



It was the time when the shadows lengthened. Summer was playing out his last carefree golden days in the month of September, and Autumn was just hinting at her arrival with the tinkling of the moon-lit, chilly nights and the first sprinkling of colors among the high trees of Southall. A lawn tractor hummed its lazy song around the Dupris' wide lawns, making a strange duet with the high-pitched whirr of a weed-whacker, while a hedge trimmer kept time along a prodigious wall of three-foot shrubs that encompassed the property along two sides. It had been a fairly dry season, but the deep well behind the house and the large sprinkler system kept the grass a lush green and prompted the weekly manicure by Borsov Lawn and Garden.

Today two men and a woman were merrily toiling away, the woman riding the tractor, a portable CD player blaring rock music under her ear protection. One man operated the hedge trimmer while the other one worked the weed-whacker. The Duprises were picky enough that they demanded that none other than Ken O'Tare be present while the work progressed. Though now general manager of BL&G, he was more often found at some home or business, doing some of the more menial jobs, rather than bouncing around in the manager's new, big Jeep Grand Cherokee, checking in on the half-dozen work crews scattered around the county and into the next. Vern Borsov's taking up a second career as a classical guitarist had effectively left Ken the owner of the business in all but name. Vern still took his cut of the profits every month, but besides that he didn't even care to live in Southall anymore, having moved up to the state capital. Well, Vicki's rejection of him would have made him a bit unhappy, Ken mused. And Vern was never really one to face his emotions. Besides, who should tamper with a good thing? Business was better than ever and he could be off doing whatever he wanted.

Between the heavy ear protectors and his thoughts Ken didn't even hear his employee until the man stood beside him and tapped him on the shoulder. He quickly shut down the hedge-trimmer and pulled off the head-set.

"Yeah?"

"It's five o'clock, Ken," Barry announced, swinging the weed-whacker back over his shoulder. "We were going to quit early."

The blond man squinted down the hedgerow, eyeing the section he'd trimmed roughly earlier, but had been unable to cut to perfection. Maybe another half-hour – or maybe better next week. It was the section behind the house, away from the road and he knew that Mrs. Dupris was away for the next ten days, visiting relatives in Colorado. And Mr. Dupris was blind, so he couldn't tell whether they were trimmed or not. Still, Ken's conscience pricked him at leaving everything any less than perfect.

We'll give them a discount this week, he thought. After all, I didn't bring Lonnie in, so that's one less hourly wage they'll have to pay.

"Okay," he told Barry after a moment. "Have Monique put the tractor back on the trailer. Be there in a minute." Barry grinned broadly, dark eyes shining with delight and hurried off to get his stuff put away. Ken knew that was one thing that his employees liked about him – no forced overtime, just because he felt like it. What they didn't like was the fact that he cared nothing for rain and had them out working in light to moderate sprinkles, whereas Vern had been known to call a day off at the merest *hint* of precipitation. Ah, the memories. Ken smiled to himself and padded across the springy green expanse. For some reason he always felt more like he was walking across a golf course rather than the back lawn of the mansion of the largest fishing industrialist in the two towns. Well, you could do a lot of things if you had money. And – talking about money – he couldn't wait to get home to see if the closing had gone through as Harry had promised him.

The drive back to the office, the stowing of the equipment, and the filing of the paperwork took longer than Ken expected (Ken's secretary, Anne Roget, was an excellent administrator, but *did* have a penchant to like paper a bit too much), but he finally was able to grab a land-line and dial Harry's number.

"Beldieu," came the crisp answer.

"And?" was all Ken asked.

"Well, it's covered, Ken," the investor/attorney laughed into the other end. "We beat the other customers out by a hundred dollars. As a matter of fact they were coming back with a counter-offer, but I think the Hansons took a liking to you..."

"Only been doing their lawns for three years," Ken shot back. "Gotta count for something!"

"Yes, it did. Come on over tomorrow and I'll have the paperwork for you, okay?"

"Sure." Ken paused for a moment and then asked the other question that he had on his heart. "How's Pris?" Harry let out a sigh.

"She had another episode the other evening and is back with the therapist. I'm on my way to pick her up." There was a pause. "And it had been good for six months. I don't see where we've gone wrong."

"Some things just take time, Harry," the blond man soothed. "I'm praying."

"Thanks, Ken." There was a fumbling noise and a suppressed curse. "There goes Rip Thol again!" Harry came back. "I swear, we've got to get Downs to yank his license!"

"Yeah, catch you later, man."

"See you." And they cut the connection. It was all Ken could do not to let out a whoop. The house was his! After all this time he finally had gotten it. He'd drive over right away... And then he checked his watch. No, no good. He had to get home, get dinner and get over to Elliot's for singles' flock. Some things just had to wait. Well, maybe he could just drive by it. After all, it *was* on his way home. He called good-night to Anne, hurried out, and climbed into the black PT Cruiser he'd picked up only a week earlier. Between his new car and his new home he was on his way to success. There was only one thing – one person – missing and she was just a dream. The thought dampened his mood some, but he forced it away from himself and drove off.

His "drive by" turned into a stop-over and what with wandering through the rooms, he found himself almost twenty minutes late to flock, barely having enough time to shower, throw on some clean clothes, and grab a sandwich at his parents' home. He parked his car off the side of the McDermotts' driveway and hurried to the house. He let himself in, hoping to be unnoticed. The happy chatter of the twenty-odd singles lounging on and among the couches caught him up and drew him to the living-room. *Good, they haven't started.*

"Hey, Kenner," came Elliot's voice from the kitchen.

"What's up?" Ken replied with a quick smile.

"Oh, nothing much." The small group leader gestured towards the kitchen. "Drink and dessert?" The blond man followed his friend.

"No study tonight?" he asked.

"No, we've got an old friend in and she's going to tell us a bit about what she's been up to." Elliot grinned, brushed at his goatee, and his shaved head fairly glowed with delight.

"Who is it?" Ken wanted to know.

"She's been asking about you and absolutely wouldn't start until you got here," the other man laughed. "Pie or cake?" He didn't wait for Ken's answer, but dropped a large piece of each on the plate.

"Hey, one or the other!" the blond man shot back. "Don't want to look like you, man!" Elliot laughed and slapped his belly.

"It's all muscle, Ken, you know that." He shoved the plate into Ken's hands. "Now go on into the living room. They're all waiting for you."

"Okay, okay," Ken sighed a laugh, turned and went through the doorway.

"Ken!" came a call from Little Jimmy, the big Native American boy who had recently joined the group. "You finally made it."

"Yeah, sorry I'm late," he glanced around, noticing the new girl. She looked familiar, he thought, then almost dropped his plate. It was *her*! For an instant it felt as if something had reached into his chest, grabbed his heart,

and squeezed it. Michelle! He felt like turning and running and at the same time wanted to storm across the room and grab her up in a passionate embrace.

"Hi, Kenner," she laughed, getting up from her place on the couch and coming across to him. She was a sight for his lonely eyes. Her long, dark hair hung loose beyond her shoulders and a pair of very stylish European glasses were perched on her nose. She was wearing a white blouse with short, puffy sleeves and a moderate cut, and a dress made of a black bodice and black-and-white patterned skirt. Over that was a red apron with a flower pattern. This was completed by flesh-toned nylons and low-heeled shoes of the same tone as her apron. To Ken it looked like she had jumped out of one of his childhood fairytale books.

"Are you going to say something or are you just going to gape, man?" came a voice from beside him.

"Sorry," he stammered, glancing at Elliot, who was grinning like the Cheshire cat. "Hi, Michelle," he said to the girl, trying to regain his composure. He stuck out his hand awkwardly. She ignored it and gave him a quick hug.

"How come *he* gets the hug?" one of the other guys complained, just loud enough to spark a few stifled chuckles.

"It's been a long time," she replied with a laugh. "Come on and sit down." Almost mindlessly Ken let himself be led to the sofa where Jerry scooted over to give him room next to his old friend. Somehow he divested himself of the paper plate, something he could never really remember having done the whole evening.

"Okay," Elliot thundered over the din, "now that Ken's here, how about we get started."

"Sure," Michelle returned.

"Everybody knows Michelle Hayes," the small group leader began.

"Ken best of all!" someone crowed from across the room. Ken was too far gone to even shoot him a dirty glance.

"Right. Now, she's been in Germany for the past year and she's going to tell us a bit about it. Michelle?"

"Hey, Mike," one of the girls put in, "you were going to tell us about your dress."

"Okay, Tonya, all in good time," she replied. "Only, it's not Mike anymore. It's not been that for years. You can call me Michelle or Michi, as my German friends like to say." She pronounced the *ch* as a slight hissing at the back of her throat, much like a softer version of the Scottish pronunciation. She straightened her apron.

"Now, after I finished college I was asking God to show me a place where I could go to study the Bible for a while and also reach out to people who needed to hear about Jesus. Mrs. Amos told me about Word of Life over in New York state and I wrote to them. I went up there for a short weekend to visit and see what it was like. I felt it was a bit conservative for my tastes." This garnered a few snickers and knowing nods from the others.

"While I was there," she went on, "there was a piano concert by a guy called Gregor. He was *awesome!* I've never seen anybody play like that. Anyway, I wanted to go talk with him, since I play the piano a bit." Ken smiled a bit, thinking of how well she actually did. "He was a great guy – from Germany, you know – and he told me about Word of Life Germany. From the way he described it, I immediately wanted to go there. I think I actually asked him if he'd brought any applications for it." Her green eyes were shining at the memory as she pushed her hair back with one hand. "He slowed me down and told me that I would have to speak fluent German and that I ought to pray about it before applying. I was kind of taken aback by that, but I decided to take his advice. You know me back then, prayer wasn't exactly something I reveled in." She took a deep breath and continued.

"Well, I did pray about it, dusted off my German books, and spent two months with old Mr. Blumenauer over in Druin. When they sent me the applications he helped me fill them out. We had to twist some arms and do some serious praying before they let me come – they don't usually take foreigners, especially not Americans who have their own Word of Life Bible Institute. But they let me come and when I got there... Wow! It was amazing!" Her hands fluttered as she described the place. "The school is in this old castle off of a big lake in Bavaria – that's south-eastern Germany. And that's also where they dress like this." She motioned to the clothes she was wearing. "This is called a *dirndl* and it is a traditional dress that is worn in southern Germany."

