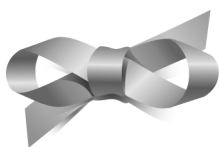


Forget Me Not
By
Karen Cogan

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CHAPTER ONE



MIRANDA PRESSED THE stapler down with deliberate care, aligning the papers before applying just enough pressure.

It jammed.

She paused, releasing a slow breath as her hand rested on the metal.

Small inconveniences weren't worth reacting to. They never were.

She worked the staple free with practiced precision, smoothing the edges of the papers when she was finished.

Order mattered. It kept things manageable. Predictable.

And predictable was safe.

She heard the office door open and set her papers aside before she looked up.

Visitors came and went all day in the school office, including parents, students, and delivery drivers. She expected one of these.

Then, something in her instinct told her she was wrong.

A man stood just inside the doorway, as though unsure whether to speak or wait for her to notice him. He wasn't what she expected. There was an ease about him, something unguarded in the way he carried himself. It set him apart from

the usual stream of hurried parents wanting to speak to the principal and students who needed to borrow lunch money.

He held a folder in one hand, his gaze moving briefly around the office before settling on her.

Miranda straightened, suddenly aware she had been staring.

“Can I help you?” she asked, keeping her tone professional.

“I hope so.” His voice was warm, touched with a quiet humor. “I’m looking for Mrs. Walters.”

“She’s in her office,” Miranda said, gesturing toward the closed door. “Do you have an appointment?”

“I do.” He smiled, and something in that simple expression caught her off guard, not because it was especially charming, but because it felt genuine.

She wasn’t expecting that.

“I’m Paul Green. Mrs. Walters is expecting me.”

The way he said the principal’s name carried an easy certainty, as though he was used to being expected.

Miranda sent a quick message to Mrs. Walters. “Mr. Green is here to see you.”

He smiled, transforming his good-natured face into something unexpectedly distracting.

There was a brief pause before Mrs. Walters replied, “Send him in.”

Miranda told the handsome visitor, “She can see you now.”

She opened the door to the principal’s office so that he could step inside. As he passed her, the faint scent of his aftershave reached her. Cinnamon, she thought.

Miranda closed the door behind him and stood there for a moment longer than necessary, as the warmth of his expression lingered.

Reluctantly, she turned back to her task of assembling the morning announcements.

What brought Mr. Green into the office this morning? Was he a parent? A volunteer? Or a new hire?

She shook her head and told herself to focus.

Yet even as she organized the papers, her thoughts wandered back to him. She wanted to memorize every detail. She admired his easy confidence, the strength in his broad shoulders, and most of all, his deep blue eyes.

She shouldn't let herself get distracted by him. He was probably a parent. Perhaps his wife couldn't get off work to come.

From behind the closed door of the principal's office, she heard him chuckle. The sound sent a strange flutter through her chest. Was he discussing his child with Mrs. Walters? Did he have children with those same blue eyes?

What would it be like, she wondered, to have a child who reminded her of a man she loved? The image was unbidden and unwelcome. She pushed it away and wondered if she would ever allow herself to fall in love. The future was uncertain and not always worth the risk.

She sent up a quick, silent prayer for better sense. Her heart had always been quicker than her caution. The Lord knew she had a habit of running ahead of His timing. Straightening the pile of weekly lunch menus, she reminded herself she had a school to help manage, not a future to invent.

She was pulling up the attendance folder to get the count ready for the day when the office door opened. Paul stepped out beside Mrs. Walters, tall enough that the doorway seemed to shrink around him. For a second, Miranda forgot the emails, the phone calls, even the quiet ache about ever having a child. Her pulse quickened as Mrs. Walters asked, "Have you met our school secretary, Miranda Wilkins?"

"Not officially." Paul extended his hand. "Miranda is a pretty name. It suits you."

The way he said it made her name sound new somehow. It caught her off guard, and warmth crept up her cheeks. She took his hand, aware of the warmth and strength of his grip.

"Thanks," she said.

Mrs. Walters said, "Mr. Green is starting an after-school athletic program two days a week for our extended-day kids. He also coaches baseball and teaches P.E. at the high school."

Before Miranda could respond, the opening bell rang. Almost immediately, a teacher entered the office, gripping two scuffed-up boys by their arms.

"They were fighting again," the teacher said, exasperation in her voice. "I told them their parents would have to be called."

Mrs. Walters sighed. "All right. I'll take care of it."

She turned back to Miranda. "Would you show Mr. Green to the gym and introduce him to the P.E. teachers. They're expecting him."

"Yes, of course," Miranda said, as butterflies stirred in her stomach.

She wasn't surprised to learn that he taught physical education. His broad shoulders and solid build suggested an

athletic background. As he turned toward her, she noticed his left hand.

“No ring. She suddenly forgot what she was about to say. Maybe he didn’t like wearing jewelry. Or maybe it was impractical during sports. Or maybe he was single. Stop being an idiot, she told herself firmly as she took a steady breath. She was just showing him to the gym. That was all.”

They walked together down the hallway, children streaming past them in bursts of laughter and motion. Miranda drew a deep breath and asked, “Do you have children?”

He shook his head. “Nope. I don’t have any kids. I’m not married. I hope to have them someday.”

Her pulse leapt with excitement. “With the job you’re in, that doesn’t surprise me. You must like kids,” she said.

Paul slowed his steps, glancing along the walls at the student artwork, and neatly pinned papers.

“This takes me back,” he said, smiling. “I remember how excited I was the first time I got a gold star on a math paper. My teacher put it up on the wall.”

The comment drew Miranda back to her own school days. “I know what you mean. I had a third-grade teacher who put my art projects on display.”

“Do you still like art?” he asked, looking down at her with interest.

“Yes,” she said. “I love to paint.”

“What sort of paintings do you do?”

“Mostly landscapes and animals. I also love painting the four seasons. It’s a challenge to capture winter lighting.”

He chuckled. “I admire your ability. If I tried painting, no one would recognize what I was trying to depict.”

"A lot of it is just practice," she said.

He glanced at her. "I'd need eons of work."

The scent of his aftershave drifted close again as they walked, a welcome contrast to the pine cleaner scent drifting from the linoleum floors.

They reached the gym, where one of the P.E. coaches was busy loading kickballs into a wire cart. She looked up expectantly when she saw Miranda.

"Jean, this is Mr. Green," Miranda said. "He's here to talk with you about the after school athletic program."

"Oh yes," Jean said brightly. "Come on in. I'll show you our equipment."

Paul turned back to Miranda. "Call me Paul."

He offered her another smile. "Thanks for guiding me."

"You're welcome."

As he strode across the gym floor, she watched him go. Her anticipation lingered long after she turned back toward the office. They would surely cross paths again.

When she returned, Emilie, the attendance clerk, had arrived. Emilie was a stout woman in her mid-thirties, divorced and remarried, with two young children who attended the school. Her life was a tangle of complications involving her ex-husband and her current husband.

"I thought I'd never get the car to start this morning," Emilie said as she set down her purse. "It needs work, but Ed's running late with child support again and there's not enough money for repairs."

"That must be hard on you and the kids," Miranda said sympathetically.

"The kids pick up on my feelings toward him even though I try not to talk badly about him in front of them."

"I'm sure that's better for them," Miranda said. "But I'm a good listener if you need to vent."

Emilie rolled her eyes. "You mean when I vent again. I already fill your ears with all my problems."

"I don't mind if it helps," Miranda assured her.

After that, the hours flew by in the usual busy blur. Phone calls, messages, and paperwork. Before she realized it, it was time to go home.

She cleared the papers from her desk and waved as Emilie left for the day. Mrs. Walters emerged from her office, locking the door behind her.

"I hope your plans for tonight are more fun than mine," the principal said, patting her satchel full of paperwork.

"Not really," Miranda replied. "My big excitement is laundry and a frozen dinner."

The principal gave a sympathetic smile. "One of these days you're going to surprise me and say you have a handsome escort waiting outside."

Miranda tried to laugh it off. "If he exists, he hasn't found the school parking lot yet."

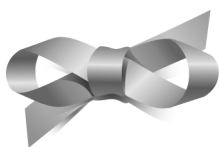
"Well, when he does, tell him to come inside and meet me. I'd like to inspect anyone who steals my best secretary." Mrs. Walters headed for the door, then paused. "Don't stay too late. The work will still be here tomorrow, no matter how heroic you feel tonight."

Left alone, Miranda straightened the stack of pink message slips and wondered when her life had narrowed to hallways that smelled of floor cleaner and evenings spent alone, eating

frozen dinners and finishing her paintings. She used to go on dates and to occasional parties. Now, many of those friends were married. Her vision of meeting a man who would change her life had grown hazy. If she did commit to someone, would she dare risk loving him when life had a way of taking things away?

Paul's face danced unbidden through her thoughts. Blond hair. Blue eyes. That smile.

Would she see him tomorrow? The thought lingered as she locked the office door behind her. She hadn't expected it to matter so much.



CHAPTER TWO



WHEN SHE WOKE UP THE next morning, Paul was the first person she thought of. The hope that he would come by the office after school sent a flutter through her chest. She shook her head at herself as she got ready for work. She hadn't felt this aware of a man in a very long time.

When she arrived at work, Mrs. Walters stepped out of her office, her brow already creased with concern. "It's you and me, kid. Emilie called last night. She's sick and two more teachers just called in this morning. I guess the warnings about flu season were warranted. Could you please grab the sub list and see who you can find for third and fifth."

Miranda set her purse beneath the counter and reached for the worn binder that held the substitute roster. "I'll start calling right away."

She moved with practiced efficiency, dialing numbers, leaving messages, and scanning the list for familiar names. Some subs were reliable, others less so, and a few had long since stopped answering calls altogether. Outside the office windows, the gray morning pressed close, rain misting the sidewalks as students hurried inside beneath jackets and umbrellas.

"Mrs. Daniels can take fifth," Miranda said after hanging up. "She's available all week."

"That's a blessing," Mrs. Walters replied. "What about third?"

Miranda scanned the list again, then tried another number. No answer. She tried once more. Busy signal.

"We may have to combine third grade," Miranda said regretfully. "Or pull Mrs. Jensen from reading support."

Mrs. Walters sighed. "Let's see if we can avoid that. Keep trying."

The first bell rang, and the calm of the office dissolved instantly. Children clustered at the counter with notes from their parents. Some were neatly folded. Others were crumpled in small hands. Lunch money appeared in envelopes and loose bills. A teacher poked her head in to report a missing backpack. Another asked for the copier code.

Miranda handled it all with the steady rhythm she'd developed over her four years in the front office. After the teachers took attendance, she submitted the compiled reports to the central office. Then, she sorted notes into piles and returned phone calls with professional politeness.

She liked the sense of order she brought to chaos, the quiet knowledge that the school functioned more smoothly because she was there. Still, beneath the surface, her thoughts wandered. She pushed the image aside and focused on the task at hand. Now was not the time for distraction.

By midmorning, she'd managed to secure a substitute for third grade. She was an older woman who lived nearby and sounded grateful for the work. Miranda hung up the phone and allowed herself a small sigh of relief.

“Well done,” Mrs. Walters said, handing her a stack of forms. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Miranda smiled. “You’d survive.”

“But I wouldn’t like it,” the principal said with a wink before disappearing back into her office.

The rest of the morning passed in a blur of minor crises. A child arrived without glasses. Another needed medication logged. The copier jammed twice. By the time lunch rolled around, Miranda realized she hadn’t taken a break or even thought about food.

She poured herself a cup of coffee and leaned against the counter, watching the rain streak on the windows.

She wondered if she would see Paul today, and why he captivated her thoughts so completely.

It wasn’t just that Paul was handsome, though he certainly was. It was the ease in his manner, the gentleness in his smile, the way he had spoken as though he belonged here. As though he was someone who would stay.

She frowned at her tendency to daydream. Too often disappointment followed close behind her hope that she had found the right man.

Later that afternoon, Mrs. Walters stepped out of her office and said, “Mr. Green’s after-school program paperwork just came through district approval. He’ll be back this afternoon to finalize schedules. I have to be at a meeting in a few minutes. Can you hold things down until the end of the day?”

Miranda’s pulse jumped. Paul was coming in the afternoon?

“I can stay until whatever time he gets here,” Miranda said.

“He’ll arrive around four o’clock, I think.”

Miranda nodded, hoping her reaction hadn't shown. "I'll make sure his paperwork is complete."

Time crawled. By the time dismissal rolled around, the rain had eased, leaving the pavement slick and shining. Cars filled the pickup line, and children's voices echoed through the halls as kids hoisted backpacks and zipped their coats.

Excited for his arrival, Miranda busied herself with small tasks, straightening the pencil cup, aligning the stack of tardy slips, pretending the empty doorway didn't matter.

The clock slowly clicked away the minutes.

At four thirty, she switched off the copier and wondered when Paul would arrive.

Then the front door opened.

Miranda's office door faced the school's entryway. Cool air swept in, carrying the clean scent of rain and wet pavement. Paul stepped inside, his jacket rain-darkened at the shoulders. He held a folder tucked under his arm.

"Am I too late?" he asked, a little breathless. "The meeting ran long, and the traffic out there is a mess."

Miranda felt her spirits lift. "Mrs. Walters already left, but I can help you finish what you need."

He opened the folder, signed the last line of the form, and slid it across the counter. "I hate leaving things undone. I'm grateful you are still here."

Miranda reached for the paper, but for a moment their hands brushed against each other on the counter. The contact lasted only a second, yet she felt a small, unexpected warmth travel up her arm.

"I know how you feel. I don't like leaving things undone either." She looked over the paperwork, trying to ignore the

pleasant flutter his presence caused. The office seemed smaller with him standing there, warmer somehow.

He glanced at the quiet hallway. "It's strange to see the school like this. No kids, no bells, no chaos."

"It's my favorite time of day," Miranda admitted. "Everything feels finished."

Paul smiled. "You like putting things in order."

"I like to try. Someone has to keep the world from sliding off its axis."

His low laugh filled the room. "Then I'm glad you're on duty."

Rainwater dripped from his jacket onto the tile, and Miranda noticed a small tear near his pocket. She doubted he knew it was there. Working as a teacher and a coach would leave him little time to look over his clothes. He seemed to hurry from one responsibility to the next.

"Thanks again for waiting for me. I appreciate you staying," he said. "Most people would've locked the door and left."

"It's no trouble." She hesitated, then added, "I'm glad you came."

His eyes met hers in a warm and steady gaze. "So am I."

The phone rang, startling them both. Miranda answered automatically, grateful for something to do with her hands. When she hung up, Paul had gathered his things.

"I should let you get home before the next storm hits," he said.

She hated to see him leave but knew he was being thoughtful. "Be safe," she answered.

"I will." He paused at the door. "See you tomorrow, Miranda."

The way he said her name lingered after he was gone.

She turned off the lights, locked the office, and stepped outside into the cool evening air. The school parking lot was empty now, the sky a pale wash of gray and lavender. For a moment she simply stood there, listening to the drip of water from the eaves and the familiar hum of traffic.

She had spoken to Paul again. The ordinary day suddenly felt brighter.



THE NEXT MORNING, MIRANDA pulled up the sub list again. After several calls, it became clear it wouldn't be easy to find anyone who wasn't sick or already committed as a substitute.

She glanced at the clock. There was only a half-hour until the morning bell rang. Racing through the numbers, she finally managed to find a sub for third grade. However, there was also a fifth-grade teacher who was out sick and she hadn't found a sub.

When she exhausted the list, she admitted defeat. There was no one else to try, and only ten minutes remained before the bell rang.

Mrs. Walters stuck her head out of the office. "How's it going out there?"

"We've got a sub for third, but nobody for fifth," Miranda replied, waving the list in the air. "Is there anybody else I could call?"

"No. We'll have to wing it. We'll combine a couple of classes. With so many kids absent, it won't overload the rooms. I have some forms that need to be faxed downtown by nine

o'clock. Do that first, then whatever else you can get done. Did I tell you I'm glad you're here today? Don't you dare get sick."

Miranda flashed a quick smile. "It's nice to be needed."

"You may regret those words before this day is over."

The prophecy proved true. Miranda struggled to field phone calls from parents who were reporting that their child was sick. Absences mounted, including several teachers who had gone home with the flu.

After a half-hour of chaos, the bustle of activity slowed. Miranda glanced at her watch. It was eight forty-five. The fax had to be in by nine. She sighed, missing Emilie's capable presence. This would be a difficult day. She punched the numbers into the fax and was pleased when it went through.

The rest of the morning went by quickly. Shortly after lunch, Mrs. Walters poked her head out the door. "I have a meeting with the counselor at one o'clock. Think you can manage the office for an hour?"

"Sure. It can't be worse than this morning."

The principal smiled. "That's what I like about you, your positive attitude."

"That could change if anybody else gets sick."

Mrs. Walters nodded. "I know what you mean. I feel like the last of a dying species."

Alone in the office, Miranda looked up from her computer to see one of the second-grade teachers walk in.

"I'm feeling awful," the teacher admitted. "I know everybody is out today, and I hate to call it quits, but I have to go home. The class is working on an assignment, and Susan is watching them along with her class. I hope you can get somebody to fill in."

"We'll work something out. You go home and get some rest. And get well."

There was still an hour and a half until school let out, and they had one second-grade teacher watching two classes. While she debated what to do, Mrs. Walters rounded the corner.

"This government red tape drives me crazy. All these forms we have to fill out to get kids in the programs they need."

"Well, I'm afraid I have bad news. Sharon Frazer had to leave a few minutes ago. She looked really sick. Susan's watching her class."

Mrs. Walters sighed. "How many kids in those classes today?"

Miranda looked at the attendance roster. "Eighteen in Susan's and fifteen in Sharon's."

"I hate to combine that many second graders, but I doubt we can get a sub. Would you mind filling in until the end of the day? You shouldn't have any problem with Sharon's lesson plans."

"Sure, I'll fill in." It had been a while since she'd taken over a class, but after the hassles of the day, she welcomed some time away from the office. At least in the classroom, there was no phone ringing.

"You're my right-hand man," Mrs. Walters said.

Miranda smiled and headed toward the second-grade hallway. Since she kept their records, she was familiar with the children. She walked to the front of the class and checked the lesson plans. "Okay, kids, if you work hard and we finish math and spelling, I'll spend the last twenty minutes reading this book." She held up a copy of the mystery story their teacher's lesson plans said she'd been reading each day.

There was a murmur of agreement from the class as fifteen small heads bent to work. The remainder of the day went smoothly. She wondered how well Mrs. Walters had fared alone in the office.

When they finished their work, Miranda rested her hands on the desk and smiled at the students.

"You've all been good and have done what I asked," she said. "So now it's time to read."

She lifted the book so she could see the cover. "This is a mystery. Who wants to guess what's going to happen next before I read it to you?"

Hands flew into the air.

"I think someone is going to get lost," a girl said.

"Or forget something important," another child offered.

Miranda listened to their excited guesses, then turned the page.

Her voice dropped, instinctively, as the story shifted. The character had followed the clues to a place no one else dared to go. Miranda slowed her reading, letting the suspense stretch. She leaned forward, lowering the book slightly, as if sharing a secret meant only for them.

Miranda read softly, "And that's when she heard the sound. Not behind her, but close. Too close."

Several children gasped.

Miranda paused, eyes flicking up. Fifteen faces stared back at her, eyes wide and unblinking. She let the silence hold for just a moment longer before continuing.

"She reached for the door, her heart pounding, and then—"

The bell rang.

The sharp clang shattered the tension, drawing a chorus of groans from the room.

"Nooo," a boy protested.

"That was the good part!" another cried.

Miranda closed the book, smiling despite herself. "That," she said, "is exactly where we'll stop."

The children gathered their things reluctantly, their voices overlapping with theories and protests.

"She's going to open the door," one insisted.

"I think someone's hiding," another whispered.

A girl hovered near Miranda's desk. "You *have* to read the rest tomorrow."

"You will probably have a substitute tomorrow," Miranda said, meeting her earnest gaze. "I'll ask her to continue reading," she added.

That appeared to appease them. Still, more than one child glanced back at the book as they lined up, as if afraid the mystery might slip away without them.

After she walked the children outside, Miranda started back to the building. Just as she rounded the corner, she walked headlong into a broad chest. She drew back quickly and looked up into the deep blue eyes of Paul Green.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I should watch where I'm going," she gasped.

He took her arm to steady her. "We meet again."

His smile warmed her, and she felt a sense of comfort in his touch.

"I was subbing for a sick teacher," she said.

"You must be a woman of many talents. I thought you were the school secretary. Now it seems you're a teacher, too."

He nodded at the children who were scattering toward the sidewalk.

"I'm filling in for the afternoon. Everybody has the flu, and we can't get enough subs."

"I know. It's taking a toll at the high school where I coach, too."

"Hopefully, the worst will be over soon. The attendance clerk was out today, and when I left to sub, Mrs. Walters was alone in the office."

Paul grinned. "When I signed in, she was holding the phone with one hand and signing a note with the other."

"I guess I better get back and give her some relief."

"Take care of yourself. Anyone who does the job of two people is too important to get sick."

"I'll tell that to Mrs. Walters, even though she already appreciates me."

"Won't hurt to tell her I said so."

He flashed a parting smile and headed to the gym. Her shoulders tingled from his firm grip, and she felt a shiver go up her spine at the memory of his touch. His hands were warm, gentle, strong, and masculine.

Though their collision had been an accident, not a hug, she wondered what it would feel like to have Paul embrace her.

She stumbled up the step into the building. *It's time you got your mind back on your job*, she scolded herself.

When she returned to the office, Mrs. Walters said, "I'm glad you're back. These schedules have to be entered into the computer before tomorrow morning. I need a copy for each classroom."

"I'm on it," Miranda replied. She set to work, hardly glancing up until she finished entering the new academic schedules. A dull headache began. She rubbed her forehead, trying to massage it away. By five o'clock, she felt worse. *Not the flu*, she begged silently, bones aching as she finished some typing.

At five-thirty, Paul entered to sign out. "You look pale. Are you feeling okay?"

Miranda shrugged. "A little achy. I think I'll go home and try to shake it off."

Mrs. Walters popped up from the file cabinet where she had been rummaging. "Are you sick, Miranda?" She came around the desk to peer at her. "You do look pale."

Miranda tried to smile. "I'll be okay once I rest." She stood up and was hit by a sudden spell of dizziness that had her clutching the desk for support.

Paul moved toward her and grasped her elbow. "I don't think you should be driving. I'm on my way home. Suppose I drop you off?"

"I couldn't put you to so much trouble. I'll be all right." She took a deep breath and felt a little better. "I can make it."

Mrs. Walters shook her head. "Better take his ride. You don't look very steady. I'd offer to take you, but I have an appointment in a half hour."

"What about my car? It's here at work."

"I'll give you a ride when you're ready to come back," Paul said.

When she hesitated, he said, "Come on. I really insist."

He offered her his arm.

She clutched it gratefully, leaning against him as they walked slowly out of the building and across the parking lot. "I really hate to be such a bother."

"You're no bother. I can't think of a better use of time than helping a lady in distress."

He put his hand on her waist and helped her get into the passenger seat of his pickup. "Where to?"

"I live at the Manor Apartments on Davis Street."

"I know where they are. You just relax, and I'll have you there in a few minutes."

She leaned back and closed her eyes to shut out the swirling scenery. It was nice to be taken care of, she thought hazily as she drifted into a half-sleep.

She roused as the truck slowed to a stop. The familiar red-pink bricks of the building came into view. All she had to do was get inside. Then she could fall across her bed and wait for the aching to go away. She reached for the door handle. "Thanks for giving me a ride."

"Let me come around and help you."

"I think I can manage."

Paul was there before she opened the door. He took her arm and steadied her as they walked upstairs. She unlocked the door and smiled at him.

His eyes were full of concern. "You're still pale. Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"I'll be fine. I just need to rest."

"Call me if you need anything. I'll give you my number."

He pulled a pen and a slip of paper from his shirt pocket, sticking the cap of the pen between his teeth while he wrote his number. He handed her the paper and asked for her number so

that he could check on her. He entered it into his phone while she scanned the note he'd given her.

"From the desk of Paul Green?"

"I use it to send home notes about my students. You call me if you need anything, you hear?"

She nodded as she closed the door. "I will. And thanks."

He was sweet, the sort of man she had always wanted. So why, when she longed to impress him, did she get the flu?

She trudged to the bathroom and took her temperature: one hundred and two. She took two pain tablets and headed for the couch, leaning back and flipping on the news. Trying to concentrate on the news proved pointless as names and places blurred in her fevered mind. She flipped off the set and slipped into an uneasy sleep.

It was completely dark when she awoke, trying to remember why she hurt all over. *Oh, yeah—the flu.* She pushed up onto her elbow and turned on the lamp. Its soft glow lit the room in eerie shadows.

Clearing her dry throat felt painful. She trudged to the kitchen and opened her last soda. Taking it back to the couch, she sank down and drank from the can.



THE NEXT MORNING, SHE didn't have to call in sick. Mrs. Walters had sent a text telling her to stay home. She flipped through a magazine, napped, and watched television. Late in the morning, she nibbled toast made from the last piece of bread and wished she'd waited to get sick until after she'd gone to the store. Somehow, she'd have to get by until she felt like venturing out.

The afternoon dragged. Her temperature, down in the morning, hovered again at one hundred and two. When would this go away?

That evening, the doorbell rang. She pulled her bathrobe around her and looked out of the peephole. She was surprised to see Paul's good-natured face. Seized by panic, she froze. Her appearance was less than impressive after a day spent lying on the couch.

He knocked softly. "Miranda. Are you okay?" His face was filled with concern.

There was only one thing to do. Taking a deep breath, she brushed back her hair, opened the door, and tried to smile. "You're going to catch the flu if you don't stay away from sick people."

He looked at her and grinned. "I never get sick. How are you feeling?"

"I've been better. I've looked better, too. But I'll be all right."

"You're lucky then. You look better sick than most people do well. Go back and rest. I brought a few things I thought you might need, like tea bags and soup. I hope you like chicken noodle."

The thought of warm soup was appealing. "It sounds like gourmet food right now."

As soon as she felt hungry, she'd heat it.

She sank into a chair at the kitchen table and watched him empty the contents of the sack onto the counter. Along with the tea and soup, he produced applesauce, bananas, juice, and crackers. It was certainly enough to see her through one illness.

"This was very considerate. You went to a lot of trouble."

"It was my pleasure. Would you like me to heat some soup before I leave?"

"No thanks. I'll have tea now and soup later."

He opened the box of tea bags. "Cups?" he asked, gesturing toward the cabinets.

"That one." She pointed to a cabinet behind him.

He retrieved a teacup and filled it with water. After he heated it in the microwave, he dropped the tea bag into the cup.

"Thanks. You're going to spoil me," she said, gratefully sipping the warm drink.

"I have a basketball game to coach tonight, but I'll be home by ten. If you need anything, feel free to call. Be sure to rest all weekend."

"I will. Let me pay you for the groceries."

He shook his head. "Groceries are on me. You just try to get well."

"Thank you. You're very kind. Good luck with your game."

He shrugged. "If we don't win, we'll at least have a good time." With a wave, he walked past and quietly closed the door.

No one had taken care of her like that since her mom had nursed her through pneumonia as a child.

The warmth of it frightened her a little. Kindness had a way of slipping past the careful walls she had built around her heart. She had learned long ago that depending on people could leave you exposed to loss. Yet Paul's quiet thoughtfulness stirred something she had tried very hard not to need.

She carried her tea to the couch and sank wearily onto the cushions. As much as she appreciated his kindness, the effort to get up had exhausted her. She turned on a show and struggled

to follow the plot as she sipped her drink. When the effort became too much, she prepared for bed while thanking God for sending Paul into her life.

Sleep came easily that night. She awoke in the morning to find the aching gone. Her mood lifted. She had much to be thankful for. Nonetheless, she remained a bit sluggish until Paul called in the evening.

"How are you feeling?" His voice, low and mellow, was soothing.

"I'm feeling better, and I should be back on Monday. There'll be a lot of work to catch up on."

"Try not to think about that, or you're likely to relapse."

"I may faint when I see the piles of paper."

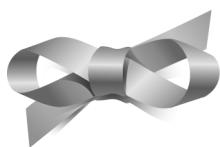
"You'll get caught up. And I expect to see you fully recovered."

"I'll try. Thanks for checking on me, and for all the food. It's what I've lived on all day."

"I'm glad you could use it. To this day, I can't stand canned soup. My mother gave it to me when I was a kid and had the flu. It made me feel better, though."

