size of her belly for the first time. "Yeah, I know," she sighed, "I'm really starting to show. For awhile there I just had this little pooch, and it looked like a beer belly, or something. At least, now I *look* like I'm pregnant. My first trimester ended last week."

"Yes, I know," said Jake, as they entered the hallway.

"How could you possibly know that?" she laughed, incredulously.

"I've been keeping track," replied Jake. "I can read a calendar, too."

In the flood of his recent ordeals, Abby had thought her pregnancy had pretty much been forgotten by him.

"I've probably been reading up on it more than you have," added Jake, with a small smile. "You and your runaway pet hamster! I'm not taking any chances."

"I would never forget to feed a *baby!*" she exclaimed indignantly. "Honestly, Jake!"

The young man grinned at her and walked into the master bedroom, where Izumi was eagerly waiting. She hadn't seen Jake since before he had been arrested, and was understandably anxious to see him.

"There you are!" she exclaimed, smiling warmly at her son-in-law. "It's so good to see you, Jake!"

"Hi, Mom," he smiled, trying not to make a big deal out of her large, distended belly. He had realized his mistake with Abby, and wisely decided not to stare at the obvious. "How are you doing?" he inquired.

"That's kind of you, especially when I should be asking you the same question," sighed Izumi. "I'm so very sorry about what happened to you in prison."

"What's done is done," he shrugged, as Abby entered the room and helped to adjust the pillows her mother was leaning on for support.

"Thanks, Sweetheart," said Izumi. "Ten more weeks of this bed rest to go. I just have to keep reminding myself that it's for the triplets. Every day I can give them inside my womb, increases their chance for survival."

"Jake," asked Abby, sitting down on the bed beside Izumi, "how's your chest been doing? You're not whispering anymore, so I guess the pain is getting better?"

"I guess so," he replied, awkwardly stuffing his hands into his pockets. "When I take deep breaths, it really hurts."

"Jake's moving back," Abby informed her mother. As she said this, Abby noticed Jake clutch up, for fear that she would talk about "the process," in front of her Mom. Seeing he was uncomfortable, she changed the subject as soon as she could.

After their visit with Izumi, AJ walked down the hall on their way to the living room. As they passed the triplets' nursery, something caught Jake's eye. Curious, he went inside. Unaware that he wasn't behind her, Abby continued on her way. She listened to the men talking in the living room for awhile and was about to make some comment to Jake, when she noticed for the first time that he wasn't there. After a quick search, Abby found him in the triplets' nursery.

"There you are," she sighed in relief, as Jake stared at the finished mural on the wall.

"It's good, Abby," he smiled. "I really like what you've done."

"You did most of the work," said Abby, not trying to take credit for the completed artwork. "I just followed the lines you had sketched on the wall."

"I can't tell where you started, and I left off," Jake sighed happily. "You're finally painting with your heart, Abby." By the honest look on his face, she knew it was a sincere compliment.

"Do you really think so, Jake?" she asked in surprise.

"I always knew you had it in you," he said, with a pleased nod of his head.

"I guess," smiled Abby, "I just needed someone to coax it out of me."

As she gazed at him with those large blue eyes, Jake felt his heart begin to race. Oh! if she only knew how much he loved her!

"Thanks for going along with me back there," he said, in a hushed voice. "You must think I'm pretty ridiculous. Any other man..."

"I'm not married to 'any other man,'" finished Abby, with an encouraging smile that went straight to Jake's heart. "I'm married to *you*! I don't think you're ridiculous," she added, recalling the talk she had had with her uncle earlier that month. "I think this takes a lot of courage."

"What I'm trying to do is for both of us," explained Jake. "I want this, Abby. I need you."

With these words, Abby felt a hot tear roll down her cheek. She covered her mouth and began to sob. Not wanting the others to overhear them, Abby's husband softly closed the nursery door and came to her side.

"Please, don't cry," he gently pleaded.

"I can't help it!" she wept. "I've missed you, Jake!"

"Well," he smiled, "I'm here now." The young man tried to reach out and touch her arm, but couldn't.

Though Jake was disappointed by this failed attempt, Abby was encouraged that he had even tried. If physical intimacy was in their future, Abby knew it would take time. Whatever the outcome, she wanted him home-- whether he could ever touch her, or not.

"When are you moving back?" she asked, gratefully accepting the handkerchief Jake was offering.

"My stuff is in Dr. Jacoby's car," he answered.

"Good," she sniffed, drying her face. "Are my eyes red? Do I look as though I've been crying?"

"You look beautiful," Jake sighed tenderly. "Do you want to go home, now?"

Leaving the privacy of the nursery, AJ said their good-byes to the others and went outside to collect his things from Dr. Jacoby's vehicle. Overhead, storm clouds gathered, reminding Abby that snow was forecasted for that night. Hurrying in out of the cold, the two entered their little yellow house. Just as Jake reached to close the front door, a strong gust of wind slammed it shut.

"The wind is starting up," breathed Abby. "It's going to be a cold one, tonight."

"I'll go put my things away," said Jake, disappearing down the hallway.

Carelessly tossing her coat aside, Abby went to her room to feed the saltwater fish. After making sure the aquarium heater was properly working, she walked to Jake's room to watch him unpack the few things that he had taken with him.

"I'm glad you came back when you did," she said, leaning against the wall near his doorway.

"Aside from the fact that I was missing you like crazy, you almost missed out on Thanksgiving. I was really hoping we could spend it as a family. I wanted to put it off until you came back, but Dennis and Mr. Winkler are leaving soon, and Dad already invited them to come."

"I've had Thanksgiving... once," replied Jake, smiling to himself. "She missed me," he mused under his breath, still glorying in the fact that she cared when he wasn't there.

"Uncle Terry and I are planning a big meal with lots of everything," she continued. "Dad wanted to just order out from a fancy restaurant, but Uncle Terry and I wanted to do it, ourselves."

With a smile, Jake shook his head skeptically.

"What?" she laughed. "Contrary to popular belief, I *can* cook!"

"I didn't say anything," smiled Jake. It was good to be home! Just the sound of her voice made him warm inside. Jake put away his nightshirts and tried to stifle a yawn. He had had a busy day, and his body needed some rest.

Not trying to wear Jake out with her talking, Abby went to the living room to work at her computer before dinner. Dennis had already put Abby to work on his website, and had promised to give her more responsibilities, after he arrived in California at the end of the month. She was so engrossed in her work, that Abby didn't notice when Jake stretched out on the couch beside her computer table. For several minutes, he watched her with sleepy, half open eyes. Gradually lulled by the sounds of computer keyboard taps and mouse clicks, Jake softly drifted to sleep.

The hours flew by, until Abby at last stopped to take a break. When she reclined in her chair with a tired yawn, she noticed that the only light in the living room was coming from her computer monitor. Nightfall had descended on Three Mile Bay, plunging the unprepared house into darkness. After another weary yawn, Abby got up to close the window curtains and lock the front door, which was part of their nightly routine. As she made her way back to her computer, Abby realized for the first time that someone was asleep on the couch.

"Jake?" she whispered. When there was no response, Abby knew he was asleep.

With a cold shiver, Abby touched a button and the gas fireplace obediently came to life. Then she sat down at the computer, intent on finishing her work. However, Abby's concentration was elsewhere, for her gaze kept returning to the sleeping form on the couch, just a few feet from her table.

By the light of the fireplace, Abby couldn't help but notice how handsome Jake looked, and she marveled at the reality of his presence. The way his chest quietly moved up and down with each peaceful breath; the arm that hung over the side of the couch, so that his hand rested on the floor; his faded jeans, and the white socks that she had bought for him at the store; even his red and black checkered flannel shirt, was a source of amazement to her. This man was flesh and blood, and she belonged to him. As these thoughts flooded her heart, Abby offered a quiet prayer of thanks to the Lord in heaven who had brought this person into her life in such a powerful way.

While he slept, Jake suddenly became aware of a soft warmth covering his body. Blinking his eyes open, he found Abby, tucking him in with a warm blanket.

"I didn't mean to wake you up," she said, quietly.

"How long have I been out?" asked the young man, noticing that the fireplace was burning merrily.

"For a few hours," replied Abby, going back to her table. "I know it's a little late, but I'm not hungry yet, are you?"

"No, I'm fine," yawned Jake. "Are you still at the computer?" he sighed.

"I'm almost done," said Abby, a little surprised at his disappointment. As she struggled to regain her concentration, she became aware of him watching her from his vantage on the couch. "Why don't you turn on the television?" she suggested, hoping to get his eyes off her so she could finish her work.

"Will you watch with me?" he asked.

Expectantly, Jake sat up, making plenty of room for her on the sofa. Deciding that she could use a break anyway, Abby took her customary place on the far end of the couch while Jake turned on the television. He flipped through the channels and made the familiar gloomy announcement of,

"There's nothing on."

Unable to find anything else, Jake left it on a nature channel.

"This female black widow spider," said the announcer, "is eating the body of her mate, after copulation..."

At this, Jake quickly turned the channel. Unfortunately, it was a love scene in the middle of some movie, so he rapidly changed the channel once again. This time, Jake found a religious program, talking about one of the books of the Bible. Content, he settled back to watch the show.

"And in verse thirteen we read," said the pastor, "'A bundle of myrrh is my wellbeloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts...'"

Discouraged, Jake turned off the television. This wasn't going the way he had hoped it would.

Restraining herself from any obvious comments that might embarrass him, Abby prepared to return to her computer.

"Do you have to keep working on that thing?" he asked.

"You're the one who turned off the set," she pointed out.

"I know, but..." Jake hesitated. He had his moves all planned out, and it would only work if they were watching television. Sensing that there was a deeper reason for all this than he was letting on, Abby asked for the remote control.

"If we have to, we'll watch infomercials," she replied.

Gratefully, Jake handed her the remote, and Abby quickly turned it to the most boring channel she could find: a math professor explaining calculus to a large roomful of students. It was dull, but it was Jake-safe.

After a few minutes, Jake made an excuse to get up. However, when he returned, he deliberately sat down next to Abby, (something which he never did).

"Did I miss anything?" he asked.

"Are you kidding?" she replied, dryly.

Abby could see he was trying very hard to act nonchalantly, even though he was slightly trembling. Very slowly, Jake reached out and took hold of her hand. His tremors were becoming more violent and noticeable now, and Abby was beginning to wonder if she should say something. Suddenly, he had to let go, and Abby could hear him breathing in agonizing gasps.

"Do you want me to get you a painkiller?" she asked, realizing that all this was aggravating his chest.

"No, don't leave," he pleaded, waiting for the pain to back off on its own accord.

"Maybe, this is too soon," she suggested, trying to give him an easy way out.

"All I want to do is hold your hand," groaned Jake, leaning his head back on the sofa to catch his breath. "Is that too much to ask of myself?"

The minutes ticked by, and the pain in his chest settled down. By now, Abby was trying to think of a way to excuse herself so that he could stop putting himself through this agony. As she watched the calculus program deep in thought, Abby felt him take hold of her hand. Wincing

from her own discomfort, Abby tried to endure the vice-like grip he was subjecting her poor hand to. When Jake started to gasp, he had to release her once more.

"Why don't you try to lighten your grip?" suggested Abby, attempting to be helpful.

"I can't," he whispered, waiting for the pain to again subside. "I have to hold on as hard as I can, but when I do, my ribs hurt. It's because I'm using my chest muscles," he explained.

"Maybe, we should just forget about 'the process' for awhile," she proposed.

"Please, let me handle this," begged Jake, fighting back the frustration that was beginning to well up inside him.

"You have two broken ribs," Abby pointed out. "You can try again, *after* you're better."

Too sore and too embarrassed to debate with her, Jake got up and left the room. With a groan, Abby quickly realized her fault. When she went to apologize, she found him sitting on the edge of her bed, staring at the lighted aquarium.

"Jake, I'm sorry," she sighed. "I'll try hard to not be so insistent with my opinions. This is your recovery, and not mine. Do things however you want."

In silence, Jake watched the brightly colored fish, darting about in the large saltwater aquarium.

"Could I try again?" he asked suddenly.

Abby was about to remind of him his last attempts, but quickly shut up.

"Whatever you decide," she replied.

The couple returned to their living room, only to find that the calculus program was over, and the channel had signed off for the night. Abby turned it to the news, and Jake once again took his place beside her on the couch. Just then, a commercial aired on the television that greatly interested Jake.

"I'll be right back," he announced, quickly getting to his feet.

"Where are you going?" she called after him. When he didn't respond, Abby sighed. Maybe the stress was finally too much for him to take, and he was escaping through a back window, only to send a postcard every month to let her know that he was all right. Abby pictured him

hitchhiking across America with his ratty duffel bag, trying to find a warm place to sleep each night. She shuddered. Her imagination was a little too good at times.

Thankfully, Jake finally made some noise in the kitchen, proving that he hadn't escaped through a back window, after all. As she heard the utility drawer open, Abby wondered what he could possibly be looking for.

Just as she was about to go see if he needed help, Jake triumphantly appeared with a roll of duct tape. Puzzled, Abby watched as he tore off a long piece of the silvery adhesive. Next, he took her hand in his and tightly bound them together with the tape.

"What on earth are you doing?" she asked, incredulously.

"What does it look like?" he smiled, wrapping the last of the duct tape around their joined hands.

"I can't believe you just did that," said Abby.

Grinning with satisfaction, Jake settled back to watch television. To him, it was easier to adhere himself to Abby, than it was to hold on to her with sheer willpower. This arrangement also meant that he didn't have to use his chest muscles, so his ribs didn't hurt. All in all, Jake was fairly pleased with himself. He had found a way to do something that he was unable to do on his own.

"You're certifiable, you know that?!" laughed Abby.

"Only when it comes to you," he replied, with a shy smile.

"Duct tape-- the secret of our relationship," she mused, only half joking. "Why, it's practically the bond that holds us together!"

"Please, Abby," he begged, beginning to feel silly for resorting to such a desperate tactic, "don't make fun of it. This is worth it, isn't it?"

Realizing that she was at risk of hurting his feelings, Abby quickly quieted down. This was the best he could do, and she didn't want to make fun of him for trying. Abby lovingly squeezed Jake's hand. Yes, it was worth it.

The next morning, Abby found that they had fallen asleep on the couch, their hands still bound by the duct tape. Her husband had his feet propped up on the coffee table, while she had rested

against the arm of the sofa. Weary of the still droning television, Abby located the remote between the couch cushions, and turned it off.

"Jake," she yawned, "it's time to get up." Jake slowly stirred, and opened his eyes. "Come on," she coaxed, "undo the duct tape. I have a lot to get done, today."

"Dad said that Mr. Winkler gave you the day off," he recalled.

"That's right, because tomorrow is Thanksgiving," answered Abby. "Uncle Terry and I have a lot of cooking to do, so undo the tape."

Jake looked at her thoughtfully, as if weighing his options.

"I don't know," he hesitated, trying not to laugh at the expression on Abby's face.

"Jake Murphy!" she exclaimed. "If you think I'm going to let my family see us like this, you're crazy! Why they..."

"Abby," he interrupted.

"What?"

"I love you," said Jake.

"I did it again," she groaned, in self reproach. "If you need this duct tape on today, then I'm willing to go along with it."

"Abby," he repeated once more, "I love you."

The young wife looked into his brown eyes and realized that he was waiting for her to respond in like fashion.

"I love you, too," she smiled, awkwardly.

"That's better," grinned Jake, undoing the duct tape. "I was only teasing, Abby. Of course, I'll let you go. There," he said, releasing her hand, "I hope I didn't hurt you. We don't have to tell your parents about this, do we?" he asked, a little timidly.

"You really *were* teasing, then," she replied.

"This is just between you and me," said Jake, looking at her intently. "This isn't their marriage-- it's ours. Isn't that right, Abby?"

"You can feel safe with me," she assured him. "Whatever happens, I won't tell."

With a sudden, loud groan, Jake ran his hands through his hair.

"Listen to me," he cried, "I sound like one of my abusers, trying to keep someone silent! 'This is private,'" he repeated, "'just between us,' 'they wouldn't understand'! Every time I heard those words, it made me sick to my stomach!"

"Jake, look down at your left hand," requested Abby. She understood that he needed to reason through these confusing feelings, and did her best to remain calm for his sake. "Please, just do it." Jake looked down and noticed the gold wedding band wrapped around his finger. "See that ring?" she asked. "I belong to you. You have every right to ask me not to talk about private things to anyone else, without your permission. See?" she asked, holding up her left hand so he could see. "I have a ring, too."

"Oh, Abby," he sighed longingly, "I wish I could hold you."

"It's all right," she smiled tenderly. "As long as I know you're still trying, it makes it easier to wait."

"Thank you for that," he replied, gratefully.

"Uncle Terry and I are going shopping this morning," said Abby, now trying to change the subject. "I know you probably want to come, but I was hoping you could visit with Mom, instead. I know she would really appreciate the company."

"All right," he shrugged, somewhat disappointed that he couldn't tag along with Abby.

"I hate to drag you through the grocery store," she explained, seeing his downcast face. "You need to give your body a chance to heal itself."

"Are you afraid I'm going to have a flashback in the checkout," he wondered, "because you don't have to make up an excuse to keep me home. All you have to do is ask-- I'll understand."

"If you want to come, you can," replied Abby, not trying to make a bigger deal out of it than it really was. "Honestly, I wasn't thinking about your flashbacks. I only thought you'd need the rest."

"Okay, I'll visit with Mom," accepted Jake. "I can't always guess what you're thinking, Abby. Always be honest with me, even if you think it might hurt my feelings."

"That's probably one request you don't have to worry about me keeping!" she smiled grimly. "Don't underestimate yourself, Jake. You often know me better than I know myself."

Later that morning, Terry and Abby hauled in the bounty they had just purchased at the supermarket, and wearily deposited it onto the Johanneses' kitchen table. Abby was glad she hadn't brought Jake along with them, for Terry had taken a long time to make up his mind over some "unscheduled" items that weren't on their grocery list. As they began to prepare for tomorrow's Thanksgiving meal, Abby heard her mother's laughter coming from the master bedroom at the end of the hallway. Intrigued, she went to the open doorway, and found Izumi showing Jake some childhood pictures of a very young Abigail.

"And this one was taken when we went on vacation at the Grand Canyon National Park," Izumi was saying, as Jake sat in a chair near the bed and looked at the photo album she was holding. "I took this picture when she fell asleep on John's lap," smiled the proud mother. "It's one of the few times she ever held still long enough to let one of her parents cuddle her. That girl! She wouldn't hold still for anyone-- not even Terry! Why, I remember..." Izumi looked up and noticed her daughter standing in the doorway. "Hi, Sweetheart! Did you and Terry get everything you need?"

"That, and then some," she groaned tiredly.

"Mom's been showing me your baby pictures," smiled Jake. "I think I like this one best." He held up the album to show a squealing toddler in her birthday suit, running down the hallway, covered head to toe in soapsuds. Behind her was John, patiently trying to return her to the bathtub from which she had escaped.

"Mom," protested Abby, "do you have to show *everyone* that photo? I think there's only one or two people left in Three Mile Bay who haven't seen it, yet!"

"Jake isn't 'everyone,'" insisted Izumi, "he's family. Besides, you look adorable in that picture!"

Just then, Terry called Abby back to the kitchen. As she and her uncle started work on the pumpkin pies, Jake entered the room and hung back, silently watching the two work. Unlike Abby, Terry *could* cook. Even though he didn't need more help, when Terry saw Jake wistfully watching the young woman, he offered to let the newcomer join in. Eagerly, Jake accepted the offer, and was soon standing beside Abby at the table, mixing this and measuring that.

"Abby," declared Terry, after searching the cupboards, "we didn't get the ground cinnamon."

"Sorry," she sighed, "I forgot to put it on the list."

"Well," mused Terry, "I'd better make a run to the store. Is there anything else we forgot?"

"I could do it," volunteered Abby. "After all, it was my fault."

"Nonsense," insisted Terry, "you stay and help Jake finish the chocolate chip cookies." Terry grabbed his coat and smiled at Jake. "Keep her out of trouble while I'm gone."

As the front door slammed shut, Jake turned to his wife.

"It must have been nice growing up here," he sighed.

"I guess so," replied Abby, with a shrug.

"Your childhood pictures are a far cry from mine," confided Jake. Then he said something that surprised Abby. "I hope our baby looks like you," he wished out loud.

"Since it's a boy," responded Abby, "he'd do better to resemble *you*."

"Are you sure it's a boy?" asked the expectant father.

"You've asked me that, before," she sighed. "Is it so hard to accept?"

"I can't let him go though the same hell I did," said Jake. "No child deserves that."

"He won't," Abby replied, confidently. "I know you. You love God too much to do that to someone else-- especially to your own son. It takes a terrible kind of man to hurt a child that way."

"Abby, would you make me a promise?" asked Jake. "Promise me that if I ever do anything like that to any child, then you'll do everything in your power to lock me up and throw away the key. I don't care what prison it is-- just make sure I'm put away behind bars."

The seriousness of the request startled her.

"You have my word," she promised. "But, you shouldn't live in constant fear, Jake. 'A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit,'" she quoted. (Matthew 7:18) "You're a good tree. The fruit of your walk before God is good. Your son will be a blessed little boy if he grows up to be like you."

Jake silently gazed into her eyes, drowning in similar pools of blue that John had lost himself in with Izumi. Abby could see the love in his eyes, and her heart began to race. Leaning forward, Jake gently kissed her lips. When it was over, he stared at her in surprise! It had only been a small kiss, but Abby could feel the great love that was behind it. Then Jake kissed her again, this time trying to put his arms around her. But, it was too much for him, and he quickly retreated.

"I'm sorry," Jake awkwardly apologized. Then they kissed again, careful to keep their hands to themselves. Abby could barely feel the floor beneath her. She had never thought this would come, *today!* But, as Jake whispered in her ear, "I love you," she knew her heart could not contain any more joy than she was feeling at that moment! "Thank you, God," he sighed happily, taking a step back to calm his breathing before his broken ribs REALLY started to hurt. As he leaned forward for another kiss, Terry walked in.

Without a single word, Jake and Abby quickly resumed their work. While Terry hadn't actually seen them kiss, he had witnessed enough to guess what he had interrupted. Not wanting to embarrass the young couple any further, the delighted uncle wisely chose to remain silent.

When lunchtime neared, John appeared from his office, where he had been tying up some loose ends before walking away for the Thanksgiving weekend.

"Everything smells good," he complimented the trio. "Abby, how about a chocolate chip cookie for your poor, old Dad? Hummm?"

"Those are for tomorrow!" cried Abby, as her father accepted a sweet from Jake.

"Hey, these are pretty good!" exclaimed John, as if surprised that anything good could come from the same kitchen that his daughter was in.

After John accepted a cookie for Izumi, he left the cooks to their work. The pumpkin pies were done, and the rest of the chocolate chip cookies were cooling off. As Terry worked on that day's lunch, Jake and Abby exchanged private glances at one another behind his back.

"I think the egg salad is still a little flat," sighed Terry. "Jake, what do you think?"

"It needs more seasoning," agreed Jake, catching Abby's gaze once more.

"I can't say the same about you two," Terry mumbled with a grin.

When lunch was finally ready, John prepared Izumi's tray, and ate with her in the master bedroom. Feeling like an intruder, Terry took his plate to the living room, leaving the newlyweds to themselves.

In the privacy of the now empty kitchen, Jake and Abby continued where they had left off, until one of them realized that they needed to eat, before Terry came back.

"Couldn't we leave?" pleaded Jake.

Unable to resist, Abby gave in.

"Uncle Terry?" she asked, approaching the man who was busily eating his lunch on the couch. "Could Jake and I take a break, and come back in a little while?"

With a knowing smile, Terry excused them both from any further kitchen duties for the day.

Then Abby followed Jake across the way to their little yellow house. When the front door closed, the man and wife began to kiss once more. As happy as they both were at this new discovery, a problem soon became apparent. Except for a kiss, Jake couldn't touch his wife. Even hand holding was still difficult for him.

"I'm sorry," he apologized for the second time. "I don't know what's wrong with me! It's not because I don't love you," explained Jake. "Please, don't think that this has anything to do with you." He tried to kiss her again, but Abby moved away.

"I think we need to cool off," said Abby, for she could tell his chest was causing him pain, even though he was struggling hard to hide it from her.

"It was good, Abby," smiled Jake, trying not to double over in pain. The deep breathing he had subjected his ribs to, was causing him more anguish than Abby had first realized.

"Please, take a painkiller," she entreated, finding it difficult to watch him fight under the excruciating pain. When Jake lamely tried to pretend it wasn't that bad, Abby went to the kitchen and returned with a glass of water and a Xantol.

"I'm only taking this because you said 'please,'" he joked softly. Without further prodding, Jake swallowed the medication and went to his room to lay down. "I'm getting better," he announced,

as Abby drew the curtains on his windows so he could rest. "Just wait and see, Abby. I'm going to be normal."

"Try to keep your expectations realistic, Jake," she tried to caution him.

"But, Abby," he argued, raising his head so he could see her, "I *kissed* you! I didn't know I could do that! And if that isn't enough, I haven't had a really bad flashback *in days!*"

"But you still can't hold my hand," she gently reminded him. "I'm not trying to discourage you, but I hate to see you building unrealistic expectations. Besides," she added, going to his bedroom door, "if I had wanted normal, I would have married Tyler." With that, Abby closed his door halfway, leaving a happy Jake to his own thoughts.

"Thank you, God," he whispered. Too enthused to sleep, but too exhausted to get up, Jake lay in bed awake. Even the throbbing in his chest couldn't dampen his spirits. This was the closest he had ever come to being "normal," and no amount of warning from Abby was going to stop him from dreaming.

"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine."

~ Song of Solomon 1:2 ~

"Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other."

~ Psalms 85:10 ~

Chapter Twenty-three

Something Called Hope

"Thou art my hope, O Lord GOD: Thou art my trust from my youth."

~ Psalms 71:5 ~

Jake's newfound ability to kiss his wife had taken its effect on the young man. After taking a painkiller, he finally had to retreat to his room until the pain backed off. Not wanting to leave him alone in the house, Abby went to her fly tying table, instead of returning to help Terry with the rest of the Thanksgiving preparations for the next day.

Tying flies usually captivated Abby's interest for hours on end, but today, she found it difficult to concentrate on her work. As Abby thought about Jake, she heard a small, indistinguishable sound coming over the baby monitor. Concerned that this could be the beginnings of a flashback, Abby ran to Jake's room, only to find him wide awake, and staring up at the ceiling with a strange smile on his lips.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, realizing that the question was an unnecessary one. The look on his face told her that he was more than fine.

"The Xantol's working," he smiled.

"That's good," replied Abby, with a grateful sigh of relief. "I'm sorry I did that to you," she apologized.

"I can take *that* kind of pain, anytime," grinned Jake.

"I don't want you to," resisted Abby, going to the corner of the room and moving a chair beside his bed. "I've been thinking..." she began.

"I'm glad one of us is," he smiled playfully.

"I don't think it's a good idea to push things too quickly," she continued.

"Abby..." sighed Jake, not liking the direction that the conversation was making.

"I know you want to make me happy," Abby went on, "but, you don't have to push yourself into Xantol and flashbacks to do it. Just the fact that you're home, makes me happier than I deserve."

Jake reached out and softly stroked the back of her hand with his fingertips.

"Please," she implored him, "don't hurt yourself because of me."

"Abby," he answered in a tender whisper, "you're going to have to trust me."

"I'm scared," she confessed. "There's so much that could overwhelm you..." Abby paused, as she felt Jake's fingers softly caressing her hand.

"Don't be afraid for me," he smiled, encouragingly.

Abby looked into his dark brown eyes, and silently prayed for a fraction of his strength.

As Jake leaned forward to kiss her, he let out an involuntary gasp of pain and fell back to his pillow with a dull groan.

"You'd better get some more rest," she observed, getting up from her chair and moving it back to its place in the corner of his room. "We haven't eaten lunch yet. Do you want something to eat?"

"I couldn't hold anything down," said Jake, sitting up and swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. "Not after that Xantol I just took."

"Jake," hesitated Abby, as he got to his feet and walked over to where she stood, "maybe you should lay down some more."

"Dr. Jacoby said we should go at *my* pace," he reminded Abby, his eyes leveling with hers. "Let me make my own decisions-- at least, when it comes to this." Jake gently kissed Abby and then smiled at her triumphantly. "Go eat the lunch Terry made. I'll be along in a while."

"And leave you here by yourself?"

"Please," he requested, "go to your parents' house."

"What are you going to do while I'm gone?" she wondered, suddenly realizing that he didn't want her around for a reason.

"I'm only going to take a quick shower," explained Jake, turning his face away from her, for he could feel himself beginning to blush with embarrassment.

"You'd better make it a cold one," grinned Abby, now understanding what he had meant.

With a bashful glance at his wife, Jake disappeared into the bathroom and shut the door behind him.

As Abby entered her parents' kitchen, Terry looked up at his niece in surprise. He hadn't expected to see her so soon.

"You didn't have to come back," said Terry, wiping his hands with a washcloth and tossing it onto the countertop. "I don't want to interrupt anything you and Jake might have going on."

"I'll ignore that last comment," smiled Abby, grabbing his cookbook and thumbing to the next recipe they had earmarked for the Thanksgiving meal.

"Have you or Jake had lunch?" asked Terry. "I'm guessing that you didn't go home to eat."

"Even Dad and Mom have more privacy than we do!" groaned Abby. "Do I have to keep you updated on *every* aspect of our relationship?"

"I'm not asking for any details," mused Terry with a grin, "I was only wondering if you and Jake still wanted lunch."

Abby looked at her uncle and smiled in spite of herself. It was a little unnerving how perceptive Terry was.

"The egg salad is in the refrigerator," grinned Terry, seeing that he had guessed correctly.

"Please," she asked him, "don't tease Jake when you see him. He's a little sensitive about all this."

"I won't," he promised, giving the young woman an understanding hug.

Grateful for Terry's assurance, Abby started in on her lunch and kept a watchful eye on the kitchen clock. She didn't want to leave Jake by himself for very long, and was prepared to go check on him if he didn't show up in the next few minutes. When her husband finally arrived, Terry kept his promise, and Jake unwittingly escaped the knowing grins and chuckles that Abby had endured.

As everyone set about to make ready for tomorrow's celebration, a holiday spirit pervaded each soul in the Johannes household. Even Jake, who was relatively unfamiliar with Thanksgiving and its traditions, was soon caught up in Terry's jokes and funny stories, all the while trying to line a large casserole dish for the apple cobbler. Jake laughed so hard that Abby finally had to ask Terry

to calm down, for he was only making Jake worse. However, the warning went largely unheeded by both men, until Jake suddenly had to retreat to the living room couch until the pain in his chest lessened. Realizing his mistake, Terry subdued his mirth, though he found it difficult to do.

While Jake lay on the sofa trying to forget Terry's last joke, he heard the mailman shutting the mailbox outside, before going on to the yellow house, as was the route the mailman usually took. When his chest pain finally subsided, Jake went outside and retrieved the Johanneses' mail. As he opened the mailbox at his house, however, Jake made an unexpected discovery: four envelopes addressed to Abby, bearing the address of a doctor, a hospital, a laboratory, and a pharmacy. Puzzled, he opened one of the envelopes and found a large bill for his stay at the Watertown Mercy Memorial Hospital. Suddenly, Jake understood that Abby was being charged for his expenses.

With a lump in his throat, the young husband opened one envelope after another, only to find thousands of dollars that others said Abby now owed them. They had been assured that the state was picking up the tab for these expenses, so this was coming as a great shock. Jake knew his wife was far from rich, and he wondered how she could possibly ever hope to pay these bills.

Stunned and confused, Jake hid the four envelopes in his room, before returning to the Johanneses' home with their mail. As he resumed work on the apple cobbler, Abby noticed that the former holiday cheer in Jake's demeanor was gone. Instead of smiles, his mouth was pensive, his brow furrowed in thought, and his eyes kept evading her inquiring gaze.

"So there I was," related Terry, biting into one of their homemade chocolate chip cookies, "standing in the checkout line holding a home pregnancy kit, and trying to look not guilty. The lady at the checkout knew me, and must have thought I had gotten someone poor woman pregnant, because she gave me one of the sternest looks I've ever had-- bless her heart! I tell you, John owed me for a long time after that one! I'll never forget that day, Jake. We learned that John and Izzy were going to be parents for the first time, and even though I didn't know Abby yet, I could hardly wait to meet the little person God was creating for this family!"

Jake smiled faintly, as if caught between two thoughts. As he sliced the red apples Terry had cleaned in the kitchen sink, Jake wondered what he should do about the thousands of dollars in medical bills that he had generated for Abby.

The woman in question watched Jake out of the corner of her eye, debating with herself what to do. Whatever was weighing so heavily on his heart, he was keeping to himself.

"Hey, look!" cried John, coming to the kitchen and beckoning everyone to the living room window. "It's snowing! This time, it's really coming down!"

"At this rate," observed Terry, peering out the curtained window, "we're going to need to shovel the walk."

"We'd better keep an eye on the roofs," remarked John, "so they don't pile up with too much snow."

Thinking that perhaps Jake didn't understand what her father was talking about, Abby explained.

"If you get too much snow on the rooftops," she told him, "then they could collapse."

"I know," retorted Jake, "I grew up in New York, too. This isn't the first time I've ever seen snow, Abby."

There was a bite to Jake's voice that surprised Abby. Before she could react, he went back to the kitchen to finish the apple cobbler. Silently, Abby resumed her work, and wondered if she should say something to her husband.

"After this thing is done," Jake asked her rather abruptly, "what am I supposed to do with it?"

"I don't know," she stammered. "I'll go ask Uncle Terry."

Jake waited until Abby returned with Terry's directions.

"The oven's already preheated," she related, "so Uncle Terry said to put it in for thirty minutes."

Jake slid the casserole dish into the oven and unintentionally slammed the door shut. Abby jumped as the loud thud sounded in her ears.

"Sorry," he apologized, seeing the startled look in her eyes.

"It's all right," she smiled.

When he didn't return her smile, Abby's concern began to grow.

"We're going to have a few inches of snow on the ground by tomorrow," forecasted John, as he went to the refrigerator to pour a glass of milk for Izumi. "Abby, maybe we could build a

snowman for your mother outside her bedroom window, tomorrow," he suggested. "You know how she loves playing in the snow! Jake, you'd think I married a schoolgirl!"

"You nearly did!" came a voice from the master bedroom. Chuckling, John went to talk with his wife, who was eagerly watching the heavy snowfall from her bed.

Abby was about to make a remark to Jake about the silliness of her parents, when he suddenly excused himself.

"I think I need to lay down for awhile," he announced, untying the apron he had been wearing.

"Maybe I should come with you," she hesitated, "in case you have a flashback."

"I can handle it myself," he brusquely replied.

"All right," said Abby. "Whatever you need, Jake."

At this, the young man paused. She was being so kind to him, that Jake felt a pang of remorse. With a troubled conscience, he went home, leaving Abby to feel more uneasy and perplexed than before.

"Where did Jake go?" asked Terry, returning to the kitchen to resume cooking.

"He went home to lay down," Abby slowly answered. "I'll fix dinner tonight, so Jake won't have to." She was hoping against hope that fatigue was the culprit for his disturbing behavior. Perhaps, he didn't know he had hurt her feelings... perhaps, he hadn't lost his patience... perhaps, he wasn't in sin, after all. Jake so rarely gave her cause for this kind of concern, that she wasn't sure how best to handle it. Abby prayed for wisdom.

"There's no pressure about Jake coming back to work on a daily basis," said Terry. "We may need him, but getting better is more important. And tell him not to worry about his paycheck. He can earn it later. Besides, your parents and I have decided--" Terry stopped short of finishing his thought out loud. "I may have already said more than I should of," he scolded himself. "John!" Terry shouted down the hallway, "is it all right if I tell Abby?"

"You never *could* keep a secret for very long!" laughed John from the master bedroom. "Go ahead!"

"We were thinking of presenting it to you and Jake, tomorrow," beamed Terry, going to their home office and returning with an envelope.

"What is it?" asked Abby, accepting the mysterious white object from her uncle.

"Hey!" shouted John, "bring it in here so Little Dove can see Abby's reaction!"

Terry hurried Abby down the hall to her parents' room.

"Sorry, I got a little ahead of myself," he apologized to them.

"Does she know, yet?" asked John.

"Nope," grinned Terry, as Izumi eagerly watched her daughter peek inside the envelope.

Unsure if the light was playing tricks with her eyes, Abby pulled a slender piece of paper from the envelope. It was a check, made out to her. Abby reeled when she saw the dollar amount clearly written out in her father's handwriting.

"Seventy-six thousand dollars!" she exclaimed in shock.

"It's your college fund," explained Terry, beaming with joy.

"Sweetheart," explained Izumi, "we know you and Jake probably have a lot of financial strains right now-- especially since he's been in the hospital."

"I wanted to hang on to your college money," continued John, "in case you ever changed your mind about furthering your education. But, since that doesn't look like it's going to happen, we decided to give it to you now. Where's Jake? We were going to make a whole presentation out of it until Terry here spilled the beans!"

"That check is not just from your father and I," added Izumi. "Terry's been freely contributing to your college fund for years."

"You didn't have to tell her that, Izzy!" exclaimed Terry. "She didn't need to know!"

Abby went to her uncle and gave him a big hug, which was rapidly followed by Izumi and John.

"I need to show this to Jake!" said Abby, stunned by this sudden windfall. "But, don't you guys need this money?" she quickly remembered. "What about the triplets?"

"God is providing for your sisters, just as He's providing for you," said John. "That's *your* money, Abby."

"Don't spend it all in one place!" laughed Terry.

"She just might, depending on what Jake's medical expenses look like," warned John, soberly.

"Dick said the state is paying for Jake's hospital stay and the medications," said Abby. "At least, that's what he told us."

"Well, you do with it whatever you and Jake deem best," said John.

"Abby, there was one other thing I wanted to talk to you about," ventured Terry. "With your baby being due next May, I was wondering if you've given any thought as to how you're going to fit a car seat into that jeep of yours."

"I don't understand," replied Abby. "What do you mean?"

"By law, you're required to put the baby's car seat in the back seat," explained Terry, "and for practical purposes, your little jeep doesn't have one. I don't think those fold down seats count, do you, John?"

"I'd hate to stake my child's life on it," he hesitated in agreement.

"You're saying I need to buy a new car?" Abby gasped in surprise. "Just because I'm going to have a baby?"

"Welcome to parenthood, Sweetheart," smiled Izumi.

"Now aren't you sorry you didn't listen to me and get that sensible sedan I recommended so highly?" chuckled John.

"You can't put a canoe on top of a sedan!" Abby exclaimed. "Besides, who would've thought in a million years that *this* would've ever happened! I guess I know where this money is going."

"Not so fast," continued Terry. "I would like to propose a trade. Your jeep for my crew cab pickup truck. The back seat doesn't fold down, so it will easily accommodate a baby. Plus, it has the four wheel capability that I know you love. What do you say, Abby?"

"Your shiny red pickup?" she cried in disbelief. "Why, that's your pride and joy! Your truck is worth a lot more!"

"Your jeep will suit me just fine," replied Terry. "Think it over, Abby. It'll save money. There's no need to buy another vehicle, when this swap will answer everyone's needs."

"Uncle Terry," sighed Abby, overwhelmed by her adopted uncle's generosity, "I can afford another car with this check. I hate to take your truck from you!"

"That money will disappear faster than you think," warned Terry. "I want you to seriously consider my offer. Besides, you've taken good care of the jeep. I don't feel as though I'm getting the short end of anything. Abby," he added, in a serious voice, "I don't have a husband and new baby to take care of-- you do. Save money wherever you can. Talk it over with Jake, and let me know what you both decide."

"Are you sure?" asked Abby. "I mean, are you absolutely positive you want to do this? I know how much that truck means to you."

"You and Jake mean much more to me than any set of four wheels ever could," affirmed Terry, with a kind smile.

"Then, I accept," sighed Abby. "Thank you, Uncle Terry. You guys have always been there for Jake and I, but I certainly wasn't expecting anything like this!"

"In a way," explained John, "you and Jake are starting over in a new life together."

"This is our way of helping out," added Terry.

"Why don't you go tell Jake all the good news?" smiled Izumi.

"Don't you want to be there when I do?" asked the young woman.

"It's probably for the best that you be the one to tell him," reasoned John, ruffling his blond hair thoughtfully. "We're not trying to embarrass him."

Abby was puzzled by her father's last remark. How could this possibly embarrass Jake?

Evening was hidden behind a white sky, as snow continued to descend from the heavens. Forgetting to stamp the snow from her shoes before entering the yellow house, Abby tramped

wet puddles all over the carpet, unaware that she was making a mess for Jake. When she took off her coat, Abby was unexpectedly greeted with more cold.

"Jake," she sighed to herself, "why didn't you turn on the fireplace?"

Eager to tell Jake her news, Abby headed straight to her husband's room. To her surprise, Jake was not there. Thinking that he went outside, Abby started down the hallway to put back on her coat and shoes and go look for him. As she passed her bedroom, however, Abby noticed a form lying on her bed, watching the aquarium fish dart this way and that in the clear water.

"Jake?" inquired Abby, stepping inside the snug bedroom. "Are you all right?"

"I'm sorry I snapped at you a little while ago," he apologized.

Abby sat down at her fly tying table, and faced Jake.

"I wasn't sure if you'd sinned or not," she admitted, "but I could see you were under a lot of pressure. I just didn't know what from."

"I can't hide anything from you, can I?" he smiled sadly. A tear slid down his cheek, and the ex-convict quickly brushed it away, hoping his wife hadn't seen it. But she had.

"What's wrong, Jake?" she asked, her voice betraying concern.

"Guess I'm feeling sorry for myself," he tried to answer lightly. "Earlier today, I was so hopeful that I could be normal, but now..." Jake sighed. "I know I'm not much help to you. I'm sorry, Abby."

"What on earth are you talking about?" she wondered.

Then Jake handed her the hospital bills that he had been contemplating over while she was away.

"I already owe you so much," he sighed heavily, "and all I ever do is make things harder for you."

"This isn't right," said Abby, looking over the small stack of medical bills. "I know we're responsible for any sessions with Dr. Jacoby after you were released, but Dick said the State had taken care of all this."

"I feel so useless," confessed Jake, getting to his feet and standing before Abby as she sorted through the envelopes. "A man's supposed to take care of his family, and all I ever give you is more burden to carry. I feel like so much *dead weight!*" he exclaimed in self-reproach.

"Stop talking nonsense," replied Abby, still trying to understand why these bills had been sent to them.

"I have no job, and no prospects," said Jake. "I know your family is letting me work as their housekeeper, but I can't do that indefinitely! What else am I fit for, though? Who's going to hire a convicted murderer to do *anything?*"

"Calm down," soothed Abby.

"I'm failing you as a husband, and now also as a provider," Jake continued.

"You are *not* a failure!" rejoined Abby, her indignant blue eyes flashing up at him. "Stop saying those things about the man I love!"

"Some man," Jake muttered under his breath, leaving her bedroom with Abby still holding the bills.

With a sigh, she joined him in the kitchen where he was taking another Xantol for his chest.

"I didn't know you were hurting again," remarked Abby, becoming concerned that all this emphatic talking was causing him more than emotional distress.

"I feel so impotent," resumed Jake, swallowing the painkiller with a glass of water.

"I wish you'd stop saying things like that," she sighed, taking the glass from him and drinking a sip of water herself. "This baby didn't come out of thin air, Jake."

Abby was standing so closely beside him, that Jake dreamily closed his eyes and savored her presence.

"You smell so good," he sighed, his mouth parting in a wistful smile.

"It's only shampoo," she answered.

Retreating to the living room, Jake sat down on the couch, and clutched the coat that his wife had carelessly tossed there.

"Jake," reflected Abby, taking a seat on the opposite end of the sofa, "sometimes, I have a hard time keeping up with you. Earlier today, I was afraid you were building unrealistic expectations, and now you're just the opposite."

With that, Jake clicked on the television set. Anything had to be better than what he was presently thinking.

"I have some good news to share with you," she announced, trying to sound cheerful.

Seeing she had something to say, Jake patiently muted the T.V., and waited for her to finish.

"For a long time," began Abby, "my parents set aside a portion of whatever income they made for my college tuition. I found out today, that Uncle Terry had also been adding to it." Abby handed Jake a white envelope and smiled.

He opened the envelope and pulled out a very expensive slip of paper.

"It's my college fund," she explained. "Dad and Mom, and Uncle Terry," she quickly added, "thought we could use the money. We can pay those bills, Jake."

For a moment, the ex-convict stared at the check, unable to speak.

"I don't want you to think that I'm ungrateful," said Jake, "because, I really appreciate what God is doing. God is providing for us, and He's making that very plain to me right now. But, Abby," he sighed, "this is more than just my hospital bills. I need to do something that supports my family. It's not your parents' responsibility to make sure there's a roof over your head, and food on the table-- it's *mine!*"

With that last emphatic statement, Jake winced in pain, his eyes traveling to the floor as he tried to catch his breath. It was then that he noticed the wet puddles Abby had left on the carpet from tracking snow into the house.

"Jake," she sighed, "I think you're being too hard on yourself. No one is expecting you to be the sole provider. I have a good job with Dennis, and have plenty of opportunity to move up in his family business. And," she added, hopefully, "I might be able to give private casting lessons, when the time comes. Jake, it's actually looking like we can have a career!"

"You mean *you* are going to have a career," replied Jake. "I know this may sound like pride, Abby, but it isn't. I just want to be able to take care of you and the baby, like I'm supposed to!"

"I realize you're not making as much as I am," she reasoned, "but, you *are* helping to support this family, Jake."

"Abby," he wondered, "do you expect me to clean your parents' house for the rest of my life? Or, go back to being Mr. Winkler's errand boy come next spring? I'm extremely grateful for those jobs, but they were temporary at best. I want to do something real... something that means I have a livelihood, other than that of living off my wife."

"I don't mind if you live off me," argued Abby.

"*But, I do!*" exclaimed Jake. "Don't you understand, Abby? I feel like a freeloader! Even your uncle is doing more for us than I'm able to!"

"That reminds me," she awkwardly hesitated, "there was one other thing I didn't tell you yet. It's good news, so you don't have to get excited," she added. "Uncle Terry is trading vehicles with us."

"Trading what?" asked Jake.

"My jeep... I mean, our jeep," rectified Abby, "isn't able to have a car seat in the back, so Uncle Terry is swapping our jeep for his pickup."

"Terry's red pickup?" asked Jake, incredulously. "The shiny, four door pickup truck he takes care of as if it were his baby? That pickup?"

"I agreed to his proposal," shrugged Abby, with a smile.

"Without talking it over with me, first?" he cried.

"I didn't think we had to discuss it," she replied, surprised that Jake was taking the news this way.

Even though he had swallowed a Xantol, Jake's chest was hurting him even more, for the young man wasn't giving it a good chance to work. This discussion with Abby was making the pain worse.

"I guess you're right," groaned Jake, wearily rubbing his forehead with the palm of his hand. "It's your jeep. You should be able to do whatever you want with it."

With a heavy sigh, Jake went to his room, leaving Abby alone with her coat and the puddles on the carpet from her melted snow. Jake's reaction was not what she had expected. To be honest,

Abby was more than a little confused by his rationale, and insistence that he somehow support their small family in the making. Jake had vivid flashbacks, and a violent criminal record; how could he possibly ever hope to make a living independent of her income?

Later that evening, Jake readily declined her call to dinner at her parents' house. His system was so full of Xantol, that the mere thought of food made him feel sick.

"I'm really not hungry," he resisted, lying on top of the bed covers in his room.

"Do you want me to save you something for later?" persisted Abby, for she knew he hadn't eaten lunch because of her, as well. Whether they were kissing or arguing, everything made his chest worse-- or so it seemed to Abby. "At least, come with me and lay down on Dad and Mom's couch while we eat," she urged. "I don't like leaving you by yourself, Jake."

"Then," he suggested wearily, "take the baby monitor with you."

"Very well," she sighed. Abby watched as Jake closed his eyes and tried to rest. "I love you," she whispered, trying to encourage his spirits a little.

"I know," he replied with a small, tired smile. "I love you too, Abby."

When she returned home later that night, she found Jake asleep in his bed, dressed in the day clothes that had become his version of pajamas. After ensuring that he had enough blankets to keep warm through the cold winter night, Abby disappeared into the bathroom to prepare for bed. When she opened the door, however, she found Jake, waiting for her in the hallway.

"I thought you were asleep," she pleasantly greeted, brushing past him on her way to her bedroom.

"Abby, could you answer a question?" wondered Jake, only following his wife partway into her room.

Abby turned on the aquarium canopy light, and climbed into bed. The room filled with the soft shimmer of the aquarium, inviting Jake to linger and watch the colorful fish that he had come to love so dearly.

"What question?" asked Abby, pulling the blankets up under her chin. "Oh! These covers are so cold!" she exclaimed. "I wish it would hurry and cozy up! It's warmer where you are than under here!"

"I wanted to ask you," began Jake, getting another comforter and gently draping it over Abby, "if you think I'm capable of making a living without relying on the money you make."

The question immediately alarmed her.

"Oh, no!" she gasped, at once sitting up in bed. "You're not trying to move out, are you?"

"Take it easy," he smiled, "I'm not leaving. Slide back down under your blankets," directed Jake, covering her once more. "I meant," he explained, "if you thought I could ever earn a good living with the skills I currently have."

Abby cautiously looked at Jake, wondering how honest she should be in her response.

"I thought so," he sighed disappointedly, seeing her quietly searching for a safe answer. "I don't mind menial work," said Jake, venturing to sit down on the edge of her large mattress, "if I thought that it'd be enough to provide for what you and the baby needed. You've done so much for me," he added, "I'm never going to be able to repay your kindness." His gaze met hers, and she smiled sadly.

"I wish you'd stop talking as though you were a stray puppy I took in," Abby sighed. "I'm sorry I accepted Uncle Terry's pickup truck without your consent," she apologized. "I didn't mean to leave you out of an important decision."

"I'm sorry I was so touchy," said Jake. "I shouldn't have been."

"You had every right to be," disagreed Abby. "I was thinking about it, and if Mom had done something like that without Dad's agreement, I don't think he would've liked it."

Jake rubbed his arms, for the house was chilly.

"I don't want you to get nervous by what I'm about to propose," said Abby, "but why don't you stay with me, tonight? You could put your sleeping bag up here, on the bed."

Both horrified and delighted by the suggestion, Jake stared at her, incredulously.

"It's a big mattress," she smiled.

"I thought you were going to let me go at my own speed," he reminded her.

"And I am," replied Abby, snuggling down under her now warm blankets. "I only made a suggestion. It's up to you to act on it."

Jake was thoughtfully silent. When he suddenly realized he was sitting on her bed, he quickly jumped off.

"Good night," mumbled Jake, exiting the bedroom as fast as he could.

Abby smiled. At least he had stopped thinking about his financial outlook. From the baby monitor on her nightstand, Abby could hear Jake restlessly moving about in his room. She wondered if she had made a mistake in making the invitation, but her instincts had told her that Jake was ready for such a step.

To Abby's dismay, the telephone suddenly rang. She looked at the clock and groaned. She had just gotten the bed warm! Grabbing her robe, Abby hurried to the living room to answer the phone.

"Abby, it's Dick," said the caller. "Your father told me this evening that you received some bills from Jake's recent hospital stay."

"That's right," replied Abby, "several thousand dollars worth! I thought you said the State would take care of it."

"You never were supposed to get those bills," explained Dick. "I just got off the phone with Governor Smith, and he said to put everything into a large envelope and send it directly to his office. The State of New York is going to keep its word and pay for Jake's medical expenses."

"Thanks, Dick," said Abby, "that's great news."

"I'm sorry it gave you and Jake such a scare," apologized Dick. "Well, I'll let you go now. It's getting late. I hope you both have a Happy Thanksgiving, tomorrow!"

When Abby hung up the phone, Jake entered the living room, careful to maintain a good distance from her.

"I thought I heard you say Dick's name," said Jake. "Was that him on the telephone just now?"

When Abby related the news to Jake, he looked very much relieved.

"I guess," she mused, "it's the least the State could do, after what they did to you."

Jake hung back, as Abby passed him to return to her bedroom. As she slid beneath the covers, she could hear him rummaging around in his room for something. Curious, Abby was about to go see what he was up to, when Jake appeared in her doorway with a rolled up sleeping bag in his arms.

"I thought I'd give it a try," he sighed, looking apprehensively at the large mattress. It suddenly didn't look big enough.

"I promise to keep to myself," smiled Abby, as her husband unrolled the sleeping bag on top of her blankets on the opposite end of the bed.

"I'm trusting you to keep your word," he replied, in a shaky voice.

As he was about to climb in, Jake noticed that the hallway light was off. After turning it on and leaving the bedroom door completely open, Jake finally zipped himself into the heavy sleeping bag.

"Just watch the fish," she heard him whisper to himself.

Abby turned onto her side, and smiled at the nervous young man now cocooned in the sleeping bag beside her.

"Thanks for doing this," she said, gratefully. "I know it isn't easy for you."

"It isn't," he affirmed.

"If you could do anything at all with your life," wondered Abby, "what would it be?"

"I don't understand," replied Jake. "Do you mean, as in an occupation?"

"Yes," coaxed Abby, "what job would you *like* to have?"

"Well," answered Jake thoughtfully, "I suppose, I'd want to become a wildlife artist."

Abby softly laughed. It was the very same ambition that she had had before pursuing a career in fly fishing.