"Can you get me one?" Tonya Jenkins asked, her dark face eager. Michelle smiled.

"Maybe. I could write to some friends there." She took a deep breath. "Well, as to Word of Life, or *Wort des Lebens*, as they call it – more often they call it *vay day el*, which is the way you pronounce the letters W, D, and L in

German." She paused for a moment to collect her thoughts and plunged in again. "WdL is in this big castle, as I said, but they also have this huge palace, both of which really belong to the government, but are leased to the school.

"But before I could go, I had to take a German language course and I did that in Munich, which wasn't too far from WdL. I saw Gregor again there and also got to meet some really nice people. A Christian family put me up. The man used to be a missionary in the Middle East and was working with people from there in Munich. It was a *blast* to be there. I made so many friends among the other language students. One was a girl from Iran. The course took a good three months, but got me ready for everything that I was going up against.

"Anyway, I was down in the palace when I got there and each of us had jobs around the place. I was in cleaning." She made a face. "Now you know how I feel about cleaning, but God taught me a lot about humility. You know, here I am in a different country. I'm dealing with the fact that most American's aren't really liked – and there was this one guy on the team who was a complete *jerk* and thought that all Americans were from hell – " Someone groaned and remarked that Germans were all idiots.

"Only as much as we are!" Michelle shot back. "They like things the way they are there, just like we like ours. Anyway, I had to deal with this guy and the fact that I was sharing a room with two other girls, Tanya and Nadine. They got to see my bad side quite often, but they were so sweet! They helped me with my German and when I really missed Southall." She sighed the last bit and glanced at Ken. He thought he could see a tear forming in her eye. She lifted up her glasses and swiped at it, then went on.

"God taught me so much about being a servant. I met these great, godly people. And then in the summer we helped run these family and youth camps. They were great fun. I got to talk with this one girl and even prayed with her to receive Jesus. It was the most *awesome* thing. And I want to go back! Even if I can only visit for a short time."

As she said that, Ken's throat suddenly constricted. *She's going away again*, he thought. *And I'm not going to get to see her!* Another voice echoed behind it. *Well, what did you think, waiting all this time? She was just looking for an excuse to dump you.* He slumped back, suddenly sullen. Michelle didn't seem to notice.

"So, do you have any questions?" she finished.

"Yeah, you pick up a boyfriend there?" Little Jimmy called out.

"James Whitetail!" Michelle exclaimed. "That you would *think* such a thing! Of course *not!*" Ken sat up. Maybe there still was hope.

"What did you guys do for your free time?" one girl wanted to know.

"Well, we'd go into town, sometimes we stopped off for a beer or a bratwurst. We went to the movies and we visited museums. When it got warm we girls would go sunbathing and sometimes we went down to the lake and swam or boated. I slept a lot."

"What would you say was the main truth you learned while you were there?" Elliot's wife Constance put in. Michelle looked up at the ceiling and blew out a breath.

"The main truth." She huffed again. "Now that's a hard one. I learned so much. But I guess I learned a lot about forgiveness." She looked around at the people in the room. "I found that I had to forgive my parents for dying when they did and my second foster parents and ... well, there were a lot of people I had to forgive. And I keep having to forgive them and I keep having to forgive myself." She leaned forward, gesturing as she began to make her point.

"Forgiving others is what opens the way for God to forgive us. He tells us to forgive them, so that He can pour His grace into our lives. Before I learned that about two-thirds of the way through the year I was struggling to grow and move on." She made a large gesture. "There was so much I was learning, most of which was true and important, but I wasn't changing the way I believed God wanted me to. I tried to surrender to Him, but this hate kept coming up. And then I talked with one of the other girls there. Olga is a bit younger than I am, but she's already learned that truth and when she told me about it and we worked through forgiving people, it was like I exploded. I began growing! God gave me some really tough situations to try out my growth in, but He brought me through each one. So I guess that's the biggest thing I learned."

Ken did his best to keep his mouth shut over this new, improved Michelle. If she lived up to *half* of what she said she now believed, she was way out of his league. He shifted his weight uncomfortably. More people shot

questions at Michelle who answered them with equal ease and with more emphasis on spiritual things, but Ken wasn't listening any more. Might his dream become reality, or might he have lost her to something bigger? After all, she wanted to go *back* to Germany, back to that castle. *What about me here? I've waited more than two years. And now she's so different. Do I even still love her?* Strangely, for the first time, there was no ready answer and he longed for the session to be over so that he could escape.

Elliot's voice broke into his reverie.

"Okay, now that you've heard some of Michelle's prayer requests, let's take some time to pray for her as she fits back in to the U.S., finds a job, and renews old relationships." There were murmurs of assent. The group bowed their heads and prayed for their new old friend, but Ken found he couldn't join in. He'd prayed for her often during those long years where they'd been apart and she'd grown – far more than in his wildest dreams, but now he felt he couldn't face her. *I need to think about this*, he decided. *Maybe talk to Larry.*

Then the prayers were over and people started talking and laughing. Several people began getting up and preparing to leave. Ken looked at his watch – two hours had already gone by and it was nine. He pushed himself up off the couch, mumbled a general farewell and slipped out of the house.

He hadn't even made it half-way down the driveway, when he heard a voice call after him.

"Kenner!" He turned to see a *dirndl*-clad figure hurrying after him with a feminine grace that he had only imagined before. She came to stand before him, the moonlight glinting off of her dark tresses.

"Where are you going?" she asked. "I thought we could spend some time together and talk."

"Sorry, Michelle, I can't," he told her. "I have an early morning tomorrow."

"So we'll watch the time." She reached for his hand. "Just half an hour." He drew back.

"No, I can't." He looked down at her, his dark eyes distant. Michelle looked up, searching, she sensed that there was something.

"What is it, Ken?" she said so softly it was almost a whisper. "Are you scared?"

"No – yes! God, Michelle!" He glared down at her. "Did you think we could just pick it up where we left off? It's not that easy!"

"Of course I *didn't*, Kenner," she replied, taking a step back. "I missed you, too."

"Then why didn't you write back?" he demanded. "Do you know how long it's been?"

"Two years, two months and eleven days," she returned. "That's 802 days. And I counted every one." She drew in a ragged sigh. "Kenner, did you know that I cried myself to sleep every night for two weeks after we talked up at the ridge? Did you know that I spent that day locked up in my room for the past two years. I know what I did hurt you and it hurt me, too. But it was necessary, don't you see?"

"No, I don't," he snapped. "I don't see how *we* would have kept *you* from growing. For heaven's sake, Michelle, couldn't you have at least replied when I wrote to you? I e-mailed you once a week when you returned to college, but you wouldn't write, then the letters got bounced back, and then you were off to Germany and I didn't even see you between your graduation and your leaving! If you were serious about us, you could have at least corresponded!"

"I'm sorry, Ken," she said evenly. "I changed my e-mail address that fall and when I e-mailed you the change it came back." She made a half-smile. "'lusciousbabe54' was not exactly what I wanted to be known as."

"Well, that clinched it, Michelle." He sighed. "I haven't seen you in two years and then you walk into my life again. No warning, nothing." He glared down at her. "How long have you been back, anyway?" His right hand was pumping and even in the darkness she could see the burning in his eyes, before he looked away. "Look, I'll catch up with you when I've cooled down, okay?"

"Okay." She turned to go, then called over her shoulder. "Check your messages when you get home. I left two of them, one two days ago and one today." And with that she was gone. Kenner turned around, stomped down to his car, climbed in, slammed the door and leaned his forehead on his steering wheel.

"God, why *again*?" he demanded. "Why does it always hit when everything is going so well?" He listened for a long moment, but there was no answer forthcoming, so he turned the key, gunned the engine and drove off into the night.

TWO

About mid-morning of the following day Ma Miller dropped Michelle off at the Stone House, where the young woman hoped to catch up with her friend Vicki Frasier. She hurried up the broad stone steps and pulled the ancient bell chain that dangled next to the large, oaken door. She could hear the golden peal of a gong somewhere far off in the house. As she waited, she looked back over the expansive, circular driveway and noticed that the Mitchells had finally decided to cultivate the shrubs in the middle, putting in an artificial waterfall which splashed merrily over field stones dug up from the vicinity. She wondered what kind of plants had been planted around it. She could recognize the ferns, but that was about it. Or were they ferns? Well, maybe Ken could tell her. And that thought immediately brought back the memory of last night and the twinge in her belly. What had she been thinking, coming on to him like that? Ken was right, they couldn't just pick up where they'd left off. And maybe she'd thought they could. But as she tried to sort through what she was thinking, it fled away, like so often when she didn't have someone to share it with.

"C'mon, Vicki," she muttered and reached for the handle again. Just as her hand closed around it the door swung open to reveal a mid-sized lady with auburn hair, bright green eyes, and a bright smile. Her belly was swollen and Michelle instantly deduced that this was a child on the way.

"Yes?" she asked in a husky voice and then recognition came. "Mike Hayes! Where have you been all this time?"

"Hi, Erin," Michelle answered. "You're right, it's been a long time."

"Well, come on in!" the other woman laughed, stepping aside to let her come through the doorway. Michelle gazed up at the truly palatial atrium of the Stone House. The floor was marble and it was a good eight feet before the foot of the giant chestnut staircase that wound up the back wall before splitting and going up to the second floor. It had been about a year and a half since she'd seen it last and it was larger than she remembered.

"What brings you to our humble home?" Erin asked, pushing the door shut with a resounding thud.

"Well, actually I was looking for Vicki," Michelle began, only to be interrupted by a squeal of delight and the pattering of little feet. A red-headed boy of about two came skittering around the corner calling for his mommy and slid to a halt as he noticed the visitor. He quickly slipped behind his mom and clung to her pant-leg.

"This is Elijah," Erin said proudly, putting one hand on her son's shoulder. "Say hello to Miss Mike, Elijah," she coaxed.

"Hello, Elijah," the dark-haired woman greeted him, crouching down to his level. "I'm Michelle." He just pushed a thumb into his mouth and peeked at her from behind his mommy's leg. She straightened up.

"Come on and have a cup of coffee," Erin invited her. "Except I can't have the coffee."

"Yeah, I guess," Michelle replied, glancing at her friend's sister's pregnant form. "When's it due?"

