

Leave Yesterday Behind

Ethel Lewis

# **LEAVE YESTERDAY BEHIND**

**A Novel**

**Ethel Lewis**

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Cover design: Ethel Lewis

Dedication:

To all my family and terrific friends who have always believed in me and encouraged me to never give up.

All you guys ROCK!!!

One

August, 1970

“Come on, Mandy... don’t be so hard on me. I don’t need that right now,” Becky Carson pleaded tiredly. She squeezed her eyes shut and ran her free hand through the long blond hair that spilled across the shoulder of her faded blue tee-shirt. She felt the immediate, all too familiar bittersweet sting of tears behind her closed lids. “I know you have my best interest at heart, Man, and really. . . I do love you for it, but I don’t need your preaching right now. I need your strength, your support.”

“Okay, Becky. I guess you know best.” Mandy groaned in resignation, once again feeling the sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. She shook her head.

This wasn’t the first time Mandy had tried to get Becky to see the light. She had long since lost track of the number of times they had shared this very same conversation. It was beyond her how Becky – or anyone else for that matter who had anything even close to resembling a brain in their head---could be so damned naive! Why couldn’t she get through to her? Why couldn’t she make Becky see that she was only throwing her life away on that worthless boyfriend of hers, Bradley Ames?

“I apologize, Becky,” she said. “I just don’t like seeing Brad hurting you the way he is.”

Becky felt herself cringe as she listened to the bitter sarcasm in Mandy’s voice coming through the line. She gripped the receiver tighter to her ear. “Look, Mandy. . .” she barked in response. “I can’t sit her all day and listen to you argue about my life with Brad. I know you think he’s a jerk, and I can’t help the way you feel. But I love

him, and we're happy together, and besides. . ." She paused a moment and sucked in a fresh breath of air. She hated it that she had to defend herself to the one person in all the world who should know her better than any other living soul. They had known each other for too many years now. It just wasn't fair. So what if she and Brad were having a few bad times right now? Didn't most young couples go through a similar adjustment period? She and Brad would work everything out, things would get back to normal. She was sure of it.

"And besides what?"

The sound of Mandy's nagging interrupted the hopeful thoughts filling Becky's head. "Mandy, please", she heard herself pleading again. "I've got to get off the phone and get ready for work or I'll be late."

Becky knew that was a lie – and she knew, too, that Mandy probably knew it was as well. She had stopped working on Sunday nights over a month ago already, but for right now, for at least this one more minute, she just didn't feel like arguing anymore. Her head ached as it always did when she was trapped into having this same conversation with Mandy. A deep pulsing throb that started from behind her eyes. She knew it was only tension, but she knew, too, how to make it stop. She had to get off the phone. She had to put an end to all this stupid arguing.

"Can't we just drop it for now?" Becky groaned. "We'll talk more tomorrow, okay?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll drop it if you want me to. But please. . . don't forget," Mandy paused a moment, hating to go on, yet knowing she had to try one more time. She switched the phone to her other ear and pulled a hopeful grin to her lips. "Just remember though," she added carefully, her voice barely loud enough to be heard on the other end, "You can always move back into the dorm with me if you need to."

Becky smiled in quiet resignation. There was no hope for Mandy, she would never change. She would always be a ‘mother-hen’ to anyone she ever loved – or for that matter, to anyone she ever cared about. And that was that! She could be exasperating at times, especially times like right now---never knowing when to drop it. Yet, strange as Mandy’s ways were, Becky mused, she couldn’t help but love her nonetheless.

Her next words came with a gentle smile of her own, “I know I can, Mandy, but really, I’m fine right where I’m at. Now,” Becky sat up straighter and slid her legs off the sofa where she had, had them folded beneath her. She reached for the base of the phone. “I’ve got to get a move on it before I’m late. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Sure. No problem. I understand.” Mandy answered, sounding as if she really did understand---as if she really did see that Becky and Brad had their own lives to live. And truly, it was one of the things she wanted most in all the world. She wanted to understand. . . but something deep inside her heart---intuition maybe---simply wouldn’t let her! She had seen Brad hurt her best friend far too many times already. “Just remember, though,” she answered with a timid smile, knowing full well that Becky couldn’t see her---yet feeling a little embarrassed all the same---just thinking of how her words must sound to her friends’ ear. “If you need me, you’ve got a friend.”

“Thanks, Man. I will.” Becky breathed a sigh of relief, and tossed her head, sending her straying hair back across her shoulder. She didn’t mean to sound gruff and sarcastic – she really cared about Mandy’s feelings---but for now, she just felt too tired. She said “good-bye,” and then abruptly---even before Mandy had the chance to open her mouth one last time---Becky slid the receiver back into its cradle and lifted the phone from her lap. She reached up with her free hand, absently rubbing the numbness from her left ear, as she set the phone back in its place on the coffee table before her.

\* \* \*

Becky tried, without much success, to quell the nagging echo of Mandy's words that kept darting back and forth through her mind as she made her way into the small kitchen of her and Brad's apartment. She glanced at the table with a heavy heart, and for the second time in just this one day, she felt her eyes filling with fresh tears.

She had been busy all afternoon preparing one of Brad's favorite dishes. Homemade lasagna. And now, Becky slumped tiredly into the chair closest to her side, and stared through the dampness of her tears at the delicious looking dinner that lay before her on the neatly laid table. The slanting rays of the late afternoon sun spilled across the table from the window above the sink. Sparkling glints of light danced across the wall behind her head in a glorious kaleidoscope of colors as it bounced off the cut-glass candle holders and highly polished stainless silverware, she had worked so hard on shining to perfection. Everything looked so perfect. Everything looked so delicious. But, Becky thought with a heavy heart – reaching out and stroking the folded napkin on the nearest plate – looks could be ever so deceiving.

Everything might have been delicious two hours ago, but now... it looked doubtful. The fresh garden salad seemed to be wilting, leaf by leaf, and minute by minute, before her very eyes. And the lasagna and French bread had no doubt grown too cold to come anywhere even close to ever being called edible again.

At long last, Becky pulled herself to her feet, and with hands that felt almost as heavy as the heart she felt beating within her breast, she started clearing the table. She knew it would be a waste of time to wait on Brad any longer. He should have been home over two hours ago already. Who did he think he was fooling? She knew what time he got off work.

And then, a short twenty minutes later, as she wiped the last plate dry and stacked

it with the others on the lowest shelf of the cabinet, she knew something else. This wasn't the first time Brad had done this to her... and no doubt it probably wouldn't be the last.

Becky reached for the switch by the door and flipped the overhead light off as she stepped from the room. And as she did, and as the dark shadows from the kitchen seemed to follow her out into the hall, the sudden ache in her heart reminded her of the one thing she wanted most in all the world not to ever have to be reminded of again... It didn't look like Brad would be coming home tonight either!

## Two

Berkeley College: September, 1967

Neither of them, Becky Carson nor Mandy Powers, had ever had any great aspirations of going to college. But since the both of them had been raised to be nothing less than obedient, and each of them being a child of the sixties and respecting their parents' wishes – even though they knew in their own hearts they had far better, and definitely more worthwhile plans for their futures – they ended up at Berkeley College in the fall of 1967. Starry-eyed, young and naive as the two of them had been back then, frightened of all that surrounded them in the outside world; Becky and Mandy began their futures on the same long pathway.

It was a bright and sunny day in early September in California when Becky and Mandy first bumped into each other. As they climbed the steps to the women's dorm, each of them completely unaware of the others' presence, and single-mindedly trying to navigate their own heavy suitcases and bags and boxes up the steep stairway – both their struggles looking all but in vain as they tugged and shoved, trying desperately to prevent their awkward burdens from slipping back down – they ran smack into each other. Their eyes met and held for a long moment. They stood still, each of them still breathing heavy from their labors, and both wearing red flushing cheeks from their strenuous efforts in the afternoon heat, and then---at almost the exact same instant--- they looked back down the steep incline they had barely just managed to safely traverse. An instant later, they burst out laughing, the sounds of their happy giggles growing louder as each lilting decibel seemed to echo off the rust colored brick walls on either



side of them. They watched, almost in shock, as two of their largest suitcases---both of which had but a moment earlier somehow managed to slip from their cramped fingers, and end up ramming into each other. And then slowly---as if each of the over-packed bags were moving in slow motion like some gigantic, ancient shelled turtle trying to surmount a mighty obstacle---they slid the full length back down the steep stairway. The resounding echo of the crash rose up and met their ears as the bags hit the ground with a thunderous kaboom!

Becky and Mandy stood frozen, staring with opened mouths, at the vast assortment of brightly colored lacy panties and bras, and various other quite feminine – totally unmentionable looking pieces of clothing sprawled across the sidewalk and well-manicured lawn far below. The loud commotion caused several of the other newly arriving college kids to stop in their tracks, oblivious for the moment as to where they themselves might be going, and stare. They saw the onlookers stop and laugh, but neither of them, Becky nor Mandy, seemed to mind. They were too busy laughing themselves.

When they looked back up, and theirs eyes met again, they couldn't believe what they were seeing. It seemed almost creepy. It was as if they were looking into a full length mirror. Anyone could easily see that they were sisters---everyone who ever saw them thought that---and yet, they weren't. Both wore their blond hair hanging long and straight, parted down the middle and tucked behind each ear, and letting the rest fall in a gentle cascade around their shoulders. Each of them wanting to look like every other smartly dressed girl of the day and blend in with the crowd. Becky's legs looked a bit longer than Mandy's, but only because she chose to wear her mini-skirts a few inches shorter,... and their pale blue eyes seemed almost identical. The same exact color as a cloudless summer sky after a gentle cleansing rain.

And then, they met again, the second time in one day, when they both struggled into the same dorm room on the second floor of the largest of the women's dormitories. When their eyes touched, and the realization of what was happening struck the both of them; they couldn't stop the giggles that rose once again to nearly choke them. Could this be fate? Destiny had obviously led them to be together.

The tiny room they shared in the west wing of the brick colonial dormitory seemed a far cry from the frilly, comfortable rooms they had both left behind at their respective childhood homes. The furniture, if you could call it that, looked as if it had been rescued from the salvage yard by someone who had an eye for something other than interior decorating. Nothing seemed to match.

Pushing the door open, but not yet entering the small room, Becky and Mandy got their first look at their new home. Along the wall to the left, they saw two narrow single beds, separated by an ugly, uncomfortable looking avocado green love seat, which had no doubt survived an extremely hard life by the looks of its many patches and cigarette burns. It sat atop a well-worn oval braided rug that seemed to be held together at the seams by nothing more than memory. On the other side of the room, one old and heavily scarred blond desk sat below the single window that was the room's only outside view. "Oh look..." Mandy bounced from foot to foot as she peeked around the still opened door. "We even have a small fridge and a hot-plate. Just like home, huh?"

"Yeah... just like home." Becky followed Mandy into the room, taking it all in. There were a few pictures, none of which either of them would ever have chosen for themselves – due to their obvious ugliness – and several rock-and-roll posters hanging here and there on the sandy beige walls.

Becky and Mandy looked at each other, and once again they had a good laugh.

It was a struggle, a job they had never dreamed would take so long, but finally,

they were through. Mandy plopped down on the love seat with a heavy sigh, patting the cushion at her side. “Come on, girl. Have a seat. I think we’re through.”

Becky forced a tired smile to her lips as she pulled the last record album from the last box to be emptied, and placed it with the others she had stacked on the floor beside the desk. This was one day she was more than glad to see coming to a close. “Do I look as tired as I feel?” she asked, kicking the now empty cardboard box out of her way, and coming to take her place next to her new ‘roommate’.

But Mandy was exhausted, too. Her blond hair had long since managed to slip from her scarf-bound pony-tail, and now hung in limp and lifeless strands against her flushed cheeks. She looked down at her own rumpled shirt, her dust and grime covered jeans. “I’m afraid I’d have to say we both look a little less than perfect.”

Becky couldn’t help but laugh as she nodded in agreement. She knew that was the understatement of the year. She had already managed a quick glimpse of her own rag-tailed reflection in the mirror by the door a short while ago. “Oh well,” she groaned, leaning forward and grabbing her lukewarm soda off the coffee table. She glanced around the crowded room, “At least we’re finally all moved in.”

“Thank, God.” Mandy answered, a broad grin lifting her lips, and lighting up her entire face.

The long day was coming to an end, the last dying rays of the setting sun barely reaching through the lonely window, and lending any brightness to the drab carpet at their feet. And, tired as they were, they both couldn’t help but feel excited. Today was the first day of their long, four year journey that lay ahead of them here at Berkeley College!

Their new home was filled to almost overflowing with all their clothes, and books, and records. All the many personal things a young girl needed for survival. Yet,

crowded and small as it was, that tiny room had more than enough space for their friendship to grow and blossom into a thing of such a rare and wonderful beauty, that everyone who ever met and knew them, seemed to be jealous. Becky and Mandy seemed almost inseparable from that very first day.

They attended many of the same classes, helped each other study and cram for finals, swapped their favorite mini-skirts and tight fitting sweaters, shared their deepest and darkest and wildest secret dreams – and occasionally – they sometimes even traded boyfriends. It wasn't long before they became even closer than 'mere' friends. They truly became the sisters that everyone on campus already assumed them to be.

\* \* \*

“Hi...” Mandy groaned as she stepped into the sunny living room and leaned back, pushing the door closed with her hip. She was too tired to go a step further. Her arms had started to feel cramped and sore even before she had finished climbing the first flight of stairs, and now, after having struggled all the way up to the second landing, without dropping even one book from her heavy load, she looked as if she might collapse at any moment.

“Oh my goodness, girl.” Becky jumped up and hurried across the crowded room. She placed a hand on Mandy's elbow and pulled her back towards the lumpy love seat. “Let me help you with that.”

Mandy gladly accepted the offered assistance and flopped down with a heavy groan, the mountain of books piled high on the lap of her crumpled skirt. She looked up, her eyes barely clearing the rim of the enormous bookkeeping book that was on top of the stack. “Thanks a million,” she answered, her eyes scanning the room for her rescuer. “You're a real life saver, Bec. Hey, where did you go?”

“Here, you look like you could use this.” Becky said, offering her friend the cold

soda she had grabbed from the fridge. Mandy was squirming, trying to adjust her load and take the soda, and Becky couldn't help but laugh. She reached over and slowly began lifting the books from Mandy's lap.

"On, God... I can finally breathe."

Becky eyes filled with curiosity as she lifted one heavy book after another, and started stacking them on the floor at their feet. She tried to read the titles – Bookkeeping, typing, shorthand, math, and several others that slipped past before she could scan the covers. "For heaven's sake, girl," Becky said, glancing back at the stack of books towering even higher than the top of their rickety coffee table. "How many years are you planning on staying her? Or are you planning on living her forever? There's no way you can learn all this stuff in just four years you know!"

"Sure I can," Mandy answered in earnest. "I happen to be very intelligent."

"You might be that, but I think you would have to be a real genius to accomplish this much learning." Becky looked away from the mountain of knowledge that loomed up between them, her eyes playful, as she reached for her own soda. She tucked her legs up and under the hem of her ankle-length peasant skirt, and faced Mandy with a smug look. "And besides," she teased, "I thought you said you only came here to get a husband. Who are you planning on nabbing, a true blue Einstein?"

"You're cruel, girl. You're really cruel."

\* \* \*

And then, by the time they were beginning their second month of school, Becky had her friend, Mandy, all figured out. It was true – she was indeed here to find a husband for herself. And she was in no way going about it like a dummy. She threw herself into her studies with a vengeance. It wasn't good enough to find just any husband. Mandy wanted to latch onto a smart one, someone who, like herself, was

going to be somebody someday.

And that was the one dream the two of them shared. Becky had her sights on a career in the entertainment field. It didn't matter, acting or singing, or maybe even directing if she found she lacked enough talent to pursue any of her other leads. All that mattered to her, too, was that someday she was definitely going to be somebody. Somebody big!

She kept pretty much to herself, her books and her classes were the most important thing in her life these days. And unlike, Mandy, Becky didn't want to coast to the top on the shirt-tails of any man. Making it 'big' was a dream she wanted to fulfill all on her own!

Mandy seemed to know everyone on campus. She was having a wonderful time, laughing and meeting people, and going out nearly every night of the week. And at the same time – and much to Becky's surprise and astonishment – she seemed to be breezing through all her classes. She hadn't yet found her perfect man – her one and only 'husband-to-be', but she didn't seem worried.

"I've still got plenty of time left for that, Becky." She would tease. And then a moment later, she would throw a light sweater over her shoulder and hurry out the front door. "Don't wait up for me. I'm going out with Jake Petrie tonight, you know---the cute guy with all that wavy blond hair I told you about, he's in my bookkeeping class. And anyway," she gushed, "we might be pretty late.. . we're going to the drive-in."

## Three

And then, just this last summer – the summer of 1968, and only one short year after their first meeting – after sharing that first burst of laughter together watching their suitcases spill across the lawn in front of their dormitory – life, as Becky and Mandy knew it to be then, ceased to exist.

Becky's whole life seemed to do a somersault. It happened so quickly – almost overnight, and taking everyone by surprise. It was then that, Bradley Ames, the star player on the college basketball team, stepped into Becky's life.

She had gone out on dates before. In fact, she had been out on lots of them. And she had even managed to enjoy a few of them, but in the end---she had always managed to keep a level head---and not let herself get too serious about any one boy. But then again... Becky had never been out on a date with someone quite like Bradley Ames either.

Becky noticed Brad right away – as did nearly every other girl on campus. But Becky knew better. She didn't dare to let herself even think he might return the favor. And then she felt honored when after but a few short weeks, she realized that he had done far more than merely taking notice of her, too. Brad followed her everywhere. The library. The cafeteria. The pep rallies. It seemed as if this same, handsome, debonair Bradley Ames – hero of all the basketball teams – had chosen her over all the others' that were so readily available to be 'his' girl.

Brad was handsome and bright, so much fun to be with. His laughter always so ready, his manner, carefree and jovial and incredibly happy. And more important than anything else – this same, Bradley Ames, made Becky Carson feel happier than she had

ever felt in her entire life.

Within a month after their first awkward and nervous meeting, Brad and Becky fell hopelessly in love... and thinking of no one else – they rented a small apartment off-campus and moved in together. It tore Mandy’s heart out the day Becky packed her things with a bright and happy smile, and moved from the beloved dorm room the two of them had shared for the past two years.

\* \* \*

Mandy sat cross-legged in the middle of the single bed on her side of the tiny dorm room she and Becky shared. She frowned as she watched Becky pulling her clothes from the narrow closet, and shook her head in dismay. It seemed inconceivable that Becky could do this to her. How could it be happening? They had been together for too long for one of them to just up and move like this.

“But how do you know he won’t turn out to be a jerk like that other guy... ?” Mandy’s words stopped in mid-sentence, and Becky looked up from her packing in time to see her tapping her forehead with one finger. “Oh well,” Mandy went on, “I can’t remember his name right this minute... but you know the guy I’m talking about. The one with the frizzy blond hair and that stupid looking little mustache that barely showed at all unless he turned sideways in a bright light.”

“His name was Thomas... something-or-other.” Becky’s words faltered to a stop. She spun around and picked up another sweater from the pile she had tossed across the foot of the bed. Her hands wavered as she pretended to be busy folding it, but hopefully Mandy wouldn’t notice that she, too, had so easily forgotten Thomas’ last name. “And anyway,” Becky continued, her hands tucking one arm of the sweater over the other. “I don’t recall Thomas being a jerk. I just got tired of going out with him after a while.”

“Awhile?” Mandy snorted, her eyes widening in disbelief. “You dated that guy



nearly every night for about two months! And if I remember right...” She turned then, and with a wicked grin, wagged an admonishing finger in Becky’s face. “You were trying awfully hard to convince me for the first few weeks of that steamy little affair that he was none other than your one and only ‘true love’.”

Becky placed the half folded sweater in the suitcase and reached for another. She cocked her head to one side and batted her sky blue eyes in Mandy’s direction. “Okay,” she grumbled. “I owe you that one.. . you’re right. But don’t you see?” she asked. “Brad’s not anything like Thomas. He’s such a sweet and honest man. He would never dump me just so he could go out with some dumb bimbo on the cheer leading squad who has more looks than brains.”

Mandy had to think about that for a minute. Becky’s words did make sense. She tried to picture Brad, the all-star super hero of the basketball team, going out with anyone quite as bubble-headed as most of the cheer leaders she had seen around campus. No! Becky had to be right. Surely Brad had more class than that. But all the same... Mandy still thought he was a jerk, and she wasn’t going to just sit here and twiddle her thumbs while her best friend got herself into something over her head.

“You might think Brad’s sweet and honest,” she added, her eyebrows arching. “But have you ever heard any of the rumors floating around about his past?”

“No, I haven’t,” Becky snapped. “And even if I did I wouldn’t listen.”

Mandy swung her legs over the edge of the bed and wiggled her way into the narrow space between Becky’s two suitcases. She draped her arms over their raised lids, her hands waving to stress the importance of her words. “I was in bookkeeping class the other day and I heard Stephanie and Barbara talking about some girl Brad supposedly dated last semester, and...”

“Mandy!”

“But, Becky...” she said. “You’ve just got to hear this.”

“I’ve got to hear what?” Becky slammed the first suitcase shut and slid it to the floor at her feet. She sat down on the edge of the bed and turned to face Mandy with a solemn stare. “You’re a little late if you’re trying to tell me the story about the girl he was supposed to have gotten pregnant and then left at the altar. I’ve already heard all about it...” She paused in mid-sentence, confident she had said enough to put Mandy in her place, and then she changed her mind. “And in answer to that shocked look I see on your face right now,” she added even before Mandy had the time to interrupt, “I heard all about it from Brad himself!”

Mandy couldn’t believe her own ears. “Do what?” she asked, her mouth hanging open, her words spilling out unhindered. “You mean he already told you?”

“Yes, Man, I don’t think you were listening when I told you a minute ago...” Becky flashed a triumphant grin, “But, Brad is very honest. He has nothing to hide, especially from me.”

“Well...” Mandy paused then, the bluntness of Becky’s statement catching her off guard. She felt her eyes growing wide in astonishment. How could Becky say such a thing? Didn’t she have any better sense?

And then, almost as suddenly as the shock had overtaken her a moment before, Mandy tossed her head in defiance. She remembered one more thing---the one thing that had to be worse than any so-called rumor anyone had ever told about anyone else. She was certain it was the one thing that Brad would never in a million years admit to anyone; especially to Becky. He would never tell her, he wasn’t a complete idiot. “But, do you know...?”

But Becky wasn’t listening. She cut Mandy short. “Look, Man... I already told you I don’t want to hear it. I don’t care what it is . . . I don’t want to hear it!” Becky got

to her feet and reached to close the second suitcase. Her eyes bore into Mandy's. "You know yourself that people who live boring lives are the ones to start rumors. It's all the excitement they get out of life, and I am simply not interested. Period!"

There was no more talking about it. The subject was closed. Mandy didn't like it, but she held her tongue. For the rest of the afternoon, and until Becky had finished emptying the dorm room of all her personal belongings, Mandy never said another word – she only listened. And listened, and listened. And to her it felt like the end of the world. She knew this was their last hour alone together – Becky, her dearest friend, was moving out tonight.

Everything would surely change. Mandy was sure of it.

\* \* \*

Becky and Brad had so much fun setting up housekeeping in their little one bedroom apartment off Pecan Avenue. During the day they spent most of their time with their studies so as to keep their grades up to par, but their nights... Their nights were something very special. They made love for hours on end. As soon as they came in from their last class, after dinner, and so many nights while watching the late show on television. They talked and dreamed and loved each other with a perfect passion. Their funds being limited, they furnished their small apartment with used furniture they gleaned from second hand shops around town, and soon, their little 'love nest', as they had laughed and called it back then, started looking like a real home. Their future together seemed bright and happy, and was filled with such high hopes.

\* \* \*

The war was still going on in Vietnam – and protesters carried their banners high, their shouts of disapproval ringing out loud and clear – not only in Berkeley, California, but on college campuses all across the nation. There were 'flower children' everywhere.

And ‘love-in’ became the word of the day. Drugs like LSD and acid and pot flowed as freely as water. It was a pretty scary time to be out in the world, so far from home – but as long as you kept your head straight, and as long as you had real ‘friends’ you could count on – you could do okay.

And life went on.

Becky and Brad and Mandy studied a lot, sometimes they even played a lot... but for the most part, they dreamed their dreams a lot. And somewhere along the way, they even managed to grow up a lot.

At least... some of them did!

Four

August, 1970

Becky leaned forward, her cheek pressing against the coolness of the glass, her palms resting on the narrow ledge of the window sill. On any other night she might have seen the brilliance of the star-filled heavens above, she might have taken notice of the peaceful, tree-lined street bathed in the shimmering moonlight at her feet. But not tonight! Tonight she yearned to see Brad. If only he would come home.

She turned from the window, and in an instant her hand shot up to her neck, to massage the tautness of the muscles she felt there. The clock on the narrow shelf on the far wall above the television told her she had been standing here for over two hours. It was almost ten-thirty.

And the ache she felt in her heart reminded her that she still waited all alone.

She thought of the uneaten lasagna dinner she had thrown out earlier. How could something that had looked so delicious on the dinner table so quickly change and look like nothing more than a pile of garbage just because she had tossed it there in the bottom of the can? The memory brought a gentle smile to her lips... but a quick second later, it faded. She couldn't stop herself from thinking of why she had thrown it out. Why would she want to sit down and enjoy the meal without Brad?

On the inside – somewhere deep inside and locked far away from any outward emotions that might somehow reach to the surface and show – a secret part of her brain wanted to shout 'it wasn't fair!'

It wasn't fair that Brad hadn't come home tonight. It wasn't fair that he left her

home all alone. She didn't want to sit up all night and worry, and wonder. And even more than that... even more important than worrying if it was fair or not . . . she wanted so desperately to know what she had done wrong? Why was Brad doing this to her?

\* \* \*

Everything seemed so perfect in the beginning. She and Brad hardly ever had a fight, or even so much as a disagreement... their lives were filled with loving and laughing and happiness beyond measure.

And then Becky started singing at the Hang-Out Club. It was a small place, nothing more than a local haven where all the college kids could get together at night and relax after a grueling day of sitting in the classroom studying or taking exams. A comfortable place to share a beer and a laugh, and if they were lucky, it was a place where they might get the chance to dance with their favorite sweetheart on the cramped and crowded, darkened dance floor in the corner opposite the bar.

Becky only sang on the weekends, and for the first few months she always had the joy of seeing Brad sitting there on the front row smiling up at her. He came to hear her every night he didn't have a basketball game to play in, or ball practice to attend. And she had always felt so proud. And then, just this last summer... it all started to change.

The image stayed with her every day now, like the rancid odor of rotting meat that hung in the air, not daring to let go and float away---and she remembered it well. It was then that she had started singing at the club six nights a week. School had let out for the summer again, she and Brad didn't have to get up early for classes... so why not? And life was so wonderful . . . But that was then!

Becky turned to the arm chair by her side and let herself sink into the comfortable softness of the over-stuffed rose colored cushions. But maybe wonderful was asking

too much. She couldn't help but wonder. Maybe wonderful wasn't meant to last forever.

Brad seemed to change overnight. If he saw another guy even so much as smile in her direction he would become instantly jealous. He started picking fights with her nearly every day, and for hardly any reason at all. And then, like a bolt out of the blue, the fighting just stopped. It was like something inside of him just quit caring. He stopped coming to the club to see her at all, and it almost broke her heart to realize – Brad was fast becoming no more than a stranger to her.

And after that, as each new day dawned and then came to an end, Brad became even more withdrawn. He steadily drifted farther and farther away from her. He now had other things to occupy his time.

Becky hardly knew anymore when Brad would bestow the honor upon her of even coming home at night. And some nights he didn't. Some nights he chose to party and play with his friends, and not come home until late in the afternoon of the following day. Those were the nights she dreaded the most.

Becky shuddered as she sat in the darkness, remembering all those lonely hours, all those heartbreaking and agonizing nights she had spent all alone. It wasn't fair! All she could do was sit up and wait, and stare out the window into the darkness... and pray. And, oh God, did she ever pray.

She closed her eyes then, and saw the haunting image of Brad's new 'friends'---or so he chose to call them – behind the darkness of her closed lids. The youngest of them had to be at least five years older than any of the other college students they had always hung out with before. They seemed dirtier, somehow wilder, and Becky found it difficult to believe that Brad could ever enjoy doing anything with any of them. But she really did try. In the beginning, she tried to force herself to see past the rough and filthy

exterior she saw only with her eyes. Maybe they weren't so bad after all.

And then she discovered the truth. All these 'new friends' of Brads seemed to live for was their drugs and their drinking. They were nothing but trouble – with a capital 'T'---but Brad never seemed to notice it.

That was when everything in their lives, all the happiness they had shared together for so long, slowly began to crumble. Becky felt the strain of it all almost immediately. She could hardly sleep anymore, she could barely force herself to eat. Her already slender body was quickly dropping in weight. Depression seemed to be her only companion and close friend. It seemed to take every ounce of energy she had left to make herself crawl up on the stage and sit there in shimmering spotlight night after night, and have to try to smile and sing all the old familiar love songs. They had long since lost any real meaning for her. The words sounded sad and empty now – they only made her feel like crying.

\* \* \*

Becky reached up to brush the tears from her cheek, and sitting there in the darkness, she heard herself asking the question once again, "Why do I let Brad do this to me?" The words hung in her throat, nearly choking her, and she covered her mouth with one hand, trying to stifle her sobs.

She knew in her heart it wasn't fair... but did she ever ask? Did she ever let that inner part of herself take command and shout about the injustice of it all? She forced herself to look inside, to search for the truth, and when the answer finally came – so did the ache in her heart.

No!

Sometimes she almost hated herself for her cowardice. And then, more often than not, she realized it was so much more than that. Cowardice was by far too weak a word



to describe it. It was fear! Yes, that was it. Deep down inside, hidden somewhere far in the darkened corner of her heart, she felt it. She recognized it as certainly as she knew she would readily recognize an old friend. It was the raw and burning feeling of gut-retching fear. If she asked the questions, Brad might tell her. And if he told her – his answers might frighten her to death!

Maybe he had fallen out of love with her. Or maybe – she shuddered at the thought – maybe he had never loved her at all. And that was what she feared the most.

So Becky never asked... and Becky never complained.

She pushed the terrifying thoughts and fears back down, never letting them surface from the deep and dark, hidden recesses in the back of her brain. She would only let herself dwell on the happy thoughts. She loved Brad---he was the most important thing in her life, her only reason to even go on living each and every day---and in return... he loved her back. She was sure of it. Brad would never consciously do anything to jeopardize that strong and loving bond that held them together.

So why did he do it? The question hung in her mind, not daring to leave for even a moment. Her mind wanted answers, and until it got them, she knew it would never let her rest.

Becky forced herself to get to her feet and plodded slowly down the short hallway and into the bedroom. She traded her jeans and tee-shirt for the silky smoothness of her favorite nightgown and sat down on the edge of their bed. She felt faint, her mind running in frantic circles. If only she could figure him out. What was so damned important to him that he felt he needed to spend so many nights away from home? She lay down on top of the covers and stared through the darkness hovering above her face and stopping her from seeing the ceiling. Time stood frozen. Her pulses echoed loudly in her ears, and in her heart she heard the silent prayer that screamed for release. If only

she could think.

Endless moments passed before she finally let herself go – truly thinking about it and rationalizing it deep within her heart and soul. There had to be a reasonable explanation. It couldn't be as bad as her fears were trying to make her think it was. And it couldn't be as bad as Mandy was always trying to make her think it was either. And then suddenly she knew. As if some bright light had been switched on inside her head – she knew the answers.

Her smile felt good as it returned to cover her lips. The unsteady pounding within her chest slowed to normal, and almost immediately she felt the ache that filled her heart all evening slowly melting away. The answer was so simple, it was right before her eyes all along, and she couldn't help but wonder why it had taken her so long to see it.

She knew Brad wasn't doing anything wrong. He would never do that. He was only being himself. He had never had any intentions of hurting her. He only needed his 'space'. He had a right to have his own friends – even if they were separate from 'their' friends together – didn't he? What was the harm in that? Did she expect him to sit by her side twenty-four hours a day?

Becky heard the answer to these last questions echo loudly inside her head, 'No, no, no!' And as she did she felt her smile broaden. It was such a relief to finally be able to see the truth.

And then a moment later, she glanced one last time at the clock on the nightstand on her side of the comfortable double bed, and lifted the covers and snuggled down under the crisp coolness of the freshly washed sheets. It was late – three-thirty am., to be exact – but she didn't let the lateness of the hour bother her. She already knew in her heart that all was well with the world. Her only regret was that it had taken her such a

Leave Yesterday Behind

Ethel Lewis

long time to finally realize it. She could see now that she had been incredibly foolish for letting herself think it could possibly be otherwise!

## Five

The applause was barely audible as Becky stepped off the stage and started down the narrow hallway towards the tiny dressing room in the back of the Hang-Out Club. She pressed her fingers to her temples, trying to erase the tiredness she felt pressing in on her. It was barely ten o'clock, and she still had two more sets to go before closing time.

Sometimes she hated it that she had ever told James Cornell, the owner of the small off-campus college club, that she would sing six nights a week. Classes at Berkeley had let out for the summer over two months ago and they hardly ever had a crowd anymore. So many of the college students had decided to go home for summer vacation. And now, more than ever before, Becky felt that her place was at home with Brad. It seemed they never had enough time together.

But then, just as quickly as she swung the door open and stepped into the crowded, closet-like dressing room, she pushed the sadness aside and forced herself to remember all the things that had come to mind the night before. She sat down with a tired sigh and smiled at her broken reflection in the cracked mirror above the ancient dressing table. Things were going to work out, she was sure of it. Confident, in fact! All she had to do, she reminded herself, was to be a little more patient.

She reached for her hairbrush among the clutter of makeup bottles and lip glosses, and slipped it effortlessly through the length of her long blond hair. Her eyes shone brightly, illuminated this time with the moist tears of hope and joy. She realized, too, he didn't want to be sad any longer. She wanted to think of the happy times, the times when she and Brad didn't have a care in the world. They had been so incredibly

happy together for that first year – and she knew, deep within her heart – that they could be once again. This sadness would not go on forever.

Becky tossed her hairbrush back on the cluttered table, her thoughts filled with hope for the first time in such a long while, and it took her a moment to realize someone was knocking on the closed dressing room door. Her heart gave a startled jump, and for a moment she feared it might choke her. “Yes?” she answered, turning in her seat and grabbing a tissue. “Come in.” She knew better than to allow herself to think it might be Brad... but it could be. She dabbed at the few remaining tears clinging to her dark lashes, and felt her smile broaden at the memory . . . he used to come by and see her, before . . .

“Hey, girl...” She heard the words and looked over her shoulder just as her boss, James Cornell, poked his head through the door. “Can you spare me a minute?” he asked.

The sudden urge to cry rose up within her heart again – it wasn’t Brad. But instead, she forced a flimsy smile to her lips and prayed it would stay put. “Sure, Mr. Cornell,” she answered brightly. “Come on in.”

James stepped into the cramped room and took his seat on the one, high-backed wooden chair next to the make-up table. He smiled again as he removed his black framed glasses and idly rubbed the bridge of his nose between his thumb and first finger. “I’m sorry we’ve been so slow around here lately,” he said, his words sounding kind and fatherly as he spoke. “But... I hope you understand it’s just because so many of the kids have gone out of town for summer vacation.”

Becky felt her dread disappearing almost as quickly as it had registered a moment earlier. For a brief second she had feared he might be assuming the slump had been her fault. Maybe the usual crowd had picked up on her recent depression and decided to go

elsewhere to enjoy themselves. “Well,” she said, a shy smile lifting the corners of her lips. “I have been noticing the crowds keep getting smaller and smaller. And I was afraid you were going to think it was because of me.”

“Oh no.” Mr. Cornell interrupted. He leaned forward, resting his palms on his knees, and Becky saw a welcome smile cut across the fine lines around his mouth. “In fact...” he added eagerly, “I’d have to say that you’ve been quite good for business. With your talent and your looks . . .” Becky saw the rosy blush creep to his cheeks as he ducked his head and stared at the floor in embarrassment. “It’s just that time of year around here, Becky. We always get pretty slow in the summer.”

Becky smiled, hoping to put him at ease – he hadn’t said anything out of line and there was no need for him to feel embarrassed. “Thank you, Mr. Cornell,” she said. “You’re very kind. This is my first real job at singing, and sometimes I can’t help but feel a little nervous.”

James laughed at her then and shook his head. She was still so young and naïve. “I’m not trying to flatter you, little lady,” he offered. “But you’ve got one terrific voice there, and your good looks are an added plus. I’m just glad I was able to latch onto you when I did.” He slid his glasses back in place and leaned back in the uncomfortable wooden chair. Lacing his fingers in his lap, he studied her a moment longer, the look on his face indicating he had something more to add.

“The real reason I wanted to see you is...” Mr. Cornell paused a quick moment and Becky couldn’t help but notice the concern so clearly reflected in his dark eyes. He cleared his throat loudly and watched her over the rim of his glasses. “Are you all right, Becky?” he asked.

Becky felt her heart give a sudden lurch, skipping a beat once again, as it had done only a short time ago when she had first heard the knock on her door. Mr. Cornell

did if fact know something was wrong. She ducked her head and stared down at her lap. How could she ever have let herself think that he might not? Warm tears filled her eyes, and for the moment, she couldn't find the words to answer him.

But, James Cornell didn't need to hear her words spoken out loud. His fatherly instinct told him all he needed to know. His many years in running the college club had revealed so much more to him than he had ever hoped to know. How many times had he seen it before? A pretty young girl suffering from a broken heart. That was the easiest to detect. His heart went out to her.

"I'm not trying to interfere," he said. "It's just that you seem to be a little out of sorts here lately. Is anything wrong? Can I help maybe?"

"Well," Becky murmured, her voice barely louder than a whisper, and spoken, too, without looking up to meet his concerned gaze. Her eyes burned and she feared she might burst out crying if she dared to try and open her mouth to speak. This was so embarrassing. "It's really nothing very important, Mr. Cornell," she began, forcing the words out. "It's just that Brad and I are... well, we're just having a few minor problems. That's all."

"Are you sure it's not something more?"

She looked like a very small girl to him as she finally looked up and met his eyes with her own sad ones. She smiled and dabbed her lashes with the crumpled tissue she had been twisting in her fingers. "Yeah," she nodded. "I'm sure." Never before had she ever dared to let Mr. Cornell see the private side of her life. How could she sit here and reveal her personal problems to him? After all, she reminded herself, he was only her boss. Why should he care? And she couldn't help it... she felt incredibly childish and stupid.

James smiled again and reached out and lightly touched her folded hands on her

lap. He watched her in silence for a long moment. He knew it had to be hard for a young girl to talk about problems of such an intimate nature. And especially to someone who was virtually a stranger – and quite old enough to be her father as well. “I think I understand, Becky,” he answered softly. “You don’t have to say anything else.”

A single tear slide down her cheek and dripped onto her lap. She smiled shyly and brushed it away with the palm of one hand.

“I won’t ask you any more personal questions,” he added, sounding even more fatherly to her ears. “It’s your life, and I’m not trying to butt in. I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

Her smile widened as she studied his solemn face. “I’m sure, Mr. Cornell. Really.”

“Well then... since we’re so slow here tonight, why don’t you knock off early and go on home and spend some time with your young beau?” He sat still, watching her expression change from being embarrassed and shy, to a look of shocked excitement. Her blue eyes seemed to dance in the soft amber light filling the small dressing room. His own smile broadened as he saw her gloomy mood disappearing. “You know,” he added lightly. “I think some quality time together would probably help the both of you a great deal.”

“You mean it?” Becky asked, unable to contain the excitement in her voice. “I can go home right now? I don’t have to stay around and finish up my last two sets?” This was almost too good to be true. Becky felt her heart soar upwards, nearly choking her with happiness, and almost immediately, she shot to her feet. Her chair tipped backwards, nearly toppling to the floor, and she saw James from the corner of her eye laughing openly.

He nodded his head. “Of course I mean right now,” he said. “Now, go on and get



out of here. You're wasting precious time just sitting here with an old man like me. Go on home before it gets any later."

Becky threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. "Thanks, Mr. Cornell," she whispered, pressing a quick kiss to his upturned cheek. "You know... you're one pretty cool boss man!"

James Cornell laughed again as he watched her grab up her purse from off the edge of her dressing table, and dash from the room on hurried feet. He was still chuckling to himself as he stood up, too, and started back towards his office. Sometimes he envied these college kids their youth and energy, but more often than not, he realized he certainly did not envy them their painful, sometimes heartbreaking experiences in growing into adulthood.

\* \* \*

There was a new bounce to Becky's steps as she hurried across the near-deserted parking lot and crawled behind the wheel of her old, ever faithful, blue VW. A bright and happy smile clung to her face. She truly liked James Cornell. He reminded her so much of her own dad back in Texas. And even to this day, after being away from her parents' home for nearly three years, she still cherished her dad's sound and careful advice to her. She had missed their close relationship over the past few years, but it suddenly looked to her as if Mr. Cornell could easily fill that lonely gap in her life. His advice to her tonight seemed as wise and thoughtful as she knew her dad's would have been had he been here with her instead.

She heard the sound of the cranky VW's engine coming to life as she turned the key in the ignition, and she paused a minute to let it warm up. It sputtered and coughed, sounding as if it hadn't been quite ready to wake up and be called to service. She thought of the simple solution Mr. Cornell had come up with to remedy her and Brad's

problem. It was true---she and Brad had been spending far too much time away from each other---and for far too many long and lonely months. It was no wonder he wanted to spend so much of his time going out with his friends. Was she ever there for him? Guilt ripped through her heart, and forced the truth to the surface of her brain. No, she realized.. . it was all her fault!

But it wouldn't be all her fault for very much longer. She would start tonight---- thanks to Mr. Cornell. Tonight would certainly be a great help to the both of them. They could use the extra time to snuggle, and love, and talk.. . and hopefully get back to making plans for their future together again. She so desperately missed that part of their life. They had always been so close before. Classes would be starting again in a few more weeks---she would only be singing at the club on weekends then---and she and Brad would have more time to be alone again. And then . . . after this last year of college for the two of them, they would have the rest of their lives to be alone together.

\* \* \*

As Becky drove down the darkened streets she hummed a happy tune. She would tell Brad how sorry she was that they had been drifting apart. And then, even if it took her the rest of her life, she vowed silently – steering the little car around the next corner and heading north on Pecan Avenue – she would make it all up to him. She would tell him once again, over and over again, how much she truly loved him. He would see how much she had been missing him. There would be no doubt in his mind of how hard she would be willing to work to make everything right between them. Everything would work out for the best. He would never again doubt her love for him.

Becky felt confident...!

And then, as she turned into the driveway and saw the darkened apartment, she felt dejected. Evidently Brad wasn't home. Again!

No doubt he was probably out with his new ‘friends’, carousing another night away, and God only knows when he would decide to come home. Becky felt the burning sting of tears fill her eyes. ‘If he decided to come home tonight at all’, she thought. ‘Dammit, Brad’. She wanted so desperately for them to work things out. She wanted so desperately to love him. . . to make their life happy and normal once again.

She climbed the stairs slowly, her heart heavy, her steps no longer light and peppy as they had been when she left the club only minutes ago.

There was no need to switch the lamp on inside the darkened living room, she had traveled this same dark and lonely journey many times before. Tossing her purse on the sofa, she made her way down the short hallway towards her and Brad’s bedroom. In the eerie silence surrounding her she heard the sad words, ‘Just like last night’, echoing inside her head. She felt like screaming, but she didn’t. She knew it wouldn’t do any good. It wouldn’t make Brad suddenly appear before her – waiting with open and loving arms to take her in. She knew it wouldn’t change anything.

Her hand felt as if it weighed a hundred pounds as she lifted it to open the bedroom door. But it was her heart that felt even heavier, it had to weigh at least a ton. She paused a moment, feeling the coolness of the door knob against her palm, and then a second later, she felt herself freeze.

She heard a faint noise coming from behind the closed door, and she stopped, frozen in her tracks. ‘Voices? But how could that be?’, she asked herself, a dreadful fear gripping her pounding heart, and causing her to feel as if she might faint.

She waited, immobile, still as any statue, for what seemed like an eternity. She heard the sound of Brad’s voice. . . but the other voice sounded strange to her ears. Who could it possibly be? What was going on in there?

It seemed to take another eternity for her to find the needed courage to turn the

knob and push the door open. She held her breath, terror choking her, yet urging her onward like a deep and dreaded instinct. The door swung slowly and silently inward. She saw the shimmering glow of the votive candles burning on the dresser first, and then. . . looking in the other direction, her eyes fell on the ones on the night stand beside her and Brad's double bed.

The air suddenly gushed back into her starving lungs with a loud and startled gasp. She felt as if she were choking on the very air she breathed. Her eyes remained frozen, staring straight ahead, and seeing the worst nightmare she could ever have imagined having. She tried to look away, she wanted to look away, but her eyes held firm.

The nightmare came to life.

It was then that she saw the two of them, naked, arms and legs entwined, lying atop the rumpled covers in the center of the bed. Brad. . . her one and only true love. Her whole life, and only real reason to even go on living, was making love with some unknown . . . unnamed woman. Becky never found out who the strange girl was. But--- it didn't matter anyway. Nothing mattered . . . anymore.

All Becky could do was stand still, and stare in shock and disbelief – her sad eyes open wide and taking it all in – but her confused brain refusing to accept the sight before her as being the truth.

Brad jerked the rumpled sheet from the foot of the bed, wrapping it around his nakedness, as he lunged to his feet and hurried to Becky's side. "Becky," he stammered. "What in the world are you doing home so early?"

But he was too late. Becky never heard his nervous words. She never saw the naked, and still unknown girl, running from their bedroom. It was then. . . at that exact moment in time, that Becky's world ended. She never knew when the gloomy, dark and

haunting hands of oblivion, grabbed hold of her senses, and carried her away. She was totally unaware of all that surrounded her.

Becky's legs grew too weak to support her weight. She slumped to the floor at Brad's feet, never moving even an inch from where she had been standing when the door first swung open.

Clasping her empty arms around herself, Becky rocked slowly, back and forth--- as if swaying to a rhythm heard only by her ears alone. She didn't feel the burning tears coursing freely down her cheeks and spilling across the floor. She saw nothing. And she heard even less. She only rocked back and forth.. . her lonely tears falling in the gloomy silence that surrounded her.

## Six

Brad grasped Becky by the shoulders and pulled her to her feet. Her tears continued to stream freely from her wide, unblinking---still unseeing eyes. If God had suddenly turned her into anything other than the rag doll she currently was, she might have been able to offer a little more resistance. But as it was, she couldn't. She didn't balk, she didn't refuse.. . she only obeyed.

Brad led her to the bed and eased her down on it. He stared with wide eyes as she curled herself into a tight little ball and numbly dragged her empty pillow to her breast, clutching it tighter and tighter, as if it were a life line, and she were drowning in the angry waves of a mighty ocean.

“Would you please stop crying for a minute and listen to me?” Brad shouted. His words competing with the sound of her tortured sobs – and losing.

And Becky didn't answer.

He watched her carefully, feeling a little helpless himself as he saw her lying so still, so motionless on the edge of the bed. He grabbed her shoulder, feeling the soft flesh beneath his fingers as he shook her. And still.. . she didn't respond.

He groped on the floor beside the bed, picking up his clothes he had dropped there a short while ago as he and his unknown girlfriend had begun their little sex game. He pulled his jeans on, still watching Becky as he did so. Why wouldn't she shut up? He felt his confusion turning to anger. “Dammit, Becky,” he said. “Shut up.. . it's not like it's the end of the world. You act like this is the first time I've ever done something like this.”

Becky never saw the one swift movement he made as he pulled his tee-shirt over

his head and turned back and stared down at her again. She never heard him laugh – not caring that he might sound sarcastic – as he pushed one hand through his hair, trying to straighten the corkscrew waves his pillow had left.

“Hell, girl,” he shouted. “This is just the first time you ever caught me. I had to have something to do while you were up at that damned club singing every night.”

But, again... she didn't hear. Brad's words were completely useless. Becky was too far gone to even try and pretend she might be paying any attention.

Brad yanked the closet door open, laughing as he heard it crash against the bedroom wall, the knob shattering the sheetrock behind it. He lifted his suitcase off the top shelf and let it drop to the floor at his feet.

His explanations droned on – falling on her deafened ears – as he pulled his hanging clothes from their hangers, dropping them into the suitcase, unfolded. Her sobs continued as he scooped his things from his dresser drawer. He didn't care. His suitcase was full, he slammed it shut. He turned and shot one last angry glance in her direction and hurried from the room.

He ran a shaking hand through his rumpled hair as he paced back and forth in front of the sofa. What was he going to do now? He couldn't just walk out the front door and leave her crying and hysterical in the other room. Dammit, why did she have to carry on like this? Why couldn't she just accept the fact that it was all over?

Brad slumped down on the sofa, cradling his head between his palms. If he thought hard enough, he knew he would come up with something. And then, light a light going off in his head, the idea popped into his head.

He grabbed the phone off the coffee table and dialed the number with a trembling hand. It seemed to take an eternity before he finally heard the sleepy answer. “Hello?”

“Mandy,” he said. “You've got to get over here right away. Something is wrong

with Becky.”

Mandy glanced at the lighted dial on the clock on her night stand. It was barely midnight. She sat up in bed, rubbing the sleep from her eyes with her free hand, and stammered. “Brad?.. . What’s going on? What are you talking about?” For a quick moment she felt nauseous, fear gripping her heart, and the receiver hurting her ear as she pressed it tighter against her head. If something had happened to Becky . . . she shuddered at the thought.

Brad sat on the edge of the sofa, his foot tapping the floor in rhythm with his nervous heartbeat. He shifted the receiver to his other ear. It didn’t help. He could still hear the dreadful sound of Becky’s moaning coming from the bedroom. “Mandy, please,” he said. “Just get over here, will you? I can’t get Becky to stop crying.”

\* \* \*

By the time Mandy got her clothes on and drove the short distance to Becky and Brad’s apartment on Pecan Drive, she was close to being hysterical herself. She barely remembered driving through the near deserted streets. Her mind raced in vicious circles, and Mandy didn’t like any of the theories it kept coming up with. Had Becky been in an accident on the way home from the club tonight? Had she and Brad just had an argument? Maybe he had hit her. She felt her fingers beginning to ache as she clutched the steering wheel tighter in her sweaty palms. What if her parents had called with bad news from Texas? “Oh, God, no.. .” she prayed aloud. “Oh please, God . . . no.”

Brad stood in the open doorway waiting, the dim light of the living room silhouetting him in the darkness, as Mandy brought her car to a screeching halt at the curb. She took the stairs two at a time and hurried past him, not bothering to stop for even a second to ask what was wrong. The sound of Becky’s sobbing assaulted her ears as soon as she stepped into the living room. Her feet barely touched the worn carpet as



she ran the short distance down the hallway and rushed to Becky's side.

Brad shrugged his shoulders as she passed. 'Women.' he thought, shaking his head, as he shut the door behind her and went back to the sofa and sat down. He listened to the sound of Mandy's voice as she crooned softly, trying to calm her friend as best she could. The mournful sobs seemed to be getting even louder than they had been earlier. He pressed his palms to his ears, trying to block out the dreadful sounds filling the tiny apartment. If Mandy didn't get her to shut up, and soon, he felt like he would scream, too.

\* \* \*

Mandy sat on the edge of the bed, stroking Becky's forehead with a gentle touch. Her heart ached for her dearest friend. What had happened to cause her so much pain? She didn't see any visible signs of bruises, so apparently Brad hadn't hit her. But all the same, Mandy couldn't help but feel that whatever had happened to cause Becky to be acting this way, it probably had to do with the way Brad had been treating her for the past several months. How many times had she begged Becky to open up to her, to tell her about their problems? But no... . Becky had always held firm, swearing that she and Brad were the 'ideal couple'. She would never admit that anything was even remotely wrong.

For a long while, Becky continued to sob to herself, her eyes squeezed shut, but unable to stem the flow of tears flooding the pillow she clung to. It seemed as if she hadn't yet realized that Mandy was sitting by her side.

But Mandy didn't give up. She spoke softly, praying her words might in some way soothe away some of the horrible pain Becky was living with. "I'm here with you, honey," she said. She patted Becky's limp hand as she held it in her own. "Everything's going to be all right."

Becky didn't move for a long moment, then at long last, she opened her tear swollen eyes and stared around the candle lit bedroom. To Mandy, she looked pitiful, lying in the middle of the wide, rumped bed.

Becky's eyes drifted to Mandy's solemn face, and she inched closer, wrapping her slender arms around her friend's waist. She clung to her like a drowning man would to a life raft. "Oh, Mandy.. ." she sobbed. "He's gone." Her words spilled out in tortured gasps, filling the eerie silence surrounding the two of them.

"I know, sweetie," Mandy said, her own tears sliding down her cheeks and dripping on her hand where she caressed Becky's shoulder. "But you'll be okay, I promise. I'll help you. Just cry and let it all out. You'll feel better."

Mandy felt the dampness of Becky's tears on her lap, but she didn't care. She let her friend cry for another half hour, then eased her back on the soft pillow at the head of the bed. She smiled down at her, and reached out, brushing the straying hair from Becky's tear stained face. "Why don't you try and close your eyes now and get some rest? I'll sit right here with you. I promise."

Mandy sat on the edge of the bed, holding tightly to Becky's still limp hand, and watched her. Her own tears sliding down her cheeks. It seemed to take forever, but finally, Becky drifted off into what looked like a restful sleep. Mandy continued watching her sleeping friend for another half hour before she pulled herself to her feet and tiptoed from the now silent bedroom.

Brad, still sitting on the sofa, looked up in surprise when Mandy stepped into the room. "I see you finally got her to calm down and stop that God-awful bawling," he said. "How did you manage to accomplish that miraculous feat?"

Mandy brushed her long hair across her shoulder with one hand, and shot a quick sarcastic look in his direction. "Well," she said, "if you think it's any of your business.

And for some stupid reason, I just don't feel that it is.. ." It would have been useless to try and hide the contempt she felt for him. She didn't even try. She flung her words at him over her shoulder as she stalked past him and into the kitchen. "I had to force her, but finally I got her to take three damned sleeping pills."

Brad leaned back on the sofa and crossed his legs. He felt his anger rising to near the boiling point as he watched her light the burner on the stove to reheat the half empty pot of coffee. The expression on her face did little to hide the fact that she had always hated him. Should he stand perhaps.. . and humbly bow before her? The thought brought a sinister grin to his lips. She wasn't the only one lucky enough to share that emotion. She had never been one of his closest and dearest friends either. Who did she think she was anyway? She damned sure wasn't his keeper. She might be Becky's . . . but it would be a cold day in hell before she became his.

Mandy stepped back into the living room and sat in the over-stuffed chair across from Brad. Eyeing him over the rim of her steaming cup, she couldn't help but think of how damned pathetic he looked. How could he ever call himself a man? What had Becky ever seen in him?

Long moments passed as she and Brad sat in the stony silence, their eyes the only communication between them. Each of them, knowing full well, the true depth of the hatred they shared for one another. It would have been senseless for either of them to have tried to hide it.

"So..." Mandy said, the first to break the silence. "What have you got to say for yourself? Do you have even the slightest idea of the extent to which you have hurt her?"

She saw the light from the lamp on the end table reflect in his eyes as he cocked his head in her direction, an evil looking grin upon his face. "Well," he said. "Let me see. Where should I begin?"

Mandy watched him in brooding silence as he lifted his hand and touched his right temple with one finger and frowned. She knew he was mocking her, pretending to be deep in thought. . . as if searching his mind for the correct answer to her question.

“Begin?” she asked through clenched teeth. His sarcastic reply and childish actions tore through her heart like a bullet gone astray. Her cup clattered loudly as she slammed it down on the coffee table. She didn’t seem to notice, not bothering to even flinch, as its hot contents spilled across her fingers. Her anger was far hotter than the spilled coffee could ever have been. If looks could have truly killed, Brad would no longer have been among the living. “Damn you, Brad. Where do you get off with even saying the word ‘begin’? Don’t you think you should rephrase that to ‘end’?”

Mandy had truly had her fill of him. It felt as if, she too, had gone berserk---the way Becky had just a few short hours ago. Her angry words didn’t stop. They flew at him like daggers. . . but she didn’t care. “Don’t you sit there and try to tell me you’re still thinking---I mean even remotely thinking, that there’s any kind of a chance for you and Becky to still have a future together.”

Brad’s eyes flashed with renewed anger as he inched forward, resting on the edge of the sofa. . . listening to her angry accusations. He lunged to his feet then, and closing the distance between them, he towered over her. She couldn’t help but notice his fists, clenching and unclenching at his sides, and for a moment, she feared he might hit her. “Together?” he asked. He laughed arrogantly . . . his eyes boring angry holes into her own frightened ones’ as he stared down at her from his impressive height. “You must be kidding,” he leered. “For your information . . . ‘little miss perfect’, I’ve hung around here for a whole lot longer than I ever planned on.”

“You’re a real son-of-a-bitch.”

He didn’t answer, he only smiled at her again. He shrugged his shoulders in a

sarcastic shrug, and spinning around on one foot, he walked to the door as if he hadn't a care in the world. He hesitated a brief moment as he reached down and lifted his suitcase with one hand. And looking back over his shoulder one last time, he shot back, "Yeah.. . I'm a real bastard all right. And like I already said a minute ago, you're 'little miss perfect'. So why don't you just sue me?"

