

SO ALONE

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OTHER NCP TITLES BY LOIS CARROLL

Overbyte

Chapter One

“Give me a break,” Carrie Whitmore cried out as she pulled the pillow over her head. She quickly discovered that not even the insulating feathers could silence the constant roar outside the open bedroom window that sounded louder each time it passed.

Rudely aroused after too few hours of sleep, Carrie Whitmore sat up to identify the noise. Someone was pushing a gas-powered lawn mower next door to her grandmother’s house.

Carrie’s knit nightgown twisted around her as she glanced at the clock on the antique walnut table beside the sleigh bed in which she had slept. Seven-thirty! And on a Saturday morning. Way too early for that much racket. They were mowing the church lawn, for heaven’s sake. They should be more considerate, especially in a small, country town like Sunville, North Dakota.

Suddenly the fact that she was in Sunville and not at home in Fargo registered in her sleepy head. She gasped. “Oh, no! You can’t make that much noise now.” She threw off the light handmade quilt. “You’ll

wake up Grandma.”

Her grandmother, Madeleine Whitmore, was sleeping in one of the other five bedrooms in the immaculately preserved three-story Victorian house. At least Carrie hoped she was still asleep.

Maddie, as everyone called the eighty-three-year-old founding member of the little Sunville Community Church behind her house, had kept Carrie up far into the night. Dressed only in her nightgown and robe, Maddie had been determined to go to church. Carrie worked to convince her grandmother, whose mind often wasn't in touch with reality as her Alzheimer's got worse, that services weren't until Sunday. She repeatedly promised to take Maddie then, but only when she finally tired was Carrie able to get her back to bed.

Now, after little sleep Carrie worried that the mower would wake her. “Grandma,” she muttered. “Please, please stay asleep.”

That noise had to stop. Now.

Carrie jumped out of bed and grabbed her shirt from the chair where she'd dropped it the night before. She pulled it on over the nightgown with North Dakota State University blazoned across the front, and reached for her jeans. Hopping on one leg at a time in a zigzag path toward the stairs, she stuffed her legs into the pants and tucked in her nightgown.

The jeans zipped easily and she began buttoning the shirt while she sailed two-at-a-time down the stairs of the huge house. Her hand pivoted around the highly-polished newel post as she ran toward the big eat-in kitchen that stretched across the back of the house.

Just a few buttons remained. She always had thought so many contrasting buttons close together were cute, but this morning she wished there were half as many. She hesitated only a moment longer to finish down to the last one as the insistent roar set her off at a run again.

“Come on. Come on,” she urged when the old-fashioned lock on the door stopped her and added to her ire. She supposed she could have left it unlocked the night before as Maddie always did, but Carrie lived in Fargo, the biggest city in the state. She didn't feel safe unless the doors were locked.

The noise was increasing as the worker neared the hedgerow that provided a privacy screen and separated Maddie's lawn from the church's.

Stepping out the door, Carrie carefully closed the screen to keep it from slamming and dashed across the deep yard. She ducked through the break near the end of the row of bushes where people had worn a path by cutting through for decades.

Breathless from the pace at which she'd traversed the distance, Carrie darted across the church lawn and stopped ahead of the mower. Her heart and breathing rate raced. She clutched her side where a muscle was cramping from the sudden exercise.

She held up her hand like a school crossing guard. “Stop. Please. Do you have any idea what time it is?” she managed breathlessly, her chest heaving.

As the lawn-service guy stretched out his strong arm and turned off the mower, Carrie straightened. She was relieved to discover the muscle in her side no longer pulled.

“Thank you,” she said, waving a hand toward the mower.

As she swallowed and steadied her breathing, she couldn't help noticing his shoulders were a great deal broader than his tee shirt was expected to accommodate. His worn, cut-off jeans and holey sneakers had seen much better days, but then she wasn't expecting to find North Dakota's best-dressed man working behind a lawn mower.

She didn't remember seeing him around town before, but she hadn't been back for more than brief visits since she had graduated eight years ago from the area high school.

Realizing how rudely she was staring, she quickly said, “Ah, I'm sorry to interrupt your work. I appreciate your turning the mower off.”

His dark hair had fallen forward, and he ran his fingers through it, pulling it into some order. She didn't want to notice how tall and attractive he was, not someone in this town, but she couldn't help doing so.

“No problem,” he said with a friendly smile.

He whipped off his sunglasses, revealing the lightest blue eyes she'd ever seen. Struggling to persevere in her mission, Carrie swallowed past a new lump that had settled in her throat and looked down at the mower instead of at the man.

“My grandmother... the noise...” she tried to explain. “I was up half the night getting her to sleep. She's ill and... and now you're making so much noise--so early. I was afraid you'd wake her up.” She glanced at his friendly smile and then couldn't look away.

“Hey, I'm sorry if I woke her,” he said in a smooth baritone voice. “I guess I was so wrapped up in getting my work done that I didn't think about how early it is.” He stepped around the mower toward her and pulled the work gloves from his hands. “And I'm sorry I woke you up, too.”

“Woke me up?” Her hand splayed on her chest. How did he know she'd not chosen to get up with the sun like the workers on the grain and sugar beet farms that surrounded Sunville?

“Yeah.” His smile blossomed into a grin. A little-boy mischievousness sparkled in his eyes. “Or do you always button your shirt that way?”

Carrie pulled her shirt tails forward and saw two empty buttonholes at the bottom of one side while two lonely buttons sat at the top of the other. She groaned. Her embarrassment doubled, but she had to smile at how silly it looked. “You caught me.”

His close inspection reinforced her need for a quick exit. She steeled herself with a deep breath. “Listen. Thanks for stopping the mower. I... I know that with the new minister having been at the church just a few months and all, you want to get the lawn done early to make a good impression.”

“No, I'm not...”

She didn't let him finish. “Believe me, an hour or so isn't going to make much difference to Reverend... ah... whatever his name is. But an hour could make a big difference in how my grandmother feels when she wakes up. Thanks again for stopping.”

Carrie turned back toward the hedge to make her escape. He followed a few steps, and Carrie stopped

reluctantly when he spoke.

“Wait, I’m really sorry about the noise,” he reiterated with that friendly grin that seemed to appear so easily. “You see, the church youth group is due in an hour to start a car wash. I can finish mowing later, but as for doing it for...”

“Good,” she said, interrupting him again. “I’ll be sure to put in the good word for you with Reverend What’s-his-name when I meet him--if I meet him, actually. I hope I won’t be stuck in this town that long.”

The workman frowned and tried to say something, but she shook her head and stopped him yet again. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure he understands that it was entirely my fault that the lawn mowing wasn’t finished before the kids got here. As a matter a fact, if Grandma’s up to going to church tomorrow, I’ll tell him myself. I promise,” she said, backing away. “Thanks again,” she called over her shoulder as she turned and dashed through the break in the bushes.

She was jerked to a stop when the sleeve of her shirt caught on a broken branch jutting out beside the path. In a moment’s panic about her new blouse, she stepped back, hoping to lift the cloth from the stout twig. She could hear the man’s footsteps coming up behind her.

“Need some help?”

She glanced back to see he was nearly at her side. “No, ah, no thanks.”

Unable to move because the splintered end of the branch was caught in the hem stitches, she felt embarrassed--again. Here was one more in a series of uncomfortable and guilt provoking events that always seemed to happen to her when she visited Sunville. Determined not to feed the rumor mill with a story about her and some workman, she yanked the cloth free from the branch without taking time to assess the resulting damage and fled toward her grandmother’s kitchen door.

The man called something out to her, but she kept on running, her heart pounding in her ears, obliterating his words. Once inside Maddie’s kitchen, Carrie closed the door and leaned against the cool painted surface of the wall beside it. Her heart and breathing rate were still rapid, and she knew he was the cause. That man with the gorgeous smile.

She’d let him affect her with his good looks and friendly attitude. The sparkle in his eyes had triggered a response in her that she’d never expected and certainly never intended to feel about any man from around Sunville. Not ever again.

Hers was a response that could not be permitted if she was to stay free and clear of Sunville, something she’d had to do since her senior year at the state university. After what had happened that year and the fact that everyone blamed her for it, she knew she could never be happy living in Sunville.

She frowned and turned to look out the window that was centered in the top half of the back door. She watched the lawn-care guy push the mower through the side door of the church.

Somehow this man was different from others she knew. When he looked at her, she felt as if he could see all the terrible secrets she thought she’d buried. If he did, he would turn against her like most people in this town had.

He wouldn’t be easy for her to ignore if their paths ever crossed again though. It would be best to steer

clear of him altogether, she decided. She hoped that would be easy to do since she wasn't staying long.

Confident in her new resolve, she ran upstairs to check on her grandmother. With all Carrie had to accomplish while she was in town this time, she probably should be glad to have the extra time available by being awakened much earlier than she'd planned. Maybe she should thank the lawn guy for waking her the next time she saw him, but then, there wouldn't be a next time.

She tiptoed across the hall to Maddie's room and peeked in the open door. Maddie was still asleep, her slender body barely making a mound in the bed. Her hair, as white as the pillowcase under her head, framed her face that looked so serene in slumber.

If only more rest would make you well, Carrie thought, but she knew it wouldn't. Maddie was getting worse and that's what had brought Carrie back to Sunville now instead of the first weekend of each month when she normally visited.

She'd returned to employ live-in help for her grandmother. Such responsibilities had fallen to her since her parents had died the summer before her senior year at NDSU. Her sister, Mary Ellen Morse, who lived in Boulder, Colorado, was Maddie's only other close relative. However, Mary Ellen was in no position to help Carrie because she worked full-time and had a husband and two young daughters who needed her there.

For a number of years, Maddie had managed quite well on her own and enjoyed the independent living in her own home. Several months earlier, however, when she'd shown signs of needing help, Carrie had hired a housekeeper to look after her. Working days, the housekeeper did all the cooking and cleaning. On Maddie's bad days, the housekeeper even helped her bathe and dress and sometimes served meals in her bedroom when she couldn't make it down the stairs. However, that help had not been enough.

Last weekend, dressed in her nightgown, Maddie had wandered out of the house after the housekeeper left for the night. Coming home from a date, some neighborhood teenagers had seen her and walked her home. With a caring concern for her neighbor, the young woman persuaded Maddie to go back to bed before she and her boyfriend left to tell the girl's mother what had happened.

The following morning, the girl's mother called the one clinic in town to report the incident to Maddie's doctor, Bill Bolton. Bill immediately called Carrie's apartment in Fargo to tell her. Carrie had long resented the small-town environment where everyone knew everyone else's business because of all the pain she'd suffered as the subject of numerous rumors. In this instance, it had seemed heaven-sent, and she was thankful.

After rearranging her work responsibilities as an assistant editor at a company that published several magazines, Carrie took a leave of absence to tend to Maddie herself until she found live-in help to take over. She hoped that wouldn't take longer than a few days at the most.

Heading back to a room on the back of the house where she always slept on her visits, Carrie hugged the wall to avoid the squeaky floor boards. After a childhood of playing and sleeping here whenever her folks were out of town, she knew where each loose board was.

After showering and dressing again, this time in a clean knit top with no buttons, Carrie headed for the kitchen. She made just a small pot of coffee for herself because Maddie had to steer clear of caffeine, and then Carrie phoned her sister.

"I'm in Sunville, and the news isn't good," she reported.

“Let me have it,” Mary Ellen responded in her typical no-nonsense way.

“I talked to Dr. Bolton as soon as I got to town yesterday. He said we have no choice. We must find someone to live with Grandma full-time, to see that she eats properly, and to care for her when she isn’t capable herself. It was hard to hear him say we can’t trust her not to wander off again.”

Mary Ellen was silent. From the rustling, Carrie guessed she was wiping away her tears with a tissue just as Carrie had done in Bill’s office.

“I asked him if she was...” Carrie inhaled deeply to strengthen her voice. “Dying,” she finally said, not wanting to utter the word.

“What did he say?” Mary Ellen asked hoarsely.

“Well,” Carrie began, picking out the positive things to tell her first. “He said she’s not in any pain or discomfort, and except for what is probably Alzheimer’s, she’s very healthy for her age. She could live for years.”

“That sounds good,” Mary Ellen responded, her voice more cheerful.

“But he wasn’t finished. As time passes she’ll forget things more, and she’ll be aware of less around her. Sometimes she won’t even know people who have been her friends for years. She won’t know us!”

“I didn’t know she was that bad.”

Carrie waited while Mary Ellen blew her nose. “I had no idea how far Grandma’s illness had progressed. Mom and Dad always tended to her, not me.”

“I knew they spent a lot of time at Grandma’s house,” Mary Ellen said, “helping to fix this and that. Dad was always taking his tool kit over there for something.”

“Yeah, but now it’s Grandma who needs the fixing. And Mary Ellen? I don’t know what tool we can use to fix the problem for her.”

“There’s nothing we can do to make her better? Some pill she could take? An operation?” Mary Ellen asked hopefully.

“The doctor said no. If we can’t find help night and day for Grandma, the only other alternative is a nursing home. She can’t be left home alone any longer.”

“Oh, Carrie, it would break her heart to leave that house. She’s lived there since she got married.”

“I know. I know. I could never be the one to make her leave. And I don’t want to even think about going to that nursing home again where Ralph died. I couldn’t stand being reminded of what happened there every time I visited grandma. I’ve spent all these years fighting the guilt I still feel, not to mention wishing the people in this town would forget about it, too.”

“I understand, hon. Really, I do. And there must be something else that can be done.”

“Well, the doctor gave me the name of two services that provide round-the-clock care-givers. Neither

one is in Sunville, but that doesn't surprise me." Carrie hadn't hidden her contempt in her voice for the shortcomings of the small town. "Anyway, I drove right here from the doctor's office and..." She broke off what she had begun to say and sighed heavily.

"What is it? What happened?" her sister asked.

"I came in the front door calling to Grandma like I always do. The housekeeper said she was upstairs in bed."

"Was she okay?"

"I ran upstairs to see her. I... I..." Carrie sniffled.

"What? Tell me."

"Grandma asked me who I was!" Carrie admitted. She pulled a piece of paper towel from the roll over the sink and wiped the tears that had escaped down her cheeks.

"Oh, hon," Mary Ellen said, sounding equally moved.

"By the time the housekeeper left, Grandma at least understood that someone different would be staying the night. I can't tell you how sad and lonely I felt."

Mary Ellen blew her nose again. "What are you going to do?"

"I'd like to think it's, 'What are we going to do?'," Carrie responded pointedly. "I can't stay here and take care of her for more than a few days because I could lose my job. It's complicated, but small companies don't have to hold jobs for people on emergency leave. And there's no job in this town for me unless I want to bag groceries or hoe sugar beets, that's for sure."

"I hate to leave this all to you to handle. I had to do that when Mom and Dad died, and I've always felt guilty. And then Ralph died a few months after Mom and Dad's accident. I still feel awful about not being there for you."

"No need for us both to feel guilty," she said with a weak try at a laugh. "You couldn't help that you were eight months pregnant when Mom and Dad had the accident, Mary Ellen. Everyone understood why you weren't here."

"It makes me wish even more that I could help you now, but all I can say is that I'll go along with whatever you decide."

Carrie shouldered the heavy burden of determining Maddie's fate without a complaint. "As long as Grandma can afford it, I'll find a full-time, live-in caregiver then."

Mary Ellen agreed.

"Until I find one, I'll tend to her. Speaking of which, I'd better start getting our breakfast. I'll call again when I have more news."

Carrie said her goodbyes and set the phone back in its cradle. She washed her hands and poured a cup of coffee, thinking about all she had to do and wondering how best to do it.

She knew no one in Sunville to whom she could turn for help or support. She felt so alone and nearly overwhelmed by her responsibilities.

If only she still believed that God could help her when she needed him.

Chapter Two

Earlier that Saturday morning, The Reverend Peter Newhouse, pastor at the Sunville Community Church, awoke with the sun and reveled in the beauty of the day. Although the church had no manse, he didn't miss having a whole house to rattle around in all by himself. His rental half of a two-bedroom duplex was small but just the right size for his bachelor needs.

He stretched and began his regular regime of exercises to keep his body fit. After his shower, he went to the study he'd fashioned in the smaller bedroom and began his regular Bible study and prayer routine aimed at keeping his mind and spirit fit.

Twenty minutes at each activity and he was ready for breakfast. Today would be a busy day so he did not dare skip the meal. There would be donuts and soda at the church later but that was hardly a healthy breakfast.

In the three months he'd lived there, Peter had come to enjoy the peaceful time to himself that preparing his breakfast provided. All through college and seminary, he'd lived on his own so he had learned to cook early on. He loved trying new recipes for this early meal which often proved to be his most substantial meal of the day.

Normally on a Saturday like this, he would stay home and review his sermon for the next morning. It still made him nervous to get up there in front of the congregation, to talk to them about how they could find the Kingdom of God. It made him nervous, but made him feel better than anything else he could possibly imagine doing.

He'd known he wanted to be a pastor to some small-town church exactly like Sunville's since he was in high school in Minneapolis. By then he'd had enough of city living to last him a lifetime.

Peter could think of nothing that would ever make him willingly move back to a city. He was totally convinced that God wanted him to work and live in Sunville. Peter was happy to oblige. At the age of thirty-one, after two jobs as an assistant pastor, he was in his first position as senior pastor and he loved it.

In fact, he loved the area and the people so much that he hoped to stay and raise a family of his own in Sunville. "Now would be a good time to bring me a woman to love," he added to his prayerful conversation over his Dutch pancake breakfast. "A very good time, thank You."

After he finished eating, Peter left the dishes soaking in the sink and drove to the church to get an early start at the work he'd promised to do. He glanced at his watch as he parked in his reserved spot in the church lot. He had a list of chores to get done before the teenaged youth group arrived between eight-thirty and nine.

The young people had been working for weeks to make puppets and learn a script they had found in a Sunday school magazine. A Biblical quiz show, the performance was intended for children and adult audiences. They didn't have sufficient funds to pay for everything they had to purchase, hence the fund-raising car wash.

Peter let himself into the church storage room and dragged out the gas-powered mower. The deacon's son, who normally did the lawn each Saturday, had left for Boy Scout Camp the day before. Peter told him not to bother getting a substitute because he thought the exercise from mowing would feel good. It wouldn't hurt to get in the practice for when he had a home and family of his own.

Thinking it would be a lot of years before his future son could take over the mowing, Peter chuckled. Or his future daughter either, he amended. No reason she couldn't mow.

Peter shook his head. Here he was planning what his kids would do, and he hadn't even met their mother yet!

The mower started easily and Peter began cutting close to the church, going across the lawn parallel to the hedgerow that stretched along the length of the back property line.

He'd traded his dignified slacks and a shirt with his clerical collar that he usually wore at church for his cut-off jeans and a tee shirt. As sure as that glorious sun was shining, he knew the kids would find a way to get him soaking wet when the hoses were turned on--probably more than just once.

After mowing the big lawn that surrounded the old-fashioned white clapboard church, the shower from the hoses would probably feel good.

Looking beyond the hedgerow, he noticed a low red car in Maddie's driveway. Assuming his secretary was correct--and she hadn't been wrong before--that car belonged to Carrie Whitmore. She'd arrived yesterday to tend to her ill grandmother.

Sad that Maddie's mind was suffering, Peter thought, as he reversed direction at the end of a stripe, but she was lucky she had family who could come care for her. He hoped she would be well enough to come to church tomorrow. Then he could meet Carrie and let her know she could count on him if she needed help or just for moral support. If they didn't show up, he decided he would stop by during the afternoon to introduce himself and to say hello.

Peter glanced up at the few white cumulus clouds that dotted the endless summer sky. The immensity of the North Dakota sky never failed to impress him. He knew it was the same sky that he had seen growing up in the city, but he could see so much more of it above the flat terrain of the northern prairie. The beauty of the bright blue and the frightening power when it blackened with a storm amazed him. Appreciating the beautiful picture that God's handiwork had created was a daily habit he never wanted to break.

On his next pass across the sweet-smelling lawn, he was startled when a woman appeared out of nowhere and ran right into the mower's path. She was breathing hard and Peter felt his own breathing speed up right along with hers.

Quickly switching off the mower so he could hear what she'd come to say, he couldn't stop staring at her. Her blond hair fell in chin-length tousled curls around her delicate face. No makeup marred her natural beauty. He watched the movement in her slender neck as she swallowed, and then forced his gaze back up to meet hers. The woman was beautiful as an angel.

When she explained what had brought her out there, he felt like a jerk. Of course other people didn't share his love of mornings--certainly not one who'd been sitting up with a sick grandmother much of the night.

While he wanted to say more to apologize and offer to help, she seemed to want to get out of his sight as quickly as possible. He stared after her, remembering her lovely face. To think that she'd even blushed when he teased her. He didn't think women still did that nowadays.

"Please tell Maddie that I'm sorry if I woke her," he called after her as she returned across the yard.

She disappeared into Maddie's house before he had a chance to introduce himself, or find out for sure who she was. She hadn't heard him still talking. Or had she chosen to ignore him?

Reaching for the mower handle, he realized how his worn clothes must have appeared to her. He sighed. No wonder she'd run away. Today was definitely going to be a long day, he thought as he shook his head.

"Just minutes ago, God," he said as if God was right there with him, which Peter believed that He was. "I said that now would be a good time to bring a woman into my life. You remember? One I could love. Well, I just wanted to thank you. I never expected action so quickly, and if she's to be the one, I sure can't complain about the selection. Way to go!"

Turning back to grip the handle of the mower, he paused a moment longer. "For the time being," he continued in his conversation with God, "I'll ignore the fact that she didn't seem to want to have anything to do with me, if that's all right with You."

Grinning broadly, he pushed the now-silent mower back toward the rear door of the church. While he stowed the mower, he mentally reviewed his plans for Sunday. He decided that a pastoral visit to Maddie's house tomorrow, whether or not she made it to church, was definitely a good idea.

#

"It's so good to have you visit, dear," Maddie said with a hug and kiss when she came down to breakfast Saturday as if nothing was amiss. Without asking for assistance from Carrie who was making the muffins for their breakfast, Maddie had gotten herself up and dressed.

Carrie, happy that her grandmother had found her way back from being lost in the recesses of her mind, for the time being at least, breathed a sigh of relief. She helped Maddie into her chair at the kitchen table.

"How long can you stay?" Maddie asked cheerfully.

"A few days, Grandma. I took a short leave from my job."

"I wish you could stay longer. You don't seem to spend much time in Sunville since Ralph died."

“No, Grandma, I don’t. I can’t. Sunville is full of unhappy memories for me.” She tried to smile. “But not your house. I come see you each month, but I admit I don’t like going out where I can run into other people who might ask about Ralph.” Her smile disappeared under the burden and sadness of the guilt she’d felt since Ralph’s death. If she’d just been more patient and not taken advantage of the situation to break off their engagement, he might still be alive. “People always seem to ask about how and why he died. I just want the whole matter to be forgotten. I hope you understand.”

“Of course, dear. I’m just so glad you come see me.”

Carrie tried hard to smile again and felt her lips quiver. “Say, Grandma, do you know your crickets are louder than the traffic under my apartment window?” she added lightly, trying to use humor to change the subject.

Maddie smiled and bit into the warm muffin. “This is wonderfully light and moist, Carrie. You’re wasting your talents at that job in Fargo. You should be at home here with kids of your own eating this delicious treat.”

Carrie felt the comment stab painfully into her broken heart, but she shook her head and said nothing. What could she say? She did want a husband and children someday, but not yet. Since Ralph’s death she’d avoided getting involved in another relationship. When she got over her feelings of guilt and loss, she hoped to meet someone special, but she certainly did not want that someone to be here in Sunville. She could never fall for a man who might want her to live here. She’d given up that dream five years ago, but wouldn’t mention that to her grandmother.

Maddie didn’t seem to understand that Carrie looked at Sunville as a place from which to escape while Maddie viewed this dot on the map as the perfect, friendly little town in which she’d lived happily all her life without ever wanting to leave.

“Listen to the noise of those kids washing cars at the church,” Carrie said, feeling her gaze drawn to the window by the cheerful laughing and playful screams as unsuspecting volunteers got soaked with a spray from the hose.

“Are you going to drive over to have yours washed?”

“No, it doesn’t need it,” Carrie responded, knowing that she shouldn’t leave Maddie alone that long.

Carrie caught a glimpse of a familiar black head of hair at the head of the line in the driveway. The man who had been mowing the lawn must have decided to stay and help.

“They sure sound like they’re all having fun,” Maddie concluded.

After breakfast Carrie had just settled Maddie in the living room when the doorbell rang. “I’ll get that, Grandma.” She hadn’t reached the door yet when it opened and Bette Baker, Maddie’s best friend, who lived down the block, walked in.

“Bette, it’s good to see you,” Carrie said as she hugged the woman she’d known all her life. “Don’t you look bright.”

Carrie grinned at Bette’s fuchsia-pink sun hat that covered her white hair. Her long floral-print dress featured pink tulips to coordinate with the hat. The hemline fell almost to the top of her white socks with fuchsia bands around the ribbing. This was one Sunville lady that Carrie would never forget. No one

could.

“Where did you find fuchsia shoe laces for your white sneakers?” Carrie asked with a laugh.

Bette’s wrinkled face pleated into a broad smile. “I get around,” she said proudly. “You look wonderful, Carrie. Working in Fargo must agree with you.”

“I do like it,” Carrie said automatically to be polite as they walked into the living room where Bette greeted Maddie.

As the friends chatted, Carrie found herself listening for a familiar baritone voice in the sounds from the car wash. She only barely resisted the temptation to look out the back window again. The image of the stranger mowing persisted in Carrie’s memory. She tried to forget him. She couldn’t.

“You still working for that publishing company, Carrie?” Bette wanted to know.

“What? Oh, yes.” Carrie nodded. “I’m just finishing a whole series of plays that we’ve been running for several months in the magazine that markets to young adult Sunday school classes.”

“Say, Maddie, isn’t the Reverend using one of those for the youth-fellowship project?”

“What project is that?” Maddie asked as she looked around her chair. “I wonder where my crocheting is.”

“The puppet play the youth group is working on at church, remember?” Bette prompted.

“Can you put some music on, dear?” Maddie asked Carrie, as if she hadn’t heard Bette at all. “I wish I could find my yarn bag.”

Carrie did as Maddie requested. With the strains of a lively Mozart filling the high-ceilinged parlor, Maddie’s thin body relaxed against the tall-backed chair. A smile lifted her pale cheeks.

“Are you warm enough, Grandma? Would you like the throw over your legs?” Carrie pulled Maddie’s crocheting from the big pocket in the side of her chair and handed it to her.

“There’s my crocheting. Thank you, and could you hand me the lap robe? I can feel a draft on my legs.”

Carrie draped the knitted piece over Maddie’s knees and sat down.

Bette shook her head. “Lord love her,” she said quietly to Carrie in a tone too low for Maddie to hear. “There’s nothing to do but make her comfortable, I guess.”

“I think you’re right,” Carrie whispered as tears pricked at her eyes. She tried to replace the sadness she felt with annoyance at herself. I can’t be any good to Grandma if I get tears in my eyes at the drop of a hat.

She sniffled a little and quietly confided about the doctor’s orders to hire a care-giver to live with Maddie.

“You have a lot to do in a little time,” Bette said with an understanding pat on her arm.

“I certainly have a lot to do before this day is over: Grocery shopping, laundry, change the linen on Maddie’s bed. I should get started.”

“Could I help with anything?”

“Oh, would you?” Carrie asked hopefully. “Could I impose on you to stay with Grandma while I run to the grocery store? Everything else I have to do is here in the house so I can do it while Grandma and I are here alone.”

“Sure. You go right ahead. Maddie and I will listen to the music, won’t we?”

Maddie brightened up when Bette leaned over and patted her knee, but then her eyes resumed their vacant stare. Apparently on automatic pilot, her hands worked nonstop on her crocheting. Wherever her mind was, Maddie seemed to be happy there. Carrie felt thankful for that.

“There are muffins left from breakfast, if you’d like one while I’m gone,” Carrie told Bette.

“Well, walking the block over here does work up an appetite,” Bette answered with a smile and a wink that told Carrie there would be at least one less muffin when she got home.

That night, with the second long and emotionally draining day in a row behind her, Carrie collapsed into bed. In the few moments before her tired body relaxed into sleep, her mind served up a picture of the handsome gardener behind the mower again. She turned over restlessly and tried to erase the persistent memory.

Why was his face tormenting her? She prayed often that she would not feel any attraction to a man, not forever, just for a few more years at least. She had to forget what she had done to Ralph first.

She was being silly praying about something like that, though. She figured God had much more important things to tend to. She’d learned that the hard way five years ago. Then she’d prayed for help everyday and got none. Now, contrary to her prayers, she couldn’t forget the workman from that morning.

Yes, God had better things to do than answer her prayers.

#

As she made her bed, Carrie viewed a cloudy Sunday morning through the white-ruffled Priscilla curtains on the bedroom windows. She thought about all the cars that had been cleaned at the church carwash the day before. From the way the leaves on the mountain ash outside her window danced when the rain drops hit them, she could see the cars were all going to be rain-spotted.

Bette stopped in on her way to church after breakfast. Her Sunday costume was much more subdued than Saturday. Her socks and walking shoes were taupe, her dress a navy paisley. Her hat was navy and much smaller than the wide-brimmed affair of yesterday. Her umbrella was even navy to match.

Carrie smiled. “Bette, I’ve got you beat today. My bright print skirt and red jacket with matching red shoes are a brighter combination than what you’re wearing.”

Bette chuckled. “Don’t you love wearing colors? It cheers me up just to see them.”

Carrie nodded.

“I came to take Maddie to church with me,” Bette announced.

“Oh, I’m not sure that’s a good idea. What if she forgets where she is?” Carrie said with a frown.

“I’ll sit on her other side. There won’t be a problem, really,” Bette insisted as she patted Carrie’s arm.

“I know Bette, but…” She stopped as Maddie approached them from the kitchen.

“Oh, good, Bette’s here. Just in time. I’m all ready to leave for church,” Maddie announced alertly.

Carrie didn’t intend to keep anyone away from church who wanted to be there, so she helped Maddie put on poplin raincoat.

“It’s stopped raining for the moment, but I’ll drive us over in case it rains again during the service. The back seat of my car is small, Bette, so you may have to take off your hat for the trip.”

Bette laughed and set the mood for the drive around the block in the small sporty car. With little additional difficulty, the trio walked up the wet church steps to the entrance.

Carrie inhaled the sweet smell of damp vegetation after a summer rain, which in combination with the cut grass, was fresh and welcoming. She tried to focus on Maddie and not on how nervous she was to talk with people who might bring up her part in what had happened when Ralph died.

Because it was a rainy morning, she saw several men and women she knew to be farmers who had taken the morning off in their busy season producing the majority of the durum wheat that the whole country enjoyed in their pasta. The hard wheat was exported around the world, but Carrie had never thought of these farmers as international business people before now.

“Carrie, it’s good to see you,” a farmer’s wife whom she hadn’t seen in years said.

Carrie returned her warm greeting, but couldn’t help feel surprised by it.

“Stop by and see what we’ve done to the old place,” the woman added. “You won’t recognize it.”

“Thanks,” Carrie responded, feeling even more surprised by the invitation. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been in anyone’s home in Sunville but Maddie’s. The woman turned to talk to someone else, and Carrie gently steered Maddie into the sanctuary.

The trio was ushered to a pew Carrie selected near the back. Bette went in first and then Maddie. Carrie took the seat on the center aisle in the event a problem arose and they had to leave.

Ironic, she thought, that she had taken a seat where escape would be easy with her aged grandmother as the parents with the tiny baby on the other side of the aisle had done.

“We can’t bear to leave our new baby in the church nursery just yet,” she heard the young mother explain to someone.

Carrie caught a glimpse of the baby’s serene face peeking out from the soft folds of the pastel blanket. She looked away to tamp down the longing she felt for a child of her own. If only that persistent longing for a child would disappear and leave her heart in peace, but the closer she got to thirty, the stronger it

grew.

Chapter Three

The blue-robed organist captured Carrie's attention as he came in the door behind the pulpit and took his seat at the organ that the church had purchased recently. She didn't recognize him.

He made her realize how long it had been since she'd come to church services here. On her visits, she usually slept late while Maddie went to church with Bette. Then after Sunday dinner, she would drive back home to Fargo.

Carrie looked down to see a broad smile filling Maddie's face. Maddie reached for her hand and squeezed it as if to tell Carrie that everything would work out for the best. Carrie returned her smile and wished she could feel as optimistic.

The organ melody changed and from behind the pews the choir began to sing and march up the center aisle. The congregation stood and joined them in the opening hymn.

Carrie held the psalm book she shared with Maddie and sang while Maddie watched the passing faces. Without looking back over her shoulder toward the aisle, Carrie could hear the sopranos, altos, and then the tenors and basses as they filed past beside her.

After a short break, she heard a strong baritone voice. Carrie assumed it belonged to the new preacher who would be walking in behind the choir.

Wanting to get a look at him up close so she would recognize him in order to put in a good word about the lawn-service man, she looked back over her shoulder at his face.

Two familiar pale-blue eyes looked directly at her. The man's face suddenly sparkled with a broad grin of recognition.

Carrie stopped singing in mid-word and gasped. He was the lawn-care guy! The man behind the lawn mower who had awakened her yesterday morning had been the minister.

Heaven, help me. I scolded the pastor for making too much noise!

Carrie felt light-headed. She quickly looked down at the hymnal, only to have to tighten her grip on the book when it started to slip from her trembling fingers. She closed her eyes and pressed her hand against her churning stomach.

At the end of the hymn, Carrie sat down abruptly and paid close attention to the church service. Never had she seen the sanctuary so full of worshippers. Whatever the new pastor with the penetrating eyes was doing, he seemed to be doing it right.

Even though attentive to Maddie's needs, Carrie found her gaze riveted on the minister. He had a charisma that she could feel all the way to where she sat.

When it came time for the sermon, there was none of the fussing and shifting positions from the congregation that she was familiar with in the Fargo church she had attended while she was a student at NDSU.

During the service, Carrie thought she felt the pastor's gaze return again and again to her. It had to be her imagination. From so far away, she couldn't tell exactly where he was looking.

The staccato of the rain on the tall, frosted-glass windows accompanied the congregation for the closing hymn. As he had done before the service, the pastor followed the choir along the center aisle. Without looking up as they passed, Carrie sang along with the others. She leaned over and adjusted the hymnal for Maddie at the moment she heard the baritone voice approach. Only after the rich voice had passed, did Carrie trust herself to straighten up.

After the service, Maddie became the center of attention. Apparently she hadn't been to church for several weeks. Now as before the service, Carrie was thankful the talk was not about her--or Ralph.

"It must be wonderful having your granddaughter home to take care of you now," a lady friend said. "I was so afraid they'd put you in the nursing home," she added as if it were a terrible fate not worth considering no matter what the circumstances.

Carrie stoically accepted the guilt these comments heaped on her. Unable to escape by any other route, she and her companions joined the others in the flow that led out the front entrance, right past Reverend Newhouse.

A few times he looked up and their gazes locked. Then someone in front of him would say something and the fragile connection was broken when he looked down.

Carrie grew increasingly uncomfortable the closer she got to him. She felt foolish for what had happened yesterday. If she'd only known who he was.

Instead of looking for a place to hide, which crossed her mind, Carrie concentrated on pulling on her coat and helping Maddie and Bette into theirs. There would be no escape for her.

Her gaze went back to the black-robed figure just a few feet ahead of her. With a vigorous handshake from one of the teenagers in line, a shock of his hair fell across his forehead. His hand slid effortlessly through the errant strands, pushing them back before he took the next hand offered him.

Carrie wiped her damp palms on her raincoat. Had she truly wanted to run her fingers through that tousled hair to push it back herself? Please, God, don't let this be happening.

Almost there.

As friendly as the man seemed to be, she could only hope that he would make as little fuss as possible. She would apologize, and she and her companions could go home quickly.

Then he spoke to them and all of Carrie's plans were swept out the main door with the summer breeze that always blew on the prairie.

“Bette, Maddie, how good to see you ladies out on this rainy morning,” he announced, taking a thin, age-spotted hand gently in each of his.

“I wouldn’t miss one of your sermons, my dear boy,” Bette announced.

Carrie’s eyes widened at her referring to this man as a boy. Definitely wrong.

“Peter, I want you to meet Maddie’s granddaughter,” Bette told him along with Carrie’s name. “She’s come to arrange things for Maddie. Carrie, dear, this is Reverend Peter Newhouse.”

He held out his hand to her. Carrie extended hers and watched it disappear into his.

“How do you do?” she managed, feeling heat rise into her cheeks. Her breathing became shallow. Would he say something about her reprimand? How could she apologize when she didn’t even want to bring it up?

“Carrie, is it?”

“Well, my name’s Carolyn, but everyone has called me Carrie since I was little,” she responded, thinking how inane it sounded. She loosened her fingers and pulled on her hand, but he covered it with his other hand and held on to it more firmly. He didn’t seem inclined to allow her an easy escape. Here it comes, she thought.

“Carolyn’s a beautiful name.”

“What? Oh, thank you,” she mumbled, thrown by his sweet comment.

“And you must call me Peter. We don’t stand on much formality here. But you probably know that.” His smile was gorgeous.

Carrie nodded. “Thank you.” Another brilliant statement, she thought wryly. Why couldn’t she think clearly when she was near this man?

Peter glanced at Maddie. “How come you didn’t tell me you had a beautiful granddaughter hiding somewhere, Maddie?” He punctuated his question with a laugh.

Carrie, her cheeks hot with more embarrassment, tugged her hand free from his grip and took Maddie’s elbow to engineer their immediate exit. “Come on, Grandma, we’re holding up the line of people wanting to greet Reverend...”

Peter interrupted her by clearing his throat in a manner that sounded like he was correcting her.

She looked up to see him raise an eyebrow. “Peter, I mean,” she finished, duly noting his grin and matching it with one of her own.

“That’s better,” he said.

Maddie wasn’t about to be moved, however. Apparently energized by all the attention, she asked lucidly, “You’re coming over for dinner today, aren’t you, Peter? We haven’t had you over in such a long time. Please come.”

Stunned by the invitation, Carrie was speechless. She could only hope he couldn't come because she'd be too nervous to eat sitting at the same table with him.

Bette was no help. "Then Peter can get to know Carrie since they haven't met before. That's a wonderful idea, Maddie."

"I must say, I think it is, too," Peter agreed with a grin. He looked at Carrie.

No, don't come, she wanted to say. I don't want to get to know you better because I think I'd like you. I don't want to get to liking any man in Sunville--especially not a minister when God and I are only barely on speaking terms. She pressed her lips between her teeth and held her breath.

"That is, if Carolyn thinks I wouldn't be too much of a bother," he finished politely.

She laughed nervously. He'd startled her by calling her Carolyn. She'd always loved her name, but it never had sounded as beautiful as when he'd said it.

Given no real choice, her good manners rose to the occasion. "No, of course not. Another plate would be no bother."

"Great. I'll cut through the backyards as soon as I'm done here. I know the way," he added, his persistent grin broadening. "And I'll be careful not to get caught on the bushes."

Carrie eyes rolled up and her sense of humor won out. That was all he was going to say about yesterday. Feeling relieved no one else would learn of her faux pas, she couldn't keep from smiling broadly.

"You do that. Whenever you get there for dinner is fine."

Once in the car, Carrie invited Bette to join them for dinner. The more people present, the happier Carrie would feel. Maybe she should have shouted an invitation to everyone on the steps as they left the church. No, the turkey breast roasting in the oven while they were at church wasn't big enough to feed them all, and she knew she would be the last person to get a loaves-and-fishes miracle.

For Maddie's sake, Carrie concentrated on getting the food ready and the table set while Bette talked to Maddie in the living room. The meal was not the company fare that Carrie was used to as a child when the pastor came to Sunday dinner. But why was she fussing about the food now? She wasn't trying to impress the new pastor. Far from it. She would probably never see him again after today.

She tried to ignore the frown that thought brought, and she moved the fresh flowers that she'd picked to the center of the table. She hoped they would add a festive touch.

Rain was falling lightly when Peter knocked at the back door moments later.

"Come on in." Carrie took his wet trench coat to hang in the former pantry off the kitchen that had been converted to a laundry and mud room.