"But," he continued, "I don't have the proper training. The only time I've ever painted in any medium at all, was when I worked on the murals in your old room. I'm only really good at pencil

sketching, Abby. I don't know how to properly use colors, yet. I know you liked the mural for the triplets, but it's not good enough for a serious artist."

With a sigh, Abby closed her eyes. Before she knew it, she had fallen asleep. But not Jake. He lay awake on her bed for hours, finally deciding to return to his room. Before he could act on that impulse, however, Abby woke up without warning.

"I just had a thought!" she announced in an excited voice.

At this sudden unexpected outburst, Jake nearly jumped out of his sleeping bag in surprise.

"It came to me in my sleep!" Abby laughed. "Jake, when you let me read your file before we got married, it said you had taken your high school equivalency exam-- is that correct?"

"Yes, it is," replied Jake, forgetting to make good his escape. "What about it?"

"If your grades are good enough, you could go to college," she suggested. "You could get the training you need to become a professional wildlife artist."

"But," argued Jake, "I couldn't attend college. I'm an ex-convict! They'd never let me into a place like that, Abby!"

"If you have the grades and the money, then I think they might," she reasoned.

"I had decent grades," admitted Jake, "but we don't have the money."

"Yes, we do," smiled Abby. "We have my college fund, remember?"

"But, that was intended for *you*," he resisted. "Besides, I could never graduate!"

"I happen to think you could," she debated. By the light of the aquarium, Abby could see the hopeful look on Jake's face. She smiled happily. He was interested.

"Me," he breathed in amazement, "go to college?"

"Why not?" she asked, resting her head against his shoulder. "More miraculous things have been known to happen."

Jake nuzzled his cheek against the side of her head and sighed contentedly.

"I never knew shampoo could smell this good," he remarked.

"I don't know why you're carrying on," mused Abby, "it's the same shampoo you're using!"

"Then it must be *you*," Jake chuckled softly.

"Don't go to college, unless you want it," she advised, their voices hushed in private whispers that only the other could hear.

"I don't want to waste the money, either," he agreed.

"That's not what I meant," explained Abby. "It's your flashbacks..." her voice drifted off into the stillness of the room. "You've got to really want it, if it's going to happen."

"And if I do?" he asked.

"Then," she encouraged him, "you should go for it."

Jake snuggled his face into her long, warm hair.

"Do you really think I could do it?" he wondered.

"Absolutely," came her confident reply.

"Even though it means having to leave Three Mile Bay until I graduate?" asked Jake, intently looking at her to see her response.

"As long as you take me with you," answered his young wife, "I'll be happy, Jake."

Jake tenderly kissed Abby, but quickly had to stop, for his desire was worsened by their close proximity to each other. With a sigh, he turned from her and watched the fish in the aquarium.

"There's one thing I'd like to ask, if it's possible," requested Abby. "I want to remain in Three Mile Bay until our son is born. By then, the triplets will be here, and we'll have a chance to help out my parents during those first hectic months. It would also give you a chance to prepare yourself, emotionally," she planned. "There's only one really outstanding Christian fine arts college in the country, and classes begin late next August. I know, because Tyler once talked me out of going there. He wanted us to attend the same school, and he wasn't interested in art, so I changed my plans. Later, I thought that maybe I could become a successful artist without any further

education. I don't know," she sighed, "I think my heart wasn't really in it-- not the way it is with fly fishing, anyway."

"Are you sure you don't want to use your college fund, yourself?" asked Jake.

"No, I *have* my opportunity," answered Abby, without a moment's hesitation. "It's your turn, now."

"Wow," sighed Jake, stunned by her generosity. "I don't know how I can ever repay you, Abby."

"Would you knock it off?!" she groaned, playfully kicking him through the heavy sleeping bag he was hiding in.

With a smile, Jake cuddled his face against hers. This sure was a far cry from prison!

The next morning, John's weather forecast was proven right, for everyone awoke to a Thanksgiving with several inches of freshly fallen snow. While the young of Three Mile Bay hurried into their coats and mittens to go play outside, one other child at heart was eagerly getting into his own winter paraphernalia.

"Last one outside is a rotten egg!" shouted Terry, bounding from the Johanneses' house like a child just let out from school.

Resigning himself to be "the rotten egg," John followed his friend outdoors a few minutes later. After a brief snowball fight, the two men began shoveling the walk.

Inside the yellow house, its occupants were just beginning to stir. Abby was encouraged to find Jake still peacefully sleeping beside her, albeit safely tucked away in his sleeping bag. It was a small step, but it was progress. Above them, Abby heard the dull thudding sounds of someone clearing snow from off their roof.

As she looked back to Jake, his now open eyes met hers. With a wistful smile, Jake was about to kiss his wife when he suddenly noticed someone's face at Abby's curtained bedroom window.

"Hey, Abby!" shouted a young, male voice. "You're missing all the good snow! You'd better get out here before Terry tracks it all up!"

"Who is that?" asked Jake, quickly ducking into the privacy of his sleeping bag.

Abby followed Jake's eyes to the window, and laughed.

"I think it's Harry!" she smiled, as her old fishing buddy waved at the window. "Don't worry," soothed Abby, seeing Jake's apprehension, "he can't see anything through the curtains."

"Tell him that," replied Jake, disbelievingly.

Realizing that Jake was not going to kiss her after all, Abby got out of bed and hurried into her robe.

"It's freezing!" she shivered, fighting to put on her slippers before her feet turned to blocks of ice. "I'm going to turn on the fireplace!"

After sticking out an arm to test the temperature of the room, Jake quickly jammed it back into his sleeping bag, deciding to face the day only after the house had sufficiently heated up. It was a brilliant excuse to linger where he was, for a few moments longer.

When Abby returned from the living room, she laid out her clothes and was about to take off her robe, when someone suddenly protested.

"Stop!" called Jake, fighting to climb out of his warm cocoon. "Let me get out of here before you undress, Abby!"

"Sorry," she apologized, seeing his flustered face as he hastily retreated from her bedroom. "I forgot you were still there, Jake!"

Suddenly exposed to the cold, the young man made a beeline to the fireplace blazing in the living room. After toasting himself until he could brave his still chilly bedroom, Jake quickly dressed into another change of day clothes, and put on his boots and coat.

"I'm going to help Terry get breakfast started," he shouted to her, just before stepping outside.

"I only want toast this morning!" she called back.

With a burst of freezing air, Jake left the little yellow house and followed the recently shoveled path that John had just cleared for them.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" shouted a friendly voice, as Jake looked up at their small rooftop where John and Harry were hard at work. Terry had gone inside to begin the meal preparations for Thanksgiving, so John had been glad to accept Harry's offer to help clear the snow.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" Jake called back with a wave.

When Jake reached the Johanneses' house, he found Terry, bent over a frozen turkey, busily reading the instructions printed on its label.

"I think you might've waited too long to start thawing that bird," observed Jake, entering the kitchen.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" exclaimed Terry, looking up from the stiff bird.

"You guys are really into Thanksgiving," observed Jake, with a smile.

"It's a time when we count all the blessings God has given us," replied Terry, "and this year, we have more than usual to be grateful for." Terry looked at the turkey label and sighed. "I got a late start with this bird. Izzy's usually the one who cooks Thanksgiving around here. Jake, could you fix the hot apple cider? John and Harry will be in a few minutes, and I still have this bird to contend with."

"You could put the turkey in the sink and run cold water over it," suggested Jake. "I don't know how long it will take to thaw, but it might be worth a try."

"Where on earth did you learn that trick?" asked Terry in admiration.

"It's no big deal," shrugged Jake, heating a pan of water on the stove for the hot apple cider. "I read it in one of the cookbooks Mom lent me."

"Ahhh," smiled Terry, "someone who actually reads those things. I just hit the high spots and improvise the rest."

"That's because you know what you're doing," grinned Jake. "I don't know if this is the right time to say this or not," he sincerely added, "but I wanted to personally thank you for your generosity."

"Come again?" asked Terry, puzzled by this display of gratitude.

"Your pickup," explained Jake. "I just wanted to thank you."

"What *about* my pickup?" asked Terry, with a twinkle in his eye. Suddenly thinking that Abby had misunderstood her uncle's offer, Jake blushed in embarrassment. At this, Terry burst out into peals of laughter. "I'm only teasing, Jake!" he cried. "You're very welcome!"

A few minutes later, John and Harry trudged into the kitchen with red noses and numb fingers. They gratefully accepted the hot beverage Jake had waiting for them, and laughed at the still bagged turkey bathing in the kitchen sink. After a few moments of exchanging remarks about the weather, Harry asked Jake where Abby was.

"She should be along in a little while," answered Jake, returning to the stove to pour another cup for John.

The conversation changed topic, until Abby appeared in the kitchen doorway and accepted a mug of hot cider from Jake.

"Harry!" she exclaimed in a pleased voice. "So, that *was* you outside my window this morning! When did you get back?"

"Yesterday!" greeted the young fishing buddy. "Mom said if it weren't for these school breaks, she'd never see me at all!"

"Won't you be graduating soon?" she asked, making a quick mental calculation.

"Next year," answered Harry, "so I'll be back in the neighborhood before you know it. Speaking of the old gang," he ventured, "I saw Tyler, yesterday."

"How is he?" inquired Abby.

At this, Jake turned to wash the countertop, intently listening to every word.

While Harry was nearing the end of his college education, Tyler had only begun his that August. Since both were attending the same school, Abby was curious to know how her old friend was doing.

"Has Jane adjusted to college life, yet?" smiled Abby.

Harry looked at her with a strange look on his face.

"Didn't you hear about the accident?"

"What accident?" she asked, soberly sitting down at the kitchen table. Abby could tell bad news was coming.

"Jane was hit by a drunk driver while crossing the street only a block from their apartment," related Harry. "She passed away last week." Abby numbly tried to catch her breath. "I'm sorry," stammered Harry. "I thought you already knew."

"Tyler's family and I haven't been that close, lately," she explained. "How is Tyler?"

"He dropped out of college and is back with his parents," answered Harry. "You didn't know he was in Three Mile Bay?"

Nervously, Jake looked at Abby and swallowed hard.

"I didn't know," she breathed, stunned by this news.

"I'm stopping by Tyler's place in a few minutes," said Harry. "Mrs. Greene said he's keeping to his room a lot. I know what's happened between you and him is water under the bridge, but he could really use a good friend right now. Since you two were always close, I was wondering if you'd go with me. It might help Tyler if he saw you."

Abby thoughtfully looked at her husband, and realized that this was not a decision she should make on her own.

"Jake," she asked, "could I speak with you in the next room?"

The young man followed her to the triplets' nursery and closed the door for some privacy.

"You want to see him," he correctly guessed.

"Not if you're against it," replied Abby.

Jake stared at the floor.

"I won't stand in your way," he finally replied. "I trust you."

"Jake," she quickly reminded him, "I've never loved Tyler. If anyone knows that, you should."

"I remember," nodded Jake. "I only hope Tyler remembers that, as well."

After donning a warm coat and mittens, Abby left with Harry to visit Tyler. When Harry's car turned into the Greenes' driveway, she began to wonder if this was such a good idea, after all.

"What if Tyler's mom won't let me see him?" Abby wondered out loud. "She wouldn't even invite me to his wedding."

"At least, you'll know you tried," consoled Harry.

Harry opened the passenger door and Abby stepped out into the cold November air. The snow crunched beneath their shoes as they made their way up the sidewalk to the front door. Abby could hear the blood pounding in her ears as Harry rang the doorbell.

Before long, Mrs. Greene opened the door. When she saw Abby, she remained silent, as if unsure what to say to her son's former girlfriend.

"I just found out about Jane," explained Abby. "I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am, Mrs. Greene."

Seeing that Abby was harboring no ill feelings towards her, Mrs. Greene gratefully hugged the young woman.

"Please," she told the two visitors, "come inside. I apologize for not saying anything about this to you or your family, Abby," sighed Mrs. Greene. "We're dealing with so much right now, I just thought it might be best..." she paused. "I'm glad you're here. Harry visited him yesterday, but Tyler still refused to come out of his room. It's as though he's shutting out everyone and everything. Maybe you... maybe you could help him."

"I'll try," offered Abby, in the same hushed voice that Mrs. Greene was using. The house felt as though someone had just died. The feeling was very real to her as she climbed the stairs and walked down the hallway to Tyler's room. How many times had she and Tyler done their homework with the door open, while they were in high school? Old memories came rushing back, and Abby smothered a cry.

"Don't," she silently scolded herself. "Whatever you do, don't cry."

With courage that Abby didn't know she had, she knocked on her old friend's door.

"Tyler?" she asked. "It's me, Abby."

The bedroom door opened and Abby saw Tyler peering at her from inside. He was wearing a pair of blue jeans and a flannel shirt, much like what Jake was wearing that day. Abby could see the grief in his eyes, and that it was all he could do to not break down in front of her.

"Harry just told me about Jane," began Abby. "I'm so sorry, Tyler."

"As long as you're here, you might as well come in," he sighed heavily, stepping aside so she could enter.

Tyler's old room was just as Abby had remembered it. She took a seat at his desk, while Tyler sat down on the bed and stared at her.

"Congratulations on the baby," he observed.

"Thank you," Abby mumbled under her breath, uncertain what to say to her old friend.

"You won't break me if you say something, Abby," Tyler laughed sadly.

"Your mom said you won't leave this room," began Abby.

"I'd prefer you talk about something else," he quickly interrupted.

"You have to face life, sooner or later, Tyler."

"Okay," he politely smiled, getting up and showing her to the still open door. "I've had enough. You've fulfilled your obligation, so you can go home."

"God has a reason for everything that happens in our life," Abby tried to console him.

"And just what would that be?" cried Tyler. "What good reason could God have possibly had to allow Jane to die?"

"I don't know," confessed Abby, "but I asked myself that very same question when Jake was sent back to prison... and then raped," she finished, struggling to get out the words. "I felt as though God were asking too much of us. I didn't think either of us could handle the pain, but God was faithful. He brought us through it all, and I can only believe that the bad He allowed to happen, was somehow for our good."

Tyler was calmer now. Of all the people who had paid their condolences, he felt as though Abby could understand what he was going through, for she had recently been in a place of terrible affliction, herself.

"I heard about that," said Tyler, soberly. "Mom said he was beaten pretty badly."

"Jake has two broken ribs to show for it," she replied. "For awhile, it didn't look as though he was going to make it." Abby brushed a stray tear from her cheek. "I never knew how much I loved him, until I thought I would lose him."

"Jake's a blessed man," remarked Tyler.

"I'm the blessed one," she responded. "You know, whenever I'm tempted to give up, I look at Jake, and remember the fight of afflictions that he's had to come through. It always makes me stronger. If he can keep moving forward-- still hanging on to God, and keeping faith with his Lord, even after all that he's suffered, then who am I to give up on God?"

"He sounds like quite a guy," said Tyler.

"He is," smiled Abby. "Whenever you feel up to it, drop by and visit us."

"I will," promised Tyler, giving his friend a parting hug. "Thanks for coming, Abby."

The young woman left, more hopeful than when she had come. Mrs. Greene and Harry met her downstairs, seemingly encouraged that Tyler had even agreed to speak with her.

"He's accepted so few visitors," lamented his mother.

After saying "hello" to Tyler, Harry dropped Abby off at her parents' home. The moment she walked through the front door, Jake immediately appeared from the kitchen, wearing Izumi's apron.

"Thanks for trusting me," said Abby, gratefully. "Tyler's struggling, but with God's grace, he'll make it."

"That's good," nodded Jake. He hesitated. "Do you still think I should go to college?" he wondered, for they had planned to tell her family that day. "What if I can't make it?"

"After all you've been through," Abby mused with a smile, "you're afraid of a measly college?"

"I never said I was afraid," argued Jake, sensing her playfulness.

"That's good," she laughed, "because I just finished telling Tyler what a brave guy I married!"

Jake grinned playfully, and kissed his wife. Just then, Terry walked in. By the time he noticed them, it was too late to pretend that he hadn't.

"Okay you two," he chuckled, "break it up! We have guests coming, shortly!"

Embarrassed, Jake quickly returned to the kitchen to resume work on the meal.

"Did you talk to Tyler?" inquired Terry, in a hushed voice.

"You don't have to whisper," said Abby. "Jake knows." Then she related the meeting with her old friend, while Terry listened sympathetically.

"I'm glad you had the opportunity to encourage him," sighed her uncle. "I'll be praying for him."

As John set up the dining table in the living room, Terry checked one more time on the main attraction still cooking in the oven.

"Whew!" exclaimed Terry, as Jake looked over his shoulder at the bird, "I think our turkey will just make it in time! I nearly messed that up!"

"There's a lot going on right now," admitted the young man, as he picked up a stack of china plates to take to the living room.

"You'd better let me carry that in," advised Terry, as he saw a flicker of pain register on Jake's face. "Save the heavy housework for me and John."

"I want to earn my paycheck," resisted Jake, as Terry did the task for him.

"Hey," smiled Terry, "you're not hired help-- you're family. We know you're doing your best."

Jake had never gotten over the fact that God had placed him into such a caring group of people that called themselves his family. This Thanksgiving was driving that point home to the ex-convict more poignantly than ever. When Abby and John joined them in the kitchen, a warm feeling came over Jake-- and it wasn't coming from the oven. Awed at what God had given him, Jake quietly slipped away to the nursery to be alone.

It wasn't very long before Abby came looking for him.

"Uncle Terry's about to take the turkey out of the oven," she announced from the doorway of her old room. Abby's smile quickly vanished, however, when she saw the tear streaked face that Jake was trying to hide from her. "What's wrong?" she asked, coming to him in concern.

"Nothing," he sniffed.

"Then," reasoned Abby, "why are you crying?"

"It's because I'm happy," he smiled at her through his tears.

"Oh, Jake," she sighed tenderly, "I love you so much."

Weeping more than ever, Jake unexpectedly put his arms around Abby and embraced her. Stunned, Abby shut her eyes and relished the moment. She could feel every beat of his heart, and every fiber in his being as he tried to hold on to her. A flood of contentment swept over Abby; she felt safe and loved in his arms, so that every care seemed to melt away. But, as Jake's arms drew even tighter about her, Abby's senses quickly returned.

"You're hurting yourself," she observed, realizing that he was forcing himself into this physical contact.

As much as Jake had wanted to hug her, the pain and discomfort on his face was obvious.

"Jake," she insisted, "let me go."

Quickly withdrawing his embrace, Jake looked as though he had just run a marathon of endurance.

"I hope you don't need a Xantol," sighed Abby. "If you do, there goes your Thanksgiving turkey."

"I don't need any turkey to be grateful," groaned Jake, sitting down on the carpeted floor of the nursery, waiting for his chest and emotions to calm down. He could feel the threat of a flashback looming over him, and Jake knew how easily it could overtake his senses.

Just then, they both heard Mr. Winkler's voice, coming from the living room.

"The guests are arriving," said Abby, closing the nursery door and kneeling down on the floor beside her husband.

"Don't come too close to me," he requested. "It's starting to back off, and I don't want to make it worse."

Abby wasn't sure if he was referring to the pain in his chest, or a possible flashback. At any rate, she did as she was told.

After a few minutes of calm, Jake was looking more like his old self.

"That was close," he muttered, carefully getting to his feet.

"Are you sure you're all right?" she asked, standing up and looking Jake over. "Do you need a painkiller? Maybe you should lay down."

"No, it's over," he assured her, taking the sleeve of his shirt and drying his face. "I'm okay now."

"I don't think that hug was such a good idea," regretted Abby, as they prepared to open the nursery door and meet their guests in the living room.

"Let *me* be the one to decide that," insisted Jake, still shaking a little from his latest experience. "Don't overprotect me, Abby."

"Just be careful," she begged him.

"I love you, too," said Jake, with a boyish grin.

Then AJ went out to greet Mr. Winkler and Dennis, who had both been invited to spend this Thanksgiving with their family.

In a few short days, Dennis was leaving Three Mile Bay to join his dad in California, where the main offices of "Bassin' the Weeds," was located. It was an exciting time for Dennis. His famous father, Archibald Beckman, was handing the reigns of the family business over to his son, and Dennis was eager to prove that he was equal to the challenge.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" smiled Mr. Winkler, as he saw the young couple enter the living room.

While Dennis and Mr. Winkler made themselves comfortable on the couch, John pulled his daughter aside to the kitchen.

"Is Jake all right?" he asked in concern. "He looks as though he's been crying."

"Please, Dad," she begged him, "don't let Jake know that you've noticed. He was a bit shaken up, but he's fine."

"Is everything all right between you two?" pressed her father, uneasy that this might be signaling another departure on Jake's part.

"We're good," she smiled, seeing John's reluctance to leave it at that.

Just then, Terry entered the kitchen to carry out a large tray of appetizers that Jake had prepared earlier that morning. As he was about to leave, Terry caught sight of John's concerned face.

"Is something bad happening?" he asked, balancing the tray on one hand, while trying to hold onto a fistful of napkins with the other.

"Only if you drop that thing!" laughed Abby. "Here, let me take in those napkins, Uncle Terry!"

Terry left with the tray, while John searched his daughter's face to see if there was anything more she wanted to tell him.

"Believe it or not," Abby smiled, "Jake's happy!"

Satisfied with this answer, John went back to their guests.

To Abby's pleasant surprise, Jake behaved as though he were mildly enjoying Dennis' presence, instead of merely tolerating him. Whatever had transpired to make this change, Abby was glad that Jake had finally made friends with her new boss.

"Will you be returning next season, Dennis?" asked John, placing an assortment of appetizers onto a plate for Izumi, who was trying very hard to enjoy her Thanksgiving while being stuck in bed.

"No," replied the former casting instructor, "this year was it for me."

"On to better and bigger things, eh?" smiled Terry, biting into a cracker topped with cheese and sliced olives.

"I hope to," Dennis grinned ambitiously. "I want to introduce our publication to the next generation of fly casters. There's a large, up and coming readership of young people out there who are discovering that fly fishing isn't only for their dads and grandparents. It's the future, and 'Bassin' the Weeds' needs to change with the times. The trick is to attract a younger audience, while still hanging onto the older subscribers that Dad worked so hard to get. That's where I hope to use Abby."

"Our Abby?" piped up John, who had just returned from the master bedroom. "What about her?"

"Mr. Johannes," explained Dennis, enthusiastically leaning forward in his seat, "she's going to be the new face of 'Bassin' the Weeds.' Abby's a gifted fly caster, she's young, attractive, only beginning to set records in tournaments, and she's extremely knowledgeable for someone her age. Why, people at the tackle shop often return simply because of her! I know a good thing when I see it, and Abby is good for business!"

"That's a fact," admitted Mr. Winkler, sipping his cranberry juice. "Abby frequently has students coming in, specifically asking for her as their instructor."

"As soon as I get settled in California," said Dennis, leaning back and nodding to Abby, "I'm going to be giving you bigger responsibilities. That also means a bigger salary, so I hope you'll keep that in mind when other publications start knocking on your door."

"I'm not looking to jump ship," she assured him. "As long as we're talking about the future," Abby smiled at her husband, "Jake is hoping to attend the San Diego Christian Fine Arts College in California, next semester."

The announcement dumbfounded everyone in the room. Even Izumi, who had been following the conversation from the master bedroom, wasn't sure if she had heard her daughter correctly.

"Jake?" said John, in a shocked voice. "Go to college?"

"Why not?" asked Abby, a little perturbed at the grave reception that their news was receiving. Dennis made big plans for the future and everyone applauded; Jake did the same, and everyone hesitated-- everyone, that is, but Abby. "Look at them, Jake," she laughed, "they're so proud of you, they're speechless!"

Abby's remark jolted her mother out of shock.

"Good for you, Jake!" Izumi called from down the hall.

"Thanks, Mom!" he shouted back with a large smile. Jake was pleased. Dennis wasn't the only one who had big plans. It made Jake feel good, for he had something to work toward... something that encouraged him to dream for the future... something, called hope.

"Yes, congratulations," stammered John, slowly realizing that Abby's college fund was making this dream possible. There was much to discuss, but that would wait for another time. As John carved the Thanksgiving turkey, he quietly wondered how this ex-convict whom he had

predicted wouldn't last a month in Three Mile Bay, would fare at a prestigious college. Only time would tell.

"Where there is no vision [hope], the people perish."

~ Proverbs 29:18 ~

"It is good that a man [Jake] should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD.

It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth."

~ Lamentations 3:26, 27 ~

"I [God] will remember My covenant with thee [Jake] in the days of thy youth, and I will establish unto thee an everlasting covenant."

~ Ezekiel 16:60 ~

Chapter Twenty-four

Jake's Choice

"To prove the sincerity of your love."

~ 2 Corinthians 8:8 ~

After Thanksgiving was over, Dennis left Three Mile Bay as he had planned. His departure was soon followed by Mr. Winkler, who had securely locked up his tackle store for the winter. Abby didn't have long to mourn their exit, however, for she was fast making new friends through the subscribers at "Bassin' the Weeds." It was an interesting job, and Abby was loving every minute of it.

The only one not happy was Jake.

Since Abby worked from home now, it was harder for her to walk away from her workplace and "go home," for she was home; just as she would finish with one task, a new subscriber from "Bassin' the Weeds" had a question that she needed to answer via email. And when it wasn't a subscriber, it was Dennis with new ideas for the magazine, and more work for her to do. Jake soon discovered that even though Dennis had left Three Mile Bay, his spirit was more present than ever-- especially with Abby. In fact, Jake couldn't have a single conversation with her without getting an enthusiastic update of what Dennis had said recently. Everyone had thought Dennis was in California, but Jake knew better. Dennis was actually living in the machine on the desk in the living room, just waiting for Abby to check her email.

Jake peered out the window of the Johanneses' house, watching the front door of the little yellow home across the way. It was lunchtime, and Abby was late. With a disappointed sigh, Jake went back to the kitchen where Terry and John were eating their hot meal.

"Business must be good," mused Terry, "for her to be kept so busy."

"You'd think she could get away for lunch, though," said John, seeing the downcast look on Jake's face. "Maybe, you should call her again," he suggested.

"No," replied Jake, finishing off the last bite of food on his plate, "she's too busy to talk to me right now."

After Terry returned to their office down the hallway, John remained, soberly thinking to himself while Jake slowly cleared away the lunch dishes. The young man was quiet, until John finally broke the silence.

"You really miss her, don't you," the father smiled sadly.

"I don't know why I do," sighed Jake. "She's working at home. I see her more now, than when she was at the marina."

"But, does she see *you*?" asked John.

Jake looked at his father-in-law, and slowly shook his head "no."

"It's one of the dangers of working from home," said John, knowingly. "I can easily overdo it, and put in more hours at home than if I had a job to commute to."

"I suppose so," mumbled Jake.

"You know," smiled John, "whenever I make the mistake of neglecting my other half, she fights back."

"How?" asked Jake, eagerly sitting down at the table to glean wisdom from Abby's father.

"Well," John chuckled sheepishly, "she has her way, and it never fails to get my attention."

"Oh," said Jake, in a disappointed voice. That didn't sound like something he could do.

"Find a way to let her know how much you care," encouraged John. "Love needs something to burn, or else it will fall away like an unfed fire. A great man of God by the name of James Hudson Taylor once said, 'True love cannot be stationary: it must either decline or grow.' Don't let the love you two share, die out. Guard it jealously."

"But, I can't..." Jake hesitated, leaving the rest of his thought unsaid.

"It doesn't have to be sex," said John, "though it helps. God wouldn't have created men and women the way he had, if it didn't. But Jake, the important thing is to keep making that choice to love each other. Every single day of your life, choose her to be the one. And once in a while, remind her of it."

Jake looked at him thoughtfully.

"Love is a choice," finished John, "or God wouldn't have commanded us to do it so many times in the Bible."

John left to check in on Izumi, while Jake quietly sat at the kitchen table, deep in thought. After several minutes, he slowly got up and finished cleaning the kitchen. Maybe it was easy for Izumi to get her husband's attention when she was being neglected, but Jake was very different from Abby's parents. For him, making *that* kind of choice would be the greatest act of courage he could think of. It would require so much courage... and love.

An hour after everyone else had eaten, Abby showed up in the kitchen, only to grab a bowl and make herself a quick meal of cold breakfast cereal. Jake turned off the vacuum cleaner he had been using in the next room, and found her noisily munching away.

"You didn't have to eat cereal," he sighed. "I saved you some lunch in the refrigerator."

"That wasn't necessary," replied Abby, loading her spoon once more. "When I'm this late, I don't expect you to save me anything."

"Well, I did," sighed Jake, pulling a plate out of the fridge and setting it on the countertop beside her.

"Would you mind if I saved that for later?" she asked, weakly. "I'm almost done with this cereal, and I really need to get back to my computer." Jake held his breath, waiting for the very next words out of her mouth. "Dennis said..." How many times had she begun her sentences with that phrase! It usually preceded a new task for her to do, or some idea that required her attention. As Jake patiently listened, he seriously thought over what John had told him about love and choices. Minutes later, Abby was back home in front of her computer, hard at work.

As dinnertime neared, Jake went to the master bedroom to ask Izumi what she wanted him to fix for the meal that evening. He found John sitting on the bed with his wife, kissing and nuzzling her neck, obviously enjoying her company.

"Excuse me," stammered the young man, quickly turning to retreat. "I didn't mean to intrude."

"That's all right," John called back. "The door was open."

Embarrassed, Jake mumbled out his question to Izumi.

"Whatever is easiest for you to fix," came her reply. John nuzzled her neck once more, and Izumi playfully swatted him away. "Keep that up," she laughed, "and you'll be taking another cold shower!"

"One more reason I'm counting down the days until these babies are born," sighed John, still in good humor. "I'm looking forward to getting things back to normal."

Confused, Jake looked at him, questioningly.

"In her condition," explained John, "I can't get too serious, or Izumi could go into preterm labor. If the triplets came out this early, it would put them at risk for survival."

Suddenly troubled at a new thought, Jake returned to the kitchen to start dinner. If Izumi shouldn't, then maybe Abby... Jake hurried through the meal preparations and excused himself from joining them at the table.

When he entered the little yellow house, he found Abby still at her computer, oblivious to the time.

"Abby," asked Jake, tugging at her shoulder.

"Hold on," said Abby, typing as she went, "just one more minute."

"What's the phone number for your obstetrician?" he asked.

Abby's fingers suddenly came to a stop. That was an odd question.

"Why do you want to know?" she wondered.

"Just tell me," insisted Jake.

"It's in my purse," she shrugged, pointing down the hallway to her room.

Without any explanation, Jake disappeared into her bedroom.

"I can't find it!" he shouted a few minutes later.

"I'm coming," said Abby. She quickly located the object under a pile of clothing in her closet, and opened the bag. "Here's the number," she said, handing a slip of paper to him. "Why do you want it?"

Jake looked at her and said nothing. His eyes were deep and thoughtful, but Abby was unable to read them as she usually could.

"All right," she smiled, "go ahead and be mysterious. I need to get back to work."

Jake waited until he could hear Abby typing, before he stole into the kitchen and quietly picked up the telephone. He had one question for the obstetrician, and one question only. His decision would rest on that answer.

Abby paused at her keyboard. She was unable to get her mind back on the blinking cursor in front of her. Dennis was waiting for a response, and all she could think about was Jake's odd behavior. It wasn't so much the question itself, but the way in which he had asked it. There was a hint of desperation in his voice that unsettled her. What was going on?

Unable to fight her curiosity any longer, Abby got up and found Jake in the kitchen, talking to someone on the telephone in a hushed voice. When Jake saw her, he hastily ended the conversation with,

"Thanks, you've answered my question."

As he hung up the receiver, Abby looked at him curiously.

"Were you just talking to my OB?" she inquired.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, obviously trying to change the subject.

"What did you ask her?" she pressed.

"I needed to know something," Jake mumbled under his breath. He opened a can of mushroom soup, and emptied it into a small pan.

"What did you need to know?" she asked, baffled as to why he was being so vague.

Jake briefly looked up at her, and then quickly returned his eyes back to the pot that was simmering with their soup. With a sigh, Abby folded her arms and shook her head. This was going nowhere. She couldn't make him talk, if he didn't want to. As Abby turned to go to her computer, Jake suddenly stopped her.

"Do you have to work right now?" he asked. "You've been at it all day."

"Dennis and I are setting a lot of things up," she explained, "and it takes time."

"I know," he sighed, "but do you have to work *all* evening? I'm sure even Dennis needs a break." The last remark had a bite to it that surprised Abby.

"He's my boss," she argued. "Dennis is under a lot of pressure right now, and he needs my help."

"He's not the only one who needs you, Abby," said the young man, his brown eyes flashing at her. "I need you, too."

"I'm right here, Jake," replied Abby. "I've been here all day."

With a groan, Jake returned to the stove and rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. The answer from Abby's obstetrician had been a positive one. But, could he go through with it?

"Could I ask a favor of you?" he asked, his voice laced with vulnerability. As Jake turned to look at her, Abby was stunned to see terror in his eyes. "Give me this one night," he requested. "Don't ask any questions, just say 'yes.'"

"I don't understand."

"You don't have to."

"What do you want from me?"

"Whatever I ask."

As Abby stared at him with those questioning blue eyes, Jake had to turn his back to her. He couldn't withstand them. Not now. Quietly, Jake served the hot soup and carefully placed the bowls on their small table. Then he sat down and waited for her response.

"All right, Jake," she whispered. "Whatever you ask."

Jake looked up at her with huge brown eyes, and Abby saw him tremble with fright. Abby knew she had just made a big mistake. Jake wasn't ready. She didn't know what he had in mind, but whatever it was-- he wasn't ready for it.

With a great deal of determination, Jake planted his hands on the table and stood up. He went to the cupboard and pulled out his bottle of Xantol.

"Jake, what are you going to do?"

"No questions, remember?" he pleaded. Abby stared at him, uncertainty etched in her beautiful face. Jake took two pills and swallowed them down. Instead of putting the bottle back into the cupboard, however, he tucked it into his pocket and returned to the table.

"Jake..." she began.

"Please," he implored her, "I'm asking you to keep your promise, Abby-- *no matter what.*"

Unwittingly, Abby had bit her bottom lip until it drew blood. A single drop splattered into her bowl and mingled with the mushroom soup. Suddenly feeling a twinge of pain, Abby touched her lip and licked the small cut with her tongue. She couldn't believe Jake was doing this.

"Eat your dinner before it gets cold," he coaxed, unsuccessfully attempting a smile.

Abby prayed over her meal in silence, and petitioned God to somehow help them. With a deep resigned sigh, she picked up her spoon and ate the mushroom soup.

Jake kept silent, but Abby had an idea of what was going through his mind. More than once, his spoon shook so violently, that it spilled onto the table. It happened so frequently, that he finally stopped cleaning each mess as it occurred.

"Let me help," volunteered Abby, filling her spoon and guiding it to Jake's mouth. He could see by the somber look on her face that she thought this was all a grave mistake. "Don't look at me like that," she sighed. "I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to," he replied. "Please, don't fight me."

"I'll keep my promise," Abby affirmed tersely, "even if it kills you. Come on, open your mouth, so you can vomit this up, later."

When Jake stared at her, Abby dropped the spoon and buried her face in her hands. The tears came and she was powerless to stop them. Jake might be brave, but she wasn't! She knew first hand what a bad flashback did to him, and the thought of being the cause of it was more than Abby could take.

While she wept, Abby felt Jake's tender, trembling hand softly touch her shoulder.

"Don't cry," he begged her.

"If I stop," she asked, raising her head to look into his face, "will you call the whole thing off?"

"No," he answered, swiftly pulling his hand away. "I'm going to hold you to your promise, Abby."

At this, Abby burst into tears once more. Realizing that she needed to get it out of her system, Jake got up and washed their bowls. By the time he finished, Abby had finally quieted down. She wiped her tear streaked face and accepted the handkerchief that Jake handed her. Even then, his hand was trembling. Abby wondered how they were ever going to make it through the night.

"I can feel the Xantol," said Jake. "It's time, Abby."

"Dear God," she prayed out loud, "please, help us. Help me to have faith."

"Wait for me on the couch," he directed her. "I'm going to lock up the house."

Abby weakly did as she was told. She sat down on the sofa and watched as Jake locked the front door and then went to each window to draw the curtains. He stood back and then tried to peer through the cracks, as if testing whether someone could see through them or not. Abby smiled in spite of herself, and brushed away a few more stray tears.

"I hope you're not going to start crying again," he observed, walking to the next window, and repeating the same test. "You only promised me one night, you know. I can't afford to waste any more time."

Abby knew better. The painkiller in his system was taking hold, and he had to act while the medication was working. It would be another four hours before he could safely take more.

After Jake had satisfied himself that they were truly alone, he sat down beside her on the couch.

"Do you mind if we just stay here for awhile?" he asked timidly.

"That's fine," she answered, feeling her eyes moisten once more.

"I'm going to turn on the fireplace," he announced, getting up and returning with the remote. Red and yellow flames danced in the fireplace as the room slowly began to warm.

Jake looked at Abby, and she could see the fear in his eyes. Abby suddenly became ashamed of herself. She was the one crying and weeping, while he was trying so hard to be brave.

The young man tried to take her hand, but couldn't. One simple act, and he couldn't do it.

"When my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the Rock that is higher than I," Jake repeated over and over under his breath. "Abby," he said, turning to her in anguish, "please, help me do this."

In a prayer of her own, Abby gave her fear to God. Jake had enough to struggle with, without having to deal with hers as well.

With gentleness that she had never shown anyone before but him, Abby carefully drew his arms around her waist and snuggled against his chest. Jake shook violently, and it was all Abby could do to hold on to him without shrinking back and asking if she were hurting his ribs.

"I'm all right," he whispered, sensing her apprehension.

Realizing that he was waiting for her to continue, Abby reached up and touched his face, drawing his mouth to hers. As she kissed him, Abby could feel his arms closing in tightly around her. She desperately fought the impulse to pull away and check to see if he were hurting himself. Then, Jake kissed her, as he had always wanted to kiss her-- completely and entirely. When he came up for breath, she could hear him repeat, "when my heart is overwhelmed," over and over again. He caressed her arm, and Abby could feel his heart race alarmingly fast.

Jake got up, and stared down the hallway at her bedroom. Abby wanted to ask if he were absolutely sure he wanted to do this-- that she could wait-- that he wasn't ready. If Jake would only give her a chance to resist him, she was sure she could find a reason that would stop him.

"You promised," he reminded her, a firmness in his voice that spoke of resolve. "Don't go back on me now, Abby. I need you." Jake held out his hand to her, his eyes pleading with her to trust him. Abby placed her small hand in his, and he led her to the bedroom.

Sacred intimacy between a husband and wife, is their business, and their business alone. I ask the reader to let your imagination go no further than the bedroom door, and not intrude on their God-given privacy. Not even I am allowed to follow them there. Come, we'll wait in the living room.

The minutes tick by, and the fireplace is still burning brightly, even though Jake and Abby are not there to enjoy it. If you peered through the curtains that Jake had so carefully drawn, you would see snow settling on the already white ground. By morning, there will be enough for Izumi's snowman.

Suddenly, Abby's bedroom door opens.

"Jake!" cried Abby, as her young husband ran to the bathroom across the hall, wrapped in a blanket.

Jake dropped to his knees and vomited into the open toilet. Abby could hear his gut-wrenching heaves and lingered in the hall. She drew the tie on her terry robe around her waist even tighter. Taking a deep breath, Abby ventured inside.

"Jake..." she whimpered, going in and trying to comfort him.

Jake held up his hand to stop her from coming any closer. His face was white, and he was in a great deal of pain. Jake put a hand to his temples and groaned in agony. Then he tried to throw up again.

Abby was frantic to know what to do.

"Go away!" he shouted into the air. Abby knew he wasn't speaking to her, but she shrank back, nonetheless. "Please, stop!" he cried. Jake had lost all he had to vomit, and each dry heave was making the next one even more excruciating. His body shook violently, and his handsome face twisted in pain.

Abby was numb. She didn't know how to help him. She had seen his flashbacks before, but none like this. He came in and out of delirium, shouting at people that only lived in his memory, and flailing his arms wildly to keep them away. Jake was fast reaching the limits of his endurance. He cried to God for help, and blindly reached out for Abby.

Eagerly, she clutched his hand, and kissed it, tears streaming down her face.

"Please," he said through clenched teeth, "hold me, Abby."

Since Jake was doubled over beside the toilet, she had some difficulty getting to him. But when she did, he quickly buried his face in her lap, and gripped a handful of her soft, terry robe. Abby tenderly stroked Jake's head, knowing that it was the one place where he was the least sensitive to being touched. Jake kept repeating her name, over and over and over again. "Abby... Abby... Abby..." Realizing that he was trying to bring himself back to reality, Abby did the one thing that she often did when he was in a flashback. She talked to him.

"It's all right," she whispered softly, "you're safe. There's no one here to hurt you, Sweetheart."

"Abby... Abby..." he mumbled.

"Try to open your eyes, Jake," she coaxed.

"Don't leave me," he pleaded, gripping her robe even tighter.

"I won't," she promised. "Please Jake, look at me. It will help."

Slowly, Jake sat up and stared at Abby, his brown eyes wide open. He looked down at his blanket, and saw that he had wet himself.

Abby reached out to stroke his face and comfort him, but Jake recoiled from her touch. Then he leaned over the toilet and tried to throw up. Abby could see his muscles tighten in agonizing pain, and realized that she had to find some way to stop his dry heaves before he caused himself greater harm.

Struggling to keep her wits, Abby's eyes caught sight of the shower, and an idea flashed through her mind. She quickly jumped up and turned on the water.

"Jake," said Abby, trying to take him by the arm and help him to his feet, "you need to get up."

Jake, however, was so lost in his dry heaves and pain, that he could barely hear her, and his strength was giving out fast. Not to be deterred, Abby put Jake's arm around her neck and finally managed to get him upright. When his blanket started slipping to the floor, Jake made a feeble attempt to retrieve it.

"It's all right," she assured him, "I won't look."

It took Abby every ounce of strength she had to get him into the shower, but she did it. Abby was hoping that the warm water would help relax his muscles, and ward off the flashbacks that were intermittently hounding him. Jake propped himself under the refreshing torrent and looked as though he were going to pass out from fatigue.

Then the young wife unfolded a large, thick towel, and discreetly wrapped it around her husband's waist. Grateful, Jake smiled at her weakly.

The effects of the flashbacks were wearing off now, but Jake's pain had only just begun. His chest was livid with agony.

"Can you still breathe?" she asked, remembering what the doctor had said about broken ribs and collapsed lungs.

Unable to speak, Jake signaled to her that he was breathing fine. It was the pain that was causing him so much trouble.

"Come," she said, leading him from the shower, soaking wet towel and all. "You need to lay down." Abby was about to take him to his bedroom, when Jake headed for hers, instead.

"Would you close your eyes?" he panted, for he needed to take off the wet towel.

Abby turned her back for a few moments, while Jake slowly climbed under the covers.

"Okay," he breathed.

After Abby had tucked the warm blankets around Jake, she helplessly stood by.

"You can take more Xantol in three hours," she tried to say in a hopeful voice. Three hours were an eternity to Jake. It might as well be ten or twenty-- it made no matter to him. He was hurting NOW.

"I'm going to be all right, Abby," he tried to comfort her between painful breaths. "I just have to wait for it to back off."

"Is there anything I can do besides pray?" she whimpered.

Jake opened the covers on his good side, where his ribs had never been broken, and motioned for her to join him.

"Are you sure?" she hesitated.

"Just stay with me," he asked. "My night isn't over, yet."

At this fresh reminder of her promise, Abby carefully took her place beside Jake, robe and all. If he wanted more, he would have to ask her for it. But he didn't. Jake only grasped her hand and drew her close, so she could rest against him.

"You're tired, Abby," he whispered gently. "You can sleep now. I'll still be here in the morning."

In spite of everything that he was enduring, Jake was comforting *her*. He cradled Abby in his arms, letting his senses drown in her closeness. When he felt her body at last drift asleep, Jake silently rejoiced.

"Poor girl," he whispered softly. "I've put you through a lot."

When Abby awoke the next morning, she was delighted to find herself still in Jake's arms. He had fallen asleep, and his tired body was finally relaxed and composed. Abby snuggled against her husband and closed her eyes, relishing the hard-fought fruits of their victory. Jake had been so brave. Abby's heart swelled with gratitude and love. God had been faithful. Yes, it hadn't been easy, but then, life rarely ever is. God had blessed their trials, and it had only made them stronger.

Just then, Jake stirred and let out a small groan before opening his eyes. Suddenly, he realized someone was with him! The young man quickly looked down and saw Abby's form cuddled against his. With a sigh of relief, Jake softly kissed the top of her head, so that she turned to meet his gaze. He felt himself drown in those two blue pools that were staring back at him so lovingly.

"I can hardly believe I'm actually with you," sighed Jake. "I've wanted to hold you so many times."

Abby put her head back down on the uninjured side of his chest, and could feel it rise and fall with each breath.

"You took such an awful chance, last night," shuddered Abby.

"Thank you for keeping your promise," he said, gratefully. "I think you're learning to trust me a little more."

"I could say the same about you," she smiled, picking up his right hand and looking it over with curiosity. She put her small hand against his large one and measured the difference. Jake watched curiously, as Abby traced the outline of his fingers, and followed the small lines in his palms, as if discovering a new part of him that she had never known before.

"What are you doing?" he laughed softly.

"I've never noticed until now how much bigger your hands are from mine," she mused. Then Abby traced her finger down to his wrist and stopped. Quickly, Jake withdrew his hand from hers, and hid it beneath the covers. "Why won't you let me see those scars?" she wondered.

"Because it's something I don't want to remember," replied Jake, his muscles growing tense beneath her head.

"Please," she begged, "just let me look."

Reluctantly, Jake returned his hand to her, so she could finish her inspection. Straight across his wrist, was a large, jagged scar where he had tried to end his life. As Abby traced the scar with her finger, she could feel him begin to tremble. Tenderly, Abby pressed her lips to his wrist, and kissed the scar.

"Oh, Abby," he sighed, lovingly, "I'm *so* glad I lived!"

Jake eagerly kissed her, desire welling up within him. Sensing this, Abby tried to free herself from his arms.

"I can't let you do that to yourself, again," she said, trying to put a little distance between herself and Jake. "You really scared me last night."

"Didn't I do it right?" he asked, hesitantly.

"That's *not* what I'm talking about," replied Abby, sitting up in bed. "You could have hurt yourself, Jake! What if the flashbacks had been too much for you? And your two broken ribs... they're not simply fractured, you know! They're *completely broken*! It's going to take a long time to heal as it is, and then you had to go and set back progress by making love to me! And then your vomiting..." Abby shivered in horror. "I don't even *want* to know what that did to your ribs." Abby folded her arms, and shook her head. "It didn't have to be last night, Jake. We could have waited for you to get well."

"Enough," said Jake, reaching out and placing her back beside him where she belonged. The firmness Abby had heard in his voice the night before, had returned. Abby didn't know how to explain it, but Jake had somehow changed. There was a new confidence in his voice that surprised her. "I choose you, Abby," he said in a hushed whisper. "I promise to choose you every single day of my life, even if I may not be able to prove it to you all the time. I need you to know how very much I love you."

Abby looked up at Jake in shock.

"Is THAT why you put yourself through last night?!" she cried in horror. "To prove to me that you loved me?"

Jake was silent, but the steadfast gaze in his eyes told her that it was true.

"You knew I loved you," he explained, "but I needed to remind you of it. This was my way of getting your attention."

"Well," she gasped, "congratulations! You succeeded."

Abby got out of bed, and absently searched for her robe, before realizing that she was still wearing it.

"Abby," he pleaded, "come back."

"I have to use the bathroom," she retorted, marching out the bedroom door and disappearing into the bathroom across the hall. Abby turned on the shower as high as it would go, and collapsed onto the floor in a pool of tears. Jake had done all that for *her*. The fear and the pain that he had to conquer just to put his arms around her, made Abby weep uncontrollably.

A minute later, the door opened, and Abby saw Jake standing over her, his towel securely wrapped around his waist. Carefully bending down, Jake whispered her name, and brushed a wisp of hair away from her face with his fingertips. He was so gentle.

"Why?" she wept. "Why did you feel you had to prove your love to me?"

Jake paused, looking away for a moment, and then back at her, as if hesitant to give the reason. But the answer was right there in his eyes, and Abby suddenly realized her mistake.

"My new job," she stammered. "You felt left out."

"I felt ignored," he admitted.

"I suppose," she said thoughtfully, wiping the tears away with the sleeve of her terry robe, "that with all the hours I've been putting in lately, it would be easy for you to feel that way."

"You once told me never to shut you out of my life," he smiled, tenderly. "I'm only asking that you do the same for me."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, burying herself in Jake's open arms.

"Abby," he confessed, "I didn't just do this to get your attention."

"I know," she whispered, knowingly. "I wanted you, too."

For a few minutes, the two sat on the bathroom floor, just holding each other, until Abby realized that Jake wasn't wearing much. Despite the fireplace still being on, the house was chilly.

"You'd better get some clothes on," she advised him. "You don't want to catch a cold."

Seeing that his night was over, Jake reluctantly let Abby go. When he tried to help her to her feet, an involuntary gasp of pain escaped his lips.

"I'll be all right as soon as the Xantol sets in," he smiled, trying to minimize the pain.

"I didn't think you could take any more so soon," said Abby in surprise, for sometime that morning, she thought she had stirred from her sleep long enough to hear him taking more medication.

"I suppose," Jake said wistfully, "Dennis has a lot of work for you, today."

Just then, someone knocked on their front door. Jake was about to go answer it, when Abby reminded him that he was only wearing a bath towel. Abby laughed as the young man quickly retreated to dress himself.

When Abby unlocked the door, she found Terry in his pajamas and slippers, huffing vapor trails as he rubbed his arms in the freezing cold.

"I locked myself out of the house," he explained, quickly stepping inside, and immediately going to the fireplace to thaw. "I just went out for a second to get the paper, and the door swung shut!" Terry flapped his arms and stamped his feet to get his circulation going.

"I'll call over and get someone to let you in," said Abby, starting for the telephone.

"It won't do any good," said Terry, rubbing his cold hands together. "I think your Dad's in the shower, and Izzy can't come to the door. Got any coffee?"

"How long have you been out there?" laughed Abby, going to the kitchen to see what she could find.

"About ten minutes," answered Terry from the next room, for he wasn't ready to leave the warmth of the fireplace just yet. "We got a good five inches of snow last night," he informed her.

Abby remembered the snowman that her father had wanted to build for Izumi in front of her bedroom window, and smiled. Now there would be enough snow for one.

"We don't have any coffee," announced Abby, "but how about hot chocolate, instead?"

"Perfect," said Terry, coming to the kitchen doorway. "Say," he grinned, noticing her attire, "you're really getting into the work-from-home spirit of things! It's nine in the morning, and you're still in pajamas!"

Abby could have told him that she was *only* wearing a robe, but quickly decided against it. That was more information than her uncle needed to know.

Jake had dressed into a warm flannel shirt and jeans, and had paused in the hallway to tie the laces on his sneakers, when he overheard Abby talking to Terry in the kitchen.

"Thanks," she was saying. "I've been working too hard lately, and Jake and I need a little time to ourselves."

"Good for you!" cried Terry. "You've been at that computer way too much. You need to do what John and I do. Whenever work gets a little heavy, we go out and shoot a few hoops. You've got to let all that tension out." Terry glanced at the time and set down his mug of cocoa. "John should be out of the shower by now. I'll call and get him to unlock the front door. I tell ya, it's no fun standing ankle deep in the snow, in you PJ's!"

After Terry left, Jake ventured into the kitchen.

"Want some hot chocolate?" she asked, handing him a mug.

"I just heard what you said to Terry," he grinned hopefully. "Does this mean I can have today, too?"

"Dennis owes me for getting his project on its feet," said Abby, "so I can afford to walk away from work for awhile."

Not even bothering to taste the sweet beverage, Jake set aside his mug and slowly approached Abby, a loving look kindling in his brown eyes.

"I asked Uncle Terry to cover for you at home," she continued, her voice hushing when Jake put his arms around her waist. As their eyes locked, Abby could hear her heart loudly pounding. She wondered if Jake could hear it.

"Same promise as last night?" he asked in half a whisper.

"You can't take Xantol all day," murmured Abby, as he lowered his head to kiss her lips. "You couldn't eat anyth--" The young woman lost herself in Jake's embrace, and the couple retreated back to her bedroom once more.

This time, there was no mad dash for the bathroom, but their intimacy triggered another flashback. Jake curled up in bed, refusing to touch even Abby. He only asked for Daisy, her large, oversized black teddy bear. When Abby placed Daisy into his arms, Jake latched onto the stuffed animal and rode out the nightmare as best he could.

Abby stood by the bed in her robe, silently asking God to make the pain in Jake's chest go away. But Jake's ribs were only a part of his problem. The many years of abuse and torture had left its mark on the young man, so that he could not touch his wife without recalling some vivid memory from his past.

Even as Jake felt the flashback subside, anger welled up within him, tying his stomach into knots. He was too mad to speak, and for several minutes, Abby could only watch as Jake pounded Daisy with his fists, crying, "Why? Why?" The bear was hurled across the room, and hit the wall before sliding down into a heap on the floor. "I don't understand, Abby!" he wept. "Why did Dad have to hurt me? Why did I have to be so messed up for you?"

"Give it time," she tried to encourage him. "Remember what Dr. Jacoby said? You need to learn to associate intimacy with me, instead of with the others. That only comes with time and patience."

Jake wearily dried his eyes with the palms of his hands. He stared at Abby and shook his head, apologetically.