Mandy breathed a great sigh of relief when Brad stepped through the front door and slammed it shut behind him. At long last, he was gone. Good riddance.

She leaned forward in her chair, cradling her face in her hands. Her tears fell for Becky. Poor Becky. What in heaven's name was she going to do now? As Mandy sat all alone in the eerie silence that hung in the air like a dense fog, she prayed, "Please, God.. . let me be able to help her."

## Seven

The early morning sun filtered through the drapes and spilled across Mandy's sleeping face. She groaned and stirred. The muscles in her neck and back stiff. Her eyelids fluttered for a quick moment and then popped open. Confusion rushed to greet her. What was she doing sleeping in Becky and Brad's living room? She forced herself to sit upright in the uncomfortable chair. It hurt to move.

Rubbing her neck with one hand, she forced herself to her feet. Why was she here? She had never done something like this before. It took a few awkward steps around the empty room, and then, oh so slowly, she started to remember. Bit by bit, tiny flashes of memory crept back into her groggy brain. She groaned in agony. The full impact of the horrible nightmare from last night rushed full strength, like a runaway train, slamming into her consciousness.

Mandy squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed her aching temples. God, she hated Bradley Ames. She remembered now, all that had happened, and all that lay ahead for her dearest and most cherished friend. A painful emptiness filled her heart as she turned and tiptoed quietly into the kitchen to put on a fresh pot of coffee.

Her thoughts turned once again to Becky as she stood in the quiet room, leaning one hip against the edge of the counter, her eyes mesmerized, watching the flames dance and sway beneath the coffee pot. Thankfully, Becky had managed to sleep throughout the remainder of the night. Her sobbing silenced, her pain erased---even if only for this one night---by the powerful sleeping pills Mandy had managed to get her to swallow. But, when she woke up.. . Mandy felt a shudder run the length of her spine at the thought.

Mandy lifted the coffee pot from the burner and filled a mug with the delicious smelling brew. She sank into a chair at the table and took a small sip. Becky's awakening would bring the whole ugly nightmare to the surface again. Her consciousness would remind her of all Brad's wrong-doings. She would remember he was no longer there with her. He wasn't there anymore to share her life, her future, her dreams. . . or even her lonely bed at night. Not anymore. And probably . . . thankfully, Mandy thought . . . not ever again.

Brad had long since disappeared into the darkness, and taking with him Becky's only hope for a happy life. The pain would start afresh for her. Would she ever be free of it? Or for that matter. . . would she ever be free of even him? Only time would tell.

Mandy refilled her mug and went back into the sunny living room. She stepped to the front window, pushing one panel of the sheer drapes aside with her free hand, and stared out at the beautiful day that lay before her. How typical it was for California. The sky the same color as the soft, powder blue eye shadow Becky always wore. A gentle breeze rustling through the leaves of the tall trees in the yard below like a giant invisible ocean wave.

Time seemed to stand frozen. Endless moments passed. The serene looking view faded to a blur. One lone tear slipped from the corner of Mandy's eyes and she felt it melt slowly down her cheek.

She couldn't stop thinking of all that had happened, and in such a short time--- just since last night. And thinking, too, of all that was yet to happen today, and tomorrow, and probably for forever. . . for Becky. Poor Becky. And then she couldn't stop the pain she suddenly felt surging through herself like a raging forest fire burning out of control. It felt as if her own heart were breaking . . . not for herself . . . but for Becky.

And then the questions came. What was going to happen now? What was she going to do? Hell.. . what could she do? How was she going to be able to help Becky? In all the years they had known each other, neither of them had ever had to go through something quite so horrendous . . . quite so devastating.

They had both come from loving and protective families, pain and heartache was something completely foreign to each of them. How many times had they sat up and talked late into the night, marveling at the fact that they were both so fortunate? Becky's parents had never had another child, as did her own, and both girls had grown up with every luxury imaginable. And now, all this was coming down on Becky's head like a weight far too heavy for anyone to ever carry.

Mandy racked her brain. She had to come up with something.. . some kind of plan to help her. And she knew, too, she had to do it soon. It wasn't exactly like time was on her side. Becky wouldn't go on sleeping forever.

Classes at Berkeley would be resuming in a few short weeks, and that didn't allow her much time either. If only she could get Becky to.. . To what? She searched her mind as she swallowed the last of her coffee and balanced the empty mug in her left palm. She paused a moment, letting her eyes stray upwards, searching the blue skies so far away. Were the answers written there? She squeezed her eyes shut once again and silently prayed. She knew she would never be able to succeed all alone.

If only she could get Beck to go away somewhere for a few weeks. A little time away would probably do the trick. It was probably what she needed more than anything else right now. A little time would give her painful, still too fresh wounds, the needed time to heal.

Mandy almost dropped the empty mug she was still holding. 'Yes,' she gasped aloud in the silent room. A sudden surge of hope growing from deep within her heart,



feeling for a moment like a bright light instantly going off inside her head. God had heard her prayers. He would find a way. A smile of thankfulness touched her lips for the first time in all the agonizing hours she had spent all alone in Becky's living room since last night. Maybe she could talk Becky into going to Texas for a short visit. A trip now to see her mom and dad would surely do her a world of good. Mandy felt confident.

She turned from the window then, and started for the kitchen to refill her empty mug. Having gone less than two steps, she froze in her tracks, her heart doing a quick somersault. She heard noises coming from Becky's room. The mug clattered noisily as she slammed it down on the coffee table, and darted towards the hall. She touched the door knob, her hands trembling, and ever so quietly, she pushed the door open. And with eyes wide, she peered inside.

Becky lay motionless and still, looking as if she hadn't moved even an inch throughout the night. Her fragile body still curled tightly into a ball the way it had been when Mandy had left her there the night before. Lying all alone in the middle of the wide bed, she looked incredibly small, not much larger than a newborn infant, Mandy thought. Her golden mane of hair splayed wildly around her head. Her bloodshot eyes were swollen almost shut. . . and still, her lonely tears fell unchecked, melting silently into the rumpled sheets beneath her head.

Mandy gasped in horror, one hand flying to her lips, but unable to stifle the sound, and Becky turned a pained and pitiful looking face in her direction. She struggled to sit up, the powerful effect of the sleeping pills she had taken refusing to leave her, and she slumped back to the bed, her arms and shoulders quivering and limp from the effort. But she couldn't give up. She had to try. She had to find a way to reach her friend. Then finally, after sucking air deeply into her lungs and struggling to free herself from the fog still clouding her thoughts, she managed to lift one trembling hand.

Mandy didn't try to hide her groan this time as she rushed forward and sat on the edge of the bed. She had never seen anyone as physically and mentally devastated as Becky was. She reached out, and as tenderly as a mother with her infant child, she wrapped her arms around Becky's slender shoulders. Her voice cracked with emotion. "It's going to be all right, honey," she said. "I'm here with you now. . . and everything is going to be just fine."

"But, Mandy... Brad's gone. You don't understand," she sobbed. "He's gone and I don't know what to do anymore. I just. . . can't live . . . without him." Becky's words trailed off as she buried her face even closer into the softness of Mandy's shoulder.

Mandy held her close while she cried, rocking her back and forth, and her words sounding almost as gentle as the fingers she used to stroke and caress her friend's back. "I know, sweetheart," she said. "But you've got to try not to worry about all that right now. Besides. . ." she paused a brief moment, almost hating herself for the words that popped into her mind. She didn't want to say them . . . but what else could she do? She knew she had to speak the truth. "Honey," she said bravely. "You know Brad's not worth you going through all this."

Becky heard the words, the words spoken so casually by her dearest friend... but even more than hearing them, she felt the impact they made as they sliced through her aching heart like a sharpened knife.

She wanted so desperately to tell Mandy to just listen to herself. 'Listen to the way you're sounding so heartless and cruel', she wanted to shout. But. . . she didn't. She knew Mandy would never understand. In all the years they had known each other, had she never once seen Mandy truly and completely in love? And it pained her even more than she already was when she realized that the answer was a definite 'No!' Not even one time. Mandy Powers had never once been truly in love . . . not in the same way she

herself had been in love with Brad. And she knew, too---something deep inside her heart seemed to scream---there would be absolutely no way to ever convince Mandy of how desperately she was hurting. Or even how badly she just wanted to die!

Becky heard the quietness of Mandy's voice, her words droning on and sounding soft as they fell close to her ear, and she tried to listen. She tried to concentrate. She knew Mandy wouldn't be saying them if she didn't want her to listen. The words impelled her to understand, the way Mandy herself did, and yet Becky knew they were spoken without any awareness on Mandy's part as to how she truly felt inside.

"You just need to try and pull yourself together," Mandy said. "You'll be okay. I'm here... and you know I'll help you all I can."

Becky shifted her head on Mandy's shoulder and stared numbly at the grayness of the bedroom ceiling. She had heard all she could stand. She felt herself waiver, and for a moment she thought she might faint, but she pulled herself free from Mandy's arms and looked deeply into the face she thought she knew so well. How many times had the two of them sat facing each other, piled up in the middle of the bed just like this, sharing their innermost thoughts and fears? She wondered to herself. So why did she feel so lost today? She couldn't stop the tears that rushed her eyes, blurring her vision once again... and she couldn't bring herself to ask.

Where should she begin? How could she ever hope that Mandy might understand? What words could she use to get her to see? And in her heart she already knew – she never could. If all the words in all the universe were at her ready disposal, Becky knew she would never be able to make Mandy truly understand. Not completely. Mandy never depended on someone with her whole life. Not in the same way she herself had done with Brad. Becky knew it was useless.

And so... she didn't even try.

Becky forced a weak smile to her trembling lips and slumped back tiredly against the wooden head board. She saw the worry written so boldly in Mandy's earnest gaze, and suddenly she knew she could only say the words that Mandy wanted to hear. She couldn't speak the truth – Mandy didn't want to hear that. And so, reluctantly, Becky opened her mouth and forced the empty words past the thick lump in her throat.

“I'll try, Man,” she answered flatly. “But.. . that's all I can promise for right now.” She felt the tears rushing down her cheeks, but for now she didn't allow herself the luxury of reaching up to brush them away. For now she didn't even care. Mandy was asking the impossible of her.

And in the next split second – even before Mandy had the time to open her mouth and respond to what she had said – Becky knew that if she was never able to do another thing in all her life, she knew she would never be able to just ‘pull herself together’ the way Mandy so thoughtlessly urged her to do.

Mandy smiled then and stroked the limp hair from Becky's sad face. Their eyes met and held a long silent moment. And then, Mandy added cheerfully, “That's the brave little girl I always remembered you to be.”

Becky didn't argue anymore. She knew it would be totally useless. If Mandy insisted that she simply ‘pull herself together’.. . then she'd just have to go along with her. Somehow---Becky still didn't know exactly how right at the moment---but somehow, some way . . . she would just have to do it.

“I just perked a fresh pot of coffee,” Mandy smiled again, and looking for the moment as if she had won the war – or at least to Becky, looking as if she was certain she had – and got quickly to her feet. She smoothed her hand across the tail of her floppy, sleep-wrinkled sweat shirt. “How about I go and get you a cup? You look like you could sure use it.”

“Yeah... sure,” Becky said. “That sounds great.”

Becky saw the sudden look of relief that swept instantly over Mandy’s happy face as she paused in the open doorway and waited, one hand resting on the door jamb. And once again, Becky forced her own smile back to her lips. It hurt to do so, feeling strained and almost plastic-like.. . but she did it anyway. For Mandy! The pain in her heart kept reminding her she was only doing it for Mandy. She knew it would be next to impossible to ever do it for herself.

As soon as Mandy stepped from the room Becky felt the sudden explosion of all the unanswered questions rush to fill her head. She lay all alone in the eerie silence, her tired brain rushing blindly in agonizing, hectic circles, and almost immediately she felt her tears returning. She couldn’t allow herself to ask the questions while Mandy was still present, she knew she had to keep them hidden.. . but now she was all alone. Her only other companions in the silence of the empty bedroom were the haunting questions that wouldn’t go away.

Why? She desperately wanted to know why. Why did Brad do this to her? How could it have possibly happened? She had to have failed him somewhere. But where? She tried to think. What could she have done differently that might have prevented it? Becky pressed her trembling fingers to the sides of her head, trying to force the confusion from her brain, but she knew it was useless. Her head felt as if it might burst—the faintest traces of the sleeping pills still lurking deep within her brain – and for a moment it felt as if she might never feel normal again.

Normal? The thought almost made her laugh – but she felt too tired. And on the inside – she felt as if she had already died.

She felt incredibly weak, and for a moment she feared she might even faint, but she knew she had to get out of bed. Mandy would be returning with the promised coffee

at any minute, and if she found Becky still in bed, Becky knew she would no doubt be returning to fuss at her about it.

So she shook her head stubbornly, and willed herself to get up. Every step felt like a mile, but finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Becky made it to the dresser on the other side of the narrow room. She held tightly to the dresser's edge with both hands, her legs weak and feeling as if they might crumple beneath her at any second, and she forced herself to look at her reflection in the wide mirror. She couldn't stop the shudder she felt running down her spine as her swollen eyes stared at the pathetic image before her. Her eyes were red and swollen from the rivers of tears she had shed throughout the night. And her hair. . . It hung limp and lifeless across her slumped shoulders. A lopsided grin touched her lips then, and she had to laugh. She looked like hell . . . and even worse than that . . . she felt like it, too. Actually . . . she felt more like dying.

Her eyes began to burn again as she felt her tears welling up yet one more time. She squeezed her eyes shut, blocking out the pitiful reflection, and squared her shoulders as best she could. She wouldn't let herself cry anymore. She couldn't! She refused to allow herself to feel the pain any longer. Mandy had told her that she needed to 'pull herself together', and by God. . . she would.

No one, absolutely no one... not even Mandy, her dearest friend in all the world... would ever again get the chance to see the true depth of pain Bradley Ames had caused her. No one. Not ever again!

Becky tasted blood as she bit into her lower lip. But. . . she didn't care. She opened her eyes and forced herself to stare at her reflection long and hard. It was one of the hardest decisions she had ever made . . . but she knew she had to do it. And then, standing all alone in the empty bedroom, and feeling her heart crumble beneath her

breast, she squeezed her eyes shut once again and uttered a silent vow. She would bury her pain deep inside. Far from all the outside world and all that surrounded her. It didn't matter that it might kill her in the process. . . Did anything matter anymore?

No.

But, Becky already knew that. She would never again let anything matter anymore!

## Eight

On the calendar it looked like such a short time, but inside the heart that still ached for him every day, it felt more like an eternity had already passed. Brad had been gone for a whole week now. Seven long and desperately lonely days. . . and seven even longer, even lonelier nights. Becky really did try, but no matter what she did, she couldn't forget Brad. She couldn't forget all they had shared. He had been far too important a part of her life. Hell . . . he had been far more than that. For so long Brad had been her only reason to even live.

The pain wouldn't go away. It was something real, something alive, hiding deep inside her soul. She had long since lost track of the oceans of tears she had shed since his leaving. But thankfully. . . no one ever knew. No one ever saw. She only permitted herself to cry on the inside. The pain and agony that dictated her life now---each and every day, and even every lonely hour of the night---never got any closer to the surface than deep inside her broken heart. She kept it well hidden. It was her secret. It was nobody's business except her own. No one, not even Mandy, ever found out the truth of the nightmare she was now living in with Brad gone.

\* \* \*

“So... when are we going back to your old apartment and get the rest of your things?” Mandy asked in earnest, her blue eyes pleading.

Becky stepped carefully over a gnarled piece of driftwood, washed ashore and lying across their path on the nearly-deserted beach. She and Mandy strolled along in silence for a long moment, the sun warmed sand feeling good beneath their bare feet. She inhaled deeply, savoring the rich and salty taste of the ocean breeze. It tugged



viciously at their loose fitting clothing, as if trying to rip them naked, and whipped their straying hair into their faces with a force that nearly blinded them. Mandy's question was something Becky didn't want to think about right now. In fact, it was a question she wished she would never have to answer.

For the past week she had been staying, once again, in the tiny dorm room with Mandy. And with classes starting again in just a few short weeks she knew she would have to make a decision pretty soon. It was something she had been putting off doing for too long already. It would be like admitting to herself the truth of the fact that Brad was never coming back. Warm tears filled her eyes at the thought.

"I don't really know Man," she said, her eyes huge and sad. "But I guess we don't have too much time do we?"

Mandy reached out and took Becky by the hand, and with a gentle nudge, urged her to sit beside her on the warm sand. "I'm not trying to rush you," she said. "And I know it's still terribly painful for you right now.. ." She hated to see Becky hurting this way. Sometimes she felt guilty, she had never had to go through a loss so deep herself, and time after time, she caught herself praying she never would. She knew she didn't have the strength that Becky did.

Becky forced a weak smile to her lips. "I know you're not trying to push me," she said. "I never thought that. It's just that I haven't really tried to force myself to look much further into the future than the moment I'm living in right now."

"Yeah... I know," Mandy answered. She picked up a piece of a broken sea shell and drug it through the sand beside her leg. She looked back up, her eyes meeting and holding Becky's. "But we don't have much time if we want to get the moving done before we start school again."

"You are going to help me, aren't you?"

“Well of course I am, you silly goose.” Mandy laughed then and playfully swatted the back of Becky’s hand. “But. . . I’ve been thinking of something else, and I don’t want you to say no until you hear me out.”

Mandy’s blue eyes sparkled in the fading light of the setting sun, and Becky frowned as she watched her. What in the world was Mandy up to now? “Oh yeah,” she asked cautiously, “and what’s that?”

“Well,” Mandy began slowly, awkwardly, fearing Becky’s response even before she asked, but for the moment she had the courage and she didn’t dare stop. “Since classes don’t start for another week and a half, and since Mr. Cornell gave you a temporary leave from work. . . I was just thinking that it might be a good idea if you went home to see your folks for a short visit.”

Becky’s eyes grew wide as she listened to Mandy’s excited words. She never ceased to amaze her. Who else could possibly be scatter-brained enough to come up with such an outlandish idea? She shook her head. “And just where do you suppose I come up with the money to finance such an adventure? Have you forgotten that along with my leave of absence from work, that also means I’m quite broke?”

A mischievous grin spread slowly across Mandy’s happy face. She had already thought of that. . . and to her, she knew her plan was fail proof, and all that remained--- was to convince a very stubborn friend. She twisted around and sat cross-legged on the sand in front of Becky. The wind caught her hair and whipped it across her face, but she lashed out with one hand and shoved it aside. “I’ve got a little money saved, and you could . . .”

“No. No way!” Becky interrupted, without giving her a chance to finish. The expression on her own face changing almost immediately, her grin melting away and a dark frown taking its place. She squared her shoulders and glared into Mandy’s wide

eyes. “No way, girl. I would never take your money.”

But Mandy refused to be put off so easily. She touched Becky’s sleeve, her smile unwavering, and went on quickly. “I know you wouldn’t, Becky,” she said. “But I don’t think I ever said anything about you just taking it. Did I? I was only suggesting that maybe you could borrow it.” She paused then, silently holding her breath, her eyes pleading almost as much as her words. “Please. It would do you a world of good, and besides.. . I would even finish moving the rest of your stuff for you while you’re away.”

Becky felt the sting of tears in her eyes as she stared back into Mandy’s solemn face. A thick lump struggled to her throat, threatening to choke off her words. “Well,” she answered at long last. “If you’re sure I could pay you back. I mean.. .” She paused, and Mandy watched her swipe at the one lonely tear that somehow managed to escape from the corner of her eye with the back of her hand.

“Oh yes... I’m sure.”

Becky sat still, her eyes straying once again to the rushing waves a few yards away. Uncertainty filled her heart. Should she let Mandy do this for her? What had she ever done to deserve such a dear and sweet friend?

Long moments passed before Becky dared to answer again. “Why are you doing this for me?” she asked.

Mandy touched her hand. “Probably because I love you silly girl.”

Becky pulled her gaze from the ocean and stared deeply into her friend’s eyes. She lifted one hand and twisted the length of her hair into a make-shift pony tail and held it in place close to her shoulder. “And I love you, too, Mandy,” she said softly.

“So it’s all settled then? You’re really going? I can’t believe you let me talk you into it so easily.”

Becky pushed herself to her feet, and brushing the sand from her jeans, she

released her hair and turned into the wind, facing the ocean once again. She didn't try to stop the tears she felt rushing to her eyes this time. She remembered all the times over the years that Mandy have more than proven her love for her. She had always been there for her. Just as she was now.. . trying with all her might to help Becky get over the heartache of losing Brad.

Something in her heart told her she would probably never be able to accomplish that remarkable feat – how in the world could she ever expect to get over the only man she had ever loved in all her life – but, all in all, she loved Mandy for trying to help.

She reached down and took Mandy's hand, pulling her to her feet, too. She slung one arm around her friend's shoulder and hugged her tightly. "Well girl," she said, sighing bravely, and pushing the pain in her heart aside yet one more time. "I guess we'd better get busy." Her words were soft and Mandy leaned closer, clinging to her hand, and waiting for her to finish. "I've got to get my bags packed, and call my mom and dad, and call the airlines to get a reservation, and.. ."

A genuine smile eased across Becky's lips for the first time in over a week as she and Mandy turned and walked arm in arm along the beach. She could feel the nervous excitement begin to surge through her veins. How long had it been since she had last seen her mom and dad? It might be good for her after all.

\* \* \*

The flight from Berkeley, California, to Becky's home town in Galveston, Texas, was pleasant and uneventful, even though to her; it felt like it took an eternity to get there. For a long while, she felt sad to be leaving, but she knew Mandy had been right to encourage her to get away for a while. Putting some distance between her and the heartache Brad had left her with would no doubt do her good.

Becky let her thoughts turn inward. Was just knowing it was good for her going

to be enough? How could she ever convince her heart to stop breaking? How could she ever force herself to stop loving Brad? Love wasn't something you just shut off like a water faucet. Maybe someday she would be ready to move on, maybe even start all over again with someone new---at least she hoped so---but not right now. She couldn't give up her love for him. She wasn't ready to do that yet.. . and something in her heart told her she might not ever be.

All she could do now, and probably for forever, was to plant a happy smile on her face and go along with everyone's good intentions for her. She could play their silly little games. She could pretend that everything was perfect in her life. She didn't have to let anyone know the truth. She leaned back, resting her head on the high cushion of her comfortable seat and let her mind ponder the thought. It was painful to think about, but the real truth was this – she continued to die, bit by bit, on the inside, a little more with each passing day without Brad.

Long moments passed, and even though she still felt heartbroken, Becky tried to push the gloom aside. After all, she reminded herself.. . she was going home. She could hardly wait.

Excitement took the place of her sadness with every mile the jet covered, drawing her closer and closer to her parent's welcoming arms and her childhood home. It was the first time she had been there in over two years, she realized with a fierce yearning. It was strange how quickly time seemed to slip by without one ever being aware of it.

She watched the clouds melting away outside the window by her side, and thought of how much her life had changed since starting college. She felt selfish and terribly guilty. She had been so completely wrapped up in her life with Bradley Ames for such a long time. And somewhere along the way, her mom and dad had been pushed further and further into the background. She realized now, a guilty tug at her heart

strings reminding her, how much she truly loved her parents. The three of them had always been so close. She shuddered. She had somehow, so carelessly and thoughtlessly, let that close relationship dwindle to nothing more than a few letters each month, and the traditional, hurried phone calls on birthdays and special holidays.

Becky leaned her forehead on the coolness of the window, her eyes searching, as if she might be looking for Texas to appear just over the horizon. She saw instead the vastness of the Grand Canyon stretching far below. She felt a tiny smile tug her lips upward, remembering the last vacation she and her parents had taken when they visited here. The vacation had been part of their present to her upon graduating high school. The three of them had had such a wonderful time. And since then.. . so very much had changed in all their lives.

She had so much to make up to them.

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Becky awoke the next morning to the pleasant sound of birds chirping their happy songs outside her bedroom window. She smiled and rolled over in the narrow single bed she had slept in since her earliest childhood memories. It still felt comfortable. In fact, she thought, swinging her feet over the edge of the bed and sitting up, the whole room looked comfortable to her. It seemed cozy and secure, just the same as it had been on the day she had left home so many years ago. Her high school pennants, her cheerleader pom-poms, and her many rock star posters still adorned the pastel blue colored walls. Her many scrapbooks and yearbooks still occupied the same space on the walnut shelves above her dresser. Mementos of her carefree growing up years were scattered throughout the room.

She smiled to herself and stretched lazily. Her first night back had been filled with pleasant and happy dreams of her childhood. It was the first night in such a long

time she hadn't been bothered by the terrible nightmares about Brad. And for a change, that felt pretty good. She felt totally at ease, and more than just a little bit thankful. If it hadn't of been for Mandy pushing her she might not ever have decided to come home. It might take her a while, but somehow, she knew she had to try and pay Mandy back for encouraging her to take this trip before they had to return to classes at Berkeley.

Throwing the covers aside, Becky scurried from the comfortable bed and threw on a pair of well-worn cut off blue jeans and a loose fitting tee shirt. She would worry herself with coming up with some way to repay Mandy at a later date. But for now... she took the stairs two at a time as she hurried for the kitchen, and her first breakfast at home in over two years.

She paused a moment in the opened doorway, a happy smile on her face as she took in the welcoming sight before her, and she felt her heart soar upwards, filled with a deep and incredible love. She lifted one hand, touching the corner of her eye with a quick finger, and erasing the dampness of the tears she felt there.

Richard Carson, her dad, was sitting at the round oak table in the middle of the sunny kitchen, a cup of coffee in one hand, and a folded newspaper in the other. "Hey, babe," he said, speaking to Becky's mom, Sara. "Look who's finally up."

Sara stood in front of the stove, looking as lovely as Becky remembered. She smiled at her daughter as she turned, holding an enormous platter, filled to almost overflowing, with Becky's favorite blueberry pancakes and link sausages. "Morning, sweetie," she said. Under her embroidered apron, she wore a simple, cream-colored pant suit, and comfortable, low heeled sandals. Her shoulder length, graying hair, styled in the familiar page-boy she always wore.

Becky looked back at her dad, her smile broadening even more. He looked to her as dapper and handsome as she had always remembered. He wore his usual, navy-blue

coveralls with the sleeves rolled up to reveal his muscular tanned arms up to his elbows. He looked as if he might have gained a few extra pounds, especially around his once slim waistline, Becky mused, and the salt and pepper hair he had always been so proud of looked a bit thinner on the top.

“Good morning, Mom, Dad,” she said, sliding into her old familiar chair, and smiling broadly at the two people she loved most in all the world. “You guys have no idea how good it feels to be home again. It’s been such a long time.”

Placing a steaming mug of delicious smelling coffee before her daughter, Sara squeezed her shoulder and planted a gentle kiss on her forehead. “Well, sweetheart,” she said, her own smile beaming. You wouldn’t get an argument out of Sara – she was overjoyed at having Becky home again, too, even though it saddened her to think the visit had to be such a short one. “I’d have to say we are just as thankful as you are. We have both missed you a great deal, my love.”

“You can sure say that again,” Richard added, feeling as grateful as he knew Becky’s mom did. “It feels good to have you home again, and I can hardly wait till you get out of college for good and get back here.”

“Now, Richard,” Sara chided. She looked him sternly in the eye as she stepped around the table and settled into her own chair. “Let’s not rush her, she just got here. And besides. . .”

Becky reached across the table and touched her mom’s hand. It felt like old times, listening to her mom defending her to her dad. “Thanks, Mom,” she said, smiling in amusement. She knew how much her dad wanted her to move back to the island after graduation, but as yet. . . she hadn’t made her mind up. She and Mandy still talked and dreamed of going to New York, but for now, she most certainly didn’t want to dredge up that discussion with her dad. There would be plenty of time for that later on in her visit,



but hopefully . . . not today.

“So, Dad,” she added lightly, trying like her mom had done to change the subject. “How’s work been here lately?” She lifted a forkful of syrupy pancakes to her lips. “Are you still working as hard as you were the last time we talked?” The forked food disappeared into her mouth.

Like his own father, and grand-father even before him, Richard Carson, was a commercial fisherman. He owned a small fleet of fishing boats, and kept his loyal crew quite busy. They fished the Gulf of Mexico year-round, bringing in whatever species of fish and other seafood specialty that happened to be in season at the time. He earned a very comfortable living for his small family, and Becky had always felt extremely proud.

Richard swallowed the last of his coffee, and reached for the pot, sitting on a pot holder in the center of the table. He watched the steaming brown liquid as he filled his mug. He knew full well how easily Sara and his daughter had managed to change the subject on him. He smiled. For him, too, it brought happy memories of Becky’s growing up. “I can’t complain I guess,” he said, his deep voice echoing in the small room. He cleared his throat noisily. “We’ve all been working pretty hard, but that’s what it’s all about, right?”

Becky saw the reproachful glance her mom shot at her dad, and she ducked her head.

Sara wiped her mouth on her napkin and pretended she hadn’t noticed the way Richard had said ‘we’ve all been working pretty hard’. She knew he didn’t approve of her working, too, but she did enjoy it so much, running her own small florist shop. It didn’t take too much of her time and it made her feel good about herself. And besides, she refused to just sit around the house, and grow old and fat before her time. She knew

they didn't need the extra money she earned, she just enjoyed working.

Becky reached for another sausage link. She, too, pretended not to notice the implications in her dad's words, the way her mom had done, and she couldn't be sure. . . but something in the air seemed to say that the two of them had argued about her mom's job, and more than just a little bit. But, it seemed her mom had won, and her dad was, evidently, learning to accept his wife's growing independence. She knew, too, that the two of them would never let anything so trivial interfere with the strong marriage they had. That thought brought a contented smile to her young face, and she reached for her cup. She sipped her coffee in silence. It did feel terribly good to be home; she had missed the both of them a great deal.

\* \* \*

A few minutes later, after her mom and dad had left for work, Becky got to her feet and busied herself with cleaning up the kitchen. She knew they had both been disappointed when she had declined their invitation to go and visit them at work today. . . but there would be time for that on another day. She didn't want to be rude, but for now, she needed a little time for herself.

She locked the back door and hid the key, where she had always hidden it, in the overflowing pot of ivy hanging from the edge of the porch roof. No wonder her mom had decided to open a florist shop, she thought, seeing how healthy and full the ivy had grown. She certainly had a green thumb.

It was a beautiful day. Already growing quite warm even at this early hour, as Becky walked the three blocks to the seawall. She felt the dampness of her tee shirt clinging to her shoulders as she turned the final corner and hurried across the street. As soon as she stepped on the seawall she felt the familiar rush of the ocean breeze cooling her skin. She hurried down the rough concrete steps and smiled as soon as she felt the

warmth of the sand on her bare feet. It was a feeling she had learned to love many years ago when she had been a little girl.

Tiny wisps of her golden hair, escaping the ponytail she wore, blew freely around her face and tickled her cheeks. The ocean breeze seemed to reach out and caress her tenderly, welcoming her home again.

Her thoughts roamed freely. She thought of the many conversations she and Mandy had had during the past week and a half. . . And with the sting of a fresh tear in her eyes, she slowly began to realize, Mandy's words were true. Brad was never coming back. He had been gone now for nearly two weeks, and it didn't look likely that he would be returning any time soon.

With a heavy heart, Becky sat down on a large piece of driftwood and turned to face the mighty waves rushing towards the beach. A lonely seagull squawked loudly, circling overhead, but she didn't lift her head to watch it. She remained staring into the foamy waves before her. Had someone been watching her, it would have been hard for them to tell – were the tears they saw in her eyes caused from the gusty ocean breeze that blew against her face – or were they in truth, the result of the breaking heart that beat beneath her breast?

The longer she sat here, the more she came to realize that maybe Mandy had been right after all. She was still young and her whole life spread before her, like a large, unwritten book. The pages blank, pure and white, were waiting for whatever she would write therein. It was time for her to start a new chapter in her life. Brad was nothing more than a part of her past. Wasn't he? A painful sensation tore through her heart as the thought penetrated her brain. But, she had to remind herself. . . it was true, wasn't it? He was gone. He would never return. And . . . it was time for her to start living her life once again. Hadn't Mandy reminded her of that often enough in the past few weeks? Brad

simply wasn't worth her throwing her young life away anymore.

As Becky sat all alone, still facing the ocean, yet not really seeing it, she began to cry. Her tears falling silently, hidden from all who might see, muffled by the roar of the ocean. Everyone seemed to want so much from her. She knew she should put her past behind her, where it truly belonged, but.. . she just didn't feel strong enough yet. Not today. Maybe someday, maybe sometime in the distant future, but not yet. She just wasn't ready.

\* \* \*

"Mom, Dad," she said, warm tears filling her eyes as she spoke. "I love you both so much. Thanks for all that you've done for me." All too quickly, her short visit had come to an end. It was time for her to return to California.

Becky and her parents stood solemnly in middle of the dense crowd at Hobby Airport. "Sweetheart, we love you, too," Sara said. She held tightly to Becky's hands, her eyes blinking rapidly, trying to still the tears that kept coming. There was so much she still wanted to say before the flight was called. "Please, Becky.. . don't stay away so long this time."

"I'll try, Mom," Becky answered. "Maybe I can come back over the Christmas holidays." She grabbed her then, hugging her mom to her breast, already feeling the angry pangs of homesickness at the thought of leaving them.

She turned and faced her dad, and had to stand on tiptoe to be tall enough to hug his neck. "I love you, too, Dad." She saw him swallow hard, and couldn't help but feel comforted; she knew that he, too, was close to tears.

Richard's already husky sounding voice sounded even deeper to Becky's ears. "I love you, too, little girl," he said, his words barely making their way past the lump in his throat.

The three of them froze, feeling the impending sadness of separation descending upon them like a mush too heavy blanket. Over the airport intercom, they heard the dreaded announcement. “Final call. . . Flight 212 for San Francisco . . . now boarding at Gate 5.”

Becky planted a quick kiss on her dad’s weather-beaten cheek. “I’ll miss you terribly.”

She turned then, and as she pulled her mom back into her open arms, she felt her burning tears slide unchecked down her cheeks, and knew they were melting into the silky, softness of Sara’s blouse. Her heart was breaking, but she had to go. “I’ll call you when I get back to the dorm,” she reassured them. “You and dad take care of each other.” Becky turned away and hurried towards the door, her last words catching in her throat, and sounding as if they were going to choke her. “Bye, you two.”

Sara wiped her own eyes with the drenched handkerchief she had been clutching for the past half hour. “Bye, sweetheart,” she whispered coarsely, waving frantically with her free hand, and not ever knowing for certain, if Becky had even heard her final words or not.

\* \* \*

It was the fall of 1970. Classes at Berkeley College resumed as usual. And once again, Becky and Mandy, found themselves caught up in the fast-paced routine of college life. It was the beginning of their fourth year. And thankfully, it was their final year. They were truly going to make it. Their parents would be so happy. And, undoubtedly, so would they.

It was hard for Becky for the first few weeks. She didn’t want to, but she caught herself nervously glancing over her shoulder at almost every turn. She was terrified she might run into Brad somewhere. He might be in one of her classes, or perhaps she might

run into him while strolling one of the many paths on the vast campus. Or Heaven forbid. . . what if she saw him some night while performing at the Hangout Club? Her nerves were frayed and she knew she couldn't handle it. Mr. Cornell hated to see her go, she had been good for business, but he did understand. She resigned from the Hangout Club before the end of September.

She tried to overcome her fears of seeing Brad. But more often than not, she found herself lying awake, long after Mandy had fallen asleep in their tiny bedroom. . . her thoughts threatening, refusing to let her rest. How would she handle seeing him again? What would she say? There were no answers. She feared she would fall apart. Brad had been far too important in her life, and for far too long. It felt as if he had some kind of unreal power over her. There would be no way she could simply walk away as if nothing had ever happened between the two of them. But thankfully, no one ever knew that . . . no one that is---except for Becky herself.

The constant ache in her heart kept reminding her. There was no doubt about it. . . she would surely die. Brad had not only 'been' her whole reason to live . . . he still 'was'. Even Mandy, her dearest friend in all the world, never knew the truth. Becky couldn't live without Brad. The pain was still too fresh.

Becky heard several rumors from some of their fellow classmates that Brad had dropped out of school. At first she was cautious. . . were the rumors true? Then after the weeks kept slipping by, all without any sightings of him, she started believing. She hated to think of him dropping out, knowing how important an education was---for all of them---even for someone like him . . . but then there were times she was thankful he had. He was no here to bother her. It was so much easier this way.

Becky threw herself into her studies with renewed enthusiasm. Her classes were tough, her professors even tougher; demanding and unyielding. . . but she studied hard.

And her good grades proved it to be worthwhile. Mandy, on the other hand, was too relieved that they were in their final year. She had already proven her ability to learn without ever having to study and cram. The two of them made quite a pair, as they had since their first meeting years ago, and the one thing that held true above all else . . . they were still closer than any sisters could ever have been.

Mandy was glad that Becky had moved back into the dorm with her. They spent endless hours, undisturbed now by Becky's undying love for Brad, getting to know each other all over again. They talked late into the night, drinking sodas or iced tea, and talking about their bright and hopeful future plans. They both shared the dream of moving to New York as soon as they graduated. Becky could pursue her dream of becoming an actress, and Mandy could fulfill her fondest wish.. . she could find a husband, get married, and live happily ever after.

Sometimes it made Becky laugh. The two of them were so much alike in every way---it was rare for them to ever disagree on anything---but when it came to the subject of marriage, they always managed to lock horns. She had already been down the 'happy couple' road before.. . with Brad. And it hadn't worked then, so why would she think it might work now? She had no desire to even try for it again. She didn't want to get hurt again. Not now, not ever.

She never told anyone about the pain she continued to live with each and every day of her life. Did anyone else need to know of the heartache that tormented her on a daily basis? She didn't need to tell anyone how hard it was for her to crawl out of bed every morning and face the new day. She put on her happy face and always wore a cheerful smile. She went through all the motions of living a life as carefree and happy as anyone else. No one ever knew how bad she felt on the inside.

Sometimes it felt like Brad would never completely go away, never leave her all

alone. He haunted her dreams every night. And in her dreams.. . they were always together. They were so much in love, as happy as they had ever been.

And then, even before she ever had time to awaken from her dreams, they always turned into the hellish nightmares that continued to haunt her. He was gone. She had to relive, over and over again, every night, the pain and agony of Brad's cheating on her.. . and then his walking away and leaving her all over again.

Sometimes it was almost more than she could bear. But, she never gave up hope. The nightmares would go away someday. Someday she would get past all the pain. Someday---she didn't know how just yet---but sooner or later.. . Brad would be behind her. Hopefully . . . someday.

\* \* \*

And then, almost miraculously, it was graduation day. Becky and Mandy's long four year journey at Berkeley College was over. It had been a struggle, but they both had survived it. Their whole future lay brightly before them, a blank white canvas, waiting and ready for the artist's magic touch. They were all grown up now, and more than just a little bit eager to start living their adult lives. Their parents' watched proudly, tears of happiness glistening in their eyes, as the two of them crossed the stage and received their diplomas. Becky and Mandy were exhausted, yet filled with an enormous feeling of excitement. They had finally made it.

And a short three days later, in June of 1971, they held tightly to each other's hands as they boarded the plane. Their hearts hammering with nervous anticipation, and their voices echoing in unison, 'New York.. . here we come'.



## Nine

Mandy landed a high paying job at a prestigious law firm within a week of their arrival to the 'Big Apple'. And almost immediately, she fell in love with her boss; the wonderful, the glorious ---Joseph McPherson. He was all she ever talked about, night and day, Joe this, or Joe that.

Becky thought she might lose her mind. It reminded her of the way she had acted herself, when she had first met Brad. She could only pray Mandy wasn't making the same mistake.

They argued endlessly, Becky trying her best to get Mandy to listen to reason. "I just don't want to see you get hurt," she pleaded. "What if he turns out to be like.. .?"

"Like who, Becky?" she snapped. "Like Brad?"

The hurtful words stung like a slap. Becky shifted on the sofa and turned to face her. "Mandy.. ." she gasped, slamming her cup down hard on the coffee table, her coffee spilling across her fingers. "How can you say that?"

Mandy ducked her head. "I'm sorry, girl," she said. "I wasn't trying to hurt you." She placed a gentle hand on Becky's arm. "I know it's still painful to you and I never meant to open old wounds. But, this is different. Joe is not Brad. He's nothing like him."

In the end, it was Mandy who had finally won the argument, and Becky had to come to terms and admit that she might have been wrong. A short four months later, at Christmas-time, Becky stood proudly beside her dearest friend as she exchanged vows with her handsome, twenty seven year old boss. Mandy was now Mrs. Joseph McPherson.

It didn't take Becky but a short time of being around the newly married young

couple to finally admit it openly – she had never seen Mandy happier. It did seem as if the two of them were indeed the perfect pair. Mandy’s motherly instinct fit in well with Joe’s easy going manner. It seemed as though he had been looking for someone just like Mandy for his entire life. Becky never saw them argue or even so much as give one another a cross look. As each new day faded into the next Mandy’s happiness seemed to grow even more.

Becky was truly pleased for the both of them.

After all, she was forced to remember, marriage and having babies had been Mandy’s ‘life-long wish’, finally coming true... and apparently this Joseph McPherson was the answer to Mandy’s prayers. Becky smiled as she waved good-bye from the crowded airport. Mandy and Joe were off on their much anticipated, two week honeymoon to Las Vegas. And as she stood there now, her heart in hand and her blue eyes transfixed on the departing plane, watching it taxi towards the runway, Becky remembered thinking, ‘Theirs had to be a marriage truly made in Heaven’.

Things didn’t move quite as rapidly in Becky’s life. Her dream of landing a starring role in a major Broadway production didn’t come right away. And even when she had to settle for a cashier job at a busy ‘five and dime’ store a few blocks from home, she never lost hope. She knew she would make it someday.. . somehow, if only she kept the faith.

She spent every waking minute – when she wasn’t in front of the cash register – pouring over the classified ads. And then it finally happened. Becky auditioned for, and much to her surprise, landed a bit role in a small, no-name play. It wasn’t exactly what she had had in mind – she had wanted more than anything in all the world to be the ‘star’---but she squared her shoulders, planted a happy smile on her young and thankful face, and accepted the bit part she was given. ‘At least it was a start’, she mused.

And it was a beginning she was truly thankful for, for more than one reason. The rent was now her responsibility, since Mandy had gotten married and moved out, but Becky didn't mind. Her job at the theater paid almost double what she had been earning at the 'five and dime'.

The quiet apartment she and Mandy had rented together in the Village wasn't much – just a refurbished loft over what had once been a flourishing Chinese restaurant – but it was all hers now, and she loved it. The airy rooms were neatly decorated with all her personal and private-most treasures, pictures and books, and a varied assortment of oddly shaped, colorful sculptures and vases she had picked up for next to nothing at flea markets and second hand shops here and there. But, all in all, the small apartment more than met her needs. It was a roof over her head, it was close to the theater, and above all else, it was a comfortable place – all her own – to call home.

In no time at all, she discovered she truly enjoyed acting. It was all she had ever hoped it to be, and then some. Everything was new and exciting, and she found herself having even more fun than she ever had singing at the Hangout Club back in college. She was on her way.

The small group of actors she worked with were a far cry from being ready to perform on Broadway, but the director, Samuel Matthews, had a sharp eye for good talent, and obviously – nerves of steel. He understood all their problems and was probably the most patient man any of them had ever known.

Samuel Matthews, or 'Sammie', as he preferred to be called, had once been, in his own day, an up and coming young actor himself. And now, at the ripe old age of forty-six, but not looking a day over thirty.. . still wearing his straight brown hair pulled back in a neat ponytail, and without any sign of gray in it, or even in his neatly trimmed beard . . . he had retired from the stage. Within a year of his last curtain call, he took up

directing, and it turned out he was quite good at it. Everyone in the cast looked up to Sammie with great admiration. He seemed to be a workaholic, working from early sunup, and until way past the time the last actor had dragged themselves from the tiny theater, and long since fallen tiredly into bed.

Acting was a lot more difficult than Becky and the others in the group ever anticipated, but under the patient tutelage of Sammie, each and every one of them slowly began to blossom. Nothing escaped Sammie's keen eyes. He saw them all working as diligently as he did. They tried their hardest, and no one, not even the lowliest of stage hands, ever gave up. Everyone had such high hopes. There was always the dream of making it to Broadway, and making it big. They all knew it couldn't take forever.

Becky spent long and sleepless hours, sitting up and rehearsing her lines, over and over again, sometimes until the early morning sun had long since crept up over the horizon of the Atlantic Ocean and climbed high into the sky above the majestic skyscrapers. But it was worth it. . . her hard work paid off. It wasn't long before Sammie began to give her larger and more important roles in his plays. Becky began to really feel like a 'star'. She had never been happier.

And as for plans for marriage for herself – Becky's reply was always the same... "No way. That's out of the question for me."

It worked for a while. But still, she had to contend with Mandy, and now her husband, Joe, too, trying to play match-maker for her. Becky quickly lost count of the number of eligible bachelors they had introduced her to. . . it almost made her head spin.

Friday nights were always the worse. How could she ever forget? After the last act, and the final curtain had fallen, Becky always stepped off the stage with more butterflies in her stomach than she ever had at the beginning of act one. She never knew

anymore who Mandy and Joe would have sitting by their side in the audience, anxiously waiting to meet the fledgling, ‘young and beautiful’ blond actress. It was always so embarrassing.

When would they ever learn? She was one tough cookie, always standing her ground, and never giving an inch. She had her career to think of. She had her friends, she had her beautiful loft apartment, and above all else.. . she was happy. And that was that. Becky didn’t need anything more.

And then... in March of the following year... it finally happened. There was no warning. Nothing planned. It just happened like a bolt out of the blue.

The small theater group finally landed a hit play. It was almost too good to be true. Every seat in the house continued to sell out, week after week. They were into their eighth week, and still going strong. It looked as if they had, at long last.. . finally hit the big time. Even the critics smiled favorably on them.

Shooting Stars Magazine sent a photographer to the theater to shoot publicity photos for an article they were doing on the up and coming young performers. That was when a Mr. Bill Simmons stepped into the easy-going, carefree and uncluttered lifestyle Becky had grown so accustomed to – and had for such a long time, enjoyed living in all alone.

\* \* \*

Bill Simmons was quiet, not in any way overbearing, as one might think a top photographer at one of the widest read publicity magazines in all of New York might be. Becky sensed it almost immediately, the first time they were introduced, and he had grasped her hand in his own, giving it a firm handshake. She knew this Mr. Bill Simmons was far from being any other ordinary guy.

“Hello,” he said, his words spilling from the wide grin he wore. “I’m Bill

Simmons, Shooting Star Magazine. . . and you must be, Becky Carson. I've heard so much about you that I feel as if I know you already."

Becky felt herself blush at the mere sound of his sultry voice, the warmth of his touch. "Yes.. ." she answered shyly, peering up at him through lowered lashes. She had never seen eyes quite as green as the ones she found herself staring into. "I'm Becky Carson, and I assure you . . . the pleasure is all mine."

She felt the jolt of her heart jack-hammering excitedly and knew she should just acknowledge making his acquaintance and move on. And yet she found it nearly impossible to stop herself from staring at his handsome face.

He touched her elbow and she saw him smile as he turned and ushered her down the short hallway and into the break room at the back of the theater. His sandy brown hair fell in a gentle wave across his forehead, trying, yet not succeeding, to hide the emerald green eyes she found so intriguing.

"Have a seat," he said, dropping his nylon camera bag on one of the long folding tables, and motioning for her to sit down. He headed to the counter and lifted the half empty pot from the coffee maker. "Where do they keep the cups?" he asked over his shoulder, his free hand pulling open cabinet doors.

Becky couldn't help but smile. He was just too darned cute. "Right here," she said, tapping the stack of plastic wrapped Styrofoam cups on the table, drawing his attention.

Bill carried the coffee pot to the table and sat down across from her, his own cheeks now a bright shade of red. "I didn't notice," he answered shyly. He poured the coffee in the cups she had set before them, and reached out.. .

Their fingers met when they both reached for the sugar container at the same time. Becky felt her heart give a sudden leap.

Their eyes met and held for a long moment, and Becky felt certain his own understand – but for some reason she didn't feel the slightest bit vulnerable. Looking into Bill's eyes somehow made her feel completely understood. As if in some way he already knew her as intimately as she knew herself. As if he somehow knew her from the inside out. She sensed her saw the pain that lingered there – hiding so closely behind her own smiling eyes, but never getting any closer to the surface than that – and yet at the same time, she felt confident he would never pry. He would always remain the perfect gentleman.

The rest of the cast members had long since disappeared into the dressing rooms, and still... Becky couldn't bring herself to get up and walk away. "Are you finished here?" she finally managed to ask, taking a quick sip of the lukewarm coffee in her flimsy cup, her eyes still glued to his. "I mean.. . do you have all the pictures you need for the article?"

Bill saw the embarrassed smile linger on her lips a moment longer than she ever anticipated it would, and he smiled in return. He knew he had taken more than enough pictures to complete his assignment. In fact, he thought, shooting a quick glance at his overstuffed camera bag, he no doubt had a sufficient number of photos to complete several such articles if the need ever came arose.

He nodded his head. "Yes, I'm afraid so. But.. ." He paused then, and Becky felt the warmth of his hand as he reached across the table and touched her arm. "I just can't seem to find the words to tell you good-bye."

Becky knew immediately what he was trying to say. She felt it, too. But once again, she felt the all too familiar tug of panic fill her heart. She smiled shyly and got to her feet, and tossing her empty cup into the waste basket, she turned back to face him. Bill had stood up, too, and Becky took a cautious step back, distancing herself even

further from this extremely handsome young man standing before her. It was just too dangerous. Memories of Brad crowded her head---and for once.. . she felt glad that they had.

Always in the past she had tried to keep them hidden, buried far beneath the surface of her everyday emotions, but not today. Today the ghostly images reminded her of the pain and heartache loving someone could bring. And that was something she knew for certain she could stand to live without for the rest of her life. Never again would she allow herself to go through all that.

She looked back up at Bill's face, this time avoiding the mesmerizing greenness of his eyes and the sexy way his hair fell across his forehead. This time she didn't want to see it. She didn't want to be faced with the temptation. She squared her shoulders and shoved her hands deep into her pants pockets all in one quick movement. "I guess you just open your mouth and say good-bye!" she answered abruptly.

She turned and exited the room, never looking back to see the shocked and hurt expression on the handsome face she left behind. She never bothered to even care that her words had cut him to the bone. Her steps carried her quickly to her own dressing room, towards safety – and far from the danger that was Bill Simmons.

\* \* \*

Becky never allowed herself to even think of Bill Simmons after that first day when he had come to the theater for his interview and pictures. She pushed all thoughts of him far from her mind. It was too easy to busy herself once again with all the normal activities that filled her life. She had the theater – and like the others in the cast, it was still an overwhelming feeling to see the plays' continued success continue to grow day by day.

And at night... Becky still went home all alone. She shared some of her free time,



two or three evenings a week after the ending curtain call – and sometimes even an occasional weekend with her dearest friends, Mandy and Joe – as she had always done in the past---but all in all, Becky was relieved that her life had so easily fallen back to the comfortable routine she had enjoyed for such a long time.

And as Becky had done, so did Bill Simmons.

For several weeks after that first dreadful meeting he tried to forget her, too. But, unlike her, it was a feat Bill Simmons knew in his heart he would never be able to accomplish completely.

He remembered seeing her for the first time at least a month before his boss, Mr. Tate, had ever given him the assignment to cover the plays' publicity story. He and a few friends from the magazine had heard of the popularity of the play, and decided on a whim to check it out.

From the very first moment when he and his friends saw Becky Carson walk out onto the brightly lit stage, Bill Simmons knew she was the girl of his dreams. Never before had he ever seen anyone quite as lovely, quite as talented, and so perfectly fitting the image of the woman he knew he wanted to someday marry.

He knew that was the reason why he couldn't get her out of his mind even now. Even to this day. He hated himself. . . he reprimanded himself daily . . . but it did no good. That first day was all it had taken. He knew now why he had acted like such a clumsy idiot when he had come for the photo shoot and interview and been introduced her. He hated to admit it, even to himself . . . but it was true. He loved her. He loved Becky Carson! It was as simple as that.

And try as he might, Bill Simmons knew he could never forget her. She might have given the impression that first day that she wasn't interested.. . but he couldn't let that stop him.

He had to find a way to win her over. He had to find a way to ‘change her name to his!’

## Ten

When the knock came on the closed door of his office at Shooting Star Magazine, Bill Simmons already knew what time it was. He didn't have to look at his watch, or even turn in his swivel chair and part the heavy drapes to stare at the digital clock on the front of the bank across the street. He already knew it was four-thirty.

For the past two weeks he had heard the same exact knock at the same exact time. It was always four-thirty on the dot – never a minute before, never a minute after.

He tried not to let it bother him at first – what did it matter, he remembered thinking, that she had sent the flowers back? That didn't necessarily mean she hated him. Did it?

And then the second week came and went, and just like the first – he was almost tempted to start setting his watch by the regularity of it – it had been the same messenger... returning not only the flowers, but this time, too, the gaily wrapped boxes of chocolates.

And so began the third week.

Bill heard the familiar sound of knuckles rapping on the closed door. His stomach gave a sudden lurch. Could he even dare to hope the knock this time might be someone else?

“Yes,” he called out, and without bothering to get to his feet, he spun his chair around and faced the door, his fingers crossed in his lap just for luck. “Come on in.”

He watched as the door swung open, and as he had feared it might be only a moment before, Bill saw the sight of the pastel wrapping paper on the flowers first. Next to come into view was the red and gold foil paper that covered the expensive

candies he had bought. He let his eyes drop to the floor, expecting to see next, the all too familiar steel-gray trouser legs that would announce the return of the smiling, ever jovial messenger.. .

But, it wasn't.

Instead of the trouser clad legs he had been expecting to see, he saw in their place the black patent-leather high heels and curvaceous legs of a woman. For the briefest of moments he thought his eyes might be playing tricks on him – he knew he couldn't be seeing right – and then, inch by inch, he let his stunned gaze float upwards.

He was on his feet in an instant, his gaping mouth struggling to find words, and his confused brain refusing to let that happen. The voice that belonged to the beautiful legs cut him short.

“Look, Mr. Simmons.. .” It was Becky Carson.

Bill felt his heart leap to his throat, and in the next instant, he felt it sink to his feet. The stern look he saw on her beautiful face as she stormed into the room told him all he needed to know. She was more than just a little bit perturbed.

“I don't know what you think you're trying to accomplish by sending me all these fancy gifts,” she said. “But I can tell you right now you're making a big mistake.”

Becky watched him, his lips opening and closing like a goldfish in a bowl, and suspected he might be searching for the words needed to defend himself, but she didn't care. She rushed into the room and tossed the packages atop his cluttered desk.

“Well, but.. .” he said, his hands busy, trying to catch the pens and pencils spilling from the overturned ‘I Heart N. Y.’ mug and scattering across the opened folders before him.

There was no stopping her fury. “Well, but nothing,” she said, “I just came by today to return these in person. And to tell you one last time.. .” She had turned then and

was almost back to the door, and Bill hadn't managed to get out more than a few words. "You're wasting your time trying to buy me like this."

"Buy you?" he said, his mouth falling open, his eyes wide in disbelief. He lunged around the corner of his desk and a second later he was standing at her side. His own eyes reflected the anger he felt boiling up from the pit of his stomach. "Is that what you think," he asked, "that I have been trying to buy you?"

He grabbed Becky by the elbow and spun her around, and it was now her turn to look shocked. She opened her mouth, but he cut her short.

"I can see where you might have gotten that impression," he said, his voice growing louder by the minute. "I don't exactly buy cheap presents.. ." He turned and waved one arm towards the boxes she had but a moment ago tossed so carelessly across his desk. "But let me assure you, young lady . . . I'm not. I only sent you the flowers and candy as a way to maybe let you know I sort of like you. But I can see you don't appreciate my efforts in the least."

Becky jerked her arm free from his grasp and squared her shoulders defiantly, her eyes big and round, yet not looking frightened. How dare he hold on to her this way? "Appreciate it?" she demanded.

Bill watched her without saying another word for a long silent moment. It had taken long enough – but finally he was starting to get the whole picture. For the past three weeks he had been sending her flowers and expensive boxes of candy hoping to somehow make her see how much he cared. She was all he ever thought of. He had to show her he loved her. But what had she done? She had only thought he was trying to buy her. How dare she?

He reached one arm around her and shoved the door closed. It was his turn to vent his anger. He grabbed her shoulders and drew her close, forcing her to face him

squarely. He wanted to kiss her so badly he could almost taste it. . . but he refrained himself. He knew it wasn't the right time. She was still, too, upset with him, and kissing her now, wouldn't be a wise thing to do.

"You know," he said, "I don't know who you think you are. I've never done anything to you. I came to the theater that day a few weeks ago to get some pictures and an interview of an up and coming actress. . . and what did I get instead?" He paused a moment, and Becky watched in silence as he went back around his desk and slumped into his chair. She saw the sadness in his emerald green eyes as he looked up and held her gaze.

"But I..." she began, but he held up one hand, silencing her.