"Three weeks." The red-haired woman heaved a sigh. "And when she comes, I'll finally get to have that latte I've been dreaming about for the last eight months." She took Michelle's arm affectionately and directed her down the long hall to the left.

"I thought you shouldn't do that when you're nursing," the other lady remarked.

"Well, one in a while won't hurt. Nothing like when I was working at the D.A.'s office."

"You've quit that?" Michelle asked incredulously.

"Sure!" Erin replied, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "I am first and foremost a wife and mother and since Elijah came I have had nothing but joy."

"Lots of work, I guess," her guest replied.

"I enjoy it. And when my little girl gets here, I'm going to be glowing even more." By now they had entered a gigantic kitchen with a long, wooden table off to one side. Light poured through a pair of tall French doors facing a broad back yard and a fair-sized pond. The walls were painted a pale yellow, the wood cupboards and marble counter-top glowed with a warm, golden luster, and the place smelled of food and home. It struck a chord in Michelle and suddenly she found herself longing for a kitchen of her own. Not as big as this one, but still one that she could call hers.

Erin directed her to a chair by the table, but near enough to the counter so they could talk while the lady of the house pattered around, preparing the hot beverages. Little Elijah remained glued to his mother, peeking at their visitor now and again curiously.

"You said it was a girl," Michelle put in. "Did they already tell you?"

"The doctor let it slip out, even though we asked him not to tell us," Erin told her. "Larry was a bit disappointed. He was hoping for another boy, but now we'll have one of each."

"Well, there's still a chance he might get his wish," Michelle returned. "I've been told that those ultrasounds aren't all that accurate."

"Not if I have anything to do say about it," the mother laughed. "I have always wanted a girl. Larry's got his boy. Now it's my turn."

"I say." The dark-haired woman watched as Elijah slipped around his mother and smiled out from between her legs. Michelle held her arms out to him. He hesitated a moment, looked up at his mommy, who nodded, then pattered around her and came at his guest with a flying leap. Michelle caught him up and laughed.

"Gotcha!" He squealed with delight and immediately tried to wriggle away. His captor put up a bit of a fight – just for fun, mind you – and then let him go. He skittered back across the floor and hid behind his mother again, almost making her spill the mug of coffee she'd made for her guest.

"Elijah, calm down!" she admonished him. She padded across to the table and set the large cup down in front of Michelle, before pulling up a chair herself. Elijah looked up at her with liquid blue eyes.

"Oh, all right," she sighed and gathered him on to her lap as well as she could. He perched there, leaning against her pregnant belly and grinned at Michelle. The two of them chatted for a while about how things were going with Erin's family and Michelle told of her trip to Germany. Elijah moved back and forth between the two women's laps several times before being banished to the play room where Aunt Rian was waiting to entertain him.

"So, is Vicki around then?" Michelle asked when Erin had returned.

"She's *around*," Erin sighed, sitting down again. "Just not here at the Stone House."

"Oh?" the dark-haired woman was surprised. "Did she get her own place?"

"Yes. She got married."

"Vicki? Married?" Michelle shook her brown tresses. "She didn't tell me about it. I thought I'd be maid of honor or something!"

"Well, it was all a very hush-hush affair," Erin began. "Vicki was kind of worried about Vern making all those advances, so she and Bill eloped."

"Bill?" A premonition was dawning in Michelle's heart, but she didn't think she could believe it.

"Bill Maniks. You know, the big guy you used to hang out with." That just about knocked the younger woman out of her seat.

"Vicki married Bill Maniks?"

"Yes."

"But I thought Vicki was never going to get married!" Michelle said incredulously. "Not after all that baloney with the married guy when she was at college. *And* she was going for a *doctorate*, for crying out loud!"

"And she still is." Erin smoothed her maternity blouse with a satisfied look on her face. "It took all of us by surprise – except for maybe Ken. I think he was behind it."

"Ken was playing matchmaker?" This was getting better and better.

"Well, nobody knows for certain, but after your – hm – adventures two years ago Vicki and Bill began to see more of each other. Neither said anything, but the next thing I knew, Vicki was wearing a rock. Not a very big one, mind you, but a genuine one."

"And when was this?" Michelle leaned forward, somewhere between delight and anger.

"Oh, about three months ago." Erin settled in to her tale. "When Vern found out, he went over to Bill and had a big fight with him. Bill put it to him straight, that he and Vicki loved each other and that was that. Vern then went off and tried to 'talk some sense' into Vicki. She would have none of it and told him to get lost. That was just about when his classic guitar career began to take off, so he left on a tour. I think he was planning to get her back when he got back to Southall. And I think Vicki knew it, too." She smiled to herself as she thought of what

happened next. "Then, just at the beginning of August – two days before Vern was due back – Bill and Vicki packed up and left town. They just got back about a week ago, legally husband and wife, courtesy of a justice of the peace in Massachusetts." Erin shrugged. "If even Ken and I weren't invited to the wedding, it must have been a very quick affair."

"Is she happy?" Michelle pressed, thinking of her own ill fortune.

"It's like she's walking on clouds every time I see her." Erin began gesturing as she spoke. "It's Bill this and Bill that. They've got a cozy little place in Druin proper."

"And she's still going to school?"

"Yeah, by correspondence. And Bill's doing pretty much the same thing, except for him it's seminary." Well, that wasn't so hard to believe, after all the big man had a heart the size of Kentucky and he prayed with a fervor that Michelle had rarely seen anywhere else.

"Do you have an address for her?" she finally pushed out.

"I can't remember it correctly, but I could take you there." Erin glanced at the clock on the wall. "After all, I need to get some groceries and those films I dropped off at the drugstore." She thought for a moment. "Vicki may not be home, though. Say, what day is it?"

Now it was Michelle's turn to be pensive. She'd been back for four days and jet-lag was still gnawing at her.

"Wednesday?" she said after a moment.

"Oh, she's home, then. Wednesday's one of her days off." Erin hoisted herself out of the chair. "Come on, Mike. It'll be good to see my little sister again."

"Uh, Erin, it's Michelle," the dark-haired girl pointed out as she followed her friend out of the kitchen.

"Oh, right, I forgot," the other woman apologized. "These name-changes are tough on me. Now..." She stopped in at the play room where Rian sat on the couch with a book and Elijah was sprawled in front of a large TV, watching computer-animated vegetables sing about being thankful for what you have.

"Elijah dear, let's go to the store," she called. The boy immediately leaped up and echoed, "Store!" Within minutes the three of them had all hurried out and piled into the Mitchells' dark blue Caravan and they were off to Druin.

Vicki and Bill's home was definitely cozy, especially when compared to the big mansion that Erin lived in. Vicki did not seem at all surprised to see Michelle and the dark-haired woman suspected that the town grapevine had been going full-tilt again. *What are they saying about Ken and me?* she wondered.

"It's so good to see you, Michelle!" Vicki exclaimed as she let her friend out of a warm embrace. "I was planning on going by your house today to see if you were there."

"I guess I saved you the trip." She allowed herself to be pointed to a couch while Vicki turned toward the little boy.

"Not to mention that you brought my favorite nephew with you," she laughed. "This is turning out to be some day."

"I was wondering where you were last night. From what you'd been writing you were a regular at singles' flock for the past few years." Vicki broke into a broad smile and waved her left hand in Michelle's direction.

"I got married. No more singleness for me."

"So I heard," Michelle replied, pouting just a bit. "And you didn't tell me!"

"Hey, I e-mailed you the day it happened. And *you* haven't checked your e-mail again in three weeks." Vicki gathered Elijah up and planted herself next to Michelle.

"My inbox is too full."

Vicki turned to her sister who was still standing in the doorway.

"Sit down, Erin," she invited. "Have a chat."

"Sorry, dear," the older woman sighed. "I need to go to the store. Mind if I leave Elijah here while I shop?"

"Sure." Vicki stroked his bright red locks. "I just got a new Blue's Clues video that he'll love." And she got up to put on the TV while Erin let herself out. When Elijah was taken care of, Vicki sat back down with Michelle and drew her feet up under her.

"You know, I was considering making an exception last night and showing up for flock so I could hear what you've been up to."

"It was good you didn't," her friend sighed. "I made a bit of a fool of myself." She wrapped her arms around her midriff and put her feet up on the couch.

"Ken?" It was more of a statement than a question.

"Who else?" Michelle paused and then looked back at her best friend. "What happened to him? I haven't heard anything." Vicki sighed as she thought of their friend.

"He's been having a really tough time since – well, you know."

"Hm, yeah." The dark-haired girl stared past her friend at one of the framed prints on the wall. "Sometimes I wonder if I did the right thing, breaking it off like that." Vicki reached out and put one hand on her shoulder.

"You did, Michelle, and nobody knows it better than you do."

"I hate the fact I hurt him," she sighed in return.

"Then I won't tell you any more," the other woman said and leaned back.

"No, Vicki." Her voice was adamant and she picked up eye contact, green boring into blue. "I need to know why he's like that. I need to know what I've caused so I can forgive myself. I need to know how to pray."

"That's a first, coming from you," Vicki remarked, pulling at her short, auburn hair.

"I've changed a lot."

"And so has Ken." Vicki sighed. "Oh, all right, I'll tell you what's been going on. Ken was really down after you split up that summer. He still came to church, but dropped all involvement with flock. He avoided all of us. The only one he'd talk to sometimes was Larry. Then, shortly after you went back to college for your last year, he stopped coming altogether. Bill mentioned something about him having traded words with Pastor Jenkins. I tried to catch up with Ken and find out what was going on, but when I found him at work one day, he wouldn't talk to me. All he said was that it was my fault you'd left him."

"Ken said *that*?" Michelle gasped.

"He did." Her friend nodded sadly. "Bill saw him around a few times, but Ken wouldn't talk. Then all of a sudden he broke off contact even with Larry. That in itself was unusual. We heard something about him taking a trip to Florida. It was some time the end of May and he went with Vern and a couple of his buddies." She curled her mouth in distaste. "We didn't even find out that he'd gotten back, until Bill ran into him coming out of the pub up in Druin, drunk silly. Ken tried to run away from him, but Bill just picked him up, took him to his house and sobered him up. He had a long talk with Ken and I guess that's where he turned around. Started coming to church again. He hung out with us a lot then and I could tell he was different. Still quiet, but he smiled more. Except when we mentioned you." Michelle grimaced.

