Homegrown Dandelions

A Love Story

by Judith Bronte

Love can thrive in unlikely places...

After a tragic day years ago, Beth Carter was left to pick up the pieces and move on with her life. But she hasn't. She's shut herself to the world, and has vowed never to love again.

Matt Taylor is looking for work, but nothing more. His life is complicated enough with three burdens and a difficult past that won't go away. When Matt arrives at Beth's Garden Nursery to ask for a job, he meets its beautiful owner, and over time, finds something he hadn't expected. Surrounded by plants with fancy names, all Matt has to offer is a scarred heart-- that, and homegrown dandelions.

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Chapter One
Hard Times

"Behold, the eye of the LORD is upon them that fear Him, upon them that hope in His mercy."
~ Psalm 33:18 ~

The needle on the fuel gauge hovered above empty, adding to Matt Taylor's already mounting troubles. The old pickup truck needed gas, and with prices the way they were, it would be expensive. Fingers nervously tapping the steering wheel, Matt did some math. He'd never been very good at numbers, but even a twenty-four-year-old high school dropout like himself could do the arithmetic. With all the unpaid bills stacking up at home, he knew he was nearing the empty mark, himself.

Matt prayed he would have enough gas to reach his destination. He only had five dollars left in his wallet, and desperately needed a job. A firm believer in Providence, Matt had poured over the help wanted section of the newspaper that morning, praying for guidance. An ad for a salesman at the local car dealership had caught his attention. It touted "no experience necessary" -- three very important words to Matt. Even better, Matt knew the owner of the dealership, and believed God had pointed him to this job.

Parking his vehicle outside the showroom, Matt removed his Stetson to whisper a prayer. The truck door screeched open as he climbed out. New Mexico felt good at this time of year -- not too hot and not too cold. Matt enjoyed the fresh air, letting the breeze swirl around him as he strode inside.

Light jazz played faintly in the background, as Matt scanned the showroom for a familiar face. A bald man took notice of Matt, and waved a friendly greeting from across the room. Matt returned his wave. He hoped the man would remember him from church.

Dressed in dark slacks and a white business shirt, Jerry Westhaven put down the clipboard he had been holding, and came to Matt with an outstretched hand and a broad smile. "Matt Taylor, I never expected to see you here! Don't tell me you're finally replacing that old pickup truck!"

"No, sir, I'm here about the job," Matt said, feeling a little self-conscious about the black T-shirt and worn jeans he had put on that morning. With a sinking heart, Matt noticed the other salesman dressed as sharply as Jerry.

"Job?" Jerry looked puzzled, and then a flash of understanding crossed his face. "Matt, I'm sorry, but that job was filled only an hour ago!"
His spirits fell, and Matt hoped he didn't appear as disappointed as he felt. "Oh, sorry for bothering you." As he awkwardly turned to leave, he saw Jerry open his wallet and take out two twenty dollar bills.

"Here," Jerry said, offering the money a little clumsily, "I'd like you have this."

Longingly staring at the bills, Matt realized what Jerry offered -- a handout -- charity to someone less fortunate than himself. "I'm not here to beg for anything," Matt said, feeling the heat of shame creep up his neck.

"I know you're not," Jerry said, thrusting the money into Matt's hip pocket. "I just have a feeling you might need this more than I do at the moment."

Matt knew he had no right to turn down the money, especially when he needed it so badly. Even so, it stung to accept charity, though it came from someone as friendly as Jerry Westhaven.

"Come to think of it," Jerry said thoughtfully, "I heard the garden nursery across the street might be looking for help. You could check there for work."

"Across the street?" Matt tried to be hopeful, but knew a job there wouldn't be very likely. He knew nothing of plants, and even less about what it took to keep them alive. Nodding, Matt gratefully shook Jerry's hand. "Thanks, I'll look into it."

Before Jerry had a chance to ask how things were going at home, Matt made a polite excuse and left the dealership. From the way Jerry had greeted him, Matt knew the man easily remembered him from church. And if he'd remembered, then questions would be asked. They always were, ever since their pastor had spoken to the congregation about his problems. All that fuss had been before he'd lost his job. In his present condition, as much as Matt knew people meant well, he knew they could also bring trouble.

And Matt had already had enough trouble, to last him a lifetime.

In the privacy of her office, Beth Carter sat at the metal desk on one side of the room, her eyes focused on the picture frame beside her pencil sharpener. For the past several days a growing sadness had overcome her, and it hadn't been until today, when she had glanced at the calendar, that she realized why. The anniversary. It would be soon. It always came with the approach of spring, making her usual sadness unbearable.
Beth longed for the month to be over, and the grief to lessen again. She lifted the picture frame with dirt-stained hands, her thumb gliding across the photo as old memories flooded her soul.

A woman stuck her head in the office, interrupting Beth's thoughts. "What is it, Sylvia?" Beth asked, returning the frame to its place on the desk. "Aren't you supposed to be preparing gift pots?"

Sylvia nodded, her black curls bobbing as she moved. Biting her lip, she came inside the office, carefully shutting the door behind her as though she had a great secret to tell.

Beth sighed patiently, although her patience ran thin as Sylvia came round to peek through the blinds over the desk. She and Sylvia shared the same age, though Sylvia always acted ten years younger, and not someone about to turn thirty.

"There he is," Sylvia sat down on the edge of Beth's desk for a better vantage, and motioned for Beth to look out the office window with her. "See him? He says he's looking for work."

Standing in the loading yard, Beth saw a man in a black T-shirt and a gray cowboy hat that had seen better days. He shifted his weight from one booted foot to the other, his back to the window.

"Isn't he stunning?" Sylvia fanned her cheek, as though sitting beside an open flame. "I know we don't have any openings right now, but couldn't we think of some way to keep him?"

"I'm not taking on workers I don't need," Beth said decidedly. She returned to her desk, only to find Sylvia sitting on the open files she had been organizing.

"I'd almost be willing to take a pay cut, if I could come to work every day and see him here," Sylvia said, her voice trailing off wistfully. She got up from the desk, the hesitation in her posture unsettling Beth. "I told him I'd find an empty employment form."

"You didn't tell him we're not hiring?" Beth looked at her incredulously. Sylvia had left the man waiting out there, so she could come in and gawk at him through the window.

Sylvia shrugged lightly. "It couldn't do any harm to keep his form on hand. If we ever do have a job -- "

"Forget the gift pots," Beth said, pushing away from the desk. "I'll handle this guy, myself. I want you to move the potted roses, so there's room for the new shipment coming in tomorrow morning."
Tossing her pretty head, Sylvia left the office with a pouting frown.

Ignoring Sylvia, Beth grabbed the sunhat she kept hanging behind the office door. If she had half the good looks of her friend, Beth thought she'd not waste them, by covering herself with heavy makeup and perfume the way Sylvia did. Beth entered the store adjoining the office, laughing to herself as she realized what she had been thinking. She could never hope to have Sylvia's beauty, her own having already blossomed and fallen away like an untimely flower.

Matt couldn't help but feel someone observing him from the blinds, and had moved to the vine covered lattice around the entrance of Beth's Garden Nursery to keep from its view.

Waiting for the woman to return, Matt dug at the dry ground with the toe of his boot. He tried not to let himself become too hopeful, for the woman had only promised to get him an empty form so he could apply for a job. Nothing more. He sensed she might've felt sorry for him, although with women he never could be sure what they were thinking.

A cool breeze drifted from inside the store, inviting anyone in the entryway to come in and look around. Resisting the invitation, Matt remained where he was. He casually looked inside, however, noting the fresh smell of earth and the pleasant fragrance of some nearby potted plants. The walls were lined with gardening tools and organic pesticides, while several aisles filled the center of the store with merchandise and very few customers.

As Matt waited, and did his best not to seem impatient, a slender woman in baggy overalls and a broad brimmed hat came toward him. The brim concealed her face, but when she lifted her chin, Matt saw a woman in her late twenties with expressive green eyes and surprisingly white skin for someone who looked at home beneath the sun. Eyes trimmed with long lashes, and a faint sprinkle of freckles on her cheeks, the woman's only fault lay in her smile. She didn't have one.

Matt wished she would, if only to make him feel better about getting a job. He glanced at her name-tag, realizing her name sat above the store.

The woman gave him an appraising look, her demeanor very close to something like annoyance. "I'm told you're looking for work," she said, slanting a miffed look at the woman Matt had talked to several minutes earlier, as she carried a potted rose outside. "I'm sorry you've wasted so much time waiting, but there aren't any jobs here."
Matt swallowed his disappointment, quietly scolding himself for hoping as much as he had. "Someone said you might be looking for help, so I thought I'd give it a try." As much as Matt despised begging, he knew his money wouldn't last much longer. After seeing the nursery, he felt this would be a better fit for him than Jerry's car dealership -- with dress slacks and white shirts he didn't have. At least here, his jeans didn't look out of place. "I know you're not hiring," Matt said, summoning courage he didn't know he had, "but I'm a good worker and I know how to work hard." He caught the hard look in her green eyes and realized they had turned cold. "I really need a job, ma'am. I'll do almost anything."

The woman's lips pursed in a fine line, and Matt suddenly felt as though he were twelve years old again, seated in the principal's office for having done something wrong. Matt regretted the request the moment he made it. He hadn't begged Jerry, and he shouldn't have begged this woman.

"I told you," she said evenly, as though he hadn't understood her the first time, "there's no work here."

"Thank you for your time, ma'am," Matt touched the brim of his Stetson, and walked away.

He berated himself for having begged, his pride stinging him all the more because the woman, although older than himself, had been attractive. The way those cold green eyes had sliced through him, Matt felt like a reprimanded child instead of a man. A curse threatened to form in his mouth, and he bit it back with determination. He had promised God never to utter another profanity in his life, and that coldhearted woman wasn't a good excuse to go back on his promise.

By the time Matt reached his old pickup truck, the sting of his hurt pride had subsided. The woman hadn't done anything wrong, other than to turn him away with as little feeling as one would ignore a stray dog. Matt never ignored strays, but he guessed she did -- and probably fairly often. Climbing into his truck, Matt felt a twinge of pity for the woman with the soft auburn hair that hung in a long braid at her back. With all her authority, she somehow seemed weak.

Glancing at the fuel gauge, Matt laughed grimly. Who was he to call her weak, when he was the one running on fumes? From the name-tag the woman had worn, he had identified her as the owner of the nursery. Matt groaned. Why did it seem as though all the mean people in the world had plenty, while the kind and sympathetic had nothing? Biting back his envy, Matt reminded himself that God had not forgotten him. He took out his money, staring at the forty dollars Jerry had thrust into his pocket.
Matt tossed his hat onto the dashboard. "Thank you, God," he said with eyes closed in prayer, "thank you for remembering us. Please strengthen my faith so I don't let You down."

Stuffing the bills back into his pocket, Matt started the engine. He would only buy enough gas to last a few days, and use the remainder of the money for tonight.

Trowel in hand, Beth turned the dark potting soil, trying very hard to absorb herself in her work. She stood at the potting bench behind the store, preparing soil for the small gift pots she would place near the cash register. Behind her back though, Beth could overhear the hushed whispers of Sylvia and Amy, busily talking about "the good-looking man in the cowboy hat." Beth had to admit some truth in their assessment, for his intensely dark eyes had gazed directly at her, and it hadn't been an unpleasant experience. But Beth had also seen the humiliation in his youthful face as he tipped his hat before walking away, and that hadn't been as pleasant.

Beth tried to ignore the guilty pang in her chest, and wondered why he had made such an impression on her. It might've had something to do with the muted helplessness in his posture when she had told him there was no work; in that split moment, Beth had almost thought the man would cry. It had been an absurd thought, for she had seen enough of his kind in town to know better. His T-shirt had revealed a garish tattoo on his biceps, only confirming Beth's opinion of this guy who came to her, asking for work. She could sum it up in two words: trailer trash. A polite "ma'am" couldn't hide that fact from Beth. He probably didn't even know the meaning of the word "work," let alone how to hold down an actual job. So why did she feel so guilty? It wasn't as though she had a job open for him. Beth stabbed her trowel into the potting soil. Why couldn't he stay on the other side of the tracks, and leave her nursery alone?

Today, when she closed shop before going home, Beth intended to make sure all the locks and doors were secure. She didn't want to return in the morning, only to find her business had been vandalized by that man. The thought eased Beth's guilty pangs, and she felt better for turning him away from a job she never had.

With a weary groan, Beth checked her watch, realizing she had stayed a full half-hour after closing time. Sylvia and Amy had already left, and after having talked herself into the certainty of the man's return, Beth felt uneasy being at the nursery by herself. By the time she finished her paperwork, her office window had begun to dim with the approach of sunset.

Beth hurried from the building, locking the door behind her. As she fumbled for her car keys, she heard footsteps behind her back. She quickly turned, only to find it was Jerry, from the dealership across the street.
"Sorry to frighten you like that," Jerry smiled good-naturedly. "I see you've put in another long day. It's not healthy, spending every waking hour at work. You got to spend more time with family and friends, or they won't recognize you anymore!"

Beth smiled politely. "You're one to talk, Jerry. You're just now going home, yourself?"

"You've got me there," he said with a laugh. He hesitated, as though wondering if this were a good time to ask a question. "A young friend of mine came in today, looking for work. The job had already been taken by someone else, but I told him I thought you might be hiring. I don't suppose he stopped by? You might know him -- he goes to our church."

Beth groaned inwardly. He went to church? Her church? The man she feared would vandalize her store? Beth wasn't too pleased with Jerry, for Jerry had sent him here, creating today's embarrassment.

"His name's Matt Taylor," Jerry continued. "He comes from a rough family, but he's a good kid with some pretty big responsibilities -- "

"Yes, he came to see about a job," Beth interrupted, "but I didn't have one to give, so I sent him away. Really, Jerry, I wish you hadn't directed him to my nursery. Church friend or not, if I want hired help, I'll advertise for it in the paper."

"You sent him away?" Jerry looked disappointed. "Did he tell you anything? Did he happen to mention how things were going for him at home? I think he's too embarrassed to ask, but I have a feeling he needs help."

"That's not my problem," Beth sighed impatiently. She went to the same church as Jerry and his family, and only knew Jerry's wife in passing. Beth rarely attended services, and as such, hadn't recognized Matt Taylor when she saw him. She had only heard Matt's name in passing, when their pastor once asked for prayers for certain members of the congregation. Beth couldn't remember what the request had been about, but her feet were tired, her stomach empty, and her patience gone. "Jerry, I can't hire everyone I feel sorry for! I'm not hiring, and that's that. Good night." Beth got inside her car, slamming the door shut before Jerry could say anything more.

Pulling from the parking lot, Beth drove off with Jerry's words still echoing in her mind. Something of what he had said sounded vaguely familiar, and Beth didn't know why. What had been the pastor's prayer request? She remembered it had something to do with someone named Matt Taylor, but couldn't recall anything else. For some reason, it nagged at her, refusing to let go.
As Beth came to a stop at the intersection, and waited for the light to turn green, she saw a father with two small children in the vehicle next to hers. Children. Suddenly, Beth remembered what the pastor's prayer request had been about. With a groan, she covered her mouth, wishing she hadn't remembered, after all.

Having spent the rest of the day looking for work, Matt pulled up in front of his home, without success. In these hard times, there weren't many jobs available, and what few he'd found, had required experience. Matt had experience, but not the kind that paid bills and put food on the table. His experience lay in where to find drugs, and the overwhelming rush of serenity that flooded the body, the moment they hit the bloodstream. On days like this, Matt could feel the old hunger, pulling him back to his former life like a moth to the flame. And like the moth, that flame would consume him. He needed to remember that.

Staring through the dusty windshield at the dandelions in his front yard, Matt sat behind the wheel, deep in thought. God had rescued him once before, and Matt prayed He would do it again.

Just then, the screen door on the house opened, and a teenager stepped outside. The boy stared long and hard at the pickup truck, his eyes focused on Matt.

Matt drew in a deep breath, recognizing the frightened, angry look in his brother's eyes. He wished Ethan would share his hope in God's mercy.

Matt opened the truck door, wincing as it squeaked loud enough to get a neighbor's attention.

"We need to get that thing fixed," Ethan said, making his way to the driver's side of the pickup. He shoved his hands into his pockets -- a habit he always had when worried. "Did you get the job?"

"No," Matt said, seeing the immediate hopelessness that set into Ethan's face, "it was already taken before I got there. The food pantry at the church was empty, but someone gave me some money," Matt lifted a grocery bag from the passenger's side, handing it to Ethan with an encouraging smile, "so I got enough groceries for dinner. If we're careful, we might make the food last until the end of tomorrow."

"No job?" The panicked look in Ethan's face was unmistakable. "What are we going to do, Matty? How are we going to pay the bills?"
"The same way we've always manage to pay them in the past," Matt said sturdily, "God will provide." Matt shut the pickup truck door, not forgetting to lock it before he walked away. This neighborhood wasn't the best, and even locked vehicles were often vandalized.

"You always say that," Ethan said angrily, "and things never get any better!"

"We're still together, aren't we?" Matt quickly countered. "God hasn't forgotten us, Ethan. He's gotten us this far, and He won't abandon us now." Noise from the house caused Matt to lower his voice. "Don't tell the others about the job. There's no need frightening them."

"What if we can't pay the rent?" Ethan asked, as the two headed down the dirt path to the front door. "What are we going to do?"

"Keep your voice down," Matt said evenly, stopping Ethan before they went inside. "I don't want the others to know how bad off we are."

Ethan smiled bleakly. "When we're evicted, I won't have to tell them anything. They'll know."

Before he could stop him, Ethan opened the front door with, "He didn't get it!"

Matt squeezed his eyes shut. Sometimes, he could throttle that brother of his. Ethan was seventeen, and old enough to know better.

Stepping inside, Matt locked the front door, pocketing the house keys. He dreaded going into the kitchen where he knew the others were probably waiting. Slowly, Matt made his way through the front room, and into the kitchen. At the table doing her homework, his sister, Cassie, looked up at him with scared blue eyes. Her hand hovered above the paper, her pencil slightly trembling.

"You didn't get that job you were praying for, Matty?" Cassie asked in a tremulous voice.

Putting on a brave face for his twelve-year-old sister, Matt smiled. "No, somebody else got it. I'll keep looking, tomorrow."

"If there is a tomorrow," Ethan said with a sarcastic laugh.

Shooting his brother a warning look, Matt smiled again for Cassie. "Don't worry, Cass, God will take care of us."
"I wish you'd stop with that God nonsense," Ethan said, opening the grocery bag to see what Matt had bought. "Ever since you found God, you've been forcing us to find Him, too. I wish you'd cut it out."

"You'd better watch your mouth, Ethan." Matt glared at him, wishing he could haul his teenage brother into the backyard and beat some sense into him. Matt knew he couldn't, for aside from his doubts whether God would approve, Matt knew the social worker certainly wouldn't. "We have different opinions about God, so let's leave it at that."

"Just because you're seven years older than me, you think you can boss me around," Ethan said in a low grumble.

"Just about," Matt grinned. "The judge made me your legal guardian, remember? Now stop grumbling, and get out the dinner plates."

At the mention of dinner, a little boy ran into the kitchen, his face all smiles as he chanted, "Dinner! Dinner!"

"Were you a good boy, today?" Matt asked, lifting four-year-old Ryan into his arms. Of all his siblings, the only one Matt had successfully witnessed to, had been his youngest brother. Even though Matt didn't know how much the little guy understood, it made Matt feel less alone to have another Christian in the family.

"I've been good," Ryan nodded quickly. He looked at the food Ethan had set out on the countertop. "Dinner?" Ryan asked hopefully.

"Yes, dinner," Matt said, tickling Ryan's belly and getting screaming laughter as a reward. "I'll need a few minutes to get it ready, though. I'll let you know when it's time to eat." Matt patted Ryan's backside, trying to get the child out from underfoot as he moved about the kitchen.

Cassie remained at the table, her blonde head bowed over her homework. Matt knew she still thought of his not finding work yet, and once again, Matt felt himself craving meth. If only he could get high just one more time, he could survive the next few days, and perhaps make it through an entire month without having to think again about drugs. Matt knew the lie well, and fought to resist the temptation.

Dinner on the table, Matt called Ryan to his chair and everyone but Ethan bowed their heads to pray. Cassie did it out of respect for Matt, though Matt knew she didn't believe as he did.
When they started eating, Matt looked about at the glum faces around the table. Only Ryan smiled, happy to have a hot dog and some canned corn on his plate.

Matt quickly finished his dinner, and then went into the boys' bedroom to get something. Guitar in hand, he headed straight to the radio on the kitchen countertop. After finding a favorite country music station, Matt sat down at the table to tune his instrument. Out of the corners of his eyes, he noticed everyone smiling -- even Ethan. Matt listened to the familiar song on the radio, waiting a few measures to relearn the melody. Then, with an easy strum, Matt joined the music, his guitar offering backup to the country music singer on the radio.

First Ryan, and then Cassie, joined their voices to the song, until the kitchen filled with music. Ethan kept quiet, though the tune seemed to lighten his mood. Matt usually enjoyed singing, but this evening he remained silent, his heart not in the music. He played his guitar, letting his hands keep busy so his mind couldn't think about anything else but the song on the radio.

After the dinner dishes had been washed and dried, everyone prepared for bed. Not ready for sleep, Ryan jumped on the living room sofa until Matt picked him up and carried him off to their bedroom.

"Cookies," Ryan kept saying, "I want cookies!"

"Would you shut up?" Ethan groaned, tossing a pillow at Ryan as Matt tried to change the rambunctious boy into pajamas. "Ever since I picked him up from Mrs. Lott's house today, that all he talks about -- the sugar cookies she made him!"

Matt grinned, happy to hear the old lady and Ryan were getting along together so well. Mrs. Lott lived next door, and babysat Ryan every day. She had been a Godsend to Matt, for while he was away at work, and Ethan and Cassie were at school, Matt could count on Mrs. Lott to keep an eye on Ryan and make sure he didn't get into trouble.

Their mobile home had two bedrooms and two baths -- one for the boys, and one for Cassie. Being the eldest, Matt's one luxury was that he had a bed of his own; Ethan had to share the king-sized mattress with Ryan.

The kids finally quiet and in bed, Matt went to the boys' bathroom to clean up the mess they had made. As he stood before the sink brushing his teeth, Matt observed his reflection in the mirror. He recalled the way Beth Carter had looked at him, and wondered what about his appearance had given her such a bad impression. His brown hair and brown eyes seemed ordinary enough, though Matt had never cared very much for his face. He looked too much like his dad, and his dad never gave him any pleasant memories. Matt shared the same father as Ethan, but since
Ethan took more after their mom's side of the family, Matt usually didn't think of his dad unless he chanced to see himself in the mirror.

Frowning, Matt clicked off the bathroom light and stepped into the boys' bedroom. In the half darkness, he edged his way between the two mattresses, trying not to awaken his brothers.

As Matt sat down on his bed to pull off his boots, he heard the sheets rustle behind him. Matt groaned. "Ryan, get back to your own --"

"It's me, Cassie," said a soft voice. "Please, Matty, let me stay for just this one night?"

"Cass," Matt sighed heavily, "you remember what the social worker said. You're too old to sleep in my bed, anymore."

In the darkness, Matt heard his sister quietly cry.

"I'm sorry, Cass, but you've got to go. You don't want to make me feel guilty, do you? Come on, get up."

"But," Cassie wept, "I don't want to sleep by myself. Please, Matty! I won't tell anyone."

Matt shook his head. "Out."

Sorrowfully, Cassie slid off the bed with her pillow, but lingered in the room, not wanting to leave.

"Why don't you take Ryan with you?" Matt suggested in a whisper.

Cassie whimpered. "I already tried, but he won't come. Please, Matty? I don't want to be by myself."

Someone on the large bed stirred, and Matt got up to take Cassie back to her small bedroom off the living room. She clung to his hand, reminding Matt just how fragile his twelve-year-old sister had become over the years.

"Cass," he said, sitting her down on the bed, "at least you have your own room -- the rest of us have to share. Try to look at it as one of the benefits of being the only girl in the family." A small comfort, he knew, but Matt struggled to find something good for Cassie to think about, for their financial worries had made her even more fearful to be by herself than usual. Making sure her nightlight was on, Matt tucked Cassie in while she continued to beg to come with him.
"I'll just be through the living room and the kitchen, right in the boys' bedroom," Matt said gently. "Try to be brave, Cass. Do you want me to find one of your old dolls?"

"No," she sniffed, "they don't help."

Pushing aside his own weariness, Matt sat down on the floor beside Cassie's bed. "I'll stay for a few minutes so you can get to sleep. After that, you're on your own."

"Oh, thank you, Matty!" Cassie leaned over to give her brother a tearful hug.

Matt yawned. "Yeah, yeah, just hurry up and go to sleep. I need my rest."

Content with his presence, Cassie plumped her pillow and then closed her eyes. "Good night, Matty."

"Good night, Cass." Leaning his head against the mattress, Matt let his eyes rest a moment. When she fell sleep, he would leave.

The next morning, Matt awoke to find he had passed the entire night on Cassie's bedroom floor. She gave him another hug, no doubt thinking he had stayed because of her, and Matt let her think what she wanted. He felt too stiff to contradict.

Everyone ate a breakfast of leftover canned corn, giving Matt another opportunity to remind God they needed the Department of Public and Social Services (DPSS) to straighten out their paperwork. Matt had given them the report concerning his monthly income, but they had lost it, and now claimed he had never handed it in. While Matt struggled to get the mess straightened out, he no longer had food stamps or government aid to help make ends meet. No one at the table complained, though Ethan's worried frown made Matt's stomach tighten. They had made it through some tough times, but things hadn't looked this bad in quite a while.

As Ethan and Cassie hurried out to the school bus, Matt carried Ryan to Mrs. Lott's house. As soon as Matt set Ryan down, the boy ran to her television to watch cartoons. One of the perks coming to Mrs. Lott's house was her satellite dish. Matt made sure Ryan had it turned to something he approved of, and then paused to talk a few moments with his neighbor.

"I can't thank you enough for babysitting Ryan," Matt said, accepting a sugar cookie from the plate Mrs. Lott offered. "You're saving me a fortune in childcare."
Mrs. Lott smiled knowingly. "I'm saving you a fortune you don't have. There's no need to keep thanking me, Matt. I enjoy having the company. How's the job search coming?"

"Still looking," Matt smiled, accepting one last cookie before leaving. "Thanks again, Mrs. Lott."

The screen door banged shut as Matt left his neighbor's house. The few people Matt had trusted enough to tell of his situation, always asked if he had found work yet. Matt feared he would be unable to keep it from social services much longer. The last report he'd given them, had been while he still had a job. In an odd way, their losing the paperwork had been a blessing in disguise, for although Matt needed the aid, he also knew they might break up his family, if they discovered he was presently without a monthly income.

Rent would be due next week, and as Matt crossed the front yard to his pickup truck, he sent another prayer to Heaven, reminding God of their need.

At that very moment, Matt noticed the mailbox. The flag was up. He hadn't remembered leaving anything for the mailman, and went to investigate. Inside the mailbox, Matt found a plain envelope without a postmark -- just his name printed on the front. When Matt opened it, he found an employment application with Beth's Garden Nursery logo printed at the top. Along with the form, he discovered a small, handwritten note that read:

"If you're still interested, fill out the application and bring it in. I can't promise you anything."

The note hadn't been signed, and Matt prayed the owner had put the envelope into his mailbox, and not an employee trying to help him behind her back.

Taking the application inside, Matt sat down at the kitchen table to fill it out. As he scribbled in his name, Matt noticed his hand trembled with hope. He had to steady himself, or else his writing would look more lopsided than usual.

As soon as he filled out the form, Matt would take it down to the nursery. He only prayed, that by some miraculous circumstance, Beth Carter had given him this chance. If she hadn't, Matt had little hope of this application materializing into a job.

"Trust in the LORD, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed." ~ Psalm 37:3 ~
Chapter Two
Beth's Garden Nursery

"I [Matt] have refrained my feet from every evil way, that I might keep Thy word."
~ Psalm 119:101 ~

The employment application finished, Matt climbed into his pickup truck and started the engine. He didn't tell anyone of the surprise he had found in his mailbox, in the likely event this new lead should turn into another dead end. As Matt drove down the street, he recognized his pastor's car, heading straight toward the house. Matt groaned. Jerry Westhaven must have called their pastor, after finding out he'd been searching for a job. Determined to put off his pastor for as long as he could, Matt kept going and didn't turn around.

By the time the old pickup had been parked in front of Beth's Garden Nursery, Matt's prayers were coming one after another. He needed this job. God knew he did. "Well," Matt said in quiet prayer, "I'm doing all I can, God, so I'm depending on You to do the rest."

Putting on his Stetson, Matt swung open the squeaky truck door. There were very few cars in the small parking lot in front of the store, making him wonder if the nursery had come on hard times -- like himself. The thought crossed his mind that perhaps, even if he got the job, he might soon lose it if the nursery went out of business. Matt had to admit to wishful thinking, for he first had to get the job before he could lose it.

Seeing no one outside in the loading yard or the lattice covered entrance, Matt stepped inside the store. A young woman, a few years younger than himself and wearing a green T-shirt with the nursery's logo, looked up from where she stood at the cash register.

"May I help you?"

"I'm here about a job," Matt said, hesitating to turn over his application to anyone but the owner. "I don't suppose Beth is around?"

The woman narrowed her gaze, then suddenly her blue eyes grew wide with recognition. "You're that guy from yesterday!"

Uncomfortably, Matt shifted in his boots. "Could you tell me where Beth is?"

"Mrs. Carter is in her office," the young woman said, pointing to a doorway at the back of the store. "Are you going to work here?"
The slight ring of hope in her voice made Matt smile. "We'll see," he said, nodding his thanks before heading to the office. The young woman's name tag had read "Amy," and Matt began to wonder how many women worked at the nursery. So far, he had counted three, including Beth. Matt corrected himself -- she preferred to be called Mrs. Carter, and not Beth.

Grateful for the warning, Matt made a mental note and knocked on the closed office door. When no one answered, he tried again. He could hear two sets of muffled voices, one deeper than the other, speaking back and forth in animated discussion. Not wanting to make a nuisance of himself, Matt quietly waited outside the door. None of the words were distinct, though he tried not to make out what was being said, for he didn't want to eavesdrop. He heard a woman's voice, and then silence.

The name on the door was Mrs. Carter's, so Matt knew he had the right office. From the looks of the store, there was only one office, anyway. He checked the time on his watch just as the door opened. A grinning man brushed past Matt, and when Matt looked through the open door, he saw Mrs. Carter looking somewhat embarrassed as she straightened her shirt.

Sensing he had intruded on a very private moment, Matt awkwardly stood there, the form in his hand. The man must have been her husband.

"If you want to come in, then come in," Mrs. Carter said, waving Matt inside. Her voice sounded abrupt and curt, and not at all as though she had been expecting him. She took a seat behind her desk. "I don't have a lot of time, so make it quick."

"Someone left this in my mailbox," Matt said, handing her the employment application. "It had this note attached to it," he added, giving her the handwritten slip of paper. He paused, waiting to see her reaction. "I didn't know who left it, but I filled out the application and brought it over as instructed."

"I put it in your mailbox," Mrs. Carter said, casting a quick glance over the form before turning her eyes back on Matt. She had an uncanny way of making him feel that he was in trouble, and awaiting punishment for something he had done. "Sit down," she pointed her chin at a nearby chair.

Matt obeyed, relieved the application had come from her, and not someone else.

"Jerry Westhaven told me we attend the same church. Why didn't you tell me that, yesterday?"
This came as much of a surprise to Matt, as it apparently had to Mrs. Carter. "I didn't know. I'm afraid I didn't recognize you from church."

"Yes, well..." Mrs. Carter cleared her throat, "I don't attend church very regularly, so that must explain it." She turned back to the form, looking it over with an expert eye. "It says here, you worked in construction before you were fired for stealing." The green eyes turned back to him, quietly awaiting more of an explanation than Matt had written on his application. He had given no references to speak of, and that one admission of having been fired because of theft, didn't look good.

"My boss accused me of stealing supplies from the worksite," Matt said, reluctant to tell the truth, yet compelled by conscience to do just that.

Mrs. Carter raised her eyebrows.

"Instead of pressing charges, he fired me."

Matt couldn't miss the almost victorious look on Mrs. Carter's face, as though his admission had affirmed something she had thought about him all along. "That was very nice of your boss," she said evenly, her green eyes becoming a shade cooler than before.

"I didn't steal anything, Mrs. Carter -- I give you my word, I didn't."

This declaration of innocence procured a stiff smile, but little else. She perused the application, and Matt knew she had already made up her mind to turn him away.

"I've never hired anyone who didn't have at least some experience with plants," Mrs. Carter said, placing Matt's form on her desk, "but I suppose there's a first time for everything."

Matt stared at her in disbelief. "You're going to hire me?"

"Yes, but not because of you," Mrs. Carter said in a slow, deliberate tone. "I've heard our pastor speak of your situation, and no one is going to accuse me of forcing little children onto the street because I wouldn't give you work. From what I understand, you have two brothers and a sister?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's right." Matt felt desperate enough to take the job, even though Mrs. Carter had made it quite clear she didn't want to hire him. "Ethan is seventeen, Cassie twelve, and Ryan just turned four."
The ice in Mrs. Carter’s expression melted a little, and Matt caught her glancing at the picture frame on her desk. From where he sat, he couldn’t see the photo it held, but he wondered if she had children of her own.

"I can't pay you as much as your last job," Mrs. Carter said, turning the subject back to business, "but I can offer a fair wage for a fair day's work. I warn you though, steal from me and you'll be dismissed. I will not be as understanding as your former employer," -- she held up her hand to stop him -- "and if I find out you've been abusing this opportunity, I will press charges. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes, ma'am." Matt realized any defense he could offer would most likely be disregarded. His previous boss hadn't believed him either, so why should Mrs. Carter be any different?

"I pay my employees twice a month, and I expect them to manage their money responsibly, and not ask for any advances. This position is seasonal, meaning you'll only have it for a few months out of the year. If you had experience or some knowledge of plants, it might be different, but as things stand, I think my offer is fair."

Matt listened as she explained the finer points of the position, smiling when she told him he would only be a laborer and nothing more. Not a stranger to manual labor, Matt had no fear of hard work, only the lack of it. While Matt would've preferred a full position at the nursery, he didn't begrudge Mrs. Carter for not giving him one. As she had said, he didn't have experience, and at this point in his financial crisis, he rejoiced at the prospect of even a seasonal paycheck.

He agreed to work Tuesday through Saturday, and not to arrive late. As a laborer, he would be subject to the other two employees at the nursery, and would take direction from Mrs. Carter as well as them. Hearing this, Matt smiled grimly. He'd be taking orders from three women. God help him!

Then Mrs. Carter took him outside to meet Sylvia and Amy, his new coworkers.

Sylvia Northam, the woman he had talked to the day before, was an attractive woman, though her hair was as overdone as her heavy makeup. She called Mrs. Carter, Beth, as the two were evidently good friends. Sylvia greeted Matt with the same admiration she had shown the day before, and expressed genuine delight at his being hired.

"I told Beth you were a keeper," Sylvia said with a smile. "I hope you'll be happy here. I know I will!"
Mrs. Carter gave Sylvia an exasperated look, and then introduced Amy Warley, the young woman he had met at the cash register that morning. Nineteen years old and attending night school to further her education, Amy shook Matt’s hand with more reserve than Sylvia.

"Matt starts work tomorrow," Mrs. Carter said, pulling a pair of worn gloves from the back pocket of her work slacks; putting on the gloves, she slanted him a wary glance, as though unsure if she had made the right decision. "I'll expect you to show up on time," she said, and then disappeared behind the store with a half open bag of mulch.

Their boss gone, Amy returned to the cash register, while Sylvia walked Matt to his pickup truck.

"So," Sylvia asked in a very casual manner, "is there a Mrs. Taylor?"

"No, I'm single," Matt said, not too surprised by the question. For some annoying reason, women often asked him that.

"So am I," Sylvia said, her smile deepening now that she had an answer to her liking. "In fact, I recently broke up with my boyfriend, so there's room in my bed again."

Matt said nothing, but hurried to his truck a little faster than before.

"I didn't offend you, did I?" Sylvia asked, looking worried as she quickened her step to match his. "You aren't gay, are you?"

"No, I'm straight," Matt said, wishing this woman would leave him alone. "I'm just not looking for a relationship right now."

Sylvia's black curls bobbed as she nodded her understanding. "No problem, Matt. If you're ever interested, let me know. I'll be around."

As Sylvia walked away, Matt breathed a sigh of relief. Since this job was seasonal, he needed to keep looking for work that would last all year round. And, Matt had to admit, getting away from these women wouldn't be so terrible, either.

On the drive home, Matt poured out his thanks to God. He had a job! Praise the Lord, he had a job!
For some ridiculous reason, Beth struggled with guilt after her interview with Matt Taylor. As far as she knew, no one had any idea of her interest in Skip. Even so, Matt's awkward appearance in front of her office suddenly made Beth feel she were guilty of something she hadn't yet decided to do. Of course, it was ridiculous, for Matt hadn't seen anything. When her conscience still bothered her, Beth reasoned she had nothing to be ashamed of, for nothing much had happened. Skip had only been acting like Skip, once more trying to coax her into something she couldn't be sure she wanted.

Beth bit her lip, recognizing the lie she had just told herself. She wanted what Skip could give her, a fact Skip himself had already known. Why else would he have persisted for so long? All the denials and claims of her not needing him, were utterly useless and pointless. They both knew it. She was resisting the inevitable, and as Beth thought it over, she decided -- once and for all -- to go through with it and call him that night.

Since God had robbed her of happiness, Beth determined to make her own.

When Matt arrived home, his next-door neighbor, Mrs. Lott, came out to meet him with Ryan at her heels. The boy immediately wanted to be picked up, and as Matt lifted Ryan into his arms, Mrs. Lott told him of the visit she had received from his pastor.

"He's very worried about you, Matt," Mrs. Lott said, as they stood in the dandelions in Matt's front yard. "He said he had a call from someone named Jerry, and was concerned you needed money. He said to give you this," Mrs. Lott said, presenting Matt with five hundred dollars, "and he promised to keep praying for you."

"Wow." Matt took the money, looking it over in his hand as though it were a mirage. "I didn't expect him to do this. I suppose I should give it back though; I just got a job down at Beth's Garden Nursery."

"That's wonderful, Matt!" Mrs. Lott said, smiling as Ryan clapped his hands. The boy didn't know why everyone smiled, but that didn't stop him from being happy. "So you'll be working for Beth Carter?"

"Yeah," Matt smiled, noticing Mrs. Lott's hesitation. "Why? Should I be worried?"

"No, it's only that -- " Mrs. Lott shook her head as though it were nothing important. "Don't mind me, Matt. I'm just an old woman who thinks too much. Do you still want me to keep Ryan for the rest of the day?"
"Thanks, but I'll take the little guy off your hands," Matt said, putting Ryan down so he could more easily talk with Mrs. Lott. "About Beth Carter --"

"I'm sorry I said anything," Mrs. Lott said, turning to leave. Then she paused, sighed deeply, and gave him a tired smile. "She's a lonely woman, Matt, so be on your guard."

The warning took Matt by surprise, and he could only give Mrs. Lott an assenting nod.

"I'm glad you have a job again," Mrs. Lott said, her face wrinkling into a warm smile as she left. "You're a decent man, Matt Taylor. I hope you can stay that way."

Matt didn't know what to say, and thankfully, Mrs. Lott didn't expect a response, for she disappeared into her house without a word more. Though it seemed a strange warning, Matt sensed it might be useful to keep it in mind when at work. He thought it odd for a married woman like Mrs. Carter to be lonely, but then again, lonely people could hide a lot from public view.

And something about Beth -- Mrs. Carter -- seemed lonely.

Taking Ryan by the hand, Matt went inside to call his pastor. In good conscience, Matt couldn't keep the money without telling his pastor about the job, although he sure could use it to tide the household over until his first paycheck. To Matt's secret relief, his pastor told him to keep the money; with so many mouths to feed, he was sure Matt would need it, anyway.

As usual, Pastor Mark didn't press for information Matt wasn't ready to give, though Matt could tell he felt perturbed about not being told of the lost job.

"You've been able to trust me before, Matt, and I hope I haven't lost that trust. If you need help, I'm here."

"I know Pastor Mark," Matt said gratefully. "Ever since we moved to New Mexico, you've been a good friend. I appreciate this money, and I'll pay it back as soon as I can."

Pastor Mark laughed. "Stubbornly self-sufficient, as usual, Matt! You know you don't have to pay me back, but do what you feel is right."

After talking with his pastor, Matt climbed back into the pickup truck with Ryan. Now that he had some cash, Matt could buy food to last them to his first paycheck. Wouldn't Ethan and Cassie be surprised!
Beth wheeled her grocery cart down the long aisle, wishing she didn’t have to stop for groceries on her way home. It seemed everyone else had had the same idea, crowding the sprawling store to near capacity.

She only had one thing more to add to her cart, and then she could be on her way. With all the people crowding the store though, she dreaded the wait she would inevitably endure in the checkout. Beth rounded the corner to get into the next aisle, when a newly familiar face caught her attention. Wasn’t that her new employee? He was minus the gray cowboy hat, but those ruggedly youthful good looks couldn’t have belonged to anyone but Matt Taylor.

For a moment, Beth watched Matt and the small boy beside him. That must be Ryan. She stared at the child with black hair and brown eyes, admiring his sweet smile, and the way he tried to help Matt by putting things into the cart.

“No, buddy,” she heard Matt say, as he took a bottle of shampoo from the boy’s hands, “we don’t need this.”

“Can we get hotdogs?” Ryan asked, taking hold of the grocery cart his brother pushed.

“More hotdogs?” Matt laughed, as the two started into the same aisle as Beth. “We had hotdogs, yesterday.” As Matt said this, Beth suddenly found herself face to face with her new employee. “Mrs. Carter! what are you doing here?”

“What does it look like? I’m shopping.” Beth winced at the sound of her own harsh tone.

Matt looked embarrassed, and for a long moment, neither one knew what to say.

“Is that your brother, Ryan?” Beth asked curiously, as the boy took off down the aisle ahead of Matt’s grocery cart.

“Ryan, get back here!” Matt called after him. “Yeah, that’s my brother.” Matt grinned proudly as the boy returned to his side. “Ryan, this is my new boss, Mrs. Carter.”

Beth smiled at the boy, and he smiled back without a moment’s hesitation.

Someone behind Beth murmured something about them blocking the aisle, forcing her to move away from the small boy with expressive brown eyes. “It was nice meeting both of you,” she said, waving a small good-bye to Ryan.
"Bye-bye," Ryan said, imitating her wave with one of his own.

She knew she shouldn't, but Beth couldn't help it, and turned for one last look at Ryan. The brothers had moved on, leaving Beth with an all too familiar sensation welling inside her.

"Stop it," she quietly scolded herself. Her eyes stung, and Beth blinked furiously to keep the tears back. Unwilling to make a fool of herself in the middle of the grocery store, Beth commanded her emotions and managed to take her place in a long checkout line.

As soon as she got home, she would call Skip.

"Small world, isn't it?" asked a masculine voice. Beth turned, only to find Matt and Ryan waiting in line behind her. "Why is it I've never noticed you here, before?" Matt asked pleasantly. "I shop here every week, and I don't think I've seen you."

"I usually go to the market across the street," Beth said, her eyes straying back to Ryan. "It went out of business, so now I have no choice but to come here."

Matt smiled politely, and Beth realized how her statement must have sounded. The market across the street had been a gourmet specialty store, and not a discount mart with the lowest prices in town.

Feeling uncomfortable, Beth faced her cart, her back to the brothers.

"Can we get this, Matty?" Beth saw the boy pick up a candy bar from a nearby display.

"No, put it back," Matt said firmly.

"But why? We never get anything, Matty."

"We're getting the ice cream, aren't we?"

"Yes," Ryan said, exhaling a disappointed sigh. Beth saw him return the candy bar, his small frame disappearing as he went back to Matt's grocery cart.

"Can we watch a movie, tonight?" Ryan asked, as the line inched forward.

"Not tonight, buddy, I've got work tomorrow."

"But," Ryan said with a whimper, "you said we could celebrate!"
"What do you think the ice cream's for?" Matt laughed.

"Do you think Mommy has ice cream?"

To Beth's consternation, someone in the next checkout spoke so loudly she couldn't hear Matt's answer. She only knew that when she could hear the boy again, his voice sounded with tears. Feigning an excuse to look behind her, Beth saw Ryan in Matt's arms, Ryan's head leaning against Matt's shoulder for comfort.

Matt gave her a strained smile. "It's time for his nap."

"Oh," Beth nodded, and faced her cart once more. She couldn't help feeling some curiosity, and would have paid to hear Matt's answer.

All too soon for Beth, her groceries were bagged and her receipt ready. She left the Taylors, still wondering if their mommy had ice cream.

Home felt as empty as ever before, even with the presence of Bailey, muzzling Beth's hand as she greeted him in the living room where he liked to sleep on the sofa. While she was at work, the old labrador retriever mix had the entire sofa to himself, though from his friendly tail wagging she knew he was happy to have her home -- even if it meant sharing the sofa again. He was much smaller than a purebred labrador, and as a consequence, didn't take much room on it himself; that didn't mean, however, he couldn't appreciate the liberty of stretching out on the cushions as much as he wanted.

The crumple of plastic grocery bags prompted Bailey to follow Beth into the kitchen. He waited to see if she had gotten him any doggie treats, and when his patience had been rewarded, Bailey plodded back to the couch for more sleep.

Some minutes later, Beth called Bailey to his doggie dish. Her own dinner sat in a skillet on the stove, its savory smell making her hungrier than before.

Taking her meal of vegetables and chicken into the living room, Beth sat down on the sofa. She thought about the phone on her nightstand. Skip would probably be home by now. He'd said he'd wait for her call, in case she changed her mind. The cushion beside her gave way as Bailey climbed onto the sofa; he rested his head on her lap, his large eyes looking up at her, begging for attention.
"How was your day, old boy?" Beth put down her fork long enough to give him a good scratch behind the ears. "Not so good, huh? Me either."

Bailey watched as she finished her dinner, his tail thumping the cushions when she set aside her plate. He knew she would pet him some more, and immediately rolled over so she could scratch his belly.

"Not now, Bailey." She gently pushed him from her lap. "I've got plans for tonight, and it doesn't include watching television and getting covered with dog fur."

Bailey didn't seem too disappointed, for Beth got up, leaving him the sofa.

Deciding to wash her dinner plate tomorrow, Beth went to the master bedroom and flipped on the soft overhead lights. Her gaze unavoidably went to the large empty bed. If she called now, he could be there in half an hour.

She sat down on the edge of the mattress to give herself a moment longer to think. "I hope Luke's not watching," she whispered, and picked up the receiver.

A woman answered Beth's call, and without a word, Beth hung up.

She'd call Skip some other time.

Macaroni and cheese didn't seem like much of a celebration, but to Matt, it symbolized a degree of normalcy. They would be eating like they used to, before he had lost his job and the hardship of the past few weeks. Of course, he couldn't spend everything on food, for their rent needed to be paid, and some bills would come due in the next few days. No, this celebration would be modest, but as Matt cooked dinner over the stove, he hoped the others would feel the same way and be happy in spite of the noodles.

"Matty?" Ryan came into the kitchen with a large photo album in his small arms. "Show me Mommy."

"I showed you Mommy when we got home," Matt said patiently.

Ryan frowned. "I want to see her again."
"Later, Ryan. I'm busy." Out of the corner of his eye, Matt saw Ryan heave a deep sigh. He wished his brother would forget about their mother, for the old wounds hurt every time they went over the past.

"Please, Matty?"

"After dinner," Matt found himself saying. How could he expect Ryan to forget, when he couldn't?

A sound at the front door distracted Ryan, and the boy ran to greet Ethan and Cassie as they came home from school.

"We're having mac and cheese!" Matt heard his little brother say.

"No, we're not," Ethan said harshly. From the tone of his voice, Matt knew Ethan had gone through another difficult day. "Matty! where are you?"

Matt tried to ignore Ethan's bad temper as the teenager came into the kitchen.

"Tell Ryan to keep his big mouth shut, if he can't tell the truth!" Ethan said, dropping into a chair at the table with his homework.

Lifting a lid on the stove, Matt showed Ethan what was cooking.

"See? I told you!" Ryan grinned, jumping about as Cassie joined Ethan at the table to do her homework.

"Matt, where'd you get the money?" Ethan asked, his surprise evident to everyone present. "Don't tell me you found a job!"

"All right, I won't," Matt said with a grin. He turned his back to the stove as the sounds of Ryan's laughter filled the kitchen.

"Oh, Matty!" Cassie jumped up to give Matt a hug. "I knew you'd find work, I just knew it!"

"How much does it pay?" Ethan asked, leaning back in his chair and propping his shoes on the table. For all his bravado, Matt could hear the relief in his brother's voice.

"Enough to get by," Matt said, returning Cassie's gentle hug. He didn't like sharing numbers with Cassie and Ryan, for he felt they were too young to bear the burden of such detailed knowledge.
"I start work tomorrow, at Beth's Garden Nursery. It's only seasonal work, but it'll give me plenty of time to find a more permanent job someplace else." He let go of Cassie, only to notice she had started crying. "Cass, try to stop before you make yourself worse."

"I wish you'd grow up, Cass," Ethan said, opening a textbook across his outstretched legs to do some studying. "If you get yourself all worked up, don't expect me to help."

"Go wash your face and calm down," Matt told his sister. When she retreated to the bathroom, Matt shot a warning look at his younger brother. "She's not as strong as you, Ethan. Cut her some slack."

"I cut her slack all the time!"

Just then, Cassie quietly returned to the table to do her homework, and both boys changed the subject.

"Now that you have a job," Ethan asked, his voice steeped in disappointment even before he finished asking the question, "could we finally get another truck? I'm sick of walking everywhere, just because you have the pickup."

"How am I supposed to hold down a job without a vehicle?" Matt asked, getting out the dinner plates. "We can't afford another truck right now -- you know that."

Ethan groaned, his attention clearly not on his homework. "I don't know why I bother with this. Clay dropped out of high school, and he's making two hundred grand for hardly doing anything at all."

"Clay?" Matt swung around, leveling his eyes on Ethan. "I thought I told you to stay away from him. You keep clear of drug dealers like Clay. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you," Ethan said, flashing Matt a rebellious look that frightened Matt to his very core. Ethan said nothing more, but started his homework in heavy silence.

"Guys like Clay are always in trouble," Matt said, motioning Cassie to move her textbook so he could set the table, "and so are their friends. Hang out with them, and you'll throw your life away."

"You should know," Ethan said, plopping his books on the floor beside his chair.

"Yes, I should. You aren't going to repeat my sins, or our dad's. Get your feet off the table."
Ethan obeyed, his cheeks flushing with fresh anger at the mention of their father. "Dad was such a loser, Matty. He was only good at getting mom pregnant, staying drunk and chasing that high of his."

"And that's not going to happen to you." Matt waited for Ethan's response. "Agreed?"

"Agreed." Ethan didn't sound as though he really believed it.

"What happened in school today that's got you so worked up?" Matt asked, as he set a pot of macaroni on the table. The sound of silverware made Ryan appear without prodding, and everyone gathered for dinner.

Ethan gave a despairing sigh. "My guidance counselor is on my case again."

"What's he want?" Matt asked, hushing Ryan's pleas to say grace so they could eat. "You've been staying out of trouble, haven't you?"

Ethan shrugged. "He says I should be getting ready for college."

"College." Matt sighed, and suddenly he realized he was beginning to sound like his brother. "We don't have any money for college."

"That's what I told him," Ethan said, sliding down on his tailbone until he slumped in the chair like a defeated man. "He said my grades might be good enough for a scholarship, and that I should be thinking about my plans for the future. Plans -- he's always pushing me to make plans. What good are plans when I'm going to end up like you and Dad?"

"You're going to be better than me," Matt said, inwardly smarting from the sting of truth, "and if you don't do better than Dad, you're going to answer to me -- not your guidance counselor."

"Matty isn't like our dads," Cassie gave her oldest brother a sweet smile before turning to Ethan. "If Matty can be better than his dad, then so can you."

"Right," Ethan said with a smirk. "If I follow Matty's example, I should drop out of high school so I can be a loser just like him."

"Matty is NOT a loser!" Ryan said defiantly.
"He only dropped out so he could take care of us," Cassie said, folding her arms and giving Ethan a reproving look. Even in her anger, Cassie was never too confrontational.

"Okay, okay," Ethan sighed heavily, "I take it back. But my dad was a loser, and if anyone here argues the point, they'll have a fight on their hands."

"There won't be any fighting," Matt said, bowing his head to pray, "at least, not while I have anything to say about it."

Everyone but Ethan followed Matt's example, and after a prayer had been said over the food, and thanks had been given for the job, everyone helped themselves to the macaroni. When the pot had been emptied, Matt got up from his chair.

"Ice cream, ice cream!" Ryan said excitedly, seeing Matt open the freezer to get their dessert.

"Did you really find work, Matty?" Cassie asked, as Matt placed her bowlful on the table. "Don't forget the spoons, Matty."

"Here you go," Matt said, tossing Ethan some spoons. "Yup, I got a job, Cass. And a good one, at that. Mrs. Carter isn't paying the same as my last job, but it'll be good enough to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table."

"And ice cream!" Ryan said, his eyes fastened on Cassie as she tasted her dessert. "Why does Cassie always go first, Matty?"

Matt laughed. "How many times do I have to remind you that ladies go first?"

Anxious not to be late on his first day of work, Matt woke up well before he needed to. He stared at the glowing clock beside his bed, blinking to see if he were dreaming. No, it really was two A.M., and he had to get back to sleep if he didn't want to be a zombie the next morning. Giving his pillow a punch, Matt tried to get comfortable beneath the covers. In these quiet hours, alone in bed, he sometimes found himself wishing for Helen. The soft feel of her lips, the touch of her hand -- it had been a long time since he'd been with her. Matt shook his senses back to the present. Helen had been a part of his former life, a life without God, without hope.

Rolling onto his back, Matt let his arm drape across his forehead as he stared at the dark ceiling. All the reasoning in the world couldn't stop his senses from missing Helen. They had done much together, and now those memories haunted him without mercy. Matt smiled grimly. Another person he'd like to forget. Mom, and now Helen.
"I have to forget, God," Matt said in a quiet whisper, his lips mouthing the words to heaven. "I have to, or else I'll go crazy." He thought it over. Maybe he already was. He slaved at one dead end job after another, while worthless punks like Clay made more money than he knew what to do with. All Matt had to do was ignore his conscience, and sell drugs. Not a problem for people like Clay, but a big problem for Matt. He'd been a terrible sinner, but he'd never stooped to becoming a drug dealer.

"Help me get to sleep, God," Matt prayed silently. "Help me sleep, so I'll stop thinking."

Matt rolled onto his side, his hand feeling the sheets beneath him. Maybe he should take a cold shower. He glanced at the time. The night was passing at an agonizingly slow pace, and he needed that shower. He needed to wake up, and let consciousness sink in and chase away his ghosts. He felt alone, and without a friend.

Weariness warred against Matt's loneliness, until he decided against a shower. He must sleep!

As Matt asked God for help, a small boy climbed onto the mattress, a pillow clutched in his hand. His other hand was at his mouth, for Ryan habitually sucked his thumb in his sleep.

"Did you have a bad dream?" Matt whispered.

Ryan shook his head. "No, Ethan is snoring."

"I snore, too," Matt smiled, immediately glad for the company. "Here, I'll share my blanket." Matt tucked Ryan beside him in bed, and soon the boy fell asleep.

The ghosts slowly faded, and Matt felt a wave of comfort drift over him. He could hear the soft breathing of Ryan, and with each breath, Matt's loneliness eased. He knew Ryan would protest if he were awake, but since he wasn't, Matt planted a kiss on the boy's forehead.

"Thank you, God," Matt prayed to himself. "Thank you for my family."

The next morning, Matt awoke later than he had wanted, sending the entire household into a flurry of activity.

"Ethan, get out of the bathroom so I can use it!" Matt shouted at the closed door.

"Use Cassie's!" came the response.
"You've been in there for ten minutes," Matt protested. "I can't be late, Ethan!"

"Use Cassie's bathroom!" Ethan shouted at the top of his lungs.

"I can't!" Matt said, checking his watch. "Ryan's in there! Hurry up, Ethan, we're going to be late!"

The bathroom door slammed open, and a stinky smell wafted to Matt's nose.

"Couldn't you open the bathroom window?" Matt asked, waving away the smell but hurrying inside. "Would you take Ryan over to Mrs. Lott's house? I have to refuel the pickup, and that won't leave me much time to get to work." Matt didn't wait for Ethan's response, but slammed the door shut so he could use the toilet and then shave. He hadn't overslept by much, but one thing or another conspired to make him late, and that was the last thing Matt needed right now.

"Bye Matty!" Cassie said, pausing outside the boys' bathroom door before she ran out to meet the school bus. "I'll keep my fingers crossed for you!"

"I'd rather you prayed," Matt said through the door, "but thanks, Cass. Now get going, or you'll miss your bus!"

By the time Matt came out to find his car keys, everyone had left.

Closing up the house, Matt climbed into his pickup and started the engine. One last glance at his watch told him he'd make it to work on time.

When Matt parked his truck outside the nursery, a dark blue sedan was the only other vehicle in the empty parking lot. He wondered who the sedan belonged to, and if this meant the others had yet to arrive.

Retrieving the work gloves under the driver's seat, Matt climbed out of his pickup and put them on. Unable to find anyone outside, he passed beneath the vine covered lattice that framed the store's entrance. To his surprise, the door stood open.

"Hello?" Matt said, stepping inside the empty store. "Anyone here?"

"I'm sorry, but the nursery isn't open yet," a woman said from behind the cashiers counter.
Matt couldn't see anyone, and had to lean over the countertop to find the invisible speaker, on her knees, organizing some shelves.

"Come back later, when we're open," the woman said, without checking to see who had come in.

Early morning sunlight poured through the large store windows, flooding the room and casting secondary light on the woman kneeling on the floor. Though her face looked downward, Matt needed no one to tell him her identity. From the auburn hair and the braid at her back, he knew.

"Good morning, Mrs. Carter."

At the sound of his voice, Mrs. Carter looked up. The graceful movement bathed her pale skin in a soft semi-glow, stunning Matt into silence. Robbed of breath and speech, he felt a lump in his throat that made it impossible to swallow. How could a woman be so beautiful in faded overalls?

Her eyes met his, and for a moment both were silent.

Abruptly looking away, she turned back to her task. "It's nice to see someone finally showed up. What time is it?"

Pushing back the cuff of his glove to see his watch, Matt steadied his breath. He needed to be more careful. "It's nearly seven forty."

"I suppose it's still early, but I predict Sylvia will be fashionably late again, nursing a hangover from last night. Which reminds me, do you drink?"

"No, ma'am."

"Good. One party goer in this nursery is enough." Mrs. Carter stood up, her eyes not meeting his. "I guess none of us can help what our friends do, especially when we're not around to stop them from behaving rashly."

"I suppose not."

Mrs. Carter nodded absently, as though it mattered little what he said. "Wait here, and I'll bring you some work gloves."

"I brought my own."
Quickly glancing at Matt, Mrs. Carter hardly took the time to notice what he had on his hands before continuing. "You can start behind the store."

Wordlessly, Matt followed her outside to a large pile of bagged steer manure -- a very large pile.

"This shipment came in early this morning, and now we need it out of the way. Stack the bags in the shed, over there. When you're done, I'll tell you what to do."

"Yes, ma'am." Matt immediately set to work, glad for the activity. He hated to stand about without direction or purpose, when he had come to earn a paycheck.

It seemed only a few minutes had passed when Matt heard a friendly,

"I see Mrs. Carter has already put you to work."

Turning, he found Amy, standing near a flat of potted plants, a clipboard tucked under her arm.

"She did," Matt grinned.

Amy smiled, though her smile seemed a bit strained, and went back to whatever she had been doing.

Matt quickly checked his watch. Eight o'clock. Mrs. Carter wanted everyone to show up at seven-thirty, but the nursery opened at eight. It looked as though she might be right about Sylvia, after all. Shrugging, Matt returned to his job.

It was none of his business.

Though mildly cool, the wind wasn't blowing and it offered no respite from Matt's labors. Sweat formed on his face, running in small rivers down his neck before absorbing into his damp T-shirt. He removed his Stetson long enough to swipe a gloved wrist over his wet forehead. Those bags of manure were heavy.

"Tired?" asked a voice Matt quickly recognized as Mrs. Carter's.

"Not yet, ma'am," he said, replacing the Stetson and going back to work.

"If it's too much for you, you can quit."
"No, ma'am, I can handle it." Matt hefted a forty pound bag of steer manure onto his shoulder, and made his way to the shed.

When he returned for another bag, she had gone.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Matt redoubled his efforts. He didn't want to give Mrs. Carter any excuses to fire him.

"Hey, Beth!" a woman's shout made Matt turn to see who had spoke. Sylvia had finally arrived. "Why don't you get Matt to use the side loader, instead of lifting all those heavy bags by hand?"

Matt waited for an answer, having wondered that himself. How had these women managed to move the large flats he saw in back of the store, without a forklift?

"It's not working," came Mrs. Carter's reply.

From the puzzled look on Sylvia's face, Matt knew better.

He sucked in a deep breath. If his boss wanted him to do things the hard way, then so be it. He was getting paid.

For all of that morning, Matt toiled away, hauling one bag after another, until the pile began to look visibly smaller. The others stayed away, and Matt decided they didn't want to incur Mrs. Carter's displeasure by showing sympathy or giving him a different task.

Just before noon, some of the fear must have worn off, for Sylvia came to see his progress. She stood, arms folded, head shaking back and forth at the small pile of bags still remaining. "You've gotten a lot done."

Matt swiped at the sweat on his brow. "In another half hour, I can have this finished."

"No, it's time for lunch," Sylvia said, beckoning him away from the manure bags. She looked at him through dark sunglasses, her hand shading her eyes from further sunlight. "Beth said the side loader would be fixed, tomorrow."

"Sounds good," Matt nodded. "Is there anyplace I can get a drink of water?"

Sylvia's hand came down long enough to point at a hose beside the wall of the store. "You can drink from that -- all the employees do."
Matt tugged off his work gloves, tucked them in the back pocket of his jeans, and tramped across the dirt to the rolled up hose. He turned on the water, and holding the stream above his mouth, gulped down the cool water to wash the dryness away.

Having followed him, Sylvia leaned against the building, her head cocked to one side. "Is that all you have to say? Beth made you work like a dog, and you just shrug it off? What does it take to get you angry?"

Bending forward, Matt let the hose run cold water onto the back of his neck. "I'm not getting paid to complain. Besides, you said the side loader would be fixed."

"Well, you're certainly easy to get along with, I'll say that for you," Sylvia said laughingly.

Matt turned off the hose, letting the air evaporate the wetness from his clothes. "I can't afford to lose this job."

"So I gather." Sylvia straightened, her hands on her hips as she looked up at him from under a mound of black curls. "It's lunch break. Amy and I usually go to the restaurant down the street. Want to come with us?"

"Who watches the nursery while we're gone?"

"Beth, of course. Come on, lunch is on me."

Just then, Amy came out and joined them behind the store. "Is he coming with us, Sylvia?"

Sylvia looked at Matt. "Well?"

"I guess so," he shrugged.

Looking very sympathetic, Amy lightly touched his arm. "Matt, I'm really sorry -- " she caught herself before finishing the thought out loud. "I'm really sorry Mrs. Carter said the side loader wasn't working."

Matt noticed Amy's careful wording, understanding it to mean what he had thought all along.

The coolness of the restaurant almost made Matt shiver in his T-shirt, for he still felt a little damp. Placing his Stetson on the empty seat beside him, he waited for the women to return from their visit to the ladies' room. Their food would be coming any moment, and Matt decided
to let himself enjoy this free meal -- although he fully intended to pay for his own food in the future. The meal that sat in the paper bag in his pickup wouldn't be wasted, for it would keep until tomorrow's lunch. Peanut butter sandwiches were like that.

He leaned back in his chair, watching the traffic speed past the large pane window a few feet away on his right. After all that work, his back would be plenty stiff tonight.

"Has our food come yet?" Sylvia asked, as the women returned to their table. Even though there were empty seats to choose from, Sylvia moved Matt's Stetson onto the table so she could sit beside him.

Seeing this, Matt placed the hat under his chair.

"Do you have family in Las Cruces?" Sylvia asked, leaning forward, gazing at him without sunglasses. Her eyes looked a little red, and she squinted against the light coming through the window.

"Let's swap places," Matt said, getting up from the table with his Stetson. He exchanged places with Sylvia, then tucked his hat safely beneath his chair.

"How rare," Sylvia laughed, "a gentleman! I wish my last boyfriend were this considerate. We'd still be together."

"Do you?" Amy asked, looking at Matt to say something.

"Do I what?"

"Have any family here in Las Cruces?" Obviously, Amy had been following Sylvia's question.

"Two brothers and a sister," Matt said, hoping his accepting the women's invitation for lunch hadn't been a mistake. He hated to be impolite, especially on his first day.

"How about a girlfriend?" Sylvia asked.

"Do you women always ask this many questions?" Matt asked, unable to conceal a smile; he had the bad habit of grinning when uncomfortable, and people often took it as a sign of good humor instead of what it really was -- embarrassment.

"I'm afraid we do," Sylvia said, brightening as a waiter stepped forward with their food. "I ordered the linguine," she told the waiter.
The women quieted down as Matt silently prayed over his food. When he opened his eyes, he found them watching.

"Beth said something about you both going to the same church?" Sylvia asked, before taking a bite of pasta.

Matt nodded, his mouth full.

"How long have you two known each other?"

Matt shrugged, swallowing his food. "We haven't -- not until the day before yesterday."

"Beth doesn't go to church too often," Sylvia nodded understandingly. "Ever since Luke died, she's pretty much stayed away."


Sylvia seemed incredulous, her fork pausing midway between plate and mouth. "Luke was her husband. Didn't you know she's a widow?"

"No, I didn't." Contemplating this news, Matt took a drink from his glass. If Mr. Carter were dead, then who was the man in her office, yesterday? Matt began to doubt his gut instincts, for although he'd thought a private moment had been interrupted by his arrival, Matt hated to think so lowly of Mrs. Carter. Perhaps he'd been mistaken. Maybe it had only been a customer, or some associate talking over business -- grinning like he'd just gotten his hand into a cookie jar. Matt frowned. At any rate, he quickly reminded himself that, aside from praying for her, she wasn't any of his concern. Mrs. Carter was his boss, and he was her employee.

Nothing more.

"Let integrity and uprightness preserve me [Matt]; for I wait on Thee."

~ Psalm 25:21 ~
Chapter Three
One is Alone

"I [Matt] had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness. For the LORD God is a sun and shield: the LORD will give grace and glory: no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly. O LORD of hosts, blessed is the man that trusteth in Thee."
~ Psalm 84:10-12 ~

Matt spent the remainder of lunch in relative silence, only half listening to the chatter of his talkative coworkers. They had said nothing more of Mrs. Carter’s deceased husband or her past, and quietly maintaining that she was none of his business, he hadn't asked anything further. He finished the food on his plate, the complementary glass of ice water, some breadsticks, all the while trying not to seem impatient by the frequent glances at his watch. Sylvia seemed oblivious to the time, her attention on the conversation instead of returning to the nursery. At last he could stand it no longer, and retrieved the hat under his chair.

Not catching the hint, Sylvia continued to talk.

"I think our lunch break might be up," Matt said.

She blinked her eyes and gave him a dismissing shrug. "We've got plenty of time."

Not believing her, Matt pushed away from the table. "I need to get back and finish stacking those manure bags. Thanks for the meal."

Sylvia looked mildly annoyed, but not too annoyed to give him an appraising glance as he stood up.

"See you later," Matt said, and left the restaurant as the two women continued to talk. He might have a lot to learn about the routines of the nursery, but he wasn't about to take the word of someone who appeared to be habitually late for everything. If Sylvia didn't mind getting their boss angry over a long lunch break, he did.

Tossing the tuna sandwich wrapper into the office waste basket, Beth flicked her eyes at the clock on the desk. He was late. It figured, since she had seen him leave with Sylvia and Amy. Beth unscrewed the cap of her bottled water. She had to give him credit, though. He hadn't complained about the steer manure.
Taking a drink, she replaced the cap and got to her feet. She put on a sunhat to guard her sensitive skin against sunburn and went outside. The nursery was empty of customers, had been all morning long. Spring was just around the corner, so where were her customers? She put on her work gloves. If things kept going this poorly, she would have to reduce some overhead. Such as wages. It hadn't helped that she'd taken on another employee, and she promised herself that Matt's was the last sob story she would fall victim to, little children or not.

Worried over more serious things besides lengthy lunch breaks, Beth rounded the back of the store, only to stop in her tracks.

The first thought that popped into her mind -- besides her initial surprise that Matt had returned after all -- was the fact he was without his shirt. Sun glinted off sweat as he moved, highlighting a tanned body used to outdoor labor. His face was half cast in shadow beneath the Stetson, but when he suddenly looked up, the dark eyes beneath its brim met her gaze full on.

For the second time that day, Beth found herself lost in a wide-awake dream.

"I'm almost finished," he said, breaking the silence. He mopped the sweat on his neck with the discarded T-shirt, then put the shirt on. "All I need is another five minutes."

"When you're done, pull the weeds around the back fence." Beth gave him instructions, and he nodded mildly, looking neither put upon nor indignant at being given such menial tasks. She thought she detected a hint of embarrassment in those deep brown eyes, but couldn't be sure. After that initial stare, he avoided her gaze altogether.

Beth went to the potting table to retrieve her trowel. She wondered what she had gotten herself into, by hiring Matt. It unnerved her the way he kept surprising her every time she turned around.

Trowel in hand, Beth went around to the side of the store to work on the potted roses just as Sylvia and Amy returned.

"Where have you two been?" Beth asked in as stern a tone as she could summon. "Do you know what time it is?"

Sylvia's casual laugh filled the loading yard. "It's not like we're holding up business, Beth. This place is as empty as we left it."
"That's not the point. You have one hour for lunch, no more. Did you know Matt is already hard at work, pulling weeds?"

"You've got him weeding? Why doesn't that guy ever complain? First the steer manure, and now this. Really, Beth, there's something deeply disturbing about him."

Beth thought Sylvia was right, but not in the mocking way Sylvia had meant.

"Don't change the subject. I'm struggling with this nursery as it is, without having to babysit you and Amy."

Amy startled a little upon hearing her name, and began to ease herself toward the store where she would stand duty over the cash register. Beth let her go without more of a warning, for she knew who had been responsible for the extended lunch break.

"All right, all right, I'm sorry." Peering over her dark sunglasses, Sylvia looked annoyed, but nothing more. Hardly penitent. "It won't happen again, Boss. Happy?"

"Ecstatic." Beth shot her friend a cautionary look, then returned to the roses. To her annoyance, Sylvia remained and leaned against the store siding to watch Matt in the distance.

"What do you know about him, Beth? Besides the obvious, I mean."

"Silvi, I'm not going to gossip."

"Why not?"

"I have better things to do, and so do you."

Sylvia's painted mouth spread in a smile, showing off her impossibly white teeth. "You're right." She patted Beth's shoulder, then sashayed in Matt's direction.

So Sylvia was adding another man to her collection, Beth thought bitterly as she saw her beautiful friend stop to flirt with Matt. Some women had any man they wanted for the asking, while other women had to make due with what they could get.

Unable to keep herself from watching, Beth saw Matt shake his head, then back away from Sylvia. He smiled politely, stooped to resume weeding the fence, and it seemed to Beth, ignored Sylvia's flirtation.
Beth would have gloated, except for the fact she hadn't expected Matt to show any character. It troubled her to know he had refused something she was all but ready to accept from Skip. Sure, Skip wasn't as tempting as Beth thought Sylvia had been to Matt, but the parallel stuck, refusing Beth to dismiss it from her conscience.

Apparently, Matt didn't sleep outside the marriage bed.

And she was about to.

A customer strolled into the nursery, needing Beth's advice about petunias. It came as a welcome distraction and she talked longer than she needed, discussing various plants and the weather. By the time the customer left empty-handed, Beth observed Matt working alone.

Sylvia had given up. For now.

Matt kicked off his boots, laughing as Ryan bent to pick them up, one by one. He had guessed his back would be sore after a day of hefting manure bags and pulling weeds, and he was already sure this evening wouldn't disappoint him. Even now, his muscles were aching their protest, demanding to know why he had put them to so much trouble. His body might have difficulty understanding, but Matt sure didn't. He had bills to pay, two brothers and a sister to look after. Those things wouldn't take care of themselves.

Ryan dumped the boots into the corner of the living room, then climbed onto the sofa with Matt. Matt propped his dirty socked feet on the coffee table and wiggled his toes. Even they hurt.

"I have got to find another job," Matt laughed half jokingly. He noticed Ethan sit up at attention in the nearby chair.

"Why?" Ethan asked. "Your boss giving you trouble?"

Matt expelled a breath of air. "Not exactly, but in a way, yeah. She keeps challenging me to quit, as though she expects me to throw up my hands and admit I can't handle the job."

Ethan scowled in relief. "That doesn't sound so bad."

"It wouldn't be, if that was all." Matt moved his arm as Ryan climbed onto his lap. "Mrs. Carter isn't married."
"So?" Ethan challenged him with an unsympathetic grin. "Deal with it, Matty. We need the money."

"I know." Matt did know, even better than Ethan, how much that was true. Still, the three women he worked with at the nursery were unmarried and looking. Looking at him. Looking as though he might suddenly drop to one knee and propose to one of them. Matt figured that's what women really wanted when it came down to it. A ring and a promise of happily-ever-after.

Pulling from Matt's arms, Ryan went to sit on the floor to scribble in a coloring book. The day pulsed through Matt's aching muscles, anchoring him to the sofa. He heavily leaned his head against the cushion, watched his brother play. Ryan had been the result of their mother's relationship with a loser she had picked up at some bar and brought home. The only good thing about the man, had been the fact he had helped to create Ryan. It didn't take long for Matt to relive the painful memories of fights with his mom; he felt himself grow angry, then forced himself to relax. He knew from experience anger would leave him exhausted, and he was tired enough as it was.

The smell of cooking food drifted in from the kitchen and Matt's stomach grumbled impatience.

"How's it coming, Cass? Are you sure you don't need any help?"

"No, I can handle it." Cassie's voice sounded strained, and it took Matt some self control not to barge into the kitchen and take over the dinner preparations.

"Are you sure nothing's burning?" he called to her from the sofa.

"I'm sure. Relax, Matty, it'll be edible."

"I'll believe that, when I see it," Ethan said with a disbelieving laugh. "You should never have let her near the stove, Matty."

"She wanted to help out," Matt said in defense of his sister. "And I was tired enough to let her try. If it doesn't taste good, don't tease her about it. I appreciate the effort."

"Yeah, yeah." Ethan slid back in the worn upholstered chair with a textbook and propped his feet on the coffee table like Matt. "I'm just saying, we're all going to be sorry she wanted to help."

Ethan was proven half right, in that one side of dinner had turned to crusty black over the stove. But it was edible, as Cassie had promised, and thankfully, Ethan didn't tease her too much about it. Matt was so tired, he didn't feel like refereeing a shouting match, and was thankful when one didn't develop.
As soon as Matt's head hit the pillow that night, he fell into a sound, peaceful sleep. He had made it through his first full day at the nursery, and he still had a job.

It was all Beth could do to stop from pounding her fists on the steering wheel as she pulled up to the nursery. The morning sun had already come up and she had no difficulty seeing the graffiti slashed across the nursery store wall.

"Not again! Not again!" she shouted in frustration. She threw the car door open, got out, slammed it shut. She was in no mood for this. Skip had called to say he couldn't make it last night after all, and that meant she would have to go through all that guilt, afresh, tonight. Then to come to work and see this. It was too much.

A beat-up pickup drove into the mostly empty parking lot and easily found a vacant space. Matt stepped out, wearing his cowboy hat, a white T-shirt and scuffed boots. He pulled on his work gloves and stared at the nursery.

"What happened?" he asked, sauntering over to where she stood.

"What does it look like?" the words tumbled from her mouth in the form of an accusation.

An edge of warning flashed into his eyes, then disappeared. Beth wondered where he had put the anger.

"I'd say you were vandalized," he said finally.

"This has happened before," Beth said, her voice rising in anger. "Young punks like you trashed my store, killed half my plants and scrawled junk all over my walls. I don't suppose they're friends of yours?"

It wasn’t a question, and Matt didn’t answer. His stance stiffened, but he controlled himself to such a degree Beth felt a little foolish. But only a little.

"I’d better go inside and see the damage." Beth yanked out her keys, held them in her hand as though the mere fact of them calmed her. She had installed a new alarm system, and since the cops hadn't been called, the vandals probably hadn't broken inside the fenced loading yard that partially flanked the building’s left side, or behind, where plant material was kept secure by a tall perimeter fence.
Not really expecting to find any damage inside the store, where security was tightest, she unlocked the door and went inside. Everything was as she had left it. Only one wall outside had been defaced, and that she could take care of without too much trouble. She would still have to report this to the police, but if the last time was any gauge, they wouldn't be able to do much except to promise to patrol the area more frequently.

She turned to Matt, who had followed behind her into the building. "Everything looks fine."

"Good." Matt nodded, his mouth drawn into a tight line.

"I... I suppose I owe you an apology," Beth said, hating the guilt she heard in her own voice. "I'm just so tired of those wild teenagers -- those trailer trash kids -- marking up everything in sight like animals urinating lines of territory."

The grim line on Matt's face deepened. "I'm not a teenager."

"You look like one." She had made her apology, and wasn't about to eat any more humble pie than she had to. "Go finish weeding the fence."

"Yes, ma'am." He tipped his hat, and strode out the door.

That young man. For some reason, he made her uneasy. And it simply wasn't because he came from the same kind of trash that kept vandalizing her store.

Maybe it was from guilt, maybe she was tired of trying to provoke him into quitting -- whatever the cause, Matt enjoyed hours of relative solitude without Beth closely overseeing everything he did. He worked out of sight in back of the nursery until noon, flexing the muscles that had stopped groaning when he got out of bed that morning.

Perhaps best of all, Sylvia didn't hang around, trying to flatter him with language he wished he hadn't heard. It didn't help his resolve to live life the way God wanted him to, but after fending off her advances, he felt a measure of power. He could survive these women. He still wanted to find another job, one that wasn't seasonal, but Matt no longer felt a sense of desperation. Confident that he was learning how to handle the situation God had placed him into, Matt poured his energies into the job. If Beth -- Mrs. Carter -- wanted him to sweep the nursery floor with a toothbrush, he would do it.

After that morning he felt confident enough to voice an objection, but he would do it.
Though her reasons for hiring Matt had been purely to ease her own conscience, Beth made a
confession to her friend as they sat in Beth's office later that day.

"He's a good worker, Silvi."

Sylvia raised her brows, enjoyed one last draft of tobacco before extinguishing her end-of-the-
day cigarette in the ashtray. "You sound surprised."

"I am." Beth didn't mind admitting it to Sylvia. "He doesn't get angry easily, and he stays out of
trouble. I wish all my employees were as responsible."

Sylvia rolled her eyes. "Please, not another lecture on how I'm ruining my life. You're not any
better, my dear. I know all about you and Skip."

"You do?" Beth didn't know why she should be so surprised. Her friend was a good observer,
maybe too good.

The smirk on Sylvia's face was very unladylike. "Don't worry, Beth, I won't tell anyone. If your
church friends found out, they might revoke your membership or something."

Beth dismissed the subject and moved on to another, but it wasn't until after Sylvia had left, that
Beth allowed dread to settle in her heart. Sylvia had put it there, by treating Beth's plans with
Skip as something clandestine. Something to be kept secret.

The office phone rang, and without thinking, Beth answered.

"When you didn't pick up at home, I thought you might still be at work," a masculine voice said
with a chuckle.

"Skip, I was just thinking about you. About tonight--"  

"I'm sorry, Beth," he interrupted, "but I can't make it. Something came up. You know how it is."

"Yes, I know." Beth tried not to betray any emotion.

"Maybe tomorrow," he said, searching for a fresh invitation. "I could come by after work."

"I don't know, Skip, I'm just not as sure anymore." Beth clutched the receiver to her ear. "I just
need some time to work things out."
"I've been giving you nothing but time," Skip said, his voice sounding with impatience.

"I'm not the one who called to cancel tonight," Beth shot back. She rubbed her temple, realized a headache was brewing. "Call me tomorrow, Skip. I just don't feel like talking to you right now."

"Fine." Skip slammed down the receiver.

"What a day," Beth breathed weakly. Now she had to go home and face an empty life, an empty bed, and an empty heart.

Maybe she was wrong. Maybe she should just enjoy Skip, however long it lasted.

Home felt as alone as Beth had feared it would. Even after Bailey had struggled to get his old doggie self onto the bed, and curled up on the empty side of the mattress for the night, Beth still felt very alone. She petted Bailey's long fur, trying very hard to feel the presence of Luke through his dog.

Bailey had been Luke's, adopted as a gentle elderly dog from the animal shelter when she and Luke had learned she was pregnant. Oh, to relive those days again, when her son was alive and her only thought was potty-training and daycare.

"Caleb." The name whispered from her lips as though he were standing before her, his cherub face upturned to greet her. "Mommy loves you, Caleb." She wanted to get up, go into his room, touch his toys and remember his childish laughter. Instead, she clamped her eyes shut and tried to sleep.

It was almost spring. What had she expected? The hurt was always hardest to bear at this time of year, and she yearned for it to be over. The terrible anniversary loomed near, threatening to swallow her in grief once again.

Beth threw back the covers, got out of bed. She wouldn't haunt Caleb's room, only to melt into unconsolable tears. Not again. It only left her feeling despair, sharp and hungry despair, and still her arms would be empty.

Sensing disquiet, Bailey lifted his head to watch as she paced the room.

"I don't know how much more of this I can take, Bailey." She spoke to the labrador mix as though his large brown eyes saw her with complete understanding. "Why did God take them,
and not me? Couldn't He have taken me with them? Did He have to leave me by myself, to endure this torture alone, Bailey?"

Bailey wagged his tail, hoping the mention of his name meant he was going to be petted, or at least get his ears scratched. But she kept walking, measuring out the bedroom with restless steps and distracted talk. He put his head down and went to sleep.

"I don't want to go through the rest of my life like this. I can't. I won't." Beth stopped her pacing, thought of the pills in the bathroom cabinet. If she hadn't been such a coward, she'd have done it long ago. But still the thought of what God might do to her, held her back. Suicide was a frightening word, as were the doubts that tumbled in about her whenever she thought of that way out.

Sobered, Beth sank onto the edge of the mattress. Too much of a coward to take her life, too scared to let Skip into her bed. What a mess, she thought, brushing back long tresses from her face. What was left? The nursery? Tending and selling plants hardly seemed a good reason to keep going, but for the moment, it had to be enough.

Standing, Beth went to the large walk-in-closet on one side of the bedroom. The nursery reminded her of Matt Taylor. He had survived his second day of work, and had a feeling he was there to stay the season out. The guy just refused to quit.

For the first time that night, Beth smiled.

She wondered if Luke's old nursery T-shirts would fit Matt. Luke had helped out at the store when he wasn't on call at the hospital, and she had bought shirts especially for him. Shirts with her nursery logo on the front, like the ones she and Sylvia and Amy wore -- only bigger, to accommodate the man wearing them.

Then Beth realized Matt was the first man to work at the nursery since Luke. The realization didn't settle her or make her feel good, especially as she dug around in Luke's clothing for those shirts. It felt as though she were betraying Luke somehow, by giving his "Bethy shirts," as he'd called them, to another man.

She found them neatly folded and stacked where Luke had left them, untouched since his death.

"What am I supposed to do, Luke? Hold on to your things forever? You aren't coming back, and neither is Caleb." The sound of her own words crushed Beth to her knees and the sobs she had fought so hard to keep away, descended in full force.
In the close darkness of the closet, Beth wept loudly.

The morning of his third day of work, Matt found a stack of green T-shirts on the checkout counter.

"They're for you," Mrs. Carter said with a quick nod, as she headed out with a clipboard tucked under her arm. "From now on, wear those when you come to work. Without the store logo, you don't look like you belong here."

"Really?" This surprised Matt, for he had thought he fit in fairly well, with his old jeans and cowboy hat. Then again, he was the only employee who didn't have "Beth's Garden Nursery" emblazoned across his chest. He picked up a neatly folded shirt, unfurled it and noted the slightly worn look of the material. No matter. It may have been used, but it was in better condition than the shirt currently on his back.

Taking the clothing to his truck, Matt pulled off his shirt, put on a "new" one, then returned to work with a hopeful spirit. Mrs. Carter had wanted him to look as though he belonged at the nursery. Maybe that meant she no longer wished him gone. Please, God, all he wanted was peace. Peace to do his job, to earn his paycheck and provide for his family.

Sylvia had work that kept her in the store that day, leaving the outdoor tasks to Mrs. Carter and Matt. He followed Mrs. Carter's instructions as they worked side by side at the potting table, transplanting short green plants into small plastic pots.

"These will go by the cash register," Mrs. Carter explained. For some reason, she seemed to need to talk, to keep the air filled with someone's voice. When she didn't speak, she adjusted her ridiculously large hat and kept clearing her voice as though she were coming down with a cold.

Matt subdued a groan of dismay. He'd just gotten Sylvia to leave him alone, surely Mrs. Carter wouldn't be next. The thought came to him that perhaps that was why Sylvia had backed off. To give her friend -- her boss -- a try at him next. That would explain the shirts, and the kinder treatment, if a mere lack of coldness could be called kindness.

"I'm hoping customers will want to give these pots as gifts." Mrs. Carter held a plain plastic container before her, her mouth pursed in thought. "Are your brothers and sister doing all right?"

The question seemed so out of place, here at work, hands deep in soil and the smell of earth filling his nostrils, that Matt considered a moment before answering. "Yes, ma'am, they're fine."
"And the little boy? I believe his name is Ryan? Is he happy?"

"Excuse me, Mrs. Carter," Matt straightened his shoulders, his voice stiffening as he spoke. "I'm grateful for this job, but I don't see how it's any of your business."

She dismissed the question with a quick shrug. "I was just wondering, that's all. I didn't mean to pry."

"I'm not trying to hurt your feelings, Mrs. Carter."

"You didn't."

"It's just that I'm so used to people asking questions, I've become gun-shy of good intentions."

"You don't need to explain, Matt," she said, momentarily flicking her gaze on him as she reached for a trowel. "The last time I saw Ryan, he was crying. I only wondered if he was all right."

"He's fine."

Mrs. Carter smiled, though Matt thought the smile looked somewhat forced. "You're very protective of him, aren't you."

Matt remained silent. He didn't quite know how to take her remark, a part of him sensing resentment. Why she should resent him, he had no idea.

"He's a very sweet little boy."

"Yes, he is." Matt held the pot as she dumped soil around the roots of the spindly young plant.

"I wonder if you know how lucky you are to have him," she said, packing the soil with gloved fingers. She nodded for him to tip the watering can over the dry earth.

"I'm blessed, and I know it," Matt said with an affirming nod. "That's why I do my best to protect him and the others."

Mrs. Carter's mouth parted in a most becoming way, pink and soft and even warm. When she glanced at him again, the resentment was gone, replaced by something Matt couldn't name. Admiration, perhaps, but Matt didn't think so highly of himself to believe that.
When the pink smile lingered for more than Matt felt comfortable, his previous concern returned.

"I see the shirts fit you," she said, motioning for the next pot.

Matt brought forward the next in line. "Yes, ma'am."

"I don't suppose I could talk you into bringing your family over for dinner sometime." She gave him a sidelong glance.

"No, ma'am." The words slipped out before Matt had a chance to consider his position as an employee; he owed her some kind of consideration for giving him this job, after all. But what kind of consideration and how much, he didn't know, only that he felt he was treading on tenuous ground.

Mrs. Carter laughed quietly, as though not at all surprised by his answer. "You're very independent, aren't you."

Another non-question Matt decided needed no answer. He set aside the plant, picked up the next empty pot.

"I'm not Sylvia, Matt. You don't have to avoid me too."

He looked at Mrs. Carter warily. He'd been warned about her, and something told him the warning was valid. The desperate vulnerability that flashed in those green eyes made him beware, as did her gaze, every time it fell to his lips as he spoke.

There was no doubt about it. He was stuck in a job with three lonely women, one of them being his boss.

"I'm not looking for anything but to stay out of trouble and to do my job, Mrs. Carter."

She packed the loose soil around another pitiful looking plant he couldn't name. "I can understand that," she nodded.

"I'm grateful for the work," he continued, "but if it comes with any strings attached, I'd appreciate it if you said so up front."

She shook her head. "There's no strings -- not if you don't want them."
"I don't."

"Then that's that." She smiled, motioned for another pot and let the conversation fall silent.

Beth scolded herself for speaking to Matt, and allowing herself to be caught in what had sounded like a thwarted attempt at seduction. She hadn't intended that at all, although she couldn't deny the thought hadn't crossed her mind.

Guilt seemed to be her lot in life, for it hounded her and gave her little respite, no matter what she did. The calendar on her office wall reminded her of it, and when that failed, the picture frame on her desk succeeded. Beth was growing desperate to forget.

More than once that day, she toyed with the idea of calling Skip. Not that he would come. After all the putting off, stalling, and pleading for more time, she guessed he'd let her suffer awhile before giving in. He'd come to her after his pride had healed, and then they'd get together as he'd always wanted.

Sitting in her office, staring at the frame on her desk, Beth suddenly jerked her head up when Matt's voice broke into her thoughts.

"What?" She looked at him with an almost impatient frown as he leaned against the door jamb. "What do you want?"

"I said I changed my mind. If you still want to invite my family to dinner, we'll come."

"May I ask why the sudden change of mind?"

Matt lifted a shoulder. "I figure I owe you something. I'm willing to accept your invitation to dinner, but only if it includes my family. I'm not coming alone."

She caught herself smiling. "I'm not chasing after you, Matt."

He seemed unfazed. "I'm just trying to be polite, Mrs. Carter. There's a lot of us Taylors, and you just look so--" he stopped short.

"Go on, Matt. How do I look?"

"I don't know." He shifted uncomfortably. "Lonely. You look lonely."
Swallowing back the tears that came too easily, Beth found herself powerless to deny his observation; he couldn't possibly know how right he'd been. She was so lonely, it hurt.

"Are you going to cry?" Matt looked somewhat horrified as she dabbed at the wetness gathering in her eyes.

"No, I'm just tired," she finally managed in a steady voice. "Would this Saturday evening be convenient? I'll write down the directions to my house before you get off work."

Matt sighed audibly. "Yeah, I guess it's all right." Looking as though he already regretted accepting the invitation, he tipped his hat, then strode out the store with his hands shoved into his pockets.

What he thought of her after that little display of tear-eyed weakness, only God and Matt Taylor knew.

"There is one alone [Beth], and there is not a second...

"Two are better than one... For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to [her] that is alone when [s]he falleth; for [s]he hath not another to help [her] up."
~ Ecclesiastes 4:8, 9, 10 ~
Chapter Four
The Panting Heart

"Withhold not... Thy tender mercies from me, O LORD: let Thy lovingkindness and Thy truth continually preserve me [Matt]."
~ Psalm 40:11 ~

Matt knew exactly what to think. He had been an idiot for accepting Mrs. Carter's invitation. He had let obligation get in the way of better judgement.

He stooped to lift a potted plant, moved it to where Sylvia had directed, went back for another. The process was repetitive, leaving the mind free to think.

Tomorrow, he would take his family to his boss's house for dinner.

Oh, he was a prize idiot, all right.

The only thing stopping him from calling the whole thing off was guilt. He owed her something. His entire family owed her something. This job had meant they could survive a little longer, until he could find permanent work. The least they could do was show up and eat the lady's food.

"Matt."

He looked over his shoulder, saw Sylvia behind him. She offered a diet can of soft-drink.
"Thought you could use this."

"Thanks." Matt accepted it, popped the top.

Sylvia nodded distractedly. "What were you talking about to Beth just now-- when you went into her office?"

The foaming soda caught in Matt's throat, and he coughed it down.

"Something happened, and I want to know." Sylvia pinned him with a forceful look that made him stubborn instantly. It didn't matter that the question might be harmless, he didn't appreciate being forced.
He gulped down the rest of the drink, crushed the can in his fist, tossed it into an open trash bin. "Nothing much," he said, and resumed the pot moving.

She thrust her hands on her hips, gave him a cautionary stare.

Which he refused to acknowledge.

Another pot down, five more to go. And maybe by then, Sylvia would leave.

When she did, Matt silently thanked Heaven. These women were killing him.

Beth glanced up from the laptop on the desk, long enough to see the pout on Sylvia's face. "Why aren't you working?"

"I saw him first, Beth."

"Saw who?"

"Don't play innocent. I'm talking about Matt. He was in here a few minutes ago, and when he left, you had a hopeful smile. I saw."

"I don't have time for your games, Silvi. I really don't."

"Did he ask you out?"

With a sigh, Beth pushed back from the desk, eyed her jealous friend. "I only invited him and his family to dinner. Nothing else. Now if you're finished, I'd appreciate it if you got back to work."

The background sounds of a customer had Beth on her feet. She looked into the store, smiled when she saw Amy with three women at the checkout. Finally. Some business.

"You've already got Skip. I've got no one. It's not fair!"

Beth turned, drew a long patient breath. "I told you already, it's only a family dinner. He's not mine. I don't think he's anyone's. Now would you please work?"

"Are you sure?" Sylvia looked at her undecidedly.
"Yes, I’m sure I want you back to work."

Sylvia rolled her eyes. "Are you sure he doesn't belong to anyone?"

"His clothes are always rumpled," Beth said, returning to her desk chair. "Does it look to you a woman is taking care of him?"

"Are you sure it's only dinner?" Sylvia asked.

"His whole family's going to be there," Beth said, turning back to her laptop. "Any more questions? Or can we work now?"

"I guess." The pout outlining Sylvia's lips had faded into her usual, movie-star smile. "Have you and Skip got together yet?"

Beth narrowed her eyes. "Have you been eavesdropping at my office door?"

"Only a little," Sylvia laughed. "Come on, Beth, what are you waiting for? You aren't getting any younger, you know."

Mercifully, the phone rang and Beth had a good excuse to interrupt the conversation.

Sylvia leaned forward, whispered in Beth's ear. "You'd better take what little you're offered. Call Skip." With a gloating smile, Sylvia left Beth with a smarting heart. Her friend sure knew how to hurt, when she wanted.

Matt parked his truck outside the house, pulled the keys from the ignition. He needed to decompress, let himself relax and unwind before going inside.

After his minor confrontation with Sylvia, she'd come back, smiling as though she hadn't a care in the world. Women. Maybe she'd been in her period or something, but whatever the case, all seemed to be back to normal-- at least, as normal as it ever got at the nursery.

He opened the truck door, closed it, made sure it was locked before walking away.

The nasty stare of the neighbor across the street couldn't be missed. The prison tat on the guy's biceps threatened all onlookers that its owner was not to be pushed around. Matt's own tattoo had been acquired at a shop, when he and his then-buddy had been drunk, but didn't have the same impact of his neighbor's.
The man folded his arms across his chest, glared at Matt. The stance was that of someone demanding attention.

Matt nodded to him, stepped across the street to talk. "Howdy. Can I do something for you?"

"Tell your brother to stay away from my daughter."

"Your daughter?"

"If I catch him hanging around Susan again" -- he paused, leaned forward -- "he'll be sitting a toilet like a woman. Catch my drift?"

Though Matt felt like backing away, he held his ground. Neither wanted to appear weak, but he had a hunch his neighbor didn't want a fight, only the threat of one.

Matt nodded slowly. "I'll tell him."

"You'd better do more than tell," the man said, hardening his stance. "Susan's already got a baby to take care of, and she's just seventeen. Just a baby herself."

A knot tightened in Matt's stomach.

"Your brother isn't the father," the man said, reading the worry in Matt's face. "But I'm going to make sure he doesn't get my Susan into trouble. She's got enough."

"Matty's home!" Ryan shouted from the open doorway across the street, prompting both men to look at the Taylor house.

"Stay where you're at, Ryan," Matt called to him. "I'll be there shortly."

The angry father wasn't in the mood for more talk, and to be honest, neither was Matt. The men parted with a curt nod, and Matt strode back to the house, only to have Ryan rush out and greet him eagerly.

"Matty, Matty, guess what?" The boy lifted his arms, and Matt picked him up. "Mrs. Lott made a cake!"

"Did she?" Matt hefted the boy onto his hip, looked across the street and saw the man had gone.
"She said we couldn't eat it, until you got here!"

"Oh, so that's why you're so happy to see me!" Matt tickled Ryan until the boy was laughing so hard he couldn't speak.

The door opened, and Cassie stood inside, smiling when she saw Ryan with Matt.

"How was your day, Matty?"

"Okay, I guess. Where's Ethan?"

Cassie shrugged. "Studying, I guess."

"Where, Cass?"

"In his room. Why? What's wrong?" Her voice turned to worry so quickly, Matt was afraid she'd start having another panic attack.

"I just want to talk to him, that's all," Matt said, putting the squirming boy down.

"Cake, Matty! Cake!"

Matt gently tugged at Ryan's shirt. "Calm down, buddy; if there's cake, we're saving it for dessert."

Sweet brown eyes turned stormy as Ryan looked up at Matt. "We have to wait?"

"Please, Ryan." Matt ruffled his brother's black hair. "Be patient a little longer."

"But, I want to eat it now."

"Remember what I said about patience?"

Thought briefly creased Ryan's forehead. "No."

By now Cassie had retreated from the door, and was seated on the sofa with her arms wrapped about her knees. Walking Ryan inside, Matt closed the door, then went to check Cassie. She'd been getting more and more emotional, and the tears and panic seemed to come easier than usual.
He sank onto the cushion beside her. He knew how she felt. After the day he'd just had, Matt felt like curling into a ball, too.

He put a hand on Cassie's shoulder. She was trembling, and when she looked up at him, her eyes brimmed with unshed tears.

"Do you want to see the counselor again?" he asked, letting her settle into his shoulder for some big brother comfort.

"No," came her muffled response.

"Did school go all right, Cass?

"Yes."

"Any bullies I should know about?"

"No."

Matt rubbed Cassie's arm, letting her know he was there and she wasn't alone.

The excitement of cake momentarily forgotten, Ryan soberly stood by the sofa. "Is Cass all right?"

"She's just a little over-wrought," Matt said gently. "She'll be fine in a minute."

A lanky teenager sauntered into the living room, sat down and put his feet on the coffee table. "Hey, Matty, when'd you get home?"

Matt looked Ethan over, his heart heavy when he considered what the neighbor had said. "I was told to give you a message."

"Oh?" Ethan wore that insolent look teenagers are so good at, one that always made Matt sick with worry when he thought of Ethan's future. His brother was too much like himself at that age.

"Susan's father wants you to stay away from her."

"Oh, is that all." Ethan shrugged carelessly. "The way you were frowning, I thought it was something important."
Matt checked Cassie, smiled when she looked calmer. "Do me a favor, would you, Cass? Take Ryan into the kitchen and get dinner started."

"Sure, Matty." Cassie got up, and with Ryan bouncing excitedly behind her, the two went into the kitchen.

Now that the younger ones were out of earshot, Matt turned his attention back to Ethan. "Have you been sleeping with Susan?" he asked seriously.

"Not yet," Ethan grinned. He sobered a little when Matt didn't smile. "No, we haven't done it. There's nothing to get excited about, Matty. All we did was make out."

"Don't follow in my footsteps, Ethan."

The teenager shrugged. "What set off Cass?" he asked, in an obvious attempt to change the subject.

"Nothing much. She just got a little afraid." Matt stood up, looked at Ethan. "Stay away from Susan."

"You can't tell me what to do. I'm almost eighteen."

"Which means for the next several months you'll still be seventeen, so you'll do as I say."

"Until then." Ethan shifted back onto his tailbone, leveled his rebellion at Matt. The two brothers had been tugging at each other ever since Matt had pulled them up from Texas and brought them to New Mexico for a brand new start.

Ethan hadn't wanted to leave.

"Do I have your word concerning Susan?"

With a reluctant groan, Ethan finally nodded. "Yeah, I guess."

"Okay, then." Matt took a step toward the kitchen, stopped. He wanted to say more to Ethan, but knew it would only get shoved back in his face, so kept silent. "Dinner will be ready soon, so you'd better get your homework done."

"Already did," Ethan called out, as Matt entered the kitchen.
The tall stool Matt kept in the kitchen had been pulled from its place, and now sat before the counter with Ryan perched on its seat. Ryan watched Cassie start dinner, anxious for it to be ready, so they could get to the tall chocolate cake by Ryan's elbow.

Not wanting dessert to wind up on the floor, Matt scooted it back a few inches, then relieved Cassie at the stove.

She moved to the table, picked up her textbook to study.

Though Ethan had already finished his homework, he went to the table, flopped into a chair. Matt knew Ethan would never admit it out loud, but the teenager liked the company of his family. Especially when they could sit about the kitchen, the noise of siblings filling the empty spaces of quiet and too much solitude.

Ryan peered at the temptation on the counter, moving so close he nearly dipped his nose into brown frosting.

"It's chocolate, Matty."

"Really?" Matt smiled laughingly at the boy. They rarely had homemade treats such as this. While Matt knew how to handle himself in the kitchen, his skills mainly covered basic survival.

"I have some news," Matt said, noticing how the kitchen quickly fell into a hush. "Good news," he added, seeing Cassie grow fearful. "Mrs. Carter invited us to dinner, tomorrow."

"She did?" Cassie set down her book, looked at Matt. "Why, Matty?"

He shrugged. "I think she's lonely, and our family was handy."

"Lonely?" Cassie tilted her head in thought. "But I thought she was supposed to be rich."

"She is-- or at least, I guess she is." Matt stirred the simmering sauce, turned down the flame. "I guess some things money can't buy."

"Maybe not, but it can sure buy a lot," Ethan said, folding his arms dreamily. "A sports car, designer shades--"

"More cake," Ryan added excitedly.
"You'd better watch that sweet tooth of yours," Matt said, giving a playful warning to Ryan. "You're going to rot out your baby teeth."

"Did you say tomorrow night?" Ethan suddenly snapped from his daydream.

"Yup."

Ethan shook his head. "I can't come. I've got a heavy date, Saturday night."

A dull groan filled Matt's chest. "I told you Susan was off limits."

"It's not with Susan. Honest, Matty, I can't come."

"This is my boss we're talking about. We have to come-- she's expecting all of us to be there."

"She really expects us to give up a Saturday night?"

"You're getting too old to whine," Matt said, checking the pan before the sauce burned. "Whatever date you've got, you'll just have to cancel. Which reminds me, who's it with?"

"Just a girl from school."

"When can we eat the cake, Matty?"

"When it's time, Ryan. Who is she, Ethan?"

"Casey Thompson. Her father is the manager at the grocery store on West Avenue. If you force me to cancel, Matty, I swear I'll get even with you. It's taken me weeks to get her to say yes."

This prompted a sober look from Matt.

"For her to agree to go out with me," Ethan said with a teenager roll of his eyes. "Lighten up, would you? I can't cancel. Your Mrs. Carter will just have to get over the disappointment and suffer without me."

"She's not my Mrs. Carter, and you are coming." Matt dropped the stirring spoon into a holding saucer, the resulting clatter making Cassie jump. He could feel the tension build between him and Ethan again, and the two brothers stared at each other in silence.

"I'll cancel." Ethan scowled as he said it, but he backed off.
"Thanks, Ethan. I appreciate it."

"Yeah, yeah." Ethan stood, left the kitchen with a defeated slump in his shoulders.

Cassie looked at Matt plaintively. "Do I have to come, too?"

Shaking his head, Matt chuckled wearily. "What is it with this family? This is free food, guys. Free homemade food, not the processed stuff we eat, but real, probably expensive, food."

"Like what normal people eat?" Cassie asked.

"What are you talking about? We're normal." Matt looked at his sister in baffled astonishment, then winked at her.

She lit up with a laughing smile. It was good to see her happy again.

Dessert couldn't come soon enough for Ryan, but when it did, he gobbled down all the chocolate cake Matt would allow. When it was over, Ryan had brown frosting on his cheeks—a happy little piglet who's gotten its fill.

No one felt like singing that night, but when Matt retrieved his guitar from the bedroom, everyone remained to listen. In those few moments with the children together, their stomachs full and their faces content, Matt didn't feel like the failure he knew he was. It didn't matter that he did the best he could. No matter how hard he tried, it never felt like enough. If he were a good man, a better man, he felt certain Ethan would've become a Christian long ago. Cassie wouldn't struggle with panic nearly as much, and Ryan... Ryan would be a little more patient. For a four-year-old though, Ryan wasn't doing half bad.

Saturday morning, Matt let the kids sleep in, as was their right on a non-school day. He envied them their rest, their lack of responsibility. He was their brother, not their parent, and when he had to get up early and go to work, a part of him was tempted to resent his situation.

With it came the old hunger, screaming at his resistance to be fed. Stop trying and give in. Give in, admit you can't handle it. With the release of all those burdens, you could score again. Just one more hit. You know how peaceful it'll make you feel. Beyond peaceful. Euphoric. When was the last time you felt that?
Matt clenched his jaw. "God, hold me back. Please, hold me back." He released a pent up breath, turned into the parking lot of the nursery. He needed activity, something to keep his mind from drugs, and the chemical rush that would free him.

As usual, Matt was the first employee to arrive, not that it surprised Beth anymore. But this morning, he seemed impatient to be given direction, and dove straight into his work like a maniac. She stayed out of his way, let him work off whatever bothered him.

By lunch break, she noticed he had calmed and was looking more like his normal self. She had to bite her lip to keep from smiling when he turned down Sylvia's invitation to join Sylvia and Amy for lunch at the restaurant. His refusal was adamant, and not even Amy's polite begging could make him change his answer.

Beth had to admit to some curiosity when he left to sit in his pickup and eat lunch. It was none of her business, but she wondered what kind of lunch he had packed, if it satisfied his hunger after all that activity. He'd already put in a hard, if frantic, day's work, and it was only noon. She wished he'd bring his lunch inside the store, eat where she could happen by and perhaps strike up a conversation. But he didn't, and it wasn't until an hour before the nursery closed that Beth had a good opportunity to draw Matt aside.

"Here's the directions to my house," she said, handing him a folded slip of paper. "I hope you can read my handwriting. People tell me I write in hieroglyphics, not English."

Matt quickly glanced at the map, then stuffed it in his pocket. "What time you want us?"

"Six thirty." Beth didn't attempt more humor. She could tell Matt was tired, and probably didn't want to come, though he was polite enough to try and hide it from her.

Beth closed the nursery at five, but didn't stay behind to plan a weekend with Sylvia, as they frequently did on Saturday nights. Instead of hanging out at a bar, Beth would be cooking dinner for five. The thought made her smile all the way home.

She'd planned the menu and bought groceries yesterday, anticipating the fact she wouldn't have much time to prepare the meal. After Bailey saw she was busy, he went back to his sofa and left the kitchen to the mad woman dashing about in an apron.

Chili cooked in a large pot over the stovetop, corn bread baked in the oven, their aroma filling the kitchen with the promise of a Mexican dinner.
It felt good to be doing something for someone else, to cook for someone besides herself.

Contrary to Mrs. Carter’s claims at hieroglyphic handwriting, Matt easily followed her directions. He had finally gotten everyone bathed and dressed in their Sunday best, and successfully potty checked Ryan before buckling him into the car seat. Matt glanced in the rearview mirror, checked Cassie and Ryan in the backseat of the pickup's extended cab. Cass wore her best jeans and the pink top she’d been given the last time their mom had visited.

She looked like the little girl Matt knew she still was.

"I’m okay, Matty," Cassie said, smiling when she noticed him in the mirror.

He nodded, not trying to make her feel more self conscience than she already did. She had fussed over what to wear, right up until Matt had declared it was time to leave.

The land became more agricultural West of Las Cruces, crops and orchards spanning between the occasional house. He checked the map, turned onto a dirt road that led away from the main highway.

The fidgeting teenager beside Matt grew more restless. "I can't believe I cancelled with the captain of the cheerleading squad. For this." Matt could hear the scowl in his voice. "For a dinner at an old lady's house."

"Hey, it's free food, so stop squawking." Matt would be glad when this was over. He felt uncomfortable coming to Mrs. Carter's house in the first place, even more because she was his boss.

If Matt had any lingering doubts as to her being rich, they were forgotten when he saw where she lived. At the end of the dirt road, not far from the highway, a Spanish style hacienda came into view. It sprawled to the left and to the right, one story high, and flanked by large bay windows. A light shone above each window, and in the dim of shade trees and a setting sun, it looked like a warm adobe invitation to come inside.

"Wow." Ethan didn't unfasten his seat belt, just stared at the house. "So much for the lonely widow theory. She must be worth a bundle."

Matt shot his brother a look. "Don't you dare say anything like that when we get inside."
The sound of a vehicle pulling up outside the house prompted Beth to check the dining table and make sure everything was ready. They were right on time. As if Matt Taylor would be late.

She tugged at the strings on her apron, caught her reflection in the mirror by the entryway. She hoped she didn't look old in her white slacks and red top. Her outfit had been picked to make her look at least five years younger than she was, but to her dismay, she thought the woman staring back looked every bit her age.

The doorbell rang, reminding Beth it was too late for yet another wardrobe change.

Summoning her hostess manners, she opened the door, invited the Taylors inside. There were four of them-- three boys and a girl-- and they all looked out of their element. Even so, she thought Matt was... what had Sylvia called him? stunning. He was that, and more. His long sleeved button-down shirt, crisp black jeans, Stetson and polished boots gave a formal but casual appearance. Aftershave clung to the air about him, carried in the light breeze to Beth, made her senses quicken.

The girl, Cassie, hung close to Matt's side, her long blonde hair drawn into a ponytail. There was a woman blossoming under that pink top, one that seemed unaware of the fact she was on the verge of becoming a young adult.

Wide blue eyes, a wistfully shy smile. Cassie exuded someone unsure of herself, unsure of the world around her.

"You must be Cassie," Beth said, smiling as kindly as she could. Beth wanted to give her a welcoming hug, but Cassie looked so timid, Beth refrained herself and shook Cassie's hand instead.

Matt nodded to the teenage boy. "That's Ethan, and Ryan, you've already met."

With a grunted hello, Ethan shoved his hands into his pockets. He bore a resemblance to Matt, but no more than was usual for brothers. More than the others, Ethan didn't look as though he wanted to be there.

Beth smiled. "It's nice to meet you all. Won't you come into the living room? Dinner will be ready in just a few minutes."

They hadn't even entered the living room, when Ryan began tugging at Matt's pant leg. He pointed a small finger at the sofa, spoke in an excited hush. "A doggie, Matty! She has a doggie!"
On the sofa, the excitement of strangers had Bailey's tail working in overtime.

"Is it all right if he pets your dog?" Matt looked to Beth for permission. "Ryan loves dogs."

"Sure, only..." Beth tried to push down her concern. "Please be careful, Ryan. Bailey is a very old dog. So don't tug his fur. All right?"

Ryan nodded, grinned excitedly as the dog climbed off the sofa, came over to sniff him. Ryan pet Bailey like a pro, and before long, had Bailey eating out of the palm of his hand. Literally. When Beth brought out a large platter of tortilla chips and salsa, Ryan fed most of his to Bailey, but at Beth's insistence, without the salsa.

The Taylors had taken the sofa vacated by Bailey, leaving the second sofa entirely to Beth. Dinner would be ready when she took the cheese enchiladas out of the microwave, where they had been keeping warm. A little longer. Just a few more minutes. She had a hunch as soon as the Taylors were done eating, they would leave. And she wasn't ready for that.

"How old are you Cassie?" Beth was drawn to the feminine young woman, her soft blue eyes and sweet demeanor. The way Cassie looked at Matt, Beth could tell the girl thought the world of her oldest brother.

Perching the cowboy hat on his knee, Matt nudged her in the side. "Go on, Cass, she's talking to you."

"Twelve and a half."

The words came out so softly, Beth nearly didn't hear her.

Ethan folded his arms, as though daring Beth to ask him the same question. She wisely chose not to.

"Do you like school, Cassie?"

The girl shrugged. "I guess."

Laughter bubbled up from the floor as Bailey licked Ryan's face repeatedly. The louder Ryan laughed, the more frantically he was licked. It was a moment Beth delighted to watch.

"Do you have kids, Mrs. Carter?"
Beth looked up, saw Matt smile politely. "I did-- once," she said, steadying her breath before explaining, "My son died in an airplane accident with my husband."

The stunned look on Matt's face was what she had expected. Whenever people learned of her loss, they frequently didn't know what to say.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Carter. I didn't know."

She dismissed his apology. "I don't talk about it much-- at all, really." She wondered why. "It was a long time ago," she added. "A very long time."

"How long?" he asked.

"Why--" Beth stopped. They had died almost four years ago, to the day. The anniversary that marked the accident was next week. "Four years. It's been four years."

"That's not very long," Matt said. "You must miss them a lot."

"Yes, I do." She looked at Matt, wondered if he could understand. It had only been four years, and yet to her, they had been an eternity.

She needed dinner to be ready. Those dark eyes, handsome face were seeing too much. She stood, excused herself.

Dinner was eaten in silence, punctuated by polite talk. Ryan hurried through his food, then after asking to be excused, ran off to play with Bailey.

"He must keep you on your toes," Beth said, in deference to Matt. "What was he like as a two-year-old?"

"Shorter." Matt smiled good-naturedly. "Always has been a bundle of energy." He shrugged. "You know how they are at that age." When she bit her lip, he stiffened. "Sorry. I only assumed... You look at Ryan as though you're remembering."

"My little boy, Caleb, died when he was two. He'd be six years old by now."

Matt was silent. He considered her, the linen tablecloth, his bowl of chili.

And said nothing.
What was there to say? Sorry? Beth restrained a bitter laugh.

"How'd they die?" Ethan asked. "Ouch! Matty, all I did was ask. Stop kicking me!"

"It's all right, Matt, I don't mind answering. It was a private airplane. My husband loved to fly, got his pilot's license as soon as he could afford the time. He took Caleb out for a short trip and their plane had mechanical failure. No one survived the crash." Beth marveled at her own stoicism. She knew she would pay for it later, when they left. For now, she was glad she had spoken without the embarrassment of tears.

Once again, Matt was silent. What did those dark eyes see when they looked at her? she wondered. Matt studied her with careful reserve, as though he had difficulty forgetting she was his boss.

She wished he would. Just once.

When he didn't say more, she knew he didn't want to forget. For whatever reason, she wasn't enough to make him think past his job.

She tried to look at it from his viewpoint. It was probably the job itself, that held him back. She hoped it held him back -- that there was something to hold him back from -- that he wanted to do something else than be so painfully polite.

Beth tried to tell herself it didn't matter, but knew it wasn't true. Deep down, where secrets are held and hopes are grown, she knew it mattered very much. She liked Matt, liked him even more after seeing him with his family.

And the quiet feeling told her that liking would only grow stronger the better she knew him.

"Lord, all my [Beth's] desire is before Thee; and my groaning is not hid from Thee. My heart panteth..."
~ Psalm 38:9, 10 ~
Chapter Five

A Mother's Love

"Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted... Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy."

~ Matthew 5:4, 7 ~

It explained a lot, really. Her loneliness, the longing in her eyes. She had lost so much, it was understandable. He felt sorry for her, but that pity only went so far. Now that he understood her better, it made him all the more uncomfortable.

He hadn't expected to see her in anything but baggy clothing and a nursery shirt, and rebuked himself for being shocked when she appeared at the door in something else. Surely, Mrs. Carter wouldn't wear work clothes at home. But that outfit wasn't what Matt had expected, or wanted. It made her look different. It made her look more desirable.

As Matt finished his bowl of chili, he struggled not to think about it. He hadn't been intimate in such a long time, he felt the danger of awareness cautioning him to step carefully. He hadn't wanted to notice, but he had, and now that he had, he must back off.

Dessert brought Ryan back to the table, laughing and bursting with talk of what a great dog Bailey was. Matt was glad Ryan was having such a good time, though he couldn't help wishing Mrs. Carter owned a goldfish. Bailey would only make Ryan's pleading for a puppy grow stronger, and it pulled at Matt's already low spirits. Why couldn't she have a stupid cat? And why did she have to dress so nicely?

Matt felt under siege, and by the time dinner was over, he was more than ready to go home.

"Maybe," Mrs. Carter said as they filed to the front door, "you could all come for dinner next week."

"No thanks." Matt winced a little at the abruptness of his refusal, but the last thing he wanted was a repeat of tonight. He planted his hat on his head with a firm tug, gave her a nod good-bye. "Thanks for the meal. I hope we didn't put you to too much trouble."

"You didn't." Mrs. Carter's lips were pulled into a thin, pained smile. The pain he saw in her eyes seemed more understandable, less of a puzzle. Her loneliness was palpable, and he could nearly feel it beat in his chest, pump through his heart. He knew what it felt like to be alone, to feel as
though no one on earth cared for your soul. Though their pain was not identical, he identified it and understood it.

Yet he could not help her. In fact, he felt helpless to do anything but run.

Matt ushered his family outside, waited patiently for Ryan to part with Bailey. He lifted Ryan into his car seat, buckled him in. He rounded the truck, paused when he noticed Mrs. Carter still standing by her front door.

She stepped toward him, her smile sad and subdued.

"Cass, Ethan-- get in the truck. We'll leave in a minute." Matt moved toward Mrs. Carter, stuffed his hands helplessly into his pockets and wondered what to say.

Her arms folded against the chill of the evening air. "I appreciate you bringing your family out here, Matt. It was kind of you to share them with me, even for this one time."

With a sigh, Matt looked off into the distance. "You're welcome," he said finally.

"Matt, I'm not--" she stopped. "I won't ask you and your family to dinner again, and I'll leave you alone from here on out if that's what you want."

His chest rumbled with inward laughter. "The day you women leave me alone, I'll eat my hat."

Mrs. Carter's soft smile quickened his breath. She looked at him, and his insides twisted a bit, as though her very gaze could rearrange him from the inside out. "I like you, Matt. I like you well enough to stop bothering you, for I can see plainly that's what I've been doing."

He shrugged casually. "No harm done. We had to eat."

"Well, thank you for coming out this evening." When she rubbed her arms, he felt the urge to find a jacket and put it around her shoulders. He had no jacket, and when he remembered he hadn't, his feet refused to move. He knew he should go back to the truck, get in, and not look back. But he couldn't.

Instead, he stood there like an idiot, and gave her the opportunity to talk some more.

"Would it be possible..." Mrs. Carter bit her lip in a very Cassie-like manner, endearing his employer to him, almost without his realizing what had happened. "Would it be possible for us
to be friends? If it makes you uncomfortable, I'll let it drop and never bring it up again. It's just that--"

"It's so hard being alone?" he finished.

She nodded in agreement. "Somehow, I think you know what I'm feeling."

"In a way, I do." He shifted in his boots, wished he had already left and were miles away by now. "I guess we could be friends. I'm not sure it's a good idea, though. I'm warning you up front, I'm not looking or wanting anything but mild friendship."

"Thank you, Matt. I understand. Will you shake hands on it?"

She extended a pale hand, and after a few moments thought, he took it in his own. He felt the warmth of her hand, the delicate fingers lightly roughened by the occasional contact with soil, her faint pulse as it quickened with his.

He quickly let go.

"Good night, Mrs. Carter." He turned to leave, heard her call after him in a gentle voice he hadn't known she possessed.

"Good night, Matt. See you on Sunday."

With a lump in his throat, he remembered they attended the same church. "Yeah, see you on Sunday." He climbed into the truck, only to find Ethan staring at him with raised brows.

"Well? What's your problem?" Matt asked.

"I'm not the one with a problem," Ethan said with a laugh. "I think your boss likes you, Matty."

"Shut up."

"You told us she was an old lady," Ethan continued, as Matt backed away from Mrs. Carter's home. "That was no old woman."

"I never said she was old." Matt frowned at his brother. He didn't think he had ever called her old. She wasn't all that old, just older than him. What was she-- twenty-eight? thirty? He caught himself, shoved his interest aside as rapidly as he could.
"What did she talk to you about?" Ethan asked.

"She wants us to be friends." Matt cast a glance at Ethan. He saw Ethan's disbelief. "Why? You don't think she's telling the truth?"

"Maybe she believes she is," Ethan shrugged, "but that's sure not the way she was looking at you, Matty."

"Yeah, that's what I thought, too." He sighed, snorted disgust at the sound of Ethan's laughter. "Would you cut it out? I don't see what's so funny!"

"When she proposes marriage, can I be the best man?" Ethan doubled over in laughter, until Matt gave him a swift kick in the leg. The teenager turned to look out his darkened window. From Ethan's reflection, Matt could see him still smiling.

Sunday morning, Beth went to church for the first time in a long while. She tried to tell herself it was for godly reasons, that it wasn't just to see Matt and his family again. As she had predicted, she had cried herself to sleep last night, only to awaken with red eyes and a puffy face. The thought of meeting the Taylors gave her a reason to get out of bed, dress, and come to church. She felt depressed it took a reason like that to make her come. She sat in the pews with people she barely knew, half listening to the pastor, half searching the congregation for Matt.

The sermon over, she accepted a hearty thanks from Pastor Mark for giving Matt his job. Guilt kept her from accepting the gratitude without protest.

"You're being too modest," Pastor Mark said, touching her arm warmly. "That job is just what the Taylors need right now. I'm just grateful Matt is finally accepting help from someone. Heaven knows, I've tried to do more. But you know how he is."

Unsure what he meant, Beth nodded absently.

He sighed heavily. "Matt is so independent, so self-sufficient, he's a hard guy to help. Ever since he and his family moved to Las Cruces two years ago, he hasn't asked for help but once or twice. He uses the food pantry here at church-- a lot of the needy families around here do."

"Do you know what happened to their mother?" Beth asked.

"Such a sad situation. There's nothing good I can say about her, only that she has enough sense to allow Matt guardianship of the children. It's to his credit those kids are still together. He's made
a lot of sacrifices, taking care of those kids-- pushed himself to the point of breaking, if you ask me. I wish he'd let someone think of his own needs once in a while, and not just the children's."

Pastor Mark shrugged. "But you know Matt."

No, she didn't know Matt, but what she heard seemed consistent with what she had seen.

Someone called the pastor over to their group, and he excused himself before Beth had a chance to ask more.

It wasn't until Beth had left the crowded building, that she saw the Taylors. Ethan hadn't come, but Matt, Cassie, and Ryan had. She watched as they got inside that old pickup truck of Matt's, lifted a hand in friendly greeting as their vehicle pulled past her in the parking lot.

Matt nodded to her, and then they were gone.

In a move unlike Sylvia, she came to work early. Monday mornings, she usually slept in to nurse a hangover, but today, she looked sober and steady as she stood in Beth's office for a report on the dinner with Matt.

"There's nothing more to tell, Silvi. They came, they ate, they left. End of story."

"Are they coming to your house for dinner, again?"

"I have no idea," Beth said, beginning to rebel at the way Sylvia prompted-- no, demanded-- information, as though it were a right, and not a favor from a friend. Beth was only thankful Matt didn't work Mondays, where he could walk in and overhear their discussion.

"I think I'll ask him out," Sylvia said, leaning against the desk, her painted mouth parted in a glossy pout. "Wear something special for the occasion. You know, something unforgettable."

Beth kept her thoughts on the matter to herself. Had she been trying to help Sylvia-- which she certainly was not-- she would've told her friend that Matt didn't like revealing clothing. Her red top had hardly been revealing, and yet, Beth had the distinct impression it had almost scared away the very man she had been trying to attract.

"Matt strikes me as a man who likes bold women." Sylvia preened her hair in the reflection of the photo frame on the desk. "I know his type."

Beth wasn't so sure. She had a different impression, but that, too, she kept quiet.
The phone rang, and Beth waved Sylvia out of the room before picking up. Whoever it was, whatever the reason, it came as a welcome change from Sylvia’s plotting. Beth picked up the receiver, was unexpectedly greeted by the sobs of a girl.

"Who is this, please?" Beth asked.

"M-Mrs. Carter?"

"Cassie? Cassie Taylor? Is that you?"

"Yes," the voice trembled. "Could you come, Mrs. Carter? I... I need your help."

"Are you hurt?" Beth snatched the car keys from the desk drawer. "Are you bleeding? Do you need first aid?"

"Please, come." The line dropped into a dial-tone.

It didn't take five minutes for Beth to hand over the nursery to Sylvia, jump into her car, and head for the Taylors' house. She had bandages in her purse, a tiny bottle of hand sanitizer that could clean wounds until proper medical attention, and aspirin to help with the pain. She was a mother, and though her own child had passed away, her instincts were very much alive and pulsing with maternal alarm.

Beth parked the car outside the mobile home, raced to the door, jammed her thumb into the doorbell.

"Where is Matt?" she breathed. "How could he leave Cassie by herself at a time like this! What if I hadn't been here?"

The door opened, and Beth caught her breath as she came face to face with the very person she had all but accused of neglect a second before.

"Mrs. Carter! What are you doing here?" Matt didn't move aside to let her in, but stood there in stunned surprise.

"I'm here because your sister called me," Beth said. "Is she hurt badly? She was crying, but hung up before I could get much else from her."

"Cassie?" Matt frowned. "She's in school, Mrs. Carter."
"No, she's not," Ryan said, tugging at Matt's pant leg for attention. "She's in her bedroom, Matty."

Matt shook his head, lifted the boy into his arms. "You'll have to excuse Ryan. He sometimes doesn't understand the difference between pretend and real."

"But she is in the bedroom. The school bus left without her."

"Cassie called me at the nursery, Matt. Could I come inside? She's still here, and asked for my help."

"Come in," Matt said, his voice troubled. He kept Ryan in his arms, led the way down a short hall on the right side of the living room, straight to a closed door. "This is Cassie's room," he said, and knocked. "Cass? Cass, sis, are you in there?" When there was no answer, he tried the handle. "It's locked." He set Ryan down. "Cass?" He knocked harder, more urgently. "Are you hurt, Cassie?"

"No," a wavering reply finally came. "Is she there, Matty? Did she come?"

"Yes, Cassie, I'm here." Beth stepped forward, listened intently for the soft voice. "Why don't you open the door, and let us help you?"

"Yeah, Cass, open the door!" Ryan shouted. Matt gave the boy a quieting look, and Ryan obeyed.

The door cracked open, and Beth could see Cassie's tear streaked face. Matt put a hand on the door, forcing it open, but Cassie put her shoulder into it and stopped it from opening any further.

"Cass, let us in," Matt said, giving her the same look he had with Ryan. Beth could see the surprise on Matt's face when it didn't work.


"Tell me you're not hurt."

"I'm not."

"All right, Cass." He stepped back, let Beth into the bedroom without him. When Ryan tried to follow, Matt grabbed the boy's shirt. "Oh, no you don't, buddy. If I can't go, neither can you."
Beth shut the door behind her, saw Cassie standing in a pink bathrobe, her eyes brimming with fresh tears. There were no missing limbs, no cuts or bruises, nothing but those distressed tears to indicate anything was wrong.

Beth took a slow, calming breath. "I came as soon as I could, Cassie. How did you know my nursery's phone number?" She looked around for a phone, saw a cheap cell phone on the mattress behind Cassie. "Did you call information?"

Cassie nodded "yes," then reached into her robe to produce a wad of toilet paper stained red.

"Oh, I see." Beth was careful not to smile, though she felt instantly better knowing what the problem was.

"I've got my period," Cassie said, her voice small and embarrassed. "I couldn't go to Mrs. Lott, because she's too old." Cassie dried more tears against the shoulder of her terry robe.

"Who's Mrs. Lott, dear?"

"Our next door neighbor. She babysits Ryan."

"Okay. I'm here, and you're going to be fine. You know that, don't you? Periods are perfectly normal. I know it looks bad, but I promise you won't bleed to death."

Cassie smiled weakly, nodded that she understood.

"Do you have your own bathroom?" Beth moved past Cassie, saw that she did. "Let's get you cleaned up. I have an emergency Maxi in my purse."

Minutes later, Beth went to find Matt. She didn't have far to look, and all but bumped into him outside Cassie's bedroom door.

"What's wrong with her?" Matt asked, agitation and worry evident in his voice, his stance. He folded his arms, waited for an explanation. At his side, Ryan followed Matt's example.

"Cassie has become a woman," Beth said in a hushed voice.

"She's what?"

"She has her period."
"Oh." Matt relaxed enough to chuckle. "For a minute there, you had me scared. Ryan, why don't you go play with your toys?"

Ryan frowned, but did as he was told.

"Is Cass holding up all right?" Matt asked. Beth could see he tried hard not to laugh.

"She just needed some help," Beth said. "Some womanly help."

"I guess she's going to need a run by the store. Thanks for coming. I can handle it from here."

"Actually, I was hoping I could take Cassie shopping." Beth held her breath, waited for Matt to object.

He did, without missing a beat.

"I appreciate your help-- I really do. But I can take care of my own sister. If she needs something more, I'll get it for her, myself."

"She needs a bra."

"A what?"

"You know, a woman's undergarment?"

Matt looked at her blandly. "I'll take her to the store, right after I call the school to let them know she's not coming. Thank you for helping my sister, Mrs. Carter." He stared at her, willing her to leave by sheer force of willpower.

It almost worked.

"Please, Matt, it would embarrass Cassie to have to sort things out in the store with her brother, especially when she's new to all of it. This is something better left to a woman."

"But--" Matt sighed, stared at the closed bedroom door. "All right. Take her. Give me the receipt when you return, and I'll pay you back. Are you sure she's old enough, though? And, isn't this early for her to get a period? She just a little kid!"

"She's a young woman, and I went through the same thing when I was about her age."
"Mrs. Carter." He stopped her, hesitated before letting her back into the bedroom. "Cassie is kind of fragile. She's been through a lot, and sometimes everything gets to her and she slips into a panic attack. It's why I make sure she carries a cell phone everywhere she goes. To give her some confidence, give her some security that if things get too much, she can call me for help."

"I'll be gentle with her," Beth nodded in understanding. "Was she ever abused or neglected? She's so timid, I couldn't help but wonder."

Matt stiffened. He looked at Beth as though carefully weighing the consequences of telling her the full truth.

"I can be trusted not to spread gossip, Matt."

He rubbed the back of his neck, stared at the toes of his socks until he decided to answer. "Cass had a rough childhood. Her father beat her once when she was five, when he was drunk and she couldn't get out of his way fast enough. When I found out, I managed to throw the bum out of the house, even though Mom put up a fight to keep him. Cass wasn't hurt seriously, but it left a scar in her growing up," Matt said, touching his heart. "She became more afraid, more fearful of being abandoned. Our parents routinely forgot about us, and it wasn't unusual for the younger ones to search the cupboards for something to eat because Mom spent all the money on booze."

"I'm sorry," Beth said.

"Yeah." Matt looked at her with a half smile. "Everyone always says the same thing-- sorry. Sounds kind of lame, doesn't it? Your husband and boy get killed, and all I can say is 'sorry.' Mom is drunk, the electricity is out because no one paid the bills, and Cassie is crying. How many times did I tell her the same thing? Sorry. Sorry I wasn't there to make sure you had something to eat, that I left you and Ethan to fend for yourselves again." Self-reproach clouded Matt's handsome face. "I should've been there for them. At least I had my act together when Ryan was born. He had it better than the other two."

"Those kids are blessed to have you, Matt."

"No, they're not. They just got stuck with me, that's all." He shook himself, and Beth sensed he regretted saying as much as he had.

She refrained from asking questions, though she thought it unfair he should be so hard on himself; Matt couldn't have been more than a kid, himself, at the time. She watched that
youthful face regain composure, heard the strength come back to his voice, and knew the time for heartfelt talk had passed.

"When will you have Cass back?" he asked.

"After lunch. I thought I'd take her to the mall. We'll eat in the food court."

He nodded agreement, then stopped her a second time. "I'll be expecting those receipts."

To Matt's credit, he didn't tease or make fun of Cassie when she emerged from the bedroom. From what Beth had seen of Matt's consideration for his sister, Beth hadn't thought he'd give Cassie a hard time. Beth was glad to see she had been right.

He only gave Cassie a hug, reminded her she could come to him with anything at all, and then told her to enjoy herself with Mrs. Carter. Ryan clamored to come with them, but Matt held the boy back, promised to take some time from the newspaper and play with him.

Beth went to her car, unlocked the passenger door for Cassie. "Do you mind if we make a quick stop by the nursery, first?" Beth asked.

Cassie nodded timidly, her long blonde hair trailing over one shoulder. She was very pretty, Beth thought, as they pulled away from the Taylors' house.

"When I was about nine years old," Beth said, deciding talk was better than quiet, "I begged my mom to dye my hair blonde. I couldn't stand being a redhead." She glanced at Cassie, saw the smile.

"I don't see why, Mrs. Carter. Your hair is lovely."

"You think so?" Beth laughed softly. "My hair is a mass of red tangles, if I don't wear them in a braid or a bun. I once hacked them off, wore it short. Then my hair went out in all directions, and I vowed never to repeat that mistake again."

"Oh, no, I think your hair would look good if you wore it loose." Cassie looked at Beth, and Beth could feel the scrutiny. "Maybe you could get it cut, so it wouldn't be quite so long. Maybe just below your shoulders. I wish my hair did something. All it does is lay flat."
"You have the hair I always wanted," Beth said, laughing at the irony. "Here we are. I'll be just a
minute. Roll down the window if you get hot." Beth got out, walked into the nursery where
Sylvia was chatting with an actual customer.

"Is the emergency over?" Sylvia asked, pausing a moment to speak to Beth. "Is your friend all
right?"

"Yes, everything's fine." Beth waited for the customer to finish, then spoke to Sylvia. "I need you
to run things around here for a few hours."

Sylvia raised her brows. "Okay. What's up?"

"If the Garcia delivery comes while I'm gone, make sure they unload the plants in back, out of
the way."

"Yes, yes," Sylvia dismissed Beth's concern. "I know what to do. You've left me in charge before.
So who's this friend? Anyone I know?"

Beth ignored the question by moving quickly to the entrance. "I'll be back in a few hours. Don't
leave the nursery unattended when you break for lunch."

Sylvia rolled her eyes, but followed Beth out a short distance into the parking lot. Beth saw the
question in Sylvia's eyes, as Sylvia saw the girl in the car. Sylvia couldn't know it was Matt's sister,
for they didn't bear a great resemblance to each other, but Beth was determined not to let Sylvia
know, and hurried into the car before her friend could ask again.

"Did you get hot?" Beth asked, not waiting for Cassie's reply before rolling down a window in
the stuffy car.

"Are you sure you have the time for this?" Cassie asked, as Beth headed the car in the direction of
the mall. "We don't have to go now-- not if you're busy."

"Getting cold feet?" Beth darted a smile at Cassie. "I wouldn't be doing this, if I didn't want to,
Cassie."

Monday morning shoppers were few, leaving the mall relatively quiet. Beth led the way to a
garment store, explained to Cassie the cryptic bra sizes and what they meant. After purchasing
what Cassie needed, the girls left the store and meandered at a leisurely pace down one wing of
the mall. Cassie relaxed noticeably, looking very much relieved, as though she finally had something that had worried her for some time.

They passed a salon, and Beth paused. Her hair had grown to her waist, and though a long braid had become part of her routine, Beth was ready for change.

She turned to Cassie. "Would you mind if we stopped here?"

Cassie's blue eyes smiled excitedly. "Oh, I think you should!"

"I haven't had my hair cut in years," Beth said, as they went inside. "Not since before Caleb was born. Luke liked my hair long, so I just let it grow." A hair stylist approached them, and Beth told him what she wanted. "Nothing drastic. Just a foot off the bottom."

She sat while the man unfastened her braid.

"You have beautiful hair," he said, freeing it into a tangled curtain. "Nice, thick, curly auburn hair. You've been hiding it in that rope."

Cassie smiled, turned down another stylist who approached her.

"Would you like a haircut, too, Cassie?" Beth looked at her, saw the wistful eyes turn to worry. "This is on me."

The stylist grew excited at the possibilities, and an instant after Cassie had agreed, went to work on the blonde mane.

Cassie was the first to finish. She looked in the mirror, and Beth saw her gasp in delighted surprise. Her hair had been cut to just below her chin, the volume of hair styled into a cute layered bob that moved as she did. She had been given long bangs, a few inches short from the rest of the cut, to hang loose over her face in a sweet fall of hair.

"Oh, Beth, I love it!"

"So do I," Beth said, hoping she would look at least half as good when her haircut was over. She kept wincing as long tresses fell to the floor, as though each cut gave her pain. It did, in a way. She was cutting Luke's hair, changing it from the way he liked it. Beth had never been very conscious of her looks, only the lack of them. If Luke was happy, so was she.

"I'm sorry. Did I pull your hair?" asked the stylist, as Beth dried a tear from her cheek.
Beth shook her head "no," and felt Cassie take her free hand in a quiet show of support.

"I'm just being ridiculous," Beth said, but held onto Cassie's hand.

After what seemed to be an eternity, but what turned out to be only an hour, Beth's hair had been shampooed, cut and styled. When she looked into the mirror, she winced. Her long, long hair was gone, replaced by a mane that came just below her shoulders. It volumed with natural curls, still as red as ever, and just as attention-getting.

"Well, I suppose it looks all right. I had to get it cut sometime." She turned to Cassie. "What do you think?"

"I think," Cassie said, coming to her side to look in the mirror with her, "that if I had such magnificent hair, I would never wear another braid in my entire life."

"Magnificent?" Beth wasn't so sure about that, but at least she looked as though she had rejoined the modern age.

The bill paid for and the stylists tipped, the girls left with their new looks.

"Are you allowed to wear any makeup?" Beth asked. "As long as we're here, we might as well get you something appropriate for a young woman."

Cassie made no protest, but followed Beth into a store. They bought shimmery lip-gloss, soft pink nail polish, to complete Cassie's new look.

They made their way to the food court, ordered lunch, and chose a quiet table. Cassie sipped from a straw as they watched people walk by.

"I've never really enjoyed shopping before, but I have to admit I had a good time this morning." Beth popped another french fry into her mouth, glanced at her watch. "It's getting late, and I have to get back to the nursery. Come on, you can finish that soda in the car. We'll stop by the grocery store for Maxis before I drop you off at home."

They walked outside, the sun causing Beth to pull her sunglasses out and put them on. Cassie beamed at her, as radiant as the sunshine Beth hid from.

"I had such a good time," Cassie said, two shopping bags dangling from one hand, her soda cup in the other. "I always wondered what it would be like to have a real mom, and today..." Cassie
shrugged, "I don't know. I could kind of imagine my mom and I doing something like this, you know? Like she cared or even loved me just a little." Cassie sighed, took another sip. "I shouldn't think about stuff like that too much. Matty says it's no use wishing for things you can't have, because it'll just make the hurt worse."

Beth's speech caught in her throat. Her eyes grew hot, and she was suddenly grateful for the sunglasses.

Matt looked up from his newspaper, stared out the living room window for the umpteenth time. They hadn't gotten back yet, and it was nearly two. He and Ryan had eaten lunch, he'd played with the little guy, and then he'd went back to his job hunting. So far, he'd come up empty, but at least this time, there wasn't the same desperation. He didn't absolutely have to find work today. His job at the nursery was tiding them over decently enough to keep hunger and the bill collectors at bay.

A car door slamming got him to his feet. Mrs. Carter's sedan was out front, and he could see Cassie getting out. He tried to push away the guilt. All this anxiety, and he wasn't as concerned about Cassie, as he was over the amount she and Mrs. Carter had spent. Matt didn't begrudge Cassie the money, but they didn't exactly have a lot. He jokingly thought to himself that if the bill was high, hunger and those bill collectors would be a little closer than they were before.

As Cassie came up the dirt walk to the house, Mrs. Carter drove away without coming inside. Just as well. Cassie could give him the receipts, and he could pay Mrs. Carter tomorrow, when he came into work.

The door opened, and Cassie stepped inside. The very first thing he noticed was the hair. She had cut it.

"What do you think?" Cassie asked, biting her lip as she waited for his reaction.

"It..." Matt sighed. "It makes you look older. Is that makeup you're wearing?"

"It's just lip-gloss and nail polish, Matty. Do you like it?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, I guess. Did you get your bra?"

Cassie nodded, though she looked too embarrassed to talk about it. "Mrs. Carter helped a lot, Matty. She's awfully nice."
He nodded, held out his hand. "Where are the receipts she gave you?"

"Oh, she kept them." Cassie handed Ryan her soda cup, let her little brother suck the ice cubes. "She said it was her treat."

Matt watched Cassie take two designer name shopping bags, and the grocery bag with the sanitary napkins-- or whatever women called them-- into her bedroom. He said nothing to Cassie, for he didn't want her to feel guilty for spending the money, but tomorrow, he was going to pay Mrs. Carter back. He owed her, and whatever the cost, Matt always paid his debts.

"Owe no [wo]man any thing, but... love..."
~ Romans 13:8 ~
Chapter Six
The Problem with Skip

"Better is the poor that walketh in his uprightness [Matt], than he that is perverse in his ways, though he be rich [Skip]."
~ Proverbs 28:6 ~

From what Matt had gathered by Cassie's description of her outing at the mall, Mrs. Carter hadn't used it as an excuse to ask Cassie a lot of questions about their family. For that, Matt was grateful. Mrs. Carter had asked to be friends, and she hadn't abused that friendship by using Cassie behind his back.

If only Mrs. Carter had given him those receipts. As he drove into work Tuesday morning, he tapped the steering wheel in an agitated rhythm that matched his mood. If only she'd handed Cassie the receipts, like they'd both agreed, he wouldn't even have to mention yesterday.

As it stood, Matt had no other choice.

To his disappointed surprise, he wasn't the first to arrive at the nursery. The moment he turned into the parking lot, saw the red sedan, he new Sylvia had arrived already.

"Great," Matt breathed as he parked the pickup. "What else can go wrong?" He swung open the truck door, got out, and stuffed his work gloves into his back pocket. Putting on his Stetson, he noticed Amy, pulling into the lot. Matt sighed, but smiled to his young coworker before going into the store.

On the one day he'd needed the girls to be their usually tardy selves, they were not only on time, but early.

Mrs. Carter was at the cash register, in what seemed to be a part of her everyday routine. She looked busy, so he stood in front of the counter, waiting to be acknowledged.

"Beth!" Sylvia's impatient voice easily carried through the store. "I can't find it!"

"It's in there!" Beth shouted, not looking up from the register. "For pity's sake, Silvi, do I have to come and get it myself?"

"I wouldn't have to search so hard," Sylvia said, still unseen in the office, "if you didn't hide it so well!"
Mrs. Carter breathed an impatient sigh. "It's in the filing cabinet, under 'G'! Stop wasting time, Silvi, and bring me the shipping invoice!" Hot green eyes flashed up at Matt, and he suddenly felt like a boy who'd just been caught doing something wrong. He hadn't-- or at least he didn't think he had-- but that look on her face made him feel like an utter child. "Go help Sylvia," Mrs. Carter said, her voice hard and lacking the gentleness he'd heard only last Saturday. "For pity's sake, you'd think she was a man-- she's that blind. It's under 'G,' in the dark green filing cabinet."