"Instead I found this young woman there who seemed to have a gigantic chip on her shoulder or something," he said. He looked down, and for a moment Becky thought he might be ignoring her as she watched him lay the flowers atop the candy box and slide them aside. He re-stacked the folders strewn across his desk. "But I hung around after the shoot anyway, and I tried to carry on a civilized conversation with you." He looked back up and met her gaze. "I sort of hoped we might be friends. You know. . . like maybe I could get to know what makes you tick. Find out what it feels like to be a famous star. What you do for fun. You do have fun don't you?"

He watched her with a determined stare, but didn't wait for her to answer. He got up and went back to the door and opened it with a jerk. "I thought we could go a little further than just a simple interview and the usual eight by ten glossies," his angry words droned on. "But no! You seem to really like it where you are. . . hiding behind that damned protective wall of yours. So why should I care? Why should I care what happened in your past to make you so hard? What difference does it make to me if you go on running forever? Why should I give a damn?"

And as far as Becky was concerned the feeling was mutual. She stormed to the door, too, but before she could step in front of him and out into the hallway, he caught her by the arm once again. She jerked her arm viciously, “Let me go,” she demanded, trying to shake him off, but he held firm.

“Oh, you can be sure of that, my dear. I wouldn’t want to hold you for even one second longer than it takes me to tell you this one last thing.”

“What?...”

“You’ll turn around one day, little girl, and find yourself a sad and lonely old lady... but I guess that’s okay. Hell.. . it’s not like I ever asked you to marry me, you know. I only hoped we could maybe be friends. But evidently . . . I thought wrong.”

“Well, I never...”

And once gain he cut her short. “Yeah, you’re probably right, Ms. Carson.”

Becky felt his gentle shove then, her mouth hanging open, her angry words hanging on the tip of her tongue waiting to be spoken, but an instant later – she found herself staring at the closed door he had slammed in her face.

\* \* \*

Becky fought the feelings for the next several weeks, but eventually, she was forced to face the facts... She knew she was just as madly in love with Bill Simmons as he was with her.

Standing by the living room window in her apartment, a lukewarm mug of tea between her palms, she watched the crowds milling to and fro on the busy street far below. It was true, she had to admit to herself. She was indeed falling in love with Bill Simmons. Why else would it have bothered her so that he had gotten angry at her that day in his office? Why couldn’t she just forget it, push all thoughts of him from her mind and get on with her life as she had always done before? Why was he there in every

thought that crossed her mind. . . there in every dream she ever had?

It had to be 'love'.

Becky went into the kitchen, and placing her mug in the sink, turned on the faucet and absently watched as the water washed away the remains of her tea. She knew it sounded crazy.. . but what other explanation could there be? She had seen it on that very first day when Bill had come to the theater for the interview and photos---she had tried to block it from her mind---but had it worked then? No! So what made her think it might work now?

Bill Simmons was everything Bradley Ames had never been. He was courteous and sincere, easy to talk to, fun to be with. She never once felt insecure around him. He was genuine and real, and never seemed a threat to her.. . not the way Brad had always been, she remembered. And for the first time since Brad had walked out on her so long ago . . . she found herself wanting to trust again---and shocking as it was---she realized, it felt terribly good.

Thinking of that first day when they had shared a cup of coffee and a quiet moment of conversation in the break room, Becky realized that that had been what had impressed her the most. He had just turned twenty-six, and was only three years older than herself.. . and yet he seemed quite mature.

She remembered his heartbreaking story...

\* \* \*

Bill Simmons had had to grow up fast.

Both his parents had died in an auto accident just two short months after he had started third grade. He was a cute and endearing little boy, freckles lined his rosy cheeks, nine year old mischief filled his young heart, and he was always happy and carefree, but.. . he was no longer a mere baby. And no one ever wanted a boy quite so



old. Everyone always wanted a tiny baby to adopt and love.

And so... Bill Simmons, the sad little nine year old boy, grew up all alone. There were orphanages and foster homes all over the state of Ohio where he was born, but Bill had never had the chance to know the security and love of a stable home life. He left the last orphanage at age eighteen and struck out on his own. His dreams had always carried him to someplace far away – a place filled with more excitement, and hopefully more love---than Dayton, Ohio. And in the end it had been his dreams that won out. He found himself in New York City.

Life was hard, there were plenty of times he thought he might starve, but he had never given up... he was persistent. His young heart never lost hope. And finally.. . he made it.

His college days were spent in a community college taking courses in photography and article writing, while his nights were spent busing tables in more crowded restaurants and diners than he cared to remember. But in the end all the hard work paid off. Bill Simmons was now one of the most popular up and coming photographers Shooting Stars Magazine had seen in several years.

One year slipped quickly into another, Bill was always happy, he was successful, but... he still had one more dream yet to fulfill.

He hadn't found the 'right girl'.

And then...

\* \* \*

Becky felt herself smile now as she remembered the story he had shared. She looked down, the sound of the running water gurgling down the drain catching her attention, and she twisted the handle, shutting it off. As she turned to leave the room she felt her smile fade, a frown etching her forehead taking its' place.

Bill Simmons might not ever forgive her for the little stunt she had pulled in his office a few weeks ago!

And then what would she do?

She hurried back into the living room and sank down on the edge of the sofa, her eyes glued to the phone on the coffee table. She knew what she had to do. She had to call him. . . she had to get him to somehow understand why she had acted the way she had. She had to get him to forgive her and give her another chance.

She reached for the receiver.

It sounded so easy when you thought of it that way, she mused. Just pick up the phone and dial his number. Tell him you've got to see him. Tell him you're sorry.

But then what?

Her trembling hand froze in mid-air – the receiver still nestled in its' cradle, the number she had long since forged into her memory like the memorized lines of one of Sammie's plays, still waiting to be dialed. She couldn't do this, she realized. Not this way. Not over the phone. Telling someone you loved them was something that had to be done 'face to face'.

Becky withdrew her hand and watched as it lay trembling in her lap, the wild jack-hammering sound of her heart echoing in her ears. She felt like a nervous school girl all over again. But what else could she do? Did she want to run the risk of losing him forever? No!

She knew it would be hard, looking him in the eye – those gorgeous emerald green eyes she had already fallen so madly in love with – and having to admit she had made a mistake. But she knew, too, it was something she had to do. She was the one who had acted such a fool, not Bill. It was she who had been all wrong.

\* \* \*

Becky climbed nervously from the back of the cab and stood staring up through the glare of the late afternoon sun that spilled across the face of the enormous red bricked building that housed Shooting Stars Magazine. She knew it was late, almost five o'clock already, but she didn't let the lateness of the hour hinder her. She smoothed one hand over the back of her skirt, hopefully erasing any wrinkles that might have ironed themselves there during the short drive, and sucked a deep relaxing breath into her lungs. Squaring her narrow shoulders, she marched across the sidewalk and headed straight for the revolving glass doors. Hopefully, Bill would still be in his office. And, hopefully, too.. . her apology wouldn't be, too, late.

## Eleven

One month later:

Acapulco was beyond gorgeous, the gentle ocean breeze singing a welcoming melody in the palm fronds high overhead, and Mr. and Mrs. Bill and Becky Simmons had a full two weeks to themselves.

Two wonderful weeks with nothing more to do than rest and relax, and explore all of Acapulco. They could sleep until noon if they wanted, try their hand at becoming beach bums, or do anything and everything their hearts might ever desire. Fourteen glorious sun filled days, and fourteen romantic moonlight nights. They had so much to do, so much loving to catch up on. This was going to be the most glorious honeymoon anyone had ever dreamed of.

And Becky never once forgot to count her blessings. If she lived to be a hundred she knew she would never forget the relief she had felt when she stepped into Bill's office to apologize on that day just over a month ago. . . and found Bill waiting for her. With opened arms he had welcomed her into his embrace, but even more important . . . Becky found his heart opened to her as well. She knew she would forever be grateful.

\* \* \*

By the time their first Sunday in Acapulco rolled around Becky and Bill were already starting to look and feel like native islanders.

Bill sighed and looked down at his young bride as she lay by his side on the warm sandy beach, the early morning sun rising higher and higher in its relentless journey to cross the cloudless, picture-perfect sky. Its warming rays feeling good as they gently caressed their exposed skin, leaving behind the evidence of the golden tan that,

in only two short days, was inching across their waiting flesh.

A soft moan slipped past Bill's lips as he rolled over and propped himself up on one elbow to eye Becky's sexy, bikini-clad body through his mirrored sun glasses. He stared at her for a long moment. Was she asleep? He couldn't be sure. To his untrained eye, she looked peaceful and relaxed, lying on her stomach, her arms folded beneath her head, her unshielded eyes closed against the brightness of the sun's fiery rays. Even her breathing sounded deep and relaxed.

Bill eased himself into a sitting position and turned his gaze to the frothy waves rushing to shore a short distance away. He felt a contented smile playing across his lips. He slid his fingers idly through the warm sand between his and Becky's wide multi-colored beach towels. He knew they had been here for quite a long while already, and even though he really hated to disturb her... he couldn't help it. He was getting bored. The ocean looked so enticing, and he desperately wanted to go for a swim.

His first impulse was to resist the urge – she might truly be sleeping and resent his intrusion – but the temptation to pester her was stronger than he could bear. “Honey,” he whispered, leaning close to her ear. “Are you sleeping?”

But Becky didn't move... her only response, if you could call it that, was a soft, almost imperceptible moan. And still, she didn't appear to move. She felt far too comfortable to make any more of an effort at answering him.

Bill had to hold his breath to keep from laughing out loud. This was even more fun than he had anticipated. He wanted to play. Lifting a small handful of sand, he eased his hand closer to his young bride---feeling like a mischievous little boy as he did it--- and watched the sand trickle through his parted fingers. The first few grains that touched her seemed to melt instantly into the shimmering suntan oil covering her back. She didn't move... and he didn't stop. He watched as the sand began to pile up, forming

what looked like a mini sand dune on her lower spine. “But, Becky,” he said, his voice louder now, “I forgot to tell you something.” He waited.

He knew in the next instant that if she had indeed been sleeping a moment before... she certainly wasn't now.

Her response was instantaneous.

She rolled over, and with a sudden jerk of her hand, she was slapping his arm away. She blinked her unshielded eyes rapidly as the harsh glare of daylight rushed to greet her. “Bill,” she gasped, “that feels terrible. How do you expect me to get an even tan with you pouring sand all over me?”

She tried to sound upset, but Bill knew better. He knew already the true sound of her anger coming through – like the day she had returned his flowers and candy. But today he knew she was only teasing. He saw almost immediately that she couldn't stop the playful smile that sprang to her lips, betraying her angry words.

She sat up then, watching him through squinted eyes, as she struggled to reach behind her back to try and wipe the gritty sand from her oily skin. “Okay, smarty pants,” she said, “I'm up now. And I'm all ears... What did you forget to tell me?”

Bill's grin widened as he felt his playfulness urging him even further. And instead of answering her verbally, he reached out and grabbed the edge of her fluffy beach towel, and with one quick movement he gave it a mighty tug. The shocked look on her face was priceless.

She tumbled backwards, her arms waving in frantic circles trying to prevent it from happening... but unable to stop it, she went flying off the towel. Bill laughed even harder when he saw her land, spread-eagle, in the sun baked sand.

The happy sound of Bill's laughter hung in the gentle ocean breeze as he sprang to his feet and made a hasty departure for the nearby ocean. “Catch me if you can,

slowpoke,” he yelled to her over his shoulder.

“Stop,” she shrieked.

Bill only ran faster as his young bride struggled to regain her balance and get to her feet. Less than a minute later she was up and off, chasing after him as fast as her long legs would carry her.

She didn't catch up to him until they were both waist deep in the rolling waves. They held tightly to each other, gasping for breath, the sound of their laughter melting into silence, as he looked down into her beautiful face and pressed a hungry kiss to her parted lips.

He was still grinning when he pulled back and finally admitted. “I really didn't want to wake you,” he said, “but I couldn't help it. I only wanted to ask you to go for a quick swim.” He laughed again, his green eyes sparkling and filled with love. “But since you're already in the water... I guess I don't have to ask anymore.” With that, he lunged forward, carrying her with him, and dunked her beneath the warm turbulent waves.

She had already sensed his next move, and a moment before the salty water closed over her face, she sucked in a deep breath of air. She wiggled and squirmed, finally pulling herself free from his powerful grasp, and forced herself even further below the waters' surface. He seemed to have forgotten she had grown up romping and playing in ocean like this. She had him now! With one fluid movement, driven by some mischievous impulse all her own, she grabbed the waist of his swimming trunks with her thumbs and swam farther downward, dragging them to his knees.

She felt the soft sandy floor of the ocean beneath her feet and kicked off, swimming away as fast as she could under water. Not surfacing until she felt sure she was at least ten yards nearer the beach. She pulled herself up, gasping for air, and shook

her head vigorously, sending her dripping hair across her shoulders like a mighty blond wave. Becky burst out laughing. Bill looked so funny, thrashing about, trying to keep his balance and pull his trunks up at the same time.

Becky cupped her hands to her lips and shouted, “I don’t think I heard you, sweetheart. Did you say you wanted to go swimming?”

Finally managing to get his wet trunks back into place, Bill spun around, his eyes wide and searching. He heard her taunting words as they floated across the waves and met his ears. Becky saw him glaring in her direction. His face was solemn now, the happy grin having long since faded away, and had she not known him better... she would have thought he was really mad at her.

She needed nothing more than the look she saw on his face to persuade her to flee for her life. She had pissed him off. She slowly began to back farther away. The beach was drawing nearer – just a few more steps and she would be free. “Now, Bill,” she pleaded, holding her hands out as if trying to soothe his anger. “Remember, you’re the one who started it. You’re the one who wanted to play.”

For a moment he looked to her as if he might have gone mad. Never before had she ever seen such a threatening stare come from his gorgeous green eyes. Did he plan on killing her? Were the angry waves of the ocean to become her grave? She continued moving backwards, her eyes glued to the shortening distance between them. “Honey,” she said, her voice faltering. “Bill... please. . .”

As each step he took brought him closer, she felt her fear growing even more intense. “Come on honey,” she begged. “Don’t look so angry. I was only playing.” She shot a quick glance over her shoulder. The beach still looked so far away. How would she ever make it?

“I know you were only playing, sweetheart,” he said. He was close enough now



for her to see his right eyebrow as it rose up at a sharp angle, causing his handsome face to look even more sinister. “Now it’s my turn to play.”

“But, Bill,” she begged again. “I’m sorry.” Her own voice sounded weak and was barely louder than a groan, but she felt, too, afraid to stop pleading. “You aren’t going to dunk me again are you?”

Inch by inch she edged closer towards the safety of the nearing beach. But... he kept coming, the gap between them growing smaller with every giant step he took. If only she could keep away for a few more minutes. And then finally, after taking only two or three more backward steps, she turned and made a hasty attempt at escape. She took off like a bullet leaving the barrel of a gun as she thrashed through the knee deep waves. She didn’t take the time to look back to see how close he was getting to catching up. All she could think of now was securing her safety on the nearby shore.

He was close enough to hear her gasping for breath when he lunged forward, tackling her by the knees. They tumbled together, Bill falling on top of her – barely managing to catch himself on his elbows to prevent crushing her – as they met the waters’ edge. The sound of his laughter quickly dispelling all feelings of dread that had filled her only moments ago.

They laughed and held tightly to each other as they rolled in the sand until they were both breathless, the warm waves lapping their feet and ankles. Bill looked down into her face. “I love you, sweetheart,” he said.

“Oh you do, do you?” she asked, her grin playful.

Bill shook his head vigorously, like a dog shaking water from his coat, and laughed as he watched Becky squirming, trying to avoid the salty droplets falling on her nose and lips. “Yes I do,” he laughed. “And what are you going to do about it?”

“Well...” she began slowly. Her tongue darted out, licking the salt from her lips.

“I guess I’ll just have to love you back.”

She watched him wrinkle his nose at her. “You guess you’ll have to, huh?” he asked, his eyes sparkling and clear, filled with love. “It sounds to me like you’re asking for another dunking.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

He grabbed her then, pulling her even tighter into his embrace, and planted a quick kiss on the tip of her upturned nose. And then she heard his whispered words.

“No, I wouldn’t dare...” he said. “At least not for the moment. Right now I’m too tired. But, there’s always tomorrow.”

Bill tickled her ear with the damp strands of her hair he held between his fingers. “So,” he added with a contented sigh, “what do you think we ought to do tonight?”

Becky remained still, lost in thought and enjoying for the moment the closeness of his touch, the warmth of his body pressing close. “I don’t know,” she mused. “How does a picnic sound?”

“A picnic?”

“Yeah,” she answered, pulling herself free from his grasp and sitting up. Tucking her damp hair behind her ears, she turned and pointed upwards, indicating he look, too, at the one lone seagull circling high above them in its persistent search for food. “We could have a romantic moonlit picnic right here on the beach, and we could even invite our hungry friend up there if we wanted to.”

He liked the idea almost immediately – except for the part where she wanted to invite anyone else to join them. He sat up, too, and reached for her left hand. He smiled. The afternoon sun sparkled off the gold of her wedding band. “Really?” he asked in disbelief. “A picnic? Here on the beach?”

“Sure, why not?” she answered, her eyes reflecting the love that filled her heart

and was far too intense to be contained only there. It had to show. “We could get all the food and stuff in town, and bring along a dry blanket, and build a fire, and...”

Bill didn’t wait to hear the further mapped out details she might have in mind. He silenced her with a kiss. “You’ve got yourself a deal,” he said. “As long as we don’t bring along any hungry buzzards. Now, come on,” he helped her to her feet, “let’s go and get cleaned up.”

\* \* \*

Becky spread the blanket on the still warm, moonlit sand close to a large piece of driftwood. She busied herself with unloading the picnic basket while Bill gathered wood for a fire. The beach was deserted. The moon nearly full. It was the perfect night for a romantic picnic.

The ocean seemed alive as Becky and Bill snuggled even closer, resting their backs against the driftwood, and listened to the steady, thrusting rhythm of the waves rushing to meet the sandy shore in the darkness. “You look absolutely gorgeous tonight,” Bill said.

She smiled at the compliment, glad she had chosen to wear her favorite green bikini with only a light and airy poncho cover-up over it. “Well, thank you,” she said, passing him his glass of wine she had poured into one of the plastic glasses they had brought from the hotel room. “I’m certainly glad you think so.”

It was all Bill could do to keep from attacking her on the spot. He had never seen her look quite as lovely. He had never before felt as turned on. Her hair hung loose around her shoulders, and he saw the reflection of the fire sparkling in her blue eyes. “Are you glad we came?” he asked, accepting the wine with one hand, and pulling her back into his hungry embrace against the driftwood.

“Glad?” Eagerness echoed in her voice. “You’ve got to be kidding. I’m ecstatic.”

Becky sat her wine down, and twisted around, tucking her knees beneath her. Bill felt a smile tug his lips upwards. She was a vision of loveliness, the shimmering moonlight bathing her with its gentle touch as they sat alone in the solitude of their retreat.

“This has got to be the most glorious honeymoon anyone could ever ask for,” she said, “and I think you just might be the most wonderful husband in all the world for thinking of it.”

Bill leaned forward, seeing her obvious happiness reflected in her smile, and he smiled, too, as he pulled her back into his open arms. Dinner was long since over, love was definitely in the air, and her beauty beckoned. He couldn't resist a moment longer. He had to have her now.

He kissed her, softly at first, and then with even more eagerness.

Becky felt his hands as they slipped beneath the light cover-up she wore and she smiled. Next she felt the gentle tug against the strings that held the whisper-thin bikini top in place. For the briefest of seconds, she felt the gentle caress of the ocean breeze as it filtered through the lacy holes of her poncho top, and then almost instantly in its place she felt the warmth of Bill's strong hands on her naked breasts. She moaned in the darkness.

He pulled her down with him as he stretched out on the rumpled blanket that was their bed. He felt her yearning body pressing even closer as his fingers tugged and pulled, removing the few remaining pieces of the skimpy bikini and poncho that covered her loveliness.

Afterwards... they lay panting. Becky couldn't move. Her limp body collapsed on top of his. He reached out and pushed the sweat dampened hair from her neck, and pressed a kiss to her lips. “You're incredible,” he said, his voice hushed and still, filled

with the passion that had but a moment ago carried him away.

“I’m so happy, Bill.” Becky pushed herself up on her elbows and stared down into his eyes. Her breathing hadn’t yet returned to normal, and if the light that remained from their waning campfire, or even the glimmer of the moon that bathed their nakedness had been brighter, she knew he might have seen the blush that clung to her cheeks. But she didn’t try to hide it. She was much, too, in love.

“Is any of this real?” she asked, “or are we only caught up in a fantastic dream?”

He smiled then, seeing her flushed cheeks for the first time, and knowing, too, that his were just as red. Their lovemaking had been incredible. “Sweetheart,” he said, “you’re so damned cute.” He gripped her buttocks even tighter, feeling the softness of the untanned flesh he knew was hidden there beneath his grasp. “How about a pinch just to prove it’s all real?”

She had been prepared to hear his words of love too... but for the moment his teasing caught her off guard. She heard herself gasp as she pushed away and quickly got to her feet. “Don’t you even think about it,” she said, smiling and covering her naked butt with her hands.

And then she was gone.

Both Bill and Becky splashed and swam and played in the warm surf for what seemed like hours. And then, finally exhausted, they walked arm in arm back to the blanket and the dying glow of the fire. He handed Becky a dry towel as they sat down, and poured the last of the wine into their plastic glasses.

“Here,” he offered, smiling as he watched her towel the salty water from her naked body. “You look like you’re cold.”

Becky finished drying off and lay down. “No,” she answered, taking a sip from her glass. “I’m not cold as long as you’re here with me.”

Bill smiled and took his place beside her on the rumpled blanket they had such a short time ago used for their lovemaking. He eased her head over onto his shoulder and together they lay, sipping the last of their wine and smiling up at the millions of stars dancing in the heavens above.

“It’s so wonderful here,” she whispered, “I just wish we never had to go home.”

“Me, too.”

Bill heard the even steady rhythm of Becky’s quiet breathing and knew that she was no longer enjoying the view in the darkened skies. She was fast asleep. He reached for the edge of the blanket and pulled it closer, covering their nakedness. He kissed the top of her damp head and hugged her tighter as he, too, slowly drifted off into a peaceful slumber.

\* \* \*

The rest of their honeymoon was just as wonderful as the beginning had been. Becky and Bill spent their days exploring the city, the island... and their nights exploring each other.

The quiet dinners, dancing sometimes until dawn, the many breakfasts in bed, and all the romantic nights spent on the beach did wonders for the both of them. By the time they returned to New York they looked like, and felt like, too, native islanders... and were ready to settle down to the everyday routine of living life in the big city.

And to being man and wife

## Twelve

The rays of the early morning sun filtered through the parted drapes and fell in cheerful patterns across the beige shag carpet. Without moving, Becky opened her eyes and smiled. She had never felt happier in all her life. The past three years – since she and Mandy had arrived in New York – had proved to be very rewarding. They had both found happiness.

Becky stretched lazily and felt her smile growing even wider. It was still early, she mused, far too early to be getting up on a lazy Saturday morning, but... if she was very quiet and didn't shake the bed too much . . . it was always such fun to awaken Bill with gentle, tickling kisses, and mischievous straying fingers.

Her hand slithered under the covers seeking the warmth of his body, and finding instead... an empty spot. Empty. She groaned aloud.

Bill had obviously snuck out of bed earlier and left her sleeping. She slung the covers back, her smile returning. It looked like she would have to go into the kitchen and chase him down. He was probably up to his elbows in the morning paper and well on his way to polishing off his second pot of coffee by now.

Becky slipped her robe on, covering her nakedness, and couldn't help but laugh as she stepped around the foot of the bed. 'How could anyone, anyone normal, that is', she thought, shaking her head and belting her robe, 'get up so early on a Saturday morning?'

The soft carpet ticked her bare feet as she made her way down the hall. She paused and brushed her loose hair over her shoulder, the delicious aroma of freshly brewed coffee rushing to greet her as she neared the kitchen doorway. She turned the

corner, stepping into the sun filled room, her mouth open and ready to greet her handsome husband with a cheery good-morning... and then she froze. For a quick moment she felt her heart gave a sudden jerk and leap to her throat, her happy smile fading instantly into a deep and worried frown. The kitchen was empty.

Where was Bill? It wasn't like him to leave the apartment without letting her know. Becky felt a bitter taste fill her mouth, and for a second she feared she might get sick. Panic gripped her heart. Something was dreadfully wrong. And then she remembered... 'How could she ever forget?' Her old fears, never far from the hidden recesses of her heart, came rushing back, sweeping over her like an angry ocean wave and dragging her down. It felt as if she were suddenly drowning. The memories and fears sucked and pulled the very air from her lungs. 'Bill was gone . . . just like Brad. Oh, God . . . Bill was gone, too!'

Becky crossed the room, her legs feeling as if they were made of rubber, and barely made it to the table before she slumped into the nearest chair. A strangled groan slipped from her lips. She felt the hot burning tears filling her eyes, but didn't try to stop them. Even if she had tried, she knew they would only keep coming. She stared around the empty room with unseeing eyes.

"What was happening?" She couldn't think straight. Slumping forward and resting her head between her palms, she pressed her trembling fingers to her temples. Her brain refused to work. The questions kept playing in her head, "Where was Bill? And why had he left her, too?"

Time seemed to stand still. The distant sound of the clock ticking from the other side of the room echoing loudly in her ears. She wanted to look, she should know the time, but she couldn't make herself move. She felt paralyzed. Her watery eyes stared blindly at the glare of sunshine reflecting off the highly polished linoleum tiles at her



feet. Long moments passed before she summoned the strength to finally pull her gaze from the floor and look up and across the table.

She feared her eyes might be playing tricks on her. She blinked hard, trying to force the tears away. ‘What was that?’ She couldn’t be sure. She shook her head, willing herself to come to her senses. She looked again.

Sucking a jagged gulp of air into her heaving lungs and staring for what seemed like another eternity, she focused on the folded note leaning against the sugar bowl in the center of the table. And still, she felt frozen. She felt too afraid to reach out and try to pick it up. It might not be real. It might disappear before her eyes. Confusion – that spooky feeling of not being certain of even one thing in your life, the feeling that had occupied her brain for most of the morning so far – filled her head all over again. And then, finally, she reached out a trembling hand.

She heard the crinkle of the paper beneath the weight of her hand. Her heart skipped a beat. The note was real, she hadn’t imagined it after all, and as she drew it closer and scanned the top of it with tear filled eyes, she realized it was from Bill. Her aching heart felt strangled. Becky shuddered, feeling her old, familiar fears rearing up even larger within her.

Her frightened mind raced to the night before. Had she and Bill had a fight? She tried to remember. No... there hadn’t been even as much as a cross word spoken between them. She squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed her temples again. ‘If there hadn’t been an argument, then why did she feel so empty and cold inside?’ She wanted to read the note---she had to read it to make herself understand what was happening---but she found it impossible. Fear stopped her . . . freezing her movements as it had done a moment before, and she felt like screaming. She rocked back and forth in her chair. ‘If only she could think.’ She racked her brain. ‘She had to remember.’

And then slowly, one by one, the faint shadowy memories of the previous night seeped back into her head. ‘She had had one of the ugly nightmares again.’ Of course... how could she have let herself forget so quickly? She felt herself shudder. Like a menacing ghost, hell-bent on torturing her forever, her nightmares about Brad continued to haunt her.

The dreams were always so terrible. So many hurtful words were spoken. The accusations so cruel. And after that... there was always the horrible emptiness. Brad was gone . . . for good this time, and he was never coming back. They would never be together again . . . be happy. So what was left? Nothing. Becky always found herself all alone . . . and dying inside. She had nowhere to go. She had no one.

One by one, the hot burning tears slipped slowly down her cheeks and began falling on the crumpled note she clung to in her lap. Becky shook her head sadly. The dream was from so long ago. It wasn’t real anymore. It wasn’t happening in her life now. And thankfully... it wasn’t Bill who was gone. It scared her that she had to keep reminding herself of that fact, but . . . it was true. Bill was still here with her. And as he had told her so often . . . he always would be. It was only Brad who was gone now.

Shaking her head, forcing the gloomy thoughts away, Becky reached for a napkin and blew her nose. She glanced down at Bill’s note and felt her smile return. Oh, Bill... such a dear and wonderful man. Nothing like Brad at all. He would never hurt her, she knew that, he loved her too much. He showered her with love in every possible way. She was truly thankful they had met and married when they had. And she was equally thankful that all that remained from her painful past with Brad were the stupid nightmares. She knew that they, too, would someday stop haunting her. With someone as loving as Bill in her life . . . she felt sure of it.

Becky sucked in a breath of cleansing air, and squeezing her eyes shut once

again, she prayed quietly in the silent room. “Oh please, God... someday please.”

‘Dear Becky,’ the note began, ‘You were sleeping so peacefully this morning when I left that I didn’t have the heart to wake you. You had a pretty restless night---a nightmare I guess---so I opted to let you sleep in. Please forgive me. Anyway... Hi there, sweetheart. I had to fly down to Houston to get those pictures for the new layout I’m working on. Remember . . . we talked about it on Thursday night? Take care of yourself while I’m gone, and I’ll see you in the morning. Love always, Bill.’

The tears that filled her eyes now were tears of thankfulness. She could never have asked for a more loving husband. She wiped her eyes on the dampened napkin and placed Bill’s note back on the table. She pushed herself to her feet and crossed the room. Pouring herself a cup coffee and stepping from the empty room, she felt her smile returning... ‘she could hardly wait until tomorrow.’

\* \* \*

The alarm went off at seven sharp and Becky silenced it with smile on her face. Not allowing herself the luxury of being lazy this morning, she sprang from the bed and made a mad dash for the kitchen. By the time the coffee was finished brewing she would be out of the shower, and ready to inhale her first cup while she dressed for her and Bill’s happy reunion. She could hardly wait.

As she climbed from the cab Becky shot a quick glance at her watch. Barely eight-fifteen. She heard herself laugh out loud as she crossed the sidewalk and joined the busy crowd entering the airport. You would have thought Bill had been gone for several weeks instead of just overnight, but she couldn’t help it... she was excited. This was the first time they had been apart since their wedding day.

She found the arrival and departure board, announcing the times of the various flights comings and goings, and again she had to laugh. She was plenty early. “Oh

well,” she mumbled to herself. And looking around, she went in search of a cafe or coffee shop. “Bill always said I was never any good in the morning until after my second cup.”

She froze in her tracks and clamped one hand over her mouth. She looked around nervously, hoping no one had been near enough to hear her talking to herself – but thankfully – she stood apart from the milling crowd in the busy airport. She let out an almost silent whistle of relief. And then, trying to look as normal as anyone else, she quickly adjusted the strap of her purse on her shoulder, held her head high, and with a broad smile, hurried towards the nearest coffee shop.

Time seemed to stand still as Becky sipped her coffee and stared anxiously at the bold black hands that didn’t seem to move on the clock high above the counter. If only they would move a little faster. She sighed. Her fingers drummed quietly against the sides of the over-sized mug on the table before her, and her thoughts drifted far from where she sat.

She hoped Bill had done well on his assignment, she knew he probably had, but just in case... she prayed anyway. It wouldn’t do any harm. He was up for a promotion. She knew his boss, Mr. Tate, had been praising his work over and over again for many years... and all that remained now for him to make his final decision was this huge shoot Bill had been assigned to do in Houston. Becky smiled at the thought. Bill could do it . . . if anyone could---Bill could.

A cheerful looking waitress stepped to the table and refilled Becky’s cup even before she had the chance to protest. She had been sitting here for the longest time already, waiting patiently for the coffee to cool enough for her to dare finish it. “You having breakfast this morning?” the waitress asked.

Startled at the interruption, Becky glanced up and shook her head. “No,” she

answered, and instantly becoming aware of the shocked expression that clung to her face, she forced a smile to her lips. “I think I will pass today. I just have time for coffee.” She twisted in her seat, trying to look over the waitress’ shoulder to check the time yet again. It was nearly eight-forty-five. Bill’s plane would be landing in less than fifteen minutes.

The waitress looked bored, and shrugged her shoulders as she placed Becky’s ticket on the table and walked away. This wasn’t the first time she had served someone like Becky. She was accustomed to the usual airport crowd – everyone was always in such a hurry, most times darting off without ever ordering anything to eat. It didn’t bother her that most of her shift consisted of nothing more than coffee drinkers.

Becky took one last sip from her mug and jumped to her feet, anticipation urging her forward. She grabbed her purse, dropped a spare fifty cents on the table for a tip, and hurried to pay her ticket. Less than a minute later she rushed from the crowded restaurant, walking past the man’s table without really seeing him – or even pausing for a moment to think she might know him.

But... Bradley Ames – sitting at a table near the door, and knowing her very well – ducked his head behind a flimsy menu and smiled to himself. He had certainly seen her.

## Thirteen

Becky waited nervously, her head bobbing from side to side and barely keeping her balance as she teetered on tiptoe. It was hard to see over and around the heads and shoulders of the departing passengers making their way down the short corridor. Where were they all coming from? Where was Bill? It seemed to take an eternity, but finally, he was there, sweeping her off her feet and spinning her in circles. She no longer saw any of the other departing passengers, she no longer saw anything else in all the airport. She only had eyes for Bill. He was home at last.

As soon as they stepped into the apartment, Bill tossed his overnight bag on the sofa and turned to face Becky, his smile hungry. “Come here,” he breathed, pulling her into his waiting arms. She felt his fingers slipping the silk scarf from her ponytail as she pressed her lips to his.

They spent the remainder of the morning in bed, laughing and talking, and of course... making love. It was well after two when they finally dragged themselves from the rumpled bed and made their way to the kitchen to fix a late lunch.

Becky smiled, listening to the excitement in Bill’s voice, as he filled her in on his trip to Houston. “You know, sweetheart,” he said, “I bet I beat Marty Johnson out of that promotion Mr. Tate has been promising. Marty is the only real competition I had to worry about, but I think I might have just passed him over. Wait till you see the shots I got, and the interview.” Bill chuckled out loud. “That interview was something else. It was awesome.”

Becky listened intently, she could see the smile in his voice even without turning to face him. She finished stirring sugar into the freshly brewed pitcher of tea and

reached for the pretzels and chips from the cupboard above the stove. She turned and smiled, crossing her arms over her chest and shaking her head as she stared at the table. All she could see of Bill was his butt, as he had his head and shoulders buried in the fridge. It looked as if he had emptied it.

“What in the world are you doing?” she asked. The table was covered with stacks of cold cuts, three different kinds of cheeses, pickles and onions, and still, Bill was hunting for more.

“I’m starved.” His words drifted up to meet her ears. She leaned her hip against the counter and smiled. Bill extracted himself from the near empty fridge and turned to face her, a questioning look on his handsome face. “I don’t know about you, but I worked up quite an appetite this morning.”

He heard the gentle ring of her laughter as he struggled to make room on the already, too crowded table. “You’ve got to be kidding,” she teased, shaking her head at him and tucking her straying blond mane behind her ears. He looked so cute, she thought, the way he must have looked when he was a little boy. His hair spilling across his forehead, a childish grin tugging at his lips.

“What?” he asked with a shrug.

“Oh,” Becky said, rushing to his side, and catching the head of lettuce midair as it toppled off the tables’ edge. “There’s no way we could possibly eat all this food.”

Plucking the rescued lettuce from her hand, he planted a quick kiss to the tip of her nose. “Oh, yeah,” he grinned. “You just stand back and watch.”

Pulling a picnic basket from the pantry closet, and filling it with the assorted food from the table, they stepped into the living room. Becky spread a soft blanket on the floor while Bill went to the stereo. The tender strains of guitars filled the air as they settled down to enjoy their indoor picnic. They couldn’t go outdoors to have it. Neither

of them had bothered to get re-dressed after their wonderful morning spent in bed.

Becky smiled as Bill held out a thin slice of apple. He watched her lift it to her lips and take a small bite. His heart soared looking at her loveliness. Her long blond hair, spilling across one bare shoulder, almost covering one entire breast. The way her pouty lips moved as she chewed. They had been out of bed for less than an hour, and still, he felt the familiar tingle in his groin. He wouldn't have to be asked twice to drag her back to the bedroom.

“What?” she asked. “You seem to be lost in thought. What’s up?”

“Well...” he answered slowly, deliberately, unsure if he should tell her the truth. He knew she wouldn't object to him carrying her back to bed. He tilted his head to one side and finished his sentence with a slow smile. “I was thinking of molesting your beautiful body one more time.”

“You're a beast.” Her eyes sparkled as she teased and Bill knew he couldn't possibly love her any more than he did at this very second. “But...” She reached out to ruffle his wavy hair. “I guess I'll just have to learn to put up with you.”

Bill sat up straighter, and pushing his lower lip out in a pretend pout, he grabbed another sandwich. “Well,” he said, “if that's the way you feel... I guess I'll have to settle for mere food to satisfy my appetite.”

Becky giggled and threw an olive at him. She turned and pulled a large pillow from behind her and into her lap, covering her nakedness. She heard Bill sigh.

“What were you saying when we were still in the kitchen?” she asked. “Were you talking about the promotion?”

Bill swallowed the last of his sandwich and reached for his tea glass. “Thanks,” he said, accepting the napkin she offered. “Yeah... Mr. Tate has been telling everyone we should all be on our toes. He's looking for someone to step into the office next to



his.” His eyes sparkled as he talked and Becky felt her heart swell with pride. She leaned back against the edge of the sofa and pulled his hand into her own.

“It seems that old man Tate is wanting to start taking more time off, and he needs someone...” Bill paused and squeezed her fingers tighter. “Someone good that is... to be in charge while he’s gone.”

“Do you think he might be getting ready to retire?”

The evening sun began setting, the last of its’ golden rays slipping quickly back across the floor and towards the window from where it came. Bill leaned towards the end table behind them and reached up with one hand, switching the lamp on. Almost instantly the deepening shadows rushed back to the farthest corners of the room and hid there. “I don’t want to speak out of turn,” he went on, his smile warm as he turned to face her again. “But it certainly looks like he is.”

He leaned down and touched her cheek with a gentle kiss. She smiled contentedly. He felt confident that he would be the one to take his boss’ place. And making it even more worthwhile... more than the promotion in itself, and even more important than becoming second in charge at Shooting Stars Magazine, maybe he and Becky could concentrate on having the baby they had both wanted for such a long time.

## Fourteen

By ten o'clock the next morning Becky had finished cleaning the entire apartment, and was busy now putting away the last load of clean laundry she had pulled from the dryer. The theater group was on summer hiatus and it felt good to be off until the first week of August. It was fun sometimes not to have anything more to do than the normal everyday household chores that other married women did every day. They might take it for granted... but she knew she never would. She was doing her part.

She knew Bill wanted nothing more in all the world than for her to be a contented housewife, and mother. She could manage the first part, stay at home on vacations and holidays... but for the rest of his expectations---how could she do that? Bill would just have to give her a little more time. Having a family was a serious step, and for now . . . she wasn't sure she was ready yet.

A gentle smile tugged at the corners of her lips as she opened Bill's top drawer and placed his shirts there, in neat orderly rows as he had been taught to do. The undershirts first, and then the socks and underwear. How often had she heard the recited instruction from her mom's own lips?

Her thoughts turned to Mandy. How many times had she heard Mandy teasing her, 'You sound just like I used to when we were still in college... All I ever wanted was to get married and settle down, and now ... look at you?'

But Becky never really had a doubt. Not really. She knew that someday, when she and Bill finally decided to settle down and have their first child, she would be home like this every day. But for now, she couldn't help but feel glad that things were the way they were. She and Bill had decided to wait a little longer before having children. Her career

was still too important to her. And thankfully, Bill had known that. Besides... she smiled as she thought to that distant day in the future... they would have plenty of time for having babies later.

She hummed a happy tune as she went into the kitchen, dressed in a comfortable peach colored sundress, and ready to finish her weekly chore of shopping for groceries. Her list was growing even longer. Shutting the refrigerator door with a nudge of her hip, she added pickles and relish to the bottom of the page, and went in search of her purse. All that remained of her chores for the day was going to the market to restore their diminished food supply. And once again she had to laugh as she remembered Bill's huge appetite from the day before. She had thoroughly enjoyed their wonderful day together... and apparently he had, too.

As she reached the front door she gasped in surprise, hearing the doorbell ring as soon as her hand touched the knob. She didn't want to be rude, but she couldn't help but pray that the visitor wouldn't be a long winded salesman trying to sell her something she knew she wouldn't need nor want. It was always such a pain trying to tell them no – and still be polite while doing so. She sighed and pulled the door open.

Her smile froze on her lips.

She had been prepared to open her mouth and say 'no thank you'. Surely, hopefully she could turn him away without him being too disappointed. But even before she had a moment to open her mouth and utter the words, she froze in her tracks.

She didn't believe her eyes. She hadn't seen him in so many years, and yet here he stood now smiling down at her with the same lopsided grin she was so accustomed to seeing on his handsome face. How could she ever forget it? He had used it on her many times before.

It was Bradley Ames!

“Well hello there, Becky...” he said, his voice haunting, his smile unwavering.

Becky felt her mouth fall open. How could this be happening? Her heart gave a sudden jolt, and for a moment she feared she might faint. She couldn’t wrap her mind around it.

Surely she must be seeing things!

She silently hoped and prayed she was... but in the fraction of a second it took her eyes to focus on him standing before her, her heart screamed she wasn’t. It was all too real. Brad was truly here – not a figment of her imagination – and try as hard as she might, she knew she couldn’t just wish him away.

“Are you going to stand there with your mouth open all day?” He had known his visit would surprise her, but he never dreamed she would react this way.

Becky remained frozen to the spot, the door open wide, and her mouth still gaping. Her brain refusing to find words. Long moments passed in silence.

Finally finding her voice, and pushing the words past the lump in her throat, she snarled, “Get out of here... you lousy, good for nothing...” Her words trailed off. It was hard to think of anything bad enough to call him. She clutched her breast, still feeling faint, and leaned against the door jamb for support.

It was now Brad’s turn to look shocked. “But, Becky...”

“But, Becky hell...” she cut him short, her words no longer locked within her dazed brain. She didn’t want to hear any of his lame excuses. It was too late for that. She shook her head, her heart jack-hammering beneath her ribs. “I don’t know why you’re here, Brad. And I really don’t give a damn either.”

Brad chuckled. “But, my dear,” he added. “You sound so bitter. What seems to be the problem?”

Problem? How dare he? He had to be aware of all he had done to her. All he had

put her through. What she was still going through in her nightmares every night. How could he come here this way?

She swallowed hard trying to regain her composure. “I don’t know why you’re here... you have no right to be. I certainly don’t want you here. I never want to see you again. Why don’t you just leave?”

But Brad couldn’t understand. And even more important, he didn’t want to. How could she do this to him? Her words made no sense. And then, even though he didn’t want to feel it, he felt his own anger rising as he listened to her bitterness. He had come so damned far... and only wanted her to hear his side of it, hear his explanations. And here she was, standing but a few short inches in front of him, and what was she doing? She was trying to shut him out. This was more than he had been prepared for.

He glared at her, and with a firm shove, he pushed the door open further and stepped inside. This just wasn’t right. She should never be acting this way. He didn’t like her attitude even a little bit. If only he could get her to shut up. She was always talking. He had a good reason, a good explanation. If only she would listen... if only she would understand.

Becky stumbled backwards as he came through the door, but he didn’t seem to notice or even care. He brushed past her and stood in the foyer. He smiled down at her frightened face, and she couldn’t help it – she felt terrified.

He was close enough for Becky to feel the warmth of his breath on her face. She knew she should be stronger... but she wasn’t. She felt her knees grow weak, and in desperation she reached out blindly and caught his arm for support.

Time seemed to stand still. Becky heard the sounds of their breathing. It was the only sound in the quiet hallway. Strange and unfamiliar feelings swept over her like a raging tidal wave. She felt torn. One part of her yearned to have his arms around her

again – to make everything all right again, to make up for all the pain he had caused her so long ago. She only wanted to love him.

And then, in an instant, another part of her wanted to hurt him as deeply as he had hurt her. She wanted him to feel the pain she had lived with all these years. None of this was fair. He had hurt her so much. The pain was all too real. . . the scars far too deep.

Long moments passed before Becky came to her senses. She remembered she was still holding her purse, and realizing it was more than a purse---she could use it as a weapon---she lashed out at him. The part of her that he had damaged so long ago took over. She didn't care anymore. He had never cared. . . so why should she? It was too late. All that was behind her now. She only wanted him gone. She didn't want to feel the pain any longer. It was something she had lived with for far too long.

Becky saw him dodge her attack through angry eyes. Her purse missing its target, falling short from hitting his face by mere inches. And then they both heard the animal-like scream that hurled itself from her throat. It seemed as if she had suddenly gone mad.

The unexpected outrage caught Brad by surprise. He watched her, his eyes wide, dodging her as best he could. Catching her by the wrists, he struggled to restrain her and finally managed to pin her arms to her sides. She continued fighting, squirming against his strength, but soon found him a much stronger opponent than she had anticipated. She lost her balance and fell to the floor.

Not daring to let her go, he scrambled with her, pinning her arms at her sides as he straddled her chest. "Damn, Becky," he gasped. She had put up a good fight. He was out of breath. He swiped his mouth with the back of one hand and tasted blood. Apparently she had landed at least one good blow, and for a quick moment, he felt like slapping her back. He gritted his teeth and shook his head. It saddened him to see the

hurtful look in her eyes, as she, too, gasped for breath beneath his weight and stared up at him. God, she must truly hate him. “You probably think I deserved that don’t you?”

She didn’t answer as she lay motionless, watching him. She saw the blood on his mouth and felt a weak smile lift her lips. How dare he ask her that? He deserved far more than a fat lip.

Brad ducked his head and squeezed his eyes shut. It wasn’t easy for him to admit what he felt in his heart. What words were needed to make her understand? So instead of speaking, he grasped her by the shoulders and pulled her close. She might get away. She might escape without ever hearing. She might forever be lost to him. “I know, Becky,” he said. “And I guess you have the right.”

He felt the tension in her muscles began to relax beneath his weight, and slid to the side and off her. Pulling her up into a sitting position by his side, he held her wrists in his firm grip. He wasn’t ready yet to let her feel the freedom she had.

Becky sucked in a gulp of air, trying to calm her raging pulses, and looked up into his solemn face. It was a hard question to ask, but she had to know, “Brad?” she asked, her voice quiet, and Brad had to listen carefully to hear her. “What do you want from me now? Don’t you think you’ve hurt me enough already?”

Brad sat on the floor beside her and listened in silence to her hurtful words. It almost tore his heart out, to think of the damage he had done, but he knew in his heart---he deserved it. Sorrow filled his eyes. He felt helpless. There wasn’t anything he could do to make it up to her, to erase the damage he had done. She would always hate him. He was sure of that. But for now. . . something deep within his soul refused to let her see he knew it. He didn’t mean to be flippant, but at the same time, he had to be . . . he had to cover his own pain.

“I saw you yesterday at the airport, and I don’t know,” he shot her a crooked grin.

“Maybe I was just wondering who this new man in your life was now?”

His words cut through her like a sharpened knife. He was still so damned arrogant. “It’s none of your business who he is,” she snapped, tossing her head in defiance. “Or don’t you remember. . . you’re the one who walked out on me all those years ago?” It still amazed her, but once again she caught herself wondering how she could ever have allowed herself to love him so deeply. What had she ever seen in him? She watched him through lowered lashes. How could she ever have been so stupid?

Brad pulled himself to his feet, still hiding his true feelings behind his gruff actions, and jerked her roughly to her feet beside him.

She wasn’t sure, but for a quick moment she thought she caught a glimpse of a tear shining in his eyes. But even before she had the chance to look closer, he added lightly. . . almost tauntingly, “But, Becky . . . I really do still care. That’s why I came looking for you.”

He smiled and pulled her into his arms and kissed her hard on the mouth. Then, without another word, or even a backwards glance, he was out the door and gone.

\* \* \*

Becky slammed the heavy door shut as soon as Brad crossed the threshold. She grabbed for the dead bolt, missing it the first three times she tried, her fingers trembling and making it next to impossible to grasp. The metallic clink of the bolt sliding into place a welcome sound when at last she managed to twist it. Giving in this time to the weakness she felt in her knees, she sank to the floor. She leaned forward, cradling her face in her hands, as heart retching sobs tore through her exhausted body. She looked like a broken and limp rag doll as she sat, huddled and crying, on the cool tile floor in the middle of the empty foyer.





## Fifteen

Becky sat there crying, for what seemed like an eternity, before finally regaining the needed strength to pull herself to her feet. Clinging to the walls for support to keep from falling again, she forced her weakened legs to carry her into the living room. Gasping for air she collapsed on the sofa, feeling drained, sapped of all her strength.

She tasted blood and realized she was biting into her lower lip as she tried to halt the burning tears threatening to spill forth yet one more time. Her arms felt like leaden weights as she lifted them, reaching for the phone on the coffee table. Through eyes swollen almost shut she dialed carefully dialing Bill's number at work. She listened to the echo of her heart pounding in her ears as she waited for the sound of his voice to answer.

Within half an hour Bill was sitting by her side and cradling her in his strong embrace. He rocked her back and forth, crooning softly in her ear, while stroking the dampened hair from her cheeks. Her sobs returned, tearing through her slender body with a renewed vengeance as he held her tightly, listening to her retelling the horrible story of Brad's visit.

"It was the scariest thing that's ever happened to me," she sobbed. "I only wanted him to be gone. . . I wanted to kill him. I wanted . . ." Her voice cracked and she couldn't go on.

Bill pulled her closer. "It's okay, sweetheart," he said, comforting her with his words almost as much as with his tight embrace. "He's gone now. . . and everything is going to be all right."

She prayed he was right. And hopefully he was, after all, he was here with her

now. . . and Brad was gone. She sighed and melted into the comfort of the feel of his arms around her shoulders, and after a long moment, she felt herself beginning to relax.

Pulling back to look up into his eyes, Becky's own still wide and fearful, she opened her mouth to speak. But even before she had time to force the words past her trembling lips the doorbell rang loudly and she screamed instead, and flung herself back into his open arms.

"Honey," Bill breathed quietly. He grasped her by the shoulders and pushed her back far enough to stare into her frightened face. "I called the police before I left the office," he reassured her. "It's probably just them. Okay?"

She was too frightened to answer. She watched his stern look through dampened lashes and nodded instead.

Bill watched her as he got to his feet. "I'll be right back," he said. "You just sit here and try to relax."

Becky nodded again, wiping her eyes with the now drenched handkerchief he had given her earlier. She gulped in a jagged breath of air. This was all so unreal. How could any of it be happening in the perfect life they shared? Bill was so patient and loving. . . so strong and supportive. She knew she had put him through his own kind of hell with her recurring nightmares about Brad . . . but he had always been so understanding. And just as Bill had always tried to convince her, the nightmares had begun to fade into the background. When they had first married, the nightmares had been so frequent, but now . . . for so very long now, they had become fewer and fewer. But now, after all this . . . She shuddered as the thought slammed into her brain. What would happen now?

The next hour and a half seemed like an eternity. The two middle aged police officers sat stiffly on the edge of their chairs across from Becky and Bill. They watched her carefully, their trained eyes taking it all in. She sat on the sofa, answering their

questions as best she could, and with Bill's arms wrapped protectively around her once again. Their questions droned on and on, wanting to know every sordid detail of Brad's visit. They didn't want to miss anything.

Lt. Adams, the older looking officer, and obviously the one with the most rank, asked the questions. The younger of the two, Sgt. Frank Benning, looking a bit embarrassed by it all, wrote it all down, word for word, on a large yellow note pad.

Was she sure she hadn't invited Brad to come? Had he done anything to her that she hadn't wanted him to do? Had she perhaps antagonized him in some way?

Bill was the first to lose his temper. He jumped to his feet and ran a shaking hand through his rumpled hair. He didn't even try to hide his anger as he stormed around the sofa and stood behind Becky, placing his hands protectively on her shoulders.

"How dare you..." She heard him bellow from over her head. "You act like you think my wife is the guilty party here." Bill's angry words grew louder as the two officers turned their attention from Becky and looked to him. "We called you for help," he raged, "and certainly not for you to sit here and harass us this way."

"We didn't mean for our questions to come out that way, Mr. Simmons. That was never our intention, but nonetheless. . . they have to be asked."

For a moment Becky felt almost sorry for the younger officer, Sgt. Benning. He looked to be in his mid to late thirties, but she sensed this type of questioning was still fairly new to him. Apparently he had joined the police force later in life than had Lt. Adams. She reached up and covered Bill's hand on her shoulder with her smaller one. She nodded her head slowly as she listened to Sgt. Benning's apologies. "We understand," she said. She looked up and met Bill's gaze, her eyes boring into his, pleading for understanding on his part, too.

Lt. Adams cleared his throat and glanced at his younger colleague. He hadn't

realized he had been getting out of line. He caught himself at times, thinking that Sgt. Benning was more of a hindrance than a help since becoming his partner last year. . . but not this time. This time he felt grateful to the young man's sincerity. He seemed better equipped at handling the more delicate cases like this one. He added his apologies. "Mr. and Mrs. Simmons. . . . please forgive me," he said, his cheeks a bright rosy pink. He nodded politely. "But please bear with me. These questions have to be asked."

After that, with the four of them reaching a better understanding of their own respective responsibilities, the interrogation continued. Becky answered their many questions as best she could. Bill returned to the front of the sofa and sat down by her side. She smiled inwardly, feeling the comfort of his hand gently holding hers.

Lt. Adams and Sgt. Benning were both sympathetic and patient, yet they remained unhelpful. Since no 'real crime' had been committed, there seemed to be little they could do. They gathered their notes and stood to leave, both of them looking a bit worse for the wear, the past hour and a half had been had on them as well. They left Becky and Bill their number at the precinct, with instructions for them to call again if they could be of any further use. And then, with a quick handshake and a curt 'good-bye', they left them alone.

\* \* \*

For the remainder of the evening Bill continued to soothe his frightened young wife. He kept reassuring her, over and over again, that they would get through all this, strong as ever before. . . together. It was close to eleven o'clock before Becky finally calmed down enough to eat the simple dinner of cheese omelets Bill had prepared for the two of them.

She sat on the floor, leaning back against the sofa, and watched Bill as he piled

several small logs into the fireplace. It was the middle of June, and the weather had long since turned quite warm, but still. . . after all that had happened today there seemed to be an uncomfortable chill in the air.

Bill smiled and extended a hand, hoping she might join him in front of the fire. To him she looked incredibly lovely as she sat there, her long blond hair spilling in gentle waves across her shoulders. She smiled in return, and gladly accepted his offer.

They lay close together on the soft carpet for a long while, her head resting on his shoulder, their eyes mesmerized by the dancing flames. Their conversation was quiet, a soft mixture of soothing words and tender expressions of love.

“Becky... I love you so very much.” He breathed almost silently, his words spoken close to her ear. “I just don’t know what I would do if anything ever happened to you.” The echo of fear evident in his words.

Raising herself up on one elbow she peered deeply into his solemn gaze. By the light of the flames burning beside them she saw the reflection of the moist tears clinging to his lashes. She touched his cheek with a gentle palm. “Oh, honey,” she whispered, hoping to comfort him. He seemed always to be the strong one, comforting her, standing by her side, loving her. It was now her turn. “I’m sorry I frightened you so much by what happened today.”

“You have no reason to be sorry.”

“I know,” she said, “but what I’m trying to say is, I really don’t think I was in any real danger.” Becky paused a moment, letting her eyes drift to the dancing flames in the fireplace. A distant look crept into her gaze. Her thoughts carrying her back to the frightful events of earlier in the day. Brad had never attempted to hurt her in any way – even after her attacking him first, striking out with her purse, her fists. It had to be a miracle.

Becky sighed and pulled her thoughts back to the moment. “I don’t know why I panicked the way I did. It was just such a shock to open the door and stare up into his face after all these years.”

Bill lay quietly by her side, holding her hand in his own. It tore his heart out, listening to her tortured words. “I guess I just went berserk,” she said, her eyes serious, her expression sadder than he had ever seen her. “All those painful memories of our past together, Brad’s and mine, came flooding back on me. . . and I felt like I was . . . I don’t know, drowning, I guess.”

“I know, sweetheart,” he soothed.

“Brad would never physically hurt me. He never did in the past.”

Bill gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “Are you sure?” he asked. His words trailed off---he wanted to believe her---but for the moment, he couldn’t shake the dread filling his heart. He hated to ask, fearing he might upset her even more, but he couldn’t help it. . he had to know. He wasn’t yet convinced of Brad’s true intentions.

“But what if Brad has changed over the years? He might not ever have been physically abusive in the past. . . but what about now? Don’t you think he might still somehow hold a grudge against you? What if he feels bad about the way he treated you, I mean . . .” He watched her eyes, and then, swallowing hard, he continued, “what if he wants to grab hold of you and make you his again?”

“Oh, honey,” Becky murmured. She let a tiny smile lift her lips as she placed her palm against the strong line of his jaw. Her thumb stroked his cheek, touching ever so lightly the deep worry lines she saw there close to his mouth. She shook her head, “No. . . I don’t think Brad has changed that much. He would have no reason to hold me responsible for the mistakes he made so long ago. He might be sorry now . . . but no, I would never think that he might want me back.”

Bill remained quiet. He had listened to her words, knowing she had spoken them to try in some way to reassure him – but something in his heart refused to be convinced.