"He said that you were just a dream and nothing would ever come of it." Vicki sighed to herself. "But we never stopped praying." Then she smiled "And would you believe he was the one who was constantly inviting us to hang out, then leaving early so I got stuck with Bill." That brought an involuntary smile from Michelle. "It was his idea that we go elope in the first place and he warned me about Vern, too."

"He did?" The dark-haired girl sighed. "He really cared."

"More than you think. He always said that if anyone deserved to be happy, it was Bill and me."

"So what happened to him, then?" Michelle prodded.

"Well, his turnaround was quite dramatic and he worked so hard at Vern's business that he made general manager within three months of his talk with Bill. He didn't really get involved at church much until last Christmas, though. They had him play Joseph in the Christmas pageant and after that I think he started going to flock again and now he sometimes helps out with the fifth-graders in Sunday School. He seems on an upward swing, but – if you ask me – he still hasn't gotten over you."

"I say," Michelle sighed and proceeded to tell Vicki about the happenings of the previous evening. Vicki put her arm around her shoulders.

"He's still hurting," she said after a long pause. "I think he's going to have to learn to forgive you before anything else can happen."

"Yeah, and I need to ask his forgiveness." She looked away to where Elijah was watching the glowing screen. "It's not easy, but I've been forgiven by God. Now I need to make it right with Ken, even if nothing ever comes from it."

THREE

Ken felt that rain would have better suited his mood than the bright sunshine that had lain across his back all day. The fact that most of his work allowed him to think while he did it was no solace today, especially not when his thoughts kept drifting to Michelle. He sang to himself, tried to recite Scripture, thought of how he was going to paint his house, planned exactly how to remove the somber, dark wood paneling in the den without harming the drywall underneath and drew up a mental list of things he needed to pick up at the store on the way home. It didn't really help. Michelle was there the whole time, lurking, just ready to jump out. She was back, after all, and he had dreamed of her for these past two years. Even his six-month binge hadn't kept her from his nights. And now, for the first time since his talk with Bill, he was seriously considering going out and getting really smashed. He decided to start painting the study instead.

And so it was about seven-thirty when there came a knock at the front door of his new house. Wondering who it might be, he dropped the brush on top of the paint can, wiped his hands on his rag and went to the door. He pulled it open and immediately resisted the urge to slam it shut again.

"Hi," Michelle said with a small smile.

"Yeah," was all he replied. He drank in her presence despite himself. Her hair was pulled back and she was dressed in a conservative, but form-fitting blue cotton top with short sleeves and a pair of bleached jeans. She clutched at the strap of her purse with both hands. The rage that he had pent up all day suddenly receded at her presence and he felt ashamed that she would see him in his paint-spattered pants and ragged t-shirt.

"Would you like to come in?" he asked after a long moment. "It's getting cold."

"Sure." She stepped through the entry, looking around. "When your mom said you'd bought a new house, I didn't realize it was our old one," she remarked.

"Well, it always had a special place in my heart." He looked at her thoughtfully as she stepped through the front hall, still holding on to her purse, and peered through the doorway into the living-room.

"Hm, dark blue doesn't really fit there," she said.

"I'm painting it yellow," he told her. She looked at him quizzically and then back at the room.

"I don't know; I've always thought this room ought to be ivory, even though Mom had it painted green."

"You remember *that*?" he demanded, stepping up behind her.

"Sure, I do." She turned to face him. "I just tried to suppress it." He shook his head and turned away.

"You surprise me, Michelle." And he walked towards the study where he'd been painting, caught between the hope she'd follow and the wish she'd go away. She came after him, and went into the room that he was working on.

"This was my playroom," she remarked. "We used to spend hours in here." She laughed at the memory and he found himself smiling as he picked up the brush and went back to cutting in around the windows.

"So what brings you here?" he asked.

"I wanted to talk to you." She dropped her bag and sat down on the stepping stool Ken had been using to work on the upper corners of the room.

"What do we have to talk about?" he shot back, straightening. He could feel the burning behind his eyes come alive again.

"A lot." She looked at him, and there was something in her deep green eyes that at any other time he might have realized was a reflection of her love for him, but right now it simply felt like pity – something that he did not want. He turned back to his painting.

"Like what?"

"Like saying 'I'm sorry.'" He flinched, bouncing the brush against the trim and leaving a splash of primer on the molding around the window.

"Isn't it a little late for that?" he sighed, resisting the urge to lean his head against the wall.

"It's never to late for that." Michelle's voice was adamant, but in the same moment it cracked. He looked at her and noticed a trickle down the side of her nose. She wiped at it.

"Look, Ken, I hurt you deeply, I know that," she began. "The way I said it and my timing was probably wrong, but it was the right thing to do." He bristled at that remark and made to reply, but she raised a hand.

"Please, let me finish. I am very sorry that I hurt you and I need to ask your forgiveness. I am sorry that what I did drove you to – do what you did."

Oh, God, she knows, he thought to himself. *How on earth does she know?*

"And so I want to ask you to please forgive me," she finished in a quavering voice. He looked down at the brush in his hand, suddenly wanting to thrust it into her face.

"I think you'd better leave," was all he said.

"Kenner," she pleaded.

"Go, Michelle, before I do something I regret." She caught the tone in his voice, the fire in his eyes, and nodded miserably. She got up and took her bag, then walked to the door, shoulders slumped. She paused and looked over her shoulder, tears streaming freely now.

"I love you, Kenner O'Tare," she whispered and then was gone. And he was caught between the walls of rage and despair. They pressed ever closer and he slumped down against the wall, not caring that his brush was now staining the hardwood floor or that his hair was resting in the fresh primer he'd just put on underneath the molding.

Why he decided to drive up to the Stone House that evening was a mystery to him, but as the large door opened to reveal his friend and mentor, Ken knew it was the right thing at the right time. Larry's glasses glistened, backlit by the hall light.

"Ken," he exclaimed. "Welcome." Ken noticed that there was no surprise in Larry's voice.

"H'lo, Larry," he muttered in return and walked into the entry hall.

"I take it you came to talk." The teacher was all business as he looked at his blond friend who was clad in paint-spattered jeans and a dark t-shirt with a black leather jacket thrown over his shoulders. By comparison, Larry looked about ready to walk out the door for a meeting, being attired in suit pants, jacket and a bow tie. *Typical,* Ken thought to himself.

"Yeah," he grunted in reply.

"Then let's go upstairs." Larry led the way up the broad stairs and then up the narrow ones to the attic. They turned left past a large bank of book cases and came into Larry's study. He offered Ken his usual seat in one of the two large captain's chairs, while taking the other for himself.

"So," the teacher began thoughtfully. "I take it this is about Michelle." Ken nodded. "And?"

"And she came to see me tonight." He pushed the words out with difficulty. "She came to ask me for forgiveness." The ghost of a smile flitted across Larry's lips.

"Well?"

"Well what?" The younger man glared at his mentor.

"Did you forgive her?"

"Would I be here if I had?" he snapped back. Larry tilted his seat back.

"No, I don't think so." He paused for a moment, collecting his thoughts. "So why come to me?" The question suddenly brought the crystal clarity that Ken had longed for.

"Because I want to move on."

"With or without Michelle?" The question stung.

"She's just a dream," he shot back.

"She seemed pretty real to me this afternoon," Larry pointed out.

"Not *that* Michelle. *My* Michelle. I've got to leave her behind." Ken pushed his hands out towards the other man.

"I see your point. This Michelle who has returned from Germany – what do you think of her?" A dreaded question. Ken brushed his hands through his hair.

"She scares me, Larry. She reminds me of me before..." He looked away. "I want to be like that again."

"Well, you can..."

"...And the first step is forgiveness," Ken completed the sentence. "We've been through this before." Larry looked at him through his spectacles and at that precise moment knew that this was the breaking point. It was now or never.

"So I'm forgiving her for what?" the younger man continued. "For destroying my life? For causing me to waste these years when I could be doing other things?"

"Well, that might be a start," the mentor said quietly. "But I think it was you who destroyed your life, not her."

"I don't have to listen to this," Ken snapped, standing up. Larry raised his voice just slightly, but the command was clear.

"Sit down, Ken, we're not through yet." The younger man slumped back into his seat. The battle was on the inside, the sullen rebellion playing on the surface, but the diamond-hard, laser-bright desire to be changed slammed against it repeatedly. As much as he tried to tune Larry's words out, he couldn't help but listen.

"It wasn't Michelle who messed things up, Ken, it was you."

"But I repented," he defended himself.

"Yes, but I think you need to do more. You need to not only forgive Michelle for hurting you deeply, you need to forgive yourself for acting the way you did."

"So God drops her back into my life just when things are going so well, huh? Why this? Why now? I thought I'd passed the test the first time!" Ken could hear his pulse pounding between his ears. He knew these were all lame excuses.

"There is a secret to the Christian life that few people ever grasp, Ken," Larry explained quietly. "Each trial that you've withstood will lead to another, bigger one. You shouldn't worry about being tested, you should worry about *not* being tested."

"And this one's forgiveness?" It was hopeful. Maybe there was an easy way out. Larry paused, as if listening to something.

"I'm not so sure if that is *all* of it, Ken." He paused for a moment, then turned to his desk and retrieved a small note pad and a pen. He wrote on it for a few minutes, tore the sheet off, and passed it over to Ken. There were Bible references written on it.

"What are these, Larry?" he demanded.

"They are some passages that deal with forgiveness." Larry leaned back. "I want you to go downstairs to the guest room and read them. And then I want you to spend the rest of the night here."

"I can do that at home," Ken protested, almost jumping up.

"No, you won't." He sighed heavily and, for the first time in many months, Ken's exceptional gift of reading people revived. He could see a great burden on Larry's heart and he knew that he, Kenner O'Tare, was that burden. Larry knew and understood something that he didn't. And Larry wanted him to know that truth.

"I let you push me away once, Ken," the teacher continued, taking off his glasses to wipe his moist eyes. "Never again." And he repeated it more quietly, "Never again."

"All right, I'll do as you ask." The admission was pushed out sullenly, but deep inside Ken felt relief at giving in.

"Let's pray before you go." Larry reached out a hand and placed it on his friend's shoulder. "Dear God," he began, "I come to You for my friend Ken. I know You've been prodding him. Thank You that You have shown him that his Michelle is a dream. Thank You that he has realized that she must go. But, Lord, I pray that You would help him to realize the power of forgiveness. I pray that You would speak to him through the passages that I have written down and that You would help him to understand what he must do. I pray this in Your name, amen."

