



AN
Orchard Hill
ROMANCE

BLESSING

Losing Patience

KARA LYNN RUSSELL

Losing
Patience:

An Orchard Hill Romance

by

Kara Lynn Russell

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Losing Patience: An Orchard Hill Romance

COPYRIGHT © 2008 by Kara Lynn Russell

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or The Wild Rose Press except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

The Wild Rose Press

PO Box 708

Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706

Visit us at www.thewildrosepress.com

Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2008

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my brother Bob. It never fails to amaze me how alike and yet how very different we are. Your accomplishments inspire me to keep striving for my own.

Prologue

Misty bustled about her kitchen, happily making supper for her fiancé. *My fiancé*; she relished those words. At fifty, she'd long ago given up hope of ever being able to say them, not because she hadn't had opportunity when she was younger. She'd known that none of the men she'd dated could hold her heart.

Perry had been worth the wait. He may seem like just a fifty-something, balding, divorced handyman to everyone else in Orchard Hill, but to her, he was Prince Charming.

There was a knock at her back door, and Perry came in before she could answer it. "Hi Misty. Am I late?"

"No, you're just on time," she said as she emptied the rice from the steamer. "Give me a kiss and have a seat."

Perry followed both her directions, and when they were settled and had said grace, he opened their dinner conversation with "I have some news."

"Really? What is it?"

"I found a job today. A steady job with benefits, not just a handyman request."

Misty squealed with delight. "Why didn't you tell me right away?"

Perry gave her that smile that made him look like a schoolboy. "Because I knew dinner would be delayed, and it smelled too good to wait."

There were not a whole lot of men in Orchard Hill who embraced Misty's health conscious style of cooking. Perry's compliment warmed her heart. "Oh, you sweet talker." She tried to brush the compliment aside, but she was sure he could see how much it meant to her. "Tell me about the job."

"I'd be a supervisor for one of the crews that's working to put up a new subdivision."

"Oh, that sounds great. But what about after the subdivision is built?"

"It's a big company. They assured me there would always be work."

"Perry Parker, I'm so proud of you. I knew it was just a matter of time before you were back on your feet work-wise."

"Thanks, hon. Your encouragement kept me going."

They ate in silence for a bit before Perry laid down his fork, his plate still half full. "There's more."

Misty laid down her own fork, sensing that this was important. "Go on."

"The job is in the Madison area. We'd have to move."

Misty stared at him. Move away from Orchard Hill? Could she do that? Her life was here, her business. She'd worked so hard with the church choir. There was no way she could leave.

Perry watched her with evident concern, no doubt guessing some of what was in her mind. "I can tell them 'no' if you'd rather. I've been doing all right as a handyman."

And then she knew. She'd follow this man anywhere. She was getting married at fifty. Why not start a whole new life together while they were at it?

"Of course you're not going to turn them down. I was just thinking of what I had to do to close my store." Misty was the owner of The Green Scene, a health food store. "The name won't fit after we're

married anyway. I'll be Misty Parker, not Misty Green."

Perry reached across the table and took her hand. "I can't wait."

But this did complicate things. Now she'd have a move to plan on top of making one more match before the year was over. There was no way she was going to let Pansy Parker win their matchmaking contest, even if the woman was going to be her mother-in-law. She knew exactly whom she wanted to bring together as her last match in Orchard Hill. It was time to roll up her sleeves and get to work.

Chapter 1

“The Lord upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down.”

~Psalm 145:14 NIV

Shaun slammed the door behind him with enough force to shake the whole apartment—no the whole building. He left the sound of Patience crying behind, climbed into his truck and backed out of the driveway.

He should be comforting Patience, he knew. In fact, he should be apologizing because he was the one who'd made her cry in the first place—and probably for no reason; but when he'd seen her talking to their neighbor, a ladies' man if there ever was one...

He knew Patience wasn't the type to be unfaithful, so he shouldn't have yelled at her. He shouldn't have knocked over that table.

Then again, how did you know who was the type to stray? He hadn't thought his mother was the type, and look how that had turned out? The memory of his mother's betrayal made Shaun's head pound. He couldn't believe it when she'd told him she was leaving his father. Well, that part he could believe. His dad wasn't exactly the ideal husband, but Shaun was sure he'd always been faithful. His mother was leaving so she could move in with her boyfriend, a

man she'd admitting seeing for years.

Shaun's world had shattered on that day. The woman who represented stability and home had been lying to him for a long time. He knew the anger that he struggled with was hurting him, and hurting Patience as well. He wanted to let go of it, but somehow it wouldn't let go of him.

He found himself pulling up in front of his folks' home—his father's home now, he reminded himself. The white clapboard farmhouse where he'd grown up seemed somehow older and sadder since his mother left it. The house was dark. Shaun found his father in the shed, working on one of the ancient tractors. "Hey Dad," he called in greeting.

Shaun was not surprised to find him out in the shed working this late at night. His father believed hard work was the answer to everything. Alcohol, drugs, gambling and even church were all crutches in his father's eyes. The only way to overcome one's problems was through hard work. Funny he hadn't realized how unsuccessful that had been for solving his own problems.

His father looked up when he came in, grabbed a rag he had in his back pocket and wiped his hands. "What are you doing here?" There was no warmth in his voice. No indication that he was glad to see his son.

"I came to check on you, see that you're all right."

"So, I can't take care of myself these days? You think I'm helpless without her?"

"No, but..."

"Well, you can quit wasting your time. I don't need anything from you."

The harsh words cut Shaun. He was used to criticism and negativity from his father, but not this open hostility. "All right. Can't I just stop in to say 'hi'?"

“Cut the act. I know you always liked her better than me. That hasn’t changed overnight.”

“No...but you’re still my Dad.”

“Am I? Maybe that’s the reason you always got along better with her than with me. Maybe I’m not your real father.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying maybe this Ellis guy wasn’t her first boyfriend. How do I even know you’re my kid?”

Shaun didn’t know what to say. How did you answer something like that?

“So you don’t have to worry about me anymore. Chances are you aren’t mine anyway.”

“Dad, you don’t mean that.”

“Don’t I? Well I mean this. Get out of here, and don’t come back. You aren’t my son anymore. I don’t want you here.” He turned back to his tools and resumed work on the tractor.

Shaun backed away and left without another word. He and his father had never been close. But to hear the man actually disown him, that was harsh, and it hurt.

Patience took one last look around the apartment. She swiped at the tears which continued to fall, even though she’d told herself sternly to stop. She couldn’t drive if she was crying. With a sigh, she grabbed a box of tissues off the counter, picked up her suitcase and went out the door.

She felt horrible, leaving Shaun at a time like this. She’d promised for better or for worse, and already she was breaking that promise.

Lifting the lid on the trunk of her car, she put the suitcase inside and then slammed it shut. She carried her purse and the box of tissues into the car. Guilt overwhelmed her, and she couldn’t turn the key for a few moments. As a sob welled up in her throat, she rested her head on the steering wheel.

Losing Patience: An Orchard Hill Romance

How could she leave Shaun when she knew how much he was hurting? How could she stay when he treated her like this? She thought of all the fights, the angry accusations, the hurtful words. Why had he turned on her? She wasn't the one who'd hurt him.

She could hardly believe this was the same shy teen who'd won her heart in high school. *That* Shaun was sweet and caring. He noticed every shift in her mood, listened to her whether she was sharing secrets or just commenting on the weather and always treated her with consideration.

Was that Shaun still around, or was he gone for good now that the angry Shaun had emerged?

Patience stroked the gold band that he'd placed on her finger just months ago. She wished they could have had the ceremony in the church, but her parents had objected so strongly to the idea of her marrying Shaun, that in the end it had been easier to elope. Whatever their wedding had lacked in ceremony was made up for in the emotion. She'd never forget the look on his face—so tender and earnest—as he'd repeated his vows and slipped the ring onto her finger. How could all of that have changed so quickly?

Enough. Patience straightened. She wasn't going to waffle anymore. She had someone to consider now besides Shaun. And she wasn't going to stay away long. She just needed to be somewhere quiet so she could think. She would come back.

With a whispered prayer for strength and guidance, she turned the key and put the car into gear.

Shaun returned home with his emotions more jumbled than when he'd left. But he promised himself he'd apologize to Patience anyway. It wasn't her fault he was so on edge lately.

They'd been married for eight months now. Shaun had fallen for her on their first meeting on the first day of his junior year of high school. She was the new girl—a year younger—and Patience asked him how to find one of her classes. She looked so lost and overwhelmed; he walked her to the room even though it meant he was late for his own class.

When she got a job at the town's coffee shop, The Grace Place, he started hanging out there, even though he hated coffee. But he must have drunk a hundred cups of the stuff before he worked up the courage to ask Patience out. Now at twenty and twenty-one, they were married and planning a life together..

He could see that all the lights were out in the apartment when he pulled up to it. She must have gone to bed. He got out of the car and trudged up the steps. Maybe apologies could wait until morning.

But, he knew something was wrong the moment he opened their door. The place had that empty feeling. The same feeling his father's house had now. He tore through the rooms, turning on all the lights.

Patience was gone.

Her clothes were gone.

Her toiletries were gone.

She was gone.

In the kitchen Shaun found a note, stuck to the refrigerator with a "Thorsen's Hilltop Apple Orchard" magnet. He pulled it down and read:

Shaun,

I'm sorry, but I have to leave for a while. I know how badly your mother hurt you, and I wish I could help, but I don't know how. Your outbursts scare me. I need some time to think, to make a decision. I'll be at my Aunt Elaine's. Please don't call me. I'll come home soon.

I love you,

Patience.

Shaun crumpled the note and half sat, half fell into a chair at the table. He'd been betrayed by his mother, disowned by his father, and now Patience had left him.

He forced himself to be honest. She hadn't left him. He'd driven her away. A wave of self loathing overcame him. He stumbled out of the house again, not sure where he was going, just knowing that he couldn't stay in the apartment tonight. The absence of Patience would mock him, emphasize his failure. He couldn't go to his father's. There was no way he was going to his mother's.

What was left?

Chapter 2

Two Months Later

“How many times are we going to do this, Shaun?”

Shaun looked up from his beer and tried to focus on the people—person—in front of him. “Joseph, is that you?”

“Of course it’s me. Who else would come out to drag your sorry hide home yet again?”