"I'm sorry to put you through this," he said, struggling to get a hold of his grief.

"This makes three times," Abby hopefully reminded him. "When we first got married, you couldn't even kiss the bride."

Jake opened his covers, and invited Abby back to the bed.

"Three is all for now," he breathed wearily. "My chest is on fire." As Abby snuggled against Jake, he gripped her hand tightly. "I remember the day I found out I was different," he recalled, his voice just breaking above a whisper. "It was during school recess, and some kid made a remark about my father. I remember looking at the boy, and suddenly realizing that all fathers didn't do to their sons, what mine was doing to me. It was so unfair. Why me? Why me, Dad?" Jake groaned. He put his arm around Abby, so she could rest her head against his shoulder. "I learned

to loathe the touch of others," he continued with a sigh, "and I never wanted to get over it... until now. It was a way to defend myself. Their desire was worsened by physical contact, so I tried to avoid it whenever I could."

Abby was silent.

"Dr. Jacoby would love to hear all this," he chuckled. "You're good therapy for me, Abby."

When she remained quiet after several more minutes, Jake looked down at the solemn face leaning against his shoulder.

"You're suddenly quiet," he mused.

"I was praying," said Abby.

"For what?" asked Jake, with a curious smile.

"I was just thanking God for a little boy who learned to trust," she sighed gratefully.

Jake and Abby remained in bed all that morning, simply trying to accustom him to her touch by snuggling and holding hands beneath the warm covers. However, as noon approached, Abby began to feel the effects of holding still for so long. She was getting restless, and Jake realized that the only way he would be able to keep her, was to go with her.

Since Jake couldn't eat because of his painkillers, they both skipped lunch and went outside to enjoy the several inches of snow that had fallen the night before.

"Doesn't everything look fresh and new?" exclaimed Abby, eagerly inhaling the crisp winter air. "By January, I'm going to be sick of the stuff," she quickly acknowledged, "but right now, I only want to enjoy it!" Abby looked at Jake, who was trying to keep up with her exuberance. "You've put me in a very foolish mood," she laughed. "I feel a strange kind of helplessness, as though you have me in the palm of your hand-- yours to crush or to cherish. Even so, I'm not afraid. Why is that, Jake? What have you done to me?"

The young man put his arms around her and sighed contentedly. But Abby couldn't hold still for long, and Jake had to release her much too soon.

"Let's build Mom's snowman!" she exclaimed, tugging him by the hand and leading him to her parents' bedroom window. "Hi, Mom!" she shouted, waving through the partially curtained window to get Izumi's attention.

The very expectant mother looked up from her book and smiled when she saw her daughter, standing outside in the snow with Jake.

"Hi, Sweetheart!" she called back. "Hi, Jake!"

"We're going to build you a snowman!" Abby shouted.

"What?" hollered Izumi, unable to hear her daughter clearly through the closed window.

Abby cupped her hands to her mouth and was about to repeat herself when John slid open the window.

"If you two shout a little louder," he laughed, "then the neighbors might hear you better!"

"John," Izumi eagerly asked, "would you get my coat? I want to leave the window open. I think they're going to build a snowman, and I want to watch!"

"Well then," he sighed, "you'd better bundle up. It's freezing cold out there, Little Dove, and in a few minutes, it's going to feel like that in here."

John helped Izumi put on her heavy winter coat, and then covered the rest of her with a thick warm blanket. He fought the urge to tease her, as she finished the ensemble with a stocking cap and gloves. Instead, John kissed his wife and opened the bedroom window wide open.

"I'm going to keep the door closed," said John, "or else the rest of the house is going to get pretty interesting." He rubbed his arms and waved to AJ, before joining Terry in their home office. At least there, he could stay warm!

Seeing they had an audience in her mom, Abby was impatient to begin.

"Come on, Jake!" laughed Abby, taking a handful of snow and adding to it until it was big enough to roll on the ground. Jake rolled the ever growing ball of snow, while Abby patted it down into a firm shape.

"I think it's big enough for the bottom," announced Jake. "Now for the middle."

They repeated this until AJ had three large balls of snow, each stacked one on top of the other.

"You know," grinned Jake, with a playful hint of fun in his eyes, "we could..." he whispered the rest into Abby's ear so Izumi couldn't overhear.

Abby burst into laughter.

"I don't know if we have enough snow to do that, though," she said, looking about her thoughtfully.

"Okay, what are you two up to?" laughed Izumi.

"You'll see!" giggled Abby. Abby suddenly caught herself. "Oh great," she gloomily thought, "he has me *giggling!*"

As Abby collected all the loose snow she could find within an easy distance, Jake began to craft three snow people in front of Izumi's open bedroom window. Delighted, Izumi covered her mouth with her hand, and watched as they took form.

"I'll go get some things to dress them with," volunteered Abby, running into her parents' house.

Izumi watched as her daughter rummaged through their closet, and then hurried to Terry's room before rejoining Jake outside.

"Close that door!" shouted John, appearing from the office, and rubbing his chilly arms.

"John, look what the kids are building," beckoned Izumi.

The father looked out the open window and grinned. There were two tall snow people, and one short one with a large, distended belly. Abby had dressed one of the two taller people in John's old baseball cap and sunglasses, while Terry's snowman sported a fishing rod. For good measure, Abby topped her mom off with an old, ridiculous gardening hat.

Izumi laughed, and clapped her hands in delight.

"Oh my!" exclaimed Terry with raised eyebrows, when he came to the window to see what all the fuss was about. "They look vaguely familiar." Then he saw the lopsided grin on his snowman, and wagged a playful finger at the two responsible artists. "I'll get even with you AJ!" he laughed.

After everyone had finished admiring their creations, Jake quietly took Abby by the hand and led her down the snow covered beach. John leaned out the window to see Jake put his arm around Abby before they disappeared out of sight.

"Did you notice something different about them?" wondered John, closing the window while Izumi took off her coat.

"Don't bring it up if they don't," she cautioned him.

"Then, you noticed it too?" asked John.

"I'm so happy for them," affirmed Izumi. "Jake must love her very much."

Out on the snow covered beach, Jake didn't say a word for some time. He clung to Abby's hand, and kept whatever thoughts he was having to himself. When he stopped to look out at the icy bay, Abby leaned her head against his shoulder, and clasped his hand with both of hers. A cold wind blew against them, and Abby moved even closer to Jake for warmth. He looked at her for a moment, and then back out at Three Mile Bay.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked, as a contrail of vapor spilled from her mouth and vanished into the chilly winter air.

"I can't take you from this," muttered Jake, shaking his head.

"What are you talking about?" wondered Abby.

"This," he said, pointing to the bay with his free hand, "all of it-- it's your home."

Then Abby realized he was referring to college. They hadn't talked about it in days, mostly because she had been too busy with her new job.

"If I take you away from your family," continued Jake, "and we move to California where that college is, what happens if I can't take care of you and the baby? Your Dad and Mom won't be there to help you, and there wouldn't be any Uncle Terry to run to; you wouldn't have any family or friends at all."

"*You* are my family and friends," Abby tried to encourage him. "I know you'll do your best. And," she reminded him, "Dennis would be there."

"Dennis!" laughed Jake, halfheartedly. He had almost forgotten that the former instructor had moved there, only weeks ago. "I guess he wouldn't have to email you, anymore," said Jake, bleakly. "He could just drop by or pick up the phone whenever he wanted something. Maybe, we shouldn't go. He takes enough of your time as it is."

"I've really been neglecting you, haven't I," sighed Abby, gently rubbing his strong hand between her small ones. "I'm so sorry, Jake."

"I was looking through the college application forms you showed me," he continued in a discouraged voice, "and on it, they ask if I've ever been convicted of a felony. This is a *Christian* college, and you said that there's more students who want to attend than they have spaces available. I can't help thinking why they'd ever accept me! They said it wouldn't automatically disqualify me, but Abby, they want me to give them an explanation for their review. What am I supposed to tell them?"

"Tell them the truth," she answered. "You killed your father in self defense."

"But I was *convicted* of second-degree murder," he argued. "It's only my word against theirs! Why should they believe me? Besides," groaned Jake, "it sounds like an excuse, and I have none. I went to my father's house, with the intent to kill him. *I* was the one who waited in the bushes, *I* was the one carrying a weapon-- not my father. If he had tried to come at me on any other day, he'd still be alive."

"But *you* might not be," Abby was quick to point out.

They continued to walk, until Jake stopped and they began to kiss. Suddenly, his face betrayed that he was in considerable pain. Quickly freeing his hands from her grasp, the ex-convict reached into his pocket and pulled out the bottle of Xantol. He popped two more pills into his mouth and waited for them to take effect.

"You've been taking a lot of those-- even more than last night," observed Abby, in a concerned voice.

"I'm all right," he shrugged carelessly.

"You aren't taking more than the prescription said to, are you?" she asked.

"What if I am?" said Jake. "It's not as though it's going to kill me. If I tried to make love without Xantol, now *that* would!"

"Stop taking any more pills," pleaded Abby, suddenly becoming frightened.

"Just when I'm getting used to being with you?" he cried. "*No way!*"

"It's too dangerous, Jake!" argued Abby. She plunged her hand into his pants pocket and retrieved the bottle. "It doesn't say what to do if you overdose," she read frantically. "Jake, maybe you should throw up!"

The glaring look on Jake's face frightened her. She wasn't sure if he was angry with her, or angry with the situation. Either way, he wasn't going to stop.

"I'm going inside," Jake muttered, tramping off in the direction of their home. Before leaving though, he had grabbed the bottle from her hand. Even from Abby's vantage, she could see him opening the container for more.

"If you take *one* more pill," she shouted after him, "then you can forget ever coming to my bed again, Jake Murphy!"

Upon hearing this, Jake suddenly stopped in his tracks and turned to face her, his brown eyes livid with anger.

"*Fine!*" he yelled, and flung the bottle directly at her feet, the brightly colored pills tumbling out and scattering about on the white snow. "I hope you're happy," he muttered bitterly. Without another word, Jake disappeared into the yellow house.

Thunderstruck, Abby could feel hot tears rolling down her cheeks. It was the first time he had ever yelled at her like that, and it stung. Abby bent down and put each pill back into the open prescription bottle Jake had thrown at her. She purposed within herself not to give it back to him. No amount of intimacy in bed was worth poisoning him. Abby hid it in her coat pocket and waited on the porch, trying to gather enough courage to face him inside.

"God," she prayed silently, "please, help us! Tell me what to do!"

Abby turned the door handle and went in. Jake was on the couch, staring at the unlit fireplace, his hand nursing the side where he was feeling his ribs. He looked up at her only briefly, before staring back at the empty fireplace. Timidly, Abby went to her room and searched for a place to hide the bottle of Xantol. She opened her closet, and grabbed the nearest shoebox she could find. After shoving the bottle into the toe of a running shoe, she carefully hid the box and quickly shut the closet door.

Just then, Abby heard footsteps directly behind her. It was Jake. She didn't like the wild look in his eyes.

"Where did you put the bottle, Abby?" he asked, in a low voice.

Jake had never hurt her before, but she still felt herself shrinking from the dark look brooding in his eyes.

"I'm not giving it to you," she replied, fighting to keep her voice calm.

"Give it to me," he insisted, taking a step toward her.

Abby defiantly shook her head "no."

With a loud moan, Jake took her by the arms, and frantically began to kiss her face and neck. Abby struggled to get free, but Jake pinned her against the bedroom wall, unwilling to let her go.

"Please," Abby begged him, still trying to remain calm, though she was feeling more panicked by the second, "don't Jake-- not like this."

Suddenly recognizing the panic in her voice, Jake paused and looked at her, his chest heaving in pain.

"Please, Abby," he entreated her, "I need the Xantol."

Abby bravely shook her head.

"I can't let you hurt yourself," she breathed.

Slowly letting go of her arms, the young man sank onto the bed. His face was ghostly white. Abby tried to calm her breathing, for she was starting to hyperventilate and began to feel faint. The pregnant woman stumbled from the bedroom and went to the kitchen to splash cold water on her face, and revive herself.

Jake sat on the edge of the bed, his chest on fire with agony. The pain had been cumulating since last night, and it was getting worse. When Abby returned, she carried a damp washcloth, and knelt down on the floor in front of him. With a great deal of gentleness that he knew he didn't deserve, Abby wiped the sweat from his face, and helped him to lay down on the bed.

God had heard Abby's prayer, and the Holy Spirit was working on Jake's heart. It didn't take much longer for Jake to admit to himself and to God that he had sinned. As remorse swept through his soul, Jake looked up at his wife.

"Is it too late to ask you to forgive me?" he wondered in a shaky voice, his broken ribs shooting waves of pain through his chest with every word he breathed.

"It's not too late," she answered.

"I'm sorry," Jake apologized.

"I've never seen you look at me like that before," shuddered Abby.

"I know," he said. "I saw the fear on your face."

Still dazed, Abby went to the living room and curled up on the sofa. She was pregnant and hadn't eaten breakfast or lunch. The added stress of what had happened between her and Jake, made her feel weak. She tried to close her eyes and rest, but found she couldn't. Heartsick, Abby began to cry.

Back in Abby's bedroom, Jake was grieving as well. When she had chosen to be alone, instead of turning to him for comfort, Jake loathed himself for what he had done. He had to talk to her and somehow make it right.

With a great deal of deserved agony, Jake very slowly got out of bed and made his way down the hallway. He saw Abby curled on the couch, shivering with cold, and tears spilling down her beautiful face.

"What have I done?" he scolded himself out loud. Jake walked to her as fast as he could and sat down on the carpet, leaning his back against the couch beside her head. "I don't know what to say," he began.

"You already said you were sorry," replied Abby, unsuccessfully trying to staunch the oncoming flood of tears.

Jake lowered his head in shame.

"I didn't want it to end," he said, "and I didn't care if I hurt myself or you, to get what I wanted. It's no excuse, Abby. I know better." Jake groaned inwardly, and his chest punished him bitterly for it.

"You wouldn't have hurt me," Abby tried to console him. "You couldn't."

Jake didn't look so sure. His confidence was shaken, and he was feeling more guilt than Abby felt he deserved.

"How can you ever trust me again?" he cried.

Abby got up and went to her room. She found the Xantol, and took it to the living room.

"I trust you to do the right thing," she said, placing the bottle into his hand.

Jake looked at Abby. The temptation to take more painkillers and be with her was great. The desires that had been awakened in him as a small boy, were always resisted by him, and looked upon as disgusting and filthy. But with Abby, there was no guilt or shame attached with intimacy. God had created her for him. Jake knew it every time he held her in his arms. Even so, he realized that he couldn't abandon self-control, simply because he didn't have to feel ashamed of that desire now. He had to act responsibly with this newfound freedom. It was a new lesson for him, and Jake prayed that he would learn it well.

"Would you throw it away?" he asked, handing the Xantol back to her. "Please, have patience with me, Abby. I'm learning."

Abby smiled gratefully, and kissed his cheek.

"You'd better hold off on that," he sighed. "At least, until my ribs get better."

"You can still take your painkiller, Jake," she advised him. "Only, you can't abuse it. This drug isn't candy. It could really hurt you."

"I know," he replied, hanging his head in embarrassment.

"You can come to me," she tenderly whispered in his ear, "but not if you have to overdose to do it. Please, promise me."

"I promise," said Jake, accepting her hand and pressing it to his lips. "I love you, Abby."

That night, Jake slept in his own room, for he couldn't take any additional Xantol, until the remaining drugs in his system had been flushed out. Even when he *could* take more, he had to wait and see what he was capable of, using only the correct dosage. It was a test in patience and self-control that Jake was determined to pass. He never, *ever*, wanted to see that same look of fear in Abby's eyes, again. As he lay awake in bed, Jake thanked God for not letting him do anything worse to Abby, than he had.

The next morning, Jake didn't go to work, but stayed in his room and let his body recover. Abby had offered to keep him company with a game of checkers, but Jake refused. Reluctantly, she spent the morning in front of her computer, while Jake remained in bed, staring at the ceiling.

Noon came, and with it, the promise of a second chance. Jake went to the kitchen and took out the bottle of Xantol. He swallowed the prescribed dosage given by his doctor, and sat down on the living room sofa while Abby continued to work.

"I hate to interrupt you," he smiled, "but you're missing lunch, again."

"Just a few more minutes," said Abby, her fingers tapping away at the keyboard. "If it's lunchtime, why aren't you eating?" she suddenly wondered out loud.

"I can't," announced Jake. "I just took my painkiller."

Abby glanced at the time and suddenly realized that he could start taking the drug again.

"Couldn't you wait until *after* you had eaten something?" she asked, with arched eyebrows. Jake's face fell. His stomach was very empty, but even in his hunger, he hadn't thought of that. Abby grinned and turned back to her computer. "I'll eat later, as well," she told him. "From now on, though, I'll break from work whenever you want."

Smiling tenderly, Jake got up and took Abby's hands from the keyboard. *She* was learning, too.

"There is difference also between a wife and a virgin... she that is married careth... how she may please her husband."

~ 1 Corinthians 7:34 ~

"Let thy fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of thy youth. Let her [Abby] be as the loving hind [female deer] and pleasant roe [female mountain goat]; let her breasts satisfy thee [Jake] at all times; and be thou ravished always with her love."

~ Proverbs 5:18, 19 ~

Chapter Twenty-five
Our First Christmas

"I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself, and was gone... I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer."

~ Song of Solomon 5:6 ~

Abby rolled over in bed and groggily blinked through her sleep at the digital clock sitting on the nightstand. It was midnight, and for some reason she was awake. With a tired yawn, Abby reached for Jake, who had fallen asleep beside her in bed earlier that night.

"Jake?" mumbled the young woman, feeling about in the darkness for her husband. "Jake, I'm cold. Jake?" Suddenly, Abby realized that Jake's place in bed was empty. Thinking he had momentarily gotten up to go use the bathroom, Abby closed her eyes and waited for his return. Seconds turned to minutes, and Abby slowly lost track of time as she fell back to sleep. But the cold awakened her once more, and Abby turned to Jake's familiar presence beside her in bed. However, when she reached for him, her hands only found emptiness. Where was Jake? Abby lifted her head and looked at the clock. An hour had passed, and Jake still hadn't returned.

Growing concerned, Abby climbed out of bed and checked the bathroom, only to find it empty. As her concern began to mount, her eye caught sight of the half open door to Jake's room. Normally, it was kept wide open... except for the old days, when he used to sleep by himself.

An entire week had passed since Jake had come to her bed, and even when his ribs wouldn't allow him to be intimate, he still held her. It had been too easy for Jake's past to spill over into the present, so he slept with Abby firmly clutched in his arms-- a constant reminder that the presence beside him was hers, and not someone else's.

As she stared silently at the door at the end of the hallway, the very real possibility that he could be there filled her heart with disappointment. Following her intuition, Abby quietly looked inside. Sure enough, Jake was back in his own bed, looking comfortable and snug, and worst of all, *without her*. Just then, the slumbering young man momentarily stirred before settling back into sleep.

Realizing that he had made his choice for the night, Abby solemnly shuffled back to her now empty bed, sighing wistfully. Her bedroom felt cold and empty without Jake, and so did she.

"What's the matter with me?" she groaned softly. "So he went back to his room. I've slept alone all my life. It's no big deal!" However, the logic of Abby's head wasn't able to fill the hollow aching in her heart. Jake wasn't there, and no amount of reasoning could make that fact go away.

Disgusted with her own weakness, Abby folded her cold legs beneath her and tried to fall asleep.

"Why is this so hard?" she wondered. Seven nights with Jake, and she suddenly couldn't stand to be by herself! The power of her physical connection with him, amazed her.

Suddenly craving a comforting presence, Abby got out of bed for Daisy, her long-beloved teddy bear. When Abby was little, Daisy was the one she had huddled against when the thunder sounded like a giant stamping its feet on the house rooftop. And when shadows on the floor began to take the hideous forms of lurking monsters, it was Daisy that Abby had clung to, all the while reciting her Bible memory verses to assuage her fears. But this time, there were no giants on the roof, and no monsters hiding in her bedroom-- only an inexplicable longing that Abby was unable to fill without Jake. Determined to prove to herself that she could overcome this perceived weakness, Abby searched her room for the stuffed animal. When the bear didn't turn up, it finally occurred to her that Jake must have taken Daisy with him.

Defeated, Abby returned to her empty bed and pulled the cold covers up around her body. With no husband and no teddy bear, Abby finally surrendered. As the lonely tears streamed down her face, she was grateful that no one was present to see her making a fool of herself. Abby would have been ashamed for anyone to know how she was carrying on, when Jake was only down the hall. Jake was safe and at home, her pregnancy was going well, and her parents and Uncle Terry were in good health. There was no excusable reason to feel this way!

"Dumb old bear," she sighed, trying to cozy down into her pillow. Envious of the stuffed animal in Jake's arms, Abby at last fell asleep.

The next morning, Abby awoke only to discover that Jake had already left for her parents' house to start breakfast. Disappointed to have missed him so completely, Abby lingered at her bedroom window and paused to see the natural beauty of the winter wonderland that lay just outside the pane of glass. Overnight, a storm had passed through, covering over the unsightly tracks everyone had made in the snow, and making everything look crisp and new. But Abby couldn't enjoy the unspoiled landscape, for her mind was busily engaged elsewhere. Jake had left without kissing her good morning, and though it had been a small oversight, Abby couldn't help feeling that he had missed seeing her on purpose.

The newly fallen snow crunched beneath her feet as Abby walked to her parents' house for breakfast. She was eager to see Jake, and to learn how he had fared sleeping a night through

without her. A part of Abby secretly wished for a confession of how terribly he had missed her, so that she might feel less ridiculous for the miserable night she had endured.

When Abby entered the kitchen, she found Jake busy at the stove, while Terry read the morning paper at the table, making thoughtful remarks about the local news. Terry looked up from his newspaper as she made her way to the coffee pot to pour herself some of the hot beverage.

"Good morning!" he greeted his niece. "Only six days till Christmas! I hope everyone has already done their shopping! The malls are going to be jammed this week!" As if to confirm his prediction, Terry examined the newspaper and shook his head knowingly.

Jake glanced up at Abby and quickly returned to his work, giving the simmering meal of bacon and eggs more attention that it really needed.

"That reminds me," continued Terry, "I'll be with some friends from church tonight, and we're going to do a little Christmas caroling around town. John wants to stay home with Izzy, but I thought maybe you and Jake might want to come along." When he heard no response, the uncle looked up from his newspaper. "Abby, are you listening?" he asked, for she was staring into her coffee mug with a distant look on her face.

"I'm sorry," apologized Abby, returning to earth. "You said something about caroling?"

"Are you and Jake coming?" asked Terry.

"I don't know," stammered Abby, "are we, Jake?"

"If you want to," shrugged Jake, his back still turned to her.

"Then, I guess we're coming," she sighed, unenthusiastically.

Narrowing his eyes thoughtfully, Terry looked the young couple over. After a few moments of silent deduction, he set the newspaper aside for John, and got to his feet.

"I think I'll go alphabetize my bookcase," he announced, quickly exiting the kitchen without further explanation. Terry hadn't lived with John and Izumi for so many years, by not being able to recognize when a married couple needed to be alone.

With Terry out of the room, everything suddenly became quiet. All Abby could hear were muffled voices as the rest of the house went about its morning routine, and the crackling of

bacon in Jake's frying pan. With a loving smile, Abby quietly walked across the room to where Jake was still facing the stove, and slipped her arms tenderly around him.

Gasping in surprise at this sudden, unexpected physical contact, Jake nearly jumped out of her arms.

"Don't *ever* do that to me, again," he chided her a little sharply, relieved that it had only been Abby, and not someone else.

"I-- I'm sorry," she stammered. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"I don't like people coming up from behind me," explained Jake, his voice softening at the sight of her startled face. After kissing Abby on the forehead, Jake smiled at her tenderly. "I'm all right, Abby. You just took me by surprise, that's all. Before you do that again, give me a little time to prepare myself, okay?"

With an understanding nod, Abby reached out to embrace him, but Jake quickly stepped back. As a hurt look flashed across Abby's face, Jake winced inwardly. Why had he reacted to her that way? He wasn't quite sure.

"What's wrong?" she asked, wondering if he was still recovering from being surprised, or if this was something more.

"Nothing's wrong," he mumbled, turning his back to Abby and giving the scrambled eggs on the stove another stir with his spatula.

Just then, John appeared in the doorway.

"Did you hear someone cry out?" he asked, a little puzzled. "It wasn't exactly a shout..." Then the father noticed Jake's downcast eyes, and suddenly stopped his question. "Just give a holler when breakfast is ready," said John, quickly excusing himself.

Abby turned back to Jake.

"Nothing's wrong, Abby," insisted Jake, once more resisting the touch of her hand on his chest.

"Did I say or do something to hurt you?" she wondered out loud.

"I told you," he sighed, "you only startled me. I'm fine," he added in a firm, but annoyed voice.

Abby sighed and took another step back, seeing that her proximity was making Jake uneasy.

"I thought you were getting used to me," she remarked.

"Not so loud," Jake pleaded in a whisper. "They might hear you!"

"What's wrong?" she pressed, in a hushed voice.

"What makes you think *anything* is wrong?" he argued, trying to keep his patience. "Abby, you're making a big deal over nothing!" Even as he said these words, Jake sensed in his heart that something was happening to him, but he couldn't explain why.

"You left me last night," she whispered. "You took Daisy with you, but not *me*. After this past week..." Abby paused, "I thought things were different between us. I thought you were happy."

"I *am* happy," he insisted.

"Then why, Jake?"

Jake took a big gulp and looked into her expectant blue eyes.

"I don't know," he replied, trying his best to be honest, even if it made him vulnerable being so open before her. "Abby, I love being with you, but the flashbacks after we're together, are taking a lot out of me. Sometimes, just holding you can be difficult." As those smarting words escaped his mouth, Jake could see tears welling in Abby's eyes. "I love you," he whispered in a firm voice. "Please, never doubt that."

"Oh, Jake," whimpered Abby, wiping a hot tear from her cheek, "if anyone knows how much you love me, it's *me*. I don't doubt it for a second." The young woman gulped back a sob.

"I need to back off for awhile," he explained, only beginning to understand it himself. "I'm tired, Abby. I'm tired of fighting those memories. Just once, I want to fall asleep without feeling their touch still on me. Please, *please*," he begged her, "tell me you understand."

"I understand," she replied in a quivering voice. "I'm so sorry I make you feel that way."

Upon hearing this, Jake seized Abby by the shoulders and gazed straight into her face.

"*Never* apologize to me for that," he made her promise, shaking Abby by the shoulders ever so gently. "Why, Abby, all you've ever given me is happiness! Just the sight of you brings me joy!"

Baby, look at me," he pleaded. Abby raised her tearful eyes to his, and saw that he was crying. For a moment, Jake struggled to steady his voice. "This isn't your fault," he insisted. "Those flashbacks were not *your* fault!"

"But, if it wasn't for me..." wept Abby.

"If it wasn't for you," interrupted Jake, beaming at her through his tears, "then I never would've known what it was like to be loved by such a wonderful woman as you. I may not look it," he added, "but I've had a few miracles in my life, and you, Abigail Murphy, are *definitely* one of them. Never apologize for that!"

As Abby collapsed into a pool of tears, Jake let his wife bury her face against his shoulder. It pained him greatly to see her suffering for someone else's sins. The transgressions of his father, and the others that had come afterward, seemed to surround him and Abby like a prison with no bars. In that moment, Jake was more angry with his abusers than he had ever been in his entire life. Their sins were now hurting his beloved Abby, and it was almost more than he could bear. Jake could only hold her, and tell her that he loved her.

Even as Abby hid herself in Jake's strong arms, she knew that he was forcing himself into this physical contact for her sake, alone. Drying her face on his shirt, Abby freed herself from Jake's firm grasp.

"I'm sorry I burst into tears," she apologized, accepting his handkerchief. "I understand, Jake-- I really do."

"I know you do," he sighed. "Could you promise me, never to feel guilty when I have a flashback after we're together?" he wondered. "Could you, Abby?"

Abby looked at him, uncertainly.

"Are you able to promise me," she countered, "never to come to my bed unless you really want to?"

"Not when I think you need me," answered Jake, soberly. "I don't want to fail you as a husband, Abby. In spite of what you're thinking right now, this past week has been one of the happiest of my life. I just can't be there all the time."

"I can accept that," replied Abby, her voice much calmer now. "I'll try not to feel so guilty," she bargained, "if you can make me a promise: hold me if you think I need you, but don't go any further unless you really want to. That way, when you have a flashback, I'll know it was *your*

choice, and not something you were doing just for my sake. If you could promise me that, then it would really help."

"Would it, Abby?" he asked in surprise.

"It would."

"Okay then, I promise," said Jake. "Is there anything else?"

"Since you ask," Abby smiled tearfully, "you could return my teddy bear."

Jake grinned. When Abby's face lit up with a beautiful smile, Jake could feel the anger over his past melt away. The sins of his father paled in comparison to the marvelous love Jake had found in Abby. As God's grace flooded his entire being, it became clear to the young man that there were no bars here, only the tender mercies of a God that knew his every pain. This realization slowly crept into Jake's heart, until it shined as brightly as the noonday sun. God's love for His children became as obvious to Jake as Abby's laughter was to his ears. He didn't have to search long and hard for it-- it was standing right before him.

Jake stepped close to his wife and gazed lovingly into her soft blue eyes.

"I love you so much," he whispered. "Thank you, dear God, for Abby."

Contentment permeated Abby's soul.

"Thank you God, for Jake," she added to his prayer.

In the warmth of his visual embrace, the loneliness of the previous night vanished. Reassured of Jake's love, Abby knew she could brave a thousand nights by herself, though something told her she wouldn't have to.

Just then, AJ heard someone clearing their throat. It was John.

"I really hate to interrupt," he apologized, "but your mother is getting hungry."

"Izzy's not the only one," chimed in Terry, joining them in the kitchen. "When do we eat?"

Jake smiled at Abby and planted a warm kiss on her forehead. While John prepared Izumi's breakfast tray, the rest of the family happily sat down to an overcooked meal of bacon and eggs. Peace gently settled around the gathering, pervading every soul at the breakfast table, and those

down the hallway in the master bedroom. Maybe it was the Christmas season, or maybe, just maybe, it was because God was blessing them, as a family.

A few days later, Abby looked up from her computer keyboard long enough to see Jake carrying her mother's family album to the sofa.

"What are you doing?" she asked, curiously.

"I'm having difficulty getting your father's expression right," he confessed, disappointedly. "The painting is coming along, but something about Dad's face just isn't right, and I *have* to get it right," he sighed heavily. "Christmas is only days away."

"Won't you let me see it?" she begged once more.

"I want it to be a surprise," insisted Jake, trying hard to resist Abby's pleading eyes. "This is supposed to be for the *whole* family. I only wish I could do more. One painting just doesn't seem enough, especially after everyone's been so kind to me."

"Are you kidding?" smiled Abby. "Dad's wanted me to do a family portrait for years, but wildlife is more my speed. There's too much you have to get right with a human figure, and it gets even harder when it's someone you're familiar with."

"If you're trying to encourage me," chuckled Jake, "then you're failing miserably. You're a better artist than I am, Abby."

"No, I'm not," she sighed confidently. "You only need time and practice. You have a lot of potential, Jake-- more than I've ever had."

"I just can't get his face right!" groaned Jake, shutting the album with a soft thud. "I don't know, Abby. Maybe I'm trying something too ambitious for my first attempt with acrylics. I should have stuck with pencil. It's what I know best." Jake wearily ran his fingers through his loose brown hair and leaned back on the couch in defeat.

Thoughtfully, Abby got up and returned with a small photo album of her own.

"May I sit next to you?" she wondered, making sure that she asked Jake for permission before surprising him again.

"Okay," he replied, shifting a little to make room for her on the sofa.

"These were taken the first year Dad and Mom were married," explained Abby, opening the album carefully. "Uncle Terry took them. Maybe, it will help you."

Curious, Jake looked over Abby's shoulder as she slowly turned each page. The blush of newlyweds was evident in their faces, and Jake suddenly realized something that he had seen before, but had not fully recognized for what it was.

"Sometimes, they still look at each other that way," he mused, taking the album from Abby and inspecting one of the photos carefully. "Only, it's a little different now. What *is* it?" he sighed. Jake turned one page more and paused at a picture of John gazing at Izumi. "I know," he answered himself, "it's confidence. They look at each other more confidently now, than in these photos. I think there's more trust now, too."

"Really?" asked Abby. "I don't see it, Jake."

"That's because they're your parents," he explained, "and you see them all the time." Jake carefully took one of the photos he had been using as reference for the painting and compared it to Abby's album. "Your parents are both older now," observed Jake, "but you can tell that their bond is much stronger than when they were younger. Just look at the expression in your father's eyes, Abby. I think I understand it now."

"It's the same photo you've been staring at for weeks," sighed Abby, still not seeing what Jake was seeing. "What's so different about it, now?"

"I understand his soul better," replied Jake with a sigh of satisfaction. "Abby, eyes are a window to the soul. If you can understand the eyes, then you can read a person's heart."

Abby laughed and shook her head, good-naturedly.

"I don't know why you're so incredulous," he smiled. "You do it to me all the time. You can read me like a book, Abby. Sometimes, I don't even have to say a single word, and you know what I'm thinking."

"Well," she sighed, "*that's* different."

"How is it different?"

"After last night," she sighed, "do you have to ask?"

"It's no different for your parents," he smiled.

"Of course it's *different!*" argued Abby.

"How?"

"I don't know how," she stammered, "it just is."

"Oh, Abby," laughed Jake, "don't ever change!"

"If you're going to laugh at me," sighed the young woman, smiling in spite of Jake's amusement at her expense, "then I'm returning to my computer."

Abby could feel Jake's grin all the way back to her desk. After typing a few words in an email to Dennis, she glanced in Jake's direction and saw him still smiling at her.

"I love you, Abby," he glowed tenderly, getting up with her photo album in hand. "Thanks for this. It'll help the painting."

As Jake returned to his room to work on the Christmas present, Abby sighed to herself. Sometimes, that man was beyond her comprehension!

The next day, Abby went out to do some last minute shopping for Christmas, while Jake stayed home to work on his painting. Since he hadn't had any flashbacks unrelated to their physical intimacy in some time, Abby was willing to leave him alone in the house. It was late afternoon, and Jake was putting a few finishing touches on John's shirt, when he heard a knock at the front door.

"I'm coming," he muttered, wiping his hands clean on a rag. Jake hated to tear himself away from his work, for progress was going well and his opinion of the painting had been slowly improving.

Jake swung open the front door, and raised his eyebrows in surprise when he saw who the visitor was.

"Hi," greeted Tyler, a little awkwardly. "Abby told me to drop by when I was in the neighborhood. I hope this isn't a bad time?"

"I'm afraid Abby's not here right now," explained Jake. "In fact, you just missed her. I think she's Christmas shopping."

"So close to the twenty-fifth?" smiled Tyler. "It's like her to wait until the last moment. Well, I'll come back later. I don't want to bother you."

"No, please," invited Jake, surprising himself by his own hospitality to Abby's old boyfriend, "come in."

"Are you sure?" Tyler asked, hesitantly. He didn't know how Jake would receive his presence, and wasn't sure he wanted to find out.

"You must be cold by now," Jake insisted, ushering Tyler out of the chilly air and into the warm house. The fireplace was burning, so Tyler made his way to the heat to warm his hands. Under one arm was an ornate container.

"Mom made this for you and Abby," said Tyler, presenting Jake with the small Christmas tin. "It's gingerbread," he explained. "Every Christmas, Mom goes a little crazy in the kitchen."

"Thanks," accepted Jake, setting the container on the coffee table.

"Be glad it isn't fruitcake," said Tyler, as Jake offered him a seat on the couch. "Last year, Mom made so much of the stuff, Dad was passing it out to strangers on the street."

Jake smiled politely, and for a moment, the men were silent.

"I was sorry to hear about your wife," said Jake. "I can't imagine what you're going through."

"I think you can," replied Tyler, thoughtfully. "You've been through some pretty rough times, yourself. It must have been hard to leave all this and go back to prison."

"It was," confirmed Jake, noticing for the first time that his jeans had become smudged with paint.

"You're an artist?" asked Tyler, recognizing the familiar smell of acrylics on his host.

"I'm trying to be," Jake answered with a smile. "Would you like to see what I'm working on right now?"

"Sure," said Tyler, getting up and following him to the master bedroom where Jake had set up an easel to work. A high stool sat nearby, and on it rested the artist palette that Jake had been using to mix his colors on.

"Here it is," sighed Jake, showing his guest a large canvas on Abby's old easel.

"Wow," said Tyler, immediately struck by the skill of Jake's artistry. "You really did this?"

"I've been working on it for a few weeks," said Jake. "I'm going to give it to the Johanneses for Christmas. Do you think they'll like it?"

"They'll like it," smiled Tyler, knowingly. "It's really impressive, Jake. No way Abby could've ever done something like this."

"Why do you say that?" asked Jake, curiously.

"The Abby I know," answered Tyler, "never sees that kind of emotion in anything but her fly fishing. It's as though she has a blind spot where matters of the heart are concerned. I don't know," he mused. "Maybe, it's because she grew up around so many men. Abby was always trying to prove herself to the rest of us. I think that's why she's so good at fly fishing. It's the one thing she does that no one else can touch."

"You're still in love with her," Jake observed sadly.

"I'm in love with a dream that someone else fulfilled," replied Tyler. "Jane completed me. As for Abby, she and I never really got that close. She only put up with me, because her family expected it of her. No," he smiled, "I never really managed to get past being fishing buddies with Abby. She never let me. Too busy keeping her guard up, to let anyone love her. I'm sorry," Tyler suddenly apologized, "I didn't mean to be so frank. To be honest, you're not what I was expecting."

"What *were* you expecting?" asked Jake.

"I don't know," answered Tyler, "but there's more to you than I first gave you credit for."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Jake smiled.

"I hope you do," said Tyler, sincerely. "Mom tells me you're going to attend college next year," he recalled, as the two men returned to the living room.

"I haven't sent in my college application yet," replied Jake, "but Abby's really making fast work of it, so it'll be ready soon."

"Abby once wanted to attend that same art college," said Tyler, "so I guess she already knows what to do. I talked her out of going there, you know."

"Yes, she told me," smiled Jake. "I hear you dropped out of college when Jane passed away," he ventured. "Any chance you might change your mind, and go back to finish?"

"You're starting to sound like my parents," smiled Tyler.

"If I'm intruding where I shouldn't," said Jake, "tell me, and I'll change the subject."

"No, it's all right," sighed Tyler. "I can't make my mom and dad understand. I don't want all my old dreams, if I can't have them with Jane. She was my life, and it's as if my parents are expecting me to just go back and pick right up where I left off. I can't. My wife is gone-- how can I?"

"When I was sent back to prison," said Jake, "I wasn't supposed to get out for another seven years. There was a chance of getting paroled again, but after what I said at the commission, I knew it wasn't likely. Even when things got bad, I held on to the hope that I would see Abby again-- even if it was only in heaven. Death lost some of its sting for me after she confessed that she loved me. I didn't want to die, but if I did, I knew that I'd see her in heaven, no matter *what* happened to me." Curious, Tyler listened intently to what his host had to say. "You know," admitted Jake, "the worst thing about dying, is the realization of who you're leaving behind. I can't speak for Jane, but when I realized that I probably wasn't going to live, the only thought I had was for Abby and the baby. Jane wouldn't have wanted you to give up on your dreams, Tyler. That's the *last* thing she would have wanted for you."

"My head knows you're right," sighed Tyler, "but my heart doesn't want to go on without her."

"What's the alternative?" asked Jake. "Suicide? Take it from me, God's plan for your life will be better than anything you could've ever planned for yourself."

"I'm never remarrying," asserted Tyler. "And I'm not waiting for you to kick off so I can take Abby, either," he grinned.

"Thanks," chuckled Jake.

"I suppose," hesitated Tyler, "that if God wants me to get married again, then I'd do it-- though it's hard to imagine that there's anyone else I could ever love besides my Jane." Tyler looked about the room, and noticed a bundle of Christmas wrapping paper sitting in the corner. "Have you done all your shopping, yet?" he asked. "If you want, we could stop by the mall. I know you can't

drive, and it's probably hard to surprise Abby when she has to be the one to drop you off and pick you up everywhere."

"You don't have to do that," said Jake, surprised by Tyler's invitation.

"I haven't anything else better to do," shrugged Tyler. "Besides," he quickly added, "I feel like I owe you, somehow."

"Why?" asked Jake.

"I don't know yet," replied Tyler, "but, I have a feeling that I'm going back to college."

While Abby climbed out of her red pickup truck later that day, she noticed Tyler's car pulling up to the yellow house. As it stopped behind her, she noticed Jake, sitting on the passenger side, saying something to Tyler.

"Jake?" she breathed, incredulously.

After Tyler waved to Abby, Jake got out of the vehicle and the ex-boyfriend drove away. With a big smile, Jake walked to his wife and kissed her on the forehead.

"I see you did a lot of shopping," he observed, noting the stack of packages she was trying to balance in her arms. "I did a little shopping, myself," he grinned, keeping a large bag hidden behind him so Abby couldn't see.

"You... and Tyler... went *shopping*?" she gasped in shock. "Why?"

"Because he invited me," replied Jake, rather matter-of-factly. "I like him. It's a pity you two ever broke up."

As he said this, Jake quickly ducked a playful swat from Abby, who was still trying to hold on to her packages. Jake laughed, his eyes twinkling with excitement. By the secretive manner he was keeping his parcel behind his back, Abby became intrigued.

"Is it for me?" she asked, her eyes flashing with curiosity.

"Maybe," was all Jake would answer. By the eager grin on his face, Abby could see that it was. "What about you?" he asked, peering curiously at the boxes in her arms and the large bags hanging from her wrists. "Is there anything for me in all that?"

"After your 'maybe,'" she laughed, "do you really expect me to tell you?"

Then Jake glanced at her belly.

"What am I *thinking!*" he suddenly cried in self-reproach. Abby's concerned husband pulled the parcels from her arms and shook his head. "You're *pregnant*, Abby! You shouldn't be carrying all this stuff!"

"It wasn't heavy," she argued, unlocking the front door.

"I don't care," Jake insisted with a frown, "I don't want you taking any chances like that. I mean it, Abby."

"If you say so," she conceded, kicking off her shoes onto the living room floor. "Would you put all that on my bed, Jake? I'll wrap it, tonight."

"Save me some wrapping paper," he requested, taking the parcels to her room. "Wow!" he shouted a few moments later. "Thanks, Abby! I always wanted one of *these!*" He quickly appeared from the bedroom, deep in laughter, though his ribs hurt for it.

Abby put her hands on her hips in reproof, but she could plainly see that he had only been teasing.

"I'm just kidding," he smiled, kissing her on the forehead once more. "I didn't look. Promise."

"You're certainly in a good mood," she observed, as Jake took his mysterious, large shopping bag to his room. "What in the world did you get that's so big?" she asked.

"Hey," he smiled, "no peeking!" When Jake returned to pick up her shoes, he noticed the weary look on Abby's face. "You really look tired," he observed. "Do you want me to run you some bath water? You have time for a good soak before dinner."

"That would be wonderful," sighed Abby. "The mall was jam-packed. My feet are throbbing, and my back is killing me."

"It is?" asked Jake. "Do you want a back rub?"

"Are you sure it won't bother you?" she asked, cautiously.

"I don't think I'll have a flashback, if that's what you mean," replied Jake, helping Abby off with her coat. "Go lay down on the sofa-- on your side," he directed, as the pregnant woman did as she was told.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" she asked, trying to get comfortable on the cushions with her back turned to the room. "I don't mean to question that pregnancy book you've been reading, but I don't think you've ever given anyone a massage before."

"Would you relax?" he smiled, getting down on his knees beside the couch. "You want to feel better, don't you?"

As Jake began to slowly massage Abby's lower back, she sighed in relief.

"That feels good," she admitted. "This is the last time I ever go shopping so close to Christmas. The checkout lines took forever..." Abby turned her head to see Jake. "Why did Tyler come here?" she wondered.

"I guess he just needed someone to talk to," shrugged Jake.

"So he talked to *you*?" Abby puzzled out loud.

"You sound surprised," he replied, moving the massage up to her shoulders.

"I am," confessed Abby. "A little to the left? There! Right there," she sighed. "Tyler isn't a very emotional guy," she explained, "not like you. He never showed his feelings, so I always had to guess, and if I guessed wrong, he would say something silly like, I didn't understand him."

"Tyler said something similar about you," related Jake.

"You two talked about *me*?" Abby cried in dismay.

"What's the matter with that?" asked Jake, working the tense muscles in her neck.

"Well," she groaned, "how would you like it if your wife and old girlfriend compared notes about *you*? Not that Tyler has much to compare, but still, it's a little disturbing."

"I don't have any old girlfriends," said Jake, finishing up the massage, "so I wouldn't know."

"None?" teased Abby in mock surprise. "I can't expect to find a beautiful woman on our doorstep one day, trying to renew any old acquaintances?"

"Cut it out, Abby," smiled Jake, blushing with embarrassment. "I was too busy trying to survive, to do anything but imagine what real love was like. I knew love wasn't the things my father told me it was, and it certainly wasn't what the men at prison did to me. I could only hope that there was more."

"Is love everything you were hoping it would be?" she wondered.

"No," replied Jake, gazing into her deep blue eyes, "it's so much more."

Abby could see the longing in his face, but knew that he wasn't prepared for intimacy right now. The young man apologetically hung his head and looked up at her through a floppy fringe of brown hair. Abby tenderly combed it aside with her fingers and smiled understandingly.

"It's not because I don't love you," he whispered.

"I know," replied Abby.

"You see," he smiled softly, "you *can* read my heart, without me having to say a thing."

After dinner that night, Abby absconded with all the Christmas wrapping paper and scotch tape in the house, and barricaded herself in her room. By the time Jake came back from her parents' home, he was unable to wrap the special present he had bought for her.

"Abby?" he asked, knocking on her closed bedroom door.

"Don't come in!" she cried.

"I need some wrapping paper," requested Jake.

"Hold on," she called back. With the sounds of rustling paper, Abby appeared in the door and cracked it open a few inches, just wide enough to pass him a roll of wrapping paper. When Jake saw the candy cane stripes, he frowned.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Don't you have anything softer than this?" he asked. "Something with flowers?"

"Flowers?!" exclaimed Abby.

"Or something feminine."

"Let me see what I can find," she sighed, disappearing back into her room to rummage through the stash of wrapping paper. "Here," said Abby, presenting another roll to him through the open crack of her door. "It's the only one with flowers I have."

"They're poinsettia," observed Jake, unenthusiastically.

"Poinsettia are flowers," she insisted. Then Abby shut the door and returned to her gift wrapping.

Jake glumly looked at the roll of paper and sighed disappointedly. It wasn't anything like what he had wanted. Suddenly getting an idea, Jake went to his room and put on a warm winter coat.

"I'm going out for a minute, Abby," he called to her. Before she could respond, Jake was already through the front door.

A half hour later, Abby heard Jake's return.

"Where have you been?" she cried, bursting into the living room as Jake tried to warm himself before the fireplace. On the floor at his feet lay a roll of floral wrapping paper printed with hearts and doves. Abby sighed heavily as Jake rubbed his cold, numb hands together for warmth.

"I only went to the drug store," he explained, his teeth chattering slightly.

"That far on foot?" she gasped. "In this weather? Oh, Jake."

"I'll be all right as soon as I get warm," he assured her, standing as close to the hot iron doors as he could without scorching himself.

"You went without a stocking cap," Abby sighed, dusting his hair from a heavy coating of snow. "You'd better get out of those clothes and into a warm bath, before you catch a cold. Jake, what happens if you come down with something? With your broken ribs, sneezing and coughing are going to hurt beyond words."

"I haven't caught a cold, yet," he replied. "I'll just take a quick hot shower, Abby. I don't have time for a bath."

"Whatever is so important for you to wrap, can wait," she asserted, firmly. Just then, Jake sneezed. Wincing in pain, he gently touched his hurt side and saw the look of dread on his wife's

face. "Please," she begged, "go take a long, hot bath. I'll fix you some tea with lemon, and then you're going straight to bed."

"I'll go to bed *after* I've wrapped your present," insisted Jake, sitting down on the couch to take off his shoes.

"Let me do that," sighed Abby, seeing the pained look as he tried to bend over. Abby knelt on the carpet and fumbled with the knots in his shoe laces. "Jake, sometimes you scare me," she breathed quietly. As a single tear slid down her cheek, Jake gently brushed it away with his hand. Abby leaned her forehead against her husband's knee while he softly stroked her hair.

"I'll be all right," he tried to comfort her. "I'll take a Xantol, and then relax with a long soak in the bathtub, okay?"

"Thank you," said Abby, gratefully.

Jake went to the kitchen and swallowed a painkiller, but as he started to make his way to the bathroom, he paused and looked at Abby.

"Come with me," he said, clasping her hand in his and pulling her along. Before Abby could protest, Jake kissed her lips and closed the bathroom door, shutting themselves in from the rest of the world.

The next few days passed, until Christmas Eve finally arrived with all its excitement and expectations. It was time to put up the tree, and Terry was more than ready for the enjoyable task. Since Jake had never done this before, Terry brought him along to the Christmas tree lot in Chaumont, and bestowed his knowledge of how to pick just the right tree to his adopted nephew.

"Next year, when you and Abby are away at college," Terry explained, as the two men stood in the tree lot, gazing at row after row of tall evergreens, "you'll know how to pick out a tree of your own. Now, look at this sorry specimen-- it wouldn't support a single candy cane, let alone all the ornaments we're going to drown it with. Over here," Terry's mouth parted in satisfaction, "now, *this* is more like it! *This* is a Christmas tree!"

Jake watched with interest, eager to learn the traditions of Abby's family and adopt them as his own. He had seen others celebrate Christmas, but like a child looking through a window at what others had and he lacked, Jake had never felt the joy of knowing that precious sense of belonging. This first Christmas with his new family meant a lot to the young man. As Terry and

Jake drove home with their "perfect tree" in the back of the red truck, Jake wondered at the new life God had given him.

Deep in the garage back at the Johanneses' house, John was moving box after box, in search of what had been placed on top of everything else, just the year before.

"We gotta stop buying all this junk," he sighed, lifting another container out of the way. "How could all this be accumulated in only one year?"

"It's not all new, Dad," Abby reminded him, wading through the mess to where her father was standing. "Jake was in here a few months back, looking for the tents and camping stuff, remember? I think he must have mixed up where everything went."

"Oh, yeah," muttered John. "Feels like a lifetime ago, but it *has* only been just a few months, hasn't it." John looked at his daughter and smiled. "Seems to me," he remarked, "that you and Jake have gotten much closer to each other since then. Why, I remember a day when you actually got mad at him for trying to have a romantic night out on the beach."

"I remember," smiled Abby with a small sigh.

"Is Jake..." John hesitated, wondering how to best ask what he wanted to know. "Your mother and I don't want to pry, but are you and Jake... you know... are you normal with each other?"

"You mean are we having sex?" she asked, bluntly.

"That was the word I was struggling for, yes," smiled John.

"Jake has his good days," answered Abby, "and he has his not-so-good days. But, yes, we've been intimate with each other. Please, Dad," she begged her father, "don't say anything about this to Jake. I don't want him to feel as though the whole world is talking about whether he can come to my bed, or not."

"I hope you give your old man more credit than that," chuckled John. "Hey! I found one of the Christmas boxes!"

Abby eagerly opened the flaps of the cardboard container and pulled out a delicate tree ornament.

"The other boxes should be nearby," said John. "I hope Terry isn't going to take all night. You know him and 'the perfect tree.'" Just then, they heard the pickup truck pull up to the house. "Well, his timing is improving," grinned John, stepping out of the maze of boxes with Abby.

"Did you get us a good one?" shouted John, as Terry and Jake climbed out of the vehicle.

"Best they had on the lot!" cried Terry, tugging at the trunk of the tree. John helped his friend lift the evergreen out and stood the fir on its end in the snow.

"Say," grinned John, "that's one good looking Fraser fir!"

Jake walked over to Abby with a big smile. He pulled a small bag out of his pocket and handed it to her.

"We stopped by the gift store," he eagerly explained, as she opened the enclosed box. "It was Terry's idea." Against the light of the evening sky, Abby held up a heart shaped tree ornament, and smiled lovingly at Jake. Inside the heart was a couple hugging each other with a banner over them reading, "Our First Christmas."

"Do you like it?" asked Terry, coming over to the couple while John kept the Christmas tree upright in the snow. "Jake picked it out, himself. Next year, you both can get a 'Baby's First Christmas' ornament, and put it on your tree!"

"Terry," called John, "this tree's getting a little heavy!"

While Terry rushed back to help his friend, Jake accepted a hug from Abby.

"Thank you," she whispered. "It's wonderful, Jake."

Delighted, Jake went back as the two men carried their Fraser fir into the house.

"Head straight for the master bedroom," directed John, as the procession made its way down the hallway.

"The Christmas tree!" exclaimed Izumi, as they entered the room with the large evergreen.

"Terry, its lovely! I don't know how you do it, but every year, the trees get better and better!"

Terry gave a knowing wink to Jake, while John placed the trunk into its stand and screwed the fasteners in place.

"Okay, you can let go now," said John, as Terry slowly stood back to see if it would stand on its own, or topple over. "I think the tree looks straight, don't you?" asked John, as everyone cocked their heads to one side.

"Better adjust the base a little," laughed Terry. "I'm getting a neck cramp!"

