

The Greatest of These

A Love Story

by Judith Bronte

Love is the greatest of all...

Charlotte Overholt is used to responsibilities in her teenage life, but they're quickly multiplied when she learns her father has Early Onset Alzheimer's Disease. As "Charlie" adjusts to these changes, she becomes acquainted with her father's good friend, Adam Clark. When Charlie's friendship with Adam blooms into something unexpected, Adam suddenly finds himself in a situation he never dreamt possible.

Middle-aged Adam Clark is a confirmed bachelor, settled in his ways with no hope of ever changing. But this unassuming Master Plumber has a big secret that not even Charlie can anticipate, and when it comes to light, no one in their small town will ever be the same again.

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Dramatis Personae

Key Members of the Cast

Ages are relative to the first year in the story.

The Overholts:

Arnold [70 yr.] & Vera [66 yr.] Overholt - Husband & Wife

Jerome Overholt [48 yr.] - Arnold & Vera's Oldest Son

Charlton (Chuck) Overholt [42 yr.] - Arnold & Vera's Youngest Son

Martha McEntire Overholt - Charlton's Deceased Wife

Charlotte (Charlie) Overholt [15 yr.] - Charlton & Martha's Daughter

The Goodmans:

Mark [37 yr.] & Angela [37 yr.] Goodman - Husband & Wife; Angela is Martha McEntire Overholt's Younger Sister

Sherri Goodman [16 yr.] - Mark & Angela's Daughter

Reggie Goodman [9 yr.] - Mark & Angela's Son

The McEntires:

Janice McEntire [78 yr.] -

Angela McEntire Goodman [37 yr.] - Janice's Daughter

Martha McEntire Overholt - Charlotte Overholt's Mother & Janice's Daughter

The Clarks:

Ruth Clark [69 yr.] -

Adam Clark [44 yr.] - Ruth's Son

Shirley Clark Garner [43 yr.] - Ruth's Daughter

The Garners:

Thomas [51 yr.] & Shirley [43 yr.] Garner - Husband & Wife; Shirley is Ruth Clark's Daughter

Michael (Mike) Garner [25 yr.] - Thomas & Shirley's Oldest Son

Chad Adam Garner [9 yr.] - Thomas & Shirley's Youngest Son

The Rileys:

Maxwell (Max) [73 yr.] & Roberta [67 yr.] Riley - Husband & Wife

Constance Riley [39 yr.] - Maxwell & Roberta's Daughter

The Westons:

Horace [63 yr.] & Millie [59 yr.] Weston - Husband & Wife

Sandra Weston [21 yr.] - Horace & Millie's Oldest Daughter

Rebecca (Becky) Weston [8 yr.] - Horace & Millie's Youngest Daughter

The Downens:

Doug [76 yr.] & Linda [71 yr.] Downen - Husband & Wife

Wayne - Doug & Linda's Deceased Son

Maggie [30 yr.] - Doug & Linda's Daughter

The Ericksons:

Jeff Erickson [38 yr.] -

Debbie [8 yr.] - Jeff's Daughter

Chapter One
Family History

That the generation to come, "might not be as their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation; a generation that set not their heart aright, and whose spirit was not stedfast with God."

~ Psalm 78:8~

Time may heal all wounds, but the scars can last a lifetime. Whether physical or mental, we all carry the baggage of the past with us into the present.

However, there are people who do not have the burden of baggage. Two days after Jerome Overholt's thirtieth birthday, his fifty-two year old father was diagnosed with Early Onset Alzheimer's disease. Like a burglarized house being stripped of its valuables, the memories that Arnold Overholt had accumulated over the fifty-two years of his lifetime were slowly being cleared away. There was no cure. With only the faint hope of some unforeseeable breakthrough in medical science that would halt his descent into madness, Arnold Overholt and his family prepared themselves for the unthinkable.

Charles Dickens once wrote, that "time and tide waited for no man." The same could be said of Arnold's family. Life ran its course, even though the world seemed to be an alien one. Vera, Arnold's forever-timid wife, now fought with the insurance company to pay for her husband's expensive medication. Jerome, their eldest son, was actively pursuing his career in the health care business back East, a desire he had since graduating from college. Jerome dreamed of bettering America's failing health care system-- a dream that would tarnish through the coming years.

Three years after Arnold's diagnosis, Charlton, the Overholt's only other child, married Martha McEntire. Charlton and Martha settled in Los Angeles, California. Since Arnold and Vera had lived in Southern California for most of their married life, the proximity of their youngest son was a great comfort to them both.

God always does things for a reason. Nothing ever happens without one. Two years later, though, Charlton no longer made the pretense that he believed in providential reasons. He had endured his father's heartbreaking diagnosis and remained close to home so that he could help his parents. All this he felt could be endured. Then Martha died an hour after giving birth to their only child. Before dying, she had named the new baby girl after him. His daughter, Charlotte, had come into the world at the cost of his wife's life. Charlton never blamed Charlotte. No, he blamed God instead.

After Martha's funeral, Mrs. Janice McEntire, Charlton's mother-in-law, insisted that Baby Charlotte should return to North Carolina to be raised by herself and Mrs. Angela Goodman, Janice's surviving daughter. Mrs. Vera Overholt disputed that the baby's place was with her father's family, while the McEntire family and the Goodman family disputed otherwise. Angela Goodman had a daughter that was one year older than Charlotte. The two girls could be raised together. Martha, they insisted, would want it. The families stood divided. Jerome, who had flown in from the East for the funeral, ducked and ran for cover whenever anyone asked for his opinion on the matter.

Feeling as though the only remnant left him of his wife, was now trying to be taken from him, Charlton packed up Baby Charlotte and moved to Butte, Montana. There they lived for the next fifteen years, until God, once again, stood in Charlton Overholt's way.

Charlotte Overholt, now fifteen, unlocked the apartment door and dumped her school books on the sofa. Exams were tomorrow and she had a lot of cramming to do. Last week, Charlton had pulled her out of school and taken her with him on a camping trip with his group that lasted for five days. The group consisted of six stressed out city people paying a total stranger to take them out to the middle of nowhere, in hopes of forgetting their troubles. Charlotte usually enjoyed these camping trips with her father, even though she was expected to cook for eight people. Lately, however, Charlotte had noticed that her absences from school were biting deeper into her grades than she had previously thought. Charlotte arranged her books on the kitchen table and tried hard to concentrate on the text before her.

Charlton glanced up at the clock over the store counter. It read four fifty-two.

"Time to close shop, Chuck," announced a voice from the back room. Charlton lowered the steel shutters over the store windows, secured the back door, and locked the cash register. "When you're finished, you can leave," said the voice, it's redheaded owner appearing from behind the back room door.

"Bye, Frank," called Charlton as he exited the door. Charlton had worked as a salesman for a camping equipment store called, "Venture Outdoors" for the past three years. He enjoyed the work, and the pay didn't hurt either. Once in a while, Frank, the owner of "Venture Outdoors," would collect the names of a few people who wanted to go camping, but were too inexperienced to go by themselves. After each person had paid a nominal sum, Frank would furnish the required supplies. As Charlton for a guide, he would lead them to the best camp sights and instruct them in the do's and don'ts of outdoor survival. Depending on the humor of the city dwellers who were unused to "roughing it," the camping trip would last three to five days.

Charlton inhaled a deep breath of fresh Montana air and started his sports utility vehicle (SUV).

Back at the apartment, Charlotte was still consumed with her homework. The telephone rang, breaking into her concentration. It was the landlord reminding all the tenants to leave the light on in the hallway at night. There had been two break-ins lately, and the landlord attributed it to the fact that everyone kept turning off the hallway light at night, making it possible for thieves to skulk about in the dark. Charlotte promised she would pass the message on to her father and hung up the receiver. Before then, she hadn't noticed that he wasn't home yet. It was ten o'clock.

"Daddy got off work at five," she thought. "Maybe he went out with Frank and forgot to call," she reasoned. Charlotte called Frank, who said he hadn't seen Chuck since they closed the store. He told her not to worry.

"He's probably out having a good time somewhere and just forgot the time," said Frank. Charlotte muttered something in the affirmative and hung up. No matter what Frank said, it was not like her father to be this late. She grabbed her red windbreaker and headed out the door.

The sun had long ago retired behind the steep Montana mountains, leaving a dark blanket of black to cover the sky. Not even the moon could be seen tonight. Charlton looked up from the steering wheel. It was dark outside. He was parked on the side of the road. Where was he? None of his surroundings looked familiar. Charlton noticed his hands were trembling. He rubbed them together and started the engine. The dark trees whizzed by his window as Charlton made the long drive back home. He tried to reason away the thoughts in his mind.

"Too much stress," he thought, "that's it. It has to be stress."

It was one in the morning by the time Charlton was back in front of his apartment building. After thinking up a reasonable excuse, he went in.

"Daddy, where have you been?" demanded Charlotte. "You had me worried to death!" Charlton gave his daughter a hug, which was not reciprocated.

"I was with Frank," he explained, "and just forgot the time. That's all. Nothing to be concerned about," he added, disappearing behind his bedroom door. Charlotte knew her father was lying.

Since father and daughter were close, this holding back of the truth hurt her more than she liked to admit. She knew she never told her father everything that was on her mind, but she always had the assurance that he would. Charlton shared everything with her.

"He's OK," she thought, "that's the important thing."

The next morning, both acted as if nothing had happened the night before. Charlotte kissed her father and went to school. Even though Charlton pretended that it was an ordinary morning, it was just that-- pretend. He had spent the night in wakeful fits, half afraid to admit to himself what he was thinking. Charlton called in sick, and made an appointment at the doctor's office for that afternoon.

Dr. Estrada was a short man with white hair that stuck out every side of his head, excepting the top. His small mustache sat perched on his upper lip as if to defy gravity. When children sat in his office, their thoughts would be momentarily diverted by the hypnotic movement of Dr. Estrada's cookie duster.

One look at Charlton's face told the doctor that he was dealing with a very concerned man. After the doctor did a general examination of Charlton, he led the patient into his office.

"Well, did you find anything?" asked Charlton, nervously.

"Was I supposed to find something?" asked the doctor, raising his eyebrows.

"Didn't you find something wrong with me?" Charlton asked.

"Chuck, I did a general examination of you. You passed with flying colors." Dr. Estrada looked at his clipboard. "You are forty-two years old and exercise more than most on a regular basis. Did I leave out anything?" Charlton rose up from his chair, and then sat down again.

"It's probably nothing," he began, "but I've been having a few memory problems."

"Over how long a period?" asked the doctor.

"Just the last few months." In actuality, Charlton's memory lapses had been occurring much earlier than this, but he hadn't been aware of it until recently.

"What kind of memory problems? Are you misplacing keys and forgetting appointments?" smiled Dr. Estrada. "This is perfectly normal." Then Charlton told the doctor, in detail, the events of the prior night.

"And you don't remember driving to that location," asked the doctor, "at all?" Charlton shook his head.

"From five in the evening to about ten at night is a total blank. I don't remember a thing. I remember that I was on my way home from work and the next thing I know, I'm in an unfamiliar place, late at night." Dr. Estrada leaned back in his chair.

"Have you been under stress lately? Maybe at work?" asked the doctor.

"Yes, exactly!" exclaimed Charlton. "That's exactly what I thought! I knew there was nothing to be concerned about!" Charlton was about to get up from his seat when Dr. Estrada stopped him.

"Well, are you?" the doctor repeated.

"Am I what?" Charlton asked, his voice overcome with frustration.

"Chuck, calm down. Are you under stress at work?" Charlton slowly shook his head.

"I've never had a better job than this one. I talk to the customers about things I enjoy talking about. And just about every month I go camping, and get paid for it."

"You came in here expecting me to find something wrong with you. Why don't you tell me what you think it might be, and I'll tell you whether your worries are unfounded or not." Charlton explained that his family history was the source of his concern.

"My grandfather died of Alzheimer's when he was eighty-two. My father was diagnosed with Early Onset Alzheimer's when he was fifty-two," said Charlton. "I'm forty-two."

"So, you think it's your turn next?" asked Dr. Estrada.

"Alzheimer's is hereditary, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. But that doesn't mean you have to have it also. It just means that you are at a greater risk. I have a rule," explained the doctor, "always to look for the easy solution first. There are many things that could have triggered these memory lapses, including stress."

"But how can I know for sure that it isn't Alzheimer's," asked Charlton. "Isn't there a test I can take?"

"Alzheimer's can only be diagnosed by a series of medical, neurological and psychological tests to rule out other possibilities. I would like to schedule you for the first of the tests sometime tomorrow," said the doctor. "Make an appointment with my secretary." Charlton went to the

door, his face betraying the anxiety he was feeling. "Try to relax, Chuck. Forty-two is a very early age to have Alzheimer's. The odds are against it."

"Yet [he] hearkened not unto Me, nor inclined [his] ear, but hardened [his] neck: [he] did worse than [his] fathers."

~ Jeremiah 7:26 ~

"Notwithstanding I have spoken unto you, rising early and speaking; but ye hearkened not unto Me."

~ Jeremiah 35:14 ~

Chapter Two

Mullen-Overholt

"Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

~ Isaiah 40:3 ~

Twin Yucca sat in the heart of Southern California's Mojave Desert, just off Highway Sixty-two. The earliest recorded homesteader in Twin Yucca was Silas Graham, circa 1900, who, upon digging a well, claimed it was drier on the bottom than on the top. At the end of World War II, more and more people made Twin Yucca their home, bumping the population from the high hundreds to the low thousands, a boom by Twin Yucca standards. Over the ensuing years, the numbers evened out, it's neighboring cities easily outstripping the small community in terms of citizens and attractions. To the left of Twin Yucca, lay Yucca Valley, and to the right, Joshua Tree, both popular with tourists. In between them, lay Twin Yucca, just a tiny way-point on the map.

Twin Yucca was a settled community, the last census placing fifty percent of it's population over the age of sixty. This made Twin Yucca resemble more a retirement community than a city. With so many retired people in the vicinity, businesses had a reasonable chance to stay in business, and to cater to the occasional stray tourist. Brad Weiss, President of the Chamber of Commerce, predicted that any time now, some big developer would remodel their sleepy community into an "oasis of prosperity and opportunity." That speech always got a rise of excitement from the younger fifty percent of the population. Of course, Mr. Weiss had been saying that every year for ten years, but it never seemed to matter.

A popular gathering place in Twin Yucca was Hanna's Family Restaurant, open from six in the morning to nine at night, Monday through Saturday, and never on Sundays. Other businesses included a small motel, Clark Plumbing Service and Supply, Logan's Garden Nursery, and a convenience store, which had the only gas to be found until Joshua Tree further up Highway Sixty-two.

Every business operates on a common principal: to make money. One class of business, that many people take for granted as a right, are nursing homes. In 1996, a nursing home in Twin Yucca came under the scrutiny of the city council. The owners of the nursing home apparently cared little for the "quality care" they had promised to give their residents. The list of neglect was long. Even so, negligence was not what caught the attention of the city council. The owners had applied for and received a permit for a residential care facility. The permit was for senior citizens only. Over the preceding years, the nursing home also admitted residents who were mentally ill, in violation with the "use permit" issued by the city. After two years of appeals, and failures to

meet the requirements, the facility was forced to shut down. The residents were sent to other nursing homes, and the building sat empty.

It is a well known fact among the medical profession that care for the elderly is in a state of crisis. As the Baby Boom generation ages, this crisis will reach epic proportions, or so the Twin Yucca newspaper said in an article published one month after the closing of the only nursing facility in, or near, Twin Yucca. Since over half the population was over the age of sixty, this issue received spotlight attention. The reporter who wrote the article was swamped with letters and phone calls, all petitioning the city council for a local nursing home.

Among the first to jump into the health care spotlight was Mia Wilson, a woman who had her sights set on the mayor's seat. She had been on the city council for five years and had decided it was time to climb higher.

With Mia Wilson leading the way, a plan was proposed to fund the home by the citizens of Twin Yucca, making it a community nursing home. There was one sticking point, however. A community nursing home would mean higher taxes. Even the older fifty percent didn't like that thought. Mrs. Wilson was just about to lose her spotlight, when someone bought the vacant nursing facility.

The city council, who had just spent two years trying to vacate the last owners, were slow to believe that the new ones would be any different. Even so, the new owners attended the planning commission meeting to get approval from the city, as the law required.

The ownership of the nursing home would be split between two men: Todd Mullen, who provided most of the capital, and Jerome Overholt, who provided the experience. Todd Mullen, 35, a successful real estate agent in San Francisco, had a wife and two young children, was learning to accept the fact that male pattern baldness ran in his family, and had the kindest smile you ever saw. He had a frank way about him that instantly made you want to be his friend. From all appearances, Todd was everything his partner wasn't. Jerome Overholt, 46, had a small grim face that most people found difficult to approach. Jerome had never married, preferring the bonds of work schedules to that of matrimony. He had gained a wide field of experience in the health care industry back East, rightfully earning the reputation as someone who knew how to get things done.

The new owners introduced themselves to the planning commission and were given a chance to speak. Todd, the spokesman of the partnership, adjusted his wire rimmed glasses, and after clearing his throat, began: "Ladies and gentlemen of the city council, my partner and I understand your hesitation. The responsibility for the care of others is not one to be taken lightly. No one knows this better than myself. Some time ago, I was confronted with placing my

mother into a nursing home. Every nursing home has a different standard. I personally feel that most of the standards adopted by many nursing homes are unacceptable. I have visited many of them and feel I have an accurate idea of what they are like.

We joke about hospital food. The food in most nursing homes is nothing to laugh about. In fact, the food I tasted was outright awful. If a stewardess served you a meal that is commonly dished out in nursing homes, the airline would be sued. Believe me, I am not a hysterical person. What I have spoken about here today is just the tip of the iceberg."

Todd took off his glasses, and wiped his eyes. "I promise you," he began again, his voice becoming resolute, "any profit made will go directly back into the facility-- and not so the hallways can be re-wallpapered for the fiftieth time! Understand, this nursing home will not have the eyewash that most others do. Oftentimes, money goes into the appearance of the facility, not into the care of the elderly who must live there. I promise the residents will see that money in the form of well trained staff, decent food, in a clean and caring environment."

Todd's speech was well received, even though the quality of the previous nursing home had never been an issue. The city council only wanted to be sure that the new owners would stay within the confines of the "use permit." The necessary permit was issued, and, so that there would not be any further trouble in the future, it covered the mentally ill, as well. With this, the Mullen-Overholt Nursing Home was born. That was two years ago.

Todd Mullen kept his word. The Mullen-Overholt Nursing Home did not have much eyewash. It solemnly sat in the middle of a residential neighborhood, much to the chagrin of the neighbors. The white cement block building housed twenty beds, relatively small by nursing home standards. The furniture was shabby, the paint on the ceiling was peeling, and the carpets were worn and threadbare. There was no central air conditioning. On hot days, a collection of floor fans could be found scattered about the facility, trying their best to keep the air from stagnating. In the winter, the fans were replaced with space heaters.

The staff roughly consisted of: 24 certified nursing assistants, (12 for the weekday shift and 12 for the weekend shift); 12 nurses, (6 for the weekday shift and 6 for the weekend shift); the Director of Nursing, (DON); the Assistant Director of Nursing; the Medical Director; the Pharmacist; Housekeeping personnel; the Maintenance Supervisor; the Assistant Maintenance Supervisor; 6 cooks, (3 for the weekday shift and three for the weekend shift); the Resident Care Coordinator; the Activity Director; Accounts Payable and Accounts Receivable personnel; and the Social Worker. At the top of this staff heap was Jerome Overholt. Jerome was not only the Administrator, but because of the smallness of the nursing home, he also served as the Admissions Coordinator. He lived at the nursing home five days a week. Jerome's living area was connected to a door located at the back of his office. The staff sarcastically referred to it as one of

the perks of being the co-owner. Why anyone would voluntarily spend all their time at a nursing home, they could not comprehend.

Jerome's partner remained in San Francisco, leaving him in charge of practically everything connected to the Mullen-Overholt Nursing Home. Todd had done his part, the rest was up to Jerome.

"Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more."

~ Luke 12:48 ~

Chapter Three
Breaking News

"There is no peace, saith the LORD, unto the wicked."
~ Isaiah 48:22 ~

Charlotte sat on the far side of the sofa, her arms wrapped around a throw pillow. She watched Charlton as he finished his dinner at the table in the kitchen. Ever since a few weeks ago, he had been quiet and withdrawn. Charlotte noted that her father see-sawed between two distinct moods with alarming regularity. Sometimes she could glimpse fear in his eyes, as if he were being pursued by a relentless phantom that dogged his every step. Then there was the unsettling calmness, as if resigning himself to some inevitable fate. Several times, Charlotte had asked her father what was wrong. Charlton would only shake his head and say, "nothing." In vain, Charlotte had suggested they go camping, anything to chase away the storm that pervaded every waking moment.

The next day, Charlton went to Dr. Estrada's office. The last of the test results were in. The look on the doctor's face said it all. Charlton exhaled, his whole body relaxing.

"You're taking the news very well, Chuck," remarked Dr. Estrada encouragingly. "I'm proud of you. I know it must take a lot of courage."

"A hero dies once, a coward dies a thousand times," Charlton chuckled. "I'm only walking around because Someone has forgot to bury me!" The doctor placed a worn hand on Charlton's shoulder.

"It's important to be with family and friends at a time like this," he said, patting Charlton lightly. "Any medication I can prescribe will not be as effective as a loving and trusting relationship with the people who will be taking care of you, your caregivers."

"I haven't seen my family in fifteen years," said Charlton.

"I'm sorry to hear it," responded Dr. Estrada. "You need to reestablish any broken ties before the deterioration progresses to the point where that it is no longer possible."

"I was always terrified that I would develop this disorder, and now my worst fears are realized. Did you know," asked Charlton, "that one of the reasons I got married was so that someone would be there to take care of me if I ever got Alzheimer's? Sad, isn't it?" smiled Charlton grimly. "Looks like the joke's on me! When Martha died, I felt the safety net being jerked out from

under my feet. Logically, being the coward that I am, I ran. I ran away from the only people that can help me now." Charlton sat like a limp doll, the sarcasm disappearing from his face. "What am I going to do?" he asked, helplessly.

"Hug your daughter," suggested the doctor. "Here is the phone number of a support group for people who are experiencing the same problems that you are facing. They can help you learn to cope with Alzheimer's."

"I haven't figured out a lot of things yet, but I know one thing: Charlie is not going to see me turn into a blithering idiot," said Charlton, taking the phone number.

"Charlie? Oh, yes. That's your nickname for Charlotte. You and your daughter are very close. It would hurt her a great deal if you pushed her away. I'm sure she would want to know the truth," advised Dr. Estrada. "It would be in her best interest to know what is going on, Chuck."

"I'm her father. I'll decide what's in her best interest," responded Charlton, bluntly. He left the doctor's office and went for a walk to think things over.

It was about one in the afternoon when he returned to the apartment. Charlton hunted through his dresser drawer for a few minutes, and pulled out an address book. He went into the living room and sat on the end of the sofa next to the telephone. After looking up Mrs. Angela Goodman's number, he picked up the receiver. Charlton momentarily froze. He hadn't spoken to his sister-in-law since Charlotte was a baby. This was not going to be easy. Charlton dialed the phone number and held his breath.

"Hello?" answered a boy's voice. Charlton thought for a minute. The last he had heard, Angela only had a daughter.

"Hello? I'm looking for the Goodman's. Is this the right number?" Charlton asked.

"Yes," the boy answered.

"Who is it, Reggie?" asked a woman's voice in the background.

"I don't know yet," shouted Reggie, in a voice so loud that Charlton's ear smarted.

"Who is this please," asked the woman's voice.

"Angela? It's me, Chuck."

"Chuck! How are you?" asked Angela, her voice betraying surprise.

"I'm fine," replied Charlton. "And you?"

"We're doing fine." Angela paused to collect her thoughts. "Mom just celebrated her seventy-eighth birthday. She's in frail health, but doing well under the circumstances. Sherri is sixteen now, and just getting her learner's permit. Mark declares he won't let her near the family car! Reggie is nine, and the star pitcher of his little league team. I hear he is the best pitcher they ever had."

"Was that Reggie I just spoke to?" inquired Charlton, politely.

"Yes, I'm afraid it was," laughed Angela nervously. There was an awkward silence. "How is Charlotte? Is she well?" asked Angela.

"Charlie's at the top of her class," answered Charlton, glad of something to brag about.

"Is she really? I expect she's pretty tall now?" Angela asked.

"She's five foot one. Charlie has her mother's brown hair and brown eyes. She looks more like Martha every day," Charlton added, hoping to tempt Angela into making an offer of some kind.

"Does she really?" Angela replied, her voice filling with resentment. "I haven't seen Charlotte in fifteen years, so I wouldn't know." Charlton paused, not knowing whether to continue or not.

"It has been a long time," he conceded.

"Who's fault is that?" Angela asked, setting aside her company manners. "You take Martha's child and hide her in Montana, not bothering to call or write to let us know where you are. I didn't even know where to send Reggie's birth announcement!"

"Yes, I know," was the only answer Charlton could think of to say without turning the conversation into an argument.

"It's not right to cut Charlotte off from the family that loves her, Chuck."

"Yes, I know."

"Mom misses her granddaughter very much."

"Yes, I know."

"Mom isn't going to be with us forever, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"Then what do you intend to do about it?" demanded Angela, hoping to corner Charlton into some kind of offer.

"Actually, that's the reason I called," began Charlton. "I just came back from the doctor's office, this morning. He says I have Early Onset Alzheimer's disease." Charlton paused, but Angela was stunned into silence. "I don't want to put Charlie through what lies ahead for me. You once offered to raise Charlie, and I know this is presuming a great deal of you and your family, but I was wondering if the offer was still good." Charlton nervously waited for a response. Nothing less than the events of that morning could possibly have humbled him into making this phone call.

"I'm very sorry to hear of your... difficulty," answered Angela, her voice taking on a sympathetic tone. "Of course, I'll have to talk it over with Mark first, but I'm sure we would love to have Charlotte come live with us. Martha's child was always welcome here, Chuck. You just remember that. Things could have been different if it hadn't been for that stubborn Overholt pride of yours." It took all the restraint Charlton had, to say,

"Yes, I know." Realizing that she had the upper hand of the situation, Angela decided to make the most of it.

"I'll fly down this weekend and help Charlotte pack. Of course, I'll need your address." Charlton thanked her, gave her his address, and after exchanging a few more polite remarks that neither one meant, he hung up.

He was relieved it was over, but now he had to break the news to Charlotte. Charlton dreaded this more than the phone call he had just made. He knew his daughter. If Charlotte understood that he had Alzheimer's, she would refuse to leave him. So, Charlton decided not to tell her about his diagnosis.

When Charlotte made her way home from school, she continued to ponder over her father's disturbing behavior. Upon entering the apartment, she found him sitting on the end of the sofa. Charlotte noticed that his face was unusually set and determined. Without saying a word, Charlotte went to her room, dumping the school books into an uncluttered corner of the floor, and sat down on the edge of her bed. Though just fifteen, Charlotte had a very well developed

sense of womens' intuition. She had the uneasy feeling that he was going to break some kind of bad news to her. She looked up to find her father standing in the doorway.

"This room is a mess, Charlie," he chided her in a light tone. "When are you going to learn to pick up after yourself?" he asked, picking up a pink sock from the floor. Charlotte shrugged. She knew he didn't come into her room to talk about it's tidiness. "You know," began Charlton, sitting down on the bed beside his daughter, "when your mother found out she was going to have a baby, she said she was the happiest woman on earth. I believe she was." Charlton looked at his daughter. "You do look very much like her," he said. "I wish you could have known her."

"So do I," said Charlotte, leaning her head on her father's shoulder.

"I'm glad you said that," said Charlton, his voice stiffening. Charlotte raised her head. Here it came. The bad news. "After your mother died, her sister, Angela, wanted you to come and live with her and her family." Charlotte tensed. She didn't like the direction the conversation was going. In the past, whenever Charlotte disobeyed her father, he would jokingly threaten to ship her off to Aunt Angela. This time, however, he was serious. "I've been thinking," continued Charlton, his fingers toying with the pink sock in his hand, "that you are getting to the age where you need a woman around. A woman that can set a good example for you. Since your mother can't be with you, I think she would want Angela to take her place." Charlotte stood up, facing Charlton.

"Are you sending me away?" she asked.

"Charlie, it's for your own good."

"No! I won't go! Why are you doing this to me? Daddy, what's wrong?" Charlton was silent. He was planning a desperate lie.

"You're young, Charlie. I don't expect you to understand. I've come to a point in my life where I need a change. Things can't go on as they have."

"What do you mean, 'a change?' A change of clothes? A change of scenery? What? You're not making sense, Daddy!" Charlotte was overflowing with anger and fear. Her world was rapidly changing and there was not a thing she could do about it.

"You've noticed that I haven't been happy lately," Charlton pointed out. "I just think it's time we went our separate ways."

"Our separate ways!?" repeated Charlotte, shocked by her father's words. "Daddy, this is me, Charlie!"

"I know who you are!" shouted Charlton, angrily. "I am your father. You will do as you are told! Your Aunt Angela will be here this weekend to help you pack. She'll look out for you from now on. I'm finished." Charlton got up from the edge of Charlotte's bed and went to his own room. If Charlotte had stayed in the apartment a minute longer, she would have heard her father's tears.

"Our hands wax feeble: anguish hath taken hold of us, and pain, as of a woman in travail."
~ Jeremiah 6:24 ~

Chapter Four
Mom's Keeper

"I have showed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He said, It is more blessed to give than to receive."
~ Acts 20:35 ~

A warm Friday morning sun shone through the large pane window of Room 2 of the Mullen-Overholt Nursing Home.

"Time to wake up, girl!" announced a loud voice. Mrs. Ruth Clark blinked open her eyes. Leticia Ross, a young black woman, was standing above her, impatient to get the routines of the morning over with as soon as possible. She hastily put on a pair of white latex gloves and rolled Ruth onto her side. After the dirty adult diaper was disposed of, Leticia cleaned the patient. She grabbed for something, and upon finding that there were none left, shouted, "More diapers in Room 2!" Carla Hernandez walked into the room, shaking her head. Both women were certified nursing assistants, but Carla had many years of experience compared to Leticia.

"I thought you counted them this time," she remarked, handing Leticia a diaper.

"Madeline was stubborn this morning," complained Leticia.

"You can draw more flies with honey," advised Carla.

"The way this place smells, you don't need no honey," mocked the young woman.

"It wouldn't smell so bad if you did your job quicker," retorted Carla, disappearing from the door. Leticia jerked on Ruth's sweater, not realizing that she was hurting the sixty-nine year old woman.

"Thinks she knows everything," muttered Leticia. Ruth patiently waited as her white hair was combed, her glasses cleaned, her dentures washed and put into place. She was hungry. The other four women who occupied Room 2 had already been wheeled into the dining room for breakfast. Since Ruth was bedridden, she had to eat all her meals in bed. She fixed her eyes on the door, waiting for a certain loved one to appear. Leticia set her breakfast tray on Ruth's bed table. Without a word, the young woman left, leaving Mrs. Ruth Clark alone with her breakfast. Ruth sighed. Leticia Ross was twenty-six years old, and the single mother of two small boys, Theodore and Ernest. Ruth tried to remember this when Leticia's impatient attitude was at it's worst.

"For this cause I, since the day I heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that you might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding," prayed Ruth, bowing her head. When she opened her eyes, a middle aged man was smiling over her.

"Starting breakfast without me, Mom?" he asked, picking up a chair near the window and placing it beside her bed.

"Good morning, Adam," greeted Ruth, as she kissed her son's cheek when he bent over to give his Mom a hug.

"How did you sleep?" asked Adam, picking up the spoon on the table and filling it with food. "Open," he said, guiding it to her mouth.

"I've had better nights," she confessed, "but I'm not complaining." Ruth opened her mouth and swallowed the spoonful of oatmeal. An involuntary twinge of nausea crossed her face. After seeing his mother's reaction, Adam tasted the oatmeal. He quickly spit it back into the bowl.

Unbeknownst to Adam and his mother, Nancy Cortez, the morning cook, had been up the whole night with Teresa, her five year old daughter. The little girl, who was always coming down with one thing or another, had given her mother a sleepless night by means of a high fever. For this reason, Nancy had mistakenly over-salted the oatmeal, making it bitter and inedible. In fact, salt was not supposed to be served at all, for most of the residents at Mullen-Overholt were on low sodium diets. By the time she had realized the mistake, it was too late.

Adam looked at his mother.

"You don't have to be here, Mom," he said, flatly. Ruth shook her head.

"Now, we've been over this before. I'm here by choice," said Ruth. Adam turned his head away.

"I'll send Chad over with some breakfast that's edible," said Adam, pushing aside the bowl of oatmeal.

"How is Chad?" asked Ruth, glad for a chance to change the subject.

"Fine," replied Adam, standing up.

"And Michael? How is he?"

"Fine."

"I just like to know how my grandchildren are doing," explained Ruth, somewhat defensively.

"Mom, you saw them both two days ago. You're just trying to change the subject," responded Adam.

"It's my decision. That's final. I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"I have to get back," he said, checking his watch. Adam kissed his mother on the cheek and turned to go.

"Adam?" she called back.

"Hmmm?" he asked, turning in the doorway.

"I love you."

"I know. I love you too." Adam walked down the hallway, past the two nurse stations that were posted on either side of the hall, and into the main room. From the main room, he made his way past the Break Room to the Administrator's office. A woman occupied one of the three chairs outside the office door, patiently waiting to talk to the Administrator. Adam knocked on the door. The woman was about to protest that someone was cutting in front of her when Adam said, "I'll just be a moment." Resigned that she still had a while to wait, the woman nodded with a patient smile. Adam went in, closing the door behind him.

Jerome Overholt was seated behind his desk, a telephone on his right shoulder and an open file before him, the contents of which were scattered over the desk.

"Hold that thought," Jerome said into the receiver, looking up at Adam. Jerome put a hand over the mouthpiece, awaiting an explanation for the interruption.

"Chess tonight?" asked Adam. Jerome nodded his assent. The townspeople of Twin Yucca who did not have family members in Mullen-Overholt, could never understand why Adam seemed to never miss an evening of chess with Jerome. The two men had few things in common. Like Adam, Jerome had gray at the temples, but Jerome's face was square and his eyes deep set into his skull. Jerome was forty-eight, (four years older than Adam), and unlike Adam, was seldom caught in a kind act or word. Were Jerome's chest opened and his innards examined, those who cared to look would find a stack of rules and regulations where his heart should be; a mind

tangled with cob webs from lack of mental activity; and ears atrophied from years of neglect. On the rare occasion of a smile, his ruler-straight mouth would draw out into a thin horizontal line across his face. Few people knew this, for few people had thought Jerome Overholt capable of smiling, let alone catching him in the act. Indeed, if Adam Clark were stopped right now and asked if he had ever seen a kind look on the stony face of the Administrator of Mullen-Overholt, he would be unable to give an answer in the affirmative.

After Adam left his office, Jerome finished his business on the telephone, tidied the file on his desk, and told the woman who had been waiting outside to come in. The woman was thirty something, and had her blonde hair neatly pulled back from her face. She sat down in a chair facing Jerome's desk, nervously tugging at the zipper on her purse.

"What can I do for you?" Jerome asked in a clinical voice.

"I would like to transfer my mother from another nursing home to this one as soon as possible," said the woman, urgently.

"I'm afraid that's impossible. We have a lengthy waiting line, in fact," proudly stated Jerome.

"But, it's an emergency!" said the woman, nearing hysterics. "The current nursing home my mother is at right now took over a week to find out that she had a broken hand! The nursing aid thought mother had sprained it or something and never did anything about it, even though mother told her repeatedly, that she was in great pain! But then, as if that wasn't enough, mother wound up in the hospital two weeks later because someone at the nursing home administered glucose to her, sending mother's blood sugar out of control!"

"Your mother is a diabetic, I assume?" asked Jerome, dryly.

"I've put over eight hundred miles on my car to find a good place like this for mother," said the woman wearily, too disturbed to take notice of Jerome's rude manners, "because mother has been in nursing homes so long that she relies almost entirely on Medicaid to pay her bills."

"Patients in that situation are usually the lowest paying," stated Jerome, not caring to get into the differences of MediCal, and Medicare with her.

"You will take her, won't you? I spoke with a friend and she said that you took her mother, that's why I'm just sure you'll admit mine." The frantic logic of the desperate woman escaped Jerome. He only saw someone who had ignorantly assumed something before asking about it beforehand.

"I suggest you get your facts straight, and keep looking," advised Jerome, coldly showing her the door. All his beds were filled. The waiting list was long. He felt no monetary need to involve himself with her problems. Dazed, the woman left. Jerome sat back down in his chair. For just a flickering moment, he regretted the way in which he treated the woman. But, alas, his regrets left him almost as soon as they came.

Mike Garner, not wanting to disturb his grandmother's sleep, tiptoed quietly into Room 2. Ruth smiled out loud.

"I'm awake, Michael," she said, motioning the young man to her bedside. "Where is Chad?" she asked. "I thought Adam was going to send your little brother over with my breakfast. I see you were enlisted instead," she laughed, pointing to the brown bag in Mike's left hand.

"Uncle Adam forgot that Chad is in school at eight," said Mike, handing his grandmother the bag. Inside, Ruth found two blueberry muffins and two warm slices of buttered toast all wrapped together into one saran ball.

"You know Uncle Adam and the kitchen never did mix," chuckled Mike, when Ruth showed him the buttery mess. Mike Garner was twenty-five, had his mother's brown hair, and was generally considered by the townspeople of Twin Yucca to be the most handsome man in Southern California-- if not the whole of the entire state. It was a title that Mike shrugged off with little regard. His girlfriend liked the way he looked, and Mike felt that hers was the only opinion that counted.

"Don't you have to hurry back to the store?" asked Ruth, upon seeing Mike's readiness to talk.

"Uncle Adam said I should take my time," replied Mike. "He wanted me to stick around and make sure you're OK."

"Are you learning anything from the Master Plumber?" asked Ruth, in an effort to change the subject.

"Adam really knows what he's doing," said Mike, with admiration. "He says I show promise, but I think he's just saying that because he's my uncle and he hates to admit that he has a knucklehead for a nephew," he laughed.

"If Adam says you show promise, then he means it. In no time, you'll be a Journeyman," said Ruth. "Your grandfather would be so pleased."

"I still have a long way to go before I get my license," warned Mike. "I first have to get enough on-the-job hours and I hear the California Journeyman Plumber License exam is difficult."

"Well, Adam has been there. You just learn from him. Someday, you'll become a Master Plumber like Adam and your grandpa," Ruth encouraged. "My Matthew was the greatest Master Plumber there ever was," reminisced Ruth. "And such dedication-- people would call in the middle of the night because of some plumbing emergency, and your grandpa would go, not giving a single complaint. He would say, 'it's more blessed to give than to receive.' That was my Matthew," finished Ruth, proudly.

"I better go so you can eat," said Mike, pointing to the untouched ball of saran. He kissed his grandma and left.

Lunch was better than breakfast, for Nancy, after perceiving her oatmeal error, tried doubly hard to make the lunch meal as appetizing as she could (taking into consideration the ingredients she had available to her). Jerome had cut back the budget for the meals, making it difficult for Nancy to do her job with any satisfaction. Nancy was a licensed dietitian, but, just like she would constantly say when someone complained about the quality of the food, "I'm no miracle worker!"

Jerome "beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was."

~ James 1:24 ~

Chapter Five

Train Up a Child

"How are the mighty fallen!"

~ 2 Samuel 1:27 ~

Mrs. Angela Goodman, Charlotte's Aunt, arrived early Saturday morning at the Silver Bow County Airport. Charlotte despaired in her room while Charlton went to meet his sister-in-law at the airport.

It was no great difficulty for Angela to recognize Charlton. His light brown hair had not grayed; the blue eyes that her sister Martha had so admired were not faded; his rugged good looks were as handsome as ever; his six foot three inch frame had never looked stronger; in short, he was the picture of robust health. Despite Angela's mental preparation for this meeting, his healthy appearance caught her momentarily off guard.

"How could anyone so young as Chuck, (he was forty-two), have Alzheimer's?" she asked herself, as Charlton approached her at the gate.

"Hello, Angela," greeted Charlton somberly.

"Chuck," nodded Angela in acknowledgment. "How are you?" she asked, her voice filling with sympathy and pity. Charlton attempted a careless shrug, as if to say that the recent events hadn't fazed him one bit.

"The car's this way," he motioned toward the parking lot. "We better start back. Charlie's waiting," he explained.

"Of course," replied Angela.

"Don't we need to get your gear first?" asked Charlton pointing toward the luggage conveyor belt.

"Gear? Oh, you mean baggage," reasoned Angela, out loud. "I didn't bring anything with me. I think I can have Charlotte packed and ready to take the return flight with me by this evening," she replied. Charlton's face fell. He had hoped to at least have Charlotte until Monday morning.

"I see," was all he could say.

The short trip back to the apartment was quiet, except for the occasional polite remark from Angela about the scenery. All too soon for Charlton, the drive was over.

"Angela," said Charlton, "before we go in, I have a favor to ask."

"Of course," replied Angela, half afraid that Charlton had changed his mind about the arrangement.

"Charlie doesn't know about my... my problem," he explained. "I would appreciate it if you could keep it from her. It would only upset her."

"Of course," repeated Angela, relieved that he hadn't changed his mind.

As they approached Charlton's apartment, Angela's face grew puzzled.

"Do you hear music?" she asked.

"It's coming from our apartment," observed Charlton. When he opened the front door, music blared from Charlie's room. Amazingly, her door was closed.

"She must be stone deaf!" shouted Angela, covering her ears and stepping back outside.

"CHARLIE!" yelled Charlton, his voice barely audible over the ear-piercing noise, "turn it off!" There was no answer. Angrily, Charlton tried to open her door. It was locked. "Charlie," he shouted, "open the door!" One of the neighbors appeared at the front door and peered in. It was old Mrs. Jenkins from across the hall. She timidly tapped Charlton on the shoulder. Frustrated, Charlton threw up his hands and followed Mrs. Jenkins outside.

"It's about Charlie, the poor dear," began Mrs. Jenkins. "The poor dear! I caught her trying to run away, not ten minutes after you left this morning. I sent the poor dear to her room. Nearly broke my heart," sighed Mrs. Jenkins. Charlton looked at her in disbelief. Charlotte would never run away-- not his daughter!

"My Charlie would never do something like that," disagreed Charlton. Angela shook her head.

"Charlton Overholt, you are in denial. Pure and simple. Pure and simple," she repeated knowingly. Charlton clenched his jaw.

"Charlie's my girl! I ought to know her better than you," he retorted.

"Yes, you ought," observed old Mrs. Jenkins, as she returned to her apartment.

This humiliating scene was being played out in front of Charlton's sister-in-law at his expense. He had no control of his health, and now it appeared, no control over his own daughter. He angrily pounded on Charlotte's door. The music grew louder. She obviously was not going to listen. Charlton had enough. With one swift kick of his strong leg, the door swung opened.

He found Charlotte sitting on the floor by her bed, her hands clenching a pillow against each ear. Charlton quickly located the obnoxious disturber of the peace and sent it flying out the window, smashing into dozens of plastic pieces on the pavement. Charlton breathed a sigh of relief. Everything was quiet.

Angela entered Charlotte's bedroom, shaking her head in disapproval.

"Charlie, this is Mrs. Angela Goodman, your mother's sister," Charlton explained. Charlotte brought the pillows down from her ears. Angela stepped forward as Charlotte got to her feet.

"My, Chuck," Angela said, forgetting momentarily the trouble Charlotte had just caused, "you were right. She's Martha all over."

"Give your Aunt Angela a hug," prodded Charlton. "She graciously traveled from North Carolina just to help you pack." Charlotte rooted her feet in defiance of her father. "Charlie, do as you are told," he ordered.

"Now, now," said Angela soothingly, upon seeing Charlotte's continued defiance, "no need for hard feelings between family. Chuck, why don't you go take a walk while Charlotte and I get to know each other," suggested Angela. Charlton understood. He was being kicked out, however politely, by Angela. Charlton looked to Charlotte, half waiting for her to object, but she remained silent. Without a word, Charlton left the apartment.

"Well," began Angela, turning her attention to Charlotte, "the last time I saw you, you were just a baby. Look how you've grown!" she exclaimed.

"Fifteen years does that," replied Charlotte blandly. Angela grinned through her teeth.

"Chuck may put up with your smart mouth, but I assure you, I will not," warned Angela, in a sweet voice.

"Whatever," replied Charlotte, rolling her eyes. Before Charlotte knew it, a hand suddenly appeared, slapping her hard on the left side of her face. Charlotte touched her stinging cheek and looked somewhat fearfully at her Aunt.

"Do we understand each other?" asked Angela, firmly. The slap hurt, but Charlotte didn't feel it. Deep down, she had to admit that she had it coming. Even so, Charlotte felt that an injustice had just been committed. Up till then, her father had been the only one to really discipline her. This usurper of authority was taking her father's place. When that realization sank in, Charlotte finally understood. Her father was giving her away-- as if she was no longer his daughter anymore. Charlotte had secretly hoped that her father would change his mind. Up till then, she had refused to believe he would do this to her. But the finality in Angela's voice deflated that hope like air rushing from a popped balloon.

"Do we understand each other?" repeated Angela, after seeing Charlotte's hesitancy.

"I understand," mumbled Charlotte. As far as she was concerned, it was the end of the world-- at least the way she knew it.

"Good," said Angela, her voice taking a lighter tone, "now we can get to work." Charlotte reluctantly obeyed her Aunt as they gathered up her belongings, one by one, and packed them into suitcases and bags for the trip to North Carolina.

"Your father has already sent me your records, so you will start school right away," said Angela, emptying Charlotte's sock drawer into an open suitcase on the bed. "You will be attending the same high school as your cousin, Sherri," continued Angela, "so you will make new friends in no time. In fact, Sherri will be sharing her room with you. I just know my two girls will get along famously."

Every sentence sounded like a death knell on Charlotte's ears. Life was changing too rapidly to keep up with the emotions attached to it. Despair was the only reaction her numb heart could conjure.

Frank looked up from the magazine he was reading and smiled when he saw Charlton standing behind the counter.

"Couldn't stay away, not even on your day off, huh?" Frank laughed. Charlton smiled lamely.

"Needed to get out of the apartment for awhile. How's business?" asked Charlton, running his thumb along the edges of the store's "Venture Outdoors" flyers on the counter.

"It's been slow today," replied Frank, popping open a can. "Charlie giving you a hard time?" asked Frank, tossing Charlton a refreshment.

"You have kids," began Charlton, "tell me, how do you know if you're doing right by them?" Frank raised his eyebrows. He really didn't know how to answer his friend's question.

"Look," explained Frank, "I've tried to instill the same values I have into my kids. They seem to be turning out good anyway," laughed Frank.

"But how do you know if you're right?" asked Charlton, his voice growing urgent.

"What's with the twenty questions?" asked Frank. "You and Charlie have a fight?" he asked. Charlton silently took another drink from his can. "Am I glad I don't have any daughters," sighed Frank. "Boys I can handle, but girls? I'm doing good if I can make sense of my wife half the time."

It was early in the evening when Charlton returned to the apartment. He found Charlotte's luggage stacked neatly by the door, ready to be loaded into the car.

"Chuck," asked Angela, upon seeing him step through the front door, "Do you know where the mate to this pink sock is?" They were the first words out of Angela's mouth since his return.

"No," replied Charlton, realizing he hadn't been missed.

"Well," said Angela, placing her hands on her hips, "I guess that's everything." Charlotte walked into the room, dressed in the traveling clothes her Aunt had picked out.

"You look nice," said Charlton, in a lame attempt to cheer her. Charlotte looked down, refusing to acknowledge the presence of her father. Angela cleared her throat.

"It's time to leave," she said, picking up her purse. "Our flight takes off in half an hour."

"I'll put the gear in the car," replied Charlton.

"Gear?" repeated Angela, quizzically. "Oh yes, I forgot. You always had such a way with words, Chuck," she smiled. "Charlotte, dear, why don't you get in the car," said Angela, in a firm voice that suggested an order rather than a request. "We really do need to hurry if we're going to catch our flight," reminded Angela, seeing Charlton's hesitancy with the "gear."

The short drive to the Silver Bow County Airport was over all too soon for father and daughter. Charlton helped load Charlotte's luggage onto the conveyor belt and waited as Angela presented her tickets at the counter. While Angela was busy with the tickets, Charlton tried to speak to Charlotte, but when he opened his mouth, she turned away.

"It's time to say good-bye to your father," announced Angela returning from the ticket counter. "Our flight is about to take off."

"Good bye, Charlie," said Charlton. "I know you don't want to talk to me right now, but I'm doing what's best for you. I want you to remember that." Charlotte looked away, as if she didn't hear him. "I love you," he said, his voice breaking.

"I wish you well, Chuck," began Angela, "and don't worry about Charlotte. I'll treat her as if she were my own." Angela hurriedly shook hands with her brother-in-law and started Charlotte toward the plane.

Charlotte took a quick glance back. Her father was weeping and looking very much alone. Angela's grip on her arm tightened.

"Be strong for your father, Charlotte. Remember what he said, 'I'm doing what's best for you,'" reminded Angela. Confused and hurt, Charlotte got onto the plane and took her seat. The strain soon became too much. She fainted.

Charlton watched as the airplane slowly disappeared from view. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small, pink sock. It was all he had left.

"Woe is me now! for the LORD hath added grief to my sorrow; I fainted in my sighing, and I find no rest."

~ Jeremiah 45:3 ~

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge."

~ Hosea 4:6 ~

"Train up a child in the way [she] should go: and when [she] is old, [she] will not depart from it."

~ Proverbs 22:6 ~

Chapter Six
Adam's Move

"There is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil."

~ Job 1:8 ~

Adam Clark sat down at a small table in the Recreation Room of Mullen-Overholt Nursing Home. It was nine in the evening on Saturday night, (a half hour after the bedtime of the residents), so the room was comparatively empty, save for the occasional nurse or nursing assistant, who used the tables while they filled out the tedious paperwork their occupations generated. Adam organized the chess pieces on the checkered board in front of him, careful to make sure they all faced the correct direction.

Adam was a soft-spoken man, always tending to be withdrawn and quiet. Because of this, many of the Twin Yucca townspeople nicknamed him "Solitary Adam", or "The Bat", for he routinely had trouble sleeping at night. Often, Adam could be found working in his garden by the light of the moon, late into the night. He also loved to stargaze-- an excuse Adam sometimes offered when pressed for an answer about his peculiar sleeping habits. He was an unassuming man-- always first in line to help a friend or someone in need, but always the last in line to ask help for himself. He quietly worked out his own problems, choosing not to burden others with his troubles.

It was not entirely the fault of the townspeople for their misconception of Adam. He made little effort to change popular opinion. Instead, he adopted a "let them think what they want for they will anyway" policy.

Adam Clark's understated appearance partially accounted for the way he was treated by the townspeople. Adam had dark cropped hair that resembled a two week old Marine haircut; his hair was a little white at the temples, giving him the appearance of someone who was a few years older than his 44 years might suggest; he had light complexioned skin that burned easily in the sun; and he was colorblind, which accounted for the lack of flowers in his garden and the absence of any real color in his wardrobe.

Adam was also a Master Plumber and the owner of Clark Plumbing Service and Supply in Twin Yucca. People knew him as an excellent plumber, though he was "a bit odd." He lived in a comfortable house and made a good living. His handsome nephew, Mike Garner, worked for his Uncle at the store. It was a quiet and relatively peaceful life.

In spite of this, the greatest cause of concern to his mother, Mrs. Ruth Clark, a current resident of Mullen-Overholt Nursing Home, was the fact that her son was still unmarried. Ruth had two children, Adam Wallace and Shirley Alice. Her daughter, Shirley, had married a bearded gentleman by the name of Thomas Garner. They had two children, Michael Thomas, 25, and Chad Adam, 9, who was named after Shirley's older brother, Adam. The Garner family lived fashionably in a large, adobe house on the outskirts of Twin Yucca. Thomas Garner had made his fortune writing how-to books and lecturing at specialty conventions. With an absentee father in the family, Mike and Chad spent their childhood "visiting Uncle Adam." It was often said, much to the annoyance of Shirley, that Mike and Chad behaved more like Adam's sons than Thomas'. Indeed, if a comparison could be made, Thomas had been a wild and rebellious child, only slowing down after a bout with rheumatic fever when he was fifteen. Thomas's eldest son Mike, however, was quiet and introspective, much like his Uncle Adam. Young Chad was a blue-eyed, blonde-haired ball of energy. If Adam had saved anyone from becoming too much like their father, it was Chad. Adam's company had benefited the boys' lives for eternity.

Even so, Adam had spent so much time selflessly taking care of others, that Ruth prayed for someone to take care of him.

Constance Riley was Ruth's answer to prayer. Constance and Adam had known each other a little over eight years. She was beautiful and intelligent, (save for the fact that her hair was a little too bleached and her eye makeup a little too heavy for Ruth's taste), she was the ideal wife for Adam. Indeed, by all accounts it was a perfect match. Constance was five years younger than Adam, a real estate agent, and was rumored to be his undeclared fiancée. Ruth hoped and prayed for the day Adam and Constance would be married.

"Waiting for Jerome, Adam?" asked a friendly voice, pausing by the table where Adam had set up the chessboard in the Recreation Room. It was Chandra Powell, an attractive, black nursing assistant who had the evening shift at Mullen-Overholt Nursing Home.

"Have you seen Jerome?" asked Adam, checking his watch.

"I saw him with Arnold, just a minute ago," replied Chandra. Just then, someone called for her in a loud voice. "Gotta run," said Chandra. Five minutes after Chandra left, Jerome appeared in the doorway, his face tired and grave. Adam covered his mouth with his hand and stared at the chessboard. Without a word, Jerome sat down at the small table opposite Adam.

"Your move or mine?" asked Jerome, examining the chessboard carefully.

"Yours," replied Adam.

"This board doesn't look right," announced Jerome, pointing to Adam's queen. "I distinctly remember taking that queen last night."

"No, you're thinking about the game before, when I lost my queen to your bishop," disagreed Adam. "I set up the board exactly the way it was yesterday." Jerome shrugged.

"You're the one with the photographic memory," he replied. The next few minutes were spent in silent contemplation as Jerome calculated his move.

"Your move," said Jerome, advancing a pawn by one square. Adam looked at the board thoughtfully.

"How's your father?" asked Adam, his eyes fastened on the chessboard.

"Chandra must have told you," Jerome deduced.

"Either that, or I can hear through walls," smiled Adam.

"Dad's doing as well as can be expected," answered Jerome stiffly. He leaned back and folded his hands across his chest, patiently waiting for Adam to make his move.

Arnold Overholt, Jerome's father, had been a resident of Mullen-Overholt almost as soon it opened in 1998. Arnold was now in the sixth stage of Alzheimer's, and depended almost entirely on assistance from others to do the most basic things as get dressed or comb his hair. Vera Overholt, Arnold's self-sacrificing wife, traveled to Twin Yucca to be near her husband. She moved into Jerome's largely unused house, and walked the short distance to the nursing home everyday, to spend her time by Arnold's side.

Jerome minded little that his Mom had, practically speaking, taken over his house. The house was a present from Todd Mullen, Jerome's partner. It was a kind gesture, but Jerome insisted on living at the nursing home instead. Jerome's "living space" consisted of three small rooms located at the back of his office. If Vera was importunate enough, Jerome would spend the weekend at home with his mother.

"Your move," said Adam, moving his castle forward two squares. Jerome rubbed his chin, and after a few minutes of thought, moved his knight, capturing Adam's last bishop.

"Your move," Jerome smiled slyly. Adam raised his eyebrows and stared at the chessboard.

"I ran into Lynda Jennings, this morning. She thought that maybe her Mom's bed was too near the window," said Adam casually, as if it had just happened to cross his mind.

"Betty has been moved three times already," responded Jerome, impatiently.

"Lynda says her Mom is susceptible to the draft that's coming from the window," said Adam, still trying to decide on his move.

"Very well," sighed Jerome. "I'll have Betty trade places with someone not susceptible to the draft."

"With your permission, I'll fix the window," volunteered Adam, glancing up at Jerome.

"That's a job for maintenance," replied Jerome. "Are you going to sit there all night, or are you going to make a move?" Jerome asked impatiently. Adam moved a piece forward and waited silently while Jerome concentrated. "There," said Jerome, "your move."

"Maintenance doesn't have the time to fix the window," said Adam, returning his eyes to the chessboard.

"Are you still thinking about that?" asked Jerome, leaning back in his chair. If Adam had been monitoring his opponent's face, he would have seen a faint smile playing around Jerome's mouth. "If you want to do it so badly, go ahead," Jerome said, waving a hand toward Adam.

"Your move," said Adam. Again, he waited till Jerome had made his move before speaking.

"Jack Robertson," began Adam, "wanted to know if he could stay up an hour later at bedtime on Tuesday nights."

"Who is Jack?" asked Jerome.

"Jack lives in Room Four," replied Adam.

"And why does Jack want to stay up an hour after bedtime on Tuesday nights?" asked Jerome, intently watching Adam's bent head.

"On Tuesday nights they play reruns of an old show that Jack used to listen to on the radio," answered Adam.

"If I let him stay up an hour later, then everyone else will want too also," protested Jerome. "It's hard enough to get them quieted down before bedtime as it is."

"Jack's program is on the radio. He can wear headphones," suggested Adam, fingering a chess piece. "If you tell the staff to leave him alone on Tuesday nights, no one will be the wiser."

"You've thought of everything, haven't you?" asked Jerome. "Very well. Let Jack have his Tuesday nights." Adam moved his chess piece and leaned back, satisfied with the way the game was progressing.

"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 ~

"The LORD is good to all: and His tender mercies are over all His works."

~ Psalm 145:9 ~

Chapter Seven

Friends and Bosses

"I will bring the blind by a way that [he] knew not; I will lead [him] in paths that [he has] not known: I will make darkness light before [him], and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto [him], and not forsake [him]. [He] shall be turned back, [he] shall be greatly ashamed."
~ Isaiah 42:16, 17 ~

Except for Frank, Charlton was alone in every respect. He only left the apartment to go to work or buy groceries. Charlton's biggest fear was that he would have an episode in public-- especially in front of Frank, for Charlton had not told him about the diagnosis. Not only was Frank a friend, he was also a boss. Friend or not, Charlton was unsure what Frank would do if he found out. After all, the Alzheimer's was beginning to affect Charlton's work at Venture Outdoors. Frank had not said anything, but Charlton was uneasy all the same.

To avert any thoughts Frank might be thinking, Charlton organized another camping trip. Seven novice outdoor enthusiasts signed up for a five day excursion in the great outdoors with Charlton Overholt as their guide. Frank, as always, furnished the supplies and collected the fees for sponsoring this small "vacation." (Frank thought these trips were good for the store's image.) Frank agreed to meet the group five days from now at a spot preselected by Charlton and himself, so he could drive the group back to civilization without them experiencing the same hardships in reverse.

The first day was damp and overcast. The threat of rain smothered the group's expectations of a perfect trip, making that day's hike tedious and somewhat tense for Charlton. One of the group suggested that they go faster, to try and avoid the storm. The suggestion reminded Charlton of a story he had told Charlotte hundreds of times. The recollection of Charlotte lifted his spirits. With a lighthearted voice, Charlton entertained the unhappy group with a story called "The Cowboy Who Bulldogged A Cloud."

Back when the old American west was untamed, and the ranges were open and free, there lived an unassuming cowboy named Gritts. He had gotten his name from the way he would bare his teeth whenever he set his mind to do something. Gritts rode for the Four Brother Ranch, so named because four brothers shared ownership. It was a vast ranch, covering several thousands of acres. If you went to the center of it, you could see nothing but land owned by the Four Brother Ranch, from one horizon to the other.

This land was Gritts' idea of perfection, except for one major problem: it had no water. No water for mile upon mile. It had no ponds, no rivers, only wells that had finally dried out a few days earlier. The wells were fed by rain from the nearby mountain and it hadn't rained in months. If it didn't rain on the mountain soon, then the wells would remain dry, and the cattle on the Four Brother Ranch would die.

Now even though the cattle weren't his, Gritts hated to see such prime beef waste away on the prairie, so he set out to do something about it. The next day off he had, Gritts didn't join his fellow ranch hands into town, as he was in the habit of doing, but instead, saddled his horse, General, and set out for the mountain.

As Gritts and General climbed up the steep mountain, a spindly, dry cloud formed overhead, curious as to what this cowboy was up to. Gritts watched the cloud out of the corner of his eye, until at last, he and General made it to the summit of the highest peak.

"That there cloud sure ain't gonna be no drencher, General," remarked the cowboy, "but, mebbe I kin fix that."

Then Gritts took out his lasso, and with an expert hand, roped the cloud in one fail toss. General looked at his rider with admiration.

"It's all in muh wrist," grinned Gritts.

The cloud, seeing that it had been tricked, bucked and tugged at the lasso, until Gritts was pulled clean off his horse! Still gripping the rope, Gritts tied one end of the rope to General's saddle horn and climbed back on.

With every moment, the spindly cloud was becoming angry, dark, and threatening. With a tap of his spurs, Gritts nudged General backward, jerking the rope until the cloud was thrown down to the ground! At this, the cloud became furious, and rapidly doubled and tripled in size, until it's sides bulged with rain. Then, in one great rumble, the cloud gained altitude, until General's hooves were no longer touching the ground!

"I'm a gettin' a might onry," muttered Gritts.

Back at the bunkhouse, down the mountain, the ranch hands had noticed a large dark cloud with a cowboy and his horse dangling by a lasso beneath it.

"It's Gritts!" exclaimed one fellow, taking off his hat and pointing it toward the mountain. "And he's caught hisself a rain cloud!"

From his vantage in the sky, Gritts could hear the cheers of the men below.

"General," muttered Gritts, who was too busy to take much notice of the cheering, "when this thing busts loose, we better hightail it outta here."

General whinnied and kicked his legs, ready to make their getaway. Gritts looked up at the cloud and bared his gleaming white teeth. Not wanting to be outdone by a mere cowpoke, the cloud rumbled and flashed with brilliant display of lights and sounds. Meeting the challenge, Gritts widened his grin, and shouted "Waaaahooooo!" and "Kiiiiyaaaaay!" at the top of his lungs, until the entire mountain was filled with his calls. Livid, the cloud broke through its side with a piercing bolt of lightning, causing a huge torrent of water to pour to the ground, just in back of Gritts and General.

With one flick of his knife, Gritts cut the rope, causing General to land on his feet running! A trail of dust followed them as they descended the mountain and back onto the open plains.

Gritts looked behind him only to see that the cloud was rapidly doubling itself, until it formed a large dark blanket, steadily rolling and rumbling, straight in their direction! It was raining so hard, that the clouds looked like they were falling onto the land, drenching it with the much needed rain. But Gritts was too determined to outwit the rain, that he didn't notice its beauty.

"Don't feel like gittin' wet, today," muttered Gritts, tightening his grip on General's reins. And with that, he urged General to go faster and faster, until he and the rain were in an all out race to reach the gates of the ranch.

"Would yuh look'it that!" cried one of the hands, seeing the torrent that was pursuing Gritts and General. "They're tryin' to outrun the downpour!"

Gritts looked back. The rain was gaining on them.

"Yah, General! Yah!" he shouted.

The ranch gates now came into view. If they could only make it a little longer, they could win. Gritts hunkered down in the saddle and bared his teeth in determination. General came galloping through the open gates and was headed straight to the safety of his dry stable, when a low hanging tree branch knocked Gritts out of the saddle and onto the ground. Just then, the torrent of rain passed overhead, drenching everyone and everything-- except General, who had made it to cover just in time!

In celebration, the ranch hands carried Gritts on their shoulders, as the range thirstily drank in the rain. And that is how a cowboy bulldogged a cloud and saved the Four Brother Ranch from drought.

"So, you see," finished Charlton, as the group struggled along the trail, "unless you're a quick thinking horse, you can run from the rain for only so long. Eventually, you're going to get wet!" The group laughed, rallying their spirits.

As the sun set over the mountainous horizon, Charlton's thoughts turned to making camp for the night. Since Charlton was so familiar with the terrain, a good camp site was quickly scouted out. The campers eagerly took off their backpacks and set about to dig a fire pit so dinner could be ready sooner, and not later. While dinner cooked, the group erected their tents and stowed their gear, ready for a night of rest under the darkening sky. As they gathered around the fire to eat, the light flickered on their faces, revealing seven spirited campers.

For a brief moment, Charlton forgot his troubles and joined in the hearty conversation. Then he remembered that Charlotte was the one who always tended the fire and cooked for his groups. The old pain returned, aided by memories of his daughter.

"She would have enjoyed today," thought Charlton, staring into the bright flames of the fire. "She missed the story. She never missed the story before." Then Charlton thought of a life full of landmarks, each setting the same lonely precedent: "Charlie wasn't here."

"Hey, gang," said Charlton, standing up and stretching out, "I'm pretty bushed. Think I'll turn in. Don't stay up too late," he admonished. "We have a busy day tomorrow." Everyone said goodnight to their guide as he left the friendly glow of the fire. Charlton had pitched his tent on the outskirts of the camp sight. He had desired to be alone but not by himself. As Charlton fell asleep, he could hear the campers singing exuberantly around the campfire.

It was early afternoon by the time any of the seven campers woke up. The day had already started and they were just waking up. Why hadn't their guide awakened them? They were wasting valuable daylight-- daylight they had paid for. Their voices edged on anger as they crossed the campsite to Charlton's tent. To their amazement, the flap door on the tent was unzipped and waving in the cool Montana breeze.

"Where is he?" asked one of the seven, looking around.

"Maybe he's hunting breakfast," suggested another.

"Not without me!" cried the first, running back to his tent to dress. Eager not to miss out on a single moment of "roughing it" the seven campers went in search of Charlton, who, undoubtedly, was busily getting their breakfast. The farther away from the campsite they grew, the more concerned they became.

"Do you think he left us?" asked Dick.

"Out in the middle of nowhere?!" exclaimed Ralph, his voice betraying panic.

"Maybe something happened to him-- some sort of emergency," suggested James, trying hard to keep a level head. "We should split up and search for him. He might be in trouble." The group, who, up to now, had been motivated by hunger and an exciting awe of adventure, were now spurred on by a subdued fear of being stranded by themselves in the middle of nowhere. None of them had any grand delusions of being able to make it on their own. They needed their guide. They needed Charlton.

Their search soon ended when Dick shouted,

"He's over here! He's over here!" Everyone ran to where Dick was kneeling on the ground. There lie their strong guide, shaking from hypothermia, for he had been exposed all night to the cold, damp mountain air. Charlton's teeth were chattering and his face was pale.

"Quick," said James, taking off his coat and placing it around Charlton's shoulders, "rub his hands and legs." Everyone shed a warm article of clothing, wrapping it snugly around him. "Can you walk?" asked James, still trying to think ahead. Charlton nodded. Slowly, they made it back to the campsite. James lit a fire and seated Charlton beside it.

"Are you going to be OK?" asked Ralph, not knowing whether he should still be concerned or not.

"I'll be all right," responded Charlton, his body temperature rising. "Let's eat lunch here and head back," said Charlton, his voice half command and half suggestion.

"What happened?" asked James, while lunch heated over the fire pit.

"This camping trip was a bad idea," said Charlton, shaking his head. "I shouldn't have brought you guys out here. I'm really sorry," he apologized.

"How was it your fault?" asked Ralph, forgetting his previous panic.

"Sometimes, I'm forgetful," Charlton explained, trying hard to leave out the word Alzheimer's. "At any rate, you'll all get your money back." That was all the explanation Charlton was going to offer, so they instead contented themselves with the letters, R-E-F-U-N-D.

Providentially, Ralph suddenly remembered he had brought a cell phone with him.

"Call Frank," instructed Charlton. "Tell him to meet us at the start of the trail."

"What do I tell him if he wants to know why?" asked Ralph, unsure of the reason himself.

"Just tell Frank that we're heading back early," said Charlton, secretly dreading the questions that Frank was going to ask. The call was soon made. Frank agreed to meet them at the beginning of the trail. When Frank questioned the sudden change of plans, Ralph repeated word-for-word what Charlton had said, "We're heading back early."

Lunch passed in silence, everyone unsure what had happened to their happy group. Things had gone so well, and then... what? The hike back to the start of the trail was made shorter than the time it took for them the day before, for Charlton knew a short cut. He dreaded another night spent outdoors with a group of strangers. The sooner they got back, the better he would feel.

Frank met them at the appointed spot and greeted them in a friendly fashion. The seven campers nodded back, uncertain how they felt about him at the moment.

"What happened?" whispered Frank to Charlton, as the solemn group climbed into the van.

"I wasn't feeling too well," explained Charlton, hoping to leave it at that.

"As soon as we drive these people back, I'm taking you to Dr. Estrada," declared Frank. For a minute, Charlton thought Frank knew. Then he remembered that Dr. Estrada was also Frank's doctor. The group was taken back to the store, and their money refunded to them. All too soon for Charlton, they were in front of Dr. Estrada's office.

Dr. Estrada was a happy man by nature. He greeted all his patients as though they were long lost friends. This time however, his face was not happy when he greeted Charlton and Frank. After instructing Frank to wait outside the office, Dr. Estrada ordered Charlton to sit down on the examination table.

"Normally," the doctor began, "I stay out of the personal lives of my patients. At medical school they practically brand us with the motto, 'never get personally involved with a patient.'" Dr. Estrada ordered Charlton to undress. While he examined the patient, he continued to talk. "Chuck, I consider myself your friend, and as your friend, I must protest the way you are running your life. Should I keep my nose out of other peoples' business? Maybe. My wife, God bless her, constantly tells me to mind my own business. I tell her, 'My friends are my business.' When they don't feel good, I take it personally." The doctor raised his eyebrows. "Am I getting through to you, Chuck?" Charlton smiled weakly. "Good, then maybe this time, you will take my prescription more seriously," Dr. Estrada continued. "I'm not talking about medication. I could prescribe all the meds available to people in your condition, but the absolute best thing you can do for yourself is to be with family. Emotional instability aggravates Alzheimer's. Stabilize the love and support around you, and you will minimize the intensity of these episodes. Am I reaching you?" asked the doctor.

"What do you want me to do?" responded Charlton, his voice verging on helpless frustration. "Do you want me to go get Charlie? Do you want her to see me like this?" cried Charlton.

"Chuck," said Dr. Estrada, placing his hand on Charlton's shoulder, "I don't know how long you have before you won't even recognize her. Alzheimer's progresses greatly from individual to individual. I can tell you that Alzheimer's is a degenerative disease. You will get worse. The only question here, is time-- something you don't have much of, my friend."

"Charlie can't take care of me by herself," said Charlton, thoughtfully. "I can't do that to her. The responsibility would overwhelm her. You should have seen the faces of my camping group," remarked Charlton. "They were overwhelmed by something they didn't understand, and it scared them. I know it scared me."

"The unknown always frightens us. Truth is important because it helps us to understand the inevitable, and arms us with the facts to prepare for it," sagely counselled the doctor. "You have other family, don't you? I believe a brother... Jerome, am I right?"

"Yes, Jerome. He's my older brother," answered Charlton.

"Where does older brother, Jerome, live?" asked Dr. Estrada.

"The last I heard, he was in Southern California-- someplace called Twin Yucca. I don't know... I haven't spoken with him in years. He might be there, he might not," said Charlton, in a voice that suggested he didn't care.

"Go find Older Brother Jerome," ordered Dr. Estrada. "It's not safe for you to live by yourself anymore."

Frank got up from his seat when Charlton left the good doctor's office.

"Are you going to be OK?" he asked, as they walked to the van parked outside. Charlton no longer felt it was possible to keep his diagnosis a secret. Frank had suspected something was wrong even before the disastrous camping trip. Charlton hesitated.

"Hey, I'm your friend," coaxed Frank. "You can tell me. What gives?" Frank The Friend waited for Charlton's answer.

"Dr. Estrada says I have something called Early Onset Alzheimer's," blurted Charlton, laying it on the line.

"Alzheimer's? You mean that thing old people get? You have it?" asked Frank, stunned by what Charlton had just told him.

"Yes," answered Charlton, waiting to see what his response would be.

"No mistake?"

"No mistake."

"Whew," said Frank, "I'm right behind you, buddy. What are you supposed to do... probably rest a lot, or something?" Charlton could sense that Frank was feeling extremely uncomfortable and awkward in his presence.

"Something like that," mumbled Charlton. Before Charlton very eyes, Frank The Friend was slowly becoming Frank The Boss.

"Why don't you take tomorrow off," suggested Frank, "you know... to get better. You'll feel like new with a little rest. In fact, take as much time as you need. You really deserve it... I mean you're overdue for a vacation anyway." Frank cleared his voice. He knew his voice sounded guilty. To change the subject, he began to talk. He talked about anything, just as long as it wasn't related to the visit to the doctor's office. "I remember once, I really overdid it, and I was feeling miserable, I mean miserable..." and so Frank continued to talk all the way back, as if nothing had happened.

"Laugh, and the world laughs with you; cry, and you cry alone," thought Charlton, gloomily.

"My heart panteth, my strength faileth me: as for the light of mine eyes, it also is gone from me...
my friends stand aloof from my sore."

~ Psalm 38:10, 11 ~

"Which now of these... thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him? He that showed mercy on him."

~ Luke 10:36, 37 ~

Chapter Eight
Two of Them

"Man goeth forth unto his work and to his labour until the evening."
~ Psalm 104:23 ~

The day shift waited in a long line, each holding their time cards and eager to go home, as their replacements arrived to work at Mullen-Overholt. These replacements were the evening shift, which began at three and lasted till eleven at night.

Recently, one of the nursing assistants had quit, complaining of poverty level wages, lack of affordable health insurance, and a heavy workload. Nevertheless, one employee quit, and another was hired.

With a critical eye, Jerome examined the new nursing assistant from the top of his neatly combed head to the toe of his polished white shoes, as if to find some hidden flaw of the soul conspicuously tattooed across his new white uniform.

Julia Rogers, the nursing assistant for Room 3, watched from behind a stack of dingy white towels. (Due to recent procedural changes implemented by the Co-Owner/Administrator himself, all the clothing, towels, cloth diapers, etc., went into a common laundry process, where everything was intermixed with soiled cloth diapers and bedding, to come out in a dingy and smelly state. For this reason, the Director of Nursing, [DON], implemented a procedural change of her own. She transferred the last of the residents who were still using the cloth diapers to disposable adult diapers. Any money Jerome had hoped to save by taking "shortcuts" with the laundry, was now spent on more disposable diapers. Evelyn Saunders, the DON of Mullen-Overholt, always endeavored to stay two steps ahead of her penny-pinching boss. Much of the time, when Jerome made another change in the budget, he wound up spending more money in a less efficient manner than before. No one envied Evelyn's job.)

"Absenteeism, is not, and will not, ever be tolerated," began Jerome in his cold, detached voice. "When you call in sick, or come in late, someone else has to fill in for a job you are getting paid for, Mr. Tucker," he declared to the new nursing assistant. Jerome scowled when he saw Julia's pretty face peering over the "clean" towels. Julia quickly moved her hands, as if to be hard at work with something or other. "Smile at the visitors," continued Jerome, "and remember to treat them courteously. This is a people business, Mr. Tucker. Don't forget that. It's all about people," repeated Jerome, pounding his fist on an imaginary platform before him. "Service is our top priority," he concluded. During Jerome's speech, Mr. Tucker nodded and smiled in agreement to everything Jerome said. To Mr. Tucker, Jerome sounded like someone who genuinely cared for

his residents. After Jerome walked away, Julia approached the new recruit. Mr. Tucker was a white, middle-aged man, who wore thick glasses that magnified his eyes and temples, giving an odd illusion of someone who was all eyeballs.

"My name's Julia," greeted the eavesdropper.

"I'm Louie Tucker," he replied, shaking Julia's outstretched hand.

"I see you've made it through orientation," smiled Julia, picking up an armload of towels.

"I'll try my hardest to live up to the Administrator's expectations," Louie said, zealously.

"You're new to this business, aren't you?" asked Julia. "Jerome Overholt is a lot of hot air. I don't care what's printed on his office door, Evelyn runs this nursing home. This place should be called, Mullen-Saunders instead of Mullen-Overholt," stated Julia, with a high degree of conviction in her voice. "Don't forget to 'Smile,'" she repeated, shaking her tightly curled black hair indignantly. "For shame! Why, I've never seen him smile at anyone in all the time I've worked here!"

"Quiet!" hushed Louie, looking side to side for his boss. "He might hear you."

"Let him!" replied Julia. "It might do him some good!" Louie wisely changed the subject and went about his work in Room 4, the room next door to Julia, who worked in Room 3.

Each nursing assistant was responsible for one room; each room housed five residents; each resident had a bed, bed table, a yellow dividing curtain for moments of privacy, and a small chest at the foot of their bed that stored a few personal belongings. The white block walls were barren, save for an old print of Christ praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Louie had left Room 4 for only a few minutes, and upon returning, found two men discussing something very seriously. Contrary to the idea of privacy that the yellow dividing curtains suggested, in reality, there is no privacy in a nursing home. Louie quietly continued to work, though everyone in the room could clearly hear the conversation.

"It's the third bedsore in six months," said one man, obviously in an agitated state.

"Talk to the nursing assistant," suggested the other man, in a patient voice.

"It's no good, Adam. They're lazy and don't want to work. I see them all the time in the Break Room, just lying around! Why doesn't Jerome hire someone who wants to work?" the frustrated

man asked. "My dad needs to be repositioned every other hour, and he needs to drink more fluids if he's ever going to get rid of these bedsores!" Adam quietly listened, and as he did, he noticed someone new was working Room 4.

"Excuse me," said Adam, walking over to where Louie was working, "are you the new nursing assistant?" Louie was at first hesitant to answer, half afraid of admitting that he was and being blamed for the condition of the father of the angry man. But Adam's voice was friendly, and had no tone of reproach in it. Louie could not help smiling.

"Yes, I'm Louie Tucker," he replied, shaking Adam's hand.

"I'm Adam Clark, and this is Greg McCain, Terry McCain's son-- one of your residents," said Adam, gesturing to where a white haired gentleman was asleep in Bed 1. Louie nodded a "hello" to Greg, and Greg nodded a "hello" to Louie, both unsure what to think about the other. "I wonder if you could help us," explained Adam, trying to choose his words carefully. "You see, Greg's father has a bedsore. It seems he hasn't been repositioned often enough. I know your schedule is very busy, but could you help Greg's father switch positions in bed every once in a while? He is so weak, and has a hard time doing it himself," finished Adam, waiting to see what the new nursing assistant's response would be.

"People who stay in bed for lengthy periods of time must be repositioned every two hours, or they will develop pressure sores," explained Louie, quoting almost word-for-word his instructor. "I'll see to it that Mr. McCain is taken care of," reassured Louie, more to Adam than to Greg.

"He needs to drink more regularly, too," said Greg, distrustfully. Adam tried to ignore Greg's agitated looks and remarks.

"Of course," answered Louie, a bit hurt that someone was questioning whether or not he would do his job.

"How long have you been a nursing assistant?" asked Adam, trying to gain Greg's confidence in the new man.

"This is my first day," smiled Louie. "I started out as junior volunteer in the ER when I was a teenager. That's when I knew God wanted me to use my life to help others."

"God always knows what's best for us. You sound like you enjoy your work," Adam smiled, taking a quick look in Greg's direction. Greg had been listening. His face had softened and his demeanor was relaxing.

"I enjoy seeing the look on a person's face when I help them," answered Louie. "It makes me think that God has a reason for why I'm on this earth," he said thoughtfully.

"When you love God with all your heart, loving your neighbor as yourself comes a lot easier, doesn't it?" agreed Adam, happy to find someone who was at least thinking in the Right direction.

"I hadn't thought about it just that way, but you're right. Without love it would all just be a bunch of worthless good deeds, wouldn't it?" replied Louie.

"Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing," quoted Adam.

"I'll be extra careful with your father, Greg," said Louie as they turned to leave. Greg bowed his head, ashamed of what he had said earlier that evening.

"I was wrong about you guys," Greg said, shaking Louie's hand. "I apologize. I'm sure you'll do your job as best as you can." Louie thanked him and returned to his work, his spirits lifted and encouraged.

Before leaving, Adam stuck his head through the door of Jerome's office.

"Chess tonight?" asked Adam. Jerome nodded his assent. Two minutes after Adam had left, Jerome's phone rang. Since he was busy, it rang five more times. Realizing that the caller was not going to give up, Jerome reluctantly picked up the receiver on the sixth ring.

"Mullen-Overholt Nursing Home, Jerome speaking," answered Jerome, impatient to get back to work.

"Jerome? It's me, Chuck," said the caller in a timid voice.

"Well, well. So I finally hear from you."

"Jerome, I want to come home," said Charlton, pleadingly.

"Why?" asked Jerome, coldly.

"I have Alzheimer's," replied Charlton. For a moment, there was silence.

"I thought it would be me," said Jerome, his voice now more subdued.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"Since Alzheimer's is inheritable, and I was more like Dad than you, I always figured that I'd be the one to get it. I never thought for one minute that it would be you," said Jerome, disbelievingly.

"Jerome, I can't come by myself. It's not safe for me anymore to be alone. Can you come and get me?"

Charlton's helpless voice reminded Jerome of a time when they were both little. Charlton couldn't have been more than five years old when the incident happened. He had not come home from playing all day, and their Mom, Vera, was growing concerned. At her prompting, Jerome went to search for his little brother. The sky was growing darker with every minute and Charlton was nowhere to be found. Then Jerome heard Charlton's frightened little voice coming from a tall tree. Jerome quickly ran to it and looked up into its thick branches. Out on a far limb, high up in the tree, clung little Charlton. He had been playing contentedly up there for several hours until he suddenly realized he couldn't climb down. Resigning himself to spending the rest of his life, alone and up a tree, Charlton began to cry. It took all the brotherly support Jerome could muster to climb up there himself and coax his little brother to climb down with him. He never forgot the grateful hug Charlton gave him when they reached the safety of the ground.

"Can you come get me?" repeated Charlton. "I can't afford to have an episode in the middle of a busy airport."

"You'd wind up in Timbuktoo and not remember how you got there," replied Jerome knowingly. "I know what to do. I'll be there tomorrow."

"Thank you, Jerome," said Charlton, gratefully.

"Just make sure you're packed and ready," replied Jerome. When they hung up, Jerome leaned back in his office chair and called his Mom. He quickly informed her of Charlton's phone call, and, after a few minutes of motherly disbelief and tears, Jerome instructed her to get the guest room ready for Charlton.

"Charlotte's coming, isn't she, Jerome?" asked Vera.

"I suppose so," replied Jerome, who had't even noticed the omission of his niece in Charlton's phone call.

"Of course she's coming," said Vera, answering the question, as if she had just spoken to Charlton herself. "Oh, I can't wait to see my grand-daughter again!" she exclaimed through her tears.

"You'll see her soon enough," responded Jerome, patronizingly.

That night, to Adam's surprise, Jerome thoughtlessly lost his queen within the first fifteen minutes of the chess game.

"What's on your mind?" asked Adam, realizing that the loss of Jerome's queen had strategically undermined the safety of the king.

"What?" asked Jerome, who had not yet noticed the precarious situation of his king.

"I know your mind's not on the game, so it must be elsewhere," deduced Adam.

"My brother called today," answered Jerome.

"I didn't know you had a brother," Adam said, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

"Well, I do. He just informed me that he has Alzheimer's," continued Jerome, quite forgetting there was a chess game in progress. Adam listened intently. He had never known Jerome to be distracted from a game of chess before, let alone by the problems of someone else. "Ever since Dad was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, I knew I would get it. There was no doubt in my mind," Jerome said, impatiently pushing the chess board away. "Well, it looks like I dodged the bullet only to be run over by the train."

"Excuse me?" asked Adam, unclear what Jerome had meant by the last remark.

"Now I have two of them," explained Jerome.

"The fear of the wicked [Jerome], it shall come upon him: but the desire of the righteous [Adam] shall be granted."

~ Proverbs 10:24 ~

"Those that walk in pride He is able to abase."

~ Daniel 4:37 ~

Chapter Nine

Business As Usual

"The LORD giveth wisdom: out of His mouth cometh knowledge and understanding. He layeth up sound wisdom for the righteous."

~ Proverbs 2:6, 7 ~

As the buzzer on the door of Clark Plumbing Service and Supply sounded, Mike looked up, hugging a receiver between his chin and right shoulder.

"Please hold for a moment, Mrs. Tieger," Mike said into the phone. The customer walked to the counter where Mike was standing.

"You sell plungers, right? I mean, this is a plumbing store, right?" asked the man.

"Third isle, on your left," directed Mike. The man nodded and Mike returned to his phone call.

"Mrs. Tieger, we don't pump septic tanks," he continued. "Yes, I know. My uncle called someone to come over the last time you called..." the excited woman's voice interrupted Mike. He patiently sighed. "But he doesn't work for us, Mrs. Tieger. Harvey runs his own business. He pumps septics for a living-- we do not. Uncle Adam gave you his phone number..." Mike sighed again as Mrs. Tieger interrupted once more. Just then, the customer returned to the counter holding a plunger. "Uncle Adam isn't here right now, Mrs. Tieger," continued Mike as he ran the plunger through the scanner. "He's at a job right now." Mike handed the customer his receipt. "Yes, Mrs. Tieger, I'll do that," replied Mike, hanging up the receiver. As the customer was leaving, an old white van with the store logo painted on its side pulled up and parked in its usual spot near the entrance to the store.

Adam breathed a sigh of relief as he entered the air conditioned coolness of the store.

"Anything happen while I was gone?" he asked, walking to the back of the store where the office and storeroom were situated.

"Mrs. Tieger called again," announced Mike, following his uncle.

"Let me guess," smiled Adam.

"She wants us to pump her septic," finished Mike.

"What month is this?" asked Adam, leaning over the desk to look at the calendar. Adam narrowed his eyes, squinting at the blurred squares before him.

"Where are your glasses?" asked Mike, knowing that his uncle couldn't read a thing without them.

"Oh, they're around here someplace," replied Adam. "I believe the last time Mrs. Tieger called it was only five months ago. Her septic can't be full already," reasoned Adam, thoughtfully.

"Mrs. Tieger said that Harvey said that she needed more leach lines," repeated Mike.

"Either that, or Mrs. Tieger has a leak somewhere," suggested Adam. "A bad plumbing leak can really fill a septic fast."

"It's a long shot, but I guess it's possible," conceded Mike.

"If my guess is right, Harvey could pump her septic again, and we could get the same phone call from Mrs. Tieger in another five months. Wouldn't it be worth it to us to pay Mrs. Tieger a visit and make sure that her problem couldn't be solved now instead of later?" asked Adam. Mike smiled. "Anything else?" asked Adam, filing away some papers in a tall, gray metal cabinet that stood solemnly in the left corner of the office.

"Just a few customers... and, oh! before I forget, Jerome called a half hour ago. One of the residents flushed a hair brush down the toilet," said Mike.

"Do they know how long the hair brush has been there?" asked Adam, in an urgent voice.

"Jerome didn't say," shrugged Mike. "He only said to come before he has to leave for the airport at noon."

"Mike, you should have paged me," said Adam, firmly.

"It didn't sound like an emergency."

"If the hair brush has been there for very long, the toilet will back up," explained Adam. "Close up the store and put out the sign. We'll first go take care of the hair brush, and then Mrs. Tieger."

It was eleven thirty-five in the morning when the Clark Plumbing Service and Supply van pulled up in front of Mullen-Overholt Nursing Home. Jerome was toting a brown suitcase when he met Adam and Mike at the door.

"It's the bathroom in Room 2. I've got a plane to catch!" Jerome shouted over his shoulder as he rushed out the door. Leticia Ross, the nursing assistant for Room 2, tried to explain the situation as they walked down the hallway.

"The hair brush usually sits on the toilet tank lid, along with some other things," said Leticia. "This morning, when I went to go get it, it wasn't there. One of the residents told me this morning that Laura flushed it down the toilet yesterday afternoon because it pulled her hair, or something. It doesn't make any sense, but when they get this old, few things do," observed Leticia.

"Well, let's go see the damage," sighed Adam. Mrs. Ruth Clark was sitting up, awake and alert, reading her Bible when Adam and Mike came through the door.

"Hello!" she exclaimed happily, her arms reaching out for a hug.

"Sorry, Mom. I'm kind of dirty," apologized Adam, referring to his smudged blue coveralls.

"We're here on business, Grandma," explained Mike, as he hugged her.

"Oh?" replied Ruth. She watched as they made their way to the bathroom and inspected the toilet.

"A classic example of a backed-up toilet," said Adam, in his teacher voice, for Mike was under his apprenticeship. "The hair brush, by itself, was not a problem. But when you flush solids or toilet paper, while the brush is still jammed in there, it has a tendency to get caught. The more you flush, the more obstructed it becomes. Look, even the water won't go down."

"What do we do?" asked Mike.

"Think it through. What would you suggest?" asked Adam. Mike stood there for a moment, reasoning the problem through.

"Well?" asked Adam.

"Leticia said that the hair brush was flushed down the toilet yesterday afternoon. The chances that it's still in the toilet are pretty slim, especially with all the flushing since. The obstruction is

probably in the drain pipe by now. If we use an electric auger, won't the pipe still remain clogged?" asked Mike.

"We'll just move the obstruction further down the pipe," agreed Adam.

"So... we have to remove the toilet and remove the clog that way," reasoned Mike, thoughtfully. "Am I right, Uncle Adam?" asked Mike, searching for a concurring diagnosis.

"You're learning," answered Adam, with a proud smile. It was late in the afternoon when Adam and Mike finally removed the hair brush from Room 2's drain pipe. When they reappeared from the bathroom, Ruth had already eaten her lunch and fallen asleep. Quietly, Adam and Mike cleaned up the mess they had made in the bathroom, loaded their tools back into the van, and took off their coveralls.

"I don't know about you," said Adam, slamming the back door of the van shut, "but I'm hungry. Why don't we get a bite to eat before tackling Mrs. Tieger's septic?"

"Where do you want to go?" asked Mike, as Adam drove down Twin Yucca's Main Street.

"Hanna's all right with you?"

"Sure," replied Mike.

Hanna's Family Restaurant was a popular gathering place for many of Twin Yucca's citizens. The restaurant was family owned and operated by the Hanna family, themselves. Marilyn Hanna managed and was the head cook; her husband, Gerald Hanna, was in charge of the books; their twin daughters, Jenna and Kendra, (who had recently turned fifteen), helped out after school.

To outsiders, the difference between the manager's name and the restaurant's name were sometimes a thing of puzzlement. Marilyn was the person the customers interacted with, so she was obviously the "Hanna" in Hanna's Family Restaurant. Newcomers had a hard time understanding that Hanna was Marilyn's last name and not her first. The distinction was further jumbled by the fact that, conversationally, the townspeople had shortened the restaurant's name to just "Hanna's."

Whatever disagreements people had about the name, they all agreed on one thing-- the food. Marilyn Hanna was well known for her homemade breads: Raisin, Cinnamon Swirl, Banana Nut, Pecan Cinnamon, French Onion, and Cornbread. She also sold whole homemade pies that ranged from Apple to Vanilla Creme. During breakfast hours Marilyn served waffles and

blueberry pancakes; lunch featured assorted sandwiches and pizza with toppings by demand; dinner's specialties varied as the seasons and the availability of produce changed. All in all, the Hanna's made a good living.

As Adam and Mike entered the restaurant, the aroma of freshly baked pizza greeted their nostrils.

"We already know what we're ordering," announced Mike, pushing aside the menu the waitress handed them.

The food came, and since no female scrutiny was around to tell them not to talk with their mouths full of pizza, Adam and Mike continued to discuss business just as though they were at work.

"Friday night we need to do inventory," reminded Adam, taking another bite of pizza. Mike looked up in surprise.

"Friday night? I forgot all about inventory!" exclaimed Mike, disappointedly.

"Did you have other plans?" asked Adam, picking up his napkin.

"It's nothing important," replied Mike, downplaying his prior reaction of disappointment.

"Does it have to do with Sandra?" asked Adam, concealing a smile behind his napkin as he wiped his mouth.

"Sandra?" repeated Mike, questioningly, as though he had never heard her name before.

"You know, Sandra Weston. The pretty young lady you've been seeing almost everyday for a month," reminded Adam. "How serious is it between you two?"

"She's pretty terrific," admitted Mike.

"Does your Mom know about Sandra?" asked Adam, wadding his napkin and tossing it onto the empty plate before him.

"I'm over twenty-one," reminded Mike. "I don't have to report to Mom every time I go out on a date."

"If you don't tell her yourself, she'll find out about it from a gossiping neighbor. I promise you, what they will say about you and Sandra will be fifty times worse than the truth. 'The words of a talebearer are as wounds,'" warned Adam, solemnly.

"And the wounds 'Go down into the innermost parts of the belly,'" finished Mike. "But, what's to gossip about? We haven't done anything wrong!"

"I know that. I trust you to behave like a Christian when you and Sandra are together. But this is a small town. Nothing excites gossip like a secret."

"It's no big secret, really," insisted Mike. "I just didn't want to tell the whole world about us. We're not serious. We just wanted to be left alone without everyone insinuating things that are not true," explained Mike.

"I hope your plan doesn't backfire," warned Adam.

"Everything will be fine," reassured Mike. "We haven't done anything to gossip about, so there's no reason to be concerned." Before they checked out, Marilyn handed Adam an apple pie.

"What's that for?" asked Mike, pointing to the pastry.

"Today is Wednesday," reminded Adam.

"Family dinner night! I totally forgot!" exclaimed Mike, disappointedly.

"Son," said Adam, placing a hand on Mike's shoulder, "I hope you know what you're doing."

Their next stop was Mrs. Tieger's house. Adam's educated guess proved to be correct. After making some checks, he discovered a bad leak in the bathroom plumbing that was filling Mrs. Tieger's septic prematurely.

"My son... keep sound wisdom and discretion: So shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck. Then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble."

~ Proverbs 3:21-23 ~

"A talebearer revealeth secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter."

~ Proverbs 11:13 ~

Chapter Ten

Promise of a New Day

"His heart is as firm as a stone; yea, as hard as a piece of the nether millstone."

~ Job 41:24 ~

Except for the unappetizing in-flight meal that Jerome flatly refused to eat, the flight to Montana passed uneventfully. When Jerome got off the airplane, he saw Charlton waiting for him at the gate. Momentarily forgetting that his brother was a man of little ceremony, Charlton greeted Jerome with a great hug, which engulfed him east to west.

Never could two brothers be more different and still claim their genes from the same pool of heredity. Charlton was an emotional man, carelessly basing his actions and speech on the way he felt at any given moment. Jerome, on the other hand, exacted his emotions with cynical animosity that made people feel he questioned their sincerity. Being a man that passed most of his days indoors, Jerome looked pale and sickly in comparison to his tan-skinned brother. It was the difference between anemic florescent lighting and genuine natural sunlight. And yet, in a peculiar turn of Providence, Mr. Natural Sunlight needed Mr. Florescent Lighting to take care of him.

After freeing himself from Charlton's bear hug, Jerome lost no time getting down to business.

"Are you packed as I instructed you?" were the first words that exited Jerome's mouth. A bystander would never have guessed that fifteen years had passed since Jerome had last seen his brother.

"Sure, Jerome," replied Charlton, in a tone reminiscent of a reprimanded child. "It's sure good to see you," continued Charlton, while his older brother checked the luggage over. "I've been living alone since Charlie went away... so it really means a lot... you're coming to get me," Charlton explained haltingly. Jerome, who up to this point, had not even noticed the absence of his niece, looked up only briefly to hear what his brother was saying. Jerome was too preoccupied with the business of getting the luggage as quickly as possible onto the redeye flight back to Southern California. After all, he wasn't here to take a sightseeing tour of Montana, or even see where his younger brother had been living or what he had been doing for the past fifteen years. The way Jerome saw it, the sooner they were on the plane, the sooner they would be in Twin Yucca; the sooner they were in Twin Yucca, the sooner he could return to the daily routine of his job that he so tenaciously clung to. With hardly a word more from either brother, Jerome and Charlton boarded the plane, leaving Montana for the place Charlton would now call home: Twin Yucca, California.

It was three in the morning when the two brothers pulled up in front of Jerome's house.

"Mom forgot to turn on the outside light, again," Jerome grumbled, opening the trunk of the car and unloading Charlton's luggage. The lateness of the hour had not improved Jerome's disposition, so Charlton, not wanting to upset his brother further, chose to remain silent. Jerome was about to unlock the door, when Charlton tried the handle and discovered that it was unlocked. With a surprised "what?!" Jerome swung open the door and flipped on the light switch. Charlton watched as his brother made a quick search of the house.

"Mom's not here," announced Jerome, handing a handwritten note to Charlton. "She's at the nursing home," he informed, as though Charlton had suddenly become illiterate. "Dad's being difficult again," Jerome explained, hauling the luggage into the room that was to be Charlton's.

"How is he?" inquired Charlton, his voice so low that Jerome had to strain to hear him.

"Who?"

"Dad... how is he?" Charlton's voice was hesitant, as if he was afraid to hear the answer. Jerome could see the apprehension on his younger brother's face.

"He's had Alzheimer's for eighteen years, Chuck," replied Jerome, bluntly. "He's had better days." Jerome placed the last of the luggage in Charlton's room. "I've got to get back to the nursing home. Do you want to come along?" Charlton hesitated. "You have to face him sometime," advised Jerome. "Besides, I doubt he will even remember you. He hasn't recognized me in a long time."

Even though the sidewalks were intermittently dotted with glowing street lights, the light they gave off were surprisingly dim. The City Beautification Commission had recently spent \$10,532.64 on hand-blown, glass street light covers. The street light covers did make the sidewalks more attractive, however, they had one side effect that the City Beautification Commission hadn't counted on. The white glass covers were so thick and ornate, that they cut down the light the street lights gave off by nearly three fourths. The commission hated to admit they had made a mistake, so the covers stayed. For this reason, Charlton tripped over two bushes, three curbs, and one nearsighted dog, (who was as surprised as Charlton), as he and Jerome made their way to the nursing home. Mullen-Overholt was only a short walk from Jerome's house, for Tom Mullen, (who had bought the house and presented it to Jerome), had

thought it a convenient walking distance to and from work. As they entered the cement block building, Charlton prepared to brace himself to meet his father.

"Dad's in Room 3," said Jerome, leading the way. Charlton felt the palms of his hands. They were clammy. He quickly jammed them into his jacket pockets and stepped inside Room 3. Though he had steeled himself for this moment, Charlton was not prepared for what he saw. Vera was sitting on the edge of Arnold's bed, cradling his head on her chest. Arnold's face was bleached white and his eyes were red, as if he had been crying. Jewell Warren, the nursing assistant for Room 3, noticed Jerome standing in the doorway. Jerome opened his mouth, as if to speak to her, but before he could utter a sound, Jewell put a finger to her lips and led Jerome and Charlton into the hallway, carefully closing the door behind her.

"Please don't go in right now. We've just gotten him calmed down," pleaded Jewell.

"Tell Mom to come to the Recreation Room," ordered Jerome, authoritatively. As Jerome turned to go, Charlton noticed Jewell wrinkle her nose in distaste. "The Recreation Room is this way," directed Jerome, knowingly.

It was half past three in the morning, so Jerome was surprised to find Adam in the Recreation Room, slumped over in a chair by one of the tables, fast asleep. Jerome walked over to the sleeping plumber and shook his shoulder. Adam opened his eyes, was about to ask Jerome what he was doing in his bedroom, and then suddenly remembered where he was.

"Hello, Jerome," said Adam, stifling a yawn.

"Whatever are you doing here-- and dressed like that for?" asked Jerome, pointing to the dirt-stained overalls Adam was wearing.

"I've been gardening," explained Adam, still groggy from his nap.

"I can see that," retorted Jerome impatiently. The impatience in Jerome's voice put Adam on his guard. He rose to his feet, and smiled congenially.

"I couldn't sleep, so I worked in my garden. That explains the overalls," smiled Adam. "After doing that for an hour or two, I went for a walk, found myself in front of the nursing home, and decided to check in on Mom as long as I was here," he explained, taking notice of the tall man standing beside Jerome. "I guess I dozed off while I rested my feet." Jerome wearily pulled out a chair from the table and sat down.

"Always awake when you should be asleep and asleep when you should be awake," observed Jerome out loud. "People don't call you 'The Bat' for nothing, Adam." If Adam's feelings were hurt, he didn't let it show.

"It's true," Adam smiled at Charlton, "insomnia is a cross I must bear patiently. But when I think of the cross Christ had to bear for me... well, it shames me to even think of complaining about mine." Adam waited for a second, and when Jerome didn't bother to introduce the tall stranger, Adam took it upon himself to make the man welcome. "I'm Adam Clark," said Adam, extending a hand to Charlton. "And you must be Charlton, Jerome's brother?"

"That's right," replied Charlton, smiling for the first time since arriving in Twin Yucca.

"How was your flight?" asked Adam, silently making a mental note of how opposite the two brothers were from each other.

"Good," replied Charlton. "It was a smooth flight. So, how long have you known Jerome?" asked Charlton, curiously.

"I guess it's been a few years now. Twin Yucca hasn't been the same since," smiled Adam.

"I can imagine," grinned Charlton. Just then, Vera appeared in the doorway. She looked tired and exhausted, but extremely happy to see her son.

"Chuck!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms around Charlton. "I've missed you, baby," she said, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Oh, but look at you. So healthy and strong-- look at all those muscles! Why, you'd have to turn sideways, just to get through the door!" she exaggerated.

"Mom, you haven't changed," smiled Charlton, giving her another hug. Vera peered from under the bear hug, and looked about the room. She smiled when she saw Adam, but turned wonderingly to Charlton. "What is it, Mom?" asked Charlton.

"Where is she?" asked Vera.

"Who?"

"Charlotte, my granddaughter! Where is she?" repeated Vera, in an overprotective grandmotherly tone.

"She's... she's living with Angela Goodman, Mom," replied Charlton, ashamedly.

"Since when?" demand Vera, temporarily forgetting how happy she was to see her "baby boy." Charlton covered his eyes with his hand. His shoulders began to shake uncontrollably. Vera put her arms around her son and comforted him.

"Mom," Charlton whispered, "I sent her away!"

Feeling that he was intruding in a private family matter, Adam quietly excused himself from the room. On his return walk home, Adam was reminded of a passage in Deuteronomy: "When thou art in tribulation, and all these things are come upon thee, even in the latter days, if thou turn to the LORD thy God, and shalt be obedient unto His voice; (For the LORD thy God is a merciful God;) He will not forsake thee, neither destroy thee." Adam looked up into the heavens. On the far horizon, he could see where the darkness was giving way to the light of a new day.

"Therefore will the LORD wait, that He may be gracious unto you [Charlton], and therefore will He be exalted, that He may have mercy upon you: for the LORD is a God of judgment: blessed are all they that wait for Him... thou shalt weep no more: He will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when He shall hear it, He will answer thee. And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity, and the water of affliction, yet shall not thy teachers be removed into a corner any more, but thine eyes shall see thy teachers: And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is The Way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left."

~ Isaiah 30:18-21 ~

Chapter Eleven

Free-fall

"There is none to guide her... neither is there any that taketh her by the hand."

~ Isaiah 51:18 ~

Because of her exceptional grade point average, Fayetteville High decided that Charlotte should skip the tenth grade. She was bumped to the eleventh, among juniors who were only one year older than herself, but acted as if the age gap somehow denoted their superiority over someone who was "only fifteen." When Sherri, Charlotte's sixteen year old cousin, found out that her uninvited and certainly most unwelcome roommate was going to be attending the same classes as herself, threw a temper tantrum to end all tantrums. Her "stupid excuse for a cousin" was going to embarrass her in front of all her friends! How could she ever show her face in school again? Mark Goodman, Sherri's father, assured her that she could... and would, (if she ever wanted a car of her own). This was just one more reason that added to Charlotte's "I don't belong" mentality. Charlotte was spending more and more time alone, growing up in a kind of free-fall; directionless, confused, and always scared. Lately, her fear never seemed to end-- it was ever constant, and steadily becoming worse.

Charlotte Overholt was considered to be a pretty girl... not beautiful, not ugly, just pretty. Her long, wavy brown hair hung loose about her shoulders; when startled, her brown eyes looked like a frightened deer, who might suddenly dash off into the forest and hide, (if only she could find the trees).

It was just another ordinary day in school, when Charlotte was approached by a redheaded boy in between classes. Darren Hayes was a straight A junior who wore his contempt for everything and everybody but himself, on his sleeve for everyone to see. He didn't care for the "IN" crowd at school, preferring to create his own clique of teenagers who were worthy enough to be considered his friends. True, the membership list was almost nonexistent, but Darren attributed it to the fact that most kids were too intimidated by his intellect to approach him. In short, he was about the most unpopular kid in high school. Charlotte smiled and accepted his offer of a date for next Friday. Charlotte was so low, she had reached up and touched bottom.

"This pathetic building, Principal Jaffy has the nerve to call a high school, is just teeming with stupidity," remarked Darren, walking beside Charlotte to their next class. "Great," he muttered, pointing to a room filled with noisy teenagers. They were laughing, talking, and totally oblivious of the teacher at the head of the room who desperately looked as if she wished to be somewhere else. "This is what happens when a class is required," grumbled Darren. "Another hour of

grueling boredom. It'll be a miracle if I actually learn anything with this mindless yammering in my ears!"

When Charlotte got out from school, she went straight home, knowing full well that no one would be home this early, except Mrs. Janice McEntire, Charlotte's grandmother, who stayed in her easy chair in the living room most of the time.

"Charlotte, is that you?" called Janice, leaning forward in her easy chair, to see who's reflection shown in a mirror by the door. Janice was mostly deaf, so she relied on reflections and intuition to make up for her deficit. Charlotte hung her head. She had hoped to come in unnoticed.

"Yes, Grandma, it's me," replied Charlotte, dragging her feet into the living room.

"Pick up your feet," scolded Janice. "Mark paid good money for this carpet. It's a StainMaster, you know," she added, as if that made all the difference. "Don't slouch! Look at me when I'm talking to you!" ordered Janice, wagging her finger in Charlotte's direction. "Martha always obeyed me the first time," she continued. "I never had any cause to be ashamed of her. The only time her good sense failed her was when she didn't listen to me and went off and married that man! I told her she was making a grievous mistake, but he told her so many lies, poor Martha didn't stand a chance. If only she had listened to me," mourned Janice, her knitting needles clacking away, "my Martha would still be alive to this day." Charlotte hated her grandmother for what she had just said. Her grandmother had not only blamed her father for Martha's death, but also herself. If Charlton hadn't married Martha, Martha wouldn't have died giving birth to Charlotte. "My Martha could've had anyone she wanted," Janice continued, looking up from her knitting and peering at Charlotte from over her bifocals. "When Martha was your age, she had a long string of boyfriends. She had boys calling her every night-- she was that popular." Charlotte understood what her grandmother was driving at. Where were her boyfriends? Charlotte silently despaired. How could she ever hope to live up to these expectations? Martha did. Martha was perfect but she was not.

"What is wrong with me?" thought Charlotte, desperately digging her foot into the StainMaster carpet. Suddenly, she remembered Darren. He wasn't popular, but Janice wouldn't know that. "You don't have anything planned for Friday, do you?" asked Charlotte, as if her life was so busy with social events that she barely could spare the time to talk with her grandmother. Janice looked up suspiciously.

"Why?" she asked, holding the knitting needles in suspended animation.

"Oh," replied Charlotte, carelessly batting her eyes, "it's nothing. This boy asked me out on a date for Friday night, and I hate to disappoint him if you have other plans." Charlotte's little performance was skeptically received by Janice.

"There's no plans, and you know it," said Janice flatly. "You're just making this story up to prove me wrong. But I know better. You're just like him! Both liars!" As if to affirm this truth, she rapidly knitted five more rows in one minute flat. As Charlotte stormed from the living room, she heard Janice mutter, "Ungrateful child!" Charlotte spent the next hour and a half, drowning her hurt feeling in tears.

Angela, Charlotte's aunt, was the first to arrive home from work. After Janice caught her daughter and repeated everything that had happened while she was away, Angela appeared in the girls' bedroom door. She did not look happy.

"What's this I hear about you telling lies to your grandma?" demanded Angela, placing a hand on her hip. Charlotte looked up from her pillow, her face wet with tears.

"It wasn't a lie, Aunt Angela!" Charlotte cried. "Darren Hayes asked me out on a date for Friday night! Honest, he did!"

"He did?" repeated Angela, her face brightening. "Now, now, Charlotte," she said, wiping the tears from Charlotte's face with a tissue, "Grandma just misunderstood you, that's all. There's no need to get so worked up about it. Gracious me!" Angela patted Charlotte on the back proudly. "I was telling Mrs. Horace across the street, just yesterday, that my niece was popular with the boys. I told her you were just waiting to pick out one you really liked, instead of wasting your time on a nobody," laughed Angela, triumphantly. "Who is he? Do I know his parents?" she inquired. Just then, Reggie, Angela's nine year old son, came bounding through the front door, dressed in his little league uniform, covered with sweat and dirt. Angela, forgetting that she was in the midst of interrogating Charlotte, ran after Reggie, pleading with him not to shake the dirt all over the clean carpet. Charlotte breathed a sigh of relief. She didn't think her aunt would like Darren, even if he was the only boy who ever asked her out since arriving in North Carolina.

Mark, Charlotte's Uncle, was the next to arrive home. He disappeared into the bathroom, and reappeared ten minutes later in a black T-shirt and a favorite pair of shorts that had palm trees printed all over them. Angela hated those ugly shorts, but Mark insisted on relaxing in the evening, his way.

Charlotte sat at a small desk in the girls' bedroom, waiting and dreading for Sherri to come home. Sherri had a life. Sherri was out with her friends. The fact that Sherri wasn't home yet, and Charlotte was, embarrassed Angela. But, Angela reminded herself, things were looking up. Just

wait till she had a chance to tell Mrs. Horace across the street about Charlotte's date! Who would get the last laugh then!

"I'm home!" yelled Sherri, slamming the front door. Charlotte groaned and hid her face behind her history book. From where she sat, she could just make out her aunt's voice talking to Sherri in the kitchen.

"Who is Darren Hayes, dear?" asked Angela, busily preparing dinner.

"He's only, like, the most unpopular boy in school," replied Sherri, in a voice suggesting that her mother was stupid for asking such a dumb question. Charlotte heard Angela slam the stack of plates she was holding onto the kitchen table.

"Charlotte!" she called, angrily. Charlotte reluctantly dragged her feet into the kitchen. "You don't honestly think I'll let you go out on this embarrassing date, do you?" demanded Angela. Sherri, who just now realized what was going on, suddenly visualized her social life going straight down the toilet.

"I'll say you're not!" Sherri yelled. "Mom, don't let her!"

"Don't worry, dear," Angela soothed her daughter. "Charlotte, you call that boy right now! Tell him you just remembered that you have prior commitments," directed Angela, placing the receiver in Charlotte's hands. Charlotte's emotions may have been numb with anger, but her mind was in full operation. Charlotte punched in some numbers, held down the plunger, and made believe that she was speaking to Darren.

"Hello, Darren? It's me. I'm sorry, but I can't make it Friday night. I just remembered a prior engagement. (pause) I'm sorry too. Good-bye," said Charlotte, hanging up the receiver. She turned to face her tormentors. Sherri looked relieved, but Angela still looked angry.

"I don't want one word of this to escape this house," Angela ordered. "Do you understand me?" Charlotte nodded, soberly. Why did Sherri have to come home and spoil everything! Just when it looked like she was going to have some peace, Sherri tears it apart with just a handful of words.

Dinnertime at the Goodman's house primarily consisted of three stages: Angela fixed the dinner, Sherri and Reggie gulped down their food and rushed out the door, and the adults finished their meal in silence. Conversation was never a high priority with the Goodman's. They grudgingly put up with each other, and in return, expected to be left alone. Charlotte was unaccustomed to such an acrid atmosphere. When Charlton came home from the store, she would make dinner,

and they would talk about their day. As she sat there, slowly chewing her spinach in silence, she could hear her father's laughter, just as if he were sitting across the table.

"Hope deferred maketh the heart sick."

~ Proverbs 13:12 ~

"Better is a dry morsel, and quietness therewith, than an house full of sacrifices with strife."

~ Proverbs 17:1 ~

Chapter Twelve

A Righteous Man's Prayer

"To every thing there is a... purpose under the heaven."

~ Ecclesiastes 3:1 ~

For some reason known only to the Providential planning of God, Clark Plumbing Service and Supply saw so little business Thursday morning, that Adam left charge of the store to Mike, while he went home to work in his garden.

Adam was dressed in his gardening overalls, bent over a tomato plant, and about to reach for a spade, when the tool suddenly appeared in his hand. Adam looked up, only to find Charlton, who had been quietly observing Adam as he worked in his garden.

"Hello," greeted Adam, surprised by Charlton's unannounced presence in his backyard. Charlton nodded in response, and leaned back on the wrought iron fence that ran the border of Adam's backyard. The silence of his visitor was at first disturbing to Adam, but the longer Charlton remained mute, the more Adam realized there was an unspoken war ensuing between the Alzheimer's and Charlton-- both battling to gain control of his body. Not wanting to make his guest feel uncomfortable, Adam continued with his gardening. "Look at these peas," observed Adam, pointing to a long row of clinging vines that had grown over into the tomatoes, "give a pea an inch, and they'll take over the whole garden!" Adam's joke had some effect on Charlton, for his lips parted in a small smile. "Got to keep the peas in their place," continued Adam, pruning back the unruly vines. When Charlton realized that his presence had not made Adam feel uncomfortable, he ventured to make a short remark about the weather. "Yes, it is good weather today," replied Adam. Charlton was about to say something more, but hesitated, as if unsure what word he was missing to complete his next thought. Seeing that Charlton was embarrassed, and not wanting to show pity that would, doubtless, make his guest retreat from the yard, Adam continued with his work in silence.

The sun slowly crept to the noon position in the sky, reminding Adam that it was lunchtime by its stinging rays on his back. Adam looked to the spot where Charlton had been standing, and upon seeing that he was no longer there, suddenly realized that he was bent over in the tomato row, busily pulling weeds and small shoots of grass that had migrated from Adam's lawn. "Thank you," smiled Adam, gratefully. "Come on, let's clean up. I'll treat you to lunch," invited Adam, pulling off his gloves and tossing them down on the green lawn.

"You don't have to do that," responded Charlton, who was unaware that it was lunchtime.

"The workman is worthy of his hire," disagreed Adam, opening the back door, and disappearing into the house. Charlton noticed Adam left the door open for him. Charlton remembered how Frank, his longtime friend of several years, had acted uncomfortably around him upon learning that he had Alzheimer's. Not wanting to repeat that same feeling of desertion, Charlton had put up a wall, to guard himself from being hurt again. But Adam was different. Charlton had sensed that the very first time he met him. He didn't know why he felt drawn to Adam, nor did he understand the Divine Providence that was drawing him, but the leading was there and could not be denied. Charlton stepped out of the garden, stamped the dirt from his shoes, and went inside.

Adam was standing at the sink, rinsing off a lather of soap from his hands, when Charlton closed the back door and stood, blinking, in the middle of the kitchen.

"It takes a while to adjust your eyes to the indoors," observed Adam, drying his hands on a towel beside the sink, and stepping aside to let Charlton use the sink next. While Charlton washed up, Adam opened the refrigerator and pulled out a casserole dish of barbecue-glazed chicken. "My sister," said Adam, sliding the casserole dish into the oven, "refuses to believe that I can live without 'home cooking,' so she makes these meals for me ahead of time." Adam placed two plates on the kitchen table and returned to the refrigerator. "Seven Up or Pepsi?" he asked his guest.

"Pepsi," replied Charlton, looking around the kitchen now that his eyes had adjusted. "You have a nice house," observed Charlton, upon seeing the marble counter tops and oak-finished cabinets lining the kitchen walls. "Jerome mentioned that you're a plumber," continued Charlton, the words coming easier now.

"Yes, I am," replied Adam, pulling out a chair at the table and opening his can of Seven Up. Charlton did likewise, feeling relieved that the Alzheimer episode was retreating. He was beginning to feel "normal" again. "What do you do?" asked Adam.

"I'm a salesman at 'Venture Outdoors,'" replied Charlton, "or at least, I used to be. Sure miss my job," Charlton said, taking a gulp from his can, "more than I realized I would. Frank, my boss, used to organize these camping trips with the customers and I would take them out for days at a time-- just them and me... and Charlie."

"Who's Charlie?" asked Adam, checking the casserole dish in the oven.

"Charlie's my daughter. Fifteen and a half, and the very image of her mother. Do you have kids?"

"No, I don't," replied Adam, taking the dish out of the oven.

"You don't know what you're missing," continued Charlton. "Kids can really make the difference. I don't know what I'd be if I never had Charlie."

"Lunch is ready," announced Adam, setting the chicken on the table and sitting down. Charlton was about to help himself, when he saw Adam bow his head to thank God. "Thank you for this food, Lord. You are ever Faithful and Just. May I say with Jacob, 'God which fed me all my life long unto this day.' In the blessed name of Jesus, Amen." Adam helped himself to some chicken and opened another can of Seven Up. After a moment of thought, Charlton followed suite.

It wasn't until Adam had put the dishes in the sink that Charlton spoke again.

"I wonder if you would still thank God for being 'Faithful and Just,'" observed Charlton out loud, "if you had what I have." The bluntness of Charlton's comment caught Adam off guard.

"What do you mean?" asked Adam, forgetting to wash the dishes, and instead returning to the table.

"When Martha, my wife, died, I realized that God has no reason for doing what He does. What possible reason could He have for taking her away from me-- away from her baby daughter? I was willing to play God-knows-best when Dad got Alzheimer's. But when God took Martha, I had enough," said Charlton, wadding his napkin in one hand.

"God always has a reason for what He does. 'He is the Rock, His work is perfect: for all His ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is He,'" quoted Adam.

"You wouldn't say that if you were me! What would you know-- you have a perfect life. Nothing is wrong with you," scorned Charlton, resentfully slamming his fist on the table. "Look at me. My life is useless... no! I take that back! My life was needless! I wish I hadn't been born! Let God go play with someone else's life, and leave mine alone!" said Charlton in a loud voice, getting up from the table and going to the door.

"Chuck!" called out Adam, rising from the table, "I don't know how, but God will prove to you that He was, and is, a righteous Judge of our lives!" Charlton shook his head in disbelief and departed. Adam sank down into his chair at the table, his hands trembling with emotion. With eyes turned upward, Adam prayed: "O LORD, though our iniquities testify against us, do Thou it for Thy name's sake: for our backslidings are many; we have sinned against Thee. O the Hope of Israel, the Saviour thereof in time of trouble, why shouldest Thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night? Why shouldest Thou be as a man astonished, as a mighty man that cannot save? yet Thou, O LORD, art in the midst of us, and we

are called by Thy name; leave us not." The tears streamed down Adam's face. "Horror hath taken hold upon me because of the wicked that forsake thy law. Thy statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage." Adam remained at the table the remainder of the afternoon, interceding and weeping for Charlton.

"Uncle Adam?" asked Chad, shaking Adam's shoulder. "Wake up." Adam opened his eyes. He had fallen asleep at the kitchen table.

"What time is it, Chad?" asked Adam, stretching out his arms and yawning.

"It's four o' clock," laughed the nine year old. "You didn't get much sleep last night, did you, Uncle Adam?"

"What makes you say that?" smiled Adam, teasingly. Adam looked at the sink. The dishes still needed to be done.

"I'll help," offered Chad, picking up the towel beside the sink.

"Thank you," replied Adam. "So, what have you been up to?" Chad shrugged.

"Nothing. Hey, did you ever hear of the inventor who invented a plate that had layers so you could peel the dishes clean, instead of washing them everyday?" asked Chad.

"Too bad it never caught on," chuckled Adam.

"Uncle Adam?"

"Yes, Chad?"

"Does Mike seem different to you?"

"Different? How so?"

"I don't know," shrugged Chad, drying a plate. "Does he?"

"Does he what?"

"Seem different?" repeated Chad.

"I haven't noticed anything out of the ordinary. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing. Becky said Mike was in love," replied Chad, somewhat carelessly.

"Becky who?"

"Becky Weston," replied Chad, dumping the soggy towel into a pool of water beside the sink.

"Sandra's little sister?" asked Adam, not willing to pass off the conversation as easily as his nephew. Chad nodded, going to the freezer to see if Adam had any snacks that were readily available. "What makes Becky say that?" asked Adam.

"Say what?"

"Say that Mike is in love," repeated Adam, shutting the freezer door while Chad was still inspecting it. Chad opened his mouth to ask why he couldn't have an ice cream snack, when Adam cut short his protest with, "Not before dinner. Well?"

"Well what?" asked Chad, who was still thinking about the chocolate Klondike bar he glimpsed in the freezer, sandwiched between two frozen dinners.

"What made Becky say that Mike was in love?" persisted Adam.

"We set them up, that's why," smiled Chad, proudly.

"Set them up?"

"Yeah, you know-- Becky and me got them together."

"Becky and I," corrected Adam. Chad shrugged. Correct English meant little to him.

"I sort of talked about Sandra while Mike was around, and mentioned that she was beautiful... and a bunch of other things Becky told me to say. Anyways, they've been going out a lot, and Becky thinks Mike and Sandra are in love," related Chad. "Becky says that when two people are in love, they act different. I was just wondering if Mike was acting different," explained Chad.

"I've seen Mike behave 'different' over a girl before," observed Adam. "If things were serious, he would've mentioned it to me. No, I don't think Mike is in love. Smitten, maybe-- but not in love."

"Are you in love, Uncle Adam?" asked Chad.

"What makes you ask that?" puzzled Adam.

"Becky says you and Constance Riley are going to get married," replied Chad. "Becky says you're engaged already, but you're too shy to announce it to everyone."

"Becky has a lot to say," observed Adam, lightheartedly.

"She sure does," agreed Chad. "I don't think she's right about you, though."

"Which part?" teased Adam.

"Turn again our captivity, O LORD, as the streams in the south. They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him."

~ Psalms 126:4-6 ~

"The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

~ James 5:16 ~

Chapter Thirteen
Charlotte's Secret
(Friday Night)

"Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is. And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit."

~ Ephesians 5:17, 18 ~

Somehow, Charlotte managed to keep her date with Darren Hayes a secret from her relatives. When Friday night finally came, Charlotte was relieved to find that most everyone in the house had somewhere else to be that evening. With little difficulty, Charlotte snuck out of the house and met Darren outside, just as his car pulled up in the driveway. She quickly jumped into the car.

"Let's get out of here!" Charlotte whispered, half in panic that Grandmother Janice, (who was the only one who did not have somewhere else better to go that evening), should catch her.

"We are going to live tonight!" shouted Darren, not comprehending Charlotte's fear of being caught. Darren started up the car, and pulled out of the driveway. Charlotte anxiously watched the house as they drove away. No grandmother was to be seen at the front door or the windows. Breathing a sigh of relief, Charlotte leaned back in her seat. It was then that she realized she was riding in an expensive, black convertible.

"You own a convertible?" asked Charlotte, in amazement. Darren, seeing that his date was impressed, decided to make the most of it.

"I thought black would suit tonight. It was either this or my red corvette, but I thought that would be a little overdoing it," bragged Darren, "don't you think?" Charlotte, not wanting to look stupid in front of Darren, only nodded. She couldn't understand why Sherri had made such a big deal over her going out with someone who had his choice of expensive cars to drive. Figuring that everyone at school must have been wealthy to call Darren unpopular, Charlotte decided to keep quiet about her own uncertain financial status. "Ever been to a rave?" asked Darren, opening a small bottle with one hand and taking a swallow.

"Sure," lied Charlotte, again not wanting to sound like the inexperienced debutante that she was. "All the time."

"The ultimate experience!" shouted Darren, excitedly. "I guarantee you haven't been to a rave like this one! Nobody DJ's a rave like Chris Stevens! He is the absolute best! I've seen him attract

crowds upwards to 200 people! It's the ultimate experience!" howled Darren. He shook the small bottle, and after testing it to see that every drop was indeed gone, he tossed it out the window. Charlotte heard the glass bottle shatter as it hit the pavement. The biggest party she had ever been to was when Charlton had taken her to a large benefit dinner to raise funds for an endangered species of Spotted Owl.

"What were you drinking?" asked Charlotte, noticing that Darren looked angry that his drink was all gone.

"Milk," he replied, changing lanes to pass a car.

"Oh," replied Charlotte, pretending to understand. Darren laughed at Charlotte's ignorance.

"You have no idea what's going on, do you?" mocked Darren. "I have serious doubts that you've ever been to a rave in your life!" Darren glimpsed Charlotte's face in the mirror. Her expression said it all. "I thought so!" he gloated.

"Please, take me home Darren," panicked Charlotte.

"Not on your life!" yelled Darren. "No one is going to spoil tonight-- not even you!" Darren sped up the car, weaving recklessly through the traffic until suddenly stopping in front of a large, mansion-like house. "We're here," he announced, getting out of the car.

Dozens of vehicles crowded around the mansion, each parking where there was just enough room to fit a car in. The night air was filled with loud, booming music and bright flashes of colored lights that beamed from the bottom floor windows like airport beacons.

"Come, on," said Darren, impatiently. Realizing that she was not intending to get out of the car, Darren opened the passenger door and extracted Charlotte from her seat by the arm. "You are such a newborn! Once you get inside, nothing on this inconsequential planet will matter," explained Darren, pulling her through the open doors.

The music outside was loud, but inside, it was deafening. Charlotte covered her eyes until they adjusted somewhat to her surroundings. Along the walls hung large screens of flashing images and shapes. Colors strobed and whirled about the room, giving it an unearthly feel. Before she knew it, Darren had plunged her through the crowds of clamoring people, and dragged her onto the dance floor.

"I don't want to dance!" yelled Charlotte, trying to make her voice audible over the incessant booming of the speakers. Seeing that Charlotte refused to participate, Darren pulled her aside to

one end of the room. She saw a large table, covered with bottles and glasses. Darren went to the table and returned with two white cups, one of which he placed into her hands.

"Here," he ordered, "drink this. It'll make you feel better." Charlotte examined the frothy liquid. "Go on," prodded Darren, "it won't hurt you." Charlotte took a small sip. She wrinkled her nose.

"It tastes salty. What is it?" she asked.

"It's Mountain Dew, stupid," mocked Darren, taking a few gulps from the glass he was holding. Charlotte hesitated. "Look, you want me to take you home, don't you? Well, I won't-- not until you be a good girl and finish your drink. That cost me \$15, and I intend to get my money's worth," demanded Darren. Charlotte quickly drank down the salty beverage, trying not to notice its funny taste. As she finished the drink, she noticed a strange solvent-like residue on the bottom of her cup. "Now we can go home," Darren grinned.

Darren led Charlotte back to the car, and maneuvered the convertible through the clutter of parked cars. As Darren got onto the freeway, he began eyeing Charlotte in a way that made her feel extremely uncomfortable. The effect of the chemicals he had been drinking a half hour earlier, suddenly began to take its effect.

"I need to pull over," announced Darren, urgently. Charlotte watched as he stumbled from the car and lay down, face up, on the side of the road, not heeding the headlights that were speeding by him. Darren's behavior was frightening Charlotte.

"He must really not be feeling well to lie down there," she thought. "Darren, are you OK?" asked Charlotte, venturing from the car. Darren didn't answer. She bent over his face and saw that he had passed out. A honking car whizzed by them. Charlotte glanced away briefly to watch as the honking car disappeared into the traffic. Suddenly, she felt a hand on her ankle. Frightened, Charlotte screamed. She looked down to find Darren, twitching convulsively, and vomiting. "What's wrong?" she screamed. Darren didn't respond, but kept vomiting.

Terrified, Charlotte wildly waved her arms at the passing traffic, pleading for someone to stop. No one stopped, but five minutes later, a squad car pulled to the side of the road where Charlotte stood screaming over Darren's still unconscious body. A policeman jumped from the car and ran to Darren, while his partner called for an ambulance. The policeman checked Darren's pulse. He couldn't find one. The officer quickly began CPR, his clean uniform rapidly being covered in vomit.

"An ambulance is on its way," shouted the officer's partner, running to the scene.

"What has he been taking?" asked the partner. Charlotte tried to catch her breath in between sobs. "Is he on drugs?" shouted the officer bent over Darren.

"He said it was milk," cried Charlotte.

"Did the milk taste salty-- did it leave a residue in the glass?" he asked. Charlotte suddenly felt faint. Her drink matched that description.

"I.. I don't know," she stammered, "but the drink he handed me looked like that. He said it would make me feel better."

"Sounds like GHB," the partner replied, bending over Darren to see if he could find a pulse. "How much GHB did you drink?" asked the partner, standing up.

"Only half a cup! Darren said it was Mountain Dew," cried Charlotte.

"Most likely, it was Mountain Dew, but with GHB mixed in," replied the partner.

"Is Darren going to die?" sobbed Charlotte, uncontrollably.

"Not if we can help it, Miss," replied the officer, seeing the ambulance pull to the side of the road. "Over here!" he shouted.

Two medics jumped out and began to work on Darren. After a few minutes of frantic effort to revive the unconscious sixteen-year old, they rushed him to the hospital. Another ambulance was called for Charlotte, who was beginning to feel the "buzz" that many users who take GHB and other chemicals, chase after. Providentially, there was not enough GHB in Charlotte's drink to do any lasting harm. Darren, however, was not so blessed. He lay in a coma for two hours, before passing away. Gamma Hydroxybutyrate, (GHB), had claimed one more victim.

Mark and Angela Goodman were promptly notified. They drove to the hospital and picked up Charlotte, who was so stunned that she could not understand a word of chastisement that her aunt and uncle were dolling out. No charges were to be filed against Charlotte. She was free to go.

The drive back home was a blur to Charlotte, who had been crying so much that her cheeks hurt. When the car pulled up to the house, Charlotte darted from the car to the girls' bedroom, jumped into bed, and pulled the covers over her head. Sherri had not arrived home from her date yet, so Charlotte had the room to herself.

"I will not send her back to Charlton Overholt!" refused Angela, her voice so loud that Charlotte could overhear her in the bedroom. "I don't want him to get the last laugh! He'll say this happened because we're bad parents! Do you want that?" screamed Angela. Mark, the recipient of his wife's anger, shook his head. "If we can keep Charlotte's name out of the papers, then no one ever need know of this-- this-- little fiasco. After all, she didn't know what she was doing. It was that Hayes boy. It's his fault! He's the one responsible! Driving around in a stolen car! Imagine!" Angela shouted. Mark shook his head in disbelief. "There's no need to drag our name into this mess, because it's not Charlotte's fault. If it were, the police would have pressed charges. All we need to do is keep quiet and pretend this evening never happened. I for one, intend to do just that." Mark nodded in agreement. There was no need to tell anyone what happened. Reggie was at a sleep-over at a friend's house; Sherri wasn't home yet; and Grandmother Janice was so hard of hearing she had slept through the excitement. Only Angela and Mark knew... and, of course, Charlotte.

Mark and Angela - "Which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another."
~ Romans 2:15 ~

Darren - "The great God that formed all things both rewardeth the fool, and rewardeth transgressors. As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly."
~ Proverbs 26:10, 11 ~

Charlotte - "Deliver my... darling from the power of the dog."
~ Psalms 22:20 ~

"As a jewel of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman which is without discretion."
~ Proverbs 11:22 ~

Chapter Fourteen

Trial by Fire

(Friday night continued...)

"I being in the way, the LORD led me."

~ Genesis 24:27 ~

"Though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing."

~ 1 Corinthians 13:3 ~

Friday was a busy day for Adam and Mike. Cary Jerrod stuffed his kitchen sink with table scraps, thinking he had a food disposer; Mrs. Bailey forgot that Kotex isn't flushable, backing up her toilet; and then Max Henderson, who, having a day off, decided he could fix the shower himself, flooded his bathroom in two inches of water, (to name only three).

With these disasters behind him, Adam visited Ruth at the nursing home Friday evening, and made sure she was comfortable. Adam, who didn't feel like playing chess with Jerome that night, excused himself from the game, for Charlton had been sitting nearby, reiterating his feelings on the unfairness of God and the uselessness of life. Charlton's diatribe against God grieved Adam's soul deeply. With a heavy heart, he left the nursing home and stepped into the night, little knowing that this walk home would forever change his life and the life of one who's danger of hellfire was foremost in his thoughts.

Adam's home was a few blocks away from the nursing home. It was not a long walk, but Adam, who suffered from insomnia, discovered that if he did a lot of walking before going to bed, it improved his chances of getting to sleep. It never worked 100%, but then, nothing did. It was for this reason, that Adam took the long way home, cutting over a large vacant field and then using a little known dirt road to return into town. Adam zipped up his jacket, for there was a coolness to the breeze that made a shiver go up his spine. Though this walk was routine to Adam, he couldn't help shaking a feeling that God was going to expect something of him tonight. When he crossed the field and reached the dirt road, Adam began to pray for Charlton. Just then, Adam paused. A car was coming down the road. He could tell by the tires hitting the rocks in the dirt that the vehicle was covering a lot of ground quickly. Not wanting to be hit by a speeding car, Adam stepped off the road, and watched expectantly for the car to pass him before he continued home. He may not have been able to see the fast approaching car, but he could hear it.

As the car drew closer, Adam began to feel uneasy. It was traveling too fast to make some of the tight turns that were coming up ahead. Suddenly, a pair of bright headlights cut through the

darkness. Adam waved his arms and shouted to the driver that there were two tight turns ahead in the road, and to slow down. The car sped along, achieving the first turn successfully. But, as it tried to make the second turn, the driver lost control of the car. It slid down an embankment, slamming into a tree sideways. Almost immediately, it caught fire. Adam ran ahead, and looked down the embankment. The driver was screaming frantically for help. With no thought of his own safety or that the car might explode at any moment, Adam jumped down the embankment and worked his way to the car. The nearer he came, the more intensely he could feel the heat from the ever-increasing flames. Shielding his face with his left arm, Adam approached the driver's side. The driver, a teenage girl, was slamming her fists on the window, screaming for help. Adam tried the door handle. It wouldn't open. He looked down, noticing a rock was wedged just under the lip of the door, making it impossible to open. Adam kicked at the rock with his heel, slowly loosening it from under the door.

"I can't move my leg!" the driver screamed, when Adam had opened the door.

"Come, I'll help you," urged Adam, putting her arm around his neck. Jumping down the embankment was one thing. Climbing back up with an injured girl was another. He slowly worked his way up, each step painfully slow. Sometimes his feet slid a little, but he always moved upward. As they neared the top, Adam realized the girl was frantically trying to tell him something. Her speech was so panicked that he could barely understand her. Then, in one big breath, she screamed,

"My sister! She's still in the car!" Adam looked back at the car. He could just make out the terrified screams of a young woman. Taking a deep breath, he jumped back down the embankment and made his way to the passenger side of the car, which was no small thing, for everything sloped downward. The passenger side was blocked by the trunk of the tree, which was now catching fire also.

"Help me, please!" cried the girl still inside the car.

"Try to climb out the driver side!" shouted Adam.

"I can't!" she cried, "the seat belt is stuck!" The flames were spreading and growing more intense with every second. The precious time he had spent getting the driver out of harms way, should the car explode, was working against the second girl. As Adam climbed to the driver's side, the girl let out a shriek of terror. The flames were starting to come up through the floor of the car. Adam put his hand on the door handle, but quickly jerked it away, for the car was heating up like a furnace. Suddenly, Adam heard four loud explosions. The tires had exploded because of the intense heat.

"God, don't let her die!" prayed Adam, tearing off his jacket and wrapping it around his hand. Using this protection, the door opened. Adam could see the girl sobbing frantically, tugging at her seat belt. He tried the buckle, but it had melted shut. "I need something sharp to cut the belt with!" shouted Adam.

"I don't have anything!" screamed the girl. Just then, flames shot up between Adam and the girl. The seat was on fire! Adam tried to beat the flames back with his jacket. He could hear the driver at the top of the embankment, still shrieking at the top of her lungs. Fight as he could, the flames were approaching him. Suddenly, he felt something hot on his leg. He turned around to find his pant leg was on fire. Adam glanced back at the girl. Their eyes locked. She was strangely silent. Adam quickly jumped from the car, rolling down the embankment to put out his pant leg. Just as he cleared the car, he felt a tremendous explosion.

When his roll came to a complete stop, he looked up at the car. It was completely engulfed in flames. There was no sign of the girl. Except for the sound of the flames and the screaming sister who had been watching the whole time, the night was quiet. Adam let his head drop to the ground.

"Why, Lord?" he asked. "Why couldn't I save her?" The horror stricken shrieks of the driver interrupted his thoughts. Adam climbed back up the embankment. The young driver was lying on the ground, screaming incoherently. Then, as if the moment was too much for her senses to bear, she passed out.

The approaching sound of wailing sirens made Adam turn around. A fire truck appeared from the dark and parked beside them. Firefighter Dan, who had known Adam for a number of years, looked at his friend in wonderment. Adam's face was black with soot; his clothes were singed from the intense heat; and the fire had burned a hole through his right pant leg, revealing a red patch of skin. "I couldn't save her," said Adam, in a stunned voice.

"Save who?" asked Dan, while the other fighters ran to the burning car. Adam told Dan everything that had happened.

"You did your best," replied Dan, clamping his hand on Adam's shoulder. "Nobody who could see you like this would doubt it," he added, referring to Adam's smoldered appearance.

Saturday morning found Adam in a hospital bed at Twin Yucca Community Hospital. When he woke up from his drug induced sleep, Adam discovered Charlton gravely sitting beside the hospital bed, a folded newspaper in his lap.

"You're on the front page," announced Charlton, his voice strangely different.

Adam sat up, suddenly wincing in pain. He looked at his hands-- both of which were wrapped in white bandages. He soon found that both knees and part of his right leg were also bandaged.

"How do you feel?" asked Charlton.

"It's as painful as all the pain I've ever had," replied Adam, candidly, who up to now, had been hoping it was all a bad dream.

"Still believe God's fair?" asked Charlton, a twinge of sarcasm in his voice. "I heard you couldn't save the passenger," he continued, referring to the newspaper.

"Yes, I do," replied Adam, trying to keep back the tears. Charlton looked at him in surprise.

"How can you still say that? One of the girls died because you couldn't save her!" asked Charlton, incredulously.

Adam shook his head. Everything screamed failure. All Adam had left to stand on was God's Word. Then the Spirit reminded him of Jeremiah eighteen and Daniel four.

"O house of Israel," quoted Adam, taking comfort in every word, "cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in Mine hand, O house of Israel." And, "All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What doest Thou?" finished Adam, who up to that moment, had been tempted with thoughts of failure, himself.

"But," stammered Charlton, "it all happened for nothing. You got burned and the girl died!"

"One girl lived," reminded Adam, regaining his spiritual equilibrium. "I don't know how, but it will work to my good. God has promised, 'We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose.' I don't know why He let the other girl die. God could easily have kept the flames from even coming near us, but He didn't. He had some purpose... some reason for all of this. I cannot believe otherwise!"

As Adam looked up from his little speech, he noticed Charlton was hunched over the hospital bed, his face buried in Adam's blanket. The Holy Spirit had convicted Charlton of sin, and Charlton could resist HIM no longer. Ever since Charlton had first heard the news of the accident, he could not get it out of his mind, for the young girl who perished in the fire was

Charlotte's age. It could easily have been his own cherished daughter! But it wasn't Charlotte, it was not his sweet Charlie, oh, dear God, it was NOT! She meant more to him than anything else in this world. The danger of his hatred toward God, that he could have forced the hand of God's punishment to take away Charlotte from him-- not just sending her away as he, himself, had unjustly done-- but taking Charlotte away FOREVER. This danger suddenly burst through the darkness of his heart like the first rays of morning. Charlton had called God unfair while Adam had pronounced Him just-- even though the plumber's pain and grief were great. Now Charlton saw himself as the unfair and unjust one!

If Charlton only knew how perilously close his daughter had come to the precipice-- that very same Friday night as the accident in Twin Yucca! As Adam saw the car explode and the last hope evaporated of ever getting the young passenger out, Charlotte, thousands of miles away in North Carolina, was saved from the intentions of one who would have had his own way with her-- no matter what the cost. The stolen car Charlotte had been a passenger in that very night, could easily have lost control, for its driver was under the influence of GHB, a popular drug that had a nickname hinting of its potential danger-- "Grievous Bodily Harm." This bodily harm truly would have been as grievous to the passenger of the stolen car as to the passenger of the burning one! Little had Darren known how soon God would require his punishment. But, Charlton did not know all this-- he only pictured his daughter trapped in the passenger seat of a burning car. It was too much for this father to think of.

"You make me so ashamed!" wept Charlton, not caring that he had gained the attention of everyone in the room. "I blamed God for being unfair. I just remembered a verse my Sunday school teacher always quoted when I was a boy: 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' How can He ever forgive me?" cried Charlton, sobbing as one who saw a Great Light that was shining into his life, revealing the hidden things that he had tried to hide from God. Realizing what purpose God had for his fiery trial, Adam silently gave praise to the Lord, Who desires truth in the inward parts.

"First John, chapter one, verse nine says, 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'" quoted Adam, still rejoicing inwardly.

"I'm so sorry!" wept Charlton.

"And from Jesus Christ, Who is the Faithful Witness, and the First Begotten of the dead, and the Prince of the kings of the earth. Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father; to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen!" prayed Adam, momentarily forgetting that his burns were so painful.

The doctor discharged Adam that same day, informing him that his burns, which were mostly first degree, would heal in three to five days.

"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them... Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and for your abominations.

~ Ezekiel 36:26, 27, 31 ~

"And they were astonished out of measure, saying among themselves, Who then can be saved? And Jesus looking upon them saith, With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible."

~ Mark 10:26, 27 ~

Chapter Fifteen

A Thorn Named Charlotte

"An hypocrite with his mouth destroyeth his neighbour: but through knowledge shall the just be delivered."

~ Proverbs 11:9 ~

For the next two days, Darren Hayes was the talk of the town. People lamented his early death, wondered how anyone in their community had obtained drugs, and praised their own children for not being "like him." All this hand washing only fueled Angela Goodman's resolve to keep silent about her niece's involvement with Darren's death. To make matters worse, it was rumored that a girl was in the stolen car with Darren that night, but because she was a minor, the police refused to give her name. The neighborhood gossips had something new to talk about.

Like her mother, Sherri Goodman also had reasons to be uneasy. Though she was never told what happened, her suspicions were strong that the minor was Charlotte. The fact that Darren's death coincided with the same night of Charlotte's broken date, did not go unnoticed by her. It was just too much of a coincidence to be accidental. Truth be told, Charlotte did little to dissuade Sherri from thinking otherwise. Her aunt and uncle may have conveniently forgotten that night, but Charlotte could not. The way she reasoned it, if she hadn't disobeyed by going out on the date, Darren would still be alive.

When Charlotte arrived to school Monday morning, it seemed everyone was talking about 'the mystery girl.' As she walked down the hall to her locker, she imagined her guilt was so obvious and apparent to the world, that, try as she might, she could not hide it from them. She went from one class to the next, counting the minutes until she could return to the relative refuge of her room.

"Look at that," commented a teenager, unaware that Charlotte was listening nearby, "the drug awareness posters are up again."

"It's because of Darren," replied another.

"My Dad's been looking at me like I have horns growing from the top of my head, or something. Just because one guy can't handle what he doses and gets himself killed, the rest of us get blamed," groaned the first teen.

"Tell me about it," sympathized the other. As the two walked away, Sherri approached Charlotte, pulling her aside by the arm.

"Don't you dare say one word about Darren to my friends," she whispered, thinking that Charlotte had been contemplating otherwise.

"Don't worry," replied Charlotte, jerking her arm from Sherri's tight grip, "I won't."

"Just make sure you don't," she threatened. Sherri was terrified of scandal. The close knit community she lived in thrived on social events, community togetherness, gossip, and the general feeling that they were somehow better than other communities. Sherri held her social standing too dear to let Charlotte ruin it for her.

As usual, since Charlotte had no better place to go after school, she arrived home before Sherri. To Charlotte's surprise, Angela was home early from work, and in the living room, gossiping with her mother. Charlotte paused by the doorway, catching her father's name in the discussion.

"I'm just glad my Martha isn't here to see what's become of Charlton Overholt," Grandmother Janice was saying.

"I told her he would come to no good end," said Angela.

"We were right to warn her, but with him around, she wouldn't listen to us," continued Janice.

"If only you could have seen what was going on for yourself," said Angela, "you would know how right we were. Such a state! He was at wits end with Charlotte-- she was that out of control." Charlotte winced, for she had given her aunt reasonable cause for this particular accusation against her father. Charlotte vividly remembered her stubborn behavior the day Angela arrived in Montana to bring her back to North Carolina. How she regretted giving Angela and Janice a chance to put down her father!

"You've done wonders with that child," Janice commended her daughter.

"I've tried my best," conceded Angela. "You know, Chuck was so bad off, I almost felt sorry for him."

"Well, it's beyond me how he kept something so serious hidden from his own daughter," remarked Janice.

"He practically begged me to keep it a secret from her," continued Angela. Charlotte leaned as far forward as she dared, straining every muscle to get the best vantage so she wouldn't miss a word. "No one can say I haven't kept my promise."

"Serves him right, after what he put my Martha through," said Janice, vindictively.

"Even so, it's a dreadful thing to have," replied Angela.

"Do you remember Gladys Hopper's father?" asked Janice, her knitting needles clacking away furiously.

"The one from Philadelphia?" asked Angela.

"Yes, he's the one. Well, I hear he also has Alzheimer's Disease. Poor Gladys is beside herself about what to do. He requires so much of her time that she says she'll eventually have to put him in a nursing home," said Janice.

"Imagine that!" remarked Angela. "I guess it's convenient that Chuck's brother is so handy to take care of him at a time like this-- him owning a nursing home and all."

"His brother might be handy but I can't say the same for his choice of location," continued Janice. "Whoever heard of Twin Yucca, anyway?"

"Very true," agreed Angela. "But then, Southern California has beautiful weather. It probably helps to make up for its other deficiencies. After all, every community can't be as ideal as ours." Though the topic of discussion slowly changed, Charlotte's feet remained rooted to the floor. Was this true? Was her father really sick? Was that why he sent her away? She knew something had been disturbing Charlton, but until now, she had no clue as to what it was. Suddenly, her problems seemed unimportant.

"I've got to go to him," thought Charlotte, going to the girls' room and shutting the door behind her. "He needs me." Charlotte dumped the school paraphernalia from her backpack onto the bed. She quickly located one of the suitcases she had brought with, under her bed, and opened it. In the space of half an hour, she had every earthly possession that she valued most, (there wasn't room for everything), crammed into her suitcase and backpack. Charlotte opened the small purse Charlton had given her three birthdays ago, and counted what little money she had. There were two one dollar bills, one five dollar bill, and two tens-- plus three dollars in change. She let out a disappointed groan. Even though it was hardly anything, it would have to do. Knowing that Sherri could come home at anytime, Charlotte hurriedly cleaned the room, and

hid the suitcase back under her bed. In order to sneak out of the house unnoticed, she would have to wait until everyone had gone to bed.

It was an hour before dinner when Sherri came home. She went to her room, which she was sharing with Charlotte, and took a quick shower before dinner. As she came out of the girls' bathroom, Sherri noticed Charlotte's suitcase slightly protruding out from under her bed. After checking to make sure her cousin wasn't in the room, Sherri pulled out the suitcase and opened it. Charlotte was planning to run away! Thoughtfully, she closed the suitcase and put it back. Ever since Charlotte had arrived a few weeks ago, Sherri had to share everything with her: her room, her school, her friends, and her privacy. The latest incident with Darren Hayes only proved to Sherri's mind that Charlotte's departure would be a desirable thing.

After dinner, Sherri found Charlotte doing her homework in the girls' room.

"Charlotte," began Sherri, closing the bedroom door so her parents wouldn't hear, "I found your suitcase, packed and ready to go." A cold sinking feeling came over Charlotte. Here was Sherri's chance to get even. Charlotte half expected to see Sherri run out the door and tell Angela and Mark.

"What are you going to do?" asked Charlotte, staring fearfully at Sherri.

"When are you leaving?" asked Sherri.

"Tonight, when everyone is asleep," replied Charlotte, wondering why her cousin wasn't already spilling everything to her parents.

"Where are you going, and how do you intend to get there?" inquired Sherri.

"Southern California... a place called Twin Yucca. I thought I'd hitchhike," replied Charlotte, realizing her scheme sounded lame when spoken out loud.

"Hitchhike across the United States?" laughed Sherri, incredulously. "You are so stupid! You'll be picked up by the police and sent back here before you've even started!"

"What do you care?" asked Charlotte, defensively. She knew it sounded stupid, but she had no other choice. Her father needed her!

"Oh, I care. When you leave, I get my life back," replied Sherri, going to her collection of Barbie dolls in the closet. From a bag containing doll clothes, Sherri procured an envelope. "If you want to actually get where you're going, you'll need money," stated Sherri, opening the envelope.

"I have money," retorted Charlotte. Sherri rolled her eyes.

"You are so juvenile. I checked your purse, yesterday. You only have thirty dollars. Do you honestly expect to travel thousands of miles on thirty dollars?" Charlotte was incensed that she had been going through her things, but the success of her escape was more important than her privacy. It wouldn't do to make Sherri angry, for it looked like she was going to help. Swallowing her pride, Charlotte listened quietly. "I'll make reservations for a one way ticket to Southern California, in your name," continued Sherri. "I can use my telephone and do it right now, without Mom and Dad knowing. I'll do this on two conditions," said Sherri. Charlotte nervously gulped. "Number one, you don't come back. Two, if you get caught, you keep me out of it. I'll deny that I had anything to do with it. I'll even say you stole the money from me. Agreed?" Charlotte quickly agreed. To promise to never return was easy. To not say that Sherri had helped her run away was a little harder. If she got caught, she would look like a thief. At any rate, a way was opening for her to leave, and she was going to take it.

Later that night, after everyone but the two girls had gone to sleep, Sherri and Charlotte silently left the house. Since Sherri had Providentially just gotten her driver's license, she started the family car and drove Charlotte to the airport. Sherri paid for Charlotte's ticket and handed it to her. It seemed too good to be true. Charlotte sensed that this one ticket would change her whole life. Even though Sherri had resented her presence from the start, she could not help but feel grateful.

"Thank you," said Charlotte, the excitement of seeing her father again, racing through her blood. The last few weeks had been filled with the pain of separation from her father, the loneliness of being unwanted and unloved, and the guilt of Darren's death. But, right now, nothing else mattered more to Charlotte than to see her father again.

"Since they won't sell a ticket to a minor, unaccompanied, on the last flight of the day, I told them you were eighteen. Remember that if anyone asks you," instructed Sherri. There was no hint of felicity in her voice. She had been willing to pay hundreds of dollars, money she had been saving for over a year, just to finally be rid of this thorn named Charlotte. It was with relief instead of regret, that Sherri parted company with her cousin. To make absolutely sure that Charlotte really was leaving, Sherri watched as Charlotte boarded the airplane and taxied down the runway. When the airplane disappeared into the night, Sherri happily returned home. The deed was done. Charlotte was going home.

"Surely the wrath of [Sherri] shall praise Thee: the remainder of wrath shalt Thou restrain."
~ Psalms 76:10 ~

"Ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the LORD for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."

~ Isaiah 55:12, 13 ~

Chapter Sixteen

One Fine September Day

"Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."

~ Galatians 5:1 ~

When we sin, we make ourselves the slaves of Satan, that Old Serpent, who is the Devil. It is impossible to live on his wages, for the wages of sin is death. The best revenge against sin and the devil is repentance. Godly repentance breaks the fetters of our iniquity and releases us from the prisons of our hell bound fate, into the blessed liberty of Christ. You can be sure that whenever a man comes to the Light, the darkness has been robbed.

One prisoner who had recently been set at liberty was Charlton Overholt, (Chuck to his friends). He spent Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, breaking the fallow ground of his heart, and laying a foundation for his faith to stand on. The hallmark of every Christian is faith-- they live by it and they walk by it. And Chuck needed faith so desperately. Since faith came by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God, Chuck spent most of this time in God's Word. He prayed, he confessed, and he wept before his new Master. Unlike his previous master, this One promised an easy yoke and a light burden; this One promised life eternal; this One promised never to leave or forsake him. Every time Chuck thought upon this, it reduced him to tears of gratitude.

For the last three days, the front door of the Overholt house had been opened and closed so many times that Vera feared it would fall from its hinges from pure fatigue. The culprit was Chuck, who, with every new and difficult question concerning God's Word, would go find Adam Clark, (wherever he might happen to be at the time). For example, there was the question of sins that he had long since forgotten. Would God still let him go to heaven if he couldn't remember every sin he ever committed? Would God tolerate these unconfessed, forgotten sins?

"I don't understand, Adam," said Chuck. "The Bible says, 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.' If I say I have cleared my conscience before God by confessing my sins to Him, this verse says I am deceiving myself. I have tried so hard to remember everything, but I just know I've forgotten some things!" exclaimed Chuck, in obvious distress.

Adam excused himself from the customer he had been talking to, and walked Chuck outside the store.

"That particular verse, in context with the others before and after it, is speaking of those who REFUSE to submit to God by saying that they have not sinned, when their conscience bears witness against them," explained Adam, pulling out a small Bible he had been carrying since Saturday for just such emergencies.

"See? Look here. It says, 'But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.' But read what the very next verse says," pointed Adam, "'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' How are we cleansed? By confessing our sins. You have done that." Adam was struggling to understand Chuck's dilemma. What was apparent to one, seemed a mystery to the other.

"But, if I miss just one sin, then God will have none of me!" explained Chuck, the thought becoming more terrible in his mind than before. Thanks to the quickening of the Holy Spirit, Adam suddenly understood what Chuck was driving at.

"I think I understand," replied Adam, turning some pages in his pocket testament. "Listen to this: 'Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.' You see, this man suddenly remembered that his brother had something against him. So, before he could sacrifice to God with a clean conscience, he had to go and make things right. Only then could he make the sacrifice. You know, a great man once said, 'Willingness to obey Christ is to be a Christian.' God wants you to repent of the sins you can remember, not of the things you can't. It's all about the heart. Here, listen to this verse: 'If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land.' If you are willing to do your best, then the good things God promises are yours. Do you understand?" Chuck still looked a little unsure. "'To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.' Sin is by knowledge. It's the same with repentance," finished Adam, silently praying that Chuck would understand this principle.

Adam's prayer was quickly answered, for the last verse satisfied Chuck. A content smile spread across his face-- a smile that only comes with the understanding of God's Word.

"It's just like that verse, 'Wisdom entereth into thine heart, and knowledge is pleasant unto thy soul,'" quoted Chuck, relieved that God was not angry with him. Adam breathed a sigh of relief, for Chuck had found peace in the Truth. Suddenly, Chuck realized he was keeping Adam from his customers. "I'm really sorry for taking up your time," apologized Chuck.

"It was my pleasure," smiled Adam. "If you have any other questions, please let me know." The bear hug Adam received was sufficient to express Chuck's gratitude. As Chuck left, Adam thanked God for putting the right words in his mouth.

This was just one of the many crises that were averted within the last three days. With much patience and long-suffering, Adam helped Chuck to first stand in faith, and then to walk. And none too soon, for God was about to test Chuck's newfound confidence.

It was four o'clock in the morning, on a cool Tuesday. Vera had been called to the nursing home in the middle of the night, because Arnold was having "one of those difficult times," again. After a few hours of calming her husband down, Vera returned home, only to find Chuck rummaging around in the kitchen for something to eat. Since they were both up, Vera decided to have breakfast early. After fixing a hot meal, they sat at the kitchen table, each absorbed with their own thoughts. As Chuck buttered his toast, Vera crinkled a page she had saved from yesterday's newspaper and gave a sad sigh. Seeing that it had not gotten her son's attention, she sighed again-- only this time louder. Chuck finally looked up.

"What is it?" he asked, helping himself to more bacon.

"It's these statistics," lamented Vera. "Did you know, that without a father, boys are twice as likely to drop out of high school, two and a half times more likely to shoot or stab someone, and three times more likely to be in prison before their nineteenth birthday?" Vera looked up from her newspaper to be sure Chuck was listening before continuing. "It also says, without a father, girls are twice as likely to get pregnant in their teens, thirty-seven percent more likely to abuse drugs or alcohol, and fifty-three percent more likely to attempt suicide." Vera eyed her son expectantly. Chuck stared silently at his plate. "When are you going to send for my granddaughter?" demanded Vera, dropping the newspaper page onto the floor beside the table.

"As soon as I get a few more things settled in my mind," replied Chuck, desperately trying to grasp a promise that would avert these catastrophes from happening to his daughter.

"When?" persisted Vera.

"Soon," replied Chuck, trying to fight back frustration. "I just can't call Angela and say I've changed my mind."

"Why not?"

"Do you remember how she fought over Charlie when she was a baby? It's going to take nothing but a miracle for Angela to give up Charlie now," answered Chuck, fighting despair. What was that promise about children? And what did Adam say the Bible said about despair, again? The feelings and emotions were coming so rapidly in succession, that Chuck silently cried to God for help not to sin against Him.

"She's the kind who would take you to court," affirmed Vera.

"Yes, I guess she could. If only I hadn't given her to Angela!" mourned Chuck, chastising himself.

"Where are you going?" asked Vera, seeing her son leave the table before finishing his breakfast. Chuck didn't hear her, for he had already disappeared into his room. The thought had crossed his mind to go ask Adam what to do... but it was his responsibility to make this decision, not Adam's.

Strangely enough, when it's four o'clock in the morning in California, it's seven in the morning in North Carolina. Unlike Vera, Angela was setting the breakfast table at her usual time. As Angela was about to call everyone to breakfast, Sherri darted from her room to the door with a--

"Igottarun!" Before Angela could ask any questions, Sherri was gone. After muttering something about breakfast being the most important meal of the day, the rest of the family came in to eat-- everyone except Charlie.

"Charlotte!" called Angela. "It's breakfast time!" Angela sat at her usual place at the table and began to eat. Five minutes later, Angela called again.

"It's time to eat breakfast, Charlotte! If you don't hurry, you'll be late for school!" There was no answer. Angela was becoming impatient. "Did you hear me?" Angela got up from the table and went to the girls' closed bedroom door. She turned the handle and looked in. To her surprise, Charlie wasn't there-- her bed hadn't even been slept in. Angela's first thought was anger and then one of puzzlement. "Why hadn't Sherri said something?" thought Angela, opening Charlie's drawers and finding them all empty. "Surely she knew," continued Angela. Then, she remembered Sherri's quick exit that morning-- not even bothering grabbing a bite to eat. "She knew," muttered Angela, bitterly.

Angela stormed to the living room telephone and called the high school. After a few minutes of waiting for someone to locate her, Sherri was put on the phone.

"Sherri," asked Angela, angrily, "where is your cousin?"

"Isn't she there?" asked Sherri, in feigned surprise.

"Don't play innocent with me, young lady," threatened Angela. "Tell me what happened or you'll be grounded for a year!" With this pricey ultimatum hanging over her head, Sherri cracked.

"She's on a flight to California," replied Sherri, unapologetically, "to go live with Uncle Charlton."

"How could she pay for the ticket?" demanded Angela. "Did you help her?"

"It was my money," retorted Sherri. In her haste to defend herself, she had temporarily forgotten her mother's threat of a year long grounding.

"When did she leave?" asked Angela, resigning herself to the realization that this was going to make her look like an incompetent mother in front of Chuck. There was no way that she could hide this from him. Charlie was going to show up in Twin Yucca. If she didn't call Chuck before she arrived, it was going to put her in an even more awkward position. It would look like she hadn't even noticed Charlie was missing. Sherri reluctantly told her mother which flight Charlie was on and when it was due. Angela promptly informed Sherri that she was grounded for a month. When Sherri heard this, she protested the sentence that had just been passed, at the top of her lungs. Angela interrupted her daughter's tantrum by hanging up the phone. Now to do what she dreaded-- call Chuck.

After spending some time in Scripture searching and praying, Chuck emerged from his room, armed with God's promises and ready to make the phone call. He was not going to take "no" for an answer; he was going to insist that Charlie come home; and he was not going to fear or be intimidated by Angela. To Chuck's amazement, as he wrapped his fingers around the receiver, the phone rang.

"Hello?" answered Chuck. He could hear someone clearing their throat, as if preparing to speak.

"Hi, Charlton. It's Angela."

"Is anything wrong with Charlie?" asked Chuck, sensing that she was preparing to break unpleasant news.

"Not exactly. It seems Sherri and Charlie have become close friends," lied Angela, trying to minimize the responsibility and guilt of herself and her daughter. "Sherri saw how much Charlotte missed you, so she decided to help her come to you," explained Angela.

"Come to me?" repeated Chuck, unsure if he had actually heard what he thought he did.

"Charlie... I mean Charlotte, is on a flight to Los Angeles International Airport. It's due in about half an hour," continued Angela, assuming the same unapologetic tone of her daughter. "It was my responsibility to take Charlotte in, but she is just not adjusting to her surroundings very well. I think it would be best if you assume responsibility for your daughter. If you can't handle her, I suggest you take her to a psychotherapist," advised Angela.

Chuck was shocked! Was Angela really giving Charlie back to him, without even a fight?

"I have done my best," added Angela, after a few moments of uneasy silence from Chuck.

"Thank you," Chuck responded, not wanting to make Angela angry and reconsider. "Please thank your family for their hospitality. It was very kind of you." Surprised that Chuck was not going to yell at her for being a bad mother, Angela didn't quite know what to do with the coals of fire Chuck had heaped upon her by his graceful acceptance of the news.

"Uh, you're very welcome, I'm sure," replied Angela. "I hope Charlotte arrives safely."

"Thank you," repeated Chuck.

"Well, I have to be going now. Take care," said Angela.

"You too," replied Chuck, hanging up the receiver. That was that.

Vera was standing nearby, anxiously waiting to hear the news, for by the expression on her son's face, she could tell something had indeed happened.

"Well?" asked Vera.

"Charlie's on her way home!" shouted Chuck for joy. Vera clasped her hands in delight.

"When is she arriving?" asked Vera, making a quick spot check of the house to make sure everything was ready.

"Angela didn't give the exact time," replied Chuck, hurriedly thumbing through the telephone book.

"Angela!" exclaimed Vera in surprise. "Angela is responsible for this miracle?"

"I'll fill you in later," said Chuck, finding the number for Los Angeles International Airport. "Hello, could you tell me when flight two forty-one from Fayetteville, North Carolina is due to arrive?" asked Chuck. The receptionist needed a moment to check her computer.

"Flight two forty-one?" she repeated.

"Yes, that's right," replied Chuck.

"Flight two forty-one from Fayetteville, North Carolina arrived at gate three, precisely at five this morning. Will that be all?" asked the receptionist.

"Did you say five this morning?" asked Chuck, stunned by this latest development.

"That's correct," she answered.

"My daughter was on that flight," began Chuck, "and she hasn't called."

"I'm sorry, sir, but that's not our problem."

"She's fifteen years old, has brown hair, and brown eyes. Her name is Charlotte Overholt. Please, could you find out if anyone has seen her?" pleaded Chuck, near tears.

"Last year, we had over sixty-four million people come through LAX. That's roughly one hundred seventy-five-thousand people a day," informed the receptionist.

"Please," begged Chuck, "she's my daughter."

"I'll patch you through to security," conceded the woman.

"Thank you," replied Chuck. Security, however, was of no help. They even paged Charlie, but came up empty. Vera, who had picked up the kitchen extension, was anxiously voicing her fears and worries over the receiver. Chuck quickly called the police. They informed him that unless his daughter had been missing for at least forty-eight hours, they couldn't do anything. The police suggested he call them back tomorrow if she still hadn't shown up.

Chuck slowly sat down on the couch, while Vera rattled on about the tragic possibilities that had befallen their Charlie. Try as he might, he was unable to pull his thoughts together. When he grasped for a word, he would open his hands, only to find them empty. "God help," was the only coherent, two-word prayer he could make. Gradually, even those two words vanished.

As Vera talked, she noticed a vacant look on her son's face. A sick feeling knotted her stomach. She didn't need a doctor to tell her what was happening. How many times had her husband, Arnold, had that same expression? Alarmed, Vera picked up the phone and called Jerome.

"Jerome, it's your brother," said Vera. "It's happening."

"I'll come after I finish this report," replied Jerome, in his detached clinical voice.

"But, it's your brother!" pleaded Vera.

"I know who he is," Jerome answered tersely. Before Vera could say another word, he hung up. Vera sat on the couch beside Chuck and tried to keep him as calm as possible. Two minutes later, Jerome appeared in the doorway. It was just like his father-- only it wasn't. It was Chuck.

"He'll come out of it in a while," assured Jerome, sitting in a chair facing the couch. Vera, who was bursting with news, told Jerome everything that had transpired that morning.

"How old is Charlie?" inquired Jerome, thoughtfully.

"Fifteen. Why?" asked Vera.

"She's old enough to find her way. And if she isn't-- if she hasn't shown up in forty-eight hours, then I'll go look for her myself," declared Jerome, getting up.

"But, it could be too late!" exclaimed Vera.

"A policy that's good enough for the police is good enough for me," replied Jerome.

"But, Charlie is missing now!" panicked Vera, unaware that she was exciting her son. Chuck, in reflex to his daughter's plight, suddenly jumped to his feet and bounded across the living room to the front door. With no comprehension of what he was doing, he attempted to run through the closed door. The next moment, he lay sprawled in front of the solid wood door, dazed by the blow. Vera gave a cry of distress as she ran to her son's side.

"I don't think anything's broken!" Vera announced, as Chuck sat up and looked around. "Help me get him to his feet." The thing was easier said than done, for as soon as Vera and Jerome tried to help Chuck up off the floor, he flailed his strong arms and legs wildly, making it dangerous for them to go near him while he was this disturbed. Whenever a man of Chuck's strength and size becomes uncontrollable, things grow serious rapidly.

"Stay away from him," instructed Jerome, when Vera again attempted to approach Chuck. While Vera watched helplessly, Jerome went to the phone and called Henry Gillis, a trusted doctor who had several patients in Mullen Overholt. Since it was impossible to move Chuck away from the front door without meeting crazed resistance, the doctor had to enter the house through the back door. Dr. Gillis shook his head sympathetically when he saw Chuck.

"So young," he observed sadly. In order for the doctor to administer the sedative, Jerome had to pin his brother to the floor by putting his weight on Chuck's chest.

"Has he had an episode like this one since arriving?" Dr. Gillis asked. Vera and Jerome both replied no. "It's most likely the strain of his daughter being missing," he concluded. "Until she's found, if you can't keep him calm, give him these," said the doctor, handing Vera a small bottle of medicine. "I'd like to see him in my office before the week is through. There's a drug that could improve his memory."

Now under the calming influence of a sedative, Jerome helped Chuck to his room and lay him down on the bed. Like a small child, Chuck tucked his legs under his chest and drifted to sleep.

After Jerome left the house with Dr. Gillis, Vera visited Chuck's bedside. If only she could think of a way to help her granddaughter. She would go look for Charlie, herself, but she couldn't drive. If Jerome and the police refused to search, Vera felt there was little more that she could do but to hope and wait.

Brisk, Autumn wind whipped into the open windows of the Clark Plumbing Service and Supply van as it began its return trip from a job in Palm Springs.

Mike turned the van onto the highway back to Twin Yucca. Usually, Adam drove, but the bandages on his right hand made it difficult for him to hold onto the wheel. Beside Mike sat Adam, silently comforting himself with the thought that the last of the bandages would come off the next day, for Mike's driving always made him a little apprehensive. Mike sped up a little as he changed lanes to pass a car.

"Slow down, Mike," instructed Adam. "I'd like to reach home in one piece." Mike adjusted his speed. He always thought his uncle drove too slowly, but that was Adam-- never in a rush to get where he was going.

Chad sat in the passenger seat beside Adam, hanging his head out the open window, taking in the cool desert air. When Chad had learned that his uncle and brother were going into Palm Springs on a job later that day, he ran straight from school when it let out, and jumped into the van just as it was pulling away. The nine year old frequently tagged along on these drives, for he loved the company of Adam and Mike, (though he would be the last to admit it out loud).

"This cloud cover is a good sign," observed Mike, noting the thick white clouds that were casting their shadows onto the wide-open landscape of the Mojave Desert.

"How so?" asked Adam.

"The cows are facing East today," Chad piped up.

"Clouds don't have a face," contradicted Adam, groggily.

"I wouldn't say that. If cows have their backs to the West, then it's a given that they must be facing East," disagreed Mike.

"Yesterday, they were facing the other direction," said Chad, knowingly.

"The clouds or the cows?" asked Adam, half conscious.

"Clouds, of course. La Nina has a lot to do with it," Mike explained.

"Yesterday, the wind was blowing from the West," added Chad.

"See what I mean?" said Mike.

"I don't see any cows," disagreed Adam, opening his eyes long enough to glance outside the window.

"La Nina affects the clouds every day, whether we notice it or not," continued Mike.

"Which does it affect-- the clouds or the cows?" asked Adam. "Make up your mind!"

"Cows always face against the wind, you know," explained Chad.

"Both," answered Mike.

"A cow cannot face two directions at the same time," informed Adam. "It's physically impossible."

"I disagree. La Nina warms the water along the coast, helping to build a high pressure dome over our area. Storms just bounce off of it. That's how," explained Mike.

"How what?" asked Chad.

"How La Nina affects the clouds," answered Mike.

"But, I was talking about the cows," said Chad, disappointedly. "Hadn't anyone heard what he was saying?"

"I know," replied Mike. "I was trying to explain how La Nina affects the cows by determining which way the wind blows."

"I've never seen a cow face two directions at once-- La Nina or not," disagreed Adam, sleepily.

"Horses do it, too," informed Chad.

"I never knew that," replied Mike, thoughtfully. "I thought only cows did that."

"Face two different directions at once?" asked Adam. "Cows or horses-- it makes no difference. It's still impossible."

"Yeah, horses are just like cows," repeated Chad, happy that for once, he knew something that his brother did not.

"What they teach kids in school these days," mumbled Adam, finally falling asleep. Hating to interrupt sleep that came so hard for their uncle, Mike and Chad promptly ended the debate.

Mike turned off the highway onto the long stretch of main road that led into Twin Yucca. As he did this, Chad spotted a young woman walking along the right side of the road. She was wearing a backpack and lugging a suitcase.

"Slow down," directed Chad, not wanting to pass the girl too quickly.

"Not you too," groaned Mike. "You can't tell me how to drive. Uncle Adam can, but you can't."

"We're going to pass her," warned Chad.

"Pass who?" asked Mike. Chad pointed to the girl on the side of the road. As they passed her, she stopped and adjusted her backpack. Mike slowed the van to a stop.

"What are you doing?" asked Chad.

"I'm going to give her a lift," replied Mike, preparing to get out of the van.

"I saw her first," protested Chad.

"Go on," replied Mike, placing his hands back on the wheel. The van slowly backed up to where the girl stood. Chad stuck his head out the window.

"Want a ride into town?" he offered, his blue eyes twinkling in the sunlight. The girl looked at him and the others in the van warily. "Come on," said Chad, opening the passenger door and jumping down. "I'll put your suitcase in the back."

Even though the girl hadn't yet let go of her suitcase, Chad quickly took it from her hand, and, after opening the sliding door on the side of the van, set it down on the floor. The girl was about to protest that he was stealing her luggage when Chad climbed back in beside his uncle and held the door open for her. Seeing that they already had half of her belongings, she decided to accept the ride.

To take on another passenger, however, some alterations were necessary. As Chad moved over, he slid his still sleeping uncle, (who's only acknowledgment of the move was to make a small groan), hard up against Mike. Mike now found it difficult to sit in the driver's seat and still remain behind the wheel. With a patient shake of the head, Mike accepted the new arrangement. Charlie squeezed in and shut the door.

"My name is Mike Garner," introduced Mike. "That's my uncle, Adam Clark. And the kid who impolitely jerked your suitcase away was my baby brother, Chad," apologized Mike with a laugh. Chad cringed at the sound of "baby brother."

"I'm not a baby," retorted Chad, embarrassed that Mike had said that in front of a pretty girl.

"My mistake," replied Mike.

"My name is Wendy," said the girl, seeing that it was her turn to introduce herself.

"Slow down, Mike," yawned Adam, waking up from his nap.

"Yeah, slow down," teased Chad.

"Everyone's a critic," joked Mike, adjusting his speed once more. Adam yawned again, stretching one arm out behind Chad's head, and the other behind Mike. As he stretched, he felt his right hand run into someone's face. Adam leaned forward to see who else was in the van.

"I beg your pardon," he apologized. "Who do we have here?"

"This is Wendy. We're giving her a lift into Twin Yucca," replied Chad.

"It's not safe for kids to hitchhike," explained Mike. The girl looked up reproachfully. He had just inferred that she was a kid.

"These days, hitchhiking isn't safe for anyone," asserted Adam, leaning back in his seat once more. Adam wrinkled his forehead thoughtfully. Suddenly his face brightened. He glanced back at the new passenger and gave a knowing smile.

"So, where are you from, Wendy?" asked Mike.

"Here and there," evaded the girl, uneasy that someone was asking her questions that she really didn't want to answer.

"Are you staying or just passing through?" continued Mike.

"Not sure yet," came the reply. Mike looked in the mirror at the girl, catching her shyly watching him. When she saw he was looking at her, she quickly looked away.

Adam chuckled to himself. When Mike was little, he could remember the small girls that would constantly follow his nephew around. Mike was so young that his appreciation of the fairer sex had not yet developed. He protested their interest in him at the top of his lungs. It was like that throughout Mike's childhood. He had good looks that attracted attention wherever he went. Now twenty-five, Mike saw nothing unusual about the fact that when women passed him on the street, they would do a double take; that mothers would drag their daughters up to him so they could be introduced; and that girls, especially in Twin Yucca, dreamed of being Mrs. Mike Garner. Adam could not help being amused. It looked like Mike had inadvertently made another conquest.

"Do you have friends and family in Twin Yucca?" pressed Mike, realizing that Wendy was doing all that she could to evade his questions.

"Mike," interrupted Adam, "she obviously doesn't want to answer your questions. Leave the poor girl alone." Mike looked up in surprise at his uncle. Surely, Adam understood their responsibility to return this probable runaway to her family. How could they do that, if he couldn't ask her any questions? Adam gave Mike a firm look and shook his head. Puzzled, Mike turned his attention back to the road and remained quiet. Grateful for the respite, Wendy breathed a sigh of relief.

Seeing his chance to talk to the pretty passenger sitting beside him, Chad pointed out the landscape, giving her a guided tour without leaving the van.

"See over there? That's a Joshua-tree. It means we're really close to home. And over there is some Creosote Bush, Shadscale, Big Sagebrush, Bladder sage, and Blackbush. In the summer months, if you even look at them sideways, they go up in flames," said Chad.

"You know a lot about the desert, don't you?" asked Wendy, impressed by his knowledge of the drab-looking plants. To her, they just looked like tumbleweeds. To Chad, they had names.

"Uncle Adam told me," replied Chad proudly. So Chad continued until they reached town.

"I'm going to have to ask where she wants to be dropped off," whispered Mike, leaning toward Adam.

"Ask her," consented Adam.

"Where should I drop you off, Wendy?" asked Mike.

"Is there a nursing home in Twin Yucca?" asked Wendy. Mike raised his eyebrows in puzzled surprise.

"One-- Mullen-Overholt," stammered Mike.

"Is it too much out of your way?" asked Wendy.

"That's where you want to go? A nursing home?" asked Chad, incredulously.

"It's not out of our way," interceded Adam. Without another word, Mike pulled up in front of Mullen-Overholt and stopped the van.

"Here's your stop," he announced. Wendy eagerly opened the door and jumped out.

"Sure this is where you want to be?" Chad asked, sliding back the side door and handing Wendy her suitcase.

"Thank you for the ride!" she exclaimed, running to the door and disappearing inside. Chad threw up his hands in disbelief and climbed back inside. Now that their passenger wasn't present, Mike turned to Adam.

"Why didn't you let me ask her about her family?" asked Mike. "We might have been able to contact them for her!"

"Calm down, Mike," replied Adam. "Her family will know she's home shortly."

"How do you know?" Mike asked, astonished at his uncle's confidence in the matter.

"Because that was Charlie Overholt," explained Adam.

"Chuck's daughter?" asked Mike in surprise. "How do you know that was her?"

"Because, ever since Chuck got here, he's been showing off pictures of his daughter to anyone who'll stand still long enough for him to open his wallet," replied Adam. "I'd recognize her anywhere."

"Then why did she say her name was Wendy?" piped up Chad, who was following the conversation with much interest.

"She probably ran away," postulated Adam, "and didn't want us to call the police. Not to change the subject, but we had better drop Chad off at home before your mother gives me another speech about how she hardly sees her sons anymore. As a matter of fact," continued Adam, checking his watch, "it's almost dinnertime. She'll be expecting both of you."

When Charlie eagerly ran into Mullen-Overholt, she was halted at the door by an elderly woman dressed in a dark green jumper. The woman smiled at Charlie, taking her by the hand and leaned forward as if she didn't want anyone else to hear.

"Did you come to take me home? I want to go home. Please let me go home," she pleaded, pressing Charlie's hand tightly. Charlie, who was impatient to find her father, tried to politely

pull her hand away from the old woman. "Please let me go home," the old woman repeated, tears coming to her eyes.

"I'm sorry, I can't," replied Charlie, still trying to escape the old woman's clutches. The more the old woman insisted, the more trapped Charlie felt. "I can't take you home," repeated Charlie, her voice growing louder. Just then, a young black lady came up behind the woman and gave her a big hug.

"You don't really want to leave me, do you, Goldie?" asked the lady in a gentle voice.

"Please let me go home," repeated Goldie. This time, however, the pleading tone in her voice had disappeared. She instead turned around and reciprocated the hug.

"Are you hungry, Goldie?" asked the kind lady. Goldie nodded. "Of course you are, it's dinner time. Wouldn't you like to go and finish your supper with your other friends?" Goldie reached for another hug. "Of course you would," said the lady, answering for the old woman as she gave her another hug.

"Goldie is one of our hugging residents," explained the black woman, slowly guiding her charge back to the dining room. "She's harmless," the lady assured, seeing the apprehension on Charlie's face. As Charlie turned to go look for her father, a middle aged white woman approached her. Her tired demeanor bespoke of one who had had a long day.

"Can I help you?" asked the woman, adjusting her ponytail, and brushing back the dark brown hair from her eyes.

"I-- I'm looking for someone," stammered Charlie, hesitating to give Chuck's name. For all she knew, everyone in the nursing home could have been asked to call the police if they saw a teenage girl asking for Charlton Overholt. The last thing she wanted was to be returned to Aunt Angela-- especially before seeing her father.

The tired woman smiled patiently. "My name is Evelyn Saunders," she said. "I'm the Director of Nursing at this facility. I know everyone here. Tell me who you're looking for, and I'll tell you where to find them." There was no hint of suspicion in Evelyn's voice. Deciding that it was safe, Charlie chose to trust her.

"I'm looking for Charlton Overholt," said Charlie, hoping she hadn't made a mistake that would suddenly find her on a return trip of Fayetteville, North Carolina. Evelyn gave a surprised start.

"You mean Chuck?" she asked.

"Yes, that's him," replied Charlie, trying hard to contain her excitement. The fact that Evelyn knew her father's nickname was tantalizing proof that he really was in Twin Yucca. Evelyn bent forward slightly, as if to get a better look at the stranger. Charlie shifted uncomfortably in her shoes and wondered if Evelyn subjected all newcomers to like inspections.

"Wait here," Evelyn said, walking to an office door. She knocked on the door, and after giving one last stare, disappeared inside. Charlie wondered if she should stay or run. Maybe Evelyn was in there right now, calling the police. Charlie took one retreating step backward but stopped herself short. No, she wouldn't run. Evelyn knew of her father. She could tell her where he was. Steeling herself with resolve, Charlie decided to wait.

Evelyn tapped her foot impatiently on the worn carpet of the Administrator's office, waiting for the occupant to get off the phone. Seeing that Evelyn was not going to leave until she said what she came in there to say, Jerome gave in to her importunance.

"Yes?" said Jerome, hanging up the phone.

"There's a young woman outside asking for Chuck," informed Evelyn in a low voice.

"Why in the world are you whispering, Evelyn?" asked Jerome, purposefully raising his voice. As he got up from his chair behind the desk, Evelyn placed her hands on her hips.

"No one will ever accuse you of being tactful, Jerome. That's certain!" In a state of great agitation, Evelyn promptly left his office, feeling quite sorry for the girl outside. Truth be told, no one ever had called Jerome tactful-- and it seemed quite probable that no one ever would.

As Jerome exited his office, he saw a teenage girl, sitting on her suitcase, watching the nursing assistants as they worked. For a moment, Jerome stood there, staring at her.

"So, this is Chuck's daughter," thought Jerome. "The last time I saw her, she was a tiny baby. Look at her now," he mused. As Jerome walked over to Charlie, she stood up. "We've been expecting you," said Jerome, giving no explanation of who he was. Charlie looked pale. This grim man had been expecting HER? Jerome put on the jacket he was holding and walked over to the main door, waiting for her to follow. "You want to see your father, don't you?" asked Jerome, seeing that Charlie was not coming.

"Do you know him?" asked Charlie, taking a step forward.

"I should say I do. He's my brother," replied Jerome, matter-of-factly. Delighted at this new revelation, Charlie dropped her suitcase and ran to Jerome, throwing her arms around him.

"Oh, Uncle Jerome!" she exclaimed happily. "I shall love you forever! I'll always remember that you were the one who took me to Daddy!" She gave him another hug and kissed him on the cheek. Excitedly, she ran back to pick up her suitcase. Stunned, Jerome stood frozen to the floor. Charlie ran back and looked at him expectantly.

"See you later, Jerome," said a voice from behind. Jerome turned around to find Evelyn. There was an amused look plastered on her tired face. "If she can hug and kiss you like that, maybe its a sign that you aren't a hopeless case, after all," Evelyn observed hopefully, returning to her rounds.

"What did she mean by that?" asked Charlie.

"Never mind," dismissed Jerome. This was the second time in approximately ten minutes that his dignity had been threatened. Not caring for this average, Jerome motioned Charlie to the door.

A blast of chilly evening air greeted them as they began their walk to Jerome's house. Jerome puzzled over how complicated his life was becoming. Not long ago, it used to be himself, his father, (who, since coming to Mullen Overholt, he hardly ever had to converse with), and his mother, (who he tried to see as little as possible). To Jerome, attachment meant pain, and pain was something he couldn't handle.

"Is Daddy all right?" asked Charlie, her suitcase beginning to feel like a lead weight tied to her tired arms. Charlie stopped for a minute to switch the suitcase to her other hand. Jerome kept walking, so Charlie had to run a little ways to catch up. Breathing heavily, Charlie repeated her question.

"He had an accident today. Apparently, he couldn't handle the news of your running away," said Jerome coldly, as if to get even with his niece for her public display of affection at the nursing home, "and it aggravated his Alzheimer's. We had quite a time calming him down." Charlie's face fell. She wanted to cry, but the tears wouldn't come. Numbly, she followed Jerome down the sidewalk until they reached her new home.

It was nearing six o'clock, and since Daylight Savings Time had not yet taken effect, Charlie could still see Jerome's house against the dimming sky. It was a medium sized house made of red brick. There was nothing fancy about it, but the solidity of the masonry gave an impression of lasting durability. There were no plants adorning the tiny yard in front of the house, save two: an anemic tree and an enormous shrub that ran the entire distance of the right side of the house, completely hiding the red brick wall behind it. It looked like years since anyone had taken the

time to acknowledge its untamed presence. For a brief moment, Charlie envisioned the great shrub slowly swallowing the entire house. She followed Jerome up the concrete walk to the house, taking sad note of the dry, yellow blades that made up Jerome's lawn.

Jerome opened the door and took off his jacket. Charlie followed inside and shut the door. Unlike the outside of the house, the inside had a homey feel. Things looked lived in and well cared for. The white living room walls were littered with pictures of the Overholt family. Charlie made a mental note to take a closer look at them when she had the opportunity. Charlie looked around while Jerome disappeared into a room. It looked like all the walls were white. The dark brown carpet that lined the living room, ran into a hallway and branched off beneath some closed doors. Beyond that, Charlie could glimpse the kitchen, and one or more rooms that she couldn't see from her vantage.

Suddenly, an old woman with light brown hair, appeared from the room Jerome had gone into.

"Charlie! You're in one piece!" exclaimed the woman, rushing to her and taking the girl's soft face between her aged hands. "Blessed child, how you've grown!" she exclaimed, this time giving her a hug. "Look at you, you're so thin! Well, I'll take care of that. They probably didn't feed you enough," she continued. "You look hungry. Did Jerome feed you?" she asked. Not exactly knowing what to think, Charlie shook her head. Who was this woman? And where was her father? "Oh, that son of mine," she lamented, walking to the kitchen, "sometimes I don't think he has the sense he was born with." Charlie followed the old woman to the kitchen.

"Grandma?" she asked, suddenly realizing that Jerome was her son. Vera looked up as she tied an apron around her waist.

"Yes, Pumpkin?" she replied, taking a casserole dish from the refrigerator. Charlie smiled contentedly. No one but her father ever called her that. This really was home.

"Where is Daddy?" asked Charlie, taking off her backpack. Vera looked up from the stove, sadly.

"He's had a difficult day, Pumpkin. He's been resting a lot. Jerome is checking Chuck right now, and if he's able, you'll see him in a minute. How much about his condition do you know about?" she inquired, turning back to the stove. Charlie eagerly looked down the hall. One of the rooms had a light shining beneath the door. Soon she was going to see him! Seeing that Charlie was too excited to answer, Vera dropped the question. The door soon opened, and a familiar face appeared.

"Daddy!" screamed Charlie in delight, running to him. Chuck received his daughter with open arms.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed, lifting her right up off the floor in a tender bear hug. "Are you all right? Please God, let her be all right!"

"I'm fine Daddy, just fine," she replied, burying her head into his strong arms.

"Thank God!" repeated Chuck, still unwilling to let his daughter down. "I never should have sent you away. Please say you forgive me, Charlie." In answer to his question, Charlie lovingly kissed her father on the cheek.

"Isn't she wonderful, Mom?" asked Chuck, walking into the kitchen with Charlie in his arms. "Didn't I tell you she was a treasure?" Vera smiled, relieved that Chuck had been able to see his daughter in the same familiar way she had seen him last. Chuck pulled a chair from the kitchen table and sat down, Charlie and all. Then Charlie remembered that her father wasn't well. She tried to escape from his lap, but Chuck wouldn't let her go. "What's wrong, Charlie?" he asked.

"You shouldn't be carrying me!" she exclaimed. "Not in your condition!" Chuck wrinkled his forehead in puzzlement.

"In my condition?" he repeated, questioningly.

"Your All-Timers, silly," replied Charlie, successfully making her get-away. Overcome with the realization of how little her granddaughter knew, Vera covered her face with the apron and quickly left the kitchen, not wanting anyone to see her while she wept. "What's wrong with Grandma?" asked Charlie.

"When did you find out I had Alzheimer's?" asked Chuck, gravely.

"Is that what it's called, Alzheimer's?" asked Charlie. "I thought All-Timers wasn't the right way to say it."

"When?" repeated Chuck.

"I heard Grandma Janice and Aunt Angela taking about you," replied Charlie. "That's when I knew I had to come. You needed me," she explained, putting her arms around her father's neck. Chuck gave his daughter another hug,

"That I do, Pumpkin, that I do." Jerome walked into the kitchen followed by Vera, who had dried her tears in private and was now ready to make dinner.

"There's enough casserole here for everyone," announced Vera, setting the table.

"I have to get back to the nursing home," Jerome protested, seeing the his mother was setting four places at the table.

"Except for your father, the family is together tonight, and its going to stay that way," insisted Vera.

"No, I'm going to miss chess," refused Jerome.

"For once in your life, forget chess! Your niece is home. You can afford to miss another night of chess with Adam Clark," persisted Vera. Seeing that his mother was not relenting, Jerome gave in and sat down at the table.

"You play chess with Adam?" asked Charlie, questioning her uncle. "That's funny. He doesn't look the type."

"How is it that you've only just arrived, and you already know Adam?" asked Chuck in astonishment.

"Oh, he and Mike and Chad gave me a ride into town," replied Charlie, taking a seat at the table. She hadn't eaten since she had breakfast on the plane.

"I'm glad you've already met them," Chuck smiled thankfully. "They're good people."

"What did you think of Mike?" asked Vera, taking the casserole from the oven and placing it on the table. "Didn't you think he was handsome?"

"Mom!" exclaimed Chuck. "She's too young!"

"I was sixteen when I married your father," informed Vera. "Besides, she's not too young to see what fish there are in the sea." Charlie blushed. Thankfully, no one noticed.

That night, Chuck surprised everyone by saying grace before they ate their dinner. Jerome groaned inwardly. Adam had struck again.

"The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise."

~ Proverbs 11:30 ~

Chapter Seventeen
And Thy House

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house."
~ Acts 16:31 ~

The first thought of every man who comes to Christ, is the salvation of his own soul. Naturally, when that question has been settled in both heart and mind, his next concern is the salvation of his family.

Chuck Overholt understood this fact well. He had slept soundly through the night only to awaken three hours before daybreak. As he stared groggily at the dotted paneled ceiling of his room, the pattern slowly formed into the likeness of Charlie. Yes, she was foremost concern in his mind, for the salvation of his dear Charlie's soul was at stake.

Overcome with care, Chuck decided to give it to the Lord in prayer. First, he thanked God for the return of his daughter, who was the dearest person, except for Christ Himself, to his heart. Then, Chuck asked God to intervene on his daughter's behalf, and somehow reach his Charlie, to the saving of her soul.

As any good parent would, Chuck knew his daughter. He knew her temperament and inclinations-- both of which could easily stand in the way for this glorious event to take place.

As Chuck lie in bed, waiting for morning to break, he recalled the time when Charlie, who was no more than four at the time, wanted to "pet" a cactus at a local zoo in Montana. She had never seen a cactus before, and was enthralled with its myriad of spines and showy flowers. Chuck told her, repeatedly, that she would get hurt if she touched the cactus, but Charlie simply refused to believe him. Chuck could still remember holding his screaming daughter while the zoo doctor extracted each painful spine with the aid of tweezers and a magnifying glass.

Charlie's inherent stubbornness was compounded by the realization that she was smarter than her father. This understanding bred a tendency to disbelieve him. When it became apparent to her that he didn't comprehend something as accurately as herself, Charlie would often dismiss his point of view, even though it had merits of its own.

When Charlie's eyes glazed over in the I'll-humor-you-because-you're-my-Daddy look, Chuck knew he was fighting a losing battle. At these times, he would pull rank and make an executive decision, rather than debate the subject any further. If she was to be saved, God would have to perform a miracle to do it.

Then there was Vera's, "fish in the sea," comment to consider. He had protested that she was too young to think very seriously about boys, or, in Mike Garner's case, men. However, he could not deny the fact, that his own mother was only one year older than Charlie when she married his father. What did the future hold for his daughter? Oh, that his life had been one of faith and Christ-like example! Charlie had grown up without Christian principles or guidance. True is the proverb, "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it." Charlie had not been trained in the way she should go. Chuck had left her spiritually open to whoever might walk into her life and influence it, whether for good or for bad. The older his daughter became, the harder it would be to correct her before it was too late-- before his influence over her would be replaced by someone else's.

Chuck chastised himself for putting his daughter in such a precarious circumstance. How could Charlie possibly have any hope of being reached, now? As Chuck began to despair, he thought of something that Adam had told him-- if we love God, then all things conspire to our good. "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose." Clutching this promise, Chuck took heart, and fell asleep once more.

"He was such a cute baby! See here?" pointed Vera, holding the photo album in front of Charlie. Charlie squinted her eyes to read the inscription beneath the photo.

"Chucky, three and a half months old," she read out loud. "Chucky?" repeated Charlie, grinning at her father who had just sauntered into the living room in his pajamas. Chuck smiled sheepishly.

"Now you know," he said, flopping down into an armchair opposite the couch.

"Arnold gave him that nickname when we brought him home from the hospital," explained Vera, running her hand sentimentally over the worn pictures. "It doesn't seem possible that forty-two years have passed already," reminisced Vera. She turned a few pages, lingering at a photo of a young man in a cap and gown. "Your father's high school graduation picture," pointed out Vera, as Charlie leaned over to get a better look. "Arnold was so proud of you, Chuck," said Vera, wiping a tear from her eye.

"I didn't know that, Mom," replied Chuck, surprised.

"Oh, he was! He was!" exclaimed Vera. "He knew how hard it was for you to graduate."

"I wish he had told me."

"Arnold always had trouble expressing his feelings-- you know that," reminded Vera.

"Yes, I know," replied Chuck, grimly.

"Good grades came so easily to Jerome, that when it looked like you might not even graduate...," explained Vera, her voice trailing off.

"Dad had a hard time accepting the fact that I was doing the best I could," finished Chuck, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. "I wasn't a goldbricker."

"He never should have called you that," replied Vera. "I know he regretted it the moment it came out of his mouth."

"How did you know he had regret, Mom? Did he tell you?" asked Chuck. "Did Dad ever say he was sorry for being so unforgiving with me?"

"Your father never played favorites between his sons," denied Vera.

"I didn't say he did, Mom," replied Chuck, getting up from the armchair.

"He didn't know he was hurting you, Chuck," pleaded Vera. "If he just had the right opportunity-- I know he would have made things right between the two of you."

"It's too late for that now," Chuck said, sadly walking back to his room to change. Vera sighed, heavily.

"Well," Vera said, returning her thoughts to the present, "I have to go fix breakfast, Pumpkin." She closed the album and placed it on the living room coffee table.

There was a sadness that clung to Charlie after Vera and Chuck left. It was as if the past had temporarily stepped out of the shadows and visited the room with its bittersweet memories.

She opened the photo album once more and looked at the faces of her father, her uncle, and her grandma, all much younger. Then there was the taciturn face of her grandpa. Charlie couldn't help noticing that he bore a resemblance to Jerome. But of all the photos, the one she liked the most was of her parents, just after they were married. Charlie had seen pictures of her mother before, but this one was her favorite. Chuck had his arms tenderly around Martha. It was as if the photographer had walked in on a private moment between husband and wife. Charlie

sighed wistfully. If only someone would hold her the way Chuck was holding Martha; if only someone loved her like that. Before Charlie had time for another "if only," Vera called everyone to breakfast.

After Charlie sat down at the table, she immediately began to help herself to some toast. Chuck cleared his throat, giving her a disapproving look.

"Charlie, from now on, we're going to give thanks to God before we eat," informed Chuck. For a second, Charlie wanted to laugh. Was this a joke? Sure, he had prayed before dinner last night, but that was only because he was so excited that the family was together again. Surely, he wasn't serious! Back in Montana, they never prayed. But as Chuck bowed his head and thanked God, Charlie realized that her father was serious. Charlie threw Chuck a look afterward that gave him a knot at the pit of his stomach. It was the same patronizing look he had seen a thousand times before.

"When are you planning to put Charlie in school, Chuck?" asked Vera, pouring some coffee into his mug. Vera waited expectantly for a response, but Chuck did not answer. His mind was elsewhere, trying to think of the best way to reach his daughter. It was not until Vera repeated the question, that Chuck realized someone was speaking to him.

"I hadn't given it much thought," admitted Chuck.

"Well, you better enroll her before she misses too much of the school year," warned Vera. "You probably miss your friends, don't you?" asked Vera, addressing Charlie now. Charlie shrugged. She didn't miss anyone in North Carolina. But there were some friends in Montana that she did miss. Taking Charlie's shrug as a sign that she was worried, Vera continued. "Don't worry, you'll soon make lots of friends," she assured. "Twin Yucca has a really good public high school."

"Actually, Mom," said Chuck, "I was thinking of a private school." Vera looked up in surprise.

"Whatever for?" asked Vera.

"I think she'll be better off in a private school," replied Chuck, thoughtfully.

"Nonsense!" contradicted Vera. "She'll be just fine at the public school, right here in Twin Yucca."

"She wouldn't learn about Christ in a public school, Mom," said Chuck, rotating his coffee mug clockwise on the kitchen tablecloth.

"You want me to attend a Christian school?" asked Charlie, incredulously.

"That's what I'm thinking, yes," replied Chuck.

"But private schools are so expensive," reasoned Vera.

"It's worth it, to me," said Chuck, his voice sounding extremely final to Charlie's ears.

"I won't go," flatly refused Charlie.

"You'll do as I say," came Chuck's firm response.

"But, it's not fair!" retorted Charlie.

"What's so terribly unfair about a good private school?" asked Chuck.

"Do you think most people my age go to a private school? Daddy, I'm weird enough without hanging this albatross around my neck."

"Charlie, you're not weird," assured Chuck. Charlie gave him a disbelieving look.

"You have to say that. You're my father," she replied.

"Think about a private school," continued Chuck, "you might change you mind."

"Either way, I'm going, right?" asked Charlie. Chuck remained silent. "Dura lex sed lex," grumbled Charlie, punching her finger into the toast on her plate.

"What did you say?" asked Chuck, alarmed that Charlie had been picking up bad language.

"It's Latin," Charlie informed him. "It means, 'the law is hard, but it is the law.'"

"It isn't law, Charlie. It's my wish. There's a difference," stated Chuck, trying not to lose his ground. Charlie stared dejectedly at her toast, which by now, had been poked to pieces. Chuck silently asked God for help. It was only eight-thirty, and already, it had been a difficult day. Chuck had no joy in making his daughter unhappy.

After seeing that she was not going to respond to him any further, Chuck rose from the table.

"Where are you going, Chuck?" asked Vera. "You haven't finished your breakfast, yet." Chuck had not finished his breakfast the day before, either. This pattern disturbed Vera. In her mind, he was still a boy who needed to eat everything on his plate so he could grow up to be a strong, healthy man.

"I'm going to lie down awhile," answered Chuck. His body wasn't tired, but he could tell his mind was slowing under the strain of the events of the morning. Thoughts were no longer whole. He felt like a clock, slowly unwinding. If he could get some rest, then he would feel better. Chuck retreated to his room, and lay down on the bed. The dotted ceiling panels blankly stared back at him, as if to say, "You again? What are doing back here so soon?"

As he stretched out on the bed, Chuck heard his door open. A soft hand touched his. He looked up. It was Charlie.

"I'll go to a private school," she whispered, her eyes wet with frightened tears. "I'll go anywhere you want me to. Just feel better. Please, feel better." Chuck kissed her hand and closed his eyes.

Charlie sat on the edge of his bed and watched him rest. What was this monster who was turning their lives upside down? Her father never needed to take a rest because of an argument, before. Why, he could hike for hours, and still not be winded. She remembered the times when he would purposefully slow his pace, just so she could keep up. Now the roles were reversed. She had to slow down so that he could keep up with her.

Vera softly opened the door and motioned to Charlie. Charlie quietly tiptoed from the room and shut the door.

"Better let him rest, Pumpkin," admonished Vera. "Don't worry, he'll feel better after he wakes up. I remember your grandpa went through the same thing. He almost always felt better after a good nap." Vera had said this to assure Charlie that everything was going to be all right, but to Charlie, it didn't feel like encouragement. "Why don't you go outside for a while?" suggested Vera. "A change of scenery will do you some good."

"What if he wakes up and needs me?" asked Charlie.

"I'll stay here and keep an eye on him. Only, be sure to come home by lunchtime," instructed Vera. "Your father has an appointment with Dr. Gillis at two o'clock. He might be able to prescribe something to help Chuck. After lunch, we'll all go down there and see what can be done." Charlie smiled optimistically. It wasn't much, but it was something positive to look forward to.

Charlie stood on the front step, trying to decide whether or not she would need to put on her sweater. As she was about to make up her mind, an elderly woman across the street, who was watering a cactus garden in front of her house, shouted, "Hello! Welcome to the neighborhood! I'm Mrs. Jacobs! You're Jerome's little niece, aren't you? Yes, I can see the Overholt resemblance! I was sorry to hear about your father. Two people in the same family! I can't imagine! But then, my sister in Topeka knows a woman in her quilt guild who has two nephews that have Alzheimer's, so I guess that's just the way things work out sometimes." The woman paused, as if to get a better look at her new young neighbor. "I guess you'll be enrolling in school, soon?" she asked.

"I guess so," Charlie shrugged.

"Well, I hope so!" Mrs. Jacobs exclaimed, emphatically. "I know a woman who used to live in Twin Yucca about eight years ago, and she had a daughter who dropped out of high school. The foolish child married some no-account and got herself pregnant. When she started showing, he left her high and dry! Imagine that! Now she's a waitress in some dingy cafe, just because she dropped out before her education was complete! Now, you don't want that happening to you, do you?" she asked, almost accusingly.

"No, I don't," responded Charlie. Silently, she was trying to think of an excuse to extricate herself from this conversation.

"I should hope not!" said Mrs. Jacobs. She was about to add more, when Charlie hastily waved good-bye and made as rapid of an exit as she could manage, without breaking into an all-out run.

"We would have to live next door to a neighborhood gossip," complained Charlie, slowing her pace now that she was out of Mrs. Jacobs' range.

Charlie soon discovered that there wasn't much to see in the neighborhood, since most of its residents were retired and old-- nothing really appealing to a teen out to see the sights. With this in mind, she headed into town.

The lifeblood of any city, is its commerce. Twin Yucca was no different. As Charlie walked down the sidewalk, she read the signs: "Logan's Garden Nursery, open 7 days, 8am to 5pm. Fertilizers, shade trees, roses, herbs, vegetables, pottery, patio furniture," read Charlie. "Megan's Blinds and Draperies, custom and commercial draperies, pillows, etc." Charlie passed a few more stores, looking for more interesting signs. "Dean Electric, breakers and fuses replaced. Clark Plumbing Service and Supply..." Charlie paused. This must be where Mike Garner worked. "Family owned

and operated, open Monday through Friday, 8am to 5pm. Emergency repair service available on weekends." Charlie peered in through one of the large plate windows that were located on either side of the door. A slouched man sat in a chair beside the counter, fast asleep. Charlie sighed, disappointedly. It was only Adam Clark.

As Charlie made her way further up the street, she paused at a rather beat up bus stop. Twin Yucca looked like it was a well kempt city, but this bus stop stuck out like a sore thumb. The sign looked as though it had been pummeled multiple times by rocks, and the bench was covered in graffiti. While Charlie was making these observations, a woman in her early forties took her place beside the sign, waiting patiently for the bus. Charlie couldn't help noticing the dark navy cap the woman was wearing. It read, "Dairy Cream, since 1952." Charlie followed the woman's expectant gaze up the street. No bus was in sight.

"She must be early," thought Charlie, preparing to leave. Just then, a blue pickup truck drove by, honking its horn. After Charlie had taken a few more steps, another car honked its horn as it passed the bus stop. Charlie stopped. Why were these people honking their horns? She turned to look at the woman, who was still waiting for the bus. She seemed unaffected. "Maybe it's a strange, local custom," Charlie shrugged.

It was eleven thirty when Charlie decided to head back home. Soon, it would be lunch time. After lunch, there was the important doctor's appointment that Charlie wanted to be sure she didn't miss. As Charlie passed the bus stop again, this time in the opposite direction, she noticed that the same brown-haired woman was still standing there, waiting for her bus. Another car drove by, honking its horn as it passed the bus stop. "Why do they keep honking their horns?" thought Charlie. Suddenly, Charlie heard screeching tires. When she looked up, she saw that the woman was running into oncoming traffic, chasing her dark cap which was blowing in the wind. One car stopped, shouted something angrily at the woman, and drove away. The woman quickly returned to her spot, looking helplessly at the cap, now laying in the center of the street.

"Why not?" thought Charlie. Quickly, Charlie crossed the street, stooping to snatch up the cap. The woman ran to Charlie and gave her an exuberant hug.

"Thank you!" she cried. "It wouldn't be official without my hat," she said, placing the Dairy Cream cap back on her head.

"I'm Charlie," said Charlie, introducing herself.

"My name's Maggie Downen," the woman replied. "It was really nice of you to get my hat for me."

"It was nothing," said Charlie. "The bus must really be running late today," Charlie observed.

"Oh, it came, all right," replied the woman.

"Then, why didn't you get on it?" asked Charlie.

"Because, I'm waiting for my brother," laughed the woman, adjusting her cap.

"Oh," said Charlie. "You've been standing here a long time. Didn't he tell you which bus he was arriving on?" Maggie shook her head.

"I got here early, so I wouldn't miss him," she said. Another honking car passed them.

"I've been wondering all morning," said Charlie, "why do people honk when they drive by this bus stop?"

"I don't know," Maggie shrugged. While Charlie was asking her question, three teenage boys walked up to where they were standing. One of the boys laughed and made a face at Maggie, while another pushed her off the curb, into the street. Maggie screamed.

"Leave her alone!" yelled Charlie. Silent and unobjectionable up to now, the third boy helped Maggie back to her spot.

"Come on," he said to his two friends, "let's find something else to do."

One of the antagonists took a step closer to Maggie, laughing. He put out his hand to push her back into the street when Charlie gave him a swift kick in the shins. The boy yelped in pain.

"Ooooooh, look what we have here," laughed the first boy.

"Come on," urged the third boy, "let's go before Officer Erickson shows up." As the boy finished speaking, a police car pulled up to the bus stop. A tall brown-headed man stepped out.

"Boys," Officer Erickson said, "I thought I told you Miss Downen was off limits."

"We weren't doin' nothin'!" denied the first boy.

"Then you won't mind leaving-- NOW!" ordered Officer Erickson. With a few rude noises and gestures, the boys walked away. "Come on, Miss Downen," said Officer Erickson, gently helping

Maggie into the passenger side of the squad car. "Your Mom wants you to come home and eat lunch."

"But, Wayne, I have to wait for Wayne," protested Maggie.

"I'll wait for him, Maggie," offered Charlie. Officer Erickson looked up at Charlie in surprise.

"You're new to Twin Yucca, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Charlie, giving an involuntary shudder. Since Darren's death, Charlie wasn't too fond of policemen-- they only reminded her of that terrible night.

"That's my friend," declared Maggie, happily.

"Go home, Maggie's friend," advised Officer Erickson. "You've done all you can." As the squad car pulled away, Maggie waved good-bye.

"What a weird town," puzzled Charlie, waving back to Maggie.

Charlie returned home, just as Vera was setting the table. Vera's prediction came true-- Chuck did feel better after a rest. Lunch passed in relative calm, for Charlie tried hard to do nothing that would upset her father in such a way that would send him off to the bedroom for another rest.

Since Vera could not drive, and Chuck didn't feel confident enough to get behind the wheel, Jerome drove everyone to Dr. Gillis' office. After dropping them off, Jerome returned to Mullen-Overholt.

The Overholts waited for their turn to see Dr. Gillis in the waiting room. Charlie, who was unaccustomed to medical facilities of any kind, wrinkled her nose at the antiseptic appearance of the room. The walls were white and bare; the ceiling was white and bare; and the floor was white and bare. Charlie sighed impatiently. They had been waiting for hours (or so it seemed to her). Didn't the patient with Dr. Gillis right now, know that people were waiting out here? Charlie shifted in her seat and rapped her fingers nervously on the armrest of her chair. Vera, who was quite used to doctors' offices, chatted pleasantly with someone else in the waiting room about something in which Charlie had no desire to eavesdrop. While Vera accepted Charlie's impatient attitude as immaturity, Chuck knew better. He recognized the fear in his daughter's face. She had been calm and relaxed at lunch, but now she was anxious and pensive.

"Try to relax," said Chuck, giving his daughter a calm smile. Charlie was about to respond that she was, when the examination room door opened.

"If you experience any discomfort, use the creme I prescribed," said Dr. Gillis, standing in the doorway.

"Thank you," replied the patient, exiting the examination room. As he turned, Chuck caught glimpse of a familiar face.

"Adam!" exclaimed Chuck, getting up from his seat. "I never expected to see you here!"

"Dr. Gillis just removed the last of the bandages," explained Adam, holding up his right hand.

"Thank the Lord," said Chuck.

"Amen to that," smiled Adam.

"I think you already met my daughter, Charlie," said Chuck, motioning his daughter to come over and say hello. Charlie got up and stood beside her father, too embarrassed to look the plumber in the eye. Just the day before, she had introduced herself as Wendy-- not Charlie Overholt. "She tells me that you and your nephews gave her a ride, yesterday. I can't thank you enough for bringing my Charlie safely to me," continued Chuck, gratefully.

"It was our pleasure," replied Adam.

"Chuck Overholt, Dr. Gillis will see you now," announced the receptionist.

"I have to go," said Chuck, shaking Adam's un-bandaged hand. "Thank you, again." As Adam walked away, Chuck turned to his daughter. "Why didn't you say, 'thank you'?" he asked. "I don't want him to think we're ungrateful."

Dr. Gillis gave Chuck an examination, while the ladies waited outside. After the examination was over, Dr. Gillis opened the door and asked Vera and Charlie to step in. This involved them, also.

"Vera, I know you've been through this, before. But Charlie, you haven't. So, when you have a question, and I know you will, please don't hesitate to ask," said Dr. Gillis, sitting down in a black chair behind his desk. "Chuck, since you tell me that your daughter has never had any personal experience with AD, before now, I'd like to begin at the basics," said the doctor, swiveling his chair in Chuck's direction.

"I'd appreciate that," replied Chuck. Dr. Gillis swiveled back to Charlie.

"I understand this might be scary for you to hear, but knowledge of the facts is our best defense against fear," began the doctor. Actually, faith and confidence in God is our best defense against fear, but Dr. Gillis did not know this. "Your father has Early Onset Alzheimer's Disease, a progressive and incurable illness. Because Alzheimer's Disease, or AD, destroys nerve cells in the brain, it causes frequent and increasing forgetfulness, confusion, and personality changes. These symptoms are progressive, which means they grow worse over time." Dr. Gillis' voice was straight forward and matter-of-fact. He had given this speech hundreds of times before, and this time was no different. "Do you have anything you want to ask me, yet?" asked the doctor, pausing.

"Is Daddy going to die?" asked Charlie, her voice quivering

"You're a big girl, so I'll give it to you straight. Yes, your father is going to die. It's impossible to say exactly when, for it can vary widely. AD is as individual as the people who get the illness. Some can live up to twenty years with the disease, though most don't. I can tell you, however, that your father is not in an advanced stage. Most likely, he has years to go before you have to be concerned with death."

"Are you sure Daddy has Alzheimer's?" asked Charlie, hoping that some great mistake had taken place.

"Misplacing the car keys, is quite normal. But, if you have the keys and misplaced the house, you're in trouble. There's a high likelihood that Chuck, I mean, your father has been exhibiting symptoms of AD, even before he was diagnosed. Let me ask you, does he make excessive notes for the most routine tasks?"

"Yes," replied Charlie, almost unwillingly. Charlie knew she could open Chuck's pockets right now, and find fistfuls of notes and reminders. But she had thought this oddity was just her father's way of organizing his life. She had no idea how much he depended on those scraps of paper to remember the simplest of tasks.

"Just because your father keeps excessive notes, by itself, does not necessarily mean that he has AD. Some people simply have poor memories. However, we have too many test results confirming that those notes are a lot more than mere to-do-lists. We are indeed dealing with Alzheimer's Disease."

Dr. Gillis swiveled back to his desk, and addressed Chuck. "Chuck, I'd like you to try a fairly new drug. It's a cholinesterase inhibitor that stops the enzyme, cholinesterase, from breaking

down the neurotransmitter acetylcholine. The drug operates on the theory that the more acetylcholine in the nervous system, the better the nervous system will function. In effect, it might help to improve your memory. Note, I said, 'might.' Now, understand, this drug will not slow the diseases' progression-- nothing can. But it might help. There might be some side effects, but most people have found that they are usually temporary. I've had modest success with this drug, and think you might be able to benefit from using it." Charlie counted the number of "might"s in Dr. Gillis' speech. He had used the word five times.

"I guess nothing's for sure, anymore," thought Charlie. Chuck asked a few questions, and then it was time to leave.

They went outside and waited for their ride. The trio didn't have long to wait, for Jerome soon picked them up, remarking that the doctor's appointment had made him late for a meeting. Everyone was strangely quiet on the drive back home. Dr. Gillis had given them a lot to think about.

Mike Garner looked up from his issue of "Plumbers' Magazine", as his uncle entered the store.

"How'd it go, Uncle Adam?" asked Mike, putting down the magazine. Adam held up his right hand, now bandage-free. "Way to go!" congratulated Mike. Adam walked back to his office, Mike hot on his heels. "You don't seem very happy," observed Mike, leaning against the doorjamb.

"Have you ever considered that we, too easily, take things for granted?" asked Adam.

"What do you mean?" asked Mike.

"You never know how good you have it, until you meet someone worse off than yourself," explained Adam.

"That's usually the way it works," observed Mike. Adam wrinkled his brow, as if deep in thought.

"Now, you're thinking too much," joked Mike, returning to his magazine in the other room.

"Some people don't have that problem," mused Adam.

"Did you call me?" shouted Mike.

"No!" answered Adam, getting up from his chair. "By any chance, you didn't forget that tonight was family dinner night, did you?" asked Adam, sticking his head into the shop.

"Wednesday, already?" asked Mike, in surprise.

Shirley Garner, Adam's younger sister by one year, made a point to invite immediate family over to her house, for what she termed, "family dinner night." It was actually a well-planned excuse to get her brother to come eat at her house instead of remaining at home, alone.

However, Shirley's motivation was not purely sisterly concern. There were a few guilty pangs that she tried to alleviate by giving her brother extra attention-- no matter how hard he resisted her "help." For a number of years, Ruth, their mother, lived with Shirley and her family. Then, last year, Ruth was moved to Mullen-Overholt Nursing Home. Adam protested this move as forcefully as he knew how. Why should their Mom have to live in a nursing home when she had family who could still take care of her? Shirley was a stay-at-home mom. It wasn't as if their mother was getting in the way of her childrens' or grand-childrens' lives. Shirley told her brother that the move was in the best interest of everyone concerned. She said that it was becoming too difficult to care for Ruth at home. To Adam's astonishment, Ruth agreed with her daughter. When Adam offered his home to her, Ruth flatly refused him.

One day, when Adam's anger over the whole situation was at its peak, Ruth pulled him aside. Ruth asked Adam to trust his sister's judgment. She told Adam that no matter how it looked to him, Shirley was not being selfish or uncaring. Shirley was doing the best she could-- Adam must believe that. For his mother's sake, he tried.

"Where's Tom?" asked Adam, sitting down to the dinner table. This was the fifth consecutive family dinner night Tom had missed.

"Dad had business to attend to," explained Chad, hoping his uncle would soon change the subject.

"Oh," replied Adam.

"Dinner looks good, don't you think so, Uncle Adam?" asked Chad. "I made the biscuits, myself."

"Did you, really?" said Adam, feigning astonishment.

"Since when did you learn to cook?" asked Mike, incredulously.

"Since tonight, that's when," replied Chad.

"Your brother's smarter than you give him credit, Mike," smiled Adam.

"That little knuckle-head?" teased Mike, playfully.

"He's not the one who forgot that today was Wednesday," reminded Adam. Chad grinned, triumphantly.

"You got me there!" laughed Mike, leaning over the table and giving his little brother a noogie. Between laughs, Chad struggled to get away from his strong brother. In doing so, his foot caught hold of the tablecloth, jerking it once or twice so that a cup of grape juice tipped over onto the carpet.

"Boys!" cried Shirley, running to the puddle of grape juice and mopping it up with a kitchen towel, "I wish you would remember your table manners!" As Shirley worked to remove the stain, she began to cry. Mike and Chad immediately grew sober.

"Let me do that, Sis," Adam offered, taking the towel from Shirley's hand. "It's a dark rug. The stain won't show." Weeping, Shirley ran to the master bedroom and closed the door behind her.

"It's just grape juice," whispered Mike, puzzled.

"I'll go see if Mom's OK," said Chad, leaving the dining room. The nine-year-old returned two minutes later, with a message from Shirley. She apologized, but she didn't feel like eating. They were to continue dinner without her.

"I know! Mom's probably in her period," guessed Mike, after they returned to the table.

"It's not polite to talk about peoples' periods, is it, Uncle Adam?" asked Chad, taking a bite of dinner.

"Strangers, no; family, yes," agreed Adam, making it up as he went.

After dinner, Adam and his nephews washed the dishes, so Shirley wouldn't have to. As Adam said good-night to Mike and Chad, Shirley appeared from the bedroom.

"Sis, are you all right?" asked Adam.

"I'm fine," Shirley replied. "I must be near that time of month to react to spilled grape juice with tears," said Shirley.

"That's what Mike guessed," smiled Adam.

"Are you going to play chess with Jerome, tonight?" asked Shirley.

"I guess so. Why?"

"Could I come? I want to visit Mom," asked Shirley.

"Sure," replied Adam.

Jerome Overholt eyed the chess board, methodically. After some deliberation, he moved his queen diagonally across the board, capturing Adam's remaining knight.

"Your move," said Jerome. Adam advanced a pawn by one square and leaned back. Jerome looked at his opponent in surprise. It was the seventh move Adam had made without saying a word. Jerome was not accustomed to this. "What," asked Jerome, "no complaints from the residents to report? Could this be?" he mocked.

"Now that you mention it," replied Adam, "Mr. Fox would like an extra blanket. The nights are getting colder and so is he."

"Love thy neighbor," quoted Jerome, coldly.

"As thyself," finished Adam. Jerome moved his knight four spaces, capturing one of Adam's bishops.

"Your move," replied Jerome. Adam suddenly moved his queen out from behind two pawns.

"Check mate," said Adam. Jerome looked closely at the board, realizing that he had just walked into a trap. The plumber had purposefully sacrificed his bishop to make a point. Adam rarely ever pressed his advantage in chess-- a quality which made Jerome willingly put up with his "interference" with the residents of Mullen-Overholt.

"Everyone receives appropriate bedding when it gets colder, you know that," said Jerome, vindictively.

"That wasn't the point," replied Adam, getting up.

"Then what was this little demonstration of your skill about?" asked Jerome, as Adam met Shirley in the doorway to drive her home. Adam turned around to face Jerome.

"You said it yourself, Jerome. 'Love thy neighbor as thyself.'"

"What was all that about?" asked Shirley, as they walked to Adam's van.

"One of these days, Sis, Jerome's granite heart is going to change-- don't ask me how, but it will happen!" declared Adam, fervently.

"... the violent take it by force."

~ Matthew 11:12 ~

"His heart is as firm as a stone; yea, as hard as a piece of the nether millstone."

~ Job 41:24 ~

"A new heart also will I [God] give [Jerome], and a new Spirit will I put within [him]: and I will take away the stony heart out of [his] flesh, and I will give [him] an heart of flesh."

~ Ezekiel 36:26 ~

"Written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the Living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshly tables of the heart."

~ 2 Corinthians 3:3 ~

Chapter Eighteen

With A Little Persuasion

(Thursday)

"We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad. Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men."

~ 2 Corinthians 5:10,11 ~

Though the morning before had been clouded by the remembrance of his daughter's stubbornness and the seeming impossibility of his ever reaching her, Chuck's spirits were high. Today, anything seemed possible, even her conversion. Being a new Christian, Chuck's faith was like a newborn calf, who, after just learning to stand, was now attempting to run. The necessity of his situation, however, dictated that he begin now.

As the trio gathered together for breakfast, Chuck silently prayed for God's wisdom and guidance. To his surprise, Vera did not set a place at the table for herself. She had plans of her own.

After finishing her morning duties, Vera left to be with her husband at Mullen-Overholt. Her husband, Arnold, was unable to feed himself, so it was Vera's routine to hurry to the nursing home at his meal times, knowing that he accepted food from her hand much easier than from a stranger's. Ever since Chuck's arrival, Vera found it difficult to spend as much time at the nursing home with her husband as she would have liked. While her presence calmed Arnold, it wasn't safe to leave Chuck home by himself. Vera knew how demanding it was to be the primary caregiver to one person with Alzheimer's-- but two! The mere thought of it was enough to reduce her to tears. Vera was sixty-six, and not in the best of health. As much as she loved her family, it was impossible for her to be in two places at once. However, since today Chuck had made it known to her that he and Charlie were going to have a talk that morning, Vera hurried off to the nursing home with the assurance that her son would not be by himself.

After breakfast was over, Chuck put his plan into action.

"A talk about what?" asked Charlie, sitting down on the living room couch as her father had instructed.

"The Overholt family tree has a long tradition of professing Christ," began Chuck. "Some of them, no doubt, really were believers, but I'm sad to say that Christianity in our family was largely taken for granted. People never gave it much serious thought. They would never admit to

it, but they treated Christianity as though it were genetic, something you were born with and couldn't help being; one had brown hair, blue eyes, the 'Overholt disposition,' and an automatic place in the family pew every Sunday. This was the way I was brought up, Charlie," explained Chuck.

"As dead as it all was, you don't even have that. When you were little, I didn't raise you with even the slightest outward appearance of religion. Now here you are, on the verge of your adult life. I raised you on dangerous ground, and the time is growing so late, Pumpkin. When everything falls apart, there's nothing earthly that you can hold on to-- but to the Saviour."