Joseph was the owner of the company Shaun worked with. They built and remodeled houses. It was a small enough company for Joseph to know all his employees, and for some reason, he’d decided to concentrate on Shaun right now. Shaun didn’t know if he was happy about that, or not. Joseph had expectations he didn’t think he could live up to right now, but on the other hand, it was good to know there was at least one person in the world that cared what happened to him.

He took another drink. “I’m not ready to go home yet.”

Joseph grabbed his collar and hauled him to his feet. “Believe me, Shaun, you are.”

With Joseph’s support Shaun was able to stumble out of the bar and to the parking lot. When they got to Joseph’s big truck, he more or less heaved Shaun into it.

His head struck the dashboard and Shaun gave a short, sharp cry of pain. Joseph climbed in the driver's side. "Why do you do this? Is getting drunk helping you solve any of your problems?"

He leaned back against the window and tried to focus on Joseph again. "No."

"So why, Shaun? You aren't even good at this. The bartender said you were only on your third beer."

He shrugged and attempted a smile. "Practice makes perfect, you know."

The look on Joseph's face told him it had been a mistake to try to make light of things.

Turning back towards the front, Shaun slumped down in the seat. "I didn't ask you to come and get me."

"No, the bartender did. Let's just get you home for now."

He tried to shake his head but that set off some alarming feelings of dizziness. "Can't go home."

"Why not?"

"I forgot to pay my rent. I'm locked out."

He heard the heartfelt groan that Joseph let out. "What am I supposed to do with you? I can't take you home to my kids like this."

Shaun didn't think his boss actually expected an answer, so he allowed himself to slide down further in the seat while Joseph took out his cell phone and punched in a number. The conversation he had with the person he'd called floated over Shaun's head. He was half asleep when Joseph whacked him on the arm. "Put your seatbelt on. We're leaving."

Shaun fumbled with the buckle and managed to get it fastened before Joseph pulled out of the gravel lot. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

Another Two Months Later

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” Shaun complained to Pastor Isaac. “You never told me this was what you had in mind.”

Pastor Isaac laughed. “Quit complaining. At least you aren’t playing John the Baptist. You wouldn’t believe how uncomfortable that costume is.”

Shaun surveyed the costume for St. Peter. “I bet the beard itches.” The beard was long and white and reminded him of a bird’s nest.

“You won’t have to wear it very long. I think you’re tough enough to handle it.”

Shaun gave up the argument. He could indeed endure walking around in a smelly fake beard and a dress for a short while if it would help Isaac with the All Saint’s Day children’s sermon. He owed the pastor a lot. And it was better than spending his time brooding about Patience and when she’d come back—if she’d come back. He’d honored her wishes and not contacted her, but the longer she was gone the harder it was to resist.

Laying the costume over the back of a chair, Shaun flopped onto the couch and picked up the remote. “Is there anything on tonight?”

“Hey,” Isaac protested “you have your own place now.”

“Yeah, but it’s too quiet there. Don’t you get tired of living alone?”

“It looks like I’ll never have the chance to find out.” In spite of the sarcastic remark, Isaac joined him on the couch. “The news is on now.”

Shaun shrugged. It was better than the game show re-run he’d found. He flipped the channel to the local news station he knew Isaac preferred.

What they saw made their jaws drop. “Is that Joseph?” asked Shaun.

“Is that our church?” Isaac responded.

Shaun turned up the volume. A reporter was talking to Harmony Solberg, whom Joseph had been dating. She was asking Harmony about an offer a network had made to produce her television show. She said she was turning it down and before they knew it, the interview ended with Joseph proposing to Harmony.

Then the scene switched back to the anchor. The two men stared at each other. Shaun felt a grin spreading across his face. Who’d have thought his boss had it in him? Everyone swore Joseph would never remarry after his wife’s death.

Isaac groaned and so Shaun turned to him. “What’s wrong? This is great news, isn’t it?”

“Great for Joseph,” Isaac conceded “But bad for me.”

“How can it be bad for you? Joseph’s your best friend.”

“Do you know how many weddings I’m juggling right now? I swear it must be something in the water. Our congregation has gone wedding crazy this year.”

“Really?”

“I have eight couples on my schedule right now. And it’s not just about performing the ceremonies themselves. There’s the pre-marriage counseling and the arrangements and writing extra sermons, and...and...well, there’s just a lot involved.

“Patience and I eloped. We never had any of that.”

“I wish a few more couples would get that idea.”

Shaun had never really thought about that before. The pre-marriage counseling would have been a good idea. And there wasn’t a whole lot to look back on in their “justice of the peace” ceremony. He wondered if that had bothered Patience. Shaun realized that he’d like to have his marriage blessed

by God, now that he was a Christian.

“If I ever win Patience back, I think we should have a ceremony. What do you call that when married people get married again? To each other, not other people.”

“A renewal of vows.”

“I’d like to do that for Patience.” Maybe they could do it all the way with the fancy dress and flowers. Lilies were her favorite.

“Heaven help me,” grumbled Isaac.

“Look on the bright side. Weddings are more fun than funerals.”

Isaac ran a hand over his face. “Take your scruffy beard and robe and go home, Shaun. OK?”

On the day of their first anniversary, Patience received flowers from Shaun, a beautiful bouquet of lilies in shimmering colors. At first she thought they were for her Aunt Elaine, but then she read the card and heart twisted. He’d remembered.

A tear slipped down her cheek. Who would have guessed that they’d be apart before their first anniversary? All those people who’d thought they were too young to get married, that’s who. But she’d certainly never thought so. She’d only known Shaun a few years before they’d married, but she was closer to him than anyone in the world. He was the only one who understood her dream of building a home and family when the other kids her age had been talking about college and careers.

Her parents were always trying to steer her along a path that they’d predetermined was right for her, but in reality it hadn’t fit at all. Shaun was the only one who’d been interested in what she wanted.

Shaun was definitely not part of her parents plans for her life. They’d disliked him from the start. He had no plans for college, his father had the reputation of being difficult and unfriendly, and

worst of all, his family didn't go to church.

She carried her beautiful bouquet of flowers arranged in a crystal vase, upstairs to her room and set them on the dresser.

Patience knew she should be concerned about her chosen life-partner's lack of faith—and she was—but it wasn't so much that he didn't believe. He just didn't understand. She'd always hoped he would come into faith if she set a good example for him. And at first he'd gone to church with her when she asked. She suspected her parents' unfriendly attitude had been the reason he'd stopped. She had planned to suggest they find a different church, but then the whole thing with his mother happened and everything fell apart.

When the mail came, there was a letter for her as well.

It began simply with: *Patience*. That was typical Shaun. He wasn't one to use flowery terms or gushing endearments.

I miss you. I wish you would come home. Things have changed a lot since you've been gone. I've changed a lot.

At first, things got worse. You already know about my mom. But you don't know that the night you left, I went to see my dad. He told me he didn't think I was really his son and that he never wanted to see me again. Then, when I came home, you were gone.

Losing you, Patience, was harder than losing my dad or my mom. I don't blame you for leaving. I deserved it, and I was ashamed of myself when I read your letter.

I have to admit something else I'm ashamed of. After you left, I started drinking. Not all the time, but when I got really depressed and I couldn't take it anymore, I went to the bar. I don't know why I did it after the first time. It sure didn't help.

I felt like I was lost in some sort of thick fog, and no one could reach me. I stopped caring about everything. And this is where I made another really big mistake. I didn't pay the rent and got us kicked out of our apartment. I'm sorry.

That night Joseph pulled me out of a bar. He did that more than once. I was lucky to have him because no one else cared. That night, since he couldn't take me home, he took me to a friend's house. The friend was Pastor Isaac, from your church. This is when things started to change.

Isaac let me live with him for a couple of months. He had me do things around the church in exchange for room and board. And we spent a lot of late nights talking.

To make a long story short, I'm back on my feet. I've found a new place for us. I think you'll really like it. And I've started going to church. Every Sunday, Patience. Honest. I can't talk much about that. I don't have the words. All I can say is I've changed. I'll be a much better husband if you come back to me. Please, please come back Patience. Just come and talk to me, see how things are now. That's all I ask.

It was signed *Shaun*.

What was she going to do?

The baby kicked, distracting her. She pressed her hands to her stomach, relishing the feeling of the new life moving within her.

The baby was the reason she'd left. Things were so confusing. Even though Shaun had frightened her with the rage he'd shown after his mother's betrayal, and his father's rejection, she never thought he'd physically hurt her. But her parents saw this rough spot as the perfect opportunity to emphasize what a "horrible mistake" she'd made in marrying Shaun.

When she'd found out about the baby, it was too much. Overwhelmed by the pain and chaos around her, she'd fled. She hadn't meant to be gone for so

Losing Patience: An Orchard Hill Romance

long, just long enough to decide what to do. Now, she was afraid to return. How angry would Shaun be when he discovered she was pregnant and had kept that news from him? Had he changed enough to forgive her?

“Patience, honey, I need you.”

“Coming Aunt Elaine.” She put away the letter and went to see what her great aunt needed. Not long after she’d arrived Aunt Elaine fell and broke her hip. That as much as her indecision had kept her from returning to Orchard Hill.

Chapter 3

On the way home from work a couple of weeks later, Shaun stopped at the grocery store. He hated pushing the carts around, so instead, he filled his arms with a few items and grabbed a gallon of milk on his way out. Before he could reach the check out, Todd Ellis stepped in front of him.

Shaun stopped cold. He didn't know what to do. He didn't want to have anything to do with his mother's boyfriend, but at the same time, he didn't want to make a scene in the store.

"Your mother would like to see you," Ellis said to him in a low voice.

Shaun's first instinct was to reply with a belligerent "so what?" The fact that he was able to restrain himself gave him confidence that he could live up to the new standards he'd set for himself. He decided on a mild, "Does she?" for a response.

"Yes, she's worried about you. No matter what else happened, Shaun, she does love you."

He had no answer for that, so he said nothing.

"Thanksgiving is coming soon. I know it would mean a lot to her if you'd join us. You know where we're living, right? Dinner will be at 5:00."

"I...I don't think I can make it." Shaun fervently wished he weren't standing here with an armful of perishables. He wished he could drop everything at Ellis's feet and walk away.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re there right at 5:00. Just come. Come over anytime in fact. Your mother wants so badly to see you.”