"What is?" Matt asked.

"The Garcia invoice, of course. Go help Sylvia find it."

"Yes, ma'am." He left the counter, found Sylvia bent over the bottom drawer of the green cabinet.

"That stupid slip of paper," Sylvia said, in a barely audible mutter. "Where did Beth hide it?"

"Mrs. Carter said I should help," Matt said, announcing his presence.

Sylvia looked up, her mouth forming a smile the moment she saw him. "Surprised, aren't you?"

He shrugged, not sure what she'd meant.

"I beat you into work this morning," Sylvia said laughingly. "Of course, Beth called Amy and I to arrive early to hunt for that idiotic invoice, but I did beat you."

"I guess you did," Matt said, moving to the filing to cabinet before Mrs. Carter came and caught him not searching like everyone else. "What does the invoice look like?"

"It has a truck logo on the top, with Garcia-something-or-other printed on the side." Sylvia straightened, moved so Matt could slide open the top drawer. "If Beth had been here yesterday, and not playing hooky, she could've accepted delivery on the Garcia shipment, herself. But noooo, something goes wrong, and who do you think gets blamed? Me, that's who!" Sylvia shut the bottom drawer. She straightened, thrust her hands onto her hips and glared into the store to where Beth worked, preparing the cash register for the day.

Playing hooky? Matt thought. He couldn't be sure, but this problem might have been caused because Mrs. Carter was at the mall with Cassie, and not here at the nursery. He flipped through the tabs, looking for Garcia and the truck.
"So, I hear you went to Beth's house for dinner."

Matt turned, saw Sylvia perched on the edge of Mrs. Carter's desk.

"How'd it go?" Sylvia asked innocently.

Matt lifted one shoulder. "Fine, I guess."

"Did you stay for dessert? Or did you go straight home with your family?"

Matt slid the drawer shut with a loud bang. "I went home."

"You don't have to look at me like that, Matt. I'm on your side." Sylvia leaned forward, looked back at the register. "Neither of us likes Beth, so you don't have to defend her. She's always pushing herself onto people, making you feel sorry for her just because she's a widow. Don't get me wrong, I'm a compassionate person," Sylvia said, looking back at Matt, "but it's hard to feel sorry for someone, when they keep taking advantage of you." Sylvia's voice quickly hushed as Mrs. Carter entered the office.

"Well, Silvi, where is it?"

"How should I know?" Sylvia asked. The insolence in her eyes lessened, though, as Mrs. Carter stared at her. "Okay, okay, I'll keep looking."

"You do that," Mrs. Carter said, glancing at Matt. "Let Sylvia look through the cabinets. I want you to water the plants out back."

"Yes, ma'am." Tugging out the gloves, he left the office to the women.

The mild New Mexico sun came as a welcome change to Matt. He unwound the hose, turned on the faucet. There was hardly a cloud in the pristine blue sky, and he wished he could enjoy it more.

Movement by the potting table distracted Matt's attention. Mrs. Carter was there, doing something garden related with an open bottle that stank to high heaven. He squinted, read the label. Fish emulsion? What did fish have to do with plants? He stood there, absently letting water splash onto the ground instead of the plants. She turned to reach for something, and he quickly looked away. Maybe now was a good time to talk to her about those receipts. He twisted off the faucet, dropped the hose, and went to the potting table.
"Mrs. Carter?"

She looked at him, a tired smile on her lips. "Yes, Matt?"

"When you dropped Cassie off yesterday, you forgot to give me the receipts."

Mrs. Carter nodded absently. "I told her it was my treat."

"I know, but..." he hesitated. "I'd appreciate those receipts, Mrs. Carter. I said I would pay for the trip, and I will. When it's convenient for you, I want the receipts."

Her brilliant green eyes narrowed. "This is nonsense, Matt. I was glad to do it for Cassie."

"This isn't nonsense," Matt said, glancing about for the others before he continued. "I don't owe anyone I don't have to. I don't ask for favors, and I don't expect them. I appreciate what you did for Cassie, and so does she. It was very nice of you, but I will pay for what you spent."

Mrs. Carter sighed heavily. "This is a fine way to treat a friend, Matt. I suppose if you're so determined on paying, then I have to let you. The receipts are at home. I'll bring them into work tomorrow morning."

"Thank you." He stepped away, noticed she somehow looked different.

"What?" she asked.

"You don't look the same," he frowned.

"I had my hair cut," she said, turning so he could see the braid at her back was now shorter.

He nodded. "That explains it. I thought something looked odd." He tipped his hat to her, and went back to work.

Odd? She looked odd? For the next several minutes, not even the error in the Garcia delivery could distract Beth from her brief talk with Matt. She'd worn her newly chopped hair in a braid on purpose, for it was not only more convenient, but she had also promised Matt to simply be friends. That meant not doing anything overt to attract his attention, for he had made it clear that anything more wasn't wanted. He'd even gone as far as to say "mild friendship." So she was
keeping it mild. She hadn't worn her hair any differently than usual, and he'd thought she looked odd.

Beth stabbed her trowel into the potting soil. His insistence on paying for the small outing with Cassie annoyed her. He was pushing away even her mild friendship, and she was fast coming to the conclusion that their "friendship" would have to be kept on a strictly boss and employee footing. Matt wasn't allowing for anything else.

But what of it? Beth jammed a helpless geranium into a plastic pot. If nothing more was going to develop with Matt, why did it matter if they couldn't be real friends? What she needed was someone to want her, someone to hold her in the middle of the night and whisper the things that Luke had.

Feeling pathetic, and not a little sorry for herself, Beth noticed Sylvia outside, watching her and Matt from a distance. Ignoring Sylvia and the task Sylvia wasn't doing, Beth thought about Skip, the middle aged man she'd been almost seeing. For all the flattering things he'd had said, Beth knew he didn't love her; but at least with him, she could be held.

With no other prospects of love, Beth sat on an upturned bucket to think. Her life had come to this. At what cost was she willing to sacrifice her conscience-- what she knew was right and wrong-- to enjoy the comforts of forbidden intimacy? Her conscience forbade an affair with Skip, but with no other arms offering her comfort, her convictions seemed rather inconvenient.

"Mrs. Carter?" Matt stood over her, a small pot of limp daisies in his hand. "These look like they're dead. Want me to throw them out?"

"No," she got to her feet, took the plant. "It only needs some extra care, that's all."

Beth placed the plant onto the table as Matt walked away. She wished she were as strong as he seemed to be.

"Ma'am?" Matt came to her again, a hesitant look on his face. "Are you mad at me?"

"No, Matt, I'm not."

He smiled, but said nothing more on the subject. "While I'm here, I didn't kill that plant," he said, pointing his chin at the daisies. "I found them that way. Honest."

She returned his smile, and let him go back to his work. If she had no prospects of love, and knew ahead of time that she never would... would she have an affair? Get what little she could
out of life, even though she knew it would displease God? The question haunted her, for she had been asking it in increments, for a while. She had flirted with it, been indecisive, and now, Beth felt the question urgently burn in her soul. Early that morning, when he'd thought she'd be alone, Skip had called with an apology, and Sylvia and Amy had accidentally overheard Beth as she put him off once more.

Just then, Sylvia shouted Beth's name. Beth stepped around the corner of the building, saw her friend by the store entrance. "Skip just called!" Sylvia waved happily. "He said he'd be over in a few minutes!"

"He called again?" Beth asked in wonderment.

"He's coming to the nursery!" Sylvia grinned, then disappeared inside.

Beth groaned softly. Knowing Sylvia, she had called Skip, herself. Beth wouldn't put it past her. After their fight over the Garcia shipment, Beth figured Sylvia was getting even.

And perhaps, Beth thought, just perhaps, trying to rid herself of some competition. Sylvia knew Beth liked Matt. The problem was, both women did. Well, Sylvia didn't have anything to worry about. Beth was still hoping for mild friendship, and even that seemed unlikely right now.

Tugging off her work gloves, Beth rounded the building to wash up and meet Skip. She'd talk to him in private, in her office, away from the others.

Inside the store, Beth passed Sylvia, arranging product on some shelves. "Silvi?"

Folding her arms, Sylvia glared at her.

"I want to apologize, Silvi. I shouldn't have given you a hard time over the invoice. This is my business, and my responsibility. I should have double-checked the order immediately after I got back from the errand yesterday, instead of waiting until this morning. I shouldn't have assumed that you'd already done it."

"I never would have accepted the shipment in the first place," Sylvia said, "if you'd only told me that you changed your mind about the ornamental grasses."

"But the invoice didn't even match what they shipped," Beth said. She could feel impatience welling up once more, and decided to just forget it. Sylvia couldn't be relied upon. It was a fact of nature, and Beth had been a fool to forget it. "Never mind. I'll take care of the shipment, myself."
"Okay." Sylvia still looked miffed, but she did seem somewhat appeased. The quirk of her mouth went from protest, to one of sly pleasure. "You getting ready to meet Skip?"

Beth took a long look at her friend, saw the mischievous gleam in her eye. "You called him, didn't you?" An expression of feigned innocence was all Beth got, and Beth didn't feel like pressing for an insincere apology.

"Mrs. Carter?" Matt had come in sometime during the conversation, and was looking at Beth expectantly. She wondered how much he had heard.

"What is it?" Beth asked abruptly. She bit her tongue, hating the curtness she had heard in her own voice, but helpless to take it back. If only she could be more gentle, more soft. Women were supposed to be soft, weren't they? Her personal faults seem stacked against her, and Beth felt she was doomed to a lifetime of moments such as these-- moments where she saw that wincing hurt of look in the other person's eyes. Matt looked at her that way now.

"I apologize for the interruption," Matt said. "Amy came out to tell me you wanted tags on the plants you just potted, but she couldn't remember where you store the labeling pen."

"I'll be with you in a moment, Matt." Before she left to take him outside where the pots were waiting, Beth looked at Sylvia. "Don't call Skip behind my back. Ever again."

With a careless shrug, Sylvia resumed her sorting and organizing.

"It doesn't appear I'm going to have a good day," Beth said to Matt, as they moved toward the entrance. "I should warn you, Sylvia has mentioned that she's thinking of asking you out. I know you've put her off before, but if she continues to pursue you after you say no, report it to me and I'll take care of it. That goes for Amy, as well as myself. None of us would appreciate a man who didn't take no for an answer, and just because we're women, doesn't mean we should do the same thing to men. I'm sorry I didn't protect you any sooner." She groaned miserably. "It seems I can't live up to my responsibilities any better than Sylvia can refrain from being Sylvia."

Matt looked at her thoughtfully. "Are you feeling all right, Mrs. Carter?"

She glanced through the large store windows, felt a knot of dread as she noticed Skip's van enter the parking lot. "Matt, may I ask you a question?"

He shrugged. "Okay."
"Do you believe God has ever given you more than you could bear?"

A slight smile parted his mouth. "That's not exactly a question I'd expect from my employer."

"Please, Matt, please answer me as a friend."

"Are you sure you're not sick? You don't look well, Mrs. Carter." Her earnestness must have finally gotten to him, because Matt rubbed the back of his neck, looked at his boots and answered. "No ma'am, I don't believe God has. There's been plenty of times when it looked that way, but God has been faithful. Wish I could say the same for myself."

Wrestling back her fears, Beth was about to resist temptation, and she felt unequal to the challenge. Skip walked into the store, saw her and waved. She felt weak, and silently prayed for help. Please, God, she needed help! The loneliness of being without Luke, and their little boy--Caleb--came crashing down on her, and all she could do was plead with God for help. She felt someone touch her shoulder, looked up, noticed it was Matt.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Matt asked quietly. "You look like you're in trouble, Mrs. Carter."

Skip came over to them, his grin lessening several degrees when he noticed Matt's hand on her shoulder. "I came as soon as I got your message, Beth." Skip glared at Matt, and folded his arms as though Matt were putting his hands on private property.

Apparently, Matt didn't intimidate easily, for he only dropped his hand when he looked good and ready, and not a moment sooner.

Beth trembled inwardly. She wished the problem would just go away, without her having to do or say anything. It would be so much easier if Skip simply stopped calling. She could pretend he had never happened.

Matt stiffened, and Beth saw his expression turn somber. She followed his eyes, saw he had noticed the the gold wedding band on Skip's left hand. The look of pained disappointment on Matt's face, made her heart weep.

"Beth?" Skip blinked at her, and she realized he was waiting for an answer.

Matt turned to leave, but Beth touched his arm, silently pleading for him to stay. To her deep gratitude, he remained.
"What's this all about?" Skip asked, irritation rising in his voice. "Who is this guy?"

"He's just a friend," Beth said truthfully. "There's been a mistake. I didn't send the message you received today."

"What do you mean?" he said with a disbelieving scowl. "Of course you sent it. I'm tired of your stalling, Beth. I want you to come with me, and we'll go someplace private to talk this out, once and for all. There's too many people here," he said, looking at Matt. "Come on, Beth, I haven't got all day." Skip waited, the picture of confidence.

"I'm sorry I let this go on as long as it has, Skip. We knew it would never work."

Stunned, he opened his mouth but nothing came out. A hand flew at her, struck her hard on the side of her face. Almost immediately, Matt lunged at Skip, and she thrust herself between the two men to stop anything more serious from happening. Her cheek stung, and she felt the added shame of knowing it had happened before.

"Please, let me handle this my way, Matt." She spoke as calmly as she could, though the sound of her heart pounded loudly in her ears.

"He hit you," Matt said in obvious disbelief. "I can't believe he hit you."

I can, Beth thought numbly. She turned to face Skip, careful to keep Matt behind her. "I'm sorry, Skip. It's over."

The pale, thin lips Beth had always thought looked unattractive on Skip, pulled into a taut line of scorn and disdain. "You're nothing but a tease, Beth."

"I'm sorry, Skip. I can't."

He turned to Matt, but directed his words at her. "I suppose you're getting a better offer from someone else?"

Temper blazed in Matt’s brown eyes, and his fists tightened dangerously. Panic surged through her frame, and she prayed Skip would accept that things were over and back off. She had never tasted Skip's jealousy until now, and it tasted of the bile that churned in her stomach.

"You misunderstand, Skip. Matt is only a friend, an employee. He has nothing to do with my decision."
"I don't believe you, Beth. You're too scared of being by yourself, to think I'm going to fall for that lie!"

"Please, believe me, Skip. It's the truth."

Skip jabbed a finger into Matt's chest. "Who do you think you are? Taking advantage of a lonely widow-- your BOSS!-- just to get a job!"

"You'd better leave, mister," Matt said through clenched teeth. "If the lady is calling it quits, it's time for you to walk away." He took a threatening step toward Skip. "I don't want a fight, mister, and trust me, neither do you."

Beth believed Matt. He had youth and muscle in his favor, and she could easily picture him taking Skip apart. It felt good to know Matt stood beside her, and didn't leave.

"Beth," Skip pointed an accusatory finger at her, "I'm going to call you later. This isn't over, and if you know what's good for you, you'll get that through to your young stud. I've put up with your games long enough. You and I aren't done." Skip looked anxiously at Matt. The cold anger that hardened Matt's face, spoke louder than any shouting could have done. It was a potent warning, one that Skip couldn't ignore. He waved his index finger at Matt, and then left-- Beth imagined--as fast as he could without breaking into a run.

With a loud groan, Matt swiveled, slapped his fist hard on the checkout counter. Amy, who stood at the register, jumped back, clearly frightened by the harsh look on Matt's face.

"I didn't want trouble, Mrs. Carter. I can't afford it. Not now."

"I'm sorry you got dragged into this, Matt."

"I've got a family depending on me," he said, looking at Beth over his shoulder. "I can't afford to get involved. I have enough strikes against me, without this. If I can't stay out of trouble, they'll take the kids away."

"I understand, Matt."

"Do you?" He turned, looked at her. "I'm all those kids have got left! I can't let them down, let them be pulled apart to live in foster homes because their big brother messed up. Don't ask it of me, Beth" -- he blew out a huff of frustration -- "Mrs. Carter."
"I'm not asking anything of you, Matt." Beth felt helpless, and for the first time, realized they held Sylvia and Amy's full attention. Both women watched-- Amy with her mouth open in astonishment, and Sylvia, with a look of envy. "Okay, the show is over," she told them, "time to get back to work."

Head bowed and a few shades calmer, Matt looked at Beth wearily. Her heart went out to him, though she told herself, in a very mild, friend-like way. She did have a friend in Matt. Today had proved it.

"I can't get involved," Matt said, his voice low and hushed. "If things were different..."

"But they aren't," Beth said, shaking her head. "Thank you for helping me, Matt. Don't give Skip a second thought. He won't give you any trouble."

Matt nodded absently, as though he didn't believe her. "I'd better get back to the watering," he said, slapping the counter dully. He hesitated before leaving, turned to look at her until Beth felt her heart beat double time. Dropping his gaze, he went outside.

Matt didn't even see the plants he watered. He couldn't remember anything of the errand that had sent him inside the store, and didn't really care that Mrs. Carter had seemed to forget, as well.

All he could think about was Beth.

"Watch it, Taylor," he muttered to himself. "She's Mrs. Carter. Call her that one more time, and I swear, I'll whip your behind if I have to get Ethan to do it for me."

After drowning everything with the hose, he went to the fence line and searched for weeds. He'd already gone over the area once before, and when he couldn't find more, sucked in a deep breath. He needed to calm down. He could still see Skip-what's-his-name, hitting Mrs. Carter and gaping at her like the opportunist he was. Okay, maybe the guy hadn't actually gaped, but from the way he treated her, Matt knew he did at other times. Mrs. Carter was a good looking woman, and a man would have to be blind not to notice it. After this morning, Matt understood more than ever how vulnerable she was, how desperately lonely she'd become after her husband's death. She had even put up with physical abuse to keep that worthless jerk.

It reminded Matt of his mom. Oh, did it ever remind him of his mom.
The soft approach of footsteps stopped his thinking. He braced himself for Mrs. Carter, and instead, found Amy.

She smiled timidly at him. "Rough day, huh?"

"I've had better," Matt said. He looked about for any weed at all, like a drowning man searching for a life raft.

"I really admire you for what you did back there," Amy said. "Ever since I found out from Sylvia that Mrs. Carter was mixed up with that man, I've thought Mrs. Carter could do better. Should do better," Amy quickly added.

"Then he really was married," Matt said, "and not just a widow who kept wearing his wedding ring." He smiled ruefully at Amy. "The thought crossed my mind. I'd have felt like an idiot, acting the way I did, if he hadn't been married. But when he hit her..." Matt sighed, willing himself to think of something else.

"No, he's married," Amy nodded. "Mrs. Carter still wears her ring, though."

Matt kicked at the dry ground. "I've noticed."

"You really like her, don't you?"

Matt opened his mouth to protest, saw the smile, and decided not to answer.

"I wish someone would look at me, the way you look at her," Amy sighed wistfully. "I don't suppose you have a brother my age?"

Matt considered it, remembering Amy was nineteen. "I have one that's two years younger than you," he said finally, "but I'm afraid he's bad news. He's my brother, and I love him dearly, but I wouldn't wish him with anyone's daughter, let alone a nice girl like you."

"Thanks for thinking I'm a nice girl," Amy said with a genuine smile. "I just came out here to say thank you for what you did for Mrs. Carter. I think you're a really sweet guy." She smiled at him, then went back into the store.

Matt frowned. What was he supposed to do with a compliment like that?

He needed someone to give him direction, to tell him what he was supposed to be doing. The thought of returning inside made him feel uneasy, though. It was probably too much to hope his
coworkers could forget what they'd seen and heard that morning. He knew already they were assuming things that weren't true. Amy had given him enough proof of that, from their conversation. Sure, he liked Mrs. Carter, but not in the way Amy had thought.

Matt didn't have much longer to decide what to do, for Mrs. Carter appeared and went straight to the potting table. She opened a container, pulled something out.

"Matt," she called to him, "here's the pen you were asking for."

He nodded, went over and took the pen she offered.

Silently, she turned to her table, back to the smelly bottle of fish emulsion and the plants she'd been working on for most of that day.

He stood there, measuring her, the way she kept her eyes on her work, never once looking up to meet his gaze. She looked guilty, acted like it as well. The burning question that had been troubling him so much, that had given him so much pain, finally found its way to his tongue.

"Beth, has he ever beaten you?"

She looked up at him now, those green eyes misting with wetness. "Not exactly. He's never beaten me, just struck me when I had it coming. That's all."

"You're an intelligent woman, Beth. You shouldn't have to put up with it."

He saw the courage in her eyes gather a little strength. "Today, I didn't," she said.

He sighed longingly. He wished he could get that moment out of his head, the sick look on Beth's face when she felt her cheek, the fear in her expression.

Matt had to know. It was none of his business, but he needed to know. "Did you ever sleep with him, Beth?"

"No," she said quietly. She looked near tears, and he resisted the strong urge to wrap his arms around her.

"I shouldn't have asked," he said. "You don't have to say any more."

She smiled sadly, pulled off her work gloves, and wiped her eyes with her fingers. "I'm glad you did. Skip wanted me to have an affair, and I'm ashamed to say that I almost did, but when it
came down to it, I just couldn't. I couldn't sleep with him outside of marriage, knowing he was married to another woman and had children."

Children. Matt knew he must've winced, for she looked more ashamed than before.

He lightly touched her shoulder. "Hey, you did the right thing, Beth. You told him off, and put a stop to it."

"But I should have done it much sooner," she said, her voice filling with something very near to despair. "It seems like I can't do anything right. Even now, I'm not as good a person as you think I am: I only found the strength to say what I did to Skip, because you were there."

His hand moved from her shoulder, and he stood there, looking at her. He didn't know what to say, what to do. He'd asked her straight out about her and Skip, and her answers rang with genuine honesty. It was the painful honesty that caught him by surprise, and made him quiet for several moments while he struggled to think.

"Me?" he asked finally. "Why did my being there have anything to do with you and what's-his-name?"

She smiled. "It's your testimony, Matt. I've seen who you are, and what you're trying to do with your life. It makes me want to do more with mine."

He relaxed a little, shrugged. "I guess that's a good thing. I was afraid it might be something else."

Her lips parted wistfully. "I promised to be just a friend, remember?"

He couldn't help smiling. "I remember." What kind of green is that? he wondered, looking into those beautiful eyes. They held the color of a thick forest, plants as deep and alive as the ones she tended in the nursery. When the sun cast its glow on her face, that green shone with vibrant life. How sad then, to see them look so forlorn in that pale, china-doll face of hers-- that face lightly sprinkled with freckles.

Matt shoved his hands into his pockets. Thinking like that would only bring trouble.

For some reason Beth smiled, more confidently than before, and he suddenly found it difficult to speak. His mouth had gone dry, and he wished he could walk away without seeming rude.

"I didn't know you could blush so brightly," she said, picking up her work gloves and putting them on. "I suppose you want to get away from me now, so I'll let you. After you're done placing
those tags, I’d appreciate it if you swept the store and cleaned the front windows. They’re dirty again."

"Yes, ma’am." He walked away from her, feeling more like a boy and less like a man. She had a way of putting him in his place, of reminding him who was boss. Did she know she did that to him? He wondered at his own frustration, for she was his boss. Then why did he feel like going to a rowdy bar, getting into a fistfight, just to rid himself of this pent up feeling? It wasn't a feeling Matt felt he had a right to, and he struggled to forget Beth, and reminded himself once more of Mrs. Carter.

He grabbed at the shop broom, muttering under his breath. "Great. I must’ve called her Beth, at least a dozen times today. Just great." He pushed the broom across the floor with quick, sharp movements. A customer approached him, and Matt had to control his self-reproach long enough to politely answer the grandmotherly woman about which aisle she could find the watering cans.

"Thank you, young man," the old woman said, her face wrinkling into a warm smile. When she left, he wondered if he should grow a mustache or beard. He’d look older with a beard. Then maybe, Beth wouldn't treat him like a boy.

Matt jammed the broom into the concrete floor. His thoughts troubled him, for he didn’t want Beth to see him as he really was. If she ever did, he felt certain he would lose any friendship they had.

And that, Matt decided, was worth protecting.

"Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful."
~ Proverbs 27:6 ~
"... [Matt] had withdrawn himself, and was gone... [Beth] sought him, but [she] could not find him..."

~ Song of Solomon 5:6 ~

When Beth closed the nursery for the day, Matt left, almost as though he were running from her. How she wished that he’d stayed, lingered after the store was closed, and talked to her as they had done by the potting table. Matt had actually asked her some questions—some very personal questions—and he’d even gone so far as to call her Beth. She found she enjoyed the deep gentle tones of his voice and craved to hear them again. If only he’d stayed to talk. She would have been grateful for just a few minutes of his company, but he’d gone. Gone in that old pickup truck of his, gone to be with his family.

I think he likes me, Beth thought as she turned the key in the nursery gate. Surely, she couldn’t have misunderstood that long wistful look that had him blushing so brightly with embarrassment. She’d caught him looking, and he knew it. She’d been looked at with such sweet longing, her heart had trembled like a vibrating piano string, the sound of it echoing even now in her heart. Matt liked her, she was certain of it.

Or at least, somewhat certain. Maybe he was just shy, and looked at all women that way. Maybe she had misunderstood him.

No, Beth thought, as she unlocked her car door, she didn’t think Matt treated the others at the nursery the same as her. Ever since Skip had left earlier that day, after Matt had defended her so gallantly, (it was gallant, Beth wouldn’t see it any other way), Sylvia had treated Beth with a bitter envy that betrayed Sylvia’s desire to have Matt defend her, give her one of those long looks.

Then he must like me, Beth reasoned as she turned the car onto the street. Even if it was just a tiny, miniscule liking, it was something. With all the nothing she had in her life right now, even crumbs were enough to make her unreasonably hopeful. She cautioned herself not to yearn for too much, and tried to reign in her loneliness long enough to look at things objectively. Matt was just a friend, a friend who happened to like her; how much, Beth struggled not to guess, though it was hard not to.

The sky had already faded into evening by the time Beth arrived home. She’d stopped to buy some groceries, run a few last minute errands, and was looking forward to a hot dinner and
maybe some television. She would find a channel, leave it there and let the noise fill the room until she went to bed. It was easier to be alone, when you weren't sitting in silence.

Carrying grocery bags, Beth went into the adobe home she and Luke had bought together. They'd had so many plans for the future, the memories taunted her as she moved into the kitchen to start dinner. Luke should've been here, talking to her about his day, laughing and playing with Caleb until dinner was ready.

Enough. Beth shoved aside her grief, flicked on the small television set on the counter, and started putting away the groceries. An odd feeling nagged at her, one not born of grief, but something else almost as unsettling. Something was missing from her usual routine. Something hadn't happened, that usually did. But what?

The phone rang, and without thinking, Beth picked up the receiver, her mind elsewhere. Bailey hadn't come to greet her. She realized it now, and was about to put the receiver down and go look for him, when a voice at the other end started talking.

"Beth, you'd better have a good explanation for what happened, today."

"What?" Beth frowned, trying to concentrate on the caller. "Skip, is that you?"

"Of course it's me! Who else would bother? Maybe you were expecting that worker of yours— that Matt! Does he call you at home, Beth? Does he come and see you?"

She sighed heavily. "Skip, it's not what you think, it really isn't. Matt is simply a friend."

"Then why are you calling off our relationship, Beth? Answer me that. And while you're at it, explain why you're turning me away, after all we've meant to each other."

"Oh, don't give me that tired lie, Skip! You warned me ahead of time that you weren't going to leave your wife, that we were only going to have a simple, straightforward affair. No one would fall in love, and no one would get hurt. Those were your words, Skip, not mine."

"Beth," his tone was softer now, filled with regret and a compassion she knew he didn't feel. "Things aren't good with me and Sue right now. We're constantly fighting, and I get so lonely. I need you Beth. I need you to understand what I'm going through, and be there for me."

"I'm sorry, Skip, but that's between you and your wife. I can't be a part of it any longer."
The silence that followed hung heavy, so heavy and quiet that for a moment, Beth thought he had walked away from the phone.

"You'll be sorry, Beth. No one does this to me." All traces of empathy had been replaced by a coldness that made Beth involuntarily shiver.

A dial tone sounded in her ear, and she hung up the phone.

The unsettling stillness of the house tugged her attention back to the previous concern. "Bailey?" she called, whistling to her furry companion as she entered the room where he slept on the sofa. "Bailey, there you are--" she stopped in mid sentence, saw the still form on the cushions. His head didn't lift to look at her, his tail didn't wag with doggie happiness. She was home, but Bailey wasn't moving.

Rushing to the couch, Beth fell to her knees, put her ear to the cold body that was her one and only, dearest companion since Luke had died.

"Dear God, please, no." Beth whispered frantically, going to the kitchen to retrieve her discarded keys. She ran outside, unlocked the car and rushed back for Bailey. His body felt frighteningly stiff in her arms, but she hurried, carefully laid him on the backseat, and ran around to the driver's side.

Her foot on the gas, she sped to the veterinary clinic she always took Bailey to in Las Cruces. Surely, God wouldn't be so cruel as to take her dear friend from her! Not now. Didn't God know what tomorrow was? She'd pretended she'd forgotten, but it had been there all the time, lurking, waiting for her to feel the full impact of it, as that terrible anniversary always did.

She couldn't lose Bailey. The old mutt was all she had left of Luke. If God was as merciful and as kind as her pastor had said He was, then God wouldn't take Bailey. God knew what that dog meant to her.

And surely God knew what she'd do if Bailey were no longer there.

Matt couldn't claim he'd gotten a good night's sleep, because he hadn't. She'd been there, crowding his dreams with those startling green eyes, filling his thoughts even when he slumbered.

At the breakfast table, each time Matt realized he was drifting back to her, he forced himself to think of something else. It didn't matter what, just as long as it wasn't her.
He faithfully saw the children off to school, then deposited Ryan with Mrs. Lott for safekeeping. The next door neighbor remarked that he looked distracted, but Matt simply chalked it up to his lack of sleep.

It took a strong cup of coffee before leaving, to make him feel as though he could finally shake off last night's dreams. Braced with caffeine, he climbed into the pickup truck and started off for work.

Caffeine pulsing through his veins, he impatiently waited at a stoplight for what seemed an eternity. There must have been some grand conspiracy to make him late for work, for one after another, he hit every red light between home and the nursery, and pulled into the nursery's parking lot with only two minutes to spare.

He got out, put on his hat, and realized the lot was empty. Where was Mrs. Carter's sedan? It wasn't here. Frowning, Matt stepped toward the still locked entrance, looked through the glass. Like the parking lot, it was empty. Where was everyone? More importantly, where was Mrs. Carter? It wasn't unusual for the others to be late, but not her. She was always the first to arrive, and the last to leave.

He tried the gate, but wasn't surprised when he found it locked. Glancing at his watch, Matt went back to the truck to wait. The girls would arrive any moment, and if Mrs. Carter didn't hurry, Sylvia and Amy would actually beat her into work. He hoped it wouldn't happen, for he knew Sylvia would use it to rationalize her own tardiness.

Amy's car pulled into the lot, and the young woman got out with a friendly, though somewhat bewildered, smile.

"Am I early?" Amy asked, checking her watch. "Where is Mrs. Carter?"

Matt shrugged. "Has she ever been late, before?"

"I don't think so. I don't remember her ever being late. For as long as I've worked here, Mrs. Carter always arrived first. I wonder if she's sick, or something."

There was little for either to do but wait and speculate. Forty minutes later, Sylvia finally arrived, her bloodshot eyes hidden behind a stylish pair of sunglasses.
"Don't tell me she's late?" The triumph in Sylvia's voice was unmistakable. "After all that talk about punctuality, our Beth is late! Ha! I can't wait until the next time she gripes. This ought to shut her up and put her in her place."

Matt groaned inwardly. He hoped Mrs. Carter would get here soon.

In a half-hearted attempt to reach their employer, Sylvia pulled out her cell phone and called Mrs. Carter's home number. Matt could hear the joy in Sylvia's voice when she announced no one had answered.

Glossy red nails tapping folded arms, a languid pout on her mouth, Sylvia paced and waited for all of two minutes before declaring she was leaving.

"It's nearly an hour after eight," Sylvia said, dismissing Amy's protest. "If Beth wanted to open the nursery, she would have been here by now. She's probably sleeping off last night with some stranger she picked up at a bar."

Matt stiffened, sensing the remark had been made for his benefit. He said nothing, and tried not to seem indignant when Sylvia glanced at him. He hoped he didn't give her the pleasure of knowing her barb had hit its mark. He thought back to his talks with Beth, remembered how she'd turned away Skip and called off their almost relationship. No, Sylvia was wrong. Beth was better than that.

"Do you think she's sick?" Amy asked in concern. "Maybe we should check her house and make sure."

"She didn't pick up, so she's not there," Sylvia said so emphatically, so convincingly, Amy nodded in agreement. "Come on, let's get out of here and have some fun." Sylvia paused, her blood red lips forming a seductive smile as she turned to Matt. "How about you? Coming with us?"

"No thanks," Matt said, straightening as he stood by the entrance with the girls. "I think I'll wait here a little longer."

"She isn't coming," Sylvia said, her voice hardening. "Like I said, she's in some guy's bed, having a good time. We won't see her until tomorrow."

Matt didn't reply.

"Fine. Do whatever you want." Sylvia checked her lipstick in the reflection of the store window. "Wait here all day. I don't care."
Amy didn't look as though she wanted to go with Sylvia, but lacked the courage to protest. Reluctantly, Amy followed her coworker out of the parking lot, leaving Matt alone.

He waited for another hour before deciding it was crazy to stay any longer. Mrs. Carter was obviously not coming, and he wondered why. He got inside his pickup, started the engine and let it run a few moments while he made up his mind.

"It's none of your business, Taylor," he muttered under his breath. Even as he spoke, though, he knew his decision was already made. With a grumble of self-reproach, Matt turned his truck South, away from Las Cruces and toward farm country. He was going to feel really stupid for showing up, unannounced, on Mrs. Carter's front step, just to see if she was okay. And if she was with some guy, like Sylvia had said, he'd feel like a total idiot.

But she wasn't, Matt quickly corrected himself, unwilling to think the worst of Beth. There was probably no one home, and he'd leave with nothing to show for his concern but an emptier fuel tank.

Turning off the highway, Matt drove down the dirt road that led to Mrs. Carter's house. He slowed when he saw her sedan sitting out front. The driver's side door hung wide open, as though its owner had stepped away and would soon be back. Figuring it was already too late to leave without attracting more attention, Matt parked his truck, pulled the keys from the ignition, and waited for her to appear.

When she didn't, he checked his watch. Where was she?

Hating the idea of leaving an open invitation to any car thief who happened by, Matt got out and went to the sedan. He was about to shut the door, when he noticed something furry and motionless laying on the backseat.

It was Mrs. Carter's dog, Bailey.

Poor guy. Matt remembered her saying something about the dog being very old, and he shook his head sadly as he shut the car door. It explained why she hadn't come to work this morning. She had been dealing with an emergency.

Matt waited by the car a little longer, still expecting her to emerge from the house to take Bailey to the vet, or wherever it was rich people took their pets when they died. A minute passed, and Matt became concerned enough to go to her front door and ring the bell.
He waited on the front step, but no one came.

"Hello?" he called, moving off the stone walk to peer through a large pane window. "Mrs. Carter? Are you all right?" When there was no answer, Matt tried the door handle, and found it unlocked. Concern overriding the last of his caution, he ventured inside. "Mrs. Carter? Are you here?" He kicked himself for asking such a dumb question. Of course she was here. Her car was out front.

"Mrs. Carter?" Matt announced himself as he moved into the living room. It was empty, and he found himself momentarily lost in the sprawling house.

Coming to a partially open door, Matt knocked, and waited for a response. "Mrs. Carter? Are you in there?" When no one answered, he cautiously looked inside and discovered it was the master bedroom. He was about to leave, when through a partially open door to the master bath, an uncapped prescription bottle lying on the floor caught his attention. His heart in his throat, Matt quickly moved to the bathroom, shoved open the door, and saw her.

She was dressed in yesterday's shirt and blue jeans, crouched on the floor with her knees drawn against her chest. Her arms lay limply at her side, the palms up, the fingers still. Her eyes were closed, and for a terrifying moment, Matt thought she was dead.

He crossed over to her, dropped to his knees, checked her neck for a pulse. The touch caused her eyes to flicker open in surprise.

"Thank God," Matt sighed heavily, allowing himself to breathe once more. He rocked back on his heels, feeling stupid for the crazy thought that had so briefly run through his mind. Then he looked back at her, saw the anguished grief in her pale face, and the concern returned. He snatched up the prescription bottle and counted the scattered pills. "How many did you take, Beth?"

When she didn't answer, he shook her by the arm.

"How many?" he repeated.

"None. I didn't take any." The words tumbled out in a weak whisper, and she leaned her head against the wall as though she lacked the strength to fully sit up on her own.

Matt saw the full glass of water beside her, and told himself he hadn't been too late. He gathered every pill, dropped them into the toilet, and flushed.
She looked up at him with the sad green eyes that had haunted Matt’s dreams the night before. "Bailey’s dead. He was Luke’s dog, and now he’s gone." She spoke without hope, the tone heavy and dull, as though she were being smothered alive by grief. "I tried to take Bailey to the vet last night, but it was too late. They were closed and he was dead."

"Last night?" Matt went to her, squatted to look into her face. "Have you been sitting there all night, staring at those pills?"

"I couldn’t do it," she said helplessly. "I wanted to-- oh! how I wanted to-- but I couldn’t. I’ve thought about it so many times..." She closed her eyes, and a drop rolled down her tearstained cheek.

Matt swallowed hard. He hadn’t counted on this. He hadn’t thought Beth was suicidal. How could he, when he hardly knew her?

Stunned, Matt sank onto the cold bathroom tiles and stared at her. This woman needed help, but what could he do?

"Today is their anniversary," she said, her eyes still closed. "Luke’s plane went down four years ago, today. I lost everything. Even my baby."

"You still have your life," Matt said, trying to find something for her to hang on to. "They’re in Heaven, but you’re still here. You have to keep going, Beth."

"Why?" She opened her eyes, and stared at him blankly. "Why should I?"

Uneasy fear settled in Matt’s stomach. "Are you sure you didn’t take any of those pills?"

She frowned. "I told you I didn’t. Why don’t you believe me?"

"How close were you to doing it, Beth? I need to know."

"I changed my mind last night." She sounded frustrated, on the verge of fresh tears. "I know what this looks like, but it’s not that bad. I just hadn’t put the bottle away, that’s all."

"Promise me you’re all right," Matt said, grasping her hard by the arm. "Promise me, or I swear to God, I’ll get on the phone and call 9-1-1."

"I promise." She looked at him pleadingly, a look of hurt crossing her face.
Realizing he was probably leaving a bruise on her arm, he quickly let go.

"I didn't take any, Matt. I promise you, I didn't."

The air around Matt felt thick, and he moved to the other side of the bathroom to think clearly. Responsibility hung heavy on his shoulders, and it almost overwhelmed him.

Beth must have recognized the fear on his face, for she tried to give him a reassuring smile. "I'd long changed my mind before you came, Matt. I promise."

He nodded numbly. "That's good."

She said nothing as he went to the sink and splashed water on his face. He saw her watch him in the reflection of the nearby mirror, and turned to look at her.

"Don't hang on to me, Beth."

The warning made her frown.

"You need help, and I'm not that person. I'm barely staying afloat, myself. Hang on to me, and I'll take us both down."

Tears slid down her cheeks, but she didn't move. She looked as though she could stay on the floor, forever.

"Beth, you don't want anything to do with me."

"Let me be the one to decide that, Matt."

"You called me trailer trash, remember?" he leveled a hard look at Beth. "I'm worse than that, but you just don't know it yet." He grabbed a thick towel from off the rack and rubbed it over his face.

"I was wrong," she said quietly.

"No, you weren't." He threw aside the towel. "You don't know me at all."

She closed her mouth, leaned her head back and stared at him.

"Don't expect too much from me, Beth."
Her eyes shut, and he guessed she expected him to leave.

Matt wished he could.

Crossing the distance between them, Matt took her by the hands, and pulled her to her feet. She looked surprised, but didn't ask what he was doing as he led her through the house.

"Do you have your keys?" he asked.

She nodded absently, reminding him of a fragile porcelain doll that might break if it were handled roughly. He locked her front door, then went to her car to take care of the deceased pet in the backseat.

"Do you have a shovel?" he asked.

She nodded. "Around back-- in the shed."

Matt followed Beth around the house, to a large building with clear walls. Inside, he could see several tables lined with plants. A small wooden shed sat beside the see-through building, and Beth went inside and brought out a shovel.

"Where do you want him?" Matt asked, looking about for a good place to dig Bailey's grave. "How about over there, by the tree?"

A hand covered Beth's mouth, and he heard a stifled sob.

Determined not to let her grief swallow him as well, Matt went to the tree and started digging. He hoped after Bailey was put to rest and buried, Beth would stop crying. His insides twisted painfully at the sound of her sobs, and it made him want to retreat. Even worse, it made him want to find a relief of his own, and Matt knew what that meant. He would go searching for a drug dealer. If only he could use meth. Just one more time. Maybe he'd give some to Beth, and they could--

"Shut up," he breathed viciously. "Just shut up."

The crying abruptly stopped. He turned, saw Beth looking startled and even a little afraid.

"What?" he asked.
"You just told me to shut up," she said with wide green eyes.

"I was talking to myself, Beth." Shaking his head, Matt sighed in disgust and continued digging. "I don't treat women like that, okay? If I want you to be quiet, I'll ask, not tell." He slanted her a quick glance just in time to see the trembling lips part in a fleeting smile.

The hole dug, Matt went to the car to get Bailey. He lowered the beloved pet into the hole, then covered him over with dirt. By the time Matt had finished, Beth was weeping again. Feeling as though he'd somehow failed, Matt put away the shovel, took Beth by the arm, and led her to his truck. He opened the passenger side and waited for her to get in.

She looked puzzled, but didn't ask where he was taking her or why. He hardly knew the answer to that himself, only that he didn't feel easy about leaving her alone right now.

On the drive back to Las Cruces, neither one said a single word. Beth sat beside him, her hands in her lap, her face so pale the freckles seemed exaggerated on her nose and cheeks. Matt didn't realize where he was going, until he found himself parked in front of his house, staring at the dandelions that had overtaken the front yard.

He shoved open the driver's side door, got out of the truck, and waved a reluctant hello to the old woman watering her meager bed of flowers next door.

"I thought you worked Wednesdays," Mrs. Lott called, turning off the hose and coming over to meet him.

Matt tried not to seem impatient. He just didn't feel like talking. "The nursery is taking an undeclared holiday," he attempted a careless smile. "Where's Ryan?"

"Inside, watching television, of course." Mrs. Lott cast a curious glance at the passenger still in the truck. "I can keep him a few hours more, if you have company..."

"No, I can take him." Matt knew his neighbor was dying to ask, and decided to just tell her, instead of making her guess. "I brought my boss home."

"Oh?" Mrs. Lott looked more than a little surprised.

"She had a rough night," Matt explained in a hushed voice. "Her dog died. The one her deceased husband used to own."
The old woman's surprise changed to concern, and Matt sensed the concern was more for him, than for his boss.

"It's the anniversary of her husband's accident," Matt said, hoping it explained just enough to avoid having to say more.

He groaned as Mrs. Lott studied him thoughtfully. Things were getting complicated, and he wished he could walk away and go somewhere to think. His boss sat in the truck behind him, looking like she'd just survived a plane wreck of her own, while Mrs. Lott, his well-intentioned but nosey neighbor, prodded him with rheumy eyes that held way too much understanding.

"I see," Mrs. Lott said finally.

No, you don't, Matt thought. You couldn't possibly.

"If you and Mrs. Carter would come inside for a cup of tea," Mrs. Lott said, "we could wait for Ryan's show to end."

The request was gentle but firm, and Matt decided not to fight it. He went to open Beth's door and help her out. Once again he didn't explain where they were going, and once again, Beth didn't ask. She simply followed.

"Matty!" Ryan shouted as they entered the living room. Even in his joy, however, the boy remained where he was apparently glued to the television.

"When that's over, buddy, I'm taking you home."

"Okay, Matty."

Mrs. Lott invited them to sit on the couch, then disappeared into the tiny kitchen to put some water on the stove. Every chance she got, she looked at Beth, as if unsure what to make of what she saw.

Dropping his hat on one knee, Matt turned his head and watched whatever show it was Ryan was watching. A grown man danced about on the screen, dressed like a chicken, flapping his arms wildly, while singing *Old Mac Donald had a Farm*. On the fourth chorus of *E-I-E-I-O*, Mrs. Lott returned with a small plate of homemade lemon cookies and placed them on the end table.

Ryan eagerly took two, then went back to his program.
"It's so nice to have him here," Mrs. Lott said, looking at Ryan fondly before returning her attention to Beth. "I don't have any grandchildren, so it's a comfort."

Matt didn't know if Beth was listening, and didn't want to look away from the television to check. He rotated the hat on his knee, wishing the man in the chicken suit would stop flapping his arms and end the show.

"No, I don't have any family in Las Cruces."

Matt realized Beth had been listening, after all, and was speaking to Mrs. Lott. He stopped following the chicken, though his eyes remained on the television.

"I have a younger sister in Santa Fe, and an older brother in Phoenix. They're both doctors, so it's hard to keep in touch as much as I'd like. They're always busy."

The kettle on the stove began to whistle, sending Mrs. Lott to the kitchen. Matt kept watching the man, now parading as a monkey, while Beth sat quietly beside him on the couch. He didn't turn to look at her, and she didn't move or say a word to him.

Mrs. Lott returned with a tray, and Matt politely accepted a cup of herbal tea. The truth was, he hated tea. Thought it tasted like dishwater. Beth seemed to like it, though. She smiled at Mrs. Lott, and for that, Matt felt grateful.

"He's very handsome, so I expect he catches a lot of attention from women," a voice was saying. "I only hope it's the right kind of women."

Matt had been so carefully avoiding the tea, somewhere along the way he had lost track of the conversation. Panicked, he realized Mrs. Lott was talking, and that she was talking about him. What had she said? What had he missed?

"I understand," Beth said, taking a sip of tea. The women exchanged knowing glances, and Matt scowled. What was understood? What had been said?

He reached for his cup, took a gulp, and immediately gagged on the dishwater. Mercifully, Ryan's show ended and the boy climbed onto Matt's lap, knocking the hat off his knee.

It wasn't difficult for Matt to excuse themselves, for Mrs. Lott seemed satisfied that she'd accomplished something. What that something was, Matt didn't know, but he did notice the kind smile Beth gave their hostess as they left.
"I think she's worried about you," Beth said, as she followed him into the house next door.

Matt glanced over his shoulder, noting the visit had brought color back to Beth's face. He made sure Ryan had some toys to keep him busy on the living room floor, then went into the kitchen to make lunch. It felt strange to be home in the middle of a workday, stranger still to see his boss at the kitchen table, watching him spread peanut butter and jelly onto bread.

"What made you come this morning?" Beth asked, her eyes following him to the refrigerator.

He shrugged. "I dunno."

"Whatever it was, I'm glad you did." Beth smiled at him, and he felt his face grow warm. "You couldn't have known this, but I asked God to help me, and not ten minutes later, you showed up in my bathroom."

Matt chose not to see the irony, and mutely continued assembling sandwiches. God could send help in many forms, many ways, but he didn't see himself as one of those ways.

"I appreciate your not mentioning last night," Beth said, her voice lowering as though she didn't want Ryan to overhear. "I prefer to keep what happened private."

Matt turned, looked at her. "The only reason you're sitting in my kitchen, is because you scared the living daylights out of me."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Sorry... that's good. Sorry is always good." Matt went back to the peanut butter. "I suppose the next time you want attention, you'll try it again." He dropped the spreading knife, and took a deep breath. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. You couldn't have known I'd show up." He looked back at her, saw his regret mirrored in her face.

"I truly didn't, Matt."

"Yeah, I know." He picked up the knife, dipped it into the plastic jar. Neither one spoke as he placed a plate before her. He called Ryan, and five seconds later, the boy was seated at the table, ready to say grace.

Matt prayed out loud, only half aware of the words he spoke. When he momentarily raised his head, he saw Beth was watching him.
Knowing what had been going through her mind, only last night, burdened Matt with an
unspeakable sadness. If a woman like Beth— who had so much going for her— thought about
giving up, then Matt figured someone like him should’ve stopped fighting a long time ago.
Might as well lay down and don’t bother getting up, for there’s nothing to hope for. You always
suspected it in the past, and now you know it for a certainty. Great. He was beginning to think
like her. Matt swallowed down a bite of sandwich, and realized his own vulnerability. He had to
guard himself carefully around Beth.

After lunch was over, Ryan went to the living room to play while Matt made co
ff
ee.

"I'm not much for tea," Matt said, sliding a full mug over to Beth.

She gave a half-smile. "I noticed." She li
ned the mug to her lips, blew, then took a careful sip.
"Hot," she said, and returned it to the table.

"I'm not a counsellor or anything," Matt looked at her directly, hoping his words were making an
impression. "I've never lost a spouse or a child, so I can't know what you're going through. But I
do know a little something about giving up hope."

She looked at him, took another careful sip, and kept listening.

"In the past, I've treated life as though God had lost all mercy, and there wasn't any point in
trying. I've reached bottom so many times..." he stopped, struggling to choose his words
carefully. "It's no good thinking that no one cares, that there's no mercy in life. With that kind of
thinking, I'd have offed myself long before now."

"Why didn't you?" Beth asked.

Matt prayed she wasn't mocking him, for it was difficult enough for him to sit there. It made
him feel wide open and vulnerable.

He shrugged lightly, then berated himself for the casual gesture when they were talking about
such a serious matter. "To give up hope, is to give up on God." Matt stared at his mug, watched
the remaining froth gather around the edges. "God isn't done with me, and I'm not done with
Him." He looked up at Beth, smiled weakly. "Does that make any sense?"

She remained quiet.
Sighing, Matt leaned back in his chair. "I guess it just boils down to believing what God says in His word. He promised He won't forsake us, and as long as I still have that hope, I'm not giving up. On life, or anything else."

Beth turned the mug in her hand. "Hope can be so fragile," she said quietly.

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't fight for it, Beth."

She looked up at him, and he saw a glimmer of resistance in her eyes. "I didn't say I wasn't going to fight."

"You didn't say you were, either." Matt finished off the last of his coffee. "Life isn't easy. I know you've lost more than I could possibly imagine, but you can't stop living just because you've decided you had enough. We all have to fight. You're not the only one who has to keep going even though they're hurting." Matt bit his tongue, wishing he had kept his mouth shut. Beth looked at him, anger and pity mingled into something he didn't care to name. He only knew she was feeling sorry for him-- for the trailer trash who admitted he was hurting. That's what he had said, wasn't it? Matt scrambled to recall the exact words, but they were jumbled in his own thoughts.

"Are you still hurting, Matt?"

"Don't make fun of me, Beth."

"I wasn't. I only wondered."

"You can stop wondering." He shoved aside the empty mug, stared at the worn kitchen linoleum. "I'm doing good enough. I'm not giving up on God, and as long as I keep remembering Him, everything will be all right." He hated himself for answering so honestly, and fought to keep from saying any more. "It helps to pray."

"You sound as if you know a lot about despair," Beth said thoughtfully.

"I'm trying to do you a favor, lady." He stared at her, wrestling to keep his embarrassment under control. There was no earthly way she was going to turn this into a conversation about him.

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings, Matt. I didn't intend to."

"You didn't," he shrugged. Matt thought about it, and realized she had. "Sorry I snapped at you."
"I'm afraid I'm overstaying my welcome," Beth said, getting up from the chair. "If you could take me home, I'll make it worth your while. I'm afraid my wallet is at home."

"Keep your money." Matt swiped both mugs from off the table and dropped them into the sink. "Did I ask you for anything?"

"No, I suppose you didn't." Beth looked as though she regretted the offer. She stood there awkwardly, lost and uncomfortable as he washed and put away the coffee mugs. "Thank you for trying to help me, Matt. I really appreciate it."

He shrugged as he moved past Beth to go into the living room. "You helped me, so it's only fair I returned the favor."

She grabbed his arm, stopped him from leaving. "Did you come today, only because you felt you owed me?" She pensively waited for an answer.

"Maybe," he said.

She tightened her grip, and he swallowed hard.

"I don't know, Beth. I just don't know."

The hurt in her green eyes was apparent, but Matt couldn't do anything about it. He went into the living room, found Ryan had fallen asleep on the floor with a throw pillow from the sofa. What would he do if he didn't have any brothers or sister to look after? Matt didn't know. He only knew they gave him something to think about, besides his own problems. They needed a lot of love, and their love in return, along with God's care, kept him sane. Scooping up Ryan, Matt carried him into the boys' bedroom. When he returned, Beth was staring out the front window. She looked beautiful, with the light filtering through the faded curtains, her red hair curling in a wispy fringe around her face.

"I'll take you home now," Matt said, pulling car keys from his pants pocket. "I need to ask Mrs. Lott to keep an eye on Ryan. I'll just be a moment."

"Before you go," Beth said quickly, "thank you for letting me spend this day with you and Ryan."

His hand was on the door, and he knew he should leave, but his feet hesitated. "Would you promise me something, Beth?" He chanced another look at her. "Promise me you won't do anything drastic?"
She nodded in understanding. "I promise. And Matt--" she stopped short, gave him a smile.
"Nothing. I'll wait for you."

"I'll only be a moment," he said, going outside with the keys in his right hand. A few steps from
the house, he turned and looked at the window. He could see her there, watching him through
the curtains. She waved to him in a friendly gesture, and he caught himself waving back.

God, cause her to fight, Matt thought as he went next door to find his neighbor. Cause her to
hope.

"And the LORD... will be with thee, He will not fail thee, neither forsake thee: fear not, neither
be dismayed."
~ Deuteronomy 31:8 ~

"Uphold me [Matt] according unto Thy word, that I may live: and let me not be ashamed of my
hope."
~ Psalm 119:116 ~
Chapter Eight
An Unspoken Attraction

"Though I walk in the midst of trouble, Thou [God] wilt revive me..."
~ Psalm 138:7 ~

On the drive home, Matt didn't say a single word. Beth watched him, his hands gripping the wheel, his stare on the road ahead, his mouth set in a firm and troubled line. She had scared him. It gave her no pleasure to know it, or to see the fear flickering in his eyes every time he glanced in her direction. It was almost as if he needed to know she was still there, still breathing, still existing.

Beth sighed heavily, the sound of it causing another of those quick glances from Matt. She wished he had believed her more. True, she had come dangerously close to taking those pills, but she hadn't gone through with it. Didn't that count for something? Was he going to treat her like a fragile plate forever? She despised her momentary weakness, even more since it had been in front of him.

She recognized the scenery outside the window, knew they were approaching her home. It would be good to say something to him now, to give some kind of reassurance that she felt better, that the danger had past.

But she couldn't.

The very thought of going back to the hollow adobe, empty without Luke or Caleb-- and now even Bailey-- made her heart sink. She wished she could let herself puddle into tears, beg Matt to take her home with him. She'd sleep on the couch, keep out of everyone's way; they wouldn't even know she was there, only please, take her with him.

The truck pulled to rolling stop, and Beth realized she was home. Matt climbed out, rounded the hood to open her passenger door. She couldn't help but smile. Always the gentleman.

The chances to beg were slipping away, and when Beth found herself on the front step of her house, she knew she had waited too long. Matt got back behind the wheel, and waited for her to go inside. She bit her lip, unlocked the door, and went in. She waited for the sound of Matt's pickup truck before looking out the window to watch him leave.

If only she had let herself be weak, she might be in that truck with him.
Then the absurdity of the thought snapped her senses back to reality. She had been desperate enough to entertain such wild hopes, when to act on them would have been unfair to Matt. He had already stretched his neck out to help her, and it hadn’t been easy for him to do. She’d sensed it in his dark eyes, in that pained but gentle voice.

He had known great anguish in his life, of that she was sure. There were moments, sitting at the kitchen table, where she glimpsed images of a drowning man struggling to stay afloat. Then strength would cover his features, and all she could see was quiet determination. The rolling waves, and that quiet, steady determination not to let go.

If only she had that kind of strength.

The house felt ghostly, and it was all Beth could do to keep herself from crying. Bailey hadn’t come to meet her, and she knew he never would. He was lying in a grave behind the house, beneath the pecan tree where Luke had planned to build a treehouse for their son.

Her mind strayed back to the medicine cabinet, to the bottle she had opened the night before. Then she remembered Matt had flushed away the pills, and she quietly thanked him.

God, please help me, she thought, going to the bedroom to shower and change into fresh clothes. She hated her morbid thoughts, and the way they made her long for death, instead of life.

Matt’s thoughts troubled him as he drove, and he prayed Beth would remember her promise not to do anything drastic. He fought with himself to keep driving, to not turn back and see if he had made the right decision. He certainly couldn’t take Beth home with him, for she wasn’t even his responsibility. Maybe it was the big brother in him, the almost-a-parent, that made him want to shelter and protect Beth.

It was a stupid thought, Matt knew, for she was a full grown woman-- a mature woman-- who could take care of herself. She had been married to a man who could afford to give her a nice house, she had known what it was to be a mother, and even owned and operated her own business. Ha! Beth could take care of herself better than he ever could-- better than an ex-junkie who kept thinking about sex and escape. If she had only known half the thoughts that had occurred to him that day, she would have fired him on the spot.

It was enough to know that God kept watch over his thoughts, and God alone knew he would never act on them. Each time the old temptations came, he remembered another promise from
the Bible and kept going. Don't think about it too much, just keep going. Keep putting one foot in front of the other.

Keep fighting.

He parked in front of his house, and smiled when he saw Cassie step outside and wave to him. School was out, the bus had come, and their family could enjoy the rest of the day together.

The worry on Cassie's face, though, spoiled the illusion Matt had of a peaceful evening. She came to him with folded arms and serious blue eyes.

"Ethan's locked himself in the bedroom, Matty."

"Maybe he just wants some privacy," Matt said, trying to coax his baby sister into a smile. Matt wasn't ready for trouble. Not yet. At least wait until tomorrow. Please.

"He's with Susan," Cassie said, worry spilling into her voice. "They're alone in his room... Matty, what are we going to do?"

"Take Ryan and go to Mrs. Lott's house," Matt said, absently patting Cassie's shoulder. "Hurry, Cass." He watched as Cassie went inside, then reappeared with a struggling Ryan; the boy had been playing with his toys, and didn't want to leave.

The younger ones out of the way, Matt clenched his fists as he passed through the kitchen, on his way to the boys' bedroom. Rage mingled with panic, and it didn't even cross his mind to knock on the door. With one deliberate kick, the door flew open. Thankfully, he hadn't been too late.

"Susan, get your shoes on." Matt flung her sandals onto the bed. He turned to the boy lying beside her. "Ethan, meet me in the living room."

"You've got no right--" anger choked the remaining words from Ethan's mouth. Bare-chested, he followed Matt into the living room. "Who do you think you are?" Ethan shouted, as Susan quietly appeared from the kitchen.

"Go home, Susan." Matt shot her a warning look, and the young woman bowed her head and hurried out the front door.

"You aren't my father!" Ethan cried, thrusting a fist into Matt's chest. It didn't hurt, but it had the intended effect: Matt felt provoked, and Ethan looked ready for a fight.
"Watch it, Ethan. You're seventeen, and I'm still your legal guardian."

Ethan scowled. "The day I turn eighteen, I'm leaving this place forever."

Those words stung Matt, but he struggled not to let it show; he struggled not to get into the fight he knew Ethan wanted; he struggled not to walk out that door and not look back. His family needed him, whether they always knew it or not.

"What you do when you're eighteen, is beside the point." Matt went to the front door and closed it, using the time to cool down. He needed to react clearly, and not out of fear. He turned to look back at Ethan, saw the initial rage had subsided into simmering anger.

"Don't look at me as though you're any better," Ethan said with a frown. "I didn't do anything in there that you haven't."

Matt braced himself, knowing what to expect next.

"You've got no right to tell me how to live my life, not a
er what you did to Helen."

There it was, the old wound in all its glory. Matt felt sick, but held his ground.

"That's in the past, Ethan."

"Maybe in yours, but not hers. Not hers, Matty."

"Don't speak to me like that," Matt felt the anger harden into resolve. "You don't know what you're talking about. Helen has nothing to do with this. This is about you and Susan. It's going to stop. Here and now. You aren't ever going to see her again, do you hear me?"

Ethan didn't move a muscle.

Matt glared, and Ethan flinched.

"Do you hear me?"

The disdain in Ethan's voice was thick. "Yeah, I hear you."

"You broke your word to me concerning Susan."

Ethan shrugged. "Who cares if I keep a stupid promise or not?"
"A man's word is everything, Ethan. If you don't honor your promises, why should anyone else?"

Ethan looked at him through frustrated anger, though the words appeared to have some effect. "It won't happen again." He turned to leave, slapping the wall as he went. A few moments later Matt heard the bedroom door slam shut.

Wearily, Matt sank onto the sofa. He had known Ethan wasn't exactly a virgin, but that knowledge had been left somewhere in the past. Somewhere in a life they'd left behind in Texas. No more running around, no more drugs, no more alcohol. Those were the rules, and they hadn't changed since Matt had first presented them to his siblings. Not this family. Not anymore. Their parents would live how they wanted, but Matt and the kids were going to do something different.

The rules hadn't meant much to Cassie, for she had been too timid to get into any real trouble, but it had meant a great deal to Matt and Ethan. Ethan was eagerly following in the footsteps of his older brother, and never was that more clear to Matt, than right now.

The mention of Helen brought back a flood of memories Matt quickly tried to forget. He couldn't think about her. Not now, not ever. How Ethan loved to dangle her situation over Matt's head. Even Matt didn't know how he had the right to tell Ethan what not to do, when he had done many of the same things himself, and so much worse.

Noise from the kitchen made Matt get up. He found Ethan at the refrigerator, rummaging for something to eat.

"When's dinner?" the teenager asked, not bothering to look over his shoulder at Matt.

"In a few minutes." Matt hesitated. He didn't know what to say to his brother. If he said too much, Ethan would start talking about Helen again, and then Matt would be fighting his own guilt as well as his brother. "You know I'm not proud of what I've done in the past," he said quietly.

"I know." Ethan shut the fridge door, turned and leaned back against the counter. Ethan was growing up too fast. Much too fast to make Matt feel comfortable.

"I'm not expecting anything from you that I don't expect of myself."

Ethan didn't look as though he quite believed it, but held his tongue.
"I know I was a terrible sinner," Matt said, "but I repented, and I'm trying to put it all behind me. I'm not living the way I used to, you should know that by now."

Ethan narrowed his eyes, then shrugged. "Whatever."

The day had been too long. Matt shut his mouth, and went to Mrs. Lott's house for Cassie and Ryan.

Dinner was eaten in quiet, and afterward, Matt didn't bother with his guitar. He went straight to bed, and let the others deal with the dishes.

At times like these, Matt felt like a helpless boy without a parent. Lying on his back, he draped an arm over his eyes, kicked the shoes off his feet and didn't bother to change out of his clothes. He didn't care. He had spent all day caring, and now that it was over, who cared for him? Certainly not Ethan.

"Matty?" Cassie's timid voice broke through his dark thoughts. He lifted his arm, saw his sister with a small box of candy. She offered it to him. "A girl in school brought this today. I thought I'd save it for Ryan, but I think you need it more."

"That's all right, Cass, you can keep it," he said with a smile. "Who's this girl? Is she a friend of yours?"

Cassie shook her head. "She threw it away, so I got it out of the trash."

"Cass!" Matt took several deep breaths to keep from yelling at his already timid sister. "We aren't poor-- okay, maybe we are-- but we're not that poor. Don't ever dig through the trash again, do you understand?"

Tears came to Cassie's eyes and she nodded.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he groaned with self reproach. "You're not going to cry, are you?"

Moisture kept pooling in her blue eyes, but she whimpered "no."

Matt dragged himself out of bed to give Cassie a hug. Sometimes, he thought, he could be such a jerk.
Instead of going back to bed, Matt stayed up and cleaned the kitchen. To his surprise and
gratitude, Ethan and Cassie remained to help. Matt corrected himself, as he washed dishes and
Cassie dried and Ethan put them away. God cared about him, and so did his family.

Thursday morning, Matt came to work earlier than usual. He breathed a little easier when he
saw Beth at the cash register, unharmed and looking wonderfully normal. She had passed the
night without any visible harm, and he felt better for having left her alone.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Carter?"

"What is it, Matt?" The strain in her voice couldn't be missed, though he wasn't quite sure why it
was there. She kept working, her eyes on the register and not on him.

"Those receipts... for Cassie--"

"I brought them with me." She shoved the cash register shut. "I had a feeling you wouldn't let me
forget."

"I always pay my debts, Mrs. Carter."

She stared at him in reproach. "By your accounts, do you figure we're even yet?"

Matt stiffened. He'd been crazy to come in so early. He should have waited for the safety of the
girls before chancing a talk with Mrs. Carter. If Sylvia and Amy were here, these words would
have gone unsaid.

"I'm trying not to keep score, Matt, but you're making it impossible for me to do otherwise."

He frowned, not knowing how to answer.

"I think my life is worth at least the price of Cassie's trip to the mall, don't you? Or do you place
a greater value on my life? What will it take for us to even our accounts, Matt? Should I give you
a bonus check for saving me? Would that make us even?"

"I knew I should have kept my mouth shut," Matt said under his breath. He tried to turn away,
but her eyes held him firm. "This isn't a game, Beth."

"I'm glad you don't think so," she said coldly.
He shoved his hands into his pockets. "I need to pay my debt. I need those receipts."

With a frustrated groan, Beth stepped out from behind the counter. "Then you won't even allow me to say 'thank you'?"

Matt realized he was smiling. "I'll accept your thanks, but not your money."

A warm, if not reluctant, smile parted her lips. "You're so stubbornly independent, it's maddening." She sighed as she led the way to the office. She opened her purse, pulled out the receipts, then handed them over as though it greatly annoyed her that he was forcing her to do such a thing. "I've highlighted Cassie's expenses at the hair salon. I had my own hair done at the same time, so you don't owe me the full bill."

"Thanks," Matt said, barely looking over the totals before shoving them into his pocket. At this point, he didn't care about the amount. He just wanted to get out of her office.

"Perhaps you'll let me repay you another way," Beth said, stopping his retreat with more words and a heartrendingly tender look. "Please, Matt."

"I can't, Beth."

"I'm only asking to bring over a hot dinner," she said, as though it were as simple as that. "It's just food."

"I can't."

He looked at her full in the face, and hoped it would somehow convey what he wanted to say without actually having to speak the words.

Beth cocked her head at him, almost playfully. "You can't eat my cooking?"

Matt sucked in a breath. "I meant, I can't get into a relationship with you."

"Why not?" she asked, her voice rising in frustration.

"I just can't."

"If you have a good reason for turning down a perfectly good meal, I'd like to hear it," Beth said, folding her arms as though she were offended.

"You weren't just talking about food," Matt said.
"Yes, I was. You were the one who somehow turned food into a relationship."

Matt shut his eyes for a moment to cool down. He was growing dangerously frustrated, and feared what he might say. This was, after all, his boss.

"Do you even have one?" she asked.

He opened his eyes. "Have what?"

"A good reason."

"Couldn't you just trust me on it?"

"It'd be easier if I had an actual answer."

"Please, Beth, just leave me alone." He tried to leave, but she caught his arm, and gently stopped his retreat.

"Matt, I'm not really asking anything from you, except to acknowledge that there's something between us. Please don't deny it. It happens every time we look at each other."

Stunned, Matt spoke without thinking. "You feel it, too?"

"Of course I do." She smiled. "I don't think you intended to say that out loud. You're blushing."

Matt pulled his arm free. "You're playing games with me again."

"I would never do that to you, Matt. You believe me, don't you?"

"I guess." He shrugged, secretly wondering how he could escape the office.

"Do you want me to drop the subject?" she asked quietly.

"Yes." It was an easy answer. He didn't need a second to think it over, it came that quickly.

"Then consider it dropped." The hurt look returned to her green eyes, and Matt kicked himself for putting it there. "Does this mean I can't drop off a hot dinner at your house this evening?"

Matt wavered. She wasn't asking for much, at least it didn't sound like she was. "I guess it's okay."
"Thank you, Matt. You like to repay your debts, and I like to repay mine."

Again he shrugged, dearly wishing he hadn't noticed the faint scent of jasmine as she moved. This lady didn't know what she was dealing with, for if she did, she wouldn't be trying to bring him dinner. Maybe he should tell her. But if he did, she would fire him, and then he'd lose what little he had. Without realizing it, he had grown to look forward to seeing her at work; the thought of losing that, pained him more than he cared to admit.

His heart weighed down with heaviness, Matt left the office only to find Sylvia working nearby. She stood at a rack of gardening books, struggling to look busy, but obviously trying to eavesdrop. He absently nodded "hi" to her, and she fell into step beside him.

"Did you find out why she didn't come to work, yesterday?"

Matt grunted. "You're supposed to be her friend-- you ask her." He didn't feel like playing games this morning, and walked off without saying a word more to Sylvia.

Beth hoped she hadn't overstepped herself, especially after the embarrassment of yesterday's ordeal with Bailey and the prescription bottle. She had told herself Matt wasn't interested, that he couldn't be after seeing her on the bathroom floor looking so defeated. She had repeated it over and over to herself all night, and in the morning, had almost believed it. Then he'd looked at her while she stood at the counter, and all traces of doubt were gone. He liked her-- again, how much, she couldn't know-- but the attraction was there. To deny it would be to deny the existence of hunger, sorrow, pleasure.

She wished she hadn't said so much, but something about Matt compelled her to speak. He sure wasn't doing any talking, so it was up to her.

For the remainder of the workday, Matt stayed away from Beth to such an extent it caught the attention of Amy.

"What's wrong with him?" Amy asked Beth as they saw Matt move past the window, helping a woman to load her truck with the two hefty rose bushes she had just purchased. "He's not acting normal, and he's avoiding you like you have something contagious."

Beth wished she could deny the truth of the observation, and when she didn't, Amy's eyes grew wide.
"Something's finally happened between you two!" Amy said, smiling excitedly. "Tell me-- what did he say?" The painful silence that followed brought a disappointed sigh to Amy's lips. "You two had a fight," she guessed.

"I suppose you could call it that," Beth said, not really wanting to term their disagreement as a fight; it somehow made things worse than they actually were. "Matt doesn't want a serious relationship, and I can't say I blame him. I have enough faults I'm sure I must scare him away."

Though Amy couldn't possibly understand what Beth had meant, Amy didn't press for an explanation. Instead, she looked at Beth with something akin to pity, and it made Beth feel even worse than before. Someone was feeling sorry for her, and the pity, though kindly meant, only served to make her feel more self-conscious and awkward.

"Well," Amy said with a disappointed little sigh, "I'm pulling for you two to get together. He really likes you, Mrs. Carter. When he gazes at you with those intensely dark eyes, even my heart skips a beat."

Beth let herself smile, grateful for the encouragement.

After work, Matt left the nursery without even casting Beth a parting glance. It didn't matter, Beth told herself as she drove to the store to buy what she needed to make the Taylors' dinner. She would see him again, even if it would only be to drop off the promised meal at his house.

Home didn't seem quite as frightening today, and she forgot to miss Bailey's welcome as she came through the door. She needed to hurry, to make this meal before Matt or Ethan, or maybe even Cassie, started eating out of sheer hunger. Then her meal would go untouched.

When it was ready, she bundled the prepared food into an insulated carrier to keep it hot, then hurried to her car. The sun was setting on the western horizon when she looked at the time on her car's dash. Seven thirty. She'd taken more time than she'd realized, and knew the kids wouldn't have waited this long to eat. They had probably snacked their hunger away by now, and no longer wanted her food. Still, she had promised the meal would be there, and headed into Las Cruces with a great deal of self-reproach.

The bad neighborhood should have made her careful as she pulled in front of the Taylors' mobile home, but in her haste, she didn't give it a second thought. The streets were darkly lit, the only light coming from tiny porches and curtained windows. She opened her door, and a dog somewhere in the distance started to bark nervously. This was the right house, wasn't it? She
couldn't be certain in this dim light. After lifting out the food carrier, Beth locked her car and started toward the house.

Before she was halfway up the walk, the front door opened and a figure stood silhouetted against the light. It was Matt.

"I apologize for being so late," Beth said, checking the contents of the carrier before handing it over. "Let this cool off, then store it in the fridge. It won't be as good tomorrow, but it'll still be edible."

"That's all right," Matt said, awkwardly accepting the food. "We're hungry enough to eat it all now. There won't be any leftovers."

Beth blinked at him in surprise. "You waited?"

He shrugged lightly. "It wouldn't have been polite not to. You went to the trouble to cook it, so the least we could do is wait."

Someone passed through the open door, the petite figure coming to Matt's side. Beth smiled at Cassie. "I was just telling your brother how sorry I was that this is so late. I hope you enjoy the meal," Beth said, turning to leave.

"Aren't you staying?" Cassie asked in alarm.

"No, I'm just dropping off the food." Beth quickly glanced at Matt. He didn't look ready to offer an invitation.

"Matty," Cassie tugged at his shirt, "tell her to stay."

It was all Beth could do to not stop and listen as she went back to the car. Matt's low voice said something to Cassie, and Beth could imagine what he said. The girl promptly replied, forgetting or not even trying to speak in her brother's hushed tone.

"Hurry, Matty, she's leaving!"

"Mrs. Carter?" Matt cleared his throat, the reluctance evident but admirably restrained.

Her hand on the driver's side door, she looked over the rooftop at Matt. He was standing there, the carrier in his hands, the cool breeze playing with his untucked T-shirt. Beth couldn't
remember the last time she had seen a more handsome picture than the one Matt made. Then she remembered Luke, and the moment turned bittersweet.

"Have you eaten yet?" Matt asked, wincing noticeably as he spoke. Dim hope sounded in his voice, a dim hope that she would turn him down, say that she had already eaten and go away.

But she hadn't, and even though the invitation had been strained, Beth would not turn it down. "No, I haven't eaten yet," she said with a polite smile.

He sighed reluctantly. "Then I suppose you're invited to eat dinner with us. But if you have other plans, it won't hurt our feelings if you can't stay."

"I don't have any plans," she said, taking her hand off the car door.

Matt smiled weakly. "Yeah, that's what I thought you'd say. Come in... I guess."

"I've already set your place at the table," Cassie said, joining Beth as Matt went inside. "Oh, Mrs. Carter, you're not wearing your hair down!"

"I didn't have time to fix it after work," Beth said, not knowing why she made any excuses to Cassie. After Matt's comment about her looking odd, the braid had been deliberate.

For some reason Beth couldn't fathom, Ethan glared at Matt as they gathered around the kitchen table. She couldn't interpret what was being exchanged between the two brothers, but sensed whatever it was, it put Matt on edge.

Cassie helped Beth set out the food, while Ryan eagerly watched from his chair.

"I hope you guys like chimichangas," Beth said, peeling back the aluminum foil on the casserole dish. The cheese had melted perfectly over the deep-fried tortillas, and inside those flour wraps were chicken and rice and even more cheese. The smell of it practically filled the kitchen.

A minor stampede to wash hands at the kitchen sink quickly ensued, with Matt pushing aside Ethan so Cassie could get to the soap.

"Ladies first," Matt said to an angry looking Ethan.

It was a mystery to Beth why the brothers should be at odds with each other, especially when they so obviously cared about each other.
"I learned something interesting from Cass today," Ethan said, sauntering over to the table and plopping down in a chair. He looked at Matt with a knowing grin. "Cass said Mrs. Lott told her that you and Mrs. Carter were at her house, yesterday."

Matt shot Ethan a withering look, but the teenager grinned even harder.

"Then you two went home for a cozy lunch together..." Ethan paused, staring at Matt, lingering the moment as if to imply something more had happened. "I thought one of our rules stated you couldn't bring home women, Matty."

Now Beth understood. Ethan was getting back at Matt-- probably something having to do with a girl-- and was using yesterday's incident against poor Matt.

"Ethan, we only had lunch and a talk," Beth said, trying to speak in Matt's defense.

"Thanks, Beth, but I'll handle this." Matt pulled Ethan up from his chair, then hauled the teenager into the living room.

"Dinner," Ryan said helplessly, staring wide-eyed at the food before him.

"Should we wait?" Beth asked, looking to Cassie for permission. It might not be polite to start without everyone at the table, but it was past eight o'clock, and Ryan's tummy was making loud noises. Cassie nodded that it was okay, and Beth started serving the two children.

Noise from the living room betrayed an all-out argument, and Beth picked up pieces here and there about someone named Susan. Then the name Helen was mentioned, and Matt hurried Ethan out the front door where they continued their fight on the weed strewn lawn.

Several minutes later, Matt and Ethan returned, looking strained and tired from whatever they had been arguing about. Beth offered them some chimichanga, only one of them pausing to pray before eating. Ethan looked angry, Matt looked tired, and both looked hungry.

"You owe Mrs. Carter an apology," Matt said to Ethan.

After a swift kick under the table, Ethan finally complied. "I apologize," he said glumly.

Beth smiled, and tried to finish her meal without making more trouble for Matt.

"I'm so sorry about Bailey, Mrs. Carter." Sweet Cassie was obviously attempting to change the subject, and Beth silently thanked her for it. "Mrs. Lott said your dog Bailey died recently."
"Good old Mrs. Lott," Matt said wearily. He bit into a tortilla, his mouth widening into a smile as guacamole and cheese squeezed past his lips. "This is good, Beth."

Beth smiled, hoping she didn't smile too broadly or too eagerly. He liked her cooking.

"Bailey died?" Ryan's troubled face peered at Matt, and Matt put down his fork.

"Bailey was an old doggie. Mrs. Carter told you that, remember?"

Ryan soberly nodded "yes."

"I think he probably died in his sleep," Matt said, looking to Beth for confirmation. She nodded in agreement, and Matt returned his attention to a now crying four-year old. "Come here, buddy," Matt said, pushing away from the table to let Ryan climb onto his lap. "Bailey is happy now, playing in Heaven with Mrs. Carter's husband and little boy."

"No more doggie," Ryan whispered through his tears.

Matt hugged Ryan, and Beth dried her eyes. She hadn't expected anyone here to grieve over Bailey, and it made her feel as though she belonged at the table. Of course, she knew she didn't, but to see Ryan mourn Bailey, it somehow made Beth feel comforted, as though she wasn't alone after all.

For the rest of the meal, Ryan sat on Matt's lap, sharing bites of tortilla, cheese and meat. Matt didn't allow Ryan to dwell on sorrow for long, but kept the boy occupied with food and a steady supply of hugs and laughter. Even Ethan seemed to forget his quarrel, and did his best to make Ryan smile.

By the end of dinner, everyone had full stomachs and a satisfied smile plastered on their face.

"I'll get your guitar, Matty," Cassie said, leaving the table before Matt could stop her.

"Not tonight, Cass," he called after her. But it was too late. Cassie had already returned with an old guitar, that, like its owner's boots, had seen better days.

Beth looked at Matt in surprise. "You play the guitar?"

"Not tonight, I don't," Matt said, setting aside the instrument.
"Please, Matty?" Cassie asked, looking very sweet and very pleading.

"Nope," Matt promptly dismissed the request. "I'm full. Maybe tomorrow."

Ethan smiled knowingly. "You just don't want to make a fool of yourself in front of her."

"Please, Ethan, be nice."

"All right, Cass, I'll leave him alone." Ethan slid back in his chair, glanced at his watch. "It's getting late, Matty, and it's school tomorrow."

"Time for bed," Matt said, standing up with a sleepy Ryan in his arms. "Do me a favor, would you Ethan? Put Ryan to bed. I'm going to walk Mrs. Carter out to her car."

Beth almost expected Ethan to turn down his brother, but the teenager lifted Ryan from Matt's arms, then took the boy into the next room.

"Thank you for dinner, Mrs. Carter," Cassie said softly.

"Please, call me Beth," Beth told the smiling young woman.

Matt groaned quietly, but not quietly enough. Beth smiled at him, ignored his groan, and started to help Cassie clear the table.

"We'll clean the dishes tomorrow, and I'll bring your stuff to work in the morning," Matt said, ushering Beth to the door. She was happy and in a good mood, so she allowed Matt to walk her to the car without trying to linger.

The air had turned cold, and Beth shivered in her nursery shirt as Matt took her keys and unlocked her car door.

"I appreciate what you tried to do," Matt said, handing her back the keys, "but after tonight, I consider us even."

"You do?" Beth looked at him, and she saw him blush in the faint moonlight. "I wonder what it would be like to belong in your arms, Matt."

She knew he stared at her, for glints of light shone in his eyes. She could see his expression, hear his breath, and sensed he had wondered the same thing.
"Stop wondering," he said finally.

"What happened to make you so gun-shy of me, Matt? What woman did this to you?"

"It's what I did to her," Matt said gruffly. He swallowed, looked away, and Beth sensed she had asked too much.

"Are we really even, Matt?"

He looked at her, the moonlight swimming in his eyes.

"Will we ever be even?" Beth asked. Gently, she touched his shirt. "I don't think I ever want us to be completely even. Whenever I think you're trying to settle our account, I'm going to find some way to get you back in my debt. I'm giving you fair warning, Matt."

He closed his eyes, drew a long deep breath.

"Good night, Matt." She dropped her hand, opened the car door, and climbed inside. He moved to close her door, stooped to look inside.

There was so much in his face, she knew he wanted to speak his heart. Instead, he smiled sadly. "Drive safe," he said, and backed away from the car.

"Don't forget," she smiled, "I want my casserole dish back."

He nodded, and stepped onto the lawn, out of the street.

Beth didn't want to drive away, but no other reasonable choice presented itself. She couldn't force Matt to speak when he wanted to be silent, and right now, he definitely wanted to be silent. He swiped at the moisture in his eyes as she pulled away, and Beth knew, in that single moment, she would not give up. Whatever he had hidden away in his life, it couldn't discourage her from moving forward.

Matt had told her to fight. So she would fight.

"The LORD... healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds. He telleth the number of the stars; He calleth them all by their names. Great is our Lord, and of great power: His understanding is infinite."

~ Psalm 147:2-5 ~
Chapter Nine

Bruised Hearts

"Be of good courage, and He [God] shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the LORD."
~ Psalm 31:24 ~

Sleep had been impossible. Beth had seen to that. The soft hand on his chest, the searing longing in her eyes, the penetrating words that had cut through his soul like a hot knife through butter. Man. He sure wished he had turned down her offer to bring over that meal, those chimichangas. Forget how good they were-- never had a guy paid so dear a price for Mexican food.

Like a total raving idiot, he had cried as she pulled away. Just one or two tears-- nothing she could have possibly noticed-- but it had been more than enough to get in the way of his self-respect. And Matt had decided, as he palmed his face dry, he had some self-respect left; Beth hadn't left him much, but what few shreds remained, were his.

There ought to be a law against women speaking their mind so bluntly, Matt thought, as he stared up at the bedroom ceiling, waiting for sleep. Some women knew how to talk, to make men say things they wished they hadn't. Beth was one of those women. So he had looked at her. Big deal. All she had to do was mention the fact, and he was spouting, "You feel it, too?" Matt rubbed his face hard, wishing desperately he could take back the day, do it over differently. It didn't matter how different, just not the way it had turned out.

Pushing onto his side, he stared at the bed beside his, envying Ethan and Ryan. They didn't have to go in to work in the morning, and face his boss.

His boss.

Wow, had she smelled good. Even at dinner, he could still detect the faint scent of jasmine she had worn that morning. That had been jasmine, hadn't it? Mrs. Lott had jasmine growing in her garden, though right now they didn't have any flowers. Matt wished he could compare the scents: on the plants, he hadn't thought about it much, but on Beth, it could stop him in his tracks.

Enough, Matt thought, flopping onto his other side to stare at the wall. He had to stop thinking about Beth. Even more importantly, he had to put a stop to her and her "fair warning."

How had he let it get that far, anyway?
Since sleep had abandoned him, Matt spent his wakeful night tossing in the sheets, thinking and punishing himself every time he thought of Beth in any other way than his boss.

Beth readied herself a full hour earlier than her usual morning routine, then drove to the nursery in Las Cruces. Seven-thirty could not come soon enough for her. At seven-thirty, the employees were supposed to arrive to help prepare the store for the eight o’clock opening. Beth expected Amy and Sylvia to be late, but not Matt. At seven-thirty on the dot, his pickup truck would pull into the parking lot. Any minute now, she expected to hear his footsteps, see his face.

But no one arrived at seven-thirty. Not even Matt. He wasn’t late-- not technically-- but this was the first time she could recall when he wasn’t as punctual as an atomic clock. Maybe that was carrying things a bit too far, but after last night, after that talk they’d had outside Matt’s house, his absence this morning felt intentional. The thought stung her, but not enough to forget the promise she’d made to herself.

Five minutes before opening, Beth heard the tramp of Matt’s boots as he entered the building. She stood up from her office chair, looked into the store to see he had brought her food carrier.

"In here, Matt," she called to him.

He moved past the checkout, made his way to the other side of the room without smiling.

The Stetson was pulled low over his face, and his eyes had trouble meeting hers when he came to the open office door. She noted he was very careful not to come inside.

Matt handed her the carrier, took a step back, looked over his shoulder at the empty aisles. He stood there, staring at nothing, while she opened the carrier and found her casserole dish.

"You didn't have to wash it, Matt. I would have done the dishes myself, if you had let me."

Matt tugged the work gloves out from his back pocket. "Want me to water the plants now?" he asked.

Beth closed the carrier. "I hope I didn't cause you too much trouble last night. It sounded as though you and Ethan were having quite a disagreement."

The cowboy hat hid Matt’s features as he stooped to knock dust from his boots. "I almost forgot-- the garden hose needs to be replaced," he said, straightening, looking into the store as he
spoke. "I can keep patching it if you want, but since you have so many hoses in stock, it doesn't make sense not to replace it. Either way, it's your call."

Beth set the carrier on the floor beside her desk. "I hope you enjoyed the meal. I have a tendency to cook Mexican food, because Luke said it reminded him of home. His father was born and raised in Southern California, and his mom came from Mexico."

"If you want me to water the plants, I should really get started, Mrs. Carter."

Beth reminded herself to keep breathing. "If you don't like Mexican food, I could try something else. Italian maybe? You guys like pizza, don't you?"

A groan strangled in Matt's throat. He swiped off the hat, vigorously rubbed his forehead with a gloved hand, then yanked the hat back on. His chest heaved in a long, slow sigh, and when it was over, she sensed he had calmed down. "If I don't get to the watering the first part of the day, some of the plants might wilt."

"I think I'll try pizza," Beth nodded, bending over her desk to make a note. "Although," she added, turning to smile at Matt, "you seemed to really enjoy the chimichangas. I won't cross Mexican food off the list just yet."

Matt squeezed his eyes shut.

"You'd better water those plants," Beth said, picking up her floppy sunhat. "I'm told they wilt without water."

He opened his eyes, glanced at her with a hint of a smile tugging at his mouth. It was so slight, so barely there, Beth wondered if she was falling prey to wishful thinking.

"Oh, and you'd better pull a new hose from inventory," she said, lightly brushing past him into the store. "Business might be bad, but if we look like we can't even afford a new garden hose, it'll won't help the nursery's image."

Matt moved away from her, half stumbling over the cast iron garden sculpture outside the office door in his escape. Beth turned to look at him, smiled when she saw the red blush of embarrassment creep up his neck.

"Do you need me to tell you where we keep the hoses?" she asked innocently. "They're on aisle--"
"I know where they're at," Matt said, regaining his balance as well as his composure. He flicked an annoyed glance at the sweet bunny statue that had gotten under his foot. "Stupid rabbit," he mumbled, then stalked off toward the garden hoses.

Beth pulled on her work gloves while she waited for Matt by the entrance. From the mild breeze, it promised to be another beautiful New Mexico day.

Matt stopped in his tracks when he saw Mrs. Carter, standing by the entrance with her gloves and that silly sunhat. Great. She was waiting for him. He shifted the garden hose to the other hand, lowered his chin, and plowed through the door as fast as he could without being obvious. He sure wished she'd go away.

Beth followed without a word of reproach. If he was hurting her feelings, she hid it well.

He tossed the new hose on the ground, then crouched to unscrew the old one from the faucet by the store wall. Beth pulled a box cutter from the pocket of her overalls, opened the blade, knelt to cut through the plastic ties binding the new hose. She unwound an end, then handed it to him so he could twist it into the faucet.

"May I ask you a personal question?" she asked as she stood up.

He squinted against the sunlight to look at her. "If I say 'no,' is it going to stop you from asking, anyway?"

"It would," she said with a smile. "Say the word, and I'll mind my own business."

Matt sighed inwardly. Why did she have to be so nice right now? Why couldn't she be gruff, make it easier for him to turn her down?

"What's the question?" he asked.

"Who's Helen?"

Matt didn't dare look at Beth. He kept his face down, his eyes on the new hose as he wound it into a neat circle.

"Where did you hear that name?" he asked quietly.
"When you and Ethan were fighting, I heard Ethan mention someone named Helen. Is she an old girlfriend of yours?"

Matt twisted on the spray nozzle. "I'm saying the word."

"Excuse me?" Beth asked.

Matt stood to his full height, faced Beth down without flinching a muscle. "I'm asking you to mind your own business."

"All right, Matt, if that's what you want."

He looked at Beth and she looked back.

The crazy thought came to him to ask if that scent she wore was jasmine. He fought it off, turned to get to work and water those plants.

To his relief, Beth went away. He didn't check to see where. It didn't matter. She no longer stood three feet away, slowly fogging his mind with perfume and the suggestions that came to him from just looking at her.

Matt realized he had to be more careful about that, more on guard. In his condition, it wasn't safe. He felt like an alcoholic craving booze. The thoughts, the suggestions made him feel sleazy, like he'd just crawled out from a sewer. Did he have any self-respect left? Maybe he didn't, maybe he'd spent it all on Helen.

The mere mention of Helen's name made him feel discouraged.

God, please give me grace, Matt prayed within himself. Don't let me give up. Not now.

Her eyes felt wet, and Beth hurried to dry them before Matt noticed. She took out the compact from her office desk, dabbed her eyes and cheeks with powder. Her disappointed reflection stared back from the small mirror. She hated those horrid freckles, her face. Her life. With a sigh of disgust, she snapped the compact shut. Dangerous thinking, she realized, and hurried back outside with her sunhat.

Thankfully, Matt hadn't fled the nursery after that miserable attempt to get to know him better. She found him behind the store, crouched over the potted geraniums, busily pinching out green shoots of grass.
She took a deep breath, moved to a nearby potting table to keep her hands busy. "I should have Amy doing that," Beth said, as Matt acknowledged Beth's return with a quick glance. "She spilled a bag of grass seed all over the place, and some of it scattered into the pots. It's made a terrible mess of things."

Out of the corner of her eye, Beth watched Matt. He said nothing.

"It's sometimes hard to know how to handle messes, isn't it?" Beth asked, her heart hopelessly lodged in her throat. "You do one thing, then suddenly, things don't turn out as you'd hoped they would."

The Stetson turned away from her, and Beth braced herself with a silent prayer.

"As I said, I should really be getting Amy to pull out all that grass."

Again no answer, not even the smallest of glances in her direction. This couldn't be a good sign. Beth didn't know how she could take Matt's silence to mean anything but, "go away." Plunging her trowel into the potting soil, Beth turned, leaned against the table to look at Matt. She might be taking a terrible risk by speaking now, but she didn't see any other way.

"Matt?"

He looked up, the hat shading his eyes from the sun, as well as her. "What do you want?" he asked, his voice dull, discouraged.

"Do I have your permission to speak to you as a friend, and not your employer?"

He shrugged halfheartedly. "I suppose. It's kind of tough to forget you're my boss, though."

"For just a few minutes, let's pretend you don't work for me, and we're not at the nursery."

In obvious skepticism, Matt looked about the nursery, then at her.

Beth folded her arms. "Humor me."

He shrugged, went back to his weeding without further comment on her sanity.

"I think," Beth said, trying to speak her mind, but not her heart, "if our friendship is going to last for very long, we need better communication."
Matt gave her a sidelong glance.

"No," Beth persisted courageously, "I mean it. We seem to get our signals crossed so much of the time, I think it would help if we talked about our expectations from this relationship."

Matt immediately straightened. "What relationship?"

"Friendship is a type of relationship," she insisted, hoping she hadn't said too much.

"Maybe it is," Matt said, folding his arms across his chest, "but you seem to take your friendships more seriously than I take mine. When I'm friends with someone, I'm simply that -- just friends. I don't bat my eyes at them, drown them in jasmine until they can't think straight."

They faced each other, arms crossed, very serious and both a little tense.

"I don't bat my eyes," Beth said a little defensively. "And I'm not trying to drown anyone in jasmine, let alone you."

Matt raised his brows. "So it is jasmine?"

"I think if we expect too much from our friendship," Beth pressed on, this time careful to avoid the "r" word, "then someone will very likely be disappointed-- probably, me."

"Is it?" he asked.

"Is it what?"

"Is it jasmine?" For some ridiculous reason, Matt seemed to need to know.

"Yes, I suppose it is. As I was saying, we're going to be disappointed if we expect too much--"

"Hold on there, you were the one who was going to be disappointed, remember? I don't expect anything but a whole lot of trouble. That's what I've been expecting, and so far I haven't been disappointed."

Beth looked at him, noticed the fear in his voice, in his eyes. She was beginning to feel some of that fear, herself. "Have I been very much trouble, Matt?"

He lifted a shoulder, suddenly hesitant. "Yeah, I suppose."
"Is it because of the night I lost Bailey?" She didn't want to know, and yet she had to ask. "Am I giving you so much trouble because you're afraid of what I might do to myself?"

The strained tension between them pulled even tighter, and Matt looked as though the words were being dragged out of him, almost against his will. "That was trouble, sure, but that's not exactly what I'm talking about."

Evidently, something else was bothering him even more. What that could be, Beth had no way of knowing unless she asked.

"Have I asked anything from you besides friendship, Matt?"

"Not in so many words," he said, shifting in his scuffed boots. "It's what you've left unsaid, that bothers me."

"What are you afraid of, Matt?"

A look of manly defiance immediately crossed his face. "Who said I was afraid?"

"You did -- just now. What have I left unsaid?"

His eyes squeezed shut, and she saw him take several deep breaths. "You want something more than friendship," he said finally, opening his eyes, looking at her with an almost sad expression on his handsome face.

"And this frightens you?" Beth asked.

"It frightens me," Matt said, his voice hushed as though she were the only one he wanted to hear his words, "because that 'something more' you want is not something I can give you."

Beth didn't know what to say. She stared at him for several moments, blanked, then found her voice. "What are you trying to tell me, Matt?"

He looked more frustrated than ever. "I'm trying to tell you -- what I've been trying to tell you all along -- is that I'm not a good person. You don't know what I've done, what I'm capable of doing again. I suppose, if I'm honest, I'm afraid I can't even give you friendship."

"Homegrown Dandelions by Judith Bronte"
At that very moment, Amy entered through the loading docks, a clipboard in the crook of her arm. "Sorry, I'm late Mrs.--" Amy looked at them both, promptly turned about and left them alone.

Matt looked ready to retreat as well, but Beth wouldn't let him go so easily.

"How could you have anything to fear from friendship?" Beth asked in a troubled voice.

Matt cast a weary glance in the direction of the nursery, then looked back at Beth. "I'm afraid we can't stay just friends, and I'm afraid what I'll do if that happens."

"What?" Beth felt as frustrated as she thought Matt looked. "I don't understand, Matt. What are you afraid you'll do?"

"Please, Beth, don't make me say it."

"I won't make you say anything, but I need to know what you're so afraid of."

He yanked off his cowboy hat, and Beth could see his eyes had grown intense from their discussion. "Me, Beth. It's me, I'm afraid of."

"I don't understand, Matt."

Matt turned his eyes to the loading dock, frowned. "Sylvia's here," he muttered darkly.

Not wanting to let the moment pass without understanding Matt's fear, Beth stepped between him and the loading dock to block his view of Sylvia. "Please, Matt. What are you afraid of?"

The hat rotated in his hands, and he couldn't look Beth in the eye until after he'd cleared his throat. When he finally did, she could see wetness gathering in his eyes. "I, uh-- man, this is hard." He planted the hat back on his head, took a deep breath. "I'm afraid of being around you too much, because something could easily happen that I'll regret for the rest of my life."

"What do you mean? What's the thing you'll regret? Falling in love?"

Matt pressed his lips together, but just before he did, she saw them tremble ever so slightly. "I'm an addict, Beth."

She stood there, wondering if she had heard him correctly. "You're a drug addict?"
"Yes, I am -- or at least, I used to be. But that's not exactly what I'm talking about, either." He glanced around her shoulder, grimaced. "Sylvia is trying to eavesdrop, again."

Beth turned, saw that Matt was right. Sylvia stood by the water faucet, her back propped against the building, her gaze directed at them.

"Go help Amy at the cash register," Beth called to Sylvia, not caring if the directions made any sense. All she wanted was for Sylvia to go, so Matt could finish what he had been trying to say.

With a mischievous look that said she thought they were doing something naughty, Sylvia pushed away from the wall, replaced her sunglasses, then sauntered into the store.

Beth turned back to Matt. "I think you were trying to tell me something. I'd like to hear it now, please."

His lips pressed together until they were white. "I was a meth addict, but that's not all. Me and... someone else-- she and I would get high, then have sex until we passed out. Meth is like that-- once you start something, you can't stop. I gave that life up, but the problem is, it was easier to kick the drugs than everything else that went with them."

"I think I understand," Beth said quietly.

His smile trembled, and the lips tightened once more. "No, I don't think you do. Until you've lived it, you can't really know what it's like. You think you're alive and pulsing with life, but it isn't life at all, it's death. You're a living corpse, waiting for someone to bury you. Thing is, Beth, when I'm around you, sometimes I want things that I know I shouldn't. You keep pressing me, and I'm afraid if you do, I'll have a weak moment and turn my back on everything I know is right. I can't -- I won't -- do that to God, to my family, or to myself. Not again."

"I'm not pressing you for sex, Matt," Beth said, dearly hoping Sylvia and Amy weren't nearby to overhear the conversation. "I need a friend, and to be honest, I'd like a man back in my life. But, Beth realized she was making a very important decision as she spoke, "I don't want a relationship that isn't right. This has to be God's way, or no way at all."

Matt swallowed hard.

"If I do something to make you uneasy, let me know. I'll go away if I have to, but I promise I won't knowingly push you into temptation. You'll be on your guard, and so will I. But I can't know to do anything differently, unless you're honest with me about your feelings."
The wetness collected even faster in his eyes, until he was forced to palm away a stray tear. "You still want to be friends?" he asked, his voice catching on a stifled sob. "After what I just told you?"

"I still want to be friends," Beth said, hoping her smile gave him some comfort. "I like you, Matt."

Matt's smile looked shaky. "I guess I must like you, too. I haven't told anyone this stuff since Pastor Mark."

That came as a surprise to Beth. "Pastor Mark knows? I've never heard him mention drugs... or the other thing."

Matt looked at her, a trace of grimness in his eyes. "You can't even say it, can you? You have no idea what you're trying to get yourself into, Beth." Matt inhaled, let out a breath as though he had been holding it for a very long time. "I asked Pastor Mark not to repeat it to anyone. I've got enough strikes against me, without people knowing everything I've ever done. I didn't tell him all of it, though. Even you don't know-- not by a long-shot."

Despite the warning, a calm sort of resolve settled into Beth. There very well might be more to Matt's past than what he had just told her, and chances were it wasn't pretty. But he couldn't frightened her that easily. Not this time.

Her smile felt calm, unshakeable. "You can count on my discretion, Matt. I may have my faults, but gossiping isn't one of them. What you've said this morning, won't go any farther than me. I promise."

The cowboy hat hid his features as he stared at his boots. "All right," was all he said -- for all Beth knew, all he could say. He remained stone silent, until she broke the awkward stillness.

"I suppose we'd better get back to work," Beth said, glancing quickly at her watch. "Go ahead and finish pulling the seedlings from those pots. When you're done, sweep the store, then straighten the displays."

He tipped his hat, said "Yes, ma'am," and returned to the geraniums -- all without looking at her.

Beth refused to be disheartened. They had made progress, even if Matt refused to ever admit it.

What had just happened? Matt thought about it carefully, half frantic, half numb as he tried to untangle the discussion he had just had with Beth. He finished a pot, moved to the next, momentarily swiped at the worried perspiration beading on his forehead. She'd done it again.
He had said so much more than he had ever intended. Especially to her. Maybe he could blame it on the jasmine. An unconscious grin spread across his face. He'd guessed right about that.

The happy feelings disappeared the moment he remembered he had told her about being an addict. Why, oh, why, had he told her that? She didn't have to know. Being friends didn't mean he had to spill his guts to her.

Matt forced himself to stop, take a moment to clench his trembling hands, keep them steady. She knew about the meth now, about his addictions and the struggles he still had. But at least he'd had enough sense to keep the rest from her.

At least he hadn't told her everything.

He had to calm down. He just had to. He still had his job, didn't he? She knew about the drugs, his other shameful addiction, and she hadn't fired him. In fact, she still wanted to be friends.

That brought Matt to another troubling thought. She wanted another man in her life. Maybe he shouldn't have held back, maybe he should've told her more, enough to scare her off and leave him alone forever.

Matt wondered how quickly he could find another job. He pulled off his hat, dried his face against his shoulder, put the hat back on and went back to pinching out the tiny blades of grass.

He didn't want to leave, but after their conversation, didn't this mean he had to?

God's way, or no way at all. Beth had said that. Remembering it made Matt feel better. He felt even better when he remembered she had promised not to push him into temptation. Whatever else she had said, whatever else he had said, that had been the most important part of their talk. Without that assurance, Matt felt sure he would have quit his job as soon he found work elsewhere. He knew his own weakness, but what he hadn't known for sure, was Beth's determination to do things God's way.

Matt couldn't help grinning. Beth was fighting, just as he'd prayed she would. Well, he hadn't expected her to fight for him, but she was determined to do the right thing and that was most definitely an answer to prayer.

With this in mind, Matt decided it would be all right for him to keep his job at the nursery. He prayed it was the right decision.
Even from her office desk, Beth could feel the curiosity of the store upon her. The customers didn't know something was going on, (Beth made sure she thanked God for the customers), but Sylvia and Amy sure did. Both women had seen the earnestness of Beth's conversation with Matt, and both women looked eager to know what had been said. Neither one asked, and Beth decided not to bring it up if they didn't.

As soon as Sylvia had a free moment, she did just that.

Slumped against the doorjamb, Sylvia stared at Beth until Beth put down the phone to ask what she wanted.

"What's with you and Matt?" Sylvia asked, her manner careless, seemingly unaffected by anyone else's troubles but her own. "You and Matt were really going at it this morning."

"We were just having a talk, that's all," Beth said, straightening the papers on her desk.

Mischief played on Sylvia's mouth. The glossy red sheen of her lips made her look as though she had been drinking blood. "It looked to me, whatever you and Matt were talking about seemed awfully important. Serious even."

Beth caught that word-- serious -- just as she knew Sylvia had intended her to. "Yes, Silvi, things are getting a little more serious between Matt and myself. Does that answer your question?"

Beth and Sylvia exchanged an icy cold stare.

"Does this mean you two are involved?" Sylvia asked finally.

A loaded question if there ever was one, Beth thought with a twinge of panic. It took her a moment to decide how she wanted to answer. "He's off limits, if that's what you mean."

"I think I'll wait for him to tell me that," Sylvia said with a very unladylike snort. "Nothing personal, but I don't believe Matt's all that interested in you. You're not his type. What are you five, six, years older than him?" Sylvia screwed her nose as though she smelled something past its expiration date. "Too old."

Sylvia must've seen that she'd hit her mark, for a smug smile parted the glossy red sheen as she sashayed back to her work.

It stung, Beth realized. No use pretending it hadn't. Shaking off the pain, Beth went to the filing cabinet to retrieve some information before she called one of her suppliers. She didn't want to
think about what Sylvia had said, and instead chose to bury herself in the business of running the nursery.

Great. Just what he needed. Sylvia again. Matt pushed his broom across the floor, stopping abruptly as Sylvia deliberately stepped into his path.

"What does it take to get your attention?" she asked with a soft feminine pout. Anymore lipstick, and it'd be dripping from her lips.

"Mrs. Carter told me to sweep up," Matt said with a shrug.

The pout deepened. "That's not what I meant, and you know it. I feel sorry for you, Matt," Sylvia said, moving toward him with an anything but a harmless smile. "I'd hate to have to endure my boss's advances, simply because I want to keep my job. It must be very hard for you."

Matt felt his grip tighten on the broom handle, but he said nothing.

"Beth must be so desperate, to have to force someone like you to be interested in her." Sylvia raised a manicured hand, admired her brightly lacquered nails. They had to be artificial. No human would grow them that long, not even a woman. "When you get bored of her, Matt, you should look me up." Sylvia leaned toward him provocatively. "If I'm still available."

Not caring if he missed that opportunity, Matt nudged the broom at her open toed sandals, and she jumped out of his way. He continued on with his work, not bothering to comment on Sylvia's hateful remarks. That a woman like Beth must be desperate to even bother looking in his direction, was a given. But Sylvia had gone too far when she'd accused Beth of forcing him into a relationship he didn't want. The problem was, he did, and Beth knew it. That was why they'd had that discussion this morning, and why he knew that when lunchtime came, he'd eat inside the store instead of out in his truck.

"Watch your step, Taylor," Matt told himself as he put the broom away to go straighten the displays. "I'm only staying so I can keep my job and be a friend to Beth. Don't you dare forget who you are. Her heart is bruised enough, without you adding to her pain."

Matt laughed darkly. He sure was stupid, all right. As if he needed to worry about her feeling too much. After everything Beth had learned about him that morning, she would never be able to feel anything but pity where he was concerned.

Certainly never love.
"[How] shall a young man [Matt] cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to Thy [God's] word. With my whole heart have I sought Thee: O let me not wander from Thy commandments. Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against Thee."
~ Psalm 119:9-11 ~

"Take us the foxes [Sylvia], the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes."
~ Song of Solomon 2:15 ~
Chapter Ten
Just Friends

"There be three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not: The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a [woman]."
~ Proverbs 30:18, 19 ~

Relief breathed into Matt when he saw Sylvia leave for lunch. His relief wasn't as great as he would have liked, for Amy stayed behind to eat in the office. For once, Matt had wanted to be alone with Beth. Only for lunch, of course, and for what reason Matt couldn't explain intelligibly to his own satisfaction. He simply wanted to eat his peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in the same general vicinity as Beth, and to eat them without Sylvia or Amy watching.

The light sound of women talking gently echoed near the back of the store as Matt stepped inside after retrieving his lunch from the pickup. He'd never eaten in the store before, but knew Beth wouldn't mind for he knew the girls sometimes ate in the office. Struggling not to feel as though he were intruding, Matt crossed the floor to the open door, then stuck his head inside the office to see if there were any room for him.

Her feet crossed in the walkway, Beth was scooping out yogurt from a dainty container, the plastic spoon coming halfway to her mouth before she saw Matt in the doorway.

"Matt." She said his name in shock, as though surprised to see him. The spoon was returned to the container. "Is there something you want?"

From a chair near the desk, Amy smiled, her eyes traveling to the brown paper bag in his hand; without a word, Amy set aside her own lunch to retrieve a second folding chair from behind a filing cabinet.

"Oh, you're here to eat lunch." Beth moved so he could pass between her and Amy and get to his seat. She said nothing, but watched as he moved past her.

His elbow hit the filing cabinet, but he managed to squeeze into the space where he guessed Sylvia usually occupied. Wondering why in the world he had come, Matt opened his bag to pull out a sandwich. He shut his eyes for a silent prayer, then bit into the bread. The women remained quiet, though Matt did his best not to notice. He looked at the pasta salad Amy had in her clear food container, and tried not to wonder how it tasted. On the desk, Beth had prepared
some sort of delicious smelling rice dish, and from the steam, he could tell it was hot. Puzzled, Matt looked about until he saw a microwave tucked into the far corner of the office.

"If you ever need to heat up your meal," Beth said, putting down her yogurt to pick up the rice, "you can use the microwave. And there's a mini fridge," she added, pointing to the object on the floor at his feet, "if you need to keep your lunch cold. Just be sure to put your name on anything that's yours; things have a tendency to disappear if you're not careful."

Amy smiled apologetically to Matt. "Sylvia accidentally takes things from the fridge that aren't hers, so it's best to write your name on anything you care about."

"Oh." Matt didn't want to comment on Sylvia, so he continued to eat his sandwich.

"I was just telling Mrs. Carter about this cute guy I met at the supermarket," Amy said, putting down her fork long enough to take a sip from a bottle of iced tea. "Like I was saying, we talked and I thought we hit it off pretty well. He kept finding an excuse to keep from walking away, and of course, I did the same; we must have blocked the aisle for a good ten minutes! Then what do you think? You'll never guess, not in a million years!" Amy paused for dramatic effect and Matt had the good sense not to guess. "I still can't believe it!" she glowed brightly. "This incredibly good-looking guy actually asked me out on a date!" She gave a loud squeal of girly delight, her face a picture of unrealistic expectations. "It was fate to meet like we did," she continued. "He's so absolutely perfect-- my knight in shining armor and prince charming all rolled into one." She shook her head as though no one could possibly have a differing opinion.

Matt sighed mildly. In his years of experience with women, there were some ways in which all of them were terrifyingly the same. This was one of them. A guy had caught her attention, and now the poor man would have to live up to those fantasy-filled expectations. How fair was that? He waited for Amy's elation to die down, then relaxed to eat another sandwich.

Leaning forward, Beth opened the mini fridge, pulled out another bottle of iced tea with a fancy label. She offered it to him, and without thinking, he accepted. He didn't even like tea.

Amy finished off the last of her pasta salad, took another sip from her beverage. "I've been around a lot of guys, but Joe is different. It's like when he sees me, he's actually seeing me, and not just something superficial like what I'm wearing or how my hair is fixed. I don't feel like I have to tell him what I'm thinking, he just knows."

Matt couldn't help groaning. "Do me a favor, Amy-- when you find out the guy can't read your mind, cut him some slack."
Amy laughed in good humor. "That is such a typical male response."

"Yeah, well," he paused, gulped down several mouthfuls of iced tea, swiped his mouth with the back of his hand, "this Joe hasn't even taken you out yet, and if he can't guess what you're thinking five minutes into the date, he's already fodder for tomorrow's lunch discussion."

"That is not true! It's simply not true!"

Matt slid back in the chair, rested the bottle on his knee. "Do you know what the trouble with you women is?"

Amy folded her arms. "No, enlighten us."

"You aren't realistic. You've been sold a bill of goods by every chick flick, romance novel, and fairy tale ending with 'happily ever after.' There is no such thing as a perfect match. You'll go out with Joe tonight, and when your feet never leave the ground, you're going to blame him for not sweeping you away. I tell you, the guy has lost and he doesn't even know it yet." Matt took another swig of tea, forgetting that he didn't even like the stuff; it didn't actually taste so bad, loaded down with sugar.

Amy stared at Beth. "Did you just hear what he said?"

"I heard."

"And?"

"And what? Matt's entitled to his own opinion."

"But it sounds as though he doesn't believe in romance."

It was Beth's turn to smile mildly. "He never said that, and besides, there are other things in life besides love."

The young woman frowned. "Are you referring to sex?"

"What I'm referring to, what I'm trying to say," Beth spoke slowly, Matt sensing she was choosing her words very carefully because he was listening, "is that there's something else besides romance, something not as deep, but sometimes just as meaningful."

Amy nodded. "You mean sex."
"I mean friendship." Beth looked at Amy the way a teacher looks at a student, the way a more experienced person looks at someone who doesn't know any better. Matt was well acquainted with that look, and knew Amy's best choice was to back off.

Exasperated, Amy shook her head. "I hope I'm never as cynical about love as you two," she said, unable to resist a parting shot before leaving the discussion alone. Amy gathered her trash, dumped it into the waste basket, then went to go see to a customer.

"She's young and has a lot to learn about life," Beth said, sounding somewhat embarrassed by Amy's nonsense; after all, he had grouped Beth into the "you women" right alongside Amy, and Beth probably felt he thought she held the same views. "I prefer to be more levelheaded than that," Beth said, confirming Matt's hunch. "Falling so crazy in love isn't necessarily a good thing."

"I agree." Matt tipped his bottle to empty the last of the beverage into his mouth.

"Just look at her," Beth sighed, leaning forward in the chair and watching Amy, "she's chatting with that customer as though she's already forgotten about her disagreement. I wish I could shrug off things as easily." Beth was silent, then she turned and looked at him. "What she said about us-- it doesn't make us cynical, does it, Matt?"

He frowned. "No, it makes us realistic. We've both had love before, and like you said, we both know it's not all it's cracked up to be."

"I didn't say that-- not in that context," Beth said quickly. "I want love, Matt."

"But you want realistic love," he shrugged. "You can't even really call it love. It's more like friendship. There's a big difference between what you want, and what Amy is expecting tonight when she goes out with 'Mr. Right.'"

From Beth's silence, Matt knew she was in complete agreement.

Reality became abundantly clear to Beth after their conversation. Matt had only heard what he had wanted to hear, making him a more typical male than she had previously thought. He also didn't share her views of love, though after what he'd just said, Matt HAD been in love at some point in his life. Maybe even with Helen. Old girlfriends aside, Beth regretted trying to distance herself so far from Amy's romantic notions. Though she had spoken in defense of friendship, and had mentioned she thought crazy love wasn't always a good idea, Matt's idea of being realistic was still very different from her own.
And that, Beth surmised, potentially made Matt about as romantic as the toaster oven sitting on her kitchen counter. Deciding she liked him anyway, she resumed work with Matt very much on her mind.

As closing time approached, Beth wondered if it were too soon to offer to bring over another dinner for the Taylors. Would Matt allow it, and more to the point, was she being pushy? Overly eager? She walked a fine line, a line she couldn't define but knew was there. No, she decided, she would back off and make no mention of dinners or Mexican food. She would still continue her fight, but knew if she didn't be careful with Matt, he would come to resent her presence as an intrusion.

When Matt told her he had finished his work, and he offered no smile, her heart sank. Maybe she had already made herself too much of a nuisance, maybe he was angry with her for pressing him that morning for an answer. She had tried not to hurt him, and had approached him as a friend and not as a boss.

In her anxiety, she at first didn't notice Matt's hesitancy to simply leave, get in his truck and drive away. For once, he lingered, still not smiling, but not walking away, either.

Amy left as soon as she possibly could to rush home and get ready for Joe. Sylvia seemed to wallow in a dark mood all day, one that grew noticeably darker when she saw Matt remaining behind as she left the store. Beth knew Sylvia's jealously was getting the best of her, and prayed it wouldn't cause trouble for Matt.

As Beth went about shutting the nursery for the night, Matt remained outside. She glimpsed him through the office window, again when she moved through the store to the front door. He didn't leave, just stood by the gate with hat in hand, the retreating daylight casting a warm hue on his brown hair.

Then she realized what was happening. Matt was waiting for her.

Trying not to appear overly anxious, she took her time leaving the store, locking the door, then crossing to where Matt stood by the gate.

Beth tucked the keys into her purse. "It's been a long day."

"Yes," he nodded, "it has." Silence reigned supreme, until he added, "Long, but good."
"I appreciate your telling me about..." Beth paused, searching for the courage to speak the words.

"My addictions?" he ventured.

"Yes-- I appreciate your honesty."

He shrugged lightly. "I wasn't going to lie to you."

She smiled, but to her discouragement, he didn't. The Stetson fumbled in his hands, his eyes turned to the toes of his scuffed boots, then to the pavement, as if searching for something on the ground.

"Would you like to come over Sunday afternoon?" The offer came suddenly, without warning, and his eyes jerked up to meet hers. "For lunch-- I meant for lunch. After church service." He shrugged, though this time it was hardly a causal gesture. "It won't be anything special. I'm cooking, so..." he stopped, sighed heavily. "It won't be anything special."

Beth couldn't help herself, and smiled. "I can't imagine you doing anything, and it not being special."

"You're teasing me again," he said, a half grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

She cocked her head to one side. "Maybe just a little."

"I thought you said you wouldn't play games with me."

"This is one game I don't mind playing," she said, feeling the full glow of his presence on her heart.

He slanted her a cautious look, but Beth knew he was pleased.

"So, are you coming?"

"You know I never turn down your invitations, Matt."

"There's a first time for everything," he breathed with a slight grin.

Even a first date. Beth didn't say it, but she certainly thought it.
Looking more confident than before, Matt put the hat back on. "Come around at one. It'll give us time to get the house ready."

"I'll be there."

"I'm glad we had that talk, Beth."

"Which one?"

He smiled broadly. "Both. It's good to know where we stand. Like you said this morning-- no unrealistic love, just meaningful friendship. I like that. Keeps things simple." He chuckled softly, the sound of his voice melting Beth until she thought her knees would buckle. "Not many women are as levelheaded as you, Beth. I guess that makes you special."

Despite the complete and utter lack of romance in his manner of speaking, Beth returned his smile without hesitation. Hadn't she told him she preferred to be levelheaded instead of crazy in love? She had-- she did-- but not so very levelheaded as Matt wanted.

"Don't show up early," he asked, breaking in on her thoughts. "The house is usually a mess Sunday mornings, and I'll need time to get the meal ready. It's not often we have a guest over for lunch."

Disappointment crowded her thoughts as Beth understood Matt didn't view his invitation as a date. Even so, she managed a smile. "I'll be as punctual as you."

He flashed a grin, then they both stood there until it felt awkward.

"Guess I should get going," he said, tossing a glance at his watch. "The kids are home by now, and probably wondering where I am."

"Thank you for the invitation."

"I'm not trying to settle our account, Beth."

Pulsing warmth spread throughout her being, small ripples of happiness erasing the sting of disappointment. She felt like a teenager again. Crazy.

He gave one of his half smiles, almost shy but at the same time unnervingly direct and very male. "I'll see you at work tomorrow."
It took Beth a moment to remember that today was only Friday; she would have to wait a full day before Matt’s lunch. "See you tomorrow," Beth called as he strode to his pickup.

He turned to look at her one more time. She waved, and he tipped his hat. As the truck pulled away, Beth took a deep breath to steady herself. Matt had a way of looking at her so deeply, so thoroughly, she often thought he could see her soul. But that, she reminded herself with a quiet laugh, Matt would never approve. Such notions were too unrealistic.

On the drive home, Matt felt a mixture of bliss with an undercurrent of disappointment. He knew he shouldn't be, but Matt had secretly been disheartened when he heard Beth talking so warmly of a meaningful friendship. Sure, guys think women blow the whole love thing out of proportion, but friendship being just as meaningful as love? Ouch. Maybe love wasn't all it was cracked up to be, but he still wanted it.

And Beth didn't. She had made that clear with her "meaningful" talk with Amy.

"It's for the best," Matt rebuked himself as he came to a red light at an intersection. "You can't fall in love. It wouldn't be fair to Beth, not with everything you've done. Besides, she's not interested in you that way-- she couldn't possibly, not after what she knows about you." He punched on the radio, intent on getting his mind elsewhere. They were friends. He wanted-- no, needed-- to keep it that way, and yet... Matt sighed heavily. For all his past talk about friendship, whenever he looked at Beth, being friends was the furthest thing from his mind.

Matt rested his hands on the steering wheel, lightly accelerated when the signal turned green. "It's for the best, Taylor. I told her I could only give her friendship, and that's all she wants from me. Just shut up and be happy."

After being around Beth so much, it was good to know where he stood. Simple, uncomplicated friendship. In spite of his difficult past and scarred soul, she still wanted to be friends. Matt smiled with all his heart. She was special.

Instead of Ryan running to greet him at the door, Matt found his baby brother in the kitchen, licking grape jelly from his fingers.

"What are you doing? And why are you eating before dinner?" Matt moved quickly to Ryan, pulled the jelly jar from the boy's hand. "Where's Ethan and Cassie?"
Ryan smacked his sticky purple lips, grinning ear to ear with sugar coated joy. "Ethan is in our room, studying."

Groaning patiently, Matt lifted Ryan onto the countertop to clean his face and hands. "And Cassie? Where is she?"

"She's in her bathroom crying."

"Crying? What about?"

Ryan shrugged.

Grape jelly doesn't come off of small fingers fast enough, not when there's a twelve and a half-year-old crying in the bathroom. Matt hurried as fast as he could, calling out to Ethan for help but getting no response.

"Stay out of the jelly jar," Matt said, setting Ryan back on the floor. "I mean it, buddy. And while you're at it, go brush your teeth." He patted Ryan's bottom, then headed through the living room, down the short hall to Cassie's bedroom.

"Cass?" He banged on the door, fearing another menstrual crisis, and wondering what he would do if it wasn't. Having a preteen in the family was complicated even more by the fact the preteen was a girl. In a house full of boys, Cassie's troubles kept Matt on his toes. "Cass, open the door!"

He waited impatiently, straining to hear her cry. He heard nothing, then the soft footsteps of someone coming to the door. It opened, and Cassie looked out at him with red rimmed eyes.

Matt breathed deeply. At least she looked mostly coherent. "Have you been crying?" It was a stupid question-- he knew it-- but the words flew out of his mouth before he could take them back. He knelt, pulled out a clean handkerchief and dried her face. "What is it, Cass? Did you have a hard day at school?"

Cassie shook her head "no," then hugged him with more tears.

Helpless to do much else until she calmed down, Matt hugged his sister as Ethan sauntered down the hall, the teenager's hands shoved into his pockets. Matt immediately recognized the worried stance of his brother, then noticed with some shock that Ethan's eyes were red, as well.

"What happened?" Matt asked.
Ethan lifted a shoulder. "Mom called."

"When?"

"I don't know-- an hour ago, I guess."

"What did she want?"

Ethan's careless attitude cracked a moment, and he sniffed back some tears. "What she always wants. Money."

"Did you promise her anything?" Matt was on his feet in an instant, Cassie still clinging to him. "Did you?"

"No, of course not. I know better than that, Matty."

"Cass," Matt looked down at her, his arm around the girl's shoulders. "Did you?"

The guilty look on her face said it all.

"Cass, how could you? You know what she'll do with it."

"She begged so hard, Matty! She said if I loved her at all, I would give her what she needed!"

"When is she supposed to be here?"

Cassie wiped her eyes. "Tonight or tomorrow. Please, Matty, this time it'll be different. She said she'd stay and make a birthday cake for Ryan."

"His birthday was weeks ago."

"But she really wanted to, Matty. She was sorry for missing his birthday, and promised to make it up to us. To all of us."

Distracted, Matt rubbed his forehead, nearly knocking off the Stetson in the process. "I've heard it a million times before, Cass, and so have you. You know better than to believe her now."

"But, Matty--"
"No buts!" Matt surprised himself with his own forcefulness. Cassie swallowed hard, and he rubbed her shoulder to stop her from crying again. "Cass, she doesn't care about us. If she did, she would have changed long before now." He looked steadily into Cassie's soft blue eyes. "She doesn't care."

A fresh sob escaped Cassie's lips, and Matt hugged her with all the fierce protection of an older brother. Their mother's promises hurt everyone, but especially Cassie and Ryan. They needed her so much, and she was never there. Not when it counted.

Matt looked to Ethan, reminding himself that even Ethan wasn't too old to be untouched by their mom. "Does Ryan know she's coming?"

"No." Ethan dried his face against his shoulder, turned and left the hall.

"Did Mom leave you her number?" Matt asked Cassie, patting his sister on the back, hoping she would calm down. Contact with their mother usually turned everyone inside out, causing fresh pain to old wounds that had never healed. "Cass, did she give you a way to contact her?"

"No."

Matt wasn't surprised. It was so like Mom to do that, to stay away and not show up until she wanted something from her children. If she gave them her cell number, they might actually call.

Standing in the living room, Ryan looked down the hall at Matt and Cassie, his small face worried.

"Ethan's really quiet, Matty," the boy said, coming to Matt with a somewhat fearful voice. "He locked the bedroom door, and won't let me in."

"Let him alone for awhile," Matt gave Ryan, and then Cassie a brave look to encourage them to do the same. "We need to clean up the house, pick up the toys in the living room, and do some major dusting before Sunday."

"Mom won't care about a messy house," Cassie said, brushing away the hair from her eyes. "She never does."

"It's not for Mom's sake." Matt looked at Ryan, saw the boy's face suddenly grow hopeful. "Mom's coming tonight or tomorrow--"
Before Matt could finish, Ryan began bouncing up and down, chanting excitedly, "Mommy's coming! Mommy's coming!" until Cassie begged him to be quiet. When that didn't work, Matt picked up Ryan, asked Cassie to get a head start cleaning the house, then carried the boy into the kitchen to begin fixing dinner.

"Mommy's coming!" Ryan couldn't hold still, absolutely refused to be quiet, and tugged at Matt's shirt so many times to ask when she would arrive, it wore on Matt's patience.

"I don't know, Ryan. Settle down and let me work."

When Ryan took his excitement into the living room, Matt tried to gather his sanity. It wasn't easy, not when one of the persons he least wanted to see made Ryan so very happy. He could still hear the boy chanting about his mommy, and knew he would camp out by the living room window to wait for her.

"Don't let her stay, God. Please, don't let her stay." Matt twisted off the top of a bottle of spaghetti sauce, dumped its contents into the pan to simmer. That's all he needed right now. Mom. She hadn't even arrived yet, and already the pain and resentment felt unbearable. He jammed the spoon into the pan, sloshed the sauce around until it splattered on his jeans. While he worked to get the stain out with a wet paper towel, Cassie came into the kitchen. She slumped against the refrigerator and watched him.

"Do you think she'll stay for long, Matty?"

"I hope not."

"But she could if she wanted to, couldn't she?"

"Cass..." Matt sighed, knowing how vulnerable Cassie was when it came to their mother. He tossed the paper towel away, turned back to the stove. "Let's not talk about it until she gets here, okay?" He glanced over his shoulder at Cassie. "She knows the rules. It's up to her."

He dumped pasta into a large pan of boiling water as Cassie moved to the stove to watch.

"She'll be good, Matty. Wait and see. This time will be different."

Matt muttered darkly. "Yeah, right."

"Please, Matty, give her a chance."
He wanted to scream that he'd given that woman who so glibly called herself their mother, all the chances he could, and it still hadn't been enough. It hadn't, and for all he knew, it never would be.

"I'll give her the same chance as I always do, but" -- he looked at Cassie -- "I won't let her hurt you or the others. That's a promise." Matt didn't know how good that promise was, considering his mom had already caused more than a little grief with just her phone call. "Not to change the subject, but why aren't you cleaning up the house?"

A weak smile parted Cassie's mouth. "Not to change the subject back, but why should I when Mom won't care?"

"Because," Matt said, turning down the heat beneath the sauce, "you're not doing it for mom."

Cassie looked at him curiously. "Then who for?"

He opened the cupboard door, took out four plates. The question had gone unanswered, and when Matt saw Cassie staring at him, he reluctantly replied. "Beth Carter."

Cassie's eyes grew wide. "You're inviting her to the house? As in a date?"

"No, no," Matt shook his head adamantly, "definitely not a date. Just Sunday lunch."

After a few moments of silence, Cassie smiled. "But you do like her?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Matt resisted the urge to tell Cassie to mind her own business; he was the head of the family, and if he liked a woman, it affected everyone, including Cassie. "We're not serious," he insisted. "We're just friends." Matt heard a chair scoot across the floor, turned to see Cassie taking a seat beside the stove while he worked.

"I think Beth likes you, Matty."

He smiled good-naturedly. "You do, huh? What makes you say that?"

"I can tell."

"I see," he gave a conscious grin, happy to divert Cassie's attention even at the expense of his own privacy. "Besides your as-yet-underdeveloped sense of women's intuition, how can you tell?"
Chin propped on the palm of her hand, Cassie looked at him with a faint sort of smile playing on her face, one that said she thought she knew more than she was saying.

"Never mind, Cass. Sorry I asked."

She laughed softly, half sympathetic to the vulnerability of his feelings, half delighted at his embarrassment. "I know something else, Matty. You like her, too. An awful lot."

Matt’s first impulse was to deny it, but he knew it would be useless; Cassie knew him too well, and besides, Matt refused to lie to his sister.

"Don't tell Beth," he asked quietly. "I'd appreciate it if she didn't know."

Sadness tinged Cassie's smile, but the girl nodded that she would do as he had asked.

"Do you think we'll ever be happy, Matty?" Cassie breathed a long, wistful sigh. "I mean not just a little happy, but really happy-- so happy you don't have to second-guess what you're feeling. You just are."

The melancholy reflection made him frown. "We're happy... aren't we?"

Cassie bit her lip. "I guess so."

"Since you've decided not to help me clean the house," he joked, shooing her from the chair, "help me set the table. Dinner's ready."

It took some difficulty on Matt's part to tear Ryan from the living room window, for the boy kept insisting that Mommy's car was pulling up to the house.

"Come on, buddy, we'll know when she arrives." Matt crouched to speak to Ryan. "She'll come up that walk, open that door, and find us in the kitchen."

"When's she coming?"

"I don't know, exactly, Ryan. Sometime tonight or tomorrow."

A marked look of disappointment touched his features as Ryan looked out at the street. "Maybe she forgot. Maybe she's not coming."

Matt sighed heavily. "She'll come."
"But if she forgot about us again--"

"She won't forget, Ryan. She needs money. She'll be here. You can count on it. Now come on, dinner's getting cold."

Sorrowful eyes looked at Matt, and the boy finally nodded. He took Matt's hand, allowing himself to be led to the kitchen. Matt regretted speaking so plainly to Ryan, and promised himself to be gentler in the future.

"Where's Ethan?" Matt asked Cassie, as he helped Ryan into his chair.

"Still in the bedroom," Cassie said between bites of spaghetti. Matt didn't blame her for eating without them. This evening, it seemed nearly impossible to get everyone seated at the table at the same time.

"Ethan!" Matt stepped toward the boys' bedroom, just off the kitchen, and rapped on the door. He didn't mind giving Ethan privacy when the teenager needed it, but they shared the same room, so when Ethan didn't open the door, Matt did.

Ethan lay on the bed, an arm draped over his eyes.

"Dinner time," Matt said, hoping the mention of food would nudge his brother from off the bed.

"Matty, can I go to Mrs. Lott's house when Mom comes?" Ethan raised his arm, looked at him pleadingly. "Do I have to be here?"

Matt rubbed the back of his head, wishing the visit were already over. "Mom's going to ask about you, Ethan, and she'll want to see you."

"But do I have to see her?"

"She's your mom."

"She's yours, too, and I don't see you falling all over yourself to throw out the welcome mat."

"Ethan, we don't have a welcome mat."

The teenager looked at him dryly.
"All right," Matt conceded, sympathetic to Ethan's wish, "but only if Mom comes tonight. I'll be at work Saturday, so you'll have to stick around for Cassie and Ryan's sake tomorrow. I don't want them to have to be around Mom alone. Even if it costs you a lot to do it, you're their big brother and you're going to watch out for them. Understood?"

The forcefulness of Matt's language didn't prompt any rebellion, just a grateful nod. Ethan rubbed at the redness in his eyes as though he were a little boy who had cried over his mommy, and not a teenager over his mom. "So why do we have to clean up the house before Sunday?" he asked, pulling himself up from the bed. "Someone coming over?"

"Yeah, Beth Carter."

"Your boss?" Ethan stared at him incredulously. "When did this happen?"

Matt blinked. "When did what happen?"

"When did you start getting so serious about Mrs. Carter?" Ethan asked, placing undue emphasis on the Mrs.

"She's a widow, Ethan."

"But she's your boss, Matty."

"We're just friends."

Ethan didn't look convinced.

"I only invited her over to Sunday lunch, okay? I admit, we're good friends, and I like her" -- Matt held up a hand to stop Ethan from interrupting -- "but we're not serious. Absolutely not. We really are 'just friends.' Now, can we eat dinner before Ryan and Cassie take all the spaghetti?"

It annoyed Matt that Ethan still looked skeptical. But, since they were both hungry, and it was spaghetti, Ethan dropped the subject, and the two remaining boys sat down at the table.

Dinner was a solemn event with Ryan popping into the living room every five minutes to check the window, Cassie looking conflicted over telling their mother she could come, and Ethan and Matt dreading her arrival. Since it was Friday night, and there was no school the next day, Matt allowed everyone to stay up later than usual to wait.
After an hour, Ethan could no longer take the suspense, and went next door to Mrs. Lott’s house.

The evening grew long, and when it became apparent that their mother wasn’t coming that night, Matt announced it was time for bed. He went over and retrieved Ethan, only to return to their house to find Cassie worrying over why mom hadn’t come.

"She forgot," Ryan repeated. This prompted Ethan to remind Ryan that she often did. Matt hushed them both. Such reminders were unnecessary.

Nerves strained almost to the point of breaking, Matt sent everyone to bed. Before turning out the boys’ bedroom light, he checked Cassie’s room to make sure she didn’t go to sleep crying. Whenever their mother re-entered their lives, the feeling of abandonment often resurfaced; it was all Matt could do to comfort the others, when his own heart struggled with the same cutting pain.

In the boys’ bedroom, Matt let Ryan snuggle with him, the small boy needing reassurance that someone was there to take care of him as he fell asleep.

Night quieted the house, and Matt stared into the semi-darkness of the room, his soul once more repeating two promises that had given him solace in the past; they soothed the ache, balm the pain, gave him hope that though people often failed them, God never would.

Matt’s promises: "Can a woman forget her... child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, [she] may forget, yet will I [God] not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands [nail prints from the cross]; thy walls are continually before me [always present with Matt]."
~ Isaiah 49:15, 16 ~

"When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take me up."
~ Psalm 27:10 ~
Chapter Eleven
Lunch with the Taylors

"Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and He shall sustain thee: He shall never suffer the righteous to be moved."
~ Psalm 55:22 ~

Something tugged at Matt. He ignored it, intent on getting a little more sleep before the alarm went off. Then it came again, the insistent tug at his shoulder that refused to go away. Reluctant to crack open his eyes, Matt gave in only to find Ethan standing by the bed.

"What do you want?" Matt asked, casting a quick glance at the glowing clock. "I've got another two hours coming."

"Sorry, Matty."

"Then why'd you keep shaking me?" As Matt's bleary eyes came into focus, he regretted the sharp reply. Ethan looked miserable. "What's wrong? You sick or something?"

"No, I'm fine." Ethan slumped onto the narrow mattress beside Matt, raised a leg onto the bed, propped the other foot against the floor. "I was just thinking about Mom."

"Oh." Matt let his head fall back onto the pillow. He had forgotten. Ryan moved on Matt's other side, reminding the boys to keep their voices low or they would wake the child.

The teenager drew a knee to his chest, wrapped his arms around the leg in an unconscious need for comfort.

"Don't let her worry you, Ethan. Try to go back to sleep."

"I can't."

"Then try harder." Matt didn't feel in the mood for another painful reflection about their mom. He drew an arm over his eyes, sighed when Ethan didn't go back to his own bed.

"Matty? Could I ask you something?"

"Do you know what time it is?"
"Yeah, I know."

"I've got work today, so make it fast."

"What do you think she wants? It's something big. I can feel it. She's traveling too far to just ask for a few dollars. We haven't even seen her in over a year."

"I know." Matt sighed, disappointed the same thought had occurred to Ethan. Last time they knew, their mom had moved to Nashville so her musician boyfriend could get a job in country music. The entire plan had been a joke, including the boyfriend. That guy couldn't stay sober long enough to break into a car, let alone the music industry. The dread that gnawed at Ethan also chewed its way through Matt. Mom was probably on her way back from Tennessee, her dreams and hopes broken yet again.

"I wish she'd just forget about us the way she does the rest of the time," Ethan sighed, his voice laced with heartache. "It hurts when she does things like this and I hate it. I hate her. Sometimes, I wish she'd just die and leave us alone. Why can't she leave us alone, Matty?"

"I dunno," Matt put an arm around Ryan, cuddled the boy as he thought over Ethan's words. He didn't know what to say. A better person than him would know, but he sure didn't. "Whatever she's done, she's still our mom. I guess we owe her that much."

Ethan raised his voice, leveled his frustration at Matt. "We don't owe her anything."

"Hush," Matt checked Ryan, saw Ryan hadn't stirred. "Keep your voice down. I had a hard time getting him to sleep and if he wakes up now, he'll be up for good." Come to think of it, Matt rubbed his face with a small groan, now that Ethan had gotten him thinking about Mom, he wouldn't be able to get back to sleep, either.

In the dark bedroom, the older boys talked in quiet tones about their mother. They speculated about what she wanted until they exhausted the subject and were left in quiet dread of the possibilities.

A small movement at Matt's side caught both boys' attention; they smiled when Ryan began sucking his thumb in his sleep.

"He's going to be bucktoothed if he keeps that up," Ethan remarked, leaning forward to pull the thumb from Ryan's mouth. "He's still a baby, isn't he, Matty."
Matt smiled.

The boys remained together for the rest of the morning, Ethan relaxing his usual tough guy act to the point of cracking a joke at the breakfast table and making Cassie laugh. After the tension of yesterday evening and all that waiting, they needed a reprieve.

The drive to work was hard for Matt, knowing he had to leave Ethan and the others by themselves to meet their mom. He prayed as hard as he knew how, that everything would go all right.

Pulling on leather work gloves, Matt strode into the store and found Beth in her office, talking to someone on the phone. She signaled for him to give her a moment, excused herself from the caller, placed a hand over the receiver so she wouldn't be overheard.

"Do your usual watering, Matt, and then watch the register. Amy called in sick today-- said she didn't feel like coming in after her big date last night-- so you'll have to cover for her. I'll show you how we run things at the checkout, just as soon as you're done and I'm off the phone. All right?" Beth's tone sounded in control, kind, and a little like a teacher instructing her classroom that play period was over.

Did Beth know she sounded like his kindergarten teacher? Matt couldn't be sure. Maybe she couldn't help it. Maybe she was bossy by nature, and being her own boss made things worse. He chuckled to himself as he unwound the garden hose. It didn't really matter. He was stuck with the fact he liked her. He also needed to keep this job. To save his self-respect the sting of further guesswork, Matt concluded she hadn't meant to sound so controlling. As she stepped outside and smiled at him, Matt knew it truly didn't matter. He could endure much worse just to have that smile beamed in his direction every so often.

"When you're done watering, meet me at the checkout," she called.

He waved, then went back to work. Okay, it mattered a little. One day, though, it really wouldn't. His daydream grew bold, and he imagined himself respectable, well off financially with a house in a safe neighborhood for the kids and a cool set of wheels in the driveway. His clothes would be nice-- hey, since it was his daydream-- designer labels, and because the clothes were expensive, they would somehow make him look more attractive for a certain woman. Sporting a pair of designer shades, and driving those cool set of wheels, Matt pictured himself pulling into the nursery, getting out and sauntering into the store to sweep Beth Parker off her sensible little feet. Then she couldn't give him that teacher tone again-- not if she ever wanted to get kissed.
Reality hit Matt hard. Such thoughts were dangerous, and more than that, they were painfully impossible. "Never wish for what you can't have" had always been his motto, and now wasn't a good time to forget it. He berated himself for daydreaming, all too aware of how much he had just punished himself by imagining Beth in his arms.

He had done it to himself, and now he had to pretend the hot sting in his eyes was sweat and not something else.

Tugging off the gloves, Matt shoved them into his back pocket and went into the store. Beth waited for him at the checkout desk, her smile fading into a look of concern when she saw him.

"Having a hard day?" she asked.

"Not especially," he said, stepping up to the counter. Matt hoped that didn't count as a lie. He lowered his head, allowed the brim of the Stetson to get between him and that velvet green stare of hers.

"If I didn't know you any better," Beth sounded incredulous, "I'd say you've been--"

Matt snapped up his chin, his eyes narrowing into a dare.

"Never mind." Beth backed away a step, but remained at the counter. As she explained the way she wanted him to tend the checkout, she never once met his eyes.

After three hours, Matt decided keeping an eye on the cash register wasn't all it was cracked up to be. He could tidy nearby displays and organize the "Beth's Gardening Tips" flyers on the counter, but he still felt restless. He wanted to be outside. The store felt cooler than working outdoors, but he didn't mind the heat or the sweat. He never had. At the moment, being cooped up behind a desk seemed like the worst possible punishment. When Beth passed in front of him to talk to a customer, Matt changed his mind. Not having that daydream was worse.

At lunch, instead of moving into the office, Matt opened his lunch bag on the checkout counter. Sylvia hadn't shown up, and so half the workday had been spent with just Beth and Matt and a whole lot of silence.

"You aren't going to join me in the office?" Beth asked, after he'd started his meal alone. She leaned over the counter to look at him, the first direct look since he'd backed her down with that silent dare. "Would you like to talk about it, Matt?"
The unexpected question made Matt momentarily choke on his food. "Talk about what?" he asked.

"About what's bothering you," Beth said, tilting her head to one side and looking unbearably cute in the process. "You are having a difficult day. I was hoping you'd let me help you, but from that look on your face just now, I get the feeling the turtle has just ducked its head back into its shell. Hasn't it?"

A non-question he didn't mind not answering.

"If you need a friend, Matt, you know where to find me." She gave him a gentle smile, pushed away from the counter, then went back to the office and to the rest of her lunch.

Staring at the uneaten remainder of his sandwich, Matt no longer felt hungry. How had she done that? Managed to make him feel so dazed and lightheaded and yet so tenderly guilty. He didn't understand it, but he knew he felt it. All she had to do was tilt her head, speak to him in the quiet, private way she sometimes had of speaking to him, and he felt strangely better. Happy even, and then at the same time a little guilty. Matt sighed. It was complicated.

He wadded the paper lunch bag, made a two point shot as it passed into the waste basket by the entrance. They hadn't had many customers that morning-- no surprise there-- and he decided to pay a small visit to the office to see Beth. Just to say hi.

The door stood wide open, giving Matt a good view of the office. Beth sat at her desk, staring out the window, her face quiet and thoughtful. The polite thing to do would be to announce himself, but Matt couldn't-- not yet. He stood there, watching her, and in that moment, he felt tempted to return to his daydream. This time, his feelings throbbed with longing, and something even more fatal. Lust. Not good, he decided, and turned to leave. The movement caught Beth's attention, and she swiveled the chair to catch him just as he stepped away from the door.

"Matt," she said, halting his retreat, "have you seen any signs of Sylvia, yet? I tried her cell, but she's not picking up."

"I guess that means she's decided not to come in, today," Matt said, grateful for something else to think about. He folded his arms, leaned against the door jamb. "Does she do this kind of thing a lot?"
Beth dropped her trash into the waste basket. "Not often. Then again, she's not often jealous of me. It feels strange. I'm usually the one who envies her." Beth slanted Matt a quick glance that he decided not to answer.

"I'd better get back to the counter." He moved away from the door, paused, went back to find Beth at her desk sipping from a tea bottle. "My mom's coming today," he told her matter-of-factly, "that's why I might not seem like myself right now."

Beth put down the tea. Her china doll face turned thoughtful again.

"Every time mom drops by for one of her visits--" Matt couldn't finish, his voice having hopelessly caught in his throat. "It's hard," he said at last, when the moment had passed and the pain had subsided. "It makes everything hard, even coming into work and seeing you."

"If you hadn't come in, I'd be here all by myself," Beth said with a soft smile.

"It's just..." Matt couldn't find the words to explain what he felt.

