

# Ever After

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IRENE BRAND

*To Love and Honor*



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**To Love and Honor**

«HarperCollins»

## **Brand I.**

To Love and Honor / I. Brand — «HarperCollins»,

Love is patient...With her warmth and grace, Violet Conley easily captured the heart of her neighbor Roger Gibson. Yet, the handsome law officer believed she'd always think of him as merely a friend.Love bears all things...Suddenly Violet faced stunning news. News that tested her faith and challenged her courage. And when so many abandoned her, Violet turned to Roger, her one true companion.Love is always hopefulAs he sheltered beloved Violet, Roger considered Heaven's mysterious ways. Could such stormy nights give way to a glorious wedding day?

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## **“Roger, why haven’t you ever remarried?”**

Violet asked as she gazed into the fire.

“Are you proposing to me?” A mischievous twinkle sparkled in his dark eyes.

“Of course not,” she said. “I’m just...curious. Don’t you miss sharing your life with someone?”

“At first the pain was too deep to even consider it. But lately, I have been thinking about marrying again,” he admitted.

Roger stood and stoked the fire. “Now it’s my turn to ask questions—are you going to marry Larry Holland?”

His question startled her, but she smiled. “He hasn’t asked me.”

“But if he does, will you marry him?” Roger continued to look at her, his gaze intense.

Violet looked away. She stared into the flames.

“I’ve often asked myself the same question. Right now, I honestly don’t know...”

## **IRENE BRAND**

Writing has been a lifelong interest of this author, who says that she started her first novel when she was eleven years old and hasn't finished it yet. However, since 1984 she's published thirty-two contemporary and historical novels and three nonfiction titles. She started writing professionally in 1977 after she completed her master's degree in history at Marshall University. Irene taught in secondary public schools for twenty-three years, but retired in 1989 to devote herself to writing.

Consistent involvement in the activities of her local church has been a source of inspiration for Irene's work. Traveling with her husband, Rod, to all fifty states, and to thirty-two foreign countries has also inspired her writing. Irene is grateful to the many readers who have written to say that her inspiring stories and compelling portrayals of characters with strong faith have made a positive impression on their lives.

## To Love and Honor Irene Brand



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For I was hungry and You gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and You gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and You invited me in, I needed clothes and You clothed me, I was sick and You looked after me, I was in prison and You came to visit me.

—Matthew 25:35–36

Dear Reader,

Frequently I'm asked, "How long does it take you to write a book?" That's a difficult question to answer, for the time needed to write a book varies with each story.

Probably the best answer would be, "It takes a lifetime to write a book," for whatever a writer produces, either fiction or nonfiction, is a composite of the author's life up to that point. While I have never considered any of my writing as autobiographical, I do rely heavily upon information I've accumulated during years of varied experiences. The ideas for most of my historicals germinated when I was studying and researching for my master's degree in history, or when I was teaching the subject to ninth graders. I was inspired to write my books on early church history while touring Switzerland, Germany and Holland in 1992.

And my interest in writing for the inspirational market has been a result of my religious training from early childhood. Prayer, Bible study and church involvement have been my normal routine for most of my life. Although I've experimented with secular writing, I've had little success, perhaps because God was directing me toward a more fulfilling ministry—inspirational fiction.

It's still an awesome experience when I see a new book in print. I often express my gratitude in the words of David: "Who am I, O Sovereign Lord, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?" (II Samuel 7:18)

I pray that you will be uplifted spiritually by reading this book. May God bless you.

*Irene B. Brand*



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## Chapter One

As the closing school bell rang, Violet Conley dropped into her teacher's chair with a deep sigh. Would she ever sponsor another Social Studies Fair? She closed her eyes for a few minutes, and then opened them slowly. Did the room really look as bad as she had thought?

Afraid so! Violet conceded grimly, as she pushed herself upward. She had permitted the students to work too late in their frenzy to be ready by the weekend, and they hadn't had time to clean up the classroom before catching their buses. All of them were gone except Janie Skeen, who was shelving books. Janie lived two blocks from the school, so she often stayed behind to help Violet. The girl's slender body already exhibited lovely curves and grace, and except for the melancholy look in her deep brown, long-lashed eyes, she would have been beautiful.

Violet was pleased to have Janie's help, for the whole room was in disarray, due to the past several days of research. While valuable to the pupils, it had been hard on a teacher's nerves.

"You're probably glad that tomorrow is the last day to work on projects," Janie said with a slight smile.

"Right now, that's true," Violet agreed as she carried the waste bin from desk to desk picking up litter.

"But when the projects are all arranged, and I see the culminated effort of our whole school, I forget about the frustration and hard work." She shook her head in exasperation as she picked up a book that a student had left behind, for it was a book on the rules of football, which he undoubtedly was reading when he should have been working on his class assignment. She locked the book in her desk. She would discover, and admonish, the culprit when he came looking for his book.

"You say your project is coming along well?"

"Yes, I think so," Janie said timidly, "but I don't suppose I'll be a winner."

"You'll have as much chance as anyone." When Janie still looked skeptical, Violet added, "The judges are from out of town, so names won't mean anything to them."

No need to pretend that she didn't know the reason behind Janie's skepticism. Janie had enrolled in Maitland High at the beginning of the school year, but she hadn't been accepted by her peers. The teachers liked Janie, because she was well behaved and eager to learn, but most of the students ignored her...some because they feared her, others considered she was inferior to themselves, while the majority of pupils didn't know how to befriend a runaway girl who had lived on the streets of Chicago for six months, before she was placed in a foster home in Maitland, their small town in southern Illinois.

Moving into the computer room, Violet found it in better shape than the classroom. The students had found the Internet indispensable in researching their projects, and Violet was happy that the principal, Larry Holland, had secured a federal grant to provide the equipment. Violet sat at one computer and typed in a password to check her E-mail. "Receiving one message of one," she read, hoping that the communication wouldn't require any further work on her part today.

"Don't forget our date. I'll pick you up at six. Larry"

The day's frustrations were forgotten and, with a broad smile on her face, Violet clicked the icon, Return to Author, and typed in "OK." On days when Violet didn't have occasion to speak privately with Larry, he often contacted her on the Internet.

Although the classroom was orderly at last, Janie loitered. "Thank you, Janie," Violet said with a warm smile. "You've been a big help, but you should go now. I'll need to leave in a few minutes."

Janie picked up her books and, with a wave of her hand, walked out into the hall, passing Nan Oliver in the doorway.

"I wish I could give that girl a big hug every day," Violet said, as her friend and fellow teacher sat at a student's desk that was much too small for her plump frame.

“I know what you mean. The girl is starved for love. I hate these new rules that forbid us to touch any of our students.”

“I wonder if her foster mother is good to her.”

“As far as I know, Margaret Grady is a good and caring person, but she’s mothering three foster children, and since Janie is the oldest, she probably doesn’t get much attention. I’m sure she has enough food, and her clothes are adequate, but she has such a lonely look in her eyes.”

“She stirs my sympathy and a desire to mother her,” Violet commented.

“I suppose we can never understand what it’s like to grow up with a troubled childhood,” Nan said.

“When I remember how secure I felt at home, I can’t comprehend what life has been for Janie and others like her. Can you?”

Violet lowered her eyes. Although Nan was her closest friend on the staff, there were some details about her past that she couldn’t disclose even to her. Fortunately, she didn’t have to answer because the all-clear buzzer sounded, indicating that the students were gone and teachers could leave the building. Nan heaved herself out of the chair.

“I’d better run,” Violet said. “Larry is picking me up at six o’clock, and I have lots of things to do before then.”

She locked her classroom door and walked down the hall at Nan’s side.

“Heavy date, huh?”

“It’s his mother’s sixty-fifth birthday, and we’re going to Saint Louis to celebrate. Many of her relatives live in Saint Louis, and they’ve reserved a private room in an exclusive restaurant.”

“Must be nice to travel with the upper crust!” Nan said, her smile taking the sting from her words.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Violet said, lowering her voice. “Why does she approve of me, when she’s chased away the other women he’s dated?”

“If you don’t mind my saying so, it isn’t any credit to you. She’s probably decided that you aren’t any threat to her, that if Larry marries you, she can still control his life. If you do anything to cross her, she’ll boot you out the door in a hurry.”

“In other words, you’re suggesting that I’m wishy-washy,” Violet accused with uplifted brows.

“Those are your words, not mine,” Nan replied, and her round face exploded into laughter. Seriously, she added, “I hate to see you mixed up with that family.”

“Well, I may just dare to disagree with one of Olivia Holland’s opinions tonight. That will give her a reason to remember her sixty-fifth birthday. Would that suit you?”

“If you do, I may need to come to Saint Louis to bring you home, but don’t expect to reach me until after the soccer game. I’m driving my boys and other team members tonight.”

A ten-minute drive brought Violet to her home. She entered the house with a sigh of pleasure. Since she had bought this house a year ago, it had been a sanctuary. The four-room dwelling, a bungalow so typical of the Midwest fifty years ago, had been a bargain. Violet had spent a lot of time working on the house, painting, papering and even making window curtains.