After the tree was as close to straight as it was going to get, Terry set about the yearly tradition of untangling the long strands of multicolored Christmas tree lights. John went out to the garage and located the rest of the Christmas boxes and brought them inside, while Jake fixed hot chocolate and passed out warm mugs to everyone.

One by one, the Christmas ornaments went up, with the careful direction of Izumi, who advised each placement like a general commanding her troops.

"No, not that branch," directed the expectant mother, "the one above. Yes, that's the one. Perfect!"

Then came time to light the tree. Everyone waited with bated breath as John plugged in the cord to the Christmas tree lights.

"Nothing happened!" cried Izumi in dismay.

"There must be a loose bulb somewhere," sighed John.

"We should've gotten those new lights down at the store," groaned Terry. "You know, the ones that say they'll light up even if half the strand is out. Oh well. I'll start from this end, and you take that end, John." One by one, John and Terry checked each tiny glass bulb on the tree.

Jake offered to help, but with his broken ribs, the men were anxious to keep him away from anything that might hurt him. Abby could have told them that Jake was able to do this, but decided not to, because then she'd have to explain *why*. Knowing how protective Jake was about maintaining their privacy when it came to matters of intimacy, Abby was very guarded in what she told others. She could hardly blame him. The duct tape incident, alone, would have been enough to embarrass *anyone*, let alone someone as sensitive as Jake.

Several minutes later, the Christmas tree finally lit up, much to the relief of John and Terry. Soon, colorful lights raced about the tree, in twinkling patterns that made Izumi's eyes sparkle with joy. John sat down on the bed beside his wife and gave her a loving squeeze.

"We'll put presents under the tree, tomorrow morning," said John, with a tired yawn.

"I suggest we turn in for the night," said Terry. "I don't know about you guys, but I'm bushed!"

After everyone had exchanged good nights and Merry Christmases, Jake and Abby walked through the softly falling snow back to their little yellow house.

"Is the painting ready?" she asked, as Jake unlocked the front door and let her inside.

"I wrapped it up this afternoon," yawned Jake. He picked up the shoes Abby kicked off and tossed them out of the walkway. "I think I need to sleep in my own room tonight, Abby."

"I'll see you in the morning, then," she smiled, as he gently kissed her forehead-- a habit that he had started when he felt unable to give her more of himself. The two went to their separate rooms and spent the night by themselves.

Christmas Day morning, Abby was suddenly awakened by someone excitedly shaking her shoulder. "Wake up, Abby!" exclaimed Jake, as she tried to blink open her eyes. "It's Christmas!" he cried. "How can you still be asleep? Come on, Abby, get up!"

Abby sleepily checked her clock and moaned when she saw the time.

"Jake," she sighed, "it's five in the morning! It's too early for Christmas. Go back to bed." With a groan, Abby pulled the covers over her head and tried to get a little more rest.

Then the mattress moved as someone climbed onto the bed. When Abby peeked out from under her warm covers, she found Jake, sitting with his back against the headboard, staring at the aquarium and checking the clock every so often.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Waiting," replied Jake, folding his hands patiently.

"You're acting like a little kid," smiled Abby. "You know that, don't you?"

"It's our first Christmas together," he grinned. "Aren't you excited, Abby?"

"Well, yeah," she sighed, "but not five-in-the-morning excited."

"I don't believe you," replied Jake, a smile playing around the corners of his mouth. His exuberance was contagious, and even though Abby wanted to deny it, she could feel the excitement of the day beginning to build.

"You win," she sighed, sitting up in bed. "There's no going back to sleep, now." It was then that she noticed Jake was wearing the new suit and tie he had bought a few days ago. "You really *are* ready," she observed. "I suppose," she sighed, climbing out of bed, "I'd better shower and get ready for church, myself."

Jake silently watched Abby as she put on her robe. He closed his eyes tightly and sighed. It was easier to watch the fish swimming in the aquarium, than to see her graceful movements and do nothing about it. Jake also couldn't touch the fish, but at least, he didn't *want* to.

After Abby had decided what she would wear that day from her closet, she disappeared into the bathroom and shut the door behind her. Jake loosened his tie and went to the window. It was dark outside, but he could see the snow still falling. The longer he watched, the more Jake realized how heavily the snow was coming down.

"Hey, Abby," he called, going into the hallway and speaking through the bathroom door, "do you remember what the weather forecast was for today?"

"No, I didn't think to check," came her response.

"The snow's coming down pretty hard," he informed her. "I'm not sure it's going to be safe to drive to church, today. I'd better call Dad."

Before Abby had a chance to tell him that her father was probably still asleep in bed, Jake was in the living room, dialing her parents' house.

"Yes?" came a sleepy voice on the other end of the phone.

"Terry, it's Jake," explained the young man. "It's snowing really hard right now. I don't think it's a good idea to be traveling anywhere, today. I don't want Abby getting stuck in the snow-- even if it *is* with us."

Terry checked out the window to see for himself.

"I'm afraid I agree," he answered, a little disappointedly. "Oh well, John was going to stay behind with Izzy, anyway. I guess we might as well stay home with the ladies, this Christmas morning. Say," he added, just noticing the time, "you're up a little early, aren't you?"

"I suppose I am," Jake confessed, with some embarrassment.

"No harm in that," smiled Terry. "Why don't you both come over and I'll help you make breakfast? That should wake up John and Izzy! Afterward, we could open gifts."

"We'll be over as soon as I can get Abby out of the bathroom," Jake grinned excitedly.

By the time Abby was dressed, Jake had their winter coats ready and waiting in the living room. She noticed two large white bags with several boxes stacked inside. One bag was obviously Jake's, for she could see the wide outline of a canvas bulging out the sides of the bag, and the shape of a large box that immediately intrigued her.

"Did you find all the presents I wrapped?" she asked, as Jake helped her into a heavy coat.

"All the ones that you had stacked in the corner," replied Jake, putting on his own protection from the cold.

"Hold on," smiled Abby. She returned with one more package and placed it into her bag of gifts. "I didn't want you to find it," she admitted.

Grinning, Jake shouldered her bag and let Abby take his arm for support as they braved the gusting winds to her parents' house across the way. Snow whirled about them as Terry opened the front door and hurried the couple inside.

"It's a good thing we got our tree when we did!" exclaimed Terry. "Today, would've been impossible!"

"I have to go back for my presents," said Jake, opening the door and facing the cold flurry once more.

"We'll put these under the tree after your parents are up," smiled Terry, setting aside the large bag. "Hopefully, tomorrow will be better. I'd hate to miss out on Sunday services, as well."

"I doubt very many people will be showing up for church this morning," remarked Abby.

Just then, the front door opened, sending in a harsh arctic blast as Jake quickly ducked inside.

"Wow," he gasped, setting down his bag and rubbing his hands together, "one more time back and forth out there, and I'd be frozen stiff!"

"I'll go make some hot coffee," said Abby, making her way to the kitchen.

The Johanneses' home was warm and snug-- a great contrast to the merciless cold just outside the window. As Jake followed Abby to the kitchen, Terry excused himself. He had noticed that Jake was wearing a suit and tie, and didn't want the young man to feel out of place. Soon, Terry emerged in his Sunday best, even though it was only Saturday and they were staying home.

Jake wouldn't let Abby do much in the kitchen, so she had to content herself with watching, while Terry pitched in to help with the Christmas breakfast. Before long, the smell of hot cinnamon rolls filled the house, until John could resist it no longer and finally woke up. Still in pajamas, he appeared in the kitchen doorway, surprised to see everyone else up and already dressed.

"What's going on?" he laughed.

Terry explained the bad weather, and handed his friend a breakfast tray already prepared for John and Izumi.

"Just give us a little time to pull ourselves together," smiled John, carrying the tray back to his wife. He could see they were eager to get to the presents, and since the Christmas tree was in *their* bedroom, no one could begin until John and Izumi were ready.

Now that everyone was awake, Terry turned on the living room sound system, flooding the house with "Deck the Halls," and "Angels We Have Heard on High."

While Abby slowly finished her cinnamon roll, Jake hurried about the kitchen, making sure that everything he had planned for the afternoon meal was on schedule. Terry hovered nearby, giving instructions and helpful advice wherever needed.

It wasn't long before John returned with an empty breakfast tray, and compliments to the chef. Pleased, Jake grinned. He felt like gathering everyone into a big group hug. He couldn't do it, of course, but he felt like it.

After a few more minutes so John and Izumi could dress, the party assembled in the master bedroom. As Terry set out all the presents under the Christmas tree, he noticed a large box covered with wrapping paper that looked more like Valentine's Day, than Christmas. In the midst of holiday wreaths and snowmen, the hearts and spring flowers somehow looked out of place. Then Terry read the name of the giver, and smiled. It explained everything.

When Terry had placed enough chairs for everyone to sit, John climbed up on the bed in his suit and tie, and sat down beside Izumi. Then the father opened his Bible and read from the book of Isaiah:

"For unto us a child is born," read John, "unto us a Son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end..." John paused, and turned his Bible to the book of Luke.

"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night," continued John. "And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger." John looked up at the people gathered around him and Izumi.

"This past year," he smiled, "God has grown our family in ways that we never could have imagined. He gave us the expectation and hope of three baby daughters, and our first grandchild. Also, the blessing of a godly son-in-law." Here, Jake smiled. "I just want us to remember on this day, of all days," finished John, "that the peace we're enjoying right now, came at a great price. As it says in Philippians, 'And being found in fashion as a man, He [Christ] humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.' Christ did all that, because He loved us. I know there's many gifts we're all going to be opening in just a few moments, but always remember: there is no greater gift than the one God sent to us, and that is Jesus. Jesus is the very essence of love, and if we can all live our lives in that love, then we cannot help but grow in His grace."

"Amen!" Terry heartily agreed.

"All right," smiled John, "I guess we can open the presents, now. Jake," he asked, "why don't you do the honors, and pass out the gifts?"

Smiling, Jake knelt down on the floor and picked up the nearest package.

"To John, from Terry," read Jake, handing the gift to its recipient.

As each present was opened, the bedroom floor became littered with wads of wrapping paper and packing material. Terry received two sweaters, a large box of his favorite hard candy, and a video game. John opened his presents to find a new basketball, a tie, and some books he had been wanting. Izumi was delighted to get a video camera to record the triplets' first moments, a music CD from her favorite singer, and a stack of new puzzles she could assemble while on the bed during her bed rest.

Abby smiled eagerly as she watched Jake open her present. Jake pulled out a wooden sketchbox easel with several tubes of acrylic paints. Inside the easel were paintbrushes, a color mixing guide, pencils, and a brand new sketchbook.

"It's so you can keep in practice," explained Abby. "I know you've been long-suffering with my old easel. This one is portable, so you can take it with you anywhere."

Jake looked at her gratefully.

"It's perfect," he sighed happily. "Thank you, Abby."

John gave his son-in-law a laptop computer to take with him to college, while Terry's gift was software that he thought would be useful on campus. Izumi's present was some new clothes that Abby had picked out in her stead. All in all, it was quite a windfall for Jake.

Finally, Jake came to the large, flat present.

"This is from me to the whole family," he smiled nervously.

As head of the family, John got up from the bed and unwrapped the large canvas. When he tore away the last of the wrapping paper, John's face became still.

Jake had painted a portrait of the entire family, with such loving care that John couldn't speak for several minutes. He held it up so everyone could see. Against the backdrop of Three Mile Bay, Jake had painted John and Izumi, standing on the beach, with their arms around each other. On their right was Terry, wearing the smile that everyone loved so well. To the left, was Jake and Abby. Abby's face was looking forward, as if embracing her surroundings, while Jake's gaze was fixed on his wife. The painting was large, and each heartfelt expression seemed to show the soul of every person depicted.

"It's absolutely wonderful," sighed Izumi.

"Jake, it's stunning," John finally managed to say. "I had no idea you were *this* gifted." Suddenly, John could see his son-in-law going to college, and making something of himself. John had seen the mural in the triplets' nursery, but it had been stylized to a child's sensibilities, so he hadn't really taken it seriously. But this-- this was something altogether different. "Abby," asked John, "did you know Jake could do this?"

"I have to admit," Abby mumbled, "I'm floored. I really am, Jake. Why didn't you tell me you were a genius?!" She swatted him playfully and went back to the painting, marveling at his artistry. "I can't believe it only took you a few weeks to do all this-- and without any primary photograph to work from! Dad, do you know that Jake painted this using only the photos in our old albums?"

"Did you?" smiled Terry, momentarily forgetting himself and slapping Jake on the back. "Well done!"

When everyone could finally tear themselves away from the painting, Abby realized that there was one more box still sitting under the tree.

"There's still one more gift," announced Terry, as Jake bent down and lifted the Valentine papered box. "It's for Abby, if anyone can't already guess!" chuckled the uncle.

"Abby, this is from me," said Jake, placing the large present in her arms.

Smiling, Abby carefully opened the paper and found an unmarked, brown cardboard box. Jake was grinning, as she opened the flaps and looked inside.

"It's a teddy bear," said Terry, puzzled by why Abby was beginning to cry. No one could understand why she was weeping over a new stuffed animal. No one, that is, but Jake.

"Please, Abby," he begged in a hushed whisper, while taking her in his arms, "don't cry."

"There, there, Sweetheart," said John, touching her on the head like a child, "you're just a little overwrought."

"I'll start setting out lunch," volunteered Terry. "Is that all right with you, Jake?" he asked, for Jake was the one who had planned out the entire meal.

"Yes, thank you," replied Jake, still clutching a weeping Abby.

By now, Izumi was in tears as well, although she couldn't understand why. Her baby girl was crying, and that was all the reason she needed.

"I suppose," sighed John, trying to calm his own wife, "that with two pregnant women in the house, this should be expected."

Jake picked up the teddy bear and took it with them to the living room couch, where he and Abby sat down.

After Izumi had finally quieted, John checked to see how his daughter was faring. To his relief, Abby was curled up on the sofa, snuggling against Jake. With a happy smile, John sat down in his favorite chair and turned on the television. For several minutes, Jake held Abby, until he whispered something in her ear that John couldn't overhear. Out of the corner of his eye, John saw Abby turn to the large stuffed teddy bear and wrap her arms around its neck. Jake stayed by Abby's side, looking as though he had somehow failed her, while she clutched the bear for comfort.

Suddenly, John understood.

The father muted the television just long enough to hear Jake whisper, "I love you," to his daughter. John sighed heavily. He recalled what Abby had said about Jake not being able to come to her bed every night, and suddenly realized why Jake had given her the teddy bear. It was the only way the young man knew to comfort Abby when he couldn't be there for her. Until now, this was an aspect of his daughter's marriage that he hadn't considered before. Silently, John watched as Jake continued to talk to Abby in overly hushed tones that he was unable to make out. Then, as if Jake had been able to coax the clouds away from hiding the sun, Abby smiled. Jake tenderly kissed her on the forehead, and every trace of sadness disappeared. Then the young couple got up and went to help Terry with the food preparations.

"Those two make quite a pair," John sighed to himself, smilingly. He turned the sound back on, and watched television until Abby called him to Christmas lunch.

"For Thou [God] hast been a strength to the poor [Jake], a strength to the needy in [her] distress [Abby], a refuge from the storm [Terry, John, and Izumi]... when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall."

~ Isaiah 25:4 ~

Chapter Twenty-six

A Husband's Reward

"So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church."

~ Ephesians 5:28, 29 ~

As the snow and blustery winds of winter continued to rage through the middle of January, Abby was beginning to feel huge in more ways than one. Her belly was getting bigger, and so were other parts of her body. To her embarrassment, Jake first noticed the change as he was walking past her open bedroom door one morning, as she was finishing buttoning her blouse.

"Don't say it," Abby begged, as she caught the young man gaping at her in the reflection of her mirror.

Broadly grinning, Jake stared at his wife with raised eyebrows.

"Wow, Abby," he smiled, "either you've grown, or that top shrunk in the dryer!"

"Thanks a lot!" she cried, adjusting her shoulders and taking another look at herself in the mirror. "This blouse isn't too tight, is it?"

"No... it isn't," he hesitated, finding it difficult to take his eyes off her, "but if you get any bigger, it will be."

"Do you have to gawk at me like that?" she whimpered, catching his steady gaze in the mirror. "No wonder you haven't come near me in days. I'm getting so ugly!"

"Hey," he gently scolded her, "stop saying that about the woman I love."

"Why not?" Abby gloomily sighed. "It's true. Oh, Jake! I'm even getting stretch marks on my belly!"

Jake answered Abby by coming to her side and nuzzling his face into the nape of her neck. Then, he rested his head against hers and looked at their reflection in the mirror.

"You're so beautiful, Abby," he breathed, "inside and out." Jake kissed her ear and smiled affectionately. "You don't really think I sleep alone because you gained a little weight, do you?"

"No, I suppose not," she answered slowly, closing her eyes and relaxing against him. Abby was about to get cozier, when she noticed two apologetic brown eyes staring back at her, and realized that she had to let him go.

"Abby," he whispered, "you'll always be desirable to me."

"I will?" she asked hopefully.

"You have nothing to worry about," Jake consoled her, nervously taking a few steps back and shoving his hands into his pockets. "Would you do me a favor?" he wondered. "Change out of that blouse. It may not be too snug for anyone else, but it is for *me*."

"Yes, Jake," she smiled.

Before turning to leave, he stared at her once more and shook his senses back to reality.

"Abby," he muttered, "you turn me inside out, without even knowing it."

With a soft groan, Jake disappeared down the hall to go put on his coat and boots to start breakfast at her parents' house. As Abby changed tops, she could hear Jake call her from the living room.

"Are you coming, Abby?" he asked, zipping up his coat and checking the time. "I don't want you trying to get across all that slippery ice by yourself. I sprinkled sand over it last night," he continued, as Abby entered the room and put her arms into the coat Jake was holding for her, "but it's still not safe. After breakfast, I'll walk you home, so don't leave without me. And make sure you keep the fireplace on while I'm not here," he further instructed her.

"Yes, Jake," replied Abby, as he buttoned her coat.

"You need to keep warm..." Jake paused, as he noticed a tender smile playing around the edges of Abby's mouth. "What is it?" he asked. "Why are you smiling?"

"I didn't think it was humanly possible," she answered honestly, "but my love for you only gets stronger. How can that be, Jake?"

The young man hesitated, and gazed into her eyes with a longing that made Abby ache for his arms.

"Oh, Abby," he moaned, "why can't you tell me wonderful things like that when I'm prepared to do something about it?!" He could only kiss Abby on the forehead and place a warm scarf about her neck to protect her from the cold.

"I'm sorry, Jake," she apologized. "It just sort of slipped out. I usually don't say romantic junk like that."

"I *know*," he lamented, opening the front door and closing it behind them as a burst of chilly air stung their faces. "Watch your step on the ice."

Overhead, the sky was clear and brilliant, giving everyone a welcome reprieve from the white and gray clouds that had settled over the bay like a bad chest cold for the past few days. Such mornings made Abby impatient for spring. But, she was quick to remind herself, it was only after the middle of January, and there were many snowy days that still lay between her and fly fishing.

"I wish you didn't have to work all day, today," sighed Jake, as Abby accepted his arm to cross over a large icy patch on the ground. "We're assembling the triplets' nursery after breakfast, and I hate for you to miss out."

"I can spare some time for that," she answered.

"Could you?" he brightened. "Thanks, Abby."

Warmth enveloped the young couple as they entered the Johanneses' house and took off their winter paraphernalia. Jake hung their coats in the closet while Abby went to her parents' room to check on her mother.

"Good morning, Sweetheart," greeted Izumi, as Abby's smiling face appeared in the bedroom doorway.

"How did you sleep, Mom?" inquired Abby, after the pregnant women had exchanged hugs.

"Your father certainly is long-suffering," Izumi smiled wearily. "After I use the bathroom, it takes me forever to get situated in a comfortable position in bed, and by the time I do, I have to use the bathroom again!" Izumi moved her legs and sighed patiently. "It's taking every ounce of endurance I have to just lay here. I'm so big, I can hardly believe that my body is holding together!"

"Keep going, Mom!" Abby tried to encourage her. "You've managed to keep the girls inside your womb for thirty-four weeks! Just seven more days until your cesarean, and then it will *all* be over!" Abby paused, wondering if this was the right moment that she had been waiting for to talk to her mother in private.

"It will hardly be over, Sweetheart," Izumi replied, not realizing that her daughter was searching for a way to ask something. "I suppose, by then, I'll be wishing for the good old days when all I did was lay around in bed and watch T.V. I hope you and the others are ready. I won't be able to do everything by myself."

"You won't have to, Little Dove," smiled John, entering the bedroom with their breakfast tray.

"I'm not so 'little,' anymore," sighed Izumi.

Tenderly brushing Izumi's cheek with his hand, John smiled kindly at his wife.

"I love you," he reminded her.

With a smile of her own, Izumi nodded her head and stared at the large breakfast that Jake had prepared. It took a lot of food for the three babies to grow at a healthy rate, but as her due date neared, Izumi was finding it increasingly difficult to eat while the triplets were placing so much pressure on her stomach. In spite of feeling as though she were a beached whale, Izumi was actually a little under the goal weight her doctor had prescribed. It was with this understanding, that the weary mother tried to eat at least a small portion of her meal.

"Everything will be ready for the girls," John continued, sitting beside her on the bed and starting in on his own meal after saying grace.

"I don't know how you can say that," sighed Izumi, "when the cribs and everything else we bought are still in their original boxes!"

"I know, I know," admitted John, talking with food in his mouth, "but we'll be ready. Terry, Jake, and I will be assembling the nursery after breakfast. I realize that we're cutting it a little close, but it's not my fault, Little Dove. AJ kept using that room for their private discussions, so if you want to blame someone, blame *them*!" John looked at his wife with a twinkle of merriment in his eyes, and Izumi saw that it was no use fighting him.

"Oh! you!" she had to smile. "Abby," she asked, "could you get Jake to use that digital camera he has to take pictures of the nursery when they finish it? I'd love to see his mural!"

After breakfast, John and Terry disappeared into the garage and returned with their toolboxes, in preparation for the assembly that was ahead of them. When Jake saw that the men were supposed to bring their own tools, he began to feel a little left out, until Abby took him aside.

"You can use my toolbox," she offered. "It's in our garage, on the shelf, to the left of the pickup truck."

With a quick smile, Jake went off to get his wife's tools.

"Sorry," John apologized to Abby, "I forgot to bring anything for him to use."

"Jake isn't very handy," she warned him, "so I'm not sure how much help he'll be to you and Uncle Terry."

"It's all right," smiled John. "He tries. Whatever else you can say about the guy-- he tries."

Soon, Jake returned with a heavy metal box, and set it on the nursery carpet beside John and Terry's tools.

"Okay, I'm ready," said Jake, as the three men stood in the cluttered room and surveyed the unopened boxes.

"This place looks more like a warehouse, than a baby nursery," observed Terry, with a sigh.

"Okay," said John, "here's what we'll do. Terry and Jake, you each take a crib. I'll assemble the third one and show you which piece goes where. If we work in tandem, we should be able to go faster. Abby," her father noticed, "are you going to stand in the hallway the whole time? I don't think it's a good idea for you to be on your feet the entire morning."

"I'm fine, Dad," she persisted.

"I have a cushioned chair in my room," volunteered Terry, going to his bedroom and placing the comfortable seat in the doorway for Abby.

"Really, Uncle Terry," she continued to resist, "thank you, but I don't need it. I'm perfectly able to stand."

"Abby," Jake spoke up in a firm voice, "sit down."

Without another word of protest, Abby did as she was told. Grinning, Terry glanced at John.

"All right, then," smiled John, with a shake of his head, "let's get to work."

There wasn't much room in the crowded nursery to assemble three cribs at the same time, but Abby kept this observation to herself. The men were acting as though they knew exactly what they were doing, so she decided it was best to keep quiet-- especially, if they didn't.

In the space of a few minutes, the guys had the entire contents of three identical cribs strewn about the room, making little effort to keep them separate. Curious as to how they were going to get themselves out of this growing mess, Abby watched from the doorway, trying to hide her amusement. She could easily find John and Terry's attempts entertaining, but when she noticed Jake was struggling to keep up, Abby wasn't smiling anymore.

As the young man puzzled over what John was telling him, Abby knelt down on the carpet beside her husband and picked up the parts list for one of the cribs.

"Abby," said Jake, now realizing that she was joining him, "you should be taking it easy."

"When you think I'm overdoing it, I'll back off," replied Abby, beginning to separate out the pieces belonging to Jake's crib, from John and Terry's.

After watching her for a few seconds, Jake went back to work. He had to admit that it felt good to have her on his side. Soon, Jake's crib was taking on a recognizable form, while John and Terry were still trying to sort out the duplicate parts from their own piles of unassembled hardware.

"Look at him," said John, nudging Terry in the direction of Jake. "His crib's nearly done."

"Well," sighed Terry, "he had help."

"Maybe we can learn from AJ," mused John. "Why don't you help me with my crib, and then I'll help you with yours?"

"Beats doing all this on my own," chuckled Terry, turning around on his knees to help out his friend.

When the cribs were finally assembled, Jake took Abby back to her seat, while the men cleared away room against the wall where they would place the baby cribs. Next, came the high chairs, and this time, they didn't make the same mistake of dividing up. All three men worked on one chair, before moving on to the next. Abby mused to herself that they were looking like a baby furniture assembly line.

"We're getting pretty good at this!" exclaimed Terry, encouraged by their progress.

While the men worked at piecing together the changing table, Abby set up music mobiles over each crib. It was hard for her to imagine, that in a short while, three baby sisters would be occupying these very cribs. Abby wound one of the mobiles and let the small stuffed animals rotate to the music above the crib. The sound of the lullaby soon quieted the men.

"It's really happening," sighed John, "I'm going to be a father, again. You know," he chuckled, "when I heard that we were having triplets, I felt tired. When I learned that I was going to be a grandfather as well, I felt tired *and* old!"

"It's going to be fun, John," grinned Terry. "Just think of six little feet running all over the house... getting into trouble... climbing over everything imaginable... putting absolutely anything within reach into their mouths..."

"Okay, enough!" laughed John. "I get the picture!"

"Cheer up!" chuckled Terry. "After the hardship Abby's put you and Izzy through, three more should be no problem!"

Upon hearing this, John saw a pained look slowly cross Jake's face, as though a thought was gradually sinking his spirits. Even though Jake hadn't said a word, John could feel a little of what he was thinking: if it hadn't been for HIM, Abby wouldn't have put her family through so much.

Even though that wasn't what Terry had meant, Jake thought it probably was. Jake imagined the triplets bringing three ex-convicts home to meet John and Izumi, and he couldn't help but cringe. Jake would have wanted someone better for Abby than himself, and he couldn't blame Terry for voicing it out loud. The only balm in all of this, was Abby's love. She actually loved him, and Jake knew that he would never get over that precious fact.

"Son," said John, "whatever you're thinking, we're blessed to have you in our family."

With a grateful smile, Jake went to the kitchen to start lunch.

"What was that about?" wondered Terry, collapsing one of the large empty boxes for the trash.

Abby followed Jake and watched while he started his work at the stove.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"I'm fine," he shrugged.

A few minutes later, Terry appeared in the kitchen and hovered near the stove to see what was cooking. The uncle made some attempt at small talk, and then glanced at Jake, as if to see how he was feeling.

"Jake," ventured Terry, "I'm afraid I might've said something back there that you misunderstood."

"It's all right," shrugged Jake, not blaming Terry one bit for feeling the way that he thought he did.

"No, it *isn't* all right," insisted Terry.

"What are you talking about?" asked Abby.

"Sweetheart," suggested Terry, "would you make sure that I alphabetized my bookcase, correctly?"

"I can take a hint," she smiled, leaving the kitchen to the two men.

"Jake," continued Terry, "what I meant by Abby putting her parents through hardship, had nothing to do with you."

"It didn't?" asked Jake in surprise.

"No, it didn't," confirmed Terry. "That girl," he paused to see if Abby was listening before continuing, "was a bundle of untapped energy growing up. I used to joke that we should put her in a large hamster wheel, and let her power the electricity to the house with her crawling. It only got worse when she learned to walk. Do you know what she did, when she was nearly two years old? Abby-- our beautiful Abby-- somehow managed to unlock and open the front door all by herself. I found her toddling down the middle of the main road, waving at the traffic! Then there was the time she got too close to the waterfront... Jake, I could go on and on. Abby never held still for very long."

"Is it all right to come back?" asked the party in question, peering through the doorway.

"See what I mean?" smiled Terry, with a roll of his eyes. "So, Jake, are we all right? No hard feelings?"

"Of course not," shrugged Jake. "I wouldn't have blamed you if you *had* been referring to me, Terry. I'm not someone any rational parent would want their daughter to marry."

"Do you know what you need?" said Terry, lightly punching Jake on the arm. "A good dose of confidence. If it came in pill form, I'd buy you a lifetime supply. On the other hand," he added with a grin, "you don't need it. You have Abby, and she has enough self-confidence for the both of you!"

"I believe she does," smiled Jake, as Abby folded her arms in mock reproach.

When Terry went to help John organize the rest of the nursery, Abby resumed her seat at the table. For the first time since she had known Jake, Abby heard him humming a tune as he worked.

After lunch, Jake took his digital camera and walked about the completed nursery, capturing pictures to show his mother-in-law. Then he plugged the camera into his laptop computer and placed it in front of Izumi on the bed. John and the others eagerly awaited her reaction.

"Jake!" she gasped in surprise, looking at a photo of the bird mural. "Doves! Oh! I *love* it!"

Izumi tearfully looked through picture after picture of the girls' nursery, while John hugged his wife. In her condition, John knew that it was useless to stop her from crying, so he didn't even try to.

When Abby sat down at her computer to work later that day, she had to smile to herself. Izumi's overreaction to seeing the nursery was what Abby had expected it to be. Lately, her mother would cry at the drop of a hat. Abby was sure that *she* would never be so unreasonable!

A few minutes after Abby had started her work, she felt something strange in her belly. Thinking that she had merely imagined it, Abby continued to type at her keyboard. Then she felt it again. Alarmed, Abby jumped up and ran to the door. Not giving a moment's heed to the cold or slippery ice, she hurried as fast as her legs would carry her, and burst into her parents' living room, breathless and frightened.

"Mom!" shouted Abby, running down the hallway to the master bedroom as Jake and the others came to see what all the commotion was about.

"What's wrong, Abby?" cried Jake.

"Mom," said Abby, quickly going to her mother's side, "I just felt something really weird! It was like someone kicked me from *the inside!*"

Izumi relaxed and smiled at her inexperienced daughter.

"That was the baby, Sweetheart," she soothed Abby.

"Are you sure?" asked the young woman. "Is it really supposed to feel like that? Until now, it's only felt like I swallowed a butterfly, or something. This was different! Are you sure it was the baby? Maybe, I should see a doctor."

"Is the little guy kicking right now?" asked Jake, stepping forward and feeling the top of her belly.

"No, he isn't," sighed Abby, relieved that the others didn't seem to find any cause for alarm. "Wait! He did it again!"

"Where?" asked Jake, eagerly gliding his hand across her belly.

"It's gone now," she sighed, seeing Jake's disappointed face.

"Tell me the next time you feel it," he requested. Suddenly, Jake noticed that Abby wasn't wearing anything warm on her arms. "Don't tell me you came over without a coat," he disappointedly shook his head.

"I thought it was an emergency," Abby sheepishly explained.

"Thank God it wasn't," sighed John, as he and Terry returned to their office down the hall.

Jake pulled off his sweater and made his wife put it on.

"I wish you'd be more careful, Abby," he reproved her. "You could have fallen on that ice!"

"I'll be careful next time," she assured him.

"Promise?"

"I promise," she smiled.

"I'll walk you home," said Jake, taking her by the arm to leave.

"I'm not ready yet," said Abby. "Since I'm here, I'd like to visit with Mom for awhile."

"All right," he said. "When you're ready to go, let me know. No more walking across that ice by yourself, okay?"

"Okay, Jake."

As Jake left the room, Izumi looked at her daughter and smiled warmly.

"He takes good care of you, Abby. That's good to see."

"Mom," wondered Abby, shutting the bedroom door so she could speak in privacy, "I've been waiting for a time when you were alone. I need to ask you something, but it's a little embarrassing."

"What is it?" asked Izumi, as Abby sat down on her bed to talk.

"Dad's probably told you by now that Jake and I..." Abby rubbed her forehead and suddenly wished for some aspirin.

"Yes, your father has told me," smiled Izumi, knowingly.

"The thing is," continued Abby, "when we started being intimate, I was two or three weeks into my second trimester. I thought I was normal enough, but lately, things are changing, and I'm beginning to worry a little."

"Your desire to be with Jake is stronger?" guessed Izumi.

"How did you know?" asked Abby, in wonderment.

"It's normal, Sweetheart," assured her mother.

"It is? I wasn't so sure. I already feel like a freak with this huge belly."

"That isn't huge," laughed Izumi, "*this is!*" She patted her triplet sized belly and eyed her daughter's with some amusement. "Does Jake know how you feel?"

"No, he doesn't," hesitated Abby, unsure how much she should tell her mom.

"Do you mind if I give you a little advice?" asked Izumi. "Tell him what you're feeling. You know, you could have asked Jake about the movement of the baby, and he would have been able to tell you what was happening. I've given him several books about pregnancy, and that man has read every one. Be careful to include him, Abby. That's *his* baby, too. Just because he's a man, it doesn't mean he can't understand what you're going through."

"Thanks, Mom," smiled Abby.

"Before you go," added her mother, "there's one more thing you should know. Enjoy your second trimester while you can. You might not be so romantic during your last one."

Pondering over her mother's wisdom, Abby walked down the hall and found Jake folding laundry in the living room.

"Are you ready to go home?" he asked, looking up from the television he had been watching while working. "Just give me a moment. I'm almost done here."

Abby sat down in her father's favorite chair and wondered how she could tell Jake what her mother had advised her to say.

"Have you felt the baby, again?" wondered Jake, returning from Terry's room where he had deposited fresh laundry on the bed.

"Not yet," smiled Abby.

Jake retrieved his winter coat, and gave it to Abby.

"But, I'm already wearing your sweater!" she protested.

"I'll be all right," he insisted, offering her his arm before they stepped outside.

Jake carefully guided her into their house and quickly turned on the fireplace. Seeing that he was slightly chattering from the cold, Abby turned up the gas until the setting was as high as it would go.

"You're a fine one to lecture about going outside without a coat," she sighed.

"I'm not the one who's pregnant," said Jake, turning to warm his back.

"Do you have much work, today?" she ventured to ask.

"I think dinner is the only thing left for me to do," replied Jake. "Why do you want to know?"

"I was thinking," said Abby, "that maybe we could watch a movie and snuggle on the couch this evening-- that is, if you want to."

Abby figured she could gauge how Jake felt about her suggestion, by the way he responded. Out of the corner of her eye, Abby watched his face.

"I suppose I could deal with that," he grinned. "I can't believe you actually suggested it, though. Are you feeling all right?"

"The further I get into my second trimester," replied Abby, "the stranger I'm becoming about some things. You wouldn't understand what I'm talking about," she quickly added, trying to shrug off the topic. Besides, she reasoned, he probably didn't even know what she was talking about, anyway.

But instead of passing over her remark, Jake only stared at her. He was putting two and two together, and the answer bothered him.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he wondered, his face troubled into a frown.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"What do you *think* I'm talking about?" pressed Jake. "Abby, how long have you felt this way?"

"For a little while now," she confessed, "but how can you possibly know that what I'm talking about, is what you *think* I'm talking about?"

Jake looked at her rather quizzically and tilted his head to one side for a moment. After some reflection, mostly to puzzle out her last statement, Jake went to his room and returned with one of her mother's books. He opened the volume and flipped through several pages until he found what he was looking for. Then Jake handed the book to Abby, and returned to the fireplace to warm himself.

When Abby read the page Jake had opened the book to, she quickly realized that he *had* understood her casual remark, after all.

"Why didn't you tell me?" repeated Jake.

"I didn't want you to think I was pressuring you," she confessed.

"That's why you wanted the movie and the cuddling this evening, isn't it," he deduced. "So I would think that intimacy was my idea and you could seduce me. Actually," he confessed with a smile, "I don't mind that part so much, but, Abby, I don't like to be tricked into it."

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "I didn't know how to tell you. I'm not trying to coerce you against your will," she insisted.

"And I suppose," chuckled Jake, "that by the time you were done with me this evening, I could easily go to my room, alone."

Abby winced.

"Are you angry?" she wondered.

"That's a silly question," smiled Jake. "How could I ever be angry with you?" He opened his arms and let Abby embrace him, but when Jake was unable to draw her any closer, he looked down at Abby's belly and laughed out loud.

"I know," she whimpered, "I'm getting big."

"There's more than one way to hug my girl," breathed Jake, turning her about, and wrapping his arms around her from behind. "There's something I need to ask you," said Jake. "It's important, so brace yourself," he playfully warned her.

"What is it?" she wondered.

"Could I pick the movie?"

While Abby retrieved the large, warm comforter from off her bed, Jake popped a video cassette into the player. Upon hearing the opening music score to an old classic movie, she groaned.

"I should have known," complained Abby, "one of those sappy love stories."

"What's the matter with you?" he smiled, sitting down on the couch and wrapping them both with the blanket as Abby snuggled against him. "Don't you have a romantic bone in your body?" Jake ran a finger up her arm, and Abby suddenly giggled.

"Jake, stop it!" she laughed. "That tickles!"

"Does it?" he teased.

"Now, Jake..." Abby nervously giggled, as his hands disappeared beneath the blanket. Soon, she was laughing so hard that her eyes began to tear. "Oh, stop!" she gasped, as Jake took advantage of this newfound weakness.

"This is for not liking my movie," he laughed, "and *this* is for thinking you could wrap me around your little finger!"

Then Jake kissed her, and while the onscreen heroine discovered that she loved the hero, Jake and Abby discovered each other under the blanket on the living room sofa. Once more, I ask that your imaginations go no further.

When it was time to put in the other video cassette to finish the second half of the movie, Jake decided to let the screen go blank instead of leaving his warm cocoon with Abby.

As the late afternoon sky slipped into evening, Abby noticed that Jake was bracing himself for something unpleasant. She knew he was waiting for his fight with a flashback.

"I don't understand," breathed Jake, "it should've hit me by now. It always does after we make love."

"Your flashbacks have been getting better," she reminded him.

"I know," said Jake, "but to have none at all?"

They both quietly waited for several minutes, and when it didn't come, Jake looked at Abby, dumbfounded.

"What's happening, Jake?"

"I don't know," he replied. "The memories are coming back to me, but they aren't taking over my senses like they used to. Dr. Jacoby must have been right."

"Right about what?" puzzled Abby.

"He said that when my body started associating intimacy with you instead of the abuse, these flashbacks had a good chance of going away," explained Jake. "But," he sighed, "this can't be. It's

too good to be true. God has already given me so much more than I deserve. To have this go away... it's too good to be true."

Then, as if to test his theory, Jake gave himself to Abby once more, and waited for the flashbacks to come. When they didn't, he was silent.

"Jake?" she whispered.

Jake leaned his head against hers, and Abby felt something wet splash onto her shoulder.

"Go ahead and cry," she comforted him, as he tightly grasped her hand. "It's all right. I understand."

For the rest of their time together that day, Jake would not let her go. He had already learned to fight those terrible memories during his waking hours, but when he was with Abby, and his senses were drowning in hers, the past would come crashing down on him with renewed vengeance. But Jake had braved it all, and God was now giving him the reward for his courage.

"Abby," he breathed quietly, "do you know what? God's love for me is greater than all the pain of my past. For the first time in my life, I *know* that I'm going to be all right. I can't explain it."

"It's called 'faith,'" she smiled.

"That must be it," he peacefully sighed. "Abby, the next time you want me, don't be afraid to speak up."

Just then, Jake felt something move against him ever so slightly.

"Your son is awake," she announced, adjusting the blanket that was snugly wrapped around them both.

"That was him?!" Jake cried in delight. "That's the first time I've ever felt him! Oh, Abby!" he exclaimed. "I can hardly wait for the baby to come out!"

"Neither can I!" she laughed.

"What do you think he's going to be like?" dreamed Jake. "Do you think he's going to be sorry that I'm his father?"

"Impossible!" exclaimed Abby, cuddling closer to her husband. When her eyes caught sight of the time, she groaned softly.

"Do you know what time it is?" she asked. "Everyone will be waiting for dinner in a few minutes."

"I guess I'd better go," sighed Jake, as Abby stuck her hand out and retrieved some of her clothing. "You're not going to tell your parents about this, are you?" he asked, fastening his pants beneath the blanket.

Before Abby had a chance to answer, someone hurriedly knocked on their front door.

"I may not have to, if they see us like *this!*" she softly laughed.

Unable to see any humor in the situation, Jake hurried into his long sleeve shirt, and stood at the front door buttoning while the person outside continued to frantically knock.

"Just a moment!" called Jake, as Abby finished dressing.

When he opened the door, their telephone suddenly rang.

"I'll get it," said Abby.

To his surprise, Jake found Terry on their porch, excitedly trying to speak.

"*It's time!*" Terry finally gasped, his face flushed with excitement.

"What is?" asked Jake, for surely this wasn't about dinner being late.

"It's Dad!" Abby called from the telephone. "He and Uncle Terry are taking Mom to the hospital!"

"That's what I was trying to tell you!" huffed Terry, his breath making long contrails in the evening air. "There's not enough room in the car for you and Abby, so you'll have to follow in your truck!"

"Uncle Terry, Dad says to hurry!" cried Abby, relating his message over the telephone.

Without another word, Terry went to the garage and pulled John's car up to the front door. Hurriedly donning his coat, Jake stepped outside to see John carefully helping a very pale Izumi into the awaiting vehicle.

Back inside the little yellow house, Abby was frantically running about, gathering things and stuffing them into her purse. At first, Jake thought she was simply panicking, but when he saw her jam a cell phone and his camera into the open bag, he realized that she was thinking clearly, after all.

"Don't forget your coat!" he exclaimed, when Abby had grabbed the truck keys and was two steps out the door with only her blouse and his sweater on her arms.

"I don't have time!" she argued.

"Dad and Terry have things under control," said Jake, firmly leading her back inside and dressing her in a warm winter coat. When John's car pulled away without them following behind, Abby wanted to get as fast as she could to their pickup truck. Jake, however, made her take the time to walk carefully over the slippery ice, instead of flat out running as she had wanted.

As they drove down the main road on their way to the Mercy Memorial Hospital in Watertown, Jake glanced at his wife, anxiously sitting behind the wheel. John's vehicle was so far ahead of theirs, that they were unable to see them, and Abby was impatient to know how her mother was faring.

"You're speeding," Jake warned, keeping his eyes on her speedometer. "Slow down, Abby. Your Mom's in good hands. There's nothing you can do to help her right now."

Annoyed by how much sense her husband was making, Abby slowed the truck to a legal speed and nervously drummed her fingers on the steering wheel.

After what seemed to be forever, they finally arrived at the hospital. When the vehicle was parked, Jake helped her out of the truck and remembered to bring the purse that Abby had absently left on the front seat.

A cold chill went through Abby as she looked at the sprawling building, and suddenly remembered what this place was. On a dark night not too long ago, she had come here with John and Terry after Jake had been airlifted from the prison hospital. Still carrying her purse, Jake finally located the front entrance, and guided Abby inside.

Not far from the main desk, they saw Terry watching a nurse take Izumi away in a wheelchair, while John walked beside his wife, holding her hand. When Terry saw Jake and Abby, he beckoned to them.

"Your Mom's going into labor," Terry informed them, before Abby had a chance to ask. "She's being prepared for the cesarean," he continued, checking his watch and comparing it to a clock on the wall. "Dr. Williams said that it was a miracle Izzy could keep the girls in her womb for thirty-four weeks, given her medical history." Then Terry saw his niece's solemn face. "The doctor was upbeat and hopeful, Abby," he grinned. "They're only performing the cesarean seven days ahead of schedule."

While Izumi was changed into a hospital gown, Terry and AJ were led to the waiting room until she was ready to see visitors before the operation. Navigating past others who were also waiting for someone, Jake located a soft chair for Abby and encouraged her to sit down.

When the young man noticed a few odd looks from the others in the room, he suddenly realized that he was still holding Abby's purse. Jake quickly handed the bag over to its proper owner, and took a seat beside hers.

"We remember this place, don't we, Abby," Terry sighed, sitting down across from them. "At least," he smiled, "this vigil is a happy one."

It took only a moment for Jake to understand Terry's remark. Until now, it hadn't even occurred to him that this was the same hospital. Realizing what must be going through Abby's mind, Jake reached over the armrests and squeezed her hand.

"Don't be afraid," he tried to console her, "if God could save *me*, then He can save Mom."

Abby clung to Jake's steady hand, and tried to remind herself of the many Bible promises that she and her mother had been claiming for the success of their pregnancies. The one that stood out in her mind the most was from First Timothy, chapter two, verse fifteen: "She shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety." In a silent prayer, Abby reminded God of His promise. "She shall be saved."

Just then, a nurse appeared in the doorway and the three expectantly stood up. The woman informed them that Izumi was unable to see any visitors, because she was being taken to the operating room for the cesarean. The surgery had to take place now, before the babies tried to come out the natural way. And since the natural way was risky for a pregnancy of triplets, the cesarean could not wait any longer, for Izumi's contractions were too strong.

"I forgot to bring Izzy's camcorder!" exclaimed Terry, disappointedly flopping down into his chair once the nurse had left. "I was supposed to give it to John so he could tape the girls' birth! Oh, well."

"I guess it's a good thing Abby remembered to grab my digital camera, before we left the house," said Jake, as Abby took the camera out and handed it to her uncle.

"Thanks, guys!" cried Terry, jumping to his feet. "Maybe someone can pass this to John in the operating room!"

A few minutes later, Terry returned with a triumphant smile.

"John has the camera," he announced happily.

The three waited as patiently as they could for any news of Izumi and the triplets. When over an hour had passed and still no word had come, Abby stood up, and began to pace on one side of the waiting room. Jake kept an eye on her to make sure she was all right, but remained seated, for his ribs were aching.

Just as Abby was reminding God of His promise once more, John entered the waiting room dressed in a blue surgical cap and gown, his face weary but happy.

"Izumi's in good condition," he announced with a thankful smile, "and so are the girls-- all three of them!"

Terry heartily clasped his best friend and gave him a great big hug.

"Thank God!" was all the uncle could say.

"When can we see Mom?" inquired Abby, after Jake had also shaken hands with her father.

"She's under anesthesia right now," explained John, "so she's a little groggy. Before she wants you guys to visit, she's going to breastfeed the triplets for the first time."

"Just let us know when we can see them," grinned Terry.

"I can hardly wait for you to see the girls, Terry," said John, his gray eyes wide with amazement. "They're so tiny-- only about five pounds each, but Dr. Williams said that it's a healthy weight for triplets, so we shouldn't be concerned. Abby," said the father, eagerly going to his eldest daughter, "all three of your sisters are in perfect health. Those were the doctor's exact words,

'perfect health'! Each one has the right number of fingers and toes! Terry," cried John, going back to his friend, "you should see them! Three beautiful baby girls! I still can't believe it-- three at one time!"

Then John went back to be with his wife, while Terry borrowed Abby's cell phone, (for he had forgotten to bring one), and began to call their family and church friends to let them know what had happened.

As Abby listened to her uncle excitedly talk to their pastor over the phone, she noticed Jake carefully resuming his seat. Recognizing the pained look on his face, Abby went to Jake's side and spoke to him in hushed tones so no one could easily overhear.

"Did you remember to take any Xantol before we watched the movie?" she wondered.

"Are you kidding?" replied Jake, with a soft groan. "I wouldn't have been able to 'watch the movie,' without it. Tonight would've gone easier on me, if we hadn't done it, though. I guess our timing is a little off."

"Are you sorry?" she winced in remorse.

"After what happened, today?" he smiled tenderly. "At least, it's not as though your parents are counting on me for anything right now. Abby, don't bother fussing over me. I've had worse pain than this."

"If you recall when you took the Xantol," said Abby, opening her purse, "then you can take more when it's time. I brought your painkiller with me."

"You angel," smiled Jake, resting his head against the wall, for the back of the chair only went up to his shoulders. "Please, don't tell them why I'm hurting."

"I won't," she consoled him.

Reaching for her hand, Jake shut his eyes and thanked God for his mother-in-law's safe delivery. While Terry continued to use up Abby's minutes on her cell phone, AJ sat in their side by side chairs and quietly held hands.

An hour slipped by, and Terry was back in his chair, waiting with the other two for more news. Just as he was beginning to nod off, John excitedly came to bring the family to Izumi's room.

"They're ready to see you!" John beamed with a broad smile. Hanging around his neck was Jake's camera, for the proud father had been using it frequently in the last few hours.

They found Izumi lying in bed, looking very pale, but very happy.

"Sweetheart," she smiled weakly, as Abby went straight to her mother and eagerly kissed her cheek. "I'm all right," she assured her daughter. "Go, meet your new baby sisters."

John motioned to the other side of Izumi's bed and pointed to three small cribs.

"Abby," he smiled proudly, "I want you to meet someone."

Terry and Jake stood back as Abby walked around Izumi's bed and peered into the cribs. Three small newborns, cuddled beneath three small receiving blankets, lay sleeping in their cozy beds. In awe, Abby bent forward to get a closer look. It was then that she noticed that all three girls had tufts of their father's blond hair adorning their tiny crowns.

"This little lady," introduced John, touching the blanket of the first baby, "is Deborah Anne. And this one is Elizabeth Chloe, and the last one is Ruth Danielle. We had their names all picked out, so the first one out, got the first name on our list."

"Let *me* see," said Terry, as Abby made room beside the cribs for her adopted uncle. "Deborah, Elizabeth, and Ruth," he mused, as if trying the babies' names on for size. "Let me think... Debbie, Lizzie, and Ruthie," Terry modified, while John chuckled out loud, for he had known his friend would do just that. "Hey, little bits," cooed Terry, "welcome to the family. Just wait until you're old enough to go fishing!"

Then it was Jake's turn. He looked over the tiny girls in utter amazement. To think, he was married to *their* big sister! It didn't seem possible. Suddenly, one baby opened its eyes and whimpered, promptly waking up the other two.

"Dad!" he exclaimed in surprise. "They all have the same blue eyes as Abby's!"

"Let me see," laughed Terry, bending over the cribs to see for himself. "Sure enough! Izzy, you have three, blond haired, blue eyed babies!"

"I know," smiled the dark haired mother.

Jake marveled over the babies and shook his head with a knowing smile.

"Dad, those are going to be three little heartbreakers," he predicted. "I know Abby is."

"Thanks a lot," laughed Abby, looking up from the cribs to see the smiling face of her husband.

"You *can* be, sometimes," he admitted.

"Have you guys noticed anything else, yet?" wondered John, with a mysterious twinkle in his eyes.

"Such as?" asked Terry, going back to the cribs one more time. Then, it suddenly hit him. "Uh-oh," gasped Terry. "They all look alike."

"Dr. Williams insisted that they're not identical," said Izumi, "but for the life of me, without those hospital bracelets, I can't tell one girl from another."

"Then how can they not be identical?" asked Abby, just noticing the striking similarity, herself. "It looks as though we have three carbon copies of the same baby!"

"Yes," explained John, "but they had three separate membranes in the womb, so, Dr. Williams said they are fraternal, and not identical."

"Well," sighed Terry, "that's great for the doctor to say, but how in the world are we supposed to tell them apart?"

"You could write their names on the backs of their hands," suggested Jake, quickly trying to stifle a laugh, for his ribs still hurt.

"Very funny," smiled Abby, as John and Terry broke into soft peals of laughter.

"Actually," said Izumi, "the nurse suggested that we paint their big toenails with nail polish."

"You mean," chuckled Terry, "we're going to color code the girls?"

"Do you have a better idea?" inquired John, scratching his head, thoughtfully.

"I suppose I don't," admitted Terry, bending over the cribs and peering down at the small bundles of love. "Aren't they just as cute as a bug's ear?" By now, the girls were falling asleep, so as much as Terry wanted to, he refrained from asking to hold the babies.

"I wish Grace were here to see the girls," Izumi wistfully sighed. She had never forgotten the daughter that Jesus had taken home to heaven, and this birth only reminded her of how much she was missing her other baby.

"Grace *is* watching, Little Dove," replied John, tenderly kissing his wife. "She's watching from heaven from that great cloud of witnesses." (Hebrews 12:1)

With his family gathered round, John said a prayer, thanking God for the health of Izumi and the three baby girls. He thanked God for the very brief time they had Grace, and asked Him to tell her how much they loved their little angel. Izumi wanted to cry, but she was so exhausted, that tears wouldn't come.

Izumi tried to moisten her lips, but failed miserably. Her mouth felt like dry cotton, and she was desperately craving a glass of water. Knowing how thirsty his wife was, John put another small piece of an ice cube into her mouth, and let her suck on it for moisture, for she was instructed to not drink so soon after the surgery.

As John told them about the operation, Jake tapped Abby on the shoulder and asked for more Xantol. All the events of the day were showing on his face, and he looked tired. Even Abby wilted when she checked Terry's watch and realized that it was well after midnight.

"I think Jake and I should go home," Abby explained, trying to excuse themselves from the happy scene. "Jake's chest is giving him some trouble, so he really needs to lay down and rest."

"Okay, then," smiled John, hugging Abby and waving to Jake before they parted. "Drive safely."