"You're hurting," she finished for him.

The lump in Matt's throat grew. He couldn't answer, or let her know that she was right and that he desperately needed a friend right now. More than that, he needed her. Matt couldn't speak his feelings, so he just gave an indifferent shrug and tried to clear his throat.

"Do you have my phone number?" Beth opened her desk drawer, pulled out a business card and turned it over. "This is my private number. I carry my cell phone with me at all times," she said, taking a pen and scrawling on the back of the card. Then she held up the card, offered it to him without explanation.

She didn't have to.

It was an invitation to call her when he needed someone to talk to, when he needed a friend most.

Without a word, Matt stuffed the card into his pants pocket, turned and went back to the checkout counter. Comfort flickered inside his soul like a candle braving a storm.

Throughout the day, Matt slipped his hand into the pocket to feel the crisp edges of Beth's card. She couldn't possibly know how much her gesture of quiet kindness had meant to him.
It pained Beth to see Matt looking so forlorn. The news of his mother's impending visit explained everything though, even the sad look in those soulful brown eyes that pleaded for comfort. Beth couldn't help feeling protective. It took all her self-restraint to not go up to Matt and give him a great big hug, but she refrained herself, knowing he would object.

So Mrs. Taylor would be visiting the kids. From the little Beth had learned of the woman, she had not been impressed. Pastor Mark had almost nothing good to say about Mrs. Taylor, besides her possessing at least enough sense to let Matt have guardianship of the children. It is never a positive sign when the only good thing to be said about a person is their willingness to let go of responsibility. The thought of those children having to suffer without any kind of a mother to comfort their hurts, sparked every protective instinct in Beth's soul. She had felt that instinct before, when going to help Cassie, and it resurfaced now.

Not surprisingly, Matt kept to himself for the remainder for the day. Beth let him seek her out if he wanted company, and before leaving for home, he had done just that. It had only been a quiet smile, a "see you in church," followed by a lingering gaze that had left her weak in the knees. As Matt's truck left the parking lot, Beth wondered what kind of a reception he would get at home, now that his mom was there.

The first thing Matt noticed as he neared his house, was the absence of any vehicles parked out front. Frowning, he parked the truck and checked his watch. Maybe Mom had hitchhiked again, and her ride had already left. Or perhaps Mom was out with the kids, shopping at some mall with someone else's credit card; she'd done that before with one of her ex-boyfriend's cards, joking how much the creep would hate her when he got the bill.

Worry knotted Matt's stomach as he got out of the truck. The inviting memory of meth taunted him, whispering how with just one hit, all of his troubles would vanish and he'd feel unspeakable relief. An intense memory of Helen flashed before him, and Matt stopped in his tracks to fight back and get his mind right. Stress didn't help. It made his cravings worse.

Just get in there and face Mom, he thought, moving up the dirt path to the front door. Get it over with. I'll feel better afterward.

The door swung open before he could reach for the handle. Matt braced himself for Mom, and instead came nose to nose with Ethan.

"Where is she?"
Ethan shrugged. "She didn't come."

"What do you mean she didn't come?" Matt roughly brushed past Ethan, barged into the living room where Ryan lay belly down on the carpet with one of his coloring books. No Mom. Matt shoved aside a chair on his way to the kitchen, rammed his fist into the kitchen table when he found it empty.

"Matty, I told you, she's not here."

Matt turned, glared at Ethan, aware of the faint trace of fear in Ethan's face.

Ethan swallowed hard. "Are you using again?"

"What makes you ask that?" Matt retorted.

The teenager shrugged, shoved his hands into his pockets and stared at the linoleum.

The realization that he was scaring Ethan, caused Matt to think twice about his own actions. Gripping the back of a kitchen chair, Matt forced himself to calm down. He needed the dread and the waiting to be over, but it wasn't.

"Do you think she's coming, Matty?" Ethan looked at him, his voice expectant, as though Matt had all the answers and knew everything.

"How should I know? Mom didn't give us her number." The pained look on Ethan's face turned Matt's frustration into regret. "Sorry, Ethan. I shouldn't have snapped at you."

One shoulder lifted in a careless shrug, and Ethan gave one of his nothing-can-faze-me looks. "I'm not a baby, Matty. You don't have to sugar-coat anything for my sake. I can handle the truth."

"The truth is," Matt sank into the chair, "I don't know where Mom is, and I don't even know if she's still coming."

"Mommy's not coming?"

Ethan turned abruptly, and both brothers saw Ryan in the kitchen doorway.

"How long have you been standing there?" Ethan demanded.
"I've been waiting for Mommy all day," Ryan said, ignoring Ethan and coming to stand by Matt's knee. "Where is she, Matty?"

Weary, and helpless to say it out loud in front of those who relied on him so heavily, Matt pulled Ryan onto his lap and gave the boy a hug. The non-answer brought tears to Ryan's eyes; the boy understood more than Matt liked, and the disappointment crushed Ryan.

"I hate her," Ethan stomped to a chair, yanked it from the table and dropped into it so hard Matt thought the chair would break. "I wish she'd die and leave us alone!"

A pale face in the living room made Matt realize Cassie had heard and seen everything. She offered a weak smile, and when Matt returned it, she straightened as if she'd just been given a shot of courage.

"I'll fix dinner, Matty," she said, coming into the kitchen as though she were in charge and not him. "Go rest on the sofa. I'll let you know when the food is ready."

"Cass," Matt sighed with a half smile, "I appreciate what you're trying to do, but you can't cook."

"You can say that again. I'm still recovering from the last time she volunteered."

"Don't tease her, Ethan."

"Who's teasing?" he grinned at Matt.

"Please, Matty, I can handle it. You've been working and need the rest."

Matt wanted to argue that he'd done nothing all day but hover near a cash register and speak to a few customers. He shouldn't be this tired. Frustration nipped at his heels again, and Matt pleaded with God to give him help.

"I can help, Matty." Cassie's offer broke in on Matt's prayer request.

Deciding not to get in God's way, Matt lifted Ryan and took him into the living room. Ethan followed.

"Want me to park him in front of Mrs. Lott's television?" Ethan asked as the boy promptly climbed onto Matt's lap on the couch.
"No, I don’t mind him." Matt smiled at Ryan, hugged the boy then closed his eyes to pray in silence. God’s help was there, all Matt had to do was ask for it.

"What are you going to do about Mrs. Carter?" Ethan wondered, dumping himself onto the cushion beside Matt.

Matt’s eyes opened. He stared at Ethan. "What about Mrs. Carter?"

"She’s coming tomorrow afternoon, isn’t she?"

"Yeah. So?"

Ethan rolled his eyes, a habit Matt had hoped he’d outgrown. "What if Mom comes while Mrs. Carter is here?"

A deep sigh filled Matt’s chest. He let the air out slowly, willing himself to relax.

"Are you going to call off the lunch?" The teenager looked a little too pleased with Matt’s predicament for Matt to be comfortable.

"I probably should," Matt finally admitted. He had been looking forward to it, and the thought of not seeing Beth tomorrow, of not talking to her and seeing her at his table, discouraged his already tired heart. "Beth is coming. I’m not letting Mom get in the way of our lunch."

"But what if Mom comes?"

"We don’t know she will."

Ethan raised his eyebrows. "For money? Mom not show up for money?"

"Then Beth will meet our mom."

"But, Matty--"

"I’m not calling it off, Ethan. I want tomorrow."

"You see her all day," Ethan flashed a teasing grin. "Isn’t that enough for you, Matty?"

A heartbeat away from retaliating with an untruth, Matt stopped, and defended himself in the only other way he knew how.
"We're having hamburgers."

Ethan sat up straight. "With the fancy buns?"

"And the pickles you like so much, and I'll even let you pick the dessert when I go shopping after dinner this evening."

Folding his arms, Ethan smiled in triumph. "Coward."

"Call me what you want," Matt said, as he released Ryan back to his coloring book. "I'm too tired to fight."

Every time the cell phone rang, Beth's heart quickened in the hopes it might be Matt. Two telemarketers and a wrong number later, she resigned herself to the reality that Matt didn't have an overwhelming desire to call her. Not an easy thing to accept, but Beth did, and without a great deal of disappointment. The man she liked might be vulnerable at times, but he had a stubborn strength that didn't often ask for help. When the cell phone remained quiet for the rest of the night, it didn't surprise her.

For a long time it hadn't been customary for Beth to attend church, but as of tomorrow morning, that would change. This is a milestone for me, she thought, climbing into bed and sinking into the warm covers. I've been given yet another chance at life. Don't let it slip through my fingers, God.

Before the sun peeked over the Organ Mountains, Beth rose to pick out a soft green sleeveless dress that reminded her of Spring. After a long struggle, her thick tangle of curls finally submitted to a french braid. To her annoyance, a few strays escaped to frame her face in long wisps of red and auburn; they stuck to her mouth as she smoothed on a light lipstick and she was forever clearing her lips of the hair. Beth had always joked how her hair had a mind of its own, but this morning she didn't feel like laughing. She wanted to look her best, but not to look as though it were on purpose. Matt wouldn't like that.

Locking the house before she left, Beth climbed into her car, placed the Bible on the passenger seat. Luke had given her that Bible when they were married, calling it a foundation to build their marriage upon. Luke. What would he think of her right now? Going to church not only for God, but also for another man.
Luke would want me to be happy, she told herself, quieting her thoughts long enough to enjoy the mild New Mexico morning. Luke wasn't here, but she was. Whatever twinges of guilt she felt, she had to remember that.

When Beth arrived at church, her hopes were gradually disappointed. She couldn't find Matt in the congregation, although she knew he and his family had come. Pastor Mark had told her he'd seen them, commented how good it was to see her in church, and expressed dismayed surprise when Beth happened to mention that Matt's mother was in town.

"I spoke to him for ten minutes this morning, and he never once mentioned his mother." Pastor Mark's disappointment creased his face with concern. "This is troubling news. In the past, after one of the times his mom came for a visit..." the pastor hesitated, as though he thought better of saying anything more. "Matt had a very hard time, afterward. His difficulties returned and it frightened the children. This was before Matt moved to Las Cruces, but he told me about it so I could pray for him and be aware of the danger." The pastor sighed, but his eyes remained fixed on Beth. "That guy needs a friend. I've tried, God knows I have, but he fiercely keeps his problems to himself."

"You're afraid his 'difficulties' might return?" Beth asked, her question as guarded and measured as Pastor Mark's retelling of events.

A gleam of understanding brightened the pastor's eye. "He's told you, then?"

"Some of it. Enough to comprehend what you're trying to tell me without violating Matt's confidence."

"I had wondered if he might choose you to talk to. Interesting." Pastor Mark spoke to himself more than to her, and when he awoke from his reverie, he gave a smile to Beth. "I pray for him daily. I ask God to keep him from returning to his former pain, and to give him a sufficient helpmeet to share his burdens."

The warm smile that followed made Beth uncomfortable.

Before she could say "We're just friends," the pastor shook her hand and moved to a small group of teenagers who were talking about something he had said during the service.

Pastor Mark's well-intentioned comments, combined with her previous guilt over Luke's wedding Bible, unsettled Beth's heart and deepened her conflict. She couldn't even be sure she loved Matt, and that uncertainty gave her a small measure of comfort. If Beth's reasoning made
any rational sense, she deferred to another day to figure it out. For now, all she wanted to do was
drive home, freshen up and look forward to one o'clock.

As Beth pulled up to the Taylors' house, she felt a flutter of nerves in her stomach. She
wondered if their mother had already left, and if she hadn't, how she should behave to Mrs.
Taylor. As she straightened her hair in the rearview mirror, Beth noticed the living room curtain
move. The front door opened, then Cassie came down the walk as Beth got out of the car.

The young girl's smile reminded Beth once more just how pretty Cassie was.

"Matty's almost ready," Cassie said, shyly hanging back until Beth stepped forward to give her a
hug. "We missed seeing you in church. Matty went all over the building, searching for you." Cassie's blue eyes sparkled. "He said he was looking for Pastor Mark, but I knew better."

Not knowing how to answer Cassie, Beth smiled and followed the girl into the house. Four-year-
old Ryan abandoned his toys on the living room floor and came to stare at her.

"Hi, Ryan," Beth said, smiling at the neatly buttoned long-sleeved shirt that, in all probability,
Matt had forced him to wear. Normally, Ryan wore T-shirts like his brothers.

"Hi," Ryan sniffed, lifting an arm to rub his face with his sleeve. "Are you going to get another
doggie like Bailey? I sure liked him."

"I liked him, too," Beth said, taking a seat on the sofa as Ethan sauntered into the room and
plopped into a chair. Ethan wore long sleeves, as well. "I don't know if I'll ever get another dog,
Ryan. It broke my heart when Bailey went to Heaven and I don't know if I can go through that
again."

Ryan looked puzzled. "Your heart's broken? Are you dying?"

Ethan groaned. "Of course she's not dying. It's a figure of speech, Ry."

The boy climbed onto the sofa and offered his coloring book to Beth while he pursued his line
of questioning. "Then you aren't going to get another doggie until your heart's fixed?"

"Leave her alone, Ryan," Cassie said, taking the seat on Beth's other side.

Crestfallen, Ryan heaved a sigh of disappointment. "Bailey was the best doggie in the world."
"Yes, he was," Beth said, admiring the little boy's round face and long lashes. Matt and Ethan bore a striking family resemblance, and while Ryan had similar though darker hair than that of his brothers, his features were more pronounced. He had what Beth termed a "punkin head," that is, his head was round and he had large, expressive brown eyes.

Elbows propped on his legs, Ryan looked at her with earnest interest. "When do you think your heart will get fixed?"

Having apparently heard from the kitchen, Matt burst into the living room, went straight to the sofa and captured the boy with an apologetic grin. "Sorry he's being such a nuisance, Beth. I think I told you once that Ryan is nuts over--" Matt stopped dead in his tracks, his attention on her hair, her dress, her face. "You look really good."

The frank compliment made Beth grow warm. "Thank you, Matt. I'm sorry I didn't see you at church. I did look."

"So did I." One side of his mouth pulled into a half-grin, and his gaze didn't falter. Beth supposed having his family present made him feel more at ease, more confident that nothing regrettable could happen with so many watching. He had warned her about his addictions, and the warning hadn't fallen on deaf ears. Beth understood, or rather, thought she understood and respected the distance Matt put between them.

From Matt's arms, Ryan beamed a broad grin. "We're having hamburgers," he told her happily.

"Is that so?" Beth smiled at Ryan, then glanced back at the young man holding the boy and found he was still watching her.

Nose up, Ryan looked at his brother. "I'm real hungry, Matty."

"Okay, I guess I've made everyone wait long enough. Go wash up, Ryan. You too, Ethan."

Ryan frowned. "Why don't you ever tell Cassie to wash up?"

"Because she doesn't need to be reminded," Matt replied, patting Ryan's bottom as he ran from the room. Matt straightened, still smiling as they heard Ethan and Ryan debate over who got to wash first at the kitchen sink. "I'm glad you could make it," Matt said to Beth, his face betraying he felt much more than gladness at seeing her again.

"Thank you for inviting me," she smiled, standing up from the sofa. She noted the long button-up shirt, the tie Matt wore.
"Oh, that reminds me--" Matt excused himself, hurried into the kitchen, returned a few moments later with a small box. "I know you like tea, so I got this for after lunch."

"Thanks, Matt. I know it was a sacrifice."

He grinned. "Yeah, well, we don't have company very often. I've got the last of the hamburgers finished on the stove. We don't have an outdoor grill, just the stove."

"Smells good," she said, trying to lighten Matt's self conscious apology. "Could I use the kitchen sink a moment to wash up?"

"Sure." He stepped aside, let her move past him into the kitchen where Cassie was setting out napkins on the table.

"Matt, how did the visit with your mom go?" Beth asked as she washed her hands beneath the running tap.

"She didn't come."

Beth turned, saw Matt didn't look too disappointed. "I expect she'll turn up sooner or later." He shrugged. "As far as I'm concerned, no news is good news."

"Maybe she's not coming," Ethan said, going to the table and locating a place to sit down.

A lighthearted grin touched Matt's mouth. He lightly cufféd Ethan as he moved to the stove. "I thought you were so all-fired sure she was coming-- 'Mom not show up for money?' Remember?"

"A guy can change his mind." Ethan slid onto his tailbone, folded his arms and assumed an indifferent attitude. For all his posturing, Beth sensed he and Matt were beginning to have a good time. "You've changed your mind often enough," Ethan shot back. The teenager turned, grinned at Beth. "Matt kept changing his clothes this morning. You'd think he was getting ready for a heavy date, and not just Sunday morning services. Ouch!" Ethan scowled at Cassie, who had slipped into the seat beside him. "Why'd you kick me?"

Cassie cupped a hand to Ethan's ear, whispered softly but not so softly Beth couldn't overhear. "Don't embarrass Matty."
Still cocky, Ethan shrugged off the admonition; Beth noticed however, he didn't crack any more jokes at Matt's expense.

The hamburger platter on the table, Matt set out the buns, pickles, ketchup and mustard. He filled the cups with soda pop and ice, then passed them out on the table.

"Where do you want me to sit?" Beth asked. Matt pulled out a chair, and when she sat down, gently pushed it under her. It had been ages since a man had pulled out a chair for Beth, and the single act of gentleman-like manners made her smile more than she probably should.

Everyone at the table, Matt took the chair next to Beth's. "We usually hold hands when we pray," Matt said, taking Beth's hand with a conscious smile. They bowed their heads, and Matt thanked God for the good sermon, the good food, and the good company. As Matt said, "Amen," he gave her hand a quick squeeze before letting it go.

Such a small affectionate gesture, and yet Beth thought it terribly sweet.

One by one the hamburgers disappeared, and when it came time for dessert, Ethan was the one to get up and go to the freezer and not Matt.

"We never get to have this unless it's a special occasion," Ethan said, pulling out a box of ice cream sandwiches. Beth was puzzled, then understood when Ethan set it on the counter and began assembling more ingredients: soft chocolate chip cookies, chunky peanut butter, whip cream, chocolate coated candies, chocolate sauce, crushed graham crackers. Then Ethan began constructing towers of layered desserts onto five plates.

Beth could feel herself gain five pounds just by watching.

Like a chef who'd just escaped from an insane asylum, Ethan gave Beth a strangely endearing maniacal grin. "There's about a zillion ways to do this, but this is my own special concoction."

"Oh my," Beth gasped as Ethan shoved one of the plates before her.

"You don't have to eat it all," Matt said in a rather apologetic voice. Then he added, most helpfully, "I'll finish what you don't want."

"I'll take you up on that," Beth said, taking a small bite of the monster dessert. "You guys must burn calories left and right to eat like this and still be in good shape."

"If anyone wants seconds," Ethan declared, "there's plenty to go around."
"We don't always eat like this," Cassie confided to Beth with a shy smile. "I can't eat the whole thing, either."

"It's very good," Beth had to admit-- in a very fattening, diet busting, going to have to run nine miles just to work this off, kind of way.

Just then, Ryan's head bobbed up from his plate. He looked into the living room, jumped from his chair and took off.

"What's got into Ryan?" Ethan frowned.

"You didn't hear that?" Cassie asked in surprise, pushing away from the table and going into the living room. A car door slammed, and from the way the children had reacted, it hadn't been the first.

Ethan stared at Matt, and Matt stared at his plate.

"I've lost my appetite," Matt said, as excited sounds flooded from the living room-- the front door opening, the cries of "Mommy! Mommy!" and then the deep voice of a man, saying something Beth couldn't understand.

Gripping his spoon, Ethan stared at Matt. "Can I go to Mrs. Lott's? Please, Matty!"

With a dark laugh, Matt shut his eyes. "Go."

Bolting out the back door in the kitchen, Ethan disappeared without even remembering to take his dessert. A second later, Cassie came to Matt's chair, her eyes wide and tremulous.

"What is it, Cass?" Matt stood up, looked over Cassie and into the living room.

Unsure what had startled Cassie, Beth followed Matt's gaze. What she saw put a lump in her throat and an ache in her heart.

A middle-aged man and a dark haired woman stood in the living room, a carrier dangling from the man's hand. An infant's cry filled the house, tiny, helpless, and probably in need of a diaper change. The woman tossed a glance at the carrier, then turned to look into the kitchen, her eyes traveling directly to Matt.
"Hello, Mom." Matt's voice sounded heavy, on the point of breaking. "Ethan warned me you'd want something big. Don't prove him right."

"The LORD... will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. And they that know Thy name will put their trust in Thee: for Thou, LORD, hast not forsaken them that seek Thee."
~ Psalm 9:9, 10 ~
Chapter Twelve

For the Sake of the Children

"I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people... A people that provoketh me to anger continually to my face..."
~ Isaiah 65:2, 3 ~

With a defiant thrust of her chin, the dark haired woman turned to the man at her side. "I haven't even said 'hello' yet, and already my eldest is taking me on a guilt trip. I don't need this."

"Hey, Matt. Long time no see," the man acknowledged as Matt stepped into the living room. "Hope we're not interrupting anything important," the man said, his eyes flicking to Beth as she moved from the table to look over Matt's shoulder. "The car kept breaking down, then we got a flat tire and had to scrape up the money to get it fixed. You know how it is."

Matt folded his arms. "Yeah, I know."

The man awkwardly switched the carrier to the other hand. "Eve and I thought we'd like to see you and the kids. See how you're doing, and all that."

"We're still here," Matt said, as Ryan moved closer to his mom. The boy tugged at Eve's hand, and when he couldn't get the woman's attention, Ryan edged even closer and hugged her arm. "When did you guys get back from Nashville?" Matt asked in a sturdy tone.

The man's face quickly paled. He glanced at Eve, and when she sat down on the sofa with a dark smile, he turned back to Matt. "We never made it that far-- to Nashville, I mean. Thing is--"

"Don't bother explaining anything, Wade." Eve flashed her displeasure at the man. "Matty will only use it against me. Won't you, Matty?"

"Aw, come on, Eve, don't be like that." Wade took a seat on the sofa beside her, placed the carrier on the floor next to his feet. The infant had stopped crying, though the newcomers didn't seem to notice either way. "We agreed in the car to not fight with the kids, remember?"

"I resent being treated like garbage in my own home," Eve said, folding her arms and glaring back at Matt.

"This isn't your home, Mom." Matt went to shut the front door, which until now, had been left wide open. "If you don't like it here, you're welcome to leave."
This prompted an alertly apologetic look from Wade. What a mess, thought Beth. I hope he's not that baby's father. Wade was a picture of a beaten man-- worse, a man who had even given up trying to keep himself clean. His unwashed hair poked out every which way in a disheveled mop, his dirty jeans looked as though he had been sleeping in them for some time, and he wore a shirt that had stains splashed across his chest. From the smell, Beth guessed it to be alcohol.

"She'll behave-- won't you, Eve?" Wade looked to his girlfriend-- for that was what Beth supposed Eve was, Wade's girlfriend-- and waited for her to agree.

Unlike her boyfriend, Eve Taylor had well groomed hair and pearl white teeth. She had a striking face, fine features and flawless skin that revealed the source of Cassie's beauty. Like Wade, however, Eve reeked of alcohol, though Beth couldn't be sure if the smell came from recent consumption, or simply from unlaundred clothing.

By now, Ryan had climbed onto the couch and claimed Eve's lap. Eve responded with a deliberate show of forced warmth. "How's my baby boy?" Eve asked Ryan in a motherly tone that had Ryan beaming ear to ear. "I wish I could have been here to make your birthday cake, but I promise, I'll make you one just as soon as Matty is done talking to me and Wade."

"What do you want, Mom?" Matt moved in front of the sofa, arms still folded. Beth noticed his gaze travel to the infant more than once, as though he were afraid to ask the obvious question.

"Yes, that's mine," the woman said with a snorting laugh. "Mine and Wade's."

Wade grinned as he lifted the carrier onto the sofa. He looked as though he wanted to say more, but Matt's glare kept him quiet.

"When did this happen?"

"Is that any way to speak to your parents?" Eve asked, getting to her feet and pushing away Ryan with as little tenderness as one would shove away an annoying problem.

"Wade isn't my dad." Matt stood toe to toe with his mom, while Cassie shrank into a corner and kept silent. "You haven't been our mother in years. Tell us what you want, so you and Wade can visit before leaving."

Eve's mouth twisted into a thin smile. Beth sensed Eve would have loved to retaliate with some kind of threat. Something to punish Matt, make him twist with even more pain.
"I need money," Eve said at last, spitting out the words as though they tasted bitter on her tongue. "Wade had to pawn his guitar for gas money. If you could loan me five hundred, I'll pay it back as soon as Wade and I get on our feet."

"I don't have that kind of money."

"You've got a job, don't you?" Eve pinned her son with a look intended to extract guilt. Then those eyes flashed at Beth, and Eve seemed to momentarily forget the five hundred. "Who's she?" Eve asked Matt.

"She's my guest," Matt replied evenly, stepping in between the women in an obvious attempt to stop the discussion from going any further. "I don't have any money to give you. Everything I make goes to keeping food on the table and the electricity turned on."

"You won't let me forget, will you? You just won't let it go." Eve turned to face Wade, who remained on the sofa with Ryan and the carrier. "Matty's father kept popping pills and drowning himself in booze. Spent all we had on drugs, and guess what? Matty blames me!"

"You were doing them too, Mom!"

"And so were you!" Eve leveled Matt a hard, unforgiving look. "Don't give me that holier than thou attitude. You're no better than me. Look at Helen. That poor girl is still suffering because of you."

As though he had just sustained a blow to the stomach, Matt swayed on his feet but maintained his balance. "Wow, Mom. You sure know how to hurt the ones you love."

"Are you going to give me the money, or not?"

"I don't have any money to give."

"What about you?" Eve faced Beth, and Beth felt herself grow bold in the woman's angry presence. The infant let out a small cry, but it went unnoticed by Eve. "Well? You look like you've got money. I need five hundred, but a thousand will get me out of Matt's hair for the next two months."

"Mom!"

"Stay out of this, Matty. Let your girlfriend speak for herself."
"Beth isn't giving you one red cent."

"Is she paying for your habit, Matty?" A wicked smile spread across Eve's features. "Or are you turning her into another Helen?"

"Mom! Don't!" Cassie emerged from the corner, tears running down her cheeks. "Please, Mom, just go! I'm sorry I ever said you could come!"

"Not without my money!" Eve stared at Beth. "Well?"

Once again, Matt placed himself between Beth and Eve, effectively blocking them from each other.

"Get out." Matt breathed the words in such cold anger, it frightened Beth, though Matt had directed them at Eve, and not her.

"Now, now," Wade stood up from the couch, deposited the carrier on the cushion next to Ryan. "Calm down you two. You guys know how you get on each other's nerves. Let's not do anything rash."

An impatient sigh escaped Matt's lips. "I wish you'd get down to what you really want."

"Your mom told you-- a few hundred dollars."

"What else?"

"Nothing."

"Wade--"

"All right, all right." Wade gave another of his weak smiles. "Eve and me was hoping you might let us crash on the living room sofa for a couple of days."

"I suppose, but you'd have to obey the rules of the house," Matt said, his voice brinking on frustration. Beth knew without asking that Matt didn't want them to stay. It was obvious.

"You and your rules." Eve laughed, the sound flat and humorless. "I'd rather sleep in the car."

"Have it your way, Mom."
The sharp glare Eve sent her son chilled Beth to the core.

Shoulders slumped in defeat, Wade glanced at the sofa where Ryan was letting the baby hold on to his finger. "There's something else--"

"The answer is 'no," Matt cut off without apology. "I know what you're about to ask, and I won't do it."

Wade stammered helplessly. "It's not that I don't want the kid."

"Then why'd you get Mom pregnant?"

"Hey, man," Wade's smile had an oiled look to it, as though he were slithering around something naughty but didn't want to say it out loud. "I'm not saying we're the most responsible parents around, but give us a little credit for not getting an abortion, okay?"

"Well, good for you," Matt gave a heavy laugh. "And here I thought you were going to give the baby away. I apologize, Wade. I misunderstood you."

Wade stared at Matt for several seconds, then gave a nodding smile that sickened Beth. "Okay, you got me," he grinned, holding up his hands in mock surrender. "I won't deny it. Eve and I can't handle the responsibility, so we're going to leave the kid with you."

Matt straightened. "What gives you the right to do that without my permission? No, I mean it--don't shrug and turn away! What gives you the right to walk in here and drop your responsibilities without so much as a promise from me that I'll even take care of him? What's wrong with you? That's your child!"

"I know it is," Wade said defensively. "I'm not saying it isn't. It's just that I'm not cut out to be a father."

"And I am?"

Wade didn't respond.

"We can't take him," Eve said, not betraying a bit of emotion at the announcement.

"I can't either, Mom."

"What do you want us to do, Matty? Put him up for adoption? Do you really want that?"
"I can't take another one." Matt's voice rose several notches. "I know I've told you in the past that I want to keep the family together, but I can't take in another mouth to feed. We're barely staying afloat as it is."

"Well," Eve said, gathering her purse, "that's not my problem. Give him away for adoption if you have to. I've done all I can. Come on, Wade."

"You can't leave-- not like this!"

"Matty, I just can't handle it anymore."

"Mom!"

"When Wade and I get settled, I'll let you know where, so you can send over any papers that need to be signed."

"Mom--"

"This is for the best, Matty." For the first time since Eve's arrival, Beth saw the woman soften just a fraction. "I'm irresponsible and heartless. You've accused me of that often enough, and it's true. We both know Amadeus will be better off without me."

"Amadeus?"

"I'm the one who named him," Wade grinned. "You can change it, but I thought since you and I both like music, you wouldn't mind him keeping the name."

"Bye, Matty. The birth certificate is in the carrier." Without looking back, Eve left the house with Wade.

The door hung open, Wade not bothering to close it in his hurry to depart.

Stunned, Beth watched Matt stand there, expressionless, in a state of stunned disbelief. It was only when Ryan ran past Matt through the open door to go after his mom, that Matt finally emerged from his trance.

"Ryan, come back here!" Matt hurried after the boy while Cassie slumped in the corner, her face pale.
"I'm going to be sick," Cassie mumbled.

Knowing she was needed, Beth went to the girl, helped her up, then walked her to the nearest bathroom. As they moved, Cassie trembled against Beth, as if seeking comfort from anywhere she could find it. After witnessing such heartless words coming from her own mother, Beth could only imagine Cassie's grief.

The baby had been left unattended in the living room, so Beth kept going back and forth between Cassie and the baby to make sure no one's needs suffered from neglect. Beth had just crouched on the bathroom floor beside Cassie when the front door slammed shut. The noise jolted Cassie to ask in a numb voice if her mom had changed her mind and come back.

"I doubt it, Sweetheart," Beth said as gently as she could. "Do you want me to check?"

Cassie nodded, and Beth went back to the living room where she found Ryan cradled in Matt's arms. The boy sobbed for his mommy, refusing to be consoled by Matt's assurances that mommy still loved him. When Matt offered to put Ryan down, the boy clung to Matt all the harder.

"It's all right, buddy, I understand." Matt rubbed Ryan's back; the motion seemed to gradually soothe Ryan, and he finally leaned his small punkin head against Matt's shoulder in a resigned sigh.

"Mommy's not coming back."

"Not today, Ryan. Can I put you down for a moment?"

Ryan gave a vigorous "no." He didn't want to be without Matt.

Sucking in a deep sigh of his own, Matt took Ryan back outside. Beth moved to the window to see Matt picking up a diaper bag from off the curb, apparently where Eve and Wade had left it. When Matt returned, he dumped the bag on the sofa beside the carrier.

The look of complete and utter weariness etched in Matt's face reminded Beth of Pastor Mark's warning about the effect Eve's visits usually had on her son. Raw anger, dulled by grief and horror-- that's what Beth thought Matt felt right now.

His eyes raised to meet hers.
"She left it on the curb." Matt stared at Beth with a blank expression, still dazed by the shock of what had just happened. "She just left it on the curb. I guess I should be grateful she didn't leave the baby on the curb, as well."

"Cassie is sick," Beth said, not knowing what else to say. "She's in the bathroom."

"I can't believe Mom did that. I just can't believe it." Matt sank into a chair, Ryan still in his arms. "You said something about Cass-- I suppose I should go to her." Matt looked at Ryan, then turned to Beth. "Would you help her? My arms are full at the moment."

Beth nodded her willingness. "Leave Cassie to me. I'll take care of her."

"I just can't believe it." Matt turned his eyes to the window, an absent hand still rubbing Ryan's back. "I thought she might try to get me to take him, but not like that. Cold as ice. Both of them."

Beth returned to Cassie, and seeing the girl had calmed down a little, helped Cassie up from off the floor. Already a timid soul, Cassie seemed even more fragile as Beth walked her into the living room to take a seat on the sofa.

Pulling her knees to her chest, Cassie eyed the carrier where the infant slept. "Somebody should tell Ethan."

Before Matt could respond, the back door to the kitchen opened with a loud bang. Ethan walked into the living room, then looked at Matt with a sober grimace.

"What did Mom want?"

Matt nodded to the carrier on the sofa.

"Oh, man." Ethan sank into a nearby chair, his face slack jawed in astonishment.

"What are we going to do, Matty?"

"I have to call our social worker."

Cassie looked more than a little alarmed. "But she'll take Amadeus away!"

"Amadeus!" Ethan sat up with a jolt. "Is that what they called it?"
"This isn't a stray puppy, Cass. We just can't keep him because we want to."

"It figures they'd call him that." Ethan slumped back in his chair. "Wade is such a loser-- he can't be a musical genius, so he names his kid after one. Talk about delusions of grandeur."

"We can't give him up, Matty!"

"I don't have a choice, Cass!"

"You wouldn't give me away, would you?"

"Of course not. But that's beside the point--"

"Please, Matty!"

"Cass..." Matt sucked in a deep breath, and Beth sensed he was again nearing the breaking point. Like a hanger being flexed back and forth, Matt was showing the strain.

The baby woke, and not being able to find its mother, began to cry in fits of plaintive wails.

Unable to stop herself, Beth went to the carrier, peered down at Matt's newest sibling. Such a small child, truly a newborn infant. Its legs kicked, the fists clenched, and the tiny face turned bright red with each cry. Beth looked to Matt for permission.

"Go ahead," Matt sighed.

Heart fluttering with excitement, Beth scooped the baby into her arms, cradled it close and soaked in the sensation of holding a new life. It had been so long.

"That kid is a boy, isn't he?" Matt asked, as if he were unsure whether Wade was bright enough to know that Amadeus-- the eighteenth century composer, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart-- had been a man, and not a woman.

Beth unsnapped the thin sleeper, peeked beneath the edge of the diaper, then smiled to Matt that the baby was indeed a boy.

"Why couldn't Mom have a girl?" Cassie asked, looking about the group for agreement. "We already have three boys. Why couldn't I have a sister?"
"At the rate Mom's going," Ethan said with a dark laugh, "you might get your wish, Cass. I thought Mom said she was getting her tubes tied. After Ryan was born, she swore on a stack of Bibles she's get herself fixed so this wouldn't keep happening. Now look. Out popped another one."

"I guess she forgot," Matt said dully.

"This baby still has the stump of an umbilical cord," Beth said, feeling reality hit her full force. "This child can't be over two weeks old."

Leaning over, Matt felt about the carrier until he pulled out a birth certificate. "You're not off by much, Beth. Amadeus Dylan Taylor was born ten days ago at the Corpus Christi Medical Center."

"Corpus Christi!" Ethan sat up again. "Are you trying to tell me Mom has been in Texas all this time, and she never told us? So much for Nashville!"

"I see Wade didn't bother giving Amadeus the benefit of his last name," Matt said, tossing the certificate back into the carrier.

"This baby really needs a change," Beth said, wrinkling her nose at the smell.

Willing to help, Cassie reached for the diaper bag. She opened it, looked to Matt, then to Beth with a discouraged sigh. "There's only two diapers left, and no baby formula. Not even a baby bottle."

"I guess Eve has been nursing, and formula hasn't been necessary," Beth said, side-stepping the obvious lack of maternal thoughtfulness from their mother. Eve had known Matt and the kids wouldn't be prepared, so why hadn't she at least warned Matt that the baby had nothing to eat?

Beth didn't like to consider the ugly truth that Eve simply didn't care.

The same grim fact registered on Matt's face, and he lifted Ryan onto the floor without asking Ryan if he wanted to be put down.

"I need some air. Would you watch the kids for me, Beth?" As Matt got to his feet, Beth felt the rawness of his emotions. He looked off balance, as though someone had beaten him and he was struggling to keep his composure. "I'll go by the store and get some formula. Oh, and some diapers." Matt rubbed his face. "Anything else I'm forgetting?"
Feeling desperate, Beth turned to Cassie. Knowing Matt, he would stay strong as long as Cassie was watching. "Would you do me a big favor and go with Matt?" Beth went to her purse, handed Cassie some money. "Here's fifty dollars. Buy as much formula, baby wipes and diapers as you can."

Matt stiffened. "That's not necessary, Beth. I can handle it."

"I know you can, but I want to help." Beth expected him to protest, put up a fight and tell her he would pay her back. When Matt didn't, she grew even more concerned. That wasn't like him.

"Go with Matt, Cassie. I'll have this baby cleaned and changed by the time you get back."

Grabbing his jacket and keys, Matt headed for the door with Cassie following close behind.

"What a day," Ethan groaned, as Beth one-handed a hotel towel from the diaper bag. "By the way, thanks."

The unexpected gratitude puzzled Beth.

"I know why you wanted Cass to go with Matty. You're trying to keep him from using again."

"I thought it would be good for him to have some company," Beth said, not trying to undermine whatever confidence Ethan had in his big brother.

The teenager lifted a shoulder. "You're probably right. This hit Matty hard."

Even though Ethan didn't say it, Beth caught the underlying fear in his voice. Those kids counted on Matt for everything-- from the food they ate, to the fact they were still together as a family. It was a miracle of God's mercy that Matt was trying to do the right thing by his brothers and sister, that he had overcome his personal troubles enough to step in for their absent parents. Such circumstances would be hard for anyone, let alone a young Christian with no support besides his community church and an elderly neighbor who baked lemon cookies.

The pure delight of cleaning the baby, putting him in a diaper, wrapping him in the receiving blanket to rock to sleep-- everything gave Beth more joy than she had thought possible. After Caleb's death, she believed her heart had been shattered into so many pieces it would never beat again. Five minutes of cuddling the baby had Beth thinking otherwise. Thirty minutes after that, she was rethinking her entire future.
When Matt returned from the store with Cassie, they found Beth on the sofa, the baby sleeping in her arms, a smiling Ryan snuggled close at her side.

Ethan stepped from the kitchen with a plate of dessert and greeted Matt. "Everything on the table melted and had to be thrown away. But there's more in the freezer."

"I'm not hungry." Matt dropped the shopping bags on the coffee table while Cassie went to go sit on Beth's free side and admire the baby. Even in his numbed state, he had to admit the three of them made quite a touching scene.

"He's so darling!" Cassie cooed, playing with an itty-bitty hand. "He has Mom's eyes-- see, Matty? Isn't he positively precious?"

Matt ignored the invitation, and stalked into the kitchen to get something to eat. He didn't feel hungry, but it was better than being in the living room. Head buried in the fridge, he could still hear Cassie talk about how wonderful Amadeus was. Matt harrumphed. Amadeus. What a name. Saddle your little boy with a dumb name like that, and he'll never be able to hold his head up in public. Not to mention the hard time he'll get from the other kids at school.

Thanks Mom. Thanks Wade. What a pair. Matt plucked an apple from the fruit drawer, slammed the fridge shut. Ryan's voice carried from the next room, exclaiming how the baby already had tiny fingernails.

Unable to take it a moment longer, Matt jerked open the kitchen door, and retreated to the relatively quiet backyard. It wasn't really a backyard, just dirt and mesquite, and of course rocks. Plopping himself on the back step of the mobile home, Matt bit into the crisp apple. Not even the cool breeze could make him feel easier. If only Mom hadn't forced him to make all the hard decisions.

The door opened, and Matt didn't bother to look up. He knew it was Beth. He could smell the jasmine.

"I left Amadeus with Cassie. I thought maybe you and I could talk."

Not really sure he wanted to know why, Matt didn't invite her to sit. True to form, she did anyway.

For a long painful minute, she didn't speak. Hearing what she had that afternoon, Beth had to be thinking the worst about him and the children. What a family. What a total and complete mess. It was a wonder Beth was still here.
"How are you doing?" she asked finally.

Inspecting his apple as though he’d just bitten into a hidden worm, Matt shrugged. "I’ve been better. And you?"

"I’m serious, Matt. How are you? Really?"

He frowned, slanted a look at Beth. "How am I supposed to be? I just found out that even though I didn’t think my mom could sink any lower, she’s found a way to do just that. Besides that, I’m fine."

"Are you always this sarcastic when you’re having a difficult time, or am I seeing the exception?" She smiled, and the gesture made Matt feel more comfortable somehow.

"I hadn’t realized I was getting as bad as that," he said, lowering the fruit with a shake of his head. "My self-loathing can get out of hand sometimes. I have to be careful. It can lead to trouble before I know it, and then--"

"I want to help you, Matt."

"I’m not going to fall apart, if that’s what you’re thinking," Matt tossed the apple away with a flick of his wrist. "Come out here to soothe the ex-junkie? Is that it?"

"Please, Matt... I’m not trying to make things harder for you than I’m sure they already are. I know you’re hurting. Just please try not to take it out on me. I’m on your side."

Growling at his own callousness, Matt stood up and paced several feet from the back step. He slowed, turned and faced Beth.

"I’m sorry I barked. I’m sorry you had to be here when Mom came, I’m sorry lunch was ruined, and I’m sorry I’m punishing you for my failures. I’m sorry for the whole thing."

Beth raised her eyebrows in seeming amusement. "When you’re busy loathing yourself, you really don’t hold back, do you? Why don’t you apologize for the national debt while you’re at it?"

Matt scowled. "Now you’re the one playing games."

"How was this afternoon Matt Taylor’s fault?" she asked, assuming a casual pout. "Let’s see-- your mom’s insensitivity and basic disregard for her own children? Nope; I didn’t see you twisting her
arm to say and act the way she did. Lunch being ruined? Again, I disagree; the hamburgers were actually quite good. And what was that last one-- you punishing me for your failures? There weren't any failures, so you can't punish me for things you never did. In short, I refuse to accept a large portion of those apologies.

Matt didn't back down. "Mom mentioned Helen. You're not going to ask me what she was talking about?"

"I wasn't intending to. If you want to tell me what happened, I assume you will when you're ready."

"I'm not ready."

"Then I won't ask."

His heart calming to a steady rhythm, Matt thought it over. "You don't blame me for refusing to take Amadeus?" He waited, fearing the answer in spite of her kind defense.

"No, I don't blame you." The words were hesitant enough to make Matt's insides twist about in uncertainty. "The way things are right now, I don't see how you can possibly keep him."

Matt frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean," Beth paused, as though she were choosing her words very, very carefully, "you have an option I don't think you've yet considered."

"What option? Leaving him on someone's doorstep? Are you volunteering to be that doorstep?"

Beth bit her lip-- a warning sign if Matt ever saw one. "Not exactly," she breathed in a quiet voice. "I'm volunteering me."

Suddenly, Matt understood. The ground beneath his feet swayed, as though the grand-daddy of all earthquakes was doing its level best to knock him flat.

"Matt--"

"Please, Beth, don't say anything more."

"But you'll think about it?"
"What's to think about? The answer is 'no.' It's bad enough you're my boss. Anything more than that is out of the question."

She cocked her head to one side. "I'm guessing Social Services won't let you keep the baby. The house is too small for so many people, and you don't make enough money. Am I right?"

Matt didn't respond, though he didn't have to. Beth was right and she knew it.

"It would be for the children, Matt."

In the desperate need to fight Beth's reasoning, Matt grasped at the first thing he could think of without pausing to weigh his words. "No way, Beth. I'm not making a lifetime commitment to someone I don't love."

If it hurt, she kept it from him. Her eyes lowered, and for several moments she said nothing. "It wouldn't have to be forever. Just until the kids are old enough to not need me anymore."

Matt shook his head. "I can't accept your proposal."

"It's not a traditional wedding proposal," she said, her gaze boldly rising to meet his. "This would be in name only. I'm simply offering a way to keep your family together. If another proposal needs to be made in the future, I'll let you be the one to make it."

Unsure what to make of that last remark, Matt ignored it and pushed on. "You're my boss."

"I'm your friend. It's worked so far, hasn't it, Matt?"

"I don't know, Beth. Everything is happening so fast."

Beth leaned forward, Matt thought, in an effort to give her words more force. "I believe I have something to offer, not only to the baby, but also to Ryan and Cassie. I can help them. And I think I can even contribute something to Ethan's welfare, not to mention your own. I can help take care of you and the kids, remove some of the burden from off your capable shoulders. You're already doing so much for them, I want to help. You once helped me, now I want to help you."

"I thought you said you weren't going to settle our accounts?" Matt asked.

She smiled cryptically. "We can work that out some other time."

"You're crazy."
"Maybe I am," she threw up her hands, "but until the guys in white jackets come to haul me away, I have to make due. In the meanwhile, what do you think?"

"Where would we live?"

"In my house."

"Where would we... you know, where would we sleep?"

"There are bedrooms in separate wings of the house. We would each take one. There's quite a few rooms, actually. Ethan could have his own bedroom, but I think it might be best for Ryan and Amadeus to share the same space while they're both so young. What's your opinion?"

"I repeat-- you have totally lost it. That baby has messed up your thinking! You're a rational woman, and here you are, throwing away several years from your future to assume responsibilities that aren't even yours!"

"I want to do this, Matt. I need this."

"You can't possibly."

"I need to feel useful again, like God has saved me for a reason besides keeping that nursery open day after day. You taught me to be grateful for my life, and I am. But I need to do something besides operate a business. I want to belong in a family again, and you need to keep yours together. We can help each other."

"But at what cost?" Matt continued to stare at her, insistent that he get an answer. What she was suggesting was huge.

"The cost doesn't matter, it's a price I'm willing to pay."

"Twenty years' worth of price? Beth, that baby is what-- not even two weeks old? What you're proposing will continue until he's at least old enough to move out of the house and start a family of his own."

"I know," she nodded. "I wouldn't dream of breaking up the family by backing out of our deal before then. When the kids are old enough to not need us anymore, we'll be free to make our own plans."
"You're crazy."

"You've already made that abundantly clear," she smiled.

"Beth, you're not only going to be stuck with the kids for at least eighteen years, you're also going to be stuck with me. In spite of the separate bedrooms, that's a big commitment."

"I know."

"I'm going to need time to think it over."

"I understand. I'm not asking you make up your mind, tonight. Just put off calling Social Services until you've given my suggestion some serious thought."

Matt folded his arms. "All this for the sake of the children?"

"You need some looking after, yourself," she smiled. "You run yourself too thin, Matt."

"I don't need a mother, Beth."

She smiled sweetly. "You need someone."

"I already have someone-- three someone's and counting."

Brushing off her pale green dress, Beth moved to her feet. "Just think about it," she said, and then disappeared into the house.

Alone, Matt groaned loudly, not caring if the noise happened to provoke a neighbor's wandering chihuahua into wild yaps. As if Beth had to remind him to think. As if he could do anything right now but think of what she had just said, and the way she had said it.

Maybe he was more deluded than he had thought, but Beth was doing more than volunteering. She was offering herself in a way that triggered every alarm he had into high alert.

Or maybe not.

Matt rubbed his face with both hands, wishing he could do the day over again. Knowing how hard he wished for things he couldn't have, he was probably kidding himself. Beth liked him, but not that much-- not crazy enough to be in love with him. What had she called it? Crazy in love. No, she wasn't crazy enough for that.
But she was insane. No woman in her sound mind would have offered such a proposal. And no man with an ounce of self respect would accept it.

The problem was, she was desperate and so was he.

Knowing what he did now about the depths of his mom's cruelty, Matt would have offered to take that baby from the start-- whether he later gave up the child or not. At least the baby wouldn't be with her. But knowing his mom, if she had thought he actually wanted the kid, there would have been a steep price tag attached to her compliance.

Oh well, Matt thought. What's done is done.

Now if he could only shake the jasmine from his senses, he could think more clearly.

"Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart: so doth the sweetness of a man's friend by hearty counsel."
~ Proverbs 27:9 ~
Chapter Thirteen
Keeping the Family Together

"Horror hath taken hold upon me because of the wicked that forsake Thy [God's] law."
~ Psalm 119:53 ~

Even after the jasmine had cleared, Matt's thoughts tangled in a helpless jumble of horrified anger against his mom, and numb shock toward Beth. His arms felt weak, his legs tired. For all of the fatigue, he could have been hard at work on a construction site, instead of coming away from Sunday lunch with a lovely guest. And what a guest she had turned out to be.

For a fleeting moment, Matt imagined himself accepting the proposal. Then the absurdity of it all came crashing down around him, and he shook himself back to reality. No, he had to refuse. Beth had gotten caught up in the moment, and so had he. Insanity had to be the only explanation. Sane people didn't make rash, life-changing decisions based on one afternoon. It had been unbelievably generous of Beth to make the offer, but he had to turn her down. He just had to. This was simply too much, too huge a proposition to actually work. Desperate or not, there could be no other answer. The baby would be put up for adoption.

His mind made up, Matt went inside.

Of course, everyone had gathered in the living room, crowded around Beth and the infant. Even Ethan hung about the sofa as Amadeus stared in awe at the girls who cooed to him in non-stop babytalk. The biggest offender was Cassie, who couldn't seem to stop marveling. So the baby was cute. Big deal. Ryan had been cute at two weeks old, too. He didn't remember Cassie drooling over Ryan back then, so why should she start marveling over this one? Of course, Matt had to admit, as he plopped into a living room chair-- far away from the sofa-- when Ryan was a newborn, Cassie was about eight years old and still emerging from the coma of her traumatic childhood. As Matt thought back on it, even then, there had been some cooing and "best baby" remarks from Cassie.

A gurgle from Amadeus brought a fresh round of "Sweetie-pies" from the girls.

Matt groaned. That kind of behavior must be genetic with women. For once in Cassie's life, Matt needed her to be perfectly sensible and unemotional. He needed her to face the facts, to not look at things with sentimentality attached to any decisions.

"Can I hold him?" Ryan asked, looking up at Beth with an endearing little-boy smile. "Please? I'll be extra careful!"
Another sigh slipped from Matt. Ryan, not you, too, Matt thought with a surge of despair. Come on, buddy. You’re not going to let me down, are you?

"I’ll give him his bottle, and wipe his chin, and-- can’t I hold him, too? Pleeeeeese?"

Aspirin. Matt needed aspirin. As he made up his mind to search the bathroom cabinet for some, Beth shifted the baby to her shoulder. Matt paused as he watched Beth pat the tiny sleeper on the back; when an equally tiny burp erupted from Amadeus, a purely involuntary smile found its way to Matt’s mouth. Beth put an arm around Ryan, gave the boy a hugging squeeze. "Let’s give your big brother a chance to hold him first, all right?"

At once fearful, Matt lifted a hand to turn down the offer. "Thanks, but I’ll pass."

"But you haven’t even had a good look at him," Beth said, her voice baby-playful, as though she were still talking to Amadeus, and not a grown man. "Don’t you want to say ‘hi’ to your new brother?"

"Not really." Matt shifted in the chair. He wished Beth would leave so he could do the responsible thing and call the social worker.

"Oh, yes, let Matty hold the baby!" Cassie, traitor as she was, jumped off the sofa and came running to Matt with a happy glow on her face that put to rest any hopes Matt had of her being reasonable. "Oh, Matty! He’s the sweetest baby ever! Beth offered him the bottle, and he just started sucking on it as if he knew what to do all along!"

Determined to be the reasonable one, Matt gave a patient smile. One that would prove to everyone that he wasn’t about to lose all proportion of reality just because a baby was in their midst. "Ryan did the same," Matt said, crossing his ankles. "Ryan took to the bottle like a natural. I guess it runs in the family."

"I guess so," Beth smiled, as she lowered a tiny human toward Matt. Seeing he couldn’t escape, Matt opened his arms and accepted the infant.

For a heartbeat, Matt refused to look down at the life in his arms. He could feel the slight heft, the scent of baby formula. It gurgled, and Matt turned his gaze on the tiniest baby he had ever held. The dark flashing eyes so like their mom’s, half open and tuckered out from an already momentous day, peered at Matt with the awe of someone who still couldn’t grapple with the shapes and voices he saw. The chin quivered, ready to let out a cry.
"There, there," Matt said, patting the blanketed bottom, feeling the cushioned, tiny diaper beneath his palm, "don't cry, buddy. Don't cry. I know all of this is new and probably a little frightening, but you're with family. There, there." Matt offered his finger-tip, and Amadeus began sucking it fervently. "Poor little guy. Everyone you know has run out on you, haven't they?" Grief tugged at Matt's throat. He couldn't speak. All he could do was hold the baby he knew he couldn't keep.

A gentle hand touched Matt's arm. He looked up, saw Beth smiling at him. She said nothing, but something shimmered in her eyes and she bit her lip, just as she did a few hours ago when she had made him that outlandish proposal.

"Here," Matt held the baby out to her, "I have to get some air again."

Quiet alarm touched Beth's features. She took the child and remained by Matt's chair, as though trying to penetrate his silence and figure out what everyone's future held. This one innocent baby-- though helpless to act for itself-- had the potential to change every single person there.

"On second thought," Matt got to his feet, stared at the kitchen. "I need to clean dishes." He took one last look at the baby falling asleep in Beth's arms, then went to go tackle the cooked-on-grease left from the hamburgers.

To Matt's annoyance, Beth followed.

Rolling up his sleeves, Matt cleared the table, placed the dishes in the sink and then ran hot water over the detergent until mountains of suds revealed he had dumped in too much soap. Matt yanked off the water. He could feel Beth staring at him.

"Did you tell them?" he asked, plunging his hands into the scalding water and quickly jerking them back when the pain registered in his head. He had to calm down, force himself to think.

"No," Beth's voice came in a hushed whisper, "I didn't want to intrude by speaking to them without your permission."

Matt tossed a glance over his shoulder. "You're picking a fine time to be shy," he said with an ironic laugh. "You wouldn't be having second thoughts about your offer, would you?"

"No, I'm not." Beth's answer came so swiftly, it unsettled Matt.

"I'm afraid I can't say the same for myself," he said, jamming the faucet handle in the upward position, splashing water onto a sudsy plate and at the same time, soaking himself. "Great. I'm
making a mess." He shook off the plate, dropped it into the wire rack, then stared blankly out the window. In the darkening evening, he saw nothing besides Beth's reflection staring back at him, the baby on her shoulder, her body moving in a slight sway to rock the baby to sleep.

Matt turned to face Beth. "This will never work. You know that, don't you?"

She shook her head in disagreement. "I think it could-- if we both want it badly enough."

"Want what badly enough?" Ethan asked, sticking his head into the kitchen. When Matt remained silent, Ethan moved past Beth, and came straight to Matt for an explanation. Cassie soon followed, her face puzzled and sober. Something big was happening, and the older ones could sense it.

As usual, Ryan wanted to be where the people were, and came to stand on tiptoes and look at the baby napping on Beth's shoulder.

True to her word of not wanting to speak about the proposal without permission, Beth remained silent, her eyes trained on Matt.

"Come on, Matty. Give. What are you guys talking about?" Ethan folded his arms. "Is this about calling Social Services to take Amadeus?"

"It's about the baby," Matt confirmed. He went to the table, pulled out a chair and offered it to Beth. "We need to have a family meeting, and in light of everything, you'd better join us."

"What does she have to do with this?" Ethan refused to sit even though Ryan and Cassie were now finding places at the table. "I mean it, Matty. I want to know what's going on."

"Calm down, Ethan. Nothing's going to happen unless this whole family agrees."

"Agrees to what?"

"Sit down."

"Not until you tell me."

Matt sucked in a steadying breath. "After Mom left, Beth and I had a talk."

"A talk about what?"
"Sit down, and I'll tell you." Matt stared at Ethan so hard the teenager finally obeyed. The usual feelings of abandonment that often followed in the wake of their mom's visits, were only magnified by the question of what to do about Amadeus. But for the order of their birth, that baby could have been any one of them-- a fact that didn't set easy with any of the Taylor children. It sharpened Matt's guilt all the more, and made him willing to gather at the table and hold this family meeting.

"Okay. I'm sitting," Ethan leaned back in his chair and stared hard at Matt.

The baby in Beth's arms stirred a moment, and everyone's eyes turned on Amadeus.

Cassie sniffed-- the first indicator Matt had of the girl's impending tears. "We don't have to give him away, do we, Matty?"

"It's not that simple, Cass. We don't have the room, and I don't make enough money."

Ethan swallowed hard. "If I go to college..." he hesitated, as though unsure where his thoughts would lead, "if I went to college, there would be enough room to keep Amadeus."

Shaking his head, Matt tried to explain. "If you went to college, and actually moved out of the house, it would mean you're paying board somewhere, and that's money we don't have. In fact, unless you get a large scholarship, you couldn't go at all."

Frustrated, Ethan blew out a breath. "Well, we can't just give him up!"

"The way things currently stand, I'd have no choice but to do just that."

"You can't, Matty! That's our brother!"

"What more do you want from me, Ethan? I quit school to take care of this family. I took jobs no one else wanted, I gave up on any personal life of my own, just to take care of you and the others. So far, I've given everything I can. And, God help me, I'll keep on trying to do what's best for you and the others."

Ethan scowled, though his frustration had lowered a few notches and his voice sounded calmer. "I didn't say I wasn't grateful."

"I'm not searching for gratitude," Matt said, leaning back in his chair. He looked at Beth, took a deep gulp of air. "As I was saying, the way things stand, it isn't possible to keep Amadeus. However, Beth has made an offer that I think we should at least consider."
Eyes narrowed, Ethan glared at Beth. "She wants to take the baby."

A whimper came from Cassie's direction. "You wouldn't take him from us, would you?"

"No, Sweetheart, of course not."

"But Matty said--"

"Everyone, just hold your horses until I get the whole thing out," Matt said, raising a hand to hush the table. "Beth didn't offer to take the baby. She offered to take all of us."

Bewildered silence fell over the kitchen to such an extent, Matt felt certain no one understood. Matt cleared his throat. "The thing is... what happened is this-- Beth asked me to marry her so this family could stay together."

"She what?" Ethan froze in his chair, not moving, not even flinching, as if he had heard Matt wrong and would be told otherwise in the next breath.

"Beth asked me to marry her."

"That's what I thought you said. And what did you tell her?"

"I said I would think about it." The shock in the kitchen intensified as Matt went on to explain Beth's proposal. "If Beth and I do this, it would be in name only. It wouldn't be a real marriage, just an agreement to live in the same house and take care of you guys."

A scowl crept over Ethan's face. "You're not serious."

"I'm afraid I am."

"You'd be willing to marry her, to live in-- what did you call it?-- in name only, just because of us?"

"Can you think of any better ideas? If anyone here can, please don't keep them a secret."

"What about welfare?" Ethan asked. "If there's another kid in the family, they'll give us more government aid, right?"
"Yes, technically, that's true. But this house is still too small for so many, and besides that," Matt ran a hand through his hair, trying to lessen his own agitation, "I'm not sure a judge would give me custody of another child. With my record, I'm doing good to get you three, let alone another one. The judge could easily argue that I couldn't handle so much responsibility, and he might be right. I'm just not sure I can handle all this on my own. I wish I could, but I have my limits."

With a heavy groan, Ethan scooted onto his tailbone, shook his head and frowned. "So it's marry Beth, or send Amadeus packing? Some choice."

"Hey, watch your language," Matt said, shooting his brother a warning look before casting a sidelong glance at Beth. "She's only trying to help. Considering the choices, her offer isn't all that bad. The family would stay together."

"Yeah," Ethan snorted, "you only have to marry someone for the rest of your life to do it. Matty, I know you like her, but MARRY? Have you lost your mind?"

At the grim reference to his sanity, Matt squeezed his eyes shut. "The arrangement would only last until the kids are grown up and moved out."

"And until then," Ethan said with a snort, "you couldn't date, marry someone else, or have sex. Sounds like a great plan to me. You have lost it, bro. I'd never even consider such a thing."

"Then be grateful you're not me." Matt felt his jaw tighten as he returned Ethan's glare. "What do you want from me? You want to keep Amadeus, don't you?"

Unable to offer any kind of retort, Ethan shoved away from the table, then stalked over to Beth. "Could I have my brother?" he asked in such a surly tone Matt grimaced.

"Of course," she said, and handed over the infant.

Without a word, Ethan left the kitchen with Amadeus.

"Well," Matt sighed, "that went well. Cass? Ryan? What words of wisdom do you have to offer?"

Wide-eyed and confused, Ryan rubbed his nose and looked to Cassie for help.

"I'm sorry," Matt said quickly, running both hands through his hair until he felt a degree cooler. "I shouldn't take this out on you."
Somewhere along the way, Cassie’s eyes had cleared and she no longer seemed to be verging on tears. Still, Cassie looked funeral solemn, and Matt sensed she understood the impact of this decision.

"He’s only trying to protect you, Matty."

"Who? Ethan? That’d be a change."

"I mean it, Matty. None of us want to see you sacrificing your future happiness just for our sake."

"Future happiness? Cassie, life isn’t a fairy tale with happily-ever-afters all over the place. Besides, it’s not like this would last forever. It’d only be for a few years."

Cassie looked skeptical.

"Okay, more than a few years, but that’s not the point. If-- and I use that word sparingly-- if I’m willing to go through with this, would you consider the offer? How badly do you want to keep Amadeus?"

"But what about you, Matty? You aren’t going to be happy."

"Yes, I will." He gave Cassie a firm, decided nod of the head. "This family will be together, and that will make me happy."

"But, Matty--"

"I appreciate everyone looking out for me, I really do. But this isn't about me. This is about you, and Amadeus, and the others."

The words must’ve carried into the living room, for Ethan appeared in the kitchen doorway, the baby cradled in his arm. Matt considered the slumped shoulders, the downturned mouth of his brother.

"I’m touched by your concern, Ethan. I’m also a little surprised."

The teenager shrugged, or gave as much of a shrug as he could with a newborn. "I guess all that religion must be rubbing off on us."

Never before had Matt received any kind of admission that his testimony had made an impact on his brother. It touched Matt deeply, and he couldn’t respond. He waited several long
moments, cleared his throat, and observed the baby in Ethan's arms. The newborn was getting hungry again, and trying to suck Ethan's shirt.

Matt sighed. How that reminded him of baby Ryan, when their mom had stopped breastfeeding Ryan and Matt had become Ryan's legal guardian.

"I'm not asking for a vote right now," Matt said, tapping the table to punctuate his words, "only to get you guys thinking about Beth's offer. I want you to think about it-- really think about it and what it would mean to this family. We could keep Amadeus."

Ethan rolled his eyes. "That name!"

"I know," Matt's strained but genuine laugh went far to lighten the tension in the room, "if he stays, we're changing that name!"

"You could always shorten it," Beth said, venturing to speak for the first time since assuring Cassie that she wasn't going to take their brother away. "Dylan Taylor is a good, solid name. It sounds much better than Amadeus."

Suddenly quiet, everyone in the kitchen stared at Beth, and Matt guessed they all had similar thoughts. If they went through with this, Beth would become family.

After her suggestion, the conversation came to a stand-still. Beth expected to be grilled by the Taylor children, but when no one asked a single question, she realized the fear hanging in the air. What had just been proposed would mean a huge change for everyone.

Pushing back from the table, Matt got to his feet, came to Beth's chair to help her up. It was an unnecessary act of gallantry, and Beth understood the true motive behind it. She needed to leave, to let them think without her listening to every comment they spoke out loud. Matt ushered her into the living room, and Beth looked back one last time at the baby Ethan held. It had taken her some restraint to not warn Ethan to hold the baby properly, but the teenager seemed to know what to do without being told; after all, it hadn't been so very long ago when Ryan had been that size.

"Do you still have Ryan's crib?" Beth couldn't help asking as Matt led her outside to her car.

The question caused Matt's step to pause, his face to cloud over in dismal thought. "No, we sold it before we left Houston. Come to think of it, most of Ryan's baby stuff was either given away or sold."
"Houston?" Beth smiled at the new piece of information. "I didn't know you were from Texas. I suppose that explains the cowboy hat and those boots that never seem to leave your feet."

Wariness played on Matt’s face. He took the car keys from her hand, opened the driver’s side door for her. "Yeah, we’re from Texas," he said, handing her back the keys. "We’re from an ugly, run-down neighborhood where drugs, gangs and prostitutes are more common than the tumbleweeds." He stepped into Beth’s way as she moved to get inside the car. "Dear old Dad introduced me to pot when I was nine. By the age of twelve, I was hooked on meth and about as tweaked as Dad. I tagged along with him to his drug dealer, because I didn't want Dad to get cheated and return home with less drugs then he should've. What’s the matter, Beth? You don't look like you're feeling well."

True, Beth did feel a little sick, but Matt’s challenge gave her courage she felt sure he didn’t intend. "You can’t scare me, Matt. My mind is made up. If you say 'yes,' I fully intend to go through with my proposal."

A slow, heavy sigh parted Matt’s mouth. He looked at her intently. "Then nothing you’ve heard today is giving you second thoughts?"

She smiled in spite of his graveness. "To be honest, I’m having second, third, and fourth thoughts. But any bouts of lingering hesitation are overcome whenever I look at Amadeus, and Ryan, and Cassie, and even Ethan and yourself. You need me. I know this is the right thing to do."

The reluctant tenderness melting into Matt’s eyes only confirmed Beth’s opinion.

"If you want it, I still have Caleb’s crib," Beth said, brushing past him to climb behind the wheel of her car. "Tomorrow is your day off, but if you need to speak to me, you have my number." Beth turned the key in the ignition, shut the door as Matt took a step onto the curb to watch her leave. The tenderness she had only seen moments before, had faded into the same mask of serious thought she had seen on all the faces of the Taylors that evening.

For all her bravery, Beth’s hands trembled as she drove away. What in the world was she getting herself into? God willing, a family.

When the dark blue sedan had disappeared down the street, Matt pulled himself from the curb and returned to the others in the house. Ethan had placed Amadeus back in the carrier, and was
now in the kitchen rummaging through the fridge while Cassie remained in the living room to watch the baby.

Cassie smiled as Matt came to sit beside the carrier.

"Do you think Beth means it?” Cassie asked, her eyes fastened on the baby as Matt lifted the boy out to check his diaper.

Uncertain, Matt shook his head. "She says she does. Whatever else she might be feeling, Beth is keeping it to herself."

Propping her chin on a hand, Cassie leaned forward and smiled as she watched Matt take the baby bottle from off the coffee table. He offered the nipple to Amadeus, and the infant took to it without any coaxing.

"Cass, why don't you go help Ethan find something for dinner? It sounds like he's making a mess in there."

"That's because Ethan is building more of those monster desserts," Cassie smiled, as Ryan's eager voice chanted from the kitchen, pleading for Ethan to add another handful of candies to his ice cream tower.

"I'm glad Beth isn't here," Matt sighed in relief. "She would probably disapprove. We haven't even had dinner yet. I guess I should go in there and put a stop to it."

"Please, Matty, we need to smile right now. Let's finish our special dessert. Just the five of us."

"Five-" Matt startled at the number, then looked down at the sweet innocent feeding on the bottle. "Oh yeah, I forgot. We have another Taylor in the house. What do you say, Dylan? Care to watch us eat?"

Cassie giggled when the baby only shut his eyes and continued to feed.

Forcing aside the sober decision that faced them all, Matt smiled. "If you'll get my dinner, Cass, I think I could use some of that ice cream. This little guy isn't the only hungry man in the family."

Dinner was eaten without mentioning Beth or their mom, or anything that even remotely touched on what to do with the baby. Everyone relaxed, and ate their dessert while Dylan slept in the carrier.
Then came bedtime. Loaded with so much sugar, Ryan had a great deal of difficulty holding still while Matt tried to dress him in pajamas. When Ethan took over the job of fitting a wriggling little boy into bright blue PJs, Matt cleaned the kitchen while Dylan's carrier sat on the table. They didn't have a crib, and until other arrangements could be made, Dylan would have to remain in the carrier. But definitely not on the table, Matt smiled as he lifted it down and headed for the boys' bedroom.

"Do I have to sleep, Matty?" Ryan asked, bouncing up and down on the king-sized mattress he shared with Ethan. "I don't feel sleepy yet! Do I have to?"

"Yes, you have to. And stop jumping on the bed." Matt set the carrier on his own real estate-- a single mattress shoved against the wall. Here, the carrier would be in no danger of falling off. Feeling more than a little unnerved by the responsibility of yet another life in his care, and not wanting to make any mistakes, Matt placed a blanket around the base of the carrier to ensure it wouldn't topple over. Still revved with all that sugar, Ryan kept jumping and laughing. Yup, Matt thought darkly, Beth wouldn't approve. But the thought made him frown. When had he started caring about Beth's approval of how he raised the children? Matt checked his watch. As of four o'clock, that's when. She had sat on his back step, and with a straight face, had proposed marriage. Now his mind kept toying with the idea of actually accepting her offer.

"Ryan," Matt captured the boy before he bounced off the mattress and into the drywall, "it's time for bed. Come on, buddy, help me out and lay down."

"Is she going to be my new mommy?" Ryan asked, as Matt placed him beneath the covers.

The question made Matt swallow hard. "Is that what you want?"

Ryan looked thoughtful. "Can she make grilled cheese?"

"I'm sure she does."

"Without the crust?"

"Ryan, you can't remove the crust. It's food, and you're not going to waste any of it."

"Can she make popcorn?"

"I would think so. Tossing a bag into the microwave isn't exactly rocket science."
"Can she make a birthday cake?" The hopefulness in Ryan's face couldn't be missed. Matt thought back to their mother's empty promise, and his chest grew heavy.

"Yeah, Beth can make a cake. Come on, let's pray and then it's time for you to get to sleep."

Night prayers over, Matt returned to his own sliver of the room while Ethan went into the boys' bathroom to brush his teeth. Matt stripped down to his boxers, then climbed into bed while Dylan stared at him in infant wonderment. Or maybe it was infant ignorance-- Matt didn't know which. He only knew the baby kept staring at him, a non-speaking witness to the life going on around them.

"You're going to sleep, too, aren't you, Dylan?" Putting his head down on the pillow, Matt lifted a hand and let the boy grab hold of his index finger. "You'll be quiet tonight, won't you?"

Ethan stuck his head into the bedroom, toothpaste dribbling down his chin like a rabid dog. "Is that what we're going to call him? Dylan?"

Matt turned, saw the toothpaste and groaned. "Go spit in the sink."

Ethan disappeared, then a moment later was in the bedroom undressing like Matt. "You're going to let Beth tell us what to name the baby? I hope you're not going to let her boss us around."

Tugging his finger and playfully testing Dylan's grip, Matt sighed at Ethan's protest. "She didn't boss anyone, and Mom and Wade were the ones to name this guy-- not me. I'm just shortening it."

The overhead light switched off, and the room went pitch black until Matt's eyes adjusted to the darkness.

"Yeah, well," Matt could hear Ethan grumble from the next bed, "she'd better not try to tell me what to do. I'd tell her to get off my case and go bother someone else."

The resentment in Ethan's voice didn't go unnoticed by Matt. In a way, he understood his brother's feelings. To have someone outside their family make such a bold offer, and to be so desperate as to actually consider it, frightened Matt. While they had endured difficult times in the past, they had always managed to get by, and to do it together-- most often without anyone else's help besides the government aid. Trouble had toughened Matt's self-reliance, and made him wary of trusting anyone so completely that they could be in a position to hurt him or the others.
His thoughts gradually slipped away, and Matt fell asleep until about two in the morning, when a baby's wail jolted him awake.

Crying his heart out, Dylan startled everyone in the bedroom. Ethan jumped to turn on the light, and Matt inspected the carrier.

"Is he all right?" Ethan asked, his voice groggy with sleep but still concerned.

Matt lifted Dylan into his arms. Almost at once, the crying lessened.

"I think he just needs to be fed and changed," Matt said, tossing the diaper bag into the carrier, and then grabbing the carrier with a free hand. "Go back to bed, guys. I'll take Dylan into the living room."

Turning off the light, Ethan yawned as Ryan burrowed under the covers. "Night, Matty."

Blowing out a tired sigh, Matt went into the kitchen. The cries came at a lower decibel than before, though Dylan's face still held a flushed, red glow. It must take a lot of determination to cry with such forceful intensity, Matt thought with a yawn.

After warming baby formula in the microwave, Matt poured it into a baby bottle, then checked the temperature on his wrist. Stifling another yawn, Matt took the operation to the living room couch and stopped himself from plopping onto the cushion as he was used to do. Ignoring the night chilliness of the room, Matt moved the baby to the crook of his arm.

"Okay, okay, here's your bottle," Matt said, offering the nipple to Dylan. The cries immediately quieted when Dylan began to feed. Matt checked the clock. It was early, but he didn't feel like trying to get back to sleep. He leaned over, pulled the Bible out from under the sofa and opened it on his knee while Dylan kept feeding.

Matt tugged the pad of paper from between the pages, then unclipped the pen. It was difficult to find undisturbed time every day to work on his Bible study, to just read God's Word without being interrupted by one thing or another. But two in the morning was as good a time as any, and Matt seized at the opportunity. He worked on the study he'd started a few days ago, then began another, this time, focusing on the dilemma before him.

Dylan turned his head, and Matt removed the bottle. He burped the little guy, then felt the diaper and smiled when he touched squishy warmth. Without doubt, Dylan was good and ready for that change.
Happily taken care of, Dylan fell back to sleep with a full tummy and a clean diaper.

Letting his tiny brother nap in the crook of his arm, Matt returned to the Bible study, adding verses and thoughts as he went. He wished God would send an angel, give him a vision, anything that would tell him what to do. Three verses in particular stuck out at him, and he referred to these over and over: God would provide for their needs (Philippians 4:19), God would give him wisdom (James 1:5), and God would instruct him which way to take (Psalm 32:8). Several other promises came before him, and Matt finally set aside the pad and closed his eyes to pray.

After pleading with God to give him wisdom, a thought crossed Matt's mind. He turned his head, stared at the phone sitting on the battered end table beside the sofa. She wouldn't be awake. She couldn't possibly.

Needing to talk, Matt decided to try. If he got her voicemail, he'd just apologize and say he'd call back later.

Baby Dylan stirred when Matt leaned forward, grasped the telephone with his fingertips, then pulled it to his side. He was about to dial the number, then remembered her card was in his pants pocket. Let it go, Taylor, a voice sounded in his head. You'll just wake her up, and then you'll look like an idiot.

But Matt couldn't leave it alone.

In his bare feet and Dylan still fast asleep in his arms, Matt went to the boys' room, felt about the foot of the bed until he found his jeans. Matt stalked back to the living room, sat down on the couch, pulled out her card and stared at the feminine handwriting on the back. He would call. Definitely. Hand on the receiver, Matt hesitated. He jerked it back, a second thought turning him chicken. Sucking in a deep breath, he shook off the feathers, lifted the receiver and punched in the number. To his amazement, the call answered on only the second ring.

"Matt?" Beth sounded fully alert, not at all as though she'd been sleeping. "Is the baby all right? Do you need anything?"

"Dylan's fine. I just thought I'd call."

Beth's soft laughter sounded like music to Matt's tired ear; he could listen to that voice, forever, and still want more.

"I know what you mean," she breathed in amusement, "after what happened Sunday, I couldn't sleep, either. Although, I'm guessing you're having help staying awake. Did Dylan wake you?"
"He did." Matt gave the baby a small jiggle to nudge him back to sleep. Dylan seemed to enjoy the attention, and gave an answering gurgle. "I'm in the living room, reading my Bible, and I remembered something Ryan asked me before bedtime."

"Go on," Beth coaxed. "What did he ask?"

"Among other things-- mostly food related-- Ryan asked if you were going to be his new mommy."

This drew stunned silence from Beth. Matt strained to hear her reply, and when he heard nothing, he pressed the receiver to his ear and asked if she were still there.

"Yes, I'm here. Ryan asked that?" Matt heard a deep breath, and then a hushed, "Wow. And what did you say?"

"I didn't have a chance to say anything. The subject quickly moved on to food and grilled cheese sandwiches. Without the crust."

Here, Beth laughed. "I never cut off the crust. It's too wasteful."

"Same here," Matt smiled. "But all of Ryan's questions got me thinking. The others hardly know you at all. You're a stranger to them-- a stranger who asked to be a big part of their family. I think it might be a good idea for everyone to get together and talk about the decision. And maybe give them a chance to know you better."

"That sounds like a good idea, Matt."

"The thing is," he pressed on, trying not to let frustration bog him down with everything that needed to be done, "we don't have a lot of time to make this decision. I'm afraid if Social Services finds out I have Dylan, and that he's here to stay, they might act before we're ready."

"I understand."

"I'm amazed you haven't told me to shut up yet," he said in relief.

"Matt, this was my idea."

"Yeah, I guess it was. Anyway, we're going to need time to get married, move to your place, find a lawyer and start the paperwork. I'm also going to need Mom's full co-operation, but I have no
idea when she'll contact me again. The thing is, all this is going to take time. Probably only a few months, but it's still far away enough that we need to get the ball rolling. We need to start acting before Social Services gets involved."

"I understand, Matt. If you're willing to let Ethan and Cassie have a day off from school tomorrow, I suggest you and the others come over to my house first thing in the morning. I won't open the nursery, so I'll be home to show you around. As I said, it's a big house and I'm sure we can find an arrangement that will work for everyone. And you tell Ryan and the others that I'll be happy to answer any questions they might have for me."

Not knowing what to say, Matt let her talk. This woman would be sacrificing a great deal, just to raise someone else's kids. That not only earned Matt's admiration, but also his respect. When she came to a pause, and nothing came afterward, Matt decided to ask her one more time.

"Are you sure about this, Beth? I mean absolutely sure?"

"Are you?"

"Not yet, but I'm getting there," he sighed, rocking Dylan as the infant continued to doze. "Ethan is determined to keep the baby, and Cassie already has her hopes up that this is going to work. She'd be in large puddles of tears right now, if she thought otherwise."

"I understand, Matt. I've raised a lot of hopes."

"Mine included," Matt said, hugging Dylan a little closer. "We've been let down by people with good intentions, before. A neighbor lady in Houston once called Social Services, thinking she was doing us a favor. For a short while, Ethan and Cassie got split up and put into foster homes, and I had to work with a lawyer to be appointed their legal guardian. Ryan wasn't born yet, and I suppose in the end, things did work out for the better. But I can tell you, it wasn't a happy time for any of us."

"How old were you at the time?"

"Eighteen."

"That's very young to have such responsibilities."

"I was old enough." Matt forced himself to relax his grip on the receiver. Bringing up those old memories had rubbed salt into old wounds, renewing his caution about Beth Carter. He would be risking a lot-- what or how much, he couldn't be certain. Matt only knew if he accepted her
proposal, he would be taking a risk not even he could calculate. "This talk isn't easy for me, Beth. All this time, we've managed to get along with just the four of us."

"I'm willing to help, Matt. I'm willing to do anything within my power to keep your family together."

"You'll be taking on a load of responsibility," he warned. "Those kids come with a lot of baggage."

"The house is big, so there will be room for all the baggage they've got," she said with a smile in her voice.

"I'm serious, Beth. They have scars you can't see. It won't be simple."

"I'm serious too, Matt. I know you haven't had an easy life, but I'm willing to take you on."

"This isn't about me, it's about them."

"All right," Beth retreated, and he didn't pursue the subject any further.

Matt preferred to leave himself out of the conversation. If he went through with this, it would be for them, and them only.

"If you're willing to wait, I'll have breakfast ready when you and the children arrive," Beth said, resuming her usual no-nonsense tone. "Since I'm already up, I'll start cleaning the house so you'll be able to see it without the dust and cobwebs."

It sounded like a joke, but Matt couldn't be sure. For all he knew, that house had sat mostly empty, ever since Beth's husband and little boy had died in the plane crash. It was yet another reminder of how lonely Beth's life had been.

"See you tomorrow?" she asked, waiting for him to accept the invitation.

Matt looked down at Dylan, cuddled against his chest and sleeping with abandon. "Okay. We'll be there."

"I promise, Matt-- I give you my most solemn word-- I won't let you or the children down."

"Thanks." Matt didn't know what else to say. What else could he? I owe you one?
"You promise to bring the children?" The hope in Beth's voice sounded so palpable, Matt could almost touch it.

"I promise."

Without having to see her, Matt knew she wore a smile.

"I'll see you then," she breathed.

"Okay, bye." Matt moved to hang up the receiver, but stopped when he heard,

"Good night, Matt."

He swallowed, feeling as though something must surely be getting lodged in his throat besides his tongue.

"Night," he blurted, and quickly hung up the phone. Inhaling a deep sigh of relief that the call was over, he turned his eyes once more on Dylan. Sometimes, that woman could render him speechless with just a few words.

Twenty-four hours ago, if anyone had told him he would ever consider marrying Mrs. Carter for the sake of the children, he would have thought they'd lost their mind. He might not marry her, still, but every time Matt looked at Dylan, the likelihood of the brothers ever parting, grew less and less.

"God help us," Matt sighed. "But you know what, buddy? I have a sneaking suspicion God already is."

Not wanting the baby to wake the others for a second time that night, Matt decided to stay in the living room. He momentarily placed Dylan back in the carrier, then pulled on his jeans. A blanket from off the bed, quickly tossed around Matt's bare shoulders, kept out the encroaching chill as he sat on the couch and felt night turn to morning. With Dylan cuddled in Matt's arms, his blanket keeping them both warm, Matt watched his infant brother sleep.

"But my God shall supply all [Matt's] need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus."
~ Philippians 4:19 ~
Chapter Fourteen
Special Circumstances

"... I being in the way, the LORD led me..."
~ Genesis 24:27 ~

It felt strange not to start breakfast, hurry the others out of bed to catch the bus. But here he sat, snuggled with Dylan on the couch with early sunlight filtering through the living room window. Matt moved the infant to the carrier, stood up to stretch his legs and let out a full-bodied yawn. What a night, he thought, taking the carrier with him to the kitchen to stare at the note tacked to the fridge. He needed to call Ethan and Cassie's schools, let them know the Taylors wouldn't be coming in today.

Then he needed to tell Ethan and Cassie they wouldn't be going, and why.

Maybe he should have gotten more sleep, he decided, going back to the living room to use the telephone for the second time that morning. As if he could sleep with all this going on.

Cassie padded into the living room just as Matt got off the phone. She went straight to the carrier, her sleepy eyes brightening at the sight of their new brother.

"Don't wake him," Matt said, as she bent to touch Dylan's baby soft cheek. "He's been sleeping solid for awhile now, so let him rest."

"Isn't he precious?" Cassie said with a wistful sigh.

"Yeah, I guess." Matt scratched the back of his neck, glanced at the clock. "Get dressed, will you, Cass? I'd like to leave in the next hour."

"I thought you didn't work Mondays."

"I don't. We're going to Beth's house for breakfast."

At once, Cassie straightened, her face thoughtful and sober. "What about school?"

"I called and let them know you and Ethan won't be coming in today."

Cassie blinked, turned to gaze at Dylan with such heartfelt longing, Matt understood how much she wanted to keep their brother.
"Nothing's settled, Cass. Beth and I want this family to talk about it, and see what everyone thinks."

"Oh, Matty." Cassie's blue eyes held a sheen of tears. "I'd live in a cardboard box, if it meant we could keep him."

"You won't have to-- not with the nice house Beth has. Hey, you're not going to start crying, are you?" With a deep sigh, Matt went to his little sister and gave her a gentle squeeze. "There's no reason to be frightened. Beth is trying very hard to make this work."

"What if she finds out she doesn't like us, Matty? What if she changes her mind, and we have to give up Dylan?"

The string of what-ifs piled into Matt's mind, burdening his heart until he had no choice but to throw them off. "If Beth hadn't spoken up when she did, we'd have already lost Dylan. We just have to wait and see what happens, Cass. But don't worry, God will take care of us."

"You always say that."

"Well, He always does, doesn't He?"

"I suppose." Cassie gave a noncommittal sniff. The tears for the most part subsided, she went to change out of her pajamas.

Matt took the carrier into the boys' bedroom, tugged the window shade and let it snap open to announce that morning had arrived. Almost at once, groans of protest filled the room.

"C'mon guys," Matt pulled at the blanket covering Ethan and Ryan, "you got to sleep in late this morning, and now it's time to get up."

"Sleep in?" Ethan moaned from beneath the pillow he had stuffed over his head. "No way. It's Monday. We've got school."

"Not today you don't." Matt jerked off the blanket, exposing his brothers to the cool bedroom. "Up. Before I dump a glass of water over your sorry heads."

Groggy with sleep, Ethan pulled off the pillow and stared at Matt, his hair going in every conceivable direction but down. "No school?"
"Nope." Matt dumped the blanket back on the bed. "We're having breakfast at Beth's house. She's going to show us around, and see how we like it there."

A defiant frown creased Ethan's mouth. "I can tell you right now, I won't like it. I don't care if she is rich. We don't need her money."

"I hate to break it to you," Matt said with a humorless laugh, "we need it. It's marry Beth, or send Dylan packing? Remember?"

"My vote's 'no,'" Ethan said, burying his face into the pillow.

"Fine. Then you marry Beth, and I'll go to college."

A smothered moan came from the pillow. "Either way, I'm not going."

"Oh, yes, you are. Now get up, before I haul you out of bed. You too, Ryan. C'mon, guys-- she's making breakfast for us."

Heavy sleep blinked in Ryan's eyes and even the mention of food did little to wake him. Matt lifted Ryan from the bed, pulled off Ryan's pajamas, then dressed his limp little body for the day.

The entire lot of them, Dylan not included, showed up in the living room in shirts and jeans. Gone were the Sunday long sleeves and ties, the pink barrettes and lip-gloss. Cassie had pulled her short hair into an everyday ponytail, while Matt had simply run his fingers through his still wet hair in an effort to save time. In a show of defiance, Ethan pulled on a smelly black shirt as he entered the living room, then went to change when Matt pressed the issue to its natural conclusion. Change, or be left behind.

No matter how much Ethan complained, drug his feet and gave nasty looks, Matt knew the last thing Ethan wanted was to be left out of the decision.

Everyone dressed, fed, potted and diaper changed, Matt loaded the family into the extended cab pickup. The small ones in the back, Ethan and Matt sat up front.

God, please give us wisdom, Matt thought as he started the engine. Beth can't possibly know what she's getting herself into.

Hair tucked beneath a blue bandana, and donned in old jeans and a garden nursery T-shirt, Beth worked the night through cleaning the house of dust and cobwebs. Necessity made it easier
to force aside the guilt that squeezed her heart every time she moved through an area that held a vivid memory of Luke--the books he had piled into the corner of the second master bedroom, the squeaky hinge he was always promising to fix.

Vacuuming the hobby room felt surreal, knowing Luke's "guy space" might soon hold children, and those children, not Luke's. Beth cleaned around the books, avoided the squeaky bedroom door by leaving it open, and busied herself with work until exhaustion made the grief more bearable.

They would be here soon. The family that wasn't Luke's, but might soon be hers. They would step into this house, and into the rooms that others used to call their own. Only the former owners couldn't object, because they were buried in a cemetery beneath a cold headstone that both father and son shared.

Enough, Beth thought. She had to keep moving, keep scrubbing and cleaning so she wouldn't have time to think. The first rays of the morning sun spilled through the East facing windows, coaxing Beth to leave behind the cleaning and get into the kitchen. She had promised Matt that breakfast would be ready when they arrived, and she didn't want to let him down.

With every window thrown open, a crisp New Mexico breeze moved through the house, filling it with an excitement Beth had never before remembered. It simply wasn't the fresh air, but something else even more tangible. Maybe it was hope, a second chance at life within a family, a life Beth had thought forever gone.

It seemed odd to be preparing food for so many, but it felt good, as though she had a purpose to do some real cooking, and not just the quick meals she fixed for herself. With only one at the table, the work never seemed worth it. After setting the scrambled eggs to low flame on the stove, Beth prepared the waffle iron, the mix, and every strawberry she had left in the refrigerator. Since this meal had been a favorite with Caleb, Beth reasoned it might go over well with Ryan. She hoped it would. Did the other two Taylor boys like waffles? Beth's fingers trembled as she cut the few strawberries she had into thin slices, hoping there would be enough to go around. If she had been thinking with a mind untainted from the pungent fumes of the industrial strength bathroom cleaner, she should have gone to the store, picked up a few things more sure to make the boys happy. Beth hurried around the kitchen, trying not to think about the time.

They would arrive any moment.

The sound of a vehicle pulling up in front of the house, sent shivers down Beth's spine. If she had any spine left, after the bravery it had taken to clean the house in the presence of her family of
ghosts. Luke and Caleb were in Heaven, but that morning, Beth felt they had descended to follow her every move, to watch as she turned her back on them by joining another family.

Grief filled Beth as she wiped her hands on the apron tied about her waist. She had to stop thinking like that. Her heart belonged to Luke and Caleb. Surely, they knew that.

The doorbell rang, and Beth drew in a long breath to purge herself from the uncertainty clinging to her heart. She moved to the front entry, put her hand on the doorknob and prayed. The door opened, and four young faces—Matt’s included—greeted her with solemn "hellos" and restive glances. The baby carrier hung from Matt’s hand, Dylan stirring with the slight motion and the sound of voices. Cassie and Ryan stuck to Matt’s side like glue when Beth invited them inside. Ethan wore a perpetual scowl as he followed Matt into the house, then slumped against the wall and folded his arms as though he were there out of protest.

"Hope we're not too early," Matt said. His gaze went to her head, and she could tell he did his best not to smile.

Suddenly remembering the bandanna, Beth tugged it off. "I must look terrible," she said, glancing to the entryway mirror. A smudged face with glaring red hair tied into a messy braid, stared back at her. "After a night of house cleaning, the place is presentable, but I’m afraid I’m not." She looked away from the sorry reflection, back to the Taylors. "If everyone is ready, I’ll serve the eggs and start making waffles."

No reaction from Ryan, Beth thought with a dismal sigh. Oh, well. So much for that.

She showed them past the kitchen, invited them into the dining area where she had set the table for breakfast. Her eyes traveled to the carrier as Matt placed it on the table. The infant was looking about, his dark eyes going from one object to another. Ryan claimed the chair on Matt’s right, and Cassie took the one on Matt’s left. The small boy kept looking to Matt for assurance, while Cassie seemed content to just stay next to Matt. In a show of I-don’t-care, you-can’t-intimidate-me, Ethan took a chair directly opposite the others.

Despite the almost hostile looks from Ethan, Beth felt her heart beating easier. Seeing them had that effect on her.

She went into the kitchen, returned with scrambled eggs and a pitcher of milk.

"I hope everyone came hungry," she said, pouring Ryan and Cassie each a glass of milk while Ethan helped himself to the eggs. "I haven’t made Belgian waffles in a long time. In our house, they were always considered something of a treat."
Ryan looked at her with cautious curiosity. "What are waffles?"

"Don't tell me you've never had Belgian waffles." Beth opened her mouth in surprise. "Fancy pancakes with powered sugar and strawberries? No? None of you? Well, you're all in for a surprise. My little boy couldn't get enough of them."

As Beth went back to the kitchen for the coffee pot, she hoped she didn't betray undue astonishment. Never had waffles? Of course they required a waffle iron, some patience to keep up with fast eaters and hungry stomachs, but still, hadn't their mom ever done that for them? Such a simple thing, and yet, it made Beth wonder what else Eve had neglected to do for her own children.

The cooking went at a steady pace, the children eating as fast as Beth could turn out waffles. After letting the younger ones go first, Matt gulped down waffles with maple syrup, strawberries and powdered sugar. He kept saying "Thank you," whenever Beth gave him more, so she continued to feed him until he at last gave a satisfied smile, and a "Thanks, but I couldn't hold another bite." Ryan ate with a large sloppy grin, a milk mustache perched over his mouth and syrup dabbled on his chin. More than once, Matt cleaned Ryan's face, and kept urging the boy to use his napkin. With full tummies, the Taylors seemed more relaxed than when they first arrived.

When Dylan stirred in the carrier, Beth looked to Matt for permission.

"Go ahead," Matt smiled. "You've been dying to ask ever since we set foot in this house."

"My clothes are dirty," she warned, but when Matt only shrugged, Beth got to her feet and moved around the table to pick up Dylan. "Who's the cutie-pie?" she cooed to the baby. Gentle hands lifted Dylan and he reached out and grabbed her bottom lip with tiny fingers. Large, dark eyes followed her mouth as it moved. "Such a sweet boy," Beth sighed, hugging the baby to her shoulder. "Has he eaten?"

Matt nodded. "I fed and changed him before we left."

Feeling more sure of herself, Beth pressed forward. "Would you like to see the rest of the house?"

In unison, the children looked to Matt.

"Okay," he said, scooting back the chair as he rose. "I told them it's all right to ask questions, so you've been warned."
With Dylan in her arms, Beth felt she could brave anything, even the four anxious faces that watched her closely as she talked about the house.

"This used to be the home of a popular architect in the area," Beth said, showing them to the right side of the building. "His parents-in-law lived with him and his wife, so the layout sprawls out to the left and right, kind of like two separate houses, but with a common living room, dining area, and kitchen."

As she talked, Ethan turned and looked through one of the three sets of glass double doors, lining the North wall of the adjoining dining area and living room, that offered a good view of the patio. Ethan jabbed Matt in the ribs, jerked his chin at the patio with an awed grin. Matt gave him a sharp warning look that even Beth couldn't ignore, then took a deep breath and continued to listen as she talked about the house.

"There's two main wings and a master bedroom on each wing. This one, the one on the right, is my room." Beth invited the group inside to look around, then closed the door when Matt tugged at Ethan's arm to stay where he was. Beth moved on to the second bedroom on the right wing of the house. "This is-- I mean, was-- Caleb's room. I was thinking it might do well for the little ones, but then it occurred to me you might prefer to have the girls on one side of the house, and the boys on the other." Beth led them inside a neat single bedroom with soft blue walls and an empty crib by the window. "We could repaint the room to suit Cassie," Beth offered, leading them to the adjoining bathroom. They looked at the bathroom, the bedroom, then at each other.

When Beth asked Cassie what she thought, Cassie smiled politely, but seemed at a loss for words.

"Let's move to the left wing," Beth said, leading them through the dining area and living room, to the other side of the house. "This is the second master bedroom, the one the architect's in-laws used." Beth opened the door, showed Matt and his family inside. "I was thinking you might like this room, Matt. It has a master bath, of course, and you could be near the boys. The room next to this is the guest bedroom, and it has its own bathroom and a nice closet. I thought it would do for Ethan, and the hobby room beside that could be converted into a nursery for Ryan and Dylan."

Looking intrigued, Ethan went to the glass double doors in the master bedroom and shoved them open, stepping out onto the small private patio that mirrored the one off Beth's room. "Hey, Matty, get a load of this."
His face creasing in a conscious frown, Matt followed the teenager outside. Ryan stuck to Matt's side so hard, Matt finally lifted the boy into his arms, where the child seemed much more happy.

With an encouraging pat on the shoulder, Beth coaxed Cassie onto the patio with the others.

"That's a pecan tree," Beth said, nodding to the tree North of the private patio. Matt had already met that tree, having earlier buried Bailey beneath the shelter of its sturdy branches. Deciding not to mention that for Ryan's sake, as well as her own, Beth went on. "The see-through building to the right is a greenhouse, and then there's the tool shed, and then, of course, at the opposite end of the house is my patio."

Beth moved down the patio steps from what she already considered as Matt's master bedroom, and onto the wide common patio that spanned between the two wings of the house. A Mexican-style breezeway traveled around the edge of the patio, while red brick paved the patio floor. The backyard had only nominal grass, for most of it was just dry dirt and gravel, but on the whole, Beth thought it didn't look too bad.

"Well," Beth turned to Matt, each holding a little boy in their arms, "what do you think?"

Matt blew out a heavy breath. "I don't know. It's all so... so big."

"Luke had plans to remodel, and at first suggested we rent out some of the rooms--" Beth stopped, bit her lip to control the tremor in her voice. "I never wanted tenants, so Luke had his parents stay with us for part of the year. They move around a lot-- Luke's parents, I mean. After Luke died, they stopped visiting." Beth forced herself to swallow back the grief welling in her chest. "I'm afraid if we convert the hobby room into the boys' nursery, they won't have their own bathroom."

Matt gave her an unconcerned smile. "They can use mine."

"Is it all right if I look around on my own?" Ethan glanced to Matt, then Beth for permission.

"Sure," Beth said, "but don't you have any questions for me, first?"

"What's to ask?" Ethan shrugged. "You and Matty are getting married. I don't think it's a great deal for Matty, but me? I could get used to this."

"Cass," Matt nodded to his sister, "would you take Ryan for a little while? I need to talk to Beth."

With Cassie and Ryan tagging after Ethan, Matt called to them to stay near the house.
"This place is amazing," Matt sighed, glancing about the patio, then through the double glass doors that looked back into the living room and dining area. "It's overwhelming. I don't know what to say."

"Say 'yes,'" Beth smiled.

Looking a bit skeptical, Matt turned to the private patio behind him, then at the one on the opposite end of the house. "Do you think it's enough distance between us?"

"As long as we're careful, I think it'll be enough." Beth tried to sound as positive as she could, though she felt more uncertain than she sounded.

"Right," Matt said with a drawn-out laugh. "You could be on the other side of New Mexico, and it not be far enough."

The candid remark didn't surprise Beth as much as she thought it would. It didn't even shock her. Unnerve, yes, but she felt no shock. "What I said before-- about this marriage being in name only, still goes. But if anything happens to change that..." Beth bit her lip and felt herself blush at Matt's frank gaze. "We're going to need another talk before either of us does anything rash."

"I'm not going to break down your bedroom door, Beth."

"I didn't say you were."

"I know where we stand," he insisted. "Don't worry, I won't do anything to change our agreement."

"That's not what I meant, Matt."

"Well, it's what I meant. You may have different ideas-- I don't know, and frankly, I don't want to know. I'm only staying here to raise the others, and to pay you back for your kindness." The Stetson had been left inside on the sofa, and Beth could easily see the dark eyes that flashed at her without concealment. "Don't try to get to know me any more than you already do, and don't wish yourself into my bed; I might not have the strength to turn you away, and then we'd both be sorry."

In the shade of the breezeway over the patio, Beth cuddled Dylan closer. She felt as though she had been slapped, but in an odd twist, she could summon no anger or resentment. Matt had cut
himself off, without any hope of even discussing the possibility of their relationship turning into something more precious.

"Don't look at me like that," Matt leveled her a knowing glare. "I don't want your pity. All I want is what's best for the others. That's it."

"All right, Matt. I won't talk about it any further." She patted Dylan's sleeper, then decided to take the infant into the house to give him his bottle. She had seen the diaper bag on the living room sofa, and started to open a patio door to go inside.

"Beth." Matt called after her, and she turned to look at him.

Never before did she feel so sorry for Matt, than she did at that moment. He thought so badly of himself, he refused to even consider his own happiness.

"I didn't mean to bark at you."

"You didn't," she said with a sigh in her voice.

He swallowed, stared at the toes of his boots, then back at her. "The others need this to work, and I don't want to mess it up for them."

"You haven't, Matt."

He looked unsure. "You're giving up so much, and I have to jump down your throat."

"Would you cut it out?" Beth offered him a smile which he accepted with only the faintest of half grins. "Stop beating yourself up. I'm not offended that you spoke your mind, and I think we understand each other well enough to do the next logical thing."

"Which is?"

"We need to get a marriage license."

He scowled. "I thought you said logical."

"Matt, a few moments ago you admitted the children needed this."

"Yeah, yeah, I know."
"We need a marriage license," she said, allowing the necessity of the situation to lend force to her words, "and we need to get married."

"When?"

"I was thinking later this afternoon, after the children have had a chance to voice any objections or concerns."

Looking lost and more than a little bewildered, Matt let out a small groan. "Is it even possible to marry so soon? Isn't there a waiting period for the license or something?"

"Do you need to wait, Matt?"

"No, but isn't it the law?"

"There's no waiting period in New Mexico. We can get the license and marry as soon as we want. And considering the things we need to set in motion to keep Dylan, why not today?"

"Today." Matt sounded hesitant, but then his gaze shifted to the baby in her arms and he nodded in agreement. "You're sure about there not being any waiting period?"

"I have a confession to make," Beth said, biting her lip and then wincing when she realized her lip had become sore. "Last night, I didn't only clean the house, I went online and did some research."

"I see." A reluctant smile tugged at a corner of Matt's mouth. He took a deep breath, turned his head and watched the three children explore the back property. Matt's hair ruffled in the breeze with the look of a boy who wanted to play. Then his dark eyes turned on Beth, and the image of a child vanished-- but not so much, she still couldn't see the playful boy in those handsome features. "All right, Beth. I have to talk it over with the others, but I say let's do it."

Not a very romantic way to put things, Beth thought, looking Matt over in his untucked shirt and faded jeans, but then, this wasn't supposed to be a romantic moment.

Then why did a nervous-happy tingle insist on dancing its way to her heart?

When he sighed, she couldn't help smiling. "Don't look so glum, Matt. You're not losing your bachelorhood, you're gaining a house with no mortgage and a roof that needs repairs."

His brows went up in bemused delight. "No mortgage?"
"See? You're interested." Smiling, she took Dylan inside, and left Matt on the patio to talk to his brothers and sister in private.

Today. Matt thought it over, shut his eyes and prayed before talking to the others. He took in the farmland surrounding the property, the furrowed ground, the subtle smell of fertilizer that gave the definite impression of farm country. As Matt approached, he saw Ethan and Ryan crouched over an anthill, Ryan dipping a finger into the busy column before yanking it out with a shout of laughter. Cassie stood nearby, pushing the windblown hair from her eyes and waiting for nothing in particular. When Matt joined them, Ethan straightened and stared Matt in the eye.

"Well?" Ethan asked.

The irritation in the teenager's face annoyed Matt. "It's what you think it is. Unless you guys fight it, Beth and I are getting married."

"I thought so." Ethan folded his arms. "Congratulations, I guess."

"This is for the best, Ethan."

"If you say so." Ethan turned to look at the anthill. "When's it going to be?"

"Later this afternoon."

Ethan's head shot up, his eyes narrowed. "That's rushing things, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess it is," Matt caught the unspoken jolt of happiness from Cassie, "but Beth and I have a lot to get done before we can keep Dylan."

The frown on Ethan's face deepened, but he said nothing.

"Cass?" Matt addressed his sister. "Do you have anything you want to add before Beth and I go through with this? Like I said before, everyone in this family has to agree."

"I agree," she said with a quick smile. The sentimental hope in Cassie's voice stopped Matt from probing further. Knowing Cassie, she was weaving romantic notions he would only have to deny. Much better to leave the whole thing alone, than to get tangled in pre-teen logic.
"Ryan, what about you?" When the boy continued to play with the ants, Matt stood the four-year-old up and brushed the insects from his hand. "Ryan, Beth and I want to get married. Do you understand?"

The small boy puzzled over the question, then his eyes grew wide. "Does that mean we get to stay here?"

"Yes, but that’s not what I’m asking you."

With an impatient groan, Ethan tugged at Ryan's arm to get the boy's attention. "Ry, Beth is going to be your sister-in-law."

"But I already have a sister," Ryan said, looking to Cassie in alarm.

"You're going to get another one," Matt said, moving the boy's head to make sure he held Ryan's full attention. "I need to know what you think."

"A sister!" Cassie gasped in unconcealed delight. "Oh, Matty!"

Ryan frowned. "But I wanted a mommy."

"Unless Beth tells you different, you'll have to make due with another sister. Cass, would you calm down?"

"Calm down!" Ethan gave Cassie a hard nudge with his elbow, nearly knocking her sideways.

"Hey!" Matt stepped toward Ethan. "Be more gentle with Cass."

"She's driving me nuts," Ethan said, shooting a scowl at Cassie. "Why can't she just shut up?"

The tension in the air pulled taut as Matt stared down his teenage brother. "What's gotten into you? You have a gripe, let's hear it."

"Yeah, I got a gripe." Ethan squared his shoulders. "It's bad enough having one in the family telling me what to do, and now there's going to be two!"

"Is that all?" Matt didn't want to press Ethan, but he had little choice. Beth had said today. "You told me yesterday that my religion was rubbing off on you. Is this how you show it?"
Frustration balled Ethan's fists, but he didn't move. "What if she kicks us out, Matty? Have you ever thought of that? What if she decides she doesn't want us anymore?"

"Beth isn't Mom."

"But what if she is?"

"Beth wouldn't do that to us. She's better than that."

The fists at Ethan's side opened, his fingers flexed, his system working through the tension and fear. "Why can't we just take Dylan and leave town? Go someplace they don't know us, and we tell everyone that Dylan is your kid. No one would bother us, then."

"I can't leave my job."

"You'd find another."

"How do you know?"

"You're the one always claiming God is looking after us. Let *Him* worry about it."

"God *is* looking after us, and I can prove it. He sent Beth."

Chest heaving, Ethan stared at Matt with a fear Matt understood. They would be placing a great deal of trust in one person, and if things didn't work out, the consequences would be high.

"Do you really believe that?" Ethan asked. "Do you really trust her?"

"I do." Matt forced himself to swallow. Make that two people; he was asking them to not only trust Beth, but to also trust him that this was the right decision. Matt prayed for wisdom, and felt God pushing him forward when Ethan's fists relaxed.

Eyes still wary, but now a little more trusting, Ethan backed down with a nod of cautious agreement. "Okay. My vote is yes."

A monumental gulp slid down Matt's throat. "Okay, then. I'm getting married today."
Seated on one of the living room sofas, with Dylan snuggled in her arm and nursing on a bottle, Beth heard a patio door open behind her. She looked up as Matt and the other children filed inside.

"We've got the go-ahead," Matt said, shoving his hands into his pockets while a beaming Cassie settled on the sofa beside Beth. "I guess I'm ready when you are."

"Dylan is almost finished," Beth said, noting the difference between Matt and Ethan's sober expressions, and that of smiling Cassie's. "Are you all sure? Once Matt and I do this, it won't be easy to undo."

A grunting, "I've got a question," came from Ethan as he dropped into the sofa next to hers. "What if Mom won't give us Dylan, after all? What then?"

Taking time to think the question over, Beth removed Dylan's bottle, then moved the newborn to her shoulder for an after meal burp. "I want to be a part of this family for as long as you want me."

"Which means?" Ethan asked.

"It means," Beth paused, choosing her words with careful consideration, "this will be your home for as long as you want it, whether Dylan is here, or not. This arrangement isn't just for the baby, but for everyone."

"But if Dylan wasn't in the picture, this wouldn't be happening, right?"

"Yes, that's probably true." A small burp sounded in her ear, and Beth lifted the baby back into the carrier. She turned to face Ethan and the others. "I admit Dylan is the primary excuse for this arrangement, but he's not my only excuse. To be honest, I don't want to live by myself. I want to belong again, to be really needed by someone besides employees and bill collectors. Perhaps you think it was selfish of me for proposing to Matt the way I did, but I keep telling myself that I won't be the only one to benefit. If you choose, Ethan, you could go to college. I can't promise it will be an Ivy League education, but I'll do everything I can to help you get into the best school we can afford."

"We?" Ethan slumped back on the sofa. He slanted a look at Matt, who remained quiet and standing. "Just for the record, no one bought my vote. I didn't say 'yes,' so I could get anything out of this, but Dylan."

Beth smiled. "I appreciate your honesty."
The suspicious gleam in Ethan's eye didn't fade, but he held his skepticism at bay. He said nothing as Ryan climbed onto the sofa and asked to hold the baby.

"Matt?" Beth offered Dylan to the oldest brother, and he stepped forward to accept the bundle. "I'll let you decide what to do about Ryan. Right now, I need to shower and get changed for the wedding."

The baby cradled in his arm, Matt looked Beth over. "Do you want me to go home and change into my Sunday clothes? We're going to look kind of silly, you all dressed up and me in my shirt and jeans."

"Please, Matt," she moved to her feet, and he stepped back to give her room. "I don't want to get married looking like this. I've been up since two, maybe even earlier-- I can't remember-- I'm covered in dust and grime, my nails are filthy and so is my face. And besides that, I smell."

"You look fine to me," Matt said, nodding to Ryan as the boy tugged at his shirt to hold the baby. "Shower if you want, but I was only saying, we're going to look lopsided if you get dressed up and I don't."

"Please, Matt."

He grinned. "I take it, you want me to change. All right, Beth, if that's what you want. Ethan, Cassie-- watch the little ones while I go home and get ready."

"Can I hold the baby?" Ryan directed the question to Cassie when she stood up to take Dylan from Matt.

"I'm getting hungry," Ethan said, checking his watch and groaning at the lateness of the day. "It's almost noon."

"Help yourself to whatever is in the kitchen," Beth called out before disappearing into her bedroom. She had a lot to do, and not a lot of time to do it in.

Today, she was getting married. Beth only hoped Luke didn't mind.

The drive home passed quicker than Matt thought it would, his mind somewhat dazed by what was happening. He jogged to his room, picked Sunday's clothes out of the hamper, then twisted on the shower. If Beth wanted things to be a little special, then so be it. She wouldn't be getting a
big wedding, or anything nice, so if she wanted the groom to be at least presentable, Matt could hardly blame her.

The groom, Matt thought in numb wonderment. What in the world was he doing? And what would Pastor Mark say, when they showed up to ask for an impromptu marriage ceremony in a small corner of the church? He'd probably talk them out of it, or at least try to. After all the talking they'd done to get themselves into this situation, to find the courage and actually go through with the marriage, Matt wasn't so sure he wanted the added challenge of convincing his pastor that this was what God wanted.

Someone was going to a lot of trouble to keep this family together, and if it wasn't God, Matt didn't know who. Not even Beth, in all her loneliness, could orchestrate these special circumstances to fall out the way they did. And after taking into account the studying he had done early that morning, combing God's Word for wisdom and direction, Matt felt more sure than ever that he understood God's will.

In all probability, Pastor Mark wouldn't see it that way, but Matt sure did.

In ten minutes flat, Matt had showered and dressed. As he tucked the long sleeved shirt into Sunday's blue jeans, he wondered if he should kiss Beth. At the end of weddings, the guy was supposed to kiss his wife, wasn't he? Just because there wasn't going to be a honeymoon, didn't mean he couldn't kiss her, did it? Pastor Mark would expect a kiss, and so would everyone else. The alternative flashed through Matt's mind, and he pictured himself shaking Beth's hand after the ceremony.

Nope, Matt needed to kiss her. Perhaps just a peck on the cheek? He frowned as he grabbed his keys, locked the front door, then hurried back to the pickup. Maybe the direct approach would be best-- smack on the lips. Oh yeah, Matt thought, he could do that. For a few dazzling moments, he imagined what that kiss would be like, how it would feel to have her close.

Reality tumbled Matt back to his senses, or what was left of them after his fantasy lifted. Disappointment pulled at him as he remembered he had to live within the boundaries of their agreement. Kisses were dangerous-- Matt knew it, understood it without question, and yet, this was their wedding. If an exception could ever be found, surely today would be the occasion.

Just once, he decided, tensing his hands around the steering wheel as he headed back to Beth's house. Just this one time, he would relax his guard and kiss Beth.

A grinning idiot caught his attention in the rearview mirror, and Matt decided to ignore him. He needed to be happy, to let whatever joy existed in the moment, carry over to help pacify
future disappointments. A marriage of convenience. Beth had all but called it that when she talked to Ethan, and it made sense to Matt. Was this a fair exchange? Right now, despite the sacrifice of not being able to marry for outright love, Matt felt as though he and the children were getting the better end of the bargain.

Except, of course, for that painful line drawn at Beth's bedroom door-- the door he promised not to break down.

"I have totally lost it," Matt breathed. "But crazy or not, I want that wedding kiss."

Wrapped in a bathrobe, Beth inspected the walk-in-closet and tried to picture herself getting married in one of those dresses. A knock at the bedroom door had her shouting to ask who it was.

"It's me-- Cassie."

"Come in, Cassie. I'm in the closet."

When the young girl came to where Beth stood at the racks of clothes, Beth gave her a smile. "I'm afraid I'm not ready yet. Is Matt back?"

With a shy nod of her head, Cassie leaned against the closet door. "He's in the kitchen with Ethan and Ryan, making peanut butter sandwiches. I hope that's okay."

"There was better than peanut butter in the pantry, but it's all right with me. I told them to help themselves, and that goes for you, too."

Cassie shrugged. "I'm not hungry."

With a small laugh, Beth resumed the dress hunt. "Leave it to a man to eat on the verge of making a life-changing commitment. Oh, well, maybe you can help me make a decision of my own. I can't decide what to wear to the wedding." The words sounded surreal to Beth's ears, prompting a quick pinch to the arm to ensure she wasn't dreaming.

"Beth?" Cassie tilted her pretty blonde head to one side. "Can I ask you a question?"

Somewhat alarmed by the serious tone of the request, Beth nodded to Cassie. "Ask away."

"Matty said you're going to be my sister. Is that true?"
Feeling more relieved then she realized, Beth blew out a small sigh. Of all the questions Cassie could asked, that one seemed safe. "Technically, I'll be your sister-in-law, but if you like, I have no problem considering you as my sister." It warmed Beth's heart to see the delicate smile on Cassie's face, the way the girl stepped forward to give Beth a heartfelt hug. "You're a sweet girl, Cassie. Thank you."

"I'm so happy," Cassie said, brushing the tears from her eyes. "I've wanted a sister for so long..."

"Now, now," Beth hugged the girl in the hopes of calming her down. She had seen the way Matt handled Cassie with great gentleness, and endeavored to do the same. "Try to dry your tears, Sweetheart. I think I understand. I have an older brother and a younger sister, and I can't imagine not having them around when I was growing up."

Cassie dried the tears and gave Beth such a sincere smile, Beth had to hug her once more before letting go.

"Aren't you still close with your brother and sister?"

"Not especially." Beth turned to face the dresses instead of the question.

"Why not?" Cassie asked, coming to Beth's side to stare at the same racks of clothes.

"Oh, many reasons, I suppose. They're both doctors, with successful careers and growing families. It's difficult for us to keep in touch, and when I'm around them, I often feel left out." Beth startled at her own honesty. She had yet to really admit that to herself, let alone to Cassie.

"You feel left out because your husband and little boy died?"

"Yes, I think that's true." The admission caused Beth pain, and she squeezed her lips together to stop from saying more.

With Cassie's help, Beth chose a soft gray, one-piece dress with long sleeves, matching high heels, and an elegant string of white pearls to wear at her throat. She put her hair up in an elegant French twist, applied makeup, added a touch of perfume, then announced she was ready to go.

What on earth was Beth doing in there? How long did it take a person to shower and change? His lunch eaten over an hour ago, Matt and the others waited on the living room sofas for
something to happen. And then it did. Beth and Cassie came into the room, and Matt couldn't take his eyes off of Beth. She had that flaming red hair fixed in a fancy braid again, and a gray dress fitted over her slender curves.

"Well?" Beth asked. "What do you think?"

When Matt tried to swallow, his mouth felt as dry as New Mexico's famous white sands. "I-- I think you look fine."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Beth said with a smile. She placed her purse on the coffee table. "I've been thinking it over, and before we leave for the county clerk's office to get our marriage license, we need to make two calls. First, we should call our pastor and ask if he's available to preside over the wedding ceremony. Second, I need to call my parents and let them know what I'm about to do."

"Okay," Matt nodded in hesitant, though willing agreement. "I'll call Pastor Mark, and you call your parents. I'd tell my mom, but she didn't leave her number."

Pulling out his cell phone, Matt stepped into the dining area and speed-dialed his pastor's number. Matt already had a good idea of what the man would say, and tried to brace himself for the impending conversation. When Matt discovered Pastor Mark's cell phone wasn't turned on, Matt couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief. They could always find someone else to marry them. Then Matt thought of trying Pastor Mark's home number, and he dutifully made the call. When an answering machine announced Pastor Mark wasn't home, Matt decided to hang up without leaving a message.

There would be plenty of time to talk to him later.

Tucking the cell phone back into his hip pocket, Matt went to the other side of the open space, and waited for Beth. Through the glass doors, he could see her outside on the patio, an expensive looking cell phone pressed to a lovely ear. Her eyes trained on the red bricks, then turned upward. She shook her head, folded away the phone. When she stepped into the living room, he saw the bright smile on her lips.

"Mom and Dad weren't home. All I got was an answering machine, so I suppose I'll have to let them know after the fact, instead of before."

"Did you try their cell phones?" In all good conscience, Matt had to ask. If Beth could be talked out of this marriage, it would be better to get it over with now.
A smile curved Beth's lips. "They don't carry phones."

"Did you try your brother, your sister?"

Beth shrugged. "I'll tell them later. What about Pastor Mark? What did he have to say about our plans?"

"He wasn't home."

"Did you try his cell phone?"

"It wasn't on."

"Did you leave any messages?"

"Did you leave a message with your parents?"

The two stared at each other, and Matt knew she hadn't. He had to chuckle in spite of himself. "If we're about to make a tragic mistake, no one is home to stop us."

"Do you think we're making a tragic mistake?"

"No, I don't."

"Then let's go get married."

It sounded reasonable enough, though Matt wasn't sure how reasonable he felt when everyone went outside to his pickup truck and there wasn't room for Beth-- not with Dylan's carrier in the backseat. Driving her sedan, Beth led the way to the Doña Ana County Clerk's office in Las Cruces, while Matt and the others followed in his pickup.

Matt didn't remember getting out, unstrapping the baby carrier, following Beth into the building with his brothers and sister close on his heels. Ethan had to help him remember his address when it came time to fill out the paperwork, and when it came down to it, Matt couldn't even remember his middle name. It was Logan.

With no blood test, no physical exams, and no waiting period, Matt and Beth soon left the office with their marriage license.

He blinked at her, and she took a deep breath.
"Does this mean you guys are married?" Cassie wondered out loud.

"No, now we need someone to actually preside over a wedding ceremony." Beth dialed information on her cell phone. When she hung up, her face was sober. "There's no Justice of the Peace in Las Cruces. It looks as though we're going to need a licensed minister."

"His cell phone isn't on, Beth. I tried."

"Try again. Unless you know of someone else, we need Pastor Mark."

"I don't think he'll do it."

"You could always ask. If you're too afraid, I'll make the call."

"I never said anything about being afraid." Scowling at Beth, Matt pulled out his phone. "His cell phone is off, and he's not at home. It's just that simple."

"But you didn't even leave him a message."

"Hey, I didn't see you tying up your parents' answering machine."

That silenced her. Biting her lip again, Beth's absent fingers toyed with the strand of pearls about her neck in an unusual show of nerves. Finally, a crack in the porcelain doll. Matt swallowed any satisfaction he had at knowing she was just as nervous as he was, and tried Pastor Mark's cell phone number again. If they both were this nervous just calling up their pastor, how would they ever make it through the ceremony? That is, if Pastor Mark ever let them get that far.

To Matt's reluctant relief, the call answered.

"What can I do for you, Matt?" Pastor Mark asked in his usual upbeat voice.

Turning his back so Beth couldn't see any fear, Matt took a deep breath and summoned courage he didn't know he had. "I was wondering if you'd do me a big favor."

"Name it. Are you short on rent money again?"

Matt took a quick glance at Beth in her soft gray dress, classy high heels, and observed her attentive expression. She was listening to every word Matt said. "No, I don't need any money. I
was wondering if you’d be willing to marry me and Beth.” There, he had said it. Matt rubbed the back of his neck, grateful the moment was over.

Relief turned back to raw nerves when Pastor Mark fired a string of rapid questions at Matt.

"Marry? You? I didn't even know you were dating. Who is Beth? Have I met her?"

"You know Beth-- Beth Carter, the woman who comes to our church. She and I want to get married. We have the marriage license, but now we need someone to make it official."

"I'm sorry, Matt, I need to sit down. Am I hearing you correct? You... and Beth Carter? The same Beth Carter who owns and operates the garden nursery downtown? Your boss?"

"Yeah, that's the one," Matt shifted in his boots, unsure how to take his pastor's incredulity.

"And you proposed to her?"

"Pastor Mark, Beth and I want to get married. Is that so hard to accept?"

The minister gave an audible sigh. "I suppose this is more of a shock than it should be. I knew you and she were getting to be good friends-- you were confiding in her, that much I knew-- and I admit to entertaining a thought about that developing into something more. But your call stuns me, Matt. I never considered it seriously, and especially not so soon after you two met. What date have you set for the wedding?"

Matt gulped. "Today."

"Today? What's the rush? Is someone in trouble?"

"I suppose, in a way, someone is in trouble. But it's not what you think, Pastor Mark. Beth isn't pregnant, but there is a baby involved." Doing his best to stay calm, Matt explained the situation to the bewildered minister, not holding anything back or the fact it would be a marriage in name only. When it was over, Pastor Mark gave an audible sigh.

"I see," the minister said after another long pause. "Have you and Beth given this prayerful thought? Have you asked God what He wants you to do?"

"I'll pass the phone to Beth, so you can talk to her yourself, but I've asked God for help, and He answered. I've prayed and read my Bible, and talked it over with the others. Beth and I are dead serious about this."
"Matt, I'll be honest with you. I have grave reservations about this arrangement. You say it's a platonic relationship, but you'll be living together in the same house."

Indignant, Matt forgot he had an audience and his voice rose several notches. "If I say Beth and I won't have sex, then we won't have sex! I'd never lie to you about that!"

"Don't be offended, Matt. I trust your sincerity, but I need time to think this over. Please pass the phone to Beth."

Matt turned to see Beth staring at him, her lips parted in waiting anticipation.

"He wants to talk to you," Matt said, shoving the cell phone into her hand. He took a few steps back, paced and watched Beth's face as she spoke to the pastor.

Beth nodded. "Yes, we're serious."

Feeling a burst of self-conscious awareness, Matt turned to see Ethan with the baby carrier, Cassie and Ryan rooted quietly at Ethan's side.

"I didn't say a word," Ethan grinned.

The phone passed back to Matt, and Pastor Mark told him to bring everyone to the church office. They needed to talk things over before any decisions could be made.

Somewhat over the hill of middle-aged life, Pastor Mark had a full head of salt and pepper hair, a stomach that bulged (though he was losing weight with the help of the Lord), and lines that creased his face more and more over the years. When Beth saw him sitting behind the desk in the church office, she wondered if he looked older than his years because of the challenging situations his congregation got themselves into. With that patient greeting and tired smile, he looked as though he were yet again being tested by God through the people to whom he ministered.

When the pastor spoke, however, it wasn't weariness in his voice, but caution.

"I've been sitting here, thinking and praying over your plans. I want you to be aware that when you both take these vows, in the sight of God, myself, and everyone else, you two will be married. Though it's in name only, this will mean a sacred, lasting commitment."
"But what if we choose to have our marriage annulled in twenty or thirty years?" Beth asked.

With a low groan, the patient, tired lines on Pastor Mark's face deepened. "In all honesty, do you expect people to believe the marriage has never been consummated in all those years? It's a lot to ask of anyone. What I suggest is this: enter into the marriage with the sincere intention of staying together, abstain from sex if you both so choose, but don't be surprised when people refuse to believe your relationship is platonic. Truly, as long as they know you're both in this for the long haul, it doesn't really matter what they think. You're married, and what you choose to do, or not do, is your business. To a certain extent, you'd also be safe-proofing your marriage by not placing undue temptation in each other's way. Keep the marriage in name only, but make the marriage last. It's the best advice I have to offer."

Beth nodded. "Matt and I need to talk this over."

"What's to talk about?" Matt asked. "Unless you tell me you want out, I say we go for it."

"Are you sure, Matt? You'd be making a serious commitment without love."

"So? You'd be doing the same thing."

"This is big, Matt. Very big."

"No offense to you, Beth, but I don't have much of a choice. It's either give up Dylan, or go through with the marriage."

"In name only?" she asked.

"Yup," he nodded, "name only."

"Okay," Beth sighed, turning back to Pastor Mark, "we agree to make the commitment."

The pastor looked at each with a steady gaze, then closed his eyes as though in prayerful thought. "Matt, I don't know if I've ever told you this, but I've been petitioning God to give you a helpmeet to share in your burdens."

"You have?" Matt looked surprised. "I wish you'd told me that sooner. God might have worked things out differently if I had put a stop to those prayers."

His eyes opening, Pastor Mark smiled for the first time since their arrival. "Just as God called you away from drugs for a purpose, I believe all things will continue to work together for your
good. Never underestimate Romans eight, twenty-eight." He remained silent a few moments, then beamed at the carrier hanging from Matt's hand. "What a tiny newborn. May I hold him?"

With a smiling shrug, Matt placed the carrier on the office desk, then scooped out a blinking Dylan with both hands. Matt lifted the infant into Pastor Mark's awaiting arms. "He has my Mom's eyes, and the rest I guess I have to credit to Wade."

"God must surely get the credit for such a child as this," the pastor said with marked tenderness in his voice. "So this is the reason two people are forever changing their lives. Such a small person, making such a great change." Pastor Mark looked up, smiled first at Matt, then Beth. "It would be my privilege to marry you."

Fifteen minutes after calling the needed witnesses for the ceremony, (Pastor Mark's wife and a next door neighbor), the two volunteers arrived in a hurried bustle of congratulations and apologies for being late. They admired the baby for several moments, prolonging Beth's nervousness over the life-altering commitment she was about to make. Matt looked patient but eager to get it over with, and after assembling everyone in the office in their proper places, Cassie as maid of honor and Ethan as best man, Pastor Mark began the ceremony while Dylan fussed in the pastor's wife's arms.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this company, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony..."

Beth felt her palms grow moist as she listened to the words. When Pastor Mark asked Matt, "Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou comfort her, honour her, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?" and made no mention at all of love, Beth understood Pastor Mark had left it out on purpose. It hurt more than Beth thought it would, but she knew it was for the best. They were making promises that could be kept, not ones that were fancifully out of reach.

Matt gave a sturdy, "I will," and then it was Beth's turn.

"Wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, honour, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

"I will." Beth admitted her voice sounded shaky, but she had said the right words. The sacred words that would make her part of a family again.
Then came time to exchange vows, and Matt and Beth quickly realized they had no rings.

"No matter, it’s legal without them," Pastor Mark said, and continued on with the ceremony. Matt repeated the pastor’s words, again leaving out any references to love, and then Beth did likewise. Afterward, Pastor Mark prayed, asking God for His divine help and grace, and then came the announcement,

"You may kiss the bride."

Matt stepped forward, and Beth lowered her head, his lips greeting her forehead in such awkward momentum, it felt as though they had bumped into each other by accident. When Beth looked up, she saw a frown forming around Matt’s mouth. His eyes refused to meet hers, and he said nothing.

A gasp of fear lodged itself in Beth's throat. Was he experiencing second thoughts? Matt, who had shown no doubt during their talk with Pastor Mark?

Whatever passed through Matt’s mind right now, the deed was done.

They were married and Beth suddenly found herself Mrs. Matt Taylor, and no longer Mrs. Luke Carter. The startling realization unsettled her, filled her with sharp guilt until Dylan rested in her arms and the guilt turned to gratitude.

Luke, please don't blame me, she thought, as both witnesses signed the marriage certificate. You still have my heart, Luke.

It's still yours.

Her poor dazed heart pounded so hard, it created a painful need for comfort. Clinging to the newborn until she dared not tighten her hold for fear of hurting him, Beth strengthened her resolve to remain practical.

Luke had her love, and Matt had her future. Somehow, she would make it work.

"God setteth the solitary in families..."
~ Psalm 68:6 ~

"And wherefore one? That He [the Almighty, in cooperation with Matt and Beth] might seek a godly seed [the children].” ~ Malachi 2:15 ~
Chapter Fifteen

Tender Boundaries

"... rejoice with the wife of thy youth."
~ Proverbs 5:18 ~

The disappointment stung even more than Matt expected. No wedding kiss. In his entire existence, there would only be one day with Beth like this one, and there had been no kiss.

The congratulations that followed the ceremony were only half heard by Matt. He took his family outside, amazed that his family now included Beth.

As they made their way to the parking lot, Matt couldn’t shake the feeling that Beth watched him. He shot a glance behind him, and sure enough, she was staring. He weighed the keys in his hand, came to a stop beside his pickup. The large envelope with the marriage certificate remained tucked under his arm, thin and incredibly light for something that marked such a huge occasion in his life.

"Well, it's done." Matt shook his head, blew out a sigh that did little to relieve the ache in his chest. The moment felt surreal, dreamlike and at the same time frightening. The baby moved in the carrier Beth held, catching Matt’s attention for a few moments as he struggled to gather his thoughts.

"What now?" Ethan asked, shoving hands deep into his pockets.

Recognizing the frightened stance, Matt took a deep breath, looked at Beth and found her still watching him.

"Please," she said, her voice just below a whisper, "tell me you're not sorry we got married."

"I'm not."

"You look like you are."

"I'm not." He gave a forced shrug. "It's only... I was expecting it to be different."

"We didn't have time to plan the wedding," the words tumbled from Beth's mouth in a dazed mix of panic and confusion. She hugged the carrier close, as though frightened by what they had done.
He placed a hand on Beth's arm. "I'm not sorry."

"But the wedding--"

"I'm fine with the wedding."

Green eyes filling with tears, Beth bit her lip. "Then why do you look disappointed?"

"It's not important." Matt sighed as he looked about the group, all the quiet faces. "Hey guys, lighten up. You're supposed to be happy at weddings."

Eyebrows raised, Ethan turned to Cassie. "I'm happy, how about you? You happy?"

Tears stood in Cassie's eyes. She smiled, rubbed her cheek against the back of her hand.

"Yeah," Ethan said with a dark chuckle, "this is one happy day. Congratulations, Matty."

"Cut it out, Ethan. The girls are almost crying as it is. Don't make things worse for them than they already are."

"I'm fine," Beth insisted.

"You don't look fine," Matt replied.

"Well," she paused, her bottom lip quivering, "you don't look happy."

Ethan groaned. "He just tied himself to someone he can't have sex with. Why should he be?"

"Ethan, I'm only going to say this once. Knock it off."

"You're not my father, Matty."

"I know I'm not, but Dad isn't here, and neither is Mom. You're stuck with me, so make the best of it and keep your mouth shut so I can think."

"Matty," Cassie tugged at his arm, "Beth is crying."
Matt looked over to Beth. Tears spilled onto her cheeks as she placed the carrier on the ground, then lifted out Dylan. Sobbing so quietly Matt almost couldn't hear, Beth cradled the baby close to her heart.

"Beth." He moved to her side, put an arm around her shoulders. "Please don't cry, Beth. Please don't." She turned into Matt's embrace, and with Dylan between them, wept without restraint while Matt hugged her tight with both arms.

He couldn't help feeling he had brought these tears on by not looking happy.

As sobs racked her body, Matt felt them tremor through his own. In the rush to get their marriage license, find a minister, and settle on the terms of their marriage, there had been none of the sentimental finery women were used to. Matt didn't mind skipping the flowers or the other fluff that followed a wedding, but that kiss...

Matt peered down at the tear streaked face nestled against his shoulder. Tilting Beth's chin back, he ignored the wide-eyed surprise of those shimmering eyes; he lowered his mouth to hers, and gently dropped a kiss on those trembling lips. It lasted only a moment-- that one soft touch-- but when Matt raised his head, the world swam around him in a dance of pleased shock.

"Wow," he breathed, smiling easy for the first time since their wedding.

Long lashes wet with tears, Beth blinked at him in a gaze of quiet wonderment.

"You owed me a kiss, Beth. I was aiming for your mouth, but all I got was forehead. Now I'm happy."

Unable to resist one last squeeze before letting go, Matt stepped back. The sobs quieted, the tears came less frequent. Where words of comfort failed, that one kiss soothed her, even upturned the curve of her lips.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, drying her face with the handkerchief Cassie offered. "I don't know why I'm making so much trouble over nothing."

"It's no trouble, Beth. I suppose this afternoon hasn't been easy for you."

Dabbing her eyes, she smiled at Matt. "It's ending nice. I'm grateful for that."

An easy feeling skipped through Matt's heart. She hadn't minded the kiss; maybe, even liked it.
He sure had.

Ethan stooped to pick up the empty carrier, his face contrite as he held it without being asked.

The power of a crying woman, Matt mused as he unlocked the pickup. Then Matt noticed how pale Cassie looked.

"Cass, when was the last time you ate?"

"I don't know." Cassie straightened her shirt, frowned when Matt continued to stare. "I can't remember, Matty."

"Try."

A shoulder lifted, her face concentrated. "Breakfast, I guess. I ate some of Beth's waffles."

With a groan, Matt adjusted his hat, his eyes fixed on Cassie. "Do you have a headache yet?"

She shook her head. "Honest, Matty, I'm all right."

"Don't go fainting in the parking lot," he asked. "You're emotional because of all this wedding stuff, and to top it off, you haven't eaten. You're not in your period, are you?"

"Matty!"

"Just checking," he replied, tossing the marriage certificate onto the dashboard.

"I'm not emotional!"

"If you say so," he said, taking the carrier from Ethan. Matt strapped it into the backseat of the truck, cinching the seatbelt to make sure it held fast. When he straightened, he noticed Ryan stood so close, the boy almost hugged his pant leg. "Hey, buddy." Matt took note of the somber face, the thumb sucking that made Ryan look even younger than his four years. "You're not scared, are you?"

Ryan shook his head, but didn't push away when Matt lifted Ryan into his arms. Matt expected the boy to announce his hunger, but instead of a complaint, Ryan hugged Matt around the neck. Then, with a small sigh, Ryan placed his head on Matt's shoulder.
It had been a long morning and afternoon, and at the end of it, all everyone needed was to be reminded that they weren’t alone. Even Beth had needed that comfort.

The thought made Matt smile. Confident and self-assured as Beth might be, she had needed him.

"Let’s eat out," Matt suggested, hoping to coax his family into a happier frame of mind. "We got married today, so I think a celebration is in order."

Beth handed the handkerchief back to Cassie, then received a hug from the girl. Time to get moving, Matt decided. They needed to leave this parking lot before one or both of the girls started crying again.

It ached Beth to let go of Dylan, even for the short drive to the Mexican restaurant on Mesquite Avenue where Matt suggested they eat. She followed behind his pickup, her resolve slipping a few notches at the memory of Matt and his unnervingly sweet gesture to stop her tears. It had been more than a gesture-- Beth felt it in her heart, though she refused to acknowledge it as anything more than a celebratory kiss. They had gotten married today. Of course there would be a kiss. But no more.

Not for her.

That would be the first and last kiss she’d ever get from Matt Taylor. The thought comforted and depressed her at the same time.

The old pickup pulled in front of the restaurant, and seeing no empty spaces beside Matt, Beth navigated to the other side of the building. The separate vehicles-- her alone in the car, the rest of them in the pickup-- the knowledge that she would return home alone, only seemed to underscore her loneliness.

Beth’s mind refused to stop comparing her first wedding to the one a few minutes ago: Luke dressed up in a new tuxedo, handsome and grinning ear to ear as she moved down the aisle in the step-pause-smile cadence of the wedding march. The eager kiss before Luke scooped her into his arms, carried her through the hotel door, then kicked it shut to begin their honeymoon in earnest. Waking up beside Luke, feeling his hand brush her side, the warm intimacy of newlyweds discovering each other. It rushed back to Beth, real and vivid and tinged with pain. She struggled to forget. But to forget, would be to betray Luke.

"Beth?"
She jumped at the sound of someone rapping on the window. Matt's frown jolted her back to the present, and she scrambled to collect her keys, her purse.

"You okay?" he asked as she stepped out of the car. He held the door open for her, closed it when she forced a smile. When she didn't respond, he waited.

"I was remembering."

"Remembering what?"

When Beth smiled, it felt shaky, so she stopped trying and asked to take Ryan's hand. To her quiet delight, the boy beamed when she promised he could have anything he wanted for dessert. The "within reason" she added when Matt's frown deepened, didn't seem to dampen Ryan's spirits, and Ryan even laughed when Beth swung their hands as they followed Matt and the others inside.

A waiter showed them to a table, Matt pulled Beth's chair out for her, and she sat down with a murmured "thank you." Everyone ordered from the menus, then Matt bottle-nursed Dylan on his lap while trying to stop Ryan from pestering Cassie with questions about who invented burritos.

"Why, the Mexicans, of course," Cassie answered with a patient roll of her eyes.

"But how did they get the idea?"

"Ryan." Matt gave the four-year-old a cease-and-desist look and the boy settled down.

A waiter carried a tray to their table, unloaded plates of hot food while Beth passed around a small bottle of hand sanitizer. When the waiter had gone, they joined hands, said a hushed prayer, then started eating while Beth tried to work up an appetite.

She noticed Ryan's sweet face light up when she cut his food for him, then tucked his napkin under his chin. When Ryan announced to Matt that she had done it "just like a real mommy," her eyes misted without warning. The past churned up fresh memories of another little boy, one who used to call her "momma," one who loved to give his daddy hugs and butterfly kisses at the breakfast table.

"Beth, you're scaring me." Matt stared from across the table, his eyes narrow, as though trying to see inside her.
Unable to answer, Beth hugged Ryan for the sweetheart he was, then pushed away from the table as her eyes began to burn even more. "I need to use the ladies' room. Excuse me."

Her feet moved across red carpet, past Mexican folk art wall murals and straight to the door with the "Señoritas" painted in bright letters. Beth thanked God when she found no one inside. She twisted on the faucet, cleaned her hands, then splashed cool water onto her face. It didn't matter that her makeup would wash off, she needed the cold to snap her mind into focus.

The door opened behind her, and Beth saw Cassie's reflection in the mirror.

"Matty sent me after you. He's worried."

"Please, tell him I'll be there in a few minutes."

The girl started to turn, hesitated, then came to Beth's side. She stood there, looking uncertain what to say or do.

Beth clutched the sink basin, bowed her head and wrestled to force back the grief. And all that cutting guilt. It came in strong waves, threatening to capsize her composure.

"Did you know..." Beth paused, not wanting to further alarm Cassie, "did you know sometimes grownups are as bad as children when it comes to fear?"

"I suppose." Cassie gave a weak shrug. "I don't think it happens very often, though. Nothing scares old people."

" Haven't you ever seen Matt afraid?"

"He's not a grownup," Cassie smiled.

An inadvertent laugh spilled from Beth's lips. "Spoken like a true sister." Beth grabbed a paper towel from the dispenser on the wall. She wet it under the running water, pressed the towel to her face. "People are afraid of different things, but do you know what frightens me most?"

Cassie shook her head.

"Being alone." Beth gazed at herself in the mirror. "It's easier to drown in grief when you're by yourself. I have to remember to trust God, to keeping living one breath at a time, and to do it without constantly looking back."

"We're all right, Matty!" Cassie called over her shoulder.

"Is she okay?"

Cassie eyed Beth in uncertain hesitation.

"Cass, is she crying?"

"Not exactly."

Beth spoke up. "We'll be out in a few minutes, Matt."

The door swung open and Matt looked inside as an older woman pushed past him, on her way to use the restroom. The sounds of a fussing baby, the rocking sway of Matt before the door closed, all told Beth that Matt wasn't alone.

Time to rejoin life, Beth thought, rinsing her hands under the cold-water tap. She ripped a towel from the dispenser, then used it to twist off the faucet and open the door to keep her hands clean.

A few feet from the ladies' room, Matt held a fussing newborn that refused to be comforted. The decibel of Dylan's cries rose as she came near, his tiny face contorting into impassioned sobs that begged her to try and comfort him.

"Give that sweetheart to me." Beth reached for the infant, and Matt didn't argue. He placed Dylan in her arms, then swiped at his face with a shirtsleeve. Dylan had become the proverbial baby in the public place, the one everyone wished his parents would hurry up and quiet. Beth rocked and swayed, and tried to hush Dylan's frantic sobs, but for all their efforts, the cries didn't lessen. "He probably needs a diaper change," Beth said. "Cassie, would you go to the truck and get Dylan's bag?"

Handing over the truck keys to Cassie, Matt intently watched Beth as she waited by the bathroom for the girl to return.

Beth tried to smile, and found it came easier now that Matt was there. "I can use the changing table inside the ladies' room. It's nice to see this restaurant is so family friendly."
No response from Matt, only that long hard stare.

"Matt, I hope you're not going to ask me if I want out of this marriage. Because I don't."

A squinting frown creased his forehead, and Beth knew she had guessed his thoughts.

When the door pushed open, the woman flashed a bright smile at the baby as she moved between Beth and Matt. "They're adorable at that age, aren't they? Enjoy them while they're small!"

A pink flush crept up Matt's neck as he gave the older woman a polite nod. No doubt she thought they were married, and the baby theirs. All true... in a way.

After the woman left, Matt cleared his throat. "You feeling better?" he asked.

"I'm fine, Matt."

Skepticism crept into his features. He studied her a moment. "The last time I saw you looking this shaken, you were on the bathroom floor trying to convince me you hadn't OD'd on prescription medicine."

Denial sprang to Beth's lips, but for several moments, she couldn't speak. "I wasn't aware I looked so terrible."

"Beth," Matt touched her arm, "if you're ever in a bad way again, you'll tell me, won't you?"

"I'm not suicidal, Matt."

"I didn't think you were-- not anymore."

"Then what are you trying to say?"

Moving aside for another woman to pass into the ladies' room, Matt pressed his mouth shut until the door closed. "What I'm trying to say is-- you don't have to be inches away from taking your life, to be having a hard time. I get that. Life is rough, and things aren't easy." He sighed, looked off into the restaurant, then back at her. "I want you to know I'm here."

"Thank you, Matt. That means a lot."
"I don't want your thanks." He huffed out a sigh. "I want you to promise me not to suffer in silence. I'm telling you what I tell the others-- if you need help, speak up. Don't make me guess, because I'm not a good guesser. Especially when it comes to women."

"You're selling yourself short," she smiled, cuddling her cheek against Dylan's tiny crown of brown hair.

"I take care of my family, Beth."

"I can see that, Matt."

"Okay, then." He nodded to her, waited a beat. "So you're all right? Really all right?"

"I think so," she nodded.

"And if you're not later on?"

"I'll tell you."

"Okay," he sighed. "Okay. For the record, I didn't think you were in there popping sleeping pills. I give you more credit than that."

Something warm stirred in Beth's soul, like embers catching flame. She realized Matt's opinion meant a lot, and his confidence in her bolstered her spirit. The woman in the restroom came out, passed between them with a smile but said nothing. Beth wondered how much she heard, but it didn't matter.

A strong warmth burned in Beth's heart. Matt was treating her as a member of his family, and she basked in the glow of that comforting knowledge.

The food eaten, the dessert served and enjoyed, Matt reached for the bill the waiter left on the table.

"I'll take care of that," Beth said, picking up her purse.

"No, you won't." Matt pulled out his wallet. "This is my treat."

"But--"
"Don't step on my feelings, Beth." He said it in dry humor, though she could find none in his dark eyes.

Though wanting to insist, she put away her purse and let Matt pay for the dinner. Beth knew his paycheck, and knew he must not have much money after all the expenses of raising his brothers and sister. And still he paid for dinner. Gallant or stubborn, Beth didn't know which, but she noticed the satisfied look on his face when he included a tip for the waiter.

The momentary tension eased away when Dylan began to hiccup from the carrier. Everyone smiled, and after collecting bags and jackets and children, they left the restaurant and stepped into the cold night air.