Ken laid the Bible down on his lap, staring out into the darkness of the room. He'd looked at the Lord's prayer, where it said, *"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not*

*forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*¹ Then he read the parable of the unforgiving servant. And there it said of the servant, *"In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."*²

Not forgiving those who had wronged him was tantamount to turning off the flow of God's grace into his life. How long had it been since he had refused to forgive Michelle. He grimaced. Two years, two months, and twelve days exactly. A long time. Maybe that's why he'd been allowed to drift. It wasn't her fault after all. The guilt came crashing down on him as he realized it and for an instant he felt as if the ceiling was going to smother him.

"But I don't feel like it," he pushed out between clenched teeth.

"Forgiveness is a choice," he heard Pastor Jenkins' voice from the past. Wait – last Sunday's sermon! In that instant he could almost see the large black man holding on to the pulpit with one hand, gesturing to the sky with the other.

"Forgiveness is a choice," he intoned. "We are to *choose* to do so, not wait until we feel like it. We are to forgive. *That* is what God wants us to do. We are to choose to revoke our right to revenge on the person who has wronged us and to lay it in God's hands. Whether or not that person accepts our forgiveness is another matter, but if we have forgiven, we have done our part."

Those last words echoed on and Ken whispered them into the night, "But if we have forgiven, we have done our part." At that moment, the diamond spikes broke through his dark rebellion. He bowed his head and the tears began to flow.

"Oh, God," he sobbed, "forgive me for being such a selfish fool. Forgive me for not forgiving Michelle. I know she was right to do what she did. I know that I was wrong and that You wanted me to let You bear the pain. Oh, God, I forgive her, because You have told me to. I *choose* to forgive her. And I give her back to You." And at that moment he knew he was free.

There was a tap on the door. He quickly grabbed a tissue from the side table and wiped his eyes before calling a hoarse, "Come in."

"Hey, Kenner," Rian called, coming in and perching herself on the end of his bed. "I heard that you were here and thought I should stop by and see if I could do anything." Larry's younger sister still had her dark-blond hair cut boyishly short. She was dressed in a pair of flannel pants and a tank top, looking quite comfortable despite the slight chill of the guest room.

"Thank you, I think I'm taken care of." He patted the book on his lap.

"Oh." She glanced down at it and then back up at him. "That was about *her* wasn't it."

"Yes," he affirmed. "And it was time that chapter was closed."

"So you're moving on?" There was a hopeful lilt in her voice.

"In a manner of speaking."

"Hm." She looked away then fixed him with a firm stare. "Where to?"

"I take it you were thinking of yourself." His voice had suddenly turned flat.

"Well, it almost happened – once." She picked at the covers of the bed and Ken found himself remembering the time they'd shared a few drinks at the pub when Ken was going through his down period. They'd gotten awfully friendly and Rian had invited him back to the Stone House. Though somewhat tipsy, he'd been sober enough to decline. Rian had eventually left with someone else from the party.

"That was once," he affirmed. "No more."

"So there are no others."

"No, there was ever only one," he told her and knew that it was his conviction. She stood up and glared at him.

"Then stop moping around and go propose to her, for Chrissakes! Why did you think she came back in the first place?" And she was gone.

¹ Matthew 6:14-15

² Matthew 18:34-35

Ken smiled. There was ever only one. And that one had been Michelle. Could they really get together again? He would have to accept her change. No, it wouldn't work right away, he decided. They would have to be friends first, but he knew without a doubt what his goal would be if his thoughts were confirmed. With that he rose, closed the door, slipped out of his clothes and into bed and slept the deepest sleep he'd had in years, completely with out dreams.

FOUR

Michelle finally pulled herself out of bed late the next morning, miserable from the exchange the night before. She'd watched the house from her foster mom's car and had seen him come out a half hour later, climb into his shiny, new car and drive off. She drove home rather than follow him, told Ma Miller that she wasn't feeling well and didn't want to be bothered until further notice and went upstairs. Ma Miller was wise enough to heed her foster daughter's wishes, knowing that when she was down, she would be down until she decided not to be any more. And so she did. She had mourned long enough, she had presented her peace offering and, while not rejecting it outright, he hadn't accepted it, either. Now it was in his hands.

But I still feel like I'm going to puke, she said to herself. Sometimes she hated the roller coaster of her relationship with Ken. Had she ever even given it up? Perhaps not, but now was as good a time as any. If he didn't want to have anything to do with her, she wouldn't pursue it. She'd hunted long enough and, as Nadine had put it, there was a natural order to things. The man does the hunting. The woman waits, but sometimes hunts covertly. Perhaps she'd been too visible. Now it was his turn.

So she pulled on her old terry-cloth robe, shoved her feet into her slippers, gathered her long tresses up in a knot, stuck a pencil through it to hold her hair in place, and padded downstairs to find some food.

She was just working on her second piece of English muffin when Mrs. Miller poked her head in.

"There's someone to see you, Michelle dear," she said.

"I really don't feel like seeing anyone right now, Ma Miller," Michelle sighed.

"I think you'll want to see this one," was all the older woman replied. Over Ma Miller's shoulder Michelle noticed a tall shape, just out of the light. It shifted and she caught a glimpse of his face.

"Ken?" And the first thought that crossed her mind was, *Oh my, I'm not dressed – and my hair's a mess!*

"Yeah, it's me," he replied, still remaining behind her foster mom. The young woman quickly gathered her wits. He was here about something and if she took the time to put on something more – hm – good-looking, he might leave.

"Well, come on in," she said and gestured to the other seat at the kitchen table. He walked in hesitantly, clutching a bouquet of flowers in his right hand. She noticed that they were small, but of many types and colors. Perhaps they were wild.

"For you," he pushed out, holding his hand out at an arm's length.

"For me?" She couldn't keep the smile away as she reached for them. Their hands brushed as the bouquet was transferred and for a moment it was pure magic to both.

"What are they for?" she asked, sniffing at the blossom closest to her. There was a sweet smell to it, full and rich. Wherever Ken had found these, he knew what she liked.

"A gesture," was all he answered. "A bridge." He sat down across from her, still looking very stiff. She noticed that he was now wearing a black short-sleeved polo shirt with the BL&G logo on it. His well-toned arm muscles rippled as he folded and re-folded his hands. He was looking at her and she could see in those dark, expressive eyes that he was searching for what to say.

"So...?" she prompted.

"Like you said, we have to talk," he began lamely, stopped again and licked his lips. She could sense the change coming, the switch to the slow, deliberate speech that he used when he was about to share something very important with her. And then it came, something that she did not expect at all.

"Michelle, I wanted to tell you that I forgive you," he began, only to be interrupted by a little squeal of delight from her. He held out one hand.

"Please, let me finish." She nodded, placed the flowers aside, and leaned forward on the table, tenting her hands in a listening posture. In that instant Ken felt the words that he'd prepared slip away. She was so lovely, even though she had obviously not had time to get dressed or make herself up. Stray wisps of brown cascaded around her face and her glasses caught the light from the kitchen window off to the side, hiding her bright green eyes. *I've got to tell her*, he said to himself and forced his thoughts back to the business at hand.

"I also want to ask your forgiveness for my behavior last night," he continued. "I was wrong to act that way when you were doing what was right." She shifted her head and he saw the softness in her eyes that the night before he'd misinterpreted as pity. Oh, her feelings were there, all right. *God, help me get through this*, he prayed silently, pushing down the urge to gather her in his arms.

"You see, Michelle, for all these years I had someone else in my mind when I thought of you," he told her. "She had your face and your voice, but she wasn't you. She was a dream I'd made up. I projected that dream into you. That was wrong, because you are not that person and I was disregarding who you are and who you've become. I was trying to put my image over what God has made. I'm sorry for that. Please forgive me." Though she didn't quite understand what he meant by that, she felt that this was the real reason that he had been so uptight at her appearance and there was only one thing to do.

"I forgive you, Ken," she whispered. They sat there for a long moment, just looking at each other. The warmth and the silence were too comfortable to break. The dust danced in the air around them, the sunlight turning it into a glinting, golden haze that surrounded them and for the first time ever they both felt completely at ease with each other.

"So where do we go from here?" Michelle finally broke the silence.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "I think we need to get reacquainted. I need to get to know this new Michelle." He paused and gave a little half-smile. "I think I like her – a lot." Michelle smiled back.

"So are we doing anything this weekend?" she asked.

"Besides church?" She nodded.

"Well, I don't really have much time. We're in full late-summer swing and I'm booked up to here," he held one hand over his head, "with projects until the end of the month."

"Then what are you doing here?" she chided playfully.

"General manager's prerogative." He grinned. "I get to take time off whenever I want. I'm salaried."

"Oh." She glanced towards the sunlight, then settled her gaze back on his shining face. She could just get so lost in those warm, brown eyes.

"Vicki invited me over to the Mitchells' for dinner and hang-out time," she said.

"How odd, Larry invited me, too."

"Are you going?"

"Are you?" She giggled.

"Of course," she exclaimed. "And if I'm coming, so are you." It was a statement that made backing out impossible.

"Okay." He glanced at the clock on the wall.

"Look, I've got to go," He began, then hesitated. "What are you up to today?"

"Nothing much." She looked at him quizzically. "I thought you said you were extremely busy." He smiled and licked his lips, clearly a bit uneasy about what he was going to say next.

"I'm playing General Inspector today. I have to do it every once in a while or my dear employees don't do their best." He looked at her. "You can come along if you like and see what we're up to. It would give us a chance to talk."

"I'd love to," she said. "But I do need to shower and stuff."

"Yeah." He was thoughtful. Was this a nice way of saying 'no'?

"Could you wait for me? It would only take a half hour." So she wasn't saying no. Hm. He glanced at the clock again.

"Well, not really. But, tell you what, I have a site that's just a couple miles from here. I'll go check on them and then I'll swing by and get you on the way back, okay?" Now it was her turn to think.

“Okay.” And she smiled broadly. The haze of the room laid a softness over her features that seared deep into Ken’s heart and he knew that being without this woman would be second only to death.