A serving bar separated the small, convenient kitchen from the dining space. She ate her meals at the bar, and she didn’t entertain much, so the dining room served as an office, where she used a computer to write her lesson plans.

Her bedroom was large, and a bathroom separated it from the smaller bedroom, which was only big enough for a single bed. This was Aunt Ruth’s room during her occasional visits to Maitland.

The living room was cozy. Bookshelves lined one wall and several easy chairs and a comfortable couch faced the television. Ruffled curtains graced the double windows that opened on the porch. A bookcase housed Violet’s collection of ceramic dolls that she had been gathering since childhood. Several landscape prints hung on the cream-colored papered walls, and a multicolored carpet covered

the floor. A fireplace, housing a gas stove, provided extra warmth to the house on those days when she didn't need the furnace.

After Violet went out on the porch for her mail, she decided that she had a few minutes to relax before she dressed for the evening, so she settled into the lounge chair in the living room and put her feet up.

She laid aside the two bills, pitched the junk mail into the small waste can beside her chair, and opened Aunt Ruth's letter. The note was brief, as they always were, but receiving them weekly made a big difference in Violet's life. She had always struggled with the need to establish an identity, and that was one reason she was so sympathetic to the plight of Janie Skeen. Aunt Ruth and her husband had given Violet a home from the time she was two years old, but that wasn't the same as living with one's parents. Violet had fought all her life to overcome a feeling of inadequacy, so she understood Janie's situation completely. Aunt Ruth lived alone since her husband's death five years ago, but her notes were always upbeat as she wrote about her part-time job, the neighborhood children and her church activities.

Not least among the debts that Violet owed to Aunt Ruth was the blessing of living in a Christian home. Church attendance had been a part of Violet's upbringing, instilling a dependence upon God in her that had often been the only consolation she had during her maturing years.

Reluctantly, Violet left the cozy chair and went to the bedroom to dress for the evening. She was flattered that Larry Holland, Maitland's most eligible bachelor, had singled her out for his attention, but still she dreaded this evening. When she was alone with Larry, Violet was content, but she was always uncomfortable in Olivia Holland's company. The Hollands were rich and very influential in the state, and Mrs. Holland never let one forget the fact. Her own family had impeccable lineage, or so she insisted, and she didn't let anyone forget that, either. When they first started dating, Violet had expected Mrs. Holland to check her ancestry, but apparently she hadn't, for Violet was convinced that if the aristocratic Olivia Holland had even looked into Violet's family background, she would have heard about it.

Larry wasn't like his mother, else Violet wouldn't have given him a second glance, although he had subtly suggested a few times that Violet should buy more expensive clothes, a hint she had ignored. By the time she made payments on her house and car, she didn't have enough money to buy designer clothing.

So, what was she going to wear tonight? She soon decided on a navy, ankle-length silk skirt and long-sleeved lace blouse that matched her violet eyes—a striking feature that had resulted in her name.

Violet showered quickly, wearing a cap over her head, because she didn't have time for a shampoo and styling. Fortunately, Violet's naturally curly hair was easily managed. She visited the hairdresser to have it cut and shaped every two months, but the rest of the time a few strokes with a brush left her short hair in black soft curls all over her head.

She applied makeup sparingly. Her fine features and smooth skin, rich and deep in texture, needed little enhancement. She left off eye makeup completely, because her violet eyes fringed by long, up-curling black lashes were naturally distinctive. Violet was above average height and well proportioned. With her graceful form, even inexpensive garments set well on her.

She knew that Larry would arrive promptly at six o'clock, so she was surprised when the doorbell rang twenty minutes before that. She pulled a lightweight evening jacket from the closet and rushed to the door.

Her friend, Roger Gibson, stood on the porch. "Oh, hello," she said. "Come in."

He whistled. "Wow! You are really dolled up this evening. If you're going out, I'll come back later."

"Larry won't pick me up for fifteen minutes. Come on in."

Roger, a lieutenant in the Illinois State Police, and his family attended the same church as Violet, and he had been her friend since she had moved to Maitland. He stepped inside the living room, which seemed to shrink with the presence of his tall, powerful build. Roger was off duty now, and in casual dress, but in his policeman's uniform, Violet had often thought he looked awesome.

"Actually, I'm begging," he said. "The church youth group are sponsoring a garage sale next month, and we're looking for donations. We'll take anything that's salable."

"I'm sure I can scrounge up some good items, but you'll have to wait for it until after the Social Studies Fair is over."

Roger was the father of Misty Gibson, one of Violet's pupils so he knew about the fair. "Oh, yes, I'll be happy when that event is over, so I can take possession of our dining room table again. Misty has been struggling for several days to make a papier-mâché model of the White House. Perhaps I shouldn't tell you that."

His generous mouth with rather full lips broke into a smile, causing attractive crinkles at the corners of his dark eyes. Roger Gibson had thick dark hair, curled close to his head, with touches of silver at the temples. His dusky skin hinted of a Middle East ancestry far in the past. With his warm, open nature Roger possessed an air of decency and strong character. Violet always felt elevated to a higher spiritual and moral level when she was in his presence.

"It doesn't matter, for I won't be one of the judges. I'll give them a grade for turning in the project, but I won't have to decide which is the best one, thank goodness."

Roger's brown eyes resembled deep dark pools when he smiled again. "Artistic ability isn't one of Misty's strong points. I'm not concerned about having to escort her to the regional competition in Missouri." He moved toward the door. "I'll go now. I see Larry driving down the street. See you at church on Sunday."

Rather than observing Larry's approach, Violet admired Roger's energetic walk toward his truck. His step was fast and springy, an unusual gait in such a large man. A widower when Violet first met him, he bore well the responsibility of rearing two children by himself.

She turned to greet Larry when he stepped up on the porch.

"Ready on time, as usual," Larry said. Roger waved to them as he drove his pickup down the street.

"Are you in trouble?" Larry asked, smiling, but with a hint of worry in his eyes.

Pulling the door shut behind her, and taking Larry's arm as they left the porch and walked to his car, Violet said, "Oh, you mean Roger. He directs the youth activities at our church, and he was soliciting items for the group's garage sale. Roger was one of the first people I met when I moved to Maitland. He nearly gave me a ticket for neglecting to signal a right-hand turn." She laughed at the memory. "And after he let me off with a stern warning, he invited me to attend his church. We've been friends ever since."

"Not the usual way to make friends, I'd say."

"Perhaps not, but I couldn't ask for a better friend. In fact, he tries to befriend everyone."

"Have you ever considered leaving that church, Violet? It's too conservative and folksy for me. You would be welcome at the church we attend."

"But I'm welcome at First Community Church, too. The large church family I've gained there makes up for the small natural family I have."

Violet tried to keep her voice from reflecting the irritation she felt, for she suspected that Mrs. Holland was behind Larry's comments. She was ready to take issue with him, but he dropped the subject and looked at her approvingly. "May I say that you're looking fantastic tonight? Mother will be pleased."

"You look pretty sharp, too. Perhaps I'm not the one to say this, but we do make a good-looking couple," she said, eyeing, with appreciation, his black suit, snow-white shirt, and expensive silk tie, its rich burgundy and gray pattern a perfect contrast to his dark suit.

One couldn't help admire Larry Holland. With the family wealth, he wouldn't have to work at all, yet at thirty, he had already earned his doctorate in education, and had been the principal at Maitland High for five years. His brown hair swept back from his forehead in deep waves, and his eyes were hazel colored. A square, jugged jaw that he'd inherited from his mother, kept him from being handsome, and in Violet's opinion, the well-trimmed mustache didn't enhance his appearance a great deal, but overall his looks were certainly worthy of notice. In height, he stood eye-level with Violet, his body slender. He was a man to be admired, and he had earned Violet's regard both because of his personality and his proficiency as an administrator.

Despite the heavy traffic, they reached the restaurant at the appointed time. They entered a room filled with celebrating guests, and Larry introduced Violet to his extended family. Larry's brother, William, was a frequent visitor in Maitland, and she already knew him and his wife.

As everyone began to eat the first course, Larry devoted his attention to his maternal aunt on his left, and Mrs. Holland chatted graciously with Violet, but eventually the conversation turned to a subject that distressed Violet. Was it by design or only accidental that Mrs. Holland asked, "Are you related to the Kansas City Conleys, Violet?"

"I don't know anyone in Kansas City."

"That's too bad, for those Conleys are prominent, both politically and socially." Mrs. Holland leaned back to let the waiter take her plate, sparing Violet the necessity to comment. She had been born in Kansas, so she could be related to the Conleys Mrs. Holland mentioned, but she didn't ask whether Mrs. Holland referred to the city in Missouri or Kansas. It wasn't wise to ask the matriarch of the Holland family too many questions.

"Where do your relatives live?" the woman persisted, and Violet decided this was Mrs. Holland's way of checking her eligibility to enter the Holland family. Larry must be getting serious in his attentions to her.

Choosing her words carefully, Violet said, "I know nothing about my father's family. He died when I was two years old, and I went to live with my Aunt Ruth in Minnesota. I don't know any Conleys except myself."

"And your mother?"