"I don't want to track in any soil I might have picked up crossing the hedgerow," he said as he leaned down to take off his shoes and set them on the boot tray that sat below the coat rack. Instead of feeling awkward or embarrassed, she was struck by how natural and considerate the simple act had been.

“Good thing I wore socks without holes in them this morning,” he joked with his ever-ready smile.

Carrie had to laugh at that. “But wouldn’t holey socks be appropriate on you for Sunday?” she ventured.

Now it was his turn to laugh as he dropped his second shoe.

Carrie didn’t know pastors wore loafers on Sunday. They made Peter seem so... so human. In fact, she’d never thought about a pastor being a handsome young man before either, not before meeting Peter.

Oddly enough, even in a charcoal-grey suit with a dark shirt and white clerical collar, Peter looked comfortable in the big, warm, country-style kitchen. Surprised and for some reason annoyed, Carrie tried to shake off the image he created of being very much at home in Maddie’s house.

Peter glanced around the room. Anticipating his comments, Carrie watched as he looked at the glass-front white cabinets and the white appliances set in the white tile counter. He ran his fingers along the narrow tiles that curved around the edge on the island that contained the range and an eating counter with four stools.

“Here’s a kitchen I wouldn’t mind cooking in,” he said. “So light and inviting. Even the faucets have white porcelain handles. This room looks like it might be original, but something tells me it’s much closer to new.”

Carrie nodded. His discerning comments pleased her somehow. “It’s only about five years old. My folks arranged for it to be renovated just before they were killed in a boating accident in Minnesota. I love the way they made the kitchen look like it fits right into the hundred-year-old house. It’s so bright and cheery, even on rainy days like today. In fact, this kitchen actually makes cooking fun.”

Peter smiled in agreement as he looked back at her. “Is that turkey roasting? It smells heavenly.”

“High praise from a minister, I think, but maybe you’d better wait until you taste it to compliment it. Living alone, I don’t often cook anything that requires roasting, so I’ll warn you, this dinner is a gamble.”

Carrie felt quite amazed at how easy it had been to tease him back. She’d never teased anyone but her sister. She was out of practice and yet it had come so naturally.

She extended her hand toward the hall. “Maddie and Bette are sitting in the living room, Peter. We can walk through this way,” she said, still feeling some discomfort calling a pastor by his first name.

She decided, nevertheless, that feeling uncomfortable using his first name was better than the myriad of other feelings that had skittered through her since she first had seen him pushing the mower yesterday.

“Oh, there you are,” Bette exclaimed when he and Carrie walked through the large arch leading from the foyer. “Maddie, Peter’s come for dinner.”

Maddie looked up at Peter with a welcoming smile. “Oh, that’s lovely. John will be pleased. He’s wanted to have you over for weeks.”

Peter looked at Carrie for an explanation. She felt thankful he seemed to comprehend the little shake of her head that reported that John had passed away long ago.

“I wouldn’t miss a chance for home cooking, Maddie,” Peter declared as he picked up her hand and stroked it lovingly for a few moments.

“I don’t know if you’ll call this home cooking worth looking forward to, but at least I didn’t order a pizza,” Carrie assured him.

“Thank goodness,” he said with mocked relief as he straightened. “The pizza delivery boy and I are good friends just because he’s come to my apartment so often with an order.”

“You poor boy,” Bette said with a laugh.

Carrie found herself laughing too, both at Peter’s joke and at Bette’s insistence on calling him a boy. Funny, she couldn’t remember laughing like this since before... well, not in a long time.

Carrie turned to Maddie. “Dinner’s ready, if you are, Grandma.”

Peter helped Maddie to rise and guided her into the kitchen with his hand firmly supporting her elbow.

“I hope you don’t mind eating in the kitchen,” Carrie told him as they passed her. “There’s a lovely view of the backyard and it’s much homier than the big table in the dining room.”

Carrie glanced at Maddie and looked back at Peter. She had confidence that a man in his position knew the score. “The housekeeper said sometimes there are accidents...” she added softly for his ears only.

Peter nodded in understanding and took a seat at the small round table after the elderly ladies were settled next to each other.

Carrie set the serving dishes on trivets in the center of the table and sat down beside him. She suddenly had second thoughts about eating in the kitchen. It might have been better in the dining room where they wouldn’t have to sit so close together.

Maddie was thinking clearly enough to ask Peter to say the grace. To create a prayer circle, he held his hands out to Maddie and Carrie. The others all clasped hands before Carrie slid hers into his.

Her hand felt cool against his despite the warmth of the summer day. Their gazes locked, and it was she who bowed her head and closed her eyes first.

Help me not to feel this way when I’m near him, Carrie prayed, feeling the warmth of his hand far beyond where they touched.

“We thank you for bringing Carrie back to Sunville,” Peter prayed aloud. “May her visit be a blessing for all of us.” He went on to thank the Lord for their dinner and the fellowship of those gathered there. “Amen.”

“Amen,” the others chorused.

After raising his head and holding Carrie’s gaze for a few moments longer, he squeezed her hand before he released it.

Carrie dropped her hands to her lap and looked at her fork. For a moment, she couldn’t remember

what she was supposed to do with it.

“I understand you live and work in Fargo,” Peter said over his shoulder to Carrie as he picked up a serving dish to hold for Maddie as she helped herself.

Carrie’s head jerked up. What has he heard about me? Nothing, please, make it nothing. She drew in a deep breath and told him briefly about the company and the magazines they produced.

“I know a couple of those magazines. You sound like you like the publishing business,” he said sounding genuinely interested.

She began to relax a little. “Yes, my job keeps me very busy,” she offered. “It’s one of those jobs that if I don’t finish at the office, I bring the work home with me.” In fact, she funneled all her energies into her work, but she didn’t tell him that.

“What do you do exactly?”

Carrie felt uneasy again because she was talking so much about herself. “Well, I’m an assistant to an editor. I do more proof reading than I like, but I do enjoy the copy editing. I also get to write some things once in a while. There was a period a while ago when I didn’t write anything for several years, but now I’m getting back to it and I love that.”

“You’d like to write more?” She nodded. “Must have been hard not to write anything for several years.”

“Yes.” Carrie felt the pain wash over her as if it was fresh from five years ago. “I... I wrote something that was involved in a very painful experience. I’ve wished for years that I hadn’t.” She drew in a deep breath. “It was off-putting to say the least.”

“But if you love writing, it’s good you’re getting back into it.”

“It’s my dream. I just finished several stories for young beginning readers.”

“That’s wonderful, Carrie. When will they be published?” Bette asked.

“I don’t know if they ever will,” she said with a self-conscious laugh. “I sent them to a publisher of childrens’ books just over a month ago. It will probably be months more before I hear from them. Then if they don’t buy them, I’ll keep trying and send them to another company,” Carrie explained. “In the meantime I try to content myself with writing what my boss tells me to and keeping up with the copy editing and proofreading.”

“That takes a special eye. Proofreading is so hard to get right. We could use someone like you to proofread our church newsletter before we send it out each month. A mistake never fails to rear its annoying head in each issue,” Peter said, grinning as he did so often.

Carrie liked his grin. His whole face lit up. Made her feel like smiling, too, even when there wasn’t much in her life to be happy about. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if there was?

“Anyone can look right at a mistake without seeing it. I’m not immune to doing that.”

“I’ll bet you’re very good at your job,” Peter suggested.

“Well, I work hard, but I have a long way to go. I may have to move to Minneapolis or Chicago or even New York next to get experience with a bigger publisher.”

Peter merely nodded, and Carrie was glad he let the subject of her job drop. She’d shared her dream of being an author some day. At least he hadn’t made fun of her writing childrens’ books as her boss had.

“Kids’ books?” her boss had asked when she’d asked advice about what publisher to send them to. “What do you want to write for little kids’ for? Unless you’ve got a gimmick that will create a series, you’ll never get rich.”

She didn’t understand that Carrie wrote the stories because she loved doing it, not to get rich. Money was not that important to her. It was the thought of happy children enjoying reading her stories that made her happy.

As Carrie and the others finished their dinner, she watched Peter draw each one of them into the conversation with an ease born of having done it almost daily for years. In fact, he was so considerate of Maddie and Bette as well as herself, that Carrie decided he related to each of them equally in the same honest and friendly fashion. She could tell he must love his job because he was very good at it. He always seemed to be enjoying it, judging from the amount of time a smile appeared on his lips.

Carrie found her gaze returning to him again and again. She wanted to feel relieved that he didn’t seem to be singling her out for any special attention as they chatted. While under different circumstances of time and place, she might be attracted to him, she didn’t want his attentions on her here.

So then why did she feel somewhat disappointed?

Carrie jerked her gaze down to her calf-length skirt that draped to the floor beside her chair. She was astounded that she felt an interest in him. It had to stop.

This is Peter, Maddie’s pastor, she repeated to herself. He lives in the little town you want to escape. Remember that!

“I’ve got to tell you that turkey with riced potatoes and gravy are high on my list of favorite foods,” Peter said after the last bite.

“I saw the turkey in the grocery store yesterday and couldn’t resist because I don’t get it very often.”

Carrie stood and began clearing the dinner plates. Peter jumped up and reached for the serving dishes to help.

“Thanks,” she said, thinking how modern it was of him to offer his assistance.

She didn’t remember that the men at the Sunville church ever did anything to help at the dinners there. The men sat and talked while the women served dinner and while the women cleared the tables and washed the dishes, too.

Could it be that Peter believed that clearing tables and doing dishes weren’t just women’s work? Pressing the point, she said, “If you want to clear the rest, I’ll get dessert.”

“Happy to,” he responded easily, making more trips from the table to the counter beside the white double sink.

A man in Sunville who liked to help in the kitchen? Maybe she should begin to believe in miracles again.

Chapter Four

Carrie had tried to make dessert a treat for Maddie. She could only hope the others wouldn't think it too childish because she hadn't figured on company when she'd made her selection. She lifted out the raspberry gelatin that Maddie loved from the side-by-side refrigerator and cut the shallow panful into small squares. She scooped the jiggling chunks into sherbet dishes to serve along with packaged cookies.

"I wish I'd had time to bake homemade cookies."

Peter stepped up behind her and reached over her arm to pop one of the red cubes into his mouth.

"It's not very fancy," she said, amazed at how much at ease she felt, working side-by-side with him.

"This is fun to eat and it tastes as good as ever." Without waiting for her response, Peter picked up two desserts and placed them down in front of Maddie and Bette.

"Oh, look Bette. My favorite kind," Maddie said with a smile. "Thank you, dear."

Carrie was delighted she'd remembered correctly. She set down her own dessert while Peter seated himself at his place. She moved to set his dessert on his placemat, but he took the stemmed dish from her with both hands. His hands covered hers and pressed gently as he took possession of the refreshing dessert.

"Thanks." His remarkable smile appeared.

"You're welcome," Carrie mumbled as she slipped her hands free of his. Looking across the table at the smiling elderly faces watching them, she decided Peter's happy facial expression seemed to be contagious.

By the time dessert was finished and they had chatted in the living room for a short while, Maddie's head had bobbed once or twice with sleep. Peter prepared to take his leave and she looked up more alertly. He stooped to place a thank-you kiss on her delicate powdered cheek.

"Thanks for inviting me, Maddie. Dinner was delicious, but you know, now it'll be harder to go back to my own cooking," he remarked with a dramatic teasing sigh.

"You should get married," Maddie told him as if the solution to his dilemma was simple. "Get a wife to do your cooking. Find someone like Carrie who's not spoken for anymore. She'll feed you right."

"Grandma!" Carrie said aghast. Before continuing she tempered her voice while still making her point. "Peter doesn't plan to marry a woman so she can cook his meals for him. And besides, a woman

nowadays wants more out of life than being a cook and bottle washer.”

Peter stepped around Maddie’s chair to stand beside Carrie. His smile was gone, but the merriment was still in his eyes. “Shucks. The way you said that, you sound like you won’t marry me, even if I promised to do my share of the cooking and the dishes,” he said dramatically.

She opened her mouth to respond and noticed that all three faces were looking at her expectantly. “And be stuck here in Tiny-town?” she asked, hoping she sounded just as light. “No way. You don’t know how determined I’ve been to get out. I’ll take the city over this country town any day. Besides, I’m not looking to get married--to you or anyone.”

Thinking that wasn’t exactly true and she didn’t want to fib to a pastor, she amended, “Marriage isn’t in my plans now, I mean. Not yet.”

No one spoke. She glanced around the table to find everyone looking at her. All their smiles had disappeared. Carrie worried that she’d changed the mood in the room by putting him down. “See? Now you don’t have to worry. You’re off the hook,” she added with a little one-shouldered shrug, trying to be funny and lighten the mood again.

“Well, Maddie, I guess she’s going to make me wait,” he said with a conspiratorial wink. “Thanks again for having me to dinner though.”

“We’ll have to have you over more often, now that Carrie’s here to cook. Yes, real soon. John loves having company.”

After Peter said goodbye to Bette, she stayed with Maddie in the living room. Carrie and Peter strolled over to the back door where he slipped into his loafers.

“Maddie said you’re ‘not spoken for anymore?’” Peter asked without warning.

Carrie’s fingers turned cold and she felt the blood leaving her cheeks as she thought about what “anymore” meant. “Ah, no. Ah, I was once engaged to someone, but not any more.”

He nodded, but did not speak. He looked over at her as if he expected her to continue.

“That was a long time ago,” she said, closing the subject.

He pulled on the other shoe. “Maddie thinks of John as being here with her?” he asked.

“Yes,” Carrie responded, happy he’d dropped the subject of her late fiancé. “They were married a lot of years before Grandpa died, and all of them were spent in this house. That’s why I’m trying to find someone who can live here and care for her so she can continue living at home.”

He straightened and looked right at her, his eyebrows pressed toward each other in a frown. “That someone can’t be you? I understood that’s why you were here.”

Carrie shook her head. “I don’t know who you’ve been talking to about me, but you shouldn’t believe everything you hear.”

He interrupted her. “No, I haven’t talked about you with anyone. The church secretary told me Maddie’s granddaughter had come to take care of her now. That’s all.”

“Well, I can’t stay here. Grandma needs a trained care-giver. And I have a job in Fargo I have to get back to,” Carrie answered more sharply than she had intended.

“Right. Your job. And you said how much you like living in the city.”

Something in his voice made her feel more defensive. “I do like living in Fargo. There’s so much going on all the time.”

“Sure. Lots of concerts and plays at the State University, I know. Museums. The art galleries. Yeah, I’ve been meaning to take a day off and take in some of that culture oozing out of Fargo myself,” he said with his good-natured laugh.

It was impossible to stay upset. “Careful what you say about the state now that you live here,” she teased, trying to sound stern, her hands on her hips. “The natives are very sensitive.”

“Okay. Okay. Then I’ll drop in on you there some day. You can show me around all the cultural hot spots.”

She was very glad he was only teasing. She smiled and let the idea of his visit drop without saying more than “Oh, sure.” She couldn’t imagine him ever driving all the way to Fargo just to see her.

Besides, if he asked, she would have to mention that she used to see more of the cultural attractions in Fargo on family trips from Sunville than she had since living there. She found it easier to rent video tapes and have a pizza delivered when she wanted to do something special. She hadn’t dated anyone to speak of since Ralph died, and she hated going out alone at night during the long winters. Besides, when the temperature went for weeks without rising above zero degrees Fahrenheit and sometimes fell more than 35 degrees below zero, it was downright dangerous.

Peter grabbed his trench coat and tossed it over his arm as he crossed to the door. “Thanks, Carolyn, for going along with Maddie’s invitation for dinner. I know you didn’t want to.”

Carrie gasped. She felt mortified. Her cheeks heated. She tried to cover them with her cool fingers. “No, I...”

Peter laughed. “Wait. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded,” he said quickly. He lifted her hands from her cheeks and held them. “I meant you hadn’t planned on having me over. But thank you. If this is the kind of meal you come up with on forty-five minutes notice, I’d love to partake of what you spend hours preparing.” He released her hands with a squeeze as he had at the table after the prayer and stepped back.

“Thank you,” she managed. She felt the heat on her cheeks receding. She wished she didn’t blush so easily.

“Anyway, now that I’ve got my big foot out of my mouth, thanks again for inviting me. Dinner was delicious.” He stepped out the screen door and turned back to her as he closed it quietly. “See you soon.”

She watched as he jogged across the wet grass through the hedgerow and around the church.

His promise that had sounded so much like a threat to her, echoed in her head as she returned to the

living room. “See you soon. See you soon.”

“I’ll be going home, too,” Bette announced after Carrie refused her offer of help with the dishes. “I want to get there before it starts to rain again. I don’t want to get my new walking shoes muddy.”

“Soon as Maddie’s asleep, I’ll be happy to drive you home, if you’d like.”

“No, thanks, I’ll be fine. I have only a short walk. It only feels long when I’m tired. Thanks for the lovely dinner, Carrie. And please remember, if there’s anything you need, I want you to feel free to call me any time.”

“Thanks, Bette. It’s a comfort to have you here to keep an eye on Grandma for me. In fact, there is something you can do for me. I have to leave as soon as I find someone capable to stay with Grandma. You can write me about how things are going after I’ve gone back to Fargo.”

“I understand,” Bette assured her. “I’d be happy to.”

“I wish I could stay longer, but my job may not wait. It’s a small company, and I won’t bore you with the details of the government policy, but they don’t have to hold the position for me if I take a longer leave of absence.”

“In this day and age, no one can afford to walk away from a good job. And don’t you worry. I’ll be happy to tell you all about how Maddie is doing. I wish there was more that I could do for her, but we each do what we can in this life,” she added philosophically as she left.

Instead of making Carrie feel good with her parting statement, Bette added to the heavy guilt that Carrie already felt. She was doing all she could by finding someone qualified to care for Maddie.

“And I’ll do my best to find a care-giver who will be just right for the job,” Carrie vowed as she turned away from the screen door to go check on Maddie.

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“I’m sorry, Ms. Whitmore, but we have only one person who would be available right now to live with your grandmother and there’s a good likelihood that she won’t want to live in the country.”

Carrie sighed. “Another problem with living in a small town.”

“Well, Sunville is thirty-five miles from a city of any size. But that’s not the only reason. While we can provide the live-in kind of help your grandmother needs, it may prove difficult to find someone who wants to live and work in Sunville because the medical support out there isn’t as good. They might not be comfortable with that.”

Carrie felt tears sting her eyes. She had had no idea it would be this hard to find someone to live with Maddie. This was the second agency she’d talked to. “I understand.”

They made an appointment for Wednesday morning, but when she learned the applicant didn’t own a car, she decided the care-giver really needed one. She canceled the appointment.

By the time Carrie had canvassed doctors who specialized in geriatric care, she had a list of three women she could interview. At least she could hope one of them was right. She wasn’t going to waste

time and energy worrying what she would do if that didn't prove to be the case.

By that evening, though, Carrie was in search of some quiet down-time to relieve the stress she couldn't repress. She took a glass of lemonade out to sit on the porch swing after Maddie was in bed. She stretched out her legs and crossed them at her ankles. She bent her lower foot on her heel to give the swing just a little movement. Trying to relax the tension she felt in her neck, she rotated her head in circles.

The air felt hot and more humid than usual, but she was thankful for the perpetual prairie breeze that moved the heat around so it felt cooler. She held her cold glass, already wet with condensation, in both hands on her thigh. She ran her thumb down the side and idly watched the drops fall to darken her tan cotton slacks.

"Come back. Come back, wherever you are."

Carrie jumped at the close deep voice. The lemonade sloshed out of the glass and made an even larger wet area on her slacks. She barely saved the glass from crashing to the wooden floor by catching it against her leg.

"Peter!" Carrie cried, releasing the air she'd gulped. With her hand over her rapidly beating heart, she collapsed back against the swing.

"Would saying that I startled you be an understatement?" he jested. "Hey, I'm sorry." He hurdled over the railing and dropped down beside her on the swing.

"I only jumped a mile."

He dispatched the nearly empty glass to the floor beside the railing where it would come to no harm before he took her hand in his and stroked the back. "I really am sorry. I thought you heard me coming across the lawn."

One look at how seriously concerned he appeared was all she needed. She had to laugh. "It's okay. I wasn't expecting anyone, that's all. I'm all right. Really."

He leaned back, dropping her hand and putting his arm on the back of the swing behind her, not quite touching her. "I'm surprised you didn't hear me coming. But then you've got a lot on your mind. If there's anything I can do to help, I hope you'll call on me."

"Yes. Yes, of course. Thank you," she added politely.

"How's it going? The church secretary said you had called and asked about women in the congregation who might move in with Maddie."

She nodded. "I hoped I might find someone locally who would be interested in the job."

Carrie wished she hadn't looked at him. The errant strands of hair that seemed to prefer falling across his forehead were covering part of one brow. She turned away. She didn't like the way her fingers itched to push it back. She stood up and walked to lean her thighs against the railing, looking out toward the deserted street.

"I wish I could think of someone else to suggest. No luck since then?" He rose and stepped over to

stand beside her.

“I... I have two interviews tomorrow and one on Wednesday.” She moved backwards a couple of little steps and then turned to face the railing again when he stopped advancing. She could think better when she was farther away from him.

“That’s good. One of them will be perfect for Maddie.”

She looked at him, her head cocked to one side, her brow wrinkled with doubt. “Perfect? I sure hope so because I’m not willing to settle for less. But it’ll be tough to take more than a week off from work in case I have to look further.”

“You’ll find someone,” he reiterated confidently, as he flipped his hair back off his forehead with a jerk of his head. The strands in front began to slide back down slowly across his temple.

“I’ll find someone. Simple as that, huh?” She wanted to laugh, but shook her head instead. He probably really believed that solving all her problems would be easy.

“Ya gotta have faith,” he said simply.

“No such luck for me anymore. They were fresh out when I went to the market last week,” she quipped.

He frowned.

“So now I suppose you’ll tell me I can solve everything by praying about it,” she said as she looked away.

“You seem to know the answers. That one’s a given, Carolyn,” he said softly. “Hey, what can I say?” he added with a little shrug. “I’ll put in a good word for you with the Boss.”

Carrie startled herself with a bright laugh. “Thanks. I needed that.”

“But don’t let that stop you from praying yourself. Prayer is a powerful thing. Turn your problems over to God and let him solve them.”

“You make it sound easy. Like I’m supposed to believe He doesn’t have more important things to spend time on than my little life’s problems. He sure hasn’t had time to help me before when I needed it. It’s a waste of time asking any more.”

“I don’t know about what happened before, but I know your problems aren’t little to Him. They’re very important. You’re very important to Him. Give Him a try. So often people make their lives a lot tougher than they have to be.”

“I sure wish mine would get easier about now,” she said to close the subject. “But I don’t think your method would work for me anymore. Thanks for trying to help though,” she added with a smile.

“That’s better. A smile belongs on your face. You’re even more beautiful then.”

Her smile disappeared in a flash. Feeling uncomfortable with his compliments because she didn’t want to encourage any personal relationship between them, Carrie turned away and walked to the door. “Thanks for stopping by, Peter, but you’ll have to excuse me. I have to go in now.”

“Wait.”

Carrie’s hand stilled on the screen handle. Without looking at him, she was aware that Peter was moving toward her. Her hold on the escape handle tightened until her knuckles were white.

“You forgot this.” He held out her glass where she could see it.

Releasing the breath she’d been holding, she reached an unsteady hand to take the sticky glass. “Oh, thanks.”

Instead of surrendering it, he held on and circled her hand with his other one. Her gaze rose instantly to his.

“Tell me something?” he asked questioningly, his gaze locked on hers, denying her the chance to look away.

This is Peter. He’s not a man, he’s just Maddie’s pastor, she told herself. She nodded to him with one quick dip of her head.

“I have no information other than you were once engaged, but you must have been hurt badly. I’d be happy to help if you want someone to talk it through in order to get past it.”

As if talking would help, she thought. The only thing that would help would be to go back five years and handle the situation very differently. Since that was impossible, she just wanted to forget. “Thanks.”

He looked at her several moments, still holding her gaze. “Or is the reluctance I see in you because of something I’ve done, or said? I’m getting the feeling you don’t want to be around me tonight.”

Unable to face his intense gaze, her eyes closed. Her head shook side to side, and she looked down at the glass.

“Whatever you’re avoiding each time you change the subject and I see a shutter close over your eyes, it’s not me in particular?”

Tears stung her eyes. She shook her head and looked out into the night. “I just don’t like being in Sunville, so I... I don’t allow myself to ah... make any ah... attachments that would make leaving difficult for me.”

“But I’m your grandmother’s pastor. There’s no reason we couldn’t be friends, is there?” he asked.

She dared to look back at him. “I guess not, if I can think of you that way,” she managed in a whisper. “I... I’m sorry. I just have a lot on my mind now.”

His warm grin filled his face. “That’s okay. I understand. At least you’re not still angry with me for waking you up Saturday morning.”

She shook her head. “No, not at all. I don’t carry grudges. My area of expertise is carrying guilt for a very long time,” she tried to jest with a comment closer to the truth than she should have uttered.

“So you’re not upset because I asked about your former fiancé?”

She inhaled sharply and then shook her head. "That was years ago and he... he died. End of story." Carrie held his gaze and watched as his face reflected his indecision.

"Well, I'm happy I haven't been the cause of any more upset for you."

She exhaled the breath she'd been holding when she realized he wouldn't ask her any more questions.

He squeezed her hand around the glass and then dropped his arms to his sides. "Well, good night, friend," he said softly before he stepped back and jumped over the railing behind the swing and jogged toward the backyard.

Carrie turned and leaned against the wall beside the door. Her heart was beating rapidly. She was so relieved that he hadn't asked about Ralph. She didn't think she could ever tell Peter what she'd done. Slowly her heart quieted and she became aware of the summer evening.

The crickets were making a racket, and the clean smell of freshly mowed grass sweetened the air. Waving away the pesky mosquito that threatened her forehead, she listened until she heard Peter's car pulling out of the church parking lot.

The odd thought flashed into her mind that the preacher got Mondays off because he had to work on Sundays. What had he been doing at the church on a Monday night?

Maybe extra work had piled up in his office. She would rather think the work had brought him than to believe he'd come just to see her. While she couldn't deny an attraction she felt toward him, he was the wrong man, the wrong place, and the wrong time for her.

That would never change because she was absolutely the wrong woman for him.

Chapter Five

"Thank you for coming."

Carrie had to admit to herself as she left that the first woman did more to interview Carrie than Carrie did of her. When it was over, she'd decided neither of them felt comfortable with the other. She hoped she had better success with the other two.

If not? Well, for now, she would try to think positively and believe that it would work out like Peter said it would. For a few moments she thought how wonderful it would be to have that strong a faith again. She missed a closer relationship with a church--with God. She sighed and went back to chores until the second appointment.

That applicant, Joyce Barret, came right on time. Carrie watched her walk up the sidewalk and cross the

porch. Armed with a ready smile, she returned Carrie's greetings.

"Come in. I've just been going over your references from the agency. They're excellent."

"My last patient had broken her hip and recovered to the point that she didn't need my care anymore. I love it when the patient gets well even if it means I'm unemployed again." She chuckled. "When the agency said you had a position available in Sunville, I thought it might be a nice change from living in the city most of my life."

Carrie felt a spark of excitement. Could Joyce be the one? "If you like quiet living, you'll love it here. We'll start with a tour of the house and that way, if you have any questions, you can ask them."

"This is a lovely house, but so big. So much fancy woodwork to dust."

Carrie frowned. "And I'm afraid during the summers dust is a problem, especially at harvest time. When they combine the durum fields around town, you'll know it."

"Then you get the little triangle piles of dust at the corners of your windows on the sills. Yeah. We got those where we lived before my husband passed away."

Carrie nodded. "The rest of the year you'll find it's actually easier to keep the house clean here. Even less air pollution to dirty windows. But cleaning would be your responsibility." She took a deep breath. "Do you think you could handle that?"

"Never could abide a dirty house. Messy is one thing, but dirty is another. When my Harry was alive, he might have left his papers on the table so it didn't look right orderly, but the table was dusted, sure enough, before he dropped 'em there. We were married twenty-seven years when he died," she added proudly.

"You don't have any family now that is depending on you to be somewhere else?"

"I've got a daughter and a son with families of their own in Dickinson. They live nice and close so they can see each other often. It's not too bad a drive, and I go visit regularly."

"If you take this position, I'm sure that could be worked out. If the agency can't provide someone for your vacation time off, I think I could come if I had enough notice to arrange taking vacation time from work."

They walked in and out of each of the other bedrooms, the bathroom, and then they stepped into Maddie's bedroom. She was lying in bed, idly threading her fingers in and out of her favorite shawl that she'd crocheted years before. A Straus waltz was playing quietly and Maddie looked content.

"Grandma? I have someone to meet you." Carrie walked over to the bed, took Maddie's hand, and sat at her side. "Grandma, this is Joyce Barret. She's come to visit us for a little while. Joyce, this is my grandmother, Madeleine Whitmore. Her friends call her Maddie."

A broad smile filled Joyce's face as she leaned over to give Maddie's arm a gentle pat or two. "It's lovely to meet you. May I call you Maddie?"

Maddie smiled.

“You wouldn’t mind? Good. I think I would be quite lucky to be included in the group known as your friends.”

“Is that you, Harriet?” Maddie asked with a puzzled expression on her face.

“No, dear. My name’s Joyce. How are you feeling today?”

“All right, I suppose. I was too tired to get up this morning though. I’m old, you know.”

“Well, you deserve to have a lovely lazy morning, Maddie. It does us all good to have a lazy day once in a while. Maybe you’ll feel up to coming downstairs later today.”

“Yes, a lazy day.” Maddie lay her head back against the pillow and looked out the window beyond the bed.

Carrie lifted the shawl to cover her arms. “I’ll look in on you later. If there’s anything you need, just call me, Grandma. I’ll hear you and come a runnin’.”

After kissing her papery cheek, Carrie rose to join Joyce who was already out in the hall. Leaving the door open behind her so she could hear Maddie if she did call, Carrie led the way downstairs.

“Your grandmother’s a lovely woman. It makes you heart-sick to see a mind going sooner than the body.”

Carrie wanted to hide the tears that suddenly filled her eyes. “Come on into the kitchen,” she suggested as she turned away and tried to recompose herself. “There’s everything here that you could need. The laundry room’s through there. There’s a laundry chute from the bathroom upstairs, so you wouldn’t have to carry the clothes down the stairs.”

“Everything looks just wonderful. You’ve worked a modern kitchen into this old house so nicely.”

“Thanks, but that was my parent’s work, not mine.”

“They live here in town?”

Carrie explained that her parents had passed away several years before. Joyce seemed to digest that information as she examined the laundry room.

When she’d looked over the back yard, she turned back to Carrie. “I wouldn’t have to mow that big lawn, would I?”

A fleeting image of the dark-haired man pushing the mower Saturday morning floated through Carrie’s memory. “No, a service does that along with trimming the bushes. Oh, and they shovel the snow, too, when the time comes.”

“That’ll be nice not to have to clear the walk.”

“The service sends a bill to me once a month. You won’t have to pay for anything. And I’ve set up a charge account at the grocery store for food as well as at the pharmacy for the medicine Grandma takes. You’ll only be responsible for your own personal purchases.”

Joyce nodded.

“Do you think you could handle everything? I mean, I know you’ve had training in how to tend to Maddie, but what about the house. That wouldn’t be any problem?”

“It would sure mean a lot of stairs. How does Maddie do it? You haven’t got a chair-lift for her.”

“Some days she doesn’t come down. I’ve been worried about that,” Carrie admitted. “Her meals can be brought up to her, but she’s a prisoner in her own bedroom when the stairs are too much for her.”

Joyce walked through the kitchen, past the eating area in the bay window where the round table sat, and on into the dining room. “How about in here?”

“How about what?”

“Why not bring her things down and set up her bedroom in here? You could take out the leaves and set the dining table in the corner of the living room. A little dresser from one of the spare bedrooms with a few of her things could fit right there beyond the china cabinet. I could bring down whatever else she needed each morning. That way I wouldn’t be running up and down. But best of all Maddie could move about to the living room and the kitchen.”

Carrie stood by the long table and turned a full circle, picturing the room as a bedroom. Looking back at Joyce, she smiled as she spoke. “I never thought of trying to move her down here, but that would be perfect. There’s a full bathroom off the hall just a few steps away. She would have all the windows to see out and yet the drapes would give her privacy when she needs it.”

“And she wouldn’t have to go far to get some fresh air because it’s just a few steps to sit outside.”

“Oh, and she wouldn’t have just the tops of trees to look at,” Carrie added with a smile.

“It would all be much easier and a whole lot less expensive than putting in one of those elevator-chairs. We could put in an intercom so I can hear her easily when I’m upstairs at night. They’re not too expensive.”

“Great! I’ll get started right away on setting it up. I’m very glad you thought of it, Joyce. That tells me you can anticipate problems and work out solutions. That’s high on my list of requirements for the person who takes care of Maddie. In fact, I want to offer you the job, if you’d like it.”

“Well, yes,” she decided quickly. “I think I’d like that.”

“Wonderful. You can start today or anytime this week, but I hope no later than Saturday. I should leave Sunday afternoon at the latest so I can get back to work on Monday.” Carrie found herself instantly deciding that she wouldn’t leave until after church.

“Oh, dear. I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

The smile flew from Carrie’s face. “What? But... but...”

“I’m going to stay with my children starting this Friday. I told the service I couldn’t start for another week. Seeing as I’d be starting a new job that was long-term, I really don’t want to pass up the chance to see my family now before I begin. My grandkids are growing so fast.”

Carrie chewed on her lower lip wondering what she would tell her boss. Joyce was too good to lose. "I'll have to work out something then."

"Good." Joyce held out her thick hand and Carrie shook it, sealing their deal.

Within an hour of Joyce's departure, Carrie had completed all the arrangements with the agency for her to come to work and live at Maddie's house.

Without any feeling of regret, Carrie canceled the third interview appointment. Joyce was a highly-recommended caring and capable person, and she didn't need to interview others to know Joyce's care was exactly what she wanted for Maddie.

By the end of the day, Carrie also had arranged to exercise her power of attorney. Maddie had signed it over to Carrie after her parents died and could no longer act on Maddie's behalf.

"You never know when it might come in handy," Maddie had said back then, displaying a degree of trust in Carrie that had flattered and pleased her.

Carrie needed it now to access money to pay Maddie's bills. In arranging to do so, she discovered another advantage to living in a small town. Maddie's attorney quickly paved the way for Carrie at the bank so she was able to facilitate using Maddie's checking account.

"All the statements will be sent to your apartment address in Fargo," the bank officer said as Carrie signed the signature card that would add her name to the account.

Her next chore was the biggest--find someone to care for Maddie until Joyce could move in. But she could think of no one. There just wasn't anyone else who could help her. She would have to do it herself.

Carrie dialed her boss' number, and dreading what she would hear in answer to her request, she clutched the phone with both hands to lift it to her ear.

"This is the end, the last time off I can give you, Carrie," Carrie's boss said after listening to her request for another week off from work. "We have to get out the seasonal materials this month. I need you here at your desk. In this business you work during the busy times and take vacations at slack times."

"This is hardly a vacation," Carrie interjected.

"I know. I know, but if you can't be back by Monday, I can't guarantee your job will be here when you do get back."

"But I can't just leave my grandmother here alone and there's no one to stay with her."

"I'm sorry, but you've got to understand my position. This company is so small that the loss of one person can really hurt. I'd hate to lose you permanently, but I've got a business to run. And frankly, you know there are several other people anxious to move up to fill your job."

Carrie did know, but she didn't have to like it. She ended the call feeling upset. She was near her limit and couldn't bear thinking that anything else could go wrong. Feeling very much alone, she closed her eyes for a moment and tried to calm her breathing.

Standing here wishing things would work out well, won't help any. I've got no one to depend on but myself. So quit moping and get to work, she ordered herself. Taking a deep breath, she checked her "To Do" list for the next item and then reached for the phone to dial another number.

"Bette, it's Carrie."

"Good to hear from you. How is Maddie doing?"

"She's fine, thanks. Bette, I need some help--some big-muscle help to move furniture. Do you know any strong teenagers in the neighborhood who could do it for me?"

Bette insisted on hearing about what she had planned. Before she knew it, Carrie had explained the whole switch of Maddie's bedroom to the dining room. "I've located a hospital-style bed I can rent. It can be cranked up and down instead of relying on stacks of pillows. That will be more convenient for Joyce."

"Joyce? Who's Joyce, dear?"

Carrie told her all about Joyce and then got back to moving the furniture. "The company can deliver the bed Thursday afternoon so I want to get the other things moved by then."

"Well, as for strong teenagers, there are several that go to the church, but I only know one nearby. His name is Marc Anderson. He lives about half way between your house and mine. He probably has other friends who could help," Bette offered.

"Sounds promising. I'll give him a ring."

"You could always call Peter at church. He's nice and strong. Handsome, too. He'd be happy to help you." Bette chuckled. "Offer him another home-cooked meal, and I do believe that he'd move your furniture in a minute."

Carrie thanked her politely for her suggestions, but there was no way she was going to invite that man to come back over to Maddie's house. She was still working hard to forget him. The farther away from him she stayed, the better, she thought as she ended the call.

Marc was at home and Carrie explained her situation. "The dining room table is heavy oak. Ideally, I'd like about four strong guys to lift it so we don't take a chance of nicking anything. The dresser I want moved is upstairs. I don't think it's lightweight either. Have you got some strong friends who might help?"

"I'm getting together with some friends tonight from six-thirty to eight. If eight wouldn't be too late, I can bring some of them by then."

"As long as they're strong, that would be wonderful."

Her step decidedly lighter after the call, Carrie bounded up the stairs to tell Maddie all the news. She wasn't quite sure that Maddie understood what was to happen, but when Carrie told her she could sit on the porch for a time tomorrow without having to worry about going back up stairs in the evening, her tired face brightened.

After lunch was cleared up, Carrie decided to make some lemon-flavored sugar cookies. She thought the teenagers might like them, though she would pay the young people for their trouble, of course.

Maddie enjoyed the cookies for dessert that evening. Talking over their tea in Maddie's bedroom, she seemed surprised to hear about Carrie's plans to move her downstairs.

"Like I told you this morning, Grandma," Carrie began and then chided herself for doing so. Maddie didn't arbitrarily choose not to remember, after all. "We're going to set up your bedroom downstairs in the dining room so you can get around more easily. Good thing Dad had a full bathroom put in downstairs. You'll have everything you need without having to go up and down the stairs. If you need something from up here, Joyce can get it for you."

"Who's Joyce, dear?"

Carrie sighed. Maddie truly had no idea at all who Joyce was. Although Carrie had told her all about Joyce coming to work for her, she repeated her explanation.

"Wouldn't it just be easier if you stayed with me?"

Thrown by that question, Carrie recovered enough to say, "Joyce is specially trained to know what to do to take care of you if you get sick. She's licensed to take care of people who need special help sometimes like you, Grandma. But I'll come visit often, so don't you worry."

"It would be nice to have you here. You don't have to stay away, dear. I know what happened to Ralph was not your fault. You shouldn't let his death keep you from coming home more often." Maddie patted her hand as if she were a child.

"Thanks, Grandma." She looked out the window, but the scene she saw was of five years ago. "It was a very bad time in my life and I don't like thinking about it. So many things in Sunville remind me of that year when all I want to do is forget. Each year fewer people mention it to me, but I haven't managed to forget."

Carrie drew in a deep breath and looked back down at Maddie. She was ready for sleep. Selecting some quiet string music tapes to play on the stereo system, Carrie adjusted the volume to low and took the dirty dishes downstairs.

She'd washed the pots and pans and put them away by the time she heard laughing voices coming from the behind the hedgerow. Must be a noisy group leaving the church, she thought at first, but the voices seemed to be moving closer.

At the knocks on the back screen door, she turned on the light that more clearly illuminated a group of young people gathered on the back stoop. Her eyes flitted over the smiling youthful faces to rest on the taller head behind them. Peter.

"Ah, hi. I'm Marc. You called me today about moving furniture?"

Carrie's gaze was pulled back to the blond teenager built like a football player who stood right by the screen door. "Yes, of course," she managed.

She opened the screen and six young people, including two girls, crowded in past her. Peter came in last, allowing the screen to close behind him so that he stood right next to her. He proceeded to introduce everyone, but Carrie wasn't sure she would remember more than a name or two.