“Good.” He got up and she followed suit, walking him to the door. Once there, he resisted the urge to hug her and opened it. She glimpsed the big, silver Jeep Grand Cherokee with the Borsov Lawn and Garden logo emblazoned on the side.

“Nice wheels,” she said.

“Another one of the perks of being General Manager,” he laughed. “Get to drive around in style. No more beat-up red Jeeps.”

“Did you sell it?” she asked wistfully.

“No. It’s still doing duty with one of the work crews. Hey, you wouldn’t believe how much the business has grown in the past two years, but I’ll tell you about it later, okay?”

“Yeah.” She smiled, wanting more than anything else to let him snatch her up in his arms. “See you later.” He echoed her and headed back out to his Jeep.

FIVE

On the first Saturday of November Pastor Alex Jenkins and Larry Mitchell sat together in a back booth of Simpson’s Diner for their weekly prayer and planning breakfast. What had begun as a one-time affair at the Stone House with David Scartes, Zac Downs, and Scott Kingscote besides the two of them had quickly become a ritual for Alex and Larry. Until Elijah’s arrival they’d met at the Mitchells’, then for a while had met at the Jenkins’ house until Aurora decided that she didn’t want two men lounging about in the kitchen at ten in the morning, talking. She ran a tight ship and wanted to have the kitchen to herself at that time. So they’d migrated to Simpson’s Diner, where breakfast was cheap and very good.

“So how’s youth group going?” Alex asked, cradling his freshly-refilled cup of coffee.

“Quite well actually,” Larry replied. “I’m very much enjoying having Michelle Hayes helping out. She’s really good with the girls.”

“Yeah, she certainly has changed,” the black man laughed. “She even screwed my Jonathan’s head on straight when she caught him making snide remarks about his sisters. He still talks about it.” He chuckled again. “Almost think the boy’s in love with her.”

“Along with half the other boys in youth group.” The teacher sighed. “I know Michelle doesn’t mean to be so attractive to the boys and she dresses quite conservatively, but when she walks in, it’s all I can do to keep them focused on the lesson.”

“Does she make that much noise?” Larry shook his brown head.

“No, and she’s not wild either – except when we do outdoor stuff. I don’t think it’s really her fault. Maybe if she got married...”

“That wouldn’t necessarily help with the boys,” the pastor pointed out. “They’ll go on ogling her.”

“Yeah.” Larry sighed and took out his handkerchief to polish his already spotless glasses. “It’s something we need to pray about, Alex. I want her to continue to help out. I want her there, because I know she’s got something to offer. She’s been where the girls are now. She knows what they’re going through – perhaps better than anyone. And I can see Jesus shining in her. I just wonder *how* we could get her to be less – hm – attractive?”

“That would be very difficult to do. She is such a shiny person, after all.” Alex pondered that for a while. “Is she still going with Ken O’Tare?” Larry replaced his glasses.

“I wouldn’t exactly call it ‘going with him,’” he explained. “They like each other, yes, and I think they may eventually get married, but,” he shook his head in frustration, “there’s a dynamic there I can’t understand. They are and yet they aren’t. It’s like the old Ken and Mike two-step.”

“I’m glad to see that Ken is back and growing again,” Alex changed the subject. “Joyce Oblander has been telling me how much she enjoys having him in her fifth grade class. And lately I’ve had the feeling that he’s been able to read people more again.” He hesitated, glancing at Larry as he said it. “Do you think this is just a passing thing?”

"With Ken? Because of Michelle?" Larry shrugged his shoulders. "I'd like to say 'no.' As a matter of fact, I can pretty certainly say 'no,' but only God knows for sure." He looked at Alex. "What is this leading up to?"

"Well, I thought we might be able to diffuse the situation in the youth group a bit by bringing Ken in."

"And turn the boys green with envy so they don't focus on *anything* at all?" The teacher shook his head.

"Anyone who sees them together *knows* that they click. It's just a matter of time, if you ask me."

"So you're just going to ride it out?"

"Whether or not Michelle ends up marrying Ken, I don't think it's going to make much difference to the boys in the youth group. All they've got their heads full of is girls and guns and coolness anyway. And Michelle is cool. She's *very* cool. She's beautiful, shiny and outgoing. I can't see any single man who wouldn't be attracted by that."

"Besides having become extremely spiritual." Alex nodded thoughtfully. "We really need to pray about this Larry. Maybe something will move soon. Maybe they'll get used to her." Larry thought for a long moment.

"Maybe we have to have a guys'/girls' session again. I think Michelle can lead the girls' session. Maybe we guys can talk about keeping thought life clean and treating women with respect."

"Sounds good to me." The black man shook his head and sipped his coffee. "I don't think those boys' dads treat women with respect, either. Maybe if they had better role models..."

"There are a lot of maybes. But there is only one certainty, and that's prayer."

"Amen. Preach it, Brother Larry!" Alex chuckled. "Then let's pray." And so they did.

SIX

The Thanksgiving dinner spread was to be magnificent. Luc and Suzi O'Tare had spared no expense this year, especially not since their daughter Kayla and her husband Brent Smythe were coming over from Seattle for the holiday. It was the year in which they spent Thanksgiving week with her family and so the O'Tare household had expanded to put them and their three children up. Ken had offered his new home, but parts of the upstairs, including the bathroom, were still being renovated, so Kayla had opted for her parents' house.

In addition to Smythes, Ken had prevailed upon his family to invite the Millers over and they had gratefully accepted, all eight of them. Michelle joined the party, much to her friend Vicki's chagrin.

Ken finally arrived at quarter after four to find Brent's minivan sandwiched between his dad's Buick and the Millers' Dodge Ram van. There was no more room for his Jeep on the driveway, so he pulled up over the lawn and bounced along to the place that had once been occupied by his dad's old Land Rover. He shut off the engine, grabbed the store-bought pie off of the passenger seat and hurried around to the back door. His mother greeted him with a quick hug.

"Hey, Ken, what took you so long?" she asked.

"Guy wanted a last-minute estimate. Had to drive all the way over to Rockland. Didn't even have time to go home."

"Which explains why the pie isn't homemade," Suzi teased.

"Sorry." He shrugged out of his blue work jacket.

"Well, hurry on in, they're all waiting for you," she smiled at him and winked. By "they're all" he knew she meant one person in particular. And tonight was the night. He fingered a little box in his left pocket as he left the kitchen for the living room. The place was packed, even though Jude and Ishmael Miller had taken the older Smythe kids upstairs to play games on Luc's computer. Kayla was off to one side with Michelle, deep in conversation, while Brent was sharing a drink with Stu Miller and Luc. Carolyn Miller was holding Kayla's youngest on her lap and reading a book to the little girl in the way that only she could. The two oldest Miller girls, both now in their late teens, bustled past him with plates and cutlery to set the table, while the middle kids were lounging on the couch, eyes glazed over, watching the football game. Ken stood there, drinking in the peace. This was what he had always loved: family together. Perhaps next year he would be here with his own?

"Ken!" His father was the first to notice him.

"It's time you finally got here, bro," Brent put in. "I've been starving.

"Bet you skipped lunch again to prepare for this," Ken said with the ghost of a smile.

"Oh, not just lunch. I've been fasting for two days. Nobody does stuffing like your mom." That brought a good laugh from everyone. Ken looked over to where Michelle was sitting, caught her eye and winked. She smiled back. His sister made a comment that he couldn't hear and the dark-haired girl blushed.

"Well, let's get to the table then," Luc announced.

"Gilead!" Pa Miller called to his eldest son. The boy looked back over the top of the couch and grunted, "Huh?"

"Will you please call the kids down? We're about to eat."

"But, Dad, it's the third quarter!" Gilead exclaimed.

"We'll catch the recap later. Now go!"

The boy grumbled, pushed himself up, and ran upstairs to get his little brothers. Brent followed him, and a few minutes later he was back, one of his children on his shoulders, the other under his arm, both giggling. They spread out around the table. Luc sat at the head with Suzi at his right and Kayla at his left. Ken sat next to his mother and on the other side of him was Michelle. The youngest Smythe, Lydia, sat between her mom and dad, while the older two, Jordan and Eowyn sat following Brent, next to Ishmael and Jude. Ma Miller was next to Michelle, then her husband and then Esther, their eldest, Fran, their second and the twins, Gilead and Helen.

Luc asked the blessing and then it was a free-for all on the massive amounts of food. Brent stood when everyone was finished.

"Now, you know my family tradition – old Scottish tradition – that at every feast we have a time for making toasts. Since some of you may not be new to this, I'll begin." He raised his glass of ginger ale and, affecting a thick Scottish burr, began to recite a traditional blessing on his host and hostess. He was followed by Luc who, favoring his mother's side, recited a French poem. To the surprise of all, Pa Miller made the next toast to his lovely foster daughter.

"No fair," Ken whispered to his mother. "That was my line." Suzi laughed. Down the table Fran recited the priestly blessing from Deuteronomy, which she'd done every Thanksgiving from the time she was in first grade.

"You still can't get Gilead to do it?" Michelle asked Ma Miller.

"No, he says that he's not that good at memorizing."

"Baloney!"

"You said it."

"What about you, Ken?" Luc prompted. "Don't you have a toast?" The young man blushed.

"It'll have to wait, Dad," he said.

"Very well," the head of the house exclaimed, raising his hands. "Time for a break, walks, whatever. Desert will be served when we're ready for it." At this Pa Miller leaned forward to catch Ken's eye. When he did he gave a quick wink. The blond man nodded.

"Let's go for a walk," he said to Michelle.

"Sure," she replied, "I'll just get my coat." And she hurried off to do so.

They wandered off across the back yard and into the woods adjoining their property. Their neighbors, who owned the forest, had given them permission to hike through them at any time. They were silent at first, listening to the rustle of the leaves beneath their feet. Ken glanced at Michelle and smiled to himself. She'd put in her contacts today and more than ever she reminded him of the mermaid he'd fished out of the sea more just a bit over two years earlier. He gently reached out and took her hand into his own. She looked over, smiled and gave him a little squeeze.

"It's been a long time since you've done that," she remarked.

"Hm," was his reply. They walked a little farther.

"I guess this means we're getting more serious," she said after a while.

"Mm-hm." He smiled at her in her deep burgundy winter coat. She'd tucked her dark hair around her neck, supplementing the scarf she wore.

"I've been wondering," he began after another long pause, "when were you planning to return to Germany?"