"I lost her about the same time, so I'm fortunate that Aunt Ruth wanted me. She gave me a good home."

"I would like to meet your Aunt Ruth sometime."

"Perhaps you can the next time she comes to Maitland. She visits two or three times each year."

Violet's hands were clammy with cold sweat, and she laid down her fork, slipped her hands under the table and wiped them on the napkin. She was trembling inside, but she hoped it wasn't obvious to Mrs. Holland. William summoned his mother to cut the birthday cake, and when they returned to the table for dessert and coffee, Mrs. Holland didn't question her again, but Violet was nervous and apprehensive the rest of the evening.

The next day, Thursday, was pure bedlam for Violet as she spent the day in the gym guiding excited students as they assembled their projects. Tables had been placed in close proximity to accommodate the two hundred exhibits. Violet was pleased with most of the students' work, relieved that she didn't have to choose the best entry. Janie's project brought tears to her eyes, and she wondered how the girl, in the face of her ostracism, had the courage to display the evidence of what her life had been as a runaway.

The exhibit, titled *Life on the Street*, was enclosed in a shadow box, and many of the models were three-dimensional. Although Violet knew little about art, even she could tell that the girl had great creative ability, and she decided to encourage Janie to enroll in some art courses. The background of the box was a cityscape, a dark backdrop of brick buildings, but the attached figures were in vivid colors.

The scene portrayed the outcast, the struggling poor, the homeless, as well as troubled teenagers—all victims of an existence that had lost its meaning, lost all hope and faith.

The caption at the bottom said it all. “There, except for the Grace of God, goeth I.”

Violet was careful not to comment on the projects, for she didn’t want to give any of the pupils false hopes when she would have no part in the decision making. All day long, as she worked to arrange the exhibits, she thought of Janie and what her life must have been as a runaway. She wanted to help the girl, but where did compassion end and meddling start?

To take her mind from Janie’s problems, Violet thought of Misty Gibson’s poor efforts to produce a replica of the White House. The columns sagged, and instead of being white, glue had seeped through the paint, leaving the structure a sickly gray. She and Roger had exchanged amused glances when he had carried his daughter’s project into the gym. Misty was a good cheerleader, and popular with the other students, but she wasn’t overburdened with artistic talent. Jason, Roger’s oldest, was much like his father in personality and appearance, but Misty’s blond hair and fair features indicated that she must favor her mother.

Three judges from adjoining counties met in the gym at the close of the school day to make their selections and the teachers went home. Violet resisted the urge to return in the evening to learn the judges’ decision, and she was able to say honestly to the dozens of telephone calls from anxious students, “I don’t have any idea whom the judges chose. We’ll have to wait until tomorrow to see.”

But before bedtime she did know the judges’ decision, and she learned it in a revolting way that both angered and disillusioned her. When the phone rang at ten o’clock, she was pleased to hear Larry’s voice. She had been so busy all day that she hadn’t exchanged words with him.

After greeting her, Larry said, “I’m at the school now, and we have a problem that I think should be corrected before the students arrive tomorrow. Janie Skeen was not only awarded first place in her grade, but she was given the Best of Show award. You know what that means.”

“Oh, yes, and I’m delighted. I thought her exhibit was fabulous, and it certainly deserves to be entered in the regional exhibition.”

“Well, I’m not happy about it, and I want those awards changed.”

Not willing to believe what she was hearing, Violet said, “Why?”

“Would you want a girl with her reputation to represent us at a regional function?”

“And why not?” Violet demanded, trying not to sound belligerent.

“It’s unthinkable. There are other projects just as deserving as hers, and it’s going to cause trouble with our most supportive parents if we allow Janie to be the winner. I’ll admit her exhibit is realistic, and it should be—she has obviously seen all of that firsthand.”

Violet felt sick. She had always admired Larry for his ability as an administrator and his fairness to the staff. Until now, she hadn’t considered that Larry was influenced by his mother’s narrow opinions. She conceded that many of the parents would be angry, for there had been some strenuous objection when Janie enrolled in the school. Violet had dealt with angry parents many times, but always before she had Larry’s support. He obviously wouldn’t support her now, but to do what he suggested was repugnant.

“Larry, I will not change those awards.”

“Then, I’ll do it. If you haven’t seen them, you don’t even know who was chosen.”

“But I will know, for the judges send me a copy of their deliberations and the winners’ names. And,” she paused to draw a deep breath, “if Janie doesn’t have the recognition she deserves, I’ll make their report public.”

“You’re making a mistake,” Larry said angrily and terminated the conversation.

Violet didn’t even go to bed for she knew she would never sleep. She agreed with Larry that many of the parents would complain long and loud about Janie being chosen, and she had enjoyed a good rapport with the parents, who had endorsed everything she wanted to do. She didn’t want to lose their support. But why should they blame her?

And what about her relationship with Larry? His attention had given Violet more self-confidence than she had ever had. She enjoyed the prestige she had gained in Maitland because she was a part of the Holland circle. More than that, their relationship seemed to be serious.

Was it necessary to sacrifice her future as a teacher, and her bond with Larry for the sake of a girl she had known such a short while? Violet had to honestly admit that the cost seemed high, but her conscience and ethical upbringing wouldn't let her do otherwise.

She could almost hear Aunt Ruth say, "Right is right and wrong is wrong. You can't ride the fence between the two. Nobody has ever said that living an upright life is easy."

She envisioned Tom Walker, the minister at the local church she attended. He had preached a sermon on integrity a few weeks ago. His theme Scripture had been from Psalm 101, "No one who practices deceit will dwell in my house; no one who speaks falsely will stand in my presence."

And there was Roger Gibson, a man she admired. More than once she had heard him say to his youth group, when he was challenging them to live a cut above the average, "It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil."

It was a difficult decision to make, but as a Christian, a teacher, and a friend to Janie, she couldn't give in to Larry's demands. She would have to face critical parents without his support.

A cup of strong coffee, a cinnamon roll, and a hot shower did little to bolster her courage when she set out early for school. She had to be on hand to answer students' questions or complaints if there were any. Violet went first to the gym and checked the projects. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that Janie's exhibit still had the Best of Show purple medallion, so she wouldn't have to confront Larry publicly on that.

Overall, she was pleased with the awards and didn't see why anyone should have any just complaints. Violet entered her room a half hour before any students were due, which gave her time to review her lesson plans. Her mind had been blank on everyday matters since Larry had called last night. After readying the equipment she would need for the day, Violet accessed the Internet. She felt faint with relief when she read her one E-mail letter: "You were right, of course, and I apologize. If there are any complaints, I'll try to field them in the office. Dinner tomorrow evening? Larry."

Feeling as giddy as a kite in a strong March wind, Violet clicked the Reply to Author button, and typed in, "Sounds great to me. I'll be ready at six."

When a bouquet of roses arrived during her prep period, Violet concluded that her friendship meant as much to Larry as his did to her.

Although no one made any complaint to her about the judges' decisions, Violet was alert to an undercurrent of discontent among the student body. As soon as the gym opened and the students learned the outcome, Janie had rushed into Violet's room.

"I can't believe I won, Miss Conley. You were right—the judges didn't know anything about me."

"It was a good project, Janie, and I'm pleased for you."

"Does this mean that I can be entered in the regional competition?"

"Yes, but it won't be until January, since all of the high schools don't have their fairs as early as we do. The regional fair is held in Springfield, Missouri, and I'll take you to it if that's all right with your guardian. It's during a weekend so we won't miss much school."

Later, when Janie entered the room for her class time, her enthusiasm had waned, and Violet detected angry glances in her direction by some students, but they did nothing for which Violet could reprimand them. No doubt, in the hallways, they were giving Janie a rough time. At the close of the day, Janie came into Violet's room, and though she was shedding no tears, her lips trembled.

"My exhibit had been pushed to the floor. It's ruined." Violet was so angry, she didn't dare speak. Disregarding the rules, she put her arms around Janie, and the girl started sobbing.

"I knew my good luck wouldn't hold. Nothing ever goes right for me."



Through clenched teeth, Violet said, "It is going right for you. You will go to that regional competition. You'll have plenty of time to redo your project. Let's go check on it."

As they started out the door, Violet saw the large form of Roger Gibson swinging down the hallway. His figure was even more prepossessing in his smart, brown uniform.

"Hi. I came to get Misty's project." He looked from Violet's angry face to Janie's tear-streaked one.

"Is something wrong?"

"Janie's exhibit was awarded the Best of Show medallion, but someone pushed it on the floor. I'm going to see how badly it's damaged. I'm determined that she's going to the regional competition, if she has to do a whole new exhibit."

"Of course she is," Roger said, and he put his arm over Janie's shoulders. "Come on. I'll help you pick up the pieces and go from there." Roger's support was as welcome to Violet as Larry's had been.

Miraculously, the shadow box had only a few damaged places, which could easily be repaired. The models had all pulled loose from the box, but only one was broken. Roger knelt on the floor and helped Janie pick up the items.

"No problem at all to put your exhibit back together," Roger said. "As soon as I get Misty's project, I'll take you home so you won't have to carry this."