Chuck looked into his daughter's dark eyes. "That's the way it was for me. I was drowning and there was none to save me. It wasn't until I called to God for help, that the storm became a calm. It reminds me very much of Psalm one hundred and seven," said the sincere father, opening his Bible. "He [the LORD] commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind," read Chuck, "which lifteth up the waves thereof. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wits' end. Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and He bringeth them out of their distresses. He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad because they be quiet." Chuck smiled peacefully. "Have you ever heard it put so plainly?" he asked. "It wasn't until my need became so overwhelming that I finally resorted to the LORD!" Chuck's voice was filled with so much sincerity that tears came to his eyes.

Charlie rigidly sat on the couch as though made of stone. Why was he doing this? Had the illness so affected his mind that he couldn't see he was making a fool of himself? He was the parent; he should be in control of the situation; it was his job to tell her everything was going to be all right, not crying in front of her and humbling himself in such a stupid manner.

In truth, Charlie would not have felt her father was so foolish if his testimony hadn't struck a common chord within her heart. At times, she too felt as though she were drowning. But, these were weak moments. Ever since Chuck's sudden decision to send her away to North Carolina, Charlie's spirit began to harden: she scolded herself for fainting in the airplane the night of her departure; she was angry for allowing Aunt Angela's lack of love, to hurt her; when Sherri teased her, Charlie rebuked herself for the tears she cried in her cousin's presence. With every injustice and indignity, Charlie's spirit toughened. Then there was Darren's ugly death. If she hadn't disobeyed Aunt Angela, he would still be alive! She could still see it all as though it had happened yesterday. She could see Darren's writhing body, covered in vomit, twitching and convulsing; she could hear the traffic and see the headlights; she could feel the panic welling up inside. Charlie bit her tongue to get her mind off of the terrible image.

"Great peace have they which love Thy law," continued Chuck, unaware of the fact that his daughter had not been listening to him as he poured forth his soul. After wincing in pain, Charlie could taste blood in her mouth. She had bitten her tongue too hard.

"Daddy," Charlie interrupted, "have you taken your pill this morning?" Charlie was determined not to let her father's weakness undermine her own strength.

"What?" asked Chuck, surprised that Charlie should think of medicine at a time when, he hoped, she was thinking of her soul.

"Your medicine," repeated Charlie, "did you take it?"

"What does that possibly have to do with your salvation?" asked Chuck.

"I don't think you're feeling very well, Daddy."

"Anything I'm feeling right now isn't because I forgot to take my medicine!" exclaimed Chuck, fighting back frustration.

"Then you did forget," said Charlie, in a vindicated tone. Chuck fell back in his chair and set the Bible down beside him.

"I'll go get your pill," said Charlie, going to the kitchen and quickly returning with his medication. Chuck obediently swallowed the pill and looked sadly at his only child.

"Oh, Charlie," he sighed, "it's all my fault. I should have raised you right."

"It's O.K., Daddy. I'm fine."

"Are you?" questioned Chuck. "I don't have very much time left to make things right for you. Everyday, I can feel my body changing. I never thought it would move this quickly, but it is."

"Dr. Gillis said you would have years yet, Daddy. Don't over-dramatize."

"I used to be able to dress, shave, and put on my shoes in under fifteen minutes," continued Chuck. "Now it takes me an half hour."

"An half hour's not so bad," reasoned Charlie.

"But, it's taking longer each day. How long will it be before I can't dress and shave myself at all? How long before I won't even recognize my own little girl?"

"Don't say that, Daddy!"

"I have to say it, Charlie. It's the truth. I have to face this and so do you. Our time is short. That's why your salvation is so important! I know how stubborn you can be! If I don't try to act now while I can-- while I still have some measure of influence over you, then I will have failed both you and God."

Charlie was still. She could hear the steady tick of the grandfather clock standing by the front door; she could smell the acrid odor of the greasy bacon Vera had fixed them for breakfast, clinging to the air like indigestion following a heavy meal; she focused her eyes on the dark brown carpet and wondered if it was a StainMaster like the one at Aunt Angela and Uncle Mark's house. She imagined herself pouring all sorts of messy ingredients on the carpet and wondered if they would really clean up without leaving a stain. She tried in every way to get her mind off of what Chuck had just said. A part of her refused to believe that things truly were as black as her father painted. This was absurd! This couldn't possibly be her life! She must be dreaming... she had to be. Charlie stood up and turned to go.

"Pumpkin?" called Chuck. "You will think about what I've said?"

"Sure," replied Charlie, walking back to her room.

Chuck watched as she disappeared behind the door. He knew he hadn't reached her.

"Well," reasoned Chuck to himself, "I just didn't do it right. I need help!"

"Come again," called out Adam, as the customer exited the store. It was a slow business day for Clark Plumbing Service and Supply. Adam had few customers and almost no service calls. Mike was out on an errand, so Adam had the place all to himself. He sank into the comfortable swivel chair behind the counter and put his feet up. If no one else interrupted him, he could get a few winks of sleep. The plumber had almost dozed off when the store buzzer sounded, rousing him from his hard-earned rest. Adam smiled kindly at the familiar face.

"Hi, Chuck," greeted Adam, getting up from the chair and walking over to his friend. Adam braced himself to be questioned. Ever since Chuck came to Christ, he had shown up at the store like clockwork, trying to resolve all manner of questions and spiritual dilemmas. Adam could tell by the look on Chuck's sober face that today was no different.

"I need your help," pleaded the helpless father.

"What is it?" asked Adam. This was not how he usually asked for help. There was a hint of desperation in Chuck's voice that alarmed Adam.

"It's Charlie, my little girl," explained Chuck.

"What about her?"

"I can't get through to her. I've tried, but she just won't listen!"

"Can't get through?" repeated Adam, bewildered by his friend's lack of clarity.

"I've been witnessing to her."

"Oh," nodded Adam. "And I take it's not going very well?"

"It's all my fault! I don't think I presented Christ to her correctly, or else she would have listened!"

"Presentation isn't everything," Adam answered, calmly. "A person must be willing to listen. You can't force willingness."

"I was thinking..." Chuck hesitated, "maybe, you could talk to her?" Adam uneasily shifted his weight to the other foot, and folded his arms.

"Chuck, she's your daughter. If she won't listen to you, why should she listen to me?"

"I'm begging you," pleaded Chuck. "She's my little girl!"

"Very well, I'll go," consented Adam. "I'll do my best, but I can't promise anything," he warned, seeing his friend's expectations were rather high.

"When can you come?"

"I'll be there as soon as Mike gets back," replied Adam.

"Thank you!" cried Chuck. "She'll listen to YOU. But... there's just one thing to remember."

"What's that?"

"Charlie sometimes spouts Latin whenever she tries to gain the advantage in a discussion," warned Chuck. "When she does that, don't let her throw you off."

"Chuck," replied Adam, "the only Latin I know is 'E Pluribus Unum!'"

When Chuck left, Adam reminded himself that he wasn't a total stranger to the young girl; she would listen to him-- if only out of courtesy. When Mike returned, Adam made his way to the Overholt house, half wishing it were already over.

It was ten thirty when Charlie heard a knock on her bedroom door.

"Yes?" said the girl. Chuck opened the door and stuck his head in. She was lying on the bed, her nose stuck in a book.

"What are reading?" asked Chuck, his parental curiosity getting the better of him. Charlie tossed him the paperback. "A touchy-feely book?" asked Chuck. "I didn't know you liked those kind of stories," he observed, throwing the volume back to his daughter.

"It's a girl thing, Daddy," replied Charlie, returning her attention to the book.

"Pumpkin," Chuck interrupted, "could you come to the living room? There's someone here to see you. It's very important," he added. The whole thing seemed suspicious to Charlie. She didn't know anyone in Twin Yucca yet-- not well enough for them to stop by just to see her.

"Reinforcement?" she guessed.

"Please, Charlie. For me?" pleaded Chuck. With a groan, Charlie tossed aside the paperback and followed her father into the living room, expecting to find a minister or preacher.

"The plumber?" asked Charlie, looking at her father, incredulously. "HE is your reinforcement?"

"Give him a chance, Pumpkin," whispered Chuck, pushing her forward. "Charlie, I think you remember Mr. Clark."

"Oh!" exclaimed Adam, "no one has addressed me as 'Mr. Clark' in years. Everyone just calls me Adam." Chuck sat Charlie down on the couch and stood beside the plumber-- both men staring at her. Adam shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"So, how's business?" asked Charlie, addressing Adam.

"He's not here to talk about business, Pumpkin," said Chuck. "He's here to talk about your soul."

"So, Adam," Charlie boldly started the conversation, determined to show her visitor that she was not going to let him influence her in any way, "when you don't succeed, should I expect a visit from the grocer next?"

Chuck was about to answer in behalf of the friend who had walked away from his business in the middle of a weekday, when Adam took him aside. Charlie watched as Adam whispered something to her father. Then Chuck nodded, and mumbled, "Maybe you're right." After glancing back at his daughter, he retired to his room.

"I think it would be best if we had this talk without Chuck," explained Adam, hoping to lessen Charlie's antagonism by the departure of her father. "Chuck asked me to come and talk to you. He thought I might be able to better explain his feelings concerning the salvation of your soul."

"Excuse me if I'm rude," replied Charlie, "but, I don't see how this is any of your business." Adam looked at her thoughtfully.

"In a way, this is my business," he replied. "Your father is a dear friend of mine. Even though he's facing this terrible disease, his greatest concern is that you won't come to Christ before..." Adam abruptly stopped short. He was going to say, "before his mind leaves him," but he didn't have the heart to finish the thought out loud.

"You came here to talk about my soul. So talk," said Charlie, wishing to lead the subject away from her father's future.

"God cares what happens to your soul, Charlie. The Bible says, 'For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.'

All this concern over your soul is not unfounded, for God has said in His Holy Word, 'He that believeth on the Son [Jesus] hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.'

The only hope any of us have is to repent of our sins and let Jesus reign in our hearts." Adam paused to see if she had any response. "The Bible also says, 'I [Jesus] am The Way, The Truth, and The Life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me.'"

Charlie made no response. "If there's something you want to ask or say, please go ahead. I'm here to help, not hinder," he informed her.

"Acta est fabula," she replied, carelessly. Charlie wanted to prove that she was smarter than he. It was her way of getting in the last word.

"I'm not even going to pretend to understand, because I don't. Whatever you just said doesn't change anything," responded Adam, undaunted. (Translated, the Latin phrase, 'acta est fabula,' means, 'the drama has been acted out,' usually to an unhappy end.)

"May I go now?" she asked, impatient to leave.

"Your father loves you very much," replied Adam. "If he thinks the salvation of your soul is this important, doesn't it behoove you to give his concern the time it deserves?"

"Just because you've been able to take advantage of Daddy's vulnerable mental health, doesn't mean you can manipulate me, also!" retorted Charlie, getting to her feet. He was not going to maneuver her into giving in, by using Chuck against her! No, she was too smart for that.

"You can't run from God forever, Charlie," warned Adam. "Sooner or later, the rain will catch up to you, and you'll get wet, no matter how hard you ride General to escape it." Charlie looked at him in surprise. How did he know that story? Of the many campfire yarns her father told, "The Cowboy Who Bulldogged A Cloud" was her favorite. She remembered how she laughed at the funny faces Chuck made as he told the story. Charlie dug her sock-covered toe into the brown carpet. It seemed like a lifetime ago. She longed for the way things used to be-- before Early Onset Alzheimer's; before North Carolina and Darren; before Twin Yucca.

"It's a funny story, isn't it?" asked Adam, sensing that he had struck a nerve. Charlie solemnly nodded her head.

"No one can tell a story like Daddy," she replied, the agitation in her voice fading.

"I know you love your father, Charlie. So do I. That's the reason I came here today. I don't want to be your enemy. In fact, I'd like to be your friend. However, I wouldn't be a very good friend if I didn't warn you about the danger you're in. It's as real as...," Adam paused for a second, "as if you were trapped in a burning car. Promise me, as your friend, to at least consider what your father and I say," asked Adam.

It was such a gentle plea that before Charlie could refuse, she found herself saying that she would. Maybe it was because she felt sorry for him when she saw how sad he looked when he compared her to someone trapped in a burning car; maybe it was because she noticed the scars on his hands; whatever it was, it almost made her trust him.

Adam recalled to mind that from what Chuck had told him, Charlie's habit was to pull whenever pushed, and to push whenever pulled. Sensing that if he stayed longer, he might undo the good that was just done, Adam decided that it was time to go. He would let the Holy Spirit do His job.

"It's time for me to go," Adam said, standing up.

"I'll tell Daddy you're leaving," offered Charlie, going to her father's bedroom door. She peered in, only to find him asleep on the bed. "He's sleeping," Charlie reported, walking her visitor to the door.

"I'll talk to him later," said Adam. "And remember, you promised me to think about your salvation. I'll be praying for you." In spite of herself, Charlie smiled.

After going to the kitchen to get a drink, Charlie returned to her room. The "touchy-feely" book she had been reading, laid in the corner where she had tossed it. Charlie picked it up and fumbled to the page where she left off. Try as she might, she couldn't get her mind back into the story.

"What a weird man," she thought. "I wonder how he got those scars on his hands."

Unbeknownst to Charlie, the doctors had told Adam there would be no scarring from his burns. However, when the bandages came off, it became quite apparent that they were wrong. All Adam had to do was to glance at his hands, and he remembered the one young girl he couldn't save.

The emotion of witnessing to his daughter had so fatigued Chuck's mind, that he decided to ride out the episode, unconsciously. When he awoke, two hours later, a wave of nausea swept over him. He tried to get to his feet, but the room suddenly whirled around him, so that he had to quickly retreat to his bed. Chuck was tempted to call for help, but wasn't sure if he should. Maybe this would soon pass. He hated to trouble anyone unnecessarily, but the nausea and dizziness continued.

"Mom," Chuck called out, trying to compose his voice in an even tone, so none would suspect him of needing help, "are you there?" The house remained quiet. As the dizziness and nausea grew steadily worse, Chuck determined that he must make it to the bathroom. He didn't know how much longer he could keep it down. "Mom?" he called again, this time his voice betraying that this was indeed, an emergency. Deciding that his Mom wasn't home, Chuck finally called for Charlie. To his surprise, no one answered. He was alone.

Vera Overholt placed her carryall by the front door. She made her way to the kitchen, and began to prepare lunch. As she passed through the hall, she noticed Chuck's bedroom door was ajar. Thinking nothing was out of the ordinary, Vera went about her business. However, as she opened the refrigerator and took out a jar of dill pickles, she heard a low moan, coming from Chuck's room. The dill pickle jar fell from her hands, crashing into large shards of broken glass on the kitchen floor.

Vera ran to Chuck's room.

"Chuck!" she called, while opening his bedroom door, "are you all right?" To her horror, Vera found Chuck lying on the floor, unconscious. Vomit covered his face. With a cry of fear, Vera got to her knees and cleared the throw-up from his breathing passages. "Chuck!" she cried, "Chucky, speak to me!" screamed Vera, slapping his face as hard as she could. Suddenly, Chuck coughed and gasped for air.

"I... I must have blacked out," he muttered, trying to sit up.

"What happened?" asked Vera, pulling a handkerchief from her pocket and wiping the vomit from her son's face.

"I don't know," Chuck replied, looking about himself to gain his bearings. "First I felt nauseous, and then dizzy. Never experienced anything like it in my entire life."

"Why didn't you call for help?" Vera cried, still trying to recover from the shock of seeing her youngest son, unconscious on the floor.

"I did," replied Chuck, using a nearby chair to help himself stand up.

"But Charlie," said Vera, "Charlie is here. Why didn't you call her?"

"I did, Mom," he replied. "I'm really sorry about this mess."

"Never mind that," Vera said, "as long as you're all right, that's the important thing." Chuck was still feeling a little woozy, so Vera helped him to the bathroom to clean up.

When Charlie returned ten minutes later, she found vomit on the floor of her father's room.

"Daddy?" she cried, looking about the room for Chuck.

"In here," came a response from the bathroom. The young girl found Chuck sitting on the clothes hamper, using a damp hand towel on his pants. He looked up with a pleasant smile when he saw her face in the doorway.

"Hi, Pumpkin," he greeted her.

"What happened?" asked Charlie, seeing Vera washing Chuck's shirt out in the sink. Vera made no response.

"I just had a little accident," Chuck explained, not wanting to scare his little girl. "Everything is all right."

"Everything is NOT all right!" exclaimed Vera, directing her displeasure toward Charlie.

"Where were you? I left you in charge of him while I was away!"

"It's okay, Mom. Really," said Chuck, trying to step in.

"Do you realize he could of choked to death on his vomit while he was unconscious?" exclaimed Vera, pointing a soapy finger at Chuck. "You just can't walk off and leave him alone! I told you not to leave him by himself-- I told you this before I left!"

"I forgot," Charlie whimpered.

"She's not used to this," excused Chuck. "Besides, she doesn't need to hover over me twenty-four hours a day!"

"I came too close to burying my son this morning," replied Vera, looking sharply at Charlie. "I've been through this before. Both of you haven't!"

"She's only fifteen, Mom," Chuck interceded again. Charlie hung her head. She knew it was no excuse.

"She may be, but she's got to grow up! I can't take care of both you and your father at the same time! I'm only one person!" Vera exclaimed, slapping the soapy shirt back into the sink.

Large tears rolled down Charlie's frightened face. The similarity between her father's ordeal and Darren's, terrified her. Both had lay in a pool of vomit, in an altered state of consciousness; and both, she felt certain, had been her fault. She purposed in her heart, then and there, to never endanger her father, again-- no matter what it took. She would do anything to ensure his safety and happiness. Charlie felt the roll of parent and child was reversing. The feeling scared the young girl, for who was going to take care of her? However, she was becoming grown-up enough to have such an important responsibility; she was the caregiver of her Daddy. The sensation made her feel independent and terribly lonely at the same time.

"I'm sorry," Charlie sobbed, "I won't ever do it again. I promise!" Chuck beckoned her to come to him. When she came, he gave her one of his great bear hugs.

"It's okay, Pumpkin," he reassured, "I'm all right." Vera wiped her hands on the bathroom towel, and patted her granddaughter's head.

"Everything worked out, this time," conceded the tired woman, "but when you make a mistake, even a tiny everyday mistake, it could mean life or death. I can't emphasize this enough. Right now he looks fine, Charlie, but his mind is not. It's only going to get worse, and the sooner you accept it, the better off he'll be. He's going to depend on you more and more! If this family can't care for him, we'll have to get a stranger! Do you want that?" cried Vera, trying to relay the magnitude of the situation to her granddaughter.

Vera felt completely overwhelmed by the gravity of the situation. She had always counted on the fact that Arnold would most likely die before she did. She felt that she could outlive her husband. But her youngest son, was another matter, entirely. She felt like grabbing Charlie by the shoulders and screaming, "Do you want someone like Jerome taking care of him?" On the other hand, no matter how she felt about Jerome, he was her son. This thought silenced her on that subject.

"I don't know how much I'm going to be able to help you, Charlie," continued Vera. "Obviously, when you begin school, we're going to have to get a different arrangement." Vera continued to think out loud as Charlie sobbed into her father's shoulder. "Maybe, I can take you with me to the nursing home," said Vera, addressing Chuck, now. "Then, Jerome could look after you while I'm with your father."

Chuck's heart sank when he heard the words, "nursing home", but he knew he was the one responsible for putting this burden on the family. Without saying a word of protest, Chuck tried

hard to accept the fact that he was going to be spending time there, whether he liked it or not. Everyone would have to do things that were hard, and this was one of them.

After they had hugged each other, the trio sat down at the table to eat lunch. Chuck, his stomach still reeling, declined to eat very much. Charlie ate her lunch in silence, preferring to keep her thoughts and feelings to herself. It had been a sobering afternoon. She tried hard, for her father's sake, to be happy, but it just wouldn't come. She hadn't realized the enormity of her responsibility. In reality, she still hadn't; keeping an eye on her father was only one of her duties; others would soon follow in rapid succession.

"Charlie, I almost forgot to ask," inquired Chuck, glad for an excuse to push his plate away, "how did your talk with Adam go?" Charlie shrugged. "What did he say?" prodded Chuck.

"I don't know," mumbled Charlie.

"Well, I'm sure he said something," said Chuck.

"I guess so," replied Charlie.

"Pumpkin, I'm trying to have a conversation with you," replied Chuck.

"Let her be," interceded Vera. "She's had a difficult afternoon, and doesn't feel like talking right now. It's best to let her sort it out on her own." Vera stood up to clear the dishes. To Vera's surprise, Charlie suddenly jumped to her feet.

"I'll do that," Charlie offered.

"Why, thank you," replied Vera, puzzled.

"I'll make dinner tonight, so you can go be with Grandpa Arnold," offered Charlie, carefully scraping the leftover bits of food into the sink's garbage disposer.

"I think it would be best if I made the meals, dear," said Vera, politely declining her granddaughter's generous offer.

"In Montana, I made all the meals," informed Charlie. "I can do it. I know how."

"Well, that would be very helpful... if you think you could manage it," replied Vera.

"I can take care of Daddy," continued Charlie. "You have Grandpa Arnold to look after. Daddy's mine." Charlie's use of "Daddy's mine" was extremely possessive. She purposed in her heart to be the one he depended on-- not someone else. He was HER father, not theirs. The lesson Charlie learned that afternoon would never leave her, as long as she lived.

"You won't be in this all by yourself, Pumpkin," said Vera, understandingly. "I just don't know if I can do it all over again, at my age. I had hoped that the family's Alzheimer's would end with Arnold."

"Do you mean that others in our family have it-- other than Daddy and Grandpa?" exclaimed Charlie.

"Your Great-Grandpa had Alzheimer's Disease," informed Vera.

"Alzheimer's Disease runs in our family," explained Chuck. Charlie was becoming frightened. If her Great-Grandpa had Alzheimer's Disease, and her Grandpa had Alzheimer's Disease, and her father had Alzheimer's Disease, could she be next? Charlie didn't really want to know the answer. It was too terrifying to contemplate.

"I think I'll clean my room, now," she announced, leaving the table abruptly. Activity was what Charlie needed. This was all too much to deal with at one time. She would do what her grandmother said-- she would sort it all out later.

"Thank you for helping, Pumpkin," called out Vera. "You're a treasure!"

"She's never cleaned her room in her entire life," observed Chuck, "without me on her case, first."

"Son, your daughter is growing up," pointed out Vera.

"I know, Mom," responded Chuck, sadly. "I just wish she didn't have to grow up so fast."

Reality had hit Charlotte Overholt like a ton of bricks. She was sure that nothing would ever be the same, again. Oh, that she would have the confidence that only comes from resting in Christ Jesus! Then she would have known that when God closes one door, in faithfulness, He opens another. Even though Charlie didn't understand this, a certain plumber did. The Overholt family had long been in his prayers. Even now, his prayer was that Charlie would surrender to God; absolute and total surrender; only then would she find peace. Charlie very much reminded Adam of Matthew eleven: "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."

After lunch, Vera called Dr. Gillis and told him of Chuck's episode. He informed her that the nausea and dizziness were most likely side effects of the new drug. However, since the side effects were usually mild and temporary, it was in the doctor's good opinion that they should give it some more time before pulling Chuck off of the medication.

"Give it a while longer, Mrs. Overholt," advised Dr. Gillis, "after all, it's only the first day."

"Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?"

~ Jeremiah 8:22 ~

Chapter Nineteen

Blood is Thicker Than Water

(Thursday continued...)

"[Jerome's] heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: He turneth it whithersoever He will."

~ Proverbs 21:1 ~

The afternoon had went so well for Chuck, that Vera ventured to suggest that they all go down and visit Arnold at Mullen-Overholt.

"After all," reasoned Vera, "Charlie has been in Twin Yucca all of two days and she still hasn't visited her grandpa."

"I know," replied Chuck.

"And while we're on the subject, you haven't visited your father yet, either!"

"I saw him the night I arrived," reminded Chuck.

"That was not a real visit," responded Vera, wiping the kitchen table with a damp cloth.

"I guess," replied Chuck, slowly. He wasn't eager to see his father in the deteriorated state that eighteen years worth of Alzheimer's had left him in.

"You act as though you don't want to see him!" observed Vera.

"I do, Mom," refuted Chuck. "It's just hard seeing him that way."

"What do you think it does to me?" exclaimed Vera, tossing the cloth into the sink. "I've been taking care of him for eighteen years! Don't you think it's hard for me to watch him fade away, bit by bit, until there's nothing left of the man I once knew?"

Chuck apologized to his mother. He wondered if Charlie was ready to see her grandfather. It was true that she knew he had this illness, but Chuck didn't think she was really aware of what was going to happen to him. In a way, he wanted her to remain untouched by the harsh reality of Alzheimer's, but Chuck knew that it would be impossible to shield her from it. Then he remembered Dr. Estrada's sage advice: "The unknown always frightens us. Truth is important because it helps us to understand the inevitable, and arms us with the facts to prepare for it."

When Chuck told his Mom that he and Charlie would go see Arnold that afternoon, Vera was delighted.

A tornado is a funnel-shaped cloud that descends on land, creating havoc and destruction in its wake. Places that we thought could never change, suddenly transform into martian-like landscapes. Alzheimer's is a kind of tornado. We suddenly find ourselves faced with decisions that we never would have thought probable-- never, in a million years. And never in a million years would we have thought of actually making that decision. He didn't know it yet, but today, Chuck would be faced with such a decision.

It all began early that Thursday morning, in Jerome's office at Mullen-Overholt Nursing Home, with the unexpected arrival of a FedEx parcel containing Chuck's financial records and personal papers. Inside was a note from Chuck's former landlady, explaining that the papers and enclosed items were accidentally left behind in the apartment when Chuck had moved out. (Chuck had given her Mullen-Overholt as a forwarding address, for he was uncertain exactly where his brother lived.)

Being the older brother, Jerome automatically assumed the responsibility of handling Chuck's financial affairs. There was no hidden motive on Jerome's part, other than to expedite things as quickly as possible. He had been through this before with his father, so Jerome knew the paces. However experienced he thought he was, the older brother was unprepared to see the disarray of Chuck's financial status. He wondered how Chuck had managed to function with such a slipshod way of paying bills and spending money.

Jerome remembered how his father, who, even before being diagnosed with Early Onset Alzheimer's at the age of fifty-two, had displayed symptoms of being incapable of taking care of the family finances entirely by himself. Arnold would not listen to anyone. He simply refused to believe that he was no longer able to do something he had always been able to do before. Jerome groaned at the memory of the many fights he and his "stubborn as a mule" father had over money. Arnold would often become so angry that his face grew alarmingly red. The fact that history seemed to be repeating itself was almost more than Jerome could take.

Jerome's biggest shock came, however, upon learning that Chuck had absolutely no life insurance. His medication and other needs would have to be paid for out-of-pocket. And from what little money Chuck had, it was clear that it must come from Jerome's pocket.

After a few hours of disbelief, Jerome phoned his lawyer. He presented, in detail, his family's precarious situation. The two men talked for hours. Legalities had to be explained, California laws interpreted, and advice given. It was a long and drawn out conversation. By the time Jerome

hung up the phone, he felt unfairly trapped. He didn't mind the responsibilities that came with running a facility like Mullen-Overholt-- it was his job. But the overseeing of his brother's life, was decidedly not. However, Chuck was his brother, and, as Jerome grudgingly reminded himself, blood is thicker than water.

It was in this dismal state of mind that Vera found her son, later that afternoon.

"You spend too much time in here, Pumpkin," observed Vera, walking into Jerome's gloomy office.

"What do you want, Mom?" asked Jerome, impatiently. He was in no humor to make small talk.

"Chuck and Charlie will be here in a few moments to visit your father," replied Vera, dusting her son's desk with her right hand.

"That's nice," came Jerome's grim reply.

"I thought it would be nice if you could be there," continued Vera, starting in on Jerome's bookshelf. "It's the first time in fifteen years that the family would be together in the same room."

"Here we are," Chuck announced, standing in Jerome's office doorway, Charlie close behind him. Chuck looked pale. This time, it wasn't the fault of his medication. The very thought of visiting his father was depressing. Chuck feared the feelings and thoughts that would invariably assail him with such a meeting. Arnold's condition was a reminder of what he should expect his future to look like.

"I know your father would love to see his two sons, together," Vera coaxed, spotting a dusty filing cabinet. Before she had time to assail the dust, Jerome stopped her.

"I'll come, if you'll stop messing up my office," complained Jerome, getting up from his chair.

There was an unmistakable look of apprehension on everyone's faces.

Ever since she first heard the news of Chuck's diagnosis, Vera began to have an awful sense of *deja vu*. It made her feel extremely burned-out and old.

Jerome's mouth was pulled into an even tighter line than usual, for he was feeling the full weight of the legal responsibilities and financial burdens of his younger brother.

Chuck was wondering if the faintness he was feeling was coming from his AD pill, or from the fact he was about to see his future. He felt weak.

Charlie was confused and frightened. She could barely recognize her life; things were changing so rapidly. Other than keeping an eye on her Daddy, what was going to be expected of her? What did all this mean? Why was this happening to THEM? Was this some kind of punishment from God?

Vera, Jerome, Chuck, and Charlie, silently walked down the main hall to Arnold's room, their minds occupied with the future. The future lived in Bed 2, Room 3.

"Look who's here to see you!" exclaimed Vera, as she led the small group into the room Arnold Overholt shared with four other residents. "It's Chucky, see?" said Vera taking Chuck by the hand and leading her son to his father's bedside.

As Chuck bent over and said, "Hi, Dad," to his father, there was no spark of recognition on the old man's face. Everything about Arnold was foreign to Chuck. The dark eyes which once commanded fear from his sons, were now dimmed with emptiness. They stared ahead, blankly. Indeed, Chuck had never seen his father so subdued-- so altered. The only thing that told Chuck this was his father was the familiar form of his eyes, mouth, and nose, which even the Alzheimer's could not entirely erase. It was like recognizing the house you once lived in by its outside shell, only to find upon entering, the unfamiliar blank spaces where life once took place.

Chuck felt tears welling up in his eyes. He was feeling what only those who have stared into the vacant face of their future, can feel. One emotion barrages the soul after another. After reality sets in, fear begins its terrible campaign; he envisions himself in the same body, unable to move or think for himself; panic ensues, tormenting its victim with hopelessness and despair; thoughts of not going on momentarily flash through his mind; horror takes hold of him that those thoughts could even occur to him in the first place. But then, as if by some Unseen Hand, a small voice whispers to his soul; faith gets a firm foot inside the door of Chuck's heart, by reminding him of a golden promise given from God's Own lips: "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." Chuck's pulse ceases to race. His future may be grim, but it is NOT without hope.

Chuck buried his head in his father's bedding and wept. He shed tears for the future he would not have with his daughter, and he grieved for the father who had never loved him.

Charlie comforted her father as best she could, but was unable to find any words. She looked to her grandmother for help, however, Vera was weeping, also.

Jerome found a nearby chair and waited for this display of emotion to pass. He was dead to tears. He lived in a world where people waited to die; where hope is a forgotten stranger, and love, a distant memory.

Chuck felt better after he shed those grief stricken tears. It was a cleansing and relieving experience. He realized that if God could get him through a hard day like today, then there really was hope for the future.

While Vera introduced Charlie to her unresponsive grandfather, Jerome spoke to Chuck.

"Chuck, we need to talk," said Jerome, impatiently.

"Couldn't it wait?" asked Chuck, wondering what was so important to interrupt this family reunion.

"My office, now," ordered Jerome, sounding more like a principal about ready to punish an unruly student, rather than a family discussion between brothers. Chuck excused himself from the group and followed Jerome back to his office.

Jerome closed the office door and sat down in the chair behind his wide desk.

"What's this all about?" asked Chuck, somewhat bewildered by the severity on Jerome's face. Jerome shoved the opened FedEx package he had received that morning toward Chuck. "What is it?" asked Chuck, picking up the parcel.

"My problem," answered Jerome.

"These are my records!" declared Chuck, thumbing through the pages. "How did you get these?" Jerome passed Chuck his former landlady's note. "I distinctly remember setting aside these papers because they were important. I didn't want them to get lost among everything else," explained Chuck, realizing that he was looking like a bungler in front of his brother.

"Never mind the excuses," said Jerome. He wearily rubbed his forehead and looked at the picture of Arnold sitting on the desk. "After going through that mess, I discovered that you don't have any life insurance. Care to explain?"

"I-- I was meaning to get around to it," stammered Chuck, thrusting his hand into his pants pocket and pulling out a wad of paper. "I made a note, so I wouldn't forget, see?" he asked, holding up a small piece of paper.

"It doesn't matter if you had a thousand such notes," replied Jerome, dryly. Chuck looked at him, puzzled. "You have a preexisting condition," explained Jerome. "No insurance company in their right mind would touch you!" He snatched the note from Chuck's hand and tossed it into the wastebasket.

"What does it mean?" asked Chuck. "I know it's probably bad, but surely, it's not that serious."

"It's a wonder you graduated from high school at all," berated Jerome. "You obviously don't know, so I'll explain it to you. Since you don't have any life insurance, expenses that normally would have been covered, will have to come out-of-pocket. You understand what that means, don't you?"

"Yes. That means I'll have to pay for it myself," replied Chuck.

"Wrong," retorted Jerome, "I'll have to pay for it! After looking at your finances, the only pocket anything will be coming out of is mine!"

"I know my checkbook isn't as neat as yours, but I'm not broke!" replied Chuck, becoming a little nervous that someone as smart as his brother could think otherwise.

"Humph," replied Jerome, arranging Chuck's papers on the desk in neat piles. "Look at this," he muttered, something catching his eye. "I've never seen so many late charges in all my life!" Jerome was well aware that he was making Chuck feel degraded and embarrassed. "I guess you forgot to make enough notes," he commented, snidely. Jerome had done a complete work of making Chuck feel humiliated.

"Is there anything else?" asked Chuck, wishing to escape his older brother's cold gaze.

"We have a lot to settle, yet," replied Jerome. "I spent the better part of this morning on the phone with my lawyer. I informed him of our situation and he advised me what to do. The first step is to get a court to appoint me your legal guardian." Jerome continued to organize the stacks on the desk. "It means I'll be the one legally responsible for your care-- financial and otherwise. The legal grounds for appointment of a guardian include mental conditions such as Alzheimer's disease, so we shouldn't have much trouble there."

"Legal guardian?" repeated Chuck, disbelievingly. "I'm not helpless! I can still take care of myself, you know."

"Are you, really," Jerome replied, dryly.

"I'm not handing my financial responsibilities over to you. I can take care of it myself," insisted Chuck. Jerome looked at his brother with his cold, deep-set eyes.

"I don't know why your kicking. I really don't," said Jerome. "You have no choice, and neither do I. If the disorder of your financial affairs hasn't quite convinced you, then I'll tell you a story. Dad once signed a check to pay the phone bill, and it cost him twenty-five thousand dollars because he transposed the numbers. By the time I caught it, it was too late. One of the workers at the phone company skipped with the check and cashed it before I had time to stop it. And when Dad and Mom didn't have enough money to meet their needs, who do you think footed the bill? Whether you like it or not, you're my burden."

"But is it necessary to have a legal guardian?" asked Chuck.

"For your information," began Jerome, "admittance to a nursing home may only be arranged by a legal guardian." The words "nursing home" rang in Chuck's ears. "You're going to have to face it, sometime," Jerome said, seeing the disturbed look on his brother's face. "What are we supposed to do with you when we can no longer take care of you at home? You must consider the position your family will be in." Chuck hung his head. Vera never wanted to place Arnold in a nursing home, but there did come a time when she had no other alternative. "My lawyer advised me to get this squared away with before you're not able to give your consent," continued Jerome. "Many don't want to face it and put it off, making it ten times harder to do, later. You don't have to look so concerned," laughed Jerome, "I'm not doing this so I can steal your money! You have none!"

"O.K.," sighed Chuck, resigning himself to the fact that a nursing home was in his future.

"That brings us to our next topic," continued Jerome, "Charlie."

"What about Charlie?" asked Chuck, alarmed.

"This was my lawyer's idea, entirely," Jerome prepared his brother, "I don't want to do it, but she is my niece. Blood is thicker than water, and I won't have any niece of mine shipped off to any foster home."

"What do you mean!" exclaimed Chuck, not sure if he heard Jerome correctly.

"According to my lawyer, the law requires that there must be an adult who is legally responsible for the care of unmarried minors under the age of eighteen. If the the parents are unable to care for the child, say for instance you're no longer mentally able to take responsibility for Charlie, then it is possible that the Child Welfare System could become involved."

"The Child Welfare System!" exclaimed Chuck.

"Must you parrot everything I say?" asked Jerome, impatiently. "Now where was I? Oh, yes, the Child Welfare System. Anyway, intervention might lead to the placement of the child, in foster care."

"How can it be prevented?" asked Chuck, fighting back panic.

"My lawyer advised me to protect Charlie by obtaining a legal guardianship. That way, no court could claim that there isn't anyone taking responsibility for the child. It doesn't always happen, but it could."

"You want to be Charlie's legal guardian, also?" exclaimed Chuck, still numb. "Do you want to raise her?"

"I don't want to do anything of the kind!" replied Jerome. "It's only a legal precaution, that's all. According to my lawyer, a guardianship remains in effect until the child turns eighteen, or marries, whichever comes first. How old is she? fifteen?" Chuck nodded. "Well, there you are. It'll only be for three years. It's very temporary." Chuck looked concerned. "I don't like this any more than you do!" exclaimed Jerome. "They're going to do a background check on me, to make sure I don't have any arrests or previous involvement with Child Protection Services! That's one indignity I can do without!"

"Do I have any choice on who Charlie's legal guardian will be?" asked Chuck.

"That's a fine thank you, I must say," grumbled Jerome. "As far as I'm concerned, you're both connected. When I take responsibility of you financially, I am, in effect, taking responsibility for her, also. I don't see how you have much choice. Anything that concerns Charlie, financially, concerns me, legal guardian or not." Chuck still looked unsure. "Look," said Jerome, growing impatient, "I don't want to be Charlie's father. That's not what this is about. She's your kid, and she always will be."

This was the decision that Chuck had never dreamed he would have to make. He had to admit that his financial instability had placed him even deeper into Jerome's clemency, than he had thought possible.

"If I agree, will you promise not to interfere in my raising my daughter, any way I wish?" asked Chuck.

"Gladly," replied Jerome, not eager to take up his brother's mantle of fatherhood.

"I'm trusting you to keep your word," reminded Chuck.

"I'll keep my promise," replied Jerome. "The only time I'll ever interfere in your family affairs is when it concerns money. And that, by the way, has nothing to do with any guardianship. You're sleeping under my roof and eating my food. I have a right to say where and how my money is used. If that's going to stick in your craw, tell me now."

There was no other choice, and if there were, Chuck couldn't think of one. Chuck knew he must trust in God's providence. After all, not everyone had a brother who could assume the burden of one ill, middle-aged man and his teenage daughter. Even with Jerome's belittling attitude, Chuck was fully aware of the fact that God was providing for their needs. This was part of the Lord's promised way of escape, that Chuck and Charlie would be able to bear the financial strain that Early Onset Alzheimer's would cause.

"Charlie and I are very grateful," replied Chuck.

Jerome went about his business as if he hadn't heard his brother. He wasn't doing this out of any benevolent pity; this was a duty that could not be gotten out of-- no, not by this self-righteous man.

"Are you coming back to Dad's room?" asked Chuck, seeing that Jerome had left off speaking.

"I would sooner go to a wake," Jerome breathed under his breath.

"I think Mom is expecting us to come back," continued Chuck, going to the office door. He looked expectantly at Jerome.

"Very well," sighed Jerome, getting up.

Soon after being introduced to her grandfather, Charlie quietly left Arnold's room. His room felt creepy and weird. And besides, the old man that lie in Bed 3 was a stranger to her. The implications of his current mental health had little effect on Charlie. Yes, it looked like there was something wrong with him, but he was old-- not youthful and strong like her father. A lot of the

elderly at Mullen-Overholt looked like they had problems. In truth, Charlie had no previous memory of Arnold to compare against his present state. She just couldn't picture her father looking as sickly as Arnold Overholt.

Another factor which caused Charlie's hasty retreat were the eight inquisitive eyes of the other four strangers. They unashamedly eavesdropped, intently listening to every word. Hushed whispers didn't seem to discourage them. They would only crane their necks all the harder. There was no limit to their curiosity. However rude the old men appeared to be, Charlie's indignation was really ignited when they stared at her father when he wept. Their blinking eyes observed every tear and every heaving sob. Understandably, Charlie didn't like her father to be the gazing stalk of four total strangers.

"Med cart coming through," said a black woman pushing a small cart as she brushed past Charlie leaving Arnold's room. The outside of Room 3 differed very little from the inside. Two or three male residents sat in wheelchairs, on either side of the main hall. One man was slumped over, another's hands and waist were tied to his chair, and the third was staring straight at her.

"How well do you play chess?" he asked, his wrinkled face kindly beaming at her. Charlie looked around, to see if he was speaking to her or someone else standing nearby.

"Who, me?" she asked. The old man's shirt pocket bulged with a small box. A white cord ran from the box to his left ear. When Charlie spoke to him, he took out the box and fiddled with its dial.

"When my hearing began to fail, they gave me this contraption," he said, placing it back in his pocket. "Sometimes, it doesn't work very well." Seeing that the young woman was about to escape from him, he plied the question once more.

"I haven't played chess in years," replied Charlie.

"Why?" the old man asked. Charlie couldn't help noticing how lonely he looked.

"Well," Charlie responded, "I used to play with a good friend. But, when she died, I quit."

"How old was your friend?" he continued, hoping to draw the young woman into a conversation.

"Donna was sixty-two when she passed away," replied Charlie, noting how eager the old man was for someone to talk to. "She was a retired Latin teacher who worked as a librarian at the public

library. She loved chess-- among other things," smiled Charlie. "Donna was the most intelligent person I have ever known. She loved crossword puzzles, (the harder the better), reading, and..."

"And you," finished the old man, beaming.

"She was my best friend," remembered Charlie.

"You can always tell the character of a person by the people they love," he remarked. "How long ago did Donna pass on?" he asked.

"Three years," said Charlie. "We were good friends since I was eight."

"You must have been very lonely," guessed the old man.

"Why do you say that?" asked Charlie.

"You were eight years old and your best friend was fifty-eight," he pointed out.

"That doesn't mean I was lonely," disagreed Charlie. "I've always had friends who were older than myself."

"Then, I must be one of them," smiled the old man.

"I would like that," replied Charlie, shaking the wrinkled hand he held out.

"My name is Skip," he said, introducing himself. "What is yours?"

"Charlie," replied the girl.

"An odd name for a young woman," replied Skip.

"Charlie is short for Charlotte," explained Charlie. "I was named after my father, Charlton Overholt." Skip raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Why, you're Jerome's little niece, aren't you?" Skip asked, his voice filling with indignation.

"Yes, I am. Is that a crime?" she asked, wonderingly.

"I guess none of us can help who we're related to," Skip conceded.

"Is Uncle Jerome as bad as all that?" asked Charlie, a little incredulous.

"I won't say anything against him in your company," replied Skip, "seeing as how he is your uncle. I'll only say that I pray for him, daily."

"That's very good of you," smiled Charlie, trying to hide her amusement. To her, Jerome came off as being very institutional, but nothing more.

"Go ahead and smile, Charlotte," said Skip. "You'll see what I mean soon enough." Charlie smiled politely and excused herself. Before leaving, Skip was able to extract a promise from her to visit him again.

"Med cart, coming through!" announced the black woman, this time going the opposite direction. Charlie quickly ducked into a nearby room to get out of her way.

"Are you visiting someone, dear?" asked an elderly woman. Charlie turned to find an entire room of women staring at her.

"Of course she's visiting someone, Ellie," said a resident named Madeline. "Does she look like she lives here?"

"What's your name, honey?" asked Ellie.

"Charlie," came the response.

"Disgraceful! Charlie is a boy's name!" exclaimed Laura, always eager to disapprove of anything.

"Let her be," scolded a kind voice. "Come over here, child," beckoned the woman. Charlie did as she was told. The only time she had seen this many old people in one place was at a senior center in Montana. "Is Charlie short for something, child?" she asked.

"Charlie is short for Charlotte. I was named after my father, Charlton," explained Charlie, for the second time that day.

"Why, you must be Chuck's daughter!" exclaimed the woman.

"You know Daddy?" asked Charlie, in surprise.

"Jerome's niece! I should have known," grumbled Laura.

"Oh, hush!" scolded Ellie.

"Nothing good ever came out of the Overholt's," continued Laura.

"Vera is an Overholt," reminded Ellie, "or have you forgotten?"

"Vera was a Harper before she was an Overholt," came Laura's stout response.

"My son, Adam, is friends with your father," explained Ruth, trying to change the subject. Charlie gave an involuntary start. "Adam tells me you've already met my grandsons."

"Grandsons? Oh, you mean Mike and Chad," replied Charlie. "They gave me a ride into town."

"Yes, I know. They're good boys," observed Ruth. Charlie smiled nervously, wondering how much Adam had told his mother of the discussion they had that morning.

"People think a lot of Adam in Twin Yucca," Ellie commented. "And the boys too, of course," she quickly added, not wanting to slight any of Ruth's kin.

Charlie remembered how she accused Adam of manipulating her father. She wondered what Ruth and the others would say if they knew what she had said. Charlie had regretted her accusation almost as soon as she had said it. Adam didn't strike one as being a manipulator. In fact, the reverse was true. His willingness to help others made him prone to be taken advantage of.

Charlie politely excused herself from the women of Room 2. Anyone who was capable of conversation, wanted to talk; and those who couldn't, would track your every movement, until Charlie felt like a goldfish in a glass bowl; it seemed as though everyone wanted attention. She quickly decided to go back to Room 3.

Upon returning to Arnold's room, Charlie found Jerome and her father in a heated discussion.

"I told you," Jerome was saying, "anything that concerns money, is my business."

"But," protested Chuck, "Charlie is my daughter! I have the right to decide where she should go to school!"

"Public school was good enough for us," replied Jerome, "it should be good enough for her!"

"Charlie won't learn about Christ in a public school!" explained Chuck. Just then, he noticed Charlie standing in the doorway. Jerome followed his gaze.

"Come here," ordered Jerome. Charlie looked to her father for approval. Chuck nodded. "What grade are you in?" asked Jerome.

"The eleventh," Charlie replied.

"I thought you were fifteen," replied Jerome. "You're supposed to be a sophomore, not a junior."

"I jumped a grade," said Charlie, glad of something to be proud of.

"Did you hear that, Chuck?" asked Jerome, pleased with his niece. "She jumped a grade. Did you know that?"

"No, I didn't," replied Chuck, surprised.

"It happened in North Carolina," explained Charlie. Chuck was happy that his daughter was smart enough to jump a grade, but at the same time, it disturbed him. She was growing up so fast.

"Well, Chuck," said Jerome, "she didn't inherit her brains from you, that's for certain." Charlie startled at her Uncle's coldness. Was that what Skip was talking about?

Suddenly, an idea inspired by the Holy Spirit came to Jerome. Jerome didn't know from Whom it came-- nor did he care. He sat down in a chair at the foot of Arnold's bed and thought it over. "Chuck, if you still have your heart set on a private school for Charlie, I'll go along with it, on one condition: it must strive for academic excellence. Private schools can afford to spend more individualized time with the students than at a public one. And seeing how my niece isn't stupid like most teenagers, she'll have the best chance to excel at a private school."

"I have a condition of my own," replied Chuck. "The school must also teach Christ."

"Though you're in no position to bargain, Chuck, I'll let you have your way," acquiesced Jerome, "this time."

It was settled. Charlie would attend a private, Christian school. Chuck prayed that God would continue to hold this door open for his daughter. He wanted every opportunity for Charlie to become a Christian that he could possibly give her. Chuck wanted so many things for his daughter: happiness, safety, success. But, most of all, he wanted Charlie to know the love of

God. He yearned for her to know the peace of mind that accompanied such great love. The faith-filled father could only pray that God would find a way to teach this to his Charlie.

Chuck couldn't know it yet, but God was going to answer his prayer in a way that he never would have imagined possible.

"But thus saith the LORD... I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children."

~ Isaiah 49:25 ~

"Behold, I send an Angel before thee [Charlie]... to bring thee into the place which I have prepared."

~ Exodus 23:20 ~

"I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with Mine eye. Be ye not as the horse, or as the mule, which have no understanding."

~ Psalm 32:8, 9 ~

Chapter Twenty
Love Creates Love

"If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from Him, That he who loveth God love his brother also."

~ 1 John 4:20, 21 ~

"Just five more minutes," pleaded Charlie, pulling the covers over her head.

"It's time to get up now," persisted Chuck, opening Charlie's bedroom window, hoping the bright morning light would drag Charlie out of her bed. However, the overgrown shrubbery that grew on Charlie's side of the house, almost entirely covered the window. The plants filtered the light so much so that Chuck felt it necessary to flip the bedroom light on, if she was ever going to wake up. The overhead light quickly brought the desired effect. Charlie groaned and sat up in bed.

"Hurry up and get dressed," instructed Chuck. "It's Friday!"

"What's the big hurry?" asked Charlie, yawning.

"We're going to enroll you in school, today!" Chuck announced, closing her bedroom door as he left.

"Great," mumbled Charlie. She went to her closet and confronted the impossible decision that faces every girl upon her first day at a new school: what do you wear? What combination of clothing would make the most friends, and show others that she wasn't the total weirdo that she was certain she was.

"What's taking her so long?" asked Chuck, checking his watch for the twentieth time. He had already finished his breakfast, and Charlie still hadn't appeared from her room.

"She's probably trying to figure out what to wear," replied Vera, recalling an experience from her own girlhood.

"We're going to be late!" exclaimed Chuck, pacing the living room. "Charlie doesn't even have time to start her breakfast! Could you go see what's taking her so long, Mom?" Before Vera could leave, Charlie appeared from her room.

"How do I look?" asked Charlie. "Does this black top make me look like a geek?"

"That's fine, Pumpkin," replied Chuck, hurrying her out the front door. "If we hurry, we can still make it on time!"

"But," protested Charlie, "you didn't even look!" It was a testament to how nervous Charlie was: never before had she consulted her father on clothing.

Outside, Jerome was waiting with the car to drive Chuck and Charlie to school.

Galilee Christian School was located in the nearby desert community of Joshua Tree Village. (Twin Yucca was so small, it didn't have a Christian school of its own.) Galilee Christian School was founded in 1975 by Jim Edwards, the pastor of Galilee Community Church, in the hope of bringing Christian morals to children who were not likely to acquire them in public schools.

"Pastor Edwards wanted a school that would help build a child's Christian faith, and at the same time, stress the importance of good academics," explained Mrs. Strickland, one of the teachers at Galilee. "We currently have 159 students and 10 teachers. In 1980, Arlo Hall was built. In it we have several classrooms, an extensive library, a fully functioning science laboratory, and one of the largest gymnasiums in Joshua Tree. Mr. Overholt, I've been teaching at Galilee for nineteen years, and I can personally vouch for the Christian standards this school promotes. You won't be sorry."

"This school sounds exactly like what my Charlie needs," replied Chuck, looking at his daughter.

"Charlie, some of the kids here are also from Twin Yucca," said Mrs. Strickland. Charlie didn't know any kids in Twin Yucca, either, so it mattered little to her. "Which reminds me, Mr. Overholt," continued Mrs. Strickland, undaunted by Charlie's lack of enthusiasm, "you do understand that we have no busses to transport the children in? You see, most of the students at Galilee are from Joshua Tree Village, and it's within easy walking distance for many of them. I'm afraid your daughter will have to have a ride to get to school. If it's a problem, maybe your daughter can ride with one of the other students from Twin Yucca. At the very least, I thought you should be aware of the situation before you made any commitment."

Chuck hadn't considered that possibility. In his joy at finding a good Christian school at all, he had forgotten the transportation issue. Indeed, Jerome himself, had not given it any thought.

"I want Charlie to attend this school. I'll work something out," replied Chuck.

"My husband is the principal," smiled Mrs. Strickland. "Why don't we go to his office and get your daughter enrolled, Mr. Overholt?"

Principal Strickland's face looked as grim and strict as his name suggested. Charlie was silently feeling sorry for herself when she heard Principal Strickland mention the grade into which she was to be placed.

"But, in North Carolina, I was in the eleventh, not the tenth grade," protested Charlie.

"That may be," replied Principal Strickland, "but until your school records arrive, and you have been adequately tested by our staff, you will be placed among students of your own age."

There was a sound of finality in his voice that made Charlie fear she was doomed to the tenth, no matter how high her grade average was. Chuck signed some papers and handed over a check that Jerome had already approved.

"Charlie can begin class today," informed Mrs. Strickland, handing the fifteen year old a schedule of the classes she would be attending. "Your locker number is printed at the top of the page," pointed out Mrs. Strickland. "I'll go get the textbooks you'll need."

"Welcome to Galilee Christian School, Charlie," said Principal Strickland. "We hope you'll be happy here." Charlie smiled weakly. "School begins at seven and lets out at two thirty. Tardiness will be disciplined," warned Principal Strickland. "Disobedience in class is not acceptable. Here is handbook of rules that Galilee Christian School adheres to. I suggest you read it thoroughly." Charlie took the pamphlet from his hand and flipped through its contents.

Mrs. Strickland returned with an armful of textbooks.

"Why don't we put these in your locker?" she suggested, leading Charlie and her father into the hall. Charlie found her locker and stowed the books away. Mrs. Strickland checked the large white clock in the hall. "You've already missed English 2. World History began at eight o' clock. It's right over there," pointed Mrs. Strickland. "You had better say good-bye to your father now, and join the class."

Chuck reached out to hug his daughter, but she pulled away.

"Daddy!" she complained, "not in public!"

"I'll see you after school, Pumpkin," called out Chuck, watching his daughter disappear behind the door.

Mr. Jenkins, the World History teacher, looked up from his desk as Charlie entered the room. Most of the students, eager for any distraction that interrupted their work, turned in their chairs to gawk at the new kid.

"You have precisely nine minutes to finish your test," reminded Mr. Jenkins. The teenagers reluctantly returned to work. Mr. Jenkins motioned Charlie to his desk.

"I'm Charlie Overholt," she whispered.

"You may take a seat," instructed Mr. Jenkins. Charlie quickly found an empty seat near the back and sat down. Charlie sat there, stupidly doing nothing. The entire class was taking a test, so there was nothing to do but to wait.

When the nine minutes were up, and the test papers were gathered, Mr. Jenkins announced that they had a new pupil.

"I expect you all to make Charlie feel welcome. And remember, you were once new here, yourself," he reminded. After class was over, everyone got up and filed out of the room. Charlie noticed that the boys were hanging back, and letting the girls go first. She picked up her textbook and followed the other girls outside.

"Hi," said one of the girls, shyly introducing herself. "My name is Kendra Hanna. That pretty girl over there is my twin sister, Jenna. I know we don't look like each other. We're fraternal twins," she explained. The other girls introduced themselves, but Kendra was the only one who didn't leave. "Where are you from?" asked Kendra, walking beside Charlie to their next class.

"Twin Yucca," replied Charlie. "But before that, I lived in Montana."

"Really?" exclaimed Kendra, "me too! I mean, not the Montana part. But, I live in Twin Yucca, too! My parents own a restaurant there. Maybe you've been there? It's called 'Hanna's Family Restaurant.' I'm been lobbying to get the name changed, but I've been vetoed every time!" Charlie couldn't help smiling. Kendra was nice.

At lunch, Kendra and Charlie ate together, along with Jenna and her friend, Sara.

"After lunch we have Bible class," said Jenna. "We're studying Moses and the plagues of Egypt."

"Oh," said Charlie.

"There sure were a lot of them to remember," groaned Sara. "We're going to be tested, today."

"I guess I have a lot of catching up to do," observed Charlie, thoughtfully.

"Oh, Pastor Edwards won't expect you to take the test," replied Kendra. "It wouldn't be fair, not with you being new and all." As the four girls ate, a boy walked by them and gave Charlie a look of recognition. Knowing him, Charlie quickly turned away.

"Do you know Scottie Zimmerman?" asked Kendra, surprised.

"No, not really," replied Charlie. "He and two other guys were bugging a woman at the bus stop, the day before yesterday. I kicked one of them in the shins."

"You didn't!" exclaimed Kendra.

"You were with 'Mad' Maggie?" asked Jenna, incredulously.

"I wouldn't be caught dead with 'Mad' Maggie!" chimed in Sara.

"What's the big deal?" asked Charlie, wanting to understand the cause of their disapproval.

"Surely you noticed she wasn't all there," replied Kendra.

"I guess so."

"My Mom says she's brain damaged. She told me to stay away from 'Mad' Maggie, because you can't trust people who's brains aren't normal," said Jenna.

"How did she get that way?" asked Charlie.

"Well," began Kendra, "I heard my Mom talking to a friend of hers, and they said that 'Mad' Maggie once had an older brother, I think his name was Wayne. She never met him, because 'Mad' Maggie was born a year after his death. Anyway, Mom said that Wayne was drafted and shipped over to Vietnam. A few weeks after his twentieth birthday, Wayne was involved in a terrible firefight in which forty-two in his company of one hundred and ten, were killed. Wayne was a hero because he rescued two of his buddies, by carrying them on his shoulders. Three days after, a terrible thing happened: Wayne shot himself in the stomach with his own gun while having a nightmare!"

"He had only been in Vietnam for fifty days!" exclaimed Jenna, picking up where her fraternal twin had left off. "He was awarded the Silver Star, posthumously, of course. Mom said Mr. and Mrs. Downen, Wayne's parents, went crazy after that. He was their only child, and the sun rose and set with Wayne. Anyway, 'Mad' Maggie was born a year after all this happened."

"I told Charlie that, already," pointed out Kendra.

"Mr. and Mrs. Downen kept grieving over Wayne, long after he died. 'Mad' Maggie grew up with their incessant talk of how great Wayne was and everything. 'Mad' Maggie wasn't all there when she was born, to begin with," said Kendra, "and the Downen's obsession over their dead son just drove 'Mad' Maggie into insanity."

"She didn't seem insane to me," said Charlie.

"Oh, but she is," confirmed Sara. "She stands at the bus stop every day, waiting for her brother Wayne to come back from Vietnam! My Dad said that's the reason the bus stop looks like a dump. The city is trying to encourage her to go somewhere else, by letting the benches and stuff run down. No one wants to go near 'Mad' Maggie, so the bus line won't even stop there anymore!"

"Why do they honk their horns at her?" asked Charlie.

"Oh, everyone's just having some fun," replied Jenna, "that's all."

"You know, Scottie Zimmerman is one of the cutest boys in school," said Sara.

"So?" asked Charlie.

"So, I would be a little nicer to him the next time he takes notice of you," replied Sara.

"I don't care if he does or not," said Charlie, proudly.

"It's probably just as well," said Kendra. "Scottie is going steady with Debbie Randall."

"Debbie doesn't go to Galilee," informed Sara. "She's a cheerleader at Twin Yucca High." Sara bent over and whispered something in Charlie's ear and Charlie giggled.

"I think Scottie is definitely the cutest boy in school," mused Jenna.

"He's not as cute as Mike Garner," said Sara.

"No one is as cute as Mike Garner," said Kendra.

"He didn't look so cute to me," disagreed Charlie, who was looking for an opportunity to tell her story.

"You've seen him?" asked Sara, surprised at how fast the new girl was at meeting boys.

"Sure," replied Charlie, as if it were no big deal.

"Well," prodded Kendra, "what did he say?"

"He asked me if I wanted a ride into town," answered Charlie. "Chad was there, also."

"Chad Garner goes to Galilee," informed Kendra. "He's only nine, so you won't see him in any of our classes."

"Mike drives Chad to and from school," said Jenna. "All the girls hang out in the parking lot, hoping to run into Mike Garner."

"I can't believe you were in the same vehicle as Mike Garner," sighed Sara, dreamily.

When lunch was over, the girls went to Bible class, along with the all the other grades, so that the entire student body was in one room. Pastor Edwards opened the class with the Lord's Prayer and then opened his Bible to read a passage from God's Word before they began the lessons.

"Psalm forty-one," read Pastor Edwards, "'To the chief Musician, a Psalm of David. Blessed is he that considereth the poor: the LORD will deliver him in time of trouble. The LORD will preserve him, and keep him alive; and he shall be blessed upon the earth: and Thou wilt not deliver him unto the will of his enemies. The LORD will strengthen him upon the bed of languishing: Thou wilt make all his bed in his sickness. I said, LORD, be merciful unto me: heal my soul; for I have sinned against thee. Mine enemies speak evil of me, When shall he die, and his name perish? And if he come to see me, he speaketh vanity: his heart gathereth iniquity to itself; when he goeth abroad, he telleth it. All that hate me whisper together against me: against me do they devise my hurt. An evil disease, say they, cleaveth fast unto him: and now that he lieth he shall rise up no more. Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me. But Thou, O LORD, be merciful unto me, and raise me up, that I may requite them. By this I know that Thou favourest me, because mine enemy doth not triumph over me. And as for me, Thou upholdest me in mine integrity, and

settest me before Thy face for ever. Blessed be the LORD God of Israel from everlasting, and to everlasting. Amen, and Amen."

The words spoke to Charlie's conscience. Hadn't she and her friends just been laughing at 'Mad' Maggie? She glanced at Kendra, who was sitting beside her. There was no mark of guilt or regret on her face.

Next, Pastor Edwards did something that surprised Charlie. He invited "those students among us who are not yet saved, to come forward and accept the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour." Charlie sank down in her chair. She felt as though he were deliberately trying to shame her into coming forward, in front of everyone, and admit that she was a sinner. Pastor Edwards looked about the room, said another prayer "for the unsaved souls" and began the lesson.

After school was over, the kids from Joshua Tree Village quickly disappeared into their houses, leaving the kids who lived in other towns to wait for their rides in the hot parking lot. One by one, the cars came, until only a handful of the students were left.

Kendra and Jenna stood with Charlie, as they waited for their Mom to come and pick them up.

"I can't wait until I have my own car," said Jenna, impatiently.

"Kendra," asked Charlie, "when Pastor Edwards asked the unsaved students to come forward in Bible class, was he talking specifically to me?" Kendra laughed.

"No, silly. He does that at every Bible class. Besides, you're not the only unsaved student that attends Galilee. I once took a poll, and about half the kids aren't professing Christians," stated Kendra, matter-of-factly.

"I thought I was the only one!" exclaimed Charlie, wide-eyed. "Isn't this a CHRISTIAN school?"

"Our parents send us here for mainly three reasons: firstly, because we are already saved, and they want to encourage our faith; secondly, if we aren't saved, they're hoping we will become saved; or thirdly, because Galilee has such good academics. You don't have to feel awkward, Charlie. I'm not saved, either," Kendra informed her.

"You're not?" asked Charlie.

"My Mom said she was baptized when she was eighteen, so I figure I'll do it then."

"Kendra, is Scottie Zimmerman a Christian?"

"I think so. Oh, here's my ride! See you Monday, Charlie!" called out Kendra as she and Jenna climbed into their mother's car.

The teenager was confused. How could this be? How could a Christian do something that was against their own faith?

Resigning herself to an unanswered question, Charlie looked about the parking lot to see who was still left. To her surprise, the only other person left was Chad Garner, who seemed to be deeply engrossed with a lizard he had trapped between his hands.

"Hi, Chad," called out Charlie, not wanting to wait by herself. She had been waiting in the dusty parking lot for over half an hour, and no one had come for her.

"Heya!" cried Chad, setting his small prisoner free. "I didn't know you went to Galilee!" Charlie walked over to where the nine-year old stood.

"I started, just today," explained Charlie.

"Oh," replied Chad. "Is your Dad coming for you?"

"Daddy doesn't drive, anymore," replied Charlie.

"You mean ever since he got sick?" asked Chad. Charlie nodded. She was glad the Hanna twins weren't around to hear her talk about Chuck. If they were repulsed by 'Mad' Maggie, how would they treat her father?

"You know what?" asked Chad.

"What?"

"On hot nights, sometimes Uncle Adam takes me down to Dairy Cream and we get two hot fudge sundaes, and we just sit around and talk. Do you and your Dad ever do that?" asked Chad.

"Once, when I was twelve, Daddy bought some fried chicken at a drive through, and we went to the airport. We ate chicken and watched the airplanes take off and land. Sometimes, we'd guess where they were going, or where they had just come from. That night was special," remembered Charlie.

"It's nice to have someone like that, isn't it?" observed Chad.

"Yes, it is," replied Charlie. Suddenly, Chad noticed a cloud of dirt in the distance. "Someone's coming," he announced, shielding his eyes from the hot desert sun to get a better look.

"Who is it?" asked Charlie, hoping it was Uncle Jerome's car.

"It's our van," replied Chad, picking up his backpack.

The old white Clark Plumbing Service and Supply van pulled up to where Chad and Charlie stood.

"Hi, Mike," greeted Chad, opening the passenger door and climbing inside. Just then, Chad remembered his friend. "Want to ride with us?" he asked, turning to Charlie. Charlie looked around. There wasn't a living soul left.

"Thanks," accepted Charlie, getting in beside Chad. "I guess something's holding up my ride."

"We're glad to have you," smiled Mike, pulling out of the parking lot. "Well, kiddo, how'd school go, today?"

"I got a B on my history quiz, and Mr. Hatcher didn't give me any homework, so I guess it went O.K.," Chad replied.

"And how'd your day go, Charlie?" asked Mike, pleasantly.

"Fine," replied Charlie.

On the drive back, Chad talked about how he once killed a rattle snake, but Charlie didn't pay much attention. She was too busy trying to think of something to talk to Mike about. Every time she opened her mouth, nothing came out. Before Charlie knew it, they were in front of her home.

"Thanks again!" said Charlie, waving good-bye as the Garners drove away.

When Charlie entered the house, she found her father casually working a crossword puzzle on the kitchen table.

"Daddy!" she cried, "where were you? I waited in the school parking lot for over half an hour!" Chuck threw down his pencil in disgust.

"I'm so sorry, Pumpkin!" he said, getting up from his chair and giving his daughter an apologetic hug. "I guess I forgot," he said, sadly.

"You aren't home by yourself, are you?" asked Charlie, suddenly realizing that Vera wasn't present.

"She's in the bathroom," replied Chuck, sitting back down at the table. "I really am sorry, Pumpkin. I should have remembered." Charlie tapped on the bathroom door until she heard Vera's voice.

"It's O.K., Grandma," replied Charlie, "I was just checking."

"How did you get home?" asked Chuck, suddenly coming to the conclusion that she had gotten a ride from someone. "You didn't hitchhike, did you?"

"When Mike Garner picked up Chad at school, they offered me a ride," explained Charlie, getting ready to prepare dinner.

"That was Providential. Chad goes to Galilee, huh? I didn't know that," mused Chuck, happily.

"What's with the crossword puzzles, Daddy?" asked Charlie, putting on Vera's apron.

"Dr. Gillis said I should try to do things that stimulate my mind," replied Chuck. "He suggested that I take up jigsaw puzzles, or crossword puzzles."

"Donna used to love doing the crosswords," reminisced Charlie. "Only, she did it differently."

"What did she do that was so different?" asked Chuck.

"Donna used a ballpoint pen," grinned Charlie, pointing at the pencil her father was holding.

"Very funny," said Chuck, smiling in spite of himself. It was good to have Charlie home again.

After dinner, Charlie retired to her room to study. Although no one had assigned her any homework, Charlie felt it would be best if she devoted the entire weekend to studies, so she could catch up with the rest of her class.

Chuck, on the other hand, had other ideas.

"Charlie," began Chuck, standing in his daughter's open bedroom door, "the kitchen sink is dripping. I just called Adam and he said we needed a new washer. Could you run and get it? Here's five dollars," he said, handing her a few dollar bills. Charlie looked at him suspiciously. "Keep any change for yourself. Think of it as a tip," grinned Chuck, innocently.

"And if Adam just happens to be there, maybe we'll talk about Jesus?" said Charlie, trying to put into words the look she saw in her father's eyes.

"The sink really IS dripping," said Chuck. "You can come to the kitchen and see for yourself."

"It's seven-thirty, Daddy. The store will be closed."

"Adam says he has a spare washer laying around his house," explained Chuck.

"Oh, Daddy," sighed Charlie.

"Please, Pumpkin. For me?" pleaded Chuck.

"How do I get there?" asked Charlie, resignedly.

Adam's house was in the middle of an upscale, residential area, where small ornate trees dotted the sidewalks, and elaborate wrought iron fences ran the perimeter of each property. Charlie was surprised by the surroundings. Then she reminded herself that he was a plumber.

As she approached her destination, Charlie observed that Adam's two story house was conservative when compared to that of his neighbors. It was a deceptively small looking house, mostly due to the two tall elm trees that stood on either side, hiding the home's outline behind wide trunks. A black wrought iron fence ran the perimeter, disappearing behind the house. Adam's house was constructed of rough stone, (as was the walk leading up to the front door), giving everything an earthy feel. From here, Charlie noticed that Adam had green shutters on every window. It was the first time since she had arrived in Southern California that she had seen shutters.

As Charlie was about to ring the door bell, small sprinkler heads shot up from the lawn and sputtered into action. Startled, she jumped. It was then that she noticed Adam's grass. It was thick and green-- the picture of robust health. As Charlie rang the doorbell, she dismally compared his grass to the stubby stuff outside her own home-- sickly and yellow. She shook her head in dismay at the thought. Someday, she was going to ask Adam how he did it.

Charlie rang the doorbell a second time, but there was no answer.

"Hello?" she called out.

"Who is it?" asked a voice from behind the house.

"It's me," answered Charlie.

"Who's 'me'?"

Charlie followed the voice, and found Adam dressed in a faded pair of overalls, kneeling in the middle of an amply-sized vegetable garden. Enormous oleanders with white flowers lined the generous-sized backyard, providing unexpected privacy to such a large plot of open ground.

"Oh, Charlie, it's you," observed Adam, getting to his feet. "Come on in," he invited.

"It's a beautiful garden," said Charlie. "This must have taken you a lot of work."

"My skin is sensitive to the sun, so I do most of my gardening at night," explained Adam.

"I always wanted to start a garden back home in Montana," said Charlie, "but we lived in an apartment complex."

"That's too bad," said Adam. "But, you're in California now. Maybe it's not too late to begin."

"You give away the vegetables you grow, don't you?" conjectured Charlie. Adam wasn't going to say, but she could see by the look on his face that she had guessed correctly. "I thought so," she laughed.

"Why?" asked Adam. "Why would I do something like that?"

"I don't know," she shrugged. "You're not the kind of person who would go to all this work, simply for yourself. There had to be another angle."

"You mean self-gratification?"

"Yeah," replied Charlie. "Nobody does anything unless they think there's something in it for themselves."

"You don't really believe everyone is like that, do you?"

"Why not? It's true, isn't it?"

"No, I'm glad to say it isn't, Charlie," answered Adam, "not everyone-- not Christians. You see, Christians operate on the principal of love. According to the Scriptures, there is nothing greater than love. The fulfillment of the first and second commandments is to love: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.'" Charlie's face suddenly brightened.

"Is that why someone who calls himself a Christian can do something that's against his faith? because he's not doing it in love?" asked Charlie, suddenly remembering Scottie Zimmerman.

"That's correct," replied Adam, sensing that she was resolving a question.

"So that person wasn't exercising Christianity because he wasn't exercising love," concluded Charlie.

"If that person was doing something that they knew to be contradictory to the law of love, then yes."

Charlie looked very thoughtful.

"I had no idea love played such a big role in Christianity," she mused.

"God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him," said Adam.

"I think I get it," replied Charlie. "It's kind of like 'amor gignit amorem.' A friend of mine used to say that all the time. It means, 'Love creates love,'" explained Charlie. "If she was right, then I must conclude that if God really is love, and He really does dwell inside you, then God's love for you creates your love for Him."

Adam smiled and shook his head. This was, by far, the brightest teenager he had ever witnessed to. Why she wasn't already a Christian was a source of great concern to him.

"What's holding you back, Charlie?" asked Adam. "I know you understand. What keeps you from taking that next, logical step?"

The girl was silent. She was about to walk away, when Adam stopped her. For a minute, he looked up, as if imploring God for help.

"Follow me," said the plumber, "I want to show you something."

Charlie followed Adam out the gate and down the street. When they reached the cul-de-sac, Adam continued walking straight ahead. As the porch lights dimmed behind them, Charlie was suddenly aware that the night sky was teeming with bright, brilliant stars. They were on the outskirts of Twin Yucca.

"Here it is," announced Adam.

In front of them stood a large plant. At first glance, it looked like something from a child's story book. Its green leaves were long and bayonet shaped, forming a rosette at its base. A tall candle-like column jutted out from the center of the rosette, towering twelve feet above the leaves. Creamy white blossoms covered the column in such a beautiful array that it amazed Charlie.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's a Chaparral Yucca," answered Adam. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"And it's so tall!" observed Charlie.

"They grow wild in the mountains of Southern California and bloom every spring. It's a little late in the year for this, but I wanted to show you something."

Adam took a small flashlight from a pocket in his overalls and turned the light on the flowers. "Do you see it?" he asked. Charlie moved in closer. There, among the white waxy flowers, she saw a small, snow-white moth with grayish hind wings.

"I see it," said Charlie, "but what is it?"

"This," said Adam, "is the yucca moth. This small moth is completely dependent on the yucca plant for its existence, and the yucca plant is completely dependent on the yucca moth for its survival. One can not exist without the other-- it's not possible. No other insect but the yucca moth is capable of pollinating yucca plants. If the moth were to disappear, so would these magnificent plants." Adam pocketed his flashlight. "It's incredible," he said, "to think that this twelve foot giant is dependent on a small insect for its existence!" Adam turned to Charlie. "The Bible says we can learn wisdom from the ant."

"You're not going to compare me to that bug and plant, are you? They need each other to survive-- I don't need anyone!" defied Charlie.

"Look at that yucca plant," said Adam, "see how intricately God has provided for His own Creation? Nature depends on God's wisdom to make it all work right. Without His intervention, all life would perish. Yes, you need Him, Charlie. We all do."

"But, when everything changes," she retorted, "all you're left with is yourself! Even Daddy is going to leave me!"

"Put your trust and faith in God, He NEVER changes. He will never forsake you," beseeched Adam.

"I can't, don't you see? He'll leave me, just like everyone else. First Mom, then Donna, and now Daddy. Everyone I have ever loved is either dead or dying! Now you want me to love a God I can't see, and trust Him that I won't get hurt. Well, I'm sorry, but I can't do it!"

"Charlie, how can I make you see? It's not difficult to understand, but you must understand with your heart, not just your head! When you love someone, it's easy to trust them. If you loved God, then faith would come easily. The world could speak evil of Him and it would not shake your confidence in Him, in the least! 'In the fear of the LORD is strong confidence'!"

"Maybe you can walk on water, but I can't!" cried Charlie. A flood of Holy Spirit-induced Scriptures passed through Adam's heart. He was fighting as hard as he knew how. He would not let God go, without blessing Charlie, first!

"Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God! Charlie, Christ has said, 'I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee!' 'Know therefore that the LORD thy God, He is God, the FAITHFUL God!'" The words pierced Charlie's soul like the two-edged sword it was. There was nowhere to run and no place to hide. She fell to her knees, sobbing,

"Please, help me, Adam! Please help me! I want to trust Him, I really do, but I can't! Help me to believe!" Adam knelt beside Charlie. He took her hand, and began to pray.

"Dear Heavenly Father, please help Charlie. Only You can do this. I have tried, Lord, Thou knowest. But I can of mine own self do nothing. Only You can heal Charlie's heart and give her love to trust again. Reveal Yourself to her heart, and incite her to love."

As Adam prayed, Charlie felt a flood of warmth cover her entire being. She opened her eyes and watched Adam as he petitioned God. There were tears rolling down his cheeks. At that moment, Charlie knew she could trust God. Through Adam, she could see God's love for her. It was as

clear to her as the chaparral yucca towering above their heads. She was no longer afraid. It felt good to not be afraid.

In the dark of the Mojave Desert, Charlie gave her heart to God. By the time Adam finished praying, he opened his eyes to a very happy girl. He knew God had answered his prayer.

As Adam and Charlie walked back to her home, he gave her sound counsel to help Charlie rest in her newfound faith. Adam warned her that the coming days would not be easy, but to cleave unto God, and He would see her safely through.

When Charlie opened the front door, she found her grandmother asleep on the living room couch. Vera woke up as Charlie tiptoed by.

"Pumpkin!" she whispered, "it's nearly ten o'clock! Where have you been?"

"Where is Daddy?" asked Charlie, wanting to tell her father the good news.

"He's in bed, dear," whispered Vera, noticing for the first time that Charlie was glowing with joy. "What happened? Where have you been?" she repeated.

"Oh, Grandma!" exclaimed Charlie, "I just got saved!"

"That's nice, Pumpkin," replied Vera, not comprehending the importance of what Charlie had just said. "Why don't you tell your father tomorrow morning? He needs his rest right now."

Disappointed that Vera didn't understand her, Charlie went to her room. She had expected her news to be met with joy, not indifference. Charlie quietly brushed her teeth and went to bed. She tried to close her eyes and sleep, but her heart was awake.

As Charlie lie awake in bed, she could hear the drip, drip, drip, of the kitchen faucet.

"We love Him, because He first loved us."

~ 1John 4:19 ~

"Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith."

~ 1 John 5:4 ~

"That thou mayest love the LORD thy God, and that thou mayest obey His voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto Him: for He is thy life, and the length of thy days."
~ Deuteronomy 30:20 ~

Chapter Twenty-one
Changes in the Wind

"Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life."
~ Proverbs 13:12 ~

Just like her father before her, Charlie woke up the morning after her conversion, excited. Now that she was saved, Charlie felt sure that everything would be all right; she would take care of her Daddy, fix the meals, clean the house, and do whatever else that needed to be done. She was positively glowing with hope. But before she had opportunity to share this good news with her father, the happiness of the morning was abruptly extinguished: for the first time, Chuck was unable to finish dressing himself.

"I'm here," Charlie said, soothingly, sitting her father down on the edge of the bed, and tenderly guiding his feet to the correct pant legs. Charlie wondered if she was dreaming-- maybe she was still asleep. Surely, this wasn't really happening! Charlie slipped Chuck's feet into the shoes and carefully tied the laces. Concerned, Vera hovered nearby, trying to help where Charlie would let her, for the girl was determined to care for him, by herself.

Chuck fretfully studied his shoelaces after Charlie had finished tying them, struggling to understand why he was unable to do it himself. The simple act that he had done for years without any thought, had suddenly eluded him. His face was flushed with frustration.

When Charlie looked into his eyes, she could see the depth of Chuck's confusion. It pained her deeply to see her own father so helpless.

Before they ate breakfast, Charlie said a prayer at the table, in the hopes that her father would notice. In her entire life, she had never prayed before eating. However, much to her disappointment, Chuck seemed oblivious of his daughter's sudden change of heart. The Alzheimer's Disease was doing this! It certainly didn't seem like the Daddy she knew.

This breakfast was unlike any other Charlie had known before. Chuck repeatedly asked for the salt and pepper shakers, each time forgetting that he had already used it. By the time Charlie successfully snatched the shakers from off the table without her father's notice, Chuck's eggs were inedible.

It was such a simple task; that's probably why it was so frustrating to Chuck. By the time he remembered that Christians should not frustrate the grace of God, he would become agitated

that he had forgotten, and so on. Unless some outside influence interrupted this cycle, Chuck would continue to be confused and flustered.

Now was not the right time to share the news of her salvation. How could she, when she wasn't even sure that he was following the little that was said?

The fifteen-year old was astonished at how quickly her father's disease was progressing.

"Tomorrow will be better," assured Vera. "In the early stages, Arnold had more good days than bad. When he did experience an off day, the day after was usually a little better. Take heart, Pumpkin."

Charlie wanted to cry. She had hoped things would be easier, now that she was a Christian. But, instead of getting easier, it was becoming harder. Why? Why was her father so much worse today? Even the smallest things were unbelievably tedious. Charlie found herself repeating answers, over and over, even more than was usual.

"I don't think he's even trying!" lamented Charlie, appealing to Vera's experience.

"He is trying, Sweetheart," answered Vera. "Life is getting harder for him to cope with."

"I wish there was something I could do to make it easier for him," sighed the girl.

"There is," relied Vera. "We can make tomorrow easier for your father, by making some changes."

"What changes?" asked Charlie.

"Well," answered Vera, "he uses too much energy and time to get dressed in the morning. Today made that perfectly clear. We need to replace his button shirts with the pullover kind; pants should have elastic waists, and not belts; shoes should have Velcro, instead of shoestrings."

"But," asked Charlie, bewildered by the suggestions, "will these things really help?"

"Mornings could be easier... for all of us. I know it's hard for you to imagine, but simplifying life can make a difference."

Charlie hadn't been through this before, but Vera had. The girl could only hope and pray that her Grandma was right. What Charlie didn't understand, she was learning-- the hard way.

Meanwhile, at Clark Plumbing Service and Supply, a certain member of the city council was learning how hard it was to change Adam Clark's mind, once it was made up.

"Surely, you won't turn it down!" protested Councilman Stafford, clearly annoyed by Adam's reluctance to accept the Mayor's generous offer. Even though Clark Plumbing Service and Supply was closed on Saturdays, Councilman Stafford had all but forced his way into the store when he saw Adam and Mike through the front window, finishing some last minute chores from the previous day. "The mayor has never had such a good opportunity to honor one of Twin Yucca's own for heroism!"

"Heroism?" asked Adam, placing an unused pipe back on the shelf. "I only did what anyone else would have done."

"Such modesty!" exclaimed the councilman. "Why, at great peril to yourself, you saved the life of that... that, young woman... what's her name?"

"Jessica Enslow," replied Adam.

"You're a bona fide hero!" finished Councilman Stafford, not missing a beat. Adam's decision, however, remained unchanged. Displeased, the councilman thumped his fingers on the store counter. "Then think of the citizens of this fair city," continued the councilman. "Will you rob them of their civic pride, only to satisfy your caprice?"

"Who was robbed?" asked Mike, walking to the counter where the two men were talking.

"Maybe you can convince your uncle to attend the banquet," said Councilman Stafford.

"What banquet?" asked Mike, putting down the box of plumbing equipment he had been carrying to the back room.

"You didn't tell him?" asked the councilman, addressing Adam.

"Dan," replied Adam, "it doesn't matter. I'm not going."

"The good people of Twin Yucca want to recognize Adam's heroic act, by holding a banquet in his honor. The mayor himself will present your uncle with a medal of heroism. What do you think of that?"

"Congratulations!" exclaimed Mike, clapping Adam on the back.

"There, you see? Your nephew is in favor of the presentation," reasoned Councilman Stafford. "He refuses to attend," explained the councilman, answering Mike before he had the chance to ask. "Very well, Adam," continued the councilman, "if I can't appeal to your civic pride, then let me appeal to your wallet. Think of all the free advertising you'll receive over this publicity! Why, reporters from Joshua Tree, Yucca Valley, Palm Springs, and Twenty-nine Palms will be at the ceremony! Think of that!"

"I appreciate the sentiment behind the banquet, and the ceremony, and the publicity," replied Adam, "I really do."

"Then what's the problem?" asked Councilman Stafford.

"Jessica Enslow walked away from that accident, but her sister didn't," continued Adam. "I don't want a medal for that."

"It wasn't your fault," reminded Mike.

"I know," replied Adam. "It was God's will."

"What do you want me to tell the Mayor?" asked Councilman Stafford, resigned that the plumber wasn't going to change his mind. "The Mayor was depending on this occasion to give an important speech. He's been working on it for the past two days. It's reelection year, and he needs every opportunity to present his agenda to the public that he can get." Councilman Dan Stafford had inadvertently let slip the true motive behind the banquet and ceremony. The Mayor wanted the attention it would not only give to Twin Yucca, but also to himself.

"Tell the mayor that I'm sorry, but I can't accept this kind gesture," replied Adam, more firmly than ever.

Mike walked the councilman to the door. As he returned to the counter, Mike observed his uncle looking at the burn scars on his hands.

"Dan Stafford didn't understand, but I hope you do," said Adam. "I did everything I could that night, but God didn't permit me to save the other girl. It was God's will, and I accept it. Do you understand?"

"But, what's so terrible about a medal?" asked Mike.

Adam dropped the subject. His nephew didn't understand. Mike didn't realize that every time his uncle glimpsed his burn scars or remembered the tragic night, that his faith was being tested. In Adam's dreams, he could still see the young woman's face as her eyes locked upon his through the flames of the burning car. It took faith to take those terrible memories and say, "Thy will be done." He found that it took more courage to live with the memory of that night than in the actual rescue, itself.

The fact that Mike didn't comprehend what his uncle was going through, somehow distanced the two. Immediately after the car wreck, Adam seemed to be totally at peace with that night's events, but lately, Mike sometimes sensed a change. And yet, the nephew had only brief glimpses of disquietness, so he half thought he was imagining something that wasn't there.

"Did you hear the joke about the plumber and the doctor?" asked Adam, hoping to lighten the atmosphere before they parted for the weekend.

"No," grinned Mike, happy that his uncle was acting more like himself again.

"A sink backed up in a doctor's house, so he called a plumber," related Adam. "The plumber came and fixed the problem. When the plumber was done, he handed the doctor a large bill. The doctor exclaimed, 'This is incredible! Even I don't make that much as a doctor!' The plumber replied sympathetically, 'Neither did I when I was a doctor!'"

"I'll have to remember that one when a customer remarks about the size of the bill!" laughed Mike.

"Be honest in your work, otherwise, that joke won't be funny," replied Adam. Even in laughter, Adam was always careful not to laugh at sin, for only "fools make a mock at sin." He strove to please God in all things; this he took into consideration before all else.

"Yesterday, Sandra's Dad asked me how much money I make," informed Mike.

"What did you tell him?"

"I told Mr. Weston I'm an apprentice and make an apprentice's wage."

"Are you seeing Sandra tonight?" inquired Adam.

"Yup," replied Mike, locking the door and tossing the keys to his uncle.

"Have you told your mother about her, yet?"

"Not yet," replied Mike.

"In this town, gossip spreads like wildfire," warned Adam.

"It's no big deal," shrugged Mike, "I just haven't gotten around to it."

"You want your mother to hear the truth from you first, before the neighbors give her their version of your love life, don't you?" asked Adam.

"Mom knows not to believe gossip about me," refuted Mike.

"When the neighbors know something that the parent does not, it looks like you're hiding something," said Adam.

"You've warned me before," replied Mike. "I promise, I'll be careful!"

"It's your life," conceded Adam, throwing up his hands to show he was letting go. "I just don't want to see you get hurt."

Mike smiled, warmly. It was a demonstration of the near father-son relationship they shared.

"Constance and I are dining out tonight, so when you see your mother, tell her not to make me another tuna casserole," said Adam, walking to the old white van.

"Just be grateful you missed out on Mom's broccoli surprise!" laughed Mike.

"See you in church!" And with that, they parted ways.

Vera had never learned to drive, and she was now at the age where she feared it was too late to ever begin. This wouldn't be particularly important, if it weren't for the fact that the nearest retail outlet was in Palm Springs-- a distance much too far for anyone to walk. Because of this, Vera found herself calling up friends who had transportation. To her dismay, no one was available.

When prospects looked the bleakest, Mrs. Jacobs, their neighbor from across the street, knocked on the Overholt's front door. She had just received a phone call from one of the women Vera had phoned earlier, and was here to volunteer. Mrs. Jacobs said she was willing to spend the entire day, if needed, driving Vera and her granddaughter around Palm Springs. Vera

immediately accepted Mrs. Jacobs help, and explained to her why they needed to buy new clothes for Chuck. She went into detail the difficulties her son was having. Charlie was amazed at how unabashed Vera treated their family problems. Was nothing sacred?

Charlie wished, dearly, that her Grandma had gotten someone else, for Mrs. Jacobs was continually spreading "dirt" about others. She was not the only gossip in Twin Yucca, by far. Nearly half the population were retired elderly, spending their golden years in a "desert paradise." Unfortunately, the retired citizens of this town didn't seem to have anything else better to do than to talk about the private matters of others. Don't misunderstand, all people over sixty aren't incurable gossips-- that's unfair and untrue. With that said, to the shame of Twin Yucca, gossip was a recognized pastime.

Against Charlie's wishes, Vera and Mrs. Jacobs decided that Chuck would be better off at Mullen-Overholt with Jerome, than to drag him all over Palm Springs with them.

"Why can't I stay home with Daddy?" reasoned Charlie, wishing Mrs. Jacobs would leave the room while she and her grandma discussed what to do with Chuck.

"He'll be fine with Jerome," insisted Vera. "There's no need for you to stay, when you can go."

Charlie was about to state that there was no reason to go when she could stay, when Mrs. Jacobs interrupted with, "Vera knows best, dear." It sounded more like a reproof than anything else. In truth, Mrs. Jacobs appeared to be irritated that Charlie was refusing the sacrifice she was making-- in her presence. Ungracious child!

Vera made some light excuse for Charlie's behavior, obviously embarrassed. Seeing that she was only making matters more unpleasant than they already were, Charlie gave in. She tried to remind herself that Chuck would be looked after at Mullen-Overholt. After all, it wasn't as if she were abandoning him.

Mullen-Overholt Nursing Home was not where Chuck particularly wanted to be, especially since he wasn't himself today. But, like it or not, want it or not, this was where he had to be. (Charlie was experiencing a similar sensation.) Jerome, who was not in the humor to keep his brother company, let Chuck wander the facility as though he were a resident.

As he walked past a vacant room with beds, Chuck noticed that one of the beds wasn't empty. An old woman reading her Bible looked up and smiled. It was Ruth Clark.

"Would you like for me to read to you?" she asked, in a kind voice. Chuck entered the room and sat down in a nearby chair.

"Remember the word unto thy servant, upon which Thou hast caused me to hope. This is my comfort in my affliction: for Thy Word hath quickened me," read Ruth.

The peaceful words and the steady sound of Ruth's voice, put Chuck at ease. The calmer he became, the easier it was to think clearly. Agitation had made his confusion worse. When he calmed down, the Alzheimer's was easier to bear. The longer Ruth read, the more placid Chuck became.

"Just look at these prices!" lamented Vera.

"Isn't it terrible?" concurred Mrs. Jacobs, shaking her head, as they passed a rack of mens' clothing.

"I just don't know what Jerome is going to say about all this," sighed Vera.

"Times are hard for everyone, right now," admitted Mrs. Jacobs. "My stock broker says he thinks we're going to see a recession next year."

"I didn't buy anything that Chuck didn't absolutely need," continued Vera, trying to rationalize spending so much money without her son's pre-approval.

Just then, an animated group of teenage girls walked by. Charlie recognized Jenna Hanna in the group and smiled a friendly hello. Jenna whispered something to the other girls, and they laughed. After a few gawks at the Overholt girl, the group continued on their way.

"Isn't that one of your friends from school?" asked Mrs. Jacobs. "Jenna goes to the same school as you," she stated firmly, as if Charlie was about to deny it.

"Yes, I think that was Jenna," replied Charlie, as casually as she could. What made them so rude, now? Hadn't they been friendly to her, just yesterday? Charlie tried to pretend that her feelings hadn't been hurt, but they were.

"And how do you like your new school?" pursued Mrs. Jacobs.

"It's all right, I guess," replied Charlie, trying to be as vague as possible.

"Oh!" exclaimed Vera. "It completely slipped my mind! You start school next Monday, don't you?"

"So?" shrugged Charlie, who couldn't understand why her grandma was suddenly getting so excited.

"School clothes, child," explained Mrs. Jacobs.

"What's Jerome going to say!" repeated Vera. "I've already spent more than I dare!"

"Now, Vera," said Mrs. Jacobs, "calm yourself. You are one of my best friends, and you know I will do anything I possibly can for those less fortunate than myself. My sister in Topeka has been collecting clothing for charity. I'm sure we can find something for Charlie. I'll phone her just as soon as we get home, that's what I'll do. There, there, Vera, everything will work out, you just see!"

"Thank you, Gloria," replied Vera, accepting a hug from Mrs. Jacobs.

"It's really no trouble. She was planning to give it to charity, anyway. Now, why don't we have lunch? I know this darling little place..."

It was dusk when the trio arrived back in Twin Yucca. While Charlie went to retrieve her father in Mullen-Overholt, Mrs. Jacobs made Vera promise to bring the family, (including Jerome, if he wasn't busy), over for dinner, that evening. Vera declined, saying dinner would be too great an imposition; she had already done them a great service. However, Mrs. Jacobs would hear none of it.

As Mrs. Jacobs pulled up in front of the Overholt house, Charlie and her father learned that they had been invited over to dinner at her house across the street.

"Chuck, I hope you're feeling well enough to come," said Mrs. Jacobs. "I've spent the entire day with your beautiful daughter, and am looking forward to your company, as well."

"Thank you," replied Chuck, getting out of the car with Vera and Charlie. "I'm sure I can make it."

Once inside, Vera immediately fell upon the task of unpacking Chuck's new clothes from the shopping bags, careful to remove every tag and label before it went into the wash. Charlie

wanted to go take a shower and cleanse away the day, but now seemed like the perfect time to have that talk with her father. He was in good mental condition, and even smiling-- something Charlie hadn't seen him do all day.

"Daddy? I have something to tell you," asked Charlie, as Chuck sat down on the living room sofa to hear what his daughter was going to say.

"Don't take too long, you two," shouted Vera from across the house. "Gloria is expecting us at seven!"

"Okay, Mom!" Chuck called back. "Now, what is it you wanted to tell me, Sweetheart?"

When Charlie told him of her good news, Chuck's eyes widened with surprise.

"How-- when did this happen?" stammered Chuck, the questions coming quicker than he had time to put them into words.

"It was Adam, Daddy," replied Charlie. She went into detail the night she accepted Christ into her life. She told him of how Adam had prayed for her salvation; she related the lesson of the Chaparral Yucca and its moth; there wasn't anything Charlie left out.

Chuck listened, astounded that this good news was actually true. Although he had been praying and hoping, he hadn't expected it this soon. Secretly, he thought it a sign from God that he didn't have much time left before the Alzheimer's Disease would take away his mind. Somehow, miraculously, God had reached his little girl-- and while he could still praise Him for doing it! To Chuck, this was the most important thing he had to resolve before his illness progressed much further. Charlie's salvation was the best news he could have had. For a few minutes, all he could say was, "Thank you, Jesus!" His eyes filled with tears as he hugged his daughter.

"Daddy," said Charlie, her face beaming with joy, "it was truly the happiest night of my life!"

Mike and Sandra ate dinner at a tiny Italian restaurant in Yucca Valley, while Adam and Constance opted for Jalbert's, one of the more upscale restaurants in Palm Desert. At Jalbert's you could only get a table if you had made a reservation at least three days in advance.

Even though the Master Plumber spent most of his time in very unglamorous places, he was not out of place at Jalbert's. Looking handsome in his dress suit, he and Constance made a striking pair.

Miss Riley's shoulder-length blonde hair was arranged in an elegant French braid, complimenting her black evening dress. Everything about her appearance was meticulous. A cell phone rested face down on the white linen tablecloth beside her glass, a sign that even though she was not currently at work, this real estate broker was always on call. Tonight, they were celebrating her recent promotion.

"How was your day?" asked Adam, finishing a serving of Raspberry Linzer Torte.

"The Morton's have finally decided to buy," answered Constance, "which is a big relief. I told them the Grant house was perfect for them. It was within their price range, the style suited their taste perfectly, and the neighborhood couldn't have been better."

"Good," replied Adam.

"Mrs. Morton was ready to make the commitment, but Mr. Morton was excessively cautious. Not that I blame him-- buying the right house is an extremely important decision, but he couldn't be convinced that this really was a good deal. I must have showed them fifteen or sixteen houses, but I knew all the time that the Grant house was for them."

"And it was," concurred Adam, good-humoredly, for he had no information on the matter, whatever.

"It was very gratifying," continued Constance. "You really have to have an instinct about people in this business, and listen to not only what they say, but what they mean. Henry carries around a beeper and a cell phone with him when he goes to meet his clients. Can you imagine? I keep telling him, 'you've got to focus on the needs of your clients, when you're with them.' A cell phone at a meeting says you're not 100% there."

"I heard a great joke today," spoke up Adam, in a laughing grin. "There was this doctor who had broken pipe..."

"Excuse me," interrupted Constance, picking up her ringing cell phone, "this won't take but a minute."

As Constance talked, Adam glanced at his watch.

"I know Mr. Morton, but the building inspector gave the Grant house a clean bill of health," Constance was saying.

By the time Mrs. Jacobs served dessert, Chuck was falling asleep in his chair. Charlie quickly ate her small serving of cheesecake, eager to leave as soon as possible. The two women talked a little more, and then Vera announced that it was time to go. Chuck awoke from his slumber and thanked Mrs. Jacobs for everything she had done for them, that day.

"If you ever need anything, let me know," replied Mrs. Jacobs. "I happened to be free today," she quickly added, so everyone would get the impression that her offer was limited. "Now, Vera, I got in touch with my sister in Topeka, and she's going to send me all the young girl's clothing that she's collected for charity. I'll bring it right over the minute it arrives!" Vera thanked her, and after Chuck nudged his daughter, Charlie did likewise.

"I hate false charity," observed the teenager, as the family crossed the street to their home.

Miss Charlie Overholt was baptized at church the next day. It was glorious confirmation to Chuck that God would take care of his little girl.

"Though I bestow ALL my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

~ 1 Corinthians 13:3 ~

"Blessed be the LORD God... I [Chuck] being in the way, the LORD led me."

~ Genesis 24:27 ~

"Thy children [Charlie] shall be taught of the LORD; and great shall be the peace of thy children."

~ Isaiah 54:13 ~

"Behold, I [God] will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, even a marvellous work and a wonder."

~ Isaiah 29:14 ~

Chapter Twenty-two

The Caregiving Heart

"And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing."

~ 1 Corinthians 13:3 ~

"Do you like school?" asked Jerome, trying to pass the time as he drove Charlie to her first full day of school in Joshua Tree.

"I do, when I get good grades," smiled Charlie.

Since the other two members of the Overholt family were either unable or unsure about getting behind the wheel, Jerome was left holding the bag-- at least, that's the way he felt about the matter. Yes, he had wanted Charlie to have a good education in a private school; yes, he had to admit that there wasn't one in Twin Yucca! Even so, Jerome felt unfairly pressed into service! The idea of being duty-bound to drive all those miles, to and from school, every single day, made him ill-tempered.

Unlike her uncle, Charlie was in better spirits. Even though she had witnessed Jerome's caustic side a few days previous, she was optimistic that maybe they might get to be good friends. She had never had an uncle until recently, and was looking forward to having a family relationship with her father's older brother. By the look on Jerome's face right now, she knew this was not very likely, but she was willing to give him as much benefit of the doubt as she could muster.

Jerome's sedan dipped as they drove through a dry wash on the road.

"Do you know what line of work you want to go into when you graduate?" he asked, preparing himself for the typical teenage answer of, "I don't know."

"Well," replied Charlie, thoughtfully, "I was going to become a dentist; I was going to take college prep curriculum in high school, major in biology when I attended college, apply to dental school, and do at least one year of residency after I graduate before going into practice." Jerome was pleasantly surprised. His niece had planned her future in accordance to what it would take to achieve her final goal of becoming a dentist.

"You sound like you know exactly what you want out of life," he replied.

"I even started learning Latin because I would need to understand scientific terms in both college and dental school," continued Charlie. "But, with Daddy the way he is, I think I'm going to give that dream up."

"Why?"

"Because, I'd have to have a minimum of five years in college, followed by at least four years in dental school, then a year or two in residency; I can't possibly take care of Daddy and attend classes at the same time. And that's not even counting the many hours I would have to dedicate to studies!"

"Is there any money in dentistry?" ventured Jerome, hating to see this bright "A" student give up a promising future just to care for her father.

"Beginning salary is around a hundred thousand dollars," replied Charlie, "but it doesn't matter, anymore. I'm changing my plans."

"What if," suggested Jerome, "I put Chuck into a nursing home while you attended college and dental school? Then, you could pursue your career without any hindrance."

"I'm going to take care of Daddy!" replied Charlie, resolutely. She tried to hide her shock, from Jerome. How could he even suggest putting Chuck into one of those "death houses?"-- just so she wouldn't be saddled with the responsibility!

Jerome's pencil-mouth spread wide across his face; he was amused by his niece's defiance.

"So, you want to care for your Daddy for the rest of his unnatural life, do you?" he mocked. "You realize, it's my decision when and where Chuck is placed, and not yours." This was true.

Charlie's first impulse was to argue with him over this. But, she sensed that there was a stubborn defiance in him that would only bare down and grow stronger when met with resistance. Charlie didn't know it, but it was the same realization Adam had come to, the first time he had tried to witness to her.

"I want to be useful to the people I love," pleaded Charlie. "I know I can do it. It won't be easy, but I'm determined!"

"That's sound reasoning," Jerome replied, snidely.

"You think I should pursue dentistry, instead?" asked Charlie, fighting to remain calm.

"Money answers all things," retorted Jerome, in the affirmative.

"It doesn't answer love, does it? I want more out of life than just legal tender-- I want happiness!"

"You're going to find happiness as a caregiver?" mocked Jerome. "You've a lot to learn about life, Charlie."

"I realize that," replied the girl. "But, if I became a dentist at the expense of Daddy's health and well being, I can guarantee that it wouldn't make me happy! Besides, surely you're happiest when you're helping others. That's one reason why I wanted to become a dentist, in the first place! If I really wanted to help others, I'd be willing to do it whether it paid well, or not!"

"Self-sacrifice doesn't ensure happiness," replied Jerome, firmly.

"You sound like you know from experience," observed Charlie.

"I've been in the health care industry for twenty years, and the only happiness I've ever fancied myself possessing was derived from work executed in a professional manner. Happiness is a mirage, Charlie; it's all dry sand."

Oh, Jerome! What happened to the man who was going to make a difference? After the first few years of youthful zeal, you had no delusion of reforming health care, on the whole, but, in part, you did think you could change it for the better; to leave it in better condition than when you found it. Do you remember, Jerome? Alas! you set out to change the industry, but without the love of God, the industry has changed you.

Charlie, your dream of helping others has become to mean much more than the "do-gooderism" of your past. It is now a rooted belief that true Christianity helps his neighbor, and carries one another's burdens. Yes, this is what it means to "fulfil the law of Christ"!

Since Vera had to be near her husband, and Chuck was unable to remain home alone, he found himself in the Recreation Room of Mullen-Overholt. To have something to do, he brought along his family album, in the hopes of conversing with some of the others. As the album was passed from person to person, the interested residents talked about their families. Some of them were falling asleep in their wheelchairs, while others related experiences of raising their own children.

The oldest resident at Mullen-Overholt was Mrs. Goldie Cook, who at ninety-seven, could remember her childhood on the plains of Topeka, just forty-four years after it became the capitol of Kansas. She could still recall the stories her mother had passed down to her of how runaway slaves bound north on the underground railroad were hidden there in Topeka by abolitionists.

Goldie had outlived all her friends and relations, and was now waiting for "the Good Lord to gather me up to the Promised Land." She joked that she had been waiting since 1975.

Some days, her mind would slip, and she would plead to be taken back to her home in Yucca Valley, (which had long since been sold). A hug from a kind face, and a few gentle words usually served to calm her down. Today, Goldie was her normal, intelligent self.

"I didn't have any girls," Goldie was telling Chuck, "only boys. God knows Cecil and I tried for a girl, but it just wasn't meant to be.

I was fifteen when the Great War ended in 1918. I married Cecil the year after and we had Frank the year after that. George came along in '23. The year America entered World War II, George turned eighteen.

When both of my babies joined the army, I was terrified. Cecil was glowing with pride. I was so angry with him for encouraging them to join. George was killed in Normandy, but Frank came back home to us and married a nice girl.

Cecil and I had some hard times, but mostly, it was good. I thought nothing could be harder than losing George, but I didn't know how wrong I would be. I'm ninety-seven, and I've buried two sons, a husband, and a daughter-in-law. But, I know I'll see all of them again in heaven, so that comforts me."

The conversation then turned to their children's first steps, first words, and early accomplishments.

"Charlie was early at nearly every stage," recalled Chuck. "Her first word was 'umbrella.' At five, she took it upon herself to start recycling our trash.

When Pumpkin was seven, she boycotted a certain tuna company until they used Dolphin-Safe nets. When she started eating tuna again, I asked her if it had been worth it. She replied, 'It worked, didn't it?'

At ten, Charlie became a vegetarian, which totally took me by surprise. She said the conditions in which animals were raised to be later slaughtered for human consumption, was not only inhumane, but also unhealthy. All I knew, was that this meant that if I wanted a hamburger, I would have to visit a drive-through!

At thirteen, when other girls her age were consumed by thoughts of the opposite sex, she was raising money from door to door donations to help a homeless shelter!

I don't know what cause she'll take up next, but Charlie has always had the ability to surprise her father!" smiled Chuck, not realizing he was to be her next cause.

Soon it was lunchtime, and everyone had to take their medications, injections, etc. Chuck stayed out of the way by working a crossword puzzle in Jerome's living quarters behind the Administrator's office.

Charlie found the curriculum at Galilee Christian School harder than the public schools she had just come from in Montana and North Carolina. Even so, she felt confident that with a few weeks of catch-up studying, she would overtake the rest of the student body in the tenth grade. Maybe then, the principal would place her back in the eleventh, where Charlie felt she belonged.

When lunchtime rolled around, Charlie found herself eating alone. Had she unknowingly done something to make everyone avoid her like the plague? She wondered why Jenna Hanna had treated her so rudely at the mall on Saturday. Did this have something to do with that?

Jenna's kinder twin, Kendra, took the new girl aside and explained that one of the others had said that they had heard from someone else, that Charlie was hanging out with "Mad" Maggie at the bus stop; that Charlie's father was going mad, and that she would go mad, too. There was even a rumor going around that Chuck's disease was contagious! Charlie could refute the first rumor, but the last two were harder to dismiss with any certainty. When confronted by the ignorance of others, she had to admit that she knew little about Early Onset Alzheimer's Disease, herself.

After school, Jerome dutifully picked up his niece. Since he was still in bad temper, Charlie assumed that this was always the way he was.

"Uncle Jerome," asked Charlie, on the drive back to Twin Yucca, "am I going to get Alzheimer's Disease?"

"How do I know?" responded Jerome.

"Did you know Daddy would get it?" continued Charlie, undaunted by her uncle's coldness.

"Of course not," he replied.

"Is there any way to find out for sure if you're going to get it next?" she asked. When a close relative becomes affected by AD, the first reaction is condolence; the second is fear of being next. Jerome was well acquainted with these emotions-- better than he wanted to be.

"You ask too many questions," responded Jerome, sharply.

"Is Alzheimer's Disease contagious?" she asked. She had to know, ill-temper or not.

"You get Alzheimer's Disease because of bad luck, or because of bad genes," answered Jerome. "It's not the flu!"

"Grandma said that Great-Grandpa Overholt had Alzheimer's Disease. Did he give it to Grandpa through his genes?"

"Probably," Jerome replied, hesitating to be more definite than that. "About five percent of AD cases are thought to be familial. Researchers have been after me for years to be tested for the gene that causes Alzheimer's, but I keep turning them down. If I have it, I don't want to know."

Charlie was quiet. She thought of the plans she had made for her future, and wondered if she might want to know what lay ahead. Then she considered her father, and wondered if she might want to know how best to prepare for his future care by knowing if she would be next, or not. If she became affected with Alzheimer's, how could she take care of her Daddy? But, that was IF she had this gene her uncle was talking about. Such foreknowledge had the power to change her plans, both immediate and future. She didn't WANT to know, but Charlie felt she HAD to know. Secretly, she began to make plans to find out more about this test, and more about the disease, itself. These decisions required a kind of bravery that Jerome did not possess.

Chuck was waiting for his daughter when they reached home. He asked Charlie how she liked the school and if she had made any friends, yet. Charlie realized that she had two choices: either be candid and tell him that the kids at school didn't want to be around her because they thought AD was contagious, or, she could shrug it off. Charlie chose the latter.

"I plan on returning, tomorrow," she laughed.

Chuck was satisfied; his daughter was saved and attending a Christian school. He could face his own future with the assurance that his Pumpkin was on the Right Road.

Before Charlie dove into her school studies, she wanted to settle some unfinished business, first. It had to be done! Someone simply had to put an end to this foolishness, once and for all! Walking into town, Charlie passed Logan's Garden Nursery, Megan's Blinds and Draperies, Dean Electric, Clark Plumbing Service and Supply, and straight to the bus stop where "Mad" Maggie Downen frequented.

Sure enough, the woman was waiting at the beat up bus stop, complete with her Dairy Cream cap, and all. Maggie greeted her pleasantly.

"Are you waiting for the bus, too?" asked Maggie.

"They're making fun of you. You know that, don't you?" asked Charlie, folding her arms in an assertive posture.

"They?" asked the woman, bewildered by Charlie's directness. This was something she was unused to. People either made fun of her behind her back, or they treated her as though she were too stupid to understand what they were saying about her.

"'They' is everyone in Twin Yucca!" answered Charlie, indignantly. "I don't believe you're as 'Mad' as everyone says you are, but you're sure not helping yourself by waiting at this bus stop every day!"

"But," responded Maggie, "I have to!"

"Why?" demanded Charlie.

"I have to wait for Wayne!" cried the woman.

"Wayne isn't coming back," explained Charlie, softening her stance.

"How do you know?" replied Maggie, her voice teetering on frustration.

"Because he's dead," reasoned Charlie.

"He is not!" retorted Maggie.

"How do you know?" asked Charlie.

"Well," she hesitated, "because."

"Because what?"

"Just because," confirmed Maggie, nodding her head in a knowing way.

Charlie sighed. How could she make Maggie realize that she was waiting for someone to come who was never going to return, on a bus that no longer even stopped at this stop, any longer?

"Wayne is coming back," affirmed Maggie, showing Charlie a small, silver plated bracelet she was wearing. It read, "Wayne James Downen, Missing In Action, March 10, 1969. 'Return with honor.'"

"But," said Charlie, confused by the discrepancy of stories, "I thought Wayne shot himself while having a nightmare. This bracelet says he's missing in action." She looked to Maggie for an answer.

"Wayne didn't shoot himself," replied the woman. "His friends were caught in an ambush. He carried two of them to safety after they had been hit. After he returned to help the others, he wasn't seen again."

"They never found his body?" asked Charlie. Maggie shook her head, solemnly. The story Charlie had heard at school was flawed in its accuracy, at best. Maggie had been waiting for her brother to return from a war that, evidently for her, had never truly ended, while the people of Twin Yucca gossiped and spread stories about her until the truth was unrecognizable. This injustice only made Charlie's resolve to help her, grow stronger.

"Look," began Charlie, "no bus stops here, anymore. If Wayne comes back, it's for certain that he won't get off at this bus stop."

"But they make fun of me when I wait at the other ones," replied Maggie.

"Secondly," said Charlie, seeing that there were actual reasons why Maggie was doing as she was, "I'm sure Wayne appreciates the fact that you keep his cause alive, but I'd imagine he wouldn't want you to wait at this bus stop, instead of living your life." Maggie looked at her expectantly.

"Then what do I do?" she asked.

It had never occurred to anyone that Maggie might be there because she felt there was no other place to go. Not that she was homeless-- but friendless.

"Well," stammered Charlie, trying to think of an answer to such a simple question, "why don't you do volunteer work, or something?" Maggie was hoping that this new found friend who had taken an interest in her, would make some kind of an offer, or something that would include her in Charlie's life. She was ready to leave the bus stop forever. "I guess you can come to dinner," conceded Charlie. "You can volunteer to help me with the dishes."

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

~ Jude 22 ~

Over dinner, Charlie learned that Maggie worked at Dairy Cream part time, that her parents had lived in Twin Yucca since she was little, that she was unable to graduate from High School, and that Charlie was the first real friend she had since a childhood girlfriend of hers went away six years ago. The delicate way Maggie had said, "went away" gave Charlie the impression that her previous friend had died.

Chuck received Charlie's guest warmly, though he was puzzled why his daughter had invited her.

Vera was glad to let Charlie and Maggie fix dinner and clean the dishes, but she didn't appreciate the fact that Charlie was befriending a city outcast; and, Maggie was more than twice Charlie's age. She should be making friends with other teenagers, and not grown women with slow ways. What would their across-the-street neighbor, Mrs. Jacobs, say?

After the dinner dishes were finished, and the food had been put away, Charlie excused herself from everyone, including her guest. She had to retire to her room for some intense studying. To Charlie's great surprise, Maggie followed her into the bedroom.

"I have to study now," explained Charlie, politely. She hoped Maggie would take the hint and leave, but she didn't! She was like a stray puppy who had found someone to befriend it. "Aren't your parents going to miss you?" asked Charlie.

"I called Dad and told him where I was," replied Maggie, taking a look around. "You don't have much stuff," she observed. "I have pink walls and a canopy bed, and a collection of old dolls. Do you collect dolls?" Maggie was trying the teenager's patience. Charlie hadn't went to the bus stop to find a new best friend-- or had she?

Jerome snorted smugly at his opponent. His castle had just defeated Adam's bishop, and now was within striking distance of his knight.

"Did you know Arnold has a bedsore?" asked Adam, advancing a pawn forward one square.

"Arnold who?" asked Jerome, his attention on the game before him.

"Your father," hinted Adam. "You know, the man who showed up at mealtime and sat at the head of your table?"

"Yes, yes, what about him?" exclaimed Jerome, impatiently.

"He has a nasty looking bedsore," replied the plumber.

"What am I supposed to do about it?" snapped Jerome. "I'm not a nurse!"

"I naturally thought you would want to know how he was doing," replied Adam, harmlessly.

"Anyone would think you're the DON [Director of Nursing]," sneered Jerome.

"How long do you think it will be when Chuck begins to manifest the same symptoms as Arnold?" asked Adam. It was more than mere idle curiosity; he was concerned, as Chuck's friend, to know what was going to happen next.

"You, too?" groaned the Administrator.

"What do you mean?" asked Adam, moving his queen out of reach from Jerome's remaining castle.

"Charlie wouldn't shut up today," replied Jerome. "She kept asking questions about AD, and would she be next, and other such nonsense."

"It's only natural for a child to be concerned about their parent," reminded Adam.

"Did you know that she's going to throw away a promising career, just to take care of her father?" asked Jerome incredulously. Adam was about to repeat his last statement, when Jerome continued. "The little lady acts like I'm made of money!"

"You think she should help pay Chuck's expenses?" inquired Adam.

"Well, she's not planning on it any time soon," scoffed Jerome.

"Maybe Charlie is trying to help in the best way she knows," suggested Adam, purposefully moving his queen into Jerome's path. "So, she was willing to sacrifice her own interests for her father, huh?"

"Ah-ha!" cried Jerome triumphantly. "You've lost her highness! Now I can capture your king!"

"You win again," conceded Adam.

"But thou, O man of God... follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, [and] love..."

~ 1 Timothy 6:11 ~

"Have respect unto the covenant: for the dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of cruelty."

~ Psalms 74:20 ~

Chapter Twenty-three

Mike's Birthday

"Casting all your care upon Him [God]; for He careth for you."

~ 1 Peter 5:7 ~

"Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and He shall sustain thee: He shall never suffer the righteous to be moved."

~ Psalms 55:22 ~

Mrs. Shirley Garner entered Clark Plumbing Service and Supply and greeted Mike as she walked to the office.

"What are you doing here, Mom?" asked Mike, setting down the journal he had been studying for the California Journeyman Plumber License exam.

"Where's your uncle?" asked Shirley.

"In the office."

"Go back to your studies," smiled Shirley. When she found Adam, his head was cocked over the back of the chair, his feet were on the desk, and he was fast asleep.

"You're not supposed to take naps in the daytime," reminded Shirley, shaking her brother by the foot to wake him up. Adam opened his eyes wearily, and sat up straight in his chair.

"Hi, Sis," he yawned.

"No wonder you can't sleep at night!" scolded Shirley. "You're supposed to adhere to your schedule!"

"I know, I know," replied Adam.

"I don't understand why you can't go to bed and sleep at bedtime like everyone else! It's not difficult to do when you stick to a routine!"

Adam shrugged it off. He had long ago given up trying to explain to his sister that sometimes all the schedules, the staying awake during daylight hours, the sleeping pills, the midnight walks, and all of her good intentions were not enough to give him a good sound sleep. When he

couldn't sleep, he couldn't sleep! And when he couldn't sleep, Shirley's concerned hovering only served to make it worse. It was easier to agree with her than to excite Shirley's motherly sensibilities.

Even though he was older than her by one year, Shirley was the protective "big" sister who always knew what was best for her brother. Since their childhood, it had always been this way.

"What brings you here?" he asked, hoping to divert the subject.

"Saturday is Mike's birthday, and I thought we might have a barbecue party at the house," suggested Shirley.

"That's right," muttered Adam. "I forgot it was in September. How old this year?"

"Twenty-six," sighed Shirley. "It doesn't seem possible, does it?"

"They do grow up fast," conceded Adam.

"I thought I would invite a few friends and neighbors-- nothing big, just a small party," continued Shirley.

"That's nice," he replied, scribbling a note to get Mike a birthday present. "May I bring a friend or two?"

"Constance is always welcome," replied Shirley.

"Actually, I was thinking of inviting Chuck and his daughter," answered Adam. "That is, if it's all right with you."

Shirley was disappointed. Just as she was certain Adam was messing up his life with this sleep deficiency nonsense, she was positive that Constance was the right woman for her brother. For many years, Shirley had thought he needed a wife, and that Constance was the perfect mate for him. In fact, it was Shirley who had introduced them to each other.

"Why don't you two get married?" suggested Shirley, as if this were the first time she had brought up the subject. "Constance is beautiful, intelligent, loyal, trustworthy..."

"Sis, you make her sound like a dog!" laughed Adam.

"I'm only trying to say, you're never going to find anyone better suited to you than Constance," reiterated Shirley. "Why don't you ask her to marry you?"

"I'm not ready for marriage."

"You've been seeing each other for eight years!" Shirley exclaimed. "Is it going to take another eight before you propose?"

Adam didn't have an answer.

"Very well," she replied, throwing up her hands in disgust, "have your own way! But, if you wind up alone in your old age, don't say I didn't warn you!"

"May I bring them?" he repeated.

"Bring the entire neighborhood!" replied Shirley, dramatically. She gave her brother a loving hug, which he returned in good humor. He considered her interference to be interference, but understood that it came from a loving and caring heart.

For the next few days, whenever Jerome dropped off his niece at home from school, Maggie could be found waiting for her on the front steps. She followed Charlie around the house getting underfoot; she talked when Charlie studied, and ate dinner at the Overholt house almost every night!

What made circumstances even more difficult for her was that Charlie had been reading books about Alzheimer's Disease in her spare time. She waded through various descriptions of dementia, digested the progression of the disease, pondered what she could expect, struggled through medical jargon concerning AD and heredity, and tried to memorize helpful suggestions that others had found useful in their experience with the disease. The culmination of all this material had a depressing effect on Charlie. She learned that while AD was not contagious, it could be inherited (just as Jerome had confirmed). The fact that only five percent of AD is familial, had little comfort for her. She remembered how many members of the Overholt family had the disease. Charlie also learned from the books that emotional or physical distress may quicken the progress of the disease. She made a mental note never to tell her father about Darren Hayes, or that terrible night. His life must be as carefree as possible.

The certainty of doom that the Alzheimer's books predicted, kept pulling Charlie's spirits down. It was a struggle between faith and the seeming certainty of sight. The thought to ask someone for spiritual help crossed her mind more than once, but the pastor of their church was away, and

he didn't even live in Twin Yucca! She thought about talking to her father, but the caution that emotional distress could hasten the AD, kept her from it. The teachers and faculty members at school didn't feel close enough to confide in, so she remained silent.

Then there was Adam. Ever since her conversion, she had shied away from him. The fact that such a personal and private event had been shared by Adam Clark, made her feel embarrassed. She couldn't explain to herself why, but it did.

Charlie was a new Christian, and a teenager who had suddenly found herself with a great deal of responsibility thrust onto her shoulders. It would have been wiser if she had talked to someone, but she didn't. Charlie was unwittingly setting herself up for disaster. However, the most important person she didn't talk to was God. She said her prayers and read her Bible, but that alone was not enough. She did not cast her burden upon God and give it to Him. "Casting all your care upon Him; for He careth for you." (1 Peter 5:7) She was too busy trying to carry the burden, herself. And so the weight steadily grew, until the day before Mike's birthday.

Friday evening found Charlie doing her homework. Maggie, as usual, was talking about this and that, making conversation since her young friend remained silent.

"I had a favorite doll named Lucy," Maggie was saying, "and I went everywhere with her; I wouldn't go to school without her. One day, I couldn't find Lucy. Mom said it was time to go, but I couldn't leave without my dolly." The simple story briefly diverted Charlie's attention away from her homework.

"Did you ever find Lucy?" asked Charlie.

"Yes, I did," replied Maggie, surprised that Charlie had been listening. Charlie nodded and returned to her homework. "Don't you have any favorite dolls?" asked Maggie.

"I threw away mine when I was twelve," informed Charlie, in a grown-up voice.

"Oh," replied Maggie, remembering her large collection of dolls at home. "What DO you like?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" asked Charlie.

"Collecting pretty dolls is my favorite hobby. Don't you do anything that makes you happy like that?"

Charlie thought for a moment. "What classification of happiness are you speaking of?"

"Classification?" repeated Maggie, confused that her simple question had suddenly become so complicated.

"Do you mean falling-in-love-for-the-first-time happy, just-found-a-hundred-dollar-bill happy, or Wallace Shipley happy?"

"What's Wallace Shipley?"

"You mean to tell me, you don't know who Wallace Shipley is?" exclaimed Charlie, forgetting her homework. Maggie shook her head solemnly. The way Charlie was carrying on, this was obviously something important. "He is only the best solo pianist in the entire world!" informed Charlie, emphatically.

"Oh."

"Wallace Shipley's music always makes me happy," said the teenager.

"Oh," said Maggie. "I've never heard of him."

"I'd play you one of his CD's, but my CD player isn't working right now," said Charlie, returning to her homework. Suddenly, Maggie's face brightened.

"See you later!" she exclaimed, hurriedly leaving.

"I'm sure I will," thought Charlie, snidely. It was just one sinful thought, but it only takes one sin to block us from the peace and joy of God's abiding presence. For, "if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will NOT hear me."

Then, the Holy Spirit, Who's job it is to "reprove the world of sin," reproved Charlie's conscience. The reproof she felt made her angry. All this really was too much! She had been bravely enduring all the bad news about AD, only to have this "Mad Maggie" hanging around her neck all the time! After all she's had to put up with, didn't she have a right to complain? The Holy Spirit replied with a resounding, "NO!" but Charlie refused to listen.

This just wasn't about Maggie. In that one spiteful moment, Charlie had rebelled against all the trials and testings God had given her to endure. Instead of being able to reward Charlie with the desires of her heart, (the way God was longing to do), He had to chasten her, instead. "We are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world." (1 Corinthians 11:32)

In frustration, Charlie slammed her textbook shut. Her peace had departed. "Why was God making such a big deal out of this?" thought Charlie. She hadn't said it out loud! It wasn't as if she had actually hurt anyone's feelings! God was blowing this out of proportion!

Then, a still small voice, spoke to Charlie's conscience, saying, "as a woman thinketh in her heart, so is she."

Then Charlie remembered the many ways she hadn't tried to befriend Maggie, the simple little tokens that she hadn't done to make her feel welcome. This conviction sat heavily on her conscience. Her heart had spoken the ill feelings toward Maggie that she had been harboring.

Then the still, small voice whispered, "inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to Me."

Charlie opened her Bible. The first verse her eyes met read, "Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee." Charlie repented right there. She confessed her sin to God, and His peace returned to her, like the Faithful Friend that He is.

It is no small thing to have a conscience void of offence before God, but it is what God requires of us. "Herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men." (Acts 24:16)

Charlie immediately went to the living room and called Maggie's home. An older man's voice answered.

"May I speak to Maggie, please?" Charlie asked.

"She's not here," replied the voice, promptly hanging up the phone. Charlie sighed. She would have to wait to apologize to Maggie, later. Charlie wanted to be sure she had made things right between them.

It was time to check up on her father. Charlie found him busy at the kitchen table, working yet another crossword puzzle.

"What's an eight letter word for horse?" asked Chuck, using the tip of his pencil to count the blank spaces.

"Stallion," replied Charlie, not needing any time to reply. Chuck looked up at his daughter in mock indignation.

"Who's puzzle is this, anyway?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," laughed Charlie. "You asked!"

"Next time," said Chuck, "just give me a hint. I want to do things for myself as long as I can."

"O.K., Daddy," said Charlie getting an apple out of the refrigerator. "What have you done, today?"

"I visited Mullen-Overholt, and tidied the house," was his answer.

Lately, Chuck had taken to staying indoors, only venturing out of the house with Vera when she went to Mullen-Overholt, or to stroll around the neighborhood after the sun had gone down. This trend made Charlie uneasy. She hated to admit that her father was that affected by AD.

"I'm not going to the birthday party, tomorrow," announced Chuck, as Charlie peeled her apple with a paring knife.

"Why not?" she asked. Charlie had thought that since Adam had personally invited them, he would surely go; she knew how much her father admired the plumber.

"I haven't been doing too well in crowds, lately. All the people make me disoriented and confused."

"Well, I'm not going if you aren't," stated Charlie, matter-of-factly.

"Someone has to go and represent the Overholts," said Chuck.

"Besides, who'd give Mike his present?" asked Vera, walking into the kitchen.

"I hardly know anyone in Twin Yucca. They're all going to be strangers," pointed out Charlie. "Why don't you go, Grandma?"

"Adam knew I was going to be busy with Arnold on Saturday, that's why he didn't include me in the invitation in the first place," said Vera. "And what's this nonsense about strangers? You know Adam, and Mike, and Chad," reminded Vera. "Mrs. Garner does take some getting used to, but I think you'll like her."

"Maybe I could take Maggie along, so I don't have to face everyone alone," suggested Charlie.

"Maggie wasn't invited," said Vera. "You tell Mrs. Garner that your father couldn't make it. Do you understand?"

"Fine," conceded Charlie.

"What's the highest elevation in the world?" asked Chuck, counting the spaces with his pencil. "It's two words."

"I hope Mike likes the tie I picked out for him," said Vera.

"The second word rhymes with 'nest,' Daddy," hinted Charlie. "Grandma, couldn't we get Mike something else? A tie is the sort of gift you give someone when you don't know what else to give!"

"Aren't you going to give me the answer?" asked Chuck.

"Do you have a better idea?" asked Vera.

"I guess not, Grandma," she admitted. "Daddy, the last time I gave you the answer, you told me to only give you a hint," reminded Charlie.

"Then I take it back," answered Chuck, unable to remember.

"Be sure to wrap it in the paper I gave you, before you leave tomorrow," Vera instructed.

"What's the answer?" persisted Chuck.

"Mount Everest," sighed Charlie, taking the peeled apple to her room.

"It'll go fine, tomorrow, you'll see!" Vera hollered after her.

Early Saturday morning, Charlie called the Downens' house. Once again, an elderly man answered, and once again, the man rudely hung up. While she waited, Charlie got ready to go to Mike's birthday party. It wasn't until nine that Maggie's happy face appeared in Charlie's bedroom.

"Maggie," cried Charlie, "where have you been? I tried to call your house, but a man keeps saying you're not at home."

"That's Dad," replied Maggie. "He always says I'm not home, even when I am."

"Why?" asked Charlie.

"Sometimes, he has too much to drink," replied Maggie, carelessly.

"He doesn't hurt you, or anything, does he?"

"Not Dad," replied the woman.

"Maggie," began Charlie, "I want to apologize to you for the way I've been treating you. I'm very sorry."

"You haven't done anything," answered Maggie, puzzled.

"Then you're not mad at me?" asked Charlie.

Maggie laughed. "Sometimes I think you might be the slow one!" she giggled. "You haven't noticed that I've got a surprise behind my back!"

Charlie was relieved. She had not offended her friend.

"What have you got there?" Charlie asked, trying to sneak a peak behind her.

"Guess!" she shouted happily.

"A flower?" asked Charlie.

"No!" she giggled. "Guess, again!" Charlie went through a few more guesses, and was about to suggest to Maggie that she end the game, when Maggie put a small box into Charlie's hands. From the picture on the outside of the box, Charlie could see that it was a brand new CD player.

"Are you surprised?" Maggie asked.

"Maggie, you shouldn't have!" replied Charlie, in surprise. "You didn't sell your dolls to buy me this, did you?"

"No!" laughed Maggie. "I save all my money to buy dolls with." From the bits of information Charlie was able to piece together, she learned that Maggie had been working at Dairy Cream for several years. Since she lived at home, and her parents charged her nothing for room and board, she hoarded all her money to buy new dolls for her collection. It was a genuine act of love.

"Thank you, Maggie," said Charlie hugging the woman. "It's just what I wanted!"

The rest of the morning was spent on the floor, listening to Wallace Shipley CD's and eating some of the fresh chocolate chip cookies Vera had made the day before. Charlie was enjoying herself so much, that she even forgot to be nervous about Mike's birthday party.

Understanding that Charlie would be gone for most of the remainder of the day, Maggie returned home before lunchtime, a much happier woman.

Adam's white van arrived in front of the Overholt house a little after eleven thirty. Chuck walked his daughter outside and explained to Adam that he was unable to attend Mike's birthday party. Chuck opened the passenger door and Charlie got inside.

"Daddy, are you sure you don't want me to stay and keep you company?" suggested Charlie.

"I'll be with your Grandma," assured Chuck. "Go, have a good time!"

"She will, Chuck," said Adam. "I'll have her back around four." Chuck waved goodbye as the van drove away.

"Well, how have you been?" asked Adam. Charlie shrugged. "I haven't seen you around, lately," he observed. "Are you sure everything is all right?" Adam asked, his voice betraying concern.

"Why all the questions?" asked Charlie, trying not to become defensive. "Did you expect something bad to happen?"

"Not necessarily," replied Adam. Adam had expected Charlie to barrage him with questions concerning the Christian walk, and to pester him at the store at all hours, as Chuck had done. He had expressly asked Chuck if Charlie had been asking questions, or needed help. Chuck's only reply was that his daughter was doing very well, and needed little help. Adam wasn't sure what to think. However, since he didn't want to pry it out of her, and since Charlie wasn't

volunteering any information, the rest of the drive was dotted with polite comments about the weather.

Thomas and Shirley Garner lived in a spacious adobe house on the outskirts of Twin Yucca. It had been designed by Thomas in 1973, and was the topic of one of his how-to-books entitled, "Adobe Homes: From the Ground Up."

As the van pulled up to the house, Charlie could smell steak barbecuing on a grill. Lawn chairs covered the front yard, while people sat and talked, a cool lemonade in one hand. Even though it was September, the weather was warm, with only a mild breeze coming off from the Pacific. In all, it was the perfect weather for a meal outdoors. Adam led Charlie to a woman wearing an apron, that read, "Wife of the cook."

"Sis, this is Chuck's daughter, Charlie. Charlie, this is my sister, Shirley Garner," introduced Adam. "Chuck couldn't make it."

"It's nice to finally meet you, Charlie," said Shirley, shaking hands with her young guest. "I'm sorry your father couldn't come. Adam tells me you're going to be living in Twin Yucca. I hope you're not too homesick for Montana."

"It's nice here, also," said Charlie.

"Can't beat the weather, eh, Adam?" asked a man standing beside Mrs. Garner. "Why, I heard on the news that New York received three inches of snow, yesterday!"

"You have a nice home, Mr. Garner," said Charlie, courteously. The man laughed.

"That's not Mr. Garner," pointed out Adam, smilingly.

"I should say not!" exclaimed Shirley, swatting a fly away from her face. "Harry, this is Chuck's little girl, you know, the one from up North?"

"Oh, yeah, the one with the sick dad," remarked Harry. "Shirley, those steaks are smelling really good! When do we eat?"

"I think we're almost ready," replied Shirley.

"Harry is a next door neighbor," apologized Adam, in a whisper, "and is not known for his tactfulness."

"That's all right," shrugged Charlie.

Everyone filed past the large picnic table and helped themselves to Jello salad, potato chips, mash potatoes, Caesar salad, and biscuits.

Shirley called out each person's name as the steaks finished cooking. When she called Charlie's name, the teenager came forward and accepted the steak graciously from her hostess. When Charlie returned to her seat, she eyed the two inch slab of red meat with skepticism. She glanced over at Adam and saw him happily eating away at his portion of "bloody flesh." She shuddered. Charlie felt like leaping to her feet and crying out loud, "Do the words 'Mad Cow Disease' mean nothing to you people?"

However, she managed to keep her repulsion to herself. Charlie wanted to be polite. When it was at all possible, she was a vegetarian. The times when she was unable, she would eat what was set before her without any derogatory remarks. But bloody meat really was asking a lot from her! Charlie got up from her seat and casually edged her way to the back of the yard. When no one was looking she dumped the meat into an open aluminum trash can, and covered it with some loose newspapers. Charlie looked around. No one had seen her do the deed. Discreetly, she finished her meal away from the crowd, so as not to raise suspicion.

After the meal, Shirley and Chad disappeared into the house and returned with a birthday cake. Everyone sang the birthday song and Mike blew out his twenty-six candles. Next, Mike opened presents. To Charlie's relief, more than one person had given him a tie. He thanked everyone for their gifts and cut the cake.

"I told Mom last year," Mike was saying as he served the cake, "that just because I was still living at home, didn't mean I expected birthdays, anymore. But-- you know my Mom," he laughed.

"She only hates to admit that one of her babies is old enough to stop celebrating birthdays!" laughed Shirley. Everyone chuckled, and complimented her on the cake, (even though it did have a bitter after taste).

"The mashed potatoes were much too salty," wondered Charlie silently, "the gelatin salad had not been left in the refrigerator long enough, and the biscuits were burnt. And yet, Mike had thanked his Mom for making the meal, so she was the one responsible. I feel so sorry for them!" she thought. "But, I guess after all these years they have become used to it."

After desert, everyone took turns at pitching horseshoes. Mike and Shirley were the best at it, but someone whom Shirley had only just met today, a Miss Sandra Weston, came in a decent third.

Afterward, Chad took the teenager aside and showed her his extensive catalogue of desert plants which he had carefully pressed between wax paper and labeled with the proper scientific names. His enthusiasm for the Mojave Desert was something Charlie marveled at. To her, it looked like a barren stretch of nothingness, intermittently spotted with dull sagebrush and weeds covered with thorns. To Chad, however, it was full of wonder and beauty. He showed her photos he had taken of various wildlife, and explained to her what she was looking at.

"This picture is really special," prefaced the nine-year-old, handing her a photo of a rather large, uninteresting looking turtle. "This is the desert tortoise. It's on the endangered species list," said Chad.

"That is an endangered species?" asked Charlie, incredulously. "Who'd want to hurt this?"

"Its land is being encroached upon," replied Chad, sadly.

"It's happening everywhere," replied Charlie, indignantly.

"Uncle Adam says it's moral insanity to treat the planet the way we do," replied Chad, taking back his picture.

"I can agree with that!" said Charlie.

"I'm going on a wildlife trek next Saturday, if you want to come," invited Chad.

"Sorry, I can't," said Charlie. "I'm needed at home."

"That's O.K.," the boy replied, "I'll ask again some other time."

"It's not likely to be too soon," warned Charlie. Chad flashed a typical Garner smile and carried his collection back indoors.

From her vantage, Charlie observed Mike and Sandra Weston exchange loving glances across the lawn. They weren't sitting together, but the fact that Mike and Sandra were so obviously trying not to be seen together made Charlie think twice. As Donna used to say, "Where there's smoke, there's fire."

"Are you enjoying yourself?" asked Adam, sitting down in the lawn chair Chad had been occupying.

"Sure," replied Charlie, rather surprised that the plumber was walking away from the rest of the guests to talk to her.

"Did Chad show you his catalogue?"

"Yes, he did."

"Hmmm," replied Adam. He opened his mouth to say something, but upon reflection, closed it again.

"What did you think of it?" he asked.

"It was very informative," replied Charlie, discerning that there was obviously something else on his mind.

"Mmm-hmmm," replied Adam. Charlie smiled. "What are you grinning at?" he asked.

"You look so grave and somber," she replied. "Surely, you didn't come over here to ask me my opinion of Chad's collection."

"It's true, I do have something on my mind," admitted Adam. "Excuse my bluntness, but I have to know. Have you been all right? And this time, don't shrug off the question the way you did earlier. I know that when someone is new in Christ, there's a lot of questions and issues that need to be resolved. I also realize no two people are the same, but you haven't been pulling me away from the store, nor have you been calling me every few hours."

"Is that what this is about?" asked Charlie. "I don't call you often enough?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Then, what do you mean?"

"When your father was saved," explained Adam, "I saw him in my store, constantly. He had questions and needed a lot of support. I don't see that from you, and I wanted to be certain that everything was all right. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes, I think so," answered Charlie.

"Well?" asked Adam.

"Well, what?"

"Are you all right?"

"I confess there's been times when it would have been nice to talk to someone with more understanding about certain issues, but all in all, I'm doing good."

"Can you talk to your father?" asked Adam. "Is he well enough for that?"

"I found out recently that emotional and physical stress can quicken Alzheimer's progression, so I'm not about to risk it," replied Charlie.

"I know our pastor isn't always readily available, so if you need someone to talk to, or to answer your questions, you can always call me. I can see what you're going through isn't easy. God only knows the way I'd react, were I in your situation."

"I think I have a pretty good guess," replied Charlie.

"Well, it's almost four. Are you ready to go home?" asked Adam.

"Just let me say thank you to Mrs. Garner, first," replied Charlie, getting up.

The return drive home was more friendlier, thanks to Charlie's realization that she did indeed have a friend in Adam. The day of Mike's birthday closed to the content satisfaction of everyone concerned.

"A [girl] that hath friends must shew [her]self friendly: and there is a Friend [Jesus] that sticketh closer than a brother."

~ Proverbs 18:24 ~

"Delight thyself also in the LORD; and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart."

~ Psalms 37:4 ~

Chapter Twenty-four
Night Adventure

"Behold, I have seen [Adam]... [who] is cunning in playing, and a mighty valiant man... and prudent in matters, and a comely person, and the LORD is with him."

~ 1 Samuel 16:18 ~

This workday found Adam in front of Logan's Garden Nursery, a store along the main street of town. Since the job was in front of the store, orange cones were needed to cordon off the area so vehicles wouldn't hit the plumber while he worked. With shovel in hand, Adam labored to uncover the damaged pipe in question. It was no easy task; the rocky ground was stubborn, and would not yield easily. Since Mr. Logan didn't want to keep away potential customers with loud jackhammer sounds, heavy equipment could not be called in, as Adam had desired. For this reason, he added an extra cost for the additional manual labor, to which Mr. Logan readily agreed.

It was a warm day, with hardly a breeze in the air. With all the physical exertion the job required, Adam was soon damp with sweat. His damp shirt served only to make him perspire all the more. Needing relief, Adam pulled off his shirt and wiped his face with it. His sensitive skin sunburned easily, but in the heat of work, Adam had quite forgotten.

So engrossed in his work was he, that Adam did not even notice when a pretty woman approached the cordoned off area.

"Excuse me," she interrupted. Adam did not hear the first time, so the woman repeated herself, "Excuse me?"

"Yes?" said Adam, looking up from his hole in the ground.

"My girlfriend wants to know if you're married," said the woman, pointing to an attractive woman standing beside a motorcycle. The woman's girlfriend waved to him.

"No, I'm not married," replied the Master Plumber, embarrassed that such a thing was happening to him-- again.

"Here's her number if you're interested," said the woman handing him a slip of paper. Adam politely accepted it, and resumed his work. He hoped no one had been watching.

Just as soon as Charlie had managed to forget Mrs. Jacobs' promise of the second hand clothing, she arrived with a box in her arms from her sister in Topeka, "Courtesy of the Topeka Charity Relief Organization." Not yet ready to leave, Mrs. Jacobs hinted to Vera that she would like to see if the clothes fit all right. Sensible of her indebtedness, Vera instructed Charlie to try on the clothing and model each item before their next door neighbor in the living room.

Maggie stayed quietly out of Mrs. Jacobs' way, preferring the sanctuary of Charlie's bedroom, instead.

"I couldn't help but notice," whispered Mrs. Jacobs, as she and Vera waited for Charlie in the living room, "but that Downen woman seems to be here a lot."

"Yes, well," replied Vera trying to think of a suitable answer, "Charlie has taken a liking to her."

Just then Charlie entered.

"Turn around," said Mrs. Jacobs.

"Isn't that nice!" Vera politely exclaimed.

"It'll be good for these windy November days-- you see the fabric?" observed Mrs. Jacobs, expertly. "Yes, that will do nicely."

Charlie smiled weakly and returned to her room to change into the next outfit. She was grateful for the clothing, but the false charity that accompanied it made her feel used.

"As I was saying," continued Mrs. Jacobs, when Charlie left, "your granddaughter sees far too much of the dimwit."

"But, she's harmless," replied Vera.

"That's not all," continued the neighbor, "Maggie Downen has been seen frequenting Adam Clark's home. I'm not one to believe everything I hear, mind you--" just then, Charlie entered the room, and turned around a few times.

"That's very nice," dismissed Vera, waving Charlie back to her room. "Go on," she said, after the teenager had left.

"I don't believe everything I hear," repeated Mrs. Jacobs, "but as Charlie's grandmother, I would be interested to know what others are saying about her friends."

"What are they saying?" asked Vera, in bated breath.

"Well," whispered the gossip, "they say Maggie is using your granddaughter to get to Adam Clark's house without arising suspicion!"

Vera looked puzzled.

"The dimwit and Twin Yucca's very own Master Plumber are having a 'you-know-what'!" explained Mrs. Jacobs in an excited whisper. "Your granddaughter is being used! It only proves you can never trust a man who is aware of his own good looks. They're just not trustworthy! Why, just today, he was in the middle of main street, showing off before every attractive woman who happened by!"

"No!" replied Vera, wide-eyed. Mrs. Jacobs nodded knowingly. Charlie returned to the living room and turned around. Vera had an odd look on her face, as though she had just swallowed something that had a bitter taste.

"Well, I know you two have a lot to talk about," said Mrs. Jacobs, "so I'll run along home now." As she exited, she mouthed the words, "Tell me what happens!" to Vera.

"What's going on?" asked Charlie, curiously.

Upon hearing Mrs. Jacobs departure, Maggie entered the room and turned around a few times, just as Charlie had done.

"Run along home, dear," said Vera, "I have something to discuss with Charlie."

"See you later, alligator," said Maggie, putting back on her Dairy Cream hat. (Until recently, she had been in the habit of wearing it indoors as well as out. When Charlie pointed out to her that Vera was annoyed when people wore hats indoors, Maggie quickly complied with the old woman's wishes.)

"After while, crocodile," returned Charlie. "What's going on?" repeated the girl, after Maggie had left.

"Gloria just told me some disturbing news," worried Vera. "She said that Maggie and Adam Clark are having an affair! Now, what do you think of that?"

Charlie's mind immediately rebelled at the notion; neither of her friends would do such a thing. "You don't really believe her, do you?" she asked.

"Well," reasoned Vera, "Maggie HAS been seen a lot at his house."

"That's because she follows ME there!" exclaimed Charlie, defensively. "She tags along everywhere I go! You know that!"

Vera remained unsure.

"Adam is the kindest, most decent, nicest person in the world! He would NEVER do anything like that! I know it! I know it as surely as I know he's a Christian!"

"But, Gloria said..." began Vera.

"Mrs. Jacobs is a gossip!" pointed out Charlie. "As someone once told me, 'Never take a liar at their word.'"

When Vera had time to calmly take into consideration the parties in question, the truth was the only reasonable conclusion.

"Gloria didn't know it was untrue," reminded Vera, sufficiently convinced that the rumor was indeed, unfounded.

Vera followed Charlie into her bedroom and helped to unpack the box.

"Why do you have to have Mrs. Jacobs as a friend?" asked Charlie, hurt that Vera could even contemplate for a moment that Adam could be guilty.

"Now, now," said Vera, "don't talk that way about Gloria. She's been a good friend. I'll call her and set everything straight. You've got nothing to complain about. At least you got some nice clothes out of it. And, I must say, Gloria did touch upon something true: you don't see enough young people your own age."

"You're not going to make me stop seeing Adam or Maggie, are you?" asked Charlie.

"Of course not," replied Vera. "But I do want you to promise me that you'll try to make friends with other teenagers. It's not healthy for you to always be around others who are three times your age!"

Later that evening, Charlie walked to Mullen-Overholt and watched Jerome and Adam as they played chess. As usual, Jerome won the game and exulted over his vanquished enemy with typical animosity. And, as usual, Adam brought up one or two timely necessities that needed Jerome's attention. When their game had come to an end, Charlie lingered a while after Jerome left the room.

Seeing there was something on her mind, Adam offered Jerome's vacant chair to the teenager, which she readily accepted.

"Penny for your thoughts," said Adam, setting up the chessboard. "You do play, don't you?"

"Try me," challenged Charlie.

Charlie moved her pieces with rapid decision, while Adam preferred to take his time. Even with Adam's thoughtful pauses, the game finished all too soon.

"You win," he acquiesced.

"I can't say I'm surprised," replied Charlie, disappointedly. "Don't you ever stick up for yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

"You let me win just as you let Uncle Jerome win. At least I don't belittle you like he does. Why do you let him win, anyway?"

"It's my choice," pointed out Adam, setting up the board again.

"People say horrible things behind your back and even to your face, and all you do is remain silent! Why?"

"What horrible thing did you hear about me?" asked Adam, soberly. Charlie hesitated. Even in her fluster of righteous indignation, she was embarrassed to say it out loud.

"Our next door neighbor accused you and Maggie of having an affair," whispered Charlie, not wanting the staff to overhear her.

"I see," replied Adam, quietly. There was sadness in his eyes, but he tried hard not to let it show. "To answer your question, I play chess with Jerome, because he is in a position to help the people in his care. My mother happens to be one of those people. And, sometimes, I'm able to intercede

on the behalf of others. Chess affords me rare access to your uncle. As for what others say about me, all I can do is live my life in the fear of God, so that when others try to defame my name, those who truly know me, will recognize a lie when they hear one."

"For what it's worth, I know you're innocent," said Charlie, looking up from the chessboard. "I never doubted it for a second."

"I'd say that's worth a great deal," returned Adam, gratefully.

"A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold." (Proverbs 22:1)

As time passed, the ugly rumor was unfortunately replaced by another concerning someone else. (Much to our relief, it wasn't concerning anyone we knew.)

It was an hour after midnight when Charlie first realized something was wrong. She had been fast asleep, when a muffled noise came from the living room. Charlie opened her eyes, and wondered if she had been dreaming. Still half asleep, she dozed off only to wake up, inexplicably, once again. From her bed, Charlie strained to hear any abnormal sounds in the house. All was silent. Thinking she had imagined the noise, she was about to go back to sleep, when the grandfather clock by the front door chimed once. It was one in the morning. Realizing that she would not be content until she went to investigate, Charlie climbed out of bed and put on her robe.

Blinking the sleep from her eyes, she went down the hallway and into the living room. She took an umbrella with her to use as a weapon, just in case it was an intruder. Upon entering the room, she noticed that it was strangely chilled. She groped about in the darkness, unable to notice anything out of place, when she suddenly noticed something moving beside the grandfather clock. Charlie's heart beat quickly. Gripping the umbrella as she would a baseball bat, she cautiously moved toward the darkness with boldness that surprised even her. Suddenly, a gust of wind blew the object against her, smashing up against her nose.

"Ouch!" she exclaimed, falling backward onto the floor, more out of surprise than anything else. Instead of apologizing, the rude object continued to move back and forth until Charlie realized that the dark form she was trying to recognize was their very own front door. It was open and moving in the wind. Sighing a breath of relief, she got up from the floor, picked up her umbrella, and shut the door.

"Silly!" Charlie scolded herself, making her way back to the bedroom. As she passed her father's room, she noticed for the first time that his door was wide open. Thinking nothing out of the ordinary, Charlie tiptoed inside to see if he had kicked off his covers as he sometimes did. To her shock, the bed was empty!

"Grandma!" shouted Charlie, running to Vera's room, "Daddy's gone!"

An hour later, Jerome had a search party comprised of volunteers gathered in front of his house. Vera watched helplessly from the front lawn, while Mrs. Jacobs comforted her with, "They'll find him!" Not content to sit idly by, Charlie quickly dressed and took her place beside the other volunteers. From her vantage she counted at least twenty-five others, not including herself. Officer Jeff Erickson was there, as were ten other police officers; Mike Garner was present, as was Gerald Hanna, father of Jenna and Kendra; neighbors and friends that Charlie, herself, had never known had come running and grouped around Jerome as he informed them of the graveness of the situation.

"Chuck is wearing dark blue pajamas, and is most likely barefoot," began Jerome. "Although wandering is a common effect of Alzheimer's Disease, I cannot express to you the importance of finding him soon. Chuck has a forty-six percent chance that he will die of hypothermia or dehydration if he's not found within the next twenty four hours." A nervous murmur went through the crowd. Charlie gripped her flashlight tightly, and prayed for help. "As luck would have it, according to the weather report," continued Jerome, his voice becoming bitter, "temperatures are going to dip well below freezing tonight." El Niño, a few days before, had sent a flush of heated air throughout the Mojave Desert, causing everyone to hope for a milder than normal winter. But, like a fickle woman, instead of heat, it sent colder than usual temperatures. It was vital that they find Chuck as soon as possible.

Charlie searched the crowd for Adam, but could not find him.

"Mike," asked Charlie, "where is Adam?"

"I don't know," Mike replied. "I called his house but there wasn't any answer. He's probably already out looking for your father."

While Jerome and Officer Erickson began to assign everyone a place to search, Charlie slipped away from the crowd and ran as quickly as her legs could carry her, to Adam's house. By the time she arrived at his front door, she was out of breath.

"Adam!" she shouted, knocking on his door with a clenched fist. "Are you home?" There was no answer, save for a dog in the next door neighbor's yard, who decided she needed to be barked at.

Remembering that he sometimes worked in his garden at night, Charlie ran to the back of the house. There she found Adam, dressed in his blue faded overalls, a warm coat, ear muffs, and scarf-- leaning on a hoe, dozing. It was both humorous and pitiful at the same time. However, Charlie had no time to make such observations.

"Adam!" cried Charlie running to the tired plumber and shaking him awake. "Daddy is missing! Is he with you?"

"Missing?" repeated Adam, groggily stumbling backward, still not yet fully awake.

"Please wake up!" cried Charlie, bopping him lightly over the head with her flashlight. "It's an emergency!"

"Oh, Charlie," yawned Adam, letting the hoe drop to the ground, "the one night I take sleeping pills, and this has to happen!"

"Isn't Daddy with you?" exclaimed Charlie, trying not to be disheartened.

"No, but you'd better check the house, anyway," replied Adam, slapping his own face as hard as he could.

Charlie searched the house from top to bottom, except for one room on the second floor that was locked. Charlie ran downstairs and back into the yard where Adam was reviving himself. The adrenaline of Chuck's disappearance was now kicking in, and Adam now had no trouble staying awake.

"Did you find him?" asked Adam.

"No, but I couldn't search one of the rooms because the door was locked!" answered Charlie, trying to catch her breath.

"When I'm not in that room, the door always remains locked," replied Adam, somewhat mysteriously. "He's not here, Charlie."

"Uncle Jerome has organized a search party. He says if we don't find him in the next twenty-four hours, then he could die of dehydration or hypothermia!" cried Charlie, nearing hysteria.

Adam took her by the shoulders and looked evenly into her face. A peaceful calm descended on her. Adam closed his eyes and began to pray.

"Dear Heavenly Father," he began, out loud, "we know not what to do, but our eyes are upon Thee. Send an angel to wherever Chuck is, and keep him safe and warm. Lead us to him, Lord, and grant us the wisdom to know where to look. In Jesus' name, Amen."

"Thank you, I needed that," said Charlie, collecting her thoughts for the first time since Chuck had been missing.

"Where would you go if you were your father?" asked Adam.

"He has Alzheimer's," reminded Charlie, "he's not thinking rationally."

"I know, but it's a starting place," shrugged Adam. "Think, Charlie. You know him better than anyone. Where would he go?"

"I can see my breath," said Charlie. "It's getting colder."

"What about your school?" asked Adam. "What if he's on his way to your school?" The suggestion had validity.

"But, that's all the way in Joshua Tree," said Charlie. "Surely, he wouldn't even think of making that distance on foot in this weather!"

"Come on," said Adam, taking Charlie's hand and nearly dragging her to the van.

"That's miles of open desert," continued Charlie, as she climbed in. "If he doesn't stick to the road, he'll get lost, and then we'll never find him in time!"

"Yes, we will," asserted Adam, starting the engine and backing down the driveway. "God is with us!"

A black moon shrouded the Mojave plains in darkness so that Charlie could not see past the headlights of the van. Charlie aimed her flashlight out the window, imitating a searchlight. She had never remembered the drive to school taking this long, before.

"Are you sure we're going in the right direction?" asked Charlie, looking to Adam for reassurance.

"I'm sure," replied Adam. "Let's just pray your father is, also."

Just as Charlie turned the flashlight back outside her window, she saw something bright flash by them.

"Stop!" shouted Charlie. "Back up! I thought I saw something!"

Adam carefully backed up. Charlie unexpectedly swung open the door and sprang from the van.

"Charlie!" called out Adam, jumping out to see where she had gone. Five feet in front of him, Adam saw a beam of light searching the shoulder of the road. He could barely make out Charlie's form against the night sky. "Do you see anything?" he shouted. The beam of light turned around and slowly came back to where he stood.

"It was only a rabbit," said Charlie, disappointedly.

"Come on," coaxed Adam, "we've a few miles to go before we reach Galilee."

When they pulled into Galilee Christian School's empty parking lot, both got out of the van and searched the premises on foot. The actual grounds were locked, making it impossible for Chuck to be inside. After a half hour of searching, they climbed back into the van.

Charlie stuck the tips of her fingers in her mouth to warm them.

"Here," offered Adam, taking off his gloves and handing them to her, "you wear them for awhile."

Charlie put her hands inside Adam's large gloves, taking comfort from their warmth. Every step of the way, Adam had refused to let her despair. No matter how desperate the situation seemed, Adam was confident that God wouldn't let her down. His confidence had a bolstering effect on Charlie's faith.

"He has to be somewhere," said Adam thoughtfully, his hand on the ignition. Suddenly, a thought came to him. His face broke out in half a smile. "It can't be that simple," he muttered.

Charlie looked at him in bewilderment. What was he talking about? Without a word, Adam quickly jumped out and opened the large sliding door on the van.

"Charlie!" he cried, "come here!"

Charlie ran to Adam and looked where he was pointing. There, on the floor of the van, huddled against some plumbing equipment, was Chuck. He was fast asleep, huddled under a canvas tarpaulin. Charlie cried with delight and jumped in.

"I must have forgotten to lock up the van after I drove home," mused Adam, thoughtfully. "Looks like Chuck just climbed in and made himself comfortable!"

"He's so cold!" said Charlie, feeling his hands and face. Adam climbed in and lifted Chuck outside.

"Open the passenger door, Charlie," he instructed. Once inside, Adam turned on the heater. Charlie got in beside her father, and Adam sat down in the driver's seat so that Chuck was sandwiched between them. "He'll be all right," said Adam, starting the engine.

On the drive back to Twin Yucca, Chuck repeatedly asked for Martha, his deceased wife. When he noticed Charlie was sitting next to him, he smiled happily.

"Pumpkin," said Chuck, "I've got to get to work. Frank is waiting for me."

"I know, Daddy," replied Charlie, not wanting to excite him by disagreeing.

"We have to do inventory," he continued. Chuck was seemingly unaware of his surroundings, or even what state they were in. He couldn't remember Adam, but he had no difficulty recognizing his daughter. It is often so with Alzheimer's patients. Memories that are oldest tend to last the longest.

Charlie instructed Adam to drive to the nearest hospital. Although her father seemed to be in good physical condition, the measure of his incoherency was alarming.

While a doctor examined Chuck, Charlie related what she knew about his case history. Thankfully, the doctor affirmed Adam's prediction that her father was O.K.; Chuck had not suffered any bodily harm by this episode of wandering. However, the doctor informed Charlie that steps would need to be taken so that this night would not be repeated. He suggested that she disguise the front and back doors of their house with curtains, or place STOP signs on them. The doctor also said that if Chuck could be exercised enough during the day, he may become too tired to wander at night. It was no easy thing to wear out a man who loved the outdoors, and who could hike all day with only minimal rest breaks! But, this was reality, and Charlie had to face it.

While the doctor talked to Charlie and tried to give her helpful advice, Adam called Mullen-Overholt on a pay phone in the hospital. Jerome wasn't there, but a staff member answered and promised to deliver the message immediately to Jerome, who was still out searching for his brother. Next, Adam called Vera, who had been camping by the telephone, and related to her everything that had transpired.

Mrs. Jacobs, who had been listening in on an extension, (with Vera's knowledge), offered to drive her to the hospital. However, Adam explained that he would have Chuck and Charlie back home within half an hour. It wasn't necessary for Vera and her friend to make the drive.

When the trio reached home, Jerome and Vera met them in the driveway.

"Chucky!" exclaimed Vera, rushing to her son.

"He's O.K., Grandma," comforted Charlie. "All the time Daddy was missing, he was in the back of Adam's van. It was extremely Providential. Things could have easily turned out much worse!"

"If he keeps this up," observed Jerome, "we're going to have to look into a care facility, soon."

"You mean a nursing home?" asked Charlie.

"There are places for people like him," said Jerome, as Vera helped her son inside.

"Daddy's place is with me!" insisted Charlie.

"This is a family issue, and we'll discuss this at a more appropriate time," declared Jerome.

"I have to get back home," said Adam, excusing himself.

"Thank you for everything," said Charlie, gratefully. Adam nodded in recognition, and drove away. "You could have at least thanked him," said Charlie, turning to her uncle. "He drove clear to Joshua Tree looking for Daddy!"

"Yes, but he was in the back of the van all the time, wasn't he?" replied Jerome, snidely. "Adam is always poking his nose into my business. We would have found Chuck, given enough time."

Back inside, Vera was all tears and worries, while Charlie remained calm. She had grown up some in the past few hours. Her faith had been tried in the furnace of suffering, and she had passed the test God had given her. Charlie thanked God, and blessed His Holy name, for He

had kept His promise to watch over Chuck. God had not failed them nor had He forsaken them!

"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."

~ Deuteronomy 7:9 ~

"He [God] knoweth the way that I take: when He hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold."

~ Job 23:10 ~

"I [God] will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on My name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is My people: and they shall say, The LORD is my God."

~ Zechariah 13:9 ~

"That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ."

~ 1 Peter 1:7 ~

Chapter Twenty-five

Coming ATTRACTiOns

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

~ Galatians 6:2 ~

"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 ~

The fact that just a few days before, Charlie's father had wandered from home in the dead of night, made Charlie an oddity in the eyes of her classmates. None of their fathers had ever been the cause of a manhunt! The pupils at Galilee who didn't completely avoid her, and remembered God's admonition to bear one another's burdens, didn't know what to say to Charlie, or how to act around her. They gave the teenager kind smiles and sympathetic glances, but none of them really understood what Chuck or his daughter were going through.

Some of the students still thought Alzheimer's was contagious, and deemed it best to pray for the Overholt's from a safe distance. The general lack of understanding concerning this disease prompted Principal Strickland to post a flyer on the bulletin board in the Main Hall, explaining the facts. To the general relief of the students, Alzheimer's Disease was not contagious. She was still different, but Charlie was more or less accepted as one of them.

Life seemed to gradually improve for Chuck. He no longer had violent reactions to his medication, (his night wanderings had nothing to do with this), and now only needed occasional help getting dressed. On some days, he almost forgot he was sick, and on other days, it was all too obvious. But, on the whole, Chuck was slowly learning to adapt to his situation.

Chuck wasn't the only one. Some days after Chuck's night adventure, Charlie nailed a stop sign on the inside of their front door. As if it wasn't bad enough, she hung drapes over the door, just as the doctor had suggested. It was the finishing touch. The door was completely disguised.

"Do you really think this is necessary?" asked Chuck, embarrassed that such drastic measures had to be taken because of him. "Don't you think it looks a little bizarre?"

"I don't care how odd it looks," replied Charlie, "I'm going to do everything within my power not to repeat that night!"

From that day on, she and her father began to take a long walk before bedtime, so that he would be tired and less likely to wander. Chuck enjoyed these walks, and soon looked forward to them. In the evenings, Twin Yucca was peaceful. This time of day suited Chuck very well. When dusk fell, the serenity of the Mojave Desert swallowed the small city, reclaiming it to the still of the night.

Chuck and Charlie's evening strolls inevitably ended at Adam's house, where they spent the rest of the evening sitting in outdoor chairs in the backyard next to the garden, talking about their day. Chuck would talk extensively about his symptoms, while Adam listened attentively. Then they exchanged short passages of Scripture they had learned, and prayed for the success of the next day.

Most often, Charlie studied from a schoolbook next to the back door light, while night bugs flitted over her head. Occasionally, she dropped her homework and listened, thankful that her father had someplace to go that he looked forward to each day.

But nights were not the only time Charlie could be found in Adam's garden. The evenings may have been Chuck's, but the late afternoons were Charlie's. It was not odd to find Charlie and Maggie pulling weeds or other such chores in the garden, while Adam helped Chad with his homework under the shade of the tree. Adam insisted that it wasn't necessary for the girls to work in his garden, but Charlie was glad for the excuse to be near Adam. When Chad was done using Adam's time, Charlie would quit her work, and sit under the tree and enjoy his fellowship.

Unattended, Maggie rooted up everything that had the misfortune to resemble a weed. By the time the girls left, a few of Adam's plants would inevitably find their way into his compost heap.

In more ways than one, the Overholts were steadily taking over Adam's life. When Chuck wasn't requiring his attention concerning spiritual matters or needing someone to talk to, Charlie was ever present, ready to accept any crumbs of time that he could spare.

Chad wasn't thrilled about this competition for his uncle's attention, and would sometimes long for the days when he had Uncle Adam all to himself. Even so, he unselfishly shared his beloved relation with the Overholts.

Adam's divided attention was an annoyance to Mike, who was studying for his California Journeyman Plumber License exam. Adam tutored his nephew on the side, when they weren't busy with customers. However, it was difficult to do with Chuck routinely popping in to chat.

Shirley, who had a deep-rooted opinion that Adam gave more of himself than was healthy, tried to get him to put his foot down. Adam was overextending himself. When he jokingly asked,

"Which foot?" Shirley declared she would not be responsible for the consequences! Adam, who had a deep-rooted belief that Shirley was too overprotective, responded that he would not begrudge her an "I told you so," should his health come to ruin.

Adam didn't mind the Overholt's presence, but for one exception: wherever Charlie went, Maggie was sure to follow. Endeavoring to follow Charlie's lead, Maggie did her level best to be helpful. On average, she did more harm in the garden than good. Some of the people Adam would give the vegetables to, relied on the produce, for they could not afford such luxuries, otherwise. Mercifully, Adam supplemented what Maggie destroyed by regular trips to the supermarket. He admired Charlie for befriending Miss Downen, and didn't want to be the cause of any discouragement.

However, if Adam had known what was happening to Charlie, he might not have gone out of his way to make her feel welcome. Even with Maggie's slow ways, she saw a change in Charlie that the teenager hadn't yet noticed herself-- Charlie was attracted to Adam. No one had noticed it but Maggie. Unaware of the conventional impediments such an attraction would incur, Maggie was ignorantly happy for her friend.

Officer Jeff Erickson was driving his eight year old daughter, Debbie, home from Galilee Christian School, when they passed by the old bus stop where Maggie used to frequent.

"That reminds me," said Jeff, "I haven't seen Miss Downen at the bus stop, lately. Have you seen her around?"

"Around where?" asked Debbie, teasing her father.

"Around Twin Yucca, silly," replied Jeff, threatening to tickle her with a free hand.

"No, don't!" laughed Debbie. "I'll talk!"

"A good tickle will do it every time," grinned Jeff, triumphantly.

"Miss Downen is friends with the new girl, Charlie Overholt," said Debbie.

"Charlie is a girls' name?" questioned Jeff.

"It's only a nickname," continued Debbie. "For what, I can't remember."

"The Overholts," repeated Jeff, thoughtfully. "Charlie wouldn't happen to be related to Jerome Overholt, would she?"

"I think so," replied Debbie.

"Well, let's hope Charlie hasn't inherited her uncle's disposition," said Jeff. "How much do you know about this Charlie?"

"Some of the kids say she's stuck-up, but I don't know since I've never met her," shrugged Debbie. "What's for dinner?"

It was true, Jeff missed the daily phone calls from Mrs. Downen, asking him to fetch her pretty daughter from the bus stop. He missed Maggie's gentle ways and hated to think of Jerome Overholt's niece tormenting Maggie the same way Jerome verbally tormented others. There was only one way to find out if Miss Downen was in good hands, or not. He decided to visit Mrs. Downen and see for himself.

Saturday, Jeff pulled into the Downens' driveway. He got out of his station wagon holding a casserole he had baked the day before. Unlike Adam, Jeff was handy in the kitchen.

"Hello, Jeff!" greeted Mrs. Downen, opening the front door.

"How is everyone?" asked Jeff, handing her the casserole.

"Wasn't that sweet of you!" exclaimed Mrs. Downen. "Everyone is fine-- just fine!"

"Is Maggie feeling all right?" asked Jeff. "I haven't seen her at the bus stop, lately."

"Bless you, no!" laughed Mrs. Downen. "Is that why you went to all this trouble?" she exclaimed, referring to the casserole.

"It wasn't any trouble," replied Jeff.

"Maggie is just fine!" replied Mrs. Downen. There was a silent pause as Jeff waited to hear Mrs. Downen's explanation, but she didn't offer one. She was standing in front of the door as if to block him from seeing inside.

"May I see Maggie-- I mean, Miss Downen?" asked Jeff.

"I'm afraid she's not here at the moment," replied Mrs. Downen, nervously.

"Is everything all right?" asked Jeff, growing more concerned.

Mrs. Downen's face fell. She stepped aside so Jeff could see inside. On the sofa, Mr. Downen was "sleeping one off" after a night of too much alcohol.

"I don't know why I tried to hide it from you," said Mrs. Downen. "You, who are so familiar with this family's troubles."

"I thought Mr. Downen had promised to quit," said Jeff.

"He didn't mean it," replied Mrs. Downen. "He never does."

"That much alcohol is never good for anyone, let alone a man as old as he is," reminded Jeff, solemnly.

"I know it!" exclaimed Mrs. Downen. "But try telling him that! It just goes in one ear and straight out the other! Once he starts talking about his perfect Wayne, there's no stopping the liquor that follows! Well, if there's nothing more, I have work to finish," said Mrs. Downen, almost tersely. Her company manners were wearing thin.

"May I see Miss Downen?" asked Jeff, for the second time.

"She's not here," replied Mrs. Downen, crossly. Then, as if repenting from her rude behavior, she added, "You might try Vera Overholt's house."

Jeff had only been inside the Downen house once, when Mrs. Downen had phoned the police accusing her husband of beating her. At the time, Mr. Downen was seventy-four years old, and it was highly questionable that if he had struck her, it was anything more than one of their usual fights. When questioned further, Mrs. Downen admitted that she had bent the truth. It was a sad household for a mentally challenged person like Maggie to live in. However, Jeff never heard Maggie complain; it was the only family she had.

After hearing Maggie might be at Vera Overholt's house, Jeff went there and asked to see Miss Downen.

"I'm sorry," replied Vera, "but Maggie is at Adam Clark's house."

Jeff did not know Adam personally, so he could not vouch for his character, other than to admit that the plumber had never had a run-in with the law. In fact, the only time Jeff had ever spoken to him was on one occasion where one of Adam's taillights had gone out. The off-duty police officer felt compelled to follow through and make sure this Adam Clark fellow was a man to be trusted around Miss Downen.

Jeff found Adam in front of his house, raking up autumn leaves.

"May I help you?" asked Adam, not recognizing Jeff out of his uniform.

"I'm Jeff Erickson," said Jeff, introducing himself. "I'm the police officer who pulled you over once because one of your taillights were out."

"I had it replaced right away," replied Adam, puzzled by Jeff's presence.

"I'm not here on police business," said Jeff, hesitating to glance around. He couldn't see Maggie anywhere. "My department is urging us to get to know the citizens better. It's part of Chief Niven's new community awareness policy." While that wasn't the direct reason Jeff was here, Chief Niven DID have a new community awareness policy.

"Well," said Adam, "I'm all for that." Adam put down his rake, and invited Jeff inside.

"Do you live here by yourself?" asked Jeff, as he accepted a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice from his host.

"All by myself," Adam replied, sitting down in a kitchen chair across from Jeff. "Do you have any family in Twin Yucca?"

"My Debbie," answered Jeff with the smile of a proud father, "is eight years old. She attends Galilee Christian School."

"Really? I have a nine year old nephew who attends the same school," said Adam.

"Small world," chuckled Jeff. "When we moved here two years ago, I quickly discovered that there weren't many Christian schools nearby. I was blessed to find one within driving distance."

"Mike, my oldest nephew, attended public school, but I'm thankful that Chad has had the opportunity to attend a Christian school. It's very important to 'train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it,'" quoted Adam.

"I agree wholeheartedly," replied Jeff, pleasantly surprised to hear someone applying Scripture to everyday life. It's one thing to claim you're a Christian, but it's another thing entirely to live as a Christian.

"So, how do you like our fair city?" asked Adam.

"It's small," commented Jeff, "but I can't complain. After my wife, Hayley, died of cancer, I became more aware of the fact that I was in a dangerous profession. We lived in Chicago and I didn't want Debbie to suddenly find herself parentless. Twin Yucca may be small, but I have a greater certainty that I'll survive to see my grandchildren!"

"Living in the desert does have its advantages," pointed out Adam. "I can't imagine living anywhere else. The warm summer evenings are my favorite. I love to sit in my garden and watch the fading light on the horizon; to listen to the tune of the crickets as they serenade the evening. I even love the sound of the lawn sprinkler! I guess it's a sign that I've lived here too long, but nights like that make all the scorching temperatures worth it."

"You do love it here, don't you?"

"Except for music itself, I can think of no greater earthbound symphony," replied Adam, with a smile.

"I can," suggested Jeff. "When I was with my wife, there were more symphonies-- more silent raptures than ten thousand cricket-filled nights. I am reminded of the verse, 'the greatest of these is love.'"

"You know more than I on that topic," replied Adam. "I don't believe I've ever felt that way about a woman."

"You've never married, then?" asked Jeff.

"No."

"Until you've heard the inward symphony of love, everything else is 'sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.'"

"I'll never marry," commented Adam, pouring another glass of orange juice. "I figure if God hasn't shown me my soul-mate at my age, then it's not destined to be."

"You never know," smiled Jeff.

"Do you miss being married?" asked Adam. "Of course you miss your wife, but do you miss being married to someone?"

"I miss Hayley; I will always miss Hayley, but I have to admit that I do miss having someone to talk to on that level of intimacy. We were partners. We discussed everything with each other. I miss someone knowing me better than I do myself. I could come home from work in a bad mood, and without my having to say a word, Hayley would already be trying to cheer me."

"Would you ever consider remarrying?" asked Adam. "On second thought, don't answer that. I sound like my Mom: 'When are you getting married? How long are you going to deprive me of grandchildren?'"

The policeman laughed.

"My sister is even worse!" chuckled Adam.

"I've been there," agreed Jeff. "However, I think Debbie is still young enough to need a mother."

"If you can't find the right woman, I'm sure my Mom and sister would be more than willing to play matchmaker," joked Adam. "I was so weary of people asking me when I was going to get married, that when Shirley arranged a blind date for me with Constance, I decided to play along. Then I could at least say I was seeing someone!"

"How does Constance feel about that?" asked Jeff.

"Constance knows," answered Adam. "Now she has an escort to all her business parties."

Love and feelings were odd topics for a seasoned policeman and plumber to discuss. Both men were surprised by the frankness of the other. They normally didn't speak this openly about their private lives with people outside of immediate family.

Adam and Jeff found they had a lot in common: both men were middle aged and unmarried; both had years of experience in their respective professions, and to their delight, had a shared love of God's Word. Men do not easily speak of their emotions, but the policeman and the plumber found themselves at ease in such conversation. By the time Jeff declared he must leave, he had quite forgotten that he had originally come to inquire after Maggie. It wasn't until they heard female laughter coming from the backyard that Jeff suddenly remembered his mission.

"I didn't mean to take you away from your company," said Jeff, wondering if one of those voices was Maggie's. "I shouldn't have just dropped in without notice."

"No, you're not interrupting anything at all! Why don't you come outside and meet some more 'members of the community'?" offered Adam, getting up from the table and going to the kitchen door that opened to his backyard. Jeff followed Adam out to the vegetable garden, where they found Maggie and Charlie, working on the opposite ends of a long row of summer squash.

"Jeff," introduced Adam, "I'd like you to meet Charlie Overholt. Charlie, this is Jeff Erickson." Charlie looked up from her work and nodded hello. "The one pulling up my summer squash is Maggie Downen," continued Adam, sighing in dismay at the destruction of yet another of his plants.

"Maggie," called out Charlie, "pull only the weeds!"

"Sorry," groaned Maggie, attempting to bury the roots back into the ground.

"Hello, Miss Downen!" greeted Jeff, walking to where Maggie was kneeling over the limp squash plant.

"Jeff!" exclaimed Maggie in surprise. "Does Mom want me to come home, now?" (She had been used to Jeff appearing when Mrs. Downen wanted her daughter to return home.)

"No, no," replied Jeff. "I haven't seen you in awhile. I wanted to make sure you were all right."

"How do you like Officer Erickson?" Adam asked Charlie, out of the earshot of Jeff and Maggie.

"What's he an officer of?" asked Charlie.

"The Twin Yucca police department."

"He's a cop?" asked Charlie, her voice hinting dislike. She had seen him once before, but like Adam, had not recognized him out of uniform.

"What have you against policemen?" asked Adam.

"Nothing," denied Charlie.

"The way you said 'A cop?' gave me the impression that you don't like the profession."

"I never said that," refuted Charlie, her voice rising in irritation.

"No need to get defensive," said Adam. "I was only curious."

For a moment, Charlie was tempted to be candid with Adam. She wanted to tell him about Darren, but she was afraid he would then go to her father and tell him everything. Chuck didn't need any emotional stress in his life; it could hasten the Alzheimer's progression. Charlie reasoned within herself that she hadn't lied. After all, the police had been there when she needed help. However grateful she was, the uniform reminded her of her own guilt about sneaking out of the house against the wishes of Aunt Angela. Charlie told herself that it wasn't her fault Darren took drugs, but in the back of her mind the thought kept returning that maybe if she had obeyed her Aunt, Darren might still be alive. She had asked God to forgive her, and then asked for grace to believe that she was forgiven.

"Is 'A cop!' better?" asked Charlie, trying to laugh away the matter.

"Funny what inflection can do," observed Adam, dryly. The look on Charlie's face and the sound of her voice told him that she was holding back something.

A few feet away, Jeff continued to talk to Maggie.

"I didn't know you liked to garden," Jeff said, observing Maggie's soiled hands and dirt stained clothes.

"I don't!" replied Maggie, matter-of-factly. "If only dirt wasn't so dirty!"

"Then, why are you out here?" asked Jeff.

Maggie shrugged, but looked in Charlie's direction.

"I see," replied Jeff, glancing at the teenager who was busy working a hoe. Maggie was here because Charlie was here.

"Maggie, please get me the hose," instructed Charlie. The woman obediently ran to fetch the hose near the back door.

"It's a very nice garden," observed Jeff, going to the other end of the row of summer squash and addressing Charlie. He hoped to enter this clique of new friends Maggie had acquired, and maybe, someday, to give her the courage to follow her own wants instead of doing what others were doing-- just because they were doing it! Jeff tried to tell himself that his intentions were

disinterested, but something deep in his heart disagreed. "Do you follow any given design concerning which plants to plant, or do you simply plant what you want to?" asked Jeff, trying to be friendly.

"I'm only a volunteer," shrugged the girl, accepting the hose from Maggie and going to the side of the garden where it would be hard for Jeff to continue any conversation with her. Maggie followed Charlie close behind, holding the hose up over the vegetables so they wouldn't be damaged. Adam appreciated her effort to not do further damage.

"Does Miss Downen always take her lead from that girl?" asked Jeff, observing the two from a distance.

Adam nodded in the affirmative.

"Is it just me, or does she have something against policemen?" asked Jeff, wondering if he had done anything to offend Charlie.

"She's a little protective of her friend," observed Adam, unable to answer Jeff's question directly.

"Maybe you could put in a good word for me," hinted the officer, glancing at the plumber out of the corner of his eye.

"So, it's to be Maggie, is it?" asked Adam, smiling.

"If Miss Charlie won't stand in the way," replied Jeff.

"Charlie's only a teenager," dismissed Adam.

"She has a great deal of influence over Maggie-- I mean, Miss Downen," said Jeff. "Since before I arrived in Twin Yucca, Miss Downen had waited at the bus stop on Main Street. Almost every day for two years, I've escorted her home in my patrol car. Nothing in the world could persuade her to leave that bus stop! Suddenly, she's content to be someplace else. In my view, that's nothing short of miraculous!"

"Charlie won't stand in the way of her friend's happiness," replied Adam. "I know her. She's a good Christian."

"I'm grateful Miss Downen has such a good friend as Miss Charlie," said Jeff, his tone softening. It was not his intention to speak against any friend of Adam's.

"Don't be concerned, Jeff," said Adam. "Charlie is a level headed girl-- more than most kids her age. I'm sure everything will turn out all right."

It was two days before Thanksgiving, and Charlie was determined to make it a happy experience for her father. In Montana, she had always been the one to prepare the Thanksgiving meal, so it was no novelty to her to do all the work herself.

Before Chuck and Charlie's arrival, Vera and Jerome always spent Thanksgiving in a restaurant, for she was too preoccupied with Arnold's care to take out the needed time to prepare an extensive meal. This year, however, Vera looked forward to a genuine home-cooked Thanksgiving. She made a halfhearted offer to help Charlie, but Charlie insisted that she had everything under control. Besides, Maggie was there to help. Charlie omitted to tell her grandmother that Maggie was absolutely useless in the kitchen, but she didn't really want Vera's help. Charlie had done this by herself many times before, and was confident that she could do it again.

Charlie wrote out the menu and made a shopping list of the needed ingredients. Thanksgiving meal would include a twenty-two pound turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, baby carrots, broccoli and cheese casserole, baked beans the way her father liked them, baked macaroni and cheese, candied sweet potatoes, hot rolls, turkey gravy, pumpkin pie, apple pie, butter cookies, cheese ball with crackers and sliced sausage as an appetizer, iced tea, cranberry juice, and decaffeinated coffee. It was a lot for a fifteen year old to manage, but she had a schedule that had worked ever since she was old enough to cook.

Even though Charlie was an ardent vegetarian, Chuck had insisted that no matter what, they would always have a Thanksgiving turkey. Charlie agreed as long as it was a free range bird. It was the one meal in the entire year where she actually intended to eat meat. To make the meal even more special for Chuck, she was going to allow sliced sausage to go along with the cheese ball and crackers. For Charlie, it was a generous concession.

The pies, butter cookies, casseroles, stuffing, baked beans, and candied sweet potatoes, Charlie intended to prepare today and tomorrow, while the rest she would do Thanksgiving day.

Eager to take part in the preparations, Maggie followed Charlie to the supermarket as she did her Thanksgiving shopping. Maggie had never done a day's cooking in her life, so she watched Charlie with curiosity and excitement.

Vera was patiently waiting for the girls to return home from the supermarket so she could leave for the nursing home. Chuck was in his room, quietly reading his Bible, when Charlie and

Maggie burst through the front door, their arms full of grocery bags. Both were chattering excitedly about turkey and pumpkin pie, when they heard Chuck shout from his room,

"Charlie, could you and your friend hold it down a little?"

"Sure, Daddy!" shouted Charlie, putting the grocery bags on the kitchen table.

"I'm going to be at Mullen-Overholt, if you need me," said Vera, kissing Charlie on the cheek, and gathering her knitting bag as was her routine.

"See you later, Grandma," waved Charlie, as Vera went out the door.

"What are we going to bake first?" asked Maggie, excitedly tying on the apron her Mom had lent her.

"Well," replied the teenager, "let me check the schedule. Thanksgiving is the day after tomorrow, so we need to begin thawing the turkey right away. Thanksgiving morning, I'll have to get up early to start cooking it so it'll be ready by two o' clock."

"Two o' clock!" exclaimed Maggie. "You're going to eat that late?"

"Sure, why not?" asked Charlie. "It's tradition. Besides, it's such a large meal, that it takes a lot of time to prepare. Then everyone eats so much that you only need a small dinner."

"Oh," replied Maggie.

"Doesn't your family have Thanksgiving?" asked Charlie, readying the ingredients for the butter cookies.

"We used to," replied Maggie, "but Dad says there's no reason for it since Wayne's not home to enjoy it."

"That's too bad," replied Charlie, wondering if she should invite Maggie and her parents to share Thanksgiving with them. "Maggie, do you know why Thanksgiving is such a special day?" asked Charlie, measuring the ingredients into a large mixing bowl.

"Our pastor said it's because we're supposed to be thankful," said Maggie.

"That's right," continued Charlie. "On Thanksgiving, we celebrate God's blessings by remembering all that He has done for us."

"Wouldn't it be nice if God did something nice for Dad and Mom?" asked Maggie, hopefully.

"He already has," smiled Charlie. "God gave them a sweet daughter like you."

For that, Charlie had to receive a hug from a beaming Maggie.

Later that day, Charlie asked Vera and Chuck's permission to invite the Downen's for Thanksgiving. They weren't overjoyed at the thought, but since Charlie was the one investing all the time and energy, they gave their consent.

This Thanksgiving promised to be one everyone would remember.

"Now we exhort you, brethren... comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men."

~ 1 Thessalonians 5:14 ~

"Give thanks unto the LORD, call upon His name, make known His deeds among the people."

~ 1 Chronicles 16:8 ~

Chapter Twenty-six

A Little Thanksgiving Romance

"A friend loveth at all times."

~ Proverbs 17:17 ~

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

~ Proverbs 18:24 ~

The day before Thanksgiving, Charlie had an unexpected visit from Adam. He found her in the kitchen, busily preparing for the next day.

"That's a lot of food," observed Adam, leaning against the kitchen table.

"I always prepare a lot of food on Thanksgiving," replied Charlie, shooing Adam from the table, for he was in her way. "What isn't eaten, I save for leftovers. I even put some away in the freezer so I won't have to cook so much later on."

"Makes sense," said Adam, retreating to the other side of the kitchen. "Charlie," he began, "I've been thinking."

"I'm really busy right now," said Charlie. "Could it wait until later?"

"I'm afraid it can't." Adam's face was serious.

"Is this going to be bad news?"

"No," replied Adam, "but it can't wait any longer."

"You have my attention," said Charlie, folding her arms.

"Where's Maggie?" began Adam.

"You mean, right now? She was supposed to help me today, but had a headache and stayed home. I was actually a little relieved, for she's about as much help in the kitchen as she is in the garden!"

"Knowing Maggie, I don't think she really intended to lie," said Adam.

"You're leading up to something," sighed Charlie, "and I don't think I'm going to like it."

"You're Maggie's best friend, and she tries hard to like the things you like. When Maggie finds something, or, for instance, someone that she likes and you don't, I think she becomes afraid that she'll lose your friendship."

"This is about that policeman, isn't it?" guessed the teenager.

"Charlie, Maggie isn't home with a headache. I just saw her and Jeff out strolling together. I knew she was supposed to be helping you today, so I took the opportunity to talk to you without her overhearing. I wanted to know what happened to make you dislike policemen so much. You didn't know Jeff long enough for him to offend you, so I must conclude that it's his profession you dislike."

"What are you talking about?" denied Charlie.

"Maggie knows you don't like him, that's why she went behind your back," pointed out Adam.

"What's the big deal if I don't like cops, or not!" exclaimed Charlie.

"Because whatever it is, it's hurting Maggie," said Adam, maintaining his composure. "What hurts Maggie will eventually hurt you, because you care for each other."

Charlie looked at him skeptically.

"It's one of those circle things," explained Adam.

"This isn't just about Maggie, is it?" asked Charlie. "You're fishing for something."

"Is there anything you want to tell me?" inquired Adam. "You know I'm your friend, right?" he asked, smiling.

Charlie relaxed a little. His smile was disarming her resistance.

"It seems as though you're a better friend to me than I've been to Maggie," Charlie acknowledged, angry at herself for placing Maggie in such a spot.

"I wouldn't go that far," said Adam. "But, I'm glad you're aware of the situation before Jeff had a chance to pursue Maggie any further!"

"Do you think I should invite him to Thanksgiving dinner?" asked Charlie.

"I think it's a start," replied Adam. "Don't forget to include Jeff's little girl in the invitation."

Charlie nodded.

"So, you're not going to tell me?" asked Adam.

"Tell you what?" asked Charlie, knowing full well that she had left Adam's inquiry to the cop question unanswered.

"Someday, maybe you'll be able to talk about it," said Adam, preparing to leave.

"Someday," replied Charlie.

"Happy Thanksgiving," said the plumber, departing. Charlie heard the front door shut behind him.

"Happy Thanksgiving," whispered Charlie, reflectively. If her father had been the one conducting the conversation, Chuck would have immediately pressed her for an explanation, thus provoking her stubborn side into an unbudging state. At least, that was the way father and daughter had argued in the old days-- before Alzheimer's Disease and becoming Christians. Now, Charlie tried hard not to disturb Chuck with disagreement or conflict, lest it should hasten the progression of the disease, which was the main reason Charlie refrained from speaking about Darren and the drugs.

However, Adam was not her father. Once learning of her life and death scrape back in North Carolina, would he feel obligated to go to her father and tell him everything? Sometimes she could sense Adam was trying to balance the delicate difference between close friend and concerned adult.

He must have been doing something right, because Charlie regarded Adam's tact. It was clear he felt she was hiding something significant-- significant enough to warrant concern on his part. However, Adam took everything in stride, trusting the teenager enough not to force her into an explanation.

As Charlie was musing this over, a burnt aroma wafted from the general direction of the oven.

"Oh!" she cried, "My pumpkin pies!"

Later, Maggie made an unprovoked confession that she had spent her time with Jeff Erickson that day, instead of at home with a headache. To Maggie's amazement, Charlie simply shrugged it off and announced that they were having two more guests at Thanksgiving.

Jeff Erickson was also surprised by the Overholts' invitation to join them and the Downens' for Thanksgiving dinner. He assumed Adam was behind it, and made up his mind to thank the Master Plumber the next time he should see him.

Thanksgiving Day began with Charlie rising early in the morning to tidy the house and polish Vera's good silverware. A quick breakfast was prepared and everyone was encouraged to eat quickly, for Charlie needed to clean the last of the breakfast dishes before taking the kitchen entirely over.

Realizing they were in the way, Vera and Chuck did as they were told. They both went to Mullen-Overholt so Vera could be near her husband, and so the staff could watch Chuck. They promised to return at noon to be ready to accept their guests. Since the Thanksgiving meal was to be such a large one, it had been previously agreed upon to start at one in the afternoon.

Maggie showed up promptly at eight, insisting that she should prepare some part of the meal by herself.

"I want Jeff to know I can cook," explained Maggie.

Charlie sighed, patiently. What could she trust Maggie to do?

"I know!" Charlie exclaimed. "You can make the cheese ball, and prepare the pre-dinner snacks!"

At first, Maggie wasn't sure that it would be important enough to impress Jeff. But, when Charlie asked her to also serve the guests the pre-dinner snacks when they arrived and to make sure that everyone's coats and bags were neatly placed on Vera's bed, Maggie was content. She had two important jobs to do.

While Maggie worked away at the cheese ball, Charlie preheated the oven to 325 degrees Fahrenheit so that it would be ready to accept the turkey once it had been prepared.

Trying to recoup yesterday's loss of the two pumpkin pies, Charlie left Maggie alone in the kitchen while she ran to the store to purchase two substitutes. It was a decision she would soon

regret. She had not been gone for fifteen minutes, when Charlie returned to find the kitchen in an absolute mess! Maggie was standing by the counter where she had been preparing the cheese ball, an electric mixer in her hand right and a mixing bowl in the other.

"I thought the cheeses wouldn't be so hard if I blended them for a while," explained Maggie, trembling with excitement, "but they wouldn't mix. So then I added water, and I kept adding it until it was really gooey. Then it didn't look so good, so I added honey. But then it tasted too sweet so I added peanut butter to balance out the flavor. Here, try some!" she offered shoving a spoonful of the mixture in front of Charlie's face. In her exuberance to impress Jeff with her cooking prowess, she had electric mixed the kitchen into a mess of spatters and puddles. Maggie herself, was in no condition to greet guests. Her hair and clothes reflected the state of the rest of the room.

Choosing to accept the test from God that this obviously was, Charlie tried hard not to become frustrated or angry.

"Well," commented Charlie, leading Maggie off to the bathroom to clean her up, "Jeff can always hire a cook."

Maggie was soon out of her sullied clothes and into Charlie's bathrobe. As the washing machine tried to do its part, Charlie faced the kitchen. She had four guests, (Maggie's parents, and Jeff and his daughter), that were due to arrive in about four hours, and if she didn't hurry the turkey into the oven immediately, it would not be ready in time. With Christ-like patience that reminded her of a certain Master Plumber, Charlie was ready to meet the task.

As Donna, her longtime friend back in Montana used to say, "People are like tea bags; you never know how strong they are until they're in hot water!"

However, the water was about to get a little hotter! In her rush to get the turkey into the oven, Charlie lost her balance on the sticky floor. Hearing a cry and then a loud thud, Maggie came rushing into the kitchen.

"Are you all right?" cried Maggie, helping Charlie onto her feet.

"I'm all right," answered Charlie, "but I just twisted my ankle." Maggie helped her to a chair. "What a day!" exclaimed Charlie. "I can't fix Thanksgiving dinner while standing on this sore ankle."

"It's my fault," said Maggie, apologetically.

"Anyone can make a mistake," consoled Charlie, surprised at her own patience. No matter how many things continued to go wrong she kept remembering the verses, "In your patience possess ye your souls," and, "I do not frustrate the grace of God." She didn't know how or why, but she just knew the day was going to somehow turn out for the better.

"I can fix Thanksgiving dinner," offered Maggie.

"No," replied Charlie, quickly, "that's very kind of you, but I'll call Grandma and Daddy, and they'll help get things ready."

"Oh, please," begged Maggie, "let me try!"

"I don't know," replied Charlie, hesitantly.

"Tell me what to do, and I'll do it," said Maggie. "Please?"

The success of the meal seemed to mean more to her than to Charlie, so she decided to let Maggie have a second chance. Worst case scenario, they could always postpone the dinner for a later date (although Charlie wasn't looking forward to repeating this event too soon).

"The oven is already preheated," instructed Charlie, "so I'll tell you how to prepare the turkey. Only, we must hurry a little." Charlie didn't want to sound too anxious, for Maggie looked nervous enough. Step by step, Charlie told Maggie what to do.

Charlie was pleasantly surprised at Maggie's ability to follow instructions. When left to herself, Maggie lacked direction, but when shown how to go about a task, she did better than Charlie had thought was probable.

While the cooking turkey's aroma filled the house, Maggie took a mop to the kitchen floor. Under Charlie's supervision, Maggie carefully made the stuffing, and prepared the cranberry sauce. Next, she cleaned the walls of the kitchen. Instead of the cheese ball, the sliced sausage would just be served with plain crackers. Charlie reminded Maggie to rotate the turkey pan in the oven every hour, so that it would be evenly cooked. The iced tea, cranberry juice, and decaffeinated coffee were prepared and put into pitchers. The butter cookies Charlie had baked two days earlier were arranged by Maggie onto plates and set aside with the apple and pumpkin pies for dessert. The fold out table in the living room, which usually stood unused in the corner of the room, was brought out, and additional leaves put in place. Vera's good linen table cloth which Charlie had ironed that morning was draped over the table, and chairs were placed around it.

Maggie was enthusiastic. She was doing something important and doing it correctly!

Maggie's clothes had come out of the dryer, so she quickly dressed, returning Charlie's bathrobe to the bedroom.

At twelve o' clock, Vera and Chuck arrived home, remarking how good the house smelled with all the food aromas wafting in from the kitchen. Maggie and Charlie were too busy to pay much attention to any compliments, however, for it was time to take the turkey out of the oven. Carefully, Maggie placed the turkey pan on the counter, and set about to make the mashed potatoes, gravy and the hot rolls. Vera offered to assist Maggie, but was quickly shooed out of the kitchen by Charlie. Maggie was doing just fine, she told Vera.

Next, casserole dishes Charlie had prepared the day before, went into the oven to be warmed. Maggie set the table using Vera's good silverware, (which Charlie had polished that morning), and even set out a paper turkey as a centerpiece, something Maggie herself had bought earlier-- just for today.

It was then that Vera counted the places set at the table.

"Pumpkin," Vera said, addressing her granddaughter, "you're one plate short."

"What?" asked Charlie. "There's you, Daddy, Jeff and his daughter, Maggie and her two parents, and myself. That makes eight."

"What about your uncle?" asked Vera, hurt that Charlie could forget Jerome.

Charlie had assumed Jerome wasn't coming. He was hardly ever at the house, unless it was to pick her up or drop her off from school.

"Maggie," called Charlie, "set another place at the table!"

Chuck and Vera went into the living room and waited for the guests to arrive.

Charlie went down her mental checklist. She couldn't think of anything that had not already been done. Even the kitchen looked clean!

"Am I forgetting anything?" asked Maggie.

"Nope," replied Charlie, smiling. "You did a wonderful job, Maggie! I think this dinner is going to be a success, after all!"

"You already did most of the work," replied Maggie, humbly. "And I only did what I was told."

Just then, Jeff and his eight year old daughter, Debbie, arrived at the front door. Maggie timidly watched from the kitchen as Vera greeted the Ericksons and showed them inside. Jeff had brought a bottle of apple cider which Vera took to the kitchen.

"Thank you for inviting us," Jeff said, shaking Chuck's hand. "This is my daughter, Debbie."

"Please, sit down," said Chuck. "I've been told that some snacks will be here shortly."

In the kitchen, Charlie was putting Maggie's hair up into an attractive French twist.

"Your guests are starting to arrive, Pumpkin," announced Vera, handing the bottle of apple cider to Charlie. "I wish you would go out there and entertain them."

"But Grandma, I still have work to do in here," protested Charlie, not wanting to leave Maggie alone in the kitchen, with a room full of hungry people waiting in the living room.

"But I don't know them!" exclaimed Vera. "You invited them, so you go out there and behave like a hostess should!"

Vera was a little terse with her granddaughter. She had had a rough day with Arnold and was in no humor to sit and make small talk with a bunch of perfect strangers.

"Maggie, take the last of the casseroles out of the oven and place all the food on the table," instructed Charlie. "As soon as Uncle Jerome and your parents arrive, we'll start dinner. Oh, you might as well hand me the sausage and crackers. I'll take them in myself."

Maggie nodded, and handed the snack tray to Charlie.

"Make sure you use the oven mittens like I showed you," said Charlie, giving a last minute warning before she hobbled from the kitchen into the living room.

"Here's your hostess," announced Vera.

Jeff stood up out of politeness and took the tray from Charlie, setting it on the coffee table.

"Thank you for inviting us," he smiled.

"It was our pleasure," replied Charlie, sitting down.

"This is my Debbie," said Jeff, introducing his daughter to Charlie.

"Nice to meet you," said Charlie. "Please, help yourself to some sausage and crackers."

The front door opened and in walked Jerome, wearing his usual scowl.

"Uncle Jerome, this is Jeff Erickson and his daughter Debbie," said Charlie.

Jerome nodded and sat down on the sofa next to Vera. Debbie was quiet and ladylike; she was using her best company manners. Vera was starting to nod to sleep, and Chuck didn't know what to say. An awkward silence hung in the room.

"Dinner shouldn't be too much longer," said Charlie, secretly wondering how Maggie was doing in the kitchen.

A knock on the front door announced Mr. and Mrs. Downens' arrival.

"Maggie, your parents are here," called out Charlie. Maggie appeared from the kitchen and answered the door. As she walked by, Jeff gave her a smile that made Maggie blush.

"Hi, honey," said Mrs. Downen. "I'm sorry we're a little late."

"That's all right," said Maggie, proudly, "dinner is still hot. I just took the baked beans out of the oven. Wait till you see the turkey! And I set the table, too!"

Mrs. Downen gave her daughter a peculiar look. She had never taught Maggie how to cook or run a household. She assumed Maggie would never need to do either of these things for herself. It had been long ago determined, that in the event of Mr. and Mrs. Downens' death, that Maggie should be placed in a group home with others like herself. This was a side of Maggie that Mrs. Downen had never seen before.

"The idiot cooked dinner?" laughed Mr. Downen, his breath betraying the fact that he had had a few drinks before arriving. "This I gotta see!"

Mr. and Mrs. Downen were introduced to Chuck and Vera.

"Please," said Mrs. Downen, shaking Vera's hand, "call us Doug and Linda."

Jeff said his hellos, and introduced his daughter to Doug and Linda. As Charlie hobbled back into the kitchen, she overheard Linda ask Vera,

"Does she always limp like that? What happened?"

"Maggie," whispered Charlie, as her friend was about to carry the hot rolls to the living room table, "is everything ready?"

"Unless I forgot something, I think so," replied Maggie.

"Then as soon as you've placed all the food on the table, Daddy will say a Thanksgiving prayer, and then you seat everyone. Daddy sits at the head of the table, Vera to his right, and myself to his left. Seat your parents together, and Jeff and Debbie and yourself together. Put Jerome next to Vera. Can you remember that? Try to seat all the families together."

Maggie was excited. She nodded happily.

Soon it was time to eat. Before everyone sat down at the table, Chuck bowed his head and led the group in a prayer:

"Heavenly Father," began Chuck, "thank you for your unstinting faithfulness during the past year, and every year. Each day is a gift from You, so let us never take it for granted. As we look ahead, give us the courage to go forward and meet our destinies. As the psalmist said, 'So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.' In Christ's precious name, Amen."

"Everything sure looks good!" commented Chuck as Maggie showed everyone to their seats.

"You have Maggie to thank for that," said Charlie, advertising the fact that her friend had done a good job in the kitchen.

Linda Downen seemed awed by the fact that her daughter could have been part of anything that had turned out successful. She also noted Jeff's attentiveness to Maggie. Even Debbie seemed to like her. While thoughts of Maggie as a wife preoccupied Linda's mind, Doug Downen was busy relating old stories of his son, Wayne. There was the time Wayne pitched a no hitter in Little League, and the time he locked himself out of his car and had to break the window to open the car door, and several other memories of a son that had been missing in action for over thirty years. The years of waiting and wondering without Godly hope had taken their toll on Doug. The only way he felt he could deal with the pain was to drink alcohol. If only Doug and Linda had lived according to Psalm fifty-five, verse twenty-two! "Cast thy burden upon the LORD,

and He SHALL sustain thee." Doug had not cast his burden upon the Lord; he had been carrying it himself, all these years-- and the weight of it was crushing him.

"So, you're a cop, huh?" asked Doug, helping himself to more turkey.

Jeff nodded politely, but tried to say as little as possible to Maggie's father. Doug was obviously drunk, and Jeff didn't want to provoke him into some scene that would embarrass Maggie. But Doug, drunk as he was, noticed Jeff's attentions to his daughter.

"Do you beat people you arrest?" asked Doug. "You know, like them cops we see on television."

Jeff had never beaten anyone in his life. He just smiled and shook his head.

"Please pass the baked beans," asked Charlie, hoping to turn Doug's attention away from Jeff.

"This stuffing is really good," commented Vera.

"Maggie made it," replied Charlie.

"Really?" asked Linda.

"Charlie helped," said Maggie.

"It's delicious, sweetie," said Linda to her daughter.

Maggie beamed. All she needed was someone to take a chance on her, to take the time to teach her what to do and how to go about it.

"If only she could learn the difference between weeds and vegetable plants," thought Charlie, smiling to herself.

This meal was a sign from God that Maggie belonged in a home of her own. Yes, Charlie had really done most of the work, but Maggie had successfully proven to everyone that with time and a lot of practice, she could accomplish more than anyone had previously thought she was capable of.

Doug, seeing he couldn't provoke the policeman, finished his meal and sat down on the sofa to take a nap. The minute he dozed off, everyone in the room breathed a collected sigh of relief.

After everyone had their fill of turkey and stuffing, Maggie, Vera, and Linda cleared away the dishes. Jeff patiently listened to Chuck's story of how he was diagnosed, what medication he was on, and what mental exercises he was doing. Poor Debbie was unwilling to stir from her seat. Doug Downen's smelly breath and caustic behavior toward her father had caused her to wish for the earliest possible time they could leave.

Dessert was soon served, and everyone, (except Doug), helped themselves to apple and pumpkin pie, vanilla ice cream, butter cookies, and a healthy glass full of Jeff's apple cider. All faces shone with the contentment of full stomachs.

"I'm going to have to let my belt out a notch," noted Chuck.

"I might have to do the same," laughed Jeff. As the dessert dishes were cleared away, Debbie whispered something into her father's ear. Jeff nodded, and said, "soon."

In the kitchen, Charlie divvied up the leftovers into plastic containers for each family to take home with them. Even Jerome received one.

"Well," declared Linda, "that sure was a good meal. I'm obliged to you, Charlie, for letting Maggie be a part of it." To Charlie's surprise, Linda gave the teenager a hug. "Doug and I have to be getting on home now. Thanks again for the meal, and the leftovers."

Linda roused her husband from the sofa and walked him out to the car. Doug muttered something that amounted to "thanks," and shuffled out the door.

"I'll do the dishes, Charlie," volunteered Maggie.

"You've done more than your share, today," replied Vera, rolling up her sleeves. "This is my contribution."

Jerome took his plastic container and returned to the nursing home, secretly wondering on the way if he had gotten any more turkey stuffing.

Jeff invited Maggie out for a drive with him and Debbie. Debbie ran to Vera's room to fetch their coats. She was glad to leave. Maggie blushed again and left with Jeff and his daughter.

All the guests had gone. Vera was in the kitchen, washing dishes, while Charlie sank into the sofa and rested her sore ankle on the coffee table.

"Are you going to be able to go to school, Monday?" asked Chuck.

"Yeah," replied Charlie, "I only need to stay off it for a while."

"That was a good Thanksgiving meal," said Chuck.

"Thank God for that," replied Charlie, "for it was no small miracle that the dinner went as well as it did."

That evening, Adam stopped by for a visit. He had waited for Chuck and Charlie to make their routine visit after dinner, and when they didn't show, came to see if everyone was all right.

"Except for a small mishap with Charlie's ankle, everyone here is fine," declared Chuck, contentedly reclined on the sofa.

Adam sat down and felt at ease. No one said much, but being in the company of close friends no one had to say much to be happy.

After an hour, Adam got up to leave.

"Are you playing chess with Uncle Jerome, tonight?" asked Charlie.

"Yeah," replied Adam. "Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," smiled Charlie. "Well, I'm going to turn in early. Goodnight, Daddy," said Charlie bending over to kiss her father. "Goodnight, Adam."

As Charlie hobbled away to her room, she overheard Adam say to her father,

"That's quite a girl you have."

"Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God!"

~ Matthew 5:9 ~

"Praise ye the LORD. O give thanks unto the LORD; for He is good: for His mercy endureth for ever."

~ Psalms 106:1 ~

"Enter into His [God's] gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise: be thankful unto Him, and bless His name." ~ Psalms 100:4 ~

Chapter Twenty-seven

True Friends

"Herein do I [every Christian] exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men."

~ Acts 24:16 ~

December brought Thomas Garner home from promoting his do-it-yourself books at fairs and conventions, to spend the Christmas holiday with his family. He had been away since September, having only been in contact with his family by telephone. To celebrate his homecoming, Shirley was going to throw a party and invite all their friends and neighbors.

It was soon after Shirley had sent out the invitations, that Adam learned from Chad that though Chuck and Vera had been invited, Charlie had not.

"She's always around your house," later explained Shirley, to her bewildered brother.

"There's nothing inappropriate about her behavior," replied Adam. "You're overreacting to absolutely nothing."

"Mike visits your house a lot," prodded Shirley.

"So?" replied Adam.

"Oh, men!" exclaimed Shirley.

"I don't get whatever you're driving at, Sis."

"You know I'm not one to listen to gossip," began Shirley, "but there's some ugly rumors going around that Mike and some mystery girl are having an affair. I know it's not true-- Mike doesn't even have a steady girlfriend, but I don't want to give everyone more reasons to gossip. If you'll only discourage Charlie Overholt from visiting as frequently, I'm sure everything would just go away!"

Adam sighed. Apparently, Mike had not yet told his mother of Sandra Weston, nor of the fact that things between he and Sandra were becoming serious. Adam knew Mike would not sleep with anyone outside of marriage, so that part of the rumor didn't bother him. What did, was the fact that Mike was still keeping their relationship a secret. The plumber remembered warning

Mike that nothing excites gossip like a secret. Now Shirley had wrongly concluded that the "mystery girl" was Charlie.

"Not that such a thing could happen," continued Shirley. "Charlie's so young-- Mike would never even consider her, but when Mrs. Jacobs informed me what everyone else was saying, I had to take action, action that would show conclusively that we had nothing to hide."

"By not inviting Charlie, aren't you only confirming their gossip?" asked Adam, sighing. "Sister, you care too much for what people say."

"You don't care enough!" retorted Shirley. "Do you know what they call you?" she asked. "The Bat! My own brother! And do you know why? Because you keep all hours of the night in that garden, or else the lights in your windows are on, so that the neighbors can see that you're not asleep like any normal person. If you would only give a little thought as to what others will think, you wouldn't make yourself susceptible to such rude name-calling."

"Now, Sis," replied Adam, resisting the impulse to throw up his hands and walk away, "I'm willing to do reasonable things to not excite gossip, but when it interferes with who I am-- things I can't help..."

"You mean things you *won't* help!" interrupted Shirley, getting out a handkerchief and wiping a tear from her eye. "If you won't think of me, and what I have to go through when people like Mrs. Jacobs confront me with such slander, then think of Mom and what she has to endure!"

"She wouldn't have to endure so much if you'd only take her back home where she belongs!" interjected Adam. As soon as he had said it, he was sorry. Shirley broke out into unrestrained tears. "Please forgive me, I shouldn't have said that," apologized Adam, his temper cooling. Shirley nodded.

This had been a sore subject for both brother and sister ever since Shirley had first placed their mother in Mullen-Overholt.

"Mom said you're doing your best, so we'll just leave it at that," said Adam.

"What are you going to do about Charlie?" asked Shirley, returning to their first discussion.

"Invite her," replied Adam, resolutely.

"But what will people say?" asked Shirley.

"Why should you consider other people?" asked Adam. "As long as we're living with an honest conscience before God, and we endeavor to have a good testimony before all, why should we consider the opinion of those who think so meanly of us as to believe such ugly lies? As if we could force them to think or say differently than they do!"

"Still..." hesitated Shirley.

"Very well, for your sake and for Mom's, I promise I'll do something about it," said Adam.

"What are you going to do?"

"Leave that to me," replied the plumber.

"Thank you, Adam," smiled Shirley, hugging her brother.

The next opportunity Adam had to pull Mike aside, he confronted him with what his mother had said concerning the "mystery girl."

"But it's none of Mrs. Jacob's business!" fought back Mike.

"That may be, but it IS your mother's business. She loves you enough to know you're innocent, but she's under the misapprehension that Charlie is the one everyone thinks is your girlfriend. It's not fair to Charlie for her to have to bear the burden of your secret," said Adam.

"I guess you're right," yielded Mike. "I don't suppose you would explain it to Mom, for me?" grinned Mike, hopefully.

"Don't you think that after everything you've put your mother through, you owe it to her, to tell the truth, yourself?"

"What's Mom going to say when she finds out that even Sandra's parents know about us?" groaned Mike. Then something else came to Mike's mind. "Charlie is just a baby," he reflected, "surely no one actually thinks I could possibly... ewwww!" he shuddered.

When Chuck and Charlie visited Adam in his garden that evening, as was their routine, Adam made a proposition that surprised Chuck but delighted Charlie.

"Oh, please, Daddy, say yes!" pleaded Charlie, excitedly.

"But it will interfere with school," debated Chuck.

"I'll do my homework after I finish working here," she reasoned, "and it won't effect my grades one bit! Oh, it's terribly nice of you, Adam," thanked Charlie. "I've been wanting an after-school job for a while now, but was putting it off until I got my learner's permit. Are you sure you really need a housekeeper?"

"I'd have done this sooner, but I hate the thought of strangers unsupervised in my house. Currently, Shirley insists on doing my housekeeping. She feels guilty about me living by myself, or something, so she'll be glad I finally hired someone."

"Please, Daddy?" begged Charlie.

"If Jerome is willing to drop you off here instead of at home," resigned Chuck, "then I guess it's all right with me."

Adam gave Charlie a rough idea of what would be expected: vacuuming, dusting, sweeping, laundry, cleaning the windows, and other ordinary household chores.

On the walk back home, Charlie realized that in her excitement, she had forgotten about her father.

"Daddy, I forgot! You're with Grandma all day at the nursing home, and if I go on to Adam's house, you can't go home until she does! I'll go back and tell Adam I can't accept the job," resolved Charlie.

"I already thought of that when I gave my permission," said Chuck, stopping his daughter. "I don't mind being at Mullen-Overholt. There's a guy in room three who's really good at checkers!" he said, trying to brighten Charlie's disappointed face.

"But, Daddy..."

"It's all right," consoled Chuck putting his arm around Charlie's shoulder and resuming their walk back home. "Maybe I could get a job. Surely there's something I can still do," he mused.

"You could be an airline pilot," suggested Charlie. "Women love men in uniforms!"

"Naw," rejected Chuck.

"I know! You could become a doctor and find a cure for Alzheimer's!" laughed Charlie.

"Oh, much too hard!" smiled Chuck. "Can't you think of anything easier?"

"A janitor?" joked Charlie.

"Now you're talking! Do you think women would still love me then?" he mused.

"This one will," said Charlie, hugging her father. "Always."

Charlie's first day of her new job as Adam's housekeeper was successful, except for one incident that would occupy her curiosity for some time to come.

The plumber hadn't been at home, so Charlie went to the broom closet and set up the vacuum as she had been instructed. She cleaned the bottom floors, and had just finished the top of the stairs, when she came to the first door to the left of the hallway. It had been the same door she had tried to open the night Chuck had went missing. She tried the handle and found it was still locked. Under the door, she saw a sliver of sunlight, as coming from an open window. Knowing Adam wasn't home, she put down the vacuum cleaner hose and ran downstairs. She went outside and counted windows until she came to the right one. The green shutters were open, but since it was on the second story, she couldn't see inside. She thought about climbing the big tree closest to the window and looking inside. Charlie pictured herself shimmying up the trunk, only to fall off a limb while trying to look inside, what was most likely, the guest bedroom. She laughed in spite of herself.

Charlie resumed her work and was cleaning the master bedroom shower when Adam arrived. She heard his van pull up outside, and tried to hurry so she could get out of his way, in case he wanted to use the shower. A few minutes passed. Charlie came out of the bathroom, passing through Adam's sparsely decorated master bedroom, and headed down the hall when she noticed that the room with the locked door was slightly ajar. Thinking he was in the room, she reached for the door handle but quickly pulled it back when the door suddenly opened. Adam's startled face betrayed the fact he had forgotten she was in the house.

"Oh, that's right, you start today," he stammered, quickly shutting the door behind him.

"I heard you drive up," replied Charlie, somehow feeling as though she were caught in the act of snooping. "I was just coming to let you know that you're out of detergent."

"Thanks," muttered Adam, perturbed that she might have seen inside the room.

Charlie wanted to ask, but she refrained herself. It was none of her business.

"There's one more thing I think you should know," said Charlie, in a grave voice.

"What?" asked Adam, stiffening.

"Your vacuum cleaner needs a new bag," she replied, anticlimactically.

Adam breathed a sigh of relief.

"You really should get a new vacuum," joked Charlie as they went downstairs. "They make them without bags, nowadays."

"I'll remember that," smiled Adam, still not as relaxed as he usually was. "I'll get my keys and drive you home."

"Don't bother," replied Charlie, picking up her school backpack. "It's not far. See you tomorrow," she waved.

Charlie could feel Adam's eyes on the back of her neck as she walked down the street. What was he hiding? His behavior defied explanation. Just when Charlie thought she really knew him, Adam showed a side of himself that made her think twice.

Upon returning the next day, the Master Plumber acted as though all were forgotten. He was his usual self and the mysterious door remained locked.

As Adam had half expected, Shirley disapproved of Charlie's new job as his housekeeper. However, Shirley had to admit that when Mike explained his relationship with Sandra Weston, Shirley's perceived danger of Charlie's presence had diminished greatly. When a prying neighbor would begin to question her about Charlie and her eldest son, Shirley would reply that Charlie was simply Adam's part-time housekeeper, and that was all. To Shirley, this was a much better answer than to say nothing.

In light of Charlie's newfound work status, she was invited with Chuck and Vera to Thomas Garner's homecoming Christmas party. Chuck, who was uneasy with crowds, (because they disoriented him easily), bowed out of going, leaving Vera and Charlie to represent the family at

the party. Mrs. Jacobs, who had also been invited, offered to drive Vera and her granddaughter to the party.

The Garners' house was decked with dancing Christmas lights from one end of the house to the other. An outdoor Christmas tree festooned with yet more lights, stood grandly in the front yard. A plastic snowman with his painted eyes looking upward as if welcoming the nonexistent snowfall, greeted the guests as they entered the fashionable adobe house.

Inside, it was a catered affair. Waiters dressed in black vests mingled through the crowd, balancing trays crowded with fancy crystal glasses. A photographer was busily snapping pictures; the photos would be printed into a small album that would be later sent to all the guests as a way of remembering the occasion. In the large dining room, the party coordinator was making the last alterations to the elaborate centerpiece.

The stair banister was wound with an evergreen bough, accented with gold pine cones, bright red holly berries, and a long, white satin ribbon. The gas fireplace log was lit, giving the room a wintery feel that was decidedly lacking outside. Besides the cool weather that required a coat, it was difficult for Charlie to tell if it were really winter or not.

In the living room, Shirley was entertaining their guests with festive small talk. Thomas, looking dressy in his tuxedo, was at the other end of the room, debating with one of the guests as to the best way to dovetail a dresser drawer he was working on. Chad was sitting on the stairs with Becky, Sandra Weston's eight year old sister. They shared a plate of goodies between them while Chad described to his blind guest the party below. Mike and Sandra, who were officially a couple, could now be seen together in public. Adam had brought Constance as his date, and both seemed to be having a good time. Vera and Mrs. Jacobs mixed into the crowd, easily conversing with the others.

Charlie tried to look like she was enjoying herself, but she didn't recognize anyone, except a few of the Garners' friends she remembered seeing at Mike's birthday party. Charlie smoothed out the elegant black formal she had bought for the occasion. It was the first major purchase she had made with her own money. It gave her a feeling of independence-- something which she hadn't had in the recent months.

Then a familiar face appeared from the crowd. It was Kendra Hanna, the younger of the Hanna twins.

"I didn't know you were coming!" greeted Charlie.

"Quite a party, isn't it?" observed Kendra, holding an eggnog in her right hand. "Mrs. Garner gives the most formal parties in Twin Yucca," she groaned. "Boring, huh?"

"A little," smiled Charlie.

"You're looking good," remarked Kendra. "You certainly didn't get that dress from charity." It was common knowledge that most of Charlie's clothes were hand-me-downs from Mrs. Jacobs' sister in Topeka, who had organized a clothing drive for the needy. Charlie smiled politely. "I've already asked Mom for permission to leave this party early and hang out with a few other kids. Want to come?"

"I have to call Dad first," said Charlie.

"Sure," replied Kendra. "Charlie, look, there's Scottie Zimmerman. Isn't he cute? If he were to ask me to marry him today, I'd say 'yes!'"

"You're only fifteen," laughed Charlie.

"A girl's got to plan ahead," replied Kendra. "Oh! He's coming this way! Is my hair all right?"

"Are you ready to get out of here?" asked Scottie, addressing Kendra. "Jenna and Sara are already waiting outside."

"Scottie, you remember Charlie from school, don't you?" asked Kendra.

"Oh yeah, the quiet girl," recalled Scottie. "You're welcome to come, too. We're not going to do anything special-- just hang out."

"Let me go make a quick call, first," said Charlie. She reappeared a minute later, with her father's consent.

Charlie could see her breath as they stepped out into the cold evening air.

"I hope it snows," Jenna was saying to Sara, as the three teens joined them.

"Does it ever?" asked Charlie, surprised.

"Last year it snowed for three whole hours," laughed Scottie.

"Charlie, guess what?" asked Kendra, suddenly remembering that she had big news to tell. "You couldn't possibly guess!"

"Dad said we could get a car when we got our learners' permits," informed Jenna, not waiting for Charlie to guess. "The only problem is that we're going to have to SHARE the car," complained Jenna.

"Well, if you don't want to use it, it'll just mean more car time for me," triumphed Kendra.

"Oh, stop it you two," sighed Sara, "it's too cold to argue."

The five teenagers walked down the road leading back to Twin Yucca. Sara and the twins walked ahead, chattering about the excitement of the new car, while Scottie lingered behind a little to fall into step with Charlie, who preferred to remain quiet.

"They can talk your ear off, if you're not careful," he smiled, good naturedly.

"I don't mind," replied Charlie, turning up the collar of her coat to warm her neck. "How far is it back to town?" she asked.

"If you keep along this road, it's a few miles, but we're going to take a short-cut," answered Scottie.

"A few miles!" exclaimed Charlie, under her breath.

Up ahead, Sara, Jenna, and Kendra had turned off into a field, disappearing in the darkening evening. When Charlie and Scottie reached the edge of the field where the others had gone, she saw a worn dirt path parting the undergrowth and yellowed grass.

"Twin Yucca is full of these trails," said Scottie.

"Who made them?" asked Charlie, curiously.

"Animals," replied Scottie. "Mostly, wild dogs."

"Wild dogs?" repeated Charlie. "Just how safe is this short-cut?"

"They won't bother us," assured Scottie. "They upset people's trash cans, and carry off small pets who wander too far from home, but if you keep a careful distance, they're pretty harmless."

Charlie was beginning to seriously question the safety of the situation, when the path broke off onto the paved road, once more. She could see Sara and the Hanna twins, further up the road, still talking. They didn't look concerned, so Charlie felt a little easier. After all, Charlie was the new kid, still adapting to her surroundings.

"Do you miss your friends back in Montana?" asked Scottie.

"To be honest, I didn't have that many friends to miss," said Charlie, surprised at her own candidness.

"Why not?" asked Scottie, curiously.

"I don't know," shrugged Charlie, a little self-consciously. "I suppose, that after my best friend died, I didn't feel like making new friends."

"I've never known anyone that died, except my great grandpa, but even then I didn't really know him," said Scottie. "What was your friend like?"

"Donna was a librarian," explained Charlie. "Donna absolutely loved piano, especially one solo pianist-- Wallace Shipley. She introduced me to his music when I was eight years old, when she gave me one of his albums for my birthday. Wallace Shipley has only made four albums, but I've listened to all of them a million times!"

"I've heard of him," commented Scottie. "Mom has one of his albums, a Christmas one, I think."

"Epiphany," replied Charlie.

"What?" asked Scottie.

"Epiphany, that's the name of the Christmas album," informed Charlie.

"Oh," replied Scottie, growing bored with the conversation. He considered Wallace Shipley's solo piano to be dull and monotonous-- something only grown-ups had the ability to enjoy.

The short-cut had worked, for the teenagers arrived in town much sooner than Charlie had anticipated. Instinctively, they gravitated to Dairy Cream, a favorite haunt of the local teens.

"It's too cold to eat outside!" exclaimed Sara, as the group passed the outdoor tables.

"I'm in the mood for a hot chili dog and nachos with melted cheese!" exclaimed Kendra.

The restaurant was relatively quiet, causing Charlie to wonder if everyone had been invited to the Garners' party.

"What have you two been talking about?" asked Jenna, as they picked a table and sat down.

"Dog trails and music," replied Charlie, taking off her coat.

"She's into Wallace Shipley," said Scottie, referring to Charlie.

"BOOOOORING!" said Jenna, as if to insult Charlie on purpose.

"He's not that bad," defended Scottie, unwilling to let Jenna dominate yet another argument.

"You can't sing to his music," refuted Jenna.

"And you can't dance to it, either," chimed in Kendra.

"Could we PLEASE change the subject?" suggested Sara.

"OK," said Jenna, still wanting to exact revenge. "Scottie, whatever happened to you and what's her name... Debbie? I thought you two were going steady? It didn't take you long to find another 'soul mate'!" Ever since Scottie had broken up with Debbie Randall, Jenna was waiting and hoping that she would be his new girlfriend. However, Scottie had made no such indication, and Jenna, still flustered over having to share the new car with her sister, was venting her anger on Scottie and Charlie.

"You can really be mean, Jenna," observed Sara.