“We were rehearsing the puppet show at the church when Marc told us you needed some heavy muscle power,” a tall slender boy told her. “So here we are.” The other kids laughed because the boy who had spoken was not rich in the muscle department. Carrie smiled. “Okay, so we were glad for the chance to quit. The rehearsal stunk,” the boy admitted.

One of the girls punched his arm lightly with her fist. “That’s because you couldn’t remember your lines, Dummy.”

“Okay, okay.” Peter interjected. “Let’s not scare Carolyn. I think she’s hoping you’re a well-mannered group.”

All the faces turned to her expectantly. She smiled. “Don’t worry. I’m not ready to kick you out, but I am sorry to hear about the rehearsal. What play are you doing?”

Marc told her about the play they had selected from a magazine.

“Hey, dude, she knows all about it. Like it’s her magazine,” a third boy told him.

Carrie smiled warily, wondering how he knew that. “Not mine, but I do work for the publishing company.” At least I hope I still do, she added silently.

She didn’t want to look over at Peter, but she wondered if he’d told them where she worked. Or was she the subject of the small-town gossip that even these kids had picked up on? She knotted her hands together at her flip-flopping stomach. She wasn’t happy with either prospect.

“Hey, maybe she could help us with the show,” Marc said, looking around at his friends for their reaction. “We could use someone else to tell us what to do to make the show better.”

“Far out,” a young man who’d been silent to that point added. “Peter’s great and everything, but he thinks whatever we do is good. And it’s not. We really s...”

Marc’s hand quickly covered the boy’s mouth to prevent him from saying more. “Wayne’s new to our group and he forgets himself. He was about to say that we really could use your help.”

Carrie glanced at Peter. He was fighting a smile. She felt no such compunction and allowed one to spread across her face. “Maybe for as long as I’ll be in town anyway. As of today, that looks like it will be another week.”

Peter’s smile broke loose at the same time as his brow wrinkled with his unspoken query. There would be time later for Carrie to tell him what was going on with Maddie. It would be good to have him aware of the arrangements because he was so close at hand in case something happened. That was why she looked forward to talking to him again, wasn’t it?

Carrie led the way through to the dining room. “This is the table I need moved,” she said, and then explained the rest of her plans for the downstairs bedroom.

“No problem,” they chorused.

With Carrie’s direction, the young men did an excellent job of moving it without a scratch. Peter and two of the boys hefted the smaller dresser from one of the other bedrooms without disturbing Maddie.

“Will ya look at that bedspread and cover on the canopy,” one of the girls whose name was Susan said when she saw the old-fashioned bed in one of the bedrooms.

“My grandmother crocheted those,” Carrie told her proudly. “She made the spread that’s under the crocheted cover, too.”

The girl ran her hand over the lacy hand work. “This is beautiful.”

“Took her a long time to make. It was part of her hope chest.”

“What’s a hope chest?” a young man asked.

“Well,” Carrie said hesitantly, glancing back at Peter who’d just reentered the room. “It’s a chest that young women used to get before they were married. They would make things for their future homes and store them in the Hope Chest until they were married.”

One of the boys elbowed Susan. “No sense you getting a hope chest, squirt. You’ve got no hope!” He laughed with the other boys.

“Shhh! You’ll wake Mrs. Whitmore,” Peter said in a loud whisper. “Let’s get the rest of this downstairs.”

The youths each carried a drawer down the stairs with no more conversation. When the drawers were all returned to their rightful spots, they surveyed the results.

“The bed will go there and this should work wonderfully,” Carrie told them. “Thank you all so much. I’ve made some cookies and lemonade. Would you like to go on into the living room while I get the tray? You can enjoy them while I write the check to pay you for your trouble.”

Peter let the kids take the lead into the front room. She headed in the opposite direction to the kitchen. When he spoke close behind her, she was startled. “Need some help carrying anything? I’ll be happy to play waiter.”

Her back stiffened as she resisted feeling his voice flow over her like a hot fudge on ice cream. This was Peter, her grandmother’s pastor. There was no reason to react this way to just the sound of his voice, she told herself.

“Thanks.” She put the large pitcher of lemonade on the tray she had ready with the plate of cookies. “You can carry this in if you like. Just let me add a couple glasses. I wasn’t expecting so many helpers.”

“Say. My secretary told me you found someone to stay with Maddie.”

“How did she know? I just hired her yesterday. No, don’t tell me,” she ordered, shaking her head. “I don’t want to even think about how much people in this town talk about me,” she added sharply. “But now you see why I’m glad I got out of this town.”

Chapter Six

“Carolyn, I can’t believe anyone in this town would want to talk about you in any way you’d need to be concerned about,” Peter said softly after her uncharacteristic outburst.

Carrie ignored his comment and puzzled expression. She didn’t want to discuss the rumors about her, and she didn’t want to be here alone in the kitchen with him any longer than she had to be. “There,” she said as she put the last glass on the tray. “That’s enough glasses now.”

Thinking about the tragedy again had made her angry--an easier emotion to deal with than the complicated ones she’d been feeling lately since she met Peter. She marched around him through Maddie’s new bedroom-to-be and into the living room.

The kids had made themselves comfortable, leaving the couch vacant for her and Peter. She sat on the edge of the cushion at one end and turned her thighs toward the center. Peter sat beside her, put the tray down on the coffee table, and reached for the pitcher.

Susan who appeared to be the younger of the two girls, jumped up. “I’ll help,” she said. She passed out the glasses of lemonade after Peter poured each one.

“Hey, did you really mean it, about helping us with this play thing?” Marc asked.

Carrie concentrated on relaxing her tense muscles. She leaned back a little on the arm at the end of the couch. “Sure. Tell me what the problem is.”

The kids obliged her with more details about the puppet show than she probably needed to know. The basic problem was that different kids showed up for each rehearsal. There was no continuity.

“When’s your next rehearsal?” Carrie asked of Marc, careful not to direct her comments to Peter at all.

“Tomorrow night at six-thirty again. Then we skip until Saturday morning,” Susan announced eagerly.

“Well, the time wouldn’t be a problem, but rehearsing at the church would be. Until the care-giver I’ve hired moves in next week, I have to stay here with my grandmother.”

There were multiple groans that appeared to be their universal reaction to disappointing news.

“Whoa. What about Mrs. Baker?” Marc asked. “She’s the lady who gave you my name for the furniture moving. My mom says she’s a good friend of your grandmother. I know she’s old, but couldn’t she stay with her for an hour and a half?”

“That would be all right with me,” Carrie responded. “I’ll call and ask her. Maybe she wouldn’t mind a couple of times.”

“That would be great,” Marc told her. The other kids agreed in general statements of their approval.

“Shh! Keep it at a lower decibel. Mrs. Whitmore is asleep upstairs,” Peter reminded them.

“Probably not any more,” one of them offered and was rewarded by general laughter and a few feigned punches.

“Time you all got home anyway. We’re past our eight-thirty cut-off time and I don’t want your parents to worry.” Peter urged them to bring their glasses to the kitchen, and he carried in the tray with the empty pitcher and plate. Not a cookie remained.

“I can’t thank you all enough for moving the furniture,” Carrie called out as they headed for the back door. “I want to pay you for all your work.”

“Hey, like between the great cookies and the help with the play, I’d say she’s paid us enough,” Marc concluded. “You guys agree?”

Carrie didn’t give the others a chance to reply. “Well, I think you could add this to your car wash proceeds,” she said as she wrote out a check and handed it to Marc.

There were thank yous and good nights all around. Everyone, including Peter, filed out the back door. “See you at rehearsal,” a couple of them called.

They seemed genuinely pleased with the prospect of getting Carrie’s help with their play and that, oddly, pleased her. She felt good about having made a donation to their puppet stage fund, too. Actually, having kids in the big, old house had been fun. A place this size would make a wonderful home for a family with a lot of kids.

During high school in Sunville, Carrie had often fantasied that this house would be her own home some day. That was before she started going steady with Ralph. The daydreams she used to have even included children in each of the many bedrooms.

Wanting to erase those images, both of Ralph and of living here with a family of her own, Carrie ran upstairs to see that Maddie was still asleep. She turned off the continuous-play tape deck and switched the light so that only the base was illuminated as a night light.

Returning to the kitchen, she was done cleaning up and about ready to switch off the light when she heard a soft knock at the back door. She knew before she looked that Peter had come back.

Wordlessly, she walked over to unhook the screen. She tried to ignore the fluttery feeling in the pit of her stomach, but couldn’t. He stepped in to stand too close.

She stepped back around a few steps to the counter and didn’t look back at him. “Did you forget something?”

“Might say that,” Peter allowed. “Ah... I came back to personally thank you for what you’re doing for the kids and their puppet show.”

“It’s the least I could do. They helped me out a lot. If you all hadn’t come over, I would have had to hire a moving company. Thank you for your part.”

“You’re welcome.”

She hadn’t heard him move. Suddenly he was so close behind her that she could feel the warmth emanating from his body. When he placed his hand on her shoulder and turned her toward him, she

stiffened. Her long skirt fluttered in waves against her legs as she turned and then again as gravity straightened it. She couldn't remember being aware of it brushing across her skin like that before.

She didn't want to look up at him because all sorts of crazy ideas were swimming around in her head. Her hands were tightly clasped together at her waist. "Please," she pleaded and wasn't sure if with him or with herself. She closed her eyes and tipped her head away.

"Can't bear to look at me?" he asked softly. She could hear his smile in his voice.

Carrie didn't want to smile back. She didn't want to grant him even that small reaction that might encourage him, but a finger on her chin for a few seconds turned it back.

"It isn't that," she whispered, turning her head away again. He left it there and dropped his hand. She squeezed her eyes more tightly, wishing he'd go.

"Go ahead and keep your eyes closed. That could be good," he responded just as softly. "Yeah. Not needing to see me is good because that... that must mean you trust me... I think that's what it means anyway. I hope it does."

Carrie listened to his warm chuckle. This was getting silly. She opened her eyes and looked up into his intense blue ones inches away.

"Are you wishing I'd disappeared while your eyes were shut?"

How had he known? Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. She could hear the rustle of his shirt and knew his arm was moving, but she wasn't prepared when he raised his hand high enough to gently cradle the side of her jaw. He stroked her cheek with his thumb.

Carrie's brow wrinkled and she bit down on her lower lip. Her movement caused her cheek to press against his palm. She gasped. His hand felt so warm.

She repeated her litany. This is Peter, Maddie's pastor. There's no reason to react this way to him, she added, hoping it would work.

"You make me worry you're trying to hide from something, or running from something. You said at dinner here that you had written something once that resulted in a great deal of pain for you. Is that it? Is it anything I can help you with, Carolyn?" he whispered.

Carolyn. She had always loved the name, but no one but Peter ever used it. He'd used the name she loved, and he was digging too deeply into what hurt her the most. He had to be stopped. "No, I... It's nothing you need to be worried about."

His breaths were brief, warm puffs on her face. He was so close. She struggled to get air into her lungs, but that only meant she inhaled his scent that she knew she would never forget.

A warm smile lit his face. His hand still caressed her cheek. She swallowed hard. This is only Peter, Maddie's pastor. He's just being nice, she told herself.

Peter looked down at her mouth and she panicked. She felt the blood drain from her face as fast as her determination was flying out the window. Was he going to kiss her? She would never have the strength to stop him.

Heavens! She didn't want to stop him!

The mere thought of him kissing her lips made her feel light-headed. She looked at his mouth and then back at his eyes. This is crazy!

"You're certain there's nothing I can do?" Peter asked.

She tried to shake her head, but the movement made her cheek rub against the palm of his warm hand. She stopped. "Yes, I... I..." she stammered. "There's nothing."

He seemed to study the look on her face a few moments longer before he slid his hand along her jaw until his finger tips were beneath her chin. "Let me know if you change your mind," he said simply. His hand fell to his side as she watched him step back from her. He was truly moving away. He was not going to kiss her.

Carrie released the breath she'd been holding and inhaled another, deeply. All she could smell now was the fragrance of the cookies she'd baked. Funny, her relief somehow felt a lot like disappointment.

"We'll have more chances to talk," he added, reinforcing his offer of aide.

"I... I don't know. I'll only be here a short time until I leave to go home."

He frowned and then his face brightened. "We'll have more chances to talk," he reasserted confidently. "Good night, Carolyn."

In the face of such determination, Carrie couldn't speak. Unable to even wish him a good night, she watched him walk out the door and into the darkness beyond the circle of backyard light.

Somehow in the next few minutes, she checked all the door locks on the house and climbed up the stairs to her room. Originally intending to read in bed for a while, she abandoned the idea and climbed between the sheets to curl up on her side.

Peter had only caressed her face and yet he had left such a wonderful feeling. Why did he have to be the one to do that? Why here in Sunville? Why couldn't she find someone to care for in Fargo? Or, better yet, Minneapolis?

What was she doing wrong? Why couldn't her life move smoothly in the direction she wanted it to? Why couldn't her past be exactly that--her past and not her present?

#

"Those roses on the trellis next door are so beautiful. I've always loved roses," Maddie said from her new bed that the rental company had installed.

Carrie agreed, doubly glad to have moved Maddie's bed down to where she could see outdoors. "Bette's here to visit, Grandma. Would you like to sit outside on the porch?"

Maddie's face beamed with a broad smile. She always appeared happy to have Bette come to visit, and now it meant Carrie was free to spend the time helping the teenagers at church. She was looking forward to it.

“You go on to church and don’t worry a minute about us,” Bette told her once they were settled.

The two ladies sat in the wooden tall-backed chairs, looking very much like the grand old dames they were, despite Bette’s socks trimmed in lime green to match the scarf she’d tied on as a band for her white straw sun hat.

“You’re sure you’ll be okay out here while I’m gone?” Carrie asked as she handed the two women their glasses of lemonade.

“We’ll be just fine,” Bette assured her.

“I’ll just be an hour and a half or so, like I was Thursday evening. If you need me, I’ll be next door. Grandma, now that your bed’s down here, you can go in and lie down if you get tired before I get home.”

“Go on. Scoot,” Bette insisted when Maddie didn’t respond. “We’ll be fine.”

Carrie kissed Maddie’s corrugated brow and took off at a run across the lawn to the church.

The puppet stage was set up downstairs in the social hall, a large tiled room where the church suppers and special programs were held. The kids had mentioned that the Sunday School classes and the daycare that sometimes used the room weekdays would also benefit from being able to use the stage. The young people had done a good job in its construction, making a stage that was sturdy and yet portable.

Peter unfolded two metal chairs for Carrie and himself during the delay as they waited for the last of the cast members to arrive. After a false start that ended in a sea of giggles, the show finally began in earnest.

Rehearsal was rough, but Carrie urged the cast members to work on switching rolls. “Then when key players don’t show up for one reason or another, the show can go on with the understudies,” she explained.

“I ain’t playing no girl,” the new boy stated firmly.

Marc sidled up to him with his hips waving as he walked. “Why not?” he asked, his voice raised in the falsetto he had just practiced playing the girl the last time through. “Too much of a challenge for ya?”

The boy glared at him a few moments, then accepted the challenge and grabbed the puppet from Marc. “Nothing’s too much for me. After you,” he said in a high strained voice.

“Ladies first,” Marc joked.

The boy tugged at the skirt on his puppet’s costume and fluffed it’s hair. “If you insist.” He led the way backstage amidst a chorus of laughs.

Carrie sincerely hoped he would never be forced into playing a female voice again. She wasn’t sure his vocal chords could take the exertion.

The other kids couldn’t stop their giggling behind the stage, but at least they understood the problem. They realized they had to learn roles other than the ones they played most often.

Carrie's heart went out to all those Sunday School teachers who somehow managed to produce performances for the congregation without knowing from one week to the next which children would come on Sunday. The parents, who made little effort to get their kids there each week, would have to be a teacher or a project leader only once to learn how important steady participation was to the program and to the child as well.

"Okay, okay. You've had your fun. Let's start again," Peter called out.

"Places. Places," Susan called as if she were the director.

"Like we really need you to tell us what to do," Wayne said as he passed her.

Carrie watched the other young people interact with friendly horsing around as they took their places behind stage. Everyone seemed to get along except for Susan.

"I'm only trying to help. That's more than I can say for some people," Susan said pointedly.

As Carrie watched her, she developed an uneasy feeling. The others didn't seem to enjoy Susan's participation, just to tolerate it. Now that she thought about it, she realized that she shadowed Peter in whatever he was doing and spoke up on every point, always agreeing with him.

"You might as well be his Siamese twin," another boy said under his breath. Sure they hadn't meant her to hear, Carrie frowned at the laughter that followed. They could only mean Peter was the other twin. She saw the hurt and angry look on Susan's face.

Carrie decided to stick around after the rehearsal and speak to Peter about it. He didn't give the impression that he'd noticed anything out of the ordinary, and she wanted him to be aware of the potential for a problem there.

She did not, however, want to explore her feeling of urgency in her concern for him except to decide she was acting as she would for any new friend.

Her chair was a little behind as well as to the side of Peter's as they watched the last run-through. As she watched she wanted to give the kids some hints, but felt hesitant.

Peter leaned back on his chair and turned to her several minutes into the show and smiled. "What do you think?" he whispered.

"Hmmm. Can I make a suggestion?"

"Sure. That's what you're here for."

Carrie took a deep breath and rose to step closer to the stage. "Stop! But don't anybody move," she called quickly so the puppets would remain where they were. She peered over the front of the puppet stage at the kids kneeling behind it. She grabbed at one hand puppet that started to sink. "Don't move. Look at your puppets."

"And?"

"What for?" the puppeteers asked.

“Is your puppet standing up straight? If your character is a tall man is his head higher than the other puppets in the scene? If your puppet is on an angle like this one,” she said, squeezing the hand inside a drooping puppet, “is this puppet supposed to be bending over?”

“My arm’s getting tired,” Susan complained. “Why’d you have to stop us anyway? We already know the puppets are supposed to be up straight. We don’t need you to tell us,” she added with contempt.

“Then pick it up from here and show us,” Peter suggested gently from his seat.

Carrie frowned as she returned to her seat. The puppeteers decided what line to begin on and the play resumed.

Carrie and Peter each stopped the action again later. Susan agreed with all Peter’s comments and complained that Carrie just did not understand how the youth group did things.

After a final curtain call prompted by Carrie and Peter’s standing ovation, the kids poured out from behind the stage to put the puppets all away in the big cardboard box.

“Great job. Great job,” Peter shouted over all their conversations going at once. “Gather around. I have a surprise for you.”

The young people loped over and with the normal amount of pushing and grousing, finally settled down enough to listen to him. As Carrie had expected from her previous behavior, Susan stood attentively at his side.

Watching from beside the stage, Carrie did not have a clue of what he was about to say. She waited to hear along with the others.

“What would you guys say to a dress rehearsal tomorrow afternoon in front of a bigger live audience?”

Both cheers and groans greeted his question. “What do you mean?” the kids asked. “Who’d want to see us now?”

“Thanks to Carolyn’s help,” he said as he turned and smiled at her. “You’ve come a long way today.”

The kids cheered and clapped. Carrie laughed and took a very dramatic and deep theatrical bow with one hand at the front of her waist and the other extended out to her side. Everyone laughed more. Everyone but Susan.

“Here’s the deal. Reverend Hoag called me yesterday on behalf of the Sunville Nursing Home,” Peter announced.

Carrie gasped. Her head jerked in his direction. She hoped she hadn’t heard him right.

“I bragged to him over a month ago that you would have something ready to perform about now. What do you think? Are you up for a trial-run show tomorrow afternoon at the nursing home?”

Carrie’s legs weakened, and she sank in to her folding chair. He couldn’t mean at the Sunville nursing home. She couldn’t go there again... not ever.

The room was a buzz with conversations. Almost everyone had something different to say. “Do you really think we could do it?” Wayne asked.

“Aren’t you jumping the gun on this?” Marc wanted to know.

“If you ask me, I think the show in front of a real audience would be great,” Susan said.

“Carrie, what about you?” Peter asked. “We’ll need you there to help.”

Carrie dragged in a ragged breath and rose to stand beside Peter as she gathered her strength to speak to the cast. “I... I don’t know what help I could give, but I think you’ll give them a good performance. At the same time, you’ll learn what the audience reactions will mean to your timing. You’ll see where you have to pause for laughs.”

“Carolyn’s right,” Peter agreed easily. He casually put his arm around her waist and gave her a little squeeze. Carrie could tell he’d guessed she was upset about something. Just as quickly he dropped his arm and went on talking to the kids.

She folded her arms across each other at her waist. Even holding her sides in that position, she could not duplicate the feeling that had skittered up and down her spine when Peter hugged her. What was it about him that he could do that? She figured it was useless to hope it was static electricity.

If he could pick up that she was upset, though, she worried the kids would. She tried for a neutral expression on her face.

“So, what do you say? Is it a go?” Peter asked.

“Carolyn will be there too, won’t she?” Marc asked, holding up his hands to show his fingers crossed for good luck. “We need her backstage to give us our lines if we forget.”

I can’t go to that nursing home ever again, she wanted to say. “You will be fine without me,” she said instead. She saw disappointment replace the hopeful look on most of the faces as the kids vocalized their objections. Could she manage to go there? “Well, I guess I can come as long as Bette doesn’t mind staying with my grandmother again,” Carrie said instead. “I’ll have to wait and see.”

“She won’t mind. She’s over there all the time,” Marc assured her.

“You can’t miss her when she walks down the block,” the new boy said. “I’ve only lived here a few months, and I know who she is already.”

The kids laughed.

“She’s doing us a big favor,” Peter reminded them.

“Yeah, we should write her a thank you note,” Susan suggested eagerly.

“Good idea,” Peter told her.

Susan beamed with his approval of her plan. “I’ll write the note myself, if you’d like. My mom has some cards with ‘thank you’ on the front.”

“That would be great,” Peter told her.

“You’re not his secretary, runt,” Wayne told Susan.

Amidst the grousing from the boys about Susan playing up to Peter again, Carrie frowned. She didn’t say anything, but she felt that Peter should.

Instead, he set up the time to meet for the performance the following afternoon. “Everyone will have time to go home and eat after church, but be back by two to help pack the stage and puppets into the cars to go to the nursing home,” he told them. “We’ll need another car. Marc, do you think your Mom would let you drive?”

“Sure.”

“My mom can’t drive because she has to work tomorrow,” Wayne admitted. “She’s always working.”

“That’s okay. What about the rest of you?”

“Susan, could your father drive?”

“He doesn’t live with us,” Susan mumbled sullenly.

Carrie couldn’t catch the boy’s response, but Susan’s lower lip jutted out, and she turned away from him in a huff.

“Carolyn, could you drive?” Peter asked. “Carolyn?” he prompted when she didn’t respond right away.

“What?” she asked. “Oh, I can drive, but I can only take a couple of passengers in my small car.”

“That’s all we’ll need. That’s it then. See you all in church in the morning.”

“I’ll help you put everything away, Peter,” Susan offered, using his first name as he encouraged all the kids to.

“Kind of you to offer, Susan, but I can do it,” Carrie said suddenly before Peter could respond. “I have to talk to Peter about something else, so I’ll be staying for a few minutes. I don’t mind helping pick up while we talk.”

Susan threw all her weight onto one foot and raised her hands to her hips. She appeared even less happy when the newest boy in the group spoke up. “Do you really think he wants your help when a beautiful mature woman is willing to help him, Squirt?”

Susan spun around and glared at him. “Don’t call me that, creep!” She stomped off with heavy steps that turned into a run before she reached the door.

Apparently used to such scenes, the others followed at a slower pace. “You’d think she’d take the hint,” one grumbled.

“See you all tomorrow morning,” Peter called after them without commenting on the boys’ statements.

Chapter Seven

“Well, maybe miracles can still happen in church basements, and they’ll do a bang up job,” Carrie said after they left. She packed away the puppets in a straighter fashion than the kids had left them. No sense wrinkling all the little costumes. The characters didn’t have to look like they’d slept in them.

Peter switched off the lights they used to illuminate the stage, leaving only the bright sunlight streaming through the high bank of windows.

“I know miracles can and do happen in church basements, but I’m not so sure about how they’ll do with the puppet show,” he responded with a chuckle and a jerk of his thumb in the direction of the door through which the kids had left.

A smile tempted the corners of Carrie’s mouth. It was amazing how concentrating on someone else’s problems could take her focus off her own.

“So, what did you want to talk to me about?” he asked, folding up his chair and stacking it in the long rack with others.

“I... I wanted to talk to you about something that may be none of my business, but I thought it wouldn’t hurt to mention it. And it might be important.”

“Is something wrong?” he asked, straightening.

She had apparently aroused his concern because Peter turned to look back over at her. “Peter, it’s Susan.”

“Aaargh. Here I thought something was wrong.”

“Peter, I think something is wrong,” Carrie insisted. “Susan practically hangs on you every minute you’re within sight.”

“You’re not telling me this because your jealous, are you?” he asked dramatically with his hand over his heart.

Teasing right back, she raised her hands palms out, rolled her eyes up, and groaned.

He snapped his fingers as his arm swept downward. “Nuts.”

“Seriously, Peter, I don’t know her home life, but she’s obviously looking to you for attention and maybe affection that she’s starved for.”

Peter walked over to her, but stopped a foot short. “Very perceptive. There’s no male figure in her family life. I think she’s picked me as the substitute.”

“A tall, good-looking man like you is an obvious choice,” she said quickly and then felt the heat rise into her cheeks for having told him what she thought without thinking.

“Good-looking, huh?” he asked with a grin.

She couldn't help but laugh as she spoke. “You can quit fishing for compliments. That's all you're getting from me.”

Peter smiled as he picked up the last chair and dropped it in the rack without speaking.

“The other teens in the group ride her about her crush on you. I know you're aware of it. I hope I haven't overstepped my bounds by mentioning it, but I'm concerned.”

He nodded and sighed. “I was sort of hoping that if I ignored it and treated her the same as I do everyone else, her feelings would dissipate.”

In the short time Carrie had known Peter, she could tell his basic instinct was to help people, to reach out to them when they were in need.

“Maybe you're right, Peter. You're the expert here, but I believe you should make sure you don't find yourself alone with her anywhere away from the other kids. The papers are full of stories of weird things people of all ages do. She has already lashed out verbally at anyone who is at cross purposes with her.”

He nodded. “It's sad, but I think you're probably right. I'll have to keep a more attentive eye on her.” He stepped over to the stage. “You know, this situation only points out another advantage of having you here with me to help the kids, too. How about helping us on a regular basis?”

“Have you forgotten? I won't be here much longer,” she said softly.

“Yeah. I do keep forgetting and I shouldn't.” He sighed and closed the puppet box.

For a split second, she wondered what it would have been like to work with Peter. She'd never met anyone like him before.

“Carolyn, can you get that end so we don't scratch the floor?”

“What? Oh, sure.” She ducked her head to hide the warmth that crept up her cheeks with thoughts of him as they carried the box of puppets behind the stage and pushed it against the wall. She was glad he couldn't read her mind.

“You know, I'm disappointed,” he announced casually. “I was hoping you wanted to stay after rehearsal to ask me out on a date.”

Carrie felt the heat increasing in her cheeks. Forgetting about hiding it, she looked at Peter only to find him grinning broadly. He was teasing her again. “Don't you wish,” she answered in like tone.

Her comment earned his chuckle. He walked over to stand facing her. “And if I asked you out for a date, Carolyn, would you go with me?”

She looked away and took a few steps toward the door. “Peter,” she said hesitantly. She took a deep

breath and looked out at the broad expanse of lawn behind the church. “I... I don’t think that would be a good idea.” She turned back to him. “Not that I wouldn’t enjoy being with you,” she added quickly, shaking her head. “I obviously do. But I’ll be leaving this town as soon as I can and I...” She shrugged and left her thoughts hanging in the air.

Did she want to go out with him? Yes. But would she? Carrie didn’t see how she could and still be fair to either one of them. She had a feeling that Peter wasn’t into casual dating. She wouldn’t encourage him, not even a little bit.

They walked out the lower-level door onto the back lawn where Peter stopped. “I’d like to walk you home so we could talk some more, but I’ve got to lock up and go home to practice my sermon.” He sighed. “The kids aren’t the only ones who have to rehearse on Saturdays.”

Carrie smiled and considered how much he did for the church. “You put in a lot of time, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess I do, but it goes with the job. And I love it.”

“Would it be easier in a bigger church where you could have an assistant pastor to help?”

“No, I wouldn’t want that. I love living in Sunville. Ever since I was a kid growing up with nothing but cement to play on, I knew I wanted to live in a small town like this one. I figured out that I wanted to go to seminary, and when I got the call here, I knew God was steering me toward Sunville. I think I’m here for a reason. I truly love it here.”

Carrie shook her head. “And all I want to do is get away,” she admitted. “This town holds too many bad memories.”

A little frown creased his forehead. “The people are great. The fresh air is wonderful, even if it does get frightfully cold in the winter. What is that bumper sticker I see around once in a while? ‘36 Degrees Below Keeps Out The Riffraff!’”

Their gazes locked. “You truly do like it here, don’t you?”

“Yup. There’s no area more beautiful than the flat plains when the golden ripe wheat sways in wind-blown waves, or when the fields are white as far as you can see with snow that never seems to get dirty.”

She laughed. “It never gets dirty because it never melts or turns into dirty slush. It’s too cold to thaw from October to April.”

“I know, and there’s less air pollution to discolor it. But the sky. Look at that unbelievable sky,” he told her with a sweep of his arm over his head. “It goes on forever!”

They looked up at the clear sky that contrasted so beautifully with the green leaves of the tree beside them. Not a cloud in sight, only the church’s tall white steeple, visible from anywhere in town, pierced the broad unbroken expanse of blue and made Carrie feel small and very insignificant.

Carrie turned to watch him looking at the sky. “Sounds like the North Dakota countryside has a convert.”

“What’s not to like? I’d be happy to live here the rest of my life.”

Tears stung her eyes. She turned and touched the corner to take one away before it escaped down her cheek.

“What’s wrong?” He caught her arm to stop her when she tried to move away.

“I... I just got something in my eye from all that unpolluted country fresh air,” she tried to joke, wondering what the eternal punishment was for fibbing to a pastor. Good thing there were no clouds or she would worry about lightning striking.

“Let me see,” he offered as he reached to hold her face in his hands.

“No. No, thank you.” She backed away quickly, and he had no choice but to drop his hands to his sides. “I’m all right. I have to go anyway. Can’t leave Maddie alone too long.”

“Okay. See you in the morning,” he said easily.

Carrie nodded. “If Maddie is up to it.” She continued backing across the lawn. “So long.” She started to turn away from him.

“Carolyn?”

She stopped walking. “Hmmm?”

“I’ve learned something about myself since moving to the country.” She tilted her head slightly in question, but didn’t speak. “I can be very patient when I need to be.”

Her gaze remained locked on his and she shivered. If only she had been able to be more patient five years ago, she wouldn’t be feeling so miserable right now. Unable to maintain the visual contact with the tumult of emotions churning within her, she turned without a word and jogged to Maddie’s house. She had to escape before she did something stupid like let him discover that she’d wanted to cry when she learned he would be happiest if he could spend the rest of his life in Sunville.

Careful not to catch her gored skirt on the bushes, she ran around the house. She swiped at her cheeks with the backs of her hands and focused her thoughts on thanking Bette. Thinking about Bette’s colorful personality always brightened her mood.

She rounded the front of the house and found the porch empty. The heat had probably driven the ladies inside. North Dakota always amazed her. It could be over a hundred degrees Fahrenheit in the summer and thirty-five degrees below zero or colder in the winter. It was a wonder anything survived here--people, plants or animals.

Carrie ducked in the front door and called out when she didn’t see the women in the living room. She began to feel uneasy when she discovered Maddie’s bed and the kitchen were empty, too. “Bette?” she called, running to look on the back porch.

When Carrie hurried back to the front hall, she saw Bette coming down the stairs in tears. Her steps heavy, she was clinging to the railing. Her face was flushed and Carrie thought she could see tears on her cheeks. Carrie had never seen the woman other than cheerful. Panic clawed at Carrie’s chest.

“Bette, what’s wrong? Where’s Maddie?”

“I... I was only gone a minute. I came in to get us some more lemonade. It was hot out and we were thirsty.”

Carrie reached for a tissue from the box by the hall phone and handed it to Bette. “Where is she? Where is Maddie?”

“I’m trying to tell you. I don’t know. I just don’t know where she is. I looked all through the house in case she went back upstairs to find her old room. You know how she forgets.”

Her hand went to her chest and grabbed a handful of her dress. “I’m so out of breath from everything that I have to sit down a bit.”

Carrie stroked Bette’s shoulder and walked with her to a living room chair. “Sit down and try not to worry.”

“Oh, Carrie, I’m sorry. I was supposed to watch her and I lost her. I lost my best friend.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Bette. She just wandered off. If you know she’s not upstairs, then I’m going outside to look. You sit here and rest. We can’t have you getting ill over this. I’ll find her. Don’t you worry,” Carrie said, hoping it was true.

She had to find her and quickly. Not waiting for Bette’s response, she ran out the front door to the street. Looking each way down the tree-lined curbless blacktop, she couldn’t see Maddie--only one neighbor out in a yard working. She ran to his side. “My grandmother,” she said when she had reached his side. “Maddie. She’s wandered away from the porch. Have you seen her come down this way?”

“Maddie’s gone again?” he asked as he rose with his pruning shears in his hand.

Carrie nodded, too worried to have his “again” bother her much at the moment. “Have you seen her in the last ten or fifteen minutes?”

“No, Carrie, sorry. I’ve been trimming these bushes here that long, but I guess she might have wandered by and I wouldn’t have noticed.”

Carrie looked up and down the street again and saw no one. “Thanks,” she called over her shoulder as she took off at a run for home. Bounding up the porch stairs, she let the screen door slam behind her as she raced into the house.

“Did you find her?” Bette called from the living room.

“No!” Carrie pressed her fingers to her pounding temples. “Where can she be?” she cried.

Carrie grabbed the railing and bolted up the stairs. She looked in every bedroom, just to be certain Bette hadn’t missed seeing her. She checked the bathroom downstairs and the mudroom, as well as the backyard.

Returning to the front foyer, she leaned her palms on the phone table to catch her breath. Moments later, when she thought she was breathing slowly enough to be able to talk, she picked up the phone and dialed the police.

“No, I just got home,” Carrie told the police who asked if anyone had been there with her grandmother when she disappeared. “And of course someone was with her, but when they left the porch for a few minutes she disappeared. She’s been gone for maybe ten or fifteen minutes.” She glanced at Bette who was nodding in agreement.

With their promise to send someone right over to help look, Carrie went to stand at the front door, anxiously awaiting their arrival. In a few minutes, the local police car arrived in the driveway with the red lights on top flashing.

She ran out to explain the situation to the officers. She stopped in her tracks when she saw the tall balding officer who climbed from the driver’s seat.

“Ms. Whitmore,” he said politely as he put his hat on his head. He gave his name and she nodded. “We met some years ago after the unfortunate death you were involved in at the Sunville Nursing Home,” he reminded her.

She nodded more vigorously and had to swallow before she could speak. “Yes, I remember.” How could she ever forget? Her sense of guilt reminded her everyday. She took a deep breath and tamped down all the torment that had surfaced when she recognized him.

“So what’s the problem today?” he asked.

Carrie didn’t dwell on the past when she thought of Maddie being missing. She explained the situation to the officers and answered their questions.

“You stay at the house in case someone calls about Maddie and we’ll canvas each house in the neighborhood to see if anyone has seen Maddie.”

Carrie agreed and returned to the house as they walked down the sidewalk in opposite directions. For once Carrie was thankful Maddie lived in a small town and Carrie didn’t have to wait twenty-four hours to report a missing person like on TV detective shows set in big cities.

Passing through the front hall, she looked up wide-eyed when the back door burst open and Peter ran in.

“Carolyn?”

He stopped for an instant in which their gazes locked, and then they ran toward each other. He swept her into his arms and held her tightly. “What is it? What’s wrong?” he asked without loosening his hold on her.

Beside herself with worry, Carrie gave little thought to what she was doing as she circled his waist with her arms and accepted his warm and supportive hug. “Oh, Peter. It’s Grandma.”

“I was so worried when I saw the police car. Tell me. What’s wrong?” He straightened enough to look at her.

“When I came home, she was gone. Bette doesn’t know where she is. We can’t find her! Two policemen came and they’re going door to door to see if anyone’s seen her.”

She hiccupped in her effort to stop crying. Peter slid his hands from her back to hold her jaw in his

palms while he wiped away the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs. Carrie could have dropped her arms from his waist, but she didn't. She needed to maintain the contact with him. Even though she shouldn't, she felt so much better with him close.

"What about her friends? Could she have gone to see one of them? Can you call some?"

She shook her head and Peter moved his hands to her shoulders. "No, I'm to stay off the phone in case one of them is trying to call me."

Bette appeared at the arch to the living room, her aged face red, her eyes still brim-full of tears. She leaned the heel of her palm against the wall for support. "Oh, Peter, I'm glad you're here. I lost her. My best friend. I lost Maddie."

Carrie turned out of Peter's embrace. She wiped the remaining tears from her cheeks with her trembling fingers. She felt so worried and helpless, but one look at how pale Bette looked and Carrie began to worry about her, too. She and Peter both urged Bette to return to a seat. "It wasn't your fault, Bette," Carrie told her. "Don't think that I believe that for a minute."

"I'll go back to the church to use the phone there. We need more manpower for the search," Peter offered.

"That's a good idea." Carrie straightened and turned to face him. "Thank you, Peter."

"You're okay?" His hand rested firmly on her shoulder. His thumb rubbed the hollow in the base of her neck in reassuring circles.

She nodded. "We've got to find her, Peter."

"We will," he promised before he turned and ran out the kitchen door.

Bette sniffled. "I wish there was something more we could do," Bette said, leaning heavily against the back of the chair. She wiped a tear from her cheek with the back of her hand.

"Bette, you mustn't get so upset. We'll find her. I know we will." Carrie handed her a tissue from the box she retrieved from the telephone stand in the hall.

"I just can't imagine where she is," Bette insisted. "Where could she go?"

"Exactly. If we could just figure out where she could have gone in such a short time, we'd know," Carrie said as she rose. She felt too tense and restless to stay sitting beside Bette. "I'm going to look out front again. You rest there," she said as she walked out on the front porch.

The policemen were crossing the street at the end of the block to canvas each house on the other side. Maddie was no where to be seen.

"Carolyn!"

She heard Peter shout her name before she heard him burst through the back door a second time. She ran back inside letting the screen door bounce shut behind her as she ran to meet him.

"I found her. I found Maddie," he said pausing to swallow and catch a breath. "She's fine. She's over in

the church sitting in a pew. She's fallen asleep."

Carrie's eyes widened when she heard "asleep".

"Yes, I checked," he assured her before she could ask. "She's probably exhausted from the walk and fell asleep. You go on over there and I'll go tell the police."

She smiled up at him. "Thank you, Peter."

"Hey, what are good friends for?" he asked with a shrug and his arms spread in a palm-up gesture.

Without thinking Carrie rose onto her toes and kissed him briefly on his lips. In another ten seconds, without giving the kiss another thought, she was halfway across the yard, racing for the church.

She took the front steps two at a time. Inside the sanctuary the air felt cool and her skin, moist from her run, felt chilled. After a quick glance across the rows, her gaze fixed on Maddie sitting over to one side.

Carrie inhaled deeply and uttered a soft, "I haven't had much opportunity to show appreciation, but I thank You, Lord, for keeping Maddie safe."

Slowly, Carrie slipped into the row and moved sideways to sit beside Maddie. She put her arm around her grandmother and spoke softly. "Grandma? Grandma, are you feeling all right?"

"Oh, dear," Maddie said, waking up with a start. "I must have dozed off. Is the service over already? Wasn't the music lovely? I truly love organ music. John does, too. We had such a lovely time together this afternoon."

Maddie looked down the pew beside her and then back at her granddaughter. "I see he's left already. He's such a busy man, but I'll see him later at home."

"Come on, Grandma. Let me help you up. It's time for us to go home."

With infinite patience, Carrie waited until Maddie tucked her lace-edged handkerchief into her dress sleeve at her wrist before she helped her to stand and walk toward the rear of the sanctuary. They were nearing the double white doors when they opened and Peter came in with the two police officers.