"Oh, no," Janie said quickly, "I thank you, but I don't want to ride home in a police cruiser. Mrs. Grady or the neighbors might think I'm in trouble." Roger's gaze met Violet's over the girl's head, and his brown eyes were compassionate.

"Very well," he said, "but I do want to invite you to our teen group at the church. You will find a welcome there."

"I'm not so sure about that. Some of the teens who attend your church aren't friendly here at school. I'll continue to worship with Mrs. Grady. Very few young people go to that church, and I'm accepted by the adults."

The matter-of-fact way the girl talked about her ostracism crushed Violet. So much stoicism in a girl of that age wasn't healthy. "If you won't let Lieutenant Gibson take you home, I'll walk with you and be sure you don't have any more trouble. I want to see you home safely with your project."

Janie nodded assent, and Roger moved toward Misty's project. "I still want you to join our teen group, Janie. Think about it." The grim expression on his face indicated that he would have some stern words to say to the youth he counseled. "I'll see you at church on Sunday, Violet."

Since he had bidden her goodbye in that manner, Violet didn't expect to hear any more from Roger until Sunday, so it was with some surprise that she opened her door to him, still in uniform, Friday evening.

He removed his hat. "I have something I need to ask you, Violet. Is it all right for me to come in?"

Violet unlocked the storm door and motioned him inside. Obviously this wasn't a social call. He twirled his hat around in his hands a time or two, and his demeanor puzzled Violet. She had never known Roger to be ill at ease.

"Violet, do you know Linda Conley, an inmate in a correctional facility in Topeka, Kansas?"

Roger's face blurred, Violet's hands fluttered nervously, and her body sank slowly toward the floor.

## Chapter Two

Violet didn't black out completely, and she felt Roger's arm around her, leading her to the couch. He pressed her head forward to her knees.

"Hold on a minute." Roger's voice sounded a long way off. Soon, he sat beside her on the couch, supported her head and wiped her face with a cool, damp cloth. He brought a glass of water and forced a few drops between her lips. She had trouble breathing, and she gasped for air.

"Tell me I'm dreaming, Roger. I can't believe you said what you did."

Roger smoothed the damp hair back from her face, for he had been overzealous in wetting the cloth.

"It's true, Violet. I received a call about her a few minutes ago."

Violet caught his hand. "Tell me everything."

"Linda Conley, a life prisoner, has terminal cancer, with a life expectancy of six months. They're looking for her next of kin to give her a home so she won't have to die in prison."

Violet shuddered and shook her head in disbelief, grasping Roger's hand as if it were a lifeline. "Roger, you can't understand what you've just said to me. I've never needed a friend more than I do now."

He squeezed her hand. "You have a friend, so don't worry. Whatever it is you're facing, I'll be with you all the way."

She sat up, pressing her hand to her forehead. "Who else knows about that phone call?" she asked finally.

"No one in Maitland. Fortunately, I was alone in the office when the call came in."

"I won't lie to you, but I would rather die than answer that question. I thought when I moved to Maitland, I had left the past behind, and now it's pursued me here."

Roger patted her hand. "Your past doesn't matter to me, and I wouldn't have approached you if it wasn't my official duty. I don't want to do anything that will hurt you, but you know I can't return that call and say I couldn't find the answer. From your response, it's obvious you do know Linda Conley."

Violet smiled slightly. "One of the things I've always admired about you, Roger, is that you do what you think is right regardless of the consequences, so I would never blame you for doing your duty because it involves me. It's just difficult to unearth the past."

"Is Linda related to you?"

"Linda Conley is my mother, but I don't remember ever seeing her, because I was only two years old when she shot and killed my father."

Violet hadn't looked at Roger when she blurted out the truth. The words left a bitter nasty taste in her mouth. After a moment, she glanced sideways to see how Roger had taken the news. His brown eyes were deep dark pools of despair, also displaying another emotion. Was it shock? In his line of work, Roger often encountered appalling situations, and she thought he would be hardened to it by now, but his face registered horror. And no wonder, Violet conceded. A law officer would think twice before befriending a murderess's child. If this news circulated around Maitland, she could bid Larry goodbye, but would she lose Roger's friendship, too?

Lowering her lashes, she said softly, "Think any less of me than you did a few minutes ago? Do you still consider me a reputable teacher for your daughter?"

Roger moved closer to Violet, his arm encircled her shoulders, and he shook her gently. "Stop that kind of talk. I'll admit I'm concerned, but only for your sake. What a burden you've carried all of your life! I have wondered occasionally why you didn't talk about your family, but I thought that was your business, and it really didn't matter to me."

Violet buried her head on his shoulder, and his hands roamed soothingly over her curly hair.

"Do you want to tell me any more about it?"

“I really don’t know much more than that. I’ve always lived with my mother’s sister and her husband, and I have their version of the episode. Aunt Ruth said that my mother acted in self-defense, but that my father was from a wealthy family, and normally, a large portion of their money would have come to my mother and me, so the Conleys tried to prove that she had murdered him to justify stealing my inheritance. They had enough money to hire the most powerful lawyers. My aunt feels my mother’s attorney was not capable of standing up to such high-powered lawyers. The verdict was guilty, and she was sentenced to life imprisonment without mercy.”

“Have you had any contact with your father’s family?”

“None! I don’t even know where they live. My Aunt Ruth wouldn’t tell me anything about them. My uncle was an archaeologist, and he and Aunt Ruth traveled all over the world, but after they took me in, she stopped going with him, and moved with me to Minnesota. That’s where I grew up, and after I graduated from college, Aunt Ruth thought I would be better off not to return to her home. She wanted me to be hard to find should the Conleys ever try, for she feared that if I was my father’s heir, they might try to dispose of me. I thought it was a rather ridiculous idea, but she’s right about most things, so I was eager to move to Illinois.”

“And you’ve been happy here?”

“I have never enjoyed complete happiness. I’ve always felt unwanted, rejected by my father’s people and my mother. I can’t forgive them for that, and it eats away at my peace of mind.”

“But if your mother was sent to prison when you were a child, she couldn’t have done much for you. I don’t consider that rejection. Didn’t you ever go to see her?”

“Vaguely, I remember going to a large brick building when I was a child and seeing a woman, but Aunt Ruth said that my mother didn’t want me exposed to a prison environment. She thought the experience of seeing her incarcerated would be psychologically harmful to me. She told Aunt Ruth not to contact her again.”

Violet paused. She had to rein in her emotions and bolster her courage before she told Roger anything else. She took a deep breath and settled into one corner of the couch with her feet curled under her body.

“So not having a real, live mother, I fantasized endlessly about one. As I walked home from school, I imagined that my mother would meet me at the door with a kiss and a hug, and take me to the kitchen for fresh-baked cookies and milk. It was my mother, not Aunt Ruth, who dried my tears, and bandaged my knee when I fell off my bike. And she kissed me fondly beaming with pride when I brought home excellent report cards. She was beautiful, kind and sympathetic, and she made me happy.” Violet shook her head to rid her mind of a comforting childhood dream.

“The year I graduated from college, I had occasion to be traveling through Kansas, and I found out where she was imprisoned, and feeling self-righteous and full of sweetness and light, I went to see her. She refused to see me. My own mother refused to see me!” Violet struggled for self-control, but her usual well-modulated voice gave away her emotions. “Can you imagine that?”

“But why?” Roger said compassionately. “Surely she gave a reason.”

“Oh, yes, she sent back a message that she wanted me to leave and forget I had a mother, that a meeting wouldn’t do either of us any good. To my dying day, I’ll never forget how that hurt me.” She paused and wouldn’t meet Roger’s eyes when she said, “And may God forgive me for such an unchristian thought, but when I wanted to see her, she told me to forget that I had a mother—now that she’s dying, she wants me to take her in.”

“I’m not so sure about that. The woman who telephoned me said they tried to get Mrs. Conley to tell them if she had any relatives, and she refused to name anyone. They traced you through your birth records and Social Security number, and when they asked your mother if you were her daughter, she responded that she had never heard of you.”

“Still rejecting me!”

“I don’t think so. I believe she’s still trying to protect you.”

“If she doesn’t want to come to me, why are they forcing the issue?”

“I asked that question, and I received a runaround answer. Some kind of new regulation gives prisons the option to parole terminally ill patients. It may be that they don’t have the staff to take care of her, but they are going to release her, if not to the next of kin, then to a nursing home, where she can receive proper care.”

“I don’t see how I can possibly bring her here. I have no feeling for her as a mother—it would be like taking in a stranger. Besides the fact that it would upset my whole life-style, how can I afford to do it? I’m living on a shoestring budget now, and there is no way that I can assume her medical expenses.”

“Then she isn’t eligible for Medicare?”

“No, I’m sure of that. I think she was only twenty when I was born, so that will put her in her midforties. She’s still a young woman.” Violet went into the bedroom and came back with a photo of a man, woman, and baby.

“That’s the only picture I have of my parents, and I would assume I was about a year old when the picture was taken. Aunt Ruth gave that to me when I started asking about my parents. They appear to be a happy couple, don’t they? What could have happened in a year’s time to cause such a crime?”