Kissing her mother good night, Abby and Jake wearily walked out of the hospital, and into the large parking lot. It was beginning to snow yet again, and Abby was suddenly grateful that Jake had made her wear the warm coat, after all.

As Jake helped his pregnant wife into their pickup truck, he looked at her with a tired smile.

"It'll be our turn, next," he sighed happily.

One week later, Izumi and the girls came home from the hospital. While Izumi rested on the living room sofa, the others took turns holding the girls, and debating which parent they all resembled more. Before long, friends began to drop by, offering their congratulations to the family, and to see the triplets for the first time.

"Izumi, you must be worn out," said Dick, as his wife, Sara, gently rocked baby Lizzie to sleep. "I can't imagine how you must be feeling right now."

"Tired and happy," answered the mother, cuddling Debbie on her lap. When Jake walked over to see the baby once more, Izumi offered to let him hold her.

"Make sure you support her head, Jake," warned Abby, as the young man cradled Debbie in his strong arms.

"I know, Abby," he smiled, as Debbie looked about her surroundings with large, blue eyes. When her gaze suddenly met his, Debbie opened her mouth in surprise. "Well, hello there," said Jake, in a gentle voice. "Do you know who I am? I'm your big brother." Debbie watched his moving mouth and blinked at him in wonderment. Then, her tiny hand reached out and grabbed hold of his outstretched finger. "For such a little thing," he mused, "you have quite a grip."

"How does it feel, Son?" asked Dick, with a big smile.

"It feels good," grinned Jake, dancing his finger in front of Debbie, and laughing softly when she wouldn't let go.

"Get used to it," chuckled Terry, as he held little Ruthie, "because, yours is due in May!"

After the guests had left later that day, and the girls had been placed into their cribs in the nursery for a nap, John and Terry quietly made their way into the room and each picked up a baby.

Terry cradled his infant in the rocking chair, while John gently swayed back and forth with his.

"John," asked Terry in a hushed voice, "which one do I have?"

"Since yours is wearing green," explained John, "that must be Debbie. This one is in a pink sleeper, so I have to be holding Lizzie."

Just then, Izumi walked past the room and sighed when she saw the men holding two of the babies.

"I just managed to get them to sleep," she shook her head with a tired smile.

"Isn't Lizzie cute?" deflected John, trying to get his wife's attention away from their interruption of the girls' rest.

"That's not Lizzie," informed Izumi, with a knowing smile.

"Of course, it is," reasoned John. "Lizzie wears pink."

"*Ruthie* wears pink, *Lizzie* wears green," answered their mother.

"You mean," cried Terry, checking the color of the sleeper his baby was wearing, "I've been holding Lizzie all morning, and didn't even know it?"

"Then," concluded John, "I'm *not* holding Debbie? But, I thought we agreed that Debbie would wear green!"

"Are you sure this is Lizzie?" wondered Terry, a little uncertainly. "I think the baby I held this morning, had a slightly longer head." He compared his infant to John's and glumly sighed. "No, they're all the same."

"I suppose we could always check their big toes," smiled John, as Izumi scooped up the remaining baby and took her back to the master bedroom for a feeding. "Which one do you have, Little Dove?" he called, as Izumi was shutting the door to their master bedroom to nurse in privacy.

"Debbie!" she laughed.

John looked down at his baby and smiled.

"Are you sure you're Ruthie?" he chuckled at the blue-eyed girl in the pink sleeper. With a small contented gurgle, Ruthie's tiny hand touched his chin.

"Terry, they're actually home," John smiled happily. "The triplets are *actually* home!"

Just then, Lizzie began to cry loudly in Terry's arms, while Ruthie and Debbie rapidly followed their sister's example. Soon, the entire house was alive with three babies, all wailing at the top of their lungs.

"Yep," chuckled Terry, as he rocked little Lizzie in his arms, "they're home, all right."

"Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is His reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth. Happy is the man [John] that

hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate."

~ Psalm 127:3-5 ~

"Blessed is every one that feareth the LORD; that walketh in His ways. For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee. Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house: thy children like olive plants round about thy table."

~ Psalm 128:1-3 ~

Chapter Twenty-seven

What Tomorrow Might Bring

"Happy is that people, that is in such a case: yea, happy is that people, whose God is the LORD."
~ Psalm 144:15 ~

January turned into February, and February slipped into March. The trees nestled in back of the little yellow house had shed their wardrobe of white, and now eagerly soaked in the sunshine that fell generously from the blue heavens. Large patches of snow still lingered in places on the ground, as winter struggled to hang on until the end of its reign.

About the time when Abby was sure she couldn't bear another dreary month of winter, Three Mile Bay began to thaw. Clinging to this promise of spring, Abby waited for the day when she could return to the shoreline and revisit her favorite pastime.

Jake was also looking forward to the future, but it wasn't to fly fishing. The prospect of a new baby, the possibility of attending college, the ever decreasing pain in his chest as his ribs healed, and the expectation of a lifetime of tomorrows with Abby, all made him happier than he could put into words.

How Jake loved to be with Abby! To hear her laugh, to hear her talk, to feel her soul melt into his when he held her close.

Since that intimate day on the living room sofa, Jake no longer slept by himself. He unofficially moved into Abby's crowded bedroom, sharing space with her long saltwater aquarium, the baby crib at the foot of the bed, and her fly tying table. There was little room for his belongings, but Jake didn't mind. Whenever he left his shoes on the floor beside her bed at night, Jake could feel the sting of his past grow just a little bit dimmer. God was steadily pulling him forward, and Jake was taking each step in faith.

Abby had loved this time with Jake-- going to sleep with him beside her, stirring in the middle of the night at the touch of his lips, and the joy that came when she discovered he was still with her in the morning. It was a life that she hadn't thought possible only a few months ago.

While the little yellow house was enjoying its romantic solitude, the home across the way was experiencing something else altogether different.

Everyone was adjusting to the changes in their lives that the triplets had brought. When the babies weren't being shuttled to and from the master bedroom so Izumi could nurse them, they

were crying; when they weren't sleeping, they were often crying; when no one was holding them, they let the entire house hear their disapproval. Indeed, the girls spent so much of the time crying, that the men considered going to bed with plugs in their ears just so they could get a good night's sleep. Neither man had the courage to do that to poor Izumi though, for if they didn't get up to check on the girls, she would.

And Izumi was constantly worn out. She still ate a lot of food, this time, to meet the challenge of producing enough breast milk for the three babies. She had been assured that other mothers had been able to do this, so she purposed within herself to do it, as well. Izumi wanted to give her girls the best possible start in life that she could, and that meant breast milk-- not formula. But nursing so many meant that she needed a lot of rest, which was hard to do with three tiny people all clamoring at the top of their lungs for her attention at the same time. The exhausted mother had never felt so thinly spread in her entire life.

But Izumi wasn't in this alone. Even though he was an experienced father, John had changed more diapers in these first few weeks with the triplets, than he had ever done in Abby's entire childhood. One baby or another constantly needed to be changed, so that Izumi's well planned color coordinating system went completely out the window. If there was only one clean sleeper left, it went on the baby who needed it. Nervously, John kept checking their painted big toes, trying to assure himself that they could tell the girls apart if they had to.

Always willing to be helpful, Terry pitched in wherever he could. He was constantly pulling one baby or another out of her crib and dandling her in his arms as if she were his entire world. He babytalked and made faces to amuse the girls, and was always ready to baby-sit when the parents needed to catch up on some much needed sleep, though he often was not far behind John in insomnia. While John and Izumi napped, Terry would bathe the girls and dress them in clean sleepers. Sometimes, he would spread out a quilt on the living room floor and let the girls lay on their backs, looking up at him while he introduced them to the newest baby toy he had bought, even though the infants were still much too small to do anything with it than stare and grasp.

Through it all, Terry's camera was ever present. Abby remembered growing up with Terry behind a camera, and these triplets would be no exception. John and Izumi would wake up from their nap, only to be called over to his computer to see the latest photo slideshow of what fascinating thing the girls had been doing while their parents had been asleep.

But Terry wasn't the only member of John and Izumi's support team. Jake was doing more and more around the house, as the men were too busy with their home business and the babies to do as much as they usually had in the past. Jake worked hard to keep up with the tide of laundry that flowed from the nursery, sometimes doing as many as two or three loads a day. John and the others had thought Jake was helpful to have around the house before, but now, he was proving

himself indispensable. No matter how hectic or tired everyone was, they could always count on a hot meal waiting for them, on time, at the kitchen table. Carpets stayed vacuumed, bathrooms remained spotless, and Terry's toys were kept neatly swept aside on the living room floor.

With such helpers as these, Izumi's house was in better running order than it should have been. Jake was so helpful, that Abby had jokingly asked her father if she could buy Jake back from him when she gave birth to her own baby.

One early March morning, Abby was awakened by something tenderly stroking her cheek. Blinking her eyes open, she found Jake lovingly staring down at her, his face only inches from her own.

"Good morning," he whispered, so that she could feel the soft caress of his breath on her skin.

"What time is it?" she asked, with a tired yawn.

"I don't know," he shrugged, twirling a small lock of her raven hair around his finger. "It's early, I suppose."

Realizing that it wasn't time to get up yet, Abby closed her eyes and snuggled under the covers close to Jake.

"Are you going back to sleep?" he asked, disappointedly.

"I might," she sleepily mumbled.

"Abby?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Are you awake?" he asked, studying her closed eyelids and trying to detect any signs that she was listening. "Could we talk for a minute?"

"What about?" she yawned, rolling onto her side and pulling up the warm blanket under her chin, for it was still winter, and even though the bay was thawing, the temperatures were low enough to keep the house quite chilly.

"Are you sure you're awake?" asked Jake, not being able to see her face anymore, for her back was turned to him.

"I'm awake," sighed Abby, trying to focus her bleary eyes on the fuzzy numbers of their alarm clock. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Would you forget about the time?" he pleaded, carefully rolling her onto her back so he could see her face once more. "I want to talk to you."

"Okay, I'm awake," she smiled, her eyes struggling to stay open. "I just caught a glimpse of the time, but I'm still awake."

"Do you know what you want to name the baby, yet?" he carefully inquired.

Abby noticed the hesitant look in his eyes, as if he were about to ask some kind of favor from her.

"No, but you do," she guessed. "What is it?"

"Could we name the baby after Dick?" he hopefully wondered.

"Dick?" sighed Abby, with a small frown.

"He led me to Christ," explained Jake, pained to see the way she was reacting to his suggestion. "Dick was there so many times for me in prison, and I owe him so much."

"Dick Murphy," mused Abby, trying the name out loud. "I don't like it, Jake."

Disappointed, Jake dropped his head back onto his pillow, and Abby could hear him audibly sigh.

"His full name is Richard," he informed her. "It doesn't have to be 'Dick.' Besides you, he was the first real friend I've ever had, and I'd like to thank him, somehow."

"Rich Murphy," Abby frowned. She didn't like the sound of that, any better.

"How about Rick?" proposed Jake, watching her out of the corner of his eye. The fact that she was still listening was enough to make him cautiously hopeful.

"Rick Murphy," she lightly touched her belly. "I suppose, we could nickname him Ricky. If we don't, Uncle Terry will."

"I suppose he would," agreed Jake, trying to hold back his enthusiasm until he was sure he had Abby's agreement.

"I get to pick Ricky's middle name," she laughed, as Jake's face broke out into a wide grin.

"Anything you want!" he exclaimed. "Thank you, Abby!"

"I hope Dick appreciates how much you love him," she sighed, as her husband gratefully hugged her.

"Abby?" asked Jake, suddenly getting a sober thought. "You're not sorry I didn't want to name Ricky after your father, are you? You know I think the world of Dad."

"I know you do," she replied, touching Jake's arm understandingly. "I'm not sorry, Jake. Richard is a good name."

"Dick has been such a faithful friend," breathed Jake, resting his cheek against hers. "I would've been lost without him. I can always rely on his good judgment."

Abby held her tongue. She could have debated Jake's last remark, but for his sake, remained quiet. If it hadn't been for Dick convincing Jake to testify at the hearing... well, the less said about that, the better. The young wife was eager to move on with their lives.

Later that day, Terry loaded the last baby into the three seated triplet stroller, and secured their tiny pink, yellow, and green buntings to keep out the cold. After making sure their blankets were snugly in place, he stepped back to see if it would pass Izumi's watchful inspection.

"Here's their diaper bag," she said, handing Terry a pastel bag printed in a floral design.

Terry dutifully slid his shoulder into the strap and looked at her helplessly.

"Aw, Izzy," he groaned, "have a heart!"

Just then, John entered the room and saw Terry's sheepish face as he shouldered the floral diaper bag.

"You're not making him go out in *that*, are you?" he asked Izumi.

"See?" cried Terry. "Even John thinks I look stupid!"

"It's the only bag big enough to hold all their things," reasoned Izumi in a practical voice. "I don't see what you men are fighting about. One look at this stroller, and no one will be noticing that Terry's wearing my old purse."

"Purse!" whimpered Terry, glimpsing the girls once more as if determining whether or not such humiliation was worth it. To his chagrin, it was.

"For pity's sake, Little Dove," chuckled John, "he's just taking them out for a few minutes around town, not across country!"

"Make sure you keep their hoods down," instructed Izumi, pulling down the shades over the three seated tandem stroller. "And make sure you have them back in time for their next feeding! You didn't forget your cell phone, did you? Call if you need us to come and pick you up for any reason."

"I will," promised Terry, impatient to hit the sidewalk with his tiny nieces. "Well, do we pass muster, Izzy?"

"I suppose so," hesitated Izumi, for this was the first time she was letting anyone take the girls out of the house without her.

"Now, don't you go worrying," he grinned. "I've handled babies, before. You and John have a good time with the house to yourselves for awhile."

Terry angled the long stroller out the front door, and into the bright March sunlight and chilly air. Each girl's seat was situated behind the other, so that Terry resembled a long train, except that this engine was pushing, instead of pulling.

"Okay, little bits," he laughed, "here we go!"

The adopted uncle made his way to the sidewalk beside the main road and pushed the girls toward an elderly couple who were out to enjoy the weather.

"Oh, my!" exclaimed the old woman, turning as Terry and the girls passed them.

Seeing they had an audience, Terry slowed down so the couple could catch up.

"Good morning!" he greeted, as if a sight such as himself and the girls were nothing at all special. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Are those triplets?" inquired the elderly woman, in amazement.

"Why, yes," Terry smiled proudly, "they are!"

After a few compliments, Terry moved on. Only minutes after the last couple, he met two women engrossed in some conversation, waiting for a break in the traffic so they could cross the road. When they saw the girls, the ladies immediately came over.

"Are they triplets?" they asked, almost simultaneously.

"Yes," stammered Terry, who normally found it difficult to talk to women. It was as if he were suddenly holding a sign that said, "Look at me! I'm special!" Of course, it also read, "This guy is married."

Terry noticed that neither of the women had even bothered to check if he were wearing a wedding band, because it was almost assumed. But instead of making sure that they understood he was only baby-sitting, Terry remained tongue-tied.

As the women admired the triplets, he wondered what it felt like to be a father; to have a wife that intimately knew his soul the way Izumi knew John's; to belong to a family of his own, and not be just an adopted relative of someone else's. Lately, thoughts such as those were becoming more frequent, and he wondered why it should be happening to him now. In the past, he had been fairly satisfied to stay in the background of his friends' lives. Why was now so different?

After the two women left, Terry's train carefully proceeded down the sidewalk. All too soon, he was stopped with more questions and more compliments. By the one millionth time someone asked if they were triplets, Terry dryly responded,

"No, they just look alike."

Seeing that he was obviously joking, the questioner chuckled and moved on.

On the other hand, friends were always a welcome sight to Terry, for it meant no explanations or questions to answer. Just friendly exchanges, and passing comments as to how big the girls were getting, though they were only about a month and a half old, and still relatively small.

Izumi had been right. With those three babies out in front of him, no one even noticed that he was shouldering one of her oversized purses. Seeing another stranger up ahead, Terry quickly diverted the stroller to a little used path that he frequently took as a shortcut.

This was much better. Finally able to really enjoy his outing with the girls, Terry introduced them to the beauty of their surroundings, though they were just on a narrow dirt path. Snow still spotted the landscape, but spring was definitely on its way. Always the nature lover, Terry turned his gaze upward and watched in wonder as birds deftly rode the air currents in the blue expanse overhead. He smiled faintly. It truly was a beautiful sight. When baby Debbie gurgled, however, Terry's daydreams quickly returned to earth.

"Little bit has drool on her mouth," he smiled, squatting down and gently wiping the infant's face with a clean handkerchief. Suddenly, he noticed the position of the sun overhead, and checked his watch. "Guess I'd better return you three home to your mommy," Terry chuckled knowingly, "before she sends your daddy after me."

Terry and the triplets arrived home before lunch, only to find Izumi waiting for them outside, by the front door. She tried to hide her relief from Terry, but he could plainly see that she was suffering from new-mother jitters.

"Here we are," smiled Terry, "right on time, just like I promised. Now, don't you feel silly for worrying?"

"I wasn't worried," contradicted Izumi. "I'm just trying to be careful, that's all." She checked over each baby, and after seeing they were still intact, took them inside for their noon feeding.

"I hope you both appreciate the sacrifice I made this morning, so you could have a few minutes of peace and quiet around here," he lightly announced, taking off his coat. "I must've told half a dozen people about the girls, today."

"They do tend to attract a lot of attention," conceded John, as the men went to the kitchen to see what Jake was fixing for lunch.

"Especially women," confided Terry in a hushed voice. "They find the triplets irresistible. It's one thing to be pushing a single baby in a stroller, but three at the same time!" He shuddered.

"Terry, I wish you could overcome that shyness of yours," sighed John, as Jake looked up from the kitchen stove and overheard the tail end of that last remark.

"Nah! What for?" Terry good-naturedly shrugged. "This is all the family I'll ever need."

After John went to see if he could help his wife with the girls, Jake saw a strangely quiet look on Terry's face. It was very unlike him.

For a few silent moments, Terry lingered by the stove and then settled into a chair at the empty kitchen table, as if troubled by his own thoughts.

"Jake," he finally broke the silence, "I think it's because of you."

"What is?" asked the young man, taking a break from the meal preparations and sitting down across from Terry at the table. "What are you talking about?"

"You and Abby have something good going on," smiled Terry. "I don't need a daily bulletin to know that things are getting better for you; it's obvious to anyone who has eyes." Terry looked at his friend in admiration. "I envy you, Jake."

Jake stared at him, incredulously.

"Why in the world would you envy *me*?" he asked in surprise.

"I didn't fully realize it until now," Terry reproached himself, "but I've used my abuse as a reason for not risking intimacy with a woman. But you," he sighed, "you, who have so much to overcome, *you're* doing it."

Taken aback by the frankness of Terry's admission, Jake was speechless. Before he could gather his thoughts to give some kind of encouraging reply, the expression on Terry's face quickly resumed to that of his old self.

"Don't tell the others what I just said," regretted Terry, scooting his chair back from the table. "I've probably just changed one too many baby diapers, and the fumes have finally gotten to me." Terry smiled his lopsided grin, and went to wash up for lunch.

Jake looked down at the gold wedding band on his finger. It was good to belong to someone, but it was even better to belong to Abby.

The days passed, but Jake never forgot that one brief moment when Terry had let his guard down and confessed his true feelings. Since Terry hadn't spoken of it since, Jake didn't feel at liberty to discuss it with anyone but Abby. As always, talking with her somehow made him feel better.

"I had no idea that Uncle Terry felt he was using it as an excuse," sighed Abby, as Jake leaned against her computer table in their living room one morning.

Abby had once told Jake that he could interrupt her work whenever he wanted, but Jake hated to take too much advantage of that promise, unless she should become sorry for giving him so much liberty with her time. As he stood with his arms folded, Abby couldn't help smiling.

"What?" puzzled Jake.

"Nothing," she laughed, shaking her head of the thought that had made her smile. "God will find happiness for Uncle Terry," said Abby, confidently. "After knowing you, I realize that nothing is impossible for God-- even love."

"What were you thinking?" pressed Jake, leaning forward with inquisitive brown eyes.

"If I told you, you'd only be embarrassed," she warned him.

"I'm willing to risk it," smiled Jake.

"Okay," laughed Abby, "you asked for it! I was just thinking that I have a very cute husband."

"Cute?" Jake wasn't so sure he liked that. "Is cute supposed to be good?"

"It is for me," she smiled.

"If you say so," he tried to shrug it off. "Don't tell Terry what I told you."

"I won't," said Abby, still smiling at his bashful face. "Jake," she observed, "you're blushing!"

Jake opened his mouth to protest, but he could feel how warm his face felt, and realized that she was probably right.

"You really like doing this to me, don't you," he mused, leaning toward her and planting one hand on her table. "Just don't say that in public, Abby. It's a little embarrassing."

"I told Dad that I thought you were cute the very first day we met," she informed him, "so it's too late, now."

"In prison," he explained, "being cute or pretty isn't a good thing. I guess on the outside, things are different. Until you, attracting attention by the way I look has never been a blessing."

"Oh, come on," she smiled, "as if you needed a handsome face to get my attention!"

"I didn't, huh?" he grinned. "But, it might've helped... just a little?"

"It might have," smiled Abby, "just a little. But, the real attraction was in here," she said, extending her hand and touching his heart. Jake quickly caught her fingers and kissed them.

"Don't say the cute word in public?" he pleaded.

"If it makes you so uncomfortable, I won't," promised Abby, as he still clutched her hand.

"As big as I may get," Jake teased Abby, spying her large belly, "you'll still find me attractive?"

"Oh, absolutely," she laughed, as Jake chuckled and followed it with a kiss for his wife.

"I love you," he sighed.

One late afternoon, still in early March, as Abby sat working at her computer, she heard a car door slam shut in front of the little yellow house. Curious, she went to the window and saw Dick a few feet from their porch, pausing for a moment to look over the beauty of the thawing bay.

Puzzled as to why he should be here, Abby opened the door and greeted him.

"Well!" cried Dick with a happy laugh. "I can see you're growing like you should! Two months from now, you'll be just about right!"

Not very amused at the remark concerning her size, she invited Dick inside.

"I can't tell you how proud Sara and I were when Jake told us what you're naming the baby," sighed Dick, gratefully. "It meant a great deal to me. Thank you."

"Jake thinks a lot of you," replied Abby, politely offering him a seat on the couch.

"I believe he does," admitted Dick, suddenly looking a little uncomfortable. "I see the bay is thawing," he began, as if trying to find something to talk about. "You're probably impatient to get back to fly fishing. I know I would be. There's nothing like sending that line out and feeling that first tug when a fish takes the bait!"

"Sometime," invited Abby, "you should come over, and we'll go fishing. When the season's right, you can catch some pretty decent pike and plenty of smallmouth bass. Maybe, you might even catch Ole Sequoia! That bass is really tricky..." Abby paused, sensing that Dick wasn't interested

in what she was saying, even though at any other time, he would have loved to talk about fly fishing.

"I apologize for showing up uninvited," faltered Dick, "but I was wondering if I could see Jake. I have something important to discuss with him."

"Oh?" Abby asked curiously.

"Yes," hesitated Dick, shifting in his seat and precariously dangling his sunglasses from one hand. "Is he around?"

"He's at my parents' house," she slowly replied. "Jake's been a great help, especially since the triplets arrived."

"I can imagine," nodded Dick. "Well," he said, rising to his feet after an awkward pause, "I've interrupted your work long enough. I'll just go on over and see Jake."

After Dick had showed himself to the door, Abby went to the living room window and watched as the balding man crossed the beach to her parents' house. Apprehensively, she folded her arms and tried to calm herself. This was only Dick, here to visit someone that he was as close to as a son. It was no cause for worry. Then why was her heart pounding so hard? Just then, she noticed her parents' front door slowly open and someone stepping outside. Abby leaned forward to get a better look. It was Dick.

"Surely, he's not leaving so soon," she thought to herself. "He only went inside a minute ago."

Soon, Jake exited her parents' house and led Dick to the picnic table on the beach. They brushed away a few remnants of the last snowfall from the benches and sat down.

Abby tried to talk herself into returning to her computer, but something kept her rooted to that spot in front of the window.

The longer they sat there, the more engrossed they became in their conversation. Abby could see Dick's animated hands emphatically gesturing in the air, while Jake's head nodded up and down in apparent agreement to whatever his friend was saying.

Then Dick's hands became still, and he was leaning forward across the table, as if in great earnest. Abby could see Jake's back stiffen, and then his head slowly nod up and down.

"What is he getting you into, now?" she sighed nervously, for the last time Dick had talked to Jake out on the beach, Jake had testified at the hearing.

Any excuses Abby had been trying to calm herself with suddenly evaporated when Jake pulled a lighter from his pocket and lit up a cigarette. Her heart stopped. Something must be wrong, for he hadn't smoked in months.

Grabbing the small blanket she had been using to keep her legs warm at the computer, Abby quickly tossed it over her shoulders and stormed out of the house.

As the two men talked, Jake suddenly noticed Abby coming towards them, her feet moving as fast as she could without breaking into a run. Concerned, Jake stood up from his bench at the picnic table, but before he could open his mouth to ask what the matter was, Abby glared at Dick and then turned to Jake with tightly drawn lips.

"What is Dick trying to talk you into?" she demanded, her heart sinking as she gazed into the pale face of her husband. Something serious was happening, and Jake's grave demeanor only made her more concerned.

Before answering her, Jake put a trembling cigarette to his lips and drew in another draft of tobacco.

"Abby, please go back to the house," he asked, exhaling the puff of smoke into the clean March air. "I'll tell you about it, later." His voice was pleading, but there was a firmness to it that made Abby take notice.

"But, Jake..." she resisted.

"Please," he now begged in a low whisper, "go back home. I won't make Dick any promises until we've had a chance to talk."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"You're smoking again," bemoaned Abby. "You only smoke when you're worried."

Suddenly realizing that he was, Jake dropped his cigarette on the sand and stamped it out with his shoe.

"There," he said, trying to force a smile, "I put it out."

Reluctantly, Abby made her way back to the house, stealing a glance over her shoulder at the two men with every few steps she took. What were they up to?

Only when Abby had disappeared inside, did Jake resume his seat at the picnic table.

"Whew!" breathed Jake, as Dick took off his sunglasses and soberly looked at his friend. "She knows me too well. Can you believe it, Dick? All the way from the house, she knew something was going on."

Counting the seconds when Dick would leave, Abby waited by the living room window until her swollen feet began to protest and she finally had to retreat to the sofa. Just when she thought about going back to the window, Abby heard the familiar sound of Jake's footsteps on the front porch. Expectantly, she waited for the door to open, but when it didn't, she went to the window and saw Jake standing on the welcome mat, his troubled face deep in thought.

When Jake finally came inside, he was struggling to smile. When he discovered that Abby had been watching from the window, he realized she probably had seen him hesitate on the porch.

"Dick went home," said Jake, as if she was unable to see for herself that Dick's car was gone. "I told him that he and Sara should have dinner at our house, sometime. We haven't seen them in a few weeks."

"What did he want from you?" she questioned, immediately getting to the point.

With a deep sigh, Jake walked to the couch and Abby sat down beside him. After contemplating the carpet for a few moments, he looked up at her and tried to smile. This time, he failed miserably. His silence seemed to confirm her worst fears.

"Let me guess," said Abby, "Dick wants you to picket Watertown State Penitentiary until someone comes out and beats you up. Or," she laughed grimly, "maybe he wants you to talk to whoever it was that put you in the same cell as Alex Walters. If you're lucky, maybe you'll be thrown back to him!"

"Abby, that's not fair," replied Jake in a low voice. "Alex Walters wasn't Dick's fault."

"Maybe not," she retorted, "but I certainly don't feel like inviting that man to dinner right now--not when he's trying to drag you into even more trouble!"

"I wish you wouldn't talk about Dick that way," sighed Jake, fumbling in his pocket for a cigarette. Then he remembered that Abby associated it with him worrying, and quickly stuffed it back into his pocket. "Dick is trying as hard as he can to do the right thing."

"Just what did good friend Dick want from you?" she asked, folding her arms defiantly.

"With the mood you're in," observed Jake, "I'm not so sure I should tell you. Dick could ask me to go ice skating with him right now, and you'd be against it."

"Jake," observed Abby, "you're hands are trembling, and you want another cigarette. Dick *didn't* ask you to go ice skating."

The young man stared at a worn spot on the knee of his jeans.

"Dick wants me to go down to the penitentiary with him and talk to the warden," he carefully explained. "Dick thinks that we might be able to persuade him to listen to some suggestions we have. Maybe, we can improve the situation, and stop prison rape from happening to anyone else."

"Is Dick really feeding you that ridiculous fairy tale?" she cried, disbelievingly.

"See what I mean?" Jake groaned, standing up and lighting the cigarette he had been desperately craving for the last several minutes. "I told you this would happen. No matter what Dick would've said, you'd be against it!"

"Just how does that man think he's going to 'persuade' the current warden to listen to you?" pressed Abby, getting up from the couch, and confronting Jake. "Neither of you are exactly welcome there!"

"Dick says that some lawyer thinks I have a good case," he answered. "If they won't listen to us, we could take them to court."

"You mean, *threaten* them?" cried Abby in horror. "Why don't you just stand in front of the prison gates with a sign that says, 'Here I am. Wipe your feet on me, *again!*'"

Jake lowered his gaze and clutched his cigarette.

"Dick is just full of great ideas!" Abby exclaimed derisively. "And this is the man you want to name your son after?!"

"Please," begged Jake, his face bleaching white, "no more, Abby. I can't take any more right now."

Abby bit her lip and returned to her computer. If she couldn't talk to Jake about this, at least she could get her mind on something else.

"You haven't already promised Dick anything, have you?" she wondered.

"I said I wouldn't," replied Jake, hurt that she even had to ask. He put on his coat and quietly gazed at her while she tried to work. "Abby," Jake breathed softly, "I hate it when we fight."

"I hate it when you give in to that man every time he wants you to do something dangerous!" she retorted.

"I'll be outside if you need me," mumbled Jake, quickly ducking out the front door.

For several minutes, Abby was so angry that she pounded her keyboard, as if Dick's face were imprinted on every key she typed. As her anger cooled, her fingers slowed to a stop. Resting her elbow on the armrest of her chair, Abby covered her eyes with her hand and prayed. She was sorely in need of wisdom, and she knew it.

When Abby finally stirred from her reverie, the sun was setting on the horizon, casting the last of its warm rays on Three Mile Bay, as if bidding everyone a final farewell before retiring for a cold night. Jake still hadn't come home, but he had never stayed out all night before, so she didn't have any anxiety that he wouldn't eventually turn up. Still, Abby disliked the thought of him wandering the streets or hanging around some public place just because he felt he couldn't come home.

With a heavy heart, Abby put on her winter coat and stepped outside. Pulling up its warm collar around her throat, she tried to peer into the moonless night for any sign of Jake's form against the empty beach.

"Abby?" came a masculine voice from behind her.

Surprised, Abby cried out in fright.

"Don't be afraid," said Jake, getting up from the porch swing and coming to her side. The light from the living room window shone softly on his face, revealing the strain he was presently under.

"You scared me," she tried to catch her breath. "Have you been sitting on the porch swing, all evening?"

"More or less," shrugged Jake, plunging his hands deep into his coat pockets. He gazed out into the darkness and then back at Abby, careful to avoid looking directly into her eyes. "Mom said she wanted to fix dinner, and since it was the first time she's done it since coming home from the hospital, I decided to humor her." Abby could see a brief flash of white as Jake nervously grinned. "I wasn't hungry, though..." his voice trailed off. Then he noticed her huddling in her warm coat against the cold. "Maybe you should go back inside," he observed.

"Are you coming in?" she asked.

"Do you *want* me to?"

"If you have to ask," said Abby, reproachfully, "then you deserve to stay out here all night!" As she turned to leave, Jake caught her from behind and wrapped his arms tightly around her.

"Say it, Abby," he pleaded in a low whisper. "Tell me. Tell me you want me to come inside."

"I want you to come in," she said, trying not to melt under his touch.

"Tell me you love me," asked Jake, burying his cold numb face in the soft warmth of her long dark hair.

"I love you," murmured Abby, as he kissed her neck in loving response. His lips were ice cold on her skin, and she shuddered. "Jake, you're freezing," she said, pulling herself free from his grasp. "Let's go inside before you catch a cold out here."

Jake followed his wife into the cozy house and locked the door behind them. When he reached for her once more, Abby resisted his advances and stood beside her computer table by the couch. Her face was troubled, and he knew exactly the reason why.

"Abby," pleaded Jake, "couldn't we talk it over in the morning?"

"What will be different tomorrow morning?" she challenged him. "Nothing will be different, and we'll be right back where we started."

Sensing an impending argument, Jake went to the kitchen and Abby could hear him getting a drink of water. He was probably taking a Xantol, and the sound of it distressed her. When he reappeared, Abby thought he looked more tired than she had seen him in a long time.

"All right," he breathed heavily, "if you want to do this now, let's get it over with." Trying to steady his trembling hands, Jake took out a cigarette. As he pulled out his lighter, he paused, contemplating the object in his hand, and then taking the unlit cigarette from his lips. "You don't approve of me smoking, do you," he smiled grimly. "I can see it on your face every time I light up."

"This is hardly the time to talk about it," she sighed.

"I never knew being married could be so difficult," reflected Jake, staring at the cigarette in his hand. He rolled it between his fingers, knowing how good it would feel right about now. "Why don't you like me to smoke?" he suddenly wondered. "Is it just because I do it when I have a lot on my mind?"

"Jake..." she hesitated.

"No," he resisted, "I want to know, Abby. If I smoked more often, you'd have told me by now. I think the only reason you haven't made an issue of it yet, is because you didn't want me to fall apart-- and I only smoke when I'm falling apart, right?"

"I never said that," denied Abby.

"Maybe not," he sighed, "but you're thinking it." Jake looked into her deep blue eyes and smiled sadly. "See? It's right there. I wish I had a mirror, so I could show you." As he gazed at her, the young man clenched his jaw. "I'm stronger than you think I am, Abby."

"Then, I'll tell you," she answered, accepting his challenge. "Our bodies are God's temple, because His Spirit abides in us. Since nicotine is bad for your health, it's bad for God's temple. [1 Corinthians 3:16]" Abby blinked at him, arms folded, and showing little sympathy, though the look on his face just now made her wish that she had been a little gentler with him.

Jake looked temptingly at the cigarette and then at Abby. Without a word of protest, he walked to the wastebasket and dropped his pack of cigarettes and lighter into the trash. Then he stared at his trembling hands and balled them into tight fists.

"Dick isn't forcing me into anything," he said, looking directly at her with a great deal of determination in his eyes. "I need to do this."

"Why?" she cried. "Why does it have to be *you*? Why can't someone else do it? Haven't you given enough? How much pain does one man have to endure before it's enough, Jake?"

"Abby," he sighed, "I have to. Don't you see? If I don't, then everything I've done will be for nothing. I need to see this through."

When Jake began to tremble more visibly, he gripped the back of her office chair.

"Do you need a cigarette so badly?" she asked.

"It's not the cigarette," Jake shuddered. "Abby," he confessed, "I'm scared. Please, could I hold you just for a few minutes?"

"Of course," she said, as he quickly came to her side and hugged her from behind.

"Thanks," he breathed, trying to steady himself against her. "Abby, they can't send me back to prison," he tried to console her with quaking arms. "No matter how mad I may get them, they can't put me back in there unless I break the law."

"Just how mad do you intend to get them?" she asked in a tremulous voice.

"I have to get their attention," replied Jake. "A lawsuit won't exactly make them happy."

Abby closed her eyes tightly.

"What about college?" she asked. "What about your future?"

"I haven't been accepted, yet."

"So?" she cried. "You *will* be! The acceptance letters are supposed to go out next month!"

Abby tried to get out of Jake's embrace but he hugged her all the harder.

"Your whole future is right in front of you!" she argued. "Jake, let me go!"

The young man suddenly relinquished his hold on her and she quickly stepped away from him.

"How can Dick ask you to do this?" she demanded. "How can *you* ask me to do this?!"

"They can't hurt me, Abby," he tried to assure her.

"Then tell me it's not dangerous," she challenged him.

Jake bowed his head and then looked up at her through a brown fringe of loose hair.

"Jake," she pleaded, "I know you think this is risky, otherwise you wouldn't be shaking so badly. Don't sugarcoat the truth just because you're afraid I won't go along with Dick's plan. You're my husband. Whatever happens to you, happens to me."

"Dick has had three death threats," admitted Jake, "and recently, someone broke into his home and stole a family photo album. It was later returned with all the pictures of Dick and Sara torn into shreds. I know it sounds bad, but it's just threats and intimidation."

"Jake, don't ask me to do this," she pleaded, shaking her head more adamantly than before.

"I know it's not easy being married to me," he apologized. "I realize I keep asking a lot from you. I promise, I'll go to college after the lawsuit is over."

"This isn't about money!" exclaimed Abby. "I don't care if you ever hold down a single paying job! I'll scrub floors for a living if I have to, but I refuse to give you back to them!"

When Jake began to tremble once more, Abby moved back into his arms.

"I can't take any more discussion right now," he breathed wearily. "Will you let me be with you, tonight?"

"You usually don't have to ask," said Abby, as his hand grasped hers.

"I usually don't feel I *need* to ask," said Jake, a little uncertainly. "I don't think you like me very much right now."

Abby smiled, almost involuntarily, at this remark.

"I like you," she affirmed. "Heaven knows, it'd be easier if I didn't."

"No more talking," he pleaded, burying his face against her neck.

"I suppose the rest of this discussion can wait until tomorrow morning," sighed Abby. Jake needed her tonight, and for now, that was the only thing that mattered.

As Abby lay awake in bed with Jake's sleeping arms still tightly clutching her for comfort, she wondered what God might ask of them. She prayed for the courage to meet it, and for the

discretion to fight Dick if his plan was as foolhardy as it had first sounded. Abby was determined to hear what the former prison warden had to say for himself!

Early the next morning, after Abby had managed to pry Jake from her without waking him up, she dressed and quietly slipped out the front door. As she climbed into the pickup truck, however, she saw Jake standing in the doorway of the little yellow house, half dressed in the day clothes he always wore to bed.

"I'm coming with you," he announced, disappearing for a moment to grab a shirt and coat.

Briskly walking from the house while pulling on his coat, Jake climbed into the passenger seat and understandingly looked at Abby.

"Do you know where I'm going?" she asked.

"I know," he sighed. "Thanks for last night, Abby."

"I haven't agreed to anything," she warned him.

"I hadn't figured you did," replied Jake with a slight smile. His hand moved across the seat and lightly touched the hem of her coat. Comforted, Jake softly exhaled and closed his eyes.

"Dick has a lot of explaining to do," muttered Abby.

Before long, their red truck pulled up to the Doyle's house in Watertown. As Jake helped Abby out of the vehicle, she saw the dread on his face.

"Abby, don't be too hard on him," requested Jake. "He loves me, too."

Unwilling to make any promises, Abby could only sigh in response.

Before Jake could ring the doorbell, the front door suddenly swung open and Dick invited them inside.

"Please, come in," said their host, showing them into the den. "Abby," he sighed, seeing her displeased face, "I can only imagine what you're thinking about me right now."

"How could you suggest this to Jake?!" she exclaimed. "How *could* you?!"

"Abby, please..." begged the young man.

"He may love you, Jake," said Abby, "but we have a baby coming! Ricky hasn't even been born yet, and this will be the second time you've risked your life for those criminals in prison! You've done enough!"

"Abby," began Dick, gently guiding the pregnant woman to a comfortable seat on the couch, "the day Jake was taken to the hospital, I promised him that I wouldn't let his sacrifice be for nothing. I have a plan, and I think it might work. This time, no matter what happens, they can't put Jake back in prison. You need to understand that. He is a free man."

Abby opened her mouth to argue, but Jake pleadingly squeezed her hand.

"I don't think we'll have to take this to court, after all," continued Dick. "Something happened this morning that changed a few things. I had an important call from Governor Smith a few minutes ago. He heard a rumor that we're considering legal action, and he's trying to be proactive, and contain the situation before it gets out of hand. The last thing Governor Smith wants is to see Jake on television, telling reporters what happened to him, and why." Dick reached for his reading glasses and put them on before picking up a notepad.

"You really don't think there's going to be a lawsuit?" asked Jake, his face visibly relieved. A call from the governor was no small matter.

"After the talk I had with him this morning, I don't think it'll be necessary," smiled Dick, looking down at the notepad to harvest the pertinent facts from the call for Jake and Abby's benefit. "There's still a lot to be worked out, and our fight is far from over. But, if he'll just agree to commission an advisory board to counsel the current warden, I think it will potentially be a great victory for the inmates of Watertown State Penitentiary. If the warden has a group of people busily coming up with suggestions to prevent prisoner rape, at least we have an opportunity to do some good. Governor Smith hasn't given his okay, but I think we may be getting close to some kind of agreement."

Jake's tremors were lessening, though he still gripped Abby's hand until his knuckles turned white. None of this was easy, and Jake prayed for courage to carry it through. Still, Abby hadn't given her agreement, and until she did, all of Dick's efforts might be for nothing.

"Abby, I need to ask you something," Dick breathed hesitantly. "If the governor won't act, would you be willing to let Jake take this to court?"

Jake looked at her pleadingly.

"I won't do it, unless you agree," Jake promised her.

"Jake, I have to admire you," Abby said in wonderment. "You've been mumbling scripture promises all night, clinging to me as though your life depended on it, and when Dick said there might not be any lawsuit, I know you were relieved. How can you still be trying to talk me into this, when you really don't want it, yourself?"

"Because," explained Jake with a patient sigh, "it's the right thing to do."

Abby closed her eyes for a moment to think. Jake had so much to lose. Surely, God wouldn't expect him to risk it all just so a bunch of lawbreakers could spend their sentences without being assaulted! But, Abby had to remind herself, that as a sinner, she was no more worthy of mercy than they were. Christ was the only redeeming factor in her life, and without Him, she would be serving an everlasting sentence in hell. Abby looked at Jake, who was patiently waiting for her answer.

"If this goes to court," she finally spoke, "we're going to do it, together. I'll want you to start seeing Dr. Jacoby more regularly, and my parents... you'd better let me be the one to tell my parents. I'm going to want to start a Bible study with you, and if you get accepted into college, we'll have to let them know you can't come. Maybe, you can get in again at some other time. If you can't-- well, I suppose it just wasn't meant to be. Jake, I can't believe I'm saying this, but if you really feel that this is the right thing to do, then I'll stand by you."

At once, Jake hugged his wife.

"I'm so glad the argument is over," he sighed in a relieved voice.

"Let's go home," said Abby, trying to get to her feet before Dick had a chance to suggest any more ideas concerning Jake's future. As she stood up, however, the room began to spin around her and Abby had to grab Jake's arm to keep from falling over.

"Did you eat this morning?" asked Jake.

"I didn't want to wake you up," said Abby, sitting back down on the couch.

"Dick, she didn't eat dinner last night, either," explained Jake.

"You know where the kitchen is," said the former warden, as Jake quickly excused himself.

"Do you want me to fix you something, too, Dick?" Jake called from the kitchen.

"Thanks!" shouted back the man. "I haven't had breakfast yet!" He turned his attention to Abby. "You might want to lay down on the couch for awhile."

Abby tried to close her eyes and rest, but Dick was sitting in a chair across from the sofa, and he was watching her.

"That took a lot of courage," he smiled at Abby. "Between Jake and yourself, Ricky will grow up to be a fine man." With that, Dick got up and disappeared into another part of the large house.

The young woman tried hard not to cry. She would have gladly asked Jake for a hug instead of the breakfast he was preparing for her. But, she did feel weak, and Abby realized that she needed to eat. Abby was in her third trimester, and her emotions were stronger than they usually were. She had to give Jake credit for not holding it against her, or teasing her about it. He was treating her as he normally did, and she hoped she could return the favor by not being overemotional.

As she rested on the couch, Abby realized that she hadn't seen Sara, Dick's wife. When Jake brought Abby a glass of orange juice, she asked him about it.

"Dick said she's at her sister's house until things settle down a little," Jake whispered. "Maybe, I should send you away, as well." Abby could see the horror in his eyes as he contemplated what that would mean.

"No," she smiled, "you need me too much."

"Do you think," Jake wondered out loud, "that one day, you'll need me as much as I need you?"

"Jake," laughed Abby, "I already do!"

A handsome grin spread across his boyish face.

"I'll have breakfast ready in a little while," he said, kissing her lips before returning to the kitchen.

With her very pregnant belly, Abby struggled to get up from the couch and went to the large mirror hanging on the den wall. She cringed with embarrassment when she spotted a small bruise on the side of her neck where Jake had lingered the night before. As she tried to hide the mark with her long hair, she remembered making fun of her parents for such silly behavior. Now, she and Jake were the silly ones, and Abby had to admit that her preconceived ideas of what romance looked like had changed as her relationship with Jake had changed.

Just then, Jake came in with a tray and set it down on the coffee table in front of the couch.

"Is it all right if Dick joins us?" he wondered.

"Of course," she laughed, "it's *his* house! Really, what an odd thing to ask!"

"I think he's hiding from you," explained Jake, pouring Abby a hot cup of tea.

"Whatever for?" Abby didn't need Jake to answer her question. "I'm not mad at him," she said, accepting the cup from her husband.

"You aren't?" Jake looked at her in surprise.

"I used to be," admitted Abby, "but not anymore. He's not being as reckless with your safety as I had thought he was. Still, I wonder how the governor just *happened* to hear a rumor that you were considering legal action. That phone call from the governor this morning was very timely-- too timely, if you ask me." Abby took a suspicious sip of tea and noticed Dick standing in the doorway.

"I'm afraid you caught me," confessed Dick, entering the den. "Abby, I knew you probably weren't going to let Jake go through with this, and I couldn't blame you. So, I called an acquaintance who knows the governor, and told him what Jake was considering. Maybe I didn't have the right to do it, but it DID get fast results-- and I *needed* fast results. Abby," he said, "I want Jake to go to college, too. I don't want him to tie up several years of his life, fighting this battle in court."

"Sounds a little sneaky," Abby sighed, uneasily.

"Perhaps it was," admitted Dick, "but I hope I meant well."

"We know you're doing the best you can," consoled Jake, offering him a small plate with jam and buttered toast.

Abby kept quiet, choosing to eat her breakfast in silence. In her opinion, Dick had overstepped himself. But, she had to admit, with that one phone call, he had probably saved them from a drawn-out lawsuit.

The young woman had difficulty relaxing too much, for she had given her consent to push things further, if the governor needed more coaxing. Abby was sure that she would be grateful when all this was over and behind them.

Later that day, when Abby had told her family what Dick and Jake were up to, they gave her serious looks that very much mirrored her first reaction. Their church started praying for them, and John and Terry were extra vigilant about strangers who just happened to wander onto their private beach. Jake also kept a watchful eye on Abby, remembering that Dick had been concerned enough to send Sara away. He even ventured to again suggest that Abby stay somewhere else for awhile, but, gratefully, Abby wouldn't hear of it.

As the days passed and nothing bad happened, things began to settle down and Mrs. Doyle came back home. March faded into April, and spring finally came to Three Mile Bay. Now that the bay was no longer frozen, Abby eagerly took to the shore as soon as she could. The real fishing couldn't begin until June, when bass and pike came into season, but Abby was so overjoyed that she didn't care. With a hookless fly tethered to the end of her line, Abby sent the harmless feathered object out onto the water.

"I'm happy for you, Abby," grinned Jake, standing beside her while she fished.

"I'm in terrible form," she groaned, trying to execute a double haul and not doing it very gracefully. "I'm so out of practice! Usually, I dry cast in the snow over the winter just to keep from becoming rusty, but this year..."

"This year, you've been distracted?" Jake finished her thought with a knowing smile. "I'm sorry."

"I can't say it was a boring winter," she admitted. "But, this belly! It's ruining my backcast!"

"Poor Baby," teased Jake. "Another Murphy to spoil your fishing."

"I hope Dennis stops pushing me to get into another tournament soon," fretted Abby. "I'm going to need a lot of practice before I'm ready to compete. Dennis wants me to set more records so it will help the circulation of his magazine, but at the rate I'm going, I'll be doing good to not tarnish his reputation as a knowledgeable instructor."

With the wooden sketchbox easel Abby had given him for Christmas, Jake settled on the sand a few feet away, and began to paint his favorite subject on the empty canvas. While Abby practiced, she occasionally glanced at her husband, busily working as he usually did whenever she fished. Abby breathed in a contented sigh. His handsome face smiled as thoughts that only he was privy to, slipped through his mind and his paintbrush glided over the canvas. Abby was so caught up in watching Jake, that she didn't notice a quick tug on her fly rod.

When it happened again, Abby suddenly realized that someone was paying her a visit at the end of her fly line. She let out a little more line, and let the bass run with it for awhile, before pulling it back to shore. After realizing that it wasn't going to get a meal, the fish opened its mouth and let the hookless fly go.

"Just wait until June, when bass season begins," she warned the creature as it swam away.

Abby yawned, suddenly realizing how tired she was feeling. Fishing never made her tired-- unless she had been at it for several hours, of course. Then she remembered that she was pregnant, and sighed patiently. The Murphy men in her life were making it difficult to not only stay in practice, but to also fish. Abby smiled to herself when she recalled Jake's apology. As if she would have wanted it any other way!

Reeling in her line, Abby walked over to where Jake sat on the sand and tried to sit down beside him.

"Need any help?" he asked, as she clumsily attempted to lower herself onto the ground without landing in a sudden heap.

"Thank you, but I can manage," she insisted, finally putting her hand on his shoulder and settling down on the hard ground. The look on her face told Jake that she was uncomfortable, but she wouldn't admit it.

"I thought you were so eager to fish," mused Jake, loading his paintbrush with more color. "What are you doing here with me?"

"I got tired," she sighed, seeing for the first time what he was painting. "Jake," Abby laughed, "you must have hundreds of pictures of me by now. Why do another?"

"You don't see me making any remarks about your fishing, do you?" he teased.

"No."

"Then leave me to my painting, Little Fly Casting Instructor," he smiled.

"At least," sighed Abby, "you could've painted me without that large belly."

"I love that belly," said Jake, gently slapping her hand away as she reached for a brush to fix the painting. "I suppose this is what I get for being married to a wannabe artist."

"Oh, it is?!" she cried.

Jake broke out into hearty laughter as Abby tickled him beneath his arms. When he let the paintbrush fall to the ground, Abby knew her hold over him was gone. Gently overpowering her, Jake tenderly pinned her back to the sand, and intently looked down at her with breathless awe. As he thirstily drank in her blue eyes, Abby gazed at him in wonderment.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she laughed.

"I can't believe how blessed I am," he sighed in amazement.

"I can't believe you can still get so romantic with someone about to give birth next month," replied Abby. "And I'm surprised I let you. Mom said my third trimester wouldn't leave me in the mood for love, but so far, it hasn't happened."

"For that, I'm truly thankful," he grinned.

"Oh, Jake," sighed Abby.

As April waxed in earnest, so did Jake's anticipation over his college acceptance letter. Day after day, the young man expectantly checked the mail, searching for the one envelope that would decide his future.

Just when Jake's attention was fully engaged in whether or not he would be attending college, Dick unexpectedly visited the little yellow house one April morning with news straight from Governor Smith's office.

"He's agreed to the advisory board!" cried Dick, shaking hands with Jake in congratulations.

"There's still some debate about who's going to be on the board, but you and I have already been approved!"

"Jake is going to be on the advisory board?" asked Abby in surprise. "What about college? How often are they going to meet?"

"Once every two weeks," replied Dick, "though the schedule is far from being set in concrete. Don't worry, Abby, I'll pay for Jake to fly back and forth from San Diego out of my own pocket. I don't care what it costs, but *he is going to college!*"

"But, Dick, it'll be so expensive," resisted Jake.

"I'm not going to let this stand in the way of your future," insisted Dick, with a firm nod of his head. "Not when I can do something about it! We wouldn't even have this opportunity if it wasn't for your willingness to take this whole thing to court. It's the very least I can do. Abby," he said, turning to her, "don't let him talk you out of it! Jake is going to college, and that's all there is to it!"

Abby smiled thankfully, and Dick received as much of a hug as a pregnant woman was able to give with such a large belly in the way.

"Don't start buying airplane tickets," warned Jake. "I haven't been accepted to college, yet. It's mid April, and there's still no word."

"The letter will come," said Abby, in a confident voice. "God is opening a lot of doors to make this happen."

One bright sunny day late in April, the document Jake and Abby had been waiting for, finally arrived with the daily mail. Pensively, Jake handed the precious envelope to Abby.

"You open it," he asked. "I'm too nervous."

With a quiet prayer, Abby opened the seal and unfolded the enclosed letter. Jake watched as she sped through the document, not bothering to read it out loud.

"Abby!" he frantically cried in anticipation. "What did they say?!"

Her flashing eyes met his and she broke out into a proud smile.

"You're in! You're going to college!"

Numb with disbelief, Jake snatched the letter from Abby's hands, while his wife began to dance about the kitchen singing,

"We're going to San Diego!"

Then Abby hugged Jake, while he continued to reread the letter, over and over.

"I told you this was going to happen," she laughed. "I just knew it! Oh! I'd better call my parents! I guess I'd better let Dick know, as well!"

Racing to the telephone, Abby quickly called the interested parties and told them the good news. Terry immediately went out to get pizza, and even invited Dick and Sara to come over and celebrate with the rest of the family.

That evening, the Johanneses' house was alive with noise. Three babies were shuffled into willing arms while Dick, Terry, and John spoke of the advisory board and AJ moving to California so Jake could attend the San Diego Christian Fine Arts College.