She couldn't imagine him being sick, even as a child. He'd said he never got sick now. Perhaps it was his sturdy frame that protected him. She hoped his luck would hold with so much exposure to the flu.

With a parting "good night," they hung up. The movie she'd been watching no longer held her attention. Paul felt entirely perfect. She replayed their conversation over in her mind. Dare she hope he felt more than brotherly concern for her?



CHAPTER THREE



MIRANDA'S ANTICIPATION grew as she waited for Paul to pick her up on Monday morning. Perhaps she would finally understand why he had come to her aid. Was he simply being kind, or was it something more? Maybe she had looked so unwell that he had been genuinely worried about her.

What if that wasn't it? Her heart raced to answer before her mind could catch up. She found Paul Green attractive, and there was no use denying it.

She watched his truck pull into the complex and waited until he knocked on her door. She grabbed her purse and then greeted him with a smile.

"You look better," he said.

She smiled. "I feel better. It must have been the chicken soup."

He kept her elbow cupped protectively as they started down the stairs.

"Are you dizzy?" he asked.

"Not a bit," she said.

"Fever gone?"

"None since Saturday," she said.

They reached the truck and he helped her inside. He adjusted the heater vent, so the warm air flowed toward her.

"In case you get chilled."

The simple gesture stirred her heart.

They drove in silence for a moment. The morning sky hung pale. Yesterday's rain still clung to the pavement in shimmering streaks. The quiet inside the truck felt full rather than empty.

She lowered her eyes. "Thank you."

He glanced at her. "For what?"

"For everything. The groceries. Checking on me. Bringing me to work." She hesitated. "Not everyone would have done that."

His expression shifted, something deeper moving beneath the easy warmth she was used to seeing.

"You looked like you needed someone," he said simply. "You shouldn't have to be alone when you're that sick."

The words settled around her like a warm blanket.

He slowed to a stop as they reached the school. She turned toward him at the same moment he turned toward her.

Their eyes met.

The space between them felt suddenly charged, as though the air itself had thinned. She became acutely aware of how close they were, how easily he could reach out. For a moment she wondered if he might lean closer.

Then Emilie walked past the front of the truck, breaking the moment. As Miranda opened the door and slid out, he said, "I'll be here this afternoon if you need anything."

She nodded and smiled, "Thank you. I'll remember."

The hallway lay silent, waiting for the bell to ring and children's voices to fill the void.

After greeting Emilie, Miranda glanced at the clock. Would more teachers be calling in today telling her they were

sick, too? If so, the morning promised to become hectic. She felt cheated out of the weekend. She had imagined spending it in front of her easel, planning a new painting. She had pictured herself listening to soft, romantic music as she mixed her colors and blocked in her scene. She had missed that, but at least she had seen Paul again.

She shifted her attention to the tasks for the day. There would be no time for coffee this morning. In moments, the office would be swarming with students needing everything from birthday ribbons to excuses for absences. She braced herself for the flood of activity.

The bell rang, and a small girl with blonde pigtails limped into the office, tears spilling from her brown eyes.

"I fell down and cut my knee. And I tore my tights. Mama's going to be mad."

Speaking in a comforting tone, Miranda said, "Let's get your knee to the nurse. She can put a bandage on it. I don't think your mother will be mad. She'll just be sorry you hurt your knee."

Leaving Emilie in charge, Miranda guided the child to the clinic. Watching the little patient settle in, she felt a tender longing. Someday she hoped she might have a child like this.

Returning to her desk, she found Mrs. Walters waiting.

"Emilie says she can manage the office a little longer. I need someone in Room Two until the substitute arrives. Want to go down there for a while?"

"Sure." Room Two was a kindergarten classroom, and young children had always been her favorites. Besides, a break from the paperwork that had piled up during her absence was welcome.

The children greeted her with bright, curious eyes.

"Everyone sit in a circle. We're going to see who's here today," she instructed. As she spoke, the little girl with the hurt leg entered and smiled when she recognized Miranda.

"My leg's better!" she announced proudly, holding out her knee. "Are you our teacher today?"

"No. I'm just here until your substitute arrives," Miranda said, smiling.

Once the stragglers were seated, she took roll. When she called a little boy named John, he responded eagerly.

"We're going to have a Thanksgiving play! I'm going to be a pigman!"

"You mean a Pilgrim," Miranda corrected, holding back a chuckle. "I bet your mom and dad will be proud of you."

"My dad can't come. He lives in England."

She felt a pang of sympathy. How could a father endure being so far away from a child like this? She remembered her own childhood. When she had a play or a ballet recital, she scoured the audience until she found her parents' proud faces. Her dad had always brought his camera. Even if the photos were blurry, the moments of approval had mattered.

Shaking her thoughts loose, Miranda picked up a book. Soon, the children were enthralled by *The Gingerbread Man*.

When the substitute arrived, Miranda returned to the office and dove into paperwork, phone calls, and overseeing students waiting to see the principal. Before she knew it, three o'clock arrived, and school was letting out. Moments later, Paul walked in, and her pulse skipped.

Since Emilie was out of the office running off copies for the impending teachers' meeting, this was Miranda's chance to give him the brownies she had baked the night before.

"I have something for you," she said, extending the foil pan.

Paul smiled, curiosity lighting his eyes. "Oh really?"

"Brownies. I hope you like chocolate."

He lifted the edge of the plastic wrap and grinned. "Brownies? That's my favorite dessert. They're quite a reward for delivering a few cans of soup. Thanks."

He cradled them carefully in his large hands.

"You're welcome. You look ready to meet your young athletes."

Dressed in sweatpants and a short-sleeved polo shirt that revealed the curve of his muscular arms, he looked entirely at ease. "I'm looking forward to it. It's going to take us a while to get organized for a new sport, but it will be fun." He set the brownies on the counter and penciled his name on the sign-in sheet, then hesitated as though he wanted to say something more.

A flush warmed her cheeks as he rubbed his chin with the back of his hand. Silence stretched between them.

Finally, he held up the brownie pan. "I'm coaching kickball today, so I better put these in my truck until I finish. Thanks again, Miranda. I'll try them on the way home."



PAUL STEPPED OUTSIDE and paused beside his truck before opening the door.

He glanced down at the foil-covered pan in his hands and smiled to himself.

Miranda Wilkins had baked him brownies.

Some people barely noticed the small things others did for them. Miranda noticed and extended her own kindness to sick children who came into the office and to sick teachers who needed a substitute. It even extended to the coach who had only brought her a few groceries when she was sick.

He shook his head slightly, still smiling.

It had been a long time since someone's kindness had meant this much.



MIRANDA HAD BEEN TOO absorbed watching his broad shoulders retreat to notice Emilie's entrance.

"Good-looking, isn't he?"

Miranda gave her a quick glance. Could everyone read her mind? "I'm not even sure if he has a girlfriend."

"Nope. I asked if he had a girlfriend who likes sports. He said he had no current girlfriend."

"That doesn't mean he's interested in me."

"Why don't you find out? He certainly didn't make a point of remembering my name."

Miranda realized that, perhaps, she wasn't alone in imagining his interest in her. She hoped for another opportunity to speak with him. Though they still knew very little about each other, she craved a chance to learn more. Eventually, daydreams had to become reality or die, and she wanted this one to live.

Sooner than she expected, an opportunity arose. The high-school secretary called with a message for Paul.

"The coaches' meeting scheduled before school tomorrow is being moved to the afternoon. Could you make sure he gets the message before he leaves?" the secretary asked Miranda.

"I'll make sure he gets it." Turning to Emilie, Miranda smiled. "That was the high school. I'm taking a message to Paul. I'll be back in a minute."

Emilie gave a knowing smile. "Take your time."

On the way to the outside door, Miranda passed a pair of second graders who darted out of their classroom doorway, arguing over whose turn it was to carry the class hamster.

She called out, "Gentlemen, remember, Hammy is not a football."

"Yes, Ma'am!" they chorused, immediately calmer.

She smiled, wondering if she might have imps like them someday.

Miranda stood near the edge of the playground while the children spilled out onto the blacktop. The rain had left everything smelling fresh, wet rubber from the swings, damp earth from the flowerbeds, the faint tang of disinfectant drifting from the open cafeteria doors.

Paul was already outside, whistle hanging loosely from his fingers, his voice carrying easily over the chatter.

"All right, guys, let's keep it friendly out here. Hands to yourselves, and remember, recess is supposed to be fun."

A small boy, one of the second graders whose name Miranda could never quite remember, hovered near the edge of the blacktop instead of joining the kickball game. His shoulders were hunched as he scuffed his shoe at the pavement as if he hoped to disappear into it.

Paul noticed immediately.

"Hey there, champ," he called, walking over and crouching so he was eye level with the child. "You planning to guard that fence all afternoon, or are you going to come help me show these guys how kickball is really played?"

The boy shrugged, as his face tightened. "I'm not good at it."

"Not good yet," Paul corrected in a kindly tone. "There's a big difference. Nobody starts out good. You should have seen me when I was your age. I kicked the ball straight backward and knocked over the water cooler."

The child's mouth twitched, almost a smile.

Miranda was just close enough to hear the exchange unfold as she watched from the edge of the blacktop.

There was nothing showy about the way Paul handled the moment. No raised voice, no exaggerated encouragement meant to impress anyone nearby. He simply knelt so he was level with the boy and spoke quietly, as though the two of them were the only people on the playground.

Miranda's heart warmed.

Kindness like that couldn't be pretended.

When the boy finally managed a clumsy kick that sent the ball wobbling forward, Paul reacted as though the child had just won a championship game.

"There it is!" he called. "I knew you had it in you."

The boy grinned, a real grin this time, and jogged after the ball while Paul called the other kids to form a circle and begin the game.

There was something about the quiet patience in Paul's voice that made children trust him.

And, unexpectedly, she realized it made her trust him, too. He wasn't just the handsome new coach with an easy smile, but a man who saw the one afraid to try.

Her admiration for him deepened.

Miranda smiled to herself. That simple moment told her more about Paul Green than anything he had said in conversation.

Noticing Miranda, Paul told the kids, "Keep practicing and I'll be right back. I'm expecting professional-level kickers."

With determined expressions, the children continued to practice.

She looked away, embarrassed to be caught staring. She pretended to have a sudden interest in her clipboard. Her heart was beating faster than it should have been. She held the image of him kneeling beside that little boy.

When she reached him, she said, "The high school called. Here's the message."

She held out the yellow paper.

"Thanks. I bet it's about a meeting. Sometimes I feel like I spend more time in meetings and paperwork than teaching."

"Our teachers get bogged down too, although Mrs. Walters tries to keep it to a minimum."

His smile softened.

She hesitated, suddenly aware she might sound foolish. "You're good with them," she said quietly. "The boy who didn't want to play. You didn't embarrass him. You made him feel brave enough to try."

Paul shrugged, but there was a hint of pleasure in his expression. "Sometimes kids just need someone to believe they can do something."

Miranda studied him for a moment.

"That works for adults too," she said before she realized she had spoken aloud.

They shared a quiet moment before Paul glanced at the playground.

Knowing their shared time was over, Miranda said, "I'd better get back before Emilie thinks I've stayed to play kickball. I never liked the game when I was a kid, but with your coaching, I might enjoy it."

She bit her lip, realizing her comment sounded more flirtatious than intended.

A mischievous smile spread across his face. "I can think of other places to meet. How about a restaurant Saturday night at seven o'clock?"

Her heart stumbled. "I was just kidding," she said, though her heart danced. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. Do you like steak and seafood?"

"Yes."

"There's a place on Reed Street, on the corner."

"I know where it is."

"Well, how about it? We could meet there, or I could give you a ride. Seven o'clock."

Ignoring her racing pulse, she said, "I'll meet you. I'll see you at seven."

For a long moment, they stared at each other. Then, Miranda headed to the back door of the school. A strange sense of unreality held her in its grip.

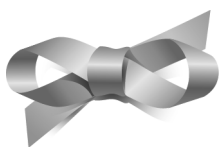
Back in the office, Emilie's expectant look prompted Miranda to smile.

"Well?" Emilie asked.

“We’ll see. We’re going out. Don’t jump ahead and decide we’re getting married.”

Emilie clapped her hands in excitement as she laid a finger over her lips.

Miranda gathered her things, the image of him kneeling beside the timid little boy lingering stubbornly in her mind.



CHAPTER FOUR



MIRANDA SPENT SATURDAY morning in the second bedroom that she used as a studio, absorbed in the labor she loved. When she had looked for an apartment, she had planned on renting one with a studio that got northern light. She had discarded that notion when she saw the western light that filled this room with a warm amber glow in the afternoon. She also loved the view that faced an open field with no buildings to block the sun. Every spring the field brought forth a colorful crop of wildflowers.

The morning passed in pure contentment as she added brush strokes that made the small squirrel under the spreading oak come to life. By late afternoon, the squirrel on the ground had been joined by another in the tree. When she stood back and surveyed her work, she was filled with satisfaction. It was far from perfect, but still a solid painting.

Her thoughts shifted to the workshop that her gallery owner had told her about. It would be beneficial to her career to be chosen. Under the guidance of Mr. Weldmon, she could improve her skill.

As she studied the painting, she realized evening shadows were creeping into the room.

She glanced at her watch and saw it was almost time to clean up and get ready for her date with Paul.

With a few extra minutes left, Miranda cleaned and straightened the kitchen to work off the nervous energy. This date was what she wanted. However, now that it was here, all sorts of fears filled her mind.

What if he was not who she believed him to be? She would be terribly disappointed.

What if she made a fool of herself and said something stupid? She would have to face him at work and live through her embarrassment.

Shortly before she needed to leave, she curled the sides of her hair toward her face and applied light makeup. Then she changed from her work clothes to a silk blouse and a pair of fashionable jeans that clung to her figure.

The knot in her stomach grew bigger as she drove to the restaurant. What if they didn't hit it off? Maybe behind Paul's good looks and sensitive nature were a moral code of pure disappointment.

She took a deep breath to calm her quickening pulse. *This isn't the first time you've ever met a new guy.* But she knew what she really feared was that tonight her dreams about Paul would come to an end. She would wake up tomorrow without the promising possibility of this new relationship.

She listened to music as she drove to meet him. When she parked in the lot, she saw him waiting for her beside the double doors. He walked toward her as she walked through the parking lot.

"You look beautiful," he said.

A warm flutter spread through her chest. He was accepting, kind, and fun.

"You clean up well yourself," she said.

He was dressed in a powder-blue shirt that matched his sports jacket and brought out the blue in his eyes. No doubt he was the most handsome man she'd ever met. The only thing out of sync was that he was wearing a faded blue tie.

When they reached the double door, he said, "I've been here several times, and the food was always good."

She responded with her sweetest smile. "I trust you completely."

Inside the cozy interior, the hostess greeted them. "Right this way, please."

Miranda followed along the corral-style fence that led to the main dining room, where more western decor welcomed them. A high-beamed ceiling sheltered a center fireplace that crackled with fake logs. Old wagon wheels, spurs, and lariats were mounted above two mantels.

She sat across from Paul at the cozy round table. Her gaze rested on the western paintings on the walls. Some were impressionistic with soft cows and fuzzy landscapes. Others were realistic. She was comparing them to the quality of her work when she felt Paul's hand rest gently on her fingers.

She lifted her gaze to him. "I'm sorry. I have a habit of critiquing paintings and seeing what I can learn from other artists. I'm an artist and I've applied for a professional workshop. It will be a great opportunity if I get in. It's being led by a well-known teacher in the art world."

"That's wonderful. I hope you do get in. However, if the restaurant owners wanted beautiful art, they should hang a portrait of your face right at this moment."

Miranda's flush deepened. She wished he knew how much his words meant to her.

"If you keep that up, you'll make me conceited. But thank you," she said.

Changing the subject, she decided to ask about his tie. It must mean something to him since it didn't complement the rest of his attire.

"That's an interesting tie. Is the picture hand-painted?" she asked.

His cheerful expression faded to a faraway look that hinted at sadness.

He held up the faded monogram. "It was painted by somebody special. I wear it a lot. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not." She stiffened as jealousy invaded her curiosity. Was there a broken romance, someone he had loved and could not forget?

She supposed he sensed her thoughts. "It's not from an old girlfriend. I don't keep it as a bitter-sweet memory of good times gone bad. I wish that's all it was. It was a gift from my little brother. He died of bone cancer when he was twelve. It was the last gift Jimmy gave me. He put our initials and painted a football because we played a lot of football together."

The sadness in his voice made her want to reach across the table and take his hand. "Oh, Paul, I'm sorry." Her words were barely a whisper, her heart aching for him.

"It was a long time ago, but I still miss him."

"I understand," she said. "When my grandmother had heart disease, I prayed for her recovery. It broke my heart when she died. At least she lived into her seventies. Your pain must have been unbearable," Miranda said.

Paul took a moment to reply. "It was pretty bad."

There was a moment of silence that was interrupted when a server came to deliver their menus and take their drink orders. They each ordered a soda and he promised to bring them right away. He also assured them their waitress would be with them soon.

After the server left, Paul said, "It's still hard for me to talk about Jimmy. I don't deal with loss very well. It's been helping me to read a book a friend loaned me about why God allows tragedy into our lives. I blamed Him a lot when Jimmy died. That's why I sometimes hesitate to get close to people. I'm afraid of losing them."

Tears stung her eyes.

Miranda understood that fear more than she wanted to admit. Loving someone always carried the risk of loss, and sometimes it felt safer not to hope too much. Yet looking across the table at Paul, she wondered if some risks were worth taking.

Noticing, Paul said, "I didn't mean to make you sad. Let's talk about the workshop you applied for. It sounds like quite an honor to be chosen."

Accepting that she could not ease his sadness, she said, "It is an honor. It's during the week of spring break, so I wouldn't even have to take time off work. Since I was a kid, I've taken art classes every summer of my life. But a workshop like this is a rare opportunity."

A smile lit his face. "I hope you get in. I'm sure you will. And while you're there, I'll be flying out for a visit with my folks. I see them each year at Christmas and again on spring break."

"Are you from a big family?"

"No. Just my mom and dad. A few aunts, uncles, and cousins live in the area. Mom usually has some of them over for dinner each time I come."

"You sound popular."

"You can't beat a mother's love."

"I know what you mean."

While they ate, she told him about her family. He listened with interest to her affectionate account of her father's habit of discussing his accounting job at the dinner table, her little sister who was growing up fast, and the love of art shared by her mother.

"So, you inherited the painting gene from your mother?" he asked.

"I guess so. From the time I was four or five, I remember the smell of turpentine in the house."

"Does she paint landscapes?"

"No. She does mostly still life. And all kinds of flowers. Dad always has a beautiful garden, and Mom arranges his cut flowers to paint. I learned when I was very young that I could always get Mom a vase when I needed a gift idea. She still has all of them. She immortalized most of them in paintings, even though some of my gift vases were pretty gaudy." She smiled at the memory of the assortment.

He smiled in return. The warmth in his gaze made her feel important, as though he found her rather common

background supremely interesting. Either he did, or he had the nicest manners of any man she had ever met.

The waitress brought their menus. She had pretty dark hair and wore red lipstick. Her name tag said, 'Angie.'

"The special tonight is Salisbury steak with potatoes and green beans," she said. "If you like, I can give you a few more minutes, to look at the menu."

"What do you recommend?" Paul asked.

She answered quickly. "The steaks are very good. However, my favorite dinner is the fried catfish with homemade tartar sauce, soft rolls, and a big baked potato with all the works."

Miranda nodded. "That sounds good."

Paul also nodded. "Yep, I'll have it, too."

Angie smiled. "Good choice. I'll have it right out."

While they waited, Miranda asked Paul about the little boy who had been reluctant to play ball with the other kids. "You did him such a favor by pulling him in," Miranda said.

Paul grinned. "He's gained confidence since then. He's made some friends and they team up together when we play baseball."

"I'm glad to hear it. I hate to see someone left out," Miranda said.

Paul cocked his head. "I'm not surprised that upsets you. You have a tender heart."

"Tell me what you do at the high-school," she said.

He told her about the history classes he taught and about coaching the football team. From what he said, he got along well with the students and the head coach. This didn't surprise her.

It didn't take long for the fresh fish to arrive, and they took a break to enjoy the flavorful meal.

After they had eaten for a bit, Paul studied Miranda and gave her an easy smile, "So, tell me something real about you. Not the school secretary version of who you are. I want the real Miranda version."

She laughed softly. "I think they're mostly the same person."

"I don't believe that for a minute."

His blue eyes held hers, his expression warm and unhurried, as if he truly wanted to know. The rapt attention unsettled her. She wasn't used to being studied like a valuable jewel.

"Well," she began, searching for something that wouldn't sound foolish, "I paint too late at night, I burn toast when I'm distracted, and I talk to my houseplants even though none of them have ever answered."

"That's a start," he said. "Anything else?"

She hesitated. There were other things, quieter things. The way she sometimes felt like she was standing outside other people's lives, watching them connect to one another. The way she prayed for courage more often than she prayed for anything else. The way she wanted a future but was secretly afraid of wanting it too much.

"I guess I'm still figuring out who I'm supposed to be," she admitted.

Paul nodded as if that made perfect sense. "I think most of us are."

His easy acceptance loosened something tight inside her. For a moment she let herself imagine what it would be like to

sit across from him at a table each morning, sharing ordinary conversations.

The thought startled her. She barely knew him. Happiness, she reminded herself, could disappear as quickly as it arrived. She had learned that already in smaller ways, friendships that faded, plans that never quite worked, dreams that looked solid until you touched them. Yet sitting here with Paul, breathing air that smelled of warm bread and garlic, Miranda felt dangerously close to believing this would turn into something real.

Having nothing more to say, she asked Paul to tell her about his own history. She was soon enraptured by his stories of mischievous deeds as a child. "I guess the worst trouble I got into was the time I pushed Joey Martinez against the wall. We were just playing around, but he tried to catch his balance, and when he grabbed the wall, he pulled the fire alarm. The whole school turned out for an unexpected fire drill. And I served a week of after-school detention." His boyish grin gave credence to the imp he had been.

"Another time, I bet this kid that he couldn't take his Pekingese dog to school and keep it for a whole day without the teachers finding out."

"Well? Did he take his dog to school?"

"He did. He almost made it, too. We had music class an hour before school was out, and the dog thought it could sing. It decided to accompany the teacher while she played the piano."

"He got caught, huh?"

"Yeah. I was glad, too. That bet almost cost me fifty cents."

"Are you still a gambler?"

"Nope. I gave up betting after that."

"And you never got in trouble after that?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I remember..." He continued with stories that made her laugh. What an imp he had been.

"You must have been quite a handful for your poor mother," she said.

"She only has a few strands of gray hair, but they are all because of me."

When they finished their coffee, she said, "I have a gallery over in Belmont Square that carries my work."

"Do I have any chance of getting a personal tour?"

"I think that could be arranged. Now what about you? What do you do when you're not at work?"

"I coach Youth Basketball one night a week. I usually go to the health club once or twice a week. Oh, and Shawna and I jog each morning. She wakes me up early so we can go before work."

Her stomach sank. In spite of her attempt to conceal it, she felt her face blanch. Emilie had said Paul wasn't married. So, who was Shawna? Had he taken Miranda on a date while living with another woman? She bit her lip. Now that the evening was ruined, she could only hope it was over quickly.

"A few times I've had some lame excuses like the flu and missed our jog. But I don't do it very often. She gets this look of disappointment in her big brown eyes. It makes me feel guilty. You know how it is with dogs. Once you start something, you can't stop." He said it as though reading the question in her mind.

Her suspicion had raised a jealous guard which she hurried to drop. Judging from his smile, she guessed Paul hadn't missed

her reaction. In fact, she suspected it was deliberately engineered. Her relief mixed with an urge to give him a swift kick under the table.

"So, Shawna's your dog?" she asked.

Yes. A big red Irish setter. I've had her for three years. I think she's just about got me trained."

"That surprises me."

Their waitress returned to offer dessert.

"Nothing for me, thanks. I couldn't eat another bite," Miranda said.

They ordered only coffee and Paul said, "Now, I know why you look so great. It's will power."

"Will power and early morning jogs, six thirty every weekday morning. I've been jogging alone. I don't have a dog to keep me company."

"Is that a fact or an invitation?" He leaned forward, wearing an amused smile. But there was a look of deep penetration in the blue eyes that earnestly sought an answer.

She blushed. He had a way of catching her off guard. And now she wasn't sure what to say.

Finally, she answered, "I just meant that I didn't have a dog. You could certainly take it as an invitation, if you like."

"I'll remember that." He reached for his billfold to pay the check.

She scrambled for her purse. "I'd be glad to pick up some of the tab. After all you just bought me two sacks of groceries."

He shook his head. "I wouldn't dream of it. I'm old-fashioned, I guess."

They paused outside the restaurant door. She wanted to extend the evening, so she said, "The gallery is open until ten tonight. Would you like a tour?"

His face lit up, giving his answer before he spoke. "I can't think of anything I'd like better."

He followed her to the gallery. As they walked toward the building, she took a deep breath and tried to settle her nerves. Her work was part of herself, each and every painting like a child whom she had lovingly crafted. It was hard to entrust her children to someone else's approval, especially when she really cared what they thought.

They stopped in front of the large plate glass window, and she took a deep breath. Then she pointed to the center painting of the three on display. It was a medium sized picture of a country road, bordered on the left by a large oak tree. To the right of the road, lay a field of swaying flowers and grass bending in a breeze. "That's one of mine."

"If I had to pick, I would have guessed that."

"Why?"

"It fits what I know about you so far, kind of quiet, gentle. I like it." He looked down into her eyes, and she felt her heartbeat quicken. He was so close that his mouth, sure and firm, was only inches from her own. She wanted to reach up and touch his lips with her fingers. She wanted to feel the masculine stubble of blond beard that covered his firm chin.

His lips parted in a quizzical smile, and she realized she was staring. She felt her face heat into a flush as she looked away. Had she wanted him to kiss her? She hardly knew him. But there was no denying the physical attraction she felt for this man.

She looked away and hurriedly explained. "Painting is a family tradition. My grandfather painted until he died a few years ago. My mother paints. Neither of them ever put their work for sale. They just gave it to friends and family. I suppose that's why I feel insecure about selling my work. Still, I'm glad you like it."

"Yes, I know what I like." His tone implied a deeper meaning as he put his arm around her waist.

The bell jingled, announcing their entrance. The owner came forward. She was a short, slender, woman in her early forties, dressed in designer jeans. She greeted Miranda warmly. "I'm glad you came in tonight. Did you bring me a customer?"

"I'm afraid not. This is my friend, Paul. Paul, this is Vicki. She owns this gallery."

"I'm glad to meet you," Vicki said. "You're welcome to look around at all the work. There's none better than the ones Miranda brings in. She has a promising career ahead of her. She could use a little more self-confidence though. She seems surprised that people want to buy her work."

"If I get too conceited, I'll demand higher prices," Miranda retorted.

"That will come in time," Vicki said.

Paul said, "I could tell she had talent from looking at the painting in the window. Now I'm wondering if I should ask for her autograph before she has to travel with bodyguards to protect her from the crowds."

Miranda rolled her eyes. "Don't you think you two are getting a little carried away?"

"You'll get well-known. I'm just glad I don't have to worry about you becoming a prima-donna. By the way, I have

something I want to show you. I was going to mail it, but since you're here, I'll get it for you. Look around a minute and I'll be right back," Vicki said.

"I wonder what she has," Miranda mused. "Vicki's always a bundle of energy. That's the main reason my paintings sell."

She led Paul to a wall of pastoral scenes, painted from her trips outside the city to the ample acres of rolling land. Old country barns, cows, flowers, and trees were the subjects. One painting, different from the rest, was done on a whim. It was a picture of a black Lab puppy, chewing on a shoe, as he lay under a mailbox. The shoe might have been in decent shape before he got it. When she saw it, he had shredded the tongue and was working on the sole. She had not been able to resist painting him.

Paul had been quiet as he looked over the paintings. When he saw the puppy, his contemplation turned to outright laughter. "I love it! I want that painting."

"Right." She laughed in return.

"I'm serious." He turned the price tag over in his hand. Four hundred dollars seems like a fair price."

She stared at him, mouth agape. He couldn't be serious. Men had done some quaint things to impress her. But she'd never had a date buy a painting at first sight, or any sight for that matter.

"You don't have to...I mean I don't expect.."

"I know you don't expect me to buy a painting. Believe me, I'm not generally a big spender and I'm not trying to impress you. I have a good reason for wanting that painting. If you let me meet you for a jog at six-thirty tomorrow, I'll show you."