"Stop picking on my sister!" retorted Kendra, who also had cause to be jealous of the attention Charlie was receiving from Scottie.

Charlie was trying to keep up with the conversation, unclear what Jenna and Kendra were talking about. After a few more unkind exchanges, the Hanna twins stormed off, leaving Charlie, Scottie, and Sara behind at the Dairy Cream table.

"Whatever happened to 'love thy neighbour as thyself'?" remarked Sara. "Sometimes, those two are too much!"

"You said it!" agreed Scottie. "I'm glad we're not like THEM!"

The waitress arrived with their tray and set it on the table. Charlie was still puzzling over what had just transpired, when she suddenly recognized the waitress.

"Maggie!" exclaimed Charlie, pleasantly surprised, "I forgot, you work here, don't you!" She got up from the table and gave her good friend an expected hug.

"I usually don't work nights, but I'm filling in," Maggie explained.

Scottie and Sara looked uncomfortable. Sara had been the one who had once claimed she would never be caught dead with "Mad Maggie." Scottie was the boy who had watched while his friends pushed Maggie around at the bus stop-- a fact Charlie had forgotten until she saw Scottie's guilty face.

Maggie recognized her former antagonist, but for Charlie's sake, pretended as though she didn't know him.

"Scottie and Sara, this is my good friend, Maggie," said Charlie.

Sara was ashamed of herself. Only a minute ago, she had accused the Hanna twins of not loving their neighbor. Scottie was feeling similar pangs of remorse.

"Nice to meet you," smiled Sara, shaking Maggie's hand.

"I'm sorry for the bus stop thing," apologized Scottie, shaking Maggie's hand. "I shouldn't have even been with those other two guys."

"You tried to help," smiled Maggie. "I have to go back to work now. It was nice meeting you both."

After Maggie left, the three teens soberly sat at the table. Charlie reproached herself, that for Maggie's sake, she hadn't remembered that Scottie was one of the boys at the bus stop.

"She's nice, Charlie," reflected Scottie.

"You know, when everyone was dumping on Maggie at school," confessed Sara, "I knew it was wrong, but I wanted to fit in. I didn't want to be different. I had forgotten that God said His people were peculiar. '[Jesus] gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works,'" Sara quoted. "It was one of my memory verses."

For Sara and Scottie, the two small incidents concerning Maggie had given them both a glimpse of what the rest of their lives had been lacking. They had professed Christ, but their deeds and words denied Christ. In First John, chapter three, verses eighteen through twenty-one, the Bible says, "My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God." When confronted by their sins, Sara and Scottie did not have the confidence that assured their hearts before God. Instead, their hearts condemned their actions.

Charlie sat thoughtfully, musing over the strange turn of events. God truly does everything for a reason-- even this soul-searching evening.

"If only," thought Charlie regretfully, "if only Donna had had such an evening."

"Godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death. For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge!"

~ 2 Corinthians 7:10-11 ~

"Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him."

~ Luke 17:3 ~

Chapter Twenty-eight

Secrets and Announcements

"A talebearer revealeth secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter."

~ Proverbs 11:13 ~

Charlie's first Christmas Day in Twin Yucca was solemn and uneventful; Jerome, who controlled the family finances, had declared that they didn't have money for gifts, or any more fancy meals. By this, Charlie understood that Jerome had disapproved of the Thanksgiving meal she and Maggie had prepared. Charlie, who was now making a generous sum from her housekeeping, was prepared to make up for the lack with her own money. However, when she saw the hurt look on Chuck and Vera's faces when she offered, Charlie quickly downplayed her disappointment at not having a traditional Christmas celebration. Chuck felt badly that he was unable to give his daughter the Christmas she deserved, while Vera, in her unwillingness to judge her son for what he was, did her best to justify Jerome's motives.

January slipped by Charlie in a daze of daily routine and endless homework. All seemed to Charlie to be stuck in predictable cycles of sameness, until one day, early in February.

Charlie had been dusting in Adam's living room, when the phone rang. Adam's answering machine beeped and waited for the caller to leave their message, but instead of talking, the person hung up. Thinking nothing was out of the ordinary, Charlie went back to work. Again, the phone rang, and again, the caller hung up instead of leaving a message. This happened six more times. Charlie was tempted to answer the phone and tell whoever it was to stop it. Just when she finally decided that enough was enough, the calls stopped. Charlie later told Adam what had transpired, but he didn't seem affected.

The next few days seemed to be normal again, until one day, while Charlie was housekeeping for Adam, the phone rang. The machine beeped and the caller hung up. Knowing Adam was in the next room, Charlie thought it strange that he hadn't answered it himself. The phone rang again, and again, the caller hung up. Charlie laid aside the kitchen broom, and went into the living room where Adam was, curious as to what was going on.

She found Adam, at his desk, staring at the phone. His face looked grave, and troubled-- yet Charlie thought she observed one other emotion she had never seen in Adam before: pain. Charlie wanted to say something comforting, but she didn't know what to say. Instead, she straitened the books on the coffee table and went back to the kitchen, grieved that her friend seemed to be so troubled by something he wasn't willing to talk to her about.

The phone rang again. Charlie held her breath, waiting to see if Adam would answer the call, or not. This time, she could hear Adam pick up the receiver. She tiptoed to the kitchen door and pressed her ear against it, straining to hear what he was saying. Most of the conversation was muffled, but near the end, she heard Adam's voice pleading with the caller. She could make out the words,

"Please, don't do this to me!"

Charlie wanted to march into the living room, pry the receiver from his hand and make the caller stop torturing Adam. The receiver hung up, and Charlie realized that she had lost her opportunity.

Inching the kitchen door open, Charlie peeked through the crack to see what Adam was doing now. When she saw that the desk chair was empty, she opened the door all the way and looked about the living room for the plumber. He was nowhere to be found. Concerned, she searched the bottom floor, and then proceeded to go upstairs. Charlie stopped in her tracks when she noticed a light from under the mysterious locked door. Afraid that the door might suddenly open to find her gawking, Charlie proceeded no further. However, even from where she stood at the top of the stairs, she could hear Adam sobbing. Distressed and confused, Charlie silently retreated.

What had the caller said that could hurt him so much? And why was that door always locked? Charlie couldn't help but wonder if there was a connection.

That night, Chuck wanted to finish off their walk by stopping by Adam's backyard, as was their routine.

"Daddy, let's go home," resisted Charlie.

"Why?" asked Chuck, unwilling to forego his visit with Adam. It was a time he looked forward to every day.

"I don't want to intrude," explained Charlie, knowing that her explanation sounded mysterious, for she had not told anyone about that day, nor of the locked door.

"Nonsense," said Chuck, swinging open Adam's wrought iron gate.

Charlie was half pulling her father back, and half guiding him forward. It was more than idle curiosity, but genuine concern for someone she had grown to trust and respect.

"Where is he?" asked Chuck, more to himself than to his daughter.

From outside, they observed that all the lights in the house were out, save one on the second story. Charlie recognized this to be the mysterious room. Tugging at her father's arm, Charlie led Chuck out of the garden.

"Why didn't he come out?" asked Chuck, somewhat hurt.

"I don't know, Daddy," was all Charlie could reply.

Charlie didn't do any housekeeping for Adam the next day, for it was Saturday. She was grateful for this fact, because it was the perfect excuse to stay away. She wanted desperately to help him, but couldn't, as long as he was unwilling to share his problem with her.

Chuck seemed unusually sullen Saturday morning. Before departing to the nursing home to be with Arnold, Vera suggested Chuck find something to occupy himself with.

"Like what?" asked Chuck as his mother was starting down the sidewalk.

"Well," paused Vera, looking back at the house, "why don't you clean the gutters? They certainly need it."

"All right," sighed Chuck.

Not possessing a ladder, Chuck went inside and brought out a kitchen chair and placed it beside the house. Armed with gloves and a spade, Chuck stepped up onto the chair. Mrs. Jacobs from across the street, eyed the strange spectacle from her cactus garden. Chuck placed his right foot on the wooden fence separating his house from the house next door, and hoisted himself onto the sloping rooftop.

"What is that man up to?" wondered Mrs. Jacobs.

Bracing himself so he wouldn't fall off, Chuck began to clear the gutters with his spade.

Shaking her head, Mrs. Jacobs resumed weeding her cactus garden. She briefly went inside for something and returned, only to notice that Chuck was no longer to be seen on the roof. Thinking he was now working on the other side of the house, she went back to her garden. As she worked, she had the nagging feeling that something was wrong.

When Mrs. Jacobs crossed the street, she saw Chuck lying on the ground, holding his head between his hands.

"What happened?" cried Mrs. Jacobs, helping Chuck to his feet.

"I fell," replied Chuck, rubbing his head.

"Chuck, you're bleeding," observed Mrs. Jacobs, guiding him to the house.

"Vera!" she shouted, "Vera, get out here quickly! There's been an accident!"

Charlie came running out of the house. Blood was trickling down the right side of Chuck's face.

"What happened?" cried Charlie.

"We'd better get him to the emergency room," instructed Mrs. Jacobs.

While the doctor stitched up the cut on Chuck's head, Charlie and Mrs. Jacobs waited in the hall. Vera was phoned, and soon arrived at the hospital with Jerome.

"What happened?" asked Jerome.

"He fell off the house roof," replied Charlie.

"What was he doing up there?" demanded Jerome, angrily.

"I don't know," replied Charlie, resenting her uncle's anger. She felt this was not her fault.

"He was cleaning the gutters," volunteered Mrs. Jacobs. "I saw him up there, plain as day!"

"Who gave him that bright idea?" sneered Jerome, glaring at Charlie.

"I did," mumbled Vera. "I thought it would be good for him," she explained. "He needed something useful to do."

The doctor opened the door and Chuck came out, his head bandaged.

"He's going to be all right," announced the doctor, patting Chuck on the back. "Just a superficial wound. It looked worse than it really was. However, he did suffer some concussion, so I don't want him sleeping tonight. Someone needs to stay up with him and keep him awake."

"I'll do it," volunteered Charlie.

"No, I'll stay up with him," interposed Jerome.

"Tomorrow isn't a school day," reasoned Charlie.

"What I say, goes," commanded Jerome.

Charlie bit her lip. For her father's sake, she would remain quiet, and not make the situation more unpleasant for him than it already was.

For the sake of convenience, Jerome took Chuck to work that night, that is to say, he dragged Chuck to Mullen-Overholt. Jerome reasoned that the night shift could keep an eye on his younger brother while he got some sleep.

Carol Lentz, acting Assistant Director of Nursing who had the weekend shift, protested that her staff had enough work to do without the added load of taking care of someone whom they were not professionally responsible for. Realizing he wasn't going to receive free help after all, Jerome stayed up with Chuck, watching TV together in the small living quarters behind Jerome's office. It was such a peculiar break from Jerome's routine, that he didn't even notice Adam's absence or their usual chess game.

Sunday morning, on her way to church, Charlie stopped by Mullen-Overholt to see how her father had fared. She found him fast asleep on Jerome's couch, after having stayed awake the entire night.

At church, Charlie saw Adam sitting in his usual place, with his sister and the boys. Charlie tried not to stare, but Adam's eyes were half closed, as if fighting off sleep. His eyelids shut, his head jerked forward, and he would awaken. This happened so many times during the course of the service, that Charlie's heart went out to him.

After the church service, Charlie overheard Shirley scolding Adam as they filed out the door.

"If you tried harder to stay on a normal sleep schedule, this wouldn't happen!"

"Honestly, pastor," said Shirley, shaking hands with the minister, "I don't know what I'm going to do with him!"

"I thought he fought it valiantly," smiled the pastor, shaking hands with Adam.

Monday, when Charlie came to work, she found Adam's house in an unsettling disarray. Books littered the living room floor. "How to Learn Spanish" was open on the coffee table, as was "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" and "The World's Hardest Crossword Puzzles." In the kitchen, it looked as though no one had done the dishes for the past two days. Charlie went upstairs and found Adam's bed still unmade, the sheets twisted as though the occupant had had been tossing and turning, instead of sleeping.

Suddenly, the phone rang. Angrily, Charlie picked up the receiver to scold the caller for doing this to her friend. To Charlie's surprise, the caller was a young woman.

"Who is this?" demanded the young woman.

"I'm Charlie Overholt, and I think what you're doing to Adam is cruel!" said Charlie, indignantly.

"Where is Adam?" asked the caller.

"I don't know, but if I did, I wouldn't tell you!" cried Charlie. "You should be ashamed of yourself, tormenting this poor man!"

"I'm not the one who should be ashamed!" retorted the young woman. "At least I'm not a *murderer!*"

Charlie was stunned into silence.

"He killed Cathy, and I'm going to make him pay for it!" shouted the caller.

"I don't believe you! Adam's never hurt anyone in his life!"

"You don't know him very well, do you?" scoffed the woman. "Tell him I haven't forgotten!" The caller abruptly hung up.

Charlie was breathless after the conversation. She went to the kitchen sink and threw cold water on her face. Her hands were shaking and she felt like crying.

She looked about the messy kitchen. Was this the guilty conscience of a murderer? Charlie thought about the numerous times she and Adam had talked about God, and how essential it was to the Christian walk to "have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men." She remembered the many times Adam had sacrificed his time for her father's comfort; how he gave the fruits of his garden to those who couldn't afford it otherwise; the countless times he had interceded for the residents of Mullen-Overholt while playing chess with her uncle. And then there was the night Adam led her to Christ, on the dark landscape of the Mojave. She remembered his tears as he pled for her soul before God, and how gently he had treated her at all times.

"She's wrong!" breathed Charlie. "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit! I know Adam has his secrets, but murder isn't one of them!" With her newfound resolve, Charlie went about cleaning the house.

By the time Charlie finished the housework, Adam had still not returned. Wanting to at least see him before she left, she went into the garden and watered the tomatoes, waiting for him to come home.

Ten minutes later, Charlie heard the front door, for she had left open the kitchen window on purpose, so she could hear the door from the garden.

"It's happening again, isn't it?" Shirley was saying. "Mike said you got Dan to fill in for you at work," she added, as if to prove her point. "When was the last time you got some sleep?"

"The night before last-- maybe," said Adam, tossing his keys onto the coffee table. "Really Sis, you're not helping matters. Just let me deal with it in my own way."

"Are you sure the sleeping medication didn't work?" asked Shirley. "Maybe you should see the doctor, again."

"Please, go home," begged Adam, wearily. "I'm too tired to debate with you."

"But not tired enough to sleep," remarked Shirley. "I'm keeping Chad away from here, so you can get some rest," she said, just now noticing the house was tidy. "When did you clean up?"

"Now that you mention it, the house does look better," replied Adam. "Charlie must have been here."

"Well, she's doing a better job than I was giving her credit for," replied Shirley, getting ready to go. "Please, Adam, get some sleep!" With that, Shirley left.

Adam sighed. As if sleep could come by his willing it more.

Charlie overheard the conversation, while working in the garden.

Minutes later, Adam entered the backyard, wearing his gardening overalls.

"I hope you're not expecting overtime," he warned, smiling.

Charlie laughed, noting that even his smile was tired.

"I heard about your father," said Adam. "I'm glad he's going to be all right. You've done enough here, why don't you go home now?"

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" asked Charlie.

"Now isn't the best time for company," said Adam, seriously.

"You do look tired," observed Charlie. "Why don't you sit down under the shade tree and rest, while I finish this row of lettuce?"

"Please don't tell me what to do," said Adam, becoming agitated. "First Shirley, and now you. Please, go home!"

"If you don't mind so very much," persisted Charlie, trying to think of an excuse, "I need a friend right now. Because of Daddy's accident, things have been a little difficult at home. Please don't send me away just yet."

Realizing that she wasn't there to feel sorry for him, Adam sat down under the shade tree. After Charlie finished hoeing the row of lettuce, she came and sat down on the ground beside him.

"What's wrong at home?" asked Adam, not realizing that for the first time in days his mind was not dwelling on the fact he couldn't sleep.

"Uncle Jerome blames me for Daddy's accident," said Charlie. "Even though Grandma told him it was her idea for Daddy to clean the gutters-- not mine."

"Why do you think he blames you, then?" asked Adam, yawning.

"Because Daddy is my responsibility," explained Charlie. "Even so, how was I to know he would climb up on the roof?"

"I see," yawned Adam, his eyelids drooping.

"I thought Daddy was at Mullen-Overholt, not on the roof," continued Charlie.

"Uh-huh," said Adam, his breathing becoming regulated and heavy.

"And I don't understand why elephants have flat feet..." whispered Charlie, getting up and tiptoeing away.

"Feet..." repeated Adam, dreamily.

When the plumber awakened several hours later, he found a prepared meal waiting for him in the refrigerator.

It was Valentine's Day and Mike Garner was nervous. After rechecking his pocket for a certain item, he pulled into Sandra Weston's driveway and got out of the car.

Becky, Sandra's little sister, greeted him at the door.

"Sandra, Mike's here!" Becky called out.

"I'll be down in a minute!" Sandra called from upstairs.

"Can you keep a secret?" asked Mike bending over Becky and whispering something in her ear. Becky's face lit up in surprise.

"She will," replied Becky, beaming with excitement. "Can't I tell Mom and Dad?" she asked.

"Not yet," warned Mike. "She might say 'no.'"

"She's been up there for hours trying to find the right outfit," giggled Becky. "I think she already suspects."

"What are you two up to?" asked Sandra, coming downstairs.

"You look great," complimented Mike.

"Thank you," smiled Sandra.

"Have a good time, honey," came a woman's voice from the den.

"Bye, Mom," called Sandra, giving Becky a quick kiss, and departing with Mike.

"On the phone last night, you wouldn't say where we were going," said Sandra, getting into the car, while Mike held the door open for her, "only to dress formal. Is it still a secret?"

"You'll see," grinned Mike.

Mike was about to break the hearts of all single women in Twin Yuca under the age of twenty-five. He took Sandra to the fanciest restaurant in town. When it came time to order desert, a waiter, tipped by Mike, delivered a dozen long stemmed red roses to their table.

"How beautiful!" exclaimed Sandra.

It was then that she noticed tiny messages embossed in gold, on the petals of the red roses. The messages all read, "Will you marry me?"

The couple had the whole restaurant's attention when Mike got down on one knee and presented the ring to Sandra.

"Will you marry me?" asked Mike.

"Yes!" replied Sandra, hugging Mike. The restaurant burst into clapping.

When they returned home, the couple broke the news to Sandra's parents, Horace and Millie. Sandra and Mike were heartily congratulated. While Millie cried because her "baby" was getting married, Horace called Mike, "Son," for the first time.

Late that night, Mike told his Mom, who promptly called Thomas, who was at a convention in Boise. Shirley wasn't as thrilled as the Westons over the engagement, for she wished Mike would have waited till he had gotten his journeyman's license. Even so, she was happy for her son.

When Adam heard the news, he hugged his nephew and said,

"Aside from Chad, I'm the only bachelor left in the family. I knew it would change, sooner or later. Life doesn't remain stationary."

Every girl in Twin Yucca, at one time or another, fancied themselves in love with Mike, and Charlie was no exception. She was happy for Mike and his family, and surprised even herself with how unaffected she was at the news.

Things were changing at home for Charlie. Chuck's Alzheimer's was growing worse. The fall had hastened his Alzheimer's, a fact which the doctor later confirmed. Charlie tried her best to weather through her father's changing personality, paranoid calls to the police, and erratic behavior, but it wasn't until a certain incident, that Charlie began to gravely reconsider the future.

It was February twenty-third, the morning of Mike and Sandra's wedding. Neither one believed in a long engagement, so they decided to get married as soon as the necessary arrangements could be made.

The entire Overholt family was invited to the wedding and reception, but Chuck's attendance was out of the question.

Early that morning, while Charlie was helping Chuck put his socks on, he swiftly kicked her in the face, bruising her left eye. Charlie quickly left the room and showed her eye to Vera.

"Let me get something cold to put on that eye," sighed Vera. "Are you sure you didn't set him off, somehow?"

"I was helping him put on his socks," said Charlie, fighting back the tears.

"There, there," comforted Vera, "he didn't mean to do it. You know your father would never do that to you on purpose. It's the disease, not the man."

"I know," whimpered Charlie. "But, it still hurts."

Chuck walked into the kitchen, oblivious to what he had just done.

"What happened to you?" he asked, examining his daughter's black eye.

"She ran into a bed post," explained Vera. "Now, why don't you go rest so she can get ready for the wedding?"

"Grandma, I can't go. Everyone will think Daddy's beating me!" said Charlie, after Chuck had left the room.

"I think we can put some makeup on that bruise. I once did this for Chuck when he was ten," said Vera, dabbing foundation onto Charlie's eye. "He had gotten into a fight with a bully, and came out of it with a black eye. Well, the next day he was to have his school picture taken, so I was absolutely horrified! So, I got out my makeup, and Chuckie's school picture turned out just fine. Someday I'll show it to you. There..." said Vera, dabbing on the finishing touch.

"It still looks dark," observed Charlie in the mirror.

"Wear your sunglasses," suggested Vera. "I'm afraid you'll have to attend the wedding without me. I'll stay home with Chuck."

"Thank you, Grandma," said Charlie retiring to her room to dress. She came out a while later wearing the sunglasses.

"You look very stylish," complimented Vera.

A sobering thought had settled in Charlie's mind-- one that could not be easily answered. Chuck's outburst of strength had caught Charlie off guard. She had always considered herself to be the best possible person to take care of Chuck, and thought she was more than up to the task. However, how was she going to physically restrain her father when he was bigger and much stronger than she? She knew from other people's stories that people with Alzheimer's could become violent. Mild-mannered people tended to become placid, while quick-tempered people could become violent. Chuck was neither mild-mannered, nor was he violent. As long as Charlie could remember, Chuck was given to fits of happiness and periods of moodiness. This had become much more stable since he became a Christian, but the Alzheimer's was changing his awareness. As long as Chuck had all his faculties, he could control frustration and anger. Charlie could see turbulent waters ahead, and prayed for wisdom.

Mike and Sandra's wedding was amazingly elegant, given the fact that they had only a few weeks to prepare for the ceremony. Sandra's Mom, Millie, enjoyed every moment of the preparations, continually repeating how she had been waiting for this day ever since Sandra was a baby.

Charlie sat at the back of the church with Jerome, while close family and friends sat near the front. The church was festooned with baskets of white and yellow flowers, baby's breath and milk white roses.

A hush came over the congregation as the bridal march started, and the Bride made her way down the aisle. Charlie thought Sandra was absolutely beautiful in her long white wedding gown.

The wedding photographer took pictures as Mike and Sandra stood before the minister and said their vows. Then Mike and Sandra kissed, and greeted everyone outside the church.

The reception was being held at the Westons' home. Jerome went straight for the food, while Charlie preferred to hang back and watch the happy scene. She must have not looked as happy as she was trying to seem, for Adam stopped to talk to her.

"Your heart isn't crushed because Mike married Sandra, is it?" teased Adam.

"Very funny," replied Charlie.

"Why the sunglasses, then?" asked Adam.

"I felt like wearing them," answered Charlie, waiting to see if the answer would satisfy him.

"Well, if it's not because you've been crying..." Adam left the sentence unfinished. "Charlie, has something happened to your right eye?" asked Adam, tilting her chin back with his finger. Other guests were starting to stare at Charlie.

"Please, not here," said Charlie, forcing a smile.

Adam and Charlie stepped outside and Charlie took off her sunglasses. Apparently, even with them on, she didn't stand up to close scrutiny.

"Where on earth did you get that black eye!" exclaimed Adam.

"Promise you won't tell anyone?" asked Charlie.

"If someone's hitting you..." began Adam.

"It's not what you think," interrupted Charlie. "This morning, I was helping Daddy put his socks on, and he kicked me in the face. But, it's not his fault. He didn't know what he was doing," explained Charlie.

"Do you still think you can take care of him by yourself?" asked Adam, thoughtfully.

"You're starting to sound like Uncle Jerome!" reproached Charlie.

"Charlie-girl, we all have to face the truth, even when it's not what we want to hear," said Adam, his voice sounding of experience.

"It was the fall," cried Charlie, bursting into tears, "it made the Alzheimer's worse!" Now the guests *outside* were staring at them.

"It's all right, cry if you want to," comforted Adam, putting his arm around her in support. "Let's take a walk."

"Oh, Adam," wept Charlie, "why couldn't God have prevented that fall? That one stupid fall? God is taking Daddy away from me, and I don't understand why!"

"Charlie, everything in life happens for a reason. 'We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose,'" quoted Adam. "I don't pretend to know why God let the accident happen, but you can be sure that since He did, it WILL work together for Chuck's good."

Charlie continued to weep. Adam handed her his handkerchief and she blew her nose.

"I know it's hard, Charlie-girl. But, God will get you through this, you can depend on that!"

"I'm sorry for ruining Mike's wedding for you," sniffed Charlie.

"You didn't ruin anything," replied Adam. "Are you ready to go back?"

Charlie nodded. Their talk had calmed her soul. She was ready to face whatever God deemed best for her and her father's future.

"Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to Him in well doing, as unto a Faithful Creator." ~ 1 Peter 4:19 ~

"They helped every one his neighbour; and every one said to his brother, Be of good courage."
~ Isaiah 41:6 ~

"Be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the LORD."
~ Psalm 31:24 ~

Chapter Twenty-nine
A Forgotten Promise

"Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life."

~ Deuteronomy 4:9 ~

The cryptic phone caller who had been tormenting Adam for the past few weeks, was now doing it two to three times a day. Charlie had been patient, and respected Adam's wish that she not confront the young woman on the phone, but one day, Charlie forgot her promise.

It was a Friday, and Charlie finished a long day at school where she had just survived a surprise algebra quiz, completed her history essay on Byzantine architecture, and passed a biology test which she had forgotten to study for. As a result, Charlie's mind was well preoccupied when she arrived at work that late afternoon.

The phone rang, and without thinking twice, Charlie answered it.

"Where's Adam?" demanded the voice.

"He's not here right now," replied Charlie, in an irritated tone.

"Tell him I haven't forgotten!" charged the woman.

"Tell him yourself," retorted Charlie, in no mood to cater to the madwoman.

"You listen to me," said the caller angrily, "I will make him pay for what he's done, and you can't stop me!"

"I've had about enough of you!" cried Charlie, passionately. "I've tried to walk around you long enough. Adam may feel he has some obligation to endure your harassment, but I don't!"

"You've got no right!" screamed the young caller. "No right at all!"

"And you've the right to hound Adam?" scoffed Charlie. "I don't think so!"

"You know NOTHING!" retorted the young woman.

"I know enough to unplug Adam's phones so you can't call again," threatened Charlie.

"You wouldn't dare!" screamed the caller.

It was just the prompting Charlie needed to immediately hang up the phone and unplug it from the wall. Soon thereafter, Charlie could hear the living room phone ring. Not waiting for the answering machine to take a message, she marched into the room, and disabled that phone as well. Then she proceeded upstairs and unplugged Adam's bedroom phone. At last, the house was silent.

Charlie finished her work, and went home, without meeting Adam. She was lying on her bed, working on her homework, when Vera called her to the living room. When Charlie reached the living room, she saw Adam standing next to the grandfather clock near the front door, talking to Chuck and Vera.

Charlie overheard her father saying,

"I understand. Mom and I will leave so you can talk to her."

Just then, everyone noticed her presence.

"Charlie," said Chuck, "Adam wants to talk to you. Your grandma and I are going to step outside for awhile."

Charlie didn't like the sound of that. She would have gladly followed her relatives out the door, but when Chuck shut it firmly behind him, any thoughts of evading Adam quickly evaporated.

"What have you done?" cried Adam.

Charlie jumped back a step, surprised by the sudden outburst of emotion from the plumber.

"I suppose you mean the phones," replied Charlie, gathering her courage.

"I don't just mean the phones," answered Adam. "What did you say to that girl?"

"Nothing that she didn't have coming," replied Charlie, defensively.

"How could you?" he cried. "What in heaven's name possessed you treat her that way?"

"Maybe it's because she's treating you like her personal whipping boy, or maybe it's just because I couldn't take the incessant phone calls anymore! Take your pick!" Charlie shocked herself with her own boldness.

"Sit down!" shouted Adam. The forcefulness of his voice made Charlie instantly obey. "What you did today was not because you were trying to protect me! If you had thought at all about me, and what I asked you to do, you wouldn't have even answered the phone in the first place! God only knows what she'll do now!"

"What are you talking about?" asked Charlie.

"You really don't know what you did, do you?" reflected Adam.

"How can I, when you don't tell me anything?" said Charlie, indignantly.

Adam sat down on the facing couch across from Charlie, bowed his head and exhaled, trying to calm down from the rush of emotion that was overtaking him.

"I guess it's no use trying to keep it from you," he sighed.

"Wait," interrupted Charlie, realizing that she had hurt her friend by her own carelessness. "It's none of my business. You asked me not to answer the phone, and I forgot. But, when I remembered, I went ahead anyway, and meddled where I had no right to. You don't owe me any explanation. I'm truly sorry," apologized Charlie.

"I accept your apology," said Adam, "but I want to tell you, anyway. This is one secret that I think needs telling. How much do you know about my accident?"

"You mean the accident where you got those scars?" asked Charlie, pointing to his hands.

Adam nodded.

"Daddy said you were burned while pulling a girl from a burning car," said Charlie.

"Did he tell you that there was another young woman I couldn't save?" asked Adam, his voice straining for composure.

"Yes," mumbled Charlie.

"Her name was Cathy Enslow," related Adam, "and she was about your age and height. She was sitting on the front seat of the car-- on the passenger side, and her seat belt would not budge. It had been welded shut by the heat of the flames. I tried..." Adam's voice wavered, "I tried to free her, but I couldn't find anything to cut the belt with. Just one seat belt! She looked at me with those eyes-- eyes that said she knew she was going to die. All because I couldn't cut one simple seat belt!

"Jessica Enslow, the driver of the car, and Cathy's older sister, was the girl I was able to pull from the wreck. She is the one who has been calling me," revealed Adam.

"But, why?" asked Charlie.

"Jessica blames me for her sister's death," said Adam, taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly.

"It's not your fault!" cried Charlie, indignantly. "You did your best, and that's all anyone can ask of another! I have half a mind to tell her just that!"

"You will *not*!" declared Adam, resolutely. "It's *because* of your talk with her today that Jessica's father called to say she has run away from the hospital, and this time, they can't find her!"

"The hospital?" asked Charlie, a sinking feeling settling in the pit of her stomach.

"She attempted suicide a few weeks ago," explained Adam, "and these phone calls were the only thing stopping her from trying it again."

The overwhelming reality of what she had done landed on Charlie's shoulders with a sudden thud. The next thing she knew, Chuck, Vera, and Adam were looking down at her.

"She's going to be fine," said Vera, patting Charlie's hand.

"I shouldn't have been so abrupt," apologized Adam. "I didn't know she'd take it this way."

"You fainted, Pumpkin," explained Chuck.

"Did you tell them?" asked Charlie, addressing Adam, and beginning to cry.

"Yes, Adam told us all about it," assured Vera, "but you just put it out of your mind. Everything will be all right, you'll see."

"Are you sure you're not hurt?" asked Chuck.

"I fainted on the couch, Daddy," replied Charlie, between sobs.

"I'm going to make everyone some coffee," announced Vera, going to the kitchen.

"Don't cry, Charlie," comforted her father. "I've prayed, and everything will be fine. I know what! I'll fix strawberries just the way you like them! What do you say to that?"

Charlie remembered that emotional distress could aggravate the Alzheimer's Disease, so she smiled bravely and dried her tears. While Chuck and Vera were in the kitchen, Charlie talked to Adam.

"Does Mr. Enslow have any idea where Jessica might have gone?" asked Charlie.

"They're looking for her right now," replied Adam. "I could kick myself for involving you in this mess," he said, reproaching himself. "You have enough to struggle with," he added, referring to Chuck.

"No, I'm glad you told me," said Charlie. "I was feeling guilty that I kept coming to you with my problems, but *you* wouldn't let me help with yours. I'm really sorry about Jessica," Charlie apologized again. "It was entirely my fault. If I had only done as you made me promise to do, none of this would have happened. If anything happens to Jessica, I'll never forgive myself!"

Vera and Chuck returned from the kitchen, with the coffee and strawberries.

"I hope you don't mind your coffee black," said Vera, handing Adam a mug.

"How long has Jessica been missing?" asked Chuck, sitting down on the couch next to Charlie.

"Since four o' clock," said Adam, glancing at the grandfather clock near the door. "Almost three hours now."

"Poor thing," sighed Vera, sadly.

"I wish I could do something instead of just sitting here feeling sorry!" said Charlie, stabbing at the strawberries with her fork.

"You said the Enslows live in Palm Springs, didn't you?" asked Vera.

"Yes," replied Adam, hesitating. "I volunteered to search for Jessica, but Mr. Enslow thought it would be best if I stayed out of it."

"He told you that?" asked Charlie.

"Not exactly in those words," said Adam, "but that was what Mr. Enslow meant. I think he was afraid what Jessica might do if I happened to find her. I can't blame him."

Charlie leaned back in her seat and took a small bite of strawberry. She felt Adam was getting the raw end of the situation. He saved Jessica's life, and now the Enslows were treating him as though it were his fault that he hadn't died attempting to save the other girl. Charlie tried not to think that. Maybe Mr. Enslow was just trying to protect Adam by not letting him search for Jessica.

Charlie felt ashamed for digging Adam deeper into an incident that Adam had treated as private and personal. The plumber had never talked about the accident to her. It was as though there were parts of Adam's life that he guarded and protected from everyone. Oh, he could keep quiet about a secret like no one else! In fact, it had taken great restraint on Charlie's part not to divulge what little she knew about the caller or the mysterious room to anyone.

The mysterious locked door. What did that room have to do with Jessica? Charlie quickly wiped the thought from her mind. She was done trying to pry into Adam's life. This was the one time she overstepped her boundary-- and look what had transpired.

Charlie thought she saw Adam wanting to leave, and yet something restrained him from going home. He would look at Charlie, look at the clock, and drink his coffee.

"Shouldn't you be home in case Mr. Enslow calls?" asked Charlie, trying to give Adam an easy excuse for leaving.

"I gave him my cell phone number," explained Adam, taking the phone from his pocket.

"Well," said Charlie, "I'm going to go get some air."

"Do you want me to come, Pumpkin?" asked Chuck.

"No, you stay here, Daddy. I'll be back in a while."

The March desert wind blew in small gusts around Charlie as she walked down the street and turned onto a small dirt path leading away from the houses. In the distance, low hanging clouds

sailed across the desert sky, reflecting the hues of sunset with brilliant pinks and deep oranges. Charlie drank in the natural surroundings as though she were back home in Montana, wandering through her favorite fields, and enjoying the serenity of being alone.

It had taken a while, but Charlie had come to appreciate the rugged and sometimes barren climate of the Mojave Desert. It had an untamed openness that Charlie found intriguing, and yet there was a delicate side to the desert that was almost vulnerable. She recalled how Chad had told her that if sufficient rain didn't come during the winter months, drought would follow in the summer, baking the parched land into a hardness that only weeds could penetrate.

Charlie put a hand over her eyes and looked off into the fading horizon. A jackrabbit scurried off to its burrow, leaving the desert to the nocturnal hunters while it slept. In the summer, some days were so hot, that even creatures that hunted for food by day, would wait until night before foraging. A Northern Mockingbird trilled and trebled nearby, as if showing off its ability to mimic dozens of bird songs in rapid succession. While Charlie marveled at its deftness, a coyote cried in the distance. Charlie looked up into the darkening sky, and decided it was time to start back home.

Instead of taking the shorter route home by which she had come, Charlie decided to take the long way, knowing that she had a full hour yet before darkness would overtake the Mojave.

As the teenager came to the second turn in the dirt road, she noticed a solitary figure standing near the edge of an embankment. Curious, Charlie came closer, and as she did, the figure jumped back in surprise.

"Cathy!" shouted the stranger, running up to meet Charlie in the road. As the young woman drew near to where Charlie stood, a look of disappointment crossed her face. "I thought Cathy had come back to me," she mumbled, returning to her place on the embankment.

Charlie suddenly recognized who the stranger was. Intrigued, Charlie came closer and looked down the slope to what Jessica was staring at. A scorched tree stood out prominently on the side of the embankment. It was then that Charlie knew she had stumbled upon the place where the accident had occurred. Charlie observed Jessica in the light of the remaining twilight. She was wearing a long knit purple sweater that covered the top and back of her hospital gown. Her wrists were bandaged, and in her hand she clutched a photograph of someone who looked remarkably like Charlie.

"Is that Cathy?" asked Charlie, venturing a question.

"Where?" asked Jessica.

"The picture," said Charlie, pointing to the photo.

Jessica looked at Charlie with renewed curiosity.

"Who are you?" asked Jessica.

Charlie thought for a minute. Should she say who she was? or would it be best to leave the question unanswered? Seeing how long it was taking for Charlie to respond, Jessica was becoming suspicious.

"Who are you?" she repeated.

"I'm Charlie."

"You're the one I spoke to on the phone, today?" asked Jessica.

"Yeah," mumbled Charlie, not proud of what she had done.

With a loud shriek, Jessica knocked Charlie to the ground. They wrestled-- Charlie trying to free herself, and Jessica, trying to pin her down. Suddenly, they felt themselves tumbling down the embankment. They rolled into a sagebrush, cushioning their fall. Charlie used the opportunity to jump to her feet and pin her knees on Jessica's back, so that she could not get up.

"I'm sorry for what I said to you on the phone, today!" panted Charlie.

"No, you're not!" cried Jessica, struggling to get to her feet.

Charlie leaned into Jessica's back with her knees a little more, until Jessica yelled in pain.

"I said I was sorry!" repeated Charlie. "I don't want to hurt you, but I refuse to let you beat me up! I have a father to take care of, and he depends on me! Now, say you forgive me!"

Jessica yelped and then stopped struggling.

"Okay, I forgive you," said Jessica.

Charlie got up, and helped Jessica to her feet.

"My picture!" cried Jessica, suddenly remembering the photograph.

The girls searched the ground, finally finding it near the top of the embankment.

Jessica dusted off the picture.

"I really am sorry," said Charlie.

"Sure you are," said Jessica.

"You're not going to do anything... are you?" asked Charlie not wanting to say "suicide."

"Are you talking about these?" asked Jessica holding up her bandaged wrists.

"Well, yes," stammered Charlie.

"Give me one good reason not to," dared Jessica.

"You wouldn't go to heaven," replied Charlie.

"Says who?"

"God says so," answered Charlie.

"You're making it up," mocked Jessica.

"In John chapter eight, Christ says, 'I go My way, and ye shall seek Me, and shall die in your sins: whither I go, ye cannot come,'" said Charlie. "I didn't make that up."

"So, you're saying if I did it right now, and I died, I wouldn't go to heaven?" laughed Jessica.

"If you died in your sin, yes," replied Charlie. "If you still remained unrepentant to the very last, then yes, you would go to hell."

"What if I gave myself enough time to repent before I actually died, what then?" asked Jessica.

"Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap," quoted Charlie.

"You're saying that if I repented, God would still send me to hell?" asked Jessica.

"Well, no, not if you REALLY repented," replied Charlie, "but if you REALLY meant it, you wouldn't do it in the FIRST place! How is God supposed to believe your sincerity after doing something like that? Would you? I mean, how could YOU be sure that you really DID mean it, and that you just didn't say it because you were scared, or something? You actually have to believe in Christ and have faith before repentance will work. 'But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name.'"

"Okay, okay," said Jessica in an agitated voice. "So I'm going to hell. Maybe I can deal with that."

"They 'shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth,'" recited Charlie. "Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched," she added.

"What are you trying to do, push me DOWN?" accused Jessica.

"That wasn't the direction I had in mind," replied Charlie.

"Well, if I can't go up, and I don't want to go down, what is there left?" cried Jessica.

"There's Jesus," answered Charlie. "He's the Answer to every problem you've got."

"What are you talking about?" asked Jessica.

"Christ is all, and in all," quoted Charlie.

"If Christ is all, what does that mean to ME?" asked Jessica.

"'There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man,'" recited Charlie, "'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,'" finished Charlie. "THAT's what it means to you. It means that if Jesus dwells in you, nothing will be too hard or too difficult for you. And when things get their darkest, God Himself will give you a way to escape, so you can bear it. I guess what I'm saying is this: Jesus won't let life crush you, if you're believing on His name."

"Where were you that night?" cried Jessica, in despair. "I was down there," she pointed, "trapped in a car that was on fire! The flames were so hot, I could see my skin melt! And Adam Clark left Cathy in there-- in that furnace of heat and metal!"

"He did all he could," replied Charlie wiping tears from her eyes.

"He could have died, couldn't he?" snapped Jessica.

"Would that have brought Cathy back?" asked Charlie.

Jessica sank to the ground and stared at the picture of her sister.

"You asked me where I was on that night," said Charlie, "I'll tell you. I was in North Carolina, on the side of a busy highway, trying to wave down help for a boy named Darren. I didn't know it, but earlier that night, he had been taking something called GHB. After he was taken to the hospital, Darren was in a coma for two hours. Then he died. To this day, every time I see a police officer, I think of that night. His death was partly my fault, because I had snuck out of the house and went out with Darren against the wishes of my Aunt. Maybe, just maybe, if I hadn't been there, Darren wouldn't have overdosed. That's my truth. That's what I have to live with."

"I was driving," confessed Jessica, "and we were having an argument. I can't even remember what it was about! Cathy begged me to slow down, but I was angry, so I sped up, instead! I remember a man waving at me to slow down, but I didn't. I kept on going, and that was when we crashed."

"That man was Adam," replied Charlie.

"Was it?" asked Jessica. "I wasn't sure."

"I wish Adam was here instead of me," sighed Charlie, sitting down beside Jessica on the ground. "He's the best person I know-- except, of course, my Daddy. Adam was the one who led me to Christ. I wish I could say the same about you."

Jessica got to her feet.

"You gave me a lot to think about," she confessed.

"I hope you do," replied Charlie, standing up.

"I've got to go home. Mom and Dad must be worried sick," said Jessica.

"Do you want me to call Adam?" asked Charlie. "I'm sure he would be delighted to take you home."

Jessica shook her head. She wasn't ready for that. Not yet, anyway.

"If you could take me to the nearest pay phone, I'll call Dad, and he'll come get me," said Jessica.

"It's this way," sighed Charlie, leading the way.

When the girls reached a pay phone, Jessica called home. A while later, Mr. Enslow drove up in the family mini-van. Before Jessica departed, she handed Charlie the picture of Cathy.

"I think Cathy would want you to have it," said Jessica. With that, the Enslows drove away. Charlie said a prayer, asking God to finish the good work He had started in Jessica that night.

"Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6)

When Charlie reached home, she found Adam asleep on their living room couch. Charlie tried to tiptoe by, but Adam sensed someone was in the room and woke up.

"I told them I'd wait up for you," explained Adam, yawning. "What time is it?"

"It's ten thirty," replied Charlie, collapsing into Chuck's recliner. "I feel perfectly buoyant tonight! Like I couldn't sink, even if I tried."

"Do you usually stay out this late?" asked Adam.

"What do *you* think?" challenged Charlie, good naturedly.

"My, my, you're in a good mood," observed Adam. "You left home with your tail tucked between your legs, and now you look as if you were on top of the world!"

"That's because I know something you don't!" laughed Charlie. "Guess who I bumped into tonight? You won't be able to-- not in a million years! Jessica Enslow!" blurted Charlie, not waiting for her friend to guess.

"You're kidding!" exclaimed Adam, his jaw dropping to his chest. "Was she all right?"

"I wouldn't be happy if she wasn't!" pointed out Charlie. Then, she related to him the conversation she had had with Jessica, doing her best to leave none of the particulars out. Charlie even told him about Darren's death, and how Jessica, upon hearing Charlie's confession, had confessed herself, saying that she blamed herself for Cathy's death.

A relieved expression came over Adam's face.

"I know you could have done better, if you had been the one to witness to her," said Charlie.

"No, I think God sent the right person for the task," he disagreed. "I'm grateful to you, Charlie. I really am. Jessica has been in my prayers for a long time now, and I was really becoming concerned about her. Every time I started in on the Bible, she would hang up. I asked God to intercede, and it looks like He did."

"Jessica didn't actually say she would believe on the name of Christ," warned Charlie, "but she did say I had given her 'a lot to think about.'"

"I realize that," said Adam, "still, that's more than I was ever able to do. And to know that at least for now, she won't try to end her own life-- that's a lot for someone who was on five different antidepressants.

"You know, it's not until several days after the accident, that I realized that if I had only picked up one of the shards of broken window glass, that I could have cut through Cathy's seat belt. But," he sighed, "I didn't think of it then."

"Why, Adam!" exclaimed Charlie. "That's the second time today you've confided in me! I've been coming to you with my problems for so long now, and was beginning to think that you'd never come to me with yours. One who takes and never gives anything in return, is a burden. I never want to be that to you."

"You're very kind," smiled Adam.

"And as far as Cathy Enslow is concerned, you did your best," consoled Charlie. "I guess God really wanted her up in heaven with Him," she mused, pulling out Cathy's photo and showing it to Adam.

"Jessica gave you this?" asked Adam. Charlie nodded. For a long while he couldn't speak.

Knowing she was in the way, Charlie retreated to her room, leaving Adam in the living room with the photo.

The weeks passed in uneventfulness, until one day, Jerome came to the house with something totally unexpected.

"What's this?" asked Chuck, as Jerome set a large box of groceries on the kitchen table.

"It's food," replied Jerome.

"I thought Mom did the shopping," said Chuck, surprised at the sudden thoughtfulness of his older brother.

"It's not from the store," informed Jerome. "Samaritan Baptist Church is giving away food every month to low income families. Here's the brochure," he said, casually handing the folded flyer to Chuck.

"You're accepting charity?" said Chuck, astonished.

"Don't tell me you're too proud to accept free food!" scoffed Jerome.

"But, do we really qualify for this kind of program?" asked Chuck.

"All they wanted was my name and address, not an income tax statement," muttered Jerome. "They weren't choosy about giving it away, so what's your problem?"

"I don't know," hesitated Chuck, "it doesn't feel right-- taking food away from needy people."

"You're in no position to turn down anything free!" growled Jerome. "I don't see you paying the utilities, or the medications, or the doctor visits, or for that matter, the groceries!" Jerome stomped out of the house.

When Charlie came home after work that day, she found the box of groceries and the church flyer, laying on the kitchen table.

"Where did this come from?" asked Charlie.

"Jerome brought it," explained Chuck.

"But," said Charlie, reading the flyer, "this program is meant as an alternative to food stamps."

"I know," sighed Chuck.

"Are things *that* bad?" asked Charlie, surprised.

"I don't think so," replied Chuck. "It's only Jerome's way of saving money."

"But, if we don't need it, than Uncle Jerome is taking the food away from people who can't afford it!" protested Charlie.

"I know," replied Chuck.

"You'd think Uncle Jerome would be too proud to accept this," observed Charlie.

"Not where money is concerned, Pumpkin," said Chuck, going to the refrigerator for some orange juice. "You should have heard him. He said I didn't have the right to turn down anything free, because I don't pay for my own way around here. He has a point," sighed Chuck. "Well, I'm going back to my jigsaw puzzle. You know, I really think it's helping to improve my memory," he added, overoptimistically.

Her father's resignation to Jerome's cruel behavior bothered Charlie. She was grateful to Jerome for taking them in, but she hated the way Jerome rubbed Chuck's nose in it, at every opportunity. It was as if Jerome was saying, in effect, that he had bought their self-respect. This thought made Charlie indignant. Chuck may have felt there was no choice, but Charlie decided that she could do something about it.

An hour later, Charlie marched down to Mullen-Overholt, and presented Jerome with nine hundred dollars.

"Where did you get this kind of money?" demanded Jerome, thinking his neice had surely stolen it.

"I've been saving," Charlie replied. "From now on, I'll keep twenty dollars of my paycheck, and give you the rest."

"How much *does* Adam Clark pay you?" asked Jerome.

"Four hundred a month," replied Charlie. It was one piece of information that she had kept from her Uncle. Till now, she had felt that it was none of Jerome's business.

"Adam pays you this well?" asked Jerome, incredulously. "He's a bigger fool than I thought he was-- if that's possible."

"I worked for it," insisted Charlie.

"Not four hundred a month," sneered Jerome, putting the money in his desk drawer. "You're almost a taxpayer," he observed.

"By the end of the year, I'll be paying taxes," replied Charlie, turning to go. "It turns out, I qualify."

Satisfied that she had accomplished what she set out to do, Charlie returned home. Now, Jerome could no longer say that they weren't lifting a finger to help with the expenses. She could still see Jerome's amazed face when she handed him the money. It was a moment she was sure she would never forget.

Even if Jerome wasn't so cheap, Charlie reasoned that the financial contribution was owed her uncle-- unsympathetic though he may be. After all, Jerome was paying for things that her father could not possibly afford-- her private education for one. It reminded Charlie of the Scripture, "Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour. Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law." That night, she fell asleep a poorer, but happier young woman.

"Better is the poor [Charlie] that walketh in [her] integrity, than he [Jerome] that is perverse in his lips, and is a fool."

~ Proverbs 19:1 ~

"That at that time ye [Jessica] were without Christ... and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world."

~ Ephesians 2:12 ~

"Being confident of this very thing, that He [God] which hath begun a good work in you [Jessica] WILL perform it."

~ Philippians 1:6 ~

Chapter Thirty
Sweet Sixteen

"When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."

~ 1 Corinthians 13:11-12 ~

As March came to an end, Charlie eagerly looked forward to April. Her birthday was April twenty-third, and she was going to turn sixteen.

For most teenagers, sixteen meant a driver's license. However, Charlie had been the only one in her class that didn't already have a learner's permit. To obtain one, she had to get her legal guardian to sign a permission form-- something which Jerome had flatly refused to do, saying that next, she would want him to buy her a car.

Over the past months, however, Jerome grudgingly admitted to himself that he was sick and tired of driving Charlie back and forth from school. To Charlie's delight, he finally signed the permission form, three weeks before her sixteenth birthday.

As happy as Charlie was over her learner's permit, it was tempered by the fact that Jerome was going to be her teacher. He was going to give her lessons at home, but as soon as she was able, he would let Charlie drive herself to and from school, while he was the licensed passenger. After she turned seventeen, and obtained her driver's license, Jerome said he would find Charlie her own transportation-- providing that she would now be the one to take Chuck for his doctor's appointments, and that she would also drive Vera wherever and whenever the need might arise. Charlie agreed, and the lessons began.

It didn't go too well...

"STOP!" screamed Jerome, as the car lurched forward and hit the dumpster in an abandoned parking lot. "That's the accelerator, not the brake!" Oh well, as Charlie pointed out, it was only a small dent.

With Charlie's birthday so near, Vera began to make preparations for the birthday party.

"I don't want a party," resisted Charlie. "It's too much expense and trouble."

"But, you're turning sweet sixteen, and I think that calls for a celebration," refused Vera. "And just think, you could invite all your friends! Maybe you could have a slumber party. What do you think of that?"

"Grandma, my friends are too old for slumber parties," reasoned Charlie.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Vera.

"Adam would never come to a slumber party," laughed Charlie, "but Maggie might."

"I wasn't talking about grown adults!" argued Vera. "Surely, you have plenty of friends your own age that would be more than happy to come!"

"The only two people that are my age, and that I call friends, are Sara and Scottie!" exclaimed Charlie. "And I don't think Scottie would come to a slumber party, either! Really, Grandma, I'm too old for all of this. Why can't I fix a cake for that day and just leave it at that?"

"I'll be the one to make your birthday cake and meal," insisted Vera.

"Grandma, you don't have the time," reminded Charlie. "Not with Grandpa's current situation."

Vera shook her head and went to knit in the living room. She refused to talk about her husband-- it was just too painful. For the first time, Arnold wasn't eating. If he didn't eat soon, he would have to be fed by a tube. It was a sign that he was approaching the very last stage of his battle with Alzheimer's. Dr. Gillis had explained to Vera that Arnold's brain was no longer able to tell his body what to do. Vera refused to accept it, but this meant that the end was nearing for her husband. Caring for Arnold had been her only occupation for the last nineteen years. She expected that when Arnold died, she would soon follow.

"Grandma, I didn't mean to make you unhappy," apologized Charlie, entering the living room.

"I don't see why you won't let me give you a normal sweet sixteen birthday party," retorted Vera. "It only happens once in your life! It's a very special time, and you shouldn't just push it aside!" Vera's knitting needles clicked away.

Soon, the needles slowed, and Vera was lost in her memories. "When I turned sixteen, I married your grandpa. Did you know that? Arnold was so handsome! How he hated that brown suit, but his mamma made him wear it-- said no son of hers would wear jeans to his own wedding! It was such a happy occasion!" Vera smiled wistfully. Her eyes wandered to Charlie, who had

popped onto the couch and was listening to her grandma, her chin resting on the back of her hand.

"Charlie," Vera resumed, "I wouldn't for the world let your father hear me ask this, but do you think you've met the man you'll someday marry? Is he someone I know?"

"Grandma, honestly!" exclaimed Charlie in surprise.

"Not even a hint?" coaxed Vera. "When you find the right man, you know it."

"You can't be serious!" replied Charlie.

"I only ask, because I'm not always going to be here," said Vera, returning to her knitting.

"What do you mean?" asked Charlie, puzzled by the last remark. "Are you going somewhere?"

"I won't force you to have a party you don't want," resumed Vera. "Even though it *would* be the first one since you came to live here. Heaven knows I've missed enough of your milestones with you and Chucky off in Montana. Now that you're here, I want to enjoy it! Is that so terrible?"

"I love you, Grandma," said Charlie bending over Vera and giving her a loving hug. "We'll have a party, and do anything you want."

"That's not the point," replied Vera, as the teenager returned to the sofa, "and don't patronize me. It's not about what I want, but what *you* want. If you could have anything, what would you want for your birthday?"

"A new coat," replied Charlie, not knowing what to make of her grandma's odd behavior. "I could use a new coat."

"If you need a coat, you'll get a coat-- but not for your birthday-- not for *this* birthday," replied Vera. "I don't want a practical wish. I want a wish that comes from your heart. Please, make one, even if you think it sounds silly."

The sincerity of Vera's request made Charlie think.

"An autographed picture of Wallace Shipley," replied Charlie, a little embarrassed by the wish.

"Is that all?" asked Vera. "I'm serious now. Any wish at all."

"Well, I don't expect you to find a spontaneous cure for Alzheimer's," replied Charlie, "and Uncle Jerome is going to 'find' me my own car when I get my driver's license, so yes, that's my wish."

"You're not just trying to put me off, are you?" asked Vera, suspiciously.

"I've listened to Wallace Shipley's music, almost everyday, since I was eight years old," replied Charlie, "and I've never seen a picture of him. But Grandma, this wish isn't really fair. There is no known photo of Wallace Shipley. He's never even been interviewed except once in 1987, and even then he didn't say much. Why don't you get me a new coat, instead?"

The fact that Charlie thought her wish was impossible, satisfied Vera. If it the wish had been easy, Vera would've known that it wasn't real.

To Charlie's surprise, Jerome was not willing to give her the time she felt she needed to learn the basics of driving. Instead, Jerome gave her a current Driver Handbook from the DMV, and secretly hoped that someone else would teach her enough to take over the driving to and from Galilee Christian School in Joshua Tree.

Chuck, who felt this was one skill he could pass down to his daughter, readily stepped in. His older brother was not happy at the prospect of damaging his car again, but he grudgingly handed it over to Chuck, with an order to stay away from crowded streets.

There was not a great deal of wide paved surfaces in Twin Yucca, so Chuck took Charlie to a flat dirt field, where the only things she could run over were small clumps of weeds.

"Shouldn't we switch sides?" asked Charlie, eager to get behind the wheel.

"Basic safety first," instructed Chuck. "When you're going to your car, always have the... the things you unlock the door with."

"Keys?" asked Charlie.

"Yes, always have them ready, and be sure to stay unaware of your surroundings," said Chuck.

When Chuck couldn't remember a specific word, in order not to break the line of thought, he sometimes substituted it with any word that popped into his mind. When he wasn't in a hurry, he would try to describe the word, in order to get across his meaning. However Chuck communicated, it always became worse when he was under stress or pressure. Charlie tried hard not to ask dumb questions, but Chuck could not always remember the answers, and he would

become more agitated. Unfortunately, the lesson did not last long. Charlie and Chuck had to walk home and call Jerome to tell him where they left his car.

Vera couldn't volunteer, and Maggie, who wanted to help but couldn't, (Maggie didn't know how to drive either), talked her friend Jeff Erickson into giving Charlie some lessons using Jerome's still intact car. At first, Charlie felt awkward having a police officer for an instructor, but she found him to be helpful, and most of all, patient. He was such a good teacher, that Charlie felt sure that in a month or two, she could drive to school. She was thankful to Maggie for the idea, and to Jeff for helping her out of the predicament she had been in.

Bill Paulson leaned back in his suede office chair and opened a letter addressed to his client.

"Lisa," Bill asked, holding down an intercom button to his secretary, "what's this letter doing on my desk?"

"A tap dance?" guessed Lisa, bursting into laughter. "Seriously, boss, it's a letter for Wallace Shipley."

"I thought I told you to toss the fan mail," replied Bill.

"This letter was different," explained Lisa.

"Oh, one of those," sighed Bill. "O.K., I'll take a look," he replied. Upon finishing the letter, Bill placed a phone call to his famous client.

"Hello, Wallace, Bill here. Since you're a soft touch for a sob story, I thought I'd pass this on. You've been sent a letter from a grandma in California who is asking for an autographed photo for her granddaughter."

"Bill," replied Wallace Shipley, "you know I always turn down those kinds of requests."

"I know," answered Bill, "but this one is different. Without naming names and getting into the particulars that you won't let me tell you, this grandma thinks she doesn't have another year to live. Her granddaughter is a big fan, and the grandma wants to do something special and fulfill this birthday wish. There's more to the story. Actually, it's a rather long letter. For what it's worth I don't think the grandma is making it up-- sounds too real."

"I don't know," hesitated Wallace.

"What if I can get the party in question to promise not to publicize the photo? Would you do it then? You did it for the leukemia guy, and the multiple sclerosis lady. Hey, it's not like anyone is asking for something impossible... like a personal appearance."

"All right, but only if the party in question promises," replied Wallace.

"Great!" replied Bill. "I'll send her one of the many glossies we didn't use to promote that interview you didn't take."

"The ones in the recording studio? I thought you threw those away."

"Someday those photos will be worth a lot of money, my friend," laughed Bill. "In fact, they already are. Everyone is dying to see what the famous Wallace Shipley looks like!"

"Very funny," replied Wallace.

"I'll overnight two pictures to you to autograph. Get it back to me ASAP. The grandma needs it by the twenty-third."

"Sure," replied Wallace.

"On another note, you're not stalling on the ever-postponed, next album because you're going to sign with another personal manager, are you?" joked Bill. "Just remember, I knew you before you were Wallace Shipley!"

It was a week from Charlie's birthday. By the knowing smiles Vera was dropping, Charlie began to look forward to her birthday with mounting anticipation. She hadn't told anyone of her birthday wish, in the event her grandma wasn't able to fulfill it.

These days awoke Charlie's daydreams of old concerning Wallace Shipley. When she was younger, Charlie would pretend that the famous pianist had knocked on her door, dazzled her with his talent and good looks, while at the same time falling passionately in love with her. And of course, he would have the good sense not to marry anyone else, but her. Charlie knew she had outgrown these childish flights of fancy, but a part of her still wondered and foolishly hoped as teenagers sometimes do.

This year, the twenty-third landed on a Monday, so Vera planned on an evening party. To Charlie's relief, Vera had quite given up on a slumber party, instead, planning a birthday meal followed by cake and presents. The fold out table, which hadn't been used since Thanksgiving,

was opened in the living room, its extra leaves carefully put into place. A pastel centerpiece made from inflated mylar balloons, all saying "Sweet Sixteen" and "Happy Birthday," adorned the center of the table. Vera's good china came out of storage, along with the lead crystal. "Sweet Sixteen" napkins, desert plates, and place cards, were all purchased by Vera to make the occasion as special as possible. Since Vera was unable to find anyone selling "Sweet Sixteen" party hats, she opted for hats that simply said "Happy Birthday" on them.

"At least," thought Charlie to herself, "no one is going to ask me how old I am."

Vera mailed the "Sweet Sixteen" birthday invitations she had bought. The guest list was a cross section of Twin Yucca. It consisted of Adam Clark, Chad Garner, (Mike was away on a short vacation with Sandra), Shirley Garner, (Thomas was at another convention), Maggie Downen, Officer Jeff Erickson and his daughter Debbie, Sara and Scottie from school, and Mrs. Jacobs from across the street. Charlie didn't want to invite the last guest, but Vera had insisted. Jerome was invited, but he was able to find an excuse to stay away from the celebration. All together, twelve people, counting Charlie, were to attend the party.

Even her aunt had remembered her. Charlie received a Birthday card from Aunt Angela in North Carolina, with an enclosed check of a hundred dollars.

That morning, Charlie went to school but could hardly pay attention to her classes, for all the excitement of the birthday wish.

When she arrived at Adam's home to work, he gave her the day off and said he was looking forward to the party. Little did Charlie and Adam know, that after that night, nothing would *ever* be the same again.

At six o'clock in the evening, the guests began to arrive. Charlie greeted them, while Vera accepted the presents, placing the festive packages on the kitchen table to open before desert.

"My, you are growing up fast, Charlie," said Shirley handing her a gift wrapped present. "This is from Thomas and myself. I'm sorry he couldn't be here."

"Happy Birthday, Charlie," said Adam, handing her a small long box with a red bow on it.

"Thank you for coming," replied Charlie, handing the presents off to Vera.

"Here's my present," said Chad, adding it to Vera's load.

One by one, everyone arrived, each with a present for Charlie.

The birthday meal was served and everyone was seated at the table in the living room. The group joined hands while Chuck prayed.

"Dear Lord," prayed Chuck, "thank you for Charlotte. She's been a blessing to all who know her, and a great help to me, especially. Please bless her this day, and arrange her future according to Thy great and tender mercies. Thank You for this meal and for the good friends that have gathered here today. In Jesus' name, Amen."

After the meal was over, Vera dimmed the lights, and carried a beautiful pink frosted cake, bearing sixteen lit candles. Everyone sang the traditional birthday song, and Vera placed the cake on the table in front of Charlie.

"Make a wish!" prompted Maggie. Charlie closed her eyes, made a wish, and blew out every single candle. Everyone politely cheered and the lights came back on. Shirley waved the candle smoke away from her face, for she was sitting downwind.

"Time to open presents," announced Vera, "then we'll have desert!"

Charlie was trying to contain her excitement over one present, in particular.

The first gift was placed in front of Charlie. It was from her father. She read the attached card, and smiling, opened the package carefully, by cutting the tape, instead of ripping through it as was her custom when she was little. Inside, she found a camping backpack.

"It has detachable daypack," said Chuck, grinning, "and a lot of pockets. Sometime, we'll go camping like we used to."

"Thank you, Daddy!" replied Charlie, hugging her father who was sitting next to her at the table. "It's really nice!"

Next came a birthday card from the absent Jerome. Charlie recognized the handwriting to be her grandma's. Inside, was a brand new hundred dollar bill. From Mrs. Jacobs, Charlie was given a beautiful handmade quilt. Charlie suspicioned that the reason for this very nice present was because she was Vera's granddaughter.

Scottie gave Charlie a cosmetic bag that his mom had picked out, and Sara's present was a silver plated bangle bracelet. Jeff and his daughter Debbie gave Charlie a nice purse with matching accessories, while Shirley's present was a pair of earrings and a matching necklace. Maggie gave

Charlie a beautiful doll that Charlie knew to be from Maggie's own collection. She graciously accepted the gift, thanking Maggie for her generosity.

Next came Adam's present. Inside were three tickets to a piano concert at the Spencer Arts Cultural Building, celebrating the original music of Edward Johnston.

"Edward Johnston, himself, is the featured pianist," pointed out Adam.

"Edward Johnston is going to be in Palm Springs?" asked Charlie. "Wow! Thank you Adam! I've heard his music, but never in person!"

"Who is Edward Johnston?" asked Shirley, mildly interested.

"He's an extremely talented solo pianist who's beginning to make a real name for himself," replied Adam.

"He's very talented, but I don't think he'll ever hit legend status," replied Charlie, knowingly.

"What do you mean?" asked Chuck.

"Edward Johnston tries too hard to imitate Wallace Shipley," replied Charlie. "His latest album proved that. I heard one critic say that there were many imitators but only one Wallace Shipley. Edward Johnston could improve instantly, if he would just be himself. I've heard his arrangement of Pachelbel's Canon, and it was magnificent!"

"Yes, that was an excellent arrangement," agreed Adam.

"Oh," replied Chuck, not comprehending what his daughter was really taking about.

"Shipley is my mother's maiden name," pointed out Shirley, at last finding something in the conversation which she could relate to.

"When grandma was young, didn't people nickname her, 'Shapely Shipley'?" blurted Chad, suddenly remembering a private family joke. Shirley gave him a stop-and-desist glance, so Chad promptly dropped the subject.

Next, came Chad's gift-- a guide to the best hiking and camping places in Southern California.

"There's a great chapter just about the Mojave Desert!" pointed out Chad, enthusiastically.

Just then, the telephone rang. It was Mrs. Jacobs' sister in Topeka. When Mrs. Jacobs got off the phone, she apologized for leaving before the party was over, but her elderly mother had just had a serious stroke. She had to pack and take the very next flight to Topeka, so would everyone please excuse her. Vera escorted her friend to the door, and said a few consoling words.

After Mrs. Jacobs left, Vera announced that there was one more present to be opened.

Every nerve in Charlie's being tingled with excitement. Vera handed her granddaughter a gift-wrapped, sealed envelope which even Vera hadn't opened.

"What is it?" asked Chad. Surely, nothing interesting could be so flat.

"It's my Birthday wish," exclaimed Charlie, carefully opening the seal on the envelope.

"Birthday wish?" repeated Adam.

"Yes," replied Vera. "I wanted to do something extra special for this birthday, because it might be my last."

Suddenly, Adam Clark was extremely silent.

"There's two photos!" exclaimed Charlie, gingerly sliding out the large glossies. Then, a peculiar look crossed her face. She looked at Adam and then back at the picture, and then back at Adam again. Suddenly, Charlie covered her mouth with her hand in astonished shock.

"Charlie, I--" began Adam.

"Hey!" interrupted Chad, who had gotten out of his chair and was now standing behind Charlie to get a look. "Wallace Shipley looks a lot like you, Uncle Adam!"

Shirley's eyes narrowed. One could almost see the gears in her head turn. She looked at Adam, and requested to see the photos, herself. Adam groaned and covered his eyes with his hand. The two glossies were handed down from Charlie, first to Jeff Erickson, who noted the resemblance also, then to Scottie, who could really care less, then to Sara, who could sense something exciting was going on, then to Shirley. All the while, Charlie sat speechless and numb, her eyes fixed on Adam.

"What is it, Pumpkin?" asked Chuck, growing concerned.

"Adam Wallace Clark!" exclaimed Shirley, angrily. "You promised Dad that you were giving up piano!"

"I never made any such promise!" refuted Adam, now showing his face.

"That day, in your college dorm room, you promised us to give up your music and go into the family business!" retorted Shirley, nearing tears.

"I said I would set it aside, not give it up altogether," replied Adam.

"How could you keep such a thing from me-- your sister!" cried Shirley. "And you never told Dad, not even on his deathbed! How *could* you keep this from us?!"

"Please don't take it that way," replied Adam, seeing the same hurt look on Charlie's face.

"All those years!" exclaimed Shirley, getting up from the table.

By now, Charlie was close to tears, herself.

"I'm sorry, but we're going now," said Shirley, dragging Chad behind her. The front door slammed shut as Adam's sister went home.

Everyone at the table was silent, including Adam.

"Say something, Charlie," pleaded Adam.

"What do you want me to say?" asked Charlie, in a dazed voice. "Do you want me to say that I understand? that everything is all right? Dear God! When I think of how you let me go on and on about the wonderful Wallace Ship... about you, and you said nothing!" Confused, Charlie jumped from the table and ran to her room.

"I'm sorry I ruined the birthday party," apologized Adam, getting up from the table. "Please apologize to Charlie for me the next time you see her."

After Adam left, the rest of the guests dispersed, unsure if what they thought was so, really *was* so. Vera cleared away the uneaten desert. Chuck helped put the wrapping paper that Charlie had so neatly folded after opening every present, into a garbage bag.

"Mom," asked Chuck, bewildered, "what happened this evening?"

Vera picked up the two glossy photos. One photo was of Wallace Shipley sitting at a piano in what looked to be a sound studio. The other, was of Wallace Shipley sitting with one elbow leaning on the piano, smiling that all too familiar Clark smile.

"Oh my, it's true!" exclaimed Vera, sinking into a chair.

Charlie didn't know what to think. One minute she was angry, and the next she was unspeakably happy. In a fit of confusion, she gathered all the Wallace Shipley CD's and threw them into her trashcan. She was sorry four minutes later, and fished them out again.

Every time she doubted that the truth was real, Charlie would take another long look at the photos, and the doubts would vanish. The first photo Charlie found interesting, but the close up of Wallace Shipley fascinated her the most. There was a marked difference in his expression to what she normally witnessed in everyday life. In the photo, Adam looked at ease, like he was utterly and thoroughly enjoying life. Charlie had never once considered that Adam wasn't entirely happy, for she had nothing with which to draw the comparison. She had become accustomed to his unusual need for privacy, and the way he had of keeping her at a distance. For the first time, Charlie was glimpsing the complete Adam Clark. Her mind awash in these thoughts, she fell asleep, forgetting to change from her party clothes.

At three in the morning, Charlie was awakened by a tapping sound coming from her window. Since the entire house was only one story, she could see Adam's face peering through a large opening in the thick shrub that ran the entire distance of the house. Charlie went over to the window and opened it.

"Charlie-girl, I need to talk to you," pleaded Adam.

"Please don't call me that, anymore. Besides, tomorrow is a school day," replied Charlie, indifferently.

"Charlie, I know you're hurt-- that's why we have to talk," said Adam. Charlie shook her head. "All right, if you won't come out here, I'll climb in there," said Adam.

"You wouldn't dare!" cried Charlie.

Just then, Vera appeared in Charlie's bedroom doorway, dressed in a hair net, slippers, and a terry robe.

"Adam, or whatever your name is, what on earth are you doing outside my granddaughter's window at this time of the morning?" asked Vera.

"I came to talk to Charlie," responded Adam.

Vera observed Charlie's indifferent look, and defiantly folded arms.

"I think she needs to talk to you, too," agreed Vera. "Take her, but have her home in time for breakfast. I trust your integrity, but our neighbors will gossip about this till the day I die, if you don't have her back before daylight."

"Grandma!" protested Charlie. "I don't *want* to talk to him!"

"You'll thank me for this later," was Vera's stout reply.

Suddenly, Charlie found herself being pushed through the window by Vera and into Adam's ready arms. When Charlie's feet found the ground, she turned to climb back through, but found Vera had already shut the window.

"I'm sorry to have to do this to you," apologized Adam, "but this is very important. I've already made peace with Shirley. Now, I must explain to you why I did what I did. Otherwise, I'm afraid your friendship won't last the night!"

Adam took Charlie to the garden where they had talked so many times before-- mostly about God. This time, for the first time Charlie could remember, Adam was actually going to talk about himself. This intensely private man began:

"When I was a boy, I had no more interest in music than most other kids my age. Even so, Mom forced me to take piano lessons everyday after school for most of my childhood.

"This imposed knowledge of music never turned into love, and by the time I began college, I had long forsaken the piano. Then one day, I met Ronald Paulson, a teacher at the college I was attending. I listened to one of his classes and was so impressed by his enthusiasm for music, that I signed up for his course. The knowledge of music that I had accrued those long years of practicing, now returned to me with a passion that I had never known before!

"My second year in college, I began to compose for the first time. Ron said I took to it like a duck takes to water. I felt so alive and free! I found that I could better express myself through my music, more than I ever could through words. It was then, that Ron Paulson's son, Bill,

approached me about a career in music. I immediately rejected the idea, but I couldn't make it completely go away.

"After completing my third year in college, I was determined to set aside my plans to enter the family plumbing business, and follow my dreams with music. When I told Dad about my new plans, I think he nearly had a heart attack. How could I think of giving up a steady profession to become a piano player? Dad was dead set against it, no matter how much I tried to reason with him. Mom's reaction wasn't as bad, but she sincerely thought I was making a dreadful mistake, even though she had been the one to force me into all those unwanted piano lessons when I was a boy-- a fact which she now seemed to regret. My sister shared the same horror as Dad, and could hardly believe I was going to mess up my life to do what? pound a keyboard?

"To make matters worse, the insomnia I had had since childhood, was now interrupting my sleeping hours. Of course, my family thought this was due to the negative influence music was having on me.

"I don't mean to say that they had any moral objections to my music, but even Dad pointed out that the kind of music I write has only a limited spiritual value. I had to admit that it was true. My music made me feel closer to God, but to others, it was just another nice sound-- nothing more. This was the best understanding that I had at the time, so I followed it. I told my family that I would set aside music and become a plumber. I have no regrets about the decision, for I made it honestly.

"I returned to my other studies, and only composed as a hobby to help me sleep at night. Eventually, I graduated and moved to Twin Yucca to join the family business.

"Over time, I kept up with my music, but in an increasingly secretive manner. I knew that if I publicly showed an active interest in music, even to the point of composing, it would reopen wounds that had closed long ago. This was how I rationalized it. I never told an untruth concerning my music-- I can swear that before God and you, Charlie.

"A few years after I graduated, Bill Paulson came to see me in Twin Yucca. I confided to him that I was still composing. He listened to the pieces I had completed, and expressed an earnest desire to be my personal manager. He felt convinced that a record label would be interested. I thought about it for over a month, and asked God for guidance. I finally accepted Bill's offer, and gave him a list of stipulations that I would have to have before signing any record deal: firstly, I had to have First Corinthians thirteen somewhere on the album; secondly, I had to be able to use another name and not be bound to make personal appearances or tours; thirdly, that I could not be bound by contract to take any interviews. Bill said no record label would touch me with a ten

foot pole if I demanded all that. But, this was the ONLY way I would be willing. I figured that if God wanted it, then it would happen.

"Bill went to Periwinkle Records, and they were very interested, but they didn't like all the stipulations. I don't know how God and Bill worked it, but, miraculously, I was finally signed to do an album. I worked feverishly at night on the album, and by day, at Clark Plumbing Service and Supply. Two years later, 'A Walk in the Rain' debuted. 'Rain' had a lot of critics, and overall, I wasn't very encouraged to try another album. However, Periwinkle Records had enough sells to justify one more.

"It took me five years of composing, and reworking my compositions before I felt I had a good enough album to go public. 'Convergence' was born. It would come to be, of all my albums, one of the best, I feel, I've ever done."

"I totally agree!" smiled Charlie. "It's my all time favorite, and it really deserved all the recognition it received!"

"A week after getting a particularly prominent award for 'Convergence,'" recalled Adam, "an interviewer managed to corner me when I visited Bill at his office in Vermont. I said as little as possible and got out as quickly as I could. I hadn't even attended the awards ceremony in the first place, just so no one would see me! When 'Convergence' won, the presenter accepted it in my name and I thought that was that. But Wallace Shipley was becoming famous, and people wanted to know about the man behind the music. It was very unnerving."

"Donna, my old friend," laughed Charlie, "once told me she watched that awards show, and was so disappointed when you didn't make an appearance! She so wanted to know what you looked like!"

"I released one or two singles," resumed Adam, "but stayed away from doing anything more serious, until Bill suggested that I try a Christmas album. He said Christmas albums usually sold well, so, I decided to give it a try.

"I had no idea how true Bill's words would prove to be. When 'Epiphany' hit the stores, it was an instant success, and eventually sold over twelve million copies worldwide. Bill and I'd never seen anything like it, and neither had Periwinkle Records. It was just phenomenal."

"I think the reason it did so well," added Charlie, "was because it was considered something highbrow that even the masses could understand."

"I think you're probably right," agreed Adam. "I've never tried to be anything more or less in my music than who I am. If people want to put me high on a pedestal, it's their problem.

"Lastly," he finished, "I released 'Stratification.'"

"And you haven't put out another album in ten years!" scolded Charlie. "I've always wanted to know why you didn't keep it up?"

"Oh, I don't know," hesitated Adam. "I've been having serious doubts that I'll ever be able to do another album. I'm not sure it's in me, anymore."

"That's nonsense!" replied Charlie. "Why, you could no sooner give up music than you could air!"

"I'll have to see," shrugged Adam. "Well, I guess you're up to speed on Wallace Shipley. The only other thing I have to add, is that I never meant to hurt you with this secret. In my own defense, you may not have noticed, but whenever you mentioned Wallace Shipley, I DID try to change the subject as soon as I could."

"I suppose you did," conceded Charlie. "I'm sorry I said the things I did." Charlie shook her head in disbelief. "I still can't believe I'm actually talking to Wallace Shipley!" she exclaimed. "I've dreamed of meeting you for most of my life, and when Grandma asked me for a birthday wish, I blurted out that I wanted an autographed picture."

"I had absolutely no idea that the birthday request lady was your grandma," confessed Adam. "I hate fan mail, so Bill keeps people's names from me."

"I guess the secret's out now," said Charlie, "after what happened this evening. Probably this time tomorrow, everyone in Twin Yucca will know."

"God does everything for a purpose, Charlie-girl," smiled Adam. "Come, I want to show you my music room."

The mysterious locked room was in fact, the hideout of Wallace Shipley. In the corner, Charlie recognized the concert grand piano that Wallace Shipley was known for as his "preferred instrument." On the floor against the wall, stood a large, golden award for "Convergence." On the wall opposite to the window was a homemade music studio, where Adam listened to live performances of other musicians, in order to study their music and gain inspiration for his own.

Stacks of music related magazines surrounded the tattered couch that was against the other wall. Adam explained that it was where he did most of his "thinking." Charlie couldn't help adding,

"Probably with your eyes shut!"

Adam had to smile in spite of himself. He checked the time. There was another hour left before sunrise.

"Do you want me to play something in particular?" he asked, sitting down at the piano.

"How about 'Shades of Love'?" asked Charlie, not believing that Wallace Shipley was taking HER request! She nestled into Adam's comfortable sofa, and he began to play. Charlie smiled so hard her cheeks hurt. She watched, fascinated by Adam's fingers as they masterfully flew about the keyboard, bringing to life a favorite composition that she had loved for so long.

Charlie walked home alone, so neighbors might not see them together, her heart full of music and her lips full of thanks to the Lord Who had put Adam in her way.

First Corinthians Chapter Thirteen:

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.

But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."

Chapter Thirty-one

A Season For Everything

"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven."

~ Ecclesiastes 3:1 ~

Charlie opened her eyes and smiled dreamily. It was the day after her sixteenth birthday. To the awakening teenager, yesterday almost didn't seem real. Had it only been a wonderful dream? Charlie sat up in bed and looked at the photos of Wallace Shipley she had leaned up against her nightstand lamp. Yes, they were still there. She let out an awed sigh and slid back down into her covers.

"Adam Clark is Wallace Shipley!" whispered Charlie to herself. She said it a few more times, liking the way the words sounded. Charlie burrowed her face into the pillow and smothered a giggle.

When she had composed herself, Charlie finally noticed that the usual morning light that flowed into her room from the rising easterly sun, was not in its usual place. With a loud groan, she checked her alarm clock. It was almost eleven thirty in the morning! How could she have slept in so late? It's true that she had gone to bed at five, but today was a school day! She tried to remember turning the alarm off, but it was a complete blank.

Charlie climbed out of bed, put on her robe, and opened her bedroom door. She could hear the grandfather clock by the living room front door chime the half hour mark. Finding the living room empty, Charlie went to the kitchen where she found an empty plate on the table with a folded note from her grandmother. It read:

"Pumpkin,

You had such a big day yesterday, that I thought it best to let you sleep in this morning. I called your school to let Principal Strickland know not to expect you today. Chucky is at the nursing home, while I run a few errands. I'll be home by noon. Please don't talk to anyone about last night until I get home.

Love,

Grandma

P.S. Your breakfast is in the refrigerator."

"Don't talk to anyone about last night until I get home'?" repeated Charlie, mysteriously. Shrugging, she went to the refrigerator and took out her breakfast. It was odd to have the house to herself for a change-- especially on a school day. She picked the fried bacon strips from off her eggs and poured herself a glass of water. Vera's eggs always had a lot of salt. Just then, Charlie heard someone knocking on the front door.

Charlie opened the front door, meeting Adam face to face. Charlie gasped in surprise and slammed the door shut.

"Uh, Charlie?" asked Adam, bewildered.

"O.K.," shouted Charlie running to her room to dress. "You can come in now!"

Adam opened the front door slowly, and stepped inside.

"I'll be out in a minute!" called Charlie from her bedroom.

"No hurry!" called back Adam.

Five minutes later, Charlie appeared down the hall, now dressed for the day.

"Vera asked me to stop by, and not to talk to anyone about last night," replied Adam, explaining his presence.

"Have you noticed anything weird about Grandma, lately?" asked Charlie, clearing away her breakfast dishes. Adam sat down at the table and accepted the cup of coffee Charlie handed him.

"I was meaning to talk to you about that," Adam replied. "Yesterday, with all the fuss about Wallace Shipley, I forgot the reason why I sent your grandma the photos in the first place."

"Why *did* you?" asked Charlie, curiously.

"It was the request of a Grandma who didn't think she was going to live out another year," replied Adam, solemnly.

Charlie sank down into a chair.

"Grandma *did* say something about not always going to be here," remembered Charlie. "I thought she only meant she was going to take a trip. I don't understand. Why would grandma think she's going to die?"

"Does Vera have any outstanding health problems?" asked Adam.

"I don't think so," replied Charlie, growing concerned. As Charlie was wondering, Vera walked into the kitchen.

"Good morning, Pumpkin!" greeted Vera, sitting down at the table. "Thank you for coming without any explanations, Adam," said Vera. "This is very important. Charlie, I want you to hear this. Come, sit down." Charlie left off washing the dishes from the party yesterday, and sat down at the table.

"First of all, Adam," said Vera, reaching out across the table and touching his hand, "I want you to know how very sorry I am for being the one to burst in on your incognito. I had absolutely no idea that you were who you were. That said, I thought that there might be still some way of preserving your secrecy."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, Adam," began Vera, "first thing this morning, I splurged and called a taxi. I visited your sister Shirley and had a talk with her. I explained to her my regret and asked her if there wasn't some way to still keep Wallace Shipley a secret. (It's an almost impossible idea, especially considering the gossip-ready place Twin Yucca is.) Shirley expressed her dislike of your 'hobby,' and said she was more than willing *not* to tell a living soul, save her husband Thomas and of course, Mike and Sandra. She and Chad both promised not to reveal your secret, with the understanding that they would not tell a lie. There is a catch, however. Shirley said it's your responsibility to tell your Mom."

"I was going to," replied Adam.

"Next," continued Vera, "I visited Jeff Erickson. I found out that he never had any intentions of saying anything about last night. Jeff said he had always respected you as an artist and as a citizen. He felt it was none of his business to repeat information that had been intentionally withheld. Debbie, his little girl, had also been instructed to keep quiet. So, there was no need for alarm concerning Jeff.

"Maggie's house was my next stop. By the time I had gotten to her, Maggie had already told her parents, both of whom, fortunately, did not believe her. Maggie is willing to remain silent, also.

She told me to tell you that she's sorry she talked, but that her Mom wasn't really listening, and that her Dad was drunk and he never remembers anything when he's that way." Vera sighed. "Poor thing! So Maggie is taken care of.

"Charlie's friend from school, Sara, had also told her Mom, but was told not to repeat confidential news. I don't think Sara's Mom really believed her, either. Sara has also promised to keep silent.

"Scottie, I learned, is not aware of Adam's other identity. The only thing he had to say about last night was that he had left before he had a chance to eat any birthday cake!

"That brings me to Gloria Jacobs," said Vera. "Fortunately for you, Adam, she was called away to Topeka. If she had stayed for the entire birthday party, your secret would have been all over Twin Yucca by now!"

"I was wondering what was going to happen," said Adam, his voice betraying how relieved he was feeling. "I was so shaken that I called in a friend to fill in for me at the store, this morning."

"I've already asked Chuck not to say anything, but in his condition, who knows if he'll remember," warned Vera. "But, there's nothing we can do about that. As long as Charlie and I won't talk, then Adam, I think your secret still has a good chance of being kept."

"What about Uncle Jerome?" asked Charlie, wondering if her Grandma would be willing to keep a secret from her son.

"What he doesn't know, won't hurt him," replied Vera.

"Thank you, Vera," replied Adam. "I can't express how much I'm grateful to you for doing this! Going public was a life change that I wasn't prepared for. Last night, I just had to trust to God's Providence."

"It does appear God was looking out for you," admitted Vera.

"Grandma," asked Charlie, "when you made the birthday request, you said you thought you only had a year to live. Is it true?"

The suddenness of the question caught Vera by surprise. She got up from the table and poured herself a cup of coffee.

"Are you going to die, Grandma?" asked Charlie, her voice quivering.

"We've all got to go sometime, and meet our Maker," answered Vera. "But, it's too early for tears, Charlie. I don't know for certain. The doctor says I'll live to a ripe old age! Still, I must confess that when Arnold passes away, I believe I'll soon follow." Charlie got up and went to her Grandma, burying her head in the old woman's arms.

"Are you ready to 'meet your Maker'?" asked Adam, solemnly. It was a question that most could take offense at, but Adam was not willing to let that get in the way of Vera's salvation.

"I believe so," was Vera's reply. "Lately, I've been looking at my life, and I'm not proud of what I've found," replied Vera, smoothing Charlie's long brown hair away from her face. "I attend church and call myself a Christian, but until recently, I realized that it was all talk and no works. My granddaughter's testimony has been an inspiration to me. I'm not just saying that Charlie... I really mean it.

"Before, I've *said* that Christ was my Savior, but now I *know* Christ *is* my Savior. Before, I never thought it was possible to be sure of one's salvation, but by your example of faith, Pumpkin, I see that we *can* know. 'And hereby we do know that we know Him, IF we keep His commandments,'" quoted Vera. "It's long overdue, but yes, I *am* ready."

"The doctor says you're all right?" repeated Charlie. "You're not trying to spare me any bad news, are you?"

"If I could spare you of anything, Pumpkin," replied Vera, "it would be to not leave you alone with Jerome." It was the first time Charlie had ever heard her Grandma say anything about Jerome that was not in his defense. "I'm going to bring Chuck home now," said Vera.

After the front door closed, Adam stood up to go.

"Thank you for asking Grandma about her salvation," replied Charlie.

Adam nodded and was turning to leave, when Charlie blurted,

"Would you go with me to the Edward Johnston concert?"

Adam hesitated.

"I thought you would ask some of your friends," he replied.

"You *are* my friend," said Charlie. "In fact, you're probably my best friend. You don't mind... do you?"

"No, Charlie-girl, I don't mind," said Adam.

"I'm going to ask Grandma to come, too," added Charlie.

"I think she'll enjoy the concert," said Adam.

"I'm driving Uncle Jerome's car," continued Charlie, "but since I have to have a licensed driver in the car, you'll have to walk here, instead of me picking you up, because Grandma can't drive."

"I'll look forward to it," answered Adam. He hesitated. "You're not asking me to come because I'm Wallace Shipley, are you?"

"Why, Adam! How could you ask that?" exclaimed Charlie, indignantly. "I was your friend BEFORE this Wallace Shipley business, wasn't I?"

"Yes," replied Adam.

"And now that I know who you are, I'm STILL your friend, aren't I?" asked Charlie.

"Yes," replied Adam.

"Well, there's your answer!" declared Charlie, folding her arms. "You may be brilliant in front of the piano, but you've a lot to learn about women!"

"I withdraw the question," retracted Adam. "Please, don't treat me differently than you usually do," he entreated. "The idea of fame is a little frightening to me. Don't forget, I'm still me."

"I won't forget," promised Charlie.

"Are you sure you want me to come? Maybe you should take your father, instead," said Vera, later that day.

"Come on, Grandma," coaxed Charlie, "you know how Daddy is in crowds. Besides, he always falls asleep when I force him to listen to 'my kind' of music."

"You say Adam's coming, too?" asked Vera.

"Yes. Though I think he was afraid I was just doing it because he's Wallace Shipley," replied Charlie.

"Did you?" asked Vera, curiously.

"Grandma!" exclaimed Charlie. "Not you too!"

"It must be a unique experience to have a childhood crush on someone for so long, only to find out he was someone you already knew and liked," observed Vera.

"I guess so," replied Charlie, slowly. "I've always liked Adam. But somehow, it's different now. Everything I've ever felt about Wallace Shipley is now tangled up with my preexisting admiration of Adam Clark. Adam is the best friend I've ever had, but somehow, Wallace Shipley complicates everything! It's fiction and reality all in one man! How can that be?" asked Charlie.

"You're confused right now," replied Vera. "For years, you've seen Adam with one eye only, that is, through his music. Now, you can see him with both eyes. Don't let the one overshadow the other, Pumpkin. I think that's what he was trying to tell you."

Thursday, Mike and Sandra returned from their vacation. Mike handled Adam's secret identity with first joking laughter, then to concern that his uncle was sick and running a fever, then to dumbfounded disbelief. It wasn't until Adam placed into his nephew's hands the large, golden award that he had won for "Convergence" that Mike finally believed him.

As was his mother, Mike felt hurt by the fact that someone so close to him as his uncle, had kept this secret from him for so long. The novelty quickly wore off of Sandra, however, who was more concerned with Mike's continued studies so he could pass the California Journeyman Plumber License exam which was set to take place next month. To Sandra, this family controversy was only a distraction. Indeed, she was not overreacting. On their vacation, Mike was continually pulling out his study materials, even enlisting his wife's help in quizzes.

Saturday, the day of the concert, finally came. The day before, Vera and Charlie had went shopping in Palm Springs. The total outing was an expense that Charlie paid for herself, insisting that Vera also get a dark gray sequined gown that Vera had admired from a distance in a shop window. It was the fanciest dress Vera had worn in years. Charlie bought for herself a floor-length shimmering black satin gown embellished with tiny silver beads.

The two dresses, combined with two sets of matching shoes, set Charlie back her entire savings, but it was worth it! Early that evening, Chuck clapped proudly when the two women entered the living room where he and Adam were waiting.

"Mom, you look fantastic!" exclaimed Chuck. "And just look at my little girl! Doesn't she look all grown up!"

Adam, dressed in his black tuxedo, stood up politely when the women entered the room. Upon prodding from Chuck, Adam admitted Charlie looked "very nice," but was careful not to say more than he could of.

"Come on," said Charlie, "we've got to get going, so we won't miss a minute of the concert!"

With Adam looking on apprehensively, Charlie got behind the wheel of Jerome's car. Adam sat beside Charlie in the front seat, while Vera and Chuck got in the back. Charlie first dropped off Chuck at Mullen-Overholt, and then proceed to Highway Sixty-two, where she carefully merged with the oncoming traffic. Adam was clearly nervous over Charlie's driving. The teenager tried to console herself with the fact he acted the same way to Mike's driving-- although his suggestions weren't quite so numerous.

"Careful," warned Adam, "the semi truck wants to pass."

"I see him," replied Charlie, confidently.

"Slow down a little, Charlie," said Adam.

"I know the speed limit," laughed Charlie. "Maybe you'd feel better if you got out, and ran alongside the car!"

"Just watch where you're going," was Adam's reply.

The closer they came to the off-ramp, the more congested the traffic became. Red brake lights dotted the highway.

"Wow, I didn't think traffic was going to be *this* heavy," remarked Charlie, becoming a little apprehensive of her driving skills in this situation.

"Stay in this lane," instructed Adam. Just then, a white limousine cut in front of Charlie, causing her to brake suddenly. However, since the traffic was moving so slowly, no one bumped fenders.

"Adam, maybe you should take the wheel," suggested Charlie, her confidence a bit shaken. To her surprise, Adam refused.

"You're doing fine," he assured her. "Just keep your attention on the road."

"What time is it?" asked Charlie, not wanting to take her eyes off the traffic.

"Five thirty," replied Adam. "We have plenty of time."

By six o' clock, Jerome's car had found the crowded parking lot at the large Spencer Arts Cultural Building in Palm Springs. The bustling parking lot was lined mostly with expensive cars and limousines. People dressed in formal evening attire made their way to the entrance of the center. Charlie's first thought was to make a silent prayer that she not bump into any of these costly vehicles the way she had with the dumpster in the empty parking lot back in Twin Yucca.

"There's a parking space," pointed out Vera.

Before Charlie could maneuver the car into position, a sporty red car took it, instead.

"There's another spot," pointed Adam. This time, Charlie was able to easily park the car. She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well," replied Adam, "whether this concert is a success or not, you did a fine job of driving," he complimented.

"Yes, you did very well," chimed in Vera.

Adam got out of the car, first opening the driver's door, and then Vera's. He escorted the ladies inside, each accepting an arm.

The Spencer Arts Cultural Building was a circular amphitheater covering 24,000 square feet. Inside, tiered rows of seats gradually rose outward from the center, encircling an area featuring a large grand piano. The threesome presented their tickets, and went down the tiered steps to the appropriate row their seats were on. Vera sat to Charlie's left, while Adam was to her right.

"These are excellent seats, Adam," observed Vera. Charlie counted, and discovered that they were only four rows away from the center stage!

People were still finding their seats, when an announcer entered the stage, holding a microphone.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, please find your seats. The concert begins in five minutes!" he announced.

"Have you ever seen Edward Johnston perform?" asked Charlie, addressing Adam. He shook his head.

"No, this will be a first," he smiled.

"I'm glad I brought these," said Charlie pulling out a pair of stage glasses. "I want to watch his hands."

The lights were dimmed, and a spotlight shone on the stage just a few feet in front of them.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," said the announcer, his voice filling the amphitheater, "the Friends of the Spencer Arts Cultural Building are proud to present to you tonight, the exceptionally gifted talents of Edward Johnston, in his first season here at the Spencer Arts Cultural Building of Palm Springs. Please give a warm welcome to Edward Johnston!"

A slightly balding man in a black tuxedo entered the spotlight, while everyone clapped. He bowed and went to his piano. The applause hushed, and Edward Johnston began to play. Charlie put the stage glasses to her eyes, trying to calm the excitement she was feeling. Here she was, watching Edward Johnston perform just a few feet away, while sitting next to Wallace Shipley! It was an irony that was not lost on her.

The first presentation was one of Edward Johnston's signature pieces, which was met with instant applause. After it was over, he began another, which Charlie quickly recognized to be an altered arrangement of one of Adam's compositions.

"Adam," whispered Charlie into her companion's ear, "what *has* he done to your song? It sounds awful!"

"At least I'm getting royalties for it," Adam grimly smiled.

Song after song poured from Edward Johnston's hands, until Charlie was quite sure she was dreaming. At intermission, the lights came back on, and everyone streamed into the dining hall where linen draped tables scattered the room. A waiter showed the threesome to their reserved table and took their order.

"How long is the intermission?" asked Vera.

"An hour," replied Charlie.

"Good, then I'll have time to use the rest room," said Vera, leaving the table.

As Charlie was taking a sip of water, an older man approached Adam.

"Adam Clark!" exclaimed the man, shaking Adam's hand. "I told my wife I thought I saw you here! How's business?"

"Doing good, Pete," replied Adam.

"And who is this lovely lady?" asked Pete.

"Oh, I'm sorry," apologized Adam. "Pete, this is Charlie Overholt. Charlie, this is Pete Harrison."

"Nice to meet you," smiled Charlie.

"I see you're doing pretty good for yourself, you sly dog!" winked Pete, nudging Adam with his elbow. "Better not tell Constance, eh?"

Before Adam could refute the innuendo, Pete left the table.

"Don't pay any attention to him," said Adam, seeing Charlie was embarrassed.

"Is he one of your friends?" asked Charlie.

"No," replied Adam. "He's one of Constance's clients. She's a real estate agent."

"Oh," replied Charlie.

"Pumpkin, I phoned the nursing home to check in on your father," said Vera, returning to the table.

"How is he?" asked Charlie.

"He's doing fine, and hopes you're having a good time," answered Vera.

"I'm having a *fantastic* time!" replied Charlie.

The concert began once more with one of Charlie's favorite Edward Johnston songs. When he finished the last featured presentation, the audience applauded the concert pianist. The announcer came out again, holding a microphone and asked Edward Johnston if he had ever had a more responsive audience. The pianist politely replied that he had not.

"Before everyone leaves tonight, I was wondering if you could take a few questions from the audience," suggested the announcer. The audience immediately cheered in approval.

"I'd be happy to," agreed Edward Johnston.

Hands went up in the audience.

"Where do you get your inspiration for your music?" asked one.

"Well," replied Edward Johnston, "I draw inspiration from many places, but mostly, I'd have to say, from my family."

"I'm told," said the announcer, "that there's an interesting story as to how you became a concert pianist. Would you share that with us?"

"Yes," he began, "I was one of the lucky few to ever meet Wallace Shipley in person." (Ooooh's filled the amphitheater.) "I had the opportunity of performing some of my original pieces before him, and he was kind enough to recommend that I pursue a career in music. I did, and I'm standing here today because of the encouragement I received from Wallace Shipley!"

Vera looked at Charlie who looked at Adam, who was clearly displeased.

"Is what he said, true?" whispered Charlie.

"No," whispered Adam, flatly. "I've never met the man in my life!"

"What did Adam say?" whispered Vera.

"Adam said Edward Johnston is lying about Wallace Shipley!" whispered Charlie.

Edward Johnston answered some more questions, and the lights came back on. Adam, Charlie, and Vera, got up and filed out with the rest of the crowd.

As they walked back to Jerome's car, Charlie could tell Adam was angry.

"How could he say that about you, when it isn't true?" argued Charlie. "Surely, he would be afraid of you exposing the lie in public!"

"Not from a musician who's never made a public appearance in over twenty years," reasoned Adam. "Johnston must have figured he was playing it safe to make that claim!"

"At least," said Vera, "he didn't blacken your name."

"It's not the lie that I mind the most," stated Adam, "but the fact someone was taking advantage of my silence! If I only *happened* to witness this lie, what *else* is being sanctioned in my name?"

The drive home was quiet and without incident. Adam even forgot to be nervous about Charlie's driving. He hardly said a word until Charlie pulled up in front of Mullen-Overholt to drop off Jerome's car and pick up Chuck.

"Thank you for inviting me to the concert, Charlie," said Adam, as he prepared to walk home.

"I'm sorry Edward Johnston spoiled the evening for you," apologized Charlie.

"Nothing was spoiled. I just have a lot of thinking to do," replied Adam, solemnly.

As Charlie watched Adam's form disappear into the night, she had a premonition that he was contemplating a big change in his life.

The days flew by, and before Mike knew it, the California Journeyman Plumber License exam was upon him. It was no surprise to his family when he passed. Shirley threw a party in honor of Mike, and invited so many people that the spacious adobe house on the outskirts of Twin Yucca could barely contain them all.

A few days after this celebration, Adam and Mike were called upon to fix a leaking water pipe at the local Twin Yucca hardware store. Ever since the night of the concert, Adam had been unusually quiet, not even speaking to Charlie of what was weighing on his mind and soul.

Mike hadn't noticed this change in his uncle, for he and Sandra were too busy with plans to finally move out of his parents' house and into an apartment of their own. Mike had wanted to move sooner, but Sandra wanted to wait until after Mike had his license. It was a decision based on practicality more than sentimentality, for Shirley was not a hands-off mother-in-law. The

newlyweds would have had much more privacy and freedom if they had moved when they were first married.

"This new apartment is only temporary," Mike was telling his uncle as they finished repairing the water pipe. "In the future, Sandra and I are planning to make the big plunge and buy a house."

"That's good," replied Adam.

"I sure will be glad for the privacy," added Mike. "Chad just had a hard time remembering to knock before entering. After the first time, Sandra started locking the door! Once in a while, we would hear footsteps, and then someone trying to turn the door handle. One of us should really explain to him about married people," added Mike.

"Have you tried?" asked Adam, curiously.

"In a very limited way," laughed Mike.

"Well, that's a job for your Dad and Mom," replied Adam.

As the two were talking, Adam's cell phone rang.

"Clark Plumbing Service and Supply, Adam speaking," said Adam, answering the call.

"Adam, it's Shirley!" frantically cried his younger sister. "The hospital just called! They said Mom had a blood clot that traveled to her heart. It was over before anyone could do anything to help her!"

"Wait a minute!" said Adam, fighting back the tumult of grief that was welling up in his breast. "What do you mean? I saw her just this morning! She was FINE!"

Shirley collapsed into tears and could no longer speak coherently.

"What is it, Uncle Adam?" asked Mike, very concerned by the look on Adam's face.

"Leave the rest of the tools," replied Adam, still in shock. "We're going to the hospital."

Minutes later, Adam barreled through the emergency room, and went straight to the front desk, Mike following close behind.

"What room is Ruth Clark in?" asked Adam, desperately hoping that this was simply a horrible mistake. The nurse looked a little hesitant.

"You were supposed to get a call," she replied.

"Where's my mother!" cried Adam.

"Sir, if you'll take a seat, I'll bring the doctor over to talk to you," said the nurse.

Adam was about to insist, when Mike took him by the arm and led him to a chair. Seeing his uncle in such a disturbed state troubled Mike, who looked up to Adam, almost as father. A minute later, the doctor approached them.

"Mr. Clark, I'm very sorry to inform you that your mother passed away this afternoon at two fifteen of a blood clot that traveled to her heart," explained the doctor. "We won't know for sure that it was a blood clot until an autopsy has been performed, but with Ruth's past medical history, it's highly probable."

"Did she suffer?" mumbled Adam, almost incoherently.

"The clot cut off the blood supply to the heart, resulting in cardiac arrest. By the time Ruth arrived at the hospital, she was already gone. Her suffering was of a short duration, Mr. Clark," comforted the doctor.

"May I see her?" asked Adam.

"She's in there," replied the doctor, pointing to a room on Adam's right.

Adam got to his feet, and pushed open the door. On a table in the center of the room, lie the mortal remains of Ruth Clark-- a white sheet covering her entire body. Adam went to his mother's side and lifted the sheet from her face.

"Mom?" he whispered, as if to awaken her from a deep slumber. "Mom!" sobbed Adam, burying his face in the white sheet. Though an adult, he was as a helpless child, seeking security and consolation from a Mother that could no longer hold her little boy, anymore. In that single moment, Adam felt alone. Tears streaming down his face, Adam pulled the sheet back over Ruth's lifeless form, and left the room.

When Charlie arrived to work from school that day, she found Adam's front and back doors were both locked. Jerome had driven away before Charlie could beg a ride home, so the teenager walked to Mullen-Overholt to find her Grandma and father.

When Charlie entered the nursing home, she noticed the unusually solemn faces of the nursing assistants and nurses. Charlie navigated to Room Three, her Grandfather's room, where she was sure to find Vera. Charlie's Grandma greeted her in a hushed voice.

"What's going on?" asked Charlie, not sure why she was whispering.

"It's Ruth Clark, Adam's Mom," explained Vera. "She's gone to be with the Lord. It only happened just a few hours ago. I feel so sorry for her family," replied Vera. "Did you just come from Adam's home? How is he taking it?"

"Adam's house was locked up, so I came here," answered Charlie.

"It's probably best to let him alone right now," said Vera. "Come, let's fetch Chuck, and go home."

Charlie could hardly keep her attention on her homework. The thought of what Adam must be going through, saddened her greatly.

"If only there was some way I could help him," she thought. Charlie contemplated going over unannounced to his house, but she didn't have the nerve to intrude upon his grief. She finally decided that the best thing she could do was to ask God to comfort him.

A day passed, and Charlie didn't see any sign of Adam. When she showed up for work, she found the house was still locked up, as the day before.

That evening, Charlie wasn't in the mood for their usual father-daughter nightly walk, so Vera volunteered to go with Chuck, instead. Charlie was watching the evening news on the television, when she heard a knock on the front door.

"Come in!" she shouted, not getting up from the sofa.

To her surprise, Adam walked in, looking very tired and sad.

"Adam!" said Charlie, in surprise. "I haven't seen you in a while. How are you doing?" She didn't really have to ask the question, for his weary appearance told her that most likely, Adam hadn't gotten any sleep. "Why don't you sit down?" asked Charlie.

"It's almost bedtime," sighed Adam, sitting down on the other end of the sofa. "I'm dreading the idea of going to bed only to stare at the ceiling, again."

"The weather forecast says tomorrow will be cooler than today," observed Charlie.

"I haven't been able to get a wink of sleep," continued Adam. "I'm just praying this doesn't turn into a several day episode."

"Today was pleasant, though," added Charlie. "How about a game of chess?"

"All right," shrugged Adam.

"Do you have any coffee?" asked Adam, as Charlie was setting up the chess board on the kitchen table.

"Won't the caffeine keep you awake?" she asked.

"It's helps me to relax," he explained.

"I'll pour you a glass of uncaffeinated iced tea," suggested Charlie.

"Do you have to fight me on this?" asked Adam. "Can't you just give me the coffee?"

"If you want caffeine, go home and get it yourself," replied Charlie, emphatically. "I refuse to make your insomnia worse! Now, do you want the iced tea, or not?"

"I'll take the tea," sighed Adam, sitting down behind his side of the chess board.

Charlie set the glass beside Adam and sat down at her end of the chess board.

"You're not going to let me win the way you did last time, are you?" asked Charlie. "Because this won't be any fun if you won't try."

"If you say so," replied Adam, drinking his iced tea, "but I warn you, I'm not an easy man to beat."

"That's more like it!" exclaimed Charlie.

After the first few moves, it was obvious to Charlie that Adam was keeping his word to not let her win. First he captured her knight, followed by half her pawns, both rooks, a bishop, and Charlie's queen, while she only claimed a few of his pieces.

"Checkmate!" said Adam, grinning.

"You win," conceded Charlie, content that he hadn't just rolled over and played dead like their previous game some months back.

As Charlie was clearing the table, Vera and Chuck returned from their walk.

"Adam, I can't tell you how sorry we were to hear about Ruth," consoled Vera, greeting their guest.

"Thank you," replied Adam, as the group sat down in the living room to visit. Chuck tried to speak, but when his body was tired, it became more difficult. He contented himself to resting in his armchair and listening to the conversation.

"I remember," said Vera, "when Martha, Charlie's mother, passed away. It was very hard on Chuck, especially with a new baby."

"I can imagine," replied Adam.

"But, life goes on," added Vera.

"I *suppose* it does," said Adam, a hint of self pity in his voice. "Still, I didn't even get a chance to say good-bye to Mom."

"At least you knew your mother, Adam," pointed out Charlie. "I never knew mine. And just think, you have a lifetime of memories to carry with you."

"You sound like a sappy greeting card," complained Adam, irritated by Charlie's attempt to give him hope, when what he really wanted was to feel sorry for himself. "My mom has died and all you can do is talk about memories!"

"Adam," reproved Charlie, "if you came here tonight to indulge in self pity, then you came to the wrong house! I'm sorry your mother died, but she's in heaven; you'll see her again. I know you're hurting, but by the way you're talking, it sounds as though you're blaming God!"

"Charlie!" reproved Vera, surprised by her granddaughter's boldness. "You shouldn't talk to him that way!"

"If I'm his friend, I will," insisted Charlie.

"Charlie's right," confessed Adam, the Holy Spirit quickly reproofing him of his sin. "I miss my Mom very much, but it's no excuse. God willed that she go to heaven, and I, as a Christian, should say, 'the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.'"

"I think you need some rest, Adam," comforted Vera. "You do look very tired."

"Sleep is a blessing I don't deserve right now," replied Adam, still angry with himself for saying and feeling the way he had.

"I'll pray that you can get some rest," said Vera, getting up to help Chuck to dress for bed, for he had fallen asleep in his armchair.

Charlie reached for the television remote and found a station airing an old black and white movie marathon. Adam leaned back in the sofa and looked over at Charlie.

"I'm sorry I said that to you," he apologized. "I had no right to."

"You're forgiven," replied Charlie, still a little shaken by what had just happened. "I did the right thing, didn't I?" she asked. "When I heard you talking like that, it really scared me."

"You passed the test God gave you," consoled Adam. "I was the one who failed."

Charlie and Adam watched the movie, until she thankfully noticed Adam's head bob forward, as if on the brink of slumber. By the end of the movie, he had stretched out on the Overholt's living room couch, and was fast asleep. Charlie tenderly covered him with a blanket and returned to her room.

"Let the righteous [Charlie] smite me [Adam]; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head: for yet my prayer also shall be in their calamities."

~ Psalms 141:5 ~

"He [God] giveth His beloved [Adam] sleep."

~ Psalms 127:2 ~

"Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints [Ruth]."

~ Psalms 116:15 ~

"A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth."

~ Ecclesiastes 7:1 ~

Chapter Thirty-two
Adam's Big News

"Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted."
~ Matthew 5:4 ~

The day of Ruth Clark's funeral was pleasantly warm, as if the cooler spring months were struggling to have just one last day of bearable weather before the long hot summer began.

The funeral service at church was attended by many of the prominent citizens of Twin Yucca, for the Clarks had been fixtures of the small community for over fifty years.

Ruth and Matthew Clark had first settled in Twin Yucca along with many other families after World War II, in a population boom that had never been matched since. It was a peaceful community where one could raise a family without the influences of hectic city life. It was here that Adam and Shirley had been raised, and it was here that everyone assumed they would always stay.

"Adam's the last member of the family to bear the Clark name," Charlie overheard someone say as the church service was waiting to begin. She turned her head to see the mayor sitting in the pew behind her.

"Such a shame," added the mayor's wife. "Poor Ruth never lived to see Adam settle down. I wonder how much longer he's going to make poor Constance wait. It was Ruth's dying wish that they marry-- or so Mrs. Jacobs told me."

Vera, who had also overheard the mayor and his wife, leaned over and whispered into Charlie's ear:

"I wouldn't be surprised if Adam finally sets a date with Constance soon," she confirmed hopefully. "Wouldn't that be nice? To follow such sadness with a wedding?"

The very idea made Charlie inexpressibly sad. Wiping a stray tear from her cheek, she wondered why it disturbed her so much.

"I'll miss Ruth, too," comforted Vera, not comprehending the true cause of her granddaughter's sorrow.

The pastor began the ceremony with a tribute to Ruth and what she meant to the community.

"In this time of great sadness," continued the pastor, "we can take comfort in the Holy Scriptures, for in them we have hope. 'For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.' Oh blessed day, when we shall see our loved ones who have passed on before us into the Promised Land, and to stand before the Son of Man! Let us temper our sorrow with this sacred consolation."

The congregation agreed in unison, "Amen!"

"And now," announced the pastor, "I understand that Adam Clark would like to play a song for us in memory of his mother."

Adam rose up from the pew and solemnly walked over to the church piano at the front of the room. The congregation whispered in surprise, for this was the first they had ever heard of Adam's ability to play the piano. For a moment, he sat on the piano bench in silence. Then, placing his hands on the keys, he began to play a composition he had written several years ago. The church echoed with his touching and poignant music. The congregation, who had been expecting an unskillfully played favorite hymn of Ruth's, was in hushed amazement, for it was a technically demanding piece.

Charlie could see the bewilderment on everyone's faces and wondered if Adam had ever told Constance of his secret. Curious, she glanced to where Constance was sitting across the room. Adam's "intended" was in evident disbelief. Just then, she looked toward Charlie's direction.

Constance's intuition recognized the fact that Charlie was not surprised by Adam's ability at the piano. The woman was puzzled. Had Adam been practicing this piece just for the occasion, or was it part of a bigger secret?

When Adam had finished playing the last note, he returned to his seat beside Shirley and her family. His sister squeezed his hand, saying, "Mother would have been proud."

After the funeral service, the pastor and congregation went to the cemetery to bury Ruth Clark in the consecrated ground beside her husband.

Adam watched as the casket was gently lowered into the ground. The death of his mother had been a turning point in his life. God had been preparing him for a big change, and now he was ready.

Before dispersing, friends and acquaintances filed past Ruth's family to pay their condolences. Thomas Garner had flown in for the funeral, as did two of Ruth's cousins. Sandra stood faithfully by Mike's side, while Chad remained close to his parents. When the line progressed to the Overholt's, Vera, Jerome, and Charlie expressed their sympathies while Chuck remained silent.

"If there's anything we can do-- anything at all," said Vera, "please, let us know."

"Thank you," replied Thomas, his wife Shirley echoing his sentiments.

"We will remember your family in our prayers," consoled Vera.

As the line was about to move, Adam called after Charlie. Shirley gave him a disapproving look, but he didn't notice his sister.

"I need to talk to you, Charlie," said Adam. "It's important. Will you be home tonight?"

"Yes," replied Charlie. The strange urgency in his voice gave her an uneasy feeling. Was this about Constance? or perhaps something connected with his music? Charlie was about to ask what it was, when she noticed that everyone was staring at them.

The Overholts went to their car, and the procession line continued to move once more.

"What was all that about?" questioned Jerome.

"I don't know," was Charlie's reply. She looked back only to see Constance eyeing her suspiciously.

Constance did NOT like being kept from secrets that she felt she should have known. She feared the questions people were going to ask later, concerning Adam's sudden skill at the piano, and the strange importunate request to see a sixteen-year old about something "important." To her, Adam was suddenly full of secrets, and she did *not* like it! It was so unlike the man she was accustomed to.

But even more, Constance resented Charlie's closeness to her friend. The girl had somehow managed to wheedle herself into Adam's life. He was confiding in a teenager and not the woman he had been dating for the past nine years! This, she felt, was definite proof of Charlie's negative influence in Adam's behavior. It had been a growing concern with her for some time, but now it was coming to a head. She must speak to him later concerning Charlie.

That same day, Jerome dropped Chuck and Charlie off at the house while Vera accompanied him back to the nursing home to visit awhile with Arnold. Chuck sat down in his favorite chair and watched television. Charlie pulled off his dress shoes and undid his tie.

"Do you want some orange juice, Daddy?" she asked. Chuck continued to stare at the TV. "Daddy?" she repeated. Chuck looked up at his daughter and then back at the television set. "Okay," replied Charlie. "I'll be in the kitchen making dinner."

A little before dinner, Vera returned home. After the family had eaten, Charlie cleared away the dishes, and settled on the living room sofa to wait for Adam. With all the speculation of Adam's marriage to Constance, Charlie wondered if that was the important thing he had to tell her. And yet, the glaring look Constance had given her at the funeral suggested that it was something else. Surely, Constance wouldn't have looked so displeased if she was about to be married.

Vera put Chuck to bed, for the stress of the crowd at the funeral had exhausted him. Afterward, the grandmother returned to take back up her knitting. Charlie watched as the metallic knitting needles clicked away, forming rows of neat columns in their wake.

"Grandma McEntire knits also," mused Charlie, when Vera had caught her watching.

"Does she?" asked Vera, casually.

"Uh-huh," yawned Charlie.

"You've got school, tomorrow," reminded Vera.

"I know," sighed Charlie. "But I think Adam has something important to tell me." As she finished saying this, the living room clock sounded eleven o' clock.

"Well," reasoned Vera, "it couldn't have been very important, otherwise he would have been here by now. Come, we're going to bed," she insisted, folding up the partially knit sweater and placing it in the knitting bag. "If Adam wants to talk to you, he'll just have to wait."

Charlie obeyed. She would see him tomorrow.

The next morning, on the drive to school, Jerome noticed the Clark plumbing van going past them in the opposite direction on the road to Galilee Christian School.

"That reminds me," said Jerome, "what did Adam tell you last night?"

"He never showed up," replied Charlie, checking the rear view mirror.

"He didn't, huh?" mused Jerome, curiously. "What do you think he's up to?"

Charlie remained silent. She preferred not to speculate in front of her uncle.

After school, Jerome met her with the car, and moved to the passenger side so she could drive to work, at Adam's house. Then, Jerome took the car back to the nursing home, as was their routine.

To Charlie's disappointment, Adam wasn't home. Instead, she found Maggie working in the vegetable garden in the backyard.

"Hi, Charlie," greeted Maggie, as she watered the tomatoes with the garden hose.

"Adjust the nozzle, Maggie!" instructed Charlie, for she was shooting a jet of water at the defenseless plants. Maggie twisted the nozzle to the right, accidentally increasing the torrent. "It's the other way, Mag," reminded Charlie. Maggie turned the setting to the left, and after completing the watering, came inside the house to talk to Charlie while she worked.

Charlie started tidying the second floor and worked her way down to the kitchen, while Maggie happily chatted about Jeff Erickson, and the picnic they had went on in the park two weeks ago. Charlie had already heard the story several times, but kindly paid attention to her friend, who obviously had had a good time.

As Charlie finally made her way to the kitchen, she found the back door wide open and swinging in the May breeze.

"Sorry," apologized Maggie, who had forgotten to shut the door.

Without thinking much about it, Charlie closed the door and went to the cupboard to retrieve the window cleaner. As she was about to cross the room to go clean the living room windows, she saw Maggie standing rigidly in front of her.

"What is it?" asked Charlie, stepping aside to see what the matter was.

There on the floor, between the girls and the two only entrances to the kitchen, lie a coiled brown snake, hissing angrily, for Charlie had almost stepped on him when she shut the door. Charlie smothered a scream.

For a minute, the snake and the two women just stared at each other. Then, as if warning them away from his reach, the snake shook its tail at them. Charlie felt ill as she heard the distinctive sound of a rattlesnake.

"Quickly!" exclaimed Charlie, as she and Maggie climbed up onto the round kitchen table. It rocked back and forth as the two women found room enough to keep their legs from dangling off the edge. Charlie could hear Maggie breathing rapidly from fear.

"Let's just stay calm and pray," suggested Charlie. She led her friend in prayer, asking God for protection and deliverance. Afterward, Maggie was considerably calmer, though still shaken.

"Now what?" asked Maggie.

"I wonder if I could reach the telephone on the counter," suggested Charlie, testing how far out she could extend her arm. Next, Maggie tried, but all was to no avail. "I'll have to get off the table," Charlie sighed, disappointedly. Maggie grabbed hold of her friend's arm.

"Snakes can strike up to half their body length," warned Maggie. "And that's an awfully long snake."

Charlie was surprised by her friend's understanding on the matter.

"My cousin was bitten by a rattler while hiking many years ago," related Maggie, "and he became really swollen, and couldn't move his arms or legs. He said it hurt a lot, too."

"Did he die?" asked Charlie.

"No, my Uncle rushed him to the emergency room, and he's all right now," she replied. "Ooh, I hate snakes," Maggie continued, shivering with disgust.

"I'm not very fond of them, myself," added Charlie, who had wisely given up trying for the phone. "That reminds me of an old saying Daddy told me: 'The first one wakes it up, the second one makes it mad, and the third one gets bitten.' This snake is already mad."

The girls waited on top of the table for either the snake to move, so they could escape, or for help to arrive.

"My leg is falling asleep," sighed Maggie, trying to reposition herself. The table rocked a little until Maggie stopped moving. Obviously, it wasn't meant to hold the weight of two women. Thankfully, as long as they didn't move around too much, the table showed no signs of collapsing.

Charlie leaned forward to see what time it was, but the digital clock was just out of the way so she could only read the first digit.

"It's still four o' clock," she announced.

"I'm getting hungry," said Maggie, who by now, had recovered from the initial shock of the snake.

"Look at him," remarked Charlie, folding her arms in disdain, "just sitting there, like he was king of the desert, or something. You'd think he'd get tired, and find someplace else to go."

"I wish someone would come," sighed Maggie.

Time passed, and now it was five-something o' clock. Charlie and Maggie had repositioned themselves on the table several times, and both were getting cramped and tired.

"When *is* Adam coming home!" exclaimed Charlie.

"All this time, and the snake has moved only two inches," sighed Maggie.

Suddenly, the kitchen phone rang. Charlie looked at Maggie, and then at the phone. After five rings, the caller gave up.

"Are your parents expecting you home by now?" asked Charlie.

"I told Mom I was going to have dinner at your house," explained Maggie, rubbing her sleeping leg.

"Then, that must have been Grandma on the phone," concluded the teenager.

"Charlie?" asked Maggie, timidly.

"What?"

"I have to use the bathroom," whispered Maggie, sheepishly.

"Can you hold it?" asked Charlie.

"Maybe," was Maggie's somber reply.

The clock now read six-something and still no sign of help.

"You know, I'm beginning to feel a little silly on this table," said Charlie. "I feel like the housewife who saw a mouse and ran screaming to a chair!"

"That's no mouse," reminded Maggie, pointing to the rattler.

"I figure we've been here for at least two hours," groaned Charlie. "You know, I never realized how slowly time passes when you can't mark the minutes."

The snake looked up at the two tired women, and then put its head down. To Charlie, the telephone looked so temptingly near that she asked Maggie to retell the story of her cousin's snake bite, convulsions, dizziness, swelling, and all. That was enough to cure her from any rash attempts.

Just as Maggie was thinking she'd have to "hold it" forever, they heard a vehicle pull up outside.

"I think someone's finally coming!" rejoiced Charlie, expectantly. Charlie heard someone turning a key in the lock, and then the front door opened.

"Just make yourselves at home," she heard Adam's voice say.

"Adam!" shouted Charlie.

"Charlie, is that you?" asked Adam, about to enter the kitchen.

"DON'T COME IN!" yelled Charlie, for he nearly came into striking range of the rattlesnake.

"Charlie, Maggie, what in heaven's name are you two doing on the kitchen table?" asked Adam, standing in the doorway separating the kitchen from the living room. Just then, two strangers joined Adam.

"If you haven't noticed," pointed out Charlie, "there's a snake on the floor!"

The snake snapped in their direction but still remained in his defensive coil, ready to strike, his tail now rattling incessantly.

"Don't get off the table!" instructed Adam, as he ran to the living room phone.

"Now that was the most unnecessary piece of advice I've ever gotten," Charlie remarked to Maggie.

"Are you both all right?" shouted Adam from the living room.

"We're fine!" yelled Charlie.

"Keep an eye on the snake, would you, Bill?" asked Adam, still on the phone. "Tell me if it moves."

"Just as long as you don't want me to tackle it," replied Bill, taking off his jacket and tossing it onto the sofa.

The second stranger followed Bill back to the kitchen door.

"So," asked Bill, "how long have you two been up there?"

"What time is it?" asked Charlie.

"It's nine thirty," replied Bill, checking his watch.

"Nine thirty!" repeated Maggie, in shocked surprise. "I didn't know we were here *that* long!"

"Bill, you're still on Vermont time," corrected the other man.

"Oh, that's right," said Bill, "then pacific time, it's really six thirty."

"Then we've been here for two and a half hours," answered Charlie. Suddenly, she realized who Bill was. "You're Adam's manager, aren't you?" she guessed.

"That's right," replied Bill, "and this is Gary Nelson, Adam's new agent."

With two strange men staring at her and Maggie crouched together on the kitchen table, Charlie was beginning to feel a little self-conscious.

"Adam just drove us in from LAX," continued Bill.

Maggie whispered something to Charlie.

"Adam, please hurry!" Charlie shouted.

Gary returned to the living room and sat down on the couch. He had heard Californians were a little strange, but he never expected a rattle snake in the kitchen!

"So, Charlie," Bill continued, folding his arms with a smile, "I understand I have you to thank for Adam's decision to go public. You've done what I've been trying to do for the past twenty-two years!"

"He's going public?" repeated Charlie, in surprise.

"Yup," answered Bill, "on DTM this Friday. Gary was able to get none other than Norman Jones! How about that? And the publicity will help us put together enough bookings for a tour!"

Charlie felt numb. So that was the important news Adam had to tell her. She was relieved that it wasn't marriage to Constance, but a tour meant that her friend was going away.

"How long will the tour last?" asked Charlie.

"Adam doesn't want to go longer than a year, but guessing on the high demand Wallace Shipley has already created, I think Gary and I will be able to talk him into a longer engagement," replied Bill.

"Animal control is on their way," announced Adam, returning to the kitchen doorway.

"Will they be here soon?" asked Maggie, almost in a whimper.

"Any minute now," replied Adam.

"I was just telling Charlie about our plans," said Bill. "Wallace Shipley on tour for the first time!" he added, triumphantly.

"Bill," said Adam, "I wanted to break it to her myself."

"Sorry," shrugged Bill, going to the living room to talk to Gary.

"Charlie, are you all right?" asked Adam.

"The snake hasn't touched either of us," answered Charlie, trying not to cry.

"I wasn't referring to the snake," replied Adam.

"Please," she begged, afraid that if she stayed any longer, she would burst into tears, "just get rid of the snake and let me go home."

Adam wanted to talk more, but the man from animal control arrived in his tan pickup truck.

"It's a Mojave Pacific rattler," said the man, "they rarely get over over three feet, but this one's at least five foot. It's the largest I've ever seen." He extended a long pole with a hook at the end, out toward the snake. The rattler hissed and lunged out at the hook. Maggie held on tight to Charlie's arm, as the animal controller worked the hook under the snake's body and lifted it harmlessly into a white cloth bag. Then he twisted the top of the bag into a knot and placed it into a plastic carrier.

Maggie immediately jumped from the table and ran to the bathroom, nearly stumbling, for her legs were numb from lack of circulation.

"Are you all right?" Adam repeated, as he helped Charlie from off the table.

"Are you really leaving?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so," replied Adam.

Maggie was soon back from the bathroom and eager to go home. She wanted to get out of Adam's house before finding another snake!

"Wait a minute, I'll walk you both home," said Adam.

Adam picked up the kitchen receiver and called Vera. He related to her what had happened, and asked Vera's permission to have some time to speak with Charlie before bringing her home. Thankful that she was all right, Vera gave her consent.

Adam and Charlie walked Maggie home almost without a word. Afterward, the two walked off in the direction of Charlie's house, but found themselves at the Twin Yucca park, instead. Adam sat down at a picnic bench and Charlie sat across from him. For a while, he was quiet, just as he had been the past few days-- even before Ruth's passing.

Something in Charlie made her speak first.

"I knew something like this was coming," she said, thoughtfully.

"How could you know?" he asked.

"I had a feeling it was coming ever since the night Edward Johnston lied about knowing you," replied Charlie. "When we got home from the concert, I broke his CD into little pieces! I could almost wish that night never happened!"

"I'm thankful for that evening," disagreed Adam. "It reminded me of what I had always longed to do. Actually, I'm excited about the future! I can hardly believe it, but I'm actually going to go on tour!"

"On tour!" repeated Charlie, the reality of it sinking in. "I've always thought you should. I just never thought what it would mean. Bill says you're going to be away for at least a year!"

"Charlie, I've always wanted to do this, and now I have the chance," he explained. "I wasn't ready before, but when my family found out about Wallace Shipley, thanks to you, my biggest excuse was suddenly gone. And, after Mom died, the decision suddenly became much easier. I could never have left her for such long periods of time-- not with Jerome."

"You're truly leaving?" she repeated, not really wanting to believe it.

"You're not going to start crying, are you?" asked Adam.

"I might," replied Charlie.

"You know, you're the main reservation I have against leaving Twin Yucca," said Adam, pulling out his handkerchief and handing it to Charlie.

"I am?" she asked.

"Chad will miss me, but he's past the age where I'm the most help. Now he wants to be a park ranger, not a plumber. Mike doesn't need me like he used to, either. Charlie-girl, you're the only one I somehow feel as though I'm letting down by leaving. My head tells me 'go,' but in order to do that, I need to know that you'll be all right."

"You don't have to feel guilty about going," replied Charlie, wiping her eyes. "You're not responsible for me. Besides, I can take care of myself."

"Before I go, I'll give you Bill's number. If you or Chuck ever need anything, contact him, and he'll get in touch with me," said Adam.

"That's not necessary," replied Charlie, feeling her courage returning.

"Even if you never use it, it would make *me* feel better," insisted Adam. "I'll be on tour for at least a year. A lot of things will change. Afterward, I very much doubt if I'll ever be able to go back to the life I had before."

"What's going to happen to the store?" asked Charlie.

"I'm hiring a good friend who is a Master Plumber," answered Adam, "to take over the business for me, and to operate it until Mike is licensed to run it himself." Adam let out a deep breath. "I never thought I'd say this, but I'm leaving plumbing for good."

"Do you think you'll miss it?" she asked.

"For me, plumbing was a means of securing the family business, but I never loved it the way I loved music," confided Adam. "And I'll tell you a secret, I never did it for the money, either."

"Album royalties?" guessed Charlie, with a smile.

"Over seven million," he affirmed.

"You're kidding!" exclaimed Charlie.

"There was more, but I gave a lot to charities," explained Adam. "Anyway, I'd like you to continue taking care of the house while I'm gone."

"I think you can afford it," laughed Charlie. "But, with all the publicity, do you think you'll ever be able to live in Twin Yucca, again?"

"I'm taking one step at a time, Charlie-girl. Worst case scenario, if I can't, I'll have at least a year to find someplace else," replied Adam.

"You made Twin Yucca feel like home," confided Charlie. "I can't imagine what it's going to be like without you."

"My family is here, and my friends are here," consoled Adam. "I'll always keep in touch, and visit as often as I can. And, hopefully, after the tour, I can still come back here to live. But, whether I can or not, this is something I feel I must do."

"Of course you must," agreed Charlie. "Just imagine all the people you'll meet, and the many chances you'll have for a Christian testimony. Wherever you go, Christ will go with you. It's a very brave thing you're doing."

"At any rate, it's the boldest thing I've ever done," said Adam.

They talked as Adam walked her back home.

"How is Chuck doing?" he inquired, as they neared the Overholt house.

"Not so good," replied Charlie. "He's stopped talking. Maybe it's a mood, maybe he's stopped trying, or maybe it's something more serious. The doctor said that it's possibly the Alzheimer's progressing to the next level."

"It can do that?" asked Adam.

"Alzheimer's Disease effects everyone differently," replied Charlie. "All I know for sure is that it's been days since he's said a word. It's almost like he's on another planet," she sighed.

"Well, here's your house," said Adam. "I'll be sure to give you Bill's number, before I leave."

"I know. I get in touch with him, and he'll get in touch with you," finished Charlie, with a small laugh.

"Shirley is expecting me for dinner tonight," said Adam. "She says that the family needs to be together while we can. By the way, I'm sorry for not showing up last night," he apologized. "Constance and I had a disagreement, and I lost track of the time."

The rest of the week leading up to Friday, was spent in a blur of bittersweet excitement.

The school kids at Galilee, even the ones who didn't know who Wallace Shipley was, were all excited that someone from Twin Yucca was actually going to be interviewed by Norman Jones, and that it was going to air worldwide. Even the teachers, when they passed Charlie in the hall,

told her to give Adam their best wishes. Charlie and Chad, who both attended Galilee, were suddenly more popular-- that is to say, everyone noticed them.

At Clark Plumbing Service and Supply, Mike tried hard to work around all the local well-wishers that came in to congratulate Adam. Councilman Stafford, at the request of the Mayor, wondered if Adam would be willing to compose a Twin Yucca anthem, (to which Adam respectfully declined); Mrs. Jacobs brought Adam a pound cake and asked him to autograph her copy of his Christmas album, "Epiphany"; someone even put up a banner under the city welcome sign that read, "Home of Wallace Shipley." Yes, Twin Yucca was finally claiming its place on the tourist map.

The day before Adam traveled to Atlanta for the live interview, a news crew from Los Angeles showed up, attempting to be the first ones to interview Wallace Shipley on camera, thus scooping Norman Jones. Bill and Gary, who were determined to keep it an exclusive first-time-ever interview, secretly flew Adam to New York ahead of schedule. In fact, Adam left so stealthily and without fanfare, that even his family and friends didn't have the chance to say goodbye. Bill and Gary planned to make a few stops before flying back to Twin Yucca, after the interview. Then, they would make plans for the tour. It was more than Charlie could take in.

Friday night, the streets of Twin Yucca were empty. Everyone was in front of their television sets, waiting for Adam's interview.

At home, the Overholts were crowded around the set, while Charlie stuck a tape in the VCR to record the occasion. Even Jerome was present.

"Tonight, I'm speaking with celebrated solo pianist, Wallace Shipley," began the show, "in his first ever television interview."

"Look!" exclaimed Charlie. "There's Adam!"

"If he's nervous, he's hiding it well," observed Vera.

"Quiet," hushed Jerome.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Norman Jones was saying, "his second album, 'Convergence,' has won several prominent awards, and his Christmas album, 'Epiphany,' sold over *twelve million copies worldwide*, and has since become a perennial Christmas favorite. Chances are, you have 'Epiphany' in your music library-- I know I do. That is a lot of albums, Wallace," said Norman Jones, setting aside his notes temporarily.

"Yes, it is," agreed Adam.

"And yet," continued Norman, "you stayed out of the public spotlight. Why?"

"Well, Norman," replied Adam, "there were a number of reasons why I tended to keep away from publicity, but I'd have to say it was mainly because of my family."

"Is it true that you actually kept the fact that you were Wallace Shipley from them, for all those years? How is that possible?" asked Norman, incredulously.

"Yes, that's true," smiled Adam. "I would compose in a sound proof room at home, and during the day, it was off to work. Wallace is my middle name, and Shipley was my mother's maiden name, so no one knew that it was really me."

"Why keep it a secret?" asked Norman.

"My father expected me to take over the family business," explained Adam, "and he couldn't understand why I could possibly want to pursue music. I can't blame him. Our family isn't musically inclined, except maybe my Mom, so it wasn't really looked at as a viable career choice. It was after I entered the family business, that I decided to compose under an assumed name. Then, as time passed, it just became a way of life."

"And what a life it is!" exclaimed Norman. "What made you decide to come into the spotlight after so many years?"

"The timing was right," answered Adam. "My mother passed away recently, and I just felt the Lord leading me in this direction."

The show broke off to a commercial break. Charlie looked up at Chuck, who seemed to be following the interview.

Jerome was dumbfounded at the double life his longtime chess partner had been leading. When he had heard the news Tuesday from a nurse at the facility, he had not believed it. Even now, it seemed impossible to Jerome.

"I hope Adam knows what he's doing by going public," sighed Vera. "His life is never going to be the same, again."

"He knows, Grandma," replied Charlie. "Un-mute, it's starting!"

"Welcome back," announced Norman Jones, "and I'm here with Wallace Shipley, in his first ever televised interview. Wallace, to get back to your family. How could your family and friends not *possibly* know that you were this famous solo pianist?"

"Well, as I said before, I simply didn't tell them. They couldn't have possibly guessed from the life I led, so it never even became an issue," replied Adam.

"And your family bears no hard feelings?" probed Norman.

"They've been extremely supportive," answered Adam, "and very understanding. I've been blessed."

"I'm looking at my notes, here," resumed Norman, "and it says you live in Twin Yucca. Where exactly is that?"

"It's near Palm Springs, between Yucca Valley and Joshua Tree," replied Adam.

The interview continued; Norman Jones probed, as was his job, and Adam answered everything as best as he could. In many ways, this interview was a test to see if Adam could handle public life.

"So you're going on tour," Norman said. "Any plans for a future album?"

"Not presently," replied Adam, "but I definitely intended to continue composing. Music is my life, and with God's help, I'll put out more albums in the future."

"Your fans will be glad to hear that! Well, our time is almost up," announced Norman, "and I want to wish you luck on the tour. Come back after it's over. I'd love to have you again!"

"Thank you, Norman," replied Adam.

"Coming up next, Senator--" Jerome clicked off the television.

"Well, the cat's definitely out of the bag, now," mused Vera. The living room telephone rang, and being the closest, Vera answered it.

"Hello? Yes, Gloria," said Vera, "I saw the interview. Yes, he did look striking. No, I didn't think the camera made him look heavy."

Charlie rolled her eyes and ejected the tape from the VCR. While Vera talked on the phone to Mrs. Gloria Jacobs, Jerome rose up to leave.

"I guess he thinks he's really something," muttered Jerome, enviously.

Charlie wanted to refute her Uncle's last remark, but she was too tired. All the excitement had worn her out, emotionally. After kissing Vera goodnight, the teenager went to bed. Before she fell asleep, she asked God to protect and preserve Adam.

"Because thou [Adam] hast made the LORD, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation;

There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.

For He [God] shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways [the tour].

They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.

Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder [snake]: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet.

Because he [Adam] hath set his love upon Me [God], therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high, because he hath known My name.

He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honour him.

With long life will I satisfy him, and shew him My salvation."

~ Psalms 91:11-16 ~

Chapter Thirty-three

Two Are Better Than One

"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 ~

Charlie didn't get to talk to Adam until six days after the big interview with Norman Jones, for Bill Paulson and Gary Nelson wanted to take advantage of the publicity and get one or two concert bookings settled before returning to Twin Yucca.

The local paper heralded Adam's return with a headline reading "Wallace Shipley To Go On Tour!" Adam spent most of his first day back with Shirley and the boys out at the Garner house, while Bill, Paul, and a new guy feverishly planned the tour schedule on the long coffee table in Adam's living room.

When Charlie arrived to houseclean that day, she endeavored to work around the three men in the living room, opting to vacuum the carpets at a later time, when it would not be so important to "keep down the racket." While Charlie worked, however, she was able to make a few observations concerning the men that were now responsible for Adam's well being.

Gary Nelson, 36, had flaming red hair that dramatically contrasted with his pale skin, making his well trimmed goatee stand out all the more. His brilliant green eyes, long face, and sharp nose made him stand out in any crowd. As Adam's agent, Gary was responsible for lining up the concert dates. Bill Paulson had known Gary for several years, and were good friends. A number of agencies had expressed interest in handling Wallace Shipley, but Bill chose Gary over all the rest-- not only because he trusted Gary's savvy sense for business, but because an agency would demand more control and a larger cut of the profits. For Gary, Wallace Shipley was the big break he had been waiting for. After years of handling lesser known artists, here was his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be a part of history, and to really make his mark in the music industry.

Bill Paulson, 45, (the same age as Adam), was decidedly different than his counterpart. Bill's wide mouth and heavy eyebrows were constantly animated in discussion, while his wavy dark hair and sun-kissed tan gave him the appearance of one who enjoyed being out of doors. Later, Charlie would learn that Bill was married, though presently separated from his wife of seven years. They had no children. On the other hand, Gary was single and so concentrated on his work, that all thoughts of settling down were far from his mind.

The latest member of the entourage was Melvin Galloway, Adam's new publicist. Melvin, 52, was happily married with three children. He had flown in just that afternoon to help prepare the way for the tour. Charlie thought Gary spent a lot of time on the phone-- Melvin practically lived on it! His job was to get press coverage for not only the tour, but for Adam. He acted as a middleman between Adam and the media, endeavoring to get the best publicity as possible by ensuring the right information got into the correct hands at the most advantageous time. Today, he was creating press kits to be released the day of Adam's departure, which included publicity photos and various information that he wanted publicized. An African-American who could trace his ancestry back to the American Civil War where his family had fought for the North, Melvin knew who he was and how to assert himself when a client's situation needed extra attention. At all this, he was an easy man to talk to, making Melvin a great asset to Adam's team.

They had obviously been too preoccupied with the upcoming tour to keep the house in order. Charlie was amazed at how quickly four men could turn a house upside down in under one day. In the bathroom, a pile of damp towels were heaped in the corner beside the shower. Besides the lakes of water on the bathroom floor, none of the beds, including Adam's, had been made. The spare room-- not the music room-- had been outfitted with a single bed. Half open luggage filled with Gary's belongings, reminded Charlie that soon, Adam would be living out of a suitcase, as well.

Another change was Adam's sleeping arrangement. Since he was an extremely light sleeper, Adam had moved his bed from the master bedroom into the music room, making room for Melvin and Bill, both of whom snored heavily.

The living room was strewn with balls of crumpled paper and more than one pair of dirty socks. When Charlie attempted to tidy the floor, she was hurriedly called off by Gary, who insisted that everything remain untouched.

Take-out containers from lunch were scattered across the kitchen table. Besides being messy houseguests, the men had nearly snacked the refrigerator empty. Just as Charlie had finished making a grocery list, she heard Adam's voice in the living room, having just returned from the Garner house.

"How's it going?" asked Adam, sitting down on the sofa and fumbling through the schedule book. "Hummm," he said thoughtfully, "looks like you guys are going to keep me busy."

"Yeah," muttered Gary, only halfway listening, "could you tell her to stay out of the way?"

"Who?" asked Adam.

"That girl," mumbled Gary. "She came in here and tried to clean up my notes."

"And please tell her to talk quietly," added Melvin, "especially when I'm on the phone."

"Oh, you mean Charlie," said Adam, half smiling. "Where is she?"

"In the kitchen," replied Bill. "Does she fix dinner? I'm getting hungry."

"No," answered Adam, walking to the kitchen, "she has a father and grandma to fix dinner for."

"Hi, Charlie!" Adam greeted her.

"I saw you on T.V.," she smiled.

"How do you think it went?" he asked. "Did I look as nervous as I felt?"

"Not at all," replied Charlie. "You handled yourself very well."

Just then, from the kitchen, they overheard Gary saying to Bill,

"We've got the Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York City dates confirmed! I've never had such an easy time trying to get bookings!" Gary exclaimed. "The second they hear the name Wallace Shipley, they're interested!"

"When are you leaving?" asked Charlie, almost afraid of the answer.

"I'm not sure, exactly," answered Adam, leaning against the kitchen counter. "I think the first date is in July."

"Next month," sighed Charlie.

"That reminds me," said Adam, "I need to talk to you about your job. Bill suggested that I hire a full-time caretaker."

"I thought you said I would be looking after the house," replied Charlie, surprised.

Adam hesitated.

"That was before I knew the house would have to remain in constant readiness," he said. "I didn't think I'd be back here except for brief visits, but the guys want to use the house as a place to stay when we're between engagements."

"I could do that," said Charlie, "though I can't live here, I could keep the house ready."

"Are you sure? The house must remain in working order," replied Adam. "It's possible that I could be back at any time, so I'm afraid you won't have very much head notice, if any."

"I'm still listening," replied Charlie.

"The utilities will be left on, and mail will continue to be delivered here," resumed Adam. "When you come to work everyday, if you could get the mail and leave it on the desk-- that would be great."

"Does that mean I have the job?" asked Charlie.

"If this is EVER more than you can handle, you must promise me to quit," warned Adam.

"I promise," said Charlie.

"Bill's secretary," continued Adam, "will fly down from Vermont once a month to pay bills and give you your paycheck," he explained. "She's also going to give you a household allowance to pay for things that the house might need, such as light bulbs, laundry detergent, etc. If the house needs any repairs, you're the one in charge of hiring someone to fix it. I'm paying Chad to keep the lawn mowed and to tend the garden. Maybe you could show him what to do."

"Sure," agreed Charlie. "Did you think of asking Mike to take my place?" she asked, curiously.

"I did," admitted Adam, "but, he and Sandra are too busy playing house to look after mine. Why, are you having second thoughts?"

"Not if you aren't," Charlie smiled.

"Okay, then," replied Adam. "I can use your help. I've notified the police that I'm going to be away a lot, so they will keep an extra watch on the house; don't get nervous when you see a patrol car stopping outside," he added, remembering her skittishness concerning policemen. "Oh, and I'm putting the porch lights on a timer, so don't play with the switches. Are you sure this isn't too much for you to handle?" he asked again.

"What, you don't think I'm able to bring in the mail?" laughed Charlie.

"I know you're sixteen," Adam replied, "but, even *you* have your limits. With Chuck and schoolwork, I don't want you to run yourself into the ground on my account."

"I can take care of myself," answered Charlie.

"I know," Adam teased, "but the last time you said that, you had to be rescued from the kitchen table!"

"That was an extenuating circumstance!" exclaimed Charlie, indignantly.

"Here's Bill Paulson's number, and also his secretary's number," continued Adam, handing her a business card. "Make the call from my house, and your uncle won't have a large phone bill."

"Okay," replied Charlie, putting the card into her pocket.

"Aren't you going to ask what's the salary?" asked Adam, curiously.

"You already pay me more than enough," replied Charlie, handing him the grocery list.

"You'll never be a good businesswoman with that attitude," he laughed.

Charlie only shrugged. She wasn't about to take advantage of Adam's generosity.

"Well, since you don't care," replied Adam, nonchalantly, "I'm going to triple your salary." Before she had a chance to say anything, he returned to the living room.

As the month of June wore on, an ongoing concern was finally coming to a head. Arnold Overholt wasn't eating-- no matter how much Vera and the nursing assistants coaxed and cajoled. Whenever the spoon came to his lips, he only sat there, staring off into space. It seemed a simple thing to just swallow, but Arnold couldn't remember how. Gradually, his body was forgetting basic bodily functions. In a desperate attempt, Vera fixed her husband his favorite foods, cutting it up into tiny bites sized morsels.

When this failed, Arnold's doctor asked Jerome and Vera if they wanted him to install a feeding tube directly into Arnold's stomach, thus prolonging life. Not wanting to be the one to make the heart-rending decision, Jerome left it entirely to his mother.

It was not a happy day for the Overholt household. Charlie watched as her grandma struggled with the decision, all the while knowing that one day, she too, would be forced to face the same reality. After much prayer and thought, Vera arrived at her decision:

"Arnold left us long ago," said she, "and now his body is, too. This is God's timing. Who am I to stand in the way? 'The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD,'" concluded Vera. The doctor reminded the family, that inevitably, Arnold's body would forget how to metabolize food-- no matter what they decided. So Vera gave her permission: there would be no feeding tube. It would only prolong the inevitable. This was Vera's decision. She made it in faith, and in the fear of God.

The next several days were difficult for Vera. She watched as Arnold slipped further and further away, until one night, she received a phone call from Jerome at Mullen-Overholt. It was over. Arnold was gone.

Even in the midst of Vera's tears, she felt a kind of relief-- a relief that only comes after seeing a loved one slowly fade away. Arnold and Vera's long good-bye was finally over.

When news of Arnold's passing had reached the community, Mrs. Jacobs and other well-wishing neighbors arrived at the Overholt house, all bringing casseroles, and other food dishes. Seeing the home was filling with people, Charlie got her father out of the house, for crowds made his condition worse.

Walking hand in hand, Charlie took him away from the houses and streets, to the edge of the Mojave desert. The hot evening June wind gusted around them, as they sat on a large rock, silently looking off into the distance. Chuck seemed content to sit there and listen to the wind, but Charlie's mind was more actively engaged.

She had witnessed, for the first time, the end effects of Alzheimer's Disease, realizing that her Daddy was to go through the same ordeal. Charlie had to face the stark reality of the truth. The teenager wondered how she could prepare Chuck and herself for the future. If she went away to college, as Jerome wanted, who would look after her father? Charlie knew deep in her heart, that if she left, Jerome would place Chuck into a nursing home-- no matter how Vera protested.

But Charlie had an even greater concern. She had known for some time that Alzheimer's Disease could be inherited. Her family had a strong history of the disease, and Charlie was concerned that she might be next. If she became ill as well, who would take care of Chuck, then? Charlie came to the hard conclusion that if she were able to be genetically tested for Alzheimer's, then it would give her the information needed to make informed decisions about her future, and her father's.

Chuck was still not talking. In fact, Charlie wasn't even sure if he understood that his Dad had died. To Charlie, his face seemed to grow more confused with each passing day. One side effect that she was certain was Alzheimer's Disease, was the fact that Chuck was having a difficult time sleeping an entire night through. He would frequently wake up in the middle of the night, and wander about the house. Since Vera was a sound sleeper and Charlie was not, the teenager found herself awake more often than she cared to admit. To aid the situation, Chuck's doctor had prescribed for him a powerful sleep medication, but the side effects were more serious than the ailment, so it was quickly abandoned. Thankfully, the stop sign and curtains on the front door were effectively confining Chuck's night wanderings to the house.

Understandably, most people in Charlie's position react emotionally about the prospect of being tested for Alzheimer's Disease, for there is no known cure. But Charlie felt she had no choice. She decided to become tested sometime after Adam left.

In late May, Adam buried his mother. In early July, he attended yet another funeral. He had little opportunity to reflect over the timing, however, for the tour was to begin next week.

There were many changes and preparations to be made. Since he was going to be living out of a suitcase for the next year, Adam had a lot of sorting and packing to do. It was not uncommon for Charlie to come to work, only to find him going through stacks of boxes that were to be put into storage, while setting aside the things he intended to take with him.

Little by little, Adam's house was being converted into a dormitory and retreat in between engagements-- and Charlie was to be responsible for running it.

Trying to anticipate their needs in advance, Charlie emptied the cupboards and refrigerator of all highly perishable food, instead stocking the shelves with canned food, so Adam and his entourage would have something immediately at hand to eat when they stopped by. Cases of bottled water were stacked into the broom closet, along with soft drinks, and several cases of ground coffee. She also laid in an ample supply of large bath towels-- which the men went through rapidly-- and more bed linen.

Charlie buried herself in her work, so she wouldn't have to think about her father's present situation. But one heartbreak followed on the heels of another: her best friend was leaving. Charlie kept a brave face in front of the guys, and Vera. She consoled herself that there would be plenty of time to cry, later.

Finally, the day came for Adam to say good-bye. Most of the luggage was already packed into a rented limousine that would take them to the Los Angeles International Airport, several miles away. Melvin had done his job and invited the media for Adam's sendoff. The front lawn was teeming with reporters and news crews, all vying for an opportunity to interview the celebrated musician before his tour began. Before going out to meet the media, Adam said good-bye to his family, behind closed doors.

Shirley was in tears when Adam hugged her good-bye.

"And remember," advised Shirley, "don't drink the tap water. You don't know where it came from!"

Thomas, Adam's brother-in-law, had flown in to wish him well.

"We're all pulling for you," Thomas said, shaking Adam's hand.

Mike hugged his uncle with all the emotion of a son saying good-bye to his father. It seemed impossible to Mike to think that Adam was truly leaving.

"Be safe," said Mike, giving him another hug.

In a way, Sandra was grateful that Adam was leaving. All the hype of Wallace Shipley was distracting Mike, who had his *own* career to think of.

"We'll miss you," said Sandra.

Chad soberly hugged Adam good-bye. He was proud of his uncle, but like Mike, could not imagine daily life without him.

"Don't forget to come back," reminded Chad.

Like Sandra, Constance was also glad to see Adam leave, but for entirely different reasons. She hoped distance would cool Charlie's ardor, and quell Adam's dependence on her.

"Don't forget to write," said Constance, giving him an elaborate gift basket of nuts.

Adam went up to his music room-bedroom to get the last of his luggage, and found Charlie looking out the window, watching the media on the front lawn.

"Will they ever let you come back to stay?" asked Charlie, swallowing back her tears.

"I don't know," he replied, candidly.

Charlie turned to bravely say her good-bye.

"Could you hide this, somewhere?" asked Adam, handing her the gift basket Constance had just given him.

"Sure," answered Charlie, smiling at the assorted nuts. Only Constance would think to be formal at a time like this.

"Well," said Adam, turning to leave, "I have to go now. Thank you for all your help."

"I'll keep the house in readiness," Charlie confirmed. "Try not to stay away too long."

Adam hesitated. He knew her well enough to know that she was trying to be brave.

"God keep you, Charlie-girl," uttered Adam. Closing the music room door behind him, he returned downstairs.

The flood of tears she had kept at bay, refused to be contained any longer. Sinking to the floor, she let the tears come. Charlie was grateful Adam had been so thoughtful as to close the door, for she needed to be by herself.

Getting to her feet, Charlie lingered at the window, waiting for him to appear outside. After a minute or two, Adam went out to be interviewed by the press, flanked on either side by Gary and Bill. Camera flashes flickered, as the press flocked around Adam. Melvin was already outside, handing out the press packets, and talking to his acquaintances in the media.

After question and answer time, the team headed to the limousine. Adam had wanted a lower profile vehicle, but Melvin insisted they had an image to maintain. So a limousine it was.

Before the vehicle pulled away, Adam looked up to the window where Charlie was standing, and waved good-bye to her. The black limousine pulled away, soon disappearing down the street. Some of the press followed in their vehicles, to get some pictures of him boarding the plane, while others stayed behind to interview the neighbors, and to see if they could get any comments from the family.

An hour later, the reporters gradually dispersed. When everyone had gone, Charlie came out of hiding from the music room. She closed the windows, locked the doors, and secured the house for the night. As she walked home, Charlie wondered when she would see him next.

The next two days, Charlie didn't hear any word from Adam, save for an article in the paper about his arrival in Philadelphia. She had cried herself to sleep both nights, and fully expected to do the same again that night, when a mysterious parcel came to the Overholt house. The medium sized box had been over-nighted from an address in Vermont. Surprisingly, it was addressed to Charlie.

"I think it's from Bill Paulson," observed Charlie, opening the box. "His office is in Vermont." Inside she found another box, and an envelope addressed to her. Charlie opened the well-typed letter and read it out loud.

"Dear Charlotte, My name is Lisa, Bill Paulson's secretary. Mr. Shipley instructed me to send this parcel on to you, in the hope that you would use it. If you need anything, please call me directly at 555-7832, extension 2. I'll be in Twin Yucca on the twenty-third, to take care of the bills and to give you your check and household allowance. I look forward to working with you.' It's signed, 'Regards, Lisa,'" finished Charlie.

"Open the package, Pumpkin!" urged Vera.

Charlie opened the box, and was puzzled to find a satellite phone. Taped to the back was a telephone number. Charlie was curious. She dialed the number and nervously waited to see who would answer.

"Hello, Charlie, is that you?" asked a familiar voice.

"Adam?" asked Charlie in surprise.

"Guess where I'm talking from," laughed Adam.

"I don't know. Where?" replied Charlie.

"Oh, come on, guess!" coaxed Adam, obviously having fun at her expense.

"You're on a yacht in Palm Springs," guessed Charlie, taking a stab in the dark.

"Wrong! I'm in Philadelphia, and at this very moment, I'm looking at the Liberty Bell! Aren't these satellite phones great?" he asked.

"Adam, I don't understand," replied Charlie.

"I wanted a way to keep in touch with back home wherever I go," he explained. "Since you're the keeper of the house, I thought you might as well be keeper of the phone, too. Do you mind?"

"No, I don't mind," smiled Charlie, happy to hear his voice, once more.

"These phones are great," Adam continued. "I could be in the Congo, and could still call you. You have my number, right?" he asked.

"Yes, it's taped to the phone," replied Charlie, gratefully.

"I have to go now," Adam said in a hushed voice, "the tour guide says other people are trying to hear her. I'll catch you later!"

Charlie set the phone down. That was perhaps the strangest call she had ever had.

"Was that Adam?" asked Vera.

Charlie nodded in the affirmative.

"I guess he wanted to keep in touch," mused Vera. "Where is he, anyway?"

"In Philadelphia-- site seeing," laughed Charlie.

"It's nice to see you more cheerful," observed Vera.

That night, after Vera and Chuck had gone to bed, Charlie pulled out her CD player and listened to her favorite Wallace Shipley album. The satellite phone from Adam had lifted her spirits. Somehow, just talking with him, made her feel more at ease. Charlie changed into her nightgown, climbed into bed, and turned out the light on her nightstand.

At about one in the morning, the satellite phone rang. Unused to the sound, it took Charlie a moment to wake up before she was fully aware that the new phone was ringing.

"Hello?" she answered, yawning.

"I'm sorry I woke you up," apologized Adam. "I knew it was summer vacation, otherwise, I wouldn't have disturbed you at this late hour on a weeknight."

"That's all right," replied Charlie. She quickly recognized the strain in his voice. "You can't sleep, can you?" she guessed.

"How did you know?" asked Adam. "I haven't slept since I came here, and the first concert is tomorrow evening," he groaned. "I've been staring at the hotel ceiling all night, just counting the tiles."

"Calm down," said Charlie.

"I walked my feet off today, trying to tire myself out," he confessed.

"First, I want you to lie down," instructed Charlie, trying to keep her voice calm and reassuring. She knew Adam was tired, and fighting back panic.

"Okay, I'm lying down," said Adam.

"I want you to remember," reminded Charlie, "that in Psalms, God has promised His beloved sleep-- that means you."

"I remember," he replied.

"Now, try NOT to close your eyes," she said.

"That's ridiculous!" resisted Adam. "I'm TRYING to go to sleep, not stay awake!"

"That's just the point," said Charlie, "you're trying too hard. Sleep has got to come naturally. You can't force it."

"All right, I'm trying NOT to close my eyes," sighed Adam.

"Now, I want you to put your clock somewhere you can't see it," said Charlie.

Adam was too tired to resist her help. He obediently hid the clock and returned to bed, clutching the phone to his ear.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Talk to me," she said. "What's Philadelphia like?"

"I don't remember," replied Adam, kicking off his covers.

"You spent the whole day site seeing, and you don't remember anything?" laughed Charlie.

"I was too tired to notice," answered Adam, wearily.

"When I called you the first time, you said you were looking at the Liberty Bell. Is that right?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah," said Adam.

"Tell me about the bell, then," suggested Charlie.

"It was big, and had a crack running down one side of it," said Adam, trying not to close his eyes.

"I could have told you that," smiled Charlie. "How's the weather there?"

"I don't know, the window's closed," he yawned.

"Right now it's really pleasant outside," related Charlie. "That means tomorrow is going to be another scorcher. My window is open," she continued, "and from here, I can see a full moon. The stars are out in force, tonight. There's a slight breeze, just enough to gently rustle the bushes outside my window. Everything is so peaceful."

Charlie continued to talk, while Adam listened. When she at last heard his regulated breathing, and soft snore, she knew he had fallen asleep. Charlie put down the satellite phone and snuggled down into her bed.

Just as she was falling asleep, she heard the familiar sounds of Chuck wandering the house. With a patient sigh, she got up to lead her father back to his bed.

"Please, Daddy," she said, tucking him in, "please, try to go to sleep."

Chuck rolled over and closed his eyes. Thinking he was asleep, Charlie returned to bed. A few minutes later, however, she heard Chuck bumping around in the hallway. Charlie looked at the clock. It was three in the morning. She got up, and led Chuck to the television set in the living room. Clicking on the set, she found a documentary and sat Chuck down on the couch.

"Here's the remote," she said, placing it into his hand.

She waited for a few moments to see if he was content to stay put. Seeing he was, the weary girl returned to her bed. She tried to fall asleep, but the TV was turned up so loud she could hear it all the way from her room.

"Honestly," she exclaimed to herself, getting back up. She went to the living room, and turned down the volume. "Daddy, you and Adam should get together and form a club for insomniacs!" she joked, more to herself than to her father. "If you two keep it up, you're going to have another member!"

Adam's first concert in Philadelphia was an instant success. The next morning, Charlie watched the news, and was thrilled to see a few clips from the concert. There was Adam, sitting in front of his piano, the spotlight fully on him. He was the picture of confidence. Who could have guessed, that just the night before, he felt helpless and frightened? Charlie thanked God for giving Adam help, at a time when it was so desperately needed.

A few hours after the concert, Charlie received a call on the satellite phone from Adam.

"You should have heard the applause," he told her. "I've never heard anything like it in all my life! Everyone said how much they enjoyed the music, but I couldn't stop thinking that you were the one responsible for it," said Adam.

"Me?" asked Charlie, puzzled.

"God really used you, last night," confided Adam. "I'm truly grateful. Sometimes, just getting into bed is an incredible struggle. I keep thinking, 'I should be asleep by now!' I just have to remind myself that God doesn't give us a temptation without a way to bear it. I apologize again, for waking you up."

The sincerity in his voice deeply touched Charlie. Here was a man who had all the acclaim the world had to offer, and yet, he struggled with the same temptations and weaknesses that everyone must face.

"I'm so glad I could help," replied Charlie. "Whenever you need to talk to me, I'll be here."

The freedom that the satellite phones gave, suddenly transformed Charlie's life. She never talked to Adam as much as she did now. At any time, she could reach for the phone and chat with her friend *anywhere* in the world. While this was not exactly the original intent of the phones,

Adam had to admit that it was comforting to hear her voice, and to listen to the news back home. Yes, the two friends were becoming closer and dearer to each other than ever before.

If Constance only knew.

"He [God] giveth His beloved [Adam] sleep."

~ Psalms 127:2 ~

"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."

~ 1 Corinthians 10:13 ~

"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. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken."

~ Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 ~

Chapter Thirty-four

The Secret Place of Thunder

"Thou calledst in trouble, and I [God] delivered thee; I answered thee in the secret place of thunder."

~ Psalm 81:7 ~

"Look!" exclaimed Vera, calling Charlie away from the kitchen sink and into the living room where Vera and Chuck were watching television.

"What is it?" asked Charlie, coming from the kitchen, dish cloth still in hand.

A news clip showed Adam and his entourage at an airport, surrounded by fans and photographers-- some carrying signs reading, "We Love Wallace Shipley," and others that read, "Welcome to Chicago."

"At O'Hare International Airport today," the newswoman was saying, "solo pianist, Wallace Shipley arrived for his well publicized, first ever concert in Chicago. Tickets reportedly were sold out in only five hours."

"The reception here has been just great," said Adam, taking off his sunglasses. "I'm really looking forward to Friday!" To this, the crowd cheered.

"Wallace Shipley's publicist," continued the reporter, the footage now showing Adam waving to the crowd and taking autographs, "said that even *he* was surprised by the large turnout of fans that waited at the airport to welcome Wallace Shipley to Chicago."

"I don't think anyone could have anticipated this," grinned Melvin Galloway, Adam's publicist. "For decades, Wallace Shipley's name has been synonymous with solo piano, and for the first time, people have the opportunity to see a live performance! Wallace is thrilled to be here, and it's going to be a great concert!"

When the news clip was over, Charlie returned to the kitchen to place the last of the cleaned dinner dishes back into the cupboard. The amount of publicity Adam was receiving, numbed Charlie. Wallace Shipley may be famous, but that same man on television was the mild mannered plumber who loved to watch the stars on peaceful desert nights, where only the sound of the wind and the distant baying of coyotes would break the stillness. This man who was making thousands of fans happy with his music, was the same person who could coax Charlie's tears into smiles.

She wasn't prepared to see those images on television. Charlie was surprised to feel resentment toward the zealous fans who acted as if Adam was *theirs*. This strong emotion took Charlie by surprise. If she had ever seriously suspected herself of being in love with Adam, it was now.

By the time Charlie climbed into bed that night, she hadn't heard from Adam all day. Charlie wanted to call him, but she knew that since he had just arrived, he would be too busy to chat with her right now-- unless it was important.

Sleep didn't come easily that night, but when it did, a peculiar thing happened. While deep in sleep, Charlie saw a private jet come into view. She saw Adam sleeping in a comfortable chair with a pair of headphones, getting some well-deserved rest. Outside, thunder crashed, though there were few clouds in the day sky. Suddenly, Charlie saw the plane rock violently from side to side. She could see smoke coming from the right engine, as the plane plummeted from the sky. Adam was now awake, and gripping the armrests of his seat. She heard him scream... and then... she woke up.

A little later, Vera came running from her bedroom.

"Charlotte! What is it?!" exclaimed Vera, alarmed by the scream she heard coming from her granddaughter's room in the middle of the night.

Charlie sat bolt-upright in bed, her face covered with perspiration.

"Pumpkin," repeated Vera, now more alarmed than before, "what is it?"

"Grandma!" gasped Charlie, now bursting into tears, "I saw Adam's plane go down-- it hit a mountain!"

"What?" asked Vera, sitting down on the edge of Charlie's bed. She took Charlie's hands into her own, and felt them tremble.

"I-- I saw him die!" blurted Charlie.

"There, there," comforted Vera. "You just had a bad dream. Calm down, and you'll feel better."

"But, I SAW it!" cried Charlie.

"With all this Wallace Shipley business," reasoned Vera, "it's no wonder you're having nightmares."

By now, Charlie had calmed down enough to realize that she had, indeed, been dreaming.

"It was the most vivid dream I've ever had," said Charlie, still trembling.

"Those kinds of dreams happen," replied Vera. "I remember a dream I once had about Arnold-- it was something about chickens," she said, her voice trailing off, sleepily. "Are you going to be all right? Do you want to come and sleep in bed with me?" asked Vera.

Charlie declined. After Vera was satisfied that she was all right, the old woman returned to her bedroom.

The teenager climbed out of bed and walked to the bathroom to splash cold water on her face. Before leaving, she caught her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Her pale face betrayed the greatness of the shock she had just been through.

"What an awful dream!" she thought.

The next day, when Adam called on the satellite phone, Charlie was on purpose NOT to tell Adam of her nightmare. She didn't want to frighten him, for he had enough things to deal with right now. But, at the end of the conversation, Adam made mention of a private jet. The hair on the back of Charlie's neck stood on end.

"Bill says we're going to need the freedom a private jet can afford," Adam was explaining. "To be able to take a flight at whatever time, at whatever airport you need, is a great convenience that Bill and Gary thinks we'll greatly need. Besides, it will mean I can land at the small Twin Yucca Airport, instead of commuting to and from LAX every time I come back."

"Adam," began Charlie, apprehensively, "I had the most vivid dream that I've ever had in my entire life last night. I wasn't going to tell you about it, but when you mentioned the private jet, I knew I had to."

"What are you talking about?" asked Adam.

She related the dream, and waited for his response.

"I admit, it's a coincidence that we chartered the jet on the same night you had the dream, but maybe that's all it is-- a coincidence," said Adam. "You saw me on TV, at an airport, so you had an airplane dream," explained Adam.

"There was a lot of thunder," continued Charlie, trying to convince him of the realness of the dream, "even though it was daytime."

"I'm afraid I agree with Vera," replied Adam. "You simply had a bad dream. I've had nightmares before, but that didn't mean they came true."

Before Charlie could argue any further, Adam had to hang up. Maybe he was right. Just because she had one bad dream, it didn't mean that it *had* to come to pass.

Charlie slept through the next two nights without incident. However, just as she was beginning to put it all behind her, the dream returned on the third night, more vivid than before.

Again, Vera came running from her room, for Charlie had screamed her heart out.

"Grandma," cried Charlie, "this time I KNOW it was real! God is trying to warn me about Adam! I've got to call him, right now!"

Vera looked at the time while Charlie dialed Adam on the satellite phone. It was ten minutes after four a.m. in Twin Yucca, but in Chicago, it was after six o' clock in the morning.

"I think his satellite phone isn't charged!" cried Charlie, trying the number again. "I'm going to call Lisa, and see if she can warn Adam for me!"

"Yes," confirmed Lisa, Bill's secretary, "their chartered jet took off at six o' clock, from Chicago Rex Field Airport. I was told that they're on their way back to Twin Yucca, and should be there sometime today, after a refueling stop in Arizona."

"Lisa," explained Charlie, "do you know for sure that Adam is on that plane?"

"Not absolutely," replied Lisa, "but he's *supposed* to be."

"Adam's phone isn't charged," said Charlie, "so I can't reach him. Could you call Bill and relay a message to Adam for me?"

"I wish I could," sighed Lisa, "but it so happens that Bill had his cell phone stolen just yesterday, so I was only able to talk to him from a phone at the hotel. I think I have Gary's number around here somewhere. Do you want me to see if I can locate it?" offered Lisa. "I'll call you back just as soon as I find it."

"Yes!" exclaimed Charlie. "Please hurry!"

Charlie hung up and waited.

"Adam's plane took off at four-- our time," explained Charlie, to her grandmother.

"Isn't that good news?" asked Vera.

"If he *did* get on that plane, then he's going to die," breathed Charlie, in horror.

"Pumpkin, you're frightening me," said Vera.

"Dear God!" prayed Charlie, "get the pilot to land!"

"Lord," prayed Vera, out loud, "Be pleased, to deliver Adam and his friends: O LORD, make haste to help them."

Even though Charlie was pale and visibly shaken, the thought of her friend dying had finally brought her to a realization that she had resisted in the past: not only was she attracted to Adam, but she loved him-- so much that the thought of life without him was almost more than she could bear.

The hours of waiting that passed afterward, seemed like days to Charlie. Wanting to keep busy, Vera turned on the news on the living room TV and went to the kitchen to fix lunch. While she was getting the eggs out of the refrigerator, she heard Wallace Shipley's name coming from the living room.

"Charlie! they're talking about him on the news!" shouted Vera. Charlie darted into the living room, still clutching the satellite phone.

"To recap," said the news anchor, "the chartered jet carrying Wallace Shipley and three others, has gone down near Flagstaff, Arizona, while en route to Twin Yucca, California. At this time, it is not confirmed that Wallace Shipley was on board, but according to the FAA, flight plans included four passengers and two crew members."

Stunned, Charlie sank into the couch.

"An eyewitness to the crash," continued the anchorman, "reported seeing flames and smoke coming out of the right engine prior to crashing into the side of a mountain. Stay tuned to 'On The Scene News' for further developments."

Just then, Charlie's satellite phone rang. She snapped up the phone.

"I'm so sorry," said Lisa, "I couldn't find Gary's number."

"Did you just see the news?" asked Charlie, frantically.

"No," replied Lisa. "Why, what happened?"

"They just said that Adam's plane went down-- it crashed into a mountain!" blurted Charlie.

"Are you sure?" asked Lisa, incredulously. She turned on the small television set sitting on her office desk. "It's true!" she gasped.

Charlie held the line while Lisa listened to the news.

Vera was dumbfounded. She wanted to comfort Charlie, but all appearances told her that God had said "no" to the prayer request of saving Adam's life. Still, maybe she was wrong. Vera certainly hoped so.

Charlie and Lisa exchanged a few more words, and then Charlie hung up.

"She promised to call me back as soon as she hears any news," said Charlie. "I just can't believe he's gone!" she cried, breaking down. "Why, why would God warn Adam and then not save him?" she sobbed.

"I don't know, Pumpkin," said Vera, hugging her granddaughter. "But we must trust God that all things work together for good. That's the verse you're constantly reminding me of, isn't it?"

"Yes," whimpered Charlie.

"You just watch, God won't fail His people," confirmed Vera.

The satellite phone rang, and Charlie picked it up, thinking that it was Lisa with some news.

"Charlie-girl?" asked a voice that Charlie instantly knew to be Adam's.

"ADAM!" screamed Charlie, a torrid of emotions flooding her being at the same time. The scream was so loud that Adam had to take the phone away from his ear for a second.

"Charlie-girl," continued Adam, "you saved my life, and the life of everyone with me..." he broke into tears, and they both wept.

"I was on the steps of the jet," related Adam, when he had collected himself, and I heard thunder-- from a sky that had hardly a cloud in it! Right then, I knew your dream was really going to happen. God was giving me a chance to live, so I took it! I told Bill, and the rest of the guys, and they didn't believe me. But, since I refused to board the plane, they didn't either. I tried to warn the flight crew, but they took off, anyway."

"Why didn't you call me!" cried Charlie. "I know your phone isn't charged right now, but you could have used *any* telephone!"

"At first," explained Adam, "I didn't know the flight had crashed. Then Melvin told me that everyone thought we were dead, so I tried to call you, but the line was busy! I also tried to get in touch with Shirley and Mike, but their phones were busy, too!"

As Adam spoke these words, the anchorman on TV announced that Wallace Shipley had *not* been on board the private jet that went down in Arizona.

"Do you want me to keep trying their numbers until I get through?" asked Charlie, drying her eyes.

"Lisa is working on that as we speak," said Adam, his voice struggling for control over his emotions.

"It's *so* good to hear your voice," said Charlie.

Adam wept once more. He had come so close to death, that the shock of walking away from the terrible crash in Arizona was something he could not fully grasp.

"I love you," said Charlie.

"I love you, too," wept Adam.

But, even as he said the words, Charlie knew in her heart, that he had not meant what *she* had meant.

"I must go now," said Adam. "Thank you once more, from the bottom of my heart, for saving my life. I'll *never* forget it!"

Vera was relieved and grateful to God for answering their prayers. The strain of the morning had plainly taken their toll, for Charlie's face was white as a sheet. Vera tried to get her to go back to bed, but Charlie resisted. So, while news cameras showed aerial coverage of the Arizona crash on television, Charlie fell asleep on the living room couch, still grasping the satellite phone.

It's not often that we have the opportunity of knowing just how close we came to certain disaster. We can't count all the varied ways that God has preserved His people, but one thing we DO know: our God is a Faithful God. Hallelujah!

"He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: He that keepeth thee will not slumber. The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore." (Psalm 121:3, 8)

Wallace Shipley's close shave with death, was big news for at least two days. Reporters and journalists once more found their way to Twin Yucca, interviewing Adam's family and neighbors. Since Adam wasn't eager to immediately get into another chartered airplane, he opted to take a commercial flight back home. Even though the thought of flying in general wasn't very appealing to him, he recognized that he couldn't live his life in fear. He had to trust that God was taking care of his safety.

The morning after the crash, Charlie went to prepare Adam's house for their arrival. She got an early start, for it was summer vacation and there was no school. When she arrived, however, she found herself confronted by reporters camped outside the entertainer's house. She had already went too far to turn back, so she smiled politely and opened the front gate, closing it behind her.

"Miss, who are you?" asked a reporter.

Unsure whether she should speak or not, Charlie ducked indoors. The house was hot and stale, giving it a feel of not being lived in recently. After adjusting the thermostat, she vacuumed, dusted, and put on the coffee. Charlie sat down in a chair next to the front living room window to wait for Adam's arrival. As the time drew closer, she noticed more reporters and camera crews setting up outside Adam's front gate.

Then, as if on cue, a long black limousine pulled up. The driver got out and opened the door... and there was Adam. He was wearing sunglasses, and this time, he didn't stop to talk to the press. He went up the walk, leaving Melvin and Bill to answer questions at the front gate. Gary followed Adam as he opened the door and stepped inside. When the door closed, Charlie ran to Adam, readily accepting the hug he offered.

"It's so good to be home," sighed Adam, looking about the room.

Gary went to the window and watched Melvin and Bill at work.

"I hate to admit it, but Bill is right," Gary observed.

"Two people died in that accident," reminded Adam, letting go of Charlie, and sitting down on the couch to take off his shoes.

"Even so," continued Gary, "you couldn't *buy* this kind of coverage. If you wanted to, we could easily extend the tour a year."

"Please don't start on that, again," replied Adam, wearily. "It's nice to come back to a home filled with the smell of coffee," smiled Adam to Charlie.

"Do you want me to get you some?" she asked, willing to be put into service.

"I'd like some coffee, too," said Gary, opening his laptop computer.

Charlie went to the kitchen. She placed four mugs of coffee onto a tray, along with the sugar and creamer, and carried it to the living room. Adam took a mug from the tray while Charlie set it on the coffee table. She sat down on the couch beside Adam, simply enjoying his presence.

"Do you want a sip?" asked Adam, offering her his cup.

Charlie took a small sip and sank back into the sofa, her legs comfortably folded beneath her. Gary noticed this little exchange and scowled, as if contemplating an unpleasant thought.

Just then, Melvin and Bill came through the front door.

"I've got first dibbs on the shower!" announced Bill, dropping his bags on the floor and immediately making his way upstairs.

"Do you want coffee?" asked Adam.

Bill turned around and took a mug off the tray. It was then that he noticed Charlie sitting on the sofa next to Adam.

"Well, well," he said with a smile, "if it isn't the heroine! I'd be an Arizona pancake right now if it weren't for you!" With that, he shook Charlie's hand.

"That's right," said Melvin, also shaking Charlie's hand, "we're very grateful."

Adam proudly watched on as even Gary admitted that she had been responsible for saving their lives. Gary didn't seem to like it much, though.

"What's for lunch?" asked Bill, going back up the stairs.

"What do you want?" asked Charlie. Bill didn't reply, though, for he had already made it to the bathroom.

"Oh, no," replied Adam, "you've done enough. I'm not paying you to fix meals."

"How about take-out?" suggested Charlie. "I could stop by Hanna's."

"Who's Hanna?" asked Gary.

"It's a restaurant," replied Adam. "You couldn't carry it all by yourself. I'd do it, but the media would be all over us."

"I'll go with her," volunteered Gary.

It was only after Adam had made her promise to stay and eat with them, that he allowed Charlie to make a list of everyone's order. Then she and Gary went out the back way to avoid most of the reporters. Twin Yucca was a small town, so walking from place to place was not unusual.

"Listen, Charlie," began Gary, after they were clear of the house, "Adam has already been through a lot. He doesn't need any *extra* complications in his life."

"What do you mean?" asked Charlie.

"I'm talking about you and him," continued Gary. "The press would have a field day with that one," he mused, sarcastically. "I can see the headlines now, 'Wallace Shipley's Affair with an Underage Girl.'"

"That's not true!" exclaimed, Charlie, indignantly.

"Of course it isn't," replied Gary, "but you can't tell the press what to believe. You tell them one thing, and they're imaginations will fill in the rest. Look," said Gary, pulling Charlie aside, "I can see what's coming. Adam is constantly calling you, or you're calling him, and everything is getting much too intimate. He may not see the forest for the trees, but I can!"

"But," replied Charlie, feeling more candid than usual, "I love him!"

Gary paused for a minute.

"So it's already come to that, has it?" he muttered. "You know, he doesn't love you-- not in *that* way," said Gary.

"I know it," replied Charlie, quietly. This was the first time she had spoken her feelings out loud.

"How old are you, again?" asked Gary.

"Sixteen," answered Charlie.

"Sixteen!" groaned Gary, throwing up his hands. "I've told you how it is," he said. "I can't force you to do anything you don't want to do. I'm only asking that you consider Adam's position, before you act."

"I don't want to hurt him," replied Charlie.

"Well, that's something, anyway," said Gary, resuming the walk. "I don't suppose you could just give him up?"

"I think it's too late for that," smiled Charlie, a little embarrassed. "Are you going to tell him?" she asked, curious what Gary was going to do with this knowledge.

"Are you kidding?" he replied. "If anyone's going to upset the apple cart, it won't be me! Just for the record, I must tell you that such a relationship doesn't have a snowball's chance in hell!"

The lunch turned into a hero celebration for Charlie. After that, she was accepted as, more or less, one of the guys. Even Gary seemed to tolerate her presence.

That evening, Shirley invited her brother and the guys to dinner. Charlie stayed home, having not been invited. She told herself that it was only natural for Shirley not to include her, (for it was the truth), but Charlie wanted to be near Adam as much as she could before he left again. She didn't have long to wait, however, for at about seven o'clock in the evening, to Charlie's delight, the satellite phone rang.

"I'm back from the family dinner," said Adam. "I was about to go for a walk, and wondered if you and Chuck wouldn't want to join me?"

"Thanks," replied Charlie, "but Daddy doesn't get out much, anymore. I'd come with you, but Grandma is out with Mrs. Jacobs, so I have to stay and keep an eye on Daddy."

"Could I come over, then?" asked Adam. "Maybe we could watch a movie, or play chess."

"All right," answered Charlie, happily. "I'll pop the popcorn!"

When Adam arrived at the Overholt house, he found Chuck sitting in his favorite recliner, blankly staring at the TV. He heard Charlie in the kitchen, making the popcorn.

"Hi, Chuck," greeted Adam, sitting down on the couch.

Chuck remained fixed on the TV. It was hard for Adam to see how much his friend had changed. The man who had constantly asked Adam questions about God and religion had disappeared; no more was there talk about "my Charlie" and what would become of her; and no more evening visits from Charlie and Chuck in Adam's garden. Adam longed for the simplicity of the yesterdays he had left behind.

"I hope you like your popcorn buttery," announced Charlie, coming into the front room.

"Is he always like that?" asked Adam, referring to Chuck.

"Not always," replied Charlie sitting down beside Adam on the couch. "Sometimes, he grunts. And I think, sometimes, he knows who I am. I can't help feeling that if he only tried harder, he would be better than he is now. I suppose it's not possible, though."

"I'm really sorry, Charlie," apologized Adam. "I had no idea he was *this* bad."

"Time changes everything," replied Charlie. "Come on, the popcorn's getting cold."

They ate popcorn and watched an old black and white romantic comedy that Charlie had loaded into the VCR. Adam greatly enjoyed the evening. For a few hours, he could forget the pressures that his music career demanded of him. Charlie didn't talk about music, so neither did he. For one night, he could just be Adam Clark-- and not Wallace Shipley.

As the evening wore on, Adam inevitably fell asleep, for he was that relaxed. Charlie clicked off the set, and guided her father to his bedroom. She covered Adam with a blanket and was about to go to bed herself, when the house phone rang. It was Bill.

"Is Adam still there?" asked Bill.

"Yes," replied Charlie, "he fell asleep on the couch."

"Oh," said Bill, "then don't wake him up. You know how hard it is for him to fall asleep. Goodnight, then."

Charlie climbed into bed when, this time, the satellite phone rang. She got out of bed and looked down the hallway into the front room. Adam was still fast asleep. Who could be calling her on the satellite phone, she wondered.

"Hello?" she said, answering the call.

"It's Gary. I think you should wake him up, and send him back home," he advised.

"But," said Charlie, "he's already sleeping. It would be a shame to wake him up, now."

"Charlie," said Gary, in a barely audible whisper, "the media can't see him leaving your house in the morning. Under the circumstances, I think it's better to wake him up."

"He'll be home in a few minutes," conceded Charlie. "And Gary, thanks."

Charlie put on her robe and went to the living room. She nudged Adam's shoulder, and took back the blanket.

"What is it?" asked Adam, groggily. "Did I fall asleep?"

"It's time for you to go home," said Charlie.

"I'm sorry I missed the end of the movie," apologized Adam, getting up.

"That's all right," smiled Charlie. "I'll tell you how it ended, later."

Adam wished her goodnight, and left. Charlie locked the front door, knowing that her grandmother could use her keys, and went to bed.

"The voice of Thy [God's] thunder was in the heaven: the lightnings lightened the world: the earth trembled and shook."

~ Psalm 77:18 ~

"In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men, in slumberings upon the bed; Then He [God] openeth the ears of [Charlie], and sealeth their instruction... He [God] keepeth back [Adam's] soul from the pit, and his life from perishing."

~ Job 33:15,16,18 ~

"O love the LORD, all ye His saints: for the LORD preserveth the faithful."

~ Psalm 31:23 ~

Chapter Thirty-five

Tell Him

"My heart was hot within me, while I was musing the fire burned: then spake I with my tongue."
~ Psalms 39:3 ~

Time passed, and Adam was now touring in Arkansas... or was it Alabama? Adam moved around so much, that even *he* could barely keep track of where he was. However, no matter what state of the Union he found himself in, Adam and Charlie continued to keep in touch via the satellite phones. Little did Adam know, that whenever Charlie heard his voice, the longing inside of her grew stronger, until she felt her secret would surely consume her.

Charlie yearned to confide in a friend, for though Gary knew, she barely knew him enough to call him a friend.

One warm Friday evening in August, Charlie and Maggie found themselves sitting on Charlie's bedroom floor, leafing through old 'Quest' magazines Maggie had found in her parents' garage--most dating back to the sixties. Charlie had little interest in them, for the stories and articles were predominantly about Vietnam. Maggie, on the other hand, was sure there was a story in one of the issues that talked about her brother, Wayne, who had fought in Vietnam.

Charlie was uncomfortable about Maggie's continued insistence that her brother was still alive. She hoped this wasn't a sign of Maggie reverting back to her old habit of waiting at the bus stop for a brother who would never return. Indeed, Maggie still wore the silver MIA bracelet bearing her brother's name. Maggie had a great deal of loyalty for this brother whom she had never even met.

Charlie reluctantly flipped through pages, helping her friend search for the phantom article, when the teenager's eyes fell upon a page bearing Wayne's name.

"Maggie!" announced Charlie, in surprise, "I think I found it!"

The girls hunched over the magazine, while Charlie read it out loud:

"More casualties occurred outside of Kontum, South Vietnam," read Charlie, "when an ambush firefight claimed the lives of fifty-three American soldiers out of a company of one hundred and ten. These losses would have been even more devastating had it not been for the heroic actions of PFC Wayne James Downen. Under heavy gunfire from the enemy, Wayne Downen carried to safety mortally wounded PFC Kevin Henrickson, who died shortly thereafter. Exposing himself

to enemy fire a second time, Wayne went back to rescue PFC Terrence Franklin. Wayne then returned to the firefight, and was never seen or heard of again. Though Wayne's body has never been found, he is listed as missing in action, and presumed to be dead. Terrence Franklin, who is now recovering in a military hospital, says he owes his life to Wayne Downen."

"They gave Wayne a Silver Star," added Maggie. "Dad has it in his dresser drawer. Charlie, you don't think he's still alive, do you?"

Charlie hated to say "yes," but she hated the thought of Maggie returning to the bus stop even more.

"I think," replied Charlie, carefully, "that's it's not likely he survived the firefight."

"But," pointed out Maggie, "they never found his body."

Charlie shrugged. She didn't want to debate the subject. As long as Maggie wasn't going back to the bus stop, Charlie had resigned herself to let Maggie believe what she wanted to.

"All things are possible to him that believeth," said Maggie, quoting a promise from the Bible. "Even though no one else believes in the things you wish for with all your might, as long as one person has faith, it's possible. It's kind of like the way it is with you," added Maggie, suddenly sounding mysterious.

"What do you mean?" asked Charlie, curiously. "What are you talking about?"

Shyly beaming like a child who knows a deep secret, Maggie leaned over and whispered something into Charlie's ear. The surprised look on Charlie's face made Maggie giggle with delight.

"How did you know?" asked Charlie, shocked at the perception of her friend.

"I may be slow," replied Maggie, "but I'm not blind!" Maggie batted her eyelashes, and in her best imitation of Charlie's voice, said, "*Oh, Adam!*"

"I don't sound like that!" Charlie laughed, swatting Maggie's arm in mock reproof. "You have to promise me you won't tell!" she said, trying unsuccessfully to be serious. Then both girls broke out into giggles and laughter until their sides hurt.

When they had calmed down, both cleaned up the magazines that were scattered across the bedroom floor.

"Are you going to tell him?" asked Maggie, placing the periodicals back into their storage box.

"No," replied Charlie.

"Can you stand not to?" pressed Maggie.

"I have to admit, that it's becoming harder every day," sighed Charlie. "But, I *can't* tell him!"

"Why not?" pursued Maggie.

"What if he laughs at me?" asked Charlie.

"Do you think he would?" inquired Maggie.

"Yes... maybe... I don't know," hesitated Charlie. "What about you? Have you told Jeff you love him, yet?"

The bashful look on Maggie's face said it all.

"You're braver than I am," said Charlie.

Maggie stared at her incredulously.

"Charlotte Overholt," said Maggie, "you are the bravest and smartest woman I know! You've done things I've never been able to do," said Maggie, referring to Charlie's good grades in school. "You take care of two households, and a sick father! If any one can do this, you can!"

That night, Charlie went to sleep optimistic that she *could* tell Adam what she was feeling. By morning, however, the effects of Maggie's pep talk had worn off. Charlie felt awkward and unsure of herself. She didn't know what Adam would say or how he would react. Unsure as she was about how to approach the man she loved, Charlie *was* sure of one thing-- that she *did* love him.

In late October, Adam arrived at Twin Yucca airport in his newly acquired private plane, exhausted from the grueling schedule his career was demanding of him. Melvin had flown home on a commercial airliner to spend time with his family, while Bill and Gary had followed their client home.

Adam was so fatigued that he took the phone off the hook, and went straight to bed. He said little to Charlie, other than to thank her for the preparations she had made upon his arrival.

Bill only stayed for a few hours, before heading off to a private resort in nearby Yucca Valley, for some quiet and relaxation. Gary, on the other hand, didn't seem to know what the word 'rest' meant. He remained downstairs, tapping away at his laptop, and working his cell phone.

Gary's refusal to pretend that the rest of the world hadn't gone away, annoyed Adam, who dearly wanted to spend the two weeks of no engagements without continually being reminded of who he was. At last, Gary understood. He set his laptop and cell phone aside, though Charlie thought it almost killed him to do it.

When she came to work the next day carrying an armload of groceries, Gary followed her into the kitchen.

"What do people around here do for fun?" asked Gary, slumping into a kitchen chair, and putting his feet up on the table. "Twin Yucca rolls the sidewalks up at nine on the dot," he joked.

"Well," suggested Charlie, putting the groceries away, "there's always the bowling alley."

"Can't bowl," said Gary. "Weak wrists."

"Or," continued Charlie with a smile, "if you're really desperate, you can walk to the edge of town and count coydogs."

"What are coydogs?" asked Gary.

"You know, part coyote, part dog," explained Charlie.

"There's coyotes around here?" asked Gary, sitting up in his chair. "It's the first I've heard of this! Why don't they put up signs to warn poor unsuspecting people who weren't born here, of dangers like this?!"

"The Mojave *is* a desert," reminded Charlie. "And you don't have to be born here to live in the Mojave Desert. When I first came to live here, I admit, it did take a while to appreciate the natural beauty of a desert, but in time, it'll grow on you. You'll see."

"If I run into any of those coydogs, I have a feeling it'll grow on top of me, too," muttered Gary.

Charlie laughed. She wondered if this was the way she had once sounded.

Feeling a little dumb for carrying on, Gary changed the subject.

"Are you sticking around to fix dinner?" he asked.

"Can't," replied Charlie, "I have homework."

"Glad that part of my life is over and done with," mused Gary. "I was a terrible student. What kind of grades do you get?" he asked.

"I do all right," answered Charlie sweeping the floor under the table. "Move your feet please."

"Oh, I see," laughed Gary. "That's code for an 'A' student! You're probably one of those kids who like to sit in the front row, and do extra homework! Am I right? You're constantly raising your little hand, aren't you?" teased Gary.

Charlie looked good-naturedly in his direction.

"I don't see *why* you have to go anywhere for entertainment," she countered, "when all you have to do is listen to *yourself!*" With that, she returned to her work.

Gary chuckled in spite of himself. He was slowly coming to the conclusion that he had underestimated Charlie. Her consistency of character and usual levelheadedness, were not qualities that he often saw in adults-- let alone in a teenager. The more Gary was around Charlie, the more he understood why Adam liked her so much.

"Well," said Gary, getting to his feet, "guess I better get down to Hanna's and bring back dinner. Send out a search party if I'm not back by sunset!"

Charlie watched and waited for the right time to approach Adam, but the musician was so earnest in escaping Wallace Shipley, that he stayed mostly in his room for the first four days of his vacation. When Adam finally had enough of solitude, he came downstairs, ready to interact with life, (however, the phone still remained off the hook).

It was then, that Charlie decided it was finally the right time to make her move.

"Adam?" asked Charlie, the next day, "you're invited to dinner at my house, tonight. Can you make it?"

"Sure can!" replied Adam, a little surprised. "What about Gary? Isn't he coming?"

"I've already been invited," answered Gary, who had overheard Charlie's invitation from the next room, "but I have other plans for tonight."

"Oh, all right," shrugged Adam. For all the complaining Gary had done about there being nothing to do in Twin Yucca, it was odd that he suddenly had plans. When Adam left the room, Charlie went over and thanked Gary for cooperating.

"It's more than *he's* going to do," replied Gary, pessimistically.

"Jerome's number is on the refrigerator," instructed Vera, "and Chuck's medications and time chart are on the the counter. Don't get the bottles out of order," warned Vera. "They're lined up to correspond with his schedule. Let me see," said the old woman, thoughtfully, "I know I'm forgetting something!"

"Grandma," said Charlie, "we'll be all right! I can handle it."

"You might want to feed Chuck before your guest arrives," suggested Vera, picking up her overnight bag. "You never did tell me which 'old friend' you're inviting," commented Vera. "I don't see why all the mystery. You know I trust you."

"I know, Grandma," smiled Charlie.

"There's Jerome, now," announced Vera. "I wouldn't burden you with Chuck all by yourself, but Georgia's daughter is getting married, and I promised to help get the wedding preparations back on schedule. I'll be back before you go to school, on Monday."

"Good-bye, Grandma," answered Charlie, escorting Vera outside to the car.

When Jerome's car disappeared down the street, Charlie ran back inside to continue her preparations. Vera was going to be away for the entire weekend, but all Charlie wanted was one evening with the house to herself. Chuck didn't really count, for though he was present in body, he was not aware of his surroundings.

The filet mignon steaks were cooking nicely, as Charlie set the kitchen table. She was careful to use the good tablecloth, and the best china, for Vera had already given her permission to use them. On the table, she placed two long taper candles, lending the room a romantic atmosphere.

Next, Charlie went to her room to change clothes. She chose to wear a long, soft pink evening dress that wouldn't make her seem too dressed up, for Adam didn't know this was to be a semiformal dinner.

At six o'clock, unsuspecting Adam knocked on the Overholt door. Charlie opened the door, and showed Adam to the kitchen, where she was just taking the steaks out of the oven.

"Is that actually meat?" asked Adam, in surprise, for he knew Charlie was a vegetarian.

"It's filet mignon," announced Charlie, placing the platter on the table.

"Wow," he muttered, "what's the occasion?" It was only then that he noticed how attractively Charlie was dressed, and the lit candles, and the fact that no one else was present. "Charlie, where's Vera and Chuck?" he asked, thinking that maybe something was wrong.

"Well," replied Charlie, placing the tossed salad on the table, "Daddy ate his dinner early, and Grandma is at Georgia's helping to prepare for the wedding."

"Oh!" replied Adam, at once relieved that everything was all right. "For a minute, I thought someone was sick, or something!"

Yes, even for a man, this was naive, but Adam so wholly unexpected Charlie to act this way, that it didn't cross his mind.

When the dinner was ready, both bowed their heads while Charlie thanked God for the dinner.

"This *is* a treat!" exclaimed Adam, taking a bite of the steak, and then helping himself to the beverage Charlie had just poured into his glass. "I don't believe I've ever tasted anything like it, before," commented Adam.

"It's pomegranate wine," explained Charlie.

"I've never heard of it," said Adam, taking another swallow.

"Pomegranate wine is a tradition that was handed down from my mother's side of the family," said Charlie. "It's one of the few things I have that remind me of her."

"It's very good," replied Adam, his voice reflecting admiration.

Adam enjoyed the meal very much. He laughed and talked with Charlie, not realizing that she was preparing him for something important. When dinner was over, Adam offered to help wash the dishes. Saying she'd do them later, Charlie and Adam went to the living room, and sat down on the couch. Adam thought they were going to watch a movie, and was all prepared to rest his eyes when he noticed that Charlie's hands were trembling.

"Are you feeling all right?" he asked, suddenly becoming concerned.

"I have something very important I need to tell you," began Charlie.

"What is it?" he asked. "Is something wrong? Are you sure you're feeling all right? Maybe you shouldn't have eaten the steak. You're not used to meat, you know."

"Adam, I love you," said Charlie, her voice trembling with sincerity.

He was about to tell her that he loved her too, but there was something different in the way she had said it. He looked at her, puzzled.

"Forgive me, Charlie," said Adam, "but I don't think I understood you right. You love me as a friend-- that's what you were trying to say."

Charlie thought for a moment, trying to choose her words, carefully. She looked up into his eyes.

"I love you, like you love music," replied Charlie.

Adam was strangely still.

"You can't mean it," he said, gravely.

"But, I *do* mean it-- every word," asserted Charlie. "I've never felt this way about anyone in my life."

Adam sprang from the couch, and took two steps backward. He was as white as a sheet.

"Dear God, what *have* I done!" he exclaimed in horror.

"Adam," asked Charlie in alarm, "Adam, what's wrong?"

"This whole thing is wrong!" he cried. "You can't love me! Why, I'm old enough to be your father! I blame myself, *entirely*, for putting you in situations that could foster such feelings!" grieved Adam. "I swear to God, Charlie-girl, I never..." there his voice broke off.

As he turned to leave, Charlie called out after him. Hastening his exit, Adam left without another word.

Crying uncontrollably, Charlie fled to her room. Tears drowned her pillow, as the teenager wept in such heartrending sobs that even Chuck, for half a moment, wondered what deep pain could have been inflicted to create such grief.

Suddenly, Charlie could bear to be alone no longer. She ran to the phone and called Maggie. When there was no answer, she returned to her room and begged God for help.

"Please, God," she wept, "please, help me to bear it!"

Charlie cried herself to sleep, finally too exhausted to shed another tear. For Adam, however, sleep was not to come for him this night.

Gary heard the front door open violently and slam shut as Adam returned home from the dinner at the Overholt house. He had never seen Adam look so shaken or so angry as he was this moment.

"I see dinner didn't go too well," observed Gary, pointing out the obvious.

"Do you know what she told me?" shouted Adam.

"I can guess," replied Gary.

"She told me she loved me!" cried Adam. "ME!"

"The foolish child!" agreed Gary, surprisingly becoming angry at Adam's reaction to the situation. "To think that anyone could be sincerely in love at such a young age-- how *completely* ridiculous! Let alone to have the courage to tell you to your face-- how *could* she!"

"I don't blame her-- I couldn't!" retorted Adam. "It's all *my* fault!"

"Maybe so," replied Gary, calming down, "but the damage is done. She's in love."

"You sound as if you believe her!" Adam suddenly noted with surprise.

"I don't know," replied Gary. "Maybe it happened today-- maybe it was when I first met Charlie, but there's something genuine about her that just won't let me go."

"Now you're beginning to sound like her," said Adam.

"Am I?" asked Gary with a small short laugh. "Maybe she's starting to get to me!"

"You're too old for her," cautioned Adam.

"And she's too young for me," finished Gary. He wanted to add, "But, maybe not for you," however, on this point Gary held his tongue. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I have to leave Twin Yucca," Adam groaned heavily.

"It'll break her heart," pointed out Gary.

"And mine," replied Adam. "And mine."

Charlie didn't know it, but Adam and Gary boarded the private jet and left Twin Yucca that very night. A very sad weekend followed. Too much ashamed to face Adam again, Charlie didn't leave the house. Mercifully, Maggie showed up and let Charlie cry on her shoulder.

"How *could* he say those things to you?" asked Maggie, almost angrily.

"It's not his fault!" defended Charlie. "I misunderstood him. He never loved me! I misled myself!"

Maggie wasn't so sure.

Monday morning, Vera came home to a sad sight. Charlie told her grandmother everything that had happened, and collapsed into her arms. In truth, Vera had expected Charlie to invite Maggie over for a "grown-up" dinner party. She hadn't considered Adam, and even if she had, Vera never dreamed Charlie would turn it into a romantic dinner for two!

"Pumpkin," comforted Vera, "are you sure you're not confusing admiration with what you *think* is love? Remember, when you were little, the daydreams you had about Wallace Shipley? Isn't this the same thing?"

Charlie dried her eyes.

"I know this isn't a crush," answered Charlie, thoughtfully, "because then, he wasn't real. I only had girlish fantasies about who Wallace Shipley was-- but I didn't *KNOW* him. I do now. My love for him is based upon knowledge and understanding. I only thought I knew and understood him better than *this*."

"What do you love about him?" asked Vera, brushing Charlie's long brown hair away from her tearstained eyes. Vera noticed a soft warm look cross Charlie's beautiful young face.

"I love his gentleness and thoughtfulness," she answered. "He doesn't get angry easily; I love the fact that, even though he's color blind, he still enjoys flowers; I love the way he never gives up fighting when he knows he's in the right; I love his sense of beauty-- you can hear it in his music; I love his sense of humor, even when the jokes aren't that funny; I love the fact that he values God's opinion above anyone else's; I love his sense of justice, and integrity-- even when he walked out that door, I knew he was doing what he thought was right," finished Charlie. "I loved him even then."

Now Vera was strangely silent.

"Grandma?" asked Charlie. "Are you all right?"

"Could it be?" whispered Vera.

"Could what be, Grandma?" asked Charlie.

"Nothing, Pumpkin," sighed Vera. "Things probably worked out for the best. He *is* quite older than you. How old is he, again?"

"Adam is forty-five," replied Charlie.

"Forty-five!" sighed Vera. "And you're sixteen. That's a difference of twenty-nine years! No, it's too great an age gap! It would have been impossible!" Then Vera looked into Charlie's sad brown eyes. "Still," admitted Vera, "you would have made each other happy. Why, you two do it all the time-- exchanging calls, and enjoying music together." When Vera looked away from Charlie's eyes, her senses returned. "Twenty-nine years!" she repeated. "No, it is too much!"

Charlie didn't feel like going to school, but she knew she must. The teenager was only thankful that no one outside of her small circle of friends knew what had happened.

While Charlie was away at school, Vera had a surprise, though not wholly unexpected, visitor.

"Please sit down, Adam," said Vera, inviting him to take a seat on the sofa.

"She's not here right now, is she?" asked Adam, gun-shy of the teenager. "I only came when I did, because I thought she'd be in school at this time of day," he explained.

"Charlie's in school," affirmed Vera.

"Did she... did she tell you what happened last Friday?" inquired Adam.

"She did," replied Vera.

"I came to apologize to you for what I've done to your granddaughter," said Adam. "I assure you, it wasn't intentional."

"I believe that," said Vera, wiping a tear from her eyes. "I believe you never *intended* to fall in love with Charlie."

Adam was stunned silent. He tried to open his mouth, but the words wouldn't come.

"You see," explained Vera, "like you, I didn't think Charlie was experiencing anything but an immature, schoolgirl crush. But this morning, she told me *WHY* she loved you, and I had to admit to myself that the one not facing reality the way it really and truly was, was myself-- and not her. She has a rational, honest, and pure love for you, Adam. And though it's true that your ages are so far apart, I can't deny that she loves you. I don't pretend to know you so well that I can claim to know your heart, but I think you *do* love my granddaughter. Yours is not an easy situation-- I know," continued Vera, "but if you look into your heart, I believe you'll have to admit that what I'm saying is true."

"But, it's not right," said Adam, "for two people to be together that are so different in ages."

"I know I'm taking a great liberty with you to speak my mind, but if you'll bear with me a little longer, I'd greatly appreciate it," said Vera.

"Please, continue," replied Adam.

"I know you said it's not right, but I wonder-- can you show me anywhere in the Bible that affirms this belief?" inquired Vera.

Adam was silent.

"Charity doth not behave itself unseemly," quoted Adam.

"May I ask, what is 'unseemly' about Charlie's love for you?" questioned Vera. "Maybe, what you're confronting is your own prejudice about such relationships, for if you go a little further in that same passage, it reads, '[Charity] seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth... And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but *the greatest of these is charity.*'"

Adam was deep in thought. He knew that passage from the Bible all too well. It was the very chapter from First Corinthians he had insisted on publishing, along with every music album he had ever created.

"Do you love her?" asked Vera. "Please, be honest."

"I don't know," answered Adam, slowly. "I've never allowed myself to even contemplate it for a second. I never even thought it *might* be possible."

"Please," begged Vera, "go and think about what I've said. Leave now, for she'll be back home, shortly. I don't want her to find you here."

Adam got to his feet to leave. Before he left, though, Vera had a request.

"If you find you don't love her, I must insist that you never come to this house again," stated Vera, gravely.

Thoughtfully, Adam nodded in agreement. He quickly departed Twin Yucca as silently as he had returned.

When Charlie arrived home from school that day, Vera kept Adam's visit a secret. Whether Charlie would ever see him again or not, was up to Adam.

"And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."
~ 1 Corinthians 13:13 ~

"When I [Charlie] was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a [woman], I put away childish things. For now we [Charlie and Adam] see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face."

~ 1 Corinthians 13:11, 12 ~

Chapter Thirty-six
Adam's Epiphany

"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 ~

The days following Charlie's heartbreak, passed slowly and painfully for the teenager. The satellite phone that had once been her dearest possession, now lay silent on her dresser. Adam hadn't called her even once, and though Charlie wasn't surprised by his silence, she increasingly mourned his absence with each passing day.

Vera tried to get her granddaughter's mind off of Adam, but met with little success. The old woman was beginning to secretly wonder if she had done the best thing by telling Adam not to return to the Overholt house unless he loved Charlie. Amid the doubts, however, Vera understood that Adam had to come to terms with his own feelings, before anything could be resolved between he and Charlie.

It was early morning on the Thursday of the second week of Adam's vacation, when Charlie received a surprise call from Bill, Adam's personal manager.

"Charlie," began Bill, "Adam has been unable to sleep for more than an hour at a time, ever since he left Twin Yucca. I'm assuming it has something to do with you. I'm not trying to pry or be nosey, but I'm getting really concerned about Adam. He's so tired, he can't even play the piano, and we have a televised Christmas special coming up on Saturday. It's going to be broadcast on public television this December. Up until now, this is probably the single most important performance of his career. However, at the rate he's falling apart, I don't think he'll be able to do it!"

By this time, Vera had picked up an extension, and was listening in on the conversation, in Charlie's presence.

"Bill," said Vera, "this is Charlie's grandmother. What are you asking Charlie to do?"

"I know it's asking a lot," asked Bill, "but Charlie has a way with him. If I sent the private jet down to Twin Yucca, could you and Charlie fly to Raleigh? I'd ask Charlie to call, but Adam has refused to talk to her."

"Then," asked Charlie, disappointedly, "he hasn't asked for me?"

"No," replied Bill. "Charlie, I'm asking you not only as Adam's manager, but as his friend-- please come. The doctor here says he could knock him out with a powerful drug, but it could be habit forming, so he's only willing to use it as a last resort."

"Bill," said Vera, "I need to talk this over with Charlie. Could we call you back?"

Charlie didn't want to wait, but Vera shook her head sternly.

"Sure," replied Bill. "I've already taken the liberty of sending the jet. It should arrive at Twin Yucca airport at about eleven this afternoon. I've even reserved a room for you at the hotel we're staying at-- all at my expense. Please understand, I'm not trying to pressure you. I'm just *that* concerned."

"Thank you, Bill," said Vera, "we'll call you with the decision as soon as we can."

Vera hung up, and motioned for Charlie to do the same. Slowly, the girl obeyed.

Vera sat down at the kitchen table with a heavy sigh.

"Please, Grandma?" begged Charlie.

"Pumpkin, sit down," said Vera. "I don't want you to get hurt. If Adam's feelings for you have changed since last Friday, he hasn't said anything about it. On top of everything else, he doesn't want to see you-- he's actually refused to even speak to you on the telephone. Your arrival might make him worse. Can you honestly say that you really want to see him, after what happened last week?" asked Vera, her voice quivering with emotion. "How can I let you walk into that all over again?!"

By now, Charlie was weeping.

"Grandma," she cried, "he *needs me!* And I *need* to help him! PLEASE! Even if he slams the door in my face, I *have* to try! Please, let me *try!*" Charlie buried her face in her arms and sobbed.

It was enough. Vera stood up and went to the phone.

"Jerome?" said Vera, holding the receiver so she could see Charlie's face, "I'm taking Charlie to Raleigh, North Carolina to see Adam."

Charlie's wet face beamed with gratitude.

"No, Adam is paying for it," assured Vera. "Charlie will miss two days of school, but she can make up for it, later." Vera continued to listen to Jerome. "Yes, I'm sure you won't have to pay for anything," she repeated. "I'll need you to take care of Chuck while we're gone, though."

After Vera made arrangements for Chuck to stay with Jerome, she called Bill back, saying that they would come to North Carolina.

Charlie eagerly rushed to her room to pack. She glanced at the time, and saw that it was a little before eight in the morning. It had been a long time since she had ever missed school. This day was dreamlike. She was actually going to fly to North Carolina to see Adam! The only thing that held her back from shouting for joy was the thought of him suffering. She had seen what sleep deprivation had done to him in the past. Charlie wondered what condition she would find him in, this time.

Vera went to her room and packed, also. Afterward, Chuck's suitcase was brought up from under his bed and filled with the necessary clothing and personal effects he would need for the few days they were to be gone. At ten o'clock, Vera and Charlie took him down to Mullen-Overholt to stay with Jerome in the living quarters behind Jerome's office.

After leaving Chuck with a member of the nursing home staff, Jerome drove his mother and niece down to the small Twin Yucca airport.

Grudgingly, Jerome carried the two suitcases to the airport waiting room, and, after a few parting words with Vera, returned to Mullen-Overholt.

Charlie was so excited, she could hardly contain herself.

"So, this is the airport Adam sees when he flies home," thought Charlie. "And soon, I'll be seeing *him!*"

As they sat on the hard uncomfortable chairs in the tiny waiting room, Vera wondered if she was doing the right thing. It was an act of faith on her part. She was trusting in the Providence of God's sending for Charlie to help Adam.

At eleven o'clock, the two women heard a loud roaring sound outside of the waiting room. A sleek private jet touched down on the runway and taxied to a stop. The side door opened, and a man climbed out. He ran to the waiting room and approached Vera.

"Mrs. Vera Overholt and Charlotte Overholt?" asked the stranger.

"That's us," replied Vera, gathering her courage. She had never flown in anything smaller than a commercial airliner, in her entire life.

The man carried their two suitcases, leading them up the aircraft entrance steps and into the interior of the jet.

"Here's your seats," he said, helping Vera and Charlie buckle the seat belts. He placed their luggage in the overhead compartment. "Over here," he said, "is a private theater system. Just put on the head phones, and use the remote control to choose the programming. On your left, is a satellite, Internet-ready laptop at your disposal. The lavatory is back down the aisle and to your left. Have you ladies eaten lunch?"

"No, we haven't," replied Vera, a little overwhelmed by the affluent surroundings.

"Then I'll have the stewardess prepare lunch just as soon as we take off," said the man.

"How long will it take to get to Raleigh?" asked Charlie.

"You'll arrive in North Carolina in time for a late dinner!" answered the man.

"How can that be?" questioned Vera, incredulously.

"Well, Mrs. Overholt," informed the man, "this jet can travel four hundred and ten miles an hour. At that speed, we'll reach the East coast in a little over five hours. Of course, that's not counting a refueling stop in Tennessee."

"Oh, of course," mumbled Charlie, stunned by the personal jet which she had often heard the guys speak of. Only, they had never told her it was anything like this!

After refueling in Twin Yucca, the jet took off down the runway, like a homesick angel returning to the skies. Vera looked out the window, and called Charlie's attention to the view of the Mojave Desert beneath them.

Charlie soon wearied of looking out the window, and leaned her head back on the headrest. After eating lunch, Charlie watched the endless blue sky pass by her window, until she finally was lulled to sleep.

When she woke up, the sun was setting in the western horizon, in back of the plane. They were headed away from the light, and into the dark eastern night ahead.

"When will we get there?" asked Charlie, venturing a question when the man had returned to see if there was anything they needed.

"Our estimated time of arrival is eight P.M.," he replied. Seeing the puzzled look when Charlie checked her watch, the man continued. "We crossed time zones, Miss Overholt. In fact, when you reach your destination, you will have lost three hours."

"Do you know Adam?" asked Charlie, out of curiosity.

"Only in passing, Miss," he said, politely. "He keeps to himself much of the time. Is there anything else I can get you? Bottled water? Soft drinks? Fruit punch? Anything at all?"

Vera and Charlie were served dinner on board the jet, but Charlie didn't have the stomach to eat. She was too nervous-- too excited to think about food.

At eight o' clock, EST, Adam's jet landed at Montgomery Private Airfield. When the door opened, a gust of cold autumn air rushed into the cabin, making Charlie open her suitcase and put on her coat. Vera did likewise. When the women were ready, the man carried their luggage down the aircraft steps and escorted them to the car waiting outside.

"I leave you here," said the man. "The driver will take you to your hotel."

"Thank you," said Charlie and Vera.

The car wove through busy downtown Raleigh traffic until it stopped in front of a large elegant hotel. The doorman helped the ladies out while someone else took their luggage to the front desk.

Charlie's teeth began to chatter. She clamped her jaw tightly, to stop the noise. She barely noticed her surroundings-- all her attention was on the expectation of seeing Adam again.

Suddenly, Charlie saw a familiar face. It was Bill, coming to meet them.

"Thank you so much for coming," said Bill shaking Vera's hand, and giving Charlie a hug. Charlie was a little surprised, for it was the first time Bill had ever hugged her. "He's not very good," warned Bill, trying to prepare Charlie. "I've never seen him this bad. He didn't even eat dinner," added Bill.

"Neither did I," remarked Charlie. "I was just too nervous. Does he know I'm coming?" she asked.

"No," replied Bill, "I admit it. I didn't have the guts to tell him. This is the first time I've ever gone over his head and against his wishes. Come on, I'll take you to your room, so you can settle in."

Bill unlocked their hotel door and carried the suitcases inside.

"Do you want to unpack, first?" he asked.

Vera looked to Charlie.

"It's up to you, Pumpkin," she said.

"Just give me a moment," said Charlie, retreating to the bathroom.

Charlie looked in the mirror and saw a frightened reflection staring back at her.

"That's no good!" she muttered, defiantly.

Taking out her hair brush, Charlie brushed her long wavy hair back into place. She touched up her makeup, and looked at her reflection once more.

"You've got to be strong!" she told herself. "Please, Jesus, give me wisdom!"

It has often been said that courage is only fear that's said its prayers. So it was with Charlie. She came out of the bathroom looking calm and determined. On the inside though, she was praying nonstop, all the way to Adam's hotel door, located on the same floor. In her arms, she carried a chess game and three video movies, while Vera had brought her knitting bag along so she could work on the sweater she was knitting for Charlie.

"Are you ready?" asked Bill, before opening the door, and showing Charlie and Vera inside.

"I'm ready," replied Charlie.

The door swung open. Inside, Charlie saw Melvin sitting on a couch against the left wall, his head bent forward as if under great emotional strain. When he saw the door open, Melvin got to his feet and walked over to Gary, nudging him in Charlie's direction.

"She's here," Melvin whispered. He then looked in the direction of the bedroom, apprehensively.

Gary smiled weakly, then stepped forward to greet Charlie and Vera.

"Thanks for coming," he whispered, in a barely audible voice.

"Where is he?" asked Charlie.

"In the bedroom," Gary pointed.

"What's he doing? Is he sleeping?" she asked, hopefully.

"Five minutes ago, he was watching TV," answered Melvin, coming in on the conversation.

Both men stared expectantly at Charlie.

"No pressure, right guys?" she smiled.

"What are you going to do?" asked Bill.

"Would you please take a peek in the bedroom door and see if he's dressed," instructed Charlie.

Without argument, Bill did as he was told.

"He's dressed," whispered Bill.

Charlie went to the bedroom door and looked inside. Even though she had steeled herself before coming, she wasn't prepared for what she saw. Adam was sitting upright on a couch, watching TV. It looked as though he hadn't shaved in several days. He was clicking through the channels when, all at once, Charlie saw him weep. He buried his face in his hands, and sobbed like a child.

Charlie shut the door, and tried to get a hold of herself. She covered her mouth, to stifle a sob. When she turned around, Charlie discovered that the entire room was watching her. Straightening up, Charlie beckoned Vera to follow her into the bedroom.

When the door opened, Adam looked up, his bloodshot eyes dimly seeing Charlie's form in the doorway. Thinking he was hallucinating, Adam shook his head and then squinted at her.

"Hello, Adam," said Charlie.

Suddenly, he realized that she wasn't a hallucination.

"What are you doing here!" he demanded, at once becoming angry. "*WHY?!*" Adam demanded of Vera.

"She *needed* to come," replied Vera, a little shaken. Charlie, on the other hand, refused to let Adam see she was frightened.

Adam brushed past the women and went into the living room.

"Which one of you is responsible for this!" he shouted, angrily.

Melvin and Gary shrank back, but Bill replied,

"I did."

"How *could you* do this to me?" cried Adam.

Bill turned white and sank back down on the couch, unable to reply.

"He was only trying to help," defended Charlie.

"How many times must I ask you NOT to help me?" asked Adam, his voice more weary and strained than Charlie had ever heard it before.

"Get out of here," he ordered, confronting Charlie's flashing brown eyes. "I don't want you here; I didn't ask you here; please go!" Hoping that she might leave if he left the room, Adam retreated to his bedroom, closing the door securely behind him.

Vera sat down in a nearby chair. Everyone in the room was shaken, including Bill.

"I thought he was going to *fire* me, for sure!" he whispered out loud.

Charlie put her ear to Adam's door. She could hear him sobbing, once more.

"It's the sleep deprivation," Charlie explained to the others. "It effecting the stability of his mood." Everyone in the room was listening intently to her. "I don't know how much you guys know about what happened last week while Adam was in Twin Yucca," explained Charlie, "but Adam and I had a..." she paused, "a disagreement. That, compounded by the important concert on Saturday, is what's causing this insomnia."

"Is there anything we can do?" asked Bill, unwilling NOT to help his friend.

"Yes," replied Charlie, "there is. First of all, I need everyone to remain in this hotel room. Melvin, as his publicist, I think you can agree that it wouldn't be helpful for the press to know that an underage girl was by herself in a hotel room with Wallace Shipley."

"No, indeed!" agreed Melvin, impressed by Charlie's thoughtfulness.

"Bill, this place has room service, doesn't it?" asked Charlie.

Just then the bedroom door opened, and Adam stared at her, angrily.

"You can't chase *me* out," said Charlie, answering Adam's glare.

"What are you doing?" he asked, wearily.

"I'm ordering room service," replied Charlie, matter-of-factly.

"Oh, no, you're not!" ordered Adam.

"You haven't eaten dinner, and neither have I!" argued Charlie.

"I don't want anything to eat!" he retorted.

"Well, I do!" said Charlie, turning to Bill. "I want two plates of spaghetti, (one without meatballs), a pastrami on rye with mustard and tomatoes, and a large bucket of popcorn. Are you getting this, Bill?" she asked, while the man struggled to write it all down.

"I'm not paying for it!" declared Adam, resolutely.

"I can afford my own dinner, thank you very much," laughed Charlie. "You pay me well, remember?"

"I thought Jerome was taking all your money," replied Adam, his voice gradually calming down.

"Yeah, well," said Charlie, taking off her shoes, "lately, he's been giving it back to me. Uncle Jerome said he didn't want to have a dependent on his hands for the rest of his natural life."

Adam shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

"Don't worry," comforted Charlie, "I'm not looking to you to fill that position. I can take..."

"Care of myself," he finished, with a small laugh. "Seems to me, I've heard that one before!"

"I told you," said Charlie, indignantly, "the snake was an extenuating circumstance!"

Melvin looked questioningly to Gary, for that incident had happened before his time.

"I'll tell you later," whispered Gary.

While Bill was on the phone with room service, Charlie pulled out the chess game she had brought with her to the hotel room.

"I'm not going to play chess with you, so you can just put it away!" resisted Adam, recognizing this ploy.

Charlie looked up in feigned surprise.

"And who asked you?" she asked, folding her arms. "Gary is going to play against me, aren't you Gary?"

"Sure," replied Gary, getting up from his spectator seat on the couch and walking to the small table Charlie had set the chess board upon.

"You can't trick me into playing you," smiled Adam. "I know you."

"Listen to him!" said Charlie, addressing Gary.

The two played chess, while Adam watched on.

After a few minutes, Charlie shouted,

"Checkmate!"

"You win," acknowledged Gary.

"Oh, come on!" argued Adam, "Gary's not even trying. He *let* you win!"

"I beg your pardon!" said Charlie, placing her hands on her hips indignantly. "I thought the only one who threw chess games, was *you!*"

"Oh," challenged Adam, "you're just asking for it, aren't you? Why, I could beat you at chess, any day of the week!"

"Any day of the week... except this one," smiled Charlie, batting her eyelashes playfully.

"Move over, Gary," said Adam, getting in front of the chess board. "This kid needs to be taught a lesson."

"And you're just the one to teach me, aren't you?" agreed Charlie.

"You know it!" replied Adam. "There. Your move."

Gary quietly returned to his seat on the couch.

"Hey," whispered Melvin to Gary, "she's good! Just look at him relaxing!"

Vera finally felt as though she could breathe easy. She sat down on the other couch and took out her knitting bag, following Adam and Charlie's banter from across the room.

Just then, room service knocked on the door. Bill got up and let them in. Adam didn't notice, and continued to play chess with Charlie.

"Bill," she asked, "could you bring that plate of spaghetti over here-- the one without meatballs."

Bill set the delicious steaming spaghetti in front of Charlie on her side of the small table.

"What are you doing?" demanded Adam. "There's no spaghetti in the rules of chess!"

"There is now," retorted Charlie. "Please be quiet, I'm trying to say grace."

Adam sighed, patiently.

"Amen," finished Charlie, opening her eyes and helping herself to a mouthful of pasta. "Oh, this is *good!*" she said, wiping her mouth with a finger.

"Do you want a napkin with that?" asked Adam.

Bill came forward and handed a napkin to her.

"Thank you," she said. "You know, Bill, this is the best spaghetti I've ever had! You've just *got* to try it! There's a plate over there," Charlie offered.

"Wait a minute!" protested Adam. "I thought that second plate of spaghetti was for *me*! It even has meatballs!"

"I thought you weren't hungry," remarked Charlie, continuing to eat. "Your move," she said, advancing a chess piece.

"Bill, you've already eaten, so you don't mind, do you?" asked Adam.

Bill quickly handed him the plate and sat back down on the couch, amazed at what he was seeing.

"Oh, Bill," asked Charlie, "could you put the sandwich in the refrigerator-- this place does have a kitchen, doesn't it?"

"With what I'm paying, it should," said Adam, eating hungrily.

"The sandwich is for you-know-who, for when he gets hungry, later," explained Charlie. "And put the popcorn in the oven to keep it warm."

Happily, Bill did as he was told.

Even though Adam was rapidly winning, the chess match was drawn out for each was too busy eating, to pay much attention to the game.

"That was good spaghetti," said Adam, finishing his meal.

In the haze of sleep starvation, someone who knew him very well, was calmly and surely, leading him back to the land of the sane. Adam put an elbow on the table and watched Charlie finish her dinner. A look of admiration crossed his face.

"How do you do it?" he asked.

"Do what?" asked Charlie, wiping her mouth with a napkin.

"How do you manage to turn hell into heaven?" he wondered out loud.

Charlie gazed into his eyes and then answered with a mysterious smile,

"If I told you that, you wouldn't need me anymore."