Roger took the picture and looked at it closely. Linda Conley was a petite woman with brown hair and eyes. Her husband, Ryan, was handsome with close-cropped black wavy hair and blue eyes. White teeth gleamed below a small black mustache. His expression and posture spoke of a strong sense of determination, while his wife’s expression indicated a low-key personality.

“His death may have been an accident, but if his parents were vindictive as you’ve heard, they might have pushed for your mother’s conviction out of revenge. If she didn’t put up a strong defense, a jury could have been swayed easily.”

Roger stood up and laid his hand on Violet’s shoulder.

“What am I going to do?”

He smiled, and she noted again how his face creased into deep lines when he smiled. “If I were in your place, I would do exactly what you’re going to do, although I don’t know what that is now. But it will be the right thing—I have confidence in your decisions, Violet.” A sudden burst of wind sent an onslaught of rain against the window, and Violet shivered. Roger sat beside her again and took her hand. “Don’t try to give me an answer now. I told the woman I would return her call in a few days. I didn’t even indicate that I knew anyone by the name of Conley. Take some time to think it over.”

“I’ll have to. Thanks for understanding, Roger.”

He gently squeezed her hand before releasing it. “What are friends for, anyway?”

Violet doubted that she would sleep, but since she hadn’t slept the night before, she had to have some rest. She checked the locks, turned out all the lights and went into the bedroom. The bed did look inviting, and she reached in the closet and removed the pretty pink nightgown that Aunt Ruth had bought for her birthday. As low as she felt tonight, her spirits needed lifting, and she admitted that the pink brought out the luster of her short, curly hair, and picked up the sheen of her long black lashes. The color also complimented her violet eyes. Though tonight they looked dull and lifeless.

Violet eyes! One of the few stories Aunt Ruth had told about her childhood was the reason for her unusual name. Her parents hadn’t decided on a name for their child, but the minute the baby had opened her eyes and they had noticed that the color was violet, her father had said, “We’ll call her Violet. I’ve never seen such a startling color.”

And while most newborn’s eyes soon change, Violet’s never had, except to become more expressive and intense as she had matured. So her name was the one legacy she had gotten from her father.

Lying in bed, Violet did a lot of praying. Were there any similar incidents in the Scriptures to guide her decision? When Jesus was on the cross, suffering an agonizing death for the sin of mankind, one of his last concerns was for his mother, committing her to the care of a beloved disciple. But Jesus had known his mother; she had loved him and supported his ministry. Mary was there at the

foot of the cross to bring comfort when He was dying. When Violet had needed her mother, she had been rejected. Violet's aunt had done her best to explain that Violet's mother had only done so out of good intentions, but Violet deeply felt the pain of that rejection nonetheless—carried it with her always. Even if she was in prison, she could have kept in contact with her daughter Violet had always felt. No, Violet decided, there was no parallel between Jesus's care of his mother and her situation.

Scripture proverbs that Violet didn't remember that she had ever heard insinuated themselves into her mind. Do not despise your mother when she is old. Well, she didn't despise her mother; she didn't know her well enough to despise her. But another thought needled her conscience. You know her well enough to harbor an unforgiving attitude toward her.

Violet had never doubted before that she lived an exemplary life, one that was in harmony with the teachings of the Bible, but she knew that she was facing a situation that would put her Christianity to the supreme test. During her reflection, Violet kept pushing aside one of the parables of Jesus that she would have to deal with before she resolved her turmoil. Once when Jesus had been discussing the end of the present world, He had specified the criteria for those who would inherit eternal life, and He emphasized strongly that the proof of people's faith was illustrated by their treatment of others.

Violet picked up the Bible to refresh her memory; perhaps it didn't really say what she thought it did, but the words of Jesus in the book of Matthew pricked her soul like a hot knife. I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.

"But, Lord," Violet murmured in her own defense, "I went to the prison, wanting to see her, and she wouldn't receive me. Doesn't that vindicate me? What more could I have done?"

Try as she might, Violet could not use past circumstances to influence this decision. She knew that, whether or not she took her mother, her Christian commitment was on trial. In this crisis, would she hear her Master's commendation, "Well done, good and faithful servant"? Or would He say to her, "Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me"? Did she have a faith strong enough to sustain her in the crucible of life? She would soon find out.

Although Violet couldn't tell anyone in Maitland about her problem, she knew she did have to contact her aunt, Ruth Reed. They often chatted via phone on Saturday afternoon, so Ruth didn't think anything unusual about the call, and they visited several minutes before Violet came to the reason for the contact. In concise terms, she explained the situation.

Ruth caught her breath sharply, and was silent for a minute or more when Violet finished. "Oh, poor Linda," Ruth finally said. "After all she's been through, what a sad way to end her life."

Violet was dumbstruck for a few moments. Since Roger's visit, she had been dwelling on how this emergency would affect her; she had never once considered her mother's side of the situation, but how like Aunt Ruth to think of others first. She proved that by her next words.

"Of course, you can't take her, Violet. I'll bring her to my home and care for her."

"Now, Aunt Ruth..."

"Violet, listen to me. If you bring Linda into your home, there's a chance that her whole past will blow up in your face. Both your mother and I have tried to shield you from the consequences of events that weren't your fault. We can't let it surface now."

"Roger said that she told the prison officials she didn't have any relatives, and they traced me through my birth certificate. She apparently doesn't want to come here."

"No, she wouldn't, so don't worry any more about it. I'll get in touch with the correctional facility and tell them I will assume her care."

Violet hesitated. How tempting it was to dump the problem on Ruth. Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me. "Please don't make any arrangements for a few days, Aunt Ruth. Honestly, it would be a relief to shove all of this on your shoulders, and I'm not even sure if I can assume the responsibility for my mother. But I'm twenty-five years old, and if I'm

not mature enough now to face up to my obligations, I never will be. Give me a few days, and pray for me that I might make the right decision.”

As he often did on Saturday night, Larry took her to the country club, which featured a lavish buffet on the weekends. When he removed her coat to hang it on the rack, his hands lingered on her shoulders. “Say! You’re beautiful tonight. Is that a new dress?” She nodded as they were escorted to a reserved table. “I didn’t know the teachers at our school received a raise in salary,” he joked.

She laughed, and for a moment, cheered by his admiration, forgot the calamity about to break over her head. “I’m a careful shopper,” she answered.

After he seated her, he took a small box from his pocket, opened it and removed a thin silver chain. “Allow me,” he said, and he bent toward her, fastened the necklace around her throat and left his arm on her shoulders. Touched, Violet lifted her hand to feel the smooth circlet around her neck.

“It’s beautiful. Thank you,” she said, “but what’s the occasion?”

“I wanted to make amends for my harsh words a few days ago. I was so intent on heading off a potential crisis among our pupils and parents that I didn’t consider the right and wrong of what I asked you to do. I shouldn’t have put you in such a position.”

She covered his hand resting on her shoulder with her fingers. “Don’t speak of it again. Have you had any repercussions over Janie’s selection?”

“Oh, a few murmurings from some of the students, but so far, no parent has contacted me.”

“But you may have telephone calls on Monday.”

“Quite possibly, but we won’t let that ruin our evening together. Shall we go to the buffet? It isn’t crowded now.”

At the buffet Violet asked for a small portion of roast beef, which she surrounded with several vegetables. The salad bar was always tempting, but she chose only a bowl of marinated vegetables. She had little appetite, but to keep Larry from asking unwanted questions, she forced herself to eat. They lingered over their dessert and coffee.

As they drove back to her home, Larry said, “Do you have any plans for Thanksgiving weekend? I’m flying to Colorado with several of my friends for skiing. I would like for you to go as my guest.”

Violet’s spirits plummeted. For much of the evening, she had forgotten about her mother. “That sounds great, but I’m not sure I can go. I may have company that weekend. Aunt Ruth often comes here on Thanksgiving, and I go to her home for the Christmas holidays. May I let you know in a few days?”

“Sure, but we need to make reservations by the end of the week.”

When Larry kissed her good-night, his caress was more passionate than it had ever been, suggesting a new level in their relationship. He had never kissed her so ardently, he’d never asked her to accompany him on a trip before, nor had he bought her any jewelry. Should she jeopardize a possible marriage with the catch of Maitland by taking in her mother? On the other hand, should she tell Larry the truth about her past?

Violet changed into casual clothing after the Sunday worship service, and was about to prepare her lunch when the phone rang. It was Roger, wanting to know how she felt.

“All right, I suppose, but I’m no nearer a decision than when you brought me the news.”

“You looked a little down.”

“Gee, thanks—I needed that encouragement,” Violet replied with a laugh.

He laughed then, too. “I didn’t mean it that way. You were beautiful as always, but you seemed distressed. And with reason, too,” he added. “What are your plans for this afternoon?”

“Nothing special.” Except throwing a pity party for myself, I suppose, she thought. “You can either feel flattered or annoyed, Roger, I don’t let my guard down with anyone except you. Most people think I never have a care in the world.”

“The kids have gone to a concert this afternoon, and I’m going out to my farm to exercise the dogs. Come with me. I’ll throw some sandwiches in a backpack, and we can eat out in the open. The temperatures are supposed to be warm this afternoon.”