Becky didn't wait for him to answer. She saw the panic lingering in his gaze. She went on, cautiously, "I know, too, sweetheart, that he would never come here if he had any real intentions of hurting me. Brad would never be that stupid." Her blue eyes smiled into his green ones. She rested her hand on his chest. "He could just as easily of followed me sometime when I was away from our apartment. Surely he would be smart enough to take me somewhere else.. . somewhere far away from the middle of our very own living room."

Her words seemed to have a calming effect on his nerves, and hearing herself speak them aloud she couldn't help but feel more at ease as well. Bill's smile met hers as he lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a tender kiss to the warmth of her palm. To him, she looked like an angel as she sat in the amber glow of the fire.

He still didn't answer, instead, he eased her back down by his side. And then, with a deliberate slowness, one piece at a time, he gently lifted her clothes from her supple body. His hungry lips sought hers, lighting a searing fire deep within her soul. He listened as she sighed contentedly. The only communication between them the gentle touch of their hands on the smoothness of their naked flesh. Their lovemaking that night was with a new fierceness that neither of them had ever felt before. And afterwards.. . as they lay side by side on the soft carpet, their arms and legs tightly entwined and with Becky's head resting once again on his broad shoulder, they watched in silence as the fire burned itself out before them.

\* \* \*

For the next two weeks Becky never left the apartment. Bill called her from the office at least a dozen times a day. Mandy called morning and evening. Even Joe,



Mandy's husband, managed to nag her at a minimum of least three times a week. Just to make sure she was all right – just to be certain that Brad had not returned, they kept reminding her. But slowly, day by day, they all had to finally come to terms with the realization that their fears were ungrounded. Brad seemed to have dropped out of sight almost as quickly as he had come back a short time earlier.

Becky remained strong for Bill and her dearest friends... on the outside. She never told them, but once in a while, there were times when she felt her old fears creeping back in and taking root deep within her heart. And no matter how hard she tried.. . she couldn't seem to shake them. Bill was always away at work, her friends mere conversations on the phone, and here she was---all by herself in the empty apartment. She had nothing more to do other than let herself roam the lonely rooms for endless long hours. Nothing to do, other than let her mind wander wherever it might.

The ugly questions kept running rampant in her confused brain. What if Brad's visit had only been a figment of her imagination? Maybe none of it had really happened. Maybe none of it had been real at all. What if the incident had been nothing more than another of her nasty nightmares.. . like all the others . . . that came back to continually haunt her?

## Sixteen

Mandy let out a shriek when she burst into the room and found Becky there. “My God, girl. . .” she screeched. “What are you doing? Any you’re not even dressed yet!”

Still in the kitchen, Becky was frantically searching through the refrigerator and cupboards for anything she might have forgotten to pack. She turned with a start and saw Mandy standing in the doorway, her hands on her hips, her brows arched high above her widened eyes. For an instant, Becky felt like the naughty child caught in the act of robbing the cookie jar. She felt her cheeks growing warm as they reddened. Her hand flew to the belt of her bath robe. Since climbing from the shower an hour ago, she had been too busy trying to get ready for their upcoming trip to even notice she had neglected to get dressed.

“Oh, Mandy,” she said, her words tumbling from her mouth in an awkward stutter. “I didn’t think it was so late. I thought I had. . . more time.”

She shot a quick glance at the clock on the wall above Mandy’s kerchief-tied head. It was barely eight o’clock. She breathed a sigh of relief. . . she still had a few minutes---but before she could open her mouth to point that out---Mandy cut her short.

“Now, Becky,” she admonished. She rushed to Becky’s side, the tails of her kerchief flying out behind her head like the tail of a kite. Grabbing Becky’s hand in her own, she drug her towards the door. “You know how antsy the guys get when keep them waiting.”

She paused a moment and shook her head as she looked over her shoulder at the mess Becky had left on the table. Sandwiches, wrapped neatly in shiny strips of aluminum foil; crumpled bags of assorted kinds of chips and crackers – and an open

plate of chocolate chip cookies, as yet waiting to be wrapped; lay in the wake. Becky saw her almost shudder and had to bite her lower lip to keep herself from laughing aloud. She opened her mouth to utter a quick explanation, but as she had done a moment earlier, Mandy cut her short.

They had reached the doorway by then, and Mandy turned and faced her friend with one of her ‘mother knows all’ smiles. “You just run along and hurry and finish dressing,” she said. Her frown deepened. “You have finished packing haven’t you?”

Mandy looked frantic, and this time, Becky didn’t try to hide the laughter spilling out with her words. “Yes,” she said. “You don’t have to worry your pretty little head with that dreadful thought.”

“Good... now get going.” Mandy smiled as she took Becky by the shoulders, spinning her around, and shoved her from the room. She shook her head, her smile fading to a tired grin, as she crossed the room and began finishing the task Becky had left undone.

Becky was dressed and ready for the road a short twenty minutes later. Like Mandy, she had chosen to wear loose fitting blue jean cut-offs, a brightly colored halter top, and light and airy leather sandals. Her long locks combed smooth and held in place with a wide leather barrette clipped low at the nape of her neck. She tossed her packed suitcase on the sofa next to Bill and spun around on one foot for everyone’s inspection. Her beaded turquoise earrings swung easily from the lobes of her ears.

Joe whistled a hungry sounding wolf whistle, and ducked his head almost immediately as he saw Mandy take a playful swing at him from where she sat perched on the arm of his chair. “Well.. .” he said as he got to his feet. He lifted his shoulders in an innocent shrug and pulled his wife to her feet, wrapping one arm around her waist, pulling her close. There was no denying the fact he was only teasing. His love was for

Mandy . . . for Mandy alone. “She does look almost as gorgeous as you, my love,” he said with a shy grin.

Mandy tucked her bulky purse under her arm and snuggled closer, letting Joe engulf her in a powerful bear hug. She looked up and met his gaze with a knowing look that said it all – she was whole and complete, desperately in love.

It was the wonderful look---of being totally in love. Becky had so often wondered if she would ever see Mandy wear. But.. . she thought with a smile---she saw Mandy wearing it now. It reminded her of the way she used to look herself, a long time ago, when she and Brad had first met. When they were happy and in love. Before . . .

Becky shuddered at the remembered thoughts. She lowered her eyes and shot a quick glance at Bill. The shudder left her then, and even more quickly this time, was replaced with the sudden swell of love that filled her heart. She realized the look she saw on Mandy’s face was the same look she herself wore once again. And this time, she knew – she would always wear it.

Smiling at the trio before her Mandy asked, “Well... are we ready to go?”

\* \* \*

It was their second year to come to Long Island for vacation. And once again the local Realtor had outdone themselves. As they had done the year before, they provided the happy foursome with a comfortable two bedroom cottage located on a quiet stretch of warm sandy beaches.

Joe turned the ancient Chevy station wagon off the main road and drove the final half mile down the curving driveway and brought the car to a halt. It was amazing. The cottage looked even more beautiful than the one they had rented the year before.

Becky and Mandy crawled from the car in silence and stood in awe on the tree shaded cobblestone side walk, waiting for Bill and Joe to join them. They couldn’t

believe their eyes as they stared up at the beautiful two-story cottage before them. The cottage sat in the middle of a well-manicured lawn of lush green grass, interspersed here and there with random garden areas filled to almost overflowing with blooming yellow and pink rose bushes. Shiny white shutters adorned the windows and the two French doors that opened onto the high balcony from the two roomy bedrooms upstairs. The house was skirted below – on both sides and across the back – with a wide sweeping, trellis-shaded wooden porch. The sweet fragrance of roses filled the air here, too, as they clambered the trellis, inching closer themselves and enveloping the house with their fragrant blooming stems.

It seemed as if the cottage were a living being, beckoning with open arms, and inviting all who might see it to come inside and enjoy its warmth and hospitality. Their vacation here again this year would undoubtedly be remembered with fond memories long after their return to New York.

\* \* \*

Bill and Joe spent endless hours, trying their luck at fishing for dinner from the long pier in back of the house. But more times than not---with their heads hung low, and their cheeks and foreheads burnt to a crisp from the broiling sun---they returned to the quaint little cottage with taller tales of the ones that got away.. . than the real thing. Becky and Mandy always got a hearty laugh, but managed somehow, miraculously, to soothe their wounded spirits---as well as their sunburns---and pull a hearty dinner seemingly out of nowhere.

And while their conquering heroes were off – doing the ‘macho thing’, as the girls’ secretly called it behind Bill and Joe’s backs – Becky and Mandy had plenty of time to themselves. They enjoyed lying on the sandy dunes and soaking up the soothing rays of the blazing sun, and by the time their vacation was over, always returned to the

city with glowing and healthy looking tans.

Becky and Mandy strolled hand in hand, wading in the water's edge, enjoying the simple solitude of each other's company. The gentle warm breeze blowing in from the ocean ruffled their hair and tugged at their loose fitting tee shirts.

"Do you think the guys will have any more luck today?" Mandy asked, not really caring if they did or not. But, she asked anyway. Avoiding for the moment the real question troubling her mind. Since Brad had reappeared a few short weeks ago, she had noticed something different about Becky. She couldn't put her finger on it exactly, but something seemed to be eating at her.

Becky looked ahead and saw Bill and Joe sitting on the long pier a few hundred yards away. Even at this distance she could tell they were talking animatedly, and taking long sips from time to time from the chilled beer cans they held in their free hands. She shrugged and glanced at Mandy, holding her hair from her face as it billowed in the breeze. "You can't ever tell, Man," she said. "But I really don't care, do you?"

"No, not really."

They strolled along in silence for a long while. It was peaceful and relaxing just to be here once again. Neither of them needed any more than this. The hustle and bustle of living in the city ebbed away, leaving the both of them at peace, and lost for the moment in their own private thoughts.

Becky, as usual... was once again thinking of Brad's visit. The whole incident seemed to have happened such a long time ago---if it had really happened at all---she thought silently. She searched her brain, fearing more and more that it had only been a part of her nightmares. Brad had never returned since. So... had she made it all up? Was she losing her mind? She thought her nightmares were coming to an end. They seemed to be fading away, more and more over the past few years. But not now---after seeing

Brad again, her nightmares had returned . . . this time with a vengeance.

And even though the sun felt warm against her bare skin as she and Mandy strolled the deserted beach, Becky felt the shudder creep down her spine. The questions wouldn't stop. 'But. . . had Brad really returned? Or was it nothing more than her own stupid imagination?'

Becky looked out over the ocean to her left. She didn't want Mandy to see the tears that had suddenly sprang to her eyes.

A little boy who looked to be about ten or eleven years old rushed past them, almost knocking Mandy off her feet as he bumped into her from behind. He threw his hands up, grabbing Mandy by the hips to try and prevent the both of them from falling. Skidding to a stop, sending a spray of sand and water over the both of them, he froze. And then, in a flash he was gone. The echo of his apology came to them as he sped away. "I'm sorry lady." He was playing chase with a large black dog, and oblivious to the two ladies walking along so slowly, he left them far behind.

"Wow." Mandy grabbed tighter to Becky's supportive hand and turned with a start, her eyes wide with surprise. "Oh that we were still so young and carefree."

Becky couldn't help but grin. All that remained of the 'little boy attacker' was the blur of his carrot-red head as he disappeared from their sight behind the high sand dunes. She made a sweeping motion with one hand and gestured to a long piece of driftwood that lay a few yards away almost hidden in the tall rush grass. "Let's sit awhile. It might be safer."

The unexpectedness of Mandy's next movements caught her off guard, and without a moments warning, she heard herself laughing out loud. The solemn thoughts filling her head earlier, flung from her mind. Mandy stood before her, clowning around as she so often did whenever she sensed Becky was down, and made a grand sweep of

her right hand. Her hand flew to her forehead in a mock salute as she spun around on one foot. Her eyes shielded from the brightness of the sun with her stiffened fingers, and with her lips pursed in a thin straight line, she peered first to the right and then to her left, looking quite serious in both directions up and down the vast length of the beach on either side of them. "I think it might be safe to cross here," she answered, "but only if we hurry, my dear." Her teasing came easy as she tossed one arm across Becky's shoulder.

Becky felt her heart swell with love. Mandy's friendship was probably one of the most important things she had in all the world. Her smile widened.

She led Mandy across the narrow path and sat down on the edge of the driftwood. She leaned back as far as she could, her arms resting comfortably on the weathered smoothness of the wood next to her hips, and her long legs stretched out straight in front of her. Tipping her head back, she felt the warming rays of the sun caressing her cheeks. She heard the squawking of sea gulls as they soared high overhead, and at long last, her giggles subsided. "Mandy," she said. "Can I talk openly?"

Mandy, lost for the moment, still thinking of the small boy that had tried to run them down, answered with a smile. "You know you can, Becky. What's up?" She brushed the last of her own happy tears from her face.

Becky wore a somber look as she turned and faced her friend. She swung one leg over the driftwood and sat straddling it as if it were a horse. She and Mandy had shared so very much over the years. Experiences that had drawn them even closer than any blood related sisters. So why did she feel so hesitant now? Why was it so damned hard to admit to her that her nightmares had returned? She had told her of Brad's uninvited visit, but still, at the same time, she had neglected to mention the fact that her stupid dreams had returned. She knew Mandy would understand. . . she felt confident, and she



knew, too, that she would probably try to help her in any way she possibly could. But still . . . Becky felt frightened.

“I just don’t know...” she said, her words coming slowly, awkwardly, sounding frail even to her own ears.

Mandy watched her closely, her own blue eyes searching hard, and yet deep inside feeling as if she already knew what Becky’s next words would be. She touched her arm with a gentle hand and waited. Gone for the moment was their lighthearted teasing. This looked as if it might be important.

It was one of the hardest things she had had to do in such a long time, but sitting next to Mandy on the weather-beaten driftwood and feeling the gentle ocean breeze as it tickled their faces... Becky opened her heart to her. She felt her eyes mist over with fresh tears, and her words came slowly, but they came nonetheless. “Oh, Mandy.. . I feel so scared. My mind’s so confused.”

Seeing the frantic look on Becky’s face, Mandy nodded. She didn’t know what else to do. She held Becky’s hand and listened in silence.

Becky swallowed hard. “Remember when I told you Brad came to see me a few weeks ago?”

“Yes.”

“And I told you I felt like I was going to fall apart all over again. It seemed to me like the past five years just vanished away. He was standing right in front of me.. . and I don’t know,” Her words sounded fragile, almost as forlorn as she looked, and Mandy squeezed her hand even tighter.

“I remember,” she whispered. She looked down then and stared at the sparse clump of reed grass rippling in the breeze around their bare feet. She felt her heart start to thunder beneath her breast. What was Becky trying to tell her? She wasn’t thinking of

giving Brad another chance, was she? ‘Oh, God.. . no’, she prayed silently. Mandy squeezed her eyes shut, trying to stop the tears she felt springing to her eyes.

Becky’s words droned on, completely unaware of Mandy’s horrified thoughts. She stared out over the distant waves. “Oh, Mandy.. . I just feel so scared. Do you remember when we were still in college . . . right after Brad left? Remember the nightmares I used to have all the time?” She looked back at the solemn face next to her own. And deep inside she couldn’t stop the silent prayer that echoed so loudly, ‘please remember . . . Oh, God . . . please help me’.

Mandy nodded in silence.

A jagged sigh slipped past Becky’s pale lips. She felt her hands tremble as she reached up and pushed her wind-blown hair from her face. “I was so afraid that you wouldn’t remember,” she said. “But you’re the only one who ever knew how badly I hurt.. .” She ducked her head. “How much I just wanted to lay down and die.”

“But, honey... that’s all in your past.” Mandy hated to hear Becky talking this way. How could she ever say she wanted to die? She wanted to be able to help Becky, but she knew in her heart she had nothing more to offer other than words. ‘Words’, she prayed, ‘that would somehow, hopefully, be enough’. “You’re with Bill now,” she explained. “And you don’t have to feel that way anymore. Right?”

Becky didn’t answer right away. She stood up and walked a few steps closer to the ocean. Her hair whipped behind her head. Mandy felt terror grip her heart.

She jumped up and hurried to Becky’s side. Touching her by the chin, she pulled her head back around and stared into the tear stained face before her. It was hard for Mandy to hear the words through Becky’s sobs as she pulled her into her open arms and held her tightly. She listened with a pained heart.

“I know I have Bill... but... don’t you see?” Becky hiccuped, and Mandy felt her

slip her hand up between them as she tried to wipe the tears away. “I also have the nightmares again.”

Mandy eased back then, holding Becky at arm’s length. “Honey, what are you talking about? I don’t understand.”

“I’m afraid that I’m going crazy.”

“Is that all?” she asked in surprise. And all this time she had been afraid Becky might have been thinking of suicide. And now, feeling relief sweep over her like a mighty wave. . . Mandy couldn’t help it, she felt like laughing. Hell . . . she felt more like dancing and celebrating. Becky was okay.

“Isn’t that enough, Man? I think I’m losing my mind, and all you can say is.. . ‘is that all?’”

“Now why in the world would you think that?” she asked cautiously. She was lost in a fog, she didn’t understand. Becky was talking in circles.

Becky shook her head and stared at the confused look on Mandy’s face. She thought for a moment of all she had been saying. “Don’t you see, Man.. .” There was a long pause, and she turned back and sat down again on the edge of the driftwood behind them. She looked down and watched her foot idly kick the warm sand, watched her toes sifting through the sand and coming once again to light in the fading afternoon sun. “My nightmares are driving me crazy again. I’m not even sure anymore if Brad really came back the other day or not.” He looked up and saw Mandy frown. “Dammit, Mandy . . . what if it was only a part of one of my stupid dreams again?”

Tears rushed her own eyes, and deep within her heart Mandy felt a sadness she hadn’t felt in a very long time. “I don’t think you made it all up, Becky.”

But, Becky didn’t answer, she only waited in silence.

Mandy came back and knelt down on her knees in the shadow at Becky’s feet.

She felt her hands tremble as she reached out and laid them on her friend's leg. She searched Becky's face with solemn eyes. "Surely you wouldn't have done that. It was the middle of the day and you weren't even sleeping. How could you even think it was just a dream?" None of this made any sense.

Becky hiccuped again. "You really mean it?"

"Honey... I love you. You know I always have." She lifted her hand and stroked the one last tear she saw sliding down Becky's cheek. She smiled openly. "And I'm really sorry to hear about your stupid nightmares, but you've got to get a hold of yourself again. You're not crazy. They're only dreams you know?"

Becky nodded her head. She wanted desperately to believe all she heard Mandy telling her. But still... she couldn't help it . . . she felt afraid.

And then, without warning, another question popped into Mandy's head. Had Brad come back again? She frowned, and Becky saw the lines forming around the edges of her pursed lips. Finally, she asked, cautiously, "He hasn't been there again, has he?"

Becky shook her head vigorously. "No.. . he just came that one time." But that was enough, she thought to herself, wasn't it? And hopefully . . . he wouldn't come again.

Mandy got up and pulled Becky up beside her. She smiled and drew her close, wrapping one arm tightly around her narrow waist. "You're going to be all right, Becky. Give it enough time and the dreams will fade away again. I'm sure of it." She touched her friend's cheek with a quick kiss. "You just remember.. . you have a wonderful man now. And just in case you might have forgotten it . . . Bill loves you very much. All you have to do now is let the past stay where it belongs. In the past!"

They turned then and faced the setting sun, and walked slowly, arm in arm, towards the cottage where they knew Bill and Joe would be anxiously waiting for them.

And then, finally feeling at peace and happy once again, and with her head resting on Mandy's shoulder, Becky murmured quietly, close to her ear. "I'll try Man.. . I promise I'll try."

\* \* \*

The rest of their weeks' vacation sped by all too quickly. But all of them, Mandy and Joe, as well as Becky and Bill, too, thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it. It was fun doing the little things, and just being together. Life was simple here. And just as Mandy had told her would happen, by the time they had to pack up to return to New York, Becky did indeed feel enormously better about herself.

Her long talks with Mandy had done wonders to help her. She felt more relaxed and comfortable with her life now than she had in such a long time. She knew, too, how foolish she had been to ever let her nightmares continue to haunt her. She had Bill now---she had true friends like Mandy and Joe---and sooner or later.. . she felt confident of it---her dreams would fade away. They had done it before, and she felt certain---how could she ever doubt it---they would do it again!

## Seventeen

All too quickly it was a week later. And Becky couldn't help it. . . she felt sad. Their vacation with Mandy and Joe was over. It would be another year before they could return to their dream house on the sunny shores of Long Island. A whole year to do without the happy carefree hours of swimming and sunning and playing on the beach. She could still hear the echo of their playful laughter ringing gaily in her head, as she knew she would at quiet moments like this for a long time to come.

Bill and Joe were forever beating her and Mandy at tag football and volley-ball, and most times, too, and even ping pong. And what about the nights? Gone were the quiet romantic evenings the four of them spent in the shimmering moonlight roasting wieners and marshmallows, with nothing more than the gentle sound of the roaring surf and their easy laughter to lull and entertain them. The all night monopoly games, the funny things they did when they played charades. She knew all of them – each in their own special way – would have a great deal to miss. It had all been so wonderful.

Becky snuggled closer on the sofa and rested her head on the cushion of Bill's shoulder. She smiled when she felt the softness of his velour bathrobe tickle her cheek. Her hand slipped comfortably into his, and she sighed quietly. It was true she missed the beach house, and all the fun they had shared there. . . but times like right now were quite wonderful, too. She closed her eyes and let her thoughts carry her to the days ahead.

What was she going to do for the next few weeks? The theater group wouldn't be returning to rehearsals until the first of August and that left her with two more weeks off. Two long and boring weeks with nothing more to do than roam around the empty apartment. She would be ready to climb the walls after no more than two days. Two

weeks would seem more like a lifetime. It just wasn't fair. Why couldn't Bill's job go into summer hiatus like hers? Why did he have to return to work tomorrow? Her heart felt heavy at the thought, and for the first time in a long while, she couldn't stop the feeling. . . she felt lonely. Bill's vacation was over and she was going to miss him so much. She had become so accustomed to having him always around night and day.

"I had a great time with Mandy and Joe," Bill said. "I've always loved spending time at the beach. But. . ." He snuggled closer, cradling her in the crook of his arm. "It sure is nice to be home again. It's nicer being here all alone with you."

The sound of Bill's words interrupted her somber thoughts. She felt him press a gentle kiss to the top of her head. The faint aroma of his after shave drifted to her nose and she smiled. Tonight was not the time to allow herself to fret over him having to return to work so soon. She didn't want to be sad. She and Bill had one more wonderful evening together before the normalcy of everyday life set in. She certainly didn't want to waste it.

"Me, too," she sighed, contented and happy. Their life wasn't so bad. She hated it that they had to work different hours, but didn't a lot of others couples do the same? And besides, she reasoned. . . it wasn't so terrible. At least she didn't have to work as late at night as she had once done . . . a very long time ago.

Almost immediately her thoughts turned to the nightmarish life she had shared with Brad. There was nothing good to remember about it. He had never truly loved her. Not in the same way she had always loved him. She knew that now. An almost imperceptible shudder touched her spine. Everything was so different then. . .

But this was now. The last thing she wanted to do was to be reminded of all the heartache. Her hand rested comfortably in Bill's. He was nothing like Brad. And thankfully. . . he never could be. Love radiated from his very core. He could never hurt

anyone. Least of all her. The thought brought a tender smile to her lips.

Bill squeezed her hand and twisted around, sitting on the edge of the sofa. He watched her intently. She could tell he was trying to hold a serious look on his face, but she knew, too, it wasn't working. He was up to something. Didn't he know she could see right through him? She watched as a playful grin tipped the corners of his lips upwards.

“Would you think I was totally crazy if I suggested we build a fire... and maybe pop the cork on a bottle of wine?”

It was the middle of July and Bill wanted to build a fire. Was she hearing him correctly? “You are kidding.. . aren't you?”

The instant the words popped out of her mouth she wished she hadn't said them. Bill looked as if he had been holding his breath, waiting for her answer---hoping it would be a yes---and when it wasn't.. . she saw his face fall, his hopes shattered.

He held her hand palm down in his own, letting his thumb rub lightly against the smoothness of her slender wrist. He looked up then and held her gaze with a look that would have melted a heart made of ice. “Please,” he pleaded, “I know it's the middle of summer, but we could turn the air conditioner up higher.. . and pretend. Couldn't we?”

She couldn't help but laugh then, and the sound of her laughter was like music to his ears. He knew her so well. She could never deny him anything when she saw the way he stuck his lower lip out in a playful pout.

“Sometimes I have to wonder about you,” she said. “You're crazy you know?” She saw his boyish grin return, the sparkle in his eyes reflecting his happiness, and she laughed out loud. She rolled her eyes heavenward and shook her head as she got to her feet. “”But if you insist.” She ruffled his hair as she stepped between him and the coffee table, her words drifting back over her shoulder as she pushed through the



swinging kitchen door. “You light the fire. . . I’ll get the wine.”

Bill was making a pallet of soft pillows on the floor when she stepped back into the room. The fire had barely started burning good, and Becky paused, her eyes transfixed, watching the newborn flames. The tiny flickering fingers of orange and red and yellow circled and hovered around the thick logs, and already the delicious aroma of burning cedar filled the air. This was nice.

“Here... let me help you.” Bill reached up and took the tray from her and turned and placed it on the floor to his left.

Becky took her seat by his side and waited as he poured the wine. She let her gaze return to the flames, almost as if hypnotized. “Thanks,” she mumbled, accepting the glass without turning to face him. It wasn’t intentional, she didn’t want to spoil their romantic evening together, but she couldn’t stop the thoughts from carrying her far from where they were.

On one of their last nights on Long Island Bill had asked her if she was ready to stay home this year so they could get started on raising a family. He hadn’t pushed her for an answer. “I only want you to think about it,” he had said. She thought about it now. In fact.. . it was all she had been able to think about for the past few days. She knew how badly he wanted children, he had asked her often enough during the past two years. And there was nothing wrong with him wanting that. She wanted the same thing. But right now? Why did he want everything right now? Her heart felt heavy. Why weren’t there any easy answers? Why couldn’t she just give in and do what he asked? She almost hated herself for feeling the way she did, but she couldn’t help it. It was just too soon to think of raising a family . . . she didn’t feel ready yet. Her career was still too important to her. She only wished that Bill could somehow understand.

Before they broke for their summer hiatus Sammie had already told the group

about some of the plays he had lined up for the coming fall season. There was one he seemed especially excited about. He told them it had something to do with the impact the Vietnam War was having on families and friends back home. And even now, as she sat beside Bill watching the dancing flames before them, she could still feel Sammie's heady excitement.

After the curtain fell on the last act of their final play this summer everyone gathered in the first two rows of empty seats. All the lights in the theater had been turned off except for the one that shown down from high above center stage. She could still hear Sammie's powerful voice as he sat on the edge of the stage, his legs dangling down into the shadows that inched upwards from the floor. His eyes sparkled brightly. And a short while later, even before the young actors broke for the day and left for home, they were as fired up about the play as Sammie was. Everyone wanted to do it. And Becky was no exception. She didn't want to hurt Bill's feelings, but dammit. . . she really wanted to do this play, too. She wanted to do her part.

When the war started so long ago she was wrapped up in her future plans for college. And then with Brad. And then when her and Mandy were busy moving to New York. She felt bad, she hadn't meant to be negligent, but still the same, she had wasted so many years. It was time she paid her dues. She owed them something. Everyone, young and old alike, had given so much for the cause. . . for their country. She felt adamant, driven . . . it was her turn now.

She felt Bill's leg brush against hers as he turned to refill her half empty glass. A tender smile touched her lips. "Thanks, sweetheart."

Bill settled back against the pillows and pulled Becky close. "This is the life," he murmured, squeezing her shoulders in a gentle hug. "A roaring fire, a glass of wine, and my beautiful wife by my side."

She heard his contented groan and turned to watch him with lowered lashes. She knew she had to say something. And she knew she had to do it soon. Rehearsals would be starting in a few more weeks and she didn't want to just pretend she had never heard Bill's request in the first place. That wouldn't be fair. He deserved an explanation. . . he deserved more than that. "Honey," she began slowly. And almost immediately she felt the muscles in her throat begin to swell. Bill sat patiently by her side, his eyes staring into the flames. He had no idea of what she was about to say and it almost broke her heart. She wished she could want the same things he did right now in their life . . . but she knew, deep in her heart, she just wasn't ready yet. She swallowed hard, hoping to erase the lump in her throat, and went on, carefully. "I think we need to talk."

Bill sipped his wine. "Oh yeah?" he asked, turning to face her. "What's on your mind?"

She felt the gentle pressure of his fingers as he massaged her upper arm through the thickness of her bulky robe, and she smiled. It felt good. This had to be one of the hardest things she had ever done, but she knew she couldn't turn back now. All she had to do was open her mouth and tell him. He would understand. Wouldn't he? She turned and faced him with a solemn face. "Do you remember when you asked me if I was going back to work this year?"

He nodded his head. "Of course I remember. It was the last night of our vacation, wasn't it?"

She saw the excitement spread across his handsome face. He sat up and moved his half empty glass to his other hand. "Well. . .?" He watched her, his eyes sparkling and clear in the shimmering glow of the fire. It had fully caught hold, and she felt her cheeks turning red from the warmth it radiated.

Her heart felt leaden as she reached out and placed one hand on his arm. "Honey,

please.. .” She watched his eyes. “Don’t get your hopes up.”

“Okay.” His answer came with a frown and she couldn’t help but shudder. For a moment she wished she could tell him something she knew he wanted to hear.. . but she couldn’t. She couldn’t lie to him, she had to be honest. Almost as much for his sake as for her own.

Her words came slow, laboriously, yet carefully thought out, not hasty. “I don’t know if you’ll understand or not, but I really hope you do.” She paused, feeling her heart hammering beneath her ribs. “Honey.. . I’m just not ready yet. I want to work for at least one more year.”

There... she had said it. It was all out in the open. She breathed a sigh of relief and sat still, her eyes the only thing daring to move as she searched his face carefully. She felt certain he could hear the deafening echo of her thudding heart in the quietness that settled around the two of them like a much too heavy blanket.

He didn’t answer right away. His mouth opened and closed, but she never heard his words. It was the first time she had ever seen him stunned into silence.

“Bill?” she asked, cautiously. She set her glass on the floor and got to her knees, kneeling before him. She placed her palms on his leg. “Honey.. . you’ve got to understand. I don’t want to hurt you, it’s just that I’m not ready to start a family right now.”

It had to be her nightmares. He was sure of it. He knew she loved him. And she wanted children, too, almost as badly as he did.. . So what else could it be? He felt his eyes grow misty as he watched her intently, searching her face for answers, as if he might somehow find them written there. “I want to understand, but I don’t. And I hate to ask . . .” He paused then, the look on his face becoming even more serious. He glanced down at her small hands where they lay resting ever so lightly on his lap. “I don’t know

if it's your nightmares that have made you change your mind," he asked, "or is it something else?"

Nightmares? It was her turn to look shocked. How had he known? Her nightmares had all but disappeared. . . she rarely had them anymore. For almost two years . . . Until Brad's unexpected visit a few months ago had re-triggered them. But she was certain she had kept them well hidden. She hadn't wanted him to know they had returned to haunt her once again. It had taken her weeks to even feel brave enough to talk to Mandy about them. And then . . . just this last week when they were on vacation she had finally done so., but . . . she hadn't dared to tell Bill.

Bill didn't wait for her response. He went on, picking his words carefully, fearing what her answers might be. But, he had to know. He had to be sure. "Are you sure it's not something else that's changed your mind? Maybe you're just having second thoughts about having my children?"

This was all too unreal. She couldn't believe the things she heard him asking her. She stared deeply into his piercing green eyes. She had always thought she knew him so well. She shook her head. "What are you trying to ask me, Bill?"

She sat ridged and still. The shock and surprise that had so quickly swept over her a moment before, all too suddenly melting away. Anger filled her heart. It grew from somewhere deep inside, boiling up and coursing through her veins like a mighty raging river. She didn't hear him asking about her doubts as to having his children. She only had ears to hear him asking about her nightmares. Her nightmares! She had barely gotten over the idea herself that she might be losing her mind. Mandy had convinced her of that while they were away. And now? How dare he bring it all back? She glared at him.

"Do you think I'm crazy, too? Is that what you're trying to say?"

Bill tried to answer, but she cut him short. Her words spilled forth, growing louder and louder, and drowning out the pleasant crackling sounds of the fire before them. "I'm sorry my nightmares have come back. I didn't know you were aware of them. . . I've tried to keep them secret. I hoped they would go away again like they did a few months after we got married. But since Brad popped in so unexpectedly . . . I can't help it. They seem even more real to me this time."

"I'm sorry, honey." Bill reached for her hand but she jerked it away.

Becky pulled herself to her feet and started pacing. It seemed to him that she had all but forgotten he was even in the room. Her eyes stared blankly, not seeing anything. Not the comfortable furnishings in the dimly lit room, not the books that lined the walnut shelves along the far wall, not the delicate crystal figurines they had bought together on their honeymoon that she kept on the back of the piano, and most certainly. . . not even him. He remained where he was, sitting on the floor and bathed in the amber glow of the fire. He listened in silence.

"I don't have any explanations for my dreams feeling so real. They just do. And you don't seem to understand. Maybe it's because I as hurt so badly in the past." She looked across the room and stared intently into his solemn face. She seemed so distant, so far away, and he couldn't help it, he felt afraid. He saw the tears glistening on her cheeks, but he knew there was nothing he could do for the moment. Her words kept coming.

"I loved Brad with my whole life and he let me down. He cheated on me, he left me, and dammit. . . it hurt. You might think I was only a baby when I was in college and had the misfortune to fall in love with him, but I wasn't. I was nineteen and I loved him very much. I thought I would die after he left me." She tried to laugh, but the sound she made was a poor substitute for joviality. "I guess I was stupid enough to think he loved

me, too.”

Bill got slowly to his feet and crossed the room. He stood quietly by her side. He couldn't believe she was acting this way. He reached for her once again, but as she had done a moment before when he had done so, she pushed him away. “No,” she flung the word t him. “You wanted reasons for why I feel the way I do. . . so now I'm ready to give them to you. I struggled for so many years after Brad left me. You see . . . it wasn't just a childhood crush. I tried as hard as I could to get over him. Mandy kept getting me dates, but no one could ever seem to measure up to Brad in my heart. I just drifted around like a lost kitten or something. All I had that made any sense in my life was my acting.”

She paused a moment and went back to stare blindly into the fire. Her shoulders were slumped and Bill could tell she was still crying. The sight of her tears glistening on her cheeks ripped at his heart. He felt helpless. . . but what could he do? She had talked briefly in the past about her life with Brad . . . but never like this. He had never known, not really, how badly she had been hurt. It seemed as if a dam had suddenly ruptured within her. Her pain had been so carelessly dredged up and reawakened . . . and all because of him. He felt like hell. He shuddered, and Becky went on talking.

“After a few years the hurt seemed to go away a little. I slowly started to believe in myself again. I was worth something. Me!” Her sad eyes searched his face from across the narrow space that still separated them. She smiled then, and Bill thought it to be one of the saddest smiles he had ever seen. His own eyes filled with tears and his hands hung imply at his sides as he listened to her. She was reliving all over again the pain had caused her.

“And then you walked into my life,” she whispered. “I shrugged my shoulders and thought. . . why not? I knew I couldn't hide away for forever doing little no name

plays off-Broadway. And besides . . . you were so different. You weren't an egotistical jerk like Brad had been. You seemed to believe in me."

"I did... and I still do," he interrupted quietly.

Becky bent from the waist and lifted her glass from the floor. Swallowing the last sip of wine from it, she turned and sat it next to the silver framed photo of her and Bill on their wedding day that sat proudly on the wide mantle above her shoulder. "I fought it at first.. . remember?" She grinned and Bill saw her lower lip tremble. "I didn't want to fall in love with you. But I did. And dammit, Bill . . . I've loved you every day since." She reached up, and with the back of her hand, brushed her falling tears away as they inched down her cheeks and dripped from her chin and to the floor. She shook her head sadly. "And I can't believe you're standing here tonight and telling me you think I'm crazy."

She fell silent then and sank to the floor. Pulling her knees up, she rested her chin on them and watched the flames once again. Her back was to him as he stepped across the room on silent bare feet and knelt down beside her. There were tears in his eyes, too, as he reached out and placed one hand on her shoulder.

"Becky, honey... I'm so sorry." His voice was soft, his eyes bright with unshed tears. "I never meant to make you think that. And no. . ." He touched her chin then and drew her face around. Her eyes were red and swollen, and to him she looked like a little child as she met his gaze. He prayed she was listening . . . as well as hearing, as he finished speaking. He couldn't bear the thought of hurting her any more than he already had. "I don't think you're crazy, sweetheart. I've never thought that."

Becky lifted her hand and gently touched the tears she saw sliding down his cheeks. She didn't try to answer. She felt numb and empty inside. She had already said it all. It was Bill's turn now.



He watched her carefully. "I never meant to push you about starting a family. We can wait. There's always next year. . . or the year after that. Whenever you're ready, we don't have to rush. It doesn't matter how long we wait, we have plenty of time. And besides . . ." He smiled then and she felt the gentle kiss of his fingers as he lifted his hand and caressed her dampened cheeks. "We have each other . . . we don't need anything more than that."

They sat quietly for a long while, each of them for the moment thinking of all that had passed between them. And then, Becky snuggled close as Bill wrapped one arm around her narrow shoulders. "Honey," she spoke quietly, her words drifting to his ear in the merest of whispers. "I do want to have children. Your children! But for right now I just feel so afraid." She paused and he felt her shudder. Her words sounded strained as she forced them past her lips. "What if you leave me, too?"

He squeezed her even tighter to his side. "I do understand that you're still afraid. But, sweetheart," he murmured, "you've got to know, I'll never let anything hurt you like that again." His lips felt warm as he pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"I love you more than I have ever loved anyone in my entire life," he said. "And I'm glad we were able to open up and talk so honestly tonight. We've both been living with too many fears. . . you with all those stupid nightmares and thinking you were going crazy. And with me thinking you might not love me enough to bear my children." He felt Becky squeeze his arm then, but didn't stop the words spilling from his heart. Becky listened intently. "And I promise you, too, sweetheart . . . I'll never leave you the way Brad did. I had no idea you were so afraid that I would."

He fell silent then and reached over his shoulder for the box of tissues on the coffee table. Becky wiped her eyes and blew her nose. She didn't notice that Bill had kept one for himself, to wipe his own eyes, too.

\* \* \*

Bill lay awake for a long while after Becky had fallen asleep. His thoughts turned once again to all they had talked about earlier. Brad had caused her so much pain. And as he lay in the darkness, he vowed to himself, he would always protect her. She would never again experience pain like that.

The gentle kiss he placed on the tip of her nose didn't awaken her, and in the shimmering moonlight spilling across her sleeping face he saw her smile. She moaned softly and slid one arm across his chest. And tonight.. . he held her tightly as she slept.

## Eighteen

By the time September arrived Becky had all but completely transformed herself into the leading lady in Sammie Matthew's new play, 'Those Left Behind'.

The wide folds of the red velvet curtains swung closed. Becky and her fellow cast mates watched in silence as its' golden fringe swept across the floor of the stage. For endless moments the only sound to be heard in the crowded theater were the somber, dying strains of 'America the Beautiful'. The haunting melody floating high overhead for the briefest of moments, and then melting away into nothingness.. . disappearing into the eerie darkness and silence that filled the entire theater.

The play was over... and still... no one moved. Red, white and blue banners hung motionless from the rafters in the still, quiet air. The crowd sat mesmerized. No one dared to move. A full minute passed before the house lights came on – harsh and bright, and causing the stunned audience to blink in their brightness. The heavy curtains parted once more.

Becky stood center stage, her face still streaked with the black smudges of mascara that stole down her cheeks from the last tearful scene. She clung tightly to the hands of those nearest her. Her boyfriend, Jake.. . who had died in the war . . . her family and all the others . . . her friends---all those who had made up the heartbroken cast. They were all there, waiting. They had done their parts. It was all over . . . all except facing the audience.

They did that now!

And it was only then, after seeing the actors trembling before them, that everyone in the audience was brought back to the intense reality of the moment. The thunder of

applause began. It surged up, louder and louder, a deafening roar mixed with cheering and loud whistles, and suddenly it seemed as if everyone was standing. Where was the director? Where was the writer?

Sammie Matthews emerged from the wings to the left and hurried to center stage. His narrow face a mirror image, reflecting the smiles he saw on all the faces of the young actors he had directed. This was a big night for him as well. He squeezed himself into their tight line and bowed, over and over, as they all were.

The crowd seemed to be cheering even louder. Sammie clutched Becky's hand in his own and she saw him smiling at Roger Blevins, the handsome young actor who had so greatly performed the part of her boyfriend.

Everyone had hoped the play would be received well – there was never a doubt in anyone's mind that it wasn't good – but, this avid of an audience response was even greater than any of them had ever dared to anticipate.

The heavy curtains fell one last time and Becky and the others disappeared from view. Mandy blinked in the bright lights and turned to face Bill and Joe as they sat beside her in one of the red, velvet-covered balcony boxes. She saw the sheen of tears glistening in Bill's eyes.

“She was good,” Bill said, his voice barely louder than a whisper.

Mandy leaned closer and touched Bill's sleeve. He still hadn't moved. His eyes remained glued to the spot where he had last seen Becky standing and smiling with the others. “She was better than good,” she insisted, dragging him back to the moment.

Bill looked around, his expression a reflection of astonishment, and slowly met Mandy's gaze. He watched as she stood up and wrapped her coat around her shoulders. Her eyes never left his.

“Becky was wonderful.”

“Shall we go backstage and see her? Joe asked. He was already on his feet, his hand planted firmly on his wife’s narrow waist, and Bill noticed his smile was as proud as the one Mandy wore. “Come on, Bill,” he added. “Do you want everyone else in this place to get there first?”

It seemed as if Sammie and the whole cast, as well as dozens of other people, most of whom Becky didn’t recognize, but were probably from the press, had had the same idea. It was cramped and crowded in Becky’s small dressing room. Flowers and telegrams were piled high on her makeup table, and an endless supply of champagne seemed to float from hand to hand.

Becky sat at her dressing table, looking quite amazed, yet happier than she had ever looked in her entire life. Her eyes dazzling brighter than a million Christmas tree lights and her elation swelling into something even greater than euphoria.

Bill and Mandy and Joe squeezed into the crowded room and elbowed their way to Becky’s side. Bill was the first to reach her and she looked up with a timid smile when she felt him touch her shoulder.

“Sweetheart,” Bill leaned down and whispered close to her ear. “I’m so proud.” He was still smiling. It was impossible to stop. Becky saw the brightness of tears still shining in the corners of his eyes.

Her own smile seemed to be frozen on her face. She felt tired, utterly drained of all emotion. She had put her everything into tonight’s performance, and now.. . she was exhausted.

Someone pressed yet another glass of champagne into her hand but she quickly set it aside amid the clutter on her dressing table. Bill took her hand and helped her to her feet. “Was I okay?” she asked breathlessly, “I was so afraid I would forget my lines.”

Bill didn't care that the tiny room was filled with so many unknown faces, each of them trying in their own way to squeeze closer to the star. He folded her into his open arms, hugging her tightly, and feeling his own heart swell with pride. "You were perfect."

After what seemed like an eternity the crowd slowly began to file from the room. It was quieter now. And then they heard the words, "A toast?"

It was Sammie. He stood close, a broad smile splitting his happy face, and with his black vest unbuttoned and hanging limply off one shoulder. Champagne had been flowing like a river for the past hour – but who cared? Right?

Sammie held an empty wine glass in one hand, and yet another full bottle of the icy bubbly in the other. He waved it towards Mandy and Joe. He looked over his shoulder and searched for Becky and Bill.

They hadn't dared to move, it would have been too easy to get lost in the crowd a moment earlier. And now they stood there, their arms entwined and with Becky's head resting on Bill's shoulder.

Sammie had had a few hit plays before, but there was no doubt about it, tonight had to be the icing on the cake. He had wanted to do a play on Vietnam ever since the war began, but much to his dismay, the critics had urged him not to. They had warned that it was by far, too delicate a subject. Maybe later... much later... 'after the wounds had had time to heal', they had implored. But to Sammie... 'Now' was later enough. Some might call it stubbornness, but to Sammie it was something different. He didn't care. He had decided long ago it was more important to listen to his own heart. In the end it was the only thing that mattered. And so, he had done the play anyway. And now . . . feeling flushed with the avid reception he had just witnessed, and thinking, too, that although he might not get filthy rich from doing it---he was definitely on his way. The

play, his play, had been a tremendous success... and so was he!

Mandy crossed the room and offered her assistance. "Here," she said, touching his elbow. It was hard to keep from laughing as she watched his obvious clumsiness as he staggered around, looking for something to pour the drink into.

She rummaged through the clutter of empty glasses and champagne bottles that sat crowded in the midst of all the flowers and telegrams and various bottle of makeup vying for space on Becky's dressing table. Finding three glasses that didn't look as if someone had already drunk a toast from them, she turned and waited for Sammie to remember he had offered to fill them. As far as she was concerned this was the biggest night in Becky's life... but no one could ever accuse her of being selfish. There was room in her heart for Sammie, too. She was equally proud for him, and even though she felt he had probably already consumed more champagne than he should have, she didn't want to judge. She smiled openly and said. "I think a toast would be very appropriate."

The celebration didn't stop in Becky's dressing room. Less than an hour later, everyone found themselves at Adam's Bar and Restaurant. Adam's was a favorite haunt of all the actors in Sammie's young group. Located a short two blocks from the theater, it was convenient, and also rumored to be a great place to be seen. All the play critics were known to hang out there. Adam's was posh enough for a fancy night out on the town, and at the same time, it was casual enough for the hard working young actors to feel comfortable when they stopped by sometimes for drinks after a tough day of rehearsals.

Becky felt tired. She would much rather be at home, her feet propped on the coffee table---celebrating the play's success---all alone with Bill. She wouldn't even mind it if Mandy and Joe were there. There was room enough in her heart to share her happiness with them, too... at least for a little while. But most of all, she only wanted to

be with Bill.

But for now, it didn't look like the party was anywhere near being over yet. Bill hugged Becky closer to his side as they sat in the middle of the round peach colored velvet booth. Mandy and Joe sat on their left, smiling and sipping champagne, while Sammie and several play critics crowded in on the other side.

"You look like you're worn out," Bill whispered as he nuzzled her neck.

And she was. She smiled and melted closer, leaning her head on his shoulder and pressing her fingers against the familiar feel of his broad chest. He knew her so well. "I am. But..." She raised her head and nodded towards the smiling and happy faces of all who crowded in around them.

It was all still pretty amazing. The play had been even more successful than any of them had ever dreamed. Excitement filled the air. The music was loud. There wasn't a sad face to be seen anywhere.

"Sammie and all the others are having such a good time," she added quietly. "It would be rude to call it a night so soon, don't you think?"

Bill didn't think it would be rude to take his exhausted wife home, but when he looked, too, at the excited and smiling crowd all around them, he saw the truth in her words. She was right. This was her night... hers and Sammie's, and all the others who had worked so hard to make the play such a tremendous success. Bill smiled broadly. "I love you very much."

"Only as much as I love you, too."

Sammie ordered more champagne and Becky groaned. She had long since forgotten how many glasses she had already consumed. Her glass never seemed to run dry. Every time she swallowed the last sip, and even before she had time to set the empty glass back on the table, someone refilled it. Tomorrow would most certainly be a



good day for a hangover.

“Want to dance?” Becky heard the words, and it took her a minute – her eyes searching almost frantically the ocean of smiling faces she saw everywhere – to find who had asked them. It was Joe. He leaned forward, pressing Mandy even further into the booth, and touched Becky’s hand.

The band was playing a loud rock and roll number and Becky looked to the crowded dance floor. People were swaying and jumping and seemingly having a grand time. The champagne had warmed her. She felt good. “Why not?” she answered with a shrug. “Sounds great to me.”

She danced next with Bill, and then with Sammie. Her tiredness faded away, euphoria taking its place. This was the night she had waited for, for so long. She had finally stared in a truly great play. Everyone was ecstatic. And so was she. Who had ever said that New York was such a tough place?

“Are you about ready to get out of here?” Bill whispered close to her ear, his breath warm and tickling her neck. The band played the last song of the night and Bill held her tightly in his arms as they circled the floor one last time. It was a night she wished would never end... but it was nearly two o’clock. It was time to go home.

Becky wondered how she had managed to stay on her feet this long. The party lasting longer than she had ever anticipated. And then, like a mighty wave rushing towards the sandy beach, she felt her exhaustion returning. She nodded her head tiredly, feeling the smoothness of Bill’s jacket brushing her cheek, and answered with a tiny grin. “Yes,” she said. “I think I’m beyond ready. Lead the way.”

## Nineteen

The play ‘Those Left Behind’ continued to run, night after night, for a full month. And today, was Becky’s first day off. She felt good. It was Indian summer in New York, the weather still warm, and she was meeting Mandy for lunch.

They were meeting at Adam’s Bar and Restaurant and Becky smiled as she looked in the mirror, hooking the clasp on the thin gold necklace around her neck. She thought of the all night celebration they had all shared there last month. They had all had fun... and she had certainly paid for it in the hangover she had had for two days afterwards. She applied a drop of perfume on her wrists and rubbed them together. How long had it been since she and Mandy had been able to go out all alone? They used to always have plenty of time for each other, but now... It seemed as if the two of them were always too busy.

Becky looked at her reflection one last time. She caught herself frowning... she truly missed Mandy... she loved her like a sister, and it wasn’t fair they hardly ever had time to be together anymore. She reached up then and smoothed her hair back with the flat of her hand. The clock on the dresser told her it was eleven-thirty. “Time to go,” she said aloud as she got to her feet. Her frown quickly melted away, and in its place . . . she wore a happy smile.

It was cool and dim inside Adam’s when Becky pulled the heavy glass door open and stepped inside. She stood still, blinking her eyes and trying to adjust to the diminished lighting. She couldn’t see clearly yet, but by the sound of the noises she heard around her, she sensed that Adam’s was filled with its usual lunchtime crowd. After a few minutes, with her vision returning, Becky scanned the crowded room, searching the sea of faces for the familiar one of her dearest friend.

The noisy hum of conversation and the clinking of glasses followed Becky as she inched her way through the crowded restaurant in search of Mandy's table. Then she saw her. Mandy waved frantically from a corner table located a short distance from the mirrored bar.

Her smile was a welcome sight as Becky came to a halt in front of the linen covered table. "How's your head feel today?" Mandy teased as she jumped to her feet and reached for Becky's hand almost before she had a chance to pull her chair out and drop her purse on the table.

"Well, I must admit," she mumbled timidly. She touched her free hand to her temple and smiled as she slid into her seat. "I do feel better today, thankfully. I was beginning to wonder if my hangover would ever go away."

"I know what you mean." Mandy rolled her eyes, indicating she, too, had suffered her own hangover far longer than she would ever have thought possible.

They fell silent for a minute when the waiter stepped to their side and filled their water glasses. He smiled warmly as he offered them each a menu. "Take your time, ladies. Just let me know when you're ready to order."

"Okay," Mandy answered. "We'll let you know in a few minutes." She watched him walk away and turned her gaze back to Becky. To her, Becky looked different. She saw that now.

Was it because she was older maybe... more grown up? She looked more graceful, self-confident. The years had turned Becky into something more, something even larger than the image Mandy held for her. Gone was the carefree and young college friend Mandy had grown to love so long ago. She sat before her now, more than just grown up... she was her own woman. Mandy carefully arranged her napkin across her lap as she pondered the thought. A moment later, she burst out laughing. She couldn't help it.

Becky looked up from her menu, her eyes wide with surprise, and stared at her friend. Mandy went on laughing, uproariously, not even trying to hide her giggles, and Becky felt her cheeks growing red in embarrassment. “Have you lost your mind?” she hissed as quietly as she could through clenched teeth. She reached across the table and took Mandy’s hand. “Everyone’s staring at us.”

“I don’t care,” Mandy said, gasping for breath, and trying with all her might to silence the laughter that filled her throat. Her blue eyes glistened with tears of laughter, and she suddenly wondered how long the two of them had been the way they were now. When had the changes overtaken them? How had the changes overtaken them? “Just look at us,” she complained, her arms waving frantically.

Becky dropped her menu on her empty plate and leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. Her eyes bore into Mandy’s laughing ones. Her voice was low, admonishing. “Would you shut up laughing long enough to explain?” she begged. “What do you find so damned funny?”

“I just noticed... we’re all grown up!”

Mandy’s giggles were quieter now and Becky felt better. She breathed a quick sigh of relief and lifted her water glass to her lips. “Mandy,” she asked, reaching for Mandy’s hand again. “What are you talking about?” Becky’s eyebrows shot upward. “Of course we’re all grown up. Hell, girl...” She thought hard for a moment. This was all too unreal. Mandy had to be losing her mind, what other explanation could there be? “We’re the same age,” she answered dryly. “We’re twenty four years old. What do you expect?”

Mandy leaned closer and shot a quick glance at Becky’s lap as she reached out to touch the hem of the rose colored skirt where it lay across Becky’s knees.

Mandy looked young again. At least... younger... Becky thought. She remembered

the way Mandy looked when they were still in college. Had it really been so long ago? She opened her mouth to speak but Mandy cut her short.

“Where did the mini-skirts go?” she asked. “And the tie-dyed tee-shirts? The bell bottomed jeans... the platform shoes? God, girl... we’ve changed so much.” Mandy heaved a great sigh of relief and gave her shoulders a quick shrug. She leaned back in the comfortable leather chair and shook her head.

Becky didn’t have to look hard to see the moistness of Mandy’s tears still glistening on her dark lashes and threatening to spill down her cheeks. She blushed again and sank back into the comfort of her own chair. She reached again for her glass. Mandy had to be crazy!

She knew now what Mandy was talking about, but all the same... she found it hard to believe. What did Mandy find so darned funny? It was true they were grown now. The two of them no longer teenagers. Becky sighed and looked down at her lap.

Was she dressed so strangely? She wore her long hair in a loose pony tail, slicked straight back and tied low on the back of her neck with a silk scarf. She hated to admit it, but she wore it this way most of the time now. She no longer wore it straight and loose, swinging freely around her shoulders. Times were changing. She studied the dress she had pulled from the closet such a short while ago and chosen to wear for this special occasion. It fit her slim figure perfectly, it looked good on her, Bill had told her that often enough... but she had to admit... Mandy was right. It was a far cry from being a mini-skirt. But... times were changing.

“You’re crazy, Man.” She reached for her menu again, and hoping to divert Mandy’s strange way of thinking, she pretended to read it. She added quietly, “I don’t have a doubt in my mind anymore.”

Becky didn’t tell Mandy that her reminiscing about old times had brought up

other memories as well. Painful memories. Thoughts other than the changing clothes styles popped into her head. She thought of Brad. She didn't want to, she never wanted to – but the memories had so suddenly been unlocked.

All too clearly the image of Brad's face crept into her mind's eye. The sound of his voice, the smell of his cologne. And even, too, the way he looked when he came to see her a few months ago. He was never far from her. Sometimes she thought she saw him everywhere. She felt herself shudder. It didn't matter how many years crept slowly by... Brad was always there.

Mandy laughed again and Becky felt herself being drawn back to the present. Adam's lunchtime noises surrounded her. She shook her head and looked up. "Yeah, but it's so much fun being crazy." Mandy defended. "Would you love me any other way?" The blue eyes that Becky knew so well stared back honestly. Mandy reached for her own menu.

It took her a few minutes, but finally, Mandy hailed a passing waiter. "Excuse me," she exclaimed, catching the young man by the sleeve of his jacket with a brightly painted, red finger-nailed hand. "But, Ms. Simmons and I will have a bottle of your finest red wine... please."

"Mandy..." Becky gasped, sitting up straighter in her chair. Her cheeks flushed crimson for about the third time in just this one afternoon. She was thankful Mandy had at least managed to utter a 'please', but, for goodness sake... should they dare order wine? Hadn't they both drunk enough when they were here a few weeks ago? Hadn't they both probably caused enough of a scene then?

"What?" As far as she was concerned she had done nothing wrong. She only wished she could afford to buy a bottle of champagne. "The play's a success. You, the cast, and even Sammie... you're all a success. It's not fair the celebrating has to stop."

Becky shook her head. She should know better than to try to keep Mandy's enthusiasm in check. Mandy had never been known to be the shy one, but thankfully, no one seemed to notice. Everyone was busy with their own lunch dates, their own personal lives. She cleared her throat. "It has been quite exciting. We've all been working so hard and all."

The water came then, bearing the ordered bottle of burgundy, and busied himself filling the long stemmed glasses waiting beside their empty plates. They hadn't ordered lunch yet, but there would be time for that... later. "And you have all been doing a stupendous job. Don't you ever doubt it," she beamed, lifting her glass high, signaling for a toast. "To one of the greatest actresses I have ever known."

Becky groaned and tapped her glass against Mandy's. She didn't need to look in a mirror to know her cheeks were blazing red. Leave it to Mandy, she thought soberly. If Mandy had her way everyone in the crowded restaurant would be sent on their way this afternoon with a personally signed autograph. By the time she got through with them, everyone would most certainly know who Becky Simmons was.

"Thanks," she mumbled, quietly, and raised the glass to her lips.