Adam didn't look so sure. Then, as if suddenly becoming self conscious of everyone in the room who had been following their conversation, he resumed the chess game. Now that both had finished dinner, the game rapidly concluded with Adam as the victor.

"Yes, I know," replied Charlie, answering his playful smile, "you told me so!"

"Any day of the week!" he repeated, triumphantly.

Charlie got up and moved her grandmother to a comfortable armchair next to the couch where the guys were sitting, making the second couch in the main room, vacant.

"Now, what are you doing?" asked Adam.

"Help me move the TV in your room into this room, will you?" she asked, sweetly.

"Oh, all right," sighed Adam, not even putting up a fight.

"Can you see it from over there, guys?" asked Charlie, aiming the set so everyone could see.

The "guys" said nothing. They only nodded and smiled as ones who had had a great burden lifted from their shoulders.

"Saturday," Bill whispered triumphantly to Melvin, "he's going to give the performance of his life-- wait and see if he doesn't!"

Charlie turned on the TV and loaded a VCR tape into the player.

"I'll get the popcorn," volunteered Adam, knowing what came next.

He soon returned with the popcorn, and sat down on the second couch next to Charlie, just like they did back in Twin Yucca, when he had insomnia. The others didn't mind when the popcorn wasn't passed to the other side of the room. There was too much silent rejoicing going on.

Halfway through the movie, Adam's head bobbed forward, as if fighting sleep.

"Everyone, keep quiet," urged Bill, in a barely audible whisper.

When Adam's head bobbed once more, Charlie sat down on the floor in front of the couch. Adam yawned. Seeing that she had moved out of the way for him, he stretched out on the couch.

"Hey," said Charlie, "don't hog the popcorn."

He passed the nearly empty bucket down to her and closed his eyes. By the time the second movie had ended, Charlie looked up to find that Adam had finally drifted off to sleep.

Seeing her chance to slip away, Charlie stood up and tiptoed to the door. Vera gathered her knitting and followed her granddaughter outside. Bill, Melvin, and Gary also left, leaving Adam to get as much sleep as possible.

The three men walked Vera and Charlie to their room, thanking the teenager repeatedly for helping Adam.

"If he couldn't make the Christmas concert," admitted Bill, "it would really hurt. There are millions of dollars at stake, not to mention broken contracts, and ill will. We owe you a lot."

"Yes," agreed Melvin. "And thank you for considering the negative publicity that might have arisen, had we not stayed with you in the hotel room. We all appreciate your discretion."

"You've been a good friend," added Gary, gratefully. "Thank you, Mrs. Overholt, for letting her come."

Charlie politely accepted their gratitude, too numb to really comprehend the depth of their sincerity. Adam had kept her on her toes; she was emotionally worn out. When the men had finished thanking her, they went to their own separate rooms.

When Vera unlocked their hotel room door, Charlie made a beeline to the bathroom, and lost her share of the spaghetti and popcorn dinner she had fought so hard to make Adam eat.

"Poor, thing!" cried Vera, seeing Charlie's pale face appear from the bathroom, minutes later.

"It's all right," comforted Charlie, "I actually feel better now."

"You did a good job, Pumpkin," said Vera hugging Charlie. "You two really have a special friendship."

"Grandma, I was so scared," confessed Charlie, "but I kept praying and tried not to fuss over Adam. I wanted so much to comfort him, and to tell him everything was going to be all right, but fussing only makes his insomnia worse. I had to hold back so much, tonight!"

"You're very brave," said Vera.

"I don't *feel* brave," she replied. "Oh! I'm so grateful he's finally sleeping! Thank you, God!"

After a calming cup of hot chocolate and an apple from room service, Charlie went to bed. As she sank into sleep, a prayer repeated on her lips, "cause him to love me."

The next morning, Charlie awoke to find Vera out of bed and already dressed.

"Time to get up, Pumpkin," greeted Vera. "Adam and his friends have invited us to breakfast."

"I thought we were going home this morning," said Charlie, getting up to change.

"Well," replied Vera, opening Charlie's suitcase for her, "since we have relatives only a few miles away, here in North Carolina, I thought we should drop in and say a quick 'hello,' before leaving."

"Not Aunt Angela!" cried Charlie, disappointedly.

"You may not like her," reminded Vera, "but she *did* take you in at a very hard time in your father's life. Now, hurry up and change. Bill will be coming for us, shortly."

Minutes after Charlie was dressed and ready, Bill knocked on their door.

"We're having breakfast in the hotel restaurant, downstairs," he explained.

Adam smiled politely when they joined the rest of the group at the table in the restaurant.

"Good morning, Adam!" greeted Vera. "You're looking well rested. Did you have enough sleep?" she inquired.

"Best night's sleep I've had in several days," replied Adam, avoiding eye contact with Charlie.

Charlie remained silent, suddenly not knowing how to act. Adam's need had defined her role last night, and now that it was morning, it was difficult to look at each other and not remember the previous Friday.

"As I told you earlier," Bill was saying to Vera, "the private jet is ready to return to Twin Yucca, whenever you're ready. However, we're not in any hurry to get rid of you both."

"That's very kind," replied Vera.

"Not at all," said Melvin. "In fact, we were hoping to have a chance to repay the both of you for all your help."

"As you know," continued Bill, "The Christmas concert is on Saturday. We would like to invite you and Charlie to come and sit with us at the table reserved for the friends of Wallace Shipley."

"Thank you," said Charlie, avoiding Adam's eyes, "but I don't think we should accept-- not with things the way they are."

"What are you talking about?" asked Bill, unsure of Charlie's meaning.

However, Adam understood.

"Charlie," he said, "it was *my* idea."

"Oh," she breathed, trying hard not to cry.

"We'd be delighted to come, thank you," Vera said, accepting the invitation for Charlie.

"After you visit your relatives in Fayetteville," resumed Bill, "if you could be back here by five this evening, a personal assistant will help both of you get ready for the concert on Saturday."

After breakfast, the same car and driver that had driven Charlie and Vera the night before, pulled up in front of the hotel to take them to Fayetteville. It was yet another kindness from Adam.

For Charlie, the drive to Fayetteville was over with all too soon. Charlie at least had the comfort of knowing that Sherri, her Aunt Angela's daughter, would not be home, for this was in the middle of a schoolday.

"It's this house," said Charlie, navigating the driver through the familiar neighborhood.

The car came to a stop, and the driver got out to open the door for Vera and Charlie.

"Well," sighed Charlie, "let's get this over with."

Vera knocked on the door.

"Charlotte!" greeted Aunt Angela, giving the teenager a hug. "Vera, it's been a long time! Please, come in! Excuse the house," said Aunt Angela, "things around here have been a little hectic!"

Suddenly, Charlie heard a baby crying from another room.

"Please, excuse me," said Angela, going to the next room. She soon reappeared with a small baby in her arms.

"Vera, Charlie, I'd like you to meet Eliza Goodman, my new granddaughter!" said Angela.

For a minute, Vera and Charlie didn't know what to think. How could Angela have a granddaughter with the same last name, when her only son was just ten years old?

"It's Sherri's baby," explained Angela, a little nervously. "She got herself pregnant, and the father refused to marry her, so little Eliza has to take the Goodman name, instead."

Charlie was stunned. Sherri was only a year older than herself.

"Sherri has dropped out of school," continued Angela, "to help support the baby. My husband and I argued with her to stay in school and complete her education, but she wouldn't listen... as usual. So," she said, changing the subject, "what brings you both to North Carolina?"

"We're visiting a friend," replied Charlie.

"Really?" asked Aunt Angela, in surprise. "Anyone I know?"

"No," answered Charlie, wanting to keep Adam's name out of this. She wondered if her aunt would even *believe* her if she had said Wallace Shipley was the friend.

Angela asked how Charlie was doing in school, apologized that Charlie's other Grandma, Janice McEntire, wasn't feeling well enough to accept visitors, and wondered if they wouldn't stay for dinner.

"Thank you," said Vera, "but we have other plans."

"Well," said Angela, "take care of yourself, Charlie. And please tell Chuck I said, 'hello.' If you're ever this way again, be sure and visit!"

Vera and Charlie left-- the drive there taking longer than the actual visit, itself.

It was sobering to think of Sherri as a mother. She was seventeen, had dropped out of high school, was already a single parent, and had no help or support from the father. All this, because two people didn't wait to marry before coming together. In First Thessalonians chapter four, verse three, it reads, "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication." True love *will* wait.

The women were back by five, and found the personal assistant that Bill had told them of, waiting for them in the hotel lobby.

"I hope you haven't been waiting too long," apologized Vera.

"Not at all," she smiled, politely. "My name is Kelsey, and I'm here to help both of you get ready for the concert! Early tomorrow, I'll have people in to do your hair, makeup, and facials, but today-- we shop! And you won't have to worry about the expenses, for they've already been taken care of. Are you ready to go, now?" she asked.

The three went back outside, this time to Kelsey's stylish red convertible. It was the kind of car that made people notice you-- something that Kelsey obviously desired.

"Because this concert will be televised, you've *got* to pay a lot of attention to appearance," said Kelsey.

She took them to the best shops, and guided Charlie and Vera straight to a two piece red gown, with an elegant matching wrap.

"Since this is a holiday occasion," pointed out Kelsey, "red is a great way to go! Try it on, Charlie!"

Charlie put it on, and showed Vera and Kelsey how it looked on her.

"The A-line skirt compliments your slender waist," observed Kelsey, expertly. "The bateau neckline on this bodice is *extremely* elegant. This is what *I* would wear, if *I* were going to the Christmas concert. What do you think, Vera?"

"It looks very expensive," observed the grandmother, a little apprehensively.

"It *is*," replied Kelsey, "but I was told to buy the best, and this *is* the best!"

Next, was Vera's turn. She took Kelsey's advice, and chose a black gown that complimented an older figure. It too, was expensive.

At the hotel that evening, Adam and the guys were so busy preparing for the concert, that Charlie and Vera were careful to stay out of their way.

Early the next morning, Kelsey arrived with her assistants, and started Vera and Charlie's makeovers. The facials, hair, makeup, last minute gown alterations, and manicures took half the day.

The hair stylist had swept Charlie's long brown hair back into an attractive French twist, pulling a large section of hair free from the twist to drape down one side of her face.

Next, came the make-up. The make-up artist gave Charlie a darker shade of lipstick than she usually was accustomed to, to compliment the color of the gown.

When Charlie came out and showed Vera the finished look, Vera was shocked at how different the teenager looked. It was the same petite and womanly figure, but Charlie looked different, as one often does after a makeover.

After Vera was ready, Bill knocked on their door to take them to Adam's room for prayer before leaving for the concert.

To Charlie's delight, Adam choked on his drink when she walked through the door.

Charlie let out an unexpected gasp, however, when she saw Constance, calmly standing beside Adam, looking overdone in a red and white spangled dress. When Constance saw Charlie, her face fell.

After everyone had assembled, Adam led the group in prayer, asking God for grace and success for the performance.

Then, it was time to go downstairs, and get into the limousines that were waiting to take them to the Raleigh Fine Arts Concert Hall. Adam escorted Constance, while Gary gladly took charge of Charlie and Vera.

"Bill thought," Gary whispered to Charlie, "that it would be good to show that Wallace Shipley has a girlfriend, so Constance was invited. I just wanted you to know that it *wasn't* Adam's idea for her to come."

"Thanks, Gary," smiled Charlie, gratefully.

Adam, Constance, Melvin, and Bill, rode in the first white limousine, while Gary, Charlie, and Vera rode in a second one.

When the stretch limousines pulled up in front of the Raleigh Fine Arts Concert Hall, cameras flashed away outside their windows. In a flurry of elbows and red carpet, Gary escorted Vera and Charlie safely inside to the reserved table for Wallace Shipley's friends.

The concert hall was scattered with small richly decorated round tables surround by chairs, while at the front of the room was located the stage. Charlie was quick to recognize Adam's signature concert grand piano on center stage. In back of the piano, large screens facing the audience, had been erected. While Adam played, picturesque winter scenes from nature displayed on these.

Back at the reserved table, to Constance's annoyance, the two women were seated side by side. Gary sat next to Charlie, and Vera was next to him.

"The governor of North Carolina's table is over there," Gary pointed out to Charlie. "They say he is a *major* Wallace Shipley fan!"

When an announcer came on stage to ask everyone to turn off their cell phones and pagers, Constance gave a small groan.

"Is this your first Wallace Shipley concert?" she asked Charlie, switching off her electronic devices. Adam had not told her that Charlie was coming, and Constance wondered what *else* he had failed to mention to her.

"I've seen him play back home in Twin Yucca," replied Charlie, "but this is the first time I've been to one of his concerts."

The music that night was all too familiar to Charlie. Adam played pieces from his well-known Christmas album, "Epiphany." She thrilled to every note, even though the songs were as familiar to her as her own name. Charlie was so proud of him, that she clapped louder than anyone at their table after every piece.

As his manager, Bill was familiar with Adam's playing, but that night, he noticed there was an extra brilliance in his client's performance. The prediction Bill had made the night before, had come true-- Adam was giving the performance of his life!

Then something completely unexpected happened. When Adam began to play the one romantic piece on the "Epiphany" album, the screens behind him changed to show the reserved table for the friends of Wallace Shipley. Charlie suddenly saw that her face was being displayed on the screens behind Adam! She waited for the camera to move on, but to her amazement, it remained focused on her!

A small buzz started around the room, as everyone looked at their table. Since this *was* a romantic song, and her face *was* the one being shown on stage, obviously, it must mean she was his girlfriend-- for it was well known that Adam was not married.

Constance looked shocked, but since everyone was staring in their direction, she tried her best to act gracefully.

"Why are the cameras on me?" Charlie whispered to Gary in a frightened voice.

"I have no idea," mumbled Gary out of the side of his mouth, "but for pity's sake, smile!"

After the song was over, the audience gave Adam a standing ovation. Then they sat back down to hear the last piece. It was Charlie's favorite Christmas hymn, "O Holy Night." As Adam tenderly played, tears came to her eyes.

Soon after that, the concert was over. Lines of people began to form in front of the exits, so the group at the Wallace Shipley table got up and struggled to find their way back to the limousines outside.

Gary had disappeared suddenly, without explanation, but soon reappeared, smiling and shaking his head in amusement.

"What is it?" asked Charlie.

"I'll tell you in the limo," replied Gary, helping them into the car.

Then, Gary explained. Evidently, when Adam was to play the romantic number, "Fireside," the camera crew had been instructed by the producer, to film Wallace Shipley's girlfriend, and surprise Adam by placing her live picture on the giant screens. The cameramen had been told that the musician's girlfriend was wearing a red dress. Constance had been wearing a white and red outfit, while Charlie's gown was the only completely red dress at the table. So, when it came time for the cameras to be turned on the table, Charlie's face was the one that appeared on the giant screens-- and *not* Constance's.

"I hope Adam doesn't think I had anything to do with it," said Charlie, timidly.

"Naw," answered Gary, dismissing her fear. "Adam was more pleased than he cared to admit."

The thought made Charlie smile.

"I don't see Adam," remarked Charlie, searching for him amidst the thronging crowds outside the car window.

"Here he comes," said Gary, for the crowd had suddenly become excited.

Soon Adam appeared, flanked on either side by Bill and Melvin. They slowly made their way down the red carpet and to their limousine. All the while, Adam was politely giving autographs and smiling graciously to the fans and admirers. Charlie had seen Adam being mobbed by fans on TV, before, but it was another thing to witness it in person.

"I'll be glad to get back to the hotel," sighed Charlie.

"It *does* get a little hectic," admitted Gary. "But, that's the price of fame."

When they had arrived back at the hotel, Adam and his small circle of friends celebrated the success of the night in Adam's hotel room. Everyone was smiles and congratulations.

Bill passed out glasses of warm hotel orange juice to everyone and announced a toast.

"It's not everyday one has the chance to witness the performance of a musician's lifetime," Bill began, "but tonight, we had the honor to be present at such an occasion!" Embarrassed, Adam tried to quiet Bill, but Bill continued. "God answered prayer tonight, and I don't think anyone here can dispute that, for something special happened on that stage! I want to toast the one responsible for making this night possible," said Bill, "for without her, Adam would still be

pacing the floors!" To this, everyone laughed, except Constance, Charlie, and Adam. "To Charlie!" said Bill, raising his glass to her. "To Charlie!" repeated the group.

Charlie blushed, and drank her warm orange juice. She noticed an odd look on Adam's face, which she could not understand. The teenager hoped Gary hadn't been wrong about the mix-up-- that Adam really *wasn't* blaming her for wearing the same color of dress as his girlfriend of nine years.

Soon, it was time for Vera and Charlie to start packing for the late flight home. Adam offered Constance a seat on the private jet, but she refused, saying she preferred to take a commercial flight, instead. It was her way of saying that she absolutely did *not* want to travel with "that girl."

To Charlie's surprise, *Adam* was the one who carried their luggage down to the car. It was he, and not a hired driver, that got behind the wheel and drove Vera and Charlie back to the airfield.

Once there, Charlie saw that the jet was ready and waiting to take off for Twin Yucca. The same man that had made the trip with them the first time, greeted the women, and took their luggage on board the plane.

"Thank you for the lovely time," said Vera, shaking Adam's hand, and climbing inside.

"Yes," echoed Charlie, "I had a wonderful time."

Charlie turned to go, but Adam suddenly called her back. Just then, the jet's engines began to whirl loudly, so that she could barely hear his voice.

"What?" she yelled. "I can't hear you!"

"I said, 'I LOVE YOU!!'" shouted Adam, over the roar of the engines.

Charlie gazed at him, stunned. A flood of emotion suddenly swept her, and she looked as though she were about to pass out. Seeing this, Adam quickly picked her up in his arms and carried her aboard the plane, where the noise of the engines was not so loud.

"What's wrong?" asked Vera, when she saw Adam setting Charlie down into her seat.

"I think she was about to faint!" he exclaimed, rubbing Charlie's hands between his.

Vera searched his face for an explanation.

"I told her I loved her," Adam explained, answering Vera's unspoken question.

Now Vera looked pale.

"Do you know what you're saying?" asked the grandmother.

Charlie sat up, her senses returning to her. She waited for Adam's answer.

"Tonight, while I was in front of the piano, I saw the handwriting on the wall," he smiled, referring to the red dress mix-up. "When that happened, it was as if God was trying to tell me what I realized my heart already knew. Vera, you told me to look inside my heart. I did, and that's where I found Charlie-girl."

Charlie reached forward to hug Adam, but he stopped her.

"I must tell you," said Adam, seriously, "I'm not ready to get married. I want to wait at *least* until next summer, when this tour will be over with. I don't want to act rashly, and absolutely *refuse* to rush you into a decision that will dramatically affect the rest of your life."

"I'll wait as long as you want," replied Charlie, "but I'll *still* love you! In fact, by then, I'll love you even *more!*"

Adam gently touched the side of her face with his hand, and then drew it back.

"Call me," he smiled, tenderly.

It was the first time Charlie had ever seen that expression on his face. It told her what she had longed to hear for so long-- "I love you," "I love you."

"God keep you," said Vera, grasping his hand tightly. "You'll always be welcome in our house!"

Moved to tears, Adam turned to go, so Charlie could not see him weep. He went down the aircraft steps, and watched as the jet started down the runway.

Charlie looked out the window, and watched Adam's form grow smaller and smaller, until she could see him no more.

"And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and He [God] took one of his [Adam's] ribs... And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made He a woman, and brought her unto the man."

~ Genesis 2:21, 22 ~

"My dove, my undefiled is but one; she is the only one of her mother."

~ Song of Solomon 6:9 ~

Chapter Thirty-seven

'We were like them that dream'

"When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing."

~ Psalms 126:1, 2 ~

John Huss once wrote, "It is in the nature of truth, that the more we obscure it the brighter will it become." Today, Adam and Charlie would find this to be true.

When Charlie and Vera arrived back in Twin Yucca from their trip to Raleigh, North Carolina, the early Sunday morning sky was still dark. Charlie could hardly wait to get home, so she could call Adam on the satellite phone. Vera, however, insisted that her granddaughter go straight to bed, and get some rest, for the teenager had been too excited to get any sleep on the return flight home.

"Besides," reasoned Vera, "Adam is probably resting right now. Get some sleep, and you can call him later today."

Little did Vera know, that back in Raleigh, a certain solo pianist had not gotten a single wink of sleep, either. In fact, Adam was so euphoric, that after church that day, Gary asked him, with a grinning smile,

"Something happened last night at the airfield, didn't it?"

"I'm in love, Gary!" announced Adam, as they entered Adam's hotel room.

"Did you tell her?" asked Gary, thoughtfully.

"I did," replied Adam. "And I've never been happier in my entire life!"

It was then that Adam noticed the serious look on Gary's face.

"What's the matter?" asked Adam.

"Melvin wants to tell the media the cover story, that the live shot of Charlie on stage was a mistake, and that your 'real' girlfriend was the woman sitting beside her," explained Gary.

"Couldn't we just keep it quiet?" asked Adam, nervously.

"You're not ready to come out in public with this, are you?" observed Gary.

"Do I have to announce EVERYTHING to the public?" laughed Adam.

However, Gary wasn't laughing.

"Look," he replied, "I'm your agent-- not your analyst. I only know how things are going to look to the public. If you aren't forthcoming with the truth, then they will know you're hiding something. Do you really want to thrust Charlie into the tabloids, by trying to cover up the fact that you two love each other? You're famous and she's underage. If you don't talk, this thing is going to blow up, and when it does, no one will be able to control it-- not even Melvin!"

"I love Charlie," answered Adam, "but I only just told her last night. I don't know *what* to tell the media. It's just too soon."

"I can understand that," said Gary, sympathetically, "but the Christmas concert is going to air for the first time early next month. If you don't want Melvin to spread around his cover story, then you'd better be ready to answer questions-- and questions WILL be asked!"

"This reminds me," sighed Adam, "of a discussion I once had with my nephew when he was keeping a serious relationship from his mother. I told him that nothing excites gossip like a secret."

"What happened?" asked Gary.

"He married the serious relationship," smiled Adam.

"Smart guy," replied Gary. "But, does *your* family know about you and Charlie? Have you broke off with Constance, yet?"

"Hey," defended Adam, "this only happened last night! I haven't even talked to Charlie since then!"

Gary tossed the morning newspaper to his client. On the cover was a photo of Adam in front of the piano at the Christmas concert-- Charlie's picture on the tall screen behind him. The caption under the photo read, "Wallace Shipley and his significant other, surprised everyone Saturday, when he serenaded her with a longtime favorite from the 'Epiphany' album."

Adam was uneasy. He hadn't expected this.

"You are *Wallace Shipley*," reminded Gary. "Hold your silence, and everyone will think this is true-- which it is, but, apparently, you weren't ready for it."

"I'll talk to Charlie," said Adam in agreement. "We have to settle some things before I can tell anyone about our relationship. Still, I don't want to rush her into marriage," he warned.

"You don't have to marry her *tomorrow*," chuckled Gary, "just be ready with your story."

"It's not easy," explained Adam, folding the newspaper and setting it aside, "for me to talk about my feelings. And to do it in public..." he shuddered.

"You *do* love, her though, right?" asked Gary.

Adam responded with a frankness, that at once, put Gary at ease.

"I've never been so sure of any relationship in my life," he replied. "I just have to be assured that Charlie knows what kind of man she's getting."

Charlie had been asleep for five hours when Adam called her on the satellite phone for the first time since Saturday night. Tired as she was, she jumped out of bed and snatched up the phone.

"Adam!" she cried with delight. "I wanted to call you earlier, but Grandma insisted I get some rest."

"Oh," said Adam, "were you sleeping? I didn't mean to wake you. I can call back later," he offered, part of him wanting to procrastinate.

"Don't you dare!" laughed Charlie. "Now that I have you, I won't let you go!"

"I like the sound of that," he mused, a little awkwardly.

Adam and Charlie were transitioning from best friends to something more intimate and private. He was unused to "touchy-feely" talk, but with Charlie, it came more readily than Adam had thought he was capable of.

"Tell me you love me," coaxed Charlie, "or was I only dreaming last night?"

"I love you, Charlie-girl," repeated Adam, loving the sound of those words, himself.

"Oh! Why can't we get married right away?" asked Charlie. "I don't know if I can hold out till summer!"

"There's so much we have to settle concerning our future," he replied, soberly, "that I'm not even sure we're really engaged."

"Speak for yourself!" laughed Charlie. "You couldn't get rid of me, if you tried!"

"Before I enter into an engagement," said Adam, "I must tell you, that I've been engaged, before."

"You don't have to tell me, Adam," said Charlie.

"It's only fair that you know," he replied. "It happened after I came home from college to go into the family business. Many of my friends were either married or engaged, so I figured it was time for me to do likewise. Her name was Anna. I had known Anna since childhood, and it seemed reasonable that we should get married. Both of our parents wanted it, so I thought I wanted it, also. We were engaged for about two years, when we finally set the wedding date. Anna and I picked out a house, (it's the one I live in), and made plans for our future. Then, the day arrived. The only problem was, everyone showed up for the wedding-- except Anna. She literally left me standing at the altar. I could hear everyone whispering to each other, and giving me pitying looks. After two hours of waiting, even *I* got the message."

"Were you terribly heartbroken?" asked Charlie.

"No, I wasn't," replied Adam, honestly. "That's what bothered me more than anything else. I had been willing to marry someone I didn't love-- only because everyone else had wanted it! After that, I stopped looking for a wife. I came to believe that if God wanted me to marry, then He would make it obvious. The years went by, and nothing obvious happened, so I thought that it was never meant to be. Then, you came into my life. I don't know when I first loved you, but I know when I first *let* myself love you. I was playing 'Fireside,' trying NOT to think about you, when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw your beautiful face appear on the screen next to me. It was the 'obvious' sign from God that I had needed."

"I swear, I had no idea about the red dress," reiterated Charlie.

"You didn't know, but God did," Adam observed.

"I first knew I loved you," began Charlie, "when your jet went down, and I thought you were on board. Up until then, I thought my feelings for you only consisted of the old crush, which I had

had since I was eight years old. Did you know I was eight when Donna gave me my first Wallace Shipley CD?"

"No, I didn't know that," chuckled Adam. "Which one was it?"

"'Convergence,' of course!" replied Charlie, for ever since, it had been her favorite. "Daddy thought I was crazy for liking any musician so much, when he had only made four albums in his entire career. But, I loved every one. It occurs to me, I've got to be careful about that."

"Careful about what?" asked Adam.

"I don't want to give you a big ego," said Charlie, "after all, you're just a man-- a very special man, but still a man."

"A man in love," finished Adam.

The two fell into easy conversation about themselves and about the future, until a new concern suddenly presented itself in Adam's mind.

"Charlie, I need you to promise me something," he began. "I just remembered that many years ago, near the end of the street from where I live in Twin Yucca, there used to be a run-down house. The yard was filled with weeds, and the windows were never open. Inside, lived an old woman who's husband had been dead for several years. From the stories I heard, they were very much in love. When he died, she gave up on life. She no longer lived-- but merely existed. I need you to promise me, that when I die before you, (as I surely must), that you won't spend the rest of your life in mourning."

"I promise," replied Charlie, "but, I can't promise that I'll ever love anyone else, as I love you. You are my first love, Adam."

"There's something else I want to tell you," said Adam, forcing the words out of his mouth. He was glad that no one else was listening, for he was pouring out his heart to her. "I'm embarrassed to bring this up, but I feel I must. I know in this day and age, it's almost impossible for a man my age to have never been with a woman, but I want you to know that I am a virgin. I've been a Christian since I was a child, and I was taught that sex outside of marriage was sin. I may have more experience than you in other matters concerning a relationship, but sex is not one of them."

"Thank you for telling me," said Charlie, gratefully. She knew it was difficult for him to be so extremely honest with her. "I know it won't be a great surprise to you, but I've never been with anyone, either."

"I'm so glad I waited," said Adam, thoughtfully.

Just then, Charlie heard voices coming from the living room.

"Hold on, a moment," said Charlie, opening the bedroom door a crack to see who Vera was talking to.

"Adam!" said Charlie, after she had shut the door, "guess who's in the living room with Grandma!"

"Oh no, not a reporter!" he groaned.

"No, it's worse than that!" said Charlie. "It's Mrs. Garner!"

"Mrs. Garner? You mean Shirley?" asked Adam.

"She's asking Grandma to see me," informed Charlie, feeling a little frantic. "But she can't know, because you haven't told her yet, right?"

"No, I haven't told her," replied Adam, feeling a little frantic himself. "However, there *is* a small possibility that she *might* already know," he conceded, remembering the newspaper Gary had shown him. Even though Shirley didn't get the Raleigh paper, maybe someone had told her of it.

"What do I tell her?" cried Charlie. "Are we engaged? What do I tell her if she asks? Oh, Adam, I wish you were here right now!"

"Take it easy, Charlie-girl," calmed Adam.

"I don't think you *understand*," said Charlie, "I still call her 'Mrs. Garner'! She's never really approved of me, and she always treats me as though I were a child! If I told her, 'I love Adam,' it would mean nothing more to her than a silly schoolgirl crush!"

"Charlie?" asked Adam.

"She doesn't like me, and she *never* will!" continued Charlie.

"Charlie!" repeated Adam.

"What?!" cried Charlie, annoyed that Adam wasn't as upset as herself.

"Will you marry me?" he asked.

All at once, Charlie was still.

"Do you have to ask?" replied the young woman. "You *know* I will!"

"Stay in your room," instructed Adam. "I'm going to call your uncle, and get his permission to announce our engagement. He *is* your legal guardian. When I get his answer, I'll call you back!"

Before she could say another word, Adam hung up. Charlie was numb with pleasure and fear. She wondered what Uncle Jerome would say; she wondered what Shirley would say; and, she wondered what the world would say.

"Charlie, it's Grandma," said Vera, opening the teenager's door. "Shirley is here to see you, Pumpkin," she gravely informed her granddaughter.

Just by the look on Vera's face, Charlie knew it wasn't good.

"Let me get dressed, first," said Charlie, trying to stall long enough for Adam's return call.

"Don't be too long," said Vera, closing the door.

Charlie dressed and readied herself. The speed with which Adam called back alarmed her. Surely, if Jerome had said "yes," then it would have taken longer than this!

"Charlie, it's me," said Adam. "Your uncle gave his permission! However, there was a condition. When we marry, he wants to sign over Chuck's guardianship to me. I agreed, of course. That *IS* all right with you, isn't it?"

"Yes, certainly," replied Charlie, grieved that Uncle Jerome would use this as an opportunity to rid himself of a "weight around his neck."

"I would have accepted the responsibility, *even if* Jerome hadn't required it," said Adam, not wanting Charlie to think that he had been forced into it. "Your family will be my family. In fact, it's all right by me, if you want Chuck and Vera to live with us."

As Charlie wiped the tears from her eyes, Adam could hear her gently sobbing from happiness.

"I can remember my own disagreements with my sister when she placed Mom into the nursing home," explained Adam. "Mom said it was the right thing to do, but since I had been kept out of the decision process, it took a long time for me to live with their choice. They were trying to shield me, but because they did, it only made it harder for me to accept. I know that sounds crazy, because I wasn't the one who had to live in that place-- Mom was. It's only that I wished she could have lived with me. I would've loved that opportunity."

"I'm so grateful that you understand," said Charlie. "I admit, I was wondering what I would do if you refused to let Daddy come live with us. And thank you for including Grandma!"

"We can get married this summer," continued Adam. "I'd love to do it today, but we need more time to be sure that this is what we both want. I still don't want to rush you into marriage."

"*Oh, Adam, I love you so much!*" she cried, her heart overflowing with joy, till it spilled over into warm tears of elated bliss. This was a happiness she knew she didn't deserve. Oh! How God had blessed her with such an understanding man, as this!

"There, there," soothed Adam, "you don't want Shirley to see you crying. Just be honest with her, and try to remember that even though I'm a year older than her, Shirley has always treated me as a 'little' brother. Keep that in mind when she acts overprotective. And when she asks about our relationship, tell her we're engaged. She'll have a harder time dismissing you, after that. Do you want me to call her, and break the news, myself?" he volunteered.

"Do you think it would make any difference?" asked Charlie.

"No, not really," admitted Adam.

"She's already here at my house," said Charlie. "Providence says that *I'm* the one to tell her. There, I'm ready." She dried her face and inhaled several deep breaths to steady her breathing.

"Call me back when she leaves," requested Adam.

Shirley Garner didn't know what to expect. Constance had told her of the Christmas concert, and how Charlie's face was shown on the large screens, as if Charlie and Adam had had a romantic relationship. The last straw came, however, when a reporter from Raleigh called, wanting to know how long Adam and the young woman had been going together, for an article he was writing. Shirley's first reaction was to come to the Overholt house, to talk to Charlie. She

knew that where the teenager was concerned, her brother was soft, and lacked the resolve required to silence unfounded gossip such as this.

Charlie walked down the hallway and stepped into the living room. Vera sat quietly in one corner, knitting away. However, to Charlie's trained ears, she noticed that the clicking of the knitting needles were moving slower than usual.

"Charlie," greeted Shirley, politely, "I came to speak with you about Adam."

Charlie sat down opposite to where Shirley was seated, and calmly heard her out.

"I came here to ask a favor of you," Shirley began. "My brother is sometimes too kind for his own good. He's always helping those less fortunate than himself, and because of this, is sometimes subject to people who take advantage of his generosity." Shirley paused. "There have been unsettling rumors concerning you and my brother. In the past, I've asked Adam to not let his kindness toward you, get in the way of his better judgment. There are those who do not understand such a... a *unique friendship* as the one you and my brother share. I was hoping that your friendship would not be taken the wrong way-- but clearly, it has. Since Adam will refuse to do anything about it, I must insist, as his sister and as a responsible adult, that you cease being around my brother. I've asked your grandmother to order you to do this, but for some reason, she feels she hasn't the right. So, I'm here to do what no one else will." Shirley was adamant, and fully expected Charlie to cooperate. After all, Charlie was a "child," and Shirley was the "responsible adult"!

Charlie now fully understood why Adam had wanted her to be able to say that they were engaged. With firm insistence such as this, how could Charlie have withstood such opposition?

"Well?" pressed Shirley. "What do you have to say?"

Charlie heard Vera's knitting needles come to a complete stop.

"I can appreciate your concern," answered Charlie, in a voice so confident, that Shirley was a little unnerved. "You obviously love your brother very much. I'm afraid, however, that I am unable to do as you ask."

Shirley was shocked at the defiance of the teenager! Who did Charlie think she was?!

"You see," continued Charlie, "Adam and I are engaged."

Vera let out an inadvertent cry of surprise, her knitting yarn tumbling from her lap and onto the floor. Now Shirley was stunned speechless. For several moments, Adam's sister just sat on the couch, unable to speak.

"And when did *this* happen?" Shirley asked, when she had finally found her voice.

"We talked about it yesterday, but he proposed this morning," replied Charlie.

Vera cupped a hand over her mouth, in order to smother any visible signs of pleasure from Shirley.

"I see," said Shirley, evenly. "Vera, you can't tell me that you approve," she asked, turning to the grandmother.

"They love each other very much," replied Vera. "I'm very happy for them both."

Shirley was thoroughly disgusted!

"He let you into his house," she began, turning back to Charlie once more, "he tolerated your presence, and bent over backwards to help you because your father was ill, and this is the thanks he gets?! Charlie, you are *deliberately* taking advantage of my brother! I won't stand for it! Why, he would be the laughing stalk of Twin Yucca! Oh!" she cried, "I knew you were trouble! You put him up to this tour business, and now you want to take him away from his family! Adam was doing just fine before *you* came! How *can* he turn his back on Constance! She was the best thing that *ever* happened to him! Surely, you see how he's ruining his chance for happiness!"

To Vera's surprise and relief, Charlie remained calm throughout Shirley's diatribe.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," replied Charlie, getting up to return to her room.

"Where are you going?" demanded Shirley.

"Mrs. Garner," responded Charlie, for she still called Shirley, 'Mrs. Garner,' "Adam asked me to marry him. I'm very happy! I wish you could be, too." Then, Charlie disappeared behind her bedroom door, thankful for the opportunity to escape her future sister-in-law's glaring eyes.

Back in the privacy of her room, Charlie called Adam, who had been nervously awaiting her call.

"Well?" he asked. "How did it go?"

Charlie hesitated.

"Was it *that* bad?" he asked.

"She endured a great shock," reasoned Charlie, "so I didn't take what she said, too seriously."

"Just what *did* she say?" inquired Adam.

"She said I was taking advantage of you; that you're going to be made fun of for marrying me; that I put you up to the whole tour idea; that Constance was the best thing that ever happened to you; that I'm stealing you away from your family; and that you're throwing away every chance for happiness," repeated Charlie. "I think there might have been more, but I can't remember it all. Please, remember, you told me to give her slack for being overprotective," she reminded Adam.

"Even so," replied Adam, "Shirley had no right saying those things to you!" Angrily, he hung up the phone.

By the time Shirley reached her fashionable adobe home on the outskirts of Twin Yucca, it was not a great surprise to her, to find the telephone ringing off its hook.

"Yes?" she answered the phone, fully able to guess who the persistent caller was.

"It's Adam," he replied. "How *could* you say those hateful things to Charlie?!"

"I was not the one who was being hateful!" retorted Shirley. "She's using you, Adam! And if you can't see that, then I'm *sorry* for you!"

"You can't honestly mean that," replied Adam, gravely.

"She's much too young," argued Shirley.

"You're changing the subject, Sis," pressed Adam. "You're accusing Charlie of a maliciousness, that's not in her. She's a God-fearing, upright young woman, whom I love dearly! Whatever else you think about Charlie, you're wrong about her character. I could never love the person you describe, and I think you know that."

Upon hearing this, Shirley's temper cooled. Regret and remorse inevitably followed.

"You're right," she confessed, in a voice contrite enough, even for Adam. "No matter what I think about your engagement, it was wrong of me to falsely accuse her the way I did. Will you forgive me? I'll go back right now, and apologize to the child."

"I forgive you," replied Adam. "But, when you see 'the child,' for my sake, go easy on her. She's timid enough of you the way it is."

"For *your* sake," promised Shirley, "I'll treat her more carefully. Please understand, I *still* think you're making a terrible mistake in your choice of a wife."

"I understand," said Adam. "In time, you'll come around."

"I seriously doubt that," disagreed Shirley. "But, I'll go back and talk to her."

Shirley was as good as her word, for after conversing with Adam, she returned to the Overholt house and apologized to Charlie. She repeated her belief that the marriage was a tragic mistake, and though she didn't say it out loud, Charlie could almost hear her add, "and doomed to fail."

"If I can talk you out of it, I will," warned Shirley. "I don't believe you and Adam have thought this through. Why, when you become a middle aged woman, he'll be an old man! I should think that physical aesthetics alone, would render such a marriage impossible-- if not absurd!"

Charlie didn't know how to talk to Shirley without entering into an argument of opinion. Her own heart had told her that age would not matter-- not if she truly loved Adam. But, how could she tell Shirley this?

"Though I run the risk of sounding like a greeting card cliché," explained Charlie, "I must be candid. No one is more aware of the differences in our ages, as Adam and myself. Indeed, it took a great deal of personal revelation, to even admit to each other that our feelings went beyond mere friendship. And while love doesn't make our age gap mystically disappear, I do believe it bridges it. The Bible says that the greatest of these is love. If anything can span that distance, love can."

"I admit, there *is* an element of truth to what you say," conceded Shirley. "Love is able to overcome great obstacles, but I don't think you comprehend how great the obstacles will be. Not only is there the outstanding difference in your ages to consider, there's also the fact that my brother suffers from a great deal of notoriety. He has little privacy, (which is one reason why I was against him going public, in the first place), and such pressures would only serve to drive you apart from each other. In this, I claim to have more experience than you. As you probably

have noticed, my husband is away a great deal of the time. His well publicized how-to books and seemingly never-ending conventions, have put a strain on our marriage. To further prove my point, I'm going to tell you something that only my Mom ever knew. At one point in our marriage, Thomas confessed to being unfaithful. The temptation is all the greater for those who are famous, Charlie. They are often surrounded by beautiful, adoring women, who think it's just a privilege to shake their hand, let alone to get closer to them. I would appreciate it, if you didn't repeat this to anyone."

"You have my word, Mrs. Garner," Charlie promised, somberly.

"If we're going to be sisters-in-law," sighed Shirley, "you had better start calling me by first name."

As the breaking light of dawn signals a new day, Shirley was beginning to relate to Charlie. There was a softening in her voice that gave Charlie reason to hope that she was having second thoughts about objecting to their marriage.

"Perhaps," pointed out Shirley, "because you *are* so young and pretty, Adam won't have as great a temptation to stray. Whatever the case may be, my brother has *never* been known as a ladies' man-- thank God! Did you know, that before Mike was old enough to attract attention from the opposite sex, that it was Adam they chased after? Frequently, when I'm out in public with my brother, women come up to me and ask if he is married! He becomes chagrined whenever that happens! I think that's the reason why he's so shy of women," mused Shirley, incrementally warming up to Charlie. "Well, if it's any consolation, the Clark men have always aged very well," she continued. "Even towards the end of Dad's life, Mom once told me that 'his natural force had not yet abated'-- those were her very words. Mom was always delicate when it came to matters of sex," explained Shirley, in a hushed voice.

Embarrassed, Charlie blushed.

"Have you two set a date for the wedding?" inquired Shirley, now willing to even contemplate the marriage.

"We are thinking of next summer, when the tour is over," said Charlie.

"Then, maybe you can be a June bride," Shirley suggested. "And where are you going to live? Has Adam said anything to you about moving?" she asked, pensively.

"We've not yet discussed that," answered Charlie. "However, our family and friends are here in Twin Yucca. I don't think either of us want to leave the desert."

"Twin Yucca is an excellent place to raise a family," advised Shirley, enthusiastically. "The crime rate here is lower than in larger cities like Palm Springs. And you can't beat the weather!"

By this glowing report, Charlie understood Shirley to mean that she really didn't want her brother to move.

"Are you going to finish school?" Shirley asked, continuing her questioning. "If you marry next summer, won't you still have half a year of school left before graduating?"

"I intend to finish my education, even after the wedding," replied Charlie.

"Do you plan on attending college?" she inquired.

"I'm not sure," Charlie replied, honestly. "With Daddy the way he is, I think I'll want to stay home and take care of him as much as possible. I don't see myself entering into any kind of profession right now, when I have an invalid father to take care of."

"Yes, of course," conceded Shirley. "So, you intend to have Chuck live with you and my brother?"

"Yes, Adam and I have talked about that. We would also like Grandma to live with us, too," related the young woman.

"I see. And your uncle is all right with you marrying so young?" inquired Shirley, a little incredulously.

"Adam asked for his consent, and Uncle Jerome said 'yes,'" affirmed Charlie.

"Well, it appears you have at least given the future *some* thought," acknowledged Shirley, winding down her interrogation. "I must say, however, that I'm glad you're both waiting until next summer before getting married. By then, you and Adam will have had more time to consider what you're getting yourselves into. I don't think..." Shirley hesitated, "I still don't think this marriage will work. Life is hard enough, without so many things going against you. I sincerely hope I'm wrong, though. Adam seems to be very much attached to you, and I would hate to see him get his heart broken. Even at his age, I don't believe he has ever endured that kind of heartache, before."

Shirley got up to leave.

"I'm going to go home and break the news to the rest of the family," she said, making her way to the door. "Don't be surprised if they visit you, also." Shirley lingered at the door for a moment. "Please don't break his heart," she pleaded. Then, Adam's sister left.

Wearily, Charlie flopped onto the couch and sighed in relief.

"You've had quite a day," reflected Vera, coming out from her place of exile in the kitchen. "Imagine! You're *actually* engaged to Adam!"

"It *is* incredible, isn't it?" laughed Charlie. "I feel as though I'm walking around in a dream! Oh, Grandma! I'm so *very* happy!"

"Are you sure Adam wants me to come and live with you both?" asked Vera, unsure of the genuineness of the invitation. Vera was, after all, Charlie's grandmother, and maybe Adam was only being polite in extending the invitation to include herself.

"Grandma," said Charlie, touching the old woman's hand, lovingly, "he means it-- we both do."

Charlie half expected the rest of Adam's family to come and instigate their own round of questioning, but to her relief, they let her alone for the rest of Sunday.

Back in Raleigh, after hearing Charlie's retelling of what had happened, Adam broke his happy news to the guys. It came as no surprise to Gary, who heartily congratulated Adam upon his engagement. Bill, Adam's long-suffering manager, was delighted for Adam and Charlie, both. Ever since the success of the Christmas concert, Bill had come to respect the teenager.

Melvin, however, had a teenage daughter of his own. The publicist found himself a little uneasy with Adam's choice for a wife. Melvin privately remembered a joking statement he had once said to his own wife, when his eighteen year-old daughter began seeing an older man: "Let's lock her in her room, and not let her out until she's thirty-four!" Like Shirley, he felt that such a marriage didn't have a chance of succeeding. However, unlike Shirley, Melvin kept these opinions to himself. After all, Charlie wasn't his daughter.

"When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The LORD hath done great things for them. The LORD hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad."

~ Psalms 126:1-3 ~

Chapter Thirty-eight

Public Opinion

"Fear them not, neither be dismayed at their looks."

~ Ezekiel 3:9 ~

Charlie was eager to tell Maggie the big news of her engagement to Adam, but Mr. and Mrs. Downen had gone away for the entire weekend, dragging Maggie with them, so Charlie had to exercise patience.

Monday morning, the day after Charlie's engagement to Adam, Charlie woke up to find that she had slept in a little late. While she was still getting dressed, she heard Jerome impatiently honking the car horn outside.

"Don't you want you're breakfast, Pumpkin?" asked Vera, as her granddaughter barreled past her with backpack in hand.

"See you later, Grandma!" was all the reply Charlie had time for.

"You're late!" grumbled Jerome, when she finally slid behind the wheel.

"Sorry, Uncle Jerome," apologized Charlie, "I guess I overslept."

Jerome answered with an angry "humph!" Charlie started the car down the street and onto the long narrow road out of Twin Yucca. The crisp desert air whipped through Charlie's hair through the open window.

"It's a beautiful day, isn't it?" remarked Charlie, glowing with joy.

Jerome skeptically looked out his car door window at the gray overcast skies, and then back at his niece.

"So you've accepted Adam," he mused. "Make sure you get a prenuptial agreement."

"Why would I want to do that?" asked Charlie.

"By California law," continued Jerome, in a cold indifferent voice, "you would be entitled to your fair share of community property. You had better protect your rights."

"What *are* you talking about?" asked Charlie, only half listening.

"I didn't give my permission for him to marry you, for nothing," sneered Jerome. "I'm sick of his holier-than-thou attitude. Just wait until his marriage fails-- that'll teach him!"

Angrily, Charlie pulled the car over to the side of the road, and jumped out.

"What do you think you're doing?" demanded Jerome, ignoring the fact that he had just finished insulting the man she was going to marry.

"I'm walking to school!" replied Charlie, stunned by the lack of love in her uncle.

"Suit yourself," said Jerome, moving over to the driver's side.

Jerome drove away, leaving her on the side of the road, with a few miles more to cover between there and the school. Something moist landed on her cheek. Thinking it was a tear, she sadly wiped it away. Then another drop landed on her face. As Charlie looked up at the heavy clouds blanketing the Mojave sky, several more drops splashed onto her face. An ominous clash of thunder sounded in the near distance. Resisting the urge to cry, Charlie tried hard to forget Jerome's heartless words.

"Please, God," she whispered under her breath, "don't let me fail Adam! Cause our marriage to succeed!"

Charlie made her way down the road, reflecting on her coming marriage. Her thoughts were quickly interrupted, however, by a steady downpour of rain from the heavens. As she held her backpack above her head to shield herself from the rain, Charlie was suddenly startled by a loud honk coming from behind. To her surprise, the Clark Plumbing Service and Supply van was pulling over to where she stood.

"Adam?" she wondered aloud.

The window on the driver's side rolled down and a familiar face peered out.

"Need a lift to school?" asked Mike.

"Thanks," she replied, gratefully.

"That's all right," he said, beckoning Chad to open the door for her. "We're headed there, anyway."

Thankful to get out of the rain, Charlie got in and sat down beside Chad.

"Mom had a sudden headache," explained Mike, "so I have to drive Chad to school."

By the hard glances Chad was giving her, Charlie sensed that she had been the cause of Shirley's sudden malady.

"Did your car break down?" asked Mike, curiously. It was unusual to see anyone making the long walk into Joshua Tree on foot-- let alone in the rain.

Charlie wondered how to reply to Mike's question. What should she say? "I got out of the car because Uncle Jerome is trying to punish Adam through me?"

"I just decided to walk," replied Charlie, deciding that, in this case, vagueness was better than brutal honesty.

For a while, the only sound to be heard was the swishing of the windshield wipers, and the muffled sound of the engine. Both brothers were unusually quiet, until Chad, who couldn't hold it in any longer, suddenly blurted,

"I don't care if you *will* be my aunt! I'm *not* going to call you 'Aunt Charlie!'" Chad protested.

From Mike's silence, Charlie sensed that he had been thinking a similar thought.

"That's fine," she answered, softly.

"I don't care if you will be my aunt!" repeated Chad.

Mike gave him a you-spoke-your-piece-now-be-quiet look, but the boy retorted,

"She's only six years older than me!"

"Remember what Mom said," reminded Mike, nudging his brother in the side with an elbow.

Thankfully, Galilee Christian School was just ahead. When the van pulled up in front of the school, Charlie and Chad got out. As she reached in to get her backpack, Mike stopped her for a moment.

"Are you *really* going to marry my Uncle?" he asked, incredulously.

"Yes," replied Charlie.

Mike shook his head, and sighed heavily.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I love him," she answered.

"But, you're just a kid," argued Mike.

"Apparently, not," smiled Charlie, bravely. "Thank you for the ride."

As she walked away from the van, Charlie breathed a sigh of relief.

"Charlie!" called out Kendra Hanna, running up to meet her, as though they were old friends. "Were you just talking to Mike Garner? I wonder if he'd leave Sandra for me?" she conjectured.

"That's a terrible thing to say!" exclaimed Charlie.

"You needn't get so excited," replied Kendra, "I was only joking!"

"Only 'fools make a mock at sin,'" quoted Charlie.

Choosing to pass over that last remark, Kendra continued, for the real reason she stopped Charlie was because she wanted some information.

"So, where have you been?" exclaimed Kendra, linking arms with Charlie.

"I accidentally slept in," explained Charlie.

"I didn't mean this morning, silly! I was talking about the weekend!" laughed Kendra. "You missed two days of school! Is it true you went to North Carolina?"

"Where did you hear that?" asked Charlie, surprised that her classmate already knew.

"Oh, simply *everyone* is talking about it," informed Kendra. "When my Mom heard it, she said it was utterly indecent!"

"It isn't either!" rejoined Charlie, pulling her arm free from Kendra. "Adam and I love each other! How *many* times do I have to tell people that, before they'll *believe* me!"

Almost as soon as Charlie said the words, she was sorry she had opened her mouth. Kendra's eyes grew as wide as saucers. Her Mom had made that remark in reference to Charlie's missing school. This was the first she had ever heard about Adam!

"CHARLIE!?" exclaimed Kendra, soon flooding Charlie with a torrent of questions. "You and *Adam*? Does your Grandma know? How long has this been going on? Does Adam really love you? Have you two had sex?"

"Get your mind out of the gutter," scolded Charlie, reproaching herself for letting out the news sooner than she had wanted to. She had hoped to first tell Maggie, but it was too late to turn back, now. The breakneck speed at which gossip traveled in Twin Yucca was alarming. Charlie knew she had to tell the truth, or the gossip would become even worse. "We're not married, so no, we haven't had sex," she explained. "Yes, Grandma knows about us, and yes, she approves. Since you now know this much, you might as well hear the rest: Adam and I are engaged to be married next summer."

Kendra looked as though she would burst with the news.

"Wait until everyone hears about *this*!!" she cried, running to her friends and blurting everything she had just heard.

"Oh, well," sighed Charlie, walking to class. "They were going to find out when the Christmas special aired, anyway."

The hardships of the day were not over yet. Halfway through her second class, Charlie was unexpectedly summoned to the principal's office.

"A student has been spreading a story," began Principal Strickland, "that you and Adam Clark are engaged to be married. Before I send that student to detention for telling a falsehood, I want you to deny the accusation."

Charlie hesitated.

"Well?" pressed Principal Strickland.

"It's true," answered Charlie.

The principal's face grew angry.

"It's a sin to tell a lie!" he rebuked her. "It looks as though I have two liars to discipline!"

"Call my grandmother, and she'll verify it," replied Charlie.

Disturbed to see how far this student was going to defend a lie, Principal Strickland wrinkled his brow and promptly called Vera. From the shocked look on his face, Charlie could see that he was finally believing the truth.

"I see," he said, hanging up the receiver. "You may return to class now, Charlie."

Thinking the issue had been dropped, Charlie did as she was told. For the rest of the day, the other students pointed, whispered, and stared at Charlie. During lunch, one girl who Charlie knew was not a professing Christian, approached her and said,

"Congratulations on your coming marriage, Charlie."

"Why, thank you," replied Charlie in a surprised voice.

"What are you going to do," the girl asked, mockingly, "push him up the aisle in a wheelchair?"

Charlie could hear snickering from some of the other students.

"Only if I have to," smiled Charlie, stoutly.

Just as Charlie was hoping that the day's onslaught at school was about to end, she was called to the auditorium. Principal Strickland was there, as were a few teachers, and all the members of the school board. Charlie was even more surprised to find Jerome and Vera present. Vera's concerned face was only equaled by Jerome's annoyed countenance. He had been called away from Mullen-Overholt, and was impatient to get back to work.

Principal Strickland lost no time in getting straight to the point.

"It has come to this school's attention that one of our students, Charlie Overholt, is intending to marry someone old enough to be her father. While we can't find anything morally wrong with this situation, it is certainly *not* a desirable one. Charlie is setting a bad example for the other girls at Galilee. We don't wish to expel her, but we respectfully request that Charlie leave Galilee, and complete her education elsewhere. I speak for Galilee and all the members of the school board."

"Not *all* members of the school board, agree," pointed out a Christian woman who had voted against Charlie's removal from the school. "It's a crying shame that while we find no moral objections, that we should turn away one of our best students-- one that has consistently shown a Christ-like character, simply because she's marrying Adam Clark-- who I will remind everyone, is an upstanding Christian, himself! There are others here who feel as I do, and I will further point out, Principal Strickland, that your wife happens to be one of them!"

Murmurs went through the school board. The principal glared disapprovingly at Mrs. Strickland, who was one of the teachers at Galilee.

"That is correct," confirmed Mrs. Strickland, braving her husband's displeasure. "If we carry through with this 'non-punishment,' as you called it, we will have failed not only our students, but God also. Galilee stands for Jesus Christ-- it's in *His* name that this school was founded! *No* student should be punished for NOT doing anything morally wrong! As the Patriarch Abraham said in the Holy Bible, 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' If Charlie is forced to leave, then so will I."

A gasp spread throughout the room. The spirit-filled words of his wife, pricked Principal Strickland's conscience. Upon calm reflection, he had to admit that it DID sound two-faced. The mortal enemy of every Christian is to *not* abide in the love of Christ. "If ye keep My [Christ's] commandments, ye shall abide in My love; even as I have kept My Father's commandments, and abide in His love." (John 15:10) These words were brought to the principal's remembrance by the Holy Spirit.

"I must change my vote," he announced, penitently. "My wife is right, and I apologize to Charlie and her family for putting them through this unnecessary meeting. Charlie has done nothing wrong, and should not be punished. While this upcoming marriage *did* catch us off guard, it's no excuse for sin. I've always prided myself in being a fair man, but it seems as though I was more concerned with what others would say, instead of doing what I knew was right."

"She should not be allowed to stay at this school!" disagreed one of the teachers. "Why, it's like encouraging our girls to marry old men!"

"Adam Clark is hardly an old man," spoke out Vera.

"Do you know what some of our pupils were saying on the playground, today, Mrs. Overholt?" asked the upset teacher. "That what Adam couldn't get from Constance, he's getting from Charlie! I don't think I have to tell you what they meant by *that!*"

Charlie shut her eyes in embarrassment. Even though it wasn't true, the shooting looks some of the teachers were giving her, made Charlie feel guilty. The fact that she was underage had made this discussion even more serious. It was not impossible that one of these teachers could report Adam to the authorities, if they felt she had had sexual intercourse with an adult.

"That accusation is completely and entirely, untrue!" denied Vera, indignantly.

"Is this line of questioning necessary?" asked Principal Strickland.

"I must be satisfied that the law hasn't been broken," replied the teacher.

"Very well, continue," said the Principal.

"Do you deny that you and Charlie went cross country to be with Adam Clark, in Raleigh, last weekend?" asked the teacher.

"No, I don't deny it," replied Vera. "But I was present with Charlie every minute! You have my word for it! She and Adam were never alone together!"

"Will you swear before God, that this is true?" challenged the teacher.

"I swear, before God," replied Vera, "that what I said is true."

"Your word is good enough for us," interjected Principal Strickland. "If anyone here believes that Mrs. Overholt is lying, please declare it now. We must resolve this, today."

Every teacher and school board member looked to the person seated next to them, wondering if anyone was going to raise their hand. When it was apparent that no one was going to, Principal Strickland took another vote concerning the expulsion of Charlie. It was unanimous, she could remain at Galilee.

The meeting had lasted over an hour. When everyone dispersed, school was already out. Warily, the Overholts went home. Charlie was too shaken to drive, so Jerome got behind the wheel. Leaning her head on the back of her seat, Charlie looked out the window, and noticed that the clouds had parted, allowing the sun to bathe the desert with its warm light.

"Praise the Lord, that's over with," sighed Vera, opening a car window to let a little air in, for Charlie looked pale.

When Jerome pulled up to the Overholt house, Mrs. Jacobs from across the street ran over to Charlie, carrying a medium sized package.

"This came for Charlie while you were away, Vera," she said, handing it to the teenager, "so I went ahead and signed for it."

"It's from Adam!" exclaimed Charlie, reading the shipping label.

Mrs. Jacobs lingered, as if wanting to see what was inside the parcel, so Charlie politely excused herself and went into the house for some privacy.

"Is what I've been hearing about Charlie and Adam true?" asked Mrs. Jacobs to Vera.

Inside, Charlie ran to her room, and closed the door. She cut the packing tape and opened the box. Inside, she found a beautiful wooden music box, ornately decorated with hand carved roses and butterflies. She wound the key and lifted the delicate lid. To her delight, it played a stanza from one of Adam's songs, 'Shades of Love.' Charlie eagerly opened the enclosed note. It read:

"Dearest Charlie-girl, of all the earthbound miracles that has happened, the greatest is that you love me. I wish I could be there with you. I love you. Adam."

Charlie collapsed into happy tears and kissed the note. Those handful of printed words had made the entire morning worthwhile. She grabbed the satellite phone and called Adam.

"Oh, Adam," she cried, happily, "it's so good to hear your voice!"

"Are you all right?" he asked, concerned by the tears he heard in her voice.

"I had a hard day at school," she explained. "Your music box came at just the right moment to cheer me up!"

"What happened?" asked Adam. "Did the rest of the Garner clan pay you a visit, yet?"

"No, but I did see Mike and Chad this morning," said Charlie. "I was walking to school..."

"You were walking?!" exclaimed Adam. "That road is too dangerous to walk on, Charlie! Only last year, a hitchhiker was struck by a car on that very road! Why were you walking, anyway?"

"I sort of had a fight with Uncle Jerome," confessed Charlie. "Actually, he was the one who did all the fighting. When I had enough, I got out of the car."

Charlie could hear Adam sigh heavily.

"Was the disagreement about me?" he asked.

"Besides unloading Daddy onto your hands, I think the real reason Uncle Jerome gave his permission for us to get married, is because he's certain the marriage will fail," admitted Charlie. "He told me about as much in the car."

"Why would he say 'yes,' then?" asked Adam.

"To punish you," answered Charlie.

Adam was silent. Charlie knew he hadn't hung up, for she could hear his breathing over the phone.

"I'm sorry," apologized Charlie. "Maybe, I shouldn't have told you. Whatever the reason, the important thing is that he *did* give his consent, right?"

"Your grandmother still supports our engagement, though?" asked Adam, in a troubled voice.

"Yes, of course," she answered. "Adam, are you having second thoughts about us?"

"I want to do what's right," he replied, gravely.

"Adam," began Charlie, "I was almost kicked out of school today, because of our engagement; I endured the gossip of other students, saying that we were having an illicit affair; Chad informed me that he wouldn't call me 'Aunt;' and Mike refused to accept the fact that we could possibly be in love. *Even* after all that, I know God meant for us to be together! So don't you dare sit there all safe in North Carolina, or wherever you are right now, and tell me that this relationship isn't right! You proposed, and I'm not letting you wiggle out of it now! Where are you, anyway?" she asked, calming down.

"Richmond, Virginia," replied Adam. "Your school-- is everything all right?"

"One teacher challenged Grandma on the point that we hadn't had sex in Raleigh, and Grandma swore before God that she was always present, and that it simply could not have happened. Thank God they believed her," said Charlie. "You could have gotten into trouble, because I'm still a minor."

"Are you sure it's resolved?" asked Adam, seriously.

"The vote was unanimous," confirmed Charlie.

"Thank God!" sighed Adam. "We must be careful about being alone together, until we're married, Charlie-girl."

"I know," replied Charlie.

"Don't worry about Mike and Chad," soothed Adam. "Give them time. They'll get over it. I can still hardly believe that we're going to get married, myself. That reminds me, Melvin wants to announce to the press that we're engaged. I said I'd have to talk it over with you, first. Although, it's a little late to try to keep it a secret," he added. "When that Christmas special airs early next month, no one will *have* to be told-- it'll be obvious."

"It's all right with me," affirmed Charlie. "I just hope you're prepared to be called a cradle robber."

"As long as we stand unblamable before God, I'll endure anything, for *you*," said Adam.

When Maggie got off work at Dairy Cream that day, she stopped by Charlie's house to welcome her back home from North Carolina. Charlie excitedly told Maggie to sit down, for she had something really important to tell her.

"Maggie, you'll never guess what's happened!" said Charlie.

"What?" asked Maggie, eagerly. By her friend's excited face, she could see this was plainly good news.

"Adam proposed!" announced Charlie, her face beaming.

Maggie's odd expression, however, was not something that Charlie had anticipated.

"Proposed what?" she asked, puzzled.

"We're getting married!" laughed Charlie.

Maggie screamed with joy and jumped to her feet to hug her friend.

"I *knew* it would happen!" Maggie shouted. "Oh, I'm so happy for you! I knew he loved you, Charlie! I knew he would finally break down and admit it, *eventually*! When did he ask you?"

"Yesterday," said Charlie. "I wanted to call you, but you weren't home."

"We were in San Bernardino, visiting relatives," explained Maggie. "What was North Carolina like? Did you have a good time?"

The two sat down and Charlie told Maggie all about the past few days. Maggie was fascinated to hear Charlie tell about the jet ride; she laughed to hear the way her friend had tricked Adam into eating his dinner and how he had finally fallen asleep in time for the Christmas concert; she smiled when Charlie related the pretty dress she wore and how Adam had choked on his drink when he first saw her in it; Maggie gasped with surprise when Charlie told her that she had actually been to Adam's Christmas concert, and all about the red dress mix-up.

"And that very night," continued Charlie, "was when he first told me that he loved me."

Maggie sighed dreamily; that was the best part of the story.

"He sent me this music box, just today," said Charlie, showing her the ornate box.

Charlie wound it up and played the tune for Maggie. A solitary sad tear rolled down Maggie's cheek.

"What's wrong, Maggie?" asked Charlie.

"Dad said I can't see Jeff, anymore!" she cried.

"Did he give a reason?" asked Charlie, sympathetically.

"Dad says he doesn't trust Jeff alone with me; that he's just going to get me pregnant and then ditch me; he said cops can't be trusted," repeated Maggie, accepting Charlie's shoulder to cry on.

"There, there," said Charlie, patting Maggie on the back, comfortingly.

"Jeff tried to reason with Dad, but Dad refused to listen!" continued Maggie. "I can't ever see Jeff again!" With that, Maggie wept so pitifully, that Charlie found herself weeping, also. There was little that Charlie could say to console her. Maggie was losing out on the one hope to have a family of her own, that she had ever had. When she left later that evening, it was with a

bittersweet heart; Maggie rejoiced in her friend's happiness, but she mourned for Jeff-- the only man she had ever loved.

The next morning, Charlie woke up to find reporters in front of the Overholt house. In accordance with Adam's instructions, Melvin had officially announced Wallace Shipley's engagement to Charlotte Overholt.

"Such a commotion!" Vera said, entering Charlie's bedroom. "The phone's been ringing off the hook! Gloria said it's even on the news. Come, you had better dress, for there's someone in the living room to see you," coaxed Vera.

"Is it Adam?" asked Charlie, getting dressed to meet her company.

"No, it isn't," said Vera. "It's Melvin."

Melvin politely stood up when Charlie entered the room.

"It's nice to see you again, Charlie," he greeted, shaking her hand. "Adam sent me to help you prepare for the press. There's been a lot of publicity over this tour, and your engagement is now right in the middle of it!"

"What do you want me to do?" asked Charlie, surprising herself by how calm she was. After the school board's interrogation, she felt she could endure anything.

"When you go outside, remain calm and confident," instructed Melvin. "When you're asked something that surprises or shocks you, don't become flustered. If you don't want to answer a question, simply smile politely and say, 'no comment,' or, 'I'd rather not say.' Don't let anyone provoke you into speaking rashly. Always appear to be in control-- especially when you're not."

"Anything else?" asked Charlie.

"If you would," suggested Melvin, "refrain from calling your father, 'Daddy.' It's in Adam's best interest that you appear to be as mature, as possible. Also, try not to overuse the words, 'you know,' 'like,' and, 'uh.'"

"I wasn't aware that I did," smiled Charlie, amused.

"Any questions concerning Adam's tour, you either defer to me, or, if I'm not there, don't answer. When sex is brought up, be careful how you answer. If it unintentionally comes off as though

you and Wallace have had sex, then Adam is going to get into a lot of trouble, because you're under age. This is a very sensitive subject, so be careful."

After Charlie ate a quick breakfast, Melvin ran her through a pop quiz before going outside to answer questions.

"What about school?" asked Melvin.

"Intend to finish it," replied Charlie.

"Wedding date?" asked Melvin.

"Sometime next summer," she replied.

"Sex?" asked Melvin.

"Waiting till we're married," answered Charlie.

"Your family's reaction?" asked Melvin.

"They approve," said Charlie.

"Honeymoon?" asked Melvin.

"Location not yet decided," answered Charlie. "There, am I ready?" she asked, getting her backpack.

Melvin frowned when he saw the backpack.

"Do you have anything else you could put your schoolbooks in?" he asked. "This looks too juvenile for you. Wait," he said, getting an idea. Taking his own leather attaché case, Melvin dumped its contents out and handed it to Charlie. "Put your books in this," he suggested.

"Thanks, Melvin," said Charlie.

"It's nothing," he replied. "I promised Adam to take care of you. Now, when we go outside, answer a few questions, and then get into the car with your uncle. Some of them will inevitably follow you to school. When you get there, don't talk to the press. It might appear as though you're not concerned with your education."

"I'm ready," said Charlie, kissing her Grandma and Daddy good-bye.

When Melvin opened the door, cameras flashed in Charlie's face.

"Miss Overholt will answer a few questions," said Melvin, to the small crowd, "but then she has to go to school."

"Charlotte," began one reporter, "given the age difference between you and Wallace Shipley, has your engagement been a great shock to your family and friends?"

"Wallace has been a long time family friend," replied Charlie, "so it didn't surprise my family as much as it might have surprised others."

Melvin seemed pleased by the way she had downplayed the question, and relaxed his posture just a little. More questions were asked, and Charlie handled herself with poise and confidence. At last, Melvin checked his watch.

"O.K., Miss Overholt has to go now," he announced, leading her through the media, and to the car where Jerome was waiting.

"You did well, Charlie," complimented Melvin, as he opened the door for her.

When Charlie and Jerome pulled into the parking lot at school, they were followed by reporters, who wanted to take pictures of her, hopefully, at the playground, or some such incident that would make her look much younger than she actually was. However, Charlie gave them little opportunity, for she went directly inside, giving her a temporary reprieve from the media.

Charlie began to notice that most people had one of three reactions to her situation: jealousy, disgust, or polite toleration. Very few seemed to understand what was going on with Charlie, or how such a thing could have happened. The surrounding communities were still getting over the shock of Adam being Wallace Shipley. One circumstance, however, did work in Adam and Charlie's favor, and that was the fact that Adam Clark had always been considered "a little odd." His overall tendency to be withdrawn and quiet had earned him the title, "Solitary Adam," while his insomnia had incurred the dubious distinction of, "The Bat." Frequently understated, and often unassuming, the general conception of just who Adam was, had become all the more mysterious. And while it wasn't a mystery to Charlie, to the others, it was often more than they could fathom. All in all, the news of the engagement was only one more thing that made Adam "odd."

Charlie left school the same way she came, not answering questions, but smiling politely to the media, and going straight home. For the next few days, reporters and photographers hovered around the Overholt home. At last, seeing that she wasn't going to suddenly do anything newsworthy, they quietly left-- much to the relief of Charlie and Vera.

These days, Maggie's welcome visits were tempered by sadness, for her father had remained steadfast in his opinion of Jeff, even to the extent of banning him from talking to her on the telephone. Charlie prayed that this storm would quickly blow over.

Time passed, and it was now Friday, the last day of school before Thanksgiving week, when Charlie and her classmates would have an entire nine days, (counting weekends), free from school. It was a time of great excitement in the Overholt household, for Adam was to fly in and spend the whole week in Twin Yucca. It was to be the first time Adam and Charlie would be together as an engaged couple, and Charlie was more than a little nervous.

Now that the Overholts were going to be related to the Garner family, Shirley invited her future sister-in-law, along with Vera, Jerome, and even Chuck, to Thanksgiving dinner. This was the first real effort Shirley had made to include Charlie in the family. The invitation to the Garner house was an occasion that Charlie looked forward to with apprehension. However, she consoled herself that at least Adam would be with her to face his family.

When Charlie arrived home after school that Friday, she tore her closet apart trying to find the right outfit to go meet Adam at the airport in.

"But," protested Maggie, "it's not until Monday. Don't you think this could wait?" she asked.

"I'm so nervous!" said Charlie. "I'm not going to know how to act!"

"You've been around Adam, before," pointed out Maggie, picking up some of the clothing that Charlie had dropped onto the floor.

"But, never as my fiancé," replied Charlie. "Oh, just wait until you're engaged, and we'll just see how calm you are!" she laughed.

"I'm never getting married," said Maggie, sadly.

"Of course you are," encouraged Charlie, momentarily forgetting her own anxiety. "You and Jeff are perfect for each other. Just wait, God will find a way."

Maggie smiled weakly.

"So, you're going to have Thanksgiving with Shirley and her family, this year?" asked Maggie, feeling a little left out.

"Yes," replied Charlie, "but the day after, let's have a celebration of our very own! We could have a small meal, with a few favorite Thanksgiving dishes! I'll have to ask Grandma first, but I think she'll approve. What do you think?"

"That sounds wonderful," smiled Maggie. "I could help make the turkey, like I did last year," she volunteered.

Charlie grimly remembered the chaos that last year's Thanksgiving dinner had occasioned. For Maggie's sake, however, she was willing to endure it again.

That evening, as Charlie and Maggie were passing through the living room on their way to the kitchen for a snack, they overheard a news clip teaser on the television, to entice people to watch the news after the airing program. It said,

"What famous pianist is pricing engagement rings? Find out at news at eleven!"

Maggie and Charlie looked at each other and began screaming excitedly.

"I'm going to have to stay up and hear this!" laughed Charlie.

"Oh, me too!" exclaimed Maggie. "Although, I have to be home at ten."

"Why don't you call your parents, and ask if you can sleep over?" suggested Charlie. "You could double with me in my room. And since tomorrow's Saturday, we could sleep in a little!"

Maggie rushed to the telephone and called home, while Charlie went to the kitchen and made popcorn.

"I can stay!" shouted Maggie from the living room, after talking to her mother.

"Great!" called back Charlie.

Maggie joined her in the kitchen. This was the happiest Charlie had seen her in a long while.

"May I make the popcorn?" asked Maggie, eager to do something.

"Sure," said Charlie. "I'll go talk to Grandma, but I'll be back in a minute."

Charlie found Vera coming out of the bathroom.

"I'm going to put Chuck to bed," said Vera, yawning. "Is Maggie still here?"

"Mrs. Downen said it was all right for Maggie to sleep over! Isn't that great?" asked Charlie.

"Where's she going to sleep?" asked Vera, resisting the idea of an impromptu slumber party.

"In my room-- with me," explained Charlie. "Don't worry, she'll be my responsibility."

Vera was about to say something like, "you should have asked me first," but she stopped. As the grandmother looked at her granddaughter, a strange feeling came over her. This slender young woman was going to be married next summer.

"You grew up so fast," mused Vera, out loud.

Just then, they heard a pan clatter to the kitchen floor.

"Everything's all right!" called out Maggie.

"Can she borrow a pair of your pajamas?" asked Charlie. "I'd lend her one of mine, but Maggie's taller than me."

"In the top drawer of my bureau," instructed Vera, going to the living room to collect Chuck.

As Vera led Chuck to his bedroom, Charlie stuck her head into the hallway from Vera's bedroom doorway.

"I think Adam is shopping for an engagement ring," grinned Charlie.

"How do you know?" asked Vera.

"They just said so, on the news," replied Charlie, walking to Chuck's open bedroom door, carrying a pair of her grandmother's pajamas in her arms. "They didn't *actually* say it was Adam, but they showed the back of someone, and it looked like him."

"Poor man," sighed Vera. "Can't even surprise his own fiancée, without the whole world knowing. Before you go, please shut the door so I can dress your father for bed."

Charlie returned to the kitchen, thinking about what Vera had just said.

"You know, I was just thinking," said Maggie, gathering the last of the popcorn from the floor and dumping it into two bowls, "you might want to act surprised when Adam gives you the engagement ring."

"I was just thinking the same thing," mused Charlie.

"Do you want to miss the news, then?" asked Maggie, a little disappointedly.

"It would probably be all right," theorized Charlie, folding her arms, thoughtfully, "as long as I didn't look at the television when they show the rings Adam was pricing."

"I could tell you when it's all right to look," offered Maggie, smiling.

"Let's go!" exclaimed Charlie, rushing to the television, Maggie following close behind with the popcorn.

"What if it isn't Adam-- what if it's some other famous pianist they're talking about?" proposed Maggie, as the girls settled on the couch in front of the set. "Has Adam said anything about the ring, yet?"

"No," replied Charlie, "he hasn't. That's why I'm almost sure it IS him."

While they waited for the program to end, Maggie and Charlie practiced their surprised faces, each giggling at the silly expression the other was able to contort her face into. Then they both erupted into laughter.

"Oh, stop!" gasped Charlie, trying to catch her breath.

After the program ended, the news came on. One news story after another aired, but still no famous pianist pricing engagement rings.

"What are they waiting for?" groaned Charlie.

"The end of the broadcast," answered Maggie, gloomily. "You know, they always save stories like that until the very last."

Five minutes before midnight, the moment the girls had been waiting for, finally arrived.

"Guess who's been shopping for an engagement ring?" began the entertainment reporter. "Two weeks after announcing his engagement to sixteen year old Charlotte Overholt, [here the girls started jumping up and and down in their seats], forty-five year old Wallace Shipley has been seen at some of the finest jewelry stores in New York, searching for-- you guessed it, the perfect engagement ring for his young bride-to-be."

"Don't look," exclaimed Maggie, "they're showing the rings!"

Charlie quickly averted her eyes, but continued to listen.

"The rich and famous are the only ones who can afford these high priced gems," Charlie heard the reporter saying. "Wallace Shipley reportedly looked at a ring similar to this one-- a ten carat, flawless diamond, worth over five hundred thousand dollars. No word as yet to whether he purchased it, or not. Since the wedding is reportedly set for next summer, all eyes will be on Charlotte's left hand fourth finger! Back to you in the studio..." here Maggie clicked off the set.

"Five hundred thousand dollars for *one* ring?" repeated Charlie, still in sticker shock. "Surely, he wouldn't." She looked at Maggie. "Adam is a very practical man," stated Charlie. "I don't care what they say on the news, he would *never* spend that much money on a single piece of jewelry!"

"What if he did?" asked Maggie.

"He wouldn't," repeated Charlie.

"What if you're wrong?" pressed Maggie.

"What would I do with such a ring?" exclaimed Charlie. "Why, I'd be afraid to go outside with all that money on my finger!"

"It might be nice, though," mused Maggie. "To have something *really* special, represent the love you share with your future husband. It *did* look awfully nice, Charlie."

"With that kind of sentiment, I could be just as happy with a plastic ring!" exclaimed Charlie. "Come on, I've had enough. Let's go to bed."

The girls climbed into bed, each one still thinking about what had been said on television.

"So," asked Maggie, finally breaking the silence, "you don't think Adam would do it?"

"Oh, Maggie," replied Charlie with a deep sigh, "I hope not. Everyone's going to point at me and say, 'So *that's* why she married him!'"

"I think they're saying that, already," yawned Maggie. "Goodnight, Charlie."

"Goodnight, Maggie."

Within minutes, Maggie had fallen asleep, leaving Charlie to wonder what Adam was up to.

"And herein do I [Adam and Charlie] exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men."

~ Acts 24:16 ~

Chapter Thirty-nine

The Engagement Ring

Adam "being taken from you [Charlie] for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoured the more abundantly to see your face with great desire."

~ 1 Thessalonians 2:17 ~

It was such an early Monday morning, that the sky was still pitch black, when Charlie and Maggie walked down to the Twin Yucca Airport to meet Adam's private jet. Adam had correctly guessed that a quiet arrival in the wee hours of the morning would not attract as much attention from the media, so he chose to "sneak" into Twin Yucca rather than advertise the fact in broad daylight.

This Thanksgiving holiday at home meant a lot to Adam, because for the first time as an engaged couple, *his* Charlie-girl would be there. They had briefly talked on the satellite phone the day before, but Adam longed to see her face.

Vera had not been up to the early morning walk, so Maggie readily accompanied Charlie, instead. Maggie was excited, for she had never seen Adam's private jet. When she mentioned to Charlie that such a thing must have cost at least ten million dollars, Charlie laughed and said that it was not likely, for Adam had told her that he had gotten a great deal on the jet, because it was used!

"He doesn't throw around money, needlessly," added Charlie, as the two women stood outside the airport waiting room.

A gentle cool breeze caressed Charlie's face as she looked to the sky to spot Adam's plane.

"Do you think he would give you a 'used' engagement ring?" asked Maggie, wide eyed.

Charlie tossed back her head and laughed.

Just then, the noise of approaching jet engines greeted their ears.

"I see him!" exclaimed Charlie, stepping forward as if to draw him to the ground sooner.

In amazement, Maggie watched as the jet touched down on the runway and taxied to a complete stop. The side door opened and the musician stepped out.

"Adam!" screamed Charlie, running out to meet him.

Seeing her coming to him, Adam opened his arms and hugged his young fiancée.

"Oh, Adam," she whispered in his ear, "I'm so glad you're here!"

He looked into her deep brown eyes and sighed softly. Yes, the voice on the phone had come from this woman-- it had not been wishful thinking, after all. Then Shirley and the rest of the Garner clan, who had been patiently waiting for their turn, came forward to welcome Adam home.

"Congratulations on your engagement!" greeted Thomas, warmly shaking his brother-in-law's hand.

"Thank you, Thomas!" replied Adam, returning the handshake. "It's good to be back home, isn't it?"

"It certainly is," agreed Thomas, putting an arm around his wife, Shirley.

"Have you been eating regularly?" asked Shirley, hugging her older brother. "What has that manager of yours been feeding you?"

"Hello, Sis," smiled Adam.

"Well," said Shirley, after the others had a chance to say hello to Adam, "we had better get home and eat breakfast. You should see the dinner I've got planned for tonight! That will put some meat back on your sorry bones!"

Adam turned to Charlie, who had remained quietly at his side. No one had congratulated *her*. No one had included her in *anything*.

"Thanks, Sis," answered Adam, smiling lovingly at Charlie, "but we have other plans. Maybe you could invite us, another time?"

"Yes... yes, of course," stammered Shirley.

"Come on, let's leave them alone," urged Thomas, dragging his family away. "We'll take your luggage home for you, Adam."

"Thanks, Thomas," said Adam, placing his suitcases into the trunk of Thomas's car.

As he did this, Shirley stepped forward and whispered to her brother,

"I AM trying!"

"Try *harder!*" he pleaded, in a low voice so Charlie couldn't overhear. "She doesn't deserve this kind of treatment."

"You should be spending your time with *family*," argued Shirley, her voice rising.

"I don't want her to hear you," begged Adam, trying to hush his sister. "I'm here for only the remainder of the week, and I want to spend as much of it as I can with my Charlie-girl. She *is* family-- or at least, she soon will be! The sooner you can accept that, the easier it will be on all of us!"

Charlie couldn't hear what was going on between Adam and Shirley, but she could easily guess what they were disagreeing about. He exchanged a few more words with her, and then walked away from the car, to where Charlie was waiting for him.

Seeing that the Garners were leaving, Maggie was also about to return home, when Charlie pulled her back.

"Stay with us, Maggie?" she asked. "Adam and I can't afford to be alone together-- at least not until we're married."

Happy that she was wanted, Maggie walked alongside Charlie and Adam as they slowly made their way back to the Overholt house for breakfast. There wasn't any reason to hurry. The streets were practically empty, and there was not a single reporter to be seen.

"I miss Twin Yucca," sighed Adam, breathing in the fresh night desert air, "that, among other things," he added, smiling at Charlie.

"I'm surprised you were able to get away from the tour," observed Charlie, "especially during the Thanksgiving season."

"Well," explained Adam, "since I'm going to have to spend Christmas away from home, I thought at least I could have Thanksgiving."

It wasn't a surprise to Charlie that Adam would have to be on tour during Christmas, but the thought of him not being here at that special time of year, made her want to cry. Sensing what she was feeling, Adam tried to comfort her.

"Hang in there, Charlie-girl," he encouraged her. "Next summer, the tour will be over, and we can get married!"

"Just think!" imagined Charlie, dreamily.

"We saw you on TV!" piped up Maggie, who could hardly wait to see what the engagement ring would look like.

"You did, eh?" Adam smiled playfully at Charlie.

"Maggie! I thought we weren't going to mention it," Charlie reminded her friend.

"OOPS! I forgot!" exclaimed Maggie, putting a hand over her mouth.

"Look, the sun is starting to come up," remarked Adam, diverting the conversation. "The weather here sure beats the rest of the country! In some places, there's already several feet of snow!"

"You don't say," said Charlie, trying hard to keep a straight face.

"Yes, I do say," replied Adam very seriously, not even cracking a smile.

"Oh! What am I going to do with you?" Charlie crumbled, breaking down into laughter.

"You'll have the rest of your life to find out," grinned Adam, refraining from talking about the "it" the girls had referred to.

They walked on in silence, until Adam broke the stillness.

"Maggie," began Adam, sincerely, "I'm very sorry to hear about you and Jeff. Charlie told me what happened."

"Yes," sighed Maggie, her mind returning to her lost love. "Dad says he doesn't trust Jeff alone with me."

"I'm going to talk to Jeff, today," announced Adam, matter-of-factly.

"Really?" asked Charlie, in surprise. "What for?"

"I think maybe we can help each other," he said, thoughtfully. "But, I'll wait to speak to Jeff, before I tell you what I'm thinking. It may not work out, and I'd hate to get hopes up for nothing."

"You're just full of secrets, aren't you?" laughed Charlie.

Adam only smiled. The newly engaged couple were brimming with so much happiness, that they smiled until their cheeks hurt-- and then they smiled some more. There was an exciting awe of life in the air, that even Maggie sensed. God was doing great things in their lives, and they knew it. In the book of John, the Bible says, "He that hath My [Christ's] commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth Me: and he that loveth Me shall be loved of My Father, and I will love him, and will manifest Myself to him." Christ was true to His word, for Adam and Charlie, and even Maggie, were seeing God manifest Himself to them in their lives-- through each other, and even through the dazzling sunrise that was spreading itself in the skies before them, as if to say, "See how *much* your Creator loves you!"

After finishing breakfast at the Overholt house, Adam left with a promise to return later that day. When Charlie asked him what he was up to, all she got was a cryptic, "Wait and see."

Jeff Erickson was sitting in his squad car, eating the paper bag lunch his nine year old daughter had made for him, when he was greeted unexpectedly by Adam Clark.

"Adam!" cried Jeff, in surprise. "I didn't know you were back in Twin Yucca!"

"I got in early this morning," he explained. "I was wondering if you had a minute."

"If I get a call, I'll have to go immediately," said Jeff, "but I have some time right now. What can I do for you?"

"Well," replied Adam, still leaning through the passenger window, "it's more a matter of what we can do for each other."

"I'm listening," said Jeff, taking another bite from his sandwich.

"As you've no doubt heard by now, Charlie and I are engaged," began Adam, checking over his shoulder to make sure no one else was listening in. "Because of her age, she and I can't go anywhere without someone else accompanying us."

"Wait a minute," said Jeff, seeing that this was a personal matter. He opened the passenger side door, and Adam got in. "I think I see where you're going," guessed Jeff. "You want me to be your chaperon."

"Yes," continued Adam, "and I'll be your chaperon."

"Excuse me?" said Jeff, putting down his sandwich.

"Charlie tells me that Mr. Downen won't allow you to see Maggie, anymore," said Adam.

"That's right," confirmed Jeff, a little hesitantly.

"From what I hear, it's mainly because he doesn't trust you alone with his daughter," conjectured Adam.

"That seemed to be his main concern," agreed Jeff, his attention now fully engaged in the conversation.

"What if you and I went to Mr. Downen, and assured him that when you take Maggie out, I and Charlie will always be present. We would, in effect, be chaperoning each other. Between a publicized musician and a police officer, I'd think we should be able to manage *some* degree of credibility with Mr. Downen," explained Adam.

"It might work," said Jeff, thoughtfully.

"I doubt our ladies would mind if we double dated," proposed Adam, "for they're already pretty good friends. This really depends on if you and I can get together, or not."

"Right now, you're a hot topic in Twin Yucca," pointed out Jeff, tossing the remainder of his sandwich into the paper bag. "They're saying some pretty nasty things about you and Charlie."

"I know," sighed Adam.

"I'm not one to give credence to gossip," continued Jeff, gravely, "but if there's anything at all questionable going on between you and her, I want to know *now*. I'm not trying to offend you, but if my name is going to be connected to you, and your relationship with a minor, then I've got to be fully persuaded that nothing unlawful is taking place. And it's not only my name I'm thinking of," he added, "the Police department sure would get a black eye, if it turned out that one of its officers was 'aiding and abetting child molestation.'"

"Surely, you don't think *that!*" cried Adam, sitting bolt upright in his seat.

"I suppose I don't feel as though I know you very well--" replied Jeff, cautiously, "not enough to take the kind of risk you're asking me to take."

"I suppose you *don't* know me very well," smiled Adam, realizing that Jeff had a point. "You see, Maggie and Charlie talk about you and me, all the time with each other. When Maggie tells Charlie something, Charlie often repeats it to me. In a way, I feel as though I've known you for years."

Jeff looked at him, incredulously.

"For instance," related Adam, "I know your daughter, Debbie, skinned her left knee while jumping from a tree house last summer, and that it left a small moon shaped scar; you're allergic to strawberries, and break out in hives after just one bite; Debbie sometimes has nightmares about her mother's death, but you sing her to sleep with 'Jesus Loves Me;' your landlady has tried, on several occasions, to get you to go out with her daughter; you don't separate your colors from the whites when you do your laundry; Debbie's afraid you'll never remarry, so she plans on never moving out, so she can take care of you..."

"Okay!" sighed Jeff, grinning, sheepishly. "I can see Maggie *has* been talking about me!"

"I realize now, that this *would* be a leap of faith on your part," said Adam.

"Do you remember," asked Jeff, "we once had a talk about marriage? You told me that you thought you'd never marry. May I ask what changed your mind?"

"I fell in love," Adam smiled. "I never thought I would, but I did."

"Does her family support the marriage?" asked Jeff.

"Yes," replied Adam, "though Jerome isn't crazy about me. I think he's waiting for the whole thing to fall apart, but he's given his permission."

"What about her father?" inquired Jeff. "How does he feel about you?"

"Chuck hasn't said a word for quite a while," sighed Adam. "I don't even know if he recognizes me, anymore. But, when he was with us, we were good friends. I like to think that he would give his consent."

"So," ventured Jeff, "you and she haven't... you know?"

"No, we haven't!" exclaimed Adam, finishing Jeff's thought.

"I didn't think you had," mused Jeff, "but, it's my neck if you're lying to me. And, since you'd be sticking out your neck for me, I think it's only fair to tell you, that Maggie and I haven't... either."

"Conversation isn't very easy when you're trying to get around *that* word, is it?" chuckled Adam.

"I never use that particular word around my daughter," explained Jeff, a little embarrassed.

Just then, a call came over Officer Erickson's radio. Adam quickly jumped out of the squad car.

"I'll get back to you, later!" shouted Jeff, speeding away, his siren wailing.

Adam optimistically shoved his hands into his pockets, and walked back home to change into his gardening overalls. On the whole, he thought it had gone well.

It was late afternoon, and Charlie decided she wasn't going to wait any longer for Adam to return to the Overholt house. Taking Maggie with her, the two made their way to Adam's home, only to find him kneeling in his vegetable bed, inspecting the base of one of his tomato plant stalks. Placing her hands on her hips in mock indignation, she said out loud,

"I was stood up for a bunch of *tomatoes*?!"

"Have you been dusting them regularly with the bug powder?" asked Adam, not even looking up.

"No, that's Chad's job," replied Charlie, going to where he was kneeling. "Why, is something wrong?"

Adam ran his finger along the stalk and showed it to her.

"Aphids!" she exclaimed in surprise.

"You said that this was Chad's responsibility?" repeated Adam, thoughtfully.

"Yes, but I guess he's been preoccupied, lately," reasoned Charlie, not ready to lay any blame.

"Oh, yes," sighed Adam, "for a minute, I nearly forgot. I guess everyone's been preoccupied, lately," he said, taking off his work gloves.

"Shirley still doesn't like me, does she?" asked Charlie in a tone that indicated a statement more than a question.

"She just needs some time to get used to the idea," consoled Adam.

It had been a long time since Charlie had seen Adam in those blue overalls. Lately, they had been replaced by designer suits that Melvin thought made Adam look distinguished-- which they did, but Charlie preferred this look, instead. His easygoing and quiet nature seemed to be more at home in faded overalls, than in expensive suits. Charlie sighed when she saw that the back of his neck was already lightly sunburned.

"You should go back to gardening at night," Charlie joked, taking the red handkerchief that was hanging from his pocket and tying it about his neck to shield it from the desert sun.

"I love you," Adam whispered quietly to her.

Their eyes locked, and for a brief moment, they were the only two people on earth.

Unmasked, Maggie unwound the hose and watered the garden, as she had done so many times in the past, for she had finally mastered the skill of watering without drowning the plants in large lakes of water. While Maggie worked with the hose, Charlie raked the yellow leaves that had fallen from the large shade tree in the backyard. Adam kept busy with the hoe, turning up the small weed shoots that seemed to be forever trying to infiltrate the vegetable garden. Yard work was a strange way for one to spend a holiday, but for Adam, it was his way of escape. The green peppers didn't ask him for an autograph; the black-eyed peas never looked at him suspiciously; and even though the carrots were often bitter, Adam knew it wasn't personal. Yes, one can find a great deal of peace and solace in a garden.

Fifteen minutes into this tranquil scene, Adam heard a car honk. Putting down the hoe, he went through the garden gate and to the front yard. Nervously, Charlie peeked around the corner of the house. Was it a reporter?

Two alert, businesslike men, got out of a shiny black car. One of the men kept looking about him, as if poised to protect the other man, who was holding an odd looking briefcase. To Charlie's surprise, Adam quickly ushered them into the house, with no words exchanged between them.

"Who is it?" asked Maggie, glancing around the corner just as the men had disappeared into the house.

"Well, they're not reporters, that's for sure," replied Charlie, baffled by what she had just seen.

Just as Charlie was debating whether or not she should go back to working in the garden, the two strangers exited Adam's house and returned to their shiny black car. As they drove away, Charlie could hear the back door leading to the garden, opening and closing.

"Charlie?" called out Adam. "Are you still here?"

Puzzled, Charlie returned to the garden, with Maggie following close behind.

"Oh, there you are," said Adam, putting away the hoe. "Are you going to finish the raking, or shall I?"

Charlie looked at him suspiciously. What in the world was he up to?

"I just love the way we tell each other *everything*," sighed Charlie, folding her arms. "You do, *eventually*, intend to explain what's going on— right?"

"What *are* you talking about?" he asked, loading the wheelbarrow with the dead leaves.

"Adam, if you were in trouble, you'd tell me, wouldn't you?" questioned Charlie, growing concerned.

"That would depend on the trouble," he smiled, jokingly.

"Please be serious, for one moment," pleaded Charlie.

"Charlie-girl," Adam consoled her, "there's *nothing* wrong. The only present trouble I have, can be solved with bug spray!"

"Are you sure?" asked Charlie, a little uneasy.

"Scout's honor!" said Adam, intent on keeping his secret.

"You were never a Boy Scout," pointed put Charlie, with a smile.

"A minor detail," he grinned.

"Is everything all right?" asked Maggie, not exactly sure what they were talking about.

"I guess so," sighed Charlie, going to the pile of leaves to help Adam load the wheelbarrow.

"Oh," said Maggie, disappointed that it wasn't what she thought it was. "I was hoping those men had brought the engagement ring."

Charlie hadn't even considered *that* possibility! She quickly looked to Adam, who had suddenly found a deep interest in his shoelaces. The awkward silence that followed, told Charlie, that Maggie had guessed correctly.

"Oh, Maggie, you and your imagination!" she laughed, trying not to spoil the secret.

Seeing that Charlie was not taking her friend's suggestion seriously, Adam breathed a sigh of relief. Gratefully, the kitchen phone rang. He went inside to answer it, and soon came back out with a great big smile on his face.

"What is it?" asked Charlie, seeing that he obviously had some good news to tell her.

"Jeff and I have an errand to run this evening," announced Adam.

"Do you mean *my* Jeff?" asked Maggie, brightening at the sound of his name.

"Yes, Maggie, *your* Jeff," he replied, smiling. "I had an idea that if Jeff and I double dated with Charlie and you, then each couple could chaperon the other. We're going to see your father tonight, and propose the idea to him. If you could stay with Charlie at her house this evening, I think it would be best."

"Do you think he would go for it?" asked Charlie, dubiously.

"I hope so! Oh, I hope so!" cried Maggie, going to Adam and hugging him, gratefully. "Thank you!"

"Don't thank me, yet," he warned her. "Your father might not approve."

At the thought, Maggie started to cry. Charlie tenderly led her friend back to the Overholt house, to await Adam, for he had promised to stop by when it was over, and tell them what had happened.

That evening, Maggie didn't eat dinner. Even the fried onions that Charlie had made knowing that it was her favorite, wasn't able to tempt her away from thinking about what was going on at her house, probably at that very moment.

"I'm not hungry," she said, pushing her plate away. "What time is it?"

"It's one minute since you asked the last time," replied Charlie, gathering the dinner dishes from the table.

"Do you think Adam will call?" asked Maggie.

"Adam didn't say he would call," answered Charlie, patiently, "he said he would COME."

"What if he doesn't?" cried Maggie, half frantic.

"He *will* come," assured Charlie.

Even if Mr. Downen said 'no,' Charlie and Adam could still see each other, albeit with Vera or another friend present. Maggie, however, would not be able to see Jeff at all, unless Adam's idea was accepted by her father. Because of this, the latter was much more anxious than the former. To Maggie, years seemed to pass before she heard a car door slam in front of the Overholt house, announcing Adam's arrival.

When the door opened, Adam stepped inside. To Charlie's amazement, Maggie suddenly became quiet and shy, when she saw that Jeff had come, also.

"It's all settled!" declared Adam, triumphantly.

Jeff was all smiles and grins as he and Adam came into the living room and sat down across from Charlie and Maggie. Vera had already put Chuck to bed, and was knitting in her favorite chair, wordlessly watching the little drama unfold.

"What did Mr. Downen say?" inquired Charlie, knowing that Maggie wanted to know the same thing.

"He said I could see Maggie, *as long as* Adam and you are present," answered Jeff, smiling in Maggie's direction.

"Vera," said Adam, turning to the old woman who hadn't wanted to intrude by adding her two cents, "has Charlie told you my idea?"

"She has," nodded Vera, in approval. "It's all right with me. I've always trusted you-- I think you know that."

"I just wanted to be sure," confirmed Adam, gratefully. "Is it all right if we go out, this evening? I'll have her back by ten."

"Since it's not a school night, you can make it eleven o' clock," allowed Vera.

"Why don't we stay here and watch a movie?" suggested Charlie.

"You *would* think of that!" chuckled Adam. "Now that we have the liberty, let's go somewhere-- even if it's only a walk to the edge of the desert!"

"Isn't it kind of cold, outside?" pointed out Charlie, putting on the coat Adam had just handed her.

"A walk sounds good to *me*," replied Jeff, helping Maggie on with her coat. "Maybe, then we could stop by Dairy Cream for something cold."

"Ice cream! In this weather?" exclaimed Maggie, laughingly.

"Well, Maggie," sighed Charlie, smiling, "I think it's clear they want us to go with them!"

"If I freeze to death, you're going to have to explain it to my father," Maggie joked to Jeff, as the four stepped out into the chilly Southern California November night.

It wasn't that cold outside, but it *was* cool enough for their noses to turn pink. It was too late for them to go anywhere special, (Gary once joked that Twin Yucca rolled the sidewalks up at nine o' clock), but both men were so eager to take the girls out, that even a nippy November night stroll was inviting. It was a chance to get away, to talk about the future, reminisce about the past, and to simply enjoy each other's company. In short, they were acting like men in love.

"Maggie, do you remember the picnic we went on?" asked Jeff. "The wind blew so hard, that the blanket upset the food!"

"And what we couldn't rescue, the ants did!" laughed Maggie.

"Sounds like fun!" said Charlie.

"Maybe, sometime soon, we *all* could go on a picnic," Adam proposed.

It was about here, that Charlie recognized a certain tall plant with bayonet shaped leaves, and a twelve foot tall candle-like column jutting out from the center.

"Adam!" she exclaimed. "Isn't this the same plant you showed me that night you led me to Christ?"

"You remember, then!" he said, pleased that she hadn't forgotten.

"That was the most important night of my life," reflected Charlie. "But look," she cried, taking a closer look, "the leaves aren't green anymore-- they're gray!"

"That's because this Chaparral Yucca is at the end of its life cycle," explained Adam. "And yet, next year, the seeds this plant created, will eventually make more beautiful flowering yuccas. What's the end of one thing is the beginning of another," he said, taking Charlie's hand in his. "My days as a bachelor will soon be over, and a new life will begin." Here, he took out a small circle of gold and slipped it onto her left hand fourth finger.

Charlie gasped in surprise. It was her engagement ring! In the bright Mojave moonlight, the brilliant diamond sparkled and shimmered, as if a distant star had been plucked from the heavens and placed upon her finger.

"Oh! Adam!" she exclaimed, in stunned surprise, "it's *beautiful!*"

"I was hoping you'd like it!" he said, overjoyed by her reaction.

"I've never seen anything like it!" amazed Charlie, now showing it to Maggie, who was eager to see this long-anticipated engagement ring.

"That's not the one they showed on TV," said Maggie, "but it IS terribly pretty, Charlie!"

"Congratulations," smiled Jeff, patting Adam on the back. "I was beginning to think you weren't going to do it tonight, after all!"

"So *that's* why you dragged us out here in the cold!" exclaimed Charlie, still stunned by the ring.

"But, wasn't it worth it?" asked Adam, grinning excitedly. "This is the place where your life changed forever, in the BEST way possible! It was the most special place I could think of, to give you your engagement ring. Do you really like it?" he continued, for Charlie was so overwhelmed, that words were having a hard time coming. "It was designed especially for *you*. I looked at a lot of different diamond cuts, but I thought the emerald cut was the nicest," he explained.

"It's the largest diamond I've ever seen," said Jeff. "How many carats is it?"

"Sixteen," replied Adam.

"Whew! That must have set you back a pretty penny!" said Jeff, with a whistle of astonishment.

"Over a million dollars," replied Adam, "but it was worth *every* cent!"

Charlie nearly toppled over when she heard how much he had paid for the ring! She had been incredulous about the five hundred thousand dollar ring on the news, but she had NEVER expected that he would spend a *million* dollars!

"It's the second most expensive thing I've ever purchased," he reflected.

"The jet?" guessed Charlie, weakly.

"You got it," he smiled with a wink. "If you look on the inside of the band, I had it engraved."

Charlie numbly took the ring from her finger and held it up to the bright moonlight, but couldn't quite make out the words in the dark.

"It says, 'The greatest of these is charity,'" said Adam. "When I was asked if I wanted it inscribed, that verse was the only thing I could think of. Are you all right, Charlie?"

The sixteen year old, teenage girl— a year for every carat— was overwhelmed. Tears came to her eyes. The sentiment of the verse had touched her more than the size of the diamond.

"What a wonderful thing to put on an engagement ring," she whispered, hugging Adam.

"It's getting really cold," observed Maggie. "Maybe we should get the ice cream, now. At least the restaurant will have central heating!"

At this remark, everyone laughed. They made their way back to Main Street and headed to Dairy Cream, the restaurant where Maggie worked. Self-conscious of the large fortune on her finger, Charlie kept her left hand hidden in her coat pocket as they placed their order. It wasn't until she was seated at the table, away from the other customers, that she felt comfortable taking out her hand.

Soon, the hot fudge sundaes arrived, along with hot coffee.

"You're going to have a hard time sleeping, tonight, if that isn't decaf," warned Charlie, as Adam sipped his coffee.

"I wouldn't be able to sleep, tonight, anyway!" he laughed.

After they had finished their sundaes, and drank their coffee, the foursome returned to the cold outside air. To Maggie's delight, Charlie asked her if she could sleep over that night. Happily, Maggie went to a pay phone and obtained her mother's permission.

Upon reaching the Overholt house, the men prepared to leave, saying their "good byes" and "good nights" to the ladies.

"You do like the ring, don't you?" asked Adam, for he had sensed a little reluctance on her part.

"It's breathtaking," replied Charlie. "Do you want to come in and see Grandma's reaction?"

"That's all right," he said, gazing into her brown eyes, "*your* reaction was the one I wanted. As you've probably already guessed, I'm not an extravagant man, but I really wanted something that expressed just a small measure of the great love I have for you."

"I had better go in, before I start crying again," said Charlie, excusing herself from the group.

As Maggie followed her inside the house, Charlie looked back one more time, at Adam. The loving gaze on his face flooded her soul with joy.

"Yes," she thought to herself, "you could have given me a ring made of plastic, and it wouldn't have made me any happier than I am right now!"

Inside, Charlie and Maggie found Vera asleep in her chair, her knitting laying on the floor where it had tumbled from her lap.

"Grandma?" whispered Charlie, gently nudging her hand.

"Pumpkin," she smiled, opening her eyes, "did you just come in? I guess I must have fallen asleep."

"Adam gave me my engagement ring," announced Charlie, in a soft voice.

"Oh, did he?" said Vera. "Well, let's see it!"

Charlie held out her left hand, so Vera could see the brilliantly flashing gem. The old woman's eyes grew wide with astonishment.

"Is that a *real* diamond?" she asked, looking up at her granddaughter incredulously.

"I'm afraid it is," replied Charlie, taking off the ring and handing it to her grandmother, so she could see it up close.

"Dare I ask, how much this cost?" asked Vera.

"Brace yourself," warned Charlie. "It's a sixteen carat, flawless diamond, and Adam paid over a million dollars for it."

Vera closed her eyes in shock and quickly handed it back to Charlie. Holding that much money made her nervous.

"He had it inscribed," revealed Charlie, turning the inside of the band into the light so Vera could read it.

"He must love you very much, Pumpkin," reflected her grandmother.

"I *know* he does," smiled Charlie, putting it back on her finger. "If he loved me any less, I'd ask him to get me a smaller diamond. But, you should have heard him, tonight, Grandma. He was so happy that I liked it! He said it was a small expression of the great love he has for me."

"It's the most beautiful stone and setting that I've ever seen," admitted Vera. "It'll take some getting used to, though."

"I'm so happy!" exclaimed Maggie, hugging her young friend. "Why can't we *always* be this happy?!"

Later that night, as Charlie got ready for bed, she took off her engagement ring and carefully placed it inside the ornate wooden music box Adam had given her, and set it on the night stand

beside her bed. She knew she was happier than she deserved to be, but with the bliss came an unsettling premonition of trouble: this ring was going to cause waves.

"And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her."

~ Genesis 29:20 ~

"A gift [the engagement ring] is as a precious stone in the eyes of [her] that hath it: whithersoever it turneth, it prospereth [shimmers and sparkles]."

~ Proverbs 17:8 ~

Chapter Forty

The Famous Wallace Shipley

"Be not afraid of sudden fear, neither of the desolation of the wicked, when it cometh. For the LORD shall be thy confidence, and shall keep thy foot from being taken."

~ Proverbs 3:25, 26 ~

Charlie had just been given her engagement ring only a few hours ago, and was now fast asleep. At about two in the morning, she was awakened by a strange noise coming from her window. Stirring from sleep, Charlie sat up in bed and stared at the fully curtained window, unsure if she had only been dreaming. Then a dull bumping noise, followed by a careful but deliberate scraping sound, again broke the silence. A dark shadow moved dimly across her window. Charlie gasped in alarm, when she caught glimpse of the silhouette of a person's head. It was only then, that she realized someone was trying to pry open her bedroom window!

For a moment, Charlie was frozen with fear. Then the Holy Spirit called to her mind a verse from Isaiah fifty-four: "Behold, they [the enemy] shall surely gather together, but not by Me [God]: whosoever shall gather together against thee shall fall for thy sake." Now armed with this promise, Charlie mumbled a quick prayer and opened the wooden music box to save her precious engagement ring. As she opened the lid, however, the familiar melodic strains of 'Shades of Love,' filled her bedroom. Charlie looked back at the window. The shadowed figure had frozen still. Not waiting a moment longer, Charlie quickly snatched up her ring and fled to Vera's bedroom, while remembering to bring the satellite phone.

As Charlie passed her father's door in the hallway, she stopped long enough to lock it from the inside. Chuck was sleeping soundly, and was not conscious when his daughter softly secured his bedroom door.

Once inside Vera's room, Charlie secured that door as well.

"Grandma!" whispered Charlie, tiptoeing to her grandmother's bed.

"What?" asked Vera, groggily.

"Someone's trying to get into the house through my bedroom window!" exclaimed Charlie in a hushed voice.

"Call the police!" directed Vera, getting out of bed and going to her window to carefully look out.

"Can you see anything?" asked Charlie, punching the number for the police into her satellite phone.

"I can't see your window from here," said the old woman, "but I don't see anyone."

When the dispatcher answered, Charlie told her that someone was trying to break into the house and to please send someone right away. After a few minutes of being assured that help was on the way, they finally heard a knock on the front door.

"We can't unlock the bedroom door," warned Vera, "even if it IS the police. The intruder might have gotten into the house!"

The women waited with bated breath until Charlie's satellite phone suddenly rang. The noise made both women jump.

"It's the dispatcher," said Charlie to Vera, after she answered the call. "She says an officer is here and is checking out the premises."

Outside Vera's window, they saw the beam of a flashlight, as the policeman carefully searched for the intruder.

"It's all right to come out, now," said the officer, tapping Vera's window pane, for the dispatcher had explained to him where they were. "He never got the window open."

Both women cautiously came out of hiding, and opened the front door to let the officer into the house.

"Someone tried to open your window, all right," affirmed the policeman. "There's scrapes on the window sill where someone attempted to pry it open with what looks like a crowbar."

"Oh, my!" exclaimed Vera.

"I think I scared him off when the music box started playing," said Charlie, rethinking what had happened.

As Vera talked to the officer, two more squad cars pulled up outside the Overholt house, their red and blue lights flashing. Excitedly, Charlie picked up the satellite phone to call Adam.

"You'll never guess what happened!" began Charlie. "Someone tried to break into the house! I was asleep in bed, and I woke up to find someone trying to pry open my bedroom window!"

"WHAT?!" cried Adam, all at once alarmed. "Are you okay? Should I call the police?"

"They're already here," replied Charlie, trying to calm down. "I'm all right, though I had to lock Daddy in his room for his own protection. We're going to have a hard time getting that door open, because there's no key to the lock!"

"I'm on my way!" said Adam, promptly hanging up the phone.

Five minutes later, Adam drove up to the Overholt house and got out of his old plumbing van. He was greeted by several squad cars, and every on-duty police officer in Twin Yucca. It was a small town, and an attempted break-in was big news-- especially when it concerned one of Twin Yucca's most noteworthy citizens, like Wallace Shipley. Adam made his way into the house and, upon seeing Charlie, hugged her with great relief.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asked one more time, stepping back to get a better look at her.

"I'm fine," she smiled.

"Adam!" greeted Vera, coming over to the couple. "What do you think about that? An attempted break in! In all the years I've lived here, this has *never* happened! What do you think the intruder could have *possibly* wanted?"

"My engagement ring?" suggested Charlie, looking at the beautiful band on her left hand.

"I only gave that to you, last night," pointed out Adam. "I didn't tell ANYONE about the cost of the ring-- not even my own publicist."

Just then, they heard a muffled pounding sound coming from Chuck's room. With the help of a police officer, Adam kicked down the locked bedroom door and helped the dazed occupant into the hall where Vera was waiting to receive him.

As Vera and Charlie led Chuck to the living room, Adam went to Charlie's bedroom and flicked on the lights. On the floor beside the bed, lay an overturned music box-- the one he had sent her just after he proposed. Adam stooped down and picked up the object, careful shutting the lid and placing it back on her nightstand. He went to the window and drew aside the curtains to get a better look at the sill. After testing the locking mechanism, he returned to the living room.

"I'd feel a lot better if you three finished the night at my house," announced Adam, gravely.

"We're going to be all right," assured Charlie. "The intruder didn't get in."

"Thank God," prayed Adam. "Still, I don't like you and Vera living here, practically by yourselves."

"Daddy's here," argued Charlie.

"Chuck is in no condition to be any help, if there's trouble," reasoned Adam, with a look that told Charlie she already knew this.

"Well, we can't very well move into *your* house," replied Charlie.

"Why not?" asked Adam. "With all the time I'm on the road, I'm hardly home at all."

"If you're not going to be home, then Grandma, Daddy, and I might just as well stay here," rationalized Charlie.

"Then," answered Adam, "I'll get someone to stay *here*."

"You mean, a bodyguard?" asked Charlie, incredulously. "Aren't you taking this to the extreme? This was just a random burglary attempt!"

"He was breaking into **YOUR** window!" exclaimed Adam, getting out of the way of a police officer passing through the living room.

"I thought you said it was too soon for anyone to have known about my engagement ring!" retorted Charlie.

"It *WAS*!" shouted Adam, his voice filled with concern. "Don't you get it, Charlie-girl? The intruder was here because of **YOU**!"

"How can you be so sure of that?" asked Charlie.

The knowing look on Adam's face told her that he had been holding back something.

"I get millions of letters from fans," explained Adam, "and you'd be surprised how many of them are from crazy people who say things that could be construed as threats. Don't misunderstand, there was no one letter or crazy person who seemed especially dangerous, it's just that I'm a public figure, and now, you are too. We can't go about life the same way we always have. We've

got to realize our vulnerability, work with God to do the best we can, and trust Him to protect us."

"Why didn't you tell me this, *before*?" sighed Charlie.

"I didn't want to scare you," replied Adam. "And, I have to admit, a part of me had been thinking that we could marry and go on living in Twin Yucca as if nothing had changed. This town has always been my home, and no matter how crazy or bizarre the rest of the world is, I've always assumed it would be safe for us here. But, I'm learning my lesson. God is warning me that I have to be more vigilant-- especially where it comes to your safety, Charlie."

"Do you really think it was one of your fans?" asked Vera, wide-eyed with astonishment.

"I don't know," sighed Adam, folding his arms. "I swear before God, Vera, that if I had thought any one of those letters were more than a sick prank or the words of someone who was just temporarily off their medication, I would have done something about it! There's just so many fans-- you don't know which ones to take seriously-- and that's IF the intruder had even sent a letter to me, in the first place! I just think that the timing of Charlie's sudden notoriety and this break-in are too coincidental to be simply a random act of burglary."

"Do you want to exchange this ring for another one?" asked Charlie, remembering its million dollar price tag.

"Do you think it would make much of a difference?" asked Adam. "Even if I gave you an engagement ring one quarter the cost of that one, you'd *still* be the wife of Wallace Shipley! You might as well know now-- I'm worth eighty million."

"Dollars?" asked Charlie, with a half smile. Surely, he was joking!

Adam nodded in the affirmative. When reality began to sink in, she had to sit down on the couch to steady herself.

"But, before you first went off on the tour," she recalled out loud, "you told me you *only* had seven million. You gave a lot to charities-- remember?"

"I meant, I had seven million from royalties, sitting in the bank, *at the time*," explained Adam, sitting down on the couch beside her. "There were more assets in the form of property, and a joint venture with an overseas investor. They import tea and coffee, from environmentally friendly family-owned farms to sell in the states at equitable prices. All in all, it's been very

profitable for everyone concerned. In addition to everything else, I've also made quite a lot from the tour, so it all adds up."

Adam's fiancée stared at him incredulously.

"So," said Charlie, numbly trying to get it all straight, "that's eighty million..."

"In total assests," he finished.

"Unbelievable," muttered Charlie under her breath.

"What is?" asked Adam.

"You are," she replied, a little angrily. "Why didn't you *tell* me?"

"I was getting around to it," said Adam.

"When?" asked Charlie. "On our twentieth anniversary?!"

"What's the matter?" he asked. "You sound like you're mad at me."

Tears came to Charlie's eyes.

"I'm having a really hard night," she said, wiping the wet from her cheeks. "Sometimes, you're bigger than life, Adam. Just when I think I know you, you surprise me. What else are you keeping from me?"

"What do you mean by that?" asked Adam, stiffening. "I was only trying to protect you."

"Why?" asked Charlie. "Didn't you think I could handle it-- the threats and the money?"

"You're so young, Charlie-girl," reasoned Adam, "that I though it best to handle certain things for you."

"If you don't consider me as your equal, then why are we getting married?" asked Charlie, getting up from the couch.

Adam grabbed her gently by the arm before she could walk away.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "It's just that I'm so much older than you, Charlie. Sometimes it's hard not to 'father' over you. You're right, we've got to make decisions together. I love you, and I wouldn't hurt you for the world."

"I know... I love you, too," whispered Charlie, hugging Adam, for he was becoming afraid that she was about to call off the engagement.

"It's nearly five o' clock," said Adam, "why don't you and your family spend the rest of the day with me at my house? By tonight, I'll have someone here to act as a bodyguard-- if that's all right with you," he quickly added, not intending to make the decision without her agreement.

"If you're really as wealthy as all that, then I suppose it's a good idea," conceded Charlie.

"Safety may be of the Lord," said Adam, "but the Bible also says that the Father worketh hitherto and we work. We can't expect God to do His part if we're not willing to do ours."

As Adam led the Overholts outside to drive them to his house, three reporters descended on them seemingly from out of nowhere. Someone snapped their picture and the questions started flying.

"Wallace, what happened? Was anything stolen? Did you know the intruder? Was the intruder a lover of Charlotte's? Will you forgive her?"

Adam did his best to answer them civilly, but his patience was being sorely tested. He fought the impulse to quickly shuttle his future family away, as though they were fleeing. If Adam had learned one thing from Melvin, it was to always appear to be in control-- for nothing excited tabloids more than someone who could not control themselves in public.

Then one reporter spotted the engagement ring. They surrounded Charlie, taking pictures and asking questions, almost simultaneously, as to its worth, carats, etc. Seeing that she was fast becoming overwhelmed, Adam broke through the huddle and led her to the van.

"Please, she's had a rough night, guys," requested Adam.

"Will you give us an interview, later?" asked one reporter.

"Sure," smiled Adam, politely.

"This afternoon?" pressed another.

"If I can get my publicist down here that fast," smiled Adam, getting into the van.

Charlie was sitting in the passenger seat, with her head leaning back wearily on the headrest. She looked pale and worn out.

"How did they know you were in Twin Yucca?" asked Charlie.

"I don't know," sighed Adam, driving away from the house, "someone must have tipped them off."

"Are you *really* going to fly Melvin down?" she asked.

"I hate to pull him away from his family at Thanksgiving," said Adam, "but we're going to need him."

"Maybe, you could invite Melvin and his family to spend Thanksgiving in Twin Yucca," suggested Charlie.

"Shirley is going to have a special family meal, remember?" reminded Adam.

"Oh, that's right," sighed Charlie. "I completely forgot. Things are happening so quickly, that I'm a little dazed by it all."

"When we get home, maybe you should lie down in the guest room and get some more sleep," suggested Adam.

As they neared Adam's neighborhood, they saw cars and vehicles lining the streets, and even blocking traffic in some places.

"What's going on?" wondered Adam, out loud.

Then they saw the news cameras and the reporters, and to Adam's great astonishment, fans, trying to get a glimpse of the famous Wallace Shipley.

"How did *they* know where I live?" he groaned.

Reporters and photographers were one thing, but fans were another. As Adam maneuvered his old plumbing van through the crowd, people began to surround them with camera flashes, requests for autographs, and questions that Charlie had difficulty making out, for the clamor was quite loud.

"You don't have to say anything, if you don't want to," Adam whispered to her. "Just try and get inside the house as quickly as you can without breaking into a run."

Poor Chuck was fast becoming belligerent, for large crowds of strange, noisy people were extremely disorienting for him. Thoughtfully, Adam took charge of his future father-in-law, and rapidly ushered him inside the house, with Vera and Charlie following hard on his heels.

It wasn't until the front door had been closed and locked, that Charlie felt as though she could breath a sigh of relief. She was comforted by the fact she was in *Adam's* house. And best of all, he was *here--* not somewhere else in America, in front of a large audience, but *here*, with people that loved him.

"Chuck can take a nap in my room," offered Adam, leading Chuck to the stairs.

"He can't go up very many steps," warned Charlie. "And with Grandma's hip problem, neither can she."

Adam looked at Charlie a little helplessly.

"We're going to have a problem," he said.

After depositing Chuck on the living room couch, Adam drew her aside and explained.

"Our room will be upstairs," said the musician, "and there's a spare room and then my music room. Downstairs, there's only the living room, the pantry, and the kitchen. If both Vera and Chuck can't go upstairs, where are we going to put them?"

"I hadn't thought of that," replied Charlie. "Maybe, we could put up walls in the living room and turn it into two bedrooms," she suggested.

"Don't forget a bathroom," said Adam.

Charlie looked around, imagining what the layout might look like.

"We're practically going to be living on top of each other, aren't we?" she observed.

"There's not enough room for everyone in this house," said Adam, soberly. "It's strange, but with everything that's been going on, I never even considered this possibility."

Suddenly, there was a knock on the front door. Adam went to the window to see who it was.

"It's Mr. Garth, one of my neighbors," he announced, unlocking the door and letting the elderly gentleman inside.

"I hate to be a nuisance," said the old man, "but do you know when the crowd is going to leave? My wife is recovering from a heart attack, and she must have rest and quiet."

"I apologize for the trouble they're causing your wife," said Adam. "This afternoon, I'll go outside and give an interview. I think, they'll leave after that. I'll go out right now and ask them to keep the noise down."

"This used to be such a quiet neighborhood," lamented Mr. Garth, his aged head shaking slightly from Parkinson's Disease.

"I'm truly sorry," apologized Adam, once more.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you," said Mr. Garth, turning to leave. "But, anything you could do to make them go away would be appreciated. I almost lost my wife with that last heart attack-- I don't think she could survive another."

"I'll do everything I can," promised Adam.

With this assurance, Mr. Garth left. Charlie's eyes met Adam's, and by the sad expression on his face, she knew they were both thinking the same thing.

"We can't live in Twin Yucca, can we?" she asked, her voice betraying little hope.

After going outside to appeal to the crowd to keep down the noise as much as possible, Adam came back inside and sat down on the bottom of the stairs to think.

"I don't want to move," said Charlie resolutely. "I'm *not* leaving Maggie! Besides Jeff and you, I'm the only friend she has!"

"This isn't about abandoning friends," reminded Adam. "We must do, what we must do."

"Oh, Adam, I'm scared!" cried Charlie going to him for comfort. "What's going to happen to us? This is only going to get worse, next month when the Christmas special airs."

"I have to call Melvin," declared Adam, getting up and dialing his publicist.

While Adam talked to Melvin, Charlie went to the kitchen, where Vera was trying to make herself useful by preparing breakfast.

"Where is the skillet?" asked Vera, searching a nearby cupboard.

Charlie got out the skillet and handed it to her grandmother.

"I take it, you and Adam are in the middle of a serious discussion," observed Vera.

"Grandma, if we had to leave Twin Yucca, would you come with us?" asked Charlie.

"Leave the desert?" Vera repeated slowly, a troubled look on her face. "Arnold is gone, and Jerome doesn't want me-- not really. You and Chucky are the only family I have left."

"So, you'll come with us?" asked Charlie.

"If you both still want me, I'd be delighted to come," replied Vera. "Are you sure though, that you need to move?"

"I don't know," said Charlie, sitting down at the table. "Right now, it looks that way. I'm so tired, I could cry."

"Adam offered you his guest room. Why don't you take him up on it? Just go lie down and get some rest. I'll look after your father," prompted Vera.

Charlie smiled weakly.

"Thanks, Grandma," she said, kissing her and then going upstairs for a nap.

"Where's Charlie?" asked Adam, coming into the kitchen, for he had not seen her pass through the living room on her way to the spare room, upstairs.

"The poor dear has decided to get some sleep," said Vera, putting on the coffee.

"She needed the rest," agreed Adam, relieved that his darling was getting some respite from the pressures that were surrounding them.

"Is your friend coming?" asked Vera.

"You mean Melvin? Yes, I sent the jet to go pick him up," answered Adam. "He'll probably be here a little after lunch."

"May I ask you a question?" asked Vera.

"Ask me anything," offered Adam.

"If you had known beforehand, that you were going to marry my granddaughter, would you have ever gone public with Wallace Shipley?" asked Vera.

"I don't know," replied Adam, thoughtfully. "I hate putting Charlie through all this, but, on the other hand, a lot of good has come out of the tour. I've had a wonderful opportunity to present a Christian testimony to the general public, simply because I'm Wallace Shipley. I don't know how I would have decided back then, but now, I think I would do it again. I think Charlie would too. If God had wanted me to stay in secret, then things would have worked out differently."

"And I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them," quoted Vera.

"Amen," agreed Adam. "Listen, I don't know how much you heard of the conversation Charlie and I had this morning, but I think it's best to hire a bodyguard to stay with you guys at your house. I've called Bill, and he's going to send over someone, today."

"Whatever you and Charlie think is best," conceded Vera, pouring him some coffee. "Is this the same brand that you and that overseas investor have a joint venture in?" she asked.

"Yes, it is," replied Adam.

"It's good," smiled Vera. "Does Shirley know the extent of your investments?"

"Actually, Charlie is the first person I've ever told," confessed Adam. "My personal manager knows, of course. Charlie told me this morning that I hold back things from her because I don't consider her my equal. I think she was right. I've been a bachelor for forty-five years, and I'm used to making decisions on my own. Charlie is sixteen, and her experience with life is limited. Even so, as my wife, I'm going to need to give her space to grow as a person, and to take part in the decision making, or in time, she's going to come to resent me. What kind of marriage would *that* be?"

"God says that the husband is the head of the family, and that's the way it should be," advised Vera. "Even so, you'll have a happy marriage if you learn to listen to your wife, and to take into consideration her opinion before making up your mind. The Bible says, 'Can two walk together, except they be agreed?' I believe many marriages fail because people pull in their own directions, and not as the one flesh God says they are. 'For this cause shall a man... be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.'"

"I'm learning," Adam humbly admitted.

Just then, Charlie came downstairs and poured herself a cup of coffee, obviously in a better mood than she was an hour ago.

"I only just now remembered," she announced, "even after we get married, I still have a year of high school to finish! But, I could take the GED," she proposed, "and bypass the rest of high school, altogether. We'd need to hire a tutor, though. Hey! Maybe Mrs. Strickland, the principal's wife, would be willing to tutor me! She's certainly qualified! What do you think, Adam?"

"Wouldn't you like to graduate with the rest of your class?" asked Adam. "I don't want you to feel as though you're missing out on anything, just because you're marrying *me*."

"I can just imagine it," laughed Charlie, "the graduation ceremony flooded with media and Wallace Shipley fans! Adam, it wouldn't be fair to the other students. Besides, I don't feel as though I'm missing out on *anything*!"

He grinned the familiar smile that always made Charlie feel warm all over. Adam felt more at ease, for this was the happiest he had seen her all morning.

"If the GED is what you want, it's all right with me," he said. "That nap must have done you a world of good."

"I have a confession to make," admitted Charlie, "I woke up fifteen minutes ago. I was listening to you from the staircase!"

"Oh, you were, were you!" he exclaimed, in playful indignation, making a grab for her hand.

Charlie, however, was too quick for him, and laughing, went to check up on her father, who was watching TV in the living room.

"Are you comfortable, Daddy?" she asked him, adjusting the throw pillow behind his back.

Chuck continued to stare at the screen, seemingly oblivious to his own daughter.

"Do you know who I am, Daddy?" asked Charlie, struggling to see any recognition in his blank eyes.

For a minute, a look of strained frustration crossed his face. Seeing he was becoming agitated, Charlie calmed him down.

"That's all right," she assured him, "I know you love me, even if you don't know it yourself. I'm all right. You don't have to worry. Everything is going to be fine."

She patted his hands and kissed his cheek, but Chuck made no response that told Charlie he understood her. Leaning her head upon his shoulder, Charlie rested on the couch with her father. Since this was all she had of him, it would have to be enough.

Later that afternoon, when they had just finished eating lunch, Melvin arrived.

"Well, well!" greeted Melvin, bounding through the front door after Adam opened it long enough for him to duck inside. "You and Charlie are creating quite a stir!"

"I'm really sorry to call you away from your family on Thanksgiving," apologized Adam.

"That's all right," said Melvin, flashing his white teeth in a wide grin, "that's what you pay me the big bucks for!"

Just as he said this, a loud cry started outside the house.

"Wal-lace! Wal-lace! Wal-lace!" they chanted.

"How on *earth* did those fans get my address?" asked Adam, peeking through the curtains.

"I see HIM!" cried a fan.

Adam quickly pulled away from the window.

"They've been clamoring all over the front lawn," he continued, "and some even got through the backyard gate! Not to mention, my phone has been ringing off the hook with people asking if they can come visit me, and have an autograph!"

"I was afraid this was going to happen," sighed Melvin, setting his attaché case on the coffee table. "Someone posted your home address and telephone number at a Wallace Shipley fansite on the Internet," he explained, "and before I was aware of what was going on, it was too late. I had them remove the information, but as you can see, the word already went out."

"Great," muttered Adam under his breath.

"What's all this I hear on the news of an attempted break-in last night?" asked Melvin. "And more importantly, why wasn't I informed immediately afterward? Do you know what they're saying? That it was Charlie's former lover that tried to break in and kidnap her!"

"That's ludicrous!" emphatically denied Adam.

"I know, but tell that to the 'Daily Trash!'" exclaimed Melvin.

"You mean what happened last night is already in the tabloids?" groaned Adam, in disbelief.

"No, but it will be, tomorrow," answered Melvin. "I just had a call from one of their reporters, asking if we had any comment. I, of course, denied the whole thing, but that's what's going to be printed. And another thing, why didn't you tell me about the engagement ring?"

"You already know about that, too?" asked Adam in amazement.

"I read it on one of your fansites," shrugged Melvin. "Someone is supposedly updating it live from outside your house. But, it's a sorry day when your own publicist is the last to know! I might have been able to soften the media circus this is generating!"

"I doubt that," said Adam.

"Well, I would have *tried*," smiled Melvin.

Just then, Adam's satellite phone rang.

"Hello?" answered Adam. "Hi, Bill! What's the word on that bodyguard?"

"Have pity, and open the door!" pleaded Bill, over his cell phone. "We're getting mobbed out here!"

Adam quickly hung up and ran to the front door to let Bill in.

"I've brought the bodyguard!" announced Bill, ducking through the open door with another man.

"I didn't expect you to bring him, personally," greeted Adam. "But, I'm thankful you came anyway."

"I told you that the media wouldn't leave you alone for an entire week," warned Bill, as another cry of "Wal-lace!" went through the crowd. "Adam, this is Kevin Baker," introduced Bill, nodding a hello to Melvin, who was busy talking on his cell phone.

Adam shook hands with the rugged, broad shouldered man, silently noting what a strong grip he had.

"Kevin has a lot of experience with high profile cases," continued Bill, "and he comes highly recommended by his former clients."

"You're going to be guarding a sixteen year old woman, Kevin," said Adam, a little uncertainly. "Are you going to be comfortable with that?"

"You're the fiancé, Mr. Shipley," replied Kevin, with a tooth-capped smile. "If it's good with you, then I'm okay."

"Here's his resume," said Bill, handing a folder to Adam.

"You're an ex-Navy SEAL?" exclaimed Adam in surprise, glancing over the resume. "What made you become a bodyguard?"

"Better pay," answered Kevin.

"He's licensed to carry a concealed weapon in the state of California," informed Bill.

"You have my word, Mr. Clark," promised Kevin, "I'll get in the way of anyone who wants to harm Miss Overholt. You can count on me to do my job."

"As far as I'm concerned, you're a Godsend," said Adam, handing the resume back to Bill, "but the final decision rests with Charlie. She's the one you're going to be protecting. Charlie!" he called to the kitchen, "could you come here for a moment?"

"What is it?" asked Charlie, coming into the living room, with a partially eaten apple in her hand. "Hi, guys!" she greeted, seeing Bill and Melvin. "When did you both arrive?"

"Charlie," said Adam, "this is Kevin Baker. I want him to be your bodyguard."

"Good to meet you, Miss Overholt," said Kevin, stepping forward and shaking Charlie's free hand.

For a minute, Charlie didn't know what to say.

"Do I need anyone to protect me from *you*?" she asked Kevin seriously.

"I'm very reliable, Miss Overholt," said Kevin. "You'll be safe with me."

Charlie looked at him, and then looked to Adam.

"Say the word, and he's hired," said Adam.

"All right," said Charlie, "Grandma can move into my room with me, and he can have her bedroom. This is the one God sent us, so I'll trust in His Providence. I just want to go on record as saying, that no matter how many people I'm surrounded by, *true* safety only comes from God. There-- I've said it. Now I'll drag my soapbox back to the kitchen."

And with that, she returned to the kitchen to resume her talk with Vera.

"Looks like you're in," said Bill, congratulating Kevin.

"If it's all right with you, Mr. Clark, after I make sure that this house is secure, I want to go check out Miss Overholt's house," said Kevin.

"Sure," said Adam. "Do you know where it is?"

"Mr. Paulson [Bill], drove by the place on our way here, and pointed it out to me," answered Kevin. "With your permission, I'd like to install a few security measures around her house."

"I leave it to you," said Adam.

"One other thing," said Kevin, picking up the heavy bag he was toting, "please don't let Miss Overholt leave these premises before I return."

"You have my word," promised Adam.

After he went about Adam's home, making sure there were no glaring breeches in its security, Kevin bravely opened the front door, and made his way through the crowd.

Just then, Adam's satellite phone rang. It was Jeff.

"Sorry I wasn't there, last night," said Jeff, "but I haven't been on the night shift in ages."

"I had to get a bodyguard for Charlie," informed Adam, in an incredulous voice.

"That's probably for the best," said Jeff. "I was calling to know if you and Charlie and Maggie would like to do something tonight? You probably don't want to though, not with all the media you're inundated with right now."

"I'd love to," said Adam, "but it IS a little hard to get out of the house. Why don't you come over, tonight, and I'll invite Maggie, and the four of us could have dinner here at my place? I'm afraid it's as good as I can do."

"What time should I come?" asked Jeff, eager for any chance to see Maggie again.

Later that day...

"Are you sure you want to go out there?" asked Adam, as he and Charlie were preparing to go out and give the interview Adam had promised to the media earlier. "You don't have to, you know."

"I know," said Charlie, "but I want to refute that horrible tabloid story, myself."

Kevin had come back from the Overholt house, and was preparing his client for what was about to happen.

"I'm going to grip you by the arm," he said, grasping her upper arm in his left hand. "That way, I can stop anyone from trying to pull you into the crowd. If at any time, you feel your safety is being threatened, then tell me, and I'll get you back into the house, immediately."

"I understand," said Charlie.

"Now for my briefing," began Melvin. "Downplay the attempted break-in. We don't want to encourage the intruder by giving him a lot of publicity. Play up the engagement ring. Make sure

you show your hand to the photographers. It's a feel-good moment that can overshadow this morning's incident. Charlie, no matter how insulting the questions become, don't lose your temper! I know the tabloid story is ugly, but you'll only make things ten times worse by creating a scene. Adam, make sure you mention that Charlie and her family are only here for the day, and that they will be going home, tonight. We've told the press that you and she aren't engaging in premarital sex, so let's endeavor to give a consistent front. Remember, people, this is your first public interview, TOGETHER! Act happy and smile a lot!"

"Am I smiling?" asked Charlie, turning to Adam. "I'm so nervous, I can't tell."

Before the front door opened, Adam mouthed the words, "I love you," to Charlie. She smiled, and the entourage stepped outside. Immediately, camera flashes went off, and the crowd became excited.

"We love you!" shouted one fan.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the press," said Melvin, "Wallace Shipley and Miss Charlotte Overholt will take your questions, now."

Several reporters began talking at once until one voice won out over the others. Charlie noticed more than one news camera training in on them, and tried hard not to show how intimidated she was feeling.

"Charlotte," asked the reporter, "the Twin Yucca police said that an intruder tried to break into your home, at two this morning. Is it true that you knew the individual?"

"I never saw the person's face," replied Charlie, "but I can't imagine anyone I know doing such a thing."

"Charlotte," asked another reporter, "can we see your engagement ring?"

Smiling, Charlie held out her left hand so everyone could get a look. The crowd clapped and cheered at this, and the mood of the questions began to lighten. Melvin had been right-- the ring did overshadow the break-in, especially when Charlie told them how much the ring was worth.

It was during this line of questioning, that the phrase, 'the Shipley-Overholt diamond' was first used. The large, sixteen carat diamond made quite an impression on the fans, (namely the women), and the general feeling was that it was evidence of true love. After all, no one would give their fiancée a ring that expensive, if they intended to break up immediately after the

wedding, right? We know that no piece of jewelry, no matter how precious it may be, is enough to keep two people together. Public opinion is as changeable as the wind, but for today, the crowd decided to approve of Charlie.

When the questions were over, Adam made another plea to please keep down the noise, as it was disturbing the neighbors. However, when they went back into the house, Adam could hear another round of, "Wal-lace! Wal-lace!"

The police had been called in earlier to keep the crowd under control, and now that there seemed little chance of seeing Adam or his future wife again, most of the fans began to weary of their vigil. When the media began to disband, it sent a message to the others that they had seen all there was to see. After that, the crowd dispersed, one by one, until there were only a few die-hard fans left sitting on the sidewalk, just in case Wallace Shipley should stick his head out. It was a beautiful summer night, and they, unwittingly, were stopping Adam from going out and enjoying it, himself.

At five o' clock that evening, Maggie arrived to help Charlie prepare the dinner. Jeff came shortly after that.

"Go on, I can take care of the meal," prodded Charlie, trying to shoo her girlfriend from the kitchen. "After all, Jeff didn't come here to see *Adam!*"

In the living room, Adam and Jeff were arranging the dinner plates and silverware on the short coffee table, for this was an informal gathering of friends. When Maggie walked into the room, Jeff beamed contentedly.

A happy, relaxed feeling pervaded the house. Even Kevin, from his silent vantage in a corner of the living room, enjoyed watching the two couples mingle and interact with each other. Vera napped in the recliner while Chuck had a seat of his own right in front of the TV, so he wouldn't be in the way.

Charlie was busy preparing a light summer salad from the vegetables in Adam's garden, seasoning it with fresh basil and peppering it with the crostini, (Italian style croutons), she had made a little earlier. Herb seasoned, stuffed grilled peppers and small slices of quesadillas rounded off the main meal. Next, she filled multicolored party bowls with blended fruit cocktail made of all the different kinds of fresh fruit Bill could lay his hands on at the supermarket, and mixed it with vanilla ice cream. Charlie set these into the freezer to chill until it was time to take them out for dessert.

She made extra servings of the dinner for Melvin, Bill, Kevin, Chuck, and Vera, though they were not going to eat with the two couples. It was an odd arrangement, brought on by the necessity of the situation. For tonight, the foursome pretended as though the rest of the world didn't extend past their small dinner party.

"Okay, it's time to eat," announced Charlie, carrying the dinner to the coffee table in the living room.

Waking up, Vera went into the kitchen and served the non-guests, who were listening to the small gathering in the next room.

"I wish my wife and I could get along as well as that," sighed Bill, taking a peek at them through the kitchen door.

"Haven't you two gotten back together, yet?" asked Melvin, helping himself to another stuffed pepper.

"No," said Bill, returning to the kitchen table. "She says I'm married to my work."

"You didn't have to come today, you know," reminded Melvin. "What you needed to do, you could have done from home."

"I know, but it was an excuse to get out of that empty house," said Bill, for he and his wife of seven years were currently separated.

In the living room, a happier conversation was taking place.

"Oh! Come on!" laughed Charlie. "It wasn't *that* bad!"

"No, really!" insisted Adam, with a playful twinkle in his eye. "The driver pulled up to my passenger window and *begged* me to take the wheel from you! He even called you a 'woman driver'!"

"I haven't had a SINGLE ticket!" replied Charlie. "I can call upon Jeff as a witness. Have I ever had a ticket?" she asked him.

"No, you haven't," Jeff admitted, but, added with a laughing smile, "a few warnings, maybe!"

"You better watch out," warned Charlie, smiling, "you were the one who taught me to drive, in the first place!"

"Yes, and I talked him into it," joined in Maggie.

"I'm so glad you did!" exclaimed Charlie, thankfully. "Uncle Jerome had a *fit* when I dented his car on that dumpster!"

"Where was this?" asked Adam, who had never heard this story, before now.

"In a parking lot," Charlie answered, careful not to offer any more details than she needed to.

"Were you trying to avoid another car?" asked Adam, curiously.

"Not exactly," replied Charlie, a little sheepishly. "The parking lot was empty."

With this, everyone began to laugh. Soon, dessert was taken from the freezer, and everyone settled into talking about the future.

"I don't think we're going to be able to live here in Twin Yucca," began Adam, eating his fruit cocktail with the blended ice cream and orange juice.

Charlie glanced at Maggie in time to see her face fall.

"You're leaving?" she asked, with a quiver in her voice.

"It looks like we might have to," said Charlie.

"When do you think you might move?" asked Jeff, becoming serious.

"I suppose, not until we get married next summer," answered Adam.

"Why?" cried Maggie.

Charlie crawled to Maggie and put her arms around her friend. Both women began to sob.

"That's what I like about your dinner parties, Adam," smiled Jeff, trying to lighten the atmosphere, "they're always so HAPPY!"

At this, the women began to laugh, in spite of their sorrow.

"Congratulations, you made them smile!" said Adam, shaking Jeff's hand.

"Uh-oh, they're starting to break down again!" warned Jeff. "Quick! Adam, tell us a joke!"

The stumped look on Adam's face made Charlie and Maggie giggle through their tears.

"Just give me a moment," said Adam, trying to think of a funny story. "Oh! I remember one! It goes like this: One night, when a man and his wife were dining at a romantic restaurant, they heard a man at the table next to theirs, let out a loud 'BRAAACK!' Embarrassed, the burping man's wife scolded him for his lack of etiquette. Undaunted, he replied, 'Tis better to belch and bear the shame, than to squelch the belch and bear the pain!'"

Upon hearing this, the room melted into peals of laughter!

When everyone calmed down, Maggie helped Charlie carry the dessert bowls into the kitchen. Since that's where the others were, Maggie and Charlie slipped outside to the darkening, cool garden.

"Just listen to those crickets!" exclaimed Charlie, as she and Maggie found a comfortable place to sit beneath the shade tree.

Just then, Kevin stepped outside, and leaned against the house, still eating his fruit cocktail. He was trying not to get in their way, but at the same time, keeping Charlie in his line of sight all the while.

"Can you believe it?" asked Charlie to Maggie. "I have a *bodyguard!*"

"Why do you have to leave Twin Yucca?" repeated Maggie, this time a little braver than she was before.

"It's a lot of things combined," Charlie tried to explain. "For one thing, the house is too small for Adam, me, Grandma, and Daddy. I know it seems like there should be plenty of room, but both Grandma and Daddy can't go upstairs. Then there's the fact that Adam's address was leaked onto the Internet. Fans will be forever showing up here to get an autograph, or to have their picture taken with the famous Wallace Shipley. And that wouldn't be fair to neighbors like Mr. Garth. By the time you add in last night's incident into the equation, it's painfully obvious something's got to change."

"Why do things have to change?" sighed Maggie, heavily. "Just when I finally have a best friend, you're going to move away!"

"We're not moving to the moon!" exclaimed Charlie. "We can still call each other, and I'm sure we'll come back to visit, for Adam's family is here, and so is Uncle Jerome. It's too early to start mourning my departure, yet."

"I hope you don't go too far away," said Maggie.

"I hope so, too," said Charlie.

"So there you two are!" said Adam.

Upon realizing that the women had left them, the men came outside to enjoy the pleasant evening air with the women. Suddenly, a rustling noise was heard in the oleander bushes behind Charlie. Dropping his dessert to the ground, Kevin sprang into action. Grabbing Charlie by the arm, he rushed her into the house. As the others departed, a camera flash went off from the bushes.

"I'll get a squad car over here," said Jeff, going to the kitchen telephone.

"What happened?" asked Vera.

"Someone was in the bushes," sighed Adam. "Thank you for getting Charlie out of there, Kevin," said Adam.

"Just doing my job," replied Kevin, keeping an eye out the kitchen window at the backyard. "I should have checked the perimeter," he scolded himself.

"You might want to consider a change of address," suggested Bill. "Do you want me to look around, and see what's on the market?"

Adam looked to Charlie, and Charlie nodded her head in the affirmative.

"Go ahead," said Adam, sorrowfully.

Maggie ran to the living room.

"I'll talk to her," said Jeff, motioning Charlie to stay put.

"Maggie?" asked Jeff, coming to her side. "You don't have to cry. You won't be alone. I'll still be here."

"But, we won't be able to see each other!" sobbed Maggie.

"No, not unless we're married," replied Jeff.

Maggie looked at him in surprise.

"I wasn't planning to propose to you on Adam's living room floor," said Jeff. "I had a romantic setting picked out, and even a speech to go along with it! But, it's time for me to speak up, while you're still here with me. I love you, Maggie. I always have. I want you to marry me, and come live with me and Debbie, at my house. Do you understand?"

"You mean, for keeps?" asked Maggie, hopefully.

"For forever and a day," proposed Jeff, fumbling in his pocket for something. "I've been carrying this with me for the longest time," he said, pulling out a delicate gold engagement ring. "It's not as big as Charlie's but the love that goes along with it is," he said, presenting the ring to Maggie.

Maggie opened her mouth wide with astonishment.

"Oh, yes!" she cried excitedly. "A thousand times, YES!"

A few moments later, Maggie and Jeff burst into the kitchen.

"Charlie, LOOK!" she shouted, thrusting her left hand under Charlie's eyes.

"*Maggie!*" screamed Charlie for joy.

Both women jumped up and down like schoolgirls, while the men looked on calmly.

"Congratulations," smiled Adam.

"Thank you," said Jeff. "Are they always like this when they're together?"

"Only when we're happy!" exclaimed Charlie, laughing and hugging Maggie. "Have you set a date?" she asked.

"Yes, we have," answered Jeff. "We want to get married, tonight!"

Now it was Adam's turn to be shocked!

"I'm on borrowed time with Mr. Downen, as it is," explained Jeff. "When word gets out that you're even thinking of moving, I may never get to see Maggie, again."

"I don't think you can get a marriage license in so short a time," warned Bill. "And even if you did, it wouldn't be valid for seventy-two hours."

"How do you know that?" asked Adam, in surprise.

"A good manager is always prepared," smiled Bill. "When you and Charlie became engaged, I did some research."

"Who is the county clerk?" asked Adam. "Isn't it, oh, what's his name? He and the Mayor once wanted to throw a hero's celebration for me. Councilman Stafford! That's his name! We could go knock on his door, and get him to issue a marriage license!"

"But, you couldn't get married for three days," warned Bill.

"And, you'd have to keep it a secret!" advised Charlie.

"Three days from now-- isn't that Thanksgiving?" asked Melvin.

"Actually, it's the day after," said Vera, glancing at a wall calendar.

"Maggie," asked Charlie, "didn't you tell your parents that we were going to have a small celebration at my house the day after Thanksgiving?"

"Yes," replied Maggie.

"There you are, Jeff!" laughed Charlie. "You could get married on that day! And instead of celebrating Thanksgiving, we'll celebrate your wedding! What do you think?"

"I think we need to go get that marriage license," said Jeff, urgently.

"Charlie, you stay here," instructed Adam, putting on a coat and baseball cap to try and disguise himself a little. "Jeff, Maggie, and I have to go visit Councilman Stafford!"

The three hurried out the door, leaving Charlie to thank God for such a happy turn of events. When they returned a few hours later, Jeff showed Charlie the marriage license. Now all they had to do was wait, and keep the secret tightly guarded!

"His [God's] secret is with the righteous."

~ Proverbs 3:32 ~

"Discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee."

~ Proverbs 2:11 ~

Chapter Forty-one

The Wedding Trousseau

"God hath endued me with a good dowry."

~ Genesis 30:20 ~

The grandfather clock had just sounded one o' clock in the morning, when there was a knock on the Overholt front door.

"Just once, I'd like to sleep an entire night through!" muttered Charlie, as she got out of bed and put on her robe, for only the night before, a mysterious intruder had tried to break in. "At least this time, they're using the door!" she laughed softly.

Vera, who was sharing Charlie's bedroom, continued to snore away, too tired to notice that someone was at their front door. Charlie noiselessly slipped out of the room and walked down the hall, where she met Kevin.

"Are you expecting anyone?" he asked, picking up his shoulder holster.

"No, I'm not," replied Charlie.

"I had better be the one to answer the door, then," instructed Kevin, motioning her to stay where she was.

The ex-Navy SEAL carefully approached the door, and called out,

"Who is it?"

"It's me!" replied a woman's voice.

Though Kevin had only just met Maggie, he already recognized her voice.

"It's Miss Downen," Kevin informed Charlie, as he opened the door.

"Maggie!" said Charlie in surprise, rushing to meet her friend's tearstained face. "What happened?"

"First, could you come inside so we can shut the door?" Kevin requested, firmly but politely.

When Maggie stepped inside, he secured the door.

"Miss Overholt," he instructed Charlie, "never open this door if I'm not in the room."

"I won't," promised the teenager, sitting Maggie down on the couch for a talk.

"In that case, I'm going back to bed," yawned the bodyguard, returning to the bedroom Vera had vacated for him.

"What happened?" repeated Charlie, sitting down on the couch beside Maggie, while the middle-age woman dried her tears and struggled to find her voice.

"Dad kicked me out of the house!" she sobbed, pulling out a handkerchief to blow her nose.

"Why on earth would he do that?" asked Charlie, in a voice that betrayed little wonderment, for she had already guessed that Jeff's recent marriage proposal likely had something to do with it.

"It's because of Jeff!" explained Maggie, still sobbing. "When I got home tonight, Dad was drunk. He accused Jeff of really bad things. I can't remember how it happened, but when I opened my mouth to defend Jeff, I accidentally mentioned that we were getting married in a few days."

"Oh, no," groaned Charlie, heavily.

"I know, I was supposed to keep it a secret," sighed Maggie.

"What did he say then?" asked Charlie.

"Dad said he wasn't going to have a whore living under his roof," related the woman in a hushed voice, for she was ashamed to repeat it, untrue though it was. "Then, he grabbed me by the arm and shoved me outside. I didn't have a chance to get my clothes, or anything!"

Here Maggie began to cry once more. Charlie hugged her friend, and tried to comfort her.

"I didn't have anywhere to go!" cried Maggie. "I couldn't go to Jeff's house, because we're not married, yet!"

"You did the right thing, coming here," assured Charlie, patting Maggie's hand, consolingly. "Does your mother know where you're at?" she asked, remembering that Mrs. Downen had always been more sympathetic towards Jeff than her husband.

"No, she doesn't," sniffed Maggie.

"Do you want me to call your house, and see if I can talk to her?" offered Charlie.

"Would you?" asked Maggie, a little hopeful that her Mom could change her father's mind.
"Maybe, I could come home!"

Charlie went to the telephone and called the Downen house.

"Hello?" answered a woman's voice. "Maggie, is that you?"

"No, Mrs. Downen," replied Charlie, "it's Charlotte Overholt. I wanted to let you know that Maggie is staying with me, until her wedding."

"Thank God!" gasped Mrs. Downen in relief. "Except for when Wayne went missing, I've never seen Doug [Mr. Downen] so angry, in my life! Is my girl all right?"

"Maggie is fine," answered Charlie. "Do you want to talk to her?"

Charlie handed the phone to Maggie, and the two women talked for nearly half an hour, before Mrs. Downen had to hang up.

"I love you, too, Mom," said Maggie, before hanging up the receiver. "Charlie, I can't go back," she informed the teenager.

Unsurprised, Charlie tossed her friend one of Vera's nightgowns, and instructed her to take her place in bed next to the grandmother, for Charlie's bed could barely hold two people-- let alone three.

"But, where are you going to sleep?" asked Maggie, feeling badly for kicking her friend out of her own bed.

"I'll sleep on the couch," answered Charlie, laying out a sheet and blanket on the stiff upholstery.

"I can sleep here," insisted Maggie.

"No, you're the guest," laughed Charlie, giving her a playful push toward the bedroom.

Seeing that her host was not going to budge, Maggie thanked Charlie gratefully and told her that Mrs. Downen might come by next evening to drop off some of her belongings, if she could do it without Mr. Downen finding out about it. Then, Charlie gave her one more hug, before sending Maggie off to bed.

Maggie was about to break down in tears again, but she pulled herself together, and managed a weak,

"Good night."

The next morning, as everyone assembled in the kitchen for breakfast, Vera explained to Kevin that Maggie was going to be a guest for a few days.

Maggie had seen Chuck eat breakfast before, but Alzheimer's was new to Kevin. He curiously watched as Chuck gingerly guided the spoon to his mouth. Once in a while, Chuck would lose track of what he was doing, so either Vera or Charlie had to get him started again.

"Maggie, I want to take you shopping, today," announced Charlie, over a slice of toast. "It'll be my treat."

"You don't have to do that," replied Maggie, though the mere idea of it made her giddy with excitement.

"Think of it as my wedding gift!" coaxed Charlie.

"I hate to put a damper on things," warned Kevin, "but, someone might recognize you, Miss Overholt, and I can't guard you as well in a public place."

"Maybe, you had better listen to him," advised Vera. "You *were* on television, just yesterday."

"I'll wear sunglasses and a baseball cap," reasoned Charlie. "Besides, if we only shop in Palm City, there's so many people that we won't stand out."

"Kevin, do you have to clear this with Adam, first?" asked Vera.

"Mr. Clark said that I answer to Miss Overholt," replied Kevin, finishing his coffee.

"Adam really said that?" smiled Charlie.

"Yes, he did," replied Kevin.

"Pumpkin, I hope you know what you might be getting yourself into by going into a public place," sighed Vera, a little apprehensively. "At least, you have a bodyguard."

"Don't worry, Grandma, everything will be all right," assured Charlie.

"As to transportation," said Kevin, "the choice is yours, but I prefer to take the landrover."

"Excuse me?" asked Charlie, a little confused. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm referring to the vehicles outside your house," explained Kevin.

"You're mistaken," corrected Charlie. "There's only one vehicle outside, and that's *my car*."

"I think you had better look out the front window," he advised.

Vera and Charlie got up from the table and went to the living room window. Parked beside Charlie's old used car was a brand new, gray four-door landrover. It had dark tinted windows and looked much more reliable than the little car Charlie was used to driving.

"I don't understand," said Charlie, as Kevin and Maggie joined them in the living room.

"I thought Mr. Paulson [Bill] had already informed you," apologized Kevin. "Yesterday, when I saw your car, I requested this vehicle. It's much more secure and the tinted windows will give some privacy. When we leave today, I would prefer to use *this* vehicle."

"Oh," said Charlie, a little numbly.

"With your approval," continued Kevin, "I would feel more comfortable if I were the one to drive."

"Has Adam been telling you about my driving?" asked Charlie, trying not to laugh. "Because, I'm a better driver than he says I am!"

"I'm sure you are," conceded Kevin, "but I'm trained in evasive maneuvers, and it would be *safer* if I were behind the wheel. Adam-- I mean, Mr. Clark, didn't say a word about your driving capabilities. This is purely a security measure."

"All right," resigned Charlie. "If you say so."

The irony was not lost on her. She was just months away from getting her driver's license, only to be given a chauffeur!

"Do you want to come, Grandma?" invited Charlie.

"Gracious, no!" exclaimed the old woman. "I feel sorry for Kevin, for I know I won't be able to keep up with the both of you!"

"Come on, Maggie, let's get ready!" laughed Charlie, as the girls went to her room to change.

While Maggie was using the bathroom, Charlie picked up her satellite phone and called Adam.

"Maggie and I are going shopping in Palm City, today," Charlie told him.

"You girls won't be alone, right? Kevin will be there, too? With the recent break-in attempt, you need to be careful," warned Adam, with the same apprehension in his voice that had been in Vera's.

"Of course," assured Charlie, hearing his hesitation. "I'm not afraid."

"Neither am I... just cautious," he replied.

"Should I have cleared this with you, first? I didn't think I needed to," remarked Charlie.

"You don't have to get my permission," replied Adam, not wanting to sound overprotective. "You're old enough to make decisions for yourself, and I want to give you room to do that."

"I understand," laughed Charlie. "But, do you *want* me to go?"

"Not really," Adam answered candidly.

"Then, why didn't you say that in the *first* place?" smiled Charlie.

"Why were you going shopping, anyway?" he asked, curiously. "I thought we were going to spend the day, together."

"I know," explained Charlie, "but Maggie's father kicked her out of the house last night, and she doesn't have any clothes. Besides, she's getting married soon, and I thought it would be nice if I could give her a wedding trousseau as a gift."

Charlie could hear her future husband audibly exhale over the phone, as if wincing at the thought of trying to stop her from doing such a thoughtful act.

"Go, Charlie-girl," sighed Adam. "You told me of all the precautions you're taking, so you're not being reckless with your safety. We must learn to live with these kinds of situations, and it's best to learn to face them now. If you want to go, then go. But, please call me when you get home."

"Thank you, Adam," replied Charlie, knowing that it was a step of faith on his part.

"I'd love to go with you," he continued, "but I don't dare show my face in public. You'd be mobbed for sure. It's less likely you'll be recognized, if I'm not there. Do you need any money? I can send Bill over, if you don't think you have enough. This trousseau could be from both of us, if you don't mind sharing the cost," he offered.

"Wow," Charlie replied, in a soft dreamlike voice. "And to think, in a few months, you're going to be all mine!"

The ensuing smile that crossed Adam's face, would stay there all day long. Ten minutes later, Bill arrived with a more than generous donation to Maggie's wedding trousseau. After wishing Maggie well, Bill returned to Adam's home.

When the women were ready to leave, Kevin stepped outside and checked the rear windows, ensuring that no one was hiding in the back seat. When it was all clear, he motioned for them to come out. The women quickly ducked inside the landrover, with Maggie sitting in the back, and Charlie sitting on the passenger side up front, for Kevin had insisted that she remain where he could best protect her.

Even without the darkly tinted windows, it would have been difficult to recognize Charlie. She had gathered her long brown hair and discreetly hid it beneath a baseball cap; the beautiful engagement ring had disappeared from her finger, and sat waiting for her return, in the wooden music box; all in all, Charlie's dark sunglasses and hand-me-down clothing made her look more like a person in need of work, rather than the fiancée of the world famous musician and multimillionaire, Wallace Shipley. It was a good disguise-- or so she thought. Only the day would tell.

As the landrover drove away, a news car pulled up to the house.

"Do you think they know that this vehicle is me?" Charlie asked Kevin, as he quickly made tracks for the road out of Twin Yucca.

Kevin checked his rear view mirror to see if anyone was following them.

"I don't think so," he observed.

Charlie held her breath.

"Maybe this landrover shouldn't be parked so close to the house," she remarked, thoughtfully. "If people know this vehicle is Adam's, we'll be followed everywhere!"

"That's not a bad idea," agreed Kevin, as they merged onto Highway Sixty-two.

Everyone was quiet on the drive into Palm City, for though Maggie wanted to chat with Charlie about her upcoming marriage to Jeff, Kevin's presence was still new, and she felt awkward discussing such personal things in front of a stranger. Maggie contented herself with silent raptures of exhilaration, for she was going shopping with her friend, for a wedding that was to take place the day after tomorrow! It was almost more excitement than she could take!

Even though it was late Autumn, the arid desert was pleasantly warm, making it ideal for an outing. Charlie directed Kevin through the bustling city until they reached a large clothing outlet situated next to crowded streets lined with boutiques of every kind.

"Come on, Maggie," said Charlie, as Kevin got out of the landrover and opened the door for her. "Have you ever been here, before?"

Maggie shook her head no. This was more upscale than anything she was used to. Charlie, herself, had only been here once before, on a shopping trip with Mrs. Jacobs and Vera. They had only stuck their heads into one or two boutiques, before going to the large retail outlet located near the heart of the city.

Since this was Thanksgiving weekend, everyone and their mother was out and about, taking advantage of the marked down Thanksgiving prices and enjoying the good weather. As Maggie timidly held on to Charlie's hand, and with Kevin following close behind, the three made their way down the street toward one of the boutiques Charlie had had her eye on since the last time she was in Palm City.

"Nadine's Boutique" was a modest, fashionable store, run by the proprietor, Nadine Summers. The pink and red awning over the front display window was her trademark, and had become somewhat of a landmark over the twelve years she had been in business. A cool breeze greeted them as they opened the door and went inside. Light jazz played in the background over

discreetly hidden speakers, while Nadine, herself, was finishing with one of her regular customers.

"I'll be with you in a moment," she smiled, nodding to the women.

Kevin took off his sunglasses and stepped back, allowing Charlie and Maggie to look around without getting in their way, but staying close enough to intervene should trouble arise.

"Maggie, look at this!" exclaimed Charlie, taking an article of clothing from off a rack and holding it up to her friend.

"Would you like to try it on?" asked Charlie, pointing to the presently vacant dressing room near the back of the store.

Shyly, Maggie nodded yes. As she disappeared into the dressing room, Nadine approached her young customer.

"Excuse me," said the proprietor, fingering an elegant gold chain around her neck, "but is this your first visit to my boutique?"

"Yes," replied Charlie.

"That's strange," mused Nadine, curiously, "I never forget a face, and I could swear I've seen you before. [Gasp!] I know, you're the image of Wallace Shipley's child bride!"

"Imagine that," smiled Charlie, uncomfortably.

There was a confident knowing look on Nadine's face, that told Charlie she thought she had guessed correctly. How Nadine could have possibly recognized her in this disguise, was beyond Charlie's comprehension.

"May I help you find what you're looking for?" offered Nadine.

"My friend is getting married, and we're shopping for her wedding trousseau," explained Charlie.

"Oh?" replied the shopkeeper, a little surprised.

Everyone knew that Wallace and Charlotte were getting married sometime next summer, and the thought crossed Nadine's mind that perhaps it was *Charlie's* wedding trousseau that she was shopping for, and not for a friend.

"How do you like it?" asked Maggie, stepping out of the dressing room and standing in front of the mirror.

"You look great!" exclaimed Charlie, going to her side and adjusting a sleeve.

"Have you found your going away outfit, yet?" inquired Nadine, more to Charlie than to Maggie.

"I don't think Jeff can get off work for a honeymoon," replied Maggie, hesitantly.

"The wedding was planned at the last moment," explained Charlie.

"I see," observed Nadine, fully realizing that it wasn't Charlie's wedding, after all.

Then Nadine proceeded to show them clothes that suited Maggie's taste, making several suggestions and offering helpful advice where needed. In the proceeding hours, Maggie returned to the dressing room so many times, that she almost forgot what clothes she had come into the boutique with!

Kevin sat down in a nearby chair and patiently waited while the women enjoyed themselves.

"Oh, isn't it beautiful?" and "I like this one!" kept resounding in the store, until eventually, Maggie had a whole new wardrobe selected.

"Isn't this going to cost too much?" she whispered to Charlie, as Nadine checked them out at the register.

"It's all right," smiled Charlie, as she was handed the receipt. "This is a wedding gift from me and Adam."

Since Kevin was so handy, Charlie asked him to help carry some of the many bags out to the landrover parked outside.

"Before you go," asked Nadine, pulling out a notepad, "may I please have your autograph?"

If there was any lingering doubt as to Charlie's identity, it completely vanished when she signed,

"Thanks for your help! Charlotte Overholt."

As the three left the store, Charlie could hear Nadine excitedly tell another customer,

"Do you know who that was?!"

It was late afternoon when they left Nadine's. Charlie had spent the entire morning shopping, and had already gone through the money Adam had given her. She had enough of her own money, however, to treat Maggie and Kevin to lunch.

After depositing the shopping bags in the landrover, they went to a nearby cafe, with European chairs and tables outside, for those who wanted to enjoy the fragrant desert air. To Charlie's delight, she could hear one of Adam's songs playing on a radio from inside the kitchen, as the chef prepared their meal.

"Am I that easily recognizable?" Charlie asked Maggie, as they found a table outside.

"I didn't think so, until Nadine spotted you," sighed Maggie, a little sadly.

The more recognizable Charlie was, the harder it would be for her to lead a normal life. But, Charlie had already realized that by marrying Wallace Shipley, she was giving up a degree of anonymity that others took for granted. An example of this happened just as she was finishing lunch. A passerby quickly snapped Charlie's picture, before she was even aware of the fact that she had been recognized! Kevin was alert, however, and succeeded in stopping the individual from getting close to his client.

Minutes later, a Wallace Shipley fan asked, rather pointedly,

"Where's the ring?"

Without skipping a beat, Charlie replied with a good-natured laugh,

"In Fort Knox!"

People weren't standing in lines to see her, but once in a while, a look of recognition would cross someone's face, and Charlie would know, that they knew, who she was. She reminded herself that she HAD been on television *yesterday*, and that the attempted break-in and publicity over the engagement ring had publicized the story even more. Maybe, it wouldn't always be like this. As much as that thought comforted her, Charlie didn't count on it.

It was early evening by the time they reached the Overholt house back in Twin Yucca. To Charlie's relief, the news car was no longer there. Adam and Vera came out to meet them as the weary party unloaded the landrover of the shopping bags.

"So, you're finally back!" greeted Adam, taking Charlie's load from her. "By the number of bags, I don't have to ask if the outing was a success."

"You should have seen the crowds," groaned Charlie, with a weary smile. "I should have had my head examined for going on Thanksgiving weekend! Grandma," she said, turning to the old woman, "just wait until you see what we bought!"

"You can show me after dinner," replied Vera, as they filed into the house.

Melvin had taken a flight back home to be with his family for Thanksgiving, (which was tomorrow), while Bill, who dreaded returning to an empty house, had decided to remain in Twin Yucca for the rest of Adam's vacation. Now he sat in the Overholt living room, watching the news on the television with Chuck.

"Hello!" Bill greeted them, as everyone went to Charlie's bedroom to deposit the fancy shopping bags on the bed.

When Charlie and Maggie began to unpack the clothing, Adam realized he was in the way, and returned to the living room. Kevin sat down on the couch and breathed a sigh of relief. Adam smiled.

"Did they walk your feet off?" he asked the bodyguard.

"Not much walking," replied Kevin, taking off his shoulder holster. "A lot of waiting, though."

"Did everything go all right?" inquired Adam.

"She was recognized a few times," answered Kevin, "but nothing serious."

"Good," said Adam, silently thanking God.

"What happened to the news car?" asked Charlie, entering the room.

"Vera called me, and I handled it," replied Bill.

Charlie thanked him, and went to the kitchen to see if she could help her grandmother. Adam followed close behind, catching her by the hand.

"I missed you," he smiled.

"You made Maggie very happy, today," thanked Charlie.

"I hope she appreciates the sacrifice I made, by letting you go, today," whispered Adam, in a joking voice.

Just then, Vera came through the kitchen door, and bumped into the couple who had been enjoying this moment alone.

"Sorry," apologized Vera. "Charlie, is Jeff coming over, tonight? I thought that if Mrs. Downen was going to drop off Maggie's belongings, that she might want to talk to Jeff."

"I'll go ask Maggie," said Charlie.

"Oh!" exclaimed Maggie, as Charlie entered the bedroom. "These clothes are so nice! I don't know how to thank you enough!"

"Just thank the Lord," smiled the teenager, sitting down on the bed beside her friend.

She relayed Vera's thought concerning Jeff, and Maggie readily agreed.

"Mom hasn't had a chance to talk to him," reflected the woman. "I think it's good for Jeff to be here when she comes."

Maggie got up and went to the phone to call Jeff. He also agreed, and said that after he found someone to baby-sit Debbie, he would be right over. Maggie made him hold the phone while she asked Charlie if it would be all right if he brought Debbie with him.

"Of course," replied Charlie.

Jeff and his daughter arrived as everyone was finishing dinner. Having already eaten, the Ericksons declined the tasty leftovers Vera offered, and instead accepted dessert.

"Is the crime rate high around here?" asked Bill, making small talk as everyone ate their vanilla ice cream in the living room.

"It's pretty low, actually," replied Jeff, checking his watch for the time.

"Anyone want some coffee?" offered Vera, getting up to collect any empty bowls.

"Yes, thank you," replied Jeff, checking his watch again.

"Mom will come, if she can," Maggie assured him.

"I'm incredibly nervous," said Jeff. "Do you think she's angry with me for springing the wedding on her the way I did?"

"I don't think so," Maggie honestly replied.

Since Debbie was becoming sleepy, Charlie let her nap on the bed in her room, while the grown-ups waited for Mrs. Downen in the living room.

"Should I leave?" asked Bill, realizing that he had nothing to do with what was going on.

"That's not necessary," answered Jeff, comparing the time on his watch to the grandfather clock by the front door. When the times tallied, he let out an involuntary sigh.

"This reminds me of when I first met my in-laws," reminisced Bill with a small smile. "Madeline and I eloped without telling anyone. At first, her parents wouldn't even see me. Eventually, Madeline was able to talk them into inviting us over for dinner to talk things out. I can honestly say that I was never so scared in my life!" laughed Bill. "I accidentally upset an ice-cold pitcher of water over my mother-in-law, and broke the door handle off my father-in-law's recently restored vintage car when he invited me to get behind the wheel!"

"How did it turn out?" asked Jeff, curiously.

"Now? I love them as though they were *my* parents," smiled Bill, brushing back his wavy dark hair. "We became very close. When Madeline and I separated, it hurt them a lot."

Everyone was silent, except for the clicking of Vera's knitting needles. The grandfather clock struck eleven.

"I don't think she's coming," sighed Adam.

Just as he said this, a car pulled up outside the Overholt house. Maggie sprang to her feet and rushed outside. Kevin stood up and looked out the window to be sure that it was who everyone thought it was. When he saw Maggie and Mrs. Downen hug, he relaxed his posture.

Maggie led her mother into the house, where everyone was waiting. Jeff got to his feet out of respect as Mrs. Downen entered the room. The mother carefully looked him in the eyes before sitting down.

"This is not a time for polite talk," began Mrs. Downen, "but for the hard, honest truth."

If an audience bothered Mrs. Downen, she didn't show it. This was an unexpected opportunity to talk to her daughter's future husband, and she wasn't about to let it go by without telling him what was on her mind.

"Do you know what you're in for?" asked Mrs. Downen. "Maggie is 'special'-- she always has been. When I gave birth to her, the doctors wanted me to put her in a home for the mentally handicapped. I told them, 'Not *my* girl!' Then, years later, they did more tests, and said she wasn't as bad as they had thought, after all! Humph! I could have told them that! But all those years, I had to fight *everyone* to keep her at home with *me*! You've got to be prepared to fight for her!"

Jeff was sitting on the couch beside Maggie, his hands folded, and his face serious.

"Doug won't accept you as his son-in-law," resumed Mrs. Downen, matter-of-factly. "I don't think he ever will. He's hard enough to reason with when he's sober, but when he's falling down drunk-- it's impossible! You should know this, already. You've been called enough times to our house, breaking up fights. Doug hated it when I called the police!" she smiled grimly.

"Do you approve of the marriage?" asked Jeff, venturing a question.

"You're not giving me much of a chance to have an opinion, one way or the other," remarked Mrs. Downen, in a somewhat bitter voice. "But, I'm not against it, if that's what you mean. I don't know if she knows how to be a wife-- God knows, she didn't learn it from me. May I see your little girl, Jeff?"

Jeff nodded his consent. Maggie got up and led her mother to Charlie's room, where Debbie was fast asleep on the bed. As Mrs. Downen peered through the open door, Jeff joined them.

"One child looking after another," sighed Mrs. Downen, shaking her head. "Your girl is sweet, though."

She returned to the living room with a thoughtful face.

"Here's the key to the car trunk," she said, handing the keys to Jeff. "If you would bring in Maggie's things, I'd appreciate it. And there's more in the back seat."

"I'll help," volunteered Adam, following him outside.

Bill also pitched in, until all of Maggie's belongings were at last stacked and piled into Charlie's ever-shrinking bedroom. Maggie's extensive doll collection, alone, filled one corner of the room! Through all this, Debbie remained fast asleep, cuddled on the bed with one of Charlie's soft blankets.

As Mrs. Downen turned to leave, she pulled Jeff aside.

"Maggie has always surprised people with what she was capable of," said the mother. "Maybe she will, again."

After giving her daughter a hug and kiss, Mrs. Downen climbed into her car and drove away. Immediately, Maggie broke into tears, so that Jeff had to lead her back into the house.

Hearing a commotion in the living room, Debbie woke up and wandered into the room where she saw her father trying to comfort Maggie.

"It's all right," Jeff was saying, in a soothing voice.

"I want my Mom!" cried Maggie.

Seeing her opportunity, Debbie walked over to Maggie and climbed onto her lap. Maggie was surprised by this act, but appreciated it greatly, for she hugged the child with all her might, until Debbie had to ask for some room to breath. It had been a long time since Debbie had had a mother, and the embrace was enough assurance for the small girl that Maggie would love her as her own. Jeff kissed Debbie on the cheek, and sighed contentedly.

"What's the end of one thing, is the beginning of another," observed Vera, from her vantage in the corner.

As the day ended, the small circle of friends took comfort in each other's company and looked forward to the days ahead.

"Therefore shall a [woman] leave [her] father and [her] mother, and shall cleave unto [her husband]: and they shall be one flesh."

~ Genesis 2:24 ~

"Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows."

~ Matthew 10:29-31 ~

Chapter Forty-two

The Diamond Ring Incident

Charity "is not easily provoked."

~ 1 Corinthians 13:5 ~

Charlie had been dreading Thanksgiving Day for over a week, and now the day was upon her. Even with Adam's assurance that Shirley would at least be civil, the nervous knot in her stomach refused to leave. The Thanksgiving meal was scheduled for that afternoon, and was to be the first family get-together that would include Charlie as an accepted member of the Garner-Clark family circle. Just how "accepted" she would be, the young woman had yet to find out.

Shirley Garner put the finishing touches on the elaborate cornucopia centerpiece and stepped back to see the overall effect it had on the dining room. The caterers that she had hired for the Christmas party last year, were back in full force, this time to help her prepare for Thanksgiving. An elaborate autumn garland of nuts, with brightly colored dried leaves, hay twists, and tiny pumpkins, festooned the stair banister while flower arrangements accented with miniature gourds dotted the house, lending a festive atmosphere to the Garner house. Mike's wife, Sandra, had been at the house all morning, helping to prepare place cards, and in general, keeping her mother-in-law company with light conversation.

Mike, who had only been married since late February of that year, watched and got under foot as he tried to be helpful. Seeing this, Thomas jokingly warned Sandra that "he'll act differently when the honeymoon is over." Shirley gave her husband a sober glance, which he pretended not to notice.

After a while, Mike joined his father outside with Chad, who were both playing with the fancy new barbecue Thomas had purchased in Portland the week before.

"Thomas!" shouted Shirley from the front steps, "I told you, we are *not* going to barbecue the Thanksgiving turkey!"

"Come on, honey," he coaxed, "it could be a new Garner family tradition!"

Shirley sighed and adamantly shook her head 'no.'

In the living room, Shirley's delicate porcelain Pilgrims and Indians came out of storage, and were carefully placed on the display table near the window. A small paper turkey Mike had made when he was little, decorated Thomas' desk in the study, while a poster Chad had drawn

adorned the kitchen refrigerator door. In her best calligraphy, Sandra penned the place cards, and asked Shirley where she wanted everyone to sit.

"Thomas sits at the head of the table, of course," began Shirley, "and I'm at the other end. Mike sits to my right, and you sit next to him. Your parents sit next to you, and your sister, Becky, can sit with Chad at the children's table. Bill sits at the end of the table, to the left of Thomas. Adam will be to my left, then Vera, Jerome, and Charlie."

Sandra gave her mother-in-law a hesitant glance.

"Oh, all right, I suppose Adam and Charlie *should* sit together," sighed Shirley. "But, where on earth do I seat the bodyguard-- at the children's table?"

Shirley wasn't the happiest about inviting not only her brother's personal manager, but also the bodyguard. This was supposed to be a family occasion, but since Bill had remained in Twin Yucca, Shirley thought it would be impolite not to include him in the invitation. As for the bodyguard, Shirley figured she HAD to invite him, or else endure someone standing in the corner of the room behind Charlie, waiting to pounce on anyone who came too near. Shirley had no idea what to expect. No one in the family had *ever* required a bodyguard, before!

Back at the Overholt house, Charlie spent the morning in front of her mirror, trying on clothes while Maggie and Jeff sat in the living room, talking over their future life together in hushed voices.

"Grandma?" asked Charlie emerging from her room to talk to Vera who was in the kitchen, preparing an ornate tin of homemade cookies to give to Shirley.

"Yes, Pumpkin?" responded Vera, looking up from her work. "What is it?"

"Do I look older with my hair up or down?" asked the teenager, raising and lowering her long brown hair from her shoulders.

"Up, I think," smiled the old woman.

"What about this dress? Do you think it's too dressy, or not dressy enough?" continued Charlie.

"You look fine," assured Vera, placing the lid on the tin of cookies. "I know Shirley said I didn't have to bring any food, but I hate to go empty-handed. She *is* feeding us, after all."

Charlie disappeared and soon returned holding a pair of earrings.

"What do you think of these gold hoops?" she asked.

"I think you'll look very nice," commented Vera.

"Fine, 'Nice,'" repeated Charlie with a groan. "But, do I look like I belong with Adam? Do I look old enough? Mrs. Garner-- I mean, Shirley still refers to me as 'the child'! Oh! If only this day were already over with!"

"Talk like that won't make it go any faster," heeded Vera. "Just remember this: before next summer, you'll be a year older than I was, when I married your grandfather. You're not too young."

"But, was the groom twenty-nine years older than you?" asked Charlie, her voice betraying trepidation.

"If you're having any second thoughts," advised Vera, soberly, "you had better take them into consideration now, before you're married."

"I'm not having second thoughts about Adam," answered Charlie. "It's his *family* that concerns me. I wish I looked older. Then, maybe, Shirley wouldn't be so set against me."

"Pumpkin, you look like you're in your early twenties," consoled Vera, tweaking one of Charlie's loose curls over her forehead.

"Thirty would be better," sighed Charlie.

"Thirty will come soon enough," smiled Vera.

Just then, the telephone rang. When Vera went to answer it, she called Charlie to the phone.

"It's Adam," she said, handing her the receiver.

"Charlie, I'm afraid I have some bad news," began Adam, a little hesitantly.

"What?" asked Charlie, all at once becoming alarmed.

"I'm going to be late for the Thanksgiving meal," he informed her. "I have to go meet a reporter at the Palm Springs airport, and she's only staying long enough to talk to me, before she gets on another flight."

"But," argued Charlie, "you PROMISED you would be with me!"

"And I *will* be there-- just not at the start," assured Adam. "Besides, it's only my family. Shirley will let you in, even if I'm *not* there!"

"Go ahead and laugh," answered Charlie. "I can't believe you're not coming, just so you can talk to some reporter!"

"She has always been very kind to me in her articles," responded Adam, in a voice so calm it annoyed Charlie. "I owe this to her."

"If you think you owe her, more than you do me-- then go," replied Charlie, in an even voice.

"Please don't take it that way," said Adam. "This isn't a big deal. I'll be there before you know it, and we'll enjoy Thanksgiving together."

Charlie brushed her fingers through her hair, absentmindedly disturbing the French twist she had so carefully made.

"Charlie?" said Adam. "Are you still there? I love you."

"She had better not be pretty," warned Charlie, resignedly.

"Oh, Ms. Henderson is not pretty," replied Adam in a playful voice. "In fact, one might even say she's hideous!"

"I'm *soooo* happy you're in such good spirits," smiled Charlie. "I'm about to walk into the lion's den, without my guardian angel!"

"It's *only* my little sister!" insisted Adam, with a laugh.

"I love you, too," was Charlie's dry response.

When she hung up the receiver, the young woman broke the news to Vera.

"He said Bill would pick us up," she finished, rearranging her hair in the bedroom mirror.

"But, Adam IS coming after the interview?" asked Vera.

"Don't tell me you're nervous!" exclaimed Charlie in feigned surprise. "According to Adam, we have nothing to worry about!"

"Still," replied Vera, slowly, "I'd feel better if Adam were there. Do you think this cookie tin is enough? Maybe, I should have made a pumpkin pie, or something more Thanksgiving-ish. Oh well, too late now. Are you ready, Kevin? Where *is* Jerome? We don't want to be late!"

Just then, Jerome came through the Overholt front door, his pencil-mouth drawn tightly.

"Well, let's get it over with," he said, grimly.

"We can't. Bill isn't here, yet," responded Vera.

"What happened to Adam?" asked Jerome, sitting down on the living room couch to wait.

"He's going to be a little late," replied Kevin, putting on his shoulder holster, and checking his handgun.

"Have you ever used that thing?" questioned Jerome, curiously.

"Not in the line of duty," answered Kevin, "but I go to the shooting range to get in practice whenever I can."

"Oh," said Jerome, impatiently checking his watch.

Just then, he heard a car door slam outside the house.

"Bill's here!" called out Jerome, getting up to open the front door.

Vera had dropped Chuck off at Mullen-Overholt, earlier that day. As a favor to Vera, Evelyn Saunders, the Director of Nursing, had volunteered to look after Chuck while the Overholt's spent the day at the Garners' house. Shirley had politely included Chuck in the invitation, but it was widely understood that he would be unable to attend.

"Everyone ready?" asked Bill, as Charlie and Vera appeared from the bedroom.

Kevin got up and followed close behind his client as everyone made their way outside.

"I'm sorry about Adam," apologized Bill, as he helped Charlie into the car. "It's just that Debra Henderson is an important supporter of Wallace Shipley's music."

"Debra Henderson?" repeated Charlie in surprise, for Adam had never mentioned the reporter's first name.

Charlie had seen Debra Henderson on television before, and she was anything but "hideous."

"Oh well," Charlie thought to herself, "I know Adam. He isn't ducking out on me to go see some beautiful woman. Well, he is, but not for anything else but business."

Vera was more nervous than she cared to admit. She had known the Garner family for a long time, but relations had been strained ever since Adam had broke the news of his engagement to Charlie. Had Charlie known just how apprehensive Vera was, she would have insisted on going back to the house until Adam arrived.

All too soon, Bill pulled up to the Garner's spacious adobe house on the outskirts of Twin Yucca. Shirley and Thomas came out to greet them as they piled out of the car.

"So glad you could all come!" exclaimed Shirley. "Vera, I told you that you didn't have to bring any food! The caterers have it all under control, but I'm sure this will taste great later! Please, do come in!"

If there was one word that could describe Shirley right now, it would be "polite." She had on her best company manners, and even though Shirley's smile was strained, it was obvious that she WAS trying.

Sandra's parents, Horace and Millie Weston, were already in the living room as the Overholt's and their entourage entered the room. A round of formal "Hello," and "Nice to meet you," went through the gathering, as everyone shook hands with the newcomers. Charlie had never met the Westons before, but she had seen them at Mike and Sandra's wedding earlier that year. Sandra's blind little sister, Becky, sat beside her parents, overcome with shyness.

While everyone sat down in the living room to wait for Adam, Kevin took a look around the fashionable house, making sure that there were no glaring "breaches of security." Shirley seemed uncomfortable about this, but Thomas had already given his permission, so she tried to hide her annoyance.

For a minute, everyone sat there, dumbly staring at each other.

"This is a nice house you've got here," remarked Bill, for they weren't HIS new relatives.

"Thank you," replied Thomas, perking up at the sound of a compliment. "I designed it myself."

"Did you?" said Bill.

"Yes, and I wrote a book about it, also. Maybe you've heard of it? 'Adobe Homes: From the Ground Up'?" asked Thomas.

"Say," answered Bill in surprise recognition, "you're not *that* Thomas Garner, are you?!"

"I'm afraid he is," smiled Shirley.

"I *thought* your face seemed familiar," admitted Bill. "I saw you at the Boston Festival a few years back. I believe you were signing autographs at the time. I had no idea you were Adam's brother-in-law!"

"It's a small world," smiled Horace Weston, who up to now, had even less to say.

"Yes, it is," mused Bill.

Just then, Kevin came back and took a seat near Charlie.

"So," began Thomas, addressing Charlie, "How do you like the limelight? I can't turn on the news lately, without seeing either you or Adam."

"It's been an experience," smiled Charlie.

"Speaking of my absent brother," interrupted Shirley, "do you know when we can expect him, Charlie?"

"I couldn't really say," confessed Charlie, a little embarrassed. "He said he would be here just as soon as the interview was over."

"Yes, that's what he told me, as well," sighed Shirley, hoping that perhaps Adam had divulged more to Charlie than he had to her. "I must say, I can't see why any interview is more important than Thanksgiving with family and friends. Thomas was the one who talked to Adam, so by the time I heard of his plans, I couldn't do a thing about it."

By this, Charlie understood that Shirley was blaming her for not stopping Adam, or maybe even that she had perhaps been the one to urge him to go. Charlie bit her bottom lip and remained

silent. Vera wanted to say something in Charlie's defense, but she was so nervous that no words came to mind.

"This is our first Thanksgiving with our new extended family, as well," smiled Millie Weston to Charlie, for she sensed what Shirley had meant by the last remark. "In fact, you have something else in common with my daughter," Millie continued. "Sandra and Mike had dated each other for a short time before they became engaged, as well. And I couldn't imagine them being any happier than they are right now."

Mike gave Sandra's hand an extra squeeze while his wife blushed.

"Yes," interjected Shirley, "they had both families' consent before marrying, so they *could* become engaged so soon."

Thomas cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Very nice weather, we're having for this time of year, isn't it?" remarked Horace, trying to bring a lighter tone to the conversation.

In fact, it was very typical weather for that time of year, so his remark quickly faded into the silence of the Garners' living room.

"May I see your engagement ring, Miss Overholt?" piped up Becky, suddenly summoning her courage. "I've heard so much about it on television."

"Sure," smiled Charlie, removing the gem from her finger and placing it in Becky's hands. "And, you don't have to call me Miss Overholt. I'm just plain Charlie."

Becky moved the tips of her fingers over the large diamond, feeling its smooth faceted surfaces and clean edges.

"It's very lovely," remarked Millie, as everyone craned their necks to see the precious gem that nine year old Becky was cradling in her fingers.

In the afternoon sun, it almost seemed as though it were on fire.

"He must love you very much," grinned Becky, handing the ring back to Charlie.

"I believe he does," replied Charlie with a happy smile.

Shirley shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

"I had better see that the caterers keep the meal warm until Adam arrives," she said, getting up and leaving the living room.

With Shirley's absence, a general feeling of relief went through the room.

"Charlie, have you and Adam set a date, yet?" asked Sandra, venturing a question of her own.

"Not exactly," replied Charlie, "but I believe it will be sometime in July, for that's when Adam's tour will be over."

"I'm sure you'll be glad when it's all over, and life can get back to normal," remarked Sandra, echoing her own sentiments.

"I suppose," replied Charlie, "that normal is relative to the amount of publicity you're under."

"What will you and Adam do, if your celebrity doesn't die down?" inquired Horace. "No doubt, changes will have to be made. Have you considered a change in location?"

At this, Shirley quickly emerged from the kitchen.

"Turkey sure smells good!" exclaimed Thomas, quickly getting up and shuttling his wife into the next room.

After a few minutes, Thomas and Shirley emerged from the kitchen and took their seats. While they were gone, little else had been said on the matter of moving, for Charlie wisely decided that such news should only be broken to the others, when Adam was present.

"Yes, sir, that turkey sure does smell good," repeated Thomas, a little embarrassed. "I hope Adam gets here soon, or all that will be left is the drumstick!"

At this, everyone smiled. Just then, Charlie's satellite phone rang.

"Please, excuse me," she said, pulling the phone out of her purse.

Shirley leaned forward in her seat.

"Charlie, it's me," said Adam. "I had a flat tire on my way back from the airport, and since I didn't have a spare, I had to call the auto club. Unfortunately, the tow truck is going to be late, so tell Shirley to start without me."

"I think I'll let *you* do that," said Charlie, smiling politely at Shirley's expectant face. "It's for you," she said, handing the phone to her future sister-in-law.

Shirley quickly took the phone.

"Where on earth are you?" she cried. "We can't hold Thanksgiving meal off, forever! The caterers are getting nervous! [pause] Can't you get a taxi, or something? [another pause] But we *always* have Thanksgiving, together! [pause] I know you can't help it, but you wouldn't be in this situation, if you hadn't gone down there in the first place! [pause] Yes, I'll save you some turkey!"

Shirley handed the phone back to Charlie. Since Adam didn't know Charlie was back on the line, he hung up. Realizing that the call was over, Charlie slid the phone back into her purse.

"We might as well eat now," sighed Shirley, leading her guests into the dining room.

"What a lovely Thanksgiving garland!" commented Millie as everyone found their place at the table.

Charlie looked at the vacant seat beside her, and struggled to hide her disappointment. The only part about today that she had actually looked forward to, was Adam's company-- and he was not here. Everyone joined hands while Thomas said a prayer over the meal. Then he carved the turkey.

"White meat or dark?" asked Thomas, until everyone at the table had a helping of the fowl. Perfectly seasoned stuffing, mash potatoes and gravy, hot rolls with melted butter and cranberry sauce, steamed vegetables and many other dishes of Thanksgiving fare blanketed the lined table.

Except for complimentary remarks about the food, little was said during the meal. Shirley tried to conceal her displeasure at what she considered to be a failure of a Thanksgiving. First she was angry with Adam for doing the interview at such a time, and then she was angry with Charlie-- whom she figured was responsible for it in the first place.

Jerome paid little attention to the drama unfolding before him. The meal was free, and that was all he cared to know. Vera was unusually quiet. A sadness pervaded her soul as she watched Charlie bravely trying to hold up under all the pressure.

The Westons were silently hoping that they could find a way to excuse themselves from next year's Garner family Thanksgiving meal, while Mike and Sandra hoped they could spend it alone, together.

When the meal was finally over, the dessert was brought out. Half the people at the table would have just as soon skip the pumpkin pie and go straight home, but that would have been rude. After the last bite of pie and the last drop of cranberry juice had been consumed, Shirley started to clear away the dishes as the guests slowly began to disperse.

"I'll help," volunteered Charlie, as she gathered a small stack of fine china and headed off to the kitchen.

Seeing that volunteers were needed for the cleanup, Vera, Millie, and Sandra gathered in the kitchen to help.

"You really don't have to do this," insisted Shirley. "The caterers will be back tomorrow, and they'll clean this up."

"Nonsense!" replied Millie, rolling up her sleeves. "Why, between the five of us, we'll have this kitchen clean in no time!"

Vera gathered the leftovers and placed them into plastic containers, while Millie brought the rest of the dirty dishes in from the dining room. Charlie took off her engagement ring and placed it on the small jewelry tray beside the sink, so she could wash the dishes before placing them into the dishwasher. Shirley was removing the last of the meat from the turkey, when Chad shouted from the living room,

"Uncle Adam is here!"

Smiling, Charlie quickly dried her hands and ran outside to meet him. Without a word, Adam hugged Charlie and gazed into her brilliantly flashing eyes. Shirley watched them from the front door. It was as though they were one, the man and the woman. In that moment, Shirley caught a glimpse of the happiness Charlie had brought into her brother's life. But, something held her back from accepting this pending marriage. Maybe it was something in her own life that made her envy Charlie, or maybe it was her pride in not wanting to have to admit that she was wrong. Whatever the reason, Shirley was going against her own conscience, for she could see how God had matched Adam with Charlie. With an unyielding heart, Shirley returned to the kitchen to finish the dishes that Charlie had not yet washed.

Adam and Charlie joined the rest of the guests in the house. The men were waiting on the women, and the women were trying to hurry up and finish the dishes so they and their husbands could leave. By all the somber faces, Adam could see the day had not gone well. As Charlie was about to return to the kitchen sink, Shirley appeared in the living room doorway, her face blanched with shock.

"What is it?" asked Thomas, as his wife struggled to get words out of her mouth.

"Down the drain..." she muttered, her speech almost incoherent.

"What's down the drain?" asked Adam.

"Charlie's engagement (gulp!) ring," Shirley replied in horror.

Charlie checked her left hand and let out a cry of dismay.

"I left it on the jewelry tray beside the sink!" she gasped, running to the kitchen. "Adam! My ring isn't here!"

Adam quickly joined her-- as did everyone else in the house.

"I-- I was reaching for the plate, when I heard something fall down into the sink," stammered Shirley. "I tried to grab it, but I was too late-- I heard it go down the drain-- it made a chinking sound!"

Charlie nearly passed out. Her million dollar engagement ring had gone down the kitchen drain! Seeing her turn pale, Adam helped her over to a kitchen chair.

"Mike," he directed, "go get the tool box out of the van. I parked it out front behind the Weston's car in the driveway."

Mike quickly did as he was told, for he was used to taking orders from his uncle. Ever since Mike and the new master plumber had taken over the family business, their first decision was to retire the old Clark Plumbing Service and Supply van, in favor of a new state-of-the-art model. When Adam heard this, he saved his "old friend" from the scrap heap, and now drove it as he would a second vehicle. But, I digress.

"Shouldn't we call a plumber?" asked Horace, stunned by all the money that had just gone down the drain.

"Adam *IS* a plumber," reminded Thomas, as he went to retrieve a flashlight.

"Oh yes, that's right," muttered Horace, as Millie cleared the countertop to make room for the men to work.

Sandra helped her mother-in-law to a chair at the table across from Charlie, who was still in apparent shock.

"I- I'm sorry," apologized Shirley.

"It's my fault," argued Charlie, numbly. "I left the ring there."

"No, I'm the one to blame," insisted Shirley reaching across the table and touching Charlie's hand. "And I'm sorry for everything I said and did today to make you feel unwelcome. It was very wrong of me, and I ask for your forgiveness."

Charlie looked at her in surprise.

"Of course," the teenager replied, without a moment's hesitation.

"Thank you," replied Shirley, withdrawing her hand and bending over to regain her consciousness, for she was feeling very lightheaded.

"Maybe you should lie down," suggested Sandra.

"I must help get the ring back," resisted Shirley, weakly.

"Let Adam and Mike do it," prodded Charlie. "Besides, Adam deserves this trouble after standing us up for Thanksgiving."

"I heard that," said Adam.

"Good!" smiled Charlie, helping Sandra walk Shirley to the master bedroom.

"I'm so sorry," repeated the contrite woman.

"They'll get the ring back," assured Charlie, as she carefully tucked her future sister-in-law into bed.

"No," said Shirley, grabbing her by the wrist. "The water was running when the ring went down the drain. Who knows how far down it went!"

The thought of that rendered Charlie temporarily speechless. Seeing this, Sandra intervened.

"Don't worry, Mom," said Sandra, "Mike and Adam know what they're doing. Just lie back and get some rest."

Wearily, Shirley rested her head on the pillow and closed her eyes. The other two women tiptoed from the room and joined the others who were crowded around Adam and Mike at the kitchen sink.

"It couldn't have gone too far," Adam was saying.

"The water was running at the time," announced Sandra, relating what Shirley had just told them.

"Oh," replied Adam in a subdued voice.

"Can't you get it back?" asked Charlie, frantically.

Adam didn't respond, but looked at her sympathetically. Mike handed his uncle a large wrench and Adam got down onto the floor, and began to loosen the pipe under the sink.

"Maybe, it's still in the trap," said Mike, hopefully.

"Maybe," replied Adam, with a loud grunt as he turned the monkey wrench one last time.

Carefully, Adam lifted out the pipe and placed it onto the kitchen table. Green and black gunk poured out of it as Adam plunged in his fingers to feel around.

"Totally gross," remarked Chad, making a disgusted face. "This is why I never want to be a plumber."

Charlie watched intently as the two men made a thorough search of the gunk.

"It's not here," sighed Adam, glancing at Charlie.

"Maybe it got caught in the pipe further down," suggested Mike.

"We can only search so far, before we'll have to tear into the wall," warned Adam.

"What happens if you don't find it?" asked Thomas.

"Well," sighed the ex-plumber, "if we don't find it, there's going to be a gold rush in the city sewers like you wouldn't believe!"

"The sewer!" exclaimed Charlie in horror.

"I can get you another ring," said Adam, reaching for her face and then pulling back, for he suddenly remembered that his hands were covered with slime, "with as many carats as you want."

"But, I don't *want* another ring," replied Charlie. "I don't care if it has more carats than a rabbit could dream of-- I want **THAT** ring! I want the ring you gave me that night in the desert, the one you said was a small token of your love-- I want *that* ring!"

"That's so..." Adam paused, "like a woman," he finished.

It wasn't the money value that gave the engagement ring its true worth-- it was the memories attached with it. Of course, Charlie would have accepted a different ring, but only if the first one was beyond all possible hope of reclaiming. Adam knew this, and wanted very much to return it to her.

"Thomas?" he asked.

"The wall is made of hydraulically pressed adobe bricks," said Thomas. "It's pretty solid material. Your best chance is to follow the pipe outside and tap into it out there."

"We could put a hose down the kitchen drain," added Adam, "and hopefully, the water might force the ring out the other end. It just might work."

"I'll go get a shovel," volunteered Mike, returning to the van.

"Charlie," warned Adam, soberly, "I can't promise you anything."

"I know," she replied, folding her hands and saying a silent prayer.

Armed with a map that his father had given him, Mike went to the front yard and lifted out a square of green sod before digging into the hard earth of the Mojave desert. When he reached the pipe before it joined into the main artery that flowed into the City sewer system, Adam

came out and carefully sawed through the metal pipe with a hacksaw. After a section of it had been removed, Thomas placed a bucket beneath the exposed end.

"Anything heavy will go straight to the bottom," he explained.

Next, Adam unreeled the garden hose and dragged it into the kitchen. Jamming the green hose down the kitchen drain until it could reach no further, he shouted to Mike to turn on the water. After a minute or two, water began to spurt up from the drain and right into Adam's face. Charlie grabbed a kitchen towel and stuffed it into the drain around the hose.

"Thanks," said Adam, gratefully.

Charlie waited with bated breath.

"Please, God," she prayed. "Please, 'bring to light the hidden things of darkness.'" [1 Corinthians 4:5] It wasn't only just the sentiment attached with the ring, but Charlie wanted to get it back because of Shirley, who was still reeling from the shock of dropping a million dollars down the kitchen plumbing.

Just then, Charlie heard Mike excitedly shout from the front yard,

"I found it! I found the ring!"

Inside the house, Adam sighed in relief and grinned at Charlie as she ran outside to retrieve the golden band from Mike.

"I saw something brilliant flash into the bucket," related Mike, still elated over his find. "Here it is, Charlie. All it needs is a good cleaning, and it'll be as good as new!"

He handed her the treasured object. Charlie held it up to the fading light of the early evening sky. Yes, it was her engagement ring!

"Thank you, Mike," said the teenager gratefully. "It's so good to have it back!"

"You're welcome, Aunt Charlie," he replied.

Charlie smiled. That was the first time any of Adam's nephews had called her 'Aunt Charlie.'

"And thank you for treating Mom better than she treated you," added Mike. "Especially when Mom lost your ring."

"Yes," agreed Thomas, "you handled yourself with grace and dignity. Since no one else has said it yet, welcome to the family."

With that, Thomas shook Charlie's hand.

"Thank you," beamed Charlie.

"Well, come on Mike, we've got to put this lawn back together," said the father, as Charlie left to go find Adam.

"Congratulations!" said Horace, as she returned to the house.

"I'm so happy for you," added Millie, as the Westons were departing. "We would go say good-bye to Shirley, but I think we'll just let her rest, instead. God bless you!"

With the excitement quieting down, Chad fell asleep on the couch to digest his meal in peace, while Sandra made herself useful by tidying the house while her husband worked outside with his father.

"What was all that about?" asked Adam, when Charlie had at last found him in the kitchen, preparing to reinstall the pipe under the sink. "Did my eyes deceive me, or did I actually see you shaking hands with Thomas and Mike?"

"I was just officially welcomed into the family," announced Charlie, with a beaming smile. "And guess what else? Mike just called me 'Aunt Charlie!'"

"Did he really?" said Adam, happily. "Well, you've got your ring back, and you've finally been accepted by my family. It looks like everything ended happy, after all."

"Don't you dare think you can get off that easily!" warned Charlie with a smile. "I haven't forgotten that you ran out on me, when you *promised* to be here! I had to face your sister WITHOUT you! And that was no small matter. She apologized later, but wow, there were several times when I wanted to leave this house at an all out run."

"I admit," conceded Adam, "that I should have been here. At the time, I thought I could do the interview and the get-together, but I should have had my priorities straight. I'm sorry for leaving you like I did. Will you forgive me, too?"

He said this with a playfulness that melted Charlie's heart. When the playfulness turned to something more serious, Charlie could feel herself being drawn to him. The feeling put her on guard.

"You and I have to be careful," she quietly reminded him.

"I know," said Adam, wistfully. "I wish we could get married tomorrow, like Jeff and Maggie."

"This isn't a long engagement," pointed out Charlie. "We're getting married next summer."

"Let's set a date," smiled Adam. "What day in July should it be, Charlie-girl?"

"Not July 4th," laughed Charlie. "I don't think Independence Day coincides very well with a wedding ceremony!"

"Just as long as I'm not independant of you," smiled Adam. "How about the ninth? I've already checked next year's calendar, and it falls on a Tuesday."

"Any particular reason you suggest the ninth?" she wondered.

"I don't get back from the tour until the eighth," explained Adam.

"Isn't that cutting it a little close?" asked Charlie. "After today's experience, your track record for showing up on time is a little iffy."

"You don't expect me to be late for my own wedding, do you?" he laughed, flashing the handsome Clark smile. "I don't want us to wait any longer than we have to."

"All right, the ninth of July it is," agreed Charlie. "But if you're late..."

"I won't be!" promised Adam.

"You had better not leave me standing at the alter," she laughed softly, getting up to go tell Shirley the good news of finding the engagement ring.

With a contented sigh, Adam got down on the floor to refit the pipe under the kitchen sink.

Kevin followed Charlie around, giving her room and privacy when and where needed. But, he could always be found within an easy distance of his client. Because Kevin was so good at being "invisible," Charlie found that she sometimes forgot that he was even there.

A few minutes later, the young woman found Shirley sitting up in bed, still pale as a sheet.

"You're awake," she smiled, going to Shirley's side. "I have good news! Mike found the ring!"

Charlie held up the cleaned engagement ring so Shirley could see it.

"Thank God!" she said, gratefully. "I am truly sorry for the way I behaved."

"It's all forgotten," said Charlie, patting her hand. "Adam and I just set the date for the wedding. It's to be on July ninth of next year."

"So soon after his tour ends?" asked Shirley.

"I know," laughed Charlie, "but he said he doesn't want to wait any longer than we have to."

"How many of the wedding arrangements have already been made?" asked the woman, getting out of bed. "Have you lined up the caterers, picked the wedding gown, selected your bridesmaids, or made the guest list?"

"Nothing has been done," answered Charlie. "I confess, I hadn't really thought of it until now. I suppose that's very naive, but there's been so little time!"

"Of course, you've been busy," said Shirley, understandingly. "I suppose Vera will make the necessary arrangements?"

"I guess so," mused Charlie.

"Could I ask a favor of you?" asked Shirley, with a candid look of eagerness on her face. "Let me help Vera plan the wedding and make the arrangements! I would consider it a privilege, and perhaps, I can make it up to you for the diamond ring incident. Mike got married so quickly that I didn't have a chance to really enjoy the wedding planning process, and even then, the Westons were the ones who took care of most of that. Please say 'yes!'"

"I think Grandma would be happy for some help," said Charlie. "When you run through the list like that, it *does* sound overwhelming."

"That was only *part* of the to-do-list," warned Shirley with a smile. "Thank you, Charlie! You won't be sorry! There's so much to do, and so little time to do it in! And it all has to be done properly, for I imagine the press will somehow be involved-- am I right?"

"Most probably," sighed Charlie, "unless we eloped, or something."

"Don't even say the 'E' word!" gasped Shirley. "Our family would so much want to be there."

"Of course," said Charlie, immediately backing off.

She hadn't been serious about elopement, anyway. Shirley promised to come by the Overholt house next Monday, to begin making the wedding preparations. When Adam heard this, he chuckled,

"I hope you don't regret saying 'yes' to my little sister!"

"[Shirley did] works meet for repentance."

~ Acts 26:20 ~

"A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger."

~ Proverbs 15:1 ~

"Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace."

~ Romans 14:19 ~

Chapter Forty-three

Love is Always Brave

"Be thou strong and very courageous."

~ Joshua 1:7 ~

"Charity never faileth."

~ 1 Corinthians 13:8 ~

Maggie was so excited about the upcoming wedding on Friday, that she spent Thursday night tossing in bed, making Vera lose more than a little sleep. Charlie slept soundly on the living room couch until she was awakened by the anxious bride at about half past four in the morning.

"Charlie," she whispered, shaking the young woman's shoulder. "Charlie, please wake up! I have to talk to you."

"Just thirty more minutes," pleaded Charlie, still half-asleep, for she had opened one eye and looked at the clock.

"But," protested Maggie, impatiently, "I have to ask you something important."

"*Nothing* is important at four thirty in the morning!" groaned Charlie, turning over to shut her eyes once more.

Then Maggie bent over and whispered something in Charlie's ear that made the young woman sit up with a start.

"You mean, you don't know?" cried Charlie in disbelief.

"Shhhh!" hushed Maggie, abashedly. "The others will hear you!"

"You're almost thirty-two, and you *still* don't know about sex?" reasoned Charlie in a lower voice. "Didn't your mother or father ever give you the old birds-and-the-bees speech?"

"No," replied Maggie. "Did yours?"

"Now that you mention it, no," recalled Charlie, thoughtfully. "Daddy never even broached the subject, so I had to find out from my friend, Donna."

"Charlie, I'm getting married, *today!* Shouldn't I know this?" asked Maggie, a little frantically.

"I wouldn't be too concerned," smiled Charlie. "Jeff's been married before, and what you don't know, he does. After all, his little girl didn't just drop from the sky!"

"Won't *you* give me the speech?" pleaded Maggie.

"*ME?!!*" cried Charlie, dropping back onto her pillow.

"Just tell me what Donna told you," begged the woman. "*Please?*"

The teenager looked at her for a moment and sighed heavily.

"Let's go into the kitchen where no one can hear us," said Charlie, getting up and leading Maggie into the next room.

There, Charlie repeated the birds-and-the-bees speech that Donna had given her, years ago in Montana. At first, she wasn't sure how much of it Maggie understood, but by the end of the speech, the look on Maggie's face told Charlie that she had comprehended, after all.

"Are you *sure* you're not just making this up?" asked Maggie, a little uncertainly.

"Would I make up a thing like that?" responded Charlie, with a laugh. "Believe me, Maggie, that's how everyone in this world was conceived. God set it up that way. It's the 'natural use of the woman,' as the book of Romans puts it."

Maggie seemed a little relieved that at least she now knew what Charlie knew. For Charlie, reasoned Maggie, was about the smartest person she ever met, and if Charlie believed that incredible story, then it **MUST** be true.

"As long as I'm already up," sighed Charlie, getting up from the table, "we might as well begin some of the preparations."

"Are we going to make a turkey?" asked Maggie, for the meal had originally been scheduled as a small Thanksgiving party for the two couples.

"You're getting married, today!" laughed Charlie. "We won't have time! Here's your to-do list. Make sure you've packed all the things you aren't taking with you on your honeymoon. Jeff will be over before breakfast to take it to his house, so be sure it's ready. The minister will be here at ten this morning and will officiate the wedding ceremony in the living room. After a small

reception, you and your new family will drive to Los Angeles where you'll meet Jeff's parents for the first time. Then you and Jeff drop off Debbie there, and go on your honeymoon."

"We have to be back by Monday morning," added Maggie, "because Jeff has work."

"I'll begin fixing the reception meal, while you start packing," directed Charlie, who was already on her way to the bathroom to first change.

Maggie went back to Charlie's bedroom where Vera was getting the sleep denied her the night before. Quietly, the woman began to put the belongings that her Mom had brought the day before Thanksgiving, into boxes. Maggie felt strange as she packed away her old life, to begin a new one. The doll collection she had amassed over the many years, now seemed unimportant to her. With the hope that perhaps Debbie, her soon to be stepdaughter, would enjoy the menagerie, Maggie carefully bundled the dolls into separate boxes and labeled them, "For Debbie." The idea that she was soon going to be mother to a nine year-old, made Maggie joyous and intimidated at the same time.

Then she spotted the old Dairy Cream hat she had been so fond of wearing. Maggie had quit her job at Dairy Cream, so she could be a stay-at-home Mom. The Dairy Cream job had not been a sacrifice, but Maggie hated to toss away the hat, so she placed it into one of the boxes, for old time's sake.

As promised, Jeff arrived early, and loaded his car with Maggie's boxes. He smiled when he saw the cartons labeled "For Debbie." There was no time for the engaged couple to talk, for Maggie had to go back inside and start packing for the honeymoon.

Since there was much to do, and little time to fix breakfast, everyone ate cereal, and rushed off in different directions.

Vera went to the florist and returned with three arrangements of white flowers to be placed about the living room. She also bought a small bouquet for Maggie to hold, and a matching boutonniere for Jeff's lapel. Vera also stopped by the bakery and picked out something that looked the closest to a wedding cake as possible.

"Do you have to do that in here?" Charlie asked Kevin, as he cleaned his handgun on the living room table she and Vera had set up on one side of the living room.

"I'm almost done," replied Kevin, finishing his task.

"Charlie?" called Maggie from the bedroom.

"I'm coming!" replied Charlie, going to the bedroom.

"What is this for?" asked Maggie, holding up a negligée that Charlie had bought her on the shopping trip. "I don't remember buying this."

"Remember that talk we had this morning?" answered Charlie with a smile. "Well, that goes with it."

"Oh," said Maggie, quickly becoming embarrassed.

At nine o' clock, Jeff and Debbie arrived at the Overholts' house. Jeff was dressed in a rented tuxedo, while Debbie was very pretty in a pale yellow dress. Father and daughter nervously took a seat on the living room couch while Charlie and Vera helped Maggie dress in the bedroom. The minister came soon after, along with Adam, Bill, and Martin Thompson, who was Jeff's closest buddy on the Twin Yucca Police force.

Maggie's wedding dress consisted of a white dress suit, with matching pumps and a tiny spray of white baby's breath and tiny rosebuds that Charlie had fashioned from one of the florist arrangements. This was clearly the most beautiful Charlie had ever seen her. Gone was the baseball cap wearing woman who often waited at the bus stop for a long lost brother she had never met. The one whom so many had ridiculed as "Mad Maggie" was no longer the lonely outsider. Here stood Miss Maggie Veronica Downen, soon to be Mrs. Jeff Erickson.

"Hurry up," coaxed Vera, as Charlie handed Maggie the small wedding bouquet. "Everyone is waiting for us in the living room!"

Maggie sighed deeply and looked at Charlie excitedly.

"You've been a very good friend to me," said Maggie, taking Charlie's hand, gratefully. "God blessed us, the day you came to live in Twin Yucca."

"I wish you all the happiness in the world, Maggie," said Charlie, giving her good friend a hug.

"Okay, I'm ready," said the bride, after both women had dried their eyes.

Vera led the way as the three women entered the living room. Since it was such a small ceremony, there was no wedding march, or elaborate wedding dress. The absence of such traditions, however, had not dampened the mood of the gathering. Jeff gulped as Maggie took her place

beside him in front of the minister. Charlie was the maid of honor, while Martin Thompson was Jeff's best man.

As the minister began the ceremony, Charlie thought of all that had transpired in the fourteen months that she had been in Twin Yucca: the look of relief on Chuck's face when he saw his baby girl was safe and in one piece, after she had run away from her aunt in North Carolina; and the arguments over her attending a Christian school, along with Chuck's concern that she was yet unsaved. Charlie could still feel the desert air that night on the floor of the Mojave desert as she accepted Christ as her Saviour, and the quiet, ever growing attraction she had had to one person-- Adam. How Adam had been surprised when she pulled out Wallace Shipley's photo on her sixteenth birthday, unwittingly revealing his secret identity! The memory of it almost made Charlie laugh out loud, but she checked herself. Now Jeff and Maggie were exchanging vows. The young woman glanced at Adam, and found that he had been watching her.

"When did this wonderful thing happen to you and I?" wondered Charlie to herself.

She could not point to one place or event in the past and say, "There is when my love first began." Love had tiptoed on the heels of long quiet talks, time spent together in the garden, and their ever-present friendship. Then another thought occurred to her-- one that was unpleasant. She did not have long to contemplate it, however, for this silent reverie was suddenly interrupted by,

"I now pronounce you man and wife. Jeff, you may kiss your bride!"

Everyone clapped and Maggie blushed as Jeff kissed her lips.

"Charlie, you had better put the food out," advised Vera, after everyone had congratulated the new couple.

When Charlie went to the kitchen, she found Adam had followed her.

"I have to leave Saturday afternoon," he said, taking the casserole dish from her hands and setting it onto the kitchen table.

"That goes in the living room on the dining table," answered Charlie, trying to avoid the subject.

"I'd postpone the departure, if I could," Adam continued, in a sympathetic voice.

"The ribbon-salad didn't set," muttered Charlie, "but it will have to do. This wedding was on such short notice. I didn't have much time."

"I'm probably not going to be able to get away from the tour in quite a while," he added. "I won't be here for Christmas, either."

"Must we continue this conversation?" asked Charlie, with a painful sigh. "We can face tomorrow, when it comes."

"I *know* what you were thinking of during the ceremony," announced Adam, standing between her and the open refrigerator.

"You're getting in my way," pointed out Charlie.

Adam leaned over Charlie and whispered in her ear,

"I'm coming back in the summer, and when I do, I'm not going to leave here without you. Hold on, Charlie-girl. Our time will come."

Then Adam walked over to the kitchen table and picked up the casserole dish.

"You said this goes in the dining room?" he asked.

Charlie nodded, "yes," and gave him a loving smile. She couldn't help wondering how he had guessed what she was thinking.

Back in the other room, the wedding celebration continued. Jeff and Maggie were laughing at a joke Martin had told them, while Vera walked about the room, snapping pictures with her camera. Bill rested on the couch with his legs crossed, drinking a cup of coffee, while Kevin sat near the window, where he could keep an eye on any activity outside.

Most times, Charlie and Adam could not go outside without a fan following them to ask for an autograph or to take their picture. The situation had lately grown worse, for tour busses now made Twin Yucca one of their attractions. This is Wallace Shipley's house, that is where Charlotte Overholt lives, etc. Yes, tourists no longer stumbled into Twin Yucca by accident. Now, they actually came on purpose!

Charlie set the food out on the dining room table, and everyone ate buffet-style, each holding their plates, while sitting on the couch or chairs. Maggie was so nervous, she could hardly eat a bite. All too soon, the grandfather clock struck one, and Jeff announced that they had to go, for the Erickson family had a long drive ahead. Debbie seemed happy at the prospect of leaving, for she always looked forward to visits with her grandparents in Los Angeles. Jeff also seemed

anxious to leave, but not for the same reason. As soon as they could drop off Debbie at his parents' home, he and Maggie could go on their honeymoon.

Jeff went to the bedroom and carried Maggie's suitcase out to the car. In the meantime, the two girlfriends said their good-byes.

"I still can't believe you're a married woman!" exclaimed Charlie, with a laugh.

"Oh, Charlie," exclaimed the new bride, "I'm *so* happy!"

"I'm delighted for you and Jeff, both," said Charlie, a little sadly.

Now that her friend had a family of her own, she would no longer be at the Overholt house as often, or as frequent. In addition, Charlie remembered that she and Adam would most probably be moving sometime next summer. Things were definitely changing, and the sensation of it gave Charlie a few growing pains.

Jeff was impatient to get on the road.

"I have to toss the bouquet, first," she told him. "Here, Charlie! Catch!"

Even as Charlie reached out to catch Maggie's bouquet, a passing fan took her picture. It would later be sold to a tabloid, and be made a minor fuss over. But for now, everyone clapped as the teenager caught the bouquet of rose white flowers.

"Good-bye!" exclaimed Maggie, as Jeff helped her into the car.

When Jeff got behind the wheel, Bill stepped forward and tied a "Just Married" sign to the back of their car. It wouldn't be until miles down the road, after the Erickson's had repeatedly been honked at and other motorists had smiled knowingly at the newlyweds, that Jeff would realize what had been done.

"Well, Pumpkin," Vera smiled to Charlie, "your wedding will be next."

Martin went home, but Adam and Bill remained behind. Adam, because he wanted to spend his remaining time with Charlie, and Bill, because he didn't want to be alone back at Adam's house.

Charlie began cleaning up, but Vera shooed her back to the living room.

"Go spend your time with him," she said.

Suddenly realizing that he was in the way, Bill decided it would be best if he went home, after all. Kevin got up and went to his room to polish something, so the engaged couple could be alone. Unfortunately, it was not to last. Just as Charlie sat down on the couch beside Adam, Shirley knocked on the Overholt's front door.

"I'll get it," said Vera, going to the door.

"Hello, Vera," said Shirley, "I'm here to talk to Charlie and Adam. I believe Mike said he was here."

"Yes," said Vera, stepping aside to let the woman in.

"Adam!" exclaimed Shirley, excitedly. "You won't believe the news I have to tell you!"

"Shut the door, first, Sis," directed Adam, for even as Shirley said these words, someone came up to the open door and peered inside.

"Excuse me," said Shirley to the stranger, "is there anything I can do for you?"

"Could you ask Wallace Shipley to autograph this for me?" asked the fan.

"I'm sorry," said Shirley, politely, "but, he's busy right now."

With that, Shirley closed the door.

"What's this big news?" asked Adam, with a sigh, for he *had* hoped to spend this time with Charlie, instead of his sister.

"You'll never guess!" exclaimed Shirley, without skipping a beat. "We've found the perfect house for you and Charlie, right here, in Twin Yucca!"

"We'?" repeated Adam, a little puzzled.

"Constance and I," answered Shirley, a little hesitantly. "Now, Adam, before you say that I shouldn't have enlisted her service, I'll remind you, that before she was your girlfriend, she was a real estate agent, first!"

Adam sighed heavily.

"It's a two story wood frame house," explained Shirley, "and it's only ten minutes from my house! It has two baths a master bedroom, and..." here she stopped.

By the expression on Adam's face, she could tell he wasn't in favor of the house.

"But," reasoned Shirley, "you haven't *even* seen it. Don't turn it down until you at least *see* it first!"

"Sis," replied Adam, firmly, "we can't stay in Twin Yucca. A mere change of address will not be enough! You saw that fan, just now. No, Charlie and I must change cities, maybe, even states. I don't know, as yet. But, one thing is certain, we can't live *here*."

"Charlie," Shirley appealed to her, "maybe you can reason with him!"

"It's no use," said Adam, before his sister had a chance to drag Charlie into the debate. "Charlie and I have already discussed this, and we agree."

"Could I at least send Constance over, and maybe she could make some suggestions?" pleaded Shirley, still unwilling to give up.

"I don't think that's a good idea," hesitated Adam. "Besides, I don't want to spend the rest of my vacation, discussing real estate."

"Oh!" exclaimed Shirley. "Sometimes, you can be so stubborn! This is for your own good, if you could only see that! Why, besides Thomas and I, the boys are your only other immediate family!"

"That's something I intend to change next summer," smiled Adam. "Please, Sis, this *really* isn't a good time."

"Very well," sighed Shirley, getting up to leave, "but I'm not finished with this discussion."

"Good-bye!" Adam waved with a smile, as Shirley exited the door. "At last!" he sighed, after she had left. "I'm afraid Charlie, you're probably going to have to face Constance. Shirley seems determined to bring her into the picture."

"If you ask me," sighed Charlie, "I'm getting the raw end of the deal! All you have to face are several thousand fans-- I have to face your old girlfriend!"

Adam chuckled and leaned back on the couch.

"I'm not going to have time to go house hunting," he warned her. "December is booked solid, and every month after until July is really going to keep me busy. We could get married, and look for a house afterward, or, you can be the one to choose the house. I'm afraid that that might put too much pressure on you, though."

"You'd let *me* choose it?" asked Charlie, in surprise.

"Well, I *would* like to approve the house first, but I won't have time to go look at it, myself. Just send the information on to Bill, and he'll get it in front of me when I have the time. I'm willing to live wherever you want-- as long as I'm living with *you*," said Adam.

"It *would* be nice to go home to our new house after the honeymoon, wouldn't it?" smiled Charlie, dreamily.

As Charlie was still contemplating this thought, Adam had an idea that made him smile broadly.

"After dark, tonight," he suggested, "do you think we could slip away without anyone noticing?"

"I suppose so," replied Charlie. "Why do you ask?"

"Now that our chaperons have gotten married," smiled Adam, "the only thing left to us is the night. Wouldn't you like to take just one more ramble on the Mojave, before I go? We could hike out to Harrison's Ravine, and watch the moon glide overhead. What do you think?"

"Harrison's Ravine'?" repeated Charlie, incredulously. "Isn't that more than an hour's walk from here? Besides, we couldn't be away that long, by ourselves! Adam, I know we wouldn't fool around before we got married, but why put temptation in our way like that?"

"I suppose you're right," sighed Adam. "Hey! I have an idea!" he said, suddenly brightening. "We could drag Kevin along!"

"I don't know," hesitated Charlie. "We wouldn't be alone, but what would other people say?"

"Well," reasoned Adam, "that's *why* we would slip away after dark. No one but Vera and Kevin need know."

"What about Bill?" asked Charlie.

"What *about* Bill?" said Adam.

"Won't Bill wonder what you're up to, when you don't come home, tonight?" she asked. "I want to avoid the appearance of evil." [1 Thessalonians 5:22]

"I'll tell him what's going on-- he'll understand," said Adam. "How about it?"

Charlie paused to think.

"Where's your spontaneity, Charlie-girl?" he coaxed. "Please, do this for *me*."

"I'll come," said Charlie, "if we take Bill with us, too."

"Consider it done!" exclaimed Adam, springing up from the couch. "I'll get him to come, if I have to promise half my royalties! First, I'll go clear the hike with you grandmother. Thanks for going along with this, Charlie! Tonight will have to last me a long time."

To Adam's relief, Vera consented, while Kevin considered it his duty as bodyguard to come. Bill, on the other hand, was another matter. His idea of enjoying the outdoors was a leisure game of golf, or maybe a little tennis. Long walks in the middle of the desert at night, were not his idea of fun. However, since Adam *was* going to give the tour his undivided attention for the next several months, Bill finally agreed.

"Thanks, Grandma," said Charlie, after Adam had gone home to get a little sleep before the outing that night. "You made him very happy."

"No," smiled Vera, "you're the one who's making him happy. Go get some rest, yourself. The sun won't set until about five o' clock, so you have time to get in a little sleep."

"Grandma," asked Charlie, "if I decide to go house hunting, would you come with me? I would appreciate your opinion."

"Of course, Pumpkin," replied Vera, thankful that she was to have some input on the decision.