Warring emotions made it difficult for him to answer. Finally he just shook his head. “I can’t.” Stepping around Ellis, Shaun made his way to the check out. Ellis didn’t try to stop him or follow him. He was glad for the line at the check out. It gave him a chance to calm down before he had to discuss the weather with the clerk while she rang up his purchases.

“Yes, I’ll come home for Thanksgiving,” Patience told her mother over the phone. Aunt Elaine wouldn’t need her help anyway. Lisa, Aunt Elaine’s daughter was coming to get her for the holiday, and had told Patience that she intended to convince Elaine to move in with her. Patience realized that she would need to make a decision about herself and Shaun soon. Her refuge at Aunt Elaine’s was about to disappear. Lisa would hardly take Patience and the baby as well as Aunt Elaine.

“That’s wonderful, sweetheart. I’ll tell Misty to put you on the list of volunteers,” her mother said. “We’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too,” Patience answered mechanically. Dread pooled in her stomach. How would her parents react when they saw her condition? They had to know sometime. Better to go back now and face the music.

“While you’re here,” her mother continued “we could get a few things done.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, start our Christmas shopping, pick out a tree, see a lawyer.”

“A lawyer? What for?”

“Honey, we need to get moving on your divorce.”

“I never said anything about divorcing Shaun!”

“You know I believe marriage should be forever, but in your case...Well, you were so young. You didn’t know what you were doing. I’m sure God will forgive you.”

“Mom, I’m not ready to give up. Shaun wrote to me. He says he’s going to church now.”

Her mother sniffed. “Well, that’s true. But he’s still not what your father and I hoped. Even if Shaun’s really getting past what happened with his parents, then he’ll still just be a high school graduate who works construction. Don’t you see baby, that’s all he’ll ever be.”

“I’m just a high school graduate.”

“But you don’t have to be. It’s not too late for you to go on to school...”

Patience ran a hand over stomach. “I don’t think now is going to be a good time to start.”

“Of course it is. It would be a perfect time. It’s short notice, but I’m sure with a little work, you could be ready to start in January.”

“No, Mom, that’s not going to happen. Listen, I’ll be home on Thanksgiving, all right?”

“Don’t forget about the community dinner. Volunteers should be at the church by three o’clock.”

“Great. I’ll probably meet you there.”

Patience sighed as she hung up the phone. She knew her parents loved her and wanted what they thought was best for her. But she wished they’d accept that she wasn’t interested in their vision of the perfect life.

“Shaun, you’re doing a marvelous job in here,” said Misty Green.

He turned from the cupboard he’d just installed in the church kitchen. “Thanks Misty. I’m glad I can help out.”

“Help out? I think remodeling our kitchen is a bit more than helping out.”

Losing Patience: An Orchard Hill Romance

Shaun shrugged. It was one of the projects Isaac had given him in exchange for two months of room and board and counseling. He felt he was getting the better end of the deal.

“Will it be ready before Thanksgiving? I’m in charge of the community dinner, you know.”

“Sure. I’m almost done now.”

“I don’t have your name down for the dinner. Can I sign you up for set up crew?”

“Sure.” It wasn’t as if he had anything else to do that day. His father was hardly going to invite him over for turkey with all the trimmings, and his mother...well, he wasn’t ready to take her up on her invitation.

“It will be wonderful not to have to battle with that old stove.”

“Mr. Schmidt from Orchard Hill Appliances donated it. His daughter just got engaged, and I think he wants Pastor Isaac to do the ceremony.”

Misty raised her eyebrows. “Really? With Isaac’s wedding schedule for next year, I’m not surprised he thinks he has to butter up the pastor. Now I can count on you for set up, right?”

“Sure.”

“Be at the church by three o’clock.”

“I’ll be there.”

Shaun was surprised at the grin that spread across Misty’s face. She looked like the proverbial cat that ate the canary. “Great. I’ll put you down on the list.”

Shaun shifted uncomfortably in his chair. While he admitted his weekly counseling sessions with Isaac helped him, that didn’t mean they were easy for him.

Isaac stared across his desk. “So you’ve been invited to Thanksgiving dinner at your mother’s and you’re going to...”

"I'm not going. I'm already signed up to serve at the Community Dinner here."

"What time is your mother's dinner?"

"Five o'clock."

"We always have plenty of volunteers. You could back out and go to your mother's."

"No, I can't."

Isaac leaned back in his chair. "Why not?"

Shaun gripped the wooden arms of his chair, willing himself to stay calm. "Why are you trying to convince me to go? Don't you object to the fact that my mother, who is technically still married to my father, is living with another man?"

"Of course I do, but we both know it isn't that simple."

Shaun shrugged but didn't say anything.

"She doesn't attend church, read the Bible or pray as far as you know. Your mother doesn't have the support of a strong faith."

"I know," he answered softly. "I know my dad was awful to her for years. She used to tell me he wasn't always that way. When he lost his business, he changed. I don't know. I don't remember him being any way other than the way he is now."

"How would you describe your father?"

Shaun took a deep breath as he gathered his thoughts. "I wouldn't say he was ever abusive to us. But he wasn't...affectionate in any way. He was extremely critical and...and cold, I guess."

When he paused, Isaac urged him to continue. Shaun slumped in his chair. It seemed as though they'd been over all this a million times.

"Mom and I were really close. It was always us against him. When he was nasty and spiteful, we'd laugh it off together later. When I wanted to go somewhere or do something that he didn't want me to, she covered for me. I covered for her a few times, too. I guess she probably lied to me about what she

was really doing.”

Isaac leaned forward again, resting his elbows on the desk. “So, are you angry at your mother for betraying your father, or for betraying you?”

Shaun was stunned. He’d never thought of it that way.

“After all, your father has been pretty awful to you too after your mother announced she was moving out.”

That was true. Yet, he didn’t feel any anger towards his father, just indifference, or possibly relief at not having to deal with the bitter man any more.

“I’ll have to think about that.”

“And think about going to your mother’s for Thanksgiving.”

A spurt of anger slipped past Shaun’s control and he growled at Isaac. “You aren’t like I thought pastors would be. Why are you so insistent I do this? She’s in the wrong. She’s living with one man and married to another. Shouldn’t she move out and admit she was wrong before I talk to her?”

“Being a pastor doesn’t give me the right to pass judgment on anyone. There’s nothing you or I can do to make her behave the way we’d like. What’s important for you is that you forgive her.”

Shaun felt his jaw drop and his eyes widen. “Me? Forgive her? Why should I do that?” The rising flood of emotions moved Shaun to get up and pace the small area of the office.

“Because it’s the only way you’ll regain peace and equilibrium in your life. Jesus was very clear on the importance of forgiveness.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” grumbled Shaun. “Seventy times seven and all that. We went over it in Bible study.”

“And how is that going?” asked Isaac.

“I’m learning a lot.” Shaun stopped in front of

Isaac's desk. "But I'm way behind everyone. Most of the people in my group have been reading the Bible since they were kids."

"Then they should be able to teach you a lot. Keep going."

"I will. Maybe this forgiveness thing would be easier if I'd learned all this when I was a kid."

"I doubt it. Forgiveness is always difficult, even when you understand why you're supposed to do it. Your head knows what's right, but your heart wants to hold on to that resentment."

Shaun nodded and sat again, his anger giving way to remorse. He wondered if these counseling sessions would count as a workout. Leaping about from emotion to emotion left him as drained as a two mile run would. "I wish I'd started going to church with Patience when she asked me to."

"Why didn't you?"

"I did go a couple of times. I didn't really understand what it was all about. And her parents were always with us. They didn't like me. I guess they still don't because even though I'm going to church here, they won't talk to me."

There was a gentle knock on the door, and Pansy Parker, Isaac's secretary, stuck her head in. "Your next appointment is here."

"Thank you, Pansy," said Isaac as she closed the door again. As usual, they finished their session in prayer. Then Isaac said "All right, Shaun, I'll see you at the same time next week. I want you to think and pray about forgiveness until then."

As Shaun went out, he raised a hand in greeting to Riley O'Neil and Grace Randall. They must be Isaac's next appointment. Pre-marriage counseling, no doubt. After Isaac had stirred up all of Shaun's anger again, he didn't feel sorry for him at all.

Patience pulled into the church parking lot and

turned off her car. Her heart was beating like a rabbit's. She took a deep breath and placed her hands on her stomach. "All right, sweetie, we're about to meet your grandma and grandpa. You're going to be a big surprise to them. Let's just hope it's a happy one."

She just had to get through this dinner, and then she could call Shaun. The thought of soon seeing him made her heart race, both with anticipation and fear.

What if he'd moved on and didn't want to be married to her anymore? What if he was so angry about the baby he wouldn't talk to her? What if he didn't want the baby?"

Her emotions began to overwhelm her. She forced herself to stop following her current line of thought. She searched her mind for something else to concentrate on—a happier memory.

What came to mind was the night her parents were out of town and she'd gotten ill. With the pain in her abdomen growing worse, she'd called a couple of friends, but neither was home. Finally, she'd called Shaun. She knew her parents wouldn't approve, but she was feeling worse and worse and didn't want to be alone.

Shaun, who'd had his appendix removed when he was twelve, recognized her symptoms as appendicitis and insisted on taking her to the emergency room. She hadn't wanted to go. If he took her to the emergency room, her parents would find out they'd been together and she'd have been in trouble.

Shaun had picked her up off the sofa and taken her, and although at first she thought he was acting like a caveman, she'd been too sick to protest. Later, when the doctor told her she really did have appendicitis, she was grateful.

Shaun sat by her bed and held her hand until

they took her into surgery, and he was there when she woke up.

That was when Patience realized that he loved her. Even though, he'd told her he loved her for the first time on Prom night, she hadn't believed him until that moment.

That was what put a golden sheen on an otherwise terrible memory.

One would think that her parents' would have changed their attitude toward Shaun after he'd practically saved her life, but unfortunately it made no difference to them.

Unable to think of another reason to linger, Patience slid out of the car. She pulled her bulky winter coat around her, disguising her condition if only temporarily. With a deep breath and a whispered prayer, she entered the church.

When she stepped into the large hall that was used for the Thanksgiving community dinner, she saw a number of people bustling about with tablecloths and dishes, silverware and centerpieces. For a moment, she stood unnoticed amidst the cheerful chaos. She and her mother spotted each other at the same moment. Her mother dropped a basket of silverware on the table she was setting and ran to greet her daughter.