They enjoyed the meal they finally got around to ordering a half hour later, but even more than that, they enjoyed each other's company. It felt good to sit and talk, swapping bits of news about the others' lives. Since the two of them had gotten married, and even more so now... with Becky so busy with the play, their private time together had dwindled to a couple of lunches a month, and sometimes, occasionally, if they could swing it, a rare Friday night get together with Bill and Joe included. Times like this were special. Becky didn't try to hide her smile.

By the time they were halfway through the second bottle of wine Mandy had ordered Becky was beginning to feel warm and comfortable inside. They hadn't noticed

most of the lunchtime crowd had long since left the restaurant. “You know, Man...” Becky said, leaning back in her chair, wine glass in hand. She paused a moment and smiled lazily as she watched the young waiter clearing away their empty dishes. “I can’t remember the last time I’ve had such a good time. I miss it, you know? We used to have plenty of time to be together.”

“Yeah. I miss it, too.”

“Have I been a terrible bore? With the play and all?”

Mandy looked up. “Well...” She paused then, letting her unfinished words dangle loosely in the quiet room. She twisted her glass between her palms. It did her heart good to see Becky squirming uncomfortably before her. “I wouldn’t exactly call you a bore,” she teased. “You were more like spaced out all the time. Like you were lost in your own little world. All you ever talked about was the play. Hell...” Mandy stopped again and took a quick sip of her wine. She reached for the bottle and refilled their glasses for the last time. The bottle was empty. “I bet you even recited your lines in your sleep. Should I ask Bill?”

Becky grinned awkwardly and ducked her head. Several strands of her hair had escaped the bonds of her silk scarf and she reached up, brushing them from her flushed cheeks. She hated to admit it, even to herself, but she knew Mandy was right. All she ever thought about anymore was Sammie’s play... morning, noon, and night. She rehearsed her lines over and over again. She went around the apartment practicing the way she was supposed to walk, and sit, and especially the way she was supposed to look. How had anyone ever been able to put up with her? “Should I apologize?” she asked.

Mandy laughed and shook her head. “You silly goose. You know we all love you, so we just learn to put up with you.” She shrugged her shoulders. “It’s quite easy, you



know.”

And then, almost as quickly as her laughter had come a moment earlier, Becky saw Mandy’s expression change. She sat up straighter in her chair, folding her arms on the edge of the table and letting her fingers toy idly with the crumpled napkin before her. “Becky,” she began slowly. It had been a long time since they had talked about Becky’s nightmares, and she hated to ask, but concern urged her on. “I’m not trying to pry... I hope you know that. But, dammit... I love you, and I can’t help but worry.” She looked up and met and held Becky’s gaze. “Your nightmares... you haven’t talked about them since we were at the beach house this summer. They are gone now, aren’t they?”

Seeing the strained look on her friend’s face, Becky tried to shrug her confession off with a bit of humor. She smiled and opened her mouth. Humor failed her. There was nothing funny about her nightmares. She searched for the right words. “Oh... I guess you could say that. Like you brought up a minute ago... I’ve been so busy with the play that I haven’t had much time for anything else.”

Mandy breathed a quick sigh of relief, and Becky saw her smile return almost immediately. Her eyes sparkled brightly as her lips curved upward, surrounded by tiny laugh lines Becky had never noticed before. “I was almost afraid to ask.” The softness of her words droned on. “You were so upset the last time we talked. And I couldn’t help it... I’ve been praying so hard for you.” She reached out and touched Becky’s hand. “I’m so glad to hear you say that.” She swallowed the last of the wine in her glass in one swift gulp and spun around, searching for their absent waiter. She teased, “Should we have another drink?”

Becky lifted her arm and glanced at her watch. She let out a soft whistle. It was almost three-thirty. Their waiter had long since left their bill on the corner of their table and disappeared into the backroom. It was time to go home. If they sat here much longer

they would certainly be overrun by Adam's dinner crowd. "I really don't think so, Man," her laughter broke the silence. "But it looks like we might have over stayed our welcome by just little bit. Don't you agree?"

Mandy groaned and set her empty glass on the table. She twisted around in her seat, her eyes scanning the quiet restaurant. Even though they had polished off two bottles of wine Mandy's face didn't show it. Her eyes were bright as she stared at the empty tables on either side of them. The place was deserted. All the other tables had been cleared and made ready for the next rush of hungry customers. Neither she nor Becky had even noticed. They were too busy. So much had happened, they had had so much to catch up on. She shrugged her shoulders. "Oh well," she grinned wickedly, "at least we had a good time."

Walking arm in arm, and still giggling quietly to themselves, Becky and Mandy pushed through the heavy glass door and stepped outside. They stood motionless for a long moment enjoying the warmth of the gentle breeze ruffling their hair and tickling their cheeks. "You want to share a cab home?"

Becky tipped her head back letting the warming rays of the sun caress her bare face. She held Mandy's hand. Seeing the way Mandy had swayed when she asked, Becky was glad that she at least had enough sense to realize she needed a ride home. Two bottles of wine was by far too much for the two of them to be drinking all alone. "No," she sighed contentedly, shaking her head. "After all the wine we put away, I think a walk in the fresh air would suit me better."

"Are you sure?"

Becky smiled. It felt strange, but it looked like it was left to her to be the 'mother hen' this time. Had the tables finally turned for the two of them?

"Yeah, I'm sure," Becky answered. It was the first time this had ever happened.

“Now go on...” she urged. “You’d better get out of here. Joe will be wondering if you got lost or something.”

Mandy held up one hand and waved for a cab but didn’t wait to see if her signal had been answered. She spun around and faced Becky with a smile. “I love you,” she said, pulling Becky into her open embrace and planting a quick kiss on her upturned cheek. They heard the screech of tires as the cab slid to a halt at the curb. “Talk to you later.” Mandy pulled the door open, “Take care of yourself,” she said, slipping into the backseat. She waved to Becky from the open window. “And give Bill a hug for me.”

A moment later, she was gone.

\* \* \*

Becky turned and melted into the flow of pedestrian traffic surrounding her on the sidewalk. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry. It was the way of life for all who lived in New York. She heard the mumbled complaints of the busy secretaries and businessmen who bumped into her as they hurried past. But today... she didn’t care. It was a beautiful day, the weather warm, and she definitely wasn’t in any hurry. Enjoying the feel of the warmth of the sun on her skin, she let her thoughts turn to the wonderful lunch she had just shared with her dearest friend. It had been a welcome respite from all the hard work she had been doing on the play, but still... she couldn’t erase the guilt that crept into her heart.

Mandy had been concerned that she might still be having the tormenting nightmares. And what had she said? She had told her the truth. “No.” Becky shook her head. She hadn’t out and out lied, had she? She had learned long ago to live with the nightmares, she reasoned with herself. So why the guilt? Was it because she had failed to tell Mandy the rest of it. She hadn’t told her she couldn’t live with the feeling of Brad’s presence every minute of the day. Why did it feel as if Brad was there every time

she turned a corner, everywhere she went... everywhere she looked? What had prevented her from sharing this fact with Mandy?

Walking aimlessly along, her thoughts preoccupied once again with thinking of Brad, Becky soon found herself strolling through the park. Her heart felt heavy as she slumped down on a wooden bench beneath an ancient oak tree. It was cooler in the shade. The sun drifting to her face in dappled patches as it drifted through the spreading branches overhead. Her eyes strayed to the children's playground a few yards away. She didn't want to think. She wanted to do anything else, occupy her thoughts in any other way... but she didn't want to let Brad in anymore.

She looked past the lonely looking swing sets, swinging freely in the gentle afternoon breeze, and with no children there to keep them company. And even further the teeter-totters stood empty, one end reaching high and all alone towards the blue skies beyond the trees. She looked further. The playground wasn't completely deserted. She smiled. Two little boys were busy, laughing and giggling as they dug holes in a nearby sandbox. Their mothers' stood close, their faces smiling and happy, and Becky couldn't help but wonder what they might be talking about. They were probably exchanging recipes for fried chicken or oatmeal cookies... and soon, they would more than likely be dragging their little ones home. It wouldn't be long before it was time for them to start dinner. Life went on.

Becky smiled at the comforting sight. There was still some kind of normalcy left in the world. Normal for everyone else, but not for her. She got to her feet then, her heart still heavy and sad, and turned and started for home. Bill would be there soon... she didn't want to be late.

It wasn't as late as Becky thought it might be when she stepped into her and Bill's apartment. It was only five-thirty. Bill wouldn't be home until at least seven.

She went into the bedroom and lay down across the wide bed. The sound of her shoes thudded in the quiet room as she kicked them off and let them fall to the carpeted floor. She didn't care that her dress might get rumpled. Her heart felt heavy, filled with sadness. There wasn't a lot she really did care about right at the moment.

She hated being dishonest with Mandy. She hated being dishonest with Bill. How could she ever be dishonest with anyone? Disgust filled her heart. Her thoughts turned to Bill. She loved him more than she had ever loved anyone in her life. She felt the bitter sting of tears filling her eyes. She especially hated it that she was ever dishonest with him. She loved him far too much for that. But sometimes... especially the times when Brad's memory was just too close, she couldn't help it, she never wanted to hurt him . . . it was a weakness she couldn't quite overcome. Like she had told him, reassuring him with every fiber of her being... "Sweetheart, I've never seen him again. He has never come back." And now, the words came rushing back to haunt her.

But then, she had to ask herself once again... had she ever really seen Brad again? No. At least she didn't think she had. Not really. Surely not in the flesh. Maybe in her imagination, but... never really face to face. The sound of her heart thudded loudly in her ears as her fists pounded into the pillow beneath her head. At least she didn't think he had. The room was warm, and still she shivered. She felt confused. Why did she feel Brad's presence every minute of every single day? Was it only a feeling? May it was true... maybe she was going crazy. Was he ever really there? He had never come up to her and talked with her. Not since that one day so long ago when he had appeared at her front door. She felt herself shudder again. So why should she let it bother her now? It was all probably nothing more than her imagination. It only she could learn to ignore it.

Becky squeezed her eyes shut, trying to erase the bitterness of tears behind her lids. She didn't have time to cry... Bill would be home soon. She didn't have time to

sleep either, but a moment later, and even without thinking, she reached out and pulled Bill's pillow to her breast. It was cozy and warm here. Her tired eyes drooped. Exhaustion finally won the battle. The dream carried her away

## Twenty

\* \* \*

Becky sat all alone in the Laundromat. The washer was on the spin cycle, but Becky didn't seem to notice. She sat mesmerized---her eyes staring, but not really seeing anything--- through the heavy layers of dust clinging to the windows looking out onto the busy street. Her eyes stared numbly to the flow of people passing on the crowded sidewalk. She saw their shadows first, dancing dark across the sidewalk in the bright sunshine before them, and then she saw the people themselves. And then... something broke her hypnotic stare.

Her eyes darted upwards. Something made her look. She didn't want to see him--- she never wanted to see him---but she did. It was Brad. She saw his face, his eyes, and even the gentle twist of his lips into the all too familiar smile. For an instant she felt as if she were choking. She sat in a vacuum... the air having been sucked from her lungs. She felt her heart leap to her throat. What was he doing here? Didn't he know it upset her to see him?

She didn't wait for the clothes to finish. She never gave them another thought. Clutching her purse to her breast with a trembling hand she jumped to her feet and darted out into the busy street. Her eyes filled with tears, blinding her, as she rushed into the crowd. She had to catch him... she had to stop him.

People were everywhere. One elderly looking, gray-haired man shrieked at her as she bumped into his arm, nearly knocking him to the ground. On any other day she would have cared, she would have stopped and helped... but not today. Brad was getting away. All she could see was the distance between them growing farther and farther. She ran faster. If only she could catch him. She had to make him see what he was doing to

her. She didn't want him hanging around and bothering her. He had tormented her long enough . . . their days together had ended long ago, she had a new life now.

She ran as fast as she could, and finally, breathlessly, she caught up with him as the flow of the crowd stopped for a traffic light at the corner. Her cheeks blazed red with exertion... she gasped for breath. She grabbed hold of his sleeve and yanked him around to face her. She had him now and that was all that mattered. Everything would be okay... she would make him see.

And then... time stood still. Becky stood immobile and frozen, her feet rooted to the spot, almost as if she had suddenly grown roots from the soles of her feet and anchored herself to the very sidewalk on which she stood. If this had been her last living moment on this earth, and her moving would have prevented it... she knew right then and there she would surely have died. Her frightened eyes stared up into his face.

She heard the scream then. And for a quick moment she didn't even realize it was coming from her... but then she knew, who else could it have been? It had to be her. Her hand went to her throat as if it had a mind of its' own. It was almost unbearable, but slowly, awkwardly... she forced herself to look again. She had to look again. She had to be sure!

And once again, time stood frozen. An eternity seemed to pass. It was then, and only then – after she knew for certain her heart had stopped beating for the last time in this lifetime – she realized she was staring up at the face of a stranger.

It wasn't Brad.

\* \* \*



## Twenty One

The alarm jangled at seven-thirty sharp and Becky groaned as she groped the top of the nightstand trying to find the off switch, the snooze button – anything to stop the ear shattering noise. Finally, quiet. She lay still a long moment, her eyes squeezed shut, trying to ready herself to face the early hour. Mornings were not her favorite time of day.

Confusion filled her thoughts. Why? She didn't remember having a nightmare last night, she didn't remember anything out of the ordinary happening. So why the confusion? She heard herself groan again.

Finally opening her eyes, she saw the early morning sun spilling across the bed and lying in soft dappled patches on the side of Bill's sleeping face. She thought of Brad. Dammit! It was a feeling she hated. Why did she always have to think about him? And heaven forbid... why would she think of him now?

She rolled over and stared up at the ceiling. Memories tugged her back in time. How long had it been since she had opened the front door, answering his knock, and nearly been shocked out of her mind? God... she searched her mind frantically. It had to have been at least three or four months ago. So much had happened since then.

Life went on---she was happy, Bill was happy. They both had been working so hard. Her with the play and Bill with Shooting Stars Magazine. He was certain the hoped for promotion would happen at any day. And still... her confusion held firm. Why did she feel Brad's presence so closely this morning? When would she ever be completely free of him?

She looked to the clock again and shook her head to clear her thoughts. Ten

minutes had passed. Dammit... she had once again wasted too much time. Bill would be late for work if she didn't get him up soon.

Bill lay next to her, sleeping soundly, and she couldn't resist. The covers had fallen away sometime in the night and Becky felt herself smile as she reached out and touched the warmth of one bare shoulder with a gentle touch. She let her fingers trace an imaginary line down his spine, from just under the curling wisps of his wavy brown hair at the nape of his neck, and down until they disappeared under the warm blankets. She was glad he had let her sleep last night when he came in from work. But today... the thought touched her face with a mischievous grin, she didn't know if she could show him the same mercy. His warm flesh looked incredibly inviting.

He didn't awaken right away, but she saw him shudder at her touch, and almost immediately all thoughts of Brad melted from her mind. She no longer had the time to worry herself with the dreadful memories of him. This was now, Bill lay sleeping by her side, and once again Becky felt herself smile. Who could ever need anything more? She snuggled closer.

Bill groaned quietly when he felt the gentle touch of her lips on his bare shoulder. He rolled over, keeping his eyes shut against the brightness of the day, and Becky saw the familiar, and oh so sexy, boyish grin lifting his lips. "Morning, sweetheart," he mumbled.

He was awake now, and Becky grinned even broader. That was all the invitation she needed. Snuggling even deeper under the warm covers she drew her body closer to his. His lips touched her hair and then moved down to brush ever so lightly against her lowered lashes. There was no doubt about it... Bill was completely awake now.

The touch of his hands on her nakedness felt hot enough to melt her flesh. He kissed her mouth then, his tongue probing and insistent as it delved deeper, searching

for the entrance into the moist wetness of her parted lips. The warm sensation coursing through her veins seemed overwhelming. For a quick second she was tempted to throw caution to the wind. It would be more fun to ignore the time... who needed to get up early anyway? She wanted nothing more than to stay right here in bed beside his yearning flesh.

And it was with great restraint that she forced herself not to. She couldn't make Bill late for work only because she couldn't get her fill of their lovemaking. Even after two years of marriage it seemed unbelievable, but every day still felt like their first to her. Becky forced her eyes open and pushed back reluctantly. She smiled and watched his handsome but still sleepy expression. "I'm sorry, honey... but I'm afraid we really don't have enough time."

"Aw come on," he begged. And a quick second later, before she had time to move away, he reached out and stopped her retreat. He pulled her back under the covers and up against the harness of his hungry body. "We could always skip breakfast."

She smiled at him, a quick and playful smile, and pressed a tiny kiss on the tip of his nose. If only she could stay. But instead, she whispered, "I wish we could, but..." She pushed against the strong muscles in his bare chest with her open palms and eased herself towards the edge of the bed. "You'll be late for work if we do."

She laughed when she heard his mumbled response. "You know you're a real party pooper, don't you?" But it didn't matter now. She was already on her feet and smiling down at him as he pulled the covers up over his head, and she pulled her robe on over her nakedness.

Becky heard Bill coming down the hall thirty minutes later and looked up from the Dear Abby column she was reading in the morning paper. She smiled as he stepped into the kitchen looking handsome as ever. She liked the way he filled out his tight

fitting jeans. She reached up and put her hand behind his head, her fingers barely touching his shower-damp hair, and pulled him down and touched her lips to his. She held him close for an instant, her eyes reflecting the love in her heart.

Bill stroked her cheek and smiled as he took his seat. God he loved this woman. He reached for his napkin, his attention now on the feast before him. Becky had used her time wisely while he had been in the shower. The table was laid with bacon and eggs, freshly squeezed orange juice, steaming coffee, and even homemade French toast. “Wow, hon,” he said, letting out a low whistle. “It all looks so good. Where do I start?”

As Bill reached for his coffee mug Becky folded the newspaper in half and laid it next to her plate. She loved doing special little things to please him, but all the same, it still embarrassed her that he praised her every time she did. “I thought you might be hungry. Eat up,” she urged.

Becky reached up to tuck her hair behind her ears, ducking her head as she did so. Watching her movements, Bill almost laughed out loud. She never ceased to amaze him. It seemed almost as though she were two completely different people rolled into one neat, shapely little package. A short half hour ago she had been a wanton vixen, hungering after his vibrant manhood and all he had to offer, and now... she was nothing more than a tender young child, reluctant and shy, and needing only his approval to make her happy, make her life complete.

“If you keep this up you’ll end up with a fat old man on your hands,” he said, pulling the platter of bacon and French toast closer to his now empty plate.

Becky’s laughter filled the air as she lifted her orange juice to her lips. Their teasing and laughter came easy. There was really no need for anything, or even anyone else in their life. They had each other and that was enough. Their peace and contentment seemed almost magical.

\* \* \*

In early November Becky decided she didn't want to take a cab back and forth to the theater anymore. "It's such a waste," she argued. But Bill held firm. And finally, reluctantly... and only to satisfy his worrisome wishes... she agreed to take one at night. Every night. She didn't want to admit that he might be right, but after all, she did come home at ten-thirty. Maybe it was a little late to go jogging through the darkened streets of New York.

The theater wasn't all that far from home, maybe a whole five blocks if she went the long way, but she was no fool, her preference was to cut through the park. After all, this was her favorite time of year. Gone were the hot sultry days of summer. The air felt crisp and cool. So why shouldn't she enjoy herself for now? The trees in the park were busy getting ready for the coming winter, their leaves changing fast, their bright green colors fading into the warm and pretty colors of fall. Oranges and browns, and soft russet. It was all so gorgeous.

And still, even though he gave in to her demands and let her, Bill continued to protest at least once every day. His words deeply ingrained in her head. How could she ever forget them? By now she knew them almost as well as she knew her lines in Sammie's play. "But, sweetheart, don't you understand, I worry bout you?"

It wasn't the weather he worried about. He could pretend it was as long as he wanted to, but deep in his heart he knew he couldn't get anything past her. She was just too damned smart. Sometimes he had to wonder if he might be transparent... she always seemed to see right through him. The truth was he simply didn't want her waking alone through the park, or anywhere else for that matter, at night. It was, too, much of a risk.

But to her... she held firm. It seemed he had once again underestimated her sheer determination, her stubbornness. She refused to be put off so easily. What could

possibly happen to her? Even the remote possibility of Brad's returning didn't seem like a threat anymore. He had never returned. They hadn't seen him since that one time so long ago back in the summer. "No," she argued, stamping her black booted foot and planting her hands firmly on her narrow hips. "I know you love me, sweetheart, and I know you worry about me, but you've got to be a little more realistic about all this. Have you seen Brad lately? I haven't!" Her blond mane swung freely around her shoulders, and to Bill she looked more like a four year old throwing a temper tantrum than the full grown woman he loved so very much. "So why don't we not worry about it anymore? I'm a big girl, I can take care of myself."

Bill shrugged his shoulders in defeat. Of course she was right. She usually was. He smiled and pulled her into his open arms. And once again... Becky got her way.

## Twenty Two

It was a bitter cold day, just two weeks before Christmas, and Becky jogged towards home without a care in the world. She hummed a happy tune, her heart was light, and it was almost Christmas. Life was wonderful.

It had been snowing heavily all day, but thankfully, as all the streets in the city had been sanded and cleared, so had the endless miles of winding sidewalks throughout the park. She was dressed warm enough so that the winter weather was the last thing on her mind.

For two weeks now, and only because Bill demanded she do it, she had been wearing one of her heaviest wool coats. And today---and once more only to please her dear sweet husband---she even wore an extra thick, camel-hair sweater under the bulky coat. She could hardly see over the top of the heavy wool scarf wound tightly around her neck. She felt like an Eskimo. She could still hear the echo of Bill's protesting voice earlier in the morning as she pulled her red knitted sweater-cap low across her ears and turned for the front door. "Becky, please..." he begged. "Why don't you take a cab today? You'll end up catching pneumonia." She remembered laughing. He was such a worry-wart.

She didn't have to work today. The only reason she had even bothered to go to the theater was to celebrate the up and coming Christmas season with Sammie and the rest of the group at their Christmas party. They were going to be off for a much needed two week vacation.

The play "Those Left Behind" was still going strong. They were moving into their third month, much to the surprise of all those who had warned Sammie not to do the

play in the first place... and everyone was working extremely hard. The really important critics, the ones who knew true talent when they saw it, were still boasting every day in their columns in the newspapers about the play's success... 'This play is definitely headed for Broadway'. 'The director a newly discovered work of art'. 'Our praise falls short in describing the talent of these up and coming young actors'.

And even now, after the happy celebration, and jogging towards home in the frozen park, Becky let her thoughts turn to Bill's argument that very morning. It was such a beautiful day, everything crisp and clear, bathed in a blanket of freshly fallen snow. And to her, it didn't even feel all that cold. Why did Bill have to make such a fuss over nothing?

She bounced onward, her long hair spilling free from under the edge of her cap and billowing behind her in the crisp December air. The sound of her boots thumping on the frozen sidewalk beneath her drifted to her ears. She was much too excited to think about the coldness of the weather. Her thoughts were busy. Bill had called her at lunch time.

He had been extremely vague, but she had heard the sound of excitement in his voice. What was it he had said? They were going out tonight to celebrate something? Her brow furrowed, trying to remember. It wasn't like she hadn't tried to get him to tell her, she had... but she had failed. There was no way to pry the truth from him. His last words to her before hanging up had been, "The only hint I'll give you is this... I have a big surprise for you. You just get yourself all dolled up and be ready... I'll see you at six-thirty."

And with that, the phone went dead in her ear. She hadn't had time to protest, to pester him any further... he was gone. She was left standing all alone in the middle of the empty kitchen, holding the silent receiver in her hand, and with an anxious smile



plastered across her face.

The crisp clean air whipping around Becky's flushed cheeks brought tears to her eyes as she rounded a sharp curve in the path and began the final stretch of her homeward journey. Excitement urged her on... she could hardly wait. Bill was always coming up with special little things to surprise her, and she loved him for it... but, she couldn't help hating the part where she had to wait. He was too good at keeping surprises.

\* \* \*

And then it happened again... like a bolt out of the blue... it happened again. Never in a million years would Becky ever suspect she might see Brad again. Life was too wonderful, she and Bill were too happy. It couldn't happen again, she wasn't prepared for it to happen again – but it did!

At first it was only a strange feeling of unease, a prickling of the fine hairs at the nape of her neck. She couldn't put her finger on it, but something just didn't feel right. Something was wrong... definitely wrong.

The park seemed deserted. A quick glance over her shoulder told her there were no die-hard jogging fans like herself, huffing and puffing their way through the frozen winter wonderland. Her heart jumped to her throat. She was all alone.

Slowing her quick paced jog to a fast walk she felt a sudden shudder creep up her spine. In spite of the bitter cold enveloping her she felt her palms begin to sweat. Her stomach twisted into a knot as she listened to the thundering echo of her heart hammering in her ears. She was afraid to look around... if she did she knew she would see Brad there. Her intuitions had never lied to her before. Why would they now? Panic seized her heart. She didn't want to see Brad. And oh God... what would she do if she did? She felt the shudder run up and down her spine even more fiercely this time.

Becky tilted her head towards the frozen duck pond on her left. It felt as if her heart froze within her breast almost as solidly as the ice she saw on the pond reflected in the late afternoon sun. This time it was more than a fleeting glimpse... more than mere intuition. It was really him. She was sure of it. Brad stood no more than twenty yards away, close enough for her to see the vapor of his breath as it spiraled up and around his reddened cheeks in the December air. His hands were crammed in the pockets of his heavy parka, his head covered by the coats hood, but... there was no mistaking the fact. It was him. If she lived to be a hundred she knew she would never forget the familiar sight of his lopsided grin.

The angry winter wind lashed her face and brought fresh tears to her eyes. She ducked her head, rubbing her eyes with gloved hands. If only she could erase the burning tears. She didn't want to raise her head and look again, she was almost too afraid to, but finally... she forced herself to look again. She had to be sure. She had to know.

Blinking hard, hoping to clear her vision, she lifted her head. Were her eyes deceiving her? No one was there. All she saw on the other side of the pond were the frozen trees and shrubs standing all alone and shivering in the frigid winter wind. Brad was nowhere in sight.

Without waiting a moment longer Becky spun on her heel and hurried towards home. Towards safety. "Oh, God, no..." her silent prayers screamed inside her head and inside her heart. It wasn't only her imagination any more. She was sure of it. Brad was real. Wasn't he? Could there be a doubt in her mind? He was standing there smiling at her. She had definitely seen him this time... Hadn't she?

An overwhelming feeling of fear consumed her. She didn't know if she should be more afraid of truly seeing him there, or more afraid of just thinking she might have.

Why was he always interfering? Real or imagined... Why wouldn't he just go away and leave her and Bill alone? What did he want from them? Why did he always seem too be there? Would he never go completely away?

She could hardly think straight. She ran faster and faster, her feet barely touching the frozen sidewalk beneath her, and her eyes staring straight ahead almost without seeing. She no longer saw the beauty of the winter wonderland all around her. She no longer even cared. She had to get home. That was all that mattered anymore.

She had to get away.

## Twenty Three

At long last, after soaking in a steaming tub for nearly an hour, Becky finally managed to get herself to stop shaking. She felt the tension seeping slowly from her taut muscles. It was warm and quiet, soothing. She felt less confused, a little less... but still, the questions wouldn't stop.

Why? Her body might be relaxing, but her mind ran in circles. Had she really seen Brad again? Or had it only been her imagination? Her tired eyes watched the steam rising from the bathtub and floating up to pass the peach colored tiles above her head. She had been here long enough, Bill would be home soon, but sitting here now, surrounded by the fragrant scent of the jasmine bubbles, time seemed to stand still. She remembered the last dream she had had about Brad. She let her eyes droop sleepily. It was strange she had never remembered it before. She had had the dream so long ago. Why was she remembering it now?

She saw the Laundromat in her mind's eye. She saw the man... she saw Brad. Her frown deepened. But it hadn't really been him, had it? She had followed a stranger out into the street. Brad had never been there. Becky felt herself shiver again.

So what happened today? She searched her brain. Could she honestly say she had really seen Brad in the park today? How could someone simply disappear right before your eyes? They were simple questions she had to ask herself. But she already knew the answers. No! They couldn't.

Becky breathed a great sigh of relief. So much had been happening right now in her and Bill's lives. She knew she had been working too hard. And so had Bill. And then again, feeling the warm water lapping her narrow shoulders, she felt her smile

returning. It was warm and quiet and comforting in the candle-lit bathroom. Brad was nowhere around. Why should she let him interrupt in her and Bill's life? Why was she always letting him get to her like this?

The returning smile brought her thoughts back to the present. Bill was something real. He wasn't something only in her imagination. She forced herself to realize Brad was only a nightmare... Bill wasn't. Why should she let her worries about a haunted past deprive her and Bill of all their happiness... all their future plans? She had to put a stop to it. It was ruining their life. She couldn't let it keep happening!

When Bill got home she would finally get to find out what his big surprise was. Maybe it was a vacation. A vacation would be so nice. She sighed and tried to remember. How long had it been? They hadn't had a true vacation in so long, she knew they both deserved one. An even broader smile lifted her lips as she reached for a peach colored towel on the rack above her head and stepped from the tub. Jamaica... Hawaii... maybe even Acapulco again?

Excitement filled her heart. The last thoughts of Brad melted away almost as quickly as the warm soapy suds rushing towards the drain when she pulled the plug. Tonight was her and Bill's night. Nothing else mattered. Nothing could steal away the contented smile that stayed with her.

\* \* \*

True to his word, Bill arrived home at six-thirty sharp. Their dinner reservations at Romanov's weren't until nine, but if his suspicions were right, and they usually were in regards to Becky's timing, he knew it would probably take him another hour and a half to finish getting her ready to go and out the door. If he had learned one thing about her in their first two years together, it had to be the simple fact she was never on time for anything. He could probably count the number of times she had been on the fingers

of one hand. God, he loved this woman. She was, and always would be. . . his whole life.

Becky felt her heart leap to her throat when she heard the sound of his key turning the lock. Her blue eyes sparkled brightly like a clear summer sky. She sat on the edge of the sofa, her hands folded demurely in the lap of her blue satin evening gown. It was hard to conceal the broad smile that eased across her face as she saw Bill push the door open and step into the room.

“I don’t believe it,” Bill gasped, his jaw dropping. Becky sat before him fully dressed and quite ready for their planned evening out, the vision of her loveliness nearly taking his breath away. Obviously there was a first time for everything.

Giggling shyly, Becky sprang to her feet and rushed to his side. She threw her arms around his neck. “Surprised?” The past twenty minutes had been pure torture for her, sitting and waiting for his arrival. Waiting had never been her strong suit. “I fooled you this time,” she teased. “Do you like?” She spun around on one foot for his inspection.

Bill closed the door behind him and stared in silence for a long moment. His eyes traveled up and down the length of her entire body, seeming to devour her. She was glad she had chosen to wear one of his favorite gowns tonight. She couldn’t hide her smile when she saw the pleased look on his handsome face.

Her gown was a strapless, deep blue satin Dior that did little to conceal the creamy softness of her bare shoulders. She wore her long hair swept high on her head and with long curling tendrils hanging loosely over her right shoulder. Ting gold earrings and a matching bracelet on her wrist were all the jewelry needed to complete her exquisite beauty.

Bill took her hands in his own and spun her around. “You look absolutely

gorgeous,” he said with a hungry growl.

She giggled then and pulled him towards the bedroom. She had waited all day and she felt she might burst at the seams. It was tonight already and she was more than ready for the promised surprise to be revealed. Her eyes sparkled brightly as she sat on the stool in front of her dressing table watching him through the mirror. “So...” she asked suddenly, barely able to conceal the eagerness in her voice. “When are you going to tell me your surprise?”

Slipping the jacket of his tuxedo on and coming up behind her, Bill met her gaze in her reflection. She pretended to busy herself with putting on the finishing touches of her already perfect make-up. He knew her curiosity was getting the best of her. He pressed his lips together, trying to hide the grin aching to escape. He had been home less than thirty minutes and she had already bombarded him with hundreds of questions. “All in due time,” he said. He looked past her reflection, his fingers fidgeting with the exasperating knot in his bow tie. “All in due time.”

The elevator doors slid open and Becky looked up with a start. Had he pushed the wrong button by mistake? Expecting to see the apartment lobby, she stared instead into the parking garage. “Bill,” she stammered, reaching out to touch his arm. “We can’t get a cab down here.”

Cocking his head to one side, Bill smiled down at her. He didn’t answer. Instead, he held tightly to her elbow and ushered her across the fluorescent lit concrete flooring and to the side of a shiny red MG sports car parked nearby. For a quick second she felt her heart leap to her throat. Her eyes grew even wider in disbelief as she watched him extract a key from his jacket pocket and unlock the passenger side door. “May I help you into your new car, my lady?” he said, holding the door open for her.

She couldn’t believe her ears. Or for that matter... she couldn’t believe her eyes.

She looked away from the car and stared up at him. His mischievous grin met her shocked expression. He didn't move. "Oh, Bill..." she stammered breathlessly. "A new car? I don't believe it. How could you keep a surprise like this from me?" She spun back around and stared at the new car, stroking the shiny red paint gently with the tips of her fingers. "Are you sure we can afford it?"

He was watching her with pride in his eyes. She was all but jumping up and down with excitement. "Hey, girl. Calm down." His grin widened. "There's more."

"What?"

"This is only part of the surprise."

She eyed him carefully. Surely he was kidding. How could there possibly be anything more? "What are you talking about?" she asked.

Bill laughed then. "You'll just have to wait, honey. I'm not saying another word until we get to the restaurant." And with that, he bowed low, motioning her into the passenger seat. "Now come on or we'll be late for our dinner reservations."

Becky felt a surge of elation as they entered the elegant restaurant. She paused for a moment, her eyes scanning the dining room. Everywhere she looked she saw beautiful women, dressed to perfection and wearing the finest of jewels and furs, and equally handsome men in smartly tailored tuxedos. It almost took her breath away. The headwaiter ushered them swiftly through the crowd and Becky looked up at Bill and smiled.

A moment later, when they arrived at their table, Becky let out a quiet squeal. Mandy and Joe were already seated at the beautifully laid table for four. Another surprise. Bill hadn't told her they had been invited to share tonight's celebration.

Dinner was superb, something very French, and Becky felt sure she would never be able to even come close to pronouncing it correctly. Bill ordered champagne, and the



four of them; Mandy and Joe, and Becky and Bill, ate and drank, and shared a wonderful evening together. Time sped by, and by ten-thirty, Becky had all but forgotten about the rest of Bill's surprise. The champagne had warmed her, it was almost Christmas... and she had never felt happier. She reached for Bill's hand and gave it a loving squeeze.

Bill ordered a second bottle of champagne, and when it came, he filled their glasses and proposed a toast. Becky remembered then his words when they were still in the parking garage. She all but held her breath as she listened intently, twisting her napkin between her fingers in her lap, and with the echo of her heart pounding beneath the satin bodice of her evening gown. She watched his lips as he formed the words. "To Shooting Stars Magazine..." He paused and everyone waited in silence.

Becky's eyes darted to Mandy and Joe, but their faces remained the same, serene and void of any expression other than the look of happiness. They weren't about to give it away. She looked back to Bill. He smiled directly at her then and she felt her heart almost skip a beat. She knew she would surely faint if he didn't hurry.

His mouth opened again and he added proudly, "And most of all to the two luckiest people in all the world."

"Here, here," Mandy and Joe answered in unison, "we'll drink to that."

Becky still felt confused. She had no idea yet as to what they were all drinking a toast to. She saw Mandy and Joe and Bill take a drink of their champagne, and with fingers that trembled and threatened to spill her drink, she tipped her glass to her lips and swallowed a sip, too. "Would someone please explain?" she asked with a tiny frown.

They were all watching her, but she didn't care. She sat up straighter in her chair and cleared her throat. Her words came again. "What are you talking about? I still don't

understand?” And then, before she could ask anything else, she felt Mandy touch her arm.

Mandy and Joe laughed. “Yeah, Bill,” Joe said, gesturing towards him with his glass held high. “Why don’t you clue her in? Don’t you think you’ve kept her in the dark long enough?”

Bill’s smile broadened as he looked to Becky with loving eyes. “Well, babe... I finally received that big promotion we were talking about a few months ago.” It was all he could do to sit still as he continued. “You’re now looking at the senior photographer of Shooting Stars Magazine. Mr. Tate finally made his decision last week . . . He picked me. Can you believe it?”

She understood now why he had laughed at her earlier in the garage. Of course they could afford the shiny new car. There was no doubt about it. And for the second time in just this one night, Becky felt tears of happiness rush her eyes. “Oh, honey, I’m so proud of you.” She felt him grasp her hand beneath the table and give it a fierce squeeze. His happy smile met hers.

The rest of the evening seemed to speed away. All too quickly it was two in the morning and the happy foursome stood on the sidewalk outside the busy disco. For the past three hours they had nearly danced their legs off. For the past three hours they had all had a ball. And now, it was time to go home. It was the end of a perfect night out.

Becky and Mandy shivered in the icy night air while Bill and Joe talked excitedly about the new red car parked at the curb. Becky pulled her coat tighter and touched Bill’s arm. “Honey, please. Can’t you guys talk tomorrow? Mandy and I are freezing.”

Bill nodded and smiled in her direction, and then with one last handshake with Joe, and one quick kiss on Mandy’s half frozen upturned cheek, he bid them good night.

A moment later Mandy and Joe hailed a cab and climbed inside, and Bill and

Becky settled into the front seat of their shiny new red MG.

## Twenty Four

Becky rubbed her palm across the window beside her and peered out at the falling snow. It looked like something out of a child's fantasy. The tiny white flakes floated and swirled like a blanket of angel's wings. She waited patiently, sitting and shivering in the plush leather seat, while Bill stuck the key in the ignition. The powerful engine roared to life and she giggled. She turned back to look at Bill just in time to see him slide the heater button to the on position, flip the fan switch to high, and an instant later... she felt the welcoming warmth rush to greet her tingling winter frozen cheeks.

She still couldn't believe Bill had given her such an elegant Christmas present. Well, both of them really, she corrected herself. The new car had been a gift for Bill as well as for herself. She leaned her head back in her seat and let her thoughts drift. She and Bill had had such a wonderful time tonight celebrating his promotion and raise with Mandy and Joe.

Becky sighed and snuggled closer to Bill's side, letting her head rest against the pillow of his strong shoulder. She smiled and gladly accepted the warm weight of his arm as he placed it across her shoulder, drawing her closer still, the smell of the new leather fragrant as it met her nose. "Mmm. . ." she moaned. "This is more like it."

Bill gave her arm a gentle squeeze as he touched his foot to the accelerator. The little car leapt forward and quickly melted into the sparse flow of traffic headed north alongside them. His heart swelled with pride. This had turned out to be quite an exciting evening. He loved doing special things to please her. Although. . . he had to admit to himself, giving her the car was a bit more than he was normally capable of giving. Oh well, he thought, smiling inwardly---there was no denying the fact that the two of them

deserved it. The traffic light turned red as he neared the intersection. He tapped the brake pedal lightly, as he had been taught to do in inclement weather, and brought the powerful little car to a stop. He kissed the top of her head. “Are you happy, my love?” he asked quietly, his foot resting ever so lightly on the delicate feel of the gas pedal that would in the next second set them on their way towards home. He loved the feel of her shoulder, her warm flesh beneath the grip of his yearning fingers.

“I have never been happier in all my life,” she whispered, her breath tickling his ear. “I love you.”

Bill looked back to the icy road. “I love you, too.” The light turned green and they were off. He steered the little car around a sharp curve with a firm hand on the wheel. They would be home soon, and he could hardly wait to peel the lovely evening gown off her shoulders and feast his eyes on her loveliness.

Becky didn't see it, but she felt it. Bill saw it, but it was too late. The little car hit a patch of black ice and started to skid. Becky's head jerked up, the soft pillow of Bill's shoulder quickly forgotten, just in time to see them skidding sideways across the blurred, icy lanes. It was all happening so fast she didn't have time to think. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the blinding lights of the oncoming car hurtling towards them.

Her head spun around. Bill's hands clenched the steering wheel in a death grip, his eyes wide with fear. She watched him jerk the wheel to the left. An instant later, she saw the other car skid past them, missing them by no more than a few inches.

And still, it wasn't over yet.

Bill's knuckles looked almost as white as the snow pounding against the narrow windshield before them as he clung desperately to the wheel. She could see the taunt muscles standing out against the straight line of his jaw in the eerie amber glow of the dash lights. His eyes never left the road. She felt paralyzed, her own eyes filled with

terror. It felt for an instant like they were flying.

He jerked the wheel first to the left and then back to the right, trying with all his might to bring the car under control. Becky felt her stomach lurch upwards. She realized then, he was fighting a losing battle as he tried to slow the powerful little car down and stop the skidding. It wasn't working. The car seemed to have a mind of its' own. It hurtled forward. They kept spinning round and round, faster and faster, seemingly floating somewhere out into space. Jerking her head back to the window by her side, she tried to look outside.

There was nothing to see. Everything was a blur of white. The world outside spun by in slow motion. It looked as if they had been swallowed up in a vast mountain of snow. Becky's fingers clutched blindly for the arm rest, for anything she could grab hold of, anything to stop her spinning. This was all happening too fast.

And then, less than a moment later, she heard the horrendous crash. The sound of metal ripping and tearing, the shattering of glass. Her numbed senses barely feeling the cold air rushing around her thrashing limbs as she felt herself flying through the icy night air. And then... after what seemed to be a lifetime of suffocating terror she felt and saw nothing. Everything was suddenly quiet.

Becky's eyelids slowly fluttered open and she heard herself scream. It felt as if someone had slammed a baseball bat into her skull, the pain unlike anything she had ever felt. Her lungs felt as if they were on fire as she gasped for air. It was so cold. It was so dark. Blackness surrounded her. Nothing more, nothing less... There was only darkness. Forcing her eyes open even wider, she strained harder, willing herself to see something... anything. For an instant she feared she might be blind. She had to find Bill. If only she could find him, he would make everything all right. He would take away the cold. He would help her see.

“Bill?” She heard the words hurl themselves from her quivering lips. “Oh my God, Bill. Where are you? What happened?”

She lay still... shivering, waiting in the darkness. She heard herself scream again. “Bill...” And still---no one answered. An overwhelming surge of panic swept over her. She had to find him. He would help her... he would ease her fears.

Becky pressed against the frozen ground beneath her and tried to sit up. The agonizing pain in her right leg lashed out, feeling as if it were competing with the pain in her skull for the award winning first place prize in some nightmarish pain competition. Her head swam and for a moment she feared she might faint. But she couldn't... she wouldn't let herself. She shook her head slowly, trying to clear her thoughts.

“Bill...” she screamed again into the eerie stillness. She waited. The darkness seemed to be the only thing listening.

She knew she had to calm down, she had to think. Whatever had happened couldn't have been that bad. If she panicked she knew she would never be able to figure it out. But she could do it... she knew she could. All she had to do was crawl to wherever Bill was, and then... Squeezing her unseeing eyes closed, she tried to remember. What happened? Her head felt foggy, her thoughts confused and distorted. Nothing. It was useless. Her frightened mind refused to work. Bill was the only thought in her head. If only she could find him... she knew she would be all right.

Ignoring the wracking pain enveloping her from head to toe, and even ignoring the bitter cold blanket of snow covering her near naked limbs, Becky pushed against the frozen ground. Her hands slipped on the ice but she willed herself not to fall again. Her fingers felt numb. But still... she struggled. Her breathing came in short painful gasps, but finally she drug herself up into a half slumped sitting position. She felt something

wet in her eyes and knew it had to be blood. There wasn't any part of her body that didn't hurt or feel that it might be already half frozen. Her heavy coat hung in shreds and lay in a tangled heap around her skinned knees and ankles.

A fierce wind swept across the snow, she could feel it clutching and pulling painfully at her long matted hair. It whipped her tears into tiny trails of ice across her numbed cheeks. She couldn't stop trembling.

Time seemed to stand still, as frozen and immovable as the ice and snow that was her bed. And still... she pushed herself further. Bill had to be somewhere near. He wouldn't just go away and leave her here to freeze all alone.

She slipped over and over again, but slowly, agonizingly, dragging herself barely an inch at a time, she felt herself moving higher. The cold air in her face and lungs helping to clear her senses. She realized now she had to be at the bottom of a deep and treacherously slick ditch. She knew she had to hang on for a few more minutes, and she knew, too, what would happen if she didn't. She would never find Bill... she would surely freeze. That thought made her shiver almost as much as the cold did.

Becky paused a moment to catch her breath. She felt as weak as a newborn kitten. It was so damned cold, every part of her body hurting more than she ever could have imagined. All she wanted to do was lay down and sleep... but somehow she knew she couldn't.

She heard it then. Up above her head, and sounding as if it were a million miles away, she heard a strange noise. It sounded almost like the crackling of a roaring fireplace or a raging campfire. She tilted her head up, straining to hear, and when she did she almost screamed again at the pain that shot through her neck. She knew she couldn't let it stop her, she had to ignore the pain... she had to look. She had to find help. If she didn't she knew she might die... if she didn't she knew she might never find



Bill.

She pushed past the pain and looked again. This time her bleary eyes saw the faint red glow hovering no more than ten yards above her. The glow seemed to reach the skies, reflecting off the angry black clouds so far above. So far away, so high above the barren empty branches of the frozen trees that were her umbrella.

Her heart hammered excitedly and caused her to feel faint yet one more time. And once again, she pushed it away. She was safe now. Someone was up there, she saw the search lights quivering and swooping in wide circles. It was Bill, she knew it was Bill. He was up there somewhere, desperately searching for her.

Her voice was weak, she doubted she could be heard, but she knew she had to try. “Bill...” she called out into the darkness. “Bill... I’m coming, honey. I’m down here.”

She waited. Endless moments passed, did she fall asleep? She had to wonder? No one was coming. The pain wouldn’t leave her. Dammit... no one was here to help her.

This couldn’t be happening. Bill would never do this to her. She had to find him. Even if it killed her she knew she had to find him. He would never go away and leave her like this.

Long moments passed, eternities passed, and still... Becky found herself all alone. She was cold, she was dying. She tasted the coppery taste of her own blood rushing down her throat trying to drown her. Where was Bill? Why wasn’t he here to rescue her, to take her home and make love to her, to make her warm and safe forever? That was all she wanted. She only wanted Bill!

But Bill wasn’t here. She was all alone. And if she was to live... she knew she had to find him. Maybe Bill needed her help. “Oh, God,” she thought, “maybe it was Bill who was in danger.”

The pain wouldn’t quit. The pain would never quit. She knew it wouldn’t, but she

didn't care. All that mattered was finding, and helping Bill.

And so she tried. Dragging herself as fast as she could, she inched her way towards the top of the steep embankment. Her frozen fingers grabbed desperately at a prickly bush a few inches above her bruised shoulders. She heard the awful sounds of her own moaning, but refused to let them stop her. Ignoring the constant throbbing pain that seemed to swallow her up, she crawled faster and faster. She didn't have time to stop and rest. One more foot and she would be free. One more foot and she would find Bill.

Her tear filled eyes searched frantically across the snow covered ground as her head cleared the rim of the ditch that had so recently imprisoned her. Everything looked brighter up here... everything looked more hopeful. Bill would be easier to find.

Her neck felt stiff as he twisted her head to look first to the left, and then back to the right. She opened her mouth to call out again.. . Bill would surely hear her now. And then, just as quickly... she froze all over again.

Her words never made it past the trembling blue lips that formed the words. Her eyes came to rest on the black coil of smoke she saw up ahead. Her stomach lurched violently. She clamped one hand over her mouth, trying to stop it, but she couldn't.

Dropping her face to the cold blanket of snow beneath her she threw up. Her stomach heaved over and over. It felt as if it would never stop. Her lungs screamed for air. And then, only after a long and agonizing time that she wished she could have died, her stomach finally stopped fluttering. Grabbing up a handful of snow, she swiped it across her already frozen cheeks and mouth. And it was only then, after her stomach had no more to give, that she dared to look back up.

Her eyes found the same exact spot she had looked at a moment before. She saw the shiny red car there, no more than twenty yards from where she lay, but it wasn't

shiny and new looking now as it had been but a few short hours ago. It now lay crumpled and snarled, a burning heap of junk wrapped snugly against the trunk of a tall oak tree that appeared to be its' stop sign... a permanent stop sign for forever. She watched the billowy clouds of black smoke that lapped and sucked at it from every side. Vicious red flames leaping higher and higher towards the blackened skies above.

The pain didn't matter anymore. Her own life didn't even matter anymore. "Bill," she screamed.

With renewed strength she crawled faster, adrenalin erasing her physical pain and urging her on. She listened to the sounds of her empty screams echoing in the darkness and sounding to her as if they were trying to compete with the noise of the hungry flames she saw engulfing what was left of the tiny red car. "Oh God, Bill," she screamed, "Bill, please answer me. Where are you?"

Becky drug her crumpled and torn body even closer, until finally the heat from the burning car reached out an angry hand and held her back. And yet... her terrified eyes held firm, transfixed on the horrendous sight of the burning car. She felt the blistering heat from the wreck burning her cheeks that had been frozen only moments ago. She blinked hard, trying to erase the blinding tears from her swollen eyes, but it did no good.

It was then, that finally, she saw Bill out of the corner of one eye. She didn't want to... but there was no doubt about it... she did!

And in that split second, she knew she would never forget it even if she lived to be a hundred. She saw Bill sitting in the front seat of the tiny crumpled red car that was his Christmas present to her. His Christmas present to her only a few short hours ago... and now it was his resting place for all of eternity. His seat belt held him upright, his hands still clutching the steering wheel.

Oh my, God... it couldn't be. Becky didn't want to believe it. But, oh my, God, it was. It was Bill!

Becky heard next the distant wailing of a siren, and then it seemed to fade away. She heard in its' place the strange and mournful sound of someone sobbing. She wondered for a long while if the sobs she heard were actually coming from her own throat.

And then... she wondered no more. She no longer heard another sound.

Mercifully... she fainted!

## Twenty Five

Becky was still alive. It was a miracle, but for now, she was still alive. The doctors and nurses were quick and efficient, working tirelessly side by side over her limp and lifeless body. She had received a deep gash across her forehead and the head resident was quick to stitch it closed. She might want to see a plastic surgeon at a later date, but for now, his only concern was to stop the bleeding and get her into X-ray. “Damn, what happened to her?” He barked to no one in particular, his fingers moving deftly, expertly.

One of the attending nurses answered, “I think the ambulance driver said it was an auto accident.” She checked the flow on the IV she had attached in Becky’s right arm. “Do you think she received any head injuries?”

“I don’t know. It’s too early to tell.” The senior resident tied off the last of the stitches and grabbed the slender flashlight from his breast pocket, shining the narrow beam of light into Becky’s eyes. Her whole body was covered in blood from the many cuts and scratches she had received, but it was impossible to tell if she had sustained internal injuries as well without X-rays. He looked to the army of nurses busy scrubbing and bandaging the young patient’s wounds, checking for frostbite. Everyone moving with the precision of a well-oiled machine. “Do we have her stable enough to get her into X-ray?”

By now Becky’s beautiful evening gown lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. It has long since been cut from her battered limbs and tossed aside. One young nurse draped a crisp white sheet over Becky’s nakedness. The IV was in place, her blood pressure was strong, and she was ready to go. “Yes, doctor,” the nurse said.

The X-rays showed less damage than they had first anticipated. Becky had sustained a hairline fracture just above her right ankle, and a slight concussion, but other than that, she had escaped any further internal injuries. “She’s a very lucky young lady.”

“Yes, she is,” the head resident answered. He shot one hand through his hair and heaved a sigh of relief. He lifted one of Becky’s hands and reexamined her fingertips. She had escaped frostbite and hypothermia, a miracle in itself, but she still felt terribly cold. “Let’s keep a close eye on her anyway... and get her warmed up.”

A moment later, he stepped into the nearly deserted waiting room. Pulling his hospital mask from his face, he crossed the room, looking for Becky’s relatives. He had just been notified of another ambulance pulling into the emergency drive and he had only a few minutes to tell Becky’s friends about her condition.

Mandy lunged to her feet. “How is she?”

He touched Mandy’s arm and nodded as he led her to the long row of straight backed vinyl chairs along the front wall. She looked as if she might faint at any moment and he didn’t want to take any chances. “Here, have a seat,” he said, urging her to sit. “Your friend is a very lucky young lady. It had to have been a miracle.” He looked to Joe and nodded his head again. “Mrs. Simmons will be just fine. You can both go in and see her in about half an hour. Just give us time to get her settled into her room.”

“Are you sure? Becky’s really going to be all right?” Mandy stammered. She looked up and met his gaze. She wanted to believe his words but fear gripped her heart. “Is she conscious?”

This time the young resident shook his head no. “Right now your friend is asleep. She has been sedated to help with the shock and pain.” He patted Mandy’s shoulder, hoping to reassure her. “We are keeping a careful watch over her and she should be

waking up in a few hours...” He paused a moment, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Already his mind racing ahead to the unknown patient being wheeled into the emergency room. He smiled. “Mrs. Simmons is not in any real danger. She has a fractured leg and a slight concussion. The worse thing that happened to her is a pretty nasty gash she received across her forehead, but it’s all stitched up now and hopefully it shouldn’t leave any bad scarring. She’s been through a lot... but I expect her recovery will be a speedy one.”

Mandy breathed a sigh of relief, but it was Joe who spoke up first. He got to his feet and reached to shake the doctor’s hand. “Thanks, doc...” he said. “You’ll never know how grateful we truly are.”

“I know. But really... I’ve got to get a move on, we’re pretty busy here tonight.” The doctor crossed the room, but stopped and looked back at Mandy and Joe as he pulled the door open. “The nurse will come and tell you when we have your friend in her room. It shouldn’t be too much longer.”

\* \* \*

The only sound in the quiet room was the monotonous beeping of the many monitors. It all seemed pretty scary, but to Mandy’s ears, it was indeed a welcome sound. Her tired eyes watched the thin green lines arcing and falling as they raced across the monitor screens registering Becky’s vital signs.

Becky had survived the wreck.

Mandy squeezed her eyes shut and let the words replay themselves in her mind. The doctor had reassured her and Joe that Becky would indeed be all right. Her injuries weren’t as bad as they had at first suspected. They were only keeping her here for a few days for observation... just in case...

Joe glanced sideways at Mandy’s solemn face and watched her silent tears slide

down her cheeks. They had been standing vigil by Becky's hospital bed since four-thirty this morning, and even now, it was almost nine o'clock, and there had been little change. The doctors and nurses checked in on her regularly, and true to their word, there hadn't been any drastic changes in Becky's condition throughout the remainder of the night. Everything looked quite normal. She was still sleeping peacefully.

"Sweetheart," Joe urged softly. He reached out and touched Mandy's hand. "Please... you've got to stop crying. You're only going to make yourself sick, too."

Mandy nodded her head. She heard his words but didn't answer. She knew if she opened her mouth to try and speak she would never be able to stop screaming. She sat frozen and still in the high-backed leather chair and stared numbly straight ahead. She couldn't take her eyes off the morbid sight of Becky, lying all alone, and looking incredibly small and frail in the high hospital bed. She was still asleep, not moving or blinking or talking... or doing any damned thing. Her beautiful face and silky white arms were almost unrecognizable. Ugly scratches and bruises covered her from head to toe. The cast for her fractured right ankle extended from her foot all the way up to her lower thigh. A jagged row of stitches inched across her forehead from just above her left eyebrow and up to her hairline. Monitors hung on the wall above the head of her bed, gauging every beat of her heart, every breath of air that filled her lungs. The monotone sounds of their beeping filled the eerie silence of the dimly lit room. This was all so unfair. It was all so mean and cruel, and dammit... it was such a waste.

All the doctors and nurses kept reassuring them. They kept saying Becky would be all right. She would wake up soon. Her physical injuries were minor and would heal in no time at all. But what did they know? None of them, not even one of them, with all their medical expertise and years of training knew Becky the way Mandy did.

Mandy twisted her hands in her lap. The burning tears she felt falling there



simply rolling off the backs of her hands and melting into the silky smoothness of the rose colored evening gown she still wore. For a quick moment she felt her thoughts drift to the night before. An awkward smile touched her quivering lips. Last night hadn't been all that long ago. She and Joe hadn't even been home long enough to change clothes yet when the terrifying phone call had come. And now... such a short time later... here they all were. She squeezed her eyes shut, her head hanging low, and gulped in a breath of air. It felt as if her heart were being literally ripped from her chest. They weren't all here. She and Joe were... and thankfully even Becky, too. Her injuries would heal. She was battered and bruised and had a long road of recovery ahead of her. But at least she was still here with them. But what about Bill? Bill would never be here again!

Joe heard Mandy's strangled sobs and stepped up behind her on silent feet. Her pain was open and raw, and he was at a loss as to what to say to comfort her. He watched her tears rolling silently down her cheeks. He opened his mouth, but words failed him. He reached out and placed a comforting hand on her bare shoulders. She lifted her head and forced a weak smile to her trembling lips. Joe opened his fingers wide and stroked the stiffened muscles in the back of her neck with a continuous gentle prodding of his thumbs.

His silence conveying even more than any spoken words. Joe knew her so well. And she felt glad. It broke her heart to think of how he must be feeling, too. She knew he loved Becky almost as much as she did.

It was warm in the room. Mandy wasn't cold, but... she felt herself shudder. An icy finger seemed to caress her spine. Why was all this happening? It was all so unfair. To Bill... and to Becky. Poor Becky. Hadn't she already been put through enough in her short lifetime? Wasn't it enough she had had to lose Brad so many years ago? And now... Bill, too?