Charlie went to her bedroom, for now that Maggie was gone, she could sleep in her own bed, instead of on the couch in the living room. She brushed her teeth, changed into a nightgown, and climbed into bed. Before long, Charlie was fast asleep.

At five in the evening, Vera woke her granddaughter up.

"The sun is setting," she announced.

Charlie climbed out of bed and changed clothes. It felt a little surreal to have slept the middle of the day away, only to wake up before nightfall.

"Do you still have that backpack?" asked Vera, as Charlie tied on her hiking shoes.

"I think it's in the closet," replied Charlie. "What do you want it for?"

"I'm going to pack you and the others a light meal," explained the old woman, searching the closet for the article. "I thought you might get hungry after hiking so far."

"Thanks, Grandma," smiled the teenager. "That sounds like a good idea."

Just then, the phone rang. It was Shirley. When the call was over, Charlie groaned softly to herself, and made a mental note to tell Adam what his sister had just said.

Then she went to the living room window and looked out at the fast dimming sky. There was not a sign of any photographers or fans to be seen. Pleased, Charlie smiled.

Just then, Adam and Bill walked through the front door.

"Are you ready?" asked Adam, with uncharacteristic eagerness.

"Almost," replied Charlie, going to the kitchen to see if the backpack was prepared.

"You'd better put on a coat," he added from the next room. "It's a little chilly outside."

"Here you go," said Vera, handing her granddaughter the backpack. "Make sure you stay warm, and keep track of the time, for you must be back before sunrise."

"I will, Grandma," assured Charlie, giving her a kiss before leaving.

Kevin appeared in the living room, wearing combat boots and fatigues.

"What, no night vision?" joked Bill, seeing his colleague preparing for the night out.

The bodyguard smiled wryly, and strapped on his shoulder holster.

When Adam opened the front door, a cold late November breeze greeted them. Bill muttered something about the sanity of this idea, but continued to trail behind Adam and Charlie, as Kevin remained closer to Charlie's side.

It was dark out, and the half moon overhead afforded little light. Suddenly, Kevin noticed someone moving on the far end of the street.

"Stop for a minute," he told the others, as the dark figure made it's way down the walk and then disappeared into one of the houses. "Okay, all clear," said Kevin, for not only was he on the lookout for anyone who may want to hurt his client, but he had the added burden of trying to leave Twin Yucca without being noticed by anyone.

Adam and Charlie remained silent, until they were out of earshot of Twin Yucca. The city lights slowly grew smaller and smaller behind them, as they hiked beside highway 247 before making a right that would take them deeper into the Mojave.

"Are you warm enough?" Adam asked Charlie, as she zipped up her coat.

"I'm warm," she replied, her breath causing a trail of vapor before melting into the night air.

"You've never been to Harrison's Ravine before, have you?" said Adam. "I've taken the boys up there, several times. Mike used to love those outings, but when he became older, I suppose he lost all interest. Chad, on the other hand, has an insatiable appetite that I don't think all the outings in the world could satisfy. I'd be surprised if Chad ever follows Mike into the family business, when he grows up."

"I want to look for a house, while you're on tour," announced Charlie. "I've been thinking about it, and I want us to be able to go to our own home after we come back from the honeymoon, and not to Shirley's, like she offered."

"Shirley invited us to stay at her home?" asked Adam, shining his flashlight at a passing coydog in the distance. "When did this happen?"

"She called just before you came," Charlie explained. "I think your sister is trying to keep you in Twin Yucca for as long as possible."

"That wouldn't surprise me," he grinned.

A cool gust of air kissed Charlie's face as Adam turned from the road and started off in a westerly direction. He glanced at his young friend and noticed she was looking a little tired.

"Here," said Adam, taking the backpack from her shoulders, "I'll carry that."

"Thanks," breathed Charlie, getting her second wind. "I must be out of shape. Daddy and I often went hiking, but I never tired *this* fast."

"Do you want to stop for a minute?" he asked.

"No," replied Charlie. "I'm not *that* tired!"

"I know you can't tell it by this barren landscape," he informed her, "but, a few miles to the east of us, is the San Bernardino National Forest. To the North, is the Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Base, and to our south, is Joshua Tree National Monument."

"And what's to the west?" asked Charlie, for that was the direction they were headed in.

"Well, if you continued on this heading for a another mile or so, you'd be in Twentynine Palms," he replied, looking up at the night sky. "Don't worry, we should get to Harrison's Ravine, pretty soon."

"I hate to interrupt you two," said Bill, coming up from the rear, "but is there anything poisonous out here that I should be on the lookout for?"

"It's too cold for rattlers," said Adam, "but there's always scorpions."

Bill quickly pointed his flashlight down at the ground.

"I don't see anything," he observed.

"Don't worry," replied Adam, knowingly, "they're there. I remember once several years back, Mike and I were out driving in the desert in my old pickup, and nightfall came a little sooner than expected. Mike wanted to stop and go use the bathroom, so I told him to take the flashlight-- it was one of those blue ultraviolet lights. Well, after a few seconds, Mike came running back, his eyes wide open. When I asked him what had happened, he pointed the blue light down at the ground. The ultraviolet made all the scorpions light up, and the ground was teeming with little green bodies! After that, Mike just stood off the back of the pickup bed, to use the bathroom!" laughed Adam.

The musician's lighthearted story, however, had the opposite effect than what he had intended. Now, Charlie was looking a little unsure, as well.

"Is this *really* a good idea?" asked Bill, nervously looking around.

"That's why I gave you those thick hiking boots," Adam pointed out.

"Say," asked Kevin, seeing that their guide was answering questions, "are we going to see any tarantulas?"

At this, both Bill and Charlie stopped in their tracks.

"*Tarantulas?*" asked Charlie, incredulously. "I never knew there were *tarantulas* in the Mojave!"

"Of course there are!" laughed Adam. "But, they only come out to hunt at sunset and daybreak, so I don't think you'll get to see any."

"And I had my heart set on meeting one," sighed Bill, feigning disappointment as he tagged a little closer to Adam and Charlie.

The terrain began to get a little more rugged as they neared the ravine, but Adam expertly guided them through the brush and rocks until they suddenly came face to face with a tall, upright-standing rock. There were two others nearby, that also were standing up on end.

"Did you do that?" asked Charlie, curiously.

"Me?" replied Adam. "No. Those are called precarious rocks, or that's what the geologist called them. They've been standing here for hundreds of years, and probably will, for hundreds of years to come. You know, they say your best chance to ride out an earthquake is near a precarious rock."

"Where's the logic in that?" asked Bill. "This thing looks like it would fall over in a strong wind."

"If no earthquake in the past was strong enough to make this topple over, then it means the ground is more unlikely to shift around here," explained Adam. "Where you see the most toppled precarious rocks, the ground had moved more dramatically."

"I guess that makes sense," muttered Bill.

Soon, Charlie found herself near the edge of a middle-sized ravine, that jutted into the desert floor.

"I thought you said the ground hadn't moved here for hundreds of years?" laughed Charlie, pointing a flashlight down at the bottom of the darkness.

"Once in a while, in the rainy season, water comes rushing through here, carving out more of the Mojave," explained Adam.

"Why is this place called Harrison's Ravine?" asked Kevin, for Adam seemed to know everything.

"Beats me," shrugged the musician. "Over this way, there's a large flat boulder that gives a good vantage of the desert," he said leading them up some steep rocks.

After a few minutes of exertion, the group made it to the top. They were only a few feet from the desert floor, but in the clear night, Charlie could see sparkling lights in the distance.

"That's Twentynine Palms," explained Adam. "Look over here, Charlie. Do you see those faint glimmers on the horizon?"

Charlie squinted her eyes, and nodded in the affirmative.

"That's Twin Yucca," he smiled.

"Really?" she said, in surprise. "Have we hiked *that* far?"

Adam searched the top of the rock with a flashlight, and pronounced it to be free of scorpions. Charlie asked for the backpack and sat down on the face of the large rock. Kevin and Bill sat down also, but tried to remain out of the way, while the couple settled down to watch the stars.

"What did you bring?" asked Adam, as he sat down beside his fiancée.

"Grandma thought we might get hungry," smiled Charlie, getting out the individually wrapped sandwiches. "Would you pass these to Bill and Kevin?"

Charlie smiled as she heard, "Hey, thanks!" coming from the other side of the flat boulder. Soon, Adam returned, requesting his share.

The rock was cold, and the air was dry, but it only added to the strange rugged beauty of the desert. Off in the distance, a coyote howled, while another answered its call. Shadows raced along the Mojave floor as overhead clouds played with the remaining moonlight, jumping over sagebrush, and caressing the sandy expanse in the distance with long fingers of light and

darkness. Overhead, stars were brilliantly shining from large patches of clear night sky, as if serenading them with the grandness of the universe stretching beyond the heavens.

"I have to admit," sighed Charlie, "for all the scorpions, rattle snakes, and tarantulas, the Mojave *is* beautiful!"

When Adam didn't respond, Charlie turned away from the breathtaking vista, and found Adam had been watching her. The soft moonlight highlighted the shadows of his handsome face, revealing the loving gaze that he was showering her with. Charlie lowered her eyes, and looked back on the stillness of the Mojave, still conscious of Adam's gentle stare. Charlie's lips parted in a smile.

"Please, stop," she pleaded. "You're making me self-conscious."

"When I'm hundreds of miles away from you," said Adam, in a hushed voice that made Charlie feel warm in even the coolness of the night, "and I'm in cities I've never seen, with people I don't know, I'll remember the way you are right now. I want to memorize you by heart, so that no matter where I go, or what I do, you will be there with me. Oh, Charlie," he sighed, "do you know how beautiful you are?"

Charlie was going to make some response about him needing his glasses, but the words stuck in her throat. All she could see were his intently flashing eyes. Overhead, the moon ran its course, while falling stars cascaded around them.

"I tell myself that you love me," said Charlie, "and I can hardly believe it. I tell it to the mirror, and the reflection stares back at me incredulously. Only when I'm with you, or when I close my eyes, does it actually seem real."

Adam cupped his hands to his mouth, and shouted into the stillness,

"I LOVE YOU, CHARLOTTE OVERHOLT!"

His voice carried off into the distance, until all was silent once more.

"See?" he said. "No one is there to tell you that it isn't so."

Adam looked back at Charlie, only to see a glittering tear falling from her cheek.

"Our night is almost over," she said, trying to hold back the tears she felt welling up inside.

"No," argued Adam, reaching out to dry her face with the palm of his hand, "for us, time will stand still. Listen, you can almost hear it now. All over the world, in every home, clocks have stopped their vigil over seconds and minutes, because if the sun should come over the horizon once more, we must part. But, a word from you, and those clocks will come back to life. What do you say, Charlie-girl?"

"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven," quoted Charlie, thoughtfully. "There is a time to say 'good-bye,' and a time to say 'hello.' I will wait for the 'hello.'"

"There," said Adam, quietly, "my watch has just started up again. It's all your fault, Charlie."

"I wouldn't hold you back," she whispered, "not for all the money in the world. The sooner you go, the sooner you will come back to me."

"That's my girl," smiled Adam, lovingly.

All too soon, it was time to start the hike back to Twin Yucca. As they crossed the remaining expanse of desert, the sky slowly began to melt its dark hue.

"Are you coming to the airport, to see me off?" asked Adam, as they neared the small town.

"What if I fall apart, and start crying in front of the reporters and fans?" asked Charlie, hesitantly.

"Oh, no," Adam refuted confidently, "not *my* Charlie. She wouldn't do that. My Charlie would remember that I love her, and that God is watching out for us, and remain brave in the presence of others."

"I fear you have too much confidence in 'your Charlie,'" she sighed.

"Never!" exclaimed Adam, lovingly. "Why, didn't you know, that through Christ, she can do *anything!*" [Philippians 4:13]

Charlie smiled bravely, and wiped away another tear.

Before long, they were on the edge of Twin Yucca.

"Kevin," asked Adam, "would you take Charlie home for me? I doubt anyone on her street is awake at this hour, but I'd rather play it safe."

Kevin nodded his willingness, and waited for the couple to part.

"Say you'll come to the airport," he asked her, once more.

"I'll come," Charlie replied, courageously.

"We take off at ten a.m.," he reminded her.

"I'll be there," she affirmed.

Adam smiled gratefully, and began the walk home with Bill.

Providentially, no one on Charlie's street had noticed her coming or going that night. When Kevin unlocked the front door, and both went inside, they found Vera asleep on the couch, her knitting resting on the floor by her feet, where it had dropped when she dozed off.

"Grandma?" Charlie said gently, nudging the old woman's arm. "Have you been here all night?"

Vera woke up and groggily blinked at Charlie.

"Pumpkin, are you back already?" she asked in surprise.

"What do you mean, 'already'?" laughed Charlie. "It's nearly six o' clock!"

"I don't know why, but I got it into my head to wait up for you," chuckled the woman. "Do you two want breakfast?"

"Yes, thank you," replied Kevin, stretching out and taking Vera's vacant knitting chair in the corner of the room.

"Did you have a good time?" inquired Vera, as Charlie followed her into the kitchen.

"I had a *wonderful* time!" exclaimed the teenager, sitting down on a kitchen chair to untie her boots. "We hiked out to Harrison's Ravine, and sat on a big flat rock and talked the night away!"

"Well," smiled Vera, taking smoked sausage out of the refrigerator, "I'm glad you and Adam had a chance to be together before he leaves, today."

"Yes," sighed Charlie, a little sadder now at the recollection of his impending departure.

"Are you sure you won't have some sausage?" coaxed Vera, once more trying to get Charlie to forsake her vegetarianism.

"Thanks, Grandma," replied Charlie, "but I don't honestly see how you can stand to eat all that meat *every* morning!"

"I'll take that as a 'no,'" sighed the grandmother, fixing only enough for her, Chuck, and Kevin.

"Is Daddy awake, yet?" asked Charlie, getting up with boots in hand.

"No," replied Vera, placing the offending substance in a frying pan. "He wandered around the house last night, so I think he's a little tired this morning."

"I'll be careful not to wake him, then," said Charlie, quietly going to her room to change into the clothes she would go to the airport in.

In the bathroom, she looked at the mirror and said,

"He loves me."

Much to her joy, the reflection did not doubt it.

After taking a quick shower, Charlie dressed and went to the kitchen to eat a little breakfast, for she was too nervous to have much of an appetite.

"If you don't mind," said Vera, as Charlie took her place at the table, "I think I'll stay home with your father, and forego the trip to the airport. With all those reporters coming, I'd rather stay out of it, if I can."

"Maybe no reporters *will* come," said Charlie, so overoptimistically, that even Kevin gave her a disbelieving stare.

"From the calls I was getting early this morning, they **WILL** be there," warned Vera.

With spoon in hand, Charlie absent-mindedly played with the cereal in her bowl until it became inedible. Her mind was on Adam, and what he had told her last night. Charlie didn't *want* to face the media, but he had expressly requested that she come. He wanted to see her, one last time before leaving.

At nine-thirty, Kevin escorted Charlie out to the gray landrover, while a few reporters clamored for some kind of comment concerning how she was feeling now that Wallace Shipley was going back on tour. Charlie only smiled politely, and got inside the vehicle, while Kevin did his best to keep everyone at a safe distance.

The airport was not very far, (nothing in Twin Yucca was), and before long, Charlie could see Adam's jet, sitting on the runway, poised for takeoff. Outside the airport waiting room, she saw Adam, flanked on either side by Bill and Melvin, giving an "impromptu" press conference. Microphones were crammed together in front of Adam, as he said what Melvin had prepared for him to say, and then began to answer questions.

"Will *she* be coming, today?" was the first question asked.

Before Adam could open his mouth, the landrover pulled up.

Reporters immediately swarmed around them as Kevin escorted his client to the airport waiting room. Fans holding up signs of good wishes, shouted the now familiar chant, "Wal-lace! Wal-lace!" Soon, Adam joined them in the waiting room, for it had been quartered off for their use.

"Thank you for coming, Charlie," he said, taking her by the hand and leading her to a corner of the room not so populated. "If I have any down time between gigs, I'll try to make it back, but Gary doesn't think it will happen."

"I understand," replied Charlie, as Adam tightly took hold of her hand. "Do I have to go out there and answer any questions?" she asked, nervously.

"No, not if you don't want to," he assured her.

"Oh, Adam," she sighed, "what are we going to do?"

"We can call each other," he reminded her. "We've done it *before*."

"The jet's ready," announced Melvin, coming to where they stood. "Hello, Charlie. Sorry, but I've got to steal Adam from you. It's time to go."

Adam followed Melvin to the door, still grasping Charlie's hand. Outside, camera flashes and television news crews peered through the large glass windows, witnessing every moment, some even giving live coverage.

Adam turned to Charlie and smiled sadly. He tried to let go of her hand, but she wouldn't let him. Then, realizing what she was doing, her hand let go of his. She smiled bravely, straining every nerve within her, to hold back the grief she felt growing inside.

"That's my girl," whispered Adam, as he turned to leave.

"Adam?" called Charlie, a hint of frantic in her voice.

He looked at her expectantly. She wanted to beg him not to leave, but knew in her heart that he was only doing what had to be done.

"I love you," she said one more time.

He smiled proudly at her.

"Amor gignit amorem," he replied, and with that, Adam disappeared into the crowd, outside.

Charlie moved closer to the window, to see her beloved board the jet. Soon, the aircraft taxied down the runway, and took off into the clear horizon. Charlie watched it, until she could see it no more.

"What did he just say before he left?" wondered Kevin, out loud.

"'Amor gignit amorem,' is Latin for, 'Love begets love,'" explained Charlie. "The only time I ever said that in front of Adam, was the night he led me to Christ. Imagine him remembering *that!*"

Soon, Charlie was aware that every camera was on her, now that the famous Wallace Shipley had left. Securing her tightly by the upper arm, Kevin walked Charlie out to the landrover.

Questions such as "How are you feeling?" and "Show us the ring!" came from the reporters, while fans and well-wishers tried to get as close as they could to Wallace Shipley's fiancée.

None too soon for Charlie, Kevin pulled the vehicle away, and they were on their way back home.

"So much for not tipping the media off on which vehicle is ours," sighed Charlie. "Every time they see this landrover, they'll *know* it's me!"

"I know," sighed Kevin. "That's what I told Mr. Clark, but he said it would be worth it to have you down there to see him off. Then he gave me money to buy a new vehicle."

"He really did that?" asked Charlie, a little incredulously.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Kevin, with admiration in his voice. "He's a good man."

"The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and He delighteth in his way."
~ Psalm 37:23 ~

"I CAN do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."
~ Philippians 4:13 ~

Chapter Forty-four

The Truth About Charlie

"I [God] will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I, the LORD, which call thee by thy name, am the God of Israel."

~ Isaiah 45:3 ~

After Adam left, life gained in momentum for Charlie. Maggie came back from her honeymoon on Monday, so Jeff could go back to work. She dropped by the Overholt house to say hello to her young friend, but couldn't stay long, for she had a new home to put in order.

"We had such a wonderful time, Charlie!" Maggie exclaimed. "You were right, there wasn't anything to worry about. And that birds-and-the-bees talk? It was *true!*" she added in amazement.

Monday also brought Mrs. Strickland to Twin Yucca, for the continued public interest over Wallace Shipley was such a problem, that it prompted Galilee Christian School to send over a teacher to tutor Charlie at the Overholt residence, so she could forgo turning the school grounds into a media circus. Even though this had been Charlie's plan for some time, the school board had beaten her to it.

With Vera knitting quietly, and Chuck watching television with the volume all the way down, Mrs. Strickland began tutoring Charlie in the living room. Kevin sat on a chair near the front window, maintaining a vigilant eye on the activity outside.

A policeman had been assigned to the Overholt house. He sat outside in a patrol car, maintaining order on the near-constant traffic of tourists, sightseers, and fans. The neighborhood had requested his presence, even though the Twin Yucca Police Department really couldn't afford to dedicate a patrol unit for that street alone. However, action had to be taken, for out-of-towners were parking on lawns, traipsing about the sleepy neighborhood, trying to see if they could spot Charlie or Wallace Shipley, (even though his departure had been widely publicized).

After her lessons were over, and Mrs. Strickland had left, Shirley came over to discuss plans for the wedding. Charlie dearly wished that she could postpone this meeting, but her future sister-in-law was so zealous, that the teenager didn't have the heart to say "not now."

"We really don't have much time to get a reservation for the reception room, you know," Shirley was saying. "I've found that most places are booked solid during the summer months, because many people get married then."

There were so many things to plan and arrange for the wedding, that Charlie felt numb. There were the caterers to consider, the dress to pick out, the reception room to rent, the flower arrangements to line up, the guest lists to prepare, the wedding favors to purchase, the dresses for the bridesmaids to pick out, the wedding cake to plan, the photographer to hire, the seating arrangements to lay out, and the wedding vows that needed to be written. All in all, by the time Shirley had left, little had been settled on, and Charlie was even more tired than before.

"Oh, Grandma!" exclaimed Charlie, wearily flopping down on the couch, after Shirley left, "I'm going to be so relieved when this wedding is all over with!"

"That's not a very healthy attitude," remarked Vera, taking in the tea tray to the kitchen. "You only get married once. You should be enjoying all these preparations, not dreading them."

"I might be able to enjoy it more, if I didn't have so many other things to do, at the same time," groaned Charlie, from the living room.

Just then, someone knocked on the front door. Kevin jumped to his feet and checked the woman out before letting her inside.

"Do you know a Constance Riley?" asked Kevin, looking over his shoulder to Charlie for her approval.

"Yes, she's all right," replied Charlie, bracing herself for Adam's old girlfriend.

A well dressed, blonde-headed woman stepped inside the living room. This was the second time Charlie had talked to Constance, the first time being in North Carolina at the Christmas concert.

"Thank you for seeing me," said Constance, coming forward to shake Charlie's hand. "I realize you must be busy. Shirley thought you might need help in finding a new house here in Twin Yucca."

"That's very thoughtful of you," replied Charlie, shaking her hand, "but Adam and I think it's best if we don't remain in Twin Yucca."

Constance flinched a little when she heard the words, "Adam and I" come from Charlie's lips. She stared at the teenager for a moment, and then resumed her sales pitch.

"I hope I can persuade you otherwise," said Constance, pulling out a glossy folder from her briefcase. "This area of Southern California is rapidly growing, and it's only going to be a matter of time before people commuting from Los Angeles are going to discover our low land prices. Let me show you..."

Here Constance proceeded to show Charlie a series of homes near or around Twin Yucca. Charlie smiled and politely listened. It was clear to her that Constance did not want to be here. She was only here because Shirley was a good friend, and Shirley wanted them to stay in the area. By the time the sales pitch was over, Charlie had promised to look over the brochures Constance had given her.

"Well," said Constance, getting up to leave, "I've taken up enough of your time. May I ask..." the woman hesitated. "I know it's probably none of my business, for what's done is done. But, did you know that Adam was Wallace Shipley, when you first came to Twin Yucca?"

"No, I didn't," answered the teenager, surprised by the question. "I was as shocked as everyone else."

"It's really astounding," said Constance, "I've known him for nearly nine years, and I never even had the vaguest hint of his other identity. But then, Adam is full of surprises. After all, I always thought *I* was his type."

Charlie didn't know what to say, or how to answer. Constance, however, wasn't expecting a response. Without another word, she left the Overholt house. When the front door shut, Charlie breathed a sigh of relief-- the meeting with Constance was over.

The days that followed were a like a dream for the teenage girl. The long anticipated Christmas special finally aired on public television, causing more than a little commotion in the small community. Charlie couldn't look out the window without exciting fans outside the house. She had recorded the special on tape, only to get a DVD version in the mail from Adam, along with a note saying that he loved her.

His tour had intensified in appearances and concerts, so that he found little time to talk to Charlie on the satellite phone. Oftentimes, when she called, he wasn't able to answer. Charlie lost count of how many times Adam had apologized, but she always insisted that she understood.

Christmas came and went and Adam and Charlie were talking even less to each other than before. It wasn't intentional, but their schedules and responsibilities were giving them little time to be together. January passed, and then March. Wedding plans were at fever pitch, while Shirley frequented the Overholt house daily with fabric samples, flower arrangement ideas, and a multitude of other details that any wedding coordinator would have been more than happy to handle for her.

April began pretty much as had the months before, with much planning and preparation. On the twenty-third, Charlie would turn seventeen-- an event which she looked forward to with great anticipation. Little did she know, however, that this month would change her life in more ways than one.

"Hurry, up, Grandma!" urged Charlie, as she waited for Vera to put on her coat. "Maggie and Jeff are expecting us!"

Kevin was waiting by the front door, ready to hurry Charlie off to a car outside. The bodyguard had opted for two vehicles instead of just one: a sport utility vehicle that was parked out of public sight for the purpose of traveling long distances without being recognized, and a car, to shuttle her about Twin Yucca.

"I'm coming," replied Vera. "Didn't Maggie give you even a *tiny* hint as to what the big announcement is?"

"Her lips were sealed!" laughed Charlie. "I think it has something to do with Jeff being promoted, though," she guessed. "I just hope they don't move-- at least, not before *we* do!"

At last, Vera was ready, and the front door opened. Kevin got the women safely to the car, while tourists and fans eagerly took pictures of the little maneuver.

Since Twin Yucca was a small place, they quickly arrived at their destination. Jeff hurried the women inside the Erickson house, where Maggie happily received them.

"Charlie," she smiled excitedly, "I'm so glad you're here!"

"What's the big news?" asked Charlie, with bated breath.

"Not yet!" laughed Maggie, as they all sat down in the living room.

It was quite an informal gathering. Maggie's mother was present (without her husband), as were Jeff's parents. Debbie sat on her grandma's lap while her grandpa talked to Jeff.

Vera seemed strangely happy, for one that didn't yet know what their news was. Jeff poured everyone a glass of sparkling apple cider, and with Maggie by his side, made an important announcement.

"I'm sure, by now, you're all wondering what the big news is," he grinned. "I won't keep everyone in anticipation, any longer. Maggie and I are going to have a baby!"

The room erupted with congratulations and tearful smiles. Maggie hugged Charlie, and tried to hold back the joyful tears, without success. It was a truly happy moment for everyone. Then, Maggie showed Charlie the room they were planning to turn into the baby's nursery.

"And we're going to put the crib over here, next to the window," said Maggie, as Charlie took another sip of her apple cider.

"Have you guys thought of any names, yet?" asked Charlie, as the two women sat down on the floor to talk.

"Jeff likes Sophie if it's a girl, or Donald if it's a boy," said Maggie, with a thoughtful face. "I think I like Rachel or James, but I'm not sure. Jeff says we have plenty of time to decide."

"Well, Maggie," sighed Charlie, contentedly, "I thought it probably *would* happen to you, before it did me. After all, you have an eight month head start! Wouldn't it be neat if you had a boy and I had a girl and they grew up and married each other? That would sort of make us related, wouldn't it?"

"Is the wedding still planned for July?" asked Maggie.

"Adam promises me the tour will be over by then," laughed Charlie, "but I sometimes find it hard to believe!"

"I already have your birthday present, bought and wrapped," teased Maggie.

"You didn't have to do that!" exclaimed Charlie.

"I *wanted* to," smiled the woman. "Can I give it to you, now?"

"But," pointed out Charlie, "my birthday isn't until the end of the month!"

"Please?" begged Maggie, getting to her feet to go get the package.

"It's yours to give whenever you want," conceded Charlie.

Maggie dashed off and quickly returned with a ribboned box. She thrust it beneath Charlie's nose and eagerly urged her to open the present.

Charlie undid the bow and carefully unfastened the tape on the wrapping paper, as was her habit.

"Oh!" exclaimed Maggie, impatiently, "go faster than that!"

With a smile, the teenager did as she was told. Soon, she uncovered a small felt box. Upon lifting the lid, she saw half of a heart on a gold chain.

"I have the other half!" said Maggie, eagerly taking hers off and piecing the two halves together so Charlie could read the inscription:

"Best friends, no matter how far apart."

"It's so you won't forget me, when you move," explained Maggie.

"I could never forget, Maggie," said Charlie, giving her friend another hug.

After the celebration was over, Kevin took Charlie and Vera home. That night, Charlie lie in bed awake, thinking about Maggie and the baby. An old, forgotten thought returned to her mind. She turned over, and closed her eyes. Charlie had made her decision.

It was now mid-April, and Vera heard the front door shut as Charlie returned from an errand at Mullen-Overholt. Kevin, of course, had gone with her. Upon hearing their return, Vera went to the living room, only to find Kevin holding Charlie in his arms. Charlie's face was pale white, and visibly shaken.

"What happened?" cried Vera.

"I don't know," replied Kevin, lifting her onto the sofa. "She was in Mr. Overholt's office, and when she came out, she was shaking like a leaf! I brought her home, immediately."

Vera went over to her granddaughter and rubbed the young woman's hands together.

"Pumpkin?" asked Vera. "What's wrong? What happened?"

Charlie couldn't stop from shaking. Suddenly, her world spun around, and she passed out. When Charlie came to, she saw Vera and Kevin's concerned faces hovering above her.

"Get a wet towel!" Vera instructed him.

The bodyguard disappeared, quickly returning with a damp bathroom towel. Vera dabbed the teenager's face, slowly reviving her.

"Charlie! What happened?" insisted Vera, in a troubled voice.

"I'm sorry," stammered Charlie, getting to her feet. "I shouldn't have fainted."

She made her way to the bedroom and shut the door behind her. Vera glared at Kevin, angrily.

"What did you do to her?" demanded Vera.

"*Nothing!*" insisted Kevin. "Miss Overholt was fine when she went into your son's office. I can't imagine what happened to make her act like this!"

Vera went to the telephone and called Jerome.

"What happened to Charlie?" Vera asked him, frantically.

"Well, well," sighed Jerome. "I'll send over a nurse to take a look at her. Calm down, Mom."

Jerome's grim personality had little calming effect upon Vera. She went to Charlie's door, and tried to go in, only to find that the teenager's door was locked.

"Charlie," pleaded Vera, "please, Pumpkin, tell me what's wrong!"

After a moment or two, the door opened, and Vera saw Charlie's pale face peering out at her.

"It's all right, Grandma," said the girl, going back to her bed. "I'm just very tired, right now."

Vera wanted to press her for an answer or explanation, but saw that Charlie truly did look worn out. She stepped forward and tucked her granddaughter into bed.

"Jerome is sending over a nurse to have a look at you," she said, consolingly.

Charlie closed her eyes and tried to will herself asleep. Vera tiptoed from the room, and noiselessly shut the door. After a few minutes, a woman in a nurse's uniform knocked on the front door. Evelyn Saunders, the Director of Nursing at Mullen-Overholt stepped inside as Vera thanked her for coming. Then Vera led her to Charlie's room where she turned on the nightstand light.

"Charlie?" asked Evelyn. "Are you in any pain?"

Charlie shook her head, "no," and closed her eyes. After a few minutes alone with the girl, Evelyn went to the living room to talk to Vera.

"You understand," warned Evelyn, "that I'm not a doctor. From what I can tell, there's nothing wrong with her, physically. I think she's in psychological shock."

"Could stress have anything to do with it?" wondered Vera. "She's been under a great deal of pressure, lately. There's the wedding, the new house, passing her GED, and all the media attention."

"My advice," said Evelyn, "is to let her rest and calm down. If you're still concerned, you might want to get your doctor to examine her. I'm afraid that's all I can tell you."

"Thank you, Evelyn," said Vera, gratefully.

After the nurse left, Vera called Jerome, again.

"What happened to Charlie in your office?" pressed Vera.

"She came in today," related Jerome, "and wanted to know if I had received my wedding invitation, yet."

"Is that *all*?" asked Vera.

"I told her that I had," answered Jerome. "She'll be all right, Mom."

Vera sensed he was hiding something from her, but she wasn't sure. The old woman hung up the phone and prayed that Charlie would be back to normal after a good rest.

In her bedroom, Charlie rolled over onto her stomach and buried her face into the pillow. She smothered the sobs that now came freely. Every muscle in her body ached with grief.

"Dear, Jesus! What should I do?" she prayed.

The rest of the day, Charlie passed in tears and thought. When night began to descend on the desert, she came out of her bedroom. Her face was white, and her eyes were red from weeping, but she was composed and collected.

"Grandma," she announced, her voice still shaky, "I've decided that I need to get away for a few days. I've called Mrs. Jenkins back in Montana, and she said I could stay at her place for as long as I wanted."

"Go away?" said Vera, confused. "What's going on, Pumpkin?"

"My life is going on," answered Charlie. "Everything is happening so fast, that I need to get away and think. I *must* think!"

"All right," sighed Vera. "I'll go pack our bags."

"No," resisted Charlie. "I need to go by myself."

Vera looked at her with a puzzled face.

"Are you sure you don't want to tell me?" she asked.

"It's complicated," said Charlie.

"The only way I'll let you leave, is if you take Kevin with you," answered Vera. "I refuse to let you take a step out of this house without your bodyguard. And then, you **MUST** call me when you get there. I want Mrs. Jenkins' phone number and address, and I want to talk to her, myself."

Charlie nodded in agreement, and handed her grandmother a slip of paper with the required information.

"Do you want me to call LAX, and reserve two seats for you on the next flight to Montana?" asked Vera, seeing that she was still intent on going.

"Thank you for understanding, Grandma," said Charlie.

"Don't thank me," answered Vera, throwing up her hands. "I don't understand *anything*. What about Adam? Won't you at least talk to Adam?"

The young woman hesitated. A look of apprehension crossed her face.

"No," she stammered, "I can't talk to him-- not right now."

While Charlie and Kevin packed, Vera called Mrs. Jenkins and made sure that it was truly all right for them to come. Then, she made the flight reservations at LAX.

"Don't let her out of your sight," Vera instructed Kevin in a hushed voice. "If anything happens-- anything at all, you let me know!"

Charlie hugged her grandma and then disappeared into the vehicle outside. As soon as it was out of sight, Vera went to the telephone and called Adam.

"Hello? Adam?" said Vera.

"No, this is Bill," replied a voice. "Who is this, please?"

"Bill, it's Vera," began the old woman. "I need to get in touch with Adam, as soon as possible."

"He's finishing up an interview, right now," explained Bill. "Why? Is something wrong?"

"I don't know," replied Vera, truthfully. "I hope not."

After a few minutes, Bill put Adam on the phone.

"Vera, Bill said you wanted to talk to me," said the musician. "What's up?"

"It's Charlie," explained Vera. "I think she needs you."

Kevin had switched vehicles in Joshua Tree, effectively eluding anyone who might have been tailing them. Charlie remained silent, resting her head on the back of her seat. The world rushed past Charlie's window, in a haze of headlights and brake lights. Kevin was silent, but kept a watchful eye on his client. He had been her bodyguard for about half a year now, and her demeanor troubled him.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, seeing that it was approaching dinner time.

Charlie didn't respond, for her attention was elsewhere. Seeing it was up to him, Kevin pulled into a fast-food drive through and ordered their dinner.

"Here," he said, giving her a wrapped fish-fillet burger with fries. "You eat fish, right?"

Charlie nodded that she did, and took the wrapper off. Kevin hurriedly ate his food, and then started back onto the highway, for they had a plane to catch, and traffic out of LA was heavy.

After hours of tail to tail bumpers, they finally arrived at the Los Angeles International Airport, also known as LAX. Kevin got out and carried their luggage inside the terminal. He handed her her suitcase, so he could keep one hand firmly gripping her arm.

Charlie might have been able to run away from Twin Yucca, but it wasn't so easy to run from her celebrity. One by one, people turned and stared at Charlie, all the while whispering, and pointing. As they passed a gift shop, Kevin quickly bought a pair of sunglasses and a baseball cap and put them on her. It helped a little.

Once on board the airplane, Charlie felt like crying once more, but couldn't do so without attracting the entire attention of first class, so she took a mild sleeping sedative and fell asleep. An hour and a half later, she felt Kevin shaking her awake.

"Changeover," he explained, helping Charlie to her feet.

As they descended the flight steps, a healthy gust of wind roused Charlie from her drug-induced lethargy.

"Where are we?" she asked, numbly looking around at her surroundings.

"Seattle, Washington," replied Kevin. "Our plane doesn't take off for about another hour."

Kevin found the quietest corner of the waiting room and put Charlie there. He stood nearby, ever ready to do his duty. Just as she was again feeling the sleeping pills, it was time to board the plane that would take them to Montana.

As Charlie settled in for the nearly two hour flight, she tried not to think about what had transpired to bring her back to her Montana home.

When the plane landed, Kevin rented a car to make the short drive into Butte, and then to the apartment building that Charlie and Chuck had called home for so many years. As they pulled up to the familiar building, Charlie felt herself longing for the comforting arms of her father,

telling her that everything would be all right. It was eleven o' clock at night, and the the lights in the hallway were on.

Charlie led the way, straight to Mrs. Jenkins' apartment.

"We used to live on the door opposite hers," explained Charlie, as she knocked on the old woman's door.

Mrs. Jenkins opened the door, and hugged her favorite neighbor.

"My!" she exclaimed. "You've grown so tall, Charlotte!"

As Charlie and Kevin entered the room, a man stood up from where he had been sitting on the couch.

Charlie gasped in surprise. It was Adam!

"You're right," observed Mrs. Jenkins, smiling at Adam. "She *is* surprised! Well, I'll let you two talk while I put the kettle on."

With that, the old woman shuffled to the kitchen with Kevin. For a still moment, Adam and Charlie just stared at each other.

"Charlie," asked Adam, breaking the silence, "what's going on? Vera called me and gave me your address, and I flew down here as soon as I could. She's right, you *don't* look well."

Adam stepped forward to touch her face, but Charlie pulled away from him. The concerns he had been trying to talk himself out of, now suddenly seemed all too possible.

"You're scaring me, Charlie," he said, soberly.

"I need some time to think," replied Charlie.

"What happened in Jerome's office?" asked Adam. "Did he hurt you?"

"No, Uncle Jerome didn't hurt me," she answered. "This doesn't have anything to do with Uncle Jerome. I just need time to think."

"Yes, you keep saying that," muttered Adam, trying not to panic. "Are you thinking about us-- about me? Is that why you're here? Please, Charlie, I'm trying to understand! Is this because I've been too busy to talk on the phone with you, lately?"

"It's not you, Adam," assured Charlie. "It's *me*. Things are different now, and I don't know what to do about it, yet."

"*What's* different?" he asked. "I'm the same man who loves you as I was half a year ago, when you said you'd marry me."

"I know," answered the young woman, feeling a little weak.

Seeing this, Adam helped her to sit down on the couch. He checked her forehead.

"You don't have a fever," he observed, thoughtfully.

"Adam, please be patient with me," asked Charlie, touching his arm. "I'm asking a lot of hard questions, and the answers are frightening me. I have to sort this out on my own. I know you want to help, but this is something I have to do, myself."

"Are you leaving me, Charlie-girl?" he asked, his voice breaking at the last. "Wait, don't answer that. Maybe it's only my imagination, but I'm almost afraid you'll call off the wedding."

Adam stood up, unable to look her in the eye.

"I'll give you as much time to think as you need," he said, "but Charlie, I don't know what I'll do if you leave me."

With that, Adam left the apartment. When the door closed, Charlie collapsed into a flood of tears, causing Mrs. Jenkins and Kevin to hurry from the kitchen.

"Where is he?" asked Kevin.

After getting no intelligible answer from Charlie, Kevin opened the front door and hurried down the hall, just catching Adam as he was about to leave the building.

"Mr. Clark!" shouted Kevin, running to meet him.

Adam turned, and quickly brushed away the wet around his eyes.

"Mr. Clark," said Kevin, "what's going on?"

"I don't know," said Adam, in an unsteady voice. "I think I'm losing her, and I don't know why."

"What do you want me to do?" asked the bodyguard.

"Don't let anything happen to her," requested Adam. "If she'd let me stay, I'd take care of her myself. Please, look after her. And if she tries to fire you for getting in the way, I'll hire you back, so don't leave her alone!"

"I won't," promised Kevin. "What are you going to do, Mr. Clark?"

"Please," said the employer, "my name is just Adam. I think I'll fly back to Twin Yucca and try to drag the truth out of Jerome."

Adam checked his watch and laughed sadly.

"Bill threatened to have a heart attack, because I walked out on a concert to be here, tonight," he mused. "Dear God, I don't understand what's happening!"

Dazed and confused, Adam left the building. Kevin shook his head in sympathy, and returned to the apartment. He found that Mrs. Jenkins had helped Charlie to the spare bedroom, and put her to bed.

"The poor dear," sighed the old woman, after she closed the door and went to the living room to give Kevin an armful of blankets and a pillow so he could sleep on the couch in somewhat comfort. "This is worse than even the last time she tried to run away."

"Last time'?" asked Kevin, puzzled.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Jenkins, "it was just after Charlton had found out he had Early Onset Alzheimer's Disease. He got his former sister-in-law to take her to North Carolina, and the poor dear tried to run away. I'll never forget that day, the poor dear!"

Adam didn't get any sleep that night, as his private jet crossed five states before landing at the Twin Yucca Airport. He hurried to Mullen-Overholt, and barged into Jerome's office. Finding it empty, Adam made his way to Jerome's private quarters, where he lived at the nursing home. Jerome was in bed, sleeping soundly, when Adam turned on the lights.

"What's going on!" demanded Jerome, shielding his eyes from the overhead light, for they were still adjusted to the dark.

"That's what I was going to ask *you*!" shouted Adam, angrily.

"Adam!" exclaimed Jerome in surprise. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Something happened to her, Jerome!" Adam cried, desperately.

"Who?" asked Jerome, getting out of bed and putting on his robe.

"Charlie, of course!" answered Adam. "What happened to her?"

"So, she called off the engagement," muttered Jerome. "I can't say I'm surprised."

"She hasn't called it off, yet!" retorted Adam.

"But, you're afraid she *will*," observed Jerome.

"What did you say to her?" demanded the musician.

"Not a thing," replied Jerome. "Not a single thing. She was here to pick something up-- that's all."

"What did she pick up?" asked Adam.

Jerome hesitated.

"An envelope," he replied.

"What was *in* the envelope?" pressed Adam.

"That, I don't know," said Jerome. "You don't believe me, do you?" he asked, his mouth spreading into a long thin line. "I know I'm not a likable man, but I'm not a liar."

"Vera said Charlie talked to you about wedding invitations," reminded Adam.

"Okay," conceded Jerome. "One little white lie, to get Mom off my back."

"Who was the envelope from?" asked Adam.

"Don't worry," scoffed Jerome. "It's not your competition."

"TELL ME!" shouted Adam. "I have a right to know!"

"I'm going to bed," said Jerome. "Please close the door on your way out."

Adam resisted the urge to resort to violence, and hurriedly left Mullen-Overholt. He stood outside, unsure where to go. With a heavy heart, he finally went home, to an empty house.

The next morning, Adam had the revelation to look through Charlie's satellite phone bills, to see what numbers she had been calling. With a quick call to the phone company, and after verifying that he was the one who paid the bills, Adam was given a list of numbers. Most numbers he immediately recognized as friends and family, and of course, his own cell number. However, one number stood out.

Adam promptly called the phone number and held his breath. To his relief, it was a woman's voice that answered.

"University of Southern California, ADRB department," answered the receptionist.

"Hello," began Adam, "I need to talk to someone in charge."

"I'm sorry," said the woman, "you have to be more specific than that. What office do you want?"

"Well," said Adam, "I'm not sure. This is difficult to explain, but my fiancée is about to call off our engagement, and I found your number on her phone bill. It's the only number that I'm not familiar with, and I was hoping someone there might possibly know her. I know it's far-fetched, but I'm grasping at straws here. Maybe you've heard of her-- Charlotte Overholt?"

"Excuse me," said the woman, "but might you be Wallace Shipley?"

"Yes," said Adam. "I'm Wallace Shipley. Has Charlotte ever been there?"

"Please hold one minute, sir," said the woman, as she switched Adam to nondescript hold music.

Adam inhaled, and drummed his fingers on the desk. He hoped they hadn't only heard of Charlie because of the publicity.

"Sir, are you still there?" asked the woman, the music suddenly going still.

"Yes," answered Adam, "I'm still here."

"Mr. Webber has agreed to see you, at your earliest convenience," informed the woman. "Would twelve noon be all right?"

"Yes, that's fine," said Adam, a little unsure what was going on. "I'm terribly sorry," he apologized, "but what's your address?"

The woman gave the address, and then politely hung up. The conversation hadn't cleared up any questions Adam had-- instead, they brought up several more. Why would Charlie call a university? Had she applied to attend? He recalled some distant conversation where she had alluded to an old desire to become a dentist. Could that be what this was all about? And why was Jerome so secretive? Then there was the receptionist he had just spoken to. When she realized who Charlotte was, she suddenly seemed very polite and helpful, but was slow to say anything very informative. Adam had the sense that it just wasn't because he was Wallace Shipley, either.

"I *MUST* know!" he cried.

Not wanting to be spotted by fans, Adam began the drive to LA, just as the sun was threatening to peak over the Mojave horizon. He knew he would arrive hours too early, but he had to do *something*.

To his surprise, Adam discovered that the address he had been given was not the university's admissions center, but a research building, instead. An uneasy feeling crept over him as he made his way down the long walkways to the building number the woman had told him. Adam's heart sunk when he saw that it was the Alzheimer's Disease Research Building. He put his sunglasses back on and went back to his car.

"This is probably about Chuck," he told himself. "Please God, cause that to be it!"

The hours slowly ticked by, until it was time for the appointment. Adam followed his footsteps once more to the Alzheimer's Disease Research Building. When the female receptionist saw him coming, she immediately recognized him, and pointed to an office door.

"He's waiting for you," she said.

Adam took off his sunglasses and knocked on the door.

"Come in," said a male voice. "Mr. Shipley, please sit down. My name is Peter Webber. I understand you're making inquiries about Charlotte Overholt."

"Yes," said Adam, sitting down in a comfortable chair facing the desk.

"First, I must tell you," said Peter, "that what I'm about to tell you is in the strictest confidence. In fact, the only reason I even agreed to see you, is because the said person's legal guardian has given permission for me to do so."

"Jerome Overholt?" asked Adam.

"Precisely," answered Peter. "How much about this matter are you already familiar with?"

"Nothing," said Adam. "I'm completely in the dark."

Peter became very sober. He got up and made sure the office door was closed, before resuming his seat behind the desk.

"I see," sighed Peter. "Well, I suppose I should start at the beginning. I'm a Certified Genetic Counselor. I was approached by Jerome early this month concerning someone who wanted to test for the PS-1 gene, but wanted to keep their identity secret. Of the people we test, it's not rare to have someone wanting to use an alias, because they're afraid of not being able to get life insurance, and other such issues. Well, Jerome's friend came in, and was tested. I didn't have to see her face to know who she was. Her family's medical history told me that I was looking at an Overholt. For many years, I've been after Jerome to get tested, because families like his could tell us a lot about genetics. Finally, I had the opportunity to test another Overholt, but I couldn't use her in any family case studies."

Adam gripped the arm rests of his chair.

"Do you wish to take a moment, Mr. Shipley?" asked Peter.

"No," answered Adam, "go on."

"Charlotte was given the test, and the results came back positive. She has the PS-1 gene," informed Peter.

"What is this PS-whatever gene, you're talking about?" asked Adam, trying to hold back the feelings that were starting to flood his being.

"It's called the Presenelin 1 gene," answered the counselor, "and is found on chromosome 14. It's inherited in an autosomal dominant pattern, and is fully penetrant."

"Penetrant'?" asked Adam. "What exactly does that mean?"

"It means," said Peter, slowly, "that Charlotte has inherited the gene that is responsible for Early Onset Alzheimer's Disease."

Adam felt the room spin around him. With a shaking hand, he brushed away the sweat on his forehead.

"Just because she has the gene," he asked, "does that mean she *has* to get the disease?"

Peter was gravely silent.

"I'm sorry," he answered.

"Isn't there anything we can do about it?" asked Adam, frantically.

"There is no known cure for AD," said Peter.

"But," reasoned Adam, "she's young and healthy!"

"In cases such as these, where the inherited gene has been confirmed-- those people could lead completely healthy lives, and they would still develop AD symptoms," Peter carefully explained. "Her case is really quite rare, actually. There's only been ten dozen or so families that have been confirmed to carry the PS-1 mutation. When Charlotte came here, she had a fifty percent chance of having inherited the gene. If she ever has children, they will also have a fifty percent chance of having inherited the mutated gene."

"How long does she have?" asked Adam, fighting with every nerve in his body not to break down.

"She doesn't have the disease, yet," said Peter. "There *is* a difference. Normally, PS-1 has an average age of onset at about thirty-two to fifty-six. Her grandfather was diagnosed at fifty-two, while Charlton was diagnosed at forty-two. I'd guess that she would start exhibiting signs of Early Onset Alzheimer's Disease (EOAD), in approximately the same range."

Adam was speechless. His darling was to share in the same fate as Chuck, Arnold, and even her great-grandfather.

"Chuck used to do puzzles," stammered Adam. "He said his doctor said it might help slow the progress of the disease."

"Yes," said Peter, "it might help. However, you understand, that Charlotte doesn't need any external triggers to have EOAD. Her genes are enough."

"Yes," stammered Adam, "but it *could* help? Mental stimulation *could* help?"

"It's possible that it might help stave off the disease for an unspecified amount of time," conceded Peter. "But, when it's going to happen, it's going to happen. I can't imagine living with the threat of such a disease over my head," said Peter, "but Charlotte chose to be tested. This foreknowledge isn't for everyone. But, it *was* her choice."

"I understand," said Adam, trying to think clearly.

"Do you have any other questions?" asked Peter.

"I can't think of any," said Adam. "It still hasn't sunk in, yet."

"Of course, I understand," said Peter, sympathetically. "Here's my card. You can contact me anytime you wish, day or night. On behalf of the research building, I want to extend our sympathy to you and your family."

Adam accepted his hand and stood up to leave.

"I'd appreciate it," said Adam, "if this discussion could be kept secret. The media would have a field day with this news."

"Of course," said Peter. "As I said before, Jerome's consent was the only reason why I spoke with you, in the first place. You can rely on us for complete privacy."

"Thank you for your understanding," said Adam. "One more thing-- does Jerome know the results?"

"I couldn't say," replied Peter. "I'd assume he would, but I really don't know."

Adam went out to his car, and sat dumbly in front of the wheel before breaking down into tears.

"My poor Charlie-girl!" he wept.

As much as he mourned for the future that he knew she would suffer, the thought of her choosing to endure it alone, grieved his very soul. It was a full hour before Adam could regain enough composure to make the drive back to Twin Yucca.

Several hours later, Adam pulled up outside of Mullen-Overholt. He shut off the engine and sat there, deep in thought. A lone tumbleweed blew across the street and hugged one of Adam's car tires, before tumbling off wherever the wind would carry it. Just then, Adam's eye caught sight of Jerome's car pulling up. Adam opened his car door and followed Jerome into the facility.

When Jerome saw Adam's face, he smiled grimly.

"You wish it were me, instead of her, don't you?" he sneered. "Someday, she'll be in a place like this-- who knows? It might be this very one. She could have a bed next to her father's!"

Adam lunged at Jerome, pinning his back to the wall.

"You knew she was positive, didn't you?" he demanded.

"I told Charlie that I would help set up the test, if she promised not to tell me the results," answered Jerome.

Adam let go of Jerome's shirt and stepped back.

"By the way she took the news, I only concluded the obvious," Jerome added, straightening his collar.

"How could you let her go through that, alone?" asked Adam, in bewilderment. "She's all by herself! How could you do that to her?!"

"I'll let you in on something," confided Jerome. "It may surprise you to hear this, but every time one of my residents dies, a little of myself dies with them. Perhaps I have no soul left to feel what you ask. I don't know. But, I used to know. I used to be the best in the business. Do you know why? Because I cared! Me! Jerome Overholt! You ask how I could let Charlie go though this alone. Ask me how it feels to see your family succumb to this silent monster, one at a time. I'll tell you one more thing, Adam. I thought I was going to be next. Sometimes, that thought has been the only way this job seemed bearable. As horrible a death as Alzheimer's is, it has to be better than the death I'm living, right now."

Adam stared at his former chess partner. Without a word, he turned to leave.

"You're going to her, aren't you?" said Jerome.

"I've loved her, like I've never loved any other woman," replied Adam.

Then Adam left Mullen-Overholt, silently vowing to never let his beloved go to such a man as Jerome Overholt, pitiable creature though he was.

When Adam reached home, he found Vera waiting for him on the doorstep. Miraculously, there were no fans to hound them-- a fact for which Adam was truly grateful.

"You saw her?" asked Vera, as Adam unlocked his front door and they stepped inside.

"I saw her," he replied, tossing the keys onto the coffee table. "Vera, I found out what happened to Charlie."

He looked at her solemnly.

"Tell me, Adam," urged Vera.

"I saw Peter Webber, this afternoon," he began.

Vera didn't need to hear anymore. She sank down on the couch and buried her face in her hands. Vera was very familiar with the name, for he had been the one who tested Arnold and Chuck, and had been after Jerome to be tested, for many years.

"Not Charlie!" wept Vera, her aged frame shuddering with grief. "I'm too old, Adam! I've lived too long! First my husband, then my son, and now my only grandchild! How can God ask so much of me?"

"I can only say," replied Adam, numb with grief, "'the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.'"

Adam sat down on the couch and held Vera.

"We won't fail her, will we-- you and I?" he asked. "I'm going to fly to Montana, this evening. Do you want to come?"

After Vera left Chuck with Evelyn at Mullen-Overholt, she boarded Adam's private jet. On the flight back to Montana, Adam planned what he would say to Charlie. He held Charlie's satellite

phone tightly, for she had left it behind in Twin Yucca. Adam planned to return it to her, as soon as he could.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, the other satellite phone rang.

"Mr. Clark," said Kevin, his voice sounding an alarm in Adam's soul, "Charlie's gone!"

"And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her."

~ Genesis 29:20 ~

Love "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things."

~ 1 Corinthians 13:7 ~

Chapter Forty-five
Always In My Heart

"I [God] will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them... These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them."

~ Isaiah 42:16 ~

Kevin had just said the words Adam had dreaded to hear: "Charlie's gone!"

"Mrs. Jenkins went to wake her up for dinner," related Kevin, "but quickly discovered that Miss Overholt wasn't anywhere in the room. It appears as though she left by a bedroom window."

"Could someone have abducted her?" asked Adam, trying to gather his thoughts about what should be done next.

"I don't think so, Mr. Clark," answered the bodyguard. "Miss Overholt left a letter. It's addressed to *you*."

"Don't read it over the phone," directed Adam, checking his watch. "Vera and I should arrive at the airport, in a little while."

"I'll meet you with a car," replied Kevin. "I'm very sorry, Mr. Clark," he apologized. "You told me not to leave her alone, and I did. I blame myself for what happened."

"I didn't see this coming, either," consoled Adam.

When the musician hung up, he had the hard duty of breaking the news to Vera, who was resting at the other end of the private jet.

"Vera," he said, going to her seat, "brace yourself. Charlie's run away."

Vera's face fell, but after the news of Charlie's Alzheimer's test, this wasn't as big of a shock as it would have been, otherwise.

When the jet landed at the Silver Bow County Airport late that night, Kevin met Adam and Vera with a rented car. It was mid-April, and the Montana ground was still covered with snow. The difference in temperatures came as somewhat of a shock to Vera, who had just a little while ago, come from a dry, arid climate, to now step out into frigid air.

"Still no word," informed Kevin, as he helped Vera into the car.

"Do you have the letter?" requested Adam, getting into the passenger seat up front.

The bodyguard handed him a thin white envelope addressed to Adam. Inside, he could feel the small lump that was Charlie's engagement ring. When Adam opened the envelope, it slid out onto the palm of his hand and sparkled with all the luster of the night he had first placed it onto Charlie's finger. As the city lights of Butte passed before Adam, casting blurred images of luminance through the fogging windows, an inexpressible sadness pervaded his heart. He hadn't yet opened the letter, but he knew what was in it. He read it aloud for Vera's benefit, struggling to finish each sentence, and pausing a little before reading the next. It read:

"Adam, I've had doubts that relationships with so great an age difference as ours, could ever work. As July approaches, I know in my heart that I'm right-- it wouldn't be fair to you. I realize you won't understand, so I'm taking some time away from everything, for both of us to wake up from the dream we've been living in. Please don't come after me. Montana has been my home for most of my life, and I'll be fine. 'Sorry' isn't enough, but I don't know what else to say."

The musician dropped the letter into his lap and grieved inwardly.

"She's trying to protect me from the truth," Adam reasoned, his hand partially covering his mouth to steady the trembling lips.

"Charlie has never expressed any concerns over your age differences, to me," affirmed Vera. "She's only running away to spare you pain, Adam."

"To spare *me*?" he muttered under his breath. "And I wanted to spare *her*. Vera, I didn't want Charlie to bear this, alone!"

Everyone was silent, as the car sped down the street and pulled up outside the apartment building where Chuck and Charlie had lived for so long.

"After she went missing," related Kevin, "I did a quick search of the streets surrounding the apartment building, but didn't find any sign of her, except for a few partial footprints left in the snow beneath the bedroom window."

"What time was that?" asked Adam.

"I'd say it was about six o'clock," figured Kevin, getting out of the car. "She couldn't have gone far."

"Charlie doesn't *want* to be found," concluded Adam, "and she's on familiar ground. She might as well be hiding on the moon!"

The three carefully went up the icy walk, and made their way to Mrs. Jenkins' apartment. When Kevin knocked on the door, an elderly woman wrapped in a blanket answered.

"Kevin," said Mrs. Jenkins, "you had a phone call just after you left."

"Who was it?" asked Adam, bracing himself for disappointment.

They went inside, and Mrs. Jenkins showed them the message she had taken from the caller.

"It was Charlotte," informed the old woman. "She wanted us to know that she's in a safe place, and not to worry about her. Before I had a chance to say very much, she hung up-- the poor dear! You must be her grandmother," she said, hugging Vera as though she were an old friend. "You can have Charlotte's room."

"We wouldn't want to impose on your hospitality," replied Adam, suddenly realizing that Mrs. Jenkins was preparing for them to stay at *her* apartment.

"Nonsense!" she exclaimed, helping Vera off with her coat. "I haven't had this much company since the Overholts lived across the hall. Do you know, of all the neighbors I've ever had, the Overholts were my favorite. Every Thanksgiving, they'd invite me to their apartment. There was always so much food, and she did all the cooking herself! I remember Charlotte, when she was about six years old, wrapped in an oversized apron, and standing on top of an orange crate, so she could reach the kitchen countertop. And there was Charlton, hovering nearby, in case she fell off. Oh my! All the convincing in the world couldn't pull her off that crate!"

As Mrs. Jenkins led Vera to the guest room, Adam and Kevin discussed what to do next.

"If we put her picture in the paper," Adam was reasoning, "then someone is bound to come forward!"

"But," resisted Kevin, who hated going against his employer, "if you make it generally known that Charlotte Overholt is alone in Butte, then you'll attract every opportunist in the nation!"

"Then," said Adam, trying hard to remain calm, "we could make up a list of people Charlie knows in Butte, and go visit them. Surely, one of them has seen her!"

"It's a sound idea," admitted Kevin, "except for one thing: you shouldn't leave this apartment any more than you absolutely have to. Don't you see, Mr. Clark, that if the media gets wind that you're in Montana, then it will only serve to endanger Miss Overholt?"

"I can't stand here and do *nothing*, Kevin!" he exclaimed. "I must do *something*!"

"Tomorrow morning," proposed Kevin, "you and Mrs. Jenkins and Vera, sit down and make up that list. I'll call Mr. Paulson [Bill] and see if he couldn't fly down and help me visit everyone on the list. There's no reason to believe she's in immediate danger. Miss Overholt said it herself, 'Montana has been my home... I'll be fine.' We must operate on that belief, and trust to Providence."

"All right, Kevin," conceded Adam, wearily dropping down onto the living room couch, and shuddering at the cold. "I pray she's warm, tonight."

Adam spent the night on Mrs. Jenkins' sofa, struggling to find sleep. He had slipped the engagement ring onto his small finger and would check to feel for it every now and then, trying to feel closer to his lost love. Adam reread the letter over and over in his mind, hoping to squeeze every last drop of comfort from its lines as possible. The words, "I'll be fine," resounded in his heart.

"Please, God," prayed Adam, "keep her safe. Don't let her feel alone, for we can never be truly alone, when You are with us. 'I am not alone, because the Father is with me.' (John 16:32) Show me where she's at, so I can go to her. Help us, O Lord! I don't know what to do, but my eyes are on Thee! (2 Chronicles 20:12) Be with my Charlie-girl, tonight. Help her find her way back to me. In Jesus' name, amen."

Adam closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but sleep would not come. He had given his burden to the Lord, but the insomnia that had plagued him in the past, returned in all its wakefulness. After tossing on the sofa for several hours, Adam sat up so he could see out the window. Outside, the snow gleamed against the silvery moonlight, which shone from a cloudless Montana sky.

"I love you, Charlie," he whispered softly. "Come back to me."

The next morning, Kevin found Adam, sleeplessly staring out the window. Vera helped Mrs. Jenkins fix breakfast, while Kevin called Bill, who was several states away, holding down the remnants of Adam's tour.

"I'll hire a charter right away," replied Bill, after Kevin had related the facts. "And," he added, "I'll bring some help."

"Bill's coming," Kevin announced hopefully, after he had hung up the phone.

Adam only nodded and absently played with the toast on his plate. While they ate, Kevin made a list from all the names Vera and Adam could remember. Mrs. Jenkins, however, proved to be the most indispensable, with her vast knowledge of Charlie's former life.

"There was Donna," recalled the old woman, "but she passed away several years ago. There's Shawn, the boy that lives down the hall. Charlotte and he were good friends at one time. They never dated, though, because Charlton said she was too young. Let me see, there's Frank, Charlton's old boss. He runs 'Venture Outdoors,' a camping something-or-other near here. Then there's Carla-- no, wait, she moved last year."

"How about friends her own age?" asked Adam.

"To be honest," confessed Mrs. Jenkins, "I don't remember many children in the Overholt home. In fact, I recall one time, it was Charlotte's tenth birthday, and Charlton had invited several kids from her school. During the party, the electricity suddenly stopped. It seems Charlton had forgotten to pay the electrical bill. I don't think the children ever came back after that. There were rumors that he was crazy, but I never paid any attention to gossip like that. Charlton was just forgetful, that's all. Poor Charlotte-- all the times he forgot to pick her up at school, or get the groceries, or pay the bills. I suppose that's what cultivated her independence so. In many ways, she took care of Charlton, and not the other way around."

Mrs. Jenkins related several more stories from Charlie's childhood. Adam listened intently, for this was the first real opportunity he had had to learn of her life prior to Twin Yucca. For Vera, this too, was a rare glimpse into her son's former life.

"There was a woman," remembered Mrs. Jenkins, "her name was Morgan. She dated Charlton off and on for a number of years. Charlton would get me to baby-sit Charlotte, while they went out. Sometimes, he wouldn't come home until morning. I told him that it wasn't a good example to set for the child, but Charlton said that it was better than bringing Morgan home with him. God knows, the Overholt's weren't a religious family. However, I'm glad to hear that Charlton finally found Christ before his illness overtook him."

"Does Morgan still live in Butte?" asked Kevin, taking notes.

"No, I don't believe she does," replied Mrs. Jenkins, taking a sip of coffee.

After lunch, Kevin went down to the airport to pick up Bill and the promised "help." When they reached the apartment, Adam was completely surprised. In walked Wallace Shipley's personal manager, publicist, and agent!

"Bill! Melvin! Gary!" exclaimed Adam, getting up to shake their hands. "I've never been so happy to see you guys, in all my life!"

"*Nine million dollars*," smiled Bill, not only shaking his hand, but giving him a hug as well, "that's what it's costing you to be here right now!"

"Our vendor was a nervous wreck!" added Melvin, setting down his attaché case on the faded couch.

"Further more," informed Gary, carrying in his laptop, "I was only able to drop his threat of a law suit, by agreeing to compensate him over and above the amount he had hoped to profit by. Now, the rest of our vendors are sweating bullets-- afraid that we're going to pull out of our other engagements, as well. They've a lot of hope, energy, and money tied up in you, Adam. Not to mention all the revenue it could have generated for the local economies. Did you know that every single engagement from now until July is *completely* sold out?"

Bill and Melvin winced uneasily. On the flight to Butte, the three had agreed to ease into the conversation a little more tactfully than that. But Gary's passion about what the tour had accomplished, overshadowed any caution Bill and Melvin had thought necessary. Gary was watching the career of a musician whom he looked up to, come into jeopardy.

"What do you want me to do, Gary?" cried Adam. "Walk out on Charlie?"

"You have *other* responsibilities!" Gary reminded him. "You have contracts-- legally binding contracts that give *your word* that you'll show up! If you won't fulfill your word, it could *ruin* you financially! And then there's your fans. You'll disappoint the very people that buy your albums, and follow your music. I'm sorry, but even if Bill and Melvin are hesitant to say it, you're gambling with your career!"

"Your career," said Bill, trying to be a little more diplomatic than Gary had been, "is in a precarious balance. I know you're willing to throw it away for Charlie-- I know you. I question though, if it's necessary, or even best for Charlie."

"What Bill is saying," explained Melvin, "is that if you stay here and search for her, you'll make Charlie's presence that much more known. What we'd like to do is this: get you back on the tour, put out a press release that Charlie and Vera are taking time off before the wedding, and hire the best private investigator that's familiar with the area, that can be found. Kevin will stay here and help him search. At whatever point they begin to fear for her safety, then the police and or media will be called in using whatever discretion is advisable."

"I think it's for the best, Mr. Clark," agreed Kevin. "We'll keep you posted via phone. You'll call the shots-- only not from Montana."

"Vera?" asked Adam. "She's *your* granddaughter."

"I don't think you can do very much by staying," replied the old woman. "Go, Adam. She wouldn't want you to ruin Wallace Shipley, because of *her*."

"I don't want to abandon Charlie," said Adam, in a struggling voice.

"You *won't* be," encouraged Bill. "By leaving, you'll be doing everything in your power to ensure her safety."

Adam prayerfully thought it over. He didn't want to leave, but he realized the wisdom in it.

"All right," he conceded. "But I want to know *everything* that happens!"

"You've got it," promised Kevin.

"The concert I walked away from," asked Adam, "is it possible for us to rebook it, at my expense? I know we compensated the vendor, but the fans and local businesses got the short end of the situation."

"We can do that," said Gary, pleased that Adam had thought of it before he did.

When Wallace Shipley had walked away from the concert in question, Gary had felt the pressure, more than anyone. GARY was the one who had to face the irate vendors, and promoters, and not Bill or Melvin. He had prided himself on the fact that every obligation had been fulfilled, and that when Wallace Shipley played a date, everyone came away happy. The

recent fiasco had so shaken his confidence in Adam's commitment to honor his contracts, that Gary had actually considered walking away from the biggest client he had ever had.

"If we fly back today," planned Gary, "I think we could probably reschedule the concert for tomorrow. That nine million, however... I'm afraid we've lost it for good."

"I understand," said Adam, getting his coat. "I could've flown here *after* the concert was over, and not before. It wasn't a life or death emergency. As much as I wanted to be here, I should have remembered that there are a lot of people depending on me."

"Don't beat yourself up, too hard," said Gary, smiling a little for the first time since arriving. "She's your first love, you're my first big client, and this is our first tour together. A lot of things are happening to us, for the first time."

It was settled that Vera would stay with Mrs. Jenkins, who was more than happy for the company, while Kevin hired a private detective to go looking for Charlie. The rest would return to the tour. When Adam left Butte that day, he left his heart with Charlie.

At an undisclosed address, Charlie flicked on the television set and watched news footage of Wallace Shipley once more back in front of the piano.

"Good," she breathed to herself. "He's getting on with his life."

Even through Charlie's brave front, she knew she still loved him.

April passed, and Charlie spent her seventeenth birthday away from her family and away from Adam. She had called Jerome on occasion, assuring him that she was all right, and not to worry. The assurances weren't for her uncle, but for the others, for Charlie sensed that Jerome was little more than amused by the whole situation-- at least, that's the way he came off to her. From Jerome, she learned that Vera was still in Butte, and that Adam had hired a private detective to help Kevin hunt her down. Half of Charlie was happy that Adam still cared, and the other half was saddened, for it meant that things were far from over between them.

When May came to Montana, the snows began to melt. Rivers were full to overflowing, and life started to spring up from the ground once again. By the beginning of June, the hiking grounds Charlie had so often traversed with her father in the past, were now ready for her. This is what she had been waiting for.

Charlie prepared her hiking gear, and set out for a little known hiking trail near Stonecreek that wound through an old deserted copper mine, dating from the 1800's. This had been a favorite route of Chuck's and he would often tell stories of miners who had found wealth beyond imagine, only to lose it, and to spend the rest of their lives in search of it again. Charlie tried to ignore any parallel she saw to her own life.

It was a warm June day, and all of nature was out in force. Flies buzzed around her, while birds gathered twigs and moss for their nests. The earth was lush with green. Everything Charlie saw was thirstily drinking in life, for the days of winter and snow were at last over. Charlie bent over to relace her boots, while the ever majestic snowcapped Rocky Mountains jutted into the crystal blue sky above her. She breathed in the fresh air and thanked God for such a beautiful day.

"If only Adam were here," she caught herself thinking.

After a day's hard hiking, she made her way to the top of Grant's Bluff, affording her a panoramic view of the forest wilderness beyond.

Charlie unrolled her sleeping bag near the base of a tall Ponderosa Pine, and built the campfire. As the sun set in the horizon, she settled down by the fire, and ate her dinner of hot beans and cornbread. Owls hooted in the treetops, while other nocturnal animals came out to forage for food. When dinner was over, Charlie extinguished the campfire and climbed into her sleeping bag. She stared wakefully at the stars which peeked through the canopy of trees overhead, and wondered how Adam was doing, and if he was all right. At last, sleep came, and so ended Charlie's first day.

The next day began much as Charlie had expected it would. After pulling up camp, she left the trail and took a shortcut that only people familiar with the area would have taken. On the hiking map, it was marked for experts only. Chuck had come this way many times before, and Charlie was in no doubt that she could handle the rocky terrain with little to no problem.

After a few hours, the young woman was about to stop for lunch, when she noticed something that made her heart stand still. On the ground, a few feet away, she saw the distinct markings of a small footprint. With a furrowed brow, Charlie walked over and bent down to get a closer look. The sole of the shoe had been molded with a flower and a heart.

"This is the sole of a girl's shoe," concluded Charlie, taking a good look around her before returning to the track.

A little further on, Charlie saw where the other foot had come down on the soft ground, giving the teenager a good gauge as to the height and gait of the child.

"What do you think, Daddy?" she muttered under her breath, as if Chuck were standing over her, waiting to test her judgment as he had done in the past. "I think I'm looking at an eight year old girl."

Charlie employed the skills Chuck had taught her, and set about to ascertain whether the child was alone or not. If there were tracks of an adult present, then there was no cause for alarm. Still, it bothered Charlie that the girl wasn't wearing footwear appropriate to the terrain they were in, for the tracks were those of sandals, and not hiking boots. After making a visual marker where the tracks began, Charlie walked a small circumference around the marker, making her circles larger and larger as needed, to determine what direction the girl was going, and the possible presence of any grownups. To her horror, the girl was alone.

"Daddy," Charlie exclaimed in shock, "she's headed for the badlands!"

For a moment, Charlie felt the panic well up inside her. This was obviously a child that had become lost, and in her disorientation, was headed straight into some of the roughest country Charlie and Chuck had ever ventured into.

"Dear God," prayed Charlie, securing the straps of her backpack, "stop her before she goes too far!"

With that, Charlie began to follow the girl's tracks. It wasn't an easy job, for the mountainous region was littered with rocks that left no impression or clue as to which direction the girl had gone in. Whenever this happened, Charlie would set down her backpack near the last footprint, and make a wide circle around the marker, until she could pick up the girl's tracks, further on. This was time consuming, and took a great deal of patience. With every hour, Charlie could feel the girl getting further and further away from her.

By early evening, the teenager was exhausted, for she had forgotten to eat any lunch-- an oversight she knew Chuck would have scolded her for. Charlie knew she needed to preserve her strength, and was glad for an excuse to stop and make camp, for she couldn't follow tracks in the dark. Rest was a luxury that Charlie felt she couldn't make during those precious hours of daylight. After a hasty meal, she crawled into her sleeping bag and promptly fell asleep.

Some time later, Charlie was suddenly awakened by an odd sensation on her face. In a knee-jerk reaction, she jumped up, and brushed her face with both hands.

"Aaaugh!" she cried, as the squirmy object finally let loose of her face.

It was pitch dark, making it impossible for her to see what the thing was. Suddenly, Charlie realized just how dark it was. She could barely see her hand in front of her face. The teenager had fallen asleep under a partially lit sky, only to wake up in a vast, dark room. Charlie had seen this before, but tonight, it was different. She was alone in the wilderness, and surrounded by a darkness that seemed to smother everything. Charlie gathered the sleeping bag up around her ears and closed her eyes.

"I wish you were here, Daddy," she thought to herself. "The darkness never seemed so heavy, when I was with you."

Charlie looked up, trying to find the starry sky that she knew must be there. But, no matter how hard she strained, she couldn't see a single star, or any visible sign of the firmament above.

"Did I camp under trees?" she asked herself, scrambling for a rational reason why there was no sky.

Charlie had been so tired, that she could remember little of her hastily chosen campsite.

"How can you strain your eyes so hard," she wondered to herself, "when there's nothing to see?"

Then, as if the sleep had just cleared from her mind, Charlie remembered that she had a flashlight. As Charlie bent forward to feel for her backpack, a multi-legged creature crawled onto her hand. Startled into retreat, Charlie scrambled back inside of her sleeping bag to wait for morning.

"What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee [God]," she prayed, silently.

How long it was before she fell asleep, Charlie didn't know, but the next time she opened her eyes, it was the morning of the third day. With a breath of relief, she crawled out of her sleeping bag and thanked God for getting her through the night. Suddenly recalling her enigma of the misplaced sky, Charlie looked up. Overhead, she saw a large rock shelf, obviously the culprit that had blocked out her part of the sky, the night before. No wonder she couldn't see any stars! As Charlie gathered her gear, she realized that there had been nothing to be apprehensive about, after all.

What had started as a hike to revisit her childhood, had now turned into a search and rescue. Charlie only prayed that *she* wouldn't need to be the one rescued.

After eating a quick breakfast, she resumed the tedious task of following those hearts and flowers through the underbrush and across the all too often hard ground. Every once in a while,

the hearts would change direction, as if trying to find some familiar landmark that would signal familiar ground. Charlie knew this was dangerous logic. She remembered Chuck telling her that when you find yourself saying, "I think that's the same tree," or "the mountain might have looked like that," then you're lost and need to admit it. Thankfully, Charlie was suffering no such delusions. Even though this ground was unfamiliar to her, she had marked the trail with hair scrunchies, so she could easily find her way back. This was yet another skill Chuck had instilled in her, (though not with elastic ponytail holders).

As the day began to fade in the sky, Charlie decided to make one big effort to follow the tracks for as long as the daylight would hold out. The danger in this was, that if she lost the trail in the fading light, then it would be extremely difficult to go back and decipher where she had gotten off track, the next morning. Also, she could unwittingly disturb the girl's tracks with her own. It was a difficult judgment call, but Charlie decided that it was necessary. With each passing day, she had the feeling that she was falling further and further behind. By the tracks, Charlie saw that the girl was now in full panic, and at times, even running in the blind hope that help was just over the next horizon. Even though the teenager had never set eyes on the girl, she knew what the child was feeling. Every footprint told the story. Now it was getting to the end of the third day, and Charlie was making the bold decision to press on for as long as there was any visible light in the sky.

Charlie followed the shallow imprints in the ground, until the tracks came to a flat rock. Just as she was preparing to circle the area, she heard the faint cry of a child. At once, Charlie followed to where the sounds were coming from.

"Hello!" Charlie shouted at the top of her voice. "Where are you?"

"Help me!" came the reply.

Charlie smiled in spite of the plea for help. She had at last caught up with the girl!

"I'm over here!" cried the child. "Please, help me!"

"I'm coming!" shouted Charlie. "Just hold on! Keep talking to me, so I can find you!"

Charlie followed the sound of her voice until she suddenly found herself on the edge of a steep precipice. The girl's voice was coming from the bottom.

"Are you hurt?" shouted Charlie, trying to shine the flashlight down into the shadows, but seeing nothing but underbrush.

"My leg won't move!" cried the child.

"Okay, hold on," said Charlie, running back to to retrieve her gear.

When she came back to the precipice, the girl was crying uncontrollably.

"Try to save your strength," advised Charlie. "I'm going to come down to you, but it might take me a little while."

"Please, hurry!" came the plaintive cry.

Charlie opened her backpack and pulled out a long length of rope. After securely tying one end to the trunk of a tree, she placed the other end beneath her, and began to slowly edge her way down the rope. Once or twice her feet lost their footing, but with a firm grasp of the rope, Charlie was able to regain her balance, and continue repelling downward. All the while, the girl cried for her to hurry.

"I'm almost to the bottom!" shouted Charlie, flashing the light beneath her feet. "Where are you?"

"I'm over here!" repeated the girl, her voice becoming faint with exhaustion.

When Charlie's feet touched ground she was able to better understand her surroundings. This was the mouth of an underground cave. On any other occasion, Charlie would have thrilled at the idea of discovering an unexplored cave, but this was not one of those times. The air was cold, and smelled of a pungent odor that reminded Charlie of something she had once smelled before, but could not remember where.

"I'm over here," said the child once more, hearing Charlie's movements getting nearer.

Charlie swung her flashlight around and saw the pale form of a small girl lying on her back, her right leg jutting in an unnatural angle beneath her. Charlie recognized at once, that the girl's leg was broken.

"Help me," she whimpered, as the teenager came to her side.

"Take it easy while I have a look," said Charlie, frantically trying to remember anything Chuck had told her about broken bones. "How do you feel?" she asked, shining the light into the girl's face.

If her lips were blue, then Charlie would know that she wasn't getting enough blood and that shock was setting in. But the girl's skin wasn't clammy or blue-- just cold. Then Charlie recognized the very real danger of hypothermia. She quickly pulled out her sleeping bag and gently covered the helpless girl.

"I'm thirsty," said the child, deriving a measure of comfort from Charlie's presence.

"I'm not sure you should be drinking water," hesitated Charlie. "Here, I'll give you just a sip. How long have you been here?"

"I don't know," replied the girl. "I think it was today, but I'm not sure. Do you have any food?"

"Can you sit up?" asked Charlie.

"I don't think so," the child groaned.

"I'm sorry, but I can't let you eat on your back," apologized Charlie. "You might choke on your food."

"How are you going to get me out of here?" wondered the girl.

Charlie was asking herself that question, and wasn't able to answer, so she decided to change the subject.

"What's your name?" asked the teenager, pulling out a first aid box to see if there was anything in it that could help relieve some of the pain that the girl was obviously in.

"My name is Jo," replied the girl, closing her eyes.

"My name is Charlie," said the exhausted woman, flipping through the small pamphlet that came with the kit.

Charlie read how to set a broken leg and wilted at the thought of doing that to Jo. Even if she could do the procedure, the leg should be elevated, and that meant Charlie couldn't carry the girl back to civilization. With no painkillers but ordinary aspirin, Charlie immediately decided against setting the leg, herself. Either way, Jo had to remain behind while Charlie went for help at first light, the next day. She reasoned that the hike back would be quicker than the trip there, for she didn't have to retrace the slight footprints of an eight year old. Yes, it would be quicker-- but how much quicker, was anybody's guess.

"Tomorrow," informed Charlie in a comforting voice, "I'm going to go for help."

"No!" cried Jo. "You won't come back!"

"I promise I'll come back," said Charlie. "You need more help than I'm able to give you. I'm going to try and prop you up, so you can eat, all right? I'll go very slowly, and when you tell me to stop, I'll stop."

Cautiously, Charlie lifted Jo's head. The girl whimpered and yelped, but told her to keep going. At last, the girl was at an angle where she could eat. Charlie took the remainder of food she had left from the backpack, and placed into a small pan. Next, she built a fire and heated the meal, hoping that it might help stave off Jo's hypothermia.

"What are you doing out here all by yourself?" asked Charlie, as she stirred the small helping of beans and cornbread.

"My brother took me hiking," explained Jo, "and I got lost. It was just supposed to be a short walk."

"Did your brother get lost, too?" wondered Charlie, hoping there wasn't another wandering hiker out there, waiting to be rescued.

"He never gets lost," sighed Jo, hungrily smelling the food.

"Here you go," said Charlie, handing her the pan with a spoon. "Don't eat fast, and chew slowly. We don't have any painkillers, except aspirin. Do you want some?"

"Definitely," said Jo. "I never knew just ordinary beans could taste so good!"

"Fabas indulcet fames," replied Charlie, remembering a piece of Latin from her old days.

"Hunger sweetens the beans."

Charlie had given Jo the last of the food, which hadn't been more than half a cup of pork and beans, and a little piece of left over cornbread. The seventeen year old had been three days in the wild, and now faced the difficult trek back. Charlie looked around the area of the cave they were in, and marveled at its beauty, in spite of their predicament. It was then, that she recalled where she had smelled the acrid odor, before. Charlie bent down and examined the cave floor. The familiar droppings of a certain animal, littered the ground. It was this that had been giving off the pungent smell. With a small ironic laugh, Charlie turned to Jo.

"You wouldn't happened to have noticed anything fly by here, say in the last half hour, would you?" she asked.

"No," answered Jo, puzzled by the question. "Why do you ask?"

Charlie went to the edge of the cave's opening and saw that dusk was fast approaching.

"Okay," said Charlie coming back to the girl, "we need to hunker down. It's getting dark, and the temperature is going to drop."

"What is it?" asked Jo. "What did you see over there?"

"Bat droppings," replied Charlie, quickly gathering the contents of her backpack and putting out the fire.

Then she dropped to the ground beside Jo, and pulled the sleeping bag that was covering the small girl, over her own body as well.

"You mean real live *bats*?" repeated Jo, in a voice of dread.

"Don't be scared," calmed Charlie, "but any moment now, a colony of bats are going to fly through here, on their way to go hunting."

"How do you know that?" asked Jo, frantically hoping Charlie was wrong.

"Bats are nocturnal animals," explained Charlie, "and they come out at dusk. This cave is their roost."

Just then, the cave sounded with the distant echo of quick, flapping wings.

"I'm scared!" panicked Jo, frantically grabbing Charlie's hand.

"Get down under the sleeping bag," instructed Charlie, pushing the girl's head beneath the cover. "They won't hurt you, but we need to stay out of their way."

With the echo and reecho of the cave, the colony of bats sounded like the oncoming of a train. Charlie could feel Jo tremble, as the first of the little beasts began to pass overhead. The distant commotion rapidly grew louder and louder as the main body of bats now swarmed above their heads. The cave echoed and reechoed with the sounds of shrill squeals and flapping wings.

Then, Charlie felt movement on the bag near her head, as a solitary bat landed on the sleeping bag. A few more descended, making their squeals strait into the girls' ears.

"We need to get out of here!" screamed Jo, struggling to get out from under the sleeping bag.

"Hold on!" shouted Charlie, forcing the girl back down. "It's almost over!"

Within a minute or two, the sounds grew dimmer and dimmer, as the bats moved out into the darkening night sky. When the last flap of wings and squeal was out of earshot, the girls came out from their hiding place.

"Wow!" exclaimed Charlie, getting to her feet and going to the mouth of the cave. "That was *incredible!*"

When Jo began to sob, Charlie went back and let the girl cry in her arms. Charlie had to admit, that she was acting braver than she felt. She remembered Chuck's jokes about her hatred of bats, and her squeamishness at the mere mention of the furry beasts with pushed up noses and oversized ears. Now, somehow, the young woman no longer felt that way. Maybe it was the responsibility of the small girl, and maybe it was something else. For the first time since Charlie had learned of her Alzheimer's Disease test results, she felt a new confidence in God's plan for her life. She didn't know what lay ahead, but she was certain that God would go before her, preparing the way, and making a way to escape that she would be able to bear it. (1 Corinthians 10:13) It was a revelation of Christ, that the Holy Spirit had had shed to Charlie's soul. "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 5:5)

As night settled in, the darkness became complete. Jo huddled close to Charlie for warmth, for the temperature had fallen as Charlie had predicted it would.

"My leg hurts so much, Charlie," Jo winced in pain.

Charlie fumbled in the dark for the aspirin container, and gave Jo more medication.

"Is it helping at all?" asked Charlie.

"I don't know," replied Jo, weakly.

"Get your mind off the pain," encouraged Charlie. "Think about something else."

"Like what?" whimpered Jo.

"Well," hesitated Charlie, "think of anything. Food, hobbies, music..."

"Music!" exclaimed Jo. "I love music! When I grow up, I'm going to be a concert pianist, just like Wallace Shipley!"

"You like Wallace Shipley?" asked Charlie, in surprise.

"Oh, yes!" replied the girl. "He's the *best*! Did you see that Christmas special? I wish I could be that brilliant. Would you move over a little? Your elbow is in my stomach."

"Sorry," apologized Charlie, repositioning herself beside the small girl.

"Charlie?" asked Jo. "How old do you have to be to get married?"

"Older than you," replied Charlie, with a smile. "Why do you want to know?"

"Do you think," wondered Jo, "that Wallace Shipley would leave that Charlotte woman, for someone else? I mean, they're not married yet, so anything could happen, right?"

"Anything could happen," replied Charlie, sadly.

Jo cried in pain, and clutched Charlie's arm for comfort.

"I'll tell you a secret," said Charlie, trying to give Jo something good to think about, "I happen to be a good friend of Wallace Shipley, and when we get out of here, I promise that you'll have a chance to meet him. What do you think of that?"

"You're just trying to get my mind off the pain," replied Jo, disbelievingly. "It was a nice try, though."

"You don't believe me?" laughed Charlie. "I wish more people took that attitude. I'd have much more privacy in my life. Jo, I'm 'that Charlotte woman' you were just talking about."

"You are *not*!" giggled Jo, wincing at the last, because she forgot not to move.

"Seriously, I *am* Charlotte Overholt," insisted Charlie.

"Then show me your driver's license," challenged Jo, enjoying the game Charlie had come up with.

"I don't have a driver's license," explained the young woman, sheepishly. "Kevin, my bodyguard, does all the driving."

"You're *good* at this game!" said Jo with admiration.

"I'm completely serious," said Charlie, incredulous that she was unable to convince one eight year old girl that she was who she was. "I know! I'll shine the flashlight in my face, and you'll be able to recognize me!"

Charlie grabbed the flashlight and shined it directly onto her face.

"You don't look *anything* like Charlotte Overholt," frowned Jo, suddenly bursting into laughter at Charlie's fuddled expression.

"What do you mean?" asked Charlie.

"She was prettier!" contradicted Jo, through her peals of laughter.

"Oh, is she really?" laughed Charlie, hugging the child. "Well, I give up. My promise about Wallace Shipley still stands, though. If you continue to be brave, like you have been, I promise that you'll get to meet Wallace Shipley, if I have to drag him to Montana, myself!"

"That would be nice," sighed Jo, still not believing her rescuer's identity. "Maybe, I could get his autograph. There was this guy on the Internet, who auctioned off a genuine autographed CD jacket, and it went for a couple hundred dollars."

"Really?" smiled Charlie. "I'll have to remember that," she laughed.

As the cave became colder and colder, Charlie took out all of the extra clothing she had in her backpack, and put it on Jo, who was in worse shape than herself.

"I wish morning would come," whimpered the girl, through her loudly chattering teeth.

"You won't, when the bats return," joked Charlie.

"You mean, they're coming *back*?" cried the girl, in dismay.

"We rode it out once before, and we can do it, again," rallied the teenager. "Are you warm, yet? Here, give me your hands."

Charlie rubbed the girl's hands between her own, and then Jo did likewise for hers. As the night wore on, Jo fell asleep. Charlie wasn't sure if she should try to keep the girl awake or not, but at last decided to give her respite from the pain by letting her rest. Charlie checked Jo's lips, and they were still pink. It looked as though the shock was successfully being staved off. Before long, Charlie, too, fell asleep.

Charlie's fourth day in the wild, began with a flurry of wings and squeals. Jo cried in horror as the bats passed once more over their heads, to their roost at the back of the cave. Something happened, though, that Charlie hadn't counted on. As they hid beneath the sleeping bag, they heard the sounds of what sounded like large rain drops hitting their cover. From the smell, Charlie didn't have long to guess what it was.

"Their bellies are full from a successful night's hunt," explained Charlie.

After the flurry had past, Charlie and Jo peered out from the sleeping bag. Sure enough, bat excrement dotted the top of their shelter.

"At least they're healthy," muttered Charlie, getting out from under the sleeping bag.

Jo's face was weary with pain.

"It's time I set off," announced the young woman. "I'm going to leave behind my backpack, because I want to make good time. If I don't get back before dusk, get under the sleeping bag, and stay low until the bats leave."

"I can't do it, by myself!" cried Jo, frantically.

"Yes, you can," insisted Charlie. "You're an old pro, now. You've done it twice before, and I know you can do it, again. I'm leaving you some water, which you shouldn't drink fast, and all the warm clothes, except this sweater. I'll hurry as fast as I can, all right?"

Jo reached up for a hug and then released her rescuer.

Charlie stepped into the sunlight, and, using the rope she had attached the night before, climbed up to the top of the precipice facing the cave opening. She breathed in the fresh air, untainted by the smell of bat guano, and began following the trail she had marked earlier with hair scrunchies.

One brightly colored scrunchy led to the next, as she began to run across rocks and vegetation, through tall lumbering trees, and past startled wildlife. Where Charlie couldn't run, she climbed. By mid-afternoon, she figured she might have reached a third of the distance back to the main trail.

All was going smoothly until Charlie jumped from one boulder to the next, and caught her foot just as she was pushing off. She felt herself falling, and then crashing into the hard surface below. Charlie cried out in pain, and rubbed her ankle. After taking a moment to calm down, she got to her feet and tried to put weight on the ankle. It immediately lit up with pain.

"Great," muttered Charlie, leaning against a large rock. "Why did you let this happen, God? This is just going to slow me down!"

Then she remembered the words, "we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose."

"Okay," she breathed in acquiescence to His will. "You know best."

Taking the sweater, Charlie wound it about her ankle, giving it some support, so she could stand on it with a degree of bearable pain. This however, had greatly slowed her progress. One step at a time, Charlie made her way to the next hair scrunchy, until at last, the pain in her ankle forced her to rest.

When she pulled off the sweater, Charlie saw that her ankle was turning color and swelling. She fought back the tears. She had been so brave in the cave with the bats and the darkness, only to melt into puddles in broad daylight. Feeling herself silly, Charlie bound up her foot again, and resumed the trip back. After a few painful steps, Charlie heard the wonderful sound of a helicopter, passing overhead.

"Over here!" she cried, waving her arms frantically.

Suddenly, she remembered the handheld flare she had brought with her from the emergency kit in her backpack, and quickly sent a stream of red smoke into the atmosphere. The helicopter veered from its course, and slowly circled in the sky above Charlie.

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "They see me!"

It took a few minutes for the pilot to find a place to land the helicopter, but when he did, three men jumped from the cabin with emergency gear and raced to the young woman. While one of the men taped Charlie's swollen ankle, she told them of Jo.

"There's a little girl," Charlie told them, "I left her back at the cave. She has a broken leg, and she's in a lot of pain!"

"Is her name Jo Kiley?" asked one of the men.

"Her name is Jo," affirmed Charlie, "but I don't know what her last name is."

As they bandaged her ankle, Charlie told them who she was, and the circumstances of her finding Jo. Since she was unable to find the cave from the air, for she had used markers on the ground to find her way, the rescuers decided to let Charlie guide them back to the cave, which was unmarked on the map.

With a great deal of help from the men, Charlie managed to hobble back to where she had left Jo. She had been given medication for the pain, and could nearly put all her weight on the ankle. It was an hour before dusk, when Charlie limped back into the cave.

"Charlie!" cried the girl, in relief. "You came back!"

The men immediately left Charlie to go work on poor Jo.

"We're going to have to set the leg, before we can take her out," she heard one man say.

Mercifully, one of the rescuers injected Jo with pain medication, so the child would feel no pain during the process. More quickly than Charlie thought was possible, the leg was set, and Jo was lifted onto an orange flat bed, that had handles on all sides.

"Okay, little lady," said one of the men, "you're going for a ride now. Just close your eyes, and you'll be fine."

Overhead, Charlie heard the loud sound of helicopter blades beating the air, as the aircraft got into position overhead, and began to hover. A line descended from the chopper down to the men. When they had secured it to Jo's orange bed, one of the men waved to the pilot, and the helicopter began to rise, taking Jo with it. With the orange bed dangling securely below, the chopper disappeared out of sight.

"There's no place to land the chopper," he explained. "We'll have to hike out on foot, tomorrow. Don't worry, ma'am. We have food and blankets, so you'll have a comfortable overnight stay."

Just then, Charlie heard the familiar sound of high pitched squeals and flapping wings, as dusk descended on the cave, once more. Thinking quick, Charlie grabbed the sleeping bag and tossed it over the men, hurriedly ducked under it, herself.

"The location is great," she joked to the others, "but the neighbors are *impossible!*"

By the time the rescuers brought in Charlie the next day, reports had surfaced that Wallace Shipley's fiancée had saved the life of an eight year old girl. As the rescue party reached the hospital, reporters and media barraged them with questions about Charlotte and her involvement in the rescue. Once inside the hospital, Charlie thanked the men for their help, and was led into an examination room by a doctor.

"Is Jo going to be all right?" asked Charlie, as he inspected her ankle.

"Jo is doing fine," he smiled.

"Did she have hypothermia?" asked Charlie, in a concerned voice. "I tried to keep her as warm as I could."

"You did a good job," complimented the doctor. "They tell me that the night before last, was slightly above freezing temperature."

Charlie sighed in relief. It had been a lot of responsibility, and she was glad that it was over.

"To be on the safe side, we'll need to X-ray your ankle to make sure there aren't any fractures," the doctor informed her. "Otherwise, it looks like all you came away with is a mildly sprained ankle."

"That was *mild?!!*" exclaimed Charlie, a little incredulous that so much pain could be from a "mild" injury.

Just then, a nurse came in and whispered something to the doctor.

"Are you up for a visitor?" he asked.

Charlie didn't have the courage to ask who it was, so she simply nodded in the affirmative. The nurse opened the door, and in walked Vera.

"Grandma!" greeted Charlie, returning the old woman's hug.

"Oh!" cried the grandmother, "I'm so thankful you're in one piece! They told me you had a broken ankle! Is that true?" she asked stepping back to get a better look at the bandaged ankle.

"It's just a mild sprain," informed the doctor, leaving the room so they could talk in private.

"I'm okay, Grandma," Charlie promised her.

"They say you saved the little girl's life," smiled Vera, proudly.

"How is Adam?" Charlie finally gathered the courage to ask.

Charlie watched as Vera's face changed from unrestrained to guarded.

"He's all right," hesitated Vera. "Adam's been having some problems getting enough sleep, but he's on medication now, and I believe it's helping."

"But," said the teenager, "Adam doesn't like sleeping pills or medication. He told me they interfere with his concentration."

"Pumpkin," said Vera, tenderly, "he hasn't had much choice. Adam wasn't getting sleep for days at a time, and was only just able to go on stage with each concert. I don't know all the particulars. Bill has been keeping me abreast of the news as best as he can, but I can tell that everyone's under a lot of stress. I can hear the tension in Bill's voice, so I hate to ask too many questions. I'm so happy to see you're all right!" repeated Vera, trying to move away from the subject. "Kevin and the private detective searched heaven and earth for you! Where were you all this time?"

"I called Uncle Jerome several times, so you'd know I was all right, and wouldn't worry," replied Charlie, feeling as though she could show weakness for the first time in days. "Right now, it somehow doesn't seem enough. I'm sorry that I put you through all this, Grandma! I didn't mean to hurt you!"

Charlie wept into Vera's arms, just as Jo had done with her, at the beginning of their stay in the cave.

"Pumpkin," soothed Vera, "you haven't hurt me. I've never blamed you for doing what you did. I'm just amazed that you were able to bear up under the news of the PS-1 gene as well as you did."

Charlie looked up at her in surprise.

"You know about the AD test results?" she exclaimed, tearfully. "How could you possibly know?"

"Jerome gave his consent for Adam to talk to your genetic counselor," explained Vera. "We've known about it since the day you went away."

Vera's eyes began to fill with tears, as she remembered the pain the first realization had caused everyone concerned.

"There," said the grandmother, "I've done enough of that the last few weeks to fill a lake. I promised myself that I wouldn't cry so soon over this, and I'm determined to keep my word!"

"I've always wanted to be just like Daddy," reflected Charlie, "but I didn't think it would be to this extent. Uncle Jerome called it 'the Overholt family curse.'"

"I've heard Jerome say that, before," answered Vera. "But, it was your grandpa who said it first. However, I believe my husband Arnold was wrong. Alzheimer's Disease isn't our family curse--it's fear. I happen to know that it was fear over his own health that prompted Jerome into the line of work he's in. I know he told Adam that he sometimes wishes for the disease to pick him next, but that's only the fear talking. He's dreaded it for so long, that the fulfillment of the fear, would almost be a relief.

"And then there's your father, Charlie. Fear motivated him to get married, so someone would be there to take care of him, if he should be next. Both of my sons have been living their entire lives under the fear of, 'What if I'm next?' long before the disease ever touched Chuck. And what has been the end of all this fear? Bitterness, anger against God, and the reluctance to give their heart over to *anyone*. Charlie, I want you to listen to me, very carefully. Love is the absence of fear. First John, chapter four, verse eighteen, says, 'There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.' These many weeks since you've been gone, I've been thinking of that verse a lot. Love truly is the greatest of all things mankind is capable of. It's the fulfillment of the first commandment, ('Thou shalt love the Lord thy God...'), and it's the basis of every noble and good thing that God requires of us, as Christians."

Vera looked at Charlie intently, to see if the young woman had understood what she was trying to say.

"Grandma," said Charlie, "I *still* can't marry him."

"Pumpkin," said Vera, "if God has shown you that your path truly leads away from Adam, then that is where you must go. But, don't leave him, because of fear. Don't be the fulfillment of the family curse to another generation."

Charlie was silent.

"My mother used to say," recalled Vera, "that where there's shadow, there's also light. Now, I'm going to get the doctor to release you, so you can get some rest and elevate that ankle."

As the grandmother left, Charlie changed into the fresh change of clothes Vera had brought her. Then a female nurse entered the room with a wheelchair.

"All I need are crutches," she told the woman.

"This is standard hospital policy, Miss Overholt," answered the nurse, motioning for her to get in.

Charlie complied, and was wheeled from the room into the hall where Vera was waiting with a couple and their teenage son.

"Charlie," said Vera, "this is Mr. and Mrs. Kiley, Jo's parents. And this is their son, Jerry."

"We wanted to thank you from the bottom of our hearts, for saving our baby's life!" said Mrs. Kiley, tearfully giving Charlie a warm hug.

"You'll always be in our prayers," said Mr. Kiley, wiping tears from his eyes. "I shudder to think what would have happened to Jo, if you hadn't found her!"

Jerry awkwardly hugged his little sister's rescuer.

"Jo can't stop talking enough about you," said Mrs. Kiley. "She's under sedation right now, but it would be such a treat if you could come and see her, later. You should have seen her eyes light up when she realized that you were Charlotte Overholt!"

"So, she finally believes me, does she!" exclaimed Charlie, with a laugh. "I tried to tell her, but she just could *not* be convinced!"

"May I ask," inquired Mr. Kiley, "how you managed to track Jo, across so difficult terrain, and for such a great distance?"

"My Daddy taught me," replied Charlie, proudly.

"Someday," said Mr. Kiley, "I'd like to shake his hand! He must be very proud of you right now!"

Tears came to Charlie's eyes as she struggled to hold back the torrent that had been laying just beneath the surface. When words wouldn't come, Vera excused themselves from the Kileys.

"It's all right, Pumpkin," comforted Vera, wiping Charlie's tearstained face with the palm of her hand. "Mr. Kiley is right-- Chuck would have been so proud of you!"

When Charlie had managed to regain her composure without once more melting into puddles, the nurse wheeled her to the hospital back entrance where a car was waiting for them. The press and fans had expected her to leave by the front entrance, so no one saw her as she left the hospital.

Since the windows of the waiting car were darkly tinted, Charlie wasn't aware of the driver or person in the passenger side, until she and Vera had climbed into the back seat.

"Here are your crutches," said the nurse, placing them on the floor next to Charlie's feet.

As Charlie sat back in her seat, she saw a familiar face in the rear view mirror. It was Bill. Then she noticed that Kevin was behind the wheel.

"Charlie," related Bill, "Adam wants to know if you'll come and talk to him. Otherwise, this car will take you straight to your destination. I told him that you'd need your rest first, but I guess he couldn't wait to see you."

"Is he here in Butte?" asked Charlie.

"Adam flew in as soon as you were reported found," answered Bill, in the affirmative.

"I'll come," she replied with a heavy heart.

The car pulled away from the hospital and made its way down a series of streets until they arrived at a small, inconspicuous house.

"The media was all over the hotels," explained Bill, as he helped Vera out of the car. "We're renting this for a few days, while Adam recovers."

Bill winced, for he had said more than he had intended to.

"Adam told me not to tell you," he explained. "He didn't want to worry you."

"*What happened?*" pressed Charlie, as Kevin helped her onto her crutches.

"Adam's on medication to help him sleep," Bill explained. "He's having so many stress headaches, that I put aspirin capsules into the same bottle as his sleeping meds. The medication is red, and the aspirin is brown."

"But, he's colorblind," warned Charlie.

"So I learned," muttered Bill. "He had to be rushed to the hospital to have his stomach pumped. I completely blame myself for the accident. It's been like this, ever since you left. The tour is becoming harder and harder to do. The only reason Adam is still pressing forward, is because so many people are depending on him."

Charlie hobbled up the cement sidewalk while Kevin walked beside her to the door. Bill turned the handle, and the door swung open. The house was darker inside than it was outside, so it took a moment for Charlie's eyes to adjust to the low light.

The living room and kitchen were on the opposite ends of one large open room, with no dividers or doors separating the two spaces. An open doorway in the living room led to a hall with four bedrooms and one bathroom. Half open suitcases and miscellaneous personal effects of what was left of Wallace Shipley's entourage, were scattered all over the house. At the table, which was positioned between the kitchen and the living room, sat Gary, working away on his laptop computer.

As Charlie walked inside, she noticed a figure come out of the shadows to meet her.

"*Charlie-girl!*" cried Adam, embracing her so hard, that he almost knocked her off her crutches.

For a moment, the young woman was lost in his arms, and didn't remember that she had called off their engagement. Then he let her go, and awkwardly took a few steps back.

"Thank God you're back!" he exclaimed.

"Adam, I..." she began.

"I know," replied Adam, knowingly, "we'll talk about it later. Here, let me help you sit down on the couch," he offered, knocking some clothes off the couch so she could have a place to sit.

Vera sat down at the table with Gary, and watched the scene unfold.

"You're supposed to keep that ankle elevated, aren't you?" he asked, pushing a cushioned stool under her foot, so she could prop it up.

In this light, Charlie saw just how pale Adam's face was. She noticed that he had also lost weight, giving his handsome face a slightly drawn look. His dark eyes were weary, but his mouth was all smiles.

"They're calling you a hero on television," said Adam, his voice full of praise. "Finally, they're recognizing you for what you are-- a little piece of heaven! You understand what I'm saying, don't you? Surely, you know by now what you mean to me."

"Jo, the little girl," said Charlie, trying to change the subject, "is a big fan of yours. When she was in a lot of pain, I promised that you'd visit her. I know I had no right to make that promise, but I thought you wouldn't mind."

"No right'?" repeated Adam, in a hurt tone. "Charlie, you know me better than *that*."

He walked to the tiny coffee table and picked up a bowl of dried fruit.

"Would you like some?" he lamely offered.

"When was the last time you got any sleep?" asked Charlie, concerned by what she was seeing.

"Please, don't start with the sleep," begged Adam. "I've had doctor after doctor guess what's wrong with me, and I've had enough-- for now, anyway! Tell me about Jo," he asked, tossing aside the untouched bowl of dried fruit. "On the news, they said you discovered a cave no one knew existed! That must have been exciting!"

"It had a lot of bats," she answered, unenthusiastically. "Adam, why don't you sit down?"

"I'd rather stand," he replied, shifting wearily to the other foot. "How have you been these last few weeks? You must have been hiding really well, because I had the best private investigator money could buy, out looking for you."

"Adam," said Charlie, "we need to talk about us."

"Not now," he implored, "please, Charlie, not now. At the moment, I don't have the strength to fight you, and I'm afraid you'll win. I'm so *very* tired," he said, his voice shaking a little.

Charlie's heart went out to him.

"Come, sit beside me," she offered, tossing more clothes from off the couch.

Adam didn't need a second invitation. He readily sat down, and let Charlie tenderly place his head on her lap, so he could lie down.

"I hope you're not doing this to wear me down," he said, gently taking her left hand and holding it close to his heart. "I'm not going to let you go, without a fight."

"Just rest," said Charlie, softly stroking his hair.

"I could get used to this," he muttered, closing his eyes and putting his legs up on the rest of the length of the couch. "I love you, Charlie-girl."

"I love you, too," whispered Charlie, as she felt Adam squeeze her hand once more before dozing off into much needed sleep.

As his body relaxed, Charlie closed her eyes and tried not to think about the words that had been left unsaid. With an aching heart, she let herself drift asleep.

When Charlie woke up a few hours later, Adam's sleeping face was still nestled contentedly in her lap. Since his head was resting on her left forearm, the hand he was still gripping so tightly had fallen asleep; she dreaded the needle-pin sensation that would inevitably occur when the blood flowed again to that part of her anatomy. Charlie watched his peaceful face, and the gentle up and down motion of his chest, as he softly breathed.

Movement from across the room, prompted her to look toward the kitchen. Melvin waved hello to her, as he sat at the table with Bill, eating cold pizza and drinking flat soda. Gary had gone to bed, while Vera was sleeping soundly on the small sofa near the window. Charlie scanned the room, and found Kevin reading a magazine in the room's only armchair. Kevin looked up, and smiled at her when he saw she was awake. The overall mood of Adam's crew had gradually become more hopeful.

Charlie looked out the window, and saw that it was late in the afternoon. Still fatigued from the pain in her ankle, and the physical and emotional exertion of the past few days, she closed her eyes and fell asleep, once more.

When she awoke the second time, Adam was staring lovingly up at her.

"Thank you," he whispered, tenderly.

"Now that you're awake," said Charlie, trying to move her left arm, "I need to get the circulation going again."

Adam sat up, while Charlie rubbed her arm.

It was now early evening, and Vera was in the kitchen, preparing the food that she had sent Bill out for.

"They're awake," announced Bill, as he walked across the room to where they sat on the couch. "That's the first non-drug induced sleep Adam's had in weeks!"

"That's because she's good for me," smiled the musician.

"Adam," reminded Charlie, "we *still* need to have that talk."

"I know," he replied, half afraid that she was about to limp out the door.

Upon hearing this, Bill returned to the kitchen, where Melvin was helping Vera by making one of his Mexican cheese enchilada specialties.

"Okay," sighed Adam, "let's get this over with. What do you want to tell me?"

"Did you read the letter I left you, back in April?" asked Charlie.

"I read it," replied Adam, getting up and standing nervously before her.

"I'm afraid it still goes," warned Charlie. "I can't marry you, Adam."

He looked at her with hurt eyes, and walked past her, accidentally knocking her propped up ankle.

"Ouch!" she winced in pain.

"I'm sorry," Adam apologized. "Can I get you some ice to put on that?"

Without waiting for her response, Adam went to the kitchen and returned with a small sandwich bag filled with crushed ice. After carefully placing a towel over her bandaged ankle, he rested the bag of ice on top of it.

"Charlie," he began, "I know about the results of your genetic test. After I found out, I flew back here as soon as I could. I wanted to tell you that it didn't change my love. I love you more than ever. Can't you see that?"

"I see it," answered Charlie, softly. "But, that's why I can't let you make this sacrifice for me. Didn't you hear what Peter Webber, my genetic counselor must have told you? In my thirties or forties, I'm going to start turning into my Daddy! He doesn't even recognize me anymore, Adam!"

"I know you've been through a lot, these past weeks," said Adam, in an understanding voice. "It's been rough for everyone, but especially, for you. If I could trade places with you, I'd do it in an instant!"

"Maybe I should go," said Charlie, looking around for her crutches.

Adam quickly seized the objects and held them hostage behind his back, well out of her reach.

"I'm not letting you leave," said Adam, soberly. "Thanks to you, I've had some sleep, and I'm beginning to come back to my senses. I know this prognosis of your future looks bleak. God only knows the way I'd react if I were in your situation. I can't promise you that the disease won't claim your memory, but I *can* promise you that it will never claim my heart; I can promise to never leave you, and that I'll be there for you as long as there's a breath in this body. I'll try my hardest to be what you need me to be."

"Please, Adam," wept Charlie, tears coming to her eyes, "don't do this to me! I can't put you through that kind of torture!"

Adam set aside the crutches and knelt on the floor in front of her.

"Charlie," replied Adam, taking her hands into his own, "seeing you slip away from me because of Alzheimer's Disease wouldn't be the same kind of torture, that walking away would be. It's one thing for God to take you-- it's another for you to leave because it was *your* decision. There's so *much* life for you still to live! Give me the honor of sharing whatever time is left, *together*. Don't be afraid to give me your heart."

Adam had worn down the last of Charlie's resistance. She sobbed while he took her into his arms. With a great sigh of relief, Adam embraced his fiancée.

"Whatever happens," he whispered in her ear, "you'll always be in my heart, Charlie-girl."

Then, he pulled Charlie's engagement ring from off his little finger and slipped it back onto its rightful owner. Vera, who had been listening from the kitchen, quietly wept into her handkerchief.

"I want you to have a big wedding, Charlie," said Adam. "I want it to be something you'll never forget, for as long as you're able. It's so good to have you back! When Kevin and the detective couldn't find you, I was convinced you had left Butte, for good!"

"Actually," said Charlie, resting her head on Adam's shoulder, "I never left the apartment building."

Adam looked at her, incredulously.

"That's not possible!" he reasoned. "The detective went to every apartment, and no one had seen you!"

"Every apartment?" questioned Charlie, with a half smile. "Even the empty ones?"

In spite of himself, Adam chuckled.

"Before the hike," she said, "I left a check for unpaid rent with the landlord. He not only said he understood, but he wished me luck, as well."

"That'll teach me not to underestimate you, again," grinned Adam, with his typical Clark smile.

"Dinner is ready!" announced Vera, as Melvin placed a serving plate of Mexican enchiladas on the table.

Gary emerged from his room and smiled when he saw Adam and Charlie sitting on the couch like two perched lovebirds. With everyone assembled, and Adam and Charlie within earshot, Bill led the group in prayer.

"Lord," prayed Bill, "before we eat, we want to thank you bringing Charlie and her grandmother safely back among us. We thank you that Adam and Charlie have *finally* made up [the men

laugh softly] and respectfully ask, that when they get married next month, that they leave us out of it! [everyone laughs] In Jesus' name, amen!"

"It's too late!" shouted Adam from the living room, "the invitations have already gone out!"

"Well, guys," sighed Bill, feigning disappointment, "I guess there's no getting out of it, now!"

Adam got up and brought Charlie's dinner plate to her, for it would have been hard for her to prop up her foot at the table with so many people crowded around it. Then Adam sat down on the couch next to her, and contentedly ate his meal.

"I'm glad the tour is going to be over next month," observed Gary, from the kitchen.

The next day, Jo received a visit from the famous Wallace Shipley, and his much publicized fiancée. Melvin had allowed one photographer from the press to be present, so the small girl would have something to remember the occasion by. Adam presented Jo with a signed copy of one of his albums, inscribing it, "Jo, always stay close to the Lord-- and the piano! Your friend, Wallace Shipley." It would forever after be one of Jo's most prized possessions.

"Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men."

~ 2 Corinthians 3:2 ~

"I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes, and by the hinds of the field, that ye stir not up, nor awake my love [Adam], till he please."

~ Song of Solomon 2:7 ~

Chapter Forty-six

The Fixer-Upper

"The LORD shall comfort Zion: He will comfort all her waste places; and He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody."

~ Isaiah 51:3 ~

Late one night in June, two rented cars pulled up to Adam's private airplane at the Montana Silver Bow County Airport. Adam had taken a few days to enjoy Charlie and to recuperate from the pressures that had been placed upon him during the tour. Now that their engagement was on again, he could relax for the first time since she had run away. Charlie had also needed this time to rest her ankle, which was beginning to feel better after so much care and attention from Adam, who had single-handedly done everything to ensure her comfort and recovery, even though Vera had assured him that she was able to do it, herself. The old woman, however, understood Adam's pleasure in helping Charlie, and willingly remained in the background, silently overseeing Charlie's care.

Before long, rumors began to spread in Butte that Wallace Shipley was in town, and many citizens began to call into the local radio station, to report their latest sighting. It didn't take much longer, before Adam's location had been found out. He hadn't wanted his time with Charlie to end, but he still had concert dates to fulfill, and a tour to wind up.

As the cars came to a stop, Adam got out and lifted Charlie into his arms, so she wouldn't have to climb up the aircraft steps by herself.

"My ankle is well enough to go up a few steps!" she laughingly exclaimed.

"You can't be too careful," he smiled, with a twinkle in his eye.

Just then, a camera flash momentarily lit up their space of the night, as a photographer descended on the entourage, snapping pictures at the couple.

"I'll take care of it," whispered Melvin. "Both of you get in the plane."

Adam gently carried Charlie inside, with Kevin and Vera following close behind.

"The rumors are true, then!" exclaimed the photographer. "Wallace Shipley IS in Butte!"

"Wallace Shipley WAS in Butte," amended Melvin. "He's taking Charlotte and her grandmother back to Twin Yucca before resuming the tour."

"How about another picture?" coaxed the photographer. "It could put my kid through college."

"With the high price of tuition, nowadays, I seriously doubt it," answered Melvin, good-humoredly.

While Melvin held the photographer at bay, the flight attendant stowed everyone's luggage on board the jet. When everything was ready, Bill, Gary, and Melvin climbed up the steps, while the photographer kept taking pictures of what he could.

"Someone on the radio," Melvin informed Adam, "reported they saw you at a stop light, on your way to the airport."

Adam looked out his window, and saw other vehicles pulling into the gates of the airport.

"Looks like we're leaving none too soon," he muttered, as the jet began to taxi down the runway.

As the growing crowd grew smaller and smaller below, Charlie rested her head against Vera's shoulder and fell asleep. Bill had chosen the dead of night to steal out of Butte, so they could avoid as much media attention as possible. Now that they had made their getaway, the others followed Charlie's example, and caught some sleep before landing in Twin Yucca.

Adam, however, remained awake, sitting across from Charlie, mentally tracing the graceful curves of her face, and memorizing the way her long brown hair fell onto her shoulders. The dim light from the cabin windows became fainter and fainter, until all Adam could see were the brilliantly flashing stars in the dark night sky outside his window.

If there had been enough light to see, the others would have seen Adam's fingers, lightly tapping his armrest, as if playing an invisible keyboard. His heart was full, and it spilled into his fingertips, creating notes that were only audible to him. As Adam mulled over the tune that was coming from his heart, he wondered if this might be the birth of a new composition. After switching on a small overhead light above his seat, Adam reached for his carryon bag, and procured a composer's notebook of blank staff paper, that Bill had recently given him "in case the Spirit moves you." All night, he worked at his notebook, pausing every few moments to test the newest measure on his invisible piano. More than once, he sighed with disappointment, as he struggled to bring the tune in his head, to life in his notebook.

Adam hadn't composed in several years. But tonight, his soul was filled with notes that he had never before played; the pianist yearned to complete the circle of creation, by setting it down on paper. So engrossed was he, that he didn't notice the sun rising in his window, nor the eager flashing eyes that were now watching him from her seat just across from his.

Charlie tried to hide her excitement, but Wallace Shipley hadn't made a new album since 1989. This was the first sign she had seen, since knowing him, of any attempt to write more music. Since a young child, Charlie had always wondered how Wallace Shipley worked at his craft, and now she was seeing it happen right in front of her!

When the jet landed at the Twin Yucca airport, Adam was too busy to notice anything happening around him.

"What's going on?" asked Gary, getting up from his seat and looking over Adam's shoulder at his musical annotations.

"He's writing music, again," beamed Charlie.

Upon hearing this, Bill joined the tiny crowd.

"Looks like he's done a lot of work," he observed, seeing the pages of sheet music that Adam had torn out and set aside in his completed pile.

Suddenly realizing that everything was quiet, Adam looked up to see what was going on. Everyone's eyes were upon him.

"What's going on?" he asked, puzzled by the expression on their faces. "Why has the plane stopped? Are we in Twin Yucca?"

"I smell another album in the works," smiled Bill, hopefully.

"Don't get too excited, Bill," warned Adam, gathering the music sheets and preparing to say good bye to his beloved. "I haven't done any serious composing in a long time. Are you ready to go, Charlie?"

"Kevin has already taken our luggage to the car, so I guess I am," she sighed.

Outside, the press was waiting for Charlie to disembark, and hopefully to get a statement from her about Wallace Shipley, for the news had already circulated that he was only here to drop her off.

Adam scooped Charlie into his arms once more to carry her outside and to the car.

"They're going to take pictures of us," warned the young woman.

"Let them," whispered Adam. "Next month, the tour will be over, and I'll be coming home to you."

With Charlie hugging his neck, Adam carried her outside and placed her into the car. After giving her hand a loving squeeze, he shut the door and watched as Kevin drove the Overholts away. Cameras flashed, while reporters clamored for Wallace Shipley to do or say something newsworthy. Melvin took the opportunity of promoting their New York concert, as the musician got back into the jet.

"It won't be long," said Gary, as Adam took his seat. "This tour will be over before you know it."

Adam smiled weakly, and pulled out his sheet music.

"Is it possible to get a piano in my hotel room?" he wondered.

As Kevin neared the Overholt house, they were greeted by a large throng of well-wishers, spilling over the neighbor's lawns and coming towards them. There were some citizens of Twin Yucca present, but the large majority were Wallace Shipley fans who had wanted to come and wish her well. The crowd was so great, that Kevin, who was responsible for Charlie's safety, was about to drive away.

"Wait!" said Charlie. "They mean well. I can't just run from them. They're here because of Wallace Shipley."

"It's against my better judgment, but you're the boss," sighed Kevin, reluctantly getting out and helping Charlie onto her crutches.

"Welcome back, Charlotte!" greeted one woman, handing her a bouquet of daisies with a card reading, "Get Well Soon."

"Thank you," smiled Charlie, graciously accepting the flowers.

"Could I have your autograph?" shouted another.

"I love you, Charlotte!" cried a male fan, running forward and tearing a button off her blouse.

Without a moment's hesitation, Kevin whisked his client away from the crowd and shoved her into the car. So abrupt was the procedure, that Charlie left one of her crutches behind. An eager fan snatched it up, and later sold it on the Internet to a collector in Japan. Charlie's ankle pained her a little, for Kevin hadn't the time to be gentle with her.

"I shouldn't have let you talk me into it," said Kevin, reproaching himself.

"I'm sorry," whimpered Charlie. "I thought I could handle it."

Kevin negotiated through the traffic, but more vehicles were flooding into the neighborhood, to see Charlotte Overholt, and to maybe get a glimpse of her famous fiancé. As they passed other cars, people would slow down to a stop and stare at Charlie, wondering if she was who she looked like she was.

"Put this over your head," instructed Kevin, handing his jacket to the teenager. "Keep your face down, and don't look out the windows."

After a lot of honking, Kevin was finally able to extricate themselves from the crowded streets of Twin Yucca, and down the long road that led to the interstate.

"Where are you going?" asked Charlie.

"I don't know, just away from here," Kevin replied, checking his rear view mirror for anyone who might be still following them.

"I don't understand," groaned Charlie. "Why is everyone making so big a deal over me? *I'm* not Wallace Shipley!"

"Your picture has been all over the media because of the rescue," reminded Vera from the back seat. "And, if you remember, it's gotten worse ever since the Christmas special aired last December, because more people are likely to recognize you. Adam is a public figure, and now you are too. It's something you're going to have to learn to live with."

"Are we being followed?" asked Charlie, timidly.

Kevin checked and nodded his head in the affirmative.

"After I shake these guys, I'm going to check you into a motel in Palm Springs," said Kevin. "After a day or two, it'll probably be safe to go back home."

Since the women didn't have a better idea, the bodyguard followed through with his plan. He checked them in, and then got an adjoining room, so he could keep a guarding eye on Charlie. Vera called Mrs. Jacobs and explained why they had to leave, all the while apologizing for their sudden departure, for Mrs. Jacobs had planned a big dinner in their honor. Under the circumstances, they wouldn't be able to attend, but the neighbor graciously said she understood. Shirley and Thomas had also been present, waiting to see Charlie, when Kevin had carried her off.

"Well," said Mrs. Jacobs, "since you can't come here, perhaps we could come there. I could bring some of the dishes I've already prepared, and we could have lunch in your motel room."

"I wouldn't want to inconvenience you," replied Vera.

"Not at all!" cried Mrs. Jacobs. "It's the least I can do, after everything you two have been through lately!"

An hour later, Mrs. Jacobs, along with Thomas and Shirley, and Jeff and Maggie, knocked on their motel door. Kevin cautiously let the group inside, keeping a careful lookout for anyone who might have followed them. Charlie was sitting on the bed, her foot elevated on a small pile of pillows Vera had arranged for her. She looked up in surprise as Maggie rushed forward to greet her friend.

"I was praying for you!" said Maggie, hugging her friend tightly. "Where were you all that time?"

"I'm so happy you're back!" greeted Shirley, also giving Charlie a hug.

Thomas smiled politely, and hung back with Jeff, who both preferred to not hug the heroine. It had not been explained to the others, save Shirley and Thomas, the reason for Charlie's sudden change of mind over the wedding. The others assumed she and Adam had had a fight, and then made up. While Charlie wanted to confide this news to Maggie, she didn't know how her friend would take the news, and at last decided not to bring it up unless forced to.

Her Alzheimer's test wasn't hard to avoid, for everyone wanted to know about the rescue, and not why Adam and she had "quarreled." Charlie related her adventure to the ready listeners, while Vera filled in any pertinent details that she left out.

"How badly is your ankle hurt?" asked Shirley, examining the bandages with a critical eye. "Maybe you should see our family doctor. She did wonders for Mike two years ago, when he broke his leg."

"I'm told it's a mild sprain," smiled Charlie, "but I never would have known it by the pain. My ankle is still a little tender, but it's getting better every day. How is the baby, Maggie? Do you know if it's a boy or girl yet?"

"It's a boy!" replied the expectant mother, with a radiant smile. "Jeff and I are still trying to pick out names, but we just can't decide."

"There's no need to rush it," laughed Jeff.

"Thought you might want to keep this as a souvenir," said Thomas, handing Charlie a local newspaper with a headline reading, "Charlotte Overholt Heroine!"

"While you were away," informed Shirley, trying to move on to more urgent business, "Adam insisted that I continue with the wedding preparations, even when you called it off. Because of that, I've had to make a lot of decisions, myself. However, there was one thing I couldn't do, and that was to pick out the wedding gown. If you're up to it, I'd like to make an appointment at the wedding boutique for tomorrow. We really should do it as soon as possible, because there are sure to be alterations, and you want to have it done in time for the wedding next month."

"Thank you for all the work you've done, Shirley," said Charlie, gratefully. "I'm sorry I wasn't here to help."

"That's all right," said Thomas, with a big grin. "She was just happy there wasn't anyone here to contradict her decisions!"

Shirley flashed him a why-did-you-say-that look.

"Well, honey," said Thomas, "you know it's true. This wedding is happening just the way you wanted it."

"I'm happy to help out, in any way I can," explained Shirley, a little embarrassed. "But, this is *your* wedding, Charlie. If there's any changes you want to make, please let me know. I realize I have the habit of taking control, so don't be afraid to speak up, if I overstep myself."

"You've been doing a wonderful job," assured Charlie, who didn't have the courage to go against her future sister-in-law's arrangements, even if she wanted to.

"We're all very grateful to you," thanked Vera.

Shirley sent Thomas back to their car to get a crutch Mike had used when his leg was broken, for they had heard that Charlie had lost hers to a fan.

Mrs. Jacobs set out lunch on top of Vera's bed, and everyone helped themselves to the delicious food she had prepared. After they had eaten, and good byes had been made, the small party left.

"If you need anything," Mrs. Jacobs had said, "just let me know."

"Don't forget," Shirley added, just before departing, "tomorrow we shop for your wedding gown!"

Charlie settled back on her bed, and rearranged the pillows under her foot. As she did this, she noticed a sheet of paper Shirley had left for her on the bed. Curious, Charlie picked it up.

"Homes on the Market in the Mojave," she read out loud.

On the trip back, a thought had occurred to Charlie, that she hadn't had before. All the time she had spent in Montana had made her realize just how much the Mojave had become her home. Charlie had come to love the desert, and realized that she hated the idea of living elsewhere. Even though she and Adam had decided it was best to move from Twin Yucca, she wondered if they had to leave the desert, entirely. With this new thought in mind, Charlie grabbed her satellite phone and called Adam. After several rings, someone answered.

"Charlie, this is Bill," said the manager. "I'm afraid Adam can't talk to you right now. He's working on his composition, and isn't speaking to *anyone*."

"Is that Charlie?" asked a voice in the background. "Charlie?" said Adam, after Bill had handed the phone to him. "Is everything all right? Did you get home safely?"

"We had a little trouble with fans," answered Charlie, "so we checked into a motel in Palm Springs until things die down a little. I called because I wanted to know if it would be all right with you if we stayed in the Mojave."

"Isn't Palm Springs in the desert?" asked Adam, misunderstanding her, for his attention was wandering back to his music.

"I meant," reworded Charlie, "is it all right if we made our home in the Mojave? Constance gave me a list of available homes, and I want to check them out."

"If that's what you want," replied Adam, "then do it. I really have to go, Charlie."

"Okay, thanks!" said Charlie, hurrying off the phone.

She glanced down at the list.

"Grandma?" she asked, as the old woman rummaged through Charlie's suitcase for dirty laundry that needed to be taken to the laundromat. "Would it be all right if we went house hunting, this afternoon?"

"Are you sure your ankle is up to it?" wondered Vera, a little concerned. "I think it's best if you got some rest."

"The wedding is next month," reasoned Charlie, "and Adam and I *still* don't have anywhere to go when we get back from the honeymoon! We can't stay in his house, or ours, because of the crowds it could generate. I need to find somewhere we can live without having to struggle with the media or fans, all the time! Please, Grandma?"

"Very well," sighed Vera, "but I don't want you to hurt yourself. If that ankle starts to throb, we come straight back!"

"Shirley gave me a list from Constance," related Charlie, showing her the paper.

"I'll call Constance," said Vera, "and see if it's possible for her to show us these houses."

Charlie grimaced a little. While she didn't want to go out of her way to be around Adam's old girlfriend, she had to admit that real estate WAS Constance's expertise. Unless she wanted to purposefully go to another real estate agent, there wasn't much choice.

"Yes," said Vera on the phone with Constance, "that would be fine. We'll see you in a half hour, then."

True to her word, Constance arrived a half hour later. She seemed surprised that Charlie was actually going to let her show prospective homes.

"You understand of course," explained Constance, "it won't be possible to go inside the houses, unless I can get the owner's okay, first. There are no open houses right now, so access will be limited."

"I understand," said Charlie, getting onto her crutches, as she, Constance, Vera, and Kevin went out to Constance's car.

Vera and Kevin sat in the back seat, while Constance and Charlie sat up front.

"Well," said Constance, "what home do you want to see first?"

Starting from the top of the list, Charlie made two or three suggestions. After the first few houses, she noticed a troubling trend: they were all in or near neighborhoods, making them equally susceptible to the same problems that they were having in Twin Yucca. Charlie didn't have to go inside to know that these homes wouldn't work. She scanned down the list, running her finger to the bottom of the page.

"What about this one?" she asked. "Villa Rosa?"

"I would advise against that one," hesitated Constance. "The estate is twenty acres of sagebrush and gopher holes, and it's out in the middle of nowhere; the grounds are overrun, and the main house has had a series of vagrants living in it. I'm afraid it's a bit of a dinosaur."

"Could we see it?" wondered Charlie.

"It's located north of Drywell," argued Constance, with an annoyed sigh. "I'm sure we can find more suitable homes elsewhere."

"I would like to see it, if it's possible," pressed Charlie.

"If you insist," replied the driver, turning the car northward.

After more than half an hour of driving, Charlie saw the landscape outside her window grow more barren and bleak, as they traveled deeper into the heart of the Mojave Desert. Constance turned up the air conditioner, which had already been going, and commented on the hot June weather, that was so typical of the time of year.

"This is Amboy," announced Constance turning right at a fork in the road.

Amboy was mainly comprised of one store, a railway depot, and a collection of abandoned shacks. As they drove on, Charlie could see vast expanses of dry, parched ground, baking under the summer sun. Vera took out her handkerchief and wiped her face from sweat. Between Amboy and Drywell, was one ghost town after another, with very few remnants of the past to even mark their existence.

Charlie soon discovered that Amboy was a booming metropolis compared to Drywell. It was the most forlorn semi-ghost town she had ever seen. A desolate looking restaurant greeted them as Constance turned off the paved road, and onto a meandering dirt path just wide enough for the car to travel on.

"Villa Rosa is North of here," said Constance, glancing at Charlie's face to see her reaction.

To her surprise, Charlie seemed interested, and even a little eager. In the distance, they could see a one story building that sprawled out to the right and to the left of what looked to be the main entrance.

"It's larger than I expected," muttered the young woman, as they drove up to the building.

"There's no lock on the front door, so we can go inside, if you want," offered Constance, eager to dispel any romantic notions that her young client was entertaining.

"Let me go in and check it out, first," said Kevin getting out of the car, and stepping out into the searing heat. "There might be someone here, who shouldn't be."

Since the air conditioner was off, Constance rolled down her window to catch a little of the warm breeze as Kevin disappeared inside.

"If I remember correctly," said Constance, pulling out something from her briefcase, "this house was built in 1913 by Titus Heartsdale, a millionaire who moved west because of his wife's health. After her death, Titus boarded off all but two or three rooms, and lived there, until his death in 1963. His daughter inherited the estate, but never tried to sell it, until recently, out of financial considerations."

After a few minutes, Kevin reappeared and gave the all clear. The women got out, and Charlie looked about her surroundings. Villa Rosa was an unspectacular building comprised of twelve rooms, placing it closer to the mansion category of dwellings. The roof was flat and unshingled; remnants of red tiles strewn the ground, where the strong prevailing winds had knocked them. Tumbleweeds had gathered around the base of the walls, while tall yellow weeds grew up almost as high as the windows. The front door was arched, with carved stone decorations that were

somewhat worn away, but still visible. From her vantage, Charlie was intrigued, and wanted to go inside. Seeing this, Constance led them inside, where even she had never been before.

"Villa Rosa derived its name from the rose colored sandstone that was used exclusively in its construction," said Constance, referring to her notes. "The style is Spanish Colonial Revival, typical of the architecture found here in Southern California. It says here, that there once used to be a garden of succulents on either side of the front door," she noted, looking about for the now nonexistent garden. "Well, so much for that. Let's go inside."

The mansion echoed loudly, as Constance pushed open the heavy weather beaten door. The windows were boarded over, so Charlie had to wait for her eyes to adjust to the darkness.

"This is the entryway," informed Constance, stepping over a pile of debris. "As you can see, weeds have come up through the cracks in the sandstone floor. To our left, are the remnants of the dining room. The kitchen is through an adjoining door. To our right, is the parlor, or in modern terms, the living room. It is here where the late Titus Heartsdale resided."

"What's through here?" asked Charlie, hobbling over to a partially boarded over door straight ahead.

Constance fumbled through her notes, trying to hold them up to the little available light she had.

"This is very poor documentation," admitted Constance. "It only mentions these three rooms in detail, but makes no reference to the other nine rooms."

"I checked it out, and it's safe," said Kevin, seeing his client wanted to explore the rest of the house.

There was an opening in the boards, but Charlie was unable to get through with her crutches, so Kevin stepped forward, and with one great tug, pulled away the rotting wood.

"Watch out for the nails," he warned her.

When the wood fell away, Charlie was unexpectedly greeted by the clear brilliance of daylight. At first, she thought the roof had collapsed, but as her eyes adjusted once more to the light, she gasped in surprise. Before her was an enclosed inner courtyard, formed in the same Spanish influence as the rest of the house. A terraced arched colonnade with an overhanging ceiling surrounded all four sides of the courtyard, giving some protection from the weather, but still allowing it's occupants to enjoy the outdoors. Tucked under each arch, was a door, leading to

another part of the house. Charlie realized that the overhang also served to protect people from the elements, making it possible to get from one side to the other, without having to cross the courtyard. Huge mounds of tumbleweeds that had blown over the rooftops and into this broad open space, filled much of the area. But even from Charlie's obstructed vantage, she could see the top of a statue, poking through the old growth, in the center of the courtyard.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I have no idea," replied Constance, stunned by the discovery of the courtyard.

"All right," sighed Kevin, "I'll do it."

The bodyguard stepped forward, and cleared the weeds away from the protruding object. Slowly by slowly, Charlie saw the top of a couple, both holding a pitcher, and gazing into one another's eyes.

"It a fountain!" she exclaimed, excitedly.

Around the base of the couple, was a large sandstone basin to hold water. It was mostly filled with sand and debris, but when Kevin wiped away a little of the dirt, Charlie saw a hint of turquoise tiles, lining the inside of the fountain. She limped forward into the sunlight to get a better look.

"Is that couple, Titus Heartsdale and his wife?" she asked Constance.

"I can't say for sure," replied the woman, "but I wouldn't be surprised."

Charlie brushed the toe of her shoe along the floor, revealing through the dirt and sand, the ornate sandstone blocks that had been arranged in asymmetrical patterns, that paved the courtyard. She looked up at the clear blue sky overhead and smiled.

"This place has a lot of possibilities," she thought to herself.

One by one, Kevin pulled away the boards to other rooms, while the women explored. To the left, was the library; to the right, two bedrooms, with adjoining bathrooms and antiquated plumbing pipes protruding from the walls. At the other end of the courtyard were two doors leading to two more bedrooms, one bigger in size than the other. Weeds sprang up through openings in the floor, while weather stains streaked the rose hued walls, betraying decades of neglect. Trash and debris from vagrants were often found cluttered in the corners of the rooms, while the foul smell of feces decaying in the heat made the women sick. After a thorough search

had been conducted, they made their way through the courtyard, back to the entryway, and then outside.

In the back of the house, Charlie discovered a row of Spanish style bungalows, where guests or servants were at one time quartered. Beyond this, was the Mojave Desert, entirely encompassing the estate with its vast barren stretches of land, and strangely beautiful vistas. As Charlie soaked in the view, she heard Vera talking to Constance in hushed tones.

"I think she likes it," whispered the old woman.

"Surely, not!" cried Constance, in a hushed voice. "This place was beautiful in its time, but that time is over. It's in the middle of nothing, and needs a complete overhauling! There's no electricity, no running water, and an hour and a half from Twin Yucca. Adam would never consent to it!"

When Charlie turned to face them, both women became silent.

"What do you think, Grandma?" asked Charlie.

"I think..." Vera hesitated, not wanting to influence her one way or the other, "I think that you and Adam should talk it over."

"Could we take some pictures?" wondered Charlie. "Maybe we could email them to Adam."

With an inward groan, Constance pulled out the digital camera from her briefcase that had become an essential tool of her profession, and began to take as many pictures as she could.

"What's the asking price?" inquired the teenager.

"\$600,000 dollars," replied Constance. "It includes the main house, the five bungalows, and twenty acres of adjoining land. The owner is selling it 'as is,' so any renovations would entirely be left up to you."

"Isn't this exciting?" Charlie asked her grandmother.

Vera smiled weakly. It took more vision than she had, to see the possibilities that had made Charlie so excited. After the digital camera could hold no more, everyone got back into the hot car.

"I must warn you," said Constance, addressing Charlie on the drive back, "that there are at least two other buyers eyeing this piece of property."

"You're kidding!" said Vera, in surprise. "Whatever for?"

"It has nothing to do with the mansion, and everything to do with water," explained Constance. "There's recent talk of an underground water source, somewhere in this vicinity. It's more rumor than anything else, and many are entirely dismissing it as fiction. However, one or two buyers are considering the possibilities, and if they decide to act, it wouldn't surprise me if a bidding war followed. I'm not trying to pressure you, Charlie, but you should be aware that this land might not be on the market very much longer."

Charlie was silent. This was a lot to think about. When they reached the motel in Palm Springs later that day, the sun was declining in the west, and fast sinking into the horizon. The breeze had a tantalizing hint of cool in it, making everyone wish for the night to hurry and descend.

"As you requested, I'll have the pictures emailed to Adam, tonight," said Constance, before driving away.

After Kevin had secured Charlie and Vera in their room, he went to get dinner at a take-out, for there was no room service at the motel.

"I'm bushed!" exclaimed Charlie, collapsing onto her bed, and letting the crutches fall to the floor with a thump.

Vera gently lifted Charlie's ankle and propped two pillows under it, so her ankle could rest. In a room next to theirs, Charlie could hear the screaming of a rambunctious child who didn't want to go to bed.

"Do you want to watch television?" asked Vera, tossing the remote on Charlie's bed. "Kevin will be back with dinner, pretty soon."

Charlie turned on the set and muted the news anchor, absentmindedly watching the moving pictures.

"What did you *really* think of the villa, Grandma?" she wondered.

"It's not for me to say, Pumpkin," answered the grandmother. "This isn't my life-- it's yours and Adam's."

"But," reasoned Charlie, "you're going to live with us. It's only fair that you have an opportunity to give your input."

"All right," sighed Vera, "I'll tell you my honest opinion. Villa Rosa has so much that needs to be redone, or replaced, that it's going to take more work than I can imagine, to make it inhabitable again. I must admit, however, that despite it's present condition, the place has a certain degree of charm that I hadn't expected. I suppose it only comes down to what you and Adam want."

Just then, Charlie's satellite phone rang.

"Charlie?" asked Adam. "Constance just emailed me some pictures of the place she tells me you looked at today. I can hardly believe it, but she says two other buyers are interested."

"I know it doesn't look like much," conceded Charlie, "but it has a lot of possibilities! Oh, Adam, I wish you could have seen it in person! I already have some ideas for the doors and lighting, that would make the house look fantastic!"

"Constance tells me it's out in the middle of nowhere," mentioned Adam, as though he hated to rain on her excitement.

"There's miles and miles of Mojave on every side of the estate," agreed Charlie, "and it's just beautiful! It's only an hour and a half drive from Twin Yucca, and most of that is on paved road. Besides, I think it might be best if we didn't live near any neighborhoods, given our propensity to large unexpected crowds."

"Do you want this, Charlie?" asked Adam.

"Not if you don't," she replied, adamantly.

"I don't have time to think this through," he said, "so if you're this excited, then I say go for it."

"What, no debating?" asked Charlie, in surprise. "I had several arguments all prepared!"

"I want you to be happy," said Adam.

"I could be happy living in a one room apartment, if it was with you," answered Charlie, truthfully. "I don't want you to be sorry that you let me make this decision. I have to tell you, that since the villa needs so much work, the bill for this project will probably be high; and Constance said the two other buyers might drive the initial price up."

"I think we can afford it," chuckled Adam. "You have my blessing, if you want to go through with it."

"Thank you, Adam!" cried Charlie, excitedly bubbling with eagerness. "I'll try not to get you too involved with the renovation, so you can work on your music! There's no way it will be done in time for the wedding, so we might have to live in a trailer on the property. It's either that, or go live with your sister. Her home is far enough from town, that I don't think it would be as big a problem with your fans."

"I'm okay with the trailer idea," said Adam, not needing any time to think it over. "I'm for anything that let's us be alone together."

"Not so loud," hushed Charlie, "someone might hear you!"

Adam laughed, making her more confident that he wasn't feeling pressured into any decisions about the house.

"Charlie-girl," he sighed happily, "don't ever change!"

After they hung up, Adam related to Bill what was happening in Southern California.

"From the pictures you're showing me," observed Bill, "you're buying a dump!"

"She's happy," replied Adam, "that's the important part. And things that help stimulate her mind, have to be an asset. Charlie's genetic counselor said that mental stimulation might help fight the progression of the disease. I'm willing to try anything, Bill-- even living at Villa Rosa!"

Back at the motel in the Mojave, Charlie was getting on the phone with Constance.

"Is it still available?" asked the young woman, hoping against hope that she wasn't too late.

"Yes, it is," replied Constance, surprised at how quickly Charlie was getting back in touch with her. "Have you made a decision, already?"

"I talked it over with Adam," said Charlie, "and we want Villa Rosa. He said to go as high as it takes to outbid the others."

Constance was silent for a moment. She guessed that Adam was only going along with this, because his infatuation with Charlie was blinding him from good judgment. But, her business was real estate, and *not* Adam Clark.

"I'll contact the owner and close escrow as soon as possible," relented Constance. "There will be some papers you and Adam have to sign."

"That's great!" exclaimed Charlie. "Will you let me know as soon as it's official? I'm a little nervous we won't get it!"

"I'll call you as soon as it's settled," assured Constance, before hanging up.

When Charlie got off the phone, she smiled happily at her grandmother.

"I can't believe it's happening, Grandma!" the teenager beamed. "I know you don't think much of Villa Rosa, right now, but just wait until I'm done with it!"

"The wastes shall be builded."

~ Ezekiel 36:10 ~

Chapter Forty-seven

For the First Time

"My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone."

~ Song of Solomon 2:10, 11 ~

"Why do I have to get all fixed up, just to go pick out a wedding dress?" sighed Charlie, looking into the mirror across the motel room, as Vera arranged her hair.

"You want to know how you're going to look in the dress, don't you?" replied Vera, pinning up Charlie's brown locks.

"I hope Constance calls soon," wished Charlie, rubbing her ankle. "I gave her my satellite phone number so she can call me the minute we get Villa Rosa."

"Pumpkin, stop fidgeting," said Vera, trying to finish the teenager's hair. "You need to settle down. Remember, if your ankle starts to bother you, we'll come straight back. I wish we could do this another day, but your wedding is only weeks away. We'll be doing good to find a gown you like in just one day."

"You mean it could take *longer*?" asked Charlie, with a surprised groan.

"Charlie," replied Vera, patiently, "this is your wedding dress. It's something that you'll always treasure, and maybe even pass on to your own daughter. It's the single most important dress a woman ever buys."

"What happened to your own wedding gown?" asked the teenager, smiling at this sudden wave of sentimentality in her grandmother.

"It's packed away somewhere," replied Vera. "I'd let you have it, but the last time I saw it, it had considerable water damage. My, my! I haven't thought about that dress in a long time," Vera smiled to herself.

At nine o' clock, Shirley arrived to pick up Charlie, Vera, and Kevin. As Kevin helped Charlie into the car, her future sister-in-law began discussing what gown styles she thought were the best. Shirley was excited-- even more so than Charlie, who had a difficult time getting her mind off of the (hopefully) impending purchase of Villa Rosa. She clutched her satellite phone, and silently prayed that God would give Constance wisdom to secure the estate.

"What's your opinion?" asked Shirley, suddenly requiring Charlie's input.

Because she hadn't been paying attention, the young woman smiled politely and shrugged.

"Grandma and I went house hunting," Charlie announced, trying to change the subject from whatever it was.

"Really?" said Shirley, in surprise. "Did you see anything you liked?"

"Yes, I did," smiled Charlie. "In fact, I found a house that I liked so much, Constance is going to close escrow on it today!"

"Today?" repeated Shirley, her voice pleased but stunned. She wondered why Constance hadn't called her and told her the good news, when it happened. "I thought you and Adam didn't want to live in Twin Yucca," she recalled.

"It's not in Twin Yucca," answered Charlie.

"Near it then?" asked Shirley, hopefully.

"Not exactly," hesitated Charlie. "It's an hour and a half drive from Twin Yucca."

"Well," said Shirley, "at least it's still in the Mojave, right?"

"It's most *definitely* in the Mojave," laughed Charlie. "I've never been so excited about a house, Shirley! It's going to need some serious renovations, but when it's done, it'll be perfect! Adam and I are going to live in a trailer or mobile home on the property until the house is livable."

"Where exactly is this house?" inquired Shirley, a sinking feeling coming over her.

"Near Drywell," replied the teenager.

For a minute, Shirley was silent.

"What does Adam have to say about all this?" she asked, for Drywell was out in the middle of nowhere.

"He's fine with it," answered Charlie, leaning her head back and watching the desert speed by her window.

Shirley tried to hide her annoyance. She had wanted Adam to remain in the Mojave, but within a reasonable distance from her own home. The idea of driving ninety miles to nowhere, just to see her brother, was not appealing to her. But here, Adam's young bride had already made the important decision, and without her input or advice!

Diana's Bridal Salon was located in Palm Springs and sold only the best in wedding attire. Shirley had thought to look elsewhere at first, but knew that she wasn't likely to drag Charlie around from shop to shop on a sprained ankle, so she decided to start with the best, first.

Diana had been notified ahead of time that Charlotte Overholt was going to come in that day to look at wedding gowns, and had spent the entire morning in preparation for her arrival. The best and most exquisite dresses were hand selected by Diana, and placed near the front of the salon, to catch Charlie's eye. This was a high-profile wedding, and Diana knew that if she could advertise the fact that Wallace Shipley's bride had purchased her wedding gown from this salon, then it would mean publicity of the best kind. To that end, a large dressing room had been set aside for Charlie's exclusive use, to help ensure her safety and privacy while shopping at the salon.

Right on schedule, Charlotte Overholt and her entourage arrived. The staff at Diana's Bridal Salon peeked around corners and smiled broadly as the young woman passed by them, looking every bit as glamorous as they had imagined her to be.

"I can't believe it's really her!" excitedly whispered one coworker to another.

The women were shown into the fitting room, while Kevin patiently waited outside. This wasn't his first shopping trip with Charlie, and he knew this would likely take a long time.

Inside, Vera helped Charlie to a stately chaise longue, so she could rest her ankle until it was time to try on the gowns. Across the room was a large mirror and a rack of preselected wedding dresses. Charlie gazed at the fancy white gowns with long trains and shimmering fabric. For the first time, the realization of the importance of this one gown began to sink in. She had been so preoccupied by Villa Rosa that she had had little time to prepare herself for the surge of excitement that was welling up inside her breast.

Shirley and Vera went to the rack of wedding dresses and started browsing through them, each certain they knew what was best for Charlie.

"Charlie!" exclaimed Vera, holding up a huge gown with giant puffy sleeves, "isn't this beautiful?"

Beautiful wasn't the word Charlie would have used, but it was... big. Next was Shirley's turn. It too, was more dress than Charlie was prepared to climb into. The initial excitement began to wear off as one dress after another was set aside. Diana frantically scurried about, as her assistant handed her gown after gown. Only after Vera and Shirley had exhausted all their suggestions, did they allow Diana to venture one of her own.

"Miss Overholt's petite figure," expertly observed Diana, "should not be buried under large mounds of fabric."

Diana's assistant handed her the gem of the bridal salon and beamed with satisfaction. This was the dress Diana had been hoping to sell Charlie, all along.

"This dress has a fitted bodice with delicate hand embroidered flowers, a full length sweeping train, a delicate ivory organza overskirt, and a long veil embroidered with matching flowers," said Diana, holding up the exquisite gown before the women.

"Let me try it on," said Charlie, eagerly getting to her feet.

Diana helped the young woman into a silk petticoat and then lifted the dress over head so Charlie could pass her arms through. The dressmaker fastened the back of the gown and then assisted Charlie to the mirror.

Charlie was amazed at how different she looked, and gasped in surprise at the beautiful form that was staring back at her. Vera burst into tears and had to sit down with her handkerchief, while Shirley quietly stood by and mutely approved of the transformation.

"It's a near perfect fit," said Diana, checking the seams with an expert eye. "Let's try on the tiara and veil."

Diana crowned Charlie with the tiara and matching veil, and stood back to judge the presentation.

"We'll need to take in the dress in at least one or two places," observed Diana, "but on the whole, it fits you like a glove. I always say, the wedding dress is the centerpiece of any wedding."

"It's perfect," breathed Charlie. "I can hardly wait for Adam to see me in this!"

Charlie looked to her grandmother, who was now working on the box of tissue Diana's assistant had brought her.

"Grandma!" sighed Charlie, "if you're going to cry this much when I'm just trying on the dress, what are you going to do on the big day?!"

"Never you mind," admonished Vera, getting a fresh tissue. "Just let me enjoy this moment."

"Congratulations, Charlie," said Shirley, covering her mouth in delight, "it looks like you have your wedding dress! I confess, it didn't take as long as I thought it would."

Just then, Charlie's satellite phone rang. The young woman limped to the chaise longue and quickly snatched it up.

"Charlie, it's Constance," said the caller. "The bidding went up to one million, two hundred thousand dollars, but you and Adam are now the proud owners of the Villa Rosa Estate!"

"We've got it!" Charlie exclaimed to Vera and Shirley. "We've got Villa Rosa!"

Charlie wanted desperately to go see Villa Rosa once more before the wedding, but there was so much to do, that it was impossible for her to find the time. It was now the last Saturday of June, just ten full days from the wedding, and Shirley was working overtime on the preparations. The hall Shirley had reserved for the reception had canceled, so a last minute substitute was called into play. The hotel that was to board many of the relatives and friends that had to be flown in for the wedding, promised they would be able to accommodate such a large party, so the reception site was moved to the entire ground floor of the fancy hotel.

The publicity over Wallace Shipley's upcoming wedding had gone beyond anyone's expectations. Even Melvin had been surprised, suddenly finding it necessary to minimize the wedding whenever he spoke to the press. So great was the public's interest, that Vera and Charlie found it impossible to return home to Twin Yucca. Shirley, who was unwilling to let Charlie live at the low end motel any longer, quickly moved the young bride and her grandmother to the hotel that would host the wedding reception. This prompted several members of the media to announce that Charlie had finally "come out of hiding." Charlie had never considered herself "in hiding" in the first place, but soon discovered that the technical difference lay in the number of paparazzi that recorded her every public moment. When Charlie realized this distinction, she tried to stay "in hiding" as much as she could.

Saturday also brought Aunt Angela and Uncle Mark Goodman, their son Reggie, daughter Sherri, and little one year old granddaughter, Eliza. They had come all the way from North Carolina to attend the wedding, ten days in advance, (at the Goodmans' expense). Aunt Angela had considered it her responsibility to be there for her late sister's only child, and was

determined to fulfill that duty. Uncle Mark was eager for a vacation, as was Reggie, but Sherri, however, had come grudgingly.

"I'm so glad you could come!" greeted Vera, as the Goodmans entered the hotel lobby. "Did the taxi driver get all your luggage?"

Just as Aunt Angela was about to answer, a photographer quickly took their picture.

"I'll take you to your room, now," smiled Vera, patiently. "That way, we can lose the you-know-who," she added in a whisper.

"We're so thrilled to be here!" exclaimed Aunt Angela, as they got into the elevator.

"The last time we were in California," recalled Uncle Mark, "was for Martha's funeral. Charlotte was just a baby, then."

"Don't they grow up fast?" sighed Vera, becoming sentimental again.

"How *is* Charlotte?" inquired Aunt Angela. "You can't turn on the television without hearing what she's going to wear, where they're going on their honeymoon, and the engagement ring-- they seem to harp on that the most! So much of it is *pure* fiction-- I mean, honestly, who in their right mind would pay a *million* dollars for *one* ring?"

Vera opened her mouth to confirm that Adam HAD paid such a sum for just one ring, but quickly changed her mind. She also wondered what Angela would say if she found out that Adam had just paid over a million dollars for a dump in the middle of the desert, just to please Charlie? Vera quickly decided she wasn't going to ask, and promptly changed the subject.

"Did Eliza have a good trip on the plane?" asked Vera, smiling at the child Sherri was holding.

Before Sherri could answer, the elevator doors opened and the Goodmans followed Vera down the hall to their room.

"I heard Charlotte hurt her ankle," said Aunt Angela. "Will she be able to walk up the aisle without help? It'd be such a shame if she had to use a crutch on her wedding day."

"Charlie's ankle is doing just fine," assured Vera. "As a matter of fact, she got rid of the last crutch a day ago. She still has a compression bandage on for support, but the discomfort is all but gone."

"That's good," replied the woman.

"I'll go get Charlie and let her know you're here," said Vera, excusing herself from the Goodmans' room.

The old woman went down the hall and knocked on Charlie's hotel door.

"Charlie?" called Vera. "Your aunt is here."

The hotel door opened and Charlie reluctantly appeared.

"They're waiting to see you," said Vera, taking her granddaughter by the arm and guiding her toward their room.

"Charlotte!" cried Aunt Angela, coming forward and hugging her. "You didn't tell me that you were in North Carolina because of Wallace Shipley! I had to find out about it on the television! I called your uncle into the living room and said, 'Tell me that isn't OUR Charlotte!' and he couldn't! Ever since, we've been the talk of the neighborhood! Now, when do we get to meet this Wallace Shipley of yours?"

"Adam's tour doesn't end until July eighth-- or at least, that's when he comes back for good," explained Charlie.

As she said this, baby Eliza began to cry, so Sherri excused herself and changed the baby's diaper on the bed. Charlie watched as the young mother put a clean diaper on the girl, and then cradled it in her arms. Unfortunately, the baby continued to cry, making it difficult to easily hear Aunt Angela.

"Would you *please* quiet that child down?" shouted Aunt Angela to her daughter. "I can hardly hear myself think!"

Sherri stormed from the room and went into the hall, pacing up and down, trying to get the baby to stop crying. Charlie soon joined Sherri and invited her to her hotel room.

"I wish I had my own room," sighed Sherri, swaying back and forth to hush the child. "Mom insisted that we pay for our own accommodations, so we're all packed into one tiny space. You're so lucky, Charlie."

"I think Grandma let me have this room to myself because she wanted some peace and quiet," explained Charlie. "I have an extra bed," she offered her cousin. "You and Eliza can have it, if you want."

Sherri looked at her, trying to figure out what her angle was.

"Don't look so surprised," said Charlie, seeing the hesitancy in Sherri's eyes. "Grandma was going to offer it, anyway. That one room *is* too small for all of you."

"I'll get Dad to bring my bags over," shrugged the young mother, rocking back and forth with Eliza. "This baby!" she sighed. "Ever since we left North Carolina, she's been crying like crazy. It's driving me nuts!"

"Maybe the strange surroundings are scaring her," suggested Charlie.

"Excuse me?" asked Sherri, her voice quickly becoming imperious. "Do you have a child? Are you going to tell me how I should take care of my own baby?"

Charlie backed off, going to her bed to look at some home decorating magazines that could give her designing ideas for Villa Rosa.

"I have to use the bathroom," said Sherri, coming to Charlie's bedside. "Hold Eliza for a minute."

Charlie held the child while Sherri disappeared into the bathroom.

"Aren't you just a little sweetheart," cooed Charlie, as the baby's large eyes gazed into hers.

"Wh-whaaaaa!" cried the girl, struggling to escape this stranger's arms.

As Charlie tried to keep her hold on the wriggling child, Eliza sneezed straight into the teenager's face.

"Thank you," Charlie smiled grimly. "I needed that."

Soon after, Sherri came back and retrieved her daughter. Charlie washed her face and returned to her magazines, while Eliza continued to scream in the background.

Minutes later, the seventeen year old received a phone call from Adam on her satellite phone. Not wanting to talk in front of Sherri, she went to Vera's empty hotel room.

"Okay, I can talk now," said Charlie. "What's up?"

"Are you sure no one can hear you?" asked Adam, his voice uneasy and embarrassed.

"I'm sure," affirmed Charlie. "Why do you ask?"

"Remember the conversation we had recently," asked Adam, in a hushed voice, "where we talked about me having a vasectomy? I just saw a doctor, and it turns out that I don't need one, after all. The doctor ran some tests and discovered that I have something called azoospermia. It means there's no sperm in my semen. Charlie, I can't have children."

"I don't understand," she replied.

"I had a severe case of mumps when I was in college," related Adam. "The doctor says I can... you know... just like any other guy, but I can't father children."

"I see," said Charlie, trying hard not to make Adam feel somehow inferior because of this diagnosis. "This is good news, then. It solves our problem."

"You're not disappointed?" asked Adam, still a little concerned how she would take the news.

"We agreed that we weren't going to have any kids," answered Charlie, "remember? My babies would have a fifty percent chance of inheriting Alzheimer's Disease, and spreading it to yet another generation. In a way Adam, I'm glad to hear that you're not giving up anything to be with me. I was feeling guilty about depriving you of children, even though you assured me that I would be enough for you."

"I'm not being deprived of *anything*," said Adam in a loving voice. "In a few days, you're going to be in my arms, and this tour will be a thing of the past. Oh, Charlie! I love you! I've told it to myself a hundred times, and it never ceases to amaze me! As long as you love me back, then I'll *always* be satisfied!"

When Charlie returned to her room, baby Eliza was still screaming her lungs out.

"Was that him?" asked Sherri, curiously.

Charlie nodded her head in the affirmative, but remained silent about their conversation; it was private and personal, only between Adam and herself.

The next few days were busy with dress fittings, the wedding rehearsal (where someone stood in for the absent groom), and last minute meetings with Shirley, over the wedding. Aunt Angela had hoped to take over some aspect of the wedding for which she could take credit for, but

Shirley would brook no opposition. She had been planning this wedding for months, and wasn't about to let go of control just days before the wedding. Charlie had not said anything to her about making room for her aunt, so Shirley acted accordingly.

Everything was going fairly well, until three days before the greatly anticipated event. It all began when Sherri checked Eliza, who was sleeping contentedly in the bassinet that the hotel had brought up for the baby.

"She feels warm," muttered Sherri, placing her hand on the baby's forehead. "I think something is wrong. Would you go get my Mom, Charlie?"

The teenager ran into the hall and quickly located Aunt Angela, intently debating with Shirley over some seating arrangement on the reception chart.

"Aunt Angela?" said Charlie, running up to the two women, while Vera stood nearby. "Sherri wants you! Something might be wrong with the baby!"

Aunt Angela quickly left, with the other women following on her heels. They found Sherri standing over Eliza's bassinet with a concerned look on her face.

"Mom," said Sherri, "Eliza's awfully warm. I think she has a fever."

Aunt Angela felt the baby's face and nodded her head in agreement.

"Calm down, Sherri," said the mother, "it's probably just a little cold."

As the evening wore on, little Eliza started coughing, and her eyes and nose began to run. Aunt Angela held fast to her diagnosis of a cold. Of course, Shirley had her own opinions and freely shared them with Aunt Angela, who politely and firmly refused to listen.

Vera, who wasn't willing to jump into the debate, moved Charlie into the same room as hers, just in case Eliza did have a cold.

"I don't want you getting sick," Vera said, checking her granddaughter's forehead. "Stay out of Sherri's room, and drink plenty of liquids. You hardly touched your dinner earlier, so I'm going to order room service. This time, I want you to *eat!* 'Feed a cold, starve a fever'-- that's what my mother always used to say."

The next morning, Charlie woke up feeling warm. She kept this from Vera, but when the sneezing and runny nose began later that day, Vera didn't need to be told what was going on.

"Maybe it's just a twenty-four hour virus," said Vera, hopefully. "I don't want you attending Sunday services, today. You need to stay in bed and get all the rest you can. My, my. What will go wrong next?"

A doctor was called in, for Charlie could not leave the hotel without being mobbed by Wallace Shipley fans. She was prescribed a medication that helped to alleviate the most obvious of cold symptoms, and given a throat spray that would shorten the duration of the ailment. Armed with these, Charlie began to feel more comfortable and confident that her wedding pictures would not show her with a red nose.

A day before the wedding, scores of guests flooded the ritzy hotel, as relatives from the Overholt and Clark sides of the family flew in for the big day. Executives from the recording label that handled Wallace Shipley's music also arrived, including music vendors, musician friends, and recording technicians. Then relatives from the Garner side of the family began to show up, along with old friends and acquaintances from Vera's past. The wedding of Wallace Shipley to Charlotte Overholt was such a publicized event, that it was hard to not include people who hoped that they would be invited. All in all, the wedding guests took up a good part of the hotel.

The bride's cold symptoms had eased off a little, making her feel pretty well, under the circumstances. Charlie was almost more excited than she could stand! Tomorrow she would marry Adam! It seemed too good to be true! The last of the wedding dress alterations were finally done, and the gown hung in careful readiness in the closet. Her wedding bouquet arrived from the florist, a beautiful arrangement of small pink roses-- her chosen color for the bridesmaid dresses. Maggie was to be Charlie's matron of honor, and Bill was going to be Adam's best man. The former would arrive early the next day, while the latter would fly in with Adam that evening on his private jet.

As evening approached, the young bride eagerly awaited Adam's arrival from her hotel bed. She had been much too excited to eat very much that day. Clinging to her satellite phone, Charlie waited breathlessly, while Vera knitted in a nearby chair, trying to contain her own excitement.

"He should be landing at the airport any minute now," said Charlie, checking the clock. "Adam promised to call as soon as he got in."

Just then, her phone rang. It was Adam.

"Charlie-girl?" he began, sheepishly.

"No! No! Adam!" cried Charlie, recognizing that tone of voice. "Don't tell me you're going to be late for the wedding!"

"I won't be," he assured her, "but it's taking a little longer than we expected to wrap up the tour, so I'll be flying in tomorrow afternoon, instead of tonight. I'll be there in plenty of time for the wedding, so don't worry."

"Seems to me, the last time you promised to be on time, you showed up late," recalled Charlie, referring to Thanksgiving at Shirley's house. "You're not trying to get out of the wedding, are you?"

"Of course not," affirmed Adam. "I WILL be there."

"You'd better be," sighed Charlie. "Every person we've ever met will be attending our wedding. I'm going to look pretty silly standing up there all by myself."

"I know what it's like to be left waiting at the altar," said Adam, "and I would never put you through that."

"Be at the church by four," she admonished, with a wavering voice. "I don't care if you haven't time to get into your tuxedo, or not. Just show up."

"Charlie?" asked Adam.

"What?" she sighed.

"I love you," he answered in a tender voice.

"I love you too," said Charlie.

When the couple hung up, Shirley entered the room with a woman who Charlie did not know, but had been invited.

"Is your Dad going to give you away, tomorrow?" asked the unidentified woman.

"No," replied Charlie, sadly. "I wish he could, but it just isn't possible. Daddy's staying at the nursing home right now, and isn't in any condition to attend the wedding. Grandma talked Uncle Jerome into walking me down the aisle, instead."

Then Charlie told Shirley of Adam's change of plan. With the news that he wasn't coming in that evening after all, the anticipation died down a little, making it possible for Charlie to relax a little. After she finished dinner, Charlie changed into her nightgown and returned to bed. It was early for bedtime, but like a child waiting for Christmas morning, she knew that the sooner she fell asleep, the sooner morning would come.

To Charlie's surprise, she not only fell asleep at the early hour, but she also slept in-- much later than she had thought possible. When she opened her eyes on the day of the wedding, Charlie discovered that it was lunchtime.

"I didn't want to wake you up," said Vera, checking Charlie's thermometer. "Well, you still have a mild fever. How do you feel, Pumpkin?"

"Better, now that I'm rested," yawned Charlie, getting out of bed. "I'm glad the wedding is taking place during the second part of the day. It gives everyone a chance to recuperate from all the waiting."

Just then, Shirley entered the room and urgently whispered something to Vera.

"Oh no!" gasped Vera, covering her mouth in shock.

"What is it, Grandma?" asked Charlie, coming to where the two women stood.

"Eliza has the *measles!*" exclaimed Vera, looking at her granddaughter with uncertainty. "They've taken her to the hospital!"

"I *can't* have the measles," replied Charlie, shaken by the news. "I've already had them when I was little, so this has to be a cold. You can't get it twice!"

"Thank God for that!" cried Shirley, fanning herself with the wedding itinerary in relief.

"How many of our guests are pregnant?" asked Vera.

"A few," answered Shirley. "Why?"

Suddenly, the answer dawned on her.

"I'll tell them not to attend, and warn the others to stay away if they don't want to run the risk of being exposed," said Shirley, checking her guest list. "However, that presents a new problem."

"You mean Maggie can't come?" cried Charlie in dismay. "She's my matron of honor!"

"It's dangerous for Maggie's unborn baby," explained Vera. "There's no choice, Pumpkin. You need to choose someone else."

"I'll let you two work it out," said Shirley, turning to go. "Let me know what you decide."

"I can't believe this is happening!" exclaimed Charlie, sinking back onto her bed in disappointment.

"Pumpkin," said Vera, after Adam's sister had left, "you need to make your decision soon, because the ceremony is in a few hours."

"I know," conceded Charlie, sadly. "I just feel so sorry for Maggie."

Soon after, room service showed up with Charlie's lunch, for Vera had already eaten. The young woman found it difficult to eat, and for once, Vera discouraged her because she still had a fever.

When Shirley returned, it was to report that Eliza was doing fine, but needed to remain in the hospital under observation; all pregnant women were notified of the danger, and decided to refrain from attending the ceremony or the reception.

"We'll send wedding cake to their rooms," said Shirley. "That only leaves the question of your matron of honor. I told Jeff and Maggie of the situation, and Maggie assured me that she understands. Have you made your decision, yet?"

"I'd like *you* to be my matron of honor," requested Charlie, gratefully. "You've worked harder than anyone to make this a memorable wedding."

Tears came to Shirley's eyes as she hugged Charlie.

"Thank you," was all she could say.

When Shirley left, Vera began to fix Charlie's hair, while the seventeen year old started putting on her makeup.

"I wish Adam would get here," sighed Charlie, nervously checking the clock. "It's almost three, and he still hasn't flown in yet!"

"I'm sure he's doing everything he can to be on time," assured Vera, glancing at the clock herself.

After Vera had finished arranging Charlie's hair in an elegant French twist, and her makeup was on, the young woman climbed into the silk petticoat. Then Vera lifted the delicate wedding gown over Charlie's head while she put her arms through the sleeves.

"After I lace up the bodice," said Vera, smoothing out the gown over the petticoat, "I want you to take your cold medication again. How's your head? Are you still warm?"

"I'm feeling pretty good," replied Charlie, hopefully. "Maybe, I'm through the worst of it, already."

"I don't want you pacing back and forth," instructed Vera. "You'll wear yourself out."

"I can't sit in this dress, or I'll wrinkle it," she answered.

"Then stand," sighed Vera. "Only be careful not to overexert yourself. You're fighting a cold, and you don't want to make it worse."

"First a sprained ankle threatened the wedding, and now a cold," sighed Charlie, trying to hold back a cough.

"No worries, Pumpkin," smiled Vera. "God will get you through this. Just remember, He loves you."

At three thirty, Charlie finally got a phone call from Bill.

"We're in the lobby," announced Bill. "Don't worry, I'll get him to the church on time!"

After Bill hung up, Shirley entered the hotel room, all dressed for the ceremony.

"I'm just in time for the veil," she happily observed, as Vera placed the veil and tiara onto Charlie's head.

"Adam's here," related Charlie.

"That brother of mine would be late to his own funeral!" exclaimed Shirley, checking her watch. "He has only minutes to be dressed and ready!"

"It doesn't take as long for men to get ready," smiled Vera, knowingly. "He'll make it!"

Just then, Charlie heard a familiar masculine voice outside her door.

"Oh, no you don't!" cried Shirley, pushing the man back through the door before he had a chance to see the bride.

"I just want to talk to her!" pleaded the groom, with a laugh. "Have a heart, Sis!"

"You'll see her at the church... if you're dressed by then," sighed Shirley. "Just look at yourself! You only have fifteen minutes!"

"I'm going! I'm going!" laughed Adam, obviously in a buoyant mood.

Shirley secured the door behind her and returned to Charlie.

"The limousine is ready and waiting downstairs," she informed the women. "Kevin is ready to escort you to the car."

Shirley was suddenly interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Melvin, what do you want?" asked Shirley, barring him from entering the room.

"The press is swarming downstairs," said Melvin. "I thought I might brief Charlie before she goes down and meets them."

"It's all right, Shirley," called Charlie, as Vera made a small adjustment to the veil.

Melvin smiled as Shirley stepped aside to let him in. Shirley quietly noticed that at least HE was dressed.

"Be quick," she warned the man. "We haven't got much time."

"Sure thing," said Melvin.

Charlie turned around and faced the publicist. Melvin stopped in his tracks and nodded his head in approval.

"Don't you look nice!" he said, shaking her hand warmly. "I'm sorry we came in so late, but one thing after another came up. You know how it is."

"Yes," agreed Charlie. "I remember."

"The media has been allowed to meet you downstairs," explained Melvin. "When you come back for the reception, they won't be there. I figured it was better to make some kind of concession now, instead of later."

"I understand," replied Charlie.

"I'll go down with you, and field any questions relating to the tour," said Melvin. "Watch out for anyone trying to trick you into saying that you and Adam have already had sex. Remember, you're still a minor. Let me see, what else-- oh yes, don't call your father 'Daddy,' and always keep smiling," he added, going down his mental checklist. "But, I guess you've done this enough times, that I don't have to tell you."

"Thank you, Melvin," said Charlie. "I'm ready."

"Okay, then," smiled Melvin.

Charlie exited the hotel room, flanked by Kevin and Melvin, while Vera followed behind, carrying Charlie's wedding train. Other guests took pictures of the procession as they made their way to the elevator.

When the elevator doors opened in the hotel lobby, a flurry of bright flashing camera lights greeted them. Kevin took hold of Charlie's arm as Melvin tried to part the sea of reporters and wellwishers.

"Miss Overholt only has time for one or two questions," Melvin told them, "so please, make it brief."

"Where are you going on your honeymoon, Charlotte?" asked a reporter, while a live television camera zoomed in on her face.

Charlie didn't want to say where, so she pleadingly looked to Melvin for help.

"Sorry, guys," smiled Melvin, "but that's a secret. Next question?"

"There are reports that your pregnant matron of honor won't be attending the ceremony, due to an outbreak of measles among some of the children that were invited," asked another. "Is this true, and have you been exposed to the outbreak?"

"My cousin's baby daughter came down with measles this morning," affirmed Charlie, "but, to my knowledge, she's the only who has been affected."

"Who designed your wedding dress, Charlotte?" shouted a reporter from the back.

"It's a Diana original," replied Charlie.

To her relief, Melvin waved off any more questions so they could get into the limousine. For a moment, Charlie struggled to fit all of her gown through the car doorway, but Vera deftly rearranged the train, making it possible for a graceful exit.

Once inside, the heavily tinted windows afforded Charlie some privacy. She leaned back to catch her breath while Kevin flicked on the small television set that was in the back of the limousine.

"Hey, Miss Overholt," he commented, "looks like they were filming you live. Your wedding has even preempted the regularly scheduled programming," he said, reading the small caption at the bottom of the screen.

"That's great," Charlie smiled weakly.

She wanted to turn the limousine around, and go hide in her room. Outside, Charlie could hear throngs of people cheering as they drove by.

"What if I faint?" the teenager thought to herself. "What if I stumble and fall flat on my face going down the aisle? God, please help me!"

"Charlie, just in case I don't get a chance to later," said Melvin, leaning forward in his seat, "I wanted to say that it's been a privilege knowing you. I confess I had reservations when you and Adam first got together, but you've more than proven yourself by your professionalism and poise under great pressure. May God bless you both."

"When Adam and I finish Villa Rosa," said Charlie, smiling warmly at him, "I hope you'll come and visit us. You'll always be welcome."

"Thank you," said Melvin.

"Look," pointed out Kevin, "Mr. Clark's live on the television!"

"It's about time," laughed Charlie. "Grandma, look at Adam! He's wearing sunglasses! Adam, you're not going to an awards show!" she laughingly shouted at the television set.

The groom was handsomely dressed in his best tuxedo, as were Bill and Gary. Wallace Shipley waved to the crowd, answered a question or two, and got into the awaiting limousine. Several more stretch limos lined up in front of the hotel to collect the wedding guests and carry them to the church.

As the limousine pulled up to the church, Vera gathered Charlie's train and prepared to get out. Kevin helped Charlie out of the vehicle while Melvin tried to keep the reporters at bay.

The group made their way inside and were greeted by Reverend Brenner, who would officiate the wedding ceremony. The sanctuary was festooned with white flowers and small pink roses with delicate sprays of baby's breath. A narrow white carpet led up the aisle, leading straight to the altar. Near the back of the sanctuary, was a small room where the Reverend instructed them to wait.

"Shirley has done a beautiful job!" breathed Vera, as she led Charlie to a mirror in one corner of the room.

Kevin took his post outside, while Melvin found a seat near the open church doors, to wait for the rest of the limousines to arrive. Before long, Vera and Charlie could hear the commotion of the first of the arriving guests, as they entered the church and slowly found their seats. Many people mingled before sitting down, each relating a recent experience with reporters, admiring the flower arrangements, or just marveling at the publicity and circumstance of knowing someone as famous as Adam.

Being a good publicist, Melvin made sure that the recording label executives were promptly shown to their seats, while Shirley arrived with Thomas and the rest of the Garner family.

Shirley made certain that the ushers kept the lines flowing, by showing people to their seats in a timely manner. Then she poked her head into the room where Vera and Charlie were waiting.

"It won't be long now," she announced. "Just a few minutes more."

"How are you feeling, Pumpkin?" asked Vera, checking Charlie's forehead with the palm of her hand.

Charlie coughed once and smiled.

"Except for this cold, I'm doing great," she replied. "Does my nose look red?"

"No, the makeup is covering it perfectly," assured Vera, fixing one of Charlie's ringlets. "I'm so proud of you, today," sighed Vera, already beginning to tear up. "You're a very brave girl, Charlie. Just you remember that!"

The young woman kissed her grandmother on the cheek, and picked up her wedding bouquet. Just then, Charlie could hear the chants of "Wal-lace! Wal-lace!" coming from outside the church.

"No one needs to tell me what that means," smiled Charlie nervously.

Not long after, Charlie heard the large church organ, beginning to play the processional music. Jerome entered the small room, looking every bit terrified.

"The usher is here to begin the procession," announced Shirley, escorting Vera into the sanctuary.

"When is it our turn?" asked Jerome, looking to Charlie for instructions.

"They'll start playing 'Here Comes the Bride,'" answered Charlie, amazed at how confident her voice was sounding. "We'll be the last ones to go up the aisle, just as in the rehearsal."

Jerome took a seat and then nervously stood back up. For a dime, he would have gladly handed over his duty to someone else.

Outside, the usher showed Vera to her seat, followed by the traditional order of the other members of the bride and groom's families. Charlie waited with bated breath for the first strains of the wedding march. She checked her makeup once more in the mirror, and then it was time.

"Please, God," she silently prayed, "don't let me sneeze or cough!"

Charlie took Jerome's arm, and they exited the small room. A round of "Aaahhh's" echoed through the sanctuary, as the guests glimpsed the wedding dress for the first time. Jerome and Charlie took their place at the end of the aisle and waited for the music to begin.

Near the altar, Charlie looked up to see Adam's handsome face beaming back at her. He mouthed the words, "I love you," and then the organ music began playing "Here Comes the Bride." All was still, except for the majestic sound of music that spilled from the tall pipes of the organ.

Slowly, Charlie made her way up the aisle, keeping careful time to the wedding march. She couldn't bear to watch Adam's face as she drew near, but waited until the last when he took her hand and held it fast. Adam was grinning so hard it hurt.

Then the music stopped.

"Dearly beloved," began Reverend Brenner, "we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocence, signifying unto us the mystical union that is between Christ and His Church."

As the words were spoken, Charlie could feel her knees buckle a little beneath her. Taking a few deep breaths, she tried to calm down. When this didn't help, Charlie slowly realized that the weakness wasn't due to overexcitement.

"Marriage," continued the Reverend, "was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one should have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. Therefore, if any many can show any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter for ever hold his peace."

No one expected someone to speak up, so when someone did, a gasp of surprise shuddered through the congregation!

A man at the back of the church suddenly screamed something at the top of lungs, and was promptly tackled to the ground by three police officers. Apparently, the individual had broken through the security outside, which consisted of several police officers, for this was a high profile wedding. Kevin had been designated as one of Adam's groomsmen, just so he could remain near enough to his client to protect her. Ever vigilant, he maintained a careful watch on Charlie as the doors were once again closed and secured.

Reverend Brenner cleared his throat and resumed where he had left off before being interrupted.

"I require and charge you both," he said, addressing the couple standing before him, "as you will answer at the dreadful day of judgment when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you know any impediment, why you may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, you do now confess it."

Charlie hoped she didn't look as badly as she was feeling. Her throat felt scratchy, and in desperate need of a few good coughs. The only thing that sustained her were the loving gazes from Adam, and the pressure of his hand on hers.

"Adam," asked the Reverend, "will you have this woman to be your wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep yourself only for her, so long as you both shall live?"

Charlie felt herself wilt a little, but quickly gathered her strength again. Adam noticed this and his face became alarmed.

"Are you all right?" he whispered under his breath.

"Will you have this woman to be your wedded wife?" repeated Reverend Brenner, not seeing what had happened, for his eyes had been on the small book he had been reading from.

A murmur went through the congregation, for it looked as if Adam were having second thoughts.

"I'm all right," whispered Charlie. "Answer the question."

"I will," replied Adam, sensing for the first time that Charlie was feeling more unwell than he had been told by Shirley.

"Charlotte," continued the Reverend, "will you have this man to be your wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you obey him, and serve him, love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep yourself only for him, so long as you both shall live?"

"I will," answered Charlie, gripping Adam's hand tightly.

"Take her right hand and repeat after me," instructed Reverend Brenner.

"I Adam," repeated the groom, "take you Charlotte for my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance."

Adam slipped a delicate gold band onto Charlie's finger, fitting it beside the sparkling engagement ring that adorned her ring finger.

"Charlotte, take his right hand and repeat after me," instructed Reverend Brenner.

"I Charlotte take you Adam for my my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance," repeated the young woman.

Charlie placed a gold band on Adam's finger and the Reverend began to pray.

"O Eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all mankind, Giver of all spiritual grace, the Author of everlasting life; Send Thy blessing upon these your servants, this Man and this Woman, whom we bless in Thy Name; that, as Isaac and Rebecca lived faithfully together, so these persons may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant that was made between them, and may ever remain in perfect love and peace together, and live according to Thy laws; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Reverend Brenner joined their right hands.

"Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder," he declared. "I now pronounce that you are man and wife, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. You may kiss the bride, Adam," he smiled.

Adam lifted the veil and gave Charlie her first kiss. Their eyes met, but she could plainly see that he was concerned. To everyone's surprise, Adam lowered the veil over her face again before they went back down the aisle as man and wife.

The organ stirred as Mr. and Mrs. Clark walked down the aisle. Cheering could be heard outside, as fans of Wallace Shipley greeted them with cries of "Wal-lace!" and "Char-lotte!" As the couple exited the church, wedding photographers got into place to take pictures. Then, right on schedule, thousands of butterflies were released into the clear early evening sky, to announce the union of Wallace Shipley to his beloved Charlotte. The flutter of delicate wings quickly filled the sky, much to the joy of the crowd.

Sensing that things could get out of hand if he didn't act quickly, Kevin hurried the couple to their limousine and urged them to get inside. The vehicle pulled away, to return to the hotel for the wedding reception. Vera and the others would follow in other limos.

"Are you all right, Charlie?" were the first words out of Adam's mouth.

He lifted her veil and sighed heavily.

"You have a red rash behind your ears," he observed, "and it's just starting to break out around your hairline. Charlie," he concluded, "you have the measles."

The young bride looked at him disbelievingly.

"But," she whimpered, "I had the measles when I was a little kid!"

"I don't know what you had as a child," replied Adam, "but it certainly *wasn't* the measles."

At this, Charlie collapsed into a pool of tears, interspersed with the coughs that she had so valiantly smothered during the ceremony.

"There's no way you're going to be able to attend the reception," stated Adam, in a concerned voice.

"I have to be there," sobbed Charlie, "or else, everyone is going to know I have a little kid's disease! I mean, honestly! No self-respecting adult gets the measles! I'm not a runny nosed child, but that's just what everyone's going to say, Adam! All the people that said I was too young for you, are going to use this against you! If this gets out, you're going to be the laughing stock of... of simply *everyone!*"

Charlie ended the speech with a series of coughs choked with sobs.

"Take it easy," said Adam in a calm voice. "You're only making your throat worse. When we get to the hotel, I'm going to take you to your room, and I want you to get in bed and rest. Leave everyone else to me. All right?"

Adam tried to hug her, but she moved away and covered her face again with the veil.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Kevin, sensing that Shirley's plans would have to be dramatically changed.

"Stay with Charlie," answered Adam, who now had a lot to think about. "I'll let you know when I have things worked out."

Soon, the limousine arrived back at the hotel. Crowds of fans screamed and yelled as they waited for the newlyweds to exit the vehicle.

"Charlie, please try to stop crying," pleaded Adam. "Here, you can bury your face in my shoulder when we get out. No one will see your rash."

Charlie nodded in assent and the three got out of the car. She hid her face in Adam's shoulder as he had instructed. They quickly made their way into the hotel, and straight for the elevator. Kevin succeeded in keeping others from joining them in the elevator, while Adam counted the seconds until he could get Charlie to the privacy of her hotel room.

When the elevator doors opened, Adam lifted Charlie in his arms and carried her quickly to the room she was sharing with Vera. The couple went inside, while Kevin stayed on guard outside the door.

Charlie collapsed onto her bed, and sobbed into a pillow while Adam stood helplessly nearby. When he reached to comfort her and she pulled away, Adam grabbed Charlie's satellite phone and called Shirley on her cell phone.

"Get Vera back to the hotel, immediately," directed Adam. "Charlie needs her."

"Why?" asked Shirley. "What's wrong?"

"Charlie has the measles," answered Adam, in a disheartened voice. "Please, don't tell anyone but Vera right now. Things are so mixed up, I don't know what to do."

"Vera and I will be there shortly," said Shirley. "Just hang in there. Everything will be all right--you'll see."

Adam hung up and watched Charlie weep with such heartrending sobs that it broke his heart.

"Please," begged Adam, "let me comfort you, Charlie-girl."

"Don't look at me!" she cried, grabbing a nearby blanket and covering her head with it. "Leave me alone!"

Adam took a few steps back and bowed his head with grief. He felt lost.

"God," he prayed in a low voice, "please help me!"

For the second time that day, when help had been petitioned from God, He sent it. Shirley soon appeared with Vera and Bill, who had insisted on coming with them when he received Shirley's call about the new development.

"What did you do to her?" cried Shirley, seeing the prostrate form on the bed, hiding her head beneath a blanket.

"She has the rash, and doesn't want me to see her," explained Adam, sinking down into a chair. "I tried to help her, but she absolutely refuses to let me go near her!"

"Go back to your hotel rooms-- both of you," ordered Vera, shooing the men from the room.

Outside in the hall, Adam and Bill stared disbelievingly at each other. The musician went to his room while Bill followed. Before long, Melvin and Gary joined them.

"There's a bunch of guests downstairs expecting the reception to start soon," said Bill, hesitating to say the obvious.

"I can't go down there without Charlie!" exclaimed Adam, emphatically. "They'd know something was wrong. If I stay here, they're going to know. Any way I look at the situation, they're *going* to know! For my own sake, I don't mind what they think, but Charlie's dreading public reaction if it's publicized that she has a childhood disease on her wedding day! If I were just Adam Clark, this wouldn't be big news, but I'm also Wallace Shipley. And Wallace Shipley makes headlines, as we all know."

Bill, Melvin, and Gary could do little more than sympathize with their friend. They had seen first hand the pressures of celebrity, and were in a better position than most to understand what would happen if this news ever made it to the press.

As they discussed possible options, Vera and Shirley knocked on Adam's door.

"We have a plan," announced Shirley, as the women entered the room and closed the door behind them. "Adam, you and Charlie are going to go downstairs and attend the reception as planned. You'll do the receiving line, and then excuse yourselves early to go on your honeymoon."

"Charlie's taken more medication," added Vera, "and her fever has gone down a little. Your sister and I have covered the rash on her face with makeup."

"We've tried to talk her out of it," sighed Shirley, "but she's determined to do this. Charlie has some idea that this could haunt you in the press, Adam, so she's going to fight it with everything she's got. I'm not sure how wise this is, given she has the measles, but it's still in the early stages, so she still has a little time before it fully breaks out."

"There *is* one thing," added Vera, "she won't be able to go to the destination you both had originally chosen for the honeymoon. Charlie isn't thinking past the reception downstairs, so maybe you men could work something out. I'd suggest taking her back home to Twin Yucca, but there's too much publicity there to do that."

Adam put on his tuxedo jacket and retied his bow tie.

"I'm going downstairs," he announced.

"Me and the guys," said Bill, "will stay here and hammer out a plan."

Adam gave them a grateful look, and then went into the hall where Charlie had just come from her room. He wanted to take her into his arms and tell her that public opinion didn't matter, that as long as she was with him, he could brave the worst they had to offer. Adam could see how hard she was struggling with her emotions just to stand there and not break into tears.

"You may not want to hear this right now," said Adam, tilting her chin back with his finger, "but I love you. You don't have to do this for me."

"I'm sorry I caught the measles," said Charlie, in an unsteady voice. "I ruined today for you. If I wasn't so young, this wouldn't have happened."

"Not everyone has the measles when they're small," reminded Adam. "Unless you tell me that you deliberately set out to catch them, I refuse to accept your apology."

Once more, Charlie broke down into tears, and turned her back to Adam. Just then, Shirley and Vera emerged from Adam's hotel room.

"Adam!" cried Shirley, her voice sounding with reproach, "we just got her calmed down!"

"I only *talked* to her," he defended himself.

"How can you know so little about women?" sighed Shirley, as Vera comforted her granddaughter and fixed her makeup again. "During the reception, don't speak to Charlie! Got that? Charlie, are you ready now, dear?"

"I'm ready," replied the young woman, steadying herself.

"I'll go down and announce you," said Shirley, going to the elevator with Vera. "Give me five minutes and then come."

As they waited, Adam looked at Charlie, and was about to speak to her when he remembered his sister's admonition.

"It's time," said Adam, checking his watch.

The newlyweds got into the elevator and were greeted with cheers and congratulations when the doors opened in the hotel lobby. The wedding photographers busily took pictures while Shirley moved the couple to the head of where the reception line was forming. An ice sculpture of a grand piano, lit from beneath with soft white lights, was the centerpiece of the beverage table, while large bouquets of fragrant pink and white roses littered the rooms, for there were so many guests, that just one room wasn't enough to contain them all. At the head of the main room, a band played slow music while the reception line grew longer and longer.

"Thank you for coming," smiled Charlie, shaking one hand after another, as they filed past the couple.

Some people Charlie recognized, but most were complete strangers to her. Adam, however, seemed to know many of them. Friends from the music industry, friends from college, friends from Twin Yucca, friends of friends, and so on, lined up to congratulate the new husband and wife.

Time moved slowly, and Adam saw that Charlie's strength was beginning to flag. He whispered something to a waiter, and then moments later, the band began to play music with a quick tempo. Sure enough, the reception line picked up speed. Adam gave Charlie a wink, and then returned to thanking the guests.

"It was a lovely wedding, dear," said Mrs. Jenkins, the woman whom Vera had stayed with during those terrible months when Charlie had run away. "I'm so happy for you!"

"Thank you," said Charlie, hugging the old woman.

An hour went by, and the line began to dwindle. Many asked to take a picture with the famous newlyweds, while others wanted to ask questions. This held up progress, but the longer everyone waited in line, the more eager they became to get the congratulations over with and return to their tables to rest their feet. More than once, Charlie stifled a cough. She hid it so successfully, that no one knew she wasn't as overjoyed as she appeared to be. In spite of everything, she had to admit that she was happy... even though she felt hot and scratchy.

When the last person had at last been thanked, Adam led Charlie back to the elevator while people waved good-bye. The second the doors closed, Charlie collapsed into Adam's arms, exhausted from the ordeal. Adam gently picked her up and waited for the elevator to arrive at their floor. Even though her face was leaning against his collar, he could feel her fever.

"I shouldn't have let you do it," he reproached himself.

"It was my decision," mumbled Charlie. "I'm so tired, Adam."

Adam carried his young wife to her room, and lay her on the bed. He felt her forehead and sighed heavily.

"You're burning up," he said. "This wedding dress is holding in your body heat, Charlie. You've got to take it off."

Adam was wondering whether he should leave or not, but when he saw the teenager make a weak effort to unlace the bodice, he intervened. The musician gently unfastened the gown and lifted it over her head.

"This thing has a petticoat, too?" he exclaimed in concern. "It's no wonder you're fever is worse!"

Adam helped Charlie off with the weighty garment and discreetly covered her with a light blanket as she lay back down on the bed. Charlie was feeling self-conscious of her present state, but lacked the energy to ask him to leave.

"I helped take care of Mike and Chad when they had the measles," said Adam, "so I know what to do. Just get some rest. I'm going to go for a minute to talk to the guys. Kevin is outside, so if you need anything, just call him, and he'll come get me. I'll be back soon."

He tenderly kissed Charlie on the forehead and left the room.

Bill smiled as Adam walked in.

"Adam," said Bill, "we have an idea. You and Charlie need to go somewhere private and out of the way, and I think I know of the perfect place. My Uncle Rick, from my mother's side of the family, lives out in Oak Glen, and he and his wife have a guesthouse. When I told him of your situation, he said to bring you both down whenever we wanted."

"You *told* him?!" exclaimed Adam. "After everything Charlie's gone through to keep her measles a secret, and you told him?"

"Uncle Rick was standing right next to me when I got Shirley's call," explained Bill. "From just my side of the conversation, he could pretty much guess for himself what was going on, already."

"Your uncle is in Palm Springs?" asked Adam, a little puzzled.

"Actually," smiled Bill, "he was invited to your wedding. He's a big Wallace Shipley fan, and I thought he'd get a kick out of attending the wedding. You probably shook hands with him in the reception line."

"There were a lot of people," sighed Adam.

"Uncle Rick understands that he won't be able to tell anyone who's hiding out in his guesthouse," assured Bill. "Since I'm your manager, he was one of the few people who knew Adam Clark was Wallace Shipley-- even before you went public. You can trust him. I always have."

"All right, if you say so," shrugged the musician.

"By the way," added Bill, "I'm sorry Dad couldn't make it for the wedding. You know how he hates to fly."

"I remember," smiled Adam.

(Bill's father, Ronald Paulson, was the college music teacher who first "discovered" Adam's talent for music.)

"Now that that's settled," said Melvin, "our next problem is how to get you and Charlie out of the hotel without being followed."

"It's not going to be easy," warned Gary. "The parking lot outside is packed with fans, and they're expecting you two to leave for your honeymoon, so they're waiting for you to exit the hotel."

"Our plans is this..." began Bill, his voice quieting to a whisper so no one in the hall could overhear.

Back in her room, Charlie was able to get a little rest. Soon Vera stood hovering over her, changing her into traveling clothes.

"What are you doing?" asked Charlie, with a cough.

"I'm getting you ready to leave," explained the old woman. "Adam is going to take you somewhere safe, so you can get better."

"I won't go," said the teenager, resisting Vera's effort to pass her head through the neck of the blouse. "I want to go home with you!"

"Adam is going to take good care of you, Pumpkin," replied Vera. "If I went also, it would make it harder for you both to get out of here without being recognized. Now, hold still, so I can finish dressing you."

Charlie was too weak to put up much of a fight. After she was dressed, Vera let her sleep until it was time to leave.

At about midnight, the young woman was suddenly awakened from her sleep by a pair of strong arms, lifting her from the bed.

"Put me down, Adam!" she cried. "I don't want to go with you!"

"Quiet!" whispered Adam, carrying her into the hall.

"Please," she whimpered, "take me back!"

Instead of taking the elevator, Charlie found herself in the stairwell, as he carried her down a flight of steps and then through an exit door. Charlie felt the cool summer night of the outdoors kiss her face as Adam brought her outside.

"I'm going to put you down," he breathed in a hushed voice. "Don't make a sound, and stay in the shadows."

Charlie followed his eyes to what looked to be the outside of the main entrance of the hotel. Fans and media were lined up, excitedly waiting for the anticipated couple.

"Here they come!" shouted someone.

In wonderment, Charlie took a step forward, but was quickly pulled back into the dark shadows by Adam. Even now, there were people just feet from where they were hiding, watching from a distance to get a glimpse of the newlyweds when they left the hotel.

Then Charlie heard the crowd wildly cheering and shouting, as a couple exited the main entrance, both wearing sunglasses, even though it was in the middle of the night. She noticed they kept their heads down as Kevin, Bill, Melvin, Gary, and Adam's nephew Mike, flanked the man and woman on every side, hurriedly escorting them to their limousine without pausing to greet the throng.

"Wal-lace! Wal-lace!" the crowd began to chant excitedly.

"Now!" whispered Adam, as he grabbed her hand and quickly darted behind the fans that were still watching the hotel entrance.

Adam ran with Charlie in tow, through a maze of empty cars, and to the entrance of the parking lot.

"What's going on?" asked Charlie. "Who were those people?"

Adam, however, was too busy to answer her. He slowed down to a walk, and checked behind his shoulder. No one had even noticed them. Adam smiled triumphantly and hurried Charlie to a car, parked near the entrance of a restaurant. Suddenly, a man stepped forward from the shadows and addressed them.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Adam," said the man, shaking the musician's hand. "Bill has told me a lot about you. You too, Mrs. Clark," he added, shaking her hand as well. "If you'll both get into the back seat and keep down, I think we can get there unnoticed."

"Keep down," directed Adam, as he helped her into the back of the car.

Then he slid in beside Charlie and smiled at her with satisfaction.

"Who *were* those people?" repeated Charlie, as Adam tried unsuccessfully to put his arm around her.

"Friends," he answered with a twinkle in his eye. "Lean against me and get some sleep," he coaxed her. "Stop scratching, or you'll only make it worse. I'm not taking you back, Charlie-girl, so you might as well make the best of it."

Charlie leaned away from Adam and closed her eyes. She felt miserable, looked miserable, and in short, wanted her grandmother. To Adam's dismay, her tears began once more.

"Don't cry," he pleaded helplessly.

"You're doing the right thing," commented the man in the front seat to the groom. "From what Bill told me, you both need this time away from the spotlight."

"I don't know how to thank you enough," said Adam gratefully.

"It's my pleasure," smiled Uncle Rick, glancing in the rear view mirror at his famous passengers. "I've enjoyed your music for years, and I'm just delighted to be able to give back somehow!"

After a while, Charlie quieted down, but kept herself turned away from Adam so he wouldn't see her face, for the rash was slowly moving down from her hairline and would eventually travel the entire length of her body. As Uncle Rick continued to drive, Charlie had the sensation of gaining altitude.

"It's the mountains," explained Adam, seeing the look of apprehension on her face from the reflection on the car window. "Bill's Uncle Rick is letting us stay at his guesthouse in Oak Glen."

"I want to go home," begged Charlie.

"I can't take you back," he tenderly replied. "The media is too great right now."

"I live in an apple orchard, Mrs. Clark," spoke up Uncle Rick from the front seat. "I have twenty-four varieties of the best apples God ever created. We have an apple press and make the finest sparkling apple cider in the region, if I do say so myself. Maybe, when you get better, you and Adam could come to the house and have dinner with my wife and I. I'm sure she'd be delighted to have you."

"Thank you," replied Charlie, her voice sounding tired.

"We're almost there," continued Uncle Rick. "Just hang in there."

From her car window, Charlie could see the dark night sky overhead, sprinkled with twinkling stars. Soon, the vehicle turned onto a dirt road and bumped along until the headlight beams revealed a wooden gate.

"We're here!" the driver announced.

Uncle Rick got out, swung open the gate, and drove the car through. When he got out again to close it, Adam checked his watch.

"It's one in the morning," said Adam with a yawn.

When Uncle Rick came back, he drove down a long winding path, and finally pulled up to a large white house, with a bright porch light on.

"My wife Mae got here ahead of me to make sure the guesthouse was ready for you," said their host, getting out of the car.

A young woman appeared from the house, and smiling, walked over to her guests.

"Mae," said Uncle Rick, "this is Adam Clark and his wife, Charlie."

"Yes," smiled the woman, "we've met. I don't suppose you remember us from the reception line?"

"I'm sorry," apologized Adam.

"No matter," laughed Mae. "You both must be worn out."

"The guesthouse is this way, folks," said Uncle Rick, leading the way down a cobblestone path to a snug looking white cottage, nestled behind several large apple trees.

Mae opened the door and turned on a light. Even in her misery, Charlie was happily surprised with the rustic country feel of the house. The windows were draped with red and white checkered curtains, while an old fashioned black kettle stove stood in the corner of the main room, it's function intended for decorative purposes only. A generous fireplace made of stones, was the centerpiece of the room. To the right, was a small, but comfortable kitchen.

"The bedroom is to your right," said Mae.

"I'll go get your bags," offered Uncle Rick.

"I'll help," said Adam, leaving with the man.

"I'm afraid you've had a rather rough day," said Mae sympathetically. "I saw the crowds; it sure was crazy. Anyway, our house is just a short walk from here. If you and Adam need anything, please knock on our door. We're happy to help in any way we can."

Charlie began to cry again, and Mae stepped forward and hugged her.

"You and I are going to be good friends," predicted Mae. "I just know it."

Just then, the men returned with their luggage. Adam was saddened to see Charlie crying again, and sat down on the couch, knowing that she wouldn't accept help from him. Mae gently led Charlie to the bedroom, undressed her, and tucked her into bed. Charlie coughed so hard that her throat began to throb.

"I have a mist humidifier back at the house," said Mae. "It'll help your nasty cough. I'll be right back."

Charlie rolled onto her side, and pulled the sheets up around her chin. Adam had gotten up from the couch and was standing in the bedroom doorway, silently watching what was going on. Mae quickly returned with the humidifier and set it up near the head of the bed.

"I also brought some throat lozenges," said Mae, "and orange juice. It's really important that you keep drinking fluids."

"Thank you," said Adam.

Mae was about to leave, when Charlie grabbed her hand.

"I don't want him to see me like this," whispered Charlie. "My face is all red and horrible looking. Please, ask him to leave me alone until I'm better."

"Charlie," hesitated Mae, "maybe *you* should be the one to ask him. I've never before told a groom on his wedding night, that he can't touch his bride! However, I'll relate your wishes to him, if that's what you want. Just lie back and get some rest. I'll return in the morning to see how you are."

Mae turned off the bedroom light and followed Adam back to the living room.

"I'm afraid she doesn't want you right now," informed Mae.

"I know," sighed Adam. "Looks like it's the couch for me."

"Just until the measles are over," consoled Uncle Rick.

After Uncle Rick and Mae left, the new husband made his bed on the sofa and lay awake the entire night, aware of the fact that Charlie was just in the next room.

The next morning, Adam went to the bedroom and checked on Charlie. She was still asleep, so he was able to get a good look at her. The measles had progressed; her face was red, and the rash was now making its way down her neck and chest. Charlie stirred and opened her eyes.

"How are you feeling?" he asked her.

With a cry of dismay, the teenager pulled the covers over her head.

"Go away!" she shouted, her voice hoarse from coughing.

Adam scratched his head and went back to the living room. Married life wasn't quite what he had expected. At seven, Mae and Uncle Rick appeared with breakfast, and food for their refrigerator that Mae had brought to make them a little more comfortable. While she attended to Charlie in the bedroom, Uncle Rick gave Adam a guided tour of his apple ranch.

Adam had to admit that it was beautiful. The summer sun made the apple leaves fragrant, perfuming the air with their sweetness. The sky, the mountains, the trees, everything was scenic and peaceful.

"Over there's our apple shed," pointed out Uncle Rick, "where we house our cider press. Back towards the road, is our store. Mae cooks pies and things, and I sell 'em! It's a small operation, but we like it."

Uncle Rick looked at Adam and could easily see that his mind was elsewhere.

"You probably never imagined you'd spend your honeymoon on a sofa, did you," laughed the gentleman. "You know, there's one thing you and I have in common-- our wives. As you've probably noticed, Mae is considerably younger than I am. My first wife passed away in '89, and I swore I'd never remarry. Then, one day during picking season, Mae and her parents came to buy apples. She was beautiful and young, and I didn't think for a second that I'd ever have a chance with someone like her. But, as God would have it, she fell in love with me, and I with her. Not a day goes by, that I don't thank the Almighty for sending her to me."

Adam smiled, and kicked at a stone on the ground.

"You're right," he replied, "we do have something in common."

"By the way," remembered Uncle Rick, "Bill called this morning. He said to tell you the press found out that stand-ins had been used, and that there's a lot of speculation where you two are right now."

"Unbelievable," sighed Adam wearily.

"He said to lay low and to not be seen in public," continued Uncle Rick, "or your cover will be blown."

Back at the cottage, Mae was stocking her guest's refrigerator and talking to Charlie, who didn't feel like leaving her bed.

"There's enough food to last for a while," she said, coming back to the bedroom, and sitting down on the edge of the bed to check Charlie's temperature. "I'm going to keep bringing your meals, but the food is just in case you or your husband want a snack, or something. Hummm, you're fever went down a little. I guess the rest helped. Did Adam leave you alone like you wanted?" she wondered.

"Yes," replied Charlie, "but he keeps hovering near the bedroom door, as if I'm suddenly going to change my mind."

"I always say," laughed Mae, "that it's good for a man to wait. It helps us retain our mystique."

Charlie laughed in spite of herself.

"I'm afraid I don't have much mystique covered in anti-itch ointment," she laughed.

Charlie's laughter was quickly followed by several strong coughs. Mae handed her a glass of orange juice, and Charlie sipped it down.

"Sorry," apologized Mae, "I didn't mean to make you cough. I'd better let you rest some more. Don't worry about Adam. We'll make sure he eats regularly. I'll be back at lunch."

Soon, Charlie fell asleep.

The days passed slowly for Adam. While he was thankful for Uncle Rick's hospitality, he couldn't enjoy himself because Charlie wasn't with him. What made it even worse, was the fact that Charlie refused to let Adam be near her, and didn't even allow him to help take care of her. Adam knew he had to exercise patience, and spent many evenings walking alone in the orchards, longing for his Charlie-girl.

The rash only lasted six days, but the other symptoms persisted for days more. Adam continued to patiently wait, and hovered near the bedroom door whenever he could, to be near her.

By the end of the fifteenth day, the last of the illness had left; Charlie was feeling healthy and back to her old self again. She arrived from the bedroom, looking as beautiful as she had before the measles. Uncle Rick and Mae had left, knowing that Adam wanted to be alone with her.

Adam made a loving advance toward Charlie, but she awkwardly pulled away from him.

"I have to return Mae's humidifier," she explained, realizing how lame the excuse had sounded the second it left her lips.

Adam was overjoyed that Charlie was well, but disturbed by her continued awkwardness toward him. Now that the measles were over, he had expected that they could at last enjoy their honeymoon.

Puzzled, Adam took off for another walk in the orchard to clear his mind. As he came around a turn in the path, he came face to face with Charlie.

"Why did you leave?" she asked him.

"I didn't think you wanted me around," replied Adam, in a hurt voice. "I'm trying, Charlie, I really am."

"It's not that I don't want to be with you," explained the young woman, blushing. "I'm embarrassed, Adam. Here you are, a mature man with a silly wife that came down with the measles on your wedding day! Then to top it all off, I made you sleep on the sofa! You've been incredibly patient with me."

"There's never been any awkwardness between us before," said Adam. "Wait a minute, I take that back. There was the time you found out I was Wallace Shipley, and the time you told me you loved me, and the time you showed up in my hotel room with your grandmother... unannounced, I might add. I know I didn't want to admit it at the time, but I was so happy to see you again." Adam hesitated. He noticed that the awkwardness between them was slowly melting away. "Do you realize," he smiled, "that for the first time as a couple, we're alone together? There's no grandma, no manager, publicist, agent, or bodyguard, sitting in the corner pretending not to hear. It's just you and me."

Adam moved closer to Charlie and lovingly caressed her face with his hand.

"I didn't think it was possible for a man to love a woman as much as I love you, Charlie-girl," he whispered softly.

A light breeze blew past them, gently rustling the leaves overhead, spreading their perfume into the warm summer air, while the sun filtered down through the treetops, dancing with the shadows on the ground.

Charlie took Adam by the hand and led him back to the cottage. Once inside, she closed the door. In the warmth of Adam's embrace, Charlie knew she had found honest and true love, in the form of her best friend. For the first time, the man and wife shared in the tender innocence of intimate love that comes when two people save themselves for each other, and not with someone other than a spouse.

When the couple hadn't emerged by the following day, Uncle Rick knowingly hugged his wife.

"I guess the measles are *definitely* over!" he laughed.

"Therefore shall a man... cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh."

~ Genesis 2:24 ~

"Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder."

~ Matthew 19:6 ~

Chapter Forty-eight
The Apple of My Eye

"Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me."

~ Song of Solomon 2:5, 6 ~

The pale light of day filtered through the bedroom curtains as Charlie awoke from her sleep. When she turned to find Adam, she was met by a look of wonder from his intent loving eyes.

"I was watching you sleep," he said in a hushed voice, gently brushing back her long hair from her face. "You're such a miracle, Charlie-girl."

Adam kissed her and the time slipped by them once again. They were so preoccupied with each other, that there was little distinction between day and night. It was only after daylight had faded once more from the curtained window, that Charlie realized they had forgotten something.

"I'm hungry," she announced, as Adam lie beside her with an arm around her waist.

"What are you talking about?" he sighed contentedly. "We just ate."

"I don't feel like we just ate," she replied. "Where did you hide the clock?"

"I'm not telling you," he smiled.

"Aren't you hungry?" asked Charlie. "If I am, then you must be also."

"I'm subsisting on love," Adam replied, burying his face in the nape of her neck.

"I'm getting up," she declared, reaching for her clothes. "It might be early enough to be breakfast, but since you won't tell me where the clock is, I'll go fix dinner. Mae left us enough food to last several days."

"I'll have to remember to thank her," Adam sighed reluctantly, as Charlie left the bedroom and went to the kitchen.

He soon dressed and joined Charlie in the kitchen to help her prepare the meal.

"You know, this is more than a honeymoon for me," reflected Adam, preheating the oven as directed by Charlie. "I've been living out of a suitcase for so long, that this feels like a vacation. I almost feel guilty. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if Melvin suddenly popped through the door and told me that I'm late for some gig."

"If Melvin *does* pop in," answered Charlie with a laugh, "then I hope you just pop him back out!"

"Why don't we go for a walk after we eat?" suggested Adam, a hint of playfulness in his voice. "It's dark out, and no one will see us."

"What's with you?" she smiled. "You sound like a little boy who just got a new toy!"

Adam went over to Charlie and embraced her lovingly.

"You have to let me go, otherwise I can't fix dinner," she warned him.

"Never," he whispered.

"Adam," she laughed, "I'm serious! Let me go!"

"All right," he sighed, as she left his arms and returned to her work. "After dinner though, we're going to take that walk. There's something I want to show you."

"What is it?" she asked, curiously.

Adam only smiled mysteriously and accepted the plate Charlie handed him. Then they went to the living room and sat on the couch to eat their dinner. Adam ate quicker than he should, and spent the rest of the time watching as Charlie slowly worked her way through the spaghetti and garlic bread.

"Can't you hurry a little?" he pleaded her.

"You can't hurry spaghetti," she replied.

"I can help you finish that," he volunteered, grabbing his fork.

"Honestly!" she exclaimed, pulling her plate away from his reach. "And I can't eat while you're staring at me like that."

Adam smiled playfully, so that Charlie got up and moved to the other side of the couch.

"Let me eat in peace and then I'll go with you," she said, fighting the impulse to laugh.

With a sigh, Adam leaned back on his side of the couch and waited patiently. When Charlie finished the last bite of food, he took the plate from her hands and pulled the young woman up onto her feet.

"But, I have to do the dishes!" she cried, as Adam tugged Charlie's hand, taking her outside into the fragrant night air.

After taking a few steps onto the cobblestone walk, Adam led her behind an apple tree and embraced her.

"We came out here for this?" she laughed.

"Do you know how much I love you?" he asked her, in the tone of voice that always made Charlie feel as though they were the only two people on the planet. "I need to show you something. Maybe it will express what I can't find the words to say."

Under the soft moonlight of Oak Glen, Adam led her down the cobblestone path that led them away from the grove and closer to the road.

"Where are we going?" she asked him.

"Rick and Mae have a store," explained Adam, leading her to quaint log cabin with a sign over the door reading, "American as Apple Pie."

Adam pulled out a key and opened the door. Inside, Charlie saw display cases where Mae would set out her pies and candied apples for the customers. Several display racks presented handmade patchwork quilts, while shelves on the walls were laden with dried apple treats, trail mixes of all kinds, apple jam, apple candy, and a multitude of wares made from apples. Even a picture of Johnny Appleseed graced the wall.

"Are we supposed to be here?" asked the teenager, as Adam led her to the back of the store and to another door.

"Rick said it was all right," explained Adam, eagerly opening the door and flipping on the light.

This room housed antique furniture that was for sale. Some items had been in Rick's family for generations, and were for show only, while others had been bought at flea markets and then carefully restored by Mae.

"It's over here," said Adam, tugging at Charlie's hand.

In the corner of the room, she saw an old piano. There wasn't anything special about it that Charlie could see, and she wondered why Adam was so eager to show it to her. By the excitement in Adam's eyes, Charlie sensed something important was about to happen. He brought a chair and placed it beside the piano, so she could sit.

The musician sat down on the piano bench and exhaled.

"I'm more scared than I thought I'd be," he said nervously. "I've performed before thousands without breaking a sweat, and now my hands are trembling for just one!"

"I know you love me, Adam. You don't have to prove it," said Charlie.

"No more talking from the peanut gallery, if you please," he replied jokingly.

With one more deep breath, the famous pianist placed his fingers onto the keys of the piano. Music suddenly broke the stillness of the night, filling the empty store with a hauntingly beautiful melody. As one who was very familiar with Wallace Shipley's music, Charlie at once recognized that this was an entirely new composition. It was the first time in thirteen years that Adam had composed in a serious way, and now he was playing the new piece for her in this private performance. Any Wallace Shipley aficionado would have paid a great deal to be where Charlie was sitting at this moment.

As Adam continued to play, his one person audience was wrapped in profound wonderment. His music was both stirring and tender, all the while keeping cadence to an underlying mellifluous rhythm that was one of Wallace Shipley's signature sounds. Charlie closed her eyes and hungrily drank in every note. It was musical poetry in perfection. The longer she listened, the more she understood that this new masterpiece was a melodic love poem. Every measure filled her heart until she was sure it could hold no more. So *this* is what Adam had said would tell her what his words could not!

His hands deftly ran across the keyboard, breathing life into the old piano with each movement. When the last clear note had sounded, Adam repeated his question to Charlie.

"Do you know how much I love you?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, brushing the tears from her eyes, "I'm the most loved woman in the world!"

Adam got to his feet and hugged his wife.

"Then you understand," he sighed lovingly. "I called the piece 'Charlotte.' You may not remember this, but I started working on it that night on the jet, when I flew you back to Twin Yucca. I was watching you sleep, and this melody dropped into my lap straight from heaven-- I'm sure of it! I hadn't written serious music for so long, that I was afraid the gift had left me. I had Gary get room service to bring a piano to my hotel room, so I could work on it between engagements. I'm afraid I kept the guys up many nights, banging away on that piano!"

"Did you?" smiled Charlie. "I'm sure Bill thought it was worth it, though! That composition was beyond outstanding!"

"I'm glad you think so," he responded, humbly. "Coming from my biggest fan, that means a lot. I finished 'Charlotte' just days before the wedding," he continued. "I had planned to play it for you at the reception, but God had other plans," Adam smiled tenderly, wiping away Charlie's happy tears with the palm of his hand. "I'm glad I waited until we were alone, to play it for you. This is much better than any wedding reception."

Adam embraced her and kissed her with such desire that Charlie at last pulled away from him.

"Please," the young woman asked him, "not here. Someone might come in."

The musician locked the store back up, and strolled down the cobblestone walk with his love. Her hand was clasped firmly in his, as if unwilling to ever let it go. The bright stars overhead seemed to glow with the fire that Charlie felt burning within her soul.

"Oh, Adam," she sighed, "I love you *so much*!"

They sat down beneath an apple tree and watched the stars shoot across the dark night sky. Charlie took Adam's hand and traced his fingers tenderly with her own. It was then that she noticed the faint scars on his hands from the car accident.

"They put makeup on my hands before each concert," said Adam. "They don't look too bad, do they?"

"I hardly noticed them," replied Charlie, leaning her head on his chest. "I wish I never had to leave you, Adam."

As she said this, Charlie could feel his body stiffen.

"Be happy, Charlie-girl," entreated Adam, holding onto her tightly. "We'll take one day at a time as God sees fit. Right now, just concentrate on being deliriously happy."

"I will," she promised.

Then Adam took Charlie back to their room, and held her in his arms until the sun peered over the Oak Glen mountains, bathing the apple ranch in pure summer light.

Inside the cottage, Adam had finally fallen asleep. Charlie got out of bed, trying hard not to awaken him, for between her and his insomnia, Adam wasn't getting much rest.

After dressing and getting a quick bite to eat, Charlie went outside and found Uncle Rick working on a ladder beneath one of the apple trees.

"Hello, there!" he called to her.

"Good morning!" greeted Charlie.

"Come this September, we're going to have quite a harvest!" he announced, climbing down from the ladder. "Where's Adam?"

"He's still sleeping," answered Charlie.

"Well," said Uncle Rick, "it's good for a man to get his shuteye. If he's awake by then, maybe you both might join us for lunch?"

"Thank you," smiled Charlie gratefully, "but, I think Adam probably won't wake up until this evening."

"I see," grinned Uncle Rick knowingly.

"It's his insomnia," added Charlie, embarrassed by how it had sounded.

"You don't have to explain anything," assured the man. "You're among friends. We'll make it dinner then. I'm afraid I've a lot of work to do right now, but Mae is back at the house making candied apples. I'm sure she'd be happy for some company."

Charlie went up the cobblestone walk to the main house and knocked on the front door.

"Come right in!" called out Mae from the kitchen. "Charlie!" she exclaimed upon seeing her guest. "I haven't seen you in a few days! My hands are covered in caramel right now, so please help yourself to a chair. Do you like caramel?"

"Who doesn't?" smiled Charlie.

"Caramel candied apples are the most popular with our customers," agreed Mae, dipping a bright red apple into a small pool of hot sticky candy. "After I add some colored sprinkles, I let the caramel harden. Here, would you like one? I'll split it with you. I've been wanting one all morning, but they're so big I don't dare eat it by myself."

Mae took a knife and split a candied apple down the center, causing the center stick to fall out. After stabbing each half with wooden holding sticks, she handed one to her guest.

"It's delicious," said Charlie, after taking a bite of the sweet fruit.

"I also dip apples in chocolate and nuts," continued Mae. "The varieties are practically endless. However, caramel is my favorite. Are you and Adam coming to lunch? I made Rick promise to invite you both the next time he saw you."

"I'm afraid it will have to be dinner," apologized Charlie. "Adam is still sleeping. Sometimes he gets insomnia, and I'm afraid I haven't been helping matters any."

"Well," laughed Mae, "if a man ever has the right to a little insomnia, it's on his honeymoon! But, you could have lunch with us, couldn't you? Afterward, maybe we could do a little shopping. Oak Glen has some great stores even if you're just browsing. What do you say?"

"I don't know," hesitated Charlie. "Someone might recognize me."

"After I'm done with you, you're own grandmother wouldn't recognize you," smiled Mae. "If anyone asks, you're Mrs. Smith and you and your husband are staying as guests at our place. We have a lot of people rent the cottage. Charlie, look out the window!" exclaimed Mae in surprise.

Outside, a small dark furry creature lumbered past the house and made its way straight into one of the apple trees.

"It's a bear cub," observed Mae, reaching for her walkie-talkie to notify her husband in the orchard. "Honey? There's a cub in the tree in front of the house again. I didn't want you startling it and getting into trouble. Yes, I understand. Okay, good-bye."

"Does this happen very often?" asked Charlie.

"Apple orchards attract bears," sighed Mae.

Just then, Uncle Rick appeared from the orchard carrying a shotgun. He pulled the trigger, scaring the California black bear out from the tree and into the wild beyond the apple ranch.

"If the bears become too accustomed to human contact," explained Mae, "then they might have to be put down. If you ever run into a black bear, don't make eye contact and get away as safely as you can. Most bears won't hurt you, but it's best to play it safe. Come on, my caramel pool is hardening."

Charlie spent the morning helping Mae with the candied apples and then helped her to prepare lunch.

"Are you ready for life as an age gap wife?" asked Mae, curiously.

"What do you mean?" wondered Charlie, setting the table.

"When Rick and I first got married, people would mistake me for his daughter," smiled Mae. "I can laugh about it now, but it was hard on me at first. When we leave Oak Glen, that still happens sometimes."

"That hasn't happened yet," replied Charlie. "When people recognize Adam, they know immediately who we are and that we're together."

"Ahhhhh, the privileges of fame," laughed Mae. "I suppose the public conception is that the rich and famous can do what they like-- no offense intended."

"None taken," replied Charlie. "I've often thought that if Adam wasn't famous, then we probably *would* have a harder time being together."

"It took a long time for my parents to come around," sighed Mae. "But when they got to know Rick, and how great a guy he is, they finally accepted him into the family. Our age differences *can* make things a little weird, though. I mean, Rick has nephews older than I am!"

"Same here," smiled Charlie. "Adam's youngest nephew is only a few years younger than I am! I still don't think he's quite gotten over me, yet."

"When I first met Rick's Mom, she offered me chocolate milk, and served coffee to everyone else," laughed Mae. "I was so humiliated! We're pretty good friends now, though."

"Adam's mom passed away last year," said Charlie, "but I like to think she'd approve of me."

"Have you two thought about starting a family?" asked Mae.

"Adam can't have children," confided Charlie, "but, please, don't tell anyone but your husband. I don't want to embarrass Adam."

"You can count on me," assured Mae. "In exchange for that secret, I'll tell you one of my own. This morning, I missed my period for the first time. I'm not sure it means what I think it means, but if it does, then I guess I'm pregnant. How do you know for sure or not?"

"I don't know," replied Charlie. "I suppose you get one of those testing kits-- you know, the ones you see on television?"

"When we go shopping today," whispered Mae, "would you buy one for me? If I pick one up, Rick will hear of it before I even know what the results are. I'd hate to get his hopes up before I'm even sure or not."

"This had better be one good disguise!" exclaimed Charlie. "I can see the headlines now: 'Wallace Shipley's Teenage Bride-- PREGNANT!'"

Mae laughed and set the salad bowl on the table.

"Honey!" called Uncle Rick in a louder than usual voice from outside the front door, "we have *company!*"

"Quick, hide in the bedroom!" whispered Mae, rushing her famous guest to the master bedroom. "Don't come out until I give the all clear," she added before going.

Charlie held her breath and listened at the door until the minutes ticked away and there was still no sign of Mae. The young woman sat down on the bed and sighed. It was an hour before Mae opened the bedroom door and pronounced that it was safe to come out.

"I'm really sorry," she apologized to Charlie. "It was Megan, one of my oldest friends, and I couldn't get rid of her any sooner. She kind of invited herself to lunch-- I mean we usually do that-- but I couldn't tell her that she couldn't stay because Wallace Shipley's wife is hiding in my bedroom!"

"I understand," smiled Charlie. "Thanks for not giving me away. After Adam and I leave, you can tell all your friends that we were here."

"If we did that, it would make it harder for you both to ever come back," declined Mae. "Come back to the kitchen. There's still some leftovers."

Uncle Rick looked up from his newspaper as Charlie sat down at the table.

"We saved you some apple pie," he smiled sheepishly. "That Megan sure can talk once she gets going! Well, I have to get back to work now. Be sure to tell Adam that he's having dinner at our house, this evening."

"Thank you," said Charlie, "I will."

When Uncle Rick had kissed his wife good-bye, Mae turned to Charlie with a concerned look on her face.

"Megan told me," she whispered, "that someone spotted Wallace Shipley near Oak Glen, picking apples!"

"That's impossible," smiled Charlie, though the near accuracy of the rumor made her feel uneasy.

"Do you still want to go shopping?" asked Mae, hesitantly.

"Yes," replied Charlie, "at least, to buy the you-know-what. Oh! I hate hiding like this!" she exclaimed. "After all, it's not as if Adam and I were criminals, or something!"

"But your anonymity *is* making this honeymoon possible," reminded Mae.

"That's true," sighed Charlie, easing back from her indignation. "I wouldn't have traded this time with Adam for anything. That reminds me, I need to go see if he's still asleep."

"I'll wrap up the rest of this pie," offered Mae, "and he can eat it later."

"I'll be right back," said Charlie. "Then we can go buy the kit."

Charlie left the house, carrying Mae's apple pie. When she came to the cottage, Adam was still asleep. After putting the pie in the refrigerator, she noiselessly closed the front door and returned to the main house.