"Dennis said he would find a place for us to stay near the campus," Abby was telling her mother as Izumi cradled Debbie in her arms. "Dennis said I could help out at the main office, and that will mean a raise in pay! He's already planning out my career in San Diego!"

"I just wish California wasn't so far away," Izumi sighed wistfully. "I'm loosing my eldest baby girl."

"We'll be back, Mom!" laughed Abby. "It'll only be for a few years."

"You make it sound as if it's only a few days," reproached Izumi. "Abby, you're moving to California! Why, it's on the other side of the country!"

"We'll be all right, Mom," she smiled confidently.

"What was Terry's pet name for you?" recalled Izumi. "'Little Miss Confident'? That's you all over, Abby."

"They'll be just fine," said Dick, coming over and joining the ladies' conversation. "There's nothing those two kids can't do, when they're together!"

After the party was over and everyone had gone home, Jake and Abby retreated to their quiet little house. While Abby changed into her nightgown, Jake turned on the aquarium hood light and climbed beneath the sheets.

"That was a nice party," commented Abby, tossing her slippers aside, and getting into bed. As she cozied up to Jake's cotton and denim, he put an arm around Abby and stared at the fish in the large aquarium.

"I'm actually going to college," he mused under his breath, as if saying it one more time might make it more real to him. "I can't believe it, Abby. There were so many times in my life when I thought God had thrown me away, and there was not a single person who cared even a little what happened to me." Jake caressed Abby's arm and smiled lovingly into her eyes. "I'm so glad I

was wrong. God was there all the time, even when I couldn't see His face. I love Him so much, Abby. When everyone else had given up on me, God never did."

Safe in each other's arms, Jake and Abby kissed while the glow from the aquarium washed over them in a blanket of soft shimmering light. Outside, a silvery moon reflected off the dancing waves of Three Mile Bay, while crickets chirruped gently in the spring night air. As Abby drifted to sleep, she could feel Ricky moving inside her womb. She could feel Jake tenderly plant his hand on her belly, and gently track each movement their son made. Soon, Abby was no longer aware of the four walls or her husband's strong arms. She was fast asleep, dreaming of what tomorrow might bring.

"Come unto Me [Christ], all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light."

~ Matthew 11:28-30 ~

"We love Him [Christ], because He first loved us."

~ 1 John 4:19 ~

Chapter Twenty-eight

Labor of Love

"Unto the woman He [God] said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception [childbirth]; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee."

~ Genesis 3:16 ~

Inhaling a deep breath of air, Jake grasped the book in his hands and prepared himself for what he was about to do. He propped his feet on the coffee table and used his knees to shield the book cover from Abby, who was engrossed with her computer and not paying attention to anything going on around her. It was perfect. Jake had contemplated going to his bedroom to read, but quickly decided against it. If he passed out, he didn't want Abby to find him unconscious on the bedroom floor. Besides, what if he hit his head and bled to death? It might take Abby hours before she found him. Jake quietly laughed at his own absurdity. He guessed that he was more nervous than Abby about this whole thing, and he thought it showed. Jake only hoped that it didn't show too much.

With another deep breath, Jake opened the cover and forced himself to look at the pictures. Blood promptly began to drain from his head, and the young man had to quickly slam it shut. Hearing the sound, Abby looked up from her keyboard to see her Jake placing his head between his legs, apparently to keep himself from passing out.

"Are you all right?" she asked, puzzled by his behavior.

"I'm fine," Jake called out, not bothering to look up, but discreetly shoving the book under his leg so she couldn't see what he had been reading.

"Another flashback?" wondered Abby, threatening to get up from her chair.

"No, no," he quickly insisted, raising his head to look at his wife. "I was just relaxing a little, that's all."

"Are you sure?" she hesitated, her hand on the armrest of the computer chair, as if poised to cross the room to check on him.

Attempting to prove that he really was fine, Jake grabbed a nearby newspaper and kicked his feet out on the coffee table. With an innocent smile, he tried to engross himself in yesterday's news

until Abby was satisfied, and returned to her work. After a few minutes of waiting, Jake peeked over the edge of his paper and pulled out the dreaded book once more.

He had to do this. There was no other choice. He had gotten Abby into this predicament in the first place, and he wasn't about to abandon her when she needed him most. It wasn't the screaming that he was afraid of, or even the sight of bleeding-- it was the idea that Abby was the one doing it. The book assured him that childbirth was a beautiful thing, but Jake was having a difficult time believing it. In fact, the baby itself, seemed to be the only positive thing about this entire experience. He turned another page and was greeted by a crying woman trying to pass a baby between her legs.

With a shudder, Jake closed his book and checked the clock. This time, he had made it all the way to page twelve. Pleased that he was making progress, the expectant father returned the volume to Abby's nightstand without her noticing.

"Are you about to turn in anytime soon?" asked Jake, as Abby continued to type away at her computer.

"What time is it?" mumbled Abby, her attention on the problem in front of her.

"It's nearly eleven."

"Already?" she sighed wearily. "Dennis is waiting on me, and I really need to be ready by tomorrow afternoon or else he's going to be late for a deadline."

"All right then," yawned Jake, "I'll kiss you good night and go to bed."

He promptly bent down and smothered her with a long kiss. When Abby's senses returned to her, she tried to scold her husband.

"That *didn't* help," Abby smiled reproachfully. "I really have to get this done tonight, Jake."

"You didn't hear me make any protests, did you?" he asked, kissing her once more before relinquishing her to the computer and Dennis.

"I wish you'd cut that out," said Abby, her voice much more serious now.

Jake backed away, grinning at her the whole while.

"Don't think I don't know how to fight back when I want to," he cautioned her with a boyish smile. "Dennis is getting this time, only because I choose to let you work tonight."

"My, what bold words!" laughed Abby, folding her arms in defiance.

"Dennis may own much of the daytime," replied Jake, "but your nights belong to *me*."

"I'll tell him you said that," offered Abby, quickly turning to her keyboard to email Dennis. "Dear Dennis, only Jake gets my nights."

"Oh no, you don't!" cried Jake in alarm, grabbing the office chair and rapidly wheeling her away from the computer.

When Abby burst into laughter, Jake suddenly realized that she had only been teasing.

"You're blushing again!" she observed in merriment.

"That's because you're provoking me again."

"Oh, but it's so easy!"

"Too easy," he groaned, meeting her loving gaze and surrendering to it without a struggle.

"You were saying something about fighting back?" said Abby, with an arched eyebrow.

"I could if I wanted to," said Jake, giving her office chair a small tug.

"You see," sighed Abby, with a roll of her eyes, "I don't believe you. I think you're so hopelessly in love, that you don't know whether you're coming or going."

"Ha!" exclaimed Jake, his eyes glancing about the living room before resting on her face. He knew they were alone, but still felt the need to check.

"You're no match for me, Jake Murphy, and you know it."

"Don't push me," he warned under his breath.

Abby recognized the building desire in his eyes and knew she was winning.

"I'll come to bed when I'm good and ready," she declared, getting up and pushing her chair back to the computer table.

Jake saw the small glance in his direction, and realized that she was baiting him to come after her. Thinking to teach her a lesson, Jake shrugged and bid her good night.

Disappointed, Abby tried to return to her work. Even the deadline wasn't enough to get her mind off Jake. She had stirred the pot, only to discover that the only one simmering, was herself.

An hour passed, and Abby finally regained her concentration. Dennis emailed to confirm something important, and Abby had to rush to check her information. After a few hurried minutes, Dennis had his response, and Abby could return to the looming deadline. In the confusion, a note from her desk fluttered to the floor, landing near her feet.

Abby was nearly nine months pregnant, and bending over was out of the question. She eyed the paper and shook her head wearily. After pushing it about the floor with her socked foot in a futile attempt to somehow move the slip of paper within her reach, she let out a sigh of defeat.

"That was pretty sad."

Abby looked up to see Jake standing near the hallway, leaning against the doorjamb as though he had been observing her for some time.

"How long have you been watching?" she asked, indignantly.

"Long enough," smiled Jake, stooping over to pluck the small scrap and placing it back on her desk.

"I thought you were going to bed," said Abby, grabbing the paper and entering its information into her computer.

"I did," said Jake. "I couldn't sleep." The lowering sound of his voice suggested to Abby that he didn't like to admit it out loud.

"Well," she replied, rather stoutly, "I suggest you go back and try again. I'm still busy."

"After everything you put me through an hour ago?" quipped Jake. "Do you really expect me to sleep?"

"I thought you didn't care," she pointed out.

"I never said that," argued Jake. As she typed, her husband intently fastened his eyes on her. His expression changed, and so did the tone of his voice. "Abby," he sighed dreamily, "you have no business looking so beautiful. You're about to give birth next week. Didn't anyone ever tell you that you're supposed to look miserable right now?"

Abby could feel something tugging inside her, but tried hard to ignore it. She knew full well that she didn't look beautiful, but his words and soft voice were hard to resist. Seeing her lips moisten, Jake continued. He spoke of her with language that only a husband had the right to use. By the time he had paused, Abby's mouth was only inches from his own.

A second before Jake was about to kiss her, he whispered one word into her ear:

"Gotcha!"

With an indignant cry, Abby grabbed a glass of cold water and tossed it over a laughing Jake.

"Oh, Abby!" he howled with laughter. "You should have seen your face!"

"Jake Murphy, that wasn't very nice!" she scolded him.

"I beg your pardon," he smiled in surprise. "I forgot the only one allowed to manipulate people in this family, was *you*. I'll try to remember that next time."

"I didn't manipulate!"

"Baby," sighed Jake, "I've been staring at the bedroom ceiling for over an hour, unable to think of anything else. I just thought I'd give you a taste of your own sweet medicine." He crossed his arms and checked her computer monitor. "Now," exhaled Jake, "when are you coming to bed? After everything that's been said tonight, if you think I'm going back by myself, you're crazy. Abigail, I'm about this close to hauling you off, for a guy can only take so much."

When Abby's surprised expression met his with hope in her eyes, Jake could not take any more. Without warning, the young man scooped her up into his arms.

"Jake, put me down!" she cried in horror. "You shouldn't be doing this to your ribs!"

"I'm healed enough for *this*," Jake replied confidently. "Tonight, I won't be needing any Xantol, either." As he carried his pregnant wife down the hallway to her bedroom, Abby eagerly showered him with kisses. When Jake could finally breathe again, he placed her on the bed and

turned to close the door. "If Dennis misses his deadline because of this," he declared, "then we'll give him back your last paycheck!"

The night, however, didn't go as Jake had hoped it would. The closeness of Abby's due date made too much intimacy uncomfortable for her, and she found herself pushing him away. When Jake realized this, he had to reign in his emotions and back off. Abby had stirred the desire within him to be near her, and now she was the one asking to be left alone!

For the most part, Jake thought his wife had been fairly untouched by the mood swings that he had read about in Izumi's pregnancy books. The expectant father had been expecting emotional upsets from the start, but he hadn't expected her to take him with her! Didn't that woman know the effect she had on his senses? As he listened to her softly crying on the other side of the bed, Jake knew she had a small idea.

"It's all right, Abby," he tried to comfort her.

"Jake," she cried, gulping back even more tears, "I didn't know this would happen! I never would have teased you so much, if I did!"

Jake put his arms around Abby, and let her weep into his cotton shirt.

"I know you didn't do this on purpose," he replied tenderly. "If you don't stop crying pretty soon, you'll have me doing it, too. You wouldn't want that on your conscience, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't," whimpered Abby, drying her face on his shoulder. "What's wrong with me, Jake? I don't usually fuss this much, and my moods are off the scale. I feel as though I'm loosing my mind."

"Abby, you're not crazy," Jake assured her, "you're just pregnant. There's a big difference."

Suddenly, Abby clutched up and her hands instinctively went to her belly. With a monumental gulp, Jake sat up in bed.

"What is it?" he asked nervously.

After a minute, Abby relaxed and sighed in relief.

"It was probably only something I ate," she smiled. Just as she was rejoicing that the pain was over, Abby clutched up again. "Oh!" she cried. "There it comes, again!"

At this, Jake jumped out of bed and frantically searched for his clothes, before realizing that he was already dressed. Abby moaned, and the young man began to feel faint.

"I should be writing down the contractions," he remembered, as his previous studies began to resurface in his mind. Jake located a fishing magazine on the fly tying desk and grabbed a nearby pen. "Tell me when the next contraction comes," he instructed, hovering over the bed until she cried out in pain. Jake scribbled something on the magazine, and counted to himself until Abby's relieved face indicated that the contraction was over.

"Here we go again," groaned Abby, as she doubled over in bed. Jake grabbed her outstretched hand and began to count.

"One, two, three," he mumbled, until the pain once more subsided. When the next contraction made Abby cry out with as much intensity as the previous pains, Jake ran to the living room telephone and called his father-in-law.

"I'll be over with the car," said John, quickly hanging up the phone.

"Your Dad's coming!" Jake shouted, as he ran down the hallway and into her bedroom.

Abby was a little less frantic now, and Jake thought it might be due to the fact that she knew her dad was on his way. A second look at the scribbles on the magazine, however, soon told him a different story.

"Abby," he remarked thoughtfully, "I think they're going away."

Before long, John and Terry's anxious faces appeared in the bedroom doorway, and Jake showed the men Abby's contraction times.

"How are you feeling, Sweetheart?" inquired John, bending over the bed and placing a concerned hand on his daughter's forehead.

"The pain's almost gone," she sighed in relief.

"Probably Braxton-Hicks," said Terry, as John nodded in agreement. Then, the two noticed Jake's pale face.

"Son, you're looking pretty white," observed John. "Better put your head between your knees, before you pass out."

"I'm fine," resisted Jake, his attention fully resting on Abby. "I thought she was going to give birth-- right there in bed!"

"Well," yawned Terry, "now that the emergency is over, I'm going back to sleep. For once, the girls haven't been waking up every hour, and I want to enjoy it!"

John lingered at the yellow house a few minutes more, making sure that the expectant father wasn't about to faint. When the color finally returned to Jake's face, John was ready to go home, though he wondered how his son-in-law was ever going to make it in the delivery room.

While Jake walked her father to the door, Abby tried to relax in bed. She was relieved that the pain had gone, but a little disappointed that the hard part was still to come. After a few minutes, Jake returned to the bedroom and checked to see if she were still awake.

"Is it okay if I come back to bed?" he whispered.

"Jake," she confessed, "I'm scared."

Taking that as a "yes," Jake climbed beneath the covers and gently held his wife.

"Little Miss Confident is frightened over childbirth?" he smiled. "I don't believe it!"

"What if I can't do this?" she asked, her frame shuddering with dread. "That pain was so awful, Jake!"

"I know," he whispered.

"Will you be in the delivery room?" she asked, in a tremulous voice.

"I was planning to be."

Abby was silent, but Jake knew what she was thinking.

"You're remembering the pike incident," he sighed knowingly.

"It *had* crossed my mind," she admitted.

"Unlike that fish," explained Jake, "I know what's coming, and I have time to prepare myself. Bleeding a pike is entirely different than childbirth."

"I don't know," hesitated Abby, unconvinced that what he was about to witness could be easier than dispatching a fish.

"I didn't want you to find out," he confessed, "but I've been desensitizing myself with self-therapy."

"What in the world are you talking about?"

Jake let go of her for a moment and leaned over the nightstand for Abby's book.

"See this?" he said, opening the volume and showing her a rather graphic picture of a screaming woman giving birth. "I can look at this and not pass out."

Jake may have looked alert, but Abby was beginning to feel queasy.

"Please, close it," she requested, rolling onto her side and gathering the blankets around her. "I don't like that book."

Returning his arms to his wife, Abby sighed as they enveloped her in a hug.

"You'll do just fine," said Jake, as if reading her thoughts.

"Would you make me a promise?" wondered Abby. "If you don't think you can keep it, then say so right now."

"What is it?"

"Promise me you'll be there in the delivery room," she requested. "And whatever happens, don't leave me."

"I won't, Abby," he promised. "You can count on me. You won't be alone, you know. Your parents will be there."

"I want *YOU*," she insisted, squeezing his hand even tighter. "Promise me."

"I promise," assured Jake.

"After surviving prison," whispered Abby, "you probably think I'm silly for getting so frightened over nothing."

Jake tenderly stroked her cheek with his finger.

"Remember that Bible promise Terry gave me?" he asked. "'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. For Thou hast been a shelter for me, and a strong tower from the enemy.' Do you remember, Abby? I've faced down many fears with that verse."

"I remember," she murmured softly.

"If there comes a time," promised Jake, "when you don't think you have enough strength, just hold on to me, and I'll lend you some of mine."

Abby buried her face in Jake's arms, and asked God for a safe delivery. She prayed for the health of their unborn son, and thanked her Heavenly Father for this man who was holding her ever so gently.

For the next few days, Jake wouldn't let Abby out of his sight. He kept such a watchful eye over her, that at times, his attention became a little frustrating to Abby. She had to eat when the others did, and Jake wouldn't let her work at home, unless he could be there to make sure she wasn't going into labor. When they were at her parents' house, he even went into the bathroom with her; at home, he insisted that she leave the bathroom door open. And every time she sighed or winced, Jake was right there, asking if it was time.

Izumi tried to entertain her daughter with stories of how nervous John had been during their first pregnancy, but even that did little to lessen Abby's fraying nerves.

It was at the breakfast table one morning in early May, when Abby finally vocalized her protest.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" she asked, as Jake sat beside her at the table, watching every movement she made.

"What are you talking about?" puzzled Jake.

John glanced at Izumi and remained silent.

"You act as though I'm about to explode all over the kitchen floor!" cried Abby, in exasperation.

"Well, aren't you?" he replied, only half joking. "Your due date is tomorrow, Abby."

"For once, could we talk about something other than birthing pains and hospitals?" pleaded the expectant mother.

"Did you guys know Abe Winkler [Mr. Winkler] is returning this month?" asked Terry, trying to oblige his niece.

"Abby, try to relax," coaxed Jake. "You're going to do just fine."

"I wish you'd stop saying that," she sighed. "It only makes me more nervous."

"No, I didn't," replied John. "It'll be good to see the tackle shop open again."

"Jake, would you stop it?!" cried Abby.

"Stop what?" exclaimed Jake. "I'm not doing *anything*!"

"Dad?" the daughter implored her father. "Would you make him stop?!"

John looked at his son-in-law and the young man shrugged.

"Sweetheart," smiled John, "he's a grown man, not a child that needs disciplining."

"I hope Abe had a good winter in Arizona," mused Izumi, taking another bite of dessert and then checking on the playpen behind her. "Sounds like Debbie needs to be changed."

"It's my turn," said John, getting up from the table while Abby continued to stare down Jake.

"Ouch!" Jake suddenly cried out, bending under the table to rub his leg.

"What is it?" asked Terry.

"She kicked me!" exclaimed Jake in surprise.

"Abby, cut that out!" came her father's warning voice from the next room.

"What'd you do that for?" asked Jake, still smarting from her reproof.

"Oh, come on," sighed Abby, "it wasn't that bad. I didn't kick you very hard."

"Abe certainly was missed," said Izumi, thoughtfully. "A lot has happened since he's been away."

"I can't wait for him to see the girls," grinned Terry, as baby Lizzie pulled at her sister's hair. The other baby began to scream, while John finished changing Debbie in the living room.

"I think you gave me a bruise," said Jake, lifting the pant leg of his jeans and seeing a mark begin to show on his skin.

Alarmed, Abby leaned forward and gasped when she saw the small bruise.

"Jake!" she cried. "Does it hurt?"

"Maybe, we should invite Abe to a surprise get-together as a welcome home," suggested John, carrying Debbie back to the kitchen and placing her into the playpen with her two sisters. Ruthie was still screaming at the top of her lungs so John handed her off to Terry, who was more than willing to entertain his niece for awhile.

"That would be nice," agreed Izumi.

By now, Jake was hugging a tearful Abby. When they started kissing, John cleared his throat to remind them that they weren't alone.

"Some things around here have changed more than others," he chuckled, nodding in the direction of the young couple.

"I'm sorry," whispered Abby, as Jake dried her eyes with a napkin. He smiled, and she sighed contentedly.

"I love these family mornings," mused John, helping himself to more toast as the triplets began to cry. With a sniff, Abby leaned her head against Jake's shoulder while he finished his breakfast. Terry cooed to the little one dandling in his arms, while Izumi read the Lifestyles section of the newspaper. Yes, life was good.

Later that same day, Abby rested on the couch in the living room of their little yellow house while Jake brought her a glass of lemonade. His attentiveness was getting on her nerves again, and she was struggling not to let it show.

"Are you sure you don't want anything to eat with that?" he asked one more time.

"I refuse to eat everything you offer me," groaned Abby. "The more nervous you get about the due date, the more food I have to turn down! Honestly, Jake, I don't have to eat as much as Mom does! I'm only carrying one baby!"

"Okay, okay," he backed off, seeing that he was only agitating her further. "I'll just be in the next room."

The young woman shook her head wearily and turned on the television. Dennis had insisted that she take some time off, and she had grudgingly accepted. It wasn't that Abby didn't appreciate her boss's thoughtfulness, but now that she was no longer working, she was stuck doing nothing, for Jake wouldn't let her do much around the house. Abby had tried to fly fish, but found it uncomfortable and awkward while nine months pregnant; she busied herself at her fly tying table, but several flies later, lost interest. Too fidgety to read, and too restless to try the puzzles her mother had loaned her, Abby had resorted to the television. She felt like an unemployed derelict, watching television in the middle of a workday.

When Jake went to her parents' house to work, he took Abby with him. After planting her on the living room sofa, Jake started a load of laundry from the nursery, and began to vacuum the floors. Abby didn't feel like watching television at all. She longed to be up and doing something useful, instead of vegetating on her parents' couch.

She didn't have long to wait for a calling, for when John saw his daughter restlessly flipping through television channels, he readily handed her a little sister to occupy herself with. The experienced father knew it would give Abby a pleasing diversion while she was awaiting her own baby's arrival.

"Which one is this, Dad?" asked the child's big sister, as John and Terry headed outside with a basketball.

"It's probably Ruthie," he answered before closing the front door, "but I'm not positive."

Abby let her baby sister play with her long black hair and laughed as Ruthie grasped the shiny gold wedding band on her ring finger.

"Peekaboo!" said Abby, hiding her face from the baby and then suddenly reappearing from behind a throw pillow. Squealing in delight, Ruthie was loving every minute of it. The happy child cooed and burred at Abby's babytalk, and finally fell asleep in her sister's comforting arms.

Still about his chores, Jake walked into the living room and was about to plug in the vacuum cleaner, when he saw the two sisters on the sofa. One was asleep, and the other was lovingly smiling back at him. Nodding that he would wait to clean the floor later, Jake left the vacuum and went to go put another load of laundry into the washing machine.

When he returned, Abby was clutching her belly while Ruthie tugged at her big sister's blouse. The look of discomfort on Abby's face immediately put Jake on his guard.

"I think I just had a contraction," she whimpered, trying not to let Ruthie slide from her lap while pain shot through her belly.

Jake whisked his sister-in-law back to the nursery, while Abby did her best to remain calm. When he returned, Abby was trying to breathe without hyperventilating.

"Is it Braxton-Hicks, or the real thing?" asked Jake, his brown eyes wide with expectation.

"I don't know," mumbled Abby, as another contraction wrapped around her back and took hold of her belly. "*Jake!*" she cried, as the young man quickly sat down on the couch and let her hold on to him as she rode out the pain.

With that last cry, Izumi came rushing into the living room. One look at Abby was enough to explain everything. Sitting down in a nearby chair, Izumi started writing down the contractions on a notepad. "I'm afraid I'm not helping very much," she sighed, as Abby gripped Jake's forearm in pain. "John and Terry are out shooting hoops, and I don't know when they'll return! They *would* choose now to play basketball!"

The blood began to flow back into Jake's arm as Abby loosened her hold on him. She panted, trying to regain her breath while Jake checked the times that Izumi had been diligently recording.

"I think I'd better call her doctor," said Jake. "These contractions are getting too close together." Jake was about to get up from the couch, when Abby pulled at his sleeve.

"Please," she begged, "don't leave me!"

"I'm just going over to the phone, Abby," he tried to console her.

Shaking her head in protest, another wave wrapped about Abby and she reeled in pain.

Too frantic to remember the telephone number on her own, Izumi brought the phone to Jake and he called the doctor from the sofa.

"Are you sure?" Jake sighed, still holding the receiver to his ear. "No, the contractions aren't five minutes apart, yet. All right. Thanks, Dr. Chambers." Jake hung up the phone and looked disappointedly at the two women.

"Not time?" asked Izumi.

"No," replied Jake, as Abby took his hand for comfort. "The doctor said to wait until the contractions are closer together. When they continue for an hour, he wants us to come in."

"But, I want to go NOW!" begged Abby.

"Dr. Chambers knows what he's doing," Jake assured her. "Try to breathe, Abby. Just concentrate on breathing."

"I wish those two would hurry up and get home!" cried Izumi, as her daughter struggled to ride out the pain of another contraction.

Jake smiled bravely for Abby, but in his mind, he was busy picturing his wife going into full labor on the living room couch. Even though he felt faint, the thought of her needing him, kept him conscious.

"Please, God," he silently prayed, "don't let her have the baby here!"

Izumi went to the living room window to see if she could spot John or Terry coming home. Then, the triplets began to cry-- all three of them. Running to the nursery to check on her babies, Izumi handed off timing the contractions to Jake.

"Hold on, Abby," whispered Jake, as she cried out in pain. "They're getting closer together."

"Are they five minutes apart?" she whimpered.

"No, not yet," he replied. "Just hang in there."

Izumi returned with a baby on her hip, and went back to the window to watch for the men.

"If they're not back in ten minutes," she announced, "I'm calling Agatha to baby-sit when we go to the hospital."

With a bowed head, Abby leaned against Jake's chest while she tried to steady her breath. Feeling the perspiration on her face soaking through his shirt, Jake tenderly brushed the hair away from her hot neck.

"How much longer, Jake?"

"You're doing fine, Abby," he tried to encourage her.

"Five minutes, yet?"

"No, not yet."

Abby groaned into his shirt while Jake jotted down the time.

"It hurts so much, Jake," she whimpered.

"I read that rocking back and forth might help," he suggested. "Do you want to try?"

By now, Abby was ready to try anything-- anything at all, to lessen the pain and make it go away.

With some difficulty, Jake carefully lowered her onto the floor and sat down behind his wife, placing a leg on either side of her.

"Lean back and rest against me," he instructed. When Abby complied, Jake rocked her back and forth until she became visibly relaxed. The contractions continued to come, but Abby was calmer now, and she even attempted a smile when Izumi looked down at them sitting on the floor.

Grateful that the gentle motions seemed to be soothing Abby, Jake asked for the notepad and Izumi handed it to him.

Using her mother's intuition, Izumi called Agatha, and arranged to have her good friend baby-sit the triplets as soon as possible.

"Abby, your contractions are five minutes apart," announced Jake in a calm, steady voice. Abby was reading his emotions, and Jake realized that he had to be more composed for her sake.

"I don't want to get up," she breathed, still relaxing against him.

"You don't have to," smiled Jake. "We have to wait an hour, and if the contractions keep coming, then we can go to the hospital."

Unsure whether that was good news or bad, Abby decided not to think about it. She could feel Jake behind her, and his contact was reassuring. Even though her belly was growing tighter and tighter, Abby was strangely euphoric. This wasn't as bad as she had thought it would be!

As she was rejoicing, Abby felt something wet between her legs. The sensation quickly permeated through her clothing until even Jake noticed it.

"Abby," he tried to remain calm, "your water just broke. We have to go to the hospital right now."

"No," she weakly argued, "I don't want to get up."

Jake wanted to tell Abby that if she stayed where she was, she was going to give birth on her parents' living room floor! Since he didn't have time to debate with her, Abby could only protest as Jake lifted her to her feet and helped her out to the Johanneses' car.

Providentially, Agatha arrived just as Jake was getting Abby into the back seat. After Izumi exchanged a few hurried words with her friend, she climbed behind the wheel and started the engine.

"How's Abby doing?" inquired Izumi, momentarily glancing into the rear view mirror to see AJ as the vehicle pulled onto the main road.

"She's doing just fine," answered Jake, wiping the perspiration from Abby's pale face. Another contraction gripped Abby, and she quickly clamped onto Jake's arm with both hands. "You're doing good," he encouraged her. "I'm so proud of you."

Struggling to calm down, Abby rocked back and forth in the back seat while Jake did his best to keep up with her, for the car didn't afford enough room for him to hold her the way he had on the living room floor. Sensing that she was nearing panic, Jake took her face between his hands and encouraged her to breathe.

"Calm down, and the air will come easier," he reminded her.

Abby weakly nodded. She tried to relax as much as she had back at the house, but it was difficult when she could feel the movement of the car-- every second bringing her closer to the hospital. Abby longed for it all to be over, and to hold her baby boy. *Her* baby boy. Abby struggled to

think about Ricky, and to keep from panicking. She prayed in snatches of silent pleas, asking God for help.

"Abby, breathe," coaxed Jake, for her body was tensing with the oncoming contractions.

"They're getting worse," she moaned, trying hard to be brave for Jake. He had said he was proud of her, and Abby didn't want him to regret those words.

"I know," said Jake, stroking her hair, "but we're almost at the hospital. Try to hang in there, Abby. *Please*, don't have the baby in the car."

Abby couldn't help smiling in spite of her present condition. Another wave of tightness gripped her body, and Abby cried in pain.

"Hurry," she whimpered.

"We're in the parking lot," Jake soon announced. "Wait, Abby. Wait."

The car stopped and Jake helped her out of the vehicle.

"Can you walk inside," asked Jake, "or do you want me to carry you?"

"Walk," mumbled Abby. As her legs started to move, she wondered why in the world she had chosen to go on foot. But Jake and Izumi steadied her every step, and before Abby realized it, she was inside the large hospital.

Abby heard Jake talk to someone, and then a wheelchair appeared from nowhere. A nurse took her blood pressure, and the wheelchair started down one hallway after another, until they stopped at a room with a bed. Abby held onto Jake's hand the whole time, only relinquishing it when a nurse changed her into a hospital gown. Izumi watched as a monitor was hooked up to Abby's belly to track the contractions and the baby's heart rate.

"Are you doing all right?" asked Jake, squeezing her hand a little tighter as he spoke.

Abby nodded that she was, and then wondered if she could take it back. Before she could make up her mind, Dr. Chambers appeared in the doorway.

"Well, well," he smiled warmly, "it's not every day that I get to deliver the baby of someone I once delivered, myself."

Izumi smiled, for Dr. Chambers was the same doctor that had been present for Abby's birth.

"From the way you're looking right now," he continued, "I'd say you're feeling some pretty strong contractions." Dr. Chambers didn't wait for his patient to respond, but checked the monitor and nodded knowingly. "Okay, let's see how far along you are."

The doctor checked Abby's cervix to see how dilated she was, but before she had a good opportunity to feel too embarrassed, a fresh contraction took hold. With a cry, Abby gripped the railing on her bed in pain.

"You're four centimeters along," he determined out loud.

"Is that all?" cried Abby in horror.

"Try to do your breathing exercises," directed Dr. Chambers. "I'd also like to see you up and walking around for awhile. We want to get that baby into position to be delivered. Mr. Murphy," he said, turning to the expectant father, "the nurse told me that you thought your wife's water had broken. It didn't."

"It didn't?" gasped Jake in surprise.

"No," smiled Dr. Chambers, "I'm afraid it didn't. It's not uncommon to leak a little urine at the end of a pregnancy, so it's nothing to be concerned about. I'll check back later to see how she's progressing."

If Abby wasn't humiliated before, she was now. But the young woman didn't have long to wallow in her embarrassment. She grabbed Jake's outstretched hand, and bore down on it as a contraction sent her body into another wave of pain. Suddenly, Abby wished she could be embarrassed, or angry, or happy-- any emotion but pain!

Sensing that she was slipping into panic, Jake searched the room and quickly spotted a soft, fold-out lounge chair placed near the hospital bed-- no doubt to accommodate the expectant father while his wife was in labor.

"Okay," breathed Jake, "I need you to get up, Abby."

"No!" she resisted, but Jake's strong arms soon had her out of bed and on her way to the lounge chair.

Jake sat down and placed his legs around Abby, just as they had done on the living room floor back home. Then he rocked her back and forth, until she was relaxed and even smiling.

Izumi sighed in relief, and went to call Agatha to see if John and Terry had returned home from their basketball game yet.

"Feeling better?" asked Jake, as Abby placed her hands on his knees for support.

"Thank you, Jake," she replied, her voice sounding much calmer now. "This really helps a lot."

"Soon, you need to start moving around like Dr. Chambers ordered," he reminded her.

"Why are you always trying to get me to move, just when I begin to feel better?" she cried in dismay.

"Brace yourself," warned Jake, his eyes watching the contraction monitor.

Clenching her husband's legs, Abby rode out the pain until it subsided and she could relax again.

"The sooner Ricky is born," he encouraged her, "the sooner all the pain will go away. Just think about the baby, Abby. It'll all be worth it when you see Ricky for the first time."

"Okay," she moaned, as Jake helped her to her feet. "If walking doesn't work, can we come back to this chair?"

"If you need to," promised Jake, letting Abby hold onto his arm as they slowly made their way out of the hospital room and into the busy hall. Jake located a stretch of hallway not so bustling with activity, and the two walked back and forth, pausing every so often for one of Abby's contractions.

After her phone call, Izumi found them walking in the hall. She was relieved that Abby was in such confident hands as Jake's. Indeed, the mother had been so concerned about Jake's ability to help Abby in the delivery room, that she had even planned to take over the roll of support partner should Jake be unable to. As Izumi watched the couple, she realized how unnecessary her planning had been.

"They're on their way," she smiled, when AJ finally noticed her standing nearby. "Terry said not to let the baby come until he gets here with a camera."

The very thought of anyone recording her ordeal, made Abby feel weak. Her steps began to flag, and Jake asked if she wanted to go back and rest for awhile.

"Yes!" she almost shouted, eager to get back to the lounge chair and the comforting rocking.

Just as Dr. Chambers was about to check her dilation again, John and Terry rushed into the room, both breathless to see Abby.

"Please," she whispered to Jake, as the doctor was about to examine her cervix, "ask them to go until he's finished."

With an understanding nod, the young man did as she asked. When Jake returned, Dr. Chambers started his examination.

"I'd say you're about six centimeters along," he pronounced.

Abby wearily looked at the doctor, her face betraying just how disappointed she was at the news.

"At this rate," said Dr. Chambers, "you could be in labor for several more hours-- even days. I'd like to induce labor and see if we can't get the little fellow to make an appearance today. What do you say, Mrs. Murphy?"

"Yes," she nodded eagerly, "let's do it."

When Jake readily agreed as well, Dr. Chambers broke Abby's water and a nurse started an I.V. drip to get the needed drug into her system to induce labor. It didn't take long for Abby to feel its effects. She had thought that the previous pain was bad, but this was much worse. Clinging to Jake's presence more than ever, Abby struggled to remember that God was with her. Doing his best to keep her calm, Jake offered to rock her on the lounge chair again, but her contractions were coming so strongly, that she turned it down. With a silent prayer to heaven to ease Abby's labor pains, Jake squeezed her hand and reminded her to keep breathing.

Then something wonderful happened: Abby received an epidural anesthesia. Never in all her life had she been so grateful for a drug! Out of sheer relief, Jake laughed when he saw Abby's face spreading into a tired smile.

"It feels *so* good," she sighed blissfully. The drug didn't effect her awareness, but the sudden lack of pain was giving Abby time to catch her breath and gather strength for what lay ahead.

Seeing his chance to say "hello," John placed a warm hand on his daughter's forehead and smiled patiently.

"It'll be over soon, Sweetheart," he encouraged her.

"I know," she whispered, incredulous at how calm her voice had sounded.

Then it was Terry's turn. After telling her that he was praying for her and the baby, Terry kissed her cheek and took a picture.

As Terry went back to wait with John in the corner of the hospital room, Abby's contractions started coming even stronger than before. Dr. Chambers was quickly called, and he examined Abby's cervix once again.

"You're fully dilated," he announced, readying her for the delivery. "Just a few good pushes, and you'll have your son."

"Did you hear that, Abby?!" cried Jake excitedly.

Abby weakly nodded. She was so tired, that even the presence of her father and uncle during the examination hadn't even crossed her mind.

With a parting wave, the men waited outside the hospital room while a nurse propped up Abby's left leg and Jake supported the other. Izumi took pictures in Terry's stead, and gasped in excitement as the baby's head began to push its way into the world.

"Mrs. Murphy, I need a good strong push," said Dr. Chambers, as Jake anxiously watched on. Jake had thought that he wouldn't actually watch the birthing process, but keep his eyes on Abby's face, instead. Now that the moment was upon him, he couldn't help but watch in total amazement as his son slowly appeared from Abby's body. "Just one more push," coaxed Dr. Chambers.

Abby screamed and pushed with all her might. With that one last push, Ricky was born. Jake held his breath as the doctor gently handled a small infant and cleaned the amniotic fluid from its mouth.

With a sigh of joy, Izumi touched her daughter's hand. A little bewildered, Abby looked to Jake, who was smiling ear to ear. Then Abby heard a sound that she would never forget. Ricky let out a small cry, and as his lungs filled with air, he wailed in protest from being taken out of his mommy's safe belly.

"Listen to him, Abby," grinned Jake, shaking her clinging hand in excitement, "doesn't he have a good set of lungs?"

As happy as she was to hear her son, Abby's only thought was to hold her baby. Just as she was about to ask for someone to please give her her son, a nurse laid a small infant on Abby's chest. In awe, Abby caressed the soft, dark pink skin of her baby, and Ricky reacted to her touch by grabbing a tiny handful of her hospital gown. A tidal wave of love swept through Abby, and she forgot the agony she had just endured bringing her son into the world.

"Abby?" said a voice. Abby looked up to see Jake's face, hovering above hers. His expression was one of concern, and suddenly, Abby's world started to become hazy.

"Hey," smiled Dr. Chambers, getting her attention by rubbing the back of her hand, "keep breathing, or else you're going to pass out, okay? We wouldn't want that."

Someone took Ricky to be cleaned and examined, and the new mother weakly looked up at her husband.

"Jake, isn't our son beautiful?" she nearly whispered, her lips pale from exhaustion.

Jake smiled, and it was then that Abby saw he had tears in his eyes. They had been there for quite some time, but in her pain, she hadn't noticed.

"You might want to start breastfeeding," advised a nurse, as she helped Abby with her hospital gown. "Your baby is hungry."

As people attended to Abby and Ricky, Jake stepped back to stay out of their way. Then Ricky started nursing while Abby cradled him in her arms. Jake had never seen her look so tired, or so happy, in all the time he had known her.

When all was done, Dr. Chambers and the others left the new family alone. Jake had to admit that he was grateful for the privacy.

"Jake, sit here," Abby encouraged him, as he leaned forward to see the baby.

Jake carefully sat down on the edge of Abby's hospital bed and marveled at the sleeping infant cuddled in her arms.

"He's bigger than the triplets, when they were born," he remarked.

"He should be," smiled Abby, "he had the entire womb to himself." At the sound of his mother's voice, Ricky opened his eyes and blinked up at Jake.

"He has your brown eyes," pointed out Abby, "and your hair. Just look at those wisps of brown on top of his head. Jake, he reminds me so much of you. Imagine, this baby is half me, and half you! It's such an amazing miracle, I can hardly get over it. Do you want to hold your son, now?"

With a broad smile, Jake lifted the infant into his arms.

"My son," he whispered in amazement. Another tear slipped from his face and fell unchecked on the blue receiving blanket. Ricky gurgled up at his daddy and then tried to suckle his father's shirt. "I think he's hungry again," smiled Jake, giving the babe back to his mother.

As Abby resumed nursing, Jake gently kissed her forehead and sighed wearily. He looked so tired, that Abby forgot about her own fatigue and tried to get him to lay down on the lounge chair for awhile. Unwilling to leave her and Ricky for even a nap, the young man leaned against her pillow and snuggled his cheek on Abby's shoulder.

"I thank God it's over," he sighed. "That was tough." Jake stroked the baby's crown and marveled that this bundle of life had come from within Abby.

Outside the hospital room, Izumi was excitedly relating everything she had seen to an anxious John and Terry.

"Ricky takes after Jake in so many ways," Izumi was saying, "but he has our Abby's mouth. I'd recognize that mouth *anywhere!*"

After a half hour to let the family bond in private, a nurse invited them inside. Terry kept his joy to a quiet whisper, for two of the family members were fast asleep. Jake had one leg hanging off the bed, his sleeping head leaning against Abby's shoulder, while she cradled a napping Ricky.

"Like father, like son," whispered John with a smile.

Everyone quietly gathered around the bed while Abby turned Ricky's face to them so they could get a better look at the brand new member of their family. John gasped in surprise when he saw just how much the child resembled his son-in-law. As if knowing that he was the center of attention, Ricky stirred and let out a small cry. Hearing this, Jake's eyes fluttered open, and he checked the baby.

"He's all right," Abby smiled. "We have visitors."

Suddenly, Jake realized that Abby's family was in the room.

"Congratulations, Son," grinned John. "He's a beautiful baby."

"Thanks," smiled Jake, a little embarrassed that he should be so exhausted when Abby was the one who had done all the pushing.

"What's his full name?" inquired Terry, taking another photo with his digital camera.

"Richard Jacob Murphy," answered Abby, in a pleased voice.

"Jacob!" exclaimed Jake in surprise. "You didn't have to name him after me, Abby."

"You promised that I could pick the middle name, remember?" she reminded her husband. "We made a deal."

"So we did," smiled Jake, letting the infant take hold of his index finger. "I should have figured you'd do something like that."

Then Izumi held her grandson, while John and Terry huddled around her to see the baby. As they oohed and ahed at Ricky, Abby felt her eyes struggling to stay open.

"Go to sleep," encouraged Jake, straightening her covers and making sure she was comfortable. "You need the rest."

"Are you going home?" she asked, groggily.

"No," he assured her, "I'll sleep on the lounge chair."

"I should tell you to go home," smiled Abby, "but I confess, I really want you to stay."

With a happy sigh, Jake gave her hand one last squeeze and Abby soon drifted to sleep.

For the next several hours, Abby's rest was punctuated by cries from Ricky, who seemingly wanted to be fed all the time. To keep him quiet, Jake held the baby as often as he could in between feedings, endeavoring to give Abby as much sleep as he could.

When the new mother opened her eyes a few hours later, Abby wasn't sure what time of day it was. A little disoriented by her unfamiliar surroundings, Abby looked about the room and saw Jake sitting in the lounge chair near her hospital bed, playing with Ricky in hushed whispers. The look of pride on Jake's face was evident. The squirming bundle he held was his son, and Jake was beaming with joy. For several minutes, Abby watched as father and son interacted with each other, until she made a small movement, and caught Jake's attention.

"You're awake," he smiled with pleasure. "If you're up to it, Ricky needs to be fed."

Abby nodded her readiness, and Jake handed her the infant.

"You look better today," he observed, seeing a slight flush of color in his wife's cheeks. "I was hoping you were able to get at least a little sleep last night."

"Last night?" she asked in surprise. "Is it the next day? I don't even know what time it is."

Jake went to the hospital window and opened the blinds so she could see outside.

"You were in labor for fourteen hours," he informed her, "and just so you know, it's eight in the morning."

"No wonder I'm so hungry!" she exclaimed.

"If you want," Jake quickly volunteered, "I could go to the cafeteria and bring you something to eat."

"Thanks," smiled Abby.

For a moment, he lingered in the doorway to watch mother and son, before tearing himself away from the happy scene.

Later that day, the Murphy family started receiving visitors. Dick and his wife Sara were the first to arrive.

"Oh!" gasped Sara, seeing the infant's sweet face for the first time, "he certainly takes after his father!"

"My, I'll say he does," agreed Dick, as Abby offered to let Sara hold the baby. After getting a better look at the newcomer in his wife's arms, Dick took a few steps back and talked with Jake

for awhile. "You must be glad it's over," chuckled Dick, his tummy bouncing up and down with each laugh. "You look paler than Abby does! I'm not sure which one had the harder time of it!"

"Abby did," Jake quickly affirmed. "She was in so much pain, I almost passed out."

"So, you hung in there," smiled Dick. "Good for you. I was wondering how you were going to take it. Even thought of offering to stand nearby with a soft mattress, to catch you when you passed out!"

When Jake blushed with embarrassment, Dick moved on to another topic.

"I have an idea of what you and Abby have gone through," said Dick, his voice brimming with pride, "and all the pain you've had to put behind you to get to this day. I'm proud of you, Son. You and Abby are two of the bravest people I know, and I mean that from the bottom of my heart."

Happy beyond words, Jake surprised his former warden with a hearty embrace.

"God is smiling on you and Abby," remarked Dick, "and it does my heart good to see it."

Just as the Doyle's were leaving, a familiar face appeared in the hospital room doorway.

"Mr. Winkler!" cried Abby. "It's so good to see you, again!"

"Your father told me to expect a welcome home surprise," laughed the elderly man, "but I never counted on it being a baby!"

Jake led Mr. Winkler to the bed, and offered him a chair.

"Ah, yes," he mused softly, "the baby has Jake's features, that's certain. But," he asked in a serious tone, "can he fish?" Mr. Winkler looked over his glasses at Abby, his eyes sparkling with merriment.

"Not yet!" she laughed.

After their old boss had a chance to hold Ricky, he sadly looked at the young couple.

"John tells me that you're definitely going to California this summer," he sighed. "Well, I'm happy for you both, but I'll miss having the Murphys in Three Mile Bay."

"I'll miss being here," admitted Abby.

"This college, though," continued Mr. Winkler, "sounds like a very good opportunity for Jake. John showed me the family painting he gave your parents for Christmas, and it was very well done. He's a gifted man."

"Yeah," joked Abby, "who knew?"

Jake gave her leg a playful swat, and then checked to see how Ricky was faring in her arms, for the baby was starting to cry and grasp at Abby's hospital gown.

"I think your son wants his breakfast," chuckled the old man, getting to his feet to leave. "Come by the shop and visit when you have some free time," he offered. "The Murphys are always welcome at the marina."

Agatha, the dear friend who baby-sat the triplets the day before, was the next to arrive with her husband for a visit. Then Abby's fishing buddies and church friends began to trickle in, until the hospital room was abundant with the fragrance of fresh cut flowers.

Dr. Jacoby also wanted to see Ricky, as did Sheriff Peterson, who arrived in his uniform, for he could only take a few minutes to stop by while still on duty. The law enforcement officer tenderly cradled the baby, happily marveling at how much progress Jake had made since getting out of prison last year.

"God truly does set the solitary in families [Psalms 68:6]," the Sheriff observed with a glad heart.

That night, Jake slept in the lounge chair beside Abby's hospital bed for the second day in a row. Abby halfheartedly tried to talk him into going home to enjoy a comfortable bed, but he had easily resisted her weak arguments. The young man knew she wanted him there, and to be honest, he didn't want to go back to an empty house. His family was here, with Abby and Ricky, so Jake remained by Abby's side until the second day when Dr. Chambers declared that mother and child were ready to go home.

In readiness for their arrival, John and Terry had cleaned the little yellow house, while Izumi had stocked their refrigerator with enough food so Jake would have to do very little food preparations for the next few days.

As Abby had once insisted pushing Jake out of the hospital in a wheelchair when he went home, Jake delighted that he was able to do the same for her-- though under much happier circumstances.

John drove the small family back to Three Mile Bay, and thoughtfully installed Ricky's car seat in the red pickup truck to save Jake from having to do it later on.

Inside the house, Ricky cuddled in his blanket as Abby carefully settled on the living room couch for a little rest before lunch. Jake busily ran back and forth, getting a pillow from the bedroom for her back, ensuring she had something to drink, and even adjusting the light from the window to make sure she could take a nap if she wanted.

Izumi was not much better than her son-in-law, for she had bought a frilly bassinet for Ricky, and had John place it beside the couch so Abby could easily reach her baby when it was time to nurse.

"You really didn't have to get us a bassinet, Mom," smiled Abby, as the new grandmother lowered Ricky into his small bed. "It's very pretty, though."

"Isn't it?" sighed Izumi, as she covered Ricky with a light blanket. "I know you and Jake already have a crib, but I've always pictured your firstborn in a pretty bassinet. It's terribly sentimental of me, but they're only this small once. Enjoy it while you can, Sweetheart. They grow up much too fast."

After Abby's parents and uncle had left, Jake bent over the bassinet to see Ricky.

"Can you believe your mom bought this lacy thing for our son?" he lightheartedly chuckled. "I would have argued against it, but Mom seemed so happy to do it, that I didn't have the heart to turn it down."

"Thanks for not saying anything," smiled Abby, relaxing into the soft pillow Jake had placed behind her. "Mom's never been a grandmother, before. Try to let her enjoy Ricky as much as possible, because she won't get to see him very often when we move to California."

Jake nodded in understanding and let out a small sigh.

"Are you still sure you want to move?" he asked her. "Won't you feel better raising our son closer to your parents? It's a big leap of faith for you to be without them."

"You and I will be together," replied Abby, "so I'm not afraid."

"Then I won't be, either," he smiled, leaning down and tenderly planting a kiss on her forehead.

"Would you cuddle with me for awhile?" she asked, sleepily.

More than willing to accommodate her request, Jake sat down on the sofa and let Abby find the most comfortable spot on his lap to rest her head. When she finally closed her eyes, Jake stroked her silky black hair.

"Abby, I love you," he whispered. Just then, a small gurgle came from the bassinet. "I love you too, Ricky," he smiled.

Peace and quiet settled into the little yellow house, as Abby snuggled on Jake's lap. The morning light from the dimmed window comforted her as she took one last glance at the bassinet.

Before letting herself fall asleep, Abby thanked God for answering so many prayers in the past few days. God had not forsaken her in her great need, and had sent mercy when she needed it the most. Abby thanked God for the good health of their son, and for the great help that Jake had been. She knew Jake would have gladly endured the pain for her, if he could. How she loved that man!

Soon, Abby could hear the soft breathing sounds of her slumbering husband and newborn son, and realized how very tired she was, herself. Feeling more exhausted than either of them, Abby quickly fell asleep without even trying.

"A woman [Abby] when she is in travail [labor] hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child [Ricky], she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world."

~ John 16:21 ~

Chapter Twenty-nine
When Heaven Sings

"The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; He will save, He will rejoice over thee with joy; He will rest in His love, He will joy over thee with singing."

~ Zephaniah 3:17 ~

Ricky was proving to be a very fussy baby. To Jake's credit, he tried to let Abby sleep as long as possible, by being the first to get up and answer Ricky's cries in the middle of the night. That baby boy did his level best to keep his young parents awake, and nearly brought Abby to tears on several occasions, herself. Short on sleep, but not short on love, Jake did all he could to quiet Ricky and comfort Abby.

Both Abby and Jake had thought Ricky's cries were only louder and longer, simply because everyone wasn't getting enough sleep-- and that would be enough to make *anything* seem worse than it actually was. But when Terry observed that what amused the triplets, only frightened and terrified Ricky, they began to realize that his behavior wasn't exactly normal. What made this even worse, was the thought that Ricky might have been influenced by the flashbacks he had heard while in Abby's womb. Jake had suggested the possibility to Abby, and she had absolutely refused to even consider it for a moment. After all, Ricky hadn't shown any abnormal signs of distress inside her womb. In the past, as long as she tried to remain calm during Jake's flashbacks, then Ricky seemed to do just fine. But that was when he was safe and snug in her womb. The outside world was altogether a different matter.

This was not a thought Abby liked to entertain, and it pained her to see Jake's downcast face as he pondered the possibility while their son continued to cry at the top of his lungs. She knew Jake was struggling with guilt, and prayed to God for help.

In answer to Abby's prayer, help arrived, but not in the manner she had been expecting. On one especially trying day, Jake had a revelation: if he were Ricky, and the world continued to frighten him at every turn, what would calm *him* down? Jake immediately thought of Abby, and the comfort he often felt whenever they were together. During those times when he struggled with his past, her continual presence was reassuring to his senses that he was loved and wanted. Jake wondered if all Ricky needed was that same feeling of belonging and love that he had experienced since meeting Abby.

Determined to do all that he could for his son, Jake started his days with a baby sling strapped to his chest, even keeping Ricky with him when he worked at the Johanneses' house. Safely tucked against Jake, Ricky could hear the large world around him, and even glimpse strange faces that

occasionally peered down at him-- all within the security of the strong voice that continually kept him safe. When Jake was unable to hold Ricky, he would pass him to Abby, so that either of the two parents was always with their son.

From the start, John had been uneasy about this arrangement and had warned that it might spoil Ricky. One week passed, however, and the newborn began to settle down in many small ways. Noises didn't startle or frighten him as much, for his mommy or daddy was always with him. The only times when they were not, was as at night, when Ricky slept by himself in the crib at the foot of their bed. But, even these times were improving. As Ricky's confidence continued to grow, his fussiness dramatically subsided. He was learning that his little world was safe, and that he was loved. Even the clatter of dishes when Jake set the table at mealtime, wasn't enough to frighten the boy.

One day, while John was visiting the little yellow house, he went to the bassinet in the living room to check on his grandson, for the baby had been unusually quiet. The wisdom of AJ's decision was evident on Ricky's precious face, for when John looked down at the infant, he found Ricky beaming up at him with one of Jake's contented smiles. Whatever fear and trepidation Ricky had been experiencing, was completely gone.