She was still stunned by his quick decision. How could he part with four hundred dollars so quickly? It had taken her three months to part with two hundred fifty dollars to buy a new iPad. And that was something she had wanted for months. Surely, this decision was impulsive. Should she try to talk him out of it?

He took the painting off the wall just as Vicki returned with a brochure in her hand.

"Did you find something you like?" she asked.

"As a matter of fact, I did."

"He wants to buy the puppy," Miranda said, incredulously.

Vicki raised her eyebrows. "That was a quick sale. I'll have to study your technique."

"This one sold itself. It has a special meaning for me," Paul said.

"That's the best way." Vicki turned to Miranda. "Look over the new brochure while I write up the sale."

Painting in hand, Paul followed Vicki to the counter while Miranda read the pamphlet announcing that a nationally known artist, Robert Weldmon, was giving a workshop in March. She had admired his work for years, followed his career, and dreamed of attending one of the seminars he had begun giving.

This one would be perfect timing! She would be off work for Spring break. She could leave for the workshop on Sunday and be back before she would miss any work. Her heart beat a little faster in anticipation.

"I definitely want to do this. How do I get in?" she asked.

"It's not easy. If you look at the bottom of the brochure, you'll see Mr. Weldmon is going to select artists based on slides they submit," Vicki said.

"Oh. I wonder if I have a chance."

"As a matter of fact, I think you do. In fact, I've picked out some slides of your work and filled out an application for you. All you have to do is sign it."

"Oh, Vicki, you're wonderful. Thank you." She accepted the form and signed at the bottom.

"I've encouraged three other artists to apply, too, Dan, Sue and Patricia. I hope all of you make it."

"How many spots are there?"

"There's only thirty with three alternates."

"I hope I'm one of them."

Paul beamed down at her, sharing her excitement. She could tell by the look in his eyes that he really was hopeful for her.

They walked together to her car. She smiled up at him. "I had a great time tonight."

"So did I."

The streetlight behind them gave his face a soft outline. Once again, she realized she was staring. Before she could look away, he leaned down and kissed her softly on the lips.

It was gentle and slow and soft. When their lips parted, she longed for more. Instead, he stepped back, waiting for her reaction.

She lowered her eyes. "If you still want to go jogging on Monday, you can meet me in front of my apartment."

"I wouldn't miss it."

Thrilled by his promise, she opened her car door to slide onto the seat.

Paul said, "Is it okay if I follow you home. I'd feel better knowing you got there safely."

"That's sweet. I would appreciate it."

She waited until he put the painting into his truck, then started on her route.

When they arrived, she waited for him to park and then walked to his car.

"Would you like to come inside for another cup of coffee?" she asked.

"Just one cup. I'm nearly at my limit, but I'd like to see more of your apartment, especially your studio."

They climbed the stairs to her apartment and Miranda opened the door. She closed it behind them and felt the familiar calm of her own space settle around her. Every corner carried a memory of hours she'd spent planning her next painting. Bringing Paul into that world felt sacred, as if she were inviting him not only into her apartment, but into the future she was still trying to paint. Her gaze drifted to the closed door at the end of the hall. Beyond it, lay the spare bedroom she had claimed as a studio, the place where her best hopes took shape on canvas.

As though reading her mind, he asked, "Where's your studio?"

"It's in there." She pointed to the spare bedroom.

"Mind if I look?"

"Go ahead. I'll start the coffee."

Moonlight from the window fell across an easel standing near the wall. Several canvases leaned against a chair, their painted colors catching the mellow glow.

Paul switched on the light and walked slowly around the room.

When she joined him, he asked, "You did all these?"

Miranda leaned against the doorframe, suddenly self-conscious.

"Most of them," she said.

He studied the landscape on the easel. A line of autumn trees stretched across the canvas, their gold and crimson leaves glowing against a pale blue sky.

"This is beautiful," he said quietly.

She shrugged. "It's still unfinished."

"Looks finished to me."

She stepped beside him and examined the painting again.

"Artists always see what still needs fixing," she said. "The light needs more depth. And the shadows should be cooler."

Walking up beside him, she asked "What do you think?"

Paul turned his attention to her. "You see things most people miss. I think you're a very talented artist and a very beautiful woman."

Miranda felt warmth rise in her cheeks. Then, her breath caught. Without taking his gaze off her face, he pulled her toward him, tentatively, as though judging her reaction.

When she didn't resist, he held her close. She could feel his warm breath as his lips brushed gently across her forehead. She could feel the muscled hardness of his chest against the softness of her own, and she let herself drift happily in the intimacy they shared.

"I've wanted to hold you since the first day we met," he murmured.

She sighed as his lips traveled down her temple and cheek to graze gently along her neck. Then, claiming her mouth, his kiss was gentle, yet possessing.

She felt as though she were floating dizzily outside her body, sharing an experience that was too intense to be merely physical. Time stood still as, enveloped in his strong arms, she enjoyed his closeness.

When the kiss ended, she looked into his eyes and saw the look of caring and desire.

"You look like an angel," he whispered as he smoothed the short wispy bangs that fell across her forehead. She smiled, finding it exciting to be admired by a man to whom she felt an equal attraction.

His laugh, deep and resonant, broke the spell. "I guess one of us should get the coffee, shouldn't we?"

"Yes. I'm sure it's done by now."

"I'll have a cup. After all, that was my excuse for coming. To be honest, though, it was just a ploy to stretch the evening with you. If the coffee keeps me awake, I may have the urge to call you at three o'clock in the morning."

"It's decaf," she called over her shoulder as she got them each a cup. She carried the steaming mugs to the living room and settled near him on the couch. It was quiet in the apartment, and the room was dim. She felt warm, cozy, and comfortably tired.

The ringing of the phone jangled her from her relaxed state. In a hurry to get up, she fumbled with her cup, spilling a few drops of coffee on his slacks.

"I'm so sorry. I don't want that to stain. You better get a wet towel from the kitchen and blot it while I get the phone," she said.

"Don't worry about it. It will come right out." He obediently disappeared into the kitchen.

She picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Miranda, is your mother there?" The anxious sound of her father's voice chilled her to the bone.

"No. Was she coming over?" She couldn't imagine why her mother would be out at this time of night.

There was hesitation. Then her father said, "Wait a minute, honey. I think I hear a car."

She held the phone tightly, waiting for him to return.

Paul came back, gesturing that he'd gotten the stain out. He flipped through a magazine while he waited for her to get off the phone. His quizzical expression betrayed his curiosity.

"It's okay. She's back." Her father said a moment later.

"From where?"

"She said she started to the store and couldn't remember what she wanted to get." He uttered a combination of laughter and relief. "When I heard her leave, I was worried. I didn't have any idea where she was going."

"Why would she need something at the store at this time of night?"

"I don't know. The strange thing was, she was already in her nightgown when she went out."

Miranda stood, mutely waiting for an explanation that didn't seem to exist. Her mother had never been the type to do odd things. Why would she behave this way?

"The important thing is that she's back. I'm sorry I worried you, honey."

"That's okay, but don't you think this is a little strange?"

"Your mother's done several strange things lately. I'm sure it will straighten out. It must be hormones or something."

"Shouldn't she go to the doctor?"

"You know your mother. It's like pulling teeth to get her to a doctor. And, anyway, she doesn't seem sick."

Miranda sighed, still feeling concerned. "Well, keep an eye on her, okay?"

"Sure, honey. Good night."

Her father hung up, leaving her to ponder what was going on with her mom. Her sister had mentioned that their mother had been acting strange. Was there something seriously wrong?

"Is everything okay?" Paul asked.

"That was my father," she said as she sank beside him on the couch.

He waited for her to continue.

She sighed. There was no reason to burden him with the problems of her family. Besides, she had no idea how to explain the unusual behavior of her mother. She didn't understand it herself.

"My father was wondering if my mother had come over here. It turns out she was just out shopping." She tried to smile but knew it was a weak attempt.

He nodded. "I didn't mean to pry. My parents had a rough time when my brother died. It almost broke them apart."

It took a moment before she understood his meaning. "Oh no, they're not having trouble getting along. They've always

been close. In fact, I can hardly remember them ever arguing. It's just that Mom hasn't been herself lately."

She bit her lip. Paul sat quietly beside her, sipping the last of his coffee while hers sat untouched and growing cold. She wished they could capture their former closeness. She longed to go back to feeling cozy and comfortable. But the phone call had broken the mood, and she knew it was hopeless to try and force herself to regain her earlier serenity.

"It's getting late, and you look tired. I think I better be going," he said.

Even though she knew he had no way to fully assure her, his eyes were full of warmth and compassion.

She nodded. "I am tired. But I had a great time."

"I enjoyed it, too. Are we still on for Monday jogging?"

"Of course. Later I might drop my books in the hall so you can pick them up."

He ran his finger gently down the side of her cheek. "I'd think you were flirting."

"I would be."

"You wouldn't have to try very hard to get my attention."

"Then I'll see you Monday."

"You bet."

He stood up and stretched. "I'm coaching a soccer game tomorrow afternoon."

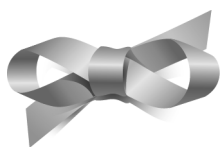
"You better get some rest, so you don't fall asleep on the sidelines."

He grinned. "Sometimes I do."

At the door, he leaned down and kissed her lightly on the lips. Then he was gone, leaving her alone to make sense of an

evening filled with a mixture of good and bad, concern and delight.

Yet she knew one thing for sure. She was more attracted to Paul than she had ever been to any other man. In her heart, she knew the truth. She was falling in love. The thought frightened, yet excited her, as she fell asleep with the sensation of his kiss lingering on her lips.



CHAPTER FIVE



THE NEXT MORNING, MIRANDA woke to sunlight streaming through the curtains, casting warm golden light across her bedroom. She stretched, savoring the comfort of her bed for a few more moments before rising. The memory of Paul's gentle touch and lingering kiss filled her mind, and she felt a flush of happiness.

After a quick shower, she attended church with her family. Though her mother behaved normally during the service, Miranda still worried about the strange behavior on Saturday night.

After church, she returned to her apartment. She dressed in casual clothes and tied her hair back. She had decided to enjoy the rest of the morning by working on her painting. Her thoughts wandered to last night's dinner and the intimacy she and Paul had shared. Her mood was light ever since their date. The memory of his stories, his laughter, and the way he had looked at her with such open admiration replayed in her mind. It gave her renewed energy as she concentrated on her new sketches.

Later, she glanced at the clock and realized that three hours had passed while she was lost in her daydreams. Would Paul call her today?

When her phone finally buzzed, Paul's name appeared on the screen, and her heart jumped.

"Hello?" she answered, trying to sound casual.

"Miranda, I hope I'm not interrupting anything important," he said.

His voice carried warmth that made her smile.

"Not at all. I'm just finishing up some sketches," she replied.

"I thought you might be sleeping in this morning, so I didn't bother you earlier. I want to know if you could join me for a jog around the park later. I know we agreed on tomorrow morning, but I'd like to see you again."

Miranda didn't hesitate before agreeing. "I'd love that. What time?"

"Six, if that works for you."

She smiled softly. "I'll hold you to that. Six it is."



JUST BEFORE HE WAS to arrive, Miranda stepped back from the bathroom mirror and surveyed herself. She was dressed in functional white cotton shorts and a pullover shirt. She'd secured her hair in a sleek ponytail to stay as cool as possible in the humid Gulf Coast autumn. Usually, her efforts would end here. Today was different. Today, she would not be alone. She would be with Paul. She added a touch of lip gloss. Her heart lifted as she wondered if Paul would notice the extra effort.

A few minutes later, Miranda stepped down the last stair and paused when she saw him waiting near the sidewalk.

Paul held the leashes of two large dogs, one a red Irish setter whose glossy coat shone in the afternoon light, the other a sturdy black Labrador who wagged her tail with hopeful enthusiasm.

Paul looked up as Miranda approached.

"Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon," she replied, trying to sound calm even as her attention fixed on the two dogs who were studying her with lively interest.

"I hope you like dogs. I usually jog with only Shawna, but I brought Mitzi today."

Paul patted the Irish setter's head. "This is Shawna."

He pointed at the Lab. "And this is Mitzi."

Miranda's eyebrow lifted. "It's nice to meet Shawna and Mitzi."

Paul chuckled softly, still amused by the jealous reaction he had gotten from her in the restaurant.

"Mitzi isn't well trained for jogging," he said. "But I wanted to show you why I liked the puppy painting I saw in your studio. Mitzi looked just like that when she was little."

Miranda held back slightly. Large dogs had always made her uneasy, especially ones that strained forward eagerly as if greeting a long-lost friend.

However, when Paul crouched to stroke their heads, she noticed the way his face softened. His affection for the animals was unmistakable.

She managed a cautious smile.

"I hope they're not the jealous type."

"No," Paul said with mock seriousness. "That would be me. The dogs are fine."

The playful remark sent a small flutter through her chest.

Encouraged, Miranda reached out tentatively. Two cool noses immediately pressed against her hand. She laughed under her breath as the Irish setter gave her wrist a quick, enthusiastic lick.

Paul gently drew the dogs back.

"You set the pace," he said. "It's your route, so we'll jog along."

They started down the path, letting the afternoon warmth surround them. Conversation flowed as they touched on light topics, shared observations about the park, and playful debates about favorite movies. Paul's easy charm and attentive nature kept her smiling and laughing.

At one point, Miranda paused to watch a flock of birds rise into the sky. Paul stopped beside her and mirrored her gaze.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he said softly.

"Yes. It reminds me how big and full of life the world is."

He nodded, his eyes lingering on her face. For a moment, silence fell, comfortable and warm. Miranda felt the depth of connection she shared with him, a connection that went beyond laughter and shared stories.

As they continued, they passed a small pond. The late afternoon sun reflected off the water, making it sparkle. Paul bent to pick up a fallen leaf, twirling it between his fingers before offering it to her.

"For you," he said.

Miranda accepted it, smiling at the small, thoughtful gesture. Her hand brushed his, and a spark of electricity passed between them.

"You're full of surprises, aren't you?" she teased.

"Only for the right person," he said softly

They continued, sometimes talking, other times, sharing comfortable silences. Miranda relaxed in a way she hadn't in a long time, appreciating the simplicity of the moment and the quiet thrill of budding romance.

Paul glanced toward her. "Do you jog each weekday morning?"

"Most mornings," she said between breaths. "It helps clear my mind before work."

"That's a good reason."

"What about you?" she asked. "You seem like someone who enjoys competition. Do you train for races?"

He shook his head. "Nothing like that. I just like being outdoors. After a day inside classrooms and gyms, running feels like freedom."

Miranda smiled at that.

For a few moments they ran in comfortable silence.

She became aware of the steady rhythm of their footsteps, the gentle rise and fall of her breathing, and the quiet companionship of someone moving beside her. She wondered if he had noticed it too.

They rounded a corner and the dogs surged ahead again, their paws tapping rhythmically against the pavement. Mitzi bounded ahead, then circled back, tail whipping happily.

"She thinks she's supervising," Paul said.

Miranda laughed softly. "I think she's making sure we don't slow down."

"If she had her way, we'd run ten miles."

Miranda shook her head. "Then she'd have to carry me home."

By the time they returned to her apartment, the sky had darkened into deep shades of twilight. Miranda felt a soft melancholy that the evening was ending.

"Thank you for today," she said as they reached the door.

Paul smiled, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "The pleasure was all mine. Shall we plan for another adventure soon?"

"Yes," she said, her heart full. "I'd like that very much."

"What will you do next Friday night, Miss Wilkins?" he asked.

The question caught her off guard. She had expected a casual goodbye, perhaps another friendly jog the next morning. Asking about her Friday plans quickened her pulse.

Deciding to tease him, she said, "I should spend some time with Leroy. I've been shortchanging him lately."

"Leroy?" His expression became guarded.

Miranda stifled a laugh. "Yes. Sometimes our dates last well past midnight. Time seems to fly whenever we're together."

Paul stared at her. Even the dogs were quiet. The hurt look on his face quickly overcame her desire to pay him back for his teasing about jogging with Shawna.

"My easel," she explained. "I named it Leroy. We've painted lots of paintings together."

A slow smile replaced the frown. "Touche."

He looked thoughtful. "I think 'Old Paint' would have been a more appropriate name."

She groaned.

"Since you are busy Friday, could Leroy spare you Saturday?" he asked.

"He's pretty demanding, but he might let me off. What did you have in mind?"

"Maybe a movie, a quiet dinner."

"I think I could persuade him to let me go."

He leaned down, placing a gentle kiss on her lips, tender and reassuring. She felt herself melting into the warmth of his arms for just a moment longer before pulling back with a soft sigh.

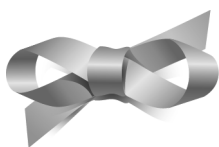
"I'll see you tomorrow morning. May I also call you in the evening?" he asked.

"You'd better," she replied with a playful grin.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," he said, giving her hand a gentle squeeze before heading down the stairs.

The simple touch sent a quiet thrill through her. Miranda closed the door, leaning against it for a moment. A flutter stirred in her chest as her thoughts lingered on him, on their growing connection, and the thrill of a love that felt new and right.

With a contented sigh, she turned toward her studio, ready to lose herself in her art once more, her heart quietly humming with the promise of what was to come.



CHAPTER SIX



AFTER FINISHING HER final sketch, Miranda lingered by the window, watching lightning dance across the dark sky. She marveled at God's artistry in the raw power and beauty of nature. She had tried to capture it on canvas countless times, but never with the satisfaction she craved. Tonight, she didn't need a painting. The storm itself was enough.

She prepared for bed with the treasured memory of spending time with Paul. He was easily the most amiable man she had ever met, and certainly the most handsome. She had begun to hope there would be a future for them and that it would last forever.



MID-WEEK, THEY HAD only a half day of school. A crisp cold front swept in, but she hardly noticed as she immersed herself in her studio, painting the leaves of a spreading oak. Her focus wavered however, when her thoughts drifted to Paul. She had doubted any relationship could come close to the exhilaration she felt during the quiet hours alone with her easel. Lately, she'd been drawn to him as Paul as much as she was to her art. She had always assured herself she would not fall

for a man who would restrict her passion for painting. She felt sure Paul would never ask her to give it up.

Her phone rang just as she was rinsing the last of the cobalt blue from her brush. She glanced at the screen and felt her pulse quicken.

Paul Green.

Anticipation arose before she even answered. "Hello."

"Hi," he said, "I was hoping you enjoyed our last jog as much as I did."

"I did," she admitted, leaning against the counter. "More than I even hoped."

"Good. Then I'm going to be brave and ask for an encore of sorts."

Her heart lifted. "An encore?"

"There's an indoor pool at the spa where I'm a member. I could bring you as my guest. Would you like to go swimming this afternoon?"

"Swimming?" She glanced toward the window where a cool breeze stirred the curtains. "Are you a member of the Polar Bear Club, or just into ice baths?"

His laugh warmed the line between them. "Neither. I promise the pool will be heated. No icicles allowed."

She hesitated, not because she disliked swimming. She loved it. However, the thought of him seeing her in a swimsuit made her suddenly self-conscious. She was not a model from a magazine. She was pale from spending the fall indoors. What if he didn't find her attractive? He'd only seen her in slacks and dresses.

"You don't have to," he added gently, misreading her pause. "We could just get coffee. I only wanted an excuse to see you again."

The simple honesty in his words tipped the balance.

"No, swimming would be fun," she said, surprising herself with the steadiness of her voice. "I haven't swum since last summer."

"Then it's settled. Four o'clock?"

"That works," she said.

When she ended the call, she remained by the easel, the brush still in her hand. Part of her was thrilled he wanted to spend the afternoon with her. Another part of her whispered doubts she had not felt since high school.

She set the brush down and shook her head. He had asked to see her, not an ideal. She wanted to be with him more than she wanted the safety of hiding.

An hour. Plenty of time to be brave.

She cleaned her brushes and retreated to her bedroom, pulling a swimsuit from the drawer. The white one-piece swimsuit was modest but flattering, high on the sides and low in the back. She studied herself in the mirror, turning once.

"You're going swimming," she told her reflection. "Not auditioning for a billboard."

She slipped into jeans and pulled a gray sweatshirt over the suit before hurrying downstairs.

Paul arrived right on time, and his familiar grin chased away her apprehension.

As she climbed into the truck, he said, "You know, this may have been a clever plan to see you in a swimsuit."

"I hope you won't be disappointed."

He tipped her chin for a quick kiss. "I have a little imagination."

It didn't take long to reach the spa. Inside, it smelled faintly of chlorine and eucalyptus. Warm air wrapped around them as they stepped into the pool area, and Miranda felt her shoulders relax for the first time since she'd cleaned her paints.

When she slid into the water, Paul met her there, his arms steady and sure.

"I can swim, you know," she said, amused. "My mom started me at eight, and I was a lifeguard one summer."

"Do you swim much now?"

"No. My job and painting take a lot of time."

They swam laps, traded playful challenges, and rested at the edge talking about nothing important, favorite foods and shows, the worst songs on the radio, and the odd habits of their relatives. Miranda soon forgot her concern about how she looked. She forgot the other swimmers entirely.

At one point, Paul cocked his head and studied her with approval.

"You look relaxed."

"I am," she admitted. "I've forgotten how good it feels. I'm usually concentrating on something at work or on a painting."

"I'm glad you came. We all need downtime now and then," he said. "All work and no play drain our energy. I know that from personal experience."



LATER, WRAPPED IN TOWELS, Paul bought burgers at a drive thru and they enjoyed comfortable small talk before they returned to her apartment. The evening had turned cool. She

invited Paul inside and turned up the heat while he searched for a movie channel.

They settled on the couch, the room glowing with warm light. Conversation drifted in and out, unhurried. For a while neither spoke as they watched the movie and listened to the rain pelt against the windows.

Miranda felt the pleasant drowsiness of a day well spent. This was what she had missed for so long, simple companionship with no pressure.

After the movie ended, he reached for her hand. "I'm glad you said yes today."

"So am I."

"I'm going to miss you next week. When are you leaving?" she asked.

He looked at her, puzzled. "Am I going somewhere?"

"Aren't you going to your folks for Thanksgiving? I thought you spent holidays with them."

"I do, but I usually wait until Christmas when there's more time. Then I go again during spring break."

"Oh." Excitement slipped into her voice. "Then you'll be here for Thanksgiving?"

"That's right."

"If you don't have any plans, why don't you come to my parents' house with me? I'm sure they'd love to meet you."

"If that's an invitation for turkey and dressing, I accept. I'd like to meet your family."

"Good. I'll call you later about the time."

He looked into her eyes. "Sounds good. It will give me a chance to find out more about you. I bet your family has good stories."

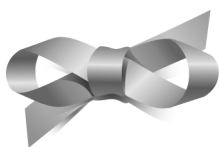
She raised an eyebrow. "I might have to rethink this."

He winked. "In that case, I promise to behave."

She walked him to the door, and he left after a good-night kiss.

Miranda leaned against the closed door and smiled. The future still held questions, but tonight she allowed herself one gentle certainty.

She was falling in love, and she wasn't afraid to admit it.



CHAPTER SEVEN



ON THE LAST DAY OF school before Thanksgiving, the walls were bright with colorful artwork. On display were construction-paper turkeys with lopsided feathers, paper plates painted to look like pumpkin pies, and a row of Pilgrims marching crookedly toward a sea of glittered corn.

Miranda walked slowly, studying each picture the way she might study paintings in a gallery. One child had drawn a family at a table so large it spilled off the page. Another had painted a single enormous turkey and written beneath it in careful, uneven letters: THANK YOU FOR MY FAMILY AND MY DOG. These were important things that made Miranda smile.

She thought of the dinner coming soon at her parents' house, the familiar table, her mother's dressing, her father carving the turkey with exaggerated ceremony. This year would be special with Paul there. The idea still felt fresh and quietly thrilling, as though a new chapter was opening in their lives.

She tried to imagine him in the living room, meeting her relatives, listening to her father's stories, teasing her sister, Paige, the way he teased her. The picture formed easily, almost too easily, and she wondered how a man she had known such a short time had already begun to fit into the fabric of her life.

A little girl hurried past carrying a paper cornucopia she was taking home.

"Do you like my picture, Miss Wilkins?"

"I love it," Miranda said. "It looks good enough to eat."

The child beamed and ran on, leaving a faint trail of glue and excitement.

Miranda touched one of the paper turkeys on the bulletin board, smoothing a bent feather. Children believed holidays were made of miracles, families that always came home, tables that were always full, love that never changed. She hoped, with a sudden quiet ache, that tomorrow would feel like that kind of miracle for each child in school.

When her day ended, Miranda gathered her purse and switched off the office lights.

Tomorrow was Thanksgiving, and she was eager for it.



SHE SLEPT LATE THE next morning, undisturbed by noise, since most of the other residents had either gone out of town or were enjoying a leisurely morning of rest. Her thoughts drifted to Paul's family in Colorado. Were they having a white Thanksgiving? Perhaps she could visit them someday. Eventually, she might give them grandchildren to brighten their lives and bring some consolation for the son they had lost. She shook her head. Where had that thought come from? She and Paul were only dating. Thinking that far ahead could be dangerous and could lead to heartbreak.

After loading the food she had prepared for Thanksgiving dinner, she slipped the key into the ignition and turned it. Nothing happened. Not a sound. She tried again, biting her

lower lip as she twisted the key harder. The engine remained silent. The battery was probably dead.

Now she understood why the car had been harder to start over the past few weeks. Knowing the reason was a small consolation this morning. She stared at the key in exasperation, realizing no amount of effort would bring the car to life.

Salad bowl in hand, she headed back upstairs and called Paul. His quick answer told her he was up and ready to go.

"I have a problem," she said. "My car won't start. I think the battery is dead. I don't know if I can get another one put in today. Certainly not before dinner."

"Don't worry," he replied easily. "I'll come to your rescue. After I pick you up, you can give me directions to your parents' house."

"I feel bad making you come get me, but I guess there's nothing else I can do."

"Hey, don't worry about it. I don't mind at all. I'll see you in a few minutes."

She was waiting when his truck pulled into the complex. The warmth of his smile made her forget everything except how good she felt when she was with him.

He set her salad on the back seat, then paused to admire her calf-length flowered skirt as it fell in soft folds from her waist. She had paired it with a silky beige blouse and flowered earrings.

"You look good," he said quietly. "I could stay here in the parking lot and stare at you all day."

He wrapped her in his arms, and they shared a warm kiss. Then, with playful gallantry, he swept her up and deposited her into the truck.

As he walked around to the driver's side, she felt assured their feelings were mutual. She loved resting in his arms, loved the tenderness of his kisses. Today, there would be little opportunity for that. Her parents' house would be full of relatives, and privacy would be scarce.

"Other than the car problem, how are you doing this morning?" he asked after he climbed in.

"Fine. And I see you brought pies. You weren't supposed to bring anything. It was enough trouble for you to pick me up."

"It's a small price to pay to avoid spending Thanksgiving alone with a frozen turkey dinner. Now, about your car, how about I put a new battery in it tomorrow?"

She raised her eyebrows. "I certainly wouldn't ask you to do that."

"You didn't. I offered."

"Absolutely not. You already have enough to do."

"What would I be doing tomorrow?" he asked. "I'd be wondering why you won't let me help you. I've changed plenty of batteries."

"I know you wouldn't offer unless you knew how. I just don't want to put you out. You told me the rain has slowed work on your new deck. If it's sunny tomorrow, you should work on that instead."

"The deck can wait. The battery can't."

"I'll have it towed to a garage."

"Doesn't that seem ridiculous and expensive when I could do it for you?" His voice held a trace of hurt feelings.

"Oh, Paul, it's not that," she said quickly. "I was raised not to put my problems on other people. If you really don't mind, I'd be grateful. But what can I do for you?"

“You invited me to dinner today. You’ve already done your part.”

She grinned. “I hope you still feel that way when we get there. It may be noisy. My cousin Trish and her husband are bringing their kids. One is a two-year-old, and the other is a baby.”

He raised a brow. “I’ve coached kids’ sports for years. I think I can handle it.”

She smiled, knowing it was true.

They drove through the familiar streets of her childhood neighborhood. The live oak her parents had planted before she was born now spread wide branches over the street. Her favorite mimosa still burst into pink blossoms each spring.

Little had changed in twenty-five years. Even her parents’ house remained the same, except for the small art studio /library they had added. Her mother painted there. Her father read westerns on the sofa to keep her company while she worked.

They parked beneath the live oak. A man and a little boy were in the yard.

“That’s Ben,” she said, pointing to the small boy kicking leaves. “The family terror.”