"Are you sure you're willing to do this?" hesitated Mae, as she placed the finishing touch on Charlie's disguise.

The frizzy redhead in the mirror looked nothing like Charlie. Mae had even gone so far as to put freckles on her cheeks and false eyelashes that gave her a very un-Charlie-like appearance.

"You were right," smiled Charlie in amazement, "my own grandmother wouldn't recognize me in this! Mae, you're incredible! I wish I had you when I went shopping in Palm City the last time. Kevin, my bodyguard was on edge the whole time after the first person recognized me-- and I thought I was wearing a pretty good disguise!"

"What can I say," giggled Mae, "it's a gift!"

"Now, where again did you say the pharmacy was?" asked Charlie.

"I'll drive you there and wait in the car," offered Mae.

"No," resisted Charlie. "I don't want you to have to answer questions about me later on. I'll walk there and back."

"If you're sure," hesitated Mae. "You can leave by the back gate. No one will see you going."

Charlie made her way outside, and after a quick prayer to ask God to keep her identity a secret, Charlie unlatched the back gate and found her way along the fence line until she reached the main road into town. As the cars sped by, Charlie felt a little uneasy. This was the first time in a long while that Kevin wasn't with her, and it surprised her how vulnerable it made her feel.

Before long, Charlie found the pharmacy just where Mae had said she would, and went inside. The cashier looked up at her and then returned to her work. Breathing a sigh of relief, Charlie made her way down the aisles and located the home pregnancy kits. Not wanting to check out with only that, Charlie grabbed a bottle of some kind of herbal remedy and made her way to the counter.

The woman in front of her was busy talking to the cashier, so the teenager patiently waited her turn.

"It's disgraceful, if you ask me," the woman at the counter was saying. "If she were my daughter, I'd get her away from that cradle robber as soon as I could! I don't care *how* wealthy he might be! No daughter of mine would throw herself at someone old enough to be her father! Did you see the pictures of that big wedding on television? Why, Wallace Shipley should be clapped in irons and made a public spectacle for marrying someone under eighteen!"

"I'll be with you in a minute, miss," said the cashier.

The gossiping woman turned to look at Charlie, and then returned to her conversation, saying things more vile and wicked than at the first. Charlie recalled how she had told Mae that she had an easier time of people accepting her relationship with Adam because he was famous! The ridicule of the woman at the counter flushed Charlie's face with shame. She had just spent long private days with Adam doing things she would never tell another living soul, and the woman ahead of her was turning it into something evil and perverse. Charlie ached to speak up, but knew she could not without revealing her identity.

When she left the store, Charlie felt sick inside. She quickly made her way down the road and back to the rear gate. As she approached the main house, Charlie saw Adam talking to Uncle Rick and Mae, intent in conversation.

As she approached the threesome, Mae looked at Adam and then back to Charlie. Adam followed Mae's line of sight and turned to see a frizzy redhead awkwardly waiting for him to say something.

"Are you trying to tell me that *that's* Charlie?" he asked Mae in disbelief. "Tell me that's a wig!"

"It is," answered Mae.

Adam turned to say something to Uncle Rick before speaking to Charlie. Seeing her opportunity, Charlie discreetly slipped the pregnancy kit out of the bag and tucked it into her back pocket, for she had made a promise to Mae. Then Adam drew her aside. To Charlie's dismay, Uncle Rick was still within earshot.

"Where on *earth* have you been?" demanded Adam. "Mae says you went to the *pharmacy* of all places!"

"I had to get something," she stammered, suddenly feeling very much like a child.

"*What for?!*" he exclaimed incredulously. "What was so important that you had to dress up in that ridiculous disguise and risk being recognized for?"

Charlie stupidly stood there, unsure how best to answer him and yet still tell the truth.

"Adam," intervened Mae, "It's my fault..."

"I had to get something," interrupted Charlie, trying to keep Mae's secret.

Adam grasped the pharmacy bag from Charlie's hand and pulled out a bottle.

"Herbal growth hormone?" he asked in a dazed voice.

Charlie could feel her face turn red. Of all the products in the store, she *would* have to pick that! Even Mae looked surprised.

"It's not what you think," she hesitated.

"Charlie," said Adam, his voice lowering into a whisper, "is something wrong? Am I somehow failing you?"

"It's not for you," consoled Charlie, seeing that Adam was becoming troubled and confused by her seemingly inexplicable behavior. "It's not a big deal, really. I'll explain later, but not here."

"Charlie," he whispered, "you don't need this, either."

"I have to go change clothes," sighed Charlie, half wanting to cry and laugh at the same time. "Mae, could you help me?"

"I can do that," offered Adam.

"Please," requested Charlie, "wait for me at the cottage. I'll be there as soon as I can, and I'll explain everything."

Mae stepped forward and walked Charlie into the main house where Charlie had left her "normal" clothes. The young woman was feeling very embarrassed, for even Uncle Rick had heard the conversation.

"Thanks for not telling," whispered Mae, as they went into the master bedroom and shut the door. "Why did you get herbal growth hormone?"

"I didn't!" exclaimed Charlie, throwing up her hands in exasperation. "I mean, I did, but I didn't *intend* to. By the way, here's your kit," she said pulling the box from her back pocket and handing it to Mae.

"You're going to have to do a lot of explaining to Adam," sighed her friend.

"I know," said Charlie, "but I didn't want to say anything in front of your husband. It's amazing how a simple favor can suddenly turn so complicated! There, I'm back to normal now. I suppose I had better go face Adam."

After Mae had given her a hug of support, Charlie returned to the cottage to find Adam waiting on the living room couch, looking every bit as bewildered as he felt.

"See this?" she said, holding up the offending bottle for him to see. "I'm throwing it away. I didn't buy it for you, and I didn't buy it for me. I was doing Mae a favor by purchasing a home pregnancy kit, because she doesn't want Rick to find out until she's certain that she's pregnant. I only picked up the bottle so I wouldn't stand out so much when I checked out at the counter."

"I'm relieved to hear you say that," sighed Adam, "but you went without even a bodyguard!"

"It was only down the road a little way," argued Charlie, "and no one recognized me."

"At least you're all right," he said, getting up from the couch and making a loving advance toward her.

Charlie let him touch her but then pulled away, suddenly remembering the words that the woman in the pharmacy had said about her and Adam.

"I don't feel like it right now," she said, backing away from her husband. "I think I'll go help Mae get dinner ready. We're invited, you know."

Adam tenderly grabbed her by the arm, and shut the front door so she couldn't leave.

"What is it?" he asked her. "What happened?"

Charlie hesitated, not wanting to repeat what she had heard. But when she looked into Adam's loving face she couldn't hold back any longer. When she told him, Adam was grieved, but not ashamed.

"I'm not surprised that there are people in this world who would try and turn something as beautiful as our relationship into something shameful and evil," said Adam. "Why did you let her make you feel like that, Charlie? We haven't done anything wrong. The Bible says, 'Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.'" (Hebrews 13:4)

"I know," explained Charlie, struggling to put her feelings into words, "but it doesn't take much to make me feel embarrassed about what happens behind our closed doors. I know I'm acting immature, but I'm trying to grow up. Please be patient with me."

"You're not acting immature," consoled Adam, "you're acting like a new bride. And for the record, this is new to me, as well. I've never shared my bed with anyone before you. I confess, that bottle had me worried."

"You have nothing to be worried about," smiled Charlie.

"Come on," coaxed Adam, leading her to the bedroom, "we still have time before we're expected for dinner."

"As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste."

~ Song of Solomon 2:3 ~

When the couple emerged from the cottage that evening, Charlie had been comforted in the fact that no matter what anyone else said or thought about them, they were blameless before God. As they strolled to the main house past the apple trees, Mae called to them,

"We're in the backyard!"

Adam and Charlie found Mae setting the picnic table while Uncle Rick was attempting to light the barbecue grill.

"How do you like your steak?" he asked, as the flames shot up from the charcoal pit beneath the grill.

"I'll pass, thanks," said Charlie.

"I like mine rare," said Adam.

"Oh, you and rare meat!" exclaimed Charlie, going to Mae's side. "His whole family eats meat so rare it could walk away on its own power! It's as if the entire family has never even heard of mad cow disease!"

"You really *should* cook it more than that," advised Uncle Rick, "otherwise, it's just not safe. I like mine cooked just enough so it's no longer pink."

"Then I'll take mine the same way," conceded the musician.

"Are you a vegetarian, Charlie?" asked Mae, more surprised than Charlie thought was warranted.

"Yes," she replied.

"So am I!" exclaimed Mae. "It's not that I have anything personal against meat, but the way they treat animals these days is simply inhumane!"

Recalling their previous conversation, Charlie whispered something into Mae's ear.

"No," answered Mae, "I was waiting for you. I haven't the nerve to do it alone."

"Do what alone?" asked Uncle Rick, placing a steak on the grill.

"Mae and I will be back in a little bit," said Charlie, taking her hostess by the hand and disappearing into the main house.

"Women," chuckled Uncle Rick to Adam, "I can't understand them!"

Adam smiled knowingly and remained quiet.

Charlie rushed Mae to the bathroom and tore open the box, taking out the instructions, while her friend eyed the kit nervously.

"Maybe this isn't a good idea," hesitated Mae. "Maybe I should wait to find out."

"Is that what you really want?" asked Charlie, looking up from the instructions.

"No," whimpered Mae.

"It says to place the test wand under a urine stream and then to set it aside and wait for three minutes," read Charlie.

"That's gross!" exclaimed the woman.

"Mae," asked Charlie, "how old are you?"

"Twenty-two," replied Mae. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason," smiled Charlie. "Here, go do your thing," she said, handing her the test wand.

Charlie waited, and before long, Mae appeared with the pregnancy test.

"How long do we have to wait before we know?" asked Mae, placing it on the sink ledge and pacing back and forth.

"Three minutes," repeated Charlie.

Mae continued to nervously pace until it was time to check the test results.

"You do it," she said, pushing Charlie in front of her. "I can't look."

Charlie stepped forward and peered down at the meter. Then she took the instructions, and reread a portion of it.

"What is it?" asked Mae. "What does it say?"

"According to this," replied Charlie, "you're pregnant."

For a second, there was stunned silence. Then the two young women erupted into laughter and cries of joy.

Uncle Rick turned the steak over and went back to the picnic table to talk to his guest.

"As I was saying," resumed the man, "Bill says the market could easily support a new Wallace Shipley album. Why, with all the publicity surrounding the wedding and the tour, I should think it's a sure thing!"

"I don't know," remarked Adam. "The public has a short attention span. What they're clamoring for today, they ignore tomorrow."

"But you're talking about loyal fans," reminded Uncle Rick. "They've listened to your music for years while you didn't put out anything new. They bought your music then, and they'll buy it in the future. Never underestimate loyal fans," he repeated.

"You sound like Bill," smiled Adam, accepting the glass of iced tea Uncle Rick handed him.

"Bill's a good boy," smiled the proud uncle.

Just then, the women appeared from the house. Adam raised his eyebrows to Charlie, and she replied with a half smile.

"There you two are!" exclaimed Uncle Rick, getting up and turning his steak on the grill again. "I had about given up on you!"

"Honey?" asked Mae. "I need to talk to you inside."

"Right now?" asked Uncle Rick. "My steak will burn if I don't take it off at just the right moment."

"I'll do it," offered Adam. "You go with Mae."

"What's going on?" asked the man, handing the large metal spatula to the volunteer.

Mae took her puzzled husband into the house while Charlie sat down beside her man.

"I'm happy for them," smiled Adam, putting an arm around Charlie. "They'll make good parents."

Charlie leaned her head on Adam's shoulder and waited for their hosts to return. The sweet fragrance of the apple orchard blended with the food on the picnic table, creating a lazy summer evening atmosphere that seemed to pervade every blade of grass.

"I had better get the steak off the grill," sighed Adam reluctantly, for he had been enjoying the quiet moment with Charlie.

Not long afterward, Uncle Rick and Mae returned to the small party outside.

"I suppose your missis has already told you the good news," grinned the expectant father.

"She did," replied Adam, heartily shaking his hand. "Congratulations!"

"I never thought I'd be a Daddy!" exclaimed Uncle Rick, sitting down to the picnic table with Mae. "You reach a point in your life when you accept that it's not going to happen to you, and then boom! it does!"

"I know the feeling," smiled Adam. "When Charlie found her way into my heart, no one was as surprised as me."

Uncle Rick hugged Mae, and shook his head disbelievingly.

"I feel like celebrating!" he exclaimed. "Mae, I'm going to break out the old vintage!"

Uncle Rick got up from the table and rushed to the house. Soon, he returned with an old bottle and a bucket of ice.

"We need to let it chill," he said, placing the bottle carefully into the ice bucket. "This apple cider was bottled from my Dad's last harvest before he turned the business over to me. I've been saving it for a special occasion, and I can't think of a better one than this!"

Uncle Rick poured three glasses full and was about to fill Mae's when she put her hand over the mouth of her glass.

"None for me, honey," she smiled. "Alcohol isn't good for the baby."

Uncle Rick grinned broadly.

"So it is! So it is!" he chuckled happily. "We're going to have a baby! Now, for a toast," he announced. "Mae, you just grab that glass of iced tea. That's right. At a moment like this, I'm reminded of Hannah from the Old Testament when God had given her the child she had long desired. She said, 'My heart rejoiceth in the LORD, mine horn is exalted in the LORD!' Mae and I can now repeat those same words with a very grateful heart! Here's to the LORD!"

Everyone raised their glasses and said in unison, "Amen!"

After everyone had eaten dinner, they sat on wooden adirondack chairs and sipped apple cider from a much less alcoholic vintage. The evening air was beginning to chill a little, but everyone hated to go inside, for they were enjoying the ever-changing hues painted on the horizon as the sun slowly sank in the west.

"What a good day this has been!" exclaimed Uncle Rick, reaching for Mae's hand, for she was sitting in the chair beside his. "God has been very good to us!"

"I can second that," sighed Adam, smiling tenderly at Charlie. "Charlie and I couldn't have had a better place to spend our honeymoon."

"You both are welcome to stay as long as you want at the cottage," said Uncle Rick. "Mae and I are in no hurry to get rid of you guys. Right Mae?"

"Thanks," replied Adam, "but we can't hide out here forever. I have to get back to my piano, and Charlie is excited about starting working on Villa Rosa."

"Wait until the end of the month, then," reasoned Uncle Rick. "That's only a few more days. Do it for each other."

"Please, Adam?" asked Charlie. "Just until the end of July?"

"If that's what you want," said Adam, "then we'll stay a little longer. I'm in no hurry to leave, either."

Charlie got up and kissed Adam. Then the two went for a stroll in the orchard, savoring the evening and each other.

"Come with me from Lebanon, my spouse... Thou hast ravished my heart... thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck. How fair is thy love... how much better is thy love than wine! and the smell of thine ointments than all spices! Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb: honey and milk are under thy tongue; and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon."

~ Song of Solomon 4:8-11 ~

"Keep me as the apple of [your] eye."

~ Psalms 17:8 ~

Chapter Forty-nine

The House of the Righteous

"The house of the righteous shall stand."

~ Proverbs 12:7 ~

At the beginning of August, Charlie turned her attention to the task of remodeling Villa Rosa. Much of her time was now spent pouring over notes and ideas she had concerning the broken-down estate. Adam admired his wife's undaunted spirit, for he had seen the pictures of the desert ruins, and he certainly didn't envy her task. With Adam's full support, Charlie began making a list of things that would need to be done, and then called Thomas, her new brother-in-law, for his recommendation for a general contractor that would oversee the renovation of Villa Rosa. It was early one morning in August, that Shirley received the phone call from Charlie, asking to speak to Thomas.

"How's the honeymoon?" asked Thomas.

"I'm getting things ready to begin work on Villa Rosa," explained Charlie, "and was wondering if you could recommend a good general contractor."

"What material is this place of yours made of?" he inquired.

"Sandstone," replied Charlie.

"Well," he said, rubbing the back of his head thoughtfully, "Shirley tells me this place is old, so it will probably take some expertise that you won't necessarily get with someone who builds with your more traditional materials, like wood and brick. There are some good GCs [general contractors] in Southern California, but with a specialty project like this, they'd be subbing [subcontracting] out to people who have more experience with certain aspects that they're not as familiar with."

"There's no electricity," continued Charlie, "and the nearest town is Drywell, where the one building has to run off of a generator, so I'm thinking of the possibility of solar energy or maybe even wind power."

"Like a wind turbine," he mused thoughtfully. "I've always wanted to combine renewable energy with a home. What about water? Do you have water?"

"Villa Rosa has some old plumbing," she answered, "and there was someone who lived there for several years, so I'd imagine there *has* to be some kind of water source, even if it's completely broken down by now."

"Have you considered drilling your own well?" suggested Thomas. "Even if you could plumb back into the city's water, you'd make the place more self-sufficient if you had your own well. Of course, that's if there's an underground water source, in the first place."

"I've also been thinking of geothermal heating to heat and cool Villa Rosa," said Charlie.

"I've heard of that," said Thomas, intrigued by the suggestion.

"It's better for the environment, and cuts down on air pollution," she explained. "Adam also had an idea that I really like. The sandstone floors are so battered and cracked, that they'll probably have to be removed. Instead of more sandstone, we'd like to put down pipes under a concrete slab floor, and pump hot water through them to heat the place."

"Radiant heating," smiled Thomas. "It could be powered by the geothermal heat pump. I'm not sure how much money radiant heating would save in utility bills, but it *would* be more comfortable in the winter."

"The only thing I don't like about it," sighed Charlie, "is that the concrete floor won't match the pink hued sandstone walls, like the current floor does."

"That's no problem," said Thomas, "concrete can be dyed."

"Also," said Charlie, seeing that she was holding Thomas' interest, "I have a problem with the inner courtyard. I love it, but it has some downfalls. In order to move from one room to the next, you have to pass through the courtyard. When it's cold or really hot outside, you have to brave the temperatures just to get to the next room! Do you have any suggestions?"

"That's a toughie," breathed Thomas. "I'd have to see the architecture for myself to know if this is possible or not, but how about converting the area into an indoor courtyard, meaning that it wouldn't be open to the elements. If you built a skylight as large as the ceiling of the courtyard, you could still have the sensation of being outdoors, but in a controlled environment."

"That sounds perfect!" exclaimed Charlie. "I was getting concerned about that issue, but your suggestion would fix it entirely!"

"Back to finding a GC," returned Thomas, "you probably could find some very good ones, but I'd love to do it myself. I've had experience GC'ing my own house, and am familiar with guys in the industry who could subcontract out for the different jobs that this project would entail. I like your approach to the reconstruction, Charlie. Keep things natural and clean, but still retaining the look and feel that the architect had in mind when Villa Rosa was first drafted. You're probably even thinking of landscaping with native plants."

"As a matter of fact, I am," laughed Charlie, surprised at his perception. "Are you sure you want the job, Thomas? I don't know how long all this is going to take."

"I don't have to think twice about it," he replied, enthusiastically. "If you and Adam will let me, I'd love to be a part of this."

"Thank you," Charlie gratefully accepted. "We don't expect you to do this for free, of course. This would pull you away from your day job for a few months, at least. Maybe you could drive up to Villa Rosa to see for yourself what needs to be done and then get back to me with your input."

"I'd like to bring along an inspector," agreed Thomas. "After that, we'll need to get an architect to design what you want changed about the architecture, such as the addition of skylights in the courtyard. Then I'll need to look into contacting subcontractors to get their best bids, and do research about what's available for homeowners who want to use solar power or wind energy."

"That sounds good," said Charlie. "I'm going to shop around for a mobile home that we can put on the property where Adam and I can live while work is being done on the house. Grandma and Daddy will stay in Twin Yucca until Villa Rosa is ready."

"Then I'd better get a septic tank into the ground fast," said Thomas, "and set up a temporary generator for electricity, and a water tank until the well is drilled. I'd also like to have a surveyor mark off the property boundaries, so we can put up a security fence as soon as possible. I have to get off the phone and write all this down," said Thomas, for his mental list was getting quite long.

"I'll talk to you later then," said Charlie, after she had thanked him once more.

After she hung up, Charlie found Adam in the living room of the small cottage, and related the substance of her conversation with Thomas.

"I'm not surprised Thomas was interested," smiled Adam. "He's was into do-it-yourself long before it became popular. It's nice to go with someone you trust, isn't it," he smiled, as Charlie cuddled on the couch beside him.

Thomas wasted no time in setting to work. He had a surveyor mark off the several acres of land, and hired someone to put up a high perimeter fence to keep people from wandering into the area. Before long, the septic tank was in, the water tank installed, and a shed for the generator was built. Then came the day that the mobile home arrived. Charlie wanted to be there, but she and Adam didn't dare leave their hideout in their hosts' apple ranch, until they had a place to move into. Thomas was in charge of installation, and had hired enough workers to expedite matters in as short a time frame as humanly possible, for he knew Adam and Charlie were waiting on it. For once in his life, Thomas could say, "Money is no object," and actually mean it.

When everything was in place, Adam and Charlie gathered their belongings and made their way down the cobblestone walk to the main house to say good-bye to Uncle Rick and Mae.

"I don't know how we can ever thank you enough for these last few weeks," said Adam, heartily shaking Uncle Rick's hand in friendship. "You and Mae were Godsend."

"It was our pleasure," replied the man. "I'm glad I was finally able to meet Wallace Shipley, but even happier to know Adam Clark. You both are welcome here, any time!"

"We'd consider it a snub if you stayed away," added Mae, hugging Charlie tightly.

"Take care of yourself and the baby," said Charlie, as they prepared to leave.

"Call when you get settled," called out Mae, as the newlyweds walked to the gate and got into the vehicle Kevin had waiting for them.

"I hope you had a pleasant vacation, Mrs. Clark," said Kevin, opening the door for his client. "I'm afraid you're stuck with me again."

Even the sight of an old acquaintance wasn't enough to make Charlie feel as though things were back to old times. She was a married woman now, and they were traveling to the property that would be their new home. This was a new beginning, and the sensation of it made her feel excited and uneasy at the same time, just as it does for anyone about to embark on something they've never done before.

Adam and Charlie sat in the back seat, while Kevin drove. The green vegetation of Oak Glen gradually began to give way to stark landscape as they neared the Mojave Desert.

"Kevin, did anyone follow you?" inquired Charlie, looking out the back window.

"I see him," muttered Kevin, glancing in the rear view mirror. "He's been with us for the last three miles."

Adam sighed heavily. Yes, they were back in the "real" world, again.

"Do me a favor, Mrs. Clark," requested Kevin, "and don't look out the window. These guys wait for hours just to get one bankable shot. I imagine he's trying to be the first one to take a photo of you and Adam after your honeymoon. Let's not make it easy for him."

Adam followed suit, and the two found themselves staring at the car floor. He playfully nudged her foot with the toe of his shoe, and took her hand.

"How many acres did you say we have again?" he asked, fighting the temptation to look out the back window.

"Twenty acres," replied Charlie.

"Suddenly, it doesn't seem enough," he chuckled.

"It's time to lose this guy," said the bodyguard, as the vehicle got off on an unscheduled exit.

The car behind them exited also, suddenly making it difficult to not appear as though it were following them. When they came to a wide spot on the empty street, the trailing car suddenly sped forward and attempted to come alongside their vehicle. Adam and Charlie looked away from the window, so that their faces were not in plain sight.

"Hold on," warned Kevin, as he brought the car to a sudden stop.

Not expecting the evasive maneuver, the trailing vehicle whizzed by them at full speed. Before it had a chance to make a U-turn and correct its direction, Kevin put his vehicle in reverse made an expertly handled one hundred and eighty degree turn before disappearing back onto the highway. Charlie had seen Kevin's professional driving before, but for Adam, this was a first.

"Don't tell me you learned that being a Navy SEAL!" he exclaimed with admiration.

"That, among other things," replied Kevin with a cryptic smile.

Now that their vehicle had been identified, Kevin got back onto the surface streets, just in case the trailing car had had a partner. The bounty for the first photo of Wallace Shipley and his new

bride after their hideaway honeymoon was very high, and many freelance photographers were out to win it.

After awhile of driving, the landscape grew more barren, as acre upon acre of chaparral covered expanse sped past their window. When Charlie spotted Amboy ahead, she clutched Adam's hand excitedly.

"Drywell is just a few miles from here," she breathed with anticipation.

Adam furrowed his brows and kept his comments to himself. Amboy was anything but impressive, and the tiny ghost towns that followed were even less so. But Charlie was so enthused, that he soon found pleasure in her excitement. She was happy, and for him, that was all that really mattered.

The tiny town of Drywell consisted of a forlorn restaurant with a weather-beaten sign proclaiming that it was air conditioned. As Kevin turned off the paved road onto a bumpy dirt path, the famous musician smiled in spite of himself. Lonely buildings in the middle of nowhere, ghost towns, and meandering dirt roads-- it all sounded like the plot to an old western movie, and not the reality of his own life.

"That's new," commented Charlie, craning her neck to get a good view of the chain link fence that blocked the road just ahead of them.

"I think you'll find that Mr. Garner has been very busy," said Kevin, stopping the car and getting out to unlock the gate.

"See that building?" pointed Charlie, excitedly. "That's Villa Rosa!"

"It's bigger than I thought it would be," mused Adam, somewhat intrigued by the rose hued sandstone walls.

To the right of the estate, Charlie saw a medium sized prefabricated house, or mobile home, as it is more commonly called. The prefabricated house consisted of two separate halves that had traveled there on the back of flatbed trucks, and then joined together to form a complete unit. A small metal shed housed the generator, and a large tank of water stood in readiness for its new owners. Thomas came out of the house and greeted the car as it pulled up.

"Welcome to your new temporary home!" he exclaimed, as Adam helped Charlie out of the air conditioned car and into the baking heat of the desert. It was hotter than she had remembered, but it was August, and the summer was at it's hottest intensity.

"Uncle Adam!" shouted a boy's voice, as Chad burst from the house and ran to meet his uncle.

"How've you been, Chad?" asked Adam, not content for the handshake the boy offered, and instead embraced him as a son. "I've missed you. Not just while I've been away for the last few weeks, but also during the tour. It's really good to see you!"

"Are you home to stay?" asked the boy, hopefully.

"Home to stay," repeated the uncle, hugging his nephew once more.

"Let's get out of this heat," said Thomas, as Chad tagged closely to his uncle.

Charlie followed behind, as Thomas showed them into the sparsely furnished house he had prepared for the newly married couple. The house consisted of a large main room, two small bedrooms, a kitchen, and a modest bathroom. It wasn't much, but at least the restaurant in Drywell now wasn't the only air conditioned building in town. Two folding chairs sat near the wall, while the sound of the air conditioner hummed in the background.

Kevin carried his bags to one of the two bedrooms, and then returned to the car for Adam and Charlie's things.

"If you'll tell me what you want from home, I can get it for you," said Thomas, addressing Adam. "The paparazzi are camped outside your old home right now, so unless you don't mind being spotted, you should let me go in your stead."

"Could you somehow get the piano in his music room?" asked Charlie, joining in on the conversation.

"Charlie," debated Adam, "as much as I want my piano, it would take up too much room."

"You need your music," she insisted. "I want you to have your piano while I'm busy with Villa Rosa. Can you honestly tell me you can do without your music for the next so many months?"

Adam couldn't; he longed to get behind the piano once more, and to immerse himself in the world that his music created.

"Is it possible, Thomas?" he asked.

"Sure," replied the brother-in-law. "Make a list of what you want and I'll get movers to load it up and haul it here. Don't be surprised if they're followed by the paparazzi, though."

"They were bound to know where we were, sooner or later," sighed Adam.

"Very well then," said Thomas. "There's a pot roast in the fridge that Shirley sent over. Charlie, tomorrow I'll bring out the architect and we'll go over the changes you want."

"Sounds good, thank you," she answered, as Thomas turned to leave.

Charlie went into their bedroom to unpack, while Chad lingered in the living room with Adam.

"Come on, Chad," said Thomas, "it's time to go."

The boy looked up at his uncle, as if begging to stay.

"I'll see you later," said Adam, touching his nephew's shoulder.

Chad reluctantly followed his father out the front door, as a blast of hot air rushed inside. Adam quickly shut the door and looked about the place he was going to call home for the next unspecified number of months. The bleakness of the situation quickly melted, however, as he saw Charlie in the bedroom. With a loving smile, he went in, and shut the door behind him.

That night, after the three had finished Shirley's pot roast sandwiches, everyone went to bed. Outside, Charlie could hear the distant baying of a coyote howling to another companion who answered in like manner. The moonless night outside their window blanketed the untamed desert in darkness, made even more dramatic by the stars that punctuated the vast nothingness with tiny orbs of brilliance.

Inside their bedroom, Adam held Charlie close as she peacefully drifted to sleep. He closed his eyes and waited for sleep to come, but it didn't. Adam stared at the digital clock glowing in the corner of their room, a vigilant reminder of the fact that he wasn't asleep yet. The hours slowly crept by, and his eyes were becoming heavy. Charlie had turned in her sleep, and now Adam was free to move a little without awakening her. Adam fluffed his pillow and closed his eyes once more, as if willing himself to sleep. Soon his eyes popped back open, and he was left confronting the time on the clock.

Quietly, the insomniac got out of bed, and opened the bedroom window, letting in the mildly cool desert air. Another coyote bayed in the distance. Since the window was open, it sounded louder than usual, causing Charlie to stir from her sleep.

"Is everything all right?" she asked groggily.

"Yes, go to sleep," he replied, pulling up the sheets around her shoulders.

The young woman soon fell asleep again, with as little effort as Adam could ever hope for. He returned to his view at the window and sighed heavily. The soft breathing of his companion made him yearn for the rest a few minutes of sleep would bring. If he were back in his old home, he could go work in the garden, or pull out his telescope and gaze at the celestial heavens. If he were in a hotel room on the tour, he could watch television or call Charlie on the satellite phone. But, he quickly reminded himself, in the old days, she wouldn't be lying next to him in bed.

Adam climbed onto the bed and got beneath the sheets, trying to derive comfort from just being beside Charlie.

"Please, God," he prayed to himself, "help me sleep-- even if it's just for an hour or two."

Then Adam felt Charlie's breath upon him, and he opened his eyes to find her looking down at him.

"Can't you sleep?" she asked, sympathetically. "Why didn't you wake me up? I could have helped you."

"I didn't want to make your night miserable, as well," he replied.

"Poor baby," she whispered, caressing his face with her fingers. Adam buried his face in her embrace, finding solace in Charlie's arms. "I'm always here," she said tenderly.

His burden suddenly seemed a little less heavy because she was there to share it with him. Adam hated to disturb Charlie's rest, but he was too tired to resist her help. The young woman stroked his head until she heard the soft rhythmic breathing of her mate, who had at last fallen asleep.

The next morning, Charlie awoke to find Adam still clinging to her. Outside, she could hear the construction crew beginning a day of work on Villa Rosa.

There was much cleanup work to do before any remodeling could even begin and Thomas was eager to get started. He already had a work detail combing through the rooms, gathering all the trash and debris that littered much of the old building. Weeds were another matter. They had sprouted up through the cracked floor, and had taken solid root; the inner courtyard was mostly

filled with tumble weeds, and had to be cleared before Thomas could even get a good look at the architecture it concealed. All in all, anyone who had allergies would've done best to stay away from Villa Rosa while cleanup was in progress.

Back at the house, Charlie could hear Kevin quietly moving around in the living room. She gently nudged Adam, trying to get him to move so she could get up. Just then, the teenager heard a knock at their front door. Kevin answered it, and Charlie heard a boy's voice.

"Adam," she whispered, "I have to get up."

Her husband sleepily turned over, freeing the young woman. She quickly dressed and went to the living room where Kevin was talking to Chad.

"I came with Dad," said the boy, when Charlie warmly greeted him. "Where's Uncle Adam?"

"He's still asleep," she answered, going to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee.

Chad was familiar with his uncle's erratic sleeping patterns and decided to wait around until he woke up. Kevin ate and went outside to help, for it was better than sitting still and doing nothing. As Charlie washed the breakfast dishes, Chad sat down on the floor and leaned against the wall.

"What have you been doing with your summer vacation?" she asked, trying to break the silence.

The boy shrugged his shoulders and remained silent. Seeing he didn't want to talk, Charlie politely excused herself and went outside to discuss with Thomas about the architect.

Chad waited for half an hour before he heard his uncle stirring in the next room. Expectantly, he got to his feet and waited outside the closed bedroom door.

"Well!" said Adam in surprise, when he saw Chad. "This is a pleasant surprise! Do you know where your aunt is?"

"She's outside," answered Chad, as Adam went to the kitchen to eat breakfast.

"How's Mike and Sandra?" inquired the man, pouring a cup of coffee.

"Fine I guess," replied the boy. "Mike's really busy at the store lately, so I don't see him very much. Can I ask you something, Uncle Adam?"

"Sure," he replied. "What is it?"

"Do you and Aunt Charlie ever fight?" wondered Chad.

"We can have our disagreements," answered the musician thoughtfully, "but we work them out with love and patience. Why do you ask?"

Chad shrugged and remained silent.

"Is everything all right at home?" wondered Adam, sitting down in one of the two chairs in the living room. He knew Chad well, and sensed that something was weighing on his mind.

Chad took the other seat and stared at the floor.

"Dad and Mom have been fighting a lot," he said in a low voice. "It's been worse since Dad's stayed home from his trips. Mom cries a lot, and neither one will tell me what's going on. Mike isn't there, and I don't know what to do."

"How long has this been going on?" asked Adam, becoming concerned.

"For a few months," replied Chad, wiping a tear from his eye.

"Do you know what they're fighting about?" he questioned, unwilling to think the worst.

"They think I don't know, but I do," answered the boy, his voice quivering with fear. "Dad had an affair, and I don't think it's his first one."

The words fell like lead on Adam's ears. Chad looked to his uncle, who was stunned speechless. This was the first Adam had ever heard about this, but then, he had been on tour for six months, and then had the added distraction of the wedding and honeymoon.

"An affair," he muttered under his breath. "I can't believe it!"

"Dad told Mom that he's a changed man, and Mom said she wished she could believe him," related Chad, tears streaming down his face.

Adam knelt down on the floor and hugged his nephew.

"How could he do this to Mom?" wept the boy.

"A better question is, how could he do this to God?" sighed the uncle, deeply disturbed by what Chad had just told him.

"I'm scared, Uncle Adam!" Chad cried.

"Does Mike know?" asked Adam, as Chad sobbed into his shoulder.

"I don't think so," replied the boy.

"God will help us," soothed Adam, trying to find the right words to calm his nephew's fears. "Keep your faith and confidence in God, for when something like this happens, it isn't God who failed-- it's man. 'The just LORD is in the midst thereof; He will NOT do iniquity: every morning doth He bring His judgment to light, He faileth not.' [Zephaniah 3:5] God hasn't forsaken us, Chad. Depend on it!"

After the boy had calmed down, Adam went outside and saw Thomas talking to Charlie in the distance. Thomas waved to him, but Adam only stared back. Thomas' face fell as Adam went to the pickup Kevin had rented for their use, and drove off without a word.

As the truck traveled down the paved road back to Twin Yucca, Adam tried to reason away Chad's fears. Maybe the boy had been mistaken! Maybe things weren't as bad as they looked. But deep in his heart, Adam had the sinking feeling that it was true. It explained all those long trips, extended conventions, and infrequent appearances back home. Surely, Thomas hadn't been running around as far back as that!

With a heavy heart, Adam pulled into Shirley's driveway and got out of the truck. Going in unannounced, Adam found his sister in the kitchen, holding a cup of coffee, her eyes red with having spent the night in tears. When she saw him standing in the kitchen doorway, she looked at him in wonderment.

"That's strange," she mused, "I was just about to call you. It's as if you were reading my thoughts. There's something... something I want to talk to you about. It's about Thomas."

"Sis," said Adam, in a sober voice, "I just had a talk with Chad."

"What about?" she asked, her face becoming more troubled.

"Chad says you and Thomas have been fighting because he had an affair," repeated Adam.

Shirley gasped in horror.

"How did he know?!" she cried.

"Chad said this wasn't Thomas' first indiscretion, either," continued her brother.

Tears came to Shirley's eyes as she realized the pain that her son must have endured.

"I thought we could keep it from the boys," she wept, "but I see now, that the only person I was fooling, was myself! God, please help us!"

"How long has all this been going on?" asked Adam, pulling up a kitchen chair.

"I know of one other affair," she answered, pulling out a handkerchief, "but there's probably more. He insists there wasn't, but I don't think I can believe him anymore. I remember all those times he gave me roses and bought me extravagant gifts when he came home from one those long conventions, and I'm not sure if he wasn't trying to quiet a guilty conscience. I look back at my life with Thomas, and I don't know what was a lie, and what was real. Was any of it real?! All those times we went to church, and he said, 'Amen,' with the rest of the congregation... how could he really mean it and do this to God and to his family?" Shirley calmed a little and then looked to her brother. "I want you to know the rest. You never knew why I put Mom in a nursing home."

"Mom said you had done your best," replied Adam, not seeing what the one had to do with the other.

"What you didn't know," continued Shirley, "was that I was having my suspicions that Thomas was being unfaithful again, and I thought that it was my fault, because I wasn't paying enough attention to the boys and to my husband. Mom needed so much round-the-clock care, that I decided to place her in Mullen-Overholt. Mom knew about the affair, but she thought all had been repented of and forgiven."

"So that's what happened," sighed Adam, leaning back in his chair. "I was so hurt that you could do that to Mom, but she kept insisting that it was for the best. You could have told me, you know."

"Dad warned me that Thomas had been a wild teenager," recalled Shirley, "and to not give in to his repeated attentions without some fruit that he had repented. After Thomas' bout with rheumatic fever and his subsequent profession of Christ, I thought I had that fruit, so I dated him. Adam, I can't believe that was a lie. I think he really did mean it. Thomas stopped running

with his wild friends and started reading the Bible. When I look back, those were the truest days of our relationship.

"But all that changed later on," she continued. "When I remember all those times when I had the uneasy feeling that he was hiding something, I regret not confronting him about it. I should have been willing to put it all on the line, a long time ago. Do you know why I didn't tell you any sooner? I was too ashamed. I was too much of a coward to face the truth."

"Aren't you being a little hard on yourself, Sis?" asked Adam.

"No," replied Shirley, "I'm not. It was my responsibility to hold Thomas accountable for his actions, and I failed him. I tried to ignore what the Holy Spirit was warning me, and now I'm paying for it. Some helpmate I was! I was more afraid of losing Thomas, than if he was right with God or not. No, Adam, I'm not being too hard on myself!"

"I can't believe this is happening," muttered Adam, with a heavy sigh.

"He's asked me to forgive him one more time," said Shirley. "If I thought he really meant it, I would. When Thomas got the call from Charlie about Villa Rosa, he jumped at the chance to get away from the house and from me. Lately, things have been coming to a head. I was about to call and tell you all this, when you showed up. Talk about Providential timing."

Shirley looked out the kitchen window at the Mojave landscape outside their house.

"You're going to love living out there," she mused, her mind settling on a course of action. "Adam, I'm going to leave Thomas. I've known the decision was coming, and now I see I must do it. I can't let Thomas think that it's all right to repent one moment and take it back the next. 'For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of,'" she quoted Second Corinthians seven, verse ten. "I think I'll ask Mike and Sandra to take Chad for a few days while I work things out."

"Let Charlie and I take him, instead," requested Adam. "We'll go on a trip somewhere and bring him back when you're ready. Maybe it will make things a little easier on him."

"Thank you," smiled Shirley, "I think he'd like that very much. Would you go with me to Mike and Sandra's house? I need to tell them, but I don't know how..." her voice trailed off.

Adam drove his sister to Mike's apartment, and Sandra showed them inside.

"Mike is at the store right now," she explained.

"Could you call him?" requested Adam. "It's very important."

The grave faces of her relations prompted Sandra to call Mike. Before long, he hurried to the apartment.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"You'd better sit down," said Adam, as everyone took a seat in the small living room.

"It's about your father and I," began Shirley. "How do I tell you this?" she cried, burying her face in her hands.

"What's going on?" asked Mike, looking to his uncle for an explanation.

"Mike," explained Adam, straining to keep his composure, "your father has confessed to at least two extramarital affairs. Your mother suspects there are more, but he denies it."

Mike stared at him in stunned bewilderment.

"He's asked me to forgive him," said Shirley, "but it's insincere repentance at best. One moment he says he's sorry, and the next, he's practically defending his actions."

"Are you sure?" asked Mike, as Sandra took her husband's hand to show her support. "Are you absolutely sure, Mom?"

"He's admitted it to me with his own mouth," answered Shirley. "Your brother already knows. It turns out he's known for some time. After this talk, I'm going to go have the same discussion with Chad. There's one other thing," she said, her voice quivering with emotion. "I'm going to leave your father. I can't stay with him any longer. He's not right with God and he refuses to be honest with me, so I'm going to leave him. If this were only a matter of a difference in opinion, then I wouldn't go. But this is much more serious."

"Are you getting divorced?" asked Sandra.

"When I took my marriage vows before God," said Shirley, "I said 'till death do us part.' The Bible says, 'What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.' No, there won't be any divorce-- at least not on my part. I don't think Thomas will, either, but at this point, I can't speak for him."

Mike was pale and shaken. This had come as a complete surprise to him. His parents were actually separating.

"Pray for your father, Mike," said Shirley, patting his hand. "He needs all our prayers. And while you're before the Lord, make mention of me, as well."

When Shirley broke into tears, Mike put his arms around his mother.

"Mom," wept the young man, "don't cry!"

Adam got up and went to the bathroom to gather his strength. Chad was next, and then Shirley had to face Thomas.

As the two drove out to Villa Rosa, Shirley prayed for God's help. When the pickup truck pulled up, Thomas knew in an instant that something big was going on, and that he was probably the cause of it.

"What are you doing here?" he asked Shirley, as she climbed out of the vehicle.

"I came to talk to Chad," she replied.

"I think he's still inside," replied Thomas, stepping aside as Shirley went into the mobile home. He looked at Adam and saw by his face that he had been told. "I never wanted to hurt her," said Thomas. "You must believe that."

"I don't," replied Adam, "and neither do you."

Inside, Shirley had a heartbreaking talk with her youngest son. When she emerged with Chad, the boy ran to the arms of his uncle. Shirley drew her husband aside, so that their son couldn't overhear what she was about to say. The conversation was short and to the point. Thomas didn't seem very surprised, but he had secretly harbored the hope that maybe she would overlook his latest indiscretion, and pretend that it hadn't happened as she had done in the past when he fell under her suspicion. But this time would be different.

Chad watched his father take off the work gloves he had been wearing and walk back to his car. Thomas looked in his son's direction for a moment and then drove away. Shirley came to Chad and gave him another big hug.

"Uncle Adam and Aunt Charlie are going to take you on a trip," she informed him tenderly. "Then, you'll come back to me."

"I won't go!" cried the eleven year old, defiantly. "I won't leave you by yourself! You need me, Mom!"

"I do need you," affirmed Shirley, trying to remain strong for her youngest son. "I need you to do something very important for me. I need you to go with your uncle so I can take care of things here. Your father and I have to work some issues out, and I need to know that you're having a good time. Please," she asked him, "do this for me? Have as good a time as you possibly can, for my sake."

Charlie had spent the last hour driving around the fenced property to see the land that surrounded their new home. Since she was in no danger of strangers, Kevin relaxed his rigid policy of always keeping her within eyeshot, and had let her go alone. As she returned to the house, Charlie saw Adam sitting on the front step with Chad, who looked very shaken. Kevin was sitting on a barrel a few feet away, silent and sympathetic to what was going on.

"What is it?" she asked, getting out of the vehicle and running to her husband.

"Shirley and Thomas are separating," answered Adam, looking up at her from his seat on the front steps.

Charlie took a surprised step backward, but her face revealed little shock.

"I have to go talk to your aunt," Adam said to Chad. "I'll be right back."

"When did this happen?" asked Charlie, as she and Adam took a short walk from the house.

"Just this afternoon," he answered. "Back there, when I told you the news-- you didn't seem very surprised. Why?"

"I suppose it's all right for me to tell you now," said Charlie with a sigh. "Before we were married, Shirley confessed to me that Thomas had been unfaithful once."

"Why didn't you tell me?" asked Adam, a little hurt that she could have kept such an important thing from him.

"She made me promise not to repeat it," explained the young woman. "Are you angry?"

"No," replied the man, lovingly hugging his wife. "Charlie, I'm going to need a lot of these to get me through the next few days."

"Just reach for me," she replied tenderly, "and I'll be there."

"I'm afraid we're going to have to put Villa Rosa on temporary hold," apologized Adam, breaking more bad news to her. "I promised Shirley we would take Chad away for a while, so she and Thomas can work out an agreement about the house and who gets custody of Chad."

"I understand," said Charlie, burying her disappointment in the graveness of what had just happened to Adam's sister.

"Shirley will be back in an a few hours with Chad's things," he sighed, looking back in Chad's direction.

"Where will we go?" wondered Charlie.

"I don't know," replied Adam. "I'd take him to the Grand Canyon, if I wasn't afraid of all the attention it would draw. We'll take him someplace fun-- somewhere he might be able to forget for just a few minutes what's happening to his family."

A few hours later, Mike's car drove up. He got out and handed Adam two suitcases and a backpack of his brother's things.

"Sandra and I just had a big fight," said Mike, looking very troubled. "I wanted to ask Mom to come live with us, and she didn't. But, that's not what's scaring me the most. If this could happen to Dad and Mom, then it could happen to me. I mean, nothing seems right anymore. Things I thought were true, suddenly turn out to be well concealed lies! Uncle Adam, what if this happens to me and Sandra?"

"I've had to wrestle a similar thought today, as well," confessed Adam, who was newlywed, himself. "When something like this strikes so close to home, we have to review our standing before God, and what it means to us. I want you to always remember this one thing: if God is building your house, it *will* stand. 'The house of the righteous shall stand.' [Proverbs 12:7] Your mother confessed to me today, that she had turned a blind eye to your father's unfaithfulness when she had suspicions of what was really going on. When you think your spouse is in sin, it is your God-given duty to confront them with it. Do it in love, but don't just let it slide. When Cain asked God, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' the answer was 'Yes!' It goes doubly so for husbands and wives.

'Open rebuke is better than secret love,' [Proverbs 27:5] quoted Adam. "If you and Sandra work to have a conscience void of offense toward God and man, then there won't be any hurdle you

both can't get over, together. Work to have agreement in your marriage, Mike. Never underestimate the power of unity. Your grandparents loved each other very much, but that agreement didn't always come easily. They had to work at it, and never give up in frustration. It takes a great deal of love and patience, Mike. Remember one of your grandma's favorite verses: 'Can two walk together, except they be agreed?' [Amos 3:3] There was a reason for that."

Mike listened intently to what his uncle was saying, readily taking every word to heart.

"One other thing," said Adam. "I love my sister dearly, but I can understand Sandra's objection. You know your mother. She'll run your life, and then tell you it's for your own good." At this, Mike grinned. "If I wasn't married myself," continued the uncle, "I'd ask your mother to come live with me. However, our wives deserve the chance to run our lives, without a well-meaning mother or sister to constantly interfere. Don't feel guilty. Give her the chance to make a new life for herself and for Chad."

Mike looked into the eyes of his favorite uncle.

"Dad wasn't around a lot of the time when I was young," said Mike, "and Chad grew up much the same way. I never really felt sorry for myself, though, because I had *you*. No matter where Dad was, you were always there for me. You led me to Christ, took me on long nature hikes, taught me how to plumb a straight line, and so many other things that all add up to being a father. I know Chad feels the same way about you as I do. I'm not saying it very well, but I love you Uncle Adam."

The two men embraced and then wiped the tears from their eyes. Chad stepped out of the house and walked over to where they stood.

"How are you holding up?" asked Mike, ruffling Chad's blonde hair with his hand.

"Fine, I guess," shrugged the boy, not fighting back as he usually did when his older brother took such liberties with his head.

"I brought your stuff," sighed Mike. "Mom said she'd call you on Uncle Adam's satellite phone, later today. Keep Dad before God in your prayers, Chad."

"I will," said the boy.

"I'll see you when you get back from your trip," said Mike, turning to leave. "Hang tough, little brother."

Chad watched as Mike drove away and disappeared down the long dirt road that lead back to the paved highway.

"Where would you like to go on the trip?" asked Adam, trying to get Chad's mind off of what was happening, even if it was only for a few moments.

"The moon," replied the boy, halfheartedly.

"I'm serious, Chad," Adam encouraged him with a gentle smile. "If you could pick *any* place on earth, where would you go?"

"Any place?" asked Chad, his eyes brightening a little.

"You name it, and if it's possible, we'll go there," promised his uncle. "Where to?"

"Alaska," smiled Chad, without a moment's hesitation.

The location surprised Adam.

"Why there?" he wondered.

"Because of the Alaska Highway," explained the boy, who was an avid reader concerning all things nature. "I read a book about it once, and I've always wanted to see it for myself."

"Alaska it is," said Adam, placing a hand on the boy who was as dear to him as his own son.

Then they went inside to break the news to Charlie.

"And thou, Solomon my son [Mike and Chad], know thou the God of thy... [uncle], and serve Him [God] with a perfect heart and with a willing mind: for the LORD searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts: if thou seek Him, He will be found of thee; but if thou forsake Him, He will cast thee off for ever."

~ 1 Chronicles 28:9 ~

"The Lord shall judge His people [Thomas]. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

~ Hebrews 10:30, 31 ~

Chapter Fifty

They Went Thataway (Part One)

"Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."

~ Psalms 119:105 ~

Having grown up around Chuck, who perpetually craved the freedom of a long hike and the openness of the great outdoors, Charlie was more receptive to the idea of traveling to Alaska than Adam had expected. Shirley however, was more apprehensive. When she stopped by the next day, she expressed her concern to Adam.

"Don't worry," he consoled her, after Shirley had taken him aside. "She isn't a stranger to the outdoors. Remember how she rescued that little girl a few months ago? Chad will be in good hands."

"I'd forgotten that," admitted Shirley. "I'm not trying to put her down, Adam. Heaven knows, I'm not."

"Maybe you should talk to her," offered Adam, motioning Charlie to come over to where they were discussing in whispers.

"What is it?" asked the young woman, as Adam folded his arms and smiled at his little sister who was quickly becoming embarrassed.

"Shirley wants to ask you something," he answered, raising his eyebrows mysteriously.

"Adam is blowing this a little out of proportion," sighed the mother, as she met Charlie's questioning face. "I just wanted to make sure you wouldn't take him anywhere dangerous..."

"Who, Adam?" interrupted Charlie in surprise.

"No, Chad," explained Shirley, uneasily. "Keep an eye on him and don't let him get into trouble. I know I'm sounding overprotective, but he's just an eleven year old boy."

"I understand," replied Charlie, now comprehending what the concerned mother was trying to tell her. "Adam and Kevin are both coming, so there will be plenty of adult supervision."

At this, the musician burst into laughter.

"I'm glad you think this is funny," Shirley scolded Adam.

"Sorry, Sis!" he grinned. "I couldn't help it!"

"We'll take good care of Chad," assured Charlie. "Adam will be bringing his satellite phone, so you can call us anytime you want. I've been making plans all morning of the places we're going to stop along the Alaska Highway. Here's a list-- that is, if you approve."

Shirley looked the schedule over.

"How did you manage to put this together in so short a time?" she wondered.

"Bill put me in contact with a travel agent familiar with the area," replied the young woman. "We should have Chad back in plenty of time to begin school in September. I was thinking we could do a little camping, some fishing, take a few nature hikes, and in general try to keep his spirits up."

"Given everything that's going on right now," put in Adam, "we should take our time and not rush the trip. What do you think?"

"It looks as if you have everything under control," admitted Shirley. "I wasn't trying to question your judgment, Charlie."

"I understand," smiled the teenager. "He's your little boy."

The youth in question scowled as he walked over to his mom, having heard the last remark.

"Make sure you don't forget to brush your teeth," instructed Shirley, fussing over her youngest son. "Don't stay up too late, and call me every day. Better yet, I'll call you. Don't drink anything but bottled water, and never wander out of your uncle or aunt's sight."

"Mom," groaned Chad, "it's only *Alaska!*"

"I don't care," she insisted, "you be careful. I'm counting on you to act responsibly."

Charlie looked at Adam and winced. Shirley might as well have added, "because your aunt might not."

"We'll take the private jet to Dawson Creek Airport early tomorrow morning," informed Adam, trying to change the subject.

"Why Dawson Creek?" asked Shirley.

"Because it's the start of the Alaska Highway!" exclaimed Chad, shaking his head in dismay at his mother's ignorance.

"Oh," said Shirley. "I thought it was called the Alcan Highway."

"It was originally called the Alaskan-Canadian Highway," continued Chad, "but the name was later shortened to the Alcan Highway. Now, it's more commonly known as the Alaska Highway, with most maps giving it that designation."

Charlie looked at the boy incredulously.

"You have *way* too much time on your hands," she laughed.

"I've been reading up," replied Chad, a little indignantly.

"The flight will be a little over nine hours, with a stopover in Seattle and Vancouver to refuel," resumed Adam. "We'll call you when we arrive."

"Well, all right," sighed Shirley, resigning herself to the trip. "It sounds exciting, Chad."

"I've never been on Uncle Adam's jet before!" grinned the boy. His face quickly fell though, when he glanced back at his mother, who's thoughts were preoccupied with someone else. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay, Mom?" he asked in a concerned voice.

"No," she smiled sadly, "this is for the best."

That night, Chad had little sleep. The anticipation of Alaska was tempered by the turmoil his parents were going through. Kevin had offered to give up his room to Chad, but Adam insisted that the boy could do just fine on the couch, seeing he only had to sleep there for one night before they were to leave the next morning. Chad stared at the closed bedroom door where Adam and Charlie were, still adapting himself to the idea that his uncle was actually a married man.

Chad and Mike had been Adam's main focus throughout their childhood, frequently absorbing his attention and time. Now, however, things were very different. Not only did the boy have a new aunt, but one who was only five years older than himself, for he had turned eleven in February. Gradually becoming tired, Chad turned over on the couch and drifted to sleep.

All too soon, it was time to get up, and Charlie was moving about in the kitchen, preparing breakfast while the men were gathering luggage into a pile in the living room.

"Wake up, buddy," smiled the boy's uncle. "We've got a plane to catch after breakfast."

Chad blinked open his eyes, and looked out the window at the still darkened sky.

"It isn't morning, yet," he protested groggily. Then, in a flash, he suddenly remembered the reason for the early departure. Alaska! Without any further protest, Chad jumped off the couch and ran to the bathroom to change clothes.

The group ate a quick meal of cereal and bagels and then stepped outside to load the car with their suitcases and bags.

"It's too pleasant for being so early in the morning," predicted Adam, "that means today's going to be a scorcher."

"Where is the jet right now?" asked Kevin, loading the car trunk to capacity and then placing the rest of their belongings on the back seat floor.

"Palm Springs," replied Adam. "Chad, if you need to use the bathroom, you'd better go do it now."

At this, Charlie went back into the mobile home and returned a few minutes later, only to find the men patiently waiting for her beside the car.

"What?" she asked, seeing the quizzical looks on their faces.

"I didn't say anything," grinned Adam.

The musician got behind the wheel, while Kevin and Chad climbed into the back seat with the luggage. Charlie sat beside her husband and soon nodded off to sleep, for it was still early. When she awoke, Adam was telling her that it was time to board the jet.

Chad was nervous and excited, all in the same breath. Normally, an event like this would have been the highlight of his summer, but the nearly ever-present recollection of his father made him feel almost guilty for having a good time.

"You can catch some more sleep on board," Adam winked to Charlie, as she yawned getting out of the car.

Kevin helped the ground crew load the luggage into the sleek private jet, before boarding the aircraft himself. By now, Charlie had been in the jet a few times, as had her bodyguard. She located a seat near Adam, and after finding a comfortable position, fell asleep once more. To Chad's dismay, Adam did likewise, leaving him with only Kevin and the male steward, who occasionally brought snacks and soft drinks, to talk to.

Soon after the jet took off the runway, the ground beneath them gradually broke out into the first rays of sunrise.

"How old are you?" asked the bodyguard, tossing Chad a small bag of pretzels.

"Eleven," answered Chad. "Uncle Adam said you carry a gun. Can I see it?"

"Not today," replied Kevin, popping a salted pretzel into his mouth. "I'm not registered to carry a concealed weapon into Canada, so I didn't bring it along."

"Oh," responded the boy.

"Do you like school?" he continued.

"You don't have to pretend to be nice to me," sighed Chad. "Grownups always ask those questions when they don't know what else to say."

"I'm not pretending," replied Kevin, looking out the jet window. "I'd guess our altitude is about thirty five thousand feet. The sky is clear," breathed the man in satisfaction. "It's a good day for a jump." Kevin had ended the sentence in midair, as if there were more he could tell, and when the bodyguard saw he had the boy's attention, he continued. "I used to be a navy SEAL," he explained, "and I've got to tell you, there's nothing quite like jumping from a C-130 at thirteen thousand on a clear day. But that's tame compared to a free fall HALO at thirty-six thousand feet-- maybe just a little higher than we are presently."

Chad looked out the window and then back at Kevin.

"You're crazy," muttered the boy.

"You'll get no argument from me there," grinned the bodyguard. "I remember once in training, my chute failed. I was trapped in free-fall, and the ground was rushing up at me at over 130 feet a second."

"May I get you a beverage?" interrupted the steward.

"Yeah," said Kevin, finishing off his pretzels. "Got any bottled water?"

"Sure," replied the man. "And you?" he asked Chad. "May I get you some soda?"

"I'll have water, too," replied the boy. "Then what happened, Kevin?"

"Where was I?" asked the man, with a hint of merriment in his eyes.

"The ground was rushing up at you," reminded Chad.

"Oh, yeah," resumed Kevin, regaining his train of thought. "It was my first HALO and I was less than a minute away from slamming into the ground. I mean, when you impact the ground that hard, all that's left of you is a pile of teeth and a hole in the runway. The instant my chute failed, the training just kicked in. I reached up, pulled my reserve chute, and floated to the ground like nothing happened."

"Wow," breathed Chad, fascinated by Kevin's story.

"Do you know what HALO is?" asked the bodyguard, opening his bottled water and taking a few swallows.

"High Altitude Low Opening," replied Chad.

"Correct," said Kevin. "There's also HAHO, High Altitude High Opening, but that's even rougher. When I did my first HAHO, I have to confess, by the time I touched ground, I had to change my pants."

"Kevin, you're not trying to talk him into becoming a SEAL, are you?" groaned Charlie, waking up with a yawn. "I'm not sure his mother would ever speak to me again, if he returned home ready to enlist."

"No, ma'am," replied her bodyguard. "They're good men, but it's a dangerous way for anyone to live, and an even harder way to die."

"Getting in between the bad guys and my aunt is safer?" laughed Chad.

"*Much* safer," smiled Kevin.

The group ate lunch later that day, and after making two refueling stops, finally landed in Dawson Creek, British Columbia, a little after three in the late afternoon.

"Welcome to Dawson Creek!" shouted a man, walking toward them as they climbed down the steps of the jet. "I'm Gus! Mr. Clark, you talked to me yesterday about a vehicle sound enough to brave our highway!"

"Yes," replied Adam, shaking his hand. "Is it ready?"

"Ready and waiting," answered the man, walking them to a large landrover sized outdoor vehicle near the main office building. "I had a mechanic check it over just this morning, and it's in perfect condition. It's so sound, I'd let my own mom drive the highway in this, and she's eighty-two!"

"How many miles have you got on it?" asked Adam, popping the hood to get a look at the engine.

"About two thousand," he replied. "There's plenty of space to comfortably seat four people, and a good sized area in back to store your luggage and camping equipment."

"Which reminds me," requested Charlie, "where can we buy some camping gear? We need to get outfitted before we can get underway."

"The mall is a little ways from here," said the man. "I'll jot down the directions."

The man scratched out a rough map and handed it to the young woman. He and Kevin loaded up the landrover, and everyone climbed inside the roomy vehicle. The pilot of the private jet waved to Adam and then got back into the aircraft to take off.

"The jet will meet us in Fairbanks at the end of the road," said Adam, starting the engine.

The mall was a modest collection of about twenty-five different outlets. Adam and Chad had never done any "serious" camping before, so they let Charlie make the decisions, for she was not only familiar with the equipment, but her father used to be a salesman at a store that did nothing else but outfit people for the outdoors. By the time Charlie had finished, everyone's stomachs were ready for dinner.

"I think we'd better stay in Dawson for the night," announced Adam, as they loaded the landrover with the new equipment. "Charlie, if we start out a day later than we planned, will we be late for any hotel reservations?"

"No," she answered. "Our schedule is pretty flexible."

"All right then," said the musician. "After we eat dinner, we'll find a place for the night and get going early tomorrow morning. Does that sound good to you, Chad?"

The boy shrugged and gave a willing nod.

As they traveled into downtown Dawson Creek, Chad pointed out a tall, white object standing in an intersection with three flags anchored to the top.

"That's the Mile Zero Post of the Alaska Highway," informed Chad with an excited grin.

After dinner, Adam checked into a hotel and got two rooms-- one for Kevin and Chad, and the other for himself and Charlie. Before the group parted for the night, Charlie made sure she was carrying out Shirley's wishes.

"Do you have your toothbrush, Chad?" she asked the boy. "How about your pajamas? Oh, and your mom said to make sure I reminded you to change your underwear and socks every day."

At this, Chad turned red from embarrassment.

"Mom still thinks I'm a little kid who couldn't find his way to the bathroom by himself," explained Chad. "I think I can take care of my own socks and underwear without any supervision."

"I'll take your word for it," smiled Charlie. "Goodnight!"

After the couple's door was shut, Charlie collapsed onto the bed while Adam set their bags in the corner of the room.

"I've got to call Shirley and let her know we arrived all right," he said, picking up the satellite phone.

Charlie disappeared into the bathroom and changed into her nightgown. Outside, she could hear Adam talking to his sister.

"Yes, he's all right," Adam was saying.

Charlie opened the bathroom door and walked into the room. Adam smiled playfully at her.

"Yes, I know," he replied. "Yes, I'll be sure to tell her. [pausing] Sis, I really have to go. Charlie needs me for something. Yes, goodnight," he added, hanging up.

Adam reached for her, but Charlie took a step back.

"Needs me for something'?" she repeated, putting her hands indignantly on her hips. "Could you be any more obvious?"

"Come on," he smiled, "it's only Shirley. She didn't know what I meant, and if she did... so what?"

"Even after all this time," sighed Charlie, sitting down on the bed, "your sister still thinks of me as a child."

"No, she doesn't," replied Adam, sitting down beside her. "I love that nightgown."

"Why do you think I put it on?" she smiled.

The next morning, the four piled into the landrover. As they began the 1,522 mile drive, Chad wondered how his parents were and what was going on back home. Shirley and Thomas were on everyone's thoughts, so much so, that Adam even took a minute to pray for "those back home who need Your constant grace," before starting the engine.

A sign reading "You are now entering the world famous Alaska Highway" with a large red arrow, marked the start of the journey. Kevin sat in the back seat with Chad, never forgetting that for him, this wasn't a vacation. No matter where they went, or what they did, he must always be alert to possible danger.

A few miles into the drive, the satellite phone rang. It was Shirley, wanting to speak with Chad. After the boy had finished talking to his mother, he was sadly quiet. Shirley hadn't said anything that he didn't already know, but he did learn for the first time that his father was threatening to fight for his custody. Shirley was careful not to sound hopeless, but from the sound of her voice, Chad knew his mother was having a difficult time.

Adam checked the rear view mirror and saw the boy's pitiful face.

"Hey, Chad," the uncle said, in an encouraging tone, "why don't you tell us a little about this road we're on? When was it built?"

"It was constructed in 1942, by the United States Army to be used as a strategic military route that could be used in any weather," replied Chad.

"Go on," coaxed Charlie, when the young boy had stopped.

"It's 1,522 miles long, and stretches from Dawson Creek, British Columbia, to Delta Junction, Alaska, though most people choose to drive a few miles further to Fairbanks, as the end of their trip."

"We have our own personal tour guide," grinned Adam, checking the rear view mirror once more.

"We're going to Fairbanks, aren't we?" asked Kevin, who was mildly interested.

Chad nodded his head in the affirmative and leaned back in his seat with another sigh.

"How long did the Army take to finish the road?" inquired the ex-navy SEAL.

"I know what you guys are trying to do," said Chad. "You don't have to cheer me up."

"Yes, we do," replied Charlie. "When one part of the body suffers, we all suffer. '[When] one member suffer, all the members suffer with it.'" [1 Corinthians 12:26]

"Come on," urged Adam, with a kind smile, "how long did it take to build this highway?"

"What does it matter *how* long it took?" replied Chad. "No one here really cares."

"Perhaps we don't," admitted Adam, "but humor us."

"If it's not finished, we're in trouble!" laughed Charlie.

"It took eight months," responded Chad, knowingly.

"Really, so short a time as that?" mused Kevin. "Not bad for just Army guys. Now if the Navy had done it..."

"Hey," called out Adam, "how about taking the scenic route for a little of the way?"

"Not if that's code for 'no pavement,'" replied Charlie, only half joking.

The landrover turned off the highway and onto a part of the "Old Alaska Highway" which went on for a few kilometers before rejoining the main road.

"Look up ahead," said Adam, taking one hand off the wheel and pointing.

Chad sat up in his seat. Ahead was the Kiskatinaw Bridge, one of the last wooden bridges that still remained from the original construction of the Alaska Highway. The old wooden bridge snaked in a graceful nine degree curved angle that spanned the Kiskatinaw River below.

Kevin leaned forward and read the sign posted beside the structure.

"Bridge load limit twenty-five," he read.

"That doesn't mean us, does it, Uncle Adam?" asked Chad, a little concerned.

"Twenty-five tons is fifty thousand pounds," answered the musician, quickly doing the math in his head. "We're well under that."

As the landrover made it's way effortlessly over the old historic bridge, everyone enjoyed the panoramic views from their windows. Tall green trees curtained the banks of the river, while a light misty fog began to roll in, giving the river an almost dreamlike pale.

"It's so beautiful," breathed Charlie, as the landrover finally reached the other side.

A little further down the road reconnected them with the main highway once more. On and on they drove, while Chad watched out his window at the passing wilderness he had read so much about.

"Let's play a game," suggested Adam.

"Oh no," came a groan from the back seat.

"I heard that, young man," replied Adam, giving the boy a laughing glance in the rear view mirror. "The rules of the game are simple. Whoever spots the most wildlife by dinnertime, gets to pick the restaurant. Charlie, would you keep score?"

"Okay," she laughed, "I'll humor you."

Chad looked over at Kevin and smiled.

"By now, you're probably ready to get out and hitchhike your way back home," the boy laughed.

"Your uncle's not so bad," smiled the man, pleasantly.

Adam quickly started the game off by spotting a rabbit that had been run over in the middle of the road. Charlie pointed out that since the poor creature wasn't alive, it could hardly qualify as "wildlife." After taking it to a vote, (at Adam's request), the rabbit was summarily disqualified.

"Even I could do better than that," laughed Chad.

"I dare you," challenged Adam, happy to see the boy in better spirits.

A few miles later, Kevin spotted a wolf standing beside the road.

"That's one for Kevin," announced Charlie, marking the notepad with a single hack mark.

After passing through Fort St. John, they arrived on the banks of Peace Island Park, where they intended to stop and make camp for the rest of the day and move on the next morning. With so much wilderness, everyone was surprised that the wildlife score still stood at one wolf. Adam joked that if they could count roadkill, the score would be a little higher.

"That's such a shame," sighed Charlie, shaking her head in dismay.

"It sure is," replied Adam. "Kevin and I would be tied right now."

"I'm not talking about the game," explained Charlie, pointing to a sign bearing the name of the park. "Just look at that. Someone shot holes in it just for fun!"

"I've been seeing a lot of that," remarked Adam, soberly.

Chad got out of the car while Adam went and paid the caretaker the small fee for their campsite. Kevin unloaded their camping gear while Charlie started to pitch the first of two large tents.

"The sooner we set camp," said Charlie, "the sooner we can go hiking."

Chad however, wasn't in the mood for company. He set off on his own, while Charlie watched nervously from a distance, trying to keep track of the boy Shirley had so adamantly insisted stay within eyeshot.

"He'll be all right," said Adam, coming to her side, and following her eyes to where Chad was standing on the banks of the river, skipping smooth stones over the glassy surface.

Charlie started a campfire, getting ready to cook lunch. This was something that she had done for her father and his camping party many times before. Soon, the savory smell of hot-dogs and warm biscuits lured the boy back to camp where his uncle had a plate ready for him.

"There's no place like this in the Mojave," Adam sighed contentedly, after the last biscuit had been eaten.

"I'm looking forward to that midnight sun I keep hearing about," said Kevin, looking up at the blue sky.

"You won't see it," said Chad. "It's too late in the year."

"What time will the sun set, then?" asked the bodyguard.

Chad shrugged. He only knew that they were too far south and too late in the year to experience a day without night.

"I think I'll stay up and find out," announced Kevin, leaning back and taking a sip of hot coffee.

Just then, Adam's satellite phone rang.

"It's Bill," said Adam, getting up to talk to his personal manager in private. "What's up, Bill?"

"I just got a call from the police," said Bill, his voice audibly shaken.

"What is it?" asked Adam, all at once sober.

"A woman in Los Angeles was arrested yesterday for shoplifting, and she confessed to being a member of a plot to kidnap Charlie and hold her for ransom," said the manager. "The LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department] doesn't know how much of it's true or not, but they want Charlie to be extra vigilant. They don't have anyone else in this supposed plot yet, so we'd better play it safe for a while."

"Does this have anything to do with the intruder who tried to break into Charlie's room last year?" proposed Adam.

"The police didn't say," replied Bill, "but I don't think this has anything to do with that. You're a high profile celebrity, and there's a lot of sick people out there."

"Has the press gotten wind of where we are?" asked the famous musician.

"Not from anything that I've heard so far," answered Bill. "How's everything where you are? Has anyone recognized you yet?"

"I've had one or two double takes," said Adam, "but I don't think anyone has believed their eyes yet. This is the last place anyone expects to see Wallace Shipley."

"Good then," sighed Bill. "I'll stay on top of the situation, and check in with you, if I have any more news. In the meantime, try to stay low."

"Thanks, Bill," said Adam, gratefully.

The new husband returned to the afternoon campfire and picked up his still hot cup of coffee.

"What did Bill want?" asked Charlie, gathering everyone's used paper plates and tossing them into a campground trash can.

Adam hesitated, his pause causing everyone to look at him expectantly.

"The LAPD has arrested a woman who says she's part of a plot to kidnap Charlie," said Adam, reluctantly. "They don't know if it's true or not, so we need to be a little more careful."

Chad furrowed his eyebrows and stared into the fire.

"Does anyone want more coffee?" offered the young woman, the pot trembling a little in her hand.

Adam took the coffeepot from her and put his arms around Charlie.

"We're in God's hands," he comforted her.

"As long as we're camping outdoors," recommended Kevin, thoughtfully, "I'd like someone to stay awake while the others sleep. We could take turns keeping watch. I'd feel easier if we had an open pair of eyes in the camp at all times."

"Let's just go stay at a hotel," sighed Charlie, "so everyone can get a full night's sleep. It's not worth it, Adam."

Adam looked to Kevin and Chad, who both nodded in agreement.

"Let's pack up, then," he sighed, dumping the rest of his coffee onto the campfire.

"Are you scared, Aunt Charlie?" asked the boy.

"A little," admitted Charlie, "but that's the time I pray the hardest."

As Adam and Charlie took down the unused tents, Chad went over and talked to Kevin.

"How much danger do you think Aunt Charlie is in, Kevin?" asked the boy, his blue eyes flashing concern.

"With people who are in the public eye, you're bound to get one or two threats," replied Kevin, trying to downplay the level of danger.

"In other words," surmised Chad, "you don't know."

"I promise you," said Kevin seriously, "I won't sleep on the job. Your aunt's safety is my highest priority."

"Do you think we should go home?" wondered the boy.

"Right now," replied the bodyguard, "I'd say we're safer here than in Southern California. No one — but a few friends and family members — knows where we are, so as long as we can keep Mr. and Mrs. Clark from being recognized once too often, I think we'll be all right."

"You and I should sit in the front seat," declared Chad, resolutely. "Uncle Adam and Aunt Charlie should stay in the back and let us take care of them."

Kevin smiled and tossed an unrolled sleeping bag to the eleven year old.

As the group prepared to get into the landrover, Chad informed his uncle of the change in seating arrangements.

"When did this happen?" asked Adam.

"The minute someone recognizes you or Aunt Charlie," explained Chad, sounding very authoritative, "then we have to go home. Now, hand over the car keys and let Kevin drive."

"All right," conceded Adam, unwilling to endanger the safety of anyone in their party simply because he wanted to be the one to drive.

Since their camping schedule was shortened, it was decided that they should press on to Fort Nelson that same day. Fort Nelson was a small town located about three hundred miles from Dawson Creek, which marked mile zero of the Alaska Highway. Making sure they would have enough gasoline to make the drive, Kevin stopped at a gas station to top off their tank before heading off.

A few minutes later, Chad excitedly called out,

"Moose! I saw a moose!"

With the score at a tie, Kevin promised to make a comeback before the day was out. As they neared Fort Nelson early that evening, Shirley called on Adam's satellite phone.

"Thomas is nowhere to be found," said Shirley, her voice strained from crying.

"What are you talking about?" asked Adam, still in the back seat with Charlie.

"We had a big argument over Chad, and he walked out," cried his sister. "I've called all our friends, and I can't find him!"

"Maybe it's for the better," said Adam, as Chad turned in his seat to face his uncle. "Maybe you and Thomas need to cool off a little. Just give it some time, Sis. I'm sure he'll turn up."

When the call was over, Chad looked to Adam for any news.

"Your father needed some time to himself," explained the musician, "that's all."

Chad sighed heavily and returned to his seat. He pulled out the road map Kevin had put him in charge of and tried to locate their position.

"I think we're almost in Fort Nelson," announced the boy, tracking the highway on the map with his index finger. Suddenly, Chad looked up. "I think I just saw a bear!" he cried, turning back in his seat to see if he could see it once more. "I can't see it, but I'm almost certain it was a bear!"

"Looks like you get to pick the restaurant," congratulated Kevin with a smile. "It'll have to be takeout, though. After we find a hotel, I need you to look after your aunt and uncle while I go get dinner. From now on, if we can't do it from a car or hotel room, we cross it off our itinerary."

"Right," affirmed Chad, folding the map up and putting it away.

"I'm really sorry, Chad," apologized Charlie, putting on her denim jacket, for the evening was turning cool. "I'm ruining your vacation. Because of me, you can't go camping, hiking, or fishing."

"It's all right," shrugged Chad. "All this sneaking around is kinda fun!"

The young woman smiled grimly.

Adam put an arm around Charlie and let her rest against him as the landrover pulled into Fort Nelson. The Alaska Highway was its main street, forcing anyone who was making the historic drive to sit up and take notice of this thriving modern town.

After Chad had picked the restaurant, Kevin located a hotel and checked everyone into two adjoining rooms. When he left to go get their dinner, Chad over exaggerated the situation by wedging a chair under each door handle, to stop anyone from kicking them in. Adam was about to protest that this was going too far, when Charlie stopped him.

"He's having a good time," she pointed out in a lowered voice. "Let him feel like he's doing something important."

Charlie flopped down onto a bed and turned on the television set while Adam pulled up a comfortable chair and put his feet up on the bed to also watch. A few minutes into the program, Shirley called. Adam took the phone into the next room so he could hear her without having to talk above the sound of the television, while Chad looked expectantly at his uncle, trying to glean any news from just his half of the conversation.

"Thomas showed up," related Shirley, "without a word of explanation of where he had been. We still can't agree about Chad, but at least we're both calmer now. How's my baby doing?"

"Chad's doing good," answered Adam, smiling at the boy. "Has Bill talked to you yet?"

"Yes, he has," replied Shirley, her voice sounding with an audible sigh. "Bill says you're taking every possible precaution. Have you heard if this woman is for real or not? Bill says the police are looking into a possible kidnapping plot."

"Yes," hesitated Adam, "that's what he told me as well. Frankly, I think this will turn out to be nothing but a hoax. Even so, we're taking a lot of security measures. If you think it's too dangerous for Chad to be with us, I could get the private jet down here and Kevin could bring him back to Twin Yucca."

At this, Chad frowned.

"No," answered Shirley, "don't do that. Chad is probably better off up there than he would be back here right now. If some pervert thinks they can get money from you in exchange for Charlie, then why not your nephew as well? No, let Chad stay with you for the rest of the vacation. He's in God's protection, and he's with family. I trust you and Charlie to take care of him."

"Thank you for including her in that," smiled Adam, gratefully.

When he hung up, Adam looked at his still alarmed nephew.

"Your Dad is back, and you can stay," he said, answering both of the boy's unasked questions.

"I'd like to see you try to get rid of me," challenged the eleven year old. "Just when things are really getting interesting, you want to send me home!"

"I didn't *want* to," replied Adam, tenderly, "but I would, if I thought you were in danger."

When Adam returned to the room, Charlie moved over and made room for him on the bed.

"I heard," said the young woman, leaning her head on his shoulder. "I'm glad Thomas is back."

The boy returned to his vigil, and waited for Kevin, relieved that he had permission to stay.

"He's here," announced Chad, opening the hotel door long enough for the bodyguard to enter before securing it once more.

"What's that for?" asked Kevin, seeing Chad wedging the chair under the door handle.

"It's to keep the intruders out," explained the boy. "Did you get my double-stacker hamburger?"

"I'd better keep my eyes open," grinned Kevin, handing the boy his dinner in a fast food bag, "or else, I have the feeling I'm going to be eating this again, tomorrow night!"

After saying grace over the food, it was promptly distributed amongst the rest of the famished travelers. Kevin had found out from one of the locals what time the sun would set that day, and was disappointed to learn that it was about a half hour *earlier* than in Twin Yucca! No midnight sun for the ex-SEAL. However, sunrise was at four thirty.

"No way I'm waking up for that," muttered Kevin.

As promised, the sky darkened at eight o'clock that night. Chad went into the room he shared with Kevin and watched the television while his roommate read a book he had brought along, looking up from the pages every minute or two to maintain a watchful guard.

"On behalf of Wallace Shipley, he's sorry you have to spend this vacation hiding in hotel rooms," said Adam, as Charlie flipped through the channels on their set to see what was on.

"Why should *he* apologize?" she laughed.

"If it wasn't for him," mused Adam, "you wouldn't be in this situation."

"Well," teased Charlie, "that depends on which situation Mr. Shipley is talking about. If he's referring to the fact that we have to hide, then I accept his apology. But Mr. Shipley should know, that I would still be with Mr. Clark, wherever that might happen to be."

"Oh," whispered Adam, as Charlie cuddled close to him, "I don't know about Mr. Shipley, but Mr. Clark likes to hear that."

Chad looked across the room through the adjoining door, and rolled his eyes. The eleven year old promised himself that he would never make a fool of himself over a woman, as his uncle was doing now. No woman was worth that!

The group had driven the first three hundred miles of the Alaska Highway, but Chad was in no hurry to reach Fairbanks, their ultimate destination. This was an adventure he was sure he would never forget!

"Thou [God] wilt shew me the path of life: in Thy presence is fulness of joy; at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore."

~ Psalms 16:11 ~

"The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day."

~ Proverbs 4:18 ~

Chapter Fifty-one

They Went Thataway (Part Two)

"Thou [God] compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways."
~ Psalm 139:3 ~

The second day of their Alaska drive, everyone woke up to a cold August morning. The skies were overcast and drizzle occasionally pelted the travelers as they climbed into their SUV.

"Where do you want to go for breakfast?" asked Adam, as Kevin started the engine and backed out of their hotel parking space.

"We'd better not go inside any restaurants," reminded the bodyguard.

"I suppose we should just find a drive-through and eat in the parking lot," nodded Adam, as a still-sleepy Charlie rested her head against his shoulder for a little more shuteye.

While they were receiving their order in the drive-through, Adam tried to keep his face turned away from the woman at the window. But as she leaned forward to hand Kevin their bags and drinks, Adam momentarily forgot, and looked up at her to say thank you. The second that surprise crossed her face, Adam knew he had made a mistake.

"You're not--" she gasped in shock. Any questions as to his actual identity were quickly dispelled as Charlie stirred to see what was going on. "It IS you!" cried the woman in delight, quickly recognizing Charlie's face as well.

With a low groan, Kevin shook his head while Adam autographed a napkin for the fan. Before she had a chance to call over another coworker, the SUV left.

"That wasn't good," sighed Adam, as they made their way back to the Alaska Highway, for Kevin had not wanted to stick around and risk exciting even more attention from the restaurant employees.

"Until now," said Kevin, "we've been getting away with you not being spotted, only because people didn't expect to see you here. Now the situation has changed."

"We should lie low for a few days," suggested Chad, unable to shake the broad smile he was wearing. He never knew being famous was so much fun!

"But, what about our drive?" protested Adam, in an exasperated voice. "I thought we were here to see the Alaska Highway!"

"I don't mind!" piped up Chad, opening their take-out bags and passing out the food while it was still hot.

"It's your call, Mr. Clark," said Kevin, locating a place to pull off the road so he could quickly eat. "I suggest that we get a few miles between us and Fort Nelson, though."

Charlie unwrapped her food and smiled at Adam.

"I shouldn't have looked up," he scolded himself.

"At least you're not forcing everyone to sleep in hotels because someone wants to kidnap you," she joked.

"That's not funny," responded Adam. "I just made things a little more dangerous for you, Charlie."

"Then, let's find someplace to stay for a few days," proposed Charlie, "like Chad suggested."

Just then, Adam's satellite phone rang. It was Shirley. Once again, Thomas was nowhere to be found, but since he had eventually shown up yesterday, she wasn't too concerned. Still, Shirley wondered where he was disappearing to.

After his sister hung up, Adam decided that it would be best to find someplace where they could hide for a while. To his relief, Chad didn't seem at all disappointed with this change, and pulled out the road map Kevin had entrusted to him, to plan their next move.

"How about Whitehorse?" said Chad, running his finger across the thick red line on his map that marked the Alaska Highway. "It's about halfway between Dawson Creek and Fairbanks."

"The road's getting a bit rough," murmured Kevin, as they rounded a narrow turn in the two-lane road.

Adam looked out his window at the dark cloudy sky.

"Keep your headlights on," he cautioned, "so people can see us coming."

"I saw a caribou!" shouted Chad excitedly.

But Kevin was too busy paying attention to a large RV that was having trouble staying in its own lane to celebrate Chad's first wildlife spotting for the day.

"What's this guy's problem?" wondered Adam, leaning forward in his seat and looking over Kevin's shoulder as the RV approached them in the opposite lane. Suddenly, it veered toward them, and Kevin had to momentarily swerve off the highway to get out of the way. Thankfully, there was enough room on the shoulder to make this maneuver, so the bodyguard was able to keep his clients out of harm's way. Adam turned in his seat to look behind them, and was grateful to see that the driver of the RV had finally managed to get back in his own lane again.

"Whew!" sighed Adam, "that was close!"

"A little too close, to suit me," sighed Kevin. "That man must have been drunk! Can you imagine driving that erratically with such a large RV, on a winding road like this?!"

"Thank God, we're okay," breathed Adam.

When the excitement had passed, the musician looked over at Charlie, who was trying to read out of a large, thick book.

"What's that?" he asked, cocking his head to one side to read the title on the cover. "Charlie, are you actually trying to study for your GED, *right now*?" he asked incredulously, for she was reading a biology textbook.

"Why not?" she asked, as the vehicle bumped and caused her to momentarily lose her place in the book. "I can't wait for our life to quiet down before I start studying, or else it might never happen!"

"The beauty of the Alaska wilderness is just outside your window, and you have your nose stuck in a textbook," Adam teased with a handsome smile. "And you call yourself Chuck's daughter!"

"I tried to study on his outings, too," she explained, "but it usually didn't work out that way. At least, in a car, I don't have to pay attention to where I'm going."

Charlie turned a page and resumed her reading. As she was learning that flowering plants had to be pollinated before they could reproduce and form seeds, the vehicle suddenly swerved, lurching Charlie over to one side in her seat. A strong hand reached out and stopped the young woman just before her head was about to hit the glass window on her passenger door.

The car slowed down, and Kevin found a place to stop on the side of the road.

"What happened?" asked Charlie, as Adam looked her over to see if she was hurt.

"I almost hit a caribou!" exclaimed Kevin, looking over at Chad and then at his passengers in the back seat. "Is everyone all right?"

"Charlie's head nearly hit the window," breathed Adam in relief, "but I think we're both okay. Chad, how about you?"

"I'm fine," grinned the boy, looking back at his uncle with excited blue eyes. "Thanks for taking me on this trip, Uncle Adam! This is more fun than I thought it'd be!"

Adam and Kevin exchanged weary glances, and then the SUV got back onto the road.

After thanking God for yet another deliverance, Charlie reached for the textbook that had dropped onto the floor by her feet.

While Kevin and Chad sat up front, remarking about the scenery and talking over this and that, Adam rested his head on the back of his seat and watched the trees pass them on the highway. Having just spent several months on tour, he wasn't as eager to play the tourist, though for Chad's sake, he tried. Instead, his eyes kept returning to Charlie, who was quietly reading her book.

Adam didn't say a word, but when Charlie found it difficult to keep from smiling, he knew she was aware of his gaze. Without giving Adam the satisfaction of entirely pulling her attention away, Charlie redoubled her efforts, and kept studying.

With a happy sigh, Adam closed his eyes and dozed off. It wasn't until a few hours later, that he felt Charlie nudging his shoulder.

"You won't be able to sleep, tonight," she warned him.

Charlie quickly regretted mentioning his sleeping habits, for she saw a familiar look of frustration briefly cross his face before it vanished in a patient smile.

"I'll be fine," he assured her.

The clouds melted the further on they drove, and Charlie could now read her textbook, more easily.

Near lunch time, Kevin spotted a drive-through, so they stopped for food.

"Let's find someplace we can get out and stretch our legs," suggested Adam, as Chad began to pass out their lunch and drinks in the vehicle.

"How about over there?" asked Charlie, pointing to a shady area near a large body of water. "There's a few cars, but nobody's around. Let's stop there."

Hearing no objections, Kevin pulled over and parked the car under the shade of a tall evergreen. Chad quickly hopped out and sat down on the grass with his lunch.

"I should keep an eye on him," Charlie told the others, before joining him on the ground.

Wanting to keep an eye on Charlie, Adam and the bodyguard promptly followed her.

"This is nice," breathed Charlie, as a cool fresh breeze wafted her face. "Look how blue that water is, Adam. I wonder what lake this is?"

"It's Muncho Lake," informed Chad, pausing long enough for another gulp of soda before devouring his hamburger.

In the distance, Charlie could hear the sounds of people fishing on the lakeshore. She remembered the fishing gear she had purchased for this trip, and winced at the thought of not being able to try it out. It seemed like such a waste of money. Chuck never would have approved-- not when they were surrounded by ample opportunities to lose themselves in this wilderness. But, then, Chuck was never mobbed by fans, and never had the burden of celebrity to always keep in mind. She glanced over at Adam, and recognized the apologetic look on his face. He knew she wanted to go fishing, but couldn't.

"Maybe later," he smiled.

"I'm having a good time," she insisted. And she was. This wasn't Oak Glen, but at least she was with Adam. Besides, she reminded herself, life wasn't one long honeymoon.

With a determined sigh, Charlie finished off her lunch and settled onto the grass with her textbook. Before long, Adam joined her, and looked over her shoulder at the words she was reading.

"I love you," he whispered, kissing her ear and encircling her with his arms.

"Adam, they're watching," she quietly protested, trying to shrug away from his advances. "Our honeymoon is over."

"What does that have to do with anything?" he mumbled, intently burrowing his face into her soft, brown hair.

"That kind of romance has little to do with everyday life," answered Charlie.

His nuzzling suddenly stopped, and Adam looked at her skeptically.

"Just what are they teaching you in that biology book?" he asked, half jokingly.

"I'm serious," she insisted. "We need to look at things realistically, and accept the fact that our honeymoon is over."

"I wish you'd stop saying that," he responded, dryly. But when Charlie's face continued to look at him intently, Adam realized that she had been serious. "You're concerning me, Charlie."

"Holding hands and kissing changes after the honeymoon," she explained. "That's just the way things are."

"What on earth are you talking about?" puzzled Adam. "I love you, and I enjoy demonstrating that love to you. Do we have to be on our honeymoon for that?"

"But, it's different now," argued Charlie.

"How?" pressed Adam, as Kevin got up and approached the couple.

"We really need to get back on the road," said the bodyguard, nervously watching a group of people with fishing rods returning to their truck nearby.

Adam wanted to protest, but he heard the caution in Kevin's voice and thought best to heed it.

Once back in the SUV, the famous musician buckled his seat belt and looked at Charlie, who was sitting beside him on the back seat.

"*How* is it different?" he resumed.

As earnest as Adam was about continuing their talk, it surprised Charlie that he was willing to speak about this subject matter in front of Kevin, and even Chad, who were both sitting up front.

"What about *them*?" she whispered in a voice so hushed that Adam could barely hear her. "Is it all right for them to hear this?"

"I don't see why not," replied Adam, not attempting to lower his speech in the slightest. "I want to know, Charlie. How is our affection for each other different, now that we're married?"

Charlie sighed. She had obviously hit a nerve with Adam.

"It's easy for people to be so romantic when they first fall in love," she explained, "but it's not the way it stays for the rest of their married life."

"I won't stop loving you," he insisted, "no matter *how* long we're married."

"You still don't understand," sighed Charlie. "I'm not saying that you'll stop loving me-- only, that the way you demonstrate it in the future, will be different than the way it was during our honeymoon."

Adam shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Charlie was making more sense than he had thought she was, but he still wasn't sure if he was in total agreement with her, or not.

"So," he reasoned, "in spite of the fact that I'll still love you, you're saying that I won't want to hold or kiss you in the future?"

"Not as much as you do now," replied Charlie.

"Does this having something to do with my age?" he suddenly wondered.

"No, I'm not talking about age," said Charlie. "This is the way married life is: the longer we're married, the less you'll desire me."

"Whoa!" exclaimed Adam, "just stop right there! I desire you-- not because I *lust* you, but because I *love* you. There's a big difference, Charlie. Where love is plentiful, desire and lust will never be too far behind."

The young woman was thoughtfully silent.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" asked Adam.

"I think so," she replied slowly.

Adam reached across the seat and took her hand in his.

"In Christ, love between a husband and wife isn't based on something as weak as lust," he tenderly explained. "It's why you could be an old woman, and still be beautiful to me. When a relationship is based on God's word, love only grows stronger with time."

There was no reproach or condescension in Adam's voice, and Charlie was thankful that he was being so patient with her, as to explain something that he had felt was obvious. But it hadn't been obvious to Charlie; the only romantic relationship she had ever witnessed firsthand, was between her father and his girlfriend, Morgan.

Even though Charlie was a child at the time, it had been obvious to her that Chuck lusted Morgan. She had seen the intimate way he had of looking at her, and had known that they were having an affair, though Chuck had been careful not to do anything in front of his impressionable little girl. But as intense as Chuck's feelings were for Morgan, Charlie recalled the way their desire seemed to fade with time. There had been no love, and since there was no stronger bond between them than lust, the relationship had not withstood the test of time.

But, Adam wasn't her father (in his unrepentant state), and she wasn't Morgan. Gratefully, Charlie hugged Adam's arm as the SUV traveled down the highway. No, she and Adam were different. She yearned to see that same kind of godly love still kindling in Adam's eyes, after years had passed and people had assumed that desire had faded. Charlie rested her cheek against his shoulder and sighed. If only she had a future like that, ahead of her.

When she continued to be silent, Adam peered down at her face.

"You're not thinking about Alzheimer's, are you?" he guessed. "Charlie, please, try to be happy."

Seeing an opportunity to cheer his aunt, Chad suddenly spoke up,

"Your Dad will be all right in Twin Yucca, Aunt Charlie. You don't have to worry about him."

Suddenly realizing that he had made a slip of the tongue, Adam sadly smiled at Chad. No one had told his nephews of Charlie's inheriting AD, and it pained him to keep it from them. Adam knew the time would eventually come, but not now. There was enough pain in the family for the boys to deal with right now, without adding to their present distress.

"I *am* happy, Adam," whispered Charlie.

Adam responded with a tight squeeze to her hand, and planted a kiss on the crown of her head.

"I'll do my best to make you even happier," he promised her in a hushed voice. Realizing that Chad was following their conversation closely, Adam left off saying anything further.

"In another hour, we should reach Whitehorse," announced Chad, in an authoritative voice. Even though Adam had jokingly bestowed Chad the title of "official holder of the map," Chad had taken it seriously, and was enjoying the responsibility.

"We've done a lot of driving, today," yawned Adam. "How far along are we on the Alaska Highway, Chad?"

"About halfway," replied the boy.

"Really? As far as that?" mused Adam.

"Mr. Clark when we reach Whitehorse," said Kevin, checking his rear view mirror out of habit, "we need to find a place to stay for a few days, as you wanted. I could ask around town, but that would mean I have to leave you on your own."

"I'll look after things," Adam willingly conceded.

"And I'll keep a lookout for anyone suspicious," Chad quickly added with an excited grin.

"I almost forgot," smiled Charlie, "but who gets to pick the restaurant, tonight? If I remember correctly, the score was one to nothing in Chad's favor."

While listening to the conversation in the back seat between Adam and Charlie that day, Kevin had forgotten to look for wildlife. Though he could count the caribou that he had nearly hit earlier in the day, the bodyguard decided to keep quiet, and let the boy win the game.

When they reached Whitehorse, Chad picked out a fast-food restaurant, and Kevin left the group in search of somewhere for them to stay.

With a tired yawn, Charlie looked out the passenger window at the sky. Daylight still pervaded the blue expanse, though a quick check of Adam's watch indicated that it was a little past eight in the evening. Alaska was playing tricks with the sun.

"I don't care *what* the sun says," she groaned sleepily, "I'm tired!" Charlie caught herself, for she could hear a whiny tone in her voice that painfully resembled an impatient child. Reminding herself that she was seventeen, Charlie bit her tongue.

"I could use dinner, myself," smiled Adam.

"I'm getting out to go look for Kevin," announced Chad, after several minutes had passed, and there was no sign of their friend.

"Oh no, you're not," said Adam. "You're going to stay right here where we can see you."

Chad gave his uncle a reproachful look, and slumped back in his seat. The boy figured that he was there to look after Adam and Charlie-- not the other way around!

Charlie pulled out one of the school textbooks she had brought and began studying. Before she had gotten very far, Chad exclaimed,

"There's Kevin!"

The bodyguard returned to the SUV and climbed behind the wheel, before relating to them the accommodations that he had been able to find. Even though he spoke to them as a group, Kevin directed his information to Adam.

"There's a cabin we could rent," he suggested. "It's a little small, but it's out of the way, and I think we could stay there without anyone bothering us."

"Sounds good to me," agreed Adam.

"I'll go back and reserve the cabin for us, so you won't have to make an appearance to the landlord," said Kevin. Adam handed him some money and the bodyguard left once more.

"As soon as we get settled," Adam promised Charlie and Chad, "I'll send Kevin out for our dinner."

"Could I call Mom?" wondered Chad.

Adam pulled out the satellite phone and handed it to his nephew.

Nothing new had happened since the last time Shirley had talked to them. Thomas was still missing, but Shirley was confident that he would turn up after he had calmed down again. Mike and Sandra sent their love, and Vera hoped everyone was having a good time. Chuck was doing as well as could be expected, and Jerome was keeping busy with Mullen-Overholt. It had been a while since Charlie had lived in Twin Yucca, so even this rather mundane report was enough to give her a twinge of homesickness.

Before Chad had finished with his mother on the satellite phone, Kevin returned from his errand and drove them to their cabin.

He had been accurate in saying that it was small. The log cabin was hidden by several tall white spruce, and overlooked a gurgling stream which was just begging to be fished.

When Adam opened the door, they found one large room with a fireplace, and a small area on one side that looked as though it was intended to be the kitchen. A wooden ladder led to the loft above the room, where two single beds were located.

"The couch is supposed to fold out into a bed," said Kevin, placing some of their luggage onto the long, worn sofa.

Charlie pictured her and Adam, cuddled on the sofa bed, while Kevin and Chad could watch them from their overhead view from the loft. She shuddered. It was too much to expect of a new bride!

Not needing to have the obvious pointed out to him, Adam apologized to Kevin.

"You and Chad will have to take the sofa," he informed the former Navy SEAL.

"I've slept on worse!" laughed Kevin, carrying up Adam and Charlie's bags to the loft, without being asked.

"Can we go fishing, Uncle Adam?" asked Chad, for he had seen the stream and how enticing the water looked.

"I thought you were hungry for dinner!" laughed Adam, ruffling the boy's blond hair.

"Tomorrow, Chad. It's getting late, and everyone is tired." As he said this, Charlie tried to smother a yawn. It was nine o' clock, and the sky outside was finally changing color. Though it still looked like early evening, Charlie knew better than to believe her eyes.

While Kevin went to get their dinner, Charlie looked in vain for the bathroom.

"I believe it was that small building, outside," chuckled Adam.

"I've never seen an actual outhouse, before!" exclaimed Chad, eagerly.

"You can take the tour, *after* I'm finished with it," Charlie replied, with a small laugh. "I suppose it beats no bathroom at all. On the trail, you just dig a hole where no one can see you, and do your business."

Charlie disappeared out the front door with a roll of toilet paper in hand, just in case their "bathroom" didn't have any. Unwilling that she should be out there by herself, Adam waited by the outhouse until she reappeared.

"After smelling that place," she confessed, "I think I prefer digging a hole!"

Back inside, Charlie washed her hands in the sink, which was little more than a water pipe that fed into a basin. A large metal tub hung on a hook on the wall, and she realized that it was meant for anyone who wanted to take a bath. In a one room cabin with no walls, there would be little privacy for baths.

It was finally getting dark, so Charlie went outside to enjoy the sunset. Since it had rained earlier in the day, mosquitos surprised the young woman by coming out in full force, so that Charlie couldn't stand still without getting mobbed by the bloodsucking insects. Realizing that she was fighting a losing battle, Adam dragged her inside and made certain that all the windows and doors were shut.

"I've never seen so many mosquitos in all my life!" she exclaimed in wonder. "It sure was a beautiful view, though! Adam, you should come with me, and see it!"

"Sit down, and let me have a look at those mosquito bites," instructed Adam, after starting a fire in the fireplace to see by. "Charlie," he sighed, "just look at yourself! Why didn't you come inside, sooner? These things have bitten right through your clothing!"

"It's not so bad," she shrugged, looking down at the small swelling bumps on her arms, as he rolled up the sleeves on her shirt.

"Chad," ordered Adam, "go get the calamine lotion out of my suitcase. I still have some left after the honeymoon."

Charlie sighed. It seemed as though she was always getting one thing or another-- to the point that Adam still had the calamine from her *last* disaster!

"Does it itch very much?" he asked, swatting a straggler that had hidden beneath the collar of her shirt. The small splatter of blood on her skin showed Adam that he had landed a direct hit at the insect.

"A little," she confessed, beginning to notice that her neck was becoming itchy as well.

Just then, Kevin returned with their dinner. When he saw Adam applying calamine to the bite marks on Charlie's arms, neck, and legs, he shook his head.

"That looks uncomfortable," he muttered, sympathetically.

While Kevin passed the food around, Chad was able to get a little of the lotion, for himself.

"Did you get bitten anywhere other than your legs?" asked Adam, with a patient sigh.

"No," Chad shook his head, "I came in when the bugs started swarming."

Charlie saw a laughing smile as Adam returned to her situation.

"Don't say it," she pleaded.

"Did the sunset mean that much to you?" he smiled, gently dabbing another swollen bite with the soothing lotion.

"It was wonderful," she whimpered, reaching up to scratch her neck. Adam quickly caught her hand and shook his head.

"Better not scratch," he cautioned.

There was no electricity in the one room cabin, so the only light they had, came from the fireplace. The warm coziness felt good, as Charlie said a prayer over her food and started in on her dinner. She had to be careful not to scratch, for if mosquito bites were anything like the measles, then scratching would only make the itching worse.

Even though the sun had only gone down an hour ago, it was late by the time everyone had eaten their dinner.

"Are you ready to go to bed?" Adam asked Charlie, as she picked up the calamine bottle and applied a little more lotion to her arm.

"I guess so," she sighed.

"If this couch doesn't fold out into a bed," said Kevin, as he pulled off the cushions, "I'll sleep on the floor and let Chad have the sofa." A battered mattress on a metal frame unfolded from the couch, its metal feet landing on the floor with a dull thud. Kevin looked at Chad and then sat down on the bed, to test it out.

"It'll do," he smiled.

Still dressed in his clothes, Chad climbed onto the wide bed and started to lie down when Adam called him back.

"Change into your pajamas," he told the boy.

Realizing that her presence was getting in the way of their bedtime, Charlie climbed up the ladder to the loft. The open room was mostly dark, for the loft floor shielded it from the soft glow of the fireplace, below. A wooden rail ran the entire length of the floor, while large wooden beams crossed the roof, as they supported the log ceiling. Careful not to bump her head on the beams, Charlie made her way to one of the single beds.

Even though it was dark, she felt uncomfortable about the prospect of undressing, for there was no wall separating the open room from the rest of the cabin.

To Charlie's annoyance, Adam had no need to hide, for it didn't matter *who* in their party saw him take his clothes off. Kevin and Chad, however, were aware of Charlie's vantage from the loft, so they dressed directly below the loft floor, for privacy.

"I know there's two single mattresses up here," grinned Adam, "but unless you tell me otherwise, we're sharing the same bed."

"Not so loud," Charlie hushed him. "Chad might hear you."

Just then, Kevin crawled onto the bed below them, the springs of the old mattress creaking beneath him as he moved.

"Do you want any help undressing?" offered Adam, seeing her indecision.

In horror, Charlie quickly covered his mouth with her hand. She could feel his lips parting in a smile.

"Let me know when you make up your mind," he chuckled softly, climbing into bed.

After giving everyone a reasonable chance to use the light, Kevin put out the fire in the fireplace. With a sigh of relief, Charlie changed into her nightgown, though, now that it was dark, she couldn't see where she was going. For a moment, Charlie pictured herself getting too close to the loft railing, and falling over-- only to be found as a large splat on the floor the next morning.

Then Adam's hand reached through the darkness and guided her forward, until she was snugly beside him beneath the covers.

"Try not to touch my arm," she whispered, as his hand caressed her. "It's making me itch."

"Sorry," came his hushed reply.

"I'm so scratchy," sighed the young woman, adjusting her head so her neck wouldn't touch the pillow.

"It'll be better, tomorrow," he assured her. "This isn't measles, after all."

"I hope you won't be sorry you married me," Charlie softly groaned. "I don't even have the sense to come in out of the mosquitos!"

"Stop scratching, Charlie," he instructed, taking her hand and pulling it away from her body. "Try to get your mind on something else for a while."

The sound of a large creature lumbering past the cabin made Charlie pause.

"I think it's a bear," she whispered. "It'll probably be gone, by morning."

"Can I count this to my wildlife score?" joked Adam. "I'm getting a little tired of hamburgers, all the time!"

"Chad's having fun, though," Charlie pointed out, "that's the important thing."

"Stop scratching," Adam sighed, as her fingernails began to work at her neck. "I think I have some antihistamine in my suitcase. Do you want me to get it?" he offered.

"No," she whimpered. "Sometimes, I feel like such a child! I may be young compared to you, but I'm not a little kid!"

"I never said you were," said Adam. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm scratching all over," she explained in a humiliated voice, "and I'm covered in calamine--*again!* Chad was only bitten once or twice, but not me! Like an idiot, I stayed out there until I became a blood donor to every mosquito in the area!"

"Calm down," whispered Adam, trying to situate her beside him so she wouldn't have to lie on her side. The single bed was narrow, and there wasn't much room to move around. "I'm not sorry we're together, Charlie. I'm willing to carry calamine lotion with me for the rest of my life, if you need it." Adam tenderly kissed his young wife, and brushed the hair away from her face. "Try to relax," he coaxed her. "You'll feel better, tomorrow."

With a deep sigh, Charlie closed her eyes. Since Adam had moved over in bed for her, she could stretch out a little easier. Just the act of relaxing seemed to lessen the intensity of the itching, and the stress of the day, began to melt away.

"I love you, Charlie-girl," he whispered. For a few hours, Adam listened to the sound of her soft breathing, until sleep finally came for him, as well.

The next morning, Charlie awoke to the sounds of Chad, getting their fishing poles out of the SUV and into the living room where he expected someone to show him how to use them. He had been fishing once when he was very small, but that was so long ago, he could barely remember it.

"I wish they would wake up," she heard Chad sigh, as Kevin washed his face in the kitchen basin. "Uncle Adam said Aunt Charlie would take me fishing."

Realizing that Chad was waiting for her, Charlie sat up in bed and prepared to climb out from under the warm covers. As she moved, the slumbering man beside her, stirred briefly, before falling back to sleep. Then Charlie noticed something that brought a cry of dismay to her lips. Adam had spent the night on the hard edge of the worn bed, just so she could be comfortable.

"Adam," she sighed, as her husband woke up, "why didn't you move me over? I didn't need the whole mattress!"

"You were having a difficult night," he mumbled groggily. He was about to go back to sleep, when he realized that the sun was shining through a small window in the loft. He yawned, and

looked at the beautiful young woman who was shaking her head at him. "It's no big deal, Charlie. How do you feel? Are the mosquito bites any better?"

"The itching has gone down, and so has the swelling," she observed, thankfully. "Chad is waiting for me to take him fishing. It looks like someone has volunteered me."

"I don't know very much about stream fishing," confessed Adam.

Charlie leaned down and gave him a tender kiss, before picking up her day clothes and looking about the loft for some privacy. It was daylight now, and there was no place to hide in the shadows to dress. There was only one thing left to do. Curious, Adam watched as Charlie ducked beneath the blankets on their mattress and pulled the covers over her head. By all the movement going on, he realized she was getting dressed.

"How's it going under there?" asked Adam, poking his head below the covers. When she swatted at him to go away, the man laughed and got out of bed. *He* could dress wherever he wanted.

"Good morning!" greeted Kevin, when he saw Adam climbing down the ladder from the loft to the main room. "I went out and brought back some breakfast for everyone," he explained, handing Adam a hot egg and bacon, English muffin.

"You've been pretty handy," Adam acknowledged gratefully. "*Everyone* should bring their bodyguard, when they go camping!"

Kevin laughed as Chad showed his uncle the fishing rod he was going to use that day.

"When's Aunt Charlie coming down?" asked the boy, for he was eager to go outside and fish. "I hope she didn't go back to sleep after you and she talked, this morning!"

"You could hear us?" asked Adam, in surprise. He was suddenly thankful that he and his pretty wife hadn't been intimate the night before.

"I couldn't make out the words very well," shrugged Chad, busily playing with the curious looking flies in the tackle box they had bought in Dawson Creek.

Adam cleared his throat, and noticed that Kevin was trying to act as though he hadn't noticed what Chad had just said. The musician guessed that Kevin had heard the same things that the boy had overheard, and didn't want to make Adam feel uncomfortable by admitting it. Making a mental note not to tell Charlie, Adam accepted a styrofoam cup of hot coffee from Kevin, and looked out the window at the deep blue sky.

"You can't get a view like that in the Mojave," mused Adam. As he said this, his attention was distracted by Charlie's slender form, coming down the ladder. As he intently watched her, a pleased smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. Charlie wasn't wearing anything out of the ordinary, but she had let her wavy brown hair fall about her shoulders, instead of pulling it back into a ponytail, as she had been doing on their trip. Quietly admiring her over his cup of coffee, Adam watched as Charlie tucked in a loose corner of her shirt before joining them.

"Aunt Charlie!" exclaimed the boy, excitedly, "can we go fishing, now?"

This comment broke in on Adam's reverie, and he quickly interceded for Charlie.

"Wait until she's had a chance to eat something, Chad!" he laughed.

After Kevin handed his client an English muffin (without the bacon) and a cup of hot coffee, Charlie found a place on the sofa and prayed over her breakfast. When she looked up, she saw Chad waiting for her with fishing rod in hand.

"I'll hurry," she promised the boy.

Before Adam would let Charlie outside, he pulled out a bottle of bug repellent, and gently rubbed it into her arms and neck.

"Chad," he warned the boy, who was trying to edge toward the door, unnoticed, "you're next, so get over here."

"Aw, Uncle Adam," complained Chad, "do I have to?"

"Yes!" came the adamant reply.

After Adam had applied some repellent on his own skin, he handed off the bottle to Kevin, who accepted it gratefully.

A bright Alaska sun shone on the group, as they headed out to the stream behind the cabin. Thankfully, the small party was alone. *This* was why they were putting up with no plumbing and electricity. Privacy was hard to come by, and Adam knew how to recognize its worth whenever he was blessed enough to find it.

To Charlie's amusement, the boys weren't as helpless at fishing as she had been led to believe. While Adam had never fished in a stream, he was handy enough with the fishing rod to prove to Charlie that he was no novice.

Charlie wasn't as surprised to find that Kevin needed no help, for as he reeled in another catch, she suspected that he would probably still be landing fish-- with or without a fishing rod.

The most eager and inexperienced member of their party was Chad. But Charlie quickly discovered that she only needed to give him a few helpful pointers, and the boy was able to figure out the rest for himself. He seemed to be soaking up the outdoors through every pore of his being, and for the first real time since learning of his father's indiscretions, he was actually having a good time.

"Watch your footing," Charlie warned him, as the boy waded into the stream a little further with his fishing rod. "Those rocks are slippery, Chad!"

With his pole draped over one shoulder, Adam sauntered to where Charlie was fishing, and grinned happily in Chad's direction.

"Thanks for agreeing to this trip," he sighed contentedly. "I think Chad needed this."

"I'm grateful he can finally do some fishing," replied Charlie. "This cabin was a good idea, Adam. I haven't seen anyone else out here all morning."

As the words left her mouth, Charlie was surprised to hear the sound of people in the distance. Puzzled, she looked in the direction that the voices were coming from.

"I hear them," said Adam, quickly glancing back at the cabin to see if they could go inside without being seen.

Before the famous musician could act, a man with two teenage boys and a young girl, appeared around the bend of the stream, each toting a fishing pole.

"Hello!" shouted the man, with a wave.

Immediately, Kevin abandoned his fishing rod and quickly made his way to Charlie's side. With cautious eyes, her bodyguard looked the strangers over.

"Howdy!" called back Adam, returning the man's friendly greeting. "Good day to go fishing!"

"It certainly is!" the man nodded with an amiable smile. "Would you mind if we joined you? There's not many good places to fish, downstream."

Adam flashed Kevin a cautious glance, but turned back to the stranger with a consenting nod. This stream wasn't private property, and there was little he could do to stop them, without exciting curiosity.

"There's plenty of room," said Adam.

Chad wasn't sure if he was happy about this, or not. The two teenage boys seemed not to take much notice of him, but the girl, who looked to be about as old as he was, kept smiling at him. With a scowl, Chad returned to his fishing.

"My kids and I have the cabin around the bend," the man was saying to Adam, as his daughter shyly watched Chad. "How long have you been here?"

"This is our first day," replied Adam, as the man began to prepare his fishing line.

"Not many rent out here," continued the man, checking the reel on his rod. "Blair, honey," he coaxed, "go find a place on the bank and start fishing."

The girl looked at her father uncertainly, and then back to Chad, who was busy reeling in a fish.

"Go on," laughed the man.

With a timid nod, Blair walked toward the stream with her fishing pole.

"Sometimes, I worry about her," sighed her father. "You know how it is with girls at that age--they're all giggles and tears. Be grateful your daughter is past that age!"

"My what?" asked Adam, keeping an eye on Charlie and Chad. Gratefully, Kevin was standing nearby, and by the look on his face, Adam knew he was on duty.

"Your daughter," said the man, "be glad the hard part is over. All you have to worry about now, is the guy she'll marry!"

Suddenly, Adam realized he must have been referring to Charlie. Since the man hadn't required a response, Adam didn't give one. While this family didn't look like trouble, Adam was wary about befriending strangers, and was ever mindful of the still possible threat of Charlie being

kidnapped. But since there had been no flicker recognition on the man's face, Adam slowly let himself relax a little.

"Have you caught anything yet?" asked the man, as he located a place near Adam on the bank of the stream.

"Not yet," Adam smiled good-naturedly.

"It sure is great to get out of the city once in a while," breathed the man, inhaling the clean Alaska air. "I'm a stockbroker, and if I didn't escape every summer to somewhere quiet and peaceful, I'd probably go nuts! So, what do you do for a living?"

"I used to be a plumber," answered Adam, with a small smile.

"You're already *retired*?!" exclaimed the man in admiration. "Man, I hope I can retire at such a young age! I guess being a plumber didn't hurt, though!" The man laughed and sent out his line into the clear stream.

From her place on the bank, Charlie watched Adam. His posture was relaxed, so she was feeling more at ease with the situation than before. But Charlie's peace wouldn't last long. To her dismay, the teenage boys, and even their father, occasionally ogled her while they thought she wasn't looking. It wasn't because she had been recognized, but because they thought she was attractive. Thankfully, Kevin had planted himself between her and the others, and his presence kept them from approaching her. One look from him, and they knew Charlie was hands-off.

The young girl called Blair, was finally beginning to lose some of her shyness. She even tried to talk to Chad, but the boy wasn't interested in the slightest.

Chad sighed wearily as he noticed Blair smiling at him once again. He was starting to appreciate those many times when Mike had complained about attracting too much attention from the opposite sex. Blair couldn't know this, but she was wasting her time. Chad had already made up his mind, that if he were ever going to be sweet on a girl, that it would be Becky, Sandra's little blind sister. He had even extracted a promise from Becky not to marry anyone else, for he intended to ask her, himself.

To his annoyance, Blair didn't seem to discourage easily, so Chad found a vacant spot beside his aunt and resumed fishing.

While Kevin's business face was meant to dissuade the boys and their father from coming too close to Charlie, it also deterred Blair from following Chad. The girl finally gave up pursuing the blond headed boy with clear blue eyes, and went back to join her dad.

As the morning wore on, Adam prepared to take his family back to the cabin. He was beginning to notice the looks the father was giving Charlie, and Adam didn't appreciate it. Of course, the man didn't know she was Adam's wife, but Adam didn't think *any* man should be looking like that at a woman-- unless, of course, he was married to her.

Just as Adam was about to make an excuse that would allow them to leave without these strangers following, Adam's satellite phone went off.

"Excuse me," he said, retreating a few steps away to answer the call.

"Adam, it's Shirley," said his sister, in a voice that immediately told Adam that she had been weeping. "Thomas collapsed at Villa Rosa while they were lifting out the old floor," she related to him. "An ambulance took him to the Twin Yucca Community Hospital, and that's where I am now."

"Do you know why he collapsed?" asked Adam, in a concerned voice. Adam's shock over Thomas' health was compounded by the surprise that he was still working on Villa Rosa. As far as he and Charlie were concerned, Thomas was no longer a part of the restoration efforts.

"They're still trying to figure that out," replied Shirley, trying to keep her voice from shaking as badly as the rest of her was. "One of the doctors said it had something to do with his heart. Pray, Adam," begged his sister, "*please!*"

"I will," he soberly promised. "Do you want me to bring Chad home? When he hears this news, I don't think I can stop him from returning."

"I think Chad should be here," decided Shirley. "If something happens to Thomas..." her voice quickly stopped, for the rest of the thought was too painful to speak out loud. Then Adam could hear Mike's voice in the background. "I'm talking to him right now," he heard Shirley say. "Adam, Mike wants to speak to you," she announced.

Then Adam heard Mike's strained voice on the phone.

"Chad should come," advised Mike, echoing his mother's sentiments. "I'm scared, Uncle Adam."

Adam could hear the plea in his nephew's voice, not only for Chad's return, but for his as well.

"We're coming," comforted Adam. "I don't know how soon we'll be back, but I'll do everything I can to make it as soon as possible. We'll be praying for your father. Keep trusting God, Mike."

"I will," he replied, in a trembling voice.

"I'm coming as soon as I can," Adam tried to assure his nephew.

"Okay," sniffed the young man.

After saying good-bye, Adam hung up and looked over to Charlie and Chad, who were busily fishing.

"Bad news from home?" asked the father, who had heard some of what Adam had said during the call.

"My brother-in-law is in the hospital," answered Adam, turning to leave.

"I hope he'll be all right!" the man called after him, as Adam walked down the stream bank to where Kevin was standing guard over Charlie. Chad looked up with a wide grin as he proudly held up the string of fish he had caught.

"Aren't they beauties?" exclaimed the boy. "I don't think Kevin will have to go for food *for days!*"

Before he spoke, Adam glanced over his shoulder to be sure that he was out of range of the man and his kids.

"Is something wrong?" wondered Charlie, who was fast becoming alarmed by the grave expression on Adam's face. "Was the call about Daddy?"

"No, it's about Thomas," said Adam. "Chad, your father was taken to the hospital today, after he collapsed while he was working. The doctors are still trying to figure out what happened, but they're doing everything they can for him. Your mother and Mike think it's best if you come home, so I'm going to call the pilot of our jet, and prepare him to be ready for us in Fairbanks."

The fish in Chad's hand dropped to his side, and his face fell. Tears began to well up in his eyes, but no words would come. Embracing his young nephew, Adam could only comfort him with pats and hugs. Chad didn't care if the teenage boys downstream saw him acting like a little kid, or not. His father was sick, and the world suddenly looked scary and uncertain to the eleven year old.

The group left that same afternoon, pausing only to stop for gas and lunch at a take-out, before heading back onto the Alaska Highway. Since Chad needed Adam more than she did, Charlie offered her seat to the boy, so he could be near his uncle. As Charlie sat up front with Kevin, she asked God not to forget their family, in this time of need.

Whitehorse was about fourteen hours from Fairbanks, so even with a good day's drive, they had to stay in a motel for the night. Before noon of the next day, they reached Fairbanks, and the airfield where Adam's private jet was waiting for them.

Soon, they would be home.

"Draw nigh [close] to God, and He *will* draw nigh to you."
~ James 4:8 ~

Chapter Fifty-two

Welcome Home, Mrs. Clark

"Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother [family], and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh."

~ Genesis 2:24 ~

"Let not the sun go down upon your wrath."

~ Ephesians 4:26 ~

It was just after seven thirty in the evening when Adam's private jet touched down at the small airport in Twin Yucca. The sun was setting against the western horizon of the Mojave Desert, as the small group descended the steps of the jet and into the warm air.

The familiar feel of the dry wind against Charlie's skin reminded her of just how much she had been missing home. She had spent much of the last few months away from the desert, and was grateful to finally be back to the land that she had come to love so much.

While Adam and Kevin unloaded their luggage and camping equipment, Chad looked about the empty airport for his brother. A few hours earlier, Mike called and had given an update as to their father's condition. He was conscious and talking, and according to the doctors, doing extremely well for someone who had suffered a mild heart attack the previous day. Tests were still being done to determine why he had collapsed, for the cause wasn't readily apparent to the doctors. As always, Mike had ended the call with another plea to pray for Thomas. Even though their father's physical condition was improving, his sins had not been forgotten. Chad had strained to hear any news from Mike that their father had repented of his indiscretions, but Mike had been unable to give his little brother any such consolation.

"Where's Mike?" asked Adam, setting the last of their luggage on the runaway and looking about the mostly vacant airport. "I thought he promised to meet us."

"I don't see him," Chad sighed disappointedly.

"Thank God there's no reporters," said Charlie, grateful that they had been able to sneak back home without arousing the attention of the media.

"Amen to that," agreed her husband.

"Someone's coming," Kevin announced. He stood beside his client and warily watched as a solitary figure walked toward them.

"It's Mike!" cried the boy.

Momentarily forgetting that he was too old for such displays of emotion, Chad ran to Mike and the brothers hugged.

"How's your father, Mike?" asked Adam, as Chad buried his face in his older brother's embrace.

"Fine, I guess," mumbled Mike. "I don't understand, Uncle Adam. He came so close to death, and he still refuses to be honest about his sin. I thought that maybe I could talk to him, but he just won't repent. He even told me that it was no big deal, because his last 'momentary lapse of judgment' had only been with a prostitute. Uncle Adam, I was sitting there, looking at my own father, and thinking, 'I don't know this man.'"

Charlie was greatly disheartened to hear those words. She had been praying and hoping that Thomas had learned his lesson, and that his family would have the great joy of knowing that he had repented. She watched Adam's grief, as he hugged his nephews and spoke a few hushed words that only they could hear. Then it was Charlie's turn to hug Mike, and to tell the boys that both she and Adam were praying for their father. As their new aunt and wife of a most beloved uncle, Charlie didn't want to let her nephews down, even though she was feeling unequal to the task. Whenever she saw Chad or Mike's sad faces, she felt like running to Adam for help. But responsible adults didn't act like that, and Charlie was determined to behave in a way that would not discredit Adam's judgment in taking her as his wife. She wasn't sure what she could do to help Mike and Chad, but she would do her best.

As the evening faded into night, Mike drove everyone to his parents' house on the edge of Twin Yucca, for Adam had accepted Shirley's invitation to stay in the guest rooms at her and Thomas' stylish adobe home. Even though Adam hadn't consulted Charlie in accepting the invitation, his young wife understood that he had a lot on his mind and didn't hold it against him for making the decision without her.

While Adam was preoccupied with thoughts of his family, Charlie was trying not to be selfish by wanting to see hers. She hadn't seen her grandmother or father since the wedding, for she and Adam had only been a day or two at Villa Rosa before they were off on their trip to Alaska. Charlie had been living in cottages, cabins, hotel rooms, and now was about to find herself in Shirley and Thomas' guest room. To be honest, it was the last place on earth that she wanted to be. As much as Charlie wished to be useful to Adam's family, she had to fight back the longing to settle down and truly unpack at home-- her and Adam's home-- not someone else's, and

especially not Shirley's. Charlie tried to remind herself of her sister-in-law's good qualities and of her helpfulness at the wedding, and it helped to soften some of the dread that she could feel building inside.

When they reached the large adobe house, Charlie braced herself to meet Shirley and to say something comforting, though Charlie wasn't sure what that should be.

"No one's home right now," explained Mike, getting out his copy of the house key and preparing to unlock the front door. "Everyone's at the hospital." Before he could place the key into the lock, however, Mike was surprised when the door suddenly opened. "Mom!" he exclaimed.

Charlie was prepared to see Shirley, but instead saw Millie Weston, Mike's mother-in-law, greeting them and inviting the weary travelers inside.

"What are you doing here?" Mike asked with a grateful smile. Millie reminded Mike of Sandra, and a reminder like that was always welcome.

"Shirley is busy at the hospital," explained Mille, "so I told her that we would get the guest rooms ready and have a hot meal waiting when you arrived."

"We?" grinned Mike. "Is Sandra here?"

"She's putting fresh sheets on the beds," informed Mille. "Adam, everyone is praying for your sister and her family."

"Thank you," accepted Adam, "we appreciate it."

While the grownups exchanged a few solemn words about the situation with Thomas, Chad disappeared upstairs to his room.

"Why don't you go wash up?" suggested Millie. "The girls and I will get dinner on the table?"

At first, Charlie thought that was meant as a polite request that she should help out in the kitchen, but when Millie shooed them towards the stairs, Charlie realized that Millie had been referring to her two daughters-- Sandra and Becky.

"I guess help has arrived," smiled Mike, leading Adam, Charlie, and Kevin upstairs.

Charlie followed her husband to one of the guest rooms, and deposited her bags on the floor by the bed. Just then, Sandra appeared from the adjoining guest bath.

"Hi, Charlie," she greeted her. "I was just putting some clean towels out for you and Uncle Adam."

"Thank you," smiled Charlie.

"Mom will be home pretty soon," Mike was telling Adam as Charlie placed one of her suitcases on the bed to do a little unpacking. "Hospital visiting hours will be over in a few minutes, and Sandra's Dad will drive her home."

"Mike," smiled Sandra, tugging at her husband's arm and leading him out into the hallway, "let's leave them alone so they can settle in."

"Oh, okay," stammered Mike, a little confused as to why Sandra was requesting privacy for his uncle, for Adam had never required any in the past. "I'll see you downstairs in a few minutes."

"Tell Millie we'll be there in a little while," directed Adam, as Sandra dragged her bewildered husband away.

"Should I unpack all of my things?" asked Charlie, for Adam had yet to tell her how long he was intending to stay.

"You'd better," he answered. "I think we're going to be here for a while."

Trying to conceal her disappointment, Charlie took out her nightgown and placed it on the bed with some very personal articles of clothing. Without warning, Chad walked through the still open bedroom door, and sat down on the bed to watch his uncle and aunt.

"Hey, Buddy," sighed Adam, ruffling the boy's hair. "Have you been crying?"

Chad shrugged his shoulders, unwilling to confirm or deny Adam's observation.

Self-conscious that her delicate under-things were out in plain site of Adam's eleven year old nephew, Charlie quickly dropped everything into an empty bureau drawer and disappeared into the adjoining bathroom to wash up for dinner.

With a tired sigh, Charlie turned on the sink faucet and splashed some cool water onto her face, trying to unwind a little after their long flight. As she reached for a towel, the bathroom door opened slightly, and Adam peered inside. Seeing that she was decent, he left the door open and

took his turn at the sink. Through the open door, Charlie saw that Chad was still sitting on their bed.

"I realize you're probably anxious to see Vera and Chuck," said Adam, washing his hands. "I don't think you've had a chance to visit them since the wedding, for we've been running all over the place."

"It's just the way things worked out," Charlie tried to reply good-naturedly, for she didn't want Adam to feel guilty for something that wasn't his fault. "I *would* like to see Grandma and Daddy, though."

"We'll go after dinner," promised Adam, turning off the water and stepping close to Charlie. He placed his dripping wet hands on the back of her blouse and smiled. "We could take one of our long walks," he whispered. Adam was about to kiss Charlie when Mike showed up unannounced in their bedroom and informed them that Shirley had arrived from the hospital. Hearing this, Chad stopped watching his uncle and aunt and quickly jumped off the bed to see his mother.

"We'll be there in a second," Adam told Mike.

"I think she wants to talk to you right now, Uncle Adam," he pressed.

"Very well, I'm coming," breathed Adam, giving Charlie a quick peck on the cheek before releasing her.

When the boys were gone, Charlie shut the bedroom door and went to the mirror to run a brush through her hair before going down to meet Shirley.

As Charlie descended the stairs, she could hear voices coming from the kitchen and the dining room. Not only was the Garner clan present, but many of the Westons were here, as well. Picking out the familiar sound of Adam's voice, Charlie followed it toward the kitchen, and found him and Shirley deep in talk.

"I can't believe Thomas actually said that to Mike," Shirley was saying to Adam. "A prostitute--" Shirley stopped short when she noticed Charlie was listening. Abruptly ending her discussion, Shirley gave the young woman a warm hug. "It's so good to see you," she smiled. "My, don't you look..." here, the woman awkwardly hesitated.

Charlie grimaced, waiting for her sister-in-law to finish the sentence. She almost expected Shirley to add, "all grown up," and by the look of embarrassment on Shirley's face, Charlie guessed that she hadn't been too far from it.

Abandoning her thought altogether, Shirley tactfully changed the subject.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here to meet you," Shirley apologized. "The house must be a wreck. Is your room all right? Do you need more towels? Sandra said she couldn't find the good towels in the linen closet." At this, Shirley went to go find Sandra and confirm the status of the towels in the guest bathrooms.

Smiling apologetically to Charlie, Adam took his wife into the dining room where the men were sitting around the table, munching on bread sticks and talking until dinner was served. Horace Weston was questioning Kevin about some military related issue, while his wife, Millie, worked in the kitchen with their daughters and Shirley.

"Well!" exclaimed Horace, as the couple entered the room, "here come the lovebirds! Is the honeymoon over, yet?" he joked.

"Oh, hush!" Millie laughingly scolded as she entered the room to set a large bowl of salad on the table before returning to the kitchen. "Sometimes, you never know when to leave well enough alone, Horace! Can't you see you're embarrassing Charlie?"

Adam smiled and was about to help his blushing bride into her chair, when Charlie turned to ask something. Right there, on the back of her blouse, were two large wet hand prints! Horace burst into laughter, while Adam tried to figure out what was so funny. Then he saw Charlie's back.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Sorry, Honey," Adam apologized with a grin. "I guess I should have dried my hands, first!"

"Oh, Adam!" Charlie exclaimed in horror.

By now, the men were roaring with laughter so that Shirley came from the kitchen to see what all the commotion was about. When she realized what was going on, Shirley withheld any comment, though her displeased looks said what her words did not.

"All right, all right," she quieted them, "you've had your fun. It's time to eat, so you'd better put down those bread sticks."

Charlie quietly sat beside Adam at the table, grateful that her back was against the chair, and not facing everyone. The hand prints would dry, but her humiliation would not disappear so easily.

Throughout the meal, Horace would occasionally tease Adam and Charlie, and even though it was all done in good-humor, it made Charlie very self-conscious.

After dinner, everyone made their way to the living room to digest the big meal the ladies had fixed. Remembering Adam's promise to go for a walk and visit her family, Charlie waited patiently for the after-dinner talk to wind down, and for the Westons to leave. To Charlie's alarm, they didn't. And to her dismay, Adam showed no signs that he remembered his promise. All she could do was sit beside him on the couch and pretend to listen. If she tried to make any hint to Adam that she wanted to leave, Charlie was afraid that the others would take it the wrong way, and the teasing would begin all over again. So, she held her tongue.

Late that night, the Westons finally went home. Mike and Sandra soon followed, and the remaining Garners began to part ways to their rooms.

In the privacy of the guest room, the Clarks were getting ready for bed. Adam sat on the edge of the mattress, pulling off his socks, and still talking about something interesting that Mike had said. Only half listening, Charlie went to the bureau and took out her nightgown. Remembering that it was Adam's favorite, she hesitated. Charlie stared at the silky garment and then at Adam. With a shake of her head, she thrust it back into the drawer and went to her suitcase to retrieve some oversized pajamas.

"Mike is doing pretty well at the store," Adam continued, oblivious to the fact that Charlie had gone into the bathroom to change and was now speaking to no one.

Soon, the bathroom door opened, and Charlie crawled beneath the covers while Adam put on his nightclothes.

"That boy is going to do well, if he keeps working like he has," Adam predicted.

Since Charlie hadn't been listening, she could only assume that he was still talking about Mike. With a heavy sigh, Charlie closed her eyes, determined to quickly fall asleep. Then the mattress gave, and she could feel Adam lying down beside her.

"Why are you wearing those ridiculous pajamas?" he laughed softly, pulling her close to him in bed. But Charlie wasn't reacting to him the way she usually did, and when he began to caress her, she stiffened at his touch.

"What's wrong?" he wondered.

"Not now," she pulled away from him. "I'm tired."

Adam didn't have a big ego, especially when it came to Charlie, but he was still a little surprised when she turned down his affectionate advances so completely.

"Goodnight then," he replied, ready to give her a kiss before sleep. But, this too, she tried to avoid, and rolled onto her side, so that she was facing away from him. "Is it just my imagination," he observed, "or are you angry?"

"Why should I be angry?" Charlie exclaimed in a hurt voice.

"I don't know," replied Adam, sitting up in bed and soberly looking at the back of her head. "Why are you?"

Charlie bit her lip. He really didn't remember.

"I don't feel like talking about it," she murmured, tucking her legs beneath her and tightly shutting her eyes. "Goodnight." She switched off the small lamp on the nightstand and pulled the covers around her.

After that, Adam was quiet for a long while. In the stillness of the bedroom, Charlie thought that perhaps he had gone to sleep. However, when he tenderly stroked the nape of her neck with his finger, she realized he had only been thinking.

"I'm sorry," he finally whispered. "I forgot about my promise to take you to see your family."

"I know Shirley and the boys need you," answered Charlie, "but I have a family to think of, *too*. Grandma is taking care of Daddy all by herself."

Adam was silent. He felt that he was unfairly being torn in two directions at the same time, and being asked to make a choice between Charlie's family and his sister's.

"I need to finish Villa Rosa so they can come live with us," continued Charlie. "If that's not possible right now, then maybe we could go live with *them*. Grandma is old, and Daddy is *my* responsibility."

"You mean, leave Shirley?" he asked.

"Just how long *were* you expecting us to stay here?" wondered Charlie.

"I don't know," replied Adam, "long enough to make sure that they're all right without Thomas. My family is going through a lot right now, Charlie."

If Adam's intention had been to make her feel guilty, then it was working. Still, Charlie felt that Adam was being unfair. After all, she hadn't asked that they not help Shirley, only that they do it from another house.

"You never asked me if it was okay that we live in Shirley's guest room," reminded Charlie, resentment creeping into her voice, "and I didn't hear you say one word to me about staying indefinitely."

Adam was beginning to lose his patience.

"Charlie, I'm doing the best that I can," he argued. "What do you want me to do-- turn my back on my sister?"

"Adam, that's not fair!" retorted Charlie, tears beginning to wet her face. "I never said that, and you know it!"

"I can't talk to you if you're going to be unreasonable," he replied impatiently. "I'm sleeping on the couch downstairs." When Charlie voiced no objection, Adam climbed out of bed and grabbed his pillow and one of the blankets. "I'll see you in the morning," he mumbled under his breath.

Adam tramped down the stairs to the living room and tossed his bedding on the sofa. He had never had a fight with Charlie before-- at least, none where he had walked away from her. With a grumble, he tried to get comfortable on the stiff couch cushions. Why wasn't she being reasonable? Couldn't Charlie see that he was trying to hold together his family? As he mulled over this thought, another quickly followed. Charlie *was* his family, and her responsibilities had become his. Shirley was his sister, but Charlie was his wife. Adam sensed that it was time to reorder his priorities. Just then, he heard sounds coming from the kitchen, and got up to see what it was.

Shirley looked up from the refrigerator to find her older brother standing in his pajamas in the kitchen doorway.

"I thought you'd already gone to bed," she said, pulling out a bowl of leftover chocolate pudding and placing it on the countertop. "What's the matter-- couldn't sleep, again?"

"Charlie and I had a fight, so I moved to the couch," he confessed.

Shirley sighed.

"I left her upstairs, crying," Adam further admitted.

The look his sister gave him only confirmed what he already knew.

"I know," he sighed, "I shouldn't have."

"Charlie may be young," said Shirley, "but she's trying very hard to please you, Adam. This evening, I felt so sorry for that poor child!"

"What are you talking about?" he wondered, for this sounded like a new offense.

"When you used Charlie to dry your hands," accused Shirley, "everyone was laughing at her, and so were you."

"Oh, that," he groaned.

"I couldn't say a word in front of Horace Weston," continued Shirley. "Knowing him, he would've only made things worse. That man sometimes doesn't know when to keep his mouth shut, and tonight was a classic example! It was just plain thoughtlessness, that's what it was! Charlie was near to tears, and you men were laughing at *your* paw marks on *her* blouse!"

Adam recalled the humiliated look on Charlie's face while they were busy guffawing, and silently rebuked himself.

"I hadn't thought about it like that," he reflected.

"I thought that's why you were sleeping on the couch," reasoned Shirley, her eyebrows arched in curious surprise.

"Actually, it was over something else," he murmured, not eager to tell his sister what it was.

"The men in this family haven't been doing too well, lately," mused Shirley, taking a spoon and filling a small bowl with pudding. "Do you want some? Heaven knows, you don't deserve any."

"No, thanks," declined Adam.

"Would it be an imposition if I asked what the fight was about?" inquired Shirley.

"I'd rather not say," he hesitated.

"Let me take a wild guess," smiled Shirley. "She didn't want to come live in my guest room."

"You were listening in at the door," Adam jokingly scolded.

"I have no need to eavesdrop, to know that," replied Shirley. "Actually, I was surprised when you accepted my invitation to stay. I didn't think she'd let you do it."

"I didn't consult her," he explained.

"That's rather obvious right now, isn't it," Shirley ironically smiled. She took a bite of pudding and pushed back the bowl with a weary sigh. "What's happening to this family, Adam? When did we stop taking care of our spouses?" Shirley put her hand to her forehead and went to the cupboard for some aspirin.

"I don't think Thomas is going to repent any time soon," Adam sadly remarked. "If a heart attack couldn't do it, then I'm afraid it's going to take something bigger to get his attention."

"I'd like to think you're better than Thomas," replied Shirley, with a directed glance upstairs.

Adam nodded and was about to walk away, when he paused.

"We're going to leave tomorrow," he informed her.

"I know," she smiled. "Go to your Charlie-girl, Adam. She needs you."

"Thanks for understanding, Sis." With that, Adam headed back up the stairs.

Adam found Charlie where he had left her, looking very much as if she had cried herself to sleep. Disappointed that she wasn't awake so he could talk to her, he quietly closed the door and got into bed. When Adam's head fell straight back onto the mattress, he recalled that he had left his pillow on the sofa, downstairs. Folding his hands beneath his head for support, Adam wondered if he should wake Charlie so he could apologize. He hated to disrupt her sleep, but this was more important.

"Charlie," whispered Adam, "I need to talk to you." He didn't expect an answer so soon, and was surprised when she replied,

"Couldn't it wait until morning?"

"I thought you were asleep," said Adam, his heart breaking at the sound of Charlie's voice, for he could hear the tears as she spoke. "Charlie," he began, reaching out to touch her and wincing as she moved away from him, "I'm sorry I lost my patience with you. I shouldn't have walked out the way I did."

"I forgive you," she sniffed.

"Thank you," he answered, gratefully. "I've been thinking, and I realize that I've been doing something lately, that I promised myself I'd never do. I've been making decisions without you, and that's dangerous for a man in my position. If I don't respect your opinion, then you're going to resent me, and I don't want that to happen." Adam stared at the back of her head and made a confession. "Charlie, when I volunteered to take Chad to Alaska without asking you, it was just me being thoughtless; when I accepted Shirley's invitation to stay, however, I didn't ask for your opinion on purpose, because I didn't want to give you a chance to disagree."

Charlie had thought that Adam had been so preoccupied with family woes, that he had forgotten to get her agreement, as they had promised each other to always do. She gulped back a sob.

"Will you still forgive me?" he wondered.

"Uh-huh," came Charlie's muffled response, for she was trying to smother her tears with her pillow so he couldn't hear her weep.

It didn't work, however, for Adam could hear every sob just fine. He dearly wanted to hold her, but he remembered the way she had resisted him a few moments ago, and decided that he didn't deserve to presume that she could want him right now.

With a sigh, Adam lie on his back, his hands still clasped beneath his head. He was about to continue his apology, when he felt Charlie moving close to him in bed. Without a word, she rested her head on his chest, until he could feel her wet face through his pajama top. Adam slowly put his arms around Charlie. A slender hand lovingly responded to his touch, nearly making Adam forget that he had something else to tell her.

"There's one other thing I have to apologize for," he said, helplessly staring up at the ceiling, for he didn't have a pillow, and couldn't see Charlie's face.

The young woman lifted her head and leaned over him, her beautiful features still evident in the partial darkness of the bedroom. Adam's breath caught, as her long, soft hair brushed against his

cheek. His heart was quickening at her presence, and the words he wanted to say suddenly escaped him. Not waiting for him to recover, Charlie bent down and kissed Adam's mouth until his arms were tightly wrapped around her once more. And so ended their first fight.

The sound of morning in the rest of the house, came as weary news to Adam and Charlie. They had been arguing and making up for most of the night, and neither of them felt like waking up.

Just as Adam was about to determine whether breakfast was worth climbing out of bed for, they noticed the handle on their bedroom door begin to turn. Charlie's eyes darted to the floor, where her and Adam's pajamas lay beside the bed. A feeling of dread surged through her, and she wanted to scream! The very next moment, it was too late, and the door swung wide open!

"Hey!" shouted Adam, sitting up in bed and angrily facing down their short intruder. "Chad! Close that door!"

Mortified, Charlie quickly pulled the covers over her head.

"It's almost breakfast time," the boy stammered, his attention riveted to two curious piles of pajamas on the floor. Then Chad looked at his bare chested uncle and the concealed form huddled beside him in bed. Suddenly, Chad's eyes grew as wide as saucers.

"NOW!" demanded Adam.

With a hurried nod, Chad did as he was told.

The door closed with a loud "Thump!" and Charlie heard Adam muttering something that she couldn't make out. When Charlie didn't respond, Adam spoke a little louder.

"You can come out," he repeated himself. "Chad's gone."

Charlie cautiously peered out from under the sheets, her hands slightly trembling.

"That boy!" sighed his uncle. "Mike told me that he had a hard time remembering to knock, but I guess I didn't take him seriously enough. Well, I don't know about you, but that was enough to wake *me* up!" Adam scratched his head and yawned, but when Charlie remained hidden and silent beneath the covers, he grew concerned. "Are you still under there?" he joked. When she didn't respond, Adam lifted the edge of her sheet and peered inside. Then he saw the tears welling up in Charlie's eyes, and had compassion on her. Tenderly drawing her into his arms, Adam tried to comfort his wife. "Now there," he soothed her, "it's nothing to cry over, Charlie-girl. He didn't see anything."

"He didn't have to!" she cried.

Adam noticed the nightclothes on the bedroom floor, and suddenly realized what she had meant.

"Chad's family," Adam reasoned, his own voice sounding a little shaken. "Try to look at the bright side, Charlie. At least it wasn't the paparazzi!"

At this, she choked back a laughing sob.

"It could have been worse," he consoled her, wiping away her tears with his hand.

With a timid nod, Charlie hid in his strong arms until she found the courage to face the world again.

"This reminds me," said Adam, "I have another apology to make."

"For not locking the door?"

"No," Adam chuckled softly, "this is another offense. I'm sorry I laughed at you, last night," he apologized. "I never meant to hurt your feelings."

"I know," she smiled through her tears. "That's why I didn't hold it against you."

"I promise," Adam breathed softly, "to take better care of you." His lips claimed hers, and for a while they contented themselves with each other. All too soon, the sounds of someone moving about in the hall, quickly brought them back to their senses.

"I'm not getting out of bed to dress," she whispered in a hushed voice, "until you lock the door!"

With a kind smile, Adam nodded in understanding.

While Shirley prepared breakfast, a strangely quiet Chad sat at the kitchen table with his glass of orange juice.

"You're awfully still this morning," she observed, for her youngest son was usually a bundle of energy.

Before he had a chance to shrug, as he was going to, he heard the sounds of his uncle and aunt coming down the stairs. With a gulp, Chad nervously dug his thumbnail into a seam on the highly polished wooden table and ran it back and forth until he remembered that his mom had repeatedly scolded him for defacing the furniture.

"Good morning, Sis," Adam greeted pleasantly, his arm slipped about Charlie's waist. He gave the boy a sideways glance, and released Charlie when she moved toward the table.

Chad's eyes were mysteriously fixed on his glass of orange juice when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked up, only to see his aunt staring down at him.

"Still friends?" she smiled, extending a hand out to the boy.

With a smile of his own, Chad accepted her handshake.

Adam was pleased, but kept the fact from his nephew.

"Breakfast is just about ready," said Shirley, pulling a jar of marmalade out of the refrigerator and setting it on the table with a spoon.

"So we've been told." Adam cleared his throat and looked directly in Chad's direction.

Chad quickly lowered his eyes.

"Oh?" asked Shirley, following Adam's gaze to her son. "Don't tell me," she sighed. "Chad, how many times must I remind you to knock before entering?"

"I'm sorry," the boy mumbled. "I forgot."

"After this morning," said Adam, seriously, "I expect you never to forget, again. If you suddenly have another lapse in memory, I'm going to assume that it was on purpose. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Sit," answered Chad, solemnly. "It *was* an accident, though. Honest, Uncle Adam."

"Okay then," replied his uncle, "that's that."

Chad breathed a sigh of relief, and hungrily looked at the plate of buttered toast his mother placed on the table. His appetite suddenly returning, Chad helped himself to several slices and loaded them with more marmalade than Charlie thought was reasonable.

After a prayer over the food, everyone started in on breakfast. The atmosphere in the kitchen lightened somewhat when Chad told his mother about Alaska, and the things that they had done and seen. Shirley was grateful that Chad had had a good time, and even more, that neither Adam nor Charlie had let him get into any trouble by wandering off.

After breakfast, Shirley and Chad prepared to get ready for their drive into town to visit Thomas in the hospital. Kevin cleaned his handgun on the kitchen table, while Adam helped Charlie with the dirty dishes. Even though the couple spoke in hushed tones to each other, Kevin could still overhear them. With a smile, he went about his work, pretending that they were alone.

"I told Shirley that we were leaving today," Adam informed Charlie.

"You did?" asked Charlie in surprise. "Why?"

"After the fight we had last night," remarked Adam, "do you really have to ask?"

"I suppose not," she admitted.

"Shirley invited us to go with them to the hospital," he continued, glancing at his wife to see her reaction. "You don't have to, if you don't want to. Thomas is doing well, so no one is rushing to his bedside."

"I'll go with you," said Charlie, rinsing off another plate before placing it into the dishwasher.

"After that," proposed Adam, "we'll go straight to your grandmother's house. Maybe, you could call Vera and let her know that we're coming."

"Are you sure you don't mind leaving Shirley?" wondered Charlie.

"Let's get something clear," said Adam, pulling the dishcloth from Charlie's hands and taking her into his arms, "my first responsibility is to you-- not my sister."

Before she could thank him, Adam kissed her. When they remained quiet for some time, Kevin glanced up to see what was going on. With another smile, the bodyguard returned to his handgun.

"Whoa!" exclaimed a loud, boyish voice.

Charlie was startled out of her husband's arms, only to find Chad in the kitchen doorway. To her great relief, he wasn't gawking at them, but at the handgun dismantled on the table.

"Can I hold it after you put it together?" asked the boy, going straight to the table and admiring Kevin's firearm.

"You most certainly may not!" exclaimed Shirley, entering the kitchen behind her son and casting a disapproving glance at the handgun. "Adam, you know how uncomfortable I am about having something like that in my house!" she shuddered.

"We'll be leaving in a few minutes," replied Adam, trying to hide an amused smile from Charlie's still blushing face, "so it won't be in your house much longer."

"I should hope not!" Shirley adamantly shook her head.

"So," mused Adam, looking over Kevin's shoulder as he reassembled his firearm, "that's where you went, last night."

"Mrs. Overholt [Vera] kept it safely hidden, right where I asked her to," said Kevin, sliding the gun barrel into place. Hearing the metallic sound, Shirley jumped, and quickly ushered Chad out of the kitchen until it was all over. "I'll be finished in a minute," he assured Adam.

The kitchen clean, and the handgun assembled, Kevin and Adam loaded up Shirley's minivan with their luggage. As Kevin was placing the last of the suitcases into the vehicle, he noticed a SUV pull up to the adobe house and park a little ways down the road. Since the Garners were the only ones who lived on the street, its presence was very conspicuous, to say the least. Casting a wary eye at the vehicle, Kevin slammed shut the side door and went inside to warn Adam and Charlie.

"Looks like we've been spotted," he announced, showing Adam to the window and pointing to the SUV. "Its either a reporter or a photographer, and since no one has been able to take a picture of you with your wife after the honeymoon yet, my guess is that it's a photographer."

Adam sighed. This would change their plans slightly.

"Sis," he called to Shirley, as she was putting on her earrings and walking into the living room, "I don't think it's a good idea for me and Charlie to go to the hospital with you. We've got some company."

"Oh?" asked Shirley, puzzled by what Adam had meant. Then she went to the window and saw what the men were looking at. "I see," she sighed. "I thought you're being in Twin Yucca without anyone knowing, wouldn't last very long. It was bound to come out, sooner or later. Well, I'll drop you and Charlie off at Vera's place, if that's what you want. I'll tell Thomas you couldn't make it."

"I'm sorry," apologized Adam.

"There's no need for that," dismissed Shirley with a wave of her hand. "At the rate Thomas and I are going, I probably won't be visiting him much longer-- whether he's still in the hospital, or not."

Now that they were being followed, Kevin took extra precautions to be careful for Charlie's safety. Donned with a baseball cap and a pair of sunglasses, Kevin whisked Charlie into the minivan, while Adam followed hard on their heels. When Shirley saw the cloak and dagger maneuvers that her brother had resorted to, just to move about Twin Yucca, she shook her head in disapproval. It was times such as these, that she felt certain that Adam had made a terrible mistake in making his identity public.

Charlie didn't get to see much of Twin Yucca as it passed by her window, for Kevin had her looking down at her shoes the entire drive. In fact, she wouldn't have even known that they had arrived at their destination, had not Shirley announced it out loud.

Not wasting any time, Kevin scuttled his clients into the Overholt house, and then returned for their luggage. Glad that the "hired gun" was finally out of her home, Shirley drove off with Chad to the hospital.

Before Charlie had a chance to take off her hat and shades, Vera was hugging her granddaughter.

"Oh!" cried the delighted old woman, "let me have a look at you, Pumpkin! Why, you're much too thin! What has Adam been feeding you?"

"Hi, Vera," grinned Adam, leaning forward and giving Charlie's grandma a hug. "How have you and Chuck been holding out?"

"We've been doing just fine!" Vera exclaimed happily. "Sit down, and tell me all the news! What's been going on since the wedding, besides your honeymoon?" When Vera slowly went to her chair to knit while they talked, Charlie noticed a limp in her walk.

"Grandma," asked Charlie, "what happened?"

"It's nothing," Vera explained, "I just twisted my hip getting out of the shower this morning. I expect it'll go away by tonight."

"Why didn't you tell me on the telephone?!" cried Charlie, wondering if there was anything else wrong that she hadn't told her.

"I knew you were coming, so why worry you over nothing?" reasoned Vera, picking up her knitting bag and finding where she had left off on the scarf she was making. "Stop fussing over me, Charlie. I'm fine."

Kevin spotted his usual place by the front window, where he could get a good vantage of the street, and sat down in the recliner that had been placed there just for him. He wasn't surprised to see that the SUV that had been tailing them since Shirley's house, was now parked across the street.

"Where's Daddy?" asked the the young woman, now wanting to take inventory of Chuck, as well.

"Napping in his bedroom," answered Vera, as Charlie disappeared down the hall to see her father. "Adam, it's so good to have you back in Twin Yucca!" resumed Vera. "I haven't seen you and Charlie in ages!"

"I apologize for that," said Adam, taking a seat on the couch while Vera knitted. "I should have tried harder to get Charlie back to you, sooner."

"I hope you're not feeling guilty," smiled Vera. "Adam, if I had needed help, I could've called Jerome. I may be getting on in years, but I'm not an invalid. According to my doctor, I've several more years ahead of me, so I have no intention of slowing down until I have to." Vera's knitting needles clacked away until she saw Adam's smiling at her. "Have you been making my granddaughter as happy as she deserves to be?" wondered Vera with a merry twinkle in her eye.

"I could do better," confessed Adam. "I *will* do better," he added in a determined voice.

"Grandma?" asked Charlie, walking back to the living room. "What medication is Daddy on? Did the doctor put him on anything new since I've been away?"

While Vera and Charlie talked, Adam tried to fight back the sleep from his eyes. He and Charlie hadn't had much rest the night before, and it was beginning to catch up with him. Realizing that

he had the couch all to himself, the tired man stretched out on the comfortably worn cushions and gradually drifted to sleep.

"Adam," said a feminine voice. Charlie nudged his shoulder, and a knowing smile stole across his sleeping face. Even though she was trying to get his attention, Charlie couldn't help stopping for a moment to watch. She didn't have to guess what her voice had suggested to him in his dreams, and was thankful that Adam wasn't a sleep talker. "Adam," Charlie finally repeated, shaking his shoulder more insistently, "it's lunch time."

"Lunch?" he mumbled, his dry lips smacking in hunger. "Did you say it was lunch time?" Adam opened his eyes and was greeted with a kiss from Charlie.

"Everyone else is already at the table," she smiled, "so you'd better get up, while there's still something left to eat."

"I'm coming," Adam yawned. "I was just resting my eyes for a few minutes."

"A few minutes?" laughed Charlie. "Try all morning!"

After a quick trip to the bathroom, Adam joined the others at the kitchen table.

"The SUV is still out there," informed Kevin, taking another bite of his lunch.

"It is?" sighed Adam, unfolding his napkin and placing it on his lap. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised."

Charlie filled Adam's glass with ice tea and set the pitcher on the table. Then she went to the stove and stirred the frying pan, adjusting the flame and adding more seasoning as needed. Adam suddenly realized that the food on his plate was only the first course.

"Isn't this a little much for lunch?" he smiled at her.

"I know, I got a little carried away," confessed Charlie, "but it's so good to be back home! I know where everything is in this kitchen, and I don't have to go searching for anything."

"Charlie wouldn't let me lift a finger to help," Vera told him over her cup of ice tea.

"Now that I'm home," said Charlie, adjusting the tie on her apron, "you won't have to do as much around here, Grandma."

"I don't want to find ways to be useless!" exclaimed Vera, adamantly. "I have two strong hands--"

Before Vera could finish her thought, Charlie had to go to Chuck's side and get his fork started again. Though Chuck was able to do repetitive tasks, he would sometimes stop, until someone got him started again. The problem corrected, Charlie returned to the stove.

Adam stared at Chuck's blank face and then looked at his beloved Charlie. The thoughts that followed came unbidden, and Adam struggled to push them aside.

"Charlie, if you want to cook all day," Adam forced a laugh, "you won't get any complaints from me! This is good!"

Pleased, Charlie gave him a warm smile.

Adam longingly watched Charlie move about the kitchen, happy, beautiful, and content. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, but a strand had escaped and tumbled down the side of her face in a long wisp of brown. Charlie would tuck the unruly lock behind her ear, only to have it later escape while she worked. Would she still do that when... Adam turned his eyes toward Chuck and swallowed hard.

"Adam, are you okay?" The sound of Charlie's voice came as a welcome interruption to his thoughts. "You looked like you were a hundred miles away," she observed.

"I'm fine," he tried to smile, his voice betraying a hint of unshed tears. "It's good to be home."

"Amen to that!" seconded Vera.

With a loving sigh, Charlie leaned down and pressed her lips to Adam's ear while he sat at the table.

"Thank you for understanding," she whispered. "Grandma and Daddy really needed me."

The wisp of hair that had been bothering Charlie, now spilled down Adam's shoulder. Adam stroked the soft lock with his fingers until Charlie took a seat beside him.

"While you were asleep," she informed him teasingly, "Grandma and I made a few decisions. I hope you don't mind."

Adam couldn't help but grin. How could his gray clouds withstand her sunlight? They couldn't, and he soon found himself laughing.

"So, you've been making decisions without me?" he chuckled. "I hope this means I don't have to start putting the toilet seat down!"

"I expect you to do that, anyway," replied Charlie, with a toss of her head. "Since there's only three bedrooms, you and I are taking my old room, Grandma is keeping hers, and Kevin will be doubling with Daddy."

"I'm okay with that, if Kevin is," shrugged Adam.

"I have a fallback position if its necessary," said Kevin. "There's always the couch. I'll need Mrs. Overholt to put my handgun in her safe before bedtime, though. It's not wise to leave it out unguarded." Kevin could have added, "especially with Chuck around," but he had tactfully left the last part unsaid. The others, however, understood what he had meant.

"That's a good idea," Charlie quickly agreed.

After lunch, Charlie retired to her room for a nap. Adam had promised to wake her up in two hours, so she wouldn't ruin her sleep for tonight-- the way she figured he had already done by sleeping the morning through. Sleep, however, would not come so easily for Charlie. She fidgeted on the bed, unsuccessfully trying to get a little rest to take the edge off her weariness. When Adam quietly checked in on her an hour later, he discovered that she was wide awake and listless.

"What's the matter?" he asked, entering the bedroom and closing the door behind him. "After last night, you should be sound asleep."

"I think I'll get up," she sighed, looking at the clock. "The floor needs to be mopped, the bathroom needs to be cleaned," her voice trailed off, as if the list were even longer but she was too tired to name it all off. "Adam," reflected Charlie, "I don't think Grandma's been able to do everything that she normally used to. The house is fairly clean, but a lot of the things that require bending over and lifting are unfinished. Have you seen the bathroom? It's terrible!"

"Let me clean the house," offered Adam. "You try to get some rest."

"Thanks," smiled Charlie, "but I need something to do. I'm done counting the tiles on the ceiling."

"I know the feeling," sympathized Adam, looking about her old bedroom. "You know," he mused, "this is the first time that I remember being in here... no, wait-- the time the intruder

tried to break in-- I checked your window." Still thinking about the incident, Adam walked to the window in question and made sure that it was locked.

"Kevin already checked," said Charlie.

"Good man," chuckled Adam, taking a closer look at the music box sitting on her nightstand. He opened the lid and "Shades of Love" began to play. Charlie heard the musician sigh heavily and shut the box.

"You miss your music, don't you?" she said knowingly.

"It feels a little like holding your breath," he answered. "I'm aching to get behind a piano-- any piano-- and just play. I don't suppose you have a toy keyboard in your closet?" he joked.

"I'm not *that* young!" she laughed, throwing her pillow at Adam. He ducked out of the way, and the object sailed past him. Charlie squealed with laughter when Adam pounced on the bed, intent on revenge. "Adam!" she gasped in between laughs. "Stop!"

From the living room, Vera and Kevin could hear Adam and Charlie, laughing, and in general having a good time with each other. Nothing sounded overly intimate, but when another peal of laughter came from behind the closed bedroom door, Vera looked up at Kevin, who was watching TV with Chuck.

"I suppose you find yourself in many awkward situations in your profession," she said, thoughtfully.

"What are you referring to?" asked Kevin. "You mean Mr. and Mrs. Clark? I mind my business, and let them mind theirs." When Vera looked a little disbelievingly at him, he added, "They have a healthy relationship, but keep it to themselves." Kevin returned to his program, and picked up the remote. "Do you mind if we change the channel, Mr. Overholt?" he asked Chuck, flicking it to another station. "I think you'll like this, better."

Back in Charlie's bedroom, the couple had quieted down and Adam lie beside his wife on the bed-- both fully clothed, and both sound asleep. The two hour mark that Charlie had wanted to be awake by, came and went, until the room began to darken as evening approached.

As Charlie stirred, a noise outside her bedroom window caused her to open her eyes. A brown and white roadrunner had perched itself on the window sill, its head cocked as a small lizard dangled from its beak. The roadrunner looked at the glass pane, almost as though it could see

inside, then, with a flick of its tail, hopped off the sill and disappeared into the brush. Charlie smiled sleepily and cuddled close to Adam.

Then the shrubbery moved again, causing Charlie's eyes to travel back to the window. Hoping that her roadrunner friend had returned, she followed the movement until a curious looking creature pushed aside the overgrown bushes. Charlie's blood ran cold as she saw a man's hand touch the window and then a face peering back at her. The man jumped back in surprise when he saw that he was being watched, but instead of running away, he fumbled for the camera about his neck.

"Adam!" screamed Charlie, shaking him without mercy, "there's someone outside our window!"

"What?" mumbled Adam.

"The window!" she gasped, pointing outside as the man raised his camera to take aim.

Thinking quick, Adam grabbed the blanket folded at the foot of Charlie's bed and tossed it over Charlie and himself. A half second later, it was followed by a brilliant flash of light. Then Adam and Charlie heard someone slamming open their bedroom door and running to the window.

"Get out of here!" they heard Kevin angrily shout. "I'm calling the police!"

That threat seemed to work, for the man literally stumbled out of the shrubbery and sprinted toward his SUV parked across the street.

"That's right, run," muttered Kevin, as Adam came out from hiding. The bodyguard quickly pulled out his cell phone and dialed the police. "I'm reporting his license plate number," he informed Adam.

"How can you?" wondered Adam, for the vehicle's plate wasn't visible from the house.

"I took it down when I noticed him at your sister's, earlier this morning," explained Kevin. "It pays to be careful."

"Oh," smiled Adam. "Glad you're on the job."

Hearing that it was all clear, Charlie jumped off the bed and ran to the window.

"I can't believe the gall of that man!" she cried, indignantly. "Wasn't he breaking the law, or something?"

"It's called trespassing," replied Adam, "and he won't get away with it."

Vera hobbled to the bedroom door and asked what was going on. While Kevin talked to the police, Charlie related what had happened to her grandmother.

"They're sending a patrol car," announced Kevin, closing his cell phone and slipping it back into his pocket. "I'll be glad to get you and Mrs. Clark back to Villa Rosa," he told Adam. "It's harder to keep them away in this neighborhood."

Hearing this, Charlie paused her narration. She had been hoping to stay at her grandma's home while Villa Rosa was being worked on, so that she could remain close to Vera and Chuck.

"Thank heavens everything is all right!" exclaimed Vera, as Charlie helped her back to the living room to sit down and rest her hip.

"Grandma," observed Charlie, "your limp is worse. Maybe, we should take you to see a doctor. Does it hurt very much?"

"I think it's because night's coming on," replied Vera, carefully sitting down in her recliner. "My muscles always get stiff during the evening."

"Does your hip usually hurt at night?" inquired Charlie, trying to determine the severity of the situation.

"No, it doesn't," admitted Vera, "but it'll probably go away. It's nothing to worry about."

"You said that, this morning," reminded Charlie.

"Is something wrong?" asked Adam, entering the living room and seeing the concerned look on Charlie's face.

"I think we should get Grandma to the emergency room," she said, thoughtfully. "Her hip is worse."

"How are you feeling, Vera?" asked Adam, crouching down and looking at her with kind eyes. "Do you want us to take you to the emergency room?"

"I don't *want* to go," she hesitated, "but perhaps, Charlie is right. If it keeps on like this, I'm going to have a hard time getting to the bathroom, tonight."

Adam looked up at Charlie and nodded.

"All right, then," he said, standing up and checking his watch. "I'll tell Kevin to be ready to leave just as soon as the police are finished asking questions. Do you think you can wait a little longer, Vera?"

"I can wait," she affirmed.

Before Charlie had an opportunity to ask when the promised squad car would arrive, a black and white pulled up to the Overholt house and an officer got out.

"It's Mr. Erickson!" exclaimed Kevin, with a broad grin.

With a cry of delight, Charlie ran to the door and welcomed him inside.

"How's Maggie?" Charlie begged information from her old friend.

"About as eager to see you, as you are to see her," chuckled Jeff, giving her a hug and then going to Adam for a hearty handshake. "I hear you had some trouble."

Adam and Kevin related the facts to Jeff, and the men discussed what was to be done.

Charlie was impatient to get Vera to the hospital. As she was waiting for the men to finish, Mrs. Jacobs from across the street saw the police cruiser sitting outside the Overholts' house and wanted to know if anything was wrong.

"Do you need a ride to the hospital?" offered Mrs. Jacobs, seeing that there was a minor emergency on their hands.

"Thank you, Gloria," accepted Vera. "I really appreciate it."

Before Charlie could help Vera into Gloria's car, Adam quickly broke off his conversation with Jeff and took her place escorting Vera to the Twin Yucca Community Hospital. There was a lot going on, and it put Kevin on guard. He didn't want another photographer or a crazy fan taking advantage of the disorder, and made sure that the house stayed locked up after Adam had left.

Since this wasn't a social call, Jeff had to leave after he had done all that he could do for Charlie and her family. The police would keep an eye on the house, and the photographer that had

trespassed would be dealt with. After extracting a promise from Jeff that the two families would get together for a visit sometime, Officer Erickson got into his vehicle and drove away.

The evening passed, and Charlie kept busy by doing some much needed housework, including cleaning the bathroom. Then she fixed dinner for herself, Kevin, and her father. After everyone had gone to bed, Charlie waited in the living room, watching TV and keeping close tabs on the time.

Adam and Vera didn't come home until nearly two the next morning, not because Vera's condition had been so serious, but because most of the time had been spent waiting for the results of an X-ray to come back. Adam had used some of that time visiting Thomas, but since visiting hours were almost over, he couldn't stay for very long. The doctor treated Vera with some medication for an inflamed hip and instructed Adam to make sure she stayed off her feet for a while. Then, Mrs. Jacobs drove them home.

When Kevin cautiously opened the front door, Charlie was glad to see that Vera's face looked a little less pained than before. Vera now had a crutch, and slowly made her way into the house while Adam did his best to make sure she didn't fall. Kevin nodded goodnight to them and went back to bed, as Charlie followed her grandmother to her room, and carefully helped her change into a nightgown.

After Vera was resting in bed, Charlie went to the kitchen to find Adam rummaging around in the refrigerator.

"I saved you some leftovers from dinner," she offered.

"I ate something in the cafeteria," Adam thanked her, "but I'm hungry, again. How did things go while we were gone? Anymore trouble with photographers? I didn't see anyone outside just now."

"That doesn't mean they're not there," smiled Charlie, placing Adam's dinner into the microwave.

"Careful," he warned with a weary chuckle, "you're beginning to sound paranoid, Charlie."

"I'd like to see someone else wake up to find a stranger with a camera at their bedroom window, and not get a little jumpy," replied Charlie, as Adam sat down to the table. "Do you want some coffee? I could start a pot."

"That's a first," Adam's eyebrows raised. "Usually, you don't offer me caffeine before bedtime."

"After all the sleep you've gotten, yesterday," laughed Charlie, "I don't think caffeine will make much of a difference, one way or another!"

While Adam ate his leftovers, Charlie kept him company at the table. Her thoughtfully quiet demeanor told him that she had something on her mind.

"I've seen that look, before," he observed. "What's up?"

"While you were gone," began Charlie, "I've been doing a lot of thinking. I can't be away from Grandma and Daddy while we're restoring Villa Rosa, as I had originally planned. Grandma should stay off her hip for a while, and even when she's better, she shouldn't be expected to take care of Daddy all by herself."

"What do you want to do, then?" asked Adam. "The mobile home at Villa Rosa only has two bedrooms," he reminded her. "I know we're managing to cram into your grandmother's house right now, but not even *you* can organize five adults into two bedrooms!"

"I don't know if it's possible," said Charlie, "but do you think we could put up another mobile home beside the existing one? Then, we could make a doorway in between the two living rooms, and it could be one big house. I know we'd be stuck with two kitchens, but the extra bathroom would be nice. What do you think? Would that be too expensive for something that's only temporary?"

"If that's what you want," smiled Adam, "then you'll get no opposition from me."

"Is 'no opposition' the same thing as agreement?" she wondered.

"It is, in my book," answered Adam, with a loving grin. "If we can afford it, then you'll get it."

"Still, I don't want to run through your money," she hesitated.

"Honey," chuckled Adam, "I think we can safely manage another mobile home without breaking the bank!"

Charlie had momentarily forgotten how much money Adam had, and she tried to hide her embarrassment behind her mug of coffee. That wasn't enough, however, for when Adam saw her face turn crimson, he couldn't help but smile.

"Go ahead and laugh," Charlie scolded him, sheepishly. "I grew up in a household where money was always tight. Daddy made sure there was food on the table, but we never spent money unless

we had to. What we couldn't afford, we did without-- not that I'm expecting *you* to understand!" she exclaimed. "You and your private jet!"

Adam burst into peals of laughter until Charlie had to remind him that there were people in the house who were trying to sleep.

"Until I met you," he tried to quiet himself, "I never considered myself as a big spender! Why, compared to you, I'm downright extravagant!"

"Just because you have more money than some small countries," she reasoned, "it doesn't mean that I'm going to be careless."

"It's not *my* money," declared Adam. "It's *ours*. I trust you, Charlie-girl. You've a sound head on those pretty shoulders, and I'm not afraid of you being careless."

The sincere look on his face told her that he wasn't teasing or joking. Adam truly trusted her, and the realization of it meant more to Charlie than the money ever could.

"You build Villa Rosa however you want," he told her, finishing off his leftovers. "Just do me a favor?" requested Adam. "Don't decorate our bedroom in frilly girl things."

"'Frilly girl things'?" repeated Charlie with a puzzled laugh. "Such as?"

"Yeah, you know," explained Adam, "lacy pillows and frilly bedspreads. Jeff told me Maggie has their bedroom looking like the stuff was going out of style."

"Did he tell her that?" wondered Charlie.

"He loves her too much to say anything," replied Adam. He grinned at Charlie. "The poor man has been blinded by his love for her. Isn't that a tragedy?"

"It's horrible," she smiled. "You, on the other hand, are *much* too sensible for that."

"Absolutely," he nodded, with a playful twinkle in his eyes. Adam slid back in his chair and looked at her from his vantage across the table. "Oh, Charlie-girl," he sighed contentedly, "what did I get myself into when I met you?"

"I don't know," answered Charlie, "but I'm sure your sister has some theories."

"Shirley likes you more than she lets on," confided Adam. "I can tell."

"Then, you're the only one who can," sighed Charlie, getting up and clearing away Adam's dishes. "She *has* been trying to be nice to me, though."

"Speaking of my sister," said Adam, "I visited Thomas, last night. I thought I might as well stop by his room while I was at the hospital waiting for Vera."

"How was he?" inquired Charlie.

"They found out why he had the heart attack," said Adam. "It was related to his bout of rheumatic fever when he was young." Adam shook his head and finished the last of his coffee before getting up to pour another cup. "I don't know, Charlie," he sighed, leaning against the countertop as she ran water in the sink to wash his dishes, "many years ago, it was the fever that turned Thomas to Christ, in the first place. Seems to me, God is trying to remind him of Who's in control. It certainly isn't Thomas, that's for sure." As Adam talked, some of the water from the kitchen sink splattered onto his pants.

"You're standing too close to the sink," remarked Charlie.

"Why aren't you using the dishwasher?" Adam suddenly realized, picking up a towel to dry himself off.

"It's out of order," she explained, rinsing a plate beneath the running water.

"When did this happen?"

"Sometime while we were away," shrugged Charlie. "I found out this evening, that the drain in the shower is a little sluggish," she suddenly remembered to inform him. "It takes forever for the water to go down."

"Really?" Adam quickly brightened. "I happen to know a former Master Plumber who's quite good. He also has very reasonable rates. But," added Adam with a discouraged sigh, "night calls cost extra. I don't know if you can afford him."

"Do you think he might accept something else in exchange for his work?" wondered Charlie, trying hard not to break into laughter, for Adam's overly-grave face was almost more than she could take.

"I think he might be persuaded," mused Adam. He set his mug down and moved behind Charlie while she worked at the sink. She could feel his breath on her neck as he spoke. "One slow drain in exchange for a game of chess," he proposed.

"Not if you're going to let me win," Charlie warned him.

"Even if you get soundly beaten?" he asked in surprise.

"You mean, *when* I get soundly beaten," laughed Charlie. "Really, Adam, it's no fun when you don't even put up a fight."

"With you, I hardly have to," he joked. "Okay, if it's a trouncing you want, then it's a trouncing you'll get! I'll set up the chess board on the kitchen table."

"*Now?*" asked Charlie, looking at the clock. "Adam, it's four in the morning."

"So?" he shrugged.

"You may be used to staying up at all hours of the night," she sighed, "but I'm not."

"Are you tired?" he asked. "You don't look it."

"No," she admitted, "I suppose I'm not. I had a rather long nap, today."

"Then, I'll set up the chess board," he grinned.

Even though Charlie predictably lost, the two were enjoying their game together so much, that she agreed to be beaten a second time.

Then the sun began to peek in at the windows, and Charlie had to get up to start breakfast. When the food was ready, Adam carried a breakfast tray into Vera's room so she wouldn't have to walk to the kitchen. Kevin turned on the morning news with Chuck in the living room, and the two ate their hot muffins and scrambled eggs, while Mrs. Jacobs dropped by to see how Vera had fared through the night.

Outside, the night had transitioned into a beautiful August morning. Charlie brushed aside the curtains and looked out the living room window as a roadrunner scampered across the front yard, chasing another lizard. An arm tenderly encircled her waist, pulling her away from the gaze of the world. Behind the thickly laced curtains, Adam kissed his Charlie.

"Welcome home, Mrs. Clark," he murmured happily.

"This is the day which the LORD hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it."
~ Psalm 118:24 ~

Chapter Fifty-three

A Love Worth the Effort

"Who is this that cometh... [to] the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?"

~ Song of Solomon 8:5 ~

Staring at the bleak sight before him, Adam switched off the engine to their SUV. Villa Rosa had little improved since the last time they had been here, and their trip to Alaska hadn't improved his opinion of the rundown dump. Struggling to bite his tongue, Adam tried to keep these grim observations to himself. He didn't want to extinguish Charlie's youthful enthusiasm about turning this desolate set of ramshackle buildings into a livable home. Sometimes, it was hard not to discourage her. But whenever Adam was tempted to betray his feelings, all he had to do was look into Charlie's eager face, and his reluctance would vanish. She was so excited, that even with the recent setback of Thomas, it wasn't enough to dim her hopes of turning Villa Rosa into their house of dreams. To Adam, that dream seemed even more impossible now that his experienced brother-in-law was no longer on the job, but Charlie was remaining optimistic through it all.

While Kevin helped Adam carry their luggage into the mobile home, Charlie walked about the estate, looking at the little progress that Thomas had made while they were in Alaska. Most of the weeds had been hauled away from the main building, and several sections of the broken sandstone floor had been removed from the kitchen. But aside from the temporary living accommodations that Thomas had set up, and the high perimeter fence that surrounded their twenty acres of weeds and gopher holes, Villa Rosa was still untouched from renovation. Even the row of bungalows behind the mansion, had yet to see any attention or improvement. Gulping back a feeling of trepidation, Charlie wondered if she had spent Adam's money for nothing. What if Villa Rosa would never be more than what it was right now-- a dump?

Charlie had left Vera and Chuck in Twin Yucca, but only for a handful of days until she could have another mobile home set up to accommodate them. Mrs. Jacobs had graciously volunteered to check in on Vera and make sure that everything was all right, and while Charlie had hated to presume on their neighbor, she had gratefully accepted the offer.

The seventeen year old shaded her eyes from the blazing sun, and gazed at the barren landscape that surrounded them. Scorched ground and miles of sagebrush seemed to engulf them in what was beginning to feel like one big do-it-yourself disaster.

Charlie's eyes turned back to the air conditioned mobile home, where Adam was taking the last of their belongings inside. At least, they had somewhere to escape from this oppressive heat! With a discouraged heart, Charlie headed to their makeshift home to collect her thoughts.

Sensing that Adam was struggling with similar doubts of his own, Charlie prepared herself to hear his disappointing remarks as she stepped through the front door. However, instead of a disapproving frown, she was greeted by Adam's wide grin. Sitting in the middle of their living room, was the cause of his sudden transformation.

"It's here!" he exclaimed, quickly moving aside their luggage so he could sit down at his piano. Adam happily ran his fingers over the black and white keys, and a familiar melody filled the air. With a laugh, Adam looked up at Charlie. "It's *so* good to be home!" he sighed contentedly.

Charlie couldn't help but smile at this sudden reversal in Adam's demeanor. His reference to this place as "home," was a kindness that she felt it didn't deserve-- at least, not yet. Feeling her resolve return, Charlie thankfully kissed Adam and left him to his beloved music while she picked up a telephone book and her satellite phone. It was time to find a general contractor to take Thomas' place. Her family needed a home, and she was determined to make one for them.

To Charlie's surprise, it wasn't easy to find someone willing to take on the renovations that Villa Rosa required. Many hung up after she gave them a brief rundown of the condition of the estate, and one even suggested that she tear it all down and start from scratch!

On the other side of the room, Charlie could hear Adam happily playing at his instrument. She had gone through every general contractor in the book-- save one, but he had been out of the office and could not be reached. Dread began to seep into Charlie's heart. She feared that Adam was going to seriously regret following her out to the middle of nowhere, and plunking down a million dollars for a wasteland, simply because she had wanted it. Charlie knew he would never berate her for this seemingly foolhardy decision, but she desperately wanted to prove herself worthy of him! Just as Charlie was beginning a prayer to rescue her from this mess, her satellite phone rang.

"Hello?" asked the caller, with a slight Italian accent. "My secretary said you were trying to reach me," he explained, trying to speak in a loud enough voice to be heard over the construction going on behind him. "What can I do for you?"

Charlie quickly related her situation to the man, and she could hear him audibly sigh.

"Do you think it's a hopeless cause, Mr. Donato?" she finally ventured to ask.

"Well, Ma'am," he chuckled, "sometimes, if you throw enough money at a problem, things have a tendency to find their own solutions." Beppe Donato hesitated. He could tell this potential customer was a young woman, and the likelihood of her being able to afford his services was highly unlikely. "You'd probably do better to tear down the building, and start over in a different location," he advised. "A project like this isn't for the faint of heart, and it certainly won't be cheap."

By the polite but condescending tone of his voice, it suddenly occurred to Charlie that perhaps the other contractors had turned her down, simply because she had sounded young over the telephone. Maybe, they thought she was just a daydreaming teenager who couldn't possibly pay for what she was proposing. Summoning what little self dignity she had left, Charlie managed to continue, all the while hoping that she didn't sound like the little girl she was beginning to feel.

"Money isn't my difficulty, Mr. Donato!" she tried to laugh with some authority. "My husband and I are living in a mobile home on the estate, and his piano fills most of our small living room! He needs a proper music room to compose in, and as soon as another mobile home can be delivered, the rest of my family will be joining us."

Music room? Compose? Beppe was intrigued.

"Who *is* your husband?" he asked.

"Why, Wallace Shipley, of course," replied Charlie, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Really," she gulped, silently praying that Mr. Donato would believe that she truly was who she said she was, "we've already invested a million dollars in this location, and fully realize that it won't be the last million before Villa Rosa is completed. I may sound young, Mr. Donato, but I'm not naive!"

The man laughed out loud-- more out of relief than anything else. Now that Beppe fully understood who he was speaking to, he knew he could take her seriously.

"How do I get to Villa Rosa?" he asked, pulling out a pen and scribbling down Charlie's directions. "I'll be there today."

With a triumphant smile, Charlie hung up the satellite phone and hugged herself in congratulations. Suddenly, she realized that Adam's music had stopped. To her chagrin, she found him observing her from across the piano.

"How much did you overhear?" she timidly wondered.

"Money isn't my problem," he repeated with an amused smile.

"Oh," sighed Charlie, "so you heard that. I was having some difficulty being taken seriously," she explained. "Everyone kept hanging up on me, until I told the last guy that my husband was Wallace Shipley."

"I'm sure *that* got his attention," laughed Adam.

"It did," grinned Charlie. "He's coming today."

"Congratulations," Adam nodded to her, approvingly. "If my name can open any doors for you, then use it freely, Charlie."

"It certainly opened Beppe Donato's door," she mused.

"Donato?" Adam exclaimed in surprise. "Why, I know him! Dad and I worked with his company several years back, on the Desert Vista complex on the corner of twenty-third." Adam laughed. "You didn't have to drop Wallace Shipley's name to get *his* attention. Clark would have been enough!"

Later that morning, a shiny black pickup with white letters pulled up to the Villa Rosa estate. A large man in his early seventies stepped out and greeted Adam and Charlie.

"So, it IS you!" chuckled Beppe, heartily shaking Adam's hand. "Your wife called me today, and I confess, she took me by surprise!"

The men swapped questions about each other's families, until it was time to get down to the business at hand. Beppe walked about the estate, while Charlie explained to him what she wanted done, and listened to his own list of suggestions. To Beppe's surprise, Charlie was more informed than he had first given her credit. She knew what she wanted, and had some ideas of how to go about getting them done. With a proud smile, Adam remained in the background, occasionally tossing in his opinion where needed. Even if Villa Rosa remained one big shack, at least it was making Charlie happy.

But Villa Rosa would be no shack. The vision Charlie had for the place, was intriguing Beppe. He had only been half joking over the telephone when he had said that problems sometimes have a way of solving themselves, if you throw enough money at them. He knew Adam had deep pockets, and Beppe was no longer laughing.

After several hours of discussion and planning, Charlie went inside to get everyone some food and cold soft drinks. While they waited, the two men sat in the shade on the front steps of the mobile home and swatted away the flies that accosted their faces.

"I guess you were surprised to get Charlie's phone call," surmised Adam, as Beppe took off his baseball cap and fanned himself from the heat.

"It took me off guard," Beppe admitted. "But once I realized it was your wife I was speaking to, things started making sense. I don't personally know of very many who could afford to pay for something like this. Charlie's got some pretty big dreams, Adam."

Adam could sense the hesitancy in Beppe's voice.

"Whatever she wants, Beppe," he answered his old friend, "I'm more than willing to pay."

"You're that far gone over her?" chuckled Beppe.

"I'm afraid I am," admitted Adam, as Charlie came out with chilled drinks and a plate of sandwiches for their lunch. "And I hope I never recover!"

Laughing, Beppe opened a can of soda and helped himself to the food.

"I should warn you about the paparazzi, though," Adam remembered to caution their new general contractor. "They've been a little insistent about getting our picture lately, and you could easily find yourself in the middle of it all. So far, out here has been the only place we've been able to go, to escape them."

"You certainly picked a good location to get away from everything," observed Beppe.

"You can't help it if they follow you," continued Adam, "but try not to let them through the front gates when you come in."

"I'm looking forward to completing Villa Rosa," sighed Charlie, longingly. "We need a place where you don't have to be concerned about who's pressing their faces against your window pane, to take a picture of your private life!"

The longer Beppe talked with Adam and Charlie, the more he realized the practicality of what they needed from Villa Rosa. From that day on, Beppe was incessantly on the telephone with Charlie. There were so many things to plan, that it nearly brought Charlie to tears just thinking

about it all. But with Adam encouraging her forward, the young woman was determined to make a home for Adam and the rest of her family.

The day the second mobile home arrived, was a big event for Charlie. Beppe had hired movers to bring some of Vera and Chuck's belongings from Jerome's place in Twin Yucca, and drive it out to Villa Rosa. The rest would have to wait for the main house to be finished, for there just wasn't enough room in the mobile homes for everything. Even Adam was waiting for the remainder of his things from his house in town. For the time being, he had to content himself with his piano, and found that he could be patient much easier, now that he had his music back.

Charlie hurried to put Vera's bedroom into order, and then Chuck's. Now that Adam's piano filled the first living room, Charlie was suddenly grateful for the second one. They had even left a door separating the two living rooms, so Vera and Chuck wouldn't disturb Adam while he was at his piano.

Kevin tried to stay out of the way as furniture and boxes of clothing were carried through the front door. Even Adam found himself underfoot more than once, and soon had to join Kevin, while Charlie managed the move.

Then, Jerome arrived with Vera and Chuck from Twin Yucca. Jerome sneered when he saw the rundown state of the mansion, and silently congratulated himself for not standing in the way of Adam and Charlie's marriage. Charlie was already beginning to punish Adam, and Jerome knew that this was just the beginning. The nursing home administrator smiled grimly as he climbed into his car and left. Finally, he had a reason to be glad over the Overholt family curse.

This was Vera's second time to see Villa Rosa, and while she was a little apprehensive about the future of its renovation, she was grateful to not be living by herself any more. Vera would have been the last to admit it, but she felt better knowing that there was someone in the house besides Chuck, should she need assistance.

While Charlie helped her grandmother to unpack into her new bedroom, Adam tried to situate Chuck in front of a television set in the second living room. Bewildered by the change of his surroundings, Chuck became belligerent, and wildly waved his arms at Adam in protest.

"Charlie!" shouted Adam, as Chuck continued to flail his limbs. "What should I do?"

The two women appeared from Vera's bedroom to see what was wrong.

"I can't get him to quiet down," explained Adam, in a rather helpless voice.

"Chucky," soothed Vera, carefully approaching her confused son. Managing to take him by the arm, Vera led him to a rocking chair and coaxed him to sit down. Patiently, she began to push the rocking chair back and forth, until he was doing it on his own. "There," sighed Vera, "that should keep him happy for a while."

Sadly, Adam stared into Chuck's blank face.

"Do you think he recognizes me?" Adam asked Vera, bending down and trying to look Chuck straight in the eye. He strained for any glimpse of recognition, but there was none.

"I don't think so," Vera shook her head. "They say the oldest memories are the last to go, and you two didn't know each other very long before he became worse."

While Charlie helped Vera settle in, Adam returned to his piano. Every once in a while, Adam would pause at his music, and listen to the happy sound of Charlie's voice as she set her home in order. Then, with a smile, he would go back to his composition, grateful that she was there to bless his life with her presence.

With Beppe's help, it didn't take long for the work on Villa Rosa to begin in earnest. Vera's arrival soon proved to be a Providential blessing, for Charlie was frequently outside with Beppe, making decisions, and planning the next step of the renovation. Adam had offered to set aside his music and help her out, but Charlie guessed that he would rather be at his piano, and persuaded him that it wasn't necessary. In truth, now that she had Beppe Donato, all she needed from Adam was his occasional input on some aspect of the renovation.

August passed, and Adam was spending the majority of his days with his music. Most mornings, he would wake up, only to find Charlie already outside with the work crew. At night, Charlie came to bed too exhausted to spend any quality time with her husband, or to hold a conversation about how her day had went. Adam had thought he could be more rational about her having so little time for him, but the longer this went on, the harder it was to be so impartial. He was missing his Charlie-girl!

Near the middle of September, Adam finally decided that he had to do something more about the situation, and made up his mind to talk to Charlie. The problem was, trying to find time where she wasn't busy. After another day of missed opportunities, Adam went outside one morning and found her with Beppe.

"That's no problem," Beppe was telling Charlie. "We can plumb into the drilled well, and irrigate the bushes along the perimeter of your fence line."

"Now," asked Charlie, "are you sure we can get already full grown oleander bushes? We're going to need a lot of them, to hedge twenty acres."

"My landscaping contractor assures me he can do it," affirmed Beppe, nodding his greeting to Adam and then returning to Charlie. "They'll be several feet high, and make a good wind break when those strong Santa Ana winds come barreling through here."

"It'll also make it harder for the paparazzi to see the main house," grinned Charlie, pleased at the mere thought.

"Charlie," Adam finally spoke up, trying to wait patiently for a break in the discussion before interrupting. "May I talk to you?"

"Could it wait until after lunch?" she pleaded. "The contractor for the runway will be here in a few minutes, and he and I need to go over the plans so construction can begin as soon as possible."

"Runway?" sighed Adam. "Okay, after lunch then."

With a sigh, Adam walked past the musclebound men that were working nearby, and went inside.

When Vera had lunch ready, Charlie sat down to the table with a clipboard beside her plate, so she could work while she ate. With a grimace that even Vera noticed, Adam finished his meal in silence, and waited for Charlie to do likewise. Then, they were going to have a talk.

But, before Adam had a chance to speak with her, Beppe showed up at the front door, and informed Charlie that there was a mix-up in the order they had made for the roofing materials. With a cry of dismay, Charlie hurriedly went with Beppe to go sort out the situation.

Groaning, Adam tossed aside his napkin. Vera didn't know what was going on, but by the way Adam looked just now, she knew it was something. The grandmother decided that unless he asked for her advice, it would probably be best to mind her own business. So Vera retreated to her recliner in the second living room to knit, while Chuck watched television.

After several minutes of reflection at the table, Adam pushed back his chair and got to his feet.

"I haven't been insistent enough," he muttered to himself. Adam tramped to the door in newfound resolve, but found himself hesitating at the last minute. "I could wait until bedtime, before she falls asleep," he reasoned. "Surely, there's no need to take her away from her work,

right now." Undecided, Adam stepped outside, and into a seeming beehive of swarming workers-- all doing their jobs at the direction of Beppe and Charlie. Heavy construction equipment was everywhere, and Adam found himself watching a backhoe as it dug its teeth into the hard ground, and dug out several bucketfuls of dirt and rock.

"What's that hole for?" Adam wondered. Just then, he heard someone holler, and realized that he was in the way of a pickup truck as it made its way through the busy scene.

"Get out of the way!" the driver impatiently shouted at him.

Adam quickly stepped out of the way, and searched the moving hard hats for Charlie's long brown mane. He found it among a group of burly men, as they looked over a large set of blueprints that were unrolled on the hood of someone's truck. His pretty wife was surrounded by suntanned, well-muscled men-- some of whom looked to be only a few years older than herself. They would smile at Charlie, and some would linger on her face longer than Adam thought necessary for a normal conversation to require. Something crept over him, and at first, he thought it was concern, or perhaps annoyance that so many of the younger men should huddle around Charlie so closely. But, he had to admit that no one was touching her or doing anything very out of the ordinary. Could it just be his imagination? Then why was his jaw set on edge? Adam had no easy answer.

Feeling strangely out of place, Adam returned to the mobile home without ever speaking to Charlie. She was clearly busy, and he suddenly decided that he needed to get back to work. Trying to get his mind off the disturbing thoughts that were beginning to stir within him, the musician slid behind his precious piano and stared blankly at the keys.

When the crew dispersed later that day, Charlie went inside for the dinner her grandmother was preparing. While Vera set the small table, Charlie discovered Adam sitting on the couch with Chuck, watching a program, that most likely, neither of them really wanted to see. With a smile, Adam noticed her dust covered form and dirt streaked face, as she paused to see what they were watching. He couldn't help thinking, that even then, Charlie was beautiful to behold.

"How was your day?" he inquired, getting up and going to her with the television remote in hand.

"Okay, I guess," shrugged Charlie, her eyes half awake. "We've finished a lot, but there's still so much left to do." She gladly accepted the arms that Adam offered her, but soon realized that she was getting him dirty.

"I don't mind," he quickly assured her.

"I'll be so glad when the work is finished," she sighed, contentedly resting her head against his shoulder.

Silently reveling in Charlie's arms, Adam's hands moved to her back as he held her even closer. In fact, he was hugging her so tightly, that when Charlie felt something hard pressing into her ribs, she winced in pain.

"Sorry," apologized Adam, showing her the object still in his hand. "It's just the remote control."

"I see you've been busy... in your own way," she smiled, her white teeth contrasting against her dirty face.

"What are they making you do out there?" wondered Adam, running a finger down the bridge of her nose and creating a pale streak where her skin showed through. "We're paying them good money to do the work FOR us!"

"No one is goldbricking," assured Charlie, as Vera called them to dinner. "Those guys have been working really hard."

Adam was quiet. After letting go of Charlie so she could go wash up for supper, he tossed the remote onto the couch beside Chuck.

"Time to eat, Chuck," he said, helping his friend to his feet.

The smell of good food filled both mobile homes, for Vera had fixed a hearty, old-fashioned American supper of mashed potatoes and gravy, glazed ham, green peas, and sweet corn on the cob. To this, she added hot buttermilk biscuits, that just begged to be patted down with butter and honey. With a very empty stomach, Charlie sat down and eagerly helped herself to the food before her. To Vera's delight, her granddaughter ate as though she hadn't seen a crumb of food all day, and even forgot her vegetarianism long enough to enjoy a small slice of ham.

When Charlie later excused herself from the table to go take a shower, Adam was still eating.

"Won't you have some dessert?" offered Vera, buttering another biscuit for Chuck.

"Thanks, Grandma," smiled Charlie, "but I couldn't hold another bite!"

Wearily, Charlie readied the shower and was returning to the bathroom with her nightclothes, when Adam unexpectedly met her in the hallway.

"I thought you were still eating dinner," she said, somewhat surprised by his presence. She tried to move past him, but Adam wouldn't budge.

"I wasn't very hungry," he replied, reaching out and gently stroking her cheek with his hand.

"You know," she mused with a loving smile, "you've been very understanding about all this. I realize we haven't had much time for *us*, lately."

Adam was about to say that he understood, but that wouldn't have been quite true, so he remained silent.

"I'm trying to turn Villa Rosa into a home," continued Charlie, "and I really appreciate your patience while I get this done. I want you to be proud of me, Adam."

"I'm not sure I deserve your saying that," he hesitated, dropping his hand and looking into her deep brown eyes.

"Nonsense," she smiled. "Of course, you do."

Instead of responding, Adam moved aside so she could get into the bathroom.

"Are you all right?" wondered Charlie. Concerned, she placed her hand on his forehead to check his temperature. When Adam softly groaned at her touch, she smiled knowingly. "There's nothing wrong with you," Charlie diagnosed in a soft whisper, "that a little attention wouldn't solve."

Adam gazed at her lovingly.

"I don't deserve you," he confessed.

"No more than I, you," replied Charlie.

"You don't understand," resisted Adam, stepping back and shaking his head in self-reproach. "I don't know what came over me today."

"What are you talking about?" wondered Charlie. Even now, she couldn't help but yawn, and Adam realized that this wasn't the right time for such a discussion.

"Not now," he sighed. "You're nearly asleep on your feet, as it is. I'll tell you later."

"Are we all right?" she smiled.

"I guess so," nodded Adam, turning to leave. "Charlie?" he suddenly asked, as she was about to go into the bathroom.

"What?" she yawned, her tired eyes falling shut and then struggling to open once more.

"Nothing," he dismissed. "I'll save you some dessert for tomorrow."

"All right, thanks," she smiled. Before she closed the door behind her, Adam called after her one more time.

"Charlie?"

Charlie opened the door and looked at him with a puzzled face.

"If I don't get to tell you later," he explained, "goodnight."

She cocked her head at him curiously.

"I just wanted to tell you goodnight," repeated Adam. With that, he returned to the table to finish his dinner.

Charlie was perplexed for only a moment. With a knowing nod of her head, she disappeared into the bathroom for that long awaited shower. She would take care of him, *after* she no longer carried half the Mojave Desert in her hair and clothing.

The hot water felt good, and Charlie was tempted to shut her eyes and drift to sleep under its soothing torrent. After the grime of the day had been cleaned from her skin and hair, Charlie wrapped herself in a large bath towel and ran water in the shower to rinse the dirt she had contributed to its walls and floor. When the shower still looked dirty, Charlie realized that it would take more than just a little water to get the bathroom looking clean again. Too tired to do anything about it now, the young woman put on her nightgown and robe.

As Charlie opened the bathroom door, a draft of air greeted her warm skin and chilled her, for she had just come from the humid atmosphere of a hot shower. In her bare feet, Charlie padded to the living room and found no one at the piano. When she stuck her head into the second living room, she found Vera asleep in her easy chair, while Chuck dozed away on the sofa. Charlie realized that she had spent longer in the bathroom than she had intended, for everyone

had already gone to bed, or was about to. When Charlie turned to leave, Vera stirred and looked up at her granddaughter.

"You look much better," she observed, setting aside her knitting bag. "I think I'd better get Chuck ready for bed. Adam and Kevin have already turned in."

"Do you want any help?" offered Charlie.

"No, no, I can manage," said Vera, turning off the television set.

Kissing her grandma goodnight, Charlie went back through the first living room and then to the bedroom that she and Adam shared. Thinking he was probably already asleep, Charlie quietly opened the door and stepped through, careful to close it again without making any noise.

"How was your shower?" asked Adam, leaning forward in bed and clicking on a small lamp on the nightstand.

"Are you still awake?" she asked in surprise. Charlie took off her robe and climbed into her side of the large bed. "Sorry I took so long in the shower," she apologized. "Every major muscle group in my body is sore, and that hot water felt good."

Smelling the clean fragrance of the soap she had just used, Adam leaned forward and turned off the light. Instead of quickly falling asleep as she usually did, however, Charlie cuddled against Adam and began to be intimate with him.

"What are you doing?" he asked her through the darkness. "You're already worn out, Charlie."

"But, you need me," she reasoned, trying hard to stifle another yawn.

"It's all right," he assured her, unwinding her arm from about his neck and tucking her into bed. "Go to sleep, Charlie."

"Goodnight, Adam," her voice drifted away. "I love you."

"I love you, too," he whispered.

Later that night, Adam was awakened by the soft touch of Charlie's lips against his mouth. His eyes traveled to the blue glow of the clock near the head of the bed, and he realized that it was extremely early in the morning. Halfheartedly, Adam tried to resist Charlie's touch, for he could

feel her still-tired body straining to please him. But she wasn't giving him much chance to resist, and before long, he succumbed to her embrace.

As the time slipped by, Charlie grew so tired that she wouldn't have been able to stay awake if the house were on fire. Still in Adam's arms, she fell into a deep, sound sleep, and didn't even awake the next morning when he climbed out of bed and dressed for the day. Not even the smell of Vera's hot breakfast was enough to rouse Charlie from her slumber.

"You need to have a talk with Beppe and the rest of the crew," Vera whispered to Adam, as they checked in on her before lunch that day. "Just look at her! It's not her responsibility to do their work for them!"

Adam didn't know how to respond. He was feeling guilty for accepting Charlie's sacrifice last night, and guiltier still for the thoughts he had been wrestling with the day before.

Outside, Beppe did as much work as he could without Charlie's input. Some projects came to a complete halt, while others went forward as planned. Adam had a hard time caring if it meant that they would fall behind schedule, or not. He was determined to give Charlie as much rest as she needed, and wasn't about to wake her before she was good and ready.

With a satisfied yawn, Charlie rolled over in bed, her sore muscles protesting as she stretched out beneath the covers. What a day she had had! Then she remembered the love she and Adam had shared the night before, and a smile parted her lips. Charlie knew Adam had needed her attention, and she was glad that she had made the effort to spend time with him.

Charlie groaned as she put her nightgown on and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. Her muscles were stiff, but after she stood up and moved about the bedroom, the discomfort gradually lessened.

It wasn't until Charlie was buttoning her blouse, that she noticed the odd position of the sunlight coming through the bedroom window. Didn't it usually shine differently, when she woke up in the morning? Maybe it was cloudy outside, and that explained why it was darker than usual. Charlie looked for the familiar presence of the clock on the nightstand, but couldn't find it. No doubt, Adam had hid it again, so he wouldn't know how late he had stayed up with his insomnia.

Sighing that her husband most likely had a difficult night, (even *with* her love), Charlie put on her shoes and opened the bedroom door. She was determined that Villa Rosa's renovations wouldn't cost Adam anything more than money and a little inconvenience. The young woman purposed within herself to do better with her time management, in the future. After all, she was

a married woman now, and it meant taking care of those who needed her-- even when she was tired and all she wanted to do was sleep.

"How are you, Pumpkin?" asked Vera, looking over her granddaughter with some concern.

"Where is everyone?" asked Charlie, glancing about the two living rooms and not finding anyone present.

"Kevin is out working with the crew, and Adam is taking your father for a walk around Villa Rosa," explained Vera. "You must be famished! Come with me to the kitchen, and I'll fix you a late lunch."

"Lunch?!" exclaimed Charlie in horror. "Just how long have I been asleep?"

"All morning, and most of the afternoon," answered Vera, going to the kitchen with a bewildered Charlie in tow. "I wanted to wake you earlier, but Adam insisted that you get your rest."

"I admit," said Charlie, as Vera made her a sandwich, "it felt good not to be getting up at the crack of dawn and rushing off. The renovation can be stressful at times. That reminds me!" she suddenly remembered. "Did Beppe ever get the correct materials we needed for the roof?"

"I have no idea," shrugged Vera, as Charlie stuffed the last of her sandwich into her mouth and quickly washed it down with a glass of orange juice. "Wait! Before you go running out there, don't you want the dessert Adam saved you?" Vera called after her.

But Charlie didn't hear her grandmother, for she was already out the door and looking for Beppe.

Gently clasping Chuck's hand, Adam slowly walked his father-in-law around the two mobile homes, endeavoring to keep from getting in the busy crew's way. As they rounded the buildings once more, Adam caught sight of Charlie's figure as she ran to Beppe's truck and began discussing something with the general contractor.

"She's awake, Chuck," said Adam, pausing for a moment to watch the young woman. Chuck, however, was not ready to stop, and he kept walking until he jerked Adam forward by the hand. The two continued their circuit around the mobile homes, but every time they passed within eyeshot of Charlie, Adam would watch her with the other men.

After a half hour of stretching their legs, Chuck became tired and Adam took him inside to watch television. Not ready to resume work at his piano, Adam went back outside and sat down

on the front step, his attention once more fixed on Charlie. There was a troubled look on his face, as if disturbed by his own thoughts. In fact, so lost was he in his own meditations, that Adam was unaware of the person approaching him, until a pretty face bent down and kissed him on the cheek.

"Hi," greeted Charlie, sitting down on the step beneath Adam's. "Thanks for giving Daddy some exercise. I have a hard time getting him away from that television."

"It's all right," replied Adam, as she leaned her head against his knee. "How did you sleep?"

"Like a baby," she whispered, dreamily closing her eyes. "You let me snooze half the day away."

Adam stroked her hair and gazed down at the peaceful woman next to him.

"I'm sorry I let you entice me last night," he apologized. "I shouldn't have."

"I don't remember giving you much of a chance to resist," she smiled.

Just then, a young man in a white T-shirt shouted something to Charlie. She opened her eyes and looked to see who it was that was calling her.

"I think someone wants you," muttered Adam, as the broad-shouldered man urgently beckoned to her.

"It's probably about the well," she sighed, standing up. "I'll be right back."

Taking a deep breath, Adam watched her talk to the man. After listening to her with intent blue eyes, he flashed a handsome grin and then nodded. Adam shifted on his step, and furrowed his brows.

"Stop it, Adam," he thought out loud. "She doesn't deserve that. You trust her, remember? Of course, I trust her," he answered himself. "I love her. God knows, I love her."

When the broad-shouldered man's problem was solved, Charlie returned to Adam, and resumed her place on the front step of their mobile home.

"At least, we have water!" she laughed. "Remember when we wanted to buy this place, and there were other prospective buyers who thought there might be an underground water source, somewhere around here? There is, and it's going to come in handy. We're going to plumb into the well we drilled, and irrigate our plants."

"Plants?" asked Adam, raising an eyebrow in amused curiosity. He found it difficult to imagine *anything* growing in this desolate landscape, besides tumbleweeds and sagebrush.

"Given the right conditions," replied Charlie, "things will not only grow, but thrive! I shouldn't have to remind a seasoned gardener like yourself of that!"

With a small chuckle, Adam intently looked at his pretty wife. Glimmers of the late afternoon sun reflected in her eyes, and for a while, Adam lost himself in silence.

"What are you thinking?" wondered Charlie.

As he opened his mouth to answer, Beppe called to Charlie and waved a clipboard at her, all the while saying something in another language.

"Uh-oh," she sighed. "Whenever he starts speaking in Italian, I know something's wrong."

"So I remember," recalled Adam. Charlie went off to speak to Beppe, while Adam leaned against the front door and watched. Beppe was old enough to be her grandfather, and Adam quietly took note of this fact as he monitored his own reaction-- or the lack of it. Adam noticed that his jaw didn't clench as it did when she was with a younger man, and it disturbed him.

After several minutes, Charlie returned with a big smile.

"It was a misunderstanding," she explained. "Beppe thought we ordered a standard tile for the roof, when we actually decided on a custom glaze. At the rate he's forgetting things, you'd think HE was the one with Alzheimer's, and not me!"

"*Don't say that!*" Adam abruptly snapped.

His sudden outburst surprised Charlie, and he could tell that he had hurt her feelings.

"I'm sorry," Adam quickly apologized. "I shouldn't have talked to you like that. Charlie," he pressed, "you don't have Alzheimer's Disease-- at least, not yet. You're just fine. You're as normal as anyone else your age."

"I was only teasing," she reasoned.

"Well, *don't*," requested Adam. "Not about that." With a deep groan, he ran his hands over his short brown hair.

"What's wrong?" wondered Charlie. "I'm trying to make you happy, but you seem set against it. Why, Adam?"

"What makes you think I'm unhappy?" he asked, looking up at her in surprise.

"During the last few days," explained Charlie, "I've felt something slip between us. I thought it was because I've been too busy to spend much time with you, but now, I'm not so sure. When you look at me, it's as if you're testing me. I can't explain it, but yesterday and today, I see it in your eyes. What's going on, Adam? Is it something I did?"

With a heavy heart, Adam tightly shut his eyes. He had thought he could keep his unspoken struggles secret, but Charlie was proving him wrong. She was in his heart, and knew when something else was in there with her.

"I *have* been trying to tell you," he responded, immediately hating the defensive tone that crept into his own voice. "I just keeping getting interrup--" Adam was cut off by another shout from the broad-shouldered man who had called Charlie away, a few minutes earlier. Adam bit his tongue, trying to keep his patience with the situation.

"They'll be going home in an hour or two," she tried to explain. "Do you want me to stay with you until then?"

"No," Adam smiled patiently, "you go do what needs to get done. I'll be okay."

"We'll talk, later," said Charlie getting up and taking two steps forward. She paused, and looked back at her husband. "We'll talk, *tonight*," she promised.

Adam nodded gratefully, and watched as she walked away.

"God, *please*, help me," he entreated Heaven.

For the remainder of the workday, Charlie went about her business with a sense of urgency. When Beppe stopped to talk before climbing in his truck and driving away, Charlie found herself trying to hurry him along. How could she explain that her husband was waiting for her? As the last of the crew drove down the dirt road and disappeared out of sight, Charlie closed and locked the main gate, still trying to puzzle out what was going on with Adam. She was quick to blame herself for whatever was distressing him, but was at a loss to explain why. It just *had* to be her fault. After all, Charlie reasoned, she was the younger, more inexperienced one in this relationship.

When Charlie stepped inside their mobile home, Adam was quietly sitting before his piano, looking very much as though he didn't have the heart to play.

"I really need to talk to you," he said, his voice betraying the strain he was presently under.

The sound of dinner preparations coming from the kitchen, told Charlie that Vera was going to have the food ready, before too long.

"I'll tell her we'll eat later," said Charlie.

"No," sighed Adam, shaking his head. "Don't do that. I'd forgotten about dinner. Vera's gone to too much trouble, to not show up when she expects us. I can wait."

"Adam," whispered Charlie, taking a seat beside him on the piano bench, "you're scaring me."

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, as Charlie leaned her head against his shoulder.

Before five minutes had passed, Vera was calling everyone to dinner. Adam and Charlie ate in relative silence, and finished their meal sooner than usual.

"What's the hurry?" wondered Vera, as the two excused themselves from the table.

"Adam and I are going out for awhile," explained Charlie, bending over to kiss her grandmother goodnight. "Don't wait up for us."

Adam didn't know that they were going out, but had to admit that it was a good idea. They needed to get out of the house, and have a heart to heart talk, without the added pressure of being overheard.

"Have a good time!" Vera waved, as they stepped out into the cooling desert air.

The sun was setting on the western horizon, casting golden rays of light across the ground before retiring behind the mountains in the far distance. Adam felt Charlie grasp his hand, and he tightly held on to it as they headed off toward the direction of the open desert. There was no need to be cautious over the paparazzi, for the twenty acres that surrounded them were fenced off, and vehicles could be seen for a great distance, before they could even get close enough to be a problem.

"It's nice out here," admitted Adam, after they had put a little distance between themselves and the mobile home. "For once, it's nice to not worry about being spotted by the media."

"Would you like to drive around for a while?" suggested Charlie. "At least, we would have someplace to sit."

Adam nodded his willingness, and they walked to the pickup truck that Kevin had purchased in Adam's name. It was a great utility vehicle for a such a sizable piece of property as Villa Rosa. Charlie was about to get behind the wheel, when she noticed Adam about to do the same. Seeing the eager look in her eyes, Adam went around and climbed into the passenger side.

"We're just staying on the property," Charlie reminded him, for she recalled how nervous he was about her driving. As she was about to place the key into the ignition, Adam tensed. "Do you want to drive?" she laughed.

"No," he quickly shook his head. Then he looked at her with a slightly brightened face. "You wouldn't mind?"

Charlie laughed, and got out to change sides with her husband. Adam placed his hands on the wheel, and smiled at Charlie.

"It's not that I don't trust you," he told her. Charlie smiled back at him, but when he heard the sound of his own words, Adam's smile quickly vanished. An anguished look crossed his face, and he sighed.

"Won't you tell me what's going on?" she pleaded.

Starting the engine, Adam drove a distance from the main buildings of Villa Rosa, before parking the truck and leaning back in his seat. The sun had set by now, and a bright Mojave moon was taking its place in the desert sky.

"Oh, Charlie," Adam's voice finally broke the silence, "what have I gotten myself into?"

Charlie wasn't sure how to respond. Was he referring to their expenditures over Villa Rosa, or was this about something else? Charlie didn't want to consider the possibility that he could be speaking of their marriage, so she remained silent.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I'm scaring you, again."

"Please, tell me," begged Charlie.

"I don't know when I first realized this," began Adam, "but I remember it crossed my mind a few times after we were married. I was always able to push it aside, but yesterday..." his voice hesitated. "I was missing the time we usually spent together, and I confess, I was feeling a little sorry for myself. I think that's probably why I was more vulnerable to the temptation, when it came to me this time. It's no excuse, though."

"What are you talking about?" she wondered.

"Charlie," he sighed, "are you sorry that..." Adam paused. "Do you ever wish that you'd married a younger man? Please, be honest with me."

"Have I ever wished that I married someone else?" she asked. "Of course not!"

"No," said Adam, "I mean... do you wish that I were younger? Are you ever sorry that I'm not closer to your age?"

"Well," she sighed, "if I am, it's a little late to do anything about it, now!"

"I'm being completely serious," insisted Adam.

"I know you are," replied Charlie, folding her arms, indignantly. "I refuse to answer that, Adam."

"I'm not questioning if you love me," he explained.

"Oh, really?" she cried. "Because, that's the way it sounds!"

Adam softly pounded the steering wheel with his fist, and stared out at the vast Mojave that lay just beyond their truck.

"Do you *really* want me to answer that?" asked Charlie.

"Yes," nodded Adam. "I do."

"Even after all that's passed between us?" she questioned. "Can you honestly question my desire after everything we've meant to each other?"

"I wish you wouldn't put it *that* way," he muttered.

"I'm sorry," responded Charlie, "but it's the way I feel!" Hurt, Charlie opened the passenger door and jumped out, her feet quickly carrying her away from the pickup.

"Charlie?" Adam called after her through the still open door. "Where are you going? Home is in the other direction!"

"I don't care!" she cried, her hand wiping away the tears that were beginning to fall.

Charlie heard a truck door open, and then the quick footfalls of someone hurrying after her.

"Charlie," said Adam, placing a firm grip on her arm, and forcing her to come to a stop. Not wanting to hurt her, he quickly loosened his hold, but held her fast, so she couldn't leave. When he saw the tears in her eyes, Adam scolded himself.

"I never should have asked you that question," he apologized. "You're right-- you don't need to prove anything to me, because I should already know."

"You *should*," agreed Charlie, "but do you?"

A solid gust of wind hit the couple, nearly knocking them off their feet. They were on the open desert, and there was no protection from the Santa Ana winds to soften its blows.

"I *know*, Charlie," he answered, his hands trying to steady her, as the winds began in earnest. "I know."

"Then, why, Adam?"

"I'm not an old man," he explained, "but I'm not young, either. When I saw you with those crew workers, I became jealous. I was jealous of your time, and jealous of your attention. You were spending more time with them, than you were with me. And before you try to say anything, I knew it was an unreasonable fear. But, there you were, smiling and looking so beautiful with them, that I allowed myself to entertain the temptation. I know it was wrong of me, but by the time I tried to push away my jealousy, the sin had already done its damage, and I began to question us. Even worse, I began to question *you*."

The wind whistled past Charlie's ears, and threatened to rob her of her very breath, as she sobbed into the night air.

"You didn't deserve my distrust," Adam apologized. He let go of her arm, and she stumbled back a few steps, trying to regain her balance in the gusting wind. Now that he was no longer holding

on to her, she found it difficult to remain upright. Charlie's hand reached out for his, and Adam quickly guided her back to the refuge of their pickup.

After helping her inside, Adam ran around the truck and climbed behind the wheel. When the door slammed shut, they both sighed in relief to get out of the wind. He looked at Charlie, and brushed away the tears on her face.

Without a moment's hesitation, Charlie hugged her husband.

"Honey, I'm so sorry," whispered Adam.

"I know you don't need me to answer your question," murmured Charlie, her face buried against his shirt, "but I don't desire anyone but *you*. Adam, you're the love of my life."

"Thank you for that," he tenderly held her close. "Thank you for not being like--" Adam caught himself, and he was suddenly silent. Charlie sat up, her tear streaked face gazing into his.

"Like Thomas," she finished his thought out loud.

By the look on Adam's face, she knew she had guessed correctly.

"So," she sighed, "*that's* what this is all about. You're afraid we'll turn out just like Shirley and Thomas."

"Not *just* like them," explained Adam, "but I've seen marriages fail over less than a difference in ages."

"Do you love me?" she asked.

"You know I do," he replied.

"Do you believe me, when I say those very same words to *you*?"

"It wasn't fair of me, I know," he apologized. Adam looked at Charlie's downcast eyes. A gust of wind lightly rocked their pickup, so that Charlie quickly fastened her seat belt, half thinking that their vehicle might turn over. When Adam saw this, he smiled. "That wasn't strong enough to topple us," he assured her.

Charlie remained quiet, her face still troubled by Adam's confession of being jealous.

"It's not fair," she whimpered. "*You're* the famous Wallace Shipley! If anyone should have a cause to be jealous, it should be *me*! I've seen those pretty women fall all over you for your autograph, and light up like a Christmas tree when you smile at them. But," she added, "I never gave into the temptation to think that you could be unfaithful in your promise to love me! I always held fast to the knowledge of who you were, and your love for God and His word. I trusted you, because I *loved* you!"

Adam was too ashamed to respond, but hung his head and nodded in agreement.

"I know you're sensitive about the difference in our ages," she continued, "but you're not the only one who sometimes feels as though they're in over their head! You should have a wife who already knows the things that I'm just beginning to figure out! All it takes is one slip on my part, and you could be exposed before the world as a first class fool for marrying me! I've dragged you out here, and now everyone is waiting for me to fail!"

"No one thinks you'll fail," disagreed Adam, "least of all, me!"

"You should have seen Uncle Jerome," argued Charlie. "The way he looked at me, and then at Villa Rosa! He's just waiting for me to punish you for being the godly man, that he knows *he* should be! And now I've dragged grandma and daddy out here!" Charlie's back straightened in her indignation. "Don't you dare sit behind that comfortable piano of yours and doubt my faithfulness, Adam Clark! I have plenty of reasons to feel sorry for myself, but you don't see *me* doubting *your* love, do you? *Well, do you?!*" she wept, retrieving her already damp handkerchief and blowing her nose.

"No, I don't," he admitted. "You give everything you have, Charlie, and then you push yourself, and give me more." Wondering if she would resist a hug, Adam carefully slid beside her on the front seat and gently touched her hand. When she made no effort to get away, he unfastened her seat belt and wrapped his arms around his wife, holding her tightly. "You're a good woman, Charlie," he whispered. "Please, be patient with me. I may have had more life experience than you, but when it comes to a relationship like ours, I'm learning everything for the first time."

"I can identify with that," Charlie weakly smiled.

"You know," recalled Adam, "I remember my dad once telling me, 'If happy marriages were easy, everyone would be doing it. But when you love someone, its always worth the effort.'"

"It's worth it," affirmed Charlie, drying her face against Adam's shirt. Through the darkness, her fingers felt the well-muscled arms of the former Master Plumber she was married to. "And *you* were jealous over *them*?" she wondered, incredulously.

"I'll always care when someone looks at you with hunger in their eyes," said Adam, "but I promise to never again doubt your love. Jealousy is a terrible thing, Charlie, and I'll fight it with every breath I've got."

"The only hunger I'm interested in satisfying," promised Charlie, "is *yours*."

"I don't deserve to hear you say that," he thanked her, "but I appreciate it, just the same."

"What men are you referring to?" it suddenly occurred her to ask. Charlie sat up and tried to remember anyone on the crew who might have behaved inappropriately toward her. "Many of them use profane language," reflected Charlie, "but Beppe told them to cut it out when I was around."

"Their choice of words isn't what I'm talking about," said Adam. "I don't know, Charlie, maybe it's just me being overly sensitive. I have a beautiful, attractive wife, who often catches the eye of other men. It's just something I've got to learn to accept."

"I don't notice men doing that to me," reflected Charlie. "There were those boys and their father when we were fishing in Alaska that one time, but that's about it."

"I could easily have been jealous over nothing," sighed Adam. "If *you* don't notice it, then it's probably not happening."

Charlie could see that Adam was feeling very badly, and she didn't want him to continue beating himself up all night. With a teasing smile, she playfully eyed her handsome husband, and he looked at her expectantly.

"Could I get your autograph, Mr. Shipley?" Charlie squealed in girlish delight. "Oh, pleeeeeease, say you will!" she clamored, tugging at Adam's sleeve and then pretending to faint. "I've *touched* him!" she gasped, while Adam laughed at her antics. "Oh!" she cried, "I'll never wash this hand again, for as long as I live!"

"Okay," he smiled, pulling her back to him, "I've had enough. If I wanted *that* kind of attention, I would have stayed closer to civilization."

"Are you trying to imply that we're out in the middle of nowhere?" she feigned shock.

Just then, a coyote howled in the distance, causing Adam to grin at its timing.

"I don't know how I got that idea," he chuckled.

Seeing that he was smiling a little easier now, Charlie left off her teasing and snuggled back into his strong arms.

"Are you sure you don't mind being out here with me?" she asked. "Villa Rosa *is* a little out of the way."

"Better alone with you," he answered, "than in a city full of people who don't have a claim on my heart. No, Charlie," he sighed contentedly, "I'm happy right where I am." Suddenly realizing that he was feeling better, Adam tenderly squeezed Charlie. "It was sweet of you to cheer me," he smiled.

"It's all right," she laughed softly. "You're worth the effort."

Outside, the strong winds were dying down, and the desert returned to a peaceful stillness that soothed Adam and Charlie. The famous musician checked his watch, and saw that it was getting late.

"I hope Vera doesn't start worrying about us," he said, thoughtfully.

"I told her not to wait up," remembered Charlie, trying to smother a giggle as Adam playfully blew at her neck.

"Do you want to go back?" he asked, a hint of disappointment sounding in his voice.

"Let's stay out all night," proposed Charlie. "I'm having too good of a time, to go in."

"What about tomorrow?"

"I'll catch some sleep, later," Charlie murmured lovingly.

"Then, I think we should have a little music," said Adam, leaning forward to turn his key in the ignition just enough to power the radio. He punched a button and the truck speakers in the cab crackled to life.

"Today, in the news..." a radio announcer began.

"We want music," Adam shook his head, punching the button until a mellow symphony sounded in the speakers. "I said, *music*," he muttered, quickly hitting the button once more.

"We'll both fall asleep, if we keep listening to that stuff." One station crackled after another, until the sound of a piano abruptly flashed by.

"Oh!" cried Charlie. "Go back!" She didn't have to ask, however, for Adam was already trying to backtrack stations to find the same song that had caught her attention, as well. The clear vibrant sound of a piano broke through the stillness, and Charlie laughed. It was Adam!

"So *that's* why I thought it sounded good," he chuckled. "Not tonight," said the musician, quickly running through the remaining channels on the dial. "Don't we get any good stations out here?" he sighed. Suddenly, an old classic standard began to gently play, and Adam paused. The singer broke into a soft love song, and Adam nodded happily. "That's more like it," he sighed, returning his attention to Charlie.

"Do you usually listen to old love songs?" she wondered.

"No, I don't," admitted Adam. "Why? You can change the station, if this isn't what you want."

Instead of finding a different station, however, Charlie turned up the volume, gently bathing the entire cab in music.

As the lyrics continued to sing of love, Adam's lips softly brushed Charlie's face until he reached her mouth. The kiss that followed, made Charlie suddenly afraid that he was going to get too serious for the pickup truck. Before Charlie could find the strength to speak up, Adam backed off, and tried to steady his breathing as he realized the same thing.

"I was just thinking," he laughed, "it would be a little embarrassing if anyone found us like this. We'd better take it easy." As if to oblige him, the DJ next played a lighthearted song, and Adam and Charlie were soon humming and cuddling to the familiar lyrics.

The moon passed by overhead, while coyotes bayed in the distance. When dawn began to crack on the horizon, Adam started up the engine, and they drove around Villa Rosa, while Charlie showed him the progress that they had made.

"I've been meaning to ask," said Adam, "but what are those large holes doing in our front yard? I saw the backhoe digging them out, and couldn't figure out why!"

"That's for our palm trees," explained Charlie. "I'm going to plant several full grown palm around the buildings on Villa Rosa. It'll help cool the air, and give a little shelter to the winds."

"Palm trees," smiled Adam. "I suppose that sounds reasonable. I may have been mistaken," he continued, "but I thought I heard you say something about a runway, recently."

"It's for the jet," she replied. Charlie looked at Adam's incredulous face, and knew that he was having a hard time accepting what she was telling him. "I'm building it so you won't have to drive here from Twin Yucca Airport, whenever you fly in," she tried to explain. "I wanted you home as soon as possible."

"I like the sound of that," he grinned. "So, we're actually going to have a runway," he mused, as if the saying of it would make it seem more real. "I don't know of anyone who has a private runway!"

"And a hangar," continued Charlie. When Adam looked at her with a laughing grin, she sighed. "It's to put the jet in!" she exclaimed. "You don't expect it to just sit out there and get sandblasted by the Santa Ana winds, do you?"

"I suppose I don't," smiled Adam. "Charlie," he sighed, "you really have a lot going on, don't you?"

"I should," she mused. "I'm spending enough of your money."

"*Our* money," he rectified. "I have a little news for you, myself," he informed her. "Yesterday, Bill called, and he wants me to fly into Atlanta next week for a follow-up interview with Norman Jones."

"That's great!" exclaimed Charlie. "Why didn't you tell me this, sooner?"

"Things were a little hectic around here," smiled Adam, "and I wasn't sure I wanted to accept."

Charlie hesitated, sensing that there was more he wanted to say.

"So, why are you telling me, now?" she wondered.