To Matt's gratitude, he observed the pensive wistfulness in Beth's eyes grow less and less, all evening long. Ever since their talk, she seemed happy, her face lit up with something that glowed from within. Pregnant women were supposed to have such a glow, but since Beth couldn't possibly be pregnant, Matt didn't know what to think. She looked full of life, at least, right up until they struggled over who paid for dinner. After she backed off, and they smiled over Dylan's hiccups, she seemed to improve once more.

Then they reached the parking lot and began to part ways.

Beth's sadness returned, and though she said nothing to betray it, Matt guessed she didn't want to sleep in an empty house by herself. The sky darkened with early evening, and Ryan slumped in Ethan's arms, Ryan's eyes half closed with spent excitement and a full tummy. They needed to go home, get some sleep. Since they outnumbered Beth five to one, Matt figured it would be easier for Beth to stay with them, than the other way around. At least for now.

"Cass," Matt tugged his sister to one side as Beth strapped the carrier into the pickup. "Ask her to share your room until we move. You don't mind, do you?"

Cassie gave him a bright smile. "I was already planning to ask you. She shouldn't have to be by herself, anymore."

Slinging an arm around Cassie, Matt gave her a quick hug. "Thanks for understanding."

"I understand more than you think I do, Matty."

Though he seriously doubted it, Matt let Cassie's remark slide by without comment. He watched Cassie go to Beth, saw Beth's face warm as Cassie offered to share her bedroom. When he heard,
"It was Matty's idea," Matt hurried into his pickup. Cassie could have left that out, even taken honest credit for it, herself. Oh, well. At least he wouldn't have to picture Beth enduring an empty house until they moved in.

Instead, she would be crammed into theirs.

They stopped by Beth's place for the things she would need for the next few days, all of which filled two large suitcases and an overnight bag to capacity. At her suggestion, Matt and Ethan took apart Caleb's baby crib, then placed it in the back of the pickup truck. A good idea, Matt thought, if Dylan was ever to escape the carrier.

By the time they left for home, the moon and stars had claimed the pristine night sky. Ryan fell asleep in the backseat, and Cassie and Ethan yawned at such regular intervals, Matt found himself doing the same.

As Matt pulled into his neighborhood, he winced at the stark contrast between Beth's upscale house, and the trash-strewn front yards of these mobile homes. Dark shadows of broken down cars and trash no one bothered to haul to the dump, littered the front yards. Some kept their places tidy, but most didn't. Though the house Matt rented languished for want of attention, it didn't collect trash. Matt tried. He was still trying. Still struggling to live, to not give up on life. Maybe that made him a dreamer, an idealist. He didn't know. He only knew the day he stopped trying, would be the day he stopped living. The yard sure need to be weeded, though. Those dandelions sprang up everywhere.

When Matt came to a stop beside the curb in front of his house, Mrs. Lott walked across her tidy yard with a slip of paper in her hand.

Matt got out and greeted her.

"Your mother left a message," the old woman said, disdain creasing her wrinkled features even more. "That woman--" Mrs. Lott went stone silent as Beth's car parked behind his truck. Beth climbed out, an overnight bag under her arm. Reproof settled into Mrs. Lott's rheumy eyes as she looked to Matt for an explanation.

"We got married," he smiled.

"You did?" Mrs. Lott couldn't look more stunned if she'd tried.
In an effort to play down the suddenness of the marriage, Matt shrugged. "It was the only way we could keep Dylan."

"Dylan-- you mean Amadeus?" Mrs. Lott sighed, and the grim disdain returned. "Your mother told me all about her happy news. Another child she's abandoning, walking away from without a care in the world. It makes me so angry, I could spit."

"Well, angry or not, I couldn't keep Dylan without Beth's help." Matt put on his Stetson, slammed the door shut and smiled when Dylan began to cry. "Guess I woke him up. Cass," he stepped around the hood of the truck as Beth approached Mrs. Lott, "unstrap Dylan, would you? Ethan and I are going to set up his crib in the living room. What was Mom's message, Mrs. Lott?"

"Your mother told me to tell you," contempt filled Mrs. Lott's voice, "that she and Wade-- I take it he's the baby's daddy-- will get in touch with you tomorrow. About what, she didn't say, only that she'd get in touch. Oh, and she refused to leave her number. I asked her for one, so you could return the call, and she flatly turned me down. Said if she wanted to talk to you, she'd call you. That woman."

Though Matt didn't want to see his mom again, he needed to. She had to be told about Beth and the arrangements that were being made so the family could stay together. Eve had to agree to it, give her approval before she signed the papers that would make Dylan officially theirs. Mom has no choice, he thought, handing Ethan the hefty sides of the pricey looking crib. If Mom wants me to keep Dylan, she'll have to accept Beth as part of the family.

Cassie took the carrier to the women, and all at once, Mrs. Lott went into delighted grandmother mode. Matt smiled at her tender effusions. Neighborhood children like Ryan benefitted from the old woman's maternal love, a love she offered even though she had no grandkids of her own.

While the women enjoyed Dylan in all his babyness, Matt and Ethan took the crib into the house, piece by piece.

"For a crib, it sure is solid," Ethan muttered as they each lowered separate sides of the bed against the sofa. They looked over the lathed wooden ribs, the glossy dark finish. "It looks expensive."

"That's because it is," Matt said, running a hand over the impressive carpentry. He'd worked with wood before, had an idea of quality when he saw it. "This crib is made of mahogany."

"No kidding?" Ethan let out a whistle. "Just how rich is Beth?"
"I don't know," Matt shrugged. "Rich enough."

They carried the rest of the crib inside, reassembled it and then stood back to admire their handiwork.

Ethan grinned, jabbed Matt in the side with an elbow. "Kind of makes the rest of the place look like a dump, doesn't it?"

Matt replied with a grin of his own, though the same thought had occurred to him, as well.

The sound of approaching feminine voices cut short the boys' five minute break. Mrs. Lott carried Dylan inside, followed by Beth, who busily discussed with Mrs. Lott which baby formula was best for newborns. Ryan trotted at Beth's side, looking wide awake after that nap on the ride home. Matt groaned. That wide-eyed, bushy-tailed little boy was going to give him trouble when it came time to go to bed. Last of all, Cassie came in, set the carrier on the sofa and yawned. Unlike Ryan, Cassie looked worn out, and ready to fall asleep where she stood.

"How lovely," Mrs. Lott said, moving to the crib with Dylan in her arms.

"I'll get the mattress," Ethan said, going back to the truck for bedding.

The look on Beth's face as she went to the crib, laid a hand on the rail, made Matt's heart sadden with pity. "When Dylan is older, this will convert into a toddler bed." The wistful words made Matt think Caleb had never been old enough for that to happen. The boy had died at, what--two years old? Two years old and still a youngster.

Leaving the women to talk, Matt went out to collect Beth's suitcases from her car. When he lugged them inside, Mrs. Lott prepared to leave.

"This is a big day for you," Mrs. Lott said, smiling at Matt as he moved his way through the living room, on his way to Cassie's bedroom.

"Yeah, I guess," he smiled, then disappeared into Cassie's room. It embarrassed him to think of telling Mrs. Lott that the marriage was in name only, even more so when he imagined admitting that to other men. With an attractive woman like Beth for a wife, what guy had a right to call himself a man when he didn't claim his wife in the bedroom? He strained, tried to hear Beth say anything to Mrs. Lott that might be construed as "in name only," but heard nothing. It's up to me then, he thought, dumping Beth's luggage onto Cassie's bed. He moved down the short hall,
ready to make his confession to the elderly neighbor lady and to bear the humiliation that came with it.

To his surprise, Beth was saying good night, walking Mrs. Lott to the door, and promising to call whenever they needed a babysitter for the children. The moment Mrs. Lott left, Beth closed the door and blew out a sigh of relief.

Matt shot Beth a grin. "You didn't tell her, did you."

"Is that a question?" Beth asked.

"Not really." Matt shoved his hands into his pockets. "We're going to have to tell her, sometime."

"We need to discuss that," Beth said, going back to the crib where Dylan lay on his back, fast asleep, despite all the talking.

"What's to discuss?" Matt moved to the crib and smiled at Dylan, who looked even tinier in such a substantial piece of furniture.

Yawning, Ethan grunted a "good night," followed by an apologetic Cassie. Before Ethan left, Matt hollered after him to put Ryan to bed.

"Yes, father," Ethan said in a mocking tone. "Come on, Ry. Time for bed."

Ignoring Ethan's insolence, Matt turned back to Beth. "Like I said, what's to discuss? We tell people this marriage is in name only. End of story."

"It's none of their business, Matt. We're never getting an annulment, so they don't need to know. Do they?"

"Beth, after awhile, our friends won't need to be told anything-- they'll know."

"But this is our marriage, not theirs."

"I won't lie." Matt folded his arms in direct challenge.

"I'm not saying we should lie. I'm only saying, why bring it up if no one asks?"

Matt frowned. "What are you going to tell your girlfriends when they ask how I am in bed?"
Beth shook her head. "It's none of their business. Besides, I never talk about things like that—with my friends, or anyone else except maybe my mom."

Shoulders slumped, Matt went to crash on the sofa. He propped his feet on the coffee table, pinned Beth with a long look. A stressful day and she still radiated beauty. "Beth, we're going to hurt feelings if we don't tell people it's in name only."

A thoughtful expression crossed her face. "What if we only confide that fact to our family and close friends?"

Silent, Matt thought it over.

"Matt, I don't want to have to tell people something that isn't any of their business in the first place. Why should we? This is our marriage, and like Pastor Mark said, it's none of their concern what happens or doesn't happen in the bedroom."

Wearily, Matt rubbed a hand over his tired eyes. "Mrs. Lott is a close friend, as close a friend as we have in this"—he paused, smiled—"this wonderful neighborhood."

"Then we tell her tomorrow. Or you can tell her," Beth added. "You know her better than me."

The hand dropped from Matt's face. "Do I sense a coward in the room?"

"I'm not a coward, I'm practical." A reluctant smile parted Beth's lips. "Okay, I'm not looking forward to telling anyone. I agree our family and close friends must be told, but I don't want to bring it up with others if it's not necessary."

Wild commotion sounded from the boys' room, then a second later, Ryan came speeding through the kitchen half dressed.

"Get back here!" Ethan shouted, bursting into the living room without regard to the newborn sleeping in the crib. "Matty, Ryan won't brush his teeth!"

A cry erupted from the mahogany crib, followed by a string of urgent sobs.

"Ethan, you woke the baby," Matt got to his feet, nodded his gratitude to Beth when she went to Dylan. "Now, what is this all about? And why are you in the living room in only your shorts?"

Ethan smirked. "This is what I always wear, same as you."
"Not anymore, not with Beth in the house. Let's take this into the boys' room." Matt picked up Ryan, then prodded Ethan back into the kitchen.

"This is our house--" Ethan started to argue, but Matt forced him back to their room before letting the debate go any further. "I don't see why I have to change the way I dress, just because Beth is here," Ethan finished, as Matt shut the bedroom door.

Matt set Ryan down, patted his small behind and ordered him into the bathroom to brush his teeth. When Ryan obeyed, Matt addressed his teenage brother.

"I'm tired of your whining. Beth is a part of this family, and you will respect her at least as much as you do me. Maybe that's asking a lot, but you had your chance to call off the deal, earlier today. That opportunity is over."

Ethan grimaced. "I knew she was going to be bossy. I just knew it."

"She is not the one telling you to pipe down. I am. Now what's the problem? Ryan is brushing his teeth, so that leaves the boxers." Matt threw up his hands. "So you can't roam the house in your underwear. Big deal. Get over it and move on with your life." In a moment of levity, Matt cracked a grin. "With all the problems in the world, you have to kick at that one?"

Ethan stared at Matt. "You know what this means, don't you?"

"No, I don't."

"Pajamas. Stupid PJ's. I'm not wearing them, Matty."

"Of course you're not wearing them. Only sissies wear PJ's-- them, and little kids," Matt added, seeing Ryan appear from the bathroom. "Tired, buddy? No? I'm afraid you don't have a say in the matter." Matt lifted Ryan, carried him over to the bed. "Let's say your bedtime prayer, then it's lights out."

"But what about my boxers?"

"Put on your pants before you leave the bedroom," Matt said, tucking Ryan beneath the covers.

The answer seemed to subdue Ethan's bent on pushing an argument. Ethan settled on the edge of the mattress as Ryan began his nightly prayer. The four-year-old asked God to bless his family, the next door chihuahua, Mrs. Lott and her lemon cookies, and the lady sleeping in Cassie's room.
"Her name is Beth," Matt whispered after the prayer had finished. He planted a kiss on Ryan's forehead, then went to switch off the lights.

"Hey, Matty." A big smile creased Ethan's mouth. "If you want any action tonight, vacate Cassie to the living room sofa so you and Beth can have some private time."

Turning the light out, Matt went to the bedroom door. "Mind your own business, Ethan."

"Yeah, yeah." Ethan yawned, then Matt heard the covers shift as Ethan got comfortable in bed. "Night, Matty."

What a long day, Matt thought, hauling himself through the kitchen, into the living room to finish his talk with Beth. He braced himself to resume their debate, only to find she had gone to bed. At least, that's what he assumed, for she wasn't in the living room. Matt checked Dylan, cuddled on his back in the safe position for babies, to lessen the risk of SIDS, then went to lock up the house for the night.

The front door secure, Matt went for the living room light switch when he saw Beth. She came from Cassie's room dressed in a white nightgown and a matching robe that skimmed her ankles. From the way the material moved, he guessed it was silk.

"Is the crisis over?" Beth asked, going to the crib to check on Dylan.

"Crisis?" Matt struggled to make his brain work. "Oh, the boxers. He won't do it again."

"Did you give my suggestion any thought?"

"Beth, I need to finish this conversation some other time."

"Why?"

"Because..." Matt gulped in air, wished he had been blind so he couldn't see that silk and all those curves.

"Matt, this nightwear is completely modest."

"If you say so." He backed away, stumbled over something on the floor but remained upright, and kept moving toward the kitchen. "We'll only tell our close friends and family. Good idea. Night."
He pivoted, ran to the bedroom and had to catch himself before he slammed the door shut. Man, if she was going to wear stuff like that, he was in big trouble.

After checking on Dylan one last time, Beth returned to Cassie's room where she shared a single mattress with a pre-teen who claimed she'd never had a "real roomie" before. At first, Cassie's enjoyment over the crowded arrangement baffled Beth, but the longer she heard Cassie talk, the more she realized the absence of women in the girl's life. Cassie now had a sister, the closest thing to a mother since the ever-absent Eve, and a girlfriend, someone to tell secrets to, exchange confidences with and simply pal around.

"You can have half the closet," Cassie repeated, going to the closet and making sure every one of the girl's hangers didn't encroach on "Beth's side." Beth also received the distinction of half the dresser drawers, the medicine cabinet in the attached bathroom, and the honor of turning "Cassie's room" into "the girls' room."

Beth didn't mind at all when Cassie snuggled beneath the blankets, then cuddled against her. There wasn't much room on the narrow bed, and Beth guessed the girl needed comfort. Though no one mentioned it, the dread of seeing Eve the next day had put everyone a little on edge.

With Cassie cuddled at her side, Beth went over some very private thoughts in silence.

It had been a mistake to go out there in her "safe" nightgown, not even a nylon garment and an ankle length robe that concealed everything. With Matt, there was no safe. Not with his past. She could not assume that simply because they were living in the same house, it would be all right to cover up with a robe and think there still wouldn't be a problem. Better to stay fully dressed outside of the bedroom, than to put poor Matt through such torture again.

Poor guy. If she could take it back, she would. She should have been more careful, more mindful of Matt's scarred past. Though unintentional, her carelessness had caused him distress, and the thought of it distressed her, as well. The boundaries of their agreement were being drawn, and Beth determined to live within them.

In the future, she would be more careful with Matt.
"... a prudent wife is from the LORD."
~ Proverbs 19:14 ~

"Can two walk together, except they be agreed?"
~ Amos 3:3 ~
Chapter Sixteen
A Good Man

"A good man obtaineth favour of the LORD..."
~ Proverbs 12:2 ~

"Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the LORD."
~ Proverbs 18:22 ~

When Matt cracked open his eyes, nothing felt different than any other morning. When he
rolled over and bashed in the alarm clock's snooze button for five more minutes of sleep, the day
before never even occurred to him.

Then he heard a woman's voice coming from the kitchen, and all of a sudden it hit-- he was a
married man.

Wow. How had that happened?

Even before he felt wide awake, the thought twisted in Matt that his wedding night had been
spent alone. The memory of Beth in that soft robe came before him, and it was all he could do to
push the image from his mind. He swung his legs over the side of the mattress, rubbed his face
and tried to get his mind right.

A pan rattled in the kitchen, followed by the click of the gas range. With a twinge of regret,
Matt realized Beth was making breakfast. He should have gotten up early, made sure she didn't
do any housework. After all, Beth was sort of his guest. Wasn't she?

The sounds of breakfast stirred Ryan before they did Ethan. The boy climbed from bed, went
into the bathroom, and after a few moments, Matt heard the toilet flush.

"Is she still here?" Ryan asked, coming into the bedroom with a hopeful face. "Is Beth here to
stay?"

"Yes, she's still here." Matt scratched his leg, gave Ryan a sidelong look. "I didn't hear the sink just
now."

A sly smile crossed Ryan's face.

"You did wash your hands after you flushed the toilet, right?"
"Ethan said I don't have to."

Matt blinked. "He what?"

"Ethan said I don't have to wash my hands if I don't touch anything dirty."

Reaching for a pillow, Matt hurled it across the room to where his teenage brother lay sleeping. "Ethan, wake up."

"Why?" came the groggy reply.

"Did you tell Ryan he didn't have to wash his hands after using the toilet?"

"No."

"He says you did."

A hand pulled the pillow from his head, and two half open eyes peered out at Matt under a messy fringe of bed-tossed hair. "What are you talking about?"

Matt stared at Ethan. "Do you wash your hands after you take a leak?"

"Of course I--" Ethan stopped short of finishing. "Not all the time."

"Well, wash up. All the time." Matt stood, pulled on some jeans and a pair of heavy work socks. "This family is going to start shaping up. I don't want Beth thinking we grew up in a garbage bin."

"Speak for yourself. I don't care what she thinks."

"Get out of bed, Ethan. Beth is cooking breakfast, and if you don't start moving, I'll tell her not to feed you."

After firing a scowl at Matt, Ethan sat up in bed and stared at the sheets until Matt threatened to haul him off the mattress.

Some days, it didn't pay to be the older brother.
Tugging a work shirt from the closet, Matt put it on as Ryan twisted off the bathroom faucet after washing up. His face expectant with a rare treat, Ryan went to the bedroom door and swung it wide open. Aroma wafted in from the kitchen, heavy with the scent of eggs and toast and syrup.

Eyes wide as saucers, Ryan turned to Matt with a wide grin. "French toast, Matty!" In Ryan's excitement, he raced off, but not before slamming the door shut behind him.

"Wonderful." Ethan got out of bed, pulled on some jeans and stared at Matt with a dismal sigh. "Beth just got here, and already she's using up our groceries for just one meal. Someone should go in there and tell her that food is supposed to last all week."

Matt glared at his brother. "You keep your mouth shut in front of her. She doesn't know that."

Silence fell between the boys as they finished dressing. Matt stuffed his work gloves into a hip pocket, stooped to tug on his boots.

"You going into work today?" Ethan asked in alarm.

"It's Tuesday, isn't it?"

"But what about Mom? Isn't she supposed to come?"

"I suppose." Matt shrugged. "She wasn't exactly explicit in her message."

"What if Mom comes while you're still at work?"

"Then we'll have to hope you'll be home from school by then to talk to her."

"Matty--"

"Ethan, you can't avoid her forever. I know you don't like her, but it's only Mom. If she drops by, tell her to come back in the evening when I'm home." Picking up the Stetson, Matt opened the bedroom door, went into the kitchen with Ethan hard on his heels.

"Do I have to talk to her, Matty? Couldn't you stay home from work this one day?"

"Good morning," Beth smiled as they came to the table. She set a plate before them with more of the French toast Ryan was already enjoying. She flicked a smile at Matt, then went to the stove where slices of egg-dipped bread sizzled in a skillet.
Placing the hat beneath his chair, Matt sat down and smiled at his sister's bright face.

"You're looking chipper this morning, Cass. Is your new roommate treating you all right?"

"She's given me half her closet," Beth said, flipping the bread over with a slotted turner.

Matt grinned. "With all that luggage, I have a hunch you're going to need the space."

"Matty," Ethan dumped himself into a chair at the table, "can't we leave Mom a note on the front door? Does she have to know I'm home? Do I have to let her in?"

"If you and Cass are home, then yes, you have to let her in. Ethan, she's our mom."

"I wish you'd stop reminding me."

"Then Mom is coming?" The brightness in Cassie's face dimmed. "Matty, do we have to be here when she comes?"

"I wish you guys would calm down and relax a little." Matt reached for the syrup, noticed a certain small somebody had left sticky fingerprints on the bottle. "Ryan, wash your hands."

"Please, Matty," Cassie leaned forward in her chair, "when school lets out today, couldn't we come to the nursery? We could wait there, then go home and face Mom, together."

"The school bus doesn't stop at the nursery, Cass."

Ryan examined a hand. "I already washed. Do I have to again?"

Ethan's face twisted into a scowl. He folded his arms, ignored the plate Beth set before him. "I'm not waiting around for Mom to show up."

"Please, Matty," Cassie's begging grew more desperate with each passing minute. "Don't make us face Mom without you."

"Guys, come on," Matt set down his fork, looked first at Cassie then Ethan. "I'm not asking you to face a firing squad. Just deliver a message to Mom and wait for me and Beth to get home. Ryan, go wash your hands."
With a thoughtful look, Beth took the remaining chair at the table. "They could come to the nursery, Matt. It's all right with me."

"I'd have to go get them, Beth. Like I said a moment ago, the bus doesn't stop at the nursery."

Beth smiled. "I think I can arrange some time off with your boss so you can pick up the kids."

"That's nice of her," Matt said in a sturdy tone, "but the kids will stay here."

"Matty, please?"

"Cass, I don't want the girls at work to meet the rest of my family. Things are going to be interesting enough there, as it is."

A gasp parted Beth's lips.

"We have to tell them, Beth. Ryan, I told you to go wash your hands."

"But I didn't take a leak, Matty!"

"I suppose we can't keep it from Sylvia and Amy," Beth said with a sigh.

"Does this mean we can't come?" Ethan asked.

Matt gave a grim chuckle. "I never said you could in the first place. Ryan, would you get up and go wash your hands before you spread syrup everywhere?"

"I've been thinking," Beth stared at her French toast, then turned her green eyes on Matt, "maybe you wouldn't mind being present when I call my parents, today."

"Sure." Matt lifted a shoulder. "I'll talk to them, let them know I'll take care of you."

"Thanks, I'd appreciate it. They don't know you, and I'm sure all this will come as quite a shock--not that you're shocking, mind you. It's just that--"

"I'm a total stranger," Matt finished. "I get it, Beth. You don't have to explain. Are you going to tell them everything?"

"They're my parents, Matt."
"Yeah, I guess." Matt felt his stomach turn at the thought of Beth informing her Dad and Mom of his past-- or at least, the part of his past that Beth knew about. Thank God he hadn't told her the rest. Her Dad would drop with a heart attack, if he knew his daughter had married such a man.

The grim faces of Ethan and Cassie added to Matt's growing heaviness at the prospects for the day. The morning had yet to really begin, and already he wanted to start over.

"Okay, I give in." Matt leaned back in his chair with a groan. "If Beth is willing, you guys can wait at the nursery until we get off work. The girls are going to be curious, but I suppose if it'll buy me some peace at home, it's worth it."

Beth smiled her approval.

"Okay, then." Matt shook his head at the thought of what he might be getting himself into. "I'll come get you guys after school. I want you both to do your homework, though. This isn't a vacation."

Ryan came back to his chair, held out his hands for Matt to see.

"Thanks, buddy."

"Can't I come to the nursery, too?"

"Nope. You and Dylan will keep Mrs. Lott company, next door."

After breakfast, Matt and Beth took the smaller ones to the elderly neighbor. Matt asked that if Eve showed up, to tell her to come back in the evening when everyone would be home. Seeing an opportunity to tell Mrs. Lott the truth, Matt took her aside and told her about the marriage being in name only. To Matt's relief, the old woman took the news in quiet understanding. They were doing a good thing. Even Mrs. Lott didn't need to be told every single last detail to understand that.

For about five minutes, while the kids raced to their school bus, Beth and Matt struggled over who's car to drive into work. Even though it didn't make sense to take separate vehicles, Matt flat out refused to accept a ride from Beth.

The stubborn cowboy.
Deciding not to fight, Beth climbed into the passenger seat of Matt's pickup. Of course he would drive, after all, it was his vehicle and why he didn't want to take her car, in the first place. He wanted to be the one behind the wheel. The words were never said, but very much implied. If she was coming with him, then come. Otherwise, they were going to be late for work. This male reasoning did little to ease Beth's already busy mind.

She wished the morning had gone better, that Matt would flash his easy smile-- the one she had seen after their wedding kiss. By the grim set of his mouth just now, she guessed he felt as depressed as she did. Maybe even more so.

When Matt pulled into the garden nursery's parking lot, Beth breathed a sigh of relief at being the first to arrive. She popped open the pickup door, stepped out while Matt planted the Stetson on his head.

"Let me be the one to tell them, Matt."

"I won't fight you for the privilege," he said with a wry grin.

Beth gave him a long look. "If I don't decide to tell them everything?"

"Do you really think we can hide it? The kids are going to be here, remember?"

Biting her tongue, Beth shut her eyes. Everything was happening at the same time, the same day. Why couldn't God space things out, give them a chance to breathe before the next hurdle presented itself?

"I can do all things through Christ," Beth breathed, remembering the Bible passage she had studied earlier that morning. The promise came as welcome encouragement, especially when a horn tooted behind her as she unlocked the store entrance.

"Sylvia's here," Matt said with a hint of irony. "For once, she's here before Amy."

Dark shades covered Sylvia's eyes, her glossy curls bouncing as she made her way to where they stood by the entrance.

"Good morning, Beth."

"Sylvia."
The red lips below the sunglasses parted in an unsettling smile. "I thought I'd surprise you, and come in early, today."

"This isn't early, Silvi. This is what being on time looks like."

An impudent smirk crossed Sylvia's face.

They went inside, and Sylvia moved over to where Matt stood by the counter, waiting for work instructions. Nothing was said, but Beth saw the flirtatious smile, the way she leaned over the counter to show off her figure to its full advantage in front of Matt.

Matt turned to Beth, a pleading look in his eyes. Whether he wanted to be out of the store and away from Sylvia, or desired something more from Beth, Beth didn't feel confident enough to guess. She did, however, sense his relief when she handed him the gate keys and told him to go out back and water the plants.

With Matt out of the way, Beth went about her morning routine while Sylvia watched.

"When Amy comes in, I have some news to tell you." Beth ignored the sudden jolt of interest from Sylvia. She sensed, rather than saw, the narrowing eyes behind the dark glasses.

"Does this have anything to do with why you closed the nursery, yesterday?"

"It does," Beth said, not bothering to look up. "Please start work in the office by finishing the paperwork you left from Saturday."

With an impatient sigh, Sylvia left Beth alone.

A half hour later, while Beth worked a calculator at the office desk, she heard Amy's voice coming from inside the store. It seemed but a moment between Amy's arrival, and Sylvia's holding Amy by the arm in Beth's office doorway.

"You can let go now." Amy pulled her arm free from Sylvia. "What's all this about?"

Sylvia gave a glowing smile. "Beth has news to tell."

"Is Matt still out back?" Beth asked, ushering them inside. She got up, closed the office door for privacy, then returned to her desk.

"Yes, he's out back." Sylvia folded her arms. "Give, Beth. We're here, so what's the news?"
Beth leaned back in her swivel chair. "I got married yesterday."


The incredulous wording gave Beth the direct impression Sylvia thought it impossible.

Doing her best to ignore the insult, Beth pressed on. "It was a small ceremony, with only a few people present. I'm not an overly sentimental person, but it was a happy occasion and I'm sorry I didn't have time to invite you both."

"Who's the guy?" Sylvia asked in an offhanded manner.

Beth allowed herself a smile. "Matt Taylor."

Sylvia blinked, her imperious act coming to a dead stop. "You can't be."

"I'm afraid I am, Silvi. Matt is taking another brother into his family-- a newborn baby boy-- and he needs my help raising the children. It's not the most ideal situation for romance, I'll admit, but I don't mind saying that the marriage has made me very happy."

"Are you sure about this new brother?" Sylvia asked. "Maybe Matt is trying to pass off his own kid as a brother, just so you'll feel sorrier for him."

"I don't appreciate that kind of talk in my office, Sylvia."

Sylvia pressed her lips together, and Beth enjoyed the momentary silence it brought.

Unlike Sylvia, Amy didn't show much emotion. Though Amy looked pleased by Beth's news, Beth figured Amy didn't have the courage to say it out loud and had decided to take refuge in cautious silence; as a consequence, after Sylvia and Beth's exchange, the conversation ended with Beth excusing them back to their work without anything more said about Matt Taylor, his baby brother, or the marriage.

Shutting the office door for a few moments of quiet, Beth leaned forward in the chair, put her head in her hands and breathed. She had told them all they needed to know. If they ever found out more, she could always tell them to mind their own business.
The plants watered, Matt headed into the store to find Beth. Sylvia wasn't anywhere in sight, but Amy sat perched on the stool at the checkout, chatting with a customer who was just leaving. When Amy saw Matt, her face broke into a smile.

"Where's Beth?" Matt asked.

Amy wiggled her eyebrows. "So it's not Mrs. Carter, anymore?"

He smiled. "Beth has told you, huh?"

"She didn't say much," Amy said, her head tilting to one side in a teasing manner, "but she did tell us that you've made her very happy."

"Beth actually said that?"

"I can't remember if those were her exact words," Amy said with a smile, "but something to that effect."

Embarrassed for having asked the question, Matt gave a quick nod, thanked Amy for her congratulations, then moved off to find Beth.

From the sounds coming from the office, Beth was on the phone. He stepped through the doorway, waited for her to get off.

"That's because you're overwatering, Mrs. Palmer. The leaves shouldn't be yellow. Yes, I know you're being careful, but do you remember what I told you last time? Boston Ferns don't need a lot of water, in fact, they're very drought resistant. Yes, if that's what you wish, I can give you a refund. Thank you, Mrs. Palmer. I'll see you later today."

Beth hung up the phone, blew out a tired sigh. "That was Mrs. Palmer. She's killing the fern I sold her, and is now blaming me because it's turning yellow."

Matt shrugged. "Then don't give her money back."

His suggestion was met with a dismissing wave. "For the most part, she's a sweet old woman with a very lonely life. I refuse to fight her for the sake of a few dollars. Have you finished watering? Good, then I want you to rotate the pots, placing the best ones in front for display purposes. When you're done, hose down the loading dock and then join me at the potting table to help with transplants. Any questions?"
Beth's teacher tone rubbed Matt the wrong way, but he ducked his chin and went outside to do his job. He had wanted to ask what Beth had told the girls, and how the news had gone over with Sylvia. The teacher tone had cut him off, however, and Matt struggled with the helpless feeling it left inside him.

Not long after he began sorting pots, Sylvia rounded the building and went to the herb section of the nursery's open lot out back. She hunted around, found what she was looking for, and without even acknowledging Matt's presence, went into the store with a potted sage in her hand.

Content that at least he didn't have to talk to her, Matt went about his work with a sense of relief. It didn't last for long.

"I didn't know you were that serious about her," sounded behind his back, and when Matt turned, he found Sylvia. She stood a few feet away, the dark sunglasses tucked into her hair. "Beth says you're making her happy. Is it true?"

Though his heart beat fast at the thought of Beth saying that, Matt returned to the pots. "If that's what Beth said, then it must be true."

A snort came from behind his back. "You know what everyone will think, don't you? That you married her for her money. They might be too polite to say it, but they'll certainly think it."

"That's their problem." Matt shrugged, but the barb had made a direct hit.

Sylvia moved into another row, faced Matt over the potted geraniums separating them. "You don't even love her."

Matt's head snapped up. "You assume a lot."

Her bright red lips parted to hurl a retort-- Matt could feel it coming-- then they pressed shut with a frown.

"It's not fair. Beth went through one husband, and now she gets another. What about me? When's it my turn to find a good man?"

Unable to think of a single thing to say in reply, Matt went back to work. As Sylvia stalked off, he fought to keep from smiling. He didn't deserve the backhanded compliment Sylvia had flung at his feet, but it made for an amusing joke. Then the smile slipped away, leaving regret in its wake. A good man. How he wished that description fit him.
Hands on the steering wheel, Matt waited at the stoplight while Cassie sat in the backseat and talked of her day. He didn't mind the conversation, provided it only went one way. He didn't feel like talking, and neither did the teenager next to him. Ethan had shoved his text books onto the seat between him and Matt, and whenever Matt made a sharp turn, they slid to one side.

According to a brief remark Ethan had made getting into the pickup, his day had totally crashed. Coming from Ethan, that could mean anything.

"I wish you could always pick us up, Matty." Cassie smiled at him when he glanced in the rearview mirror. "This is a lot better than the school bus."

"The bus stinks," Ethan said with a groan. He put an elbow on the door, looked out the window. From the reflection on the glass, Matt saw the despondency in his brother's face.

"Before I came to get you guys," Matt said, deciding to speak up now instead of at the nursery, "Beth told me her house is far enough from town, it's out of range for the school buses."

"What?" That got Ethan's attention. "Then how are we supposed to get to school?"

"Beth suggested we buy a minivan big enough for the whole family, then one of us will give up our vehicle so you can drive yourself and Cassie to school."

"My own truck? Are you kidding?"

"Who says you're getting my pickup?"

"She's paying for the minivan, isn't she?"

"Yeah. So?"

"So I figure you won't want to owe her anymore than you have to. That means I get the truck."

Matt frowned. "You think you know me that well?"

"Hey," Ethan grinned, "we're brothers, aren't we?"

The comment made Matt smile. "I thought you'd want Beth's sedan over this old junker."
Ethan shook his head, slumped down in his seat with more good humor than Matt had seen for a long while. "This junker might be old, but it's a cool set of wheels."

"It is not." Matt shot Ethan a glance. "The paint is chipped, the bumper is dented, and the seats are torn. Just what makes it so great?"

"I dunno." Ethan looked through the side window. "It's your truck. I always thought it was cool."

Neither one said anything more, and when Cassie started talking about the joys of avoiding the school bus, they let her talk uninterrupted.

Ethan's compliment lifted Matt's spirits, though Matt didn't know why it should. The truck was most definitely lacking in coolness, and he was most definitely not someone to be emulated. The fact that his brother, to some small degree, looked up to him, only deepened Matt's responsibility to set a good example. A good man would know how to set that example. All Matt could hope for, was to not mess up too badly in front of the others.

At least Matt wasn't here to see her being so silly. It wasn't as though she had given birth to Dylan. So why should she feel so anxious about leaving Dylan with Mrs. Lott? The woman could handle children-- Beth had no doubt of that-- but she wished she had fought to bring Dylan and Ryan into work today. They would surely get under foot, but it had to be better than calling Mrs. Lott every hour, on the hour, to ask how the small ones were doing.

The last call had been the most touching, with Ryan grabbing the receiver to tell Beth all about the tent he had made from an old blanket and Mrs. Lott's kitchen table. The eager sweetness of Ryan would have made the rest of the day go quickly for Beth, had not Sylvia thrown a tantrum at being made to do something she felt was Amy's responsibility. Amy had engaged Sylvia in the ensuing firefight, and Beth had taken a few hits in the process of breaking up their argument. When women fight, it isn't necessarily with fists. Words are a more likely weapon, and after the words that had been hurled between Sylvia and Amy that afternoon, they were no longer speaking to one another. It was, "Mrs. Carter, tell Sylvia this," or "Beth, tell Amy that..." Amy still had trouble calling Beth, Mrs. Taylor, but Beth figured with enough gentle reminders, Amy would soon catch on.

Beth hoped Luke didn't mind.

When Matt's pickup pulled into the parking lot, Beth came out from the loading dock to greet the Taylors.
"We're probably going to regret this," Matt said, coming to Beth with his hands jammed into his pockets. He turned as Cassie and Ethan joined them.

"You both can use my office desk to do your homework," Beth said, motioning to the store entrance. "Matt will show you where it is."

" Couldn't I help out?" Cassie asked, propping her books on one hip. "I don't have much homework."

Matt tapped Cassie on the shoulder. "Schoolwork first, other stuff second. Come on, I'll show you the office."

When the Taylors had gone inside, Beth went to the potting table to start those transplants. She had to hand it to Matt for keeping the children on task. Even though he had dropped out of school, Matt wasn't about to let that happen to Ethan or Cassie.

Striding around the building, Matt came to the table already wearing his gloves. "I set them up in your office," he said, li

Striding around the building, Matt came to the table already wearing his gloves. "I set them up in your office," he said, lifting another bag of potting soil for Beth. "I'm thinking about calling Mrs. Lott to see if Mom has shown up yet."

"She hasn't." Beth noticed the startled look on Matt's face and smiled. "Shown up, I mean."

"How do you know?"

"Well..." Beth paused, embarrassed to admit her weakness in front of Matt.

"You've been calling her, haven't you? To check on Dylan."

"Is there anything wrong with that?"

Matt groaned, shook his head with a small chuckle. "Our mom doesn't care about us, even half as much as you do."

"Caring isn't hard, Matt. You're a lovable bunch."

Matt slanted her a sidelong look, but made no comment.

Once every so often that day, a dark look would flash into his eyes like the approach of a thunderstorm. She noticed it usually happened after he'd been caught staring at her, and when
she dared to meet his gaze, he would look away, and the storm would temporarily clear. It was moments after such a storm, that Beth's cell phone rang in the large pocket of her canvas apron.

Hoping it wasn't Mrs. Lott to inform them of a mishap with the children, Beth pulled off her work gloves and took out the phone. One look at the display, and her concern eased.

She put the cell phone to her ear, heard the familiar voice that always made her feel loved.

"Hi, Mom."

"I'm sorry to take you away from your work, Sweetheart. We just heard the message you left on our answering machine this morning. Is something wrong? Are you hurt?"

Beth looked at Matt, saw the understanding dawn in his face. "No, I'm not hurt, and nothing is wrong. Is Dad around?"

"Aiden!" Beth heard her mom call. "Pick up the extension in the bedroom! It's Beth!"

The Stetson came off, and Matt swiped at his brow before putting it back on. "So this is it? You're going to tell them right now?"

"I'd like to get it over with," Beth said, covering the phone with a hand so her mom couldn't overhear. "You don't mind, do you?"

Arms folded, he shook his head. "Nah. It'll be a piece of cake. You'll introduce me to your dad, he'll yell at me, disown you, and then I'll never have to face him again. I figure the whole thing will only take a few minutes."

"Dad doesn't yell."

"Okay-- talk to me sternly. In the end, it's the same difference. Is he on the phone yet?"

"He must be in the bathroom," Beth smiled. "Hello, Mom? What's taking Dad so long?"

"I'm here, Peanut," a man's voice boomed over Beth's cell phone. "What's the big news?"

Beth shut her eyes. Breathe, she told herself. Just remember to breathe. Something grazed her knuckles, and when she opened her eyes, she realized Matt was taking her free hand in his.
"Mom, Dad-- do you remember how you kept telling me to move on with my life? To not keep living in the past?"

"Sure do, Peanut. What about it?"

"I've decided to take your advice, Dad. I got married."

The long dead silence over the phone told Beth what her parents could not. Shock. Absolute shock.

Matt squeezed her fingers. "When he starts yelling, pass me the phone."

"Who was that, Peanut?"

"That was him, Dad. That was Matt."

"Pass him the phone, then."

"Daddy, he's a good man--"

"Give him the phone, Beth."

Swallowing her dread, Beth handed the cell phone to Matt. He let go of her hand, took the phone and Beth felt the loss of his reassuring touch.

"Mr--" Matt looked to Beth, suddenly wide-eyed and frantic.

"Campbell," Beth whispered, realizing Matt didn't know her maiden name.

Matt swallowed. "Mr. Campbell."

Beth leaned into the cell phone pressed to Matt's ear, until she could hear the sound of her father's voice, booming loud and clear.

"So you're the one who married my daughter?"

"Yes, sir, I'm the one."

"How long have you known her?"
"Not long."

"A few years?"

"No, sir, a few weeks."

Aiden grunted. "Are you a Christian?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, that's something, anyway. When did this happen?"

"I was a teenager when I accepted Christ--"

"No, no, the marriage. When did it take place, and why didn't Beth tell us before it happened? You wouldn't have had anything to do with that, would you?"

"No, sir, I tried to get her to call. Beth said she'd tell you later."

Beth swatted Matt's arm, and despite the stress of the situation, Matt grinned.

"What, sir? Oh-- I think she was afraid you'd try to stop the marriage."

A booming chuckle filled the cell phone, so that Matt held it away from his ear until her father quieted.

"You're certainly different than Luke, that's for sure. I appreciate your candor-- what was your name, again?"

"Matt. Matt Taylor."

"I like your honesty, Matt, but you'll forgive me if I don't welcome you into the family. My daughter has just informed me she's gotten married, and to someone her mother and I have never met. Beth says you're a good man, but how are we supposed to know if that's true or not?"

"I'm not a good man, Mr. Campbell. I'll tell you that straight off."

Beth shook Matt's shoulder to get him to stop, but when he moved away and she could no longer hear, Beth leaned in to resume her eavesdropping.
"Would you care to explain that?"

"Yes, sir. I'll do my best. I'm a former drug and--"

Beth snatched the cell phone away from Matt before he said one word more. "Dad, if you have any questions, I'll be the one to answer them. Matt told me all about his past before we married, so I can tell you anything you want to know."

Matt held out his hand for the phone. "Beth, I should be the one to tell him."

"This is my father, Matt-- not yours."

"I'm not afraid of him, Beth."

"I know you're not, that's why you're not getting this cell phone back."

"Peanut, put Matt on the phone."

"What do you want to know, Dad? If Matt was ever a drug addict? He used to be, but not anymore. He's also admitted to once having a sex addiction, but there's no way I'm going to let him shame himself over the phone to someone he doesn't even know. Not just so he can satisfy his conscience by answering your questions, himself."

A pause. "He's no coward, then?"

"No, Daddy. Matt is definitely not a coward. He's been taking care of two brothers and a sister all by himself since he was a teenager, and now he's taking in another baby brother he just found out about."

"From the way you're painting him, he sounds like quite a man."

"He is, Dad. One of the finest." Beth moved to another location to avoid the insistent hand grabbing for her cell phone. "The responsibilities are too much for Matt to handle alone, so I volunteered myself. We married in name only, Dad, but this marriage is for life. You'd better start getting used to him now, because he's not going anywhere."

"Shannon? Do you hear what your daughter is saying?"

"So now she's my daughter again, is she?"
"We're coming out there to meet him," Aiden said in a tone that would brook no opposition. "If you don't have room for your mother and I, we'll stay at a hotel. But we are coming."

"There's plenty of room, Dad. You know that."

"After this unexpected bomb, I'm not sure of anything right now. Shannon, start packing. We'll leave tomorrow morning and be in Las Cruces in time for a late lunch."

"You have a doctor's appointment, tomorrow," Beth's mother said in a patient tone. "I want to make sure your twisted knee is healing as it should."

"Then the day after-- Thursday-- we'll head out to New Mexico and meet the man our daughter has chosen. I tell you, Shannon, it's a fine day when we're the last to know when one of our children has gotten married."

"Dad," Beth interrupted, "I haven't told the rest of the family yet."

"Your sister, your brother? They don't know?"

"Mom, I didn't have time."

"Very well, I'll call them myself," Shannon said with a sigh. "Elizabeth, you're sure of this man? Very sure?"

"Yes, Mom. I'm sure."

"We'll see you Thursday, Peanut."

After exchanging good-byes, the line went silent as people hung up their phones.

Beth tucked the cell phone into her apron, turned to see Matt staring at the toes of his boots.

"Why did you tell them all that stuff about me?"

"Because it was true."

"No, it's not."

"Matt, please look at me."
When he finally did, Beth saw defiance glinting in his eyes and it put her on guard.

"I did not tell them one single thing that I didn't believe in with all my heart. You can either choose to accept it, or not. But I will not stand by and let you tear yourself down like that--"

Beth let out a surprised gasp as Matt stepped forward, pulled her into his arms and claimed her mouth. His insistence made it impossible to think, as did the hands that pressed her to him.

Then all at once, he yanked away, leaving Beth to yearn for more. She could hear Matt's quick intake, her own rushing pulse easily matching his.

He sucked in air, leveled her a piercing look.

Beth put out a hand to steady herself against the potting table.

"Great. That's just great." Matt huffed out a breath, his mouth parting in a humorless chuckle. "I can't even keep my word to you. The others are counting on me to make this work, and I had to go and pull that stunt."

"Matt--"

"No, Beth." He chuckled again, his eyes turning shades darker than before. "Save all those lofty words for your parents. Tell them how great I am-- I don't care. Just don't say all that stuff in front of me. I know what I am, and hearing you..." he clamped his lips together. "If you knew me-- really knew me-- you'd never even think those words, let alone say them out loud."

"I know all I need to, Matt."

The deep sadness in his eyes caught Beth even more off guard than the rush of the second kiss. He moved away from her, went to the side of the building and ran the garden hose over his head for several moments. Beth knew he had to be freezing, for though the sun was out, she knew how cold the water from that hose could be.

Without looking back, Matt disappeared into the store, leaving Beth to piece together her shattered senses. After seeing all the water he had doused himself with before retreating, Beth took a measure of comfort in knowing that the impassioned kiss had at least cost Matt as much as it had her.

All that passion, and after she had been trying to be mindful of those boundaries, more careful with Matt and his scarred past. After being so careful, he'd still snatched her up and kissed her, then dropped her without warning.
Fine. She could live like this. Matt might drive her crazy in the process, but if he did, Beth was going to take him with her.

"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 4:11 ~
Chapter Seventeen
It's Complicated

"My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: He that keepeth thee will not slumber."
~ Psalm 121:2, 3 ~

Her parents were coming. Not today, thank God, but the day after. Matt couldn't fathom why that thought gave him so much comfort. Thursday would come, and he would face Beth's parents whether he dreaded their arrival, or not. Dig in his heels, refuse to look at the calendar—it didn't matter. They were coming, and Matt found a new reason to distrust Thursdays; they were so tauntingly close to weekend relief, but still distant enough for anything to happen. And it had.

They were coming.

"Get a grip, Taylor," Matt told himself as he pushed the broom down an aisle of the store. A bushy plant sat on a nearby shelf, its pot covered by a bright bow and a plastic insert that read "Have a sunny day!"

He adjusted the pot so it faced the aisle. Plants had it made. They couldn't read the silly things people stuck into their dirt, and they didn't have in-laws. And plants didn't kiss. No geranium ever shook with such passion the way Matt had when Beth was in his arms. Man, what a dumb thing to do. If he wanted to torture himself, why not slam his skull into a brick wall? Repeatedly. It would hurt less than what he felt now. A third-degree burn would have been better, a toothache, a stupid broken bone. Anything but letting go.

Did Beth know how crazy that kiss had made him? He hoped not. He had to get through the day, go home, and face her there, as well.

At least Matt didn't have to repeat his mistake. Maintaining a twelve foot clearance from Beth at all times, ought to do the trick. Of course, so would changing his name and moving to Alberta. No kissing Beth, and no in-laws. The thought almost made him smile.

A customer forced Matt's attention back to work. Did he know where the trowels were kept? Which aisle, and did they have cushioned knee pads? Matt answered the questions, only to come face to face with an elderly woman with a yellowed plant that looked about as frail as she did.
A tattered pink sweater covered a gray one-piece dress and a hunched frame. Support hose came to just below her knees, and her shoes looked very much like house-slippers. The old woman gave Matt a frowning look.

"Are you the one I have to see about getting this fern replaced?"

"Excuse me?"

"This fern. I want it replaced."

When Matt hesitated a moment too long, she gave a quick sigh of impatience.

"This store sold me a defective plant, and I want it replaced." She held up the unfortunate object, poked it with a finger. "See? It's not supposed to be yellow. Beth told me it wasn't."

Something fell into place in Matt's mind. "Mrs. Palmer?"

"That's me," she said with a curt nod. "Now how about my Boston Fern? You going to do anything, or just stand there and ask questions?"

"Beth told me she would give you a refund. If you'll go to the checkout and tell the cashier--"

"I don't want my money back." The old woman pulled at the corner of her sweater. "I told you, I want this fern replaced. It's defective."

It's being overwatered, Matt thought with a sigh. Maybe being stuck in a pot wasn't so great, after all.

Beth had already told him she was willing to give Mrs. Palmer back her money, so he figured a replacement instead of the refund would be all right. He glanced around the store, remembered Beth was out back at the potting table.

Out of the corner of his eye, Matt caught Amy going into the office, heard Ethan's voice and realized Amy was talking to his brother.

Great. Just great.

"Young man," Mrs. Palmer gave him a retired teacher look-- a look much like Beth's, but older--"I want to see your ferns."
"I think they're against the window," Matt said, nodding to the front of the store. He glanced at the office, saw Amy through the open door. Her head tilted as though listening, then she laughed.

"Show me," the old woman said.

"Pardon?"

"Take me to the ferns. My eyes aren't what they used to be, and I can't tell one plant from another."

"Then why do you want one?" Matt asked.

The question made Mrs. Palmer's face wrinkle in thought.

"You should have something you can see. Flowers, maybe. Something with big blooms." Matt craned his head for a better look at the office. He prayed Amy wouldn't flirt with his brother. Though Amy was nineteen—only two years older than Ethan—Matt didn't want Amy getting involved with a guy who was trying to become as reckless with his life as Matt had once been. Not that Ethan could easily outdo Matt's record, or even match it. The brothers differed, for while Ethan possessed rebellion, he lacked the total abandon Matt had experienced; and while Ethan enjoyed a degree of hope for the future, the word "hope" had been foreign to Matt throughout most of his childhood.

Hopelessness, reckless abandon, and addiction made a dangerous threesome.

"Mrs. Palmer, I didn't know you were here." Beth came toward them, and Matt caught the reprimand in Beth's eyes when she flicked him an annoyed glance. He should have found her, told her Mrs. Palmer had come. Tamping down some annoyance of his own, Matt endured the moment in silence.

"I have your money right here," Beth said, reaching into an apron pocket.

The old woman waved away the money. "None of that," she said, and looked at Matt. "I want flowers. Lots of them."

"You want a replacement? I can show you several good alternatives." When Beth started to lead Mrs. Palmer to another part of the store, the old woman resisted.

"I want him to show me," she said, a bony finger pointing to Matt.
"But he doesn't know anything about plants."

"He doesn't have to." Mrs. Palmer's face wrinkled into a warm smile. "I like him."

"I should warn you," Beth gave a feminine grin, "he's a married man."

Matt hoped he didn't appear as embarrassed as he felt. He kept glancing back at the office, wondering what Amy could possibly be saying to Ethan. When Sylvia joined Amy, Matt moaned out loud.

"What is it?" Beth asked.

"It's Sylvia. She's standing next to Amy and now they're both talking to my brother. I should have known better than to bring Ethan into a store with so many desperate women around."

"We're not desperate, Matt."

Matt gave Beth a half-hearted chuckle, and she smiled. "Okay, maybe some of us are. But Amy is getting serious about Joe, and I wouldn't be surprised if wedding bells aren't in her future. As for Sylvia... I'll go in there and make sure she retracts her claws before anyone gets hurt."

During this exchange, Mrs. Palmer seemed to forget her poor Boston Fern. In the face of such entertainment, Matt figured the old woman was getting her money's worth by just standing there.

"Show Mrs. Palmer some houseplants," Beth said, heading for the office. "The ones near the front will give nice blooms."

When Matt lingered to watch, Mrs. Palmer watched with him. Nothing much could be seen, and even less heard, so Matt headed his customer over to the houseplants near one of the large pane windows at the front of the store. Mrs. Palmer seemed content to stare at the plants with Matt, and he began to understand Beth's comment about Mrs. Palmer being lonely. He still struggled with Beth's assertion that the old woman was sweet, but maybe he wasn't paying enough attention. One plant pretty much looked like the next, just as Mrs. Palmer had said they would. When Matt noticed a pot mention on its tag "easy to care for" and "large dramatic blooms," he suggested it to Mrs. Palmer and she accepted the exchange without protest.
Clutching her new plant, Mrs. Palmer took a seat by the entrance to wait for her granddaughter to come and drive her home. She looked in no hurry to leave, and as long as she seemed content, Matt decided to smile and let her sit for as long as she wanted.

A few minutes later, all three women emerged from the office. Amy returned to the checkout, and Sylvia went outside, both employees looking their usual selves. A smile on her lips, Beth came to explain things to Matt--and all within easy earshot of Mrs. Palmer.

"They weren't talking to Ethan," Beth said with a shake of her head. "It seems Cassie hit it off with Amy and Sylvia. They like her."

Matt breathed a sigh of relief. "Cass always was easy to get along with," he said, not at all surprised that anyone should like his little sister. "Cass is the gentle one in our family, Ethan is the most defiant, and Ryan--"

"Is a little angel," Beth finished with a smile.

"Well," Matt thought it over, "I was going to say rambunctious, but I guess he can be angel-like at times."

"And what are you, Matt?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Whatever I am, I'm no angel."

"How about gentle?" Beth asked. "Defiant?"

"When it's called for."

An unnerving smile played on Beth's lips. "I think I know something that fits you even better."

"You do, huh?"

"Yes, I do. You're a darling, that's what you are."

"Aw, Beth, cut it out." He didn't feel in the mood for being teased, but she only smiled and stepped forward. His heart did a backflip when she leaned against him, put a hand behind his head and drew him so close his hat slid back. Instead of a kiss, her lips grazed his cheek, pressed to his ear with a warmth that melted his insides.

How he wanted her.
"This is for kissing me," she said, her whisper low and lightly taunting. She moved out of his grasp, and his heart staggered after her.

"That's not fair, Beth."

"I disagree, Matt. I'd say we're even now."

He straightened his Stetson, and saw Mrs. Palmer smiling. "We're married."

"Oh, Matt, I think she can guess. Who else would I tease, but my husband?"

"Well," he yanked on the hat brim, "I wish you'd stop. Things are going to get more interesting between us, if you keep doing that to me."

"Funny you should mention it," Beth smiled, "because I was about to tell you the same thing."

He stared Beth down, and she didn't flinch.

"Okay, I get the message," he breathed quietly.

To his surprise, disappointment flickered into Beth's green eyes.

She hadn't been trying to stop him.

The impulse to do something stupid coursed through Matt. His heart shouted until his ears rang with the inward warning. He heard it loud and clear, acknowledged its truth by remaining still. She didn't expect him to say more, so Matt turned and forced himself to walk away. He walked, when all he wanted to do was hold her.

Did she understand? Did he?

One thought back to his past, and Matt had all the reminder he needed. Beth had no idea who she had married, and Matt wasn't about to tell her.

Revenge wasn't as sweet as Beth had hoped. Instead of playful encouragement, she had sent him away with profound sadness pooling in his eyes. She was getting out of practice, her flirting had backfired.
Maybe she had misread Matt, only seeing what she wanted to find. The possibility that he didn't want her, came to Beth like an unwelcome nightmare. She couldn't be wrong-- not about that. The way Matt kissed her at the potting table, then later, when she leaned against him and felt him tremble-- surely, it meant more than an ex-junkie wanting part of his old life back. It was there in his eyes, his touch, the way his mouth sometimes slipped into a smile when he looked at her.

It was real, Beth knew it was.

A curious glance from Sylvia and then Amy, jarred Beth back to work. They no doubt saw her and Matt together, but what of it? If Beth wanted to flirt with her husband, Beth figured she had all the prerogative she needed to keep going.

When they arrived home from work, Mrs. Lott informed Beth that she didn't have any message from Matt's mother. Eve hadn't shown up. Big surprise, Beth thought as she fixed dinner over the kitchen stove. The children seemed happier upon finding Eve's absence, and though Beth fought Matt for the privilege of being the one to prepare dinner, everyone relaxed enough to make the meal pleasant.

All through the evening, Matt kept turning his eyes from Beth whenever she caught him looking. Instead of being discouraged, Beth took his persistent interest as a good sign.

Wednesday morning broke early in the Taylor household. Beth made a breakfast of toast and orange juice, toted the little ones next door to Mrs. Lott while at the same time wishing she could take them with her, coaxed the older ones to not be late for the school bus, then climbed into the passenger seat of Matt's pickup without comment.

"You've been busy," Matt said, as he pulled away from the mobile home. "You didn't let me help out at breakfast, and now you just hop into my truck. No argument, nothing."

"I didn't see any point in fighting," Beth said with a smile. She leaned back in the seat, watched Matt behind the wheel. "Did you mind my running things this morning?"

He shrugged. "I guess not, though I'm used to being the one to ride herd over the kids. There's pretty much never been anyone but me to look after them, and it's hard to let someone else take my place-- even for a while."

"No one could ever take your place with those kids, Matt."
"I don't know about that." He sighed, his eyes on the road and not her. "When things get rough in my life, the responsibility I have to the others forces me to keep going. They're a lot of trouble, but God has used them to help me. It's hard to focus on your own problems, when you have to think about the rent, what's for dinner, is Ryan brushing his teeth?" Matt smiled. "Even when they don't need me, I need them. They keep me focused on what's important."

The easy way Matt spoke of his family, his tenderness and obvious affection, brought a sigh to Beth's lips. She liked this man. Really liked him.

"Whenever I'm doing too much, let me know and I'll step aside."

"I'm not griping, Beth. I appreciate the help."

"I know you do." She closed her eyes, let the air from the half open window on Matt's side caress her face. "You're sharing your family with me, so I promise not to keep them all to myself." When she peeked at Matt, she saw the smile on his handsome but cute face. Contentment washed over her, a feeling of true belonging mixed with something else even more powerful. She inhaled joy like a sailor who hadn't seen the ocean in years. When was the last time she felt this relaxed, this happy?

Not since Luke.

The thought put a lump in her throat. She hoped Luke knew she still loved him, that she could never love anyone but him. When Matt started whistling, his male presence in the truck became more palpable. Beth shifted in her seat, opened her eyes and watched the scenery pass outside the window.

Life was complicated.

The first half of the workday passed slowly for Beth. One of her plant wholesalers announced they were discontinuing the small trees she had been counting on to fulfill an upcoming order, so her morning had been spent on the phone in search of another supplier.

By lunchtime, she felt worn out but happy. Her trees were secured from a large grower in Santa Fe, ensuring the upcoming order would be fulfilled without more drama.

Then it happened. The one thing sure to turn any day upside down.
As Beth cleared the office of the trash left from lunch, Matt came to the door looking as though someone had just punched him in the gut.

He came to her chair, placed an absent hand on the desk. "Mom's here."

"You've got to be kidding." Beth stood up, looked out the office window and saw Matt's mother waiting in the loading dock. "This is certainly unexpected. How did she know where to find you?"

Matt shook his head, groaned. "When Mom found I wasn't home, she went next door and got it out of Mrs. Lott. Beth, we have to talk."

At the urgent tone in Matt's voice, Beth turned to face him. "What's wrong? Shouldn't we go out and speak to her, let her know you got married so you could keep Dylan?"

"This has to come first," Matt said, moving to shut the office door behind him. "I saw the look in Mom's eye when she came into the store just now, and we're in trouble. I think Mrs. Lott already told her we're married."

"But, Matt, isn't that a good thing?"

"It's not so much Mom knowing." Matt said, huffing out a quick breath, "but how she was told. Beth, you have to promise me something..."

Several minutes later, when Beth stepped out of the office with Matt, her hands were trembling. Never in all her acquaintance with Matt, had she seen him so adamant. Beth had no choice but to give her word, and now she was about to face the enemy.

The enemy. It didn't seem right that the mother of the children she now helped to care for, should be looked upon as the enemy. As Beth moved outside with Matt, and saw the hard-faced woman puffing on a cigarette, Beth tried to give Eve the benefit of the doubt. After all, this was Matt's mom, and in an odd twist of irony, Beth's mother-in-law.

Eve smiled at Beth through the haze of tobacco smoke, the cigarette perched in a two fingered hold in her right hand. "I hear congratulations are in order."

The well-honeyed tone sent a shiver through Beth. Now she understood why Matt had tried to prepare her.
"Thank you, Eve," Beth said in as cordial a voice as she could summon. "Won't you follow me? There's some nice chairs in the corner of the lot where we can sit in the shade."

The cigarette returned to Eve's lips. She nodded, followed Beth and Matt through the loading dock, to a corner where outdoor furniture had been set up in a shady area for customers to see how nice it might look in their own backyard.

"I must say, I'm surprised you were willing to tie the knot with our Matty." Eve chose a chair and sat down with an air of casual disregard. "One look at you, and I can tell you're out of his league. Matty is only fit for trash like himself." Eve grinned around her cigarette. "When it comes down to it, we both know why you married him. You're getting paid in bed, though he must be very entertaining for you to go through with such a drastic thing as marriage."

"Stop it, Mom." Matt clenched his fists and remained standing while Beth took a seat. "Don't you dare talk to Beth that way."

"I'll talk to her however I want," Eve said with a dismissing flick of her cigarette. "Send him away. I came to talk to you, not Matty."

"Please, Matt," Beth tried to give him a reassuring smile, "go back into the store so your mom and I can visit."

"Visit." Eve snorted. "That's a good one. The last person I 'visited,' I had to go through a pat-down search for contraband. You might like to know, Matty, your worthless two-timing father sends his regards."

The knuckles of Matt's clenched fists turned white. "My father is dead."

"You mean you wish he were," Eve said with a laugh. "Keep telling yourself that, Matty. One of these days, a cellmate will tangle with him once too often, and it'll be true."

"Dad died for me the moment he walked out on us, Mom."

"Whatever." Eve rolled her eyes, crossed her legs and waited for Matt to leave.

Beth nudged her head in the direction of the store, and after some moments of quiet hesitation, Matt left.

"Well, now we can get down to business." Eve grinned, dropped her cigarette on the dirt and ground it out with the heel of her shoe. "Mrs. Lott said Matty got married so he could keep the
baby. As far as I'm concerned, I don't care why he did it. All I want is what's coming to me. My fair share, you know? Since you have money, I figure we can come to some sort of an arrangement. Maybe like a monthly allowance, huh? Matty wants to keep the kid, and you want to keep Matty. After we settle on a number, everyone will come away happy."

"I'm afraid I can't do that." Beth took a deep breath and kept going. "I can't give you any money."

"What do you mean? You're loaded, aren't you? This place is yours, isn't it?"

"Before we came out here to talk," Beth leaned forward, hushed her voice and prayed as hard as she knew how, "Matty made me promise to not give you a single dime."

"He can't do that-- not if he wants to keep Amadeus."

Beth tried to swallow the fear lodged in her throat. "Matty made it very clear: If I give you money, he walks away from the marriage."

"Then I think I'll take my baby back," Eve said, pulling a fresh cigarette from her purse. "What do you think about that?"

Though difficult to choke out the words, Beth endeavored not to show any weakness in front of Eve. "Matty said Dylan is yours, and that if you want to take him, that's your problem. Until you sign over Dylan, he's your responsibility, not ours."

"Dylan, huh? So you're dropping that dumb first name? It's fine with me, but it won't make Wade happy."

"Unless Wade is prepared to be a father, Wade won't have a choice."

A grim laugh sounded as Eve lit her cigarette. "So that's how it's going to be, is it? Then I guess I don't have any choice, either."

Uncertain what Eve meant by the last remark, Beth remained in cautious silence. She prayed Matt was right about his mom.

"Just for laughs," Eve asked, regarding Beth with eyes devoid of tenderness, "how rich are you? I saw the car in front of Matt's house. Very nice. And the crib in the living room had to cost you a bundle. I peeked through the window and saw it."

"I'm glad you approve," Beth smiled. She left the question unanswered, and Eve stared back.
"It's not fair, you know? I've spent all my life going from one loser to the next, and when one of my kids strikes it rich, I'm left out in the cold. Isn't that a kick in the head?" Eve didn't wait for a reply, but picked up her purse, stood up and flicked away her cigarette. "He'll throw you away. Once Matty has what he wants, he'll throw you away, just like he did Helen."

Beth stiffened.

"Didn't he ever have the guts to tell you about Helen? No? I can see from your face he hasn't. I'll tell you what-- go to Matty and ask him where his sweet Helen is now, and see if he'll answer. I'll bet you anything he won't. Ask him if his hands are clean, if he can sleep at night knowing what he did to that poor girl. Then ask yourself if you really want to stay married to my son. Eve turned, then swiveled and leveled Beth a glare sharp enough to kill.

"Mrs. Lott said something about your arrangement being in name only, though I'm not a big enough fool to believe it. But if it's true, and you really haven't gone to bed with Matty, then you might want to think long and hard about what sort of man he is before you give him something you can't take back."

The hatred twisted on that otherwise lovely face, sent a shudder through Beth. She watched in muted horror as Matt's mother strutted out of the nursery.

Half a second later, Matt came to the furniture corner and stared at Beth. "Well?" he asked.

"You were right." Beth stood, watched as Eve's figure disappeared around the corner. "Her threat was an empty one. She knows she could turn Dylan over to someone else, but I think she believed me when I said I wouldn't give her any money."

"Thank God." Matt blew out a sigh, collapsed into a chair. "Thanks for doing as I said, Beth."

"You didn't give me any choice, Matt."

He looked up at her, a wry smile playing around his mouth. "That hasn't stopped you before. You're one of the most headstrong women I've ever met."

Beth smiled. "And you're a very stubborn man. What if Eve had taken Dylan back?"

In a helpless gesture, Matt threw up his hands. "Dylan is still hers to take. Fight mom's right before she gives it up, and she'll never let go of Dylan. Give in to her demands, and she'll bleed
you dry until it puts others in danger. The only thing left is to be firm and pray she'll back down. Mom doesn't want Dylan. We're willing to solve her problem. That'll have to be enough."

This time, Beth's smile didn't come without being forced. She stood there, arms folded, grateful Dylan still had the possibility of being theirs, and not Eve's. Despite her relief, Beth could not bring herself to celebrate. Though Matt had called a lawyer to begin the guardianship process, Eve had yet to sign anything, and then there was the matter of Helen.

"Thank God, Mom didn't come while your parents were here," Matt said, rubbing his face with both hands. He sounded tired, as though he could lay down and not wake for days.

Beth kept thinking. That wicked woman could say whatever popped into her head, enjoy a measure of triumph at Matt's expense. Eve could hardly be trusted to tell the truth. Then again, Matt had an ugly past, he acknowledged it freely and refused to tell Beth more. And hadn't Matt claimed he wasn't a good man?

"When Mom came walking through that door," Matt shook his head, "and I saw that exultant look on her face, I knew there was going to be trouble. I don't know what Mrs. Lott told my mom, but sometimes, my neighbor has a big mouth. I'm sure she thought she was helping, maybe even trying to reassure Mom that I could now afford to keep Dylan. See the nice car parked in front of Matt's place? And by the way, Beth owns her own business."

Trust. It all came down to how much Beth trusted Matt. Not the man he used to be, but the man he was now.

Beth moved over to him, placed a hand on his shoulder and he looked up. It didn't matter that his eyes held that dark look that made her think he wanted her. She couldn't trust the yearning in her heart, or the way her feet left the ground whenever he touched her. None of those things really mattered, for none of them held Beth's answer.

"What?" he asked.

Beth knew her answer lay in his heart, the very soul and character of who Matt was.

He looked at her. "What are you thinking?"

No, Beth thought to herself, she would not ask about Helen. Eve would not hurt Matt through her. Beth wouldn't allow it. Tilting her head to one side, Beth smiled. "I'm thinking I married the right man."
"You've been sitting in the shade too long," he said with a self-deprecating chuckle. "Did Mom give you a phone number, any way to reach her?"

"No. I'm afraid I forgot to ask."

"No harm done," Matt said, getting to his feet. "Mom knows where to find us."

As they walked into the store, Beth felt Matt's hand slip around hers. Labor had calloused those strong fingers, a life used to menial work and the outdoors. She felt his masculine strength, basked in the gentle touch of those callouses until they went their separate ways. In that moment, as she watched Matt return to his work, she thanked God for the direction her path had taken. This was the man she was supposed to have, the one God had chosen for her.

If only her parents could see it that way.

Thursday was to be like any other day. Beth had insisted. Just because they were going to take her parents out for a late lunch once they arrived, was no reason to be nervous. She needed to go grocery shopping, the mobile home had to be cleaned, a spare room of her own home aired and vacuumed to accommodate her parents, and an unofficial holiday of keeping the nursery closed so they could get everything done before the zero hour.

Ah, yes, a day like any other-- or so Beth tried to convince Matt. But the more she tried to convince, the more nervous he grew. While they tidied the living room of the mobile home, Beth's nerves became more apparent.

"You'll like Dad. He's very easygoing, and hardly ever yells."

"Yesterday, you said he didn't yell at all."

"Whatever you do, be yourself. Dad will know if you're being disingenuous."

"Disn-in-what?"

"Avoid politics. Whatever you do, don't start on politics-- that, and government conspiracy theories. But you'll see, he's very easy to get along with."

"If he's so easy, then why haven't you two stayed in touch? From what I gather, you aren't necessarily very close."
"That's because Dad can be difficult."

"I thought you said he was easygoing!"

The hurried exchange left Matt confused and more than a little curious. He knew Beth did her best to evade his questions, and with all the running around getting things in order, the subject didn't come up until everyone had gathered again in Matt's living room, dressed in their almost-best.

"I wish we had time to go shopping," Beth said, licking a finger and then applying it to Dylan's tiny crown. She combed his hair, checked his diaper, made sure he looked "comfy" in his carrier. "Besides that sleeper, Dylan only has only the hand-me downs I gave him from Caleb. We should go shopping, Matt. We should take the whole family shopping and get everyone new clothes."

"I hope you don't mean right now," Matt said with a laugh. He was glad he hadn't opted for the necktie. This was Beth's parents, not Sunday services. Even so, he wore a navy blue button-up shirt and some black jeans. The shirt was long-sleeved, for Matt didn't want the "Rough Stuff" tattoo on his biceps to show. Mr. Campbell might not recognize the street name for marijuana, but Matt didn't want to chance it. The excuse of waking up after a drinking binge to find a tat of a drug he'd hardly ever used, probably wouldn't go over well, either.

Man, was he ever in trouble. Long sleeves were not going to hide what he was from Beth's parents. Then again, nothing would.

"Where did you say they live?" Matt asked.

"Phoenix, Arizona." Beth looked up from the carrier, smiled at Ryan as he struggled to smooth down his cowlick. "Let me help you with that, Sweetheart."

"So your younger sister lives in..."

"Santa Fe," Beth said, applying her own version of hair gel to Ryan's stubborn tuft.

"And your older brother?"

"Phoenix."

"Ah," Matt said, "with your folks?"
"No, in separate houses. Dad likes his independence."

"And your mom? What’s she like?"

"Mom's mom," Beth said with a shrug. "For the most part, she goes along with whatever Dad wants. Hold still, Ryan, I'm almost done."

"And what does your dad usually want?"

"To be right." Beth shrugged, a gesture Matt noticed she did often when speaking of her parents. "Dad is opinionated, Mom compliant."

"And you?"

The sidelong gaze of green eyes made Matt smile. "I suppose I'm somewhere in the middle."

"Why aren't you closer to your parents?"

"Why aren't you closer to yours?"

Ethan sat on the couch, watching the back and forth like someone at a tennis match.

"Oh, please. You're not going to compare my folks to yours, are you? Your dad may have his faults, but at least yours is..." Matt hesitated, shot a glance at Ethan.

"Go ahead and say it, Matty. We like to pretend he's dead, but he's not."

Curiosity touched Beth's china doll features. When she looked to Matt for an answer, Matt groaned.

"Come on, Matt. I've been answering your questions."

"And evading others," Matt said with reluctance. "I guess you'll find out sooner or later. My dad--the one I share with Ethan--is serving life in prison for killing his girlfriend."

"Oh." The wide-eyed look in Beth's face caused Matt to wish he had kept that particular bit of family history, silent.

For pity's sake, at least wait until her parents returned to Arizona.
The slam of a car door put an abrupt stop to their discussion. Beth jolted upright, went to the window while Cassie straightened her skirt for the umpteenth time.

"That's them," Beth said, the urgency in her voice nearing panic. "I was getting worried they couldn't follow my directions." She turned, faced the living room and everyone in it. "When we go to the restaurant, remember, I'm paying for the meal. Please don't fight me on this, Matt-- not in front of my parents."

Too nervous to think about money, Matt ran a hand through his hair, then winced when he remembered he had combed it carefully. So much for that.

"Remember, be yourself," Beth said, rushing to Matt and promptly fixing his hair. The doorbell rang, and Beth shut her eyes.

"Do you want me to get it?" Matt asked.

Beth shook her head, squared her shoulders, then adjusted the black belt on her sleeveless dress as she went to the door.

"Peanut!" erupted from Matt's doorstep, along with, "Sweetheart, you're so thin!"

A large barrel-chested man stepped into the house, the cane in his hand contradicting the strength in his hardy face. Here was a man used to the elements. Matt didn't need Beth to tell him how her father made his living. Whatever it was, Aiden Campbell was used to the outdoors. He had Beth's flaming red hair, the green eyes, the sprinkling of freckles across his face. A green polo shirt deepened his gaze, and tan slacks gave him a casual but well-off appearance. When he stepped aside, a slender woman in casual white slacks, and a pale pink blouse followed. She had Beth's delicate complexion, but her hair looked blond, as though someone wove it from flaxen gold. Instead of the complying person Beth described, Matt found an alert woman, ready to speak her mind.

"If you were still in pigtails," Shannon Campbell waved a finger at Beth, "you'd be sent to the corner until you came to your senses."

"If she were still in pigtails," Mr. Campbell laughed, "she couldn't have gotten married. Well, Elizabeth, are you going to introduce us to your family?"

"Sorry, Dad." Beth turned to Matt and Matt saw the panic in her eyes. "Dad, I'd like you to meet Matt Taylor. Matt, this is my dad."
Matt had planned to offer a handshake, but when the older man just stood there with that appraising look, Matt felt unable to move. When Mr. Campbell glanced down at Ryan with a raised brow, the boy ducked behind Matt’s pant leg.

"That’s Ryan," Beth said with a smile. "Not too long ago, he turned four."

Though Mr. Campbell’s face softened, he said nothing.

"This is Cassie—she’s twelve—and the big one on the couch is Ethan—Matt, you said he’s seventeen?"

"Yeah, he’s getting really old." Matt felt Ryan hugging his leg and half wished he could hide like his little brother.

Beth nodded again to the couch, where Ethan’s hand rested on the baby carrier. "The small one is Dylan. He’s fourteen days old."

"Are there any more?" Mr. Campbell asked with a wry chuckle.

Mrs. Campbell swatted her husband’s arm.

"I was only asking," he frowned. His eyes tracked back to Matt while Mrs. Campbell moved to get a closer look at the baby.

That strong green stare narrowed on Matt, and Matt felt its full impact. Matt shifted in his boots, but faced Mr. Campbell like a man.

Seconds later, Mrs. Campbell had Dylan in her arms, and was smiling at Ryan. "Such cute little boys, Beth. And the oldest one isn’t all that bad looking, either."

At his wife’s comment, Mr. Campbell shot her a reproachful glance.

"Are we ready to leave for the restaurant?" Beth asked in a shaky voice. "I made reservations, and if we arrive too late, we’ll lose our table." Beth took Ryan’s hand, picked up her purse from the couch. "Ethan, would you bring the carrier? Ryan, do you have to use the potty again? Oh, Matt, don’t forget to lock up the house when we leave."

"I always do, Beth."

"You don’t want today to be the first time you forget, do you?"
Matt frowned. "Could I have a word with you in the kitchen?"

"Now?"

"Yes, now. Ethan, take the others out to the cars. I want a moment with Beth."

Wary amusement played on Mr. Campbell’s face as Matt led Beth into the kitchen by her elbow.

With a huff, Beth freed her arm. "What is so important you have to drag me into the kit--" She was promptly interrupted by a sound kiss on the mouth. Matt wrapped himself around her, let the kiss deepen with everything he had. To the delight of his crazed delirium, she kissed him back.

When the moment became dangerous, Matt pulled away and gasped for breath. Wow, that felt good.

"Thanks, Beth. I needed that. Ready to go now?"

"Matt? What was all that about?"

He shrugged, though his heart still jackhammered in his chest. "It's been building all day. Stress does that to me." He pulled out his keys, tried to quiet the fire he had stoked by kissing Beth with such force. "I don't know about you, but I feel better. Let's go eat."

"Matt Taylor," Beth placed an unsteady hand over her heart, "if you keep doing that to me, I really will go crazy."

Matt only grinned. Maybe it was the grin of a maniac-- he didn't know, and for once, he didn't care. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

He was about to face Beth’s parents in open conversation, and would need all the fortification he could get.

"Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life."
~ Proverbs 13:12 ~

"The desire accomplished is sweet to the soul..."
~ Proverbs 13:19 ~
Chapter Eighteen

The Wounded Spirit

"The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity; but a wounded spirit who can bear?"
~ Proverbs 18:14 ~

The restaurant was impressive. Fancy chandeliers hung from the ceiling, gilt frames lined the walls with historic photos from Las Cruces’ past. The ornately carved tables spread with white linen, the lush plants in the elaborate terra cotta planters-- everything gave the impression of very old, very fancy, and very expensive. No wonder this place was supposed to be a historic landmark.

Maybe he should have worn his necktie, after all, Matt thought, as the party of eight were led by a maitre d’ to a table in the center of the room. Beth was definitely pulling out all the stops to impress her folks. She didn't have to worry about him fighting over who picked up the check. Not this time. It would take one or two of his paychecks, just to cover this happy outing.

Beth had used that word-- happy-- along with how glad she was her parents were there to eat the fancy green salad, the sliced roast beef, the potatoes and gravy. Surprisingly hearty food served up on painted china. Though Aiden Campbell gave a grunt of approval when a plate was set before him, Matt had the impression the man would have been just as happy at a fast food joint. Even the smile on Shannon Campbell's face seemed strained. They might be classy people, but they were evidently very practical ones. Matt caught the mother whispering to her daughter, and from a word or two Matt overheard, he understood Shannon thought the place too expensive.

Though the truth pained Matt, he faced it without sparing his own feelings. This finery was mostly for his benefit, not her parents. If Beth put Matt and his family in a nice background, they might look better to her dad and mom. Not a pleasant thought, but Matt couldn't blame her. He was as common as dandelions. So were the rest of his family, in their almost Sunday best and nervous silence. But only an idiot would mistake Beth for a dandelion. As he sat next to Beth in her red sleeveless dress, Matt felt she looked like a rose crowded among weeds.

Mr. Campbell's hard stare could be felt from across the table, making Matt wonder if that was how the man saw him. As a weed that needed to be uprooted.

Fork paused midway between plate and mouth, Mr. Campbell nodded to Matt. When he spoke, Shannon hushed her talk with Beth.
"You have a job, Matt?" The question came with a hard stare, one stringent enough to peel paint off wood.

The roast beef lodged in Matt's throat. He forced it down with a swallow of water, replaced the crystal glass and nodded. "Yes, sir. I work at the nursery."

Mr. Campbell grunted. The fork moved to his mouth, his jaw worked the beef but his eyes remained on Matt.

"Been married before?" he asked around the food.

"No sir."

"Why not?"

"Dad," Beth broke in, "why don't you try another of those buttermilk biscuits?"

"I'm talking to Matt," came the solid reply. "How old are you?"

"You already know how old I am, Dad."

"Keep out of this. I was asking him."

"I'm twenty-four, sir."

Mr. Campbell grunted. "You look younger."

"So I've been told." Matt tried to hide an inward grimace. According to Beth, he looked like a teenager. Oh yeah. He needed a beard.

"Do you know how old my daughter is?"

"No sir."

"She turns thirty next June."

"Dad."

"Stay out of this, Elizabeth. I'm trying to make a point. You like that classical stuff, but Matt--what's your taste in music?"

"There. Do you see?" Mr. Campbell pounded his hand on the table, causing Cassie to jump. "You two have nothing in common."

"I also like sacred music," Matt continued. "Old time gospels, traditional hymns, worship music."

"So do I," Beth smiled. "Sometime, I'd like to hear you sing. Cassie tells me you're quite the musician."

"Yeah, well. Cass is being kind."

"Maybe you could play for us, tonight."

"Not a chance." He shook his head, almost pushed away from the table and got up to leave. No way was he playing or singing in front of Beth's parents. And definitely not in front of Beth.

"We're getting off topic, Peanut. The point is, you two have nothing in common, no foundation for a lasting marriage."

"I don't agree, Dad."

"Well now. There's news. We disagree."

"Aiden," Shannon placed a hand on her husband's arm. "You promised."

"Yes, yes, I know. I'm trying." Mr. Campbell's frown darkened his entire face. Those green eyes again, that hard stare as he turned to Matt. "Beth said you and she aren't going about this marriage in the traditional sense. Is that right?"

"That depends on what you mean. We're married, we exchanged vows before an ordained minister. Someone even threw rice."

"Dad, we really are married."

"I know you are, that's why your mother and I drove all this way at a moment's notice. What I'm trying to get at-- what I've been trying to say all along-- is that you and this, this boy here, have made a commitment that can't possibly last."
The muscles in Matt’s jaw tensed. "I’m not a boy, Mr. Campbell."

"Men call me Aiden, boys call me mister."

"I’m no boy, Aiden."

A gleam of approval flashed in Aiden's eye, but his voice remained unmoved. "You and my daughter don’t have enough in common. She’s older than you, has had more life experience, and as a man and wife, you aren’t even sleeping together. It’s unnatural. The marriage won’t last."

Heat simmered in Matt’s veins. This may be Beth's father, but he certainly wasn't his. "I've had life experience, or have you forgotten?"

"I haven't. I remember what Beth told us." Aiden tossed the fork onto the fancy plate. "My daughter was raised right. I kept her from running around with wild boys when she was a teenager, and now she's grown up and married someone like you. Yes, I said someone like you. How am I supposed to feel, knowing my sweet little girl is with a..."

"A drug addict?" Matt finished. "I gave that up when I turned my life over to the Lord."

Aiden leaned forward in the chair. "Can you honestly tell me you haven't used drugs since then?"

A hot coal burned in Matt’s throat. He tried to swallow. "No, sir-- Aiden-- I can't make any such claim. I've used meth since then, but not in years."

"How many years?"

"Two." The admission burned Matt’s lips but he refused to lie. "I used meth before we came to Las Cruces. It’s why we left Texas. I wanted a clean start."

"And you want me to be glad you married my daughter?"

"No," Matt felt his hands tighten into fists, and forced them back open. "I don’t expect you to be happy. I don’t expect anything but your disapproval. I have no defense for what I’ve done, and I won’t start by making excuses for it now." Matt paused. "I know I’m not good enough for your daughter, but nothing I can ever say or do will change that."

Aiden’s suspicious eyes narrowed into hard slits. "Self-deprecation is an art form with some, as is flattery. I don't believe you meant that."
Matt leaned forward in the chair, matching Aiden's posture. "If I'm man enough to take on four children, I'm man enough to take on you. Beth is better than me, and that's no lie."

A grin flashed across Aiden's face. It disappeared just as suddenly, replaced by a heavy frown that seemed to pull at every feature.

"Shannon, did you hear what this man just said?"

"I heard," the woman said, "and if you both don't lower your voices, so will everyone else in the restaurant."

Aiden dismissed the comment with a grunt. He leaned back in the chair, looked at Beth. "What's the matter, Peanut? You look pale. Are you feeling okay?"

"Oh, Dad."

"May I ask something, Matt?" Shannon spoke quieter than her husband's booming voice. "Did your difficult past ever come up during the guardianship for your siblings?"

"No, ma'am, under the circumstances, my lawyer said it wasn't much of an issue and to not bring it up unless we had to. I had the full support of Mom and everyone's fathers, so there wasn't any argument that I shouldn't get the children. If I couldn't handle the responsibility, my lawyer said Child Services would."

"May I ask if you have a criminal record?"

The question made Beth sit up straight, as though unsure what Matt might answer. After all, Matt had a father serving life. What more could be expected from the son. Right?

"My record is clean, ma'am. I may have grown up wild, but no one has ever hauled me away in handcuffs."

The candid reply made Mrs. Campbell squirm in her seat. She fumbled with the gold chain around her neck and gave a slight smile that made Matt wish he'd been gentler.

Throughout the discussion, Ethan wore a deep-rooted scowl. Matt sensed the teenager's indignation, but prayed his brother continued to keep his mouth shut. Matt had all the drama he could handle with Beth's parents.
Aiden nodded to Matt. "Do you expect any problems with Dylan’s mother? Beth said there might be trouble."

"Mom might make a few noises now and then," Matt shrugged, "but she doesn't want Dylan any more than she wanted the others."

"The others?" Mrs. Campbell cocked her head to one side, much like Beth. "Are you referring to yourself, and the sweet children here at the table?"

"Yes, ma’am. Mom never really liked us, but it’s all right. You get used to it after a while." Matt shot Aiden a look. "A real man doesn't call his mother-in-law by her first name, without her permission."

Aiden gave a flicker of a grin. He folded his hands across his stomach, then passed the basket of biscuits to Beth. "Have one. I hear they’re buttermilk."

"Oh, Daddy."

"Don't 'Oh, Daddy,' me. If one of these children ever gets married without any warning to you or Matt, I hope you’ll remember today. And remember one other thing, Beth-- I’m holding back."

"I know, Dad, I was just hoping you’d hold back more." Beth took one of the biscuits, split it in two, buttered both sides, then gave half to Ryan.

If only Matt could be as happy as Ryan, sitting there with butter on his chin, eyes wide and expectant for dessert. At least someone was having a good time.

Too timid to speak with so much going on between Matt and Aiden, Cassie kept her head bowed and her eyes on her plate. A good way to keep Aiden from talking to her, but Matt knew the precaution was unnecessary. Aiden Campbell was saving his displeasure for one person, and one person alone. Matt.

Even now, as Matt lifted Dylan to still the newborn’s cries, Matt felt the hard stare from across the table.

Please, God, help me last through dessert, Matt prayed in silence. When Matt returned Dylan to the carrier, the waiter came forward with pecan pie, fancy vanilla ice cream, and small pastries that held Ryan’s full attention. He prayed the boy ate fast, not wanting to stay at the restaurant a second longer than necessary.
The gourmet dessert held no enjoyment for Matt. He stuffed down a slice of pie, took a few gulps of iced tea to keep from choking, then sat back to wait. Couldn't these people eat any faster?

When dessert finished, Ryan visited the men's room with Matt. By the time they returned, the women were making end-of-dinner conversation. Matt wished the men could do likewise; Aiden and Matt simply stared at each other and remained silent. Wasn't that pie nice? Didn't the waiter mention those pecans had been grown here in Las Cruces? Aiden offered no comment to the conversation, and neither did Matt.

Right now, Matt couldn't care less about pecans. He was more than ready to get out of that restaurant and hope he never had to come back. When the women started gathering purses and getting to their feet, Matt grabbed Dylan's carrier with one hand, Ryan with the other, and headed for the door. A glance over his shoulder showed Beth paying the bill.

One other person seemed to want escape almost as much as Matt. Cassie followed hard on his booted heels, all the way into the parking lot beneath the lights that were just beginning to flicker on. To Matt's alarmed dismay, Ethan dared Aiden by remaining behind.

"Please, God, don't let that idiot get me into trouble with the Campbells," Matt hissed through his teeth. "The water's hot enough."

A cold evening breeze made Matt hurry the keys from his pants pocket. Dylan fussed, and Cassie bent over the carrier to tuck the blanket in a little more.

"I wish we could go home," Cassie said with longing.

"Of course we're going home. Who said we're not?"

"Beth. She said we were taking her parents to her house to get them settled."

"What does that have to do with us? Why do we have to come?"

When Cassie shrugged, Matt bit back a curse. It took patience to unlock the truck, fasten the carrier into the backseat, when all he wanted to do was curse the situation until his shoulders stopped tensing.

As the others came into the parking lot, Matt shot a glance at Beth. If Beth thought he would go to her home, only to give Aiden another try at him, she had another thing coming.
"Matt," Beth moved to his side as he held the backseat door open for Cassie, "we're taking my parents--"

"Cass told me. I'm not going."

The hurt look in Beth's eyes caught Matt by surprise. Surely, she understood.

Beth cast a quick glance at her parents as they automatically moved to Beth's car.

"I apologize about my dad. I know he's opinionated at times, but I did try to warn you."

"I'll give him one thing"-- Matt let out a grim chuckle-- "he didn't yell." Matt's eyes tracked Ethan as the teenager thrust one last scowl at Aiden before climbing into the pickup.

"Matt, he's my dad. He's only trying to look out for me."

"I know that, Beth. That's why I'm not angry with him."

A puzzled frown tilted Beth's lips. She pushed a loose strand from her eyes and stared at him as though trying to read his thoughts. "You're not mad at my father?"

Matt blew out a frustrated breath. "I'm mad at myself."

"Why?" She waved away a call from Aiden to hurry. "I don't understand."

"How could you not? You were sitting at the table. You heard every word."

Another shout prompted a sigh from Beth. "We have to get moving. Dad's knee is acting up, and I want to get them settled before it gets late." Beth hesitated, and Matt could feel the plea of her velvet green eyes.

"All right. I'll come."

"Thank you, Matt. I really appreciate it. I want Dad to get to know you better."

"He knows me well enough, as it is," Matt said before rounding the hood of the pickup. He ducked into the cab as she opened her mouth. The question lingered in her eyes, and knowing Beth, it was also on her lips. What had he meant by that remark?
Matt hoped she wouldn't pursue it later. She didn't understand, and in a way, he couldn't blame her.

Aiden didn't know Matt's ugly secret, but then again, neither did Beth.

The wounded spirit behind Matt's dark eyes unsettled her. From his own admission, he wasn't angry with her father. Still that wounded look haunted her. What was it? Shame? Regret? Or simply her imagination filling in the blanks Matt refused to finish?

Beth glanced in the rearview mirror, saw Matt behind her, his headlights visible against the shadows of the retreating sun.

Only two years ago, he had used meth. Two years-- not five or ten, as Beth half imagined, half hoped it might be. She had assumed that since the past was over and done with, it had no bearing on the present. Like a bad dream to be gotten over and then forgotten. But two years was recent. It also meant the former temptations must still be strong. His relapse into drugs unnerved her more than she liked to admit. But hadn't he warned there were things he was holding back about his former life?

Maybe this was one of them. Maybe this was the worst of it-- that he'd used drugs when Ryan was two years old. Bad, yes. Disturbing, absolutely. But if this was all there was to Matt's dark past, Beth felt she could learn to live with the knowledge. He had changed-- he proved it every single day-- and he loved his family, took careful pains to raise the children right.

Matt was a good man. As certain of that as Beth felt, she also sensed the relapse was not the worst of Matt's history.

The unease in her stomach increased when her father let out a heavy sigh.

"I wish you hadn't married him so fast."

"There wasn't time, Dad." She flicked a glance at the passenger beside her. With her father's long legs, it was difficult to sit in the backseat without hitting his sore knee against something. So he occupied the seat beside Beth, his presence felt even when silent. "I wish you hadn't been so hard on him, Dad."

"He took my little girl. What did he expect?"
"In case you haven't noticed, I'm not so little anymore. I'm a grown woman, capable of making decisions on my own."

Hoping her mom might agree from the backseat, Beth hesitated before continuing.

Her father didn't wait. "How much did you know about this man before you handed over your future?" Aiden turned his parental gaze on Beth, making her feel five years old again. "In your rush to get married, how much did you know before you exchanged vows?"

"I found out all I needed to, Dad."

"Ha." Even without Beth looking, she knew he wore a frown. "Even a child can make rash decisions."

A retort welled within Beth, but she clamped her mouth shut. She refused to fight. Soon, they would be home, and her father would face Matt again. She had to keep calm. If only she hadn't talked Matt into coming. Perhaps he wasn't angry with her father now, but the day wasn't over.

Darkness kept claiming more and more of the landscape, so by the time Beth pulled off the highway, and onto the dirt road that led to home, stars began to show in the night sky. Beth parked in front of the house, glad to at least be home, even if it was only for an hour or two until she got her parents settled. The automatic timer for the porch and outside window lights had clicked on, lending a welcome atmosphere to the vast stretches of dark surrounding the adobe house. Despite the tension gathering in the backseat as Matt's vehicle pulled beside hers, Beth struggled to rise above the situation. Seatbelt still on, she asked her parents to stay in the car a moment longer.

"Dad, I'm only going to ask this once. Please be nice to him."

"He's not a little boy to be constantly protected, Elizabeth. He can take care of himself."

She turned in the seat and looked at her father. "Matt is my husband. Please treat him with respect."

"Respect that isn't earned, isn't respect. It's pity."

"Dad, I refuse to argue. Be nice to Matt, or I'll send him home right now."

"Do that," her father grinned. "I'd like to see what he does."
The slam of a truck door cut Beth short from pushing the subject any further. She hurried out, went to Matt as he opened the door to the extended cab.

"I changed my mind, Matt. You'd better go home."

A frown creased Matt's mouth as he stopped Cassie from climbing down. "What's going on?"

"Dad is being Dad, that's what's going on. I don't want you two getting into a fight."

"I won't."

"That's great, but Dad won't let you walk away without one."

The shoulders straightened, and Matt's jaw firmed. "I'm not walking away. If he wants a fight, that's his business."

"Matt, I am asking you to go home."

"No, Beth, you're telling. There's a big difference."

"Don't do this to me-- not in front of my father. Please."

Without warning, Matt slammed his fist into the side of the pickup. He made no cry of pain, no wincing expression to show it hurt. He just stood there, glaring first at the ground, then at her.

"Hey, watch it, Matty. That's my truck you just put a dent in." Ethan gave a broad grin from the passenger seat. He seemed glad they were fighting, but then, Beth hadn't missed the constant flashes of anger from Ethan when her father had gone after Matt.

Things weren't going too well between the Taylors and the Campbells.

Whipping off his Stetson, Matt swiped at his forehead. After a moment of deliberation, he put it back on with a determined tug. "Beth, if that's what you want, I won't go into your house. I'll stay out here with the kids. But I want you to know that I'm not leaving without you."

"Did you hurt your hand?"

"Forget the hand, Beth. I'm not leaving here without you. If you don't like it, tell your dad. I don't care."
"You don't, huh?" Aiden stepped toward the pickup with a decided limp. He sent Beth a disapproving look, one she couldn't miss a mile away. "If you're coming inside, Matt, then come. Beth, go unlock the front door. You're keeping us waiting."

"No need, Beth. I'll do it." Matt took her keys before she could stop him. His tone had calmed, though the same look that haunted her before, shone in his eyes now. "Would you help the others out of the truck?"

She answered his request with a nod, gave a smile she hoped might lessen the tension.

When Beth turned, she saw to her stunned shock, Aiden offering a hand to assist Cassie down. Sometimes, people surprised Beth, although those people weren't supposed to include her own parents.

When her father offered the same help to Ryan, the child broke into a loud, frightened cry. Beth stepped forward to calm Ryan, but Matt ran from the house to scoop the four-year-old into his arms.

"He's just tired," Matt said, patting his brother's back and giving him a comforting hug. Ryan buried his face against Matt's shoulder, and whimpered when Matt offered to set him down.

Her father sounded apologetic, even sheepish at being the cause for Ryan's tears. "I didn't mean to frighten the child."

"I know you didn't." Matt gave a low chuckle. "He's had a long day, that's all. Ethan, start hauling their luggage inside. And while you're at it, stop glaring at Aiden."

The teenage glare turned on Matt.

"Now, Ethan. Or do you want my pickup while you're still young enough to enjoy it?"

The threat worked. Ethan jumped from the truck, then trudged to Beth's sedan. Matt tossed Ethan the keys, and Ethan popped the trunk.

"I forgot how dark it gets out here in farm country," Aiden said, giving the sky a long upward glance. "No city lights to get in the way of stargazing."

The remark struck Beth as odd, but then she noticed the quiet that followed. The men stared at each other, then to her amazement, her father went to help Ethan with the luggage.
"I'll take the baby inside," Shannon said, casting a smile at the baby carrier already hugged in her arms. "Such sweet children. You're doing a good job with them, Matt."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"I won't mind if you call me 'Mom.' My first son-in-law has that privilege, as does my daughter-in-law. No reason you shouldn't as well. Would you like coffee before the drive back to Las Cruces?"

"Thanks, I'd appreciate it." Beth wondered if Matt would call her "Mom," but he seemed too self-conscious to make the attempt so soon.

"Hey, Cass!" Ethan shouted with a large suitcase under each arm. "How about some help with the front door?"

When Shannon went inside with Cassie and the baby, Beth remained beside the pickup with Matt. Ryan still protested at being put down, but when Ethan called from the house a few minutes later, claiming Mrs. Campbell had cookies on the table, Ryan couldn't get down fast enough.

As Ryan disappeared inside, Beth hoped for the opportunity to talk to Matt. Before she had the chance, Matt had her by the arm. He pushed her against the truck, and kissed her so soundly, her mind went blank. Absolutely blank. Then she felt his hand, and all future rational thought seemed out of the question.

"Beth," his mouth pulled away from hers, and she felt the quick intake of his breath. "I need you to help me, Beth. I can't take you to bed. Don't let me get that far, all right?"

Before she could answer, he reclaimed her mouth.

Her fingers sifted his hair. The hat tumbled to the ground. Then a familiar voice called from the house, stopping Beth but not Matt.

"Hey, you two. Mom's got the coffee ready."

"We're coming Dad!" Beth called from behind the truck. Thank God, her father couldn't see them. Matt kept trying to kiss her, and when she didn't kiss him back, he pushed away with a soft moan.
He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, and when Beth straightened her dress, she felt him watching.

Matt stooped, grabbed the hat and looked back at the house. "They're waiting," he said, his voice as unsteady as she felt.

"I know. I'll be along in a moment."

He huffed out a sigh. "I need some of that coffee." Without looking back, he started for the house.

Braced against the pickup, Beth watched Matt stride away. She wanted to ask why he couldn't take her to bed, but feared the answer so much she said nothing. Considering Matt's former addictions, whatever she wanted, he wanted even more. And if he was backing away, then it must be for a very good reason.

Whatever it was, it had to be significant to prevent a former sex-addict from sleeping with his wife. The wording of the thought made Beth wince. Either she was drop dead ugly, or he had a deep dark past that wouldn't stop.

Some choice.

By the time Beth made it inside, Cassie and Ryan were napping on the couch beside Dylan's carrier, while the others were at the kitchen table with their coffee. Even Ethan drank the brew.

Strange, Beth had never really noticed that before. A family of coffee drinkers.

"None of you are going to get a wink of sleep, tonight," Beth said, going to the stove to put a kettle of water on for some decaf tea.

"It's about time you came in." Aiden put down his mug. "I was about to send a search party after you."

Beth passed over the comment, and so did her father. He continued, almost without pause.

"By not telling your family about this marriage, Brian refuses to call you, and Fiona is angry you cheated her out of attending the wedding."

"Dad..."
"I know, Peanut, I know. There wasn't time."

"I wish you'd stop calling me Peanut." She leaned against the counter, folded her arms and waited for the kettle to whistle.

Beth's mother gave a familiar smile, one that announced she knew something Beth didn't. Beth knew that expression well.

"What is it, Mom?"

"Fiona will be here tomorrow."

"What?" Beth straightened. "She's coming?"

"With Daniel and the children," Shannon nodded. "I called her after I came inside, and she wants to meet Matt. Brian will take a little longer to come around, but Cathy has promised to work on him. We're hoping everyone will arrive before the week is out."

Looking numb, Matt turned to Beth. "Who's Cathy?"

"My-- excuse me-- our, sister-in-law."

"And Fiona?"

"My sister."

"Brian?"

"My brother. Daniel is Fiona's husband."

"And Fiona is coming..."

"Tomorrow."

"I see."

"Do you? My family is descending like a plague of locusts, and by the time the wind changes, I'm afraid there won't be anything left of the former Matt Taylor."
Matt gave a handsome grin, though Beth thought she detected terror in his eyes. "If I can survive your parents, I can survive a brother and a sister."

"Bravely spoken, but my parents aren't gone yet."

Matt smiled, took a swallow of coffee and said nothing.

"Man, I am never getting married." Ethan scooted onto his tailbone, nursed his mug with both hands. "Things get way too complicated once the big 'I do' enters the picture."

Matt sat up a little straighter. "You aren't going to get serious without it."

"Without what?"

"The big 'I do.'"

"I'd like to see you make me."

"No, you don't, Ethan. If I find out you're messing around without the big 'I do,' her angry parents are going to be the least of your troubles."

"You should know about angry parents," Ethan said, raising his mug in a mock toast to Matt. 

"You aren't going to follow in my footsteps, Ethan."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll stick it out through high school, maybe even go to college, and you'll still be neck deep in the big 'I do' without any of the benefits."

"Ethan."

"Okay, I'll shut up." A scowl plastered across Ethan's face. "I'm just so tired of people pushing us around, Matty. When's it our turn to push back?"

"I'll let you know," Matt sounded weary. He took a swallow of coffee, placed the mug on the table and got to his feet. "I'll go check the others."

As Matt left the kitchen, Aiden shot one of those disapproving looks Beth knew so well, at Ethan.

"If I were you, I'd cut your brother some slack."
Ethan glared at Aiden. "Yeah? What do you know?"

"Since Matt is your brother, I certainly don't know as much as you," Aiden said, getting to his feet with the help of the cane. "But that's the point, isn't it?"

Ashamed, the teenager hung his head.

Beth watched her father move toward the living room. "I'll say good night to Matt, then I'm off to bed. Good night, Peanut. Ethan."

Ethan made no reply.

When Aiden left, Shannon turned to the young man. "Have you ever had a grandfather?"

Ethan shrugged. "None that I remember."

"It appears you have one now," Shannon said with a smile. "Beth, I think I'll follow your father's example and turn in. Don't wait much longer before you drive back to Las Cruces. I want you to get some sleep, so you'll be well rested when Fiona arrives tomorrow."

Beth smiled, though the prospect made her wish she had been an only child.

Too harsh, she realized later, as she followed behind Matt's pickup on the drive home. Even though the Campbell children didn't always get along, nothing could change the fact they were family. They'd get through it somehow.

Watching the rear lights of the truck in front, Beth knew she had a bigger problem than her sister.

If something didn't change in this name only marriage, Beth feared they would not make it to their first anniversary. Things could not keep going this way, with Matt torturing himself, and her, every time they were alone. At the rate they were going, this marriage would fail before it had a chance to even start.

Something must change. It had to.

The children needed them to stay together, and so did Matt. Whether he ever admitted it or not, the stubborn cowboy needed someone to take care of him.
Whatever it took, Beth resolved to make the relationship work. God had placed her in this family for a reason, and she would not fail that purpose. Of course, if she went through with a change, things might become more complicated between her and Matt. Perhaps even messy.

Beth sighed. As if they needed more complications. The paperwork for Dylan's guardianship was being set up, Eve and Wade were probably living somewhere in town, Beth's parents were here, and tomorrow, Fiona and her family would join them.

Now was not a good time for messy. As Beth pulled behind Matt's pickup in front of the mobile home, she knew in her heart she had no choice.

It was a risk she had to take.

"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven... A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance... a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak..."

~ Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4, 5, 7 ~
Chapter Nineteen
About Us

"A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger."
~ Proverbs 15:1 ~

"Am I glad to get home." Ethan dumped himself onto the living room couch with a dramatic groan. He watched dully as Matt placed a wide awake Dylan into the crib beside the coffee table. "I hope you're not expecting me to go visiting tomorrow. I don't care who's coming-- I won't go."

"Save it for later, Ethan. Just save it for later." Matt leaned against the crib railing, took off his hat and sighed.

"I didn't like him, Matty."

"Shut up. Beth will hear you." Matt turned to see Beth standing in the front door, Ryan and Cassie at her side. "Sorry you had to hear that, but your dad didn't exactly strain himself with niceties."

"No, that's not my father's way." Beth ushered Ryan and Cassie inside, then closed the door to the rowdy sound of rap blaring from a car as it cruised past the house. "Dad can be blunt, so try not to take it personally. He's not always easy to be around."

A half grin tilted Matt's mouth, and he didn't try to contradict her. He tossed the hat onto the sofa, started pulling off his boots where he stood.

"Ryan, go change into your pajamas."

"Aw, Matty, do I have to?"

Matt pinned the boy with a weary look. "Yes, you have to. If you need help, get me or Ethan. Now scoot."

Head drooped, Ryan dragged his feet into the kitchen. A few moments later, he called out in a hopeful voice, "Are you sure I have to?"

"Ryan!"

"Okay, okay. I'm changing."
With a loud groan, Ethan pulled himself off the couch. "I'm going to bed." He started for the kitchen. He paused, turned to look at Matt. "I mean it. I'm not going anywhere but school tomorrow."

"I heard you the first time, Ethan. We'll talk about it later."

"I just don't like that guy--"

"Later." Matt glared at Ethan. "If you're going to bed, then go. I don't want to talk about it now."

Ethan's shoulders slumped in a defeated posture. He shook his head and left.

"Now that I said that," Matt gave a half-hearted grin as he stepped over the discarded boots, "I'm going to bed, too. Cass, don't stay up much longer. You've got school as well."

"I know." Cassie let out a tired sigh. "Night, Matty."

"What? Oh, yeah. Good night."

Cassie smiled at Beth before moving down the short hall that led to her bedroom.

Thoughts swirled in Beth's mind. Now was obviously not a good time to talk to Matt. She went to the crib, and noticed Dylan needed a change. She spread a towel on the coffee table, lifted the kicking newborn out of the crib. He blinked at her, his dark eyes wide and sweet and staring.

"Who's a sweetie-pie? Who? You are! You are!"

Dylan gaped at her, his hands balled into tiny baby fists. She placed him on his back to be changed, and some of those tiny fingers found their way into his mouth. He sucked and stared, then gave a wide yawn. He had a busy day, too.

As Beth changed Dylan's diaper to the sound of more baby-talk, Matt trudged out from the kitchen, and swiped up his boots.

"I forgot. My truck is blocking Mrs. Lott's driveway." Matt stamped on his boots, then reached for the hat on the sofa. "Hey, Dylan. Are you wet again?" He gave a generous smile to the baby, then strode out the front door.
Rethinking the situation, Beth hurried Dylan into the crib. Maybe now would be a good time, after all.

When Beth went to Cassie’s room, she found the girl in her sleep shirt and climbing into bed.

"Cassie, I have a big favor to ask, and I don't have much time to explain."

He didn't usually block Mrs. Lott’s driveway, so why had he tonight? Matt switched off the ignition, leaned back on the battered upholstery and blew out a sigh. Time to face facts. His mind had been elsewhere. With someone else, to be honest.

With a certain redhead wonder who had him going weak in the knees. And when that redhead wonder moved in his arms... Whoa. His heart either jackhammered wildly, or it stopped beating altogether. And letting go? Brutal.

Each time made it only harder to let go, though Matt knew he had to do just that. He had to command himself like a man. Stop grabbing her every time he had a chance, and stop wishing things were different between them. Hoping only made the hurt worse. Hadn't he always told that to the others? High time he started remembering that, himself.

Matt shoved open the truck door, stepped out and looked at the mobile home. It sat tucked in the semi-darkness of this rough neighborhood, surrounded by dandelions and the trash of others. Light glowed from the curtained living room window, and Matt pictured Dylan kicking his tiny feet while his diaper was being changed. He saw Beth, cooing those silly things and looking so sweet while doing it.

No doubt about it, he was on dangerous ground. The danger didn't come from the gangs that prowled this neighborhood, but from the china doll cooing to his baby brother.

He had handled danger before, and he would handle this. The only defense against this particular danger, however, had him shifting in his favorite worn boots.

No more kissing Beth. Next time, he might not be able to let go. Better to stop altogether, than to risk that.

As he went up the dirt walk, he kept pushing away the hurt that wouldn't be ignored. He would almost rather give up meth again, instead of that gut twisting, cloud soft feeling of her against him.
When Matt went inside, he saw Dylan in the crib, already fast asleep. He tugged off his boots, then his eyes tracked to the sofa. A bed of blankets and pillows had been arranged on the couch cushions, and his little sister lay neatly tucked beneath the covers.

"Cass?" Matt lowered his voice, not wanting to wake the baby. "Why aren't you in your room?"

The girl smiled prettily. "I'm sleeping here tonight."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Because what?"

Cassie rolled her eyes, though she didn't stop smiling.

"I'm tired, Cass. If you don't have a good reason to be on that couch, pick up your things and go back to your room."

"But, Matty..."

He waited. "But what?"

A timid moment overtook Cassie. She smiled and shrugged, and looked at the hall, behind Matt.

He turned to follow Cassie's gaze.

And went weak in the knees.

Standing outside Cassie's door, stood Beth, dressed in that silky robe and nightgown he had seen before. Her hair hung unbound over her shoulders, free from braids and French twists. The translucent glow of her skin, the red fall of tangled curls, made her look like one of those collectible dolls that sit beneath glass to be admired.

Matt forced himself to breathe.

"I see you found Cassie." Beth came toward him, her manner easy and almost careless, as though oblivious of her own ravishing beauty.
A quality Matt found very attractive.

"I asked Cassie if she minded sleeping on the couch, and she said she didn't. So here she is."

"Yes," Matt turned, glanced at Cassie, "here she is. But why?"

"I thought we could use some time together."

Suddenly at a loss for words, Matt paused to collect himself. With just one sentence, Beth had shattered his iron resolve and scattered the pieces beneath her pretty little feet.

"We need to talk, Matt."

"I'll say we do." He swiped off the hat, started to put it back on but stopped. "I hope you don't think we're going to talk in there-- in Cassie's room?"

"Would you prefer I go next door and ask Mrs. Lott for her guest room?"

"Oh no, don't drag Mrs. Lott into this. We'll talk right here. Just as soon as Cassie goes back where she belongs."

"But Matty--"

"Why is everyone bent on arguing, tonight? I said go to your room, and I meant it."

"Cassie, stay where you are." Beth took Matt's hat, tossed it aside, then grabbed hold of his hand and pulled him toward the bedroom. "We need privacy, Matt, and that place is as good as any. Better than most, I'd say, seeing the children are pretty much on the other side of the house."

That feminine hand covered his, and already Matt's heart did a good imitation of a jackhammer. He followed her into the bedroom, then stepped aside so she could shut the door.

He kept a careful distance as she moved to sit on the edge of the bed.

"I meant what I said, Matt. We need to talk."

"I think I know what about. You're in that silky number, and we're here, by ourselves."
"This isn't silk, it's nylon, and there's nothing wrong with us being alone. We're married, and we both made the commitment to stay in this marriage for the long haul. You aren't risking a thing by having this talk."

"Oh, yeah, I am. I'm risking my sanity." Matt drew in a steadying breath, hoping to slow the thudding against his ribs. "You want to talk, go right ahead. But I can already tell you my answer."

"Won't you even give me a chance before you make up your mind?"

"Beth, you sprang this on me without warning. This is as good as I can do." Matt searched for a place to sit, noticed the tiny vanity table against the wall and shoved the feminine stuff off to one side. He sat, felt the legs of the vanity give a little, but didn't move when they held his weight. "Go on, Beth. I'm listening."

She sighed. "Why do you have to be so bull-headed, so like a man?"

"Maybe that's because I am one." Matt frowned. Somehow, that didn't come out right.

"I think," Beth said in a calmer, more even tone that showed a struggle to remain objective, "we need to make a change to our agreement. It seems pointless to continue the way we have..." she paused, colored a little, and went on, "to continue the way we have and not do something about it."

"Speak for yourself. Me? I'm doing great."

"Matt, please take this seriously."

He folded his arms. "Did you have anything more to say before I go?"

Worry etched itself onto the porcelain doll's face. It turned self-conscious. "Is it because I'm not attractive enough? I know I'm nothing special as far as looks are concerned, but I'd think I was better than nothing."

"Stop talking like that." Matt spat out the words as though trying to rid himself of a bitter taste. "You're beautiful, and you know it, so stop trying to heap guilt on me. I've got enough as it is." He studied her face, then changed his mind. "On second thought, I don't think you know what a knockout you are. You couldn't look at me with such gratitude in your eyes, if you did."

"Matt, please--"
"NO." He stared at the door, wishing with all his might that he had never come inside. Even now, he wanted to get to his feet, and head for that door. "You don't know what you're getting yourself into, Beth. It wouldn't be fair. You don't know what I am."

"Are you trying to protect me, Matt?" His gaze slipped back to her. "Is that why you won't tell me about certain parts of your past? Because you're protecting me?"

His back stiffened. "Don't change this into something it isn't. I don't want you to know. That's enough."

"No, it isn't-- not when it's coming between us. Matt, please tell me."

He looked at Beth in all her innocent, protected childhood. She had no idea of what he had done, and if she did... Matt wasn't about to take that risk. She thought him a good man. If he told her the truth, there would be no way to regain her good opinion. It would be lost forever.

"Okay, don't tell me." She folded her arms to match his. "We can get along without the disclosures. You've warned me. Okay. I'm willing to live without knowing all of your past."

"Thanks."

"Don't make fun of me, Matt Taylor. Those children deserve a mother, and I intend to make sure that opportunity isn't thrown away simply because you refuse to talk."

Matt chuckled grimly. "That's funny. I thought all this time that's what we were doing-- talking." He glanced back at the door, wondering if now would be a good time to test his legs. Sure, he was weak-kneed at the sight of her, but that didn't mean he couldn't walk away.

Without warning, she stood, came toward him until he could feel her breath on his face. Her lips touched his, and for the life of him, he couldn't fight it. God help him, he couldn't fight. His breath came in quick gulps, he felt himself being pulled toward the bed. Somewhere in the back of his brain, reality tried to break through. He couldn't hear it, but when she started taking off that robe, it struck.

He had forgotten. He ran to the door, swung it wide open and hustled into the living room. Shoving a hand into the pocket of his jeans, he found the truck keys. He didn't stop to answer the bewildered look on Cassie's face as he hurried out of the house. Even if he could, Matt wasn't so sure he wanted to explain everything to his baby sister.
Some things, a guy had to keep to himself.

Dumbstruck, Beth sank onto the bed. She had scared him away. Beth didn't think herself capable of scaring Matt simply by taking off her robe. Was she really that ugly? Her nightgown—the one made of washable nylon and utterly lacking in romance—concealed her figure so much the robe wasn't necessary. She didn't look attractive, but Beth had hoped Matt wouldn't notice. Once he started kissing her, he wouldn't care.

Or so she had thought.

Tears at such a time were ridiculous, though not wholly unexpected. She kept wiping her eyes, telling herself she wouldn't cry, yet wetting her fingers every time she brushed away the suspicious drops. As Beth shut the door Matt had flung open, those gasping sobs struggled to the surface. Fearing the children might hear, she dropped onto the bed face down and wept.

How much time passed, she didn't know, or care. She only knew the disappointment of the truth— that despite those kind words about her beauty, he had turned her away.

A short knock sounded on the door. Before Beth thought to ask God to keep her situation from Cassie and the boys, Matt came into the bedroom. He turned, shut the door, and stood with his back to her for some time.

In his left hand, he clutched a small shopping bag.

When she tried to sniff away more tears, he turned.

"You've been crying."

A laugh caught in her throat. "You're very observant."

She smeared her eyes as Matt sank onto the edge of the bed. She pushed herself up, sat beside him, hoping against hope for a chance to make things right.

"I'm sorry I made you cry." His shoulders heaved with a great sigh that sounded old beyond his years. Then a boyish grin formed on his mouth. "I ran out of here so fast, I forgot my boots." His socked toes wiggled, and Beth smiled.
She didn't want to ask, fearing the answer to her very core, but she had to know. "Why did you leave?"

He tossed her the bag.

"What's this?" Beth opened it, noticed it came from a pharmacy and pulled out a box. "Protection? You left me to get protection?"

"I knew this was a bad idea." Matt shoved off the bed.

"Why, Matt? We're married."

"Do you want an STD?" The question snapped out of him, and he took another step from the bed. "I haven't had a physical in over two years, so I thought we should keep this safe."

"Two years?" Beth tried to concentrate. She struggled to think through the haze of shed tears and rejection. "You used drugs two years ago. Does this have anything to do with that?"

Silent, Matt stared at the carpet.

"I'm going to make another wild guess," Beth said, putting the box on the bed beside her. "You were with Helen, and that's why you used meth."

Matt looked up at Beth. "You think you're smart, don't you?"

"Tell me I'm wrong."

"You're not, but it wasn't only Helen's fault I started using again." Matt shoved his hands into his pockets. "She brought the drugs, but I used them of my own free will. I don't have any excuses for what I did. It was wrong, and I knew it."

"Then why did you do it?" Beth asked.

Matt stared at her for a long time. He shrugged. "Habit, I guess."

"I don't suppose this is your secret past?"

"Are you kidding?" Matt gave a wry chuckle. "Honey, if this was all I'd done, I would have told you long before now." He looked at the box, then at her. "I can't do this, Beth."
"Can't, or won't?"

He eyed her evenly, as though weighing his words with care. "I want things to be different between us, but not like this."

"I don't understand. What's wrong? Is it something about me? I'm not pretty like Helen?"

For a moment, Beth feared Matt would turn angry. He tensed at the question, then came to stand before her as she sat on the bed.

"Is that why you were crying?" he asked. "You thought I didn't find you desirable?"

With Matt standing over her, Beth felt oddly intimidated by his presence. His hand touched her shoulder. He pushed her back onto the mattress, lowered his mouth to hers and sent all trace of doubt into outer oblivion. It was total and complete.

She was wanted. Truly wanted. Something much deeper than relief coursed through her, something that spoke to her very heart. She touched Matt, and he came up for air.

"Beth. I can't do this." He pushed away, climbed off the bed and rubbed his face with both hands. "I won't do this-- not like this, not with you. It's going to be different with you."

"Matt, I don't understand." Beth sat up again, this time clinging to the assurance that kept her from bursting into manic tears.

"You aren't the problem, Beth. I hope you believe me when I say that."

"I do."

"Good. That's good, because it would tear me up to see you crying again. The thing is," he sucked in a breath, "the problem is with me, but it's not just me. It's us."

"What do you mean?"

"Us, Beth. We aren't what we should be to each other-- not to do something as big as this." Matt gestured to the bed. "This would be big. Monumentally big, and I want it to mean something if it happens."

"But it would mean something, Matt. It would mean we are truly man and wife."
Matt shook his head. "I want it to mean more. I've never been married before, and I want it to mean more than 'the big I do.' I've spent my life with sex not meaning what it was supposed to, and I don't want it to be that way with you. We're married, but it's not enough. Not for me."

Beth swallowed hard. "This is sobering talk, Matt."

"You started it."

They stared at each other in the silence of Cassie's bedroom. For several long minutes they faced each other. The word "love" hung in the air between them, but it remained unsaid.

Matt nodded. "I should go now."

"Where will you go? Matt, please, we'll work something out."

He gave a grim half-smile. "I meant, I should go to my room. I'll send Cass to you, if she's still awake."

"What about us, Matt?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Guess we'll have to wait and see."

"I wish you didn't have to wait."

"It's all right. You aren't ready, and neither am I."

The look of disappointment on his face grieved Beth. As he turned to leave, she moved to her feet and came to him.

"Matt, just one more thing before you go." She leaned in to him, covered his mouth with hers and gave the longest kiss she could manage.

When it came to an end, he touched his cheek to her hair. "Oh, Beth. Promise you'll never leave me."

"I won't leave."

A sigh sounded against her ear. She felt his breath on her neck. "As long as I know you won't walk away, then I'll know there's still a chance for us."
"I'm sorry, Matt."

"Hey, I couldn't say it, either." He pulled away. "I guess love is harder than I thought." His fingers caressed her face, and she closed her eyes, hoping to prolong the contact. "It's all right, Beth. We'll get through this."

She pressed another long kiss to his lips. He hugged her fiercely, then pushed down the hall, through the living room without checking Cassie, and into the kitchen. The subtle sound of a door shutting, signaled Matt had gone to the boys' room.

If Cassie was awake, the girl didn't come to ask what happened. Concluding Cassie had fallen asleep upon seeing Matt's return, Beth went back to the bedroom alone.

She clicked off the light, sank onto the mattress while her mind replayed Matt's cherished words. He had asked her to stay-- had made her promise not to leave him.

A wistful sigh escaped her lips. She touched her heart, only to find Matt had taken it with him.

It took patience not to slam the bedroom door shut, but Matt forced himself to be quiet. Ryan and Ethan were asleep, and one glance at the clock explained why. Two-twenty in the morning. No wonder the house felt empty.

Matt stalked into the adjoining bathroom, grateful that the lateness of the hour was good for something. He could count on some privacy, without one of the others intruding on his alone time.

Not that he wanted to be alone. By all rights, he should be in that tiny bedroom down the hall, enjoying the fact he was married. "The big I do" wasn't enough? How lame was that?

He twisted the shower on cold full blast, then stepped under the torrent with all his clothes on. Sopping wet didn't matter. He needed relief. Cold shuddered through his body, his teeth chattered. It took man-sized willpower to remain under that shower, but Matt forced himself to stay.

Cold was better than that awful longing. The memory of her haunted him, and he struggled to get free.
He braced a hand against the shower wall, let the water roll off him until he could take the cold no longer. Shivering like an eskimo without a coat, Matt squished in his wet socks to the towel rack. He jerked off a towel, dried his face, then his hair.

Without warning, the bathroom door swung open. Ethan strode inside with that still asleep look plastered on his face. Groggy-eyed, the teenager used the toilet without comment as Matt continued to towel himself off. The toilet flushed, then Ethan shuffled past Matt, and back to the bedroom.

So much for privacy.

Wearing dry boxers, Matt padded to his bed, the single mattress shoved against the wall that was all his own. As he climbed beneath the covers, he spotted a small body cuddled against his pillow. Ryan slept soundly as Matt scooted him over, then claimed most of the bed for himself.

What did a guy have to do around here for privacy?

With an arm draped over his eyes, Matt let himself think about Beth. Dangerous, he knew, but he couldn't help wondering how close she had come to saying the words he needed to hear before he could take her to bed. She felt bad that she couldn't say them. So did he. She felt guilty about it-- those mind boggling kisses proved it-- but still, something stopped her from speaking those words.

Face it, Taylor, he thought miserably, she's not in love and never will be. He had been an absolute idiot to turn her down.

And yet...

As much as he wanted Beth, he wanted something else even more. Holding out probably meant more cold showers and even worse heartache, but some things Matt valued more than sex. In the old days, he would have laughed himself stupid to hear anyone say such a dumb thing, but now? Now, he wanted more.

For all the mess and trouble that pancakes required, Beth enjoyed her payment in the syrupy smiles of Ryan and Cassie. The girl came to Beth early that morning, and had been crushed to learn the honeymoon hadn't taken place. Beth swore Cassie to secrecy, not wanting to shame Matt in front of Ethan, and Cassie had agreed. Even so, Beth saw the disappointed expression on Cassie's face as Cassie glanced at Matt's empty chair.
Ethan had come to breakfast, but not Matt. Even sending Ryan to tell Matt there were buttermilk pancakes hadn't done the trick.

Couldn't she do anything right? Beth wondered. Aside from the consolation Matt had given, last night had been worse than disastrous, and this morning looked to fare just as well. She wondered if she could talk Ethan into seeing what kept his older brother, when Matt came to the table in faded jeans and a garden nursery shirt.

"We saved you some pancakes," Cassie said, covering her mouth politely so she could speak while eating. "They're awfully good, Matty."

"That comes as no surprise," Matt said, throwing a playful wink at Cassie. "Beth makes the best pancakes in the world. Someone pass the syrup?"

More than once, Beth tried to catch Matt's eye, to see if she could also catch some of his thoughts; more than once, however, the stubborn cowboy purposefully evaded her gaze. She poured his coffee, kept his plate filled, and tried to act like a sane person should. Hard to do, when her mind kept occupying itself with Matt.

"Are you guys going into work, today?" Ethan chewed with an open mouth so that bits of pancake crumbled onto his shirt. He pointed a fork at Matt. "You look like you're ready for work."

"I am."

"But I thought those people were coming today."

"They are, I guess." Matt shrugged. "What about it?"

Ethan stopped chewing. "Aren't you going to stick around to meet 'em?"

For the first time all morning, Matt glanced in Beth's direction, though their eyes never met. "Unless I'm told otherwise, this is a workday like any other."

Beth spoke up. "We can't afford to keep the nursery closed. Matt's right-- we'll be going in this morning."

Now it was Matt's turn to point a fork at Ethan. "You guys have your homework ready?"

"Yeah, I did it this morning, while you read your Bible. What about those people?"
"Why are you so worked up about them? They're only Beth's family."

Finding a sudden disinterest in eating, Ethan stared at his plate. "Do I have to go back and see that man, again?"

Matt took a gulp of coffee, then picked up his fork and stabbed some pancake. "What have you got against Beth's dad?"

"I would think you'd never want to see him again. He insulted us every chance he got."

"I believe," Matt said, pausing between mouthfuls, "he said those things about me-- not you."

"But he meant us." Ethan pushed back from the table with an irritated groan. "Why are you defending him?"

"Because he's Beth's daddy." Matt shot a look across the table at Ethan. "He cares about his daughter. I don't blame him."

A surge of quiet hope pulled at Beth. Maybe the night hadn't been so disastrous, after all.

"Well, I do. He said everything short of calling us white trash."

Matt heaved a weary sigh. "I wish you'd stop disrespecting Beth's father in her presence. In case you haven't forgotten, she sitting right here." Matt glanced at her in an offhand way, then his eyes held when he noticed she watched him. He hadn't been expecting her to watch. Beth felt it in his eyes. He hadn't expected it.

She smiled. He grinned.

"That guy thinks he knows everything about us. Just because he has money, and we don't, doesn't give him the right to tell us what to do. I hate smart-mouthed people who tell you where and when to get off. After they've put you in your place, then they want to be thanked for it."

"Huh?" Matt broke free from the moment, and Beth sighed inwardly. "What are you talking about?"

"Him. Mr. Campbell. Beth's dad." Ethan leaned forward. "What planet are you on? Didn't you hear what I said?"
"Yeah, sure I did." Matt cleared his throat. "Mr. Campbell wanted to be thanked. I don't know why he should, though. It was Beth's idea to take them out to lunch."

"It's like talking to a brick wall." Ethan elbowed Cassie. "He kept tossing in bed last night, and Ryan finally left him. I think maybe he's coming down with the flu."

Cassie frowned. "Who? Ryan?"

"No, dumbbell, Matty."

"Hey! Don't call your sister names."

"I'll call her anything I want." Ethan sat straight in the chair. "What's with everyone this morning? Except for Ryan, you guys look goofy. Like you didn't get any sleep."

"I got sleep." Cassie bowed her head, but Beth caught the hidden smile.

"Time to get moving, guys." Matt shoved back from the table, told Ryan to get his things so they could bring the small ones next door to Mrs. Lott's.

"But what about those people?"

"I don't know, Ethan. They'll get here when they get here. Now move it, before you're late for the bus."

On the ride into work, Beth said very little. She watched Matt out of the corner of her eye, from the passenger seat of his pickup. The radio blared country music, some twangy tune about God and country and an unfortunate three-legged dog that got run over by a tractor. When the owner of the dog lost his childhood sweetheart to a twin brother, Beth clicked it off.

"Hey, I was listening to that."

"So was I. How anyone can hear all that heartache and call it entertainment, is beyond me."

A grin tugged at Matt.

"I've been thinking," she began cautiously. She noticed the grin vanished. "I think we should spend some time together outside of the bedroom."
"Does now count?"

"I mean it. We should set aside some time to work on us. Years after my little sister was born, Mom and Dad implemented date night. They set aside one evening out of every week to go out and do something romantic together. Mom said it helped strengthen their relationship."

"I'm listening." From the intent set of his mouth, Beth knew she had his attention.

"I was thinking if you agreed, maybe we could start Friday night."

"What? You mean, like in a date? A real date. You and me. Dating."

"My parents do it, so why not us?"

"Yeah, I guess. Why not? Sorry, Beth, but you have a tendency to spring these things on me without any warning. Most of the time, I feel like I'm running to catch up."

The encouragement made her smile. "I think there should be two rules to date night."

"Uh-oh." Matt blew out a sigh. "Rules."

"First of all, date night should be capped at a certain dollar amount. Nothing extravagant or overboard. The idea of this is to spend time together, not spend money."

The truck turned into the nursery's parking lot. Matt pulled to a stop, but remained in the vehicle. "That sounds practical. What's the other rule?"

"It has to be romantic."

Matt sucked in a breath, his eyes turning thunderstorm dark as he looked at her.

She touched his arm. "I think we should do this."

Matt blew out the breath he evidently had been holding. "Wow, Beth. You sure know how to knock my socks off when I least expect it."

"I'm not saying anything is going to happen, Matt. I'm only saying--"

"Yeah, I understand. It's not a honeymoon, just a date."
Someone stepped from the store entrance, though Beth didn't care to notice who. Right now, Matt was the only one who mattered.

"You, me, and romance." He grinned. "That's something we haven't tried yet."

"Let's try, Matt."

"Okay. Friday night, then."

Sylvia rapped on the windshield to get Beth's attention.

Beth leaned toward Matt. "You do know what today is, don't you?"

"Don't tell me I've already forgotten an anniversary."

Beth smiled. "Yesterday was Thursday, so today is..."

He leaned in, kissed her eagerly, and she moved into his arms. She had wanted him to kiss her, but felt she had no right to ask. Not after last night.

It wasn't until several moments later, that Beth remembered Sylvia. When Beth emerged from Matt's strong embrace, she found Sylvia watching them with a wide mouthed gape. Just as well, Beth thought, climbing from the pickup. If Sylvia or Amy had any suspicions that this marriage wasn't quite normal, that passionate kiss should put those speculations to rest.

There were no emergencies, nothing important that Sylvia wanted. She simply wanted to know when Beth and Matt were coming inside. The impertinence of Sylvia's urgency, and the jealous pouting that followed, did little to dampen Beth's spirits. Though business at the nursery picked up that morning, all Beth could think about was Matt. They ate lunch in her office, along with Amy and Sylvia, but Matt was the only one she noticed.

When Sylvia left, and then finally Amy, Matt shut the office door to be alone with Beth. She noticed his hands stayed at her back when they embraced, they didn't stray or caress as before. And though they did no talking, she felt his caution.

He backed away, and she forced herself not to pursue or beg. His hand rested on the office door, ready to go back to work, and yet, she saw the wavering hesitation in his gaze.

She smiled when he stepped back to her. For a husband and wife who didn't officially love each other, they sure spent a lot of time kissing.
"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth... His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me."
~ Song of Solomon 1:2, 2:6 ~
Chapter Twenty
Date Night

"Man goeth forth unto his work and to his labour until the evening. O LORD, how manifold are Thy works! in wisdom hast Thou made them all: the earth is full of Thy riches."
~ Psalm 104:23, 24 ~

With the Stetson and a red handkerchief tied over his nose and mouth, Matt figured he looked like a bank robber straight from some old western. The hat shielded him from the sun, the handkerchief, from the bombarding flies over the open compost heap behind the back lot. With back-breaking sweat and a shovel, he labored over old vines, pruned limbs, and decaying leaves. Beth called it turning the compost, but Matt called it a lot of work. According to her, this garbage had to be aerated, and properly moistened to hold just enough water so the microbes could do their work and turn all this organic material into mulch. Matt didn't pretend to understand everything Beth said-- not that he'd done much listening. A later leaving the office that afternoon, he fiercely fought to keep his attention on work and not his attractive boss.

Good thing he was keeping their necking to a minimum. Anymore of those slow, slow kisses, and he might forget his determination to wait.

Matt plunged the shovel into the compost, turned the blade, then plunged again. He had pulled off his shirt several minutes ago, needing the breeze to cool his sweat. Who knew gardening was such work? The compost heap came to his waist, and though Beth placed it far enough from the store to prevent it from being an eyesore, he needed to cover it over with dirt when done, to contain any stink that might bother the nearby businesses.

The thought of getting off work kept him going. He had a date with Beth tonight.

When he paused to shoulder away the sweat, movement from the back lot caught his attention. Thank You, God, another customer. If Beth needed help manning the lot, she knew where to find him. For now, Matt focused on getting done before quitting time so he could go home to clean up for the big date. Heaving another shovelful of trash, Matt noticed the customer pass through the open chain link fence that ran the perimeter of the back lot.

Odd behavior for a customer. They didn't usually wander this far back, but then again, the back gate didn't usually stand open.
He plunged the shovel's blade into the heap, kept working as the attractive blond-headed customer in tan slacks and a light knit top came toward him. He paused, his lungs sucking in air while the flies accosted him from every direction.

"Something I can do for you, ma'am?"

The woman stopped, looked behind her, then took another step closer.

"What is that?" she asked, first eyeing the heap, then him.

Matt slapped a fly on his bare arm. "It's compost. Is there something I can help you with?"

"No, no," the woman smiled pleasantly, "I'm just looking."

With a shrug, Matt went back to work.

"Excuse me, but why are you wearing that kerchief?"

"It keeps the flies out of my mouth."

"Oh."

He kept working, expecting the woman to leave any second.

"Do you enjoy gardening?"

"Nope. Never tried." Matt heaved the shovel, flashed a glance at the woman in her high heels and gold chain necklace. "You do much gardening?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't have the time." The woman moved to the edge of the property behind the nursery, her small nose probing this way and that as though exploring another planet.

"Are you sure I can't help you, ma'am? There aren't any plants back here. Only me and the trash."

"No, no, I'm just looking."

Matt kept turning the compost. For a woman who didn't have much time, she sure stood around a lot. And for someone who didn't garden, the nursery was an odd place to stand around in.

"Do you enjoy working here?"
Matt stooped to pick up a shard of broken glass. Someone had been tossing trash near the heap, thinking it was garbage, and not an organic compost pile.

"I said," the woman moved closer, the florid scent of her perfume cutting through the flies and afternoon heat, "do you enjoy working at the nursery?"

"I guess," Matt said, pausing to adjust his leather work gloves. "I'll admit it has it's moments."

"Such as?"

"Ma'am, I wouldn't recommend you come any closer. This stuff might get on your clothes."

The woman lifted a delicately heeled foot, examined the ground and stepped back. "Just what about this job do you like most?" she asked.

Matt shifted the shovel to his other hand, straightened to get a better look at her. He sure wasn't going to tell this woman that kissing his boss in the office with the door closed had been the highlight of his day. But the expectant look in this woman's eyes made him wonder. She looked to be a few years shy of thirty, had a short blonde haircut, and conservative makeup. From the self-assured way she spoke, it made him think twice about her being a lost customer. She looked out of place, and yet, as though she had a purpose for being there.

"Are you from Social Services?" he asked.

"Pardon?"

"Social Services. Are you a case worker?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. Are you almost done with that shovel?"

"Why? Do you want it?"

"Of course not. I only wondered when you were coming into the store."

Matt shrugged, and went back to digging. "Beth or one of the girls can help you find whatever you're looking for. I have work to get done."

"But you never answered my question. What about this job do you like most?"
The shovel stopped. Matt eyed her evenly. "Ma'am, I don't see how that's any of your business. If you don't mind, I have to finish this or get it done tomorrow, and I'm not eager to climb in the trash again. So if you'll just go back through that gate, I'd appreciate it. We don't usually allow customers back here."

"Are you always this rude? Whatever happened to the maxim, 'the customer is always right'?"

"Never heard it," Matt said, plopping a shovelful at his feet. He considered letting some of it fall beside her fancy shoes, but decided against it.

"Do you like working with Beth?"

"Excuse me?" Matt swiped off his hat, dried his forehead against his bare shoulder. "Are you a friend of hers?"

"You might say that. Do you like working with her?"

"She's all right." Matt planted the hat on, then adjusted his handkerchief. "Does Beth know you're back here, asking all these questions?"

The woman smiled. "Of course not. Do you like working with her?"

"I guess."

The woman nodded. "I'm told you married her."

"Yeah. So?"

"So do you like working with her?"

"Lady, I just answered that question."

The woman's brows furrowed in thought. "You're very different from him."

"From who?"

"From Luke."

The mention of Beth's first husband brought Matt from off the compost heap. The woman scooted several paces backward as he advanced. She stopped just shy of the gate.
"How am I different?"

"For one thing, you certainly know how to speak your mind. With Luke, I always had to guess."
She pushed a hand with a gold bracelet into her slacks' pocket. "I always called him The Great Mumbler. He may have had exceptional bedside manners with his patients, but with us, he barely said two words together."

"Patients?"

"Of course. Didn't you know? Luke was an ER physician at Las Cruces Medical Center."

"He was a doctor?"

The woman stared at Matt. "You married Beth, and you didn't know that about Luke?"

He shrugged in self defense. "It never came up. Beth is sad enough over his death, without me asking questions about him."

The woman regarded Matt for several moments. "Do you like working with her? The truth now-- none of this 'I guess' business. I would like to know."

From the way the woman behaved, Matt sensed she took herself seriously and expected others to do the same.

Thinking it over, Matt tugged the handkerchief down so he could breathe. The woman's brows went up, and he thought he saw her almost smile. Whatever that meant.

"Since you're Beth's friend, I'll tell you. Behind that desk, she's bossy and sometimes a pain to be around. But when she forgets she's my boss"-- Matt hesitated, grinned-- "she can be a lot of fun."

"Beth? Fun?" Merriment danced in the woman's face. "You aren't at all like Luke."

He shrugged, not knowing whether to take that as a compliment. "Whatever I am, she's stuck with me."

"I appreciate the candid answer," the woman said, turning to leave through the back gate. "Whatever you are, I suppose I'm stuck with you, too."

"Why is that?"
The woman gave a wry smile. "Beth's my older sister. I'll let you get back to your work." The high heels picked their way between the aisles of pots, then disappeared out of Matt's view around the store.

That was what's-her-name? Beth's little sister? Her name-- what was it? Matt searched for it, felt it on the tip of his brain but couldn't force it. He grimaced inwardly. Oh well. She asked for trouble by not saying who she was in the first place. If that woman didn't like it, there was little Matt could do about it now.

Half an hour later, Matt finished turning the compost as Beth wanted. He had voiced the opinion that the stuff would rot whether he turned it or not, but Beth informed him in her teacher voice that it would decompose faster if he followed her directions. The moment had softened considerably when he grabbed her for another kiss while the others weren't looking.

After stuffing the work gloves into his hip pocket, Matt locked the back gate, then pocketed the key. If Beth's little sister wasn't around, maybe he could pull Beth into the office. He put the shirt back on, moved through the pots, around the corner of the building and went inside.

As he adjusted to the indoor light, the sharp sounds of two women in the office caught his attention. Who was talking with Beth? The presence of Sylvia and Amy at the checkout told Matt the disheartening news. Little Sister was still here.

The women at the checkout didn't notice Matt as he moved past them, for their faces were trained on the open door, no doubt trying to follow every word of what was being said. It faintly amazed him that Sylvia didn't move closer to hear better.

Through the open doorway, the sleeve of a green nursery shirt moved into view. That had to be Beth.

"It was my decision," came Beth's voice, "and I made it the best I could."

"But you made it without taking any of us into consideration," answered Little Sister.

"I'm the one who married him, not you, and certainly not Dad or Mom."

"Maybe you married him, but now he's my brother-in-law and I resent not being consulted. You could have at least picked up the phone. I had to hear the news from Mom."
"Well pardon me for not bending over backwards to accommodate your feelings. I was getting married that day, and had a lot on my mind."

A few feet from the office, Matt froze in his tracks, not really wanting to walk in on the heated exchange.

"You weren't too busy to call. You just didn't want me discouraging you from going through with the marriage. So you made up your mind and did it without considering your family's feelings. Which is exactly why Brian won't speak to you right now-- because you won't listen."

"Fiona, I'm sorry you don't approve of my decision, but it was mine to make. Did you ask Mom or Dad's permission before you started dating Daniel? You were in medical school, and living with Mom and Dad at the time, but did you ask them about Daniel?"

"That's not fair, Beth."

"Oh, yes it is. I have my own life to lead, my own decisions to make, and I don't have to consult you about any of them."

There was a long stretch of quiet. Matt glanced over his shoulder, saw from the wide-eyed expression of Sylvia and Amy that they were soaking in every word that made it to the checkout counter. No wonder Sylvia didn't come closer. The sisters were really going at it, and no one wanted to get caught in the crossfire.

"You haven't consulted me," Fiona said finally, "because you never call. Sometimes, I don't feel like I even have a sister, only a stranger who sends me Christmas cards. And even that was missing last year."

"I didn't forget. I simply didn't feel like writing at the time. How could I put on a holiday face when I was dying inside? For those first three years after the accident, I forced myself to do just that, to say 'Merry Christmas' even though I didn't feel the least bit merry. Last year, I'd had enough. I couldn't keep going the way I was, but then something happened-- something really, really good happened to me."

"Let me guess. You met the musclebound guy who's turning your compost without a shirt on."

"You saw him?"

"Yes, I saw him."
"When?"

"About half an hour ago."

Matt glanced at his watch. Fiona was right. It had been thirty minutes.

A slender arm faintly dotted with freckles crossed the doorway, tugged at the handle so that it started to close. "How could you go out there, when I explicitly told you I wanted to be present when you met him? Tell me exactly what you said to him, and what he said to you."

Deciding he was already in the crossfire, Matt forced open the door and surprised both women.

Making sure to close the door behind him, he shot Beth a grin. "The next time you two decide to have a private chat, I suggest keeping the door shut. Too many eavesdroppers in the store."

Beth paled, gave him a wary look. "How much did you hear?"

"Enough to know you ladies were talking about me." Matt pulled out his gloves, tossed them onto Beth's desk with a decided movement that said "I belong here, don't send me away." "I finished turning the compost, and covered it over with dirt like you wanted. The gate's locked--here's the key back. Anything else need to get done before we close up for the day?"

"Matt, I don't know what Fiona said to you, but try not to take it personally. She's oftentimes too blunt for her own good."

"Kind of like your father, huh?" Matt didn't suppress his smile. "It seems you girls take after your dad more than I thought. Oh well. I guess if I'm to survive in this family, I'll have to work up an immunity when you get sick, then feel better because your body has built up its own defense?"

"An immunity?" Fiona offered.

"Yeah, that's it." Matt snapped his fingers. "I'll have to work up an immunity to Aiden Campbell's daughters, because, hey-- I'm too young to die."

Fiona's mouth curved into a smile. "You're going to need a lot of antibodies, Matt. The Campbells aren't pushovers."

"So I've noticed. But no matter. Beth can work on my antibodies later tonight. Right now, all I want is home and a hot shower."
"Which reminds me," Fiona addressed Beth, "about tonight-- there's too many of us to fit into one vehicle, so I suggest we meet at the restaurant."

Beth blinked at her sister. "What restaurant?"

"The one Daddy chose-- the one where he expects us to sit down as a family, so we can become better acquainted with certain recent additions." Fiona trailed her gaze to Matt and let the rest speak for itself.

Matt stiffened. He folded his arms, turned to Beth and silently dared her to break their date.