"That is the happiest baby I've ever seen," declared John. He even remarked that Ricky was now quieter than the triplets, and seemed quite content to let out small cries to get attention, instead of stirring up enough fuss to bring down the walls of Jericho, as he often had in the past!

And John was not alone in these happy observations. It was not unusual to find a curious smile plastered on Ricky's face, as if he had some great secret that no one else knew about but him. But Jake understood his son. Ricky had only needed reassurance, and the bond between parent and child only deepened as that love was proved each day.

With a great sigh of relief, the Murphy household began to relax and enjoy their new bundle of joy, even though that bundle kept requesting to be nursed at all hours of the night.

The great concern of Ricky behind them, Jake was becoming aware of another test that was gradually building.

Ever since they had come home from the hospital, Jake maintained a little distance from Abby, for she had just given birth and was in no condition to be intimate with him. And since her prevailing mood was one of fatigue, and not romance, Jake quickly discovered that his own needs had to take a back seat to that of his wife's.

While he had prepared himself for this change, beforehand, he hadn't been ready for the longing that overtook him at night in bed. Jake had been in the habit of clinging to Abby in his sleep, but her current condition was making this difficult for the poor man to do. As soon as his arms would wrap around her, Jake's hands would ache for more, and he often had to retreat to the bathroom for a cold shower. To Jake's dismay, he was steadily becoming worse.

It was after such an incident one night, that Jake inexplicably retreated to the bathroom, only to return several minutes later, damp and cool beside her in bed. He had offered no explanation, but Abby hadn't needed any.

"Maybe," she suggested, "you should sleep in your room, for awhile."

"Do you want me to?" he asked in surprise.

"This isn't about what *I* want," she argued, "but what's good for *you*. Do it for yourself."

"No," resisted Jake, trying once more to hold on to her so he could go to sleep, "I'm not leaving our bed."

"Why not?" she whimpered.

"If I leave now," explained Jake, "I might have a difficult time coming back, later. It's better to stay, than to risk repeating getting used to you all over again."

"Couldn't you just sleep next to me, without having to touch me?" she wondered. "It would be a lot easier on you, if you could."

"No, it wouldn't," replied Jake, struggling to keep his patience, for he was sorely being tested by these circumstances. "When I don't hold on to you, I startle too easily when I'm asleep. I have to do this my way."

"You're making me feel guilty," sighed Abby.

"I'm sorry," he regretted.

"Why are you apologizing to *me*?" Abby laughed softly. "*I'm* the one who's causing you trouble."

"Habit, I guess," he mused, carefully adjusting his arms around her while trying not to reawaken his desire.

"What if..." Abby was about to make another suggestion, when Jake interrupted her thought.

"Please," he begged her, "just go to sleep, Abby. Let me work this out for myself."

"You're not in this alone," she reminded him.

"Actually," he smiled, "in this instance, I'd prefer to think that I was."

"If it's any consolation," said Abby, relaxing under the sheets before closing her eyes to retire, "I don't feel the least bit romantic. I have baby spit on my pajamas, the smell of Ricky's last diaper is still in my nostrils, and my eyes are bloodshot."

"Thanks, Abby," Jake sighed gratefully, "it helps." He wanted to add, "only a little," but held his tongue. He knew she was exhausted, and before long, he could hear her softly breathing in her sleep.

It was a little after two in the morning, when Abby was awakened by Ricky's hungry cries. Patiently, the sleepy mother climbed out of bed, but as her toes touched the floor, they unexpectedly came into contact with something warm and slightly squishy. Alarmed, Abby quickly pulled her feet back onto the mattress.

"*Jake!*" she exclaimed in horror. "There's an *animal* on the floor!"

Abby heard a muffled yawn, and then a low voice stirring from the same direction as the mysterious creature.

"What animal?" asked the voice. "Are you all right?"

"Jake, is that you down there?" Abby wondered in amazement. She ventured to the edge of the bed and tried to peer into the darkness of the room.

"It's me," he sighed, wearily.

"Why are you on the *floor*?" she gasped in surprise.

"Ricky's crying," breathed Jake, getting up and turning on the aquarium light so they could see.

Abby's heart fell when she recognized the sleeping bag on the carpet beside their bed.

"Take it easy, little man," soothed the young father, as he scooped Ricky into his arms and gently delivered him to Abby. "Your meal is coming, Ricky." Jake stretched his limbs and checked the clock, shaking his head groggily when he saw just how early it was. "I'll be glad when he starts learning to tell time," he joked softly.

When Abby discreetly adjusted her pajamas to nurse the baby, Jake quickly turned away. He was missing her terribly, and everything she did right now only seemed to make him worse.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled.

Exhaling slowly, Jake took a seat at Abby's fly tying table and ran his fingers through his hair. With a small smile, he looked back at Abby, who was modestly nursing their son on the bed.

"I hope you already know," he said, thoughtfully, "that sex isn't the reason why I love you so much. You already know that, don't you?"

"I know," she smiled.

"Good," replied Jake, rubbing his face with the palms of his hands. "I just wanted to be sure you understood. I may be going through Abby withdrawal," he smiled at her, "but not for your love. That part of you is always with me."

When Abby met Jake's honest gaze, she knew he wasn't just saying that to make her feel better. He had meant every word. Before she had a chance to give him a loving response, Jake got up and left the room. Abby looked down at the babe in her arms, and smiled at the half awake eyes that stared back to her.

"Do you know how much your daddy loves us?" she mused gently. Ricky kicked his tiny legs and smiled as milk dribbled down his little chin. "You know what," she laughed, patting his face dry with a corner of her pajama top, "I think you do."

The next morning, Abby looked over the edge of the mattress, and greeted the reclined figure in the sleeping bag on the floor.

"Hello, down there," she said, as Jake looked up and met her gaze with a tender smile. "You wouldn't happen to know where my husband went to, would you?" she asked, playfully. "I know he's around around here, *somewhere*."

Folding his arms behind his head, Jake sighed wistfully.

"I missed you," he confessed. "Sleep is so much sweeter when you're with me." Jake regarded her for a moment, and then his lips parted in pleasure at a new thought. "Do you know what time of year this is?" he asked her, knowingly.

Puzzled, Abby blankly stared at him.

"Bass season?" she took a wild guess.

Jake frowned, and Abby could see his chest rise and fall with a sigh of disappointment.

"It's near the end of June," he hinted, with raised brows.

"I know," laughed Abby, "bass season! Honestly, Jake, I have no idea what you're talking about!"

Jake opened his mouth as if to explain, but quickly shut it again. A hurt look crossed his face, surprising Abby.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," he muttered, kicking his legs free from the sleeping bag and getting to his feet. "I'm going to have a quick shave before starting breakfast at your parents' house. Do you mind if I again take Ricky with me, this morning?"

"No, I don't mind," replied Abby.

"Feed him, so he'll be ready when I go," murmured Jake, brusquely jerking past the doorway and slamming his shoulder against the door in his haste. With a small groan, he crossed the hall and disappeared into the bathroom without looking back.

Bewildered by this sudden moodiness, Abby nursed Ricky and readied him for her husband.

When she had finished, Abby went into the hall and stood in the bathroom doorway, quietly watching Jake as he shaved in front of the mirror before the sink. Water splashed into the basin from the faucet and onto his jeans, but Jake didn't seem to mind. Abby sighed. What had she done to make him so disappointed in her? As she contemplated a list of possibilities, Abby's eyes surveyed the shirtless man before her. In public and around the house, Jake was always careful to keep the scars on his back and wrists covered, so that Abby rarely had a chance to observe him like this, outside the privacy of their bedroom.

Lost in a daydream, Abby found herself admiring Jake's square shoulders and observing things that were a wife's privilege to notice. Abby didn't realize how long she had spent with these silent observations, until she suddenly became aware of Jake's steady gaze, reflecting back at her from the mirror.

Caught in the act, Abby quickly lowered her eyes. When she recovered enough courage to look back at the mirror, she saw a grin playing at the corners of Jake's mouth.

"If I didn't have shaving gel on my face," he smiled, "I'd kiss you."

"I hope you don't let that stop you," she replied, her cheeks flushing a pretty shade of pink.

Washing the last bit of soap from his jaw, the young man shut off the running water in the sink, and turned to face her. For a moment, Abby thought he might kiss her, but Jake remained where he was.

"I don't think I can trust myself to stop with a kiss," he confided, tugging at the long sleeved shirt hanging on the back of the bathroom door. "Maybe later?"

Abby nodded understandingly, and watched as he buttoned his shirt and then ran a comb through his hair.

"You really don't know what month this is?" Jake asked her once more. "I mean, besides the start of smallmouth bass season," he quickly added, knowing how much she had been looking forward to catching the fish again. "Never mind, Abby," he finally smiled, seeing that she really was clueless. "I'm probably just being overly sensitive." Even though he was attempting to downplay his disappointment, Abby could plainly see that he was heartsick.

"Won't you just tell me what I'm forgetting," she pleaded, "so I could hurry and apologize?"

"It's all right," dismissed Jake, picking up an article of Abby's laundry from off the bathroom floor and dropping it into the clothes hamper. "Did you nurse Ricky, yet?"

"He's ready and waiting for you," she answered.

After Jake had strapped on the baby sling and placed Ricky into his secure little nest, Abby sighed contentedly as the infant looked up at his daddy with two brown eyes so like his own. Jake lightly touched Ricky's small crown with his lips.

"Are you ready to face the world, little man?" he whispered tenderly. The child opened his mouth in an "oooooh," and then smiled happily as Jake offered him a finger to grasp. "Oh, Ricky," Jake smiled in amazement, "what a miracle you are! Do you know that you're an absolute blessing? Do you?" Jake chuckled softly as the child began to close his eyes for a nap.

Preparing to leave for her parents' house, Jake leaned forward and gave Abby a quick peck on the forehead, for he was unable to give her their usual kiss before parting.

"Try not to be too long before you come to breakfast," he told her. As he started down the hall, Abby called after him.

"Jake?"

"Humm?" he asked, looking over his shoulder before coming to a complete stop.

"I love you, Jake."

A warm smile spread across his handsome face.

"Abby," he sighed deeply, "never stop telling me that."

For some reason, Terry was all winks and smiles at the breakfast table that morning. Even John and Izumi seemed unusually happy whenever they looked in AJ's direction.

"What's with everyone?" wondered Abby, as she took a sip of coffee, and noticed her mother's beaming face over the brim of her mug.

"As if you didn't know!" laughed Izumi.

John and Terry broke out into knowing chuckles, but when Abby continued to look baffled, everyone turned to Jake for an explanation.

"It's no big deal," he shrugged, "she just didn't remember-- that's all."

Silently, Abby looked to her uncle for help. Terry stared at her with raised brows, as if trying to coax her memory along. When that failed, he started gesturing to her with his hands.

Somewhat amused, Jake slid back in his chair and watched Terry's charades. Undisturbed in his sling, Ricky lay snuggled against Jake's chest, oblivious to what was going on around him.

"I don't get it," Abby sighed, trying to decipher the pantomime. "Either I'm some kind of bird, or you're trying to tell me someone in the family is dying!"

Jake smothered a laugh.

Then John started humming the wedding march and Abby finally understood.

"Oh, no!" she gasped. "Our wedding anniversary! It's *tomorrow*!"

"Your very *first* anniversary," John pointed out.

Abby glanced at her young husband, who was silently sitting beside her at the table.

"I'm sorry, Jake," she mumbled. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"We'll talk about it later," he responded with a patient smile.

"I realize I'm early," announced Terry, reaching for a small album beneath his chair, "but I wanted to give this to both of you now, instead of this evening. It's only a few photos I took of your wedding," he explained.

Jake opened the small picture album so Abby could also see. Oddly enough, this was the first time that either had ever viewed the photos, for neither Jake nor Abby had ever asked to see them.

"I know they're not very good," Terry apologized awkwardly, "but my camera phone doesn't take great pictures. The video I took with my camcorder didn't turn out very well, either, so I just printed out a few frames and added them with the others."

"Thanks, Terry," said Jake, trying to manage a happy smile. "This was very thoughtful of you." Jake looked over the few pages that comprised his wedding album, and handed it to Abby, who was strangely quiet.

"I thought that you'd want to get this over with now, instead of at the party," Terry explained.

"Party?" asked Abby, looking up from the pictures of what was supposed to be one of the happiest days of her life. "What party?"

"This evening," said John with a smile, "your family is throwing you and Jake a party. I know today isn't your real anniversary, but Terry and I have a busy work schedule tomorrow."

"Thanks, Dad," she smiled weakly. "It sounds great." Abby numbly looked back at the photos Terry had taken of their wedding day, and her heart sank even lower.

As if Jake were entertaining similar thoughts, he quickly pushed his chair away from the table and started clearing the dishes.

John and Terry talked a little while longer, and then went off to work in their office down the hall. Izumi remained to chat with Abby, but when one of the triplets began to cry, it quickly sent the remaining two into the same frenzy. Hearing the loud commotion of his aunts, Ricky blinked opened his eyes and peered up at Jake. Seeing no reason to fuss, the boy promptly went back to sleep.

Izumi wanted to stay and visit with her daughter, but her three smallest girls were demanding their share of breakfast, so the busy mother had to hurry away and go nurse them.

Shaking his head, Jake scraped small bits of leftovers into the garbage disposal, while Abby continued to sit at the table, still looking at the photos.

"Please," Jake begged her, "put that album away."

"They're pretty dismal, aren't they," she responded, understandingly.

"It's no wonder Terry wanted to give that to us now, instead of at the party," muttered Jake. "It's enough to dampen *anyone's* spirits."

"Why didn't you tell me that tomorrow was our anniversary?" she wondered. "You must be so angry!"

"Abby, I'm not angry," he sighed, "only a little hurt. I was hoping that you'd eventually remember on your own." Jake wiped his hands on a kitchen hand towel, and looked at her thoughtfully. "You know, seeing that album reminded me of just how far we've come. Abby, when I look at you in those pictures, all I see is pity. Until now, I hadn't realized how much you've changed toward me."

Abby stared at the terrified ex-convict looking back at her from the wedding photos and shuddered.

"You weren't exactly brimming over with love, yourself," she pointed out. "I know these look like mug shots," said Abby, "but my memories of that day are much happier than what's represented

in this album. Do you remember when we went for ice cream after the ceremony, Jake? We had a good time, didn't we?"

"I remember you smiled at me a lot," recalled Jake. "I was happy. I still am, Abby."

Content that they had something good to remember that day by, after all, Abby shut the photo album and pushed it aside.

"Our relationship has changed a lot since we first met," she mused, "and so have our feelings for each other."

"What about now?" Jake challenged her, planting his hands on the table and playfully leaning across it to reach her lips. Securely hanging from his chest was a wide-eyed Ricky, staring in wonderment as the horizon of his world suddenly shifted, and he found himself on his back. "Abby, what do you feel for me at this very moment?"

Abby gazed into Jake's face and smiled, knowingly.

"Well," she laughed, "it certainly isn't pity, that's for sure! And," she added, "that look in your eyes right now isn't exactly terror!"

Momentarily losing himself in her presence, Jake hungrily kissed her mouth. When his longing became too much, he had to force himself to stop.

"Sorry," breathed Jake, "I got a little carried away."

Just then, Ricky let out a small cry from the baby sling. When the infant tried to suckle the material in front of his face, Jake gave him to his mother. "Do me a favor?" he requested, as Abby searched the kitchen for a good place to nurse Ricky. "Not in front of me?"

"We'll keep Mom company while she's nursing the girls," nodded Abby, preparing to leave for the master bedroom. "I just remembered that Dennis needs me to finish a project for him, today. I think I can get it done before for the party, though. Even if I can't-- I'll be there."

"I know you'll try," smiled Jake, his voice already sounding disappointed, for he knew how easily she forgot the time when working at her computer.

Since the party was in Abby and Jake's honor, John decided to give the young man a rest from cooking, and arranged to have their favorite restaurant prepare the food, and deliver it to the

house. It was a welcome change in routine for Jake, and he smiled to himself, knowing that he wouldn't be facing what to fix for dinner that night!

After putting in a few hours at their home office, John started preparing the house for the party. While Terry set up a playpen in the living room to corral the babies, John put out the dining table and made sure there would be enough chairs for all their guests.

Back in the yellow house, Abby remembered the look on Jake's face when she told him of Dennis' assignment, and pushed away from the computer when it was time to stop. She had already disappointed Jake once that day, and was trying not to repeat her mistake.

Getting ready for the party, Abby nursed Ricky earlier than she normally would have, just to get one feeding over with before people started arriving at her parents' home. Smiling happily, Ricky made no fuss when Abby tried to pass his tiny fists through the arm holes of his white cotton dress shirt. What little squirming he did do, however, made the process more tedious than usual, for Abby wasn't used to dressing Ricky in formal baby clothing. Next, she pulled a small pair of dark pants onto the boy, and lightly combed his tuft of brown hair. There wasn't much to comb, but Abby delighted in doing it, anyway.

Jake smiled delightedly, as she entered her parents' home with Ricky in her arms. The grateful look on his face was enough to make Abby relieved that she had decided to be extra careful about being on time.

"Don't you think Ricky is too cute in his shirt and pants?" Abby beamed, showing off a dressed up infant who had no idea in the slightest what he was wearing. "We have to get a picture of him in this, Jake!"

"Ah, yes," chuckled Terry, coming to the couple with a handful of napkins for the table, "the sound of proud parents! Give it some time, and you won't be rushing to the camera every time he burps!"

"You're one to talk!" mocked Abby. "Our photo albums are chock full of my baby pictures, and *you* were the one who took most of them!"

"Well, I was a first time uncle," he lightly dismissed. "After the first kid, the rest aren't all that special." As Terry passed the three occupants in the playpen, he gave them a teasing wink.

With a laugh, Jake took his son into his strong hands.

"I'll just put Ricky in the playpen with the others," he said, bringing the small boy across the room to where the triplets were waiting.

Abby was hesitant to let Ricky stay with the girls, for he wasn't as old as they were, and the triplets often frightened him if one of his parents wasn't constantly with him. By now, the little aunts were five and a half months old, and were rolling onto their stomachs on their own and actively grabbing at anything within reach. All poor Ricky could do was lay on his back, and stare bewilderedly up at Abby as her sisters cooed and tugged at his arms and legs.

"I don't think this is a good idea," remarked Abby, watching closely as one of the girls stuffed her fingers into Ricky's mouth and then proceeded to look inside. "He's only six weeks old, Jake. He's too young." Abby bent down and rescued Ricky while his small assailant let out a cry of protest.

"Maybe after they've calmed down," suggested Jake.

"We'll see," she replied, as Ricky smiled in the safety of his mommy's arms.

"Don't let them push you around, Ricky," chuckled Jake, as his son cuddled against Abby's shoulder. "Those Johannes girls can be bossy, if you're not careful!" Abby opened her mouth to argue the point, but before she could, Jake quickly kissed her. "I've been wanting to do that, for awhile now," he confessed.

Just then, Izumi came to the playpen to check on the triplets. Seeing her mother, Ruthie excitedly waved her arms for attention. Debbie and Lizzie soon followed, until the entire playpen was filled with eager squeals.

"Oh, my," Izumi smiled wearily, for she was tired from a day of diaper changes, playtimes, and feedings.

Hearing the commotion, John came to her rescue, and tossed a few soft toys into the playpen until their attention was diverted long enough for Izumi to quietly walk away.

After witnessing Izumi's boisterous reception from the girls, Jake went home to get Ricky's infant bouncer, and placed it near the dining table in the living room, where he and Abby would be sitting.

Before long, someone knocked on the front door, and Terry showed Dick and Sara Doyle into the noisy house.

"Good evening!" greeted Dick, shaking hands with Terry and John. Then he turned to Jake, and readily accepted the embrace that was offered. "I'm grateful you're letting us share this special time with you and Abby," acknowledged Dick. "It's an honor to be counted among your friends."

"Thank you for coming," said Jake, putting a loving arm around Abby as she stood beside him with their son. The young wife smiled, knowing that Jake could touch her right now, only because they weren't alone, and there was no possibility of getting into trouble.

Then Dr. Jacoby arrived, and sent the triplets into peals of baby laughter when he jingled his car keys above their playpen. Ricky didn't see what the big deal was, and contented himself with clutching Abby's blouse, and smiling indiscriminately at his admirers.

Sheriff Peterson and his wife were the last to arrive, until the house was crowded with lively chatter, punctuated with the occasional sounds of baby cries.

"Ricky sure is a quiet child, isn't he," mused Dick, as he watched his namesake cradle in Jake's arms while the triplets vocalized their feelings to everyone in the room. "Just look at him grin, Sara! Doesn't he look like Jake when he does that?"

Even though Ricky was smiling, his eyes kept falling shut, as if they were the heaviest things in the world to hold up on his own. When he at last fell asleep, a faint grin was still evident on his face, so that Dick could not take his eyes off the infant.

"What a precious boy," remarked the former warden. This was a completely unbiased opinion on Dick's part, for he quietly reasoned within himself that with such an obviously exceptional child as Ricky, *anyone* would have said the very same thing. Dick was so certain of his lack of partiality in the matter, that he went on to observe how intelligently the newborn looked at him, whenever he met Ricky's gaze. At this, Sara only laughed, for she knew how attached Dick was to Jake and his family. She had to admit, though, that Ricky was a *very* sweet tempered baby.

Before long, Terry's camera came out of hiding. Since Jake no longer had flashbacks when his picture was being taken, the proud uncle took photos of Jake and Abby, and several of Ricky in his tiny shirt and pants. However, the others weren't immune to his attention, so that everyone had to say "Cheese!" at least twice that night.

Then dinner was ready, and the party found their seats at the large table in the living room, while Jake placed Ricky in the small infant bouncer on the floor between his and Abby's chairs. John sat at the head of the table, and everyone bowed their heads to pray.

"Dear Heavenly Father," began John, "we're here tonight to celebrate Jake and Abby, on their first year of marriage. Lord, it hasn't been an easy year for them, but Your faithfulness has continuously been present. We thank you that Jake is not spending this anniversary, elsewhere, but is free to be here with his family. Thank you for this great mercy, Lord.

"You are doing a great work in Jake and Abby's lives, and the proof of that is in their baby boy, Ricky. We ask You to grace Jake and Abby with your presence in the coming years, so they will always have the confidence to go forward and meet the future that you are preparing for them. Grant them wisdom to patiently work through differences; faith to always know that You are with them; and love to sustain them through the pains that must come, for we know that to live without pain, is to be dead to everything. Bless your children Lord, and embrace them with Your favor. [Psalms 5:12] This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen."

Jake squeezed Abby's hand beneath the table, enjoying a private exchange with his wife. He didn't look in her direction, but the return pressure on his hand, assured him that she understood.

As if seconding his grandpa's sentiments, Ricky smiled from his small bouncy chair on the floor, kicking his feet until he gently bobbed up and down.

"Say, I think he likes that baby bouncer," remarked Sheriff Peterson, backing away from the table just long enough to see Ricky's happy grin. Then he noticed the locked hands of Jake and Abby, and smiled to himself.

The food started making its way around the table, until everyone's plates were full. Dr. Jacoby laughed at one of Terry's jokes, while Mrs. Peterson and Izumi discussed the best way to potty train children. Dick related news about when the first advisory board was going to take place, and Abby listened carefully. To her surprise and joy, it wouldn't convene until after summer, so that Jake wasn't expected to go anywhere, for now. She wasn't too eager for her husband to come into contact with the people that ran the prison where he had been incarcerated, and prayed that God would get them through whatever obstacles they might come against.

Soon, the conversation changed to the local news, and Abby began to feel her eyes slowly becoming heavy. Someone's laughter quickly brought her back, and she was embarrassed to find everyone smiling at her.

"I think someone's had a long day!" chuckled Dick, as he wadded his napkin and tossed it onto his empty plate.

Abby wasn't the only tired one, for Ricky and the triplets had dozed off long ago; even Izumi was secretly hoping that their guests would go home so she could climb into bed and get some much needed rest.

"Well," sighed Dr. Jacoby, pushing away from the table and patting his full stomach, "I think it's time I start heading back. That was a very good meal, Mrs. Johannes."

"Thank John," smiled Izumi, "he arranged the whole thing. All I had to do was unpack it and put it on the table."

"No one orders restaurant food, better than Dad," yawned Abby, struggling to keep her eyes open.

"Jake," chuckled John, "I think you'd better take my daughter home, before she falls asleep at the table!"

"Come on, Abby," he agreed, "it's time to go home." Jake picked up a slumbering Ricky and led Abby to the front door. "Thanks for the party, everyone," he said, gratefully. "We'll always remember it." Abby nodded in agreement, while everyone wished them a good night and a happy anniversary.

The cool night air somewhat revived Abby, but Ricky remained fast asleep in his father's arms.

"What about Ricky's chair?" she suddenly remembered, as they walked across the way to their yellow house.

"I'll get it later," Jake replied, opening the screen to their porch and letting Abby inside. "Would you get the front door?" he asked, handing her the keys, for Ricky was still asleep, and Jake didn't want to awaken him with any unnecessary movements.

Once inside, Abby kicked off her shoes and was about to put Ricky to bed, when Jake intervened.

"I'll take care of Ricky," he assured her, as his wife tried to stifle a sleepy yawn. "Go to bed, Abby."

Too tired to resist his helpfulness, Abby wearily nodded, and went down the hall to the bathroom to get ready for bed.

Ricky's eyes barely opened at all as Jake carefully pulled off his small shirt and pants. Then he dressed the baby in a sleeper before placing him into the crib. With fatherly pride, Jake watched

in awe of the tiny person God had placed into his care. It was a sacred responsibility, and Jake felt the burden of it every time that small chest went up and down with each breath.

"Are you sleeping on the floor, tonight?" yawned Abby, taking off her robe and climbing into bed.

One look at her nightgown, and Jake knew that he was.

"I'll leave the aquarium light on," he smiled, "so you won't trip over me this time."

With a tired smile, Abby closed her eyes and quickly fell asleep. Jake sighed heavily when he saw how easily she had been able to dismiss his need for her. He longed to lay beside her, and wondered how she could sleep when he was wanting her so much. But, what had he expected her to do-- stay up all night and *talk* to him? He was also quick to remind himself that she was tired after nursing and caring for Ricky all day. The pregnancy books had warned him that Abby wouldn't be feeling romantic for awhile after giving birth, so Jake gulped down his frustration and climbed into the sleeping bag on the floor.

The hours passed, and the young man couldn't sleep. He watched the ripples from the aquarium softly reflecting on the ceiling, while he could hear the low sounds of Abby and Ricky, resting nearby. Jake rubbed his eyes and adjusted his pillow. If he couldn't get to sleep within the next ten minutes, he was going to the living room and watch television. But, ten minutes slowly crept by, and Jake remained where he was.

Just as he was about to close his eyes one more time, Jake heard the sheets rustle on the mattress above him. Then a shadow crossed the walls, and Abby's figure came into view.

"Jake," whispered Abby, kneeling down beside his sleeping bag, "are you still awake?"

"Yeah, I'm still awake," he moaned under his breath.

For a moment, Abby was thoughtfully quiet. She reached out and touched his arm.

"If you promise to be gentle," she told him, "I'll let you be with me, tonight."

"Are you sure?" he asked, jerking his head up in surprise. "It's not too soon?"

"The doctor said I could decide when I was ready," replied Abby. "You have to be gentle, though. I'm not completely back to normal, yet."

"I'll be careful," he assured her. "I wouldn't hurt you for the world, Abby."

"I know," she whispered softly.

Jake reached out and caressed Abby's face with his fingers.

"Why now?" he asked.

"It's our anniversary," she whimpered, "and you're sleeping on the *floor!*"

"I can wait longer, if you need me to," Jake gallantly offered.

"No," she shook her head, "you've waited long enough."

With a smile, Jake sat up in the sleeping bag and eagerly kissed his wife. When his arms embraced her, a disappointing sound came from the crib as Ricky started crying for his mommy. Jake waited for as long as he could, until Ricky became all the more insistent in his cries.

"I'm sorry," apologized Abby, as Jake slowly released his tight hold on her. "He probably wants to be fed."

"Go on," Jake smiled patiently, excusing her as she stood up and went to their son's crib. "I'm not the only one who needs you, anymore."

Abby settled onto the bed and began to nurse Ricky, all the while speaking in hushed tones to soothe and calm the child. This time, Jake felt no need to turn away, but watched from a distance until Ricky's tummy was full and his diaper had been changed. After the baby had been tended to, Jake took his rightful place beside Abby on the bed, finally able to enjoy their anniversary night, *together*.

The morning light filtered through the closed bedroom window as Abby glanced at the clock on her nightstand. As usual, Jake had fallen asleep with one arm snugly wrapped around her waist. Abby understood his need to maintain contact with her throughout the night, and always rejoiced to find that he was still there when she awoke the next morning.

Jake stirred, and Abby could hear his breathing change as he groggily checked the time. With small laugh, Jake dropped his head back onto the pillow.

"Don't you have to get up and go to work?" she wondered, seeing that the lateness of the time hadn't disturbed him in the slightest.

"Dad gave me the day off," explained Jake, wrapping his other arm around her as well. "It's our anniversary, you know."

Even the playful affection in his voice wasn't enough to ease the sting when Abby recalled her lapse of memory, the day before.

"I still can't believe I forgot!" she lamented. "What happily married woman forgets her first wedding anniversary?!"

With a smile, Jake nuzzled her neck.

"You more than made up for it last night," he murmured happily. Jake kissed her, and was about to get more serious, when Ricky began to cry from his crib at the foot of their bed. With an ironic laugh, Jake helplessly looked at Abby.

"Ricky knows we're awake," she explained, "and he wants his share of attention. He's probably hungry, too."

"I'll get him," Jake nodded in understanding. He quickly dressed and went to the crib where his son was waiting. "I have to admit," said Jake, "it's late enough in the morning that I'm getting hungry, myself."

"It feels strange that you're not rushing over to my parents' house to start breakfast," mused Abby, as he placed Ricky into her arms. "It feels like a holiday."

"It *is*," grinned Jake. "Well, sort of."

"I think Dennis would let me have the day off," proposed Abby.

"What did you have in mind?" Jake wondered hesitantly. "I know it's the start of bass season," he added with a wry smile, "but I don't want to go fly fishing, today."

"What else is there?" she asked.

Shaking his head good-naturedly, Jake kissed his wife and started down the hall to prepare their breakfast.

"Let me see what I can come up with," he laughed.

"Whatever it is," she called after him, "it can't be expensive! Remember, we have to save for college and California!"

"I'll remember," came the response from the kitchen.

After breakfast, Jake mysteriously disappeared out the front door, without giving Abby an explanation of where he was going or why-- though she surmised it had something to do with their previous conversation. Since he had left on foot, Abby knew he couldn't go very far, but that fact didn't help her guess what he was up to.

With Ricky strapped to her in his baby sling, Abby sat down at the computer and emailed Dennis to ask for the day off. When a response quickly followed, she discovered that he not only gave his permission, but also sent good wishes for a happy anniversary. After a thank you to her understanding boss, Abby decided to give Ricky a bath.

She was in the kitchen with a naked baby in the sink when Jake returned home with a few shopping bags-- most of which looked as though they had come from the grocery store.

"What do we have here?" Jake exclaimed with a wide grin, as Ricky looked up and smiled in response to the sound of his father's voice. "Couldn't talk mommy out of sticking you in the sink, huh?"

"Where have you been?" asked Abby, as Jake kissed her and started hurrying his perishable goods into the refrigerator.

"I did a little shopping," he smiled with a twinkle in his eyes. "Don't worry, I watched the budget." Even though Jake could see the apprehension on Abby's face, she held her tongue. He knew she was still feeling guilty about forgetting their anniversary, and was trying to let him do what he wanted with their special day. Realizing that he could use this opportunity to his advantage, Jake grinned all the harder. Today was *his*, to spend however he wanted with Abby!

Abby continued with Ricky's bath, occasionally glancing over at Jake who was intently working at the counter behind her. Once in a while, Jake would come to Ricky's sink and divert water into the opposite side of the split basin to rinse some produce.

It was while Abby was waiting for him to return her water, that she happened to notice a medium sized shopping bag with a business logo she didn't recognize, laying on the floor near the table.

"What's in that?" she asked, as Jake's eyes followed her gaze to the bag.

A playful smile was the only answer she received.

"You're really enjoying yourself today, aren't you," she laughed.

Flashing another handsome grin, Jake returned to the stove, leaving Abby to wonder about the contents of the bag.

"Come on, Ricky," she sighed, pulling the child out of the sink, "let's leave your daddy to his secrets." Abby bundled Ricky into a soft dry towel and was about to take him back to the bedroom, when Jake stopped her.

"Why don't you lay down for a nap?" he suggested, wiping his hands on the apron tied about his waist. "I won't be done for awhile, and I could wake you up when I have everything ready." It was an innocent enough suggestion, but Abby had the feeling he was getting her out of the way. "You look tired," he insisted.

"I suppose I could take a nap," she slowly replied, not wanting to disappoint the excited expression on his face, "if you want me to."

With a happy nod, Jake went back to his cooking.

It wasn't as though Abby wasn't a little tired, but she felt strange going to sleep in the middle of the day; it was just one more reminder that today was special. Abby sighed, and rolled over on the bed, trying to find another comfortable position, while Ricky napped in his crib. Jake's exuberance was making it difficult for her to shut her eyes, and she was slowly being pulled into his boyish anticipation.

"I'm being ridiculous, just like *him*," Abby sighed. But she could hear the metallic clanging of pans, and the scraping of utensils coming from the kitchen, and her heart foolishly skipped a beat. "He's only fixing food," she reasoned, trying to still the excitement welling inside her. Then, Abby remembered his loving smile as he had looked at her that morning, and she suddenly realized WHY she felt so happy and special that day. It wasn't because of food, or even any surprises, but because Jake was in love with her. It was a simple idea, really, but the more Abby thought it over, the more it made sense to her. She sighed dreamily, and soon, the calm that had been eluding her, gradually descended, and Abby was fast asleep.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," said a gentle voice, as Abby's eyes flickered open. "Ricky and I must have really kept you awake last night," mused Jake, "because you've been asleep for hours."

"What time is it?" yawned Abby, as Jake pulled out the sturdy baby carrier and strapped Ricky inside.

"It's just after two," replied Jake, shouldering their son's diaper bag. "Come on, get up," he coaxed.

"I'm hungry," declared Abby, climbing off the bed and putting on the sandals her husband was handing her. "Are we going somewhere?" she suddenly realized.

"Just put on your shoes," grinned Jake, picking up the baby carrier and leading the way down the hall.

"The house smells good," Abby noticed, hungrily.

"I know lunch is late," he apologized, "but I hope you'll think it was worth waiting for."

"Where are we going?" asked Abby, as they stepped out onto the front porch.

Without saying a single word, Jake guided his family down the beach, to the far end of the Johanneses' private property. Overhead, a brilliantly blue June sky seemed to welcome them, while waves gently lapped at the shore, and wet Abby's feet through her open-toed sandals.

Jake's brown eyes twinkled at Abby, and she looked ahead to see what he was so excited about. On the most secluded area of the beach, someone had set up John's small white canopy, which offered shade to a comfortable blanket spread on the ground beneath it. Nearby, was an ice cooler and a covered picnic basket.

"Jake," Abby sighed happily, "what a wonderful idea!"

"Do you really like it?" he asked in a pleased voice, his face brightening even more at her approval.

"Isn't this where we camped out that one night, last year?" she thoughtfully observed, looking about, and noting the familiar private feel that had once unnerved her so much.

"You remember!" he delightedly exclaimed.

"I could never forget it," smiled Abby, as Jake carefully placed Ricky's baby carrier on the blanket in the shade.

Abby sat down, relishing the picturesque scenery while Jake set out their lunch on the picnic blanket. Enjoying the fresh clean air, Ricky was one perpetual smile, for he grinned at everyone and everything.

When Jake kept pulling things out of his large basket, Abby watched in fascination.

"This is only lunch, Jake," she laughed, as the young man arranged two plates and some silverware, as though he were setting a formal table.

"Did *you* make this meal?" he asked her, playfully.

"No."

"Then please, no comments from the peanut gallery."

As Jake continued his work, a small gust of wind blew up one corner of the blanket, nearly getting the cloth into one of the dishes of food he had just set out. Jake quickly located a stone and weighted down the corner before returning to his basket.

It was quite an elaborate meal that he laid out before Abby. A casserole dish of delicious stuffed cannelloni immediately caught her attention, followed by Italian bruschetta bread, a tossed salad with mozzarella cheese, and a large plate of something Abby had never seen before.

"What's that?" she wondered, curiously.

"You've never had gnocchi before?" asked Jake. "It's a kind of potato dumpling," he explained. "They're made from herbs, ricotta cheese, and drizzled with my secret sauce."

"It looks delicious," Abby sighed, hearing her stomach rumble as her nose caught the aroma on the breeze.

"Hold on," he laughed, getting out a bottle of sparkling water and filling two fluted glasses. "We'll have coffee with dessert," he grinned.

"There's *dessert* after all this?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes, there is," affirmed Jake, "so make sure you save room."

There was so much food, that Abby was about to say that he really shouldn't have gone to so much time and trouble, but caught herself just in time. Jake looked so delighted that he was

making her happy, that her practicality seemed out of place in the presence of such a giving heart.

"Try to enjoy it, Abby," he pleaded, recognizing the familiar hesitation on her face that usually proceeded a cautionary remark.

"I'm in no danger of not enjoying myself," she softly laughed, as he reached out and took her hand from across their makeshift table. "If you're not careful, you're going to spoil me. I really don't deserve all this."

"That's for me to say," replied her husband, gently crushing her hand with his firm grip.

Hands joined, the couple bowed their heads and Jake thanked God for their meal. As if a loving breath from God, a warm breeze intermingled with the lightly cool air, and kissed the couple with its presence.

Then Abby helped herself to the gnocchi she had been hearing so much about. Jake took a sip of his mineral water and watched in joy as Abby's face melted into a wide smile.

"It's wonderful!" she exclaimed.

Hungrily, she filled her plate with Jake's cannelloni and tossed salad, leaving room for at least two slices of bruschetta on the side.

"I thought 'Murphy' was an Irish name," mused Abby, with a full mouth.

"It is," munched Jake.

"You sure do make good Italian, for an Irish guy!" she laughed.

Reveling in her happiness, Jake sighed contentedly. After they had had their fill, Jake opened the ice cooler and pulled out a mouthwatering chocolate strawberry pudding, topped with whipped cream and a delicate vanilla sauce. Abby thought she couldn't manage a bite more, but when she saw Jake dishing the confection into her bowl, she changed her mind and readily dove in.

"This isn't the way for me to get my figure back," Abby warned him.

"You look good to me," Jake observed her with a grin.

"Keep feeding me like this," she laughed, "and I won't!"

"That would be impossible," he replied, emphatically shaking his head. "Nothing can touch what makes you beautiful *to me*."

Dazed by the earnestness of his words, Abby didn't know what to say. She suddenly felt her eyes moisten, and shook her head mournfully.

"Now look what you're making me do," she whimpered, vainly trying to stop the oncoming tears. Jake crawled to her side of the picnic blanket, and embraced his wife. "I don't know why I'm crying," wept Abby, drowning her joy in his arms. "I'm terribly happy, Jake!"

"Thank you for saying that," he smiled in relief, for her tears had momentarily given him some alarm.

"So many times, you overpower me with your love," sniffed Abby, reaching into a pocket in his jeans for the handkerchief that she knew he always carried with him. Very unladylike, she loudly blew her nose. "I wish I could find a different way to say 'I love you,' but I can't think of any," she continued. "I love you, Jake!"

Nearly euphoric by now, Jake hugged her with everything he had, until Abby needed to gently ask that he not squeeze her quite so hard. Relaxing his hold, he pressed his lips to her neck, allowing himself to linger for as long as he wanted.

In the distance, Three Mile Bay glistened as though a million gems had been scattered before them from heaven's treasury. The sound of God singing over His children was just a faint whisper on the wind, but Abby knew that it was there. They had Christ's love in their lives, and the love of each other. Life can't get any better than that.

Then Jake presented Abby with the shopping bag that had mystified her in the kitchen earlier that day.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Open it, and find out," he smiled.

The shopping bag crinkled as Abby pulled out a flat, brightly colored paper object wrapped in clear plastic. Puzzled, she looked to Jake.

"It's a kite," he laughingly explained. "Here, let me open it for you. I used to fly these things all the time, when I was little."

Jake's arms let Abby go, as he unwrapped the kite and started setting it up, for some assembly was evidently required. After making sure Ricky was safely positioned in the moving shade as the sun traversed over their canopy, Jake took Abby out onto the beach where they could still keep a watchful eye on their baby son.

"Hold on to this roll of string," instructed Jake, as he took the attached kite and slowly backed away from her. "Keep a tight grip!" he called. "Ready?"

Abby nodded. Jake waited for the right gust of wind, and let go. All at once, the kite shot up into the sky, but it tugged at the string until Abby watched in horror as the object suddenly turned direction and dove toward the ground.

"Pull back and let out more string!" Jake ran to her, keeping his eyes on the kite.

Obediently, Abby unwound more line from her roll, while Jake tugged at the string until the kite recovered its altitude.

"There must be a strong current up there," she observed, "because this line is incredibly taut!"

A satisfied smile spread across Jake's lips as he watched the kite sailing in the sky over the beach. The wind was coming off the bay, so both parents were facing the canopy where Ricky was sleeping in his baby carrier. Jake's eyes instinctively traveled to his son before enjoying the kite once more. Then he stepped behind Abby and wrapped his arms around her while she gripped the roll of string.

"Let it go a little higher, Abby," he urged.

Cautiously, Abby unwound more string until she was afraid of letting out any more, for the currents kept getting stronger and stronger the higher up she went. She wondered at the resilience of the paper kite, for that was no sturdy fish at the end of her line.

"When I was a boy," recalled Jake, "I used to take my kite to a nearby field, and I would send it up just as high as my hands could grip the string." Since he rarely talked about his childhood, Abby listened with curiosity. "I wanted to be like that kite," breathed Jake, "escaping above the pain and finding refuge outside of this world. It was the closest to heaven that I could get." The memory sent Jake a disturbing mental picture, and Abby looked up to see him struggle for a moment. "I was six years old the first time I tried to take my life. When I lived, I thought God had turned His back on me." Abby took her free hand and gently touched his arm, bringing his

senses back to the present. Knowing what she was trying to do, Jake smiled gratefully. "I'm all right, Baby," he kissed her cheek.

"Do you want to take the string for awhile?" she offered.

"And let go of you?" chuckled Jake. "Not a chance."

Just then, a baby's cry filled the air and Abby shoved the roll of string into Jake's hands.

"I'm coming, Ricky!" she called, running and quickly kneeling on the blanket to look him over. When the concerned mother saw that he was all right, she silently thanked God and lifted the infant into her arms.

"Are you hungry?" she cooed to the child.

From the beach, Jake watched as Abby nursed Ricky in the shade under his father-in-law's canopy. A surge of gratitude flooded the young man's soul. Now that Abby wasn't there to enjoy it with him, his interest in the kite quickly waned and he rolled in the string until it safely landed.

With kite in hand, Jake walked back to the canopy and stretched out on the blanket while Abby busied herself with the baby. Listening to the surf, he lazily closed his eyes, and smiled at the cry of gulls out enjoying this perfect weather.

"I think Ricky's had enough of the outdoors," remarked Abby, after the boy had finished nursing, and was wriggling in her arms. "He's a little cranky right now."

"Okay," nodded Jake, "I'll start packing things up. You go ahead and take him inside."

"Hush, hush," Abby whispered to the infant, as Ricky began to cry. "You've had a big day, haven't you," she smiled. "You're all tuckered out."

Abby carried him back to their little yellow house, while Jake gathered the picnic blanket and took down the white canopy.

It took a moment for Abby's eyes to adjust to the indoors, but she easily found her way to the bedroom and changed Ricky into a fresh diaper before putting him into his crib. Then she heard the front door open and shut as Jake returned home with the remnants of their outing.

Abby wound the music mobile above Ricky's crib and sighed lovingly as her tiny son closed his eyes.

"Is he sleeping?" whispered Jake, coming to her side and peering down at the babe in the crib. "Isn't Ricky amazing?" marveled the new father. "Sometimes, I just stand here and watch him breathe."

Abby yawned and smiled happily at Jake.

"Are you tired?" he asked in surprise, for she had taken a long nap before the picnic, and though they had spent several hours out on the beach, it was only early evening.

"Not really," she replied, a little taken aback at her own weariness.

Fearing that their time together was over, Jake picked up the baby monitor, and tugged at Abby's hand, leading her through the front room and out to the porch swing.

"Just a little while longer?" he pleaded, sitting down on the small suspended bench and pulling her close beside him.

With a satisfied little yawn, Abby snuggled against her husband and rested her head on his chest. With one arm hugged around her, Jake gently rocked the swing back and forth. He wasn't ready for the day to end, and was going to fight for every last second that he could. When Abby didn't say anything for the space of several minutes, he checked to see if she was still awake.

"What a lovely day," Abby sighed dreamily, as a cool breeze gently fanned her cheek. It was June, and even though the sun wouldn't set for another few hours, Abby could feel evening approaching. She shut her eyes and relaxed in Jake's arms.

"Abby?" he whispered. "Could I tell you something before you go to sleep?"

"I'm not sleeping," she mumbled groggily.

"I mean it, Abby," he squeezed her shoulder. "It's important."

"Okay, I'm really and truly awake," she softly laughed, forcing her blue eyes wide open. "It's all your fault, Jake. You fed me, and now you're rocking me to sleep." When the swing came to a stop, Abby realized that Jake wanted her attention. "What is it?" she wondered, sitting up and looking at him, inquisitively.

"Before the sun goes down on our first anniversary," said Jake, "I wanted you to know how deeply grateful I am to you, for being my friend."

"You don't have to thank me!" laughed Abby. But her mirth was quickly cut short when she saw tears welling in Jake's eyes. He grasped her hand and pressed her fingers to his lips.

"Your friendship has meant so much to me, that I don't think you even realize what you've done," he whispered.

"You don't have to say anything," she tenderly assured him. "I understand."

"Do you, Abby?" Jake clutched her hand tightly, and searched the two deep pools looking back at him. "This life is so different from what I've known in the past," he breathed, "I can't even begin to compare it to what you've given me. I wouldn't know where to start."

"It's all right," Abby consoled him, gently brushing away a tear that rolled down his cheek, "I know you love me, Jake. You don't have to find any words for me to know what's in your heart."

Drawing her to him, Jake kissed her, until she thought the very ground beneath their feet would surely fall away and they would find themselves airborne like the kite he had bought her. The young man gulped in a deep breath and gazed lovingly at his wife.

"Thank you for being my friend, Abby," he quietly whispered.

Unable to speak, Abby tenderly caressed his face and kissed his lips. Wanting more privacy than the front porch afforded, Jake carried his wife into the little yellow house and firmly shut the door.

"[Jake's] mouth is most sweet: yea, he is altogether lovely. This is [Abby's] beloved, and this is [her] friend."

~ Song of Solomon 5:16 ~

"As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow [canopy] with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner [kite] over me was love. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me... stir not up, nor awake my love, till he please."

~ Song of Solomon 2:3, 4, 6, 7 ~

Chapter Thirty

The Secret That Isn't a Secret

"In the fear of the LORD is strong confidence: and His children shall have a place of refuge."
~ Proverbs 14:26 ~

July was a busy month for Abby and Jake, for at the beginning of August, the young couple was leaving Three Mile Bay so Jake could attend the San Diego Christian Fine Arts College in Southern California.

Since Jake was going to be a full time student, there would only be one income in the Murphy household. Because of this change in their finances, the family's budget would be a little tighter in California than it was here in New York State. Money was already in short supply, for with the birth of Ricky, AJ had found if necessary to use some of the college fund to pay for their son's hospital expenses. Even though Ricky had been a perfectly healthy baby, the bills still added up with alarmingly high sums. If it hadn't been for the Providence of God preparing the way for this small family, the move to California would have come into serious doubt.

But God *was* watching out for Jake and Abby, and the Providence of Dennis also being in San Diego was soon revealed to Abby as she looked over their finances. The pay increase that Dennis had promised as soon as she started at the "Bassin' the Weeds" main office in San Diego, was going to be a Godsend. Indeed, if it hadn't been for this pay raise, AJ would have dearly missed Jake's paycheck from her parents for his housecleaning job. All in all, Abby was reasonably confident that if they cut back on unnecessary expenses, Jake's college money could be repaid to his tuition fund in time for his last semester. Yes, things would be tight, but they could make it.

While Abby and Jake were thanking God for this blessing, the way for the move was helped even further by Dennis. Remembering that Jake couldn't drive, Dennis had found an extremely hard-to-get, small, two bedroom apartment within easy walking distance of the college campus. The close proximity of the apartment to the college made it a very desirable place for students, so ever since Dennis had learned of Abby's coming to San Diego, he had waited and watched for a vacancy. The very day one was available, Dennis quickly acted, and the apartment was secured for the Murphy family.

As the end of July approached, Abby and Jake began the difficult task of packing for the trip to California.

"I don't think we can take my aquarium with us," Abby remarked, as they started to place the things in her bedroom into cardboard boxes. Her heart sighed wistfully as the brightly colored fish darted about the glass walls of their pristine world.

While Abby may have been trying to resign herself to this inevitability, Jake wasn't, and put up a fight.

"No," he protested, "I don't want to leave it behind."

"It's going to take a lot of precious space in that small apartment," she warned him.

"I don't care," resisted Jake, who loved that aquarium almost as much as she did. "Give the fish away and we'll take the rest of it to San Diego. I really want to keep it in our bedroom."

"Okay," she replied, secretly glad that Jake had been able to talk her out of it. The fact that he had referred to "our bedroom," however, brought up another source of concern for Abby. "Are you sure you want to share the same room with me in California?" she wondered, for ever since Dennis had told them there were two bedrooms, Abby had wondered if Jake shouldn't save a room for himself, in case he needed to get away from her.

"That will be Ricky's bedroom," he insisted, loading an empty box with Abby's fishing magazines. "Couldn't we throw away some of this stuff?" he wondered, noticing that many were several years old.

"I need those," replied Abby. Jake shrugged and continued to stack them into the box. "Ricky sleeps with us," she continued, "so he doesn't need a room of his own."

"Abby," grinned Jake, "after you're done breastfeeding the little guy, he's moving out of our bedroom. Every time we get serious, he wakes up!"

"Not *every* time," she smiled.

"It feels like every time," chuckled Jake. After a few moments of thoughtful reflection, he looked at her soberly. "Abby, you weren't thinking of Ricky staying in our bedroom for the entire time we're in California, were you? He'll be running around in training pants by the time I've graduated!"

"So?" shrugged Abby. "What's the big deal?"

"I don't mind Ricky being with us when he's this young," explained Jake, "because he doesn't know what we're doing in bed."

"Jake," sighed Abby, "I think you're overreacting. Toddlers don't understand sex. They're too young!"

"My father began abusing me when I was four," said Jake. "I couldn't understand what was happening to me at the time, but I remember the fear, and I remember the days that came after." Jake sighed, kicking the box of magazines he was packing against the wall of Abby's bedroom. "Please, Abby," he begged, "after you're done breastfeeding Ricky, couldn't we move him to his own room?"

"I was planning to breastfeed for at least one year," she informed him.

"One year?!" exclaimed Jake in surprise. "That long? But, I can't be with you like that-- not with him right there!"

"If it means so much to you," conceded Abby, "we'll move Ricky to the second bedroom when we arrive in San Diego."

"You think I'm being foolish," he reproached himself.

"After what you've been through," replied Abby, "I can understand why you want to be so careful with our son."

"But, a normal father wouldn't do this?" asked Jake.

"I don't know," she confessed, with a small laugh. "I've never asked Dad and Mom!"

"You don't think your parents felt self-conscious with the crib in the same room?" he wondered.

"Well, I'm not going to ask them," smiled Abby. "You can if you want to, but I'd rather not know!"

"You still don't like to think of your parents being intimate," mused Jake, with an ironic smile.

"They act silly when they think there's no one's looking," said Abby. "All I want them to do is act their age. Is that too much to ask?"

"It is, when a man's still in love with his wife," Jake answered knowingly. "What about these old fishing books, Abby? Do you want to take these, too?"

"Of course," she answered, looking rather shocked that he needed to ask such an unnecessary question.

Jake bundled the last of her books into the large box and carried it to the living room.

"I know I have a lot of things," remarked Abby, carrying Ricky into the living room with her, "but at least, you don't have very much to pack."

"What are you talking about?" asked Jake. "You must be referring to my duffel bag," he laughed. "Abby, that was before I met you and your family! There's all those clothes I got for Christmas, the laptop, the camera, the new easel, our big teddy bears-- not to mention all my sketchpads and canvases. And after this unexpected little addition," he smiled, as Ricky gurgled contentedly while his parents talked, "I have even more things to my name. Between you and Ricky, I'm a rich man!"

"I don't know about rich," sighed Abby, "but you certainly have more clutter."

"You can clutter my life, *anytime*," Jake breathed softly, stepping close and claiming a kiss from his wife.

Just then, the couple heard a small laugh. They looked down to see Ricky grinning back up at them from Abby's arms. She looked to her husband, and could feel an "I told you so" coming.

"That second room is *his*," insisted Jake, patting the boy on the head with a wry smile.

Gradually, things they wouldn't be immediately needing while still in Three Mile Bay, were being packed into boxes and stacked in the living room. At first, Abby had kept careful track of what was in which box by keeping them sorted, but as space in the living room vanished, so did her system. Seeing this, Jake sighed. He wasn't looking forward to the unpacking process in California.