"Oh, maybe not for a while yet," she sighed. "I'm enjoying it too much here." She looked up at him and squeezed his hand again. "With you." His heart suddenly warmed at her affirmation of his feelings. He'd known it all along, known that this moment would come.

At that point they stepped out of the woods onto the rocky shore. The sea drummed a steady rhythm on the low boulders that lay in the water. It was relatively calm now, the storms having passed. Ken felt it was much like his heart. He stopped and turned to her.

"Michelle," he began, "how would you like to live in your old house again?"

"What?" The question caught her off guard.

"Well, I painted the living room ivory." At that she suddenly laughed.

"You painted it ivory?"

"I thought you might like it." He looked into her shining eyes, glimmering pools of verdant light.

"I take it you're leading up to something?" She paused playfully. "Were you planning on selling it to me?"

"No. I was only thinking of giving it to you." Her brow furrowed.

"That's a mighty big gift, Ken," she told him. "What's the catch?"

"That I get to live there, too."

"What?" She looked at him, incredulous. His free hand slipped into the pocket with the box. And he pushed the question out.

"Will you marry me, Michelle?" It didn't seem to register at first, then he caught the light dawning in her eyes. It rapidly spread from them to her face as the smile broadened, red cheeks shining with the cold and delight, her teeth sparkling. Then her arms were around his neck and she pressed herself against him.

"Oh, yes, darling! I will!" she breathed. And she drew back. Now his hands rested loosely around her waist. He paused, bent and kissed her lips for the first time ever. She returned the kiss with vigor. When they broke he brought up the box and flipped it open with one hand.

"For you," he said, presenting her with a thin red-gold band set with an emerald.

"No diamond?" she asked playfully.

"No. You, my dear, only deserve an emerald. It's like your eyes and, to me, infinitely more precious than any diamond could be." For the first time since she'd seen him again as a teen had he switched to his slow, rich speech without the usual effort. Perhaps it was this moment that changed him. She pulled off her left glove and let him slip the ring on, then gave him another kiss.

"Will you do something for me, then?"

"Anything, dear," he told her, then amended, "within reason."

"I would like you to call me Michi." She gently stroked the ch with the back of her throat as the Germans are wont to do.

"Mickey," he tried to intone.

"Michi."

"Mishy?" She laughed at that.

"Okay, that will do." She touched his nose and giggled. "I should have known you wouldn't be able to pronounce it right."

"I always stank at foreign languages," he admitted. "Never could fake any accent."

"You're right." She looked at him, eyes glimmering with the last rays of the sun peeking over the trees. "The only other person who ever called me Mishy was my dad."

"Oh." Suddenly he felt very insignificant, wondering if he'd done right.

"It's amazing that the two men that I really loved would use the same name for me." No, he now knew it was all right, that she had meant it as a compliment. He bent to kiss her again, then gently released her from his embrace. They slowly headed back towards the house, arm-in-arm.

"How are we going to tell the Millers?" she asked after they'd gone a short way.

"They already know," he said. She stopped, stepped away, turned and looked at him, aghast.

"What?"

"I asked your foster dad for your hand in marriage two days ago," he admitted. When she shook her head, he held out his hands and protested lamely, "It's the right thing to do. Tradition."

"You asked him *first*?" she demanded. "What if I'd said no?"

"You wouldn't." His satisfaction was evident in his voice. Michelle found herself torn between anger and laughter. She glared at him then melted into a chuckle that built into a full-throated, good-humored laugh.

"You knew I'd say 'yes.'" She was shaking her head and then she was in his arms again. "Oh, Ken, what would I do without you? You bring me so much joy."

"And you me," he told her and then kissed her again. "Let's go tell everyone."

"I bet they all know by now," she told him.

And she was right. As soon as they stepped back into the house there was a loud hooray from the group. Stu had quickly appraised the rest of the gathering of Ken's intentions after the two had left. The younger Miller kids and the Smythe children were then strategically kept occupied in the living room between the television and a board game, while the older ones and the adults quickly cleaned up the table, resetting it with a large cake that Suzi and Kayla had baked earlier that day while Ken was at work.

"I have an announcement to make," Ken began when they had come in and put their coats away. "I have asked Michelle for her hand in marriage."

"And what did she say?" Brent asked, bouncing little Lydia on his lap.

"I said yes," Michelle replied, then leaned over and whispered in Ken's ear, "Mishy!" He smiled.

"Congratulations!" There was quite some feasting and well-wishing. The women inspected the engagement ring, which even Ken's mother hadn't seen. Brent passed his daughter on to Esther and drew out a bottle of good Scottish single malt whiskey.

"I thought this might be good for this occasion," he remarked, cracking open the bottle. Ken made a bit of a face, but allowed himself to have just a little poured into a tumbler.

"Here's to the happy couple," Brent intoned, raising his glass. "May their love grow deep, their lives grow long and may God bless them with the abundant riches of His grace." And with that he tossed back the shot. The other men followed suit.

"You're driving, dear," Pa Miller said to his wife. Cake was shared out and the rest of the evening passed in a lovely glow of songs and stories. Ken split his time between keeping the fireplace going, sitting with Michelle and playing several different game with the younger kids. He was in rare form that evening and had them all rolling on the floor at his jokes.

He'll make a wonderful father, Michelle thought to herself as she watched them, holding little Lydia on her lap. At the same time Ken was thinking how natural it looked for her to hold the child. How many should they have? Two? Maybe Three? Six was definitely too many.

It was very late when the Millers finally departed and Michelle and Ken finally got a bit of privacy in front of the fireplace. She nestled into the sofa next to him, her dark hair spilling over her white turtleneck. He was relaxed in his black BL&G polo shirt and jeans, stocking feet stretched out in front of the fire.

"This is the way it should be," he whispered to her. She nodded.

"When shall we do it?" she asked.

"What?"

"Have the wedding?"

"I was thinking sometime end of January," he told her after a moment. "Two months should be enough to plan everything."

"May." Her voice was adamant.

"But, Mishy, that's six months away!" he exclaimed. "I really don't want to wait that long."

"Neither do I," she replied, sitting up enough so she could see his eyes. "But I've always dreamed of having my wedding in May and since I only plan to get married once, I want to do it right the first time."

"Outdoors?" he asked.

"Maybe." She snuggled back down.

"Can't we do it in April?" he pleaded after a moment. "It's a month less to wait."

"Kenner!" She sighed playfully.

"May it is. The beginning."

"All right." She looked up at him again. "Ken, this isn't just my wedding. It's *our* wedding. And anything you want goes, too."

"Well, I want January, but I'm not going to get it." He chuckled to himself. "I have some ideas about weddings that you may or may not like."

"Like what?" And he told her. She was thoughtful for a long moment, then looked at him.

"That might just work, don't you think?" she said.

"Well, let's see what the folks say. They've got a lot invested in this, too."

"I'll take advice from Ma and Pa Miller and your parents, but it's *our* wedding and we'll be planning what it's like."

"Amen," he agreed.

SEVEN

Even six months can seem like a short time when one has enough to do. Ken learned that pretty quickly as he and Mishy dove back into daily life. Mishy continued working sales at Evan's Apparel, though Ken suggested she move to BL&G as a second office worker to process the increasing amount of paperwork. Just that year Ken had expanded the business to include snowplowing by purchasing a new Ford truck with a plow and plow assemblies for the three four-wheel-drive vehicles used in the field. While snow was holding off a bit this year, Anne was already fielding calls from those who wanted to take advantage of the "preferred customer" rates that BL&G offered to their current clients.

Besides dealing with the usual leaf-raking, tree-felling and removal of potentially dangerous limbs from other trees, Ken still had to finish renovating his new home. He was staunchly aided in this by Mishy and occasionally by some of the singles from the church. Over the following months it became almost a sort of home-life, with Mishy rushing over from work in mid-afternoon to help Ken until late evening. More often than not, he ended up having to drive her home through the snow using his work Jeep, which made him wonder if it had been a mistake to buy the PT Cruiser in the first place. Even with the interruptions of work and church the renovations progressed rapidly, including an expansion of the bathroom into a former closet that neither Ken nor Mishy thought they'd need. After some discussion they'd swapped the den and the study, since she felt that her old playroom had a much more relaxing atmosphere than her father's favorite hangout.

Ken finally let himself be coerced into helping out with the teens, something that he did not feel cut out to do, but his extraordinary insights into the kids' lives and his patient listening skills made him a favorite counselor with the boys. He would have all the girls coming over, too, except that Larry kept his strict rules about same-sex counseling.

As May crept closer, things shifted into over-drive. Ken was finally able to talk Vern into coming and playing his trumpet for the wedding, though his friend and boss was none too keen to return to Southall, knowing that Vicki Maniks *nee* Frasier would be maid of honor, and her husband one of the groomsmen. Ken also had to spend quite a bit of time convincing both his parents and Pastor Jenkins to allow him and Mishy to defy tradition with their wedding. Ken's mother had always dreamed of a huge, traditional wedding for her son, much like Kayla's, but then relented when Luc finally sided with his son and pointed out that they'd already had a wedding the way she'd wanted it. It was time to let the boy do as he chose.

Alex Jenkins, on the other hand, was not so easily convinced, regardless of the semi-theological arguments that Ken raised concerning his vision of the marriage ceremony. He'd always done things the usual way and didn't want to change anything if he could help it. It wasn't until Ken rolled in the big guns in the form of Dr. Larry Mitchell and Mrs. Aurora Jenkins that the pastor agreed, albeit with reservations.

The Millers were game to whatever their foster daughter wanted. After all, they had three more girls to marry off in any way they pleased.

And so Michelle toiled over the song she was to sing, while Ken rounded up the various musicians they had agreed on and sat with Pastor Jenkins and Larry to write out the vows they way they wanted. As time

progressed, though, Alex became more and more excited about the sermon he was to preach and the direction that Ken and Mishy were taking in their wedding.

And then it was nearly time. People began arriving in Southall. Mishy even found a way to fly her roommates in from Germany. Bill and Vern planned the traditional bachelor's party, though they had differing views as to what entertainment should be. Conservatism prevailed, and the dancing girls were not hired, nor was any of the hard liquor bought, much to Vern's chagrin. Ken was kidnapped by some well-meaning friends, though, and taken to a "secret location," which turned out to be the Stone House. Larry had sent the women away for the evening.