"Norman wants to interview us, together," explained Adam, hesitating to see what her reaction would be.

"Me?" she gasped in horror. "On a live broadcast that airs, worldwide? Absolutely not!"

"I was afraid you might take it this way," he sighed. "I know it's intimidating, Charlie, but Bill thinks this might help the paparazzi let up a little. My fans are dying to see us as a married couple, and if we do an interview, the bounty for our picture might go down."

"I can't," she shook her head.

"Give it some time to sink in," he encouraged her. "I really want this, Charlie. I want people to see us happy. The quicker they can accept us, the easier it will be for you."

"I'd rather struggle under the burden of being misunderstood," groaned Charlie. "It'll be *worldwide*, Adam!"

"What else do you have planned for Villa Rosa?" he asked, returning his attention to the large, gaping holes in the ground.

"You can't change the subject," she replied, stoutly.

"I'm certainly going to try," he grinned, kissing her on the cheek. "Are you hungry? How about some breakfast? If Vera's hasn't already, I'll make you the best scrambled eggs you ever had! What do you say?"

Just then, they heard someone honking at the main gate. It was Beppe Donato and several other truck and vehicles, for the crew was arriving for another day of work.

"I'd better make it a quick breakfast," said Charlie, getting ready to climb out of the pickup. "Sorry, Adam. You do understand, don't you?"

"Go on," he nodded. "I'll let them in. Thank you for a lovely night, Charlie."

"I love you, Adam," she leaned forward to kiss him. "Always remember that."

"I will," he promised.

Charlie jumped from the truck and hurried inside to eat a quick meal and take a fast shower.

"Good morning!" greeted Beppe, as Adam unlocked the main gate and let them in. "I see you and your wife had a night out!" he chuckled, for Adam was still wearing yesterday's clothes.

After the men swapped conversation, Adam went inside. He was sleepy, but Charlie was bounding all over the place, trying to get ready so she could rush outside.

"When are you going to get some sleep?" he wondered, as she gulped down her cold cereal.

"Oh, I'll catch a few winks, later," she shrugged. "It's no big deal."

"Pumpkin," laughed Vera, "you won't be saying that, when you fall asleep in mid-sentence!"

A man's voice hollered outside the window, and Charlie disappeared out the front door to answer his call. Adam walked to the pane of glass and watched as Charlie talked with the same broad-shouldered man that had grinned at her, the day before. He couldn't hear their voices, but he could watch their faces.

Outside, Charlie resisted the urge to look toward the house to see if Adam was watching them. The man before her was grinning broadly, and she was beginning to feel a little uncomfortable. Nothing was being said that was indecent, but the way he continued to hang around her, made Charlie wonder if Adam might not have had a point, after all. Maybe, she had simply never bothered to notice men like this broad-shouldered man before. Soon, Charlie found an excuse to walk away, and quickly glanced over her shoulder at the mobile home. There was no one in the window.

The morning wore on, and a hot afternoon sun beat down on them when they dispersed for lunch. Inside, Vera had food waiting on the table, and everyone gathered to eat when they heard Charlie washing up at the kitchen sink.

"It sure is hot out there!" she exclaimed, wearily dropping into her chair.

Adam smiled, but remained quiet.

"Beppe thinks we can finish removing the last of the old floors in the bungalows, by the end of the day," she informed everyone. Charlie was feeling self-conscious, and she wondered if Adam's old temptation might be winning, again.

"That's nice," mused Vera, passing the food around the table.

"I told Beppe," continued Charlie, "that I was going to take a nap after lunch." She glanced at Adam, and he again smiled at her. Charlie sighed. What was going through his mind right now? She would have been willing to pay a lot, to find out. "Did you get any sleep, Adam?" she inquired.

"No," he shook his head. "I was waiting for *you*." There was a warm glow in his eyes as he said this, and Charlie knew in her heart that he was all right. "I didn't forget, Charlie-girl," he smiled at her. "I said I wouldn't. I even promised, remember?"

Mystified, Vera and Kevin looked at the couple, and then at each other. With a shrug, the two kept eating their meal.

"I remember," smiled Charlie.

Adam was the first to finish his lunch, and while Charlie struggled to catch up, she heard her husband softly hum the love song they had enjoyed on the radio, from their night together in the desert.

"Set me [Adam] as a seal upon thine [Charlie's] heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame."

~ Song of Solomon 8:6 ~

Chapter Fifty-four
Come What May

"And [Charlie] said unto the LORD, O my Lord, I am not eloquent... And the LORD said unto [her], Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say."

~ Exodus 4:10-12 ~

The ground beneath Adam's private jet grew small as it climbed into the atmosphere above the Southern California sky. Charlie still wasn't sure how Adam had managed to talk her into the live interview with Norman Jones, but here she was, on her way to Atlanta to meet the famous talk show host.

"This is a big mistake," mumbled Charlie, shaking her head and nervously looking at Adam, who was seated beside her on the plane.

"You'll do just fine," he assured her.

"That's easy for you to say," she whimpered. "You're the famous Wallace Shipley. I'm just plain Charlotte Overholt from Butte, Montana."

Adam's eyebrows raised when he heard her maiden name.

"I beg your pardon," he grinned, "but that's Clark-- not Overholt. One remark like that during the telecast, and people are going to think our marriage was only staged for the camera."

With a moan, Charlie slumped back in her suede upholstered seat.

"Why does he want to talk to *me*?" sighed Charlie. "Can't Norman Jones just ask you the questions, and leave me out of it? Do I *have* to be there?"

"Let's try to put this into perspective," said Adam, dismissing the refreshments that the male steward offered. "Instead of thinking of yourself as Charlotte Clark, think of yourself as Charlotte Shipley, wife of celebrated pianist, Wallace Shipley. There," he nodded, "does that make you feel any more famous?"

"Not really," groaned Charlie.

"You don't have anything to be concerned about," Adam once again tried to console her. "I'll be with you through the whole thing. Besides, Norman probably will be talking to me for most of the time. All you have to do is be yourself, and when you don't want to answer something, just look to me, and I'll step in. This isn't that big of a deal, Charlie."

"Sure," Charlie replied disbelievingly. "Flying two thousand miles cross country to be interviewed by Norman Jones happens to *everyone*." At this, Charlie folded her arms and seriously wondered if their pilot would turn the plane around if she asked him to.

Adam didn't respond, for he knew that it was only her nerves speaking. It had taken a lot of persuading to get her to agree to this interview, and Adam was half afraid of saying something that would change her mind-- such as that slip about their wedding being staged for the camera. Adam bit his tongue. That was close. He'd have to be more careful, or Charlie was going to rummage through the plane in search of a parachute.

From his seat across the aisle, Kevin listened through headphones to the movie that was being played on the private theatre. The only telltale sounds that gave him away, were his occasional chuckles as he forgot himself and laughed out loud.

After a few minutes of continued silence from Charlie, Adam motioned to the steward and requested the small magnetic chess board he kept on the plane.

"I know what you're trying to do," Charlie warned him, as he set the game board on the armrest between their seats. "I really don't feel like playing."

"You don't?" He sounded disappointed. If he had feigned the disappointment, he did a good job, for Charlie immediately felt guilty.

"Oh, all right," she sighed, "if you're going to take it *that* way."

Flashing his handsome Clark smile, Adam set up the chess board while Charlie tried not to fidget in her seat.

"Bill will meet us at the hotel," Adam informed her, as Kevin burst into laughter for apparently no good reason. Adam glanced up at the movie screen and smiled. "He has a personal assistant that'll help you get ready, and Melvin will probably want to go over your talking points."

"Melvin will be there?" Charlie brightened.

"Yes, didn't I tell you?" Adam was surprised by his young wife's sudden hopefulness. She seemed to take comfort in knowing that his publicist was going to be there, and visibly relaxed. "If I had known you would calm down like this," he smiled, "I would have told you that, sooner. It would have saved me a lot of trouble!"

"I'm sorry," apologized Charlie. "I'm not trying to make this hard on you. But I'm glad Melvin will be there. He's pulled me through facing the media, before."

"Answering reporters' questions for a minute or two," reminded Adam, "is different than an in-depth interview for an entire hour."

Charlie's eyes grew wide with horror, and she turned pale.

"I should have kept my big mouth shut," muttered Adam, as she quickly made her way to the bathroom at the opposite end of the jet. Adam followed closely behind, only stopping when Charlie tried to close the door in his face. When he blocked the door from shutting, Charlie went straight to the toilet and lost her breakfast.

Even over the sound of his movie, Kevin heard the commotion from the bathroom and pulled off his headphones to see what was going on. He saw Adam in the bathroom doorway, and guessed that this was most likely a private matter between husband and wife. Endeavoring to mind his own business, Kevin quietly resumed his movie.

"Do you want me to call off the interview?" Adam wondered, in what Charlie felt was the most obvious question he had ever asked. But as she was about to say that she did, Charlie hesitated. "Honey," he sighed, "you're as white as a sheet."

"Please," she asked him in a trembling voice, "just give me a chance to clean up? I'll be out in a minute."

"Okay, but I won't go too far," he told Charlie, and then strode across the aisle to wait for her.

Inside the bathroom, Charlie tried to pull herself together. This was no way for Wallace Shipley's wife to act. Adam was depending on her to behave professionally, and not buckle under the pressure. Charlie reached for help, and the Holy Spirit responded with comfort that came in the form of a verse. "God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." (2 Timothy 1:7)

"Please," Charlie prayed in a whisper, "give me the spirit of a sound mind. Give me the love I need to pass through this with my head held high, and maybe even a little power to remember

who I am, and who I represent. Adam represents You, and now I do, too. Don't let me bring ridicule to him, or to You, with this interview."

Taking a deep breath, Charlie reminded herself that God was with her. She was no longer simply Charlotte Overholt from Butte, Montana. She was Charlotte Clark, the wife of her dearest and best friend. Charlie found she didn't have to use Wallace Shipley's name to find enough poise to face the public. Adam Clark was enough.

Outside, Adam waited for Charlie. She was so quiet for the space of several minutes, that he was becoming concerned. As he was about to knock on the door and check on her, Charlie appeared from the bathroom, looking remarkably calm.

"Are you all right?" Adam inquired, realizing that the question was an unnecessary one. Charlie's face was back to its usual shade of loveliness, and her lips no longer looked pale.

"Do we have any food on this jet?" she asked, giving Adam a playful smile before returning to their seats. "I'm kind of hungry."

Adam waved the steward over and the man brought Charlie something to eat.

"I was beginning to think I was asking too much of you," said Adam, with an air of hesitation still lingering in his voice. "My name would be mud with Norman Jones, but I'll find a way to back you out of the interview, if you need me to. Norman wants you there, but even *he* doesn't want someone throwing up on a live broadcast."

"Your fans are expecting me to be there," Charlie shook her head, "so I'd better show up, or they're going to be disappointed. I know I would be, and I'm one of Wallace Shipley's biggest fans."

"You're number one in my book," Adam smiled gratefully. Charlie beamed back at him, delighted more than she thought possible by those few words of praise.

After a stopover for fuel in New Mexico, they arrived in Atlanta, Georgia, late in the afternoon. While Charlie prepared to gather her things, Adam went down the steps and greeted Bill, who had driven to the airfield to meet them.

"Adam," Bill quickly pulled him aside in a serious voice, "I was just notified that the LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department] and the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] are going to hold a joint news conference today, concerning the woman who claimed she was part of a plot to

kidnap Charlie." Nervously, Bill looked up and waved "hello" to Charlie as she descended the steps with Kevin.

Adam followed his manager's gaze, and forced a smile in her direction.

"They're charging the woman with conspiracy to kidnap," Bill continued in a hushed tone.

"Don't tell Charlie," Adam quickly directed him, as she approached them with her carry-on bags.

"You're looking good!" Bill greeted her with a warm hug. "Marriage must agree with you!"

"Thank you for flying out here to meet us like this," said Charlie.

"Nonsense," Bill dismissed her gratitude with a wave of his hand. "I'm just doing my job."

"Even so," Charlie smiled, "it's good to know you and Melvin are here."

At this, Bill hesitated.

"About Melvin," he stammered, "something came up, and he won't be able to make it for the interview, after all." Bill glanced at Adam and shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "But don't worry," he added, seeing the alarm rise in Charlie's face, "Melvin gave me your talking points, so you'll be good and prepared for whatever Norman Jones throws your way."

"Melvin's not here?" she gulped.

Adam saw the apprehension on Charlie's face and knew she had been counting on the expertise of his publicist to prepare her for the interview. Melvin's absence was a blow, but Adam could guess what was holding him up; he was grateful that his good friend was doing his best to stay on top of the situation developing in California.

Not wanting to elaborate further on Melvin, Bill ushered Adam and his entourage into an awaiting vehicle.

Though it had been publicized by Norman Jones that Adam and Charlie were going to be interviewed that day, the hotel they would be staying at had not been released to the press. Because of this, Adam had hoped they would be able to check in without any fanfare. It was not to be. To everyone's surprise, they were greeted by a news crew who had found out where the famous musician and his wife were going to stay.

"Kevin," Adam ordered the bodyguard, "hurry and get Charlie inside. Don't stop for anyone or anything."

A little bewildered at the urgency in Adam's voice, Charlie was quickly shuttled out the passenger door with Kevin firmly grasping her arm.

When Adam and Bill followed, a reporter shoved a microphone into Adam's face and began asking questions about the woman in California who had been arrested for plotting to kidnap Charlie. Thankfully, Kevin had done as Adam instructed, and Charlie was already inside the hotel when the reporters began their onslaught of questions.

Declining to make any comments, Adam and Bill soon joined Charlie and Kevin inside.

Adam gave Kevin a grateful smile and the bodyguard nodded. Kevin wasn't sure what was going on, but he guessed that it had to do with Charlie's safety.

"Let's get you settled in," said Bill, as the news crew threatened to enter the lobby of the hotel. To their relief, the hotel manager stood by the rotating glass doors, and refused them entrance.

When they reached the room Adam and Charlie would be staying, Adam directed Kevin to stay with Charlie while she unpacked.

"Don't let anyone in, but me or Bill," Adam charged the bodyguard in a low voice. "Not even for room service."

"You can count on me," Kevin assured him.

"And don't turn on the television," Adam whispered.

Puzzled by that last request, Kevin only nodded.

Immediately after Adam left with Bill, Kevin locked the hotel door while Charlie unpacked the outfit she was going to wear for the broadcast.

"You don't know how much courage it took for her to come," Adam sighed, as the two headed for Bill's hotel room to talk in private.

"But she'll have to know," argued Bill. "I can all but guarantee that Norman will bring it up during the interview."

"I thought the kidnapping plot was just a hoax from one of my crazy fans," sighed Adam. "I never expected anyone to actually be arrested! Thank God, we treated it seriously, and took extra precautions with Charlie's safety!"

"Adam, she's going to have to face this," Bill urged his client. "I know it's tough to handle, especially so soon before the interview, but it can't be helped."

"I just wish it didn't have to be today-- of all days!" groaned Adam.

"We can't help the timing."

"I know," Adam nodded. "Melvin's in California?"

"Where else?" smiled Bill. "He'll call me before you and Charlie go live, and give a rundown of what's going on. He doesn't want you to sound uninformed during the interview."

"What time is Charlie's personal assistant showing up?" asked Adam, checking his watch.

Back in the hotel room, Kevin had pushed Charlie into the bathroom and was now standing beside the door, trying to get a most insistent woman to go away.

"I have an appointment with Charlotte Clark," the woman repeated in an annoyed voice. "My helpers will be here any minute to start fixing her hair! And I *must* get started on the facial, or we're going to be seriously behind schedule!"

"I'm sorry," Kevin remained adamant, "I won't let you in, without the express say-so of Mr. Clark."

"Very well," sighed the woman. "Where is he?"

"That's *his* business," came Kevin's sturdy answer. Even if he knew, (which he didn't), he wasn't about to divulge that information to someone he didn't know. After his employer's urgent instructions before leaving, there was no way that door was going to open for anyone but Adam or Bill.

Just as the woman was going to throw a tantrum, Kevin could hear Adam's voice as the two started talking outside the hotel door.

"Open up, Kevin," came Adam's smiling voice. "I apologize, Miss Dee," he continued, as the door cautiously opened and the two entered. "My wife's bodyguard was only doing as I instructed."

Dee gave the bodyguard in question a terse "Humph!" and immediately started in on her work with Charlie. Then the assistants to the personal assistant showed up, and the room teemed with activity. Adam could only smile, for all these people were here for Charlie. *He* was Wallace Shipley, but all he had to do for the interview was shower and change!

The first chance Adam found, he quietly drew Kevin aside and informed him of what was going on. Kevin took the news in stride, and was grateful for the update. He had to know the level of risk Charlie was in, to properly protect her.

Then room service arrived with a late lunch for the entire group. Adam still hadn't told Charlie, and was finding it difficult to do with so many strangers in the room.

Finally, about two hours before the big interview, Adam was able to request a few minutes alone with Charlie. Dee looked annoyed, but she could sense a large tip at the end of the day, and decided it was best to not offend someone so famous as Wallace Shipley. While the personal assistant, and her assistants, waited in the hall with Kevin, Adam sat Charlie down on the bed and pulled a chair across the room so he could face her while they spoke.

In spite of the seriousness of the situation, Adam fought the urge to laugh, for Charlie's face was covered in a bluish cream, and she looked anything but glamorous.

"I know," Charlie smiled good-naturedly, "I look ridiculous."

"Maybe just a little," he admitted.

"What's going on?" she asked. "You and Bill have been as sober as generals, all afternoon."

Adam looked at his wife and took her hands in his.

"What I'm about to tell you is not necessarily bad news," he began. "I don't want to frighten you, but you need to know what's going on."

Charlie swallowed hard and listened as Adam explained the little he knew about the news conference going on at that same moment in California.

"The threat was really that serious?" she gasped in shock.

"The media is going to be all over this story," cautioned Adam, "and so will Norman Jones. Sooner or later, we're going to have to talk about this publicly, so we might as well get it over

with today. Not too long from now, Melvin will be calling us with all the details of the news conference. You aren't frightened, are you?" he asked, feeling a slight tremor in her hands.

Charlie looked at him with a wry smile.

"I'm all right," she softly laughed. "I'm looking forward to all this being over with, but I'm all right."

"You deserve a reward for being so brave," he smiled, using this opportunity as a good excuse for bringing up something that he had wanted to suggest, anyway. "After Norman Jones, I'm going to take you somewhere fancy for dinner. Did you bring an evening dress? Never mind, I'll get Miss Dee to buy you one."

"But Adam, we're flying home after the interview," Charlie reminded him.

"It'll only make us a little later than we originally planned," he assured her. "We'll still make it home tonight. Charlie, I feel like stepping out with my wife, and since we're already in Atlanta, why not make the most of it?"

Charlie couldn't help but smile as Adam's eyes twinkled with anticipation.

"Is it a date?" he grinned.

She was about to say that it was, when her satellite phone rang. Just then, someone knocked on their hotel door and Adam had to go answer it.

"Melvin called," Bill informed Adam, while Charlie talked on her phone with Beppe.

"No," Charlie was saying, "the wrought iron gates we selected should match the windows and the hardware on the front door."

Seeing the open door, Dee and her entourage flooded back into the room.

"They've arrested the woman's boyfriend as the mastermind behind the plot to kidnap Charlie," resumed Bill, just below an audible whisper. "Apparently, the two planned to hold Charlie for ransom, but one of them never intended to let her go."

For a moment, Adam stared at Bill, not believing what his ears had just heard.

"I don't care what the order invoice says," Charlie continued, as Dee examined her client. "I never ordered brass knobs. The accessories should be black wrought iron."

"Oh dear," Dee murmured, "we'd better get this facial off, before it starts irritating your skin."

To Adam's stunned mind, the voices in the hotel room sounded like the indecipherable chatter of a world turned upside down. He looked to Bill, and the grim face blinking back at him only served to reinforce that what he had heard, was true.

"Is the FBI sure that was all of them?" asked Adam. "There weren't any others involved in this... this scheme?"

"They don't think so," Bill shook his head. "It was just the woman and her boyfriend."

"Bill," Adam sighed numbly, "it's moments like this that make me wish I had stayed a plumber. Dear God! How am I supposed to tell this to Charlie?!"

Just then, a well-dressed man knocked on their hotel door. He was sent by Norman Jones to confirm the time set for the interview, and to be sure that Adam was still going through with the arrangement. As much as Adam wanted to call the whole thing off, he realized that he couldn't. They had to go through with the interview, or risk an even bigger fiasco with the media.

When the man left, Adam waited for another chance to speak with Charlie. After her hair was set in large curlers, they politely left while Adam had another private conference with his wife.

"You heard from Melvin again, didn't you," guessed Charlie, as Adam sat her down in a nearby chair with a shaken face. "Just tell me the news straight out."

"Charlie," he began, his voice cracking as he spoke, "they weren't going to let you go after the ransom was paid."

"What do you mean?" she whimpered with startled brown eyes.

"The woman's boyfriend is being charged with conspiracy to murder," explained Adam. "He had a grave site all picked out for you."

Reeling with shock, Charlie searched Adam's face, waiting for him to say that this was only a bad dream, and that it wasn't really happening.

"I see," she finally gulped. Charlie looked about the room and located her nylons. "When are you and Bill going to go over my talking points with me?" she asked, preparing to put on her hosiery.

"Charlie," hesitated Adam, "did you understand what I just told you?"

"I understood." Charlie's hand reached up and lightly touched the rollers in her hair. "I hope Dee takes these things out pretty soon. They're beginning to give me a headache." Hearing the hollow sound of her own words, Charlie gazed numbly at Adam. "Promise you won't leave me alone during the interview?"

"I promise," he answered with an unhesitating voice. "You won't be able to get rid of me."

With a grateful smile, Charlie cuddled into those protective words, and pulled them up around her heart. God was with her, and so was Adam. Suddenly, she remembered that her grandma had probably been watching the news, and hurried to her satellite phone to assure the old woman that everything was all right.

Oblivious to what the rest of the country was currently talking about, Dee and her assistants returned to their job of getting Charlie ready for her television debut. The curlers came out, the robe was exchanged for a dress suit, and Dee touched up Charlie's makeup one last time before declaring her work finished.

Then, it was Bill's turn to do his best and take Melvin's place by reviewing Charlie on her talking points. There were things that she wasn't supposed to say, answers to questions they knew she would probably be asked, and the usual reminders that Charlie always received from Melvin before facing the media. Charlie smiled to herself as Bill ran down the checklist Melvin had relayed over the telephone. Except for the reassuring confidence that Melvin's presence always gave her, it almost felt as though he were right there in the hotel room.

Bill also put Adam through his paces by asking the litany of questions that Wallace Shipley usually received. Surprisingly, the famous musician didn't fare as well as Charlie. Adam had to fight not to become flustered by the questions Bill tested him with, and more than once, he asked for a minute to collect his thoughts before continuing.

"I've had enough," Adam finally muttered, getting up and going to the bathroom to splash some cold water on his face.

"I'd feel better if Melvin was here," Bill sighed to Charlie, as they watched Adam through the open door. "Adam's been interviewed before, but never under circumstances like these." Bill hesitated, wondering if he should be so open with his concerns in front of Charlie. After all,

Charlie was nervous enough. "I'll be watching the interview from my hotel room," he smiled, trying to direct the conversation away from Adam's present state of mind. "There's little I can do by coming-- except get in the way." With an anxious check of his watch, Bill went downstairs to see if their transportation was ready to take them to the studio where Norman Jones was waiting.

Drying his face with a towel, Adam looked at himself in the mirror.

"Pull yourself together," he muttered under his breath. Then he saw Charlie's reflection as she waited for him by the bathroom door. She was smartly dressed in a solid blue dress suit with an attractive skirt that complimented her petite figure. A slender gold chain adorned her neck, and her hair was pulled away from her face in a stylish updo.

"Why didn't I notice sooner, how beautiful you look right now?" wondered Adam.

"You have a lot on your mind," she smiled understandingly. "Besides, I don't need a steady stream of compliments to know you love me."

"Careful," he cautioned her, "or I might take you into my arms." As Adam gazed at her, his playfulness slowly vanished. A distant look filled his eyes, and Charlie knew what he was thinking about. The empty grave that had been waiting for her in California.

"Are you ready to leave for the studio?" Adam washed his face one more time and waited for her reply.

"Are you?" she wondered.

"Don't worry about me," he smiled. "I've done this a thousand times."

Kevin escorted Adam and Charlie downstairs to the limousine that Norman Jones had sent for them.

"I'll be watching-- along with the rest of America," laughed Bill, as Adam helped Charlie inside the vehicle. "Remember to have a good time! See you after the show!"

Bill watched as the stretch limo pulled away, and silently prayed that the interview would go all right.

The novelty of riding in a limousine had no effect on Charlie, for she was too busy trying to remain calm to enjoy the plush luxury surrounding her. She struggled to recall what Bill had told

her, and reminded herself of the last piece of advice he had given. Have a good time. Right. Like that was going to happen.

Just as Charlie was beginning to relax, the limousine stopped, and it was time to get out. Kevin followed them inside a large building and remained close by while a makeup artist inspected Dee's handiwork. Adam didn't seem surprised when the makeup artist applied something to his face to make him look more photogenic in front of the camera. Charlie thought this was completely unnecessary-- of course, her opinion was slightly biased.

One or two Wallace Shipley autographs later, they were taken to the next room. Charlie gulped as she recognized the black walls and large desk where Norman Jones was known for giving his interviews. Intimidating cameras stood nearby, while men and women with clipboards and headsets looked on as their guests were seated at the desk.

"Welcome back, Wallace!" greeted a familiar voice, as Norman Jones stepped into the warm spotlights and took his place behind the desk. "Are you two ready? Mrs. Shipley, I'm happy to finally meet you." Norman extended a hand over the desk and Charlie accepted his welcome. "I'm glad you both decided to go through with the interview," he thanked them. "I understand this has been a difficult day, but we're expecting a lot of people to tune into this broadcast. You two are hot news right now."

Charlie searched for something witty-- or at least polite to say to this famous personality, but she came up completely blank. She didn't think this was a very good sign of things to come.

"Ready in four, three, two," said a man, and a light turned on above one of the cameras.

"Good evening," began Norman Jones. "Tonight, I'm joined by Wallace Shipley, and his wife, Charlotte, in their first televised interview together. As many of you probably already know, the LAPD and FBI held a joint news conference where a startling revelation into a plot to kidnap Charlotte was announced. Two people have been arrested, and one is being charged with conspiracy to commit murder." A news clip from the conference in California was aired for the viewers, and Adam and Charlie watched as it played.

"Linda Mae Allen and her boyfriend, Anthony Nelson Taylor," said a man that the caption said was a spokesman for the FBI, "were arrested and charged with one count of conspiracy to kidnap Charlotte Clark, wife of Wallace Shipley. In addition to the kidnapping charge, Mr. Taylor is also facing one count of conspiracy to commit murder. During our investigation, Miss Allen confessed that she and Mr. Taylor had planned to kidnap Mrs. Clark outside her home in Twin Yucca, and detain her for a ransom of ten million dollars. Miss Allen also admitted that she later learned her boyfriend never intended to release Mrs. Clark, even if a ransom was paid. It was Mr.

Taylor's argument that it was too risky to let their hostage go, in case she should be able to later identify them. Before law enforcement apprehended Mr. Taylor, he had already prepared a grave site for Mrs. Clark..." the clip ended here, and Charlie could feel a shudder surging through her body.

"Wallace," began Norman Jones with a shake of his head, "I can't imagine what went through your mind when you heard this announcement."

"It was very difficult," admitted Adam. "I thank God those people were caught before they had a chance to go through with their plans. We're extremely grateful to the FBI and the LAPD for their work in this case."

Norman asked Adam a few more questions related to the kidnapping plot, and then Norman's attention turned to Charlotte.

"Can you tell our viewers what it's like to be the wife of such a public figure?" Norman leaned forward in his seat, curiosity etched in his face. "This has to be radically different than what you were used to. One day you're attending high school, and the next, you're Mrs. Wallace Shipley."

Charlie swallowed, said a quick prayer, and opened her mouth to reply.

"My life definitely changed when I met Wallace," she smiled, trying hard to remember to use Adam's stage name during the interview. "I'm still getting used to the fact that my husband is who he is. Sometimes, Wallace Shipley is bigger than life, and it's easy to lose your identity in all the media attention. But Adam-- I mean, Wallace," she quickly corrected herself, "knows who he is, and his feet are firmly planted. His head doesn't turn easily at flattery."

"For the viewers who don't already know," chuckled Norman, "Wallace Shipley's real name is Adam Clark. Charlotte," he continued, "you mentioned that Wallace has two lives-- public and private. How difficult has it been keeping the two separate?"

"It's very difficult when paparazzi lie in wait beside your bedroom window," Charlie sighed.

"Yes," said Norman, "I heard about that. The photographer was charged with trespassing, while trying to get a photo of you with Wallace. All that resulted was a nondescript picture of a blanket with something under it!"

Charlie smiled, though she didn't really feel like it. That incident was not something she could look back on with fond memories. To her dismay, instead of aiming more questions at Adam, Norman continued with her.

"I think Wallace Shipley's fans have a pretty good idea of who he is," said Norman, "but they don't know about Adam Clark. What is Adam like?"

At this, Adam laughed, and curiously waited to see how his wife was going to answer.

"Well," Charlie slowly replied, "until Adam gets to know someone, he usually keeps them at a distance. If you're fortunate, he'll let you inside his friendship. When that happens, you know you've discovered something special."

Smiling, Norman looked to Adam.

"Wallace, what do you have say to that? Is Charlotte right? Are you something special?"

"Hardly," he denied, shaking his head but beaming at Charlie all the while. "*She's* the special one."

Charlie smiled lovingly, and for a moment, Wallace Shipley's fans glimpsed something that only friends and family usually got to see.

"Isn't he sweet?" Charlie crooned softly. Then, the young woman remembered they were on live television, and straightened in her chair. She had become much too relaxed, and tried to recover some of her professional composure.

After yet another commercial break, the interview advanced to a different topic, and Charlie was quite content to let Adam respond to a few questions about some of the people he had met on his tour.

Then came the part of the show that Charlie dreaded the most: when Norman Jones let callers ask their questions live on the air. Charlie had been assured by Adam that the show screened questioners beforehand, but Charlie still felt nervous about speaking to the viewers in so direct a manner.

"Our first question comes from Paula in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Paula, you're on the air," announced Norman.

"Hello, Wallace Shipley," said the woman, using Adam's first and last name as though she could not say the one without the other, "I absolutely love your music, and was wondering when you were coming out with your next album!"

Charlie fought back the temptation to roll her eyes. He was *always* asked that! Suddenly, Charlie remembered that *she* had asked Adam the very same question, not long after finding out who he was. Embarrassed to realize that she wasn't very different from his other fans, Charlie settled down while Adam replied to the caller.

"Well, Paula," smiled Adam, "I've often wondered the same thing. I used to think it was unlikely, but I'm finding new inspiration [here, Adam looked at Charlie] and I can say that the music is coming. I don't know when I'll have enough to put out another album, but I'm definitely working on it."

"Our next caller is from Raymond in Dallas, Texas. Raymond, you're on the air." When there was silence, Norman chuckled. "I guess Raymond is having some technical trouble. Let's move on to Doris, from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania."

"Hello, Mr. Wallace Shipley," began the caller, this time adding a "Mister" to his full name, "I wanted you to know how much your music meant to my son. He was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma when he was fourteen, and every time he went in for his next course of chemotherapy, he always took your music along to keep him calm when the drugs entered his system. To his dying day," Doris' voice wavered, "he always listened to you. He said it made him feel closer to God."

Caught off guard by this mother's touching gratitude, Adam cleared his throat before speaking.

"Thank you, that meant a lot to me," he finally managed to say. "I'm so sorry to hear about your son, but I'm glad he found a degree of refuge through my music."

"Wallace," asked Norman, "how much of an impact do you think you have on your fans?"

"I have no way to really answer that," replied Adam. "Whenever I receive an exceptionally touching letter from my listeners, I like to think that I'm making a difference. But you can't equate record sales to touching someone's life. I can only pray that God uses me to the fullest measure that He can."

"What goes through your mind, when you realize that you're effecting people in such a profound way?" inquired Norman.

"I think the first thing that occurs to me is an overwhelming sense of responsibility," answered Adam. "Then, it's usually followed by a slight case of panic. It's like the Bible says, 'unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required.' [Luke 12:48] I've been given much, and there's not a day goes by where I don't feel the responsibility of it in some fashion or form."

But," he smiled, "it's always a great encouragement to hear from people like Doris. It reminds you that what you're doing *does* count, no matter how small or insignificant you may think it is at the time. If you're doing it for the right reason, it *will* count."

"And on that note," smiled Norman Jones, "we end our broadcast. I encourage you to join me next time, when I talk to Bill Anderson about his best-selling new book, 'The Sum Total of Us: Money Management for Couples.'"

The light on the camera turned red, and Charlie suddenly realized that the interview was over. She had made it through the entire hour without stuttering or tripping over herself when she spoke-- at least, she hoped she hadn't.

"I enjoyed our time together," smiled Norman, collecting his notes and handing them off to an assistant. "It was very enlightening."

Adam gave Norman a sideways glance, while someone unclipped the small mic hanging from the lapel of his suit jacket.

"I was referring to the comments Charlotte made," explained Norman.

"I know what you meant," replied Adam, helping his wife out of her chair. "I had no idea she was going to say those things about me."

"I thought she was charming," smiled Norman, nodding in deference to Charlie.

Charming? Charlie hoped that wasn't code for "gushed over her new husband like a teenager." But Adam only smiled, and Norman shook hands with the couple before they left the studio.

The sky was just beginning to turn color as they climbed into the limousine and headed back to their hotel.

"Are you embarrassed I opened my mouth during the interview?" wondered Charlie, hoping that Adam's response wouldn't be in the affirmative.

"You did just fine," he patted her hand.

Even with that less than enthusiastic vote of confidence, Charlie didn't think Adam's behavior was too out of the ordinary. He seemed to have a lot on his mind, but given the events of the day, that was hardly surprising.

Waiting for Adam to surface from his thoughts, Charlie leaned back in her seat and watched the reflection in Adam's passenger window. His eyes absently tracked the cars that passed by their limousine, until Charlie thought she saw a look of anguish flicker across his face. The young woman leaned forward to look out his window, straining to get a glimpse of whatever it was that had made his jaw suddenly clench. She saw row after row of small crosses and headstones, and realized they were passing a cemetery.

Disgusted by some thought Adam was keeping to himself, the musician reached up and undid his tie.

"The nerve of that guy," he muttered under his breath.

"Who?" asked Charlie.

Surprised, Adam looked at her with a puzzled, but kind smile.

"What, Charlie?"

"Who had the nerve?" she repeated.

With a sad shake of his head, Adam laughed.

"Sorry," he apologized. "I wasn't aware I was thinking out loud. Just forget it."

Charlie wanted to press the question further, but Adam didn't look like he was in the humor to be pressed. And yet, she didn't sense that he was angry with her.

"Where are we going this evening?" she inquired.

"What?" Adam distractedly pulled his gaze from the window and sighed patiently. "You said something about this evening?" Charlie repeated her question and he checked his pants pocket for a slip of paper. "Your hairdresser recommended a good restaurant," said Adam, running his eyes over its contents before shoving it back into his pocket. "Bill made the reservations for us."

"Are you sure you feel like going out?" she wondered.

When Adam didn't respond, she tugged at his jacket until she got his attention.

"Do you want to go home and skip our date?" asked Charlie.

"Of course not," he frowned. "Why do you ask?"

"You don't look very pleased," she observed. "Are you sure you're not mad at me for saying what I did to Norman Jones?"

With a tender smile, Adam pulled Charlie toward him, until she was nestled against his expensive designer suit.

"I'm pleased," he murmured in the hushed, private tone he always used when it was just the two of them.

"I didn't embarrass you?" Her timidness made Adam realize that he was unsettling his precious one by his brooding silence. If he didn't want her thinking such thoughts, he had to start acting like himself.

"You made me very proud," he whispered, planting a kiss on Charlie's forehead. "I'm glad my fans had a chance to see how happy you've made me."

Comforted, Charlie let herself enjoy the rest of their drive. Adam still wasn't acting as he usually did, but Charlie could see he was trying. Thankfully, they didn't pass any more cemeteries.

For a welcome change, there were no reporters or photographers waiting for them at the hotel. After Kevin escorted Charlie inside, he went to his room to quickly shower before packing the one duffel bag he had brought with him on the trip. After all, Adam was taking Charlie to an elegant restaurant, and Kevin knew he was expected to sit at their table so he could guard Charlie. It wouldn't do for him to start smelling at a time like that!

After Adam showered, he surrendered the bathroom to Charlie, who insisted that she had more need of it than he. Adam watched with some amusement as she carried her two bags into the bathroom and then returned for the exquisite evening dress Dee had chosen. By the looks of it, Charlie easily guessed that it had cost a lot of money. She had thought it was more extravagant than the occasion required, but by the great ardor expressed on Adam's face right now, Charlie was beginning to think otherwise.

"Don't take too long in there," he grinned.

With a laugh, Charlie disappeared into the bathroom to get ready for their date. Five minutes later, Adam finished dressing and looked himself over in the mirror. He had been hoping to coax Charlie into this outing, and had prepared for the possibility by secretly bringing his tuxedo. In

fact, Adam had even made sure Kevin came prepared, and instructed him to bring formal attire "just in case."

"How's it coming?" Adam called to her. "Bill had a difficult time getting those last minute reservations, and I don't want them giving our table to someone else because we're late."

"Hold on," she responded, opening the bathroom door and hurrying into a pair of matching high heels. "I'm almost ready."

After stepping back to get a better look at his beautiful wife, Adam whistled in admiration. She was pleasingly dressed in a dark green evening gown, that gently scooped below her neckline and tapered into delicate straps over her shoulders. Charlie fastened gold earrings behind her ears and suddenly noticed that Adam was looking very striking in a black tuxedo.

"Did you go shopping while we were here?" she laughed, only half joking. "Where did the tux come from?"

"Oh, this?" shrugged Adam. "Why, I always carry a spare tuxedo with me." Adam said this with a completely serious face, but Charlie instantly knew he was teasing. "I was hoping we could do this," he admitted, quickly cracking under the pressure of Charlie's accusing smile.

"Oh, you were, were you?" she laughed, her face kindling with tenderness. Seizing the moment, Adam tried to take Charlie into his arms. Before she could warn him not to mess her hair, Bill knocked at their hotel door.

"Saved in the nick of time," she smiled, as Adam let his personal manager inside.

"I hope you both have a good time," Bill wished them well. He held his suitcase in one hand and shook Adam's hand with the other. "My flight takes off in half an hour, and I promised my wife I'd be on time for a change."

"You and Madeline are getting back together!" Charlie exclaimed with delight.

"She's giving me another chance," explained Bill, with a hint of caution in his voice. "I first have to prove that she's more important than my job."

"Making time for her will go a long way to prove that," Charlie assured him.

"It was a good interview," acknowledged Bill. "Adam finally loosened up, but you quickly hit your stride. Thank you for going through with it. I predict you've made a lot of Wallace Shipley's fans very happy."

"As long as Wallace is happy," laughed Charlie, "that's all I need to be satisfied!"

"Thanks for flying out here," Adam gratefully hugged his friend. "Say 'hello' to Madeline for us."

Satisfied that his work there was done, Bill left the hotel, thankful that the day had gone as well as it had.

Just after Bill departed for the airport, Kevin arrived at the Clark's hotel door. When the former navy SEAL stepped into the room smartly dressed in a tuxedo, Charlie looked at Adam with an incriminating stare.

"Don't tell me Kevin always carries a spare tux, as well!"

Adam only grinned.

The men gathered their suitcases, for they were checking out of the hotel, and would go straight to the airfield, after dinner. Casting his eyes about the room to make sure they hadn't forgotten anything, Adam switched off the light and locked the door.

Then the group headed outside to their awaiting limousine, for Norman Jones had given them use of the vehicle for their entire stay. The driver hurried to open the door for Adam and his party, and smiled politely as they prepared to climb inside.

"Looks like we're in for some beautiful weather tonight," Adam smiled pleasantly at the man.

"Yes, Sir," he replied with a broad grin. "You've picked a good time to go out."

After everyone was seated inside, the driver climbed behind the wheel, and the limousine took off for their destination.

The smell of sweet perfume mingled with the mens' after-shave, giving a very dressed-up feel to the interior of the limousine. Charlie usually didn't wear perfume, but always carried a small bottle in her purse, in case of a formal emergency. She knew Adam would have had a field day with that bit of information-- especially after the hard time she had given him about the tuxedos-- and wisely kept it to herself.

More than once, Adam inhaled the scent clinging to her, and followed it with a deep sigh of husbandly satisfaction. Charlie only hoped Kevin wasn't listening.

When the limousine came to a stop, Kevin kept a watchful eye for unwanted attention while Adam helped Charlie out of the vehicle. The driver pulled away, and found a parking spot where he would wait for his clients, until they were ready to leave.

A cool breeze fluttered Charlie's evening dress, as the doorman showed them inside the fancy restaurant. Adam was already beginning to be recognized, for when the maître d' showed them to their table, he called Adam, "Mr. Shipley," even though the reservation was in Adam's name. Thankfully, requesting autographs from guests was against the restaurant's policy.

"I've never been anywhere so fancy," Charlie whispered to Adam, as he pulled out her chair and found a seat beside her at their table.

Endeavoring to stay out of Adam and Charlie's way, Kevin sat down on the opposite side of the table and silently thanked Adam for warning him to bring his tuxedo. Nearly every man present was formally dressed, and Kevin knew he would have stuck out like a sore thumb, in only a suit and tie.

"Look, Charlie," Adam nodded his head toward the center of the large room. "This place has live piano!"

Charlie followed Adam's gaze to where a young man dressed in a tuxedo was seated before a grand piano. His face looked tired, and Charlie guessed that he had already had a long day. The people dining at their tables surrounding him, gave the young man very little attention, and the man looked as though he were used to being overlooked.

"What a way to make a living, huh?" Adam observed to Charlie in a hushed voice. "I think that's what my Dad must've had in mind, when I told him I wanted a career in music. It may be a thankless job, but at least it's honest work."

A waiter arrived, and handed gold embossed menus to Adam, Charlie, and Kevin. Charlie opened her menu, and gasped when she saw the prices for each entrée. What made it even worse, was the fact that most of the names were in French. If Charlie was going to pay an arm and a leg for something, she at least wanted to know what she was eating!

Hearing his wife's sigh, Adam peered over her menu with an amused smile.

"Do you want me to order for you?" he offered.

"You can read this stuff?" she asked in surprise.

"No, but I know what the names of each dish mean," Adam explained. "I'm somewhat familiar with continental French cuisine. Don't worry, I'll get you something without snails, and without meat."

"Would you do the same for me?" requested Kevin.

"I didn't know you were a vegetarian," remarked Adam in surprise.

"I'm not," Kevin explained, dryly. "I just don't want to eat snails."

With a laugh, Adam looked over the menu while Charlie occupied herself with watching the young man at the piano. Gradually, she became aware of the fact that the other restaurant patrons watching *her*! They smiled knowingly with hushed whispers, and shook their heads in disbelief.

"They were just on Norman Jones," Charlie heard one woman tell her tuxedo clad husband. The man, apparently not a Wallace Shipley fan, acknowledged his wife with a grunt and continued eating his dinner.

Before long, Adam gave their menu selections to the waiter, and settled back in his chair to enjoy the music.

"He's not half bad," Adam nodded in appreciation.

"Everyone is staring at us," whispered Charlie.

"I knew that dress would attract attention," he chuckled. Adam reached across the table and took her hand in his. He didn't seem to care if the world was watching them, or not. "I have the prettiest wife in the establishment, so of course they're going to stare."

At first, Charlie thought Adam was only teasing, but there was a sincere ring to his voice that made her think he had actually meant it. Adam gave her hand one last squeeze before letting it go.

The minutes flew by, and their food had yet to materialize from the restaurant kitchen. His stomach growled loud enough that Adam hoped no one else could hear. When it rumbled once again, Charlie gave him a laughing smile.

"Haute cuisine takes time to prepare," Adam explained. "You have to have patience so the chefs can do a good job."

"For the time they're taking with this dinner," Charlie sighed, "you could've already had a four course meal at a cafeteria."

"Yeah," chuckled Adam with a lopsided grin, "but where's the fun in that?"

Charlie playfully kicked him beneath the table, and the famous musician laughed. It was good to see him smiling, again.

Just as Adam was reminding himself one more time of the finer points of cooking, their food finally arrived. Elegant dishes of something Charlie couldn't name were placed before them, while another waiter poured a sparkling drink into their glasses.

"Try a taste," Adam coaxed her. "It's an alcohol-free wine."

"I had no idea they made such a thing," she mused, cautiously taking a sip and letting its abundant flavor deluge her palate. Charlie didn't know what normal wine was like, but it sure didn't taste like the grape juice she had expected.

Then it was time to try the dish Adam had ordered. After poking the food with her fork and looking it over, Charlie took a small nibble and her face broke into a surprised smile.

"I knew you'd like it," grinned Adam.

After each course was finished, another one took its place. Charlie had to admit, it was an exquisite meal. As dessert was being served, Charlie noticed the young man at the piano getting up for a break. As he strode past their table, his eyes fell on Adam. His jaw dropped open, and Charlie smiled as she noticed the young man making an effort to swallow.

"Adam," she nudged her husband, "say something to him."

Adam looked up and smiled when he saw who was standing before their table.

"I'm Adam Clark," he extended a hand out to the young man.

"Yes-- I know," stammered the musician, staring at the offered hand as though he were dreaming. "I'm..." he paused, no longer sure *what* his name was.

"Charlotte and I have been enjoying your music," Adam smiled in interest. "How long have you been a pianist?"

Wide-eyed, the young man stared at Adam and struggled to string together a coherent response.

"Since I was a boy," he finally managed to answer.

"Really?" Adam smiled. "Did your mother make you take lessons?"

"Yes," smiled the young man, "just like yours."

Adam laughed and the man blinked hard, as if trying to tell himself that Wallace Shipley was actually speaking to HIM!

"This is my wife, Charlotte," introduced Adam, "and this is her bodyguard, Kevin."

The young man politely shook their hands and nervously glanced at the maître d' who was now watching them.

"I'm sorry," Adam smiled, "but I'm afraid I didn't catch your name."

"Dave-- Dave Walker," stammered the young man, gulping hard as the maître d' made his way to their table.

"I apologize for this intrusion into your evening," the maître d' excused Dave's behavior. "I assure you, it won't happen again." The maître d' flashed Dave a stern look, and the young man bowed his head and hurried away. "I hope you are enjoying your dinner?" he inquired.

"Yes, very much," Adam politely nodded. "I hope I didn't get your employee into any trouble. I've enjoyed Dave's music very much."

A strange look crossed the man's face, as if he thought he couldn't quite believe their lowly pianist could incite the compliments of someone as renowned as Wallace Shipley.

"I'll be sure to tell him," the maître d' finally responded. "If you need anything further, let me know."

When the man left, Adam warily looked at Charlie.

"If I didn't know any better," Adam sighed heavily, "I'd think that I just cost Dave his job." The famous musician tossed his linen napkin onto the table.

"I'm sorry," apologized Charlie. "I shouldn't have asked you to speak to him."

"Don't be," Adam brushed aside her apology. "I was going to talk to him before we left, anyway. Well, if you're finished with your dessert, I guess we'd better leave."

When Adam motioned for the waiter to bring their bill, he was followed by Dave, who was now returning to his work at the piano. Adam smiled encouragingly at the young man, but Dave didn't dare acknowledge his presence-- no matter how sorely he was tempted.

As Adam paid for their meal, he noticed that people were still staring at them. Suddenly getting an idea, he whispered something to the waiter.

"I'll go get him," shrugged the waiter.

"What are you doing?" asked Charlie, who was now ready to leave.

"Hold on," Adam requested, coaxing her back into her chair. "I have one last surprise up my sleeve."

Puzzled, Charlie did as he directed, wondering what on earth Adam was up to. By now, everyone in the restaurant had acknowledged that they knew who Adam and Charlie were by their knowing smiles and polite nods. And this misunderstanding with the maître d' hadn't helped her feel any less self-conscious.

Suddenly, the man in question appeared before their table, and addressed Adam.

"You asked for me?" inquired the maître d'.

"Yes," smiled Adam, "I was wondering if you'd do me a favor..." Adam leaned forward and whispered something into the man's ear.

"Yes," replied the maître d', obviously flattered by Adam's request. "I'm sure that would be no problem-- no problem at all! Whenever you like, the piano is yours."

"Thank you," smiled Adam, giving Charlie a playful wink before leaving the table.

"Adam?" wondered Charlie. "Where are you going?"

"Stay with her," Adam directed Kevin.

The bodyguard nodded, and Adam walked off with the maître d' in the direction of the piano.

"What's he up to?" Kevin couldn't help but wonder out loud.

"I think he intends to play," replied Charlie, her mouth wide open in astonishment.

Dave looked up in surprise as his boss walked toward the piano, followed by none other than Wallace Shipley. His hands suddenly became still, and the music halted.

"Dave," the maître d' announced in an authoritative voice, "Mr. Shipley would like to borrow your instrument for a few minutes."

"Of course," the young man hurriedly turned over his bench to the famous musician.

"Thank you," smiled Adam. "I won't keep you from your work for too long. I just want to surprise my wife with something I wrote right after we were married."

What was this? A new composition? Dave's ears perked up and his mouth stretched out in a wide grin. He backed away from the piano and watched as Wallace Shipley sat down on the very same bench that he had just occupied!

It was evident that the other patrons had been watching what was going on, for as Adam placed his hands on the keyboard, the entire restaurant came to a complete stand-still.

Amazed by their reaction, Charlie watched as everyone's eyes were glued to Adam. Then, the room began to echo with a hauntingly familiar tune. Charlie immediately recognized the melody, and her lips parted in a loving smile. Her memory returned to a storeroom, and the old piano that Adam had serenaded her on. "Do you know how much I love you?" he had asked. Yes, Charlie knew. She knew it every time he gazed at her with his handsome smile, and sought her company out from the others in a crowd. Charlie closed her eyes and sighed dreamily. She knew he loved her. She had no doubt of it.

Then, the music stopped, and the entire restaurant erupted into enthusiastic applause. Charlie opened her eyes to see Adam shaking Dave's hand and returning the instrument to its musician.

"May I ask," inquired Dave, "what the name of that piece was?"

"Charlotte." Just the saying of her name seemed to bring Adam much joy, and Dave nodded understandingly. He knew who Charlotte was, and needed no further explanation.

"It was an honor to meet you, Mr. Shipley," Dave fairly glowed with pleasure. "Thank you. I'll never forget this night, for as long as I live!"

With a wide grin, Adam strode back to their table and helped Charlie out of her chair.

"*Now*, we can leave," he winked.

When Adam and Charlie headed for the door, people thanked them as they passed their tables. The doorman called for Adam's limousine, and the three waited outside for their ride to arrive.

A cool wind blew against them, and Charlie couldn't help but shudder.

"Are you cold?" asked Adam, taking off his tuxedo jacket and draping it around her shoulders. Not content to have the jacket without its owner, Charlie leaned her head against Adam's chest and sighed contentedly.

"I had a wonderful time," she thanked him.

"Did you?" he softly breathed, putting his strong arms around her. The night seemed to hum with music, and so did Adam. Charlie could hear the tune he had just played, softly reverberating through his chest, while the sound of his steady heartbeat grew louder as her arms stole around his middle.

Just then, the limousine pulled up, ready to take them to the airfield where their private jet was waiting.

The engine whirred loudly, as they climbed up the aircraft's steps and found their usual seats in the cabin. Then the jet taxied down the runway, and Atlanta was reduced to twinkling lights that sparkled below them.

After they had gained enough altitude to unbuckle their seat belts, Adam guided Charlie to the furthest end of the plane. He turned off the small overhead lights above their seats, and eagerly embraced her in the semi-darkness.

"Adam," she mumbled between kisses, "we're not alone."

"I know," he breathed, claiming her mouth once more.

"Please," she begged, pushing him away and nervously glancing up the aisle where Kevin was dozing in his seat. "We can't do this on the jet, Adam."

With a small groan, Adam leaned back and gazed longingly at Charlie.

"I suppose you're right," he slowly conceded.

Gratefully, Charlie smiled in relief. She would have gladly hugged him, but under the circumstances, she was afraid it might set off another round of passionate kisses. Instead, Charlie grasped his hand and Adam squeezed it tightly.

"I can't believe you got up in front of all those people and played my song," Charlie whispered in amazement. "Adam, you should have seen their faces. They were having such a good time."

Adam moved her clasped hand to his lips, and kissed each finger that intertwined with his. Charlie could hear the longing build in his breath, and realized she had to put a stop to his desire.

"Would you cool off?" she sighed, trying unsuccessfully to remove her hand from his. "Adam, I mean it!"

"Charlie," he whispered lovingly, "you're driving me crazy with that perfume."

"As if you needed perfume to go crazy," she softly laughed.

With a sigh, Adam watched as Charlie found a comfortable place to rest her head on the back of her seat. She gazed at him sleepily, looking more beautiful in the evening dress than Adam thought she had a right to. He watched her chest slowly move up and down with each small breath, and then her eyes slid shut. As she drifted to sleep, Charlie could feel the touch of Adam's fingers, softly stroking the back of her hand.

The next time Charlie awoke, she was alarmed to find the cabin mostly empty.

"Adam?" her voice broke through the noise of activity outside the jet.

"I'm right here, Charlie-girl," he answered, taking long strides down the aisle to her seat.

"Are we home yet?" she asked groggily.

"No," smiled Adam, tucking his tuxedo jacket around her, "we're refueling. Go to sleep, Honey. I'll wake you when we're in Twin Yucca."

"Okay," she yawned.

With a twinge of envy, Adam watched as his wife fell asleep once more, and wished he had the same gift of being able to rest anywhere. He recalled Charlie once saying that she was a light sleeper, but he no longer believed it.

To Charlie, it felt like five minutes later, when Adam gently shook her shoulder and announced that they were in Twin Yucca. While Adam and Charlie descended the steps, Kevin helped the steward move their baggage into Adam's SUV.

"It must be so late," she murmured sleepily.

"Actually, it's only one in the morning," informed Adam with an ironic smile. "We gained three hours by flying into the western horizon."

Charlie smiled numbly, for one o' clock still sounded very late to her.

Kevin climbed behind the wheel, and they began the last leg of their trip back to Villa Rosa.

Even though Adam had told Charlie the time, she was surprised to find herself not as sleepy as before. She had gotten a lot of rest on the jet, and now that they were nearing home, she found herself suddenly wide awake. Adam, on the other hand, was looking more tired than ever. Charlie guessed that he had been unable to get any sleep during the flight.

An hour and a half later, the bright beams of their headlights illuminated Villa Rosa's main gate. After Adam got out to unlock it and let them inside, Kevin pulled the SUV in front of the mobile homes and shut off the engine.

Thankfully, Vera had left the porch light on, making it easier to pick their way through the darkness and find their way to the front door. With a yawn, Adam unloaded their luggage and the three quietly made their way inside, not trying to awaken Vera or Chuck with their arrival.

To Charlie's surprise, they found Vera sound asleep in her favorite easy chair, while the television droned in the background. Going to check on her father, Charlie left Adam to turn off the television and wake Vera.

"You're back," the old woman awoke with a bleary-eyed smile.

"You didn't have to wait up for us," apologized Adam. "I told you we'd be home rather late."

"I know, I know," she sighed, gratefully accepting Adam's helping hand as she struggled to get to her feet. "I wanted to, that's all." Vera straightened her stiff limbs with a smarting groan. Then she remembered something pleasant, and her dim eyes glowed tenderly. "I saw the interview with Norman Jones. Charlie was absolutely sweet!"

"Yes, she was," Adam smiled fondly.

Then Vera noticed Adam's tuxedo and the coat jacket draped over his arm.

"So you had your night out," she nodded in approval. "I'm glad. After all that kidnapping business, Charlie probably needed to get her mind onto something happier."

"I think I needed it, too," confessed Adam. "Do you want any help getting to bed, Vera? You're looking pretty stiff."

"I shouldn't have stayed in that chair for so long," she groaned, taking a few hobbling steps forward and wincing in pain as she went.

Dropping his tuxedo jacket on the couch, Adam assisted Vera as she carefully made her way to her bedroom. His help wasn't essential, but Adam was still grateful they hadn't stayed overnight in Atlanta. When Vera finally made it to her room, Adam remained nearby to see if she needed any help getting into bed.

"Daddy's sound asleep," Charlie quietly announced, coming to her grandma's open bedroom door. She watched as Vera managed to sit down on the edge of her bed, and remove her house slippers. "Tomorrow, you don't have to get up early to fix breakfast," offered Charlie. "I'll take care of it."

Vera looked up to respond, and saw Charlie's new evening dress for the first time. The old woman's lips parted in a warm smile. "That dress is very becoming on you, Pumpkin."

The compliment turned Adam's attention to Charlie, and his admiring eyes looked the young woman over. Tired man though he was, his desire was still there.

"Do you need anything else before we turn in, Vera?" he asked, stifling a yawn as he reached for the light switch.

"No, I'm fine," she assured him. "Good night."

After quietly shutting Vera's door, Adam followed Charlie into the living room.

"Kevin turned in," he yawned, checking the clock on the wall. "It's two thirty, and I think I'll do the same."

"I'm going to change out of this dress and read a book for awhile," Charlie informed him. She looked ready to start a new day, while Adam felt as though one was just coming to a close. As she moved to retrieve his tuxedo jacket from off the couch, Charlie heard a disappointed sigh emanating from Adam's direction. Realizing that he had hoped she would join him, Charlie hesitated. "Of course," she smiled, "I'm open to a better offer."

"I'm afraid I'll only fall asleep after my head hits the pillow," he warned.

"I can wait," replied Charlie.

She sighed happily as Adam took her into his arms. Her answer had pleased him greatly.

"Oh, Charlie-girl," Adam softly breathed, "I love you so much, sometimes I can't think straight."

"That's because you haven't had any sleep," she explained. "You'll feel better in the morning."

"I feel pretty good right *now*," he grinned sleepily.

Heading for their bedroom, Adam slipped his arm around Charlie's waist.

"I can't believe I get to go home with you," he whispered thankfully. "I'm a very blessed man."

A few minutes later, Adam was snuggled in bed with Charlie right beside him.

"God," Adam prayed in a hushed voice, "thank you for delivering my darling from the power of the dogs, today. Your goodness and mercy have brought me to where I am, and I beg you to not let me fail You. Work Your will in me, Lord, and cause me to fulfill Your purpose for my life."

When Adam ended his prayer, Charlie felt his hand reach for hers beneath the covers.

"Sometimes," he confided, "I feel the burden of my fame bearing down on me. Today was such a day." He turned his head on the pillow and gazed at Charlie. With a gentle touch, she stroked his hair as he buried his face in her nightgown.

Soon, Adam was fast asleep.

Through the remainder of the night, Charlie cradled Adam in her arms, and waited for him to awake in his own time.

"I charge you... that ye stir not up, nor awake my love [Adam], until he please."

~ Song of Solomon 8:4 ~

"Deliver... my darling [Charlie] from the power of the dog."

~ Psalm 22:20 ~

"The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime, and in the night His song shall be with [us], and [our] prayer unto the God of [our] life."

~ Psalm 42:8 ~

Chapter Fifty-five

The Struggles of a Good Man

"My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers [various] temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing."

~ James 1:2-4 ~

Now that their trip to Atlanta was over, Adam expected things at Villa Rosa to settle into the same routine as before. But instead of quieting down, the activity at Villa Rosa only increased. It was nearing late September, and the rainy season would officially begin sometime next month. Wanting to finish the rooftops and other renovations that would be open and exposed to the elements, Beppe hired more workers to hasten its progress. Every day, a large parking lot of cars and trucks would form inside the gates of Villa Rosa, making the renovation efforts look as impressive as it truly was. If Adam and Charlie had neighbors, they would have been curious to watch as the army of workers descended on the estate each day. As it was, their closest neighbor was a small, run down restaurant in Drywell. The forlorn diner was currently enjoying a surge of prosperity, for the hungry crew would often go there for a meal and some air conditioning at lunch time.

While Beppe and Charlie kept track of the calendar and their ambitious work schedules, Adam busied himself with his music. Then, early one September morning, Charlie made an unexpected request that could change Adam's plans.

"I know you're really busy with your piano," she ventured, as she tied the laces on her hiking boots for another day's work, "but Beppe and I were hoping you might help the new guys that are arriving, today."

"You're bringing in *more* crew?" Adam asked in surprise, while he watched Charlie dress from his vantage in bed. He was still in pajamas, and since his day didn't depend on getting up early, he intended to sleep in this morning.

"I thought you might want to take care of these *particular* guys," explained Charlie, her face betraying a hint of merriment that immediately caught Adam's curiosity. "They have a lot of work ahead of them."

"Oh?" he raised his eyebrows. "Who's coming?"

"Just some men from a plumbing outfit in Twin Yucca," Charlie furrowed her brow in feigned concentration. "I can't remember their name, but I think it was Clark-something-or-other."

"Mike's coming?" Adam grinned broadly. He sat up in bed and quickly searched the room for his pants. "Is Hiram going to be here, too? Of course he is," Adam answered himself, as Charlie handed him his jeans. "I didn't put Hiram in charge of the family business, for nothing. Mike's too inexperienced for a job like this, so I expect Hiram will be running the show." Sitting on the edge of the bed, Adam leaned forward to put on his shoes. Then he felt Charlie apply sunscreen to the back of his neck. "Say," it suddenly occurred him to ask, "you're taking a lot for granted, aren't you? I never said I would help."

"Wild horses couldn't keep you away," she smiled, "and you know it!"

"Think you know me that well, do you?" Adam pulled Charlie into his lap. Laughing, Charlie playfully fought his arms as they encircled her in a loving embrace. Her laughter quieted, however, as his eyes tenderly searched hers. "What have you done to me, Charlie?" he whispered in amazement. "I've never been so happy."

"Do you really mean it, Adam?" Her eyes brightened with pleasure. "You're not just saying that because I keep you company at night?"

"You know me better than that," Adam smiled. "If I wanted someone to keep my bed warm, I would've married long ago."

"Then why did you pick me?" she tested him with a playful toss of her head.

"If I remember correctly," he softly murmured in her ear, "*you* were the one who did the picking. I just knew when to give up."

"Do you know what?" Charlie asked, leaning her head against his. "Constance didn't chase you half as hard as she should have."

"You're the only one I'll ever surrender to," breathed Adam. With a happy sigh of contentment, he reclined on the mattress while Charlie continued to kiss him.

At breakfast, Vera noticed Adam's attire and smiled in approval. "It'll do you some good to get outside, instead of sitting at that piano all hours of the day."

"Vera," asked the man as he held up his mug for another cup of coffee, "when did you become *my* grandma, as well?"

The old woman laughed and Adam smiled good-naturedly. He knew Vera tried not to meddle in his life, and give advice where it hadn't been asked. Still, he had to admit that it felt good to have Vera looking out for his welfare.

"Pumpkin," Vera asked her granddaughter over the breakfast table, "Chuck's birthday is coming up pretty soon. Have you given any thought as to how you want to celebrate it?"

"I've been so busy, I completely forgot!" Charlie exclaimed in surprise.

"I was thinking," proposed Vera, "I could make a special supper of Chuck's favorite food, and then invite some friends over to have a small birthday party."

With a sad nod of her head, Charlie agreed to the celebration. Chuck wasn't aware of anyone around him, and Charlie knew the party was more for their sake, than it was for his.

"We could invite Maggie and Jeff," Vera tried to coax Charlie into a smile. "They haven't seen Villa Rosa yet, and I know you're dying to see Maggie again."

"That's a great idea, Grandma," Charlie gave her a thankful smile.

"I know you're busy," assured Vera, "so you leave all the preparations to me. I'll need a ride into Twin Yucca, though. We're running low on groceries, and I'd like to pick out a nice birthday cake at the delicatessen."

"I could drive you," offered Kevin, finishing off his breakfast. "Of course, if it's all right with Mr. Clark."

"Are you sure?" asked Adam. "You've already been doing a lot around here. From what I've seen, you've been working right alongside the rest of the crew."

"It beats sitting on my tail just watching," shrugged Kevin.

"Even so," acknowledged Adam, "I've already changed your salary to reflect the added work you're doing. You'll notice it in your next paycheck."

Kevin looked at him in grateful surprise.

"And whenever you want it," Adam continued, "you have a lot of vacation time coming. You keep turning it down, so I thought I'd remind you of it once more."

"I'm in no hurry to leave," Kevin assured him.

"Why? Don't you have a life outside this job?" wondered Charlie, only half joking.

"I have good friends here," he replied with a nod. "As I said, I'll be more than happy to drive you into Twin Yucca today, Mrs. Overholt."

"Go ahead and take him up on it, Vera," chuckled Adam. "I think I can manage to fend off Charlie's admirers for a few hours."

"Very funny," smiled Charlie. "Do you want some help making up a grocery list, Grandma? I can spare a few minutes if you need me."

"That's not necessary," smiled Vera, "I can manage it by myself. And thank you, Kevin. I'll make sure you get an extra large slice of Chuck's birthday cake."

Kevin smiled warmly and slipped back into his professional composure of silence and guarded watchfulness. Adam wasn't sure if he did this out of habit, or if it was on purpose. Whatever the reason, Adam regarded Kevin as one of Charlie's guardian angels. And, many times, Kevin did his best to look after Adam, as well. Somewhere along the way, Kevin had become more than a member of Wallace Shipley's entourage: he was a member of this family. Even if Kevin refused to let his guard down and admit it out loud, Adam knew he felt a strong bond with the people he saw every day.

By the time Adam and Charlie stepped outside, the usual parking lot of trucks and vehicles had already assembled, and Beppe was busy giving orders to the newcomers. Mike looked up with a huge smile when he saw his uncle coming to meet him.

After hugging his nephew, Adam listened while Beppe discussed the work to be done with Hiram. Hiram was a Master Plumber and a reliable individual to have around when there was a difficult job to be done. He had a strong work ethic, and was a good teacher-- something Adam had kept in mind when he chose Hiram to take his place at Clark Plumbing Service and Supply. If Mike was ever going to take over the family business one day, he would need a dependable teacher, and Hiram was that man.

"We have a lot of pipe to lay," Beppe explained to the plumbers. "We're starting with the work that's out in the open, so if it rains, the remaining work will be under a roof."

"How IS the roof coming?" inquired Adam.

"It's nearly done," grinned Beppe, turning to look at the large estate and glowing with satisfaction. "After the plumbing is finished, we pour the concrete for the floors."

"I have to admit, this place is beginning to look impressive, Uncle Adam." Mike looked about the estate and shook his head in wonderment. The runway was drying beneath the desert sun, while construction was nearly complete with the great metal hanger that would house his uncle's private jet. Tall, slender palm trees stood in the front yard, while others towered above the row of bungalows in back of the main house.

"Now that you mention it," chuckled Adam, "things *are* starting to take shape around here, aren't they! The oleander hedge Charlie wanted, still isn't in yet, but Villa Rosa is beginning to come together!"

"We have one of the largest crews I've ever hired for a private residence," informed Beppe. "You usually don't see this many workers unless it's a commercial project."

Grinning, Mike shook his head and looked at his uncle in semi-disbelief. "How does it feel to be rich?" the young man teased him.

"Oh! knock it off!" laughed Adam, as Mike continued to chuckle. "Hiram, it's good to see you again," Adam greeted the older man standing beside Mike. "How has my nephew been doing? Has he given you much trouble?"

"Not much," smiled Hiram, shaking his good friend's hand and returning his gaze to the blueprints Beppe was showing them.

"What does Beppe have in store for us?" inquired Adam, putting on his glasses and bending over to get a good look. Peering over the rims of his eyeglasses, Adam gave Hiram a rather serious expression. "This is pretty involved, Hi. Are you and Mike up to it?"

"Reckon so," affirmed Hiram. Adam waited for Hiram to say more, but when he didn't, Adam smiled. Hiram was a man of few words, and never wasted his breath on very many, unless the situation called for it. Apparently, the situation didn't call for it, so Adam was content that Hiram was on top of things.

Then Mike started explaining what needed to be done. As usual, Hiram said as little as possible, and only interjected his opinion when Mike's was incorrect.

While Adam was brought up to speed, Charlie saw Vera and Kevin off to Twin Yucca. They were taking Chuck with them, for there would be no one in the mobile home to keep an eye on him.

Unbeknownst to Kevin, one of the workers watched with great interest as Kevin helped Vera and Chuck into the pickup, and then climbed in after them. "So, he's leaving," the man with a straw hat breathed with satisfaction. "That's useful to know."

After Charlie waved good bye to the pickup, she went to find out what Beppe was saying to Adam and Mike. To her amusement, Adam was wearing the black rimmed glasses he always wore whenever he needed to read, and he didn't have on his contact lenses. Adam asked some question Charlie didn't understand, and then nodded when he heard Hiram's brief answer.

"That sounds good to me, Hi. If you can use me anywhere, I'll be glad to help out." Adam took off his glasses and placed them into his shirt pocket.

"Okay," nodded Hiram, tossing Adam a hard hat and pointing to an area near the well. "We start there."

"This is going to be just like the old days!" Mike exclaimed happily. "I brought an extra tool belt, if you still don't have yours, Uncle Adam!"

"Of *course* I still have my belt," replied Adam, as if it was an unnecessary question. "I'd never get rid of an old friend like that. It's in the van."

"Is that beat up thing still running?" Mike asked with a laugh.

Adam looked over at the shiny, new Clark Plumbing Service and Supply van parked near the front gate. "I suppose you and Hi made the right decision to retire the old van, but I sure had a lot of memories with that vehicle." Just then, he noticed Charlie returning with his tool belt. "Thanks, Honey," he smiled. "You didn't have to do that."

"Do you need anything else before I go?" asked Charlie. "I'm going to be with the crew while they're putting in the oleanders."

"What oleanders? I don't see any," puzzled Adam.

"They'll be here," Charlie nodded confidently. "I'll see you at lunch!" After giving Adam a quick kiss on the cheek, Charlie walked off while her husband watched.

"I'm sure glad I let her catch me," he mused.

"What?" asked Mike.

"Nothing," smiled Adam. "Let's get to work."

Right on time, the first of the trucks bringing massive oleander bushes, began rolling through the gates. They would eventually run the entire perimeter of the Villa Rosa estate, and were already full-grown so that Adam and Charlie wouldn't have to wait for the privacy that this hedge would afford. A front-end loader scooped up each bush, and deposited them a few feet away in what was quickly turning into a forest of oleanders. The tall, thickly leafed plants continued to come through the front gates, until Beppe instructed Charlie to create a work detail to begin moving them to the fence surrounding the property. He would be in town, seeing an inspector about some important issues, and would return in a few hours.

A flatbed truck pulled up, and another loader began removing bushes from the oleander forest. From where they were working near the well, Adam and the others paused to watch.

"That's a lot of bushes," breathed Mike in amazement. "And more keep coming!"

"Mike!" called out Hiram. "Work."

With a nod, Mike did as he was told.

A while later, Adam was laboring on his back beneath a series of pipes that were being installed just outside the main house. He had taken off his tool belt, and was working a stubborn pipe into place with his bare hands, when he heard a loud commotion of excited voices coming from nearby. "What's going on?" he wondered, as Mike looked up from assisting his uncle to see what the matter was.

"I don't know," muttered Hiram, "but it doesn't sound good."

Abandoning their work, the three plumbers quickly made their way toward a rowdy crowd of men that had gathered near the front gates of Villa Rosa. As they drew closer, Adam could hear a woman's pleading cry for help. With a lump in his throat, Adam broke into a run and jammed his body into the crowd.

"Uncle Adam?" Mike called after him in confusion.

"What on earth are you doing, Lyle?" shouted one of the crew to the man in a straw hat.

"Adam, help me!" Charlie's scream broke through the surrounding voices, as her husband forced his way through the crowd.

Lyle Perkins was one of the original Villa Rosa crew, so Adam was shocked to see him clenching Charlie by the wrist and refusing to let her go. At first, the man looked fearful, as though something hadn't gone according to plan. But when he saw Adam's angry form coming toward him, Lyle's face broke into a smile. This was even better. Lyle squeezed Charlie, until she screamed in pain.

Without a moment's hesitation, Adam lunged at the man, knocking him off his feet and pinning him to the ground. The sheer force of Adam's impact jerked Charlie off her feet, and sent her down with Lyle. Stubbornly, Lyle refused to let Charlie go, and struggled to fend Adam off with his free hand.

"Let her go!" growled Adam, trying to land a punch at Lyle without accidentally hitting Charlie. "I said," he repeated between clenched teeth, "LET HER GO!"

Frantically, Mike stood by and watched. The young man wanted to do something to help his uncle, but Hiram firmly held him back.

"You'll start a riot," warned Hiram, casting a wary glance at the unruly work crew as they spurred the wrestling men on. Some looked disposed to help Lyle, while others seemed caught between loyalties. Tensions were running high on all sides, and Hiram sensed it wouldn't take much for the entire crew to erupt in an all out fistfight over who was right and who was wrong.

On the ground, Adam continued to punch Lyle, until the man finally released his hold on Charlie. He had only been using one hand to fight Adam, and now that he was no longer at this disadvantage, Adam suddenly found himself confronting a man who was not only younger than himself, but also stronger. Before Adam knew it, he felt a shot of pain, as Lyle whipped his head back with a blow to his right eye.

Dazed, Charlie was still trying to regain her bearings when a pair of hands suddenly lifted her to her feet. She saw Mike's pale face and was numbly aware of being asked a question.

Looking for an opening, Lyle circled Adam. He struck at Adam with a faint to his face, followed by a blow to the stomach. Then Lyle put his whole weight into a blow to Adam's head. Adam blocked the punch, just enough for Lyle to lose his balance, and then countered with two jabs that snapped Lyle's head one way, then the other. Exhausted, they both fell to the ground. The air having been knocked from Adam's lungs, he could hardly breathe. Lyle was dazed and literally

couldn't see straight. The dust began to settle, as the two men stopped their conflict long enough to pull themselves up from off the ground.

"Is that the best you can do?" mocked Lyle, panting for breath. "You barely even touched me!"

With a disbelieving laugh, Adam shook his head and eyed his opponent's heaving chest. Though Lyle was struggling to catch his breath, so was he. In fact, Adam was no longer sure who was winning. He only hoped he had knocked enough wind out of Lyle, for the man to back off from this seemingly unreasonable rampage.

"Come on, old man!" Lyle challenged him. He quickly glanced at the parking lot with a strange smile, and then shoved Adam in the chest.

"*I want you off my land!*" Adam demanded. He squared his shoulders and eyed the man with all the authority he could summon.

"You're so weak!" scoffed his antagonist. "You could never please your wife! Why, in bed..." Lyle finished his sentence with a sexually graphic and extremely deriding picture of Adam with Charlie.

Shocked, Charlie covered her mouth in horror. It wasn't true, but the accusation was so despicable and hurtful that she couldn't help the tears as they began to fall.

"Mike, get her out of here!" commanded Adam, as the two men continued to face each other down.

"But--" stammered Mike.

"Do as I say!" shouted Adam.

Numbly, Mike hurried his protesting aunt to the mobile home.

"*Lyle,*" bellowed Hiram, "walk away before someone gets hurt!"

Just then, a crew member tossed Lyle a heavy pipe wrench.

Furious, Hiram glared at the men in the crowd. "Who gave him that?" he barked. "*Who did that?*"

With a grin that sent fear into Adam's heart, Lyle flew at him with the pipe wrench. Before Lyle had a chance to land his blow, however, a disgusted Hiram jerked the tool out from Lyle's hands.

"If you're going to fight," contended Hiram, "you'll do it fair and square." Even many of the men who were on Lyle's side, had to agree.

The former Master Plumber swiped his forehead with the back of his hand and spat out the blood pooling in his mouth. "Lyle, you're really asking for trouble," he muttered. Adam leveled his eyes at Lyle with such unspoken force, that every person in the work crew took a step back.

Lyle's form swayed with fatigue, but when he spread his feet and planted himself in front of Adam, it was clear that he didn't consider the confrontation over. With a weakened lunge, Lyle threw a punch at Adam, but was easily thwarted when his opponent stepped aside. Panting, Lyle looked at Adam. To his everlasting irritation, the "old man" was still standing.

"Have you had enough?" Adam's voice was winded, but determined. For all of Lyle's strength, he lacked the endurance he had accused Adam of not possessing.

In a final effort to best Adam, Lyle came at him one more time. Blocking Lyle's punch, Adam sent the man sprawling into the dirt. Not wanting to waste this chance to end the fight once and for all, Adam towered above Lyle and looked down at him with disgust. "If you ever touch my wife again, you'll get more of the same. Get off my property."

Without a single word more between them, Lyle crawled on his hands and knees until he was a few feet away from Adam. When he was sure he was safely out of Adam's reach, he struggled to his feet and stumbled to his van in the parking lot.

With a sense of foreboding, Adam looked at the vehicle Lyle had gotten into. His quick glance at the parking lot earlier, had tipped Adam off, and the musician now watched to see if his hunch was correct. Through the van's window, he could see a dark blanket separating the front seat from the back, and the unmistakable shape of a telephoto lens as it quickly ducked out of sight.

To the loud cheers of the crew, Lyle started up his engine and drove away.

"You okay?" asked Hiram, as Adam leaned forward and placed his hands on his knees to steady his breath.

"Where's Charlie?"

"Inside."

"Thanks for saving my tail," Adam clapped his friend on the shoulder with gratitude. "That pipe wrench would've really hurt."

Hiram nodded.

"For a while there," panted Adam, "I thought we might have a mob on our hands. Thanks for letting me take care of it."

"Crazy," muttered Hiram.

"I know," replied Adam, "but Lyle didn't leave me much choice." He straightened himself and looked toward the mobile home. "I'd better calm down my wife and see if she's all right."

"You do that," Hiram nodded. As he watched Adam walk away, he recalled an old Bible verse his mom had taught him as a child: "Blessed are the peacemakers." (Matthew 5:9) Hiram smiled. "I do believe he is."

When Adam opened the front door, he expected to be mobbed by Charlie and Mike. However, as he entered the house, he was met by a different sight, altogether. A very distraught Mike was struggling to hold the master bedroom door shut, while someone on the other side tugged with all their might to be let out.

"Uncle Adam!" Mike looked at him with a relieved face, "am I glad to see *you!*" At the sound of Adam's name, the door suddenly opened a crack, and Mike quickly pulled it shut.

"I'm afraid to ask," hesitated Adam, rubbing his brow wearily, "but who's in the bedroom?"

When Mike smiled sheepishly, Adam motioned for him to open the door. As its weeping prisoner emerged, Adam reproachfully shook his head at Mike.

Unable to put her relief into words, Charlie rapidly filled Adam's arms until he was in danger of tipping over. Adam put out a hand to brace himself against the wall, and endured the onslaught of hugs and kisses she subjected him to.

"Easy there," he pleaded with a wince of pain.

"Uncle Adam," apologized Mike, "I'm sorry-- I should've done something to help you!"

"You did exactly as I asked," assured Adam, limping to the next room and collapsing onto the couch in a weary heap. "Why did you lock your aunt in the bedroom?"

"You told me to get her out of there," Mike stammered helplessly. "She wouldn't stay put! She even *bit* me!"

"Charlie." Her husband's reproving voice sounded above the young woman, as she knelt on the carpet to tend a scrape on his leg.

"Mike wasn't doing a single thing to help you," she retorted, opening a first aid kit and pulling out some antiseptic. "Adam, look at you! Your hand is bleeding!"

"He was acting under my instructions," explained Adam. "Next time, I expect you to obey. Do you understand?"

Charlie's back went rigid and her tear streaked face became tight. Sensing that her stubbornness was getting the best of her, Adam repeated his question more forcefully.

"I think I'll go help Hiram," Mike quickly excused himself.

As the front door slammed shut with Mike's departure, Adam sank against the sofa while Charlie continued to clean his scrapes and bruises.

"Did you hear me, Charlie-girl?" His voice was gentler now, but as insistent as ever for an answer.

Charlie slowly nodded her head in compliance.

"I can't worry about you, while I'm fighting off trouble. And that man was trouble." Angrily, Adam pounded the couch and winced in pain as his bruised knuckles marked the cushion with blood.

Getting up from the carpet, Charlie took a seat beside him on the sofa and began to clean his hand.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Did Lyle hurt you?" Adam felt her hands tremble slightly, and then noticed the resolute look on her face as she shook her head "no." "What happened?" Adam wanted to know.

"We were putting out the oleander bushes along the perimeter of the fence," related Charlie. "He asked the others to go do something, and when we were alone, he tried to..." Charlie hesitated. She didn't want to say the words out loud, but whispered them into Adam's ear, instead. When Adam growled, Charlie unclenched his fist and applied antiseptic to the cuts on his knuckles.

"Is that why your shirt is untucked?" he breathed in a low voice.

She nodded. "He didn't grope me, though. It was as if he was just doing it to see if he could. I kicked him and started screaming, and the other men came running. Then you showed up."

"He was posing for the camera," Adam surmised. "I saw him getting into a van with someone crouched in the back pointing a telephoto lens."

Upon hearing this, Charlie quickly took refuge in Adam's arms. With a longing sigh, Adam hugged his wife.

"I wish people would leave us alone," he muttered, his face looking quite fierce, but his touch remaining very gentle. "I wish they'd pick on me, instead of you!"

"Today, they did," Charlie whimpered.

"He knew I'd come to save you," Adam whispered. "They all know it-- that's why they keep targeting you."

"Do you want me to leave for a while?" Charlie wondered in a timorous voice.

"Never," breathed Adam, embracing her even tighter. "Never leave me, Charlie. Promise me."

Heartsick, Charlie shut her eyes. When she was unable to give the promise he wanted, Adam suddenly realized what he had asked of her.

"Willingly," he modified his request. "I meant, *willingly*, Charlie."

Charlie gazed into his soft brown eyes. Then she cuddled against his chest and tucked her head beneath his chin.

"I hope I die young," she murmured, in a voice so quiet and still, that Adam almost couldn't make out her words. But he did.

"Don't say that!" he nearly shouted. Startled, Charlie jumped, but continued to hold on to his shirt for comfort. When she began to cry, Adam moaned and cradled her even closer to his body.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled between sobs.

"Do you remember those kidnappers, Charlie? You almost had your wish!" Adam's frightened arms wrapped around her even tighter. "Your remark scares me more than everything else that's happened today!"

Charlie kissed his throat and tried to console her shaken husband. "I'm sorry I said it," she apologized. "I won't ever leave you of my own choice, Adam. I promise."

"Tell me you don't really want to die young," he pleaded, pulling Charlie away and staring at his beautiful companion.

Drying her tears with the palm of her hand, Charlie thought it over.

"*Well?*" he urgently pressed. Adam was becoming frantic, so Charlie put her fingers to his lips to calm him down.

"I hope I grow old with you," she whispered. "I hope our only problem will be your growing old before me. I hope I'll be there to push your wheel chair, and find your glasses when you lose them. I hope we'll have a chance to prove that age can't erase the love we share. I hope..." Charlie's voice trailed off in a wistful sigh.

"Charlie-girl, keep hoping."

"Why?" she asked. Charlie was immediately sorry for speaking her question out loud, for Adam's eyes began to well with tears.

"Because," he answered in a struggling voice, "I'm praying for a miracle."

"Oh, Adam." Her words were soft and mournful, and Adam could see it hurt her to know that his hopes were set so impossibly high.

"I don't expect you to share my hope," he begged, "but I don't want you to give up on the future. Please, don't give up." When she remained silent, Adam tilted her chin back so he could look into her face.

"I won't," she murmured. "Not until it's time."

Charlie could hear Adam inhale, as if he were about to make her promise more. Instead, he slowly closed his mouth and kissed the tip of her nose.

"Okay, Charlie," he softly breathed, "I won't argue. That promise will be enough... for now."

As his words sounded in Charlie's ears, someone knocked on the front door and Beppe ventured into the music room.

"In here," Adam called out, as the general contractor made his way to the adjoining living space.

"I just got back and found out what happened," sighed Beppe, tucking a clipboard under his overweight arm. "I apologize for Lyle's conduct. Do you need someone to take you to the emergency room?"

At this suggestion, Charlie sat up from her cozy embrace with Adam and looked at him apprehensively. "Are you in pain? Do you want more bandages?" The young woman held up a box of first aid adhesive and eyed Adam's knuckles.

"Now, now," chuckled Adam, seeing what she was contemplating, "if you put any more tape on my hands, I won't be able to move my fingers!"

"I have a truck outside," Beppe offered.

"Thank you," smiled Adam, "but it's not necessary. Charlie, I wish you'd put that box away, because you're making me a little nervous. I only have a few scrapes and bruises-- not anything that needs immobilization!"

"How about you, Charlie?" inquired Beppe. "Do you need the hospital for any reason?"

"She's all right, Beppe," Adam assured the worried man. "Lyle didn't hurt her. We may suffer some bad press pretty soon, but there's no need for the emergency room."

"Lyle won't ever work for me, *again!*" Beppe angrily shook his head.

"It wasn't your fault," Adam tried to calm him down. "We aren't going to sue you."

Beppe wanted to deny that the concern hadn't occurred to him, but it was useless to pretend that it wasn't there.

"Thank you," sighed the general contractor in relief. "I'd better get back to work now. The weather forecaster says we're probably in for a drought this year, but I want to make sure we finish all the outside work we can, just in case it starts raining."

"I'll be out in a few minutes," Adam waved to his friend, as he disappeared out the front door.

"How soon do you think those awful pictures will be published?" Charlie wondered with a shudder.

"I don't know," replied Adam, picking up Charlie's satellite phone. "I'm going to talk to Bill. Maybe there's something we can do about it."

While Adam phoned his personal manager, Charlie looked at the bandaged knuckles on Adam's hands. He was covered in dirt from head to foot, and where it didn't fall from him in the form of dust, it caked to his clothing and skin in dried patches of perspiration and mud. Charlie looked at herself, and suddenly realized she wasn't very clean, either. Propping her head against Adam's shoulder, Charlie decided not to go after the dirt they were spreading. In a short while, they would both be heading back to work, so the housework would have to wait until later.

After a few minutes of discussion with Bill, Adam hung up the phone. By the glum look on his face, Charlie guessed that he didn't have encouraging news.

"Bill says we'd better file a police report, so that if we ever need to, we have an official account of what happened today," related Adam. "It's possible that Lyle could be charged with assault with a deadly weapon."

"What about the cameraman who took our picture?" asked Charlie.

"Until someone actually does something libelous with the photos, Bill doesn't think we have much recourse against the photographer," Adam sighed. "Besides the fact that the he was probably paying Lyle to hide out in his van, we don't know who he was, or who he might sell the photos to. Bill's going to hire a lawyer so we'll be ready to act, but for now, all we can do is wait and see what happens."

Disappointed, Charlie picked at a small patch of dried mud on Adam's shirt and tossed it onto the carpet.

"Hey," he tried to encourage her, "no matter what they do with the photos, we'll get through it all right."

"Okay," she nodded, forcing a smile when she didn't feel like one. "We'd better get back to work, before Beppe comes looking for us."

With a heavy heart, Adam watched as Charlie got up from the couch and headed out the front door. She had already had a difficult day, and it wasn't even lunchtime.

When Adam returned to Hiram and Mike, he noticed his young wife in the distance. She was sticking close to Beppe, and looking very timid about venturing too far without him. But Charlie wasn't the only one who had changed. The entire crew had suddenly become extremely sober. For once, the broad-shouldered man who frequently hovered near Charlie, had conveniently found a task that required him to be as far from her as he could possibly get. Adam smiled grimly. At least *something* good came from this morning.

The day waxed on, and lunchtime finally came. Since Vera wasn't home to fix their meal, Adam decided he would take Charlie to the small restaurant in Drywell, and have lunch with the rest of the workers. Not surprisingly, Charlie resisted his suggestion.

"We need to show the guys we're not angry with them," explained Adam. "Everyone's been tiptoeing around me as if I'm going to pounce on them if they look at me wrong."

"Not everyone," Charlie smiled weakly. "Not me."

"Okay, one victory," chuckled Adam. "Please come with me, Charlie. I won't let anyone hurt you."

"It's that kind of thinking that's making the guys so skittish," pointed out Charlie. "It looks as if we don't trust them."

"I'm willing to trust them-- to a point," said Adam, for he couldn't forget that one of them had thrown Lyle the pipe wrench.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" hesitated Charlie. "We have stale bread in the cupboard, and we could wait for Grandma to get back with more groceries."

"I want to see the inside of that dingy little restaurant!" insisted Adam, playfully tugging Charlie forward by her hand. "We keep passing it on the road, and I keep promising to satisfy my curiosity!"

Beppe was more than happy to give them a ride to the restaurant in Drywell. As the general contractor's truck pulled up to the establishment, several workers from the Villa Rosa crew looked surprised to see who would be joining them for lunch. After the fight this morning, they didn't think Adam would be willing to tolerate their presence. And, truth be told, some of them didn't know if they could tolerate HIS presence, after what he had done to their buddy.

But Adam was his usual, affable self, as he helped his wife out of the truck. As a man with slightly ripped jeans, a cut lip, and a black eye beginning to show, he didn't look like someone who should be in a good mood. But to the surprise of the work crew, he was.

Inside the diner, all the tables were already taken, so that the remainder of the crew had to go outside, and eat their lunch in the shade of the building. It was hot outside, and Adam didn't relish the thought of eating in the heat. Even so, when a few of the workers offered to give up their table for him, the musician politely turned it down.

"We can eat outside," he smiled good-naturedly. "I guess we have to get here pretty early, if we want to eat indoors!"

At this, the men laughed, and the tension in the restaurant improved.

After Adam and Charlie had their order, they went outside and found a shady spot near some of the other workers.

"Hot day, isn't it?" Adam observed to one of the men.

"Yeah," nodded the man, taking another bite of his hamburger and watching the couple closely. He smiled with amusement when Adam and Charlie quietly said a prayer over their lunch before eating. "Someone said you were a Christian," he remarked.

"Excuse me?" wondered Adam.

"You're a Christian," repeated the man with a mouthful of food.

"Yes, I am," affirmed Adam, taking a bite of his own hamburger, while some of the cook's secret sauce squirted onto his chin.

"Thought you guys didn't believe in fighting," he continued curiously.

"That depends on the fight," smiled Adam, while Charlie tried hard not to watch as they talked with so much food in their mouths.

"What about all that 'blessed are the peacemakers' jazz?" The man tossed his head from side to side with a mocking laugh.

"Sometimes, you've got to fight, or else that peace won't be maintained," responded Adam.

The man blinked at him for a few moments, and then returned his attention to his half-eaten hamburger.

Flies accosted them every chance they could, and Charlie was hoping that Adam's curiosity about the restaurant had been satisfied. Her lettuce and tomato sandwich may have been good, but she wasn't looking forward to repeating this visit anytime soon.

Their meal was almost over, when Adam noticed a familiar pickup truck traveling down the road. "They're back," he informed Charlie, as Kevin sped by the restaurant on his way to Villa Rosa.

When Adam and Charlie arrived home a few minutes later, Kevin stepped out of the mobile home and greeted them. His face immediately fell when he saw Adam's battered appearance.

"I ran into a little trouble," the musician answered Kevin's unasked question.

"*You* ran?" Kevin's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "It looks as though trouble ran into *you*!"

"It did," Adam smiled grimly. "Repeatedly."

By the soiled look of Charlie, Kevin guessed that the same trouble had also ran into her, as well.

"I should've been here," he scolded himself.

"This wasn't something you could've handled for me," Adam sighed. "I'm afraid I had to deal with it, myself."

"Even so," Kevin replied thoughtfully, "whoever did this to you, waited until I wasn't around." He touched the handle of the automatic pistol holstered at his side. "I'm a good dissuader."

"Adam's not bad at dissuading, either," Charlie remarked with a wry smile. "I don't think we'll have anymore trouble from the crew. Is Grandma inside with Daddy?"

"She's getting ready for your father's birthday party this evening," replied Kevin.

"Tonight?" Charlie wondered in surprise. "Daddy's birthday isn't until a few days from now!"

When her bodyguard shrugged, Charlie hurried inside the mobile home. She found Vera in the living room, puzzling over dark brown stains on the couch cushions.

"Are these blood stains?" Vera exclaimed anxiously.

"A lot happened while you were away," Charlie explained. "You're never going to believe it, but Adam and I were in a fight--"

"You hit Adam?!" Vera interrupted with a disbelieving stare.

"No, of course not," Charlie shook her head, "*Lyle* was the one who hit Adam."

"Who is Lyle?" asked Vera, beginning to wonder if her granddaughter was the victim of heatstroke. Adam was such a gentle soul, that nothing Charlie was saying made sense. Still, the bloodstains were all too real, so Vera listened patiently as Charlie excitedly related her story.

Just then, physical proof of Charlie's narrative walked through the front door, looking every bit as dirty as his wife-- and then some.

"I know how this looks," began Adam, "but I can explain everything."

After Vera fussed over Adam and Charlie, she suddenly remembered she had some news of her own. Since Maggie and Jeff already had a previous commitment for the day of Chuck's party, Vera offered to move the celebration to that evening, so they could still attend.

"Shirley and Chad are also coming," Vera smiled happily, "and so are Mike and Sandra!"

Charlie noticed Jerome's name conspicuously missing from the guest list, and decided to keep quiet. By the way Vera kept trying to avoid the subject, Charlie guessed that her uncle had turned down his invitation.

Then Vera looked about the mobile home, and swooned with dread. Dirt was everywhere, the couch was stained with small amounts of blood, and Adam and Charlie were a sight to behold. "Adam," Vera addressed him soberly, "you'd better clean up before your sister sees you like that!"

"Oh, no!" gasped Charlie, as a new thought suddenly troubled her. "When Shirley finds out you've been fighting another man because of me..." Charlie shivered with dread. "She already thinks I'm bad for you!"

"If my little sister gives you a hard time," chuckled Adam, "tell her I said to leave you alone!" When this failed to make Charlie smile, Adam retreated to the master bedroom to shower and change.

While Charlie picked out something to wear for the party, Adam went to the dresser and found some clean socks and underwear. "I told Kevin I want a bodyguard of my own," he informed Charlie, as he was about to sit on the bed to take off his work boots.

"No, not there!" she cried in dismay. "Not on the clean bedspread!"

"Sorry," muttered Adam, looking about for someplace to sit where shedding dirt wouldn't matter. Deciding that the floor was his only option, Adam sat down on the carpet and began untying his laces. "As I was saying, it was a good thing I didn't have to involve anyone else in that fight today, but God really had mercy on me. I'm not so sure I can handle another Lyle on my own, especially if there's more than one."

"We may be short on space right now," Charlie readily agreed, "but your bodyguard could double with Kevin, in his room." She wasn't looking forward to another armed guard in the house, but she didn't want a repeat of today. Once was more than enough.

"I'd rather wait until Villa Rosa is finished," proposed Adam, pulling off his socks and dropping them onto the floor. "In fact, I'd like enough bodyguards to have a rotation schedule so no one person has to stay with us for any great stretch of time. Kevin hasn't had a day off in months, and I know it's partly because he feels responsible for us-- even when he isn't here. Kevin shouldn't have to make a choice between us, and whatever family and friends he has outside of Villa Rosa."

"That sounds like a good idea," replied Charlie, starting the water in the shower before taking off her clothing. "Do you mind if I go first?" she asked. "I need to do the housework, so Grandma can be in the kitchen and prepare the food for Daddy's party."

"Go ahead," answered Adam. "You know, Bill has been trying to talk me into another bodyguard for some time now. Until today, I didn't see the need." Adam raised his eyes just in time to see Charlie step behind the thickly frosted glass of the shower doors. His mouth parted in a pleased smile, and his thoughts suddenly went in another direction than that of bodyguards and schedules.

"I didn't know that," Charlie called to him, her attention still on the discussion she was having with Adam. When he didn't respond, the young woman peeked around the shower wall to see him standing in the bathroom doorway, his eyes fixed on her. "Are you feeling all right?" she wondered suspiciously. "Maybe you should see a doctor. Lyle might've hurt you, and you didn't know it."

Adam grinned. "When Lyle hurt me, I knew it." As Charlie disappeared back into her shower, Adam checked the clock on the bedroom nightstand. No, there wasn't enough time. With a disappointed sigh, Adam hoped his wife would hurry. He needed a cold bath.

While Adam took his turn in the shower, Charlie vacuumed the dirt they had deposited around the house. Several minutes later, Adam emerged from the master bedroom, his grimy shirt and torn jeans replaced by black slacks and a black button shirt. With the casual stride of a tired man, he went to the living room and found Chuck watching television, while his daughter tried to get him off the couch so she could clean the cushions.

"Adam," she implored, "could you get Daddy to move? He won't budge an inch!"

"Okay, Chuck," Adam went to his father-in-law, "it's time to get up so Charlie can do the housework."

Chuck blankly stared at Adam, but got to his feet when Adam helped him to stand.

"Charlie, do you want me to take him outside for a while?" Adam offered. "The heat of the day is over, and it's nice outside."

"Would you?" Charlie smiled at him thankfully. "If you could keep him busy for at least ten minutes, I'd really appreciate it!"

"Come on," Adam led Chuck to the door, "we're going for a walk."

A hushed breeze gently stirred nearby sagebrush, as Adam and Chuck began their usual stroll around the mobile home. With a smile, Adam looked down at their clasped hands. He wasn't sure if he was holding Chuck's hand, or if Chuck was holding his.

"Well, you're going to turn forty-four in a few days," Adam began their one-sided conversation. "I know if you could, you'd be talking about your little girl right now. She's doing just fine, Chuck. I'm trying to take good care of her, so try not to worry too much."

The muffled sounds of their soft tramps continued until Adam noticed a slight pressure on his hand. Surprised, he looked at his friend. "Could you hear me just now?" The light from the early evening sky shone in Chuck's eyes, and for a moment, Adam thought he saw a fleeting glimpse of the man he once knew. Much too soon, it was gone. "It's all right," Adam assured his father-in-law, "I understand." With a comforting squeeze, Adam resumed their walk.

At seven o' clock, a silver minivan pulled up to the Villa Rosa gates. Charlie ran out to meet it while Adam opened the fence so it could drive inside the estate. After the vehicle came to a stop, Jeff Erickson got out and opened his wife's passenger door.

"Maggie!" cried Charlie running up and hugging her dear friend. "You've gotten so big!" Maggie was twenty weeks along with her first pregnancy, and happy beyond words. She proudly showed Charlie her belly, while Jeff and his ten year old daughter, Debbie, watched on.

"Did you have any trouble finding us?" Adam asked Jeff, as Charlie giggled in delight upon feeling Maggie's unborn son move within her womb.

"No," smiled Jeff, "your directions were pretty good. I can't say I've ever been out this direction, before."

"We're definitely out of the way," chuckled Adam, as the two women began laughing together. Both men smiled and watched them for a few moments, before following the girls inside.

The sun had already set, so Jeff hadn't been able to see Adam's face very well. But once indoors, Jeff was surprised to see a black shiner forming around Adam's right eye.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed, stepping forward to get a closer look. "That's some black eye you've got! When did this happen?"

"We had some trouble with one of the crew, today," sighed Adam, shaking his head while he showed the Erickson's into the living room.

"Does it hurt?" asked Maggie.

"I'm okay," Adam assured her with a nonchalant shrug. Then he related what happened, while Jeff kept shaking his head and muttering, "The nerve of that guy!"

Like the little lady she was, Debbie remained on the couch between her parents, and waited for dinner to be served.

Then Shirley and Chad arrived with Mike and Sandra. Knowing that Debbie was also going to be there, Sandra had brought her ten year old sister, Becky, so the three children could play together while the grown-ups visited.

When Shirley entered the house and saw Adam's black eye for the first time, Adam knew he was in for a long evening. She barely let him spit out his explanation of what had happened, for she kept interrupting with sisterly indignation toward the man who tried to beat him up, and concern that her brother was truly all right. As Adam had expected, Shirley did her best to talk him into seeing a doctor; and, not surprising to Shirley, Adam played down the whole situation and tried to laugh it off.

Though she didn't necessarily say it out loud, Shirley had a running list of things she wished Adam had done differently in his life: he never should have gotten mixed up with the music business; after he did, he never should have went public with his real name; and after the public knew his identity, he never should have married such a young woman who could bring so much trouble to his private life. Ironically, the biggest thing Shirley wished Adam had never done, was the one thing Adam never really had control of in the first place-- his fame. The fact that her brother was the target of opportunists and fortune seeking photographers, only made all these problems worse.

After Chuck's birthday meal was over, Charlie escaped her sister-in-law's agitation, by spirited Maggie away to the master bedroom so they could catch up on each others' lives. As the girls climbed onto the large bed, things began to feel a little more like the old days. This time, however, they were both married women.

"Do you like having a husband?" wondered Maggie, as they settled on the bed to talk. She propped her chin on a pillow and looked at Charlie with a quiet smile. "Is it what you thought it would be?"

"That depends," laughed Charlie. "What part of 'having a husband' are you talking about?"

Maggie blushed and the two women giggled. "I don't mean sex," she shook her head with embarrassment. "Are you happier now, than when you were single?"

"I am," Charlie nodded. "But sometimes, you have to work for that happiness."

Maggie thoughtfully considered her friend. There was a sadness in Charlie that she couldn't quite put her finger on, and yet, she could plainly see that Charlie was happy with Adam.

"When Jeff and I first got married," Maggie related in a voice of experience, "it was so easy to be really happy. He would chase me into the bedroom and we would stay there until Debbie came home from her friend's house." The woman smiled, and gave Charlie an understanding touch of her hand. "But you can't live in your husband's arms, forever. You have to go fix dinner and figure out how the stove works, and how not to set fire to the potholders. And when you burn dinner, you need to find where he keeps the can opener, so everyone can eat."

Charlie would have broken into peals of laughter, but Maggie had been completely serious.

"The times when I'm the happiest," continued Maggie, "are when Jeff chooses to be happy with me."

"What do you mean?" asked Charlie.

"Happiness is easy when you're having a good time in bed," explained Maggie, "but I really know Jeff loves me, when he still gives me a kiss and his dinner is spoiled."

"I think I see what you're getting at," smiled Charlie. "I've had times like that with Adam. I haven't burned his dinner yet, but I know his being with me comes at a cost. He would've had an easier life, if he hadn't married me."

"I often think the same about Jeff," admitted Maggie. "But when Jeff comes home from a hard day of work, he tells me that I do him a world of good."

"I'm sure you do," Charlie smiled warmly.

"I really love him," Maggie's voice filled with tenderness. As she said this, the bedroom door cracked open and a girl's face timidly peered inside. Debbie looked as though she wanted to join them, so Maggie patted the bedspread and a happy Debbie jumped on the mattress. "Why aren't you playing with Chad and Becky?" wondered Maggie, as Debbie snuggled against her and rested her head in Maggie's lap.

"I don't know," the girl shrugged. "Chad's sweet on Becky."

"Why do you say that?" laughed Charlie.

"Because," said Debbie, "they were kissing and stuff."

Hesitantly, Charlie looked to Maggie for help.

"When were they kissing?" asked Maggie, trying to verify Debbie's information.

"Just now," replied Debbie, "out by the well."

With a concerned face, Charlie got up from the bed and went into the living room where Adam, Mike, Kevin, and Jeff were talking and watching television. Chuck slept in his easy chair nearby, while Shirley was in the kitchen with Vera and Sandra. When Adam saw Charlie, he excused himself and went to her.

"What's wrong?" he inquired.

"Debbie just told me that Chad and Becky are outside 'kissing and stuff,'" Charlie explained in a barely audible whisper.

At this, Adam raised his eyebrows. "Are you sure?"

"That's what she told me and Maggie."

"I guess I'd better go see what's going on," sighed Adam. "Don't mention this to Shirley. Debbie was probably mistaken, and I'd hate to embarrass Chad for nothing."

Uneasily, Adam stepped outside and tried to see through the darkness of the night. Surely, Debbie had been wrong. She had to be. Chad would never do anything like that.

Except for the chirp of crickets, everything was quiet and still. Adam put his hands to his mouth to call out for Chad and Becky, but he caught himself. If they were doing what Debbie had said they were, Adam wanted to know for himself what had happened. And he didn't want to give either of them a chance to lie about it. Adam silently reproved himself. Chad wasn't like that, and didn't deserve his distrust. But the night was terribly quiet, and an uneasy feeling crept over Adam.

A small moon shone in the sky overhead, painting the desert with a very pale shade of silver. It took a moment for Adam's eyes to adjust, but when he did, he managed to quietly find his way to the well. He was about to round the corner of a nearby shed, when Adam heard Becky's quiet voice. He paused.

"We shouldn't be doing this," Adam overheard Becky say.

"But, we're going to get married someday," argued Chad.

Their voices went silent, and Adam suddenly became afraid. What were they doing? He peeked around the corner and saw Chad sitting beside Becky on a long, overturned ice chest, left over from the renovation. To Adam's disappointment, Chad was leaning against Becky, and they were kissing. Adam groaned inwardly. Then Chad's hand reached up and touched Becky in such an intimate way, that Adam nearly fell over with shock.

"Please, Chad," Becky's voice once again begged him, "take me back to the house."

Adam could have said something, but he didn't. Chad had stopped, and Adam wanted to know what his nephew would do.

"Are you going to tell?" wondered Chad, his voice sounding with panic.

"I don't know," hesitated Becky. "Just lead me back to Sandra! I want my sister!"

Without anymore argument, Chad helped the blind girl past Adam's hiding place, and back to the house.

When Adam stepped inside the mobile home soon after, he could hear the sound of a crying girl coming from the direction of the kitchen. Sandra was trying to quiet her little sister, while the others hovered nearby, trying to find out what could be wrong. A strangely quiet Chad hung back from the kitchen, his face betraying how afraid he felt.

"Chad," said Adam in a firm voice. "Come here."

Upon hearing the tone of Adam's voice, Shirley looked up from where she was trying to help Sandra, and silently questioned her brother with a puzzled face.

"Chad and I have some talking to do," explained Adam.

The boy cast his uncle a look of dread and hung his head.

"Why?" asked Shirley. "What happened?"

"That's what I'm about to find out," said Adam, placing a hand on Chad's shoulder and leading him outside.

When the front door closed, Chad looked up at his uncle in shame.

"Before I ask you what you were doing with Becky," cautioned Adam, "I want you to take a moment and think about your actions. Don't lie to me, Chad."

Chad slowly nodded his head, and sighed heavily. "I wanted to see what it was like," he mumbled.

"What?" asked Adam. "Sex?"

Embarrassed, Chad slowly nodded his head.

Suddenly, Adam was afraid that Chad may have done far more than what he had just witnessed.

"What were you and Becky doing?" Adam asked, soberly.

"Kissing," the boy mumbled, kicking at the ground with his running shoe. When Adam remained silent, Chad looked at him and sighed. "I tried to get Becky to let me touch her."

"And did she?" pressed Adam.

"I touched her just once, and she got really scared," confessed Chad. "I'm sorry, Uncle Adam! I thought if we were going to get married, it wouldn't matter!"

"If you truly believed you weren't doing anything wrong," said Adam, "would you be so embarrassed before me right now? What is your conscience telling you, Chad?"

"I'm sorry," the boy repented, tears beginning to roll down his cheeks.

Adam exhaled, and guided Chad to a nearby pile of buckets. He overturned two of them, and they sat down.

"Does this make me as bad as my Dad?" wondered Chad.

"You repented," replied Adam. "Your father hasn't. Son," he sighed, "I'm going to ask you a question, and I want you to answer me in all honesty. Do you remember when you opened my bedroom door while I was with Aunt Charlie?"

"Yes."

"Was that an accident?"

Chad hung his head in shame. "Not exactly. I'm sorry, Uncle Adam."

"Then, you lied to me," Adam sighed disappointedly.

"I'm sorry," Chad repeated once more. Ashamed, he broke into tears, and wept.

"I forgive you," Adam placed his hand on Chad's shoulder. "You're going to have to apologize to your aunt, as well. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," cried Chad. "I'm so afraid, Uncle Adam! What if this means I'm like Dad? Mom always said Mike was like you, and I was like Dad! What if it's true?"

"You may look like him on the outside," said Adam, "but that doesn't mean you're like him on the inside. Chad, the same sins your father is guilty of, could easily happen to any of us. But, unlike our physical appearance, we have a choice of who we resemble in our heart. That happens by doing what we know is right, or choosing to do what we know is wrong. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he mumbled.

"I accept your apology," Adam tried to assure him. "But I think we need to have a talk."

"Isn't that what we're doing right now?" sniffed Chad, as his uncle handed him a clean handkerchief so he could blow his nose.

"I mean a different kind of talk," hesitated Adam. "Your mother and I have already discussed it, and we agreed that I should be the one to do this."

Chad swallowed hard. "What discussion?"

"At your age," Adam inhaled and gathered his courage, "it's only natural to be curious about girls and women. I know I was."

"You were?" Chad sounded hopeful.

"Yes," confessed Adam, "I was curious. And my hormones made me feel even worse. I was tempted more often than I cared to admit, and for a while, I thought I was a lost cause."

"What'd you do about it?" wondered Chad.

"I'll tell you what my dad told me," answered Adam. "He said that to have the temptation was only natural. But to give into it-- that's what turned a temptation into sin. Dad showed me a passage in James verses fourteen and fifteen that really explained it well," recalled Adam. "Your grandpa made me memorize it, and I still remember it to this day. 'But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.' You see, I realized that it's only when you give in to the lust, that temptation becomes sin. The Bible doesn't say that anyone who's tempted, suddenly sinned without meaning to. There I was, going around feeling guilty for something that only made me human! Chad, just understanding that, made me feel so much better."

"But, I gave in to it," sighed Chad.

"Yes, you did," replied Adam, "but you're making up for it now."

The eleven year old stood up and stared at the mobile home in the distance. He knew what he had to do, and shoved his hands into his pockets with a determined face. His dad had made his choice, but he was going to make his own.

"I'll go with you," offered Adam, getting to his feet and standing beside his nephew.

Chad smiled his gratitude and the two started their walk back to the house. It was with a little sadness, that Adam recognized the unmistakable look on Chad's face. Even though he was eleven, it bespoke the beginnings of manhood, and Adam was saddened to see the transformation taking place. He could remember the days not so very long ago, when Chad followed him about with his toy tool belt, proclaiming himself to be his helper.

Chad may have been growing up, but Adam knew that the process didn't stop upon reaching adulthood. Thomas could have taken a lesson from his son, this night.

"Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him."

~ James 1:12 ~

Chapter Fifty-six

Desert Rose of the Mojave

"For the LORD shall comfort Zion: He will comfort all her waste places; and He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody."

~ Isaiah 51:3 ~

The oleander hedge Charlie had wanted surrounding the boundaries of Villa Rosa were planted without any further trouble from the work crew. None of the laborers ever talked of the incident between Lyle and Adam-- at least, not in front of their employers. Adam and Charlie had filed a police report just as Bill had recommended, and every day, Charlie held her breath to see if those vile pictures had yet to surface in the media.

The last of September came to a close, and everyone braced themselves for October. Beppe kept an anxious eye on the calendar, for he was racing against time to finish the work outside Villa Rosa, before the winter rains began. When Adam, Hiram, and Mike finished the plumbing, Beppe didn't waste a second, and sent in another work crew to begin pouring the concrete floors, and moving on to the next step of the renovation. Now that he was no longer needed, Adam breathed a sigh of relief, and was more than glad to step aside and let others burden the pressure of Beppe's demanding work schedule.

Since Adam was back in front of his piano again, Charlie used his absence as an opportunity to get some additional work done that she had wanted to save as a surprise. One of the largest parts of her surprise, however, required a large delivery that would have been easily seen from the front window of their mobile home. Enlisting Vera's help, the women were able to distract Adam's attention away from the window long enough for the delivery to be made. Charlie oversaw her surprise every step of the way, and was so excited, that she came close to telling Adam before it was even ready! But wait she did, and the surprise kept getting better.

Gradually, Villa Rosa was no longer looking like the abandoned estate it once was. The rose hued walls that inspired its name had been cleaned and repaired; the heavy front door had been completely refinished, and any rust on its wrought iron fittings had been sanded and repainted black. Bathroom fixtures were purchased and installed, the kitchen remodeled, new windows put in-- and that was just for one of the bungalows! Every day, more material arrived by the truckload, so that it kept Beppe and Charlie very busy. The end of their work was coming into sight, and Villa Rosa was emerging as a true desert rose.

At the beginning of November, Beppe looked at his list and declared that their work was nearly finished. Fancy wrought iron gates ornamented with roses had been commissioned from a local artist, and were now ready to be installed as the front entrance to the Villa Rosa estate. Charlie was thrilled with the workmanship, but the part Adam loved the most, was the gate's automation. From the main house, Adam could speak to the driver of the vehicle and get visual identification through a small security camera-- just in case anyone claimed to be someone they were not. Then, with a push of a button, Adam could allow them entry.

After the car drove through, the gate would automatically shut and secure itself. This would mean no longer listening for horn honks, and running outside to unlock the gate to let the vehicle in! Adam knew it was a luxury, but the added security it would mean to the property, outweighed any guilt he had about spending so much money. In addition to this, a state of the art security system was being installed all around the property. Adam was paying a lot to make sure Villa Rosa would be as protected as was humanly possible-- not only for Charlie's sake, but for Vera and Chuck, as well.

By mid-November, Beppe announced that he had finished the work contracted for Villa Rosa. The rest was up to Charlie. The estate sat large and empty, waiting for her to furnish it and make it a home. Villa Rosa had required an extremely large labor force to finish so quickly, and more money than Beppe had ever handled for work on a private residence. But he was satisfied that Adam had received what he paid for, and took pride in restoring the property, to what he felt, was even greater than its former glory.

On their last day of cleanup work, Charlie threw a small party for their hardworking general contractor and his crew. Two outdoor tables were placed in front of the Clarks' mobile home, and everyone had their fill of hamburgers, hot dogs, and Vera's lemonade and homemade cookies. Then, the workers left, leaving Charlie and Adam feeling suddenly empty without the constant noise of construction and men shouting orders.

It didn't take long for Adam to adapt to the sudden change, however. It was quiet. Just the way he liked it. Now he could enjoy the sounds of the wind, as it swept across the desert floor, and the haunting cries of coyotes as they called to each other in the distance.

The change Adam appreciated the most, was the absence of so many muscular young men, walking about the property and calling attention to themselves in front of Charlie. Ever since his encounter with Lyle, the crew had been better behaved, and there had been no further problems. Even so, Adam was glad to see them leave.

But Adam could not relax too much, for Villa Rosa was not yet finished. They were still living in the mobile home, and Charlie was planning a list of what they would need, before they could move into the main house.

In a move Shirley thought very unselfish of her, she insisted that she be present when Charlie went shopping for furnishings and appliances. Disheartened, Charlie struggled to hide her disappointment from Shirley. She had been looking forward to this for a long time, and didn't want someone criticizing her every move. But Shirley was Adam's sister, and Charlie determined to make the best of it. Charlie thanked her for her thoughtfulness, and hoped that would be the end of it.

It wasn't.

After asserting herself one too many times and nearly putting Charlie to tears, Adam finally drew his sister aside.

Shirley, however, was not so easily deterred. "I'm only looking out for your best interest!" she sighed in exasperation. "Charlie is going to ruin Villa Rosa! At least, when Beppe was here, he made sure things were done correctly!"

"Beppe only did what Charlie told him to," Adam smiled proudly.

Shirley was silent.

"You're welcome to come with us when we go shopping," said Adam, "but I want Charlie to have whatever she wants."

"You're going to spoil her, if you keep letting her have her own way in everything," warned Shirley.

"That's between me and my wife," Adam stated firmly.

"Fine." The resigned tone in her voice said it all.

"I know you love me," sighed Adam, seeing her feelings were bruised, "and I'm grateful you're my little sister."

Shirley sniffed. "I'm only trying to do what Mom would have done, if she were still with us."

"I know."

"Very well, I won't stand in Charlie's way," she conceded. "As you said, this *is* her home. I just wish you'd stand up for yourself once in a while. That child..." Shirley caught herself, "that young lady, is too inexperienced to handle such big responsibilities without firm guidance. Even though you have more money than you're willing to admit, at this rate, Charlie will run through it faster than a teenager with a credit card! She needs more *discipline!*"

"Thank you, Sis," Adam smiled good-naturedly. "I appreciate your letting her do things *her* way."

"Oh!" sighed Shirley. "You're impossible!"

Charlie didn't know what Adam had said to Shirley, but after their talk, she was much quieter. With a sigh of relief, Charlie was able to fully turn her attention to furnishing Villa Rosa. They would simply need everything! The furniture from Adam's house in town, wouldn't look appropriate in Villa Rosa, while most of Vera's furniture was too well worn to put in a newly renovated estate. No, Charlie knew they had a lot of shopping to do.

Early one morning, Charlie, Adam, Shirley, and Kevin descended on the largest furniture store in all of Southern California. When Charlie stepped inside the huge outlet, she could feel the tiny hairs on her arm standing on end with excitement!

An alert salesman approached Adam, and Adam promptly referred him to Charlie.

"What room do you need to furnish?" asked the man.

"An entire house," came the response.

Sensing a sizable commission ahead, the man discreetly hid a large smile, and inquired how large the home was.

"The main house has twelve rooms," answered Charlie, "and there's also five bungalows that need furnishing."

Hiding his amusement, Adam thought the man would break into tears of joy. He attentively guided Charlie to the best their extensive store had to offer, and began showing them different sets of living room furniture that had the Southwestern appeal that Charlie was looking for.

When Charlie finally found a set of furniture that she liked, she looked poised to ask for an opinion. Adam prepared himself to tell Charlie to do whatever she wanted, when the young woman walked past him and straight to Kevin!

"Since you'll be staying in one of the bungalows," explained Charlie, "you might as well have a say in how it's decorated."

Surprised, Kevin didn't know what to say.

"Do you think this would do for your living room?" wondered Charlie.

Kevin silently looked to Adam for approval. Was this all right with him? He didn't want to overstep any boundaries.

Sensing Kevin's apprehension, Adam tried to put the bodyguard at ease. "The only advice I can think to give, is to make sure the couch is comfortable!" he chuckled.

Understanding that Adam approved, Kevin located the couch and sat down. "It's comfortable," he pronounced. "It'll do."

"Okay, then," Charlie smiled triumphantly. She turned to the salesman. "I guess we've found our first living room set! That leaves five to go! Then, there's all the bedrooms, the bathrooms, the kitchens, a dining room... oh, and I need to find some pots for the courtyard."

"Of course," nodded the salesman, trying to keep up with Charlie's extensive shopping list. "This way to the next showroom."

Evidentially, it was easy for Charlie to select things for the bungalows, for she made rather quick work of finding four more sets of living room furniture that she approved of. The main house, however, was harder.

"What do you think of this set, Adam?" she asked him over and over.

"Whatever you want," came his irritatingly familiar reply.

With a sigh, Charlie returned to the beginning of the store showrooms, and walked through each one all over again. When Adam responded with the same answer yet again, Charlie tugged at his sleeve and pulled him to one side of the room.

"What's wrong with you?" she sighed. "Don't you have any opinions at all?"

"Whatever you choose will be fine with me," insisted Adam. He affectionately touched her hand and smiled. "I want you to have your heart's desire."

"I already do," she gazed at him with sincere brown eyes. "I've got *you*."

"You look very kissable right now," he grinned playfully.

"What about the living room?" she pressed.

"What about it?" shrugged Adam.

"Do you like it?"

"I guess so."

"Did you see anything else you liked more?"

Adam scratched his head. "To be honest, they're all beginning to look alike."

"How can you say that?" sighed Charlie. "They're completely different!"

"Couldn't we just buy six sets of the same showroom, and get it over with?" he suggested.

At this, Charlie smiled wryly. "We spent millions of dollars renovating Villa Rosa, and you want to turn it into a hotel with all the rooms looking alike?"

"When you put it that way," he admitted, "I guess they should be different."

"I want you to be comfortable in your own home," Charlie explained. "Even Kevin had an opinion of what he liked and disliked! You, on the other hand, seem to be happy with a box and crate!"

"I don't want to influence your decisions."

"*Please*, influence me!" she begged.

"All right, if that's what you want," he agreed. Adam looked at the couch nearby with a critical eye. "The material is scratchy, and the first drink I spill, will show for miles."

"There!" Charlie cried happily. "Was that so hard? Let's go back to the showroom before this one. The furniture had very good upholstery..." she grabbed Adam's hand, and led the man away.

Since Adam was at last voicing his opinions, Charlie was much more confident in the furnishings she finally settled on for the main house. Now that she was on a roll, the bedroom sets for the bungalows came in easy succession. Thankfully, Adam continued to share his thoughts with Charlie, so the decision for their master bedroom wasn't as difficult as she had feared. After picking out the last two bedrooms for the main house, Charlie was ready to look at the dining rooms.

To Adam's relief, they only had one dining room to shop for, so they could scratch an entire room off their list with just one showroom!

Orders for tables, chairs, recliners, dressers, sofas, lamps, and a china cabinet, all made it onto the salesman's clipboard.

Watching on in silence, Shirley was unsettled at how quickly Charlie was making decisions. They had been at the same store for the entire day, and Charlie wasn't looking elsewhere for more selection! Yes, the furniture appeared to be of a good quality, but Shirley was annoyed by Charlie's easy acceptance that this was all there was to choose from. What if somewhere else had lower prices? As far as Shirley could determine, Charlie hadn't even checked. After making her concern known to Adam, and subsequently being shrugged off, Shirley could only watch as Charlie bought out the store, showroom by showroom.

By the end of the day, they still had the bathrooms and the kitchens to finish. That would have to wait for tomorrow.

While Shirley knew her older brother had already paid a small ransom for Villa Rosa's renovations, it still bothered her to see Charlie going through his money, in what she thought, verged on irresponsibility. When she voiced her concerns to Adam that night at Villa Rosa, he dismissed her with annoyingly good-humor. "At least, Charlie's spending it quickly," he had dryly smiled.

"Adam," Shirley used her most patient voice, "I like Charlie."

"Thanks, Sis. I like her too."

"*But*," Shirley continued, "I think you forget how young she is."

"Charlie is seventeen-- not ten," Adam replied, his back stiffening in spite of the fact it was sore from being on his feet all day. "We're both tired, and I really don't want to get into another disagreement with you over Charlie."

Shirley looked back at the mobile home just as the porch light came on. It was getting dark, and she really needed to pick up Chad from Mike and Sandra's apartment. "I just want what's best for you," she reminded him.

Afraid his voice might sound argumentative, Adam didn't risk responding out loud. He acknowledged the truth of her statement with a weary smile, and reciprocated her sisterly hug before she left.

Even though he didn't like admitting it to himself, when Shirley called the next morning to tell them she wouldn't be coming, Adam heaved a sigh of relief. Everyone was under a lot of pressure, and Shirley's presence the day before had been the hardest on Charlie. Charlie had never complained, but Adam sensed that she felt as though all her decisions were silently being second-guessed by his sister.

Today, however, would be different. And not just because Shirley wasn't coming. Instead of roaming a giant furniture warehouse, they would be spending the day at a home shopping center. Villa Rosa needed accessories to complete nine bathrooms, and Adam was curious to see what had come on the market since he had retired from the plumbing industry.

From the start, Charlie could see Adam was obviously having a good time. Since the major bathroom fixtures had already been installed by Clark Plumbing Service and Supply, Adam enjoyed taking his time by perusing the shelves of plumbing accessories and picking up nine of this, and nine of that.

"Are you sure we need *nine* toilet plungers?" Charlie had asked, as another shopper passed them and looked at their grocery cart in wonderment. After all, who buys nine plungers?

"Ask me that again when one of the toilets gets backed up," chuckled Adam.

As they continued to shop, Charlie soon forgot the oddity of the plungers. They picked up nine clothes hampers in various styles, nine wastebaskets, armload after armload of towel sets and matching bathroom rugs, medicine cabinets, and even a few scales. Unlike the furniture store where their goods would be delivered at a later time by truck, these things had to be placed in shopping carts. The more their purchases grew, the more they were drawing attention to themselves, and it was making Charlie uncomfortable. Since few people expected to see anyone famous at a home shopping center or furniture outlet, Adam had been able to get away without being recognized too often. But Adam and Charlie's caravan of carts and flatbeds being pushed by store employees, were difficult to miss.

Charlie had already known beforehand that they would be hauling a lot of bulky things home at the end of the day. Not wanting to get herself into an impossible, and potentially embarrassing situation, she had asked Adam to rent a moving truck for the occasion. As the store employees helped Adam load the truck, Charlie was grateful they wouldn't be stuck in the parking lot with no way to get it all home! Not wanting an opportunist to catch him off guard, Kevin didn't help the others, but maintained a watchful eye over his clients.

When the employees had been thanked and tipped, Adam had a small discussion with Charlie. "I don't think we should go back in there," he advised. "Why don't we shop for the kitchens, elsewhere?"

Charlie quickly voiced her agreement. If they went back in now, people would start asking Adam for autographs, for by now, most knew who he was.

After eating lunch in a fast-food restaurant parking lot, they located another home center and continued their spree. This time, the boxes were even bigger, and several employees had to assist getting it all to the checkout: microwave ovens, refrigerators, dishwashers, stoves, washing machines, and dryers. Even Kevin, who had been used to seeing the largess of his employers' expenses, was impressed. He even grinned when Charlie told him that one of each of their purchases would be placed in his bungalow!

Before they headed to the front of the store to check out, Charlie noticed the store's patio department, and insisted they have a look. Puzzled, Adam followed.

"We don't have a patio, Charlie," he reminded her, as she eyed an elegant bistro set. The small table and two chairs had an ornamental design of intertwining roses cast in black wrought iron. It was strikingly similar to the design on their new front gate. Charlie smiled excitedly. It was a near-perfect match! When Adam saw the delighted look on her face, he smiled. "Do you want this, Charlie-girl?"

"We need two sets," she eagerly planned.

Even though Adam was puzzled what Charlie intended to do with outdoor furniture, he didn't try to discourage her in the slightest. He was taking great delight in her pleasure, and would have gladly paid this, and much more, just to see her looking so happy.

As they waited for the cashier to ring up their many purchases, Charlie checked Adam's watch. It was getting late, and the store was near closing time. There were only a handful of customers left in the store, and they hurried to buy their items before the store closed. In a matter of minutes, Adam and Charlie were the only ones left. In an effort to speed the process so everyone could go

home, the remainder of the store's employees gathered round to help ring up the merchandise and then haul it out to the moving truck outside.

The sun was setting on the western horizon, effortlessly turning the desert, one beautiful shade of color to the next. Since the drive home would take about two hours, Adam located a fast food restaurant and ordered a hot dinner before making the trip back to Villa Rosa. Not wanting to risk being noticed inside the restaurant, they ate their meal outside in the moving truck, for the second time that day. Adam's notoriety came at a price, but the musician didn't mind. He was with Charlie, and could be happy anywhere.

The evening sky turned black as Adam drove the burdened moving truck home. Charlie sat between him and Kevin on the front seat, and every once in a while, her head would bob forward as she fought back sleep. Gradually losing out to fatigue, Charlie slumped against Kevin's shoulder. The bodyguard nudged her, and she sat up in her seat and yawned. After a few more minutes, Charlie fell asleep against his shoulder once more. Helplessly, Kevin looked to Adam.

"She's had a long day," smiled Adam.

With a small smile of his own, Kevin slumped back in his seat. He felt as though he could use a little shuteye, himself. The truck bumped along in silence, and soon, the only one awake was Adam.

Every few miles, Adam would glance at Charlie peacefully sleeping against Kevin's shoulder. He was a little envious, and wished that he had asked Kevin to drive, instead. Adam was tired, but felt plenty awake to be behind the wheel. No, his envy wasn't because Kevin could sleep and he had to be awake. Adam shifted in his seat and frowned. He had to watch that jealousy of his. Just when he thought he was impervious, its ugly head would raise without warning, and he could feel himself fighting fear. And there was no reason to fear. He trusted Kevin, and loved Charlie. She would never betray his love. But she was young, and he could hear Shirley's concerns echo in his head.

"Enough," he muttered beneath his breath. Shoving aside his fear, Adam rested in God's promises, and recalled Charlie's vows. The musician smiled. He was tired, and this was proof. A tired man makes easy prey for fear.

At last, they arrived home. Charlie awoke from her sleep and climbed out into the cold November air.

"We'll unload all this stuff, tomorrow," yawned Adam, as the front door opened and Vera came out to meet them.

"How was your day?" she inquired excitedly. "Did you get everything on your list, Pumpkin?"

For a fleeting moment, Adam thought Vera had just called him "Pumpkin." He laughed out loud when Charlie answered her grandma. He really needed to get to bed, for his senses were playing tricks with him!

"I'm turning in," yawned Kevin, excusing himself from the group as he headed for the mobile home. "Spending that much money in one day, isn't as easy as you'd think!"

"Goodnight," Adam called after him.

Vera smiled excitedly. "I'm really looking forward to seeing our new refrigerator."

"We got the one you wanted, Grandma," Charlie returned her smile. "In fact, we bought six of them!"

"They're in the truck," verified Adam, when he saw Vera's incredulous expression.

"Oh my!" exclaimed the elderly woman. "That must have cost you a fortune!"

"Well," joked Adam, approaching Charlie from behind and wrapping his arms around her, "we can't have this family living out of one refrigerator! What would the neighbors think?" Just then, a coyote sounded, and Charlie laughed.

"Vera!" called Kevin from the front door. "Chuck's roaming, again!"

"I'm coming," sighed Vera. "I just put him to bed an hour ago, and he's already up. I wish he'd hurry and decide that he's tired!" With a weary groan, Vera went inside.

"We didn't exercise Daddy, today," diagnosed Charlie. "He's not worn out, so he's not staying put in bed."

"Do you want me to give him a few laps around the house?" offered Adam, kissing Charlie's neck and nuzzling his face into her soft brown hair.

"You wouldn't mind?"

"Not if you wait for me in bed," he breathed into her ear.

The sensation tickled Charlie, and she couldn't help giggling. "How can you be so frisky and tired at the same time?"

"It isn't easy," he murmured.

Charlie felt his cheek rest against hers, and she happily sighed. "I'll wait."

While Adam lead Chuck around the mobile home in the darkness of the night, Charlie enjoyed a hot bath. Then she changed into Adam's favorite nightgown, and made the mistake of climbing beneath the covers to wait. By the time Adam found her, she was fast asleep.

When Adam awoke the next morning, he reached across the bed for Charlie, but found her place empty. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Adam got out of bed and dressed. As he buttoned his shirt, he went to the living room and found no one around. Even Chuck wasn't in his usual place on the sofa watching television. Where *was* everyone? Then Adam heard Shirley's voice outside the window, and stepped out to see what was going on.

"So, you're finally awake," remarked Shirley, as her brother sleepily scratched his head and came out to meet her. "You won't have a normal sleep pattern, if you don't wake up when everyone else does," she reproved.

Adam looked about the property in amazement. The back of the moving truck was open, and Mike, Hiram, and Jeff, were hauling things out and placing them on the ground. Maggie, Vera, and Sandra, were helping Shirley opened boxes of appliances, while the packing material blew in the wind. Nearby, Chad and Becky were exploring the things already set out, while Chuck sat in a chair close to Vera, enjoying the sunshine.

Seeing the smile on Adam's face, Shirley knew he was thankful. "I called Charlie this morning, and told her I was bringing some help," she answered his unspoken question. "Today was one of Jeff's off duty days, so he volunteered to come, as well."

"I sure appreciate it," confessed Adam. "I have to admit, I wasn't looking forward to doing all this with just me and Charlie." Then Adam realized he hadn't seen his young wife in all the activity. "Where's Charlie?" he asked.

With cutter in hand, Shirley opened yet another refrigerator box. "She's in Twin Yucca, running a few errands with Kevin. Honestly, Adam, how many of these things did she buy? I've counted four so far!"

"There's two more to go," he smiled. "Did Charlie say when she'd be back?"

"No," sighed Shirley, "and I didn't press for details. I had the impression she didn't want to tell me."

"Oh," Adam sighed. Seeing he had a lot to do, he joined the guys in unloading things from the moving truck. Halfway through the job, a large delivery truck from the furniture store honked outside the gates of Villa Rosa. "Looks like the furniture is here," announced Adam, putting down a microwave oven box and jogging to the gates.

"My, my," mused Shirley, shading her eyes as another truck pulled up behind the first. Soon, another and then another arrived.

After the first truck had been unloaded, Adam's pickup pulled up with Kevin behind the wheel. Charlie jumped out and ran to where Hiram and Adam were carrying out a large sofa.

"It's here!" she exclaimed delightedly.

"Charlie," panted Adam, wiping his brow from perspiration, "I hope you know where you want all this. The front yard's getting full pretty fast!"

Hiram readily agreed. "Charlie, if you'll tell us what you want in which building, Mike and I will start hauling it inside."

While Charlie began giving directions, Adam noticed Kevin carrying four large planter pots into the mobile home. He smiled. So *that's* what Charlie had been doing. She had forgotten to buy her pots, yesterday.

One of the drivers honked impatiently, returning Adam's thoughts to the task at hand. Even though it was mid-November, the weather was warm, and with all the physical exertion he was doing, it began to feel like summer. Going as fast as they could without hurting themselves, Adam and Jeff carried piece after piece of furniture from the delivery trucks and placed them on the ground.

In amazement at the sheer volume of brand new furniture, Vera overheard Sandra remark to Shirley, "Charlie must've bought out the entire store!" To this, Shirley was silent. Vera had to confess that it *did* look like more than they could possibly use. But as Mike and Hiram carried each item into the main house or bungalows, Vera began to think otherwise. Villa Rosa was simply a very large estate.

After the last delivery truck had been unloaded, Adam and Jeff collapsed in the shade and accepted a cold drink from Maggie. Maggie was looking quite pregnant these days, and Jeff wouldn't let her carry a single thing-- let alone any of this furniture.

"I hope Charlie knows what she's doing," chuckled Jeff, looking at the huge stack of furniture as Mike and Hiram picked up a heavy sofa and carried it into the main house.

"Are you guys going to sit there all day, and watch?" joked Mike. "How about a little help, here?"

"He's very funny," remarked Jeff, with a laughing grin.

Overseeing everything, was Charlie. She looked in control of the situation, though she often couldn't decide how to arrange the furniture once it arrived at its destination. "I'll figure that out, later," she finally concluded.

To Shirley's alarm, the sky outside was beginning to grow overcast. Several thousands of dollars were sitting exposed to the weather, and she could picture it getting water damaged with just one rain burst. Lunch was postponed until everything was inside, though for an hour or two, the men weren't sure they would make it in time. But the clouds parted, and the threat of rain passed.

At last, the furniture and appliances were safely indoors. Though the buildings were cluttered and unorganized, everything was in the room it was supposed to be. Through it all, Adam never noticed how Charlie managed to keep him out of their new master bedroom. Though he walked by the outside of her surprise several times that day, it never occurred to him that something was different.

"You still have a lot of work ahead of you," Jeff warned Adam, as they settled outside the mobile home to eat the lunch the ladies had prepared. "The appliances have to be hooked up, and the furniture set in order, before you'll be able to move in."

When Adam groaned with a mouthful of sandwich in his mouth, Hiram laughed. "Not while he's eating, Jeff!"

After lunch, the men lingered outside to rest and talk. Adam didn't notice Charlie's absence until their friends prepared to say good-bye, and she was nowhere to be found. Adam offered to go find her, but Maggie quickly intervened.

"That's all right," she smiled knowingly. "Let's go, Jeff."

When Jeff saw how mysterious Maggie had suddenly become, he laughed out loud. "Better look out, Adam," he advised his friend. "The ladies are up to something!"

After thanking everyone for their help, Adam closed the gate and helped Vera clean up the napkins and paper plates from lunch. When Adam announced he was going to look for Charlie, Vera tried to stop him.

"She's gone to so much trouble," pleaded Vera. "Let her show you when she's ready."

"All right," he conceded with a disappointed sigh. "If you say so."

Now that Kevin was no longer in demand, he retired to the living room and fell asleep in front of the television with Chuck. Vera kept busy in the kitchen, and then went to her bedroom for a nap. Compared to the first half of the day, it was a lazy afternoon.

Outside, Adam waited for Charlie in the nearby shade of some palm trees. He couldn't figure out what she was up to, and was seriously considering going after her, if she didn't show up within the next half hour. Just as his watch was approaching time, Charlie appeared in the doorway of the main house.

"Where have you been?" he asked, getting up and coming to her for an explanation.

"I was busy," she stammered, obviously not trying to lie, but maintain her secrecy at the same time. "Have Maggie and Jeff gone home, already?"

"They left over an hour ago," replied Adam.

"Oh?" She looked disappointed. "I didn't get a chance to thank them for all their help."

"I was going to come get you so you could do just that, but Maggie seemed to think I should leave you alone," informed Adam. He sighed as a cryptic smile tugged at the ends of Charlie's mouth. "What have you been doing?"

"If you'll just give me five-- no, wait-- better make that fifteen more minutes," requested Charlie, "then I'll show you." She laughed excitedly as Adam looked at her quizzically. "You'll like it," she promised. Without waiting for him to respond, Charlie disappeared inside the mobile home and then emerged with a brown paper bag under her arm. "You won't follow me, will you?"

Even though he was hot and muggy, Adam couldn't help smiling at the expressive brown eyes gazing back at him. "Fifteen minutes," he warned with a playful wag of his finger, "but not a second longer! After that, I'm coming in after you!"

With a girlish laugh, Charlie ran to the main house and closed the door after her.

When Adam realized he was grinning ear to ear, the musician shook his head in utter defeat. He was glad Shirley wasn't here to see Charlie reduce him to silly grins with just one look.

When his fifteen minutes were up, Adam went to the front door and was about to reach for the handle, when it suddenly opened. Charlie's beautiful face beamed back at him, and Adam let her take him by the hand. They passed the entry way, and right through the courtyard. Adam didn't have time to look around, for Charlie was heading straight for their master bedroom.

"Are you ready?" she asked, her face smiling so hard Adam thought she might hurt herself.

"I've been ready for the past hour and fifteen minutes!" he exclaimed.

"Are you sure?"

"Charlie!"

The young woman laughed, and then tried to compose herself. "This way, Mr. Clark." She opened the bedroom door, and led Adam inside. Even though he hadn't been the one to bring any of the furniture into this room, he could tell Charlie hadn't moved it from where Hiram and Mike had stacked it. Except for some new white drapes against one side of the wall, everything looked disorganized and messy.

"Okay," hesitated Adam. "What's the surprise?" Just then, a small gust of wind unexpectedly made the drapes move. "Wait a minute," he breathed, "I don't recall there ever being a window over there." Adam stepped closer to examine the wall. With a cry of surprise, he thrust aside the curtain and gazed in dumbfounded wonderment at the sight before him!

A matching sandstone wall as thick and as tall as the rest of the house, had been constructed around an area bigger than the backyard Adam had in town. Stunned, he stepped through the open sliding glass door and onto the flagstone that paved off a small patio with a wrought iron bistro set. Beyond the flagstone, spread a carpet of luxurious green grass. Except for a space on his right that had been cleared away for someone to start a vegetable garden, the grass covered the entire yard.

As much as all this amazed Adam, the thing that held his attention the most, was the large shade tree that had been planted against the far wall of the enclosed garden. Its branches were perfectly situated to be a prime spot to sit beneath during the heat of the day.

"When did all this happen?" Adam finally found his voice.

"We did it while you were working on your music!" Charlie laughed. "Grandma helped make sure you didn't look out the window at the wrong time and spoil the surprise!"

"It's definitely a surprise," he acknowledged.

"Over there," Charlie pointed out, "is a solid wooden entry gate, so you can get in without having to go through the bedroom." The entry gate was as tall as the rest of the wall, and so sturdily built, that it was impossible to see through. By the size of the lock, Adam realized it had been put there to ensure privacy.

"Come, I want to show you the tool shed," she excitedly pulled him forward by the hand. The shed was near the area designated for the vegetable garden, and had enough space to house all of Adam's tools.

From his new vantage, Adam noticed large plants against the pink hued walls, and smiled when he realized they were rose bushes. White fragrant blooms greeted his nostrils, and combined with the sweet smell of grass, tree leaves, and fresh air. Just outside these thick walls, lay the barren expanse of the Mojave Desert. But within this garden sanctuary, all Adam could see was green. It was such an unexpected contrast, that he was having a hard time getting over it.

"Did you put in irrigation?" his plumber's mind finally thought to ask. "I sure know, *I* didn't do it!"

"Hiram and Mike took care of it," answered Charlie. "They installed some fancy irrigation, so when you don't want to set out the sprinkler, you can water everything automatically."

"Where's the fun in that?" smiled Adam. "Charlie, I don't know what to say. This is so unexpected!"

The couple took off their shoes and enjoyed the lush feel of the natural green carpet as they walked to the large shade tree and sat down to enjoy the view.

"I can't believe you did this. The garden is breathtaking, Charlie!"

"I was hoping you'd like it."

"You know," he observed, "we may be outside, but this place feels incredibly private."

"That's because it *is*," affirmed Charlie. "The only way you can get in here, is to either scale those walls, or somehow force your way through the gate."

"And if I'm not an intruder?" Adam raised his eyebrows to await her response.

"You'd come through our bedroom," she whispered. A soft breeze caressed her face, and Adam found himself jealous of the wind. "I wanted a space that was just for us," she murmured quietly. "Somewhere we could be together, and not have to worry about anyone else."

Adam brushed a wisp of hair away from her face.

"I'm sorry I didn't wait up for you, last night," Charlie apologized. "I tried to."

"I know." With a contented sigh, Adam leaned against the tree trunk and drank in the beauty of their private garden. A few clouds lazily drifted above the Mojave, making Adam feel very restful. Shutting his eyes, he contemplated taking a nap.

"Adam?"

"Hummm?" he smiled dreamily.

"Would you hold me?"

By the intimate tone of Charlie's voice, Adam knew what she was asking. His eyes immediately popped open, and he stared at her in surprise. "Out here?" he asked. "Are you serious?"

Charlie settled back on the grass and looked up at him expectantly.

"You've never let me do this outside our bedroom, before," he quietly mused.

"Do you want me, or not?" she teased.

"Oh, I want you," he confirmed, grinning the handsome Clark smile that Charlie loved so much. Stretching out beside her, Adam gazed down at his beautiful wife. Charlie tenderly drew his mouth to hers, and the two spent the remainder of their afternoon in each other's company.

The winter rains that had driven Beppe to hurry Villa Rosa's completion, finally descended a few days before Thanksgiving. The dirt road leading to the estate turned to mud, and Adam was grateful they had a truck that could handle traversing the thick muck. Charlie had been hoping to invite everyone for Thanksgiving, and help celebrate Villa Rosa's completion, but the main house and bungalows were still not finished. Adam and Kevin helped Charlie arrange furniture, while Mike volunteered his time to help Adam hook up the appliances. At the rate they were going, Adam and Charlie would be doing good to move in before Christmas.

Using this opportunity to get everyone together at her house for the Thanksgiving holiday, Shirley stepped in and started making plans. Remembering last year's celebration at the Garner house, the Westons politely declined her invitation, and instead chose to have a family gathering of their own. It was a disappointing blow to Shirley, but when Mike announced that he and Sandra were going to celebrate that day at her parents' house, Shirley nearly came unglued. Mike promised to spend Christmas with her and Chad, but for a while, Sandra had difficulty talking to Shirley without coming away in tears.

It was a guilty pleasure, but Charlie was relieved to no longer be the center of Shirley's disapproval. She felt sorry for Sandra, though. The young woman knew how hard it was to be related to Shirley, sometimes.

Thanksgiving passed without any further drama, and the family woes between the Garners and the Westons were forgotten. Breathing a collective sigh of relief, Charlie and Adam began to make plans for the day they could move into the main house.

Ironically, another moving truck had to be rented before this could take place. The Clarks and their bodyguard drove into Twin Yucca and parked in front of Adam's house. Anything that Adam wanted to take to Villa Rosa had to be packed for the move. He carefully boxed up his awards, music sheets, books, magazines, sound equipment, and even his old battered "thinking sofa," and stacked them into the back of the truck. Any miscellaneous kitchen appliances Charlie thought they could use, were also packed, along with sundry household stuff they would need.

After depositing it back at Villa Rosa, Vera went with them to Jerome's house where most of her belongings still remained. Adam helped Vera gather her clothing, photo albums, favorite pots and pans and kitchen utensils, her bags of left over knitting yarn, and nearly every picture frame on the walls, and carefully packed them into moving boxes. There were also a few bags of Arnold's old things that Vera had been unable to bring herself to part with, so they too, were placed in the moving truck. Charlie and her father didn't have much, for most of it was already

at the mobile home, but when they arrived at Villa Rosa, a large pile of belongings sat in the living room of the main house.

"When we get all this sorted out," Adam announced rather glumly, "we have to bring over the rest of our stuff from the mobile home."

Charlie sighed in disappointment. Just when it looked as though they were making headway, they had to start all over again!

"Remember, Pumpkin," Vera reminded her granddaughter, "you're combining three households. It's no easy task."

But it wasn't all disagreeable. Adam was relishing the large library that Charlie had told him he could turn into his music room. It was more space than he had ever had for his music, and Adam was eagerly looking forward to returning to his work. As if to test Charlie's promise to let him decorate the room however he pleased, Adam placed his tattered old sofa against one of the walls and waited to see her reaction. When Charlie saw the threadbare couch, she bit her lip and tried to look happy for Adam. If this is what he wanted, then she wouldn't protest. But Adam knew her forbearance only extended as far as the doors of his music room. If he ever tried to put his sofa in the living room, he had no doubt Charlie would give him a piece of her mind!

Not surprisingly, the first item moved from the mobile home was Adam's grand piano. It proudly sat in the middle of his music room, and echoed melodiously whenever he played. Charlie had already planned for the times he would invariably work in the dead of night, and had the doors of the music room soundproofed. But when they were open, music spilled from Adam's piano and into the enclosed courtyard where it freely flowed throughout the rest of the house.

Setting her new kitchen in order, Vera immediately fell to work organizing her utensils, and stocking shelves of food in the pantry. She had been assured by Adam that their road wouldn't flood with all the winter rains, but Vera wasn't taking any chances. They would have food on the table, whether or not the roads were passable.

Kevin helped set up everything in his bungalow, and then officially moved his belongings into his new living space. For the first time in months, Kevin had his own kitchen, living room, and bathroom. The newfound privacy came as a welcome change.

Then the Clarks and Overholts moved into the main house. After Charlie had checked the mobile home one last time to make sure they hadn't forgotten anything, Adam surprised her by

catching her in his arms, and carrying her over the threshold of Villa Rosa. Later that night, they slept in the master bedroom, all the while feeling as though they were in somebody else's home.

"Villa Rosa is wonderful," Adam had chuckled, "but it takes some getting used to-- that it's ours!"

Now that their new home was finished and Christmas was nearing, Charlie hoped they could celebrate and have the big party she had wanted to give since November. But after Shirley's bruised feelings over Thanksgiving, Adam was hesitant to not let his sister handle all the holiday arrangements, at her own home.

"It's her first Christmas without Thomas," he explained to a disappointed Charlie. "She always makes a big deal of the holidays, and if we have a party, she'll feel like we're trying to take something away that had always been hers. I *always* spend Christmas with my sister and her family."

"Couldn't they spend it here, with us?" reasoned Charlie. "I'm not trying to take you away from them-- only bring them *here!*"

"I don't want to risk setting off another family disagreement," sighed Adam, wearily. "We've survived the renovation, the shopping, and the move, while managing to remain on speaking terms with my sister! I'm tired!" When Charlie silently nodded in agreement, he noticed a small tear slip from her eyelashes and splash onto her cheek. "Honey, if it means that much to you, I'll risk Shirley's displeasure."

"No," Charlie sniffed, ashamed of her own tears when Shirley had shed so many of her own that year, "let her handle Christmas. She's not going to have Thomas this year, and I want her to enjoy this holiday as much as she can. I'm sure it's going to be hard enough on her, as it is."

Adam smiled proudly, and put his arms around Charlie. "That's very unselfish of you."

But Charlie wasn't saying that to get Adam's praise. She meant every word, and prayed God would help Shirley and her family through the holidays without Thomas. Charlie couldn't imagine being without Adam, and the mere thought of it, helped her to find sympathy for her sister-in-law. Shirley's split from Thomas hadn't made her any easier to get along with, but Charlie tried hard to remember that Shirley WAS trying to be at peace with her-- at least, Charlie hoped that it was still the case. With Shirley, it was sometimes hard to tell.

A few days before Christmas, the Garners, Westons, and Ericksons, arrived at Villa Rosa to see the finished results. It was to just be a small dinner party, for Charlie was consciously aware of

not wanting to overstep Shirley's territory. In fact, Charlie hadn't wanted a party so close to Christmas, for this very reason. But Horace Weston had invited himself by joking that Adam wasn't letting guests into Villa Rosa, because he was still busy honeymooning Charlie! After that, Charlie felt she HAD to invite everyone over, or risk more ribbing from Horace.

On the evening of the dinner party, Shirley's car arrived in front of the tall, stately gates of the estate. In the distance, she could see light sparkling from the windows of the main house, making Villa Rosa look like a gleaming string of jewels against the dark Mojave sky. After announcing herself to the intercom, someone in the house pushed a button to let her in, and the gates swung open.

"Chad, I want you to be at your best table manners, tonight," instructed Shirley, as she pulled up to the house.

"Why?" protested Chad, as though he intended to eat with his fingers and loudly gulp down his food. "It's only Uncle Adam and Aunt Charlie!"

Shirley turned off the vehicle's engine and looked at the impressive structure before her. Somehow, she felt a little intimidated by its grandness. She had been there before, but not as a guest. "I mean it," Shirley warned her son.

"Okay, Mom," shrugged the boy.

Chad wanted to barge right in, but Shirley held him back and rang the doorbell. When the door opened, Charlie greeted her guests.

"Thank you for coming," the young woman smiled warmly. "Please, make yourselves at home. Jeff and Maggie are in the living room with Adam and the Westons, and I think Mike and Sandra should be here soon."

Charlie showed her sister-in-law into the living room where Adam, Horace, and Jeff were talking about the local news. Kevin sat nearby, while Chuck blankly stared at a muted television. Chad immediately found an empty seat beside his uncle, and plopped onto the couch.

In masked curiosity, Shirley looked about the living room. The furniture Charlie had chosen, tastefully accentuated the area, and gave it a homey yet formal appeal.

"Would you like to see the rest of the house?" offered Charlie. She showed Shirley the dining room where the table had been set for dinner, and the kitchen where Vera was busily enjoying

her state of the art appliances. Shirley politely made some kind remarks, but kept her enthusiasm to a low murmur of approval.

Then Charlie led Shirley into the enclosed inner courtyard at the center of Villa Rosa. Since it was dark outside, Shirley could see a star decked sky through the glass of the large custom-made skylight that sheltered the courtyard from the elements. A shimmer of moving light floated about the area, and Shirley realized that underwater lighting had been installed at the bottom of the fountain. The sound of softly falling water greeted their ears, and completed the peaceful scene.

"I've never seen anything like it," admitted Shirley.

"Would you like to sit for awhile?" offered Charlie, inviting her to an ornately decorated bistro table in the corner of the courtyard.

Shirley accepted the seat, and Charlie sat down from her across the small table. For a while, neither woman said a thing. In the distance, they could hear the men laughing and talking, while Vera continued to make busy sounds in the kitchen.

Feeling a need to break the silence, Charlie spoke up first. "I hope you didn't have any trouble with the road. Adam is planning to have it paved, but I know it's quite muddy right now."

From the serious expression on Shirley's face, Charlie sensed she wasn't thinking about the condition of the road.

"I've always tried to look after my brother," mused Shirley. "He's often too compliant for his own good, and I'm always afraid someone is going to take advantage of his big heart." Shirley looked at her young sister-in-law and sighed heavily. "The urge to defend him doesn't easily go away."

Though it was a loaded statement, Charlie took heart that Shirley was trying. "I *do* love him," Charlie tried to console her.

"I have no doubt of that," assured the woman. She smiled as a memory resurfaced from her past. "Mom always predicted that when Adam gave his heart to a woman, it wouldn't be halfway."

"I'm grateful your mom was right," smiled Charlie.

"Yes," hesitated Shirley, "but, because his heart too easily gets in the way, I fear Adam won't always act in his own best interest."

Uneasily, Charlie didn't know how to take the remark.

"Short of sin," continued Shirley, "I think there's nothing on earth that he wouldn't do for you."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"Only to be careful," she cautioned. "When it comes to you, Adam doesn't always think clearly."

"I'll be careful." It was the only response Charlie could think to say.

Shirley gratefully smiled, and returned her attention to the fountain in the center of the courtyard. "It's a very nice house," she acknowledged. "You did a good job."

"Thank you," mumbled Charlie, feeling as though she were a child who had just been reprimanded for something she hadn't done. Or had she? Was she taking advantage of Adam's big heart? Or had Shirley meant it only as a warning, and not an accusation?

After Shirley returned to the living room, Charlie retreated to the master bedroom and locked the door. She had succeeded in holding back her tears in front of Shirley, but now that she was alone, they would not be stopped.

Opening the oven door and checking her dish one more time, Vera glanced at the clock. Mike and Sandra had finally arrived, and it had not been a moment too soon. Dinner was almost ready.

Mike and Kevin entered the kitchen and tried not to look as hungry as they were feeling.

"Just a few more minutes," Vera smiled.

Adam soon joined them, and started a minor feeding frenzy from the open container of nuts Vera had set out for cooking purposes. Seeing Adam that considered it to be acceptable behavior, it emboldened Mike and then Kevin to do the same. When Horace came from the living room to find the other guys already eating, he obtained his share of nuts.

"Okay, everyone has had enough walnuts!" exclaimed Shirley, when she discovered the kitchen full of men ruining their appetites. "Vera has gone to a lot of trouble fixing dinner, so we can put this away!" Before Shirley could put the lid back on the container, however, Adam managed to swipe another handful.

Millie stood in front of the stove and laughed, as she stirred the saucepan she was helping Vera keep an eye on. "A small snack before dinner never did any harm!"

"Mike," sighed Sandra, seeing her husband eyeing the can, "Mom said a 'small' snack! You've already had enough!"

"Careful, Boy," Horace laughingly nudged his son-in-law, "you'd better do as Sandra says, or I know someone who'll be sleeping on the living room couch, tonight!"

At this, Mike turned red with embarrassment. But Mike didn't have long to squirm, for Vera announced that dinner was ready.

"Chad, you and the girls go wash up," instructed Shirley, getting out the tossed salad Vera had placed in the refrigerator. "And don't leave puddles on the floor!" she called after the children.

"I hope it doesn't keep raining," sighed Jeff. "Just when I wash the squad car, we get a good downpour!"

"It never rains in California," joked Adam, "but when it does, it pours!"

Just then, Maggie waddled in and offered to help.

"Oh, no you don't, Baby!" Jeff quickly guided her back to the living room. "You're already worn out!"

For several minutes, Adam had the nagging feeling that something was wrong. "Vera, have you seen Charlie?" he wondered.

"No, I haven't," replied the elderly woman, too busy with her work to notice the concern in Adam's voice.

Then Horace piped up, "The last I saw of Charlie, she was talking with your sister in the courtyard."

Adam looked to Shirley.

"I think she went to lie down for a while," shrugged Shirley.

Frowning, Adam left the crowded kitchen and walked across the courtyard to their master bedroom. He was surprised to find it locked.

"Charlie?" he called, jiggling the handle to get her attention. "Open the door!"

Everyone in the kitchen was startled when Adam came back from the courtyard, his face looking troubled. "The bedroom door is locked, and Charlie isn't responding," he frowned. "Vera, where's the keys to all the indoor locks? I can't remember where we put them."

"In the drawer," motioned Vera, as Adam went to retrieve the key he needed.

"Do you think she's sick?" wondered Maggie in concern, coming to the kitchen doorway at the sound of Charlie's name being mentioned. "Do you think she's all right?"

"He doesn't know, Maggie," Jeff tried to quiet his wife. "Do you want any help, Adam?"

"No, I found the key I'm looking for," replied Adam, shoving the drawer closed with a loud thud. He didn't think there was cause to be too concerned, but the locked door made him uneasy.

Unsure if Adam would feel they were intruding on a probable private matter between husband and wife, the guests at Villa Rosa remained near the kitchen but watched to see what was happening. Vera, Shirley, and Maggie, however, didn't feel such constraints, but went with Adam to the master bedroom.

When the door swung open, Adam went inside while the women followed hard on his heels.

Upon finding the bedroom empty, Adam jerked the white drapes aside and looked through the sliding glass door. "She's out there," he sighed in relief. The cold December air chilled Adam as he stepped into the enclosed garden. By the light of the moon, he could see Charlie's feet peering from the shade tree's dark shadow. While her feet were visible, the rest of Charlie was hidden from view.

"Charlie?" he called to her. "What are you doing out here? Why didn't you open the door when I asked you to?"

When Adam heard Charlie's unsteady voice, he knew she had been crying. "Sorry," she quietly responded. "I didn't hear you."

"Ladies," Adam turned to Vera, Shirley, and Maggie, "would you give us a few minutes?"

After they left, Adam shut the door, and returned to the garden. As he neared the shadow huddled against the tree, he heard the muffled sounds of someone crying.

"Honey?" Adam sat down beside his wife on the damp grass, and put a concerned hand on her back. "What's wrong?"

He heard Charlie gasp for breath, before making any attempt to respond. "I just needed to be alone for awhile."

"Even from me?"

Charlie was silent.

Before she turned her head away, Adam could faintly see the sheen of tears on her cheeks. "I wish you'd tell me what's wrong," he coaxed, rubbing her back affectionately.

"If I asked you something," wondered Charlie, "would give me an honest answer?"

"You can ask me anything," replied Adam.

"Did you marry me, because you felt sorry for me?"

The question stunned Adam into silence. Still waiting for her answer, Charlie turned her tear streaked face toward him.

"What gave you that idea?" he breathed soberly.

"Did you?" pressed Charlie.

"Of *course* not!" Adam nearly rebuked her for asking such a question.

His massaging had suddenly stopped, but Charlie could still feel the warmth of his fingers on her back. "Do I take advantage of you?" she questioned.

At this, Adam completely froze. "Shirley's been talking to you." The silence that ensued, confirmed Adam's suspicions. He jumped to his feet and stormed from the garden, while Charlie tried in vain to call him back.

In the courtyard, Shirley was waiting with everyone else by the kitchen. She looked up in surprise to see her brother coming straight towards her.

"Is Charlie all right?" inquired Shirley.

Adam stopped a few feet from his little sister and stared at her disbelievingly.

Charlie came running after him, and tugged at his shirt sleeve. "Adam, please," she begged, "don't do this! It's my fault, not hers!"

Pulling his arm free from Charlie, Adam glared at Shirley. "You've gone too far this time," he told her through gritted teeth. "It's one thing for you to come to me with your concerns, but when you start making Charlie question my love for her..." Adam caught his breath and let out an anguished cry. "Charlie actually wanted to know if she took advantage of me!"

When Shirley's jaw muscles began to work, Adam knew for certain that she had been the one to plant the question in Charlie's heart.

"Adam," Charlie softly pleaded, "I'm the one you should be angry with."

"I refuse to listen, Charlie," warned Adam, as the rest of the party stood frozen to where they stood. "It's Shirley speaking-- not you."

"But, she's right," Charlie struggled not to cry. "I take advantage of you. I talked you into so many things, and you only did it to make me happy!"

"Are you hearing this?" Adam angrily asked his sister.

Shirley finally defended herself. "You never would have bought Villa Rosa, unless she had talked you into it."

"SHE'S MY WIFE!" bellowed Adam, his voice loudly echoing throughout the courtyard. He was too angry to say another word.

When Charlie began to cry, Adam took her in his arms. He did it right in front of Shirley and the others. From over Charlie's shoulder, Adam gave Shirley a piercing stare.

"I was only trying to do what's best for you," stammered Shirley.

Adam closed his eyes in grief. "Is this what's best for me, Sis? Is this what you wanted for me? Take a long look at Charlie, and tell me this was for my good. You've been picking at her for months now, and it's got to stop!"

"I never intended to hurt her," apologized Shirley. There was a genuine ring of regret in her voice that made Adam believe she was telling the truth.

Adam sighed heavily as Charlie dried her eyes and tried to compose herself. "Shirley, sometimes you're hard to get along with," he breathed, "but I believe you come by it honestly." Adam looked down at Charlie. "Are you all right?" he whispered. Charlie nodded and gave him a brave smile.

Shirley took a step toward the couple and bit her lip. "Charlie, I'm truly sorry. I wasn't trying to make you doubt Adam. I only wanted you to be aware that he's willing to hurt himself, just to make you happy."

"If I am," Adam warned his sister, "then it's *my* decision. Stop planting doubt in Charlie. She has enough to deal with."

None but Shirley could've understood Adam's true meaning, for she was the only one present who knew of Charlie's gene test, and the Alzheimer's Disease that faced her in the future.

In resignation, Shirley lowered her head. "I'm sorry. Next time, I'll keep my opinions to myself." With that, she hurried from the courtyard.

"I'd better go after her," sighed Adam.

"Let me," sniffed Charlie, relinquishing Adam's hold on her. She looked calmer now, though her face was still wet and her eyes red from weeping.

Outside, Charlie caught up with her sister-in-law as she was getting into her car. "Shirley," pleaded Charlie, "don't leave!"

The key was in the ignition, but Shirley made no effort to turn it. "I mess up every relationship I hold dear!" the woman rebuked herself. "First Thomas, and then with Sandra, and now you and Adam!"

"You meant well," Charlie weakly smiled.

From where she sat behind the wheel, Shirley could see the blackness of the desert stretching beyond Villa Rosa's secure gates. "I shouldn't have lost my patience and left the way I did," repented Shirley.

"I forgive you," Charlie tried to coax her from the vehicle. "Won't you stay for dinner? It's a long drive back to Twin Yucca on an empty stomach."

Both women were embarrassed for the scene they had caused at the party, so when Shirley saw that Charlie was prepared to accept her apology and start over, she gratefully accepted.

Adam, however, was a different matter. His reaction to this latest disagreement with his sister, had been the result of Shirley's constant doubts over Charlie. Not only had he struggled with a recent temptation to doubt Charlie and give in to jealousy, but now Charlie was doubting his motives for marrying her. The added stresses of Villa Rosa, the media, and Charlie's future, all made Shirley's interference worse.

For his wife's sake, Adam asked Shirley to never again speak of her concerns to Charlie. If she truly had something to say about the way they were conducting their lives, would she please, *please*, come to him, instead? After the trouble Shirley had caused earlier that evening, she didn't feel at liberty to negotiate the terms of her surrender. She promised, and Adam breathed a sigh of relief. If one of them had to be the recipient of Shirley's advice, he wanted it to be himself, and not Charlie.

The party ended on a much happier note than it had started. Adam played his piano after the meal, and everyone enjoyed some classic Wallace Shipley compositions that made Charlie quite proud he was her husband. But she felt Adam's greatest accomplishment wasn't his music, but his continued faith in God. Even with all his troubles, he trusted that God not only had a plan for himself, but for her as well.

That night in bed, Adam watched Charlie as she fell asleep beside him. He lightly traced the contours of her face with his finger until she stirred to his touch.

"Adam?" she sleepily mumbled.

"I'm right here," he whispered.

"Are you working on your music?"

"No, not tonight," Adam smoothed back the long hair that fell against his arm. To his delight, she cuddled against his chest, and sighed with contentment.

"Adam?"

"I'm still here," he softly laughed.

"I love you, Adam."

Squeezing her ever so tenderly, Adam gently kissed the slender hand that was sleepily caressing his face. "I love you, too."

When Adam felt her body completely relax against him, he knew she had fallen asleep. Sleep wasn't coming as easily for him, but Adam didn't begrudge Charlie her rest. He was too busy thanking God for the miracle snuggled in his arms, and requesting another for her future.

Charity "is not *easily* provoked."

~ 1 Corinthians 13:5 ~

"A garden inclosed is... my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. Thy plants are an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant fruits; camphire, with spikenard, spikenard and saffron; calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense; myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices: A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon. Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits."

~ Song of Solomon 4:12-16 ~

Chapter Fifty-seven

The Changing Horizon

"Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged."

~ Colossians 3:21 ~

Christmas was spent at Shirley's house, and, as promised, Mike and Sandra were present. It was a festive occasion, though not quite as joyful as it could have been. As they were gathering in the living room to open Christmas gifts, Thomas had arrived unannounced to share his good news with Shirley and the boys. He was moving in with some woman in town, and as soon as his divorce with Shirley was finalized, he was getting married. She had just said "yes," and Thomas was so overjoyed, he just had to rush over and tell everyone the good news so they could share in his happiness. Instead of the "congratulations" that Thomas had expected, however, he was met by a tearfully angry Mike and an equally brokenhearted Chad. Both of the boys had been long hoping their dad would repent of his ways, and reunite with their mom.

Suddenly, the excitement of opening Christmas presents held no appeal for Chad. Even though it was in front of everyone, the boy ran to Adam and wet his uncle's shirt with heartsick sobs. Angrily, Shirley took Thomas to the kitchen where the two talked in ever-increasingly loud tones that everyone in the living room could easily overhear. When it was over, Thomas stormed from the house, forgetting that his presents for the boys were still in the trunk of his car.

After taking a few minutes to compose herself, Shirley returned to her Christmas party and Adam transferred the sobbing child to his mother. "I already knew he had filed for divorce," Shirley tried to put on a brave face, "but I hadn't expected him to find someone else so quickly--" her voice abruptly broke off, as she smothered a gasp of emotion.

Even though Christmas had been marked by this sadness, it still held much joy for what was left of Thomas' family. As a present to Mike and Sandra, Adam presented them with the deed to his house in town. If the house didn't fit their needs, they could sell the property, and buy another. Either way, it meant they could move out of their apartment and into a home of their very own.

The young couple was speechless. Adam's house was one of the nicest in his neighborhood, and certainly more house than either of them could have hoped for when it came time to add up their savings and see what they could afford.

For Chad, Adam created a trust fund for his nephew's college education. The boy accepted this news with relative calm, compared to his brother's broad grins and beaming smiles. But Chad's face *really* lit up when he opened a new game system from Uncle Adam and Aunt Charlie!

As January began, the winter rains subsided over the Mojave Desert. It had been predicted that drought would take hold of Southern California, and the clearing skies seemed to confirm everyone's expectations for a drier than usual year. Even so, Adam had the road to Villa Rosa paved, just as he had promised Charlie. It would rain eventually, and when it did, they would be assured of traversable roads.

As planned, Kevin actively recruited more bodyguards for his clients. Every few days, muscular looking men with thick necks would meet with Adam, Charlie, and Kevin in the living room to interview for one of the openings. Since Kevin was a former Navy SEAL, he knew many who might be interested in the job. Still, his former friendships did not outweigh his clients' best interests. There was one applicant whom Kevin felt uncomfortable about, so he let his concerns be known to Adam. "If I were married," he cautioned, "I wouldn't want him watching *my* wife." That was more than enough for Adam to turn the man down. But if the individual was fortunate enough to get Kevin's endorsement, Adam felt good about hiring the man right on the spot.

Soon the Clarks had enough bodyguards on rotation that Kevin could finally take his long-deserved vacation. It wasn't easy for him to walk away, however. Charlie had been his charge for a long time, and Kevin felt more than a little protective of her. As he drove through Villa Rosa's gates and onto the road back to civilization, he had to remind himself that Adam and Charlie would be well looked after. Mentally releasing himself from duty, Kevin was finally able to truly relax.

As January progressed, it brought more than bodyguards to Villa Rosa. Just cleaning all the bathrooms was enough to turn anyone into an instant Cinderella, so Adam suggested they hire a housekeeper to free more of Vera and Charlie's time. Many applicants wanted the position, but Charlie and Vera finally decided on one particular woman they both liked.

Mrs. Freemont was a widow with five grown children, and eleven grandchildren. She was a few years younger than Vera, though in remarkably good physical condition for someone her age. This experienced housekeeper had a no-nonsense attitude, and vowed to keep the household running smoothly. She also gave Vera someone to talk to, and the two women quickly struck up a close friendship. This alone, was enough to endear the woman to Charlie, and she gave her ready approval. Before long, their new housekeeper moved into the bedroom next to Vera's, in the main house.

With all the new staff, there was still one more position to be filled, and it came harder than the previous employees. Adam was in need of a secretary, and though Charlie was eager to fill the roll herself, she didn't have the experience that he was looking for.

"I don't see why I couldn't do the job," protested Charlie, after Adam had tried to explain one more time why he didn't think it was a good idea.

"You aren't familiar with composition or music theory," he reasoned. "I need someone I can bounce ideas off, who's also familiar with the music industry. I was even thinking I might be able to teach that person a little of what I've learned, and maybe help get them started in their own career."

"She isn't going to be young and pretty, is she?" asked Charlie. "I can just imagine one of your fans, hanging on every word you say! Oh, no! I'm going to be your secretary, if I have to learn the piano, myself!"

At this, Adam laughed. "What if I promise to hire a man? Would I get your approval, then?"

"I suppose so," she sighed, disappointedly. "You're missing out on a good secretary. I can touch-type, you know."

"You don't say?" Adam's eyebrows playfully arched in surprise. "Why didn't you tell me this, sooner?"

"Go ahead and laugh," Charlie swatted his arm, "but I refuse to give you to another woman!"

Adam gave her a disarming smile that quickly eroded the last of Charlie's defenses. "There's no chance of that happening," he breathed, putting his arms around his wife, and inhaling her feminine scent. He could smell the shampoo she had used that morning, and detected a light touch of talcum powder on her skin. "You fit perfectly in my arms," he remarked contentedly.

"No female secretaries," Charlie made him promise.

Though Adam didn't tell her this, he had never considered hiring a woman in the first place. In fact, he already had a particular man in mind, but didn't want to say anything until it was certain that he would accept.

And accept he did. Dave Walker had been dumbfounded to receive Adam's call, and needed to pinch himself for several days afterward just to convince himself that it was actually true. Ever since that evening in the restaurant when he turned his piano over to the famous Wallace

Shiple, Dave had relived the event over and over in his mind. Adam had made a big impression on the young man, and it was no small thing that he was now to be the secretary of such a celebrated pianist! Dave had never considered himself capable of being anyone's secretary, but when Adam explained what the job would entail, he immediately jumped at the opportunity. All he had to do was fly to California, and someone would be waiting to meet him at the airport.

So Dave quit his job at the restaurant, bade his mom and dad good-bye, kissed his younger sister, hugged his older brother, and got on the plane to begin a new life on the other side of the country. He had been to the West Coast before, but only as a tourist on vacation. California was a long way away from Georgia, and Dave was nervous that he might not fit in. What if he didn't live up to Adam Clark's expectations? Dave didn't have an employer right now, but he wasn't afraid that he wouldn't be able to find another job. It was the thought of being incapable of what might be demanded of him, that sent Dave into a cold sweat every time. He could only pray, and ask God to lead him where he should go. Right now, he felt God calling him to California, so that was where Dave was going to be.

"Charlie!" called Adam, looking at his watch again. "We have to get moving, or we're going to miss Dave's plane!" The musician patiently waited as his wife grabbed her purse and checked in on Chuck one last time before leaving.

Charlie's bodyguard greeted Adam's, and the four climbed into their SUV for the drive into Los Angeles. Since Adam insisted on being behind the wheel, the bodyguards sat in the back, and quietly listened as their clients talked up front.

"I told Grandma not to wait up for us," remarked Charlie, buckling her seat belt as Adam started the engine. "We might get home late, tonight."

"I'm glad Mrs. Freemont is here," reflected Adam, thoughtfully. "It feels good to have someone capable around when we're not here to look after things." The front gates of Villa Rosa opened, and the SUV made its way down the road. "I have a good feeling about Dave," he mused. "I think he's going to work out just fine."

"You sound very sure of yourself, for a guy you've only met once," laughed Charlie, with a shake of her head. "What if he isn't what you expected?"

"He'll work out," Adam nodded confidently.

"I hope you're not placing too much trust in someone you hardly know," warned Charlie, putting on her sunglasses to shield her eyes from the desert sun that came streaming through her window.

Adam checked his rear view mirror, and chuckled to himself. There was no sign of any photographers, or fans. Living so deep in the Mojave may have meant a greater commuting distance to large cities, but it had been more than worth it. Out here, he felt more at liberty to be himself, without the burden of his celebrity to constantly weigh him down.

The drive into Los Angeles took the remainder of that morning and most of the afternoon, so that by the time they arrived at the congested airport, Charlie was feeling a few hunger pains.

"We'll get something to eat, after we pick up Dave," assured Adam, his own stomach sympathizing with hers.

Anxiously, Dave Walker looked out his window as the wheels of the passenger jet touched down at the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). In a few minutes, he was supposed to meet someone who would drive him to Villa Rosa, and he wanted to make sure he didn't miss his ride. Dave wasn't familiar with Southern California, and the thought of being stranded at the huge, bustling airport made him a little queasy.

As Dave got off the plane, he offered one last prayer to heaven and then took a deep breath. Then he saw them. Near the area where he was supposed to claim his luggage, he recognized two very familiar faces. On either side, they were flanked by some imposing men who looked as though they were on duty. Momentarily going numb, Dave gulped hard.

Just then, Adam saw Dave, and waved to him with a friendly smile.

Dave nervously nodded, and walked over to where his new employer was waiting. "I didn't expect y'all to come get me," he greeted them. Normally, when Dave was trying to be businesslike and formal, he could make his Southern accent disappear. But his stomach had been tied into too many knots on the flight over, to remember his Southern drawl now. As he stood face to face with the famous Wallace Shipley for the second time in his life, it came tumbling from him unchecked.

Adam warmly shook Dave's hand, and pretended not to notice how damp and clammy it had felt. He understood Dave was nervous, and did his best to set the man at ease. "I'm glad you're here, Dave. You remember my wife, Charlie, don't you?"

Dave's eyes went from Adam to the woman standing at his side. "Nice to meetcha again, Mrs. Clark," he politely smiled.

While Adam talked to the newcomer, Charlie looked the man over with the same degree of wariness she gave the bodyguards before knowing them better. Unlike Kevin and his colleagues, however, Dave was not as imposing or distant in his mannerisms. There was no air of professionalism that reminded Charlie of someone who knew what he was doing. Perhaps she would think differently upon hearing him again at his piano. For Adam's sake, Charlie certainly hoped so.

"Honey?" Adam's voice broke through her thoughts, and she looked up to find his expectant face looking at her, as if waiting for an answer.

"What?"

"Is the restaurant we passed on the way here, all right with you?" he repeated.

"If you don't mind getting mobbed by fans," shrugged Charlie.

"Oh, I forgot," sighed Adam, disappointedly. "I'm sorry, Dave. We have to stick with drive-throughs, because I sometimes attract too much attention."

"That suits me just fine," Dave assured his employer as another passenger from his flight gave Adam a double-take. "I'm not choosy."

"That's good to hear," chuckled Adam. Just then, a man tapped the famous musician's shoulder and asked for an autograph. Dave quietly watched as Adam graciously took a moment to speak with one of his fans.

In the parking lot, Adam helped Dave put his suitcases into the back of the SUV, while Charlie waited in the passenger seat up front. The bodyguards took the very back seat, so Dave had the middle of the SUV all to himself.

After Adam climbed behind the wheel, he talked with Dave as they drove to a nearby drive-through and ate in the parking lot. "On the off-chance we don't work well together," Adam was telling him between French fries, "I'll make sure you're paid until you can find another job. From all the conversations we've had over the phone, though, I don't think it'll be necessary."

Dave gratefully thanked him. "I'll sure give it my best."

"I know you will," Adam nodded. "We have a lot of work ahead, so after you get settled into your bungalow, we'll get started."

The drive home was largely spent with Adam and Dave discussing music. They both seemed to know what the other was talking about, even though Charlie had to listen carefully to keep up with what they were saying. During the course of a lively debate over the use of the piano's damper pedal, Charlie fell asleep. She hadn't intended to, and felt a little embarrassed when Adam awakened her and she realized they were sitting in front of Villa Rosa's gates.

"I guess our talking put you to sleep," Adam mused with a smile, as Charlie straightened herself in her seat and tried to look aware of her surroundings.

It was early evening, and the sun had already dipped below the horizon, giving a dark cast to the cloudless skies overhead. Charlie glanced in the mirror, and saw Dave looking very much awake. He was getting his first glimpse of Villa Rosa, and clearly understood he was being granted access that few others had the privilege of obtaining.

As the SUV rolled inside the secure perimeter, the gates swung closed.

"Did I sleep through dinner?" inquired Charlie, when Adam had turned off the engine.

"No, we haven't eaten yet," he replied with a small yawn.

"Then I'll help Grandma and Mrs. Freemont get dinner on the table," announced Charlie, opening the passenger door and stepping outside into the cool air. "You might want to show Dave his bungalow, first."

As Adam took Dave to his new quarters, Charlie went inside the main house and found Vera in the kitchen, sipping tea with Mrs. Freemont.

The grandmother looked up and smiled as Charlie walked into the kitchen. "You look like you've had a long day," she observed.

"Dave is here," informed Charlie. "Adam is showing him where he's going to stay."

Mrs. Freemont didn't need any further prompting, and started the usual rustle of pots and pans as she began preparing dinner.

"What's he like?" wondered Vera, helping the housekeeper by getting food out of the refrigerator.

"He's all right, I guess," shrugged Charlie. "Dave doesn't remind me of the secretarial type, but Adam seems to like him."

"We're home!" Adam's voice announced from the next room.

"So I see!" smiled Vera, as Adam led Dave into the kitchen. "Will the others be joining us for dinner?"

"No, they're eating in tonight," answered Adam, referring to the bodyguards. "If you wanted more people at the table, Vera, you shouldn't have encouraged us to put those kitchens in the bungalows! Vera, this is Dave Walker. Dave, this is my wife's grandmother, Mrs. Overholt."

"Pleased to meet you," Dave politely nodded to the elderly woman. For some unexplainable reason, Vera didn't look as though she reciprocated the sentiment. She gazed at him with a watchful eye that made him feel as though he had broken into the place, and was about to be apprehended by the police for trespassing. Whatever she was thinking, the elderly woman kept it to herself.

All through dinner, Dave never forgot for a second who was seated across from him at the table. He was in Wallace Shipley's house, and was careful to use his best manners, in spite of Mrs. Overholt's cool welcome. She kept looking at him with distrustful eyes, making poor Dave so uncomfortable, that he nearly had trouble swallowing his meal.

"I have a sister who was recently married," he answered another of Vera's questions. "My older brother has been married for eight years now, and has three young'uns." Dave's Southern accent surfaced again at the thought of his family. He wouldn't admit it to anyone, but he was already feeling a twinge of homesickness. Even though he was in his mid-twenties, Dave was unused to traveling out-of-state. He rarely ever got on a plane, and never expected to be in California, sharing supper with Wallace Shipley and his family!

"And what are your plans for the future?" inquired Vera, as Dave took a second helping of Mrs. Freemont's coleslaw.

"To learn what I can, and see where God takes me," shrugged Dave. "I've been the live entertainment for a few restaurants, and I'm eager to move on. It's sure tough to improve yourself when you're strugglin' to make a living."

"I hear you," Adam nodded understandingly. "If I hadn't gone into my father's plumbing business, I could have easily ended up the same way."

The conversation turned toward the subject of music, and Vera lost her opportunity to further question Dave Walker.

After Dave retired to his bungalow that night, Adam sat in the living room and stared at the television with Chuck, while Vera busily clicked away with her knitting needles.

"The armor of the Abrams tank," the narrator was saying, "was further improved by..." Adam's attention faded away from the television and traveled in Vera's direction. He knew she had something on her mind, and judging by the quickness of her knitting, it was apparently very hard for her to remain silent.

"Vera," Adam finally spoke up, "I like to consider myself as part of your family."

"You are," the old woman affirmed.

"I don't mind getting your advice from time to time... if you have any to give," requested Adam. "Ever since my mom passed away, I've sorely missed her counsel on more than one occasion."

The knitting needles slowed to a stop, and Vera looked at him with kind eyes. "I wish Jerome had been more like you," she sighed. "You do Ruth proud, Adam. Any mother would have been happy to call you son."

"Thank you," smiled Adam, "but I wasn't fishing for a compliment."

At this, Vera rested her knitting on her lap. "Yes, I have something on my mind, but I hate stirring up trouble where there's presently none. I just hope you've given some good thought who you're hiring as your secretary."

"This is about Dave?" Adam was surprised. He muted the television and puzzled at Vera. "What about him?"

"You brought a good-looking young man into this house, and he isn't married," Vera answered rather bluntly.

"Kevin isn't married, either," pointed out Adam.

"Kevin isn't young," the old woman sighed.

For a few moments, Adam was silent. "You think Charlie..." he didn't even want to finish the thought out loud. "Vera, I trust her."

"I know you do. But you might want to be careful how much temptation you put in her way."

"Charlie would never do that. I know her."

With a sigh, Vera returned to her knitting. "I hope you're not doing this to prove to yourself that you trust Charlie. Dave Walker isn't a bodyguard, Adam. He's going to be your personal secretary, and will have access to not only your life, but to hers as well."

The television flashed silent pictures in front of his eyes, as Adam weighed Vera's words. "I've had conversations like this with Charlie, in the past," he resisted. "My jealousy has already caused her too much pain. I won't make the same mistake twice."

"Just be careful you're not borrowing trouble," warned the grandmother.

"I believe Dave's a good man, Vera. If I didn't, I never would have hired him."

"Even the good can fall," she reminded Adam. "There, I'm done speaking of this for now. If I think Charlie's in trouble, you won't have to coax it out of me."

"I appreciate your candidness," Adam thanked her.

Vera peered at him over her bifocals with a half smile. "I don't want to be mistaken for that sister of yours."

Chuckling softly, Adam turned up the television's volume and resumed his program.

The days passed, and Dave struggled to get into the routine of Villa Rosa. Since Adam was awake at such odd hours, Dave found it difficult to keep up with his famous employer. Adam would sleep one night through, and then stay up the next-- only to doze in front of the evening news before returning to his piano for another night of nonstop work. To his surprise, Dave was discovering that Wallace Shipley was an insomniac. Even worse, that he was turning *him* into one, as well! Secretly, Dave wondered if Adam was normally this driven. As greatly as he loved his job, Dave didn't know how much longer he could last!

The interview with Norman Jones had reminded Adam that his fans were waiting for another Wallace Shipley album, and the musician didn't want to disappoint anyone. To be honest, he

was eager to find out if he still had the God-given talent that had brought him so much fame. It had been years since Adam's last album, and he had occasional pangs of doubt when he stared at his composer's notebook filled with pencil scrawls and staff notes. It would take a miracle if these notes added up to another hit, and Adam was feeling the pressure of besting himself. What if the high point of his career had already come and gone? His fans were expecting great things of him, and he wasn't sure if his next work could live up to their high expectations. An even graver realization was that he had become his own worst competition. Adam felt as though he had to top his own success, or else it would prove that his career was on the decline.

From the sidelines, Charlie watched as Adam continued to push himself more each day. While her husband frequently had sleep issues, she knew he wasn't usually this out of sync with daylight hours. In the past, Charlie had been able to sweet-talk him to bed, even when he didn't feel he could sleep. After a little loving, Adam would usually find rest and forget about his insomnia. But with the never-ending hours he was keeping, Charlie had little chance to slow Adam down, and get him to relax.

About a week after Dave's arrival, Charlie peered into the music room and found the newly hired secretary seated at the piano bench, his hands seemingly frozen to the keyboard. At first, Charlie thought she might be interrupting some deep musical thought, but when she noticed his eyes were shut and that she could hear the barely audible sounds of snoring, Charlie realized Dave was actually fast asleep.

Across the room, his employer was crouched over a desk, intently working at some difficult task in a notebook. When Adam suddenly ripped the page off in disgust, Dave jerked to attention and tried to find where he had left off in the composition.

"Is it all right if I interrupt you guys for a while?" inquired Charlie, stepping into the room, and inadvertently kicking some wadded sheets of music on the floor with her foot.

"Come in, Charlie," Adam beckoned her inside.

She tried not to notice his unshaved appearance, but the familiar signs of sleep deprivation were clearly etched in Adam's weary face. Struggling to hide her concern, Charlie gave him a warm smile and bent down to pick up one of the wads.

"Leave it," Adam shook his head in frustration. "I don't know what's wrong with me, Charlie, but the music isn't coming!" There was an unmistakable edge of panic in his voice that even Dave recognized. "What if I can't do this anymore, Charlie-girl? What if..." his voice faded into a groan.

"When have you both last eaten?" Charlie tried to keep her voice light and cheerful. When Adam didn't look as though he knew, she turned to Dave.

"Uhh," Dave paused, struggling to remember the last several hours. "What time is it?"

"I'll have something ready in fifteen minutes," Charlie responded, knowingly. "Adam, maybe you could show Dave our garden. Wouldn't it be nice to eat outside, today?"

Without thinking, Adam nodded in agreement. Then he suddenly remembered his work. "What about my music?" he protested, as she turned to walk out the door.

"The piano isn't going anywhere," she smiled sweetly.

As her footsteps sounded in the courtyard on her way to the kitchen, Adam shrugged at Dave. "I suppose we could both use a break, anyway."

Dave tried not to sound so affirmative in his agreement. Instead, he casually yawned and stretched his limbs.

"The garden is this way," sighed Adam, leading Dave through the courtyard, and into the master bedroom. When Adam opened the glass door, Dave was surprised to find such a garden in the middle of the barren desert. "It's something, isn't it?" grinned Adam. "Charlie built it for me as a surprise."

The two men sat down at the small bistro table and Adam inhaled the warm January air.

After a few minutes, neither man spoke. Then Adam looked at Dave, and he understood why he had been so silent.

"You're pretty tired, aren't you," surmised Adam, as Dave's head bobbed forward to keep awake.

"I'm all right," insisted the sleepy man.

"Still," smiled Adam, "you'd probably rather be in bed right now."

"I reckon I would," Dave finally acknowledged.

"Take the rest of the day off, and get some sleep," sighed Adam. "I won't be getting any more work done right now. Charlie knows what's going on with me-- that's why she has us sitting out here, staring at the lawn!"

Dave couldn't help chuckling at his analysis of the situation.

"I suppose I should've told you sooner," apologized Adam, "but I sometimes struggle with insomnia."

"I was fixin' to say I hadn't noticed," smiled Dave, "but that wouldn't be the truth."

"When I'm this tired," sighed Adam, looking out over the garden with wistful eyes, "I sometimes wish I had never gone public. There would have been so much less pressure to be Wallace Shipley. And now I can't step inside a public place, without the risk of being recognized and asked for an autograph! That wouldn't be so bad, but it usually doesn't stop there. When someone is making a big deal over me, it often attracts the attention of others; then they realize who I am, and want an autograph as well."

"What's this about autographs?" smiled Charlie, returning with a tray of food for the tired men. "Adam, has Dave been pestering you for an autograph, *again*?"

At this, both men laughed. As Charlie set a plate of sandwiches on the small table, Dave noticed how Charlie's mere presence had a calming effect on Adam. Adam's voice relaxed, and his eyes lit from within whenever she looked in his direction.

When Charlie turned to leave, Adam caught her by the hand, and pulled her onto his lap. "Stay with us for a few minutes," he requested.

Tenderly, Charlie ran her hand over the day old stubble on Adam's chin. "Grandma and Mrs. Freemont are baking today, and I offered to help."

"I thought you were going to study for your GED," he replied in surprise.

Charlie shrugged. "I don't see the point, anymore. It's not as if I'll ever have a chance to use it."

"You have a long life ahead of you, Charlie. You're giving up."

"I'm not," she insisted. "I just don't see any reason to plan too far ahead. By the time I'm in my thirties or forties, I'll be staring at a muted television like Daddy."

Until now, Dave had been smiling at their quiet conversation. As he felt the full impact of what Charlie had just said, his face suddenly went grave.

"It doesn't have to be that way," argued Adam, once again feeling the effects of having missed so much sleep.

Charlie fought to get off his lap, but Adam held her fast. "I wish you'd accept it, Adam. You can't save me."

Seeing she still wanted free, Adam let go and Charlie stood up. Wearily, he rubbed his tired face with his hand before letting it drop onto his knee. "I won't talk about it anymore today," he promised, looking at her with pleading in his eyes. "Just stay with me a little longer before you go rushing off to the kitchen."

"I wish you'd get some sleep," sighed Charlie, climbing back onto his lap. "I hate seeing you like this."

Not answering, Adam kissed her shoulder and picked up his glass of iced tea. It was then that he noticed the startled look on Dave's face. Following her husband's gaze, Charlie smiled. "I think we just frightened Dave," she laughed softly.

"I'm sorry," the young man shook his head, trying to forget what he had just heard. "It's none of my business."

"There's no need for that," Adam quickly dismissed his apology. "You're my secretary, and I trust you."

Dave understood Adam's meaning. Before being hired, Adam had requested that he sign a non-disclosure agreement, stating that he would never discuss what he heard in private to the media or anyone else not approved of by Adam or Charlie. Dave understood he was being placed in a position of trust, and it made him all the more aware of his determination to not let Adam down.

A breeze came in off the garden, carrying with it the aromatic smell of herbs. Quietly taking a sip of his tea, Dave couldn't help but wonder at the beautiful woman perched on Adam's lap. She looked so perfect. How could she possibly be sick?

Recognizing the confusion on his face, Adam tried to explain. "She doesn't have the disease... yet. Right now, my Charlie-girl is healthy and whole."

Dave smiled faintly upon hearing Adam's pet name for Charlie.

"I promised Charlie I wouldn't talk about this anymore," sighed Adam, pushing his plate away and securely placing his arms around his wife. "At least, not for today. But she knows we'll have to, eventually."

With a heavy sigh, Charlie didn't respond. She wished Adam would stop hoping so hard for a miracle. She knew it would never come, and the hoping for it only made her hurt inside.

Sensing that the subject needed to be changed, Dave remarked about the mild weather they were enjoying.

"It's a nice day," Adam agreed rather absently.

Charlie could hear the sad tone in her husband's voice, and she touched his hand with a small smile. "You need to sleep," she whispered.

"I'm not taking any sedatives," Adam promptly refused. "I hate things that tamper with my consciousness."

Leaning against Adam, Charlie put her lips to his ear so Dave had no possibility of overhearing. A knowing smile crept over Adam's face and he nodded willingly.

"Dave," announced Adam, "you deserve some rest, and I need..." here, Adam caught himself before the words tumbled from his mouth. "I need some rest, as well."

"I sure could use the sleep," Dave acknowledged. "When you're fixin' to get back to work, let me know."

Dave walked back to his bungalow with a heavy heart. He had no idea Adam was facing such a future as the one Charlie had described. It would require a lot of love for a man to be willing to live like that, and Dave had no doubt that Adam was such a man.

The next morning, Dave was pleasantly surprised to find Adam in the music room, freshly shaved and looking well rested.

"Good morning," the musician greeted Dave. "I think I've managed to write an ending for yesterday's composition, and I'd like to get your opinion!"

Then Adam's fingers made the sweetest music Dave had ever heard this side of heaven. When it was over, all the one man audience could say was, "Outstanding."

The concert over, Adam immediately fell back to work. "I have a few ideas concerning the opening," he began.

Grinning, Dave pulled out a composer's notebook of blank staff paper and did his best to keep up.

Later that day, Charlie received a phone call from Maggie. She was going into labor and Jeff was about to arrive from work to drive her to the hospital. There was nothing Charlie could do but wait. She nearly asked Adam to drive her into Twin Yucca, but changed her mind. Maggie's mother and Jeff's parents would be there, and the waiting room would be crowded enough. Besides, someone might recognize Adam.

With a sigh, Charlie waited by the phone for Jeff to call. Charlie felt it unfair that she and Adam had to stay out of sight, like wanted criminals running from the law. Realizing the resentful tenor of her thoughts, Charlie made a conscious effort to stop her self-pity. She knew Adam was often trapped by his own fame, and never wanted him to feel guilty for being who he was.

After nine hours of labor, Maggie gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Jeff called Charlie and Adam to tell them the good news-- even though it came in the middle of the night. James Donald Erickson weighed seven pounds, two ounces, and had all his fingers and toes. Maggie had counted.

Adam promised his wife they would chance a visit to the hospital the next day, for Maggie could hardly wait to show off her son to Charlie. An hour before they were to leave, however, Jeff called to say that he had spotted a photographer near the hospital's entrance. It was generally known that Maggie was a close friend of Wallace Shipley's wife. Now someone was taking advantage of this knowledge, by waiting for them to come and congratulate the new mother. It was all Charlie could do to keep from crying.

After assurances from Jeff that he and Maggie were willing for them to come anyway, Adam took Charlie to the hospital to see the new baby. Bodyguards hurried the couple inside, and all the photographer managed to get was the back of Wallace Shipley's head.

Maggie was beaming as only a new mother could, when she placed the infant into Charlie's arms. Charlie looked down into the tiny face and marveled at the way his chest rose and fell with each small breath.

"Isn't he wonderful?" exclaimed Maggie, while Jeff stood nearby with a wide grin plastered on his face. Adam came round to where Charlie held the baby and looked at the miracle of life in her

arms. When Maggie saw the tender look in Charlie's eyes, she tried to encourage her friend. "I'm praying you'll have a girl," she laughed, "that way, our kids could get married! Remember, you said it could happen!"

Swallowing hard, Charlie could feel something stinging her eyes. Hurriedly, she gave the baby back to his mother and excused herself from the room. In the hallway, Charlie tried to get a hold of her emotions, and struggled to keep from crying.

Maggie's hospital room door opened, and Charlie could hear the happy parents while Adam looked at her with concern. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," Charlie tried to keep her voice subdued, though she felt like crying more than ever.

Just then, Adam heard Jeff laughing at something the baby had just done. Closing the door after him, Adam went to his wife and hugged her. "Are you sorry I can't have children?" he asked, half afraid of what her answer might be.

"It's not that," Charlie broke down into tears, just as their bodyguards joined them in the hall.

Unable to coax anymore of a response out of Charlie while they were in front of the others, Adam dried her tears and kissed her forehead. When she was ready, they went back inside to visit with the Ericksons.

Throughout the rest of the day, Adam looked forward to some time alone with Charlie. It wasn't until after they had gone to bed, however, that he was finally able to speak to her in private.

"Is it because of Maggie's baby?" asked Adam. "Was that why you were crying?"

At his side, Charlie lie in the darkness of their master bedroom, the sound of night filtering through the half open sliding glass door. In the stillness, Adam waited. He rolled onto his side, and touched her face. "Please, Charlie. Talk to me."

"I'm sorry I cried," she sighed. "I shouldn't have."

"Do you want a baby, too?"

"It wasn't the baby," Charlie took Adam's hand in her own. "It was what he represented. When Maggie said she was praying for me to have a girl, I just lost it. Maggie will have a future, and see her baby boy grow up. She'll be able to recognize him when he gets older, and be in her right mind to enjoy her grandchildren. But, me..." Charlie brushed a stray tear from her cheek.

Adam was silent. He squeezed Charlie's hand, and held her tightly. A part of him was grateful he hadn't been the cause of her tears, for even if Charlie had wanted children, he couldn't give her any.

As the wind gently moved the curtains by the sliding glass door, Adam contemplated ways to at least slow the progress of the disease that threatened to rob his darling of her memory. He knew she wasn't yet exhibiting signs of Alzheimer's, but he still felt the need to do all he could, as *early* as he could. Maybe it would make a difference, and postpone the onset of her illness. He had to at least try.

Movement in his arms brought Adam back to his senses. Charlie had raised her head, and was looking at him with shimmering eyes. He felt a splash of wetness on his chest, and knew that she was crying again.

"I'm sorry, Adam," her voice wavered. "I'm so extremely blessed, and here I am crying over a future that isn't mine in the first place. I shouldn't be wishing for things I can never have."

Adam heard her gulping back a sob. He caressed her cheek and smiled sadly. "It's all right," he whispered. "If you want to cry, you go right ahead and cry."

Having obtained his permission, Charlie buried her face in his pajama top and wept. Struggling not to break into tears of his own, Adam held on to her with everything he had.

"It's not because I'm not thankful," he heard Charlie's muffled voice say. As she continued, Adam realized she wasn't speaking to him, but to God. "Don't let these tears hurt You, because I know You're only giving what's best for me. *Please*, make me strong enough to bear this!"

Adam could only offer Charlie the comfort of his embrace. When she continued to cry, he did the only other thing he could think of. His lips touched hers, and he awoke her desire. At least while she was lost in his arms, she wasn't thinking of her future.

The next day, Adam shut himself in his music room. When Dave arrived from his bungalow to work, he found the musician deep in thought on the tattered sofa.

"Is your wife's friend all right?" Dave politely inquired, as he set his notebook on the piano. "I hope her baby is healthy."

"Who? Maggie?" Adam glanced at Dave and then nodded in understanding. "Yes, she's fine." Adam returned his eyes to the wall and sighed heavily.

Unsure what to do with himself, Dave took a seat on the piano bench and awkwardly waited in silence. Not wanting to disturb Adam, Dave finally opened his notebook and reviewed yesterday's progress to himself. Adam was more than halfway through on a new composition, and the results were good.

"What would you think," Adam suddenly sat up, "if I wrote a duet?"

"Duet?" Confused, Dave looked at him uncertainly. "You're known for your solo piano," he reminded. "I'm not sure how your fans would accept someone else sharin' your music."

"Not even if it was Charlie?"

Dave smiled. "I'm listening."

At lunch that afternoon, the two musicians were strangely quiet as they ate their meal. Charlie could tell they were submerged in their own world, for when Dave made some remark about the second measure and Adam grinned, she realized they had been thinking the same thoughts all along. The table once again fell silent, until Dave piped up with, "Of course, it would have to be learned by heart."

"To be the most effective," agreed Adam. "I still think it might work."

Curious, Charlie sat back in her chair and watched the two men speaking in code. They couldn't have done a better job masking what they were up to, had they been conversing in another language.

"On someone who's just beginning?" hesitated Dave. "That's askin' a lot."

"Dave," piped up Charlie, "does Adam want you to do something difficult?"

"Huh?" Dave put down his glass and tried to understand what she was talking about.

"It'll require a good teacher," Adam continued.

"And a lot of patience," put in Dave, taking another sandwich from the platter on the center of the table.

Sensing a secret, Charlie leaned forward in anticipation of something good about to happen. "What will?" she asked.

Her question had been directed to either of the men, but when Adam only smiled cryptically, she turned her attention to Dave. "What's going on?" persisted Charlie.

Instead of responding, Dave hurriedly shoved another bite of sandwich into his mouth and motioned that he couldn't speak while he was eating.

Seeing they weren't prepared to explain themselves, Charlie gave Vera a laughing smile. "I guess they don't want to tell us," she surmised. "But something's up, that's for sure."

"Actually," Adam finally confessed, "we're going to have a delivery tomorrow. I'm putting a second piano in the music room."

"Oh?" Charlie only seemed mildly surprised by the news. "I suppose that makes sense. One for you, and one for Dave. Well, I hope you two enjoy yourselves!"

Dave flashed Adam a mirthful grin, but continued to eat in silence.

Whatever they were up to, the two musicians spent the rest of the day, locked in the music room, completely absorbed in their work. No one was allowed inside but them-- not even Charlie. When it was time to dust and vacuum the music room, Mrs. Freemont complained that Dave had even refused her entrance. It was clear the men were busy, and absolutely did not want to be disturbed.

Just as Adam had said it would, a second concert piano arrived the next day, looking shiny and brand new. Wanting to get a glimpse of what was going on, Charlie stood near the open doors of the music room and watched as Adam and Dave moved the instrument into place. It was wheeled a few feet from Adam's piano, and faced the opposite direction, so that both pianists could easily see each other while playing.

As Charlie was about to leave, Adam called her over to the new piano. "Would you sit here for a minute?" he requested.

With a shrug, Charlie did as she was asked.

Thoughtfully, Dave and Adam stood nearby and pointed at the height of the bench Charlie was sitting on. "What do you think?" Adam scratched his forehead and waited for Dave's response.

"I reckon it'll do," Dave slowly gave his approval. "I've had a few pupils her height experience trouble getting at the pedals, though."

"Hey!" Charlie objected, indignantly. "Who are you calling short?"

Dave grinned. "How tall are you, Charlie?"

"Five foot, two inches."

"That's about what I thought," Dave nodded. "Try to see if you can reach the foot pedals from where you're at."

"Why?"

"Just do it," insisted Dave.

Obediently, Charlie reached out her foot and missed one of the pedals beneath the piano. Adam scooted the bench a little closer, and Charlie easily pressed the pedal nearest her. Then Adam sat down beside Charlie on the long bench, and found that his knees hit the underside of the instrument.

"Move the bench back a little," directed Dave, as Adam stood up and dragged the bench with Charlie still on it.

"Tell me when I can go," she patiently requested.

"Not yet," mumbled Adam, sitting down and testing the new position. "Try to reach the pedal now, Charlie."

She touched the pedal with her foot and Adam smiled happily. "It'll work," he pronounced.

"What will?" It was an innocent enough question, for no one had yet to tell her what they were doing.

Smiling as though he had the greatest secret in the world, Adam lightly touched the keyboard.

When the notes sounded with an odd vibration, Dave frowned. He lifted the large lid of the concert piano and looked inside. "There's some flyer stuck in here," Dave chuckled, pulling out a sheet of paper advertising the store it had just come from. "For a moment, I thought we might

hafta get the piano tuned again! Hit a few keys, just in case we still have a problem." Dave observed the vibrating strings and listened carefully as Adam played a few notes.

"How does the action look?" wondered Adam.

Charlie sighed, while the men discussed something terribly fascinating about the insides of their new piano. Thinking she could leave now, Charlie prepared to stand up. To her surprise, Adam stopped her before she even made it off the bench.

"What do you think?" he smiled hopefully.

Charlie shrugged. To her unmusical eyes, it looked like a large, fancy piano that probably cost Adam a lot of money.

"I had an idea," proposed Adam, "that maybe you'd like to play with me. With Dave's help, I'm working on a duet that I'm composing for us."

"Duet?" laughed Charlie, thinking that he must surely be joking. "For US? Adam, I can't play the piano!"

To Charlie's wonderment, Adam wasn't a bit discouraged. "I can teach you, and Dave can help too," he assured her. "He has a doctorate in music, and has taught piano before."

Charlie hadn't known this, but it still didn't make any sense. "I thought you were busy working on your next album!"

Adam grinned broadly. "I am."

Then it hit Charlie. "You want *me* on your album?"

"Why not?" reasoned Adam.

Seeing an opportunity to give some encouragement of his own, Dave joined in. "By the time Adam and I are finished with you, you'll be able to slog through the piece he's working on."

Charlie gave him a disbelieving laugh. "I don't think Adam's fans want to hear anyone 'slogging' through his music! I can't believe you two are actually serious!"

"You've played the piano, before," Adam reminded her. "Remember, you once told me you took a few lessons when you were little."

"I was *eight years old!*" exclaimed Charlie. "Unless you want a rusty rendition of 'Old MacDonald Had A Farm,' I'm in trouble!"

Adam nodded that he already knew. "I was just trying to use an example to give you a little confidence. Don't worry, Charlie. I'll teach you everything you'll need to know."

Charlie pushed herself away from the piano. "I'm not worried, because I'm not doing it!"

"Think about it for a little while," he pleaded, reaching out for Charlie's hand. "Please, Honey."

"Adam, I'm doing this for your own good," she tried to explain. "It's sweet of you to want to include me in your music, but it simply won't work. I'm not a musician." When Adam gripped her hand tighter, Charlie pulled away and left the music room.

Disappointed, Adam closed the keyboard and smiled sadly at Dave. "It was worth a try. I wish she would've given it a chance to work, though. I think it's just what she needs right now."

An hour later, Dave went outside to do some thinking. Unexpectedly, he found Charlie kneeling by the wall of the main house, trying to pull up the weeds that kept popping up through the hard desert ground.

"Need any help with that?" he offered.

Charlie looked up from her vantage, and shielded her eyes from the sun to see who was speaking. "Oh," she sighed, "it's only you."

At the sound of her disappointment, Dave couldn't help smiling. "It's only me," he chuckled.

Charlie returned to her task with renewed zeal. If he hadn't known before that she was angry with him, he would now. "I don't appreciate your encouraging Adam in this," she yanked at a stubborn weed. "He'd put me on his album and turn himself into a laughing stock, just to make me happy! And there you are, helping him measure piano benches, and telling him you guys can teach me to play!"

Even though Dave didn't look very happy right now, it took a great deal more than this to fluster him into an argument. When he finally defended himself, Dave's voice was remarkably unruffled. "I only encouraged Adam, when I reckoned he had a good idea."

Unimpressed, Charlie continued to work without responding.

"If you'll stop a moment with those weeds," he continued, "I'll tell you why Adam wanted it."

The weed-pulling came to a pause, and Charlie waited for his explanation.

"Adam is tryin' to stop your Alzheimer's," explained Dave. "He said mental stimulation might push back its onset." The young musician sympathetically looked at Charlie. "I don't blame you for mistrusting me, but I really *am* tryin' to help." With a kind smile, he walked off to his bungalow and disappeared inside.

Tossing away one last weed, Charlie stood up and brushed the dust from her clothes. Dave was different from Kevin and the others who worked for Adam. They remained distant whenever they talked to her, but Dave usually addressed her as he would a friend. It was a nice change, and Charlie guessed that Adam was enjoying the difference, as well.

Thinking over what Dave had told her, Charlie went to go find Adam. He was still in the music room, this time stretched out on the tattered sofa with his composer's notebook absently laying open on his stomach. When Adam saw Charlie enter, he sat up and set aside his notebook. He quietly studied her face, as if able to read what she was thinking by simply gazing at her long enough.

Running her fingers over the polished hardwood of the new piano, Charlie lingered by the instrument, deep in thought. "I can't do it, Adam," she breathed quietly.

Adam hung his head and nodded silently, his eyes downcast with disappointment.

"Please, don't ask this of me," she begged.

"I won't, Charlie," he sighed. "I won't." Adam leaned back on the sofa, and picked up his notebook, halfheartedly attempting to return to his work.

Biting her lip, Charlie looked back at the piano with a dread that only complete novices could appreciate. "I got mad at Dave for talking you into this idea," she timidly confessed.

Adam stared at her intently with serious brown eyes. "You shouldn't have. How did he take it?"

Charlie shrugged. "Like you, he's hard to provoke."

Adam smiled grimly and made room for Charlie beside him on the sofa. Without needing further encouragement, Charlie joined him and propped her head against his shoulder. For a while, both were silent.

"Besides God, you, my family and my friends, nothing else makes me happier than when I'm at the piano." Adam's voice was hushed with an intimacy that made Charlie feel as though they were the only two people on the face of the earth. Tenderly stroking the strong arm she was leaning against, Charlie let him speak his heart without interruption. "When I'm playing, I feel complete. I'm not like others who can communicate what they're feeling through words. I always struggle to speak from the depths of my soul, but when I'm with my music, it becomes my language. It's a speech without words." Adam lifted his arm and hugged it around Charlie. "I don't know if any of that makes sense," he smiled. "I suppose that's what you get for marrying a musician, Charlie-girl. I sometimes think my native tongue is music, and not English."

"Adam, if your next album fails because I was on it," Charlie pondered out loud, "everyone is going to blame me. They'll think I talked you into it."

Trying to conceal his hopefulness that she was still considering his offer, Adam was careful to not frighten Charlie into another "no." "You don't have to be a virtuoso," he assured her. "They'll listen, simply because you're my wife."

"That doesn't mean they'll like what they hear," she groaned.

"All you have to do is play one composition, Charlie. It's like anything else-- you just keep practicing until you know it by heart."

"What if I can't do it?" Charlie cuddled closer to Adam and shuddered at the thought of what failure might mean to his career. "What if all the teaching in the world isn't enough to make me play your one song?"

"Then," smiled Adam, "I won't include the arrangement on my album."

"You wouldn't be angry?" she murmured quietly. "All your work would be for nothing."

"There's other benefits," he was quick to point out.

Having already been told by Dave of Adam's hopes, Charlie immediately understood what he was referring to. "All the music in the world won't stop Alzheimer's, Adam."

"It might help," he pleaded. "Let me try, Charlie. That's all I'm asking."

With a lump in her throat, Charlie tightly closed her eyes and nodded.

Since she was resting against Adam's chest, he was unsure if that small movement of her head indicated agreement. "Charlie?" he asked pensively.

It took a great deal of courage, but she finally managed the words, "I'll do it," before quickly hiding in the protective arms encircling her.

Grateful, Adam gave her a tender squeeze. "Thank you for trusting me, Charlie."

For the next several minutes, the two sat on Adam's old thinking couch and remained silent. Each were occupied with their own thoughts, but both concluded with the same unspoken prayer: "God, please help us."

Over dinner that evening, Charlie took advantage of the first opportunity she had to apologize to Dave. He dismissed it as being unnecessary, but his smile was a little wider afterward.

Early the next morning, Adam took Charlie to the music room and seated her at the new piano. Dave was already there, working at Adam's desk on a composition of his own. Since Dave spent much of his personal time trying to improve his craft, Adam had encouraged him to make use of the music room whenever it was available.

Not wanting to monopolize what was not his own, Dave hurriedly gathered his things and prepared to surrender the room to Adam and Charlie.

When Adam saw what he was doing, he assured Dave he could stay if he wanted. "Charlie will only be working on finger exercises. Unless the monotony of music scales hinders your creativity, I don't think she'll get in your way. Charlie, where are you going?" he suddenly asked.

"I just need a cup of coffee," she explained, for she had been trying to edge her way off the bench without being noticed.

Folding his arms, Adam gave her a knowing look. "You're stalling."

"Is it working?"

"No."

"You'll let me go for bathroom breaks, won't you?" she laughed.

"Yes, but don't abuse the privilege," smiled Adam.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" questioned Charlie.

Undaunted, Adam placed an instruction book on the piano in front of his nervous wife and opened it to the first page. "This key in the center is middle C," he explained, hitting the white key and sounding the note for Charlie. "The next white one to its right is D, then E..." Adam continued his lesson while Charlie nodded that she already understood. Even with her sparse musical training, she could remember the names of all the keys. It was everything else that concerned her.

"Okay," smiled Adam, "now it's time to start your finger exercises. Sit up straight, and place your right hand on the keyboard with your thumb on middle C. Curve your fingers like I showed you, Charlie. Play C, D, E, F, G, and then work your way back to C."

Slowly, Charlie pressed each key until she had completed the exercise. Triumphant, she smiled at Adam.

"Now do it a hundred more," he ordered. "I want to hear each note in a steady, even tempo. I'll wind the metronome to help you mark time." Adam picked up a pyramid-shaped wooden object and wound its key. After adjusting the device to tick out the proper beat, he set it on her piano and told Charlie to begin.

Tick, tick, tick-- the hand of the metronome swung back and forth, prompting Charlie to keep up with its evenly timed intervals. After a few times through the exercise, Charlie could feel her fingers becoming heavy.

"Keep going," Adam urged her forward. "They'll get stronger with practice."

Out of the corner of her eye, Charlie could see Dave watching them, his mouth curved upward in a smile. Returning her attention to the finger exercises, Charlie sighed heavily. Her back was getting sore from sitting ramrod straight on a hard piano bench. C, D, E, F, G, and then back to C.

"I'm going to leave for a minute and make a phone call to Bill," announced Adam. "I want you to keep at it, until you've done this exercise a hundred times. Then, I want you to switch hands, and do it with your left."

"You've got to be kidding!" she exclaimed in protest. "Aren't you driving me a little hard for my first day?"

"Honey," he smiled, "we're just getting started."

When Adam left, Charlie adjusted herself on the piano bench and rubbed her sore back with her free hand. Somehow, all this had been more fun when she was smaller.

"Your back will get used to the bench," Dave encouraged her without looking up from his work at the desk. "Keep up the tempo, please."

"I almost forgot," Charlie sighed glumly, "you're a piano teacher."

"I used to be," he answered. "Pay attention to the metronome."

"When I was eight," she mused ironically, "I used to daydream about playing piano with Wallace Shipley."

"Be careful what you wish for," smiled Dave. "You're losin' tempo again, Charlie. Best stop talkin!" Dave's attention returned to his notebook again, and the music room continued to sound with Charlie's simple finger exercises.

By the time Adam returned, Charlie had just switched over to her left hand. "How's it going?" he asked.

"It's not working," she laughed dully. "I'm still not you."

Thoughtfully, Adam sat down on the battered thinking sofa and watched Charlie from his vantage.

"What did you talk to Bill about?" she asked, eager to get her mind off the monotonous ticking sound of the metronome perched on her piano.

"I told Bill all about my plan," he answered, his voice sounding more than a little discouraged.

Hopeful that Adam might be having second thoughts, Charlie halted her exercise and turned on the bench so she could see his face. "Bill didn't approve?"

"He liked it," sighed Adam. "Finish your exercises, Charlie."

"If Bill is for it, then why do you look so sad?"

Adam shook his head and sighed. "Shirley just called to let me know that Thomas got married this morning. Their divorce was finalized, yesterday."

"Oh, Adam." Charlie got up and went to her husband.

Adam gratefully accepted Charlie's hug. He didn't let her stay with him for very long, though, before sending her back to the piano. The news of Thomas marrying another woman wasn't very startling, for everyone had been warned of its inevitability since Christmas. Even so, the very fact that Thomas was now married to someone else besides Shirley, seemed almost unbelievable to Adam. His sister had been married to Thomas for twenty-eight years, and Adam knew it would take quite a while before he could think of Shirley without also thinking of his former brother-in-law.

After Charlie arrived to the music room for her second day of piano lessons, she was surprised when Adam handed her instruction over to Dave.

"Adam and I are takin' turns so he can work on his compositions," explained Dave, seating Charlie at her piano and bringing out the workbook that Adam had used the previous day. "Unlike Adam, however, I give homework."

While Charlie slowly pecked out her music scales, Adam sat at his piano, easily drowning out her meager offerings with that of his own. Once in a while, Adam would give her a loving wink, and it always managed to lighten her tedium.

The months passed in lessons and finger exercises, and Charlie was suddenly staring at her eighteenth birthday. April had literally taken the teenager by surprise, for she had been too preoccupied with music to pay very much attention to birthdays-- especially her own. Even though it meant she would no longer be considered a minor, Charlie felt embarrassed about making too big of a deal over it.

"What's wrong with a birthday party?" insisted Vera, who wanted a large celebration with layered cake and brightly colored balloons.

Charlie resisted the idea, and tried to talk Vera out of going forward with her plans. "I'm too old for birthdays, Grandma!"

"That's ridiculous!" Vera exclaimed. "You're too young to feel that way, Pumpkin!"

Charlie was having difficulty explaining her feelings. "Grandma, I really don't want a party with lots of balloons and a big cake. I'd rather not remind Adam that I'm now legally an adult! As my husband, he already takes that for granted!"

Disappointed, Vera did as her granddaughter wished. Still, she didn't want Charlie's special day to go by unnoticed. When she was able to speak to Adam in private a few days before the birthday, Vera told him what Charlie had said.

"I hadn't forgotten her birthday," he smiled. "And I hadn't forgotten how old she's turning! Why is Charlie so embarrassed? Eighteen is a big deal! I know it was for me, when *I* turned that age!"

"But at the time, you weren't married to someone over twice your years," Vera reminded him. "I think she's trying to live up to your expectations, and you already know how sensitive she sometimes is about your age difference."

The only new expectations Adam had of his wife, were concerning their music. "Do you think I'm pressuring Charlie too hard with all these piano lessons?" he wondered.

"Perhaps she needs a day or two to get her mind on something else for awhile," proposed Vera, hesitant to meddle too far into Adam and Charlie's relationship.

"But, do you think I should stop, altogether?"

"I don't honestly know," Vera confessed. "That's something Charlie will have to tell you, herself!"

As Charlie's eighteenth birthday crept closer, she was surprised Adam had yet to say anything that indicated he remembered. Charlie really didn't want a party, but was still a little hurt that her Adam had seemingly forgotten it so completely.

A few hours before the midnight of her eighteenth birthday, Charlie was awakened from her sleep by a tender voice coaxing her to get out of bed.

"Come on, Charlie," whispered Adam, "it's time to get up."

Through a haze of half-conscious dreams and slumber, Charlie managed to part her eyelids long enough to see that their sliding glass door was still dark with night. "It isn't morning yet," she protested, pulling up the sheets beneath her chin and rolling onto her side.

Adam laughed softly, and Charlie suddenly felt herself being lifted from the bed-- sheets and all!

Wondering if she were still asleep and dreaming, Charlie held onto her blankets, as Adam carried her through the sliding glass door and outside into their enclosed garden.

"It's cold," she whimpered sleepily, as a chilly breeze kissed her face and numbed her nose.

"I'll keep you warm," Adam whispered, his voice only a hush against the silence of the surrounding darkness. "Charlie, I'm going to set you on your feet now. Give me your hand."

Too dazed to understand what was going on, Charlie obediently did as she was told. She shuddered uncertainly as Adam guided her to something cold and metallic. Then a beam of brilliant light cut through the night as Adam turned on a flashlight. Only then did Charlie understand she was looking at a ladder. For some unexplainable reason, it was propped against the wall of the main house.

"Climb up," directed Adam, shining the light onto the bottommost rung. "Give me your blanket, first; I don't want you tripping on it."

"Where are we going?" she asked numbly, handing over the warm bed sheets to her strangely behaving husband.

"Up," came his one word response. It was an obvious answer, but it did very little to explain why they were outside in the middle of the night, climbing a mysteriously placed ladder. "Watch your step, Charlie."

With a little effort, she reached Villa Rosa's rooftop. Charlie shivered as the desert wind engulfed her with a bracing gust of cold air. As Adam climbed up the ladder, Charlie recognized Beppe's handiwork in the red tiles that trimmed the edges of the flat, asphalt paved roof. She had been up here before, but never at night.

Adam soon joined Charlie, and led her to a spot where no one could see them from the ground. He then handed Charlie back her sheets, and she promptly wrapped them around her body, trying to give herself more protection from the chilly breeze than her lacy nightgown was affording.

"Just hold on," requested Adam, knowing full well that she was cold. He knelt on the asphalt and quickly unfurled a sleeping bag. Expectantly, Adam held it open so she could climb inside and get warm.

"You want me to sleep on the *roof*?" she asked, completely befuddled by his actions.

"Get in," he urged, climbing in himself and then waiting for her to join him. "It's big enough for the both of us."

Another gust of cold aided Charlie's decision, and she hurried inside. "What are we doing on the roof?" She was wide awake now, and needed some answers. "Did you bring me up here to make love?"

"Not exactly," laughed Adam, "but I won't say it didn't cross my mind."

"You still haven't answered my question."

Adam smiled at Charlie. "Why don't you try to relax, and enjoy the scenery? Everything doesn't need to be carefully planned, to have a good time!"

"So," she deduced, "you don't know why we're up here, *either*."

"I wanted to watch another sunrise with my wife," he finally explained. "Is that so strange?"

"For you, I suppose it isn't," she dryly replied.

Silently, Adam slipped a gentle arm around Charlie, and looked out over the vast expanse of the Mojave Desert. Except for the faint glimmer of a single light outside the restaurant in Drywell, it was an uninterrupted panorama of desert and moonlight. Overhead, an endless blanket of stars spread before them, each one shining brightly against the dark sky.

"God's really outdone Himself, tonight," Adam breathed in admiration.

Charlie huddled against Adam, too busy enjoying the warmth of his body, to really notice the view; the sleeping bag was still cold, and so was she.

Then Adam asked her a question that took Charlie by surprise. "Are you happy?"

Her response was automatic. "Of course I am."

"Don't give me an 'of course I am, because you're with me,' answer," sighed Adam, unsatisfied by Charlie's easy reply. "Don't just say it because you think that's what your answer should be. I want to know if Charlotte Clark is happy with her life."

"I'm happy," she insisted with a frown.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Am I driving you too hard?"

"If you are," she smiled, "I know why you're doing it. I'm happy, Adam."

Adam contemplated her for a moment, before returning his eyes to the distant horizon. "Vera told me you don't want to celebrate your birthday, tomorrow."

"Then, you remembered after all," breathed Charlie in surprise.

"Of course, I did!" Adam looked at her reproachfully. "She also told me you're embarrassed that you're only just now turning eighteen. What's that about, Charlie? Don't I treat you as a grown-up?"

"Yes," she sighed, "you do. Why do you think I don't want to remind you of my age?"

"You're being ridiculous," Adam tenderly scolded her. "When I married you, I knew exactly how old you were. There's nothing wrong with my addition, and I know very well you turn eighteen in a few hours."

"I suppose it was silly," she confessed. "But when I'm with you and Dave, and we're busy with the music, I want so much to fit in! You guys are musicians, and I'm just a dumb kid who can't do her finger exercises in time with the metronome!"

"Charlie, you're not a kid," Adam assured her.

"Then why do I feel like one?" she lamented. "I don't want people to look at me and say, 'There goes Wallace Shipley's wife. Too bad he didn't marry someone his own age! Now he's stuck with that knuckle-head!'"

"And she can't even play her scales properly," he added.

"No, she can't."

"Does my knuckle-head want her birthday present now?" wondered Adam.

"I told you, I don't want to celebrate my birthday."