“I warn you I’m feeling rather grumpy.”

“You’re not the first grumpy female I’ve encountered.”

She smiled, and her voice softened. “You’ve talked me into it. I’ll contribute apples and cookies to the picnic. What time?”

“Pick you up in a half hour. Wear walking shoes and a jacket.”

As Violet hurriedly washed two yellow apples and placed some cookies in a plastic bag she felt her mood lightened. It would be relaxing to spend the afternoon with Roger; he accepted her as she was.

Roger’s fifty-acre farm was located ten miles from town. There were a few outbuildings and a small house, which he utilized as a retreat when he wanted to escape the pressure of his work. Most of the farmland was tillable, and he rented this to a neighbor to raise corn. Ten acres of the property was rugged, covered with deciduous and evergreen trees. He bypassed the buildings and drove on a private road along a large creek until he reached the base of the hill.

“Do you come out here often?” Violet asked.

“Not as often as I want to. I try to bring the dogs for a run at least once a week, and spend a few hours at the house. I’ll give you a tour of that before we go back to town.”

His dogs were housed in a wooden structure in the back of his pickup. He opened the doors, and two beagles with smooth white coats, black-and-tan patches, and long, droopy ears, vaulted out of the box and into the underbrush beside the truck. They nosed around in the grass for a few minutes, and then with a yelp, the largest dog took off through the woodland, with his companion right behind him.

“Should we follow them?”

“Not unless you’re feeling overly energetic. They’ll cover lots of miles this afternoon. They go where they want to, and when I want to leave, I whistle them in.”

“And they always come?”

“Well, not always, but let’s hope they do today. I have to go on duty tonight at eight o’clock, so I can’t spend much time looking for dogs. But they’ll be all right unless they pick up a deer’s scent. They’re not supposed to chase anything except rabbits, but I don’t have time to train them as they should be.”

He reached in the truck for a bright orange pack, in which he stored Violet’s apples and cookies, and strapped it over his back. Pointing upward through the trees, he said, “This is a one-hiker trail. Do you want to go first?”

“I’ll follow since I don’t know where we’re going.”

He adjusted the straps on the backpack. “Call out, if you want to rest.”

Sunlight heated Violet’s back as it filtered through leafless trees. The forest floor was carpeted with colorful foliage, and in moist places, green ferns decorated the earth as if placed there by a landscape designer. Violet noticed many different kinds of birds flitting among the trees: noisy chickadees bobbing their black heads and saucily scolding the intruders; brilliant, squawking blue jays already gathered into colonies for the winter and not yet accustomed to close communion; cardinals swooping back and forth among the undergrowth, picking berries from wild holly bushes; and woodpeckers hopping up and down tree trunks looked for insects.

Violet admired the fleecy clouds that punctuated the vivid blue sky and breathed deeply of the fresh air. In the distance, the two dogs barked in excitement, and as the sounds shifted often, she assumed they were hot on the trail of some prey.

At first the climb was gradual, but when they came to a steep incline, Roger stopped and waited for her to catch up.

“We’ve only a short distance to go, but this last five minutes takes some wind. We need to stop and do some deep breathing.”

“What an invigorating walk! Why haven’t you asked me to hike with you before?” she asked in mock severity.

“When I come out here, I want to be alone, excepting present company,” he added with a grin. “I like people, as you know, but sometimes I need privacy. As to why I haven’t brought you, I hadn’t thought of it for one thing, but I decided you needed to be with me today. Even if you don’t want to talk about your problem, I’m the only one who knows and understands about it. So talk or not, be assured that I’m here for you, whatever your need.”

She reached out her hand, and he took it in a strong grasp. “Thanks.”

“Ready to go on?” he asked. At her nod, he released her hand. “Good. I’m hungry. The sooner we reach the peak the better.”

Violet was gasping for breath when they reached the top of the rocky and arid hill, bare of vegetation except for a few windblown pines.

“Our picnic table,” Roger said, pointing to a level stone outcropping under one of the trees.

Violet dropped down on the rock with relief and loosened the top of her hooded sweat jacket. “Whew! I didn’t know I had a heart until it started thumping. My blood is really flowing now.”

“That’s good for you,” Roger said as he unzipped the backpack and spread it open to reveal the contents.

“You’re in for a treat—Gibson’s turkey sandwiches,” he said, “but let’s have a word of prayer first.”

He reached for Violet’s hand, and held it in his large warm one. “God, we are thankful for the beauty of Your earth. I never feel as close to You as I do when I’m in the woodlands. But Violet has a problem, God, and we believe You can bring the solution. You know the past and the future, and we are hazy on both of those points when it comes to her mother. What should she do? What can I do to help her? We are Your servants, Father, help us to recognize Your leading. Bless this food to our bodys’ use and give us a good afternoon together. Amen.”

Violet tightened her grip on Roger’s hand, and she gazed long into his eyes before she loosened her grasp. The genuine concern he had expressed for her in his prayer touched her deeply and she was speechless in the face of his heartfelt concern.

The apples and sandwiches complemented one another, and the cool juice in plastic containers alleviated Violet’s thirst, which was intense after the climb. The cookies made a fitting conclusion to the meal.

“This is a good time for a nap,” Roger said, “if you don’t mind the hard rock.” He stretched out across the rock, put his hands under his head and closed his eyes. Violet found a nearby pine tree and sat down beneath it. She intended to think about the decision she must make soon, but her mind was blank. She had always heard, “Don’t put off until tomorrow what you should do today,” and perhaps that should apply in this situation. She couldn’t stand much more emotional turmoil. A stiff breeze riffled the tops of the pines and the limbs swayed rhythmically, but the wind didn’t reach their secluded, sunny spot. She closed her eyes, and may have slept a few minutes, but Roger’s stirring on the rock alerted her.

“If you’re ready, we’ll head back toward the truck on a different trail, and I’ll start calling the dogs. They’re probably resting, too—I haven’t heard them barking for several minutes.”

The ridge path was wider, and they walked side by side in companionable silence. Perhaps Roger sensed that Violet needed time to think through her decision and he respected that time. Roger was never a garrulous man, but he normally talked more than he had today. Occasionally, he whistled for the dogs and received an answering yelp. By the time they reached the truck, the beagles, still full of pep, were panting at their heels, tongues drooling.



Roger poured water into a pan for the dogs and gave them a small portion of dry food. After the dogs had eaten, he lifted them into the truck and fastened them in their box. "They're just like kids who have played out in the fresh air all day. They'll sleep on the way back to town."

When they came to the farm buildings, Roger parked beside the house. The one-story structure, an old house, was painted a light green with modern windows installed. "Come in and see my hideaway," he invited.

"This is a good retreat," Violet said. "That row of evergreens conceals the house from the highway and blocks the noise from the road."

They walked up on the front porch and Roger opened the door, then stepped back to let Violet precede him into one large room that swept the entire length of the house. On the western side was a kitchen area with modern cabinets and appliances, a small dining area, and a broad window providing a view of the hills. The rest of the room was paneled in light oak. A brightly colored oval rug lay in front of a large fireplace with comfortable chairs grouped around it. A plaid-upholstered couch stood beneath the window, a bookcase filled with books and magazines nearby.

"This is wonderful," Violet said. "No wonder you like to come here."

"The house was in bad condition when I bought the place, but I tore down the shed on the rear of the building, installed new windows and siding, and removed some partitions to make this one big room." He motioned toward the back of the house. "There's a small bedroom and bath in that area."

"It's definitely a man's house," she said. "Do your children like it?"

"Right now, they're more interested in town life. I've brought them out a few times, but they aren't very enthusiastic. I thought Jason might enjoy working on the farm, but he hasn't shown much interest." He indicated the fireplace where several logs awaited a match. "We can have a fire if you want to stay awhile. It's cool in here."

"I have no plans for the afternoon, just so I'm back to Maitland in time for church."

"While I start a fire, see what you can rustle up for a snack from the refrigerator and cabinets."

The smell of wood smoke wafted through the house while Violet looked in the cabinets. "What about cheese and crackers?" she called. "And there are soft drinks. Or do you prefer a hot beverage?"

"Heat some water for tea, please."

Roger pulled two of the chairs close to the fire and placed a small table between them. By that time, Violet had sliced the cheese and had the water boiling. He rummaged in the cabinets until he found a plastic tray, placed the cheese and crackers and the two cups of tea on it, and carried their snack to the living area.

Violet sighed as she sank into one of the lounge chairs. She took off her shoes and leaned back. Roger removed his jacket before he sat down. "It will get hot in here before long."

As they munched on the cheese and crackers, Violet observed the sparsely furnished room more closely, and she said, "No television?"

"Nor a telephone, either. I do have a small radio in the bedroom."

On the mantel was a family picture—a man, woman and two small children. Violet hadn't seen a picture of Roger's wife, but she could see many of Misty's features in the woman.

"Roger, why haven't you remarried?"

"Are you proposing to me?" A mischievous twinkle sparkled in his deep eyes.

"Of course not," she said. "I noticed the picture and that made me curious."