Peter stepped over to support Maddie's other arm. "Good to have you come to church for a visit, Maddie." He winked at Carrie over the white head between them.

The officers politely introduced themselves and offered Maddie a ride home.

"Oh, my, no. I just live behind the church," Maddie told them.

"But you've had a busy day, Maddie. How about if I drive you around the block and right up to your front door?" Peter asked.

"Well..." Maddie vacillated.

Peter didn't give her a chance to object before helping her to his car. The two policemen left without objections after Carrie thanked them. She sincerely hoped she would never see them again.

Bette came down the front steps looking visibly relieved as she watched Peter and Carrie help Maddie out of the car after the quick trip. She hugged her friend and had to wipe away tears of relief. “Now that you’re home safe, I’m going home and take a nap. It’s been quite a day.”

“Bette, would you like a ride home?” Peter asked. Bette looked at him, her face drawn with weariness, but she didn’t respond. “Or maybe we should call the police back so you can have a ride in their car?”

She smiled at Peter. “Haven’t been in a police car before and I don’t intend to start now. In fact, I think I would prefer to walk home. At my age, my boy, I have to use it or I’ll lose it,” she announced.

Carrie suspected she felt guilty and didn’t want to be a bother after the problem she felt she’d caused. Carrie could tell because she was an expert at feeling guilty because of situations she’d caused.

“A walk sounds like a lovely idea. I’ll come with you,” Peter told Bette, holding out his elbow for her as he winked at Carrie.

“Well, if you insist, my boy.”

Bette was smiling, but Carrie noticed that she leaned heavily on Peter’s arm as they walked slowly down the porch steps and across the crushed-stone path to the street.

“Come on, Grandma. I’ll help you into bed,” Carrie said as Peter and Bette left.

“That’s a good idea. I’m all tuckered out, too.”

Once Maddie was settled in bed, Carrie raised the light cover over her shoulders and kissed her cheek. She remained by the bed and watched as Maddie’s eyes drifted shut as she went right to sleep.

“I love you, Grandma,” Carrie whispered before she left the room.

Chapter Eight

The only the sounds in the huge house were the loud ticks of the tall grandfather clock in the front hall. Carrie stood by the open front door, her hands at her waist with the fingers interlaced. She waited to catch Peter when he returned for his car so she could speak to him.

She inhaled the fragrance of freshly cut grass. It reminded her of Peter pushing the mower over the church lawn--always willing to step in to help anyone who needed assistance. How tempting it was for her to lean on his strength now. Yet she couldn’t do that. It wouldn’t be fair to him. He deserved better from her after all he’d done.

Peter’s steps crunched on the stone driveway. Carrie called out to him. The familiar grin blossomed on his face as he diverted his steps to the door. She opened the screen door to admit him and stood facing

him.

“I just wanted to thank you, Peter. Before... I was very upset. You were a big comfort and I... Well, I wanted you to know that when I... It’s just that when you said you’d found Grandma, I didn’t think. I just... You know, when I...”

No matter how she started she couldn’t finish. She could not admit that she’d actually kissed him. She shouldn’t have done it. He looked down at her mouth and she knew he was thinking about the same thing she was. Her kiss. Why had she kissed him?

“Do you want to take it back?” he asked softly.

“Take it back?”

“Your kiss. Isn’t that what you’re talking about? Do you want it back?”

Carrie shook her head. He had to be teasing her again. “Peter, I may be a naive woman raised in the country, but I know you can’t take kisses back.”

“Then I’ll have to give you one in trade.” He sounded so logical. His gaze locked on hers. He stepped closer and paused without touching her. He was giving her a chance to say no, a chance to back away.

For the life of her, she couldn’t speak. She couldn’t move.

He lowered his lips to cover hers. His lips felt soft as they pressed against hers. Their noses bumped and he turned his head slightly. Nowhere else did their bodies touch and yet every inch of her skin felt tingly.

Peter raised his head only inches from hers and smiled. Carrie had to breath through her mouth. He looked at her parted lips and back at her eyes. “There. Now we’re even until next time. See you tomorrow, Carolyn.”

The warm puffs of his breath raised goose bumps on her arms. “See you tomorrow,” she whispered as he stepped through the screen door.

She’d forgotten all about wanting to tell him that she should never have kissed him even once, much less twice.

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Long before the time for church the next morning, Carrie knew she wouldn’t be attending. Maddie didn’t want to get out of bed. While understandable, it meant that Carrie had to stay home with her. Carrie felt sorry to miss one of Peter’s excellent sermons, but she figured she wouldn’t be missed.

That afternoon when the teenagers were due at church to pack up for the puppet show, Carrie couldn’t see how she could go along to help. While she would have preferred never to go to the nursing home again, she felt bad about not being able to go today because she’d promised the young people her support.

But what could she do? She wasn’t going to burden Bette with the responsibility of tending to Maddie again, especially not on one of Maddie’s bad days like today. She wasn’t certain Bette would want the responsibility even if Carrie asked her to come over again.

When someone knocked on the kitchen door, Carrie thought it was one of the kids wondering why she hadn't shown up at the church. She was in no way prepared for what she saw. Four women stood beyond the screen door--women Carrie had seen in church for years. They were Maddie's long-time friends, but she was worried why they came.

The tallest one spoke first. "Carrie, those kids are counting on you being at their show and we can understand you don't want to leave Maddie after what happened yesterday. But we all know her. Goodness, we've known her for years."

The nearest woman continued. "We've come to sit with her so you can go with the kids. We'll take good care of her. And you're not to worry. Between the four of us, there's no way she can slip away."

The women all bubbled over with their enthusiastic contributions to the plans for the afternoon with Maddie.

"I volunteered to come because my mother's going to be in your audience at the nursing home," one said. "She doesn't have much going on in her life anymore, and she just loves it when someone comes over to the home to entertain."

Hope blossomed in Carrie's heart as she ushered the ladies into the new downstairs bedroom where Maddie was resting. "Look who has come to see you, Grandma."

The ladies struck up a lively conversation immediately. Maddie looked brighter and more attentive than she had all day. Carrie decided that she could leave after all. She thanked the women and slipped out the back door.

As she ran across the lawn, she heard one of the women playing on Maddie's spinet piano while the others sang. They had found the key to keeping Maddie happy already. Music.

Carrie forced herself to relax and stopped a few moments to look up at the pointed white steeple against the vibrant blue sky. Lord, I know you're not used to hearing from me, but I just wanted to thank you for all the wonderful help I'm getting from the people in this little country church. From the ladies today and... and from Peter. He's... Well, I wanted to say thank You.

She shuddered to think what would have happened if Maddie had wandered away from home in some city. What would she have done then? For once she was glad that she was in Sunville.

Carrie frowned at the idea, but was distracted from her thoughts when Peter called out, "Here she is."

"Sorry I'm late, but thanks for the four angels you sent over," she said after jogging to his side. He winked at her and she couldn't help but smile.

Susan slammed the door immediately behind her and she jumped. "Can we go now?" Susan asked, making it obvious that they had been waiting for Carrie.

"The stage and puppet box are all loaded in the hatch back of my car, so that's all set. Kids," Peter called. "Have you worked out who wants to ride with whom?"

It was not until that moment that Carrie remembered she was supposed to drive. "I forgot to drive my car to the church, but whoever is coming with me--we can just cut through the yard to the driveway

where my car is parked and leave from there.”

“Looks like we don’t need your car after all, Carolyn. One of the boys drove their minivan that seats seven so there’s plenty of room for everyone in the cars that are already here,” he explained. He rubbed his hands together. “Okay, let’s get this show on the road.”

“Come on, Susan. Get in the car,” Marc called over the roof of the car he was driving.

“I’m not riding with you,” Susan announced. “I’m going to ride with Peter. She can ride with you.” Her head jerked toward Carrie without looking at her. She crossed to Peter’s car and stood by the passenger-side door.

With the stage and box in the back, there was only room for two up front. While Carrie didn’t think it was a good idea for Peter to be alone with Susan, she was hesitant to say she wanted to be there in Susan’s place. She couldn’t guess how that would be interpreted by the kids, or by Peter.

The choice was taken from her when the other girl grabbed Susan’s arm and pulled her to Marc’s car. “You’re crazy if you think I’m going in that car without you, Susan,” she told her. “That would be like throwing me to the lions.”

Susan glared at Carrie a moment and then reluctantly climbed in beside her friend as the boys in the front seat roared their impressions of lions. Their impersonations dissolved into laughter.

Peter turned toward Carrie. “Well, I guess that means you’re stuck with me.” He walked around the car to get in. “Worked out perfectly, didn’t it?” Peter whispered over the top of the car.

Carrie glanced over at the other cars and was thankful the kids hadn’t heard his comment. They might not understand he was just teasing, a born kidder, she decided. No wonder the youths liked him so much, she thought as she opened her door.

Carrie’s happy thoughts of Peter disappeared as the car neared the Sunville Nursing Home. By the time she entered the door and walked into the guest lounge, she felt light-headed and her palms were damp. Her stomach cramped so hard you was certain she would be ill.

Peter must have seen her state, because he ushered her to a chair in the corner of the reception area. “You look pale. You sit here until you’re feeling better,” he insisted. “The kids and I can get the stage up. You come on in when you’re up to it.” Carrie nodded and Peter disappeared into the large dining room where the puppet show would be held.

She looked down the wide hallway that she’d walked several times to visit Ralph. Seeing it for the first time since his death brought back terrible memories that rained down on her like a sudden summer storm.

Carrie tried to focus on the happy years she and Ralph spent at North Dakota State University before Ralph had to quit. Crop prices had plummeted, and his parents, who owned the implement dealership in town, could no longer afford to keep him in school. They couldn’t afford hired help either, so Ralph had to fill in. He resented his situation and complained bitterly to anyone who would listen.

Carrie’s parents must have thought she might quit to be in Sunville with Ralph, because they’d pressured her to finish. They didn’t need to because at the time she’d wanted to go on and graduate all along. It made her feel guilty.

She remained faithful to Ralph for the next year, but each time she saw him she was aware that her feelings had cooled more toward him. They dated when she was home for school breaks, but he wasn't the same person she'd thought she had been in love with since high school. Their goals and hopes for the future weren't compatible anymore.

Ralph had turned bitter and angry and never missed a chance to make snide comments about Carrie getting all the good things in life while he got garbage. Rather than make the woman he professed to love feel good, he seemed to go out of his way to make her feel as miserable as he did. Nothing she could say would cheer him up, and very quickly it became evident that their time together was not to be savored or enjoyed. The thought of spending the rest of her life with him was a nightmare.

Instead of helping his parents out of their financial crisis or at least doing his best to wait patiently until it passed and farm prices went back up, he charged expensive clothes, accessories for his car, and dinners on trips to Fargo to see Carrie. When the bills came, he couldn't pay them, and the finance charges compounded. He and his parents teetered on the verge of bankruptcy.

Then the summer before her senior year, Carrie's parents died in a tragic boating accident on Leech Lake in Minnesota. Her sister, already married and living in Colorado, was too pregnant to travel. Carrie took care of all the details with only Maddie to help her or comfort her.

Despite the fact that she felt wretched over her parents' deaths and was still grieving, Ralph suddenly insisted Carrie marry him right away. A heated argument ensued that she was certain the whole neighborhood could hear because he shouted. She'd told him he was being unreasonable and refused to be coerced. Ralph had said she was selfish and inconsiderate and every other name he could think of. He'd stormed out of Maddie's living room where they'd been arguing and had gone bar hopping until he got so drunk he passed out in his car. The police found him and brought him home.

In her heart Carrie couldn't love him any more. She found it hard to even respect him as a friend. He wanted his life to be rich and easy and wasn't willing to work for any of it. Although she'd wanted to call off their engagement permanently, she'd still given him the benefit of the doubt and decided to wait until she'd worked through grieving for her parents to see how she felt about Ralph. Her friends told her she was too considerate because all the while she was still faithful and didn't date anyone else.

During her senior year, she knew Ralph continued to drink heavily. The rumor network in Sunville was working well and she heard all about his long nights out. Driving home in a snow storm one night from a bar, he had an accident in which both his legs were smashed.

Carrie came to Sunville, and since her parents' house had been sold by then, she stayed with Maddie in order to visit Ralph in the nursing home. He'd been recuperating there since the hospital released him after the accident. She'd decided before she went in his room not to tell him she'd fallen out of love with him and was ending their relationship. She'd felt that telling him then would be like kicking a man when he was down. She couldn't do that. If he brought it up, she would tell him to get well first and then they would talk about it.

Angry and cursing from the moment he saw her walk into his room, Ralph accused her of causing his accident. "If you'd married me last summer, I wouldn't have been drinking to forget your broken promises. Now, because of you, I'm laid up here with all these old geezers for ages."

His accusations had reduced Carrie to tears because she'd done nothing. She didn't understand how he could be so irrational.

“I’ll probably walk with a limp once I get out.”

The more she cried from the injury of his verbal stabs, the more he yelled at her. The last straw was when he’d bellowed that he didn’t love her and never wanted to see her again.

The nurses finally stopped the loud scene and insisted she leave so they could get him quiet again.

The following day, Carrie knew that her decision to break off the engagement was the right one. She felt relieved when she decided to tell him then instead of waiting. She was actually glad that he had yelled at her and called her all those names. She was free. There was no need to keep up the pretense of still caring for him. She would tell him she didn’t want to see him again either and it would be over.

She knew she couldn’t visit Ralph again so she wrote him a long letter. She mentioned she was sorry he felt the way he did about her, but he was wrong. She had not caused his drinking. He’d decided to drink of his own free will. She’d been faithful to him, but she didn’t love him any more. And since he didn’t love her any more either, she wouldn’t return to visit. “I no longer feel the love I once thought I had for you. All I can do now is pray for you and wish you well,” she wrote to end the letter.

Feeling a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders, she made one more trip to the nursing home and left the letter with a volunteer at the front desk.

The next morning Carrie was ready to drive back to Fargo when a police car pulled up to Maddie’s house. The balding officer who had responded so quickly when Maddie disappeared, had questioned her for an hour about the arguments she’d with Ralph. He asked repeatedly about drugs. He even asked about any prescriptions that Carrie or Maddie had that Carrie would have had access to.

Finally, he told her that Ralph had swallowed a handful of pain and muscle relaxant pills he’d apparently been hoarding. The nurse at the home had found him dead in bed that morning.

Carrie was devastated. In the weeks that followed, she had come close to a nervous breakdown. She had felt certain her letter was responsible for his death. It must have pushed him over the edge. If only she hadn’t written to him. Guilt ate at her. She had no where to turn and didn’t know what to do. The whole town was stirred up by the strange death of the young man after a loud argument with his fiancé. Every time Carrie ventured out of Maddie’s house, people asked her what “really” happened.

“You can tell me,” they would say. “He died because of you and the big argument you had, didn’t he? How come he had so many pills?”

Carrie fled from the nosey townspeople and stopped going out of the house at all. She even bought an answering machine for Maddie’s phone and let it screen the calls for her.

Her aging grandmother had been shaken by the questioning session in her home following Ralph’s suicide. Carrie hadn’t wanted to burden her further and never mentioned it again. Carrie told her sister what had happened, but didn’t go into enough detail to upset her. She had to care for a toddler and new baby. That left no one for Carrie to talk to.

On top of feeling as guilty for Ralph’s death as if she’d handed him the pills, she felt so alone and lost. She couldn’t understand how God could have let such bad things happen to good people. From that week on, she quit going to church and rarely prayed. What was the use? she thought. She’d done everything she could to be considerate of Ralph and his situation, but by deserting him when he needed her, and writing the letter that pushed him over the edge, she’d been the instrument of his death.

Applause from the dining room in the nursing home brought Carrie out of her deep reverie and back to the present. She pulled a tissue from her purse and wiped her damp cheeks. She slipped into the ladies room and splashed cold water on her face which helped reduce the redness. She dabbed on a little powder and when she looked more presentable, she hurried into the dining room.

“Hey, where were you?” Marc asked, spotting her at once. “You should have seen us. We were hesitant and nervous at first, but once the first act was over, the rest went, as Peter likes to say, ‘Just great!’”

Carrie managed to laugh with him at his imitation of Peter. “I’m so proud of you kids. You’ve come a long way in a very short time.”

“Thanks to your help,” Marc volunteered.

Carrie smiled. “And I knew you could do it without me here to help,” she told the others as they gathered around her. She felt a happy glow being with these young people. It was a wonderful sensation that went a long way to lightening her guilt-ridden memories of the last time she was in the nursing home.

“Hey, food’s coming!” Wayne announced.

The staff brought in juice and cookies for everyone. The kids cheerfully helped serve those who were unable to come to the table to get their own. They really seemed to enjoy helping others.

“Feel better?” Peter asked as he handed her a little plastic glass of juice.

“Much. Thanks. I just had to get beyond my memories of the last time I was here.”

“Good. We can leave as soon as the kids are done scarfing down the cookies. If you don’t mind, I’d like to take a minute to talk to Don Hoag, the home’s pastor. He’s new to this job as I am to mine. We like to compare notes,” he joked.

“Take your time. I’ll keep an eye on the kids,” Carrie promised.

Peter and Don sat a little way apart from the others. Don reminded Carrie a lot of her father, the same graying hair and kind face. Carrie found her gaze returning time and time again to that corner of the room where they sat. She couldn’t keep her eyes off Peter. Ridiculous.

Deliberately turning her back to them, she began to pack the puppets that the puppeteers had dropped behind the stage when the show ended.

“I’ll get that for you, Carolyn,” Marc offered as he picked up the last of the puppets before she reached for it.

“Thanks. It’s probably about time for us to leave. We can carry these boxes out to the car without disturbing Peter. Can you and the other boys bring the stage?”

“Sure.”

Susan strolled up and struck the pose she used often with her hands on her hips and all her weight on one leg. “Can we go now?” she demanded to know.

“When this is all packed in the car and Peter’s done talking to Reverend Hoag, we’ll be ready to leave.” Carrie tucked in the flaps on the box of puppets. “This one’s ready to go.”

“What’s Peter talking so long to him for?” Susan asked angrily to anyone in general.

“Who knows, Squirt? Maybe he’s lining up a command performance for the Sunville Community Church Puppet Players!” one of the boys said.

Marc laughed with the others and picked up the box of puppets. Susan stood where she was, her weight switched onto her other leg, and her arms crossed over her waist.

“Will ya get a move on and open the door for us?” Marc ordered. “Susan,” he whined to put a good deal of emphasis on using her name. Until now, he’d always called her Squirt.

Susan turned her head and glared at him for a minute, but then moved to open the door.

Several of the residents of the home waved and called out goodbyes to them as they left.

Peter came running out to the parking lot just a few minutes later. “Sorry. I intended to introduce you to Don, but we can do it another time.” He opened the back of his car and helped load the stage. “Everyone ready?”

Several of the kids were already in the cars and ready to leave. Susan hung back near Peter as usual. “I want to ride home with you, Peter. Carolyn can ride with them,” she added, practically spitting out Carrie’s name.

Peter looked from Susan to Carrie and back, but before he could speak, Marc called out. “Come on. Give ‘em a break, will ya? You’ll get home in one piece in my car, I promise.”

Carrie stood close enough to see tears glisten in Susan’s eyes. Her cheeks reddened and suddenly she turned to face Carrie. “Why did you have to come back to Sunville anyway? Nobody wants you here. Everybody knows you’re a murderer! And stay away from Peter! He doesn’t want to associate with a woman like you and neither do we.”

“Susan!” Peter shouted. “Stop it right now.”

“Why should I? We shouldn’t have anything to do with Carolyn because my mom says a man died because of her.”

Peter reached to grasp Susan’s elbow to move her away, but she twisted free of him. Mute and frozen in place with shock, Carrie could only watch.

“None of us want you here, Carolyn!” Susan screamed as she backed over to Marc’s car and climbed in the back seat. “Go home and leave us alone. Leave Peter alone. He’s too good for the likes of you!” She slammed the door and slumped down in the seat.

Marc looked to Peter for directions. He nodded and Marc jumped into his car and drove out of the parking lot. The other four kids climbed into Wayne’s car and drove out right behind them.

Peter walked over to Carrie who stared after them in mute shock, and gathered her into his arms.

Chapter Nine

“Is there something I can help with?” Don had come out to see what the shouting was about.

“Just the kids letting off a little steam,” Peter explained.

Carrie stepped back from the comfort Peter was offering and pulled a tissue from her purse to dab at the tears welling in her eyes. She felt numb. She’d never been the victim of a verbal attack like Susan’s. No one had ever treated her that badly--well, except Ralph... and the policeman the day Ralph died.

“From the looks of it, someone got scalded by the steam,” Don responded quietly. He lightly placed his hand on Carrie’s shoulder.

Carrie forced herself to look up at Don. Despite the heat of the day, she felt cold. A shiver passed down her spine. She hugged her arms around her waist.

Don nodded when Peter introduced her. “Why don’t you come into the office for a few minutes? You look like you could use a little quiet time.”

Don was only trying to help, Carrie knew, but there was really no reason to. She would be all right in a few minutes. Still, Carrie blindly followed down the hall to his office. Her nerves had had all they could take for one day.

Don unlocked the office door and waited for Carrie to precede him. Leaving the door open, he took Carrie’s elbow and ushered her around a row of half full boxes on the floor to a small couch and then took a seat in the desk chair, the only other seat in the room.

“Sorry about the mess. I’m trying to clean out files that haven’t been touched in years. We’re finding stuff that nobody even knew was in there.”

Peter had followed them as far as the doorway. Carrie felt too embarrassed to look up at him. She certainly wouldn’t have to worry about him being interested in her now. Out of the corner of her vision, she could see him look from her to Don. Carrie couldn’t see Don, but she could hear the rustle of his responding movement. What must Peter think of her? She hated the idea that he found out people thought of her as a murderer.

“Ah, I think I should wait out in the lounge area or outside, Carolyn. Whenever you feel like going home, just let me know.”

Carrie nodded. Without saying more, Peter turned and left the office, shutting the door quietly behind him. She could feel her heart beating in her chest. Why had Susan shouted those awful things at her? Ralph had died five years ago. Did everyone in Sunville still think of her as a murderer? Why wouldn’t

they let her forget and get on with her life?

Carrie gasped. But... But if people did think that, then by spending time with them she was damaging Peter's reputation. They would think he was wrong by letting her help the teens. Oh, no! Dear Peter. I must not have anything more to do with him. The last thing in the world I want is to hurt him.

"I asked Peter to give us a few minutes alone. Is there anything I can get for you? A glass of water," Don asked.

"No, really. Thank you." She blew her nose and thought about Peter outside waiting. Kind Peter. Generous Peter. Caring Peter. She couldn't bear to hurt him. Somehow over the short time she'd known him, he'd managed to break through her carefully built armor and touch her heart. In that instant Carrie realized just how easy it would be to fall in love with Peter, but she also knew she should not.

A relationship between them would never be possible. Hadn't he told her he would spend the rest of his life in Sunville? After today she didn't want to be in Sunville one minute longer than she absolutely had to be.

"Carolyn?"

Carrie looked up at Don and smiled though her lip trembled.

"I couldn't help but hear the shouting through the open window here," Don explained. "I don't know what the girl was referring to, and I for one could never believe you're a murderer, but if you want to talk about anything, I'm here for you."

Don looked so concerned that it took a moment before she realized that he hadn't called her Carrie.

"Carolyn?" She frowned. "Why did you call me Carolyn? Peter's the only one who calls me Carolyn. Everyone else calls me Carrie."

Don looked down at his desk for a moment before he spoke. "That's why, I guess," he said with a shrug. "Peter called you Carolyn when he told me a little about you today. Isn't that your name?"

"Yes, but just Peter calls me that," she repeated senselessly.

"From what I can tell, that's because he doesn't think of you in the same way everyone else does. I've known Peter only the few months we both been in Sunville, and I can tell he thinks you're someone special." Don smiled.

"No, he can't!" Carrie snapped loudly.

Don's surprised image became distorted by the tears that suddenly filled her eyes. "I'm sorry." She inhaled deeply and wiped at the tears.

"Why shouldn't he think you're special? He seems to be quite happy knowing you. Couldn't wait to tell me about you and wanted me to meet you. He's very excited about all the help you're giving the kids, too. He said you relate to them very well, just like he knew you would."

"No. He can't know that. He doesn't know all about me. If he did, he wouldn't feel that way about me."

She shook her head and straightened. She needed to leave. "I'm sorry, Reverend Hoag. I don't know why I let a child's anger get to me that way. With my grandmother ill and all, my nerves are frayed."

"I understand," he said kindly. "But won't you tell me--do you know what Susan was talking about?"

"Yes. I do." She waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. "Just part of my past I'm having trouble putting behind me. It keeps popping its ugly head up each time I come back to this town."

Don rose and came around to sit on the front of the desk.

"But I'm not the cause for concern here. That scene outside was created by a child who's starved for attention," she explained. "She was trying to hurt me because... well, because she sees me as competition who's drawing Peter's attention away from her. But I'm not. I'm leaving for home this week, though, so it doesn't matter."

"No, don't you see that it matters a great deal to Peter?" Don asked her. "Why are you leaving?"

"I came back to Sunville only to hire a care-giver for my grandmother. The woman will arrive this week and then I'll leave."

"What about Peter? You're going to just walk away from him?"

Carrie dug out another tissue from her purse and wiped her nose. "I must. He's too good a man to spend time with me. I'm not the type of woman for him. I don't belong here. There's no place for me in this town."

Carrie rose. "Thanks for letting me collect myself here. Children can be very cruel when they lash out. It shouldn't have bothered me, but I know a small-town rumor mill is gossip perfection."

She walked around the boxes to the door. "Thanks for caring." She opened the door and looked back at Don. "Good luck with your filing project," she added as she left. She thought she heard Don saying something as she hurried down the corridor, but she couldn't hear what it was.

Peter was leaning against the side of his car. She walked directly around his car and climbed in the far side. As they drove out of the lot, he asked, "Are you okay, Carolyn?"

Carrie nodded. "Sure. Reverend Hoag is very nice. I just needed a minute to get over the shock. I don't know why I let Susan upset me so much."

"With the way she was ranting, it's understandable."

When they pulled up in front of Maddie's house, Carrie saw the four volunteers who had spent the afternoon with her sitting on the porch.

"Carolyn, we need to talk."

"It's better if we just forget what happened." She climbed out and turned around to lean in the open door. "But Peter?"

"Yes?"

“Thanks.”

“Take care,” he responded softly with a smile.

She nodded, shut the door and walked up onto the porch, thankful to hear the car pull away behind her.

“Maddie’s taking a snooze in bed,” the ladies told her. “We’ve been checking on her every couple of minutes.”

“Thank you all for coming over here,” Carrie said.

The ladies gathered up their things and were walking around the porch to go back to the church parking lot when one turned back. “Oh, Carrie, I almost forgot. That nice young man from church--Marc’s his name, I think, came by to see you. He asked us to tell you that the whole youth group says they’re sorry. He said you’d understand.”

Carrie pinched her lips together between her teeth and nodded. “Thanks.”

The woman accepted her dismissal of the subject and resumed their walk to their cars they’d left at the church. Carrie let out the breath she’d been holding and went in to get supper started.

Later, when they ate, Maddie was still excited about her visitors that afternoon. With a memory that seemed perfect, she told Carrie all about the lovely time they’d had.

“It was such a wonderful afternoon. Don’t you think so, dear?”

#

Peter reached for the phone to call Don the minute he got home. He didn’t want the man to break a confidence of anything said between him and Carolyn, but Peter was so worried about Carolyn, he wanted whatever Don would offer him.

“I really don’t know what it’s all about, but don’t stop caring for her, Peter,” Don told him. “She needs you. If I can help, I’ll be happy to.”

“I think I’m too emotionally involved to be the one to help her,” Peter admitted.

“Try to get her to come back and see me before she leaves.”

“I’ll try, but from the look on her face when she got out of my car, I don’t think she’ll like the idea. And I don’t like the idea of her leaving without resolving what ever is troubling her so deeply. I care too much to give up hope.”

“That’s good. Say, by the way, when you told me about her, the name rang a bell. I couldn’t figure out why at first.”

“Old Sunville name. Her family has lived here for decades.”

“But that wasn’t why. I’ve been house cleaning here and found an old letter with her name on it.”

“You didn’t give it to her?”

“No. I realized it must be her after she left. She probably won’t even be interested in having it, but I’ll give it to her the next time I see her.”

Peter ended the call after thanking Don for trying to help, and sat on his couch without moving. He felt as if he’d been hit by an eighteen wheeler. When Susan had lashed out verbally at Carrie, he felt like she’d whipped him as well. He’d felt each vindictive statement physically, like real blows.

Did he really care for Carolyn in such a special and personal way that her pain would become his pain? The only answer he could come up with was yes.

He dropped his head back and closed his eyes. How could he let himself care so much? From the start he’d known that she would never consider staying in Sunville. >From the first day he had seen her when he had awakened her with the mower, she had said she hoped she wouldn’t be in town long. How could two people with such opposite goals in life end up caring for each other? Or was he imagining things when he thought she cared for him in a special way?

He slid his hands over his face. How could Susan say such things? She had even called Carolyn a murderer. Impossible. No one could believe that of her.

Peter straightened suddenly. What if the kids did believe what Susan said about Carolyn? Where did Susan hear that tale? Were there others who thought it to be true? He thought about the possibilities. Nah. Anyone who had talked to her knew it couldn’t be true. Why would she say that? And what would Peter do now? He wanted to know the whole story, but the only person he wanted to hear it from was Carolyn.

Struck with the one action he could take immediately on her behalf, he began, “Dear God.” He prayed for Carolyn and for Susan, and asked God to show him what he should do.

He always prayed to discover God’s will and the peace and contentment that accompanied it. He welcomed the inner calm and acceptance that he felt. He prayed for the same for Carolyn.

#

The following night at the church youth appreciation dinner in the fellowship hall, one of the parents of a puppet player stopped him after the dish-to-pass dinner.

“I’m hesitant to ask, but I wanted to find out just what is going on with the Whitmore woman and the youth group. I had a hard time getting the story of what happened yesterday at the puppet show out of my son after he got home, but I gather from all the shouting that was going on, something’s not right here. Are you sure she’s the type of woman who should be setting an example for the kids?”

“I’m glad you asked,” Peter began, responding to the parent. “We need to clear this up before the lies are believed and it gets blown out of proportion.”

“I think you’re right,” another parent who came up to the small conversation circle said. “Knowing what was going on would be a lot better than the conjecturing my son is doing.”

Peter glanced around at the parents and teens who were gathering their bowls and platters in preparation to going home.

“I think we should talk about this tonight. It won’t take more than a few minutes,” he promised.

Enlisting the aid of the parents beside him, they spread the word that there was a brief meeting for the parents of the puppet troupe. Five minutes later, they sat scattered around the front corner of the sanctuary.

Susan sat beside her mother, her facial expression saying she didn’t want to be there. The boys sat together and the other parents who’d been able to stay longer for the meeting sat in small clusters.

The soft-soled loafers Peter wore muffled his steps as he walked toward the alter in the front of the church. He looked up at the huge cross that hung against the stone wall behind the choir loft. “Give me a hand here,” he muttered in a brief prayer, and then he turned to face the young adults and their parents. He stepped into the second pew and sat on the back of the first, raising a foot to the edge of the seat.

“I want to thank you all for staying tonight,” Peter began. “I promise not to take a lot of your time, but I felt we needed to talk. We’re a small church in a small community, and we’ve always talked things over when any problems have come up.”

The parents and youths nodded their agreement.

“I... I hate rumors and gossip. They hurt the person that the rumors are about, and they hurt each and every person who spreads the gossip.”

He stepped into the aisle and looked around at each person there. “I’ve been asked earlier about a rumor that was repeated about an incident after the puppet show yesterday. What happened caused pain to someone I hold dear, a woman I am proud to call a friend, Carolyn Whitmore.”

Peter slid his hands into his trouser pockets and took a deep breath. “Because of that rumor, a few of you have expressed doubt in my judgement when I asked Carolyn to assist the youth group with their puppet play. I want to make it clear that thanks in part to her help that the show was a roaring success and the nursing home wants us back with the next show.”

There were several cheers and whistles from the boys at hearing the news, but they quieted down quickly.

“Carolyn had a great deal to do with that success,” Peter continued.

“Right on,” Wayne shouted as he cast a dark glance toward Susan.

“I want to straighten out the misconception and stop the rumor here and now.” Peter slowly started down the aisle.

Sitting beside her mother way in the back, Susan looked away when Peter’s gaze met hers. Her mother poked her side with her elbow.

Peter looked at Marc, sitting with his parents. “Carolyn is a kind and loving person,” Marc said.

Marc leaned forward in his pew and turned to face the others. “She came to Sunville to take care of her grandmother. She’s real nice.”

“She is generous and giving,” Peter added as he walked by a few more rows.

The new boy at the back stood up. "You know, she said she'd help with the puppet show with no strings attached. I mean, like, she just helped us 'cause she wanted to. And she gave us money for our stage fund, too. I mean, how many people do you know who'd take so much time and effort, just to be helpful? You know?" He sat down again shaking his head. Peter imagined no one ever did that where the boy had lived before.

"Carolyn has never conducted herself with anything but the utmost decorum. Carolyn is an honest, caring, and decent woman," Peter concluded forcefully as he stood beside Susan's pew.

"Then what's this all about?" Susan's mother asked. "Why'd Susan come home so upset yesterday?"

Susan didn't wait to be asked. She turned in an accusing gaze toward her mother. "I just told them what I heard you say on the telephone. You said Carolyn was a murderer... that she didn't belong here. And... and everything."

Her mother gasped and covered her open mouth with her hand. Susan slumped down into the seat and wiped off the tears that were gathering in her eyes with the back of her shirt sleeve. Her mother looked from Susan to Peter and back to Susan again. "I never said any such thing. I heard in the beauty shop that Ms. Whitmore was back in town. I did mention it to a friend on the phone. I merely said it was an awful shame that she couldn't stay and care for Maddie herself, but she belongs in Fargo where her job is. And I know I never said anything about her being a murderer." She glared at her daughter.

Susan's sobs began in earnest. "You said that... that Marilyn told you Carolyn made her boyfriend kill himself. You said that was the same as killing him herself!" she cried.

Peter's eyes opened wide at that statement. "You can't possibly believe that Carolyn was responsible for his death," he insisted. "You've got to understand that suicide is a complicated act that is often caused by a lot of things. I can't believe for a minute that Carolyn could have been the cause."

"All I know is that the boy died shortly after a car accident that left him bedridden," Susan's mother explained. "The papers said he killed himself in the nursing home after a big argument there with Carolyn. But it was years ago and they never charged her with anything." She turned to her daughter. "Why would you even bring that up now?"

Peter shook his head. He was beginning to understand why Carolyn had looked so pale when they entered the nursing home. She'd even told him she didn't want to go because of something that had happened the last time she was there. Why hadn't he listened? How could he have been so inconsiderate? But he'd deal with what he'd done later. Now he had these kids to consider.

"Do you see how repeating what you thought you heard twists and changes the words into lies?" he asked Susan, speaking slowly and deliberately. "Those lies that you put into the heads of everyone who heard you, have got to stop growing right here. Right now."

"Okay, I'm sorry," Susan mumbled. Her face fell into her hands.

"You and I are going to have a long talk tonight, young lady," her mother insisted. "And don't count on going out on weekend nights for a long time."

Susan's mother faced Peter at the end of the pew. "I'm sorry, too, Reverend. I just don't know what gets into her. I have with no husband anymore to help with the bills, and I work long hours just to pay the

rent. Maybe I'm a bad mother, but I do the best I can."

"We're not judging you. You obviously love your daughter very much or you wouldn't care what she did, and you wouldn't be here at this meeting," Peter said gently.

Marc's mother stood up. "Believe me, there isn't a parent here tonight that doesn't empathize with you. They've all been there at one time or other. The teen years are hard years to get through for most parents."

"It's no picnic for us either," Marc offered with a grin. The other kids laughed, but they all agreed with him.

"Maybe what we need is a support group for parents of teens," Peter suggested.

"Hey! You could call it POTS, Parents Of Teens Support," one of the quicker boys suggested brightly.

"We may have to work on the name, but the idea is good," one of the fathers added.

"What about the rest of you?" Peter took an informal count and most of the parents were interested in such a group. "Then what we need is a chairperson to organize it and call the first meeting," he concluded with a smile.

"My mom could do that," Marc announced. "She's great at getting me to do stuff."

"Thanks a lot," his mom teased with a gentle shove sideways in the pew.

"No prob, Mom. Anytime," Marc offered with a cocky grin.

"What about it?" Peter queried her.

"Me? Well, sure. I think the group would be good. There are lots of times I wished I had someone to talk about to make sure I'm still in touch with reality."

"Good, and I think that one of the many things we should discuss is suicide," Peter continued. "I think we can all benefit by learning more."

He ran up the aisle to the pulpit where he grabbed a pad of paper and a pencil from the shelf and came back. "Everyone write down your names, address and phone numbers to make it easy for our new chairperson. You'd better add your work numbers if you can take calls there. Let me know when you set your first meeting."

He handed the pad to the nearest parent to start filling out. "Thank you all for staying tonight."

Everyone rose and a few of the boys circled Peter in the aisle. The problem of the rumor solved, their agile minds had already shot on to the next item.

"Hey, man, my mom works at the hospital. She's in pedes. That's pediatrics for you dummies," Tim added, looking around at his friends.

"Thanks, dummy," the friends chorused back.

“Anyway, ya know, she says it would be great if we could do our puppet show up there in the ward. They have this big playroom and the kids that are up there, the ones with cancer and stuff, and they would really enjoy the play.”

“That’s ‘cause we’re such fine puppeteers,” the new boy bragged.

“Oh, give me a break,” another demanded.

“Tell you what, I’ll call her and see what she has in mind,” Peter offered.

“I’ll tell her you’re going to. She couldn’t come tonight, by the way, ‘cause she had to work. I didn’t tell her nothing about what happened after the puppet show. She gets enough grief nursing really sick kids every day.”

Peter patted Tim on the back, and the boys walked toward their parents. General laughter and individual conversations echoed in the emptying church as the gathering broke up.

After they had all left, Peter switched off the lights and locked up the church. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so tired. Now he knew what “bone weary” meant because that’s how deep it went.

Before climbing into his car, he looked over at Maddie’s house. The faint glow on the first floor must be a night light for Maddie, he concluded. Upstairs there was only one lighted window, the corner room on the back of the house. No wonder his mowing had awakened her.

He thought about her feeling so miserable and wanted to go tell her everything would be all right. He wanted to see her looking happy again, smiling her beautiful smile just for him.

Instead, he ducked into his car and headed home.

Chapter Ten

The next morning just after breakfast, Maddie’s lawn service workers came to cut the fast-growing turf and trim the bushes. At the first sounds of their mower, Carrie’s thoughts were of Peter and how she had mistaken him for a gardener. How could she have known otherwise? She’d never realized that ministers could have so many muscles, such a gorgeous smile, or such intense eyes.

This wasn’t the first time since she’d climbed out of his car Sunday afternoon that she’d thought about him. In fact, try as she might, she couldn’t stop thinking about him. Even busying herself with Maddie’s housekeeping duties didn’t keep her mind from creating his image. It would be more difficult that she imagined to stop thinking about him. She knew she would never forget him--even when she was long gone.

More than that, Carrie had to admit that she cared a great deal for him, but she could never let him

know. She couldn't stay and take the chance of hurting his reputation any further. Some day soon, she was certain, he would find a woman to marry and live happily with here in Sunville.

The phone ringing brought her out of her reverie. "Hello?"

"Hi. It's Joyce Barret. I'm calling to ask if I can start the job there earlier than we planned? My son's kids have the chicken pox and instead of going there Thursday for a couple days, I could come to Sunville Wednesday--tomorrow evening."

"Yes. That's wonderful. Oh, no. I mean, I'm sorry to hear about your grandkids being sick, but I'd love you to start earlier than we planned. I could get back to my job sooner--while I still have one to get back to." And I can get out of Peter's life, she added silently.

Carrie hadn't gotten ten feet from the phone after Joyce's call when it rang again. Her "hello" was greeted this time with a "Good morning" from that baritone voice she was so certain she would never forget.

"Hi, Peter," she responded weakly.

"Are you feeling okay this morning?"