“Looks harmless to me,” Paul said, kissing her quickly.

“Looks can be deceiving.”

Inside, she introduced everyone to Paul. Paul knelt to talk to Ben instantly winning him over. Soon there was talk of football in the yard, and laughter spilled from the house.

As Miranda entered the kitchen, she was surprised to see her father helping with dinner preparations. Her mother stood slicing celery, her movements slightly hesitant. Hannah worked

more slowly than usual, pausing now and then as if something had slipped from her mind. Each time she smiled, it appeared a fraction delayed, as though she were stepping back into the moment instead of living fully inside it. Miranda tried to ignore a quiet unease settling in her chest.

For a time, the familiar rhythm of holiday preparations carried everything forward. They set the table and arranged the dishes. Laughter drifted through the house as family gathered at the table. Miranda moved through it all automatically, performing tasks she had known since childhood.

Miranda's worry kept her attention returning to her mother.

Later, as they ate, her mom was uncharacteristically quiet. Hannah contributed only an occasional nod or smile, and a slight twitch in her shoulder caught Miranda's attention.

Miranda watched her closely, pretending to listen to her uncle's story while studying the familiar face across from her. Her mother's hands rested in her lap instead of reaching for the serving dishes the way they usually did. Once, when Hannah lifted her water glass, a faint twitch moved through her shoulder, quick and involuntary, as if a string had been pulled beneath her skin.

Concern gnawed at Miranda, even as she tried to focus on the conversation and laughter that swirled around the table. Her father described a client who never balanced his checkbook. Trish insisted the cranberry sauce she'd brought was too tart, and Paige laughed at something Paul had said.

Miranda's fork paused halfway to her mouth. "Everything all right, Mom?" she asked softly.

Hannah blinked, as though pulled from a distant thought. "Oh, yes, dear. I'm just enjoying everyone talking."

The answer sounded reasonable, yet unease settled in Miranda's chest. She tried to push it away, to focus on Paul, on the easy way he fit among her family, but the small movements kept drawing her eye, the way her mother stared at the mashed potatoes as if she'd forgotten what they were, the way she reached for her napkin twice in the same minute.

You're imagining things, Miranda told herself. *She's tired. Holidays are tiring.*

Still, concern gnawed at her, a quiet, persistent ache that wouldn't be ignored.

After dessert, Paul suggested a short walk to burn off the pie, and Ben immediately declared he was coming too. The air outside was cool and sweet with the smell of damp leaves. Streetlamps flickered on as they wandered down the familiar sidewalk of Miranda's childhood.

Ben chattered for the first few minutes, asking Paul if he knew why the doggie behind the fence was barking and whether dogs dreamed at night. Catching sight of the moon, he wanted to know who lived there. Paul answered each question with serious consideration, as if the boy had asked matters of great importance.

Halfway around the block, Ben's voice began to slow. His steps grew uneven. Without a word, Paul scooped him up as naturally as if he had done it a hundred times before. Ben rested his head against Paul's shoulder and was asleep within moments. His small fist lay curled into the front of Paul's jacket.

Miranda walked beside them, watching the rise and fall of the child's breathing, and the protective curve of Paul's arm around him. The sight touched something deep and tender in her heart. He would be a wonderful father.

The thought came unbidden, yet it felt true, steady and certain, like the man himself. Paul shifted Ben slightly, careful not to wake him, and glanced at her with a sheepish smile.

"Guess I wore him out."

"I think he decided you're his best friend," Miranda said.

Paul looked down at the sleeping boy with an expression so gentle it made her throat tighten. For a moment she allowed herself to imagine a future she had barely dared to consider before, children of her own, a home filled with peaceful warmth. Then the image of her mother at the table returned, and the fragile dream trembled. She silently prayed that whatever shadows might be hovering over her family would soon pass.

When they entered the house, Paige pulled her aside while Paul went to deliver the sleeping child to his mother.

"Mom forgot how to make the dressing," Paige whispered. "Dad's worried and so am I."

"I'll talk to her in a few days when things quiet down," Miranda promised.

Paige nodded and they joined the others who were saying their goodbyes in the living room.

When Paul drove her home, her heart was still weighed down by Paige's concern. For Paul's sake, she kept her concern to herself.

Her thoughts shifted completely when he walked her up to the balcony outside her apartment. He turned her to face him

and ran a finger along her cheek. He said, "I enjoyed meeting your family tonight. They are great people. But what I enjoyed the most was being with you."

Joy pushed the edge off her worry. "I feel the same way."

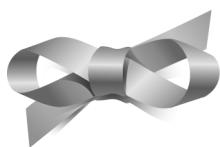
His smile widened. "I'll see you in the morning to put a battery in your car. Do you want to go for a jog first?"

She nodded. "I should. I ate too much turkey and dressing, not to mention pie."

He grinned. "So, did I. We'll work it all off tomorrow."

He gave her a lingering kiss before she entered her apartment. Then, turning, he walked toward the stairs.

As she prepared for bed, the day replayed itself in fragments. Laughter. Worry. Gratitude. She prayed fervently for her mother and thanked God for Paul, and his steady presence in uncertain waters.



CHAPTER EIGHT



MIRANDA AWOKE THE NEXT morning to a chilly wintery day. A glance at the clock revealed fifteen minutes until it was set to go off. Her thoughts jumped to plans for the day. Paul would arrive for their jog. Afterwards, they would tackle the job of replacing her battery. His presence would make the hassle much easier. Except for the expense, she looked forward to the morning.

Though concern for her mother still plagued her, she was determined to be cheerful for Paul. She arose and pulled her hair into a sleek ponytail. After applying a light touch of lipstick and blush, she slipped into a soft pink jogging suit. When she'd set the table with two placemats, juice glasses, and silverware, she hurried down the outside stairs to meet Paul.

He arrived exactly on time, with Shawna in the back of his truck. "Good morning, beautiful."

"Good morning."

They exchanged a kiss before beginning their individual routine of stretches and bends. After they warmed up, they set off along the winding trail. The sky above them stretched wide and endless, streaked with lavender and rose. Shawna happily trotted along, her leash slack, her ears perking at the rustle of

birds in the brush. Gravel shifted beneath their shoes as the path curved past scrub brush and low fencing.

When they returned, she asked Paul, "How would you like a warm breakfast? You're welcome to bring Shawna up. She's a well-mannered girl and won't cause any trouble. I'm prepared to cook bacon, eggs, and toast, in payment for help with my battery."

He rubbed his forehead in mock fatigue. "The battery is going to take a lot of energy. I hope you have a lot of bacon."

She chuckled at his inept acting. "I do."

"Then let's get up there and cook."

Despite her protests that he relax, he insisted on turning the bacon while she stirred the eggs. When the food was done, she looked across the table and grinned. "It feels strange to have you here for breakfast."

"I like it."

"So do I," he said. "My breakfast usually consists of cold cereal or pop-up pastries."

"Mine, too. But we can't have a mechanic working without proper fortification."

When they finished the meal, Paul disconnected the old battery and lifted it out. "Let's take this over and get a replacement. We'll come back and put it in."

After they bought the new battery, Shawna rode in the backseat of the truck and babysat it on the way back. "I'll have this done in no time," Paul promised.

"You're fast."

"Only with you."



A HALF-HOUR LATER, he rubbed his hands on his jeans and closed the hood. "All done, lady. No charge."

"You're too kind."

"Maybe I want something in return. If I prove I'm a good mechanic, you'll let me work on all of your cars for the rest of your life."

The rest of her life? Her heart skipped a beat. Was he suggesting what she thought? She looked into his eyes and said, "I might just take you up on that. Good mechanics are hard to find."

He perched on the hood and pulled her to him, capturing her between his legs. "Then you'd better be loyal to this one."

He bent to kiss her.

She was aware that anyone crossing the parking lot would see them. She decided she didn't care. Her pulse raced from the closeness of his body and the warmth of his lips. She wished they could share this moment forever. She would be happy to remain here and never move.

However, he interrupted their comforting cocoon when he left to run his own errands. She walked upstairs, wrapped in the warmth of his affection and looking forward to their future.



ON SATURDAY, MIRANDA carefully wrapped her new autumn scene and took it to the gallery. The vibrancy of the work spoke to her deeply. The russet leaves and soft gold light captured a moment she hoped others would feel as deeply as she had while painting it.

Miranda smiled to see several cars parked in the gallery parking lot. Winter could be a slower time for sales for Vicki as well as for herself.

She brought the painting inside the cozy front room and perused the other paintings while she waited for Vicki to finish with a customer.

After the woman left with the small purchase, Vicki scurried to greet Miranda. "I've got good news for you! I just got an email that you were accepted into Robert Weldmon's workshop. Congratulations! You deserve it."

Enthusiasm brightened her smile.

Miranda stood speechless for a second. Then, the news sunk in. "Seriously? I can't believe it! That's amazing. I didn't want to get my hopes up, I'm so happy!"

"That's not surprising," Vicki said, wearing a wide grin. "It will be intense. So, be prepared."

"Don't worry. I'll put to use everything he teaches. I'm looking forward to the challenge."

Vicki's gaze shifted as she studied the painting Miranda had brought in. She tilted her head as she took in every detail.

"It's gorgeous," she said. "You get better all the time."

A thrill of satisfaction brought a smile from Miranda as Vicki cradled the painting and carried it to the back for framing. When she returned, Miranda said, "I'm doing a portrait of Paul for his mom for Christmas."

"That will mean a lot to her," Vicki said. "He's a special guy. I liked him right away."

Miranda grinned. "So did I. He's hinted about getting married."

"Really? I better get an invitation!"

"You will. I would never overlook my favorite gallery owner."

"Make sure you keep the paintings coming and I'll be happy."

"I will," Miranda assured her.



THE NEXT DAY, PAUL arrived to sit for his portrait. He wore an unbuttoned maroon sweater his mom had made for him, the knitting even and careful. Beneath it was a light blue sport shirt, and at his collar hung the hand-painted tie his brother had given him.

"My mom will love this present," he said.

Miranda smiled at his thoughtfulness. Though the gift would be a painting of Paul, it would also be a tribute to Jimmy's memory.

Before beginning the first sketch, she told him about the workshop, and he congratulated her with a kiss. She doubted he truly understood the honor she felt to be chosen. However, his enthusiasm on her behalf filled her heart with warmth.

They settled in to begin the painting. She studied his face as she carefully sketched charcoal lines across the paper. It was a face she had come to know better than her own, and she loved every line and curve. The intense blue eyes fringed by dark blond lashes. The regal nose. The cropped blond hair. And the warm, full lips that so often curved into a mischievous smile just for her.

"I've been wondering," he said, staring straight ahead. "What are you doing over Christmas break?"

"I'll probably spend it with my family, and I'll work on my paintings. Why?"

"My folks have enough room at their place in Colorado to put us both up. Would you consider coming for a visit sometime during the holidays?"

Her hand paused in midair. The invitation was tempting. She was already dreading the two-week separation from Paul. But was she ready to meet his family?

"I know they'd love you," he continued. "They believe my judgment is beyond question. If I brought you home, they'd know it was because you are the most wonderful woman in the world."

She laughed. "Judgment beyond question. Such humility."

She did think visiting him in Colorado sounded exciting. "Let me think about it and see when I could come," she said.

His eyes lit with eagerness. "Great. Let me know and I'll make arrangements."

"I will. Now, will you sit still?"



WHEN HE CAME BACK ON Tuesday, she had made her decision.

"I'm going to spend the week before Christmas and Christmas Day with my family. After that, I'm all yours."

He embraced her. "I don't think I could have stood two weeks without you. We'll have a great time. You'll love Colorado."

She beamed. "I'll love being there with you."

In the days ahead, they worked steadily to complete his portrait. On the last Saturday before Christmas break began,

pale winter sunlight slipped quietly from the room as Miranda said, "It's finished."

Paul stood and studied the painting. "I love it and so will my mom. I still wish you would let me pay you something for all the work you've done."

"No. We agreed. I want this to be a gift to your mother from me, too. If you pay me, it can't be a gift."

He grinned. "You win. I look better in the painting than in real life. But I'm not complaining."

He traced a finger down her cheek. "I wish I could paint you. I'd hang your face across from my bed. It would be the first thing I'd see every morning."

"Don't you see enough of me already?" she teased, though she would miss him next week.

"I could never see enough of you," he murmured. "Sitting still would have been torture if I hadn't been spending time with you."

He wrapped her in his arms and buried his face in the crook of her neck. She savored their closeness as he said, "I still can't believe I've found someone like you. I'm afraid I'll wake up and find out you don't really exist. You know I couldn't stand to lose you."

She touched his face gently, searching his eyes. "I don't want to lose you either. We'll simply trust God to keep us safe in His hands."

Paul frowned. "I have a problem with that. I was raised in church. We prayed for Jimmy. All of us did. My mom knelt in prayer with tears running down her cheeks. And after all that, Jimmy died. Why didn't God heal him?"

"We don't always get what we want," she said softly. "That doesn't mean God doesn't hear us."

Paul shoved his hands into his pockets. "Watching a little boy suffer and die has confused my faith. Working though it has been hard."

"I can certainly understand why. When you told me a funny story about Sunday School, I thought you were a believer. Are you?"

"I believe God exists. I just don't think He bothers with our problems. I don't trust fairy tale endings. All it takes is one bad card to lose everything you love. That's why I'm scared of losing you."

Her heart twisted, as she said, "If you did, I'd hope you could understand that God had a reason."

She would pray each day that God would renew his faith.

"I've upset you," he said quietly. "I'm sorry. It's my problem."

"It's our problem," she replied. "And I want to help."

"Maybe sometime," he murmured. "I'm not ready yet."

Unwilling to push, she stayed quiet.

Then he said, "I hate to sound like my stomach rules my life, but I'm hungry."

"I'll make you a deal. I need to deliver a large painting to the gallery tomorrow. If you'll help me by bringing it in your truck, I'll fix supper tonight."

"Sure. That reminds me, that I need to get something out of my truck. I'll be right back."

He returned with a wrapped package just as she slid a pan of lasagna from the microwave.

"This is for you to open after we eat," he said.

Curiosity filled her thoughts as they ate in happy companionship, savoring the meal and each other's company. Later, they exchanged presents of a warm sweater for him and a silver heart necklace for her. Their excitement about the gifts helped Miranda push aside her tension about Paul's faith issue.

When the wrapping paper was cleared away, they lingered at the table, neither quite ready for the evening to end. The room felt warm and peaceful, lit by the soft glow of the lamp and the faint scent of tomato sauce and basil still lingering in the air.

Paul reached for her hand, his thumb tracing slow circles across her palm. "Thank you," he said quietly. "For tonight, and for being patient with me."

Miranda gently squeezed his fingers. "We'll figure things out. One step at a time."

He nodded, relief softening his features. After a moment, he pulled her into his arms. She rested her head against his shoulder, listening to the steady rhythm of his breathing. Nothing spiritual had been solved, but something had been strengthened.

When he finally kissed her goodnight, it was slow and lingering, filled with promise rather than certainty. And somehow, that felt like enough.



THE NEXT MORNING, THEY dropped by the gallery to deliver the painting. Vicki greeted them with a smile. "I have both my award-winning artists here tonight." She gestured to a tall young man who was standing nearby.

Miranda smiled at him. "Dan! I heard you got into the workshop, too. I hope Weldmon is as good a teacher as he is an artist."

I hope so, too. I need to pick up a few pointers."

Dan glanced curiously at Paul.

"Dan, this is Paul Green. Paul, this is Dan O' Riley. He paints beautiful Galveston beach scenes. We did our last art show together."

The men shook hands.

Looking pleased, Vicki said, "I'm thrilled, Miranda, that you and Dan will both be going to the workshop. I've decided to have you share the spring show again this year. Your work shows well together."

Miranda smiled, feeling genuinely pleased. Dan was a nice guy. His seascapes and beach scenes were loose and impressionistic and very unlike her detailed landscapes, so neither artist would be competing for the same customers.

"That would be great," she agreed.

Dan nodded. "Speaking of sharing, I was thinking that since we'll both be going to the workshop, maybe we could share a ride. I don't mind taking my car. It's a pretty long drive and we could split the cost of gas. What do you say?"

"Sounds good."

"Well, I'll call you soon and we'll settle the details."

"All right. I just came in to leave this large painting for framing."

Vicki held up a hand as she scanned some paperwork. "Let's see. Ten of the paintings you've brought in have been saved for the show. I'd like to have at least fifteen. Better get busy and keep those paintings coming."

"Don't worry. I will," Miranda promised.

She'd been so involved in talk of the show, she didn't notice Paul's mood until they got to the car. As he started the engine, she felt as if a chill had come between them.

"Is anything wrong," she asked.

"No."

"Are you sure? You've gotten quiet."

"I'm worried about all the time you'll be spending with Dan.

"Is that it? Are you jealous?"

"Should I be? I don't know how well you know this guy. You sounded like old friends and you're spending a week with him."

"You make it sound like we're going away together. I'm not spending the week with him. I'm spending it at the workshop. Don't you want me to go?"

He glanced at her for the first time since they'd got in the car. "Of course I want you to go. It's just that..."

He shrugged as though helpless to express what he was feeling. "It's not you. It's me. I'm sorry, so let's just forget it, okay?"

He had blown things out of proportion. Perhaps he realized it now. "Okay. We'll forget it," she agreed.

When he remained somber, she knew he had not shaken his doubts. As he walked her to her door, he looked so much like a miserable little boy that her heart went out to him. She reached up and gently touched his face.

"Would you like to come in for some coffee?"

"I'd better not. I have to finish packing for my flight this afternoon."

"I wish I knew what to say to make you feel better."

He sighed. "It's not your fault. I feel foolish to admit it, but I feel insecure that you're spending time with another guy. I know it's just business. But you're so beautiful, I can't imagine how anyone could help but fall in love with you. And I don't want to lose you."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and looked deep into his troubled eyes. "I've done shows with Dan for the last three years and he hasn't fallen in love with me yet. And I haven't fallen in love with him. I'm in love with you."

It was the first time she had put her love into words, and it felt right.

A smile lit his face. "It is foolish," he agreed.

"Yes. It is. It takes two to fall in love. Dan doesn't have any interest in me, other than professional. And I don't have any interest in him. I've already found you."

His expression warmed with a smile. "I'm going to miss you over the holidays. I'm not good at saying goodbyes."

"I'll see you in one week. Of course, you'll have to be on your best behavior in front of your family."

"I'll try if it means spending time with you before we go back to work."

"I'll look forward to it."

He kissed her again before he walked away. He turned to look at her once more, and she blew him a kiss.

A few minutes later, Miranda drove to her childhood home to pick up Paige for their shopping outing. When she arrived, Paige said, "Dad dropped Mom off for a visit with Aunt Sandra. So this is a day for sister shopping!"

"It's about time we had a sister's day. I haven't gone shopping with you since Mom's birthday last May

"I know. I can't wait to get to the mall. There's this really cool poster I want to get. It has the neatest picture from a movie I saw."

Miranda raised her eyebrows teasingly. "Are you shopping for other people or for you?"

"I've got some extra babysitting money. I'll have enough for everything." To prove her assertion, Paige held open her billfold and exposed a crumbled mass of cash.

"That looks like a lot."

Paige frugally planned where she spent her money, dividing it into special funds.

"I've saved over a hundred dollars for Christmas."

When they arrived at the mall, they selected a hardback book to add to their father's collection of westerns. Paige found a cookbook for their aunt and Miranda found a suspense novel for their uncle. But that still left several members of the family.

"Let's do Ben and Timmy next," Paige suggested. "Little kids are always easy."

After trying out the electronic toys, Paige finally chose a stuffed dog that wagged its tail and barked for Ben, and an activity box for Timmy.

Miranda shook her head. "Those are noisy toys. If I ever have kids, remind me not to let you inside the house with a wrapped box."

After lunch, they decided to walk down to the bath store in the hope of finding something for Trish. On the way, a bridal shop caught their attention.

"Oh, isn't that one beautiful," Paige said, pointing to a lacy dress in the window. And also, look at this silk one over here."

Paige gave her a sly look. "How are things going with Paul?"

"Pretty well," Miranda said. We've talked about the possibility of marriage. Just thinking about it, you understand."

Paige let out the breath she had been holding. "Oh. I can't believe it. A wedding. It's so exciting!

"Wait. We're just thinking about it, remember?"

"I know. But you'll marry him. I could tell he loved you from watching you on Thanksgiving. I know you love him or you wouldn't even be thinking about getting married."

Paige turned her attention back to the dresses. "Let's go inside and look."

"Oh, Paige, I'm not going to choose anything today."

"I know. But it would be fun. Come on."

Miranda followed her sister into the store.

"Isn't this the most beautiful dress you've ever seen?" Paige asked, pulling out a dress that was silky white satin edged with pearls.

"It is beautiful."

"And look at this." Paige moved to a rack on the side where she pulled out a garment made almost entirely of lace. "I don't think I can imagine anyone getting married in anything this revealing."

"I think those are the slips."

"Oh." Paige giggled. "What about bridesmaids? Have you decided on a maid of honor?"

"Are you available for the job?"

"Of course." Paige's eyes were shining.

"If I get married, that is."

"You'll get married. Can I help you pick out my bridesmaid dress? I mean, I wouldn't want you to choose something out of fashion or anything."

Miranda gave her a playful swat on the arm. "For that comment I may reconsider the job offer."

They left the bridal store and spent the afternoon choosing the rest of their gifts. When they got home, Miranda lent a hand with supper.

"Miranda can stay for dinner because Paul's out of town." Paige announced. "Did you tell them what we looked at in the mall?"

"Paige!"

"Well, you said you'd been talking about getting married."

Miranda flushed. "Talking about it, remember."

Her dad smiled. "I knew it. I told your mother it was just a matter of time."

Hannah's eyes lit up. "Oh, Miranda, you and ... " she paused, looking confused.

"Paul," Miranda finished softly, feeling another twinge of worry. "Just remember, before all of you get too carried away, that this is unofficial."

"We'll remember." Her father gave Paige a wink.

For the next two days, Miranda kept her promise to Paige to spend as much time as she could to assist with cleaning, shopping and meal preparation. It kept her too busy to work on the painting she had started.

Hannah helped her daughters decorate the house with the odd array of homemade decorations made and collected over the years. However, she was undecided as to where anything should go. The smell of fresh gingerbread that customarily

filled the house was provided by Paige. The date nut cake was forgotten as were Christmas cards to old friends. Hannah spent her time sitting in front of her still life of a poinsettia, though she never worked to finish it.

Paige was in a whirl of holiday parties. Since she didn't have her driver's license yet, Miranda took over the job of chauffeur. She was glad to do it since the activities helped keep Paige's mind off their mother's lack of holiday interest.

There was no doubt Hannah Wilkins was not her old self. The twitching in her shoulder had grown more obvious. And her memory of everyday affairs had grown worse as Miranda discovered when she took her shopping for gifts. It was Miranda who had done the choosing and when it was time to pay, Hannah couldn't remember how to use her credit card. She fumbled in embarrassment while the salesclerk waited impatiently to serve the long line behind her.

Miranda helped her find a charge card and run it through the machine. The incident caused Miranda's concern for her mother to grow even deeper. At home, she slipped into the studio where her father sat addressing Christmas cards. "I haven't done this in a long time. I hope I'm not forgetting anyone your mother usually sends a card," he said.

"I'm awfully worried. Do you have an appointment for Mom yet?"

He sighed. "Next Wednesday. It was hard to get an appointment during the holidays."

"I'm anxious to find out what's wrong."

"Me too, honey. Thanks for helping around here. It's been a sacrifice for you. You have a life of your own. As much as I appreciate the help, I can't let you keep doing this after

Christmas. I'm going to look into hiring a part-time housekeeper until your mother gets well."

Miranda swallowed hard. Her mother had always taken pride in keeping her house clean. How would it feel to have another woman washing clothes, dusting, and cooking their meals? However, that is exactly what Miranda had been doing this week.

She leaned down and kissed her father's cheek. "I better get going. I'll see you tomorrow."



THE NEXT DAY WAS CHRISTMAS Eve. At twilight, she drove downtown to meet her family for church. As darkness descended, Christmas lights lit downtown buildings in glowing patterns of stars and trees.

She parked in the lot where her dad had parked each Sunday since she was a child. Her parents and Paige were waiting. As they walked to church, she noticed a mixture of people around her.

An elderly man pushed his wife in a wheelchair. Their faces were lined with age. What had their lives together been like? Judging by their weathered faces, she was sure they had seen their share of joy and pain.

Three elderly women came together, and she decided they were probably widows. They knew what it was like to lose someone they loved.

Then, there was a mother with two young boys in tow. Why was she alone with her sons? Was she divorced? Widowed? Or maybe her husband was at home putting toys together. Miranda pictured a frazzled man with a toolbox

looking as beleaguered as her dad did the year he put Paige's bike together.

One thing they all had in common was the life experience of joy and sorrow. She thought of her mother's odd changes and hoped there was nothing seriously wrong. She thought of Paul turning his back to God after losing his brother. So far, Miranda had skimmed through life unscathed. Someday, she was sure to have a load to bear. That sobering thought made her feel close to the strangers who trod beside her.

When they took their seats, a measure of peace returned to Miranda's heart. The decorations brought back childhood memories. A tall tree draped with lights and decorated with colorful balls stood in the corner by the pulpit. Green garlands and red bows were draped along the walls. Rows of potted poinsettias sat upon the communion rail, their beauty a testament to the glory of this night.

She remembered many other Christmas Eves she had spent worshipping in this church. It gave her a sense of security to see that here, at least, nothing had changed.

The deep chords of the organ prelude began. She glanced at the faces of her family, lit in a soft glow. Her mother's face, peacefully quiet, her father's face, reverent and prayerful, taking in all the comfort he could find. Paige, young and solemn as she sang the opening verse of "Silent Night." Tonight, their faces would be etched in her memory forever.



THE NEXT DAY, THEY celebrated Christmas. They tried hard to pretend it was like every other Christmas. It wasn't. As Hannah tried to open a download of her favorite country

singer on her phone, she frowned, uncertain of what it was and how to do it. She used to play songs on her phone almost constantly as she painted or worked around the house. Now, she turned the phone over in her hands, saying, "I'm not sure how to do this."

She picked up another gift. It was a book from Paige.

"It looks good," she said, giving Paige a hug.

She pulled off the bright wrap of the antique music box Miranda had bought and stared at it. A frown creased her brow.

Miranda's heart sank as she watched her mother's confusion. "Here Mom. You wind it like this."

She took the box gently and wound it for her mother.

"Oh, it's so pretty." A pleased smile played on her lips, though her words were slightly slurred.

Miranda's father's voice broke in, saying, "I didn't know what to get you girls, so, here it is."

He handed them envelopes that held gift certificates to a local craft store.

After thanking him, Miranda turned to Paige. "How about we go shopping on the Saturday I get back from Colorado?"

"Sure. I'd like to get some fake fur to make a coat for a home economics project."

"A coat? Wow. You have learned a lot. I can't even sew a pair of shorts and you're making a coat." Her admiration was real. She could hardly mend, much less sew.

Pleased, Paige smiled at the compliment.

In the afternoon, Miranda went home to pack for her visit to Colorado. Now that the trip was near, she was plagued by self-doubt. What would she say to Paul's parents? What if she

needed dressier clothes? Were they as confused about God as Paul confessed being?

Paul said his father owned a large building company, and he did quite well. Her humble background gave her little confidence in social graces. She hoped she didn't embarrass herself.

The ringing of the phone pulled her from nervous thoughts. She answered it and was delighted to hear Paul.

"You didn't think I would let Christmas pass without calling, did you?"

"I didn't think about it, but I'm glad you did." She could hear the sounds of laughter and merriment in the background. It filled her heart with longing. She wished her own Christmas could have gone as well.

"How did your mom like the painting?" she asked.

"She loved it. After all I told her about you, she loves you, too."

"I'm not sure I can live up to all you told her."

"You already do. I miss you, you know."

"I miss you, too, even more than I thought I would." Tears welled in her eyes. She longed to tell him about her mother and how worrisome the week had been, to have him hold her and tell her that, no matter what, he would love her. She wanted to look into his eyes and see the confirmation. However, it didn't seem fair to dampen his spirits with her problem when he was too far away to give any real comfort. She decided not to mention it.

"How was your Christmas, other than missing me terribly?" he asked.

"From what I can hear in your background, it was much quieter than yours. It was nice, though."

"Good. I can't wait to see you tomorrow. I'll be waiting when your plane lands."

"Thanks. I hope I'm not late."

"I hope not, too. I can't wait to see you."