It was during one of these busy days, that the fear of leaving the only place she had ever called home, finally hit Abby. Although she denied it, Jake could sense that Abby was struggling inside, and it grieved him to see her trying to bear the burden all by herself. He patiently waited for his loved one to confide in him, and prayed that God would give him an opportunity to help her. He wouldn't have long to wait.

Late that night, Jake was awakened by a low moan of smothered cries, coming from beside him in bed. With an understanding touch, he put his hand on Abby's back, feeling it heave as she continued to sob.

Realizing that her husband was awake, she admitted what he had already suspected.

"I'm scared!" she confessed, her voice muffled by the pillow she was crying into.

"Fear's no good, Abby," he gently whispered, brushing aside a long mane of hair from the back of her neck.

"I wish I were strong, like you!" she cried.

"What makes you think I'm so strong?" wondered Jake.

"You're not the one crying!"

"Abby, look at me," said Jake, turning her over in bed so she was gazing up at him instead of hiding her tears in the pillow. "I'm about to leave a place where I've known unspeakable happiness, to journey nearly three thousand miles across America to the West coast, and attend a college with people more talented than I am; I have a past that's not easy for me to talk about, let alone explain, and I have the responsibility of a wife and son who depend on me to do the best I can for their future."

"And *I'm* the one doing all the sobbing!" she cried.

"I didn't say all that to shame you," soothed Jake, "but to show you that if I can give my fear to God, then you can, too."

"We're going to be so far away from home," she confessed in a small voice.

"Home will always be wherever you are, Abby," Jake tenderly breathed. When she remained silent, he smiled sadly. "I've been praying for you. Do you want me to say this next one out loud?"

Abby nodded, gratefully.

Jake clasped her hand between his and closed his eyes.

"Dear Heavenly Father," he began, starting his prayer the way he had always heard John do, "you know I've been praying for my sweet Abby, and asking You to give her courage for this big move ahead of us. She's a lot stronger than she thinks, and I've relied on that strength many times in the past.

"Even though Abby's the most courageous woman I've ever known," continued Jake, "she needs even more of Your strength. Lord, go before her, and be with her; don't let Your mercy fail her, and never let it be said that You ever forsook her. Abby knows that You promise all this and more from the Bible [Deuteronomy 31:8], but cause her to know it in her heart, as well.

"Lord, while the rest of the world may marvel and wonder at the confidence of Your children," finished the young man, "we know why we have so much cause to hope. You are the secret that isn't a secret."

Comforted, Abby snuggled closer to Jake in bed.

"I feel much better now," she whispered.

"I'm so glad," he sighed lovingly. "It's good to know that I can return a little of the strength you've given me this past year. I was afraid that I would only take, and never give you anything in return. Thanks for needing me, Abby. Even if it's only just a little."

"I need you more than 'just a little,'" she smiled.

The next day, Terry arrived with Lizzie in his arms, to see how their packing was coming along. The small girl cried with glee when she saw Jake coming towards them.

"That's a lot to haul to California," sighed Terry, looking over the cardboard jungle stacked in their living room. "Are you sure you can fit all that into the rented moving trailer?"

"Abby says we can," shrugged Jake, smiling at his little sister-in-law. "She's going to be the one doing all the driving, so I just do what I'm told."

"I'm glad you have my pickup," mused Terry, as Lizzie grabbed the sleeve of Jake's shirt and insisted that she get some of his attention. "I feel better knowing that you and Abby have a solid and dependable vehicle for this trip. San Diego's a long way from here."

Giving in to Lizzie's clamor, Terry offered the little girl to her big brother.

"I sure am going to miss you guys," said Terry, his voice breaking a little. "August can't come slowly enough, as far as I'm concerned."

Sensing weakness in his own voice, Jake struggled to change the subject. But no matter how hard he tried, his heart kept repeating the same words over and over again-- good-bye. How could he utter those words to Abby's family when it was time to leave?

Abby's family. They had become more dear to Jake than any other group he had ever known. And he was leaving them. Jake forced a smile down at Lizzie and tried to pay attention to whatever it was that Terry was saying. As Jake stood there with baby Lizzie in his arms, his heart began to ache.

"Hi, Uncle Terry!" greeted Abby, coming into the living room with Ricky.

"Let me see my little nephew," laughed Terry, lifting the child and gazing into two large brown eyes. "If you need a babysitter before you go, I'd love to look after him."

"Do you want to take Ricky for awhile?" offered Abby. "I just fed and changed him."

"You wouldn't mind?" asked Terry, his misty eyes brightening.

"Go ahead," Jake encouraged him.

Terry looked at the cute little boy smiling up at him, and felt like crying. Not wanting to risk his shaky voice with "thank you," he smiled gratefully and headed out the door with Ricky.

"I think Uncle Terry appreciated that," remarked Abby, going to the window while Lizzie cradled in Jake's arms.

"Would you hold her for a moment?" asked Jake.

Before Abby could ask why, he handed over his bundle and embraced both sisters. Unused to Jake's tight hugs, Lizzie protested before Abby did, and whimpered until he finally let them go.

"Lizzie, now you know how it feels being married to this guy," Abby softly laughed.

Just then, the telephone rang, and Jake left the girls to answer it. Since Lizzie was getting cranky for her mother, Abby took the girl home to Izumi and returned only to find Jake still on the phone.

"Who is it?" she whispered.

"Dick," he silently mouthed.

With a wary glance, Abby returned to her bedroom to finish cleaning out her closet. Before long, she became so absorbed in her work, that she forgot the phone call until Jake poked his head inside a half hour later. Just one look at his hesitant face, and she knew he was working up the courage to tell her something.

"Oh, no," Abby groaned, "what does that man want *now*?"

"You haven't even heard what Dick said, and you're already calling him 'that man'?" smiled Jake. Abby, however, was not amused. "Tomorrow, Dick wants me to come to his house and meet the others who are going to be on the advisory board."

"I thought he said the first meeting wouldn't convene until after summer!" cried Abby. "It's only the end of July!"

"This meeting isn't official," explained Jake. "Abby," he pleaded, as she got up from the closet floor and stormed out the bedroom, "just give me a chance to explain before you get upset."

Abby was halfway through the bathroom door, and ready to shut it on Jake, when he reached out and firmly caught the door with his hand.

"Do you still love me?" he asked with a loving smile.

"You know I do," replied Abby, folding her arms.

"Then give me a chance to speak for Dick, before you change Ricky's name," chuckled Jake.

"How can you can joke at a time like this?!" she exclaimed, indignantly.

"Abby, you knew this was coming," sighed Jake, trying to calm her down.

"Dick said you wouldn't have to meet with those people until after summer!" Abby cried. "It's not fair of him to spring this on you, with only a day's warning!"

"I'm not looking forward to this," said Jake, in a brave voice, "but I know what I have to do. Abby, you said that you'd stand by me, and I need you to keep your word."

"You know I'd never go back on a promise," she quickly countered. The confidence in Jake's face immediately told her that he already knew this, but she could see the additional strain she was putting him under, and it slowed her resistance. Abby unfolded her arms and disappointedly shook her head. "I thought you'd have more time to prepare yourself, before meeting the rest of the advisory board."

Suddenly, a familiar urge returned to her, and Abby tried to free the door from Jake's strong hand.

"I really *do* have to use the bathroom," she explained.

Jake let go and the bathroom door swung shut.

"Are you sure you still love me?" he asked from the hallway.

Abby could hear the smile in his voice, and knew that he only wanted to hear her say it again.

"I'm sure," she said, flushing the toilet and washing her hands at the sink. When Abby opened the door, Jake immediately took her into his arms. "I'll always love you," she promised, burying her face against his shoulder.

"Abby, I know you're frightened," comforted Jake, "but I don't think anything bad will happen to me, tomorrow. Put your faith in God, and do what you know is right, for I think that's all God can ask of *anyone*."

"Be careful," Abby pleaded in a hushed voice. She let herself melt into Jake's tender embrace and felt his lips against her neck. "You have a family that loves you, Jake."

"I know," he murmured softly, "I love them, too."

For the rest of that morning, Terry relished his time with Ricky. To his great pleasure, the boy favored him with one smile after another, filling the man's heart with baby laughter and soft gurgles.

"You won't forget me in California, will you?" mused Terry, as the child cooed in response to the sound of his voice. "I'll never forget you, Ricky-- I promise, I won't."

Terry held the infant close, and wept. He had tried to be brave in front of Jake and Abby, but now that he was alone with Ricky, the grief of parting had become too much for him, and the tears finally came.

Sensing that something was wrong, Ricky began to cry. When Terry realized that he was frightening the boy, he stopped his own tears to comfort his small nephew.

"You won't tell your mommy and daddy about this, will you?" Terry softly joked. "But, oh, Ricky! I'm going to miss seeing you grow up! I know it will only be for a few years, but I blinked, and my little fishing buddy is already married and with a child of her own." Terry could feel tears threatening once again, but he willed them back for Ricky's sake. "When you and your parents come back to live in 'Three Mile Bay,' he planned, "I'm going to teach you to fly fish. What do you think of that?" Ricky grinned and kicked his legs happily. "That's what we'll do, then," promised Terry. "When it's time to say good-bye, we'll remember that, and parting won't be so hard." Terry kissed Ricky's sweet little face, and cradled him close to his heart.

That night, Abby stayed up late in the living room, going through some of the boxes she had already packed. A large open trash bag sat nearby, and every once in a while, Abby would toss something into it.

"What's going on?" came a sleepy voice, as Jake entered the living room and found her sitting on the floor.

"I'm going through my stuff and throwing away the things I don't want," she replied, putting a stack of old fishing magazines into the bag with a sigh.

"But, you said you needed those," said Jake, beginning to realize what she was doing.

"I haven't read them in years," reasoned Abby, plopping another stack into the trash. "It doesn't make sense to haul them all the way to California, just to put them back into storage, again."

"You could leave them here, at home," he winced, as another bundle of magazines met their fate. "You don't have to throw them ALL away, Abby!"

"It all right," she sighed, as Jake made an effort to save her old periodicals. "It's no big deal."

"If you say so," he slowly replied, letting go of the trash bag. "When are you coming to bed, Abby?"

"In a while," answered the young woman, opening another box. "I want to get rid of all my junk, before I change my mind."

Jake quietly watched her for a few minutes, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, and then back again. When he didn't leave, Abby looked up from her box.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I'm meeting all those people tomorrow..." hesitated Jake, his eyes pleading with her where his words could not.

With an understanding smile, Abby got up from the floor and walked over to her friend.

Sighing gratefully, Jake closed his eyes as Abby wrapped her arms around him. When their lips met, Jake felt sure he could face tomorrow with enough courage to make her proud of him.

When Dick arrived the following day, Jake quickly went out to meet him before the former warden had a chance to come inside the house. Jake didn't want to risk triggering Abby's protective nature again, and thought it best to keep the two apart until this meeting was over.

Knowing where Jake was off to, Terry visited Abby and suggested that she and Ricky spend the rest of the day with them, at her parents' house.

"Abby," he coaxed, "it's better than staying here, by yourselves."

To Terry's delight, Abby agreed, and the four babies were soon on the floor playing with each other, under the watchful supervision of Abby and Terry. With all the happy baby sounds coming from the living room, it didn't take long for John and Izumi to join them. Abby was a little surprised to see her father and uncle not at work in the middle of a weekday, and soon realized that they wanted to spend as much time with her and Ricky as they could before they moved. Abby only wished that Jake was there to share in the laughter.

The triplets were beginning to crawl, and this new ability kept everyone busy, for now that the little ones were mobile, they frequently strayed from their play space on the floor.

"There goes Ruthie, again," said John, getting on all fours and pursuing the laughing baby.

"The girls certainly are a handful," Izumi smiled lovingly.

"They're also very loud," Terry good-naturedly chuckled. "Abby, when Ricky starts teething, at least you only have one baby to listen to. Try three all at the same time!"

Debbie crawled over to where Ricky was nestled on Abby's lap, and looked up at her big sister.

"Do you know who this is?" asked Abby, as the little girl inspected the baby boy. "This is your nephew, Ricky."

Debbie babbled some gibberish and grinned as Ricky met her gaze. The two babies exchanged some coos, and this attracted Lizzie and Ruthie's attention. Crawling to Abby's lap, the newcomers tried to touch Ricky, but Debbie stopped them, and even grabbed her sister Ruthie's sleeper, toppling the girl over.

"Would you look at that," mused John, as Izumi picked up a crying Ruthie. "Looks as though Debbie's a little protective of Ricky."

"Sometimes, the Murphy men *need* a little protecting," Abby muttered under her breath.

John looked at his eldest daughter and knew she was thinking about Jake and the meeting going on at Dick's house.

Abby hadn't intended to speak her thoughts out loud, and when everyone was suddenly quiet, (with the exception of the babies), she apologized for ruining their good time.

"That's not necessary," replied John, dismissing her apology. "We've all been praying for him, today."

"I appreciate that," said Abby, thankfully. "I wanted to ask Jake if I could go with him, but I already knew what he would say. He tries to protect me from knowing too much about his life in prison, and he never would've let me come."

"Maybe, it's for the best," agreed John, who really didn't want his little girl listening to what went on behind the backs of prison guards while they weren't looking. Jake was familiar with that horror, but Abby was not-- no matter how many flashbacks she had helped Jake through in the past. John had heard his son-in-law's testimony at the commission, and was grateful for his sensitivity to Abby's innocence.

Just then, Lizzie rolled over and tugged Ricky's leg, frightening the infant into tears. Abby quickly gathered Ricky into her arms, and soothed him.

"Where were you, Debbie?" laughed Terry, as Ricky's protector looked on with drool running down her chin.

"There, there," Abby hugged her son, gently rocking him back and forth, "it's all right, Sweetheart." While she comforted Ricky, her thoughts were with Jake. "Please, God," she silently prayed, "let it turn out all right."

Ricky quieted down quickly, and was soon back in Abby's lap, drifting to sleep.

After everyone ate lunch, the day faded, and early evening descended on Three Mile Bay. Since Jake hadn't come home yet, the family ate dinner without him. Abby had unsuccessfully tried to ignore the empty chair at the table where Jake usually sat, making her wish even harder for his soon return.

There was still plenty of light outside, but the heat of the day was over, and many residents and tourists could be found outdoors, enjoying the pleasant weather.

The Johanneses and their extended clan were no exception, for they took the babies with them to the picnic table on the beach, and watched the boats out on the bay. As Abby pointed out a seagull to Ricky, Dick's car drove up and parked outside the little yellow house. Jake was finally home! Not waiting for him to come to her, Abby found an open space in someone's arms and deposited Ricky.

Quickly walking toward the car, Abby tried to see the expression on Jake's face as he climbed out and said something to Dick. Then the young man turned and she could see him clearly. To her relief, Jake was smiling. Beginning to cry, Abby broke into a run and rapidly filled his arms.

"Abby, I'm okay," Jake soothed her.

Dick took off his sunglasses and waved to the people at the picnic table in the distance.

"Jake did well," he grinned, rubbing the bald spot on his head with one hand. "You should be proud of him, Abby!" Then Dick heard Abby's sobs, and shook his head a little sadly. "Jake told me you were taking this kind of hard."

Abby wanted to speak, but was too busy hugging Jake to think of anything to say.

"Well," smiled Dick, putting back on his sunglasses, "I'll just leave you two alone for awhile." Dick walked out to the beach and sat down at the picnic table, accepting a squirming Lizzie to relieve Terry from his double duty of baby-sitting Lizzie and Ricky at the same time.

"I'm sorry for embarrassing you like this," wept Abby, pulling out Jake's handkerchief and blowing her nose. "I'm just so glad you're home!"

"I'm glad to *be* home," admitted Jake, smiling at her once more. "Go ahead and cry if you want to, Abby. You don't have to be brave for my sake."

Hearing this permission, tears freely spilled from Abby's eyes. Her emotions were running high, and Abby wasn't sure if it was because Jake had arrived home safely, or because of their impending move to California. Whatever the reason, it felt comforting to have a good cry.

Jake didn't laugh at Abby's weakness or tease her for needing his arms. He seemed to understand, and was content to just stand there and hold her for as long as she needed him. When Abby's sobs came less frequently, Jake looked into her face and smoothed back her hair.

"Are they watching us?" she whimpered, too embarrassed to look in the direction of the picnic table.

Jake looked over her shoulder and smiled.

"Yeah," he softly chuckled, "they are."

With a shudder, Abby buried herself even deeper in his embrace.

"Come on," said Jake, gathering her hands in his, "let's go show them we're all right."

Jake dried her eyes with his handkerchief, and led her to the picnic table where they sat down with the others. Terry turned Ricky over to Jake, and the boy quickly settled into his father's arms.

"Dick tells me everything went well," smiled John, who had been hearing Dick's rendition of the events.

"Well enough," replied Jake, as Abby propped her head against his shoulder. "Some of them said that I shouldn't have been appointed to the board, but in the end, I think they accepted the fact that I was going to be there, whether they liked it or not."

"Jake hung in there!" laughed Dick. "They didn't make it easy for the guy, but Jake showed them he wasn't afraid!"

At this, Abby shut her eyes and squeezed Jake. The young man leaned his head against hers while Ricky began to fall asleep.

"Today was a good beginning," encouraged Dick, with a satisfied nod of his head.

After visiting a little longer, Dick handed Lizzie off to an empty lap and headed back to his car. As he drove away, Abby thanked God that the day was over, and that Jake had weathered it as well as he had. Abby could only imagine what would've happened if Jake had gone into a flashback at Dick's house during their unofficial meeting. She seriously doubted the rest of the advisory board would have stayed after that-- let alone be willing to listen to anything Jake had to say. But, as Dick had said just before leaving, Jake was important to the group, for he was the only member who had experienced prison rape, and just his mere presence reminded the others that it was an all-to-real problem that needed attention.

Not long after Dick left, the triplets began to grow impatient for their next feeding, so Izumi and her helpers took the girls inside. Jake and Abby wanted to stay outside for a little longer, but when Ricky also began to fuss for his meal, Abby realized she was fighting a losing battle.

"We've got to finish our packing," said Jake, as they returned home. "August begins next week, and we need enough time in San Diego to set up house before I start classes."

"I know," she sighed, as Jake followed her to their bedroom. "I still have boxes to go through and things that I want to throw away. Do you mind if I finish that, tonight, Jake?"

"You plan to stay up late, then?" he asked, as she sat down on the bed and adjusted her blouse for Ricky's feeding.

"If I work hard tonight," planned Abby, "I think we'll be ready for the trailer, when I rent it the day after tomorrow."

"I'll stay up with you and help," said Jake, in a tone that told her he was making a statement, and not asking her opinion.

"You don't have to," she replied. "It's my fault for being so late, and not throwing away more like you wanted me to in the first place."

"I said, I'm helping," he insisted. Jake anticipated Ricky's need to be changed after feeding time, and readied the baby powder and a clean diaper.

"It really isn't necessary," she debated with him. "I can finish the boxes by myself."

"Abby, just let me help," Jake sighed wearily, his face looking tired for the first time that evening. "If you're going to stay up, then so am I."

"Do you want to sit with us for awhile?" she offered, still cradling Ricky in her arms.

Gratefully, Jake climbed onto the bed and stretched out beside Abby while she leaned against the headboard and nursed Ricky. Since she didn't have a free hand to hold, Jake held on to a corner of Abby's blouse and closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry I wasn't with you at Dick's house," she apologized. "You shouldn't have had to face those people by yourself."

"I wasn't alone," he breathed with a tired smile, "Dick was there. But what those people on the advisory board didn't know, was that the Creator of everyone and everything was also with me." Jake nestled his head into the fluffy pillow and felt the soft material of Abby's blouse between his fingers. "You and Ricky were also there, and so was Dad and Mom, and even Terry and the triplets," he continued. "Everyone I loved was with me in Dick's living room, today. And when the Deputy Warden of the prison tried to discourage me from speaking when it was my turn, I just reminded myself that I wasn't alone. How could I be, when so many people lived in my heart?"

"I'm so proud of you, Jake."

"Are you, Abby?" he smiled in surprise. "I was hoping you were."

Seeing the effect those few words had on him, Abby shook her head in admiration.

"Jake," she marveled, "how can you be so happy with so little?"

"What are you talking about?" he puzzled. "I have *you*, don't I?"

"Always."

"That explains it then," smiled Jake, shutting his eyes once more. "Do you mind if I take a small nap before we tackle those moving boxes?" he yawned. "I can barely keep my eyes open."

With one nursing in her arms, and the other grasping the edge of her blouse, both Murphy men were soon fast asleep.

When Jake woke up, he didn't know how long he had been slumbering. He only knew that it was still dark outside and the light on the nightstand was still on. Getting out of bed, Jake checked the crib and found Ricky sound asleep.

In the living room, Jake discovered Abby busily sorting through her stuff, and marking boxes with a small list of their contents on the tops and sides.

"That's going to be helpful," said Jake, looking to see what else she had finished.

"I didn't mean to wake you up," regretted Abby.

"You didn't," he assured her.

"You don't understand," she smiled, "I started working five minutes ago. I've been in the bedroom with you and Ricky for the past two hours, trying not to move so I wouldn't disturb your rest!"

Jake laughed and grabbed her about the waist.

"I must have missed you in my sleep," he smiled, giving Abby a tender kiss before letting her go. "Do you want me to fix some coffee?" he offered, as she returned to the boxes with her pen.

"That would be great," nodded Abby, thankful for his company, and for the boost to her senses. It was late, but this needed to be done, if they were going to stay on their moving schedule.

All night, and through the entire morning, Jake and Abby worked. Not only were her belongings sorted and packed, but all the household boxes were labeled and neatly organized. After a quick lunch in their kitchen, Abby collapsed onto the bed and wearily fell asleep. Jake removed her shoes, and lay down beside her, quickly following her example. They had finished most of the packing, and the rest they could easily finish tomorrow, before the moving trailer was rented and loaded.

Later that afternoon, John knocked on the front door of the little yellow house. When no one answered, he went home to report to the others.

"I think they're sleeping," he informed Izumi and Terry, as his wife placed a triplet into the playpen. "Their light was on all night, so they must be exhausted."

"I wish they had asked us to help," sighed Terry, who would've been more than happy to lend a hand.

"You know our Abby," remarked John, "and her independent streak. It's a wonder she lets Jake help her-- let alone *us*!"

"I still can't believe they're actually leaving," said Izumi, trying very hard not to cry again. John had held her all night while she wept into his arms, and now that it was morning, her courage was fading. As she burst into tears, John went to her side to comfort his grieving wife.

"They'll be back, Little Dove," he whispered gently.

"What if they don't?" wept Izumi. "What if they like California so much that they decide to stay?!"

"This is *their* life," sighed John, "and we must give them a chance to live it. We've raised our Abby the best way we knew how, and now she's all grown up. We can only pray that we've done our job to God's satisfaction."

One of the girls began to cry in the playpen, and Izumi rushed over to hug her small daughter. At least this one wouldn't be leaving her nest very soon.

As evening approached, John walked across the way and knocked on AJ's door. It soon opened, and Jake let his father-in-law inside.

"I see you two have been busy," commented John, surrounded by stacked boxes in their living room. "It looks like you've done a good job." When John recognized Abby's handwriting on the packages, he smiled to think that his disorganized little girl was a part of this well-coordinated move.

"Except for a few things we're still using," said Jake, shoving his hands into his pockets, "we're ready to put all this into the moving trailer."

"Tell us when you do," offered John, "and Terry and I will help."

"Thanks, Dad," smiled Jake, nodding his appreciation.

"You know," hesitated John, "we would've been glad to help with the packing, as well."

"Abby likes to do things *her* way," grinned Jake, "but I made sure she didn't hurt herself by doing it all on her own. I think she would have, if I had let her. Your daughter can be a very determined woman, when she wants to be."

"I hope you can keep up with her," smiled John.

"She keeps life interesting," chuckled Jake.

"Where is she right now?" asked her father.

"Abby's still asleep," replied Jake, as the two men headed outside.

John hadn't told his son-in-law that he wanted to speak to him, but Jake could sense that he did. After all, this man was trusting him take his beloved eldest daughter and only grandchild, nearly three thousand miles across America. It was such a far distance to be without her family.

"When Grace, our second child, passed away," began John, "my wife nearly died of heartache. I've never felt so helpless in all my life. I'm feeling a little like that, right now."

"I'll take good care of Abby," assured Jake, his voice rising with the sincerity of making such a solemn promise.

"I know you will," John said, confidently.

"I love her with all my heart, Sir," Jake continued in earnest. "I'd *die* before I let anything bad happen to her!"

"Calm down, Son," smiled John. "I don't doubt your integrity. You've proven yourself to me on more than one occasion, and I trust you. I didn't mean to frighten you," he added, looking at Jake with a friendly smile. "Where did that 'Sir' come from?"

Jake relaxed a little, and smiled in return.

"No, I trust you," John repeated. "Abby's departure reminds me of Grace, because her mother and I have to let go and move forward. But," he quickly added, "we're not letting go so completely, that we don't expect to hear from you two. My wife will go on grieving for Abby, if you don't remind that forgetful daughter of mine, that her mother would like to hear from her, once in a while!"

At this, Jake chuckled. He could easily imagine Abby being so forgetful, though he knew full well that it wasn't for lack of love on her part.

"If you're ever short on rent money," continued John, "please, tell us. I know Abby won't say a word unless things get dire, so I'm counting on you to speak for her. Whatever you need, tell us so we can help." John smiled. "I'm not trying to scare you again," he added, realizing that he had

just asked his son-in-law to tell him if he was ever desperate for cash. "I'm sure you'll do just fine in California."

"Yes, Sir," answered Jake, wincing as he heard that second "Sir" slip from his mouth.

"I'm not putting you at ease, am I," laughed the father.

"That's all right," shrugged Jake. "I understand."

"I know you do," smiled John. Reflecting on a thought, he looked out into the distance, and then turned back to the young man standing somewhat nervously beside him. "If I ever had a son," said John, "I hope he'd turn out to be like you. I mean it," he insisted, seeing the disbelief in Jake's eyes. "I'm not talking about your struggles," he explained, "but the way you overcame them. I'm proud to have you for my son-in-law."

Not knowing what to say, Jake awkwardly hung back, his hands still shoved into his pockets.

"I don't know what your limitations are," ventured John, "but would it be possible for me to give you a hug?"

The request caught Jake off guard. Before he knew what he was saying, he agreed. Jake didn't know if he was ready for this physical contact, but he *did* know that he owed this man more than he could ever hope to repay, and all John was asking in return, was a hug.

Carefully, John took a step forward and put his arms around his son; slowly, Jake's hands emerged from his pockets, and he embraced his dad.

"Thank you," whispered John. Wiping the moisture from his eyes, John walked back to the house.

"Have you been crying?" asked Terry, seeing his best friend come through the front door looking very sad.

"I don't think I have," sniffed John, taking a deep breath to keep his eyes from tearing over.

"I don't envy you and Izzy right now," Terry sighed, sympathetically. "Three Mile Bay is going to feel empty without AJ and Ricky."

As he said this, one of the triplets began to cry, promptly setting off the other two. John hurried over to the playpen, and picked up the baby that had started the chain reaction.

"Three Mile Bay might feel emptier," chuckled John, as a teething Ruthie screamed into his ear, "but it sure won't be any *quieter!*"

Back in the little house across the way, Jake sat on their bed, waiting for Abby to wake up. Evening was turning into night, and Ricky was getting hungry. With a patient smile, Jake looked down at the small bundle strapped to his chest in the baby sling. Ricky wasn't sure why his meal wasn't forthcoming, but since his daddy didn't seem worried, the infant was temporarily content to suck on his pacifier.

As if sensing that she was needed, Abby turned over with a low moan. Her eyes blinked open, and she saw the two men in her life looking back at her.

"Good evening," greeted Jake, moving Ricky's tiny fist into a wave. "We've been waiting for you, Mommy."

"Is it really evening?" yawned Abby.

"It sure is," said Jake, lifting out the hungry baby and giving him to Abby. "I think someone's ready for his dinner."

To Ricky's satisfaction, he was soon happily nursing in Abby's arms.

After giving the yawning woman a wake up kiss, Jake went to their small kitchen and prepared a meal for Abby and himself. The house was mostly bare, so Jake could hear the strange sounds of hollow echoes as he jostled the frying pan over the stove while he made dinner. Like the saltwater aquarium, the rooms were eerily empty and lifeless. If it hadn't been for the hushed voice of Abby's lullaby as she nursed Ricky in the bedroom, Jake could have easily felt lonely.

When the food was ready, he and Abby ate on the bed in their room, for it was the only place left in the house to sit. They were halfway through dinner, when someone knocked on the front door.

"I'll get it," offered Jake, setting down his plate and encouraging Abby to continue without him.

The visitor was Terry, and as Jake showed him into the crowded living room, Terry made a heartfelt request.

"I was wondering," he hesitated, "if you and Abby would let us keep Ricky for the night? It would mean a lot to us."

"I'll go ask Abby," nodded Jake, understandingly.

It didn't take long before Terry was loaded down with infant formula, clean diapers, Ricky's favorite yellow giraffe blanket, a spare sleeper, and a half awake baby boy with a full tummy.

"We really appreciate this," Terry smiled gratefully. After exchanging good nights, the uncle carried his precious bundle to the Johanneses' house.

Now that the little home was even emptier than before, Abby retreated to the bedroom and began to cry. From the living room, Jake could hear her homesick sobs. He sighed heavily. They were departing on the day after tomorrow, and he knew she was already missing her family.

As Jake was about to close the front door, he noticed the moon that so frequently bathed everything in soft light, was tonight only a thin slice of brilliance in the dark sky, making the beach more private than usual.

While Abby wept into her pillow, she felt the bed give, and then the gentle touch of Jake's hand on her shoulder.

"Abby," he pleaded, "don't cry."

"I c-can't help it!" she sobbed fitfully.

"Do you want to stay in Three Mile Bay?" wondered Jake.

"N-no!" came her tearful response.

"I love you," he tenderly reminded her.

"I love you t-too!" Abby was weeping even harder than before, and Jake was struggling to know what to do.

"Are you frightened?" he asked. "I could pray, again."

But fear wasn't the cause of Abby's distress, and Jake knew it. Then an idea came to him, and Abby found herself being lifted from the bed in his steady arms.

"Jake," she whimpered, "put me down!"

In her grief, Abby clung to her damp pillow, but as Jake carried her through the open bedroom door, it caught on something and fell to the floor.

"Are we going outside?" she asked between sniffles.

"We've been asleep for half the day," explained Jake, "and now that it's night, we can have the beach all to ourselves."

"I don't *want* the beach!" cried Abby, as he transported her outside, into the cool night air. "I want to go back, Jake!" Abby kicked her legs, but Jake had a firm grip on her and refused to put her down.

"This is for your own good," he smiled. Abby was horrified to see a playful twinkle in his eyes, and tried to kick even harder. "Careful you don't hurt my ribs," he chuckled.

Suddenly, the kicking stopped, but Abby's pleas did not. She suspected that Jake had only mentioned his ribs to lessen her resistance, for he hadn't said a word about them in weeks. When he spun her around with a laugh, Abby knew she was right.

"Where are you taking me?" she protested.

"I have no idea," admitted Jake, finally setting her feet down on the sand.

Before Abby had a chance to escape, Jake caught her by the arm and hugged her close to his warm body.

"Isn't it a beautiful night?" he whispered. "It would be such a shame to waste it."

The familiar boyish exuberance that always baffled Abby, began to surface in his features, and she found herself returning his smiles.

"You know, by the time this night is over," Jake softly laughed, "you'll be thanking Terry for baby-sitting Ricky for us!"

Before Abby could argue that she would rather have their baby with them, Jake pulled her onto the dark beach, the nippy summer air tugging softly at her long tresses. Overhead, countless stars bejeweled the black sky, while a small crescent moon hid itself from the couple, as if knowing that this night was theirs.

Even though this was private property, the absence of anyone in the distance seemed to echo the sentiments of the moon, overhead. As darkness gently engulfed them, Jake brought Abby to the dock that jutted out into the bay.

"Let's dip our feet in the water," he suggested, sitting down on the wooden planks and taking off his shoes and socks.

"I think I'll just stand and watch," she declined.

"Sit next to me," insisted Jake, taking her by the hand and tenderly pulling her down to the spot beside him.

With a sigh, Abby swung her legs over the edge of the dock and gasped as the cold water greeted her bare feet.

"It feels good, doesn't it," he grinned.

"Yes, could we go home now?" she asked, ready to leave.

"Not yet," he resisted, clutching her hand even tighter.

"Then when?" Abby wanted to know.

Jake sighed.

"When you start smiling again," he finally responded.

"I'm smiling," she announced, "see?"

Since Jake couldn't see her very well, his free hand inspected the integrity of her smile.

"I'm not convinced," he said, doubtfully. "It feels forced."

"Please?" begged Abby, tugging at his hand. "Let's go home, Jake!"

Abby could hear another sigh escape from her husband's lips, but his grip on her remained firm.

"I don't want you to spend the entire night in tears," he explained.

"I won't," she quickly promised. The second Abby heard the sound of her own words, she knew that it was a dubious promise, at best. "I'll *try* not to," she altered the wording.

"I want you to be happy," said Jake. "We haven't even left Three Mile Bay yet, and you're already homesick. If I can't cheer you up now, while we're still near your parents, how am I going to when we're on our own in California?"

The helpless tone in his voice had a sobering effect on Abby.

"I'm sorry, Jake."

"I don't want your apology," he responded, "I want your smile back."

Instead of a smile, though, Abby began to weep once more. Jake's arms wrapped around her, drawing her so close to him that she could hear each beat of his heart.

"We'll go in," he whispered, disappointedly.

But Abby held onto his shirt and refused to let him go. With trembling lips, her mouth lovingly searched for his in the darkness. By the time she had finished kissing him, Abby could feel his pulse racing to the same rhythm as her own.

"Wow," breathed Jake, "I wasn't expecting that."

Leaning her head against his chest, Abby felt the cool water lapping at her feet. She gently touched the arms encircling her, and sighed happily.

"Are you smiling?" Jake wondered out loud. "Because, if you are, I can't see it!"

Her chest rose and fell in rapid succession, and Jake could feel her silently laughing. Then Abby took his hand and touched it to her face, while his fingers inspected her smile once more.

"That's more like it," he grinned, hugging her tightly.

"Jake, wherever you are, that will be home to me," said Abby, echoing the same sentiment that he had told her only days earlier. How Jake had yearned to hear her say those words back to him! "I may miss my parents, and Uncle Terry, and my sisters, but they aren't my home, anymore. You are."

The sound of Abby's soft voice filled the very air that Jake breathed, until he thought he would drown in her presence.

"You and I are one," she whispered, her fingers intertwining with his.

Jake's desire was building, until Abby could hear his heart thumping faster and faster beneath her head. When his hands began to tremble with longing, Abby straightened herself and pulled away from his arms.

"I am *not* going to make love with you on my father's dock," she declared, trying to regain some of her lost composure. "I don't care *how* dark the moon is, tonight!"

"Abby, you're an amazing woman," breathed Jake, nuzzling her neck and trying to move closer.

Seeing an opportunity to cool her husband down a little, Abby smiled.

"I've been told that, before."

"Really?" asked Jake, his senses gradually returning to him. "Who said it? I don't remember telling you that, until just now."

"Oh, it wasn't you," replied Abby, kicking her legs, and splashing her feet in the water.

"Your Dad, then?" pressed Jake. "Or, maybe it was Terry?"

"Nope," Abby shook her head, "it was Dennis."

"Dennis!" exclaimed Jake, looking at her in surprise.

"It was perfectly innocent," said Abby, not wanting to push Jake too far. She only wanted to distract him long enough to get his mind on something else for awhile.

"I don't believe you," tested Jake, trying to see her expression in the darkness. "I think you're just teasing, Abby. I've seen you bait me, before."

Abby tossed her head back and laughed into the night air.

"You're getting too good for me!" she conceded.

"I *thought* so!" Jake triumphantly exclaimed.

"Although," she added, "Dennis really *did* tell me that I was an amazing woman."

"He did, huh?"

"Yes, it was when I gave him a hand tied larvae fly," related Abby, rather matter-of-factly. "Dennis seemed to think that it was pretty special, so who was I to contradict an expert?"

Jake sighed audibly, and Abby softly laughed.

"You could've started by telling me that in the first place," he replied, dryly.

"I could have," she admitted, "but you needed a distraction."

"Other than *you*?" Jake grinned. "Be careful about teasing me like that in the future, Abby. I'm not as good at this game as you are."

"I never practice on anyone else," she assured him.

"Thanks," chuckled Jake, trying to hide the fact that he was pleased.

"You didn't do too badly, yourself," Abby reminded him. "After all, you made me smile."

"That's right!" he exclaimed. "I did!"

But as the night breeze continued to play with Abby's hair, Jake couldn't help but watch her. When Abby saw this she sighed.

"Do you want to go inside?" she asked him.

"No."

"Then stop it, Jake."

"Could I hold your hand, then?" he requested.

"You won't take it the wrong way, will you?"

"No, I'll be content, Abby."

With a smile, she nodded her consent.

"I feel like I'm always fighting to hold your hand," he softly joked, kissing the slender fingers of his hard-fought treasure.

With a contented sigh, Jake settled down and enjoyed the stillness of the bay with his wife. In the distance, shooting stars crisscrossed the horizon, giving any onlooker ample opportunities for making a wish. But Jake and Abby didn't need any stars to hang wishes upon. Their Heavenly Wish-giver heard each whisper and longing, and knew all their hopes and fears for the future. This was no deaf star, but the living Creator of all the universe. He was with the young couple, and He graced their hearts with the hope that came from His word.

Jake and Abby were happier than they thought they should be, for as the sun rose in the east, they both knew it was the dawn of their last full day in Three Mile Bay.

"We have to stay awake," said Abby, as she and Jake strolled to her parents' house to collect Ricky. "No matter how tired we may get, we must keep our eyes open. If we sleep now, then we won't be ready to get a good start on the road, tomorrow morning."

"Right," said Jake, nodding his head in agreement. He knew it was easy to say while they weren't sleepy, but come this afternoon, it would be a different matter.

"Good morning!" greeted John, as the two came through the front door. The three adults were on the floor with the babies, while Izumi cradled Ricky in her arms.

"How did he do last night?" asked Abby, kneeling beside her mother and checking Ricky.

"He was a perfect little angel," smiled Izumi. "Time to go back to your mommy, Sweetheart," the grandmother whispered, kissing Ricky's tiny face before placing the child into Abby's eager arms. Then Izumi went to the kitchen to start breakfast.

"Have you kids eaten, yet?" asked Terry, dandling Debbie on his knee and bouncing the laughing child up and down.

"Not yet," replied Jake, looking over Abby's shoulder to say "hello" to his baby boy.

"Stay with us," invited John, seeing where Terry's question was leading. "After we eat, Abby and I can drive to the rental place to pick up your moving trailer. Then, we can help load your boxes."

"I appreciate it," Jake smiled gratefully. "Abby, could I hold Ricky for awhile?"

"Look at them," laughed Terry, "you'd think they hadn't seen their son in days, not hours!"

With an aching heart, John watched the young couple as they exchanged happy glances, and talked to Ricky.

"How long have you guys been awake?" wondered Abby, breaking in on John's thoughts.

"For a few hours now," her father smiled.

Puzzled why they should be up so early, Abby looked at him questioningly. Then she understood. They wanted to spend as much time with Ricky as they could, before giving him back.

Leaving Terry to fend for himself with the triplets, John found his wife in the kitchen, quietly weeping into a dish towel.

"I love you, Little Dove," he hugged her tenderly.

All too soon, breakfast was over and John and Abby got into her red pickup truck to get the moving trailer from the rental lot in Watertown. While they were gone, Jake helped Izumi in the kitchen.

"Thank you for letting us have Ricky, last night," said Izumi, as Jake wiped the table down with a clean sponge.

"I should be the one thanking *you*," replied Jake, with a small grin. "It did Abby good to have a little peace and quiet for awhile."

Izumi smiled, thoughtfully.

"I was going to ask you to take good care of Abby and Ricky in California," confessed Izumi, "but I realize what a needless request that is."

"Would you like to give me a hug?" wondered Jake, for he thought his mother-in-law looked as though she could use one.

"Is it okay?" she brightened. Izumi gratefully hugged Jake. "Thank you for pulling this family through my bed rest," she told him. "And when the girls were born, you were a big help to me."

"Thank you for raising Abby to be the woman she is," said Jake, returning her gratitude. "I can't tell you how much she means to me."

"You're very welcome," Izumi smiled tearfully.

When the kitchen was tidy, Jake left Ricky with Izumi and went back to the little yellow house to do more packing before Abby and John arrived with the trailer. It wasn't long before Terry showed up, offering to help out wherever he could.

"This house holds some dear memories," mused Terry, as he helped Jake pack the large aquarium and place it in the living room with the other boxes. "It'll be hard to see it empty, again."

"Abby and I have been happy here," said Jake, thankfully.

"You two will be happy, no matter *where* you go," Terry remarked knowingly, "because you'll be together. It may take awhile to get used to your new surroundings, but you'll make a home for yourselves in San Diego. I just hope..." Terry stopped short of finishing his thought out loud. John had said that this was AJ's life, and that they should be the ones to make their own decisions, so Terry didn't want to pressure them.

"We plan on coming back," replied Jake, as if understanding what had been left unsaid. "Neither of us want to stay in California, indefinitely."

Terry wondered if they would feel the same way a few years from now. Only God and time would be able to answer that.

"Do you think you'll ever try fly fishing, again?" asked Terry, changing the subject to a less painful one.

"Not unless Abby gets bored with me!" chuckled Jake.

"Could I ask you a favor?" requested Terry, not knowing how Jake would react.

"You want a hug?" guessed the young man.

"How could you possibly know that?" Terry asked in surprise.

"Everyone *else* has been wanting one," Jake shrugged with a smile.

Terry's lopsided grin emerged, and the men heartily embraced each other.

"Take pictures of Ricky," Terry requested, "and email us as many as you can."

"I will," promised Jake.

"I *knew* that digital camera was a good idea!" exclaimed Terry, congratulating himself as he returned to Abby's bedroom for the hood to the aquarium.

"Abby and Dad are back!" Jake called from the living room window.

While Izumi had an enjoyable morning baby-sitting the four children, the others started loading the moving trailer. Everything went so smoothly, that by lunchtime, the crowded living room was empty. All that remained in Abby's bedroom was her large mattress, which now rested on the floor, and Ricky's bassinet, for Abby had decided that the crib was all they would need in San Diego.

After packing the last of the things from the kitchen, Abby sighed wearily. She was beginning to fight back slumber, and knew she had to stay awake, if she was going to get any sleep that night.

"I guess that's the last of it," yawned Abby.

"You look as though you're ready to fall asleep where you're standing," observed Jake.

"I'll go make some coffee," offered John, seeing that Jake could use a little reviving, as well.

Back at John's house, Izumi followed her husband into the kitchen with Ricky.

"Everything but their mattress and a few suitcases are loaded and in the moving trailer," announced John, washing his hands before starting the coffee.

"I'm going to miss Ricky so much," sighed Izumi, gazing at the napping boy in her arms.

"He's a cute little stinker, isn't he?" John softly laughed, enjoying his grandson one more time.

Just then, Terry came through the front door in search of lunch. When he realized that Izumi had been too busy with the babies to fix anything, he volunteered to get some take-out so no one had to cook that afternoon.

"I feel like fried chicken," Terry proposed, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "How does that sound?"

"I can taste it, already," grinned John.

"Thanks, Terry," smiled Izumi.

Just as Terry was leaving for the food, a tired Abby entered the kitchen, looking for her son. Ricky smiled happily as his mommy took him into her arms. He knew what was coming next-- lunch!

In search of a little privacy at her parents' house, Abby took Ricky to the master bedroom to nurse. As she sat down on the comfortable bed, she had to fight from lying down, for it looked *so* good. When Ricky began to nurse, Jake found their hiding place and soon joined them on the bed.

"Don't fall asleep," she warned Jake, seeing the sleepy look on his face.

"Thanks for reminding me," he groaned.

Terry arrived with the fried chicken none too soon, for John's stomach was beginning to growl so loudly that Izumi had to laugh.

"Hey, I've been working hard this morning!" chuckled John, as his wife shook her head in amusement.

Everyone assembled at the kitchen table, and when Abby closed her eyes for her father to pray over the food, Jake was afraid she wouldn't open them again when the prayer was over.

"Sweetheart, take a cold shower after lunch," suggested Izumi.

"I might do that," replied Abby, biting into Terry's fried chicken.

"Make sure you use our shower," said John, "because all your towels are packed away in the trailer."

The meal over, Abby disappeared into her parents' bathroom to revive herself under a rush of cold water. When she finished, Jake was next.

With nothing left to do but wait for bedtime, the tired pair sat on the living room sofa with Ricky, to watch television.

After a string of movies that was barely able to keep them awake, Izumi called everyone to dinner. Not surprisingly, AJ quickly ate their food and excused themselves from the table.

"Run along," smiled Izumi, as Abby kissed her mother good night. "Get some sleep. We'll see you in the morning."

Jake and Abby walked back to their home to spend one last night in the little yellow house, before leaving for California. Putting Ricky into his bassinet beside their bed, Abby changed into her nightgown, and wearily climbed beneath the sheets of the large mattress on the floor. As soon as Jake's arm slipped about her waist, Abby sighed contentedly. He was with her, and now they could enjoy some much needed sleep.

Abby shut her eyes. When she opened them again, it was still dark outside. Feeling her stir, Jake caressed Abby's arm, quietly letting her know that he was already awake.

"What time is it?" she whispered, not wanting to wake Ricky from his sleep.

Feeling about the floor beside the mattress for his watch, Jake located the timepiece and pressed a button to make its face light up through the darkness.

"It's three in the morning," he replied, returning his arm to Abby.

"If we want to be on the road by five," she quietly reviewed their schedule out loud, "then we have to be at my parents' house by four."

Both remained silent, as the familiar serenade of crickets spilled through the half open bedroom window. Jake smiled as Abby's hand found his beneath the covers.

"Do you think California has crickets?" she wondered.

"Probably," he answered, "but if it doesn't, we'll have your mom send us some."

After a few moments of last minute snuggling, Abby and Jake crawled off the mattress and dressed for the journey that lay ahead of them. While Ricky nursed in the corner of the bedroom, Jake managed to carry their large mattress all by himself, and fit it into the back of the moving trailer. For this, he received a kiss of admiration from Abby.

When their luggage was safely stowed away in the truck, the young couple walked to the Johanneses' house for an early morning breakfast before leaving.

Everyone in the household was awake and dressed-- even the triplets. Cold cereal was served and eaten with brave smiles and misty eyes. Not trusting the sound of their own voices, no one spoke unless they had to.

Then, it was time to go.

Beneath a sky that was still asleep, the entire family gathered by AJ's shiny red pickup truck.

"I want to check that car seat one last time," said John, clearing his throat and opening the door to the back seat. "They can be tricky, if you don't put them in just right."

"Did you remember to check the oil?" asked Terry. "How about the tires?"

"Everything has been checked and double checked," Abby assured him.

"Don't drive when you get sleepy," cautioned Izumi, tightly gripping the handles of the triplet stroller. "Keep your eyes on the road, and don't forget to call us when you check into your motel every night."

"The car seat's okay," declared John.

The group quietly stared at each other, each not wanting to be the first to say good-bye.

"Heavenly Father," prayed John, as everyone bowed their heads, "please be with our Abby and Jake, as they drive to the place where you have called them to. Protect them with Your hand, and watch over Ricky as he grows up." When John's voice began to waver, he quickly ended his prayer.

"Let me see that grandson of mine one more time," asked Izumi, as Abby placed the sleeping child into her arms.

"Good-bye, little fishing buddy," sniffed Terry, giving Abby a warm hug and then planting a kiss on her cheek. "Don't forget to email us once in a while after you get settled in."

"God bless you, Sweetheart," John hugged his daughter. "You've given your mother and I lot of joy." Her father quickly brushed away a stray tear and smiled at his little girl. "I'm putting you and your family into God's hands," he hugged her once more, "and I expect you to stay there. Always remember who you are, Abby. You are a child of God, and don't you forget it!"

"I won't forget," promised Abby, her voice breaking as she spoke.

"If you need any advice about the baby or running a household," said Izumi, hugging and kissing her daughter as though she didn't want to let go, "you call me. I don't care if it's day or night, you pick up that phone and call! And I wouldn't mind it one little bit if you only wanted to talk!"

Abby stooped down and kissed the three sleeping babies in the triplet stroller.

"Be good," she whispered to her sisters.

Under John's watchful eye, Jake placed Ricky into the car seat and made sure his baby harness was securely in place. When Jake looked back to see if he had John's approval, the father-in-law smiled with a confident nod of his head.

"Good-bye, Son," said John, shaking the outstretched hand that Jake offered him. "May God bless you."

"Study hard, and become a world famous painter!" joked Terry, shaking Jake's hand. "Don't forget about us, now!"

Izumi received a second hug from Jake, and then the young man helped Abby into the truck.

"Drive safely!" John called after them, as the vehicle started to pull away from the house.

"I will!" Abby lovingly waved back to her family. "Don't worry, Mom! I'll remember to call!"

Everyone watched as the red pickup truck merged onto the main road and drove off into the early morning darkness. In a few hours, the sun would rise over the horizon, and begin a brand new day.

"Well," sighed Jake, glancing back at Ricky's car seat, "we're on our way, Abby."

"Do you love me, Jake?" she asked, keeping her eyes on the road ahead of them.

"With all my heart, Baby," came his loving reply.

"Then, this journey will be a *good* one!" she exclaimed, with a confident smile.

"Abby, it already has," grinned Jake. "It already has!"

Full of life and love for each other, the small family went forward to meet their destiny. Though Abigail's journey was only beginning, our story ends here.

It is with much love and gratitude, that I bid Godspeed to my beloved AJ on this journey of their hearts. As it is for the rest of God's children, their future rests safely in His hands.

"Blessed be the LORD, because He hath heard the voice of my [Jake's] supplications. The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in Him, and I am helped: therefore my heart greatly rejoiceth; and with my song will I praise Him.

"The LORD is their strength [Jake and Abby's], and He is the saving strength of His anointed. Save Thy people, and bless Thine inheritance: feed them also, and lift them up for ever."

~ Psalm 28:6-9 ~

A Note from Judith Bronte:

The Inspiration Behind "Abigail's Journey"

Daniel was a half-starved, scared little dog, afraid of everyone and everything. And yet, he took a strange liking to me from the very first day my family and I adopted him into our home. Daniel would follow me everywhere he could, and no matter how much attention I gave him, he could always soak in more. I had met a lot of dogs, but this one was different.

For the first week or two, Daniel craved love and attention on a constant basis. However, as he settled in, the little dog began to change. He took to sleeping beside my pillow at night, and enjoyed being the first to wake me in the morning with his pink tongue and exuberant wagging tail. He started barking, which, apparently for Chihuahuas, they do much of. As he continued to eat on a regular basis, his health improved, and so did his coat. The coarse fur that had initially caused me allergic reactions, was now soft and shiny. Daniel no longer fought depression, but only needed a few minutes of attention every day to remind him that he was still loved and wanted.

Daniel was a Chihuahua-mix who had been abused and abandoned by his previous owner. His ribs and bones easily showed through a coarse coat, and his tail often remained between his legs. Daniel didn't know how to play, and though he was small enough to be a lapdog, he wouldn't sit on my lap unless coaxed. He wasn't used to being held or petted, and he had bouts of depression. I hadn't thought dogs were capable of depression, but Daniel proved me wrong. It was as if he were recalling bad memories, and needed to be comforted before a panic attack set in.

Though Daniel went on to become a happy little dog, he still couldn't quite get the hang of what it meant to play.

Until Daniel, I had never known what it was like to live with the effects of an abusive past. Even though he was only an animal, I learned a lot from his behavior, and it started me to thinking. Curious, I began to research the effects of abuse in humans.

At the time, I was contemplating a sequel to "Journey of the Heart," and I already knew that I wanted it to be the love story of the daughter of the two leading characters. But the man she would fall in love with, remained elusive. All the while, Daniel was following me around, until everyone began to call him my "little shadow."

I think God must have sighed in relief when I finally realized that His solution was, quite literally, staring me in the face! My image of Abigail's character was one of confidence and

strength-- a young woman who had never known the pain of not being loved. What if I paired her with someone like Daniel? The startling contrasts between the two characters intrigued me.

Not long after, I began writing "Abigail's Journey." Jake Murphy was introduced to Abigail Johannes and the effects were somewhat amusing. Abby wasn't a romantic, and Jake couldn't stand to be touched, so in Abby's words, they were "perfect for each other." But love has a way of complicating even the simplest of motives, and soon my young couple were treading on ground that neither of them had anticipated.

God knowingly sent a little stray dog, and it led me to the story you've just read. Daniel has since passed away, but I'll always be grateful for the inspiration that he was to "Abigail's Journey."

"And [Jake] said, Blessed be the LORD God... Who hath not left [me] destitute... of His mercy and His truth: I being in the way, the LORD led me... [to the Johanneses]."

~ Genesis 24:27 ~

End of Book.

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Read the novel that came before 'Abigail's Journey':

'Journey of the Heart'

http://judithbronte.com/journey/Chapter_1.html

&

the one that came after Abby:

'Terry's Journey - A Sequel to Abigail's Journey'

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