"Yes. Thanks," she said in a voice she hoped sounded stronger so he wouldn't worry any more on her account. "I'm just not used to working with teenagers. Their raging hormones are very volatile. Susan was just letting off steam Sunday."

"You're right on that score," he said brightly. "Say, if Don helped, I know he'd be glad. He's a nice guy to get to know so don't ever hesitate if you want to call him. He'd like it if you went back to see him."

"Sure," she responded, wanting to change the subject but not knowing what to say. "Thanks."

"So. What do you have planned for this afternoon?"

"You mean besides making gelatin for Maddie?" Carrie responded.

"Likes the stuff that much, does she?" Peter asked.

"Can't seem to get enough," Carrie answered with a laugh.

"Good. You're laughing again."

The smile flew from her face as fast as he had been able to put it there in the first place. "Um. What was it you called about, Peter?"

"I want to see you. Will you go for a swing ride with me on your front porch while Maddie takes her nap this afternoon?"

"Peter, I'm leaving town as soon as I can. I... I don't think your coming over is such a good idea." She had to stay away from him, but she hadn't realized how hard it would be.

"No, I think it's a great idea. I'll be there at three," he said quickly before he hung up.

Carrie stared at the receiver in her hand as the dial tone clicked on. She dropped it back into its cradle and snatched back her hand quickly as if it had burned her fingers.

Peter was coming in four and a half hours. No, four hours and twenty minutes, but who was counting? Not Carrie. In fact, she tried not to think at all about him coming. In the following two hours, she got several day's work done at the house. At least that's what working so hard felt like when she finally slowed down.

By two-thirty, Maddie had stopped crocheting and was napping in bed with a calming Strauss waltz on the stereo to keep sounds from outdoors or the phone from waking her.

Carrie ran up the stairs two at a time, determined to squeeze in a shower in the time she had left. Crescents of dirt decorated the ends of her fingernails from pulling weeds along the porch. Her hair had wilted under her hat in the hot sun.

She smiled thinking how Maddie had enjoyed sitting in the shade of the porch. The fresh air made Maddie want to rest early, but then, she seemed to nap more each day.

Tearing off her dirty jeans and blouse, Carrie tossed them on a chair and took a quick shower and washed her hair. She ran into her bedroom, deciding to skip makeup as she had most days since returning to Sunville.

She dressed in pleated cotton slacks and a light blouse. Over that she layered a long lacy vest. She slipped into her sandals and was leaving to go downstairs when she realized she had forgotten her belt. With that on, she decided she'd better do a final check in the mirror.

Her hair. Still wet from the shower, she'd completely forgotten to dry or even brush it!

Minutes later in the kitchen, Carrie leaned against the refrigerator, waiting for her breathing rate to approach normal. Usually very efficient, she couldn't understand her loss of concentration lately. What was the matter with her? At work her boss piled on dozens of detailed jobs and she handled them all without a problem. Now she was so distracted she couldn't remember simple everyday tasks like brushing her hair after she washed it.

She opened the refrigerator and stared into it, suddenly unable to remember why she'd opened it. She slammed the door and whirled around to lean against the counter, her hands clutching the edge.

"Stop doing this to me, Peter! God, make him stop!" she ordered aloud. She shook her head. Now what was she doing? God didn't have the time to worry about such a small thing as her problem in the face of everything else going on in the world. He'd already proved that by deserting her and letting Ralph die.

Carrie tamped down the memories that began to flood her consciousness. "I'm not going over that again," she vowed.

Eventually she remembered she'd wanted to make lemonade. She went back to the refrigerator a second time for the ingredients. The cook drinks were almost ready when she heard his car pull in the driveway. She met him at the door. Just as she was about to ask if he wanted to come in or sit on the porch, Maddie called out asking who was at the door.

"It's Reverend Newhouse, Grandma," Carrie answered as she opened the door and invited Peter in

with a wave of her arm. "Are you up to company?" she asked as they entered the refurbished dining cum bedroom.

"The pastor's always welcome, dear."

"Afternoon, Maddie," Peter greeted her cheerfully. "You're looking lovely as ever." He went right to her bed and sat down on the side, taking her hand in his.

"Go on with you," Maddie chided. "I don't imagine for one minute that you came to see me, young man."

"Young man am I now? I'll be thirty-two this fall, Maddie. That's not exactly young."

"Tish tosh. You've still got plenty of time to raise a bunch of kids of your own, your know. They would fill up those Sunday school classes." Maddie chuckled at her joke that left Carrie feeling unaccountably sad.

"And who do you think would marry me, Maddie? Besides putting up with me around the house, being a preacher's wife isn't a duty that I've found myself willing to burden a woman with yet. It would take a very special woman."

"You'll find one, Peter. Maybe you'll find one as good as Carrie would be."

Carrie felt the heat rise to color her cheeks. "I... I'll go get us all some lemonade." She ducked into the kitchen, but she could still hear part of the conversation in the next room.

"I'd consider myself lucky if I found one exactly like Carrie. Very lucky. She'd make a very compassionate and loving pastor's wife."

Carrie couldn't hear Maddie's response. Maybe there wasn't one. Heaven knew, she'd said enough already, too much. Carrie made noise getting ice and dropping it into the glasses so she wouldn't have to listen anymore. She lifted out the pitcher from the refrigerator and filled the glasses.

"We were married right there in the church," Maddie was saying when Carrie returned with the tray of drinks. "We moved into this house right after our honeymoon in Detroit Lakes. Lived here ever since. I love this old house. Carrie does, too. Remember when you used to tell me you were going to raise a family here like I did, Carrie?"

"That was a long time ago when I was a child and not worth bringing up now," Carrie insisted. Especially not with Peter here listening, she added to herself. "Here's something cool to drink, Grandma."

Peter took a glass from the small tray before she took her own. "Thanks. I thought I smelled freshly squeezed lemons," he said before taking several swallows and smiling. "Mmmm."

"Carrie makes delicious old-fashioned lemonade from real lemons," Maddie told him proudly. "That's the best kind."

"Not the easiest kind though, Grandma, but I think it tastes the best."

Peter agreed. "Maddie was just telling me about this house. It's such a noble old structure. The really

strong ones that are cared for lovingly last through the test of time.”

Maddie looked up at Carrie. “Dear, why don’t you show Peter around the house?” She turned to Peter with a smile. “Would you like to see the rest?”

“That’s a great idea. I’d love to see it. You don’t mind if we leave you alone for a few minutes?”

“Not at all. John may be here soon to keep me company.”

Carrie frowned and glanced at Peter. He nodded. “If you need anything, just call out, Grandma,” Carrie said.

Peter and Carrie set their glasses back on the tray Carrie had placed on the end of the dresser.

“No fair drinking our lemonade while we’re gone, now Maddie,” Peter teased.

“Oh, go on!” Maddie smiled easily and waved them away.

Carrie could see no way to get out of taking him on a tour. “You’ve already seen most of the house.”

They walked into the living room and Peter went to the fireplace. He looked at the eight-by-ten, framed family portraits lined up on the mantle. He pointed to the one of her grandparents. “This is her husband, John, she talks about?”

Carrie nodded and he moved on to the next photo. “Before my folks died, they used to live up by the new consolidated grade school. That’s where I was raised, but we came here to Grandma’s house every Sunday for dinner after church.”

“Sounds like an ideal childhood. I think this would be a great place to raise kids.”

Carrie sighed as a feeling of sadness washed over her. Not noticing the slump in her shoulders, Peter leaned over to see the faces in the last photo. “And that’s your sister?”

“Yes. Don’t her girls look just like her?” Carrie asked proudly. Peter nodded.

They strolled into the foyer and stopped at the foot of the stairs. Peter rubbed his hand over the smooth newel post. “Do I get to see the rest of upstairs?” Peter asked with a mischievous grin. “Or didn’t you make your bed?”

Carrie responded with a chastising raised eyebrow and she led the way up the stairs. She couldn’t stop the smile that managed to sneak onto her face before she turned away from him.

Her hand wouldn’t slide along the hand rail as it usually did. She was surprised to discover that the reason was that her palms were damp. Inhaling deeply, she quickened her steps. She wanted to get the tour over quickly.

“I can’t get over the carved-wood panels here in the hall and back in the dining room,” Peter remarked, running his fingers over the decorative wood panels covering the wall beside the stairs. “It gives the house such a warm and wonderful feeling.” His hands slid over the smooth surface of the railing.

“I don’t think you can find craftsmanship like that any more.”

“Not that any of us could afford.”

At the top of the stairway, he surveyed the hall and pointed toward the smaller set of stairs going up at the far end. “Another floor above this one?”

She nodded. “An attic. It’s tall enough to stand up across the middle. Grandma used it for storage. My sister and I used to play up there as kids when it was too cold to go outside which happens a lot in the winter. I used to look out the windows, across town to the fields beyond and wish I could fly away from Sunville with the wind.”

“You’ve wanted to leave town since you were that young?”

She nodded. “That’s how I got my start at writing. I used to write stories about the adventures of a girl very much like me. She traveled and got to do everything I wanted to do.”

Peter turned away, but Carrie caught a glimpse of a frown as they strolled a few feet down the hall. He looked at doorways. “Six bedrooms?” he asked. The frown had disappeared.

“Um, there were six, but Grandpa converted one in the middle into two big modern bathrooms. You enter one from the master bedroom and the other from the hall here. The sixth room is a little one off the master bedroom that doesn’t have a door to the hall. I think it was supposed to be a nursery,” she finished weakly, wishing she hadn’t mentioned it at all. She took a few steps, hoping the fluttery feeling she felt thinking about the nursery would pass.

He stepped into each room, including the one Carrie was obviously occupying. “I see you made your bed,” he teased.

“Whew! Are you lucky,” she jested dramatically as she wiped her brow with the back of her hand. Peter laughed.

“Grandma made that quilted bedspread.” Carrie noticed her gardening clothes dumped on the chair and quickly ushered him down the hall. “She made all of these except the one on her own bed.”

Peter had already seen one of the guest bedrooms when he helped move the dresser from there downstairs for Maddie to use along with the rented hospital bed. They went on into the master bedroom.

The tall, elegant four-poster bed dominated the room. The matching dressers of rich polished mahogany shone beautifully. She could smell the lilac-scented talc that Maddie used. She ran her fingers over the handmade quilt that served as the spread on the bed. “This quilt had been here as long as I can remember. My great-grandmother made this one.”

“It’s beautiful, the stitches so tiny and even,” Peter said, examining it from the foot of the bed.

Carrie’s lips curled into a sad smile. “I love this room. Grandma must have hated to give it up to move downstairs.” The swirled post at the foot of the bed felt cool beneath her fingertips. “The metal bed I rented must be disappointing after sleeping in this beauty.”

Peter walked through the open door into the little adjacent room. “If not a nursery, this would make a great study. A person could work late while their spouse slept.”

"I suppose you're right," Carrie replied absently. Her thumb slid along the groove that circled down the bed post. Looking down at the quilt, she thought about what a life here might have been like if her early childhood dreams of raising her own family here had come true.

When Peter put his hand over hers on the post, her head jerked up and her gaze darted to meet his.

"Your grandmother's lucky to have someone like you to look after her," he said softly. "You're quite special, Carolyn."

She shook her head to deny his conclusion. "No," she whispered. "Not at all. I'm just doing what I have to do because I love her."

Peter nodded and raised his free hand to caress her cheek. His hand felt warm and strong.

"And may I do what I have to do, Carolyn?" He looked at her mouth and then back to her eyes.

Her brows wrinkled. This is Peter, Maddie's pastor. No. I'm kidding myself. This is Peter, the man I'm falling in love with, she finally admitted to herself, all the while wishing it weren't true.

"I do have to kiss you," he said.

Carrie looked at his lips. She remembered how they had felt when they had rested on hers for those few seconds the week before. They moved closer as she watched them.

Was he moving toward her or was she leaning toward him? She couldn't keep her eyes open. He disappeared from sight as the warmth of his lips touched hers.

After just a few moments, Carrie felt the gentle weight lift from her lips. Her eyelids felt too heavy to open. She wanted to remain in the dark, blindly trusting him as she had trusted no other man.

"Carolyn," he whispered. His fingers threaded back into her hair and cradled her head. His quickened breaths puffed against her cheek. Lemons. Carrie could smell the scent of the tangy fruit from their lemonade.

Her eyes flickered open to gaze into his for a few seconds before his mouth once again covered hers.

Suddenly he tore his lips from hers and stepped away. His hand dropped from her cheek, taking the warmth with it. He turned away and stood with his back to her. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I kissed you, Carolyn."

Carrie smothered her gasp with her hand. How could he feel sorry about something so sweet as his kiss?

Peter ran his hands through his hair. "I shouldn't have done that. I want you to know I didn't ask for the tour of this beautiful house to get you alone up here to kiss you." He spun back to face her and held out his hand palm up in a pleading motion. It fell to his side with a slap. "I'm truly sorry."

Carrie felt as if he'd slapped her. He was sorry he kissed her. His kiss had been so lovely that Carrie hadn't wanted him to stop. No one had ever kissed her like that or made her feel that way, not even Ralph. Why was Peter sorry? He must not have liked it. She probably had done it wrong. How was she supposed to know it was going terribly wrong when it had felt so wonderful?

“Forgive me?” he asked.

Carrie shook her head and dropped her hand from the bed post to her side. “No, there’s no need,” she managed. “You’ve done nothing that needs forgiving.”

She stepped beyond him out into the hall. Still feeling shaken, she leaned her hand on the banister railing to assure herself a safe decent. She didn’t look back, but she could hear Peter coming after her. Once downstairs, a quick peek told her Maddie was asleep again. She turned back to see Peter standing by the front door, staring through the screen. She walked back into the hall, but stood well behind him.

Peter pushed off from the door frame and stepped over to face her. Carrie felt too embarrassed at what had happened to look up. She looked at her hands, knotted at her waist.

“When does Maddie’s new housekeeper begin?”

“Housekeeper?” She looked up in surprise. “Ah... Thursday. She’s moving in late Wednesday night.”

Peter nodded. “We have a rehearsal Thursday after school for the puppet show. The kids are performing on Sunday morning for the whole church and the following weekend they have a command performance at the hospital. Can you come help them get ready?”

“After what happened at the nursing home, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“That’s been cleared up. The group talked about it after the youth dinner Monday. Susan lashed out and you happened to catch her wrath.”

Carrie shook her head. “I’m sorry. I just can’t. My helping is just not a good idea.”

“Believe me, it would be a great idea. You’re a big help. The kids are lucky to have you.”

If only that were true, Carrie wished. She would love helping the children with their play again. She liked being active in the friendly fellowship of a church instead of being an invisible visitor who slipped into the back pew and slipped out again at the close of the service, never meeting anyone, never establishing any ties that would draw her back the following week. Being a part of a church like this might fill the giant void that she’d felt in her life since Ralph died, but she couldn’t fill that void here, and she couldn’t encourage Peter to want her to.

“No, Peter. I’m sorry. I can’t.” And I must stay away from you, she thought.

“What if I can prove to you that your coming to help is a good idea, that the kids really want your help? Will you come then?”

“There’s no way to prove that.”

He reached to take her hands in his. He swept his thumb back and forth across her knuckles. “But if I could prove the kids want and need you?”

Wanting him to stop trying to wear her down, she finally agreed. “Okay, okay. If you can prove that the young people want me there, then I’ll come.”

“Great. See you Thursday,” he said before he left.

Chapter Eleven

“Excuse me,” Carrie said as she approached the counter at the doctor’s office to talk to the nurse. “I’ve come to pick up the menus for the care-giver to use as a guide for Maddie Whitmore’s meals.”

“Be right with you,” the nurse responded.

“Say. Aren’t you the lady who was with the kids who did the puppet show at the nursing home?” the middle-aged woman in a seat across from Carrie asked. She lowered her magazine to her lap when Carrie nodded. “I was there visiting my mother and watched the show,” the woman continued. “I don’t know if Mom understood it, but she always seems to be happier when groups come in to perform like that. I just wanted to say thank you.”

Carrie smiled. “The kids were happy to do it. They had a lot of... of fun,” she responded.

“The kids are lucky to have you to help them out. So many people just don’t care about old people nowadays. If they only knew the wonderful good that even a little of their time visiting a nursing home would do.”

“I’ll tell the kids that you said thanks.” She smiled and turned back to the nurse’s desk to take the menus.

She certainly hadn’t meant to, but she’d told the woman an untruth. She wouldn’t be able to pass on her thanks for the puppet show because she wouldn’t be seeing the kids again. She tamped down her wishful thinking and concentrated on driving to the next place on her list.

The stop at the in-home-aide service didn’t take long. She signed the contracts for the workers that would come in every other weekend and stay with Maddie on Joyce’s time off. This arrangement would not be easy to manage from Fargo, but Carrie was determined to make it work. She wanted Maddie to be able to live at home as long as possible. And Joyce was very dependable, Carrie felt. That went a long way to making this whole arrangement acceptable and workable.

During the drive back to Maddie’s house, Carrie went over and over every eventuality that she could think of in arranging things for Maddie’s care. Groceries and medications were to be delivered.

The Food Transit was a grocery delivery service run by one of the older and smaller grocery stores that was losing business to the big new and brightly-lit store on the edge of town. To keep their customers, they offered in-town delivery for not much more than the cost of the food, plus what the delivery people could earn in tips for their fast and friendly service.

The ladies from church offered to come over to help, but Carrie wanted to set things up to save their

kind offer as a backup for emergencies rather than for tasks that had to be done often.

It has to work. It will work, she told herself as she pulled in Maddie's driveway. She braked hard beside the porch instead of going to the back where she could unload the groceries more easily. She turned off the ignition and stared at the big wrap-around porch.

Eight teenagers sat in the chairs, on the swing, and draped over the railing or sitting on the steps. Maddie sat in her favorite, green-padded chair with the wide arms. Joyce, who'd arrived as promised the evening before, sat next to her on the matching-style chair in a rust pattern.

Beside the door stood Peter.

"There she is," the kids called as several poured off the porch toward the car.

Carrie climbed out warily, glancing from one to another. "What... what are you all doing here?"

"We were waiting for you. We're ready for rehearsal, but we wanted you to watch it to be sure we're doing it right," Marc announced. "Peter just tells us we're doing great, but you gave us some great hints about handling the puppets and projecting our voices. We need more help like that."

"We're performing for the home crowd at church Sunday. It's gotta be fine. Ya gotta help us, Carolyn," Wayne pleaded.

"You'll all do fine. You did a great job at... at the nursing home," Carrie said tentatively. She wasn't sure she wanted to bring up the subject, but they didn't seem to be bothered by it.

She seized the opportunity to tell them about the thank you from the woman she talked to in the doctor's office. She felt better about not having fibbed after all. "She said you all did a wonderful job," she concluded.

Two of the boys each raised a hand for a high five over their heads. "You got that right," one of them said. "But we gotta do even better Sunday. Gotta keep the home crowd happy."

The other kids laughed. Carrie glanced up at Peter to see him still leaning casually against the house, a knowing smile on his face. His words about proving to her that the kids wanted her help echoed in her memory. He's done it, she thought as she surveyed the expectant faces around her.

Wondering how he had managed it, she turned to the rear of her car and opened the small trunk to lift out the grocery bags. Seeing what she was doing, the kids took the bags and headed into the house. Joyce rose from her seat to lead them to the kitchen to put the food away.

With fewer present, Carrie noticed Susan standing by the porch steps. She was playing with a blade of grass. Another glance up told Carrie that Peter hadn't moved an inch.

Carrie slammed the empty trunk and reached into the car for her purse before walking toward the steps. She thought it would be best to just walk past Susan and let bygones be exactly that.

"Carolyn?" Susan's voice was so quiet that Carrie almost missed it. Susan's eyes glistened with the beginnings of tears she was fighting.

"I hope you'll help us with the play. I... I'm sorry for what I said Sunday."

The child's lip trembled, but Carrie hadn't seen a greater display of courage in a long time. When she'd been a teenager herself, she wondered if she would have had that much.

Stepping beside Susan, Carrie gave the girl's shoulder an assuring pat. "Thank you for telling me. And if you think I could help with the puppet show, then I don't see how I could refuse."

Carrie looked up to see Peter grinning. "Carolyn said she would help us," he called out loudly to the kids coming out of the house who voiced their immediate approval.

"Thank you," Peter mouthed silently before he straightened and stepped over to Maddie. "Thanks for sharing your porch with this bunch, Mrs. Whitmore. Hope we weren't too noisy for you."

That was all the signal the kids needed to take off at a run for the church. The groceries put away, Joyce came out on the porch. Peter put out his hand to shake hers. She appeared quite delighted by the gesture.

"Thank you, too," Peter said to Joyce. "If there's ever any problem, be sure to call the church. We're just a minute away."

"I'll remember that, Reverend."

"Please, you're welcome to call me Peter like everyone else. And you're welcome at services on Sunday morning, too. We want you to get to know folks around here so you can feel at home, too."

"Thanks. That's kind of you."

Peter stepped in front of Maddie's chair. "You bring Joyce on over when you're feeling up to it, and I'll stop in now and then to see you, too."

"You're always welcome." Maddie raised her arms to him, inviting his hug as if he were family. He leaned over to receive the loving gesture. He kissed her sun-warmed cheek and then walked down the steps to Carrie. He took her hand and entwined his fingers between hers. "Ready?"

Carrie looked into the depths of his amazing eyes and marveled at the feeling of strength that his touch imparted to her. "I didn't think you could do it."

"I know you didn't. That's why you agreed to help again, isn't it?"

She inhaled deeply and nodded.

"You've got to have faith." He squeezed her hand. "Let's go."

"See you later, Grandma," she said with a wave as they walked around the house hand-in-hand. She looked up at Peter. "But what did you do? How did you get them to do that?"

"We merely talked about what happened. They're smart kids. None of them believed Susan. They also know a good thing when they see it. You were a big help and we all wanted you back."

Keeping hold on her hand, he let her step through the pass in the bushes first. When he stepped through, he gently pulled on her back to him. He raised his other hand to hold her waist.

“I wanted you back,” he added simply. “I don’t know the whole story of what happened to your fiancé and the kids don’t either. They don’t need to know, but when you’re ready to tell me, I’d like to hear it from you, instead of from someone else.”

“Please, Peter, just forget about it. I won’t be here long enough for it to matter.”

“There’s where you’re wrong. It matters already, doesn’t it?”

Before she could say anything or move an inch, he kissed her--right there, outdoors on the church lawn, in front of God and anybody else looking their way.

Carrie was shocked into forgetting about the story he wanted to hear, but she hadn’t forgotten what he thought of their last kiss upstairs in the house. The second he lifted his head, she asked, “And now are you sorry you kissed me this time, too?”

“Sorry I kissed you? Never.” His chuckle rumbled in his chest.

“But when I showed you around Maddie’s house, you said you were sorry you kissed me.”

“No, no. I wasn’t sorry I kissed you. I was sorry I’d inappropriately picked your grandmother’s bedroom as the site.” He smiled. “I could never be sorry I kissed you.”

Before she had a chance to respond, he tugged on her hand to resume their trek to the church. She started to giggle. She couldn’t remember the last time she felt like giggling with joy.

“And if you like it,” he bragged with a wink at her over his shoulder. “There’s plenty more where that one came from.”

The giggle she couldn’t contain any longer burst out into a laugh. Peter laughed as well and tugged on her arm to get her moving faster across the lawn. “Come on. The fellowship hall will be in a shambles by the time we get there.”

The metal door on the side of the church squeaked open. “Are you guys coming?” Marc called from the doorway.

“We’re coming. We’re coming,” Peter called and broke into a run with Carrie right along side. “Give us old folks a break.”

#

After the brief rehearsal, Carrie spent the remainder of the day showing Joyce where everything was kept in the house and making sure she understood Maddie’s routine and medication regime. She didn’t see any value to getting back to Fargo to work for only half a day Friday after spending the morning driving back, so she decided to remain for the puppet rehearsal Saturday morning, too.

The run-through was a disaster compared to Thursday’s. Two of the puppeteers had to work that morning. The remaining cast got good experience at filling in, but they weren’t happy with the results.

“As I understand it, if a final dress rehearsal is real bad, then the performance is always great,” Carrie said, trying to encourage them.

“But we really stink. We couldn’t get through one scene without stopping.”

“But your projection is better and the hand puppets only looked like a leaning towers once in a while,” Carrie said, trying to be encouraging. “By the time the curtain falls at the end of the show tomorrow, you won’t remember how bad rehearsal was today.”

“Think positively,” Peter urged. “I... We both,” he corrected, stepping over and reaching to hold Carrie’s hand. “We both have faith in you. Besides, if you make a goof or two, it’s not the end of the world.”

Carrie felt the warmth of his hand on hers. It’s Peter’s hand and I shouldn’t get to liking it there. Yet she couldn’t step away.

“Okay, that’s it. Let’s pack it all up exactly as we want to have it for the show tomorrow morning.”

Carrie looked up at Peter as he spoke. His gaze met hers as the kids scattered to put the stage away. He smiled down at her for a second or two before he dropped her hand with a little squeeze and went to help.

Carrie could almost hear her heart tear when he stepped away from her. Struggling to regain her composure while wishing she hadn’t stayed for the weekend, she waved to the kids leaving the social hall. “Break a leg,” she called in the traditional way in the theater of wishing them good luck with the show.

They called their thanks in a chorus as they went out the door. “See you tomorrow,” Marc called.

Carrie nodded and smiled, but she knew at that moment that they would not be seeing her tomorrow. She couldn’t come to church and then watch the puppet show afterwards by these young people she would miss so much.

Feeling thankful that she’d been able to help, she felt confident they would do a great job without her as they had at the nursing home. The congregation would be supportive of them and so would Peter.

Peter. Dear Peter. She would miss Peter the most, but he was the very reason she shouldn’t have stayed in Sunville for today. His affection had lulled her into thinking a relationship between the two of them was all right, that she could forget the tragedy she caused years ago, but she could not.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Peter said coming up behind her.

“Oh,” Carrie gasped with a little jump and a nervous laugh. “I was a thousand miles away.”

“Don’t want that. You’ll be too far away, and too soon, as it is.”

She smiled thinking how well he’d read her mind. “Speaking of leaving, I want to thank you, Peter, for all you’ve done for Maddie and for me. You’ve been very supportive. I can see you’re very good for the people in your church.”

He looked at her strangely, almost as if he didn’t understand what she said. “Thanks, but that’s such a pretty speech, it has the ring of a goodbye. You make it sound like you’re leaving today when even tomorrow afternoon is too soon for you to go.”

Carrie tried to smile, but turned away because she didn't think she could fake it well enough to fool him.

Peter pushed the chair cart the short distance to stand by the wall and walked over to stand a few inches from her. It occurred to her then that he didn't wear fancy-smelling aftershave like the men in her office. He didn't need to. She liked him this way. He was just... Peter.

"Well, I'm going to leave so you can get to work on your sermon," Carrie said as brightly as she could. She quickly walked to the door and looked back. She wanted to memorize every detail of his face so she would never forget. The dark lashes over those sparkling eyes, his strong chin, and the fact that his lower lip was fuller than the other.

I love you, Peter, she wanted to say, but she couldn't... not ever. She would always be grateful for the hours she'd spent with him, however. Being with him had made her feel happy for the first time in... the first time ever.

Thinking back, she remembered Ralph and all the reasons she couldn't ever be happy with Peter. She remembered all the reasons she would only hurt him.

"So long." She turned and blindly ran to Maddie's house, tears streaming down her cheeks.

#

"My cases are all in the car and I put in the sandwiches you made for me. Thanks, Joyce. That will give me something to eat when I get home to a moldy refrigerator." She wrinkled up her nose.

"Happy to do it. You're sure there's nothing else you need?"

"No, and you have the list of phone numbers, right?"

"There's a list at each telephone. Now don't you worry. We'll be just fine. You know I've been caring for folks for the service for the past six years."

After saying goodbye to Peter at the church after rehearsal, Carrie had decided she must leave as soon as possible without seeing him again. The sooner she was out of his life, the sooner he could find the right woman to be his helpmate.

She'd spent the last hour packing her clothes and going over the duties once again with Joyce. "I'm being a real pain in the neck, aren't I?"

"No, dear. You're being a loving and concerned granddaughter. Maddie's lucky to have you to look after her."

"Thanks, Joyce. Thanks for being so patient."

"Seems to me you've thought of everything. I've never worked for anyone who had things so organized for me. Everything will go smooth as egg custard, but if something comes up, I'll just call."

"Carrie is that you?" Maddie's weak voice reached them from the dining room as they walked down the stairs.

Carrie set her purse by the front door and walked in to sit on the side of Maddie's bed. Her grandmother was dressed and lying on top of the bedding with a light throw over her legs and the head inclined a little. She looked so thin, so frail. So old.

"I'm glad you woke up, Grandma," Carrie said, doing her best to sound cheerful. "It's time for me to leave for home. I wanted to say goodbye, but I hated to wake you up."

"You have to leave so soon? You just got here yesterday."

Carrie smiled with understanding. "No, Grandma. I've been here for weeks." Her grandmother frowned. "And I've loved spending the time with you. I'm going home today, but I'll be back before you know it to see how you're doing. And I'll call you often in the meantime."

"That'll be nice. And don't worry about me," Maddie said patting the back of Carrie's hand. "The good Lord looks after me."

Carrie leaned over to kiss Maddie's fragile cheek and felt her grandmother's boney fingers squeeze her arm.

"I'll check with my boss on Monday, Grandma, and find out when I can come for another long stay. For the next few weekends, though, I'll have to catch up on things at work and at home. I hate to think what the inside of my refrigerator looks like."

Standing up, Carrie glanced at Joyce. "If Maddie's up to it, I hope you can go to church in the morning. When I call in the evening, I'd love to hear all about how the puppet show goes."

"Will do," Joyce promised. "You drive careful now, ya hear?"

"Will do," Carrie mimicked with a smile. She turned to Maddie. "Bye, Grandma. I love you."

"I love you, too, dear, but you're the one I want to see happy. All that business years ago with Ralph was tragic, but it's not something to blame yourself for. That boy brought it on himself."

Carrie tried to speak, but Maddie went right on with a strength Carrie didn't know she had. "You do so much to make me happy, and now it's high time for you to allow someone to make you happy."

A glimpse of Peter's grinning face flickered in her mind, but she repressed it. Grandma didn't know about the letter that had pushed Ralph over the edge so she didn't know that Carrie truly was guilty for what happened to Ralph. There was no reason to go over that with Maddie and get them both upset all over again.

Carrie smiled to put up a good front. "Someday, Grandma. Someday."

She kissed Maddie once more and turned to walk to the doorway to the foyer where she blew her another kiss. "See you soon."

At the moment, Carrie couldn't see clearly through the tears that filled her eyes. She swiped at them with the backs of her hands before she picked up her purse from the hall table and went out to her car. A couple of blocks down the street, she had to pull over to blow her nose and pat away fresh tears.

Besides leaving her ill grandmother, Carrie was leaving behind so many other people she'd come to

love, and she was driving toward a place where there was no one she loved, only people she tolerated. At least there they didn't know about the part she had played in Ralph's death and they had never asked her what happened. The irony didn't escape her as she put the car in gear and headed for the county highway out of Sunville.

If only there was someone or something in the city to make her happy. As she drove she tried to think of who or what. She came up with a blank--a blank to match the void she felt in her life.

By the time she got to her apartment, Carrie had decided she could not ever remember a time in her life when she had felt more lonely or more miserable.

#

"Here are the galleys for the final puppet play in the series," Carrie told her boss, Marilyn, as she laid the long sheets on her desk. "I've marked the changes that need to be made by the printer. There aren't very many."

"Good. Leave them there," Marilyn said with a wave of her hand, but without lifting her gaze from the galley sheets she was marking with a red pencil.

Carrie dropped a type-written sheet on top of the galleys. "Ah, I've written a couple of paragraphs you might use as a sidebar with the lead-in. It's based on my experiences with some kids doing one of the earlier shows."

"When was that?" her boss said, looking surprised.

"When I went to take care of my grandmother. The kids at her church performed one of them for the nursing home, the hospital, places like that."

Her boss pointed to her with the pencil eraser. "I thought you went home because your grandmother needed you so much. Instead you were playing with puppets?"

"I explained I had to wait for the care-giver to move in so I could leave. I only helped the kids a couple of times."

"Listen. I'm the one who needs your help. I pay your salary to help me, not some kids doing a puppet show, and I'm not paying for you to be gone any more."

Carrie winced and turned to leave. There was no sense in arguing. She stopped at the door and looked back at the woman sitting behind the paper-littered desk.

She hated to ask about it now, but she had to know. "Ah... Have you thought about my taking a Friday or a Monday off each month to have a long weekend to visit my grandmother, instead of taking the yearly vacation time all at once?"

"What? Oh, that's not a problem for the weeks that have holidays that you get off on Monday anyway. You've used up your vacation time for the year so from now on we'll have to take it month by month."

Carrie was disappointed, but she understood. She nodded and reached for the door knob. "Can you let me know the next time you can spare me? It's been two weeks since I left. I'd like to go back just to be sure things are going smoothly."

“Sure. Sure,” her boss responded with no conviction. “Go on the weekends or holidays, but no more missing work days until you earn vacation time again.” She picked up the galley keys Carrie had set on her desk and started through them without paying another moment’s more attention to her assistant.

Feeling dismissed, Carrie sighed and went back to her work station cubicle. Her boss did not understand how she felt being far away from the people she loved and worried about. Carrie found herself wondering uncharitably if Marilyn even had anyone she loved or worried about.

Carrie didn’t want to think about her now. In a few hours her work week would be ended and she had a two-day break ahead of her.

Chapter Twelve

Carrie had worked at the office most of the day her first Saturday back in Fargo. After that she managed to squeeze in nothing more done than washing the mound of laundry and getting her hair cut at a no-appointment salon at the mall west of Fargo.

This second weekend, she had a lot of apartment cleaning to catch up on. Well, it was better than sitting at her desk in the office for on another Saturday. At least cleaning the apartment would be easier than cleaning out her refrigerator had been the night she got home. She hadn’t known molds grew in so many colors.

Saturday disappeared as Carrie waged full-scale war on dirt and germs. That evening, she turned a full circle, looking around her living room. She had to smile. The little place looked great. She’d always felt better with her rooms clean, even though this time it had taken all day. She agreed with Joyce; the lived-in look was fine, as long as it was clean. She felt good being tired from physical labor and not just exhausted from worry about her grandmother.

By Sunday afternoon, the apartment not only looked good, but it smelled good, too. Skipping church that morning as she did most weeks in Fargo, Carrie decided to do something adventurous in the kitchen--just for the fun of it. She picked something she’d always wanted to try--baking bread.

She’d never made any yeast bread before, though she’d often made muffins and biscuits. After meticulously following the instructions in her cookbook, she was rewarded with the two golden loaves she removed from the oven. The tops were not exactly smooth, but the good smell more than made up for it.

The thought of a late lunch of homemade bread and soup, even if it was from a can, made her mouth water. She was soaking the bread pans so they would be easy to wash later when her door buzzer sounded.

Someone in the apartment building entrance had pushed the button over her mailbox that had her last

name on it. While it happened off and on when a neighbor forgot a key, or kids played in the entrance, she always was wary of who might be buzzing. She pushed the reply button and asked who was down there.

“Carolyn, is that you?”

His voice sounded tinny and distant, but Carrie knew it was Peter. She was so shocked that she couldn't speak. What was he doing here? Maddie. Was something wrong with Maddie? No, Joyce would have called her. He would not have driven all the way just to tell her in person. Why was he here then?

“Carolyn? It's Peter.”

Without trying to respond verbally, she pushed the button that opened the electronic lock on the entrance door long enough to allow Peter to open the access door and step through. Opening the door to her apartment, she heard his solitary footfalls echoing up the stairwell.

His dark head appeared between the banister rails as he climbed up the steps leading away from her. He reached her floor, the third, turned around the newel post and walked past the other two apartments toward hers at the back of the building. The second he turned, his gaze locked on hers.

Peter looked tired, she thought. His eyes were reddened much like hers always were after the solo drive from Sunville. He must have started out in a suit, but the jacket hung from his finger over his shoulder. His tie was missing and the top couple of buttons on his regular business-style shirt were unbuttoned.

She swallowed against the pressure she felt rising in her throat... and then Peter was there, at her door. For a moment or two they just stared at each other. A voice from inside another apartment stirred them into action.

“May I come in?” Peter asked.

“Of course. I'm sorry,” she said as she felt her cheeks warming. Where were her manners? “Come in. I'm just so surprised to see you here that I couldn't believe it was really you for a minute there.”

She stepped back to allow him to walk past her and then closed the door. She pushed the deadbolt across as usual to keep strangers out of her apartment. Now, for the first time, the door would be locked and a man would be on the inside, locked in with her. Turning towards Peter, she drew a deep breath.

“Smells wonderful. Don't tell me you baked bread.” After looking around her living room, he turned back to her with a smile. “I didn't think people who lived outside of little towns did that anymore.”

Carrie loved that smile. She'd almost forgotten how it made his eyes sparkle. “You know how it goes. You can take the woman out of the country...”

“But you can't take the country out of the woman,” he finished for her with a grin.

Carrie nodded. If something was terribly wrong in Sunville, he would tell her right away and he hadn't. So why was he here?

“I just took the bread out of the oven. Would you like a warm heel with some butter on it?” She glanced at her watch. “You must have left right after church to arrive here now. Have you eaten?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Well, I was going to open a can of soup and have it with the bread for a late lunch. Would you like that?”

“Great. That would be great. Other than the coffee and cookies after church, I haven’t eaten since breakfast. On Sundays, I don’t eat much before the service, so I have to admit I’m starved.” The smile eased the weariness on his face.

“Can I hang that up for you?”

“This is fine.” He draped his jacket over the back of her couch.

“I suppose the last thing you want to do is sit down after a long drive,” she said with a nervous laugh. “It’ll just take a few minutes to heat the soup.”

She crossed into her small kitchen that opened off the other end of the living room. He followed her there and made the room feel tinier than it was already. Keep busy and you won’t have to think about how close he is, she told herself. But how could she not think about it?

Adjusting the burner to heat the liquid gently, she was so near him she could reach out and touch his bare arm. He’d rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt to just below his elbows.

She straightened and looked into his eyes. “Peter?” She stood just inches from him. Even if she’d wanted to, she didn’t think her legs would support her to step away.

He looked down at her mouth and then back to her eyes without speaking, without moving.

“Is something wrong in Sunville?”

He shook his head.

She bit her lower lip, trying to think of what else his reason for being there might be. “Maddie’s okay?”

He nodded and she could see the bob of his Adam’s apple when he swallowed. “She’s doing fine,” he said softly. “I see her sitting on the porch with Joyce on nice days when it’s not too hot. They weren’t at the service this morning, but I talked to Bette after church, and she said Maggie had just slept in a little too long to get ready in time.”

Carrie nodded. “Bette’s a gem. She called me last week just to let me know their first week together had gone smoothly.”

“Joyce was the right person to hire.”

“I was so worried, but I’m glad to hear she’s letting grandma get all the rest she can.” Carrie wiped her damp palms on the side of her jeans. She stirred the soup and stepped past him to set the table.

“May I slice the bread for you? I’ve done it at enough church suppers to be an expert.”

She handed him the knife and almost dropped it when his fingers brushed against hers. She turned to get

out the bread board.

“This smells delicious.”

“I hope it tastes as good as the homemade bread you’re used to. I... I’ve never made it before today.”

His head snapped up. “Never?”

Carrie shook her head and smiled. “The loaves should be smoother, and I don’t expect you to fib if it tastes awful. I can take the truth. At least I think I can,” she added with a laugh. “Besides, lightning would probably strike if you fibbed, wouldn’t it?”

Peter chuckled and set down the dish piled high with the bread he’d sliced. Carrie poured the soup into two bowls and put the pitcher of iced tea beside the bread. They sat down opposite each other at the table that was too small to accommodate any more diners.

Carrie’s hands were clenched in her lap until she saw Peter extend his out to her, palms up, on either side of his placemat. She looked from one to the other and then slowly slid her hands into his as her gaze met his.

Their gazes locked for a few seconds until Peter closed his eyes and bowed his head. Peter prayed for a blessing on their food and on them.