"I've been trying to pack, and I don't know what to bring."

"Casual, but warm. Jeans, sweaters. That sort of thing. We're not formal here."

"I'm glad. I like casual."

"You'll fit right in."

She cradled the phone against her cheek and smiled, missing him, yet comforted by his voice. If his family was anything like him, she would feel at home.

"I better get back to the group. I've been challenged to a game of chess by my uncle," he said.

"You never told me you play chess."

"My dear, I was in the chess club in high school."

"Were you now? Well, my grandfather taught me to play when I was six years old. I haven't played much in a while, but I hereby challenge you to a game."

"I like a woman with a mind for chess. I accept your challenge. I bet you put up a good fight before I win."

"You think you'll win, do you?"

"Yes."

"Well, we'll see. Maybe I'll show you."

He laughed. "Maybe you won't."

"Go play your game. I hope your uncle beats you. Maybe that will teach you some humility."

"Can't be done."

"Teaching you humility? I know."

"You're cruel, but I love you."

"And I love you." She hung up savoring the memory of his jovial banter. Hearing his voice had been just what she needed. Her heart warmed as she remembered his chess challenge. What had he been like in high-school? She tried to imagine a younger Paul, his blue eyes deep in concentration, as he studied a chess board in preparation for his move. His brows would have been furrowed, the way they were when he was thinking deeply. He would have rubbed his hand across his chin.

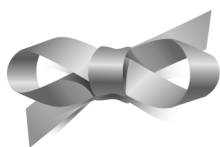
She wished she had a time machine to go back and see a little of his earlier life. How she would love to go to one of his games and see him play first base or sing in the school choir.

When she met his mother, she would do the next best thing. She would ask for photo albums. All mothers treasured them and there would surely be pictures of him from all stages of life.

There would be pictures of his brother, too. She wondered if he had looked like Paul at the same age. It must be bittersweet for them to see old pictures and relive the time when Jimmy was alive.

She wondered how his parents had handled their loss. Had they given up on God, also? She hoped not, for she needed allies in restoring Paul's faith.

Instead of dwelling on it tonight, she concentrated on Paul's words of love. They flowed into her heart like a soothing stream. He loved her. God loved her, too. He would help her through this troubling time with her mother, and whatever lay ahead.



CHAPTER NINE



MIRANDA PARKED IN LONG-term parking and caught a shuttle to the terminal. Since she wasn't a seasoned traveler, she worried about making a mistake. However, with an hour to spare, she worked her way through the crowd of holiday excursionists and checked her luggage. Signs pointed her to the right gate, and once she had her boarding pass, she began to relax. All she had to do now was get on the plane.

At the boarding call, she followed the line of passengers and slid into her window seat. A middle-aged woman flashed a quick smile as she took the seat beside her.

"I hope I haven't forgotten anything."

"I know what you mean. I always forget the most obvious things." Miranda stopped short of telling her about the time she went on a family vacation and forgot to pack her underwear.

"I'm going for a visit with my new granddaughter. She was born two days ago. She's my first grandchild." Her face shone with pride.

"I bet she's beautiful. Is she your daughter's child?"

"Yes. I only have one daughter. She's my youngest. I also have two older boys, though neither of them are married yet."

She pulled out a crochet hook and yarn and began to work on a small knitted cap. Matching booties peeked out of the bag.

The plane took off, banked, and then straightened as it gained altitude and sliced smoothly through the air. Miranda watched clouds pass just below the wing and thought about the proud words of the grandmother who sat next to her.

Would her mother have those same feelings someday? Would she hold her grandchildren one day and give advice during those early weeks of transition? Miranda hoped with all her heart that her mother would soon be back to her old self.

When they touched down in Colorado Springs, her heart began a jogging beat of anticipation. After she disembarked, she scanned the crowd. Paul's blond head stood above the throng. Excitement surged through her as he spotted her and shot an eager smile.

When they met, he embraced her. For a moment she forgot the crowded terminal and the echo of rolling suitcases. The familiar warmth of his arms made the travel stress suddenly worthwhile.

"I've missed you," he said, kissing the top of her head.

"I've missed you, too."

They retrieved her luggage and headed out to the parking lot. Expecting to see his truck, she was surprised to see him unlock a Jeep and set her bags inside.

She laughed. "I forgot you flew. It took me a minute to realize we weren't stealing this Jeep."

"I came by it honestly. It belongs to my dad. My folks are waiting at home. They're eager to meet you."

Her stomach fluttered at the mention of his parents. "I hope I make a good impression."

He looked at her from head to toe and his smile widened. "How could you not?"

As they drove, she admired the beauty of the snow-covered landscape. "I guess you had a white Christmas."

"You guess right."

They headed toward Manitou Springs. As they wound up the road, she saw snow covering Pike's Peak. It was beautiful and peaceful, like a white fairy kingdom.

Paul said, "It's beautiful here all year. I'll have to bring you in the fall so you can see the leaves change. It rivals New England. In fact, I think it's even prettier."

"Everything is so white. I can hardly imagine fall colors."

"You'd find more scenes to paint here than you'd ever have time to do. I'd love to see your talent with aspens in the fall."

She thought about the wealth of the subject matter. She could do hundreds of paintings from this variety of terrain and vegetation. If she painted different seasons, she could shower Vicki with new and exciting work.

He glanced over. "Are you planning a painting?"

"Dozens."

"If I talk you into camping someday, I could show you places you never dreamed existed."

"It sounds heavenly."

She paused, then asked, "I know why I live on the Gulf Coast. I was born there. But why did you leave there?"

He eased the Jeep around a curve. "Something important called a job."

"I do understand that."

They rode in silence for a while, enthralled by the scenery.

Soon, they turned off the main road into an area chosen for privacy. The lots were large and the houses were impressive. She drew in her breath at one palatial estate set back from a fir-lined drive.

Staring at the house, she said, "Wow. That rivals anything in Houston's River Oaks."

"It's probably as big. It belongs to a rich European who likes his privacy."

She nodded. "I can't imagine having that much room."

"You won't at my parents' house. It's modest in comparison. We'll be there in about five minutes. My folks live down at the end of this road. My dad built most of the houses you'll see along here. My mom is an interior designer. Most of these people don't do their own decorating, so she does a lot of their interiors."

They pulled into the circular drive of a cream-colored house. A large circular window looked down from the second floor above the pillars of the covered porch. The cedar trees that framed the front of the house had lost their snow and stood in verdant contrast to the white lawn.

Paul wheeled the Jeep into the three-car garage and parked next to a white sports car. "My mom's car," he explained.

The space looked too neat to be a garage. Two bikes hung from overhead racks. A spotless workbench stood against a side wall. Her father's garage was cluttered with bikes, tools, lawnmowers, and broken furniture awaiting repair.

"How long have they lived here?" she asked.

"About eight years. They built it just before I left for college. I still miss the old place. It was a rambling two-story my dad fixed up when we lived there."

"I bet it was beautiful."

"It was home," he replied, gesturing toward the door that led into the house. "Let's say hello."

Miranda smoothed her coat sleeves as they approached the door. Meeting Paul's parents suddenly felt far more daunting than stepping onto an airplane. What if they didn't like her? What if Paul had described someone she could never live up to?

She swallowed hard and tried to breathe evenly as they stepped from the garage into a light and spacious kitchen with oak cabinets and marble counters.

Paul's mom, Rena Green, met them with a warm smile. She was trim and had Paul's unmistakable blue eyes. When Paul's dad stepped into the doorway, Miranda knew where Paul got his height. He greeted Miranda warmly and shook her hand, saying, "We heard a lot about you. We're very pleased you could come."

After introductions, Rena offered to show Miranda to her room. Grateful for a moment to regroup, Miranda followed her upstairs.

Rena led Miranda to a room decorated with soothing, soft pink colors, quiet and welcoming. Paul arrived with her suitcase. He paused at the doorway to her room and gave her a teasing grin.

Gesturing at the interior, he said, "I hope you like lace, ruffles, and enough floral print to start a garden."

Miranda turned slowly, taking it in. The room glowed with soft lamplight. On the bed, lay a quilt delicately stitched in shades of rose and cream. A small vase of fresh flowers sat

on the dresser, and sheer curtains framed the window, gently stirring in warm air from the vent.

"It's beautiful," she said, setting her hand on the edge of the quilt. "I love it."

Pleased, his smile softened.

"As soon as you're ready, come on down for supper," Rena invited.

Miranda took a few moments to wash up, and then headed downstairs.

The scent of meat and yeasty bread drew her to the kitchen.

"Come on in and sit wherever you like. We have beef and barley stew. It's an old family recipe. The dinner rolls, however, came from the store."

"I'm sure it's all delicious," Miranda said as she took a chair and they all sat to eat.

After asking about her job and family, they wanted to know about her paintings.

"I love adoring my clients' walls with artwork. Painting is not a talent of which I was endowed," Rena said. "Do you have pictures of your work?"

"There are quite a few on my phone," Miranda said.

"We should have a viewing after supper. We'd both like to see them. Paul tells us you're quite talented," Paul's dad said.

Miranda described her family and Paul told stories about his relatives.

After supper, they gathered in the living room, settling into comfortable chairs near the fireplace. Miranda passed her phone around the group and enjoyed the compliments about her work. The flames flickered and snapped, casting golden light across the room as they returned her phone.

They began sharing family stories of childhood mishaps. Then, holiday disasters and memories told with affectionate exaggeration, made them all laugh. Miranda listened more than she spoke, absorbing the easy rhythm of their family.

Before long, she was comfortable enough to join in and share memories of her own. Each story loosened something inside her, easing her self-consciousness. These were unpretentious people, warm, welcoming, and self-effacing. Being with them felt safe.

When the conversation slowed, Paul stood and stretched. Then he said, "How about a swim to relax before you go to bed?"

Miranda hesitated only a moment before nodding.

She changed into the swimsuit he had told her to bring and met him at the bottom of the stairs. They walked to the sunroom. It glowed softly, its glass walls framing the quiet night beyond. Snow drifted steadily outside, swirling in the pale wash of outdoor lights. Warm air wrapped around them, carrying the faint scent of chlorine and cedar.

Miranda slipped into the water and sighed as warmth closed around her, loosening muscles she hadn't realized were tight from the trip. The surface rippled gently as Paul joined her. The sound of their voices echoed softly in the enclosed space.

For a while, they simply floated and talked in low voices, their words unhurried. Miranda noticed how easily silence settled between them, comfortable rather than awkward. Outside, winter pressed cold against the glass. Inside, the water held them in quiet comfort. The contrast felt strangely

symbolic, like stepping into a small refuge safe from the discomfort of the cold.

Later, they wrapped themselves in thick towels. Miranda paused, looking back once more at the softly falling snow beyond the glass.

"I'm glad I came," she said.

Paul met her gaze, something warm and steady in his expression. "I'm glad you did, too."

After a goodnight kiss, they parted. Miranda relaxed in a warm shower before dressing in warm pajamas and heading to bed.

That night, tucked beneath the soft quilt in her flowered room, Miranda felt calmness settle over her. In the quiet warmth, a faint scent of wood smoke lingered.



SHE SLEPT DEEPLY, MORE peacefully than she had in months. Morning broke bright and cloudless. Sunlight spilled across the quilt, turning its creamy background into pools of gold. For a moment, Miranda lay still, listening. The house was waking. Floorboards creaked, a cupboard closed, and the rich scent of coffee drifted up the stairs. She rose and dressed quickly, eager to see Paul.

In the kitchen, he leaned against the counter, mug in hand. His sleeves were pushed back, and he looked as though he belonged exactly where he stood. With a smile for Miranda, his mother stood at the stove flipping pancakes, while his father read the newspaper at the table.

"Morning," he said when he saw Miranda, his smile approving.

“Good morning,” Miranda replied, surprised by how natural it felt to be in this house. As she joined the conversation, peace settled within her. She didn't feel like a visitor, but like someone who belonged at the table.

Breakfast stretched unhurriedly as pancakes, eggs, and stories were shared across the table.

Steam rose from coffee cups while sunlight streamed through the windows, turning the snow outside into a field of glittering light. Miranda laughed and contributed to the conversation with a sense of belonging.

When the plates were finally cleared and they'd gathered their coats, Paul glanced at her. “Ready to see something spectacular?”

Eager to go, she said, “Lead the way.”

Bundled into scarves and gloves, they stepped outside into crisp mountain air that stole her breath. The cold felt clean and bracing, the kind that made everything sharper, the sky bluer, and the snow brighter as they headed toward Garden of the Gods.

The drive was quiet in the best way. Sunlight flashed against the snow-covered fields, and distant ridgelines rose in layered shades of slate and silver. Miranda sat close to Paul, enjoying his steady presence beside her.

When they reached the Garden of the Gods, she stepped from the car and stilled. The towering rock formations made her feel small, and strangely comforted. A place like this made it easier to believe the world was held in larger hands than her own.

Silence wrapped around them, deep, almost reverent. Snow lay pristine across the earth, reflecting light so bright it made

her squint. Rising from that bright stillness were the red rock formations. Their surfaces burned against the winter landscape, crimson, and copper beneath the sun.

She walked slowly, breath misting in the air.

Then she stopped at a twin peak formation, sunlight striking its red face and setting it aglow. Its beauty took her breath away and, for a moment, she couldn't speak. Standing there, Miranda felt a quiet reverence settle over her. Places like this made it easier to believe the world was held in hands far stronger than her own.

At last, she said, "I have to sketch this before the light changes."

Paul waited patiently, admiring her talent as she worked.

Later, after lunch beneath a juniper, Paul sipped the last of his soda before crushing the empty can. Then he pushed himself to his feet and stretched. The sunlight glinted off the red stone behind him. Lunch had warmed them both, and the satisfaction of the moment lingered in the crisp air.

Miranda walked with Paul toward an outcrop. The sandstone rose at a sharp angle but wasn't sheer. Its surface rippled with shallow ridges and worn grooves that offered easy handholds.

He glanced back at Miranda. "Watch this."

Before she could answer, he placed his foot against the rock and climbed. His movement was fluid and athletic, more like a practiced scramble than a climb. He pushed upward in quick, controlled bursts, fingers finding natural grips, boots settling confidently into shallow pockets in the stone. The ledge at the top rose only several feet above her, high enough to demand

skill, low enough that a careful jump would land cleanly. He pulled himself onto the flat shelf and straightened.

From where she stood, he looked balanced and completely at ease, the red stone framing him against the winter sky. The drop wasn't dramatic, but it was enough to make her pulse quicken.

"You can climb down now," she said.

He rolled his shoulders once, testing his footing. Then everything happened at once. He bent his knees, arms sweeping back in a smooth gathering of momentum. With a powerful push, he sprang outward from the ledge.

For a suspended heartbeat he was suspended in air.

Then he tucked.

His rotation was tight and precise, a clean, controlled arc that carried him through the flip with effortless grace. The sunlight caught along the curve of his movement, his jacket flashing briefly against the red stone behind him.

Miranda's heart hammered in her chest.

He opened smoothly from the tuck, legs extending just before impact. His boots met the ground in a firm, balanced landing, knees bent to absorb the force. He steadied instantly, rising upright without even a stagger.

She laughed in relief.

He looked at Miranda and said, "Perfect timing. I took years of gymnastics."

He brushed snow off his gloves. "Want me to do it again?"

She shook her head. "Once was enough."

They climbed the rest of the way up the slope. When they reached the top, Miranda stomped snow off their boots and

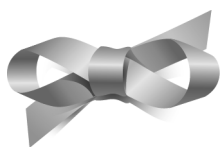
stood close enough to Paul to feel the warmth of him through the cold air.

"I just wanted you to see how much I love this place," he said. "It makes you feel alive."

She searched his face, and then smiled before saying, "And now you've made me love it, too."

He leaned in and kissed her forehead, lingering there for a moment before pulling back. "Come on. I promised you more scenery, and the light won't wait."

As they walked over the snow-dusted rocks, Miranda glanced back once more at the ledge he'd leapt from, her heart still fluttering. He was like this land, rugged and enduring. Walking beside him, she felt as though she belonged here too.



CHAPTER TEN



THEY SPENT THE REST of the afternoon driving and hiking. When the cold began to seep into their bones, they headed back through the twilight, arriving to see lights burning cozily in the house. The inviting aroma of dinner greeted them as they entered the kitchen.

Paul stopped to give his mother a kiss on the cheek. "What smells so good?"

"Chicken and rice. It's ready whenever you're hungry."

"We're hungry."

As they sat for dinner, Miranda shared her enthusiasm for the Garden of the Gods.

"It was beautiful," she enthused.

"I pulled the falling-off-the-rock trick," Paul confessed.

"Paul! How could you? You never learn." Rena's chastisement was gentle, as she suppressed a smile.

"Would you like to go skiing tomorrow?" Ron asked. "Rena and I thought we might go for the day."

The sudden panic of looking like a clumsy oaf made Miranda hesitate. She turned to Paul and said, "I don't know. I've never skied before."

He grinned at her. "It's not hard once you get the hang of it. I really think you'll like it, and I promise we'll stick to the easy slopes at first."

A vision of tumbling off a mountainside flashed through her mind. She drew a deep breath and willed it away. "I'll give it a try, but don't expect too much grace."



THE NEXT MORNING, THEY arrived at the ski slope, with Miranda dressed in ski clothes she'd borrowed from Rena.

"Now for lessons," Paul said.

"Who's teaching?"

"I am. How do you think I earned extra money when I was in college?" he asked.

"Let me guess. Ski instructor?"

"Right."

He was patient and encouraging. After a few tentative tries and several ungraceful falls, she began staying upright. By afternoon, she skied reasonably well down the gentle slope. Paul stayed beside her, offering advice and quiet reassurance as she slowly improved.

As they drove back that night, she said, "I'm afraid I slowed you down a lot."

"It's okay. You did fine, and you'll do even better tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

It had been an arduous day, yet she hadn't embarrassed herself too badly. What if she was worse tomorrow?

Paul was insistent. "If you stop skiing after the first day, you won't like it. You have to try again tomorrow. It will be much easier."

She doubted his assurance when her sore muscles made it hard to sleep that night.

However, when she returned to the slopes the next day, she found he was right. Though her legs were stiff, the second day went much better. She even progressed to the next level and was delighted by her sense of accomplishment.

Even so, she was relieved for a break the following day, when they toured Colorado Springs. After lunch at a small diner, they returned home to spend the afternoon lounging in the pool. The heated water soothed muscles still sore from skiing.

That night, they donned jackets and walked together under the stars. Resting her head against Paul's shoulder, Miranda gazed upward. "I've never seen stars so bright."

"There are too many lights in the city. You have to come to a place like this. Alone, with your own personal astronomer." He pointed skyward. "Look, there's the Big Dipper."

She scanned the sky, spotting the constellation, as well as several others he pointed out.

"See the bright star over there? That's the North Star."

When they began to shiver, he slipped his arm around her shoulders. "How about a mug of hot cocoa?"

She grinned. "You must hear my teeth chattering."

They joined the elder Greens to warm themselves in front of a crackling fire.

"We're going to miss you two after New Year's. The house will seem empty. You're welcome to visit whenever you can get here again," Rena told Miranda.

Miranda loved this hospitable couple. "Thank you. I'd like that," she answered sincerely.

She awoke the next morning to the smell of a country breakfast. Paul intercepted her at the bottom of the stairs and enveloped her in his arms. "I missed you all night."

"I missed you, too."

"You know we'll be pressed into service as a decorating committee for the New Year's Eve party tonight."

She smiled. "I don't mind. Just tell me what to do."

After breakfast, Rena greeted them with cartons of decorations for the living room and den. They strung silver and green crepe paper and attached balloons inscribed with "Happy New Year." The last step was the assembly of a large glittery table centerpiece. When it was done, they declared their job complete and stood back to admire it.

Miranda began to get nervous. "How many people did she say were coming?"

"Just a few neighbors. Three or four couples, maybe. It won't be big. And I'll be here to protect you." He pulled her close on the couch and put his arm around her shoulders. Snuggled beside him, she felt secure.

In the late afternoon, they chopped fruit and vegetables and mixed dip. The cake Ron bought at the bakery sat on the counter. Miranda smiled at the cheerful clutter. Now, this room looked like a proper kitchen.

After supper, they took another swim in the heated pool. She lounged along the side and watched snow drift slowly past

the windows. She would be leaving the next afternoon and would miss this winter wonderland.

Paul pulled her close, encircling her in his arms. "I've gotten spoiled spending time with you these last few days."

"We're going back to the same city. It's not like we won't see each other anymore. This has been special, though. I'll always remember coming here with you."

"I hope we can make it a habit." He bent forward and claimed her lips in a kiss that made her forget the beauty of the falling snow.

A short while later, they climbed from the pool to dress for the New Year's Eve party. Alone in her room, she ducked into the shower and let the gentle fingers of water caress her as she reflected on the last few days. It had been heavenly. If they were any indication of the future, she had a great deal to look forward to.

When she'd dressed in a long maroon skirt and creamy silk blouse, she brushed her bangs into soft puffs and clasped her hair in the back with a pearl clip. She added a touch of make-up and was pleased to see her face had a healthy glow. The outdoor exercise had done her good, and the warm swims were relaxing. She wished she could stay in this happy and carefree world.

She pushed the thought of going home aside. By now, her mother had gone in for a check-up. Tomorrow would be soon enough to find out what the doctor had said. Tonight, she would try not to think about anything but this beautiful place and the time she shared with Paul.

She joined the family in setting out party trays and other finishing touches. Promptly at nine o'clock, the doorbell rang. Rena greeted the first couple, introducing them as Dr. Raines,

now retired, and his wife, Melissa. Two younger couples followed on their heels.

As soon as Ron told the Raines about Miranda's talent for art, they wanted to see the painting of Paul which hung in the den.

"It's very good. Herbert and I collect western art. Have you ever done any?" Mrs. Raines asked.

"Not yet. I usually do country roads, bluebonnets, and forests. Since I've been here, though, I've seen country I never knew existed. I plan to do some paintings of it when I get back."

"We'd love to see photos of your finished work, wouldn't we, Herbert?"

"Sure would. And maybe you'd like to see our art collection."

"I'd love to if there's time. I'm leaving tomorrow afternoon."

"That's too bad. We won't be home in the morning. Have Paul bring you over next time you're here," Dr. Raines said.

Another couple drifted into the den and joined the discussion. When the talk drifted away from art, Miranda excused herself to look for Paul. She found him sitting on the couch, chatting, and laughing with the neighbors. His eyes lit when he saw her.

"Miranda, you're just in time for the punch," he said, holding a cup for her. She accepted it and joined him, settling beside him on the couch.

The rest of the evening passed in a cheerful blur of conversation, laughter, and music. She relaxed as she enjoyed

the easy camaraderie of the neighborhood gathering and the warmth of Paul's steady presence beside her.

There was a countdown just before midnight. When the clock struck twelve, he wrapped her in his arms and kissed her deeply. For a moment the noise of the celebration faded, leaving only the warmth of his embrace and the steady certainty growing in her heart. She was so delighted by his touch, that she pushed aside awareness of anyone else in the room as she lingered in his embrace.

When the party wound down and the last guests left, he walked her to the stairs. Alone, at last, she climbed the first step to look at him squarely in the eyes. "You are an enchanting man, Paul Green."

"And you, Miranda, are irresistible. I'd like to be married to you, sweep you into my arms, and carry you up the stairs."

Her heart gave a startled leap. The words were half teasing, yet something in his voice carried quiet sincerity. Glimpsing vulnerability in this disciplined man was exciting. She ran a finger along his lips. "Someday you can."

The promise lingered between them, fragile but full of hope. Her mind traveled through time, imagining them already wed and visiting this house. Late at night, they would pause at this step and remember this night, and he would sweep her away to the room they shared.

They glanced toward the kitchen as the lights flicked off. He leaned forward for one last kiss. "Good night, Miranda. I'll dream about someday."

"So will I."

She went to bed, feeling warm, fuzzy, and happily drowsy.



SHE AWOKE ON THE FIRST of January to a cold and sunny day with bright sunlight streaming through the blinds. This would be her last morning to wake up in this room. She would miss the comforting thought that Paul was sleeping just downstairs.

She dressed and hurried down to find him in the kitchen helping Rena, who puttered about in a fuzzy pink bathrobe making coffee and setting out rolls.

His face lit with a smile when he saw Miranda. "You look bright and awake. Did you sleep okay?"

"Yes. I sleep better here than I do at home. It must be the cold, clear climate."

Paul winked at Miranda and said, "I think I'll sleep better someday."

Rena raised her brows in a quizzical look, which was interrupted when Paul asked Miranda, "Do you feel like going out for a while? Dad wants to show us some scenery that I missed showing you."

"Sure. I'd love to." She turned to Rena. "Will you need any help with lunch?"

"No. It's all under control. You go out and enjoy your last morning. Just show me your sketches when you get back."

"Okay. Thanks."

Ron was an enthusiastic tour guide. He turned onto a country road, saying, "I bet you didn't take this trail. There's a great view from the top of this cliff."

He was right. The plateau offered a spectacular view of the snow-covered valley. Evergreens dotted the landscape. They

wore their snow as grandly as women wore jewels. Nestled in the middle of the valley was an iced-over lake. She sketched it, and longed to see this valley again in the spring when the ice melted and the water turned blue. Perhaps she would.

“Don’t forget about Doctor and Mrs. Raines when you get some paintings done,” Ron said. “They weren’t just being polite. They really would like to see some photos.”

She flashed him a grin. “I won’t forget. I don’t have that many clients standing in line to buy my work.”

When she finished, they took her to a snowy meadow with a view of Pike’s Peak. She sketched quickly, capturing the morning light as it graced the slope of the mountain. She concentrated on colors and composition. Her fingers were too cold for sketching details. That could be done later.

On the way back to the house, she warmed her icy hands in her coat pockets. When they entered the warmth of the kitchen, they were greeted by the succulent smell of baked ham.

Ron switched on the television to a pre-game show.

“We have a tradition,” Paul explained. “New Year’s Day dinner and New Year’s Day football. I hope you don’t mind eating in front of the set.”

“As a matter of fact, I’ll feel right at home. My father doesn’t watch much football, but he hasn’t missed a New Year’s Day game in years. I grew up eating this meal in front of the set.”

Though she had never been an avid football fan, Miranda was drawn into the spirit of the group who rooted and cheered for Ron’s alma mater. At half-time, she helped Rena clear the

dishes while Paul loaded her bags into the Jeep. Then, she ran upstairs for the last search for anything left behind.

As she glanced around the room, a feeling of foreboding gripped her. This trip had offered a break from her worry about her mother. Now that she had to go back, what would she find when she got home?

She closed the door and returned to the den.

Rena smiled warmly. "You come back soon. You're a much more charming guest than the buddies Paul used to bring home from college. They were messy boys who hiked around and then put their muddy sneakers on the coffee table."

"Thanks. I appreciate your hospitality. You made me feel completely at home."

They exchanged hugs, and Miranda climbed into the Jeep. After a last wave of goodbye, they were on the road, driving toward the airport.

"I hate to drag you away from the game to drive me back," she told Paul.

"Where do you think I'd rather be? In front of a television or here with you?"

"I know how much you like sports."

"Yes, but I'd rather play than watch. That's my philosophy of life."

She grinned at him. "I guess some people are just doers."

"That's me."

They arrived at the airport, and he settled beside her to wait until she boarded. "I'll miss our swim together tonight," he said, placing his arm around her shoulders.

"So will I. I like it here. And I really like your parents."

"They like you, too. They'd be happy to have you move in."

"I'm tempted. Think of all the scenes I could paint."

"You'd miss me when I was back in Houston."

She shuddered, unable to imagine living without him. "Yes. I would," she agreed.

"Since I miss you already, will you go out with me tomorrow night?"

She hesitated. "I'd love to. Only, I promised Paige I'd take her shopping tomorrow afternoon. I don't know how late we'll be. What time does your flight get in?"

"Early. I should be home by three. How about if I give you a call around six-thirty? If you're back, we could go out to dinner."

"That would be great."

"I'll be thinking about you today, where you are, what you're doing. I love you," he said.

She looked into his sweet, attentive eyes and answered softly, "I love you, too."

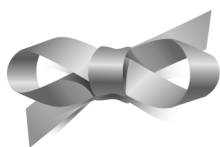
They sat quietly, holding hands, until the boarding call. Then, giving her hand a gentle squeeze, he released her. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

She nodded, already missing him. "Tell your father I hope his team wins."

They kissed briefly and parted. When she'd settled in her seat, she took her sketchbook and pencils from her flight bag. Operating from memory, she drew a thank-you card for Paul's parents. On the front she sketched a snowy meadow, pine trees, and a lake. She worked quickly, seeing the picture in her mind.