"Where are you heading for your honeymoon?" someone asked Ken partway through the evening.

"Nowhere," was the answer.

"What? That's not what I call normal." Ken shrugged.

"We're going to have a belated one in the middle of June, when we go to visit Germany," he explained. "Mishy's friends couldn't have us come visit until then, so we're waiting."

"Heh," his friend laughed. "If your wedding day is as different as I've heard it will be, you're really trying to mess with tradition – which is fine with me, mind you." And he walked off to get another drink.

The wedding day dawned bright and sunny. Ken thought they'd gotten everything out of the way and could relax a bit before going into the ceremony. It turned out there had been a mess-up with the wedding gown, so the women were rushing around like a flock of birds, trying to find the seamstress who had helped alter it. Michelle demanded everything be as near to perfection as possible, so it would be done.

Then it turned out there was a problem with the sound system, so both Ken and Mishy were called back to the church for a sound check. However, the sound-tech had the foresight to arrange it so the happy couple wouldn't run in to each other.

There were one or two other minor mishaps, including the fact that the limousine chartered for taking the bride and groom to the reception at the Stone House turned up missing, so Vicki called her uncle and got him to loan them his brand-new Chrysler Concorde. He insisted on driving it himself, which was fine with everyone involved, and he didn't mind either, what with all the gossip going around about how grand this whole affair was to be.

The invitations stated that the ceremony was to begin at 2:30 pm. Heart Community church was packed out the last aisle. Much to the surprise of the unsaved relatives and friends that were invited, the first thing on the agenda was a half-an-hour of singing and worship led by the Heart Community worship team. Then, at 3:00 pm sharp the bride was walked down the aisle by her foster father to the tune "How Beautiful" by Twila Paris.

What everyone couldn't help but notice was the fact that the bridegroom was not at the altar and some wondered quietly to themselves whether or not he had finked out in the last minute. They had their answer a few minutes later when Mishy picked up a microphone and began to sing the song that she had written at Ken's suggestion. It dealt with the longing of the betrothed one for her future husband, focusing first on the human relationship here, and then on the church, the Bride of Christ, longing for her husband, Jesus Christ, God in the flesh.

"My bridegroom come, I await you.

My bridegroom, hasten, I entreat you.

I long to see your face

Feel your presence all around me

My love, take me to your side,

My lord, come and claim your bride," Mishy sang to the accompaniment of the worship team.

Just as the song ended, a bright clarion call broke from the balcony and in clear, silver tones the trumped announced the arrival of the groom. The doors in the rear were opened and Ken strode in, resplendent in a white tuxedo, flanked by his father and followed by his two groomsmen, Larry and Bill, all in gray. He hurried to the

front, where Mishy was to wait for him, but her excitement was too great, and – contrary to the prearranged protocol – she rushed down the aisle and met him half-way. He caught her up in his arms for a long moment and then took her with him back to the altar, where Pastor Jenkins stood, uncertain of whether to laugh or to frown at this breach of etiquette.

Once there, the bride was given away in customary American fashion (a nod to tradition), before Mishy and Ken were instructed to kneel. Their fathers stood on either side and spoke a blessing, before retiring to the seats prepared for them. The couple was then seated in chairs that faced each other, just slightly titled towards the altar. Pastor Jenkins rose and came forward, accompanied by his wife. He turned and gazed solemnly out on the crowd.

“I wish to welcome you all to this most joyous of occasions, the wedding of Kenner O’Tare and Michelle Carlyn Hayes. The ceremony today is rather different, by request of my two friends here, because they do not wish to focus on themselves on this special day, but on God Himself.” Pastor Jenkins shifted his Bible in his hands. “In the Bible God likens His church to a bride and calls Himself the bridegroom. Those of us here who have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ are His bride. We are waiting for him to come and sweep us off our feet as Ken just did with Michelle. He is now preparing a place to take us to.” He swept over the congregation with dark, knowing eyes. “And that place, His presence, will be more glorious than the beautiful home that Ken has prepared for Michelle. It is more magnificent, more exciting, more wonderful than anything we could even begin to dream or imagine. It is not a place where we will sit around on clouds, strumming harps. He has things for us to do. He has a new universe to rule and we will rule with Him. He will be the all in all and we will be totally consumed by Him.

“That is why we await Him with such fervor and say, *‘The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!”’*³” And then he looked at Ken and Mishy.

“And now we have a few words to say to you two.” He smiled broadly. “Ken, you’ve chosen to take this young woman, Michelle, as your wife. You have chosen to share your life with her. That is a very big step. And being a Christian husband, you are charged with a double responsibility. The Apostle Paul writes, *‘Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.’*⁴

“That is a tall order, isn’t it? Love your wife as Christ loves the church and give yourself up for her. That will not be difficult if someone threatens her life or her safety. It is natural for a man to give himself up in a situation like that. Where it will be difficult is in day-to-day life, giving up little things, like Monday Night Football and those late nights at work. It’s never even considering to look at another woman as you look at her. It’s when you have to deny yourself to accommodate her.” Here he looked warmly at Michelle. “And I know she’s worth it.” He reached down and placed a hand on Ken’s shoulder. “And by God’s grace, and with His help you will succeed.” Pastor Jenkins then looked to his wife, who had stood beside and a little behind him as he charged Ken.

“And I have a little somethin’ to say to you, hon,” Aurora began in her soft, deep-southern drawl, gazing at the bride with soft, dark eyes. “Now you know your husband has the lion’s share of the work, right? The Apostle Paul writes to us women, *‘Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.’*⁵ And that’s the *easier* part of the command. It’s much easier than all them people in the world want us to believe, Michelle dear.” The tall black woman gently rested a hand on the bride’s head. “You see, when you follow the Holy Spirit and your husband loves you the way he should, you’ll *want* to submit to him. Submittin’ to him means that he’s got the final say and you won’t go behind his back to get what you want. It means that you support him in whatever way you can and that you go wherever God leads him.” She smiled to herself.

³ Revelation 22:17a

⁴ Ephesians 5:25-28

⁵ Ephesians 5:22-24

"That's not quite politically correct, is it?" Michelle shook her head. She had been expecting to hear this. Mrs. Jenkins had said it many times in their counseling sessions. But the young woman also believed her unsaved friends needed to hear it.

"Well, the Bible doesn't call us to be politically correct, hon," Aurora went on. "It calls us to follow God with our whole hearts. And I pray to God that you will." She stepped back beside her husband. He motioned to the young couple.

"And now, say your vows," he intoned as they rose. Ken reached out and clasped Michelle's hand.

"Mishy, I hereby vow to be yours and yours alone. By the grace that God has given me, I promise that I will love you as Christ loves His church. I promise to give myself for you in my daily living as He has given Himself for us. I promise to uphold you in prayer and in action and to stand by you, no matter what life may throw at us. I promise to forsake all others and to cleave only to you, my beloved, until death parts us. This ring is a token of my promise." He slipped a slim, gold band onto her finger. As he spoke the words that he'd worked so hard on, Ken felt his heart swell, he gazed into her eyes and saw the love and awe that he would be willing to speak such words.

And then it was her turn.

"Ken, I hereby vow to be yours and yours alone," she said firmly. "By the grace that God has given me, I promise that I will submit to you as we both submit to Christ. I promise to support you in prayer and in action. I promise to stand with you, no matter what life may bring our way. And I promise to forsake all others and to cleave only to you, my husband, until death parts us. And this ring is a token of my promise." He felt the cold of the gold ring on his finger less than the warmth in her voice and sensed the radiance of her even through the light veil that covered her face.

"*'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother,'*" Pastor Jenkins quoted in a resonant voice, "*'and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.'*"⁶ And so, by the power vested in me, I declare you husband and wife." He turned to Ken. "You may kiss the bride now." Mishy raised her veil with his help and he planted a light kiss on her lips.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the pastor boomed out over the congregation, "I hereby present to you Mr. and Mrs. Ken O'Tare." The applause resounded mightily in the room as Ken picked up his bride and strode down the aisle with her in his arms.

As they stepped through the doors and proceeded through the foyer to the doorway where the car was waiting to take them to the Stone House, sunlight poured down from heaven, sprinkling God's blessings upon the righteous and the wicked alike. But at that moment, Ken and Mishy believed that He'd sent it for them alone, the first light pointing to them to the first step on the path together.



Author's Note

So why did I end up writing this? Am I a sucker for happy endings? Not exactly. I tend to like the sad, painful ones, which show life as it is, a vale of tears that will not be resolved until our Lord returns. However, even here, the showers are parted by brilliant shafts of the sun. I strongly felt that Mishy and Ken could not be left hanging, and so I wrote to cleanse my own soul. I needed a resolution so that my sequel to *The Wager*, *The Triangle*, could work.

As to the deal with Bill and Vicki, it kind of arose naturally out of the interaction that they had in *The Wager*. Somehow it felt wrong to not allow them to be together for a lifetime – something utterly unplanned. Sometimes stories do mirror life and throw curveballs your way.

You may ask why I tacked the last chapter on to this story. This wedding was a purging of some ideas bouncing around in my head. It certainly is not completely my ideal for a wedding. A bride might not like the non-traditionalism, but the fact that each marriage is a parable of our relationship to Christ, is something that I felt should be mentioned, hence the bridegroom coming for his bride, rather than the bride coming to her bridegroom, as the western tradition dictates.

⁶ Genesis 2:24

I do not apologize for Pastor and Mrs. Jenkins' words to the married couple. Scripture is very clear on the roles that men and women will take. As a matter of fact, most of what Aurora Jenkins charges Michelle with are things that have come from my own mother's lips, and she is a woman who submits to her husband in the Biblical sense.

As the spiritual clouds part to let Vicki and Bill, Michelle and Ken enjoy a sense of well-being and happiness for a season, you can be sure that difficulties will lie ahead for them as they do for all people who join their lives.

*Pilgrims of passion, we follow the One
Who holds out a cross and a crown.
We travel a hard road that has but one light,
For we have here no lasting town.*

*Sometimes we run by the power of His might
On our own at the best we can plod.
What we hopefully look for is just beyond sight,
We're pilgrims to the City of God.*

—“Pilgrims to the City of God” by Michael Card⁷

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⁷ Card, Michael. “Pilgrims to the City of God.” As recorded on *Soul Anchor*. Nashville, TN: Word Entertainment, 2000.