"Matt, perhaps we should postpone things."

"Tonight was your idea, Beth-- not mine."

"But Fiona and her family will only be here until tomorrow afternoon. She's only here right now, because she's on her second to last day of a leave of absence. Her resident shift at the hospital begins on Sunday."

Matt paused, then remembered Beth had once told him that Fiona was a doctor. "We can't help that. You didn't invite them, and neither did I."

"I know, but--"

"You and I need this time more than they do. Fiona doesn't need to know me very well, but you do. You said we needed this for us."

Beth colored, moved to Matt's side with her back to Fiona. "I told you not to expect a honeymoon, tonight."

"I know. I'm not."

The unconvinced look on Beth's face made Matt want to squeeze her close.

"I don't care how I sound. I need to be with you tonight, and I don't think that makes me selfish. Please, Beth. Don't make me beg."

Beth glanced at Fiona, then turned back to Matt. "I'll make a deal with you. If Dad made reservations, we postpone our date. If he didn't, we'll bow out of the family get-together, and take them all out tomorrow morning. Fiona will need the second half of tomorrow to drive back
to Santa Fe to be ready for her shift on Sunday, but she can have tomorrow morning with us. What do you say?"

"Aiden probably made reservations."

Keeping her back to Fiona, Beth lowered her voice even more. "You were the one who didn't want to have sex last night. I'm sorry I'm making you wait before we can neck again, but these people are family. Give me something to work with, or Fiona will never let me forget this. Things are strained enough as it is."

"All right, Beth. You're right-- I was the one who wanted to wait. If I have to also wait before we can cuddle with our clothes on, then so be it."

She peered up at Matt. "You aren't angry?"

Everything in Matt wanted to plant kisses all over that upturned face, but he fought back the temptation. Fiona was watching.

"No, I'm not angry. Just..." he pushed out a breath, "a little disappointed, that's all."

"Let me call Dad." Beth pulled out her cell phone and flipped it open. She punched a button, waited. When the number answered, Beth spoke loud enough for Fiona to overhear. "Dad, it's me, Beth. Pick up the phone so the answering machine will turn off."

"What are you doing?" Fiona asked, her green eyes narrowing. "Daniel and I didn't drive all the way from Santa Fe so we could sit around and stare at the floor. We came here to see you and--"

"Daddy," Beth interrupted when a man's strong voice boomed in the earpiece of her cell phone, "Fiona just told me you were planning a family outing tonight. Did you make any reservations?"

For a second, Matt held his breath. He pictured them all sitting in some stuffy restaurant trying to make small talk, and possibly even being grilled by Aiden for the second time. Matt had only been half kidding about those antibodies.

"What are you talking about?" boomed the voice from Beth's cell phone. "You don't need reservations to have pizza delivered." Aiden's loud voice made Beth wince, but it gave Matt the news he was praying for.

A rush of relief and expectation flooded Matt. He leaned forward, kissed the top of Beth's head and inhaled the sweet scent of her shampoo.
"Daddy, Fiona said you wanted to take everyone to a restaurant."

"Fiona is wrong. Now what's all this about? You're coming home after work, aren't you?"

"Not exactly. Matt and I have plans for tonight. We're going out, and in fact, I was hoping you and Mom wouldn't mind keeping an eye on the kids. Ethan and Cassie will be there, so you won't have to do much."

"Going out? Where are you going?"

Unable to help himself, Matt nuzzled Beth's hair, played with the thick braid skimming her shoulder, and inhaled her scent as completely as he could.

She leaned into him and he pulled her close. "Daddy, Matt and I have a date to keep."

"What do you mean you have a date? A date with who?"

"Please don't tease, Dad. You know perfectly well with who." As Matt slipped his hand down Beth's back, her eyes began to close. She rubbed her cheek against his shirt. "Daddy, would you and Mom stay with the kids? Matt and I might get home a little late, so it would be easier if you both came to Matt's house to babysit. Beth's hand moved over the phone, shielding Aiden from overhearing. "Matt, please stop. My sister is watching."

"Hmmm?" Matt only half heard the words.

"Matt. Please."

He nuzzled her ear. "I'm not doing anything. Much."

"Peanut, are you still there?" Aiden's voice broke the tender moment for Beth. Matt felt it by the way she stiffened in his arms.

"Dad? Yes, I'm still here. I had something to ask, but I forgot what it was."

"You wanted him to babysit," Fiona spoke up from the other side of the office. Matt chanced a glance in Fiona's direction and saw the reluctant smile. "Tell Dad not to worry about dinner. The Franklins will keep them company while they're babysitting. Tell him we'll bring pizza."
"Who are the Franklins?" Matt asked, half in dreamland with Beth, the other half trying to negotiate the conversation.

"Franklin. My husband's last name?"

"Oh. Beth, you hear all that?"

A slow, deep sigh moved through Beth. Matt felt it, and relished the way Beth fit in his arms. She had relaxed again, her face coming to rest under the crook of his chin. The phone slipped from her ear.

With a patient groan, Fiona moved to her feet, took Beth's cell phone and spoke to Aiden. After that, Matt didn't even try to follow the conversation. All his energy concentrated on not kissing Beth.

"Okay," Fiona closed the phone, then placed it on Beth's desk. "Everything is set. Dad and Mom will babysit at your house, and we'll bring pizza. How old are your siblings?"

"Man, let me think." Matt pulled away from Beth and forced his brain cells to work. Being so close to Beth made it nearly impossible. "Ethan's sixteen-- no, seventeen-- Cass is twelve, Ryan four, and Dylan is two weeks. That's all of them, except for me, of course. I'm twenty-four."

"I have four-year-old twins," Fiona said, the hint of a parental smile shadowing around her mouth. "I only asked, because they might be able to play with your younger ones. I didn't need to know your age."

Matt shrugged. "You'll probably hear all about it from your dad. He thinks Beth is too old for me."

"I beg your pardon," Beth interjected her voice between theirs, "but I believe Dad only pointed out our age difference. He never said I was old."

Matt smiled. "Your father called me a boy. And," Matt said with emphasis, "he said you had 'life experience.' You know what that makes you? Old."

"Ha. Just older than you." Beth put away her cell phone, a this-discussion-is-over expression written across her lovely face.

"Beth, I didn't hurt your feelings, did I?"
"Of course not."

"You knew I was only joking, didn't you?"

She gave a curt nod. "Let's get this place closed up before it gets any later. Tell Sylvia and Amy they can go home."

"I'll go tell Daniel the change in plans," Fiona said as she moved to the door. "Matt, it was interesting to meet you."

"Yeah, thanks. Oh, and thanks for setting up things with Aiden." He tugged at Beth's hand after Fiona left the office and closed the door. "I was only teasing, Beth. You're the perfect age for me. I wouldn't change it if I could."

A red blush painted Beth's cheeks. She weakly tried to move away but Matt held her tight.

"Beth." Matt tucked a kiss behind her ear, felt her body melt against his. Her face upturned, and before Matt knew it they were all-out kissing. His lips touched Beth's neck, he lingered.

"Matt, we have to close the nursery."

"I know," he mumbled. "I'll stop in a minute."

"It's strange, but seeing Fiona with you reminded me she's closer to your age than I am."

"Strange..." Matt repeated, only half listening.

"Are you sure you don't wish I was younger?"

"Mmm-hmm. I'm sure." Matt moved his mouth over hers and all conversation stopped.

If Beth's senses hadn't been so completely absorbed by Matt, Beth would have offered Fiona her large house for the babysitting, instead of crowding everyone into Matt's mobile home. If Beth hadn't been rushing to shave her legs for the date, she would have tidied the mobile home so her mom and sister wouldn't see carpets that desperately needed vacuuming. If it hadn't taken Beth and Cassie all of a half hour to pick out that classic black dress, then change their mind about the shoes half a dozen times, Beth would have done a lot of things differently.
But the black dress was not one of those things. It came to just above her knees when sitting, had simple lines and a modest V-neck that Beth hoped, flattered her figure. Cassie kept agreeing, but the girl’s enthusiasm did little to quiet Beth’s nerves.

What made it worse was the boys. Except for Dylan, their side of the house remained stone quiet, a testament to the unfair advantage men had in times such as these. Matt certainly didn’t need to shave his legs, fuss over painted nails that would show in open-toed high heels, worry over which clutch purse to carry. Not that Beth had many purses, but it was the concept that mattered. Here she was, running around like there would be no tomorrow, when Matt was most likely shaving his face then throwing on a clean pair of jeans and a button-down shirt. It hardly seemed fair.

“I don’t look too dressy, do I?” Beth eyed herself in the girls’ bathroom mirror. Her shoulder length hair flamed in a messy thicket of red curls and loose ringlets. It contrasted against her black dress in a dramatic brilliance Beth hadn’t counted on. “This isn’t going to work, Cassie. I look like I’m about to attend a dinner party, and even then, I wouldn’t wear my hair down. With it down, I look like I’m trying to attract attention.”

“Well, you are, aren’t you?” Cassie stood beside Beth as they both stared at the mirror. “I think you look absolutely fabulous. If Matty’s jaw doesn’t drop when he sees you, then I don’t know my brother.”

“I’m not as sure…” Beth felt herself turn coward. “You don’t think I look ridiculous?”

Cassie let out an exasperated sigh. “You want to look nice for your honeymoon, don’t you?”

How could Beth explain things to Cassie, without hurting Cassie’s feelings? This wasn’t supposed to be a honeymoon, only a date. A simple date. Of course, Beth thought, as she smoothed a dab of foundation over her freckles, it was supposed to be romantic. Their one rule besides not spending much money was that it had to be romantic. Surely the dress fell into that category.

The girl returned to the open makeup bag, pulled out a bright-soft coral lipstick that Beth had completely forgotten she owned. It was the perfect touch to compliment the cool undertones of Beth’s complexion.

“There.” Beth examined the mirror, grabbed some tissue and blotted her glossy lips. She certainly looked different. Different than her usual rope braid, dirt-smereared jeans or overalls, and the ever-present T-shirt with her logo on the front. Maybe she could wear the floppy sunhat to hide
all this hair. The hat certainly didn’t keep those hideous freckles off her face. Even now, as she fusssed over eyeshadow, those freckles seemed to mock her. Why, oh, why did she have to inherit her father’s Scottish complexion? Why couldn’t she look simple and elegant like her mom? A natural blonde who looked good in practically anything.

"You look so classy, Beth. Like you’re someone famous preparing to be photographed by the paparazzi." Cassie feigned shock, turned a hand to the imaginary crowd and gave a slight wave. "No, no, I don’t feel like having my picture taken today. What? How kind of you, I suppose I do have time for one or two autographs."

"Oh, Cassie." Beth gave her a smile, then returned to the eyeliner. "Please don’t expect too much to result from tonight. Your brother is a very special person, but we’ve agreed to take things slow."

"Slow is good." Cassie sat down on the edge of the bathtub. "Just don’t go too slow, or I’ll never be an aunt."

Beth sighed. The girl had been warned.

A moment later, the slam of a car door sounded in front of the house.

Before Beth could ask who it was, Cassie ran off, then popped back with breathless news.

"It’s your parents! They’re getting out of their car! What do I do?"

"To begin with, you could open the front door."

With a gasp, Cassie darted out. She returned a few moments later.

"Now what?"

"Calm down, Cassie. I want you to take a moment and breathe. That’s it. Now walk-- don’t run-- and make sure our guests are comfortable. Tell them I’ll be out in a few minutes."

"Okay." Cassie practiced her breathing, then left the bathroom at a forced subdued walk.

Beth fastened on gold earrings, then applied the last of the mascara. It would go faster, if her hands stopped trembling.
She moved into the bedroom, located The Shoes. The high heeled red sandals she’d bought on impulse last month, then instantly regretted. Until tonight, she’d never had the courage to put them on. Even now, as she secured the delicate straps circling her ankles, she asked herself if she actually intended to be seen in public wearing something so unlike her usual self.

The baby burst into loud cries from the living room, and Beth decided to clean up the bathroom later. She grabbed her clutch, a black coat, and headed into the living room at a dangerously fast clip considering the high heels.

The crying stopped as Beth stepped into the room. Dylan lay cuddled and content in her mom's arm, the picture of newborn innocence.

"It feels so good to hold a baby again," she heard her mom say to her dad.

Both parents looked up when they saw her, and Ethan looked up from his magazine on the couch.

"I really appreciate this, Mom. You too, Dad. Our next door neighbor is visiting her daughter and won't be back until next Monday, so you guys are lifesavers. Ethan knows what to do, but I feel better knowing you're here. I fed and changed Dylan about an hour ago, but there are bottles in the fridge if you think he needs another feeding. There's diapers in the bag, but there's more beside the crib. I don't know when Fiona is supposed to get here, but there's food in the fridge if you get hungry before the pizza arrives."

"Where are you and Matt going tonight?" Mom asked.

"I don't know. I guess we'll figure that out later. The important thing is that we make the attempt."

A grunt came from Dad. His hands in the pockets of a comfortable looking pair of slacks, he inspected his daughter. "You don't usually get so dressed up. I guess you weren't joking about going out on a date."

"No, Dad, this is no joke. I wouldn't look like this if it were." Beth hesitated, but had to ask. "Do you think I look all right? The dress isn't tight, the neckline doesn't plunge, but I somehow feel awkward."

"You look beautiful," Mom said with a predictability that for once, Beth felt grateful for. "Don't talk yourself into thinking otherwise. She's beautiful, isn't she hon?"
Beth waited for her Dad's approval. She sensed his unease was not in her clothes, but in the fact she was trying to look nice for Matt.

"Dad? Say something, please."

"You look just fine," he said finally, as though he'd had to pull the words out with industrial strength pliers. "I suppose he'll think so, too."

The "he" in question strode into the living room with Ryan on his hip. The moment Matt's eyes fell on Beth, she felt it. She could have been in a dark room, and she would have felt the impact. Ryan waved hello, but Matt kept moving as he stared.

And smacked straight into her father.

Dad gave him a glare that Matt didn't seem to register. From Matt's absent, slack-jawed expression, Beth wondered if he liked what he saw.

"She really cleans up, doesn't she, Matty?" Ethan ignored Dad's irritated glare. The teenager was relishing the victory. Beth was dressing up for Matt. Finally.

Beth put on her coat while Matt placed Ryan on the couch with Ethan. "I don't know when we'll get back, Mom, but we'll try not to be too late."

"I'm in no hurry to leave," Mom said, swaying back and forth with Dylan cooing in her arm. "We'll hold the fort until you and Matt get back."

A low mumble came from Dad. He went to go sit on the couch with the boys.

"Have a good time, Beth." Cassie gave her a quick hug, then opened the front door with a coaxing wave. "Don't come home until you want to, Matty. We'll be all right."

Without a word, Matt brushed past Beth and stepped outside. He had an odd look on his face, one that made Beth wonder if he was angry. She joined him by the truck and waited for him to say something-- anything, that gave her a barometer of how he felt.

He stalked to the passenger door, unlocked it, then looked down at her fancy high heels. "Can you climb into the truck in those things?"
Before she could answer, he swept her off her feet, slid her onto the passenger seat and looked back at the house. "Wait a moment, would you? I forgot something." He didn't pause for an answer, but turned toward the house in quick booted strides.

The black jeans and long sleeved button-down shirt were what she expected, though the hurried silence puzzled her. Perhaps dressing up was a mistake. When he returned five minutes later, his face looked flushed, as though recently embarrassed.

"What is it, Matt? Did Dad say something?"

"No, it was Cassie." He swung himself into the truck, pulled off his hat and shook his head. "She caught me in your room and asked what I was looking for. When I told her to mind her business, she went to your half of the closet, opened a shoebox and pulled out the condoms." Matt looked at Beth. "Did you tell Cass about that? Does she know what they're for, because I know I sure didn't tell her."

"Cassie did see the box, but I didn't explain. I told her it was something for grown-ups and put it in the shoebox."

"She knows, Beth. She knew what they were without us saying. Where would she find out about something like that?"

"Probably, from school."

"Yeah, probably." Matt tossed the hat onto the seat between them, then reached into his pocket and dug out keys. "She's growing up too fast. I wish I could bring Cassie to Christ before the boys at school start noticing her. It scares me silly to think of my baby sister with some boy who's promising her forever, when all he wants is now."

"Have you talked to her about sex?"

"No."

"She's the age for that talk, Matt. You need to reach her before she makes those decisions on her own. Do you want me to talk to her? It might come easier from a woman."

"No, I'll do it. I'm not trying to run out on her. She's my sister, and I'm standing in the place of both parents."

"Not anymore. You have help now, remember?"
"Thanks." He breathed a huge sigh that Beth could only interpret as relief.

"Matt." She touched his arm as he started the engine. "Why did you want my shoebox?" The question could have been worded differently, but she couldn't bring herself to say the words.

"You've got your hair down for only the second time since I've known you, and you have to ask me that?" Matt rolled onto the street, then pulled away as a dark minivan drove up to the house. "I think your sister arrived."

"Yes, that's Daniel and Fiona's. Matt, about the box--"

"Forget it, Beth."

"That's hard to do, Matt."

"Yeah, well, you were the one who got dressed up."

"It's a perfectly modest outfit."

"Yeah, but-- never mind. Just forget it, okay? We're getting through this date if I have to wear a blindfold to do it. You look great, by the way."

"Thank you. I'm sorry about the hair."

"Don't be." He kept his eyes forward, on the road and not on her. "I'm not sorry I'm going out with the prettiest woman I've ever seen. In fact, I feel uniquely blessed." Matt turned into the traffic as though he had a destination already in mind. "Next week, you decide where we go. Tonight, I choose first, all right?" He flicked a glance at her and she nodded "yes." "Wow, Beth." He said nothing more, but kept driving with his hands gripping the steering wheel.

Beth pushed out a sigh. Dressing up had been a mistake.

When Matt couldn't take the silence in the truck any longer, he switched on the radio. On the floor to his right, brightly painted toes started tapping to the music.

Eyes back on the road, Taylor.

The over-sweet smell of perfume filled the cabin, the scents mixing with his aftershave.
Mind the road.

Black fabric moved as Beth tugged at her skirt.

Keep watching that road.

The sound of her breathing nudged at him, and he cranked the music higher.

Beth spoke above the noise. "Would you mind if we turn it down? It's a little loud."

He punched off the radio. "You started it."

"Pardon?"

"Nothing."

The sun visor came down, and Beth checked her makeup. Matt switched lanes, getting ready to take the next turn. She dabbed at the corner of her mouth, probably something to do with her lipstick. Her glossy fingers and toes matched. Was that on purpose?

Gritting his teeth, Matt forced his attention away from Beth. The city was putting in a new curb. Not very interesting, but good. Construction work on the new gas station was nearly over. That was definitely good. They needed another station when the one closer to home was full. That perfume-- jasmine, wasn't it? Yeah, jasmine and something else that smelled really good.

The light ahead turned red. Matt slowed the truck, came to a stop, then cranked down his window. He needed air.

"Would you please close that window, Matt? The wind messes up my hair."

The window cranked up. Matt leaned an elbow on the door. When was this stupid light going to turn green? Oh, that jasmine smelled good.

He leaned forward, punched the radio on, turned it up until even his own ears hurt. A delicate hand turned it off, but Matt refused to follow the hand back to its owner.

"Do you want to call off our date?" Beth asked.

"No."
"Then do you want to turn around so I can go home and change?"

"No."

"How about a haircut?"

"Very funny, Beth."

Silence. The light turned green, and Matt accelerated through the intersection. He turned into a fast food restaurant and parked in the waiting line for the drive-through. More silence. He expected Beth to ask questions, suggest what to order, do something besides sit there and be quiet.

After placing an order, Matt rolled into the parking lot to wait. Eighteen minutes for a bucket of fried chicken. He checked his watch.

"Are you sure you don't want to drive home so I can change?"

"We don't have enough time."

"We have eighteen minutes."

"Beth, I don't want you to change, all right? Just give it a break." He checked his watch.

"Why do you keep looking at the time? It's pretty much the same as it was a second ago."

Matt slanted her a look and paid for it heavily. "After our order comes, we have to be somewhere by a certain time or we'll be too late."

"Too late for what?"

"Would you be quiet, Beth? Would you? I can't even hear myself think."

Silence. When he looked at her out of the corner of his eye, he saw her crossed arms.

"You didn't have to yell."

"I didn't yell, Beth, I just asked you to be quiet."
"Well, then. I'll be quiet."

"Thank you."

The fabric moved, the jasmine saturated his senses, and he couldn't take his eyes off those slender feet with the toenails that matched her fingers. She had done it on purpose. He was certain of it.

Matt shoved open his door.

"Where are you going?"

"I need some air." He let the door stand open, took a few steps into the parking lot and sucked in the cool breeze. He checked his watch. He was cutting it close. "I'm going inside to get our drinks."

She shrugged. He shut the door.

When it slammed, he winced. Things weren't exactly going the way he hoped, but at least he wasn't late. Not yet. He had just enough time to make it, but if anything took longer than he thought, his surprise would be ruined.

"Please, God, don't let me mess this up." Matt went into the restaurant and sent up another quiet prayer. "Please give her a romantic first date with me."

A headache brewed behind Beth's eyes. It was getting late and she hadn't eaten anything since lunch. Why had she let Cassie talk her into wearing her hair down? The shoes, Beth took full blame for, but the hair was all on Cassie. Would Matt feel better if she blamed Cassie? The thought made her smile. Nope, it wouldn't.

Beth caught herself checking the bracelet watch slipped around her wrist. She had no idea why Matt seemed in a hurry, or why he wanted fried chicken when hamburgers would have been faster.

Then it came to her. Matt wanted the date to be special. Whatever he had planned for tonight, he wanted it to be special.

Somehow, it made her feel guilty.

The driver's side door opened, and Matt handed her two large cups of icy cola.
"They said the chicken's ready. I'll go back and get it."

Beth only nodded. He'd bought her a super large beverage, one that ensured she would need to find a restroom before the night was through.

When Matt returned, he placed the bag on the seat between them, jumped in, and started the engine. Again, Beth noticed the hurried set in his expression. Deciding to remain quiet to let him work out his own agenda, Beth settled back and placed the soda cups on the seat with her arm as a prop to keep them from spilling.

For the next several minutes, the shadows grew longer outside her window, and the landscape more desolate. She rarely had reason to come this far East, and the longer Matt drove, the more she had a sense of where he was headed.

They passed a sign announcing the White Sands National Monument-- a sea of stunning white sand that rippled like still moving waves.

But Matt didn't stop. He kept going, then turned up an incline, letting the four-by-four do all the work. He pushed forward, leaving the road behind them, and allowing nothing but desert and sky before them.

Beth watched Matt, but he said nothing.

The truck pulled to a stop beside a rise of desert plants partially covered by sand.

"Rule one," Matt grinned, turning off the ignition, "we're not supposed to spend a lot of money. I didn't. Even though dinner was on the pricey side, I made up for it by not going into the park."

"This area of New Mexico is lovely, Matt."

His face fell. "You've been here before?"

"Once. With Luke and Caleb."

"Oh." Matt unsnapped his seatbelt. "Rule two," he pushed on with determination, "it has to be romantic. This is the best part, Beth: the sunset is free."

"Is it?" She smiled and felt a surge of relief when Matt smiled in return. A genuine smile on a genuinely handsome face.
"Wait-- there's more." Matt opened his door, reached beneath the seat and pulled out an old work tarpaulin. He circled around to the flatbed, opened the tailgate and climbed up. Beth watched through the rear window as he spread the tarpaulin out like a picnic blanket. He straightened his Stetson and grinned at her. "Wait a moment, and I'll help you out."

She gathered the bag and colas, waited as Matt opened her door.

"Let me take the food around, then I'll come back and lift you down."

She nodded, choosing not to tell him that she could take off the shoes and get down on her own. He looked too happy, too pleased they had made it in time to watch the sunset.

When he came back, his arms reached for her, and she easily slid into them. The contact sparked a kiss that nearly had Beth pushed against the truck. He relaxed the embrace, swept her up and carried her around to the back of the vehicle. He placed her on the tailgate, and she leaned forward for another kiss.

"I better not," Matt said, a blush creeping up his neck.

He jumped onto the flatbed, helped her up and led her to the back where they could sit down. The bed had a slight wave to it, making Beth's navigation tenuous. The silly shoes kept getting in the way, but she noticed they made her helpless in a way that Matt seemed almost eager to compensate. If it hadn't been only a few steps, she felt sure he would have carried her again.

Matt tugged off his coat, put it down for Beth to sit on.

"You're going to get cold," she warned.

His grin widened. "Then I guess you'll have to keep me warm."

"Is that why you brought me out here? To keep you warm?"

"No, but it's a handy excuse."

Using his hand to steady her, Beth sat down on the coat. She buttoned her own coat against the growing chill, then reached for the restaurant bag as Matt took a seat beside her.

A large bucket of warm fried chicken comprised the entire meal. She placed it between them on the tarpaulin, then whispered a quiet prayer over the food that only Matt and God could hear.
The ice cold cola was out of the question, though Beth did take an occasional sip to lessen the spice of the chicken. She finished before Matt, thankful for her headache's retreat and the calm settling into her soul.

Mountains ridged in the distance, but the expanse before her was entirely desert. The sky began to fade into brilliant color, and already Beth found a sliver of moon hanging above them.

"Don't get comfortable without me," Matt smiled, lifting the bucket out of his way. "God and I went to a lot of trouble to arrange this sunset. I don't know about God, but I intend to collect."

Matt put his arm around her shoulders. She settled against him. He let out a slow, contented breath.

Color splashed the horizon as the sun began its descent, dazzling Beth with reds and oranges and yellows, before at last turning to a deep pink blush. The colors grew dim until darkness sank around them, bringing with it the jewels of the night sky. Surrounded by such quiet beauty, it gave the sensation of being alone in the midst of a sea of open space.

A strong hand moved up her back, an eager mouth claimed hers. They cuddled against each other. For several moments they stayed that way, kissing and caressing and breathing each other's air. Then she felt the push of going backwards, felt the quick intake above her as the kiss kept deepening. Heard the hat fall softly onto the tarpaulin. He unfastened her coat, and gravity pulled him to her.

They kissed and caressed until Matt pushed away with a groan.

"Three words, Beth. Just three words."

"What do you want me to say? 'Yes, please?'"

Even in the blackening night, she saw his eyes grow intense. "Those aren't the words, Beth, and you know it."

"What do you want from me, Matt?"

"You know what I want."

She pushed herself upright, not wanting to argue on her back while he looked down at her. "We're married," she reasoned. "We don't need anything more than that to make love."
His chest rose and fell with each breath. He stared at her until she closed the coat with trembling fingers.

"Is 'I love you,' so hard to say?" he asked.

"I don't hear you saying it," she replied.

"Do you feel anything for me?"

"Matt, I'm willing to make love with you. How can you ask me that?"

"Love, love," he swiped at the air with a helpless moan. "You exchange those words like it doesn't matter. Love is different from sex. They're not the same thing. Say what you mean, Beth."

"Fine." She shoved back the hair that kept blowing into her eyes. "I'm willing to have sex with you. Is that what you wanted to hear? Is it?"

In a slow movement, Matt shook his head "no."

"Don't ask for something I can't give, Matt. It's not fair. When we married, we purposefully left love out of the arrangement. I never promised you love."

Matt's eyes squeezed shut. A breath pushed through his lips. "Do you feel anything at all for me?"

Having heard the same question for the second time in under five minutes, Beth stopped herself from a hurried response. "Yes, Matt, I feel something for you."

Hope peeked into his voice. "Can you tell me what that something is?"

When she didn't answer right away, he became frantic. She could feel it in his gaze.

"I don't think I can. I don't know what I feel."

"Then describe it."

"I can't, Matt. It's too complicated."

He sucked in a sharp breath. "I'm getting scared. Do you feel lust, or is it just me?"
"No, I feel it too." Beth looked away, trying to regain her composure.

"Is it just lust, or is it something more? Please tell me."

A breath caught in her throat, she held it, then pushed it out. "It's something more."

"Is it love?"

"Matt--"

"Please, Beth. Do you love me?"

Something wet collected in her eyes and she brushed it away with her fingertips. "No, Matt, I don't love you."

For a long, drawn out moment, he didn't speak. "That sounded fairly definite. Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"How can you be sure, when you just admitted you feel something more?"

"Because."

"Because, what?"

"Because my love belongs to someone else."

"Someone else? Are you seeing someone else besides me?"

"No, there's only you."

"Then who, Beth?" Alarm sounded in Matt's voice. "Who else?"

"Matt, you aren't going to understand."

"I don't understand now. Who else?"

A frenzied laugh choked in Matt's throat. He leaned back, pushed both hands through his hair. "For a moment, you had me really frightened. I was beginning to wonder if Skip was still in the picture."

"No, it's just you."

"Uh-huh. Just me... and Luke. I don't understand. I thought he passed away."

"He did."

"Then why does he still get all your love? He's in Heaven, but I'm right here. Don't I get anything?"

"Matt, I told you I felt more than lust. Isn't that good enough?"

"No. No, it's not, Beth. I want your love. I realize if you don't love me, then I'll have to deal with it, but if I'm competing with someone else, I want to know."

Everything in Beth wanted to get up and put some distance between her and Matt, but the high heels prevented her from standing without Matt's help. "Would you take me home?"

"Not until we're ready."

"I'm ready now."

"Maybe so, but I'm not. Are you still in love with Luke?"

"Yes."

"Okay, that's understandable." Matt sounded desperately like a man trying to reason away gravity. "He was your husband, so it makes sense that you loved him. But he died. Isn't that supposed to make a little room in your heart for a man besides him? I'm not asking for the whole pie. If I have to, I'll settle for crumbs."

"Matt, please don't."

"I mean it, Beth. Do you have any crumbs left for me?"

Emotion choked her throat. She couldn't speak.
A low groan rumbled through Matt. He surged forward, kissed her with such fury she could do nothing but respond. His hands pulled off the coat, he pushed her onto her back and breathed into her ear.

"Say you don't have anything left for me. Say it. Say it, Beth!"

She turned her head away, but his hand turned her back. She gazed into those angry but intensely gentle eyes and felt her lips tremble.

"Do you have any crumbs left for me?"

Face to face with Matt in the private darkness of the hushed desert, Beth whispered her reply. "Yes."

It was all Matt needed.

As he lowered his mouth to hers and devoured his crumbs, Beth sent up a frantic prayer.

Please don't let him watch. Tell Luke to close his eyes.

Then all fear wiped itself from Beth's mind. Matt needed her, and every muscle of her heart strained to make him happy. This man who accepted crumbs but deserved so much better. This good man who needed so much more.

He held her like a starving man devouring the remains of someone else's meal. And when he began to pull away as though uncertain of the moment, Beth held him fast so that he was helpless to do anything but make love.

She would give him all she could tonight.

She only wished it was more.

"Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh."
~ Genesis 2:24 ~
Chapter Twenty-one
That Family of Yours

"Yet setteth He the poor on high from affliction, and maketh him families like a flock."
~ Psalm 107:41 ~

He waited in his socked feet, watched the wind wrestle with the bushes that scattered across the desert sand. Wind tugged at his open shirt, chilling his skin with the cold that settled in with the going down of the sun. He leaned against the side of the truck, not heeding the wind or the darkness. Five minutes. He'd give Beth five minutes before going back there to make sure she was all right. He'd lent her his boots, given her the flashlight from the toolbox in his truck, and watched while she trudged behind a sand dune for privacy. Then the flashlight clicked off.

Women. She'd gone behind a sand dune, but that wasn't enough. She had to be sure no one else could see. As if any of the infrequent cars on the road half a mile back were watching.

"What's taking you so long?" he called.

"You were the one who bought me that huge drink," came the answer.

Dragging a hand through his hair, Matt tried to get his brain working again. All clear thought had crashed to a complete stop when he held Beth, and now it was time to think.

The fact that tonight had happened, wasn't all that surprising. The real miracle was that he'd held off for as long as he had.

If only he'd waited. Matt forced out a long sigh. If only he'd held out a little longer, waited for her to say more than that simple "yes." He lifted his wrist, lit up the display on his watch.

"It's getting late," he called.

"I'm hurrying," came the reply.

Draping his arms over the side of the flatbed, he watched the distance for the flashlight to come on. His toes dug into cool sand and the thought crossed his mind to watch out for scorpions. He would, just as soon as Beth gave him back his boots.

"Are you sure you don't need any help?"
"I'm sure."

He sighed. For a simple bathroom break, she sure was taking a long time.

The beam of light flashed on. He straightened as she appeared from behind the sand dune. She walked oddly, almost a sliding shuffle, for her dainty little feet couldn't fill his shoes. He grinned as she handed him back the flashlight.

"I appreciate the boots. All this sand would have been impossible in my high heels."

The wind kept tossing her already wild curls, and his mind struggled to follow what she said. He mentally traced the curve of her lips, the soft contour of her cheek as she turned her head.

Awkward silence hung heavy between them for several long moments. Her coat covered that cute black dress, and a pale hand kept pushing the hair from her eyes. He should ask for his boots back, but he kept standing there, feeling the heft of the flashlight and the steady thump in his chest.

"Matt, we need to go home."

"I know."

"Matt?"

"Just a moment longer, Beth. I'm not ready."

A stiff breeze shoved past them, and for the first time that night, he noticed the cold.

"I hope..." Matt groaned, rubbed the back of his neck as helplessness crowded around his heart. "I hope tonight wasn't a mistake."

Beth remained silent. He feared what she thought.

"I didn't want this to happen, you know. Despite the appearances, I didn't plan this. I didn't mean for us to--" he was going to say "make love," but stopped short. He'd asked for crumbs, and though she'd given herself to him completely, his heart still felt empty. It was that emptiness that unsettled him.
"I know you didn't mean for this to happen." Beth folded her arms, warmed herself against the chill that was taking a bite out of Matt. "This needed to happen though, and I'm grateful we got it out of the way."

"Out of the way?"

"Matt, we're married. It wouldn't have been fair to keep torturing yourself the way you have. We both knew this was someday going to happen. It'll be easier to live under the same roof now."

Something twisted inside Matt. Whatever it was, it hurt.

In a move of quiet intimacy, she stepped into his arms, hugged herself to his chest while his open shirt flapped helplessly in the wind. Her warmth melted into him so completely, it carried away the hurt.

"I wanted it to be different with you." Matt pushed away, but only an inch or two. He couldn't bring himself to break all contact with her. "Beth, tell me it's different. Tell me this meant more to you than sex. I'm not asking for love-- I know you can't love me-- but I have to know it meant more than convenience or even lust. We're married, but I want it to mean more. It has to mean more."

Something wet splashed against his skin. He pushed back her hair, and saw tears slide down her cheek.

"Oh, Matt. I don't know what to tell you."

"Tonight has got to mean more. It just has to." He wrapped his arms around her, felt her tremor against him and hugged her for everything he was worth.

"It meant more." She murmured the words in a private hush. "It meant more than I probably should have let it."

His fingers grazed her cheek. Her chin tilted up, and his mouth found hers.

He pulled away, trying to give himself room to breathe, to think. "You promised me crumbs. I'm not too proud to remind you of that. Give me crumbs, Beth. Give me all the crumbs you can find. Don't let me starve to death in your arms."

She pulled him closer, and they kissed with such passion, Matt knew their night was not yet over.
It was midnight when they started the drive back home. A little like Cinderella turning back into an ordinary servant girl, Beth thought with some dismay. But her prince had not disappeared into a castle. He sat behind the wheel, his eyes glued to the road in quiet thought.

She looked down at her crooked dress, the dusty coat and winced in horror at the thought of her parents-- her Dad especially, seeing her look so disheveled. So recently with a man. "Would you stop at the next gas station? I'd like to clean up before we get home."

Matt cast her a sidelong glance, and nodded.

When Matt left the highway and pulled into a small station, Beth took off her high heeled sandals and borrowed the boots so she could climb down without help. They had more than enough gas to get home, so Matt could stay in the truck and not miss his boots. At least, she hoped, he didn't miss them very much.

The tiny bathroom was clean, though Beth didn't trust its appearance. Public restrooms were always to be distrusted, a message her mom often repeated during Beth's childhood. It was right up there with always closing the toilet lid and never applying too much eyeshadow. Too much only made a woman look cheap. It amazed Beth to review her list of do's and don'ts, and to realize they mostly came from her mom.

She brushed her dress with a dry paper towel, shaking loose the dust and sand of the night. She shook out her coat, ran fingers through her curls to give them a more orderly appearance. The smudges of mascara were cleaned away, and she applied a fresh coat of lipstick. Satisfied that she had done all she could, Beth returned to the truck where Matt waited for his boots.

While she fastened the thin straps around her ankles in the light of the gas station, Matt tugged on his boots, then buttoned his shirt. Wrappers, paper cups, and the empty bucket of chicken were discarded in the store's trash bin. Matt tidied the flatbed, stowed away the tarpaulin, then climbed back into the cab.

They said very little on the drive home. The closer they came to Matt's neighborhood, the more nervous Beth grew. Clutch purse, shoes, coat-- she had everything. It sounded silly, but would her parents be able to tell? Did it matter if they did?

The sight of the familiar minivan parked in front of Matt’s mobile home and tucked behind her parents’ sedan, caused Beth a stab of panic. They were all here. No one had gone home.
The pickup came to a stop behind the minivan, and Beth sent up a silent prayer. Fresh from her honeymoon, and very conscious of that fact, she tugged at her dress, fluffed her hair, then waited for Matt to lift her down now that she was helpless again in her own shoes.

When she slid into Matt’s arms, he hugged her fiercely. How she wanted to stay there, standing in his arms instead of going inside to face her family.

The slam of closing truck doors brought someone to the living room window.

No sign of dread or embarrassment could be found on Matt’s face. He angled his chin toward the house and kept moving with her at his side. She had to admire his cool. He made no pleas to keep their intimacies secret, no promises to hide the fact from her parents. In truth, he seemed more relaxed, more at ease with himself. Maybe the fatigue of the day had caught up to him, and he simply had no energy left for nervous worry.

He flashed Beth a handsome grin, tugged her close for a quick kiss just as the front door opened.

To Beth’s relief, Cassie rushed out to meet them.

"Did you have a good time?" the girl asked, her face young and hopeful. "Was it romantic?"

"It sure was," Matt said, enveloping his free arm around Cassie. "Did you have dinner yet? I hope you saved us some pizza."

How Beth admired him. He didn’t miss a beat, but moved up the dirt walk with an arm around Beth, and another around Cassie. The brave man even laughed when Cassie told him she had talked Beth into wearing her hair down. Did he like it? Sure he did, and it was sweet of her to help out. Matt was having an actual conversation as they stepped inside, increasing Beth’s admiration with every passing second.

She took a deep breath, held it as she saw the family scattered about the room.

A thread of tension pulsed the air as everyone greeted them and Dylan cried at the top of his lungs. The tension didn’t surprise Beth, though she had thought it would come later, after everyone had a chance to speak their mind. Then Beth caught the exchange of irritated glances between Fiona and Dad, and realized their arrival had interrupted some kind of argument. Whatever it concerned, she didn’t need any guesses to know it probably had to do with Matt. Even Matt grew quiet, though his arm stayed firmly around Beth.
"Did you two eat dinner?" Mom asked from the sofa. Dylan wailed in the crook of her arm and she worked to settle him down, an innocent bystander of the drama around him. "If you're hungry, there's leftover pizza in the kitchen— that is, if Ethan hasn't eaten it already."

Dad sat tight-lipped beside Mom on the sofa, his arms folded, his brow wrinkled in frustrated energy. It was an expression Beth knew well. How many times had she seen him look just like that, right after telling him they couldn't agree and to let it drop? More occasions than Beth wanted to remember.

"Hey, Beth. Don't you look snazzy."

Beth turned to smile at her brother-in-law, Daniel Franklin, who sat in a nearby chair with his daughter asleep on his lap. He was not what Beth would term an outright geek, but a definite layer of nerd coated his journalistic and literary tendencies. He was reliably sweet, always discussing some book he read or who wrote what in the national newspapers, and had the tendency to push his glasses up, whether they were sliding down or not. At least Fiona had broken him of the habit of wearing a pocket-protector. Nothing spelled geek like seeing a row of pens weighing down a shirt pocket.

Dan pushed up the wire-rimmed glasses, gave Beth one of his usual bright smiles, then flicked his glance to Matt.

Beth tugged at Matt's sleeve. "This is Fiona's husband, Dan."

"Nice to meet you," Daniel said, unable to free his right hand for a proper handshake. "Cassie told us you instituted your own version of date night, just like Mom and Dad's. I hope it was pleasant."

"It was, thanks."

Beth turned to Cassie, who stuck fast at Matt's side. "Why don't you take Sarah to your room and get some sleep? I don't think everyone's ready to go home yet."

Matt gave Beth a questioning look, obviously not knowing who Sarah was. Beth nodded to the child on Daniel's lap.

"Ethan is in the kitchen," Mom said with a slight yawn, "and Ryan is in the boys' room napping with David."

Matt looked to Beth, and Beth smiled. "The other twin?" he guessed.

"I tried to get this twin to lay down," Dan said, rising with his daughter still fast asleep, "but she didn't want to miss a single moment of being with Mommy. Now that she's nodded off, maybe I could put her on Cassie's bed?"

"Sure, I don't mind," Cassie said. "My room's down the hall." While Dan carried his little girl to the bedroom, Cassie kissed Beth good night, then Matt, then went to where Dylan still fussed in Mom's arms. "Good night, Dilly. Isn't he the most wonderful baby ever?" Cassie beamed over the small head, feathered his dark hair, then planted a kiss on his soft cheek. "Good night, Grandma, Grandpa." The girl flashed a tired smile to Fiona, called good night to the kitchen, then went to her room as Dan came back down the hall to resume his chair.

"They're very sweet children," Mom said to Matt. "I've been enjoying every minute with them—though I've been having some trouble calming this one down." She offered the crying baby to him, for Matt looked like he wanted to hold his brother. Even Beth could see the way he kept watching the baby. "You take my seat and see if you can't do any better," Mom offered, "and I'll go fix everyone some coffee."

Beth was still getting over the fact Cassie had called her parents "Grandma" and "Grandpa," and that they had probably encouraged it, when Fiona asked Beth if they could go outside for a walk.

"Hold up, Beth." Matt spoke from the sofa, his arms full with a quieting newborn infant. "This neighborhood can get rowdy after dark. I'd feel a lot better if you kept to the backyard and left the kitchen door open."

"We will," Beth told him, and the girls filed out of the living room, past the kitchen table where Ethan read from an open book with leftover pizza, and into the dirt lot behind the mobile home. It wasn't really a back yard, so much as a quiet area that didn't face the street.

"He seems nice, Beth. The way he looked out for you just now-- I like that. He's been taking good care of you?"

"He has," Beth smiled. "I'm glad you like him. What were you and Dad arguing about? Did it have anything to do with Matt?"
"Oh, no. It had nothing to do with our family." Fiona blew out a frustrated sigh. "Dad wanted to discuss a topic of interest, and I made the mistake of letting him. I have to remind myself not to be drawn into one of his debates, but it's never that easy. I still can't wrap my mind around the fact that our dad doesn't believe Neil Armstrong ever set foot on the moon. It was all lights and trick photography, and never mind the scientific evidence."

"Is that what the argument was about? Neil Armstrong?"

Fiona gave a grim nod. "Which reminds me why we rarely have family reunions. Brian is just as bad as Dad when it comes to conspiracy theories and off-the-wall politics, and between the two of them I lose it. I shouldn't let Dad push at me like that, but I do. I hate it when that happens, but then again, when does that not happen?"

Sympathetic, Beth let her silence speak for itself.

"Enough about Dad. I came out here to talk about you and me. I've been doing a lot of thinking, and while I don't take back anything I said to you at the nursery today, I have to admit it hasn't only been your fault that we haven't kept in touch. I haven't picked up the phone when I could have, so we share the blame. Half and half." She gave a playful tug to Beth's hand. "You look stunning. It's been ages since I've seen you look like this. And those shoes-- I love them. Aren't you full of surprises lately?"

"Admire the shoes all you want," Beth said with a smile, "but you can't borrow them. Not even if you promise to put them back where you found them. Same goes for my clothes."

"But it's just for one day," Fiona laughed in a girly squeal. "Pleeeeeease?"

The women laughed as Ethan stuck his head out to see what was going on.

"We're fine," Beth called to him.

With a grunt, Ethan went back to his book.

"We were closer when we were little." Nostalgia sounded in Fiona's voice. "What happened to us, Beth? I know we've never been exactly the closest of sisters, but we used to keep in touch more than this. You know, looking back, I think it was sometime after Luke's accident when I started noticing a growing divide. More and more, you went your way, and I went mine."

"That's because things changed." Beth steadied herself, trying to speak around the edges of what was still a very painful subject. "Until recently, it's been difficult to be around you. I don't mean
you as a person, but you as a wife and mother. Fiona, I lost my husband and only child in the same day, and soon after, you gave birth to twins. It felt as though God had ripped my family apart, robbed me of my perfect baby, then gave you not only one, but two. I wasn't even left with a husband. It felt unfair, and I couldn't look at you for a very long time and not feel envious."

Beth felt her voice break, paused, and pressed on. "I'm deeply sorry for that. I've been angry with God for so long, I'm only just beginning to realize how much it's affected my relationships."

"So you're a mommy again." Fiona gave a slight smile, one that showed she was thinking. "When I had David and Sarah, I felt guilty, but I didn't know how to tell you that. Especially when you were so busy bearing the guilt of what happened to Luke and Caleb."

The comment quieted Beth from going any further on that subject. She didn't want to talk about it, if she could possibly help it.

"I'm sorry, Fiona. I really am."

"So am I," Fiona said quietly. "The last time I remember you in Santa Fe, you dropped by the hospital to say 'hi.' My pager kept going off, and we never had time to sit and talk. Just 'hi' and 'good-bye,' and that was all I had time for. I admit I haven't been the most accessible person. Just ask Dan and the kids."

"I've been meaning to ask," Beth said, moving a little away from the house so Ethan couldn't overhear. "Why are you on a leave of absence? Aren't they hard to get while you're still a lowly resident?"

"Very lowly," Fiona grinned, "but they're not as hard to get these days. Things have changed since Luke's time." The grin faded, and she sucked in a deep breath. "I'd appreciate you not telling this to Dad or Mom. I'd tell Mom, but she spills everything to Dad."

Beth braced herself for bad news.

"Dan and I had some problems in our marriage. Not big ones, mind you, but enough for me to take some time off from work so we could concentrate on our relationship."

"Oh, Fiona."

"Before you go wide-eyed and concerned," Fiona managed a smile, "Dan and I are better now. We've done some reorganizing, and we've worked some things out. It hasn't been easy, especially since Dan lost his job at the newspaper."
"Dan lost his job? When did this happen?"

Fiona gave Beth an are-you-kidding-me kind of look. "We haven't been keeping in touch, remember? It happened recently, and the reason I don't want Dad to know about the marriage problems, is because Dad already blames me for Daniel losing his job. I wouldn't move when the newspaper wanted to promote Dan, so it's my fault. Which is true, but Dan and I made that decision together. We agreed we couldn't move while I'm still in my residency, so we stayed and Dan turned down the promotion. It eventually cost him his job, strained our marriage, and if I'd told Dad that, he'd only blame my career."

"I would hope Dad would be more fair than that, Fiona. You and Dan made the decision together."

"I would hope so too, but I don't want to risk another discussion." Fiona blew out another breath. "I'm just hoping and praying Dad will cool off by the time we go back in. Why is it so difficult to talk to our parents? It feels like ever since we've been old enough to hold an opposing view, Dad has been set on convincing us of his way of seeing things. Not that I necessarily always disagree, but why does it have to be exactly the same opinion as his? He raised us to think for ourselves, so why should he be so astounded when we don't happen to agree?"

"How well are you and Dan keeping up with the bills? I have to be careful how much money I offer since the nursery is struggling, but I could give you enough to get over any shortfalls."

"The nursery is struggling?" Fiona looked as though she could hardly believe her ears. "When did this happen?"

"For a while, I guess. Business has picked up in the last so many days, but overall, it's not very good."

Fiona shook her head. "This is what happens when we don't stay in touch. Keep your money. Heaven knows you'll need it, especially since you've taken on so many children and a new husband. Wow, Beth. How are you fixed for money? Do you need a loan, emotional support, collateral-- I don't know, anything to keep the store running?"

"I don't mind the emotional support, but I think we'll be fine for the rest. There's still the land Luke and I bought as an investment, and there's some stocks that are still doing well. I want Ethan to go to a good college, so I'll probably have to sell something to make that happen. We need another vehicle, and the family needs new clothes. I'm sure there's more on the list, but I think we'll be fine. We should have enough."
"Do Mom and Dad know?"

"I don't think so. I haven't had much time to really visit with them yet. So much has been happening."

"Ryan told me about Bailey passing away. I'm so very sorry." Fiona grasped Beth's hand. "I know how much he meant to you."

Tears came to Beth's eyes and Fiona squeezed her in a tight hug. Beth's emotions were running close to the surface tonight, especially after her date with Matt. She wanted to tell Fiona of how she'd struggled with hopelessness after Luke died, of how close she'd come to taking her own life. Beth thought about it, then decided to keep quiet. Such sobering news would be too big for her sister to burden in silence; Fiona would feel a responsibility to go to their parents, and Beth wasn't ready for that. Some things even a sister didn't have to know.

But God knew. And so did Matt.

Matt again. Beth couldn't help smiling through her tears. Of all the people on the face of the Earth, Matt had become her closest and dearest friend. When had that happened?

Patting Beth's shoulder, Fiona stepped back and breathed in the cold air.

Beth sniffed, dried her eyes and wiped away what was left of her mascara. "Are you sure you don't need money? What are you and Dan going to do without his income?"

"Well, for one thing, Dan and I agreed he shouldn't get another job."

"What?"

"Dan is going to pursue his dream of becoming a published novelist, and before you say it won't be enough to pay the bills, we already know it won't. We're going to move into a smaller house, reduce some of our expenses until I complete my residency and start making more money, and he'll start writing novels and homeschool our kids."

"Does Dad know any of this?"

"Yes."

"And what did he have to say?"
"Not much. According to him, the government is brainwashing children left and right, so he's all for homeschooling. When it comes down to it, Dan and I want something better for our kids--an opportunity for them to get a Christian education from their dad, and not some stranger. Anyway, Dan and I are happy about the decision, and we're thankful Dad seems to be, as well. The same goes for Mom, but no surprise there. I'd say all families have a similar level of dysfunction, but then again, Daniel's parents seem fairly tame compared to ours, so I might be biased."

The sisters stared at each other then quietly chuckled.

"Are you happy with him, Beth?"

"I am. Happier than I deserve. How about you?"

Fiona's smile came easily. "I love Daniel. I'm probably more in love with him now, than when we first married."

It seemed wiser not to make any response, so Beth only smiled. She and her sister were on different paths, and moments like this one made that painfully obvious to Beth.

Fiona touched Beth's arm. "We should keep in touch more often."

"After your residency is finished, we will." Beth looked back to the open door. "As a doctor's wife, I know very well that your free time is extremely precious. Your husband and kids come first, as it should be."

Fiona sighed, but they both knew Beth was right. A dog barked in the distance, punctuating what truly was a beautiful night.

"I hope you don't mind"-- Fiona paused to smile-- "but it's getting so late, we won't be joining everyone for a big breakfast. Dan and I need to get the twins back to your place, sleep in, eat a very quick meal in the morning, then start the drive home. I have to check in early Sunday morning, and I can't afford to be late. Too many are depending on me."

Beth smiled. "That's a doctor's life. It's quite a gift, though, helping others, saving lives. I always admired that about Luke, but the same goes for you and Brian. My family may be eccentric at times, but they're quite a bunch. I wouldn't trade them for anything."
"Well, thank you. Same goes for you." Fiona looked at her with admiration. "Marrying someone so he can take care of his brothers and sister is not your run-of-the-mill heroism, but the role looks good on you. I can see God is blessing your decision, and I pray it continues to work out."

When their Mom appeared in the kitchen doorway, announcing that it was almost two, the women knew their talk was over. They went inside and found Ethan dozing at the kitchen table, his head resting on his arms. An empty pizza box lay beside him. The smaller children were asleep, and even Matt looked as though he had trouble keeping his eyes open when Beth found him in the living room with the men.

Thankfully, Dad seemed back to his usual self and held no grudge against Fiona. Beth didn't think he would, but it was with relief when she saw them hug and make up. The big breakfast in the morning was called off, though Beth's parents promised to come by the nursery and visit.

Sleeping children were gathered, and good-byes were exchanged all around. As both vehicles pulled away, Beth lingered in the doorway to enjoy the night a moment longer.

"I'd close that door, if I were you."

She looked over to Matt, who had gone back to the sofa with Dylan.

"It's a rough neighborhood," he reminded.

She shut the door, locked it, then went to sit beside the brothers.

"That family of yours." Matt smiled wearily. "After you and Fiona left, your Dad did most of the talking. He made his case for why NASA never sent anyone to the moon and I kept my mouth shut until Aiden changed the subject. Daniel did the same, and when we were free to talk, I found out he's outlining some weird sci-fi novel he's excited about. For a writer, Dan seems like a nice guy."

"I'm sure he appreciates your not holding that against him."

"Hey, I try." Matt gave a lazy smile. "I thought my family was messed up, but yours... well, yours are not as messed up as mine, but they're still not exactly what you'd call normal." Matt yawned, adjusted the baby on his chest and smiled when the newborn pushed his tongue out in his sleep. Beth caressed the baby's soft cheek, felt its tiny fingers and dimpled hand.

As silence settled between them, Beth leaned her head against Matt's shoulder.
"Beth?"

"Hmmm?" She tipped her head back, saw the thought lines creasing Matt's forehead. "Why are you looking so serious?"

"What happened tonight, I mean, what happened between us..." she caught the hitch in Matt's breath and sensed he was preparing to say something difficult. "I know what we did changed things, but I don't think we should make what we did a habit. I think," he slowed his words into a measured rhythm, "I think we should keep our distance, and only find privacy together when we have to let off some steam."

Beth sat up. He looked completely serious.

"That sounded rehearsed. You've been thinking over how you wanted to say that. Haven't you."

"I'm holding out for more, Beth, but in my own way. Does that make any sense?"

"No, but then I don't think I have any choice."

"Sure you have a choice. You could tell me to get lost, throw a tantrum, start a fight. I don't think you'd move out though, so I'm not risking that."

The smile went to her lips before she could stop it. "You think you know me that well?"

"Yeah, I do." His hand massaged Dylan's back in light circles and the small chest rose in a contended sigh. "He sure is cute, isn't he?"

She gave an absent nod. "Does this mean we're not going to rearrange our family so we live in the same bedroom like normal couples?"

"I'd rather not."

"And if I did?"

He looked at her. "I'm going to need more than crumbs, before that happens."

"You aren't going to be able to hold out, Matt. I know you. We'll keep finding privacy, and eventually we'll share the same bedroom every night because it'll be more convenient."

A slight smile tipped his mouth. "I intend to hold out better than that."
"What if you can't?"

"Then it'll be my problem, not yours. Beth, I don't want to turn what we have, into the same relationship I had with Helen. I used to take her for granted, and even though I told myself I loved her, we only stayed together because of the sex and the drugs. That's not going to happen to us. Not if I can help it."

"Did you love her?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes I think I must have, then other times... I don't know. I like to think I'm different now, that I'm not the same person I used to be. I was addicted in more ways than one, and I don't want us to share the same bed every night just because it's convenient. It has to mean more."

"You keep saying that," she sighed patiently. "As important as love is to a marriage, I don't think it's absolutely necessary."

"Was it necessary for you and Luke? Was it, Beth? You loved him-- I know you did-- and yet you sit there and tell me we can get along without it." He pulled away, but ever so slightly. "How long do you think this marriage is going to last, if we don't at least try to love each other?"

"I am trying, Matt."

"But it's not easy, huh?" Heartbreak sounded in his voice. "I'm going to fight for this relationship, even if it means competing for your love. I mean it, Beth. I'm not going anywhere. I'm in this for the long haul."

The controlled passion of his words made it impossible for Beth to do anything but hug him. "You don't have to compete for me. There's no one to compete against."

He shook his head in disagreement, but when she leaned her head against his shoulder, he kissed her hair. His hand kept soothing the baby, even though Dylan was sound asleep. She touched Matt's soothing hand, and recalled his statement a few moments earlier about Dylan.

"Yes, you're right, Dylan is very cute." Beth stroked Matt's hand and heard Matt sigh deeply. "He's a sweet darling, just like his big brother."
She turned her eyes to Matt, and he met her gaze without flinching. He absorbed her appreciation like a dry sponge soaks in water, and bit by bit, the confidence eased back into his expression, and the smile returned to his eyes.

"Whatever happens between us, Matt, we're not going to break up this family. Agreed?"

"I agree. Do you really think"-- he paused, searched the room for eavesdroppers before continuing-- "that I'm a sweet darling?"

She poked him in the side. "Coward."

"I may be," he grinned softly, "but I'm also a sweet darling." Matt dropped his head back and closed his eyes. "Oh, Beth, between you and your family, I'm worn out." His hand searched for hers, and when she took it, he nestled his cheek against her hair. "If I'm your sweet darling, will you be mine?"

The wording of the question caught her off guard. She faltered, then squeezed his hand in quick reassurance.

"Thanks, Beth. My sweet darling."

Their fingers linked together, Matt sucked in a gentle breath that seemed to fill him with an almost painfully pleasant sensation. It reached through him, pulled her close and refused to let go, long after he fell asleep.

Whatever Beth had gotten herself into by marrying Matt, the connection that bound them together ran deep and strong. It would not be denied, even though Beth refused to give it a name. She gently stroked Matt's arm and let the moment sweep through her like a softly surging summer rain.

Yes, he truly was her sweet darling.

When Matt woke the next morning, he was stretched out on the couch by himself, and Dylan was back in the crib. The hungry scent of eggs wafted in from the kitchen, coaxing Matt's eyes to open even more. He sat up, scratched his side and noticed Dylan was awake.

"Hey, little guy. Ready to get up? Or are you going to lay around all day?"

Dylan blinked, but not necessarily at him, then shut his eyes.
"That’s right. Go back to sleep. I go to work today, but your job is to sleep, eat, poop, and get bigger. For a baby, that’s a lot to manage all in one day." Matt hauled himself to his feet, stared at the clock until the fog of slumber cleared from his mind. It was still early enough to have breakfast, then drive into work on time. Since the family breakfast with the Campbells had been cancelled, this Saturday morning would be like any other.

"Beth," Ethan’s voice called out from the boys’ bedroom at such a loud pitch, Matt heard him from the living room, "what’d you do with my sneakers? I can’t find them anywhere."

"Did you look under your bed?"

"Yeah, but-- oh-- never mind. I found them."

Matt checked the crib. Still sleeping. He was looking forward to when Dylan got a little older, when he could play with him and carry him around on his shoulders the way he had with Ryan. Yeah, Matt was looking forward to that.

A western tune played from his pocket. He pulled out the cell phone, opened it as he shuffled into the kitchen. "Hello, Matt Taylor speaking." He smiled at the beautiful woman cooking his breakfast, gave her a peck on the cheek as he moved into the boys’ bedroom to shower and change. "I'm sorry, could you speak a little louder? I can't hear you."

The bathroom door was closed, and Matt could hear Ethan running the shower full blast.

"This is Francine Simmons-- you hired me to oversee the guardianship process for your brother. On the papers you filled out, I noticed you gave your wife’s address as your current place of residence. Have you moved in yet? If you haven't, I strongly urge you to make the move before I file these papers with the District Court on Monday. I don’t anticipate Social Services sending out anyone, but then again, I think it’s good to be prepared in case they do. We don't want to be caught off guard, and from what you told me, your old address really is too small for so many children. We wouldn't want anything to hold up the process, unnecessarily."

While Matt waited for the bathroom, he spent the next several minutes talking to his lawyer. With all the events taking place in his own life, he’d forgotten about the urgency to act before Social Services became involved. Had he heard back from his mom yet? Did he know where she was? Since she and Wade had yet to sign anything, they would need to be served a summons so they really needed her to contact Matt. Easier said than done.

He got off the phone, left the shower to Ethan, and headed into the kitchen.
Beth stood at the table, scraping a large mountain of fluffy scrambled eggs onto five plates.

"That was our lawyer," he said, feeling the weight of what he'd just heard. "We don't have as much time as I thought. We need to move out of here, today." While Beth stared at him in subdued panic, he relayed the particulars Francine had explained to him. They needed to start praying Eve and Wade showed up in time, so the guardianship could go through without any trouble.

Going in to work this morning was out of the question. Beth understood the urgency and readily called Amy and Sylvia to stop them from coming into the nursery. They had a day off, but the Taylors were going to be busy.

While Beth fed everyone, she made a list and had Matt jotting down all the things that needed to be done. "We can get Dad and Mom to help. We have three vehicles between us, so that should make things go faster. Anything too big for your pickup, I suppose we'll have to rent a moving van."

Ethan huffed out a laugh as he dropped into his chair. "Like we're going to put our battered couch into your house. I don't think so. Except for our mattresses and Dylan's crib, it's going to be all boxes and bags."

"Ethan's right," Matt said, shoveling scrambled eggs into his mouth as he spoke. "Anything too big for the truck, should probably be staying here."

"Beth told me all about your date, Matty." Cassie beamed him a sunny smile from across the table. "I think it was terribly romantic of you to watch the sunset together."

Matt slanted a look at Beth, but Beth only smiled.

"You watched the sunset?" Ethan paused his breakfast long enough to give Matt a brotherly look of approval. "Way to go. Did you get lucky?"

"None of your business."

"Okay, okay. But knowing you, you probably did."

"Let it drop, Ethan."

The teenager stared at Matt a few moments, as though trying to read Matt's face. With an affirming nod, he went back to his food and the open book on the table.
It was odd seeing Ethan so engrossed in something with no flashy advertising and no illustrations. Matt slanted to get a look at the open pages, then elbowed Ethan. "What's that?"

"A Tale of Two Cities. Dan had it in his car, and gave it to me. It's not a blockbuster action, but it's cool in its own way. The guy gets his head chopped off to save someone else's life, so he turns out to be a hero. Don't go spreading it around that I'm reading this stuff, okay? We may be moving out of this dump, but I still have to hold my head up at school."

Matt turned the book over to read the cover. "Charles Dickens-- he wrote that Christmas Carol movie, didn't he?"

Ethan elbowed Matt. "It was a book before it was a movie. I haven't read it yet, but if it's anything like this one, I might give it a try."

"Dan gave you this?"

"Uh-huh. He knows a lot of junk about writing, grammar, that sort of thing. He's pretty cool."

Matt smothered a grin. The nerd with the glasses was cool. Though he felt a pang of jealousy over his brother's admiration of Daniel, Matt was glad to see Ethan interested in something that educated people liked. The last thing Matt wanted was for his brother to turn out the way he had-- a high-school dropout with experience in all the wrong things in life. He wanted Ethan to make something of himself, to be different than his dumb brother who was only fit for manual labor.

The reflection discouraged Matt, but he didn't have time to beat himself up. Not today. After breakfast, they had to pack up, and leave this rundown neighborhood behind.

"And now, Lord, what wait I for? my hope is in Thee."
~ Psalm 39:7 ~
Chapter Twenty-two
Secrets of the Heart

"Turn away thine eyes from me, for they have overcome me..."
~ Song of Solomon 6:5 ~

Matt had to hand it to Ethan. For someone about to be ripped out of familiar ground, Ethan accepted the impending move with admirable calm. Not even the prospect of being transplanted into a new neighborhood made him show anything but impatience to get back to his book.

Pulling out some old moving boxes that were collapsed in the back of the boys' closet, Matt thought it over. Beth's place wasn't exactly located in a neighborhood. He remembered no nearby houses, no private property that wasn't gouged with the furrowed rows of farmland. They would be moving from nose to nose urban sprawl, to a kind of privacy that only the wealthy or exclusive enjoyed if they weren't farmers, themselves. It would be a big change, but one Matt welcomed for the sake of the others. There would be no local gangs to bully Ethan into joining, no teenage vixens to entice Ethan into trouble, no neighbors who used drugs while they thought no one looked, no trash piled high in front yards, no drunken shouts in the streets after dark.

For Ethan's sake, and for the sake of the others, Matt was grateful to be leaving.

For himself, he could wish the move came later or even never at all. This rundown neighborhood might be an eyesore, and occasionally even dangerous, but it was his ground, his territory. Sure, the house was rented, but he still paid for the right to be here. The lawn had weeds, but every dandelion belonged to him. As he opened the collapsable boxes for Ethan and Ryan to get started, Matt felt the sadness of leaving behind a place he considered as his.

He stalked into the kitchen, started running water in the sink for the breakfast dishes while Beth talked on her phone to Aiden. Attractively casual in a pea-green nursery shirt and faded jeans, Beth waved her free hand in conversational gestures that had Matt both grinning and marveling at the same time. How did any woman have the right to look so good, and to do it without trying?

The loose braid showed she hadn't paid much time in front of the mirror, so she wasn't trying to hit him over the head to notice her. That cute black dress had been a definite effort to please him, but this unassuming beauty bloomed whether she tried to or not. It didn't matter to him what she wore or how she looked-- he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. With that woman who held his naked heart in the palm of her unknowing hand. It inspired a vulnerable,
open feeling that made the unsteady bump of his heart crave for more assurance. A gentle touch, a whisper of forever-- something, anything to ease this terrible longing.

Beth's sweet darling needed her.

Without the least bit of shame, he traced her in his mind, for once allowing himself the secret pleasure of wanting her without having to stop himself from thinking such thoughts. The longing grew, forcing Matt to careen to a stop before his heart tripped like a circuit breaker with too much electrical load. Only a cold shower or Beth herself, could reset his heart after such an enthusiastic jolt of distress. And she could distress him so easily.

No, Matt, I don't love you.

At the memory of those words, he squeezed his eyes shut.

Oh Beth, help me.

Sudsy hot water splashed against his shirt, and Matt hurried to turn off the faucet. "What a mess," he muttered, grabbing a dishrag and stooping to sop up the waterfall spilling onto the floor.

"Matty?" A pair of flowered sneakers stepped beside the lake.

He glanced up, half amused Cassie didn't think to help him clean the floor. "What is it?"

"Do we really have to move?"

"Of course we do. Careful not to step in the water."

The shoes inched back, the toes still staring him in the face. "Couldn't we add on to this house, so it's big enough for everyone? All we need is another bathroom and bedroom for you and Beth. The boys can share your old room, and I can keep mine."

"Our house is nowhere near as nice as Beth's, Cass."

"I know." She still sounded reluctant, so he pushed on.

"It's more practical for us to leave this place, than to make it bigger."
A sad sigh slipped from Cassie. She leaned against the counter, and when he looked up, he saw her slight face pinched with heartache.

"When you think you're going to have a panic attack, I want to know about it. All right?"

She nodded, moved back some as he stood to wring out the towel.

"I realize this sudden move might be difficult for you to take in all at once, so I want you to remain calm. Would it help if I put you in charge of Dylan? Stay clear of all the packing, and just concentrate on Dylan."

"Matty, I don't want to leave." Wet glossed her eyes, and a large tear slipped down her cheek. "Please, Matty, can't we stay?"

"Hey, don't start crying." Matt rinsed off his hands, turned to his baby sister before she dissolved into panic or sobs. "Cass, don't think about it. Take a deep breath." He hugged her when the tears came faster, and resigned himself to the fact she needed to cry. "Please, don't panic," he whispered. "We're leaving here as a family, and just like Ryan isn't going to leave behind any of his toys, I'm not leaving any of you behind. Just remember that, Cass. Our address may be changing, but we're still a family."

He knew just which comforting words to offer, for he understood Cassie's fear of change. She suffered so much neglect when little, not knowing from day to day if she would be forgotten by a drunk mother and the current boyfriend who helped spend the grocery money on booze and drugs. They habitually abandoned Cassie and Ethan, and it shamed Matt to remember all the times he'd come home to find Cassie crying and Ethan angry at the world. As the oldest, he should have been there for both of them.

Even for Matt, life in those difficult days was like living on forever shifting ground, always negotiating the change that meant no one loved you, that no one cared. In his own way, Matt figured his uncertain childhood was one reason why he'd clung to Helen and his old life so hard. They numbed the pain of not being wanted.

Bringing himself back to the present, he rubbed Cassie's shoulder. "Try to have a good time, Cass. Play with Dylan and let me know if you feel panic coming. Okay?"

The girl nodded, wiped her eyes and began to calm down. He hugged her, but didn't send her away until she left him of her own accord.

"Do you have your cell?" he asked.
Cassie nodded.

"Don't get caught up too much in the excitement of the move. If you need to talk to me and I'm not around, you have your phone."

She gave Matt a weak smile, then left for the living room where he heard her telling Dylan what a good baby he was. The worst of the crisis averted, Matt returned to the dishes. He glanced at the table, and realized Beth was off the phone.

"You're a good brother, Matt."

He lifted a brow. "Eavesdropping, huh?"

She smiled. "My parents will be here within the hour. They're bringing Dan and the twins."

"I thought they had to be back in Santa Fe before Sunday."

The answering smile on Beth's lips had Matt craving for his sweet darling all the more. "They're a gift from my sister. Fiona is leaving Dan and the kids here to help with the move, and Dad will drive them to Santa Fe, next week. So it appears we'll have some guests for the next few days."

Even though Fiona's gesture had been a kind one, the news made Matt frown. He placed the last of the dishes into the drainer. "No one's using Cassie's room right now."

There was no need to explain what he meant. Beth gave a surprised little laugh, but stopped halfway. "Is this how you hold out?"

Nothing in Matt flinched. "They're going to be with us awhile. I'll take whatever time with you I can get."

"Within the hour, Matt. If the traffic's light, they'll be here sooner than that."

"Then I'd better start praying for a traffic jam." Matt crossed the distance between them, hauled Beth onto her feet and tugged her close. He kissed her so soundly, so completely, he had to stop to catch his breath. "Just give me a few minutes," he whispered. They kissed, and he pulled her through the living room, past a smiling Cassie, and down the hall to the girls' bedroom.

To his delight, Beth didn't try to stop him, but locked the door behind them.
She knew they shouldn't have indulged in passion when so much work remained to be done. To deny him a few minutes of privacy didn't seem fair, though, especially so close to their honeymoon. And he needed her so much. She sensed it wasn't the mere intimacy he wanted, but something deeper in Matt that cried for more. That needed more.

If she couldn't give him love, then Beth determined to give all the physical intimacy he wanted. Only when she heard the slamming car doors did she try to stop him.

"Matt, my parents are here."

He snugged closer beneath the sheet, his arm muscled firmly around her so she couldn't get away.

"Matt." She whispered his name, and it sparked more kissing. "Please," she mumbled. "We can cuddle later."

"Five more minutes," he begged.

Beth closed her eyes and let Matt hold her until Cassie knocked on their door.

"We'll be out in a moment," Beth called. "Matt, let me go." She couldn't help herself and answered his kiss before shoving him away. "Help the boys pack up their room, and I'll start in Cassie's. Tell my parents Cassie will look after the baby, so Mom won't take Dylan from her. Matt, please. I can't do this unless you cooperate."

A heavy sigh moved through Matt. He let go, though it clearly pained him to do it.

After Beth dressed, she pulled off the blankets and sheets, and began folding them into neat piles. Though he offered to help, Beth sent Matt into the living room to greet her parents while she slid the mattress onto the floor. Standing it on end, she began to dismantle the bedstead just as her Mom came through the door.

Thank Heaven, she didn't see the messed up blankets, Beth thought with relief. Beth smiled, kept working while she thanked her mom for bringing help.

"I'm not sure how much help two more four-year-olds will be," Mom said with some amusement, "but I intend to enjoy every blessed moment. Here, let me help you with that."
It’s a known fact mothers don’t get the credit they deserve. As Beth watched out of the corner of her eye, the feeling that her mom hadn’t been put off the scent by the hastily dismantled bed, sounded as a known certainty in Beth’s mind. She didn’t know how Mom could possibly know, only that she did.

"Does Dad know?" Beth asked. The question came from nowhere, but Mom didn’t seem surprised.

"Of course he does. Do you think he’s blind?"

Though Beth wanted to ask when they first suspected, she guessed the answer would only embarrass her further and decided to keep quiet.

When Mom offered to start sorting through the things in the closet, Beth hurried her into the living room to help Cassie look after the children. It would never do to let her mom find a certain shoebox hidden in the closet. The reminder made Beth whisper something into Matt’s ear the next time she saw him. He needed to make that doctor’s appointment soon.

Since Dad’s knee required rest, and his family wouldn’t let him do otherwise, he remained on the sidelines and handed out large doses of helpful advice. Rooms were taken apart, the floors crowded with scattered belongings like some garage sale gone amok. People shouted, "Which box does this go in?" or "What do I do with this?" while Ryan, David, and Sarah played tag, and in general, got under foot. When the disorganized mayhem reached its height, Beth was grateful Matt had given Cassie charge over Dylan. The girl sat wide-eyed on the couch with her brother teddy-beared in her arms, sometimes near tears at the mention of leaving their home, other times caught in the excitement of so much activity. Though Dylan fuss ed and cried, the sheer noise seemed to overwhelm him and his cries came sporadically.

What Beth wasn’t able to fit in the packing boxes Matt had saved from his last move, she folded and neatly arranged into large blue trash bags that had "KEEP" scrawled in black marker on the sides so they wouldn’t be mistaken for garbage. She combed the girls’ room from top to bottom, and every hair clip, sock, and doll from Cassie’s childhood was packed away for the move. She didn’t bother asking Cassie if anything could be thrown away, for she feared the girl might melt into tears at the mere suggestion. Leave her home and throw away her dolls? No, Beth didn’t see any point in asking such an obvious question. Cassie was maturing-- that much had been proven when Beth realized Cassie had outgrown much of her wardrobe-- but at heart, the twelve year old was still a little girl. Beth recognized the fact, and appreciated Matt's thoughtfulness whenever it came to handling his sister's vulnerability.
Despite Aiden’s helpful declarations of what he thought should be done, chaos reigned in the boys’ room. Ethan argued with Matt over what to keep, and what to throw out. The brothers disagreed over everything, until Matt threw up his hands and announced Ethan could do what he liked with his things. Give them away, or sell them—Matt did not care, though Beth noticed Matt held onto everything in his own possession. Every ratty T-shirt in Matt’s section of the closet was packed away, along with battered pairs of boots, torn jeans, and a crumpled cowboy hat smashed beyond recognition. A guitar case made a brief appearance as Matt moved it from the closet, and placed it behind the boxes.

Wondering if she could ever coax Matt into playing for her, Beth headed for the kitchen to begin the next round of packing. After seeing his threadbare closet, she decided Cassie wasn’t the only one who desperately needed new clothes.

The kitchen cupboards and drawers were emptied, one by one, the contents sorted and disposed of in quick order. The scratched plastic mixing bowls landed in the trash, as did the assorted collection of chipped glassware, the non-matching silverware, the empty ice cream tubs someone had squirreled away beneath the sink, the wads of twisters and used rubber bands that tangled with plastic straws in one of the drawers, the snips of expired coupons jammed together with outdated school flyers—they all went into the trash. The blender she kept, as well as the hardworking frying pan that sat forever on the stove.

"Whoa." Matt stepped from the boys’ room and made a beeline for the trash bag. "You’re throwing away my cowboy mug? And this dinosaur cup is Ryan’s."

"It’s a toddler sippy cup, Matt. Ryan has probably outgrown it, and even if he hasn’t, when you unscrew the top, it smells like rancid milk. That mug you’re cradling was broken at some time, its handle glued back on at an awkward angle. It’s barely usable."

"Hey, this is my stuff you’re talking about. Just because it’s been over-loved, doesn’t mean it’s trash. See this mug? Cassie dropped it when she was five. When Mom told her I’d be angry when I found out, Cassie glued the handle back on, all by herself. And that sippy cup—Ryan picked it out when he was still in diapers. What else do you have in that bag?" One by one, Matt pulled out the mixing bowls, picked out the wads of twisters, sighed in dismay when he saw the ice cream tubs and even recovered the mismatched silverware. "You’re throwing these out? Beth, how could you?"

"Is that a serious question?"
Matt held up a forlorn plastic tub with no top. "When you're house painting, you need something to clean the brushes in. These are perfect for that. And what's going to catch the drips under the kitchen sink?" Matt stooped, opened the cupboard and slid it back in place.

"Wouldn't it be simpler to just fix the drip?"

"I will. I just never got around to it. What'd you do with the rubber bands?"

"Matt, they sell new ones at the store."

"But those cost money. These are free." Matt returned to the trash bag and rescued several more items, including the rubber bands. "Do me a favor, would you? Don't throw any bags out, until I've had a chance to go through them."

"Okay, fine." Beth folded her arms. "I'll remember that in the future."

"I bought these things, Beth. They're mine."

The fact he owned those sad rubber bands seemed to be more important than their actual usefulness. She huffed an irritated sigh. "Except for those keepsakes, all that junk belongs in the trash."

A stab of regret swiftly followed.

Matt's eyes avoided hers as he grabbed the two cups, dropped them into the topmost ice cream bucket with his twisters and rubber bands, and took the whole stack into the boys' room.

"Matt, wait--" she stopped short when a loud thump came from the living room.

"He's okay," Dad called. "He's not hurt."

Intent on finding out who the "he" was, Beth pushed into the living room with Matt hard on her heels.

"Now, now, Sweetie," Beth heard her mom say. "He was running, and tripped, that's all. He's just fine, aren't you?"

Tears welled in David's eyes. "I want my daddy! Where's daddy?" When Dan rushed forward to check his son, the frightened youngster eagerly reached for him and Dan scooped him up.
Tears threatened Sarah as she watched her twin cry in Daddy's arms. Grandma gave her a
consoling hug, and Beth kept hearing, "there, there," peppered throughout the comfort. A
scrapped elbow was presented to Dan, and the booboo was duly kissed with all the parental
sympathy a child could wish. When Dan offered to clean the elbow in the bathroom, Ryan
moved around the accident scene to come stand beside Matt.

Beth saw Ryan tug at Matt's pant leg.

"What is it, Ryan?"

"Where's my daddy?"

The question must of punched Matt hard, for Beth noticed a flicker of pain reach his eyes.

"I don't know, buddy."

"Can I go see him?"

"I don't know where he's at, Ryan."

The boy sighed, hugged Matt's pant leg until Matt lifted him up.

"It's okay, buddy. It's okay." The older brother hugged the younger, and Ryan seemed more than a
little grateful for the comfort. He leaned his head against Matt's shoulder, and started sucking
his thumb like someone much younger than his four years.

After witnessing the sad scene with Ryan, Dad and Mom went about trying to make the
children smile, even telling the freshly bandaged David they would have ice cream sundaes after
lunch. Though the prospect of food brightened Ryan's face, he clung to Matt like a kiddie
magnet on a refrigerator door.

Ethan went to finish up in the boys' room, while Beth returned to the kitchen. In the living
room, she heard Dan talking with her parents about Fiona and the kids, while David found a
new game to play with his sister. The booboo now long forgotten, David yelled with laughter,
his play as boisterous as before.

Faced once again with the stack of plastic mixing bowls, Beth placed them, and everything else,
straight into the moving boxes. She kept everything, even the bottle caps and broken handled
scissors.
Still holding Ryan, Matt came into the kitchen and watched in silence. He set Ryan down. "I'm sorry, Beth. I shouldn't have lost my patience."

She closed a box and secured it with tape. "You're not the one who should be apologizing. Those things held sentimental value, and I should have been able to see that without your telling me."

"But you couldn't know that old cowboy mug was something I wanted to keep."

"I should have known, Matt."

"You're being silly, Beth. You can't read my mind, and I shouldn't expect you to."

"Matt, I'm trying to apologize. I was wrong, and I admit it."

"But you weren't wrong."

"Yes, I was."

"Do you have to be so pigheaded about it?" Irritation flashed in Matt's eyes, and Beth tried to accept the fact he had called her silly-- and even worse-- pigheaded. After such a wonderful start to the day, things were going downhill fast.

"If we can accept each other's apologies, maybe we should forget it ever happened," Beth suggested.

"Yes. Thank you." He sighed deeply. "What's for lunch?"

Uncertain, Beth hesitated before moving on. "Are you just saying you accept so I'll stop talking about it, or do you really accept my apology?"

"Beth, please." Matt rubbed his face. "Ryan, why don't you go play with David?"

The boy looked at Beth, then Matt.

"Are you fighting, Matty?"

"No, we're... uh, we're discussing things. Run along and play." As Ryan obeyed, the phone in Matt's pocket began to whistle the tune to an old but familiar spaghetti western. As the melody began to "Wah, wah, waaah," Matt answered the call. "Cass? Are you all right?" He stuck his head into the living room, and Beth heard him laugh. "Yes, you can give Dylan to Grandma.
Don't use this phone unless you really need to, okay? My heart drops to my toes every time you use it to call me.” Matt strode back to Beth, tucked the phone into his pants pocket and sighed. "Now. Where were we?"

Seeing his fatigue, Beth tried to push away her tangled concern and answered with a smile. "I was about to tell you what was for lunch. We have peanut butter and one loaf of bread, but no jelly."

"No jelly?” Matt frowned, tugged her shirt until she leaned against him. "Someone forgot to go to the grocery store."

"Matt, I really am sorry. It was wrong of me to presume I could throw out your things without permission."

"Hush.” Matt claimed her mouth, and all discussion came to a stop.

Since Aiden and Shannon had promised the kids ice cream after lunch, and since there was no way the children would ever forget, it came as no surprise when Aiden announced he was taking the family out to eat. Everyone piled into their vehicles, and Matt followed Aiden’s car into the heart of Las Cruces.

He glanced at the beautiful woman beside him, her green eyes covered by sunglasses. It made him smile to know Beth had climbed into his truck, even though her father had offered a seat in his sedan. It probably wasn’t a compliment to Matt that the offer had been made, but Matt took it as a good sign that Beth turned it down.

Lunch began without any major bumps, though Dylan didn’t stop fussing until Matt lifted him out of the carrier and let the newborn sleep while being held. With Matt’s free hand, he ate his hamburger, kept an eye on Ryan, and trained both ears on what was being said at the table. While Beth and Mrs. Campbell talked among themselves, Aiden had somehow gotten Ethan into something that passed for polite conversation.

In the process of the exchange, Matt learned his father-in-law was in the business of aircraft restoration. He owned a hangar workshop in Phoenix, and was hired to restore aircraft and warbirds from private collectors and sometimes even museums. He tinkered with a few vintage cars, but the airplanes, it seemed, were the heart and pulse of Aiden Campbell.

When Luke’s name came up, Matt guessed Aiden and Luke shared a love of flying, for Beth had said Luke was a pilot. He hoped the conversation would turn in that direction, for Matt wanted
to know more about the man he was competing against for Beth's love. To Matt's disappointment, Aiden switched to politics and Matt noticed Ethan's interest quickly dropped soon after.

The ice cream sundae promise kept, the group headed back to the mobile home and started loading the vehicles with boxes and bags labeled "KEEP" on the sides. Aiden wasn't allowed to help because of his knee, but he sat behind the wheel of his car, ready to get rolling.

Even with three vehicles, the move would require more than one trip. For all of that afternoon and into the early evening, they ferried back and forth, dumping all the belongings of the Taylor family into Beth's spacious entryway.

When the last of the boxes had been stowed in Matt's truck, Aiden's sedan and Daniel's minivan met him in front of the mobile home.

Aiden rolled down his window, and nodded to Matt. "I guess that's the last of it, huh?"

"Yeah. I need to turn the key over to the landlord. I'll have to pay the last of the rent, but aside from that, we're done here."

"Dinner," Aiden said with a decided nod, "is on me."

It didn't seem fair, for Aiden had treated everyone to lunch. Matt feared any protest might be seen as ungrateful, and held his peace. He followed Aiden and Mrs. Campbell to a restaurant for the second time that day, and found himself at yet another table, listening to the clatter of dishes in the background and the hum of conversation. Matt waited for Luke's name to come up, but when no one ventured in that direction, Matt had to settle for news of how Brian-- Aiden's one and only son-- was doing, and of how much his family practice flourished in Phoenix. Since Brian was a stranger to Matt, Matt took the news with relative calm.

When the cars turned toward home, instead of returning to Matt's old neighborhood, they headed South, to Beth's sprawling adobe dream-house. Tonight, everyone, including Dan and the twins, were supposed to sleep under Beth's roof. Even in that large house, Matt didn't know if there would be enough room.

And, he had to admit, the thought of where he might sleep did cross his mind. Would it be anywhere near Beth? Or maybe he should make the resolution to sleep alone, no matter what. He had to keep reminding himself that holding out meant keeping his distance from Beth.

At least, whenever he could possibly help it.
To Matt, the house felt warm when Beth flicked on the entryway lights. Family poured inside, edged around the Mount Everest flowing from her entryway, and streamed into the living room with tired groans. Night blackened the three glass double doors that lined the North wall, the living room lights casting a soft glow onto the paving stones of the patio. Most of the entire wall was of glass, giving a kind of surreal perspective to Matt’s tired mind. Beth lived rich. She might not feel like it, but that didn’t change the fact this place felt like it belonged on the cover of a glossy magazine.

Thankfully, the baby slept through the drive home, and even now, as Matt checked him in the carrier, Dylan’s chest kept rising and falling in newborn slumber. Picking one of the two couches, Matt set the carrier down, then took a seat next to it while Ethan plopped down on Dylan’s other side. The baby jarred awake at the sudden movement, then closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

Matt reached over, thumped the back of Ethan’s head.

"Hey, what’s that for?"

"That was for waking the baby. Next time, be more careful."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever."

Tomorrow was Sunday, and Mrs. Campbell gave Beth the day off from cooking. Mrs. Campbell bustled into the kitchen like a woman on a mission, while Beth followed after her to make sure they would have enough food to get through the day without any stops at the grocery store.

Working his shoulder muscles, Dan yawned as two four year olds dumped themselves onto the couch behind him. Ryan came to Matt, and with all the confidence in the world of being accepted, climbed onto Matt’s lap with a huge yawn.

"Whew." Dan stretched out. "I honestly didn't think we'd get everything done before nightfall."

"I really appreciate the help," Matt said, as Ryan slumped against Matt’s chest to watch the grownups with half open eyes. "It would have taken much longer on our own."

"If you really want to thank someone, thank Fiona." Dan sat down beside his almost asleep son, David, and gave the boy an affectionate pat. "She knew you'd need help and mentioned the fact
in my presence. I, being the loving and attentive husband that I am, picked up on the subtle hint and promptly volunteered."

"Smart."

"I agree." Dan flashed an easy smile that made Matt feel more at ease in these foreign surroundings.

Just sitting on that couch made Matt feel like an intruder, only he hadn't noticed feeling that way before. Why now? He looked about, and spotted a large porcelain picture frame in a display case against the wall. The man in the photo gazed at Matt with unblinking eyes. A slightly younger version of Beth stood at his side, giving a contrast between their ages that pegged the man at least ten years older than Beth.

That had to be him. Luke.

The broad forehead gave an immediate impression of intelligence, as did the thoughtful turn of the mouth. Though some might say the cleft in the chin was endearing, Matt did not suspect himself of jealousy when he decided that the man, overall, was not at all good looking. If Matt stared him down, glimmers of meanness rose to the surface of those striking blue eyes. Every cruel trait imaginable could be found in that slight smile, the tilt of his chin, the blue scrub shirt that declared doctor. Why, if Matt let himself linger a few moments more, he could almost celebrate the man's demise.

Matt blinked, jerked his attention away from the picture frame. Beth had loved that man, and still did-- with every fiber of her aching heart-- and Matt hated himself for his unkind thoughts.

"Where's my backpack?" Ethan sat up, breaking in on Matt's self loathing. "I know I had it with me when we left our place, but I don't remember bringing it in. Matty, it had my toothbrush and my change of clothes for tomorrow."

"It's behind the mattresses," Cassie said, coming from the mountain with a borrowed overnight bag tucked under an arm. "I had to dig around for mine, but Ryan's and Matty's bags are behind the mattresses, along with your backpack."

Searching the couch, Matt realized an important oversight. "What happened to Dylan's diaper bag? I can't find it."

Cassie gave him a sisterly look.
"What?"

With a smile, Cassie nodded to his feet. "You brought it in with Dylan."

"Did I?" Matt leaned forward, saw the bag and blew out a sigh.

Dan chuckled. "A missing diaper bag is no joke, so I feel for you."

"Elizabeth, where are you going to put the children?" Aiden moved to meet Beth as she came into the living room. "I don't think there's enough beds to go around, so someone's going to have to sleep on the couch with Daniel."

"Give me a moment, Dad." In her arms, Beth held some outrageously fluffy towels, and Matt wondered if they were new. "With a little bit of maneuvering, I don't think Dan will have to share the living room. David and Sarah can keep the guest room, Mom and Dad can remain in the second master bedroom, and Matt and the boys can have Caleb's room. There's nothing in there right now, so if maybe Matt and Ethan don't mind assembling the two beds from their old room, that will just leave Cassie and Dylan. Dylan can sleep in his carrier and Cassie-- where are you, Sweetheart?-- you can share my room. You don't mind staying with me a little longer, do you?"

"Cassie will be with you?" Aiden seemed amused and even gladdened at the news. Matt could almost hear the churn of his thoughts. Aiden's innocent daughter wouldn't be sleeping tonight with someone who sported a "Rough Stuff" tattoo on his bicep. In the hurry that morning, the old tat had completely slipped Matt's mind, and he'd pulled on a sleeveless shirt without thinking to grab something with more sleeve. The oversight hadn't escaped Aiden, for Matt had seen him staring at the tattoo long and hard during the move.

Nice, huh?

That's all he needed right now, a good excuse to lower Aiden's opinion a few more notches. Matt could only hope Aiden didn't understand that his son-in-law had been drunk enough to flagrantly brand himself with the street name for marijuana. Ah, Matt. What a guy.

Surrounded by family and sleepy children, Matt craved for his old friend Meth. He wrestled back the longing, replaced it with desire for a certain woman, then forced himself to let go of that, too.

No need to wonder if he would be with Beth, tonight. That decision had been made for him.
Let it go, Taylor. Just let it go.

As he surveyed the mess in the entryway, he couldn't help but think how even the boxes and trash bags looked poverty stricken on Beth's gleaming tile.

They acted like guests. Beth wished they didn't, but none of the Taylor family relaxed enough to appear happy they were there. Only Dylan accepted the new surroundings with no display of awkwardness. The infant burbled on Matt's shoulder as Beth led them to Caleb's old nursery, located on the right wing of the house next to her master bedroom.

"I'm hoping to turn this into Cassie's room," Beth said, as the boys filed inside with their sister. The kids stuck together like magnets, and Beth prayed they would one day view this home as theirs. "We'll repaint the room whatever Cassie wants, and maybe get her some new furniture... I don't know yet, but maybe." Beth sucked in a deep breath, realized they looked tired and dispensed with the interior decorating. "It'll only be temporary, until Dan and my parents leave, but there's enough room in here to set up your beds."

Emerging from whatever deep thoughts had been troubling Matt, he looked about and quietly assessed the situation. "Ethan," he elbowed his brother, "we'd better start pulling out the bedsteads and mattresses. While we're at it, we might as well reassemble the crib so Dylan won't have to sleep in the carrier. Cass, would you take Dylan for me? Ryan, hey, buddy, don't go to sleep on the floor. Cass, maybe you could help Ryan find his toothbrush and pajamas."

With a nod, Cassie accepted the infant, then took Ryan's hand. "Come on, Ryan. I know where your bag is hiding."

"Is there anything you need?" Beth asked, still holding the fresh towels she intended for the adjoining bathroom. "I can give you some clean bedlinen, maybe a few more pillows to make things more comfortable."

"That's all right. We've got our own pillows and blankets. I hope you didn't go to any trouble on our account." Matt looked at the towels. "You didn't buy those just for us, did you?"

"Oh no, it only occurred to me a few minutes ago to put these in the bathroom for you and the boys."

"Thanks."

"If you need anything..." Beth hesitated, "if you need anything at all, let me know."
Matt didn't answer. He looked at her, his gaze roaming just a bit. Then without a word, he went to go help Ethan.

Flushed with the touch of that gaze, Beth's soul did a little pirouette, a quiet happy dance deep inside her.

Too bad she couldn't think of a way to find some privacy for her and Matt, tonight. Perhaps, if she gave Cassie a sleeping bag, the girl could spend the night in Luke's hobby room...


Her heart eased back from the pure pleasure of the moment, and resumed it's quiet pulse. She inhaled slowly, and went to go reorganize her bedroom so Cassie would have room to unpack.

Quiet settled in the master bedroom, contrasting against the activity that had filled the house only two hours before. Beds had been made, pajamas found, teeth brushed, and by now, Beth guessed everyone had fallen asleep.

Everyone, that is, except her. The covers tugged as Cassie rolled onto her side, her eyes closed, her breathing the steady rhythm of sleep. If only Beth could follow her example. For some odd reason, sleep just would not come.

If Beth had the room to herself, she would curl up with a book and read. Although, she admitted she had done precious little of that in a long time. Her to-be-read stack on the nightstand leaned to one side, as though ready to topple if she dared to add another volume to her symbol of procrastination. She absently wondered why she bothered to keep adding books to the pile, then wondered why she bothered to wonder. Luke had never liked the reading light on while he tried to sleep, and the habit had persisted long after it no longer mattered.

The steady tick of a distant clock added a touch of curiosity to the red clock that glowed by her pillow. Why couldn't they make digital clocks to tick, add some realistic ticking noise, to show it was actually doing something besides lighting up LEDs?

Oh, she must be more tired than she thought to be thinking such nonsense.

Determined to sleep, Beth shut her eyes and tried picturing nothing. She had heard it helped people get to sleep, but after struggling for several moments to keep her mind from wandering into something, she gave up. Nothing didn't work.
Beth sat in bed, reached for her robe and tried to very carefully get up without waking Cassie. She tip-toed to the glass double-doors in the master bedroom, opened them quietly, and stepped onto her private patio. Stars littered the sky like so many tiny diamonds, flashing and winking at admirers, distant and yet so very near. Beth closed her robe, tied it shut and breathed in the sharp air.

Something moved. A shadow sat at the wrought iron table on the main patio, its form silhouetted against the dim light showing through the glass double doors that lined the living room. For a brief moment, Beth thought of retreating into her bedroom and dialing 911.

"Matt? Is that you?"

"Sorry. I thought no one would be out here." He turned to leave, but Beth quietly called him back.

"It's okay. I wouldn't mind some company. The truth is, I couldn't sleep."

The shadow grunted. "Neither could I."

"Matt, are you happy here?"

"What makes you ask that?"

"I don't know," Beth gave herself a moment to put the feeling into words. She stepped off the private patio, moved around to the table that sat between the two wings of the house. She shivered as she sat down on the cold iron chair opposite Matt's. "You seemed distant, tonight. I couldn't help thinking you didn't really want to be here."

"It's my first night, Beth. Give me a chance to get used to the place."

"Do you like it here?"

He waited a moment before answering. "Do you want a polite answer, or something closer to the truth?"

"I prefer the truth."

Matt shrugged, his white T-shirt showing well against the darkness. "I guess I'm homesick."
"You'll get used to it. Just give it time."

"Yeah." Matt sighed. "Time." He looked over his shoulder, through the glass doors, into the living room where Dan slept on the couch. "Dan really knows how to snore. Even from the bedroom, you can hear him. I guess he's not disturbing anyone else though, because I'm the only one out here."

"You're not the only one, Matt. I'm here." She reached a hand across the table, touched her fingers to Matt's cold arm. "I'm sorry about the sleeping arrangements. I couldn't think of a way for us..." Beth stopped, remembering that she had thought of a way. Luke's hobby room. She pulled back her hand, folded her arms and sighed. "I hope you're comfortable in the nursery."

Silence. So much silence, she wondered if he were busy thinking of an answer.

"Beth."

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing," he sighed. "Just Beth. I like the sound of your name."

"I don't see why. There's nothing special about it."

Matt leaned back in the chair. "It's your name. That's enough to make anything special."

Warmth hugged her heart, touched her cheeks and pushed back the cold of the night. "That's a nice thing to say, Matt. Thank you."

He crossed his ankles and looked up at the sky. "I can't get over all this quiet. It's almost deafening."

Beth smiled. "I suppose after living where you have, this is a big change."

"Hmmm. Change."

Matt sat silent in his chair, his bare arms folded, most likely against the cold, his thoughts private and hidden from everyone but God. Maybe she should pray and ask God what Matt felt, what he needed from her right now-- besides the obvious, of course. That, she already knew. The fact that he hadn't already pulled her aside into some private area, meant he was trying to keep his distance.
Somehow, that awareness made her wish he would. Intimacy would make them forget, and desire would ease some of the strain she felt while sitting alone with him in the dark. She wanted him to ask, or even take, because it was his right, but he didn't. Then she thought of Luke, and was glad he didn't.

Oh, why did life have to be so complicated? So full of unexpected pain?

"I remember--" Beth stopped, wondering if she should continue her thought out loud in front of Matt. "Luke used to love a passage from Jeremiah, chapter nine. 'But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD.' Luke said his goal in life was to be someone who understood and knew God. Luke reasoned that if it wasn't possible, God would never have said what He did."

Matt remained silent.

"Long after Luke passed away, I kept remembering something a friend of my mom's said to me at the funeral. 'Sometimes, God takes the best first.' She was right. Luke was the best." Sharp grief welled within Beth. She bowed her head, willing herself not to cry. "I miss him, Matt. I miss him so much."

"I know." His hand reached across the table and touched her shoulder. He opened his mouth to say something, but no words came.

She eased out a breath, waited, then trusted herself to speak. "It's good to have a friend again. Someone I'm really close to, someone who understands and knows me. Kind of like Luke wanting to understand and know God. It's a sign of friendship."

Matt squeezed her shoulder.

"Thank you for being here, Matt. I know it's presumptuous to think I could ever be as good a friend to you, as you are to me, but I'll try. As God is my witness, I'll try."

"Beth." Matt stood, came over and pulled her to her feet. She expected a kiss, and instead found herself in a tight hug, at once fierce and protective, but at the same time thoroughly gentle. She leaned into the hug and let the warmth flood her soul. Once again, she felt the bond that connected them to each other, and yet could find no easy sentiment to do it justice. She struggled to describe the fullness brimming within her, and at last settled on one word.

A single precious word.
Friend.

Never before had that word meant so much to her, as it did now. Even though he made no effort to kiss her, Beth knew he wanted to. She took him by the hand, pulled him into the deep shadows of the night and kissed her sweet friend.

They held back, not trusting the night to conceal their private intimacy. When he whispered his need to leave her, she understood, and kissed him good night one more time before they parted to their separate rooms.

Glowing as warm as the sun, Beth climbed into bed and found it impossible to sleep. When her eyes at last closed, she dreamed of her darling, her friend, Matt.

In the nursery, Matt laid awake long into the night. Beth had acknowledged that his knowing and understanding her, was a sign of friendship; but it was the things she hadn’t said, that touched a tender wound in his heart. That knowing and understanding was also a sign of something more, something greater that lay just beneath the surface of their friendship. It was that something wonderful that Beth wouldn’t or couldn’t acknowledge.

Helplessness crowded around Matt. He had a desperate problem, and it poured from his heart before God in prayer. Holding Beth while she grieved for someone else, had made that problem crash through Matt’s defenses like a car barreling down a highway with no brakes.

There was no use kidding himself any longer. He was in love with Beth. Head over heels, hopelessly and deeply in love with a woman who kept calling him friend.

She needed his intimate friendship, and he desperately needed her love.

Things couldn't possibly get any worse than that.

"... [God] knoweth the secrets of the heart... Trust in Him at all times... pour out your heart before Him: God is a refuge for us."
~ Psalm 44:21, 62:8 ~

"... Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God."
~ James 2:23 ~
Chapter Twenty-three
Intensely Serious Friendship

"This is my beloved, and this is my friend..."
~ Song of Solomon 5:16 ~

It amazed Matt that such a tiny baby had such walloping lung-power. Dylan put his entire being into each cry, as if every muscle in his body strained to one purpose. To get Matt out of bed.

To the little guy's credit, Dylan had won.

Matt rolled off the mattress, bumped into another, fought against the abrupt awakening, the confusion of beds and bags strewn across thick shag carpet. For a moment, he wondered who had changed the floor on him, then rubbed his eyes to get his mind working.

They had moved into Beth's home yesterday, and after that devastating moonlit talk, he had given up every hope of getting to sleep. By some miracle, he finally dozed off, only to be awakened by Dylan, screaming his itty-bitty lungs out.

He had wondered how things could possibly get worse, and this, it appeared, was his answer.

"Make him shut up." Ethan groaned with impatience. "I'm trying to sleep."

"Don't let me stop you," Matt shot back as the teenager stuffed a pillow over his head. "I'm coming, Dylan, I'm coming." Matt's little toe slammed into Ryan's toy box. He bit back a curse, hobbled to the crib where Dylan was giving a good impression of someone who'd just found out he had five minutes to live. "Okay, okay," Matt lifted the infant, felt the diaper and wondered where he'd put the diaper bag.

"Remind me never to have kids," Ethan complained wearily. "Dylan. shut. up."

"Knock it off, Ethan." Matt searched for the all-important bag, a baby with a loaded diaper cradled in one arm. "I can't find it."

"Can't find what?"

"The diaper bag."

"Moron."
"What did you just say?"

"Nuthin."

"Yeah, that's what I thought you said." Matt fought to control his temper, locate a flashlight so he could find the stupid bag. Fat lot of help Ethan was. As always, older brother had to clean up the mess, do all the hard stuff. This screaming baby wasn't his. He hadn't gotten anyone pregnant, and here he was, chief cook and bottle washer to a helpless newborn.

The thought sunk in, reached his heart and made him ashamed. The foul mood edged away, and Matt silently prayed for more patience. A lot more.

"Dylan, please, I'm trying." His sore toe bumped into the corner of a moving box, and Matt forced himself to stop and calm down. Getting caught up in Ethan's crankiness wouldn't do anyone good, least of all the baby. Someone had to take responsibility, and that person would be him.

A knock sounded on the bedroom door. Matt limped to it, opened the door and found Beth in her robe and nightgown.

"Do you need any help?" she asked.

"Hold him a minute, would you?" Matt handed her the baby, then went to go dig through the toys jumbled around the crib. Ryan had dumped out his things just before bedtime, and the floor was littered with booby-traps. "What time is it?" he asked over his shoulder.

"It's almost five." She rocked the baby, stepped inside and closed the door so the cries wouldn't carry to the rest of the house. Or so Matt hoped. How Ryan managed to not wake up was beyond him.

He felt the loops of the diaper bag, pulled it out from under a pile of Ryan-sized clothing and toys. Thank God. He motioned to the adjoining bathroom, and she followed.

He flicked on the light, shut the door while Beth placed Dylan on a generous sized changing table. At first, it seemed odd that such a thing would be here, then Matt remembered this used to be Caleb's room.
"Thanks, I'll take it from here." Matt unsnapped the sleeper, smiled at the baby boy who grabbed Beth's finger and wouldn't let go. The impatience of the moment slipped away, and all Matt saw was the newborn innocence before him.

Beth touched Matt's shoulder. "You look tired."

"That's because I am. You said it's nearly five? How on earth am I going to stay awake in church?"

"Go back to bed and get more sleep, Matt. I'll take care of Dylan."

"No, no. I'm up. Too late to pretend I'm not." He grabbed a baby wipe, cleaned the tiny bottom, dumped on talc powder before repackaging it in a fresh diaper. The attention brought Dylan's cries a decibel lower, then it stopped altogether, as if realizing his world was suddenly good again. Tiny fists waved at Matt. Dylan yawned and preceded to fall asleep on the changing table.

When Beth leaned forward to pick up Dylan, Matt noticed the nightgown move with her. He tried not to look, but his attention held fast. What would she say, he wondered, if he simply blurted it out? Beth, I love you. Or maybe, Hey, guess what? I'm crazy about you, so how about it? Do you love me now?

Matt shut his ears to the imaginary conversation, and to his subsequent begging. If only what he felt was imagined, he could almost bear it. Like a madman, he was still trying to hold out even though he had fallen in love before knowing if his love would ever be returned. It was severely difficult to keep his distance, like trying to stop the moon from orbiting the sun, and short of a miracle, was that even possible?

Oh, was he ever in trouble.

Beth softly moved to Matt, leaned her head against his and cuddled the baby between them. Matt swallowed hard. She swayed to a hummed lullaby, and Matt swayed with her, the scent of her hair, her skin, filling him with indescribable pleasure. His fingers skimmed her arm, and his senses willingly drowned themselves in her presence.

Her lips tugged into a smile. "Are you making love to me?"

His mouth caressed her cheek, her ear. "If you have to ask, then I must be doing it wrong."

"Then I won't ask, because this feels right. So very right." She snuggled against him, and he encircled her with his arms.
Her lullaby hummed against his heart, and it was all Matt could do to remember to breathe. Surely, she knew. How could she not? Couldn't she see what she did to him, how she made him feel? He recalled those damning words—*Matt, I don't love you*—and forced aside the pain to soak up whatever she gave him, those crumbs he'd begged for and she'd promised to give.

All the humming and swaying had put Dylan sound asleep, but Matt felt more awake than he had in a lifetime. That silk robe, or nylon, or whatever she had said it was, felt cool and soft to his touch. The outrageous curl of her hair, the flick of her long lashes against his cheek, tugged at him in several directions until he thought he would die. Surely, his heart couldn't take so much all at once.

"Oh, Matt." She sighed as his lips pressed behind her ear. "I could stay like this forever."

"Could you, Beth? Could you really?"

She nuzzled against his neck, and Matt closed his eyes to thank God for giving him this moment. This moment alone together, swaying in the bathroom with a sleeping baby. After a few hours of heartache in bed, this closeness balmed his soul. He could even face Ethan's griping and bear it with a smile. Screaming baby in the dead of night? Sure, bring it on. The way Matt felt right now, he could take anything and still be maddeningly content. The sensation steeped every pore of his body, every nerve attuned to her presence, and when they swayed in unison, the air held silent music that only they could hear. There was power in it, visceral and feather-like, surging strong like a hurricane approaching land, and yet so painfully soft it felt like the grazing kiss of Beth's lips against his neck.

His head dropped, his mouth found hers and that hurricane swept through him and left nothing in its path. The destruction was sweet and total and he surrendered to it completely.

The bathroom door jarred open, and a bleary eyed Ethan stared back at them. "Hey, bro. If you're going to make out, could you do it somewhere else? I gotta take a leak."

"Ethan, don't you know how to knock?"

"Yeah, but why do I have to? It's only you. Hey, Beth." Ethan moved past them, made his way to the toilet as Beth hurried out of the bathroom.

Ethan blinked at Matt. "What?"

Groaning, Matt left the bathroom to his teenage brother. Sometimes, that guy worried him.
Keeping quiet so Ryan wouldn’t be disturbed, Beth returned Dylan to the crib, then paused by the bedroom door as Matt came to her.

"Sorry about that. At our old home, Ethan usually didn’t have to knock on the bathroom door in the boys’ room. He’s used to barging in."

When Beth only smiled, Matt surged forward and kissed her. Her hand went to his chest, and even though he knew she was trying to push him away, she couldn’t work up the strength to actually do it.

He smothered her with another kiss, and both her hands reached behind his neck to pull him closer. A toilet flushed, the bathroom door opened and Ethan shuffled back to bed.

"I’m out, if you guys still want the bathroom."

The interruption pulled Matt to a skidding stop. He breathed in Beth’s air, leaned his forehead against hers and tried to steady himself.

She whispered, "We can't-- not here."

"I know."

She waited a moment, looked at his single mattress. "My mom is going to fix breakfast this morning."

He leaned forward, nibbled Beth’s ear. "That’s nice of her."

"Matt, as long as we behave, I’ll share your bed until she calls everyone to breakfast."

His mind lost itself in a haze of soft kisses, the warm fuzzy air that clung to Beth and then to him. He registered something about behaving, and when Ethan began to snore loudly, Matt realized her meaning. They weren’t alone, though he dearly wished they were.

He smiled, kissed Beth. "We could move Cassie."

"No, I can't--" she didn’t finish her thought. Her hand touched his chest, and regret sounded in her hushed voice. "I’m sorry. I should probably leave now."
"Beth, you keep finding me tonight. You know you'll be back, so stay with me. I'll behave." He didn't wait for an answer, just tugged her behind him through the maze of beds and crib, to the single he called his own.

Without taking off her robe, she climbed in, then smiled when he joined her.

He nuzzled her ear, whispered softly. "Promise you won't leave me until I wake up?"

She nodded "yes," and he rolled her onto her side so he could spoon behind her. Her hand reached to pull up the blanket, and thinking she was trying to move away, he muscled an arm around her waist and pulled her close. She finally managed to grasp the blanket, though Matt did nothing to help as she tugged it around their shoulders.

With wild curls pillowed against his face, he held onto Beth and let sleep drag him into some much needed rest.

It amazed Beth to feel Matt's unconscious strength. The arm he'd fastened around her, pinned her in place, as though he were afraid she might disappear before he was ready to let go.

She touched a hand to his arm, felt his muscles and heard him groan with satisfaction. The man was asleep, and yet very much aware of her presence. The knowledge of it made her feel strangely powerful, and at the same time, more than a little trapped. The robe made her warm, and snuggled so close to Matt, she began to sweat. If only he'd let go long enough to take off the silly robe. She tried to pry the muscles off, but they held fast like so many bands of industrial steel.

Covering up with the blanket had been a huge mistake. Matt's breath warmed her neck, the blanket held in more heat, and the robe made the situation intolerable. It all worked to give the claustrophobic sensation of being smothered alive in a sauna.

"Matt." She jiggled his arm, but it only snuggled closer. "Matt, wake up."

Maybe if she tried to calm down, it wouldn't seem so hot. After all, this had been her idea.

"Matt, please wake up. Matt?"

Something stirred on the other mattress. Someone got out of bed, padded across the carpet to her side of the bed.

"What's your problem?" Ethan asked in a not-so-hushed voice.
"It's Matt. He won't let me go."

Ethan yawned hugely. "That's your problem, not mine."

"Would you lift his arm off, so I could get rid of this heat trap of a robe?"

It took a moment for him to answer.

"Ethan?"

"I'm thinking." He shrugged. "Okay, I'll help you." He strong-armed Matt back, and to Beth's amusement, Matt struggled against his brother. "Hurry up, I can't hold him much longer. Man, he's strong. What have you got him lifting at the nursery-- hundred pound weights?"

"No, manure bags." Matt shook off Ethan's grip, and the boys stared at each other while Beth sat up and finished hurrying off her robe. "Go to bed," Matt told his brother.

"Hey, I was only trying to help. She was getting too hot in that dumb robe."

Eyes narrowed, Matt looked as though he needed to give that excuse some thought. "Thanks. You can go now."

A grin tugged at the corner of Ethan's mouth as he left. "Night', Matty."

"Yeah. 'Night." Matt waited while Beth lay down. He turned her onto her side, snugged his arm around her, and burrowed into her hair like a dirt-starved gopher.

"You're not angry with Ethan, are you?"

"I'll think about it later."

A wide mouthed yawn sounded behind her, and before long, she heard the rush of breath that signaled sleep. Though she still felt like a slow baked potato, someone had turned down the oven and it made her entrapment much more enjoyable.

Pleasantly aware of the arm holding her tight, she fell asleep.
Small sounds moved in the background, stirring Beth from her slumber. She blinked open, looked about and saw Ethan pulling clothes from his backpack. He took them into the bathroom, shut the door as Ryan rolled out of bed.

"Ethan, I have to go." The four-year-old rubbed his eyes, looked mournfully at the closed bathroom door.

Beth got Ryan's attention, beckoned him to come to her side of the bed. "Do you remember which room is mine? You step out of this one, and the first door you see on the right, is mine. I have a bathroom-- Cassie will show you where it is."

"Which side is my right?" the boy asked.

"Hold up this hand" Beth touched his fingers "and make a fist. The side with the fist is your right. Now go out that door, take a few steps straight ahead, turn right, and knock to wake up Cassie."

"Okay." Ryan took a deep breath, concentrated on his fist as he left the bedroom.

Pushing against the arm that pinned her in place, Beth managed to wiggle onto her back. At so much movement, a low moan came from Matt. She caressed his arm, and the moan turned into a satisfied rumble.

"Matt, it's time to wake up."

His fingers massaged her side.

"Come on, cowboy," she touched his cheek and he smiled, "it's time to get out of bed and get ready for church."

"Five more minutes, Beth. Just give me a chance to wake up before you leave me."

"Leave you?" She traced a finger over the stubble of beard on his jaw. "You make it sound so final. I'm only going to my room, not leaving the state."

He nibbled her finger, raised his head to claim her mouth and kissed her as Ryan came back through the door.

Beth pushed Matt away. "Sweetheart, did you find the bathroom?"
"Cassie showed me," Ryan said, coming to Matt's bed with a curious grin. The boy stared at Matt, and Matt stopped kissing Beth long enough to stare back.

"Good morning, Matty."

"Yeah. Good morning. Oh, Ryan, no--" Matt groaned as the boy climbed onto the bed, sat on Matt's side then peered down into Matt's face. "Hi."

"Hi," the boy smiled back. "It's time to get up."

"So I've been told."

"Grandma's making French toast."

"She is, is she?"

"Uh-huh, and she said if I get dressed for church before anyone else, she'll let me go first."

"That's nice."

"Matty?"

"What?" Matt sighed patiently, though Beth could tell he was enjoying his little brother.

"What o'clock is it?"

"I don't know, buddy." Matt turned to look about. "Anyone see my watch? Oh, thanks, Beth. Let's see, it's nearly seven."

"It is?" Ryan's eyes popped wide. He tugged at Matt's blanket. "I have to get dressed NOW!"

"Okay, okay, hold your horses." Matt looked at Beth and moaned softly.

"We'll find more time for us, later," she smiled.

"Yeah, I guess. Climb down, buddy. I'm getting up."

Beth put on her robe just as Dad came to the open bedroom door. He saw the robe, the slept-in bed where Matt was just getting to his feet. And said nothing before he turned back into the living room.
It was difficult for Beth to acknowledge her father’s disappointment upon seeing her getting out of the same bed as Matt. She wished her parents-- her dad in particular-- would get used to Matt, or at least accept the fact he wasn't going anywhere. Matt was here to stay, and Dad needed to adjust to the idea of having a son-in-law he didn't necessarily approve of.

She noticed the pained grimace on Matt’s face, and realized he had caught her dad's disappointment.

"Give it time, Matt. Dad will come around."

"If you say so."

The conversation at the breakfast table centered on what a busy day Saturday had been, and how everyone was looking forward to resting on the Lord’s Day. Ryan got to eat his French toast and syrup, happy at being first to the table in his Sunday clothes.

No one commented on Matt and Beth's sleeping arrangements, and it relieved Matt to sense his parents-in-law understood he and Beth hadn't done anything serious with the boys in the same room. Mom dropped a hint about finding someplace for Cassie so Beth's master bedroom would be available tonight, and Matt breathed easier, if not more hopefully. The idea of having a honeymoon, a proper honeymoon with an actual bed for an entire night of privacy, was almost too good to be true. For some reason, Beth appeared uncomfortable with her mom's statement, but Matt chalked it up to nerves. Living in the same house with her parents wasn't easy.

Though Aiden seemed a little out of spirits, he excused any lack of appetite to the ache in his knee. Since he had popped two pain pills into his mouth before breakfast, it was a plausible claim.

It took Daniel a few minutes to wake up and smell the coffee, and Matt discovered the poor guy wasn't a morning person. Dan struggled to join the conversation, helped the twins reach the orange juice pitcher, and kept remarking at how quickly morning had come. Though he looked like he needed more sleep, he turned down the offer to stay home from church.

Today, it seemed, everyone was going. Even Ethan.

It shouldn't have surprised Matt when the church congregation met him and his family with rounds of congratulations and gifts of money tucked into wedding cards. That his marriage
came out of nowhere and surprised many, was an understatement; that people viewed Beth as a kind of hero for marrying Matt and helping to care for the children, was generally accepted, though not a few kept glancing at them to discern any other feelings. Feelings more tender than that of simply rescuing the Taylors.

Now that the Taylors had been rescued, Matt hoped their attention would soon move elsewhere. All this scrutiny was making him nervous.

Jerry Westhaven, who owned the car dealership across the street from Beth’s Garden Nursery, and who had been the one responsible for sending Matt to find work with Beth, seemed especially pleased by the way things worked out. He kept pumping Matt’s hand and saying how glad he was that Matt had found happiness and a stable home for himself and the kids. The fact Jerry kept lumping Matt with the kids, tested Matt’s good humor once or twice, but overall, Matt liked Jerry. He was a genuinely nice guy, and Matt owed him a great deal for letting God use him to place a certain jobless person into Beth’s path.

That one good turn had forever changed Matt’s life, and this morning reminded Matt to keep Jerry and his family in prayer. Like the nursery, the dealership had fallen on hard times, and Matt prayed God would not forget Jerry for the blessing he had been to the Taylors.

To Matt’s chagrin, Pastor Mark delivered a sermon on the marvelous ways God provides for His children. Matt wholeheartedly agreed with the message, only it caused everyone to glance in intervals at the Taylors again. Oh well.

After the service ended, Pastor Mark pulled Matt aside and asked very discretely how things were going.

With a nodding smile, Matt understood his meaning. "It’s not in name only anymore."

"Ah. That’s what I thought." The pastor lowered his voice another notch. "To be truthful, knowing your past, I didn't think that particular arrangement would last for long. But it’s for the best. The children will be able to see what a caring relationship looks like."

Matt noticed Pastor Mark’s careful omission of the word "love," and decided the preacher hadn't jumped to any romantic conclusions. Smart man.

"You're where God wants you, Matt. I believe it with my whole heart. I pray He strengthens your marriage, and continues to lead you into the relationship He intends for you both."
Again, Matt had a hunch Pastor Mark understood more than he was being told, and Matt had to hand it to the guy. He noticed a lot.

Sunday lunch was eaten at Beth's table, and while Beth and her mom cleared away the dishes, Aiden announced his intention to go for a walk.

"Your knee, dear--"

"I know, Shannon, I'll be careful." Aiden gathered his cane, stood up from the dining room chair slowly, as if testing his knee. He nodded to Matt. "Care to come with me?"

From the direct way Aiden looked at him, Matt sensed the man wasn't asking a question. It felt more like a politely crouched command, than a casual invitation.

Unwilling to allow any intimidation to creep into his demeanor, Matt shrugged. "Sure, why not?" Matt got up from the table, moved with Aiden to the glass doors overlooking the patio. Matt glanced over his shoulder, saw Daniel wave good-bye to him with a grim smile.

Not exactly an encouraging sign.

"Dad?" Beth called after them before Aiden shut the door. "Where are you taking Matt?"

The worried tone made Aiden's brows draw together in a frown. "I know Matt is young, but he's not a child who needs his mother's permission to go where he pleases."

"Daddy, that's not what I meant."

"I know what you meant, Peanut." Aiden dismissed her and tried to shut the door. "I want to talk to Matt without an audience. Is that too much to ask?"

"Daddy, please be nice--" the door closed before she could finish.

"My daughter means well," Aiden stepped across the paving stones as Matt flicked Beth a parting wave of his own, "but sometimes, she fusses too much. I don't know how Luke put up with it."

The mention of Luke peeked Matt's interest. He followed Aiden around the pecan tree, past the greenhouse, and paused to look out over the vast tracks of farmland surrounding the property. A cool April wind blew against them, pushing at the slight clouds that rode the crystal skies.
"Did she follow us?" Aiden asked, not bothering to look back.

Matt shrugged. "If she does, we'll tell her to go away."

The blunt wording had Aiden grinning. "You're a very different man than Luke. Very different."

"How so?"

A sigh filled Aiden's chest. He exhaled, squinted against the late afternoon sun to look at Matt. "I suppose I should answer that question politely, out of respect for the dead. But since Beth didn't follow us" -- Aiden tossed a glance over his shoulder to be sure -- "and since you didn't know the man, I'll be honest."

Matt readied himself for the ugly truth.

"Luke Carter was overly mild, irritationally quiet, lacked resolve to argue a subject through, and in short, was affable to the point of frustration. The frustration was entirely mine, I admit." Aiden stamped his cane against the dry ground. "The thing is, I don't like people coming at me from the side. You have something to say, I want a frontal assault. None of this passing messages to me through Beth, business. I need more patience, God knows I do, but Luke tiptoed around me so much, it was hard not to think him a coward."

"Was he?" Matt asked. "A coward, I mean."

"In all fairness, I can't say he was." Aiden blew out a breath, shook his head as a plane cut across the sky. "Luke lived in a constant pressure cooker at Las Cruces Medical Center. It's hard to say someone's a coward, when they spend their life as an ER physician, making life and death decisions every other minute."

"Was he a good doctor?"

"One of the finest." A hint of pride crept into Aiden's voice. "Did you know Luke met Beth through my son, Brian? Luke was one of Brian's mentors in medical school-- Brian thought a lot of him, said he was the most gifted physician he'd ever met. Brian invited Luke to come have Thanksgiving with him and his folks, and that's where Luke first saw Elizabeth. It was almost love at first sight-- I say almost, because I don't think my Beth gets swept off her feet very easily. But on Luke's part, yes, he was very much in love."

Matt sighed heavily. "I saw his picture in the living room."
"Yes, that was Luke. Handsome brute, wasn't he?" Aiden cracked a grin. "He was thirteen years older than my daughter, but had an enviable livelihood, a rock solid career, was a good Christian, and he loved Beth. As far as I was concerned, Luke had all the important bases covered."

Frowning at the ground, Matt kicked at a stone until it dislodged itself and rolled away.

"Oftentimes," Aiden continued, "you meet people who are careless about God. They let others do their thinking for them, and just nod in agreement at the appropriate places. Luke wasn't one of them. He thought for himself, and followed after God with a passion that I admit I didn't always understand. Of all the things I could say about Luke, he was most definitely a Christian."

The words weighed heavily in Matt's heart. All this painted a picture of an honest individual. More than that, this glowing testimony was proof that Luke had been the very worst kind of individual to compete against. In Matt's blind struggle for Beth, he found himself competing against... a good man.

Deep inside Matt, his heart ached fiercely for Beth. Luke would have needed to be lower than dirt for Matt to look good when compared to her first husband, but this-- this was far worse.

Aiden turned his green eyed stare on Matt, and Matt stiffened in ready defiance. He didn't know what made him ready for a fight, only that by Aiden's own admission, he preferred a frontal assault.

"If you were Luke, I wouldn't be asking this question. I wouldn't need to, because I'd already know where he stood, and I'd already know he'd hesitate long and hard before giving a dead level answer that might ruffle a few feathers. My feathers are intact, and I don't lose them easily."

"Go on, Aiden. Ask your question."

"You're a tough character aren't you."

Matt folded his arms. "Almost as tough as you."

A flicker of regard stirred in that green steel, but Aiden didn't back down. "I want to know if you love my daughter?"

"That's your question?"

"It is." Aiden waited, his hand gripping the shiny knob of his thick cane.
Matt knew Aiden wouldn't like his answer, but after that hard lead-up, there was no way on God's green earth Matt would back down and offer an untruthful response just to pacify Aiden.

"Yes, I love her."

"For how long?"

"For a while now."

"Do you understand my question? I don't mean lust, but something more substantial than that. Do you love Beth?"

"I understand the difference, Aiden."

"And you love her?"

"I do."

Aiden narrowed his eyes. "Does she love you?"

"You're her father, you tell me."

"No, no. I want to hear it from you. If I asked Beth myself, she'd very tactfully tell me to mind my own business. So I'm asking you. Does she love you?"

Everything in Matt screamed to form the lie, but he couldn't. He would not.

"No, she doesn't."

"Did she tell you that?"

"She did."

Thoughtful, Aiden fingered the cane, looked back out over the rows of farmland. "If my daughter says she doesn't love you, then you'd do yourself a favor and believe it. I didn't raise my children to be liars."

"I believe her."
"And yet you still love her."

Working his jaw muscles, Matt nodded. "Yes, I do."

A faint smile showed around Aiden's mouth. "Bravely spoken, for someone who's got most of his life ahead of him. And what are you going to do if she never returns your love?"

The direct question sparked a flare of anger in Matt. He jammed his hands into his pants pockets and willed himself to not show any ruffled feathers of his own. "If that happens, I guess I'll have to find a way to live with it."

Aiden pointed his cane at Matt. "You won't walk out on her, mistreat her because she can't love you?"

"I would never do that to Beth."

"Okay, son. Okay." Aiden returned the cane to his side, thumped the ground a few times in contemplation. "I believe you. I don't envy you your dilemma, but I believe you'll stand by your word. And I do have your word?"

"Yes, sir, you have it."

A broad grin flashed across Aiden's face. "You just called me 'sir.'"

Not wanting to add to his misstep, Matt remained silent. At least he hadn't called him "mister." Only boys called Aiden that.

Aiden gave him a sidelong glance before returning his gaze to the fields. "The longer I live, the more God surprises me. I never thought Beth would ever manage to find another of that stamp and caliber. They're still as rare as I once thought they were, and I admit I didn't expect to find one wearing a 'Rough Stuff' tattoo, but I'm glad to see the species isn't yet extinct. Kind of gives me hope for this world. Not much, mind you, but some."

"Excuse me?"

"Good men, Taylor. Good men." Aiden pointed to a dirt road between the fields. "Let's see where this leads. I'm in the mood to do some exploring."
For several minutes, Beth saw them behind the greenhouse, exchanging conversation with sharp glances and even sharper posturing. Matt's expression was mostly hid by the Christmas Ferns hanging in the greenhouse, but she could sense his anger by the broad angles of his shoulders. Her heart sank. What were they saying? More importantly, what was her father saying?

He didn't exactly have a good track-record with his sons-in-law, as Luke and sometimes even Daniel, could attest. But there had been a twinkle in her father's eye that morning, hard and unyielding, but at the same time curious. It was the curiosity that unsettled her. Her father felt he could push Matt, maybe more than he ever could Luke. Why? Because Matt stood up to her father, and her father liked to be treated in a head-on fashion.

Not unlike a head-on collision with a Mack Truck. The resulting wreck was enough to keep Luke from participating in such manly theatrics, but Matt... Beth had a feeling Matt shared some of her father's stand-up-and-take-it-like-a-man way of thinking. It didn't make Matt any less thoughtful, or Luke any more intelligent. It just made them different, and at this very moment, as she saw her father and brand new husband move off into the distance, she could wish away that difference completely.

If Matt returned home, shell-shocked from her father's rough treatment, she would have to be more vigilant in protecting Matt's feelings.

An hour passed, and Mom began talking about sending Ethan after them. Dad's knee shouldn't be stressed, and why hadn't someone thought to stop him before they left? As if anyone but Mom, or perhaps Brian, could ever stop Dad.

A half hour later, Ethan called out from the patio that they were on their way back. Ethan could see them, and in the unusual excitement caused by Mom's concern, Ryan and the twins, along with Daniel, went out to watch them cross the home finish line.

Of course, Dad's limp was worse, but he was grinning and even Matt seemed amused to see all the fuss over their return. They came into the living room like conquering heros, though one conqueror had a red face from the strain he had put on his weakened leg.

"What am I going to do with you?" Mom sighed, but hugged Dad, anyway. "Sit on that couch and don't get up until I say so."

"Now that you mention it," Dad said, planting himself on the cushions as though the idea had been his all along, "I could rest my eyes for awhile. Nothing works up a good Sunday nap like a long walk."
"Oh, listen to him talk. Anyone would think he wasn't in pain." Mom arranged a throw pillow behind Dad's neck, swatted his pant-leg when he tried to grab her by the skirt. "Such nonsense. If you even think of leaving that couch, I'll drive back to Phoenix without you."

"Now look who's talking nonsense." Dad grinned. "The woman can't live without me, and she knows it." He caught Mom's hand, brought it to his lips and gave her fingers a loud smacking kiss. "Who's the love of your life, Shannon? Come on now, tell us who."

The gesture calmed Mom, though she looked far from appeased. "You know very well who. I wish you'd take better care of yourself. You're not as young as you used to be, as twisting your knee on that ladder recently proved."

"I'm never going to live that down, am I? I would've been just fine, if the fuselage trusses had been properly secured. It was my fault, certainly, but age had nothing to do with it."

"Your knee, Aiden."

"All right, all right." Dad let Mom's hand go, but not before giving it an affectionate pat. "I'll be more careful, but only until I'm back in fighting condition. I hate all this rest and recuperation. It makes me feel useless."

"Then read a book." Mom spoke without the least bit of sympathy. "I mean it, Aiden. If you don't take care of that knee, you're going to find yourself in a wheelchair so you'll be forced to stay off your feet. I'll get Brian to find a nice big one, with large rubber wheels and a padded seat."

Dad frowned. "The woman's mercenary."

"I'm practical," Mom said with a final nod. "If you get bored, watch television."

With a hint of a smile, Daniel picked up the TV remote and placed it beside Dad. Dad stared at Daniel, and Daniel chuckled.

"If I were you, Dad, I'd try to make the best of it. I don't think Mom's going to back down."

With a mumbling groan that sounded something like a concession, Dad rubbed his knee, and watched as Daniel went to keep his promise to come to little Sarah's pretend tea party at the dining table.

In her usual way of finding something to keep the small ones busy, Grandma had given Sarah a handful of butter cookies, an old teapot, two mugs, and a plastic vase with a yellow rose for a
bright centerpiece. Seeing father and daughter have their tea on the end of the elegant table, reminded Beth of a similar time when her own daddy had folded his long legs around a short play table to have pretend tea and make-believe cake with his little girl.

The tender memory made Beth smile. It was good to have such memories to help over the times when her relationship with her father became rocky.

While David and Ryan played on the floor with coloring books, Ethan parked on the second couch with a worn copy of A Tale of Two Cities tucked under his nose. After a few pages, his leg slung over the armrest in a relaxed teenager slump. At least Ethan was making himself at home.

Feigning nonchalance but looking very determined, Matt strode to Beth's side. He smiled, cast a longing look at the master bedroom, then at her.

When Beth shook her head, "no," he caught her by the hand and gave it a small tug.

Light conversation came from the kitchen as Cassie helped Mom start the roast chicken dinner planned for that evening. Dad dozed off on the couch, oblivious to the tiny tug of war happening right behind his back.

Matt pulled Beth's hand, and she resisted.

"Why not?" his lips silently mouthed the words. When she didn't respond, he leaned forward, whispered into her ear. "Your parents won't notice if we go missing for a little while."

He pulled her to the master bedroom, and she tugged him toward the nursery. His muscles won out, and he managed to wrestle her into the master bedroom before she could get past him. He locked the door, came to her in a burst of passionate kisses.

"Matt-- I can't-- please don't--" Even in her unease, she returned his passion, and he pushed her onto the bed. "Please, Matt--" she was silenced when he claimed her mouth, then felt his hand beneath her head.

"Beth, oh, Beth." He started to take off his shirt, then froze without warning. The grin faded, and his eyes locked with something on the nightstand.

She twisted about to see what he was looking at, and almost laughed at the thought of him seeing her ridiculous stack of to-be-read books, her own Leaning Tower of Pisa.
Then she remembered, even before her eyes landed on the photo frame. It had been taken on their fifth anniversary, the last one before the accident. His eyes had been so warm, so inviting, so devastatingly handsome, Beth's heart still ached whenever she looked at the picture.

"Man." Easing back, Matt locked eyes with Luke. Matt looked so young, so very young compared to Luke, it amazed Beth to see them side by side. When Matt turned away, she saw the soft bruised expression on his ruggedly youthful face.

"Matt, maybe we should go to the nursery."

"Yeah, okay." Matt climbed off the bed, buttoned his long sleeved shirt, dragged a hand though his loose brown hair. "Maybe we could take a rain check on that. After walking with your Dad, I'm more tired than I thought."

The ache in Beth's heart deepened, like a sharp edged knife pushing into tender flesh. She forced herself not to cry. "Do you want to take a nap before dinner?"

"I guess." Matt left the bedroom without looking back. He stopped just outside the door, his head bowed.

"Do you want some company to go along with your nap?"

"No thanks." He turned, went into Caleb's old room and shut the door.

One of the four-year-olds bartered with another for the brown crayon, Daniel accepted another cookie with his tea, and Dad snored on the couch with all the exhaustion of a man who had done too much.

Grief pulsed through Beth. She knew Matt was hurting, and didn't want him to be alone. Pushing into the nursery, she locked the door, then went to Matt's bed where he had flopped down on the mattress with an arm shielding his eyes.

When he heard someone come inside, he lifted the arm, then dropped it back. "Please, let me take my nap."

"I intend to, but not without me." Beth climbed onto the narrow sliver of bed beside him, and when he didn't move to give her room, she managed to snuggle half on, half off him. She turned her head to peer under the arm.

"I wish you'd go away, Beth."
The smile in his voice gave him away, and she leaned her face against his chest.

"I dare you to say that again, and mean it."

"Give me a moment."

Sensing her momentum, she pushed away the arm and found Matt fighting back a smile. She dropped a kiss onto his mouth. When she pulled away, he breathed in a deep, satisfied sigh.

"Okay, I'll give you more room." He scooted over and she moved into a more comfortable position. They lay there in silence, until Matt blew out a quick sigh and rolled her onto her back. "Who am I trying to kid? You came in here to chase me, the door's locked, and for the first time all day, we're alone. I'm not wasting this opportunity on a nap."

She smiled, let her finger trace across his lips. "Matt, are you still my sweet darling?"

A surge of emotion reached his eyes. "Always," he breathed.

The full force of that one word stunned Beth. Matt softly lowered his mouth to hers, and his intense gentleness was overwhelming. He clung to her, shared his bed with her, and she understood this bed was his-- his ground, his territory, his wife.

Even though he had backed away from the line drawn in her heart, Beth secretly feared one day, she would be forced to choose. Luke, or Matt? Since her love had been forever sworn to Luke, she feared to her very core it would leave no room for Matt. The thought terrified her to the point of panic.

This intensely serious friendship was getting out of control, and she wildly fought to keep her balance. Falling in love with Matt was not an option, a heart-wrenchingly tender choice she could never make.

End of story, period.

And yet...

When gravity pulls, and that direction is the same as the one you're currently traveling, it's difficult not to admit you're falling.

The loud splat at the end is a dead giveaway.
"Set me as a seal upon thine 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. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned."
~ Song of Solomon 8:6, 7 ~
Chapter Twenty-four
Making It Count

"And ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart."
~ Jeremiah 29:13 ~

If Aiden minded their absence late Sunday afternoon, he didn't let it show at the dinner table. He ate and talked without once giving Matt the hard steeled gaze that commanded "hands off my daughter." Interesting, Matt decided, and tried not to act as though he noticed. Aiden had earlier called him a good man, even compared him to Luke, and it appeared Aiden had yet to take it back. Though Matt felt Aiden's assessment came from the relief of Matt's promise not to mistreat Beth if she could never return Matt's love, Matt didn't take Aiden's compliment lightly. Matt knew enough of Aiden's veracity to believe Aiden had given his actual opinion.

Odd, but Matt felt as though he understood his father-in-law. For all the difference in age and background, they shared a certain degree of sameness that they both recognized and respected. Matt didn't feel he deserved that respect, but after the long walk that afternoon, the two men had came to an understanding. They both loved Beth, and the knowledge of it seemed to comfort Aiden.

If only Mrs. Campbell could also understand, without things being painted in bright colors for her to see them. Beth didn't want to move Cassie out of the master bedroom, and Mom just couldn't understand why, until Beth took her outside for a private talk. When they came in, Mom tried to find another arrangement that would work, but Beth stopped her before she finished getting the words out of her mouth. They would be fine the way things were. In a day or two, after Dad drove Daniel and the twins home, she and Matt could take the twins' room. This was said without Daniel in earshot, and though Mom wanted to "make it work," Mom finally backed off and let Beth handle the situation the way she wanted.

Even though the thought crossed Matt's mind to toss a mattress on the floor of the hobby room, he held himself back and kept quiet.

He was getting good at keeping quiet.

His past still held a doozy of a secret, and oh, by the way, he had fallen in love with Beth. It seemed no matter which way he turned, he had to bottle in what he felt. And it wasn't getting any easier.
That night, same as the night before, Beth squeezed in beside Matt, and they shared the nursery with the boys. It pained Matt not to have privacy, but he strangled himself with patience. Spooned behind Beth, he clutched her hard until she whimpered and her hand moved to his arm. He nuzzled into that wild mass of curls, pressed his lips behind her ear. Those soft fingers caressed him, until the hand fell away and he heard her sleep.

He wanted to shake her gently until she looked into his soul and understood he loved her. They had made love that afternoon, and not once had the word "love" passed between them. Did she understand? Did she realize those long caresses, those gentle kisses came from deep inside him? He felt as though she were digging herself into him, wrapping her slender fingers around his naked heart, and squeezing him within an inch of his life. Love was a desperate, terrible thing, that needed to be acknowledged.

That afternoon, he had tried to woo her-- to not take, but give. He had been so gentle it nearly killed him, but she had to know. He needed her to know. She was different. All that wanting, all that needing, hadn't come from simply lust. It had come from love, and to Matt, that made all the difference in the world.

Did she understand?

His secret love burned him, scalded him from the inside out. She had to know. He already knew it would give her pain, and that reason alone kept him from hauling her into the bathroom, waking her up and spilling out his heart at her feet.

Despite the pain, something had to change.

He couldn't live this way, with love wrenching him one way, and her, the other. How many times during those soft kisses, had she tried to soothe him with passion instead of love? He had wooed her with gentleness, and she had answered with something very close to lust. He wanted to grab Dylan, return to the bathroom and get her to hum that lullaby so they could sway and reclaim that tender moment. Had he been dreaming? Was he so delirious, had he felt something that wasn't really there? Matt couldn't be sure, but sometime after she had asked him if he was still her sweet darling, and he had said "yes," he had felt an undercurrent of resistance to his gentleness. As much as he thanked God for that afternoon, it had been a bittersweet experience.

There was no way around it. He had to tell her. She wouldn't like it, but they had to find a way to live with it. She would want to keep Dylan, Ryan, Cassie, and even Ethan. She didn't want to be alone so she would tolerate unwanted love. She would tolerate Matt's love.

Wouldn't she?
Uncertainty made him clutch her harder, until once again, her hand raised to touch his arm. She patted him, then went back to sleep.

Okay, tomorrow. He'd tell her in the morning and get it over with.

Until then... he rolled her onto her back and kissed those sleeping lips until they responded to his touch. He hugged her, buried his kisses against her skin and prayed for courage.

It seemed to Beth that Matt was intent on keeping her awake the entire night. Just when she fell asleep, his lips would stir her awake and she would find herself kissing him. He held her until she slept, then kissed her awake with such gentleness, it nearly brought tears to her eyes. He hunted her incessantly, gave her no mercy when she needed to sleep, and yet held her with such exquisite tenderness she wanted to shake him and tell him to cut it out.

The boys were asleep in the nearby bed, and the knowledge of it held them back from anything more demonstrative. But still, she felt as though he were trying to tell her something through his actions, instead of nestling his mouth against her ear and whispering what he wanted.

Whatever it was, Beth was certain he wanted something. What that something was, she refused to recognize, but it was there, lying between them, getting in the way even though she struggled to ignore its presence.

When morning came, she ran.

Matt jolted awake. He reached to Beth's side of the mattress, and grimaced when he found it empty. He fist ed his hand, closed his eyes and bit back the curse he felt teetering on the edge of his tongue. She'd escaped while he slept, and now he had to go hunt her down.

He should have told her before morning. Before breakfast.

Rolling out of bed, he grabbed his jeans and noticed Dylan was missing from the crib. She must have him.

Pulling a shirt over his head, Matt strode out of the room and went in search of Beth. Sneaky of her to get up before he did. It almost made him think she knew he wanted to tell her something—something that she probably didn't want to hear.
Tough. There wasn’t a romantic bone in her body that didn’t belong to Luke, but she would have to get over it and accept the fact that another man loved her. It would give her pain, but she’d survive.

How he’d survive, was another matter.

"Hey, Dan." Matt nodded to the man folding blankets on the couch. "You seen Beth?"

"I think she’s still in the kitchen." Daniel pushed up his glasses, smiled as he piled the thick blanket with the others. "You and Beth missed breakfast, but Mom said she’d fix you scrambled eggs when you got up."

"Thanks." Matt pushed into the kitchen, and found Mom cleaning the stovetop. Beth was nowhere in sight.

"Good morning," Mom smiled, and went to the fridge to get some eggs. "Beth said to let you sleep in since you don’t go into the nursery on Mondays. I fixed breakfast for the kids, and made sure they ate before Ethan and Cassie left for school."

"Man, I forgot all about that. It’s Monday." Matt fist ed his hand, shot Mom a look. "Did Ethan take my truck?"

"Yes, he said he had your permission."

"Yeah, I guess he did. Where’s Beth?"

"I believe she left for work a few minutes ago."

"She what?" Matt twisted around to find a clock, any clock that would give him the time.

"If you’re looking for Dylan, Dad has him and the little ones in the second master bedroom. I believe they’re watching the Sesame Street DVDs Daniel brought from home."

"Great. Just great." Matt slumped against the counter. Beth had escaped twice that morning, and now he had no truck to get into town. He looked up to see Mom still standing at the refrigerator with a carton of eggs.

"Do you want some breakfast?" she asked.
"No thanks." Matt shoved away from the counter. "I must be losing my mind. Your daughter has me one step away from total insanity and I've never been happier in my life. It's driving me nuts."

Smiling, Mom put the eggs back in the fridge. "Dad told me about your talk yesterday. Even though I already suspected it, I'm glad you love Beth."

"Yeah, well tell that to her." Matt rubbed the back of his neck. "No offense, but you and Aiden raised one determined woman. I thought I had her last night, I thought I was close. All I needed was to work her more, wear down her resistance, and this morning she got away. I'm stupid, so stupid-- I should've talked to her before morning." He pounded the air with his fist. "I don't suppose I could bum a ride from you into town?"

"Did you and Beth have a fight?"

"We're working on one." Matt looked about for a clock. "What time is it?"

"I think it's after eight-thirty."

"That late? Then the store's already open."

"Is something wrong between you and Beth?"

"You could say that." He paused, realized he might have been too abrupt and tried to slow down enough to thank her. "I'm grateful you and Dad are looking after the kids. I appreciate your feeding them, and all the babysitting you've been doing. And I really appreciate your help during the move."

Mom nodded. "But you'd like me to please mind my own business."

"I wasn't going to say that."

"Weren't you?" Mom toweled down the island counter. "It's what Beth would say."

"I'm not Beth."

"Then you wouldn't mind a little advice?"

"Sure," he lifted a shoulder, "especially if it'll get me a ride into town."
Mom gave a slight smile, set aside the hand towel and looked him in the eye. "I don't pretend to understand everything that's going on between you and Beth, but I want you to know I appreciate the way you've been treating her. This situation is, I'm sure, not easy for you, but I admire your character for not taking it out on my daughter."

"It might be too soon to thank me," Matt nodded, "but I appreciate the fact you appreciate it. So what's your advice?"

"To continue loving her, if you have the courage." Mom inhaled deeply, looked past the kitchen, through the dining room and out the glass doors. "Patience isn't an easy thing to ask a man, but Beth is still getting over Luke's death." Mom looked back at Matt. "Surely, you already know this."

He nodded. "It's been really tough on her."