Patience braced herself for her mother's enthusiastic hug. Initially, she had insisted on meeting her parents here because she thought they might make less of a scene over her in public rather than in private, but what if she was wrong. Everyone had stopped to stare at the mother-daughter reunion.

As they embraced, Patience's throat tightened with tears. In spite of the many differences of opinions they'd had over the last few years, she was happy to see her mother again.

Taking a step back from Patience without

releasing her, her mother yelled in the general direction of the kitchen. "Jerry, Patience is here," and a few moments later her father was on the scene and both of her parents wrapped her in a tremendous hug. When they let go, all three had tears in their eyes.

"We've really missed you," her Dad said, his voice rough with emotion.

Her mother began tugging her coat off. "You're going to get overheated in this, dear. Let's hang it up and we can all get to work..."

The coat hung from her mother's hands, and her mouth dropped open. Her father looked between them, puzzled until her mother, whispered "Jerry, our daughter is pregnant."

It was Thanksgiving, and Shaun still didn't know what to do about his mother's invitation. He understood Isaac's point about forgiveness, but he didn't think he could do it yet. "Better not to go, than to go and blow up at her," he told himself as he crossed the church parking lot on his way to set up for the community dinner.

Then he saw the car, and the breath was knocked out of him. There was no mistaking that car. He'd changed the oil in it and made minor repairs to it too many times to not recognize the battered green compact that Patience's parents had bought her as a graduation gift.

His heart surged with happiness. He sucked in a breath and ran for the door of the church. Patience had come back. He hurried through the building to the fellowship hall where all the activity was. He skidded to a stop as his gaze met hers.

Her father and mother turned as one, their stares angry, accusatory. They said a few words to Patience and walked away,

Suddenly, he was unsure of himself. What if she

hadn't come back for him at all? What if she'd only come back to tell him it was over?

He couldn't believe how beautiful she was, with her long blonde hair hanging loose and that sweet smile lighting up her face as she walked towards him. She couldn't be here to tell him she wanted a divorce if she smiled at him like that, could she? Then his gaze dropped and...

He tried to comprehend what he was seeing. Patience, his wife was...going to have a baby. His baby. He was going to be a father. And she hadn't told him.

A wave of confusion, hurt, betrayal, fear broke over him. A slow burning sensation he knew well surged, pulsing in his temples—anger.

Patience stopped, and her eyes filled with tears. The look on her face made him hesitate. He driven her away with his ungovernable temper. If he lost it now, she'd run again. He knew he didn't want that.

But he knew he couldn't contain his anger either. If he stayed, he would explode. So he turned around and left.

He passed Isaac on his way out. Standing in the doorway, he'd surely seen the whole incident. Shaun avoided the pastor's gaze and brushed past him.

Chapter 4

Patience had never felt so alone, so abandoned in her life. Since they'd started dating, she'd always been able to depend on Shaun.

"Patience, it's good to have you back."

Dimly, she registered that Pastor Isaac was talking to her, but she didn't answer. "Why don't you step into my office for a minute and we'll catch up." He took her arm and drew her away from the curious, pitying gazes of everyone around her. As they left the hall, Patience absently heard the clink of dishes and silverware that meant the volunteers had returned to setting tables.

Isaac escorted her to a chair and then went back to close the door.

"Th-thank you for h-helping me make a graceful exit."

He thrust a box of tissues into her hands, and she pulled one out to dab at her eyes.

"I know it doesn't seem like it, but leaving is actually a step forward for Shaun in dealing with his anger."

"What do you mean?"

"He recognized that he was losing control of his emotions and left before his behavior became inappropriate."

"Pastor Isaac, did Shaun really live with you for a while? Has he really started going to church?"

“Yes, to both questions. He’s trying very hard to get himself together. He really wants you back.”

“You mean he did.” She wrapped her arms around her waist. “Before he found out about the baby.”

“Don’t jump to conclusions before you talk to Shaun. You threw a pretty big surprise at him, you know.”

Patience allowed her shoulders to slump. “I know. I made a horrible mistake. I wanted to tell him, but...”

Holding up a hand, Isaac stopped her. “You don’t have to explain to me.”

A knock on the door interrupted them.

Patience moaned. “That’s my parents, I’m sure.”

“Do you want to talk to them?”

She shook her head.

“I’ll take care of it.” Isaac rose and went to the door, opening it just a few inches. After a short whispered exchange, he closed it again.

“I told them you were resting.”

“Thank you.”

“If you’d really like to rest, you can stretch out on the sofa here. I should get back to the dinner set up.”

“What about Shaun?”

“He’ll come back when he’s ready. Believe me; you won’t be able to keep him away then.”

“Really?” She felt so pathetic, begging for assurance like this.

But Isaac’s smile was full of understanding. “Yes, really. Do you think you’ll be in here long?”

“I’d like to hide in here all afternoon, but I’m afraid my bladder won’t allow that. Then my mother will ambush me in the ladies’ room.”

He laughed. “Yes, she is one determined woman. I’ll try to keep her busy.”

“Thanks.”

Losing Patience: An Orchard Hill Romance

Shaun walked. He wasn't sure where he was going; he just knew that he had to move, to provide a nondestructive outlet for the out of control emotions careening through him. The faster he walked, the quieter his mind became, until he was almost running and silence reigned in his head.

There was only so long he could keep up the pace. Finally he had to slow down and take a look around him. He realized he'd walked to the neighborhood that his boss Joseph lived in.

Knowing that Joseph would be at his fiancée's house next door, Shaun felt safe in plopping himself down on the porch to rest.

As his body stilled, his mind stirred to life again. Patience had come back. But why hadn't she told him she was coming? Actually, there was a lot she wasn't telling him.

Patience was pregnant. It hurt that she hadn't shared that with him. It seemed his fate to be betrayed by the women he loved.

He could remember exactly what his mother had said to him that day, word for word "You're a grown man, Shaun, with a wife of your own now." He'd come to visit and found her packing her suitcase. "I've stayed with your father all these years for your sake. You're old enough to know there's someone else I love, and I want to be with him now."

The words echoing in his head covered the sound of Joseph's footsteps. Shaun didn't notice him until he sat down next to him..

"Are you all right?"

He was going to say "yes," but stopped. That wasn't really true. "I don't know."

"Isaac called me at Harmony's. He said he had a feeling you might show up here."

"What did he tell you?"

"Just that something happened that upset you.

You know Isaac doesn't tell tales."

Shaun was certain that this God he was just coming to know had sent Joseph and Isaac to save him from himself. Joseph had been more of a father to him than his own, and Isaac the big brother he'd never had, as well as a mentor.

"Want to come in and have some dinner?" asked Joseph.

Shaun shook his head. "No thanks, I'm not in the mood for company. I just stopped here to rest."

"You want to talk?"

Did he? It felt as if he'd talked more in the last few months than he had in his whole life.

"Nah. I don't know what to say right now."

"Is this about your parents and the holiday?"

"Not really."

He was going to be a father. The thought jolted him. A father. What did that mean?

With sudden clarity, he knew what he had to do. "But if you think Harmony could spare you for a little, could you give me a ride back to the church?"

Patience thought she'd be too overwrought to actually fall asleep on Pastor Isaac's couch, but the long drive had tired her out and she was able to doze for a little while. She was not so deeply asleep that she didn't hear the office door open and close, but she didn't respond, thinking it was one of her parents, coming in to check on her

She heard a chair being pulled up and someone sat down next to the couch. Great, she thought, they aren't going away. How long could she pretend to be asleep?

A hand, calloused and rough, gently brushed her hair back from her face. She would know that touch anywhere. Her eyes snapped open and she lunged into a sitting position. "Shaun!"

They stared at each other for a few seconds and

then Shaun moved from the chair and sat next to her on the couch. He held out his arms, and she went into them, intensely glad to be in his embrace again.

After a few moments, Shaun cleared his throat and in a ragged voice he said "I'm glad you came back."

"I'm sorry." Everything she had to say tumbled out at once. "I didn't want to leave, but things with you were so out of control, and I didn't know how to help you. Then I found out about the baby, and I didn't know what to do, how the news would affect you then....I didn't mean to stay away for so long, but Aunt Elaine fell, and she needed me...I'm sorry."

"I'm the one who should be sorry. It was my behavior that drove you away. I can understand why you wouldn't think I'd make a very good father."

She moved away from him just enough so that she could look into his eyes. "I never thought that. It's just that you were already dealing with so much and this...a baby means a lot of big changes."

"Good changes." He moved his hands from her back to her stomach. "I'm happy about the baby," he said.

Relief from one of her worries flooded through her, but Patience cautioned herself not to get her hopes up. This wasn't over yet.

"I want us to be together, but...I can't raise a child with a man who's perpetually angry."

"Like my father, you mean?" Shaun's face set itself into grim lines.

She didn't want to answer that, so instead she asked "Have things really changed? Like you said in your letter."

"Yes," he answered with a firmness that warmed her heart. "And they're about to get better. I hope. Will you go somewhere with me?"

"Now? What about the dinner? I did volunteer."

“So did I, but Isaac said they have enough people. This is important.”

“All right.” It wasn’t as though she wanted to spend the next few hours fielding questions from her well meaning parents and friends. “Where are we going?”

“To my mother’s house for Thanksgiving.”

Shaun pulled up to his mother’s new home and shut off the truck’s engine. He took a deep breath. Maybe this was a mistake. Maybe he should turn around and go back to the church.

Then he looked at Patience. He had to do this if there was to be any hope of saving his marriage and him being a part of his child’s daily life. *His child.*

Shaun realized that he knew nothing about babies. This kid would be in real trouble if it was up to his father to keep him alive. “Did you take that class?” he asked abruptly.

“What class?”

“That parenting class in high school, did you take it? I wish I had.”

Patience laughed. “No, I didn’t take it. We’ll buy a book or something.”

“Maybe they have a class at the community college. You used to do a lot of babysitting. I don’t know anything about babies. I don’t even know how to change a diaper.”

“I can show you. It isn’t that hard.”

“But that’s just one thing. I don’t even know what there is to know about babies.” Shaun dropped his head to the steering wheel. “I’m gonna mess this up.”

The sound of Patience’s laughter did not make him feel any better. “Did we come all the way over here to sit in your truck? Don’t you want to go in and see your mom?”

“Mom, oh yeah. I almost forgot. The baby isn’t

even here yet, and I'm already a wreck."

"I'm sure you'll calm down before he's born."