“Honey, please.” Mandy heard Joe’s soft words drift to her once again and she looked up over her shoulder. The sadness she saw on his face mirrored her own.

She knew he was right. She had to be strong for Becky’s sake. She would need her more now than she ever had needed anyone ever before. Mandy still didn’t answer, it was still too early for words; instead, she got slowly to her feet and went to the window and pushed the heavy drapes aside.

The early morning sun climbed higher and higher in the clear blue sky. Had she not known better, Mandy might have thought it was warm outside. She looked away then, from the warming sun, and down to the tall trees on the spreading lawns three floors below. A brisk wind whipped angrily against the few remaining leaves it found there among the skeletal-like branches of the oak trees. It looked as if the sun had melted away most of last night’s snow, the storm all but forgotten.

It looked like the beginning of any other normal, cold and clear, winter’s day in New York. But Mandy knew better than that... it might well be cold and clear, it might even be a typical winter’s day in New York. But normal? No... it was far from normal. It was only the beginning of the first day in a very long line of brutal and agonizing days that lay ahead. For her and Joe, for Becky’s parents who would be arriving from Texas at any minute... and especially for Becky. Oh, God... especially for poor, Becky!

Joe tiptoed up behind her and stood in the small circle of sunshine spilling through the parted drapes and reflecting off the highly polished floor. He placed one hand on her shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. She looked up with a saddened face and met his gaze. Her lower lip continued to tremble. “Oh, Joe... I’m so afraid,” she whispered. “What’s going to happen to her now?”

She choked on her tears as Joe took her hand and pulled her around. The heavy drape fell closed and once again the quiet room became almost dark. The only light

burning was a narrow fluorescent tube on the wall at the head of Becky's bed. He felt her tremble as he wrapped his arms around her narrow shoulders and hugged her close to his heart. It had been an incredibly long night for him as well, and even now, just thinking of all that had happened made him feel sick inside. He knew how close Mandy and Becky had always been. It would be a miracle if either of them survived all this.

"There, there now, sweetheart," he soothed. "Everything is going to be okay. We've just got to keep praying and holding on."

Mandy's words sounded muffled against his chest. "I know," she answered. She knew he was right. Her mind accepted his words as truth. But her heart refused to push past the fear lingering there. How could she ever face Becky again? She still had Joe. Nothing bad had ever happened in her life. And what had Becky ever done? What crime had she ever committed to be dealt all this heartache? Nothing was fair.

Out of the corner of his eye, Joe caught a glimpse of Becky moving as he watched her over Mandy's shoulder. "Honey... look," he gasped, spinning Mandy around. They stepped closer and bent lower, staring.

Becky's eyelids fluttered open and she stared around the dimly lit room, a look of confusion clinging to her bruised and battered face. A moment later, her eyes drifted closed again.

Mandy lifted Becky's limp hand. It felt cool and almost lifeless, and she couldn't help but shudder. "Becky?" she asked softly. Joe pressed closer. She watched him touch Becky's arm with a gentle touch. "Becky, honey... we're here. You can wake up now. Joe and I are here with you."

Holding their breath, Mandy and Joe waited long endless moments, their eyes glued to Becky's sleeping face. A warm tear dripped from Mandy's chin and landed on the back of Becky's hand.

Becky's eyes flickered open once again. And this time they didn't slide shut. They remained open and wide, confused. She blinked hard. The harsh glare of the fluorescent light shining from the wall above her head made it hard to focus. "What happened?" she whimpered. Her eyes rolled towards Mandy and Joe.

Mandy felt the jolt of her heart as it seemed to leap to her throat. She opened her mouth to speak, but she couldn't. She shot a quick glance to Joe.

"Hi there, girl." Joe said, his words filling the silence. "It's good to see you again." His voice was gentle, but underneath the gentleness Mandy could hear his panic. She knew he didn't want to be the one to have to tell Becky what had happened to Bill any more than she did.

For a moment they thought Becky hadn't heard them speaking. Her eyes stared straight ahead and seemed to be looking right through them. Her eyes filled with tears. Her voice cracked. "What happened? Where's... Bill? Why isn't he here with you?"

Joe shot a panicky look at Mandy, but even before either of them had time to answer, Becky lunged forward, lashing out with both arms. She was coming out of the bed.

"Hey!" Joe screamed, shoving past Mandy and grabbing blindly for Becky's shoulders. He pressed her back against the crisp white sheets. He didn't want to hurt her, but he was afraid to release his hold. It didn't look as if her physical injuries were slowing her down even a little bit.

She was screaming now, her eyes wide, fear contorting her features. "Why won't you tell me?" She struggled against Joe's grip on her shoulders. "Where's Bill? I want Bill."

"Oh, sweetheart," Mandy rushed in. "It's all going to be all right. We're here with you."

Becky let her head drop back to the pillow. She didn't move. Her face was blank, devoid of any expression. Joe loosened his grip on her shoulders. She didn't have to be told. He and Mandy had both been spared the chore of being the one to have to tell her. They saw it in her eyes.

Becky looked up and stared into Mandy's face. She watched the tears coursing freely down her flushed cheeks. A tired sigh slipped past her thin trembling lips. Remembrance rushed forward, trying desperately to reclaim its spot in her confused brain... she heard the echo of its familiar voice as it rattled in her head. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying not to hear the words. Why should she listen? If she listened she might hear the truth. And for now... the truth was the last thing she wanted to hear.

Opening her eyes again, and looking around in confusion, she saw the IV bottle hanging by the side of the bed. Its clear tube swung low and was attached to her right arm with a wide strip of tape. She tried to move her legs... but couldn't. She heard Mandy explaining that her leg was in a cast. She heard, too, the comforting words Mandy and Joe were telling her... she was going to be all right. But still... she lay in stony silence. Her frightened thoughts darting wildly.

And then, with the quickness of a speeding bullet, remembrance seeped back. There was no stopping it this time. It was almost like she was watching a horror movie, a horror movie she didn't want to see. Her eyes blinked rapidly, trying to stop the scenes before they took shape, before she had to see. But it was no use. The horrible picture images kept flashing before her on the giant movie screen that filled her head. She saw the accident. She heard the anguished screams. Her eyes darted from side to side. She had to find Bill. He was here and she had to find him!

The images stopped almost as quickly as they had begun. She groaned and opened her eyes once again. Her own tears fell, like Mandy's... unchecked down the

sides of her crumpled face. She didn't try to stop them. She didn't care that they dripped onto the crisp white pillow beneath her head.

Mandy leaned over the high chrome rails on the side of Becky's bed and wrapped her arms as gently as she could around her friend's whimpering body.

Joe didn't move, he stood ridged and still by Mandy's side. He didn't know what else to do. He wanted to reach t to comfort the two sobbing women, but his arms felt as if they weighed a hundred pounds each. He let them hang limply at his sides. He watched in silence as Mandy's and Becky's tears melted together.

\* \* \*

Joe heard a gentle tapping sound on the closed door behind him. He turned, quickly brushing his own tears away with the back of his hand, and stepped over and pulled the door open. Richard and Sara Carson stood before him, looking incredibly old, and incredibly bedraggled. He had been expecting them to arrive at any moment... he and Mandy had had to call them the night before with the tragic news of Becky and Bill's accident... but seeing them now, seeing the look of horror reflected on their faces, he felt his own heart sink even lower. He stepped aside, and with a silent nod of his head, ushered them into the room.

The only sounds in the quiet room were the muffled sobs coming from Becky and Mandy as they clung to each other. No one spoke as Richard and Sara inched closer to the bed, and a moment later, even before Becky knew they were there, they heard her ask in a voice that didn't sound like her own. "Why, Mandy? Why did it have to happen? We were so happy... we were so much in love." Her quiet voice trailed off, choked back once again by the heart breaking sobs.

Mandy stroked Becky's arms with a gentle hand and pressed her cheek even tighter to the side of her face. She didn't have the answers... How could she? She had no

idea of how to even begin to explain. “Oh, Becky...” she sobbed.

Becky heard the quiet swishing sound of the door as it swung closed. She peered over Mandy’s shoulder. Her heart hammered nervously beneath the thin hospital gown covering her nakedness. She knew better than to let herself even think it might be Bill... but maybe... It might be... Oh, God... it could be.

Mandy stepped aside.

Becky blinked her swollen, red eyes and stared even harder. And almost immediately, she felt her heart crumble. It wasn’t Bill. How could it be? Her sobs returned, even louder this time, as Sara and Richard stepped into the room, and she reached out with a weak and trembling hand.

Sara rushed to Becky’s side, her tired eyes traveling up and down the length of her daughter’s slender body beneath the sheets. She looked incredible small. “Oh, baby,” Sara sobbed. “I’m so thankful you’re all right. We were so worried, your dad and I.”

Richard stood close. Becky could see the wide leather belt buckled securely around his waist, but she didn’t bother to look any higher. She already knew the pained look she would see on his face. Instead, her tear-swollen eyes stared blindly at her mom’s serious expression.

She listened to the sympathizing words spilling from her mom’s lips. They were meant to help her feel better... why else would Sara be saying them? But it was useless. The kind words weren’t helping. Becky didn’t feel the least bit better. And then suddenly, without the slightest hint at any warning, the horrible truth hit her . . . As long as she lived, she knew she would never feel better again. Bill was gone. And along with him he had taken her only reason to care about anything ever again.

Sara’s gray-blond hair swung forward and Becky felt it brush against her bruised

cheek as her mom bent low enough to press a kiss to the top of her head. “Oh, sweetheart,” she groaned. “We’re just so thankful you didn’t...”

Her words froze in midair, her last sentence cut short before she had time to add the final words. Richard shot out a quick hand and grabbed Sara by the elbow. Her mouth opened and closed, and Becky thought she looked like a goldfish in a fishbowl, gasping for air and staring out without seeing through the curved glass that made up her home. The room fell silent.

A stunned look inched across Sara’s face. She looked up and met Richard’s solemn stare. Her cheeks flushed red. “I didn’t mean for that to sound so cruel,” she stammered defensively.

But it was all right. Becky understood what she meant. She didn’t have to hear the words spoken out loud. She could hear them clearly enough as they echoed inside her own head. ‘At least you didn’t die, too!’

Once again, her red-rimmed eyes filled with tears.

Richard Carson stepped closer and Becky felt him place a huge warm hand on her upper arm. She looked up and saw him grin shyly. She saw, too, the tears clinging to his thick lashes. “Honey... what your mom is trying to say is we’re so very grateful that we still have you. We know what you’re going through.” He paused then, and for a moment Becky thought he might break down---she had seen how close his tears were---but he didn’t. “And, sweetheart,” he added, “it’s only normal for you to feel the way you do.”

His words broke off and Becky had to force herself not to look away. She had never before seen him look so old. She shuddered.

And from somewhere behind him she could still hear the quiet moaning sounds of her mom’s crying. And from somewhere further away, she thought she heard Mandy crying, too. She didn’t let her eyes waiver. She stared hard at her dad.



He seemed to have aged ten years since the last time she had seen him. It was hard to believe. He no longer looked the same. He no longer looked familiar. His voice sounded the same to her ears... but that was all. The words she heard him saying couldn't possibly be coming from her father's mouth. And then she realized... she didn't know who she was looking at. It was as if she were looking into the face of a stranger. And if this stranger standing beside her bed were truly her father, wouldn't he be saying something different? Wouldn't he be trying to comfort her and ease her pain? He wouldn't just stand there and tell her such lies. Not the same lies she had heard her mother speaking.

Becky squeezed her eyes tightly shut and shook her head. She listened to the soft crackling sounds of the crisply starched pillow slip beneath her head. There would be no way possible for either of them, her mom or her dad, or for that matter... anyone else in all the world, to even come anywhere even close to understanding what she truly felt. Her husband was dead. Bill would never come back. Never again would she feel his strong arms around her, feel his closeness, see his smiling face. She would never again hear the gentleness of his voice whispering to her in the stillness of the night.

She felt her tears running down the sides of her face, and once again... she didn't care. Her tongue darted out to touch her parched lips. Her words came in unbridled anger and not caring who she might hurt. None of this was fair. She glared at her mom and dad, and then at Mandy and Joe standing a short distance away in the sunshine filtering through the parted drapes at the window. "I don't believe anything I'm hearing any of you say. Bill is dead. I don't want to go on living without him!" Her pale eyes grew wide as she yelled, but again, she didn't care. "He was my whole life. I have no reason to go on living."

"But you do," Sara tried to interrupt.

Becky was screaming at the top of her lungs now. Her knuckles white from gripping the rails on the sides of her bed. She didn't care that every movement sent waves of pain through her entire body. Nothing mattered anymore. "Dammit... can't any of you understand? I just want to die, too."

Becky was too close to hysterics to notice as Mandy dropped Joe's hand and slipped from the room. She caught a nurse in passing and quickly explained what was happening. In a matter of minutes, the nurse hurried into the room and quickly pushed Sara and Richard aside with a stern look on her face. "Now, Mrs. Simmons. . . you have to try to calm down." She moved quickly, and even before Becky had time to protest, she injected her with a strong sedative. It pained all of them to watch, but almost immediately, Becky slumped back against the pillow and drifted off to sleep. It was now ten-thirty in the morning . . . and only a short eight hours since the fatal accident.

It was almost midnight when Becky finally woke up again. Mandy and Joe, and even her dad, too, had long since left the hospital. Sara sat all alone with her in the darkened room. Sara sat rigidly on the edge of one of the blue leather chairs close beside her daughter's high, chrome-railed bed. She held her hand lightly in her own, her fingers gently stroking the bruises on the thin white skin on the back of Becky's knuckles. Her heart ached, but for the moment, her eyes were dry. She had long since lost track of the rivers of tears they had all shed throughout the day. He couldn't take her eyes off the scratches and bruises covering Becky's sleeping face. Becky's lips were swollen and cracked, and the deep gash across her forehead was stitched closed with a crooked line of ugly black stitches. Sara saw her eyes flutter.

She leaned forward in her chair. "Honey?" she whispered. "How do you feel? Are you in any pain? Can I get you anything?"

Becky blinked and let her sleepy eyes rest on her mom's troubled face. She

pondered the questions... How was she supposed to feel? Terrific? Great? Hell yeah . . . she felt on top of the world! She opened her mouth to unleash her anger once again, but stopped herself. She saw the dampness of tears on her mother's lashes. She knew her mom meant well, but... dammit. It was all so unfair.

Why did everyone assume the only pain she felt were her physical ones? No one had the nerve to ask her about Bill. Didn't they care how she felt about him? Were they all so blind as to not see how deeply she was hurting? Becky didn't understand. There as such a deep and angry hole left inside her heart. Her life was over. She wanted to die, too. He would never feel whole again. How could she?

"No, Mom," she answered quietly, numbly. The words sounding empty as they met her own ears. She inhaled deeply and winced at the pain in her ribs. She bit down on her lower lip to stifle the sob that threatened to escape her lips. It didn't matter... she refused to let it. The pain she felt shooting through her ribs was only physical pain. She pushed it aside, too, like the other pain that filled her broken heart. She could store it all away on some vacant shelf in the back of her mind. There was plenty of room for it there. For as long as she could remember pain was the only thing she kept hidden there.

She blinked back the tears she felt filling her eyes, and looked up and met her mom's solemn gaze. "No, Mom... I can't think of anything you could possibly get me... except for maybe... Bill."

Sara felt the sting of Becky's angry words. "Oh, honey," she groaned. "You've got to stop doing this to yourself." She got awkwardly to her feet and busied herself with straightening the rumpled sheets across Becky's legs. "I know it's terribly hard on you, but you've got to try to remember all the good times the two of you shared. You can't just let yourself think of the misery."

Becky lay still and tried to force a weak smile to her lips. "Mom, I can't really

think about anything right now. It's like my mind just refuses to work.”

She looked away then and stared around the darkened room. She saw several potted plants and vases of colorful flowers carefully arranged across the top of the dresser, and she couldn't help but wonder who might have sent them. She sighed and looked back to where Sara stood. “Mom...”

Becky's voice was quiet and Sara had to lean close to hear her words. And as she felt her heart crumble beneath her breast... she almost wished she hadn't. Becky opened her mouth and asked the one question for which there would never be any answers.

“Why?”,,,

## Twenty Six

The thunderous sound of the back door slamming startled Sara Carson. The ladle slipped from her hand and clattered to the counter, spilling the generous serving of chicken and dumplings before making it to the waiting bowls. Once again lunch would remain uneaten. Warm tears filled her eyes as she reached for a sponge and began cleaning up the mess.

Chicken and dumplings had always been a favorite of Becky's. Sara remembered the way she used to tug on her apron strings and cajole her when she was just a little girl. 'Please, Mommie... chicken and dumplings, chicken and dumplings. Don't you remember? You promised.' And so it became a weekly ritual, especially during the winter months. Sara would boil and de-bone the chicken, and prepare an enormous pot of the favored meal. At least once a week she fulfilled the honored role of loving mother. Sara smiled at the memory. That had been such a long time ago.

Sara reached for a dish towel and wiped the counter dry. She didn't feel like 'loving mother' would be the exact words Becky thought of her today. Today Becky only thought of her as a meddlesome worry-wart.

The echo of Becky's angry words lingered in the eerie quietness. "Dammit, Mother... you've got to stop nagging me! I don't care what you cooked. I'm not hungry!"

Sara eased herself into one of the empty kitchen chairs. She sighed and shook her head, staring blankly at her hands as they twisted in her lap. What had she done? She simply couldn't understand. All she had been trying to do was help. Becky had been home for over a month, and still... she didn't appear as if she were getting any better.

Her bruises and cuts had already healed, and with hardly any visible scars to remind anyone of what she had been through. The doctors told them her cast would be coming off in less than a week. Sara smiled. In less than a week Becky would be back to her old self again. And then, almost as quickly, as if she were only allowed to be happy but for the briefest of moments... Sara's smile faded.

She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her trembling fingers to her temples. Fear gripped her heart. How was Becky really doing... emotionally? A soft groan rose from Sara's throat and slipped past her lips. She hated to admit it, even to herself... but she knew something was wrong. Becky seemed to be getting worse. Not better. All she ever did anymore was sit around the house and cry. She hardly ate enough to keep a bird alive. She looked terrible, and Sara couldn't help but worry about her. She wasn't trying to be a nag... all she wanted was for her daughter to get better. She begged her to go and see the doctor again. What would that hurt?

Sara felt her fingers clasp in her lap. "Oh, God..." she pleaded. "Please help. Please help her get over losing Bill."

\* \* \*

The sun felt warm as it peeked through the powdery gray February clouds and reached down to caress Becky's upturned cheeks. She lay back on one of the comfortable chaise lounges on the sun deck her dad had built across the back of the house. She tried to clear her thoughts. She hadn't meant to lash out at her mother. She didn't want to hurt her. But, dammit... Why did she have to harp on it all the time? She was feeling fine. Really! Her injuries were all but gone. So what was wrong with her hanging around the house all the time? What would it matter if she never left the house again? What was so important for her to want to go anywhere?

\* \* \*

Sara and Richard sat all alone in the living room watching the ten o'clock news. It wasn't all that late, but Becky had already gone up to bed over an hour ago.

"Do you really think Becky is doing okay?" Sara asked. She hated to interrupt his watching the news, but she hadn't been able to get the memory of what had happened at lunch out of her mind. "I mean," she paused, her mind racing, searching for the words she wanted to say.

Richard looked away from the television and studied his wife. It was a simple question, a question they had both voiced many times during the past month and a half since Becky had returned to Texas with them. But tonight... It seemed as though Sara had asked it this time with a renewed urgency.

"I don't know, sweetheart," he said. "She seems to be. Isn't she supposed to be getting her cast off pretty soon?" His eyes bore into hers in the dimly lit room.

Was there something more? He wondered. Something he might not have noticed? Sara's sudden question awakened a new fear in his heart. He didn't spend as much time with their daughter as Sara did. She had been the one to leave her job in the capable hands of her assistant so she could stay home with Becky. But not him. He had wanted to... but someone had to stay out there and earn a living, he had reasoned with himself. And now, he couldn't help but worry. What if his logic and reasoning had been wrong? What if Becky had developed an infection or something and he had been too busy to even notice?

Sara didn't answer. She stared at her hands folded in her lap, blinking her eyes and trying to keep her tears in check.

"Sara..." He spoke only that one word, and Sara lifted her eyes. He got slowly to his feet and came and stood in front of her. In the amber glow from the lamp he saw the reflection of her tears glistening on her lashes.

“Oh, I don’t know what’s wrong,” she said. She tried to smile, the last thing she wanted was to upset him as much as she was, especially if her fears were truly just that, stupid fears... but she couldn’t pull it off. Her lower lip trembled and wouldn’t cooperate. All she could muster was a tired and forlorn grin.

In one swift movement Richard took her hand in his own, pulling her to her feet and leading her into the kitchen. “What I think we need, my dear, is a big mug of hot chocolate. Don’t you agree?” Sara looked up and met his gaze. She nodded. The comfortable feel of his arm around her shoulder managing to transform her grin into a tiny smile.

A moment later, Sara sat at the table and watched his back as he stood at the stove heating the milk. Long forgotten was the monotonous sound of the newsman on TV as he related the events of the day in the empty living room. Nothing was more important to either of them than their daughter’s welfare.

It wasn’t something tangible she could put her finger on, not even anything she could put a name to. Maybe it was just a feeling---instinct, or perhaps nothing more a mother’s intuition---she just know anymore. But the one thing she did know, and she knew it as certainly as she knew her own name... something had to be done. There had to be some way for her and Richard to help Becky. They had to somehow get her to snap out of it. She had to get over losing Bill.

“I think we might have done wrong. We might have been a little too hasty.” These two sentences came out in a trembling sigh, and then, before she could go on, Sara began to sob.

Richard placed the two mugs of hot chocolate on the table and knelt by her side. Her hand felt fragile and small as he took it in his own. “Sweetheart...” He searched his mind and drew a blank. He had been married to this woman for many years, he should



know her inside out, but sometimes he couldn't help it . . . at times she seemed to talk in circles. "What in the world are you talking about? When were we hasty?"

"The funeral," Sara said and hiccuped. "At Bill's funeral."

"I still don't understand, Sara. What do you mean?" By now the creases in his face, the normal creases on any normal fifty year old, had deepened into bottomless looking ravines, nearly concealing his worried eyes.

Sara looked up with tear filled eyes. She thought of the funeral they had had for Bill. Mandy and Joe McPherson, Becky and Bill's two closest friends had helped with the preparations. Everyone from Shooting Stars Magazine had attended. Sammie Matthews and all the cast members from the plays Becky had acted in had been there. It seemed that everyone had been there. Everyone that is... except for Becky. None of them, she nor Richard, or even Mandy and Joe, had even thought that maybe they should wait for Becky to be released from the hospital. What would it have hurt? She would be out in less than a week. The four of them had discussed it, they would have plenty of time. It wasn't like they were planning an elaborate funeral. It was only a small memorial service. But in the end, even after all their debating, they had decided it might be too painful for her.

But now... sitting at the table in their cozy warm kitchen, Sara couldn't help but wonder. Maybe they had made a dreadful mistake.

Richard's knees creaked loudly as he stumbled to his feet and sat down in the chair next to hers. He looked as if he might have aged another ten years in just this last few minutes. "I don't mean to act stupid," he said, shaking his head, still confused. "But you need to explain it all a little more. I still don't have the slightest idea of what you're trying to say."

"Don't you see, Richard? Becky never got the chance to tell Bill good-bye." She

paused and lifted her mug to her lips, taking a sip of the all but forgotten hot chocolate. “The last time she saw him they were on their way home after a night of celebrating with their friends.”

“So?”

Sara wiped her eyes on the drenched handkerchief she held in her left hand. She reached out and touched her husband’s arm with her other. “Don’t you see?” she asked. “And then they had the accident. Maybe she doesn’t even remember it happening. All she really knows is that she woke up the next morning in the hospital. She knows Bill is gone. But maybe she just refuses to accept that he is dead... that he’s never coming back.”

It was a long while before Richard found the words to answer. Maybe Sara was right. Maybe they had deprived Becky of her right to say good-bye to the one man she had loved most in all the world. The thought was depressing.

Richard’s chair scrapped the floor as he pushed it back and got to his feet. He swallowed the last of his hot chocolate and went to the stove. He was moving on auto-pilot, he had to be... his thoughts were too busy to be thinking of what he was doing. All he could see in his mind’s eye was their poor daughter. She was suffering. She was in pain. But was that all so abnormal? Of course she was depressed. She had lost her husband less than two months ago. What was she supposed to be doing? Going out every night and celebrating?

He went back to the table, their empty mugs refilled one last time, and sat down and faced Sara with a hopeful smile. Maybe she was making a mountain out of a mole hill. Maybe she was just letting her imagination run away with her. “Sweetheart...” He began slowly, sliding a finger across the back of her hand.

Sara looked up.

“Let’s get her to go and see old Dr. Jim,” he said. “Hell, Sara... he’s been her doctor since she was born. He might be able to prescribe some tranquilizers or something, who knows?” Richard smiled then and Sara couldn’t help herself. She did, too. “Maybe our little girl just needs a little more time.”

Sara leaned forward and placed a loving kiss on her husband’s cheek. He hadn’t shaved since earlier in the morning, and by this time of night his whiskers had grown enough to tickle her lips. She got to her feet and carried their empty mugs to the sink and filled them with water. Coming back to his side, it was her turn to help him to his feet. It was well past midnight, and certainly well past their usual bedtime.

They climbed the stairs arm in arm. And in spite of herself, Sara really did feel better. Richard’s words had made a lot of sense. And surely he wouldn’t have said them if he didn’t believe them, too. He helped her see things in a different light, a brighter more hopeful light. Becky was going to be all right. Dr. Jim would know how to handle everything.

And as they stepped into their bedroom, the same bedroom she and Richard had shared for over thirty years, Sara’s face wore an easy smile.

## Twenty Seven

Becky was fast asleep when Sara and Richard tiptoed past her door on their way to bed. Had they bothered to sneak a peek into her room, they would have seen at that late hour in the middle of the night, and in the shimmering moonlight spilling across her bed, the faintest of smiles that still clung to her lips. The smile had been there since she had closed her eyes and drifted off into a dream filled sleep.

\* \* \*

It was a bright and cheerful day, not too cold and without any signs of a single cloud anywhere in the sea-blue skies above. Becky and Sara sat in the waiting room at Dr. Jim's office. Becky eyed the digital clock that sat amid the clutter of file folders and stacks of papers on the edge of the receptionist's desk. It was exactly 11:00 am. Her clumsy, awkward cast was coming off today. Her heart felt carefree and light. Excitement surged through her veins like a wild fire through a desert-dry forest.

Becky held her crutches in one hand and sat stiffly on the edge of her seat. Her cast bound leg stretched before her, her bare toes almost touching the magazine covered table separating the waiting area from the receptionist area. Sara smiled and offered to get her a dog-eared magazine from off the table, but Becky shook her head. She was too excited to look at any old worn out magazine. Her heart hammered in anticipation. In less than an hour it would all be over. Dr. Jim would be through examining her, her cast would be off, and she would be able to walk like a normal person again. And she would finally be able to tell everyone the good news.

She had a secret. She could hardly wait to tell her mom and dad, she could hardly wait to tell everyone...

A moment later Becky heard her name being called.

“Becky Simmons, we’re ready for you now.” Becky looked up and saw Nurse Johnson, Dr. Jim’s head nurse for the past twenty years, as she pushed the inner door open and peered into the waiting room.

It was a struggle, but with her mom’s help, Becky finally managed to get to her feet. Her heart gave a sudden leap. Thank God she getting the bothersome cast removed today.

“Are you all right?” Nurse Johnson asked, coming to her side. “Do you need me to help you to the examination room?”

Becky smiled and shook her head as she adjusted the crutches under her arms. Hopefully for the last time, she thought. “No, I think I can manage.” She hip-hopped to the door, Nurse Johnson hot on her trail.

Dr. Jim had been the Carson family doctor since the day Sara first walked into his office and found out she was pregnant with Becky many years ago. He smiled at the memory as he pulled the patient file from the plastic door rack and read the familiar name on the label across the top of the thick file. “Well, hello there, little Miss Becky,” he said, smiling as he stepped into exam room Number Three.

“Hi, doc.” Becky’s smile broadened when she saw the familiar face. But whether the smile was from her happiness at seeing him, or more so from her relief that the long wait was over... she couldn’t be sure.

For the past ten minutes she had been sitting on the edge of the narrow examination table, trying desperately to clutch the loose ends of the open-backed gown she had been given to wear. Her right arm had begun to ache, and then a minute or so later, so had her left. It was hard to reach behind her back and hold the gown closed without losing her balance. Her cast-bound leg pulled her forward, dragging her closer

to the edge of the too-narrow table, weighing her down, and making balancing with only one free hand a nearly impossible task.

And then Dr. Jim stepped into the room and smiled... and Becky breathed a great sigh of relief.

Dr. Jim plopped his rounded frame atop a low, caster-wheeled stool and scooted backwards, away from her, and leaned back against the edge of the counter across the room. He crossed his legs and held Becky's unopened file on his lap. It had been such a long time since he had seen her, and it looked to Becky as if he were getting comfortable... getting ready for a nice long chat. The happy expression on his face seeming to grow.

It was a good half hour later when Becky finally got to her feet and limped into the waiting room. Her leg felt strange after being encased in the heavy cast for the past two months, but it still worked. And give her a couple of days, she thought, and her limp would be a thing of the past as well.

Sara lunged to her feet and rushed to greet her as soon as she saw the inner door swing open. "Oh, sweetheart," she said. "You're walking. You look wonderful."

Becky didn't answer; she was far, too, excited... but instead, her smile stretched even wider. Her heart hammered nervously. At long last, she could finally tell everyone her secret. Her hopes had been right after all. She could hardly wait until dinner time. She wanted to tell her mom and dad together. They would both be so happy... just like her... and she could hardly wait!

Stunned would have been a better word to describe their reaction.

The clatter of Richard's fork shattered the quietness in the dining room as he dropped it beside his plate and it hit the table. Mashed potatoes spattered across the linen tablecloth like an exploding snowball. "Do what?" he bellowed.

Becky sat stiffly in her own chair, her eyes wide watching her parent's reactions. She didn't understand. They were supposed to be happy. They were supposed to be as excited as she was. She opened her mouth in defense. "But, Dad..." Her eyes darted in her mom's direction, and then back to her dad. "Don't you see? I'm ready to go home now. I'm completely well, Dr. Jim gave me a thorough exam and he said I'm fine. There is no reason for me to stay here with you and Mom any longer."

"But sweetheart." It was Sara's who spoke up now, her voice barely louder than a whisper. Her face had suddenly paled and Becky couldn't help but notice the way her fingers twisted the napkin in her lap. "But are you sure you're ready?" she asked. "I mean... with you being pregnant and all?"

Well at least her parent's had accepted that fact. She had thought that that would be the hardest to get them to understand. It was a miracle. Becky couldn't stop the tiny smile that reached her lips. Bill hadn't left her after all. Not really. She knew he would never do that. He had left her a child!

Richard shoved his plate aside and stood up. His chair tipped precariously backwards, nearly falling to the floor, but he didn't stop to try and right it. He didn't care. Let it hit the floor! Becky had never seen him so angry. "Becky," he shouted. "Have you completely lost your mind? How in hell do you think you can go home now? How are you planning on supporting yourself... let alone with a baby on the way?"

He stormed from the room without waiting for an answer. It looked as if he were washing his hands of the whole situation.

Becky opened her mouth to speak, she had to come to her own defense, she had to explain... but words failed her.

She looked to her mom. Sara was perched on the edge of her seat. She hadn't dared to move. Becky saw her tears shimmer in the flickering glow of the candles in the

center of the table. Tonight was supposed to have been a celebration. Becky was well. Her cast was gone. And it looked like life was getting back to normal. So what had happened?

“Mom,” Becky implored. She reached for her mom’s hand but Sara pulled it away. “You do believe in me don’t you? Can’t you see that I’m doing the right thing?”

“I just don’t know, sweetheart. I just don’t know.”

Becky watched her mom as she, too, got to her feet. She stepped from the room without another word, leaving Becky sitting all alone. She had never imagined her parent’s would take the news so hard. They had always had such a strong faith in her. Always before. But apparently... not today. It suddenly felt as if she were taking on the weight of the world all by herself. It was a scary feeling.

She clasped her hands in her lap and realized her smile had returned. It wasn’t going to be so bad after all. She wasn’t left all alone. It didn’t matter if her mom and dad believed in her or not. Bill did, and that was all that was important. She still had his baby!

\* \* \*

And then downstairs, even though no one was awake to hear it in the pre-dawn darkness, the antique clock on the mantle chimed four am. And as it did... one lone tear slid from the corner of Becky’s sleeping eyes.



## Twenty Eight

On Wednesday morning Becky couldn't decide what to wear. She stood in front of her open closet wearing only her bra and panties. Her leg might be in a cast, but that didn't stop her busy hands. She rummaged through the few remaining skirts and dresses lucky enough to still be on hangers. The rest lay behind her, strewn carelessly across the foot of her bed, or piled in crumpled heaps along the carpeted floor at her feet. Skirts, blouses, assorted dresses... it didn't matter. None of them looked right.

She paused a moment in her mad search and lovingly eyed her blue jeans and slacks, pushed to the farthest right side of the narrow closet. Oh how she wished she could slip into a snug pair of faded jeans. But no... She looked down at the chalky colored cast that seemed to have become a permanent part of her anatomy. She smiled, her fingers stroking the top of the cast where it met her thigh. "After today, my old friend," she spoke in the silence, "I'll finally be rid of you. Hopefully."

Her cast wasn't supposed to come off for another week, but her mom and dad had insisted on getting her a doctor's appointment for today. They didn't think waiting another week would be a good idea. 'They were worried about her', they had said. 'You just don't seem to be improving, getting back to your old self', they kept reminding her. Dammit... what did they expect of her?

But in the end she had finally agreed to go, but only if they would help her talk Dr. Jim into removing her cast one week before it was due to be removed.

"Becky..." She heard her mom calling from downstairs. "You better hurry. We don't want to be late."

Shooting a quick glance over her shoulder, Becky looked at the clock on her

nightstand. Her appointment at Dr. Jim's was scheduled for 1100 am. and it was just now 10:15. "I'm coming, Mom," she shouted, rolling her eyes.

Oh God, how she hated to be rushed. Wasn't it enough that she had agreed to go in the first place? Why did her mom always seem to want more? She spun back around and pulled the last hanging skirt from the near empty closet, a free flowing, black and rose colored print wrap-a-round. Her fingers trembled as she tied the long black sash around her waist.

Becky hobbled out into the hallway and saw her mom, half way up the stairs. She already had her coat on, the collar buttoned snugly around her neck, and Becky almost laughed. Her mom looked like an Eskimo... ready for a long trek across the endless miles of frozen Alaskan terrain.

Sara had her purse tucked under her right arm and with the car keys jangling noisily in her left hand, she looked up and smiled. "You look lovely, honey," she said, turning on her heel and descending the stairs. "But come on..." she waved frantically, her arm motioning for Becky to hurry. "We're going to be late if we don't get a move on."

Becky took the stairs one at a time, pausing after every step. First the crutches went down, one step at a time... she could feel herself breathing heavily . . . and then carefully, inch by inch, and oh so slowly... the feet went down, broken leg held straight and supporting no weight, and then the good one. Even after having the cast on for two month, she still found it almost impossible to navigate the steep staircase.

"Gee, Mom," Becky complained. She paused a second to catch her breath. She was halfway there. "What's the rush? It's not even ten-thirty yet and my appointment is not till eleven. We won't be late."

Sara watched her daughter's slow decent from where she stood by the front door.

She held Becky's coat waiting to help her slip it over her shoulders. She looked flustered. "Stop complaining, Becky... and come on... hurry."

"Mom, it's only what, maybe five or six miles to Dr. Jim's office. What makes you think we'll be late?"

"I know, I know," Sara answered, holding the door open. She made soft muttering sounds as she watched Becky navigate her cast and crutches out onto the porch and into the early morning sunshine. She tucked Becky's coat over her shoulders and continued explaining as she paused and locked the door. "But they've got 39th St. all torn up down by Broadway. You know how they're always doing roadwork somewhere even when they don't seem to need it." Sara's eyes were bright as she took Becky's elbow and led her down the front steps and around the house to the driveway.

Becky crawled into the front seat of the old station wagon and smiled as she watched her mom tuck her crutches in beside her and slam the door. It was cold and Becky felt herself shiver. She tucked her coat tighter around her hips and shoulders, and waited.

"So," Sara said, tossing her purse on the seat between them and slamming her door. "I guess we'll have to detour on, uh... what's the name of that street that cuts across to 25th?" She sounded flushed and Becky rolled her eyes.

"Mom, just cut over to the Seawall and run it down to 25th."

"The Seawall, are you kidding, Becky? There's always traffic on the Seawall."

Becky rolled her eyes again, and added a smile. "Mom, its winter. Not exactly the middle of tourist season you know."

Sara turned the key in the ignition and the old car revved to life. Finally, Becky breathed a sigh of relief... They were on their way. They had over thirty minutes to drive the short distance, and detour or no detour, Becky knew they would have plenty of time.

Sara turned in her seat to watch the car's descent of the long driveway, and as she did her coat fell away from her lap. Becky never knew what made her look... she was much too busy with trying to drown out her mom's idle chatter... but something did. Something caught her attention.

As Sara's coat fell away from her lap Becky caught a quick glimpse of the dress she wore. She hadn't noticed before... everything had been too hectic, everything had been too rushed. But now... Becky felt her eyes widen.

A sudden feeling of déjà vu swept over her. Sara was wearing the exact same dress Becky had seen her wearing in the dream she had had two nights ago about their visit to Dr. Jim's.

They were on the street now and Sara put the car into drive. It lurched forward. Becky tried to smile... but she couldn't. She felt the familiar sting of tears rush her eyes. She didn't want to feel them... but they always seemed to be there. Why? When would she ever be past them? She had cried for Brad. And she had cried for Bill... oh God, had she ever cried for Bill. Becky felt herself shudder even beneath the warmth of her heavy coat. And still the tears came. Her mind raced in circles searching for the answers she knew she would never find. Would she ever get past the tears? Would she ever be free from the pain?

She stared through the passenger side window, her eyes staring at – but not really seeing – the rushing waves of the ocean. The pain she felt in her heart reminding her the tears were there this time for the sorrow she knew she would cause her mom and dad later this evening.

Becky listened to her mom's words but she didn't answer. Why should she? She had already had this very same conversation with her. She had already lived through this day. Everything would happen just the way it had happened in her dream. It would

be a wonderfully glorious day. All would be smiles, all would be happy. Right up until the end. And then...

She forced a happy grin to her face and turned to watch her mom. The light turned red and Sara brought the car to a stop at 25th and Broadway. Just a few more blocks and they would be there. Sara's words droned on. What was it she was now saying? 'You were right, Becky. We're making good time'.

Becky sighed. She wasn't listening. She knew she didn't need to. Her ears had already heard it all before. And then the sadness deepened. It filled her heart to overflowing. She squeezed her eyes shut even tighter, trying to block the images... but she couldn't. She saw the three of them, her mom, her dad, and herself. She saw them all at the airport... and once again she saw their tears.

The light turned green and Becky felt the car move forward. Sara smiled as she held the wheel and turned left onto 6th Street. Dr. Jim's parking lot was just ahead. Becky tried to swallow the lump she felt rising to her throat. She wanted to smile in return, but it was impossible.

And instead... she felt heartbroken.

## Twenty Nine

The first day back was harder than Becky had thought it might be. Everything looked so familiar, the memories felt so fresh... She had been gone for over two months, two months that had felt more like an entire lifetime to her, and suddenly... here she was. Shouldn't she feel different? Shouldn't she feel more like a stranger? And then the answers came to her. She stood on the sidewalk, her arm raised to hail a cab, and suddenly she knew. She felt it in her heart. She didn't feel like a stranger because she wasn't. And everything felt familiar because it was. She was home!

Becky smiled when the cab screeched to a halt at the curb, the driver quick to grab her bags and toss them into the trunk. Climbing in the backseat, Becky felt her heart soar. Familiarity rushed up to greet her like a comfy blanket. She heard once again the loud and blaring horns of the many cabs and cars and buses that made their way through the heavy noon-time traffic. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry, rushing to and fro, like a wild bunch of ants at a Labor Day picnic. Night or day, the hour didn't matter... the streets were always crowded. She had missed the hustle and bustle of life in New York.

And then she was home. Her heart pounded nervously as she turned the key in the lock. She felt excited, and yet at the same time... she felt terrified. What would she find behind the closed door? She knew better than to let herself think Bill might be there waiting on her. But still... what would she find?

Her hands trembled as she turned the knob and gave the door a gentle push. It swung freely open and the empty apartment stood before her, looking almost as if she had only just left it an hour before. Everything looked the same, everything looked so

normal. She felt her heart leap to her throat. She suddenly felt like an intruder, a total stranger about to enter someone else's home. It wasn't a feeling she could get a grasp on. She knew it was crazy. This was her home. And then she shuddered... She reminded herself, it was her and Bill's home.

She sidestepped the suitcases, leaving them all alone by the front door, and walked slowly, almost shyly from room to room. The eerie feeling stayed with her, refusing to be pushed away. She couldn't shake it. She felt almost as if she were watching it all, seeing herself going through the motions; touching things, seeing things, and even smelling all the familiar smells, but from somewhere else... somewhere far away.

All was quiet in the kitchen. She saw the shiny copper pots and pans still hanging from the wrought iron rack above the stove as they had always been. Her fingers slid along the Formica counter-top, and she smiled as she felt the smoothness beneath her touch. Hers' and Bill's coffee mugs were still sitting there. No one had moved them from their usual place between the toaster and brown ceramic canisters. She paused a moment to brush an imaginary spot of dust off the counter as the over sized mugs held her gaze. It was where they had always kept them.

Her next stop was the bedroom. Nothing had changed here either. She walked slowly around the familiar room, and as she did she heard the soft echo of her steps on the plush carpeting. She stared at the bed for a long moment. It was neatly made, just the way she left it each and every morning. Hers' and Bill's jewelry boxes were still sitting at right angles to each other on the left side of the mirrored dresser. Everything looked so normal.

And then, at long last, she went into the living room. Somehow she knew it would be the hardest to face. The living room had always been their favorite room. She

stood in the doorway in the small circle of sunshine filtering through the window across the room. Memory carried her back in time. She remembered Bill's words the first time they had set foot into the apartment. "Wow, Becky" he had shouted. The faint echo of his excited words forever etched in her head. "You've got to see this. It's perfect!" And then he had rushed into the kitchen, taking her arm and dragging her away from looking at all the cabinets and drawers. And true to his words, she felt it, too, as soon as they stepped into the living room. It was love at first sight. At long last, they were finally home.

Becky sank down on the sofa with a heavy sigh. Her eyes strayed to the empty fireplace. Everything was all so familiar... everything felt the same. And then she felt the bitter sting of tears. It was all a lie... nothing was as it had been. How could it be? It was all so empty and cold. A vacant shell. All the furnishings were there; the tables and chairs, the bed and the dressers, the bric-a-brac on the shelves and table tops... but that was all. There was nothing more. She saw all their personal belongings... hers' and Bill's. All the things they had so lovingly cherished and collected together over the years, but as she sat on the sofa staring around the quiet room, she saw them through the blur of her tears. They were only inanimate objects. None of them were real... none of them were alive. She felt her heart shudder beneath her breast. She knew then... this was as close as it would ever come... nothing would ever be the same again.

The tears came. Slipping one by one from the corners of her eyes and trailing silently down her cheeks. She didn't try to stop them... it would have been useless. Grief overwhelmed her. It felt like an old friend who had been kept waiting such a long time out in the cold. She felt it rise up and fold her into its sticky, cold embrace. She opened her mouth and shrieked her rage. But in the silence of the empty room, the room that had once been her and Bill's favorite... there was no one to hear.



When darkness came Becky's tears were dry. She felt drained, empty of all emotions and completely exhausted. But at the same time, there was no denying it, she felt something else... Another strange feeling, similar to the one she had felt when first entering the apartment washed over her. But this time she felt more... she felt somehow closer. Her eyes burned as she stared up at the ceiling through the darkness. Nothing had changed... she knew that. She was still all alone, but still, she was here. She might feel sad, she might feel lonely, but she had to remember... she was where she wanted to be. No one had forced her to come home. It had been her decision, her decision alone. She got slowly to her feet and crossed the room in the darkness.

Her fingers trembled as she piled the logs into the empty fireplace, and she shook her head. And then, almost as if they were the lines in one of Sammie's plays, she forced herself to repeat the words, over and over again in her head. 'No one ever told me this was going to be easy'. She struck the match and a moment later the tiny flicker of flame caught hold in the kindling. She watched it long enough to see the bark on the logs ignite, and then she stepped to the bar to pour herself a glass of wine.

Suddenly the room didn't seem quite so empty. She stared into the dancing orange and yellow flames. The overstuffed pillows feeling comfortable as she settled back against them on the carpeted floor and let her thoughts drift. She pushed the grief aside. The memories were so sweet. And there in the silence, with only the soft crackling sounds of the fire to fill the empty room, Becky thought of the baby Bill had given her. And from somewhere deep inside herself, she felt Bill there, too. She knew now she had been wrong to let herself look back so many times, looking back only brought sorrow...

The fire flashed for a quick moment as one of the thick logs had finally burned through and fell in two separate pieces, each still burning brightly to the hot coals

below. But in that instant, Becky never saw it. Her thoughts drug her back in time. She remembered the sorrow she had suffered for so long by looking back at her life with Brad. The guilt, the heartache, the horrible nightmares. If only she had let all that go a long time ago. She and Bill would have had more time together.. .

Becky shook her head to clear her thoughts and swallowed the last sip of her wine, laying the empty glass on the carpet by her side. Her stare returned to the dancing flames. And once again she pushed the remembered grief aside. It was easier to think of Bill. It was easier to think about the future. If looking back brought only grief, then she would never allow herself to do it again. Bill never wanted her to feel sorrow. He only wanted her to feel happiness. She felt her smile return. Relief swept over her like a warm cozy blanket. And she knew in her heart... she knew in her soul... Bill would never leave her.

Becky didn't remember exactly when she fell asleep. She never saw the fire burn itself out. But there in the darkness, with only the faint red glow of the embers to light the room, she did. Her dreams were sweet, as her memories a moment earlier had been. And there in the darkness, she slept comfortably... the glowing coals keeping her warm, and the plush carpet making her bed soft.

## Thirty

“Hey, girl... aren’t you going to break for lunch today?”

Mandy had been busy all morning. In fact she had been busy all month. Joe was working on three different, equally important court cases all at the same time, which meant of course... Mandy had her work cut out for herself as well. She spun around in her swivel chair, her mouth open and ready to shout her disapproval at being interrupted, and she froze. “Becky? What in the world?” Her mouth fell open. “I thought you were still in Texas.”

Becky stood in the open doorway wearing a comfortable pair of black corduroy slacks and a teal-green turtle neck sweater. “What kind of greeting do you call that?” Her smile was wide as she hurried across the room, throwing her arms around Mandy’s neck.

“But... when? I mean...” She couldn’t get past her stuttering. She was on her feet, wrapping Becky in a tight bear hug. “When did you get back? You should have called.”

By now Becky was giggling. “Hey, slow down girl.” She pulled back, holding Mandy’s hands in her own. She nodded her head towards the cluttered desk. “It looks like you’re pretty busy here, but... you think I might be able to kidnap you for a quick lunch?”

Mandy grabbed her purse and pulled Becky towards the door. “To hell with work. I’ll finish this stuff later. We’ve got so much to catch up on. And besides... I’m starving.”

\* \* \*

Mandy accepted the glass of wine Becky held out to her. “So tell me... when did

you get back?" They had barely sat down, and already she bombarded Becky with questions.

"I got back last week. And..."

"You what?" Mandy sputtered, nearly choking on wine.

Becky reached across the table and took Mandy's hand. She should have known Mandy would be upset that she hadn't called earlier. But she had been so busy. She had so much to do to get her life back in order. "I'm sorry," she apologized. "I know I should have let you know, but I've just been so darned busy."

"Well, I love you, too, sweetheart." Mandy pretended sarcasm.

"I said I was sorry."

Mandy hesitated, but only for a moment, and Becky saw the tiny flicker of a smile touch her lips. "Well, okay. I guess I'll forgive you this time. But only if you promise never to do it again."

Becky nodded and quickly smiled.

"So..." Mandy leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. "What's kept you so busy that you haven't even had time to pick up the phone?"

Finishing her chef's salad and pushing the empty plate aside, Becky lifted her eyes and met Mandy's gaze. She dabbed her mouth with the corner of her napkin. Where should she begin? She searched her mind. If she were to try to explain it all right now she knew Mandy would never make it back to the office. "What time did you say you have to get back to work?"

And so she began...

Mandy sat mesmerized, the two of them picking at their lunches and barely tasting their food. Becky started filling her in.

It was three o'clock when Mandy finally called the office to tell them she

wouldn't be coming in for the remainder of the day. They had long since left the restaurant, and now they sat at Becky's kitchen table. The coffee was hot... the news was astonishing... and Becky had never seen Mandy at such a loss for words.

Becky told her first about the baby. To her, it was the most important. She would never be alone again. Bill hadn't really left her... not completely. She would always have his child. And in turn... she would always have a part of him. That thought kept her going. It gave her strength, and courage, and hope. And in a way it was almost as if that one thought was the glue she needed to keep her broken heart cemented together.

Becky topped off their coffee and set the pot back on the stove. "My only regret is," she said, returning to her seat. "I just wish I could have made my mind up a little earlier." Her eyes grew misty and she turned her head.

Mandy laid her hand on Becky's arm. "Yeah, I know, honey. But you had no way of knowing..."

"So..." Becky jumped to her feet, holding out her hand. "You want to see the nursery?"

"Nursery? Sure, lead the way."

Becky paused at the door to the spare bedroom, her eyes sparkling. "If I may be so bold as to borrow a few of your own words," she teased, "this is one of the reasons I've been too busy to even pick up the phone. I've been locked up in here redecorating for the past four days."

The room was lovely. Becky had painted three of the four walls a soft peach color. And on the fourth she had hung an adorable looking wallpaper filled with assorted baby animals, puppies and kittens, and teddy bears. The crib and changing table were painted a glossy ivory color, matching the high-backed antique rocker which sat in the corner by the window.

Mandy smiled and spun around taking it all in. “I almost don’t know what to say. It looks like something out of a fairy tale.” She stroked the lacy ruffle on the edge of the curtains and shot a quick look over her shoulder, grinning slyly. “Do I somehow get the impression you’re hoping for a girl?”

Becky felt the heat of a blush touch her cheeks. “Well...”

They went back into the kitchen and Becky poured the last of the coffee into their cups. She stepped to the sink and turned the water on. “You aren’t in any hurry are you?”

“Hell, no. I may never go home... I’m having too much fun.” Grabbing the coffee canister and removing the lid, she waited as Becky ran water into the empty pot.

“Don’t you think Joe might wonder where you’re at?”

Mandy slid back into the chair she had been sitting in for most of the afternoon and leaned back with a contented sigh. “When he gets back from court I’m sure he’ll find out. You know how gossipy the girls at the office are. And besides...” She toyed with a strand of hair hanging across her shoulder, twisting it around one finger. “Everyone saw me leaving with you, so why should I worry? It’s not like I slipped out of there with a strange man.”

The next hour passed all too quickly. Becky went on to explain that she planned on going back to work next week. She had already called Sammie and he had been delighted to hear from her. She knew she wouldn’t be able to perform in any plays after she started showing, which she knew would probably happen in a few more months, but Sammie had assured her they would come up with something to keep her busy. They were always in need of someone to help out in wardrobe and props.

“Well...” Mandy watched her pensively. “It sounds like you’ve been pretty busy. You seem to have it all planned out.”

Becky toyed with her coffee cup, turning it in circles. She smiled. “But of course I’ve got it all planned out. Why wouldn’t I?”

Mandy glanced at the wall clock hanging next to the stove. It was almost seven already. She got to her feet and laid one hand on Becky’s shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I’m proud for you, you’re handling everything so courageously.” She kissed the top of Becky’s head. “It sounds like you just might make it.”

“I will, Mandy. I know I will.”

\* \* \*

Becky went to bed that night wearing a contented smile. She thought of all she and Mandy had talked about that afternoon. So much had changed, but at the same time, she couldn’t help but think of all the things that never would. Hers’ and Mandy’s love for each other would never change. It would always be there. She switched the lamp off and lay back against her pillow in the darkness.

Her hand rested on her still-flat stomach and her thoughts turned to Bill and to the new life growing there beneath her heart. She smiled again. And five minutes later... she was fast asleep.

## Thirty One

It was already three-thirty... it was already Wednesday afternoon, and as Becky hurried to finish, she felt frantic. Tonight was the first night of dress rehearsals for Sammie Matthews' new play, and she didn't have any more time.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Becky stepped back, two paint brushes in one hand and a cleaning rag in the other. She smiled, admiring her handiwork. At last she was done. She lay the brushes and rag aside and snapped the lid closed on the last can of paint. The last backdrop was finished.

For the past six weeks she had been up to her elbow with trying to complete three totally different backdrops. A job she had thought would be so easy. How hard could painting be? She had threatened to quit after the first three panic-filled days, painting backdrops was a career she was sure she would never be able to conquer.

She remembered smiling... and Sammie smiling, too. And in the end, as was usually the case where Sammie was concerned, he had gotten his way. He was such a smooth talker, making her believe it would be so easy. He gave her the needed confidence to give it a try. All she needed now was maybe skill . . . but leave it to Sammie again, he even provided that.

\* \* \*

"Becky," Sammie had said with a huge smile. "I'd like for you to meet my number one man. . . This is George Evans. And George, this is Becky Simmons." And then, without giving it a second thought, Sammie grabbed up his clip board and hurried from the room, leaving the two of them all alone in his office to get acquainted.

That day had been six weeks ago, but to Becky it still seemed like yesterday. It



was her first official day on the job, and Becky, feeling a bit overwhelmed, and more than a little put out at Sammie's hasty exit, turned and faced the impressive man who stood before her.

He looked like a giant, towering over her by at least a foot. She felt a lump rise to her throat. She didn't know if she should tuck tail and run from the room as Sammie had done, or stand her ground and say hello. The thought brought a timid smile to her lips. Deciding to do the latter, she extended her hand and glanced up and met his gaze. "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Evans. Sammie has told me all about you."

"George," he corrected, giving her hand a quick but firm handshake. "Just call me George. Mr. Evans is my father's name."

Becky grinned and turned, motioning to the two folding chairs in front of Sammie's cluttered desk. "Would you care to sit and talk for a while? I'd offer you coffee..." They both shot a glance at the battered aluminum coffee pot Sammie kept on a hotplate on a bookshelf in the corner. "But... if you know Sammie half as well as I do, you probably know it's left over from sometime yesterday."

"I think I'll pass." They both laughed.

Becky took her seat and watched as George took the other flimsy chair and spun it around, straddling it as if it were a horse. It was strange, she wanted to ask him questions then. Who was he really? What had brought him here to be working for Sammie Matthews? They had suddenly been thrown together, the student and the teacher, and now, she felt the urge to dig deeper. She didn't feel afraid any more... she had seen his smile, and she found herself liking it. "So, where do we begin?"

There was that smile again. Becky searched his face, his eyes, and instantly saw the humor she had already guessed would be there. And this time, she felt her heart do a quick flip-flop.

“Well...” George leaned forward, crossing his arms on the chairs back and resting his bearded chin on his forearms. He held her gaze. “Let me see. I guess we start with me finding out just how much painting experience you might have already. You have painted before, haven’t you?”

“Oh no” she stammered, feeling like a complete idiot sitting beside a real painter. ‘A real artist’, she corrected herself. Her cheeks burned. If Sammie had told him she had any real experience, she would murder him... she knew she would. She felt her fists clench in her lap, and for a fleeting moment, she visualized Sammie’s skinny neck between her fingers. “I’m afraid I haven’t. I’m a total beginner.”

George smiled at her and she heard him chuckle. She felt like crawling under the desk. He got to his feet and headed for the door. She watched his retreat... and still she hadn’t heard him answer.

She thought again of killing her boss, and it almost shocked her to realize how much pleasure the thought brought her. Let him squirm, let him beg... she didn’t care. How dare he do this to her?

“Are you coming?”

“Me?” George’s words had drug her from her flight of fancy and she turned to face him, her eyes wide, unbelieving. “Are you talking to me?”

George stood in the doorway, shaking his head. “Well, it’s not like I see anyone else in this cramped little room. Who else would I be asking?”

She eyed him carefully, still uncertain of his words. Could he truly mean it? And more important, she frowned... Why would he mean it? “Don’t you think you should get someone else to assist you?”

“No.”

Becky hesitated for only a fraction of a second before springing to her feet. This

was almost too good to be true. When would she ever get the chance again to be taught by someone as talented as George Evans? “If you’re sure.” Her heart felt like it would burst from her chest. “I mean... I think I owe you an enormous thank you.”

“I think you might want to wait until this time next week before you offer your thanks.” He laughed and Becky felt herself blushing again as she stepped past him and out into the hall. And when he spoke again she heard the teasing in his voice. “I’ll lay odds that you’ll probably hate me by then.”