"Do you also know she blames herself for his accident?"

The question caught Matt by surprise. "Pardon?"

"Then you don't know." Mom bit her lip, much the same way Beth did when she was thinking. "I'm not sure how much she would want me to tell you. She hardly ever talks about it, even though I'm certain she hasn't forgotten.

"After Luke died, Aiden and I tried to pull her out of all that guilt, all that grief. She buried herself so completely, shut herself off from everyone so entirely, that for a long time she couldn't speak to us without it turning into an argument. She later apologized, but I couldn't help feeling that we'd somehow lost a part of her. When she called to tell us she'd gotten married, I hoped that someone had been able to cut through all that grief and reached her."

"Mom, I--" Matt huffed out a sigh. "I don't think it's a good idea to pin all your hopes on me. I don't know anything about her feeling guilty about Luke's death, but so far, I've basically struck out with her. She's been making love without the love, and it's killing me." Matt shook his head. "I don't know what to tell you. I'm trying."

"Please keep trying."

He reached for something to comfort Beth's mother, but couldn't find the words. Frustration balled his fists, and he cast about for a clock before remembering there wasn't one in the kitchen-- at least, not one he could find.
"Wait here a moment," Mom said, then disappeared into the living room.

Matt had difficulty not jogging out of the house and braving the freeway on foot. Crazy, he knew, but he had to get into Las Cruces.

When Mom came back in, she handed over car keys with some sort of airplane hanging from its keychain. She was letting him take their sedan.

"Thank you." Gripping the keys, Matt forced himself not to run out the door. He wanted to say something nice to Mom, but his thoughts kept racing back to Beth.

Mom touched his arm. "Go to her."

He pushed out of the kitchen with one thing, and one thing only, on his mind. Beth.

Frustration nipped at Beth as she stared at the clock on the desk. Sylvia had come in late as usual, but Amy still hadn't shown up. Served her right for keeping people on the payroll who chronically had trouble getting into work on time. For once, Beth wanted to see them arrive when they were supposed to. She pushed back the stray lock of hair that had pulled from her braid. On days like this, she felt like snipping her hair short and forgetting she owned a brush.

If only Matt had let her sleep, she would have been in a better mood. If he had taken her somewhere private and let off some steam, instead of pushing at her defenses all night, she would have been able to shrug off Amy's tardiness. Instead, Beth was chasing back a headache with two Tylenol, and thinking of ways to punish Sylvia for spilling fish emulsion in aisle three. The stench filled the store, and Beth hoped it wouldn't keep customers from staying long enough to buy something. She needed the business.

She needed employees who showed up on time, and she needed a husband who didn't keep pushing at her at all hours of the night. Oh, but he could kiss. The feel of him tugged her back to last night, and she fought to reclaim her focus.

Little by little, Matt was driving her crazy.

She shoved her hands into the loose pockets of her baggy overalls. The store was empty, save Sylvia sulking by the cash register with a tabloid that proclaimed the breakup of yet another celebrity couple.
Not a good day for relationships, Beth thought darkly. Forgetting to put on her sunhat, she started to go outside when someone came into the store. Since Sylvia was busy, Beth went to go see to the customer.

The man wanted a wheelbarrow, but since his wife did more gardening than he did, would a garden cart be a better choice? Beth led him to the carts, showed him something within his price range. Someone came through the store entrance.

"I don't know," the man hesitated. "It's not very well built."

"I'm afraid if you want something better, it'll cost more." Beth showed him the next step up which had a more solid construction. Her eyes flicked around the store. And skidded to a stop when she saw Matt.

The Stetson was in his hand, and he was headed in her direction. The grim determination on his face had her heart skittering for some place to hide.

She moved to the other side of the man, showed him another garden cart.

"This one's too heavy," the man said, going back to the second model. "Does it come with a warranty?"

"Uh..." Beth snapped her eyes back to the cart, struggled for composure. "I'm sorry, what was the question?"

"Beth," Matt beelined down the aisle, "we need to talk."

"Does this one have a warranty?" The man pulled on the handle, turned it over to inspect the bottom.

"Yes, I think--"

"Beth--"

"Not now, Matt. Yes, I believe there's a twelve month warranty on this model."

Matt huffed out a sigh, shifted his weight from one booted foot to the other, then back again. When she dared to meet his gaze, she shuddered inwardly at the intensity she saw flashing from those dark eyes.
"Does it come in any other colors?"

"Excuse me?"

"The garden cart. Any other colors than black?"

"No, I'm sorry. Black is all there is." Beth refused to look at Matt. It simply wasn't safe.

"I guess this one will do." The man sighed, nodded, then hoisted the cart upright. "Do you have any shovels?"

"Yes, follow me--"

"Beth." Matt pressed closer, and the man backed off with his garden cart, obviously having gotten the message, and ducked down the next aisle.

She placed her hands on her hips, shot a look at Matt. "That wasn't necessary."

"It was," Matt insisted. "He was in the way."

"He's a customer. He's supposed to be in the way."

"I have to talk to you."

"Talk to me later. I'm busy."

He surged forward, kissed her until her back knocked against the display rack. She pushed him away, heard him struggle to catch his breath as they stared at each other.

"Matt, go home."

"I need to talk to you, Beth. Please."

The struggling desperation in Matt's voice made her knees weak. Morning stubble darkened his jaw, gave him a rugged look that only added to the danger straining between them like binding wire about to snap.

"I have to tell you something." He took a step forward, stopped when she tried to move away. "You aren't going to like this."
"Then don't say it." Beth turned to see the man in the next aisle watching them. He resumed his shopping, and Beth could hear the squeak of the garden cart as it was pushed to the checkout.

"Beth, could we go into your office?"

"I don't think so." Beth shoved the lock of hair from her eyes, swore she'd hack it off the first chance she got. "If you have something you want to say, then please get it over with. I have work to do."

A sigh erupted from Matt. "Do you have to be so stubborn?"

"I am not stubborn. I'm dedicated."

"You're dedicated, all right. To a cold grave, and a man gone for four years."

"Don't say that. You've got no right."

Hurt shot into his eyes. His jaw clenched, and she began to regret her words.

He looked away, then turned back to her with a strong undercurrent of force in his gaze. "The office. Please."

"Okay, fine." She led the way past the checkout where Sylvia and the customer had been watching, then went back to switch on the speakers. Background music floated from different parts of the store where speakers were hidden behind planters. Beth took one look at Matt, punched the volume higher, then stalked into the office. If she and Matt were going to fight, at least Sylvia and the customer wouldn't hear them.

Without a word, Matt closed the window office blinds, shut the door for privacy. Beth wished he hadn't.

"I'm not going to make love in here."

He shook his head. "I didn't come for that."

"Then why did you come?"

He backed away from her, as though he didn't quite trust himself. "You aren't making this easy, Beth."
She shoved her hands onto her hips, waited for him to speak. And desperately prayed he’d change his mind and go home.

"I went by my place before I came here." He fumbled the hat in his hand. Strong fingers, firm hands. Beth closed her eyes to push away the intimate feel of Matt's presence.

"Beth, just hear me out a moment. I have to get this out. I have to, or I’ll go insane. I can't hold it in anymore."

"Hold what in?" She opened her eyes, and dared him to say it to her face.

"Wow, you're good at that." He sat on the desk, hiked a boot on the mini fridge. "You should get that patented-- the Beth Carter cold shoulder. You could put it on the shelf next to the pesticides. Put a sign over it-- 'How to get rid of unwanted pests.'"

"Matt, you're putting words in my mouth that weren't there."

"Maybe." He looked down at the floor and sighed. "It's funny, but working around all those plants out there, I couldn't tell you the proper name for any one of them."

"What?"

He shook his head. "People come up to me and ask questions, and I have no idea what they're talking about. Those fancy, scientific names you rattle off to customers are really something. I can't do that."

"I don't expect you to."

"Yeah, I'm only the hired help."

"Matt--"

"It's okay, Beth. The truth sometimes hurts, but it doesn't stop it from being true."

The hard line Matt was taking had Beth wishing he'd left the office door open, if only to keep herself from melting into his arms. Five feet away, and she could still feel him.

"I don't know how to break this to you"-- Matt placed his hat on the desk, brim side down-- "I know how much you don't want crazy love."
"Matt, please don't."

"I have to. It's killing me not to tell you."

Hot seared her eyes. She blinked, willing back the tears that wanted to escape.

"I love you, Beth. God help me, but somewhere along the way, I fell in love. I can't tell you when it happened, only that it did and that I'm not sorry I fell. I know it'll hurt you, but when we got married it backed us into a corner that forced us to look at each other. I've been looking, Beth, and I like what I see. I like you a lot, and that liking has turned into love."

Beth covered her trembling lips.

"I'm crazy about you, and I've tried to show you that. You may want sensible love, or no love at all, but I'm afraid I'm way past that point. I've fallen hard."

Those tender words, framed in that steadfast tone, had such impact she couldn't move.

"I know I'm not much. You called me trailer trash once, and you're not that far off." He reached under the Stetson, pulled out a small bundle of weeds bound with a garbage bag twister. "Like I said, I went by my house before I came here to give myself time to think. While I was parked on the street, I saw these dandelions in the front yard." He looked over the yellow desert flowers with their fine-toothed leaves and narrow stalks. "I've always thought of you as a rose, something cultivated and looked after, probably labeled with a fancy scientific name that meant you're out of my reach. But me, I'm nothing but ordinary dandelions."

Her breath caught as he offered her the sunny blooms. "I'm not asking you to return my love, Beth. I'm only asking you to accept it."

She reached for his hand, felt his rough fingers, caressed them tenderly. And took the dandelions.

He stepped away from the desk, and she felt him watch as she hugged his gift to her heart.

"It's not fair to you, Matt."

"Let me be the one to worry about that." He moved close. She sensed he was testing the waters by touching her cheek, then he reached his arms around her like a drowning man reaching for a life jacket. She felt his desperation, alive and vivid with love.
“Matt, I shouldn’t accept these dandelions.”

“Too late now,” he said, swallowing her in a huge embrace.

“Matt, I can’t--”

“Hush, please hush. Don’t say it. Once was enough, and I don’t think I could live through hearing it a second time. You don’t have to say it. I know.” His lips touched the tip of her nose. “I love you, Beth. I’ll love you till the day I die. Say you’ll let me love you.”

“It wouldn’t be kind.” She tried to reason with him, but he wouldn’t hear it. His lips eagerly sought hers, and once again she was crushed by exquisitely tender love. She gripped the dandelions, and lost herself in that engulfing kiss. “I’m sorry, Matt.”

He said nothing, but hugged her so tight she had to gasp for breath.

“Oh, you smell of jasmine. If you wanted me to stay away, Beth, you shouldn’t have put that on. I love you and I love that jasmine.” He sought her mouth, kissed her while she blindly reached for the lock on the door handle. They needed the privacy.

Love hugged her, smothered her with kisses, then sucked the air from her lungs until she gave up trying to categorize her feelings with careful labels. Just like she organized plants in the nursery, or product in a display. Matt blew her away with his love. He offered it without hesitation, needed her to accept it so desperately, she felt helpless to do anything but comply.

When they were both thinking more calmly, she tugged a cold water bottle from the mini fridge while Matt pulled on his shirt. She unscrewed the cap, took a long bracing drink, then handed the bottle to Matt so she could finish fastening her overalls.

It still didn’t seem fair to accept those wonderful dandelions, those sweet homegrown dandelions with the upturned faces filled with bright sunshine. They came with such love, it left her speechless, grasping for something suitable to say, something to say thank you. Something besides what they’d just done.

He set the water on the desk, came to her and hugged her tight.

“I love you.”

“You keep saying that.”
"That's because it's true, and I like hearing the sound of it. I love you. I love you, Beth."

"Each time you say it, I feel guilty I can't say it back." She pulled away, picked up her dandelions and admired their beauty. After today, she'd never again look at these weeds in the same way. Suddenly they were precious gifts, each one holding a promise that someone loved her.

"Don't feel guilty, please don't." Matt slid an arm around her, pulled her back against him in a warm cuddle. "I don't need to hear it to be happy. I swear I don't." His lips curved upward, and she was caught in his boyish smile. "Those green eyes," he mused softly. "Deep green with flecks of gold, and they're flashing at me like emeralds. I'm a rich man, I'm blessed." He kissed her, and she melted into him like butter on a fresh biscuit right out of the oven. Melted into every nook and cranny of his love, held on as he enjoyed the feel of her in his arms.

She felt swallowed alive by Matt, overwhelmed to the point of tears. She hadn't basked in so much love since Luke had held her. She could almost close her eyes and pretend it was Luke, but no, that urgency again, that exquisite gentleness that was all Matt's. Against such absolute gentleness, she had no defense. None whatsoever. Before she could stop them, hot tears spilled down her cheeks.

"Don't cry, Beth. Please don't cry." He kissed her, and she gulped in his love like a fish returning to the sea. His hand smoothed her hair, pulled her closer. He kissed her wet cheeks, trembling lips, even her chin, then held her until the tears stopped from the sheer joy of his love.

By the time she opened the office door, she felt weak but outrageously happy. Happier than she felt she deserved. Matt had asked for so little, there was no room to question his feelings for her. It left her wide open, somehow changed even though she'd never said anything about what she felt for Matt.

He had pulled her out of something deep and dark, and the light on her shoulders felt foreign and yet strangely familiar. She had walked this way with Luke, had seen the scenery before, and yet... this was different in a way she couldn't understand. The ground beneath her feet felt like granite, the full weight of the earth warning her that if she fell, there would be no soft place to land. One wrong step, and down she'd go, filled with guilt for the man who couldn't be there to defend himself against Matt's love.

Beth remembered her mom saying that all things happen for a reason, that God doesn't do anything without one.
As Beth watched Matt leave the store, on his way home, she tried to find God’s reason for the turn of events in her life. From one perspective, things seemed to be working out cruelly against Luke, and yet from another, it seemed as though Matt’s love had been planned by God since the beginning of time. It didn’t make any sense.

Love didn't make any sense.

Ignoring Sylvia’s curious stare as Beth pushed past the register to work out back, Beth sent up a silent prayer to Heaven. She couldn't live this way, couldn't go on taking Matt’s love without giving something in return. Her parents hadn't raised her to be so unfair, and she knew something would have to change. Matt had fallen in love. Poor man, he fell in love with his wife, and now it was all on her. She had to be the one to change.

Fear tightened her stomach as she rounded the building.

She was being forced to choose.

Reaching out, she braced herself against the potting table and commanded herself to breathe. She would not faint. She would not pass out. She would pray and plead for mercy.

When the blood had drained back to her head, Beth pulled the cell phone from her pocket. And called her mother.

The air still held a thrill of wonder in it as Matt headed for home. The sedan clipped past buildings, then the open spaces of farm that signaled he was nearing Beth's house. His pulse raced, but he could see straight and he was breathing. He was alive. He'd told Beth how much he loved her-- or at least had tried to-- and he was still alive.

That was good. Wasn't it?

He turned the sedan off the highway, followed the dirt road that led to the house. Beth had turned him inside out then back again with that dazed look of overwhelmed emotion on her face. But she had accepted his love. She hadn’t necessarily tried to talk him out of it. She’d come close, saying it wasn’t fair to him, but that was okay. He could handle himself just fine without her worrying about his feelings.

The car rolled to a stop. He shut off the engine, sat with the keys in his hand while the strong breeze carried tufts of white dandelion seed over the hood of the car. He turned, noticed the
expanse of green, yellow and white spilling from beneath the protection of the tall tree that stood to the left of the house.

So there were dandelions here, as well. No huge surprise. Those things could grow anywhere, and did.

Matt swung open the car door, stepped out and tried not to acknowledge the ache in his heart. He was alive all right, but sadness dogged every step he took. He couldn't breathe without it clogging up his heart.

The memory of her reaching out and locking the office door, teased a smile from the sadness. Oh, yeah. He was in love. No doubt about it.

Tossing the keys into the air, Matt caught them, grinned, and went inside.

Mom's voice came from the kitchen, the kind of voice that sounded as though she were on the phone. Matt skirted the kitchen, rounded into the living room where Aiden sat watching television. Or rather, sat with the mute button on.

"What are you watching?" Matt asked, feeling confident enough to sit beside his father-in-law and toss the keys back to him. "Thanks for the wheels."

Silent, Aiden nodded, crammed the keys into his slacks pocket. He stilled, angled his ear toward the kitchen.

"Who's Mom talking to?" Matt asked.

When Aiden didn't answer, Matt grew uneasy. He got up to check the kitchen, leaned in the doorway, and listened. Mom had her back to him, and was standing beside the fridge, speaking in a low, concerned voice.

"Sweetheart, calm down." Mom sighed, shook her head with the receiver pressed to her ear. "You're hyperventilating. No, calm down before you pass out. Now take a deep breath, and start again from the beginning."

Okay, Matt thought, that had to be Fiona, because the Beth he knew would never hyperventilate. Beth was too steadfast to be such a thin flower that it couldn't find its breath. He thought of the red rose with its thick-stemmed backbone to bear a heavy bloom. Matt admired the rose for its strength, its ability to defend itself with thorns against predators-- men in love
and over-sentimental women. Beth would never hyperventilate. She was too sensible for that. It had to be Fiona.

"I don't understand, Sweetheart. He said he loved you. Isn't that what you wanted?"

Wait just a moment, Matt thought, and froze in his mental tracks. Mom could be talking to Fiona, though chances were high it was the other daughter. The one who'd just been kissed.


Okay, no question about it now. It was definitely Beth.

"No, I don't remember you ever mentioning anyone named Skip. You were dating him? Oh, Beth, not a married man."

Now Aiden moved into the doorway beside Matt, his face stone serious.

"You broke it off-- that's good to hear. Beth, wait... Beth, I'm trying to understand. I really am. Let me see if I can get this straight: Skip was never a serious threat, because he didn't love you. You were safe from falling in love, even though that's what you wanted, just not with Skip because you could never love him and he didn't love you. I'm not sure that makes any sense, but keep going."

Aiden elbowed Matt. "Who's Skip?"

"Some guy Beth knew," Matt said, trying not to lose his place in the one-sided conversation.

Mom leaned against the center island, her back still to the men. "Okay. You wanted Matt to love you--"

Matt turned hopeful.

"And that's not good, because he really does love you?"

The hope turned into numb heartache.

"Beth, do you want Matt's love, or don't you? Stop dragging Luke into this. It wasn't your fault, you don't owe him that. He wouldn't expect it of you, Sweetie."
Frowning, Aiden shouldered past Matt, went around the center island to put his ear closer to the receiver. Matt wished he could do the same.

"Beth, no, no. Take a deep breath, you need to stay calm--" Mom stared at the phone, then at Aiden. "I think she just fainted."

His heart in his throat, Matt tore out of the kitchen, only dimly aware of Aiden's presence behind him. He fumbled for keys in his pants pocket, then realized he'd given them back to Aiden.

Matt was in the lead, but by the time they reached the front door, both men tried to go out at the same time. Shoulder to shoulder, they couldn't make it, until Aiden finally stepped back and let Matt push through first. Mom followed on Aiden's heels.

"I told Dan to look after the kids," Mom said, as she hurried around to the passenger side.

The rear doors were locked, and Matt waited a frantic moment for someone-- anyone-- to unlock the door so he could go with them. Aiden switched up the lock, and Matt climbed in.

"You just came back from the nursery, didn't you?" Aiden shot Matt a look by way of the rearview mirror. "What did you do to her?"

"I didn't do anything." Matt couldn't get his hands to stop shaking long enough to fasten the seat belt and gave up. He pictured Beth unconscious somewhere, and all because of him. She had fainted, actually passed out. Beth was more solid than that, although he had to admit she'd been under a lot of stress, lately. He knew, for after last night, he had been the cause of it.

Mom turned in her seat. "You don't suppose she's pregnant, do you?"

"No, not possible." Matt shook his head. "We've been using protection."

"I don't need to hear this right now," Aiden said as he jerked the car onto the freeway. "She's not pregnant, Shannon. That's not what's going on here, and we both know it."

"She's blaming herself," Mom said with a knowing nod. "I had hoped she was over it, but she's still blaming herself for what happened to Luke."

"What do you mean? What happened to him?" Matt leaned forward in the seat. "I thought Luke died in a plane crash."
"He did, he did." Mom covered her mouth, her thoughts straying even as she spoke. "For once in my life, I wish we carried a cell phone."

At this, Matt remembered his was still in his pocket. He pulled it out, punched Beth's number and waited. "Come on, Beth. Pick up."

It rang, then rang again. On the third ring, Matt heard Beth's voice.

"Matt, is that you?"

"Who else would be using this number? Beth, are you all right? What happened? Mom said you fainted."

"I-- I think I must have. Silly of me, really. I was talking to Mom, and I guess I panicked."

"But are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine. My pride's a little bruised, but I'm okay."

"What's she saying?" Aiden demanded from up front. "Peanut, we're coming! Hold on!"

"We're on our way to the nursery," Matt told her. "We thought you needed help."

"No, please, no." A loud sigh sounded in his ear. "Okay, I'll meet you guys here. Nothing's broken, and I didn't even hit my head on anything, so please tell them to calm down."

"Give me that phone," Aiden reached over his shoulder, waited for Matt to pass the cell phone up front.

As much as Matt didn't want to, he gritted his teeth and passed it to Aiden.

Aiden put the cell to his ear, said something, then handed it to Mom.

"She hung up," Aiden shot another look at the rearview mirror, and it bounced back hard at Matt.

"I didn't do anything to her." Matt wrestled to stay calm. "I only told her I loved her."

"And that's it? That's all you did this morning?"
"Yes-- no, wait. We made love in her office."

"Figures," Aiden muttered. "You two have been chasing each other hard the past few days. I don't suppose you'd consider giving her a break?"

Matt unclenched his fist. "I would, if I thought she needed one."

"Aiden, please. This isn't helpful." Mom pursed her lips, rubbed her forehead as though fighting back a headache. "They're on their honeymoon, for pity's sake. What do you expect?"

"I was only asking a question," Aiden said, as Mom handed the cell back to Matt. "Why aren't you calling her back?" Aiden asked.

"If she wanted to talk to us," Mom reasoned, "she would have stayed on the phone. She knows we're coming, doesn't she Matt?"

"Yes, she knows." Matt held onto the cell phone. Never in all his life had a woman passed out when he told her he loved her. Of course, Beth was only the second woman he'd ever told that to, so he didn't have a lot of experience to go by. Helen had been his first, but she hadn't passed out at his news.

The cell phone rang, and Matt answered without even checking caller ID.

"Matt?" The emotion in Beth's voice trembled, like someone balancing on the edge of someplace high and trying to find the guts to jump off. It put a lump in his throat the size of a basketball. "You're coming, aren't you, Matt? You're coming with Dad and Mom?"

"Sure I am, but you don't sound so good."

"Matt, I need to tell you something."

"Is that her?" Aiden nearly swerved into the oncoming traffic. "Give me the phone. I want to talk to her."

Matt scowled into the rearview mirror. "She called me."

"Matt, please, I have to tell you something."

"I'm here, Beth. I'm here."
She hesitated. "Do you think someone would hold me to a promise I made when I thought it was the right thing to do? Can I change my mind later?"

"I don't understand. You have to be more specific."

"Do you think," Beth quavered again and Matt braced himself for the kersplat of something hitting the ground, "do you think Luke would hold me to a promise that he might not want me to keep?"

"Beth, just think about that for a moment. If it's not good for you, then of course he wouldn't. If I were him, I sure know I wouldn't. What's this about?"

"I'll tell you when you come."

"You're not going to pass out again, are you?"

"No. Just hurry."

"Your dad's pushing the speed limit as we speak."

"Okay, I'll see you soon."

Before Matt could stop her, Beth hung up. He put away the phone, worried over the odd conversation he'd just had with the woman he loved.

"What did she want?" Aiden asked, a little less demanding this time.

"I don't know." Matt was at a loss to know what to tell him. "She mentioned something about a promise to Luke, then said she'd explain when I got there."

"So," Aiden sighed, that one word hanging in the air for several moments, "this has something to do with Luke, after all. I thought as much."

"Mom," Matt slid forward on the seat, "earlier, you said Beth felt guilty about Luke. What did you mean?"

"After Luke died," Mom's voice sounded wistfully painful, "Beth folded up like a lawn chair and shut down. She barely made it through the funeral, with those two caskets setting side by side—one big, the other small. So small."
"Don't talk about it, Shannon. It'll only make things worse."

"I want to talk about it. I think we should. For a year after the accident, we couldn't talk to Beth without it turning into an argument, so we got used to holding our peace."

"That's because she wouldn't listen. Just stayed in bed all day, crying. The nursery shut down for a year, and Beth wouldn't let us stay to take care of her. Life just stopped for her." Aiden sighed deeply, and Mom turned in her seat to look at Matt.

"Before the accident, she and Luke had a fight-- a fairly big one, according to her. She said some things she regretted later, some very hurtful things that wounded Luke when he left the house with Caleb. The three of them were supposed to fly down to his parents' house in California to celebrate his mom's birthday. Beth never got on the plane."

"The Carters had no right blaming her for what happened," Aiden said with a huff. "They don't know things would have worked out any differently if the fight had never taken place. Only then, we'd have been burying three caskets instead of two."

"The crash was investigated," Mom said, "and it was concluded that pilot error was to blame. Luke was an excellent pilot, and that hurt his parents to hear. I think shifting blame to our daughter was just a way for them to handle the pain. He was their only son, you know."

Matt didn't know. Most of this was news to him, but then, he and Beth didn't usually talk about their past, especially to each other. He was busy trying to forget his, and she was struggling to live with hers. Both, it seemed, had carried a lot of baggage into this relationship.

The conversation stopped as the sedan pulled into the nursery parking lot. Matt jumped out before Aiden had a chance to pull the keys out of the ignition, sped into the store, took off his hat and scanned the aisles.

"She's in the office," Sylvia said, sitting at a stool beside the register. "She fainted next to the potting table, and I helped her inside. She looks paler than usual, but then, Beth always did look washed out."

Biting back a retort, Matt shoved his way to the back of the store, past garden displays and two surprised customers.

Through the open office door, he saw Beth sitting in her swivel chair, her elbows on her knees, her head in her hands. She looked up when he entered. Sylvia was right, Beth did look pale.
Thankfully, he didn't have to coax Beth into his arms. She came with a grateful cry, and said nothing as he stood there holding her.

The sound of Aiden and Mom didn't distract Matt from looking Beth over. He pulled her around, moved her arms, felt her head for bumps or bruises. Aside from the distress on her face, she looked unharmed.

As Aiden stepped into the office, Beth hid herself against Matt. Matt kept his arms around her, held her even tighter while Aiden stared in relief at his daughter. Mom hurried forward, brushed past Aiden and hugged Beth. Even with Mom hugging Beth from behind, Beth didn't let go of Matt.

"I'm sorry for scaring everyone. I'm all right."

"You fainted, Sweetheart. " Mom looked at her daughter squarely. "I've never known you to faint before-- not even when you were pregnant with Caleb."

"I know. Who's watching the children?"

"Dan's taking care of them," Matt said, as a sigh moved through Beth. She closed her eyes, leaned into Matt and he felt her fatigue. Too many emotions rolling through her that morning, too many things she had to think through. Matt could feel her trying to think something through, could almost hear the gears in her head turning, and hugged her all the tighter. He didn't understand what was happening, but whatever her problem, he wouldn't let her go. He'd be there no matter what.

Aiden frowned. "Give her some room to breathe. You're holding her too hard." He limped to the chair, sat down with a groan. In all the hurry, everyone had forgotten his twisted knee.

Mom checked Beth's forehead, though Matt had already done the same and could have told her there wasn't any temperature. Mom caressed Beth's cheek, then stepped back to look at them. Matt could only imagine the picture they must have made. He could feel their eyes on him, and he couldn't help squeezing Beth even harder.

To his amazement, Beth didn't complain.

He looked down at her, nestled and hidden against his shoulder. "What did you want to tell me?" he asked.
Conflicted emotions chased across Beth's face. Her knees buckled, and Matt scooped her into his arms and carried her to the desk. He set her down on the desk, let Mom rub one of Beth's hands while Aiden rubbed the other.

"I'm not going to faint," Beth told them.

"Are you sure you're not pregnant, Sweetie?"

"No, Mom, I'm sure."

Pale, and still trembling like a leaf, Beth pulled her hands from them, then looked at Matt. "Oh, Matt. What have I done?"

"I don't know," he hesitated. "What have you?"

She reached out, touched his cheek with gentle fingers. He melted against her hand.

She opened her mouth, waited a breathless moment as Matt's heart stopped. Then she pushed out the words, "I've fallen in love with you."

The entire world came to a screeching halt. The earth must've stopped spinning on its axis, because to Matt, time stood absolutely still.

"No kidding?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'm afraid not. When you fell in love, I guess I must have tumbled in after you. Do you mind?"

A breathless laugh caught in his throat. Did he mind? She knew the question was unnecessary. He took her hand, pressed his lips to her palm and stood there, unbelievably light and oh-so happy. Beth, however, looked as though she were five seconds away from toppling off the desk.

Matt started rubbing her hand. "Beth, honey, you need to pull yourself together."

Aiden grabbed her other hand and followed Matt's example, while Mom checked Beth's forehead.

"Mom," Beth said it in so helpless a tone, she could've said Mommy, and it wouldn't have sounded any different, "how could I do this to Luke?"
"Luke is in Heaven, Sweetheart. I'm sure he doesn't mind. In fact, I'm guessing he's weeping tears of joy now that you've started loving again."

"But I promised him, Mom. Before they lowered the casket, I gave my word to never love another man but him. I made a vow to Luke that I didn't keep."

The way she worded it, made Matt feel strangely guilty.

"Seems to me," Aiden said, giving Beth's hand a pat between rubs, "you're being too hard on yourself. You're not having an illicit affair, you got married and fell in love with your husband. Nothing wrong with that."

"But Luke--"

"Is dead. You've got to let him go."

"But Daddy, it isn't fair to Luke. I never had the chance to tell him I was sorry."

"So you're going to spend the rest of your life ignoring what's right in front of you?" Aiden flashed a glance in Matt's direction. "Is it fair to this one? Is it? You didn't marry a pushover, Beth. He's made of stronger stuff than that, but even Matt has his limits. Don't push him away out of loyalty to Luke. Matt and Luke deserve better than that from you. They loved you for a reason, and it's high time--"

"Dear," Mom placed a hand on Aiden's shoulder, "don't say anything you're going to regret. I think Beth has the message."

"Bah. I was just getting to the good part." Aiden flashed a smile at Mom, and continued to rub Beth's hand until she winced and he had to surrender the role to Matt.

Beth's hand tightened around Matt's. "Could I speak to him in private?"

"Who-- Matt or Luke?" Aiden asked.

"Oh, Daddy."

"Okay, okay." Aiden pulled himself out of the swivel chair. "I'm only checking. If you start having long discussions with Luke, I'm going to get Brian to give you something to set your mind right. A sedative, or something. Grief does things to people, you know."
"I'm not that far gone, Daddy."

"Glad to hear it." Aiden hobbled out of the office, and Mom shook her head.

"You have your talk, but then I want you to close up shop and come home. You've been through enough for one day, and I want to see you rested and smiling before you open this store tomorrow. It isn't healthy to work yourself down to the bone."

"Thanks, Mom. I'll close up in a few minutes."

"You could also stand to put on a few more pounds--"

"Thank you, Mom." The gentle but firm tone pulled a smile from the concerned mother.

"Of all my babies, you've always been the most determined. That's a good trait to have, Elizabeth, as long as you maintain your balance and keep moving forward. You've been living in the past long enough. It's time to live your life." Mom hugged her daughter, heard someone clearing their throat, and turned to see Aiden standing just outside the office.

When Dad stepped inside to claim his hug, Beth gave her parents a smile that reminded Matt that even though these people sometimes had their differences, they truly were a family. After she thanked them for coming, the Campbells went into the store to let the newlyweds talk in private.

Letting the door stand open, Matt took a seat on the desk next to Beth. She looked at him, and he grinned. He couldn't help it.

"I'm glad you're happy, Matt. You deserve to be."

"No, I don't." Matt touched her hand. "I haven't seen you this shaken since Bailey died. I'd ask if you're certain you love me, but one look at you, and I know. You don't rattle easily, so you must have jumped."

"Excuse me?"

"Jumped, made the plunge, slipped on a banana peel." Matt dove his hand in a downward motion. "Any way you get there, it all ends up in the same place. You fell in love. I have to admit, when you fall, you really go for it. Nose-dived right into it, clutching me all the way."
The look in her velvet green eyes narrowed, and a smile hinted at her lips. "After this morning, I could say the same about you. I only fell because you took me with you. Even though I admit I've been leaning heavily in your direction for some time, it's still more your fault than mine, that I fell."

Matt grinned, then let the grin slip away as he remembered Beth's vow to Luke.

"He'd want you to be happy, Beth."

"I know. I keep telling myself that."

"Then keep saying it, because it's the truth. Aiden said Luke was a good man."

"He was."

"Then he would want the woman he loves to be happy."

Her eyes registered surprise. "Loves-- that's present tense."

"Well," Matt shrugged, "just because the guy's in Heaven, doesn't mean he stopped loving you. If I were him, I'd feel the same way. Even though I'd wish you were with me in Heaven, I'd know that since God didn't take you, it wasn't your time yet. That would mean you'd have to keep going without me."

She turned her gaze to the office floor. "It takes a lot of courage to do that."

"Sure it does," Matt bumped his shoulder against hers, "but you have that and some to spare."

"I don't deserve so much credit," Beth shook her head as Matt squeezed her hand. "Do you think Luke has forgiven me?"

"He was a good man, wasn't he? There's your answer."

"He was so hurt when he left the house." Beth bit her lip. "I never should have said what I did. I can't remember what started our argument, but I'll never forget the deeply hurt look in his eyes. Maybe I hurt him so badly, it distracted him from what he was doing and that's why the plane crashed."

"Beth, don't do this to yourself."
"I should have been there, Matt. I should have died with my family."

"But you didn't."

"But I should have. I shouldn't be here."

"Are you trying to say God made a mistake when He didn't include you?"

"No."

"Then you're supposed to be here. Beth, I've been learning something today, listening to your parents talk about Luke, and watching you grieve for him. We're alive at this moment, for this moment. Make it count. Reach the next moment, and do the same thing until you're all out of moments and God takes you. Do it for God, do it for Caleb. Do it for Luke."

Her slender hand interlocked with Matt's, and she squeezed tightly.

"Would you promise me something?" she asked.

"Name it."

"Never ask me if I love you more than Luke."

"I won't."

She bit her lip again, a cute habit Matt was really beginning to love. "Don't you need time to think it over?" she asked.

"You love me, right?"

She nodded "yes."

"Then I'll never ask which one of us you love more. I may share your heart with Luke, but it's my turn to hold you. Luke didn't make that decision, and neither did you or I. Those kinds of decisions are made by God, and until we see God face to face, we can't ask Him all the specifics of why He made things work out the way He did. He had His reasons. He wasn't sloppy, fell asleep at the wheel, and oops... there goes Luke. Nope. I don't buy it for a moment. God loved Luke and Caleb so much, He wanted them in Heaven because it was their time. God loves you, too, but it's not your time yet." Matt inhaled, gave Beth another shoulder bump. "God doesn't play dice with the universe."
Beth raised her eyebrows.

"What?" Matt asked.

"Albert Einstein said that."

"Did he?" Matt shrugged. "Knew I heard it someplace."

A smile crept to her lips.

"I'm a high school dropout, Beth. I never claimed I was smart."

Smiling, Beth bumped his shoulder. "Don't sell yourself short. You do pretty well."

He brushed the lock of hair that kept falling into her eyes. She touched his hand as it caressed her cheek, leaned forward and kissed his mouth.

"I love you, Matt."

The precious words settled on Matt's heart, sank through the outer husk scarred by the troubles of life, and soaked into the muscles that made it pump, day in and day out. That was something worth getting up every morning to hear, something worth holding onto when life got rough. And it would get rough, for if it didn't, it meant you were in Heaven with Luke, soaring with the angels.

For this earthbound turkey, Matt figured life had its golden moments. He could only trust in God's wisdom, and keep putting one foot in front of the other. He saw the rosy glow of courage flush into Beth's cheeks, and he took heart.

He loved, and was loved.

The truth of that was more than Matt could possibly take in. He thanked God, and helped Beth close the nursery so they could go home.

"Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints [Luke]."

~ Psalm 116:15 ~
"The LORD is my [Luke, Matt, and Beth's] shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake... Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever."
~ Psalm 23:1-3, 6 ~
Chapter Twenty-five
Walking Through Rainbows

"But let the righteous be glad; let them rejoice before God: yea, let them exceedingly rejoice."
~ Psalm 68:3 ~

On the ride home from the nursery, Matt and Beth sat in the backseat and held hands like infatuated teenagers.

It felt wonderful.

If Matt wasn't so afraid of shocking Aiden and Mom, he'd have unbuckled Beth's seatbelt and pulled her onto his lap for some serious necking. He knew that was out of the question, but at least they could kiss.

Matt glanced at the rearview mirror, caught Aiden checking him before his eyes flicked back to the road. Aiden slowed, switched lanes, and Matt could feel those eyes checking once more.

Let him watch, Matt decided, and leaned over and claimed Beth's mouth.

"You really shouldn't be driving," Mom said conversationally from the front seat.

"My knee's doing fine," came the short reply. Matt could feel the stare from the rear mirror, but Beth was cuddling and her hand was caressing his until he had to pull away and catch his breath.

A playful smile parted Beth's lips and Matt knew he wanted more.

"When do you plan on taking Daniel home?"

"Huh?" Aiden sounded distracted, and when Mom repeated the question she looked behind the seat to see what her husband kept checking.

"Are you two comfortable back there?"

Beth smiled. "Yes, Mom."

"Of course they're comfortable." Aiden switched lanes again. "They've been smiling and kissing ever since we left the nursery."
"Oh, hush." Mom looked back at the road but Matt could hear the smile in her voice.

"Matt." Beth whispered, gave a small tug at his arm and Matt had to kiss her.

The car changed lanes again, making Matt wonder if Aiden intended on passing every car from here to Beth's house.

"You shouldn't be driving to Santa Fe."

The talk up front was a vague blur in Matt's mind. He gave up the slender hand, put an arm around its owner and cuddled for everything he was worth.

"My knee's just fine, Shannon. If it wasn't, you'd be the one behind the wheel right now."

Silence. Then, "I think I should drive Daniel into Santa Fe, and not you."

"Bah. I've gotten enough rest to last a lifetime. I'll admit I'm still a bit sore, but I need to stop by the hangar, get some things done on the project before we come back to Las Cruces."

"You and your projects. If it's not one plane, then it's another."

"Those airplanes," Aiden said with a touch of wry humor, "are our bread and butter. That F6F Hellcat won't wait around forever. I had Wendell working on it before we left, and I need to check on his progress. This one's going to be a real eye-popper, Shannon."

"That may be, but Daniel did us a favor by staying behind to help with the move. I know he's eager to get home."

"Then you stay, and I'll drive."

"Aiden, I'm serious. Stop chuckling-- you're never easy to talk to when you're trying to tease me."

"I don't have to try hard," Aiden said with a huge smile in his voice. "Bah. They're at it again."

Swallowing hard, Matt pulled away from Beth and caught the hard edge of steel in the rearview mirror. It was hard to ignore.

"Leave them alone." Mom spoke in a hush loud enough to hear from the backseat. "Daniel and the kids need to go home, and so do we."
"We what?"

"You said it yourself, Aiden."

"What did I say? When?"

"Just now-- you said you needed to get back to your planes. I think we've imposed on Beth and Matt long enough. It's time we went home."

"Now just hold on." Aiden slowed, and the car stayed in the same lane. "We're not done visiting yet."

"I think we are." Mom's voice hushed again, and this time, Matt couldn't overhear.

Whatever shampoo Beth used, it smelled like a fresh breeze from off the desert. He nuzzled against her temple, her cheek, her mouth.

"Bah."

The one word startled Matt from his kiss.

"There's no need," Aiden said finally. "We're not getting in anyone's way if we stay longer." Then a little louder, "Isn't that right, Matt?"

With a low moan, Matt tried to think as Beth's hand caressed his chest.

"Hey, in the backseat."

"Sir?" Matt winced at the squeak in his voice, but Beth was making it impossible to pay attention.

"Never mind." In spite of himself, Aiden gave a resigned chuckle. "Guess I can't really blame you. If my in-laws had been around for my honeymoon, I know I'd be anxious to be rid of them as soon as possible."

"I'm not anxious." Matt cleared his throat, fought the catch in his breath as Beth cozied against him. "I'll admit we'd rather be alone, but that doesn't mean we want to get rid of you... necessarily."
A loud laugh burst from behind the wheel. "An honest man. Very well. We accept your invitation and will stay the month through."

"Daddy, you really shouldn't tease. Matt turned sheet-white."

"He did not." Another flick at the mirror. "Not sheet white, just a little white around the edges."

"Oh, you and your jokes." Shannon looked behind the seat. "Pay no attention to him. Tomorrow morning, we'll head up to Daniel and Fiona's, stay the night, then go back to Phoenix."

"Got it all planned out, have you?" Aiden was still laughing at his own humor. "I still don't know if I'm ready to leave yet." The hint of play in his tone made Matt uneasy. "Tell you what, Matt. I'll make you a deal. Cassie's been telling me what a fine musician you are."

Matt groaned. Not that. Please, God, anything but that.

"You get out that guitar Cassie says you hide from everyone but family, and play us something. Do that, and tomorrow morning, I'll take Mom, Daniel and the twins home. What do you say?"

"You don't have to play." Mom turned to look into the backseat. "We're leaving tomorrow morning, music or not."

"Don't tell him that." Aiden moved into the other lane. "Before we leave, I want to hear the music Cassie keeps telling me about. No one, and I do mean no one, in our family is the least bit musical. I once played the triangle in an elementary school play, but that hardly counts."

"I have to admit, she has told us a lot about your music, Matt." Mom gave him a smile, and to Matt's horror, he saw the same hope mirrored in Beth's face.

How had this happened? He'd been minding his own business, and suddenly everyone was expecting him to play.

"Have you heard him, Beth?"

"No, not yet." Beth batted her eyes. "Please, Matt? For me?"

"I'd rather not."

"You're not being very romantic."
"There's nothing romantic about the way I play, Beth. Without the radio on, it's just me and a secondhand guitar my dad bought when he was sober. It's the only thing he ever gave me that I bothered to keep." Matt heaved a sigh of relief when Beth's home came into view. He could make an excuse to use the bathroom, then not come out till the Campbells left the next day.

If only things were that easy.

He could tell Beth really wanted to hear him, and now that Aiden saw his embarrassment, Aiden suddenly found he truly wanted to hear Matt and his guitar.

Great. The thing probably needed to be tuned. And besides, Matt hadn't given up the possibility of hiding out in the bathroom.

The moment they walked into the house, Beth, of all people-- wasn't a wife supposed to be more loyal?-- told Daniel that Matt was going to perform for them after the older children returned from school.

What? When had that happened? Matt didn't remember saying anything in the car about when this awful event was supposed to take place. If it actually did, which he still wasn't sure it would.

As Daniel lifted a wide-awake Dylan into Matt's arms, Daniel gave a curious grin.

"Cassie said you were pretty good."

"Cassie has a big mouth." Even as he spoke, Matt couldn't help smiling at the infant peering up at him. Those wide dark eyes looked about, rested on Matt, then closed as if content to find he was with his big brother.

Whenever Matt held Dylan, that bond kept getting stronger.

"You know," Dan slid his hands into the pockets of his navy blue slacks, "Cassie said your guitar meant a lot to her when she was little. Her eyes teared up when she told me that, and I couldn't help wishing my siblings thought of me as their hero. I'm close to them, but nothing like what you share with your sister and brothers." Genuine admiration touched Dan's eyes, and Matt felt the lump growing in his throat. "Cassie also said whenever she or the others were sad, you'd sometimes play and everyone would sing."

Beth beamed like a noonday sun. "Isn't he the sweetest thing?"

"Aw, c'mon, Beth. Knock it off."
"Matt, you truly are. I just can't help it."

"Well try. Please." Matt gave her Dylan, pushed off to the nursery to go find the dumb guitar. With any providence, he'd find someone had smashed it during the move or misplaced it or-- oh good. Safe and sound where he'd hidden it behind the bed.

Okay. Matt had to face facts. He'd actually hidden the guitar so no one would think to ask him to play. While it was just him and the others, it was fine, but ever since Beth had entered the picture, his dread of making himself look like a guitar playing idiot had increased tenfold.

"Matt?"

He looked to the doorway and saw Beth without the baby.

"Dad asked to hold Dylan. I tried to make lunch, but Mom shooed me out of my kitchen."

Matt grunted, placed the worn instrument back in the case and snapped it shut.

"Did I hurt your feelings, Matt?" She paused a moment, then stepped behind him and wrapped her arms around his chest. Her head leaned against the back of his neck.

"I only did it to keep the others from getting scared."

"What?"

"I only picked up the guitar because I didn't know what else to do." Matt exhaled, felt her move against him and relished the closeness that meant he was no longer alone. "It was several years ago-- Cass couldn't have been more than five at the time. She'd just been beaten by her dad and I'd thrown him out of the house. Mom was so mad at me, she could've spit nails." Matt exhaled as the memories tore through him like jagged glass. "After the beating, Cass was so scared she wouldn't smile no matter what we did to cheer her up. I didn't know what else to do. I picked up the guitar, turned on the radio and just started playing with whatever came on."

"Mmmm." A soft kiss touched his neck. "I'd say my previous statement was just proven right. You're nothing but a big, sweet, lovable teddybear."

"No, I'm not, Beth."
She said nothing for several long moments. "Okay. I'm beginning to recognize that tone. Your past isn't important. I love the man you are right now, not what you used to be. I don't need to know anything beyond that."

He stood there, silent, with Beth hugging him from behind and the guitar case before him on the bed. She couldn't know how much those words meant to him, and yet she didn't know his ugly secret. Would she still say the same thing if she knew?

The question twisted inside Matt until Beth's hug grew tighter.

"Matt, please don't do this to yourself."

"Do what?"

"You're beating yourself up. I know you are." She rubbed her cheek against his neck and he sighed inwardly. "I know you better than you think, and to prove it, I'm going to ask a question. If you know what's good for you, you'll give me an honest answer."

She gave him a playful squeeze, and despite the dread of waiting for her question, he couldn't help smiling.

"Do you believe I love you, Matt?"

"Yeah."

"Is that a 'Yeah, okay, I've got no other choice,' or 'Yes, I believe you honestly love me'?"

When he hesitated the merest fraction of a second, she squeezed him tighter.

"Okay, okay. I believe you honestly love me."

Beth planted another kiss on his neck. "That sounded forced."

"You're the one squeezing me, honey."

She nuzzled. "I'm not squeezing that hard."

Grinning, he pried her arms off, tugged her around so he could see her face.

She was smiling. The mere sight of her jolted fresh wonder into his already dazed senses.
"Wow," he breathed. "You just blow me away. I don't know what to do, Beth. I'm so in love, I'm afraid I'm going to do something stupid to mess it up. It's like being in a dream, a wonderful dream that I never want to wake up from. Do I need to tell you what I used to be? I'm scared if I do, you won't love me anymore, but if I don't, what then?"

"Matt, look at me."

He smiled. "I am."

"Whatever it is, you don't have to tell me. I give you permission to keep this secret. If it's this bad, I don't need to know."

Uncertainly, he eyed her just as she was, with that stray lank of hair falling in her face and that braid swept behind her neck. "You sound scared, Beth."

"I am." She hugged him fiercely. "I don't want to mess this up anymore than you do. Please, Matt, leave it unsaid."

"God, please help me." He traced a thumb over that china doll complexion. "If you didn't love me anymore, I don't know what I'd do."

She kissed the palm of his hand. "Don't talk like that, do you hear me? I love you, and I always will."

"Beth? Matt?" Aiden came to the open door and looked inside. "Lunch is ready. Mom said to come now, while it's still hot."

"We'll be there in a moment, Dad."

Matt couldn't move. He looked into Beth's green eyes and wanted to tell her. At the same time, he was tired and knew if he ever did, it wouldn't be now. It wouldn't be today.

"Okay, Matt?" She looked at him and he nodded. "Then let's go eat."

It wasn't until after he'd eaten Mom's tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, that the subject of music came up again. Aiden had been the one to do it.
"If you want me out of here," Aiden grinned, "then pony up a family performance. I can wait until after the kids are back from school."

Even though Mom insisted that Dad was only joking, Matt didn't feel the humor. As far as he could tell, Aiden was dead serious. Either that, or Aiden had a deadpan delivery when it came to jokes.

Not wanting to be thrown into the deep end of the pool and promptly drown, Matt locked himself in the nursery with the guitar to prepare. He tuned and prayed, and enjoyed Dylan's company in the baby carrier on the bed. He plucked a string, and Dylan's eyes popped wide with wonder. Matt mouthed an O, and Dylan sat mesmerized until his lids drooped and he nodded off. "Rock-A-Bye Baby" coaxed Dylan back to life, but then he drifted off again as if recognizing a lullaby when he heard one.

"Matty?" sounded from outside the nursery door, and Matt got up to let in Ryan. The other baby brother scampered onto the bed to play with Dylan while Matt continued to tune and pluck. There wasn't much to do to get ready, only that Matt felt he needed to.

Another "Matt?" came from the bedroom door, but this time he remained where he was.

"I'm busy, Beth."

"I know, but can't I watch?"

"There's nothing to see."

"Matt--"

"Beth, please go back and visit with your parents while they're here. I'll play after dinner, and then you can watch me all you want."

"Matt?"

He blew out a patient sigh. "What?"

"I love you."

Shaking his head, he smiled. "I love you, too." The shadow beneath the door moved away, and Matt prayed silently.
God, please don't let me look ridiculous in front of Beth.

When a loud knock sounded at the bedroom door, followed by a "Hey, Matty! Lemme in!" Matt didn't need to ask who it was.

Grinning like he'd just won a million dollars, Ethan dropped his school books on the floor by the toy box, then dropped himself onto the bed he shared with Ryan.

Closing the door, Matt eyed his brother. "How'd you like my truck?"

A grin quirked Ethan's mouth. "You mean my truck, don't you?"

"Hey, bro, until I get another one, that truck is still mine."

"Don't you mean, until Beth gets you another?"

The jab hurt, but Matt refused to show it. The brothers faced each other down before Ethan finally backed off.

"Can I have the truck tomorrow night?"

"Why?" Matt placed the guitar into its beat-up hard case. He looked back at Ethan. "If you want it, I need to know why."

Ethan shrugged. "I might have a date tomorrow. Haven't made up my mind yet."

"Oh, no, you don't-- not on a school night. And since when do I trust you with a set of wheels after dark? No telling what trouble you could get into, especially with a girl in the backseat." Matt gestured to Ethan. "Until tomorrow morning, hand over the keys."

Defiance glinted in Ethan's eyes. "Make me."

"Don't push me, Ethan. I'm still your legal guardian, and if that's not enough, I'm bigger than you. Don't make me prove it. The keys. Now."

Ethan tossed the keys and Matt caught them one-handed.

"Matty, just because you're getting it whenever you want, doesn't give you any right to stop me from getting the same."
Shaking his head, Matt stowed the guitar behind the bed. "Get married, Ethan, and I'll let you have the truck after dark. Until then, stay out of trouble."

"Then do me a favor"-- Ethan's voice sounded with angry frustration-- "make out with Beth somewhere else than the room I have to sleep in. How's a guy supposed to stay out of trouble with you two smooching all night?"

"I didn't think we were making any noise."

"Well, you were." Ethan sat up. "I got feelings too, you know. I'm no virgin, and I know what I'm missing."

For a moment, Matt was thoughtfully silent. He knew Ethan, so this wasn't big news to him. Unlike their past, they were living by the rules Matt had laid down when he took responsibility for the family and became legal guardian to the younger ones. This meant no more running around, no more drugs, no more alcohol. There were times when Ethan had come extremely close to shattering Matt's rules into a thousand tiny pieces, but for the most part, Matt knew his brother was trying. Neither of them wanted to turn into a trash heap like their Dad.

"I didn't realize I was making it hard on you. I'm sorry." Matt sighed deeply. "Beth and I won't sleep in here anymore."

The apology shouldn't have surprised Ethan, but it did. Matt could see the defiance slip from his face.

Disgusted, Ethan swiped at the worn hole in the knee of his jeans. "I guess I shouldn't have made that jab about Beth buying you a truck. I guess that was a low blow."

Now it was Matt's turn to be surprised. Ethan rarely apologized for anything.

Matt pocketed the keys. "I don't know about you, but let's call it even and change the subject."

"Suits me." Ethan flopped onto his back, rubbed his nose like a second grader then propped himself up on an elbow. "Hey, why'd you have the guitar out?"

Not ready to give an answer to that just yet, Matt let the question hang while he lifted out Dylan. Ryan had fallen asleep somewhere along the way, and Matt tucked a light blanket over him before stepping past Ethan's bed with the baby.

"It looks like I'm going to play after dinner," Matt finally said.
"You are, huh? What's the big deal? You look like you're about to face the electric chair, or something."

"I do not."

"Yeah, you do." Grinning like a maniac, Ethan dropped back and stared at the ceiling. "You're a lot shyer than people think, Matty."

Ignoring the comment, Matt pushed out of the room with Dylan, but before he left the nursery, he paused at the door. Like it or not, Ethan was growing up fast and it filled Matt with a strange mix of pride and horror. Pride that Ethan was becoming a man, and horror at what Ethan would do with all that male freedom once he turned eighteen.

After saying a prayer for his brother, Matt left the nursery and promised himself to be more careful with Beth when Ethan was close by. Ethan lived here, too.

Water splashed over the lettuce as Beth washed the produce she needed for the salad. For once, Mom had let her prepare dinner and Beth decided it felt good to be back in her own kitchen again. Since her family was leaving in the morning, Beth wanted to fix them a nice meal. Something to say "thank you." They'd only come because they cared about her, and then they helped with the move. The only thing missing from the last few days, was Brian and his family.

She had yet to hear from her brother, and the longer it took him to call, the more convinced she was that he was truly angry. Her marriage had taken everyone by surprise, but even then, Beth and her only brother were not on the best of speaking terms.

Thinking it over, she dried her hands on the apron and went to the phone by the refrigerator. As she punched in Brian's number, Matt strode into the kitchen with a crying infant. He moved to the fridge, pulled out a baby bottle, then stuck it in the microwave while he rocked Dylan.

"Does he need a change?" she asked.

"No, I think he's just hungry."

When Matt cradled the infant in his strong arms, Beth's heart went pitter-patter. They were so cute together, she wanted to drop everything and go find her camera. Her emotions still hadn't recovered from the morning, from those sweet homegrown dandelions, and the I-love-you's they
had exchanged. She had pressed some of those dandelions in wax paper, slipped them between the pages of her Bible to cherish them forever. Just the thought of them made her eyes go misty.

"Hey, are you crying?" Matt looked concerned. "Your mom kept asking if you're pregnant, and I told her why it wasn't possible. Keep that up, and she won't believe me."

"You told my mom?" Beth tamped down her embarrassment. In so many ways, they were on their honeymoon, only with lots of family to watch and get in the way. It sometimes made for awkward moments, though Beth was so very grateful her parents had come when they did.

"Beth, I just had a talk with Ethan--"

"Please hold that thought." Beth held up a hand as a recording sounded in the receiver.

"You have reached the office of Dr. Brian Campbell. To make an appointment, press one now. To talk to a nurse, press two..." The recording went through the options, and Beth wound up pressing one. Another woman answered, and this time, Beth was switched to Brian's actual office. It rang five times before he picked up.

"Dr. Campbell."

"Brian? It's Beth."

For one paralyzing moment, there was stone silence.

"Brian, I want to apologize for not calling you sooner. I should have."

"I'm busy now. Can I call you later?"

"Sure, Brian. I'll let you get back to your work. Please give my best to Cathy and the kids."

"Beth, hold on." A sigh blew past the receiver. "Mom's been after me to call you, and I've been meaning to. I really have. It's just that... I guess I'm still adjusting to your news. Did you really get married?"

Biting her lip, Beth looked over to Matt as he fed Dylan. Matt raised his eyes, and met her gaze in a private exchange of smiles all their own.

"I did. Brian, he's such a sweetheart, I know you'd like him. He's caring, loves his family, loves God, and he's simply wonderful."
In the presence of all her praise, Matt winced.

"You can stop," Brian sighed, "I think I get the idea. Dad said you didn't love this Mr. Wonderful, and that's been bothering me. Does he at least love you?"

"He does. And Brian? I love him. It actually happened. I'm sorry you couldn't have been here the past few days."

Matt mouthed the words, "I'm not," and Beth playfully batted Matt's arm. She knew she was sounding like a teenager, but she couldn't help it. She was in love.

"Please, Brian, I want things to be better between us. I really do."

"Are you sure you're feeling well?" Brian shifted in his office chair, for Beth heard the slight squeak in the background. "Either you really are in love, or you're running a temperature and in the throes of delirium. Or," he added with a conceding laugh, "somebody kidnapped my sister and replaced her with a convincing but altered double."

The laugh was a good sign.

"Maybe sometime, you can come down here with Cathy and the kids and see for yourself. Or we could come up there, only there's a lot of us now and we'd overrun your house."

"A lot of you now," Brian repeated with a faint smile in his voice. "You have a family again. That's good, Beth. I never thought it was very healthy for you to stay in that huge house by yourself. As for coming to visit, despite what Fiona says, just because I have my own private practice, doesn't mean I can take off whenever I want. Someone just came in-- I have to go. We'll talk later, Beth."

"Okay, bye." She heard the phone hang up, and smiled at the hopeful feeling in her heart.

"Beth," Matt leaned against the island counter while Dylan sucked at the bottle, "about Ethan."

"What about him?" Beth returned to her salad, and when Matt remained silent, she looked over her shoulder. "What is it?"

Matt looked pained. "It's about last night-- about anytime we get romantic and don't take into account that there's a teenage boy with raging hormones in the same room."

"Oh," The salad came to a stop. "We only kissed."
"I know, but we need to be more careful in the future. I promised Ethan we wouldn't sleep in the same room as him, anymore. It only seemed fair."

"I understand." Thoughtfully, Beth resumed the salad. Their honeymoon didn't have the best timing in the world, but that didn't mean either one of them had to be sorry it happened. She glanced at Matt, saw the faint upward tilt at the corners of his mouth as he watched her.

Oh, how she loved that man.

"Do your parents really leave tomorrow?"

She nodded. "Provided, of course, you give us a performance after dinner."

Putting down the bottle, Matt moved Dylan to his shoulder. "Please don't talk about it. I get sick just remembering." He slanted her a handsome look. "The thing is, if your parents are leaving with Daniel, we'll be able to move everyone into their rooms and you and I can have all the privacy we want. But that won't be until after tonight."

"Oh, what a sweetie-pie." Mom came into the kitchen and went straight to the cowboy holding the baby. Beth's heart was turning to mush, and tears stung her eyes. She knew all this emotion was because she was in love, but wished her mom was right. She wanted to be pregnant again, and that wouldn't happen until after Matt had a checkup with his doctor.

A loud burp sounded as Dylan got himself comfortable after feeding time. Soon he needed a diaper change, and Mom volunteered to take the "little angel."

The moment Mom left the kitchen to change Dylan, Matt jumped back to their conversation. "I know we only have one more night to get through, but couldn't we sleep in the hobby room?"

Beth nodded. "I suppose it's all right. Have you made an appointment to see a doctor yet?"

"I go in tomorrow." Matt came to the sink and started washing the tomatoes. "I've been praying about Ethan, and was hoping maybe you'd like to do that, too. I mean, now that you're family and all."

"Ethan? Oh-- I'm sorry, I was thinking about something else. Yes, I'll pray for him." She sliced through the carrots, and thought what a blessed person she was to have a husband who did kitchen work without being asked. "Matt, I was thinking. After the doctor's visit..."
"What about it?"

"Have you ever thought about having kids?"

"Not really. I've been too busy changing diapers and raising my brothers and sister to think about it. I admit it's crossed my mind, but not often." He paused, and looked at her. "Why do you ask?"

She couldn't help smiling. "After your doctor's visit, I'd like us to try for a baby."

"You're kidding, right?" He dropped the tomatoes in the sink and stared at her. "Beth, we have kids. Four of them."

"I know, but don't you want a baby?"

"We got one of those, too-- Dylan, remember?"

Skirting around the two people deep in discussion, Daniel made his way to the fridge to pull out a soft drink. He popped it open, took a swig, stood there and listened for ten seconds, then quietly left.

"Matt, I've always wanted a large family. Luke and I planned for one, that's why we have such a large house."

"Great, but I'm not Luke."

"I know you're not."

"Beth, we can't afford another kid."

"Why not? We have money, a stable family, room for another child."

Those dark eyes flashed at her, and she stilled.

"Let me rephrase that, Beth: I can't afford a baby. I barely have a job as it is, I just got married, I'm busy taking care of an infant and you want to get pregnant. Is there anything wrong with this picture?"

She took in the working jaw muscles, the gray T-shirt, worn jeans, the sock-covered feet and couldn't help thinking that this man was hers.
"Beth? Are you okay?"

"Yes, I--" she sighed, tried to ignore her dad's curiosity as he came in to pour a cup of coffee. Dad lingered in the silence, then when it got too much, he went back to the living room. "Matt, I know your job at the nursery was supposed to be seasonal, but a lot has changed since then."

"I see." Matt folded his arms. "Now that I've married the boss, I get a promotion I don't deserve."

"You do deserve it."

"No, I don't. Beth, just stop it, would you? Just calm down a moment. Wow, tell a woman you love her, and she starts planning a family."

"Matt, that isn't very fair."

"Maybe it isn't," he admitted, "but I don't want a promotion just because I’m the boss's husband."

"I really want to have a baby, Matt. I turn thirty in June, and I’m not getting any younger. And besides that, if we don’t have a valid reason for continuing to use protection, I believe it's best to let God decide whether or not we get pregnant."

"I have a valid reason." Matt scowled at Sarah as the four-year-old scampered across the floor to get a toy she left by the dishwasher. She beamed at Matt, and his face softened. "Go play with your brother," he told her, and gave her a smile as she obeyed. "Beth, I can't afford anymore kids. I can't afford to be a father right now. You want to have a baby, but that means I'd be responsible as the father. I'm not ready for that."

"Oh, Matt." Beth's heart was full to overflowing, and it was all she could do to not lean forward and give him a great big hug. "You're already a father to those children. They aren't yours, but they look up to you and give you the respect of a father. If that doesn't qualify you to be a daddy, then I don't know what does."

He didn't look convinced. "If you saw some of the matches I've had with Ethan, you wouldn't say that. But your flattering words aside, I don't have the money to pay for a baby."

"But that's what you have me for," she smiled. "I do."

The scowl on his face dampened some of her joy.
"I'm not letting my wife pay for my responsibilities. If you think that, then you've got another thing coming." He shut off the water, which had been running all this time, mopped up the counter, then tossed aside the towel. "I need to get a job-- a full-time job. Until I do, I can't give you what you want. And even then, only God can give us a baby." Matt blew out a monumental sigh. "A baby. Whoa. I never saw this discussion coming."

The few feet that separated them at the counter suddenly felt like several miles. It gave Beth a chill, and she rubbed her arms to get warm.

He saw that, reached out and tugged her to him. She cuddled against his jeans and T-shirt, and those arms protectively wrapped around her.

"Are you cold?" he asked, his voice hushing to a whisper.

"Matt, you know that whatever I have is yours, don't you?" She looked up into that youthfully rugged face and saw the emotion stir in his eyes. "The nursery, the house, the investments-- everything. I don't want any of it without you."

"Investments?" His brow arched in surprise.

"Matt, please don't quit the nursery."

"If you want a baby," he sighed, "I have to do something to contribute to the family finances. You said it yourself when you hired me-- you never took on anyone who didn't have at least some experience with plants. By all rights, I shouldn't be there."

"Well, now you have some experience." She hugged him tightly. "You belong there, and I'm going to do everything in my power to keep you there."

"Beth, I'm still not sure about all this. I should go out and get a real job. And before we start picking out baby names, we need to talk about our future. Man, am I in over my head. Love sure changes a lot, doesn't it?"

"I suppose it does," she kissed his shoulder, "but then, I think we've been sneaking up to this moment for a long time."

He nuzzled her hair. "I hate to break it to you, but we haven't known each other that long."
She smiled. "We're married, have a large ready-made family, a struggling business, and a house that needs repairs before the rainy season starts. The only thing we don't have is a mortgage—that, and a dog."

"Oh, no." At the mere mention of a word that meant more responsibility and mess, he tensed. "No dogs."

"Please, Matt? I'm ready to adopt another, and Ryan would love it so much."

He groaned. "Babies, dogs, and love. I never knew how much they had to do with one another, until now."

She backed away just a fraction, so she could see his face. "It's best if we work to have agreement, right?"

"If you say so."

"No, Matt, that's not good enough. We're in this together, aren't we?"

"Yeah, I guess. Okay, okay, we're in this together. Stop tickling me." He squirmed away from her, but she followed.

"I know I married an independent cowboy--"

He grinned. "Beth, stop it."

"But you're just going to have to work with me on this. Neither one of us wants to be in this marriage by ourselves."

"Okay, but stop trying to tickle."

She kept advancing. "And if I'm willing to do some changing to make this marriage work, shouldn't you be, too?"

"I suppose, but if you don't cut it out, I'm going to defend myself."

Beth gave a playful shiver. "Now you're scaring me."
The deliberate gleam in his eye had Beth doing just that. Before she could retreat, he pushed her against the counter and claimed her so entirely, she hoped no one walked into the kitchen to see them.

His breath warmed her ear, and she could feel his pulse race with hers. "We haven't settled on anything, Beth. You want agreement, that's fine with me. No dogs, babies, or promotions without it. Fair enough?"

She gulped back a tremoring laugh. "It's fair."

His gaze skimmed over her, so intensely passionate, she almost felt its caress. "Beth, you're wiping through me like a hurricane. Don't run so fast. Give me a chance to catch up, okay?"

"Uh-huh. Okay." She vibrated like a finely tuned instrument when his lips touched hers. He held her, and her entire being overwhelmed to the point of passing out. He must have felt it, for he steadied her before backing off.

"Wow." He let go, moved a few steps back and blew out a breath. "I remember a time when I had to be high to get a buzz like that. Whatever just happened, at least it's legal." He moved to the sink, started the water, picked up the broccoli, and rinsed it under the faucet.

To her quiet joy, his hands trembled.

Dinner ended much too soon for Matt. To his dismay, Cassie was a sweetheart and cleared away the dishes without being asked so they could get straight to the music.

The ponytailed little traitor.

She ran to get Matt's guitar case, hauled it to him with full arms and a sunny smile.

"Play my favorite, Matty. Play 'Juanita.'"

"I want the Donald song!" Ryan jumped about until Matty told him to settle down.

Taking the case, Matt looked to Ethan. "Well? You got any requests?"

Ethan gave a brotherly smirk. "Just don't play off key."
"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Matt rested the guitar on his right leg and checked the tuning. "The thing about this family is-- no one babies you. If you stink, we come right out and say it. Right?"

"Right on bro." Ethan slumped back in the chair.

"Which means," Matt smiled, "even when we do something halfway good, it's impossible to get a big head in this family. Someone will always cut you down to size."

Ethan just grinned.

All smiles, everyone sat around the table, Matt being the only one to scoot his chair back to hold the guitar. Even though they usually had the radio going, Matt decided to just go for it and start playing what he felt at the moment.

The opening riff to "Tears for My Girl" began, the notes slow and wistful at first, the harmony pleading with unspoken words to the girl of his dreams. It hung in the air for a heartbeat, and Matt sucked in a breath. The notes came without thinking, for he knew them by heart and thinking would only get in the way. The first wave came gently then rolled into a quick tempo as his fingers danced across the neck of the guitar.

The notes wept for the girl who didn't love him, each tear playing in rapid succession before falling back into the easy melody that had his foot tapping in time. He ignored the feel of everyone watching, kept the movements smooth and deliberate, then loosened it to make it more fun.

He flicked a glance to Ethan, saw his brother head-bopping to the song. He dropped back to the instrument, eased into the next riff, then sought out Beth from across the table. Her expression stumped him, and he forced away the fear that he was making an idiot of himself.

Please don't laugh, Beth. Please don't.

The anguish of the thought carried him through the next wave, crashed into the next, then rolled back into the toe tapper, hopeful wistfulness that the girl might soon love him. The notes fell into place, the harmony of it tugging at his heart so that he lightened it again, felt for the fun and followed after it until he realized he was grinning.

The easy melody of it had Cassie clapping in time, Ethan slapping the table, and Ryan playing air guitar with wildly sliding riffs. David joined Ryan, then fell into giggles as Matt quickened the
beat so they were out of time. Laughing when they gave up, Matt eased back into the rhythm and let it play out to the last measure.

In his rendition, the girl fell in love with him, and Matt decided to end it on that note. Happy and light.

When the last chord died out, Cassie led the applause from the table. Everyone there, from Aiden and Daniel, down to Sarah and David, were clapping. The actuality of it floored Matt. He had been hoping for at least no one to heckle him into stopping, but this was actually positive.

"Cassie wasn't exaggerating," Aiden admitted with a shake of the head. "That was very nicely played."

The compliment slipped past Matt, for he was tracking Beth out of the corner of his eye. She looked pleased, to be sure, but something about her seemed quiet, almost sad. Matt tried to shrug it off. At least she hadn't laughed. He'd taken a risk, opened himself up just a crack, and played from his heart. Thank God, she didn't look ashamed of him.

Even though Matt was braced for some ribbing from his teenage brother, Ethan never delivered. The grin of satisfaction that Aiden had admired Matt for something-- even something as small as playing the guitar-- visibly gratified Ethan. While Ethan could joke around that Matt was only an imitation of a singing cowboy, let someone else say it, and Ethan took offense. That was his brother, and more often than not, they stuck together.

Mom got up from the table, patted Matt's shoulder with a nod of approval, then pulled Ethan away while Ryan clamored for "the Donald song."

Forgetting that he didn't intend to sing, Matt started in on the ridiculously easy, "Old Mac Donald had a Farm." On each refrain, Ryan and the twins made barnyard noises that had them in intervals singing, then falling over themselves with laughter.

Quietly, Cassie stole away and Matt could only think it was to go do her homework. After all, this was a school night, and it was getting late.

A sad smile hinted on her lips, but Beth remained at the table, hands clasped around her mug like she was grasping for comfort.

Matt wished he knew what she was thinking.
By the time old Mac Donald had a pig, cow, duck, three elephants, and a monkey on his farm, Daniel was telling the twins it was time to get ready for bed.

"Getting close to that time, myself," Aiden said with a yawn. He watched as Matt replaced the guitar in the battered old case. "Have you ever thought of trying to do something with your music?"

"Nope." Matt snapped the case closed. "I've seen Dwayne chasing after musical fame, and it's not for me. More often than not, it's all a bunch of shadows and dreams and it takes more time away from family than I'm ready to sacrifice. I've got a brother about to become a man, a sister about to become an adolescent, a baby brother who still has the occasional accident in his pants-- sorry Ryan-- and another who's just started diapers." Matt glanced at Beth. "Not to mention what else might come along the way."

"You know," Aiden scratched his cheek thoughtfully, "I couldn't help overhearing what you and Beth said in the kitchen, today."

"No big surprise there." Matt gave a resigned shrug. He readied himself for the truckload of advice Aiden was about to give.

Shaking his head, Aiden smiled. "You and Beth keep trying to find that agreement. Love each other, keep following after God, and I expect He'll make it all work out in the end."

Matt blinked. That was it?

"When Beth told us about you," Aiden said unapologetically, "I expected something much different than what you turned out to be. Aside from that Skip character, it's nice to know my daughter's judgment in men hasn't completely changed. I like to think I raised my children right, to appreciate a good person when they find one. I think I can safely say, Beth found one in you."

"Aiden, I don't--"

"Before you say you don't deserve the compliment," Aiden finished, "I'll remind you that respect can not be demanded. It must be earned, and you, sir, have earned mine." He extended a hand to Matt.

Matt stared at Aiden, reached out and shook the offered hand.
"Welcome to the family," Aiden said matter-of-factly. He pushed away from the table, picked up his cane and looked about the room. "Where did your mom go? We need to get an early start in the morning..." his voice trailed off when Ethan emerged from the second master bedroom.

"They're almost ready for you guys," Ethan said, nodding back toward the bedroom. "Hey, Ry, come on. Time for bed."

Matt frowned. "What were you doing in Aiden and Mom's room?"

The question sailed over Ethan like an outfielder who'd just missed a fly ball and failed to get an easy out. There was a man on first now.

"Ethan, what were you doing in there?" A line drive to the outfield...

"Grandma wanted my help moving some stuff." And the ball is fumbled.

"Ethan, what stuff?"

"I dunno." Ethan lifted Ryan into his arms. "I guess just clothes and things. Grandma said she wanted everything out of there right now."

Bases loaded, and Matt steps to the plate...

"Is she moving out of the bedroom? Why?"

Carrying a sleepy Ryan, the outfielder started for the nursery. "Grandma said she wanted you and Beth to have their room. Even made me carry their stuff through the patio to the other master bedroom so I wouldn't interrupt your music."

The crack of the bat, and Matt knocks one out of the stadium for an easy grand slam.

A room all to themselves? Tonight?

Matt looked to Beth, and she smiled. "I guess Mom figured out a way to finally make it happen. Though I have a sneaking hunch Ethan wasn't supposed to tell us."

With a heavy sigh, Aiden stared at the two couches in the living room. "I'm all for family togetherness, but if Shannon thinks I'm sleeping on that hard couch, opposite Daniel, she'd better think again. I'd better go find out what's she's up to." He limped to the second master
bedroom, leaving Beth and Matt at the table while an unoffended Daniel started to make his bed on the couch.

Thinking over their conversation in the kitchen that afternoon, Matt set the guitar case beside his chair. "How badly does the roof need repairing?"

"Aside from some stains on the ceiling, I don't really know." Beth took a sip from her mug, and frowned. "My tea's cold."

"Cold dish water." Matt shuddered. "Cold or hot, I don't know how you can stand to drink that stuff."

They sat in silence for a very long moment, while everyone around them got ready for bed.

The door to the second master bedroom opened, and Mom came out. Dad limped behind with folded pajamas under one arm.

"Looks like I'm sleeping in the nursery." Aiden looked at the couch where Daniel was making a bed from pillows and blankets. "I suppose anything's better than the couch. Sorry Daniel."

"That's all right," Dan smiled. "My back is in better shape than yours."

At the same time Aiden opened his mouth to probably defend his back, Mom shushed him. "I don't want the newlyweds feeling badly for taking our room. Beth, Matt-- you two get anything you need for the night. Cassie has invited me to share the first master bedroom with her, and Dad is going to take Matt's bed in the nursery." Mom turned, waited for Aiden to agree.

"I'm going, I'm going." Aiden shook his head as he made his way past the table, on his way to the nursery. Before he went inside, he tossed Matt a wink.

Addressing Beth, Mom continued. "I'll make breakfast and see the children off to school before we leave. Ethan helped me move Caleb's bassinet from storage and put it in the room with you and Matt. Since you'll have Dylan, we'll be able to leave in the morning without needing either of you to see us off."

"Mom, it's very sweet of you to do all this, but Matt and I will be there when you leave."

"Nonsense. You're finally getting your honeymoon, and I don't want to see you or Matt come out of that room unless it's to get a bottle for Dylan. If you'll take my advice, you'll keep the nursery

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closed for the day." Mom came over to Beth and Beth stood to give her a great big hug. "Thank you for calling Brian."

"Thank you for coming, Mom. I love you."

"I love you too, Sweetheart. Matt, take good care of my daughter. Aiden? Come out here and say good-bye to Beth and Matt."

"I thought you wanted me in the nursery," came the stout reply.

Mom sighed as Dad emerged from the nursery in his pajamas.

"Make up your mind, woman. I can't be in two places at once." Despite the retort, Aiden had a smile on his face, albeit a tired one. He gave Beth a hug, then came over to shake Matt's hand for the second time that evening. "Sometime soon, I want you all to come out to Arizona. I'd like to take you up in some vintage aircraft, see a bird's eye view of where we live. I think Ethan would enjoy it."

"Thanks, Aiden. We'll take you up on that."

"Peanut, you take care of this man. And Matt, after you and Beth have worked out the particulars, see to it she gets pregnant. We love grandbabies, don't we, Shannon?"

"That we do. Cassie's in the bedroom, making sure Dylan is tucked into the bassinet. I think she's busy playing mommy." Mom smiled. "She's a sweet girl."

After Mom kissed Aiden good night, she went into the room she would share with Cassie, and Aiden disappeared into the nursery.

Putting down some bedding, Daniel came to shake hands with Matt. "Congratulations. You survived, so now you're family."

"Thanks... I think."

Daniel turned to his sister-in-law. "This family might be slightly dysfunctional, but it's a good one."

Beth gave Daniel a hug, then watched as he went to the twin's room to make sure his kids were ready for bed.
It felt strange, Matt thought, to suddenly be alone with Beth when they’d tried so hard to find every opportunity of being together. Now, it came without even trying. Since Matt slept in his boxers, he didn’t need anything from the nursery, and went straight into the second large bedroom reserved for a real honeymoon.

Cassie looked up from the bassinet, her fingers running over the lacy ruffles surrounding the tiny crib. "Isn't it just precious? Do you think after I marry and have a baby, I could use it?"

"Unless Beth tells you different, I don't see why not." Matt set his guitar beside the wide bed. No cramped single mattress here, but a decently sized piece of real estate. A real bed for a real married couple.

"Oh, before I forget"-- Cassie hurried to the nightstand, centered a creamy white taper sitting in a fancy brass candleholder, then pulled a matchbook from the drawer. "Grandma said to light this so it'll be more romantic with the lights out."

"Okay. I guess." Matt watched hesitantly as Cassie lit the wick, then blew out the match. "Drop that spent match into the sink before you leave. If a fire starts in the wastebasket, this place will go up in smoke, leaky roof and all."

Just then, Beth walked into the room carrying a nightgown.

"Thank you for this sweet surprise, Cassie." Beth came to her and gave the girl a hug. "I'll always remember today, and that it ended in such a nice way."

"Do you really like it?" Cassie showed her the candle, the bassinet, then noticed Matt and bowed her head.

"Good night, Matty."

"Thanks, Cass."

Cassie gave them a shy smile. She left, closed the door, then promptly opened it. "Make sure you lock this so Ryan won't come in. 'Night." The door closed, and Matt went to lock it. Just in case.

"Wasn't it sweet of Mom and Cassie?" Beth moved to the bassinet and peered inside. "Oh, just look at this little one. He's fast asleep."
While Beth cooed over the baby, Matt locked the glass double doors that led onto the patio, then made sure the curtains on the doors were truly shut. He pulled off his shirt, his socks, and noticed Beth was watching.

"I’ll go use the bathroom and change." She gave a slight, nervous smile, then took her nightgown into the adjoining master bath.

Silly of her to be nervous, Matt thought, but then, he knew how she felt. This wasn’t the bed of his truck, or the office at work, or a quiet afternoon in the nursery with the door locked. Honeymoons were supposed to be like this, or something close to it. Even this wasn’t exactly routine, for how many had a honeymoon with an infant brother in the room? Matt checked the bassinet, and frowned when he saw Dylan looking like a girl surrounded by all those white ruffles. No wonder Cassie was fussing over him. Women. Just give this guy a few years, and you couldn’t pay him to sleep in a bed that looked so... so girly.

Matt turned, noticed the large bed he’d just finished admiring had a ruffly thing at the bottom, and yellow and pink flowers scattered over the covers.

Okay, so he was wrong. But girly or not, he was going to make use of that bed if it was the last thing he did. He dumped his shirt and socks on a fancily upholstered chair in the corner of the room.

To his chagrin, it matched the bed.

Thankfully, there were no large photo frames to sabotage them, no Luke to unexpectedly pop up and say "Hi." Matt grinned, tugged back the blankets on the bed while he heard water running in the bathroom.

"I hope you're not taking a shower in there."

"I'm not."

By the time Beth came out, he was waiting in bed and wondering what was taking her so long.

It was worth the wait. She wore her soft white nightgown, and it gave a hue to her skin that only deepened when he snapped off the lights and the flickering candlelight made her glow like an angel.

He sucked in a deep breath and knew he'd never forget this day for as long as he lived.
Pushing aside his first instinct to grab, he waited for her to settle into bed before sliding an arm around her. He pulled her close, fought it, but couldn't help himself and kissed her soundly. Before he lost the chance to ask, he inched back, tried to get a little room between them so he could think clearly.

"Beth? Please don't-- not yet. I have to know something."

"What?" she asked, cuddling closer again.

Clear thinking was nearly impossible. "When I was playing guitar, I saw the look on your face." He let the words hang there, hoping she'd fill in the gaps he couldn't.

She laid a hand on his chest. "I didn't know you could play like that. It was simply beautiful."

"I wasn't fishing for a compliment, Beth." He hesitated, for there had been more on her face besides admiration, more she felt and had been thinking while his music played. He kept silent, hoping to coax her into speaking her thoughts.

"The song you chose tonight was an old classic from the nineties." Her head tilted up to look at him, and he saw candlelight flicker across her soft white face, those crazy freckles he'd come to thoroughly love. "It was popular when I was a teenager. Did you know that?"

"That was before my time," he smiled, then wriggled when she tried to get revenge by tickling him. "When I was ten years old, (now don't tickle, it's the truth), I kept hearing it on the radio. After some practice, it became mine."

He let that truth settle between them a moment. She was older than him by about five years, but it didn't matter. She couldn't have been more perfect had God asked him to fill out a questionnaire before creating her.

"Why did you choose that song, Matt?"

"If you know the words, then I think you know why."

A sigh moved through Beth. "A woman who can't love the man who's been desperately loving her from afar. After what happened in my office this morning, it made me want to cry. How long have you been in love with me?"

"I don't know." He scratched his chest, and thought it over. "I told you before I couldn't say exactly when, but it's been coming on gradually for a while now."
"But when did it start?"

He moved his hand, rubbed a circle into the small of her back. "I guess it all started when I came in that first day, looking for work."

"That soon?"

"Yeah. Does that surprise you?"

"It does."

He smiled broadly. "It shouldn't. When you give a guy a chance to really get to know you, he's a goner before he knows it, himself. I think I must've stepped off that jagged cliff when I met you, only to realize later on that I had, as those rocks at the bottom came zooming into view."

"What happened when you hit the rocks?" she asked, her fingers lightly teasing the hair on his chest.

"I survived the landing. Then climbed up to do it again."

"Oh, Matt."

He peered down at her and saw that sad look in her eyes. "Beth, don't feel bad it took you longer to fall than it did me. You love me, and that's all the miracle I could've hoped for."

She remained silent a moment. "I feel blessed, Matt, like I'm walking through rainbows, everything soft and unbearably happy. Then I remember that I wasn't the first to say 'I love you,' and plummet like a dead bird at your feet. You wanted to hear that so much in the desert, when we watched the sunset and kissed. Whenever we made love, I had the chance to come to my senses and tell you, but I didn't."

"I don't know about you," Matt smiled, "but whenever I'm with you, my senses are the first thing to drown. Besides, you came around soon enough. I'm not complaining." Love stirred inside him, and he could no longer hold it back and just talk. There were still so many things to discuss-- another baby, his job at the nursery, a dog to replace Bailey, the leaking roof for pity's sake-- and all he wanted to do was hold her.

Everything could come later. Everything else could wait. Right now, all he wanted was Beth.
"Do you love me?" he whispered, and thrilled when she said, "Yes." It seemed too incredible, too dreamlike to be real. And yet here she was, living and verifiable, saying "Yes," whispering "I love you," cuddling so close he could feel each and every beat of her heart.

"Oh, Matt." She breathed the words, and they caressed him like feathers against his skin. The sound of his name carried so much love, so much tenderness, that even before they blew out the candle and fell asleep in each other's arms, he knew they were getting a dog.

"Thou hast ravished my heart... thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck... Turn away thine eyes from me, for they have overcome me..."
~ Song of Solomon 4:9, 6:5 ~
Chapter Twenty-six
The Meaning of Home

"Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions: according to Thy mercy remember Thou me for Thy goodness' sake, O LORD."
~ Psalm 25:7 ~

Before his eyes thought to open, his heart remembered Beth.

Warmth stirred on his chest. He opened his eyes, found a rumpled pillow in his face and a tangle of curls curtained over his nose and mouth. A faint scent of jasmine still clung to the air. A wiggle of his fingers found they were dug into those tumbled curls. His arm moved slightly, his skin kissing against the nightgown of the woman snuggled with him. The soft murmur of her breath warmed his shoulder, and he realized he'd fallen asleep while holding her.

She gave a sleepy moan, moved her lips against his shoulder in a hazy nuzzle.

It was enough to make him shift so they could kiss.

The next time he woke, Beth was beside him under the covers and it was time to get up and feed Dylan again. Since it was Matt's turn, Matt tried not to wake her as he got up to take care of the baby. As he stole through the house on his way to the kitchen, he realized it was still nighttime, and Daniel was still asleep on the living room sofa. So they hadn't left yet, Matt thought as he warmed the bottle.

The loud ding of the microwave made Matt wince. He hoped no one woke. Just because he had to get up, didn't mean everyone else had to as well. He tugged out the glass baby bottle, pulled on the nipple, then shook it to mix the heat evenly. Once when Ryan had still been in diapers, Matt had made the mistake of nuking a plastic baby bottle; thankfully, the bottle had melted enough before it reached Ryan for Matt to know never to do that again. A quick temperature test and Matt was sneaking back through the living room and around the couch where Dan lay sprawled on the cushions.

Poor guy. This time tomorrow, and Dan would be sleeping in his own home, in his own bed.

See you another time, Dan. And thanks.

By now Dylan's fussing had woke Beth. She sat in bed, rocking the baby, her eyes half open and fighting fatigue.
"I'll take the trouble maker." Matt lifted the baby from Beth's arms and let her go back to sleep. He fed the baby, changed his diaper, then gently put him in the bassinet.

Matt climbed into bed and pulled Beth to him; even though it took awhile for her to wake up, they finally resumed their kissing. For the first time in his life, he wasn't ashamed of intimacy or the fact he sought it out. But it was more than the physical that Matt sought from Beth. She loved him. Each touch carried a token of her love, and for that alone, Matt would have been willing to give up sleep altogether, just for the pleasure of basking in the sweetness of that fact.

It wasn't until Beth slipped away to use the bathroom sometime later, that he finally bothered to check the time. It was day now-- that he already knew by the light peeking in around the window and patio door curtains.

The clock read a little after nine. Nine was good. They could afford to stay in bed all morning. Beth's family would be gone by now, along with Daniel and the twins. Mom had fed the children, saw them off to school, so Matt was covered there. He remembered Mom's order to not leave the bedroom unless it was to get a bottle for Dylan, and he fully intended to obey. Then he thought about the other little one-- Ryan-- and felt a pang of worry.

"Hey, Beth?" Matt pushed himself up, kicked off the blanket around his feet. "I'm going to check Ryan."

"Okay," came from the bathroom.

As he stalked around the bed in his boxers, he noticed a slip of paper beneath the door. He snatched it up and read Mom's neat handwriting:

_The kids have eaten and brushed their teeth. We're leaving the Sesame Street DVDs behind for Ryan-- I set an alarm clock in the living room, and when it goes off at ten, he's been told it's all right to knock on your door and get you up. I gave him some animal crackers and a box of juice to tide him until lunch. Love, Mom._

Despite the note, Matt cracked open the bedroom door. He moved around the corner, saw Ryan, bottom down on the carpet, munching animal crackers in front of the TV. A woman was counting on the screen, and when she asked "Can you count to ten, too?" Ryan nodded and crammed another cracker into his mouth.

Seeing his baby brother was happy, Matt returned to the bedroom and eyed the bed. This was supposed to be a honeymoon. The kids were at school or otherwise occupied, so...
When Beth emerged from the bathroom in her robe, and found him back in bed, she folded her arms and gave him a look. "What about Ryan?"

"Public television and animal cookies. He's good." Matt fluffed their pillows and grinned. "My doctor's appointment isn't until one, and a few hours after that, the others will be home from school. I say let's make the most of it."

At the mention of time, she sobered. "What time is it?"

"As of right now?" Matt leaned forward to read the digital clock on the dresser. "Exactly nine fifteen."

"Oh no." Beth covered her mouth. "I forgot all about the nursery. I never told the girls I was taking the day off."

"When you never showed up to let them in," Matt grinned, "I think they got the message."

"Even so, I should call." Beth went to her clothes at the foot of the bed, started searching pockets and came up empty. "My cell phone-- I can't find it."

"Here, use mine." He tossed his phone to Beth and grinned when she did a two-handed catch. So dainty, he mused, as he watched Beth dial Sylvia, then apologize for not calling sooner. Beth caught like a girl, like someone who was seconds away from covering her head and shouting "eeek!" instead of catching the ball. He toyed with the thought of tossing something else to see what she would do, then decided against it.

Four minutes. She was taking four minutes to do something that would've only taken him one. "Hey Syl? Store's staying closed for the day. Pass the message, bye." He never called her Syl, but that wasn't the point. The vital point here was four-- make that five-- minutes of their cozy time was being eaten up by apologizing to Sylvia. It wasn't even worth two.

"Beth?" He sighed when she turned her back to him, kept chatting into the phone as though she wasn't going to see Sylvia the very next day. The very next day, for crying out loud. He got up to use the toilet, groaned when he came back and found she was still on the phone. A quick check on the bassinet found Dylan asleep.

He went over to Beth, slipped the phone out of her hand before she knew what happened. "Sorry, Beth has to go now," he said Sylvia. He hung up, tossed the phone aside and grinned when Beth folded her arms.
"And just what gives you the right to do that?" she asked.

It wasn't worthy of an answer.

Hauling Beth over his shoulder, Matt carried her to the bed, dropped her onto the mattress while she burst into laughing pleas for him to "please be serious."

"I am serious." He locked the door, crawled onto the bed and pulled her to him.

"You do realize," she giggled, as he tugged the blankets around them, "we can't stay in here all day."

"Maybe not," Matt said, ready to pull her into a breathless kiss, "but I'm sure going to try."

It was a nice try. Ten minutes later, Dylan was testing Matt's patience with all the full-blasted urgency a wailing newborn could summon. Despite the frantic abandoned cries, the kid had been fed and changed throughout the night. It wasn't like he'd been neglected.

Beth smiled. "I believe that's our wake-up call." She lifted her head to kiss Matt's stubbly chin, and he didn't fight when she got out of bed.

Outnumbered by a slim woman and a five pound, ten ounce baby. What was a guy supposed to do?

"I'll heat up a bottle," Matt sighed, pulling on some jeans. "Is he loaded?"

Beth gave the tiny bottom a gentle pat. "Very."

He reached for the diaper bag beside the bassinet. "I'll flip you for it."

She looked puzzled as he dug out a quarter from his pants pocket.

"Heads, I change the diaper and you heat the bottle-- tails, you land diaper duty and I fix his breakfast." He flipped the coin, caught it midair, slapped it against the back of his hand. "Call it, Beth."

She blinked. "Heads."
He lifted his hand and did a mental fist-pump when it revealed tails. "I guess you're getting the diaper," he shrugged, pocketing the coin. "You can't say I didn't give you a chance."

"Oh, go warm up the bottle." She laughed as he scooted out of her way, carrying a newborn with a diaper so full, he was sincerely grateful he wouldn't have to deal with it himself.

There were bennies to having a wife, someone who could change your brother's diaper when there was no one else to help. And there usually wasn't. Matt had done most of the diaper duty for Ryan, and he realized an unexpected moment of freedom as he watched Beth.

It dawned on him in a very real way.

Matt wasn't alone in this, he didn't have to do everything by himself. Sure, Cass was often willing but usually wasn't much help, and Ethan? forget it. That left the lion's share of the work to Matt. He was the eldest, the responsible one, the one who had to take care of everyone else. If he didn't do it, it didn't get done. Until now.

"Are you getting his breakfast, or not?" Beth laughed. "What are you looking at?"

He shook his head and left the bedroom. He wasn't alone anymore. He had help, a responsible adult to help make sure he didn't mess up too badly with the kids. It was a comforting thought.

When Ryan saw his big brother, joy beamed on Ryan's face. The boy abandoned the TV and Matt scooped him up for a hug. As Ryan pushed an animal cracker between Matt's lips, Matt thanked God. Besides the animal crackers, being the big brother had its upsides.

It was a cozy morning, one of those mornings that Beth was sure she'd never forget. Dylan hungrily sucked at the bottle as though he hadn't been fed in days and not hours, his tiny hand fisted around one of Ryan's fingers.

"Was I small like Dylan?" Ryan asked, looking from the nursing baby to Beth.

"I don't know." Beth adjusted the bottle to make sure Dylan wasn't sucking air. "Most babies are pretty small when they're born, but they grow fast."

"Am I growing fast?"

"I'm sure you are," she smiled. "More's the pity."

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Homegrown Dandelions by Judith Bronte
The boy watched Beth as she burped Dylan halfway through the bottle.

"Beth?" Ryan gave a thoughtful sigh. "Are you going to be Dylan's mommy?"

Surprise had her pausing. "I'm not Dylan's real mommy, but I'm going to do my best to take care of him, to love him like he was my own little boy. I'm going to be his second mommy."

"Will you be my second mommy, too?"

The unabashed hope in Ryan's voice made her eyes tear up. "I'd love to, Ryan."

"You mean it?" In a burst of joy, Ryan flung his small arms around Beth's neck. If she hadn't been feeding Dylan, she would have returned the eager hug. She planted a kiss on Ryan's forehead and he closed his eyes for a long moment. "I wish my first mommy was you."

The simplicity of the childish words had her eyes tearing up even faster. She didn't know what to say to the four-year-old, other than "I love you."

Ryan looked at her earnestly and smiled. It was enough of a promise to be there when he needed her, to make him happy. He settled beside her and picked up Dylan's hand as they continued the feeding.

On more than one occasion, Beth had felt strong anger against the mother of these children. All of them, all the way up to Matt, had been left with the scar of her neglect and appalling lack of love. Dylan wouldn't survive without love, Ryan craved a mother's love even though he enjoyed all the tender affection Matt could offer; and despite being painfully shy, Cassie had been quick to latch onto Beth's close friendship. Even Ethan seemed ambivalent at times, though Beth saw the insecurity that often prompted those bluffs. And Matt--- Matt was insecure in his own way.

As she finished feeding Dylan, Beth thought over Matt's yearning for her to love him. Love was a stabilizing part of life, something that promised when things got rough, you wouldn't be left standing alone.

Things were going to be different, Beth would make sure of that. She found resolve in Ryan's contentment to sit beside her, in the way Dylan helplessly looked at her as she rocked him in her arms.

She felt a tug on the sleeve of her robe.
"Can I hold him?" Ryan had held the baby before, though not often, and she could plainly see his eagerness to do it again.

"Make a lap," she told the boy, "and always support his head." She lowered the newborn onto Ryan's lap, moved his arm to make sure Dylan's head had support and then wished she had a camera to capture the moment. Eve was a fool-- worse than that, she didn't deserve to see the brotherly awe that shone in Ryan's eyes for the tiniest member of their family.

The thin sleeper Dylan wore needed to be replaced. It looked like Eve had gotten it secondhand, and besides a meager diaper bag, a plastic carrier, and some hand-me downs from Caleb, Dylan had very little of his own. She turned to look at Ryan's worn shirt and pants and sighed in dismay. This family needed clothes.

When Ryan was ready to give Dylan up, she took the baby back to the bedroom for a diaper change, then put Dylan into the bassinet. By the time Beth emerged from the bedroom, Ryan had gone back to the TV and was munching a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

So Matt was making lunch. Smiling, she went to the kitchen, and paused when she came to the doorway. Now, there wasn't a sight she saw everyday.

At the counter, with his back to her, stood Matt, wearing a faded pair of jeans and no shirt. His feet were bare, and his brown hair as mussed as when he'd crawled out of bed to get Dylan's bottle. Sunlight filtered in from the window, casting him in a cuddly glow. Their honeymoon was really getting to her. She couldn't even look at him without melting into a sigh.

"Hey, Ryan? You want another sandwich?" Matt called to the living room.

"No," came the shouted reply.

Those strong arms replaced the jelly jar back in the fridge. He turned and found her watching.

"You hungry?" he asked.

She cocked her head and wondered what she'd ever done to deserve Matt.

As he put away the peanut butter, she smiled.

"Do you always fix PB&J for lunch?"
"Not always, but it was handy. Want some?" He held up a plate with four stacked sandwiches. "I made enough for two."

"More like three," she mused. Leaving the plate on the counter, he came to her and pulled her against him. When they kissed, he tasted of peanut butter. She hugged her face to his shoulder and closed her eyes.

"Beth, I really need to eat."

She kissed him, moved back, and accepted a sandwich from his plate. They prayed over the food, and she leaned against the counter with her PB&J. Before she could finish her sandwich, Matt had polished off two and was wrapping the third to keep in the fridge for later.

After Matt found something he approved of for Ryan on the TV, and the alarm Mom had set was turned off, Matt and Beth returned to the bedroom and locked the door.

Within the hour, they were both asleep.

Something tugged at the back of his mind, a stray thought that suddenly fell into place. Matt's eyes popped open, and he shoved himself upright to blink at the clock. Oh great-- his doctor's appointment. He'd forgotten all about it.

He grabbed his pants, yesterday's shirt and socks, which didn't smell too bad, and snagged his boots on the way to the bathroom. It took five minutes to dress, another five to locate Beth's car keys without waking her, and another five to find something for Ryan to watch on the television. Too much TV, Matt decided as he hurried out the door. The kid's brains were probably turning to mush.

A glance at his watch made him cringe. Man, he was cutting it close.

The trip into Las Cruces didn't take as long as he'd feared, and by the time he was jogging into the clinic he still had a few minutes to spare.

The clinic was shabby but subsidized for low-incomes, so it fit into Matt's tight budget. Or lack of budget-- he wasn't sure yet where he fit in, economically speaking. Beth had money, and even though he didn't, they were married and that probably meant something to his financial status... which up until he'd married Beth, had been fairly shaky.
He checked in with the nurse at the front desk, then collapsed into a hard chair while a TV mounted on the wall flickered overhead. He didn't want Beth's money, he really didn't. He wanted Beth, sure, but her stuff was her stuff and it didn't feel right to ride through life on her coattails. She'd probably have something to say about that, but he'd sort it out later. Right now, he was just relieved he wasn't late for the appointment.

Someone called his name, and soon he was being weighed and led into a dingy but clean room by a middle-aged nurse who could have been old enough to be his mom. His doctor was a guy, thank God, but beggars couldn't be choosers, so when she pulled out a clipboard and asked for a rundown of his sexual history, he did it with reluctance. He was here to make sure he didn't have anything that he could pass to Beth, no STDs that might hurt her because of him. He rubbed the back of his neck, wishing a guy was here to write it down and not this motherly woman who tried hard not to show her horror. By the time he reached his last encounter with Helen, he was feeling fresh guilt.

The nurse nodded, didn't make any judgements but asked questions where needed, then took his blood pressure and pulse. When her fingers pressed to his wrist, her eyes went large.

"I ran through the parking lot," he explained.

She smiled. "It shows." She took off the stethoscope, wrote something on the clipboard then informed him the doctor would be with him in a few minutes.

Matt shifted in the hard chair, the second since he'd arrived. Maybe soft chairs cost more-- he didn't know, and right now, he didn't care. Having gone over his past to the nurse, he worried that maybe he shouldn't have slept with Beth until he'd gotten himself checked out first. Still, it wasn't as if he'd thought through the past few days in cold blood; that first date had been unplanned, and so had the official honeymoon.

He still wished he'd been thinking more clearly. He knew condoms could greatly lessen the risk of transmitting a disease-- he'd heard all the public safety messages-- but knew this wasn't one hundred percent safe for Beth. Not as safe as he wanted it for her.

The doctor came in and a physical examination began in earnest; thankfully, the nurse was nowhere in sight. When the exam was over, the doctor asked more questions. Matt recognized the calm soberness in the man's face when he told Matt of the different tests he wanted to run. Even though Matt felt fine, he could still have asymptomatic infections; he could be infected, but not show any symptoms and so pass it on to someone else without even realizing it.
Matt groaned. He knew this, and was only grateful he'd at least had the presence of mind to use protection. One thing was certain, most people hadn't lived the way he had. "A high risk lifestyle," people called it. He called it being an addict.

Beth had no idea of what she'd married-- not really. Sure, he'd tried to tell her, and she'd known of his addictions. But there was more, and it was that more that had him sick to his stomach as another nurse took what was needed to send off to the lab for tests. The last time he'd had a physical, only one or two tests had been done, not the broad range of things this doctor wanted.

Of course, this doctor was the only one Matt had ever told his full history to, so that probably explained the number of tests.

In a few days, Matt was to call the clinic to know if any of the results had come in, and whether or not any of them were positive. Matt had never been more hopeful about being negative about something in all his twenty-four years.

Negative was suddenly good. It was one of those paradox things.

Vague heaviness settled over him as he left the clinic. Beth should know. Shouldn't she? They should probably hold off on more intimacy until the results came in. Right? The more he tried to untangle his thoughts, the more frustrated he became. What a mess.

The drive home passed without him really paying attention-- not a good thing when traffic was heavier coming than going. He pulled in front of the house and sat in the car with the engine idling, not really wanting to turn it off and go inside, but not wanting to just sit there, either.

He switched off the ignition and stared at the keys. He had a decision to make.

The front door opened and Beth stepped out in a skirt and top instead of the nightgown and bathrobe she'd been wearing most of the day. She waved to him, cuddled the baby in her arms as he got out of the car.

"Well?" she asked. "How'd it go?"

What should he tell her? I could have gotten you infected with any number of sexually transmitted diseases, and oh yeah, remember that secret you gave me permission to keep? You might live to regret it.
When he didn't answer, but rounded the hood of the car with what he thought was an ordinary expression, she went back into the house. He followed, but she moved straight into their bedroom and put Dylan into his carrier.

Matt leaned against the bedroom doorjamb, still weighing the keys in his hand.

"Did the doctor find anything wrong with you?" she asked over her shoulder.

"No, I'm good-- at least, as far as we know at the moment. Beth, we have to talk."

She turned back to the carrier, tucked a small blanket around Dylan then checked the contents of the diaper bag.

"Beth?"

"Do you know where the baby wipes are?" she asked.

"They're supposed to be on the dresser. Beth, we have to talk."

"No matter. We'll get more on the way home."

"We're going somewhere?" he asked.

"Ryan?" Beth called loudly. "Are you ready? Did you turn off the TV?"

"It's off!" the boy shouted, running past Matt with a huge grin. "We're going shopping, Matty!"

"We are? You mean, right now?"

"Dylan needs clothes," Beth continued in her distracted voice, "and while we're at it, I thought we might as well do some shopping for Ryan. You're sure the doctor didn't find anything wrong with you?"

"Nothing for the moment."

She looked at him, and he sensed she knew he was trying to tell her something painfully sensitive. So they were here again, him trying to say something she didn't want to hear. He shook his head and stared at the keys. Life kept going around in circles.
He gave her a sidelong glance as she shouldered her purse and diaper bag, then lifted the carrier with both arms.

"Let me take the baby," he said, moving to relieve her of the carrier.

"No need, I have it." She moved past him with a nervous brusqueness that he felt more than saw. "We've been waiting for you to get back from the doctor, so if you're ready, we need to leave. I'd like to be here when the children come home from school."

Matt strode ahead, and reached the front door before she did. He opened it, held it for her. "You never let me tell you what the doctor said."

She didn't answer. "Ryan, did you use the potty?"

The boy held up both hands. "I even washed," he said proudly.

Matt winced. The remark had "bad parent" written all over it. "Wash every time," he told the youngster as they left the house. Matt locked up, then went to the car to open the rear door so Beth could strap in Dylan's carrier. Ryan's booster seat was in the pickup with Ethan, so Beth buckled in Ryan as best she could.

"We need a safety seat in both vehicles," Beth said, "so we won't be caught off guard in the future."

Good idea, Matt thought, except Beth refused to look at him while she secured the kids. She talked around him, but not to him. It was driving him nuts.

He moved to the driver's side, opened the door and stepped in while Beth made last one check of harnesses and buckles before closing the rear door.

He hoped she would challenge him for the keys, so at least she'd have to address him straight on. But she slid into the passenger seat beside him and buckled up without a single word about who's car this was.

"Beth, we need to talk."

"No, we don't." She looked straight ahead. "This has to do with your secret, doesn't it? If you're all right, then I don't want to know anything else."

"Beth--"
"I don't want to know, Matt. I mean it."

He blew out a breath. "My doctor is testing me for HIV."

The words stilled her. She looked at him-- really looked at him-- and he saw the alarm in her eyes.

"I don't have any symptoms, but the doctor said it was good to check since there's a high likelihood I've been exposed to it in the past. He's testing me for things like gonorrhea and herpes, but HIV was what got my attention."

"How long until you know?" she asked.

He studied her a moment. "A few days, a week at the most. Beth, I have to tell you--"

"No. Don't." She looked out her window, directly away from him and shook her head. "If you don't feel up to driving, tell me so we can switch sides."

"I'm sorry, Beth." Matt squeezed his eyes shut. "We should have waited until I had a green light from my doctor."

"Don't tell me your secret, Matt."

He blew out a sigh. "We should have waited."

"Is this your secret?" she asked, turning to pin those green eyes on him. "That you were exposed to HIV?"

"No, it isn't. If you don't want to hear about my past, then at least hear me out about the tests."

The assurance calmed her but only by a little. "What do these tests mean?"

"At the moment-- nothing. Just because they were taken, doesn't mean I have HIV, or anything else. But we need to know the results before we can pick up where we left off." He glanced at the little boy playing with Dylan in the backseat. "After last night and today, it's probably too little, too late. I wish I'd been thinking more clearly before we... before we crossed that bridge, then set it on fire."
The wording made her smile. "God meant for us to cross that bridge. In retrospect, we might have gone about that crossing a little differently, but we did the best we could under the circumstances."

"I should have been more careful," he insisted.

"Matt. Really. I know we were more focused on other things like love, or the lack of it, but I take responsibility for what we did. I knew about your..." she glanced at the backseat, "about certain past issues and made my decision despite them. You even warned me the night before that you should probably first see a doctor. If you want to argue that you should've been more careful--fine. The same goes for me."

He sucked in a deep breath, knowing he was more responsible than her because he knew more about his past. He exhaled, and slowly nodded. "We wait until the results come back."

"That's probably best," she agreed. "I have to admit, when you came home looking so grave, I feared you were going to tell me a lot more than I needed to hear. You had that look in your eye."

For a moment, he toyed with the thought of doing just that-- of telling her everything. Then he thought of the possible consequences and decided that if she really didn't want to know, then it would be stupid to force that knowledge. It would probably hurt their relationship, and she didn't want that to happen. Neither did he.

He turned the key in the ignition. "I love you."

Her eyes flicked to the side window where she palmed off a stray tear. "I love you too," she said gently. "Oh, I love you too."

Before Matt pulled onto the highway, they prayed that his tests would come back negative. Silently, he added to the prayer that Beth would always love him.

Please, God, don't let what I've done in the past mess up our future.

Dylan needed this shopping trip, but it was useful for others besides Dylan and hopefully Ryan. Whatever guilt Matt felt over their relationship, Beth tried to coax him into forgetting by dragging him through aisle after aisle of baby stuff. Matt had been careful-- was still being careful as of that very morning, and it pained Beth to see him accepting so much responsibility for something she felt had been half her decision.
There was obviously more to Matt’s past besides what he’d already told her; Helen must have really gotten around for him to need so many tests. Curiosity had her wondering what his secret really was, before cold hard reality skidded her to a stop. The only thing that truly mattered was that Matt was a different man than he used to be, and that God would preserve their relationship. She had to focus on that.

The thought made her grab Matt's arm as they moved down the next aisle with their grocery cart and children. She was in this marriage for the long haul.

A happy little sigh rumbled through Matt, and when he looked at her, a smile reached his eyes.

She gave him a quick hug, then went to go look at the baby crib on display. Ryan closely followed her, while Dylan’s carrier had been placed into the cart’s basket so they wouldn't have to carry a baby all through the store.

"Don't we already have a crib?" Matt asked as Ryan pulled a tag from off a highchair.

Beth put the tag back, took Ryan’s hand and smiled at her young husband. Matt grinned, and pushed the cart after her.

Distracted was good, and that was how she intended to keep Matt’s mind off other things.

When they came to the clothes department, Ryan stuck close to her with the plush dinosaur he'd picked out for the baby. He kept checking to make sure she was still there, as if to say, "You're my mommy now, and mommies never stick around." It broke her heart to see him so fearful, and she took every chance she could to show she wasn't leaving.

She was shopping for newborn clothes. Her, Beth Carter-- no, make that Beth Taylor-- was hunting the racks like a new mom picking out tiny outfits. What a dreamlike blessing.

Three newborn rompers went into the cart, and Matt began to move things around so Dylan couldn't grab them from his carrier. Two tiny pairs of pull-on pants, three long-sleeved shirts, several socks, itty-bitty shoes that had Ryan giggling over how small they were, and a stack of multi-colored onesies, all found their way into the cart.

"This kid will be well dressed," Matt commented as Beth placed another romper into the pile. He picked up the outfit, played with its tiny sleeves then dropped a grin on Dylan. "You're childhood is certainly going to be different than mine."
She tugged Matt into the next department that had older children's clothing, and Ryan watched wide-eyed as she held up pants to see what he thought.

"Do you like this one, Ryan?" She smiled, and waited for some other reaction besides bewilderment.

"Hey, buddy," Matt crouched to the boy's level, "it's okay to like something if you want it. How about those pants?"

Ryan nodded timidly, as though the concept of buying so easily was foreign to him. He hugged the stuffed dinosaur until Beth suggested that Matt take him to a dressing room to see if the new pants would fit.

Hearing this, Ryan lifted the dinosaur to Beth. "Mommy hold this?" he asked.

Beth looked to Matt, feared he might think she was overstepping herself, and was relieved to see Matt's surprised smile. He hadn't minded. She took the plush toy and gave it a small hug.

"I'll keep him company until you come back."

Ryan grinned.

"Come on, buddy." Matt took the boy's hand. "Let's go see if these pants fit you."

While Matt and Ryan were gone, Beth wandered around more clothes racks while she pushed the cart. Dylan was sleeping like an angel, cuddled in the carrier and oblivious to the new clothes piled around him. It seemed a surreal moment, one almost too good to be true. She was buying infant things, and clothes for a sweet little boy. She was holding a dinosaur.

Life didn't get much better than this.

Several minutes later, Matt emerged with Ryan. "They fit him fine," Matt said, dropping the pants into the cart.

"Good, then we need four more in the same size."

"Four?" Matt stared at her as though she'd just said something incredibly strange and slightly idiotic. It was that incredulous surprise that made her smile.

"Yes, and some shirts. Don't look at me that way, Matt Taylor. One of these days, you're next."
Even his scowl was handsome. "Spending your money on the kids is one thing, spending it on me, is another."

This wasn't the place or time to hold the drag-out debate that lurked behind his scowl, so she simply pointed to the pants, then held up four fingers.

The scowl slipped into a smile as Matt lifted Ryan to the rack to pick out more clothes. Let Matt protest all he wanted, Beth was going to take care of him whether he wanted her to or not.

At least this was keeping him busy. Anything was better than that defeated look she'd seen when he came home from the doctor.

With Ryan's new room in mind, Beth dragged her family to the bedding department. Ryan helped choose a matching comforter, sheets and pillowcases that had the ever-popular dinosaurs scattered all over them. There was even a rug and curtains that matched his dinosaur, and Ryan looked stunned with joy. Even though Dylan would be sharing the nursery, Beth decided that Ryan would notice all these things while Dylan would not. So Ryan got to choose what the nursery would look like.

After picking out a new pair of shoes for Ryan, then moving to another aisle for a safety seat for Beth's car, they headed the loaded grocery cart to the checkout.

As Matt lifted out the carrier with Dylan in it, a woman in line ahead of them, smiled.

"He looks like you," she commented to Matt when Dylan began to stir. Her eyes turned toward Ryan and the boy ducked behind Matt's pant leg to avoid scrutiny. "You have a beautiful family."

"Thanks." Matt reached behind him and took Ryan's hand. "They're not exactly mine-- they're my brothers."

"Really?" The woman looked intrigued. "I don't suppose she's your sister?" She pointed to Beth, and laughed when Matt flushed bright pink.

The comment seemed forward and a bit rude to Beth's ears, but Matt bore it like a gentleman. He held on to a squirming Ryan and a fussing Dylan, while Beth took over pushing the cart. Thankfully, the woman said nothing more but checked out with only a curious glance at their family.
Beth read the time on her watch. The kids would be home soon, and she needed to start thinking about dinner.

After their purchases had been zipped across the scanner and her credit card had paid for them, Beth stuffed the receipt into her purse in the hopes Matt hadn't seen the total. From the grim look on his face just now, she guessed he had.

"Get used to it," she told him as they left the store with a cart full of bags. "Sometime this week, I'm hoping you'll accept one of my credit cards and take Ethan shopping. You both need clothes. I'll take care of Cassie, myself."

The stubborn set of Matt's jaw didn't annoy Beth as much as she thought it would. She was getting used to her cowboy and his overly independent ways, and knew he needed time to adjust.

Things had changed. He wasn't alone anymore, and the sooner he realized it, the better.

He didn't know how Beth had managed to pull it off, but by the time they arrived home, Matt realized he hadn't been thinking about test results while they'd been shopping.

Ethan and Cassie came home soon after they did, and after seeing what the little ones were getting, Cassie offered to help Beth unpack the clothes and start sorting them into like colors in the laundry room.

Claiming homework could wait, Ethan started hauling his things to the room the twins had been using. It was the room Beth had told him would be his, and Ethan was obviously eager to have his own space. For once, Matt didn't feel like badgering Ethan about his homework. Matt was too tired to argue, but not too tired to begin separating Ethan's things from his own, and the toys and boxes that would go to the nursery Ryan and Dylan would share.

The new nursery had been Luke's old hobby room, and it still had books lining shelves and things that had apparently never been touched after he died. It was a detail Beth had yet to tell him how she wanted handled, and Matt wasn't ready to ask.

In the meantime, Ethan had his room. The first thing he did was to shut the door.

Matt wasn't so sure he liked that. Closed doors shouted "stay out of my room," but they could just as easily mean "stay out of my life." Well, tough. Matt wasn't going anywhere, and as long as
Ethan lived with him under the same roof, Matt would make a point to be a part of his brother’s life.

For the moment, the door could stay shut.

The hobby room was far from ready to accept the little ones, and that meant Matt might as well stay with Dylan and Ryan in the old nursery. Cassie was to have Caleb’s nursery, though she didn’t look impatient to move into her new room; she was doing pretty well in the first master bedroom, though Matt suspected it was because she enjoyed chatting with Beth every time Beth went in there to get something.

First Ryan had called Beth “Mommy,” and now Beth was a big sister/mommy to Cassie. It seemed like a reasonable fit. He knew Ryan wanted a mom in the worst possible way, and now Cassie had someone in the family she could talk to about girl stuff. He had to hand it to Beth—she was trying her hardest to become a part of their family, and succeeding.

Man, was he ever tired.

Life blurred around the edges until Matt collapsed on a living room sofa and shut his eyes. He was already dreading a week of waiting to hear the test results and passing his nights without Beth. His empty arms started to ache. If he was in his old home, his Bible would be under the couch and he could pull it out to do his quiet time now instead of later.

Not a bad idea, he thought, and got up to go get his Bible.

As the day wore on, the house began to smell of cooking food, and Matt’s stomach growled to know what Beth was fixing. Sounds came from the laundry room just off the kitchen as Cassie kept the washing machine and dryer going, while the girls talked about Cassie’s day at school and what she would like to get when they went shopping. Music came from Ethan’s room, not loud enough to make Matt go in there and turn it down, but loud enough to make Matt notice. Country. At least the kid had good taste.

On the floor by the couch, Ryan played with the dinosaur Beth had told him was now his. It looked like Ryan had found a new best friend in the stuffed T-Rex, and Matt guessed the two would be inseparable by the end of the day.

Matt read the Bible, went over passages that helped to calm his faith, and prayed about all the changes taking place in his life. Even with the test results and the guardianship hearing looming before him, he felt incredibly blessed. So many things could have gone terribly wrong, and they hadn’t.
It was a testament to God's faithfulness. Not to say things still couldn't turn out for the worse, but if they did, Matt felt a gentle assurance that God would be there. Why? Because the Bible told him so, and if that wasn't juvenile enough to make someone burst out laughing, Matt just knew. Call it simple confidence, or the faith of a quietly desperate man, but Matt knew God would be there.

The call to dinner came and set off a minor stampede. Ethan emerged from his room, Ryan ran off to go wash his hands, and Matt put away his Bible to follow Ryan's example. Beth had set the table while Cassie was folding clothes in the laundry room.

And that smell coming from the oven? Homemade pizza.

Oh, yeah. Matt was a blessed guy.

During the week of waiting for the test results, Matt and Beth kept busy between the garden nursery and working at home.

The books in the hobby room were boxed and placed into storage. New carpet was put down, the walls painted a pale yellow, and the mahogany crib and a big boy's bed were arranged for Dylan and Ryan. Ryan's large toy box was pushed against one wall, inviting little boys into future play on the soft new carpet. A bright rug with a dinosaur sat in the center of the nursery, and in Ryan's excitement, he nearly hugged it before Matt picked him up.

When asked, Ethan shrugged that his room was fine the way it was, but Beth knew better than to believe him. She bought a lamp to sit beside his bed so he could read without straining his eyes, and got Matt and Ethan to move in a solid oak roll-top desk where Ethan could study and do his homework. The desk had been Luke's. After it had been moved into Ethan's room, the stunned teenager stood there a long time, looking at the impressive piece of furniture and running his hand over the gleaming wood. Matt knew how his brother felt. The Taylors were living in a dream.

Later that day, Matt caught Ethan going to Beth and giving the surprised woman a hug.

"What's this for?" Beth asked.

Ethan gave a one shouldered shrug. "Thanks for the desk."

"You like it?"
The teenager nodded, shrugged again and went back to his room. The shrug indicated it was no big deal, but the hug had said a whole lot more. From Ethan, such a display of affection was rare.

Way to go, Beth, Matt thought with a grin.

Every able-bodied person in the family old enough to intelligently hold a paint brush spent a good few hours in Cassie's room, painting the walls purple. Technically, it was lilac, but to Matt, purple was purple. She and Beth bought frilly things to make the room pretty-- a lacy bedspread and curtains, coordinating throw pillows with lots of ruffles, and a brand new canopy bed-- also with ruffles. An ornate vanity with an off-white finish was placed against one wall, its oval mirror and padded bench giving the room even more, over-the-top, girly appeal. The vanity had been the result of a recent trip to the furniture store with Cassie. Of course, Matt had been along for the ride, for someone had to carry the thing out to the truck.

Despite the purple horror that had become Cassie's room, the preteen declared it was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen. Good to hear, for Matt wasn't getting more purple paint on his clothes anytime soon.

On the second day, Matt called the clinic and found out he didn't have herpes. On the third day, he learned he wasn't infected with HIV.

This news was celebrated in the privacy of the second master bedroom, since HIV had been Matt and Beth's biggest concern. He was still being careful, but it wasn't as though they could undo the days and nights that had led up to, and included, their honeymoon.

He knew better than to think he'd simply lucked out. God was preserving him. He knew it deep down where love and faith kept his heart beating, where dreams came to life each time he kissed those tender lips and told Beth he loved her.

Oh, how he loved her. This was home now, the only home he ever wanted. Home meant his brothers and sister, home meant loving Beth and her loving him. Home meant love.

By the end of the week, the remainder of the tests had come back negative. Matt and Ethan had been too busy painting walls and hauling furniture to make their own shopping trip, and even Beth hadn't found time to take Cassie to the clothing outlets. They'd do their shopping later, though Matt still wasn't sure about letting Beth buy his clothes.

The moving apparently wasn't over. Not yet.
The children had their rooms taken care of, all except for Matt's. That was the way Beth had worded it, and it had instantly put Matt on the defensive.

He was a children? What a thing to say to a guy.

Before plunging into an argument about the difference between tots and fully grown men, Matt listened to Beth's suggestion. She didn't seem to think there was a real problem to her offer, but he begged to differ.

"That was Luke's room."

"Yes, but now it can be yours. Yours and mine."

"Beth, just listen to yourself a moment." Matt ran his hands through his hair. The woman simply didn't get it. "You slept with Luke in that room."

"I hate to break it to you, but Luke and I also slept in the second master bedroom."

Matt blew out a breath. "You're missing the point. That first bedroom is ground zero. His picture's in there, the bed linen looks like the guy had a hand in choosing it, and then there's the bathroom."

She folded her arms, arched a brow that he found annoyingly irresistible. "What about the bathroom?"

Matt nodded. "It's blue."

"So?"

"It's blue because Luke wanted it that way."

"How would you know?"

"I'm guessing, okay?" Matt threw up his hands. "The point is, every time I go in there, I feel like he's watching me. I don't want to live with that feeling, and don't even ask me to sleep in his bedroom. I just can't do it, Beth."

"So," she sighed but Matt could see the smile hiding behind her patience, "you want me to clean out my closet, gather all of my things, and move them to the second master bedroom, simply because you have a feeling?"
"I suppose. When you put it that way--" Matt huffed out a sigh. "Yes. Because I have a feeling."

"You're being silly."

He narrowed his eyes. "If I die and you marry a widower, and he takes you to the exact same bed he shared with his dead wife"-- Matt paused for emphasis-- "and you can sleep there and still say the situation doesn't bother you in the slightest-- then I'll take it all back."

It didn't help that Beth started laughing.

"I'm sorry," she smiled, trying to stifle what was probably more laughter. "I'll do it. For your sake, I'll do it."

"Thanks." He shook his head, but accepted the hug she offered. Oh, she felt good. He could hold her forever and it would never be long enough, for he'd always want more. "I suppose it's good you brought this up, just in case the court sends someone to do a checkup on us before the hearing. Our lawyer said they probably wouldn't, but I want us to be settled in case they do."

"I understand, Matt. Really, I do."

Her face looked innocent, but he still saw traces of humor in her eyes.


"That time Luke stopped us-- it really jarred you, didn't it?"

"Yeah, a bit." Matt let her go and went back to the dinner he was fixing to quietly celebrate a clean bill of health. The children didn't know about the tests, including Ryan who'd long since forgotten anything he'd overheard in the car, and Matt and Beth preferred to keep it that way.


Matt shrugged. "I'm living in a house that was once another man's, and with a woman that used to be his. Sometimes it doesn't feel like it's really mine."

With a sigh, she leaned her head against the back of Matt's neck as he peeled potatoes. "It's your turn to hold me, remember?"
"I can't. I'm fixing dinner."

"Then hold me after you're done. I can wait." She cuddled against his back and he couldn't help the fact his breathing came a little faster. "It took everyone a week of hard work, but I think the Taylors are officially moved in. Welcome home, Matt."

He had to hug her. He just had to. He put down the potatoes, dried his hands, then turned to embrace his wife. She warmed him until his heart thumped strong and happiness swam around, over, and through them. Being this happy could become a habit.

The kitchen phone rang.

He blindly reached for the receiver, tugged it off its hook while Beth did her best to keep him distracted.

"Hello?" He cleared his throat, grinned as Beth nibbled his free ear. "Matt Taylor speaking."

The urgent voice on the line put a stop to his joy. He knew this was too good to last. So much for happiness becoming a legal habit.

"Matt?" Beth straightened. "What is it?"

"Hold on a moment," he said into the phone. Turning to Beth, he tried to stay calm. "It looks like we've got a problem."

"The LORD will perfect that which concerneth me: Thy mercy, O LORD, endureth for ever: forsake not the works of Thine own hands."

~ Psalm 138:8 ~
Chapter Twenty-seven
A Family Matter

"Cast not away... your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise."
~ Hebrews 10:35, 36 ~

She waited for Matt to speak, fearing what he might say yet dreading that she already knew.

Matt’s face tightened. "It’s Francine Simmons--our attorney for Dylan's guardianship. If Mom and Wade don't show up in time to be served, we might have to ask for a postponement of the hearing."

"But what if we can't find them?"

"Hold on." Matt returned to the phone. "What if we can't find them?" His face held a grim expression as he listened. "Yeah, I know about the postponement, but Mom and Wade said they'll let me take Dylan. So what's the problem?" Matt blew out a breath. "I know they haven't signed a consent form yet-- you told me that was why they had to be served a summons. But what happens if we can't find them so they can be served? Besides the continuance, or whatever you called it-- what then?"

Movement at the kitchen door showed Cassie, pensively listening to Matt's half of the conversation.

"If the hearing is postponed, and we still can't find them, what then?" Matt's voice lowered as though backing away from frustration. "What exactly does 'diligent inquiry and search efforts' mean? What do we have to do?"

Now Ethan stood in the doorway, his face every bit as sober as Cassie's.

"Hold on, you're going too fast." Matt did a quick search of the counter, and Beth realized he was looking for something to write on. "Wait-- I'm sure they're not at their last known address. They came to Las Cruces with Dylan, and from what I thought they told me, they still wanted to get to Nashville. No, they didn't tell me that themselves, it's just what I assumed."

Fighting back a strong urge to panic, Beth located a notepad, a dull pencil and slid them over the counter in front of Matt.
"Mom doesn't have a cell phone-- at least, if she does, she's never given me her number." Matt picked up the pencil. "She only had the number for our home phone-- our old one before we moved into Beth's place. But Mom knows where we work. She's been to the nursery, and if she showed up in my old neighborhood, Mrs. Lott would've given her whatever information she wanted."

Folding his arms, Ethan stepped into the kitchen, leaned a shoulder against the fridge and fiercely concentrated on Matt. The dinner Matt had been preparing sat untouched in the sink, right where Matt had left it before the phone rang. Ethan was supposed to be doing homework right now, but Beth knew there would be no studying tonight. Not with this going on.

"I don't know of any business addresses, past or present." Matt tapped the pencil against the counter. "Mom's never had a job. I don't think she's ever worked a day in her life."

Ethan harrumphed. "You can say that again."

Matt waved to Ethan to be silent.

"What did you say?" Matt poised the pencil over the pad. "Address listed at the motor vehicle," he scrawled the letters in broad untrained strokes, "for the defendant's driver's license." He straightened, ran a hand through his hair and sucked in a deep breath. "I hate to tell you this, Ms. Simmons, but Mom doesn't have a driver's license. She drives-- I know she does-- but she's never had an actual license. So we should check anyway?" Matt kept scrawling on the pad, and nodded. "Yeah, I understand. We have to show the court we did everything possible to contact them."

The baby started crying from the second master bedroom. Matt looked up, and Beth squeezed his arm. She would take care of Dylan. He nodded, and asked Francine to repeat what she'd just said while Beth left the kitchen.

Cassie hurried after Beth. "What's happening? Are we going to lose Dylan?"

The question pushed itself into Beth's mind, as unwelcome as a spike through the brain. She couldn't dwell on it, kept walking, and forced herself to stay calm. "We're not losing Dylan. God won't allow it."

"But what if He does?" While Cassie's voice edged toward hysteria, Dylan cried his heart out for someone to pick him up. "What if Mom takes Dylan back? What are we going to do?"
"Cassie, calm down." Beth moved the bassinet to find Dylan waving his tiny arms and wailing with all his might.

"Mom can't take him, can she? She doesn't have the right!"

"Cassie, I said to calm down." Beth picked up Dylan. The moment she settled him against her shoulder, he stopped crying. She felt his diaper, found it dry, and realized he'd just wanted to be held.

To Beth's alarm, Cassie started breathing in quick, panicked gulps, and Beth hurried to move the girl to the bed before Cassie passed out. She sat Cassie on the mattress, shifted the baby and noticed whenever Dylan thought Beth was about to put him down, he started fussing again.

"Try to stay calm." Beth took a seat on the edge of the bed beside Cassie. "It's going to be all right. Matt will do everything within his power to keep you kids together, and so will I. You have my word on it."

"Would God do that to us, Beth? Would He take Dylan away?"

Words of quick assurance rushed to Beth's mind, but she felt unable to speak. What if God truly was going to take Dylan from them? What if it was God's will?

Tugging a comforting arm around Cassie, Beth gave the girl a strong hug. "We pray, Cassie. We pray with all our might that God would have mercy and spare Dylan the way He's spared you and your brothers. God placed you in Matt's care because God knows what's best for you. He'll do the same for Dylan."

"Beth, I'm so scared."

"I know, Sweetheart. So am I." Beth cradled a frightened child in each arm, and whispered a prayer to Heaven for the Taylor children, the small ones in particular. Yes, Beth included Cassie in that number. The girl hugged Beth and soaked up the comfort that should have long ago been given by Eve.

As far as Beth was concerned, that woman had a lot to answer for.

Sober and serious, Ryan came into the room and tried to find a place to sit on Beth's lap. Dylan started to panic that he was about to be put down, and Cassie kept crying softly into Beth's shoulder.
"Ryan, why don't you climb up on this bed and give us a hug? We could sure use one right now."

The boy scrambled onto the mattress with all the eagerness of someone truly wanting to help.

"My little hero," Beth smiled as he started passing out hugs to each of them. When Cassie began to calm down, Beth said a quiet prayer that they could all hear, asking God to keep their family together.

The phone call made Matt angry and weak at the same time. He wondered if his mom knew or cared what she was putting her family through. He also wondered if she was doing it on purpose, a way to get even with him, or possibly to blackmail them for money. The possibilities sickened him, and he had to hand it to Ms. Simmons for remaining patient and long-suffering through all his questions. Ms. Simmons had wanted to make sure she caught him at home, and not at work, and hoped she wasn't interrupting his dinner.

Matt didn't tell her that she had.

Food didn't matter. All he could think about was Mom and Wade, and of course, Dylan. In all of this, Dylan would be the one to suffer if Matt didn't handle this matter carefully. In all his agitation, he even considered taking Dylan and the family, and disappearing to another country to ensure Mom didn't get Dylan back.

He had to keep perspective, he couldn't allow fear to push him into acting without thinking.

By the time Matt got off the phone, Ethan had hoisted himself onto the island counter and was impatient to know what he knew.

"Just a minute," Matt said, scribbling down one last note before he forgot it. "Where's Beth and the others? I don't want to have to explain all this twice."

"Beth, Cassie, Ryan!" Ethan shouted over his shoulder. "Matt wants to talk to us!"

Matt shot his brother a look. "Thanks for delivering the message."

"Hey, you said you wanted them here."

Matt bit back a retort. He was tired and hungry, and like Ethan, he was scared.

Collecting his notes, Matt pushed past his teenage brother. "Get off the counter."
Jumping down, Ethan dogged Matt's footsteps into the living room. "Is Mom doing this on purpose, Matty?"

"I don't know. I sure hope not." Matt looked about the living room, then saw Beth emerge from their bedroom with Dylan, Cassie, and Ryan. Their faces were sober, and Cassie looked like she'd been crying.

Matt tried not to notice.

"I just got off the phone with our attorney. If Mom and Wade don't show up soon, we'll have to go through a lot of formalities just to prove to the court that we did our best to notify them of the hearing." Matt went to a couch, dropped onto the cushions with a weariness that went bone-deep. He waited while Beth sat down beside him, baby Dylan cradled in her arms.

Ethan sat down on the coffee table, while Cassie and Ryan took a seat on either side of Beth and Matt.

"What if we can't find Mom?" Ethan asked.

"Well, if we can't find her in time to have the summons served, then things are going to get messy." Matt glanced at his notes. "Ms. Simmons said it's Mom and Wade's constitutional right to be notified of the date and location of the guardianship hearing, and that we have to show due diligence that we've done everything possible to locate them. It's quite a list, actually. The best I understand it, then we'll have to show a judge why Dylan should be with us, and not with his parents."

"That shouldn't be hard to do, Matt."

He half smiled at Beth. "We have enough to argue that Mom has a track-record when it comes to her children, but the case isn't open and shut. Not as much as I'd like. The judge would have to make a decision without any consent forms, and he might not do what we want him to. That's why Ms. Simmons wants to hire a private investigator to find Mom and Wade. She said if they really are willing to surrender custody, that under the circumstances, it's the best way to make sure we get Dylan. She said their consent, or lack of protest once they were served, would go a long way with the judge. That was her opinion."

"A private investigator?" Beth blew out a sigh. "How much time do we have before it's too late?"
“We have about seventeen days to locate Mom and Wade and have them served. She has someone who'll serve the papers, but she needs to first know where they're at.”

“Seventeen days is a long time, Matty.” Ethan leaned forward. “It’s enough time to find them.”

“I like your optimism, Ethan, but what if they don't want to be found?”

“Then we go through all that stuff about how hard we tried to contact them, and take our chances with a judge.”

Beth nodded in agreement. “I don’t think we have any choice.”

“I agree.” Matt absently rubbed the knee of his jeans. “I don’t want to sit and wait for some private eye to find them-- I’d rather be out there looking myself, but there it is.”

“From everything you’ve said,” Beth touched the hand picking at the rip on his knee, “it’s not an impossible situation. There’s room for hope.”

Her hand squeezed his, and he felt the comfort of having someone to lean on. How he wished he could let that comfort sink in and smother the fear that nudged him toward despair. If Mom wanted to fight him in court, she would use anything and everything she thought she knew about his past, against him.

He could only pray she wouldn't fight.

That night, the call was made to Ms. Simmons to go ahead and hire a private investigator. Of course, Beth would foot the additional cost, but Beth didn't mind. It was money well spent, if it kept Dylan with his brothers and sister.

After the call, Beth finished making Matt's victory dinner-- the dinner to celebrate his negative test results-- and tried her best to move everyone from the doom and gloom that seemed to pervade the house. Ethan wasn't hungry, Cassie kept picking at her food without enthusiasm, and poor Ryan was quiet because everyone else was quiet. Only Dylan made his presence heard by fussing when it was time to change his diaper.

As Beth cleared away the dishes, Ethan went to his room under the pretenses of doing homework, and Cassie retreated to the living room to do hers. Though Beth wondered if they’d be able to study at all, life had to keep going. They’d made the call to Ms. Simmons, and someone would go out to Eve and Wade’s last known residential address in an attempt to serve
the summons. No one expected them to be there, but that wasn't the point. They'd be able to check off one more attempt and it would help the judge determine how hard they'd actually tried.

Ms. Simmons had a lot of work ahead of her, searching court records in the counties where Eve and Wade had lived, contacting the post office to see if there were any forwarding addresses, and other such measures to prove they'd been thorough in trying to locate Dylan's parents.

It would be cheaper if they did these things themselves, but Beth didn't want Matt deeply brooding over this for the next so many days, and stopped him from calling Ms. Simmons back. If he were the one doing all the legwork, and not someone else, that is exactly what would happen. As it was, Beth hoped Matt wouldn't slip into a brood and push everyone away. He needed them right now, and they, him.

Even though no one felt like sleeping, Beth coaxed everyone into their usual bedtime routine.

For Cassie and Ryan, though, bedtime came with a request.

"Please, Beth?"

"Yeah, pleeease, Mommy?"

Two hopeful faces looked at Beth as she put Dylan into his bassinet. The newborn slept so soundly, she could caress his soft baby cheeks and he wouldn't stir a muscle.

"Just this one night?" Cassie asked. "I won't ever ask again."

"Me neither," Ryan chimed in.

Out of the corner of her eye, Beth saw Matt going into the bathroom and wondered if he had heard any of this.

"Please, Beth, it's such a big house."

One look at Cassie and Beth was smiling. "I thought you liked your room."

"I do. It's just..." Cassie bit her bottom lip, gave a shrug and was silent.

Not waiting for permission, Ryan scrambled onto the mattress and proceeded to burrow into the still made blankets.
"Ryan, I didn't say 'yes.'" Beth went to the bed, dug a laughing little boy out from under the comforter. She lifted him and he hugged her around the neck. "What's this? You're not even in your jammies yet."

"Please, Beth."

Beth sighed, turned to Cassie and saw those sweet, pleading blue eyes. "You're going to have to ask your brother. You know that, don't you?"

Cassie gave a timid nod.

"If it's okay with Matt, then I guess it's all right with me."

"Thank you so much." Cassie breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"He has to agree, Cassie."

"I know."

With a sigh, Beth looked at the closed bathroom door. He wasn't going to like this, and she already knew it.

"Go help Ryan dress for bed, then put on your footed pajamas. I'll be the one to ask Matt, and don't look so hopeful. He's not going to say 'yes.'"

Despite the warning, Cassie led Ryan out of the master bedroom with a bright smile.

Oh dear.

Beth took a deep breath, then went into the bathroom to talk to Matt. He stood at the sink in his boxers, brushing his teeth while the faucet ran without being used.

"You're wasting water." Beth waited a moment, then moved around him to shut off the faucet.

"Hey, I was only doing that." Toothpaste sputtered from his mouth as he spoke around the brush. "Turn it back on."

She folded her arms. "You want to waste water, you turn it on."
He gave a rueful half grin, the first sign all evening that he hadn't sunk completely beneath the waves Eve and Wade had created.

"Your sister has a request." Beth tilted her head to one side, gave a returning smile that she hoped would make what she wanted to come a little easier.

"Let me geth." Matt spit out the toothpaste, rinsed his mouth with water then grabbed a towel to dry his face. "She wants a raise on her allowance."

"She doesn't have an allowance."

"Then that would pose a problem."

He was cracking jokes. Good, Beth thought, I want him happy.

"Dylan has the same request, and before you turn them down," Beth moved away as Matt tried to put his arms around her, "I want you to consider that today hasn't been easy for any of the kids. Yourself included."

Matt frowned. "There you go, calling me a kid again."

"While you were on the phone," Beth moved again to avoid being drawn into a passionate embrace, "Cassie did a lot of crying and even slipped into a panic attack. She's terrified we won't be able to keep Dylan."

Matt pushed out a heavy sigh. "I figured she'd been crying, but I didn't know about the attack." He punched the air, leaned against the bathroom wall and looked at Beth. "So what's the request?"

Beth smiled.

"Spit it out, Beth. I know you're not doing all this so I'll say 'no,' so what am I agreeing to?"

"The children would like to sleep with us, tonight."

Matt shook his head. "No way."

"Please, Matt. It would mean so much to them."

"It would mean a lot to me, too. That's why I'm saying 'no.'"
"But they've had a difficult day."

"So have I. And don't even think of calling me a kid because I said that."

She saw him fight back a grin.

"Of course, you'd have to wear pajamas." Beth gave him a look. "You know, the ones I bought you a few days ago, the ones you said were for sissies and you never put on. Not even once."

"That's because I don't need them."

"You will, if we're going to let Cassie and Ryan into our bed."

"There you go," he smiled. "We're not."

Beth smiled in return. "We'll put Ryan between us, and Cassie on my other side."

"And where do we put Ethan?" Matt gave a tired laugh. "What's the use of having this great big house, if the kids sleep in our bed?"

"Think about it, Matt. They're pretty scared right now, and it would only be for this one night. Ryan might need to sleep with us again, but I'm going to coax Cassie into being a little braver in the future."

Matt rubbed his face with both hands. "She had a panic attack. Oh, man. I wish I'd been there to help."

"You were busy at the time, and she understood." Beth reached over and touched Matt's shoulder. "You're a good brother. Don't beat yourself up over things that aren't your fault."

His dark eyes met hers, and without saying a word, she went to him with a hug. He accepted it, almost too gratefully, as though she were doing him a favor and not giving something he deserved.

"You're doing the best you can." She whispered with as much tenderness as she could cram into her words. "We all know you're doing your best, and we love you for it."
"Beth, don't say that." She felt resistance to her hug and backed away a few inches to see his face. "If Mom wants to fight for Dylan, she could say some fairly rotten things about me, and not all of them would be lies."

"What do you want me to say, Matt?" Beth inhaled deeply, not wanting to add to his pain. "This is the circumstance that God has allowed. I have to believe He has a good reason for what's happening. You said it yourself-- God doesn't play dice with the universe."

"I didn't say it," Matt sighed. "Einstein did."

"Well, then. There you go." Beth rested her head on Matt's shoulder, and sighed when his arms came around her. "God has gone to a lot of trouble to get us where we are, and I don't think He's done. I really don't."

A sigh breathed against her ear. "Then you think there's still room for hope?"

"Absolutely. God hasn't walked away from us. You of all people should know that."

"Yeah, I know. But I still appreciate the reminder." The hug grew tighter. "Please, God, don't let Mom, Wade, or me, pull this family apart. Please save us from ourselves. We don't know what to do, but our eyes are on Thee." [2 Chronicles 20:12]

"Amen." Beth stood there, praying and hugging her husband until she heard Dylan start to fuss in the bedroom. "I'll get your PJ's, Matt." She gave him an affectionate kiss, then stepped away. "Put them on, then come to bed."

A resigned smile formed on his lips. "You're taking something for granted. I never said 'yes.'"

"I know you haven't," Beth went to the bathroom door, "but you're about to, even if you don't know it yet. I'll be back with the pajamas." She closed the door behind her, then opened it to give him a look. "They are not sissy."

When he grinned, she retreated before he could grab her into another embrace.

If a person could ever be called a natural remedy for the heart, Beth would be that person. All she had to do was stand next to him, and he felt better. She steadied him and reminded him of hope, when hope was in short supply. And tonight, he'd needed that shot in the arm to keep him going.
Matt buttoned his pajama top, looked in the mirror and grimaced at what he saw.

Love sure could turn a sane man into an idiot. These clothes were for guys who were too embarrassed to sleep in their shorts, and he knew it. He'd better watch out. First that frilly stuff around the bed, now the pajamas, then she'd be on him for not putting down the toilet seat.

He hoped Ethan didn't see him like this.

He went to shut off the bathroom light, then paused. *Had* he put the toilet seat down?

In a moment of male bravery, he hit the lights and pushed into the bedroom without checking. This was one man who would not be changed by a woman.

"Matt, would you get my herbal moisturizer from the bathroom?"

The question knocked Matt in the face. He turned to look at Beth as she folded the heavy top comforter on the bed.

"It's in the cabinet, bottom shelf." She didn't even look up, but started arranging the extra pillows the kids had brought. "Ryan, there won't be enough room for your dinosaur. Better put him on the floor so he can guard Dylan's bassinet."

The girl beside Beth gave him a double-take. "Matty, are you wearing pajamas?"

The question added insult to injury, and Matt tried to remind himself that Cassie needed to be treated gently. Hard to do, when he recognized the unspoken laughter in her eyes.

"While you're getting the moisturizer, would you bring the nightlight by the cabinet?" Beth shook out a light quilt over the bed, smoothed it then stooped to pick up the dinosaur Ryan had left by her feet.

Cassie grinned. "I like the pinstripes, Matty. They're very distinguished."

Unsure if that was good, he escaped scrutiny by getting Beth's moisturizer goop from the cabinet.

"Don't forget the nightlight," Beth called from the next room.

He located the bottle, grabbed the nightlight and hurried back to the bedroom before he had a chance to stop himself. He was tired, and gave the items to Beth before climbing into bed.
When Ryan eagerly joined him, Matt let himself forget the indignities of pajamas and running errands. It didn't matter— not really. Not when there were more important things to do, like finding room for a stuffed dinosaur who really missed its owner.