Carrie had never wanted a prayer to be as long as she wished that particular one would be. When she had kissed him goodbye in the church, she hadn’t expected to see him again. Here he was holding both her hands in his. She wanted to go on holding his hands.

And she did, long into the silence.

“Carolyn?”

Carrie’s eyes opened wide as she looked up at Peter. A smile filled his face.

“Since you made the bread, maybe you know something I don’t know. Do I need to say more of a blessing than that, to pray for the bread?”

He’d finished saying grace and there she sat, thinking about how wonderful it was to hold hands with him. She ought to have paid more attention to the prayer, but she tended to think of prayer as something to do when she needed something--like for Maddie to get better.

Carrie felt the heat rising in her cheeks. “I guess the proof will be in the eating.” She pulled her hands back to her lap, snatching her napkin on the way. “But I should probably taste the bread first to make sure it’s safe to eat.”

Still warm, the bread melted the butter and the whole combination was delicious, but she didn’t have to say so.

Peter bit into a slice. “Mmmm. It’s hard to believe you’ve never tried it before. This tastes heavenly.”

She laughed at his dreamy expression. “Such high praise and from a minister. That makes it special.”

“Goodness, I missed your laugh. No, don’t stop.” His palm slapped his thigh. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have mentioned it. I just should have enjoyed hearing it and kept my mouth shut.”

He looked so unhappy that Carrie squeezed his hand that held his bread. “Thanks, Peter. I think I’ve laughed more when I’ve been with you than I have in... well, in a very long time.”

“Then we’re good for each other. I like spending time with you because you don’t treat me like a different kind of person just because I’m a minister. You just treat me like... well, like a man and that’s refreshing to be thought of as normal.”

Carrie smiled. She didn’t dare tell him that she’d never thought of a minister as a man until she’d met him.

“The kids all missed you at their show the day after you left Sunville.”

“Now it’s my turn to be sorry. I do apologize, but I couldn’t go see it. I... I would have made a fool of myself by crying or something stupid like that when I said goodbye to... to them.”

“Yeah,” was all he said. He seemed to accept her reasoning without argument. They each sipped their soup.

“So tell me. How was the show?” she asked.

“A lot better than the last awful rehearsal you saw,” he said laughing once again. “They got quite an ovation.”

“They deserved it for working so hard.”

“Last weekend they took the show on the road and performed in the pediatric ward at the hospital.” Peter entertained her with his description of what that performance had been like and how much the kids had enjoyed it.

“I wish I could have been there to help.”

“So do I,” he said softly as he leaned back in his chair. “Thank you, Carolyn. That was delicious.”

This was the first time Carrie had ever shared a meal with anyone in her tiny kitchen. Even the canned soup tasted better than she remembered. The whole apartment seemed brighter and she didn’t think that was because it was so clean. “Good. And you’re welcome.” She wiped her mouth with her napkin and lowered it to her lap.

Small talk. He was still making polite small talk, but not telling her what he was doing here in Fargo on a Sunday afternoon. “Oh, no. Today’s Sunday and you’re here with me. Don’t you have a youth-fellowship meeting tonight?”

Peter shook his head. “Since they’ve been spending most of their weekends with the puppet show, they all said they needed tonight off.”

She nodded and took her dishes to the sink.

He rose and brought his own to set beside hers. “Trying to get rid of me already?” His arm brushed

against her shoulder as he leaned past her.

“No. Not at all, but...” Suddenly at the end of her patience, she turned to face him. “Why, Peter? Why are you here?”

He looked into her eyes, a lopsided grin on his face. “I thought you’d never ask.” He stepped closer and raised a hand to cradle her jaw. His slender, long fingers felt cool against her cheek. His skin still held the fragrance of the bread he had sliced. “I’m here to see you.”

“To see me?” she squeaked.

“Yup. I couldn’t wait any longer for you to visit Sunville to see you again. And I didn’t know when you’d be back to see Maddie because you left without talking to me.”

“I... I’m sorry about that.”

With his free hand, he lifted an errant curl and tucked it behind her ear. Goose bumps skittered to her toes. “I missed you, Carolyn. Didn’t you know I would?”

“No. Yes. I... I don’t know what I thought.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. So I came find you in this big city of yours, to make very sure you knew that I missed you, missed seeing you, talking to you, and hearing your lovely laugh.”

“I... I missed you too,” she whispered without thinking and knew immediately that she shouldn’t have. It wasn’t fair to him. “But...”

He placed his finger across her mouth to stem the flow of her words. His chest rose as he lungs filled with a deep breath. “Carolyn?” Peter suddenly took her hands and held them in his against his chest. “I don’t want you to tell me you don’t think my visit is a good idea.”

Carrie looked surprised. He’d guessed her thoughts.

Peter laughed softly. “We’ll just have to have faith that we’ll work out whatever God has planned for us.”

“I wish I had your faith about so many things. It makes your life seem so easy to live.”

“You can have the ‘easy’ life as you put it. All you have to do is accept God’s will for you.”

Accept God’s will? She couldn’t even tell what God’s will for her was, and she had too many problems already in her life for her to take on figuring out another one. “You make it sound so simple and my life has been anything but simple for the past five years. But I don’t want to talk about the past, Peter.”

He nodded slowly and looked at her hands. “I know. I’d just like to see you give God a chance.” He squeezed her fingers once before he let them go and pulled the dish towel from the handle on the refrigerator door. “Come on. You wash and I’ll dry.”

Carrie felt relieved that he accepted her reluctance to talk about her past. She just wanted to enjoy the present. Nodding, she turned to the sink and ran water for washing the dishes.

Peter walked over to the window while he waited for her to put clean dishes on the rack. “You have a nice view of the Red River. How do you like living here? Your neighbors friendly?”

“I like the apartment, and it’s handy to work. I don’t know my neighbors well though. I’ve lived here longer than most of them. They come and go so fast that I’ve never gotten to know some of them at all.”

He studied her as if he were trying to understand. “That must be lonely.”

Carrie nodded. “A little,” she hedged. He was studying her face and it made her feel uncomfortable. “Come on, Peter. You volunteered. Let’s see how well you dry dishes.”

“Hey, what can I say? I’m an expert. I took ‘Dish Washing and Drying 101’ in seminary. If there’s one thing we do a lot of in church, it’s washing and drying dishes.”

“You always manage to make me laugh, Peter. Thank you.” She swiped the cloth over a soup bowl.

“A smile belongs on your face. It hurts me to think you’re unhappy. I’ve said before I’m too emotionally involved to be the best one to help you, but talking out your problems with someone like Don Hoag might help you discover that God has a happy life planned for you.”

“A happy life.” She hadn’t known what that was or could be until she’d met Peter and began to see what was missing in her life. Struggling to find the right words, Carrie pressed her lips together, but finally tried to explain. “I manage to be as happy as the next person, I think. I’ve got a job that could lead to doing what I want someday. That would make me happy. And I guess after I get my career established, I would like to get married and have children someday. And if I’m never that lucky, I’ll still have my career.” She rinsed the bowl and handed it to Peter. He started to say something, but she went right on. “I have to succeed on my own before I can share a life with someone else, so I guess that means I want to have it all,” she concluded as she washed a glass.

Peter listened and looked down at the dish towel he’d been twisting in his hands. For the first time since she’d known him, he seemed at a loss for words.

“Don’t look so worried, Peter. Some days I’m so confused I don’t know what I want.” She’d meant it to be halfway funny, but she looked up at him meekly, afraid of what she would see in his face.

“But you’re not so dead-set in a career track that excludes getting married and having kids?”

“No, no, not when the right time comes, or the right person.” When I find a city man who’s like you, she added to herself.

She could hear the rush of Peter’s breath when he exhaled. She absently rinsed the glass and held it out toward him. The water sloshed out on his shirt. “Oh, you’re all wet.”

“That’s what I love about you, Carolyn Whitmore. You’re not afraid to tell me I’m all wet.”

Carrie was stunned mute. It almost sounded as if he’d said he loved her. He laughed and mopped his shirt with a paper towel.

“Well, come on, woman. Let’s get these dishes done. I can only stay a few more hours before I have to drive off into the sunset.” He laughed and dried a glass from the rack. He set it beside the other one on the table and returned to the sink.

Carrie's heart beating audibly, she rinsed the bread dish and handed it to him. Would she ever figure Peter out? She knew he'd expended a great deal of personal energy to help her and support her with Maddie being ill on top of the work with the kids play.

That was it! He'd come to Fargo to see that his pastoral work had not been in vain. And when he'd said he loved her? Carrie understood that he loved her just as he loved every member of his congregation. He certainly couldn't love her as a man loves just one special woman. She couldn't let him.

When the dishes were done, Carrie needed to escape the small confines of her apartment. She asked, "How would you like to walk down to the Red River? There's a path that runs along the edge for a couple blocks. It's always fun to watch a river that defies nature and flows north."

Peter agreed and they walked together, their shoulders sometimes brushing together. He held her hand as she jumped over a downed tree and then let it go. She chided herself for wishing he'd kept her hand in his.

Never had Carrie laughed as much as she did that afternoon. She and Peter talked about a thousand things. She loved having someone here she could talk to so easily. If only he lived in Fargo.

They walked along the jogging path and Peter related the wonderful plans he had for the Sunville Community Church. "I've found everything I ever wanted in Sunville except a wife--a helpmate. That would make my life complete."

"I can tell you truly care for the people in the congregation. They're very lucky to have you, Peter. But whoever married you would always have to be very strong and willing to share you with the congregation."

"You think that would be tough?"

"She would have to be very sure of her position in your life to be able to share you with others."

"It might take a while to convince her."

Carrie looked down at the path and kicked a stone to the side. When she pictured the devout loving woman who would marry Peter some day, she didn't look anything like herself, nor would his wife have a reputation or past like hers. And she would never create scenes in a parking lot. The thoughts left her sadder, but hopefully wiser.

Carrie and Peter returned to her apartment for a late supper before he left to return to Sunville.

"I haven't got anything fancy," she warned.

"Got any eggs?"

"Sure. How about scrambled with toasted fresh bread?"

"Sounds great," he agreed, using his favorite adjective.

"That's the way I like them, too, but I think it's because I kept breaking them when I tried to fry them easy-over. They're safer scrambled the way I fix them anyway. I can be sure they're thoroughly cooked

and bacteria-free.”

“I’ll have to remember that. By the way, I love fresh bread toast,” he said in an exaggerated manner, making her laugh.

“Coming up!” She washed her hands in the sink and stepped aside when he came over to do the same.

“You’ll have to call me when you make bread again, and I’ll invite myself for supper again.”

The thought of his driving hours to taste her homemade bread... Shaking her head, she got out the carton of eggs and a bowl. Peter beat the eggs and then supervised cooking them while she made toast from the bread he’d sliced and set the table.

When supper was ready, she sat down opposite him and rested her arms on the table, this time waiting for him to offer his hands to hold hers during grace.

After dinner they did the dishes together again, but eventually they had stalled all they could. The moment had come when Peter had to leave for Sunville.

“Then we’re agreed. If your boss won’t let you off before then,” Peter summarized, “you’ll at least come to Sunville over the long July 4th weekend. That’s just three weeks away.”

“Yes, that’s one Monday I know I get off.”

“The church summer picnic has always been that weekend.”

“I don’t imagine Maddie has gone in years.”

“The Sunday School Committee has been thinking about moving it to some weekend in late August, closer to when school starts.”

“The picnic would be a good chance to get to know any new kids who moved in over the summer. I’ll have to see how Maddie is then. I can never predict from one day to the next.”

Peter said he understood and Carrie knew that he did.

“Well, thanks,” Peter said as he stood inside her front door with his jacket over his arm. “I’m glad I came.”

Carrie stared at him and knew she wouldn’t be seeing much of him any more. “Me too,” she managed.

Holding his jacket so it didn’t slip from his arm, he leaned down and softly kissed her. “See you on the fourth,” he said with a smile, and then he turned and left to drive home.

Carrie felt lonely again, but somehow not quite so alone.

Chapter Thirteen

“I’m sorry to wake you with bad news, Carrie,” Doctor Bolton said. “But your grandmother has had a massive stroke. I think you should come home right away. I would love to be proved wrong, but I don’t think Maddie has long.”

When Doctor Bolton called Carrie the last week in June, he called so early in the morning that she knew from the first ring, it had to be bad news. “When did Grandma have the stroke?”

“Last night. Late. Joyce was getting ready for bed and thought she heard something downstairs through the intercom. She always checked on Maddie anyway before she went to bed, but the sounds sent her down right away.”

Carolyn grabbed a tissue and tried to clear away the tears filling her eyes.

“She said Maddie’s breathing was shallow and her covers were pushed back like maybe she’d tried to get up. When she couldn’t rouse her, she called an ambulance. We stabilized her, but she’s in a coma. Maddie hasn’t responded to anything, or anyone.”

“Thank you, doctor. It won’t take long to throw a few things in a suitcase and then I’ll drive directly to the hospital.”

Carrie ended the call and hurried to get dressed. When she was packed and all set to leave, it was still well before business hours. She called her boss at home to let her know she wouldn’t be in. Though Carrie had explained what happened, her boss was angry and didn’t hesitate saying so.

“This just isn’t going to work out. The company is so short-staffed with the budget cuts that there’s no one else to put in your place when you take off. Maybe the best plan would be to get someone to replace you permanently. I have to have an assistant that I can count on, not one who’s gone at the drop of a hat.”

“My grandmother’s massive stroke is hardly the drop of a hat,” she responded much more sharply than she should have.

The conversation deteriorated from there and when Carrie hung up she didn’t think her job would be waiting for her when she got back. Good thing that after writing the check for her rent and buying food, she had saved most of what was left each month from her paychecks. That left her some savings to live on for a while until she found another job.

The anger and frustration that she felt about her job, however, helped spur her on. She was even able to keep the tears at bay. She couldn’t be any help to Maddie or hope to drive safely if she couldn’t see through her tears.

There’s a time for everything, and now I have to drive, she told herself. Thinking about the possibility of seeing Peter again calmed her, and she welcomed the sensation even though it was accompanied with guilt for selfishly leaning on him.

In record time and after only one close call at a speeding ticket on the Interstate just outside of West

Fargo, a relieved Carrie arrived at the hospital. She knew her way to the Intensive Care Unit. She'd traveled the same route through the corridors after her parents' accident. At the nurses' desk she asked about talking to the doctor. He wasn't there, but he'd left instructions that she could go in to see Maddie.

"The doctor said you could stay as long as you like," the nurse said with an understanding smile, walking with her to Maddie's room. Carrie knew that wasn't a good sign and probably meant the doctor still didn't expect Maddie to pull through. The nurse pulled up a chair right beside the bed so Carrie could sit close. She murmured her thanks as the nurse left the room.

Carrie sat down and laid Maddie's right hand over her palm and stroked it. "Grandma, it's Carrie. Carolyn. Doctor Bolton called me early this morning to tell me you were ill. I left as fast as I could to come see you. How are you feeling?"

Maddie didn't move or even blink an eye. The only sound was the machine beside the bed where the lighted wavy line pulsed with a quiet steady beep.

"Please, Grandma, wake up and talk to me."

Carrie searched her grandmother's face for some sign of a reaction to her voice or her presence beside the bed. There was none. She leaned back wearily against the back of the chair.

A bag of clear liquid hung near the head of the bed. The steady drip from it led into the tube that traveled down through another machine with two rows of blue-lighted numbers and on down to Maddie's arm. The white tape holding it in place pinched and pulled her thin skin. It looked painful.

Carrie looked back at Maddie's pale face. She showed no signs of feeling the pain or anything. "Don't leave me now, Grandma." She sniffled and wiped away her tears. Tears are not doing Maddie any good, she resolved, trying to get comfortable in the plastic-covered chair.

Carrie had read about talking to people in a coma and the good it seemed to do in some cases. If there was a chance it would help, she was willing to give it a try.

"I have so much to tell you," she told her grandmother, hopefully sounding more cheerful. "Peter came to see me at my apartment in Fargo. He shouldn't have taken the time from his busy schedule, but he did. He said he just wanted to see me. I never imagined he'd do that and he shouldn't have. But wasn't that sweet?"

The wavy line on the heart monitor moved erratically for the space of a few arcs and then settled back to the same pattern. A few seconds of hope vanished.

"At work, I finished the last of the plays the company is publishing. You know, the ones like the show the youth group produced at your church. The one Joyce took you to see. Joyce enjoyed it and she said you did, too. I'm glad to hear the kids did a good job. I wish I could have stayed for it, but I just couldn't. It isn't good for Peter if I'm around, but I'm glad I got a chance to help the youth group." She did her best to remain cheerful and went on to talk about the youth group, more about Peter's visit, and all about his wonderful plans for the church that he'd shared with her.

At that point the line on the heart monitor jumped a little erratically again, but when Carrie called the nurse, she said it could have been anything. "She's an old woman and her heart just flutters sometimes."

Carrie settled back in the chair and went on to describe to Maddie how the fields ripening under the hot

sun had looked as she drove into town. She talked most of the time for hours, stopping for a few minutes at noon to talk to the doctor and to call Joyce at Maddie's house.

Late that afternoon, when the nurses changed shifts, the new one came to look in on Maddie. It was about Carrie, however, that she voiced her concerns. "Honey, they told me you've been sitting here most of the day without moving an inch. That's not good. Have you eaten anything at all today?"

Startled by the question because she'd forgotten about food, Carrie had to think about the last time she'd eaten. "No, nothing today."

The nurse shook her head and marched to Carrie's side. "That does it. Come on. Up you go. You go on down to the cafeteria and get yourself a cup of tea and a sandwich or something." She urged Carrie out of the chair and ushered her to the door. "The cafeteria's on the second floor. If there's any change in Mrs. Whitmore, I promise I'll send someone to find you right away."

Realizing she should take better care of herself, Carrie left. She would have to be strong to help care for Maddie when she came home from the hospital. She slid her purse strap over her shoulder and walked down the corridor. A bell chimed by the elevators as the car arrived and the doors clanged opened. Aides exited the cars with the carts carrying the patients' dinners. The strident rattle of the trays on the metal cart assaulted the hushed atmosphere.

She was barely aware of other people around her as she waited. She almost missed hearing her name called. She looked down the hall after the baritone voice called, "Carolyn," a second time. She saw Peter striding toward her. She stepped into his inviting open arms and took warm comfort from his hug.

When they stepped apart, he took her hands in his. "Is it Maddie? She's here?" he asked frowning.

Carrie nodded wearily. "She had a stroke last night. She's been in a coma ever since. Dr. Bolton..." She inhaled deeply to control her tremulous voice. "The doctor doesn't think she's going to make it, Peter. I've been talking to her all day and there's not a flicker of response."

"Aw, honey, I'm so sorry." He slipped his arm around her shoulders and led her to the side of the corridor away from the other people. "I stopped over Sunday before I went home after church because she hadn't come to the service, but she seemed well. She was getting along fine with Joyce. In fact, Maddie was teaching her some new crocheting patterns."

Carrie smiled weakly. Peter was a rock. Here she stood, feeling miserable, and he could make her feel better, telling her good news. Maddie had been happy with Joyce. How caring Peter was.

"Are you on your way to dinner?" Peter asked, interrupting her thoughts.

"I'm going to get something at the cafeteria. I want to spend the evening with Maddie, too."

"What about Joyce? Won't she be fixing dinner for you?"

"No. The doctor came in around noon and said that even if by some miracle Maddie does get well, it'll be a while before she could go home. I called Joyce and told her she could go back to visit her son now that his kids are over the chicken pox. There's nothing for her to do here for a while."

Another visitors' elevator opened with room for the two of them, and they rode in silence down to the second floor. Over a bowl of soup and a fruit cup with a roll, Carrie asked Peter what he was doing at

the hospital.

“One of the little kids in Sunday School broke his leg falling off the bleachers at a T-ball game this morning.”

“I hope it’s not bad.”

“He’s definitely not a happy camper. I sat with his parents while they operated to put the bone back together. He’ll be in a good deal of pain for a while.”

“Poor kid. I’d go ballistic if my child broke his leg. Seeing someone you love in pain is in some ways harder than having the pain to bear yourself. If it was my child...” She shook her head and tamped down the longing that surfaced thinking about her child. She pushed back her half-eaten soup with a sigh and leaned back in her chair.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Peter said with a sudden rush of authority in his voice. He pushed the bowl of soup right back where it had been. “You eat that, Carolyn Whitmore. You’re not going to be any good to Maddie if you faint from lack of sustenance.”

“You’re right, of course,” she said reluctantly, adding, “Bully,” with a half-smile. “I can’t even complain that it tastes bad because it’s sort of good. I guess hospital food has come a long way since the last time I tried to eat in one after my folks’ accident.”

“I wish I’d been here then to keep you company.”

“It would have been wonderful. I was all alone. Poor Mary Ellen was eight months pregnant and her doctor wouldn’t let her travel.”

Peter quietly reached across the narrow table to place his hand over hers. “You’re not alone now, Carolyn. I’ll stay here with you for the evening, if you’d like.”

Carrie smiled. “Peter, you’ve been here all day already.”

“Tell you what. I should go back to the office to check up on what I missed this afternoon, but I’ll come back to see how Maddie is when I’m done there.”

“Thank you, Peter.”

“Hey, that’s what I’m here for.”

That’s what I’m here for. That’s what I’m here for. All evening long as she sat beside Maddie’s bed, Peter’s words echoed in her ears.

How could she have forgotten? Comforting her, leading her to trust him, offering to help, visiting and talking for hours with her in Fargo, even caring about her—that was what a minister was here for. He was ministering to her, a member of his flock. She’d gotten so caught up in worrying about falling in love with him that she’d forgotten why he was sharing his strength with her, and she had almost forgotten why she should not let him.

Carrie leaned her head on the mattress and held Maddie’s fingers against her cheek. “Oh, Grandma. What will I do? I don’t want to, but I love him so much.”

Exhausted from the long day of emotional stress on top of the early morning drive to Sunville, Carrie dozed lightly, her head resting on the bed.

When Peter softly touched her shoulder to rouse her an hour later, she looked up, wondering at first where she was. Seeing Maddie, feeling Peter's warm hands gently massaging her shoulders, she remembered. She leaned her head to one side to rub her cheek against the back of his hand.

Carrie stood to look more closely at Maddie. No change. She turned to Peter. He wore the same black slacks and a light-weight black shirt with the white clerical collar that he'd had on that afternoon. Seeing him standing there, looking at her expectantly, she knew for certain that she loved him with all her heart--the heart that was already breaking because their time together, even as friends, was measured.

"Okay now, Ms. Whitmore," the nurse said as she bustled in. "I told the good Reverend that he could come in here if he promised to take you home."

Carrie started to object and the nurse raised her hand.

"No, you don't. I just talked to Doctor Bolton and he said to tell you to go home. He'll be stopping by to see your grandmother again tonight before he leaves the hospital. He prescribed food and bedrest, but the prescription was for you."

The nurse turned to Peter and poked his chest with her well-intentioned index finger that had been pointing at Carrie. "And you promised me you'd see that she gets it. See that you do."

"Yes, Ma'am. You heard her, Carolyn. You're not going to make a liar out of a man of the cloth, are you?"

Despite how tired she was, Carrie wanted to stay. However, she didn't think the nurse would let her, even if she decided to.

"And before you ask," the nurse went on. "Yes, if there's any change, we'll call you. Otherwise, you're to get a good night's sleep."

"Yes, Ma'am," Carrie echoed. Resigned to leaving, she slid the chair she'd used over against the wall.

"Boy, I wish my kids would mind me the first time I tell them to do something," the nurse mumbled as she left the room.

Carrie took a few more minutes to say goodbye to Maddie. As she kissed her grandmother's sunken and grayed cheek, she wondered if it was for the last time. "I love you, Grandma," she whispered before she straightened and turned away.

With Peter's supportive hand at her elbow, they left the hospital. "You're sure you can drive, Carolyn? Otherwise, I'll drive you home and come back for my car later."

"No, really, I'm fine."

"Okay then. I'll be right behind you."

He was, all the way home. He carried her bag, and with his arm around her, he ushered to the front

door. She unlocked the door and just inside, he folded her into his arms and held her head against his shoulder.

Darkened and rough with the day's growth of beard, she could feel his sandpapery chin scratching her temple. She looked up and ran her fingers over his jaw. She'd never realized before how sensitive her finger tips were. Her hand stilled on his neck beneath his ear.

"What do you think? Could I kiss you good night or would the whisker burn be too bad?"

"I think it's probably safe," she answered softly.

With the utmost tenderness, Peter kissed her. Carrie savored the kiss, wanting never to forget it.

"Thank you, Peter. Whatever happens to me, I'll treasure our times together always. You've been very supportive and I really appreciate it."

"I wish I could do more to spare you the pain. But for now, why don't you see if you could eat something more and then go right to sleep. The morning will come soon enough when you can go back to the hospital."

Carrie nodded.

"You look less than convinced, but worrying won't do Maddie a bit of good."

"You're right, of course."

He stepped back and dropped his arms. "Good night. See you in the morning," he promised quietly before he left.

Carrie watched his tail lights disappear around the corner before she closed and locked the door. In minutes, she'd eaten a sandwich and gotten ready for bed. Despite how worried she was, she was exhausted enough to fall asleep the moment her head touched the pillow.

She slept soundly until the phone rang. A glance at the beside clock told her it was five am. "No," she cried, climbing out of bed. She ran to answer the extension in the master bedroom. She knew it was the doctor before he spoke.

"I'm sorry," Bill Bolton said as soon as he'd identified himself. "She's gone, Carrie."

Carrie grabbed the bedpost to steady herself as the strength left her legs.

"Maddie died peacefully about an hour ago without ever regaining consciousness so she was never in any pain."

"At least that's a blessing. Can I..."

"Right now, you just go back to bed. There's nothing to be done, but I wanted to call you before you left to come over to the hospital. Maddie has had everything planned for years. I'm following her instructions." He told Carrie the funeral home that would be in charge of the arrangements.

"I'll call them during regular hours to see what has to be done. Thank you, doctor."

Her head down, her shoulders slumped and her arms hanging at her sides, Carrie shuffled down the hall and went back to bed after the call, but she couldn't sleep. She went over all that she'd done for her grandmother and wondered if there had been something more that she could have done--should have done. If she'd stayed to care for Maddie herself, would she still be alive?

Carrie didn't see how that could be so, but weighed down with the guilt the idea brought, she thought about it constantly until seven when she dragged herself out of bed again. This time she showered and dressed, and called her sister, Mary Ellen.

"I wish there was a way I could help," Mary Ellen said after blowing her nose. "Are you doing okay, Carrie?"

"I'm fine," Carrie mumbled, knowing it wasn't true, but not wanting to worry Mary Ellen. "There's nothing really that you could do now that she's gone. I'll call the funeral home next and then I'll call you again about the funeral arrangements."

"What about all her stuff?" Mary Ellen asked hesitantly. "What in the world are you going to do with that huge house and everything in it?"

Carrie sighed. To Mary Ellen, Maddie's possessions had always been old "stuff", Carrie thought, while to her they were family treasures.

"I don't know, Mary Ellen. The doctor said she'd mapped out exactly what she wanted to happen when she died, so I have a feeling she's planned what to do with the house, too."

Someone was knocking on the front screen door. Carrie wondered who it could be at this early hour.

"Well, call me if you need me," Mary Ellen offered. "Otherwise, we'll come for the funeral and maybe another day, but then we'll have to come right back. With all the layoffs, Frank won't dare be gone from work for very long."

"I understand." In fact Carrie understood only too well with her own job threatened now by taking off too much time.

She heard something like the squeak of the screen door opening and after a few moments, the inside front door opened. But how? She was sure she'd locked it the night before after Peter left.

"I've got to go, Mary Ellen. I hear someone at the front door. I'll call you after I talk to the funeral home." Carrie walked with the phone toward the door of the master bedroom until the cord pulled tight and stopped her. She couldn't see the stairs from where she stood.

"You've got my work number?" Mary Ellen asked.

The sounds downstairs at the front door and the footfalls on the oak floor of the front hall suddenly turned her body to ice with fear. Her heart pounded in her ears. She clutched the phone with both hands, wondering if she would have to use it as a weapon. Someone had broken into the house.

"Mary Ellen," she whispered with her hand cupped around the mouthpiece. "There's someone in the house downstairs!"

“Carolyn?” a male voice called from the foyer. “Carolyn, it’s Peter. The hospital just called me.”

Carrie’s body slumped with relief as she exhaled the breath she’d been holding. “Mary Ellen,” she repeated in her normal volume. “It’s okay. The minister from Grandma’s church is here. He just got the news that Grandma... that she passed away. I’ve got to go. And yes, I have your work number.” She walked back to the bedroom to put the phone base back on the bedside table.

“Carrie, I hate to leave you to handle it alone like I had to when Mom and Dad died,” Mary Ellen admitted.

“I know. I know. It’s okay. It can’t be helped. You come when ever you can.”

Carrie heard Peter take the stairs two at a time. “I’ll call you tonight, Mary Ellen. Give the girls a hug for me. Bye.”

Peter appeared at the bedroom door. When she’d hung up the phone, he raised his arms to her. She stepped into them and he held her tight in his arms, rocking back and forth.

For several minutes Carrie drew on the comfort and safe haven that his arms offered her. Slowly, their arms began to relax. He lifted his head to speak and his smooth cheek brushed against her temple. He’d shaved this morning, she thought. The hint of spice she smelled had to be his shaving lotion.

“My guess is that she’s teaching the angels to crochet already. Maddie wasn’t one to beat around the bush.” He pulled out his clean handkerchief and wiped her cheeks. “How about a cup of coffee? Have you eaten something yet this morning?”

She shook her head. “Coffee sounds good. I haven’t even been downstairs yet.”

“You up for scrambled eggs?”

“Not really, but I suppose you’re going to make me eat them anyway, aren’t you?”

“Now you’ve got the idea.” He put his arm around her shoulders and ushered her to the kitchen.

Chapter Fourteen

“Where are the kids? Where’s Frank?” Carrie asked when Mary Ellen arrived in Sunville late the next evening--alone, after a bus ride from the Fargo airport.

“Oh, Carrie, I’m so sorry, but he couldn’t get away from work. His boss didn’t consider his wife’s grandmother to be immediate family and that’s the only people who rate a funeral leave of absence. I didn’t have the heart to tell you I’d be alone when I called to say when I’d arrive.”

Carrie hugged her sister and loaded her suitcase into the car for the short trip from the bus stop to the house. "I understand, but I'll miss seeing my nieces."

Mary Ellen nodded. "I left them home so they don't have to miss school. They're going to spend the afternoons with a friend until their father picks them up after work."

"We'll have to make doubly sure that we get together this Christmas," Carrie urged.

She pulled the car near the back door and the sisters went into the kitchen. While Mary Ellen took her case upstairs and changed, Carrie made a pot of tea. She couldn't help but wonder what she would be doing this winter when Christmas rolled around. To think that she might be working somewhere at a new job because the one she had left in Fargo had disappeared, was depressing. She pushed thoughts of her job away.

"Joyce came back this morning to get her things," Carrie said as Mary Ellen joined her at the kitchen table. "She stayed to dust and pick up the whole house. She even did all Maddie's laundry so I wouldn't have to. She stripped the hospital bed, too. The company retrieved it this afternoon and they were nice enough to move the dresser and the table back where they belonged. I thought we'd need the dining room put together again."

Mary Ellen looked across the kitchen into the dining room. "The house looks ready for visitors after the funeral."

"Joyce is a gem. I gave her a bonus to cover the extra things she did."

"Good." Mary Ellen sighed. "So, Carrie, tell me what we have to do."

#

The next two days were the kind one can never truly prepare for, only experience, Carrie decided. She'd experienced so much pain that she felt numb inside. For her though, it was worse because everything that happened reminded her of Ralph's funeral.

The visitation at the funeral home and the funeral for Maddie in the church went well, but the grave-side service that followed was marred with a light rain. At least that was better than the bitter cold and snow at Ralph's.

When she looked at the faces of the people around her, she was thankful that she saw only caring concern for her and the hollow look of the loss that they too had suffered. There was none of the sideways glances at Carrie as there had been at Ralph's grave.

Back then, each time Ralph's mother looked at Carrie, she'd burst out in tears all over again. "How could you do that to him?" his mother had cried. "How could you let my Ralph down so much he'd want to kill himself?"

There was nothing Carrie could say that would satisfy them. She had slipped away after the graveside service and didn't go to his parents' home afterwards. She had spent a couple more days with Maddie until she had her emotions more under control and then went back to her classes at SU. She had thrown herself into her studies and tried to forget that she was a murderer.

"It would have to rain," Mary Ellen muttered, bringing Carrie back to the present.

When the last of Maddie's mourners including Bette and Bill Bolton had walked over and taken their places around the coffin, Peter, standing at the head of the casket, began to read from a small leather-bound black book in his hands.

The rain didn't let up. Most people had come prepared with umbrellas. The funeral director and her assistant passed large black ones to Carrie and Mary Ellen. Peter stepped over to stand under the umbrella Carrie raised to accommodate him, as if it was the most natural thing in the world for him to do. She was glad that he had because the brief service was easier to get through with his strong arm pressing against her shoulder. She drew on his strength and found it easier to cope with her grief.

Nearly all the mourners returned to the house afterwards. Carrie was glad to have this time with Maddie's friends and people who had been friends of Carrie's parents. This was a special time in which she could remember Maddie without memories of Ralph intruding.

The women's fellowship from Peter's church served supper. They insisted that Carrie and Mary Ellen stay with their guests while they did all the kitchen work. Each woman had brought a casserole or dessert. One had even baked several dozen fresh yeast rolls to serve with the smoked ham that another had brought.

The women prepared the buffet on the dining room table and when the guests had all eaten, they cleaned it up. The remainder of the food was placed in Maddie's dishes and left for Carrie and Mary Ellen to eat so they wouldn't have to worry about cooking anything for a few days. When the women were done in the kitchen, it was immaculate and the refrigerator was filled with delicious homemade goodies.

Feeling a deep sense of loss and grief after the last visitors and Peter had left the house, Carrie and Mary Ellen were more than ready for a quiet time alone together.

However, since Mary Ellen had a return flight the next day, Maddie's attorney had agreed to come back in an hour to explain what had to be done to settle Maddie's affairs. The attorney, like the doctor, was a long-time friend of Maddie's. Sensing that he felt her passing as a loss, too, Carrie and Mary Ellen sat silently listening to him explain the will.

At first none of what he read really surprised them. There were generous gifts to various charities including the Sunville Community Church. Finally, he read the part that directly concerned the sisters.

"Mary Ellen?" He nodded in her direction. "Your grandmother gave you her mutual fund and a selection of what mementos you want to keep from the house for yourself and for each of your daughters. Maddie wrote that she was sure that you and your sister could decide what each wanted to keep."

Mary Ellen looked at Carrie and they nodded in agreement that they certainly could work something out. "It would be nice to have something for the girls to keep from their great-grandmother," Mary Ellen admitted.

"Definitely," Carrie agreed with a smile.

"And to Carrie," the attorney went on with another nod, this time in her direction. The sisters looked up to see a frown on his face.

The attorney cleared his throat and looked directly at Carrie. "Maddie left you this house and the contents, along with the cash balance from savings left after the estate is settled and taxes are paid."

Carrie's eyes widened. Her heart beat echoed in her ears. She clutched her hands on her lap. They felt cold.

The house.

Carrie had loved the house since she was a child, but what would she do with it? She couldn't live in it. There was no publishing company where she could work in Sunville, not even a weekly newspaper. Everyone read papers from Bismarck or Valley City. Working there and commuting was out of the question with the North Dakota winters.

The house and all the antique furnishings--how could she part with all the beautiful things that had been in her family for generations? She loved the little walnut tables by Grandma's chair with the wreaths inlaid on the top in lighter wood; the huge cedar-lined chest that Grandpa had given Grandma as a wedding gift; the hurricane lamps on the mantle with the crazed-glass chimneys that they had used in the parlor before the house was wired for electricity.

She couldn't part with them, but she certainly couldn't afford any apartment that would hold everything. What would she do? she wondered as she drew in a jagged breath.

"There's more," the attorney went on to say. Carrie's head snapped up as she listened.

"Should you choose to sell the house and the contents you don't wish to keep, Carrie, your grandmother left that option open to you. However, there is a right of first refusal that is given to the Sunville Community Church. Since the house is right behind the church, I believe your grandmother thought it would make a good home for the minister and his family."

The minister and his family.

Peter's family.

Oh, God, why are you doing this to me?

Carrie felt lightheaded as she thought of Peter living here with his wife and children. She closed her eyes for a moment to erase the image and swallowed hard.

"I must add that Maddie has insisted that the offer made to the church be at a reduced price," the attorney continued. "She didn't want you to feel badly, but she didn't want so much of the church's money going to buy the house when she thought their dollars were better spent elsewhere."

Carrie nodded. She felt numb.

"On the other hand, she wanted you to have the home that she knew you loved, or, if you chose it, a nest egg from selling the house that you could invest, so she didn't will it to the church outright. She instructed me to inform them of the provision immediately if you decide to sell."

Carrie shook her head as if that would deny what she was hearing. "Oh, Grandma," she whispered.

"Carrie? I'm sorry, but you have only thirty days in which to decide what to do."

"What? A month? No," Carrie said weakly. "No, I don't. I have to get back to Fargo to my job if I still

have one, or else I have to start looking for one. How can I make such a decision in a day or two?"

"Oh, hon, what are you going to do?" Mary Ellen laid her hand on Carrie's arm. "I know how you love this old place." Mary Ellen looked up at the attorney. "What about renting it? Can she rent it for a while so she could decide later?"

"I'm sorry. Maddie and I discussed the old houses like this one that get neglected and destroyed in the hands of renters with absentee landlords. She willed that you keep it to live in yourself or sell it now. However, if you choose to live in the house and you stay here for a year, then you are free to do whatever you want with it after that time, including renting."

Carrie leaned against the back of her chair. "Move in or sell it?"

Mary Ellen offered no additional suggestions. She just chewed on her lip and frowned.

"Well," the attorney remarked into the thick silence. "I can see that I've given you both a good deal to think about. Mary Ellen, you'll hear from me as soon as I can affect the transfer of the fund to your name."

"Thank you. I leave early tomorrow. You have my address?"

"Yes. I've kept up to date on where both of you live." He closed his briefcase and gripped the handle.

"Thank you for coming this evening so I could talk with you in person," Mary Ellen said.

"Have a good flight home." He turned to Carrie. "Call me when you've decided what to do with the house." Raising his hand when the sisters started to rise to see him out, he added, "No, stay where you are. I'll let myself out."

"What are you going to do, Carrie?" Mary Ellen asked softly after he left.

What was she going to do indeed? After a lifetime in the family, how could she possibly turn this house over to strangers? But if the church bought it?

The minister and his family. The words echoed in her head. Tears burned in her eyes.

Peter would be living here with... with his wife and family... and his wife would not be Carolyn. His children would not be her children.

Feeling overwhelmed, Carrie stood abruptly and ran up the stairs. Her tears blurred her vision and overflowed down her cheeks. She slammed the bedroom door behind her, something she hadn't done since high school, something she'd never done in her grandmother's house.

But this wasn't her grandmother's house. The realization hit her the same time she hit the mattress in a flying leap onto her stomach.

"Oh, Grandma, what have you done? I know you gave me the house because I love it, but how can I keep it? And how could I bear to have Peter living here without me?"

Sobs racked her body and eventually she fell asleep.

#

Carrie wasn't sure if it was the cool of the evening or the voices downstairs that woke her. Her stiff muscles objecting, she got up and walked down the hall to the bathroom where she splashed cool water on her face and affected some order to her hair. She couldn't get the puffiness out of her eyelids and quickly gave up. Only time and no more crying could do that. Judging from the way she felt, that might be a while.

"Here she is," Mary Ellen announced cheerily as Carrie made her way into the brightly-lit kitchen. "Peter was just going to give up seeing you tonight and let you sleep through until morning."

Carrie blinked rapidly as her eyes adjusted to the light. She smiled weakly in his direction. "I feel tired enough to."

Peter had risen when she entered the room and now moved to stand beside her. "How are you doing?"

Carrie took a deep breath. "Oh, I'll make it. I'm just feel so tired."

"Have you eaten since the food after the funeral?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"That's what I thought," he said, his tone of voice chastising her. He put his arm around her shoulder and, holding her against his side, walked her over to the table where she sat down under the gentle insistence of each of his hands on her shoulders.