For the past four months, George Evans had been the one in charge. As far as Sammie was concerned, painting was just that painting. To hear him tell it, ‘All you need is some brushes, some paint, and hopefully, something to slap it on’. Poor, Sammie, Becky mused.

\* \* \*

But, thankfully, George Evans knew better. And thankfully, too, it was this same George Evans that Becky had as a teacher. He had taught her the easy way, he had taught her all the short cuts. Did Sammie know how to get the texture on the leaves he wanted painted? Did he know what it took to get water to actually look wet? No! But leave it to George... he did.

And now, thanks to George’s patient instructions, Becky did, too. She knew she still had a long way to go before she would ever be as accomplished as George. If that day ever came. But at least now she definitely knew the difference between a paint brush and a dump truck.

She craned her head to the left, studying the newly finished backdrop from a different angle. She liked it.

She had come a long way in a very short period of time. It still amazed her. She remembered the first few terror-filled days under George’s tutelage. It had to have been

a miracle she had made it through all the long grueling hours. But then there had been no turning back. George wouldn't hear of it. He always seemed to be there. Ever patient, never tiring... and oh so persistent.

“Come on, girl... you can do it.” He had said over and over again, encouraging her. “Hold your brush like this. Just paint what you see in your mind's eye...”

And standing here now, Becky realized she would forever be grateful.

## Thirty Two

“So... how’s it going?” George stepped into the back room, the sound of his biker boot heels clicking on the hardwood floor announcing his arrival. Becky looked over her shoulder. He wore a pair of jeans almost as faded as her own, and a navy-blue sweatshirt with a worn and almost unreadable college emblem plastered across the front. His clothes were typical of any artist you might see on the busy streets of New York, they were neither well cut nor expensive, but on his macho looking frame, he looked almost handsome. He looked past her to the final backdrop she had just finished.

Becky wiped the solvent from the last brush on a clean rag. “Hopefully, it’s over.” Her voice sounded tired but she couldn’t help it. She had been here since six-thirty this morning and she was feeling every minute of it. For the last hour she had been daydreaming of going home and soaking in a hot tub. “I don’t know about you but I’m more than a little bit tired. But... I’m done.” She tried to hide her yawn with the back of her hand as she nodded towards the backdrop, inviting him to take a look. “I hope its’ good enough.”

She knew George’s smile, and she knew it wasn’t something he shared with just anyone. If George wasn’t pleased... George didn’t do it. She saw him smile now... and she felt honored.

George let out a soft whistle. “I think you’re one of the fastest... and may I add while I’m at it,” He shot a quick glance in her direction, causing her to blush, “one of the most talented beginners I have ever seen.”

Becky caught a whiff of his aftershave as he stepped closer. He smelled fresh and clean... he smelled almost sexy. She spun around, placing the clean brush in her tool

box, the fire in her cheeks burning even hotter. “I don’t know what to say. So how about... thanks. I had a really good teacher.”

He didn’t notice her flushed cheeks; he was too engrossed with examining her finished painting. She had outdone herself and he felt proud. For the past three weeks he had left her all on her own. He had told her how, he had shown her how... and then he had left her all alone. She had been assigned to paint a plate glass window overlooking a sunny springtime park. And now... he couldn’t believe his eyes. The trees, the shrubs and flowers... even the fish-filled pond all looked so lifelike. He turned and faced her with a worried frown.

Becky didn’t understand. She studied the frown, and then a moment later, she stood mesmerized. Her eyes shifted from his frown, to focusing on the way his fingers stroked his short beard. She liked his beard... She hated to admit it, but the thought had crossed her mind more than once... it just looked so incredibly sexy.

“If I didn’t know better...” George pulled up a stool and sat down next to her. His frown changing almost immediately to the smile she had seen so often before. “I might just think you’re after my job, little lady.”

He was too close. The aroma of his aftershave caressing her nose once again. Oh, God, what was happening to her? It felt like her cheeks were on fire. She prayed he wouldn’t notice. “Oh, George. Don’t be silly.”

One step... maybe two? Maybe if she moved further away. This was crazy. How could anyone ever smell so good? How could anyone look so incredibly handsome? Becky ducked her head. What if he knew what she was thinking? What if he was thinking the same thing? She cleared her throat, grabbing up her clean brushes once again. She had to pretend to be busy. She had to change her train of thought... she had to do something.

George was still busy examining her painting and Becky breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe he hadn't noticed. She tried to clear her thoughts... but it was hopeless. She caught herself watching him from the corner of her eye. How old was he? Where had he come from? She tried to think---her mind ran in circles. He looked like he might be in his early thirties. He looked so damned handsome. His wavy brown hair shot through ever so slightly with the silvery streaks of gray that made him look so sexy. How could anyone ever resist? Just run your fingers through it... 'It will feel so nice, just touch it... it seemed to beckon. Becky cleared her throat again.

"I tried," she said, hoping he wouldn't notice the tremor in her voice. If only she could stop the embarrassment... hide somewhere maybe. "I don't know what else to say. I had a really great teacher."

"Hey..." He smiled and reached for her hand. She wanted to pull away, but she didn't. She felt his warmth, his strength. His hand seemed to swallow hers'. She turned to face him, straining hard to understand his next words.

"Maybe I just had a really great student."

Becky opened her mouth but barely heard her own mumbled words, "Thanks again."

"No thanks are needed..."

George stood up and turned to face her. His eyes bore into hers', and still he made no effort to release her trembling hand.

Was it just flattery? Did he truly mean it? She pulled her hand free and stuffed it in her jeans pocket. She turned away. If only she had more brushes to clean. If only she had something more to do to keep herself busy. But, no! What could she do? What could she say? Dammit... why couldn't she think? "Like I said," she stammered, the echo of her heart pounding in her ears. "Thanks. But it was really you... not me."

His fingers caught her sleeve and he pulled her around to face him. “Wait,” he mumbled, his words soft, his eyes imploring. “What are you so afraid of? Why are you so nervous?” She saw the confused look on his handsome face. “Have I done something to offend you?” His smile returned. “You don’t have to be afraid of me, Becky. And besides... I don’t bite.”

He continued watching her, his eyes holding hers for a long moment. “Can’t we just be friends?”

Becky shook her head, sending her hair spilling across her shoulders. She smiled up at him. “I hope so... I’d like us to be. It’s just that...” Her words trailed off.

She watched his eyes and waited, but George didn’t say a word. His hand still rested on her upper arm. She felt her heart hammering beneath her denim shirt, she saw the silent pumping of his heart in the veins of his neck. Long moments passed as they stood like that, their eyes holding in the silence. She could feel his eyes... they were touching her, caressing her. And then finally, she couldn’t bear it a moment longer. She found her voice, it didn’t sound like her own, but all the same she heard the stuttered words fall from her lips. “George... I’m tired. I hope this last backdrop is good enough. I hope you like it, and Sammie, too... but I’m sorry.” She paused and once again an eerie silence engulfed them. “I don’t know what you’re asking of me... but for now... please.”

“Hey,” he said jumping back. His arms shot upwards, palms facing forward and held at shoulder level. Hurt filled his eyes. “I’m sorry if you thought I was trying to make a pass or something. I wasn’t coming on t you. Really. You’ve got that all wrong. I would never do that to you, Becky. I only hoped we could be friends.”

“I’m sorry, George,” she apologized. “It wasn’t you.” She drug her hands from her pockets. Boy, she thought... she had really done it this time. He would no doubt think she was idiot. How could she have ever let herself think such thoughts? What was



wrong with her? George was too much of a gentleman, too decent. She looked up again and met his solemn gaze as she wiped her sweaty palms on her faded jeans. “I guess I’m just so damned tired.”

George smiled. He removed his hand from her upper arm and turned it just enough to glance at his watch. It was almost four-thirty. Sammie and the others would be arriving soon. Dress rehearsals were scheduled to start at six. And he knew, too, Becky needed a break before they arrived. She needed to get away for a few quiet minutes before everything became chaotic and hectic. And he needed it, too. Before this moment was gone forever. He didn’t want it to end this way.

He touched her chin and pulled her face around towards his. His eyes met and held hers. “I’d like to buy you a cup of coffee if you’d let me.” He offered.

“Sure.” Her fingers tucked her straying hair behind her ears. “I know I look a mess, but if you’re sure you won’t mind... Why not?”

She knew what he was trying to do, and that was all that was important. He wanted to pretend that nothing out of the ordinary had happened between them. He wanted to put her at ease, he wanted to be her friend. And it was then, as he held his arm out waiting for her to take it and as they stepped from the room; she realized she loved him for it. George Evans was indeed a very remarkable man.

\* \* \*

Becky sat by George’s side on the lumpy, well-worn couch in the quiet break room drinking stale coffee---obviously left over since early morning. And for the first time since their initial meeting, they had a heart to heart chat. The next hour passed all too quickly, for the both of them... but it was a very profitable hour indeed. And by the time they heard Sammie and the others entering the theater... they both knew it. Their friendship had taken off like a mighty jet.



## Thirty Three

Becky shot a quick glance at the clock on her nightstand as she stepped into the bedroom. It was only nine forty-five. She knew Mandy never went to bed before eleven, but tonight... She sank down on the edge of the bed, her fingers automatically reaching to untie the silk scarf from her pony tail. For a moment she felt the familiar tug of guilt inch into her heart. Mandy was probably sitting by the phone right at this very second waiting---waiting for the expected call, and when it didn't come---she would no doubt worry late into the night.

For the past two months it had become such a habit, their every night phone conversations---‘just to make sure everything is all right’. That’s the way things usually were with Mandy. You could never be, too, safe. And then there were times, especially times like tonight, when Becky was just too tired; it was too much of a bother.

She reached out to turn the lamp on but pulled her hand away instead. What did she need light for? Her tired mind ran in circles... so much had happened today. She smiled in the darkness and fell back against the pillows. She hadn't bothered to change into her nightgown, but that, too, didn't seem to be important enough to bother with. The sound of her tennis shoes thudded loudly in the empty room as she kicked them off, letting them fall where they may.

Feeling almost hypnotized, she lay in the darkness, her eyes staring up towards the deepening shadows playing along the ceiling. Her thoughts busy replaying all that had happened since early morning.

It felt terribly good that she had finally finished the last backdrop. It had certainly taken her long enough, she thought tiredly. And it felt even better when she remembered

the praise George had lavished on her. She rolled over and pulled her pillow to her breast, feeling the tiniest of grins light upon her lips. It was almost too good to be true. George had been impressed. And Sammie, too. She was going to make it. She had had her doubts in the beginning – but that was then; and this was now. Her heart felt happy and light and she felt her grin spread even wider.

And then a moment later she didn't feel anything... Becky's eyes drooped, and even before she had time to think of what was happening – she drifted off into a dream filled sleep.

\* \* \*

Becky found herself waking down a long tiled corridor that looked as if it might go on forever. Maybe it stretched into eternity somewhere – it was hard to tell. There were closed doors to her right and to her left. She frowned, studying the numbers she saw written on each of their highly polished surfaces. Numbers. There was nothing more – no names or descriptive labels to attest as to what might be behind them---she only saw numbers. Confusion filled her head. Confusion filled every nerve ending. Could this be a hospital? She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts, but for the moment it was useless. The long gray corridor stretched endlessly before her. There was no end. Her frantic mind ran in circles. If this was a hospital wouldn't she feel sick? Wouldn't she hurt somewhere? How could you be in the hospital if nothing was wrong with you?

She had to find someone... anyone. She had to know. She looked frantically up and down the length of the endless corridor. Adrenalin coursed through her veins, urging her on, and still---she saw no one! The echo of her heart hammering in her ears seemed to be her only companion. Was there no one to come to her rescue? It seemed impossible---it couldn't be real, none of this could be happening---but she found herself

completely alone; and more than a little bit terrified. Panic quickened her steps, fear urging her onward. She heard herself screaming. She felt herself running. She had no idea as to where she might end up. But for now; she didn't care. For now it didn't matter. The only thing she knew for certain was the fact that she had to get out of this place... The sooner the better.

\* \* \*

The early morning sun had barely made its' presence known when Becky's eyelids fluttered. She blinked her eyes, trying to focus, trying to clear her foggy thoughts. Why did she feel so tired? It didn't feel as if she had slept a wink all night. She tried to push herself up on one elbow and heard herself groan. The muscles in her neck felt stiff, every joint in her body hurt. She must have slept wrong – if indeed she had slept at all.

Untangling her feet and legs from the twisted covers she inched towards the edge of the bed. The blankets and sheets looking as if a group of rebellious children had played a wild and rowdy game of leap frog on them.

She felt a smile touch her lips as she stepped into the bathroom for a shower. It wouldn't be long. She dropped her wrinkled denim shirt to the floor and stepped out of her much-too-tight jeans. In her mind's eye she readily saw the happy picture... she saw her and Bill's baby doing the exact same things in but a few short years. He, or she--- whichever the case might be---playing the same silly games. It was a comforting thought. "Oh, Bill," she mumbled, "I can hardly wait."

Startled at the unexpected ringing of the wall phone in the kitchen, Becky jumped. "Dammit," she muttered, missing her cup and splashing coffee on the counter. She shot a quick glance to the clock on the far wall. It was barely seven thirty. Who in the world would be calling this early? Tossing a towel over the puddle of spilt coffee,

Becky grabbed the receiver, silencing it in mid-ring. She shook her head, the thought coming to her. . . it had to be Mandy!

“Hello, Mandy,” she answered, sounding bright and cheerful.

“How did... you know? I never said a word. It could have been anyone...”

Becky stepped back to the counter, the coiled telephone cord stretching behind her, as she grabbed her coffee and went to the table. She plopped down in the closest chair, lifting her cup to her lips. “Oh, come on, Mandy,” she teased. “Who else would be trying to call me before the crack of dawn?”

“Well... I didn’t mean to bother you quite so early, but after last night when you didn’t...”

“I know,” Becky interrupted. “And I’m sorry. I really meant to call, but it was pretty late when I got home and I didn’t want to take the chance of waking you up.” She knew she was lying, it hadn’t been late at all; but she knew, too, she had to come up with some sort of an excuse – Mandy would expect it. “Forgive me?”

Mandy didn’t answer right away but Becky heard her sigh through the receiver. She was probably pouting, Becky thought---it was something Mandy was forever doing---it seemed as if it were the only way she could make Becky feel guilty. But this time... Becky refused to let it happen.

Becky lifted her cup to her lips and took a sip without saying another word. She waited.

“Of course I forgive you,” Mandy finally answered. It wasn’t an easy thing to admit, even to herself---that she might be wrong---but maybe... in this particular instance, maybe she was. Maybe Becky really had come in too late to call. “So, tell me...” she asked. “What was it that kept you out so late?”

Becky leaned back, stretching her legs out and curling her toes on the rung of the

next chair. This was more like it. She knew Mandy could never stay mad at her for very long... it wasn't in her nature. All Becky had to do was plant a little doubt in her mind--- give her something else to think about. "I don't know, Man... it would probably bore you if I told you."

"You better tell me." Mandy sat on the edge of her seat. Her thoughts running wild. A date? Oh, God... maybe Becky had had a date?

"Are you sure you have the time?" Becky paused, fetching the coffee pot and refilling her cup. Had she never before savored pure pleasure – she was most certainly savoring it now. It did her heart good to know her best friend was about to bust a gut with curiosity. "You might find it sort of boring," she teased, sitting back down.

Mandy's fingers drummed lightly against the side of her coffee mug. "Come on, Becky. Don't make me beg. I really want to know."

"Well... let me see. Where do I begin?" She had her now, and once again she felt her own self-satisfied grin broaden. This was so much fun. "I finally finished the last backdrop I had to get painted. You know... the one I told you I was having so much trouble with? And then, I don't know... I hung around the theater for a while. I had a lot of cleaning up to do. And then... let me see." She paused again, dragging it out and enjoying the thought of having Mandy on the edge of her seat.

"And then what?"

"Oh, yeah. I remember now. George Evans came in. George is my teacher. You remember... I told you about him?"

"Yeah... go on. What happened then? Did you guys go out or something? Was it fun? Is George nice? Do you like him?"

"Hey, Man... hold on a sec." Becky leaned forward resting her elbows on the edge of the table. If she didn't hurry and explain the truth of what had really happened the

night before Mandy would no doubt have her and George up and married and well on their way to living happily ever after. “Slow down, girl,” she implored. “All we did was hang around and watch the first night of dress rehearsals. It wasn’t a real date.”

“Sure...”

Becky felt herself squirm. It wasn’t fun to suddenly find herself on the hot seat. “Man... you’re crazy. It wasn’t a real date. Really! I wouldn’t lie to you.”

Mandy absently twisted the coiled phone cord between her fingers. If it took her all day she was going to find out what really happened. And even if Becky hung up on her... well then, she thought... she would just have to drive over and question her in person. “Okay, Becky,” she said. “I know you wouldn’t lie... at least not on purpose anyway. But, how do you know it wasn’t a real date? What do you call a real date?”

“A real date is where a man actually asks a woman out and she actually says yes. And I might add... that didn’t happen last night. George came in to see my finished work and we just got to talking.” Becky paused and shifted in her seat, absently tucking her hair behind her ear with her free hand. “And then we decided to hang around and watch the dress rehearsals. I knew I didn’t have anything better to do. So why not? He didn’t ask me out. It wasn’t anything like that.”

“Yeah, sure,” Mandy teased. “You can call it what you like... but to me it sounds like you’ve got yourself a new fellow.”

“You’re being ridiculous, Man,” Becky said, feeling her cheeks growing warm. This little game of teasing seemed to be getting out of hand. She refilled her cup for the third time and sat back down. “Have you forgotten I’m pregnant? Why would anyone want to go out with me?”

“Oh for goodness sake, Becky. Now who’s being ridiculous? You’re not exactly ready for the fat farm yet you know? Hell girl... you’re not even showing yet.” Mandy



shook her head. Did being pregnant mean that someone should just go into hiding? This wasn't the sixteenth century any more. It was the middle of the seventies... pregnant women all over the world went on with their everyday lives. And even if Becky was a single mother-to-be... what did it matter?

"I know I'm not," Becky protested, "but I know I will be before too much longer. I'm three and a half months along already, and I'll be showing in no time at all. And then I'll be getting fatter and fatter by the minute. Who would ever want to take me out then?"

"Honey," Mandy groaned. She had to talk some sense into her stubborn friends' head. "Damn, girl. Do you even know what year this is?"

"Well of course I do. What's that got to do with it?"

"So why don't you stop acting like such an idiot. Pregnant women go out on dates every day of the week. You see them everywhere." Was she getting through to her? "So what would stop a guy from wanting to go out with you? You're just expecting a baby. It's not like you have the plague you know?"

All this silly arguing wasn't getting them anywhere. Becky glanced at the clock. They had been on the phone for almost an hour and Mandy didn't sound as if she were anywhere near ready to hang up. "You're right, Man," she said smiling. "I'm not big and fat, and no I don't have a dreaded disease or the plague... So if a guy were to actually ask me out, I guess I'll just have to give in and go. Okay?"

"Great. I'm proud of you girl."

Becky breathed a sigh of relief. It sounded as if she might have finally managed to make Mandy happy. And she felt happy, too. She had truly enjoyed their conversation, silly as it had been, and after all... What harm had it done for her to finally admit that Mandy might be right? None! She felt her smile widen. Besides, she

thought... it might be fun to go out with George.

Her daydreaming carried her to the pleasant evening she and George had shared the night before. She had enjoyed their quiet conversation, the ease with which he had made her laugh and feel happy. She had truly enjoyed his company. It would have been easy to go on talking to him forever. So what was the harm in getting to know him a little better? No one ever said they had to get serious about each other... did they?

“Hey, Becky... You still there?”

“I’m sorry, Man,” she stuttered. “I guess I drifted off there for a minute.”

Reality seeped back into Becky’s dreamy thoughts and she felt her cheeks grow warm with color. It sounded as if she, too, might be getting the cart a little before the horse. George would have to ask her out first... wouldn’t he? And what if he didn’t?

“That’s okay.” She heard Mandy interrupting. “But it is getting sort of late, and if I don’t get a move on it I’ll be late for work.” Mandy swallowed the last of her coffee and laughed in Becky’s ear. “And if that happens you know Joe will probably shoot me.”

“He wouldn’t do that,” Becky chuckled. “He loves you too much for that... The worst thing he would do is maybe have your phone disconnected.”

“Oh, God... no.”

“At any rate, I guess I’ll let you go. I have the day off so why don’t you just call me when you get home this time? Maybe that way I won’t get in trouble and have you calling me up at the crack of dawn in the morning.”

“You’re cruel, girl.” Mandy teased in return. “But that does sound like a better idea to me, too. You have a good day and I’ll give you a ring later.”

Becky smiled at Mandy’s words and pulled her robe tighter around her shoulders. “Talk to you later, Man. By

‘Finally.’ Becky muttered, shaking her head as she crossed the room to replace the receiver back on its hook. Sometimes talking to Mandy required her to use an extra dose of patience.

## Thirty Four

Dr. William Payton was sitting at his desk when Becky pushed the door open and stepped into the walnut paneled office on Friday afternoon. Pausing, pen in hand over the open folder before him, Dr. Payton looked up, flashing the warm and comforting smile he was known for. His smile immediately put all his patients at ease.

For the first two or three weeks after her return to New York Becky had been a bundle of nerves. What if she couldn't find a suitable doctor to deliver her and Bill's much anticipated first-born child? All her telephone books were now worn and frazzled... as were most of her closest friends from the theater. She had asked everyone she knew. The question plaguing her night and day. And then... leave it to Mandy . . . Becky's prayers had been answered.

Mandy knew the perfect obstetrician... Dr. William Payton. And according to Mandy's exact words, "He comes highly recommended."

It seemed this renowned Dr. William Payton had delivered babies to at least three of the four women who worked with her and Joe in his busy law offices uptown. And so... to keep peace in the 'family', Becky gave the good doctor a try.

And now, on this Friday afternoon in early May as Becky stepped into the doctor's inner office, she was glad. She truly liked Dr. Payton. He looked to be in his mid to early forties, his dark hair highlighted at the temples with the faintest hint of gray, and his brown eyes were the kindest most compassionate looking eyes she had ever seen.

"So, Mrs. Simmons." Dr. Payton pushed himself to his feet, waving her towards one of the two chairs in front of his wide mahogany desk. "How's the little mother

today?”

“Fine, I guess,” Becky said taking her seat. She smiled timidly, folding her hands in her lap. “But shouldn’t you be the one to answer that question Dr. Payton?”

The examination was over; the urine tests, the blood tests, as well as the actual physical poking and prodding and listening to the heartbeat. She liked it that Dr. Payton took the extra time to bring his patients into the privacy of his office to chat with them after their exams; it seemed more relaxed, a little less clinical... but still the same, she waited anxiously.

Dr. Payton nodded his head as he sat back down and looked to the opened folder before him. He picked up a pen and Becky watched as he busied himself jotting notes on the first two or three pages. Long moments passed, and still... he hadn’t said a word.

Becky forced herself to remember her first three visits here. Everything seemed to be progressing quite normally. The baby growing at a steady rate, his heartbeat strong and loud. She had even gotten to listen to it on her last visit. She felt the twitch of a grin lift her lips.

“So...” Dr. Payton interrupted her thoughts. “It looks like you and your little bundle of joy are doing all the right things.”

“Really?” Becky breathed a sigh of relief. “I was almost afraid I would get into trouble for gaining too much weight or something.” Relaxing and leaning back in her chair, she crossed her legs; thankfully remembering to cross them at the ankles as he had instructed her to do. There was no way she was going to do anything that might harm her and Bill’s unborn child.

Dr. Payton chuckled. “No... So far so good. You haven’t gained even one more ounce than I recommended.”

He looked back down and continued making notes in her file. And once again

Becky found herself all alone with her thoughts. She didn't want to, but there was little she could do to prevent it. She remembered the scary dreams she had been having for the past few weeks. She had come here today with every intention of telling the doctor about them... they seemed so real, and she couldn't get past the fear they brought to her heart. But sitting here now, her hands twisting and untwisting in her lap... she felt reluctant. Should she mention them, or should she just wait? Maybe they would leave... maybe they weren't important at all.

Dr. Payton leaned back in his chair and flipped her file folder closed. Looking up and meeting her gaze his expression changed, growing serious. It seemed almost as though he could read something in her eyes, as if somehow she had become transparent. Becky squirmed in her seat. "Becky? Are you feeling all right? Would you like a glass of water?"

He was on his feet and around the desk in a flash; lifting her arm and pressing his fingers to her wrist, automatically checking her pulse. "No... really," Becky answered, shaking her head. "I'm fine. It's just that..."

Dr. Payton released her hand, satisfied her pulse was normal, and stepped back, leaning against the edge of his desk. He watched her, his eyes boring into hers. "There's something you're not telling me, young lady." He crossed his arms across his chest. "And just in case you don't know it... you're not leaving this office until you do. What's seems to be troubling you?"

Becky looked up and met his solemn gaze. The stern look she saw in his eyes told her she was trapped. Like it or not she would have to tell him now. "Well..." she began slowly, her words barely louder than a mumbled whisper. She thought of the water he had offered earlier. "If it wouldn't be too much of a bother could I please have that glass of water now?"

Dr. Payton hurried to the glass-topped table beside his desk and poured a glass of water from the chilled pitcher waiting there. “Here you go,” he said, returning and pressing the cool glass into her hand.

Becky felt incredibly foolish, but as she sipped the cool water and leaned back in her chair, she realized it was something she had to do. There was no turning back.

She opened her mouth and the words just seemed to fall out, tumbling over each other like water spilling from a busted dam. She told him of the horrid dreams which had been invading her sleep for the past several weeks. She left nothing out, even down to the tiniest of details; every face she saw, every strange room she entered. And finally, when she was through... she felt as if an enormous weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

Leaning against his desk once again, Dr. Payton waited patiently, one finger absently tapping his chin as he listened to her words. When Becky finished speaking he went back around his desk and took his seat.

She saw a tiny smile lift his lips and felt her heart leap in excitement. Surely his smile was telling her that everything was all right.

Dr. Payton leaned forward, crossing his arms on the edge of his desk. “Becky, you’ve got to remember, you happen to be pregnant. Your body is going through a tremendous amount of changes. Not only physically... but emotionally as well. Your hormones are at an upheaval.” His smile broadened, the laugh lines at the corners of his eyes deepening. “And I’d have to say these dreams you’re telling me about are of no importance. They’re just dreams.”

“But why do I always dream that I’m in a hospital?”

“Are you sure it’s a hospital?” he asked.

Becky frowned. “Yes... I’m positive I’m in a hospital. I see doctors and nurses. I

see other patents.”

“Do you seem to be sick?” Dr. Payton looked thoughtful. “Couldn’t you just be dreaming about visiting someone else who might be in a hospital?”

“No.” Becky shook her head vigorously. There was no doubt in her mind. She had had the same dream over and over again so many times. By now, everything about it was all too familiar. “I know I’m the one in the hospital,” she said. “I see everything around me. I know everyone who comes in and out. My mom and dad come to visit me. And sometimes...” Becky looked down and studied her hands in her lap. They were twisting and untwisting again, her palms feeling sweaty. “And sometimes even my ex-boyfriend, Brad. I think that’s the strangest thing of all. I can’t figure out why Brad would be coming to see me in the hospital.”

“Is there anything else you remember?”

Becky looked back up then, her eyes filling with tears. “Yes... I’m afraid there is.”

Dr. Payton slid a box of tissue closer, offering her one. “Do you feel like telling me?”

“In my dreams... I’m not pregnant.” Her watery eyes reached out to his, searching and pleading, as if she hoped to somehow find the answers written there somewhere on his face. She pulled a tissue from the box and dabbed her eyes. “And I don’t understand that,” she said. “Can you tell me why?”

“I don’t know, Becky. I’m afraid I can’t answer that one. I’m an obstetrician, not a dream or sleep specialist, but...” Dr. Payton got to his feet and came back around the desk, placing a comforting hand on Becky’s shoulder. His eyes staring intently into hers. “In my opinion though, I would have to say you have absolutely nothing to worry about.”

“Are you sure? You don’t think my dreams are trying to tell me something?”



Dr. Payton smiled. “Yes... I feel certain you have nothing to worry about.” Becky felt the gentle squeeze of his fingers on her shoulder. “And no... I don’t believe your dreams are in any way a premonition of things to come or of things that might happen. Your dreams are just that... they’re dreams. They might rob you of a little sleep, but if you just try to remember they’re not real I think you’ll be all right.”

Becky sprang to her feet, bouncing with excitement. She grasped his hands and squeezed them between her own. “Thanks, doc,” she said, beaming. “You have no idea of how relieved I am.” She almost felt like hugging him, but... thankfully stopped herself before she did. She blushed and ducked her head, releasing his hands as she reached for her purse.

“Good... I’m glad.” Dr. Payton walked her to the door. “And if you need anything before your next visit don’t be afraid to call. Okay?”

“I won’t.” Becky answered with a smile. “Thanks again. See you in a month.”

\* \* \*

Becky left the doctor’s office with a song in her heart. For so long she had let herself think the worse whenever she thought of her stupid dreams. But now... she thought of the wisdom of Dr. Payton’s words. She tucked the strap of her purse securely over her shoulder, and with her head held high; she pushed the heavy glass door open and stepped out into the brightness of the afternoon sun.

Falling into step with the crowd around her on the busy sidewalk, Becky turned west and started walking home. The sun felt warm on her cheeks. Her smile was bright and her steps lively. And today... for the first time in so long it was hard to remember when, contentment carried her along on a feathery light cloud.



## Thirty Five

George knew he should have called first, but knowing he should have – and actually doing it – were two entirely different things altogether. So now, he felt like a fool; standing in the empty hallway, his knocking unanswered. He should have known Becky would probably have a million things to do on her day off.

He glanced down at his watch as he turned and headed back to the elevator... it was almost four-thirty. Obviously popping in for an unexpected visit hadn't been one of his brightest ideas. "Oh well," he muttered, reaching to press the down button, "maybe next time."

The elevator doors slid open and there she was... the expression of shock he saw on her face mirroring his own; eyes wide, mouth gaping in surprise.

Seeing one of the two heavy grocery bags slide from her grasp, George lunged forward. "Here," he shouted, "let me help you with that." It all happened so fast Becky hardly had time to register what was going on. Moving with the speed of a bullet, and with a hand she barely saw moving, he snatched the falling bag just inches before it collided with the floor. "Whew..." he said breathlessly, "I sure hope you didn't have any eggs in here."

The last person Becky would ever have expected to be waiting on her doorstep when she got home was George Evans, but here he was now... bigger than life, and rescuing her from spilling her groceries all over the hallway. "No... I don't think so," she said, "I think they're in this bag."

Becky grinned shyly and stepped from the elevator as the doors started closing. She opened her mouth to offer a 'thank you', but... even before her words were out---

she heard George burst out laughing. It took her a moment to understand what he had found so amusing, but when she looked down and saw what she had done... she couldn't help but laugh, too. "Oh no..." she groaned. In all the excitement she had squashed the other bag to her breast, and now it looked as if it had been the one to lose the battle.

George moved a step closer, his fingers plucking at the crumpled edges of the brown paper bag in her arms, trying to straighten them out. "It looks like you might have to go with scrambled instead of over-easy," he teased.

"Oh well," she said with a shrug, feeling the warmth of a blush rush her cheeks. "I usually end up breaking the yolks anyway."

Leaning one hip against the counter, George smiled as he watched Becky putting the groceries away. He crossed and uncrossed his arms. "I guess I should apologize for just popping in on you like this, but..."

"But why should you apologize?" Becky said, looking up over the door of the refrigerator. She smiled as she slid a jar of pickles on the top shelf next to the milk. "I feel pretty lucky that you were here. You saved the day." She pushed the door shut with her hip and stepped to the sink. "Would you care for a cup of coffee or something?"

"Coffee? Sounds great." George was busy folding the empty grocery bags and didn't realize until he looked up that Becky was watching him over her shoulder. Her smile was warm as he came and took his place by her side. "If it's not too much of a bother."

Becky finished filling the empty pot and carried it to the stove, placing it on the front burner. She shook her head. "Not a bother at all. I always keep a pot on the burner. It's my one downfall... I think I might be a caffeine junkie."

"So, what brings you down to this neck of the woods?" She asked, sitting down

and motioning to the chair across from her, "Please, have a seat."

George nodded as he slid into the offered chair. "Thanks," he said, staring intently at the dancing flames beneath the coffee pot, avoiding her gaze. Why had he come here? What was he supposed to tell her? He didn't want her think he was a stalker. "I don't really know..." He shrugged. "I was just wandering around town and I thought of you."

Hoping to hide the blush she felt warming her cheeks, Becky got to her feet and busied herself with pulling two mugs from the cabinet and pouring the coffee. What was he saying to her? She didn't understand. Surely he had better things to do on his day off than aimlessly wandering around town. "You were thinking of me?"

"I know it sounds silly..." He paused and cleared his throat. "But after our conversation a few weeks ago when we stayed and watched rehearsals... I was afraid you might have gotten the wrong impression of me."

Becky carried the coffee to the table and sat back down, her eyes meeting and holding his for a long moment. She wanted to say she didn't understand what he was talking about, but she knew she did. She remembered all too clearly the things they had talked about. And now... she felt embarrassed all over again. She slid his mug across the table with a shaky hand. "I know... and I apologize again. It was all my fault."

"No... I'm afraid I can't let you take all the blame." He looked pensive for a moment and then smiled at her. "I do want to be your friend, and I feel that I should be the one to say I'm sorry. Maybe you think I'm moving too fast, but honestly... I'm not trying to. I don't want to rush you into anything you might not be ready for yet."

Becky smiled and nodded her head. "I think I know what you mean... and I want to be your friend, too." Her eyes studied the serious look she saw in his kind eyes. There was something different about this man. She felt his kindness, his understanding. She

sensed his patience. “But I don’t know... I feel so confused.”

“I know,” George interrupted “it’s still too soon. But that doesn’t mean we can’t be friends.”

His words hit her with the impact of a brutal slap to her face. What was he talking about? Too soon for what? “It’s still too soon?” she snapped, slamming her mug down. “It sounds to me like you’ve had a really good time talking to Sammie Matthews. And right now I don’t know whether I should be thankful... or whether I should be totally furious.”

On the one hand she felt relieved that George already knew all she had been through, but on the other it somehow made her feel more than a little bit angry. She felt open and naked. She knew Sammie was only trying to be helpful by letting everyone know. He was trying to save her from some of the heartache she would have to suffer by relating her sad story to every new face she saw. But still... how much of her story had Sammie bothered to share? And what right did Sammie Matthews have to play God like that? Who did he think he was? Her thoughts continued to boil angrily inside her head.

“I don’t think you have to be thankful, Becky...” George was saying, “but I do wish you would try to understand. You have a lot of friends who care a great deal for you.”

“And they show me like this?”

“Sammie wasn’t trying to spread gossip...” George pleaded. He knew she was angry at him for telling her this; she had every right, but somehow he wanted to make it up to her. He reached for her and but she jerked it away. “Becky... Sammie was only trying to help.”

He watched her, his eyes sad, as she jumped to her feet and stormed across the room. The angry clatter of her mug echoing in the silence as she slammed it down on

the counter without looking back.

She had heard enough of George Evans' words defending their employer. How dare he? How did he know Sammie had her best interest at heart? How did anyone know? "George..." Her words lashed out at him from across her shoulder. "I think it would be best if you went home now."

A moment later George was standing behind her placing his hands on her shoulders. He pulled her around and forced her to face him. "Please, Becky." Her eyes met his and she saw the tears glistening on his dark lashes. "Please don't do this," he pleaded, his voice cracking. "I care a great deal for you. We all do. And I hate to see you hurting this way... You don't have to do this all by yourself."

Becky felt the gentle pressure of his fingers squeezing her upper arms. She watched him, searching his face, but didn't dare to try and answer. So much had happened... and in such a short time. She had been so incredibly happy since leaving Dr. Payton's office a few just a few hours ago. Bill would never leave her, she knew that . . . there was no room for any doubt in heart, she was certain . . . She carried his baby, safe and secure, and growing ever stronger within her womb. All that mattered anymore was her and Bill's baby. All she had to do was hold on tightly to that thought. And now . . .

She didn't resist as George pulled her close, his arms strong, encircling her narrow shoulders. She buried her face against the warmth of his chest and began to sob. His kind words were too much for her to hear right now. How could he do this to her? Why was he dredging it all up, forcing her to remember? The memories were too painful... but they wouldn't stop---they came rushing in on her with a vengeance. It wasn't fair. All she needed was her and Bill's baby. It was all she would ever need. And then, more painful than any memory could ever be, came the realization she might be wrong. How could she ever allow herself to even think that the tiny life growing

beneath her heart could ever fill that horrible void in her life? She needed more than Bill's baby. She needed so much more... she needed Bill!

Gently rocking her, George held her in silence as she cried. Stroking her back, crooning softly. A moment later she felt him reach around and pull the handkerchief from his back pocket. He pressed it into her clenched fingers and waited while she dried her tears. He led her back to her chair, and this time it was he who poured the coffee. He went to the sink and got her mug. "Here..."

Becky looked up, her eyes and nose red, and George heard her whisper. "I'm sorry."

"Here... you missed one." He smiled, taking the dampened handkerchief from her hand and wiping the last stray tear from her cheeks. He hadn't meant to make her cry, and now he felt guilty... but still, he sensed it was something she needed to do. She needed to get it all out, and she needed a strong and sympathetic shoulder. Everyone did at some point in their life. And he couldn't help but feel relieved that he was here for her. Maybe there was hope for them yet.

"Thanks."

"My pleasure." He smiled and Becky hiccuped. It made him chuckle. "Feel better?"

She hated to admit it, but she did. "Yeah... I think I do."

George got to his feet. "Did you say you liked omelets?" he asked, rolling up his sleeves and pulling the door open on the refrigerator all in one fluid-like movement.

Becky offered to help, but he wouldn't hear of it... this was his treat. He topped off her coffee, looked her sternly in the eye, and Becky remained in her seat like an obedient child. She waited.

She watched his back as he busied himself with the pots and pans and mixing



bowls. There was no need for her to interfere – he looked as if he knew exactly what he was doing. He looked comfortable, and for the first time since his arrival, she couldn't help but notice he looked genuinely happy.

A short half hour later George returned to the table, a kitchen towel draped ceremoniously across his arm like a fancy waiter in an expensive restaurant, and Becky couldn't help but smile. And in his hands he carried two heaping plates filled with delicious smelling bacon, and cheese with mushrooms omelets he had so lovingly prepared.

And just as they had done on that day a few weeks ago at the theater – she and George enjoyed another pleasant evening. And just as she had felt it happening then, she felt it happening now, too. It was a feeling she was learning so quickly to enjoy. Their friendship was growing even stronger.

## Thirty Six

“So, what are you doing on this lovely Saturday afternoon?”

It was George, standing on her doorstep once again, and Becky couldn't help but laugh as she pulled the door open, ushering him in. “What in the world?”

It was barely ten o'clock in the morning but it looked to her as if he had been up for several hours already – and quite obviously he had been extremely busy. He held an overflowing picnic basket in one hand, and just as she opened her mouth to ask about it, she saw him whip his other hand from behind his back, producing a bouquet of fresh daises. “For you, my lady,” he said with a light bow.

Her mouth sagged open. She and George had been seeing each other quite regularly for the past month... he was always taking her somewhere; out to eat, to the movies, or even sometimes just for a quiet relaxing walk in the park. They were only friends and she knew there was nothing wrong with them seeing each other like they were . . . but standing here now and looking at the playful expression on his handsome face, she had to ask herself if she was sure he knew it, too? Shouldn't he be getting tired of seeing so much of her? Didn't he have anything better to do with his time?

“Aren't you going to answer my question?”

“I... well... I don't know.” Becky looked down at the flowers he had pressed into her hand and suddenly felt her cheeks growing warm.

Her plans for the day? She shook her head and tried to think. The only thing she had planned so far was going out to dinner tonight with Mandy and Joe, but no wait--- that wasn't until Sunday night. And this was only Saturday. She almost felt like laughing... her appointment book was completely empty.

“Well?” he asked again, his expression hopeful.

Becky shot a quick glance at the full picnic basket in his hand and felt her head nodding yes. But of course she wanted to go. She’d be crazy not to.

“Well?” George sat down on the edge of the sofa and turned to face her, a quizzical look on his face. “Are you planning on going dressed like that?”

Unlike her, he was prepared for the occasion. He was dressed in a pair of comfortable looking blue jeans he had obviously just gotten from the cleaners... or perhaps he had ironed them himself; the thought brought a smile to her lips. The white linen shirt he wore did little to conceal the broad and muscular shoulders she saw beneath it. She heard herself sigh, noticing once again, how handsome he was.

Becky looked down, her cheeks ablaze from the unbridled thoughts filling her head, and for the first time since his arrival a short ten minutes earlier, she realized she was still wearing her bathrobe. She had taken her shower as soon as she crawled out of bed, but she hadn’t planned on going anywhere... so why dress?

“Oh, God...” she gasped, her hands flying upwards and covering her bare face. She hadn’t even bothered with putting on any make-up. “I didn’t expect anyone” Becky clutched her bulky robe tighter and inched her way towards the bedroom. “I’m sorry... give me a minute.”

Becky changed into a pair of loose fitting faded blue jeans and a big floppy denim colored shirt. She tied the laces on her favorite pair of canvas sneakers. She still didn’t know why she was doing it, but for now... she didn’t bother asking herself. It didn’t matter. All that mattered was the fact that two friends were going to spend a lovely afternoon picnicking in the park. And as long as she remembered---she and George could never be more than friends---she knew she had no reason to feel guilty or ashamed. She and George had a right to be friends. Didn’t they?

She stood up then and took one last look in the mirror, running one hand across the gentle bulge of her stomach. Most of her clothes were getting a little too tight and she knew it wouldn't be long before she would have to start wearing all those horrible looking maternity things expectant mothers were 'expected' to wear. Ugh! It wouldn't be long before she started looking like a beached whale. The thought of getting fat wasn't exactly the most appealing thought she had ever had... but for now, for today... all she wanted to think about was the wonderful day George had planned for the two of them. For now it was more important to hang on to the comfort of what they shared. Their friendship had become so special.

"Hey..." She heard George shouting from the other room, the urgent sound of his voice slicing through her thoughts, and she turned with a start. "Did you get lost in there?"

Twisting this way and that, she examined her reflection one last time... and finally satisfied the over sized shirt adequately covered her too-tight jeans, she hurried from the room.

"I didn't mean to keep you waiting so long," she apologized. George was standing by the window when she stepped into the room and she couldn't help but smile when he turned to face her and she heard his soft whistle of approval.

They stayed at the park until well past sundown, talking and laughing and teasing, and simply enjoying once again the comfort of just being together. They told each other silly stories about their respective childhoods, but funniest of all were the stories they shared about Sammie and some of the outrageous and quirky things they had seen him do at the theater.

"Are you having a good time?" George propped himself up on one elbow, and Becky saw him smiling at her as he reached into the almost empty basket searching for

another sandwich.

She lay by his side, stretched full length on her back on her side of the enormous blanket they had brought along to lay on the ground. The sun felt delicious as it caressed her cheeks and warmed her body through her clothes. “Um huh,” she sighed. “Are you?”

George finished the last of his sandwich and Becky felt him moving closer. “I’ve never been happier.”

She felt the additional warmth of his body as he stretched out beside her, his leg touching hers. She knew she should move away, things were moving too fast again... but something made her stay. She opened her eyes and stared up into the blue eyes she was so quickly learning to know. “George,” It was barely a whisper, an almost inaudible plea, and Becky knew almost immediately he didn’t seem to be listening.

He touched her face with a gentle hand, urging her nearer. And then his lips were on hers. He kissed her, gently at first, and then a moment later with the urgency of a man hopelessly in love. She resisted at first---knowing deep within her heart she shouldn’t be doing this, it was all wrong---and then... she felt herself melting even closer into his embrace. It had been so long since she had felt like this. It had been so long since she had felt so needed and so loved.

She felt breathless when he at long last pulled back and stared down into her flushed face. She felt the gentle touch of his fingers as he laid them on the quivering lips he had so recently kissed. “George... don’t.” she gasped. She pushed herself up into a sitting position and smoothed her hand across her rumpled shirt. It was one of the hardest things she had ever had to do... but she knew she had to. She faced him, a pained look in her eyes. “We can’t do this. It’s not fair to either one of us.”

“Why? I don’t understand.” He was sitting up now, watching her, confusion

creasing his brow.

Becky gulped in a breath of air. "I'm sorry... I don't mean to upset you. It's just that we can't do this."

"And just why not?"

She looked at him then with the saddest looking eyes he had ever seen. He reached for her hand but she pulled it away. "Don't you see, we can never have anything more than the friendship we share?"

"Becky..." he began slowly, awkwardly. He knew he was already hopelessly in love with this beautiful woman sitting before him, but now, right at this moment, he felt incredibly lost. What could he say to her? How could he convince her? "Honey, I know you've been terribly hurt, and I don't want to rush you in any way, but... dammit." He took her hand then, refusing to let her pull away, and pressed her fingers to his lips. "Don't you see that I love you?"

"Of course I see it, but..." It was the first time she had dared to admit it, even to herself. But it was true. He was falling for her in a hard way, almost as quickly as she knew she herself was falling for him. But she knew, too, she could never let it happen. She had to stop it before it got out of hand. It wouldn't be fair to either of them.

She squeezed her eyes tightly shut for a moment, as if she might be looking for the answers to be written there behind her closed lids. She felt him press another kiss to her knuckles. "George," she pleaded, her eyelids fluttering open. She saw the pain in his eyes. "You just don't understand. We can't do this. It's just not fair."

"It's not fair for us to feel the way we do either. I know you're falling in love with me, too. I see it every time I look into your eyes. I know it sounds a little crazy... but can you sit here and tell me none of this is happening?"

She knew she couldn't. It wasn't something she had ever planned, but it was

happening. She shook her head sadly. “But don’t you see? We can’t. We have to stop it before it gets out of hand.”

“I’ve told you before, but I guess you weren’t listening.” He grinned then, looking hopeful. “I would never do anything to hurt you, or rush you. You’ve been through a lot, and I really do understand... but there’s no way I’m going to let you go. I won’t push you or hurry you any faster than you want me to. Just don’t push me away,” he pleaded. “I need you too much!”

She wanted to believe him, she wanted to trust him... and more than anything else in all the world, she wanted to love him back in the same intense way. But for now... she knew she couldn’t. Maybe after the baby came... but not right now. He was asking too much from her. “I need more time,” she finally answered.

“You can have all the time you need, sweetheart. I’ll wait forever if you want me to.”

“But don’t you see?” She reached out and stroked the muscle she saw twitching on the side of his jaw. “That’s the part that’s not fair to you. I don’t know how long I need.” It was a lie, she knew it was, but for now it was all she could answer. After the baby, maybe... Maybe then she would be ready to start living again. Maybe she would be ready to let the past go. She didn’t know for sure.

“It doesn’t matter how long you need. I’ll be here.”

This conversation was getting them nowhere. He could sit here and argue till the end of time, and she knew everything would still be the same. He would never want to raise another man’s child. She would have to be a fool to ever let herself even begin to believe he might. She knew he could never love her that much.

Becky moved away, distancing herself even further from his nearness. The heavy pounding of her heart beneath her blouse telling her it was the thing to do. He was

saying all the right things, wearing her down, and she feared she might give in. She might listen to the words he was saying... and she knew, too, she had to stop him before she found herself truly beginning to believe him.

“You can wait forever if you want to, George,” She turned to face him, her eyes filling with tears. “But it will never change anything. The fact is we can never be together... not the way you want us to be.”

“Is it because of the baby?”

“The baby... but how did...?” Her eyes widened, his words hitting her like a bolt of lightning. How had he known? How had he guessed? And then, just as suddenly, the answer popped into her head. Sammie! Sammie had obviously told him everything there was to know about her.

Becky felt the pounding of his heart beneath his sweat dampened shirt as he pressed her hand to his chest. She saw the tears glistening on his lashes. “I’ve known all along, Becky. And even if you don’t believe me, I feel it only makes me love you more.”

She started crying then, his words breaking the dam. He truly meant it. He loved her, he loved the baby. “Oh, George...”

He pulled her back into his arms and she felt the gentleness of his lips as he pressed a kiss to the top of her head. She had been afraid for so long. And now, as he held her and she felt his love swirling around her like a feathery soft cloud, she couldn’t stop the tears. She slipped her arms around his neck. This was where she wanted to be... this was where she wanted to stay forever.

“I love you, sweetheart,” he murmured.

She knew they would still have a lot of things to work out. They couldn’t be together – not like they both knew they wanted to be – but she knew, too, he meant all



he had said to her. They could wait until after the baby came. They would work it all out. Together they could do anything.

She didn't answer right away but George didn't seem to mind. He was happy just holding her close.

And then finally, in the stillness of the setting sun and as the sky took on a radiant hue of red and gold and purple above their heads, he was certain he heard her whispered words spoken close to his ear. "And I love you, too."

## Thirty Seven

Becky heard the antique clock on the mantle chime eight times as she closed the door and walked into the darkened living room. The evening sun had long since disappeared, leaving the room enshrouded in the gloomy dark shadows of night. But tonight... she didn't care. Tonight she didn't bother to switch the lamp on. The darkness felt comforting, like a long lost friend; welcoming and warm, and she was glad it was there for her.

It wasn't all that late---and the afternoon they had spent in the park hadn't been all that tiring---but she felt utterly exhausted as she slumped down on the sofa with a loud groan. So much had happened in just this one short day. In just this one short month, she inwardly corrected herself... It had all started way before just this one day.

She couldn't help but wonder if maybe she and George had been seeing too much of each other since that first night, so long ago, when George had held her in the kitchen and let her cry it all out. Hadn't he told her then that he loved her? He might not have used those exact same words... but was there room for any doubt in her mind as to what his intentions had been? No!

And then there was today. How could she have let it all happen? How could she have let herself cling to him, and kiss him...? She cringed, her fingers trembling as they pressed to her lips. She had even mumbled in his ear that she loved him, too. And now... she felt so dirty. Oh God... she felt incredibly guilty.

There was no joy and happiness in her heart now. There was only confusion. Everything in her life was spinning out of control. Why was all this happening to her? She felt torn... her love for Bill, and the love she felt for their unborn child pulling her

in one direction; while on the other... the feelings she had for George.

What was she going to do? She had never felt more afraid in all her life.

She wasn't ready to get involved with someone new---she knew that now. She might have lost her head earlier today, the picnic had been so inviting, the day so romantic... but sitting here now---all alone in her and Bill's cozy living room---she felt certain. She had her and Bill's baby to think about. Everything planned just the way she wanted it. Who did George think he was, trying to come into her life and interrupt everything? She wasn't ready to love him yet. She didn't want to love him yet!

And she didn't need him either... she didn't need anyone!

It was more important to hold on to Bill. Bill was the only person she had time for. The only person she had any room left in her heart for. And then, as Becky sat all alone in the darkness, her hands folded across her lap and resting on the small bulge she felt growing there, she was suddenly reminded. She smiled then, and as she did, she felt the single tear slip from the corner of her eye and slid slowly down her cheek. The tiny bulge in her lap was a pleasant reminder.

The only space she had left in all her heart was already reserved. She had reserved it a very long time ago for someone so very important. She had saved it especially for the tiny unborn child she carried there, safe and secure, under her loving heart.

Becky got slowly to her feet and headed through the darkness towards her and Bill's bedroom. She felt her smile growing even wider. Realizing now, maybe more at this very moment than she had ever realized before... she would always have plenty of room in her heart... and in her life, for her and Bill's wonderful little bundle of joy.

## Thirty Eight

Mandy leaned against the door jamb, her face flushed, her hand clutching her heaving breast; and looking as if she had just completed a marathon. Had she just ran the entire ten blocks from her apartment to get here?

“Oh my God, Mandy...” Becky grabbed her upper arms, supporting her sagging body. “Are you all right? What in the world are you doing here at this hour?”

“Where... have you... been?” she gasped.

Becky’s eyes went wide. How could she have forgotten she was supposed to be at Mandy and Joe’s for dinner tonight at six o’clock sharp? She felt like the proverbial child caught with their hand in the cookie jar. “I’m so sorry, Mandy...” A guilty blush warmed her cheeks. “I didn’t mean to forget our dinner date.”

She had been forgetting everything today. She had gotten absolutely nothing done. All she had been doing was worrying about all the things that had plagued her mind since last night. How was she ever going to explain to George that she couldn’t see him anymore? Or was that even the right solution? Did she really want to break it off with him completely? And what if she didn’t? What if she really did love him? That was the biggest question of all. And what if she did find that she had enough room in her heart? Should she take the risk of losing him until she got all the answers?

She tried to think---she knew she had to come up with the answers. But for now... all she could concentrate on was the hysterical friend before her.

“Oh, Man... can you guys ever forgive me?”

“Forgive you?” Mandy shrieked. She was too far gone for forgiveness at the moment. Becky had done the unthinkable! She had frightened them nearly to death.

“Where in Heaven’s name have you been?”

“But, I...”

Mandy didn’t wait for her to finish. She rushed in, the shoulder strap of her purse caught in the crook of her elbow, the purse banging her knees. She grabbed Becky by the shoulders and spun her around like a flimsy rag doll. “I’ve been worried out of my mind. Joe and I have called here at least a dozen times since six o’clock. We didn’t know. We thought you might have been in an accident, or... And then finally I couldn’t stand it another minute. I left Joe sitting by the phone, and I grabbed the first cab I saw. And dammit...”

Mandy’s words came tumbling out so fast that Becky couldn’t help but think she might faint from the lack of oxygen.

“It scares me to death to think of what I would do if you weren’t here when I got here.”

“Hey, girl... calm down” Becky took Mandy’s hand and led her towards the kitchen. “You sit and I’ll make us some coffee, okay?”

Becky set the pot on the stove and pulled two mugs from the cabinet. “I didn’t mean to forget,” she said, sliding into her chair and reaching for Mandy’s hand. She gave it a gentle squeeze. “I only went for a long walk, and I’m sorry... I guess I just forgot about tonight.”

“Forgot!” Mandy shrieked, her eyes livid.

She was angry. No, she corrected herself... what she was feeling was far more than anger. She was furious! She had seen Becky do some pretty stupid things before, but this one took the cake. It was bad enough that she had forgotten dinner . . . but didn’t she have any better sense than to go out for a long walk in the middle of the night---in New York City no less. She could have gotten mugged, or raped, or worse!

The thoughts were almost too horrible to even think about but she couldn't stop them. How could Becky have done this?

Becky opened her mouth but Mandy cut her short.

"Oh, that's quite all right," she spat, jerking her hand from Becky's grasp. "I sort of like worrying about you."

"Come on, Man. I said I was sorry." Becky went to the stove and poured the coffee with a trembling hand. It looked like she had really screwed up this time. On top of everything else she had to worry about, she now had to find a way to soothe Mandy's frayed nerves.

Mandy drummed her fingers on the table, her long nails clicking in the silence. "I know..."

"But do you know I really mean it?" She slid her hand across the table and touched Mandy's sleeve. She thought Mandy might pull away again, but a moment later she saw her look up with a timid smile and nod her head.

"I'm sorry, too," she apologized. "I didn't mean to fly off the handle like I did. But you know how worried I get."

"Yeah... I know," Becky teased. "It's one of the things you do best."

Feeling all was well with the world again – Becky was safe after all, and feeling that her own blood pressure had dropped back to within a few degrees of actually being normal again – Mandy reached for the coffee Becky had poured ten minutes ago. It was no longer hot, but it would do. "So tell me," she asked, leaning forward and resting her elbows on the edge of the table, an eager smile glued to her face. "What was so important to drag you out for this so called 'long walk'?"

Becky opened her mouth to answer, but was cut short by the ringing of the phone.

"Oh my, God!" Mandy shot a quick glance at her watch and jumped to her feet.

“It’s, Joe... I forgot to call him when I got here.”

Becky couldn’t help but laugh as she nodded in the direction of the phone, indicating that Mandy should be the one to answer it. She leaned back in her chair wearing a mischievous grin. “Go ahead... it’s probably for you,” she teased.

“Oh, hush up!” Mandy shot at her, and then into the receiver, she said, “I’m sorry, Joe. Becky’s here and I forgot to call you.”

Becky grinned as she lifted her mug to her lips. It looked like the tables had finally turned and it was now Mandy’s time to find out what it felt like to sit on the hot seat.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” She heard Mandy stutter. “Hang on a minute... I’ll get her.”

Mandy spun around, extending the receiver in Becky’s direction. “It’s for you,” she said, her brows raised in mock surprise.

“What?” Becky sputtered, nearly choking on her coffee. “It’s for me?”

Mandy nodded.

The voice coming through the line sounded familiar, but for a moment, Becky couldn’t place it. “I hope I’m not calling, too, late,” It said.

Becky looked to the clock on the far wall – it was almost ten-thirty. She opened her mouth to answer, but the voice cut her short. “I just wanted to call and tell you again I had a terrific time yesterday, and I sure do love you.”

“Yeah... me, too,” she heard herself answering shyly. She should have known. It was George!

“So,” he asked again. “Am I calling, too, late?”

Becky knew Mandy was still standing right behind her, she could feel the warmth of her breath on the back of her neck, and almost immediately, she felt her cheeks blazing red. She hadn’t yet managed to convince Mandy that she and George were only

friends, and now – with him calling so late at night – she could just imagine the thoughts running wantonly through her head.

“Becky, are you still there?”