"Why do you wonder?"

"Well, you're such good company. I have the feeling you've been alone for a long time."

"Ten years," he said musingly.

"Don't you miss sharing your life with someone? Raising two children alone couldn't have been easy," she added.

"At first, the pain was too deep to even consider another marriage, and I didn't want to saddle my kids with a stepmother as young as they were. My mother lived with us until a year ago, so the

children had plenty of supervision while I was at work. When Misty turned fifteen, Mother went to live with my sister in Arizona to get away from the cold, damp winters here. The idea of remarrying isn't distasteful to me. Now that the kids are involved with all kinds of interests and activities that don't include their Dad, I have been thinking about it."

Violet nodded approvingly. She had seen firsthand that Roger was a good, supportive father, and he would make a caring husband.

"Now, it's my turn to ask questions. Are you going to marry Larry Holland?"

His question startled her, but she smiled slightly. "He hasn't asked me."

"Maybe Olivia Holland hasn't given her okay yet."

"Now, Roger! Larry is a nice guy—he can't help what his mother does."

"I know that. So if he does ask, will you marry him?"

"I've often asked myself the same question. I'd be foolish to say no, wouldn't I?"

"Probably so. He's a good catch, or so I'm told."

Roger continued to gaze at her, his expression relaxed, yet his gaze was somehow intense. Violet looked away. She stared into the flames, sipping on the tea until it cooled. Right now she had to make a decision more pressing than marriage.

Roger stood, stoked the fire, and took the empty cup from her hand. He carried the utensils to the kitchen, and Violet heard him washing the items and replacing them in the cabinets. When he returned to his chair, Violet said, "I'm going to take her."

He reached across the table and took her hand. "Are you happy with that decision?"

"No, not exactly happy, but maybe relieved. As a Christian, I know it's the right choice. I can't get the words of Jesus out of my mind, I was sick and in prison and you came to me. Aunt Ruth advises against it, saying she will care for my mother at her home. But in all good conscience, I can't allow that. I'll have to take her and manage the best as I can."

"I'll help every way I can."

"Do you think we can keep her past a secret?"

"A lot of legal red tape will be required to transfer a paroled prisoner from one state to another, and the incident is bound to be caught by the news media. It will be better if you don't try to hide her past. It will be a worse scandal if you conceal her background and the news leaks out gradually."

"I'll probably lose all of my friends."

"Anyone who deserts you because of a tragedy like this that happened when you were a child isn't worth having for a friend."

"I've been thinking all afternoon that I probably should go talk to Pastor Tom about this."

"A good idea. If you have your church family behind you, half the battle is won. Do you want me to go with you to see him?"

"Yes, please."

"Then let's close up here and go now. He should be in the church office this afternoon."

## Chapter Three

Tom Walker was a small man with a neat figure, a kindly face, and a deep voice. His hazel eyes were bright and clear. Now in his sixties, his reddish brown hair, fringed in gray, was steadily receding from his forehead. Tom's wife had died, childless, several years ago, so Tom's whole life was tied up in the ministry of First Community Church, which he had shepherded for ten years.

He looked up with a twinkle in his eyes when Violet and Roger entered. "Have you two come for premarital counseling?"

Violet was encouraged that he started the session on a light note, for she was able to smile and said, "Why ruin a perfect relationship by marrying your best friend?" Roger said nothing, but when Violet glanced in his direction, she was astounded to note that his face had flushed slightly.

Pastor Tom laughed. "I thought you might be following the trend today. I've had two couples already this afternoon. But sit down, anyway. What's on your mind?"

The pastor's office was equipped with roomy, padded chairs grouped around his desk. Tom was a patient man, never pushing his visitors to speak until they were ready, and the three of them sat in silence for a few minutes.

"I don't know any easy way to say this," Violet began, "but my mother, Linda Conley, is serving a life sentence for murder in a correctional facility in Kansas. She's a terminal cancer patient, and Roger received a message two days ago that they want to parole her to the next of kin. That happens to be me." The silence in the room was intense, broken only by the faint ticking of a small clock on the pastor's desk. Once she had made the initial disclosure, Violet hurried on to reveal the whole story, ending with, "I know it's something I have to do, but how can I cope with this disruption in my life? I wish I could say I was doing it out of love for my mother, but I don't love her. I don't even know her. It will be like taking a complete stranger into my home."

"The first step toward coping is prayer."

"I have been praying, and I'm sure Roger has also, otherwise, I couldn't have come this far."

"You seem to have the situation under control," the pastor said. "How can I help you?"

"Although I don't know how I can possibly care for a very ill woman and teach school also, I'm concerned about local people finding out about my past, as well. I rather flatter myself that I have a good reputation in the community, and I don't know how I can bear to have everyone know that my mother is in prison for killing my father." Violet covered her face with her hands. "Just saying the words brings so much anguish that I want to crawl in a hole and die. What will it be like when those words are on the lips of everyone in Maitland?"

Roger placed his hand on Violet's trembling shoulder. "Perhaps we should mention, Pastor, that Mrs. Conley doesn't want to be released from prison. She wouldn't tell the authorities that she had any relatives. It's my understanding that right from the first, she has tried to protect Violet's name. I have doubts that she will willingly come here."

"Then I'd suggest, Roger, that you find out the particulars of her release and the extent of the obligations Violet will have to assume. If you do bring Mrs. Conley to Maitland, I can break the news to the church family, and I think most of them will support you. I can't answer for the rest of the community." He left his chair and went to a bookshelf behind him. "Have either of you read this bestselling book by Richard Cameron?"

"I don't recognize the name," Violet said, and Roger shook his head.

"What's *Your Prison?* is apparently the author's first book. His premise is that all of us are imprisoned by something, and he gives spiritual evidence that we can be freed by the Spirit. Your mother has a physical prison, but Cameron contends that other kinds of imprisonment can be just as confining and self-destructive. He refers to situations that imprison the spirit—passions, fear, jealousy, ambition, the inability to forgive, hatred, and many others—and though humankind can be

pardoned legally for its sins against humanity, only God can free a person from spiritual and moral bondage. Cameron bases his premise on the words of Jesus, 'So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.' I was so impressed by his writings that I contacted the publisher to see if we could invite the author for a series of lectures on the subject, but it seems Mr. Cameron is a recluse and will not make public appearances."

Roger took the book and leafed through it before he handed it to Violet. "I've never put it into those words," he said, "but I agree with the author. I've always thought that we make our own prisons."

"It might be encouraging to you to read this book, Violet," Pastor Tom said, "because the task you're assuming will not be an easy one. You will have your own prison."

"Thank you," Violet said, and she tucked the book in her pocket. Despite Pastor Tom's praise, she doubted that any book could hold the answers to her dilemma.

As they left the church, Larry drove by in his sleek silver sedan, but if he saw them, he made no indication. With a wry smile, Roger said, "Suppose he will make the same assumption that Pastor Tom did when we arrived at his office?"

"Oh, the pastor was just joking." Roger opened the truck door and assisted her into the high seat. "What do you think of the pastor's suggestion that you make some official inquiries?"

"I'll start on it the first thing in the morning. I should have some news by the time you're home from work tomorrow."

As they drove the short distance toward her home, Violet said, "That will make the day long for me, but if you call me at school, I won't be able to concentrate on my teaching."

When she telephoned Ruth of her decision, her aunt immediately said, "If you do bring her to your home, I'm coming to help you. You can't afford to quit work, and I can take a leave from my part-time job." Although she hated for Ruth to make the sacrifice, Violet didn't know how she could possibly manage alone, and she agreed to accept her aunt's help.

Larry telephoned soon after Violet returned from evening worship service, and after he had chatted briefly, he said, "I saw you with Roger Gibson again this afternoon."

"Yes, he invited me to go out to his farm, and we hiked in the woodlands. We needed to stop at the church afterward to speak to Pastor Tom."

"Perhaps I shouldn't ask, but what is your relationship with Gibson?"

Larry had not yet made any commitment that would give him the right to regulate her friendships, and the domineering tone his voice took on as he asked his question certainly annoyed her, but she answered calmly. "Roger is a good friend. I see him often at church, and since I've taught both of his children, we've had a satisfactory teacher-parent relationship."

"I don't like to make a point of it, but we've dated steadily for almost a year. I haven't seen anyone else during that time, and I assumed that you hadn't, but the past few days, Lieutenant Gibson has enjoyed more of your company than I have."

If the time came when she had to choose between Roger's friendship and Larry's companionship, what would she do?

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Larry. The past few days, Roger and I have had a mutual problem, which required our meeting, but I can't reveal any more than that at this time. You'll just have to trust me."

"Very well," Larry answered tersely. "Have you decided about going on the skiing trip? We're leaving the day before Thanksgiving and will be back by Tuesday when school resumes."

Violet hesitated. Since she didn't know when or if her mother would be coming, she couldn't commit herself to the trip, but Thanksgiving was three weeks away, and it was quite likely that her mother would be in her home by then. "I would really enjoy going with you, but I'm fairly sure that I'll have visitors over the holiday. Perhaps you'll give me a rain check?"