"He? is it a..."

Patience shook her head. "I don't know. I didn't want to ask if you weren't there. I mean, I didn't know if you wanted to know or not."

"I do. When do you see your doctor again? Do you have to go back to your aunt's still or can you see someone here?" He looked her in the eye. "You are going to stay, aren't you?"

"I want to. Let's just see how this weekend goes."

Shaun nodded and retreated back into his thoughts. This morning he hadn't been thinking beyond volunteering for the community dinner, and now he was trying to figure out all at once how to prove himself to Patience and how to be a father.

She shook his arm. "Come on, Shaun. Your mom and her...friend know we're here. They're watching us through the window."

And the first step for both goals began with his mother. "All right. Let's go in."

Before Patience could open her door he reached over and grabbed her hand. "Say a prayer for me, quick, Patience. I don't think I can do this alone."

Her head swung around to look at him. Her eyes were open wide in surprise. "You want me to say a prayer for you? Really?"

Shaun nodded, but gave no other reply. He knew his newfound faith would gain points for him in her eyes, but right now he didn't have the will or the wits to press that advantage. Instead of someone going to face his own mother and a man who actually seemed kind of nice, he felt like that guy, Daniel, going in to face the lions.

Shaun would have much preferred Ellis to be a jerk.

He said his own prayer in silence. Praying was

too new and too personal for him to speak the words aloud. Then, he opened his door. "Let's go."

Shaun hurried around to the passenger side to help Patience down. He didn't usually observe this courtesy, but now that she was expecting, he thought she probably shouldn't be leaping to the ground from her seat.

She allowed him to lift her down and then hand in hand, they walked to the door of the small, rather saggy looking ranch style house that his mother now called home.

In spite of the dread and anxiety this meeting was producing, he reveled in the feel of Patience's hand in his. It had been a long time since he'd enjoyed this simple pleasure. He felt less alone with her fingers intertwined with his. The softness and warmth of her touch calmed him and boosted his courage.

The door opened before they reached it, and his mother stood framed in the doorway, light spilling out from behind her. She was crying. Each tear caused a brief, sharp stab of guilt in Shaun. Anger quickly rose to replace it. Why should he feel guilty that she'd missed him? She'd created the situation, not him.

Confused by the conflicting emotions, Shaun allowed her to hug him, although he couldn't relax and hug her back. Patience did though, when it was her turn to receive his mother's affections.

"Come in, come in." She wiped happy tears from her face. "Patience, you know Todd, don't you?"

"Yes, we've met before. How are you Mr. Ellis?"

He was standing just outside their circle. "I'm fine, and you can call me Todd."

An awkward silence followed, and then Shaun's mother offered to take their coats. Shaun reluctantly gave up his and then helped Patience with hers. When her coat was removed, Shaun's mother gave a

gasp of surprise.

“Patience, forgive me. When I hugged you, I thought you’d put on weight, and now I see why. Congratulations to you both. Todd, Patience is going to have a baby.”

“I can see that,” he said gravely as he took the coats. “I’ll just hang these up.”

His mother happily swept Patience off to the kitchen, chattering away about layettes and strollers and whatnot. Shaun found himself alone with Todd Ellis.

When he’d decided to come he’d only thought about seeing his mother. He’d practically forgotten about Ellis, which seemed ludicrous now, but at the time, he’d been focused on what he needed to do. According to Isaac, that was to make peace with his mother. Did he have to extend forgiveness to Ellis as well?

“Dinner should be ready soon,” the man said. “Why don’t we go sit down in the living room? I’m not much for football, but we can turn the game on if you want.”

Shaun shrugged and followed him into the living room. Ellis sat in one of the easy chairs and indicated that Shaun should take the other one.

He picked up the remote control, but didn’t turn the television on. “So you’re going to be a father.”

“Looks like it.” Shaun sat on the edge of his seat, acutely uncomfortable. He’d rather be having his teeth filled without the benefit of anesthetic rather than to try to make polite conversation with this man.

“I’ve never had the honor myself,” Ellis continued, staring at the remote in his hand rather than looking at Shaun. “Until your mother came along, I was a dedicated bachelor.”

Shaun had nothing to say to that.

“All I had was my work, which isn’t much of

anything when you get right down to it.”

“I guess not.”

“Your mother’s a good woman.” Ellis suddenly looked up, pinning Scott with a straight stare. “If your father would have shown her any hint of affection at all, she would have stayed with him. She spent years trying to find some sign that he cared about her. It’s his own fault she left.”

“I know that,” admitted Shaun. “But she still lied to me.”

“She tried to protect you.”

Shaun snorted. “That didn’t really work out, did it?” He rose, turned his back on the older man, and stared out the window. “Let’s talk about something else.” *Anything else, please.*

A heavy, uncomfortable silence settled over the two men. Shaun continued to stare out the window at absolutely nothing.

“I understand you work construction.”

“Yeah, I work with Joseph Velasquez.”

“I built my share of houses in my day, until arthritis in my knees got the better of me. I can’t do all that climbing around anymore. Now, I just work on cabinetry.”

Shaun had never been curious enough about this man to ask what he did for a living. “You build cabinets?”

“I did the ones in the kitchen here. Do you want to see?”

“Sure.” Anything was better than sitting around here.

In the kitchen, Patience tried to help her mother-in-law, Jenny, finish making Thanksgiving dinner. It was a little difficult since she didn’t know where anything was, but she managed. Matters became more complicated when the men came in to examine the cabinets Todd had made and crowded

the small area. Patience watched Shaun while she mashed the potatoes. He was stiff and ill-at-ease, which didn't surprise her. The fact that he was actually talking to his mother's boyfriend did surprise her. How much could a person change in four months? Was this new, calmer Shaun real, or was this only an image he was holding together for just long enough to bring her back?

"Patience, honey," Jenny, said, "those have got to be the smoothest mashed potatoes ever. You can stop pounding on them."

Patience looked down. Lost in thought, her hands had worked on without instruction from her head. "Sorry. I guess I was daydreaming."

Jenny laughed. "I was that way when I was expecting Shaun. I think it's part of that whole pregnancy hormones thing."

"Right." Patience didn't think this was true in her case, but she didn't want to explain herself. She put the potato masher in the sink.

Jenny handed serving bowls to both men. "I think we're ready. Since you two are here, you can help carry everything to the table."

A little bustle and confusion, and then the feast was ready and waiting to be eaten. They seated themselves around the small dining room table. Jenny had made so much food there was hardly enough room for their plates. She'd set up a TV tray on one side of her to hold the serving dishes that didn't fit on the table.

"Mom, you didn't have to do all this," Shaun told her. "It looks like you were expecting an army."

She grew teary-eyed again. "It's the first time I've seen you in months. It had to be special."

"But I told Ellis, I mean Todd..."

The older man smiled at him. "I knew you'd come."

Shaun thought about how disappointed his

mother would have been if he hadn't come, and was suddenly very glad he'd made this decision. He was still angry with her and still convinced she'd done a lot of things wrong, but he did love her.

"Should...should we say grace?" suggested Patience.

"Yes, let's," Jenny answered.

Everyone looked at Todd, but he stared back at them blankly. "Shaun, why don't you start?" he finally suggested.

"I'm not very good at that," he mumbled.

Patience remembered that he'd written about how he didn't have the words to express his faith yet, and wanting to encourage him, she reached over and took his hand. His fingers tightened around hers. "It doesn't have to be a speech," she told him. "Just say what comes into your heart, Shaun."

He closed his eyes, and was silent for many moments. Jenny and Todd closed their eyes also, but Patience couldn't stop looking at Shaun. She'd always been certain that he had a good heart. Had he really given it to God? She held her breath and waited for him to speak.

"Heavenly Father, we thank you for the food that you've given us and for...for the people who are gathered here together...especially the new life that Patience carries."

He opened his eyes as if he were finished, but then suddenly closed them again. "We...we thank you for the continuous grace and mercy you extend to us. Please help us all to follow your example and lead us to healing and wholeness."

A chorus of 'amens' sounded and everyone opened their eyes and lifted their heads. Patience was speechless. Shaun's prayer *was* beautiful. She caught his gaze and tried to show him how proud she was of him with her smile. He lifted her hand and kissed it before letting go.

Todd said, “Thank you Shaun. That was a beautiful thought.”

Love for him welled in her heart.

Then, a half smile slid across Todd’s formerly solemn face and he added “Maybe you should write greeting cards.”

Everyone laughed and then started serving themselves and passing dishes.

Shaun was glad that Todd had made that joke and taken the focus off of him. He didn’t know where those words came from. He was not a good speaker and certainly not in a situation where he had to improvise.

But he’d felt the truth of them as he spoke them. Were they from his heart? From God?

Dinner and small talk went together. Shaun had no more time to wonder how those words and sentiments had come to him. He listened with interest to Patience’s story of how her aunt had fallen and she’d stayed to help take care of her.

“Will your aunt be all right, now that you’ve left?” Jenny asked.

“Her daughter came to pick her up so she could spend Thanksgiving with them,” Patience explained. Shaun noticed she’d sidestepped the real question.

He didn’t eat much and felt bad because his mother had gone to so much trouble, but they weren’t exactly a happy family. There were too many unresolved hurts and uncertain futures hovering between them all. His stomach had twisted into a knot, and he could only force so much food into it.

Of course his mother noticed. “Shaun, you’re hardly eating a thing.”

“I’m sorry Mom. Everything tastes great, really.”

“Well then why...”

“Stop badgering him, Jenny.” Todd said. “He can hardly eat if he knows you’re watching him like a

hawk.”

To Shaun’s surprise his mother let the matter drop. If his father had made the same comment, she would have taken offense and an argument would have begun. But then again, the tone that Todd had used was far different from the one Shaun’s dad would have used.

After dinner, Todd insisted on clearing the table and doing the dishes. Patience offered to help.

“Well,” he replied “I don’t really need the help, but why don’t you come into the kitchen and keep me company.”

The two disappeared, and Shaun was left alone with his mother. He’d come here to talk to her, to make peace with her, but now that the opportunity was at hand, no words came. He just didn’t know where to start.

And when it came right down to it, could he really do this? He was well aware of the anger and bitterness his heart still harbored.

His mother spoke, saving him from having to start the conversation. “The divorce is final. Your father and I are officially no longer married.”

He hoped she didn’t expect congratulations. “I didn’t know. I haven’t talked to Dad in a long time.”