When she finished, she looked at it approvingly. The Greens would like it. This was their country, and they loved it. And so did she. Someday she'd be back.

She lettered the inside of the card and slipped it in her bag.
Her holiday was over.



CHAPTER ELEVEN



MIRANDA SENSED A TOMB-like stillness in her parents' house when she arrived the next morning. The look on her sister's face evoked guilt over her trip to Colorado.

"How is everybody?" she asked.

Paige shrugged. "Mom's been having tests all week. That's where they are now. I can't believe how many she's had, and we still don't know anything."

"I should have stayed home and taken her so Dad wouldn't have to take off work."

"I think he would have gone anyway. He's really worried."

Miranda's heart sank. "We all are." They were silent for a few seconds.

Then Miranda asked, "Do you still want to go shopping?"

"Sure. I've been around the house a lot. I'd like to get out."

"Poor Paige. You haven't had a very good holiday."

Her little sister's eyes filled with tears that she tried to blink back. "I'm just worried. Maybe a shopping binge will help."

She disappeared down the hall and came back with a purse. "All my Christmas money's in here. Let's see how much I can spend."

Miranda smiled at Paige's attempt at enthusiasm. "Let's see how much we can both spend."

After a long morning at the mall, they stopped for a late lunch of tacos.

"I'm glad you came by today," Paige said. "Things have been depressing at home. I'll be glad when we find out what's wrong with Mom. At least, I hope I'll be glad."

"I know what you mean."

When they got home, their parents were sitting on the sofa. It was impossible to tell who looked more tired, but fear and confusion showed in her mother's eyes.

In answer to their expectant expressions, their father shook his head. "They're supposed to call next week with test results."

"Let me know as soon as you hear." Miranda knelt beside her mother. "Would you like me to stay and make dinner tonight?"

Hannah's eyes focused on her daughter. "Umm. Well, yes, that would be nice."

"We're going to Sandra's tonight, if you're not too tired. Remember? I told you on the way home." George gently reminded her.

Hannah nodded her head. "Yes. I do remember."

"I'm sure you could come if you like, Miranda. Sandra would be glad to see you," Her father invited.

"Thanks, but I have a date with Paul. I thought if I could help here, I'd cancel it."

"You go ahead, honey. We're taken care of tonight."

"I'll come over tomorrow afternoon and see if you need anything," she promised.

Her father rubbed his chin. "We could use help with laundry and cooking. Paige has been doing a lot. She'd probably like a break."

Paige hadn't been the only one doing extra work. He sounded exhausted, as well.

Miranda gave her mother's hand a gentle squeeze and kissed each of her parents on the cheek. Next week they would know. How she prayed this was something that medication or an operation could cure. Then her parents could go back to the way they were before this illness. Her mother's eyes would sparkle again, and she would take joy in her art. Her father would talk about his job and his garden with lively animation.

She sighed as she left the house. Paul's parents were in perfect health, enjoying their busy lives. Did they have any idea how fortunate they were?

She had just returned home when Paul called. "Are we still on for dinner tonight? I hope we didn't tire you out."

"Actually, I found my visit relaxing. It's the coming home that was hard."

"Not looking forward to work?" His question was tentative.

"No. My mother has been having tests run all week. I hope we find out what's making her so forgetful. I put it out of my mind while I was gone and now, I've got to face it."

"Hope for the best. Chances are good, it's something that can be treated."

"I know. Still, it's hard not to worry."

"You need an evening out and I know just the thing. We can still get tickets for the dinner theater tonight. So how about it? They're doing a play. A comedy."

She hesitated, lacking energy to get ready. Then she decided Paul was right. An evening out would be nice, and it wouldn't do any good to sit around the apartment and worry.

"All right. What time?"

"I'll pick you up in twenty minutes."

"I'll be ready."

She knew she'd made the right decision as soon as she got in the truck. The sight of his caring face, the sound of his voice, and his gentle kiss were like a soothing balm. Surely, everything would be all right. Her mother would get well, and they would all live happily ever after, just like a fairy tale, with Paul as her prince.

The play kept her spirits high from beginning to end. She laughed at the bungling detective, whose exaggerated seriousness only made his missteps more ridiculous. Each time he drew the wrong conclusion, or proudly announced a theory that collapsed moments later, the audience erupted in laughter. Miranda leaned toward Paul, sharing the moment as though they were part of a private joke.

The plot was delightfully predictable, full of familiar twists and theatrical suspense, yet performed with such clever timing and charm that she didn't mind knowing exactly where it was headed. The actors played their roles with exaggerated flair, and by the final scene the entire audience was carried along by the playful absurdity of it all.

When the curtain fell and the lights rose, a warm, satisfied murmur filled the theatre. People gathered coats, still smiling, still quoting favorite lines. Miranda lingered a moment, reluctant to let the laughter fade.

Then she felt Paul's hand slip into hers, and together, they walked out of the theatre and into the brisk night air. The sudden coolness brushed her cheeks, refreshing after the warmth inside. Above them, the sky stretched wide and clear,

scattered with bright, steady stars. Their breath drifted in pale clouds as they moved slowly down the sidewalk, their steps unhurried.

Miranda squeezed his hand gently, the echo of laughter still buoying her spirits. The night felt peaceful, open, and full of possibility.

"Did you like it?" Paul asked.

"It was hilarious. How do you always know just what I need?"

They reached the truck and she turned to face him.

She caressed his face, trying to memorize every beloved line and curve. "You're the most thoughtful man I've ever met."

He pulled her close. The warmth of his body sheltered her from the windy breeze. "And you are the most interesting, desirable woman on earth," he responded, kissing her softly, making her feel treasured as she never had before.

Without releasing her, he unlocked the truck. "Better get inside before you freeze."

She slipped in and warmed her hands in front of the heater as they backed out of the lot. She longed to be held close again. The thought of going back to her apartment was depressing. Without Paul to distract her, it would be hard not to worry.

His voice broke into her thoughts. "Want to stop for ice cream? That little dish of pudding wasn't much dessert."

She grinned at him, amused by his assessment of their dessert. That was chocolate mousse. Since there wasn't much in the cup, I guess it wouldn't hurt to have a second dessert. There is one condition, though. I will treat this time. It's only a little thing to do. You got the tickets and you bought dinner. So, I buy the ice cream."

He grinned back. "If it would make Madam feel better."

They stopped at a red light. A family crossed the street ahead of them, the little boy skipping while his mother tried unsuccessfully to keep him from tugging her arm off.

She laughed. "Someone's excited about dessert."

"That's about to be us."

She turned to face him. "What are you getting?"

"Depends," he said. "Are we pretending this is a sensible decision, or are we embracing full regret?"

She laughed. "Full regret. Obviously."

"Good," he said, easing through the green light. "Then I'm not holding back."

They drove another block in comfortable silence, the kind that didn't need filling. The sky darkened along the horizon, as she watched the way the car lights moved across his face.

"It's nice," she said softly, almost to herself.

"What is?"

"This. Going somewhere for no reason except ice cream."

He glanced at her, a small smile forming on his lips. "Yeah," he said. "It is."

They sat at a small table in the ice cream shop and ate their scoops of fudge ripple.

"I'm going to be broader than your truck if I don't stop eating like this. I can't believe I ate two desserts," she said.

He linked his arm around her slender waist and guided her out the door. "I haven't noticed you are making a habit of overeating, especially lately."

"I wanted to make a good impression on your parents."

"You did."

It was late when they got to the apartment complex. At her door, he said, "Thanks for going out tonight. I really wanted to see you."

"I wanted to see you, too. I had a great time."

"Let me know what you find out about your mother. I know how worried you are." His expression held concern.

"I will."

She pushed worry to the back of her mind as she reached on tiptoes to kiss him good night.



THE NEXT AFTERNOON, she drove to her parents' house prepared to do whatever needed to be done. When she'd mopped the floors and cleared the lunch dishes, she mixed a cake for dessert. It was baking when her father and Paige returned from the grocery store.

"What smells good?" Paige asked.

"Chocolate cake. I found a mix in the pantry."

"That's about all there was in there. It was getting pretty bare," Paige commented.

Her father grimaced. "There wasn't much time last week for shopping."

Miranda felt another twinge of guilt. If she had been there, they wouldn't have run so low on food. It wouldn't happen again. She would keep a better eye on what they needed.

"I thought I'd make a meatloaf for dinner. Did you get some ground meat?" she asked.

"Right here." George pulled a pack out of the sack.

"Do you need help?" Paige asked.

She shook her head. "No. I'll start the meat loaf while the cake cools."

Lack of practice made her work go slowly but by six o'clock she had a nicely cooked dinner on the table.

"It looks good. Smells good, too," her father said.

She grinned. "I can cook if I have to. I just don't do it very often."

They passed the dishes. George helped Hannah fill her plate. Miranda noticed how oddly her shoulder twitched from the effort of eating. Maybe tomorrow, they would know why.

After dessert, Hannah insisted on helping clear the dishes. Except for the strange twitching, she acted like her old self. "How's your new boyfriend?" she asked.

"He's fine. I enjoyed the visit last week with his parents. They're awfully nice. I hope you'll meet them sometime."

While they loaded the dishes and wiped the table, she told her mother all the details about her visit to Colorado. Hannah listened with rapt interest. But then, she had always been a good listener. When the kitchen was clean, she ushered Miranda to the studio to show her a poinsettia painting.

Miranda caught her lip in dismay. The painting lacked the usual crisp outlines. It was fuzzy and unfocused. The leaves looked like they had been painted by a child.

"I'm having a little trouble keeping my hand steady," Hannah admitted. "I'm not finished, though. I'm going to work on it some more."

"What are you going to do with it when it's finished?"

"I don't know. I might give it to Sandra. I haven't given her one in a while. It's going to be pretty."

"She'd like that." She gave her mother a hug. "I better go home. I'll be back tomorrow."

She hugged her father and Paige goodbye.

"I'll walk you to your car," her father offered, reaching into the closet for his coat.

The air was damp and there was a light drizzle falling as they reached the car. Standing under the big oak where she had parked, she looked into her father's eyes and was dismayed to see how tired and lined his face had become.

"Be sure and call me when you get the test results," she said.

He sighed deeply. "It may not be good, you know."

His tone was a warning. It sent a chill down her spine. Did he already know something? She studied his carefully composed face. It would be just like him to put off revealing bad news. He would try and shelter his daughters.

Her father drew a slow breath. "Your mother has Huntington's disease."

The words Huntington's disease hung heavily between them.

Genetic. Progressive. Inescapable.

Miranda stared at the bark beneath her hand, rough and solid. She focused on it because if she didn't, she might fall apart.

She had heard of the illness before, but only in passing, as something distant that happened to other families. How could something so frightening exist in someone she loved so deeply? Now it had stepped quietly into her own life.

Her tears fell as she leaned into her father's chest. Fear pressed against her heart like a rising tide. Then another thought followed just as quickly. God had carried her family

through every trial they had faced so far. Perhaps He would carry them through this one too.

After she drove home, she pulled medical books from the shelf and read until the words blurred. Statistics. Possibilities. Futures she didn't want to imagine.

And threaded through it all was a single terrifying question.

What if I carry it too? The thought spread through her like cold water. If it were true, what would happen to everything she and Paul were building? Miranda sat very still, her hands folded tightly in her lap.

When she went to bed, she lay awake for long hours, thinking of Paul. Of how easily hope had crept back into her life. Of how fragile that hope suddenly felt.

Yet even then, beneath the fear, something steadier took root. Resolve. Faith, imperfect and trembling, but present.

She finally fell asleep.

Tomorrow would come whether she was ready or not.

And when it did, she would face it.



THE NEXT MORNING, SHE dressed quickly and made herself a strong cup of coffee, the aroma grounding her as she considered her plan. She wanted to help her mother and sister keep the household running as smoothly as possible, and somehow, find small pockets of normalcy for herself so that anxiety did not consume her.

After breakfast, she called her father. "I'm bringing a casserole over tonight. Do you need anything else?"

George's voice was tired but gentle. "We'd love to see you, honey. Just don't go overboard. We're managing."

"I'll keep it simple," she promised, but the tightness in her chest belied her outward calm.

Driving through the drizzle, she hated the helplessness she felt. All she could do was help in small, practical ways. Cooking and cleaning would be her contributions while her family faced the storm ahead.

After work, when Miranda arrived at her parents' home, she was greeted by Paige's relieved smile. "Dad's lined up a helper, a woman to clean, cook, and sit with Mom during the day. He talked to her on the phone last night, and she came by to meet us."

Miranda nodded slowly. "That's good. You and Dad will appreciate the help."

As they headed to the kitchen, Paige said, "Dad's not home yet. He's trying to catch up on work he missed."

"And Mom?"

"She's in the studio, staring at her painting."

Miranda set the meatloaf in the oven to cook. Then she walked through the den and into her mom's studio. Hannah sat hunched over her easel, motionless.

"Mom?" she called softly. No response.

She stepped closer. "Mom?"

Hannah slowly turned, her eyes lighting up at the sight of her daughter. She rose unsteadily and gave Miranda a hug. "It's been so long since I've seen you."

Miranda's heart sank. It had only been one day since they had seen each other.

"I've been fine," Miranda said, forcing a smile. "How about you?"

Hannah sank into her chair. "Not good. Did Dad tell you?"

"Yes." Miranda swallowed hard, bracing herself.

"I can't get better, and I hate the thought of being a burden. That worries me more than anything."

"How could you be a burden? You've always been there for us. No matter what we have to do for you, we could never repay all you've given us."

Hannah's eyes glistened. "It's different now. You were children. It was fun to watch you grow. It's not the same with me."

Miranda knelt beside her mother. "It's the same when you love someone. No matter how life changes, you'll always be my mom."

They clung together, sobbing until the weight of fear and grief ebbed slightly.

"I won't be able to paint anymore," Hannah whispered, her voice flat. "I wanted to, but now it's too late. Take my art supplies tonight. Everything. They only remind me of what I can't do."

Miranda's heart ached at the thought of giving up hope so soon, yet she understood her mother's pain. "I'll keep your things safe. But if you ever want to paint again, they'll be here."

When their dad returned, they greeted him with smiles, trying to maintain normalcy. Dinner was quiet, careful avoidance of Hannah's illness filling the spaces between bites and clinking dishes.

Finally, the time came to move the supplies. Hannah went to bed, exhausted. Miranda and George carried easel, paints,

and brushes to Miranda's car. He followed her to her apartment to help get everything inside.

The night stretched long and lonely. She sat with the brushes, turning them over in her hands. Could her own hands one day shake like her mother's did now?

Only her studio offered solace. She sat before a fresh canvas and began to paint on her mother's scene of sunflowers rising boldly among the weeds. In them, she found courage and inspiration, a reminder that beauty and determination could endure even amidst decay.

That night, as Miranda left her mother's brushes in their new home in her own studio, she faced a dilemma she could not avoid, the possibility of carrying the Huntington gene herself. To find out would allow her to know if she had a future with Paul. To avoid knowing would be to live with fear. The choice waited, heavy and unyielding, as she turned off the light and prepared for a restless night's sleep.

By the next morning, Miranda had resolved to continue her life, even under the shadow of her mother's illness. She called her father to confirm dinner plans and drove to work, the gray drizzle mirroring her subdued mood. Yet she clung to small comforts: the rhythm of work, the warmth of familiar routines, and the rainbow from yesterday's storm still bright in her memory.

Stopping at her parents' home after work, she found a brief comfort in the arrival of the caregiver. Though Paige was relieved to have help, Miranda ached at the thought of a stranger performing the tasks her mother had always done.

That night, Miranda faced a dilemma she could not avoid. Did she want to know if she carried the Huntington gene?

Not knowing would leave her facing an uncertain future with Paul, living in fear. Knowing might leave them no future. The decision weighed on her as she turned off the light.



AWAKENED AT SIX BY her alarm, she switched it off and sat up. Her groggy thoughts carried her to the night before. Had it only been a dream? She knew it had not.

She studied matched paintings hanging above her bed. They were roses growing on a trellis. One set was pink. The other was yellow. They had been a gift to match a new bedspread she had gotten as a child. When had her mother done them? Twenty years ago, perhaps? The bedspread was long gone, but the paintings, loved at first sight, had been kept as life-long keepsakes.

Fighting the desire to cry again, she splashed cold water on her face and took a close look at her puffy eyes. She'd decided not to tell Paul about her mother until she had time to think things through. She hoped he wouldn't notice her sadness.

She'd just finished dressing when she heard a knock on the door. A glance outside revealed Paul standing in his jogging suit and holding a wrapped package. He offered the package as soon as she opened the door. "A belated Christmas gift. I didn't know I wanted to get it for you until I talked to you on Christmas day. Open it."

She complied, tearing off the bright wrap to reveal a handsomely boxed chess set. She fingered it gingerly, remembering their conversation. "It's beautiful. Thanks. I've never had my own chess set."

She fingered the polished pieces, remembering their conversation on Christmas Day. The fact that he had remembered such a small thing warmed her more than the gift itself.

Closing it thoughtfully, she spoke again. "It's been several years since I've played."

He grinned. "No excuses. You threw down the challenge and I accepted. It's do or die."

"Then I challenge you to a marathon chess tournament next Friday."

"I accept."

"Until then, I'll give this an honored place on the coffee table."

His smile showed his pleasure. She wished she could be truly happy. As they jogged side by side, part of her longed desperately to tell him about her mother. She was equally torn by the desire to hold her pain close, to examine it and see what it would mean to their future.

They got back with little time to spare and parted quickly to get ready for work. She was grateful the holiday was over. The demands of the office would distract her and offer a break from her pain.

When she arrived, she was surprised to see Emilie already at her desk. "You're here early."

Emilie looked up. Her face was pinched. "I have to leave early. The kids have back-to-back dental appointments for cavities. I'm thankful for insurance."

When Emilie left, Miranda had charge of the office for the afternoon. With the extra work, time went by quickly.

She stopped at the beauty shop for a hair trim and then the grocery store before going home. Paul was coaching a football game, and she didn't feel up to noise and excitement. Alone in the apartment, the evening stretched before her, long and quiet. She heated a dinner but soon gave up trying to eat. Tears blurred her eyes as she wondered how her family would endure what was to come.

Instinct brought her to her studio. The fresh canvas sitting on the easel sat ready to become whatever her imagination called it to be. She sat down and reached for a paintbrush. As she worked, she began to relax.

She became engrossed in the scene of an overgrown garden, enclosed by a crumbling gate and an old wooden fence. In the back corner of the garden, among the thorns and thistles, sunflowers turned their faces toward the sun. They were evidence that beauty could be found even among the weeds.

She didn't know where she had gotten the idea for the painting. She might have seen the scene long ago and stored it in her memory. Or, she might have made it up. It didn't matter. As she painted, she drew strength from those brave sunflowers, who, ignoring the weeds, turned determinedly toward the sun.



BEFORE WORK WEDNESDAY morning, she called her father to tell him she was bringing a casserole for dinner. "We'd love to see you, honey, but don't go overboard cooking for us. We're getting along okay, and you don't have a lot of extra time."

He sounded tired.

"I had time this morning. Since it's raining, I didn't go jogging. I'll bring the dinner over after work."

"Okay. Thanks. I'll tell Paige not to start anything when she gets home."

She hung up feeling helpless and angry.

Was this all she could do for her family? Bring casseroles over to ease the stress? What about when Paige went to college? Or would she go? Why wasn't there a cure for this heartless disease?

The pall of anger accompanied her as she drove to work through the sheeting rain. It wasn't fair that no current treatment offered real hope. If only there was someone to blame, someone to pay for this catastrophe. But there was no one. Only fate.

By the time she reached her desk, the anger had turned to depression. Mrs. Walters was called to a meeting during lunch, Miranda borrowed her office and ate alone. She stared dismally into the rain which poured steadily behind the large window and knew she was as powerless to control her future as she was the rain. If she and Paige were victims of their genes, they would someday slip down the road their mother now traveled, unable to halt their decline.

Emilie came in after lunch, having met with her lawyer. Her marriage wasn't going well and she looked drained.

Miranda waited for her to set her wet umbrella in the workroom before asking, "How did it go?"

"We're going to have a trial separation and then meet again."

They became silent, preoccupied with the circumstances that threatened to overwhelm them. Like robots programmed to perform their tasks, they answered the phone, dealt with

problems and finished paperwork until the clock released them.

By then, the rain had stopped, leaving a bright rainbow behind. Miranda loved rainbows. There was something fragile about their fleeting beauty. She stood on the sidewalk for a moment, engraving the colorful arch into her mind to take with her into the difficult evening.

She stopped at her parents' house and Paige told her, "The helper Dad hired started this week. It's already making a difference."

Though Paige seemed relieved to have some of the household pressure removed from her small shoulders, Miranda could only feel pain at the thought of a stranger doing what her mom had always done.

"I'm glad you like her. What does Mom think?"

"She didn't say anything. She just listened. She's been awfully sad the last few days."

"I can't say I blame her."

Paige followed her into the kitchen. "Dad's not home yet. He's trying to make up for some of the work he missed last week."

"Where's Mom?"

"I think she's sitting in her studio."

Turning on the oven, Miranda set the casserole inside. "I'm going to go sit with her for a while."

"Okay. I gotta get back to my homework. I'm glad you're here."

Giving her sister a quick hug, Miranda said, "If I can help you with anything, let me know. Just make sure it's not algebra."

Paige nodded. "Okay."

Miranda found her mother just as Paige had predicted, sitting on the studio couch. She entered the room and said, "Mom?"

Hannah turned to face her. Her eyes lit at the sight of her daughter. She rose to her feet and gave her a hug. "It's been a long time since I've seen you."

Tears started in Miranda's eyes. It had been only two days since she had been here. Didn't her mother remember?

Releasing her daughter, Hannah stood back to look at her. "Have you been eating right? You look like you've lost weight."

"I've been busy. When my show is over, I'm sure I'll gain it all back."

They sat together on the sofa and talked about things that Hannah remembered from the past. Then, changing the subject, Hannah said, "I've been thinking about your father."

Miranda waited, unsure where this was going.

"He gets up early and stays up late. He does things I always did without a second thought." Hannah's voice was quiet, without self-pity, as though she had moved past the sharp edge of grief into something more resigned. "I hate watching him learn my kitchen."

"He doesn't mind, Mom."

"I know he doesn't," Hannah said. "I keep thinking about all the years I was able to handle housework and shopping chores. I was glad to take that burden off him. Turns out he'll have to do it all soon. I didn't see this coming."

Miranda felt the tightness in her chest ease slightly. This was different from the raw anguish of a few nights ago. Her mother was finding her footing, however slowly, in the new shape of her days.

"How are you feeling otherwise?" Miranda asked gently.

Hannah considered the question with the deliberate care she now brought to everything. "Tired. And I miss painting. Not the act of it so much anymore. I think I've made peace with that." She glanced toward the wall where her easel had stood. "I miss the quiet it gave me. The way everything else went away when I picked up a brush."

"I know," Miranda said softly.

When the oven timer went off, Miranda said, "Supper's ready. Are you hungry?"

"Yes. I think so," Hannah said.

They heard the front door close with a thud and George called out, "I'm home."

"Dad's here. Let's tell him 'Hi,'" Miranda urged.

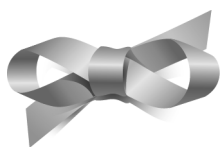
Hannah followed Miranda down the hall to the entryway. George paused in hanging his coat to greet his wife and daughter.

She was comforted by her parents' kiss of greeting that had been their routine as long as she could remember. For a moment, she could pretend nothing had changed.

When Miranda returned a few days later, she found her mother quieter, more settled into the new shape of her days. They sat together without needing to fill the silence.

After a while, Hannah looked up and met her daughter's eyes. "Keep that alive for both of us. Promise me that."

Miranda took her mother's hand. "I promise."



CHAPTER TWELVE



ON SATURDAY MORNING, Miranda drove to her parents' house. The familiar white siding and neatly trimmed hedges should have brought comfort. As she unlocked the front door, Miranda felt the stillness in her parents' house heavier than usual. Even before she stepped inside, she sensed something had shifted.

When she entered the foyer, the faint smell of brewed coffee and lemon cleaner greeted her. Ordinary scents. Ordinary sounds. Yet the house felt subdued, as though it was quietly holding its breath. Her mother's favorite radio station was silent. The kitchen clock ticked too loudly.

Her father stood at the counter, his shoulders slightly hunched as he read the morning paper. He looked up when she entered and smiled, but the smile didn't reach his eyes.

"You're early," he said.

"I couldn't sleep," Miranda replied, setting her purse down. She glanced around. "Where's Mom?"

"In the bedroom getting dressed. She was up half the night again."

Miranda nodded, though a quiet alarm bell rang. Her mother had always been an early riser, purposeful and efficient. Sleeplessness didn't fit her.

Paige appeared moments later, already dressed, and with her hair woven into a French braid. She dropped into a chair at the table and wrapped her hands around a mug of coffee that she didn't drink.

Hannah had decided to stay home and rest, so Miranda and Paige left her with the caregiver and headed out. They spent the morning wandering the mall, trying to pretend it was an ordinary day. Paige drifted from store to store, finally buying a blouse and a pair of shoes. Miranda watched people pass, families laughing, couples discussing lunch. She felt oddly disconnected. Life was continuing at full speed, oblivious to the fragile bubble her family occupied.

When they returned home, her mother was sitting at the kitchen table, slowly stirring sugar into her tea. She smiled when she saw Miranda, but there was hesitation in her eyes, as though she were searching for something just out of reach.

Miranda made sandwiches and they ate in silence. No one had enthusiasm for small talk. Afterwards, Miranda joined Paige after a request to come to her room. Paige gestured to the computer sitting on her desk. It was open to an article describing Huntington's disease.

"You've been reading about it, too," Miranda said.

"Yes. Do you know we can be tested to see if we carry it?" Paige's eyes were fervent in her slender face.

"Yes. I knew. I just haven't had the courage to do it. It's kind of an all or nothing proposition."

"I'm going to do it. I want to know. I don't want to spend my life wondering if I'm going to end up like Mom."

"What did Dad say?" Miranda admired her sister's courage, facing the possibility of someday getting the illness head-on. Her own fear felt cowardly in the face of Paige's bravery.

"Dad tried to talk me out of it. He said I was too young to face the results. He also said he wouldn't stop me if I really wanted to have it done."

"He has a point. If you don't know you're carrying it, you can hope you aren't. But if you know, that might change a lot of decisions you'd make and keep you from living a full life."

Paige shook her head. "No, I'll just know I have to live it sooner."

They were quiet for a moment as Paige stared at Miranda. "Are you going to be tested?"

"I should. I owe it to Paul. This would affect his future, too. It would affect whether I want to have children. I need to know, but honestly, Paige, I'm petrified."

If the test was positive, she wouldn't just lose her future. She might have to walk away from Paul before he ever knew why.

"Let's go together. I'd feel better if you were there," Paige said.

"We won't find out right away. It will take several days to get the results."

"I know, but we'll feel stronger going together."

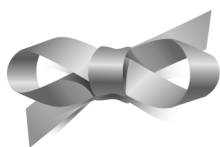
"Okay," Miranda said. "I'll make an appointment and let you know when we can go."

"Thanks. Wouldn't it be great if neither of us has it?" Paige's face brightened.

"That would be great."

"I'll be praying we don't," Paige said.

"Me too," Miranda replied.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN



MIRANDA WISHED SHE could eagerly anticipate spending Valentine's Day with Paul. Yet as she fastened a pair of red heart earrings, anxiety gripped her. He had promised not to press their engagement, and he had remained true to his word. Still, knowing he had wanted to give her a ring, she feared the evening might be awkward.

When he picked her up for dinner, she handed him the small package she had carefully wrapped in red cellophane. "Tonight, I'm serving dessert."

Quizzically, he opened the box and examined the two silver packets. Then a grin spread across his face. "Freeze-dried ice cream?"

"Just like the astronauts eat. I wanted to give you something sweet."

"I can't wait to try it. Now it's your turn. Open the glove compartment and see what's inside."

She opened the small door and found a square box wrapped in heart paper. It was just the size that would contain jewelry. Her heart froze. Had he decided to get a ring anyway? What would she do? She swallowed hard and unwrapped the package. Inside was a necklace with two intertwined hearts.

Smiling in delight, she held it up. "It's beautiful. I can wear it tonight."

Her hands still trembled. She turned and lifted her hair.

"Would you put it on me, please?"