"You never told me any such thing," chuckled Adam. "If you didn't want a birthday gift, you should have spoken up sooner!" Adam reached behind his back for the item he had secretly carried with him to the rooftop. "I bought this for you over two months ago, intending it for your eighteenth birthday! So, happy birthday!" Beneath the sleeping bag, Adam thrust a wide, slim box into Charlie's hands.

"What is it?" she asked, her voice laced with curiosity.

"Open it, and find out," he smiled.

Intrigued, Charlie extracted her arms from the cozy sleeping bag to get a better look. It was then that she realized the box was actually a velvet covered case. With trembling hands, she lifted its lid. "Oh, Adam!" she cried in surprise. Inside was a beautiful jeweled necklace that sparkled in the moonlight like a hundred brightly shining stars. Except these were diamonds.

"That's eighteen carats worth of precious stones," Adam informed her. "I had it specially made, so I can't take it back. I'm afraid you're stuck with it, Charlie-girl."

"Adam," Charlie at last found her voice, "have you completely lost your mind? How much did this cost?"

"That's a fine thank you!" he laughed. "Hasn't anyone ever told you it's not polite to ask how much someone spent on your present?"

"I'm trying to be serious!" she gasped in amazement.

"I know you are," he answered. "That's why I'm not."

"But..."

"Put on the necklace," he coaxed. "Let's see how it looks with your nightgown. I suppose diamonds will go with just about anything, but let's decide to humor me for a moment and find out."

"You really shouldn't have," Charlie finished her sentence.

"Of course I should," Adam smiled, reaching out and lovingly caressing her face with his fingertips. "If not for my wife, then for who else? *I'm* certainly not going to wear that thing!"

"Adam!" she laughed.

"Hurry up and put it on!" he urged, his voice finally betraying the excitement he had been holding back all along. "I want to see how it looks on you!"

Charlie's hands were still trembling as she carefully lifted the sparking necklace from the velvet case.

"Do you want me to do it?" offered Adam, after she had fumbled with the delicate clasp long enough. "I know there's not very much light out here to see by."

Relieved, Charlie handed over the necklace. Her tremors increased again, when she felt the cool touch of the jewels against her skin as Adam draped them around her throat.

After fastening the tiny clasp, Adam looked her over with great satisfaction. "Charlie, for shame," he smiled proudly, "all those gemstones, and you outshine every one. I'd give you more, but since the stars were busy tonight, these will have to do."

"Oh, Adam," she sighed.

"Just be happy, Charlie-girl. Since you won't claim your birthday, I'll do it for you. I don't want you to think one single thought today that will make you unhappy."

Tears glinted in Charlie's eyes, and Adam softly groaned when he saw that he was making her cry.

"Thank you just isn't enough," she whispered. Adam's eyes kindled lovingly as she pulled the sleeping bag around them for privacy.

On the rooftop of Villa Rosa, Charlie turned eighteen. As the sun greeted them in the morning, she knew this day would forever live in her heart.

"A good name [Adam Clark] is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold [and diamonds]."

~ Proverbs 22:1 ~

Chapter Fifty-eight

The Gentleness of Heaven

"Thy [God's] right hand hath holden me up, and Thy gentleness hath made me great."
~ Psalm 18:35 ~

After Charlie's eighteenth birthday, she had another reminder of the future that was never to be hers: Uncle Rick and Mae, the good friends that had hid Charlie and Adam during their honeymoon in the apple orchard in Oak Glen, welcomed a baby boy into the world. Once again, Charlie found herself holding a sweet, cuddly infant and telling the new parents how happy she was for them. And she was. But as she bravely kept back her tears, Adam was grateful that this was the last baby any of their friends were expecting for a while.

Adam knew very well that Charlie didn't need any more reminders of the future, and did his best to distract her with piano lessons. Every day, he had her working on finger exercises, until Charlie was impatient to play something that actually had a melody to it. Even "Old Mac Donald Had A Farm," would have been a welcome reprieve. When Charlie begged Dave to teach her something other than trills and scales, Dave only directed her to keep her wrists moving properly while she was playing them.

"I don't want to see any stiff movements," he instructed, returning Charlie's attention to the finger exercise before her. "I want smooth, fluid notes. Try it again."

Adam continued to alternate Charlie's lessons between himself and Dave. In Adam's free time, he would take one of Vera's books and sit on the thinking sofa to learn more about Alzheimer's Disease. At first, he also continued work on his new album, but as Adam kept reading about AD, the books gradually consumed his attention until they were all he could talk about.

As much as Charlie loved her husband for wanting to help, she found it difficult to continually hear about a disease that she was trying so hard to forget. There was nothing that could be done, so why torment themselves with statistics and medical journals that all said pretty much the same thing? There was no cure, and Adam's hoping for it only made Charlie all the more heartsick.

A few weeks after Charlie's eighteenth birthday, the situation finally came to a head. She was at her piano, struggling with a new exercise that Dave was trying to teach her, while Adam quietly sat on the tattered sofa with one of Vera's books.

Dave stood behind Charlie, trying to get her form down correctly. "You're not keepin' your fingers in the correct position," he sighed patiently. "Charlie, it's like this." He bent down and placed his hand on the keyboard. When Dave easily executed the exercise in perfect time to the metronome, Charlie groaned in dismay.

"It's no use, Dave! I'll never get it right!"

"If you haven't already noticed," Dave tried to encourage her, "the exercises have been getting more complicated, and you've been keepin' up. You're making good progress, Charlie. Now's not the time to give up."

With a weary sigh, Charlie straightened her back, and tried the exercise one more time. It was then that she noticed Adam on the sofa, gripping the book he was intently reading. Her fingers became still as she saw a single tear slip down Adam's cheek and fall onto his shirt. She didn't want to know what he was reading; it was about Alzheimer's Disease, and Charlie didn't need an explanation for his tears.

Dave silently resumed his seat at Adam's piano where he had been working on his own compositions. He didn't feel like playing right now, and sat motionless in front of the keyboard.

Wiping away his tears, Adam put down the book and realized that besides the clicking of the metronome, everyone was quiet and still. Then he saw Charlie's pained face and knew she had been watching him. He opened his mouth to explain, but closed it again and remained silent.

After subduing his emotions, Adam went to Charlie's piano bench and took a seat beside her. The famous musician placed his left hand on the keyboard, and began playing one of Charlie's finger exercises. Without a word between them, Charlie joined him, and together, they finished her lesson.

When it was done, Charlie leaned her head against Adam's shoulder and he placed a loving arm around his wife.

"No more books, Adam."

Adam was quiet. Pleadingly, Charlie looked into his eyes, trying to extract this promise from him.

"Charlie, I can't."

Biting her lip, Charlie struggled with the exercise that Dave had been trying to teach her. It was complicated, and even though he had written it out for her on staff paper, her fingers simply wouldn't go where she wanted them to. "What's the use?" she finally cried.

Adam sighed heavily.

"I wish I'd never been tested for the AD gene," Charlie tried to gulp down her sorrow. "It's better to not know."

"If I ask something of you," Adam ventured cautiously, "would you agree to it, without knowing what it was first? Could you trust me enough to do that?"

Drying the moisture collecting in her eyes, Charlie nodded her head. "I trust you," she whispered.

Adam squeezed his arm about her waist. "I'd like to make an appointment with Peter Webber. I know you don't want to, but we need to see him, Charlie. He was your Genetic Counselor, and already knows your case. I want to talk to him, and I'd like you to come with me."

"I'll come."

"Thank you, Charlie." Adam pressed his lips to her temple. "I love you." Then Adam put both hands on the keyboard, and began playing the first part of the composition he had been writing for their duet. Right on cue, Dave joined in, so that Charlie could hear what the piece would sound like with two pianos. It was beautifully crafted music, and Charlie was stunned that Adam expected her to be able to play the sounds that were coming from just one of the pianos. When it suddenly came to an abrupt stop, Adam smiled sheepishly.

"I haven't finished it yet."

Charlie tenderly kissed Adam's cheek, and picked up on the failed exercise where she had left off. It had been easy to grow weak at the knees when her heart was heavy. But Adam's confidence that no matter what God had in store for them, would be bearable, infected Charlie's heart and she took hold of courage once again. Adam's unfinished composition had told her that, and she didn't need him to further remind her of God's mercy; Adam had spoken through music, and Charlie had understood.

A few days later, Charlie sat down with Adam in Peter Webber's office. Adam had been wise to get Charlie's promise to see Peter the way he had. The last time she had seen her Genetic

Counselor, a nurse was taking a blood sample for a test to see if she had inherited the gene that causes Alzheimer's Disease. Now that she knew she had, Charlie wasn't sure what Peter could tell them that they didn't already know. Even though most people don't get AD through their genes, the Overholts belonged to a small group of people that did, and Charlie's maiden name was Overholt.

It had seemed a lifetime ago to Adam since he had last been in Peter's office, and the memory of it didn't make him smile. At least this time, Charlie was seated beside him, and not missing somewhere he couldn't find her. The day he learned of Charlie's test, had been one of the hardest of his life. He gripped his wife's hand, and silently thanked God she had agreed to come; Adam didn't know how he would've fared coming here on his own.

"If I remember correctly, it's been a little over a year ago since we last met," Peter smiled, as he settled into his chair behind his desk. "I was hoping you'd eventually contact me. I even left a few messages with Jerome in the hopes that you would."

"We never received your messages," sighed Adam.

"I thought you were trying to avoid me," smiled Peter. "I fully realize that discussing this disease isn't easy, and I've had patients refuse to return my phone calls because they weren't ready to face it yet. In those cases, I stop calling. Before I begin, maybe you'd like to ask the questions that brought you here to my office?"

"I've been reading so many books," began Adam, "and I'm overloaded with information!"

"That's not uncommon," smiled Peter.

"What I'd love to know," Adam summoned his courage, "is there anything we can do to delay the onset of the disease?"

"An excellent question," nodded Peter. "In fact, that's what I wanted to discuss with both of you." The Genetic Counselor pulled out a file with Charlie's name on it and opened it on his desk. "For most people, the first time they hear the words 'Alzheimer's Disease,' they're being diagnosed and are already manifesting symptoms. What makes Charlotte's situation different is that we know it will happen, even though she isn't presently displaying any symptoms at all. This early warning is a useful one, and can be used to her advantage."

"Oh?" asked Adam, leaning forward in his chair with curiosity so intent, it could've bored a hole straight through Peter Webber and into the office chair behind him.

"By addressing AD early, she might increase her chances of delaying onset and slowing it's progression. However," insisted Peter, "I am not trying to offer you false hope. Charlotte's genetic risk factors are so strong, that I don't know of anything that will stop her Alzheimer's Disease from eventually developing. The key here is to *delay* onset for as long as we can, and to *slow* its progression once it has begun."

"What can we do?" asked Adam.

Peter leaned back in his chair. "To begin with-- staying active and exercising regularly, maintaining social interactions with others, and engaging in intellectually stimulating activities. I'd also add to that controlling diabetes, lowering cholesterol and homocysteine levels, and lowering high blood pressure, but that's already not a problem for Charlotte. Even so, I highly recommend that her doctor monitor these risk factors."

Adam's face brightened. "You said 'intellectually stimulating activities'?"

"Yes," nodded Peter, "in fact, that's something that can be done even after the onset of AD has already occurred. One study suggests that even in the presence of AD plaques, the more formal education a person has, the better their memory and learning ability. In other words, use it or lose it."

Here, Adam broke out in a beaming smile.

"I guess that means he's going to chain me to the piano!" laughed Charlie. "Adam has been teaching me to play."

"I think that qualifies as an intellectually stimulating activity," smiled Peter. "It's my opinion that the stronger your mind, the greater its ability to compensate for areas of the brain that are in decline. Stay physically and mentally active, and eat healthy."

"There's one more thing. I highly recommend you volunteer for AD clinical trials and studies. We're constantly learning new things about the disease, and your rare genetic background would be an asset to the research community. You'd also have an opportunity to take part in new treatments before they're available to the general public."

After they had talked about Charlie, Adam turned the conversation to Chuck. Was there anything they could do for him?

"I would suggest," advised Peter, "that keeping him physically active might help increase the blood flow to his brain. It's been thought that the plaques caused by AD, starve the brain of blood. Keep walking him, and encourage him to move around as much as possible."

After they had asked all their questions and it was time to leave, Adam helped Charlie up from her chair. He recognized a little more hope in her eyes than before. The prognosis was still grave, and nothing significant about her or Chuck's future had been newly determined. Still, there was room for a little hope. And that's what Adam had been petitioning God for. Hope.

Not long after their visit, Charlie was enrolled in a clinical trial. It meant she had to endure seemingly endless tests, blood drawings, and repeated examinations, but at least they were doing all that could be done.

Even though it was technically Spring, May felt like Summer as the desert baked under a blazing Mojave sun. Adam joked he could crack an egg on the walk to the main house and it would be fully cooked in under five minutes. With the sweltering temperatures they were accosted with every time they ventured out in the heat of the day, Charlie could almost believe it was possible.

The piano lessons continued and Adam had their housekeeper, Mrs. Freemont, start cooking healthy food at mealtimes for Charlie. On the very first day, when he saw that Charlie had to eat her health food while everyone else enjoyed more appetizing fare, Adam decided that he should eat healthy as well. Charlie had not complained even once, but by the very next day, Adam was sharing her salads and abstaining from things that he had long enjoyed. It wasn't easy to turn down ice cream and cookies after dinner, but Adam's heart was stronger than his stomach. For Charlie, Adam would have done this and much more.

A brief attempt had been made to get Chuck to eat healthier as well, but Chuck wouldn't open his mouth for things he didn't like, and it was difficult to reason with a man who stared blankly into space and never uttered a single word. Chuck's intake was monitored, and he was fed as healthfully as possible, while still ensuring that he ate regularly.

Adam's new eating habits annoyed Shirley, for whenever Adam and Charlie were invited to dinner at her house, Adam always turned down things that Charlie couldn't eat. Charlie was on a rather strict diet, and though it usually turned Shirley's meals upside down, Shirley had to admire her brother for his willingness to do what was best for Charlie.

Taking Peter Webber's advice, Adam continued to walk his father-in-law every day. But Adam wasn't satisfied that Charlie was getting enough exercise, so early one morning, Charlie found herself being roused from bed and handed a pair of his sweatpants. His clothing hung oversized

on her petite frame, but they would do. From that day forward, whenever weather permitted, Adam and Charlie would take an early morning jog around the perimeter of the sprawling Villa Rosa estate. Kevin almost always joined them, and the three would get their exercise in before the sun fully came up and the heat of the day began.

In an effort to lighten Adam's sacrifice, and to finally get a taste of something sweet, Charlie went with Mrs. Freemont and Vera to the grocery store in search of things that were healthy AND tasted good. All the more tempting foods were off limits, but they managed to find a few things that would give Adam and Charlie a special treat once in a while.

That same night, long after everyone had gone to bed, the couple quietly made their way to the kitchen and cracked open the freezer for one of those healthful treats. It was a small carton of expensive, healthy ice cream, but it was worth every cent.

As Adam and Charlie sat at the table slowly eating their modest portions, Charlie looked over at the man seated next to her. He didn't have to go without, but here he was, smiling happily over a very small helping of dessert.

"I'd nearly forgotten ice cream could taste so good," Adam chuckled softly. Then he noticed Charlie's loving gaze and he looked at her puzzled. "What?"

Beneath the kitchen table, Charlie snuggled her foot against his and Adam grinned. "I wish you'd start eating like everyone else," she sighed wistfully. "You don't have to make this sacrifice. I'll still do what I'm supposed to."

"We're in this together," reasoned Adam. "This is one thing I can do *for* you, and *with* you. Besides, if I eat healthier, I'll live longer to give you more piano lessons."

"A mixed blessing," smiled Charlie, "but a blessing, none the less."

"Your last bite of ice cream is melting," Adam observed from over his empty bowl.

Charlie scooped up the sweet mouthful and guided it to his lips. "Think of this as a down payment for all those lessons you're going to give me."

Adam opened his mouth and accepted her payment.

With a tender smile, Charlie gazed at her husband. His white T-shirt and blue pajama bottoms were typical of what he usually wore to bed, and his bare feet were warm against her foot. The man grinned and reached for her hand. When she gave it willingly, he sighed contentedly.

"Adam, there's a lot of people who'd say you're not getting enough in return for all the sacrifices you're making."

"I'm being well paid," he insisted.

Charlie didn't look so sure.

Adam squeezed her hand reassuringly. "Some things can only be paid back in love."

The next morning, they had an unexpected telephone call from Peter Webber. When Vera answered the phone, he asked to speak to Adam and Charlie.

"Adam isn't here right now," explained Vera, "but I think Charlie's in the music room with Dave. Hold on a moment and I'll go get her."

Charlie was at her piano while Dave worked on his composer's notebook at Adam's desk. When Vera walked in, Charlie looked as though she could use a break from her practices. "Please, tell me you want me to do some housework!" she laughingly begged her grandmother. "Adam left Dave in charge, and he won't even let me take a break!"

Hearing his own name, Dave looked up from his work. "You don't need a break," he responded dryly. "After spendin' a half hour to use the bathroom, I reckon you can go a few more minutes without rest."

"I did *not* take a half hour!" protested Charlie, indignantly.

Dave smiled wryly and returned to his work. "Finish the exercise, please."

"That will have to wait," interrupted Vera. "Charlie, Peter Webber is on the phone."

When Charlie picked up the receiver, Peter apologized for calling her at home. "I would've passed this through Jerome, but this is important enough that I thought it best to tell you myself."

"Tell me what?" asked Charlie.

"I just learned of an operation that might reverse Alzheimer's Disease."

A few hours later, Adam came home with his bodyguard from an errand in Twin Yucca. It was hot outside, and as he stepped into the air conditioned main house, he breathed a sigh of relief. "Charlie!" he called to his wife. "I'm home!"

"In here!" Charlie called to him from the living room.

Adam sauntered into the room with a shopping bag from an automotive store dangling from his hand. "I found the part I needed for our truck," he announced, sitting down on the couch beside Charlie. He pulled off his shoes and leaned back to relax. "It sure is hot out there!" When Charlie remained strangely silent, Adam placed his hand on her knee and asked how her day was going.

Charlie didn't answer for the space of one full minute before responding. "Peter called."

"Your Genetic Counselor? What did he want?"

"He said he just learned of an operation that might be able to reverse AD."

The words sounded too good to be true to Adam's ears. "Did I just hear you correctly?" he asked. "AD? Alzheimer's Disease-- *that* AD?"

"Peter said it isn't a cure, and that it might not even work." Charlie looked at Adam, a hint of cautious hope flickering in her brown eyes. Adam could see she was struggling not to get her hopes too high. "It's called an omentum transposition surgery to the brain. People with strokes sometimes get this operation, but there's some doctors who think it can also help Alzheimer's Disease."

"What doctors?" asked Adam. "What are their names? Do you have any phone numbers?"

Charlie pushed a small notepad in front of him. Her hand was trembling, even though the rest of her appeared outwardly calm.

Adam grabbed a nearby telephone.

"Honey," she tried to slow him down, "it's an experimental and invasive operation that would have to be done outside of the United States; no hospital will want to take responsibility for a procedure that isn't recognized by the medical establishment."

"But you still want to investigate this, don't you?" Adam waited for her response, though she could plainly see he was about to call anyway.

"This isn't a cure," she warned him.

Adam clutched the telephone. "I promise not to get too disappointed." When she nodded her agreement, Adam called the first doctor on the list of numbers and names that Peter had relayed to Charlie. He stayed on the phone for over an hour, talking to first Dr. Melissa Barnes, and then to her colleague, Dr. Phillips. Both said they would have to examine Charlie and that she would have to undergo several tests to see if she was a good candidate for the surgery. The same went for Chuck. There were no guarantees-- only encouraging signs in varying degrees from the few that had already had the operation.

The omentum is an apron of fatty tissue located around the abdomen that creates blood production and blood vessels. The basic principal of the omentum transposition surgery was to encourage blood flow to the brain. In theory, the plaques associated with AD could restrict blood flow in some people, and without blood, the brain would continue to decline. During the operation, one side of the omentum is detached, and then elongated and woven up through the body under the skin, before being placed through a cut on the scalp directly on the area of the brain most affected by the Alzheimer's. Then the omentum would produce blood and nutrients to the brain where blood flow was most needed. It had been done before for stroke victims, but few had ever tried it on AD patients. There was much speculation as to its effectiveness, and extensive research still needed to be done.

Even so, Adam was interested. They set up an appointment to first see Charlie, and then another to examine Chuck a few days later. By the time Adam had hung up the receiver, he was entertaining hope that this might be at least some of the deliverance that he had been asking God for. Charlie was too cautious to get excited, so Adam contained his joy with comforting hugs and calm assurances that he wouldn't make any hasty decisions without first learning all they could about this experimental operation.

In the days leading up to her appointment with Dr. Melissa Barnes and Dr. Phillips, Charlie was so distracted that she was unable to concentrate on her lessons. Adam didn't push her to practice, and neither did Dave. During those few days, little else got done at Villa Rosa but praying and waiting.

Then it was time. Charlie went in to be examined, and a few days later, it was Chuck's turn.

The doctors concluded that Chuck was a good candidate for the operation, though since Charlie was participating in a clinical trial, she was currently ineligible. After her obligation to the clinical trial was over, she could follow Chuck. The doctors thought that, *perhaps*, this surgery might slow plaque buildup in Charlie's brain, and thus delay the onset of Alzheimer's;

and once the terrible disease began to manifest itself, that it would progress slower than it otherwise would have. By how much, was anyone's guess. This was all highly speculative, and no doctor could give Adam and Charlie any guarantees. They could only point to the others who had already had the surgery and offer their educated opinions.

After talking it over with the family, everyone prayerfully concluded that this was something they needed to try. The operation was expensive, and health insurance would not cover the costs. But money would not be a problem for Chuck and his daughter. Adam was elated that he possessed something that might actually help his family. The money he could spare, Charlie and Chuck, he could not.

The only holdout in the family was Jerome. He was so skeptical, there was little reasoning with him. Thankfully, Adam was Chuck's legal guardian, and Jerome's consent was not necessary--though Adam would have dearly loved to have it just the same. Chuck was Jerome's younger brother, and Adam was slow to go against the wishes of such a close family member. But Chuck's own mother and daughter argued so strongly for it, that Jerome finally threw up his hands in frustration and warned that the consequences would be on their heads if anything went wrong.

Once the decision was made to go ahead, it quickly set in motion a flurry of activity. Appointments had to be made for the proper medical facilities at the hospital in Germany where the surgery would take place, hotel accommodations, transportation once they arrived, and passports for all those who would be going.

Adam, Charlie, Vera, Chuck and Kevin, along with a second bodyguard, would all be flying to Germany so Chuck could have his operation. Mrs. Freemont and Dave would remain at Villa Rosa and keep things in order while they were gone. It was no small task to organize the trip, but early in June, Adam's private jet took off for its overseas destination.

The trip was long, but Charlie didn't notice its length. She was too busy trying to keep her father calm as his unfamiliar surroundings further agitated his condition. It was good that they hadn't attempted this on a commercial airliner, for Chuck became quite physical and required not only Adam, but Kevin to keep him restrained long enough to settle down. Chuck's doctor had prescribed a sedative, but it wasn't very strong and had little effect. It wasn't until Vera's calming voice was able to soothe her son, that Chuck usually fell asleep in his seat.

After their private jet arrived in Germany and they had finished with customs, someone loaded their luggage into a very European looking vehicle and drove them to their hotel. Charlie had never been out of the United States of America in her entire life, and the very fact that she was now in Munich, Germany, made her feel quite special.

Everyone only had an hour or two before it was time to go to the hospital and meet Dr. Melissa Barnes and Dr. Phillips, who had both flown in earlier to make sure everything was in readiness. After Chuck was admitted and last minute tests had been administered, Charlie learned that her father's operation would begin the next morning.

That night in the hotel room, Charlie lie awake in bed, unable to sleep. As she stared up at the ceiling trying to quiet her restless mind, Adam folded his hands behind his head and sighed out loud.

"Can't sleep, either?" Charlie softly moaned in dismay.

"I've been thinking," breathed Adam, "when we left Chuck in the hospital today, God reminded me of Isaiah, chapter thirty five, verse six: 'Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.'" Adam turned his head to look at Charlie. "This is going to work."

"What if it doesn't?" she murmured quietly.

Adam smiled. "Then God will find another way."

Charlie was silent. She turned onto her side and tried to close her eyes, but they wouldn't stay shut. Her mind kept going to the surgery in the morning, and she could hear Jerome's voice telling her that she was a fool for even hoping that this little heard of, experimental surgery might help Chuck's AD. But the surgery itself wasn't experimental-- only the application of it to someone with Alzheimer's. That did little to ease Charlie's worries, and she tossed onto her other side.

When she continued to fidget in bed, Charlie felt Adam's hand on her back. "'Cast thy burden upon the LORD,'" he quoted in a gentle voice, "'and He shall sustain thee: He shall never suffer the righteous to be moved.'" (Psalm 55:22)

"When did you memorize that?" she smiled.

Adam rubbed her back with his strong hand, before finally coming to rest on her shoulder. "Whenever I can't bear the thought of what could happen to you in the future, I have to go cast my burden at the feet of Jesus again. I've been praying for a day like tomorrow for a long time, Charlie-girl."

Charlie snuggled into Adam's arms and quietly asked God to help her not be afraid. The only balm for fear is faith, and as Charlie reminded herself of the promises from God's Word, she at last found peace.

When morning finally came, Chuck was prepared for surgery and wheeled into the operating room where his doctors were ready to begin.

In the hospital's lounge, the others could only wait.

Kevin kept himself busy by slowly walking about the room and quietly observing the people waiting for their own family and friends. An expectant father nervously paced about and kept bumping into Kevin, so that Kevin finally decided to sit down. He felt sorry for the poor man who was continually mumbling something that sounded very much like a German prayer, and while they waited for news of Chuck, Kevin offered a prayer for the expectant father, as well.

Vera had wisely brought her knitting, knowing that it would keep her hands from being idle. Her heart, however, was in the operating room with her son, and more than once, her stitches stumbled, and she lost count of where she was in her knitting.

Charlie tried to pick up a nearby magazine, but put it down when she realized it was in German. The clock on the waiting room wall seemed to stand still, and every subsequent glance only seemed to confirm her suspicion that it was no longer working. To her dismay, Adam confirmed its time by checking his watch. Disappointed, Charlie picked up the German magazine and decided to look at the pictures.

Five hours later, Dr. Melissa Barnes informed them that Chuck had come through the operation without any complications. He was still unconscious, but they could see him.

Adam took Charlie's hand and they went to the recovery room where Chuck was resting. He had just been through major surgery, and his bandaged head indicated where the doctors had delivered the omentum to his brain.

Timidly, Charlie touched her father's unresponsive hand. "When will we know if it worked?" she asked Dr. Phillips.

"That depends on Chuck and the will of God," he replied. "Let's give the omentum some time to do its job."

The following day, Chuck Overholt opened his eyes.

Vera was sitting beside Chuck's bed, talking to Charlie, when she suddenly realized that he was watching her. "Chuckie?" She touched her son's hand and he blinked.

Charlie quickly went to her father's side. "Daddy, it's me." Chuck turned his eyes on her and went to sleep.

Adam was amazed at what he had just witnessed. "Charlie, he was making eye contact with you and Vera!"

"He hasn't done that in about a year and a half," she nodded hopefully.

Adam hugged his wife and smiled until it hurt.

A few hours later, Chuck woke up again and he continued to look at people directly whenever someone managed to get his attention. There was a lot of confusion in his face, and it wore him out so much that he spent a good deal of time asleep.

By the third day, he was keeping his eyes open for longer periods of time.

And then it happened. Adam had just made some trivial remark that made Charlie laugh, when they noticed something on Chuck's face that hadn't been there in over a year. He was smiling. When everyone became excited, the smile quickly disappeared and he looked so confused and frightened that they had to dramatically quiet their excitement.

"He *actually* smiled!" Charlie whispered into Adam's ear so loudly that it smarted.

"God is in this," he encouraged her with another hug.

The fourth day required tests that had Chuck sedated once more, so they had little opportunity to see if he was still continuing to improve.

On the fifth day, however, Chuck smiled and his eyes followed Vera as she moved about his hospital room. The German and American doctors were frequent visitors, for it was an extremely rare sight to see someone who's Alzheimer's was actually improving. They continued to run their tests and make evaluations and draw blood and monitor Chuck's every heartbeat.

By the seventh day, it was clear that Chuck recognized his mother. His face looked happier whenever she was present, and he showered her with more smiles than anyone else. Including Charlie.

That was when Charlie needed Adam's hugs the most. She was happier than words could express that her father was improving so dramatically, but it hurt that he treated her the same as he did the nurses and orderlies.

But Charlie's heartache didn't last very long. On the eighth day, Chuck unexpectedly reached out and took Charlie's hand as she stood beside his bed. It was the first unprompted physical contact he had given anyone, and the fact that he had chosen her, made tears come to Charlie's eyes. From that moment on, if Charlie was in the hospital room, Chuck wanted to hold her hand.

By the end of the second week, Chuck was making indecipherable noises as if trying to speak. Nothing he said made sense to anyone, until Charlie walked into his room one day and he said as plain as anything, "Pumpkin." Adam spent the rest of that day drying Charlie's tears of joy, but as he did, he began to notice Chuck's awareness of his presence increasing.

Adam had thought Chuck had just accepted him as simply another of the complete strangers that filed in and out of his room to check his vitals and make sure he was comfortable. But the more Adam put his arms around Charlie, and touched her, and kissed her cheek to whisper something that only the two of them could hear, the more Chuck began to take notice of Adam. And the more Adam began to feel it.

After leaving the hospital for their hotel later that night, Adam confided to Charlie. "I'm not sure your father likes me."

"That's ridiculous!" she laughed. "He doesn't even know you're there!"

It was only a feeling, and nothing that Adam could outright prove, so he dropped the subject. After all, Charlie was probably right.

The next few days were followed with tiny victories, made all the more significant by the fact that no one with AD ever recovered.

Three weeks after the omentum transposition operation, Chuck boarded a sleek private jet for their flight back to California. He was still speaking sporadically, and even then, only some of what he said was intelligible. The effort always made him extremely tired, and since no one had been able to keep him from trying that morning, he quickly fell asleep once he was seated.

Charlie sat across from Chuck, carefully watching over him and making sure that he had everything he needed. She made certain that his seat belt was on properly, that he had

something nearby to drink, when he woke up, and that a snack was ready in case he became hungry.

The sweater Vera was knitting had suddenly become Chuck's, and a smile rarely left her face for very long. Her son was coming home, and in a condition that Jerome had said was impossible. If only Arnold had been alive to see this!

Keeping to the background of the activity fluttering around Chuck, Adam let the women fuss over their patient as much as they wanted without getting in the way.

As Chuck continued to sleep, Charlie settled back in her seat to watch him. "I can't believe the progress he's already made," she sighed in amazement.

Adam reached across the arm rest of his seat and claimed the hand of the woman sitting beside him. "Chuck's victory is also yours," he smiled confidently.

"The surgery may not work as well for me as it has for Daddy," Charlie tried to caution him against too much hope.

"You have the same family history, and the same genes," reasoned Adam. "I'm no doctor, but if it's working this well for your father, then I think it will work for you. God is answering our prayers, Charlie-girl." Adam pressed his lips to their intertwined fingers and smiled at her lovingly.

Just then, Chuck stirred and opened his eyes. When he saw Adam holding Charlie's hand, he scowled so much that Adam felt uncomfortable and finally relinquished his hold.

"We need to tell him about us," Adam softly whispered to Charlie.

Charlie shook her head in disagreement. "He won't understand what he's being told. Besides, he might not remember long enough to make any difference. Daddy still has AD, you know. Surgery won't change that."

Uneasily, Adam shifted in his seat while Chuck continued to stare at him. How much of that stare was because Chuck could remember him from the hospital, Adam wasn't sure. Maybe Chuck's dislike wasn't growing-- but only surfacing whenever he saw a grown man touching his daughter. It was hard to say, but Adam decided that until he had a better idea of what to do, he would keep his hands off Charlie whenever Chuck was watching.

As they traveled home, Adam's strategy appeared to work. As long as Adam didn't touch Charlie, Chuck didn't seem to remember any dislike for Adam, and everyone got along together fairly well.

After arriving back in California and being processed through customs, Adam's private jet landed at the airstrip on Villa Rosa's estate long after the sun had already gone down. Everyone was still on German time, and since it was early afternoon in Germany, they were tired from their trip but not sleepy.

The only one ready for bed was Chuck, for he was extremely worn out. Unfortunately, this made his disorientation worse than usual. He had been repeatedly told that they were going home, but this strange place looked nothing like the home he had been expecting. Chuck mumbled something to this extent, and Charlie suddenly realized he was remembering their apartment in Montana. Nothing here was familiar to him, so that Chuck kept edging toward the front door as if begging to leave. While Vera tried to explain that Villa Rosa was his home now, the last of Chuck's strength faded and he lay down on the living room carpet to sleep. He would try to understand it all later. Right now, he was just too tired.

Realizing that he was down there to stay, Adam took a throw pillow from off the couch and gently slid it under Chuck's head. Then he retrieved a blanket from the master bedroom and placed it around the shoulders of the sleeping man. "Are you sure we shouldn't try to get him into bed?" Adam wondered.

Vera shook her head wearily. "He's finally calmed down, and I don't want to risk setting him off again."

Charlie knelt down on the carpet and lovingly adjusted the blanket over her father. "I love you, Daddy. I'll see you in the morning."

As she stood up, someone knocked on the front door and Adam went to go see who it was. Since no one had asked to be let in through the main gate, it had to be Dave, for Kevin and the bodyguards had already said their goodnights and retired to their bungalows.

Dave smiled warmly as he walked into the living room. "I'm glad y'all made it home safely." His voice quickly hushed when he saw Chuck asleep on the carpet.

"You didn't have to wait up for us," Charlie softly scolded him, for Dave was still fully dressed and it was two in the morning. "We called ahead when we knew we'd be getting back so late."

"That's all right," shrugged Dave, still looking at Chuck. "How's he doin'?"

"He's making some very encouraging progress," beamed Vera. "I'm going to fix everyone a small late night supper. Would you care to join us, Dave?"

"I didn't come over lookin' for food," he chuckled quietly, "but that sounds right good, Mrs. Overholt. Thank you."

"Anything happen while we were gone?" inquired Adam, as they followed Vera to the kitchen.

Grinning, Dave pulled out a large box near the refrigerator where he had been collecting their mail and plunked it onto the breakfast table. "I also have a few messages," related Dave, pulling out a notepad. "Bill said to tell you and Charlie that he's very glad to hear about Chuck, and to expect some get well flowers from him and Madeline tomorrow."

"That was nice of him," smiled Charlie, growing a little weak when she saw how much mail accumulated in the three weeks they had been away.

"Melvin said to tell you some magazine wants to do a feature about Wallace Shipley and not to dismiss it too quickly because they're fixin' to put you on the front cover," continued Dave, "oh, and Jerome wants to come and see Chuck tomorrow." Dave accepted a cup of hot tea from Vera and located his usual place at the table. "Sure is good to have y'all back," he smiled.

"I appreciate your holding things together while we were away," Adam thanked him. "It's good to know we were in such capable hands."

Later that day, Jerome was dumbfounded to see Chuck coming toward him with the walking gait of someone who was feeling well. Jerome was well acquainted with the stooped back and shuffling feet that AD eventually brought on, and had seen it in Chuck for some time. This was nowhere near the robust man that he had gone to pick up in Montana so long ago, but Jerome could see a glimpse of it in Chuck's stride.

Jerome was still trying to find his voice, when Chuck hugged his brother and called him by name without being prompted. In wonderment, Jerome looked into Chuck's eyes and saw the look of recognition that had been missing for so long.

"How are you?" It was a simple question, but Jerome had to repeat it before Chuck finally responded.

"Good." Chuck's eyes wandered to his shoes and he broke out in a smile. "I did those," he pointed to his feet.

"Daddy actually tied his own shoe laces this morning," Charlie informed her uncle.

"Can't stay long," Chuck informed his brother in slow speech. "Have to go to work soon."

"Daddy," his daughter gently reminded, "you don't have a job, remember?"

Bewildered, Chuck slowly shook his head "no." "What about Frank?"

"You don't work for Frank anymore."

A frown crossed Chuck's face and he sighed wearily. He was tiring out fast, and Charlie realized he needed to go lie down again.

Chuck wasn't able to carry much of a conversation, for his attention was easily distracted, and his words didn't always make sense. Even so, Jerome realized the momentous turn for the better that his younger brother had just made.

Before leaving, Jerome surprised Adam with a thank you that sounded so sincere, Adam almost didn't know how to respond.

"I was wrong," Jerome admitted. It looked as though it pained himself greatly to say those words, but he *did* manage to say them.

"I know Chuck looks encouraging," Adam cautioned, "but he might not improve much more beyond this stage. On the other hand, he might continue to get better. The doctors kept reminding us that it's impossible to know, but to keep in mind that the disease is still there. AD is progressive, so we'll just have to wait and see what happens."

Jerome was not an emotional man, and this one admission that he had been wrong was not going to start a trend. Pride had been the prompting factor here, and not repentance, so with his heart as hard as ever, Jerome shook hands with Adam and returned to Mullen-Overholt.

It was the first week in July, and Charlie was trying very hard not to tell her secret. Their first year wedding anniversary was coming up in a few days, and she wanted to give something special to Adam as a gift. It hadn't been easy to shop for a man who already had everything, and she hoped the present she had secretly bought would at least surprise him.

Adam was also smiling a little harder these days, for he was keeping a secret of his own. Their first year anniversary was coming up, and he wanted to surprise his wife with a special gift. They had already made anniversary plans together, but he had purposefully made sure not to mention anything about giving presents, for he had wanted this to be a surprise.

Now that they were home from Germany, Adam sent Charlie back to the piano to resume her music lessons. Even he was returning to the new album he had temporarily put on hold to research AD, and progress began to go forward once more.

Things were returning back to normal, and Dave was in great demand in the music room. Whether it was learning from a master or teaching a student, Dave loved his time with Adam and Charlie.

A frequent visitor to the music room was Chuck, who would wander in and listen to Charlie's music scales, Adam's latest composition, or Dave's work in progress. He still didn't understand that Adam was someone special, but that suited Adam just fine. Adam already had too many people fussing over him because he was Wallace Shipley to feel he needed Chuck to do the same.

There was one issue, however, that seemed to continually come up at the most unexpected times. The more frequently it happened, the more urgent Adam became. Something had to be done.

One morning when Adam found Charlie alone in the kitchen, he grabbed her about the waist and they began kissing as the husband and wife they were. Adam began nuzzling Charlie's neck and his hands were drawing her even closer when his eyes caught movement near the kitchen doorway. Chuck was standing there, his eyes filled with horror!

Shaking his head in grave disapproval, Chuck marched over to the couple and took hold of his daughter's hand to rescue her from Adam's embrace. "Shame on you," he scolded Adam.

"It's all right, Daddy," she tried to explain. "He's my husband."

"No, he isn't," declared Chuck, adamantly. With a firm grip, he pulled his daughter out of the room and handed her over to Vera. "Charlie was with that man," he told his mother. Then Chuck needed to lay down, for all that exertion had made him tired.

When Charlie appeared from her father's room after putting him to bed, Adam met her at the water fountain in the courtyard, looking very discouraged.

"Whenever Chuck does that to me, I feel as though I've been caught doing something wrong! I know I'm being ridiculous, but it's really unnerving!"

Charlie went to her distraught husband and put her arms around him in a great big hug, for he looked as though he needed one right about now. "I've been trying to tell Daddy that the house he lives in is yours, the money that paid for his operation was yours, the private jet he flew home in was yours, and that *I* am yours. I think the AD just won't allow him to remember."

"I appreciate your trying," smiled Adam, "but you're giving him false information."

"How so?"

"The money is ours, the jet is ours, and the house is ours. The only thing you had correct was that you're mine." Adam kissed her cheek and softly laughed. "What a wonderful problem to have, Charlie-girl. It wasn't very long ago that our biggest problem was making sure Chuck didn't watch too much television." Adam looked down at his pretty wife. Her warm brown eyes were inviting and her lips extremely kissable. "Our anniversary is in few days," he whispered tenderly. "Shirley wanted a celebration over at her house, but I was able to talk her out of it. We'll spend our day at a nice, private hotel, just you and me."

Biting her lip, Charlie hesitated.

Adam became uneasy. "That's what we agreed to, isn't it?"

"I hate to leave Daddy," she explained. "What if he needs me, and I'm not here?"

Stepping back, Adam let go of Charlie. "I thought you said he could go without you for one day."

"I know, but I hate to leave when Daddy's doing so well," reasoned Charlie. "Adam, it's only been a week and a half since we got back from Germany."

"Chuck won't be by himself," her husband quickly pointed out.

"I know," hesitated Charlie, "but I'll be somewhere else, all the while wondering if I should have stayed home with Daddy. Adam," she begged, as he started to walk away, "please, don't take it that way! I'll go with you, after Daddy's had a chance to settle in!"

Hearing the plead, Adam stopped and turned to look at Charlie. Even though he had been looking forward to their anniversary, he shoved aside his frustration and managed to give her a weak smile. "I understand," he finally sighed. "We'll postpone our day for some other time."

"You aren't angry?"

"No, just disappointed." Adam walked off to the music room where he remained on his thinking couch until lunchtime.

After the noon meal, Adam sat on the living room floor sorting through a box of photos and souvenirs that he and Charlie had collected during their marriage. He had been meaning to organize this into photo albums, but had never gotten around to it until now.

As Adam lingered on a photo of Charlie during their trip to Alaska, he was joined by an unexpected visitor. Chuck sat down on the floor beside him and motioned that he would like to take part in whatever it was that Adam was doing.

"I was just looking at some old photos," explained Adam, handing the picture of Charlie over to his father-in-law. "That's a good one of her, isn't it?"

When Chuck recognized his daughter's beautiful face, he nodded proudly. "She looks like her mother."

"Does she?" Adam smiled. He showed Chuck another of Charlie during the renovations of Villa Rosa. Her hair was tied back and her face smudged with sweat and dirt. "I took this one while she wasn't looking!"

Chuck looked at the photo and then at Adam.

It was difficult to say what Chuck was thinking, if anything at all, so Adam continued. "Here's one of our wedding," Adam smiled, handing Chuck a loose photo that had fallen out of the only album in the box. "I must have been the happiest man on the planet, the day she became mine." Adam was about to place the picture back in the album where it belonged, when Chuck took the photo from his hand and stared at it intently.

Chuck pointed at the groom standing beside Charlie. "That's you," he observed.

"That's me," smiled Adam.

Chuck continued to gaze at the picture until he finally dropped it and started looking at something else in the box. He held up a photo of Charlie in a beautiful black evening gown and looked to Adam for an explanation.

"I took Charlie out to dinner that night."

"Oh," came Chuck's response.

"And in this one, we were in Alaska, just after our honeymoon."

"Honeymoon?" asked Chuck.

Adam pointed back to the wedding picture and Chuck slowly nodded that he understood. "Oh," he said once more.

Leaning his back against the wall, Adam watched as Chuck went through the contents of the box. "I don't know if you can understand this," Adam told him, "but I love your daughter very much."

Chuck looked at Adam and then at the wedding picture.

"I've been trying to take good care of her, Chuck. She has a roof over her head, and people around her who would do anything to see that she stays safe and happy. I know I'm not worthy of Charlie, but I try to be."

After some reflection, Chuck gazed at Adam and then nodded that he understood.

Gently touching Chuck's shoulder, Adam smiled gratefully at his father-in-law. He knew this acceptance would only last for as long as Chuck's short-term memory would allow him to, but it still felt good to have his acknowledgment.

The next day, Adam went into Twin Yucca with his bodyguard. Charlie thought he was still smarting from the change she had made to their anniversary plans, and tried to be extra nice to him by not asking where he was going.

Several hours later, Charlie found out why. Adam returned with a shopping bag full of picture frames, a large envelope, and their wedding album. Evidently happy with himself, he placed his purchases on the living room coffee table and sat down on the couch to begin.

"Would you like any help?" offered Charlie, completely in the dark as to what he was up to, but willing to help if he wanted her company.

"You could tell me which of these goes best in the frames I bought," replied Adam, opening the envelope and pulling out several large photos of their wedding.

"What are you doing?" wondered Charlie, taking a seat on the couch beside him.

Adam looked up from stuffing a photo into a picture frame. "I thought it was obvious what I was doing," he replied dryly. Then he flashed his handsome Clark smile and nodded to her for an opinion. "What do you think?" he asked. He held up a large photo frame decorated with wedding doves, and pointed to the famous couple in the picture. "That shows my face well, doesn't it?"

"I've never known you to be self-conscious," Charlie laughed.

"I'm not," he insisted, "but I need these to show our faces really well."

"That wedding photo of us is so big, you can't help but notice our faces," answered Charlie. She began matching photos to the frames, while Adam placed them behind the glass. "What are these for?" she finally asked.

"I was wondering when you'd ask," grinned Adam.

"I don't want to become a nag."

Adam gave Charlie a loving wink. "You're not." He inserted the last picture and picked up the largest picture frame showing their wedding. "I need to put this in your father's room," he explained. "Somewhere he can easily see it."

"You'd better hang it on the wall," warned Charlie, getting up and following Adam to Chuck's room. "He might accidentally knock it over if you don't put it somewhere safe."

By the time Adam returned with a hammer and fastener, Chuck was sitting on his bed, quietly watching. Charlie was also curious what Adam was up to, and patiently held the frame Adam had asked her to hold.

Locating a spot at the foot of the bed where Chuck would see the frame every time he opened his eyes, Adam hammered the fastener into the wall and took the framed picture from Charlie. "I think that should do," muttered Adam, taking a step back to see his own handiwork.

Charlie was about to ask Adam why he had gone to so much trouble to hang a wedding picture in her father's room, when Chuck answered the question for her.

"Charlie," the seated man spoke up, "did you get married?"

The rest of the wedding frames were strategically placed around the house, so that Adam had the freedom to embrace Charlie in front of Chuck, and no longer expect to have her dragged away. All it took was a reinforcing point at one of the wedding pictures, and Chuck would nod that he understood. He didn't always look as though he *liked* it, but he understood.

The morning of their first anniversary, Adam was awakened by a kiss from Charlie. His eyes fluttered open, and he happily accepted another.

"Sit up," she smiled, pulling free of his arms. "Daddy and I made you breakfast in bed."

"Daddy?" Adam sat up, only to see Chuck standing at the foot of the bed, holding a tray with two plates and a pitcher of orange juice.

"Happy anniversary," Chuck smiled.

"Don't tell me he remembered," Adam whispered to Charlie.

"No," she smiled, "but I did. Just set the tray here, Daddy."

"Thank you, Chuck," Adam smiled as he looked at the breakfast they had prepared. "Charlie, most of this doesn't look like things we can eat," he hungrily declared.

"I can't eat it, but you can," she answered, pouring Adam a glass of juice and then one for herself. "Thank you, Daddy. Why don't you go help Grandma make beds?"

"Okay," sighed Chuck, glancing again at the nightstand where a wedding frame had been placed. Charlie and Adam were married, so it was all right if he left them in a bedroom together.

After her father had gone, Charlie went to the door and closed it. Then she sat down on the bed and Adam said a prayer over their breakfast.

"Bless us in the coming years, and thank you for the one we've already shared," prayed Adam. "Make it to be only the first of many, Lord." His prayer finished, Adam started in on the generous breakfast before him. "I haven't had bacon in ages," he sighed contentedly. "Charlie, I really shouldn't be eating this in front of you."

"I don't care for bacon," she reminded him with a smile. "I'm sorry I called off our date at the hotel."

"You're needed here," Adam shrugged. "Besides, we can go another time."

"Thank you for understanding, Adam."

"Thank you for the bacon," he smiled.

Charlie turned her head to look out the sliding glass door and into their enclosed garden. "It's going to be a hot day," she remarked casually.

"Yes, I suppose it is." Adam didn't even bother to look up, for he was too busy working on his bacon and eggs.

Charlie got up from the bed and opened their sliding door all the way, but still, Adam didn't look up.

"The roses smell nice," she remarked, returning to the bed and taking another sip of her orange juice.

"To be honest, I can't smell them over this bacon!" chuckled Adam, helping himself to another strip of crunchy goodness.

Charlie glanced out at the garden and sighed.

"Are you sure you don't want a bite of this?" he offered.

"No."

Adam shrugged and returned to his food until Charlie sighed yet again.

"If you want some of this, all you have to do is claim it before I eat it," he chuckled.

Charlie sighed patiently. "The lawn looks particularly nice today, don't you think?"

"The lawn?" Adam looked out the open door and gasped in surprise. In the middle of the lawn, a tall shiny brass structure with spinning wheels and rotating squares, gracefully danced and spun about each other, while rhythmically sending small jets of water into the air before watering the grass. The movement was very eye-catching, and even a little hypnotic.

"It's my anniversary present to you," explained Charlie.

Adam left his breakfast and went to the door to get a better look. "It's beautiful, Honey. I've never see anything like it!"

"I was hoping you hadn't," smiled Charlie, coming to his side. "I had the hardest time trying to find something you didn't already have, or had already tried."

"I've never had one of these," chuckled Adam. "What's it called?"

"It's a copper art sprinkler," explained Charlie. "Dave's brother makes them."

"Does he really?" Adam was grinning even harder now. "I guess ole' Dave's been keeping a lot of secrets, lately."

"What are you talking about?" wondered Charlie.

"He's been keeping my present over at his bungalow," confessed Adam.

Charlie's face brightened, and Adam couldn't help but laugh at her girlish excitement.

"Wait here, and I'll get it," he smiled, planting a kiss on her cheek before leaving. Still in his pajamas, Adam walked out the bedroom door.

Several minutes later, he reappeared with a large square box that had a shiny red bow on top. "Sorry it took so long," he laughed, "but I had a little trouble with your gift. It sprung a leak, and I'm afraid it spoiled some of the wrapping paper." Adam turned the box around so Charlie could see the wet spot. As the box turned, something slid inside and let out a small whimper.

"Adam?" Charlie's mouth was open in wonderment. "What'd you get me?"

With a chuckle, Adam placed the box on Charlie's lap and stood back so he could properly see her reaction.

The box wriggled impatiently on Charlie's lap while she unfastened the bow and pulled off the top. Two large questioning brown eyes greeted hers, as if wondering why it had been placed in the box.

"Oh, Adam!" Charlie cried with delight. "A puppy!" She lifted the small furry animal out of its confinement and placed it onto the bed.

Adam took away the box and the puppy immediately located Charlie's lap and climbed onto it to be petted.

"He's absolutely darling!" breathed Charlie, as her hand glided over its soft golden fur.

"I'm glad you think so," grinned Adam, "but it so happens that *he* is a *she*."

Charlie picked up the puppy and gave it a hug, while it squirmed to get free and explore its new surroundings. "I'm going to call her Wally," declared Charlie.

Wally waggled across the bedspread and exuberantly began to lick Adam's hand, for it still smelled of bacon. "Wally is an odd name for a female," chuckled Adam, "but if that's what you want, Wally it is! I don't suppose you thought of that name because of anyone special," he hinted knowingly.

"I'm naming her after a very sweet, kindhearted man," Charlie smiled happily. "Come here Wally! Come on, Precious! Oh, aren't you so cute? What dog breed is she, Adam?"

"A golden retriever," he sighed, trying to shake Wally from his hand, for the puppy was getting more insistent in her pursuit of the smell of bacon. "I'd better go get the puppy chow before I lose my fingers."

After breakfast, Charlie took her puppy out into the garden and laughed as it played in the grass, chasing the patterns of water that the new sprinkler created. Adam had left the master bedroom door open, and Chuck soon wandered in, lured by the sound of laughter and puppy yaps.

"Over here, Chuck," Adam called to his father-in-law. Chuck cautiously crossed the lawn and stayed by Adam's side as Charlie played with Wally in the sprinkler. "It's a puppy," informed Adam.

Chuck grinned. "I know that."

"Do you want to pet it?"

Chuck quickly shook his head "no," but continued to watch until Wally ventured close to his leg. "Hello, Puppy," he softly called to the small dog. Curious, Wally took a small step forward and sniffed Chuck's hand. When the hand began gently stroking her fur, Wally rolled onto her back so Chuck could also rub her belly. After several moments of puppy tail wagging, she rolled over and rejoined Charlie. Chuck stood up and smiled at Adam.

"Did you like that?" grinned Adam.

"That's a good dog," nodded Chuck in approval. Before long, Vera appeared and took Chuck back to his room for a nap.

Now that they were alone, Adam locked the master bedroom door and returned to the garden to spend some private time with Charlie.

"The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man [Adam] availeth much."

~ James 5:16 ~

Legal Disclaimer: The characters and events depicted in this story are fictitious, and should not be interpreted as medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. The author is not a medical doctor, and used omentum transposition as a plot element in "The Greatest of These" in a manner that may not necessarily be the case for most people with Alzheimer's Disease. Consult your doctor before making any decisions.

See < http://JudithBronte.com/greatest/G_Links.html > to learn where you can get more information about omentum transposition.

Chapter Fifty-nine

Us

"A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband."

~ Proverbs 12:4 ~

After celebrating their first anniversary, Adam completed the duet he had been composing for Charlie. Now that the music was ready, Adam seated his nervous young wife on the tattered thinking sofa while he and Dave played the duet so she could hear the entire composition with two pianos. Charlie was more disheartened than before, for it sounded too professional and out of her reach. It was a wonderful piece of music though, and Charlie had to admit she was eager to leave behind the tedious scales and begin something that had a melody to it.

Under the careful direction of Adam and Dave's expertise, Charlie started practicing the first measure of music Adam had written for her. To her grave disappointment, Charlie stumbled through it so badly, she could hardly recognize it as the same music the guys had just finished playing.

"Don't be discouraged," Adam coaxed her along. "You'll improve with practice."

Charlie sure hoped so. It was one thing to mangle finger exercises, but when she touched Adam's masterfully composed music, she usually disfigured it beyond recognition. To her annoyance, (and relief), neither Adam nor Dave looked at all surprised and remained as upbeat as ever.

The weeks flew by, and still Charlie worked at the duet, though Adam had yet to join her in the music. The composition was coming a bit easier now, and Charlie realized all those finger exercises had been specially devised by Adam and Dave to ensure her success in this particular piece of music. She was doing better than she should have, and it gave Charlie a small glimmer of hope that she might be able to play with Adam on his album, after all.

Near the first of September, Adam told Charlie that she was ready for him to join her in the duet. Charlie had been dreading this, and was sure there was no way she would be able to keep up with him once he started playing his half of the music.

"Just start playing as usual," Adam instructed her, "and I'll join in where I'm supposed to. Try to ignore me, and just keep going."

While Dave watched from the sofa, Adam and Charlie began the duet for the first time together. From the beginning, Charlie could tell Adam was purposefully going slower than the

music called for, just to make sure she could keep up. Then the more technically demanding part of the composition came, and Charlie quickly found that she could not concentrate while Adam was playing. It was like trying to rub her tummy and pat her head at the same time, and it simply didn't work! She had to read the notes in front of her, all the while trying to drown out Adam's harmony on the piano across from hers.

After the third failed attempt, Charlie declared that she needed a break and went to the kitchen to find something to eat. She didn't feel in the mood for another carrot, so the young woman grabbed a cookie and dropped into a chair at the kitchen table.

Soon after, Adam joined her. His was face patient, though Charlie could see that his patience was being tried.

"I warned you this wasn't a good idea," Charlie shook her head in confirmation.

A smile played at the corners of Adam's mouth, as if threatening to break into an all-out grin. "So I remember. Are you going to share that cookie with me?"

Charlie broke it in two and handed the bigger half to him. "I know you're going to tell me I need practice," she groaned. "I'm just so tired of that piano!" As she said this, a hurt look crossed Adam's face. "I'm not tired of you," she quickly added.

"Maybe we should take some time off," he hesitated, his voice sounding as though he preferred to keep going. "Maybe I'm driving you too hard."

Hating to see Adam so discouraged, Charlie got up and planted a kiss on his cheek before returning to the music room.

Dave had been waiting for them, though he hadn't expected Charlie back so soon. "I thought it'd take Adam a good ten minutes to sweet-talk you back to the piano!" he chuckled.

"Adam's a fast worker," Charlie smiled wearily. She sat down at her instrument, just as Adam returned from the kitchen.

"Let's pick up where we left off," Adam nodded to her with a wink. Smiling in spite of herself, Charlie resumed and the two finished their practice session together.

The next few weeks were filled with patience and practice, until Adam realized that Charlie had memorized the entire duet by heart. To Charlie's horror, he took away her sheet music and insisted that she start playing it from memory-- something Charlie was sure she couldn't do.

Adam knew better than to believe that. "You already know this piece, Charlie. It's time to start playing with your heart, and not with your eyes."

Charlie stared at him indignantly. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Let's take it from the top, and it'll come," Adam smiled confidently.

Without her music before her, Charlie couldn't remember how the piece opened. It wasn't until Adam gave her a hint or two, that she was finally able to begin and the duet started in earnest. To Charlie's surprise, Adam was right. She hadn't needed the music to play the composition. It made her feel quite the musician, playing with Adam, and not having to keep her eyes transfixed on sheet music. With this feeling of elation, Charlie and Adam completed the entire duet. Still feeling pleased with herself, Charlie was about to suggest that they try it again, when she noticed the somber look on Adam's face. To her surprise, Dave was looking very much the same way.

"She's not playin' with her heart," mused Dave.

"What do you mean?" Charlie cried. "I didn't miss a single note!"

"That's not what Dave meant," explained Adam. "I suppose we're expecting too much from the first time, so let's try it again and see what happens."

Charlie's confidence was taking a hit. How could they possibly think that wasn't good? Not only had she got all the fingering down, but she had done it with Adam playing at the same time! This was a big deal to Charlie, and it caused a disappointed lump in her throat that made her feel like crying. All this work, only to have the guys looking at her as though she had done something wrong!

The duet began once more, but this time, Adam didn't bother finishing. He stopped, and Charlie could plainly see he was disappointed.

"I don't get it!" she exclaimed disbelievingly. "I'm actually playing the song the way you wrote it, and this is the treatment I get?"

"I didn't write it to sound like that," disagreed Adam. "Give your seat over to Dave, and listen carefully, Charlie."

Fighting back a twinge of anger, Charlie did as she was told, and the two men played the love duet together. Dave was more skilled than Charlie, but aside from that, she couldn't see a bit of difference between Dave's music and hers.

When it was over, Adam looked at Charlie hopefully. "Did you see the difference?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I didn't," she informed him. "Dave played the exact same notes that I did."

"But, he played from his heart," insisted Adam.

"So was I!" argued Charlie.

"No, you were playing the notes."

"What was I supposed to play?" she cried. The frustration was rising in her voice, and Adam realized it was time to back off so she could calm down. He looked at Dave, and Dave gave him an apologetic smile.

"I can teach someone the music, but I can't put it in their heart," Dave reflected. "She doesn't need anymore finger lessons to play the duet-- though I'd recommend she stay in practice, or else she'll forget what she's already learned."

Charlie sighed glumly. "I hate it when you guys talk as though I'm not in the room."

"She's made a lot of progress," continued Dave, "but I'm not the one who can take her the rest of the way." He smiled at Adam. "The rest is up to you. After all, it *is* a love song."

Charlie folded her arms defiantly, for she didn't appreciate the knowing smile Dave gave her as he left the music room. It was as though he understood something she didn't, and Charlie thought she had the music down perfectly.

"Let's try it again, Charlie." Adam took a deep breath and waited for her to begin, for her piano started the piece.

Unfolding her arms, Charlie placed her fingers on the keyboard and played the first measure. She didn't care what Adam and Dave thought. She was playing music! After all those finger exercises and hours of tedium, she was actually making music! What was their problem?

Adam let the duet play itself out, and then he quietly went to the thinking sofa.

"Well?" she asked, waiting for his opinion. "I didn't forget any of the notes, did I?"

"No, you didn't forget," he replied, leaning back on the cushions and taking a deep sigh.

"So," Charlie deduced, "that's good-- isn't it?"

"It's good."

"Then why do you look as though I just spit on your music?" wondered Charlie.

"It wasn't *that* bad," chuckled Adam.

"Then it was bad?"

"It wasn't great," he admitted, "but it didn't stink for a beginner."

"So now it stinks?" Charlie sighed. "You asked me to play the duet, so I practiced until I thought I was going crazy, and now I'm playing the duet!"

"And I appreciate your cooperation," smiled Adam.

"But I'm doing something terribly wrong."

Adam hesitated. "You're missing something important. I know what Dave said, but I don't think I can..." Adam's voice trailed off, and his face was the face of someone deep in thought.

"Well," she sighed, getting up from the piano and sitting beside Adam on the sofa, "I thought I did pretty good, even if I'm the only one who thinks so." Just then, Wally whimpered at her feet, begging to be picked up and placed on the couch with them. "Hello, Sweetheart," she cooed to the puppy. Wally panted happily as Charlie scratched behind her ears and then the dog put her paws on Adam's chest, as if begging him to give her some attention, too.

"Your dog has been chewing on my shoes again," Adam informed his wife.

"*My* dog?" laughed Charlie. "I thought you said we were going to share her!"

"Wally follows you around as though her life depended on it," chuckled Adam, "so that makes her *yours*!"

Upon hearing her name, Wally yapped excitedly, and her entire rump wagged back and forth along with her tail. Charlie laughed, but her smiles were dampened by Adam's still thoughtful face. "Do you want to play the duet again? Maybe it'll be better this time."

"Okay," he nodded. "But after this, let's break off for the day. I'm getting sick of the sound of my own music."

It was an odd thing for Adam to say, and this time when he played their duet, Charlie noticed a marked change in the tenor of his voice; they were the same notes, but the emphasis he placed on them, changed the meaning of the music. Adam sounded weary, so that by the time their duet was finished, he was more eager to escape the music room than even Charlie.

"Let's get out of here," he sighed, closing his keyboard and pushing away from the instrument.

"Did you get enough sleep?" asked Charlie, as he closed the door to the music room behind them. "You came to bed really late last night."

"I suppose it's just new album jitters," Adam smiled tiredly. "Except for polishing our duet, everything is ready for the recording studio."

"So I only need polishing?" Charlie's voice was a little more hopeful.

"I suppose," shrugged Adam. "Right now, I don't care! For a few hours, I want to forget we even *have* a piano!"

"If you're done with me, do you mind if I study for my GED?"

Adam was pleasantly surprised. "I thought you gave up on that," he recalled.

"I did," reasoned Charlie, "but I changed my mind."

Adam smiled. It was good to see Charlie hoping for a future again. He just wasn't sure if it was going to be at a piano.

"Go study," he smiled, giving Charlie a quick kiss before she and Wally disappeared into the master bedroom to find her textbooks. For several minutes, Adam thoughtfully gazed at the master bedroom. Dave had told him that the duet was a love song, and it was. The rightful one to play it was Charlie, but Adam didn't know how to get her to connect with those notes. It wasn't enough to know them, or even to play them; she wasn't feeling the music, and it showed. It showed so badly, that even Dave was quick to recognize it.

Thoughtfully, Adam shoved his hands into his pockets. He was about to leave, when he heard Wally yapping and then Charlie's voice as she played with her puppy. A smile formed on Adam's lips. Instead of leaving, he went into the bedroom and found Charlie on the bed with a schoolbook on her lap, and Wally sitting on its open pages.

"Get off Momma's book," she was coaxing the dog. "Go on, Sweet Thing. Please, Wally? Momma needs to study!"

"Momma should try being more assertive," chuckled Adam, picking the puppy up and setting her on the floor. Hearing someone in the kitchen, Wally quickly left to see if anyone had dropped something on the floor for her to eat.

"Thanks," smiled Charlie. She propped her books against her knees and leaned back against the headboard to read. When Adam continued to quietly watch her, Charlie found it difficult to study. "I thought you said you were finished with me for awhile," she remarked.

"Would you mind going back to the music room?" wondered Adam. "I'd like to try something."

Charlie smiled ironically. "I hope you realize that you're getting in the way of me furthering my education. I don't think Melvin will want this leaked to the press."

Adam's insistence finally won out, and he led her back to the music room. Ready to attempt their duet again, Charlie took her place at the piano while Adam mysteriously locked the door.

"What are you doing that for?" she laughed. "Are you afraid I'm going to stink that badly?"

"Come away from the piano," urged Adam, motioning her to the sofa.

"I don't think a pep talk will do any good," sighed Charlie, as Adam sat beside her on the tattered couch. "Haven't you..." Charlie was cut short by Adam's kiss. Before things got too involved, Adam pulled away from Charlie's embrace and he took her back to the piano.

"Play," he urged.

"Now?" she asked in surprise.

"Do you know what this duet is about?" he inquired.

"It's about us."

Adam smiled encouragingly. "Then play what you're feeling at this very moment."

"I don't see how this will change anything," she sighed, "but I'll try." Before Charlie began, Adam kissed her once more. To Charlie's dismay, her head was now swimming so badly she was afraid of forgetting her memorized piece!

"Go on," coaxed Adam, taking a cautious step back and waiting for her to begin.

Uncertainly, Charlie's fingers hit the first few keys of the duet. The other notes came easier than she thought possible, and while she didn't think this was sounding better, she was certainly playing with more ease. When it was over, Adam went to his piano.

"Do that again," he requested. Adam sounded curious, as if he wasn't sure Charlie could repeat her performance.

"But how was I?" Charlie wanted to know.

Adam didn't want to make her nervous, and remained insistent without giving any opinions. "Just play," he nodded.

As they began the duet, Charlie couldn't help but notice the smiling face of her husband at the piano across from hers. So that was her answer. It was good. But for the life of her, Charlie couldn't understand why, for she was hitting the very same notes as before!

When the duet was over, Adam excitedly rushed out to find Dave.

With Dave planted on the sofa, Adam told Charlie to play the song once again. By now, Charlie was getting tired of the melody, and they hadn't gone halfway through the piece before Adam called it off.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "You had it exactly right only a minute ago!"

"I'm getting tired," sighed Charlie.

"Just one more time, so Dave can hear," begged Adam.

"My hands are stiff," complained Charlie.

"You're loosing the moment, Honey."

"What moment?" cried Charlie.

Adam sighed. He got up and went over to Charlie, giving her the biggest kiss he had ever dared in front of someone else. Dave hid a smile, and Adam went back to his piano. "One more time, Charlie-girl."

Charlie's head was swimming again, and she couldn't understand how Adam expected her to pay attention to the music if he kept kissing her like that! As their music began, the notes came bubbling up from within Charlie, and she was enjoying the duet more than any of their previous practice times. They were playing as one, and Charlie could feel it down to her very fingertips.

When the last note sounded, Dave clapped his hands as though the sun had come out after a long and heavy thunderstorm. "*That's* the sound you were lookin' for, Adam! I knew I wasn't gettin' it exactly right, but Charlie, you nailed it!"

"I did?" The young woman was surprised. "I admit, it sounded better than before, but it wasn't *that* big of a difference!"

"Oh, yes it was!" Adam hugged her happily. "Now we can go public with the duet!"

Charlie was encouraged. "You really think I'm ready for the recording studio?"

There was a small pause, and Adam smiled as though that wasn't quite what he had meant. Charlie couldn't put her finger on it, but something about Adam made her nervous. "You'll be ready when it's time to cut the album," he hugged her once more. "I'm so proud of you, Charlie!"

Dave flashed Adam a wary glance, but Adam wasn't ready to tell Charlie his news. He had to wait for the right time, and this wasn't it.

That night, Adam went to bed with Charlie in his arms. She fell asleep with the touch of his kiss still on her lips, and Adam was glad to see her looking so peaceful. After a few minutes, Charlie stirred, and they resumed their kissing. Deciding that the time was right, Adam pulled his mouth away from hers and gazed into her eyes.

"Don't tell me you want to play the duet right now!" teased Charlie.

Adam smiled and cradled her closer. "May I ask a favor?"

Charlie's playful voice turned to one of alarm, for she had only been joking. "I'm not going to the music room, Adam!"

"Practice time is over for today," he quickly assured her.

"Then what's this about?"

"Let me say my piece first, and then you can respond," he requested. "Just hear me out before you say 'no.'"

The terrible sinking feeling Charlie had had when he first told her of their joint interview with Norman Jones, suddenly returned. Prepared for the bad news, Charlie braced herself.

"There's a benefit concert to raise funds for an organization that runs homeless shelters across America," he explained. "It'll be a big event, and a lot of musicians from the industry are going to be there. Bill was contacted about my coming to perform some of my music, and I was thinking that I'd accept. Of course, I wouldn't be paid since this would be for charity."

So far, Charlie didn't have any problems accepting this news. However, the mere fact Adam waited until after they had made love to tell her this, caused Charlie some anxiety. There was more. She just knew there was.

"I was hoping," he cautiously pressed on, "that we could perform our duet together onstage."

Charlie groaned. "Tell me you're joking," she begged.

"It'll only be a few thousand people, Charlie. I'll be right there, and we'll have a good time!"

With a disbelieving laugh, Charlie shook her head. "You won't say that after I embarrass you in front of everyone!"

"This is a good thing," argued Adam. "Charlotte Clark can raise money to give homeless people shelter and a hot meal-- simply by showing up and playing one song in front of an audience. It's a wonderful opportunity, and I know you can do this!"

"You're using the homeless to make me feel guilty?" she lamented.

"This isn't about you, Charlie, it's about them."

There was silence, and then Adam felt Charlie heave a great sigh. "All right," she resigned herself, "if you think it'll help, I'll do it."

Hugging her even closer, Adam kissed his wife. He wondered if he should tell her about the television cameras, but decided that could wait until later.

Wally whimpered and pawed at her master's leg for attention. When that didn't work, she let out a small yap. A hand came down and hurriedly petted her head, and then it was gone. The puppy whimpered in protest and began to howl. This prompted a large, strong hand to pick her up and move her to the next room. Delighted with this new game, the puppy quickly scampered back, and returned to her master's feet.

"Can't you get Vera to take Wally for awhile?" asked Adam, looking under the piano at the small dog stationed beside Charlie's feet.

"She isn't hurting anything," insisted Charlie, bending down to give Wally another scratch behind the ears.

Adam laughed. "Then tell her to stop howling! If I knew that little fuzz-ball was going to get in the way of your practice..."

"Don't say that in front of you-know-who!" Charlie gasped indignantly. "Wally, don't you pay attention to a thing he says!"

Wally's tail wagged happily, as Charlie picked the puppy up and set it in her lap.

"That dog has never listened to me before," sighed Adam, "so I don't know why it should start now. Charlie, put the puppy down, and let's get back to work!"

Charlie kissed her playful Wally and put her back on the floor. As Charlie was about to start the duet with Adam, she suddenly broke out in peals of laughter.

"I'm sorry, Adam," laughed Charlie, "but Wally's licking my leg!"

Helplessly, Adam turned to his secretary working at the desk. "Could you do something about that dog?"

"Come here, Troublemaker," Dave clapped his hands to the Golden Retriever. "You need to leave them alone, Wally. The benefit concert is in a few days, and they need practice!"

Charlie sighed. The concert was fast approaching, and whenever she thought about it for too long, she would become frightened. To Adam, this was another concert, but for Charlie, this was the biggest opportunity she had ever had of making him look ridiculous in front of absolutely everyone. The music industry would be turning out in large droves to support this benefit, and Adam's peers would be there to see them play their duet for the very first time. When Charlie wasn't practicing, she was praying. She felt it would take a miracle to pull this off successfully.

The next day found Charlie in the master bedroom, packing for the flight into Texas where the concert would be held. Plodding around on the mattress, Wally tugged at Charlie's neatly folded clothing, and curiously sniffed every corner of the open suitcases.

Pulling his luggage out of the closet, Adam placed it on the bed and unzipped one side to begin his own packing. When Wally saw this new object, she eagerly investigated it as well.

"Bill will meet us at the airfield," said Adam, "and he's made a reservation for us at the hotel, so everything is all set. Do you think Chuck and Vera will be all right without us? I know we're taking Dave along, but after all the work he's put into this, I thought he should be there. It'll be a golden chance for him to meet others in the recording industry."

"I'm glad you invited him," approved Charlie. "Dave's certainly earned it."

Adam placed a few shirts into the suitcase while Wally stuck one paw inside to get a closer sniff. "Get out of there, Wally!" he exclaimed. "You're getting fur all over my clothes!"

"Daddy will be all right," answered Charlie, lifting her curious dog onto the floor. "Grandma and Mrs. Freemont will stay with him at Uncle Jerome's house while we're gone, so he should be fine. Will we have a chance to practice before the concert?"

"I doubt it," smiled Adam. "You could play the duet in your sleep, so I don't think you need any more work. Charlie," he suddenly sighed, "your dog is tugging at my shoe laces!"

"*You* were the one who bought her!" reminded Charlie, picking up the puppy to give her a loving hug.

Adam had bought Wally to make Charlie happy, and the animal was certainly fulfilling its purpose. Giving the dog a thankful pat, Adam went on with his packing; he was glad he could give Charlie something to make her smile a little wider, and her eyes just a little brighter. Adam

returned to the closet for another suitcase. "Are you sure you don't want to buy your dress in Palm Springs? I'd rather not do any shopping when we get into Houston."

"Spoken like a true man," laughed Charlie. "All right, I'll take Kevin with me, and we'll drive into Palm Springs after lunch."

"The jet will take off tomorrow morning," Adam warned jokingly, "so you don't have forever to find your dress!"

During lunch that afternoon, Charlie noticed Dave wasn't touching his food. "What's the matter?" she asked. "Aren't you hungry?"

"Not really," he sighed.

Charlie could only laugh. "You aren't feeling nervous about the concert, are you? You don't even have to go onstage!"

"All those important people will be there," Dave shook his head anxiously. "I feel like I'm crashin' a party I wasn't invited to."

"You were invited, because *I* was invited," Adam insisted. "When we arrive in Houston, you'll see what I mean. I won't be the only one who brought a personal manager or secretary."

Dave pushed away from the table. "My appetite is gone."

"I'm not gloating," observed Charlie, "but I didn't think you got nervous over *anything!*"

"Now you know," Dave smiled grimly.

"Dave, why don't you come with me?" invited Charlie. "I'm going into Palm Springs to find a dress for the duet, and it'll help get your mind off the trip. We should be back before evening."

Taking another bite of his lunch, Adam waited for Dave's response.

"My packin' is already done," sighed Dave, "so as long as I won't get under foot, I suppose it'd do me some good to get out for a few hours."

Charlie smiled at her bodyguard. "I'll be ready to go, just as soon as Kevin finishes his sandwich."

"Let me use the bathroom, first," Kevin replied, getting up from his chair. "If you're in such a hurry to get moving," he suggested, "why don't you pull the SUV up to the house, Charlie?"

"I don't suppose you'd let me drive?" she pleaded hopefully.

Kevin shook his head and tossed her the car keys. "Nope."

"How am I going to get my driver's license, if no one ever lets me drive?" argued Charlie.

"You don't have your license yet?" asked Dave in surprise. "I thought you were eighteen."

"I am," sighed Charlie, as Kevin headed for the bathroom, "but I've been so busy with other things, it hasn't come up."

"Why do you need to drive?" reasoned Adam, finishing the last of his coffee. "You have Kevin to take you anywhere you want to go."

With an understanding nod, Charlie explained her situation to Dave. "Adam doesn't like my driving."

"I like it," differed her husband. "I just feel more comfortable, when I'm behind the wheel."

"Ha!" laughed Charlie.

"If you can talk Kevin into it," laughed Adam, "then you have my blessing to do all the driving you want!"

Charlie's eyebrows shot up, as Adam's remark gave her an idea. "Come on, Dave," she announced, getting up from her chair, "let's go bring the SUV around."

At the sound of jingling keys, Wally began jumping up and down in excitement.

"Sorry, Girl," Charlie apologized. "You're staying home this time." With Wally barking at their heels, Charlie and Dave headed out the front door.

Adam frowned. Hadn't she forgotten something?

Just then, Charlie returned to get her purse. As she passed Adam, she gave him the good-bye kiss he had been expecting.

"Stay safe," Adam called after her.

After Charlie and Dave brought the SUV around to the front of the house, Charlie used the car remote to unlock the gates of Villa Rosa, and they automatically swung open.

"Aren't you goin' to wait for Kevin?" asked Dave in surprise.

Smiling, Charlie drove the vehicle through the gates and onto the paved road, away from Drywell.

"Uh, Charlie?" Dave was looking nervous. "Isn't it a bad idea to leave without your bodyguard?"

"We're only going into Palm Springs," resisted Charlie, "and besides, if Kevin came, he wouldn't let me drive."

Just then, Charlie's cell phone rang, and she handed it to Dave. "I think I'll let you be the one to talk to Adam," she laughed.

Hesitantly, Dave accepted the phone. "Hi, Adam," he greeted his boss. "Yeah, she left without Kevin. I told her it wasn't a good idea, but..." Dave paused as he listened. "Okay, I'll tell her. [pause] I can handle it, don't worry." Dave closed the cell phone and Charlie glanced at him suspiciously.

"You aren't going to wrestle the wheel away from me, are you?" she asked, half jokingly.

"Adam isn't too happy," informed Dave, "but he said as long as I stayed with you, you could keep goin'."

Charlie smiled behind the wheel. "It feels good to be free of hovering bodyguards with loaded weapons, doesn't it?"

"They're there for your protection," reminded Dave, putting Charlie's cell phone in his pocket. "While Kevin's not here, *I'm* in charge."

"For your information," Charlie laughed, "Kevin took his orders from *me*."

"I'm not Kevin." Dave was unflinching in his response, and he looked very uncomfortable.

"Do you want me to turn around and go back home?" she offered.

Immediately, Dave looked relieved. "I'd appreciate it," he sighed gratefully. "If anything happens to you, I'll be the one responsible."

Charlie winced, when she realized the situation she had placed him in. "I hadn't thought of it that way," she apologized. "You aren't paid to be my bodyguard."

"I don't mind lookin' out for a friend," replied Dave, checking behind his shoulder to see if they were being followed, "but I'm in over my head, Charlie. I shoulda told Adam that, when he asked me if I could handle this."

"I'm truly sorry, Dave."

"Hey," he smiled good-naturedly, "you weren't tryin' to put me on the spot. There's no harm done--" Before Dave could say another word, he realized their vehicle was slowing in the middle of the road. "Why are you stopping?"

"I'm not!" cried Charlie, checking the gauges around the steering wheel. "Oh, no!"

"What?" asked Dave.

"We're out of gas!" she cried in dismay.

"We can't be!" exclaimed Dave. "Didn't you check the gauge before we left?"

"No."

"See if you can glide the SUV over to the shoulder of the road," directed Dave. When they were safely parked out of the way of any oncoming traffic, Dave opened Charlie's cell phone to call Adam. "I don't believe this!" he muttered. "Charlie, your phone battery is dead!"

"I was going to charge it overnight," explained Charlie, "before we boarded the jet tomorrow morning. Isn't there a little juice left in the battery?"

In complete silence, Dave closed the dead satellite phone. He was so busy thinking, that when Charlie tried to make a suggestion, he asked her to be quiet. A few minutes later, he was finally ready to speak.

"I can't get out and go for help," he explained, "because that leaves you by yourself in the car. I can't take you with me, because out on that open stretch of desert road, you're exposed to anyone

that happens to drive by-- especially if they were followin' us in the first place." Dave turned about and quickly made sure all the locks on the doors were really secure.

"What are we going to do?" wondered Charlie.

"You're safer if we both stay here, and wait for help," concluded Dave. "If anything happens to you, it'll be my fault, and that's *not* the way I was hoping to repay Adam's kindness." Dave hit the dashboard with his fist. "This *can't* be happening!"

Just then, Dave noticed a vehicle in the rear view mirror. "Charlie, get down on the floor, and don't look up!" he ordered in his firm teacher's voice. Charlie obediently did as she was told, and when the car continued to keep going, Dave breathed a sigh of relief. "Okay, it's all clear. I don't know why I'm so relieved," he chided himself out loud. "I should be tryin' to wave down help."

"You're afraid someone will recognize me?" guessed Charlie.

Dave nodded. "I know as sure as I'm sittin' here, Adam will come lookin' for us when we don't show up this evening. I'd rather wait for the right kind of help, then panic and let you fall into the wrong hands."

"I'm sorry, Dave! This is all my fault!" Charlie scolded herself.

"I won't fight you on that," smiled Dave, leaning back in his seat and folding his arms for the long wait ahead of them.

Just then, Charlie remembered something, and crawled between the front seats and into the back of the SUV. "I forgot about our emergency gas tank! Kevin..." Charlie groaned as she remembered, "Kevin took the tank out to refill it, but I was supposed to put it back in, before I brought the car around to the front of the house."

"As long as you're back there," sighed Dave, "you might as well stay there. You can hide easier when a car comes."

"Dave..."

"I know," he chuckled, "you're sorry."

Before long, Charlie sat up and peered between the front seats.

"Stay back there, Charlie."

"Why?" she shrugged. "There's not a car in sight for miles."

"You'll make me feel easier, if you stay out of sight," insisted Dave. "Now get back there, and stay put!"

"You weren't kidding when you said you weren't Kevin," remarked Charlie, with a smile.

"Do it," he pleaded.

"Okay, you're in charge," she sighed, returning to her seat in the back. "Do you know what your problem is, Dave? You need to loosen up a little."

"I'll loosen up, *after* you're safe at home," he replied flatly. "Please, God, don't let anythin' else go wrong!"

There was silence for the space of five minutes, and Charlie couldn't hold still. "So," she asked, poking her head up front, "how is it you have a doctorate in music, and you wound up playing piano in some restaurant? Surely, you could find a better paying job than that!"

"You're worse than my little sister," chuckled Dave.

"You don't mind answering, do you?" asked Charlie.

"I reckon not," he shrugged. "Mom was ill after I graduated, and Dad needed me to help out at home. The restaurant was supposed to be a temporary gig, until I could find somethin' better."

"Then Adam hired you," smiled Charlie.

"One of the happiest days of my life," Dave grinned proudly. "Dad thought God was rewarding me for puttin' my career on hold for them all that time."

"He was," insisted Charlie.

"Maybe," shrugged Dave, "but I wasn't expectin' anything from God for doin' what was right in the first place. Charlie, get back in that seat, and stay there!"

"Okay, okay," she sighed. "I don't know what's gotten into me," she fidgeted. "I can't hold still!"

"Try harder," requested Dave.

Hours later, the sun began to set on the horizon, and Dave checked his watch. "It's six-thirty," he announced with a yawn. When there was no response from the back, Dave turned in his seat and saw that Charlie had fallen asleep.

Just as the sky went black with the onset of night, Dave saw a bright set of headlights cutting through the darkness ahead of them. To his infinite relief, he recognized the pickup truck as belonging to Adam. Dave unlocked his door and went to go greet the truck.

Adam was the first one out, followed by Kevin, and a second bodyguard. "Is she all right?" panted Adam in alarm.

"She's asleep in the back," nodded Dave. "She's hungry, but she's fine."

"Thank God!" prayed Adam, going to the SUV to find his wife. He unlocked a side door and saw Charlie curled up on one of the middle seats between the front and the very back of the vehicle. Adam lifted Charlie into his arms and held her while Kevin talked to Dave.

"Dave?" mumbled Charlie in a sleepy voice.

"It's Adam," her husband whispered. "Charlie, I never should have let you go without Kevin!"

"I'm sorry," apologized Charlie. "It wasn't Dave's fault, so please don't blame him."

"It's myself I blame," breathed Adam, hugging her tightly. "If anything had happened to you, I never would've forgiven myself!"

"I forgot to take your satellite phone instead of mine before we left," Charlie explained. "My battery died when Dave tried to call you for help."

"Adam," Kevin shouted, "I've refilled the gas tank on the SUV, so we can go home!"

With Charlie still safe in his arms, Adam carried his young wife back to the SUV and climbed in beside her in the back. Kevin got behind the wheel, while Dave and the second bodyguard followed in the pickup truck.

"After this," Adam sighed heavily, "I don't feel like getting on a flight to Texas. You scared me, Charlie."

"We're still going, aren't we?" she asked timidly. Charlie leaned her head against Adam's shoulder. "Just think of all those homeless who won't get shelter and a hot meal, if we don't show up as we promised."

"You're using the homeless to make me feel guilty?" chuckled Adam.

"Someone once told me the concert wasn't for us, but for them."

"Promise me not to leave my sight for a very long time," requested Adam, squeezing her hand tightly. "I don't want to go through that again."

Charlie smiled. "Even if that means you have to come with me when I go shopping in Houston?"

"Even that," he softly laughed.

Charlie kissed Adam and whispered "I love you," ever so faintly into his ear. Kevin couldn't hear up front, but when the two remained quiet for the rest of the drive home, the bodyguard correctly guessed they were kissing.

The next morning, Adam woke Charlie bright and early. Through their sliding glass door, she could hear the jet engines already warming up on the runway. Even so, Villa Rosa seemed unusually quiet, for the evening before, Vera, Chuck, and Mrs. Freemont had went to Jerome's house in Twin Yucca. Wally had gone with them, and the large estate seemed unusually empty without the rest of the family.

Charlie hurried to put the last of her things into a small bag for the flight, while Adam brushed his teeth in the master bathroom.

"Did you pack your tuxedo?" Charlie called to him from bedroom.

"Uh-huh," came Adam's response, just before he spit out his toothpaste into the sink. "And my shirts, and my socks."

"Do you have your sheet music?" she asked. "I've got mine tucked away in my purse so I can review it on the jet."

Hearing this, Adam appeared in the bathroom doorway with an amused look on his face. "I've got my music." He dried his mouth with a towel before tossing it aside.

"I've packed my jewelry," Charlie ran through her mental checklist, "and we'll get my dress in Houston. Makeup, stockings, shoes..." Charlie went to her dresser and pulled out some sanitary napkins. "And these, just in case my period starts. My satellite phone is charged, the house is locked up, so I guess that means I'm ready to go."

"Okay," smiled Adam, picking up his suitcase, and carrying one of Charlie's in his other hand. Charlie trailed behind with her second suitcase and a few small bags.

Dave was waiting for them in the living room, munching a handful of cashew nuts to stay calm. His bag was at his feet, and his face was looking a little pale.

"I hope you don't lose your breakfast on the jet," Charlie laughed nervously. "The way my tight stomach is feeling right now, I might follow your example!"

"Do you and Adam have your music?" Dave asked, following the small group out to the revving jet where Kevin and a second bodyguard were already waiting.

The desert sky was still dark as the private aircraft taxied down Villa Rosa's runway. Once they were airborne, Charlie reached above her seat and turned on a small overhead light. She took Adam's sheet music from her purse and laid it on her lap. While Adam watched her in amused silence, Charlie's fingers danced in the air as she practiced her music.

The flight to Houston only took them three hours. As promised, Bill met them at the airfield, and had the necessary transportation ready to take them to their hotel. While Adam's entourage sat in the back of their stretch limousine, Bill debriefed his famous client.

Bill was in very good spirits, and when he explained his news, Charlie understood why. "The arena is completely sold out!" he laughed. "Seventeen thousand seats, and they're all sold! This event will not only be broadcast live on network television, but the performances will be sold as an album to raise more money for the benefit! I'm telling you Adam, this thing is *big!*"

Charlie's mind was still numb with the "seventeen thousand seats," part of Bill's good news. Adam had told her there would only be a few thousand people in the audience, but seventeen sure didn't feel like a few thousand! The car lurched forward in the slow traffic, and Charlie suddenly had to vomit. Since there was no place to do it but the floor, Charlie's breakfast quickly came up and splashed onto Adam's shoe.

"Charlie, are you all right?" asked Adam, taking out his clean handkerchief and wiping her face.

"I feel sick," she mumbled.

At the sight of Charlie's mess, Dave suddenly realized he had to do the same. Before he could give warning, his breakfast soon joined Charlie's on the floor of the rented vehicle.

"Oh, great," Kevin muttered uneasily. "Everyone, don't look down until we reach the hotel."

"Are we there, yet?" Charlie asked weakly.

"Traffic's backed up all the way into downtown Houston," apologized Bill, trying not to look at the soiled carpeting. "I wouldn't be surprised if it's because everyone is coming in for the benefit concert."

Wearily, Charlie propped her head against Adam's shoulder.

"Do you feel any better?" asked Adam, brushing her long hair away from her pale face.

"A little," she smiled. "I'm sorry about your shoes."

Adam looked down and realized what she had been talking about. "Let me lean forward and see if I can't clean those up before we arrive at the hotel and all the cameras."

"Cameras?" whimpered Charlie.

"Honey," sighed Adam, "you knew this was a publicized event."

With a sigh, Charlie opened her purse and took out some lipstick. Adam was right, and she needed to pull herself together before the public had a chance to see her looking less than ready.

"You can lie down once we get inside," promised Adam. Charlie, however, was already beginning to feel better. Adam knew his young wife was having a bad case of nerves, and he smiled hopefully at her improvement. He only prayed she wouldn't be this sick when it was time to go onstage.

It took them most of that morning just to reach the hotel, prompting Adam to guess that they had spent more time waiting in congested traffic, than they had in actually flying to Houston.

Photographers milled around in the hotel's parking lot, trying to get snapshots of anyone recognizable as their vehicles pulled up at the front entrance. When Adam and Charlie stepped out of their limousine, the photographers descended like a swarm of locusts, each one snapping

pictures and shouting outlandish questions to make them look in their direction for a better photograph.

Since she was still feeling a little sick, Adam had been concerned Charlie might not hold up very well under the glare of the media. To his admiration, Charlie handled herself with the grace and poise expected of Wallace Shipley's wife.

Satisfied that the photo-op had been successful, Bill took his entourage into the hotel. Dave followed, occasionally pinching himself to see if he were dreaming.

Not wanting to keep Charlie's expensive jewelry in the hotel room, Adam went to the front desk and requested that they be placed in a safe deposit box.

"This hotel is booked solid for the concert," Bill informed Adam, as they made their way to one of the elevators.

Relieved that she had weathered the storm outside, Charlie was ready to relax, when a man quickly dashed to the elevator, just as the doors were closing. Adam reached out, and stopped the doors in time for the man to make it inside.

"Thanks," he nodded to Adam. "What a crowd, huh?" he ran a hand through his hair and Charlie suddenly recognized who she was sharing an elevator with!

"Hey," he suddenly smiled at Adam, "you're Wallace Shipley, aren't you?" He quickly shook hands with Adam. "I'm--"

"I know who you are," chuckled Adam. "My wife and I have enjoyed your latest album."

"You're familiar with it?" he laughed disbelievingly. "Wow! Wallace Shipley actually listens to my music!"

Charlie fought the urge to pull out the first slip of paper she could find in her purse and get his autograph. By the time she worked up her courage to ask, the elevator doors opened, and Seth Harding disappeared into his room.

"Adam, do you know who you were just talking to?" Charlie gasped in wonderment.

"Of course," smiled Adam. "The greatest concert pianist of my generation. Which way to our rooms, Bill?"

"That was *unbelievable!*" Dave excitedly whispered to Charlie.

"I can't believe Adam never asked for his autograph!" she lamented.

Bill showed them to their rooms, and Adam expected Charlie to collapse on the bed as soon as she had the chance. Instead, she went to the bathroom to clean up, and was soon ready to go shopping for her dress.

"You don't need it until the day after tomorrow," pointed out Adam, taking off his shoes to lounge around the hotel room.

"Please, Adam?"

"I thought you weren't feeling well," he observed with a small laugh.

Charlie dismissed his concern. "That was in the car," she shrugged.

"All right, if you want, let's go," he smiled, pulling his shoes back on. "I'd better warn the guys." Adam stepped across the hallway and knocked on Kevin's door. "We're going out," he informed the bodyguards.

Kevin nodded, and the two men joined Adam while Charlie checked her lipstick one last time before leaving. Having had the pleasure of escorting Charlie on her last attempt to find a dress, Dave decided to remain at the hotel with Bill.

Once outside, Charlie could hear the fans that had gathered around the hotel entrance to catch a glimpse of Wallace Shipley.

Their chauffeur hadn't had time to clean the vomit from the floor of the limousine, and he looked anxious to not be yelled at. To his relief, the famous musician didn't blame him for incompetence, and the man relaxed.

To the chant of "Wal-lace, Wal-lace," Adam and Charlie climbed inside their limousine. It wasn't as though Adam didn't appreciate his fans, but their devotion was sometimes a little embarrassing.

"It comes with the territory," he smiled good-naturedly. "Hopefully, they're not just here because of me."

As Adam said this, their limousine passed a man holding a sign with Charlie's name on it, followed by the words, "I love you!"

Charlie groaned and stopped watching the people outside her window. It was too much.

Adam tightly gripped Charlie's hand. "You're not going anywhere without Kevin, do you hear me?" He put a protective arm around his wife and adamantly shook his head. "If you want to practice your driving skills, I'll go with you and Kevin and keep an eye on things from the back seat."

"Adam, I'm sure that man was just one of your overzealous fans. His sign didn't mean anything."

"Maybe not," frowned Adam, "but for every individual like that, there's a hundred more who don't carry signs so I can see them coming. It's not safe, Charlie."

"I won't run off like that again," she promised.

Since the warehouse clothing outlets were popular with shoppers, Charlie had to go to the more exclusive boutiques-- just to escape the possibility of being mobbed by fans. This was not one of those times where Charlie could hope to get away without Adam being recognized; advertisements for the benefit concert were everywhere, and Adam's face was on every one of them.

To save Adam the discomfort of running around from store to store, Charlie tried very hard to not be too choosy when it came to picking a dress. Most gowns were cut so low in front, Charlie never would have dared to wear them outside the bedroom. She finally settled on an elegant black gown, that complimented her figure.

"That dress will look good with diamonds," Adam smiled. "Since we're already out and about downtown Houston, I'd like to do a little shopping, myself."

"This is spur-of-the-moment," she observed in surprise.

"Not exactly," hesitated Adam. "I just thought I'd be picking up my purchase tomorrow, instead of today."

"What are you talking about?" asked Charlie.

Adam wouldn't say, and after they climbed back in the rented wheels, Adam whispered something to the driver up front.

"Sure thing," the driver nodded. "Do you want me to stop and clean the floor, first?" he offered. "I know it can't be smelling too good back there."

Adam laughed, and the driver pulled over to do a little housekeeping. When everything was ready, the limousine made its way down one street after another, before parking in front of an elegant jewelry store.

"Why are we here?" asked Charlie, as Adam helped her out of the car. Kevin and the second bodyguard stayed close at their side as Adam and Charlie went into the fancy store.

"May I help you?" asked a smartly dressed woman.

"My name is Adam Clark, and I'm here to pick up my item," explained Adam. "I was told it was ready."

The woman's face brightened into a warm smile. "This way, please." She took them to some expensively upholstered seats, and disappeared in back of the store. Soon, she reappeared with a case in her hands, and a clipboard. "I hope this meets your satisfaction," she smiled, placing the slender black case into Adam's hand. "It was precisely made to your specifications."

Adam opened the velvety case and showed it to Charlie. "I think it should do, don't you, Charlie-girl?" Inside, was a delicate diamond bracelet. "I thought it'd go well with your necklace and engagement ring," he smiled.

"Oh, Adam!" Charlie breathed in amazement. "It's beautiful!"

"She likes it," Adam smiled to the woman.

After signing some papers and paying for the expensive piece of jewelry, Adam and Charlie got back into the waiting limousine.

"Now, we can go back to the hotel," he smiled, as Charlie opened her box to look at her bracelet. "It's pretty, isn't it?"

"I don't know how to thank you," sighed Charlie in wonderment. "It's simply exquisite!"

"Charlie," smiled Adam, "you've been paying me, ever since you said you'd marry me."

Feeling tears coming to her eyes, Charlie fought to keep them back. Not trusting her voice, she smiled at Adam, and he sighed contentedly.

When Charlie reached the security of their hotel room, she climbed on the bed and closed her eyes for a nap before lunch. As she fell asleep, Charlie felt Adam lie down beside her.

The next day, Adam took Charlie and Dave to the arena where the benefit concert was going to be held. The place was huge, and as Charlie looked at row upon row of seating, she understood why Bill had said this place could hold seventeen thousand people. In the center of everything, a large stage had been constructed where sports were usually played.

"They hold tennis championships here," Adam informed them.

Cables littered the stage as Hugh Nelson took Adam and Charlie to the place their pianos would be situated. As one of the organizers of the event, Hugh was deeply involved with almost every aspect of the benefit concert.

"I can't tell you how much we appreciate you and Charlie coming," Hugh thanked them. "Many of the tickets we sold were due to you, Adam."

"I find that hard to believe," chuckled Adam. "I met Seth Harding in the elevator this morning, so you can't tell me everyone's turning out just because of Wallace Shipley!"

"Seth may be an extremely talented classical pianist," smiled Hugh, "but he's not Wallace Shipley." When Hugh saw that Adam still didn't believe him, he laughed. "The same hour it was publicized that you and Charlie were going to be here, I couldn't sell the tickets fast enough!"

Adam didn't look as though he really wanted to hear that, for it only added pressure to his already heavy burden of celebrity. "I'm glad we could help out," he sighed in a resigned voice.

"You've got a good thing going with Wallace Shipley," remarked Hugh, encouragingly. "I appreciate your using him to promote this benefit concert."

That night, Charlie had trouble going to sleep. It was little comfort to her that Adam couldn't sleep, either. He tried to get romantic with her, knowing that it was usually the way she coaxed him out of insomnia, but this time, it didn't work. Charlie was too preoccupied over tomorrow to feel very romantic, and so they retreated to the sofa to watch television.

"I'm sorry I'm not much help to you, tonight," Charlie apologized, as Adam flicked through the channels for something to watch.

"It's all right," he smiled, "you can make it up to me, later."

Charlie was just getting comfortable on the couch, when a television commercial aired for tomorrow's concert. Adam looked uncomfortable when he saw the ad heavily played off the fact that he was going to be there.

"It's not about you," Charlie reminded him, "it's about the people you're helping."

"I feel as though I'm looking at someone's else's life, and not my own," Adam mused.

Tenderly, Charlie took Adam's hand and kissed his fingers. "This is your life," she murmured quietly. Clicking off the television, Charlie took Adam back to the bedroom.

The day of the benefit concert started with Adam and Charlie sleeping in. They didn't need to show up at the arena until after lunch, and Adam decided it would be best for them to get as much rest as possible before the big event. Besides, it gave him more time with Charlie. Adam was in no hurry to rush out of her arms, and he used any legitimate excuse he could find, to remain where he was.

After lunch, Adam gathered their two garment bags, while Charlie picked up a suitcase with the things they would need in the dressing room, and both climbed into the waiting limousine with Dave and the rest of the guys.

"Melvin said this is going to be some of the best publicity you've ever had," Bill told Adam, as their car slowly made its way down the traffic congested streets to the arena. "He said to tell you that he and his family will be watching the show from home, and that he's rooting for both of you."

"From home?" asked Charlie. Then she remembered that the event would be airing live on network television, and remained silent for several minutes.

When their rented limousine arrived at the arena, Hugh greeted the group and took them through the growing crowd waiting to get in for the show to start. It was still early, and they had a while longer to wait before the doors would open to the public.

"I'll take you to your dressing room," said Hugh, leading them down several long corridors, "and I'll send in the hairdresser and makeup artists, when you're ready for them. My assistant will help you find everything you need, but he can reach me anytime you want, so don't hesitate to ask if you have any questions. George!" shouted Hugh, as a man walked by them with a heavy bundle of wound cord over his shoulder, "where are you going with that? Marie has been waiting onstage, for the last fifteen minutes! Get that cord to her, before I have to find someone else who will!"

The man apologized, and hurried off.

"If you'll excuse me," Hugh smiled to his guests, "I think I'm needed onstage. Ray, take good care of Mr. Clark and his family," he directed, handing them off to his assistant. Then Hugh excused himself, obviously busy with all the things he had to juggle before the concert began.

"Would any of you like something to eat?" inquired Ray, as everyone filed into the dressing room. "Mrs. Clark, you and your husband can change in the next room while your friends wait here," he explained, as Adam carried their bags into an adjoining room. "I can bring coffee and donuts anytime you want them," he smiled.

"I'll take some of that," nodded Kevin with a grateful smile. The other men joined in, and Ray left for the promised refreshments.

While the guys snacked on donuts, a hairdresser washed and styled Charlie's hair into an elegant twist that pulled her long brown mane off her shoulders. Then a makeup artist worked on Charlie, while another readied Adam.

While Dave and the others watched and waited, Adam practiced on the single piano in their dressing room. Before Charlie changed into her gown and put on her diamond necklace and bracelet, she took her turn at the piano and ran through her half of the duet. Adam was scheduled to play three numbers at the concert, and their duet would be the very last song of the entire show. Hugh was saving the best for last, and hoping to close out the concert with the performance that everyone was waiting to see. When Charlie was satisfied that she hadn't forgotten any of the notes, Adam returned to the piano and simply had a good time playing music, as he usually did when there were no pressing matters on his mind. Charlie was happy to see Adam so relaxed, and only wished she could feel the same.

When Charlie finished getting ready, Adam beheld her with pride. He had been right about the black gown going well with diamonds. The diamond necklace he had given Charlie on her eighteenth birthday, highlighted her lovely face, while the sparkling engagement ring and

wedding band on her left hand complimented her slender fingers. Completing this picture of elegance, Charlie's new bracelet daintily hung from her wrist in a very becoming fashion.

"You look beautiful, Charlie-girl," Adam sighed tenderly.

He didn't dare crush her hair with an embrace, but kissed her hand and smiled. Adam was looking very striking, dressed in his designer tuxedo and black dress shoes with white socks.

"White socks?" Charlie suddenly realized. "Adam, you can't go out there in black dress shoes and white socks!"

"The world isn't going to end because I forgot to bring black socks," Adam tried to calm her down.

Charlie hurried into the adjoining room and examined everyone's feet. "Dave, could Adam borrow your socks?" she asked frantically.

"What's the matter?" asked Dave, quickly taking off his shoes. "Did Adam's socks catch on fire, or somethin'?"

"No, they're white!" cried Charlie.

Much to Charlie's dismay, Adam laughed at her anxiety. "Take it easy, Honey! Everything will be all right!" Charlie wasn't easy, however, until he was wearing Dave's black socks.

As starting time grew closer, Bill turned on the television set in the dressing room so they could watch.

"When we're ready for you," explained Ray, "Hugh will make sure you're in place at the right time. We prefer you not to look directly into any of the television cameras, so just try to relax and have fun!"

Charlie smiled grimly. There was that advice to have fun again.

Before the show began, a television crew came to the dressing room and briefly interviewed Adam about the pieces he would be playing. Those clips would be interspersed along with the concert, for the benefit of the viewing audience at home.

Outside their dressing room door, Charlie could hear the noise of countless people, as their voices echoed down the long corridor to where they were waiting.

Adam took Charlie's hand, and the group bowed their heads in prayer. With all the loud clamoring outside, it was difficult for Charlie to pay attention to the sound of Adam's voice as he asked God for His blessing. But Adam won out, and Charlie added her own silent petition to her husband's prayer. "Don't let me fail," was her unspoken request.

The television came to life as an announcer welcomed the viewing audience to the benefit concert that was raising money for the homeless shelters across America. Music played, and a popular band went out to perform their number to the wild cheers of the crowd.

Adam waited in the adjoining room with Charlie, for she didn't want to watch. Her stomach was in knots, and when Dave rushed to the bathroom to lose his coffee and donuts, it didn't help to steady Charlie's nerves. Closing the door for some privacy, Adam sat in a chair next to Charlie and quietly held her hand.

After a few minutes, someone knocked on their door and Hugh stuck his head in. "Adam, your first number is next," he announced. "I need to have you in place, so the show can transition as smoothly as possible."

"I'll be back in a few minutes," Adam kissed Charlie. "Wait for me."

Charlie nodded, and Adam disappeared out the door with Hugh. On the television in the next room, she could hear the announcer say Adam's name and the applause of the audience as he walked onstage.

"He's so brave," Charlie thought to herself. She didn't have the courage to watch his performance, but listened intently from the next room as Adam's music began. She thought he sounded as brilliant as always, and was very proud of him by the time his composition was over. The audience loved him, and the applause was so loud, Charlie could hear it from the dressing room.

When the show went to a commercial break, Adam rejoined Charlie and smiled encouragingly at his nervous wife. "It was easy," he winked at her.

She laughed, and held onto his hand until he was called away for his second number. Charlie wished their duet wasn't the very last performance of the entire concert, for all this waiting was hard on her.

"I'm getting them warmed up for you," Adam had chuckled.

The evening wore on, and Charlie was beginning to think her waiting would never end. When it was time, however, Charlie felt as though it were happening too soon.

"Okay, Charlie-girl," smiled Adam, taking her hand in his. "Just follow my lead, and be yourself. I'll be with you the entire time, all right?"

"Uh-huh," Charlie breathed in between gulps.

"This way," directed Hugh, leading the couple from their dressing room and through a maze of hollow corridors. The closer they came to the center of the arena, the louder Charlie could hear the audience. Clinging tightly to Adam's hand, Charlie followed him through bustling technicians and people with headsets, as Hugh led them to the stage. The lights were dim, as everyone behind the scenes got in place for the next number.

Adam took Charlie to her piano, gave her one last kiss, and sat down at the instrument across from hers-- just the way they had had the pianos set up back home. The crowd was buzzing with excitement, and once or twice started clapping too soon.

Then an announcer boomed over the speakers, "Ladies and Gentleman, Wallace Shipley and his wife, Charlotte," here the audience was so loud they drowned out the announcer's voice with their enthusiastic applause. "Performing for their very first time together!" finished the announcer.

The stage lights went on, and Charlie suddenly found herself bathed in bright light. The audience went silent, and her hands trembled. Charlie instinctively looked to Adam for help. He winked at her, and nodded for her to begin. Adam couldn't start playing unless she did, for she opened the duet.

In a split second of panic, Charlie wished she had taken one last look at her sheet music before stepping onstage. Her courage promptly returned by the very next second. Adam was counting on her, and she was determined to not let him down. Her trembling hands reached out for the familiar keys before her, and music sounded as the duet began.

Then Adam's piano joined Charlie's, and while the two played, Hugh guessed that he could have heard a pin drop, for everyone's attention was riveted to the famous musician and his wife. The composition was simply entitled, "Us," and it was appropriately named. The two piano voices intertwined seamlessly into one song, so that no one piano had the lead for very long. It was the very essence of teamwork, and of something more-- a relationship where each depended upon the other in such a unifying way, that even Hugh momentarily lost himself in their harmony.

Then came the more technically demanding part of the duet, and Charlie's fingers nimbly ran across the keyboard as though she had been doing this her entire life. Her training was kicking in, and Charlie made the finger coordination in the music look effortless. She was dimly aware of the hushed audience as she played, but it wasn't to them that her music was directed. It was to Adam, the one who loved her with all the strength a man was capable of. Charlie played with passion, so that when she came to the final bars of music, she was suddenly sad it was over.

As the last key sounded, the audience exploded into loud applause. Adam stood up from his piano and went to Charlie, his face beaming proudly. He kissed her hand, and they bowed to the audience. To Adam's shock, they received a standing ovation! Numbly, Charlie looked over the sea of flashing camera lights and applauding people. She had never seen so many people in one place in her entire life!

Closing music played from the loudspeakers, and the announcer reminded everyone to donate money to the nearest homeless shelter in their area. The stage lights went dim, and Hugh escorted the couple offstage.

"Well done!" exclaimed Hugh, shaking Adam's hand, and then Charlie's. "I confess, I thought the duet was going to be something of a publicity stunt, but that was brilliantly executed! I've got to hand it to you Adam, you married a talented woman!"

"I had very good teachers," answered Charlie, as Dave and the other men joined them. "Hugh, this is Dave Walker. He and Adam were my music teachers."

Just then, Seth Harding approached the group and congratulated them on an excellent performance. After exchanging a few words with Adam and Charlie, Seth turned to Dave. "I've heard about you," he smiled.

"You have?" asked Dave in surprise.

"When Wallace Shipley touches something, it turns to gold," grinned Seth. "I envy you." The internationally acclaimed pianist shook hands with Dave, and walked away.

Dumbfounded, Dave stood there, rigidly staring at his hand. "Seth Harding shook my hand!" he exclaimed excitedly. Then Dave had to rush off and find a bathroom, to lose more coffee and donuts.

The blitz of people rushing them after the show was worse than the show itself, and Charlie found herself wanting to go back to the hotel. For Dave's sake, Charlie held her tongue, for she wanted her music teacher to get some deserved recognition for his share of her success that

night. A lot of people wanted to meet Wallace Shipley and his talented wife, but Adam waited for Dave to return from the bathroom, before mingling into the crowd. While Charlie carefully kept to Adam's side, Adam introduced Dave to the important people he knew in the music industry.

When they got into their rented limousine a few hours later, Charlie's stomach lurched, and she lost her food on the recently cleaned floor. "I feel sick," she mumbled, leaning back in her seat.

"I think I'm comin' down with a stomach bug," Dave informed her apologetically. "I thought I was only experiencing nerves today, but my forehead is hot, and I'm runnin' a fever."

"That explains my upset stomach," smiled Charlie. "At least I didn't throw up while I was onstage!"

"Charlie, I want you to see a doctor after we get home," instructed Adam, placing a hand on her forehead. "You did very good, Honey." In spite of her stomach bug, Adam kissed Charlie. "God was good to us, tonight," he happily affirmed.

The next day, Dave's nausea was worse, and he was unable to hold down any breakfast before boarding the jet for their flight back to Villa Rosa.

Charlie, however, was feeling much better. "Dave," she teased, as he sat in his seat clutching a can of soda to ease his nausea, "since you were the one who gave me this stomach bug, it's only fair that you should suffer more than me!"

After they arrived at Villa Rosa three hours later, Adam and his bodyguard went to bring Vera, Chuck, and Mrs. Freemont home. Not to Charlie's surprise, Vera was full of excitement, for everyone in Twin Yucca was talking about the benefit concert. The house was sounding full of life and activity, as Wally scampered from person to person, welcoming her humans with hello licks and begs for attention.

After excusing himself, Dave retreated to his bungalow to recover from his stomach bug.

Even though Charlie's nausea seemed to come and go, and she had yet to develop a fever, Adam still wanted her to see a doctor. After a few days of resisting Adam's prodding, he was finally able to talk her into a checkup.

"I'd feel better if you went," Adam thanked his wife.

After Charlie went to see her doctor, they ran some tests to see if they could find anything wrong. She was taking a medication on the clinical trial she was on, and Charlie's doctor was concerned that it might be causing some complications. A thorough examination was done, and Charlie went home with the promise of a later phone call to hear her test results.

While Dave rested in his bungalow, Charlie kept him full of chicken broth and visited him often. Wally frequently tagged along at her heels, and a week later, Dave was back to his old self.

Though grateful that his friend was feeling better, Adam was still praying Charlie would get over her stomach bug.

Then Charlie's doctor called with his diagnosis. What the doctor had to say, would test Adam's love in a way he had never expected.

"Blessed is the man [Adam] that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."

~ Psalm 1:1-3 ~

Chapter Sixty

Trusting Charlie

"Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life."

~ Proverbs 31:10-12 ~

When the phone rang, Vera was the first to answer the call. She had been fixing dinner with Mrs. Freemont, while Charlie tried to keep Chuck from getting under foot as he wandered about the kitchen.

"Why don't you play with Wally, Daddy?" Charlie patiently suggested to her father.

Chuck's eyes narrowed, as if confused by who this Wally person was.

"Our dog?" smiled Charlie, giving his memory a gentle nudge.

At this, Chuck nodded that he understood. "Wally," he called to the dog begging at Charlie's feet. Wagging her tail happily at the sound of her own name, Wally came bounding to Chuck and he took the dog into the living room to play with some of the squeaky toys Adam had bought at the pet store.

When Charlie heard Wally's excited barks, she smiled and returned her attentions to helping get dinner on the table.

"Charlie," called Vera, beckoning her to the telephone, "it's your doctor."

"Oh?" Charlie was hopeful that he could confirm her stomach bug, so Adam would stop being so concerned. She dried her hands on a dishcloth, and went to the phone. "Hi, Dr. Alberts. Have my test results come in?"

"They sure have," he answered. "I can safely say that you do *not* have a stomach bug, flu, or cold."

"I don't?" Charlie was alarmed. She had thrown up lunch that very afternoon, and had been assuring herself that it would all go away in a few more days.

"Are you sitting down?" chuckled the doctor.

"Just tell me," Charlie braced herself. "What is it?"

"Charlotte, you're pregnant."

The words didn't sink in, and Charlie thought she certainly must have heard him wrong. "Could you say that again?" she asked. "I don't think I heard you correctly."

"You're going to have a baby," chuckled Dr. Alberts. "Now that we know the cause of your mysterious nausea, I don't want you taking any more of the medication your clinical trial has you on. Since it's an experimental drug, we wouldn't want anything adversely affecting the baby."

Numbly, Charlie listened to her doctor, only half understanding what he was telling her. She knew she should be feeling joy, but the only emotion that surfaced was fear. What about the Overholt curse? What if her baby inherited the gene? Panic welled inside Charlie, and she struggled to hang up the phone when Dr. Alberts had finished talking.

Nearby, Vera was putting a sheet of biscuits into the oven when she noticed Charlie's pale face. "Pumpkin? Are you all right? What did the doctor say?"

The words wouldn't come, and all Charlie could do was shake her head. She and Adam had decided not to have any children because of what that child might inherit. Trembling, Charlie went to the kitchen table and sat down. When her child would need her most growing up, she could very well be sick with AD. It would be hard enough on Adam, but the thought of a child going through such heartache, made tears come to Charlie's eyes.

"No, God," she whispered pleadingly. "Cause this to be a mistake!"

"Adam!" Vera called him from the kitchen. "You'd better come!" The concerned old woman checked Charlie's forehead and asked once more what the doctor had said.

As Charlie was finding her voice, Adam hurried into the room. "What's going on?" he asked. Then he saw Charlie and quickly went to her side. "What's wrong, Charlie?"

"She just had a call from her doctor," Vera informed him, going to get a glass of water, for Charlie looked as though she could faint.

"Charlie," Adam rubbed her hand between his own, "what did he say?"

Charlie blinked at Adam and swallowed hard. "He said I'm pregnant."

The words nearly knocked Adam over, and he suddenly needed to sit down himself. Stunned, he sat there numbly, trying to make sense of his own thoughts. "That's *impossible!*" he finally breathed in disbelief. "There must be a mistake!"

Puzzled by the way Adam and Charlie were accepting this happy news, Vera continued to make sure her granddaughter didn't pass out. "Charlie, drink some water," she urged, holding the cup to Charlie's lips.

"Is he sure?" asked Adam.

Charlie nodded that her doctor was sure, and took a sip from the glass that Vera was offering.

Adam was now fighting back panic and the thoughts that came tumbling into his mind. For any other man this would be welcome news, but for him... Hating the direction that his thoughts were taking, Adam struggled to push it all aside and think more calmly. "Okay," he breathed, "okay." Then he saw the fear and guilt in Charlie's face, and Adam closed his eyes in dread. This was all coming too quickly!

"Charlie, you need to lie down," instructed Vera, helping her granddaughter up from the table. She gave Adam a cross look, as if to scold him for not thinking of this himself.

"I'm not tired," resisted Charlie, fighting the tears that were coming to her eyes.

Vera would hear none of it. Charlie was pale, and Adam was looking shaken. Concerned, Vera took Charlie to the master bedroom and insisted that she get some rest. Then Vera hurried back to the kitchen to confront Adam.

"What is *wrong* with you?" she cried. "Charlie is crying, and here you sit in the kitchen!"

"Vera," Adam took a deep breath, "you don't understand."

"What don't I understand?" asked Vera, trying very hard not to be angry with Adam.

Numbly, Adam grabbed the glass of water Vera had poured for Charlie and frantically took a drink. "I can't have children," he blurted, setting the trembling cup back on the table.

"I know about your diagnosis," sighed Vera, "but obviously, your doctor was wrong."

Adam forced himself to take a deep breath. "When I saw Charlie gazing at Maggie's baby, I didn't tell Charlie, but I went back to the doctor and I had several more tests done. I can't father children, Vera. It's an impossibility."

Vera opened her mouth but was so stunned, that she closed it without saying a single word. By now, Mrs. Freemont was listening. She couldn't help but hear, for she was standing at the stove, quietly stirring a pot of sauce for dinner.

Suddenly, Adam jumped to his feet and slammed the table so hard that Vera was afraid he might break his hand. "I don't care!" he yelled angrily. "I don't care if a *hundred* doctors tell me it's impossible-- that baby is *mine*! Charlie would never do that to me! I know her! If I don't know my Charlie-girl, then I don't know *anyone*!" Adam's chest was heaving, and his eyes flashed at Vera with such vehemence, the old woman could only stare. "Tell me I'm right!" Adam pleaded helplessly. "Tell me I'm a terrible person for doubting her for even a second!" Tears were coming to Adam's eyes and he gritted his teeth. "That baby is mine," he breathed. "No one is going to say differently!"

Numbly, Vera wiped the table with her dishtowel. "My granddaughter loves you."

"She does," Adam quickly affirmed. He wiped his tears and clenched his jaw resolutely. "I'd better go to her. You said she's crying?"

Vera nodded.

"Okay," Adam forced himself to inhale deeply. His heart kept screaming that Charlie would never be unfaithful, but the guilty look he saw in her eyes when she told him that she was pregnant, haunted him. What if he hadn't been enough to make Charlie happy, and she had sought someone else's arms-- someone younger-- someone able to satisfy her. Hating himself for these thoughts, Adam struggled to fight back his fears. Charlie had been visiting Dave a lot lately, and Vera had warned him not to let such a good-looking young man into their midst. What if Dave had been too much temptation for Charlie? Gritting his teeth, Adam violently forced his jealousy aside. He didn't care what sight told him. He didn't care that reason sounded so persuasive. He trusted Charlie. It simply came down to trust. Even though he couldn't explain Charlie's pregnancy, he trusted her.

Calmer now, Adam smiled bravely at Vera. "Don't tell her," he requested. Then he turned to Mrs. Freemont. "Please, don't tell anyone what you heard me say. Charlie doesn't deserve my distrust."

Mrs. Freemont nodded. "I agree with Vera," the housekeeper put in her opinion. "Charlie hasn't cheated on you."

"I know," Adam breathed quietly. As he crossed the courtyard, he could hear Charlie weeping in their bedroom. Taking a deep breath, Adam pushed open the door and found his beautiful young wife on the bed, sobbing into her pillow. She looked about as helpless as he was feeling.

With compassion, Adam crawled onto the bed and turned Charlie over so she was facing him. "Don't cry," he soothed, brushing away her tears with his gentle hand.

"It's all my fault!" she wept.

Adam swallowed hard, but continued to cling to his trust in Charlie. Unless she told him outright that she had been unfaithful, he refused to believe it.

"My fault!" she wept again.

"What is?" asked Adam. "Why are you crying, Charlie?"

"The baby's going to get AD because of *me*!" she wept.

Hearing this, Adam moaned and leaned his forehead against hers. "Is that why you're feeling guilty? Honey, we don't know the baby will inherit AD. It has a fifty percent chance of not having the gene at all."

"But," Charlie continued to weep, "it's going to grow up without a mother!"

"Hey, now," Adam brushed the hair away from her tearstained face, "we don't know that, either. There's hope, Charlie. You may very well have a long and full life ahead of you, so don't give up so quickly!"

Burying her face against Adam's shirt, Charlie continued to cry. She had felt like crying for the past few days, but hadn't had a good excuse to break into tears until now.

Quietly, Adam hugged his wife. Fear kept nipping at his heels, but Adam continued to remind himself that he loved and trusted Charlie.

After Charlie had had a good cry, she went into the bathroom to clean her face.

Adam remained on the bed, thoughtfully silent.

"I feel so ridiculous," confessed Charlie, running a little water into the bathroom sink and splashing it onto her face. "Expectant mothers are supposed to be happy, and I'm acting as though someone has just died! Oh, Adam! Whoever thought this would happen to us? I thought you couldn't have kids!"

"Yeah," muttered Adam. He paused. "Charlie..." When Adam didn't finish his thought out loud, Charlie came into the bedroom with a towel to dry her face.

"What?" she asked.

Adam groaned and looked very uncomfortable. "If I'm not completely honest with you," he sighed, "I know what's going to happen to me."

"What are you talking about?" puzzled Charlie, finishing with the towel and letting it drop to the floor so she could get back on the bed with Adam. As Charlie rested her head against Adam's chest, he sighed heavily.

"I love you," he reminded her, "and that means I trust you." At this, Charlie's head bobbed up and she stared at him hesitantly.

"What are you trying to tell me?" she wondered.

"According to what my doctor told me," explained Adam, "I can't father any babies."

"I guess you should've gotten a second opinion," smiled Charlie, "because your doctor was wrong!"

"I *did* get a second opinion," informed Adam. "And a third, and a fourth."

Charlie was no longer smiling. After a moment or two to reflect on the situation, she straitened her back and folded her arms indignantly. "So?" she asked.

The unflinching gleam in her eyes did Adam's heart a lot of good, and he half wanted to back out of finishing his thought out loud.

"Don't think you can stop there, Adam Wallace Clark," pressed Charlie.

Adam winced. He always knew he was in trouble when she used his full name.

"Go on," she demanded. "Now that I think about it, you've been pretty quiet through all this, and now I think I understand why."

"Then tell me," asked Adam.

"Oh no," Charlie shook her head, "if you want me to answer that question, you're going to have to be the one to say it-- not me." She looked at him accusingly. "Well? Aren't you going to say it?"

"Charlie," sighed Adam, "this isn't easy."

"If you actually DO say it, I should *hope* it isn't easy!" she exclaimed.

"I'm not going to ask," replied Adam, "because I already know the answer. I just wanted..." he hesitated. "I need you to understand the temptation I'm under right now."

Charlie's bottom lip quivered, and fresh tears welled in her brown eyes. "You don't believe me?"

"Of course I believe you," he sighed. "Please, don't take it that way, Charlie!"

"Which way am I *supposed* to take it?" she cried. "You think I might have been un-- unfaithful!" All her weeping had given her the hiccups, and Charlie suddenly found it difficult to talk uninterrupted.

"I don't think that," Adam tried to assure her, patting her back to help ease the hiccups.

"Then wha-- what temptation are you ta-- talking about?"

"I know you wouldn't have an affair with anyone but me--"

"Thank you!"

"But," continued Adam, "I'm having a little trouble explaining the baby to myself."

"And what is yourself saying?" pressed Charlie, her hiccups backing off with renewed indignation.

With a sigh, Adam rubbed his eyes and looked at his wife. "The doctors told me this was impossible."

Indignantly, Charlie put her hands on her hips. "And who are you going to believe... the doctors, or your wife?"

"Even though I can't explain it," replied Adam, "and even though I don't think my doctors can either, I choose to believe my wife."

"You do?" Charlie looked at him hopefully.

Adam smiled. "I do."

"Then, how are you going to explain all this to yourself?" she tested.

"Well," Adam sighed thoughtfully, "if I trust my wife, which I do, I suppose the only alternative left me, is to believe that God pulled off the impossible."

"But," Charlie wondered, "why would God do that, when it'll probably pass on the AD gene to yet another generation?"

Adam quietly regarded his wife and then smiled. "I don't think this baby will have AD, Charlie. God's going to a lot of trouble to give us a child, and I'm inclined to think it's because He's going to make the baby perfectly healthy. God knows we did our best to be responsible, but He overruled us. Our baby won't have AD," predicted Adam.

"You said, 'our baby,'" Charlie smiled slightly. "I've been waiting to hear you say that."

Adam reached out and touched Charlie's face.

"I'd never hurt you," she whispered.

"I know," he nodded. "Come here, Honey." Adam hugged Charlie, and the two sat beside each other on the bed, quietly thinking over what had just happened.

"We're going to have a baby," Adam finally shook his head in wonderment. "I'm actually going to be a father!" He grinned at Charlie. "Is it going to be a girl or a boy?"

"How should I know?" laughed Charlie. "It's too soon to tell! Besides, I have yet to even start showing." Then she realized something for the first time. "This explains why my period is late. I've been wondering why it hasn't started."

"You're late?" asked Adam in surprise. "Why didn't you suspect you were pregnant?"

Charlie gave him a patient sigh. "You weren't supposed to be able to do this to me, remember? How could I possibly guess what was going on?" Thinking better of it, Charlie scolded herself. "I suppose an older woman with more experience would have known, without a doctor having to tell her the obvious."

"This wasn't very obvious," he conceded, giving his wife a tender squeeze. "I guess God surprised both of us."

"Thank you for trusting me," Charlie kissed Adam's cheek.

"As long as I remind myself of your character," Adam hugged her, "then it's not that hard to do."

Charlie smiled contentedly. "We're going to have a sweet little bundle of our very own! I can't wait to tell Maggie!"

Adam smiled as Charlie hurried away to call her good friend. He was delighted to see Charlie so happy over the prospect of a baby, and he had to admit to some excitement, himself.

While Charlie broke the news to a thrilled Maggie, Adam got in the pickup truck with his bodyguard and drove to his sister's house on the outskirts of Twin Yucca. He wanted to be the one to break the news to Shirley, and decided it would be best if Charlie wasn't present.

Shirley was glad to see her brother, but by the look on his face, she could tell he had something important to tell her.

"Well, spit it out and let's hear it," prodded Shirley. "Is this bad news, or good?"

"It's good," assured Adam. "Charlie and I are going to have a baby."

Shirley's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "She's pregnant?"

"The doctor called this evening with her test results," affirmed Adam. "Charlie thought she had the same stomach bug as Dave, but it turns out she doesn't."

Shirley looked torn between excitement and suspicion. Adam could see it in her eyes, and braced himself for what he figured was coming.

"I'm happy for you," she smiled approvingly. "For the sake of the Clark family name, I hope it's a boy!"

"Is that all you have to say?" Adam was surprised. "I was prepared for something a little less congratulatory, and something more along the lines of an accusation."

"Then, the thought HAD cross your mind," Shirley deduced. "I suppose with news like this, it's bound to make you think twice."

"It shook me up a bit," confessed Adam.

Shirley patted her brother's hand consolingly. "I can't speak for other couples where unfaithfulness was in the marriage, but when Thomas cheated on me, I knew it. If I didn't know it here," she said, pointing to her mind, "then I knew it here, in my heart. The very fact you still trust Charlie, proves what your heart is telling you: it's safe to believe her."

Hearing this, Adam hugged Shirley. "Thanks for believing her, too."

Shirley laughed and returned her brother's hug. "So, you're going to be a Daddy? I wish Mom had lived to see this day! She would have been so happy, Adam!"

"I'd better get back home," apologized Adam. "I think dinner was nearly ready when I left, but I wanted to be the one to tell you the news."

"Then you'd better get going," smiled Shirley, giving her brother one last hug before he left. "Tell Charlie not to get anything for the baby, until I throw her a baby shower. And I hope you start giving some thought to baby names! I won't force my opinion, but it would be nice if you named the child after Dad or Mom!"

"I'll tell Charlie to expect your call," grinned Adam knowingly. "Thanks again, Sis."

When Adam returned to Villa Rosa after his errand, the table was set and everyone was waiting to eat dinner. Someone had invited Dave, and he smiled broadly as Adam took his customary place at the head of the table.

"Sorry I'm late," apologized Adam. "Charlie, I told Shirley about our good news. I think she's already planning a shower for you and the baby, so you'd better brace yourself!"

Dave shook Adam's hand and looked every bit as happy as a man could, for his friend. "I reckon your duet did its job!" he chuckled.

Adam looked at Charlie, and Charlie looked at Adam. They hadn't even considered it, but Dave was probably right. They had been so busy being together, preparing for the concert, and striking the right notes so their music would be in harmony, that they hadn't been in each other's company so much since their honeymoon. The very thought made Adam's heart glow warm with contentment, and Charlie's mouth parted in a pleased smile.

Then Adam felt something paw at his leg, and he looked down to see Wally, begging for some table scraps.

"No, Girl," he shook his head. "You already had your supper."

Wally barked and wagged her tail. She was getting bigger, but was still small enough to have her puppy dog endearments and knew that with enough coaxing, she could charm her people into anything.

"Here, Wally," Charlie called out to her pet. The dog quickly came running, and was rewarded with a small scrap of food.

"Charlie," sighed Adam, "that dog will never learn anything if you keep spoiling her!"

"I'm *not*," protested Charlie, "I'm just showing her I care."

"I think she already knows that by now," chuckled Adam. "Have it your way, Charlie-girl, but we're not raising our baby the way you're raising that dog."

"Adam, I think know the difference between animals and children!" laughed Charlie.

Just then, Wally returned to beg at Adam's feet. He looked down at the cute animal and it barked expectantly.

"Yap all you want," Adam told her, "but you're not going to get anything from *me*." Unable to completely resist Wally, Adam petted the golden retriever until she rolled onto her back so he could scratch her tummy.

Sneaking a look below the table, Charlie saw what Adam was doing. "You're a big softie!" she smiled at her husband.

By the first of November, Adam had his compositions polished and ready for the recording studio. The record label that was producing his new album, hired a studio in Los Angeles and Adam took Dave with him to get things set up and ready for the work that lay ahead.

Charlie was nervous about the prospect of playing on Adam's new album, and wasn't too eager to step inside the recording studio before she absolutely had to. After being assured that it would probably take several days before he was even ready to get to their duet, Charlie breathed a sigh of relief and procrastinated her dread for a later time. The morning sickness was coming in regular volleys now, and she spent a good deal of her day practicing at the piano, and napping in bed after losing her meal.

The first few days of Adam's commute into Los Angeles gave Charlie some concern that he wouldn't be able to maintain such a grueling routine. Adam would leave their bed while it was still dark outside, and eat breakfast and read his Bible by himself in the kitchen. Then he joined Dave and a bodyguard and they would make the long drive into LA.

Adam returned late at night, after everyone had already gone to bed and Villa Rosa was quiet. Even though he tried to slip into the master bedroom without awakening Charlie, he usually found that his caution was unnecessary. More often than not, Charlie had succeeded in staying awake and was there to welcome him home.

After finding her awake for the third night in a row, Adam tried to talk her out of this practice. "You don't need to wait up for me," he apologized, as he climbed into bed beside Charlie. "I don't want to keep you up this late."

Charlie snuggled into his arms. "If I don't, I'll never get to see you."

"This won't be forever," he consoled. "It'll only be until the album is finished."

"Have you got a name for it yet?" wondered Charlie, her voice gradually drifting off into sleep.

"I sure do," yawned Adam. "I'm titling the album 'Unification.'"

Charlie smiled sleepily. "Your fans are going to think you're talking about me."

"I am," Adam grinned. "Goodnight, Charlie." The tired musician gave his wife a small kiss, and they fell asleep.

After a week and a half of work in the recording studio, Adam was ready for Charlie to come so they could record their duet.

"This will be easier than the benefit concert," Adam tried to convince her.

All too soon, Charlie needed to make the long drive into LA with Adam and Dave, and two bodyguards. Until now, Kevin had been staying home with Charlie, so this was his first chance to see what a recording studio looked like.

It was still dark outside when their vehicle pulled up to a large building where a man was smoking a cigarette in the parking lot. When the man saw Adam, he nodded and went back inside to get things ready for their recording session.

Trying to calm her jitters, Charlie reasoned with herself that there was nothing to be afraid of. She wouldn't be performing to an audience of thousands, but to only a handful of audio engineers who were there to record the duet. All she had to play was one song and then she could go home. Clutching Adam's hand, Charlie followed her husband into the recording studio where someone already had a pot of coffee brewing.

The man from the parking lot snickered when he saw Charlie hanging on to Adam's arm like a frightened child. "She's too much!" he laughed. "I thought all that wide-eyed-innocent stuff during the benefit concert was just an act!"

"Good morning, Joel," Adam gave him a stern glance before seating Charlie in a nearby chair. "I think you already recognize my wife. Charlie, this is Joel Miller."

Joel brusquely nodded to the young woman and lit another cigarette.

Timidly, Charlie looked about her surroundings while Adam and Dave talked with Joel and the other engineers. State of the art sound equipment lined some desks, while a window into the next room revealed two pianos; this sealed room was called the live room, for it was where live performances were recorded. Everything looked extremely technical, and Charlie could feel herself intimidated by the lights, strange men, and the sickening smell of cigarette smoke.

When Adam returned a few minutes later, he noticed Charlie was looking a little green. "Do you need to lose breakfast?" he whispered.

Charlie nodded, and Adam took her to the ladies' restroom down the hall.

"What's with her?" asked Joel, when Adam walked back to resume their conversation. "She didn't look too hot."

"Charlie's pregnant," explained Adam, "and she's having a hard time keeping down food because of morning sickness."

Joel scoffed as though he knew exactly what Adam was talking about. "I've been there, man. When my ball and chain had a baby, she did everything she could to make me feel guilty for getting her pregnant. I tell you, man, it was so unfair! I don't remember her pushing me away when she wanted--"

Just then, the bathroom door opened and Charlie walked down the hall, still looking pale but much more peaceful.

"Are you feeling better?" asked Adam.

"I think I can manage under my own power," Charlie smiled, as her husband helped her back to the chair.

"You just take it easy," insisted Adam. "Do you want me to get you something? One of the guys brought donuts."

At the mere mention of food, Charlie could feel her stomach lurch. "No thanks," she quickly declined. Even though her stomach was feeling better, she still had to fight the cigarette smoke that was gathering in the room.

Impatiently, Joel took another puff of his cigarette and checked his watch. When Adam was done playing house, they had work to do.

A few moments later, Adam left Charlie, and as he passed Joel, he suddenly realized the source of Charlie's nausea.

"Please put that out," requested Adam, in a voice that gave Joel the strong impression he was being told, and not asked. "Your cigarette smoke is making my wife sick."

"Whatever," sighed Joel, and he crushed the cigarette in a nearby ashtray. "Let's get the sound check over with so we can get started."

After some preparation, Adam took Charlie to the large sealed room and seated her at one of the pianos.

"You don't need your music, do you?" asked Adam. "I'm not sure I remembered to bring the sheet music with me."

Hearing their conversation over the sound equipment in the control room, Dave knocked on the window pane to get Adam's attention. In his hand was their duet.

"Thanks!" Adam grinned.

After Charlie had her music situated in front of her, she was beginning to feel a little easier with her surroundings. At least in here, she couldn't smell the remnants of Joel's cigarette.

Adam took his place at the second piano, and Joel's voice sounded over a loud speaker. "Okay, start when you're ready!"

Adam winked at Charlie, and Charlie began to play. Halfway through the first measure, the loudspeaker told them to stop. "Could you start that over? We had some technical difficulty."

Patiently, Charlie started for the second time. She thought it was going quite well until Joel's voice interrupted the recording session. "Sugar," he asked, "could you please strike the keys a little harder? You play as though you don't mean it!"

Surprised, Charlie looked to Adam. Surely, Joel couldn't have been talking to *him*!

"Try a little more emphasis," coaxed Adam.

With a sigh, Charlie started the composition over, and once again, Joel stopped her. "I don't think you heard me, Sugar. Let's hear some of that passion you showed at the benefit concert!"

Straightening her back on the hard bench, Charlie started the piece one more time. Sure enough, Joel's impatient voice stopped her yet again. "Are you completely tone deaf?" he half shouted at her. "Maybe you can't hear me, or maybe you're not listening!" Not bothering to switch off the speaker, Joel turned to one of the engineers seated beside him. "What a dumb slut! I guess Adam didn't marry her for her brains!"

Angrily, Adam rose from the piano and marched into the control room. A quick-thinking engineer had switched off the speaker, so all Charlie could do was watch them through the window. Adam didn't look happy, and by the time he left Joel, Joel didn't look happy, either.

After Adam returned to the live room, he apologized to Charlie. "Joel may have a loud mouth, but he's one of the best recording engineers in the business." Then he leaned forward and whispered something into Charlie's ear. "This is business, Charlie-girl. You don't have to like him, just work with him long enough to finish the job."

"I understand," nodded Charlie. She had heard some rough language behind the scenes at the benefit concert, and knew that Adam wasn't responsible for their foul mouths. After all, this was the world, and not Villa Rosa. "I'm ready to start whenever you are."

Charlie was showing a measure of professionalism, and it made Adam proud to see her not taking everything Joel said to heart.

The duet began, and this time, the loudspeaker was silent. It wasn't until after the song was finished, that Joel finally spoke. "Adam, could I have a moment with you?"

Charlie felt the soreness in her back as Adam went to the control room. She had a feeling Joel didn't like their performance.

Through the window, Charlie saw Joel yell at her husband. Charlie guessed that Adam had requested Joel to have their discussions where she couldn't overhear, and when Joel began to yell and wave his arms, she was grateful that she couldn't hear what was being said. Patiently, Adam remained relatively calm and even smiled at one of the other engineers. After waiting for Joel to finish, Adam said something, and then returned to the live room.

"We're going to take five," he announced. "Are you hungry, Charlie? There's a good deli just around the corner."

"Joel didn't like our duet, did he?" guessed Charlie.

"He thought it could use some improvement," admitted Adam. "Now, how about that deli? Right now, I'd like a hot pastrami on rye with mustard and tomato. Let's forget about the diet right now, and have ourselves a treat! How about it?"

Charlie glanced back at the window, and saw Joel chain smoking another cigarette.

"Come on," smiled Adam, putting his arm around Charlie as she got up from the piano bench. "We all need a few minutes to relax."

Dave and the two bodyguards joined the couple, and soon the five were crowded around a small table eating deli sandwiches and carefully sipping hot coffee. Since this was a such small

establishment, there were very few people around to recognize Adam, and Charlie felt as though she could truly relax for a few minutes.

A half hour later, Adam and Charlie returned to the sealed live room. Interestingly, Joel was in the bathroom, so everyone had to wait for him to return before they could begin.

Instead of complaining, Adam shared Charlie's piano bench, and they played some of the finger exercises that Dave had taught her.

"You probably wish we were recording exercises, instead of the duet," Adam smiled good-naturedly. "Can't say I blame you. This session hasn't been going too well."

With a small contented sigh, Charlie leaned her head against Adam's shoulder. "At least the company is good," she mused.

As they waited for Joel to return from the bathroom, Adam put his arm around Charlie. Some of the engineers in the control room were dozing off, and Adam took this opportunity to cuddle with his wife.

"We haven't had time together in several days," Adam whispered longingly. "After this is over, we'll lock ourselves in the bedroom and not come out for a week!"

"Hush!" Charlie quietly laughed. "They'll hear you!"

"The microphones are off," Adam smiled. He nuzzled Charlie's hair and then kissed her lips.

It wasn't until Joel's impatient voice sounded over the loudspeaker that they realized he was finally back. "Let's get to work, people!"

After one last kiss, Adam returned to his piano and Charlie began their duet. Music flowed from her so easily that by the time it was over, Adam was grinning ear to ear.

"I guess that'll do," conceded Joel. "It didn't completely stink like your other attempts."

With an encouraging nod, Adam came over to Charlie and kissed her cheek. "The recordings are finally done! Hopefully, I'll have a finished album ready to promote by the end of the year!"

Nervously, Charlie reminded Adam of a promise he had made after finding out that she was pregnant. "You promised you wouldn't go on a long tour like you did the last time. I don't want to have this baby without you!"

"You won't," smiled Adam. "I've already told Gary that I won't accept any dates were I can't fly in, and get back home by the next day. There's already so much hype over Wallace Shipley right now, I won't have to promote this album very hard for it to sell well. However, I *will* appreciate your showing up for a few concerts to play the duet with me. My fans are going to expect it."

"I know," sighed Charlie. "I'll do whatever you need."

"Thanks, Honey."

When they emerged from the live room, audio engineers congratulated Adam and Charlie on a solid performance. The only one conspicuously missing from the group was Joel.

"Joel's wife left him for another man," explained one of the engineers in a hushed voice. "Seeing your wife must've put him in a foul mood."

Just then, Joel appeared from the bathroom with a cigarette between his lips. "If you're done talking about me behind my back, we have some cleanup work to do."

Grateful that her part of the album was over and done with, Charlie located a comfortable seat in a corner of the control room. Content to keep quiet and patiently wait, she watched Adam and Joel play with the recording they had just made.

It took the rest of the day for them to get everything just right, and by the time Adam and Charlie left the recording studio, evening was gathering on the horizon.

"There's a good Italian restaurant nearby where Dave and I like to eat," suggested Adam. "He goes in and takes our order, and then we eat outside on the benches. That way, no one has a good chance to recognize me. Don't worry, Charlie, I've been keeping our diet!"

"He's been eating stuff like you guys serve at home," attested Dave.

After dinner, everyone climbed into the SUV for the long drive home. Charlie easily fell asleep in her seat, and the next time she awoke, Adam was lifting her onto their bed.

When Charlie stirred the next morning, she found Adam still beside her. At first she thought Adam had accidentally slept in, for sunlight was filtering through their curtains and he usually left while it was still dark outside. Then Charlie remembered that Adam no longer had to take his early morning trips into LA, for all the recording for the album was finished.

Instead of locking their bedroom door for a week, Adam and Charlie spent the day in their garden, enjoying each other's company, and simply relaxing without the pressures of audio engineers and recording studios bearing down on them.

Having a kind of holiday of his own, Dave relished his time off by working on his composition in the music room. It was nice to have so much uninterrupted time to himself, and Dave found he accomplished a lot of work by dinnertime.

After dinner that evening, Dave's newly composed piece filled the courtyard and floated into the living room where the family was watching television. Adam muted the program, and listened to Dave's music.

"He's getting good," acknowledged Adam.

"Did Dave tell you about his job offer?" wondered Charlie.

"What are you talking about?" frowned Adam.

"The University of Los Angeles wants him to join their faculty as an assistant professor of music," she informed Adam. "Dave has the degree and the qualifications to fill the position."

Adam sighed. "Why isn't he telling me this, himself?"

Charlie shrugged, but looked at her husband with a gentle smile. "I don't think he wants to hurt your feelings," she guessed. "Dave thinks a lot of you, you know."

Adam shifted on the couch while Dave's music continued to waft in from the courtyard. "Is he going to accept the university's offer?"

"I don't know," replied Charlie.

"Un-mute the television," requested Chuck, for he was missing his show.

Adam turned the sound back on, and tried to enjoy what they had been watching. When the program was over, he got up and went to the music room to find Dave working in his composer's notebook at the desk.

"You're sounding good this evening," complimented Adam, taking a seat at his piano and running his fingers across the keyboard.

"Thanks," Dave's face brightened at the compliment.

"Charlie tells me you've had a good job offer," ventured Adam, glancing at his secretary.

Dave hesitated. "Yes, I've been meaning to talk to you about that."

"Do you think you're going to accept?" inquired Adam.

Smiling, Dave let out a small laugh. "I reckon you think I'm plumb crazy for even considering it."

"No, I don't-- not if it's what you really want."

Dave set aside his notebook and turned to face Adam. "Before I came here, I thought I wanted to be so popular that everyone listened to my music."

"Now you're thinking differently?"

"I'm seeing the other side of fame," confessed Dave, "and I'm not so sure it's what I want, after all."

"This lifestyle certainly isn't for everyone," acknowledged Adam, "but it has it's bright spots."

Dave was silent for a moment. "After I graduated with my doctorate in music, I taught piano out of my apartment for awhile to pay the bills. I enjoyed passing my knowledge on to others, but I had so few students, I couldn't make a living." He looked at his friend and mentor with serious brown eyes. "Do you think I'm making the right decision?"

"That's only something *you* can answer," smiled Adam. "I can only tell you to follow your heart. God says He'll be the one to work in us to will and to do of His good pleasure, so if you want to teach, then I guess He's the one who put that desire in you, Dave." (Philippians 2:13)

"I really enjoyed teaching Charlie," Dave sighed happily. "I enjoy helping others learn something they thought was impossible, and seeing that look of understanding cross their face for the very first time. When I teach, I feel as though I'm making a contribution to something bigger than myself."

"Do you plan on using anything you've learned while working with me?" Adam inquired with a hint of curiosity in his voice.

"No," Dave shook his head emphatically, "I signed a non-disclosure agreement, and I intend to keep it."

"Even though it might help your career?"

"I hope you know me better than that!" exclaimed Dave.

"I know you," smiled Adam, "but I needed to hear you say it. Dave, if you think you can use anything that you've learned from me about composition and music theory, then you have my permission to use it in your curriculum. As long as you keep my personal life out of your classroom, then I won't consider it a breach of trust."

Dave was surprised by Adam's offer. He knew how hard it was for Adam to maintain his privacy, and Adam was displaying a high degree of trust in his discretion when he didn't have to. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"I don't know what to say," Dave sighed in amazement. "This is incredibly generous of you, Adam. I know my students will get a kick out of hearing how a real, world-class musician composes. I appreciate it."

Adam ran his fingers across the keyboard once more and then closed his piano. "So, you really want to be a teacher? You're willing to give up the spotlight and all the accolades to become a music professor?"

"Assistant professor of music," Dave corrected with a smile. "I don't think I was cut out for all this fame. I look at you, and I don't know how you do it. I couldn't stand up to all that pressure and responsibility."

"There's certainly a lot of both," admitted Adam.

"I think I know why God gave you such a happy home-life," reasoned Dave. "He knew you'd need to draw on that strength, so you could be Wallace Shipley. I admire you for that, but I also recognize the sacrifices you've had to make. I reckon I'll make my contribution by teaching others, and not by selling albums." Dave touched his composer's notebook wistfully. "I'd still like to compose in my free time, though. Maybe, one day, I'll find a record label willing to take on a musician who doesn't want fame."

"When the time comes," grinned Adam, "I can help you with that. I've been there, myself. Just watch out, or you'll become famous before you know it."

Dave smiled understandingly. "I'll keep that in mind."

"When will you be leaving?"

"They'd like me to start this winter term."

Adam nodded and sighed heavily. "You're going to be missed around here. I've come to rely on you, not only as a secretary, but also as a friend. If you ever need any references, use my name. I'll stand up for you, any time."

"I appreciate everything you've done for me," acknowledged Dave, gratefully. "You've treated me as a real friend, and I'll never forget it."

"The pleasure was mine, Dave," Adam extended his hand to the man.

After shaking hands, Dave retired to his bungalow.

A little sadly, Adam closed the music room. He felt as though he was losing a good friend, and yet, he understood that life must move on.

Still contemplating Dave's decision, Adam went to the master bedroom where Charlie had just finished changing into her nightgown. As he sat on the edge of the bed to pull off his shoes and socks, Wally jumped onto the mattress to find a good place to lie down.

"Get down," Adam told the dog. "You know you aren't allowed to sleep up here, Wally."

"Please, Adam?" begged Charlie. "Just for tonight?"

Between Charlie's beautiful face and Wally's wagging tail, Adam knew he was outnumbered. "I give up," he sighed wearily. "But I don't want that dog thinking she can sleep up here anytime she wants."

"She won't," Charlie assured him.

Adam wasn't convinced, but he was too preoccupied with his thoughts to put up much of a fight. "I just had a talk with Dave, and he's leaving soon."

"Oh?" asked Charlie. She didn't sound too surprised, and Adam looked at her over his shoulder as she turned down the covers.

"Are you going to miss him very much?" wondered Adam.

Charlie hesitated before answering. "I hope you're not testing me, to see what I'll say."

"You're right," he yielded. "It wasn't fair of me to put the question to you that way."

"You still trust me, don't you?" asked Charlie, as Wally playfully tugged at the bed sheets and growled.

"Always," he smiled.

"But this pregnancy has been hard on you," Charlie observed, "especially, on your trust."

"It took me by surprise at first," admitted Adam, "but I got over it."

Charlie climbed into bed while Wally dug in the covers. After a sufficient amount of digging, Wally settled beside Charlie beneath the sheets and prepared to go to sleep.

"With all the excitement over recording the new album," Charlie remembered to ask, "you never told me what Shirley said, when you told her I was pregnant."

Adam buttoned his pajama top and turned off the bedroom light. "She said she hoped it's a boy, so the Clark family name won't die off with you and me."

"Is that all?" pressed Charlie, as Adam pulled up the covers and leaned forward to give his wife a kiss goodnight. "I want to know what to expect when she gives me that baby shower."

"Shirley said that it was safe for me to trust you," he smiled, giving Charlie a kiss and then trying to move as close to her as he could with Wally between them. "Does the dog have to sleep right there?" he pleaded. "When I said she could stay, I didn't think she'd stay *right there!*"

With a coo to her sleepy pet, Charlie lifted the limp furry animal and placed it on her other side. Now Adam could put his arm around Charlie without sandwiching Wally between them.

"Thanks," he smiled, settling down for some serious cuddling.

"Shirley really said that about me?"

"Not in those exact words," admitted Adam, "but it's what she meant. She trusts you, Charlie, and so do I."

After mulling it over for a few minutes in silence, Charlie asked another question. "Are you glad we're having a baby?"

"Uh-huh." Adam was tired, and his voice was drifting off. Charlie nudged him with her elbow and repeated the question. "I'm glad," he smiled.

"Do you hope it's a boy, like Shirley wants?"

"I'd settle for another talkative girl in the family," chuckled Adam, "though heaven help her future husband when he wants to go to sleep!"

"I think we're having a boy," Charlie informed him.

"You do? What makes you say that?"

"Just a feeling I have."

Playfully, Adam reached beneath Charlie's sensitive underarm and started tickling her. "And what does your feeling tell you now?" he teased.

"Adam!" Charlie shouted with frantic laughter. "Oh, please stop!"

In all the excitement, Wally's head bobbed up from under the blankets and began to tug at Adam's pajama top to defend her master.

"Okay, okay," Adam laughed in defeat, "I'm stopping! Wally, you can let go of my sleeve!"

Wally gave him one last playful tug and then relinquished her hold, leaving a sloppy wet spot on Adam's pajama top.

"This had better go into the wash tomorrow," sighed Adam, taking off his top and returning his arms to Charlie.

Wally snuggled back to her spot on the other side of Charlie, and the three quieted down for sleep.

"Do you mind if it's not a girl?" Charlie yawned.

Adam kissed his wife. "I won't mind," he quietly whispered. "Goodnight, Honey."

Cuddling closer, Charlie mumbled something that sounded very much like "I love you," and then she fell fast asleep.

Mid-October was Mike's birthday, and Sandra invited friends and family to a small birthday party at the newly renovated house Adam had given them in Twin Yucca.

When Adam and Charlie arrived for the party, it felt odd to be somewhere that was so familiar as Adam's old house, and yet not easily recognize it.

"We added a master bedroom to the bottom floor," Mike showed his uncle around, "and Sandra had new carpets put in, and the hardwood floors refinished."

"You've done a lot with the place," Adam observed with admiration. "Enough to start a family, and still have some growing space left over."

At this, Mike became quiet. "Sandra's been wanting a baby really bad," he confided.

"The doctors said Charlie and I could never have a baby," encouraged Adam, "so maybe it might still happen for you and Sandra."

Taking a quick glance around to make sure no one else was within earshot, Mike smiled as though he had a secret to share. "Sandra and I have been thinking about adoption. There's a lot of paper work involved, but the lady we've been talking to says she thinks we could qualify to adopt a child."

"I've heard there's long waiting lines for babies," warned Adam. "That's going to be a hard wait."

"We want an older child," continued Mike, leading his uncle to the next room where Shirley was less likely to accidentally overhear them. "Sandra's thinking maybe about five to ten years old. She says there's lots of kids out there who need homes, and since we want a large family, then why not us?"

Adam was more than a little surprised, even though he had known for a long time that Mike wanted to be a father. "How large of a family do you want?"

"Enough to make this house noisy," smiled Mike. "Mom doesn't know about any of this yet."

"It sounds as though you and Sandra know what you want," Adam shook his head in amazement. "Are you ready to be a daddy?"

"Are *you*?" joked Mike.

"Sometimes, I wonder," confessed Adam, as he and his nephew moved out into the backyard. "Being a parent is a big responsibility."

"You'll do fine," Mike smiled confidently. "You've been like a father to me and Chad, and I know the both of us wouldn't be the people we are today, without your influence in our lives."

"Speaking of fathers," wondered Adam, "where's Thomas? I don't see him here. After the party, I thought he was taking Chad for the weekend."

With a heavy sigh, Mike kicked at the grass with his shoe. "There's been a change of plans. Dad said a business trip came up at the last moment, so he couldn't come."

"I see." Adam looked over the redesigned landscape of his former backyard. "Did he take his new wife along?"

"I don't think so," shrugged Mike. "To be honest, I think Dad's up to his old ways again. Nothing's changed. You know," he mused, "if it hadn't been for you and Aunt Charlie, and Grandpa and Grandma Clark's marriage, I would have thought that all marriages were supposed to look like Dad and Mom's."

"Don't give me too much credit," Adam cautioned with a wary smile. "I'm just getting started, myself."

"You and Aunt Charlie have a good marriage," insisted Mike. "I remember that whenever Sandra and I have a disagreement, and it reminds me that it's possible to work out our differences."

"Do you and Sandra have a lot of differences?" inquired Adam. He never would have asked such a private thing of anyone else, but Mike was like a son to him, and it seemed natural to ask such personal questions.

"Not very many." Mike looked back at the house. "Sandra thinks we should tell Mom what we're planning, though."

"You'll eventually have to," reminded Adam. "When kids start showing up at your house and never go home, your Mom is going to start asking questions!"

"I just hate to open this can of worms with her," sighed Mike. "Don't get me wrong, I love Mom, but she and Sandra don't always see eye to eye, and I know Mom isn't ready to give up on me and Sandra having a baby yet."

Adam patted Mike on the back. "I know my sister is opinionated, but she's not unreasonable. When you decide to tell her, just be sure to give her some time to adjust to the news. She'll eventually accept your decision, and when she does, I think she'll love the idea of being grandma to a lot of kids!"

Mike laughed just as Chad came through the doorway carrying a plate with a slice of his brother's birthday cake.

"Went back for seconds?" Adam chuckled to his youngest nephew.

"Sandra can sure cook!" complimented Chad. "This cake ain't half bad!"

Mike smiled as Chad loaded his fork with more cake. "I'll tell her you approve."

"Uncle Adam?" asked the twelve year old. "Mom said you and Aunt Charlie are pregnant."

"Your Aunt Charlie is the pregnant one!" laughed Adam.

"Is the baby going to get sick, like Aunt Charlie?" asked the boy.

All at once, Adam stopped laughing. "Where did you hear that?"

Chad shrugged. "If Aunt Charlie gets sick, won't she give it to the baby?"

Adam looked at Mike, and Mike made an admission. "We know about Aunt Charlie."

"Who told you?"

"No one," shrugged Mike, "Chad overheard Mom talking to you on the telephone, and I picked up on it when you flew to Germany for Chuck's operation. You were busy, and made a remark I don't think you intended for me to hear."

Adam groaned. "I didn't mean to keep it from you boys for so long," he apologized, "but I didn't know how you'd handle the news. Your Aunt might get sick with the same thing Chuck has, and then again, with some treatment, she might not be as bad off as him. We just won't know until it happens."

"What about the baby?" inquired Chad in a concerned voice.

"It'll have a fifty percent chance of inheriting the disease," explained Adam. "That doesn't mean it will, but it could."

With a sigh, Chad tossed his paper plate into a nearby outdoor trash can. "I'll pray it won't get it," he declared soberly. "It'll be my cousin, won't it?"

"The baby will be your cousin," affirmed Adam with a kind smile. "Thanks for your prayers, Chad. It means a lot to me."

Chad smiled and went inside for some more soda pop.

Adam turned to Mike. "Why didn't you tell me that you and Chad already knew?"

"I thought you were trying to keep it a secret from us," shrugged Mike. "Now that you know that we know, there's one thing I've been wanting to ask, ever since I found out."

"What's that?"

"Did you know about Aunt Charlie's condition before you married her?"

"Yes," replied Adam, "and she called off our wedding because she didn't want me to endure what the rest of her family went through with Arnold and Chuck."

"And you married her anyway?"

"If it had been Sandra," proposed Adam, "would you have left her because she was sick?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"That was the same conclusion I came to," smiled Adam.

"If Aunt Charlie ever gets as sick as Chuck," offered Mike, "then you can count on me to help out."

Adam wanted to thank his nephew, but the words choked back, and he had to give Mike a hug instead.

Just then, Shirley appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Mike, Sandra wants you to open your presents now. What are you two doing? Adam, are you crying?"

"I'm just happy, Sis," he dried his eyes. "We're coming."

Mike gave Adam one last hug before they went inside. "That baby's going to be healthy, Uncle Adam. I just know it is!"

Autumn passed, and Dave prepared to leave Villa Rosa for the university in Los Angeles. Charlie promised she would keep up with her finger exercises, and Adam assured him that Charlie hadn't seen the last of her lessons. Adam was already working on another composition for Charlie, and he would keep her busy trying to learn this new piece. With hugs and assurances of future visits, Dave left and Adam's music room was suddenly a little emptier.

Adam compensated for his loss of a music partner, by getting Charlie back at her piano. It was starting to get a little difficult, however, for her pregnancy was showing, and her belly got in the way of getting too close to the keyboard.

"You're going to have to face it sooner or later!" Charlie laughed to her husband. "If I get any bigger, there go my piano lessons!"

Just before Christmas, Adam's new album made its debut. It was the first album he had put out in several years, and many attributed "Unification" to the success of his marriage. From the loving titles Adam had given his songs, he did little to discourage this conclusion.

With the release of Unification, Adam grew to appreciate the airfield at Villa Rosa. Gary had no difficulty in finding venues where Wallace Shipley could make one or two performances and then fly home the next day; Adam was just grateful that when he flew home, it was actually to his home, and not to an airport. It meant less of a commute, and it made everything that much easier for him and Charlie to be together.

Adam was able to draw large audiences wherever he went, and it was an especial treat to his fans whenever Charlie was able to attend one of his concerts. Now that Charlie's pregnancy was noticeably apparent, she didn't feel very comfortable waddling onstage to play a love duet with

Adam. Even so, she managed to make enough appearances that Adam finally told her it was enough. The media had had plenty of opportunity to cover her pregnancy, and he assured her that his fans would understand when she didn't show up for anymore concerts. The album was selling nicely, and Charlie could finally rest.

December came and went, and Charlie's belly grew larger with every passing month. Shirley gave her sister-in-law the promised baby shower, and Maggie had delighted in surprising Charlie with some bedding that she had hand sewn just for the baby. It was a happy time for Charlie, and after her baby shower, she had Adam set up their new baby crib in the master bedroom. Wally watched on in curiosity, and even played with Adam by grabbing his screwdriver and charging into the courtyard with him in pursuit! It wasn't unusual to find missing household items mysteriously buried in the garden, and whenever Adam missed something, he always knew where to look.

A few days after Adam's birthday in February, Charlie's doctor announced that he could finally determine the gender of their baby. As to whether or not the baby had inherited the AD gene, both Adam and Charlie decided that they didn't want any tests done to make that determination. It would not affect any decisions, and Charlie wanted their child to make that choice when it was old enough to decide for itself.

Before the doctor announced the baby's gender, Charlie asked Adam one last time if he really wanted to know.

"Some people want it to be a surprise," she reasoned.

"I'm not one of them, are you?"

"No," smiled Charlie, "I'm not."

"Boy or girl, plumber or pianist," joked Adam, "we'll love it just the same! Let's hear it, Doctor. What do we have?"

The obstetrician smiled. "You've got a boy." He moved the ultrasound probe over Charlie's abdomen and pointed to the monitor screen. "See? It's definitely a boy."

Charlie felt Adam grab her hand, while his eyes remained glued to the screen. The small life forming inside Charlie's womb moved, and Adam's smile grew so that she didn't think his grin could get any bigger.

"Charlie-girl, just look what you've got in there," Adam breathed in amazement. His fingers lightly touched the screen, and the baby moved. "I can see his arms, and his..." Adam counted to three and then burst into knowing laughter. "He has three legs right now!"

"It's the angle of the ultrasound," explained the doctor, moving the probe until Adam could get a more accurate view. "See, the third leg in the middle isn't a leg at all."

The examination went well, and Charlie's obstetrician was happy with the progress that the baby was making inside her womb.

"It's a good thing Shirley had everyone buy things in gender neutral colors," Charlie commented, as Adam helped her back into their car in the parking lot.

"Does it really make that big of a difference what color things are?" asked Adam, for he was colorblind, and didn't always know what he was missing.

"Do you want your son wearing pink?" laughed Charlie, as Kevin and their second bodyguard got into the truck after Adam.

"From the way you're laughing," concluded the expectant father, "I suppose I don't."

"Thanks for not scheduling a concert so you could be here for my doctor's appointment."

"I said you weren't going to have this baby by yourself," chuckled Adam, "and I meant it!"

"We still haven't decided on a name," reminded Charlie, leaning back in her seat while Adam fastened her safety belt securely beneath her belly. "I can do that for myself, Adam. I'm not helpless."

"I know you're not," he smiled.

"Shirley wants us to name him Matthew, after your father," continued Charlie, as Adam started up the engine. "I'm just not sure, though."

"Would you rather name him after *your* father?" wondered Adam.

"No," Charlie shook her head, "I don't like the sound of Charlton Clark very much. It somehow sounds lopsided."

"I kind of like Matthew," Adam admitted. "I'm not trying to give in to my sister, but she had a good suggestion."

"Matthew," Charlie tested his name out loud. "Matthew Clark. What about his middle name?"

"How about Charlton?" suggested Adam. "We could name him after *both* our fathers."

"Matthew Charlton Clark." Charlie smiled. "I suppose that has a distinguished ring to it. Can you imagine an announcer saying that name, and our son going onstage to his piano?"

"Our son," Adam repeated in awe. He gave Charlie a quick glance before turning the truck onto the highway back to Villa Rosa. "We're actually going to have a son, Charlie!"

Halfway home, Adam noticed they were running low on fuel, and pulled into a gas station to refill their tank. When Adam went inside the station's mart to buy a soft drink for Charlie's upset stomach, his bodyguard followed him inside, while Kevin remained in the truck with his client.

When Adam returned, his face looked so somber that Charlie immediately knew something was wrong. Then he showed her who was on the cover of a well-known tabloid, and Charlie immediately recognized the photos they advertised.

"Lyle must've found a buyer," sighed Adam. "Now that I have a new album out, it's a good time for him to profit off of my publicity. I had almost forgotten about those pictures, and there they were, staring at me in the checkout!" Adam handed Charlie her soft drink and then got behind the wheel. "I'll contact our lawyer after we get home."

Having only heard about the incident with Lyle, Kevin looked over the front seat to see the pictures for himself. He sure wished he had been around to discourage Lyle from doing what he had done, but at least it had finally prompted Adam to get a bodyguard of his own.

The Clark's pickup truck passed through Villa Rosa's secure wrought iron gates, and came to a stop in front of the main house. The driver's door popped open and Adam hurried around to the other side of the vehicle before Charlie attempted to climb out on her own. Then the couple went inside to tell everyone their news about the baby.

"It's a boy!" announced Adam.

Pleased, Vera put down her knitting and got up from her recliner to hug Adam and Charlie. Somewhat confused, Chuck stared at them and tried to make sense of it all. Sometimes, things

were too much for Chuck to understand, and he would rely on his mother or daughter's expression to determine whether something was bad or good. Right now the women were smiling, so Chuck concluded that it was safe to be happy.

"The doctor wants Charlie to have more protein in her diet," continued Adam, helping his wife onto the sofa, even though she protested that she could sit down without his assistance. "Charlie needs to have meat in her diet, because she's not getting enough protein from what we're currently eating."

"Mabel and I will see to it," Vera nodded, referring to her friend and housekeeper, Mrs. Freemont.

"Charlie's doctor also said she needs to gain more weight," Adam sighed in concern.

"Only five pounds, Grandma," smiled Charlie, half afraid Vera would stuff her full of food. "I'm doing good, and so is the baby."

"Tonight, we're going to have fried chicken," Vera patted her granddaughter's hand consolingly. "That'll put some weight on you."

With a whimper, Charlie noted the relieved look on Adam's face. She knew it was fruitless to protest and reluctantly decided to accept her fate. In need of a nap, Charlie reclined on the couch while Adam placed a throw pillow behind her head to make sure she was comfortable.

"I'm all right," insisted Charlie. "You don't have to hover over me."

"Let me enjoy this," requested Adam, tenderly taking her hand in his. "After all, it's not everyday that we're expecting a baby."

"We're just not expecting the baby, *today!*" laughed Charlie. "There's a big difference!"

Adam tucked a small blanket around Charlie. "I'm going to take good care of you," he promised.

"You always do," smiled Charlie, closing her eyes for some rest.

For several minutes, Adam lingered beside the couch and held Charlie's hand.

When he showed up in the kitchen a little while later, Vera shooed him out of their way.

"We have everything under control, so there's no need for a man to slow up progress," she informed him. "Is Charlie asleep?"

"I think all the excitement was a little much for her," affirmed Adam. Then Adam remembered he had a phone call to make, and went to contact the lawyer Bill had hired.

When Adam returned to the kitchen, he told Vera about the tabloid and his phone call. "Depending on how scared they are of being sued, they'll probably just pull the magazine and settle out of court," Adam informed Vera, as she handed him some plates to set the table with. "The bad news is, the pictures are out, and they'll never really go away. Our lawyer said they're probably on the Internet by now, and we just don't know about it yet."

"Sorry to hear it," Vera sighed.

Adam took the pitcher of juice from Vera's hands and delivered it to the table. "We knew this was probably inevitable, and I think the forewarning helped Charlie prepare herself for the pictures in that tabloid. She didn't panic and cry, but handled herself like a true pro. I was very proud of her, today."

A whiff of fried chicken drifted toward Adam and he grinned hungrily. Since the doctor had temporarily taken Charlie off her diet, that meant he was, too. "That smells so good," he sighed dreamily. "I haven't had fried chicken in quite a while!"

"Dinner's ready, so you'd better go wake up Charlie," advised Vera, taking off her apron while Mrs. Freemont placed a bowl of coleslaw on the table.

Adam went to the living room and gently shook Charlie's shoulder. "Honey," he whispered, "it's dinner time."

Charlie moaned sleepily, and tried to snuggle deeper into the couch cushions.

"We're having fried chicken," Adam coaxed, pulling off her small throw blanket.

With a yawn, Charlie sleepily blinked at Adam as he brushed the hair away from her face.

"Did you have a good nap?" he smiled tenderly.

Charlie nodded that she had, and Adam helped her to her feet.

"Tonight, after everyone has gone to bed," Adam proposed in a whisper, "why don't we load up an old movie in our room, and I'll make us some popcorn?"

"Why the celebration?" she smiled.

Adam gathered Charlie in his arms and sighed happily. "I have all the reason I need, right here."

"And God remembered [Charlie]... and opened her womb. And she conceived... a son."

~ Genesis 30: 22-23 ~

"Who is like unto the LORD our God... He maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children."

~ Psalm 113:5, 9 ~

Chapter Sixty-one

The Generation to Come

"He [God] established a testimony... That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to *their* children: That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments."
~ Psalm 78: 5-7 ~

"Little and womanly." According to the book of baby names Maggie had given Charlie, that's what the name "Charlotte" meant. Charlie wasn't sure she liked it very much, but since her figure was presently so big, anything that called her little or small had to be positive. A rumble of night thunder sounded outside their bedroom, and Charlie noticed that it didn't disturb the man sleeping beside her in bed. For once, Adam had fallen asleep at bedtime like a normal person, and unwittingly left Charlie to endure her wakefulness alone. She usually wasn't the one to battle insomnia, and it had taken Charlie by surprise.

Wearily, Charlie flipped through the small book. Even though Maggie had known that Charlie's unborn son already had a name, Maggie had insisted that Charlie at least have a look. "It's fun finding out what names mean!" Maggie had laughed.

As Charlie scanned the list of "M" names, she had to admit this was interesting. To her delight, she discovered that "Matthew" meant "gift from Jehovah."

"How appropriate," Charlie mused quietly. Her hand gently caressed the belly in front of her, while the baby inside continued to kick. "Are you ready to let your mother go to sleep yet, Matthew?"

As if the caress had touched him as well, Adam stirred beside Charlie, and he sleepily looked up at his wife. "Can't sleep?" he blinked groggily.

"Matthew's awake," Charlie shook her head. "It's two in the morning, and I'm afraid he's already taking after his father."

Adam placed a warm hand on Charlie's belly and smiled in spite of the late hour. "He's really moving around in there!"

"Adam, why can't you have insomnia when I do?" she lamented. "I've been struggling to go to sleep all night!"

"Hardly seems fair, does it?" he grinned at her sympathetically.

"There goes Matthew again," sighed Charlie, as she felt another kick inside her womb.

"Why don't you get up and move around?" suggested Adam. "Maybe the movement will rock him to sleep."

"I've already tried that," Charlie whimpered. "Every time I lie down, he starts up again!"

Tossing the covers back, Adam climbed out of bed. Even though it was late spring, the carpeted floor felt cold to his bare feet. "I'll be right back," Adam yawned, nearly stumbling over the dog as he left the bedroom. "Stay off the bed, Wally."

Harmlessly, Wally raised her head and watched until Adam had left the bedroom. Then, seeing her chance, the dog jumped onto the mattress and found a warm place beside Charlie. The young woman petted Wally and continued to read from her book.

"I wonder what Wallace means," she wondered out loud.

"Here's Chuck's rocking chair," announced Adam, carrying the piece of furniture into the master bedroom. "Try it, Charlie. Maybe you can get some rest while you're rocking the baby." Adam helped his very pregnant wife off the bed and gently seated her in the comfortable chair.

"Would you get my book?" Charlie asked him.

"Is this what you've been reading all night?" wondered Adam, taking a quick look at the book before giving it to Charlie.

"Not *all* night." Charlie squirmed as her son gave her another kick. She began rocking back and forth, and reopened her book. "Adam, did you know that 'Wallace' means 'Welshman'?"

"No, I didn't," Adam yawned, checking the time once more. It was very late.

"Is your family Welsh?" she wondered.

"Not that I'm aware of," he smiled sleepily. "Do you need me to stay up with you?"

"After all those nights when I helped your insomnia," she lightly joked, "you want to run out on me *now*?"

Adam defended himself with a handsome smile. "Hey, I'm offering to stay up!"

"Go to bed," sighed Charlie, returning her attention to the book. "Did you know that 'Charlton' means 'a peasant's settlement'?"

Shaking his head, Adam rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "Wally, get off the bed," he ordered the dog.

Wally's tail flopped back and forth hopefully, as if begging to stay.

"You're not a puppy," Adam warned her, "so those brown eyes won't work on me anymore."

Charlie slowly rocked back and forth in Chuck's rocking chair. "Matthew, please hold still for a while so I can go to sleep," she begged.

A brilliant flash momentarily lit the sliding door's curtain, and Wally let out a nervous yip! It was quickly followed by a crash of thunder that shook the windowpanes and sent Wally scrambling beneath the covers to hide.

"Off the bed," repeated Adam.

"Sounds like a storm's coming." Charlie looked up at the ceiling as though she could see straight through it. "We might be in for some rain," she predicted.

Another roll of thunder crashed overhead and Wally whimpered from under the blankets.

"Can't Wally sleep on the bed tonight?" begged Charlie. "The thunder is frightening her!"

"Oh, I suppose so," Adam gave in, as another crack of thunder boomed across their rooftop. With a loving smile, he bent over the rocking chair and kissed his wife. "This is one pair of brown eyes I never expect to get over," he sighed. "Is my name in that book of yours?"

"'Adam' means 'man,'" she nodded. "I already checked."

Light flashed against the curtains, calling Adam's attention away from Charlie. He paused, waiting for the answering thunder. When it came, Adam went to the glass door and stepped into the enclosed garden to see the storm. The leaves on their tree rustled in the wind as a tumbleweed sailed over the high wall and caught itself on one of the rose bushes. Adam turned his face to the dark sky. Sunrise was hours away, but he wished it would come sooner. A thick blanket of clouds were blocking out the moon and stars, and for some unexplained reason, it

made Adam uneasy. Maybe it was the strong prevailing winds that made him wish for daybreak, or maybe it was something else. A blinding flash of nearby lightening quickly sent Adam inside.

The thunder shook Villa Rosa so much, that Wally scampered out of bed and tried to jump onto Charlie's nonexistent lap!

"Wally!" shouted Adam, as the dog frantically searched for another place to hide. "Are you all right, Charlie?" He looked his wife over and let out a sigh of relief. "I wish that dog would settle down," Adam breathed patiently. As he said this, Wally dove beneath their bed in response to another crash of thunder.

"Adam, would you get me a glass of water?" asked Charlie. She turned her head to look at Adam, just as the curtains behind him glowed with so much light, Charlie momentarily thought the sun had come out. Then the brilliance disappeared, putting out the bedside lamp and plunging the room into complete darkness.

"Adam?" Charlie nervously called to him. "Where are you? What happened to the electricity?"

"It's all right, Honey," he assured her from the other side of the room. "I think that last lighting strike must've hit a power line." Stumbling through the darkness, his foot stepped on something furry. Wally yelped, and ran to Charlie.

"There, there," Charlie petted her frightened dog. "You're safe."

"Sorry, Wally. I thought you were still under the bed," Adam apologized. "Charlie, where do we keep the flashlights?"

"In the cupboard, under the kitchen countertop."

"After I get a flashlight," said Adam, "I'm calling the electric company to find out what's going on!"

Adam crossed the room, trying not to bump into anything as he moved. His hands were expecting to find the door, when something furry scrambled past his legs. "What was that?" he asked in alarm.

"It was Wally," explained Charlie. "I think she's hiding in the bathroom."

"That dog," mumbled Adam. "I'll be right back, Charlie. Stay in the rocking chair so I'll know where to find you."

Adam opened the master bedroom door, and gazed up at the darkened skylight above the indoor courtyard.

"Who's there?" a startled voice asked Adam.

The courtyard momentarily lit with lightening, and for a split second, Adam saw Chuck standing near his bedroom door.

"Where's Mom?" asked Chuck.

Adam went to his father-in-law. "What are you doing out of bed?" he asked Chuck. "Your mom's in Palm Springs with Mrs. Freemont. They're on vacation, remember?" Chuck had repeatedly asked the same question at dinner time, and had been unable to remember the answer for very long.

"When is she coming home?" asked Chuck, as Adam tucked him back into bed.

"Next week," Adam replied gently. "Can you go to sleep?"

"I think so."

"Good night," said Adam, quietly closing the door. More thunder rumbled through Villa Rosa, and Adam was grateful that it didn't appear to be frightening Chuck very much.

Even though the house remained pitch-black, Adam tested the light switch in the kitchen just to be sure the electricity hadn't already come back on. When nothing happened, he went to the counter and located the cupboard that held their emergency flashlights. The echo of distant thunder sounded above the house, giving Adam that same feeling of unease once more. "It's probably only because the girls are making me nervous," Adam reasoned to himself. "Charlie can't sleep and Wally's hiding in the bathroom."

Clicking on his flashlight, Adam easily found the kitchen telephone.

In the darkness of the master bedroom, Charlie squirmed in her rocking chair. "Matthew," she sighed, "I wish you'd settle down." The expectant mother slowly rocked back and forth, listening to the creak of the chair and the thunder that kept booming in the skies above their rooftop. The feeling that had been bothering her came again, and Charlie shifted in her chair to get more comfortable. Since the clock wasn't working, she didn't know how long it took before the

uncomfortable sensation returned. When it did, Charlie's instincts told her that Matthew was coming!

A beam of light shone through the doorway behind Charlie, and Adam appeared with a flashlight. "The electric company says we're the only ones without power, so we're on our own until they can send out a repair truck." When Charlie didn't respond, Adam turned the flashlight on her.

"I'm having contractions," Charlie announced with as much calm as she could summon. "They're getting stronger, and I don't think Matthew is going to wait very long to be born."

Adam gulped, and suddenly that uneasy feeling he had been trying to ignore in the pit of his stomach made sense. "But, you're not due until next month," he nervously informed her, as though that bit of information would be enough to stop the entire process.

"Tell that to your son!" Charlie gasped with the next contraction.

Racing to the dresser, Adam fumbled with the flashlight to find his wristwatch. "How close are the contractions?"

"How should I know?" she cried. "You're the one with the watch!"

"Okay, okay," Adam inhaled, trying to collect his thoughts into something that made sense. There was no need to panic, for this was just the beginning of Charlie's contractions. Telling himself that they had plenty of time to reach the hospital, Adam grabbed his car keys.

"Where are you going?" panicked Charlie, as he quickly moved toward the bedroom door without her.

"I'll bring the SUV around, and then come get you," he reassured her. "Just stay in the rocking chair."

"That's what you said last time," Charlie whimpered.

Thunder boomed in the distance, as another wave of contractions hit Charlie. These were much stronger than the others, and it took a great deal of courage for her not to panic. She was alone in the dark, and in more physical pain than she had ever experienced in her entire life.

"Dear God," Charlie pleaded with Heaven, "*don't let me have this baby by myself!*"

Wind whipped at Adam as he rushed down the flagstone walk to the garage. His only thoughts were of Charlie and the baby, and if the noise that greeted his ears hadn't been so strangely out of place, he would have easily missed it. To his great surprise, he could hear the nearby sound of swiftly moving water! Adam frowned. Since there were no rivers around here for a great distance, this could only mean one thing.

"Please, God! No!" he prayed aloud. With a lump in his throat, Adam followed the sound of water past the main gates of Villa Rosa. The emergency backup power for the security system had kicked in, and Adam still had to go through his normal routine of unlocking the heavy gate with a pass code before he could get through on foot.

The open desert's dark expanse seemed to close in on Adam as he made his way down the paved road. Overhead, the sky flashed and rumbled, threatening rain.

Trusting his ears to take him to the source of the sound, Adam followed the road away from Villa Rosa until he reached the one place where it dipped because of a former wash. The sound was quite loud now, and Adam aimed his flashlight ahead, knowing what he would find even before he saw it.

"Who goes there?" demanded a sturdy voice from behind Adam.

Instinctively, Adam put his hands in the air and slowly turned around. "It's me-- Adam!" he called out.

Two figures with flashlights appeared out of the darkness and approached the startled man.

"Sorry if we scared you," apologized Kevin, holstering his handgun. "I heard someone moving around outside and found the electricity off and the front gate open."

"The road's washed out," Adam informed them, shining his flashlight down at the rushing water. "It must really be raining elsewhere, for us to get this much runoff!"

"Guess we're not going anywhere for a while," remarked Kevin.

Adam rubbed his face and moaned. "This can't happen!" he cried.

"What's wrong?" asked Kevin with a joking laugh. "You look like you're best friend just died!"

"Don't say that!" snapped Adam.

Kevin remained silent. The desperation in Adam's voice told him that something was wrong.

"I'm sorry," Adam apologized, turning his flashlight back on the flooded road. "Charlie went into labor, and I have to get her to the hospital!"

"Is there anything we can do to help?" offered Kevin. "You're not getting through that water. It's several feet deep, and it doesn't look like it's done rising. What about the jet?"

"We don't have a pilot living on the grounds," Adam sighed. "One would have to drive in." Shaking his head, Adam turned toward Villa Rosa's gates. "I'd better go back to Charlie before she never speaks to me again! Would one of you see if you can get the generator started? It's pitch-black inside!"

"Can do!" nodded Mark, the second bodyguard on rotation at the time. Mark was a former Navy Seabee, and he was quite confident that he could easily handle the generator. A baby, on the other hand, was another matter altogether!

Kevin followed Adam through the front door of the main house, and both went straight to the master bedroom. There, they found Charlie on the floor.

"Charlie?" cried Adam in alarm, as he dropped to his knees beside the young woman. "Are you all right?"

"What does it look like?" she retorted. "Where have you been?"

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

Charlie flashed him another I-shouldn't-have-to-answer-that-look, and bore down for another contraction. "Where's the car?" she panted, her face wet with perspiration.

"We can't leave," Adam informed her gravely. "The road is washed out. I don't suppose this is false labor?"

"I don't think so!" moaned Charlie.

"Let me move you to the bed," offered Adam, trying to help Charlie to her feet.

"No, not yet!" Charlie resisted, finding her breath long enough to speak. "I'm staying here, until you find that book Shirley gave us at the baby shower!"

"Would you forget about books!" exclaimed Adam. "You need to get onto the bed, Charlie!"

"Not until you find the book!" Charlie was adamant.

"What book?"

With strength Adam didn't know Charlie possessed, she grabbed his arm and looked him straight in the eye. "That book says what to do if you don't make it to the hospital in time."

"In time for what?" It was a dumb question, and Adam knew it the second he heard his own words.

Charlie tightly squeezed Adam's arm, and he had the startling revelation that he needed to find the book. Taking his flashlight, Adam hurried to the small bookshelf beside their bed and searched for Shirley's baby shower gift.

Something moved beside Adam, and he shone the flashlight straight into Wally's face. "Go sit with Charlie," he ordered the dog. Amazingly, Wally obeyed.

Unsure what to do with himself, Kevin pointed his flashlight at Charlie. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Please check Daddy," panted Charlie. "I don't want him frightened."

"I'll see to it," Kevin assured her. "Don't worry about Chuck. I'll take care of him."

"Thank you," Charlie replied in an unsteady voice.

Kevin left the room just as Charlie noticed the water-like substance between her legs. "Oh no," she breathed.

"I can't find the book!" Adam shouted over his shoulder.

"My water just broke!" she announced.

Feeling lightheaded, Adam had to steady himself or risk passing out. "Okay," he breathed, as if his fate had just been determined. "God, please help me!" Just then, Adam's eyes fell on the book he had been looking for. "Thanks!" he exclaimed. "Charlie, I have the book!"

"Read it!" she urged, not looking anywhere near as relieved as Adam did.

Struggling to read by the light of the flashlight, Adam found himself wishing the book would hold still in his trembling hands. As he was asking God for more help, the lights suddenly came back on!

"Thank God!" cried Charlie, as Adam tossed aside his flashlight and read in earnest.

"I need to get some things," mumbled Adam, going into the master bathroom just as Kevin and Mark appeared in the bedroom doorway.

"The lights are back on," Mark informed Charlie.

"And Chuck's sleeping like a baby," added Kevin. "Is there anything else we can do?"

"We need some new shoelaces," declared Adam, returning from the bathroom with an armful of supplies. "We also need a pair of sharp scissors."

"Scissors?" asked Kevin.

Adam gulped nervously. "To cut the umbilical cord. Do you know CPR?"

"We both do," affirmed Kevin. "If it's needed, we'll be here."

"As soon as I get the bed ready like it says in the book, I'm calling 911," continued Adam.

"No!" Charlie cried. "I want my doctor!"

"But, it's in the middle of the night," argued Adam, as the two bodyguards hurried away to find the things Adam still needed.

"*Call Dr. Ron at his home!*" shouted Charlie.

She rarely ever shouted at Adam, and it startled him out of wanting to win the argument. Nervously praying that Dr. Ron would pick up, Adam dialed Charlie's obstetrician. Dr. Ron had been overseeing this pregnancy from the start, and Adam could understand why Charlie wanted to turn to him for the delivery.

A woman answered Adam's call, and tried to hand the receiver to her sleeping husband. "Hon," Adam heard her say, "it's one of your patients."

"Dr. Ron speaking," a groggy man finally answered.

"Charlie's going into labor!" Adam blurted excitedly.

"Charlie?" It took the doctor a moment to fully wake up and realize who he was speaking to.

"You mean, Mrs. Clark?"

"The road is washed out, and we can't make it to the hospital!"

This confused Dr. Ron even further. "Are you in your car?"

"No, we're in the bedroom!"

In the kitchen, Kevin pulled out several large trash bags. According to Charlie's book, giving birth involved a lot of bodily fluids, and they would need to line the bed with these bags.

"Shouldn't I get some water boiling?" questioned Mark. "New or not, these shoelaces will need to be sterilized. So will these scissors."

"Do it," nodded Kevin.

By the time the two bodyguards returned to the master bedroom, they found Adam on the phone with Charlie's doctor.

"I need those bags on the bed," instructed Adam, holding a phone in one hand, and the book in the other.

"After Charlie's birthing bed is ready," instructed Dr. Ron, "I need you to examine her cervix. I *must* know how far along this delivery has already progressed."

Kevin placed blankets over the trash bags and then watched as Adam helped Charlie onto the bed.

When Wally barked excitedly, Dr. Ron's urgent voice sounded over the phone. "Get that animal out of there! We *must* keep things as sterile as possible!"

Taking Wally by the collar, Mark hurried the dog out of the room.

"Lie back, Charlie," Adam told his wife. "Raise your knees so I can tell Dr. Ron what he needs to know."

Feeling out of place, Kevin discreetly exited before the examination started.

"I can see something!" Adam shouted into the phone. "I think it's the top of the baby's head!"

"Charlie is fully dilated," concluded Dr. Ron, realizing that the baby was coming very fast. "It's time for her to start pushing!"

"Kevin!" shouted Adam.

"Yeah?" Kevin stuck his head into the bedroom and went a little queasy when he saw Adam getting Charlie into the childbirth position.

"I need your help, Kevin! Hold Charlie's leg like this, so her foot can push against your hand!"

Charlie cried in anguish. "I don't think I can do this! Adam, I don't think I can do this!"

"Yes, you can!" he encouraged her.

"Adam!" Charlie strained to keep from pushing. "I need a Bible promise!"

"Now?" cried Adam. "Charlie, the baby is almost here!"

"*Please!*" she gasped.

Adam could see the terror in Charlie's face, and he frantically searched his memory for a Bible promise.

"What's going on?" shouted Dr. Ron, for the telephone lay on the bed and he couldn't hear anything since everyone had suddenly gone quiet.

Adam looked to Kevin for help, and the bodyguard picked up the satellite phone.

"Adam?" cried Charlie.

"I'm thinking, Honey." Adam patted her knee, and then a passage came to him. "'The LORD recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.'" It was the best he could do under pressure, and Adam gave his young wife a gentle squeeze. "You need to push, Charlie-girl."

A fresh contraction wrapped itself around Charlie's body and she clenched a nearby pillow.

"Push!" cried Adam, and Charlie pushed with all her might. "Again!" he shouted, while his eyes remained fixed on the small head protruding between her legs. "I can see his head, Honey!"

Charlie screamed in agony.

"The baby's not coming!" Kevin shouted into the telephone.

"Tell Charlie to bring her knees up and push *hard!*" ordered Dr. Ron.

Charlie grabbed her knees and pushed with the next contraction.

"I see him!" cried Adam in delight. "Just one more push, Charlie!"

Summoning every bit of her remaining strength, Charlie pushed as hard as she could until Adam exclaimed,

"I've got him! Now what?"

Kevin placed the phone to Adam's ear. "Is he choking?" asked Dr. Ron.

"No," answered Adam, examining the small infant carefully, "he's breathing."

"Rub his back until you hear him take several deep breaths," instructed the doctor.

Trying hard not to hurt the fragile looking baby, Adam gently rubbed Matthew's back. "He's breathing," Adam affirmed once more.

"Now place him on your wife's chest," directed Dr. Ron. "Make sure they have skin to skin contact so the baby can keep warm and begin nursing."

By now, Charlie was struggling to see her baby. The men were talking to the doctor over the telephone and she couldn't hear what Dr. Ron was saying.

"Where's Matthew?" cried Charlie. "Is he all right? I want to see Matthew!"

"He's right here," Adam tried to calm her, bringing the tiny infant face to face with his mother for the very first time.

Needing no one to tell her what should be done, Charlie slowly adjusted the top of her nightgown while Kevin took a few steps back to give her privacy.

"Give him to me," she breathed weakly.

Adam gently placed the infant against Charlie's skin, and she cried with motherly delight. "Oh, Adam! Look at him!" she exclaimed, as though the pain this little one had just put her through were already a distant memory. "Isn't he beautiful?" Charlie's awe was soon overcome with fatigue, and she had to stop speaking and try to get Matthew nursing.

Concerned, Adam picked up the satellite phone. "Her cervix is bleeding, and she's very pale."

"That's to be expected," replied the doctor. "The umbilical cord needs to be cut, then she can deliver the placenta. Did you sterilize the shoestrings and scissors?"

"I think so," Adam searched the room. "Kevin--"

"I'll go get them," he spoke up without needing to hear the rest of Adam's question. "They're boiling on the stove."

When Kevin returned, Mark came with him, but remained by the doorway so he wouldn't intrude on Charlie's privacy.

"Tie the umbilical cord like I told you," Dr. Ron talked Adam through each step. The shoestring wasn't what Adam dreaded, however. It was the scissors. "The baby and the mother won't feel it," he assured Adam. "Take the cord between your fingers so you can get a clean cut."

"It's kind of slippery," Adam hesitated. "Are you sure about this?"

"You're doing just fine," chuckled Dr. Ron.

"Here it goes," gulped Adam. His scissors snipped through the umbilical cord, and to Adam's great relief, neither Charlie nor the baby cried out in pain.

"The placenta needs to be delivered," Dr. Ron further instructed.

Adam took the baby from Charlie, and she heard Matthew cry for the very first time.

"Isn't he wonderful?" she asked with a smiling pale face.

"Push one more time," Adam urged gently.

Charlie really didn't feel like pushing, but she grunted until the placenta was at last delivered. "Is it over?" she panted.

"It's over," grinned Adam, returning a crying Matthew back to the warmth of his mommy.

Too weak to say anything more, Charlie smiled and closed her eyes. She felt Adam kiss her forehead and the small baby nurse at her breast. Then she felt the comfort of a clean blanket cover her body, as Adam tried to keep her warm. The room wasn't especially cold, but she was covered in sweat, and the lower half of her body was wet with afterbirth.

"I know the road is flooded," Dr. Ron told Adam over the phone, "but they need to get to the hospital as soon as possible."

"Unless you think I should call 911, I don't think I can find a pilot and an aircraft to come out here at such short notice," replied Adam. "It'll probably be sometime after daybreak before I can get them out of here-- but not tonight."

"This is an emergency, but it's not urgent," reasoned Dr. Ron. "However, if your wife or the baby display any of the symptoms I told you to watch for, dial 911 and a MEDEVAC [medical evacuation] helicopter will come out to you."

With a thankful heart, Adam put away the satellite phone. Dr. Ron had done all he could, and the poor man could go back to bed. For Adam, however, sleep was the furthest from his mind. He had to clean up the afterbirth, and make the mattress a suitable place for Charlie to rest.

Trying to be as gentle as he could, Adam removed the bottom half of Charlie's blanket and began cleaning Matthew's afterbirth from the bed. With an amazed sigh, Adam realized that he had just helped to deliver his own baby!

After taking care of the more obvious cleanup tasks, Adam noticed Charlie's eyes were open. "Are you hungry?" he asked. "Dr. Ron said you should eat something as soon as you're able."

"I think I'm still bleeding," she mumbled.

"I know," Adam sighed. "It's much less than before, though. Dr. Ron said you're doing good."

Charlie smiled faintly. "I'll eat," she whispered.

"I'll be right back," Adam assured her.

Pushing back the blanket, Charlie gazed at Matthew's tiny form asleep against her chest. "So, you were the one kicking me so hard," she gently cooed to her son. Matthew let out a small cry, and Charlie moved him so he could continue nursing a little easier.

Tired again, Charlie closed her eyes until she felt a strong hand touch her shoulder.

"Here's your food," Adam coaxed. "I fixed you some applesauce and a few cookies. Do you want something to drink first?"

Charlie accepted a sip from the straw Adam placed in her mouth. She was amazed at how good the cold juice felt in her dry mouth.

"It's raining," Adam informed Charlie, as she ate her applesauce. "There's probably going to be a rainbow in the morning."

"Daddy?" she inquired.

"He's doing fine," smiled Adam. "Kevin has been checking on him, and said Chuck slept through all the excitement."

"Good," sighed Charlie, trying to force herself to finish the meal. "I'm so tired, Adam."

"I know," he smiled. "You look it."

Charlie slowly ate her cookies while Adam remained close to her bedside. He looked tired himself, though not as much as Charlie did.

"Could I take a shower?" she asked, finishing her glass of juice. "I think I have the strength for it."

"Are you sure?" hesitated Adam. Her bedding needed to be changed in the worst possible way, but he wasn't sure he liked the thought of her trying to stand up so soon.

"I want a shower," Charlie nodded. She tried to move her legs and moaned as pain shot through her body.

Adam grimaced as though he were the one hurting. "Maybe you'd better lie still for awhile longer," he suggested.

Unwilling to remain in the soiled bed any longer than she had to, Charlie moved her legs again. This time the pain didn't take her by surprise and she managed to swing her limbs over the edge of the bed.

"I feel woozy," groaned Charlie.

"That's because you've lost a lot of blood," Adam explained tenderly.

"You'd better take Matthew," she cautioned. "I don't want to drop him."

"I'll put the boy in his crib," said Adam, taking the infant from Charlie. "Don't try to stand up without me, Charlie. I'll just be a moment."

"You've been telling me to stay put, all night," she smiled, as he lifted Matthew into the crib. "I wouldn't go anywhere without you, Adam."

"I'm glad to hear it," he grinned, coming back to her bedside. "Lean on me as you try to stand up."

"What if I fall?" she whimpered, her courage buckling as she felt just how weak her body truly was.

Adam smiled affectionately. "I won't let you fall." He placed an arm around her waist, and she slowly stood up.

"I need to use the bathroom," Charlie's face became urgent.

"That's where we're headed," replied Adam, gently trying to help her take a step toward the bathroom.

"I need to use it NOW," she explained seriously.

"Would it be all right if I picked you up?"

"Please hurry," she replied a little frantically. "I don't think I can hold it!"

Adam scooped Charlie into his arms and he carried her to the master bathroom. When he placed Charlie on the toilet, blood mingled with urine came streaming out.

"I wish it would stop," whimpered Charlie, leaning her head against Adam's leg as he stood beside the toilet.

"The bleeding keeps getting less and less," he tried to encourage her.

Charlie looked faint again, and Adam braced her with his body. "You're not going to fall off the toilet, are you?" he asked, half jokingly.

"I'm going to take a shower now," she announced, using Adam's arm to help her stand up.

"Take it slowly," coaxed Adam, as Charlie tried a step on her own. She wobbled, and before she could put out her hand to catch her fall, she was already safe in Adam's arms. "You'd better let me help," he smiled.

Adam guided her behind the frosted glass of the shower doors. He started the water, and dropped Charlie's bloodstained nightgown in a heap on the floor.

When they emerged several minutes later, Adam dried Charlie and then dressed her in a clean nightgown. She had used much of her energy just standing in the shower while he bathed her, and Adam didn't want to take very much longer.

"I need to lie down," mumbled Charlie.

"I know," he sighed. "Are you feeling faint again?"

Without answering, Charlie started to lie down on the bathroom floor!

"Wait," Adam tried to stop her, "let me carry you back to bed!"

But Charlie was already on the floor, closing her eyes, before Adam could do anything about it. Just then, he heard crying from the bedroom.

"I'm coming, Matthew!" Adam called to his son. He hurried to the crib and lifted out the baby. "Are you doing okay in there, Charlie?" When she didn't respond, Adam rushed back to Charlie's side with Matthew still in his arms. "Charlie?" he gently nudged her arm.

"I'm tired," she mumbled sleepily. "Does the baby need to be fed?"

"Probably," smiled Adam, just glad that Charlie hadn't fainted or blacked out. "As long as you're already down there, let me change your bedding before you return to the bedroom."

Crawling across the bathroom floor, Charlie leaned against the wall while Adam folded a soft towel for her to sit on.

"I must look pretty ridiculous on the floor," whimpered Charlie, as she adjusted her nightgown so Matthew could nurse.

"No, just pretty," smiled Adam, giving his wife a kiss before leaving. "I don't have to tell you not to go anywhere without me, do I?"

"We'll stay put," Charlie agreed. Her bottom was hurting and she didn't know how long she could sit, but she knew Adam needed time to clean the bedroom.

While Charlie heard Adam working, she gazed at the small life in her arms.

"Who do you think he looks like?" Adam called from the next room. "He has your eyes, and I think that mouth came from your side of the family!"

"No," smiled Charlie, "that's the same handsome Clark face I see every time you look at me!"

Adam stuck his head in and grinned. "You think I have a handsome face?"

"As if you didn't already know!" laughed Charlie. Her laughter was quickly cut short by a startling sensation.

"What's wrong?" asked Adam.

"I'm bleeding again," she announced dully.

"I didn't know it had stopped."

"Maybe I'm just noticing it more." Charlie moved her bottom on the folded towel. "I don't know how much longer I can sit here."

Adam quickly disappeared into the bedroom to finish his task. He stuffed all the soiled bedding into trash bags and then made the bed over with clean sheets.

Feeling something wet on her chest, Charlie looked down at the newborn and smiled at his still-bare bottom. "We need to put a diaper on Matthew! He just did a stinky on my nightgown!"

"I'm hurrying!" exclaimed Adam. Five minutes later, he returned to his small family in the bathroom.

"Let me take Matthew to his crib, so I can diaper him," Adam told Charlie.

"I want to be there to watch," she protested.

"There'll be plenty of opportunities in the future," chuckled Adam. "Trust me! I've changed and diapered two nephews until they were old enough to use training pants!"

"But, it's Matthew's very first diaper!"

Adam kindly regarded his wife. "I'll put some warm towels on the floor, and you can diaper him right here."

"You'd do that for me?"

"I'd do more than that, if you wanted me to," Adam smiled. "In a few days, you'll be *begging* me to change his diapers!"

Charlie gently cleaned Matthew's little bottom and showered him with baby powder until Adam coughed that it was enough. Then she let Adam take the baby back to his crib.

"Are you ready to change out of that second nightgown?" laughed Adam, returning to help Charlie from off the floor. "You just can't seem to keep your nightgown from getting dirty!"

"I'd like to see you give birth and do better," Charlie challenged him with a small groan.

After changing, Charlie insisted she felt strong enough to walk under her own power. Half expecting her to fall, Adam nervously watched as his wife wobbled into the master-bedroom and slowly made her way to the bed. When she reached the mattress, she gave Adam a triumphant smile and then quickly had to lie down before her strength gave out.

With a sigh of relief, Adam sat down on the edge of their mattress and noticed light coming from the curtained glass door. "It's going to be nice day outside," he remarked with a sleepy yawn.

"You need some rest," observed Charlie.

Adam shrugged off his wife's concern. "I've got to find someone to fly in a helicopter, so you and Matthew can see a doctor."

"You'd better call Shirley and tell her that she's an aunt," yawned Charlie. "And Grandma will want to know, and could you tell Maggie, as well?"

"Notifying our relatives!" exclaimed Adam in self reproach. "With all this going on, I'd completely forgotten!"

"Would you carry Matthew to me?" mumbled Charlie, as her eyes closed for some rest. "I want him with me."

After returning the infant to his mother, Adam quietly left the master bedroom.

"Did you see the rainbow over the desert this morning?" Kevin smiled to Adam, as he walked into the living room and searched a pile of magazines for the telephone book. "The road is still flooded, but the water has gone down enough that I think you could cross it in the SUV."

"Really?" Adam smiled in relief. "I was just about to call around for a helicopter!"

Kevin passed Adam a plate of cheese sandwiches that he and Mark had made for breakfast. "When do you want to leave?" inquired Kevin.

"Charlie just fell asleep again, and I want her to have a little more rest," replied Adam, wearily dropping onto the couch with his sandwich. Wally wagged her tail and jumped up to sit beside him. "How are you doing, Girl? Do you miss Mommy?"

"Wally's been whimpering all morning," related Kevin. "I've had quite a time keeping her out of the master bedroom."

"Your mommy's all right," Adam gave the dog a hearty pet.

With eyes turned upward toward Adam, Wally rested her head on his knee.

The tired musician leaned back in the sofa. "What a night!" he groaned happily. Then Adam opened one eye at Kevin. "How's Chuck? I haven't seen him all morning."

"He's still asleep," shrugged Kevin.

"At least *someone* in this house got some rest last night," chuckled Adam, shutting his eyes for a few moments of sleep. "Thanks for helping out, guys. I know this wasn't in your job description."

Kevin got up and Mark followed his example. "It's no problem," replied Kevin. "Let us know when you want to leave. I figure since no one will be here to watch Chuck, we'd better take him with us when you and Charlie go to the hospital."

"Uh-huh," Adam muttered, already feeling sleep overtake him.

An hour later, Adam awoke on his own and went to the master bathroom to toss some cold water on his face. He wanted to get started for the hospital, and if they didn't leave soon, it would be lunch time. "At least we gave the flooded wash more time to go down," Adam reasoned to himself. He grabbed a towel and dried his face.

The sound of water splashing in the bathroom sink awoke Charlie, and she greeted Adam with a smile when he returned to the master bedroom.

"Are you ready for a drive?" he asked.

"Not really," Charlie laughed. "Do I have a choice?"

"Not really," replied Adam with a playful wink. "How's my son doing?"

Charlie pushed back the blanket and revealed Matthew's head resting against her chest. "He's asleep."

"I'll put him in his crib so you can get dressed."

While Adam carried Matthew to the crib, Charlie eyed the closet on the other side of the bedroom. She wondered if she could make it there on her own. Glad that Adam's attention was elsewhere, Charlie carefully sat up and placed her feet on the floor. Charlie braced herself for some discomfort and stood up. Blood rushed from her head, and she staggered backward, falling onto the bed.

"What are you doing?" cried Adam.

"I'm trying to get to the closet so I can get dressed," Charlie sighed. "I guess I'm not as strong as I thought I was."

"Hold on, I'm coming," said Adam.

"Have you called Grandma and Shirley yet?"

"Not yet," sighed Adam, walking to the closet and opening the doors so Charlie could see from the bed.

"Grandma will understand, but Shirley won't," warned Charlie. "I'll take the blue skirt and the white top."

Adam pulled out two hangers and brought the clothing to his wife.

"Have you slept since I woke you up last night?" wondered Charlie, for the dark circles under Adam's eyes made him look very tired.

"I dozed for an hour on the living room sofa," he assured her, "but thanks for the concern. I'll go make those calls now." He was about to leave, when he noticed Charlie struggling to get into her clothes. "Let me help you with that," he smiled understandingly.

Adam had just finished buttoning Charlie's blouse when their bedroom door unexpectedly opened!

"Chuck!" cried Adam in surprise. "You're awake!" He wanted to add, "And in our bedroom!" but held his tongue. In his tiredness, he hadn't remembered to lock the door, as they always had in the past when when they didn't want Chuck barging in on them.

"Hi, Daddy!" Charlie smiled to her father.

"Are you babysitting?" frowned Chuck, spotting the nearby crib.

Charlie excitedly tugged at Adam's sleeve. "Show him Matthew!"

"We're not babysitting," grinned Adam, going to the crib. "Chuck, I want you to meet your grandson, Matthew Charlton Clark."

"Grandson?" repeated Chuck in wonderment. He took a cautious step toward the bundle in Adam's arms, as though not willing to trust his ears. "Who's the father?" he asked, his voice laced with concern.

Adam patiently pointed to the wedding frame near the bed.

"Oh, I forgot," breathed Chuck in relief. "Sorry."

"I understand," Adam smiled. "Would you like to hold your grandson?"

As much as she loved her father, Charlie wasn't sure she wanted him holding her newborn son. Matthew was so small, and her motherly instincts were very strong.

"I won't let anything happen," Adam assured his nervous wife.

"Be careful," Charlie pleaded with the men.

Chuck grinned. "I've held babies before." Adam placed Matthew into Chuck's arms, and Chuck gazed at Matthew in amazement. "I remember when you were were this tiny, Charlie."

It was the new memories that her father had the most difficulty retaining, but Charlie was always overjoyed whenever he recalled an old memory from the past.

"What's his name?" asked Chuck.

"Matthew Charlton," repeated Adam.

"I don't think I'll remember." Chuck looked at Adam in concern.

"I'll put Matthew's photo in your room, with his name on it," offered Adam. "That way, he'll be harder to forget."

"Okay," Chuck nodded gratefully. "Where's Mom?"

"With Mrs. Freemont, in Palm Springs," answered Adam. "Speaking of which, I'd better call Vera and Shirley before they think I'm forgetting them on purpose!"

"I know the feeling," Chuck nodded somberly. He returned his gaze to Matthew and beamed as the proud grandpa that he was.

After Matthew was placed back in the crib, Chuck turned to leave. When he opened the bedroom door, however, Wally saw her opportunity and came galloping through! With tail wagging happily, she bounded onto the bed while Adam shouted at her to get off.

"She was just glad to see me," pleaded Charlie. "The birthing is over, so can't she visit for awhile?"

"You're in no condition to deal with a rambunctious dog," Adam argued. He looked down at Wally's pleading eyes and felt his resolve weaken. "Okay," he sighed. "Come on up, Wally. But be careful with Mommy. She's not very strong."

When Adam patted the bed so Wally knew it was all right to jump, a mass of golden retriever fur quickly found its way to Charlie's side.

"Hello, Wally!" Charlie rubbed Wally's stomach while the dog's tail wagged into overdrive. "Isn't she cute, Adam?" Charlie looked up in time to see Adam rub his bloodshot eyes. "I wish you'd get some sleep," she sighed.

"I will," he patiently replied. "AFTER I call our family, and AFTER you and Matthew have seen a doctor." He went to the satellite phone and called Shirley before his lack of sleep made him to forget again.

"Good morning, Sis!" Adam's voice sounded as though he had a secret to tell. "I wanted to let you know--" he was interrupted by Shirley's excited voice. "Yes, we heard the thunder last night. It was quite a display, wasn't it? As I was saying, Charlie and I--" Adam sighed patiently and rubbed his bleary eyes. "Yes, we had some rain, too." Helplessly, he looked at Charlie and smiled while his sister continued to talk. "Sis, I really have to get going. I called to let you know that Charlie went into labor last night and I'm now a daddy! Yes, right here at Villa Rosa! We're on our way to the hospital right now!"

Then Adam called Vera, and she expressed disappointment that she hadn't been there to help Charlie. She and Mrs. Freemont were cutting their trip short, and would arrive at Villa Rosa sometime before dinner.

After the calls were over, Adam helped Charlie out to the SUV parked in front of the house. Then he returned for Matthew while Wally barked so excitedly that the small boy began to cry.

"Down, Wally!" Adam commanded the dog. "Stay! Stay, Girl! We'll be home later!"

The drive to the hospital went well, and Adam was able to get Charlie and the baby checked in without attracting any attention from the media. Matthew was thoroughly examined, as was Charlie, and both were pronounced to be perfectly healthy. Even so, just to be on the safe side, the hospital wanted to keep them for two days.

After Charlie had been taken to her private hospital room, Adam helped her out of her clothes and into a hospital gown. A crib was placed in the room, and Matthew was covered with a pale blue receiving blanket.

Adam was quick to spot the plush chair in the corner of the room, though he tried not to get too comfortable.

"Why don't you sleep?" coaxed Charlie. "You got us to the hospital, and now you can relax."

"When Vera arrives at Villa Rosa this evening, I need to drive Chuck home," yawned Adam. He glanced at his father-in-law and smiled tiredly. "Do you want to visit Jerome at Mullen-Overholt, Chuck? I could take you, if you want."

"I'm fine," declined Chuck, sitting back in his chair and staring at the baby napping in the crib.

"Wake me if you need me," Adam yawned again. He closed his eyes and was soon fast asleep.

Adam knew the press would find out about Matthew soon, though he wanted to put off any announcements until Charlie and the baby were safely back home. Not wanting to attract attention by wandering around the hospital, Adam stayed with Charlie and the baby as much as possible, and even slept in their room at night. Kevin and Mark took turns standing guard outside the door, while trying to look as inconspicuous as they could. With Adam and Charlie as their clients, it wasn't always easy.

"Excuse me," a woman with a little girl timidly approached Kevin.

Kevin warily looked the woman over. "Yes?"

"I heard one of the nurses mention that Wallace Shipley is here," the woman smiled politely. "Would it be possible for my little girl to get his autograph? She's a really big fan of his."

Kevin looked down at the small child clinging to her mother's hand. The girl wore a pair of puppy dog pajamas and her precious head was bald; in her hand, she gripped Wallace Shipley's latest CD.

"I'm sorry," stammered Kevin, feeling about an inch tall for turning the pair away. "I have instructions not to let anyone inside but friends and family."

"I understand," the woman smiled. "It was worth a try." She looked at her daughter apologetically. "I told you that you probably wouldn't get to see him," she reminded the girl.

The child looked up at the tall bodyguard with her large blue eyes. "Is he sick?" she asked in a soft voice Kevin could barely hear. "Is Mr. Wallace Shipley sick?"

"No," hesitated Kevin, who until now, had refused to divulge information to *anyone* about why Adam was at the hospital. If they had to ask, then they were definitely not friends and family of the Clarks.

"I have leukemia," the girl sighed. "Does Mr. Wallace Shipley have leukemia?"

"Emily," the woman squeezed her daughter's hand, "let's leave the poor man to do his job. Come on, it's time for your nap."

The child let herself be led away, and Kevin watched them disappear down the hospital hallway. A moment later, Kevin knocked on Charlie's door, and Adam let him inside.

"I don't suppose you'd sign some kid's CD?" asked Kevin.

Fifteen minutes later, the woman and little girl returned with the nurse who had gone to find them.

"Mr. Shipley said he would like to meet Emily," Kevin smiled at the pair.

Emily's eyes grew wide when Kevin opened the door and let them inside.

"Hello!" Adam got up from his chair and crossed the hospital room to greet their visitors. "I was told a special little girl was here to see me, and she was sent away!" Adam looked kindly at the child. "Would that be you?" he asked.

Too timid to say a word, Emily could only nod her head.

"My wife would like to meet you," coaxed Adam, inviting the woman and small girl over to Charlie's bed. "Look who's here, Charlie! This is Emily and her mother!"

"Thank you for seeing us," the woman expressed her gratitude. "It means a lot to Emily."

"How old is she?" asked Charlie, while Matthew continued to nurse beneath a small blanket.

"Six," smiled the woman. "Emily's had such a difficult time, but I've never heard her complain even once." She smiled at her daughter. "Aren't you going to ask Mr. Shipley to autograph your CD?"

With a shy nod, the girl held out her CD to Adam. "Would you, Mr. Wallace Shipley?"

Adam couldn't help smiling when he heard the child use his full stage name coupled with "Mister." He felt his pocket for a pen. "Charlie, where's that pen you were using for your crossword puzzle a few minutes ago?"

"Here," Charlie smiled. As she handed Adam the pen, Matthew's blanket moved, exposing his presence to the visitors.

"Oh!" exclaimed Emily in delight. "You had your baby!"

"He was born the night before last," Adam grinned. "Let's see that album of yours. Would you like me to sign it here, under the title?"

"May I ask his name?" inquired the woman, not trying to pry into the celebrity's privacy.

The birth of Wallace Shipley's baby had been widely anticipated by his fans, and even though Adam had tried not to encourage their curiosity, it was obvious that they would be interested in Matthew.

Adam looked to Charlie, and Charlie nodded that it was all right for him to tell her Matthew's name. The media were going to find out soon, anyway.

"Matthew Charlton," answered Adam, finishing Emily's album and handing it back to the girl.

"Thank you for your time," the woman beamed at Adam and Charlie gratefully.

"It was nice to meet you, Emily," Adam shook the child's hand. "I hope you get better soon."

"Thank you," Emily smiled shyly.

After the visitors left, Kevin resumed his station by the closed hospital door. He let himself smile, though he knew Emily and her mother had changed the situation for Charlie's hospital stay.

"Now that some of the other patients know why we're here," Adam told Charlie seriously, "it'll only be a matter of time before the press finds out."

"You knew that, the moment you told Kevin to find the woman and her daughter," Charlie smiled. "There's no need for us to stay any longer, Adam. Let's go home."

After one day and one night in the hospital, Adam took his family home to Villa Rosa. They were enthusiastically greeted by Vera and Mrs. Freemont, and the two elderly women cooed and made such a fuss over Matthew, that Adam was unable to get their babytalk out of his head for several hours afterward.

That night, after the baby had been put in his crib, Charlie went to bed while Adam stayed up and read his Bible. He was having trouble sleeping again, but this time, it wasn't because of insomnia.

While Charlie peacefully slept at his side, Adam paged through the Bible until he came to the book of Ruth. He had given Charlie a verse from Ruth when she was about to give birth to Matthew, and the verse had struck a cord in Adam's heart.

Carefully getting out of bed so he wouldn't disturb Charlie, Adam went to the closet and retrieved a used tablet of paper from one of his travel bags. Then he tiptoed back to bed and by the light of the small bedside lamp, began to write down his thoughts.

Early morning light streamed through the curtains of the sliding glass door, casting its soft hues on the occupants in the bed. Charlie moaned sleepily and rolled onto her side, not willing that the day should come so soon. She had nursed and changed Matthew only an hour ago, and was happy to hear him still asleep in his crib.

Enjoying the comfort of the warm sheets, Charlie snuggled her face into her pillow. Something crackled against her ear as she moved, and Charlie reached beneath her pillow to see what it was.

To her wonderment, Charlie pulled out a folded piece of paper with her name on it. She immediately recognized Adam's handwriting, and unfolded it to see what it said.

"My dearest Charlie," the letter read, "I can't sleep, but this time, you're the one to blame. Besides your grandmother's babytalk, a passage from the Bible has been repeating in my head, and I felt the need to write you this letter."

Charlie glanced at the sleeping man beside her before continuing.

"You were in such great pain at the time, you probably don't remember-- but I do. You had asked me for a promise from the Bible, and for some reason, the only passage I could think of came from the book of Ruth."

"I remember," Charlie mused to herself. Her voice was hushed, but it stirred Adam from his sleep. Silently, Adam watched Charlie read his letter.

"I've just finished reading Ruth in its entirety, and now I know why I thought of it," the letter continued. "In chapter three, Boaz tells Ruth, '... thou hast shewed more kindness in the latter end than at the beginning, inasmuch as thou followedst not young men, whether poor or rich.' I don't know how old Boaz was, but from these words, I know he wasn't young."

Charlie peeked over the letter and looked at Adam. His eyes were still closed.

"Like Boaz, I'm honored to have a wife who loves me in spite of myself. I'm not as young as you, and yet you love me as fully and as completely as any man could wish. I may be wealthy, but it's not because of money. It's because of you, Charlie-girl. You, and now Matthew. If happiness is any measure of wealth, then I'm the richest man I know!" The letter was signed, "Adam."

Charlie lovingly folded the letter and examined the tightly closed eyelids of her husband. She leaned over him, letting her hair lightly graze his face.

Adam flinched, but kept his eyes shut.

"If my husband were awake," Charlie mused out loud, "I'd give him a great big kiss right about now."

A smile crept across Adam's face. Then he felt the touch of Charlie's lips against his closed eyes, and could hold himself back no longer. He eagerly met Charlie's mouth in such a loving kiss, Charlie had to pull away from him or risk intimacy that she wasn't ready for.

"I just gave birth," she reminded him with a laughing smile.

Adam gazed into her eyes and sighed contentedly. "I love you, Charlie."

"Do you love the weight I picked up while I was pregnant?" she tested him.

"I love every pound."

"What about the stretch marks on my belly?"

"They do wonders for you."

"I'm sure they do!" Charlie laughed, as Adam gently rolled her onto her back.

"I wouldn't make a single change," he breathed, looking down at her with love kindling in his eyes. For a moment, Charlie was worried he wouldn't remember that she had just come home from the hospital. "I'm waiting," he told her expectantly.

"Waiting for what?"

"I wrote a love letter, told you how beautiful you look, and now I want a letter of my own."

"I don't have any paper," Charlie informed him. "And I don't have a pen."

"If you did," proposed Adam, "what would you write?"

"Well," she hesitated, "I suppose I'd say, 'I love you very much.'"

"Is that all?" he asked, feigning disappointment.

Charlie wanted to giggle at his overly-sincere face, but she didn't. Her heart had something she wanted to tell him: "Thank you for trusting me, Adam."

Adam was about to respond with a joke, but he stopped short and could only smile his affection.

"You didn't need to see Matthew, before believing that he was your son," continued Charlie, "and I love you for it."

"Thank you for loving me," he murmured in a husky voice. Tenderly, Adam leaned down and kissed his wife. He would have done more, but remembered her condition and backed off before he became too serious.

"I guess we'd better get up and face the day," groaned Adam. "Melvin's flying in so we can prepare a statement for the press concerning Matthew's birth, and Shirley will be visiting after lunch. I think she intends to help you get well," grinned Adam.

"Life goes on," smiled Charlie. "Only, could life wait another half hour? I'm not ready to stop cuddling with you yet."

Adam laughed, and snuggled beneath the sheets with his wife. "I love you, Charlie-girl!"

Soon after Melvin arrived, they released a statement to the press announcing Matthew's birth. Flowers, gift baskets, and all sorts of baby presents flooded Villa Rosa. Melvin had warned that Wallace Shipley had a lot of goodwill with his fans, and it was proved several times over by the ever increasing mountain of letters and gifts that crammed the living room floor.

Hating to see all those things go to waste, Charlie and Vera sorted the food items from the toys, and collected all the cards and letters so Charlie and Adam could read them later. The gift baskets Charlie donated to shelters, and the playthings to organizations that gave toys to the children of the homeless. Nothing was wasted. As Adam later proudly observed to Jeff, "That's my Charlie!"

In the years to come, Chuck slowly continued to improve before his Alzheimer's Disease plateaued, and he showed no further signs of progress. Though he was never the man he used to be, he was an active member of the family for the remainder of his life.

Jerome finally tested to see if he carried the Overholt family curse. He didn't, and this kindness from God went largely unacknowledged by Jerome. A few days after his negative test results, Jerome was found unconscious in his office at Mullen-Overholt. He was taken to the hospital and nearly died while doctors and nurses worked to resuscitate him. Jerome later told everyone that while he was unconscious, a man dressed in white showed him his life and how desperately it needed to be changed. The incident caught Jerome's attention, and from that day on, he was a changed man. He later married Evelyn Saunders, the Director of Nursing at Mullen-Overholt, and they went on to have three children. To God's credit, Mullen-Overholt became a model of excellence in the health care industry.

Vera stayed with Charlie and Adam for the remainder of her life, and lived to see Jerome's repentance.

Five years after Thomas remarried, he had a sudden heart attack and died alone at home, while his wife was out shopping. It was never known whether he ever repented of what he did to his family and to God, but we know that God hears the prayers of his people, and Thomas had many praying for him.

Shirley never remarried, and remained in Twin Yucca, close to her family.

Mike and Sandra eventually adopted seven children, and the large house Adam had given them was filled with the happy sounds of a happy family. In addition to their adopted children, Mike and Sandra had four children of their own. "Grandma Shirley" often baby-sat and helped her daughter-in-law, and the two women went on to become close friends. Mike and Sandra remained in Twin Yucca for the rest of their lives.

Chad grew up and became a park ranger at nearby Joshua Tree. He married his childhood sweetheart, and he and Becky went on to have two children. Whenever asked his secret to a happy marriage, Chad always attributed it to his uncle, and the talks they had had when he was a boy.

After their first child together, Maggie and Jeff had a girl. For a while, Maggie entertained hopes that her daughter would marry her best friend's son. It was not to be, however, and the two only became casual acquaintances. Even so, Maggie and Charlie remained close through the years, and shared many of their family's ups and downs, together. Maggie's brother, Wayne Downen, was never found. He is still listed as missing in action.

Dave enjoyed being a teacher, and eventually went on to become Professor of Music at UCLA. He later married a history professor, and the two had a daughter, Maureen. Dave appeared in several live concerts with Adam, and remained a close friend of the Clark family for the rest of his life.

Adam continued to write music and went on to release seventeen more albums of original compositions. Not one of them failed to be successful. At the urging of Charlie, Adam created a record label of his own, and was responsible for signing several new artists that went on to enjoy notoriety-- including the famous Dave Walker. After a lifetime of happy years with his beloved Charlie-girl, Adam died peacefully.

As hoped, mental stimulation, the same operation as Chuck's, and a preventative lifestyle all helped to delay the onset of Charlie's Alzheimer's Disease. She continued to learn the compositions Adam wrote for her, and several of them can be found on her husband's albums. Charlie never remarried after Adam's death, but happily chose to remain at Villa Rosa. While Charlie had shown signs of a failing memory late in her life, the disease progressed so slowly that by the time she died an old woman, she was still able to recognize her son.

Matthew grew up to be very much like his father. Not only did he resemble Adam in appearance and temperament, but he also inherited his father's love of music. Adam and Matthew spent endless hours together in the music room, and Matthew had eagerly absorbed all that Adam

taught him. With Adam and Dave's help, Matthew became an internationally recognized musician and composer in his own right. Though always proud of his son's success, Adam once told a reporter, "I'm even prouder of the godly man that he's become." Matthew later married Dave's daughter, Maureen, and they raised their family of two girls and three boys on the Villa Rosa estate. Since Matthew hadn't inherited the gene that caused AD in his mother, the Overholt family curse was finally over.

Adam and Charlie's great-grandchildren would one day run through the same indoor courtyard that Adam had enjoyed, and play games in the enclosed garden that Charlie had built. In honor of their memory, Villa Rosa would forever remain in the Clark family.

Soon after Charlie passed away, Matthew went through his mother's things and found a yellowed sheet of paper tucked inside her Bible. In his mother's elegant handwriting, Matthew read:

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

"And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

"And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

"Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

"Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

"Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

"Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

"Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away...

"When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a [woman], I put away childish things.

"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

"And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity." (1 Corinthians 13)

Matthew smiled tenderly, and placed the worn slip of paper back inside his mother's Bible. Truly, of all things that Matthew had known about his parents, the greatest of these had been love.

End of Book.

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