“Honey, this is a small town. I know he told you he didn’t want to see you anymore.”

Shaun shrugged. “He’s never wanted to see me, not even when I was a kid. It’s a relief for both of us not to have to pretend anymore.”

“But...but I thought you were angry because I left him.”

“I’m angry because you lied to me. You had a whole secret life that I knew nothing about while I still told you everything.”

“I know. I guess your father’s rejection made us unusually close.”

“I mean, all the time you were telling me that I

should wait with Patience and not get too serious too fast, you were running around with that guy and having an affair. I don't even know if Todd's the only one."

His mother's face went white. "Todd's been the only one. We were friends for a long time before...before we were anything else."

"Can I believe that?"

She took a step back, pain distorting her face for a moment. "I've never lied to you. I hid my relationship with Todd from you, that's true. I didn't plan to have an affair."

"You aren't going to tell me that it 'just happened,' are you?"

"No. I made a choice. You were growing up. I knew you'd be leaving soon. Your father was never there for me, but Todd always was. I tried to be the best mother and wife I could be, but when I saw that..." She paused. "saw that after all that, I was still going to end up alone, I couldn't stand it Todd had let me know that he was interested if I was ever ready to take our relationship further. The day after your eighteenth birthday, I told him I was ready."

"The day after my birthday?" He wanted the truth from her, but he could live without details like this.

She shrugged. "You were graduating in a few months. You were already talking about moving out and getting a place of your own, about marrying Patience after she graduated the next year. Living with your father was like living alone but with cleaning and cooking for two. I'm sorry, but I needed something for myself. I couldn't hold you back. A young man should be out on his own. A middle aged woman doesn't want to be alone any more. At least, this one didn't."

While he still abhorred the choices she'd made, her reasons touched his heart.

She straightened. “Anyway, that’s my explanation. I’m sorry I hurt you, and I know I made mistakes...but I hope you can forgive me.”

Shaun turned away from her for a minute, trying to process the scene they’d just lived. “I made a lot of mistakes, too Mom,” he finally said. “I should have come to talk to you a long time ago instead of letting all the anger build inside of me like I did. That’s why Patience left me. I took everything out on her.”

“But she’s back now, right?”

Shaun shrugged. “For how long?”

“But...”

“Anyway, Mom, this is about you and me. I want to forgive you. I just don’t know if I can do it all at once. It’s hard to let go of everything. But I’m going to start working on it.”

Her face lit up, and she wrapped him in a hug again. This time Shaun hugged her back, and he felt something ease inside him as he did so. Isaac was right. Forgiveness was a miraculous thing.

Chapter 5

Back in the truck, Patience rested her head on the window. She was tired and she had a lot to think about. "It's time for me to call it a day."

"All right. Wait until you see our new place. It's actually better than the old one."

"I'll see it tomorrow."

"But I thought you wanted to go home?"

She realized what the problem was. "Shaun, I'm staying at my parents' house."

"What? But I thought..."

"You've shown me a lot today, and I'm really impressed."

"Then what's the problem?" She knew the edge that was creeping into his voice was a sure sign that Shaun's temper was rising.

"But I need to think things over, to sort them out in my head."

She tensed, waiting for him to explode.

Instead he was silent. She watched his face as they went from street light to street light.

"Do we need to go back to the church so you can get your car?"

"Yes, please." That was it? Some perverse part of her needed to test this new Shaun. He seemed too good to be true. "You aren't mad at me?"

"I'm impatient and frustrated. I've been waiting for you to come back for months. But I do want you

to be sure. If you feel better staying at your parents for now, well, at least we're in the same town."

Relief brought a smile to her face. "Thank you for understanding."

"You're welcome," he replied gruffly.

Though it only took them a few more minutes to reach the church parking lot, Patience was almost asleep when they pulled up next to her car.

"Patience, we're here," Shaun said in a voice unusually soft and gentle.

"Yes, I'm awake," she sat up straighter and rubbed her eyes.

"Are you awake enough to drive? Because if you aren't we can get your stuff, and I'll take you home. We can pick up your car tomorrow."

"I'm tired, but I think I'm capable of driving six blocks."

"Patience..." He paused.

"What is it?"

"You're all right, aren't you? I mean everything is fine with the baby and with...with you, right?"

His uncertainty touched her. "Yes, Shaun, we're both healthy, but I do get tired more easily than I normally do."

Shaun wrapped her in his arms and held her close, with a tenderness she hadn't felt from him in a long time. It brought tears to her eyes.

"I don't want you to have to go through this pregnancy all alone. If you come back, I promise I'll take care of you."

She couldn't speak around the lump that rose in her throat. A sound that was half a laugh and half a sob escaped her, and she hugged Shaun tightly. She turned her face up to his, and he kissed her eyelids and feathered kisses across her cheeks and nose before finally claiming her mouth.

Patience melted into him, wanting to absorb his warmth, his strength. She gave a little cry of

disappointment when he broke away. He climbed out of the truck and came around to her side to lift her down. Then he kissed her again.

Breaking away, he opened her car door and motioned for her to get in. "Go on," he said. "While I still have the strength to let you go."

Part of her wished he wouldn't let her go. She was suddenly reminded of how much she missed having him beside her as she slept. But this was for the baby, Patience told herself. She needed to be sure of him for the baby's sake. "I love you, Shaun" she said before letting go and getting into the car.

"I love you, too," he told her, and then he shut the door.

Patience tried to slip in quietly, but her parents were waiting to pounce. "Where have you been?" her father demanded. "We've been worried sick."

"I'm sorry. Shaun and I went to his mother's house for Thanksgiving dinner. I had my cell phone with me. You could have called."

"*You* could have called," her father countered.

"What was that boy thinking, taking you there anyway?" asked her mother. "That woman is living with a man who isn't her husband."

"I know. Shaun wanted to make peace with her tonight, I think,"

"Make peace with her? Why would he want to do that?"

"Because it's the Christian thing to do, don't you think?" Patience was too tired for this conversation. "Dad, will you help me with my bags, please? I'd really like to go to bed. I'm exhausted."

"Now, you just wait one minute, young lady. We need to sit down and discuss what you're going to do. First of all, are you thinking of keeping this baby?"

Patience was shocked. "Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

“Well, you’re alone. Your father and I will help all we can, but a single mother with no education beyond high school will have a difficult time of it. Maybe you should consider adoption.”

“The manager at the bank told me just last week that they’d be glad to have you back,” her dad offered. Patience had worked there until her flight to her aunt’s. “But tellers don’t make a lot of money. Do you think you could support yourself and the baby with that?”

Patience held up her hands. “Aren’t you forgetting about Shaun?”

“Well, yes, you’re right,” her mother considered. “He will have to pay child support, but still...”

Her parents loved her and they meant well, Patience reminded herself. “I wouldn’t discount the fact that Shaun and I might reconcile. I was very impressed with the changes he seems to have made. I really think he’s back on track. And now he’s even become a Christian.” The fact that Shaun’s family never went to church had been the biggest objection her parents had when she told them she wanted to marry Shaun. She’d heard the whole “unequally yoked” speech about a hundred times. Part of her thought she went ahead and married him just so she could get away from lectures like this.

Her parents exchanged glances. Her father spoke, but it was clear they were of the same opinion. “But sweetheart, how long will it last? Are you sure he isn’t just putting on a good show to get you back?”

“What if he’s not, and I turn my back on him? What if I lose a chance at being truly happy and building a family with my baby’s father? Do you think I can afford not even to consider going back to Shaun?”

“But there could be someone so much better for you out there, someone who could give you so much

more...”

Patience didn't feel as if she lived up to her name right now. “Mom, Dad, it's my decision. If I want to give Shaun another chance, then I will. I came home tonight so I could have some peace to think and pray about it, not so you can lecture me and try to bully me into doing what you want.”

Patience left them and went upstairs to her room. She wished she could run up the stairs, stomp all the way to her room and slam the door so hard that it echoed throughout the house. She was too tired for such expressions of anger though.

Once she'd reached her room, she realized that she didn't have her suitcases. She was ready to go to sleep in her clothes, without benefit of brushing her teeth first, when her father brought up her luggage.

“I realize you're tired tonight,” he said as he set the bags down “But we have to discuss this tomorrow.”

“I need to discuss this with Shaun, Dad.”

“Believe me, Patience, you'd be better off without him. He'll never amount to anything, just like that father of his.”

She was too tired to yell, but she answered her father, as forcefully as she could. “Shaun is nothing like his father.”

“In the morning, when you've had a good night's sleep, you'll feel more like talking about it.”

She sighed in defeat. “Sure, Dad. Thanks for bringing up my luggage.”

“I love you, and so does your mom.”

“I know. I love you both, too.”

After Patience left, Shaun walked over to Isaac's and told him about his talk with his mother. Isaac didn't say much, but Shaun knew he was pleased.

On the way home, Shaun stopped to put gas in his truck. As he was unscrewing the gas cap,

another vehicle pulled up to the opposite side of the pump. It was his father's truck. Shaun watched him step down from the cab. He saw his father's face as he recognized his son, paused and then began filling his gas tank without a hint of acknowledgement.

It was the last straw. In a day that had unexpectedly turned out to be an emotional roller coaster ride, Shaun felt himself hurtling toward another hill.

He'd successfully navigated through Patience's return, the shock of finding out he was going to become a father and the ordeal of forgiving his mother. It hadn't been easy, but he'd done it. For weeks he'd told himself that he didn't care if his father had disowned him. Now, he knew it was a lie. He did care that one of the people who should have been most important in his life could cast him aside so easily. He cared that there was so little between them.

Shaun tried to remember all the "skills" he had learned to manage his temper. As he waited for the tank to fill, he counted to ten. He breathed deeply. He even said a desperate prayer. But none of it worked.

"Hello, Dad," he said suddenly, sharply. His father looked around in surprise. "Did you have a nice Thanksgiving?" He knew he should be ashamed at the sarcastic tone he heard in his voice, but he wasn't. He was beyond caring about that.

"Mom invited me over to her house for dinner."

Still no response.

He would have thought his emotions would be exhausted by this time, but once again, Shaun was filled with the anger that seemed to simmer below the surface of him so often these days. He thought about what his mother had told him about her fear of being alone and went from simmering to boiling in a heartbeat.