When he clasped it around her slender neck, she pulled down the mirror and was pleased to see how nicely the necklace complemented her dress.

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Thank you. I love it."

She longed to tell him she loved him and promise him their future together. Yet fear of what might become of her kept her silent.

When they finished dinner, they went back to her apartment and nestled on the couch while he opened one of the packets.

"Have you ever tried this stuff?" he asked.

"Yes. My dad brought some home once."

Paul took a bite of the chocolate wafer. A grin spread across his face as he chewed.

"It melts in your mouth and tastes like ice cream. Here, have a bite."

She took a bite and nodded. "Tastes just like I remembered. The great thing about this stuff is you don't have to worry about it melting."

They leaned back against the couch cushions as he slipped an arm around her shoulders. "How's your painting going?"

She was glad to be on a safe subject.

"I'm getting a lot done. I'll be glad when the show is over and I can slow down a little, though."

"Me, too. Now that our final football game is over, I've spent my misery missing you by going to the gym in the

evenings. Except Thursday, when I coach baseball. I have a great bunch of kids. I've been with them since they were little."

She patted his leg. "It sounds as if you're putting your time to good use."

"I'll put it to even better use when you have more time," he said.

Miranda's heart constricted with fear for the future when he spoke with an edge of mournfulness.

"Once I get the paintings done, we'll have more time," she said, hoping to cheer him.

He left late in the evening after they watched a romantic comedy.

As she undressed for bed, she fingered the gold hearts on her necklace and wondered what the next week would bring. Last week she had picked up her phone twice to make an appointment for herself and Paige, only to lose her nerve. She would call this week.



ON MONDAY MORNING, she resolved to take charge of her life. While Mrs. Walters was out, Miranda borrowed her office. She closed the door and, with shaking fingers, punched in the number of her family physician. Speaking softly so Emilie would not hear, she scheduled an appointment for the second Saturday of March.

She wouldn't know the results until she returned from the workshop. It couldn't be helped. The only appointments available soon would require her to take time off work. She thanked the woman and hung up. She would call tonight and

tell Paige. In a month, they would know the destiny assigned by their genes.

The next evening, she was preparing to paint when the phone rang.

"Hi, honey." It was her father. "You busy?"

"Same as every evening. I'm getting ready to paint. It's about all I've been doing lately."

"How's it going?"

"I'm getting a lot done. I surprised Vicki by bringing in two paintings again last week. At this rate, I should have at least sixteen at the show."

"That's good."

There was a short pause, then he cleared his throat.

"Paige tells me you girls have an appointment to be tested for the Huntington gene."

She smiled in spite of the anxiety his words produced. Though she was a grown woman, she would always be one of his "girls." Knowing he disapproved of their decision, she waited for him to continue.

"I've already talked to Paige, and I couldn't change her mind. I want to make sure you've both thought this out carefully. I don't see how it could possibly help you if you find you carry the gene. The knowledge will stunt your life, so to speak. There are so many things you won't do because you'll be afraid you won't be able to finish them. That's not healthy. You'd put your life on hold for a disease you might not get until you're eighty years old."

His voice, full of conviction, shook slightly with emotion.

She took a deep breath and composed her thoughts. "Mom's not eighty years old. She's only middle-aged. You may

be right about Paige. Maybe she's better off not knowing. But I have a man who wants me to marry him, and I don't think it would be right to make that kind of commitment without knowing what's going to happen to me. The same thing would happen to Paige someday. She'll meet a guy and not be sure of her future."

She paused to take a breath. "And what about children? I couldn't have a child knowing I might pass Huntington's along to another generation. Paige feels the same way. If neither of us have it, we can relax. If we do have it, it will affect a lot of our plans. It has to."

She waited tensely for his reply. At last, he sighed.

"I hadn't thought about children. But don't you think that giving a child life, even with risk, is better than having never been born? What about your mother? Think of all she has meant to so many people for all these years. Would any of us be better off if she'd never been born?"

"But she was born. Of course we won't change the way we feel about her. But I know one thing. I wouldn't choose to have a child knowing it would end up the way Mom will become, totally helpless, relying on someone else for its most basic needs. I can't help how I feel about this, and I couldn't put Paul through what you're going through with Mom. I have to be tested. I have to know."

There was silence. Then he spoke with resignation. "The length of a life has nothing to do with its quality. However, I do admire your unselfishness. You don't want to hurt Paul or your children the way you're hurting for your mom. I just pray that neither you nor Paige are carriers of that gene."

“Me, too. If we’re lucky, we can stop worrying once we find out.”



FOR THE NEXT TWO WEEKS leading up to the test, she threw herself into her painting so completely that her appetite, never large, waned until she was barely able to eat. As she sat with Paul at a restaurant the night before the test, she absently scattered the salad on her plate.

She felt his eyes on her and laid down her fork.

“You’re looking kind of pale and thin. Maybe you’re working a little too hard. No art show is worth making yourself sick over. You need to relax.”

She wanted to tell him she would love to relax. But how could she when their future hung in the balance? All she could think about was getting the test over with. Now that it was upon her, a knot of panic had taken root in the pit of her stomach.

She forced a smile. “I’m not making myself sick. I’ll work out with weights and eat everything in sight as soon as the show is over.”

Her attempt at humor met a scowl.

“You should take your health more seriously. It’s no coincidence you had to stop to rest twice last week when we were jogging.” His eyes held concern. “I know you’re also worried about your mother, but is there anything else you’re not telling me?”

“I’m okay, really. I simply haven’t had much appetite lately. There’s just too much at once with my mom and the workshop. My artistic temperament is having trouble adjusting.”

Unwilling to meet his eyes, she picked up her fork and speared a bite of tomato.

"If you're sure that's all..." His skepticism lingered.

Her stomach churned, but she managed to keep her tone light. "You worry too much."

"I love you."

"I know. I love you, too."

She wanted to assure him she would always be at his side to love and support him. It hurt that she could not make this promise. Not yet.

When they left the restaurant, they headed to an action movie. Trying to brush aside thoughts of the next day, she attempted to concentrate on the plot. It was exciting and should have captured her attention, but try as she might, it could not match the drama unfolding in her own life.

When they got home, Paul walked her to her door. His eyes still held that same look of concern.

"Want some coffee?" she asked.

"No. I want you to get some rest. Promise me you'll go right to bed and take care of yourself this week."

She raised her hand in a salute. "I promise."

He leaned down and kissed her softly. "Good night, Miranda."

She returned his kiss, knowing it would not be a good night. Sleep eluded her. When she finally dozed off, dreams of doctors in white coats talking in hushed tones as they leaned over her to draw blood returned again and again. One after another, they arrived, drawing more and more blood. When her alarm finally woke her, she was grateful to be free of the dreams.

The next morning went too fast as she awaited the ten o'clock appointment. Unable to concentrate on painting, she threw herself into a frenzy of cleaning. Soon, it was time to pick up Paige.

Paige met her at the curb. "I had Dad get Mom's attention while I snuck out. I didn't want her to know where I was going. I don't think she knows she may have passed this on to us, and I don't want her to worry. I know how I'd feel if I gave my kids some terrible disease."

"Was Dad still trying to talk you out of it?"

"No, He's given up. I think he's as nervous as we are, though."

Miranda nodded. "Okay, then, let's go."

As Miranda drove toward the clinic, the morning traffic crept at a snail's pace down the street. Horns honked in impatient bursts, and lights were especially slow.

Paige sat beside her, twisting the strap of her purse between her fingers.

"You can still change your mind," Miranda said.

Paige shook her head without looking at her sister.

"If I don't do it today, I'll spend the rest of my life wondering."

Miranda understood that feeling all too well.

They stopped at a red light.

A young mother pushed a stroller across the crosswalk while a toddler skipped beside her, clutching the woman's hand.

Miranda watched them reach the other side.

Children.

The word echoed through her mind like a distant bell.

If the test was positive, she could never risk bringing a child into the world.

Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel.



THEY PAUSED OUTSIDE the clinic and glanced at each other. Then, drawing deep breaths, they walked inside. Though flu season was winding down, the doctor's office hummed with activity.

The reception area had a line of patients waiting to sign in. When they finally reached the front, they jotted down their names and took seats.

A television mounted in the corner murmured through a morning news broadcast while patients flipped through magazines that no one seemed to be reading.

Miranda picked up a magazine from the table beside her. The cover showed a smiling family gathered around a picnic table. She stared at the photograph without really seeing it.

Across from her, Paige was tapping her foot nervously.

"Miranda gave her arm a gentle, comforting squeeze.

Paige stopped tapping and folded her hands together. "I hate waiting rooms."

Miranda managed a faint smile. "Everyone does."

A nurse walked past calling another patient's name.

Miranda's heart jumped each time the door opened.

She had never realized how many ordinary sounds filled a doctor's office.

The hum of fluorescent lights.

The rustle of paper.

A distant telephone ringing somewhere down the hall.

All of it seemed strangely magnified.

Finally, Paige leaned toward her.

"What if we both have it?" she whispered.

Miranda reached over and squeezed her sister's hand.

"Then we'll deal with it together."

At last, a blue-clad nurse called their names. "Miranda and Paige Wilkins."

They jumped to their feet and returned the magazines to the rack. Filled with trepidation, Miranda preceded Paige through the open door.

"You're just here for blood work, right?" the woman asked.

"That's right." Miranda's mouth felt dry as cotton.

The nurse led them into a small room lined with cabinets and counters. A school desk sat in one corner, and beside it was a table holding test tubes and a rubber tourniquet.

"If one of you will have a seat right here, I'll be with you in a moment." She gestured toward the desk.

"Do you want to go first?" Miranda asked Paige.

Paige shrugged. "If you don't care, I might as well."

The nurse reappeared and said, "Okay, honey, put your right arm on the desk."

She applied the tourniquet and swabbed the crook of Paige's arm with a cotton ball.

Paige looked away. "I really hate this," she murmured.

She winced slightly as the needle broke her pale, filmy skin.

After a small prick, She watched the deep red of her sister's blood fill the clear test tube. Moments later, her own followed.

Please, she silently begged, don't let either of us have the marker for Huntington's.

When she finished, the nurse pressed a bandage tightly on her arm. "We'll have to send this blood out for your tests. It will take about five days before we know the results."

Five days. It would be the end of next week. She would still be at the workshop. She would have to wait until the following Monday to find out her results.

She watched the nurse set the blood samples into a holder.

"I'll be out of town, so I'll check with you when I get back," Miranda said.

"That will be fine. You two have a nice day."

The nurse whisked out of the room to continue her duties.

Sliding out of the desk, Miranda wondered how many people this office would see that day. To the nurse, drawing blood was routine. To Miranda and Paige, it was a key to their future.

"Well, we did it. That part wasn't too bad. Now we wait," Miranda said.

"I thought it was pretty bad. I hate blood."

"How would you know? You didn't look."

"That's why I didn't look."

At the outer office, they showed insurance cards.

After they paid their bills and walked into the early spring sunshine.

"I'm glad we don't have to do that again," Paige said.

"Me, too."

They rode through streets lined with leafing trees to their parents' shaded home and pulled into the driveway.

"I keep wondering if Mom would have had kids if she knew she had Huntington's," Paige said.

"I don't know."

"Would you?" Paige asked.

"I don't think so."

"Me either, and I'd like to have kids someday."

"Then let's hope you don't have it." Miranda smiled reassuringly. "I need to go home and pack for the workshop. Tell Mom and Dad hi."

"I will."

"And, Miranda..."

"Yeah?"

"I really hope you have a good time at your workshop."

Miranda looked into eyes carrying a burden too heavy for someone so young.

"Thanks. I will."

She hugged Paige tightly.

For a moment, Paige held on, reminding Miranda of the many times she had carried her as a baby, tiny arms wrapped around her shoulders. Paige wasn't a baby now. She was facing an adult crisis with admirable maturity.

Releasing her, Paige bounced out of the car and said, "Call when you get back."

"I will."

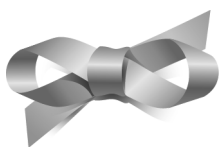
Miranda watched her disappear into the house and then drove away, knowing this ordeal had strengthened the bond between them. That was a small but real comfort in a dark time.

At home, she packed her clothes and settled down to paint. She thought of Paul. He had flown to Colorado that morning. She imagined him at his parents' house, hiking, swimming, enjoying the country he loved. She longed to be with him.

Was he thinking of her? He had been disturbed by the thought that she was riding to the workshop with Dan. Was he still worried?

The workshop would soon be over. So would the test results and the show.

Then, perhaps, life would settle into comfortable predictability.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN



DAN ARRIVED THE NEXT afternoon to give her a ride. After they loaded her bags, Miranda slid into the passenger seat. She immediately noticed a camera resting beside her.

“I see you brought a camera.”

He nodded, glancing at it fondly as he pulled onto the road. “I take it everywhere. You only get one chance for some scenes. The lighting and clouds are just right, and if you miss it, it’s gone for good.”

“I went to Colorado over Christmas break. I should have brought my camera,” she said, thinking of snowcapped peaks and wide skies.

Dan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I usually go out early in the morning or in the evening to get the best light. Are you an early riser?”

“Actually, I am. I get up at six and jog before work. When I was a kid, I used to drive my parents up the wall by getting up at six on weekends.”

“One of those,” he said with a laugh. “If I had a kid like that, she’d sleep in the doghouse.”

She was grateful for his easy humor as they merged onto the highway. Their only previous interactions had been brief

and professional at the gallery. Now, alone on a long drive, she was relieved to find him pleasant company.

As though they were old friends, he continued the conversation. "How many paintings are you planning to have in the show?"

"I'm hoping for sixteen. The holidays slowed me down, but I've been working long hours lately."

"I know what you mean," he said. "My fiancée insisted on doing all our Christmas shopping together. I don't know how you shop, but she compared everything in at least three stores. Exhausting."

Miranda glanced at him. "I didn't know you were engaged."

"Yep. Patti wants to set our wedding date for April first because it's my birthday." He shook his head. "I shudder to think of the gags our friends will pull. And she'll probably spend the whole day shopping for my present and be late for the wedding."

They passed the miles with light conversation and comfortable stretches of silence. When the hotel finally came into view, nestled in a wooded valley on the outskirts of the city, Miranda felt a flicker of relief. The lights glowed warmly as they pulled into the circular drive, a quiet welcome after the long trip.

A young man with a friendly smile stood behind the desk. "Oh yes, you're two of the artists for the workshop. I have your rooms ready. Second floor. Each has a private balcony with a view of the hills. Do you need help with your bags?"

Dan glanced at Miranda.

"I can manage," she said.

He handed them their keys.

When the elevator opened on the second floor, Dan wished her well and headed toward his room. Though he had been good company, she was glad for solitude before their welcome dinner that evening.

Inside her room, she set down her bags and stepped onto the balcony. The early evening sky was clear, and the temperature was mild. The scent of honeysuckle and lilac drifted up to her, stirring memories of her father's garden. She pictured him in worn gardening clothes, patiently tending his plants. Would he still have time for them now that her mother needed so much care?

Above her, the stars glittered against the dark sky. The universe felt ancient and vast, ordered with divine intention. The thought made her feel small, fragile, and keenly aware of her mortality. Life was brief and uncertain.

She wished Paul were here with his arms around her as they had been when they stargazed in Colorado. She imagined living there with him, painting the seasons as they changed. In time, rosy cheeked children would shriek with delight as snow touched their faces. Paul would pull them on sleds across white hills. Evenings would end with marshmallows by the fire and quiet moments together once the children slept.

The smile faded from her lips.

None of that would be possible if she carried the gene. As deeply as she loved him, she could not ask him to endure the slow heartbreak her father was living through. She would not do that to him.

She straightened and forced herself to breathe. She did not know the test results. Maybe she didn't carry the gene.

Rubbing her clammy hands against her slacks, she went inside and took a long, steamy shower. Later, as she towed her hair dry, she sat on the edge of the bed and reviewed the schedule for the next day. Doughnuts and coffee before the lecture, then lunch and a sketch workshop in the country. It would be full and demanding.

The group got acquainted during a pleasant dinner of fruit and cold cuts. Sleep came easily that night. However, anxiety stirred her awake more than once as thoughts of Mr. Weldmon's critical eye intruded. At last, just before her seven o'clock wake up call, she fell into a deeper sleep.

She dressed quickly, curling her hair and applying light makeup. In the lobby, she nibbled a glazed doughnut while sipping coffee. She felt awkward standing alone. Relief washed over her when Dan appeared in the crowd.

He selected two filled doughnuts and joined her. "Ready for the first session?"

"As ready as I'll ever be. I hope my work is up to standard. I have a lot to live up to just being here."

His smile was sympathetic. "I know. I feel the same way."

Soon, the director of the local art school called them to order and introduced the guest instructor.

"You were chosen from over two hundred applicants because your work shows the excellence and creativity we want to encourage. Please welcome Mr. Robert Weldmon."

The students clapped as Mr. Weldmon stepped forward. His steel gray hair and intense brown eyes commanded attention. After they took seats in the meeting room, he spoke about his background, common artistic mistakes, and the week ahead. Miranda took careful notes. She filled pages as he

critiqued slides, pointing out flaws in lighting and composition.

Though he spoke with quiet authority, his soft-spoken, calm manner put her at ease. Perhaps his critiques of their works would not crush the enthusiastic students who looked up to him. Teachers who corrected with kindness encouraged their students to progress.

After the lecture, he dismissed them for lunch and outlined the schedule for their afternoon field work and evening critiques.

Lunch was served in a private room behind the hotel café. The aroma of hot coffee and fresh croissants filled the air as Miranda sat beside Dan. A round-faced young woman across from them smiled brightly.

“Hi, I’m Ann.”

They exchanged introductions.

“What do you paint?” Dan asked.

“Seascapes.”

“A woman after my own heart,” he said. He gestured to Miranda. “She just came back from Colorado and wants to paint avalanches.”

Miranda laughed. “Not avalanches. But I did love the snow.”

Ann leaned in. “I grew up in Minnesota. I’ve had my fill of snow. I’m a Texan now, accent and all.”

Conversation flowed amiably. Ann spoke of ambition and fame, wondering aloud if any of them would someday be as renowned as Mr. Weldmon. Miranda admitted she had wondered about that, too. She didn’t tell them that her worries

now ran deeper than career success. Would her talent be cut short by the illness lurking in her family line?

When they asked about each other's backgrounds, Miranda spoke of her grandfather and their painting trips. Ann shared stories of teaching second grade, and Miranda spoke of her work as a school secretary.

The afternoon unfolded in green fields and blooming wildflowers. Mr. Weldmon's humor inspired them as he led them through the gate to the painting site, joking about a penned bull.

Miranda returned to her room with paint still faintly staining the tips of her fingers.

She set her sketchbook on the small desk near the balcony doors and stepped outside. The hills were dark now, outlined softly beneath a pale moon. All day she had worked beside artists who spoke easily about technique and ambition. Some of them dreamed of gallery fame. Others wanted commissions and recognition. She wondered what she wanted.

Success, of course.

But more than that, she wanted time. Time to paint every landscape she had ever imagined. Time to capture the way autumn light turned ordinary trees into something extraordinary.

Her gaze dropped to her hands resting on the balcony rail. They looked steady enough now.

Strong.

Capable.

The thought slipped back into her mind. What if someday they weren't?

She flexed her fingers slowly, studying them as if they belonged to someone else.

The possibility of losing her ability to paint felt terrifyingly real.

She closed her hands into fists.

"No," she whispered.

For tonight, they were steady.

She wouldn't think about the future.



THE REST OF THE WEEK passed quickly. Each day was a new challenge of mixing colors and choosing composition. By the end of the week, she knew it had been well worth her time. When Saturday arrived, she knew she would return home with a wealth of new knowledge. After breakfast, and goodbyes to new friends, she and Dan headed home. Dan spoke fondly of Patti during most of the drive. Miranda listened, her thoughts drifting to Paul. When they reached her apartment, she declined Dan's offer to carry her bags. Instead, she balanced them and hurried up the stairs.

The week apart had heightened her desire to be near Paul. Every time Dan mentioned his upcoming honeymoon, she dreamed about a honeymoon with Paul. If her test showed she had not inherited the Huntington gene, she would tell him she wanted to become engaged.

As soon as she got home and set her bags down, she called Paige. "Well?" she asked when Paige answered.

"Negative! No marker, no Huntington's." The words came out in a rush. Paige's voice was filled with joy.

Miranda released a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. "I'm so happy for you! That's wonderful. You can make life choices without worrying."

"Have you heard about your test?" Paige asked.

"No, but if you got your results this morning, maybe they'll call me today, too."

"Let me know first thing. I bet you'll be negative like me."

"I hope so," Miranda said, her voice barely a whisper.

After shopping and visiting their mother, Miranda drove home, her thoughts returning again and again to Paul.

His voice was cheerful when they finally spoke. "Want to trade vacation stories?"

Her heart lifted. "I was just about to call you."

"Are you free for dinner?"

"As a matter of fact, I am," she said. "Right now, I can't think of anyone I would like to see more than you."

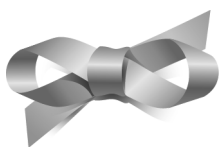
"I'll pick you up at seven, if that works," Paul said.

By the time he arrived with roses, the weight she carried lifted in his presence. His words, sincere and tender, brought tears she struggled to hide. She loved him deeply. Soon, she would finally learn whether that love could have a future.



AFTER CHURCH THE NEXT day, she lost herself in her painting. Working late, she sketched deer frozen in apprehension, recognizing her own fear reflected in their stance.

That night, sleep would not come easily. Tomorrow morning might decide everything.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN



MIRANDA AWOKE EARLY on Monday. The room was still dim, the gray-blue light of dawn barely pushing past the curtains, yet sleep would not return. Her heart beat a staccato rhythm as she rose and dressed. Each movement felt deliberate, as though slowing time might delay the inevitable. She brushed her hair and tied her shoes. Then, staring at her reflection longer than usual, she searched for an outward sign of what might already be written inside her. Certainty settled in her chest that her future hinged on a single phone call.

With a few minutes to fill before Paul would arrive for their jog, she was drawn, without conscious thought, to her painting. The familiar smell of oil and canvas steadied her, grounding her in something she could control. She switched on the lamp above her easel, its warm glow carving a small circle of certainty in an otherwise uncertain morning.

The fawns were taking shape beneath the towering mimosa tree. Their slender bodies were nearly complete now, their delicate legs braced, ears lifted, eyes wide and alert. They stared back at her from the canvas, frozen in a moment of instinctive fear. Somewhere beyond the frame, an unseen human photographer lingered. Danger hovered in the air, unspoken but unmistakable.

She ran her finger lightly across the dried paint, tracing the curve of one fawn's neck. A rush of empathy filled her so suddenly she had to swallow hard. In a way, her own well-being felt just as precarious. She, too, stood exposed and uncertain, threatened not by a hunter but by her own genes. And though some primitive instinct urged her to flee, there was nowhere to run. She could only wait and pray she would escape her mother's fate.

The irony was not lost on her. She had always believed life rewarded preparation and discipline. Work hard. Trust God. However, waiting for this answer was hard to bear.

She met Paul as he pulled into the parking lot, the sight of him both comforting and heartrending. His presence reminded her of everything she stood to lose.

"You're early," he commented.

"I woke up early."

He pulled her close, his familiar warmth pressing against her. "It must be because you missed me."

His hard muscles tightened as she pushed playfully against him, laughter rising despite the knot in her chest. For a moment, she allowed herself to forget.

She playfully said, "Now see here, we can't be making out in the parking lot."

Ignoring her protest, he kissed her neck, then her earlobe, sending a shiver through her.

"No one's out here anyway," she murmured as his lips brushed her cheek and moved toward her mouth.

He kissed her softly. "If you don't want to be kissed, you shouldn't be kissable."

She ran her hand along his smoothly shaven cheek, memorizing the feel of him as if she might need the memory later. "I do want to be kissed, as long as it's by you."

Paul checked his watch. "Unfortunately, time won't stand still, so we better start."

They began jogging and he said, "It's nice to have a relatively cool morning. We'll pay for it with high humidity in the afternoon."

Miranda watched him from the corner of her eye, admiring the strength in his stride, the quiet confidence in his movement. She wondered how she could possibly survive a future without him.

When they returned, she showered quickly and forced down a small breakfast. The minutes stretched endlessly, each one dragging her closer to the call she both dreaded and longed to make. Time had never felt so heavy.

At work, she glanced at the office calendar. Mrs. Walters had no meetings scheduled that morning and Emilie was in the room. Miranda would need to duck outside for privacy. She mapped out the logistics in her mind as if careful planning might result in what she wanted to hear.

The bell rang, and Emilie hurried in to help manage the rush of notes and tardy slips. Once things settled, they poured coffee and set to work. The office grew quiet, the steady tapping of keys echoed loudly in Miranda's ears. Each stroke reminded her of a ticking clock.

Eight forty-five.

Still fifteen minutes to go before the doctor's office would open.

Mrs. Walters appeared in her doorway. "Emilie, the lunch menus are ready to print and distribute to the classrooms. Would you take care of that, please?"

Emilie nodded and downloaded a copy. She printed it and headed to the copy room. Miranda watched her disappear as the last minutes ticked by and nine o'clock arrived.

Mrs. Walters was busy in her office. No one was around. She could make the call right here. She punched in the number, then froze. Someone could walk in at any moment. She needed privacy and space to hear whatever words were coming.

She slipped down the hall and went out a side door into the deserted parking lot. The asphalt shimmered faintly in the growing heat. Her heart, already restless, began to pound violently. With trembling fingers, she connected the call.

After a few rings, the receptionist answered, "Doctor's office."

As Miranda explained what she needed, her voice sounded oddly calm, much more so than she felt.

"Test results? Let me check," the receptionist replied.

Though the woman returned promptly, Miranda's hands cramped from gripping the phone.

"I have a note here that says the doctor would like to see you. Can you come in this afternoon at four-thirty?"

Her knees weakened. Weeks of waiting, and still no answer.

"Yes," she said. "I can come in. But what about the test?"

"The doctor will explain everything this afternoon."

Defeat settled over her like a weight. "Okay. I'll be there."

She hung up feeling suspended, as though the world had tilted off its axis. She had prepared herself for yes or no. Instead,

she was left to endure the rest of the day in limbo. At least there was an end in sight. By four-thirty, it would be over.

Shaking from adrenaline, she walked back inside. She rapped on Mrs. Walter's open door and asked, "Would it be a problem if I left about an hour early for a doctor's appointment?"

"No, no problem," Mrs. Walters replied without looking up.

No one knew the quiet drama unfolding inside her. Not even Paul. Being private had always come naturally to her. Perhaps she should have told him. However, his concern would have only frayed her already taut nerves.

The day dragged. By noon, a headache throbbed behind her eyes.

"I'm running to grab a hamburger," Emilie said. "Want anything?"

"No, thanks. I brought a sandwich."

Emilie studied her. "You look pale. Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine. Just a headache."

"I hope it's not the flu again. My sister had it over spring break."

"I'm okay," Miranda insisted, though fear whispered otherwise.

After lunch, she buried herself in typing committee recommendations, grateful for the focus the task required. At three forty-five, she shut down the computer, gathered her purse, and slipped quietly out.

The parking lot was empty. Relief washed over her. She was glad it wasn't one of Paul's after-school days.

She arrived promptly at four-thirty, signed in, and leafed through magazines until the nurse escorted her back. She sat on the edge of the plastic chair. Her fingers danced nervously along the armrest.

Finally, the doctor entered. His smile was perfunctory, his eyes weary.

"How have you been?" he asked.

"Emotionally or physically?" she replied.

He acknowledged the strain, speaking gently as he said, "It's hard to wait for results like these."

She waited, taking shallow breaths.

Before delivering the results, he explained what the test could and could not determine. He spoke of possibilities, and research.

Her heart racing, she interrupted softly. "You're telling me I have the gene, aren't you?"

Meeting her gaze, he nodded. "The test showed you carry the genetic marker."

A strange calm settled over her, unreal, distant, as though the words belonged to someone else's life.

"I guess there's nothing I can do," she said.

"Not right now. You're not experiencing symptoms and, if you do it may be a long while. Still, the diagnosis is hard to accept. I recommend you get counseling."

He handed her a card for counseling. She accepted it numbly.

He patted her on the back before she left the office. "Don't give up. There's promising research."

When she left, sunlight greeted her, warm and indifferent. She sat in her car, stunned, until the truth pierced the fog. This was real. And it would shape everything.

At home, Paige's message waited.

When they spoke, Miranda asked her to keep the news from their father. She spoke of Paul, of children she could never have, of a future already narrowing. Saying the words aloud made them heavier.