Without thinking, Carrie lowered her cheek to caress the back of his hand before he let go of her.

When she glanced at her sister seconds later, she found Mary Ellen watching the two of them. "What? What's wrong, Mary Ellen?"

A smile appeared on Mary Ellen's face and a laugh erupted. "Nothing. From where I'm sitting, there's nothing wrong at all."

Mary Ellen stood up and went to the refrigerator. "You hungry too, Peter? I think the ladies in your church have brought us a bowl of everything you could want. We can nuke it and eat in no time. You'll join us, won't you?"

"I'd like that," he said.

Several hundred calories later, Carrie leaned back in her chair and sighed. "For not feeling hungry, I sure ate a lot. You can't possibly leave in the morning, Mary Ellen. I'll never finish all this food by myself."

"Doesn't look to me like you'll be eating it alone," she responded pointedly, carrying the plates to the sink.

Peter laughed. "Now if I could just get Carrie to see it that way," he added, taking his own plate over.

He leaned against the counter beside the sink. "You know, Mary Ellen, I got double lucky when I accepted the call to the Sunville Community Church. No, change that. Triple lucky. I came to a church with a congregation of caring and sincere people, and secondly, lots of them are good cooks. I don't

have to eat my own cooking all the time.” He patted his flat tummy and grinned.

“So what’s the third lucky part?” Mary Ellen asked as she placed their cups and plates in the dishwasher.

“I met your sister,” he answered simply as he straightened and walked back to the table.

“She’s something special, all right,” Mary Ellen offered.

Peter stepped over to place his palms on the edge of the table facing Carrie and smiled. “She is.”

Carrie’s nostrils flared with the deep breath she took. “Enough you two. It’s getting awfully deep in here.”

She stood, the last to take dishes to the sink. Turning back, she saw Peter reach for the dish towel.

“No you don’t, Peter. Mary Ellen and I can handle the dishes without putting you to work drying. You’ve already done so much for us.” She took the towel from him and set it on the counter.

“That’s what I’m here for, but as long as you don’t mind, I’m going to head home. My sermon preparation time was cut a lot this week. I’ve got to make up for it or the afore-mentioned friendly congregation may revolt and walk out on me.”

“If anyone walks out on you,” Mary Ellen offered pointedly, “they’re crazy, Peter.”

Peter smiled and reached for Carrie’s hand. “Walk me to the front door?”

Carrie nodded and walked down the hall with him.

Beside the front door, he took her hands in his. “I wish I could make this less painful for you.”

“I know,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

“We’ll have to rethink what we had planned for this weekend.”

Carrie frowned.

“This is the July 4th weekend coming up.”

“I hadn’t made that connection.”

“You’ve got enough on your mind. Anyway, you still don’t have to go to work Monday on the holiday, do you?”

She shook her head. She didn’t want to tell him she didn’t think she had a job to go back to on Tuesday either. No need for anyone else worrying about her.

“Will you spend time this weekend with me? It won’t be the same as we hoped when we planned this weekend in your apartment, but we’ve got Friday, Saturday and Sunday, except for the morning in church, of course, and Monday before you go back.”

Carrie chewed on her lower lip as she thought of all the reasons she should say no, but if she went back to no job, she might be moving to a new one in Minneapolis or anywhere.

“I know you have things to do to take care Maddie’s affairs, and there’s my sermon. We’ll both be busy, but may I come see you when you’re free? I can help you... help you with whatever you have to do.”

He put his hands on each side of her jaw, his fingers splayed around her ears. “I just want to spend as much time as possible with you before you go back to Fargo.”

Carrie couldn’t speak. The lump in her throat threatened to cut off her breathing as completely as it had her voice. Hating herself for being weak and taking advantage of his comforting presence while she was still here, she splayed her hands on his chest and nodded.

How could she say no? She wanted... she needed these last few days with Peter. When she left town Monday morning, there would be no reason to ever return. The memories of this weekend would have to last her a lifetime. She hoped Peter would forgive her someday for her selfishness.

“Good. I’ll call you tomorrow.” With his thumbs, he brushed away the moisture from her cheeks. “No more tears,” he whispered. “I hate to see you unhappy enough to cry.”

She bravely tried to smile.

“That’s better.” He kissed her gently and so briefly that it felt like a whisper on her lips.

Carrie hugged herself as Peter turned and left. She closed and locked the door.

“Perfect timing. Just finished the dishes,” Mary Ellen called from the kitchen doorway. She walked down the hall and looked at Carrie. “Hey, what’s the matter?”

Carrie swallowed hard, trying to gain her voice. “Leaving him is going to be the hardest thing I’ll ever have to do in my whole life.”

“I don’t understand. Why are you leaving?”

“I’m the wrong woman for him. Totally wrong. Do you think his church would welcome a murderer as their minister’s wife?”

Carrie turned and ran up the stairs for the second time that day. Only this time she quietly closed the bedroom door, slipped on her nightgown and climbed in between the cool sheets.

The after-rain scents in the night air filtered through the open window beside her bed. She could even smell the fragrant roses climbing the trellis by the back porch.

The crickets chirped constantly with a rhythm that ultimately lulled her to sleep, but not before she’d made up her mind about what to do with the house. She didn’t feel she had a choice. She vowed to set the wheels in motion before she went down to breakfast in the morning.

Taking her chosen course of action would be the second hardest thing she would ever have to do.

Chapter Fifteen

“You’re sure this is all you want from the house, Mary Ellen?”

Carrie and Mary Ellen stood beside the dining room table and looked at the aggregate of mostly sterling-silver pieces, neatly stacked on the corner of the table.

“Yeah. Really. These things assure me of having a couple of pieces to hand down to each of my girls so they’ll have something to remember their great-grandma by. That’s all I ask. Grandma already gave me that mutual fund which was more than I ever expected. I’m going to keep it to send the girls to college some day.”

“Grandma would like that.”

“Carrie, I wish you were happier with what she left you. You deserve to be happy because you’re the one who’s always been here when she needed you. I haven’t been able to help with anything.”

“You had to go where Frank went because you knew that was the right thing for you. Grandma knew you loved her.”

Carrie walked with her to the foyer so they could hear the arrival of the Nordstrom’s who’d volunteered to drive Mary Ellen to the airport to save her the bus ride. “I’ll pack the things up you’re not taking with you now and have them shipped.”

“Have you decided what to do with the house?”

“Yeah.” Carrie inhaled deeply, fighting the weight of her decision. “I’m going to keep some of the furniture, the pieces I love the best, and sell the rest. I know that if the church ends up buying it, the house will come to life again. A guy like Peter can’t stay single too much longer.” She tried to sound light and even accented it with a little laugh, but it fell flat.

“Earth to Carolyn Whitmore. Hello in there. This is your sister, Mary Ellen, talking, not some total stranger who might believe this line you’re pushing. I saw that man kiss you last night.” She held up her hands palms-up at Carrie’s astonished look. “So I finished the dishes a little quicker than you thought I did. The point is, how can you kiss a wonderful man like that and then tell me the next morning that you’re selling the house for him to live in with some other woman? That man loves you. Even I can see that without him telling me. You love him, too, don’t you?”

Carrie looked down at her hands clasped at her waist. To keep from saying, “Yes,” she bit down on her lips pulled between her teeth until it hurt.

“Of course you do even if you won’t say it. And yet you plan to leave him? Have you taken leave of your senses?”

A car horn blaring at the curb precluded any answer to Mary Ellen's angry question.

"There's my ride to the airport and since they were nice enough to drive me, I don't want to keep them waiting. Carrie, please don't do this to yourself. Don't let what Ralph did ruin your life. Peter's a great guy. Give love a chance. Give the people of this town a chance."

There was nothing Carrie could say to explain in a few seconds. Mary Ellen did not understand. Carrie tried to smile, but didn't feel she was doing a good job of it. Her lips trembled. Tears welled in her eyes.

"Bye, Carrie. Will we see you Christmastime?"

"I'll let you know. If I'm just starting at a new job, I may not get more than the day off."

"What do you mean 'a new job'?"

Saved by the car horn again, Carrie didn't have time to explain that either. "Long story. I'll call you."

"Think about what I said, Carrie. But if you don't change your mind, good luck in whatever you find back in Fargo. You know, you could always move to Denver so we'd be closer."

Carrie hugged her sister and thanked her for her concern. They picked up the suitcase and the bag containing two small boxes Mary Ellen had packed to take as a carry-on.

"You'll call to let me know you got home safely?" Carrie asked after greeting the Nordstroms and stowing Mary Ellen's things in the car.

"Sure. Talk to you tonight."

Carrie stood at the road until the car disappeared before she trudged back into the silent house. Her steps on the hallway hardwood floor echoed through the tall-ceilinged rooms.

Looking around, she tried to memorize everything she saw. On the cold and lonely nights ahead in her little apartment, she wanted to be able to close her eyes and mentally walk through the house again and again. She ran her hand over the shiny newel post at the bottom of the wide staircase, remembering how she used to swing on it as a child.

Stepping into the living room, she spotted the photos on the mantle. She and Peter had stood there looking at them while she told him all about her family; Grandma and Grandpa; Mom and Dad; Mary Ellen and her family; and her own university graduation picture. Maddie had once had one of Carrie and Ralph there beside Mary Ellen's. Carrie hoped her grandmother had thrown it out just as she wished she could throw out the memories of their last year. She lifted each photo and looked at the faces staring up at her as she stacked them to set aside to pack.

In the dining room, Carrie opened the glass door of the wide glass-front china cabinet that matched the table and chairs. She picked up the little silver teaspoons that Maddie had had for Mary Ellen and then for her when they were babies. She would keep those and try not to wish in the near future that she had children who could use them.

Carrie squeezed her eyes shut and inhaled deeply to compose herself. She'd shed enough tears and yet she had to blink away more. Now she needed to pack up her memories and carry out the remainder of Maddie's wishes.

After consulting the phone book and making a quick trip to the local, trailer-rental place, she came back in an hour with a stack of heavy, corrugated cardboard boxes, padding materials and tape.

The fragrant perfume from the roses greeted her as she passed the trellis, as did the lemony wood polish scent at the door. She would always remember the smells of this house and of the fresh air in Sunville in the hot summer or the crisp cold winters, so different from the smell of traffic and cement around her apartment... and she would always remember Peter.

He'd been a rock, she thought, smiling at her unintentional Biblical pun. That was what he was there for, though. He'd told her again just last night. She would do better not to think of him now or she wouldn't get her work done.

Carrie took the first of the flattened boxes stacked against the stairs in the foyer and headed for the dining room. She'd decided to keep the silver flatware with the curly W etched on each piece. The sets were carefully wrapped in special cloth to keep them from tarnishing. She rolled each bundle in the bubble-wrap before putting them in the box. She knew memories would flood back every time she took the pieces out to polish them.

When someone pounded on the back door, Carrie almost dropped the serving fork she was wrapping. She'd barely gotten up and over to the kitchen when the door swung open.

Peter marched across the floor and grasped her shoulders hard. "Carrie, why in the world are you doing it?" His face was red and he was breathing hard through his mouth as if he'd run over from his office. He released her suddenly and stepped back. "I'm sorry." He ran his hand through his hair, mussing it more than the run had. "Can we talk for a minute?"

He pulled out a chair for her and urged her to sit. He stood behind her and stroked her shoulders in warm circles as if to make up for grabbing them moments before.

Carrie had never seen him so upset. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I came over here, furious with you, but I guess you know that. How could you do it?"

"I don't have a clue what you're asking about." She held her hands out palms up as she turned her head to look up at him. "How could I do what?"

"This house." He came around to face her. He pulled out a second chair to sit facing her. Their knees bumped and Carrie moved hers aside. She felt cold without his hands on her shoulders. Lowering her head slowly, she looked at her hands rather than at him.

"This house that you love... How could you put it on the market for sale?"

"Oh, that."

"Yes, that. Carolyn, how could you sell it?"

"Because I can't rent it." She glanced up to see his blank expression.

"Can you run that by me again, please?"

“The will... Maddie’s will states I can’t rent the house to anyone--unless it’s after I live in here for at least a year. Then I can do what I please with it. Otherwise, I have to sell it now.”

“You love this house. Why not live here?”

“Everything’s so simple in your eyes, isn’t it, Peter? Well, my life is not simple. Yes, I love this house. I’ve always wanted to live here, to raise a family here.”

He shrugged. “Then don’t leave it.”

“You think I should move in now, huh? Well, how do I pay for the heat and electricity once my savings and my small inheritance are gone? How do I put food on my table? I haven’t studied the yellow pages, but last time I looked, there were no publishing companies around here. Commuting to Fargo for hours each day would be a little tough, especially in the winter when it’s thirty-five below zero. The last place I’d want to be then is on the highway driving home all alone in the dark.”

“Carrie, you...”

She didn’t let him interrupt. “Or should I get a job as a check-out girl at the big grocery store just to have the privilege of living here?”

Carrie jumped up and took two glasses from the cabinet and plopped them down loudly on the counter. She jerked open the refrigerator and pulled out a pitcher, splashing some of the iced tea on the floor. She groaned.

Peter jumped up and took the pitcher from her and filled the glasses before returning the pitcher more carefully to the refrigerator.

Carrie stood there taking a sip of her tea and trying to calm down. Her hands were trembling and made the liquid in her glass slosh against the side.

“Then marry me,” Peter said calmly as he grabbed a paper towel to wipe up the spill from the floor. “Let me pay for the heat and electricity.”

Carrie choked on her iced tea. She slammed the glass down in the sink and grasped the edge of the counter for support as she coughed and tried to clear her airway.

With one hand on the back of her neck, Peter forced her to lean over as he slapped her on the back. “Are you okay?”

Her coughing under control, she nodded her head. Peter slackened his hold and she straightened. He handed her a clean paper towel to wipe away tears that had fallen during the coughing fit. She sniffled and blew her nose. Another sip of tea soothed her throat, raw from choking.

Peter leaned against the counter watching her. He folded his arms across his chest and crossed his legs at his ankles. “That isn’t exactly how I pictured the woman I love responding when I asked her to marry me, ya know.”

Carrie had to smile, but hated to. “Oh, Peter, please don’t make this tougher than it is already.”

“Tougher? What do you mean?”

“I... I can't marry you. I've told you since the first day we met that I can't stay here.”

“I love you, Carolyn, and despite the fact that you haven't said you love me in so many words, I know you do.”

Carrie's lips hurt from biting them so hard, but she had to do something to keep from saying the three little words. It just wouldn't be fair to tell him that she loved him. She didn't want to hurt him any more than she had already.

“Why can't you marry me? It's the perfect solution. Maddie wanted the pastor to live here and raise a family. I want you to be the wife and mother in that happy family group.”

“I can't be your wife, Peter,” she whispered hoarsely. “I'm just not the right woman for you. You don't know all there is to know about me. I could never be a minister's wife.”

Carrie fought the tears that stung her eyes. No more tears, she vowed. She'd wept more in the last month and a half than she had in all the years since her parents died. She had to learn to be strong again. She wouldn't have Peter to lean on anymore.

“Whoa. Wait just a little minute here.” Peter put his hand on her shoulder, turning her to face him.

Carrie looked up, knowing he would make her eventually anyway.

“What did you just say?”

“It wouldn't work,” she said, jerking out of his hand and dropping into a chair at the table.

“Why not?”

“Please believe me. It just wouldn't work.”

“You said that, but I think I'm entitled to know why you think that. Carolyn, you're the only woman I've ever wanted to be my wife. And I know you love me.”

She sniffed and pressed her knuckles against her lips to keep from telling him that she loved him with all her heart. Maybe if he doubted that she did, it would be easier for him to walk away from her, to find someone more suitable to be his wife.

“I can't love you. I can't stay here.” She shook her head. “I can't explain, but I certainly can't marry anyone to pay the electric bill!”

Peter leaned on his palm on the table beside her. “Patience isn't my biggest attribute, Carolyn, but I'll give you all the time you want. I promise.”

“Peter, you just don't understand. It's not a matter of time. It's me!”

“Then help me to understand. Tell me why!”

Carrie felt something inside her snap. She stood and faced him. “I cannot live here in Sunville. Period. I can't marry you because I can't be the role-model that a pastor's wife should be. And I'm not going to

stay around and let my reputation hurt yours. In fact, I... I'm leaving Sunville for good this weekend." A sob almost stole her breath away. "I'll probably never come back to Sunville again."

Carrie turned and ran up the stairs to her room. She wasn't strong enough to hear what he would say next, and she couldn't stand to see the hurt in his eyes for one more minute.

Peter deserved more--much more in a woman for a wife.

She threw herself on the bed and buried her face in the pillow. Was there no end to her tears?

#

"Hurry up in there, will you?" a man's voice shouted through the closed bathroom door.

A man in her house! Carrie screamed and peered around the shower curtain at the door.

"Great. Now I know you're awake," he called from the hall.

It's Peter. Carrie groaned and straightened the curtain.

"You've got four minutes to get dressed and downstairs. When a master chef prepares your breakfast, he doesn't want you to keep him waiting," Peter announced.

Carrie's eyes widened and then squeezed shut when the shampoo cascading off her hair stung them. She stuck her face under the spray of water and rinsed her hair as fast as she could. The water was barely turned off when she stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel to dry off. She wrapped another around her dripping hair.

In just three minutes flat, Carrie appeared in the kitchen, dressed in jeans and a shirt. Her hair dripped onto her shoulders and her feet were bare. She stopped and stared at him. "What are you doing here, Peter? How did you get in?"

"And a good morning to you, too," he said as he poured two glasses of orange juice.

"Peter..." Carrie warned.

"Okay. One: I'm here because you promised to spend this weekend with me, and I'm trusting you're not the sort to go back on your promises. And two: Maddie gave me a key months ago in case there was a problem."

Carrie snapped her fingers. "You used it before," she accused, pointing at him. "You let yourself into the house when I was in the master bedroom talking to Mary Ellen on the phone the morning Grandma died. I was so upset at the time, I forgot to ask how you'd gotten in the house even though I'd locked the doors."

He handed her a glass of orange juice. "Here. I found a can of concentrate in the freezer."

Without drinking any, she set her glass down on the counter. "Peter, you can't just barge in here."

"I know and I apologize, but I watched the house for over an hour and didn't see any signs that you were up. I acted impulsively."

She shook her head. "You're one of the most patient people I know."

"No. I sure wasn't last night when I burst in here like King Kong. I apologize for that as well. I'm sorry I came on so strong. Give me twenty or thirty years and I might learn not to leap before I look carefully."

He leaned down and kissed her lips firmly but quickly. She hadn't expected it so she couldn't avoid it, but she wouldn't let the kiss sidetrack her either.

"No. Wait," she said as he turned away.

"Oh, you want more?" he asked with a twinkle in his eye as he stepped toward her.

She had to smile. "No, that's not what I meant and you know it," she insisted as she backed up a step. "I wanted to say that you shouldn't kiss me either."

"Then I'll have to get my kiss back," he concluded, taking another step toward her.

Carrie backed away again, pressing her hands against his chest. "Oh, no you don't," she said as sternly as she could while laughing.

He shrugged as though it didn't matter much either way and went to the stove. "Go sit down. Your breakfast is ready to eat."

Carrie tamped down the disappointment that she felt. You can't have it both ways, she said to herself sternly as she sat at the place he had set. He proceeded to serve eggs benedict with fresh melon slices.

"I've got to say it. This is heavenly," Carrie exclaimed, tasting the special meal.

"That's my line," he joked, placing his own dish on the table and sitting down beside her.

There was little conversation while they ate the delicious meal. Carrie was just about to pour their second cup of coffee when the doorbell rang.

"You go ahead and get that," Peter told Carrie, taking the coffeepot from her. "I'll pick up the dishes."

She nodded. "I can't imagine who could be at the door. I'll be right back."

A tall, gray-haired woman carrying a briefcase stood at the front door. "Ms. Whitmore?"

Carrie nodded.

"Good morning, I'm Annie Bishop. Your attorney gave me the listing for this house, and I've brought you a purchase offer."

"A purchase offer already?" Carrie opened the screen door to admit the woman.

"Yes, isn't it exciting? I don't often sell properties this fast, but this one sold the first day on the market."

Carrie invited her into the living room to sit down. "I didn't expect an offer so quickly," she reiterated numbly.

Annie took the sheets from her briefcase and handed them to Carrie. “You just have to sign there at the bottom and on the copy I give back to the buyer.”

“The church?” she asked, turning in her seat and vaguely pointing toward the back of the house. “The church bought it?”

“No, they declined. They thought it would be wonderful if their pastor could live here, but they just didn’t think that they could go into so much more debt at this time. They just bought a new organ for the sanctuary, I heard.”

Carrie looked down at the papers, but her eyes couldn’t focus with the excess moisture. “But...”

“When the church declined, the house went on the open market according to the terms of the will. This buyer is offering you full-market value instead of the reduced price at which it was offered to the church. And he’s willing to buy any furniture you don’t take. That will be nice for you.”

“Yeah, that will be nice.” Carrie stared at the sheets of paper. Her tears still blurred the tiny black letters into a swirling jumble. She blinked rapidly.

“Here’s a pen.” Annie handed the pen to Carrie who looked at it as if she didn’t know how to use the thing. “There’s only one contingency on the buyer getting a loan, but that won’t be a problem.”

“No?” Carrie asked.

“No. The buyer won’t have a problem in this town. Isn’t it wonderful living in a small town? The bankers know everyone and they rarely make a bad loan. There. You sign right there,” Annie prompted.

Carrie pointed the pen toward the dotted line, but the point wouldn’t move any further. She looked up at Annie and then back down at the paper. She heard the tall grandfather’s clock in the hall chime. She knew from the sounds coming from the kitchen that Peter was stacking their plates in the dishwasher. The refrigerator door opened and closed. She closed her eyes and tears ran down her cheeks.

Looking back down at the line, she watched as all the dots ran back together and swam about. “I... I’m sorry, but I can’t do it now. I can’t sign it so soon.”

“What? You can’t turn down a full-price offer--not with the market the way it is today. You may not get another one. How many people are there who would want to invest in a small town like this one?”

Carrie swiped at her tears with the back of her hand. “I... I mean I just can’t sign it now. I mean I have to think about it. I really don’t have to sign it this minute, do I? How long is the offer good for?”

Annie looked at the sheet and back at Carrie. “Ah, well,” she hedged. “As a matter of fact, it’s good for only thirty-six hours, Ms. Whitmore. You will have to decide by ten o’clock tomorrow night.”

Carrie took a deep steadying breath. “Fine. I’ll sign it by then. I’m leaving for home the next morning anyway. I’m really sorry. I just can’t handle this at the moment.”

“I suppose with your grandmother’s death and all, it is a lot to grasp all at once. But believe me, you don’t want to let this offer lapse.”

Annie took her pen back and popped it into her briefcase before snapping it shut. "Shall I call you this afternoon to see if you've decided?"

"Ah, no. Please. I'll call you when the time comes."

With a trembling hand, Carrie took the card that Annie offered her with her name and phone number.

"You really should sign it right away, Ms. Whitmore. You may never get another offer for the house that's this good and you certainly won't get another one this quickly."

Carrie thanked her and showed her to the door. Staring at the card and purchase offer still in her hands, she waited until Annie had pulled away. She glanced at the buyer's name. "P. David..." The last name was unfamiliar. She wasn't even sure how to pronounce it. She dropped her hands to her sides and walked back to the kitchen.

Chapter Sixteen

Peter was washing the double boiler he'd used to make the hollandaise sauce. That task, rather than selling the house, was something Carrie felt more comfortable with at the moment. She dropped the papers on the counter and quickened her steps to his side.

"I'll do that, Peter," Carrie said. "You probably heard, that was a realtor with a purchase offer on this house."

"Congratulations. That's just what you wanted to do, wasn't it? Sell the old place and get out of town fast?" he asked softly as he dried his hands.

"Yeah, I thought it was." Funny how it didn't feel right at the moment. She'd thought the house would be on the market for months. She never expected to get an offer so soon.

Nonetheless, she had. That had to mean that leaving was the right thing to do, didn't it? Leaving was working out so easily for her.

"Then I wonder why you don't look very happy," he said as he gently turned her to face him and wrapped his comforting arms around her.

This is Peter. The man I must leave, she thought as she closed her eyes and relaxed against him. "I guess I am pretty miserable considering everything is working out the way I want."

"I love you so much, Carolyn. I need you. You can't leave Sunville," he whispered breathlessly against her temple.

A chill began to settle over her. What was she doing? Why couldn't she stay away from him when she

knew she should for both their sakes? “You shouldn’t, Peter. You can’t love me,” she pleaded as she drew away from him.

“But I do, Carolyn. I do. And as I see it, I have just over two days to convince you to stay here with me.” He sighed and stepped toward the door. “Unfortunately, I have to spend much of today at the office for meetings.”

“Thanks for breakfast,” she said instead.

“You’re welcome.” He looked at his watch. “I’ll pick you up at six-thirty.”

“Pick me up? For what?”

“Dinner. You’ve got to eat.”

“Well, you fixed my breakfast. The least I can do is fix your dinner.” From the grin on his face, she had the distinct feeling she’d been snookered into that one.

“Great,” he announced with his usual rejoinder. “In that case, I’ll be here at six. Are we to be in fancy dress for dinner?”

“I don’t think so. After the dishes are done, you can help me load my car with Grandma’s things to give to a clothing drive.”

“I shall look forward to it,” he said with a sweeping bow.

“I’ll bet.”

He laughed as he ran across the lawns to the church.

Carrie turned back to look around the kitchen. The purchase offer caught her eye where it sat on the counter with Annie’s card. Carrie turned the sheet and read the name again. She sighed and wondered who it was. Since Ralph had died, she’d made it a point to visit Sunville only to see Maddie, avoiding people she knew would ask about what had happened to Ralph. They all blamed her and they didn’t even know about the letter she’d written that had shoved him over the edge. Thankfully, it hadn’t even been mentioned in the inquest after his death. She still couldn’t stand to see the accusations in their faces. As a result, she’d met few new people over the years. Of course, the buyer didn’t have to be from Sunville. He could be moving from somewhere else. Maybe someone had already come to see Maddie about buying the house. Maybe they had decided the place would... would what?

Her hands on her hips, Carrie walked to the living room, mentally analyzing each room of the huge house. The house was easily big enough for a large family. It had been very well cared for. The offer said the buyer wanted all the furnishings she didn’t take, and many were beautiful antiques. Maybe someone would want it for a museum, but it didn’t seem that Sunville would have the population base to support that venture.

She walked up the stairs, trailing her fingers along the carved banister railing, and paused at the top. So many bedrooms, but just one bath upstairs for four of them. The rooms were large, though. She conjectured that a well-designed small bath could be built into at least one of them without sacrificing too much space. Then what?

Then it would make a nice bed and breakfast! Why not?

A Victorian bed and breakfast. Her mind filled with related facts. The height of the ceiling would be high enough to contain a sprinkler system; the far bedrooms were over the wrap-around front porch so fire escapes could be added easily for each room. And the master bedroom could be the honeymoon suite.

Carrie directed her steps down the hall to look into the master bedroom. A bed and breakfast seemed like a good idea, a way to earn some money. In fact, with a part time job she could afford to stay and live in the house.

What was she thinking? Open her home to strangers? And how many tourists were there in Sunville? In the winter? None. She'd felt so excited at first. No, it would be better to sell it and never see it again.

"Oh, show me what to do," she pleaded aloud. Or was she praying? Why would she be asking God to help her decide what to do? She'd prayed and prayed for guidance when she was having trouble in her relationship with Ralph, and look what happened.

At that moment, the only thing Carrie was sure of was that she wasn't sure of anything!

Except Peter. Carrie was very certain she loved Peter. But how could she love him and plan to spend her life away from him?

#

"There, that's the last of them."

Peter slammed down the lid the hatchback on his car late Saturday afternoon. Carrie had seriously underestimated the time it would take to sort and remove the boxes and bags of Maddie's clothes and things for the charity drive.

The woman accepting the donation thanked them profusely. "These are such lovely clothes. They'll really be a blessing."

"I'm glad you can use them. Grandma wanted you to have them."

Carrie slid into the passenger side, but groped for the catch for her seatbelt. Seconds later she felt Peter's hand over hers as he directed it to secure the lock. He briefly lifted her hand to his lips. "It's been a long day for you."

She could only nod as he drove them back to Maddie's. No, she corrected herself, back to her house.

They had spent Friday evening after supper and all of Saturday packing up Maddie's clothes and coats. Way up in the attic, they had found boxes of cast-offs that she'd packed up, too. Now the house was empty of Maddie's clothes, but it was still filled with her furniture and mementos.

She watched the streets of Sunville pass by her side window. For a few more hours, until she signed the purchase offer, Carrie wanted to think of the old house as her own. Working to sort out Maddie's personal things had led her to feel almost at home there.

Cleaning the emptied closets had been such a common homemaker-type activity that she'd felt comfortable in the role somehow. She liked the sense of responsibility and belonging. Thinking it might be

her only chance, she treasured the feeling.

“That’s everything for today, isn’t it?” Peter asked.

“I guess so. I still have to figure out what to do with all the furniture that I can’t bear to part with.” She desperately wanted to keep the master bedroom set. She loved the beautiful four poster bed and the matching dressers, but maybe keeping it was not such a good idea. She’d always dreamed of sleeping in it someday, but that day was supposed to be spent in this old house with a husband, not alone in some apartment that she moved the set to. She would have a little time to decide about the furniture since the buyer would need time to get the loan and arrange for the closing, however.

She watched Peter, his grip on the wheel sure, his attention to his driving careful and complete. “Thank you for all your help.”

He smiled and glanced at her. He’d been so solid and dependable, always putting her before himself in whatever they did. Little wonder he looked tired. With all the times they had made the trips up and down the stairs, they both had a right to feel tired and ready to call it a day.

Carrie’s hand flew to her mouth with a sudden insight. “Oh, Peter. This is Saturday. Your sermon. You told me once that you always spend Saturday going over your sermon and here I’ve kept you busy all day. Oh, I feel terrible for distracting you. Why didn’t you remind me?”

“You’re a lot more than a distraction to me. And being with you was a lot more fun.” He squeezed her hand on the seat between them. “But don’t tell the congregation I said that,” he added with a grin.

“I love your smile, Peter. You know, it lights up your whole face.” When he glanced over at her with an exaggerated, teeth-exposing smile, she laughed. “What’s your sermon on?”

“I don’t know yet.”

Carrie groaned and sank down in her seat. “Oh, Peter. You haven’t started on it? Now what have I done? You’ll be up all night.”

“I’m sort of working on two and can’t decide which one I’ll use. It all depends.”

He pulled into Carrie’s driveway and stopped beside the porch. They had taken his car because she couldn’t fit even one big box in her little sporty car.

“I wish there was something I could do to help after keeping you occupied all day long.” Carrie stopped. Here she was encouraging him to stay again. She couldn’t do that anymore.

He stared at her as if it was difficult to make up his mind and then shook his head. “No, much as I’d like to spend more time with you. I really do have to go to my office and get going on the sermon. May I stop by later to say good night on my way home?”

She knew she should say no, but because this would be the last time she could see him, she nodded. He left for the church on foot, leaving his car in her driveway until he would drive home after wishing her a good night.

Carrie walked through the house, checking drawers and closets to be certain she’d gotten everything. Her thoughts wandered to that afternoon when Peter had lifted the lid of the huge wooden trunk in the

attic. Maddie's wedding dress lay inside, lovingly wrapped in multiple layers of yellowed tissue paper. The delicate silk crepe had been trimmed with lace and garlands of silk roses, each with delicate, tiny seed pearls gracing the edges of the pedals. The sleeveless top had a hand-stitched, rolled edge.

The long, floor-length tulle veil with matching roses on the crown turned out to be so fragile that just lifting it put holes in it. Worried the same might happen to the dress, Carrie had wrapped them up carefully and put them in a box all their own to keep them safe.

"You'd look beautiful in that dress, Carolyn," Peter had said softly with so much love in his eyes, she hadn't been able to speak.

"No. Stop thinking about it. You're doing what's best for Peter," she ordered herself aloud. She turned on her heel and headed for her bedroom to pack her suitcase.

When Peter came back much later to say good night, he looked more tired, making her feel even worse. They stood in the front hall. Peter put his hands on her shoulders and drew little circles on the side of her neck with his thumbs. "Please. Please tell me you don't intend to walk out of my life a second time, Carolyn. For the love of God... no," he amended. "That's not fair... for the love of me, tell me you'll stay and be my wife."

Carrie opened her eyes to see his hurt and pleading face. She'd put the hurt look there. She'd hurt him--was hurting him with her selfish behavior. She had stop. She had to be strong. She stepped back out of his arms. "I can't," she whispered hoarsely.

"Then tell me what is so bad about your past. I already know a little about Ralph, but I've been waiting for you to tell me, not my secretary or anyone else who seems more than willing to fill me in. I want to hear it from you."

She pressed her lips together between her teeth until she felt the pain.

"Tell me what I have to do to convince you to stay," he pleaded.

If only she could say she loved him and would stay, but that wouldn't be fair to him. He would come to realize how wrong she was for him and then he would regret marrying her.

Peter had been the rock on which she'd leaned heavily in the last few weeks. Carrie knew that Peter would go right on giving and giving, until one day he would realize that he didn't have anymore to give, that he needed a wife who didn't have a past she was running away from. He would want a wife who could comfort and support him some of the time, instead of always the other way around.

He should have a wife who was whole, strong and standing on her own two feet, a woman confident that sharing Peter's life meant sharing God's will for what they would do together here at the church in Sunville. Carrie couldn't be that woman and she couldn't stand to see repulsion in his eyes if she told him why.

"Yohoo! Hey, you two," a high voice called from the front yard.

Carrie jumped. She looked out through the screen door. "Bette, is that you?"

Bette's white-haired head appeared above the porch railing, sans her sun hat in the dark evening. Peter opened the door and she stepped into the house.

“Oh, am I glad you’re here, Peter,” she said pausing to catch her breath. “I thought I recognized your car.”

“What are you doing out at this hour?” Carrie wanted to know.

“Is something wrong?” Peter asked, showing his concern.

“No, no. I just overestimated my own strength, that’s all. I was over at Marge’s watching a movie and started to walk home. I know there’s only block left, but it seems so long. When I saw your car here, well, I was hoping you’d give me a ride. I just don’t seem to have the energy I used to have.”

Peter smiled. “Be happy to.”

Bette didn’t let him say more. “Thanks. I’ll go wait in the car so you can kiss Carrie good night in private. Good night, Carrie.” Giggling, Bette stepped back through the screen. “There’s no rush,” she called back as she went down the steps.

Carrie and Peter chuckled.

“She’s such a dear,” Carrie said. “I’m glad she’s found another friend to spend time with.” She looked at Peter and her smile disappeared.

“We’ll talk tomorrow before you leave, but right now I have orders to kiss you good night,” he said in a low voice.

It will be goodbye, too. There was no sense extending the pain of separation over a longer period. She was going to make a clean cut. She could not hurt him any more.

He kissed her sweetly, dropped his arms from her shoulders, and walked slowly across the porch toward his car. “See you at church in the morning.”

She couldn’t lie, so she didn’t say anything. She didn’t even nod. When she heard his car start, she moved to the door to watch him drive toward Bette’s house. His red brake lights floated every which-way in her tears.

“I love you, Peter,” she croaked with a broken whisper.

Carrie felt her heart pound. Panic constricted her chest. Her hands flew to press on the pounding pain in her temples. She felt totally alone and devastated.

She was desperate to be strong, to believe in hope, to believe she could ever be truly happy.

“Please, God, if there was just a way...”

#

Carrie swung the refrigerator door shut. It was empty and clean, and her car sat at the end of the driveway, all packed--both situations due to her working late into the night after Peter left to take Bette home.

With a last quick look around the house to be sure the windows were shut, she locked the front door and drove down the street. She intended to stop for Sunday services on her way out of town, but not at the Sunville Community Church.

For some reason she wasn't clear about, she drove across town to the nursing home where Don Hoag led the service as he did each week. The smile he gave Carrie as she entered was warm and welcoming. She joined in to help a small group of worshipers who walked or wheeled into the chapel early each Sunday. He even asked her, as one of the few able-bodied worshipers, to help with communion so the patients didn't have to move about in their wheelchairs. She liked the feeling it gave her to help.

The service was short, but one in which the message instilled hope... just what Carrie needed.

She waited after the service until each of the worshipers had gone back to their room. Looking out the tall narrow windows, she viewed fields of ripening wheat as far as she could see. Only the green stripes of the shelter belts interrupted the sea of grain waving in the breeze.

High overhead darkening cumulus clouds rose majestically and dangerously above the horizon. She thought of the farmers who would be watching that sky, too, wondering if the winds and rain would beat the grain down, lodging it into a twisted tangle. She hoped that instead of robbing them of the harvest by flattening it and making it impossible to harvest, the storm would bring more gentle moisture so important at this point to fatten the kernels as they ripened.

"How are you doing?" Don asked as he came to stand beside her.

"I don't know. I... I'm not sure how I happened to come here. I was going to just call to say goodbye and thank you. I'm leaving, right now actually. I'm going straight back to Fargo from here."

The smile disappeared from Don's face. "Does Peter know?"

"He knows I'm leaving, but I... We didn't exactly say goodbye."

Carrie thrust her hands into her jacket pockets and toyed with a tissue she felt there. She was surprised that the tears were not flowing as she'd come to expect when she thought of how they had parted the night before without telling him she would not see him again. She'd been a coward.

"I... we..." She laughed at her false starts and then looked up at Don with a deep sigh. "I couldn't ever tell him, but I love Peter very much. However, I have to leave. He... um, he asked me to marry him."

"Wonderful. You two will be perfect for each other, if an old man may be permitted to say that."

Carrie shook her head slowly. "I want to be with him more than anything, but I can't be his wife. I would make a miserable pastor's wife, and eventually I would make him miserable."

Don took her hand and squeezed it gently. "I find that hard to believe and I'd be honored to talk to you about it, Carrie. Do you really have to leave so soon?"

She nodded. "I'm going back to see if I have a job waiting for me after I've been gone so much. I have a lot of thinking to do and I have to do that alone. I can't think very clearly when I'm around Peter."

He smiled with complete understanding of what she meant.

“May I phone you, Don? To talk to you?” she asked.

“I wholeheartedly encourage you to do exactly that. Come down to the office a minute and I’ll give you my card with my office number on it,” Don said as he led the way down the hall into his office where Carrie had sat the afternoon of the puppet show. To Carrie, that day seemed like a lifetime ago. She’d been so overwhelmed with memories of Ralph being there and then Susan had told everyone what Carrie had tried so hard to forget--she’d caused his death.

In her prayers last night and at that simple service just minutes ago, she’d asked for God’s help to straighten out her life. She’d made a terrible mess of it and hated that she was hurting Peter and herself by leaving.

“I’ll put my home phone on here too.” Finished writing the number, Don gave Carrie his card. “I’m in and out during the day visiting residents, but the best time to reach me is mid-afternoon when I take a break. Most of the residents nap about then. Of course, you can call me at home in the evening anytime.”

“Thanks, Don.” She shook his hand and turned to leave, but paused to look back. “When I watched Peter walking out the door last night, I knew I would dry up inside, but then I’ve felt like I was crumbling into pieces since Ralph died.”

“Ralph?”

Carrie nodded. “Ralph Anderson. We were engaged, but he died five years ago--right here in this nursing home, as a matter of fact. He took his own life. That’s why I was so upset the last time you saw me.”

“Wait a minute. I forgot it again,” Don said as he turned to the file cabinets beyond his desk. He opened the top drawer and pulled out a manila file to look in it. “Here it is.” He lifted out a small envelope and returned the folder to the cabinet. “When Peter told me your name the day of the puppet show, I meant to give this to you, but decided it could wait because you were so upset. I was going to bring it to the funeral, but didn’t think that was appropriate.”

He pushed the file drawer shut. “It’s been here so many years I didn’t think it could be important now, but will you forgive an old man for being so forgetful?” He handed her the feminine-looking envelope.

She saw her own name in the corner of the pale blue envelope and Ralph’s name and room number in the center. She turned the envelope over. It had never been opened. She gasped. She clutched it against her chest and closed her eyes. “Thank God.” She swallowed and then opened her eyes to look at it again. “This means Ralph never saw my letter.”