“She made a feast. There was more food than the table could hold. You remember what a great cook she is, don’t you? Oh, wait. You never cared for her food, did you? If you had, I guess you would have given her a compliment on it once in a while.”

“I can’t believe you’d associate with her after what she did.” His father spoke in a voice so low that he almost missed the words. But Shaun heard them, and they were like gasoline thrown on a fire.

“What she did? What about you, Dad? You drove her away, and then you finished the job by telling me to get lost. If you’re alone and unhappy, then I guess you’ve gotten what you deserve.”

The pump clicked off. Shaun was finishing the transaction when his father said, in a stronger, more belligerent voice. “I never wanted to be a father.”

Shaun stared at his father, his white hot anger burnt out in a second, doused with those icy words. He crossed to his father’s side of the pump and looked him in the eye. “You never tried to be one either. You could have at least tried.” He climbed into his truck and drove away, leaving his father in the pool of light that surrounded the gas pump. He looked small and alone there.

Back at home, Shaun didn’t know what to do with himself. He was too upset to sleep or even to sit still and watch television. His whole life seemed to have shattered into fragments, and he couldn’t get the pieces back together no matter how hard he tried. Patience was back, but he didn’t know if she was staying. He was going to be a father, and he had absolutely no idea how to handle that. It wasn’t as if he had a great example to follow. He didn’t really know how he felt about his mother right now and...and everything was a mess.

He wandered around the apartment in the dark, pacing like some animal in the zoo. That’s how he felt—trapped and needing to break out, to run. He

thought about walking the few blocks to the nearest bar. A couple of drinks would help him cool down, relax.

No, he'd gone that route before, and it didn't work. He hadn't even liked it.

He'd already walked over half the town, after he'd first seen Patience. There was no way he wanted to do that again so soon. But it seemed like he might put in the same number of steps, circling his apartment again and again. He paused in front of the entertainment center where he'd put up a grouping of photos. Shaun wasn't even sure why he'd put them there, except that's where Patience had put them in their old place, and he was still hopeful she'd come back. He'd wanted everything to look nice, for her.

Now he wasn't so sure she was going to come back. How could he convince her he'd changed when at the moment he wasn't convinced himself? He picked up a picture of his graduation. It showed him and Patience, flanked by his parents. His mother was beaming with happiness. His father wasn't even smiling.

They were standing side by side in the picture, and for the first time Shaun realized how much he and his father looked alike. Right now he thought they might even look alike on the inside. *If God sees our hearts is he looking at my Dad and I right now, and thinking about the family resemblance—two angry, bitter hearts, beating with self-hatred?*

A wave of disgust swept over him, and he threw the picture. The glass shattered, and the frame flew apart as it hit the wall.

Chapter 6

“Thanks for coming,” Shaun said as Joseph and Isaac walked up to him as he sat in the emergency room cradling his bandaged hand. “They gave me painkillers, and then told me I couldn’t drive myself home.”

“I don’t know why you drove yourself here,” Isaac replied. “How many stitches?”

“Just five. I was cleaning up some broken glass and...”

“I get it.” Isaac, who was usually the calmest, most patient person Shaun knew, seemed very annoyed with him. “And how did the glass happen to get broken?”

Shaun slumped a little farther in the chair. “It was from a picture frame. I threw the picture,” he admitted.

“This is not going to look good when you see Patience tomorrow—today, now.”

Joseph put a hand on the pastor’s shoulder. “Ease up Isaac. Let’s get Shaun home before you get into the lecture.”

Isaac, perhaps recalling that they were in a public place, desisted. “All right. Shaun, come with me. Joseph will follow in your truck.”

Shaun was tempted to ask if he could ride with Joseph instead. But in spite of the fact that Isaac clearly thought—no, *knew*—that he’d messed up, he

was still the person Shaun wanted to talk to.

Isaac had a few things to say to Shaun himself. Once they'd pulled out onto the highway he started in. "What happened? Everything seemed to be going well. When did it change?"

With a sigh, Shaun answered "When I saw my dad. He pulled up to the same pump I was using at the gas station.

Isaac echoed that sigh.

Shaun continued. "I know things went well today, but it was hard. I guess seeing my father just put me over the edge." Shaun told him about the encounter.

"And then he told me he never wanted to be a father. He never wanted me, Isaac. When I got home I looked at a picture of the two of us together. We looked so much alike and..."

"And what?"

"I started to wonder, if maybe I'm just like him."

"How so?"

"Angry. Bitter. Always hurting the people who love me. Maybe I'm doomed to turn out just like him. Maybe Patience and the baby would be better off without me."

There was a thick layer of silence surrounding them in the cab of the truck. Then Isaac burst out, "Of all the stupid, idiotic...I thought we'd gotten beyond this, Shaun."

He'd never seen Isaac lose his temper before. "Beyond what?"

"Beyond you not believing in yourself. Beyond feeling sorry for yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen," Isaac growled at him. "You have two fathers—an earthly one and a heavenly one. Granted, the earthly one has been a big disappointment, but you don't *have* to be like him. What if you started trying to follow the example your heavenly father set

out for you instead?”

“You mean Jesus?”

“Exactly. Think about that for awhile, Shaun.”

He did. He thought about that all the way home while Isaac glowered, staring at the road in front of them. Just before they pulled into his driveway, Shaun said “I don’t think I can do it.”

“Be exactly like Jesus? Of course not. Not without His help. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try. Now go get some sleep.”

“I know you’re mad at me, but thanks for coming to pick me up anyway. And thanks for listening.” Shaun was surprised but not upset by Isaac’s display of temper. He knew from past experience that only the people who cared about you bothered to get upset when you’d done something stupid.

For the first time during the ride home, Isaac offered him a smile. “Now that’s a better attitude already.”

Joseph appeared at his door. Shaun thanked him as well and got out so Joseph could get in. Then, as his friends drove away, Shaun fished out his key and opened the door to his apartment. A few hours of sleep sounded good. He was tired in body and mind, both.

In spite of her highly emotional state, Patience was so exhausted that she fell almost immediately into a deep sleep after climbing into bed. But she woke up in the early hours of the morning and could not fall back to sleep.

Around five o’clock, while it was still dark, she got up and got dressed. She was too restless to remain in bed. The baby kicked and Patience wondered if her anxiety was being transferred to him—or her.

She left a note and drove downtown to The Grace Place, Orchard Hill’s only coffee shop. While

working there during high school, Patience had become friends with the owner, Grace. She could use some of Grace's friendship and advice right now.

Normally, she would walk downtown to the coffee shop, but there'd been a dusting of snow the night before. Slippery sidewalks were not something she wanted to tackle in her current state. Grace was turning the sign to open just as Patience stopped the car at the curb.

She opened the door to the shop and stepped into Grace's cinnamon and coffee scented embrace. "Patience, I can't believe it's you." Then Grace stepped back, eyes widening as she took in her condition. "I *really* can't believe it's you. Wow."

Patience smiled and shrugged. "Yeah, it's me."

Grace insisted on making her a large cup of herbal tea—"No coffee for you, young lady," she told Patience sternly. The idea of Grace being stern made Patience laugh. No one else had come in yet, so Grace grabbed a couple of fresh-from-the-oven cinnamon rolls and some coffee for herself and joined Patience at one of the tables.

"Are you sure you can sit with me?"

"It's the day after Thanksgiving. I doubt anyone will be in this early," she replied. "Now tell me what's been going on with you."

"First I want to know all about you and Riley. I heard you're engaged now." Riley had been a steady customer, and Patience knew he and Grace were friends, but she thought that's all they were.

Grace's eyes lit up as she related the story of how she and Riley started dating. When she told Patience about Riley's proposal tears came to her eyes.

"That's wonderful, Grace. I'm so happy for you."

"Yes, well, I'm happy for me, too. Now tell me about you."

Patience explained the whole problem with

Shaun, and relayed what had happened the day before and about her parent's interference. When she was finished it felt as if she'd unloaded a heavy burden. She sighed in relief and took a huge bite from the still warm cinnamon roll.

"So what are you thinking now?" asked Grace.

"I don't know. I'm so encouraged with how well Shaun is doing, but..."

"But what?"

"But what about me? I left him when he needed me most. I just...just didn't know what to do for him anymore. What if... what if I'm the one who has a problem? Maybe I'm not cut out to be a wife...or a mother." A tear slid down her face and plopped onto the table.

Grace reached right across the table and grabbed her hand, squeezing it gently. "Patience, you and Shaun got married almost right out of high school. You're both still very young."

"Maybe we should have waited."

"Let me finish. I've never seen too people more in love than you and Shaun. If anyone is going to make it, you two will. I knew he was in love with you before he even asked you out."

Patience laughed. "Don't be silly. He couldn't possibly have been in love with me then."

"A man who doesn't like coffee doesn't suddenly start hanging out in a coffee shop for no reason. I can still see him, hunched over in the booth, trying to force down my best brew. Those puppy dog eyes under that shaggy blonde hair followed you everywhere you went. He already had it bad."

It felt good to remember those things. "Yes, but now things have gotten so complicated."

"Then you'll have to work on your problems—together. That's what Isaac's been telling Riley and me at our pre-marriage counseling sessions."

"I don't know..."

“And maybe your parents aren’t being very supportive, but you have lots of friends here that will be.”

“So you think I should go back to Shaun?”

“Is that what your heart is telling you?”

Patience nodded.

“Then that’s what I think you should do.”

Shaun sat in his truck in front of Patience’s parents’ house. Her car was gone. Dread tightened his chest until he could hardly breathe. Had she found out about the incident last night? No, how could she have?

He slid out of the truck and walked up to the front door. In Orchard Hill, friends always used the back door, but he knew better than to consider himself a “back door” sort of guest in this house.

Patience’s father, Jerry, answered the door. He was not smiling.

“May I see Patience?” Shaun asked, feeling no more welcome than he had when he picked her up for their first date years ago. Actually, he was probably a lot less welcome today.

“She’s not here,” Jerry answered curtly. Disapproval marked every line of his face.

“Where did she go?”

“She went back to her aunt’s of course. You didn’t really expect her to stick around for you, did you?”

“Did she leave a message? A note?”

“No, but you should expect to hear from a lawyer soon. Your marriage is over.”

Patience came home in high spirits. She was eager to see Shaun and tell him she wanted to try again. Her mother was making pancakes when she stepped in the kitchen door.

“Good morning, Mom.”

“Grab a plate and sit down, hon’. Breakfast is almost ready.”