For one impossible moment, she wished time would stop. But it didn't. All she could think to tell Paul was that she needed time to prepare for the show. When she drove off, she wondered how she would manage to let him go.



THE NEXT DAY, SHE MADE sure to be out of the office at the time when Paul signed in for the after-school program. That evening he called twice and, though she listened to his message with tears in her eyes, she did not return his calls.

Two days later Miranda spotted Paul across the playground as she was leaving for home.

He stood near the backstop, a baseball cap pulled low as he demonstrated a throwing motion to a small group of boys.

"Step forward," he said patiently. "Then follow through."

One boy tried and missed the catch entirely.

Paul retrieved the ball and handed it back with an encouraging grin.

"That's all right. Try again."

Miranda lingered beside the door longer than necessary.

She had always admired how easily he connected with children.

They trusted him instinctively.

He would make a wonderful father.

She turned away before he could see her.

It was easier that way.

Better to leave before he noticed.

Better to disappear now than to let him build a future that might crumble years later.

Still, as she walked to her car, she could not help glancing back.

Paul was laughing with the boys, completely unaware that the future they had imagined together, was already slipping quietly out of reach.



ON FRIDAY AFTERNOON, she could avoid him no longer. He was parked alongside her car, waiting for her when she came out. She tried to force a smile but his face was so solemn that her smile froze before it formed. Her hands grew damp as she faced him.

"We have to talk," he said.

She looked into the deep blue eyes that had intrigued her when they first met and thought her heart would break.

"You've been avoiding me all week. I must have done something wrong. But I don't know what. I came to find out what's wrong and to apologize."

"You didn't do anything, it's just..." She hesitated, lowering her eyes. "Things have been unsettled lately and I need some time to think."

"I know you're upset about your mother. If I haven't been supportive enough, I'm sorry. Won't you give me another chance?"

"You haven't done anything wrong," she insisted.

"Then why are you avoiding me?"

Miranda looked into his eyes and her resolve began to crumble. If she told him the truth, he would stay. She knew that as surely as she knew her own name. Paul was the kind of man who would face anything for someone he loved. That was exactly why she could not let him.

"For your sake, it would be better if we didn't see so much of each other."

"For my sake? What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means something has come up. I'm only thinking of you. We'd end up hurting each other if I keep seeing you."

"If you're thinking of me, I wish you wouldn't because I've been miserable. Just tell me what's wrong." A worried frown creased his brows and there was pain in the gaze that fastened firmly on her face.

"I can't." Tears that had been pricking the back of her eyes began to flow freely. "I really am thinking of you," she sobbed.

He took a step forward and put his arms around her. There was a catch in his voice as he spoke. "Don't do this to us. Whatever it is, I can help you work through it. Give me a chance. Please."

She shivered at the feel of his arms wrapped tightly around her. She knew she'd be happy if only he could hold her forever in suspended animation. If she could stop time, she would stay in the circle of his arms where she felt safe and loved. And nothing could ever hurt them or drive them apart.

But they didn't have forever. They had only this moment together. She laid her head against his shoulder and breathed the scent of his aftershave. She wanted to remember everything about him, the hard muscles of his arms, the deep blue of his eyes, and the dimple that formed in his chin when he smiled. She wanted to remember. Forever.

She glanced up to see Emilie coming out the door. She would be sure to stop on the way to her car. Not anxious to have Emilie notice her tear-stained face, she pulled back.

"I've got to go," she said.

"I'm not letting you go so easily. Promise you'll talk to me when I call."

She squirmed against his grip. Emilie was crossing the parking lot. Feeling panicked, she struggled to get free, but he held her firmly.

"Promise," he repeated.

"All right." She took a step back as he released her.

She unlocked her car and slid inside. As she drove away, she was haunted by the pain and puzzlement in his eyes. She longed to wipe away the hurt and restore the closeness and laughter they once knew. But such happiness would only be temporary. No one could guarantee how long it would last. He deserved more than that.

In the rear-view mirror, she saw Emilie pause beside Paul. Would he tell her what happened? Would he ask if she knew what was wrong? She thought about her promise to talk to him and wondered what she would tell him when he called.

She longed to explain. Yet that would not erase the pain in his eyes. She remembered when he'd told her he blamed God

for losing Jimmy. She would let him blame God for losing her and drive a deeper wedge between him and his Creator.

She spent all evening thinking of excuses for her behavior.

When the phone rang, she cringed. Though she didn't know what to say, there was nothing to do but answer.

Her throat constricted. "Hello."

She couldn't keep her voice from shaking.

"Hi, Miranda. This is Vicki. How are you doing?"

"Oh. Okay." She struggled to regain her composure.

While she paused, Vicki plunged on. "Didn't you tell me you had an extra easel stored somewhere? I'm planning how to set up the show, and I think I'm going to be a little short of wall space. Do you have any easels I could borrow?"

"Sure. I have a couple, but they're not very large."

"I can use them for the smaller paintings. Dan's coming to the gallery in a while and said he'd be happy to stop by and pick them up from you. Is that okay?"

"Yes, that's fine. By the way, I just finished the fifteenth painting."

"Great. Get it here this week and I can frame it. Maybe Dan could bring it tonight if he has room."

"I'll ask him. In the meantime, I'll find the easels."

She hung up and rummaged through the walk-in closet where the easels sat against the wall. "Come on you two, out of retirement," she muttered.

She dragged them out and propped them against the couch.

A short while later Dan arrived, accompanied by a young woman with long blonde hair.

"This is my fiancée, Patti," Dan said.

Miranda nodded. "I feel like I know you. Dan talked about you constantly at the workshop."

The woman smiled. "I hope he only told you the good things," she said.

"That's all he did."

Dan's gaze swept the apartment. He gestured at her paintings. "I like your taste in art."

"Thanks. It's all I can afford."

"That's why I'm marrying an artist. I get free decorating," Patti teased.

Looking at the two of them, so easy together, gave her a pang of envy. Their plans were once her plans. She had imagined herself and Paul walking back down the church aisle as husband and wife.

She pushed the unhappy thoughts from her mind. Life could still be good, even if it was different than what she had planned. She'd just have to learn to face it without Paul and without self-pity. Such feelings would only cause her to resent everyone who was happy. That could only lead to bitter loneliness, something she was determined to avoid.

She put on a pleasant smile. "Would you two like a cup of coffee or maybe a glass of iced tea to cool off?"

"I'd love a glass of tea. It's getting hot early this year. That cruise to Alaska sounds better and better, doesn't it, honey?" Dan said as he fanned himself and shot a hopeful look at Patti.

Patti wrinkled her nose. She turned to Miranda. "We're trying to decide where to go on our honeymoon. I want to tour France, and he wants to go to Alaska. If we go to Alaska, all he'll do is sketch the beaches."

Feigning innocence, Dan threw up his hands in protest. "You know me better than that."

"I do know you. That's the problem." Glancing at Miranda, she ignored his pout. "I'd love a glass of tea. Can I help you get it?"

"No. It's no trouble. You two work out your honeymoon and I'll be back in a minute."

When she returned, they were sitting close and holding hands. "Did you decide where to go?" she asked.

"Oh, we didn't need to." Patti flipped her blonde hair across Dan's face. "We decided to visit my grandmother in Dallas."

"What!" Dan protested. "Your grandmother hates me. She's sure you'll starve married to an artist."

"That's right."

Dan grimaced. "I really want to go to France."

Patti smiled broadly. "What a coincidence. So do I."

Miranda smiled at their banter as she handed them the tea. After a while, their conversation turned to the art show. "Patti's planning to come this year. She wants a first-hand look at what it's like to be an artist's wife," Dan said.

"Are you sure that's wise? She might change her mind about marrying you," Miranda teased.

"She wouldn't do that. She'd never find anyone like me."

"That's the truth," both women agreed.

"Well, since you two are ganging up against me, I'll take your easels and go," he said.

"Do you have enough room to take a painting, too? I just finished one and Vicki wants to frame it," Miranda said.

"Sure. I drove my van, so we've got plenty of room."

Miranda brought out the painting.

"Do you have an old blanket I can wrap around it?" Dan asked.

"I think so. Let me run down to the storage locker. I've got a couple down there that I used when I moved in. Be back in a minute."

She found the blankets where she expected, folded neatly in a corner of the locker. Grabbing them, she hurried back into the comfort of the cool apartment. When she stepped inside, Dan gestured to where she'd left her phone on the coffee table.

"You have someone on the line. I told him to hang on and you'd be right back." He took the blankets and began to wrap the painting.

"Thanks." Her heart began a staccato beat. Even though she had promised to talk, if it was Paul, she'd have to put him off. She couldn't talk in front of Dan and Patti.

She picked up the phone tentatively as though it were a poisonous snake. Raising it slowly, she forced confidence into her voice. "Hello?"

"Hello, Miranda. I didn't mean to interrupt." Paul sounded terse and unhappy.

"That's okay. It would be better if I could call you back in a few minutes though."

"I don't think there will be any need for that. I can't believe what a fool I've been. I've been going crazy the last few days trying to figure out what I'd done to make you so upset. Now it's all clear. I can see why you're not married. You change men as easily as you change shoes. I really thought we had something."

"What are you talking about?" She was genuinely baffled.

"Do you expect me to believe it was your girlfriend who answered the phone? Who was it? Was it that artist, Dan?"

The swirl of words that had been swimming in her head suddenly clarified. He thought there was another man! She was so surprised that, for a moment, she stood in a mute daze, trying to think of what she could say in front of Dan and Patti.

Her first instinct was to deny his accusations. Then, suddenly, she changed her mind. If he believed she had chosen someone else, it might make the break easier for him. Hadn't she been looking for an excuse? Now that it was right in front of her, she might as well use it.

"Well, was it Dan?" he repeated.

"Yes, it was." She let the admission sit, pregnant with implied meaning.

"You sound pretty cool. This isn't hard for you, is it?"

She swallowed hard as she heard his voice catch. *If only you knew, Paul. If only you knew how hard this is for me.*

When she didn't speak, he continued. "I guess this is good-bye. I hope you're both happy, at least until you change shoes again."

"Thank you. I'm sure we will be."

To her surprise, she felt no pain, only numbness, which was fortunate since Dan and Patti were waiting for the painting. They wrapped it carefully and carried it, along with the easel, to the van.

As they drove away, she trudged upstairs feeling as stiff and dead as the metal rail under her hand. But with every step, the numbness in her mind melted.

She opened her door only to be assailed by the emptiness inside. Memories of the times he had kissed her and exclaimed

over her work flooded her mind. It wouldn't happen again, ever.

She sank into a chair and stared at the roses he'd brought the weekend before. They were wilting now, turning from deep red to dark purple. As she stared at the fallen petals, she began to absorb the enormity of what she had lost. She laid her head on the table and began to cry, first with quiet tears, and then, as the pent-up emotions were released, in loud and anguished sobs, her shoulders shaking with the exertion.

When, at last, she was spent and no more tears would come, she sat quietly, acutely aware that the only sound in her apartment was the soft hum of the appliances.

Unwilling to stay alone in a silent apartment, she grabbed her purse and headed for her parents' house. At least there, she wouldn't be alone.

When she arrived, she was struck by the fatigue on her dad's face when he answered the door. "You haven't been getting enough rest," she admonished as she kissed his wrinkled cheek.

"It hasn't been easy. The last few nights, your mom has been waking during the night and wandering around the house. She's taking a nap right now. Come into the study where we can talk."

Feeling apprehensive, she followed him into the paneled study. As the waning sunlight filtered through the long horizontal window, her eyes fell on the spot where her mother's easel had stood. How many days had she come home from school to see her mother painting under the north light? As she gazed out the window, the ghostly skeleton of a neighbor's dying tree met her eyes, causing her to shiver.

Her father picked up one of the old brushes Miranda had left and stared at it as he twirled it between his fingers. "It's been a long time since she sat here to paint," he said softly.

After a moment, he continued. "I don't know how long I can keep caring for her. I love your mother. I'd do anything for her. But now that she's starting to need constant care..." he shook his head, composing himself before he continued.

"I can't retire for at least another seven years without losing some of my pension. Even with a part-time housekeeper, I can't be up all night with your mother and still work all day. What I'm trying to say is that I'm afraid, in a few months, I may have to put her in a nursing home."

The pain in his face showed a decision of desperation, not desire. She knew he was waiting for her reaction. So, she chose the words carefully. "I know how much you love Mom and how close you've always been. When the time comes that she can't be cared for at home, I'll support any decision you make."

He nodded. "You know, when your mom and I got married, I never thought of anything like this happening. I guess you never do when you're young."

His eyes held a faraway look.

She felt as though her heart would break. "There's no way either of you could have known. I wonder what's happened in Mom's biological family. I wonder if her mother had Huntington's, too."

"I guess we'll never know. I'm grateful that Paige isn't carrying the gene. What about you? Do you know yet?"

She bit her lip. Though with all her heart she wanted to spare him the truth, she knew she couldn't lie. Even if she tried, he would read the truth in her face.

"Yes. I'm carrying it. The doctor told me it would probably be a long time before I see any effects." She tried to lighten the news for his benefit.

He'd picked up her tone. "There's time to find a cure before you show any symptoms. We'll pray you'll be fortunate enough to be spared."

Still, the ashen hue of his face betrayed how deeply her news affected him. They sat together quietly, each being strong for the good of the other, and knowing, deep down, that it was fruitless.

"I should accept things as they are, but I can't help hoping there will be a cure in time to help Mom," she said, at last. "Someday, I want to bring her easel back and have her sit in here and paint again. Maybe I shouldn't hold onto such a thin hope. It will only hurt more in the long run."

Her dad said, "Don't ever give up hope. Sometimes, it's all we have."

Miranda nodded. "The housekeeper has already gone home for the day, right? Did she leave any dinner?"

He shook his head.

"How about if I make dinner tonight?" she said, trying to take charge of her spiraling mood. She wanted an excuse to leave the room that was all wrong without her mother's things in their familiar places.

Her father nodded. "That would be great if you feel like it."

She prepared a simple meal, and Paige helped her clean up.

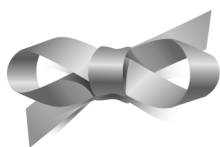
Their mother looked on, unable to help with the soapy dishes that slipped too easily from her hands.

As Miranda drove home in the quiet of the balmy night, her thoughts drifted to Paul. More than anything, she wanted

to call and explain. She couldn't bear to have him think she loved another man. It also pricked her conscience to let him believe something that wasn't true, especially when it caused him pain. Yet that was precisely why she couldn't tell him the truth, couldn't have any relationship with him at all.

A cloud of depression descended as she accepted the fact there would be no more men in her life. She might as well keep her mind on the things she could control. Maybe she would take some self-improvement courses. She'd always wanted to learn to play the guitar. Maybe she'd take a dance class. No. An aerobics class. In a dance class she might meet single men.

Even so, it would require keeping herself busy to keep her mind off Paul. Then, in time, maybe it wouldn't hurt so much when she remembered their times together.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN



AFTER THEY LEFT, HE glanced at Miranda, capturing her gaze and freezing her easily as a deer freezes in the headlights.

Her face flushed. She was already ill at ease among all these people. How could she face him, and why had he come?

Having nowhere to go and no excuse to flee, she stood rooted to the floor as he approached.

"How's the show going?" he asked mildly.

"Good. It's been busy tonight. I've sold five paintings and Vicki's talking about prints. I'm eager to do the paintings for them."

Her words came in a nervous stream. Then, realizing she had run out of things to say, she paused, feeling awkward, as he gazed into her face.

She swallowed hard. "Did you come here to shop for art?"

"No. I came to see your show."

"It was sweet of you to come. I hope we can still be friends."

"It wasn't sweet. I was curious."

"About what?" The tone of his voice gave her a bad feeling.

"Your boyfriend. That's him over there, isn't it? Dan, right?"

She nodded.

"I think I'll go over and say 'hi'."

A sick feeling settled in her stomach as she realized she was about to be embarrassed in front of Dan and Patti.

"Please don't. This isn't the right time."

"Why not?"

She began to panic. "We're in the middle of an art show. Please, Paul. I don't want a scene. Don't go over there."

"I'm not the type to cause a scene. I'll just say, 'Hello.'"

Her heart pounded as he approached them. If Dan introduced Patti as his fiancée, how would she explain her lie to Paul?

Now that the crowd had thinned, there were no customers waiting for Dan's attention. Soon, the three of them were chatting in what appeared to be a pleasant conversation. After enduring long minutes of agony, wondering what was being said, she pretended not to notice when Paul strode back.

She busied herself straightening paintings, ignoring her heart's desire standing so close she could smell his aftershave. She wondered if he knew the truth. Since she didn't know, she decided to let him make the first move.

He paused beside her. "You know, I found out the oddest thing about your boyfriend. He has a fiancée. Doesn't that bother you?"

She ran her finger along the edge of a frame, trying to think of a reply.

Before she could answer, he continued. "I bet you already knew that. And you know what? It didn't surprise me, either."

Taken aback, she stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I don't think this is the place to discuss it. I'd like to talk to you somewhere private when the show is over."

Without another word, he turned on his heel and disappeared.

She didn't see him again until nine o'clock.

He walked over with Vicki, who glanced at her watch. "Time to call it quits, kiddo. You had a good show."

Vicky turned to Paul. "She's lucky you're understanding about how much time she put into this."

"I've done a pretty good job of staying out of the way lately."

Though she knew Vicki was unaware of the undercurrent, Miranda felt her face flush and wished she could escape. Instead, he pinned her with his intense blue gaze, demanding an answer. What could she give him?

"You look exhausted. Run along. I'm going to finish some paperwork and lock up. We can talk about the prints next week," Vicki said.

"Thanks, Vicki." Impulsively, she gave her a hug. "I really appreciate all you've done for me."

"It works both ways, you know. You two go out and celebrate. And make her pay. She can afford it," she told Paul.

"I like that idea. It sounds good to me," he said.

Miranda caught the underlying tone and winced. What did he have planned for her? She tried desperately to think of an excuse to avoid facing him. There was none.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked.

Not seeing a choice, she allowed him to escort her out the door. All the while her mind reeled, wondering how she would explain why she had let him believe there was something between herself and Dan.

"I know you're wondering why I came. I would be happy to explain. Is it all right if I follow you to your place?"

The urgency in his voice drew her gaze. Though his expression was guarded, she knew if she refused, the scene would be replayed again and again.

"Okay," she agreed. "I'll make some coffee."

After they parked, they walked together up the metal stairs, neither speaking as she unlocked her door.

While she fixed the coffee, he wandered into her studio.

"It seems odd not to see a painting on your easel," he said, as he came out of the room.

"They're all at the show," she said, as she handed him a cup.

She perched on the end of the couch, feeling edgy, wondering what to expect. Her attraction to him had only been strengthened by denial.

Then, breaking the silence, he said, "I found out why you broke up with me."

Dread filled her heart. She prepared herself for the words she feared most. Would he tell her he was content with breaking up with her? Perhaps he'd convey his disappointment in her for not telling him the truth. She could have spared him the pain of thinking she had fallen for someone else.

She shuddered as he lifted her chin and gazed into her eyes. "You have the gene for Huntington's disease, and you wanted to spare me, didn't you? You believed it would destroy what small faith I had left."

Her mouth dropped in surprise at his tender gesture.

Then he continued, "At first, I was hurt you would let anything come between us and that you didn't turn to me. Then, I took your advice and read the book of Job. It made me angry. Not at God, but at myself. Job's trust put me to shame. I realized my faith had been smaller than my fear. I read the

part where God explained how His knowledge exceeds ours. I finally understood what you were saying about how we can't work things out better than God. I was arrogant to assume I could."

His words brought tears to her eyes.

As he paused to take a sip of coffee, her self-restraint finally broke. "You don't blame God for my genetic code?"

Her hands were trembling as she set her drink on the table.

He cupped her face in his hand. "I blame the fallen state of nature and our temporary, frail, bodies. What I needed was not immunity from suffering, but trust despite suffering."

Tears slid down her cheeks. "I'm glad you've worked your way through the pain and anger. I've been miserable without you," she said.

He sighed deeply and dropped his hand from her cheek. "I know there's nothing sure in life. I learned that from my brother's death. It hurt when he died, but I wouldn't have traded the brief years I had with him for anything. I don't want to miss my years with you."

Miranda could hardly believe what she was hearing. She gazed into his eyes and recognized the expression of deep love and devotion as he continued speaking.

"We don't know how long we might have together," he said, "It might be a lifetime or only a few years. You can't control the future. There might be a cure coming soon. And even if there's not, who says you won't outlive me. How do you know I won't come down with some sort of disease, or get hit by a car next week? I'm not trying to be morbid, Miranda, but the point is, I love you, and I'll take whatever time we're given."

Her heart ached with conflict. He was so near, so tempting. Still, how could she put him through what might be ahead.

"You haven't seen my mother in the last few weeks. She can hardly dress herself. I think about how that could be us in a few years. I've seen the pain this has brought my father. I look in his eyes and think it might be you."

"Have you really thought about it from your father's point of view? If he had known the future when he married your mom, do you think he would have changed his mind? Would he have given up all the years of happiness they've had? Would he have given up you and Paige?"

She couldn't imagine her parents leading separate lives. They'd always come across as so right for each other.

"No. I don't think he would have chosen to give it up. But what about us? I couldn't bear having children, not knowing whether I would pass the gene. And I know how important a family is to you and how much you love children."

He was quiet for a moment, encompassing her slender hands in his strong athletic ones. Then he smiled. "We can adopt children, if you want to. You know I'd love any kid. Why do you think I coach the Youth League and work with elementary children after school? Our children don't have to be a genetic match. There are lots of kids out there who could use a good home. First, we have to have a home to offer."

She thought over what he had said. Could he really mean he was willing to give up a child of his own blood? Could they live just for the moment treasuring their happiness while knowing that at any time it could end? The thought struck her. Wasn't that all that anyone had? No one in the world is promised tomorrow.

"Give us a chance," he implored. "Marry me and give us a chance for happiness. Before I met you, I would have said I wouldn't take a chance on losing another person close to me. But when I thought you loved someone else, I almost went crazy."

Miranda looked into his eyes and saw something she had never doubted but had been afraid to trust. His love was steady and certain.

"You don't want to think it over?" she asked.

For weeks she had been preparing herself to lose him. She had never imagined he might choose to stay.

He kissed her gently, pressing his lips tenderly against hers, deepening the intensity until she felt as though she were falling into an abyss from which she never wanted to escape. When, at last, he drew back, it felt as though a lifeline to her heart had been restored.

"I want you to know that I won't give you up. Ever," he said.

"What am I going to do with you?" She gazed at him with tearful eyes.

"Look," he said seriously, "I had a choice. When I found out about you, I could have left things alone. I didn't have to come after you tonight."

"How did you find out?"

"Paige told me last week at high school. She was worried about you and thought I deserved to know the truth." He paused, fingering a curl that had slipped onto her cheek. "She couldn't believe you could be happy without me. Neither could I." He gave her a smile that warmed her to the center of her being.

She took his hand as tears of joyful abandon welled in her eyes. She would listen to her heart and reach for every moment of happiness they were given, no matter what might be fair or logical.

"I'll marry you, Paul. And no matter what happens, I'll love you forever."

He squeezed her hand gently. "It just happens that tomorrow is someone's birthday. I thought I'd get you jewelry."

He grinned impishly. "A ring, perhaps?"

She pulled him close, delighting in the knowledge she would soon be his wife.

The next evening Miranda stood beside Paul on the familiar walkway leading to her parents' front door. The porch light glowed softly against the fading evening sky. Through the front window she could see Paige moving around the kitchen.

Her fingers tightened around Paul's hand.

"Are you nervous?" he asked gently.

"A little," she admitted. "Dad has had a lot to carry lately."

Paul squeezed her hand reassuringly. "Then we'll carry it together."

She drew a steady breath and rang the bell.

Her father opened the door a moment later. The lines of fatigue were still etched across his face, but when he saw Miranda, his expression softened.

"Hi, sweetheart."

Then he noticed Paul standing beside her.

"Hello, sir," Paul said warmly.

Her father stepped back, curious, yet welcoming. "Come in."

They entered the living room where Paige was already watching eagerly from the hallway. Miranda could barely contain the smile spreading across her face.

“Well?” Paige asked.

Miranda held up her hand.

The small diamond caught the lamplight and scattered it across the room.

Paige let out a delighted gasp. “You’re engaged!”

She rushed forward and hugged Miranda tightly before throwing her arms around Paul as well.

“I knew it!” she said triumphantly.

Her father stood quietly for a moment, taking in the scene. Then he looked at Miranda.

“You told him?” he asked softly.

Miranda nodded. “Yes. Paul knows everything.”

Her father’s eyes moved to Paul. “And you still want to marry her?”

Paul answered without hesitation. “More than ever.”

For a moment the room was completely still. Then Miranda’s father stepped forward and placed a hand on Paul’s shoulder.

“You’re a brave man,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “And a good one.”

Tears stung in Miranda’s eyes.

“We’re not pretending the future will be easy,” Paul continued. “But we want to face it together.”

Her father nodded slowly. “That’s the only way any marriage works.”

Paige clapped her hands together. "This calls for dinner. Mom would never forgive us if we celebrated an engagement without food."

They gathered around the kitchen table, sharing a simple meal that somehow felt more meaningful than any celebration Miranda could remember. For the first time in weeks, laughter filled the house.

Later, when the dishes were cleared, her father rested his hands on the table.

"Before everyone runs off," he said quietly, "maybe we should thank the Lord."

They joined hands around the table.

Paul's hand closed warmly around Miranda's, steady and reassuring.

Her father bowed his head.

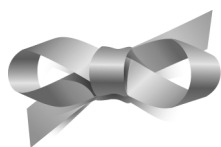
"Lord, we don't always understand the paths You give us," he began. "But tonight we are grateful. Grateful for love, for courage, and for the promise of tomorrow. Watch over these two and give them strength for whatever lies ahead."

"Amen," Paige whispered.

Miranda lifted her eyes and looked across the table at Paul. His gaze met hers, full of certainty.

For the first time since hearing the diagnosis, the future did not seem like something to fear.

It felt like something to live, every day, with gratitude and thanksgiving.



EPILOG

Miranda often thought of the years that followed not as a single stretch but as a collection of ordinary days stitched together by grace. There had been challenges, adjustments, moments that demanded patience and faith. Hope had come in unexpected forms, sometimes quietly, sometimes with breathtaking promise. One such hope was a promising new treatment for Huntington's disease, the first of its kind, developed in England."

Medical advances offered reassurance, though nothing was simple or immediate. Still, knowing progress was being made gave her comfort and the freedom to look ahead without fear.

Their family grew not by chance but by choice. They had adopted a boy and two younger twin girls. Each evening, as the sun grew low in the sky, Miranda and Paul watched them play in the yard. Their son knelt in the grass, intent on a game only he fully understood, while the twins tossed a soft ball back and forth, shrieking whenever it bounced away. Miranda watched from the porch, her heart full in that deep, steady way that came from knowing this life was real.

Paige and her father remained part of their world, woven in by love and shared history. Though her mother required special care now, Miranda visited often, holding her hand, speaking softly, offering what comfort she could.

The future was still uncertain. Some days Miranda wondered what the years ahead might bring for her own health. But she had learned that fear lost its power when faced with faith and love. She had also learned that no one is guaranteed a long life or a path free from trials. Every story carries uncertainty.

But there were joy and contentment in their lives because they chose it each morning.

Miranda reached for Paul's hand as the children's laughter drifted through the warm evening air. Together, they watched the sun sink slowly beyond the trees, grateful, hopeful, and unafraid to live life one day at a time.

Paul squeezed her hand gently.

"Ready for whatever tomorrow brings?" he asked.

Miranda smiled.

"As long as we face it together."

In the fading light, Miranda studied the colors of the sky, already imagining how she might paint them.

The End

If you enjoyed this story, I would really appreciate your review. It would mean so much to me.

Also, if you have not seen my contemporary Christian romance series, you may enjoy these books.

See the series



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



DEAR FRIENDS,

I'm Karen Cogan, and I write clean Christian romance filled with faith, family, hope, and happily-ever-afters.

Before becoming an author, I spent many years teaching kindergarten, where I fell even more in love with stories and the joy they bring to people's lives. When I'm not writing, I enjoy spending time outdoors with my stubborn horse, my dogs and trying to grow flowers in my backyard.

I've written both historical and contemporary romances, and this week I'm excited to release my newest contemporary Christian romance. It's a story that's been close to my heart for a long time, and I can't wait to finally share it with you.

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