“Yes... no. I mean...” Becky stammered awkwardly. She could hardly wait to hang up---she was going to strangle Mandy. If it was the last thing she ever did, she knew she was going to murder her---slowly! “Yes, I’m still here, and no . . . it’s not all that late. I’m still up.” She looked over her shoulder and faced Mandy with a taunting grin. “Mandy’s here and we were just having a friendly little chat.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” George apologized. “I won’t keep you then, I didn’t mean to interrupt. You girls have a good time, and I’ll talk to you later. Like tomorrow, maybe?”

“Do what?” Becky was almost too flustered to talk. Was she even making any sense?

“Can I see you tomorrow?”

Was she hearing right? She couldn’t help but wonder. Here George was, asking her out again, and all she could think about was the third degree she knew she had coming as soon as she hung up. She would probably never get rid of her now. If she knew Mandy at all---and boy... did she ever know her---she knew she would no doubt want to spend the night, and keep her up all night talking the way she used to when they were in college.

“Becky?” She heard him ask again.

“Oh, George... I’m sorry. Yes. Tomorrow sounds great. Just give me a call.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

Becky’s cheeks reddened. “Yeah, I’m fine. My mind’s just a little preoccupied, that’s all.”

A little preoccupied? Boy was that an understatement. She almost felt like



laughing. And then instead, she heard herself saying, “Good-bye.”

Just as she had suspected---Mandy was waiting on her when she turned around. “Okay...” she said, holding her palms up in defense. She knew there was no need to try and beat around the bush---Mandy was all but panting---she could see it in her eyes. “So what do you want to know?”

“Everything!”

She should have known. “Come on then...” Becky reached for Mandy’s hand. “We might as well go into the living room. This might take a while.”

## Thirty Nine

“I don’t know, Man. Where do I begin?” She shifted her weight on the sofa and turned to face Mandy. She felt her heart hammering against her ribs like a frightened bird flapping its wings and trying to escape a sudden trap. What words could she use to describe the turmoil that filled her heart night and day? “I just feel so confused right now.”

She knew she had to tell Mandy the whole story, from the beginning... but for the moment, she felt at a loss for words. How could she admit to her dearest friend that she now had a whole new set of nightmares to haunt her? Wasn’t it bad enough that Mandy already knew of the frightening dreams about Brad? And now there were more? And how could she ever hope to explain all that was happening between her and George?

“Confused?” Mandy asked. “What are you feeling confused about? I don’t understand.”

“That’s what I mean. How do I make you see?”

Mandy placed her mug on the coffee table and reached for Becky’s hand, pulling it into her lap. She studied her face and saw the fear in her eyes. “Why don’t you just start at the beginning? Maybe I can help you figure it out.”

Becky swallowed hard, but the lump in her throat stayed put, refusing to be pushed aside. All she had to do was open her mouth. The words would be there, she knew they would... she had never had any trouble talking to Mandy in the past. And so... she began. “Well... I’m scared about George. I’m scared about me. We seem to be getting along so great. He told me he loves me, and I don’t know...” Becky paused and swiped at the tears on her cheek with the back of her hand. “I think I’m falling in love

with him, too.”

Mandy shook her head and grinned. “So. What’s so confusing about falling in love with someone?”

“But don’t you see, Man? That’s only part of it.” Becky got to her feet and went to the window. She watched the twinkling city lights far below. “I just don’t know if I’m ready for all that yet. I have the baby to think about.”

Mandy followed her to the window and Becky felt the comfort of her arm as she slipped it around her waist. “Oh, honey,” Mandy whispered, “you’re such a silly goose. You have so damned much to be thankful for, and here you are trying to make a mountain out of a molehill.” She laughed then and Becky studied her reflection in the darkened glass. “Of course you have the baby to think about. But why can’t you do a little thinking about yourself, too?”

“Me? What do you mean?” she asked, her eyes still on the mirror image of Mandy’s hopeful face. “I am thinking about me.”

“Come on, let’s sit back down.” Mandy led her back to the sofa and handed her the mug of coffee she had left on the end table. Her own eyes were serious as she went on, trying as best as she could to bring some comfort back into Becky’s life. “What I mean is this... what are you going to do after the baby comes? Don’t you think you will want a man around then to share both your lives? Would it be so wrong for you to choose who that man might be before you have the baby?”

“Well, I guess it wouldn’t be... but I just don’t know. It might be unfair to him to make him wait until after I have the baby... and I’m so afraid. What if I can’t make a total commitment to him before that?”

Mandy smiled, “Then I guess he will just have to wait, won’t he?”

“But what if he won’t?”

“He will, Becky.” Mandy reassured her. “He undoubtedly loves you a great deal.”

Becky believed her. There wasn't a doubt in her mind that George might not love her. But what was she going to do about the nightmares. How could she ever make them go away and leave her alone once and for all?

Mandy saw the tears pooling in Becky's eyes and knew there was more. She hated to ask, but knew she had to. If she didn't... how did she expect to help? She grabbed a tissue from the box on the coffee table and pressed it into Becky's hand. “Is there something else you want to talk about?”

She wiped her nose as Mandy had urged her to do, but for the moment she held her tongue. If she opened her mouth right now she knew the tears would start all over again.

Mandy seemed to understand. She nodded her head and gave Becky's shoulder a gentle squeeze. “It's okay, honey,” she urged, her voice quiet. “Just open up and tell me what it is. What else is bothering you?”

“Well... you already know about the dreams I have about Brad sometimes.”

Mandy nodded, but didn't answer. How could she ever forget? She sipped her coffee and waited for Becky to go on.

“I've sort of learned to live with those dreams... but now I'm having new nightmares. Stranger nightmares. And they scare me so...” Becky paused and looked away. One lone tear dripped from her chin and splashed on the back of her hands folded in her lap. “I'm so afraid these dreams are trying to tell me something . . . like maybe I'm having a premonition.”

“What kind of dreams are you talking about?”

Becky went on slowly, explaining as best as she could all that had been troubling her. She heard herself repeating all over again the same words she had used to explain

her dreams to Dr. Payton a few weeks ago. She prayed that Mandy would reassure her, too, like Dr. Payton had done.

“Like the other day, I dreamed I was sitting in a strange doctor’s office and he was asking me the stupidest questions. I remember folding my hands in my lap, and I remember, too, that my lap was perfectly flat. I wasn’t pregnant.”

“What do you mean?” Worry lines creased Mandy’s forehead. “What did you do? Did you ask the doctor in your dream about it?”

Becky laughed then, a sad little laugh that touched Mandy’s heart. “No,” she whispered. “This doctor didn’t seem to be interested in my physical well being. He seemed to be asking me questions as if he were some kind of shrink or something.” Mandy’s eyes widened but she held up a hand to silence her. She was shaking but she went on; her words spilling out, baring her soul. “Yeah... can you believe that? I got so upset I ran out into the hallway... and then...”

Another tear followed the first and dripped into her lap. “I don’t know, Man. I don’t remember,” she admitted with a shrug. “I just woke up.”

There was a moments’ silence, and then she heard Mandy’s long low whistle. “Wow... that does sound pretty scary. But you did talk to Dr. Payton about it, didn’t you?”

Becky nodded and reached for her coffee. It was probably cold, but she didn’t care. “I told him when I went in for my last visit. He says it’s nothing to worry about and that it is quite normal for pregnant women to experience all sorts of crazy dreams.” She shrugged again and tried to pull a smile to her lips. “He mentioned something about it being hormones.”

For a moment Mandy didn’t know what to say... and so she didn’t. She leaned back, resting her head on the sofa, and squeezed her eyes shut. Almost immediately the

dimly lit room faded into darkness behind her closed lids. How could she even begin to hope she might be able to supply any of the answers? And she knew Becky needed answers... real answers, to the real questions that haunted her.

“I really don’t know what to say.” She opened her eyes and forced a timid smile to her lips. She took Becky’s hand in her own. “But maybe Dr. Payton is right. Maybe you should just try to stop worrying about it. After the baby comes you know everything will get back to normal in your life, and surely ten all those stupid dreams will be a thing of the past.”

For a long silent moment Becky studied the hopeful look she saw on Mandy’s face. And then once again, as she let herself do a short while ago, she felt herself believing Mandy’s words. What else could she do? She knew she had to believe. Believing and hoping were the only two options she had left.

By now Mandy was sitting on the edge of the sofa, her eyes wide, her frown deepening. She waited anxiously for Becky’s answer. For some kind of response.

But Becky only nodded her head without saying a word. And then... in the next instant as she pulled Mandy into her open arms for a much needed hug... Becky was certain she saw her friend’s frown melting away.

Forty

\* \* \*

Saturdays were always the best. And sometimes Sundays, too, but not to Becky – Saturdays were always her favorite. That was the day he came to visit.

And she could hardly wait... he would be here any minute.

Waiting was the hardest part. She sat all alone on the worn plaid sofa in the quiet room; her heart fluttering like it was doing flip flops, her hands twisting in her lap. Hardly daring to even blink, her eyes remained transfixed on the long circular drive on the other side of the wide plate glass window.

In the past half hour she had seen at least three cars driving up from the main road far below. But so far... none of them had been the familiar, dusty-blue Ford she had grown so accustomed to looking for.

“It’s a beautiful day isn’t it?”

Becky shot a quick look over her shoulder. “Yes,” she stammered, startled at the unexpected intrusion. She smiled timidly. “It sure is. I really like this time of year.”

“Me, too. Summer time is always the best,” the red haired girl said as she flopped down on the sofa next to Becky. “I’m sorry...” The girl seemed flustered, embarrassed that she had frightened her, and wasted no time in apologizing. “I didn’t mean to nearly scare the wits out of you. But anyway... Hi there, I’m Tinker, you know---like Tinker Bell.” She lifted her arm and Becky saw the tiny golden bell she wore there on her left wrist, suspended from a slender gold chain as fragile looking as Angel’s hair.

“That’s okay.” Becky smiled. “I guess I was just too busy staring out the window. I didn’t hear you come in... that’s all.”

Tinker was still holding her arm up in front of Becky's face, her eyes staring intently at the tiny golden bell. And then – just as quickly as she had raised it a moment before---she dropped her arm to her lap. The little bell fell silent as it lay pinned between her arm and the skirt of her jumper. She turned and faced Becky, her eyes wide and expectant. “Who are you waiting on? Your mom and dad?” Tinker paused, looking embarrassed. “Or are you waiting on your beau?”

Becky giggled and felt her cheeks growing warm. “I'm waiting on my boyfriend,” she answered proudly.

She turned her attention back to the window. What if she had missed seeing him arrive while she had been chatting with Tinker? Her eyes scanned the parking lot and she felt her heart leap to her throat. There was a blue car out there, but then – after standing up and craning her neck for a closer look---she saw it wasn't a Ford. She sat back down with a groan. It was only an old Buick.

“Oh wow,” Tinker said with a wistful grin. “I think that's great. I'm just waiting for my brother... I don't have a boyfriend. At least not yet. But I bet it's great.” She twisted around and followed Becky's gaze out into the sun-filled parking lot. “What's your boyfriend's name? If I had a boyfriend I would want his name to be Jimmy. I really like that name... Jimmy. Don't you?”

Becky shrugged her shoulders. “Yeah, I guess that's an okay name... but you can have all the Jimmy's you want. My boyfriend's name is even better than that.” Her smile broadened, ear to ear. “My boyfriend's name is Brad!”

\* \* \*

Becky's eyes flew open!

She didn't move... she was afraid to. Darkness surrounded her – above her head, all around her.



She felt a mass of sweat dampened sheets twisted beneath her trembling limbs. The loud echo of her thumping heart filled her ears and was the only sound in the stillness that was black.

Then she remembered.

She sighed deeply. She was in her room... safe and sound... it was only a dream.

Oh, God... the horrible dream.

Again!

## Forty One

By the time Becky arrived at the theater on Monday morning at eight-thirty everything seemed to be in a state of total chaos. Sammie Matthews had been here since seven, his usual arrival time, and he was now frantic.

Dress rehearsals were scheduled to begin in less than a week on his latest play. He stormed from his office, his face pinched, his arms flaying like a windmill. Nothing was going right.

Several of the new cast members he had recently hired were having a hard time learning their lines. Two of the stage hands were out sick. None of the backdrops had been completed. And to top it all off... Becky was totally exhausted.

She felt like a zombie, having slept no more than three hours the night before, and by noon she found herself wondering how she was ever going to make it through the remainder of the day. Her head ached, the muscles in her back felt like they were going to snap at any minute. And today, more than she had ever noticed before... she felt very pregnant.

“Pretty hectic day, huh?” George turned with a welcoming smile when he saw Becky coming into the room. He was standing in front of the ancient coffee maker, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, the toe of his boot tapping the floor impatiently. “How about a fresh cup of coffee?” he offered.

Becky groaned and slumped into the nearest chair. “Please,” she mumbled, leaning forward and resting her forehead on the edge of the table. “Hopefully it will wake me up.”

George placed two Styrofoam cups of coffee on the table and slid into the chair

next to her. “You look like you’re dragging today... didn’t you sleep well last night?” He gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. “Or did you and your friend Mandy stay up all night gossiping?”

Becky looked up and grinned as reached for her coffee. She watched him over the rim of her cup as she lifted it to her lips. “No,” she answered. “Mandy didn’t keep me up all night... she left about half an hour after you called.”

She was still tired, the day was only half over, but it didn’t take her but a moment to realize that George’s smile was exactly what she had needed. She had missed him, too.

Her long talk with Mandy last night had worked wonders in helping her sort out her mixed emotions. Maybe she did have room enough in her heart for George. She felt better when she thought about their relationship and where it might lead. But on the other hand – sitting here now in the light of day and enjoying a cup of coffee with the man she knew she loved---she couldn’t shake the dread she felt filling her heart. She kept thinking of last night’s nightmare.

Becky shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. She had to remember the words both Mandy and Dr. Payton had told her. There was no need to worry herself with the stupid dreams now.

“Do you have any special plans for tonight?”

“Tonight?” Did she have any plans for tonight? She tried to remember. No. Maybe go to bed early... if she was lucky. But other than that her evening was open. “Not as far as I know. Why? What have you got in mind?”

“Well... I can tell you’re pretty tired. I see the dark circles under those lovely eye of yours.”

“No you can’t.” Becky said, her fingers reaching up to rub her eyes; hopefully to

erase the evidence of her lack of sleep.

George nodded and reached for her hand with a grin that said he knew better. He held her hand in his own, his touch warm and inviting.

“Well... I might be a little tired,” she relented, crossing one leg over the other, her eyes studying the knot in her shoe laces as if it were the most important thing on her mind. “But I’m sure I’ll be okay.”

George grinned again and pressed a quick kiss to her blushing cheek. He sensed there might be something more she wasn’t telling him yet to explain her lack of sleep, but for now... he waited to ask. “How about I bring over some Chinese tonight, say about eight or eight-thirty? And we can watch old movies on the tube? Think you might be able to stay awake for at least half an hour or so?”

By now it was twelve-fifteen and the quiet break room was quickly filling up with the remainder of Sammie’s cast members and tired workers. Everyone seemed to be talking at the same time. “That’s my lunch sack.” She heard someone complain, and from across the room, “Hey, save me a cup of that stinking coffee, would ya?”

Becky grinned and nodded her head at George, in agreement with his plans for a quiet evening at home. A quiet evening anywhere for that matter, she thought, as long as it was away from here. “I think I would like nothing better,” she said, leaning close to his ear. “If I make it through the remainder of the day around here.”

George got to his feet and smiled down at her as he reached for his unfinished cup of coffee. “See you then, sweetheart.”

Becky was about to get to her feet, too, when she heard someone call her name from across the room. “Hey, Becky.” So instead, she kept her seat and shot a quick wink in George’s direction. Their plans were made, she would see him tonight, but for now. . . She turned to see who might be paging her.

In less than a minute she had her answer. She saw Rose Gentry elbowing her way through the crowd and approaching the table at break neck speed; her lunch sack and soda clutched tightly in her pudgy hands, and with the tail of her unbuttoned smock flapping wildly behind her ample hips like a might wave.

Rose Gentry was the head of costumes, a cheery middle-aged woman who looked to be in her mid-forties. She had been working with Sammie for the past three and a half years, and everyone knew it was certainly a lucky day for him when he latched on to her. Rose knew her job. And she knew it well. Sammie never worried that any of his young actors might walk onto the stage in a costume that wasn't perfectly fitted. There was never as much as a single seam out of place.

“Am I ever glad I caught up with you,” Rose gasped, her massive frame enveloping the seat George had so recently vacated. She smiled and started dragging her lunch from a crumpled looking brown bag.

It was easy to see why Rose's girth was almost as wide as her height. Becky leaned back in her chair and smiled as she watched Rose unpacked her lunch. Today, as was the case on most every other day as well, Rose had brought along two overstuffed ham and cheese sandwiches, a giant banana, a bag of chips, and last but not least, Becky noticed... three chocolate and caramel candy bars.

“Oh yeah...” Becky smiled and lifted her flimsy cup to her lips, swallowing the last of her lukewarm coffee. “And what makes you so happy to see me today?”

Rose took a bite of her first sandwich and washed it down with a quick gulp of her soda. “One of my girls is out sick today,” she complained. “And Sammie is riding my back. We only have this one more week before dress rehearsal and I'm short on getting all the costumes ready. Do you think...?” Rose paused and Becky saw her eyeing her with doe-like brown eyes. “Do you think you might be able to lend a hand?”

Becky thought ahead to her own hectic schedule, her fingers toying idly with her empty Styrofoam cup. She and George had two more backdrops to finish, but thankfully. . . they shouldn't be too big of a problem. Both backdrops were of nothing more than a bedroom wall covered in a pansy print wall paper. That would be a snap. She smiled, she had the time.

"I don't know what kind of help I might be, but I guess I could manage to squeeze in an hour or two this afternoon. George seems to have everything under control in our department."

He first sandwich was finished, and Becky couldn't help but notice the speed with which Rose unwrapped the second. She wiped her mouth on a crumpled napkin and grinned with obvious relief. "Thanks, Becky. You'll never know how much I appreciate it." She took another bite and added quickly, as soon as she swallowed. "All I need you to do is help me put up a few hems, and maybe check a dozen or so costumes for loose buttons and such. You know... no big deal, just so darned time consuming."

"That doesn't sound too bad," Becky agreed, getting to her feet and smiling down at Rose's rounded cheeks. "Just give me a few minutes to check in with George, and I'll be right with you."

"Thanks a million. See you in a short." Rose was already halfway through peeling the enormous banana.

And then it was time to go home. Becky was relieved that Rose had rescued her to work in wardrobe for the remainder of the day. She didn't feel nearly as tired as she knew she would have had she stayed in props painting backdrops with George. The break in routine did wonders to relieve her fatigue.

\* \* \*

By the time George arrived, on time as usual, at eight o'clock, Becky had already

managed to get her shower, and was waiting now, perched on the edge of the sofa, listening for his knock.

She ran her fingers through her still damp hair hanging over the shoulder of her silk caftan, finger combing and fluffing it, hoping to help it dry before his arrival. She heard the knock. The Chinese food smelled delicious... and George looked handsome as ever.

“So,” he said with a smile, his own hair slicked back and damp from his obvious quick shower as well. “I see you managed to make it through the rest of this hectic day. Sammie was really in a state, wasn’t he?”

The fragrant aroma of George’s after shave drifted to her nose as she ushered him through the door and led him into the dimly lit living room. The coffee table was empty, cleared of all the magazines and decorative things she kept there, and waiting for the feast of dinner to be laid.

“Yeah,” she answered, tossing her hair across her shoulder with one hand, and reaching to help him with the food containers with the other. “No one ever heard me complain when it was finally time to get out of there.”

George took his seat by her side and reached for her hand. He saw the gentle smile that clung to her lips. Dinner could wait for the moment. So much had happened in such a short time between them and he felt his heart swell with pride and love.

“I hope you haven’t had a change of heart about us, Becky,” he whispered, his gaze intent, his eyes holding hers. “I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind since we talked the other day in the park. And then when I saw how tired you looked today, I was afraid...”

Becky gave his hand a gentle squeeze. He already knew her so well. It was almost frightening, but at the same time, it made her realize she loved him even more for it.

“No,” she answered quietly. “You don’t have to worry about that. I did feel terribly afraid and guilty about us at the first... but after I talked with Mandy, she helped me sort it all out. And today... I feel so much better about everything.”

He breathed a great sigh of relief, and Becky smiled when she saw the sudden sparkle in his love-filled eyes. “You don’t know how relieved and happy it makes me to hear you say that, sweetheart.”

“I think we still have quite a bit of talking to do. There are so many things we need to work out. But for now...”

“I know,” George whispered. “But there isn’t anything we can’t get past. We have the rest of our lives, we will make it all happen. I won’t ever rush you.”

“And I was so afraid that you would.”

“Not me... I would never do that.” He pulled her close and wrapped one arm protectively around her narrow shoulders. “I just want you to know one thing.”

“What?”

“I’m ready to move in today,” he said. “I don’t want to wait until the baby comes... not unless you absolutely insist. I will, if you want me to... but I really don’t want to.”

He was being honest with her, she felt sure of it, and she knew, too, she loved him even more for it. She wasn’t sure yet herself if they should move in together right now... or if they should wait.

On the one hand she thought they should wait---she knew she would never consider marriage until after the baby came. Having Bill’s baby was something she knew she had to do all by herself. But on the other hand... she knew she didn’t want to spend even one more day alone. She didn’t want to spend even one more minute without George by her side.



And she knew one other thing as well... she knew she loved him far too much for waiting any longer.

## Forty Two

By now, the last week in August, Becky felt as if she were ready to explode. She felt clumsy and awkward, feeling like a beached whale, and every day it seemed to get worse. She had always been so proud of her figure... but all that was before. Her once slim waistline, if it was true she had ever really had one---a fact she wondered about with each new passing day---was now only a memory. If her life depended on her tying her own shoelaces she knew she would surely have failed. No matter how hard she tried, she knew she would never again be able to do it.

“Aw, come on, honey,” George pleaded from the doorway. He had been standing here watching her for the last ten minutes. Dinner was ready in the kitchen, and he couldn’t get her out of the bedroom.

Becky was dressed in a lovely free-flowing peach colored caftan, her hair brushed sleek and shining around her shoulders, and still... she struggled to get into her shoes. It wasn’t good enough for her to simply wear the comfy slippers she normally wore around the apartment every day. Today was their second month anniversary and she wanted to get herself all dolled up for the special occasion. She had to get her feet into a dainty pair of black leather slippers with a flimsy gold buckle across the ankle. It was useless.

For the past two months they had been sharing the apartment on a one on one basis and George felt he had had sufficient time to witness her many quirks and habits. He knew she would never give up and admit she couldn’t do it. “Don’t be so hard on yourself,” he pleaded. “You won’t be pregnant forever.”

Becky pushed herself back into a sitting position on the edge of the bed, her

cheeks flushed from her failed efforts. “It’s no use,” she pouted. “I’ve already ruined our special dinner by taking so long to get ready. Why don’t you just forget about me and go on and eat it by yourself?”

He saw the tears glistening on her lashes. “I’ll do no such thing you silly girl,” he said, kneeling by her side. “It wouldn’t matter to me if we ever made it to dinner. You’re here, and I’m by your side.” He tilted her chin and drew her face closer to his, his words husky, filled with love. “Don’t you remember? I love you, only you, and forever you!”

“But, you’ve worked so hard...”

“Come on...” George slipped the still unbuckled slippers from her feet and tucked them under the edge of the bed. “I think you worry your pretty little head way too much. Who needs shoes anyway... it’s just us, right?”

Becky smiled and took her seat. He had outdone himself. The steaks were done to perfection and kept warm on the warming shelf in the oven. A bottle of sparkling cider sat in the ice bucket on the corner of the table. “Like it?” he asked, pulling the salad from the fridge and taking his seat.

“Mm... looks wonderful.”

He was so good to her. Better than she knew she deserved, better than she felt she was to him... but she had never once heard him complain. He spent his nights sleeping on the half bed they had set up in the nursery, never attempting to invade the privacy of her bedroom. He knew she wanted to wait until after the baby was born. She would be forever grateful.

But hopefully, it wouldn’t be too much longer. The baby was due in less than three weeks.

\* \* \*

The dream quickly carried Becky back to Dr. Nelson’s office. She had been here

so many times before... but this time---something seemed different. She sensed it the moment she opened her eyes and looked around the familiar room. She didn't even look the same as she had always remembered.

Was she sleeping, or perhaps worse yet... was she dead? This time the dream seemed even more confusing. She couldn't see anything clearly, even herself, and she knew immediately she should feel frightened... but she wasn't. For the first time in such a long time she felt totally at peace.

"Now, Becky." Dr. Nelson was speaking, she heard him. She didn't see him, but she heard his voice. It sounded quiet, but at the same time, firm and in control. "I want you to think really hard and try to remember. It was the middle of December, you and Bill, and your friends, Mandy and Joe were having dinner. Do you remember?"

Becky nodded.

"Can you speak, Becky? Try harder... I know you can. You can remember."

"Yes... that's right," Becky mumbled softly as she lay on the leather sofa, her eyes closed, and with her hands folded across her narrow waist.

She heard Dr. Nelson again. "Were the four of you out for a special occasion? A celebration maybe?"

Becky smiled then as her mind silently turned the pages back and she remembered. It was such a special night in her life. "It was a promotion..." she whispered. "We all had such a wonderful time."

"Go on, please... Can you remember more?"

"Bill told us about his promotion. Now we could really start to live. I could travel, too. I could go with Bill on some of his business trips... Oh, Bill. I'm so ... happy. You're number one at Shooting Stars Magazine now. The man in charge. How exciting." Becky's smile broadened. "You won't have to work so hard now. Acapulco?"

Oh yes... Bill. Do you really mean it? When? I want to go now. A second honeymoon..." Her voice trailed off.

Dr. Nelson leaned forward and checked the length of tape left on the recorder on the low table close to her head. She had been talking for close to half an hour and he didn't want to miss the last of the session. "Becky," he urged. "Try to go on. What happened then? What did the four of you do after the celebration?"

Becky didn't move for several minutes and Dr. Nelson began to wonder if she had heard his last question. He watched her patiently.

Her expression changed. The happy smile he had seen her wearing melted away and was replaced with a dismal frown. It looked as if she was remembering something extremely painful. The shallow lines around her closed lids deepened into vicious looking crevices.

"Easy, Becky." Dr. Nelson leaned closer, his folded arms on his knees. "Go slowly... you can do it."

Becky's lips parted. "After we... I uh. We went home. Acapulco... I want to go. Bill, I want us to go now. Bill? Can you hear me?" Her face contorted. She was feeling the pain again. Her tears coursed freely down the sides of her face, dripping on the rumpled pillow beneath her head. Her mumbled words became louder. "Bill... I love you. Bill? Where are you? I can't find you. Bill ... come back!"

Forty Three

\* \* \*

“Honey,” George said, hearing Becky groaning in her sleep. He brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. “Are you all right?”

Becky tossed her head, her face twisted with pain. He felt her tears dampen his jeans. “Becky...” George sat up straighter, fear gripping his heart. He shook her shoulder. “Honey... you need to wake up. Is something wrong?”

The sound of George’s voice drifted down the tunnel of Becky’s slumber and her eyelids fluttered. She blinked in the brightness. “Huh?” she mumbled, looking confused.

“Are you all right?”

Becky smiled, swiping the back of her hand across her eyes. “I think so.” She stretched, pushing her legs towards the far end of the sofa. “Oh, my God...” she screamed. “My legs... they’re asleep.” She thrust her arms downwards, reaching as far as she could over the vast expanse of her swollen stomach. “Help me rub them... they hurt. I can’t reach them.”

A broad smile replaced the fear on his face as he shifted her head to a small pillow and slipped to the floor. “You scared me, girl,” he said, his fingers already busy massaging her feet and legs. “I heard you moaning in your sleep, and for a minute there I was afraid you might have gone into labor.”

Becky propped herself up on one elbow and ruffled his hair. “Well. . .” She rubbed her lower stomach.

“What?”

“I think you might be right.”

“Um... that’s nice,” George mumbled, preoccupied with the task at hand.

“Did you hear me?”

George grinned and looked up. He saw her grimace. And then he froze... her words finally sinking in. His fingers stopped moving, the massage long forgotten. “Do what? When?” he shouted.

He jumped to his feet and Becky laughed as he darted around the coffee table, his hands waving excitedly. Heaven knows where he might be going, she thought. “How long? Oh, Becky...”

He was back on the floor, kneeling by her side... grasping her face in his palms. “Honey. . . are you sure? I mean... are you really in labor right now? Right this very minute?”

She had never seen anyone look so terrified. She giggled. “Yes... I’m really in labor. Right now. Right this minute.” She stroked his beard and smiled. It was almost over.

By this time tomorrow she would be holding her cuddly newborn to her breast, and then... And then she and George could finally get on with their future together. Finally the three of them; her and George and the new baby, could begin living their lives as a whole and complete family.

She could hardly wait!

“When did it start? How long have you been in labor?” he asked, gasping excitedly.

Becky frowned, trying to remember. “I remember feeling a little uncomfortable when I lay down on your lap and fell asleep. What time was that... do you remember?”

George shot one hand through his hair. “I don’t know... it was around eight-thirty

I think.” He glanced at his watch and looked back up, his eyes wide. “Honey... it’s almost eleven. What are you just sitting there for?” He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her to her feet. “We’ve got to get to the hospital.”

Becky leaned forward and planted her palms on his chest. “You just need to calm down,” she said, pressing a quick kiss to his lips. “I’m fine... really.”

And a short twenty minutes later, George had Becky in a cab, her suitcase tossed carelessly in the front seat beside the harried looking young driver, and they were on their way. Hospital here we come.

Two nurses met them when they stepped through the front doors and helped Becky into a waiting wheel chair. George followed in their wake, his face pale, his hand patting Becky’s shoulder nervously.

“Sir,” a loud voice bellowed.

George stopped in his tracks and spun around, coming face to face with one of the sternest looking faces he had ever seen. He heard Becky giggle behind him as the elevator doors slid closed. He gulped.

The woman who owned the face glared at him over the rim of her reading glasses as she grasped him by the elbow. “I need you to step over to the admitting desk so you can answer a few questions before you go upstairs with your wife.”

He was too afraid to say no – this woman had to be at least twice his size, and for the moment... he feared for his life. “Yes, ma’am,” he answered obediently. “What can I do for you?” He followed, the large nurse led.

She didn’t seem to notice his anxiousness. No doubt she saw nervous fathers-to-be like him every day of her life. It was all a part of her job. “Okay, Mr. Simmons,” she said, picking up a pen and flipping to the correct page of the form on her desk. “What is your home address?”



“No...” George stammered. “My name is not Mr. Simmons. My name is George Evans, I’m escorting Ms. Simmons... she’s my fiancé, we’re getting married as soon as she as the baby.” He ran a shaking hand through his hair and shifted his weight to the other foot. “What I mean is, we’re not married yet... but we will be.”

“I think I understand, Mr. Evans.”

And once again, there she was, frowning at him over the rim of her glasses. George felt his stomach lurch.

“That information is really none of my business,” she answered flatly. “I just need to get the address, the phone number... you know, the important information.”

George swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bouncing in his throat. He shoved his hands into his pockets. He had to calm down and get through with this or they would never allow him to go upstairs and see Becky. “I’m sorry, Mrs...” He paused and leaned forward, trying to get a better look at her name tag.

She flashed a smile. “Mrs. Blackwell,” she said, lifting her shoulders and thrusting her ample bosom upwards.

“Well, I’m sorry, Mrs. Blackwell,” he apologized. “I didn’t mean to run on so, it’s just that I’ve never had a baby before. I mean... I’ve never.”

“I think I know what you mean, Mr. Evans.”

“I’m just so excited.”

“I can see that.” Mrs. Blackwell lifted her pen again---the papers still needed to be completed. “Now, if you will try to calm down we can be through here in about five minutes. Beside... it will take them a little while to get finished with Ms. Simmons. They have to get her ready for delivery.”

He understood. He knew that. He didn’t like it... but he did understand. He nodded and cleared his throat. The questions seemed endless, but finally, twenty

minutes later---what happened to the five Mrs. Blackwell had promised---they were through. And he was off and running.

He was near panic when the elevator stopped on the fourth floor. The nurse at the labor and delivery desk urged him to go into the Father's waiting room and wait. He protested, he had to see Becky right now, he didn't want to go anywhere and wait. But once again, the overbearing nurse won out.

"I promise you, Mr. Evans," she assured him with a benevolent smile, "I will come and get you as soon as they have her ready."

He turned away and paced back and forth in front of the desk. The waiting room was too far down the hall... he would wait right here.

Inside labor room One, Becky was prepped and prepared for delivery. Her pains were coming quicker and harder. Hopefully it wouldn't be too much longer.

George was finally told he could go in and see her for a few minutes. He couldn't stay long – she would be ready to move into the delivery room at any minute---but if he were quick about it, he would get to see her at least long enough to tell her he loved her.

He stood in the doorway watching her, afraid to go inside, but even more afraid to turn and leave. He cringed. Seeing her in so much pain and agony tore at his heart. Her lovely face was drenched with sweat, her tears flowing freely. She looked so small and fragile lying in the middle of her high-railed bed, her slender hand clutching at the rails.

George stepped into the room and moved closer to the side of the bed. He took her hand and lifted it to his lips, a tiny smile lighting his eyes. "Hey, girl..." he whispered. "I'm here. And I sure do love you."

Becky rolled her head to the side and tried to smile. She clutched his hand even tighter in her own as another pain ripped through her quivering body. She opened her mouth to speak, but the pain stopped her words.

Tears blurred his vision. “Oh, honey... I wish I could do something. I can’t stand to see you in so much pain.”

She groaned and he saw her nod her head. She wanted to speak, she had so much she wanted to tell him, but her mouth refused to push the words past her clenched teeth.

“I’m here with you, sweetheart.” He stroked her hand, feeling helpless. “Surely it won’t be too much longer.”

The pain eased a little and Becky forced a tired grin to her lips. “I know, sweetheart,” she murmured. “It will all be over soon.”

And then it was back... her face twisted with the next contraction, and yet he saw the determined look in her pain-filled eyes. She was working harder than she had ever worked in all her life... and all he could do was stand here and watch.

The wide door swung open behind him and two nurses entered the room, their faces already covered with drab green surgical masks. He stepped aside as they pushed a stretcher to the side of Becky’s bed. It was time. Thank, God... it was almost over.

Easing Becky onto the large-wheeled stretcher, the nurses pushed her through the door and out into the hallway. George was at her side, clutching her hand. “I love you,” he said, his voice cracking, sounding nervous. “And I’m so proud of you.”

He looked up when they reached a set of wide double door, his eyes scanning the words prominently displayed on each door: ‘NO ADMITTANCE – DELIVERY ROOMS 1-8 AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY’. He knew it would be useless to try to go any further – he wanted to more than anything---but he knew he would be stopped if he even tried.

Becky smiled up at him as the nurses pulled the stretcher to a halt, allowing them a moment to say good-bye. “I love you,” she whispered, her smile this time wide and hopeful.

“I love you, too, honey.” There were tears in his eyes, but she saw him smile through them. He leaned down and pressed a quick kiss to her parched lips. Another pain reached out and carried her away.

They were pushing her through the double doors then, but in that split second before the heavy doors swung shut behind them, she heard George’s final words to her. “I’ll see you in a little while, sweetheart. I love you.”

## Forty Four

\* \* \*

“Come on, Becky... all you have to do is try. Look deeper,” Dr. Nelson urged her one more time, his brow furrowing. She was getting so close. He felt certain they were nearing the end. “You can see it all, can’t you?”

Becky sat rigid and still, her body tense and unyielding: the only movement, the moving of her eyes behind her closed lids. Her subconscious mind listening intently as his words droned on and on. Her mind’s eye searching deeper and deeper, going further back with each hypnotic sounding word she heard.

She saw it all. The gala celebration party she and Bill had shared with Mandy and Joe. She saw the shiny red MG sports car Bill had given her as an early Christmas present. She saw them driving through the falling snow. They were going home. They were so happy... so much in love. And then she saw the rest... the wreck that left her beaten and bruised, her leg broken, and her face bleeding and raw. She saw the wreck that ripped Bill from her life forever.

Dr. Nelson leaned closer, his eyes never wavering, never leaving his patient’s troubled young face. “What do you see, Becky?” he prodded. “Can you describe it to me?”

Becky’s eyes flew open, blinking in the brightness... her movement so sudden, Dr. Nelson almost visibly jumped in his seat. Her hypnotic trance was broken, and for the first time, she spoke in a clear, coherent voice. “Yes, Dr. Nelson... I can see everything. I know exactly what happened.” She tucked her hair behind her ear and held his gaze. “I know who you are ... and I know where I am.”

Her words fell silent then. She pushed herself to her feet and went to the window on the far side of the sun-filled room.

Dr. Nelson sat motionless, his eyes curious and wide. He watched her cross the room, studying her every movement. In all his years of practicing psychiatry he had never seen someone snap out of it as quickly as Becky had just done. He craned his neck and shot a quick glance at the slowly turning wheels of the tape recorder on the edge of his desk. This was definitely one session he had to have on tape.

Becky was silent for several minutes as she stared out the window. She saw the familiar looking lawns and gardens stretching as far as the eye could see. She saw a few of the other patients, the ones well enough to be allowed outside, enjoying the sunny spring-time afternoon. Her eyes scanned it all... the budding trees and flowers, the sweeping lawns, and even the wide circular drive leading up from the main road far beyond her vision.

It was all starting to fall into place. She knew exactly where she was... She couldn't remember how long she had been here---she didn't even know what year it was---but there was no room anymore for any doubt in her mind... she was slowly beginning to see why.

“Are you all right?” Dr. Nelson asked, still seated in his chair. He hadn't moved so much as an inch. His practiced eye busy, doing what he had been trained to do. He observed her movements, he studied her facial expressions. He knew her memory had returned.

Becky turned then, her face solemn, almost void of any outward show of emotion at all. She returned to her seat and folded her hands across the lap of her denim blue jumper. “I've been here for quite a while, haven't I?”

“Yes, Becky... you have,” he answered with honesty. This was still pretty

amazing, even to a doctor with his many years of working with patients in like circumstances. “As a matter of fact you have been staying here with us for a little over a year now.” He tapped the small calendar on the edge of his desk with an index finger. “It’s Monday, April the 5rd, 1976.” What else could he say? It was the truth, and he knew she deserved to hear it. “How do you feel?”

“A little confused.”

“I can understand, my dear.” He got to his feet and came and stood by her side. “Would you like a drink of water or something?”

She shook her head no and looked up and met his gaze.

Dr. Nelson patted her shoulder. “Do you feel like going on a little more today. . . or do you want to go back to your room so you can rest?”

“No.” Becky shook her head again. “I don’t feel tired at all. I think I would like to go on. Do you mind?”

The tape recorder whined on, the soft purring of its tiny motor barely audible in the quietness surrounding patient and doctor. Dr. Nelson reached across his desk and picked up his yellow note pad and faced her with a smile. His own head seemed to whirl with so many unanswered questions.

“So tell me,” he began slowly, “exactly what do you remember, Becky?”

She opened her mouth and his pen began taking notes. “I remember the wreck. Bill died... but I didn’t.” Her eyes brimmed with tears, but she blinked them back. “I remember living here. My mom and dad come and see me several times a month . . . don’t they?”

“Yes, they certainly do.” He nodded. “What else do you remember?”

“Mandy’s come several times, too. I remember talking to her.”

Becky’s words drifted off then and he saw her frown deepen. “I think I dreamed a

lot about seeing Brad.” She looked up and met his gaze, this time her questions seemed to be coming almost as much from her eyes as from her trembling lips. “I was dreaming. . . wasn’t I?”

Dr. Nelson shook his head no.

The image of Brad’s face materialized in her mind’s eye. It wasn’t a dream? He had really been here to see her? Oh, my God... she realized he had come to see her almost every week since she had been admitted here. She felt a blush warm her cheeks.

He waited for an answer, some kind of response... he saw her blush. It looked to him as if the many long hours they had spent working together over the past year was finally beginning to pay off.

“Did I call him George?” she asked, holding her breath. She was afraid his answer would once again be in the affirmative.

Dr. Nelson chuckled. “Yes... that you did. But I must say, your young man didn’t seem to mind it a bit. He’s been here for you every inch of the way.”

Becky closed her eyes for a moment. The remembered memories flooded her mind of all she and George had shared. The long conversations getting to know each other. The flirting, the falling in love. She felt her blush deepen. But in reality it hadn’t been George she had experienced it all with – it had really been with ‘Brad’.

“I feel so embarrassed. I must have acted like a real lunatic.”

“No...” Dr. Nelson looked up from his notepad. “I wouldn’t exactly describe your condition in such a vivid way.” He smiled and Becky felt relief wash over her. “I’m sure you are still filled with a great many questions, but please... be patient. Everything will be perfectly clear to you in no time at all. You might even continue to feel like you are living in two separate worlds for a while, but I assure you, it won’t be as bad as it has been for the past year.”



Becky stared intently into his eyes – watching his expression – hoping to understand all he was telling her.

“For a long time now you have been living partly in the present, and partly in...” He paused and tapped the pen against his chin, as if he were giving himself a moment to find the right words to describe what he was trying to say. “For lack of a better word, let’s just say you were living partly in a fantasy world. But for now don’t worry yourself with trying to remember everything all in one day. You’ve made a lot of progress today. And in the days to come we will continue to work on your complete remembrance in our sessions. And you’ll see... it won’t be too hard, or take too long. You’ve already won the real battle today and you’ll be ready to leave here in no time at all.”

It was true... Becky’s head was literally spinning. Was he telling her she was nearly completely well? She twisted in her seat. “You’re right... I do have a lot of questions, but I’ll try not to rush it. But doctor,” she passed and her eyes filled with tears once again. “Can I ask you one more question before I leave?”

“Well of course you can, Becky. What is it?”

Becky felt her hands knot into fists in her lap. “Was all this caused from the injuries I received in the accident?”

Dr. Nelson leaned one hip against the edge of his desk. “That’s a hard one for me to try to explain right now.” He watched her eyes, hoping to make her see. “We’ll go into greater detail at your next session... but for now I’ll try to simplify it if I can. I don’t think what happened to you was caused by any physical injuries you received ... I think it all started way before you and Bill had the accident.”

Becky felt confused, but she didn’t interrupt.

“You received a very traumatic shock that day, seeing Bill die like he did. But even before that day... you received another traumatic shock.” Dr. Nelson picked her file

and flipped back several pages. He read for a long moment. “Yes, here it is.” He looked back up and met her gaze. “Your friend Mandy, along with your mom and dad, told me that you were barely able to handle the breakup between you and Brad when you were in college.” He lifted an eyebrow. “So, to me it sounds like you came very close to having a nervous breakdown at the time.”

Becky nodded. How could she ever forget that horrible time in her life?

Dr. Nelson went back to his chair and sat down. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the edge of his desk. “And it appears your mind has remained in a very fragile state through the years. Your constant dreams about your and Brad’s breakup. And then, when he came and visited you at your apartment... it sort of re triggered it all. Mandy told me of the many times you confided in her that you were unsure if your dreams, and subsequent sightings of Brad, were indeed real or merely imagined.”

He paused a moment, giving Becky a few minutes to absorb all of what he was saying. “So you see... with your mind already being in a fragile state, it wouldn’t take much to push you over the edge. And with you and Bill having the accident, and you witnessing his death...” He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head again. “So after the accident... you coped for a few weeks. You were probably still taking a lot of prescribed medications meant to help you emotionally. And when those medications quit helping you... your mind just sort of went on hold. It knew you couldn’t handle the reality of all that had happened.”

Becky swallowed hard and rubbed her sweaty palms on the lap of her skirt.

“And like I was telling you a few minutes ago... that was the obstacle that stood in your way. You had to let your mind remember it all in its’ own sweet time. It knew exactly when to bring it all back up... when you would be strong enough to handle it. And that was what happened today... you finally remembered.”

Becky nodded. Little by little it was all starting to make sense. The pieces seemed to be fitting together like a large jigsaw puzzle. “I think I’m beginning to see, doctor.”

“Like I said, it will all come together in due time. You just have to be patient a little longer.”

“But I feel like I’m remembering more and more with every passing minute.”

“Of course you do.” Dr. Nelson smiled again and got to his feet. He went to the low table by the window and poured two cups of coffee. “Now that your mind has let you see the accident, you’re ready to go on and remember everything else that has happened to you since then.” He came back, handed her one of the cups, and sat down in the empty chair by her side. “Let me see... Maybe I can help you fill in some of the blanks.”

Becky sipped her coffee. It was all coming together, at long last, and she could hardly wait.

Dr. Nelson leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. “After they released you from the hospital your parents closed up your and Bill’s old apartment and brought you back here to Texas with them. And like I said a few minutes ago, for a while you seemed to be getting better, but after a few weeks... you seemed to be regressing. Your folks took you to see your regular family doctor, Dr. Palmer, but he couldn’t detect anything physically wrong with you. Apparently your sub-conscious mind couldn’t handle the pain any longer. Your mind slipped into a more comfortable, fantasy-like existence.” Dr. Nelson finished his coffee and set his empty cup on his desk. “And then Dr. Palmer referred you to our sanitarium here.”

Becky continued listening in earnest. She hadn’t bothered to finish her coffee, the doctor’s words were far too interesting... the coffee could wait. “I see,” she answered. “And I’ve been here since then?”

He nodded. “Yes. You had days when you were next to catatonic. You would just sit in your chair and stare out the window. Never once would you dare to leave your room. All you cared about was talking to Bill. You didn’t seem to even notice when anyone else was in the room with you. And then... there were other times, other days, when you seemed to be your old self again. You would go to therapy and talk with your friends here.”

“Like, Tinker?” Becky asked, ducking her head and looking sheepish.

“Yes, she was one of your best friends. You and Tinker even share the same room.”

“It all seems so clear to me now, Dr. Nelson.” Becky tucked her hair behind her ears. “But there’s one other thing I can’t quite get through my head. And I’m almost afraid to ask>”

“Go ahead, Becky. What is it?”

Her eyes filled with tears again and Dr. Nelson pressed a tissue into her hand. She dabbed at her eyes and faced him with a frown. “Why did I fantasize about being pregnant? I just don’t understand.”

This was the hardest part. He hated to have to tell her right now, but she wanted to know. And once again, he knew it was the right thing to do. “I suppose it was your mind’s way of trying to hold on to Bill. You knew how badly he wanted to have children, and for a long time you must have felt you were letting him down. After the accident, your mind dredged it all back up, and in your own way... maybe you thought you could make it up to him. If you could bear his child now, maybe he wouldn’t be gone.”

Becky placed her cup on the desk next to his, her coffee still there. She wiped her eyes and forced a timid smile to her lips. “Yes, I guess you’re right. That does seem to make sense. But... why did I feel like I was really in labor? Why did I feel the real

pain?”

“The pain you felt, Becky, was your sub-conscious trying to prevent you from remembering. The painful memories of all those dreadful moments of your life was the real pain you were feeling. You only associated it with labor and delivery pains.”

“I see.”

It was getting late. The clock on the wall above Dr. Nelson’s desk told him it was almost five o’clock. It was almost time for diner.

“I think we’ve gone over enough for right now, Becky. Why don’t we call it a day? I know you’re getting pretty tired, and to tell the truth. . . so am I.”

A deep feeling of achievement swelled his chest as he thought of the past year he had spent working with her, she had certainly had a rough time of it... but it looked like she was finally on the road to recovery. Complete recovery!

“That sounds like a good idea to me, too, doc. I am pretty tired.” She stifled a yawn.

Dr. Nelson stood up and walked with Becky to the door. “You try and get some rest tonight, little lady,” he said, his smile broad. “We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

“Good night, Dr. Nelson... and thank you.”

Becky stepped through the door and headed down the hall towards her room. Her own smile bright and hopeful. She couldn’t remember feeling this happy in such a long time.

Forty Five

Long Island, New York: July 1976

\* \* \*

“Don’t you see what you’re doing to yourself, Becky?” There were tears in her eyes as she asked it, but Mandy didn’t let them stop her. She leaned closer and placed her hands on Becky’s shoulders---holding her still, not letting her pull away or turn and run for cover---this was too important... it needed to be said. “Don’t you see that you’re throwing your life away? You can’t go on letting this destroy you.”

“But you just don’t understand.”

“Understand what, Becky? Let me inside... show me. Make me understand!”

Becky reached up then, and with one swipe of her palm she rubbed the tears from her cheeks. Never before had she ever felt more confused. Why was Mandy doing this to her? Wasn’t it enough that she had already lost the only one she had ever loved in her entire life? She wanted to forget the pain. She wanted to forget everything. But, Mandy wouldn’t let her.

“I think I hate you, Man,” Becky said, her tears flowing freely, her heart beating with a hatred she had never before felt. “I think I hate you more than I have ever hated anyone in my whole life.”

“Maybe you do...” Mandy answered, her heart hammering, her own eyes flashing as brightly with anger as were Becky’s. But it was her love for Becky, the only thing that really mattered, that urged her on. “And then again, maybe you don’t. But for now. . . I really don’t care. I’m not going to let you go.”

And then, as if she were trying to prove her point, Mandy squeezed her fingers

even tighter into the soft white flesh of Becky's upper arms. She was on a roll now – the anger in her words causing her voice to rise even louder---and Becky knew it would be useless to try to stop her.

“You can't run,” Mandy demanded. “I won't let you. We're going to stand right here for however long it takes. I'm going to make you see what's happening.” Mandy's own tears were flowing as freely as Becky's by now. “I'm going to make you understand. You're killing yourself over nothing.”

\* \* \*

As Becky stood on the redwood sun deck – feeling the warm ocean breeze encircling her face and body, gently lifting the curls of her new shag haircut, and tugging the ankle length caftan tighter against her slender frame – she felt the smile return to touch her lips. She hadn't been reminded of that conversation in such a long time. She heard the gentle laughter spill from her throat.

Back then, on the day she had first heard Mandy uttering those words to her, Becky had thought it was more like an argument. A major falling out between two very dear, very close friends. That had been the day that, that very same friendship had nearly come to an end. It was hard to believe now, but all that had happened nearly six years ago. . . the summer Brad had walked out on her back in college. Mandy had been trying to save her from all the heartache. Trying to prevent her from drifting into that void where nothing else mattered ... where all she wanted to do was to die.

And then behind her, in the kitchen of the beloved beach house that she and Bill, and Mandy and Joe had visited so many times before – Becky heard the angry whistle of the tea kettle. It didn't take any serious concentration on her part to lift the kettle and pour the boiling water into the over-sized mug with the words ‘Sisters Are Forever’ written on its side. Her thoughts were still too busy – the memories too many---to be

pushed so easily aside and forgotten.

Dr. Nelson had told her two months ago, during one of their last sessions, of how instrumental he thought Mandy had been in preventing her from having a nervous breakdown after Brad had left her back in college. She hadn't realized it way back then. . . but standing here now---feeling the warmth of her tea mug in her palm---she realized how true his words had been. Thank God Mandy had been there for her.

Becky carried her tea back out onto the sun deck and sat down in one of the comfortable chaise lounges facing the salty waves crashing to the shore far below. One lone seagull soared high in the fading light of the afternoon sun. It would be dark soon and already the gentle ocean breeze was turning cooler. The seagull squawked and Becky looked up in time to see it dive towards the foamy waves, and then return a moment later to the skies, a slender fish trapped in its' beak. Ah, dinner.

She would be returning to Texas in a few days and she knew her parents and Brad would be glad. They hadn't wanted her to leave in the first place, but they had understood when she told them she needed a little more time. So much had happened in this past year and she felt she had needed a little space all to herself... to absorb it all.

Becky sipped her tea and thought of her future. She felt at ease at long last. From this day forward everything would be so different. Her life wouldn't be filled with angry ghosts anymore... Now it would be filled with love, and with hope, and with promise. The future could hold nothing less than happiness from now on.

She got to her feet and looked up one last time, looking for the seagull, but it was nowhere in sight. Apparently it had flown home to enjoy its dinner. Becky chuckled to herself as she stepped back into the house. There was only one more thing she had left to do.

It was quiet in the upstairs bedroom when she sat down on the edge of the double



bed and reached for the phone on the nightstand. She felt her heart leap to her throat, and for a moment she was sure she saw the tremor in her hand as she dialed the familiar number. It felt good that she had finally made her mind up. She had made her decision.

As she listened to the sound of the ringing coming through the line she heard her mind rehearsing the words she would say, ‘Oh, Brad... I think I’m ready now.’ She breathed a quick sigh of relief.

And then she sat bolt upright, her eyes wide... it dawned on her then. That wasn’t right. That wasn’t her decision at all. She smiled, inwardly correcting herself, ‘I know I’m ready now!’

## Epilogue

Brad and Becky's healthy eight pound, six and a half ounce baby girl arrived at ten-thirty-seven on the morning of August the third, 1977. They named her Jennie Marie – after no one in particular---but simply because they both liked the name.

Little Jennie Marie looked more like her mother than she did her father, but Brad didn't seem to mind it a bit. He was too busy floating around on cloud nine and passing out 'IT'S A GIRL' cigars to anyone, and everyone who would take one.

Brad held tightly to Becky's small hand as they stood gazing through the thick nursery glass window at their beautiful little daughter. "Do you have any idea of how happy you've made me today, honey?" he whispered close to her ear, his smile expanding.

She looked up at his radiant face and smiled in return. She saw the tears of happiness glistening in his proud eyes. "I think you helped a little, sweetheart. I didn't do it all by myself."

"You didn't?" he teased.

She squeezed his hand. "You've made me very happy, too, you know."

The young nurse inside the nursery smiled and tapped her watch, signaling that visiting hours were over. "Oh..." Becky groaned, leaning her head against her husband's shoulder. They watched the curtains close. They would have to come back and see their darling little girl after feeding time was over.

Brad pulled Becky into his arms and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Come on honey," he said, leading her back to her room. "You look like you could use a little rest, too. Let me help you get back into bed."

Slipping her robe from her shoulders, he waited until she was settled, and tucked the covers up across her lap. “The doctor says you two can probably come home tomorrow, if you both behave.” He grinned and kissed the tip of her nose. “But for now, why don’t you try to catch a quick nap?”

“I hope we can... I can hardly wait to get her home and in my new rocking chair. I’m going to love spoiling our precious little Jennie Marie.”

He saw her yawn and couldn’t help but smile. “I just bet you are,” he teased again. “And who do you think is going to sit up with her all night when you do?”

“Well...” Becky shrugged. “I was sort of hoping that you would.”

“Yeah, I just bet you were, smarty pants.” He gave her another quick kiss and started for the door. “At any rate you need to get some rest. I’m heading up to Hobby Airport to pick up Mandy...” He glanced at his watch. “She should be landing in about thirty or forty minutes. We’ll swing back by and pick up you folks and we should all be back here in an hour or so.”

“That’s great...” Becky beamed, all but bouncing on the bed. “That way we can all go back down to the nursery to see Jennie Marie together.”

“Exactly,” he said, nodding his head. “That’s why you need to take a little nap.” He blew her a kiss and pulled the door open. “I love you.”

Becky grinned and dropped her head to her pillow like an obedient child. “I love you, too.”

She never heard the door close behind him. She was fast asleep... the dream began.

\* \* \*

The evening sun was sinking fast, long shadows crept across the highly polished floor, but Becky didn’t see them. The door swung silently open and a portly young

nurse stepped into the quiet room to check on the new ‘mother’.

Becky appeared to be sleeping, but the nurse couldn’t be certain. She tiptoed closer to the side of the bed, hoping not to disturb her if she was. Leaning closer, she saw a single tear slide from the corner of Becky’s eye. Maybe she was in pain, maybe she should awaken her. But then a moment later, even before she had the time to touch her shoulder and give it a gentle shake...

A deep frown creased Becky’s forehead. Her lips quivered, her voice quiet, barely louder than a whisper. “No...” she said, tossing her head from side to side. “No... please stop.”

The frightened nurse tried to call out to her, she had to wake her up, but her words froze in her throat.

Becky sat straight up in the bed, the covers falling to her lap, and in her sleep, the young nurse heard Becky shout. “No... Bill. Let me go. You’re dead. I can’t go back. I won’t go back!”

\* \* \*

Her eyes flew open then and she blinked hard, trying to adjust her vision. She stared around the dimly lit room for long a moment before the nurse came into view.

“Mrs. Ames,” the nurse asked, her lips trembling. “Are you all right” Are you in any pain?” She reached for Becky’s wrist to check her pulse.

Becky smiled and tucked her straying hair behind her ears with her free hand. “No...” she answered. “I’m not in any pain... I’m fine. Really.” She met the nurse’s gaze. Her smile bright, her eyes clear and looking quite happy. “You don’t need to stay. I was only having a bad dream... but it’s all gone now.”

After she had finished checking Becky’s pulse, and deciding her patient was indeed telling the truth, the nurse stepped from the room.

Becky felt her smile growing. “Yes...” she mumbled into the silence surrounding her. “I finally made it. I don’t ever have to go back again. Not ever. I finally learned that I can truly... leave yesterday behind!”

From the author:

I would like to thank you for reading my book. If you have enjoyed reading 'Leave Yesterday Behind' please take a moment to share your thoughts with others by posting a review.

All reviews are appreciated, good or bad. After all, how do we know if we are doing right or wrong – unless you make us aware of it.

And once again, thanks for your support...

Ethel Lewis

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