“No, I’m sorry,” he responded. “You saw the mess of boxes when you were here last. I was cleaning out the files and while we were at it, we decided to move them. I found that letter behind the file cabinets where it and several others had fallen. One of them was even a year older than that one. I apologize for the staff back then. I hope it wasn’t real important that he read it.”

“It’s importance is to me. Now. I sent Ralph this letter the day before he killed himself. If he didn’t see this letter, that means Ralph didn’t know I was breaking off our engagement.” She paced back and forth across the small space in front of the desk. “All these years I’ve thought he killed himself because he read this letter that said I was leaving! Oh, God, how could you do this to me? All these wasted years!”

Chapter Seventeen

Don took hold of Carrie's elbow and ushered her to the couch. "Let's sit over here. You've got to tell me the whole story so I can understand."

Relief flooded through Carrie's body as she explained the whole story. "I'm not a murderer. My actions did not make Ralph take his own life, but I've thought all these years that they did. So many people in town think I killed him just as surely as if I'd fed him the pills he overdosed on."

"I can't imagine anyone thinking that badly of you. It sounds more like the guilt you felt made you think others felt that way."

"No, people do think that way. That's what Susan blew up about the day of the puppet show here. Someone told her I was responsible for Ralph's death. That's why I'm leaving Sunville even though I don't think I still have a job to go to. I couldn't stay here without seeing Peter, and I wouldn't let my bad reputation tarnish Peter's. My presence would negate all the wonderful self-less work he does."

"But that goes a long way to showing how much you love him. He's a lucky man."

Carrie had to laugh at that. It was the first time she'd thought that anyone might be lucky to have her love. It would be too much to hope for. She looked down at the letter.

"Ralph and I started out so happily. Both of us were going to SU, but he had to drop out because of his family's financial reversals. He turned into a completely different man than the one I thought I'd loved. He was abusive, disrespectful, and started drinking heavily. He was drunk the night he crashed his car and smashed his legs. But I'd known for months before his accident that I couldn't marry him. After the accident I was afraid to tell him because he might think it was because of his legs. I was actually relieved when he yelled at me that he didn't love me and never wanted to see me again. He handed me the easy way out of the relationship, and I took it and sealed it with this letter."

"The burden of guilt for his death that you've borne all these years has been a heavy one. It's price was your happiness, am I right?"

"Yes, there wasn't a day that went by that I didn't regret what I wrote to him when he was obviously so ill. But now... Oh, dear. I can hardly believe getting this letter back unopened. I've got to get to my apartment and think about what all this means."

She stood and put the letter into her purse. "I can't tell you what this has meant to me. Thank you for talking with me."

"But you'll call me to let me know how you're doing?"

"I'll call you very soon. Probably more often than you want me to," she added with a laugh.

“And you’ll call Peter?”

The smile flew from her face. “I’ve hurt him badly and then I walked away without saying goodbye. I’m afraid there’s no going back, not even to apologize.”

“No, I know he’ll want to hear from you.”

“Dare I pray that’s true?” she asked as she walked into the hall.

“You’ll never know without trying.”

Don walked her out to her car and waved as she drove off. She’d covered half the distance back to Fargo before she realized that she’d forgotten all about the purchase offer on the house she’d meant to drop off on her way out of town. She discovered the papers when she went into her purse to find money to pay for a fast-food lunch. The seller’s signature line on the paper was still blank.

And Carrie was not one bit sorry. It no longer mattered who the buyer was or what they wanted to do with the house. Carrie knew what she wanted to do with it.

The flame of hope in her healing heart rose from a flicker to a low flame.

#

Bette strode into the church office panting. She pulled off her sun hat and fanned her face with it. “Hi, Harriet,” she said, greeting the secretary who sat behind her desk.

“Bette, you look all tuckered out. Here, sit down and collect your breath.” Harriet rose and pulled a chair forward for Bette who sat in it.

“Thanks. Don’t mind if I do.” She dropped the hat to her lap and pulled a hankie from her pocket and patted her forehead. “Wish that rain hadn’t passed us by Sunday. It would have cooled things off for a while, at least. If it’s this hot in July, what is August going to bring?”

Harriet laughed. “This is North Dakota, Bette. Remember? August could bring snow.”

Bette joined her laughter. “Better not let the farmers hear you say that.”

“What are you doing all the way over here at church on a Tuesday morning?”

Bette beamed as if with a surprise. “I’m here for Peter to give me something to do.”

“Come again, dear?”

“Well, I was chatting with Peter on the way home from Carrie’s house last weekend before she left. When I told him I was bored, he said I should come over and someone would find something for me to do here. I feel so useless sitting at home with little to do since Maddie’s gone.”

“Peter had a good idea, I think. I could use the help.”

“You have something that I could do to really help.”

“Bette, there’s plenty I’d love your help with, but I don’t know what Peter had in mind and I can’t ask him now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s a long story. I’m not sure I should be telling you.”

Bette looked around. The door to Peter’s office stood open. No one sat at the desk. “Where is he?”

“Well, I guess I can tell you that. He... he’s in a meeting of the church elders.”

“I didn’t hear any announcement of a meeting.”

“No, there was no announcement. It was just called last night. An emergency, they said.”

“What’s it about?” Bette asked, more than a little curious.

Harriet shrugged and didn’t answer.

“Listen, Harriet. I’ve been a member of this church from the beginning--since before there was a building to hold services in. I have a right to know what’s going on.”

“Oh, Bette. It’s terrible.” Harriet leaned over the corner of the desk to release a flood of words. “Peter is wonderful for this church and now they’re trying to... to fire him.”

“What?” Bette sat upright, unable to believe what she was hearing.

“You heard me. Someone called a couple of the elders and told them they saw Peter leave Carrie Whitmore’s house early Sunday morning after spending the night there. They said he stayed there with her most of the weekend.”

Bette gasped, holding her embroidery-edged hankie to her mouth. “That’s ridiculous. Those children wouldn’t behave like that. You can’t mean it.”

“I do. And to top it off, the elders don’t even know who called to report it. In both cases they left a message.” Harriet looked out into the hall to be sure she wasn’t being overheard. “They know it was a female voice though.”

“What did Peter say about it?”

Harriet shook her head and clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “Nothing yet. He’s in the sanctuary learning what he was supposed to have done at this very minute.”

“That poor boy.”

Harriet smiled at the description. “He’s no boy, Bette, and Carrie’s no child. And that’s exactly what this is all about.”

“Hrump! Hog wash! When did they start the meeting?”

“Just a few minutes ago. It took a long time for them to get everyone together here on short notice.”

“I’ll bet the farmers are overjoyed about being in the church on a sunny summer day instead of out working the fields where they belong,” Bette quipped. Pushing the heel of her palms on her thighs for support, she rose.

“Where are you going?” Harriet asked as she followed Bette.

“I’m going to pray in the sanctuary.”

“You can’t go in there with the meeting going on,” Harriet scolded in a loud whisper.

“Just watch me!” Bette said as she exited the office.

Harriet scurried out behind her.

“Wish we had a balcony I could sneak into to listen... I mean to pray in without being seen.”

“What about the last row of the choir loft where it’s hidden behind the pulpit?” Harriet asked in a softer whisper. “That good enough?”

“Perfect.” Bette giggled. “I’m glad my sneakers are quiet.”

One white and one gray head ducked low as the ladies made their way to the back loft seat.

“Let me get this straight,” Peter was saying as they arrived. Bette was thankful his voice carried easily so they could hear every word. “You’re asking me if I spent the weekend with Carolyn Whitmore? How do you mean ‘spent’?”

“You’re making this harder than it has to be,” one of the members complained.

“It seems to me that you’re trying to fire me on grounds of immoral behavior. Just how easy do you want that to be?” Peter asked, his voice raised a few notches.

A murmur went through the board of ruling elders. Bill Bolton stood up--reluctantly, Bette thought, as she peeked around the pulpit.

“Can we just hear the explanation of the charges once more, Hank? I’m sorry to sound dense, but I know Peter pretty well, and I’ve known Carrie since I delivered her. I can’t imagine that what I think I’m hearing about them, is true.”

“Yeah.” A collective agreement was heard except for Hank Olson, the head of the board. Bette watched as he shook his head and stood up again.

“Look, Peter, I don’t like this any more than you do, but we have a complaint. We have to follow through on it. Someone called a couple of us...”

“Who?” Peter asked.

Hank shook his head. “It’s not that I won’t tell you, I can’t tell you. It was a female voice--disguised with a cloth over the phone or something so it was muffled.”

“This is what you dragged me in from the field for?” an irate farmer asked. “A muffled voice on the phone?”

“Now wait just a minute here,” Hank insisted. “The caller said that she thought we should be aware that Peter spent the weekend at Carrie’s house. And that he left Sunday morning in time to drive to church straight from spending the night there!”

“Rubbish,” Bette whispered to Harriet. The men hadn’t heard her because several of them were uttering the same sentiment.

“Now wait a minute. We all know that Carrie was mixed up in some questionable events several years ago. Ended quite tragically for her boyfriend. She’s been away from town for years. We don’t know what she’s like now. Peter, I think you owe us your side of the story.” Hank urged pompously, appearing to enjoy the role of the head of the board.

Peter sat on the back of a pew, facing his accusers who sat in the seats nearby facing forward. He shook his head. “Hank, I have no idea what happened in this town before I got here three months ago. But it doesn’t relate to now. So you want me to tell you what I did this weekend?”

“Yeah,” one of the men said. “Let’s get this over with. I want to get back to work.”

“You want to hear all about how we cleaned out Maddie’s closets and dusty attic to remove everything that could be of use to someone? Or how I helped Carolyn pack up her grandmother’s clothes? Would you like to hear about the drive when we took them to the mission in Valley City?” His anger grew with each proposal, so did his voice pitch. “Maybe you’d like to hear how tired I was Saturday evening when I came here to my office and finished up on my sermon--something I normally spend some part of the daylight hours of each Saturday doing while you’re out fishing.”

“But Saturday night. What about overnight Saturday? You were seen back there after dark.”

Bette watched Peter run his hands through his hair. “Tell ‘em, Peter,” she whispered, but too softly for any of the men to hear.

Peter shook his head. “Guilty as charged.”

Gasps from several men filled the silence.

“You spent the night with Carrie?” Bill asked incredulously.

Peter shook his head slowly. “Et tu, Doc? Do you really think I would? That I could, and still show my face here in the Lord’s house Sunday morning?”

Doc looked at him a moment. “No, I don’t think you would, whether you had to be here Sunday or not.”

“But he was seen coming out of there Sunday morning. What about the witness?” Hank whined insistently.

“A witness that disguises her voice and won’t show her face? You’re believing her lies over my word that nothing improper happened?”

Most of the men were silent. Peter looked at the two or three who had said no. "Thank you for your support."

He pushed off from the pew and walked sideways to the center aisle. "You'll have my resignation as soon as I can get Harriet to type it, gentlemen." He turned toward the front of the church.

"What do you mean?" Hank inquired.

"What are you going to do?" Bill asked at the same time.

"I'm resigning," Peter said dully. He stopped and looked up at the cross on the front wall over the choir loft. "You know, I thought God called me to a life in this church, but I guess I was wrong. He can't possibly want me to work where the ruling members don't have faith in me to practice what I preach, where they'd believe an anonymous caller before they'd trust me." He continued toward the front exit beside the chair where he sat each Sunday.

"Peter, hold up," Bill called, climbing out of the pew and hurrying up the aisle after him. "Peter, let's not go off the deep end," he said quietly enough so that the other men now heading for the back door couldn't hear him, but Bette and Harriet could. "I know there's been no hanky-panky, and they'll see it soon enough."

"Thanks, Doc. It seems Carolyn was right all along."

"What do you mean?"

"She said she could never be happy living here in Sunville again. One of the reasons she gave was the 'small-town mentality', as she put it. She tried to show me people were ready to gossip with no basis for what they said and that trust was a foreign commodity here. And to think I told her she was wrong."

He turned and put his hand on the door to open it, but he stopped a second time. "You know what's ironic, Doc? I went back to Carolyn's house last Saturday night to try once more to get her to marry me, but she was so set against living in this town that she said no. She knew how happy I was here and she thought she never could be. She told me right from the start that she wouldn't stay, and I still fell in love with her. She claimed she could never be a minister's wife because the town thought she wasn't suitable. I couldn't believe her even when someone called her a murderer to her face." He shook his head. "I went back Sunday morning to tell her I would wait forever, if I had to, for her to change her mind, and she was gone. She'd walked out of my life for good without even saying goodbye."

"I wish I could help."

"Thanks, Doc. And as a matter of fact, you can. You can do me a favor."

"Name it."

"Keep this about Carolyn and me considering marriage under your hat, okay? I sure don't want her to be the subject of more rumors. I've shared something very personal with you." He snorted an attempt at a laugh. "I almost said I'd like a chance to get the lady to agree to marry me before it gets all around the church what I'm doing. But now I guess I won't be around long enough to care. Maybe I should look at the bright side. If I move to a city church somewhere else, she might say yes."

Peter pushed open the door and disappeared.

Bette reached for the back of the seat in front of her and pulled herself up. She'd heard enough, more than enough. She pushed open the half-door at the end of the row of seats and stepped out behind the pulpit.

"Hold it there, boys," she shouted as she hurried over to the top of the steps at the center. "You've really done it this time," Bette said in a clear voice that sliced through the hollow silence and stopped the men in their tracks as they were exiting.

Bill hurried over to the stairs to offer her his hand as she stepped down. Harriet materialized at her side a moment later. Bette took the offer of Bill's arm as she made their way down to the center aisle as Peter and the choir did each Sunday at the close of services. She stopped within a few feet of the men and nodded to Bill before she stared at each man, pinning them in place. "I've been coming to this church longer than any of you, since before some of you were born, in fact. In all those years, I've never seen so many men allow something so stupid to happen."

Bette ignored Harriet's gasp. "You good ol' boys apparently don't know a good thing when you see one," she continued, her finger wagging in the air in their direction.

"You can't talk to us that way!" Hank insisted as his chin rose.

Bette squared off against him. "Hank, did you just get the promise of Peter's resignation?"

Hank nodded. "You obviously know I did."

"Then you deserve everything I said, and more. That boy is the best thing that ever happened to the Sunville Community Church," Bette said, pointing to the door through which Peter had left. "If you know what's good for this church, you'd best hightail it to his office and stop him. With Harriet being in here with me, it might take him a while to type his own letter."

"Bette?" Bill asked, standing beside her, "Just what do you know about this?"

"Well, it just so happens I saw Peter a couple of times this weekend."

"Unh huh. And when would that have been?"

"Let's see. It was Saturday night and Sunday morning."

"Aw, Bette, you'd cover up for him 'cause you like him, just like you tried to cover up for Carrie when Ralph died!" Hank said curtly.

"Listen here, Hank Olson," Bette ordered. "I know you think I'm half a bubble shy of plumb, but I don't tell lies. And you know it. Not even about your wife's tough pie crust. Carrie had nothing to do with Ralph drinking enough for three men, or getting himself into the accident, and then taking the quick way out of his worthless messed up life. She was a saint for sticking by him as long as she did. And I'm telling you that Peter and Carrie did not spend a night together. So you can get off your high horse and sit down and listen while I tell you a thing or two more."

The men grumbled at first, but they took their seats in the last couple rows. Bette told them about visiting Marge and getting the ride home Saturday night from Peter when she saw his car at Carrie's. "They were saying good night at the front door. He'd been working on his sermon here at his office and stopped on

his way home to say good night to her. I'd just caught him before he left."

The men looked both relieved and guilty for what they'd been thinking. They should feel guilty, Bette decided.

"Then Sunday morning, I was walking over to church when I saw Peter drive down the street. He pulled over and offered me a ride. I accepted gladly. That block gets longer each year."

The men chuckled. Bette leaned over to whisper to Harriet who quietly hurried out of the sanctuary while Bette continued. "Peter asked me if I'd mind if he stopped at Carrie's house to pick her up, too. I thought it was sweet. 'No,' I told him. 'They can't start without you, so I won't miss anything.'"

The men laughed.

"Peter thought that was funny, too," Bette bragged. "Anyway, we pulled into the driveway at Carrie's house. I told him I'd wait in the car while he went to the door. Peter and Carrie had looked so unhappy the night before, that I didn't want to interfere with whatever he had to say to her. I knew Carrie was planning to leave and I had a feeling he didn't want her to. It was too bad because I know Maddie always hoped those two would get together one day."

"Get on with it, Bette, before the sun sets and I lose the whole day, will ya?" the farmer asked. "I knew this was a waste of time."

"I'm getting. I'm getting. But there's not much more that I can tell you," Bette claimed.

"You just said he left you in the car and he went into her house," Hank insisted.

"No, I didn't. I said I waited in the car, but I didn't tell you he went in." She paused, feeling very much the center of things.

"Well?" Hank prodded.

At the back of the sanctuary, Harriet silently opened the door and stepped just inside. Bette gave no sign to the others that she saw her there, but she met Harriet's gaze and saw her little negative shake of her head. Bette frowned.

"Well, as I was saying, Peter went up to ring the bell, but no one answered. He called out, opened the screen, and knocked on the inside door. Nothing. All the curtains were drawn. No car in the garage. You see, Carrie had already left. He came back to his car where I was waiting. I didn't mind the wait neither. He's got those high-back seat cushions that were just right to lean against."

"Bette," Hank warned.

"Anyway, the ride around the block to church was exciting," Bette continued. "He was driving like the wind--in a big hurry to get there. Oh, he helped me out of his car, but I could tell he was looking all around the parking lot."

"Looking for her car?" Bill asked.

"Yep, but her car wasn't there," Bette told him. "He went on in to do whatever he does before the service begins. But as the morning progressed and Carrie didn't show up, I could tell he was feeling

sadder and sadder.”

A few heads nodded in agreement. “Yeah. I thought he was ill or something.”

Bette took a big breath. “Last I knew, it wasn’t a sin for a minister in our church to date a woman. I certainly don’t think it’s reason to fire him, or to let him resign either. I do think it’s reason to show our support for Peter. Whether it’s in God’s plan for those two sweet people to get together or not, it’s none of our business, but it’s our duty to have faith that he’s doing what’s right.”

Everyone’s head ducked as their guilt washed over them. The head of the board cleared his throat. “I... I’ll talk to Peter. Thank you all for coming and... I’m sorry I jumped to the wrong conclusion. I was just trying to do my job.”

“Before you waste too much time working up guilt, you oughta know that Peter is gone,” Bette announced.

The men all looked back at her. Bette pointed to Harriet. “Tell ‘em.”

“I just went down to his office and he’s not there,” Harriet said. “He’s gone!” Her voice sounded worried.

“Come on. We’ll look around,” Hank ordered. “I’ll go check the parking lot. You check the social hall.”

The rest of the men, except for Bill, followed him out of the sanctuary. Bill walked over to Bette. “You know, when Peter suggested you beat boredom by stopping by to see if you could find something to do, I don’t think he had this in mind,” he told her with a laugh. “But I think he’d thank you.”

Bette giggled. “Sure glad I started working today so I could help the dear boy out. Carrie’s such a lovely girl. They’re so right together.”

“You know, Bette, you really have to stop calling adults by the terms boys and girls.”

“Harriet beat you to it, Doc. She’s told me more than once not to call Peter a boy any more. But I think a lady who will be eighty-one next month should be able to pretty much do as she pleases, don’t you?”

Bill laughed and held out his elbow. “You’ve done a fine day’s work already and it’s not yet noon. May I offer you a ride home?”

Bette smiled and slipped her hand in the fold of his elbow. “Thanks, Doc, don’t mind if ya do.”

Chapter Eighteen

The long phone cord in Carrie’s apartment just reached to the couch. She made herself comfortable

sitting with her legs crossed beneath her. She looked at the card Don had given her two days earlier and dialed the digits for his office number.

She hoped he wouldn't mind if she broke into his afternoon coffee break so soon. When his secretary answered, she switched the call to his line. "Hi, Don. It's Carrie."

"Good to hear from you," Don responded.

"I'm not sure either of us expected me to call just a couple days after I left town, but some decisions are being made for me here."

"Tell me what's happening," Don encouraged.

"For one, I lost my job." She drew in a deep fortifying breath. "They'd already hired someone else by the time I got back here."

"Oh, Carrie, that's a jolt."

"My boss said some part-time editing might come up that I could do freelance during their busiest times, but I don't know. Now that I've thought about it more, I think losing the job was good." She managed a brief laugh. "I hope I'm not just rationalizing my way out of that."

"Well, assuming you're not, you've decided what you want to move away from, but what are you moving toward?" Don asked.

"Well, I'd like to get into writing more. And I've come to realize that I can do that from anywhere," she said, remembering that it was Peter who had pointed that out to her.

"Okay. Have you thought how you would like that to work out?" Don asked.

"I spent the rest of yesterday and again this morning making the rounds of the companies with offices here that put out in-house publications, to see if they needed an editor or a writer. No one did. One of them, however, encouraged me to write freelance articles for them when they saw the clips of what I've published already." Carrie smiled, thinking about the interview.

"There's a step in the right direction," Don said happily.

"That was very exciting because, from what they said, I can expect to place something there several times a year, especially if I'm willing to do a piece on a subject of their choosing."

"Congratulations!"

"Thanks." Carrie laughed briefly at Don's enthusiasm. "And one did say that if they got swamped, they would send me articles to edit via email so I could work on it anywhere. I feel good about what's happening to me, which is crazy since I've just lost my job and this freelance work isn't enough to live on. I should be depressed and at my wits end by now. The only hangup so far was this apartment."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't afford it without any income. Grandma left me a little money, but I want to save that and what I've saved myself for a real emergency. This apartment is too expensive, way more expensive than just

paying for heat and light there in Sunville.”

She sighed and then straightened, feeling the new resolve she was developing. “So I gave the apartment office my notice today.”

“How long do you have to stay?”

“I told them I’d be out in thirty days which is the minimum on my lease.” She exhaled a little laugh. “Actually, they were glad to get the apartment vacated at the end of the summer for the State University students returning to Fargo, so they said I could leave at the end of this month and not have to pay the rest of the thirty days.”

“A landlord who’s got a heart,” Don remarked with a chuckle. “That’s got to be a good sign.”

“I think he had people waiting for a place to open up and they want to grab them before they find something else. I probably could have left this week if I’d pressed the point. But I need more time to think and besides, I haven’t started packing up anything. Everything looks and even feels like I’m doing the right thing in moving back to Sunville permanently, but I’ve got to be sure. After so many years of believing I could never go back, I still can’t quite believe I’m working this hard to do exactly that. And I don’t think I would be if you hadn’t found that letter. It’s one thing to have other people think poorly of me, but quite another to have thought badly of myself for so long.”

“A new lease on life has been given to you. And God will let you know what he wants you to do, if you just listen for his direction. Pray for his guidance, Carolyn.”

“I am, Don. The burden of guilt I’ve carried all these years has been lifted. I still feel very badly about Ralph feeling he had no other option than death, but I don’t take responsibility for his actions anymore.”

Carrie heard some knocking at Don’s end of the line.

“Hang on a minute, will you? My secretary must be out because someone’s knocking at my door. I know this is long distance so I’ll be quick.”

The phone clunked as he set it down on his desk before Carrie could say she’d call back another time. She couldn’t hear anything more until Don said, “Peter!” He sounded surprised. “Come on in.”

Carrie lifted her other hand and clutched the phone tighter to her ear.

“You look awful,” she heard Don say. “What’s wrong besides Carolyn being gone?”

“You knew she was gone?”

It was Peter’s voice. Carrie’s heart beat sped up. Suddenly she felt uncomfortable eavesdropping. Peter didn’t know she could hear what he was saying.

“She stopped here on her way out of town,” Don admitted. “Is that what’s got you looking so down today?”

“Not entirely. I’m resigning from the church,” Peter said dully.

Carrie gasped. She felt dizzy and couldn’t believe what she was hearing. He’d asked her if she would

marry him if he quit and got a position in a city to please her. Had he really done it? How could he? He was so good for that church that she didn't want him to leave. Not now. Not just when she was returning to Sunville.

A sharp bang on the phone was so loud that Carrie jerked it away from her ear. When she returned it gingerly to be sure the noise was ended, she heard Peter apologizing for having knocked some books over onto it.

"Sorry. That's what I get for sitting on desks instead of chairs," she heard him say. "Don, I just don't get it. I was so sure God wanted me here. And if I can't figure out what he has planned for me, then what good am I to help anyone else?"

There were more thumps. Carrie guessed he was standing up the books again.

"Sorry, I even knocked over the phone." Peter said absently.

Click. The line went dead and Carrie realized he had hung up the phone, not knowing that Don had been talking on it. She kept the phone at her ear, but in a few seconds the dial tone sounded. She put it down in the cradle and crumpled against the back of the couch.

"No, Peter, you can't quit," she said aloud.

She closed her eyes. She knew Peter loved living in Sunville. He must be hurting badly. Her hands folded into a praying position.

Don't let him throw it over, please. He shouldn't leave, not for me. Especially not for me.

"Oh, what have I done?"

Tears pooled in her eyes. Carrie had never felt lower in her life. No matter what she did, she seemed to deeply hurt the ones she loved the most, and to hurt herself in the process.

#

Bill Bolton sat in the chair opposite Peter in his office at the Sunville Community Church. He and Bill were on a friendlier basis since Bill had stood up for him against the elders who'd later refused to accept his resignation.

Peter wanted to believe that the head of the board had been doing what he thought he had to in the investigation to fulfill the duties of his office. Never in the history of their church had anything like that happened. Peter prayed it never would again.

At the time Peter had heard Bill mutter under his breath about some people being promoted past the level of their competence, but Peter hadn't commented. He knew all the people who worked on the boards of the church did so on their own time and without pay. He was in no position to complain.

He was happy to learn the elders did not truly believe he'd spent the night with Carrie. He was relieved because he knew he couldn't set an example for others if they didn't have faith in him. The youth needed good role models and he wanted to be one.

"I feel like a new man now compared to that day I said he would resign," Peter admitted. "I don't have

to leave this area I love.”

“I’m glad you’re staying too. This church is better because of you,” Bill told him.

“Thanks. Now if I could just figure out a way to get Carolyn to come back to Sunville and marry me,” Peter mused. He would continue to pray about it and was not giving up.

“This town didn’t treat her kindly with their rumors a few years back,” Bill said. “She had few people to stick up for her other than Maddie and Bette.” He shook his head. “She was so lost and alone back then. She…”

“If you’re going to tell me about Ralph, please don’t. I still have high hopes that Carolyn will some day. At that point, I think I might have a chance with her. In the meantime, I think she still feels lost and alone, but I’m going to do my best to convince her otherwise,” Peter vowed.

“She deserves to be happy. You both do. Have you talked to her since she left?”

Peter shook his head. “I thought I would give her a few weeks to get settled in Fargo and then I’m going drive out after church some Sunday for a visit. I think I can do a much better job of convincing her in person than over the phone.”

“Sounds like a good idea, but who am I to advise you? I’ve never been married,” Bill said with a chuckle. “But speaking of phone calls, I still don’t get who did the calling,” Doc said.

“Well, I have a theory about that,” Peter responded hesitantly.

“Are you going to tell me?”

Peter laughed at Bill’s directness. “I really haven’t got much to go on except that the caller referred to Carolyn as Carolyn.”

Peter saw Bill’s blank look and explained. “You see, I’m the only adult here who calls her that. You and everyone else call her Carrie. The caller must have learned to call her Carolyn from hearing me. And that means Don Hoag at the nursing home and the youth group who are working on the puppet show and have spent time with Carolyn and I. Only two of those are females.”

“Sounds logical,” Bill said nodding.

“If the girl I have in mind did it, confronting her in public won’t help because it didn’t stop her after her last stunt. Maybe this was a lesson for me--God wanted to teach me to be less impulsive, more patient.” He ran his hand through his hair. “But I was so anxious to stop the rumors about Carolyn that I jumped at the chance and may have handled the situation wrong.”

“To your credit to recognize it. I’m in general practice and not psychiatry, but let me know if I can help,” Bill insisted as he rose and opened the door to leave.

“Thanks for stopping in, Bill.”

The men shook hands just as Bette walked by Peter’s open office door. She waved her sun hat with a polka-dot band. “Hi, boys.”

“Bette, I thought you were going to quit calling grown men, boys,” Bill called after her.

Bette giggled and continued on toward Harriet’s office.

“Are those really red and white stripe hightops she’s wearing?” Bill asked, his eyes wide with surprise. “I tell you, if I were twenty years older,” he joked.

#

Three weeks later, Sunday dawned hot and sunny in Sunville. Not a cloud marred the unending royal-blue North Dakota sky, but not even the bright light could wake Carrie.

Exhausted from moving into her house the day before, she’d unintentionally slept in. She was in the back bedroom again as she’d always been while Maddie was still alive. She couldn’t bring herself to sleep in the four-poster bed in the master bedroom all by herself. That wasn’t part of her dream.

The night before, after emptying the little trailer that she’d pulled back from Fargo filled with all her belongings from her apartment, Carrie had to drive back twenty-five miles to find a place open late enough to allow her to return it and remove the rented hitch.

She patted the top of her little car as she climbed in to return home. “I promise I won’t ever abuse you with a trailer again,” she said. But not wanting to overtax the car is why she had taken so long to move. She hadn’t gone over forty-five miles an hour all the way.

This was one time she was thankful that the eastern section of North Dakota was more or less flat. The car still sounded fine and since she wouldn’t have a regular income for the foreseeable future, that was a good sign.

By the time she returned to the house, she had energy enough only to shower and collapse into bed without a thought to the boxes and suitcases that lined her front hall. She’d tamped down how excited, and yes, how nervous she felt at the prospect of surprising Peter in the morning and was asleep instantly with a smile on her face.

The sounds of the church organ music and the choir singing the processional floated through her open bedroom windows and woke her. Panicked at being late for the service, she bounded out of bed wide awake.

She dressed in a two-piece dress and ran a brush through her hair. She skipped her makeup altogether. She didn’t need it. The shadows in evidence under her eyes when she returned to Fargo were gone. Once she’d learned from Don that the elders had listened to Bette’s story and convinced Peter not to leave the church, Carrie found she could sleep better. She’d been ready to call Peter to urge him to stay, but she hadn’t needed to. In fact, she hadn’t talked to him in the weeks since she’d left without saying goodbye.

Don knew she was returning this weekend, but she’d asked him not to tell Peter. “I want to surprise him,” Carrie told Don. “Actually, what I really want to do is to see his face when he sees me back in Sunville. I have to be sure I’m doing the right thing, and seeing Peter’s initial reaction will be the key.”

Carrie tried to ignore the flutters in her tummy when she thought about seeing him. She flew down the stairs as fast as her low heels would allow, and out the back door without bothering to lock it. In another two minutes, she’d crossed the lawns and was tiptoeing in the main entrance to the quaint, historic

Sunville Community Church.

The foyer was empty so she walked across the carpeted floor to stand behind the closed doors to the sanctuary. She swallowed and tried to breathe more slowly and more quietly as she waited for the right moment to slip into the sanctuary unnoticed.

The deacons were collecting the offering while the choir sang the anthem. She stood patiently, peeking through the slit between the double doors. The choir finished, Peter blessed the offering and turned his back to sit down.

The moment his back was to the congregation, Carrie slipped through the doors and slid into the last pew on the center aisle just before the deacons marched right by her with the offering plates.

Smiling at the people who glanced back at her late arrival, she picked up the hymnal to find the page for the responsive reading that the layreader was announcing. When she heard the first line, she knew she didn't need to follow in the book.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want," the reader told the congregation.

Carrie sought out Peter's face which she could see in profile. She wished she was closer so she could see him better. He was watching the reader. That stubborn strand of hair had fallen over his forehead again.

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters," Carrie responded with the others. She certainly felt more at peace than she had in years.

"He restoreth my soul," she heard the reader say. He has restored me, Carrie thought. During the many phone conversations with Don Hoag, Carrie had taken giant strides on the path to peace and strength within herself. She'd forgiven the townspeople who had rumored that her part in Ralph's death was a major one. She knew better now. That part of her life was put to rest.

"For Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me," she said moments later.

Peter looked tired. Carrie could see that the problems he'd been facing hadn't left him unscathed. She felt his pain and wanted to help. She smiled. Now she could... if he would let her.

"My cup runneth over." Since I met you, Peter, she added silently. I'm blessed just knowing you, and twice blessed because I love you.

As if he'd heard her, his head jerked around and he looked directly at her. She smiled at the surprised and then relieved looks that passed over his face. While they looked at each other in silence, the others around them read, "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."

The lay reader sat down.

Peter and Carrie's gazes held long into the silence until a few coughs gently reminded Peter that it was his turn at the pulpit.

Carrie watched as he stood slowly and walked over to it, never taking his eyes off her. She tried to keep smiling, but her lips trembled. She clutched the hymnal to her chest to hide the fact that her hands were trembling as well.

“Each Sunday we have a silent prayer at this point in our service,” Peter began softly, letting the microphone do the work of amplifying his voice. He paused and looked around the congregation. The remarks he was making at this point in the service were so out of the ordinary that he had everyone’s rapt attention. “I believe in the power of prayer, and today I...” His gaze returned to Carrie. “Well, I’m the one in need of that power in my life. I’m asking you to pray for me.”

Carrie could hear the collective sharp intakes of air by the congregation expressing their concern.

“I’ve been praying about something for weeks. It’s very personal. I can’t share it with you just yet, but this morning I’m asking you to pray for me, to help me find the right solution to my problem.”

A low buzz of private conversations hummed across the sanctuary as people conjectured on what the nature of Peter’s problem might be.

“I’m not sick or anything,” Peter added quickly with a dismissing sweep of his arm, apparently realizing what they might have construed from his plea. “Lost a little weight in the last few weeks maybe, but hey, that’s not all bad.” He chuckled at himself with the congregation.

“I’ll take all the help I can get on this one, folks.” His gaze settled back on Carrie. “Let’s bow our heads in silent prayer.”

The heads around them bowed, but Carrie continued to look up at Peter. His black robe made his black hair seem even darker. The high white collar around his neck stood out in stark contrast to his tanned face. Had he been mowing the church lawn again?

Her smile grew as she sat up straighter so he could be sure to see her whole face. She’d seen the love and concern in his face that she prayed would be there when he saw her. She felt strong and confident in what she wanted to do.

I love you, she mouthed silently.

With evident relief born of understanding and a broad smile filling his face, Peter closed his eyes and tipped his chin heavenward. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Carrie closed her own eyes and bowed her head. She prayed for Peter, for herself and for the life she hoped with all her heart that they could have together. Thankful for his help, she prayed for Don, and the selfless work he did at the nursing home.

Most of all, she prayed that Peter still had room in his heart for her because she wanted with all her heart to fill that space. They had a lot of talking to do. She wanted to tell him all about Ralph... even the great plans they’d made... plans that she’d abandoned long before Ralph’s death. Most of all she wanted to talk about the plans that she and Peter would make for a life together.

The rest of the service passed in a blurred montage of words and songs. Carrie wondered what she would say to Peter when she exited the church and shook his hand along with all the rest of the congregation. When the final recessional hymn began, she slipped her purse strap over her shoulder and stood with the congregation, a hymnal in her hands.

Between the first and second lines, she glanced up to see Peter quickly descending the steps from the pulpit leading the choir by a good thirty feet instead of following them at their more sedate pace, as he

usually did. Carrie forgot all about singing as he veered off the path down the center to her side. He grasped her hand and, allowing for no resistance, pulled her out into the aisle with him.

The startled woman beside her caught the hymnal that slipped from her hands so the book didn't crash to the floor.

Peter led her through the open doors at the back of the sanctuary. Carrie felt heat rush into her cheeks and knew that the people who sat at the back of the church were watching them with undisguised interest. This time she wasn't worried about what the rumor mill would say about it. She only thought about Peter and how wonderful it was to see him again.

He continued to lead her to the far side of the foyer where he stopped and pulled her into his arms. He hugged her hard, his long, full robe circling them both like a cape. "You came back," he said with a rush of air by her ear.

"I had to. I know now that this is where I belong--with you. I love you, Peter," she confessed. "I couldn't stay away."

He straightened. His hands moved to cup her face as he looked squarely into her eyes. "Say that again. Now that I can hear you and see your face clearly, please say it again."

She spread her hands on his chest. She could feel the rapid beat of his heart that matched the rhythm of her own. "Peter, I love you with all my heart. I always will."

He took a deep breath. "Carolyn Whitmore, will you marry me?" he asked quietly, his voice tremulous.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, Peter, whenever you want."

He hugged her again, even harder. She felt the air whoosh out of his lungs past her ear again. She knew he must have been holding his breath until he heard her answer.

"I love you forever," he whispered into her ear.

"Mm... music," she said moments later. "The music has stopped!"

They both turned their heads to see that the choir had stopped at the back of the aisle. They and the congregation, now turned their way, were all watching them. They had a good view through all the broad rear doors which stood propped wide open.

A grin on his face, Peter took Carrie's hand in his and moved with her back into the back of the center aisle. The choir parted like the Red Sea to allow Peter and Carolyn to walk up toward the front of the church.

Although the music had stopped, the sanctuary was noisy with conversation and speculation. Carrie could feel she was blushing, but was startled when she looked up sheepishly at Peter to find his cheeks were rosy under his tan as well.

Peter cleared his throat. "Ah, before I pronounce the benediction, I... I'd like to introduce you to someone." He bent his arm to lift Carrie's hand and hold it against his chest. "This is Carolyn... ah, Carrie Whitmore who many of you already know is Maddie Whitmore's granddaughter. If you don't already know her, I want you to meet her today."

He smiled down at her and then went on. "I also want to thank you all for your prayers this morning, because they were answered and my problem is solved--just the way I hoped and prayed it would be. You see, Carolyn has just consented to become my wife."

The congregation applauded. Several people called out, "Congratulations!"

Looking up into his beaming face, Carrie could only grin along with him. No tears pricked at her eyes, she realized. No fears filled her. No guilt and regret enshrouded or diminished her. Joy filled her heart. Joy and love. Thank you, dear Lord, she prayed.

When the sanctuary was quiet again, Peter pronounced the benediction, and a wave of well wishers surrounded them.

Carrie held his hand as firmly as he held hers. She didn't need to lean on him now, but she was glad he would be by her side if the need arose sometime in the future. And now she was confident she could be there to provide willing support for him whenever he needed her.

The well-wishers wanted to shake both their hands, but Peter's right held her left. "Just a minute here," he said laughing. To free his right hand, he moved to stand behind Carrie. He took her left hand in his left and raised them to her waist so he could hold her against his left side. This way they both had their right hands free to shake the hands of those greeting them.

"Isn't that cute?" a member of the church teased. "He doesn't want to let go of her."

"Now that I've got her back, I'm never letting her go!" Peter responded instantly.

Much later, after the church was empty, Carrie and Peter crossed the lawns and sat in her kitchen eating sandwiches and fruit for a lunch created from the few groceries that Carrie had brought with her from Fargo.

"Peter, I just remembered. Would you remind me to call the realtor and ask who the buyer was who made the purchase offer for this house? It was David somebody or other. I didn't recognize the name. He must have given up, but I want to be sure he understands the house is no longer for sale." She stood to carry the empty dishes to the sink.

"The name on the offer is Dutch," Peter said matter-of-factly as he rose and picked up the remaining dishes.

Peter's loafers silently crossed the tiled kitchen floor. He came up behind her to put down the dishes, and wrapped his arms around her waist. He silently kissed the side of her neck, instantly sending goose bumps down her back.

"Wait a minute. How do you know what his name was? Did I show it to you?" she asked, unable to remember what she had done with the offer that morning.

"No, you didn't need to," he said turning her in his arms to face him. "The name on the offer is Dutch for Newhouse. That's the way one branch of our family still spells our name."

She looked up at the tall gentle man whom she loved. "You?"

He nodded. "I love you, Carolyn," he whispered, his voice vibrating with emotion. "You were so determined to leave that I thought if I bought the house..." He stopped and inhaled deeply. "From the moment I realized I loved you, I never lost hope that I could convince you to come back some day."

Carrie raised her arms to circle his neck as they hugged each other. "I love you, Peter," she promised. "And I thank our dear Lord that you came into my life."

In her heart she knew they would love each other for the rest of their lives and she would never be so alone again.

The End