"I guess this guy can guard the baby from here," Matt said, picking up the toy and placing it in Ryan's arms. "I'll move over to make sure there's enough room for everyone."

While Beth went into the bathroom to change, Cassie sat on the large bed and stared at the bassinet. Matt recognized the fear his sister felt, and decided to pull out his Bible and read them a bedtime story— something happy that didn't involve babies being separated from the people that loved them.

Sitting against the headboard, Matt flipped through the Scriptures until he came to the Book of Ruth. As he began, he noticed Cassie settling back to listen.

It was a short book, only four chapters long, but the story of Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, held a sweetness that Matt hadn't caught the last time he read it. The way Ruth loved Naomi, and her declaration that "whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God," touched Matt in a way he hadn't expected. Ruth loved her mother-in-law, even though no tie but love still bound them together.

Love was a strong thing, one that should never be underestimated.

As Matt finished the story, he wondered if his mom had ever felt that tenderly bound to anyone in her entire life. Had there ever been a moment in time when Mom had loved them, or been willing to make whatever sacrifices were necessary for their sakes? Beth had married into their family simply to protect Dylan. Sure, it had also been for Ryan, Cassie, and Ethan, but Beth had been willing to tie herself, with love, to a family that hadn't been hers. Their problems were now her problems, and her heart beat with theirs.

Had Mom ever done that for her own flesh and blood?

Closing the Bible, Matt looked up to find Beth had been listening to the story.

"That was really sweet." She went to the bassinet and checked Dylan. "Ruth and Boaz has to be one of the greatest love stories in the Bible."

The contrast between what he saw in the story, and what Beth saw, made Matt smile. They both had seen love, but in different ways.
Matt scooted down and let Ryan snuggle with him and his dino. He wondered how different it felt to be a parent, and not just the big brother. Did it feel any similar to this? Beth wanted to have a baby, and now that he had a clean bill of health, he had to think about the possibility of parenthood.

After turning off the lights, Beth got in beside Ryan, then Cassie climbed in after her.

As the girls were getting settled, Ethan poked his head around the open bedroom door.

"Hey, what gives? Are you guys having a party and I wasn't invited?"

"Does this look like a party to you?" Matt adjusted so the stuffed dinosaur didn't push into his side. "The kids are frightened, so we're letting them sleep with us for one time only."

"What if I said I was frightened?"

In the dim glow of the nightlight, Matt looked at Ethan. "Are you?"

"No."

"Then why'd you ask?"

"I was just wondering what you'd say." Ethan shuffled into the bedroom in his jeans, folded his arms like he was unsure what to do with them, then meandered over to the lacy bed where Dylan slept.

"You have school tomorrow," Matt reminded.

"Yeah, I know." Ethan stood protectively over the bassinet, his guarded stance speaking volumes about what he felt for his baby brother. "Do you think they're in Las Cruces, Matty?"

"I don't know. Probably."

When Ethan glanced at Matt, his eyes narrowed. He came closer.

"Are those pajamas?"

Matt tensed. "What do they look like?"
"Wow, Matty."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." Ethan backed off but Matt could see him grin. "I just never thought you'd cave in and wear them."

"I didn't cave in."

"Okay. If you say so." Ethan looked at the bassinet and yawned. "Well, I'm turning in. 'Night."

Matt watched him leave. "'Night, Ethan."

"Good night," Beth called after him.

"'Night," Cassie said sleepily. "Matty, do I have to go to school tomorrow?"

"Afraid so, Cass."

"Good night, Matt. I love you."

Matt looked over Ryan's head at the woman snuggled with Cassie.

"I love you right back."

Even in the semi-darkness, he saw Beth smile.

He rolled onto his side, sniffed the little boy scent of Ryan's baby shampoo and brushed the hair from Ryan's eyes. Ryan was sucking his thumb again, a sure sign that all the tension and uncertainty of the evening hadn't gone unnoticed.

Matt pulled out the thumb.

Closing his eyes, Matt sent up one of many prayers he had prayed that day. They needed help and protection, and all the mercies God could spare to keep Dylan.

By the time Matt opened his eyes, the thumb had found its way back to Ryan's mouth.
In the morning, Beth made the children lunches for school, then packed up Ryan and Dylan to take them into work with her and Matt. While they were toying with the idea of finding a good daycare, they had yet to commit to any decision. Beth felt no eagerness to turn the kids over to someone else, especially when the responsibilities of being a parent again gave her so much fresh enjoyment.

With Dylan strapped into a baby sling at her chest, Beth opened the store and let Matt and Ryan inside. Ryan would be with Matt for awhile, then they would swap-- baby for boy.

The older children had been to the nursery before, but not the little ones. Today, the nursery would be a nursery for more than just plants.

From the start, Beth knew their hands would be full.

"Ryan, don't touch that." Matt went to take the trowel from the boy and place it back on the rack. "Hey, buddy, let's get your toys out of Mommy's car. There's lots of dirt out back and you can dig all you want. What do you say?" Hoisting the boy into his arms, Matt shot Beth a knowing smile. "Don't worry, I won't let him out of my sight. You want me to work on those pots you talked about last week?"

Beth was about to say "yes," when Amy came through the entrance in her nursery shirt and jeans.

"Morning, Mrs. Carter." Amy made her way through the store, calling out her greeting even before she saw Beth. "Your car sure needs a bath. Someone wrote 'Wash Me' on the rear window. You really should consid--" Amy cut short her thought as she neared the office and saw the children.

"We brought them into work today," Beth explained.

"No kidding." Amy's eyes lit up with genuine pleasure. "This has to be Ryan, right? Oh, what a little pumpkin head! And this is Dylan? Oh, Mrs. Carter, why haven't you brought them into work sooner? If you ever need a babysitter, I'm your girl." Amy touched the infant cap on Dylan's head, and sighed dreamily.

"Keep that up," Beth said wryly, "and we might take you up on that offer. For now, I just need you to come into work on time."

"Oh, I will," Amy nodded.
"Good." Beth looked about the store, unsure how she could trust a promise that had been given so easily. "Before we open for business, the floral displays around the checkout need attention, then I need an inventory list for the perennials. Matt?" Beth moved to catch up as Matt took Ryan outside. "About those transplants-- I want them done before closing time."

"I'll get right on it," he nodded. A hurt look hinted in his face, and for a moment, Beth wondered if she'd been too abrupt.

As he turned away, Sylvia pushed through the entrance and nearly collided with Matt and Ryan.

"Watch where you're going." Sylvia brushed past them, not even taking notice of the cute little boy that had just ducked behind Matt's pant leg. Beth imagined that with those dark shades covering Sylvia's eyes, and the blood red lipstick stretched into a sour expression, Sylvia looked somewhat scary to a four-year-old.

Shaking her head, Beth went after Sylvia to give her another speech about coming in on time. It didn't take a private detective to know Silvi had hit the bars last night. A hangover never did anything for her complexion, or her mood.

Small businesses didn't run by themselves. It took relentless management, a work ethic that wouldn't stop, and a surplus of effort to get things done. Matt understood this, and tried very hard not to let his bruised feelings show in front of Beth.

It wasn't what she had said, but the way she had said it-- in that schoolteacher voice that always disheartened him. He had once imagined kissing her so soundly, so completely, she'd never be able to give him that tone again. Either he had been wrong to think it might work, or he hadn't kissed her soundly enough to be effective. Neither thought made him feel very great, but when it came down to it, he would willingly live with the teacher's voice, if he could live with the teacher.

After hauling Ryan's toys out of the backseat of Beth's car, Matt took his brother behind the store, and placed him near a large mound of loose soil that just begged for someone to play in.

"I know it doesn't look like much," Matt said, squatting to dump an armload of trucks and planes onto the dirt, "but you'll be safe here. I'm going to be a few feet over there-- see?" Matt pointed to the potting table. He'd have to move it around so his back wouldn't be to Ryan, but that wasn't a problem. "You need to use the bathroom, or you get tired, come over and I'll take care of it. Did I put enough sunscreen on you?" Matt tugged the bottle out from his back pocket but
Ryan giggled and squirmed away. "Okay, no more for now. Where's your baseball cap? How could you lose it already?"

"What's that?" Ryan pointed to a large terra cotta planter off to one side.

"That's to grow things in. If you get tired or want to go inside the store, you let me know. All right?"

Ryan nodded as Matt located the missing baseball cap, dusted it off, then placed it on the boy's head where it belonged.

Going to move the potting table, Matt's thoughts drifted to Dylan, to the way Cassie had kissed Dylan's cheek before leaving for school. He remembered the protective way Ethan had insisted on holding Dylan before they left, and it put a golf ball-sized lump in Matt's throat.

Life had taught Matt that good never came without something bad following close behind. A lot of good had happened recently, so it gave him pause to consider what might come next. Even long ago, during those sky-reaching moments when drugs had pounded through his system, even they hadn't lasted, and were soon replaced by anxiety and self-loathing.

What was going to happen?

The threat of what his mom might do, of what she knew about his past, stirred old memories that Matt would've rather forgotten.

The dirty floor of a motel bathroom, the urgency to push himself up and vomit into the toilet, the feel of sweat soaked clothes plastered to his skin, the absolute certainty that he was losing his mind-- it all flashed before him without warning. Mom living on the stained motel couch for those first several days, watching from a distance, fulfilling her end of the bargain to keep an eye on him in case something went terribly wrong.

Meth addiction hadn't been an easy habit to kick. His come-to-Jesus moment had been followed by crashing insomnia and withdrawal induced depression. Stopping cold turkey had pushed him to that spot, and only God's mercies had helped him from shooting up the first chance he got. Looking back, he knew drug rehab would have been far less risky than locking himself in a room with his mom, and taking his chances that she'd call 911 if she thought he was dying.

More than once, he'd come close to begging her to make that call.
His strategy hadn’t been all that smart, but at the time, it had been the only way out that he’d found. His fear of being officially put on record as a drug addict, had stopped him from seeking professional help. With a record, it might be impossible to get legal guardianship of the kids, for who in their right mind would turn over underaged children to an eighteen-year-old just off drugs?

Of course his mom would, for that was why she’d been willing to sit on the couch and watch him crash.

Then came the sleep. Weeks of it, getting up to relieve himself, to find something to eat that he could keep down, dragging himself to the motel manager at the end of each week to pay in advance for the next one.

That dingy room seemed worlds away, standing here at this potting table, transplanting tomato seedlings that would one day find themselves into someone’s garden. It was worlds away, and yet all he had to do was close his eyes, and he was there, pleading with God to not let him die.

Now that life was wildly better, he feared another crash loomed in the distance. Those negative test results had given him a clean bill of health, and he was starting a new life with a wonderful woman who actually loved him. His hands were scraping the sky, and he feared it wouldn’t last. The crash had to come soon, didn’t it? Life was too perfect, and it was never that way before--never so very perfect as right now.

He patted soil around the new transplant, checked Ryan again, then grabbed the watering can to soak the roots.

Mom knew too much. She had kept silent when he filed for guardianship that first time for Ethan and Cassie, then again when Ryan was born. But now, silence meant more than freeing herself from a burden. The last time Mom had come to Beth and threatened to take Dylan away unless Beth gave her money, the threat had been mostly empty; Mom was lazy, and unless the fruit was low enough for easy picking, Mom would curse fate, and move on.

But now, Matt had an uneasy feeling Mom had only given up one tact, to pursue another. Maybe she thought Dylan was low-hanging fruit, after all. The temptation to leverage her position would be strong, and Matt feared her silence was to make them more willing to pay.

Whatever his mom was up to, he prayed it wouldn't hurt Dylan, or the others.
After Sylvia had come into work nursing a hangover, Beth had reminded her that she was late. Again. The ensuing low-pitched argument that followed had given Beth an extra strength headache, despite their quiet attempts to not frighten Dylan.

When it was over, Beth had retreated to her office and left Sylvia to lick her self-inflicted wounds.

A part of Beth felt sorry for the woman she considered an old friend, for Sylvia was always chasing after a good time and rarely ever having one. Was Silvi having fun yet?

The office chair creaked as Beth adjusted the baby sling. Dylan had barely blinked through the entire confrontation, and even now, he seemed utterly content to let Beth hold him.

Dylan's eyes grew wide as she cooed,

"What a bug-a-boo! Who's cute? Who's cute? You are, you are!"

His tongue moved, and he pushed out a sound, then another, then without warning, he broke into a smile. A wide smile. Ear to ear.

Beth gasped. "Dylan, did you just give me your first smile?"

He waved his hands, kept making sounds and stared at her mouth as she talked.

"Dylan, did you smile?"

He turned his head and drool spilled down his chin. Beth wiped it away.

"Dylan? Come on Dilly, look over here." Beth touched a finger to his cheek, and he turned back to her, his head and body comfortably supported in the sling. "Smile, Dylan. Come on, smile for Mommy. Smile for Mommy."

He didn't, but Beth excitedly got up to go show Matt.

Outside, she found him at the potting table, tending to the transplants as he'd said he would.

"Matt, you're never going to guess what just happened."

He straightened, the dark eyes below the brim of his Stetson at once serious.
"No, it's good," Beth assured him. She turned so Dylan faced his big brother. "Guess who just smiled for the very first time?"

Matt's features visibly relaxed. He pushed back his hat and leaned forward to look at Dylan.

The baby blinked at him.

"I don't know, Beth. Are you sure it wasn't gas?"

Beth shook her head. "I know a smile when I see one, and this baby did."

Matt looked at her skeptically.

"Matt Taylor, don't look at me like that. I've been a mommy before, and I know..."

He held up a hand to stop her from repeating herself.

"I know you believe what you think you saw. Dylan makes a face when he's passing gas, and it kind of looks like a smile. But it isn't. Besides, Dylan hasn't been smiling for me."

"Well, he did for me. Didn't you Dilly? Come Dylan, smile for Mommy."

"Beth, he's too young." Matt swiped off his hat and gave her a handsome grin that hinted of tender pity. "Ryan didn't give a genuine smile until he was at least six weeks old."

"So? Dylan turned four weeks today, and I saw him smile. It just wasn't his mouth, but his eyes and cheeks. Come on, Dylan, smile for your brother. Smile for Matty."

Matt chuckled. "I guess he's done passing wind."

"It was not wind."

Throughout their playful debate, Dylan gurgled and cooed, his eyes wide as saucers whenever she spoke. Then she made a face to imitate Dylan's smile.

Matt's jaw dropped, and it wasn't until she looked down at the baby that she understood why.

"He smiled." Matt tossed the hat onto the potting table and bent to look at his brother. "He actually smiled. Beth, you made that face and he smiled."
She gave Matt a playful shove.

"Yeah, yeah, you told me so." Matt grinned, parental pride shining in his eyes. "It's a big day for Dylan. Wow, he actually smiled at you."

"He'll smile for you too, Matt. Just give him time."

Though Matt gave a one shouldered shrug, she knew he was a bit hurt that Dylan had lavished that first smile on her, instead of him. She could almost hear Matt thinking, "But I'm his brother, shouldn't I have gone first?"

"It's all right." Matt picked up his hat. "I can wait."

"Oh, Matt." Beth reached out to give him a hug.

Though he looked embarrassed, he didn't turn it down.

Between them, securely snugged in the sling, Dylan made little cries to announce his presence. They weren't looking at him anymore, and he wanted their attention.

"Okay, now that sound I know." Matt stepped back and chuckled lightly. "Diaper change. Definitely the diaper."

"I don't know." Beth looked down at the baby, who kept waving his hands and making short little crying noises that had yet to grow frantic. "I think he's hungry."

Matt glanced at Ryan, then turned back to her with a grin. "Dylan was born hungry, but that's a diaper cry." Just then, the phone in Matt's pocket sounded. "Unless you want me to change the little guy on the potting table, I'm afraid you've got diaper duty for now."

"It's not his diaper." Beth cocked her head to one side, and Matt smiled.

In that brief moment, a silent "I love you" had passed between them. She felt it, and so did he. She could see it in the way he looked at her.

He put the cell phone to his ear. "Hello?"

The gentleness slipped from his face, and Beth's heart started to pound. A phone call. Another phone call.
"Yes, I'm listening." Matt stepped away from Beth, the phone glued to his ear. "Wait a moment-- where?" he signaled for something to write on, and Beth quickly searched her pockets. "I'm bringing my attorney with me," Matt said in a flat voice. "Don't give me that. You know why."

Beth thrust a black marker into his hand. He pulled off the cap with his teeth, spit it out and began scribbling on an open bag of manure.

She moved to see what he wrote. An address. An address not far from here.

"Give me a half hour, and we'll meet you there." When Matt handed the marker back to Beth, his eyes refused to meet hers. "Okay." With that one flat word, and no good-bye, he closed the phone.

She touched his arm. "Was that her?"

"Yeah, it was Mom." Matt tore the address from the bag, then stuffed it into his pocket. He took out a card stamped with a blindfolded Lady Justice holding scales. "She got my cell number from Mrs. Lott."

"What did Eve have to say? Where is she? Did she tell you?"

"Beth, I can't-- just hold off a moment." The muscles in Matt’s jaw were working overtime. He punched in a number, shoved the card into his pocket and stared at the ground. "Ms. Simmons, please. Tell her it's urgent."

Whatever Dylan had wanted, wasn't getting taken care of, for his cries became more frantic. Beth tried to adjust him, but Dylan waved his arms and refused to be comforted so easily.

Holding the phone closer to his ear, Matt took a few steps away.

"Ms. Simmons, Mom just called me."

Squirming, Dylan screamed at the top of his lungs and Beth was forced to take him into the store. She dearly wanted to stay and hear what was happening, but Dylan couldn't wait. She took him past the register and waved off a question from Amy.

"Please God, we're in Your hands." Without realizing it, Beth spoke the words out loud, and Sylvia heard them as Beth went into the office.
While Beth located the all-important diaper bag, Sylvia came to the door. Score one for Matt, Beth thought, spreading out a soft towel to change Dylan. Those cries had meant a dirty diaper, after all.

"What's wrong?" Sylvia asked.

Beth shook her head. "He's got a full diaper, that's all."

The comment didn't seem to convince Sylvia, for she came into the office and watched Dylan kick his legs as Beth lifted him out of the sling. His foot knocked the bottle of talc off the desk, and Sylvia stooped to pick it up.

"Thanks, Silvi."

Tucking her shades into her dark curls, Sylvia distracted Dylan so Beth could change the diaper.

His mind full of what needed to be done, Matt strode into the store. He must have looked like he was searching for Beth, for Amy pointed to the office even before he asked.

He found Dylan quietly allowing Sylvia to hold him, while Beth hurriedly cleaned up the mess of the diaper change.

"I need your car." Matt didn't bother with "please" or "thank you," and when Beth stared at him, he shook his head. "I have to go, and Ethan has my truck."

"Are you meeting Eve and Wade somewhere?"

He gave a quick nod.

"Then I'm coming with you."

"No, you're not." Matt forced himself from looking into those questioning green eyes. He feared she would see too much. "I need the keys."

"If you want the keys, then you'll take me with them." Beth shouldered the diaper bag as though she were preparing to leave.

He scanned the desk, lifted the keys from beside her stapler and turned to leave. "I'll call when I have news."
"Matt, please."

"I don't want to drag you into this. I have to be the one to deal with her."

"Why?"

"Because I know her and you don't."

With a sigh, Beth took off the diaper bag. "You'll try to call me?"

He nodded, then left the store without another word.

From across the street in Beth's car, Matt and Ms. Simmons watched the guy who'd been hired to serve the papers to Mom and Wade. When the man emerged from the motel room and gave a thumbs-up to the car, they opened their doors to get out.

A stiff desert wind gave Matt's gray Stetson a firm tug. He sucked in a deep breath as Mom came to the motel room door and stared at him. Her shabby pants and wrinkled shirt looked like they hadn't been washed in ages, and her hair was a mess.

"Time to go meet them." Ms. Simmons straightened her shoulders, and walked with briefcase in hand like a soldier going into battle with a trusted weapon.

However the meeting went, the papers had been served. At least that much had been done.

It meant they wouldn't have to get their hearing postponed because they couldn't locate Dylan's parents. It might still be continued, as Ms. Simmons put it, but at least it wouldn't be because of Mom and Wade.

Wade. The very sound of the man's name sickened Matt. He followed Ms. Simmons into the room, and waited a moment as his eyes adjusted to the dim indoor light.

The cleanliness of the room seemed to be insulted by the unbathed people who stayed there. On the bed, Wade lounged in a dingy white T-shirt and ripped jeans, his fingers stained orange by the Cheetos he kept pushing into his mouth.

Mom stood beside the bed, her arms folded and her back ramrod straight. The stance said everything Matt didn't want to hear.
She wasn't going to roll over and play dead. She was going to fight.

Without waiting for an invitation, Ms. Simmons located a chair and sat down.

"I'm not signing anything, and neither is Wade."

"Mrs. Taylor, I think you must agree that you and Mr. Martin aren't in any position to keep Amadeus."

It took a moment for Matt to break from his thoughts and remember Wade's last name, and Dylan's legal first name.

"What if I say we are?" Mom asked.

Ms. Simmons gave a wan smile. "I think Social Services would be in a better position to answer that, don't you?"

The not-so-subtle threat had mom quiet, but only for a moment.

"I want what's best for my baby."

"I'm glad to hear it." Ms. Simmons opened her briefcase. "As you've already been notified, a petition has been filed with the District Court for guardianship concerning Amadeus Taylor. If you don't intend to contest the petition, I'll ask you and Wade to sign a consent form before a notary public." Ms. Simmons took out some papers stapled together and gave them to Mom.

Warily, Mom looked them over. "This says we're agreeing to Matt and Beth as the guardians."

"That's right." Ms. Simmons kept her tone professional.

"If I agree that we're not the best parents for our kid, I'm not ready to agree to Matt and Beth. We've got some people who are interested in adopting our baby. We're thinking he might be better off with them."

Anger simmered in Matt's veins. It was all he could do to reign in his reaction so Mom wouldn't know her threat had hit its mark.

"I see." Ms. Simmons sat back in her chair and looked thoughtful.
Over on the bed, Wade stuffed Cheetos as fast as he could. The guy was a nervous wreck.

From the degree of Wade's fraying nerves, Matt had a hunch his mom was bluffing. Still, he couldn't be sure.

"Well, Mom," Matt forced a grin and noticed Wade grow pale, "I guess it looks like we came down here for nothing."

Mom's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, 'for nothing'?"

Matt shrugged. "We were concerned Dylan wouldn't grow up in a stable environment. You're proving me wrong by doing the responsible thing."

Now Wade looked sick. He closed his eyes and stopped eating.

"You think you're really smart, don't you?" The bitterness in Mom's face gave Matt hope. "If I give up my baby, I want something in return."

"Such as?"

"For one thing, money. I know you and Beth are loaded. I know Beth's dead husband was rich. I want some of it."

Matt leaned forward in his boots. "Not one red cent."

"Then I'm going to call those people and say they can have Dylan. What do you think of that?"

Matt stepped aside so she could get at the phone. "Be my guest. You can't sign our consent form unless we haven't given you anything in return, so until Social Services removes Dylan from your care, who you decide to call is your problem, not mine."

"They won't give you the baby." Mom gave a smile that sent icy shivers down Matt's back. "Not after they hear what I have to tell them. In fact, they might even think twice about letting you keep the other children."

A moan came from the bed. Wade pulled himself up and went into the bathroom. The pressure had been too much for his bladder to take.
Fear snaked into Matt's heart. He knew a judge could terminate his guardianship of Ethan, Cassie, and Ryan, if he thought they were in an unsafe situation. Matt hadn't adopted them, he'd only became their legal guardian. There was a difference.

Mom looked triumphant. "I've got your attention now, don't I?"

There was contempt in the way Ms. Simmons looked at Mom, and Matt couldn't blame her.

He motioned to his mom. "Maybe you and I should step outside and have a talk."

"Okay, Matty." Mom put down the consent form. "If you want me to talk, that's just what I'll do."

The double edged meaning fed the fear in Matt's heart. He had to get control of it before Mom got the upper hand.

He followed Mom outside, closed the door and desperately prayed for help.

"I'm not surprised you didn't bring Beth." Mom tugged a pack of cigarettes from her pants pocket. "Protecting your investment, huh?"

He shot her a look, but she just smiled and lit a cigarette.

"You still haven't told her, have you." Mom hadn't asked a question, and Matt didn't even attempt to make a response.

They came to a large concrete barrier that separated the motel's parking lot from the business next door, and stopped to talk.

"Poor, poor Matty." Mom blew out a stream of smoke. "Stuck out here with his druggie mother. Bet you talk about me all the time in that fancy house, don't you?"

"What do you know of Beth's place?"

Mom shrugged. "Wade has friends in Las Cruces. Word gets around."

Matt didn't reply. Those friends were probably helping Wade pay for that motel room.

"The way I see it, Matty, you owe me. I'm not trying to ruin things for you, but I deserve a cut, you know?" Mom squinted into the sunlight. "I want five hundred a month, and I'll keep my mouth shut about your misspent youth-- the drunken binges, and the days you were strung out
with Helen." She said it lightheartedly, like she was delivering the punchline to a joke, but he
didn't smile. "You need to lighten up, Matty."

He said nothing, just stood there trying to make his mind work.

Mom blew out more tobacco. "After the things I could tell that judge in the court summons, do
you really think he'd give you custody of Dylan? If you love your brother, you wouldn't take that
chance."

"Oh, Mom, stop it."

"Pardon?"

"Stop playing games with me. I'm sick of them."

Mom blew smoke in his face. "Well excuse me for breathing. Why don't I crawl off someplace
and kill myself? You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Mom, stop it." Yanking off his hat, Matt leaned against the wall. Talking to her was like pulling
teeth-- very painful, but necessary.

"You still have that Stetson." Mom gave a triumphant smirk. "I wonder what Helen would say if
she knew you're still wearing her present."

"Mom, I can't give you any money."

"Why not?"

"Because you'll only ask for more." Matt turned the hat in his hands, wishing she hadn't brought
up Helen. Not now, not when he had to be strong. "If you think you need to tell the judge about
me, then I can't stop you. I'll have to live with the consequences, and so will the others."

"Don't throw that at my feet, Matty. If they take the kids, it'll be your fault-- not mine." Mom
put the cigarette to her lips and drew in a puff of tobacco. "What's five hundred to you? You'll
hardly miss it."

"Mom, are you still using?"

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What if I am?"
"It'll kill you, Mom. You gotta jump off."

"That's just what'll happen to me if I do jump." Mom nervously sucked in more tobacco. "Don't ask me to go down the same road you took, Matty. It isn't for me."

Turning, Matt watched the traffic moving past them on the street, then looked back at her. "You won't have to jump like I did. I'll help you, whether you talk to the judge about me or not. I'll pay for the best drug rehab out there-- all you have to do is say the word. But what I won't do-- what I'll NEVER do-- is use Dylan or any of the others as bartering chips."

Mom glared at him. In this light, he noticed she was starting to look her age. She'd always bragged that no one could tell she was an addict, but now, in the direct sunlight, he could tell the years of abuse were catching up.

"Whatever you do, Mom, you won't get to keep Dylan. Not that that's what you want--" Matt broke off and regained control of his voice. "Fight me in court, and neither of us will get him. Do that, and he'll go to some foster family to later be adopted. He'll never know where he came from, or the family he had. Is that what you really want?"

Angrily, Mom dropped the cigarette on the ground. "Five hundred, Matty. Five hundred and this all goes away."

"No, Mom, it won't. We both know it won't. I pay you, and it's like paying ransom-- except this ransom will help you slowly murder yourself. I won't be a party to it."

"Then you'll lose Dylan," she warned. "You might even lose Cassie and Ryan. Ethan won't matter, because he's too old."

"He's still a kid, Mom. Like I was."

Wind blew Mom's long black hair into her face. She brushed it back, fumbled for her pack of smokes to light up another.

"Ethan isn't anything like you." Mom pointed at him with a fresh cigarette. "He'd never jump off with nothing to catch him, just to take care of a bunch of kids that weren't his own. No, he might be young, but he's got nothing on you." A strange tone of grudging pride snuck into Mom's voice. "You were puking your guts out, claiming God was with you-- I thought for sure you'd permanently gone bananas."

A slow sigh moved through Matt.
"So you won't let me have my cut?" She squinted into the light. "You'd really do that to your poor old mom?"

"I can't, Mom. I won't."

Shaking her head, Mom sucked on her smoke. "What're you going to do when I go to that judge?"

Quietly, Matt forced back the panic. "It's in God's hands."

"So that's it?" She gave a disbelieving laugh. "Just like that? You think I'm bluffing? Just try me, Matty, and see how far you get."

The old sadness swept through Matt, and he rubbed his eyes to rid himself of the mental picture of his Mom walking away. Just like she always did.

"Can I ask you something?" Matt looked at her and noticed her surprise when he didn't shout or cave in to anger. "Did you ever love us?"

"What kind of question is that?"

Matt looked at the ground, then at her. "Did you?"

"Of course I did. How could you ask that? It's not only stupid, it's hurtful."

"I was just wondering." Matt put the hat back on. "I think we're done talking, don't you?"

She blinked at him in stunned surprise.

He took one more look at his mother, greedily sucking in tobacco to soothe away the ugly yearnings for meth and whatever else she was hooked on. Cigarettes had never done anything for Matt, and he figured she would need to get a fix soon, before withdrawal really started to kick in.

When Matt returned to the room, Ms. Simmons was reading something from her briefcase. And Wade? He was in the bathroom, hiding.

"We're ready to go." Matt held the motel door open, and she gathered up her briefcase without comment.
Ms. Simmons was more than ready to leave. She nearly ran out that door.

An hour before closing time, Matt pulled in front of the nursery and sat in the car for a full ten minutes. Beth knew, for she watched him from the store window. She wanted to rush out there and dump a hundred questions on him at once, but stopped herself. He looked so sad, so very tired, she didn't have the heart to ply him with questions. When he was ready to talk, he would come inside.

On the floor by the checkout, Ryan napped on a bed of tarpaulins and Beth's heavy work overcoat. After a day of playing and running about the store with all three women watching him, Ryan was tired, and so were the women.

Beth looked down at the wide awake baby in the sling against her chest. She tickled his nose and he smiled. His little hand grabbed her finger, refusing to let go when she gave a gentle tug.

She looked back to the parking lot and saw that the car was empty.

A few moments later, Matt's weary frame filled the entrance. He looked about, saw her, and came to where she stood with Dylan.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

Instead of answering, Matt scooped her into his arms for a great big hug. He minded the baby, and didn't press her too close, but Beth felt his need for comfort.

"I told her 'no,' Beth. I couldn't do it. I'm sorry, so sorry."

It took a moment for Beth to realize what Matt had meant: Eve wanted money, and Matt had turned her down. Neither surprised Beth.

"It's okay. You did the best you could. It's all right." Beth rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. "She's going to fight us, then?"

Silently, Matt nodded.

"Well." Beth pushed out a resigned sigh. "I guess the judge will have to decide what's in Dylan's best interest. Were the papers served?"
Again, Matt nodded.

"Good." Beth tried to calm herself while Sylvia and Amy watched from the checkout. A customer came through the entrance, but Matt didn't seem to notice. He looked exhausted, emotionally drained and in no mood for anything but Beth and the children.

She lifted out Dylan, gave him to Matt and smiled when he cradled him close.

"Go sit in the office, Matt. After this customer leaves, we're closing up early and going home."

"You can't keep closing the store, Beth. It's costing you business."

"Let me worry about that. Go. Go on, the office is all yours. Sit down and try to relax. You look like a taunt rubber-band about to snap."

Amazingly, there was still a bit of fight in his eyes. He plainly wanted to resist, but finally shook his head and went to the office with Dylan.

Beth stayed by the checkout to keep an eye on Ryan. The customer smiled at the sleeping little boy, and moved about the store in a quiet hush so Ryan wouldn't be disturbed. For the man's kindness, Beth gave him a complimentary shovel. He was a contractor, and a regular customer, so Beth knew better than to give him a fern with a bright bow.

When the man left, the girls started closing up the store.

"Ryan, come on, Sweetheart. It's time to get up." From a crouched position, Beth lifted the boy. As she straightened, she felt his dead weight in her back. She would pay for it with a smarting ache later, but for now, she carried Ryan to the office to collect her two guys.

The diaper bag, and any toys they could find, all were hauled out to the car. It took two trips, but in the end, Ryan was strapped into his booster, and Dylan into his carrier. Both were in the backseat, and both were drifting to sleep.

"Do you want me to drive?" Beth asked as Matt climbed behind the wheel.

He shook his head, waited as she got into the passenger seat and closed the door.

"What did Ms. Simmons say we should do?"

"Just wait and see what Mom does. Then act accordingly."
Beth bit her lip. Waiting would be hard.

"If we lose Dylan"-- Matt looked at her squarely-- "it's going to be my fault."

"No, it won't." Beth emerged from her thoughts to buckle her seatbelt. "That's tired and worn-out speaking, not the Matt Taylor I married."

"Will you blame me, Beth?"

"Stop talking like we've already lost him."

"Beth, will you?"

Knowing that if she answered too quick, he wouldn't take her seriously, she paused. "No, I won't blame you. You're only a man, not God. God can't expect you to do more than your best, and neither can I. Are you sure you don't want me to drive?"

"Why?" he asked. "Do I look that bad?"

She hesitated. "You really do."

"Then you drive." He passed her the keys, got out and moved to the passenger's seat. "We've got precious cargo on board, and I don't want to get into an accident because I was tired."

She gave him a smile and he looked grateful for the kindness.

"I love you, Matt."

"I know."

"Then stop treating me as though I'm only saying it out of pity." She started up the car, glanced at the man beside her and observed the tired grin on his face.

He closed his eyes and leaned against the headrest. "I love you, too."

When they arrived home, Cassie already had dinner started. She didn't know how to cook, but the frozen pizza was easy enough to stick in the oven without messing anything up. Beth gave Cassie a hug for trying to be helpful. It was very sweet of her to do without being asked.
Before dinner, Matt sat the two older children down to discuss what had happened with their mom. At first, they took the news with sober faces, though from there, each reacted differently. Ethan went to brood in his room, and Cassie fought back tears.

Mercifully, by then, the pizza was ready and Beth had a good excuse to change the subject.

The subject didn't stay changed for long.

"Maybe we should get another attorney," Ethan suggested over another helping of pepperoni and mozzarella. "Are two lawyers better than one?"

Matt choked on his dinner. He smiled, coughed, and took a sip of water. "I don't know. I could always ask Ms. Simmons."

"Do you think it would help if I tried talking to Mom, myself?"

"Thanks, Ethan, but I don't think it would."

"Matty?" Cassie gave her oldest brother a thoughtful look. "Would it hurt anything if we did give Mom money? I mean just the five hundred a month. I don't know... just so she could buy groceries and stuff?"

Putting down his pizza, Matt looked about the table. "Okay, let's talk about this. If we did give Mom money, what would she do with it?"

"I know what she'd do, and so does everybody else." Ethan shook his head. "She'd get higher than a kite and then come begging for more, and it wouldn't be for food."

Sadly, Cassie nodded.

"There's one other reason I turned Mom down." Matt leaned back in his chair. "Even if we did pay Mom for Dylan, this isn't an adoption. Legally, I'm not your parent-- Mom and your dads are. Mom could still go to a judge and tell him about me, and that judge could terminate my guardianship so you all are split up and put into foster homes. If we pay Mom for Dylan, there will never be an end to it; she'll see we're willing to be blackmailed, and then use Dylan and the rest of you to force this family to support her habit. I'll also add that while five hundred isn't much, it's enough to do Mom a lot of damage." Matt looked about the table. "I didn't have time to talk this over with you earlier, but it's important we have agreement. If any of you disagree, speak up now."
Swiping at the wet sheening her eyes, Cassie shook her head. "Don't give her the money."

Ethan nodded. "No money."

Matt looked to Beth.

"No money," Beth said quietly. It hadn't been easy for any of them to say that, and no one was rejoicing that Eve had lost that round.

"Matty?" Cassie worried at the pizza on her plate. "If Mom ever gets clean and stops trying to get us to pay for Dylan, could we give her money then?"

"If Mom gets clean," Matt sighed, "then she'll have earned it."

"It'll never happen." Ethan frowned, and even in that frown, Beth saw deep sadness. "Mom will never get clean."

Everyone at the table went silent.

"Does anyone want dessert?" Beth tried to get some smiles by turning to happier thoughts. "We have ice cream and--" She was cut short by the cowboy ringtone coming from Matt's pocket.

He pulled out his cell, and Beth tried hard not to dread him answering. The last two calls had turned the family upside down, not to mention poor Matt.

"Hello?" As Matt listened to the caller, he gripped the phone so hard his knuckles turned white. A few more moments, his face turned just as pale. "Which hospital?"

Cassie sat upright in her chair. She shot a look at Beth, then Ethan.

"How long ago?" Matt nodded, and kept listening. "We'll be down as soon as we can." When he hung up, the entire table was staring at him.

"Well?" Beth asked.

"That was Wade." Matt cleared his throat, and when he spoke his voice threatened to break. "An hour ago, Wade called 911 and an ambulance took Mom to the hospital. They said she had an abnormally high heart rate. I told him we'd be there as soon as we could."
"Abnormally high heart rate?" Beth tried to make sense of it. "Does your mom have high blood pressure?"

Shaking his head, Matt sank forward at the table in grief-induced weakness. He cleared his throat, and she saw the effort it took for him to push out the words.

"Wade said she OD'd on meth. He said she tried to kill herself, and that she might be getting her wish."

The world jarred to a standstill.

In that one moment frozen in time, Beth knew the children would never be the same again.

"Every wise woman buildeth her house: but the foolish plucketh it down with her hands."
~ Proverbs 14:1 ~
Chapter Twenty-eight
Dandelions in the Night

"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 ~

Stunned horror spread through the children like the shock wave from an explosion. They reeled in silence, then Matt shoved to his feet. He couldn't afford to sit and absorb. He had to act. There wasn't time for anything else.

"I'll get the truck started. Beth, get the kids ready- I'll call Mrs. Lott."

Beth nodded in agreement. "We can't take Ryan and Dylan into the hospital."

"Did Wade say suicide?" Ethan pushed after Matt into the next room. "Did he actually say she tried to kill herself?"

"That's what he said." Matt tugged out his cell phone, punched in the number and ignored the fact his hands trembled.

Mrs. Lott answered on the second ring.

"It's me-- Matt. I know this is short notice, but could you watch Ryan and Dylan?" Matt plunged through the words quickly so he wouldn't have to feel them. "Wade called. Mom tried to commit suicide, and we have to get to the hospital."

"Oh, yes, yes, I'll watch them. Will she be all right?"

He inhaled a breath to steady himself. "We don't know yet."

"Dear Lord, have mercy. You bring the children down, and I'll babysit for as long as you need. Don't even give it a second thought."

"Thanks, I appreciate it." Matt quietly asked God to bless his kind neighbor. Except for today, when they'd brought the little ones into work, Mrs. Lott had been babysitting the whole week, just like she usually did when they had lived next door. Not wanting to impose on her so heavily, he and Beth were considering daycare.
Funny, the things that pop into your mind when the world turns upside down.

Matt moved without feeling it, started up the truck and pulled it in front of the house. The image of Mom sucking a cigarette to ease withdrawal, replayed before him like some cheap movie. Only this wasn't a movie, it was his life, his mom.

First that meeting today, now this. His instincts told him that she'd been using drugs more heavily now, than in the past. It wasn't an easy thing to admit, for it stirred unease into his horror.

Ethan came to the front door, and Matt forced himself to get out of the truck.

"What else did he say?" Ethan dogged Matt all the way into the master bedroom. "Did Mom ask for us to come? Does she want us there?"

"The call was Wade's decision, not Mom's." Matt pulled on his coat while Beth changed Dylan's diaper.

The fear in Ethan's eyes mirrored what Matt felt in his soul. "I don't know anything else, Ethan. That's all Wade said."

Frightened, Ryan and Cassie came into the room, silently clinging to the security of Matt and Beth's presence. The reminder that he was the adult, the responsible one, doubled Matt's gratitude that he wasn't the only grown-up in his family. Beth was here. Beth would keep him sane.

Matt went over to Ryan, picked the boy up and gave him a tight hug. "You're going to stay with Mrs. Lott, tonight, but we'll be back for you. I promise."

Sniffing at tears, Ryan nodded and returned the hug. They weren't going to forget him-- Matt wanted Ryan to know that. Just because their mom would, didn't mean he or Beth would.

Still carrying Ryan, Matt went outside while Ethan shadowed him for more information.

"Did he say it was meth?" Ethan lifted Ryan from Matt's arms. "Did Wade say it was meth, or something else?"
"It was meth." Matt opened the cab door, moved back to let Ethan lift Ryan into the booster. "She's used meth in the past, though not as much as Dad or me. Now though, I think she's in deep."

"How do you know that?" Ethan stepped away as Beth came forward to slide the baby carrier onto the backseat. "How do you know Wade isn't making up a story to protect himself? What if he did something to Mom?"

"She's using," Matt insisted, as Beth strapped the carrier in place. "Meth escalates, Ethan. You know that."

"Yeah, but you said it yourself-- Mom's never been into it that heavily. And she's never OD'd before."

The thought that Mom had just made a tragic miscalculation, was a tempting one to Matt. Matt shook his head.

"She believed me when I said we weren't going to give her money."

That silenced Ethan. Matt knew his brother was thinking the same thing he was-- "Did we do the right thing in not giving in?"

Cassie climbed into the cab, and Matt shut the door.

"You think she really tried to kill herself?" Guilt edged into Ethan's voice.

"I don't know. Maybe." Matt shook his head. "We'll see when we get there."

The crew cab pickup could easily fit six, so Matt didn't give it a second thought as he, Beth, and Ethan crammed onto the front bench seat.

As Matt pulled onto the freeway, he wondered dully if the sun would bother to come up tomorrow. His mom might be dying. The world should screech to a stop, shouldn't it? Out of simple respect for what was going on.

"She joked about killing herself today," Matt glanced at Ethan. "She wasn't serious -- it was just a retort-- but I don't know. Maybe it gave her an idea, maybe she's doing this to get my attention. Maybe she really did try to off herself. I don't know."

The baby in the back started to cry, and Ethan swore under his breath.
Matt gave him a sharp nudge. "No foul language."

Rubbing his face, Ethan slumped back and groaned.

In the backseat, Dylan continued to cry.

Beth turned to see. "Cassie, check the baby."

"I think he's all right," Cassie reported. "He's still dry."

The thought that Mom might be doing this out of spite, was too much for Matt. He slammed his hand into the steering wheel and everyone but Dylan went still.

"Don't let her die, God," Matt prayed out loud. "Not like this, not without getting right with You first. Don't let her die."

Ethan remained silent while Dylan continued to cry.

"Please, Dylan." Tears sounded in Cassie's voice. "Please stop."

"Are we almost there?" Ethan asked.

"Almost," Matt replied.

There was little Matt could do but pray and keep driving. Dylan was wailing out of control, Cassie was weeping, and Ryan... Ryan hadn't said a word since the phone call. Matt wasn't sure Ryan even understood what was going on around him, only that something bad had happened to his mommy.

The moment the truck pulled to a stop in front of Mrs. Lott's mobile home, Beth got out to check Dylan.

"His face is red, but he's okay." Beth lifted him out of the carrier and Matt saw what she meant.

The poor guy was putting everything he had into those cries.

The front door opened, and Mrs. Lott came out to meet them with hugs and reassurances.
"I'll take the little dear," she said, and lifted Dylan from Beth's arms. "He'll calm down. You go on to the hospital, and don't worry about the children. We'll be fine."

"Thanks, Mrs. Lott." Beth handed her the diaper bag, then unstrapped the carrier while Matt got out to unbuckle Ryan from the booster. "I don't know when we'll be back."

"You take all the time you need." Mrs. Lott cradled a screaming Dylan and gave his bottom a comforting pat. "He's just frightened, that's all. Ryan, why don't you go inside? The TV's on, and there's a plate of cookies on the end table."

The boy looked at Matt with huge eyes.

His heart lodged firmly in his throat, Matt gave Ryan a hug. He wanted to promise that things would be all right, but couldn't. It felt like a lie.

The drive to the hospital passed in numb shock. By the time they arrived, darkness and heavy clouds blanketed the sky so thickly, he could barely see the stars. It didn't feel real, or maybe it felt too real-- Matt wasn't sure, but the feeling haunted him as he got out of the truck. He had to be dreaming.

"The entrance is over here," Beth said, leading the way before he had a chance to get lost.

He didn't ask, but she probably knew the hospital. Luke could have worked here. Matt struggled to remember the name of the place where Luke had been an ER physician, but gave up. Somewhere in that great big building, Mom was lying on a hospital bed, fighting to stay alive.

Matt hoped she was fighting.

They went inside, and Cassie clung to Beth's side as they reached the front desk to ask about their mom.

"I'm afraid you can't see her," the nurse apologized. "She's been moved to Intensive Care and can't have visitors right now. Go down that hall, and turn right-- the waiting room will be the second door to the left. Wait there, and her doctor will speak to you when he can." The nurse gave them stickers to put on their clothes that declared they were visitors, then Beth once more led the way.

She'd definitely been here before.

"This is a private waiting room," Beth whispered. By the sound of her tone, Matt guessed that wasn't a good sign.
When Beth opened the door, anger crashed into Matt the moment his gaze landed on the man slumped in the chair against the wall. Wade's eyes were closed, and his hands were folded over his belly. Only God knew what Mom saw in that loser. Probably just a warm body to make sure she didn't feel lonely, someone to point at and blame when things didn't go right. Which they usually didn't.

Wade must have been asleep, for he stayed in that slumped and sloppy pose until Matt loudly cleared his throat.

"How is she, Wade?" Matt asked, and heard the disdain in his own voice.

Wade looked from Matt to Ethan, then to Beth and Cassie. "Didn't the nurse tell you?"

Matt folded his arms. "She said we should wait here for a doctor to talk to us." Even though Matt didn't consider himself an expert when it came to hospitals, the fact the nurse had been slow to talk about Mom, wasn't a good sign.

Quietly, Beth coaxed Cassie into a nearby chair and the girls sat down.

"What happened, Wade?" Matt took a step toward him, and Wade's face blanched white.

"It wasn't my fault," Wade stammered. "I didn't even know she had money."

"Who gave her the money?" Ethan asked.

"I-- I don't know. It wasn't me." Wade shook his head like a man refusing to take out the trash. "She went into the bathroom, and when she didn't come out, I looked in and found her on the floor."

Eyes glued on Wade, Ethan sank into a chair.

"She was unconscious, so I called 911." Wade shrugged like there was nothing more to tell.

Matt crossed the room, took a chair opposite Wade. "What did the doctors tell you about Mom?"

"Hey, man, it wasn't my fault." Wade smeared the back of his hand over his nose. "I told the paramedics that, and I told the cops that. They questioned me, and had to let me go."
"Wade."

"Yeah, okay. Just gimmie a minute." Wade slid himself upright in the chair. "They said something about blood pressure and heart rate-- something was abnormally high, I can't remember which."

"When you called, you said it was her heart."

"Yeah, okay. If that's what I said." Wade gave a nervous glance at Matt. "I can't remember much else. I was sort of out of it, you know? The shock, and all... it gets to me."

Wade was not good at playing victim. He shrank back and started toying with the frayed hole in the sleeve of his sweatshirt.

"Did Mom tell you she wanted to die?"

"Of course she didn't." Wade gave him a dumb look. "You know your mom, she wouldn't just tell me a thing like that-- not to my face and in those words."

"Then how do you know this wasn't an accident?" Matt's patience was wearing thin, and he prayed the doctor would come soon.

"Oh, I know." Wade nodded soberly. "I know. After you left, she said we might as well drop off the face of the earth because no one cared whether we lived or died. I said, 'Hey, Hon, you raised them. They're your kids, not mine.' And she said, 'Well one of them is mine, remember?' And she grabs her purse and leaves the hotel room like she has something important to do. I thought she was just going out for some air. She really took it hard when you said you weren't going to give her anything."

The barb struck home, though Matt refused to give Wade the satisfaction of knowing it.

The thought that his Mom would take the easy way out, angered Matt. She couldn't have any low hanging fruit, so she tried to kill herself. The kind of lazy spite that said, "I can't have what I want? Then forget you, forget all of you-- I'm checking out." Never mind what it did to herself or her family, she refused to breathe without being paid for it.

Oh, where was that doctor?

From across the room, Ethan bored holes into Wade.

"Who gave her the money?" Ethan asked.
"How would I know?" Wade gave Ethan an almost smirking stare that had Matt desperately praying the doctor would show up. "I told you, it wasn't my fault. I didn't give her any money, and I don't know where she got the stuff."

"Who sold her the drugs?"

"How should I know? Maybe she found it."

Ethan lurched forward in his chair. "And maybe someone sold it to her. Where'd she get the money? Who sold her that meth?"

To Matt's amazement, Wade had the stupidity to smile. "Why? Are you looking for a hit, too?"

"Matt, please," Beth called out as Matt shoved to his feet. "He's not worth it. Save your anger."

"I have been." Matt's fists clenched, but he sat down again and pushed out a breath. "How long has she been using meth so heavily?"

Wade blinked at the question.

"How long?" Matt pressed. "I know she's worse. I had a talk with her today, and I want to know how long she's been on the needle."

"How would you know what she's on?"

"Stop shoving trash in my face, Wade. I'm not blind. I saw her withdrawal, I heard what she told me, and now this. It doesn't take a genius to put two and two together." Matt ran a hand through his hair. He hadn't allowed himself to think it, but sitting here, waiting for a doctor to tell him if his mom was going to live, he had to consider another unthinkable thought. "Wade, you know meth is ugly. First you snort it, then you smoke it, then comes the needle. Once you start the needle, you're in it in a big way and Mom's already there. I want to know how long she's been on the needle."

"I don't know." Wade gave a twitchy shrug. "Maybe a few months, I don't know. It's been a few, okay? I can't remember, I don't go writing everything down."

The pain in Matt's heart deepened. "Wade. How long has she been on the needle?"
"Two months, all right? Are you happy now?" Wade folded his arms, and sent an imploring look to Beth as if asking for sympathy.

"Two months." Matt forced his dazed mind to accept the information. "Tell me you're lying. Please, tell me you're making this up."

"Now, why in the world would I lie?" Wade shook his head. "She started the month before--" he stopped, frowned, then clamped his mouth shut.

A dark look came over Beth. Dylan was only a month old and the easy math made them sick.

Unwilling to believe it, Matt looked Wade squarely in the eye. "Four years ago, when Mom had Ryan, she never told me about doing the hard stuff while she was pregnant. Nine months of torture she called it, but even Mom had her standards."

Ethan harrumphed. "She has standards, all right. She'll only stab you in the back, not the front."

"Hey, watch your tongue." Wade frowned at Ethan. "Your mom might die, so show a little respect."

Ethan snorted. "I'll show as little respect as possible."

"Hey--"

"Back off you two," Matt cut in. "She gave birth in a hospital, didn't she?"

"Yeah," Wade nodded. "Of course she did."

"Then doctors must have looked Dylan over?"

"Sure, they looked him over. He's small, but they never noticed anything wrong with him."

"Did they know Mom was main lining?"

"Nah. Eve would only use when she had to feel better, and before she had to shoot up again, she gave birth. By then, she could pass a urine test even if they suspected her enough to give one--which they didn't--so they didn't know she was a junkie. But then, your mom always prided herself in never getting caught. Why are you looking at me like that? Eve went easy on the hard stuff while she was pregnant. Sure, she started the needle, but she only did it a few times. Mostly, she smoked cigarettes, and even cut back on pot before the baby came."
"Man, that's our mom." Ethan wore a jaded smile. "Maybe we should nominate her for Mother of the Year."

"She did the best she could," Wade said defensively. "It's more than what some of them addicts on the street would've done. If you're all so concerned about the baby, why didn't you take him to a doctor and find out for yourself?"

Darkness settled around Matt's heart. "That's a good question, Wade, except I couldn't. You refused to sign the medical release today, and without that, I can't take him to a doctor-- not unless it's an emergency, which, thank God, hasn't happened."

"I don't remember any medical release."

"When Mom and I went outside, my lawyer asked you to sign some papers before a notary public. They were unrelated to the guardianship hearing, and one of them was a medical release. She explained why we needed this for Dylan, and you said 'no.'"

"I only said that, because Eve told me not to sign anything!"

"Wow." Matt ran both hands through his hair. "I don't know if I want to stay here anymore and find out about Mom. I'm not sure I care."

"Hey," Wade shot a finger at Matt, "she did the best she could. She tried."

"Well, trying isn't enough. If there's something wrong with Dylan, what am I supposed to tell him when he grows up? That Mom tried?"

Wade nodded. "Trying's better than nothing."

Closing his mouth, Matt struggled to control his rage.

Beth looked horrified, though she said nothing.

Thoughts tumbled into Matt from all directions, and his senses were on overload.

"I should have guessed." Matt shook his head and looked apologetically to Beth. "I should have been pushing for the medical release before the guardianship. I never thought Mom would do this to her baby, but I should have seen it coming."
"Even if you could, Matty," Ethan pushed out a long, tired sigh, "we didn't even know where they were, until today. We're doing good they were served at all, let alone forcing them to sign anything."

"What's done is done," Wade said with a magnanimous wave of his hand. "Like my grandma always said, there's no use crying over spilled milk."

In that split moment, Matt wanted to pin Wade to the waiting room wall and pound his fist into that worthless jerk until he was knocked senseless. Mercifully, the doctor came in, interrupting those dark thoughts.

The doctor closed the waiting room door for privacy, then pulled a chair to where he could face the family. Beth, Cassie, and Ethan were on his left, Matt and Wade, on his right.

The doctor leaned forward in his blue hospital scrubs and looked at each of them. He startled when he saw Beth, and a look of recognition came to his eyes.

"Beth Carter, right? Luke's wife?"

Beth gave a sad smile. "I'm Mrs. Taylor now. Eve is my mother-in-law."

After a brief introduction of everyone present, the doctor swallowed hard.

"How much do you know of your mom's condition?" the doctor asked.

Matt leaned forward. "Wade told us she had a fast heart rate and high blood pressure. That he found her in the bathroom unconscious, and he called 911. He said she tried to commit suicide by OD'ing on meth. That was all he could remember, and the nurse at the desk told us to stay here until a doctor spoke with us."

"I apologize for keeping you waiting." The doctor looked up when someone knocked on the door. It opened, and a woman stepped inside. "This is Stella, she's here to offer counseling, should you need it. Stella, this is Eve's family-- her partner, two sons, daughter, and daughter-in-law."

The woman gave a polite nod, came in, pulled out a chair, and sat down.

The doctor cleared his throat. "If you have questions-- any at all-- just interrupt and I'll do my best to explain. When your mom came in, her heart rate was very rapid, her blood pressure
unusually high, and she was running a temperature that was off the chart for normal. From the outset, it was abundantly clear that she was very sick.

"When someone's temperature is that high, they lose a lot of body fluid, so we gave her more fluid to prevent excessive dehydration. We wrapped her in ice blankets and gave her drugs to get her temperature and her heart rate down. She had a rapid onset of kidney failure, which clearly, was not an encouraging sign. I was on my way to talk to you, when I was called back to the IC. Your mom had suffered a heart attack, and everyone worked very hard to revive her. Everything that could be done, was done." The doctor looked at each of them with deep empathy. "I'm very sorry, but she passed away. She suffered multiple organ failures and there was simply nothing more we could do."

A cry of distress came from Cassie, and Beth hugged her.

Numbly, Matt reminded himself to breathe. Mom could give up, but he couldn't.

"I'm sure you must have questions. I'm here to explain them, and address any concerns you might have." The doctor waited, and Stella looked ready to do whatever counsellors did at times like these.

Tears running down her cheeks, Cassie choked out,

"Did she suffer before it happened? Did it hurt?"

The doctor blew out a breath, and Matt could hear him silently trying to put together an appropriate answer.

"When your mother's partner found her, she was unconscious. For the time she was in this hospital, she was in a coma-- meaning she was unresponsive to pain. She went quickly."

Hiding her face against Beth, Cassie wept.

Wade sat in a stunned, bewildered stupor, blinking at the carpet and not saying a word.

The counsellor was about to speak when Ethan cut in.

"Wade said the cops questioned him before they let him go. Do we have to talk to them, too?"

The doctor seemed surprised by the frank coldness of Ethan's question.
"I’m afraid that’s something you’d have to ask the police."

"Do we know for certain it was suicide?" Matt asked. "She could have OD’d accidentally, couldn’t she?"

"That’s certainly a possibility," the doctor nodded. "A medical examiner will look at your mom, see how much methamphetamine was in her system, and make a ruling as to whether or not it was suicide. Obviously, the higher the amount of drug in her system, the more likely it was intentional."

As Stella opened her mouth, Wade cut her off.

"I have to use the john."

"It’s across the hall." The doctor watched as Wade shuffled from the room.

"Did she know she was dying?" Ethan asked.

The doctor looked frankly at the family. "If the medical examiner rules this as a suicide, then I think it’s fair to say your mom expected to die."

"Matty, can we go now?" Ethan stood, his hands fisted at his sides and looking like he’d knock down the first person who got in his way.

"Anger is a very normal reaction to grief..." Stella said, then trailed off when the doctor shook his head.

Matt moved to his feet, and the doctor did the same.

"If any of you have questions for me at a later time," the doctor said, "please call my office. I’ll get back to you as soon as I can."

"Thanks," Matt nodded, then thought to offer his hand to the doctor. "We appreciate all you did for our mom."

As Cassie continued to sob, Beth stood the girl up, then hug-walked her to the door.

When Ethan also shook the doctor’s hand, the doctor seemed surprised at first, then nodded in understanding. Matt figured the man was familiar with death, and knew people reacted to grief
in different ways. If Stella had had the chance to get in a complete sentence, she probably would have said the same.

After they left the private waiting room, Matt went to the nurse's station to see if he had to sign anything. Bills, or forms, something important, because he was her eldest son and she had just died. He didn't know how these things were supposed to work, and was surprised when the answer was "no." Since Wade had signed Mom in, Matt suddenly found himself free to leave the hospital. He wanted to see Wade again, to talk about a funeral for Mom, but Wade wasn't in the bathroom across the hall. It figured. Knowing him, he was probably hiding somewhere, waiting for them to leave.

What a complete coward.

As Matt ushered his family toward the exit, another thought intruded into his grief. Would the cops ask questions about Mom? He half expected a detective in plain clothes to come up to him, apologize for the intrusion, then ask about the last time Matt had talked to her. But as Matt exited the building and no one stopped him to ask questions, he realized the reality of the situation.

A drug addict had overdosed and died. Whether it was suicide or accident, a meth addict had died and no one was all that surprised. The realization rubbed into Matt's heart like salt on an open wound.

A high risk lifestyle, remember, Taylor? That could have been you.

Numbly, Matt located his truck in the huge parking lot, unlocked it and held a door open for Beth and Cassie. As the girls climbed in, he watched Ethan slump into the backseat and slam the back cab door shut.

The night wasn't real. It couldn't be.

Giving himself a mental pinch, Matt rounded the hood, got behind the wheel and stared through a dirty windshield. He need to wash the truck.

The thought pricked him, and he wondered how he could possibly think that when his mom had just died? Who cared about the stupid truck?

"Matt?" Beth looked at him and he tumbled back to the present.
He started the engine, knowing he had to go pick up the little ones. Grief teared in his eyes, and he brushed it away before anyone noticed.

Dear God, how was he supposed to tell Ryan?

The question didn't get easier with Cassie still weeping into Beth's shoulder. He had to think, had to figure out what to do. His mom left few surviving relatives besides himself and the kids. There were no grandparents on Mom's side to contact, no aunts, uncles or cousins to care that Mom had... Matt couldn't bring himself to even think the word again, and left it untouched. He had to notify his dad, though, and the other dads-- Cassie's and Ryan's. It seemed the thing to do.

He flicked a look into the backseat, saw Ethan sitting stone silent and thanked God Ethan wasn't sobbing like Cassie.

He wished she'd stop. She needed to cry, and Matt didn't begrudge her the tears, but he had to think. He needed to think. If he didn't keep his mind busy, his eyes started to fill, and that was no good.

He pulled out of the hospital parking lot, turned onto the street and headed for his old neighborhood. The red light at an intersection forced him to stop. Impatient to get moving again, he leaned an elbow against the cold door, waited for the light to turn green and tried not to listen to Cassie's pitiful sobs.

"Matt," Beth touched his arm, "do you want me to tell Ryan?"

A sob escaped Matt's lips, and he fought to regain control. God bless her, he'd give anything to say "yes" and not have to be the one.

He shook his head. "I'll tell him." He could feel Beth looking at him and screamed inwardly to stay strong. "It'll be easier coming from me. But thanks."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded, not trusting his voice. The light turned green, and he accelerated through the intersection.

"I'd like to be on hand when you tell him," Beth said. "Is that all right?"

Again, he nodded, grateful beyond words that he wouldn't have to face it alone.
He flicked another glance at the rearview mirror. Ethan hadn't moved.

Cassie continued to cry, and for the first time in a very long time, Matt felt like shouting at his little sister to shut up. He hated himself for even thinking it, and ground his teeth shut. Patience, he needed patience.

"I'm keeping the store closed tomorrow," Beth said, taking a handkerchief from her purse to give to Cassie. "I think we should stay home with the children."

Absently, Matt nodded in agreement. It sounded like the responsible thing to do.

"I'll call their schools and tell them not to expect the kids," Beth continued. "And we probably should call Ms. Simmons to let her know what happened."

"Who?" Matt asked. "Oh, right-- our lawyer. Yeah, I guess we should call her." He turned onto the next street, the surroundings becoming more familiar as they neared his old neighborhood.

Another turn, another few miles, and the area became more residential with cheap trailers and garbage strewn front yards. Trailer trash. It didn't seem possible that he didn't belong here anymore. Maybe he still did, and any moment he'd wake up and realize that up until now, he'd only been dreaming. They still lived in the house next to Mrs. Lott's, he still struggled to make rent and put food on the table, and Mom was still alive.

He slowed as he came to Mrs. Lott's house, and as the brakes squeaked to a stop, the chihuahua next door broke into frantic yapping.

"They ought to muzzle that skinless furball," Matt mumbled as he yanked open the driver's side door. The door screeched on its hinges, and the dog went ballistic. "So much for not waking the neighbors. Beth, stay out here with the kids. I'll get Ryan and Dylan."

"We should tell her, Matt, but not in front of Ryan."

"Yeah. Stay here. I'll get them." Matt let the truck door slam shut. Forget the dog. He no longer cared.

He strode to the house and before he reached the front door, it opened.

"The boys are asleep," Mrs. Lott whispered, coming outside and only partially closing the door behind her. "How is she? Will she be all right?"
Numbly, Matt ran a hand through his hair and wished he could disappear.

"She didn't make it. She died before we had a chance to see her."

"Dear Lord, have mercy." Mrs. Lott covered her mouth, and Matt realized it was the same prayer she'd made when first hearing the news earlier that evening. They sure needed mercy, that was certain. "Did she go quickly?"

Matt nodded. "Meth is an ugly beast."

"I'm so sorry. I've been praying for you and the children."

"Thanks." He gave a half smile. "We really appreciate it."

Showing Matt inside, Mrs. Lott led him to the living room sofa where Ryan lay cuddled in a large warm blanket. While Mrs. Lott collected Dylan's things and put them back into the diaper bag, Matt gently lifted Ryan.

The boy whimpered at having to leave his snug nest. Then his eyes half opened, and he saw his big brother.

"Matty." The one word brought a sleepy smile to Ryan.

As Matt carried his brother outside, Ryan fell asleep again. Just as well, Matt thought, moving down the dirt walk. He didn't want to have to break the bad news at Mrs. Lott's house. Better to do it after they got home.

Climbing out of the truck, Ethan took Ryan. The teenager lifted the groggy boy into the booster seat while Matt went back for Dylan.

How could Mom do this to her kids? Matt wondered, shouldering the diaper bag and carefully taking the sleeping baby outside. She had so much to live for, and had wasted so much.

Ethan jumped out of the truck, then helped to strap in the carrier. In the front seat, Cassie's weeping had quieted, no doubt, in part to Beth's coaxing.

When the Taylors were loaded into the pickup, he gave a wave to Mrs. Lott, then pulled back onto the street and headed for home. It felt good to think that word—home, and know it meant someplace safe, somewhere all their own where they could take refuge.
Everyone remained silent on the long drive back, for no one wanted to be the one to wake Ryan. When Matt finally pulled off the highway, and saw the Spanish style hacienda come into view, relief eased some of the tension building in his chest.

A lot had changed in the last so many hours, and now they were home.

Without a word, Ethan pushed open the cab door and got out. The door gave a long, groaning squeak before slamming shut. Dylan woke and started to cry. The teenager didn't look back, but stalked off into the darkness while Matt got out of the truck to take care of the baby.

"Ethan?" Matt called after him, but Ethan kept going. Matt opened the cab door, unfastened Dylan and lifted him out of the carrier while Ryan began to stir.

"Where's he going?" Cassie asked, climbing from the truck. She stood in the cold night air, rubbing her arms as Beth joined her. "Shouldn't we go after him, Matty?"

By now, the baby was crying so hard, Matt nearly didn't hear her. Ryan sat wide-eyed in his booster seat, looking about with the bewildered stare of a confused little kid. Beth reached into the backseat, unbuckled Ryan, and helped him out.

"Matty?"

"Give me a moment, Cass." Matt checked the diapered bottom and decided Dylan didn't need a change. He started for the house, one-handed the keys from his pants pocket while Beth retrieved the carrier.

She gave a long look in the direction Ethan had taken, and came to the house with Cassie.

"I hope he doesn't get lost, Matt. The moon's not out, and this late at night, he could get lost."

"Just give me a moment." By the light of the outdoor fixtures that accented Beth's windows, Matt fumbled for the right key, then jammed it into the lock. Dylan was crying his heart out, and the scared rabbit look still haunted Ryan. Matt shoved open the front door. "Beth, get the boys ready for bed, will you? I'll go after Ethan. Cass, help Beth-- and don't say anything to you-know-who."

Innocently, Ryan looked up at Matt.

"Get into your PJs, Ryan. I'll be back in a moment and then I'll tell you a story, okay?"
The boy nodded, let Cassie take his hand and lead him inside.

Rocking a fussy Dylan, Beth locked eyes with Matt. There was Dylan to worry about, breaking the news to Ryan, Cassie's grief to deal with, and now Ethan. All in one night.

"Just get the little ones ready for bed," he told her quickly. "Leave Ethan to me."

Stalking off in pursuit of his younger brother, Matt knew Ethan couldn't have gone far-- not in all this thick darkness. There was no moonlight, and only a few stars peeked out from the clouds overhead. Not exactly a good night for wandering about the countryside without a flashlight.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, Matt shouted into the darkness.

"Ethan? Where are you?" His eyes detected a silhouette not far ahead, and he pushed on until he made out Ethan's form.

"Come on, Ethan. Time to go inside."

"I'll come in later." Ethan's voice sounded shaky. "I just wanna take a look around. All these crazy fields. What are they growing that's worth all the trouble?"

"It's dark, Ethan. I'm not leaving you out here."

"I know it's dark. I got eyes."

"Then come inside before you get lost."

"I said, I'd come later."

Strain weighed heavily in Ethan's voice, and Matt shook his head.

"Fine. Just don't wander off any farther. Those are pecan trees, and if you wander into the other fields, the furrows will trip you up."

"How do you know?" Ethan shot back.

"Because Aiden and I hiked around here, that's how. Don't stay out much longer." Matt turned to go, heard Ethan mutter something but couldn't make out the words. If the guy wanted to stand in the cold dark, Matt wasn't going to wrestle him indoors.
He went inside, and followed the wailing baby sounds into the nursery. Beth was desperately trying to quiet Dylan while Cassie struggled to get Ryan's arms through the top of his PJs.

"Where's Ethan?" Beth asked. "You didn't leave him out there, did you?"

"He'll be fine." Matt reached for the baby. "Let me try. Sometimes you have to hold him just right, or he won't settle down. Cass, the pajama top is inside out."

"Aw, Ryan." Cassie tugged it off the boy. "Do you think Mom did it on purpose, Matty? She wouldn't really do that, would she?"

"Cass..." Matt sucked in a deep breath. How he wished Dylan would give up and stop crying. "Let's not go over this now, okay? I still have to talk to you-know-who. Hey, Ryan, stop wiggling so Cass can get that thing on you."

"Let me try," Beth coaxed.

With a sigh, Cassie handed over the top.

"Go get dressed for bed, Cass."

"But, Matty, what about Ethan?"

"Leave Ethan to me. Go get ready for bed."

"But I'm not tired."

Matt gave his sister a look, and she obeyed. At least Beth had gotten Ryan into the pajamas.

The front door slammed shut, and Matt took Dylan into the living room to see who had just come or gone. Ethan was back. The teenager shot Matt a hard look, then pushed off to his room.

That door also slammed shut.

"Dylan, please stop." Matt swayed with the baby while Ryan came into the living room and climbed onto one of the large sofas.

In Ryan's arms, he held his beloved dinosaur.
"Who wants hot chocolate?" Beth asked, passing Matt on her way to the kitchen.

"Me! I do!" Ryan said excitedly.

Though Matt really didn't feel like drinking anything, he accepted the offer. Maybe it would help the tightness in his chest, maybe his eyes would stop blurring.

He went to go sit on the couch with Ryan. He shifted Dylan to his shoulder, tried cradling him and patting the diapered bottom.

"Well, buddy," Matt gave Ryan a smile he didn't feel but knew Ryan needed, "how about that story I promised?"

Soberly, Ryan scooted until he cuddled against Matt's side with the dinosaur.

Dylan was beginning to calm, though only by a few decibels. His little body kept pushing out cry after cry, and Matt couldn't forget what Wade had told them about their Mom. Matt prayed Dylan wasn't crying so much because something was wrong with him. Unless it was an emergency, he couldn't take Dylan to a doctor without a medical release.

Then it occurred to him Dylan might be hungry.

"Beth, could you heat up a bottle?"

Ryan tugged Matt's shirt. "The story."

"Okay, let's see." Matt tried to push past Dylan's fussing and the sadness that kept threatening to topple his hard-earned calm. "Once upon a time, there was a terrible dragon named Henry. Henry wasn't really terrible, but he had such bad breath, whenever he opened his mouth, flames shot out and burned the ground. This made him very unpopular with the people who lived on the nearby farms."

Matt paused a moment to think about the story, then went on.

"Whenever Henry happened to pass a farmer working in a field, he would forget and open his mouth to say 'hello.' Of course, the crops would go up in flames and the poor dragon would be chased off by the angry farmer. It got so bad, the farmers blamed all the dragons, and said they were all a bunch of belly crawling flame throwers with very stinky breath. A huge insult to a dragon."
Quietly, Cassie emerged from her room in footed pajamas, and came to sit on the couch next to Matt.

"One day, all the dragons got together and decided they had to do something about Henry. Some of the farmers were threatening to round up the dragons, and do something really awful. Like turn them into suitcases and handbags. Now, everyone knows a dragon's worst nightmare is to be made into a purse, so they called Henry to the meeting and told him he must go. If he couldn't control his breath, he had to leave his home and go far, far away where a stinky dragon couldn't do any harm."

Carrying a tray full of mugs and a baby bottle, Beth emerged from the kitchen and carefully set the tray on the coffee table. Smiling, Ryan scooted onto the floor to get a mug. Beth handed the bottle to Matt, and to Matt's relief, Dylan latched onto the nipple and seemed content to feed.

"So Henry started off," Matt resumed the story, "to find a place where his breath didn't matter, somewhere far, far away that would welcome a dragon who kept setting things on fire. When he walked, his tail dragged behind him, for he was a very lonely dragon. When he flew, none of the birds wanted anything to do with him, for whenever he said 'hello,' some of their flock would always go missing."

Cassie leaned forward and took a mug, and Beth settled onto the couch near Ryan.

"On and on, Henry went, until his wings grew tired and his feet were very sore. One day, he found a cave in the side of a mountain. A deep dark cave with bats hanging from the ceiling. Henry was so tired, he went into the cave to sleep even though he didn't like the dark. He sighed, and flames swept across the floor and chased out the bats. He sighed again, for even the bats didn't like him. Then he noticed something at the back of the cave, watching him and trying to hide behind an impossibly small pile of rocks so it wouldn't be seen. What do you think it was?"

"Another dragon!" Ryan chimed in.

"Yes, it was another dragon," Matt agreed, making it up as he went. "Henry said, 'Don't be afraid, I won't hurt you.' He saw a small dragon come out from behind the rocks. 'Why do you breathe fire every time you open your mouth?' the dragon-- whose name was Lucy-- asked very timidly. 'It's my breath,' said Henry. 'I can't help but breathe fire and it scares everyone away.' 'Has your breath always been that way?' asked Lucy. Now Lucy was a very timid, but very smart dragon. She came out of her hiding place and braved Henry's flames while they talked.
"My breath didn't always turn into flames,' said Henry. 'When I was just a hatchling, my mommy died and left me alone. I had to fend for myself, and I missed my mommy very much; every time I sighed, I started to breathe fire and it's been that way ever since. Mommy dragons are supposed to feed their hatchlings, but since my mommy wasn't there, my breath stank because there was never enough to eat.' 'Then you must still be very hungry,' said Lucy, covering her nostrils so she wouldn't have to smell Henry. 'God has put plenty of fish in the ocean, all you have to do is know how to catch them.' So Lucy took Henry outside, careful to avoid the flames each time Henry sighed.

"She took him to a very large ocean, showed him how to wade in and dive for fish. At first Henry, who was not so very terrible after all, couldn't catch a single slippery fish. But he followed Lucy, and kept diving and swimming, and then he caught one. Then another, and another, until his tummy was no longer empty. For the first time in Henry's life, he wasn't hungry and his breath no longer stank. He floated on his back in the ocean with Lucy, and they watched the big white fluffy clouds sailing over them. He gave a happy sigh, and no flames came out. Well, this was a very big deal to Henry, and right then and there he asked Lucy to marry him. And what do you think she said?"

"She said 'yes!'" Ryan grinned.

"She said 'yes,'" Matt nodded. "They made a nest in the cave and had many hatchlings, and whenever Henry's breath started to smell, he would get Lucy and they would fish together, and she would make him laugh. So the dragon who started out lonely and smelly, turned into a very happy dragon, one that always knew that even though his mommy had died, God had not forgotten him. God knew Henry missed his mommy, so God helped Henry by giving him Lucy. Because when we have family, we aren't alone. When our breath starts to stink, and we breathe flames, someone is there to help remind us that God doesn't forget us. Not ever."

"Not ever," Ryan said with a grin.

Matt's eyes blurred, and he forced himself to breathe. "Ryan, do you know where we went tonight? Beth and I, and Ethan and Cass-- we went to a hospital. It's where people go when they don't feel good."

Sitting on the floor, Ryan looked up at Matt with large dark eyes and a chocolate mustache over his mouth.

"Our mommy was very, very sick. She felt so bad, the doctors couldn't make her better."

"Mommy?" Ryan asked, and Matt knew Ryan understood they weren't talking about Beth.
"Yes, our mommy. Her heart was so sick, it couldn’t keep going. Do you understand what happens when someone’s heart stops? When that happens, they die."

"Mommy’s heart stopped?"

Matt nodded. "Like Henry’s mommy, she died and left, but like Henry, you have a family. You aren’t alone, Ryan. We’re not going anywhere. Do you hear me? Not for all the money in the world."

When Ryan started to cry, Matt knew the boy understood what he’d been trying to say. Their mom wasn’t ever coming back. Matt handed the baby to Beth, then got on the floor to hug Ryan. At least the little boy hadn’t asked if his mommy was in heaven. Matt dreaded that question, and decided that for as long as Ryan didn’t ask, Matt wouldn’t say. When Ryan was old enough, they’d talk about their mom. But now wasn’t the time for frank discussion.

Seeing Ryan cry, made Cassie cry. Amazingly, Dylan had quieted after being fed, and even now, he slept soundly. Matt figured Dylan was just too tired to start up again.

While Ryan clung to Matt, Cass curled on the couch and wept. Even Beth’s eyes were wet with grief. There were too many tears in the room for Matt to relax. He held in the sadness and remained strong for the others.

Taking Ryan to the couch, Matt sat down and held his brother. Beth held Dylan, and with her free hand stroked Cassie’s hair. The only one missing, was Ethan. At least he was in his room, not wandering around in the dark.

Matt shut his eyes. He had to endure this, get through this until it didn’t hurt anymore. It would stop hurting, wouldn’t it? This pain was only temporary, right?

The thought that it could last forever brought a fistened sob to his chest. He breathed, willed it back and kept holding Ryan.

There was no question where the children would sleep that night. Even before Cassie asked, he’d already made up his mind to let them sleep with him and Beth. If it would ease their pain, then Matt was thankful he could at least do that.

It had been a good idea to dress the kids for bed, before telling Ryan the story. After Beth turned down the covers in the master bedroom, Matt carried a worn out Ryan to bed. Cassie climbed in
after her little brother, and while Beth dressed in the bathroom, Matt headed outside to get some air.

He left by the front door, strode to the tree in front of the house. By the outdoor lighting, he could see the dandelions had closed for the night. He wished he could. His mind kept churning, and his heart kept bleeding. If only he could fold closed for the night and open after the sun came out, he would be stronger for the rest.

Parked nearby were Beth’s sedan and his beat-up pickup truck. Both needed to be washed. Some wise guy—probably Ethan—had scrawled “Wash Me” into the dust on Beth’s rear window.

Not a bad idea, he decided. He went into the house and found the bottle of car soap, two buckets, a sponge, and some old towels. He located a garden hose outside, and twisting it on, hosed down Beth’s car. It felt good to be doing something, to keep his hands busy so his mind would be occupied with other things besides grief.

He dumped concentrate into the bucket, filled it, and the second bucket with water, then went to work. He plunged the sponge into the soap, scrubbed, then plunged it into the water to keep dirt from collecting in the sponge. He kept cleaning and didn’t bother to wish that he could better see what he was doing. There was just enough light from the house to work by, and that was all he needed to keep going. When he’d gone over Beth’s car, he took the hose and sprayed it down. After he dried the car with the towels, he rolled his shoulders to loosen his tired muscles.

His arms ached, his back protested, but he moved on to the truck. He attacked the job like a madman on a mission to rid the world of bugs and road grime. His heart pounded but he kept moving, kept going until he heard someone behind him.

“What are you doing?” Beth asked.

He glanced at her, standing in the sleeping dandelions in her soft robe and slippers.

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

“Matt, you’re soaking wet.”

“So?”

“So it’s freezing out here, and it’s getting late. Come to bed.”

“I’m not done.”
She sighed, but he kept going.

"What you did for Ryan was very sweet." Beth's tone was gentle, and he paused to look at her. "That story made the news easier for him to accept."

Matt went back to work.

"I put Dylan in the bassinet," she continued, as though she had no intention at all of leaving, "and Cassie and Ryan are already asleep in our bed. It's no wonder. They cried so much, they must be exhausted."

Matt plunged the sponge into the water bucket. He didn't care that he could feel Beth watching him, feel her pitying him as he worked the sponge over the cab door.

"Come to bed, Matt."

He didn't answer, just kept working.

She moved behind him and touched a hand to his back. "Please talk to me."

He shook his head. "There's nothing to say."

"I think there is." Beth rubbed her hand in small circles on his back, much like a mom soothing a child. "I wonder where you got the idea for Henry."

"It's just a story," he shrugged. "It doesn't matter."

"I think it does," Beth said, her hand still comforting his back. "You're breathing like a lonely dragon right now, and the ground is burning because you miss your mom. I want to be your Lucy. Please, Matt, let me help."

His eyes squeezed shut and a sob escaped before he could push it back.

"It's all right," Beth whispered. "I understand."

He wanted to deny that she couldn't possibly know how he felt, then remembered Luke and Caleb.

"God hasn't forgotten you." Beth's words were hushed and private. "You're not alone."
Wet leaked down his cheek. "I feel alone," he confessed, his voice breaking as he spoke. "I know it's crazy, I know I have you and the others. But I can't help feeling like I did when I was a kid, and Mom left us without saying when she'd come back. I was nine at the time, and Ethan was two. She just left, walked out that door and didn't look back. I know, because I ran to the window to see if she would. For a week, we lived out of the cupboards and I kept thinking, 'Mommy's dead.' Now she really is. Beth, my mom's dead."

The finality of it hit Matt. The sponge slipped from his hand, and Matt fell to his knees and sobbed. He didn't care that he was kneeling on wet ground, or that men weren't supposed to cry. He was too tired to fight it any longer.

Kneeling beside him, Beth put an arm around his shoulders, leaned forward to look into his downturned face. He turned away from her, but she refused to leave. She placed her hand over his heart and his insides melted with warmth.

"I wish I could say something to make you feel better," she breathed quietly. "I'd give a lot to take away your pain."

She moved in front of him until they were kneeling face to face. She slid her arms around him, and he felt a rush of need as she gave a soft and oh-so-gentle hug. His breath caught, his mouth searched for hers and though he choked on another sob, the kiss she gave him left him reeling for more.

Her hand moved to the back of his neck, and her fingers sifted through his hair. He hugged his arms around her waist and closed his eyes.

"Be my Lucy," he whispered.

She let him cling to her, and when his tears came, she didn't push him away. Her lips grazed his cheek, and her tears mingled with his own.

As he knelt on the wet ground and sobbed like a baby, he felt the very real security of knowing he was loved. Beth caressed and held, and all the while Matt kept thinking how blessed he was to have such a woman. What had he ever done to deserve her? Nothing. Not a single blessed thing, and yet, here she was, as real as the cold that cut through his wet clothes and chilled him to the bone.

She kissed him, sweet and long, and it sank straight to his heart.
He wanted more, but when she began to shiver from the water soaking her robe and nightgown, he backed off and helped her to her feet.

She touched a hand to his wet cheek and even though he couldn't see the green loveliness of her eyes as she looked at him, he sure could feel it. He rubbed his cheek against her palm, then pulled her closer in a fierce hug.

"Thanks, Beth. Thanks for reminding me."

Her teeth started to chatter just a little, and he smiled.

"I'm ready to go inside," he said, and leaving behind the half washed truck, tugged Beth into the house.

He kissed Beth in the entryway, reached behind her and shut the front door. She leaned into his shoulder.

"The kids have our room, and they're expecting us."

"I know," he breathed. He raised her chin and kissed those soft lips. Then let her go.

They tiptoed into their bedroom, went into the bathroom to clean up and change into dry pajamas. Even though they had to share their bed with Ryan and Cassie, Matt felt the truth of God's watch-care in his life. Nothing got by God-- not the smallest cry nor the deepest heartache. God saw it all, and gave comfort in different ways... through Beth's love, Ryan's cuddles, and Cassie's smile. He could feel it in Dylan's quiet sleep, in knowing Ethan had come home and was safe in this house that God had given them.

Now more than ever, Matt thanked God for his family.

When Beth awoke after a night of feeding and changing Dylan, she found two knees jammed in her side, and a dinosaur sharing her pillow. She moved Ryan, climbed over Cassie, and went to the bassinet to check Dylan. He was asleep, but Beth wasn't satisfied until she again made sure he was breathing.

The thought of Eve using drugs while pregnant with Dylan, was terrifying. Beth didn't know what to expect with such news. Dylan looked healthy-- a bit small for his age, but healthy. Though he cried a lot, it gave her no cause for alarm. Some babies were simply a little more fussy than others.
Surely, if something was wrong, she’d be able to tell. She’d been a mother before, so she wasn’t new to taking care of babies. In the time she’d been with Dylan, nothing seemed out of the ordinary that would make her suspect that he’d been somehow hurt while in the womb. He’d even managed to smile at only one month old. That was a good sign, wasn’t it?

She went over to the bed, tugged Matt’s hand until his eyes blinked open.

"We need to get Wade to sign that medical release, and we need to do it today."

Groggy with sleep, Matt yawned. "Good morning to you, too."

"I mean it. I don’t want to wait for the guardianship before Dylan sees a doctor."

"I know. Me neither," Matt scratched at the pajamas she’d made him wear for the second night in a row. "I’ll ask Ms. Simmons to go with me, and we’ll talk to Wade."

"Today?" Beth asked.

"Yeah. The sooner the better," Matt moved the sleeping boy next to him, then climbed out of bed. "I have to contact our dads, and let them know about Mom. And I’d like to offer Wade help with the funeral arrangements."

Beth nodded. "I doubt Wade will be able to do that on his own. Give me a chance to make some calls so people will know not to expect us to come into work, or the children to show up in school, then I’m going with you."

"Oh no, you’re not."

To her surprise, Matt led her away from the bed and kept his tone quiet so the kids wouldn’t wake up.

"Beth, I want you to stay with Ryan and the others. I don’t want them to have to deal with Wade while they’re still dealing with what happened to Mom."

"But what about you? Who will protect your feelings?"

"I’ll be fine." A slow smile spread over Matt’s mouth. "I’ve got a lady dragon in my corner, so I’m not afraid. If he doesn’t sign the medical release, I’ll sic my dragon on him."
"Matt, please be serious."

"I am. Ms. Simmons and I will talk to him."

Just then, Ryan stirred. His eyes popped open, and he wriggled and slid out of bed. Urgently, he ran into the bathroom and shut the door.

"Leave Wade to me and Ms. Simmons," Matt said, grabbing yesterday's shirt and jeans. "Just pray and take care of the kids. Don't bother fixing me any breakfast."

"But Matt--" She was cut off with a quick kiss before he strode into the bathroom.

Moments later, he came out dressed and tugged on his boots and hat. He grabbed his coat and keys, gave Beth another kiss, then ducked out the front door before she had a chance to reason with him. He needed her help, and she needed to confront Wade about signing the medical release. She could help!

Oh, that cowboy. He hadn't even shaved.

The bathroom door opened, and Ryan came out and presented his hands to Beth.

"I washed both sides," he said, looking very pleased with himself.

For his effort, she gave him a peck on the cheek.

The morning passed in slow motion for Beth. She fed and changed Dylan, made her phone calls while the children watched the Sesame Street DVDs. They were much too young for Cassie, but the girl needed a distraction, and didn't seem to mind staying in her pajamas with Ryan while someone on the screen introduced them to the letter Y.

Subdued and somber, the house just couldn't seem to work itself into laughter or talk. As a result, everyone stayed in their PJs well into the noon hour. Beth found it surreal to be in the kitchen in the center of the day, fixing Belgian waffles in her nightgown and robe, when it was a workday and no one was sick.

As she poured batter onto the waffle iron, Ethan trudged into the kitchen to open the fridge and stare at its contents.
"Well, good morning," Beth greeted him. "I was beginning to think I might have to wake you for lunch." She closed the iron, rinsed her hands and looked the teenager over. He wore jeans and a baseball shirt, and had skipped the shave as his older brother had done. Since he hadn’t eaten breakfast, it seemed the smell of waffles had finally made him remember his hunger.

"Where’s Matty?" he asked.

"He's talking to Wade." Beth checked the waffle iron. "If you can hold on a few more minutes, I’m making lunch."

"I guess I can wait." Ethan let the fridge door slap shut. He hoisted himself onto the island counter and watched as she cooked.

"How’d you sleep?" Beth asked conversationally.

Ethan gave a one shouldered shrug. "Fine, I guess."

She glanced at him and quietly noted the red eyes, the edgy way he had of feigning less than what he felt.

Ethan frowned. "I'm doing all right, if that's what you're wondering."

"Are you?" she asked. "If you need someone to talk to, I'm willing to listen."

She saw the youthful scowl on Ethan's face, and for some reason, he looked a lot like Matt. Maybe it was all that dark brown hair, or the way he had of narrowing his eyes when he suspected a trap. Matt sometimes did that, too.

"I'm fine. Okay?" The three words challenged her to press it farther if she dared.

Beth chose to back off.

"How many waffles do you want?" she asked.

"Are you trying to replace my mom," he wondered out loud, "or are you just trying to be nice?"

"I suppose a little of both," Beth shrugged, "though I hope you'll come to think of me as a sister."

"I already have a sister."
Smiling, Beth scooped a stack of waffles onto a plate, then handed it to Ethan. "I meant a big sister. Please get off the counter. If you want to sit down, use a chair."

"Yes, Mom." He shook his head emphatically. "I don't want another mommy. One was enough."

"I'll keep that in mind," Beth said. She gave a nod to the counter, and after waiting a beat, he finally slid down. "Thank you," she smiled.

Those dark eyes narrowed again as he grabbed the syrup bottle.

"When's Matty getting back?"

"I don't know." Beth poured more batter onto the waffle iron. "He was anxious to talk to Wade, and left early."

Ethan dug a fork into the stack of waffles and proceeded to attack like a starving man. He stuffed a forkful into his mouth.

"I don't like people telling me what to do," he said, bits of waffle falling out of his mouth as he spoke.

"Cassie," Beth called to the living room, "did you want more?"

"No thanks!"

"Ryan, how about you?"

At the sound of his name being associated with food, Ryan came running with an empty plate.

"You can have one more," Beth said, and placed a little boy-sized waffle onto his sticky plate. "Do you want more milk?"

Ryan nodded as she buttered, then poured syrup onto his second helping. After refilling his cup, she resumed her station at the waffle iron.

"When you're done with that," Beth said, eyeing the already half devoured waffles, "would you go out to the mailbox and bring in the mail?"
Food must have put Ethan into a better mood, for he momentarily forgot that he didn't like people telling him what to do, and nodded "yes." He made quick work of breakfast, downed the glass of milk like it was water, then pushed off to go run the errand.

As the cook, Beth ate last. She was buttering her small stack of waffles when Ethan sauntered back with a handful of bills and advertisements. He dropped them onto the island counter.

"Thanks for breakfast."

"You're welcome."

His eyes narrowed on her, though this time, he didn't look like he was suspecting a trap.

"You and Matty really have something good going, don't you."

"Since you didn't ask a question," she smiled, "I take it you already know the answer."

A slight smile formed around Ethan's mouth.

"Yeah, I already know. When Matty's with you, he's happy even when he's miserable. It was never that way with Helen. She was shyer than you, and a whole lot quieter, but when Matty was miserable with Helen, he was depressing to be around. With you"-- Ethan shrugged-- "I can put up with him better."

"Then I'll take that as a compliment." Beth smiled at the comparison, for she hoped she was better for Matt than Helen. From what Beth had so far been able to piece together about Matt's old flame, Helen fell under the category of toxic relationships.

The mention of Helen again, rekindled a twinge of jealous curiosity in Beth. She toyed with the idea of asking some innocent questions, when her eye caught sight of one of the envelopes on the counter.

"What's this?" she asked, and pulled out an envelope of motel stationery. It was hand addressed to her.

"Is that another bill?" Ethan asked, hiking himself onto the center island.

"I don't know. I don't think so." Beth frowned. There was no return address besides the motel's logo and information printed in the corner, but it somehow seemed familiar. Then it hit, and
realization made her hands tremble as she tore open the envelope. Inside, she found two sheets of hastily folded paper.

Ethan picked up the envelope.

"Hey," he nudged Beth's arm, "this is in Mom's handwriting."

The two exchanged a sober look as Beth opened the letter.

The postmark on the envelope was from yesterday, after Eve had talked to Matt, and before Eve had been taken to the hospital. In that space of time, Eve had written this letter.

And it was addressed to Beth.

"Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, [she] may forget, yet will I [God] not forget thee."
~ Isaiah 49:15 ~
Chapter Twenty-nine
This Crazy Kind of Love

"The LORD redeemeth the soul of His servants: and none of them that trust in Him shall be desolate."
~ Psalm 34:22 ~

"Read it," Ethan prompted. "What's it say?"

These were his mom's last words, and though they were addressed to Beth, Ethan had a right to know. Steadying herself, Beth read Eve's letter out loud. It didn't start with "hello," but plunged right in without missing a beat.

*Whatever you think of me, I promise it isn't half as bad as what I think about you. You've turned my kids against me, or else Matty would've given me my fair share. Well fine. I don't want your money. You and Matty, and the rest of them can rot in hell for all I care. From day one, they've been nothing but trouble. They don't deserve me. I gave them life, and what do I get in return? Not even a thank you!*

Pausing, Beth glanced over to Ethan. His face was pained, but he nodded at her to keep going. Beth lowered her voice to a whisper, and prayed the children in the living room couldn't overhear.

*I bet you're pleased Matty turned me down. All I asked for was 500. Was that too much to ask for someone who went through what I did to bring them into the world? If that's the way they feel, then fine. Who needs them? Or you, for that matter? I don't care how much money you have, you can't buy me off like you have Matty and the kids. The money comes from you, doesn't it? so we can't make Beth angry, can we? Well I don't care!*

The words packed a punch, and Beth had to stop a moment to catch her breath.

"Don't let her get to you," Ethan said, dropping down from the counter. "Do you want me to finish it?"

"No, I'll do it." Beth continued:

*Matty's been going to great lengths to keep his secret from you, and kept me away from you every chance he got. Bet he doesn't want to spoil his investment, and all that time it took him to convince*
you to marry him. Bet you think you're pretty smug, don't you? All clean and proper in that fancy house of yours.

"Okay," Ethan reached for the letter, "you'd better let me finish that."

"Your mom addressed this to me," Beth said, giving Ethan a look that had him dropping his hand. "I want to know what was so important for her to think she needed to write this."

"She's getting even," Ethan warned. "She's doing this to hurt you and Matty."

"That may be, but I have to know." Beth struggled to hold the letter without trembling. "She addressed it to me. I can't be a coward about this-- if she had something important to say to me before she took her life, then I should at least listen. I owe her that much."

Shaking his head, Ethan moved back, folded his arms and kept silent as Beth resumed the letter.

*If Matty won't tell you, then I will. He's using you, just like he used Helen. And he'll throw you away, just like he did her. He had to have money to buy drugs, and where do you think he got it? He didn't get it from any of his family-- no, he got it by selling Helen. He turned that poor sweet girl into a prostitute so he could have money to feed his habit. Don't believe me, ask Ethan. Ethan will tell you, even if Matty never will. Helen is a prostitute because of Matty, and he left her-- just walked away and left her on the streets. You didn't know that, did you? I'll bet you didn't.*

Ethan blew out a sigh. "Thanks, Mom. Thanks a lot. We really appreciate you interrupting your suicide to tell us that."

"There's more." Beth sucked in a deep breath as she turned to the second page. Thankfully, it was only half full.

*Even when Helen got sick, Matty didn't help her, didn't even lift a finger to get her off the streets. Her parents begged him to do something, but he did nothing. All he had to do was talk to her-- that's all he had to do-- and he did nothing.*

Beth slammed to a full stop when Cassie came into the kitchen with her lunch plate and empty glass.

"Can I play with Dylan?" the girl asked, placing her dishes into the sink. "If he's awake, can I hold him awhile?"
Nodding "yes," Beth folded the letter back into the envelope. She didn't know how much more of Eve's venom she could take, and heartily wished she didn't feel the need to get back to it as soon as Cassie left the kitchen.

"Has Matty called yet?" Cassie asked as Ethan hopped back onto the counter.

"Not yet. Ethan, get down."

"Do you think Wade is fighting with Matty?"

"I don't know. I hope not. Ethan, get down."

As Ethan dropped down, Ryan came in with his dishes.

"Do you think Wade will sign the medical release?"

"I don't know, Cassie. I'm praying he will." Beth took Ryan's things, turned to put them into the sink. "I'll let you know as soon as I hear anything from Matt."

The girl noticed the envelope in Beth's hand, but must have thought they were bills for she and Ryan left without asking what it was.

Ethan pinned Beth with a look. "Are you going to finish it?"

Beth pulled out the letter, opened it, and found where she had left off.

What makes you think you're so special that Matty won't dump you the way he did Helen? The next time you let him touch you, just remember it won't last. As soon as Matty gets what he wants, you're going to wish you never met him. He'll throw you away, and then you'll be sorry. You'll ALL be sorry.

The letter was signed "Eve," and nothing more.

Beth turned over both pages to see if she had missed anything. That was it. The one chance Eve had of setting the record straight about her life, let alone making any sort of an apology to her children, and instead she'd wasted it in a long diatribe.

What a thing to write just before killing yourself.
"You're taking the news better than I figured you would." Ethan tugged open the fridge, pulled out a carton of orange juice, opened it, then hefted it to his mouth.

"Oh, no, you don't. Use a glass." Beth gestured to the cupboard. "Matt already warned me he had an ugly secret in his past, so I was prepared. This was bad, but I wasn't too shocked."

"Mom didn't pull any punches, I'll say that for her." Ethan poured juice into his glass. "When Helen got sick, her parents came to our house back in Texas. They wanted Matty to talk her into leaving the streets, and coming home so they could take care of her. Matty wouldn't do it."

"Did he say why?"

Ethan shrugged. "He didn't want to be sucked back into the drugs. Before she got sick, though, he did try to talk to her. Matty went out there and witnessed to her, told her about Jesus and all that. Instead of her turning to religion, she got him into bed and he started using again. It only lasted a day or so, but after that, Matty started making noises about leaving Texas. We couldn't get out of there until later, until after Helen became sick, but it wasn't too soon for Matty."

"Do you know what illness Helen had?"

For a long moment, Ethan stared at Beth, as though wondering how much Beth really wanted to know.

"Helen was born with some sort of heart defect, and that and all the drugs got her really sick. When she flat out refused to get off the streets, her dad was angry, big time. He was all over Matty to do something, but Matty said if she hadn't been willing to listen to him the last time, then she wouldn't now." Ethan drank some juice, wiped his mouth and looked thoughtful. "He was afraid she'd suck him back in, like she did the last time. I don't think he trusted himself to talk to Helen again."

"Do you know what happened to her?"

Ethan gave a one-shouldered shrug. "Last I heard, she was still hooking for drugs. Mom blamed Matty for Helen's mess, and I hafta admit, I liked to egg him about it whenever he got too bossy. Are you going to tell him about the letter?"

"Of course. I have to, I can't hide this." Beth folded the letter, placed it back into the envelope. "These are your mother's last words. Like you, Matt has a right to know."

"What about Cass and Ryan?"
Beth tucked the envelope into the pocket of her robe. "I'll have to talk that over with Matt, but I don't see any good coming from telling Cassie. Maybe later, when she's older, but not now. Her grief is too fresh."

Ethan nodded. "I guess that sounds right." He dropped the plastic cup into the sink, then turned to leave. "If Wade doesn't sign the medical release for Dylan, I hope Matty clobbers him."

The thought of Matt and Wade fighting didn't set well in Beth's mind. She could easily imagine it, and knew it probably wouldn't go well at the guardianship hearing to have to admit that Matt clobbered Wade into signing a medical release.

Please, God, help it to go well.

No sooner had she prayed the thought in silence, than Ryan shouted,

"Matty's back! Matty's back!"

The baby started to cry, and Beth hustled into the living room to make sure Ryan quieted down before Dylan worked himself into a fit. As she rounded into the next room, the shouting subsided.

She found Matt taking the baby from Cassie, his cowboy hat still on and Ryan clamoring to be picked up.

"One at a time," Matt said, shoudering Dylan and giving him a comforting pat on the bottom. "Cass, go get Beth." Matt looked up as Beth crossed the room to him.

"How did it go?" she asked, not waiting for Matt to offer up the information on his own. "Did Wade sign the medical release?"

"Matty, I want up!" Ryan cried as Dylan kept fussing. "I want up!"

"Here, you'd better take the baby," Matt handed Dylan over to Beth. "So far, I've had quite a day, and it doesn't look like it's getting any quieter." He lifted Ryan, and came over to the couch where Beth took a seat.

Nearby, Ethan stood with his arms folded, his feet apart, bracing himself for the news.

Nervous and apprehensive, Cassie sat down to listen.
"First off," Matt said, taking the seat next to Beth, "Wade did sign the medical release. As soon as we can get an appointment for Dylan, we can take the little guy to a doctor."

"Praise the Lord for that!" Beth settled back on the couch. That had been her biggest immediate concern.

"Secondly," Matt let Ryan climb onto his lap, "I had a long talk with Wade. It got loud at times, and God knows I could have used more patience, but Wade finally signed the guardianship papers for Dylan."

Beth gasped in shock. "No, he didn't."

"Yes, he did." Matt gave an affirming nod. "Ms. Simmons and I got him down to the notary public, and after reminding Wade that Mom wasn't there to stop him, he signed everything Ms. Simmons put in front of him."

With her free hand, Beth grabbed Matt's arm. "Does this mean Dylan is ours?"

"That's what I asked Ms. Simmons when we came out of the notary public's office," Matt said, shifting Ryan on his lap.

"And what'd she say?" Cassie cried, while Ethan came closer to follow every word.

"The judge at the guardianship hearing will make the final decision," Matt said as Dylan continued to cry, "but she said having Wade's written permission will very likely go a long way. She thinks we'll easily get Dylan."

"Yes!" Ethan did a fist pump and grinned. "For once, Wade did something right."

"Don't give him too much credit." Matt wore a grimace that reminded Beth he'd said his morning hadn't gotten any quieter. "When we got to the motel, Wade started talking about getting paid for Dylan. That got into a shouting match, and Ms. Simmons had to pull us apart. She did, too. For a skinny lady who sits behind a desk all day, she did a decent job of playing peacemaker."

"Matt, you didn't really get into a fistfight with Wade, did you?"
"Almost," Matt admitted. "It wasn't until after Wade had signed the papers, that Ms. Simmons said it was appropriate for me to propose helping out with Mom's funeral. I couldn't do anything that might be construed as paying off Wade, so we had to be careful about that."

"I'm glad Ms. Simmons was thinking."

"Oh, she was." Matt smiled. "She's sharp as a tack. I found out the hospital will probably pay for Mom's care, but the funeral expenses will be on Wade. He doesn't have that kind of cash, and told me so outright. Ms. Simmons suggested we don't have any kind of a service, and just go straight to burying Mom. Wade was all for it, but I thought I'd run that by everyone here before making that decision."

"Does that mean we can't see Mom?" Cassie asked.

"That's right," Matt nodded. "Why? Do you want an open casket showing, or what is it Ms. Simmons called it-- a visitation? Is that what you want?"

Biting her lip, Cassie nodded. "It's probably more expensive, though."

Beth spoke up. "Don't give that a moment's thought, Cassie. This is your mom, and if you want to see her, then that's what we'll do."

Though Beth half expected Ethan to protest that he wouldn't come-- visitation or not-- the teenager stood there and nodded his agreement with Cassie.

That woman had hurt these children on so many levels, Beth couldn't possibly measure it, but they were still Eve's flesh and blood. It silently amazed Beth at how strong that bond could be. Eve didn't deserve a ceremony, but these children did.

"I think you have your answer," Beth said, looking to Matt while she tried to quiet Dylan. "For their sakes, I think we should, and they never had a chance to say good-bye."

"Okay," Matt nodded, "I'll tell Wade."

"Did you have a chance to call any of your fathers yet?" Beth didn't know how to put it, for there were at least three fathers between the five children, not counting Wade.

"Not yet-- later." Matt placed Ryan on the cushion beside him. "I want to set up an appointment for Dylan, first."
"Before you get into all that," Ethan said, "I think you need to talk to Beth somewhere private."

The wording had Beth wincing, and she feared it would spark curiosity, or at least dread among the others that something bad had happened.

"Beth can probably help you work out funeral stuff, can't you, Beth?" Ethan was trying to deflect Cassie's curiosity, and it worked. The girl settled down, and Beth nodded "yes."

It was the truth after all-- she could help Matt with the funeral. She'd buried a husband and son, and knew what needed to be done.

While the ploy worked on Cassie, Matt was another matter. He looked intently at Beth, and she could feel his alarm. He hid it from the kids, but Beth could see it in those alert, dark eyes.

He knew something was wrong.

"Cassie, why don't you get dressed," Beth directed, "and Ethan, maybe you could help Ryan into his clothes?"

"Sure, come on, squirt." Ethan picked up his little brother and left without a word of fight, or any reminder of how he didn't like to be told what to do.

Reluctantly, Cassie left to change, leaving Beth with Dylan and Matt.

"Okay," Matt breathed, "let's have it. What did Ethan want to keep from the others?"

"Beth?" Cassie called from her bedroom. "Are we going anywhere today? Can I wear a nightgown and robe, like you, if we're only staying home?"

"Hold on." Beth gave Dylan back to Matt. "I'll be just a moment."

Now that Beth had Matt's full attention, she could see it frustrated him to be told to wait.

It took only a moment to tell Cassie to change. It didn't matter if they went somewhere or not, it was time to get dressed.

By the time Beth returned to the couch, Matt was standing and looking ready to come after her.
"Let’s step onto the patio," Beth suggested, and led the way through the glass doors, out onto the paved red brick beneath an open New Mexico sky. Despite telling Cassie to change, Beth had yet to dress, and dearly hoped if they had any unexpected visitors, they wouldn't come now.

"What is it?" Matt asked. "Something's wrong, isn't it?"

"You might say that," Beth admitted, "but it could be worse. Calm down, okay? I wish Ethan hadn't said it the way he had. It sounds worse than it actually is."

"Beth. What is it?"

She took in a deep breath. "I know about Helen."

"You what?"

"I know about Helen. Eve wrote me a letter, and sent it just before her suicide. It was addressed to me," Beth took the letter out from her robe pocket, "so Ethan and I read it. Cassie doesn't know it came, but..." Beth sighed, handed the letter to Matt. "Read it, and I think you'll understand why we didn't want Cassie to know about it right now. It'd be too much for her to take--" Beth stopped as Matt snatched the letter, handed Dylan back to her, then stepped back to open the envelope.

"Mom wrote to you?"

Beth nodded. "I must warn you, she says some pretty harsh things about you and the kids. Brace yourself-- it's not going to be pleasant."

Matt flicked her a glance, opened the letter and began reading.

Thankfully, Dylan was beginning to quiet, and when she started rocking him in her arms, he fell asleep. Oh, wonderful silence. When Dylan got going, sometimes she felt silence would never come. Thank the Lord for tired babies, otherwise their parents would never sleep.

"Huh." Matt harrumphed as he read. "Gave us life. What a joke. That's about the only thing she did give us-- that and a string of abusive boyfriends to terrorize Ethan and Cassie. But yeah, Mom gave us life."

Cocking his hips like a gunslinger about to do battle, Matt stood there in those worn jeans and T-shirt, his face hidden beneath the brim of his Stetson as he read. Another sigh of disgust burst from his lips.
"Oh yeah, I was bought off, all right." He flashed a look at Beth. "I only married you so you could buy me things-- or at least, so says Mom." He pushed out a sigh, then tensed as he came to the next part of the letter.

The part where Eve talked about Matt’s secret.

Matt went stone silent. He kept reading, and Beth replayed the words in her mind...

*He turned that poor sweet girl into a prostitute so he could have money to feed his habit.*

It made Beth shudder, and she cuddled Dylan close to rid herself of the ugly picture it painted of Matt’s past.

With a gurgle, Dylan blinked up at her, his tongue sticking through his lips like he sometimes did when sleeping. Beth touched a finger to his small button-nose, and his hands fisted with a happy little smile. His mouth opened in a yawn, and he closed his eyes to resume his sleep.

She looked back at Matt and saw the letter shaking in his hands.

"Matt, calm down."

"I am calm."

"No, you're not. Your hands are trembling."

"I can't believe she said this."

"Maybe so, but she did." Beth stepped forward, took the letter from Matt before he wadded it and hurled into the trash, or worse, lit it on fire and stirred the ashes. "I think you'll agree Cassie will want to see this one day, if only to see for herself what her Mom's last words were."

"I can't believe Mom did that to me." Matt went to the wrought iron table on the patio, sank into a chair and shook his head. "She had to inject that venom somewhere, and she chose the most sensitive part of my life to do that. She chose you."

"It's all right, Matt. It doesn't matter."

"But, it does." He looked at her as she came to sit in the remaining chair at the small table. "Do you believe what Mom said about me?"
The way Matt asked that, Beth instinctively paused before answering. "I believe before you became a Christian, you were not someone I’d probably like to have known. You’ve warned me several times that your past was ugly. In your own way, you’ve been preparing me for this moment for a long time."

"So you believed what Mom said about me?"

"What wasn't to believe?" Beth asked helplessly. "Ethan explained why you couldn't help Helen. You tried, and had limits to what you could do to save her."

Matt grimaced. "Yeah, I had limits."

"And as for your mom's prediction that you'll throw me away, and that we'll all be sorry..." Beth sighed. "She killed herself, so I suppose she was right in a way. We are sorry she felt she had to take her life, let alone write that awful letter."

"So Ethan talked to you about Helen?" Matt slanted her a look that hinted of things she couldn't quite name. Suspicion? Curiosity? No, it was there in his eyes-- it was fear.

"Yes, he talked about her."

"Because you had questions."

"Yes. I had questions."

The look in Matt's eyes didn't go away. It made Beth uneasy.

"Why? Was I not supposed to ask questions about Helen?"

He folded his arms and turned to stare at the toes of his old boots. "Forget it. Just forget I said anything."

"You didn't say much to begin with, Matt." She wanted to give him a smile, but his eyes were fastened on those boots and not on her. "Do you want to talk about this?" she asked.

"No. No, I don't."

"Are you mad at me?"
"No, not really."

"Then I have to get moving." Beth got to her feet. "Maybe you could take Dylan awhile? I have to start calling around for a good pediatrician, and then I need to change so I'm not the only one still in pajamas."

He reached for the baby, and Dylan whimpered in his sleep as she transferred him to Matt.

"Don't forget, you wanted to notify your dads about Eve."

Matt shook his head and sighed. "The way you say that-- 'your dads'-- it sounds like I don't know who my father is."

"Matt, I didn't--"

"I know, I know." Matt rubbed a free hand over his eyes. "Sorry. This hasn't been my day. You're right-- I'll start making those calls." He winced. "I just remembered my cell is getting low on minutes. Maybe I could use the kitchen phone?"

"Sure, I can use my cell phone to call the pediatrician. If I can't get an appointment for today, I'll get one for as soon as the doctor is free. Even if that means closing the nursery for another day."

Matt nodded absently, the baby snuggled against his chest.

"Okay then." Beth turned to leave. "I'll go see about that doctor."

Matt looked up at her, his gaze trimmed by the brim of his Stetson. His mouth opened, then closed, and he looked away. He rubbed his temple, looked back at her with an open mouth. He was about to speak-- she was certain of it, and yet he closed his mouth with a groan and said nothing.

"Did you want to say something to me?" she asked, hoping to speed things up.

"No." He shook his head. "I don't."

The adamant tone sounded positive. Since she didn't have time to play Twenty Questions, she went inside, closed the glass doors behind her and made a beeline for their bedroom. She had to find a good pediatrician, and if at all possible, get Dylan in to see the doctor today.
She glanced at the time. There was little chance of that happening so late in the day, but she decided to try anyway, and dug out her address book with the number of her doctor. A quick call garnered a recommendation for a good pediatrician, and within the hour she was talking to a nurse about the earliest opening they could come in.

"Is the baby showing any signs of distress?" the nurse asked.

"No, not really. He's proving to be a fussy baby, but he smiled at me today, and if you hold him long enough, he calms down."

"And you don't know if the birth mother had prenatal care?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't. She passed away very recently, and we only just found out that she'd been using meth while she was pregnant."

The nurse asked some questions about the hospital where Dylan had been born, and after being put on hold for about twenty minutes, the nurse came back.

"Doctor Miller has an opening at three-fifty this afternoon. Can you come in then?"

"Yes, we'll be there. Thank you."

When Beth hung up, she hurried into a white top and a pale green skirt. She scooped her hair into a ponytail, swept blush over her cheeks then slicked on her favorite shade of lipstick. They had roughly forty minutes to get down to the doctor's office, and she prayed they would make it in time.

Talking to Cassie's father was about as enjoyable as a root canal without anesthesia. If Matt had a choice, he would've sprang for the dental surgery rather than explain to a drunken jerk that his former girlfriend-- the mother of his only daughter-- had just passed away from an overdose of meth. The man didn't care, and when that message had been delivered in no uncertain terms, Matt hung up and berated himself for even trying. Ryan's dad couldn't be located, and his own father wasn't being allowed phone calls inside prison. There had been no good behavior, so there would be no phone calls. Matt left a message with a sympathetic prison guard and left it at that.

So much for family.

Disgusted, Matt went to the pickup truck out front to collect the precious medical release. He'd forgotten it in his excitement to tell Beth and the others that Wade had signed the papers.

Homegrown Dandelions by Judith Bronte
just the release, but also the guardianship! That round was all but won, and things were starting to look downright hopeful.

That is, right up until Beth had shown him that letter.

Man, he could’ve done without that.

He snagged the medical release from the glove compartment, locked the truck and stared at the hard-won document. When the judge made it official, they wouldn’t need this, and according to Ms. Simmons, the guardianship was almost a sure thing. He’d already proven he could be responsible for the others, and with their mom’s suicide and the birth father’s consent, the judge would grant this guardianship almost without thinking. That was a very broad interpretation of what Ms. Simmons had said, but it amounted to the same thing.

And instead of celebrating that almost-victory, here he was, standing in the hot sun wondering how much he had to tell Beth.

It was in the past. Surely, it didn't count-- it couldn't possibly. She didn't have to know, did she? Who said Beth had to know about what he was, or what he'd done?

If he told Beth, would she still love him?

Please, God, she had to. She just had to, or Matt didn't know what he'd do. He'd be lost without her.

No, he couldn't say anything. He'd keep his mouth shut.

He wouldn't risk losing Beth.

It took Beth longer than she thought to get ready. By the time she had changed Dylan's diaper and dressed him in a cute onesie, she was surprised to find herself running late. Where had the time gone?

Hurrying out of the bedroom with Dylan in his carrier, the diaper bag and a purse slung over her shoulder, she found the children scattered around the living room TV. Matt, however, wasn't to be found.

"Where are you going?" Ethan asked, muting the set to the protest of Ryan.
"Dylan has a doctor's appointment." Beth placed the carrier and the bag on the couch so she could search her purse for car keys. "Where's Matt? Do you know?"

"I think he's washing the truck," Ethan shrugged. "Can I come?"

"Can I come, too?" Cassie asked. "I got dressed."

"I'm coming too!" Ryan chimed in quickly.

"Washing the truck?" Beth sighed. She knew what that meant. Her cowboy did indeed have a lot on his mind. "Well, if you're all coming, everyone use the bathroom and put on your shoes. Ethan, would you help Ryan tie his sneakers? Cassie, babysit Dylan a few moments while I talk to Matt."

Car keys in hand, Beth went outside only to find Matt wet and soapy and spraying the truck down with a garden hose.

"Oh, Matt."

He turned off the hose and stared at her, water dripping down his arms. "What?" he asked.

"We have a doctor's appointment in less than half an hour," Beth said in dismay. "Look at you--you're a mess."

"Thanks a lot."

"Hurry up, get in the house and change. We're going to be late, and I don't want to go down there without you."

Tossing aside the hose, Matt strode toward her so forcefully Beth started backing away.

"Now, Matt"-- Beth held up a hand but he kept coming-- "we're going to be late. Please behave yourself. Matt?"

His arms came around her, and before she could ask him not to mess up her hair, his lips were on hers and demanding attention. His hat toppled off, and the car keys slipped from her hand. The world faded as her senses surrendered to Matt, and pure bliss fogged her mind. As his lips moved to her neck, she struggled to push him away but failed miserably.

"Matt, we have to go."
He raised his head and looked into her eyes. The intensity she saw there, left her breathless.

"Always love me, Beth. Please, love me."

Her hand touched his cheek, and he closed his eyes in something very close to anguish.

"Matt, are you in pain? Is something wrong?"

He embraced her hard, whispered, "Love me, Beth. Please."

"Darling, I do-- I will, but not here, not now. We have to go."

He eased up on the hug, claimed her mouth with such desperation she reeled with stunned pleasure.

She pulled away. "Matt, please, we need to stop."

He gulped in air, let her go ever so gently. "Love me?" he asked again.

"I do, Matt." Her fingers teased his hair, caressed his cheek and came to rest on his lips. "With all my heart."

He came at her again, and it was all Beth could do to ease Matt away without hurting his feelings. His emotions were riding close to the surface, and it wasn't any wonder. He'd been blindsided by his mom's suicide, relieved at Wade's signature on the medical release, not to mention the guardianship papers, then to endure that letter from his mom... It had turned Matt inside out and Beth did all she could to calm him.

"Go get changed," she coaxed, "you can't show up at the doctor's office sopping wet."

"You're wet, too," he said and buried his face against her neck.

"Matt, please don't--" she forced herself to breathe slowly. "We have an appointment, cowboy."

His head raised, and she saw a big grin spread across his mouth. "I love it when you call me that."

"Call you what?" she smiled. "You mean, 'cowboy'? Oh, Matt. You're so sweet."

"Will you always love me, Beth?"
"Of course," she whispered. "Always."

He looked at her steadily, and she braced herself to be told something. He was about to tell her something important-- she could feel it with every fiber of her being. It was there in his desperation.

"Matt?"

She waited, and he squeezed his eyes shut.

"I'll go get changed," he breathed, and eased her from his arms. "What time was that appointment?" He picked up his Stetson and eyed her possessively.

"Three-fifty."

He glanced at his watch. "We're going to be late."

"You don't say."

"I do say." He grinned, tugged her back into his arms and kissed her so soundly her ears began to ring. Without warning he let go, then strode back to the house with a confidence that made Beth smile.

He was feeling good.

Now that she thought about it, so was she. She'd lost all track of time, her clothes were wet from Matt's tight embrace, and her lipstick was probably a mess. She went to the truck, looked in the reflection of the side mirror and winced.

Using her fingers, she cleaned the smears around her mouth.

The front door opened, and Cassie stepped out with her purse. The girl smiled knowingly as she came over to the truck.

"Matty's wearing your lipstick, and had to go wipe his mouth." 

"Did he?" Beth smiled when Cassie giggled.
"I think it's awfully nice to be so in love." Cassie sighed dreamily. "I can't wait until I have a husband to smudge my lipstick."

"Just as long as he's your husband," Beth said, and went to go find the car keys she'd dropped when Matt surprised her. "There's more to marriage than kissing and sex, though. It's not just about love, it's also about mutual respect, responsibility, sacrifice, and doing what's best for others. Here they are." Beth stooped to pick up her keys. "It's about raising godly children, sorting laundry, washing dishes and scrubbing toilets. Love is not the destination, but the starting place for everything else."

The front door opened and Ethan came out with Dylan in the carrier. "Ryan's waiting outside the bathroom for Matty, and says he won't come if Matty won't."

"Well, Matty's coming," Beth answered. "Since everyone's coming along for the ride, we'll need to take the pickup."

"I've got the keys," Ethan grinned, unlocking the cab. "I'm going to drive, if I have to fight Matty for the right."

Ethan slid Dylan's carrier onto the backseat, and Beth came forward to strap it in.

"Does Matt know the time?" Beth asked. "We're going to be late."

"I'll go make sure he knows." Cassie went into the house, then reappeared a moment later with Matt and Ryan. "He knows!" Cassie shouted.

"Who has my keys?" Matt asked.

Ethan climbed behind the wheel and called out, "Don't you mean, my keys?"

"Get out," Matt ordered. "I'm driving."

"Not today."

"Hey, buddy, that's my truck."

"It's mine now-- you said it was."

"Get out."
"Make me."

"I will if I have to."

"Boys, please." Beth gave them what she hoped was a cease-and-desist look before going inside the house for her purse and Dylan's diaper bag. They didn't need a fight over who drove.

She locked up the house, then rushed out to the truck.

"Let's get this show on the road!" Ethan called as Beth climbed inside.

She slammed the passenger door shut, put on her seatbelt then realized that even though she was sitting beside Matt, Matt wasn't the one behind the wheel.

Ethan leaned forward and gave a maniacal grin. "I won."

"You only think you won." Matt thumped the teenager on the back of the head. "I'm letting you drive. So drive."

Ethan started the engine, flashed Matt another broad grin. "Watch and learn."

"Just go." Matt folded his arms and Beth could see it took a great deal of self-control to not wrestle the wheel away from his younger brother.

It was a simple drive into Las Cruces, but when they hit their first stop-light, everyone had something to say. From the passenger side, Beth directed Ethan onto the correct street, and told him which turns to take. It seemed comical, her giving directions, and Matt telling Ethan what he was doing wrong.

"Let up on the gas. You're going too fast."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. If a cop sees you, he'll pull your speeding tail over. Now slow down."

"Make a right turn up ahead."

"Obey the speed limit."

"I am."
"No, you're not."

"Stay on this street for two more blocks."

"I'm following the spirit of the speed limit."

"You're going faster than everyone else, so slow down before we get a ticket."

"Here, turn here."

"I don't see any cops."

"That's because they're hiding behind some billboard, waiting for a yahoo like you to make their day. Slow down. I mean it, or I'm taking the truck back."

The threat had an immediate affect, for the truck slowed to the speed limit.

By the time they pulled into the parking lot of the sprawling Douglas Medical Group building, they had four minutes to spare. Beth unstrapped the carrier, while Matt lifted Ryan out.

They hurried into the building, with Beth leading the way.

She came to the check-in desk, and hoped she didn't sound too out of breath when she spoke to the receptionist. There was paperwork to fill out, and Beth was glad Matt had the medical release handy. The kids found seats while Matt and Beth stood by a desk and did the best they could at detailing what they knew of Dylan's brief medical history. They handed in the forms, and were directed to the second floor of the building.

The family took to the stairs, for it was only one flight, and the elevator was usually reserved for those in wheelchairs or elderly who couldn't make such an effort. Ryan had trouble keeping up, so Matt picked him up and carried him to the second floor.

Seats lined the walls of the crowded waiting area, and it took some doing to find enough places to sit down for all of their family.

The others in the waiting room smiled at the little ones, especially Dylan. Shy from so much attention, Ryan climbed onto Matt's lap and freed a chair for someone else. Since they'd come so late in the day, the offices on this floor teemed to capacity. The noise kept Dylan awake, but Beth was able to keep him diverted with a peek-a-boo game that also entertained Ryan.
"Dylan." A nurse with a clipboard looked about the waiting area, and Matt and Beth got up with the carrier and diaper bag.

"You guys had better wait here," Matt said, placing Ryan on Ethan's lap. "Ethan is in charge. Be good, and we'll have ice cream later."

The promise of sweets didn't go unnoticed by Ryan. The boy nodded, his eyes wide with anticipation but still shy enough to stay on Ethan's lap.

For the second day in a row, Beth found herself surrounded by all things medical. This time, however, they weren't in a hospital waiting to hear about Eve. Dylan was finally going to see a doctor-- a pediatrician, to be more specific, and she prayed it would go smoothly. No surprises, as Luke would say. She didn't want any surprises with Dylan.

Beth and Matt followed the nurse to a small examining room, then let Dylan be weighed and measured for their records. The boy protested at first, but when Dylan was returned to Beth he settled down quickly.

"He's a cute one," the nurse smiled, scribbling notes onto her clipboard. "I'm going to need his complete family history, and the pregnancy history of the birth mother."

Beth sighed. She had known this was coming. "I'm afraid the information about the pregnancy is limited. The baby's father told us a few things, but the birth mother passed away last night. From what I understand, prenatal care was a very low priority for her."

"If you could have the birth father fill out this medical record release form," the nurse said, handing them some paper stapled together, "then we can access the birth mother's hospital records. It'll give us some background information about Dylan. We'll also need you to sign one for Dylan's records. Good, I see you have a medical release."

"At least we came partially prepared," Matt sighed. "Does this mean Dylan has to come back later before he can see a doctor?"

"No, the doctor will see him today." The nurse smiled, then started in on a long list of family history questions that kept Matt busy.

By the time Matt made it to the end of the nurse's questions, he wondered how accurate he'd been. How many people could claim for certain that any of their blood relations had never
experienced chronic diarrhea? It sounded worse than bad, but had that ever happened to Wade or Mom? Search Matt. He could only say, "I don't think so," and it was on to the next question until the nurse had a full list of answers on her clipboard.

When the nurse left, Matt breathed a sigh of relief. He sat in the padded-- yes, padded-- chair and waited for the doctor to come. It seemed he was spending a great deal of time lately, waiting for doctors.

"Wade will sign that medical record release, won't he?" Beth asked as she held Dylan. "Do you think you can get him to sign it?"

"He'll sign. I can't believe I'm getting him to sign another release, though. I feel like we've already been over that ground."

Beth smiled and cuddled Dylan.

The room was quiet, and Matt's thoughts drifted back to the letter. He didn't have to tell Beth, did he? She loved him, and he wanted to keep it that way. What good would it do to tell her? She knew enough, didn't she? She thought she knew, so why couldn't he keep his mouth shut and let her believe what Mom and Ethan had told her?

Of course, Beth thought he had sold Helen into prostitution. Beth believed it, Ethan believed it, and Mom had believed it. Cassie probably thought that, as well.

That Beth could think him capable of doing such a thing, hurt. But why shouldn't she? He hadn't said anything to make her think otherwise, and he knew why he hadn't.

Because then he'd have to tell Beth everything, and that was what he couldn't bring himself to do.

He wouldn't tell her. He just wouldn't. No one but Helen ever had to know, and Helen had promised to never tell. He was safe. All he had to do was keep his mouth shut and let them think what they wanted. It wasn't like he was lying. Mom and Ethan had come to their own conclusions, and though Ethan liked to use it to taunt him every now and then, they had kept silent about it until now.

Until now. Mom had gone all this time without telling anyone, and now she finally had.

The doctor came in and started talking to Beth, but Matt had trouble following what was being said. He just couldn't get over the fact that his mom had done such a sneaky thing. It was a
sucker-punch to the gut, that's what it was, a strike he hadn't seen coming or had time to prepare for.

Beth loved him. She'd promised to _ALWAYS_ love him, so shouldn't he keep his big trap shut? Speaking now would only mess things up.

"Mr. Taylor?"

Matt blinked, and realized the doctor was talking to him.

"Sorry." Matt felt like he'd just been caught napping in class. "Could you repeat the question?"

The man in the white lab coat smiled, and nodded to the hand he held out. "I was introducing myself."

"Oh, right." Matt shook the man's hand.

"I'm Dr. Miller and I'm going to be your brother's pediatrician."

Matt nodded. "Thanks for seeing us on such short notice."

"You look like a man with a lot on your mind," the doctor nodded, "so let's see what we can do to alleviate some of your worries."

The doctor had no idea just how much Matt had on his mind. Matt would give anything to not have to answer the question that kept slamming into his conscience. Should he tell her? Did he have to tell her? Was there anything in the Bible that said he absolutely had to tell Beth? Something like, "Thou shalt tell your wife everything?"

Matt didn't think there was. He'd remember something like that, wouldn't he?

While Beth held Dylan, Dr. Miller placed a stethoscope on Dylan's chest, and the baby grabbed it and gave it a small tug. The doctor smiled, and kept moving the scope around on Dylan's chest. Then he moved the stethoscope to Dylan's back and repeated the process.

"Everything sounds as it should." Dr. Miller took off the stethoscope. "Let's just take a peek in his ears, shall we?" He held up an instrument and placed it in Dylan's ear. "Have you noticed any unusual crying? Anything out of the ordinary?"
"No, not really." Beth adjusted Dylan so the doctor could look in the other ear. "He's a fussy baby, but some babies cry more than others."

"When he fusses"-- the doctor sat up, put away the instrument-- "is it in the middle of the night, in the day? Is it time specific?"

Beth looked to Matt. "I'd say it's pretty much all the time, wouldn't you?"

"It's not time specific," Matt agreed.

"Does he cry when you touch him?" Dr. Miller asked.

"No, not really." Beth patted Dylan's tummy as she held him on her lap. "We pick him up, and he sometimes stops crying."

"Sometimes, but not all the time?"

Matt nodded. "Sometimes he starts crying and he won't stop. We'll pick him up, sing to him, rock him-- do everything but stand on our head for him, and he just keeps going."

Dr. Miller adjusted himself on the tall stool he'd pulled out from under the desk. "I need to see the hospital records for the birth mother, and Dylan's birth records, but until then, we'll have to go on what information we have. We know the birth mother used methamphetamine while she was pregnant-- at least twice during the last trimester. She also smoked pot and tobacco, and possibly consumed alcohol." The doctor looked at them and smiled. "I'll tell you, just from the few things I've been able to observe about Dylan, he looks good."

Beth breathed a sigh of relief, but Matt saw the hesitation in the doctor's face.

"Methamphetamine use during pregnancy can bring about complications." Dr. Miller folded his arms. "There may be premature delivery, low birth weight, the possibility of birth defects. There's also the withdrawal the baby may go through after leaving his mother's womb. Some babies need to be medicated. It's a painful process for a baby to have to go through, and can be marked by tremors and the inability to tolerate human touch."

"Oh my." Beth hugged Dylan close.

"When the baby cries," the doctor continued, "it may be more shrill, more irritable than what you'd usually associate with an infant. This may be especially so during stressful situations. The
drug affected baby may have a harder time regulating himself with a lot of noise going on around him."

"That sounds more like Dylan," Beth nodded.

Dr. Miller looked thoughtful. "I'd like to schedule a CT scan. These babies can suffer skeletal abnormalities, heart defects, holes in the abdomen... if you can believe that. These children can go through literal hell, and I have to say, just looking at Dylan, I'm encouraged by what I see."

"It's a big relief to hear you say that." Matt looked over at Dylan and smiled.

"I must be up front, though," Dr. Miller looked at them both, "that doesn't mean he's completely unaffected. The effects of methamphetamine on brain development have potential repercussions that can touch Dylan for many years to come. It's not uncommon for me to see drug addicted babies later go on to have hyperactive issues, attention deficit disorders, children who lack the ability to control their rage. Then there's the potential learning disabilities, growth and developmental delays Dylan may have to contend with as he grows up. You won't know there's a problem, until there's a problem, so keep that in mind for the future. I'll give you some information before you leave-- I'd like you to look it over, and come back to me with your questions."

The doctor scribbled more on the clipboard. "I'm eager to look at the birth mother's hospital records. I'd like to have the CT done, and some other tests that I think will be helpful to rule out other complications."

"Dylan smiled at me, yesterday." Beth offered it up like a delicate dandelion in a strong wind. "That's a good sign, isn't it?"

"If it was a true social smile, then yes, that's very good."

"His eyes smiled," Beth nodded, her voice overcome with all that was being said.

Matt hugged an arm around Beth and watched as the doctor kept adding things to the clipboard.

"This CT scan"-- Matt cleared his throat and hoped he sounded confident-- "when will you schedule it?"
"I'd like to do it today," Dr. Miller said, pausing his writing long enough to look at Matt. "It's been at least four hours since his last feeding, so we can get it done this afternoon. I'd like to make sure there's nothing obvious we're missing."

"Good." Matt nodded. "That's good."

"Like I said," Dr. Miller smiled, "I'm encouraged by what I see."

"Okay." Matt rubbed Beth's shoulder and kept reminding himself that they were in God's hands. They couldn't know what the future held for Dylan, but God did. They had to trust Him.

They left the examining room, and went back to others in the waiting area.

"What's the verdict?" Ethan asked, as Ryan came to Matt's side and hugged his leg.

"Come here, buddy." Handing the diaper bag to Cassie, Matt lifted Ryan in his arms and gave him a hug. "They want to give Dylan a CT scan, but so far, it looks like he might've have dodged the bullet. He might have some problems in the future, but according to the doc, it could've been much worse."

Beth gave a sad smile, and Matt knew how she felt. Really, with such a careless pregnancy, Dylan was doing good to get by as unscathed as he appeared to be.

"Can we get ice cream now?" Cassie wondered.

"After the CT scan," Matt said as Beth pulled out her wallet and they headed toward the payment line. "Since Dylan isn't on any insurance plan, this is going to be out of pocket, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so," Beth said as the line advanced a few feet. "After the guardianship hearing, I'd like to get coverage for you and the kids."

"I'm not a kid," Matt said under his breath. "Ryan, stop squirming. Do you want me to put you down?" When Ryannodded, Matt let the boy down but grabbed his hand before he wandered away. "Did you get the information Dr. Miller wanted us to have before we left?"

"In my purse," Beth nodded, checking the carrier in her right hand. Matt checked as well, and saw Dylan sleeping with his tongue out. "Cutie-pie," Beth murmured, adjusting Dylan's baby blanket.

Smiling, Cassie hugged Beth's arm. "I was so scared they'd find something wrong with Dylan."
"God is blessing your brother." Beth kept looking at Dylan, and Matt watched Beth.

The old worry again wrestled with him in silence.

The woman at the desk called them, and Beth stepped forward to pay for Dylan's visit. At least Beth could hand over her credit card with a smile, Matt thought gratefully. This was for Dylan, and even he would've been willing to pile on some credit card debt just to make sure Dylan was okay.

The money taken care of, they went downstairs, crossed the parking area to the large building on the opposite side of the lot and went inside. Here, they did lab work and X-rays, and here they had to wait in another room for their turn at the CT machine, or whatever they called it. Matt had no idea what to expect, but from Beth's calm face, he assumed it wasn't a big deal.

Which freed him to worry about his problem.

If he kept quiet, Beth would never know, but if he told her, she'd never look at him the same way again. He knew she wouldn't. How could she, knowing that? It did no good to fool himself into thinking it wasn't a big deal. Her knowing this would be a very big deal, and he was well aware of the risk he would take if he decided to tell her.

Why did he have to say anything? The question kept pounding away at his brain. Maybe some things were better off left unsaid, but Matt had difficulty believing this was one of those times. She had a right to know. She was his wife, and had a right to know what he used to be.

He couldn't tell her now--- not in this waiting room with half a dozen strangers sitting nearby. He'd wait until later.

Oh, God, help me. She's going to hate me after this.

A nurse called Dylan's name, and Matt and Beth got up to take Dylan into another small room.

"We'll need to sedate the baby," the nurse explained, "so he won't move during the scan."

"The scan won't hurt Dylan, will it?" Matt asked.

"The risk to your baby is low," the nurse nodded, "but we have to look at the risk to benefit ratio if something is wrong and it continues undiscovered. With your baby's medical history, this really is needful."
Matt didn't bother to explain that Dylan wasn't his. In a way, Dylan was.

God, please don't let them find anything wrong. If there is, show it to them, but please cause there not to be anything wrong.

Until the sedative started to work, Beth held Dylan, swaying gently, caressing his small head against her shoulder, and rubbing a hand over his back. He seemed to soak in the attention, and in a matter of minutes was fast asleep.

The nurse led them to a room with a large, donut-looking machine with a table that slid out. Beth was told to place Dylan on the table, then they had to step back while the nurse made sure Dylan was securely in position. The table slid into the donut, and then whirring noises sounded as the machine did its thing.

According to the technologist, Dr. Miller had ordered more than one scan to examine all the major organs and spinal cord for possible damage.

Just hearing that made Matt shudder.

Several minutes later, the whirring stopped, and Beth was free to pick up Dylan. After monitoring him to see that he came out of the sedative, they were told it was all right to leave. The little guy was groggy, his eyes half open and more limp than usual, but he could go home and someone would call early the next day to make sure he fully recovered from the sedative.

Before they left, the nurse assured them that within twenty-four hours, they should hear from the doctor's office with the results.

As Matt led his family back to the parking lot, he kept praying Dylan would be all right. He had to be, he just had to be.

"Ice cream!" Ryan shouted, as Ethan helped him into the cab.

"Oh, yeah." Matt shook his head, gave a tired smile to Beth. "I'd forgotten all about that."

"Well, they sure haven't," Beth said as she placed Dylan's carrier on the backseat. "Look at that. Ryan shouted, and Dylan didn't even bat an eyelash."
"I hope this means no crying this evening." Matt rubbed the back of his neck as Ethan climbed behind the wheel. He wouldn't fight it. If Ethan wanted to drive, then Matt would let him. He was in no mood for a back and forth about who's truck this was.

Man, was he tired. Maybe, even too tired to have that talk with Beth tonight. Yeah, maybe. The thought gave him hope. If he was that tired, he might even enjoy the ice cream.

He slid in beside Ethan, and after Beth had fussed enough over the conked out baby, got in next to him. After fastening her seatbelt, she squeezed his hand and Matt's heart responded with a summersault. Dumb, he knew, but that woman did things to him he still didn't completely understand. Like how she managed to crank up his heart when only a moment ago, he'd been dragging it on the pavement.

As the truck left the parking lot, Matt wondered if he and Beth would have their bed to themselves that night. And with that wondering, his excuse went out the window.

If he was so very tired, he wouldn't make love to Beth, meaning that if he did, he wasn't so tired he couldn't talk to her. She wouldn't want to make love after hearing what he had to say, but he would tell her anyway. He'd get it over with, and sleep on the couch until she could stomach to be with him again.

Matt's heart plopped at Beth's feet, beating madly but beating just for her. Agony. This kind of love was pure agony.

She squeezed his hand, and her smile revved up his heart like a four-stoke outboard motor taking to the water.

"God is blessing us, Matt."

"I know," he nodded, and looked at their clasped hands. She fit so nicely into his hand, almost like she was made for him, and he was made for her.

"Hey, where are we going?" Ethan asked as they came to a stoplight. "Do we have enough ice cream at home?"

"What do you mean 'enough'?" Beth leaned forward, looked past Matt and pinned Ethan with a frown.

"Well, to do ice cream right," Ethan shrugged, "you gotta have the right ingredients."
Beth looked to Matt and Matt chose to keep his mouth shut.

Beth eyed Ethan suspiciously. "What ingredients?"

"You know," Ethan gave another shrug, "the usual stuff-- ice cream, peanut butter, graham crackers, chocolate syrup, chocolate candies, whip cream--"

"Oh, no." Beth leaned back and shut her eyes. "Another of your famous concoctions, another monster dessert."

"Yes, yes, yes!" Ryan chanted behind them.

"Well, I figured since our mom died"-- Ethan grinned-- "you'd want us poor children to have a special treat."

"Yes, poor children, indeed." Beth's smile sealed her fate.

Like a missile honing in on its target, Ethan pulled into the nearest grocery store, and the second he parked, Ryan started fighting to get out of his booster.

"You think he's excited now," Matt said, getting out of the truck with Beth, "just wait until he's loaded to the gills with sugar."

"I can hardly wait." Beth lifted Dylan out rather than unfasten his carrier, and Matt smiled when they saw Dylan wake up just long enough to make sure it was them.

"Ryan, get back here." Matt motioned to the boy, then took his hand as soon as he could. "Thanks for this, Beth. I know this isn't exactly normal, but they will enjoy it."

"I know, that's why we're doing it," she said, and followed them into the store.

Cassie located the chocolate candies, Ryan picked out the soft ice cream, and Ethan piled everything else into their cart and announced they had all they would need for dinner.

"If I may ask," Beth looked at their mound of goodies, "what are we going to have for the main meal?"

"You're looking at it," Ethan said simply.

"What about the other food groups?" Beth asked. "Vegetables, for instance."
Ethan reached over, snagged a bag of potato chips and dropped it in the cart.

Beth blinked at him.

"What?" Ethan asked. "Chips count."

Rocking with Dylan, Beth made no further protest. She was fighting a losing war, and for this night only, it seemed she decided to let them have their way.

As they checked out, the woman at the cash register commented that it looked like they were going to have a party.

Before Matt or Beth could answer, Ethan spoke up.

"We are. Our brother's going to be all right, so we're celebrating."

The woman couldn't possibly understand, but Beth and Matt sure did. From Beth's smile just now, Matt could tell she was pleased by Ethan's answer.

Loaded down with grocery bags, Ethan led the way back to their truck. Sometimes, Matt had to admit, Ethan could be very thoughtful.

When the family reached home, Beth decided to hold Dylan rather than place him in the bassinet. The children were in charge of making dinner-- such as it was-- so the cook had the night off.

It felt strangely wonderful to sit on the kitchen stool with Dylan limp on her shoulder, watching Ethan, Cassie, and Ryan build their dinner in five dishes. Matt hung back, his face thoughtful and oddly pensive for someone supposed to be celebrating. Of course, she knew why that sad expression reached Matt's eyes whenever he looked at her.

He was thinking about Dylan, and the results of the CT scans.

They had to have faith, she needed to remind him of that later.

"Do you want more, Beth?" Ethan looked at her from across the center island, then nodded to the dish that evidently was supposed to be hers. That dish was heaped with ice cream, and slathered with chocolate syrup, crushed graham cracker and chocolate candies.
"That's enough for me," she smiled, and secretly planned to throw out what she couldn't, or wouldn't eat. This was for the children, and never was that so plain as when they sat down at the dining table with their creations. The younger children were beaming.

Matt bowed his head, and everyone at the table except Ethan did the same.

"Thank You, Heavenly Father, for giving us hope that Dylan will be all right. Bless the doctor and the nurses, and give Dylan a long and healthy life with his family. Thank you for the signed release and the guardianship papers. We're in your hands, Lord. In Jesus' name, amen."

Ryan grinned, and started in on his dinner.

Bite by bite, the ice cream disappeared amid the laughter and smiles of a happy table. After the strain of yesterday night, and the uncertainty of the visit to the doctor, Ethan, Cassie, and Ryan looked like they were taking a collective sigh of relief, a respite from the grief of having lost their mother. For tonight, they gave themselves permission to laugh even though the next day might be filled with the sadness of remembering that their mom would never come back. They needed this, and so did Matt.

Of all the children, however, it was Matt who kept quiet and didn't join in the party. He sat there, spooning in dessert in an almost automatic rhythm, his head bowed, his face a study of deep thought.

Whatever he was thinking, it didn't put a smile on his face or add laughter to the table.

He was so utterly quiet, Beth feared his thoughts.

Dylan. It was probably Dylan and those scan results. Or maybe he was remembering his mom, or that hateful letter.

Now wasn't the time to talk to Matt.

Stomachs full, and the ice cream eaten, Ethan and Matt cleared the table while Beth held Dylan as she oversaw Ryan's progress as Ryan brushed his teeth. The only thing worse than watching that four-year-old eat so much sugar, was the rather horrifying thought of him going to bed without a good brushing.

Not unexpectedly, Ryan had the sugar fueled energy of a hummingbird after a long visit at a feeder. He ran everywhere, alert and boisterous, and was irresistibly unable to hold still.
noise kept Dylan awake, but the after effects of the sedative were strong enough to keep him from crying. In absolute calm, Dylan took everything in such great stride Beth tried to enjoy the tranquility while it lasted.

With help from Matt, Ryan managed to hold still long enough to get into his PJs. Ethan retired to his room and shut his door, and Cassie went to go read a magazine on her bed and enjoy a night of no homework.

While Beth put a clean diaper on Dylan at the changing table in the little boys' room, Ryan bounced around with his stuffed dinosaur, chasing imaginary bad guys and sending them to jail.

"Almost bedtime," she warned.

"Do I have to?" Ryan asked with a huge yawn.

Beth smiled. Her hummingbird was getting tired.

"Is he going to sleep in the crib?" Ryan asked as Beth lifted Dylan from the changing table. "If I have to sleep, then he does too."

"That's right, but tonight Dylan will be in the bassinet in the other room." Beth left out the part about wanting to make sure Dylan continued to come out of the sedative and coaxed Ryan to climb into his bed.

They said a good night prayer, Ryan got a kiss, then Beth turned out the overhead light while Ryan cuddled under the covers with his dinosaur. She didn't expect him to go to sleep right away, but knew with a little quiet, he would eventually.

After Matt had helped to dress Ryan for bed, Matt had disappeared. Taking a snuggly Dylan with her, she went in search of her husband.

She knew something was bothering Matt.