Ignoring her comment, he didn't say whether he would or not, and Violet assumed he was annoyed. "You remember that I'll be gone all next week to the national principal's convention in Florida."

Violet laughed. "It's tough luck to have to go to Florida and miss all of this gloomy weather we're having, but someone has to take the dirty jobs. Have fun."

"Remember we are going down there to work, but I intend to consider it a working vacation." His good humor seemed to have resurfaced, and he said, "Goodbye. See you in a week."

The time dragged for Violet on Monday. It was always difficult to motivate her students on Mondays, especially when her own mind was elsewhere. They had been hyperactive while preparing for the fair competition, and now that it was over, and the awards given, she could hardly interest them in the new unit they were starting.

Nan and Violet had a chance to lunch together and met in Violet's room to eat the bag lunches they'd brought from home.

"Did you have any flack about the Social Studies competition?" Nan asked.

"A lot of dirty looks on Friday, both toward Janie and me, but except for the 'accident' to her project, I haven't heard anything. Have you?"

"Some comments among the teachers about 'favoritism,' but there are several teachers who don't feel about Janie as we do. She's an embarrassment to them...they feel intimidated by her past. People who have lived a trauma-free life can't understand those who haven't had it easy."

If Janie affected them that way, how would they deal with Violet's sordid background? Would that alienate her also?

"I haven't asked about the birthday party last week. How did it go?"

Remembering her unease at the dinner, Violet's eyes clouded, and she chewed slowly on her sandwich before she answered.

"I had to sit beside Mrs. Holland, and she made me quite uncomfortable prying into my antecedents. I have some family members who wouldn't pass muster under much investigation."

"Haven't we all?" Nan said with a laugh. "If she's checking into your ancestry, Larry must be getting serious."

"That's my opinion, too," Violet conceded. "And Larry has taken exception to my friendship with Roger Gibson. What do you make of that?"

"That the Holland family is no place for a person who values freedom. Think long and hard about any alliance you make with them."

"I can't tell you the details now, but some decisions I've made this week may remove me speedily from the list of Holland 'eligibles.'"

"So much the better for you." Nan crumpled her lunch bag and tossed it in the waste can. "Larry is a good administrator because he gets to make the rules, but the traits that make him a successful principal wouldn't necessarily be welcome in a husband," she advised. "See you later," she added as the bell rung for classes to resume.

When Violet returned home after school, she was tempted to sit by the phone, waiting for Roger's call, but tried to busy herself with other tasks. She looked around her home, wondering how she could manage with two more people in the house. Probably she would need a hospital bed for her mother, and she could dismantle the bed in the small room and put her mother there. But what about Aunt Ruth? Could she put the small bed in the living room for herself and leave her bedroom to Aunt Ruth? Any way you looked at it, her whole household would need to be rearranged.

By the time Roger telephoned, Violet was so discouraged she didn't know which way to turn, and his report on what he had learned from a representative at the prison didn't make her feel any better.

"They will release her into your custody," Roger said, "with occasional visits by a parole officer, but she has a clean record as far as behavior is concerned, so they aren't worried about her

conduct. You will have to go to Topeka to sign the necessary papers, and she will be transported here in an ambulance at the expense of the correctional facility. She isn't able to travel any other way. As I understand, the State of Kansas will be responsible for her medical expenses, such as the chemotherapy treatments that she's been taking each week."

"I'll need to take school leave for a couple of days, for I don't suppose I could make the necessary arrangements over a weekend. Please get the particulars of whom I should contact at the prison, and what I should do. I'll arrive there on Thursday, and if I need additional time, I can travel home on Saturday or Sunday."

"Do you want me to go with you, Violet?"

"I can't ask you to leave your work and your family."

"Do you want me to go with you?" he repeated.

With his knowledge of the rules and regulations governing prisoners, Roger would be a valuable help to her, but she thought of Larry's suspicion of Roger, or was it jealousy? But Larry was gone this week; maybe he wouldn't know. But when she was concerned about the loss of reputation if the citizens learned about her mother, what would they think if she took an overnight trip with Roger? Would that become common knowledge, too?

"I'm waiting for an answer," Roger said.

"You know I would be grateful for your company, but that's asking too much, especially to leave your family. Truthfully, I don't know whether I can handle it alone, but Aunt Ruth might be able to meet me there, though that's a long trip from Minnesota."

"I have a few vacation days I must take before the end of the year, and my aunt comes and stays at the house when I have to be away," Roger said. "I can arrange it. I won't be going in an official capacity, of course."

"I know I shouldn't accept your offer, but it will make my load a lot easier if you're with me," she said gratefully. "We can go in my car and leave early Thursday morning. We should be in Topeka in time to make some contacts that afternoon."

"Yes, we'll travel on I-70 most of the way—it's an easy drive."

She wanted to ask Roger to meet her out of town, but if anyone wanted to gossip about them she supposed it would be less severe if they didn't act as though they were involved in clandestine activities. Once her mother was moved in, everyone in Maitland, including Larry, would know the reason that they had spent so much time together. Whatever the outcome of their journey, Violet knew that her life would never be the same again. She couldn't believe that her serene life of a month ago had suddenly plunged into such adversity.

"I'll make arrangements for two days of leave from school. I'll also telephone Pastor Tom to tell him of our plans. We'll need his prayers."

Violet reached a clammy hand to Roger as they walked into the correctional facility late Thursday afternoon. Sometime she would be able to tell him how much his support meant to her, but her throat was too tight for words now. His warm fingers curled around hers in a comforting clasp, and her feet felt lighter. Over the phone, Roger had received directions to the proper office, and they were to ask for Angie Smith who would handle the parole procedures.

As Violet approached Angie Smith kind, burnished eyes gleamed from her chubby, compassionate face, and Violet felt the knot in her stomach ease.

"I have papers prepared for your signature, Miss Conley, and then we will have to work out the details of her parole," Angie Smith explained.

"I need to ask some questions first. What kind of cancer does my mother have? How long is she expected to live? Will I be able to care for her at home?"

"She has abdominal cancer. She was too far gone when she finally collapsed and we learned of her condition. She had radiation before surgery six months ago, and chemo since, but she hasn't responded. The doctors predict that she has a life expectancy of less than six months. With the help

of a hospice, you can care for her at home, but you will need some help—she can do very little for herself. Those of us who made the decision to parole her feel sorry for your mother. She isn't pleased with us, but we thought she should be with her family. Why haven't any of you visited her?"

Stung at these words, Violet said angrily, "Because she refused to see us. I was never taken to see her as a child, and a few years ago, when I was on my own, I went to visit her when she was at another facility, and she wouldn't see me...sent word that I should forget about her. She deliberately cut herself off from her family."

"Then I beg your pardon," Angie said. "She has never been a mixer and has always seemed so lonely. In the past few years, she has spent most of her time in the computer room and has been a help to our office staff at times."

"When will she be released?" Roger asked.

"At any time convenient to you. Today, if you like. She will be transported by ambulance, but it isn't necessary for you to travel with her."

"Oh, not today," Violet said, and a wild look came into her eyes. "Not until I've made preparations to take care of her."

"May we visit her now?" Roger said. "I've understood she doesn't want to leave here?"

"Yes, Linda is reluctant about this move, but I think you should visit her." Compassion softened Angie's eyes as she said to Violet, "If you haven't seen your mother for a while, I must warn you of the change in her physical appearance."

"I don't remember ever seeing my mother. My only idea of what she looks like is a picture that was taken when I was a baby."

Angie wrote the cell number on a sheet of paper. "I'll write out a pass for both of you, but you'll have to go through security, and have a guard with you at all times."

Roger stood up, showed Angie his official credentials, and said, "I'll deposit my gun with you now, if it will be all right. As you see, I do have a permit to carry a weapon." He unstrapped the underarm holster that he wore and gave it to Angie, who wrote out a receipt for it.

"That would have caused a commotion if you'd started through security with that gun," she said. "I'm surprised you got this far with it."

"I made my official status known at the main gate, and they told me to register the gun when I came into this office building."

Violet also had to leave her purse behind, and both of them were frisked thoroughly. After they cleared the security check and waited on the elevator, Violet leaned against the wall for support. She wanted to break and run. Perhaps sensing Violet's despair, Roger pulled her into a firm embrace, and his hands gently massaged her neck and shoulders. He didn't say anything, but he didn't have to—knowing he was there gave her the courage she needed to eventually walk down the corridor toward her mother's cell.

The guard opened the door, motioned for them to enter, and locked the door behind them. Violet was horrified by the stark surroundings. For the first time, she felt a glimmer of compassion for her mother, who had spent twenty-three years in such an atmosphere.

Violet felt shocked as she realized the woman on the cot looked more dead than alive. She was dressed in a faded yellow garment and covered to her waist with a blanket. Her high cheekbones and wide brow which may have been delicately lovely at one time now gave her face a gaunt, hollow look. The sparse brownish gray hair was straight and stringy. The woman's eyes were closed, apparently in sleep, and Violet wanted to run away before her mother roused.

Perhaps he sensed Violet's discomfort, for Roger said softly, "Shall we awaken her?"

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