There wasn't any sign of him in the kitchen, or either of the master bedrooms, so she put on her coat, wrapped Dylan in a warm blanket, then went out onto the patio. Matt had already washed her car and his truck, and unless he planned on working off his mood with another round of cleaning, she reasoned he was probably enjoying the air.

Light from the glass double doors washed onto the patio, giving a good view of the immediate area but forcing Beth to adjust her eyes to look into the shadows beyond.
She found him, sitting on the ground just beyond the patio, a beverage can dangling from his hand.

"Matt?"

He looked over his shoulder, then held up the can. "Do you know what I miss? Beer. It could always loosen me up, and here I am, swigging down cola because I promised God not to touch alcohol."

"That's a good promise, Matt."

"I know." Resignation sounded in his voice. "I gave up a lot of things when I came to the Lord. I stopped smoking. Did I ever tell you that?" He squinted a look at her and she shook her head "no." "Well, I did. I gave up sex, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, a foul mouth and... what else? Man, there's more but I can't think of it right now. I gave up lying." He nodded, looked at the ground and then back out over the night. "I gave up on lies. 'The fearful, and unbelieving... murderers, and whoremongers... and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone.' That's from Revelations. One look at that verse and I knew where I was headed-- not that I needed a Bible to tell me that."

Beth stepped closer but stopped short of reaching his side. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"No, as a matter of fact, I'm not." He looked up at her, and gave a very discouraged smile. "I've been better. And you?"

"Matt, you're scaring me."

He took another swig of cola, then drained the can. "I hate to tell you this, Beth, but I'm about to scare you even worse."

Feeling unsteady, Beth moved to a chair at the wrought iron table, sat down and cradled Dylan in her lap.

"Yeah, sit down. By all means, sit down."

There was fear in his voice, a fear she couldn't understand. This wasn't about Dylan. She didn't know what to think, but this wasn't about Dylan.
He looked at her over his shoulder. "I love you, Beth. If I didn't, I wouldn't be out here trying to work up the courage to talk to you."

"Talk to me about what?"

"About Mom's letter-- what she said about me."

"What's left to say? Ethan already explained the circumstances around Helen."

"I'm sure he did." Matt pitched the can as hard as he could toward the pecan tree. She heard it strike the trunk. "You never really pressed me about my past. You knew I had one, and yet you trusted me anyway."

"I love you, Matt. Now that I know your secret, we can put it behind us and move on."

The night went silent. She saw his head bow, heard him groan softly.

"You don't know my secret."

"Yes, I do. I read Eve's letter."

"Mom didn't know, either." Matt pushed himself around to face Beth. "What I'm about to tell you, hardly anyone knows. Not even Ethan. He thinks he does, just like Mom thought she knew, but they were wrong."

"What are you talking about? I know about Helen."

"This isn't about Helen. It's about me." Matt ran both hands through his hair. "I'm talking about how I got the money to feed our drug habit-- Helen and me-- how we paid for our meth."

"But I already know," Beth insisted. "You turned Helen into a prostitute. Eve said you sold Helen to feed your habit."

Matt inhaled loudly. "I didn't sell Helen. I sold myself."

"What?"

"You heard me-- I sold myself. I was the prostitute, not Helen."

"But I don't understand. Ethan said Helen is still out on the streets, hooking for drug money."
"She probably is."

Beth stared at Matt and Matt looked away.

"I met Helen in high school. We were fourteen at the time, and I was already addicted to meth. I was what you'd call popular in school, at least with the girls. I slept around, bragged about it, and one day Helen came up to me and said she'd like to be next." Matt shook his head. "I never should of taken her up on it. She was young for fourteen, and had never been with a guy before. You might say she was infatuated with me.

"I'm not proud of it, but we started seeing each other on a regular basis. Then I--" Matt slammed his fist into the ground. "I told her it'd be better with meth. I was already into drugs, but she was scared. She'd never done anything like that before, and I said... I said if she loved me, she'd do it."

"Oh, Matt."

Matt pushed himself off the ground. "She started using because of me. I talked her into it and she did it for me. Her addiction came fast, faster than mine. With two habits to support, any part time job I could hold down suddenly wasn't enough. I got desperate and went to a friend. This kid-- Seth-- he was my age, and he was homeless and a druggie. He got propositioned often enough to stay in drugs most of the time, and I knew it. He was like, 'Hey, it doesn't have to mean anything, right? It's just sex. Turn off your mind and just do it. Man, just do it.' How many times did I tell myself that?"

Pacing the outer edges of the patio, Matt kept talking.

"When Helen and I ran out of drugs, I'd go hang out with Seth and someone would usually come along. People paid well for teenage boys, and the money was good. I'd get paid and go with the 'client,' as Seth would call them, do the deed, then go straight to my drug dealer. I'd take the drugs to Helen and we'd do our thing. She never asked where I got the money, but one day-- right out of the blue-- she promised to never tell anyone what I did. She knew I'd been with someone else."

"And you never got caught?" Beth asked.

"Nope, I never did." Matt inhaled as though he were bracing himself for what he was saying. "I thought I was charmed, you know? I couldn't get caught. Seth was picked up by the cops once, but I never was. I was always, always in the right place at the right time. I had a charmed life-- that is, until one day I picked up a religious tract someone had dropped on the sidewalk. I was
going to throw it away, but I started reading and I started thinking and I couldn't stop thinking. I was going to hell in a handcart, and I knew it. Everyone around me was headed in the same direction, and I figured I'd gone too far, done too much to be save-able. It had to be too late for me."

With a groan, Matt fell into the second chair at the wrought iron table. "I dropped out of school, and hung out with Seth more often to put food on the table so Ethan and Cass could eat on a regular basis. I knew Social Services were going to take the kids from Mom. It was only a matter of time. Dad had been raised in one foster home after another, and he'd been abused, so I didn't want that for Ethan and Cass. I figured God must've had a good reason to get my attention, or why else would He have bothered leaving that tract for me to find? I was a high school dropout, a drug addict, and a prostitute, but I still had a purpose to fulfill. If God would save me, and forgive my sins, then I'd take care of the others. It wasn't so much a deal with God, as it was an understanding. My life for theirs." Matt looked at Beth. "It made sense at the time."

"How did you get off the drugs?" Beth asked.

Matt shook his head. "You don't want to know. It wasn't pretty, and I'd just as soon not tell you what I went through. When I got my act together, though, it was a new lease on life for Ethan and Cass. Suddenly, someone was looking out for them. I got a job at a gas station, and I worked to become a legal guardian. That's when I understood why God had never allowed me to get caught. If I had a criminal record, I probably wouldn't have gotten the kids. Who'd give someone like me the legal responsibility for anything, let alone two kids? God knew what He was doing."

"Ryan hadn't been born yet?"

"No, Ryan didn't come along until after I got custody of Ethan and Cass. When Ryan was two years old, I went out and tried to witness to Helen. I even offered to marry her. She got me into bed, though, and I started using meth again. It really frightened Ethan and Cass. When I came to my senses, I knew we had to leave Texas. I had to get away, or else it'd pull me under and then I'd be no use to the others. That's when we came to Las Cruces. Two years after we got here, that's when I met you."

It took Beth a moment to find her voice. "That's quite a story."

"Yeah, but it happens to be true."

"I believe you." Beth looked down at the baby snuggled in the blanket on her lap. "Why didn't you tell me all this sooner?"
"Don't ask me that, Beth. Please don't."

"But why, Matt? Did you think I couldn't handle the truth?"

Groaning, Matt pushed to his feet, paced a short distance, then turned to look at her. "I didn't know what you could handle, and I didn't want to find out. We weren't supposed to fall in love--that was never the deal. But once I did, it seemed like I ought to tell you. You were taking a chance sleeping with me, even with protection, and I tried to be responsible. I got checked out by a doctor, but I should've done it sooner."

"Now I understand." Beth nodded. "That's why you were so anxious about being healthy."

"I don't know why I don't have AIDS," Matt said, shaking his head. "By all rights, I should. I've done things, taken risks no sane person ever would. I can only say God has been preserving me."

"I would have to agree." Beth bit her lip, and stopped short from speaking her next thought.

"Ask me anything, Beth."

"I was wondering who would pay for a teenage boy?"

"All kinds of people would pay, and do." Matt came back to the table. "People too shy about finding someone in their own area, someone closer to home. They go out, and they find us."

"When you say people, do you mean men?"

Matt studied her for a long time. "Yeah, I've been with men."

The thought forced Beth's eyes to look away.

"I didn't want you to know all this stuff for a reason," Matt said, the strain in his voice showing. "I knew it'd change the way you saw me, even change what you felt for me. But this secret-- it's too big, too important for me to keep from you. I love you, and felt you had a right to know."

"Thank you." Beth nodded, trying to keep her voice from breaking. "I knew you had a rough past, but I didn't know how rough." She lifted Dylan, moved to her feet and tried hard to smile. "I'm getting cold out here, so I should probably take Dylan inside."

"Is he doing all right?" Matt asked, getting up.
"He's sleeping like an angel." Beth lowered part of the blanket so Matt could see for himself.

"Beth, I know it's asking a lot, but Ethan and Cass don't know about me."

"I won't tell them."

"I'm not asking you to lie, just not to tell them if you can help it."

"I understand." Beth bundled Dylan. "They don't need to know."

"Thanks."

She nodded, and turned to go inside. "Are you coming in?" When he didn't answer, she looked at him. His hands were stuffed into his coat, and his hair was being tussled by the stiff breeze that cut through the patio. "Matt?"

"I heard you." He gave a shrug. "I'll stay out here awhile."

"Don't stay too long." She again tried to smile, then went inside as her heart pounded with what he'd just told her.

It was a lot to take in.

She recalled something he'd told her before, and she shuddered at the memory. He'd been a sex addict, as well. Given what she now knew of him, it was a sobering thought. Matt had overcome a lot to get to where he was right now.

Until tonight, she hadn't realized just how far he'd come.

Admiration aside, she had trouble getting rid of the pictures her imagination had painted of the man he used to be. Who would have ever thought that she would marry such a man, love such a man as that? He wasn't the same person he used to be, and she struggled to hold on to that thought.

A check of the boys' room found Ryan sound asleep. She left the door open a crack, then went to the master bedroom she shared with Matt.

It was almost a pity the sedative had to wear off, for Dylan was like a docile rag-doll in her arms. In fact, he'd been so docile, she kept checking to make sure he was still breathing. Getting back to normal was better than this drug induced peace, and she prayed the sedative would be fully
worn off by morning. She placed him in the bassinet, checked his diaper and wondered if he was hungry. If he was, he was too sleepy to let her know.

What a night this was turning out to be. So much kept running through Beth's brain that she wanted to hold out her hands and stop the thoughts from coming. What would her dad say if he knew about Matt? She wouldn't tell anyone, not even Dad, but a part of her had a feeling her father would still approve of the man Matt had become.

Dad was like that, and the knowledge of that gave her some confidence. She wasn't a hothouse plant who couldn't stand the full sun of the field flowers. She was a dandelion, and would weather this with as much love and grace as she could summon.

She went into the bathroom, washed her face and changed into a nightgown. She could still hear the tone of Matt's voice as he told her about his past. It had taken courage for him to speak, and it had taken some bravery to keep her composure in front of him. Tears kept slipping down her cheeks, but she didn't sob. Maybe it was from the nervous stress of listening to him speak so candidly about very difficult and painful subjects. He hadn't been talking about someone else. That had been him, her sweet darling husband.

"Oh, Matt." She steadied herself by the bed, dried her face and wondered how much longer he intended to haunt the patio.

She checked the front door, made sure the house was locked up for the night, then went to one of the three glass double doors that led outside. She could see him pacing in the distance, restlessly going back and forth over the same ground.

More tears wet her cheeks, and she brushed them away before he saw them.

His head snapped up when she stepped onto the patio.

"Aren't you cold?" she asked, rubbing her arms against the freezing night air. She'd forgotten to put on a robe, and was already making a retreat back to the house. "Come in before you catch a cold."

He stood there, not moving, just staring at her.

"Matt, please come."

"Beth--" his voice choked, and she realized he was crying.
The cold was suddenly forgotten. She came to him, not heeding the chilly ground or the stones that hurt her bare feet. Her arms went around him, and he latched onto her with all the strength he had. It nearly knocked her over, but he caught her and wept into her hair.

"Matt, please don't do this to yourself." She stroked his cheek, that handsome brow and tried not to cry. "It's all right," she whispered, "it's all right."

His frame shuddered with each sob, and it coursed through her like lightning on a quiet night.

"Nothing has changed, Matt. Nothing. I'm still your wife, and you're still my sweet darling."

He squeezed her tighter, then sucked in a huge gulp of air as though he were drowning in a sea of grief.

"I love you, Matt. Nothing has changed that." She pulled away just a fraction, enough to look into those eyes shimmering with tears. "You're a good man, and I love you. Not what you used to be, but the man you are now. I love you. Do you hear me?"

He nodded, gasped another sob and buried his face in her hair.

"It's okay," she whispered, "I'm here."

"I love you, Beth." The words were choked, but so heartfelt she ached with an exquisite longing that made her want to smile and cry at the same time.

She kissed his ear. "I love you more."

"Not possible," he sniffed, and held on to her all the harder.

"Matt." Her fingers grazed his cheek, and he raised his eyes to hers. They traveled to her mouth, and before she could brace herself, his mouth claimed hers. His hand moved to her back, and all she could think about was getting him inside, to the privacy of their room. He became more insistent, and she pulled away.

He reached for her, and she let him grab her hand. She tugged him toward the house, and when he realized she wasn't turning him away, followed with a quick step.

She pulled him inside, locked the doors while he hugged her from behind.
It took self-control for Beth to walk him to their room before returning his passion. As the bedroom door closed, she knew her love hadn’t changed. She loved Matt as strongly as before, if not deeper now that she knew all his heart.

This wonderful, crazy kind of love was almost more than she could bear and still maintain consciousness. Matt had entrusted her with his secret, and Beth loved him all the more for that trust.

"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 4:16 ~

"Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to Thy [God's] word. With my whole heart have I sought Thee: O let me not wander from Thy commandments."
~ Psalm 119:9, 10 ~
Chapter Thirty
Touched by Love (Part One)

"And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins."
~ 1 Peter 4:8 ~

"... [Matt's] sins, which are many, are forgiven; for [he] loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little."
~ Luke 7:47 ~

One by one, his senses came to him as he woke. The faint smell of jasmine, the slight movement of her nightgown as she stirred, the sight of those wild red curls, the touch of her hand as she snuggled deeper against his side.

He lightly traced a finger over those soft pink lips and they curved into a faint smile. She was awake, and he pushed himself up to claim that mouth, the sweetness that was all for him.

"Beth." He breathed her name, and emerald green blinked up at him. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For still loving me." He kissed her, sighed inwardly as they nestled side by side. "This is so much better with love. This is what I wanted, Beth. That first time in the desert, when we watched the sunset, then made love-- this is what I wanted. I wasn't selling myself for money, and I didn't want it because of convenience, or lust, or because we decided to have a good time. You had to be different, because you were different."

"Matt, what are you trying to say?"

Those green eyes held impact, a wonderful kind of wallop to his heart. "You aren't like the others-- you aren't like the clients I had. You're different. I love you, and that's what makes the difference."

She looked at him, and Matt wondered what she saw. Light filtered through the curtains, glinted in that velvet green gaze.

"You've said before that it was going to be different with me, but until now, I hadn't fully understood what you meant."
"I love you, Beth."

"I know." Her hand stroked his. "Don't be sorry about the time we spent in the desert watching
the sunset. Please, don't be sorry. I loved you, Matt, I loved you even then."

"You did?" Surprise coursed through him. "That's not what you told me."

"I know, and I told myself I didn't. I was confused, and I couldn't admit what I felt for you
without betraying Luke. But I want you to know that I loved you." Her fingers touched his lips,
wistfully gentle, and oh-so soft it nearly killed him.

Oh, man. What a way to die.

Grinning madly, he rolled into her arms and decided to take up permanent residence. Her heart
would be his address, so forward his mail to Beth, for wherever she was, that was where he
would be.

"I loved you, too," he admitted.

She gave a soft, deep sigh. "I think I already knew that. It's what made that night so bittersweet." Her eyes closed as he pulled her closer, and when he kissed her, she returned his love.

She loved him. It still seemed too good to be true, but it was there in her voice, that long, sweet
caress as they kissed. God had mercy on him, and had given him Beth. There was no other
rational reason why she was here in his arms, giving her heart to him so freely, so wonderfully in
love it drove him crazy.

A lone cry came from the bassinet, and Matt groaned.

He wasn't ready to get up yet. He wasn't done with Beth, he wanted to soak in all this
agonizingly sweet contentment for at least another hour. Maybe two.

"I hope that cry means the sedative has worn off." Beth tried to sit up, but Matt wouldn't let her. "I have to check Dylan."

"Hey, Dylan?" Matt called over his shoulder. "How are you, buddy? See?" Matt grinned at Beth. "He's doing great. Just one cry to let us know he's awake, nothing more."

She nudged Matt's chest. "I have to get up."
"Why? Why do you have to? The kids can fend for themselves in the kitchen."

"Matt, please be serious. We have things to do today, things that have to get done before the funeral."

"Now you're being practical." Matt groaned. "That's not fair, not when I'm in the mood to cuddle."

She smiled, nudged him a little harder and he took it as a challenge and held her even tighter.

"Unless you disagree, I'm keeping Ethan and Cassie home from school today."

"But they had yesterday off."

"We have things to do, Matt."

"There you go, you're being reasonable again."

"I can't help it. One of us has to think."

"I am thinking."

"Not about practical things," she smiled. "Matt, please stop. I need-"

The cell phone on the nightstand rang. She reached for it but Matt wrestled her back into his arms.

"The phone."

"Let it ring."

He kissed her, but she worked her arm free, managed to wriggle to the edge of the bed, then blindly reached for the cell phone. How she managed to maneuver, he didn't know, only that she was determined to answer that dumb call.

She answered it, gave Matt a quick shove that said, "No more," then got out of bed in her wrinkled nightgown.
"Yes, thank you. We just got up, and I’m checking him now." Beth went over to the bassinet and Matt realized who was calling. Someone-- probably a nurse-- was supposed to phone early the next day to see if Dylan had fully recovered from the sedative.

Matt felt a twinge of guilt for trying to keep Beth all to himself.

"Please, hold on a second." Beth set down the phone, lifted Dylan out of the bassinet, and Matt got out of bed to help. "Hi, sweetie-pie. How’s my little fella?"

Matt came in time to see a pair of wide awake brown eyes blinking up at Beth. For a moment, Dylan looked like he wouldn’t cry, but then hunger and the urgency of a wet diaper must have gotten the better of him, for he began to fuss as usual.

Cradling Dylan, Beth picked up the phone. "He’s wide awake and back to normal. Thanks so much for checking."

Knowing their morning was over, Matt pulled on yesterday’s jeans. He didn’t begrudge Dylan a clean diaper or a warm bottle, so even before Beth hung up, he took Dylan from her, changed the diaper, then took the baby into the kitchen to start warming up some formula.

His eyes blurred at the light coming through the kitchen window.

Man, was he tired. He should’ve gotten more sleep. Not that he had really wanted much sleep last night.

The microwave dinged, an innocent noise that prompted Dylan to start crying again. It didn’t seem fair. Matt hadn’t even noticed the little guy had stopped.

He took the bottle out of the microwave, opened a drawer and pulled out a baby bottle nipple. And blinked. He was holding Dylan, and didn’t think he could one-hand the nipple onto the bottle. He needed to wake up. His brain felt like it was still fast asleep, abandoning him to make clumsy mistakes.

Wake up, Taylor.

Just then, Ethan shuffled into the kitchen.

"Hey." Groggy-eyed, Ethan went to the fridge, pulled out the orange juice and took a long swig from the container.
"Aren't you forgetting something?" Matt asked.

Ethan scowled. "Like what?"

"Like pants. We're not wearing boxers around the house, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. Whatever." Ethan put the container back in, then let the fridge slap shut. "I'm feeling sick. If it's all the same to you, I'm staying home from school."

"Here, hold Dylan while I get his bottle ready. You want to stay home, that's fine with me. Beth wants you and Cass around so we can get some things done for the funeral. She didn't say what."

"The funeral's that close?"

"Depending on when the coroner releases Mom's body," Matt said with a yawn, "it'll probably be in a few days. Speaking of which, I have to call Wade."

"Is that bottle ready?"

"Almost." Matt tested a few drops on his wrist. "I have to get Wade to sign another release-- this time for Mom's medical records."

"When do you think the funeral will be?"

"I told you-- probably in a few days." Matt lifted the baby from Ethan, then tried to get Dylan to take the nipple. "Come on, buddy, stop crying long enough to have breakfast."

"I suppose I have to go, huh?"

"Go where?"

"To the funeral."

Tired, Matt struggled not to lose patience. "Come on, Dilly. Take the nipple."

"Do you think Beth would mind if I didn't go?" Ethan folded his arms, slouched against the center island. "I know she's paying for the funeral so we can see Mom, so I guess I have to go."

"Yesterday, you were all for it," Matt commented as Dylan finally latched on. "Don't tell me you're turning chicken."
"I'm not chicken."

"Then stop sounding like one, and go." Matt eyed his teenage brother. "She's our mom."

"She was our mom, and even that's debatable. We never had a real mother." Ethan shrugged. "What if I don't feel like seeing her?"

"Then stay home." Matt shifted Dylan in his arm. "I won't force you, if that's what you're asking, and neither will Beth."

"I just wish it was over." Ethan pushed off the counter and went to the cupboard. "I'm not looking forward to this."

"Neither am I." Matt watched him dump corn flakes into a bowl. "You been doing okay?"

"Yeah. I guess." The scowl didn't deter Matt.

"Sleeping all right?"

"What's it to you?"

"I only wondered."

"I'm fine."

"Okay. If you say so." Matt moved into the living room to find Cassie coming from her room. "No school today," he told her.

"I don't feel so good, Matty."

Matt frowned, pulled the bottle away from Dylan so he could touch a hand to Cassie's forehead.

"You don't feel hot, so I doubt you have a fever."

"Could I skip breakfast? I want to go back to bed."

"I guess. But don't skip lunch, too."

She nodded, rubbed her eyes and went back to her room.
The feeding had been interrupted long enough for Dylan to protest. As Matt coaxed the nipple into Dylan's mouth, the tiny fists gradually stopped waving and he began to calm down. At least for now.

How Matt wanted to go back to bed. Beth or not, he wanted to crawl under the blankets and hibernate for at least a week.

Yawning, Matt retrieved his Bible, went into the living room and found a comfortable place to read while Dylan fed. The day had yet to really begin, and already Matt felt washed out. Things tumbled inside him, like clothes going round and round in a dryer. Yesterday had been harder than most, but it had ended well. Beth still loved him, and as unbelievable as that was, the absence of having to worry about that left more room for the grief.

Mom. She wasn't ever going to walk back into their lives, and no matter how hard they might have wanted it, she would never come to Jesus, clean up her act, and come live with them and be a part of their family. Ryan would never have another hug from his real mommy, and Dylan would never know her. That hope was gone.

As Matt paged through the Bible, Beth appeared from their room, dressed and ready for the day.

"Ethan," Matt called, "go put on your pants."

"Yeah, yeah." Ethan sauntered from the kitchen with his bowl of cereal. "I'm going. I'm going. Morning, Beth."

"Good morning," she smiled as the teenager stalked off to his room. Beth came to Matt's couch, bent over him, and peered down at Dylan. "I called into work. We're keeping the store closed until Tuesday or Wednesday of next week."

Matt stared at her. "Why?"

"Because this family is in mourning. We'll go back to work as soon as we can, but for the time being, we're taking a few days off to care for our family."

"That sounded rehearsed." Letting the Bible rest on his knee, Matt rubbed his eyes. "You tell that to Sylvia and Amy?"

"I did, and they both sent their condolences." Beth straightened. "Where is everyone?"
"Ryan is still asleep," Matt struggled to find where he'd left off reading the day before, "and Cass wasn't feeling well and went back to bed."

"Anything serious?"

"I don't think so. I think the funeral's getting to them."

Bending, Beth planted a kiss on Matt's cheek. "Mind if I join you after I wake Ryan, then get us some breakfast?"

"Best offer I've had all day," Matt said, loving the way his tiredness tiptoed back when Beth was around. He felt stronger next to her, like he could do anything as long as she stayed by his side.

She planted a kiss on his lips. "I love you."

Like an idiot, Matt couldn't help grinning.

He watched her move into the boys' room to go wake Ryan, then returned his attention to the text before him from First John: "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God..." Matt smiled, kept reading until Beth moved past him on her way to the kitchen.

"Ryan's awake," she announced.

A second after Beth disappeared, Ryan emerged with his hair sticking out every which way, still dressed in his favorite pajamas, his eyes at half mast. He located Matt, then dragged his feet to the couch. With a sleepy yawn, Ryan climbed onto the cushion, sat down to watch as Matt read and Dylan fed from his bottle.

Seeing he had an audience, Matt read out loud and enjoyed the company of his little brothers. Ryan snuggled against his arm, played with one of Dylan's fists while Matt read how they should love one another, for God is love.

The bottle emptied, Matt burped Dylan, then got up to go change the now wet diaper. Without a word, Ryan climbed down to follow him into the boys' room.

"Want to help?" Matt asked, and Ryan gave a slightly interested nod. "Sit down on the floor--we'll change him there." Grabbing the diaper bag, and a clean towel, Matt knelt on the carpet and gave Ryan the towel to spread out. "This will be tricky, know why?"
His eyes a bit more awake, Ryan shook his head.

"Because boy babies can make an even bigger mess if we aren't careful." Matt placed Dylan on the towel, opened the diaper bag to get everything ready. He didn't remember ever showing Ryan what was involved in changing a diaper, and enjoyed Ryan's presence. "We get our baby wipes ready... like this... then our clean diaper. Now for the tricky part." Matt unfastened Dylan's diaper, then glanced at Ryan. "When this little guy feels a draft down there, know what's going to happen?"

"What?"

"He's going to pee, so we don't remove the diaper until he's done." Matt opened it halfway, saw Dylan was doing his thing and let Ryan see.

"Did I do that, too?"

"You sure did." Matt felt more of his grief tiptoe back. "The first several times I changed you, pee usually went everywhere."

"It did?"

"Yup. It got on the bed, the carpet-- anything within reach, including my mouth if I wasn't careful."

Now Ryan looked wide awake. "I peed in your mouth? Really?"

"Just once, but it was enough for me to keep my trap shut until I caught on. Now, this is no big deal. That's right, isn't it, Dilly?"

The baby peered up at them, his eyes large and wondering as Matt cleaned, powdered, then put him in a new diaper.

"Did I ever say I was sorry for peeing in your mouth?" Ryan wanted to know.

"Nope." Matt glanced at him. "I wasn't mad. You were just a baby, and babies don't know any better."

"I know better now."
"Yes, you do, and if you ever do that to me again, I'll make sure to get an apology." Matt reached over and threatened to tickle Ryan with a dirty hand.

Ryan laughed, scooted away until the threat was over then came back to watch. His presence and curiosity made a good companion for Matt.

They took Dylan back into the living room just as Beth was placing a serving tray on the coffee table. Orange juice, with slices of banana over yogurt.

They sat down to a light breakfast that felt special even though it really wasn't. Maybe it was because they were with the little ones, eating their meal while Dylan napped in Matt's lap. It felt cozy, somehow comforting, and once again, Matt thanked God for his family. How many times in the past had God used Ethan, Cassie, and Ryan to keep him going? The knowledge that others depended on him, gave him a reason to keep going, a reason outside of himself.

My life for theirs.

That's the understanding Matt had with the Lord, but now, looking back, Matt knew the children hadn't been the only ones who had been rescued. He had been saved, as well.

After breakfast, he and Beth spent some time in the Word, then Beth went to go wash dishes while Matt retrieved her cell phone to call Wade.

Thank God, Beth hadn't asked why he wasn't using his own cell phone. Really, he should have snagged the kitchen phone, rather than risk reminding her again that he was running out of minutes. He'd accidentally mentioned it the other day, and thankfully, she hadn't brought it up since.

The truth was, he was saving money, and had been for a while. The exact start date he couldn't remember, or when he first consciously made the decision to hold on to a small amount of his paycheck before giving the remainder to Beth, to put toward the family's expenses. She hadn't asked why he didn't give her his entire salary, and had seemed happy that he would at least have some of his own money to spend. After all, he never asked her for any.

Since he didn't want Beth to know the real reason for his need for cash, he let her assume what she wanted.

It didn't count as a lie. At least, Matt didn't think it did.
He called Ms. Simmons, then Wade, and arranged for them to meet in Wade's motel room. They had Mom's medical record release form to fill out, and Ms. Simmons would help them get it notarized-- or however that was supposed to work. Then Matt had to talk to Wade about Mom's funeral.

Other than Beth's love, the little kids who had cheered him, and the Scripture he'd read, Matt knew the morning wasn't going to be easy.

Sometimes, her cowboy could be so aggravating.

Even though Beth had thought she should go with him to see Wade, Matt had told her to stay with the kids. He would take care of things. Matt was being so brave, Beth wanted to take him by the shoulders and tell him it was okay to need her help. She had buried a husband, a son, she knew what needed to be done.

But that stubborn cowboy had left without her, and Beth struggled not to feel left out. She knew Matt was only protecting her from having to be around Wade. What bothered her more, was the thought that Matt was doing this to save her the sadness of having to arrange yet another funeral.

It irked her that his sense of chivalry was denying her the privilege of helping him.

No doubt about it, her knight in shining armor wore a cowboy hat-- a fact that made her smile even though she wished he wasn't quite so chivalrous.

Would Ms. Simmons advise Matt about the funeral? Beth doubted it. So why couldn't Beth be there?

Oh, Matt.

Instead of steeping any longer in her thoughts, Beth started planning out what the family would need to attend the funeral. In other words, clothes. Cassie and Ethan still hadn't done any major shopping to replace their thin wardrobe, and Matt-- well, that was another matter. Getting Matt to spend her money to buy new clothes, was like trying to talk a mule out of its stubbornness. It wasn't going to happen.

Her cell phone rang. Hoping it was Matt, Beth answered before the second ring.

Instead of her husband, she found someone from the Coroner's Office.
They were releasing Eve’s body.

"Do you have a cause of death?" Beth asked.

"I'm sorry," the woman apologized, "but the final report on the toxicology tests won't be ready for several weeks. We'll issue a pending death certificate so your family can proceed with the burial. If you've chosen a funeral home, please ask the funeral director to contact us so arrangements can be made for transportation."

How Beth wanted to take charge. Instead, she bit her tongue, took down the information for Matt, then called him to pass along the message.

"We need to pick out a funeral home as soon as possible. The Coroner's Office won't want to keep your mom for longer than necessary."

"Okay, I'll get started."

"Why can't I help?"

"I can handle it."

"I know you can, but--"

"I really have to hang up, Beth."

She sighed, knowing he was trying to save minutes on his cell phone. He'd dropped a comment about it the other day, and she hadn't forgotten.

"Okay. I just wanted to pass the message."

"Thanks. Bye." After several seconds, a dial tone sounded in her ear.

"Bye." Beth hung up, put down the phone and went back to her list.

This family needed to go shopping. Since Matt would be busy working out the funeral arrangements with Wade, she decided to do what she could on her own.

It took the better part of half an hour to round everyone up, make sure the little ones were changed or had recently used the bathroom, dress Dylan and Ryan, then load everyone into the
truck. Matt had been in a hurry that morning, and since her car had blocked his truck in front of the house, he’d taken her car.

Not surprisingly, Ethan insisted on driving, and Beth didn’t argue for the keys. It didn’t seem worth it, and only reminded her that they needed to buy another vehicle for the family. She’d been toying with the possibility of a minivan, but that decision would have to wait for Matt.

The idea of shopping for clothes didn’t seem to impress Ethan. He simply drove and kept his mouth shut, and Beth thought she saw some of the same quiet sadness she had seen in Matt earlier that morning. Ethan and Cassie had complained of not feeling well. Though they didn’t have a temperature, or look very sick, they did strike Beth as being rather depressed.

Understandable. Their mom had just died, and now they were shopping for her funeral.

"Man, I wish I’d stayed home." Ethan checked his speedometer, then slowed. "I don’t see why have to waste my time. I already have clothes, and it’s just Mom."

"If you didn’t want to come," Cassie argued from the backseat, "then why’d you make Beth let you drive?"

"It’s my truck." Ethan slumped behind the wheel. "We’ll hit Las Cruces soon, so where are we headed?"

"Just stay on this road," Beth said, turning to look into the back. "Is Dylan asleep?"

Cassie nodded.

"I was thinking"-- Beth looked back to Ethan-- "as long as we’re in the city and everyone is off from school today, maybe we could get you and Cassie some clothes besides what you’ll need for the funeral. Dylan and Ryan have their wardrobes, but we haven’t done a thing about you and Cassie yet."

Ethan frowned. "Do I have to?"

From the backseat, Cassie groaned. "Oh, come on. You need clothes-- you know you do."

"Shut up, Cass."

Beth gave him a look. "Please don’t talk that way to your sister."
"You aren't my mom."

"I know I'm not, but that's beside the point. I said 'please.'"

A reluctant grin tugged at Ethan's mouth. "Whatever. Do you want me to turn left, or go straight ahead?"

"Straight ahead, please." Beth checked the display on her cell phone, and hoped Matt would call to let her know how things were going. Funerals weren't simple to plan, but then, Matt would be in touch with a director once he chose a funeral home, so Matt would have help.

"Turn in here, please," Beth said, gathering her purse and Dylan's diaper bag.

"Whoa." Ethan blew out a breath as he took in the large store. "This place is expensive, isn't it? All I need are some pants, not a tuxedo."

"Cassie, the next store will be for you," Beth promised. "Can I count on you to keep an eye on Ryan?"

When Cassie didn't reply, Beth turned to see her staring at the store.

"Cassie?"

The girl looked at Beth, and gave a quick nod. "Okay."

"You're next, all right?"

Beth was rewarded with an eager smile. Cassie was getting into the spirit of things, though Ethan seemed to be experiencing price-tag shock, and they hadn't even gone inside.

"I don't want anything fancy." Ethan snapped off the seatbelt. "Couldn't we go someplace else?"

"Let's see what they have," Beth coaxed, putting on the baby sling, then getting out of the truck to get Dylan and Ryan. Bringing the little ones might have been a mistake, but Beth wanted them with her. "Ryan, hold Cassie's hand and don't go wandering off."

As Beth lifted Dylan out of the carrier, the boy began to cry.

Ethan rounded the truck, folded his arms and stared nervously at the store. "All I need are some sneakers and jeans."
"I was thinking you might get a suit." Beth placed Dylan in the baby sling, then retrieved her purse and diaper bag from the front seat. "They sell jeans and shoes, too, so let's see if we can't get everything you need here."

"A suit?" Panic sounded in Ethan's voice, though he did an admirable job of still looking tough. "I can't wear a suit to school-- I'd get thrown out for impersonating the principal."

"You'd only wear it on special occasions, like graduations and--"

"And funerals?" Ethan cut in.

"I won't force you to get a suit, but let's go in and look around. You might change your mind."

"Yeah, right." With a large groan, Ethan shook his head but followed as Beth led the group through the parking lot.

"What if Dylan won't stop crying?" Cassie asked.

Beth handed her the diaper bag. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Ryan, hold Cassie's hand."

As they pushed inside, strains of relaxed music pumped from hidden speakers and greeted their ears. Racks and displays of men's clothing scattered about the store in organized chaos.

A salesperson walked over. "May I help?"

Ethan shrank back.

"We're thinking about a suit," Beth explained, "something nice for a graduation." She looked to Ethan, smiled and wished he didn't look so much like bolting out of the store. "He needs at least two long sleeve shirts, a good dress belt, and shoes. We'd also like to look at some casual clothing-- everything but T-shirts. Those, we can get anywhere."

The salesperson gave a hopeful smile, and Beth knew the man was seeing dollar signs. Very well. She didn't mind the commission he'd get for helping them, especially if he could get Ethan to look at something besides the discount sneakers he was sure to get at the grocery mart. In the not-too distant future, Ethan would graduate from high school and attend college. Jeans and T-shirts would be the bane of his college existence-- Beth wasn't kidding herself-- but a good suit
would be useful for those special occasions when he had to impress someone. Maybe even for a job interview.

She stepped back and let the salesperson guide Ethan through the racks of clothes. From the way Ethan loosened up when she hung back, it occurred to Beth that she might be embarrassing him. She had an infant strapped to her chest, and two children following her about like ducklings. In other words, she looked like a mom.

The thought made her happy.

Though Ethan still didn't look very pleased about being stuffed into a suit, he let the salesperson show him the different styles and even consented to trying one on in the changing room.

To Beth's relief, Dylan began to calm. A man walked past them, said something to his companion, and the cries started up again.

"Beth," Cassie came close, her hand still holding Ryan's, "people are staring."

"Of course they are." Beth tried to smile. "They've never seen such a cute baby before."

"Beth..."

"I know," Beth nodded, "he's getting too loud. When Ethan comes out of the dressing room, I'll tell him we'll wait in the truck."

A moment later, Ethan emerged and everyone but Dylan went silent. Was that her Ethan-- the awkward teenager who only a short time before, had to be dragged into the store?

He stood in a classy, dark gray suit, and a white, long sleeved shirt, looking a bit confused but very handsome. His loosely cropped brown hair, that firm but hesitant smile that tried not to betray too much, all reminded Beth of Matt. She'd never seen Matt in a suit and tie before-- he probably didn't even own one, but that smile reminded her very much of Matt.

The salesperson moved to put a light gray tie on Ethan, and Ethan held still.

"This will need some alterations..." the man stepped back, looked at Ethan with an experienced eye, "but I think the color suits you-- if you'll pardon the pun."
Ethan turned, looked to Beth and she saw the confidence in his eyes. The insecure bravado had given way to steady assurance, and she marveled at the way clothes could transform a person's self-image.

"Dark gray on a young man gives the impression of experience and wisdom. It's a classic look." The salesperson gave an approving nod, and Ethan's smile turned a bit cocky.

It wasn't hard to think of Matt in his early high school years, strutting around and being the favorite of all the girls. Remembering that, Beth could almost wish Ethan didn't look so very handsome.

"Well?" Ethan turned again to Beth. "What do you think?"

"I think we're going to have to keep a close eye on you when you go to college." Beth couldn't bring herself to smile. "The suit looks sharp on you."

"Matt's not going to mind, is he?"

"Why should he mind?"

Ethan gave a shrug, and in that one gesture, she saw the insecure teenager slip back into the young man.

"He'll want you to be prepared for your future."

"I know, but..." Ethan hesitated. "He doesn't have one, and I do. It doesn't seem right."

"Never mind that, Matt will understand. We expect you to finish your education, and put that suit to good use."

Absently, Ethan nodded, and Beth sensed some indecision about his own future.

She turned to the salesperson. "You mentioned alterations?"

"Yes, the pants need hemming." The man nodded in agreement with himself. "There might be some other minor adjustments, but nothing drastic. We can probably have it ready by tomorrow morning."

"Good. He'll need it soon." Beth went to Ethan while Dylan kept fussing. "We'll wait in the truck while you continue your shopping. Make sure you at least have a suit to wear to the funeral..."
and your graduation, and some casual school clothes. When it's time to check out, come and get me and I'll pay for whatever you want. And Ethan?"

"Yeah?"

"Make sure you get some dress shoes. Sneakers won't work with this suit."

"Oh, right." Ethan nodded, nervously glanced at the full length mirror and took a deep breath.

"The hard part's done," she smiled, "but if you need my help, I'll be outside."

"Okay." Ethan nodded again, his courage gathering. "Thanks."

As Beth left Ethan to the mercy of the overly helpful salesperson, her thoughts weren't on the price tag. Ethan had promise in his future-- promise that wouldn't be there if his big brother hadn't looked out for him.

Ethan's future was possible, because of Matt.

Each one of these kids owed a great deal to their big brother, and Beth hoped they would never forget that.

She checked her cell phone again, hoping to find a voicemail or a missed call-- something that said Matt had tried to reach her. Nothing. He was probably saving his minutes. Why couldn't he ask for a little money for more cell minutes? It wouldn't cost much, but instead of asking, here she was, trying to keep in touch with a man who wouldn't call.

Even after they got back into the truck, Dylan wouldn't stop crying. She tried taking off the sling and cuddling him, getting out of the truck to walk him back and forth in the parking lot, but nothing helped.

Please, God, help me calm him down.

Then she remembered something the doctor had said-- that Dylan might have trouble regulating himself in stressful situations. She did a quick self-assessment and realized she was anything but calm.

Maybe to calm Dylan down, she first had to calm herself.

She climbed back into the truck, then rolled up the windows to keep out the traffic noise.
How do you calm down, when your mind kept racing and planning?

Closing her eyes, Beth prayed, and when her prayer only served to stir her emotions, she thought of Matt, and the quiet moments they'd shared last night when not making love. The gentle caress, the warmth of his arm as it snugged her close, the happy little sigh when he touched her hand.

She had been touched by love, and the memory of it made her smile.

Breathe deep, let it calmly wash around my heart.

The tension eased from her shoulders, her pulse slowed.

She looked down at Dylan, cuddled on her lap and all cute in his new clothes. His cries came less frequent, and she saw his eyes grow heavy. They half closed, opened briefly as a vehicle moved past them, then shut all the way. He had fallen asleep.

"Beth, Ryan has to use the bathroom."

The noise made Dylan's eyes pop open, and Beth felt discouragement tugging at her peace and calm.

"Do you think you can watch Dylan for me?" Beth asked.

"Sure." Cassie leaned over the front seat and looked into Beth's lap. "Isn't he the cutest little thing?"

"He is," Beth had to admit, "especially when he's not crying. Here, can you lift him into the back, or should I get out?"

"I have him," Cassie said, lifting her baby brother over the front seat. "Come to Cass, come to Cass," the girl crooned softly.

When Beth turned, she saw Dylan comfortably snuggled in Cassie's arms, and wearing a sweet baby smile.

The little stinker.
Beth laughed softly, relieved Dylan was taking things so well. She picked up her purse, got out, then went to open the cab door and help Ryan out.

"Do you have your cell phone?" Beth asked. "Good. You know my number. I should only be a few minutes, but if you need me, call. Keep the doors locked and the windows rolled up. It's not hot, so you should be just fine. Come on, Ryan, let's go see if we can't find a restroom in that big store."

They crossed the parking lot, Ryan almost dancing from foot to foot as they went. As they moved inside, Beth's cell phone rang. She paused just inside the entrance, tugged her phone out and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Matt's number.

"Hello, Matt?" She moved Ryan out of a couple's way. "Where are you?"

"I'm at the Nyquist Funeral Home, and I wanted to make sure of a few things before making some decisions."

"Okay, hold on. Ryan has to use the potty." Beth waved to a salesperson. "Do you have a restroom?"

"Over there," the woman pointed, and Beth hurried Ryan through the displays and clothes racks.

"Beth, this can't wait much longer."

"Just one minute," she pleaded with Matt while guiding Ryan into the ladies' room. She found an empty stall, then remembered to ask Matt something she'd been praying about all morning. "Did you get Wade to sign the medical record release for your mom?"

"I can do it myself," Ryan insisted, and pulled down his pants to use the toilet.

"Yeah, Wade signed it."

"Okay, what did you want to know?" Beth asked.

"The visitation-- we only want a private family viewing, right?"

"Yes, for the kids."
"What about a funeral service?" Matt asked. "I thought about asking Pastor Mark, but mom was never religious, and she'd never want God dragged into the picture. Is it all right if we just had the viewing, then go on to the cemetery for the burial?"

"Yes, that would work."

"Could you ask Ethan and Cass, and make sure?"

"I'm in the ladies' room. I'll call you as soon as I talk to them."

"Okay," Matt said, and hung up.

Beth hurried Ryan to the sink, then lifted him so he could reach the faucet. Taking him by the hand, they left the restroom and went to find Ethan.

The salesperson who had been helping Ethan recognized her, and waved her over to where Ethan sat trying on some shoes.

She came close, gave the dress shoes a nod of approval. "Could I have a moment in private with Ethan?"

The salesperson left, and Ethan looked at her in alarm.

"Nothing's wrong," Beth said quickly. "Things are being arranged for your mom's funeral, and Matt wanted your input." She explained what Matt had said, and Ethan took off the shoes.

"As long as Cass gets to see Mom, I don't care if we skip the service."

"Then I'll tell Matt." Beth watched as Ryan knelt to play with a shoe tree. "Don't you want to see your mom again?"

"Yeah, I do." Ethan stared at the carpet. "I guess that makes me as stupid as Cass."

"That's not true of either of you."

Ethan sighed heavily. "If Mom had to die, I wish it'd been some other way. Like a car accident, or something normal. But this..." Ethan started to tug on his old sneakers. "Tell Matty it's fine with me."
"I will." Beth placed a hand on Ethan's shoulder, wanted to say something comforting but couldn't find the words. "I have to talk to Cassie, then call Matt back. Are you almost done?"

"Yeah, I'm done." Ethan took the shoe tree from Ryan, put it back where it belonged and got to his feet. "I got some things... some jeans, some long sleeved shirts, and that suit you saw. They said they'd make changes and have it ready for pickup tomorrow morning. Is that okay?"

"It's okay." She smiled, remembered Matt was waiting and promised to be back as soon as she could.

Leading Ryan out of the store, Beth went into the parking lot and found Cassie happily babysitting Dylan. The question was repeated to Cassie, and when Beth had her answer, Beth called Matt and relayed the decision.

"Okay, thanks," Matt said, and quickly hung up. No doubt, to save minutes.

It annoyed Beth that for the sake of a few dollars, she couldn't speak to Matt for any longer than was absolutely necessary. Surely, he could afford to buy more cell minutes. Most of his paycheck went into the family's finances, but he still had enough of his own cash to buy more air time for his cell phone. Or did he? Had he run out of money? Matt didn't seem like the extravagant type, but then, maybe something had come up that she didn't know about.

Not wanting to leave Ryan with Cassie, as well as Dylan, Beth took Ryan into the store to pay for Ethan's clothes.

The teenager seemed embarrassed by the total as they checked out, though he hadn't bought anything Beth would call extravagant. The only thing that even came close, was a leather wallet. She'd seen the neon colored velcro wallet in his back pocket, and approved of the choice. Ethan was growing up.

Loaded down with shopping bags, Beth, Ethan, and Ryan left the store and made their way to the truck.

When Ethan opened the cab door, Cassie's eyes popped wide with surprise.

"Wow. You must've bought out the store."

"I did not." Ethan scowled, started piling the bags onto the floor.

"He did just fine," Beth said over his shoulder. "How's Dylan doing? Does he need a change?"
"No, but he's starting to make noises like he wants something. I think he's hungry."

"He's not the only one," Ethan said, lifting Ryan into the cab. "Are we going home for lunch, or are we eating in Las Cruces?"

"We still need to shop for Cassie"-- here, Cassie cheered--"so we'll eat out."

"Can we have hamburgers?" Ryan asked hopefully.

Ethan shrugged, looked to Beth. "I don't care. Just as long as I don't have to try on anymore clothes."

The closest burger joint was located, and after everyone piled out of the truck, they went into the busy restaurant and ordered lunch.

As Ryan sat munching french fries, and Beth held Dylan while Dylan sucked his bottle, Beth's cell phone rang.

Without checking the screen, Beth took the bottle from Dylan, then answered the call in the hopes that it was Matt. It wasn't.

"This is Dr. Miller, calling for Mr. or Mrs. Matt Taylor? I have the test results for Dylan."

"I'm Mrs. Taylor." Beth pressed the phone to her ear so she wouldn't miss a word. Dr. Miller hadn't assigned the call to one of his nurses, but was making it, himself. Beth prayed he didn't have bad news.

"As you remember, we made more than one CT scan to have a better idea of Dylan's condition. I'm pleased to report no abnormalities were found in any of the CT scans." Dr. Miller spoke with an obvious smile in his voice. "It's very good news, and I personally wanted to be the one to tell you."

"Thank you so much." Beth added to herself, "And thank You, Jesus."

"We're still waiting on results from the other tests we took, but these scans are very encouraging for Dylan's prognosis."

Beth sucked in a breath. "This doesn't mean Dylan won't have any difficulties in the future, does it? It just means he's not as sick as he could've been... under the circumstances."
"I'm afraid that's true," Dr. Miller said. "Unless he develops a problem, we simply won't know how much he was affected by the birth mother's drug use. We'll just take things one step at a time, and celebrate good news where we can get it."

"Yes, all right. Thank you again."

"It was my pleasure."

Beth hung up, slipped the cell phone back into her purse and turned to look at the others.

"That was Dylan's pediatrician. The CT scans came back without showing any problems."

"Mommy, God answered my prayer!" Ryan beamed from his restaurant booster seat. "Dylan will be okay!"

"For now," Beth smiled, trying to carefully measure her answer. "It looks hopeful for Dylan."

Cassie leaned over and touched noses with the baby in Beth's arm. "Congratulations, little guy."

"That's really great news." Ethan breathed deeply, and Beth could see the relief in his face.

Keeping her voice low, Beth asked the children to close their eyes while she thanked God for the good news. Even though Ethan looked like he wanted out of the prayer, he shut his eyes and Beth prayed.

"Thank You, Heavenly Father, for this answer of peace for Dylan. Give him a bright and healthy future, in Jesus's name, amen."

"Amen," Ryan added.

Beth gave Ryan a hug, then coaxed him to finish his lunch so they could leave.

While the children cleaned up their wrappers and cups, Beth called Matt.

And found he'd turned off his cell phone.

Really, this was getting to be too much.

After a stop in the ladies' room to change Dylan's diaper, they went back to their truck.
Even though Ethan looked tired, Cassie was eager for her turn. In a rare show of brotherly support, Ethan made little protest as they headed for the clothing outlets at the mall.

"Maybe the boys and I could wait in the truck?" Ethan asked hopefully as they pulled into the large parking lot. "Or maybe I could take the boys, and we'll meet someplace inside so we won't have to walk the length of the mall with you and Cass."

"Chicken." Cassie grinned, and Ethan waved away the insult.

"I didn't drag you into that men's store."

"Ethan's right," Beth agreed. "It's not fair to drag him all over the mall. I'll make you a deal: You take Ryan and Cassie's cell phone so you can call me, and I'll take Dylan."

"What? You don't trust me with two little kids?"

"Let's just say they can overwhelm someone quickly, especially if Dylan starts to fuss."

"'Nuuff said. Gimme your phone, Cass. When you girls are done, call me, and Ryan and I will meet you in the food court."

Eager to get started, Cassie handed him her pink cell phone and Ethan scowled as he shoved it into his pocket.

"Girls," he mumbled.

Slipping the baby sling back on, Beth prayed Dylan was tired enough to not mind the crowds in the mall. She gave the diaper bag to Cassie, kissed Ryan on the cheek and made the boy promise that he'd hold onto Ethan's hand and not wander off.

"Hey, I know what I'm doing," Ethan took Ryan's small hand. "I've babysat the squirt plenty of times."

They went into the sprawling mall, then parted ways in front of a sports store. From the safety of the baby sling, Dylan seemed to be taking all the noise in stride. Thank God for that.

"Oh, how pretty." Cassie went into a clothing outlet and headed straight for a rack of denim.
Beth caught up, glanced down at the baby at her chest and found him wide awake but not crying. She gave his tiny fist a wave, and he yawned. By all rights, he should be screaming at the top of his lungs, and Beth guessed it was because she was trying to keep the stress from her voice. Maybe she had it all wrong, but whatever she was doing, it seemed to be working at the moment.

They picked out a few pairs of jeans for Cassie to try on, then Beth waited while Cassie went into the changing room. She tried Matt’s number again, but it was still off, and pushed the phone back into her purse.

The first pair of jeans were too tight, but the second pair were a near perfect fit.

Cassie couldn't stop smiling.

"It's like I'm shopping with the mom I always wanted," the girl confessed. "It's nice to be with someone who cares about you, isn't it?"

"It sure is." Beth hugged Cassie, and Dylan protested at being squeezed.

They bought three pairs of jeans, then checked out with a trendy shopping bag. Beth shouldered the diaper bag, and let Cassie carry the status symbol that announced they were paying customers.

They came to another outlet and went inside. Here, Cassie chose a canvas jacket, and two multicolored tops. A shopping bag in each hand, Cassie seemed to be having the time of her life. And it wasn't simply because of the clothes. They were doing something special together as family, almost like a mother and daughter, or at the very least like close sisters. Beth couldn't remember having such a good time trying on jewelry, or watching Cassie turn in front of a full length mirror to see a sweet maxi dress with an innocent top, twirl about her like a princess.

Needless to say, they bought the dress.

Next came sandals to go with the new outfit, along with two pairs of sneakers she could wear with anything but the princess dress.

At another outlet, they found a cute print skirt and a matching top, then had to find the perfect shoes to go with them. They were having so much fun, Beth almost didn't hear the phone go off in her purse.

She took it out, answered it while still admiring the pumps Cassie was trying on.
"Hello?"

"Hey, do we want carnations on the casket?"

No, "Hi, Beth, it's me, Matt," just a headlong jump into funeral matters.

"Unless you have your heart set on them, I'd prefer to skip the carnations. They're so overused at funerals, every time I smell one, I think of death."

"Okay, thanks."

"Before you hang up, Dr. Miller called about the results for Dylan's CT scans."

"And?"

"Everything looked good. They didn't find a thing wrong, so this is very much an answer to prayer."

"That's wonderful news-- thank You, God." Matt sounded tired, but very relieved. "Listen, Beth, I have to run. Thanks for letting me know."

The phone hung up, leaving Beth to struggle to get her mind back into the moment with Cassie.

They looked at more shoes, then wandered through the mall with their shopping bags. Their excitement began to lag, and Cassie's enthusiasm started to quiet down. If Beth's feet could speak, they would have cried for mercy and directed her to the nearest chair. The sling felt like a heavy sack of potatoes, albeit a very cute sack. On a whim, they went into a store and picked out a necklace with some bracelets, then decided to call it a day.

"I had such a good time," Cassie sighed after Beth called Ethan to let them know they were headed for the food court. "I kind of felt like Cinderella, and now it's time to turn back into just plain me."

"There's not a thing wrong with being yourself," Beth smiled. "And you're not at all plain. The girl I'm looking at is a blonde haired, blue eyed sweetie with a very big heart. You'll do fine, just don't let beauty go to your head. Vanity is unbecoming in a woman, so always keep your wits and don't let a flattering compliment turn your head. Know who you are, and what you're about. That's called poise."
"You have lots of poise, Beth. You're the most poised woman I know."

"I don't happen to agree," Beth smiled, "but it's nice of you to think so."

They came to the food court and found Ryan finishing an ice cream cone that not only smeared his nose, mouth, and chin, but also his shirt.

Ah, yes. Back to reality.

Beth located the baby wipes in the diaper bag, cleaned Ryan's face and hands, and quickly gave up on his shirt. At least vanilla probably wouldn't stain.

When Beth handed Ethan some of the shopping bags to carry out to the truck, Ethan rolled his eyes.

"What'd you do, Cass? Buy the place out?"

"Don't tease your sister," Beth said, as they negotiated the crowd and found the entrance. "We're all tired, so let's not make each other miserable."

A cold, early evening wind whipped past them as they stepped outside, making Beth wish she had brought coats for Ryan and Dylan. They hurried to the truck, loaded in the shopping bags, then strapped in the little ones.

While her feet were so sore, Beth didn't want to contemplate how much they'd spent that day. And that was only today's shopping. Since Matt hadn't taken her credit card, he'd probably put the funeral expenses on his own credit-- if he had that much available. For the umpteenth time, she wondered how Matt was doing.

She tried his number one more time before Ethan started the truck, and found the cell phone was still off.

Well. At least the children had clothes. The only one left was Matt.

To Beth's discouragement, when they reached home, the house was empty. A note sat on the coffee table saying Matt had come back for some papers he needed at the funeral home, but that he and Wade weren't done, and to not wait dinner for him.
"I wish Matty would come home," Cassie sighed, kicking off her shoes onto the living room carpet. "Do you think he's all right?"

"If he wasn't, he'd call," Beth said in as confident a tone as she could manage. She prayed it was true. Did he know what to do about the number of pallbearers they might need, or whether or not there would be any music? What about getting Eve published in the obituary section of the newspaper, or what clothes they would need selected for the funeral home to present Eve during the visitation? From the little Beth had seen, Eve didn't own much at all. The funeral home would likely have to dress her in clothes other than her own, but did Matt know that? Something nice, but that the children would still be able to recognize their mom in?

Looking worn out despite the sugar high Ethan had kept Ryan on to distract him in the mall, Ryan climbed onto a couch and curled into a sleepy ball. Beth hoped the boy didn't have a tummy ache. She got him up, led him to the boys' bedroom to brush his teeth and put him to bed.

She plugged in the dinosaur nightlight, then went back to the living room to get the carrier from Cassie.

"He's really tired," Cassie remarked as Beth lifted out the sleeping baby. "Oh, he's so cute."

"He is," Beth smiled, taking the cute baby to the kitchen for a feeding. Tired or not, she knew Dylan would wake up and fuss for his bottle soon. He was no longer on a sedative that knocked him out, so she couldn't rely on him staying asleep.

Turning on the faucet, she warmed his bottle beneath the hot water instead of putting it in the microwave like Matt often did. He'd gotten into that habit with Ryan, and it persisted with Dylan.

The bottle ready, she coaxed Dylan to wake up. He took to the feeding so easily, she knew if she'd waited a little longer, she would have had a crying baby on her hands.

"Sweet little one," she whispered, watching Dylan hungrily nurse from the bottle. "I think you're ready for the crib in the boys' room. What do you think? Will you cry because you're not in the bassinet?" She sat on the kitchen stool, listened to the small swallows of formula until the bottle felt light and his bottom felt warm.

Time to change the diaper.

On the living room floor, Cassie sat with scissors, snipping off the store tags on her new clothes.
"Make sure you carefully sort those by color before you put them into the wash," Beth warned as she skirted around the pile to get to the second master bedroom. "And read the care labels."

"I will," Cassie said with another snip of her scissors.

Ethan moaned on the couch but made no effort to get his bags and follow Cassie's example. He looked too tired to do anything useful.

His tummy full and content, Dylan made little objection as Beth changed his diaper by the soft glow of the nightlight. The cold baby wipes made his eyes open, but she soothed him back to sleep, and after he was breathing soundly, she powdered his bottom, then gently put him into a clean diaper. He barely woke when she tenderly lowered him into the crib.

The big boy's bed rustled with the sound of moving blankets. A small foot stuck out, and Beth moved over to tuck Ryan back in. Both of her boys were fast asleep.

She adjusted the baby monitor, then forced herself to leave them to their slumber. They were so quiet and innocent, she wanted to stand there all night and watch them sleep. That is, if her feet weren't pleading for mercy.

It was a big moment for her to leave Dylan there, and know she would sleep somewhere else. The second master bedroom was close by, but it was still another room.

If things worked out well, they would put the bassinet away. A bittersweet thought.

The children had waited for her to start dinner long enough, so Beth took the baby monitor into the kitchen.

"This is so pretty." Cassie brought her maxi dress into the kitchen, held it to her body and twirled. "Do you think I could wear this to the funeral? Do you think Mom would like it?"

The question made Beth's eyes tear up. She nodded, smiled, and didn't trust herself to speak. Eve was missing out on so much love.

Life kept surprising Beth. It wore her out to think of it, and she found herself longing for Matt's strength. She hoped he would come home soon, or she would look up the funeral home's name in the phone book, and call there, herself. It was after hours, though, and they probably didn't pick up after they closed, even if someone was still there with a customer who was struggling to
get everything done. Guessing she would probably just get a message service, Beth gave up on the idea.

She dumped ground meat, some seasoning into a skillet and turned on the stove.

In the living room, Ethan played the evening news and Beth listened to the TV anchor move from one sad story to the next. Why couldn't they report on happy things? But, she supposed, if it were happy, then it wouldn't really be news.

"You'd better get your laundry started, Cassie. Dinner is almost ready."

Cassie stopped her daydreaming long enough to see Beth arrange several bowls onto a serving tray.

"Soft-shell tacos!"

"I'm glad you approve," Beth smiled. "It's late and I didn't want to spend a lot of time fixing dinner. I'll set the table, and you and Ethan wash up."

Conversation was light at the table, and more than once, when someone thought they heard a car, the TV was muted from across the room and everyone waited to see if Matt would come through the front door.

"I wish he'd call." Cassie worried her tossed salad with a fork, picked a slice of cucumber and stabbed it through.

"So do I, but he has a lot to do. I'm sure he'll call when he's able." Beth sighed, stood up to start clearing the table. "Are you going to finish the last of that salad?"

"No, I'm full." Cassie pushed the plate toward Beth. "I'm going to change loads in the washer. Ethan, do you want me to do yours, too?"

The teenager gave a slumped shrug. "I guess. Thanks."

"That's nice of you, Cassie." Beth gave her a smile, then took the stacked plates into the kitchen.

When Beth came back for the glasses, Cassie left to work on the laundry, and Ethan was nowhere to be found. His bedroom door stood shut, and light spilled out at the bottom; he was in there, probably brooding over the funeral.
After loading the dishwasher, Beth went to check on the little ones. Ryan and Dylan were still fast asleep, and it did her heart good to see them both in their room, the crib and the big boy's bed both occupied with sweetness. She was a mommy again, no doubt about it.

Keeping the baby monitor close, Beth moved into the second master bedroom to shower and change for the night. The time read seven-thirty, but it felt much later. The emotions of the day had worn her down, and now all she wanted was a steaming hot shower and the relaxing scent of her jasmine body lotion.

How her feet ached. Cassie had really given her a workout in the mall.

Beth changed into her bathrobe, dropped her clothes into the hamper, then washed her face as noise came from the bedroom. She moved into the bathroom doorway and found Matt on the edge of the bed, pulling off a boot.

"Well, you're back." Beth came in, knelt to pull off the remaining cowboy boot. "How did it go?"

"Don't ask." Matt tossed his Stetson onto the nearby chair. "Eric-- the funeral director at Nyquist Funeral Home-- had his hands full with Wade. Actually, so did I, though Eric got the worst of it." Matt pulled off his shirt, hurled it into the corner of the room in disgust. "Most of the staff went home after five, but Eric stayed behind to get all the arrangements ironed out." Matt looked to the bedroom doorway where Cassie stood listening. "Where were you guys? I came home after lunch to get some papers, and no one was here."

"We went shopping," Cassie smiled. "Oh, Matty, you should see the dress I got--"

"Later, okay? I'm bushed."

Beth took off Matt's socks, stood to go pick up the discarded shirt.

"At first Wade didn't want a memorial service, then he changed his mind and argued with me why it was a good idea. Then he wanted flowers-- lots of them. Eric suggested red carnations, and from there it went downhill. I didn't want flowers, was dead set against flowers because you were going to have to pay for them. You said you didn't even like carnations, but whatever. There's going to be red and white carnations on the casket at the visitation tomorrow evening."

"Tomorrow evening?" Beth held his shirt and socks. "When's the burial?"

"Sunday. I wanted the whole thing on Sunday, but Wade..." Matt gave a grim chuckle. "Wade thought it was hurrying things too much, not showing enough respect for the 'dearly departed.'"
Matt’s laugh sounded dark and weary. "I came close to calling the whole thing off, but I knew Cassie and Ethan wanted to see Mom one last time, so I made a deal with Wade. He dropped the memorial service, and I conceded on the flowers. Everyone was happy until Wade announced he didn't have anything to wear to the funeral."

Absently, Beth folded the clothing, placed it neatly on the chair.

"After we left the funeral home, I took Wade to a thrift store and bought him a really cheap suit for the cash I had on me. He can wear it to the guardianship hearing, I don't care. I just wanted to go home. Oh, Mom's medical record release is on the nightstand, signed, notarized, and soon to be delivered to Dr. Miller."

"How did you pay for the funeral?" Beth asked.

"I didn't-- at least, not all of it. I maxed out my credit card, and Eric let me promise to bring my wife in tomorrow to take care of the rest."

"Matt, that wasn't a good idea. Maxing your card will probably make your credit rating drop."

"It’s not like I had a lot of credit to begin with," Matt said, starting to unfasten his jeans. "Cass, shut the door, would you? I want a shower, then I’m hitting the sack."

"Have you eaten dinner?" Beth asked as Cassie left, and quietly shut the door.

Matt shook his head, pulled off his pants and stood in his boxers. "I’m too tired to eat. I noticed Dylan isn't in the bassinet."

"I thought it was time he started getting used to his new room." Beth picked up the jeans. "He was so tired after today, it seemed like a good time to begin."

"Did you set up the baby monitor?"

She nodded to the unit on the nightstand.

"Good." Matt went into the bathroom and a moment later she heard the shower running.

She searched the pockets of his jeans, found his cell phone and put it next to hers on the nightstand.

"How many minutes do you have left on your cell phone?" she asked.
"What? I can't hear you."

She moved into the bathroom, stood outside the foggy shower glass door and opened it an inch.

"Your cell phone. How many minutes do you have left?"

"I don't know."

"Matt, you had your phone off for at least half the day."

"I was busy."

"But you're running out of cell minutes, aren't you?"

"I guess."

She shook her head. "Is it just me, or are you being evasive?"

"Hey, I'm answering your questions." She heard Matt shut off the water. "Gimme a towel, would you?"

"What's the matter?" she smiled. "Shy?"

"Just give me the towel."

She handed him a large bath towel and wondered what was going on. Something about this talk was making him self-conscious, quietly flustered, and more than a little hurried in his routine.

When he came out with the towel wrapped around his waist, she couldn't help smiling.

"Your shower was awfully fast."

"That's because I don't take as long as you."

"Ha. Back to the cell phone. Why didn't you have it on so I could call?"

"Because I knew I was running out of minutes."

"So you finally admit it?"
"What do you mean, 'finally'? I didn't lie."

He started to pass her. She stopped him by placing a hand on his chest. And struggled to ignore his grin.

"You're trying hard not to lie, and I want to know why."

"Want to know what? Why I don't want to lie?"

"No--" she stifled a laugh. "You know what I meant. Why haven't you bought more cell time? You have the money, so why haven't you bought more time?"

Those fiercely dark eyes narrowed, and she sensed she'd just hit on the one question he'd been trying hard to avoid.

"Matt? What's going on? Are you saving your money?"

"Aw, Beth." He groaned, moved past her into the bedroom. "Why did you have to ask that?"

"Are you?"

He opened a dresser drawer, pulled out some shorts.

"Why couldn't you have asked if I'd blown my money on something stupid?" He shot a look at her over his shoulder, and she tried to ignore the cute way his hair was all wet and messed. "Has it ever occurred to you that money might slip through my fingers, that maybe I'm not that good at keeping track of my finances?"

"No, actually, it hasn't. You're a responsible person, and I know you. You haven't relapsed and are now buying drugs. The sober Matt I know and love doesn't spend money lightly. Since I haven't seen you with anything new, it means you're saving."

A reluctant grin tugged at his mouth. "She really does trust me."

"Why are you saving your money?"

He came to her, tugged her into his arms.

"Tonight's date night, you know."
"Matt, you're changing the subject." She tried to move back, struggled not to smile as he again pulled her close.

"You're so beautiful when you're annoyed."

"Matt, please."

His head dipped and he kissed her so soundly, her world blurred with pleasure. Lightheaded, she refused to give up and fought to pull away.

"Matt, why?"

"Because I want to," he grinned, not letting her go in the slightest.

"That's not what I meant."

"Beth, please don't ask more."

"Are you in some kind of trouble? Does the truck need something expensive?"

"No, it's nothing like that. Please, Beth, trust me on this."

She breathed heavily, the plea making her think twice about pushing him any further. She tucked her face against his bare shoulder. "I trust you. I trust you with my heart, so I can trust you on this. If you're not in trouble, then it's not a big deal-- not really. It's just I'm--"

"Curious?" he finished.

She nodded, loving the way his damp skin felt against her face. She kissed his shoulder, then looked up into those eyes-- those dark, intense eyes. Her heart shuddered and danced in response.

The arms around her tightened.

"I thought you were tired."

He made no answer, but lowered his head and grazed his lips against her neck.

"You should go to bed and get some rest."
He caressed her cheek with his own. "Only if you'll come with me."

"I still have to shower."

He kissed her lips, her neck and refused to stop. "You know what tonight is, don't you? It's Friday, so this is date night."

"You're too tired, Matt."

"Not for you. Never for you."

How love could be so exquisitely painful in its yearning, and yet at the same time overflow with joy, was a wonderful mystery to Beth. It left her breathless.

"Love me." His words whispered against her skin. "Please, love me."

"Always, Matt. Always." Helpless to do anything but yield, her lips found his.

This love held a desperate quality, something not solely bound in physical passion, but something much deeper. It went to the very core of who Matt was, what he had survived and overcome, the victory God had given him. He loved because he was a forgiven man. God had forgiven him and that forgiveness instilled a deep gratitude in Matt that couldn't help but spill onto Beth.

Matt had been forgiven much, so he loved much.

Thank You, God, for saving this man.

Beth fought to make sure the bedroom door was locked, then laughed as Matt lifted her in a huge embrace and carried her to the bathroom for her shower.

"We love [God], because He first loved us."
~ 1 John 4:19 ~

"For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith."
~ 1 John 5:4 ~
Chapter Thirty-one
Touched by Love (Part Two)

"Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair..."
~ Song of Solomon 1:15 ~

The mattress moved, and Matt woke to see Beth going into the bathroom. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, glanced at the clock and knew he had to get up. This Saturday he wasn't working at the nursery, but that didn't mean he could sleep in.

He began to think, and the cozy of last night started to lift from his sleep-fogged mind.

That woman noticed everything. Thank God she'd backed down and stopped asking those questions. This secret he had to keep, there wasn't any way round it.

Well, that wasn't quite true. There was a way, he just didn't want to take it.

His eyes flicked to the dresser, then to the bathroom door. He should have done it yesterday, when everyone was so conveniently out of the house, but he'd been busy with the funeral arrangements. And how was he supposed to know she'd ask those questions last night? He hadn't seen it coming, and knew that whatever he did from here on out, would come under watchful scrutiny.

She was curious-- a dangerous word with a woman. It meant her imagination was at work and her eyes were wide open. If he moved an inch, she would wonder if it had anything to do with "the secret."

Aw, man.

He'd already told her the one life-changing secret he had. He'd already spilled his guts to her, wasn't that enough? Did she have to know EVERYTHING?

He heard water running in the bathroom sink, dragged himself from bed while light from the window proclaimed that the morning had already begun.

With a glance at the closed bathroom door, he headed for the carved wooden box on the dresser.

"Matt?"
He jolted back, tried to look casual then realized the bathroom door was still shut.

"I hope you're awake, because we have errands to run this morning."

"Uh-huh," he said, and went back to the dresser and tried to keep an eye on the bathroom door.

Lifting the lid on the box, he looked inside. It didn't matter which one, did it? Any of them would do. Probably.

The bathroom door started to open. He snatched one, then remembered to close the lid.

"Make sure you shave." She came out of the bathroom wearing her robe. "That two-day shadow you're sporting might look handsome, but you really need to shave for this evening."

"Handsome, huh?" He grinned as she moved around him to get something on the dresser. She reached for the carved box. His breath caught, then puffed out in relief when she stopped halfway and picked up a brush.

"I'd like this family to look nice for your mom's funeral."

"Visitation," Matt corrected, and looked about for his jeans. "I don't care for that word. It makes it sound freaky, like we're going to summon her ghost, or something. Call it a viewing, it sounds better."

"I want us to look nice, Matt."

"Don't worry, I'll shave." He went to the closet, pulled out a pair of clean jeans, (for Beth had put yesterday's into the hamper), and discreetly slipped the borrowed item into a pocket.

"Actually," Beth said, "I was hoping you'd do more than shave."

He went back into the room, and saw the hope on her china doll face.

"Do more?" He shook his head. "I don't know about that. It's too much to expect I'll shower and shave. It's one or the other, Beth."

"Stop joking, I'm serious."
"Who's joking?" He gave a casual shrug, then laughed when she folded her arms. "Okay, I'll shower, too."

She rolled her eyes-- a teenage gesture that looked cute on a grown woman like Beth. "I meant do more," she sighed. "As in clothes."

"Oh." He stepped away, went back to the walk-in closet to find a clean shirt. "What's with the missing clothes? I can't find anything from yesterday. Just because I wear something once or twice, doesn't mean you have to toss it in the hamper."

She followed him to the closet door. "Did I tell you what we bought for Ethan, yesterday?"

"We?" Matt turned to give her a look.

"It's our money, darling, it's no longer just mine."

He pulled on the shirt and said nothing.

"I wish you'd stop being so sensitive about money. Everything I have is yours-- I don't know why you can't get over that."

"If you keep putting my stuff in the hamper"-- he looked about for his boots-- "you're just going to make a lot of work for yourself when you do the laundry." He found his scuffed boots beside a row of classy high heels, stepped back into the bedroom and shut the closet. "You said something about Ethan?"

"Yes, did I tell you he bought a suit?"

Matt noticed the change from "we" to "he," and sat on the chair to tug on his boots.

"No, I hadn't heard."

Poised for a talk, Beth took a seat on the edge of the mattress. "His suit needed alterations, but it'll be ready for pick-up this morning. I was hoping we--" she cut off when Matt eyed her.

"What exactly are you trying to rope me into?" he asked.

"Nothing." She turned the brush in her hands. "I can't honestly say it's nothing, because it is something, but... Matt Taylor, stop looking at me like that."
"Like what?"

"Like I'm forcing something you don't want."

"Okay." Matt stood, stamped on his boots. "What is it you think I don't want?"

"A suit."

"You're right, I don't." He went to retrieve his Stetson off the nightstand.

Beating him to it, Beth grabbed the hat, then scrambled to the other side of the bed.

Her breath caught on a laugh.

"You can't leave, Matt. We have to talk this out."

"No-- what you mean is, I have to give in and buy a suit. It's not going to happen, so give me my hat."

"Why? So you can leave?"

He started around the bed. She started back over. He stopped, and so did she.

"Beth, I'm not playing games. I need my hat. I have something to do-- something important."

"A suit. That's all I'm asking. I can take you down to the store, help pick it out--"

Matt interrupted. "And help pay for it."

She breathed a heavy sigh, settled on the unmade bed and looked at him. Her clean face and scooped back hair made him want to tug her into his arms.

"We're in this marriage together, aren't we?"

"Yeah, but what's that got to do with my giving in?"

"You won't be giving in, Matt. You'd be doing it to please me." She gave a pretty smile, batted those long lashes and he could feel his resolve begin to crumble. "If you won't do this for yourself, then do it for me."
Drawing out a groan, Matt took a step back to think it over. If he gave in to her, he'd probably have enough money to get that suit she wanted so badly. But it was just a suit, and this other thing, this important thing, was something he'd been saving and dreaming about for a while. He hadn't saved all this cash to blow it on clothes.

Still...

"I'd have to pay you back," he found himself saying. "If you think it's important enough to hold my hat hostage, then I'll go through with it... if that's what you really want. But I'll only do it, if you'll let me pay you back."

"Pay me back?" The words came out in a hurt whisper.

"Please don't do that." He folded his arms, tried to look tough. "Please don't start crying. I'm not going to have my wife paying my way for me. After we take care of this funeral, I'm going to quit my job at the nursery and find work somewhere else."

"Not that again." Pain came to her eyes and he struggled to stay strong. "I thought we came to an understanding. You'll stay on at the nursery with me, and forget about getting another job."

Matt shook his head. "I warned you before that we didn't have this settled, and I meant it."

She studied the hat in her lap. "I love you."

"I love you, too. That's why I'm getting another job."

"Oh, Matt." She turned the hat like it was some precious object to be figured out and studied. "This discussion is close to my heart, for Luke helped out at the nursery when he wasn't on call at the hospital. Looking back, I wish I had closed down the store, or only kept it open when Luke was working-- I don't know, I only know that it robbed me of my time with Luke, so that the only way he could be with me during his off-days, was to come work at the nursery.

"Despite all the pressures on him, Luke tried. He'd put on one of his 'Bethy shirts' and come to the store so we could be together, even though what he really needed was to relax and decompress with as little stress around him as possible. He loved me that much, and made that effort even though he was burned out from his shifts in the ER. I wish I had done things differently, but with you"-- she looked up at Matt-- "with you, I have that chance. You don't have a job that takes you away from me, and I see in that a wonderful opportunity. We can work together, spend our days together in a way I couldn't have with Luke, even if I had shut down the nursery. Our marriage is stronger for our time together, so why change what we already have?"
"Because what we have is unbalanced." Matt sank onto the foot of the bed and hoped he was being gentle with Beth. "I'm not doing anything to earn my keep-- not really. My job was seasonal, but now that we're married, you'll keep me all year round because I'm your husband and I need a job. That won't work, Beth. I didn't marry you so you could pay me."

She toyed with the brim of his hat. "I know, I'm not one of your clients."

"No, you're not. When I came along, you didn't need a broom-pusher. You only hired me out of guilt, and I won't use you as an excuse to push a broom the rest of my life."

"Matt, please don't leave."

"I can't. I forgot about breakfast."

She gave a sad smile. "I meant the nursery."

"I have to, Beth. I'm not doing much besides getting in your way." He caught himself and grinned. "Not that I mind getting in your way every now and then. But you don't need me at the store."

"But I do."

"No, you don't-- not really. I love you for wanting to keep me, Beth, but I have to go."

She tossed him the hat. "I wish you weren't so stubborn."

He frowned. "Facing facts isn't being stubborn."

"Then maybe it's time you were promoted." She turned hopeful. "If I want a partner, then I should make you one. You don't know the business, that's true, but I could teach you."

With a groan, Matt flopped back-first onto the mattress and tried to ignore the wishful thinking going on in that pretty head of hers. He placed the Stetson on his chest, stared up at the ceiling and prayed they would find agreement. Real agreement, not this make believe game Beth wanted to play.

To his dismay, she thought out loud.
"We'd need to set definite responsibilities, ones separate from each other, or else we'll constantly step on each other's toes. It just might work."

"Hey," someone knocked on their door, "when's breakfast?"

Matt looked to Beth. It hadn't even broken her train of thought.

"Of course it will take some effort, but I really wouldn't mind having a partner in the nursery. Things haven't been going very well, so maybe it's time I had some help."

"Anybody in there?"

"Hold up, Ethan. I'm coming." Matt shoved off the bed, tossed aside his hat and went to the door. "Beth, I'll get the kids up and give Dylan his bottle." Matt sighed when she nodded and kept planning. He opened the door and found Ethan in jeans and a T-shirt, looking tired but grudgingly ready for the day.

"Is Beth going to make breakfast, or are we on our own?" Ethan asked as he shadowed Matt into the boys' bedroom.

"If you're starving," Matt went to the window to let in some light, "you know where to find the fridge. Ryan, come on, buddy. Time to get up." Matt moved to the crib, found Dylan wide awake and lifted him out. Baby slobber spilled onto Dylan's chin, and he dropped a smile on Matt when Matt paused to cuddle him before putting him on the changing table.

"Thanks, Dilly." Matt hugged his littlest baby brother, grateful he'd been given the privilege of finally getting Dylan to smile for him.

"Did Beth tell you?" Ethan leaned against the wall in a teenager slump. "She made me get a dumb suit and wants me to wear it to the funeral."

"Poor guy," Matt shook his head. "What'll she think of next?"

"Hey, I didn't want the suit. I told her so, but she did it anyway."

Matt grunted. "Sounds to me you had no choice."

"You said it." Ethan came over to the changing table to watch Dylan. He'd defended himself, and didn't have to say more. Matt understood. Ethan was embarrassed to wear something that Matt didn't have, though it occurred to Matt that even Wade had a suit for this evening.
No big deal, Matt would wear a button-up shirt and tie, go as he was. He'd always made due in the past, and he would again.

"Matty, I'm still sleepy." The plea came from Ryan, who had pulled the covers over his head rather than face the light pouring through the window.

"That's because you're not awake yet." Matt baby-wiped Dylan's small bottom, powdered it, then fastened on a clean diaper.

"Hey." Ethan elbowed Matt. "Smell that?"

"What?" Matt asked. "The baby powder, or the diaper I just threw away?"

"I smell it, too." Ryan came up from his blankets, pushed them aside and climbed out of bed. "Mommy's making waffles!"

"I don't know about that," Ethan said, "but whatever it is, I want seconds."

"It's waffles," Ryan insisted.

"You can't possibly know that. It might be pancakes."

Unconvinced, Ryan stood his pint-sized ground. "Waffles."

"Pancakes."

"Waffles, waffles, waffles."

"Pancakes, pancakes--"

"Ethan." Matt gave the teenager a look, and Ethan backed off with a slightly embarrassed shrug.

"The squirt thinks he knows everything."

"I am not a squirt!" A troubled look crossed Ryan's face. "Matty, what's a squirt?"

"It's someone who needs to wash his hands before breakfast." Matt lifted Dylan. "Go on, see what your mom's fixing."
As the boy ran off, Ethan gave a dull groan.

"He's been calling her 'mommy.'"

"I know. She is... kind of. Why, you have a problem with that?"

"I guess not." Ethan shrugged. "Just as long as Beth doesn't expect me to call her that."

"Don't worry, she doesn't."

Carrying Dylan, Matt crossed the living room, went to Cassie's room, knocked, heard a groggy, "Come in," before opening the door.

"Time to get up, Cass." He went over to her window, let in the sunlight while Dylan started to fuss for his bottle.

A sleepy groan came from the canopy bed.

"Beth is making breakfast," Matt said, and noticed Cassie started to wake up in earnest. Nothing like the promise of good food to get someone out of bed.

Getting impatient for his breakfast, Dylan made more of a protest as Matt carried him into the kitchen.

The boys had gathered there, Ethan slumped against the counter, and Ryan perched on a stool--both watching as Beth poured batter onto the waffle iron.

"So Ryan was right," Matt edged around the crowd on his way to the fridge, "it was waffles."

Ryan grinned.

"Did you wake Cassie?" Beth asked.

"I think you're the one waking her. That smells great."

"It should." Beth gave him a smile. "You went without dinner last night."

"Now that you mention it, I am hungry," Matt placed the bottle in the microwave, glanced at Beth in her jeans and top, her feet bare and her hair loose and falling around her shoulders. That woman was his wife.
She caught him staring, gave a blushing smile that turned her cheeks a pretty shade of pink.

Ethan caught the moment, and grinned at Matt like a proud kid brother. Though Matt wasn't one to flaunt the fact he had such a pretty sweetheart, he didn't mind Ethan noticing Beth liked her husband so much.

The microwave beeped, and Matt took out the nuked bottle.

"Ethan, I was wondering if you'd do me a big favor." Beth placed a stack of waffles on a plate, handed it to Ethan. "Would you watch the kids for Matt and I, today?"

The teenager looked at the plate of golden waffles, then eyed Beth with suspicion. "Is this a bribe?"

"No, just my way of saying please," Beth smiled.

Ethan looked back at the waffles, groaned in defeat and reached for the syrup on the center island. "How long am I supposed to babysit?"

Just then Cassie came into the kitchen in her nightshirt, her eyes perking up even more when she saw what was for breakfast.

"I don't know how long Matt and I will be gone, but we'll be home before evening. The visitation is tonight, so everyone remember to be ready, okay?"

"Where are you and Matty going?" Ethan asked with a mouthful of waffle.

"Beth, I won't have much free time today." Matt held the bottle as Dylan fed. "Whatever you're planning, I hope it won't take long."

The curious look from Beth betrayed instant curiosity. Did this have anything to do with the secret, with why Matt was saving money? Great, just great. Matt feared it would be like this, that's why he had to get it done while she was still distracted by the funeral. If she was this sharp with family matters flying around her, he wouldn't stand a chance when things died down.

That woman didn't miss a thing.

"I'll try not to take up all of your time," she smiled, and went back to making waffles.
Why did he feel uneasy?

Leaving Cassie to help Ethan with the little ones, Beth felt confident that between the two of them, they should have things well looked after. Cassie knew how to care for Dylan, and Ethan would be on hand to take care of whatever Cassie couldn't.

It hadn't been hard to ask the girl to help Ethan babysit. After yesterday's shopping excursion, Beth could have asked Cassie for one of her kidneys, and the girl would have said "yes."

Turning the car onto the highway, Beth glanced at the silent passenger beside her. Matt wasn't too thrilled about not taking the truck, mainly because she knew he preferred to drive. But this was her car, and the presumption was that she would drive her own vehicle.

"Where are you taking me?" he finally asked.

"For starters, we need to pick up Ethan's suit. I promised him I wouldn't forget."

"Ah, yes. The suit." Matt shook his head. "He told me how you forced him to get it."

"Ethan said that?" Beth felt a tug of worry. "I had the impression he liked it."

"He does," Matt sighed, "or he wouldn't have tried to make sure I understood it wasn't his idea. So what comes after picking up Ethan's suit?"

Beth smiled. "One thing at a time."

"I hope you're not thinking of forcing me to get a suit. I told you I didn't want one."

She sighed, but made no comment to what was fast becoming a sore spot with Matt.

"It's been a while since we went anywhere without the kids," she said, trying to change the subject.

"Uh-huh. He still looked suspicious.

"I thought it would be good to have some time to ourselves," she pressed on. "Maybe even have a chance to talk about our relationship."

She slid him a look and saw him frown.
"What about our relationship?"

"Matt, I wish you'd loosen up a little. It's too nice a morning to be grumpy." She smiled, glad she'd dressed so casual. She felt like wearing sandals and letting her hair down, embracing the day instead of dreading it. The evening would come soon enough, but for now, she wanted to enjoy the fact that she was married again, and to not just anyone. She belonged to Matt Taylor--handsome, good man that he was.

Right now, that good man sat staring out the passenger window, his Stetson on his knee, the reflection on the window revealing an uneasy face.

"Matt, I've been thinking."

"I was afraid of that," he groaned.

"I'll be generous and ignore that remark." Beth checked the speedometer, and prayed Matt would listen to reason. "After some thought and prayer, I'd like to make you a business partner at the nursery."

"That's a bad idea."

"I could handle the business end-- buying plant material, dealing with the growers, handling the bookkeeping-- and you could manage the store."

"You're forgetting something, aren't you?" She could feel his penetrating gaze. "I don't know what I'm doing."

"I can teach you. Matt, please think about it before you dismiss it entirely. I think this partnership could work." Sensing momentum, her smile came more easily. "Our marriage is going so strong, why couldn't we extend it into a working partnership?"

"Me? A store manager?"

"A working partner," she nodded. "I'd like to keep the name, 'Beth's Garden Nursery,' though. It doesn't make sense to confuse our customers when we have so few to begin with. But it would be our business."

"Beth, you're nuts."
"If I am," she conceded, "I'm no crazier than you."

"That's debatable." His sigh weighed down some of Beth's hope. "What happens when it doesn't work? If your business tanks while I'm the so-called manager, it'll be my fault. People will drive by and say, 'See that? That used to be Beth's Garden Nursery. Poor woman. Lost her head over a man, gave him control of her business when he couldn't tell a flower from a weed, and now look at her-- living under some overpass in a rickety cardboard box, all her worldly belongings piled into a grocery cart.' Oh, yeah, I'm just the one you need."

"Matt Taylor, what's gotten into you? I know you've been having a rough time, but that's pushing things a bit too far." She straightened her shoulders. "I have not lost my head over you."

"Oh yeah? I dare you to say that again."

She opened her mouth to do just that, when he reached over and teased her hair with his fingers. It was just a simple touch, but a pleased sigh escaped her lips and gave her away.

"Care to take it back?" he asked.

"If I have lost my head, Matt, then I'm not the only one."

"I'll go along with that."

She heard the smile in his voice and took heart.

"Think about it, Matt."

The hand lingered to stroke her neck before pulling away.

He said nothing, looked out the window and let the minutes pass until she pulled into the parking lot of the men's store.

"Is this where you took Ethan?" Matt sat up and gaped at the large brick building with the fancy black awning over the entrance. "I'm guessing this place costs an arm and a leg just to get in the door."

"It's not that bad," she laughed as she parked the car. "Really, Matt, you're starting to sound like Ethan."

"If Ethan sounded like me, then he showed good sense."
Undeterred, Beth grabbed her purse, opened her door and got out while Matt remained right where he was.

"You're coming with me, aren't you?"

"I wasn't planning on it." Matt leaned back in his seat. "You go in, do what you have to, and I'll wait in the car."

"Matt, you're being silly."

"No, I'm not." He said it with a chuckle. "I go in there, and five minutes later, you'll have me trying on a suit. No, thanks."

Beth blew out an exasperated sigh. "All this is because I'm the one paying for it? Matt, I don't understand why you're being so obstinate." She climbed back in the car rather than stand and talk to him through the open door where others could overhear.

"Matt, I'm trying to understand, I really am."

He propped an elbow against the passenger door, leaned his head against his hand.

"I can't take you up on that job offer."

"Why not?"

"Because you're my wife-- and before you get excited and tell me I'm way off base, hear me out." He sighed heavily. "I will not-- I refuse, to live off you like some deadbeat looking for a mealticket. You may not see me that way, but it's how I see myself and I don't like that picture. I'm done with selling myself."

"You're not selling yourself."

"Beth, you say that now, but what am I supposed to do when I blow it, and your business takes a hit?"

"Who's to say you're going to fail? You're not giving yourself enough credit."

"Maybe not, but you're giving me too much."
Swiping back the hair that kept falling into her face, Beth remembered why she kept it in a braid so much of the time. It was a nuisance.

"Well then." She put down her purse. "Where does that leave us?"

"What do you mean?"

"You obviously don't trust me, because if you did, you'd take the job."

"Come again?"

"If you think I'm going to hold it against you for accidentally hurting my-- make that our-- business, then you obviously don't trust me."

"I trust you."

"Then take the job."

"What if I hurt you?"

"Matt, what do you think this is doing to me, now?" She cracked open the window to get some air. "I love you, and I want us to work together. Yes, there would be some risks, but we'd face them. Together."

He exhaled, looked out over the parking lot, then back at her.

"I'm fighting for us"-- she pointed at him-- "and so should you. If we keep butting heads over money, what do you think it's going to do to our marriage? Whatever you make as an employee somewhere else, we're never going to be on equal footing."

"Beth, I don't know how to break it to you, but even if I became your business partner, managed the store, and whatever else you're thinking, it won't make us equal. I barely came into this marriage with two nickels to rub together, and you-- you're what people in my old neighborhood would call rich. You're raising kids that aren't your own, and have married a worthless bum who's greatest achievement was to marry into money."

"I hate it when you beat yourself up, I really do." Beth looked away. "Your greatest achievement wasn't marrying me. It was coming to God when everything in your life was against you." She turned back to him and kept going. "You can't tell me, coming from where you have, that getting over your addictions, taking on your brothers and sister all by yourself, wasn't courageous."
"It wasn't done out of courage." Matt closed his eyes a moment before continuing. "I was scared, that's all. It was either do it God's way, or curl up and die."

"You know," she forced herself to be calmer, "you aren't the only one who's gotten something out of this relationship."

"I know." He gave a half smile. "You're a mom again."

"No, I meant something else." Opening her purse, she pulled out a wallet, unsnapped it and showed Matt the three pictures she kept in the photo insert.

One was of Caleb, another of Luke, and the third was of Bailey, her beloved four-footed friend.

"Do you remember Bailey? Do you remember what I nearly did when he died? I changed my mind before you came and found me, but I wanted to take my life. I had thought of doing it before, and if you hadn't shown up when you did, I don't know that I wouldn't have changed my mind again and went through with it." She shoved the wallet into his hand, let him stare at Bailey. "God used you to save my life. Think about that a moment, and then tell me who owes who?" She sighed. "It comes down to divine intervention and two people who need each other. We owe God to make this work."

Pain came to Matt's eyes as he stared at the photo of Bailey, and she knew he was remembering that morning when he'd found her on the bathroom floor with the pills scattered at her feet.

"I wish you hadn't reminded me of that." He closed the wallet, squeezed his eyes shut and forced his lips together in a line of thoughtful pain. "You're right-- we owe God, big time." Matt handed her back the wallet. "Why aren't I in there?" he asked.

"Why?" A shaky laugh made her aware of just how wrapped up in this discussion she'd become. "I don't have any photos of you yet to put in my wallet, and I daresay, you don't have any of me. Do you keep Ethan, Cassie, Ryan, and Dylan in yours?"

"I don't have one of Dylan yet, but..." Matt tugged out his wallet, opened it to show his family. "You're not in mine, so I guess we're even."

"Be my partner, Matt." She touched his arm. "If the nursery fails, then we'll do something else."

"You really want this?" he asked.
"I do."

"You're taking a big chance."

"I don't think it's as big as you're imagining." She stroked his arm and smiled when he did. "You have me to teach you the business, and I have you to share the burden. We share the children, the business, and our life together. To me, this is the natural next step."

Still thoughtful, Matt folded his wallet. "If we do this, I need you to promise me something."

"Name it."

He eyed her carefully. "When I'm floundering, and trying to learn everything you're struggling to tell me about the business, I'd appreciate it if you could lose the teacher voice. It's been bugging me for a long time."

"Teacher voice?"

"Yeah, that voice you get when we're at work and you're telling me what to do. I don't mind taking orders so much, but that voice..." Matt sucked in a deep breath. "It's like I'm in grade school all over again. I may be younger than you, but I'm not that young."

"I don't do that."

"You do." Matt tucked the wallet into his jeans pocket. "It's annoying, and now that I'm married to that voice, I'd like to do something about it if it happens again."

She folded her arms. "Just what did you have in mind?"

"For starters," a grin formed around his mouth, "the next time you give me that teacher act, I'm going to haul off and kiss you. I don't care if it's in front of customers, or not, I'm going to kiss you."

"You wouldn't dare. Not in front of the customers."

Matt grinned harder. "Try me."

Her mouth fell open.
"Maybe that'll keep the teacher away," he said with a nod. "Okay, let's get this over with." He popped open the passenger door. "As much fun as this is, I have something else to get done today."

She snatched her purse, opened her door and climbed out. "You're coming inside with me?"

He put on the Stetson. "Don't look so happy. I'm going to let you buy me a suit."

"If this is going to happen, Matt, I won't pay for it-- we will." She rounded the car, took his arm, and started him toward the store at a leisurely walk. "Our business, our money. This is a partnership, remember?"

"It's not going to be that easy."

"One step at a time, Matt. Please, let's just take this one step at a time." She hugged his shoulder. "I love you."

He kissed her hair. "You're a sweetheart, Beth."

They went into the store, found the salesman from the day before and asked about Ethan's suit.

"It's ready for pickup." The man led them out of the walkway where they were blocking someone else. "Since he didn't come in to try on the alterations, you'll have to take it without a final fitting. If it needs more adjusting, bring it back and we'll take care of it."

"Before we pick it up"-- Beth looked at Matt and saw him squirm-- "we'd like to buy a suit for my husband. You did such a good job with Ethan, I was hoping you could do the same for Matt."

The salesman grinned, no doubt seeing more dollar signs and led them to a rack where neatly tailored garments awaited customers.

To Beth's quiet amusement, the man chose a dark gray suit for Matt to try on. She remembered that particular color was supposed to make young men look older, and refrained from telling Matt. He'd only be embarrassed.

She could hardly wait to see it on her husband, and when he finally stepped from the changing room, the breath she'd been holding came out in a stunned whoosh.

It shouldn't have surprised her, but it did. Matt looked like he'd just stepped out of a cologne ad, all smooth and trendy and drop-dead handsome. A customer nearby saw Matt, tapped the
saleslady who was helping him with his own wardrobe, and asked about Matt's suit. No wonder, for the guy probably hoped he'd look like Matt.

Not a chance.

The salesman grinned and went to check the fit. "This is a very polished, well groomed look, and very nearly a perfect fit on you."

"I feel like I'm wearing someone else's clothes." Matt adjusted the tie around his neck, glanced at the full-length mirror nearby. "How much is this?"

"This two-piece suit is from a designer label," the salesman admitted, "but look at the results. It's like it's been tailored just for you."

The flattery wasn't overdone, for Beth agreed, but it failed to impress Matt.

"Did my brother-- the guy who was in here yesterday with Beth-- did he get one like this?"

"No, his wasn't from a designer label." The salesman went on, and Beth guessed the reason he'd chosen this particular suit was because he'd heard Beth say Matt was her husband. Husbands might pay more than a kid looking for something for a graduation.

He was right.

"I like this one." Beth moved around Matt to see the fit for herself. "He'll need some long-sleeved shirts, and dress shoes."

"What?" Matt scowled. "I'm wearing my boots."

"But those are scuffed up, and look like they're several years old."

"That's because they are."

"Then we'll need boots-- something dark and polished to go with this suit."

"That would work," the salesman nodded. "Especially if he doesn't tuck his pants into the boots. That would be tragic."

"I never tuck." Matt looked insulted and just a tad amused. "Tragic. I feel like I'm on another planet." He turned back to the mirror and shook his head. "This can't be planet Earth."
"There’s a decent Western outlet not far from here," the salesman went on, not at all discouraged by Matt’s lack of enthusiasm. "We don’t carry Western boots, but I’m sure you’ll find something appropriate there."

"We’ll need the suit for this evening," Beth said, ignoring Matt’s groan. "Besides some hemming, I don’t think it needs any alterations, do you? It fits him so perfectly."

"Doesn’t it?" The man grinned. "I wish everyone came in here and found something that fit them so exactly. It’d certainly make my job easier."

From that comment on, Matt remained silent. He must have known he wasn’t in the driver’s seat, for he let her pick out his shirts, then move on to the denim jeans for some nicely tailored casual pants. Matt tried on the clothes, though she clearly saw his discomfort over spending so much money.

When the suit trousers had been hemmed, and they came to the checkout with Ethan and Matt’s garments, Matt looked extremely ready to leave.

The moment they pushed through the entrance, and escaped the store, he breathed a loud sigh of relief.

"When it comes time to pay that credit card, just remember this was all your idea."

He offered her his arm, and she took it with a smile. "Thank you, Matt."

"Please, don’t thank me. Ethan is going to have a riot when he sees me in that getup. I’m going to hear lawyer jokes all evening long."

"Trust me, you won’t look like a lawyer."

"Ethan’s going to laugh," Matt said, and left it at that.

She disagreed, but now wasn’t the time for more involved discussion.

They headed over to the Western outlet-- a surprisingly upscale, two-story building that was even grander than the men’s store.

Matt said nothing, but this time, she didn't have to coax him out of the car.
"Have you ever been here?" she asked.

"Are you kidding?" He flashed her a look, and she could tell he struggled not to grin. "I've heard of this place, but never went in. I was too afraid I'd buy something."

"Let's hope they sell cowboy boots," Beth smiled, and pulled out her cell phone to call home.

Though Ethan answered on the second ring, he sounded annoyed that she couldn't be gone for hours at a time without making sure nothing was broken or bleeding.

"I think I can handle a few kids," Ethan said, while the TV played in the background. "They're not going to fall apart just because you and Matty aren't here. Hey, Cass-- tell Ryan to climb off the bookcase."

"What?" Beth pressed the phone to her ear, only to hear Ethan laughing.

"Gotcha! I had you going there, didn't I? Relax, would you? I got it covered." The phone hung up, leaving Beth to steady her shaken nerves.

"Everything all right?" Matt asked as she slipped the phone into her purse.

"They're fine, but your brother has a bizarre sense of humor."

The comment went past Matt. As long as the kids were fine, he apparently didn't need to know more. He kept looking back at the store with all the eagerness of a kid going into an amusement park.

As they went inside, the friendly smell of rawhide and something else-- something that bespoke of brand new-- met her senses. Instead of the rope and wagon wheel decor she half expected, tasteful lighting hung from the vaulted ceiling, casting a warm wash on the muted walls, the displays and racks of merchandise.

"Footwear," she said, and tugged Matt to the left where row upon row of cowboy boots were displayed on shelves.

"Wow." Matt started looking them over.

A woman in jeans and a long sleeved shirt approached them. "May I help you?"
"My husband is looking for boots," Beth said, turning back to Matt as he picked up a pair. "Something that would look good with a dark gray suit."

"Would this be a cowboy tuxedo, or a regular suit?"

"Regular," Beth smiled, "and very dressy."

"The only way I can get my man into a suit," the woman said with a laugh, "is to let him wear it with boots, even though he gets odd looks outside of Texas and New Mexico. The trick is to select a very fine boot in a dark shade, something that doesn't have flashy patterns with colors that have too much contrast. You want dress-- not casual, and not a cowboy work boot."

Matt was asked to sit in a nearby chair so he could pull off his boots. The woman knelt, placed a measuring device on the floor and asked Matt to put his foot in it and stand. Then she measured the other foot.

"You're a size ten, D width." She stood, went to the shelves. "I would suggest a dark boot-- really, anything along these two rows. Do you see something you like?"

He padded over in his socks, looked them over, then pulled down a pair of near-black, burgundy boots.

"Let me get these in your size," she said, and walked away while Matt moved back to his chair.

"I have no idea how much those things are going to cost."

"That's okay, Matt. Let's see if you like them."

"What's not to like?" He gave a helpless shrug. "I can't believe I'm in here."

"As long as we are," Beth moved around to see him better, "you should get a dress hat. The one you have is too worn, if you intend to wear it to the funeral."

He slanted her a look. "I'm not throwing my hat away."

"I didn't say throw it away, just get another, more formal cowboy hat."

"I like this one." He took his off, rotated the gray brim in his hands. "This Stetson and I are old friends."
"Here we are." The woman came back with a box, took out the boots and gave them to Matt. "Try these on for size."

He tugged them on his feet, stood while the woman crouched and felt the toes of the boots.

"There's some room-- that's good-- it means they're not too tight. Walk around and see how it feels."

Matt walked to the entrance, came back and looked at Beth. "They feel good."

"Do you like them?"

He nodded. "They're easily the best I've ever had."

"We'll need a dress belt to match the boots," Beth said to the woman. "We'd also like to get a Stetson-- something nice and not intended for work."

Matt shot Beth a pained look, and she couldn't help wondering if the boots were hurting him.

Insisting they fit just fine, he kept them on and came with her to look at hats. This time, he didn't seem ready to make a choice. In fact, he didn't make one at all. Instead, he hung back and watched as she roamed the displays with the saleswoman.

The intricacies of cowboy hats were explained to Beth, though she didn't pretend to understand it all. She looked over the selection, found a black hat with a silver band and turned to Matt.

He didn't smile.

"This one's nice," she coaxed. "Why don't you try it on?"

"I don't want another Stetson."

"You'd like something else?"

"I don't want any of them. I already have one."

"You need another," she said, and brought the hat to him. "Please, at least try it on."

For some reason, he shook his head and backed away. It didn't make sense.
"What is it? Why are you so attached to that old Stetson?"

He glanced at the saleswoman and she politely excused herself.

He bowed his head, his voice sounding with reluctance. "It was a gift."

"I can understand someone gave it to you, but surely, you won't hurt their feelings by getting another hat."

The look in his dark eyes puzzled her.

"Who gave it to you?" she asked.

He looked away, blew out a sigh as though he hated to tell her. "It was a gift from Helen."

There was only one significant woman in Matt's life who went by that name, though Beth hoped he meant someone else.

"Helen? As in your old flame-- the one you proposed to and she turned you down? That Helen?"

He turned, went back to the chair to take off his boots while Beth followed.

"Why are you holding on to her hat?"

The boots were returned to the box, he put on the lid and stood as though ready for the checkout.

"Why, Matt?"

"She gave it to me on our second anniversary, all right?" He sighed, lowered his voice as a customer moved past them. "She said only the bad guys wear black hats."

"Okay, forget this black Stetson. We'll find a white one."

"Beth, you don't understand. I told her I'd never wear anyone else's."

The wistful sadness in Matt's voice made Beth determined to get rid of Helen's hat. Not just give him another, but replace it altogether. Set it on fire, stomp on the ashes and scatter them to the wind, though she didn't say it in those exact words.
"You need a new hat."

"I can't, Beth. I'd feel like I'm somehow being disloyal."

"Welcome to my world," she held up her hands. "I'm living in a house I used to share with Luke, so I have an idea of what you're feeling. But Matt, it's time to let go. You don't still love her, do you?"


"Yes, but he's not living. There's a difference. What if Helen decides to pay you a visit one of these days?"

"She won't."

"That's beside the point. For a moment, let's say she does, and she sees you're still wearing her hat. What's she going to think?"

Matt groaned. "That I'm still holding a torch for her."

"And what am I supposed to think when I see you clinging to a romantic moment from an old flame who might one day walk back into your life?"

"She won't bother us." Matt moved the boot box to his other arm. "She's chosen her life, and by now probably wishes me dead."

"Then why are you keeping a promise that no longer matters?"

"Habit, I guess." He took off the hat, and stared at it. "For a long time, in the back of my mind, I thought she might come to the Lord and we'd get married. I owed it to her."

"Whatever you might owe her, you don't owe her this." Beth sucked in a deep, deep breath, grateful that he still wasn't in love with Helen. "She gave up the right to expect you to keep your word over something like an anniversary present."

Matt's face held the pained expression of guilt, not love. He'd been the one to pull Helen into her life on the streets, and Beth could see it wasn't easy for him to let go of that guilt.

With a sigh, he held out the Stetson to Beth. "Here, take it. I won't wear it anymore, though I didn't keep it just because of Helen. I love this hat."
"Then we'll find another you can love." She paused before accepting the hat. "Are you sure about this?"

"Beth, you wanted me to give it up, so take it. Let's go find something else before I change my mind."

Taking the old Stetson, Beth led him to the displays. "Pick out two. One for everyday, another for dress."

"This might take a while," he said, and handed her the boot box.

As Beth watched Matt try on hat after hat, she began to realize just how personal a cowboy hat was to some men.

The saleswoman came to Beth, and the two women watched Matt.

"Could you throw this in the trash?" Beth asked, and handed her Helen's gift.

"Some men," the woman sighed. "I couldn't help overhearing, and you did the right thing. It'd drive me crazy to think of my husband's old ex every time I saw his hat. I'll hide it deep in the Dumpster." She edged away, and while Matt examined the stock, took it into the back where Beth prayed she was hiding it in the trash.

Beth wouldn't have minded if it was crushed and shredded first, though that was probably carrying things too far.

Oh no, it wasn't.

Helen didn't want this good man, but Beth did. He was hers.

Like a territorial she-lion, Beth paced the store while her mate made his selection. Matt could consider the suit and boots as coming from their money, but these hats-- these hats would be from Beth. If Matt was going to wear someone on his head, day in and day out, it would be her.

After going through two dozen hats, he settled on a gray Stetson with a matching band. To Beth's untrained eye, it seemed like the image of his old one, though this one was brand-spanking new, and had a silver buckle on the band.

Matt looked ready to leave.
"Aren't you forgetting a dress hat?" she asked, knowing he was probably going to wear that hat in all kinds of weather, every day, for the next so many years of his life. She picked up the hat she'd been admiring before. "How about this one, too?"

He frowned. "It's black."

"So? It doesn't make you on the side of evil. It would go well with your suit."

"But it's black."

"Good guys can wear black."

"I don't know." He took the hat from her, tried it on. "It is comfortable." He took it off, played with the brim and put it back on. He went to the mirror, adjusted the brim, then went to the saleswoman who had conspicuously returned without Helen's hat.

Beth watched as the woman went behind a desk, held the black Stetson over a device that made steam, then bent it into proper shape. She did the same with the new gray Stetson, held it over the steam, then formed it into the desired shape Matt wanted.

The hats were tried on again, and Matt declared they would do.

With a sigh of relief from Beth, they paid for the hats, the boots, the dress belt, and a hat box where Matt could protect his investment when not wearing it. The hats alone cost several hundred dollars, but Beth was more than happy with their purchase.

To her pleasant surprise, so was Matt. He wore the gray Stetson out of the store, his stride more confident and his face happier than before.

He took it off in the parking lot, ran his hand along the crease in the crown before putting it back on.

"How's it look?" he asked again.

"It looks great."

"It feels great." He took it off, played with the leather sweat band. "I never thought I'd have something this nice."
They got into the car, and Beth started for home. They had missed lunch, but she was eager to get back to the kids, and wanted to be sure they would be ready for this evening.

"The others won't be able to recognize me," Matt grinned, admiring the hat on his knee as she negotiated the late afternoon traffic. "I've had that other one for years, and never thought of getting something else. Now I have this. Ethan's going to flip when he sees it. I can hardly believe I got a new Stetson, let alone two of them. I feel rich."

"You're going to look rich," she said, glad the other one was safe in the hat box in the backseat.

All the way home, Matt admired and commented about his hats.

When they parked in front of the house, he got out and carried the hat box like it held the crown jewels of England.

Thank You, God. Her sweet man was happy.

The moment Matt came through the front door, Ryan came running and wanted a hug. Then he noticed the box.

"Is it for me?"

"I'm afraid not, buddy." Matt heard the baby crying, and moved into the living room.

He found Ethan walking back and forth with Dylan, the little guy wailing at the top of his lungs.

"Man, am I ever glad you're back." Ethan came over, tried to give the baby to Matt, but had to wait until Matt set down his hat box. "He's been crying like this for at least half an hour."

"Why didn't you call us?" Matt took the baby, saw Cassie standing behind Ethan, looking very tearful and embarrassed. "What happened?"

"She had a panic attack," Ethan said, speaking up when Cassie didn't. "Dylan started crying, and Cass said she could handle him. When he didn't stop, Cass lost it. Hey, is that a new hat?"

"What's going on?" Beth asked, coming into the living room.

"I didn't hurt him, did I?" Cassie spoke with tears in her voice. "I didn't know what to do. Ryan had the TV up too loud, and I told him to turn it down. Ryan said it wasn't loud, and I told him
it was. Then Ethan shouted at us to be quiet, and Dylan started to cry and I couldn't get him to stop."

"Calm down, he'll survive." Matt automatically checked the infant's diaper. "When was the last time you fed him?"

While Ethan explained the bottle they gave Dylan an hour ago, Beth took Cassie aside.

"We fed him, changed his diaper, and things were going fine until he started crying." Ethan gave a frustrated shrug. "Cass was crying, Dylan was crying, and Ryan almost got started. I'm wiped out."

"Thanks, I'll take it from here." Matt shouldered the baby and saw Beth giving Cassie a big hug. Good. He wouldn't have to deal with two at the same time. He could concentrate on Dylan.

"What's this?" Ryan picked up the hat box and Matt had to catch himself from shouting.

"Put that down. Ryan, put it down, please."

"Hey, you are wearing a new hat." Ethan came in for a closer look, got in Matt's way as he moved to the couch. "Cool, Matty. Very, very cool."

"Thanks." Matt sat down, couldn't help smiling as he took off his hat, placed it crown down on the coffee table while Dylan screamed so hard his tiny face turned red.

"Let me help." Beth came to sit beside Matt on the couch. "Would you mind if I try?"

 Unsure what she could do that he wasn't already, Matt handed over the screaming bundle.

"Hush, hush," Beth took Dylan, and cradled him in her arms. She smiled at him and took several deep breaths. "Ryan, would you turn that TV down?"

The volume went lower, and Ryan scooted closer to the screen. A much calmer Cassie settled next to Beth.

Matt checked his watch.

"Beth, I hate to run out on you, but it's getting late and I need to leave if I'm going to be back in time for the viewing."
"But you haven't eaten lunch."

The spike of worry in Beth's voice made Dylan cry louder. She cuddled and soothed, smiled and kept breathing deeply.

"Do what you have to," she nodded to Matt. "I can take care of the kids."

"Are you sure?" He put on his hat, grinned at Ethan's thumbs up. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Go, go." Beth gave him a curious look but didn't ask questions. "If you have time, grab something in the kitchen before you head out."

He nodded, picked up his hat box to take to their master bedroom. He didn't want the others playing with it while he was gone.

Going to the kitchen, he snagged a granola bar, went to the living room and gave Beth a "thank you" kiss before heading out the door.

He left a much quieter house than the one they'd found. Whatever Beth had done with Dylan, it seemed to be working.

Moving at a quick stride, he went to the pickup truck, felt in his pocket and grinned. Good, it was still there. If he lost it, he didn't know how he'd ever explain it to Beth.

The churning in his stomach wasn't only due to hunger. This was a big deal. He knew how much money he could spend, had a store in mind and only prayed he wouldn't blow it on something that wouldn't work. On that note, he needed to check if they had a return policy. Just in case.

Sitting behind the wheel, heading into Las Cruces for the second time that day, Matt struggled to relax. The excitement over the hats and boots made it hard, especially when he glanced at the seat next to him and saw the new Stetson. He tried the deep breathing he'd seen Beth do, but it didn't work.

Not for him.

He switched on the radio, kept time with the music by tapping his fingers on the steering wheel.

It wasn't everyday a man did something like this. Maybe his wife didn't bat an eyelash when it came to spending money, but he sure did. And since he'd saved up for this, it meant even more.
When he reached Las Cruces, Matt headed downtown to the store he had noticed when driving by one day. It didn't look expensively grand, but maybe the more expensive places were the small ones. Matt had no idea how those things worked, and didn't really care as long as they had something nice within his price limit.

It had to be nice. And special. And cheap. Cheap, but expensive looking. Maybe that was the right balance.

By the time Matt parked the truck, he was ready to make the plunge.

Sucking in a deep breath, he climbed out of the truck, tugged on his Stetson, and grinned at his reflection on the window. What a hat.

Cool air greeted Matt as he stepped into the polished store. It looked more expensive on the inside than it did from the street, and he hoped that wasn't a bad sign.

A woman in a dark red dress and a pearl necklace came over to him, and he remembered to take off his hat.

"May I help you?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm looking for something in this size." Matt reached into his pocket, pulled out the ring he'd taken from Beth's dresser. "Can you figure out a size from this?"

"We sure can." She smiled, led him to a long showcase that had a dizzying array of jewelry. "Are you looking for an engagement ring?"

Trying to not appear as overwhelmed as he felt, Matt nodded. "And a wedding band."

"There are a few things to consider when choosing a ring," she began, and started in on a spiel about the clarity, cut, carat size, and color of diamonds. Just that word-- diamonds-- made Matt break out in a sweat.

He told her his budget, and she showed him the rings within his range. It narrowed the selection a great deal, but not so much he could relax.

"What kind of jewelry does your girlfriend favor?" the woman asked.

"She's my wife, and I couldn't honestly tell you. She's worn pearls once, and she likes earrings. Beth doesn't wear that much jewelry. She doesn't need to, she's beautiful enough without it."
The woman's smile warmed even more.

"I'd suggest this." She pulled out keys, unlocked the display and brought out two rings nestled together. "This is a fifteen karat, white gold, bridal set. On the engagement ring, the oval diamond in the middle is set in a marquis shaped display, while the band is encrusted with pave settings-- small diamonds inset into the band. The wedding band follows the same design, but without the marquis setting in the center."

The words flew over Matt's head, for he had no idea what it meant. He only knew they were delicately pretty, kind of like Beth.

The woman held them up to the light. "The total weight of these diamonds are one fourth of a carat."

"Is that a lot?"

She smiled. "It means it's good for a budget, but exquisite enough to be dazzling."

"How much?"

"A thousand dollars."

That made him think.

"Is that with tax?"

"Not quite," she smiled again.

"If I go through with it, can I get it in Beth's size? Do I have to wait for you to order it, or something?"

"We can have the rings resized in an hour, and if for some reason your wife doesn't like them, they can be returned with a small restocking fee."

"Okay, I'll go with these." Matt handed her the ring from Beth's jewelry box and watched as the woman measured it before giving it back.

He went to go wait out in the truck, rather than stand around the store. A thousand dollars. Just like that, he was spending a thousand dollars.
Please, God, help her to like it.

It took Beth an hour to fully calm Dylan, but when he reached that happy stage he was almost unflappable. He seemed more than content to be held by Beth as she made sure the children knew what they would wear to the viewing. He even fell asleep when Beth placed him in the carrier, took him into the kitchen and set the carrier on the wide center island where she could keep an eye on him while she fixed dinner.

Matt still wasn't home, and with all the things that needed to be done, she had to fight becoming anxious. Now wasn't the time to run another errand, though she had a suspicion it had something to do with why he was saving money.

She glanced at the clock, told Cassie to help set the table and then checked the casserole in the oven. Almost ready. The viewing was scheduled for seven, and that meant this family needed to eat, get dressed, and drive back to Las Cruces before it began. Besides Wade, and their family, the only other person she thought they might see was Pastor Mark. She'd called him and related the events of the last so many days to explain why they wouldn't be coming into church tomorrow. Tomorrow was Sunday, and they would be at Eve's funeral.

"Matty's back!" Ryan shouted, and Dylan woke to give one or two cries before Beth soothed him back to sleep.

As she took the chicken casserole out of the oven, Matt strode into the kitchen with Ryan and Cassie on his heels.

"Did I miss dinner?" he asked, and flashed a handsome grin when he saw the casserole. "I'm so hungry, if the kids don't hurry and help themselves, I might eat the whole thing."

"The table's set," Cassie told Beth, and Matt went to lift Ryan so the boy could reach the kitchen faucet and wash his hands.

Trying not to seem too curious, Beth couldn't help but ask the question on the tip of her tongue.

"Did you finish whatever it is you left here to do?"

Matt grinned and said nothing.
"Okay, as long as you're happy." Beth tried to push aside her wild curiosity, and concentrate on the evening before them. "As soon as I get this food on the table, dinner will be ready. Cassie, would you put Dylan in his crib?"

Dinner went off smoothly, with conversation kept to a minimum so no one would take forever eating. Then one by one, people got up to start getting ready.

In the bedroom, Beth hurried into a slender black skirt with a gray top, fixed her hair into a neat bun, then put on some makeup while Matt showered. Whatever he had been doing, he'd been sweating hard.

She left to help Ryan into his good clothes, comb his hair and make sure the boy was presentable to see his mommy. He understood they were going to see her, but that she wouldn't be able to talk to him, for that's what it meant to die.

"Do you remember that dragon story Matt told you?" Beth asked. "Just remember Henry, and it might help when you get sad."

With a sigh, Ryan nodded and accepted Beth's hug.

Next came Dylan. Beth fed and changed him, dressed him in cute pants and a shirt, then placed him in the carrier while Ryan watched.

"Knock on Cassie's door and ask if she's almost ready," Beth told him, and Ryan ran off to deliver the message.

Taking Dylan into the living room, Beth placed the carrier on the coffee table as Ethan's bedroom door opened. He came out in his new suit, looking a bit nervous but very handsome.

"This feels strange." Ethan tugged at the tie around his neck. "Matty's forced me to wear one of these things before, but I can't get used to it. Does it look okay? Did I do it right?"

With a laugh, Beth straightened the tie. "You did a good job. Did Matt teach you?"

"Yeah, he ground it into me when he started going to church. I guess he was hoping I'd come with him." Ethan shrugged. "You look nice."

"Thank you," she smiled, then checked the time. They were running late. "Ryan, did you check Cassie? Is she almost ready?"
The second master bedroom door opened, and Matt stepped out in his designer suit, shiny new boots, and black Stetson. They made a striking combination.

Ethan whistled.

"Make any cracks," Matt warned, "and I'll drag you in front of a mirror. I'm not the only one in a new suit."

Ethan grinned. "I didn't say a word."

"You better not." Matt gentled as Beth came to adjust his tie. Their eyes met, and a smile came to his lips. No word passed between them, but in that few moments, she felt more loved than if he'd paid her every compliment in the world.

She sighed with contentment, caressed his cheek, and smiled when he placed a kiss in her palm.

"Beth, do I look all right?" Cassie came out of her room in the new maxi dress, her mouth dropping open when she saw the boys. "Wow, you guys look like fashion models. Beth, is this outfit too casual? I'm not underdressed, am I?"

"I think I have just the thing you need." Beth took her by the hand, led her into the master bedroom and smiled. "There's a small string of pearls that would go perfectly with that dress."

She opened her jewelry box, lifted out an insert and located the necklace. For some reason, Matt stuck his head into the room and watched.

"You look lovely, all you need is a nice accent."

"I'm so nervous." Cassie blew out a breath. "Do I have to say anything to Mom?"

"Only if you want to." Beth draped the necklace around Cassie's neck. "This is your chance to say good-bye."

The girl sighed, looked in the mirror and gave a faint smile.

This evening wouldn't be easy.

For the third time that day, Matt found himself heading into Las Cruces. First, to buy clothes, second, to buy the rings, and now they were going to a funeral viewing. It had been a busy day, and it wasn't even over.
Thank God he had returned Beth’s ring before she went to get that necklace for Cassie. Beth hadn’t noticed anything disturbed in the carved box, so the coast must be clear. Hopefully, she had no clue what he’d done.

So far, Cassie had managed not to cry, though Matt didn’t expect that to last for long. Her new dress made her look older than he felt she was, but he had to admit the outfit was classy and modest. His baby sister was growing up, and the realization gave Matt a growing pang. Children sure didn’t stay small for long.

When they reached Nyquist Funeral Home, the sky looked ready for a beautiful New Mexico sunset. Death and life, endings and new beginnings. Here they were, saying good-bye to their mom, and yet finding themselves with new hopes and dreams. These nice clothes, the job promotion, even Beth’s wedding rings— they gave an undercurrent of hope to this sad evening.

Matt clung to that thought as he led everyone into the funeral home. Hope gave life.

They were met by Eric, the funeral director, and Beth went with him to pay what Matt couldn’t the day before. While the bills were taken care of, Matt left Ethan in charge of the kids while Matt went to go pick up Wade.

The drive didn’t take long, and he found Wade in the motel parking lot, dressed in his secondhand suit, and smelling like whisky and cigarettes. It hadn’t smelled that way yesterday, so Matt could only conclude Wade had been self-medicating his grief with tobacco and liquor. Wade moved unsteadily, and Matt prayed the man wouldn’t make a drunken scene at the funeral home.

By the time Matt and Wade arrived, Eric had moved the family to a waiting area, for Beth had insisted that Matt be with them when the children saw their mom.

"Thanks," Matt whispered to Beth, "I wanted to be here for that."

With his heart in his throat, Matt and his family, along with Wade, were ushered into a semi-large room with an open casket draped with red and white carnations.

Cassie gave a gasp, and Matt put an arm around her as they went up to see their mother. Beth held Dylan, and Ethan carried Ryan. Wade staggered behind.
There, in the coffin, they found Mom in the clothes Eric had bought for the event. The dark blue dress and the makeup made her look nicer than normal, but still very recognizable as their mother.

As Cassie started to cry, Matt kept an arm around her to let her know she wasn't alone. These kids weren't alone. They had him and Beth, and they had the Lord looking after them, for Matt knew he never could have done it on his own.

To Matt's surprise and gratitude, Pastor Mark showed up, as well as several members from their congregation. They had come, not because they had known Mom, or even met her, but because they knew Matt and Beth and wanted to pay their condolences.

No, this family was definitely not alone.

While Matt talked with Pastor Mark, Cassie stood beside the open casket and said good-bye to her mom.

For all the nervous preparation for the viewing, it went smoothly and without incident. Thankfully, the liquor in Wade kept him quiet and subdued, enough so that he dozed off after they arrived. When the viewing was over, Matt took him back to the motel, unlocked the door to Wade’s room with the help of the manager, then got Wade to his bed before Wade collapsed altogether.

Locking the door as he left, Matt got back in his truck to pick up his family.

That night, Matt lay staring at the bedroom ceiling while Beth slept beside him. He wanted to give her the rings, but he also wanted it to be special. Keeping it a surprise meant waiting for the right moment, one where she was happy and, more importantly, awake.

Tomorrow, he thought, and drifted to sleep.

The morning didn’t bring much change from last night, for the family ate breakfast, climbed back into their good clothes and went to the cemetery to attend the second half of the funeral. Ethan looked like he just wanted to get it over with, and Matt understood, for he felt the same way.

When Matt left his family to pick up Wade, Matt noticed Wade had sobered up a little over the night. From Wade's sour grimace, Matt knew he had to be suffering from a hangover.
Good. Matt wasn't in any mood to cut Wade much slack.

Aside from a chaplain the funeral home had provided to say a few words to the family, there were no signs of religion as they gathered to bury Mom. They stood on the green, green grass next to a gaping hole, and stared at the closed casket.

"When this is over," Wade dried the wet pooling in his eyes, "I'm leaving town."

Matt studied him a moment. "You don't want to stay for the guardianship hearing?"

"Nah." Wade sniffed, wiped his nose on the sleeve of his suit. "Your lawyer said I didn't have to. I've signed all the papers you'll need, so I'm leaving. Think I'll head out to Nashville so I can get my music going."

Matt didn't ask where Wade was getting his money. Wade had friends in Las Cruces, some who probably dealt in drugs, and drugs always meant trouble. You could never have just a little. Sooner or later you'd find you couldn't live without drugs and trouble, for they came together, and after a while, others would be left to stand around a hole in the ground, to say a final goodbye.

Just like they were doing now.

Stone-sober and silent, Ethan stood next to Matt, looking like he wanted to run away from this plot of ground that would soon swallow their mom. In his own way, Ethan was crying, though not in the way anyone who didn't know him could recognize. It was there in those clenched fists, that hard chin that seemed determined not to tremble.

All that hurt bottled up, and no way to let it out.

Cassie didn't have Ethan’s problem. She cried while Beth held Dylan, the infant unaware of the funeral and Cassie’s quiet tears.

When Matt felt a tug on his jacket, he picked up Ryan.

"This is just like Henry, the dragon," Matt told the boy. "We'll be all right."

In return for the encouragement, Matt got a hug, and a little boy who didn't want to be put down long after Matt's arms grew tired.
Throughout the funeral, Matt couldn't bring himself to weep. He had said his good-byes the night before, and if he wept, he would frighten the others. After they turned to leave and stood about talking, he saw the casket as it lowered into the ground.

A final punctuation mark to a short, messed up life.

The house felt so quiet after they came home, Beth tried to shake off the sadness of the funeral by turning on the TV. No one really watched it, but it gave a sense of normalcy to the children. And they needed a taste of normal right now. On the couch, Matt blankly stared at the TV; Ethan lounged beside him with a book, but didn't turn pages; Cassie sprawled on the other couch with a magazine and kept brushing away tears; and Ryan played on the floor with his dinosaur while Dylan slept in his crib.

Neighbors and members from their church kept dropping by with food, condolences, hugs, and flowers, and the fridge filled quickly. No one stayed for long, for they didn't want to intrude and there had been no official announcement to gather for a wake. But one by one, people came by to say how sorry they were about Eve.

Aside from the deathly smell of carnations, the funeral hadn't reminded Beth of Luke and Caleb as much as she feared it would. This funeral had little hysterics, while at Luke and Caleb's, Beth had wept so loudly it interrupted the service more than once.

The memory gave her a pang of sorrow, and she went into the kitchen to start a batch of homemade cookies. They didn't need the food, but it would keep her hands busy and her mind off of death.

In that respect, this funeral was like any other. Someone had died, leaving the living to pick up the pieces and carry on.

Keeping an ear turned to the baby monitor on the counter, Beth mixed chocolate chips into the batter. She looked up and found Matt watching.

"How are you holding up?" he asked, coming to lean against the center island.

"I should be the one to ask you that."

He smiled. "I asked first."
"I'm fine." She checked the preheated oven, went back to her bowl to start placing spoonfuls of dough onto the cookie sheets.

Matt kept watching. "Have you noticed the dandelions out front?"

"The ones by the tree?" She nodded, kept working to get the dough into perfect little mounds. "What about them?"

"Nothing, only that there's a lot of them. Since you're in the plant business, I'd assume it's bad for our image."

The "our" in his statement made her smile.

"I've been trying to get rid of them, but they keep coming back."

"I'll put that down on my to-do-list," Matt nodded. "Right along with fixing this roof. When people drive by the house, you don't want them thinking that's how we run the nursery."

Another "we." She felt encouraged, though she happened to disagree.

"I'd rather not get rid of the dandelions."

"Why?"

She looked at him. "How can you ask that?"

"Ask what?" He shrugged. "Pull out a bunch of weeds?"

"But they're dandelions."

"I know that. That's why they have to go."

"But don't they mean anything to you?"

Again, he shrugged. "Are they supposed to?"

"Matt Taylor, there's not a romantic bone in your body." She slid a cookie tray into the oven, closed the door and reached for another sheet. "I can't believe you've forgotten."
"I haven't forgotten anything." He gave a casual, teasing grin. "This is because of those dandelions I gave you, isn't it?"

She tried not to smile but failed. "I don't want to get rid of them."

"But they're taking over the front yard." He dipped a finger in the cookie batter, had his hand swatted away. "I'm all for romance, but that's overdoing it. Weeds are weeds."

Wiping her hands on her apron, she moved around him to get something from the cupboard. "They are not weeds."

"Okay. Let's play that logic through." His smile unnerved her. "If that was a bed of highly refined roses, and they were being uncivil and taking over the garden, what would you do?"

"I'd have them trimmed and thinned."

"Then I'll trim and thin your dandelions."

She glanced at him, saw that handsome grinning face and had to kiss him.

He tugged her apron strings, pulled her close even though she was sprinkled with flour and he still wore the shirt and pants from his new suit.

For a long, tender moment, he caressed her arm.

"I take it back." She leaned into him, and touched foreheads. "You are romantic."

"I love you so much, Beth."

She kissed him and it tasted so good she went back for more. A hand came around her back, she put her arms around his neck and drowned in his embrace. They fell against the counter.

"Beth," he came up for air, held her so gently it nearly drove her crazy, "I love you."

"We've already established that." She nuzzled his neck, didn't notice his hand reach into his pocket. "I love you, too."

"It's not nearly as much as you deserve," he said, half whispering the words into her ear, "but this comes from me, with all my love." He pressed a felt box into her hand, the kind that usually hid a ring.
"What's this?" she asked, entirely forgetting the cookies. "Is this why you've been saving your money? Oh, Matt, you shouldn't have."

"Open it," he coaxed.

Excitement fluttered through her.

"I didn't expect any presents."

"Would you open the box?" Matt nudged her playfully, with just enough urgency she understood he was anxious for her to see whatever was inside. "If you don't open it, I will."

"I'm getting to it." She inhaled a deep breath. "I want to enjoy this moment. I don't often get presents in fancy felt boxes. Let's see... these things usually contain rings, but I'd imagine it could be a brooch, or maybe it isn't even jewelry at all."

Laughing, Matt made a grab for the box, but Beth pushed him away.

"I'm opening it." She smiled and lifted the lid. "Oh, Matt." Her mouth dropped open as two diamond rings sparkled in the light of the kitchen window. "I never expected this."

"They're not much," he said, taking out the engagement ring, "but I bought them with my own money." Gently, he slipped it onto her ring finger, and grinned when it fit perfectly. "This is something special, something from just me, and I wanted it to be with money that I'd earned." He took out the wedding band. "From here on out, if you don't want me to make a difference between your money, and mine, then neither will I. But I wanted this to come from me." Matt slid the wedding band beside the engagement ring, and pressed a kiss to her fingers. "Thank you for marrying me."

"Matt, you take my breath away when I least expect it." Tears came to her eyes, and she tried to blink them away before she started to cry. "I love you, too. Oh, I love you, too."

She held up her hand, admired the intricate setting, the small diamonds that couldn't have been too expensive, but expensive enough to put Matt to a lot of trouble. They looked like two diamond tiaras nestled on her finger. Whoever designed them, had done a lot with so few carats. They were sweetly exquisite.

"Do you like them?"
"I do." She smiled, admired the way they looked on her hand. "I like them a lot."

"If you don't, I can return them for something else."

"No, I'm keeping these." Beth remembered to breathe. "Matt, you surprise me, this was the last thing I expected you to do."

His dark eyes danced with delight. "You didn't get a ring at our wedding, so I wanted to make it up to you. Do you really like them?"

"They're exquisite, Matt, they really are. You picked these out on your own?"

He touched foreheads. "I had a little help from the saleswoman."

"You should have a wedding band, too. I'll buy you one."

"As far as I'm concerned," he grinned, "you already bought me two of them. Those hats are amazing."

"If I get you a ring-- one that matched these-- would you wear it?"

"As long as it doesn't have all that frilly diamond stuff, sure."

Beth smiled, kissed his mouth. "I want all the girls to know you're taken. This man is mine, all mine."

They kissed until she remembered the cookies in the oven, and had to break free to take them out.

"Cassie?" Beth called to the next room. "Come see what your brother gave me!"

This prompted Ethan and Ryan, as well as Cassie, to come satisfy their curiosity. The moment Ethan glimpsed what the commotion was about, he headed back to the living room. Cassie, though, couldn't get enough of the diamond rings.

"Oh, Matty, they're beautiful! They're the most beautiful I've ever seen."

"Let me see," Ryan said, and tugged at Beth's apron until she showed him her hand.

"It's not cookies." Ryan looked severely disappointed.
"They're cooling," Beth assured him. She fell back into Matt's arms and Matt grinned with pure male pleasure. "Thank you, Matt. I took off Luke's ring the day we married, and now I get to wear yours. Thank you, darling."

Matt kissed her, hung on to her while the smell of freshly baked, chocolate chip cookies filled the house. Love had a tendency to do that-- to fill the everyday with the promise of being there for each other. She was loved, and loved thoroughly by a sweet, goodhearted man.

Epilogue: A few weeks later....

The clock on the nightstand read two A.M., though Matt knew it wasn't true. It couldn't possibly. He'd closed his eyes, actually gotten some sleep this time, and knew it had to be later than that. Rolling onto his side, he stared at the back of Beth's head, a mass of curls that sometimes tickled his nose when they cuddled.

How could she sleep? It didn't seem fair. Of course, she wasn't the one who had to do most of the talking, to look the judge in the face and speak without stammering. Ms. Simmons had prepped them on what to expect at the hearing tomorrow-- no, it was today, for it was after midnight-- and had told him how to act, what to say, and assured him that even though she wouldn't be there, he would do just fine. He didn't need a lawyer, and Ms. Simmons didn't want Matt to appear as though he did. Often, only cases where the guardianship was contested, did anyone actually need a lawyer, so Ms. Simmons didn't want to give the judge the wrong impression. Wade had signed the papers, Matt was a responsible adult, and so was Beth.

Now that Ms. Simmons had done all the difficult paperwork, it was up to Matt and Beth.

In the morning, Matt and Beth would go down to the District Court with Dylan, and ask that the judge appoint them as Dylan's legal guardians. And that was when Matt would verbally state their case. Theoretically, it wasn't supposed to be an impossible task. People did it all the time, and Ms. Simmons reminded Matt that the judge didn't expect him to sound like a lawyer. Though she'd helped him prepare what he wanted to say, Ms. Simmons thought it best if he only used it as a general guideline, and not as a memorized spiel.

Thank God he'd bought that suit. He needed to appear as a normal human being, not a disheveled mess that couldn't be counted on to take care of a pet, let alone a child. Beth had no problem convincing a judge that she was reliable and trustworthy, for she was, but Matt wasn't so sure about himself.
Forget being gallant. Matt needed to ask Beth something, so he nudged her back until she stirred.

"What time is it?" she asked in a thick, groggy haze that Matt envied.

"I need to know"-- Matt hugged himself behind her, spooned his legs behind hers and wrapped an arm about her waist-- "do you still want another dog?"

"What?" Beth yawned, patted his hand and started to go back to sleep.

"Beth, I'm serious. You said you wanted to replace Bailey. Is that still true?"

"Matt, it's too early..." her voice drifted off and he shook her gently. "Yes, I want a puppy."

"A puppy?" His heart sank. "I was thinking more along the lines of an older, mature dog, one that was already housebroken."

"A puppy," Beth mumbled. "I want it to live a very, very long time."

He thought it over, saw himself running after a lop-eared puppy dog, trying to catch the rascal as it left muddy footprints all over a clean carpet.

Matt groaned.

A smile sounded in Beth's voice. "Just think how much fun Ryan will have with him."

Matt nudged her, just to be sure she was still awake. "I'm not saying I'm agreeing to a dog, but if I did, couldn't we get one that already knows what he's supposed to do? House training makes a mess, doesn't it?"

"I want to see Ryan and Dylan grow up with our dog, Matt. I don't want him passing away too soon-- for their sakes, as well as ours."

Matt inhaled, spit out some curls but nuzzled anyway. "We've never had a pet before, so you'll have to teach us what to do. If you still want a dog-- I mean a puppy-- then I guess we should get one."

"What made you think of getting a dog?" Beth sounded awake, and Matt decided to take advantage of the fact by sharing his insomnia.
"I kept thinking about Ryan and Dylan, and what it might be like if we had a baby. I like the idea of a dog in the house, one to guard the kids and be their play buddy. I think it'd be a good thing."

"Wow, you really are nervous." Beth rolled onto her back and he had to move his knees. Her teeth smiled in the semidarkness of their bedroom. "Just because the judge will determine if you're a responsible adult, doesn't mean we need to have a baby just to prove we're right."

"It's not that." Matt propped his head on his elbow, enjoyed the view of Beth from this vantage. "I think we'd make good parents, and while I'm not saying we should try for a bunch of kids-- we have enough as it is-- maybe one of our own would be a good thing. I'd like to be a dad."

"You already are, Matt." Beth smiled so hard he could feel it. "But I won't argue when you're making so much sense. Does this mean you wouldn't mind if I started praying for a baby?"

"I won't mind." He kissed her, pulled up the blankets and listened as Beth prayed.

"Please, Lord, bless us with another child."

Matt had to smile when he heard "another," but she was right. Those kids were theirs, and hopefully, sometime later that day, Dylan would be theirs, as well.

Things were looking up, so taking on more responsibility seemed the next logical step.

With the kind help of Sylvia and Amy, Matt was learning the ropes at the nursery, and had already taken on three and a half kids. What was one more? Okay, three and a half kids and a dog. Make that a rollicking puppy who wouldn't be house trained when they got him.

Man, he should have his head examined.

Wasn't love a pleasant kick in the head? If he was crazy, he didn't want anyone to tell him-- not when being deluded was too much fun.

He rolled Beth against him, kissed her and did his part to get that baby.

Morning came, and with it the guardianship hearing. The older kids were in school, Ryan was with Mrs. Lott, and Matt and Beth had Dylan.
Dressed in his designer label suit, Matt led the way into the large building where Ms. Simmons had already shown him around the week before. Matt knew where to go, who to speak to, and made it into the courtroom while their judge heard another case.

Beth rocked Dylan, and thankfully, he only gurgled and grabbed things instead of deciding to cry. He got hold of Beth's necklace, then the collar of her white blouse. When Matt glanced down at him, Dylan gave him a broad smile, one so cute Matt couldn't help but smile, himself.

Then the moment came.

The bailiff read from a clipboard and Matt and Beth got to their feet, approached the table in front of the judge's bench.

Dylan gave a cry, but Beth rocked him and he quieted down.

The court bailiff spoke in a sober, automatic voice as he asked Matt to raise his right hand and solemnly swear "to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So help me God." Then the bailiff swore in Beth.

"Your Honor," Matt cleared his throat, prayed desperately for wisdom and a strong tongue, "my name is Matt Taylor, and this is my wife, Beth. We're the petitioners and the proposed guardians of my brother, Amadeus Dylan Taylor, who my wife is holding."

The sober-faced judge cracked a smile.

"Why do you think a guardianship is necessary?" the judge asked. It was an open ended question for Matt to state his case.

"My brother's mom-- we share the same mom but different fathers-- she committed suicide not long ago, and my brother's father signed the Consent of Appointment of Guardian. He's an alcoholic who's probably using drugs, has no job, no permanent address, and no way to support himself and Amadeus. He and our mom brought Amadeus to my house, before Amadeus was two weeks old, and he's been with me ever since.

"I've already been appointed the legal guardian for my two brothers and sister, so my wife and I would like to become Dylan-- I mean, Amadeus' legal guardians."

The judge looked over the paperwork.
"The medical examiner determined the cause of death for your mother was suicide? Is that right?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"You and your wife haven't been married long."

"No, Your Honor, we haven't."

"You married soon after Amadeus was left in your care. Was the timing coincidental? Did you marry for the express intent to give your brother a home?"

"Yes, Your Honor." Matt resisted the urge to volunteer information-- something Ms. Simmons had warned him not to do. If the judge wanted to know something, he would ask.

"Are you both prepared to take care of Amadeus until he turns eighteen, when the guardianship is terminated?"

"Yes, Your Honor, we are."

"Yes, Your Honor," Beth added in a nervous voice.

"And you both have an income sufficient to meet the needs of Amadeus?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Very well, very well." The judge looked through more paperwork, then began to read the order before him. "Petition for order appointing kinship guardian. State of New Mexico, County of Doña Ana, Third Judicial Court, Matt Taylor and Beth Taylor, petitioners, versus Wade Martin, in the matter of the kinship guardianship of Amadeus Dylan Taylor...."

The judge read and Matt wondered how things were going. The questions hadn't been too hard, but then, Ms. Simmons had said that as long as no one contested the guardianship, it was more likely to go through.

The judge began signing things and Matt felt more hope.

Before Matt had time to process what was happening, the hearing ended, and he and Beth had to wait on the clerk.
Without the paperwork the clerk would give them, they were not officially Dylan’s guardians. At least, that was the way Matt thought Ms. Simmons had explained it to him. Things were happening more quickly than Matt had hoped they would, and in all the subdued excitement, he couldn’t remember everything Ms. Simmons had told him.

They waited half an hour on hard chairs, then an hour, and Beth had to go to the car to feed and change Dylan. When she came back with a happily full Dylan, Matt was still waiting for the clerk.

A woman came up to them, asked to see some identification, then gave Matt a thin stack of papers. He sorted through them and realized he now had the official paperwork needed to say that he and Beth were Dylan’s guardians.

"It’s done." Matt looked at Beth and saw her bright smile. "He’s ours."

They joined hands, and in a quiet hush, Matt and Beth thanked God for giving them Dylan. He was theirs, to raise and to love, to live with them and be a part of their family.

"I just had a nice thought. Dylan brought us together," Beth said wistfully, as she and Matt left the courthouse. "Without him, we wouldn’t be married right now."

Matt thought it over and agreed. If it hadn’t been for one small bundle, Matt would never have married his boss. They would never have moved into her big home, let alone spending that night together in the desert when he and Beth fell in love. For lack of a better point of reference, he considered that night to be when they both fell in love. Whether it had been earlier or not, only God could tell for certain.

"Matt, that reminds me"-- already, Beth’s mind was moving forward-- "when Ethan leaves for college and he takes your truck, we’ll need to get a minivan."

"A minivan?" They moved through the busy parking lot and searched for their car. "I was hoping we’d get another truck, not some wimpy minivan."

"But if we have a baby, we might not have enough room for all the kids in a truck."

"Ouch. I hadn’t counted on that." Matt glanced at Dylan, found the boy smiling and just had to laugh. "If we need one, then so be it."

Happiness ran freely as Matt counted his blessings, then thanked God with a quiet, heartfelt prayer. He had the love of a good woman, one who stood by him even when she knew his past,
and he had three brothers and a sister, their lives touched by the loving, watchful care of Heaven.

Matt and Beth were very blessed, and so were every one of their four, homegrown dandelions.

"Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: Who forgiveth all thine iniquities [Matt's past]; who healeth all thy diseases [no STDs]; Who redeemeth thy life from destruction [former drug addict, teenage prostitute]; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies; Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed..."
~ Psalm 103:2-5 ~

"By mercy and truth iniquity is purged: and by the fear of the LORD men depart from evil."
~ Proverbs 16:6 ~

End of Book.