“No, thanks. I had a cinnamon roll with Grace.”

“You need more than that. Think of the baby.”

“Have you ever had one of Grace’s cinnamon rolls? They’re gigantic. Believe me, I had enough. I’d rather go see Shaun.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about him.”

“What do you mean?” Alarm made her suddenly tense.

“He was already here this morning, and your father told him you’d gone back to your aunt.”

“What! How could he?”

“And he told him you’d be contacting a lawyer for a divorce.”

Patience stared at her mother. She was so astonished she didn’t know what to say.

Her mother put an arm around her and said “It was for the best honey. You can do so much better.”

Anger flared, burning through her shock. “You had no right to do this. It’s my choice, not yours.”

“Now, Patience, don’t be difficult. You know your father and I only want what’s best for you.”

“I’m so tired of hearing that, Mom. You think you know what I want, but you don’t. You don’t even bother to ask.”

“Sit down and have some pancakes. We’ll talk about it after breakfast.”

“I just told you I don’t want any breakfast.”

“All right, honey, I didn’t want to have to tell you this, but my friend Viola was working at the emergency room last night. She called and told me Shaun had been in. He’d been in a fight with his father and came in because he needed stitches.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me right away?”

“So, you see he hasn’t changed at all. Can you imagine? Getting into a fight with his own father. Patience, where are you going?”

"I'm going to find Shaun, Mom." Her mother called her back, but she kept going, letting the door slam behind her. Right now she could understand very well how someone could come to blows with a parent.

It wasn't until after she started her car that Patience realized she had no clue where Shaun might be. Scrabbling through her bag, she pulled out the envelope that contained the letter he'd sent her. She noted the return address and set out.

The new apartment was on the second floor of an older house. It had a large lawn, circled by mature trees. There was an outside staircase that lead to the apartment. It didn't take long for Patience to determine that Shaun wasn't home. She should have guessed that when she didn't see his truck anywhere.

Where would he go? What had happened? Had he confronted his father after talking to his mother yesterday? Had his father somehow found out that they went to Jenny's for dinner and come looking for him? How badly was he hurt?

Sick with worry, she tried to figure out where he might go. It wasn't likely he'd go to his mother if he'd just had a fight with his father. Maybe he'd go to Joseph's or...

Isaac! Pastor Isaac had been counseling him. It would be natural that Shaun would turn to him after this incident.

As she drove to the church, Patience wished she'd stayed with Shaun last night. Maybe the incident wouldn't have happened at all if she'd been there.

On the other hand, what if it had still happened? Maybe her parents were right and Shaun hadn't changed at all. What if she were going back to a man who was being overtaken by anger? What if he'd descended into expressing his emotions through

violence?

She thought she knew Shaun. What if she really didn't?

By the time she reached Isaac's house, she was hoping she could talk to him herself, as well as ask him where Shaun might be. But he wasn't home, so she had no luck on either count.

Maybe Isaac was at the church. She didn't think he'd go in to work on the Friday after Thanksgiving, but maybe he had met Shaun there to talk with him.

It was a short walk from the parsonage to the church, but even in the small space of time it took to get from one place to another, Patience's agitation rose.

Pansy was in her office. If she was working, surely Isaac was here, too. "Mrs. Parker, have you seen Pastor Isaac?"

"No, dear," the elderly lady replied. "He went to visit some of his family today, I believe. He was a bit too busy yesterday."

"Oh, of course." What did she do now? Tears welled up in her eyes.

"Patience Thiesen, whatever is the matter? You sit down now, and I'll get you some water. You shouldn't be rushing around in your condition."

Pansy bustled about, pulling up a chair, getting water and tissues.

"I'll have to talk to that husband of yours," she grumbled as she helped Patience to settle herself. "Shouldn't he be taking care of you?"

"That's just it, Mrs. Parker. I don't know where he is."

Pansy paused. "You mean, the two of you aren't together?"

"Not exactly. I wanted to make sure of things, so I stayed at my parents last night. But then I heard he was in a fight and got hurt and my father sent him away when he came to the house and..."

Patience had to pause for breath.

Pansy was looking at her strangely. "So what did you decide? Do you want to be with Shaun?"

"I think so, yes. I know we still have some problems to work through, but Mrs. Parker, I love him. I really, really love him. I-I have to find him and make sure he's all right." Patience lunged to her feet and started for the door. Her hand was on the knob when Pansy called "wait."

Patience turned back. The older woman seemed to be wrestling with some inner question, but finally she said "Shaun's in the sanctuary."

Patience gasped. She said a hurried "Thank you Mrs. Parker" and rushed out of the office, brushing past Misty Green who was just coming in. She crossed the gathering space to the doors that opened into the church's sanctuary. The stillness brought her up short. She stepped in and closed the door behind her, letting the silence envelope her. She scanned the large room and found Shaun sitting in a pew near the front.

His head was bowed as if in prayer, but otherwise he seemed relaxed, almost peaceful. The sunlight filtering in through the clerestory windows brought out the gold highlights in his hair and made it seem as if he were wearing a halo. Her breath caught in her throat. He was all right. And he'd come here with his problems.

She walked quietly down the aisle of the church and put her hand on his shoulder. "Shaun?"

He looked up, surprised. Then a huge smile lit up his face. "Patience." He moved over so she could join him in the pew. "What are you doing here? Your father said..."

"He lied, Shaun. I never said anything about leaving or about a divorce. Now, what happened with you and your father."

"How did you know about that?"

“My mother has a friend who works at the hospital.”

“So much for patient confidentiality.”

“Don’t make jokes. What happened? Is your father all right?”

Shaun looked puzzled. “What does my father have to do with me cutting my hand?”

Had her mother’s source gotten things mixed up? “I thought the two of you got into a huge fight last night.”

“Well, we had words,” Shaun admitted. “We both happened to be using the same gas pump at the same time. He ignored me, and that made me mad and I said a few things...”

“And then?”

Shaun drew in a deep breath and said in a voice so low Patience leaned closer to hear. “He said he never wanted to be a father.”

Even knowing the situation between Shaun and his father, Patience was shocked. This must have been a terrible blow to Shaun. “I’m so sorry. What did you do?”

He shrugged. “I went home.”

He went home? That was it? “Weren’t you upset?”

“Majorly. I was too restless to sit down. While I was pacing, I happened to pick up that picture you had of you and me and my folks at my graduation.”

“So...”

“So, I threw it. That was stupid, I know. When I was cleaning up the glass, I cut my hand and had to get some stitches.” He held up his bandaged hand to show her.

“That’s it?” Relief made her dizzy and she was glad she was sitting.

“That’s it. I’m sorry. I guess I’ll never get the best of my temper.”

Couldn’t he see how far he’d come from where he

was just months ago? Patience rushed to reassure him. "Shaun, everyone loses it sometimes. And after your father said that...well, I'd lose it too." And he could have done a lot more than throw a picture. He really had changed, she was sure now.

"I was pretty depressed about it. But Isaac drove me home from the emergency room. We talked, and he reminded me that I have a heavenly father as well as an earthly one."

"So you're all right?"

"I don't know. What did you decide about us?"

Patience took a deep breath. This was her moment of truth. "I'm afraid."

"I'm sorry Patience. I never meant to make you feel that way."

"No, I'm not afraid of you. I'm afraid of me. I...I don't know how to be the person that you need."

Shaun covered both of her hands, clenched in her lap, with his good hand. "I think you know more than you think."

"What do you mean?"

"When I came home to that empty apartment and read the letter saying that you were leaving...well, I was devastated. There's no other way to put it."

"I'm so sorry." She'd let him down and she knew it. Could he really forgive her?

"Don't be sorry. You know that saying, 'you never know what you've got till it's gone?'"

She nodded.

"That describes me perfectly. I was content to wallow in my anger until it cost me the one person I held most dear."

"This isn't making me feel any better."

"It should. You leaving was just what I needed to motivate me to get better. I lost you, Patience, but I found so much more. I found a friend in Isaac and in Joseph, I found myself again through his

counseling and most of all, I found the faith that you've always had. I understand now."

Tears slipped from her eyes. "Then maybe I am glad I left."

"I wasn't at first, but I am now. Patience..."

"Yes?"

"Will you please come back? I promise things will be different. Not perfect maybe, but better. I want to be a family with you and the baby more than I've ever wanted anything."

His face, so earnest and pleading, brought a lump to her throat. She choked it down and said "That's what I want, too."

"Will you move back in with me? Because if you need more time..."

"Yes, I'll move in. I want to be with you again, Shaun."

"And we'll work on the whole parent thing. I promise I'll try to get along with your mom and dad. They can't hate me forever can they?"

Wiping away her tears, Patience shook her head.

"And there's my Mom. I was thinking, maybe we could invite her to church or Bible study or something. I think...I think she would really like to meet Jesus."

"What about Todd? He told me they're getting married, you know."

Shaun sighed. "I guess he can come, too."

Patience suppressed a smile at his obvious reluctance. "You can't believe how happy I am to hear you say all of this. I really think you grew up while I was gone."

"Maybe. I think I finally got what Isaac was trying to tell me about forgiveness. It does free the soul. And to that end..."

"Yes?"

"I think I'll even keep talking to my dad. You

never know. He might come around some day.”

Catching his gaze and holding it, Patience told him, “I am so proud of you, Shaun. Don’t ever think I don’t understand how difficult this whole thing has been for you. You’ve gone through the fire and come out a better person. There’s never been a Thanksgiving when I’ve had so much to be thankful for. My heart is so full, I’m afraid it’s going to overflow.”

“But I’m not finished yet.”

“What else can there be?”

He slid off the bench and knelt at her feet.

“Shaun, what are you doing?”

“I don’t know. I thought this was the way you were supposed to ask a girl to marry you.”

“But we’re already married!”

“I know, but I messed that all up.”

“We messed it up,” Patience corrected him gently.

“Whatever. This is like a do-over. I want to start fresh, and I want to do it with a wedding. A real one this time in the church. As soon as possible.”

Patience gasped. Had he figured out how much she felt she’d missed by not having a church wedding? But realistically... “You can’t be serious. I look like a whale.”

From where he knelt, Shaun put his arms around her waist and rested his head on her stomach. “You couldn’t possibly look more beautiful to me.”

She wanted to laugh. But she also wanted to cry. Patience found herself doing both. Then the baby kicked.

“Ow!” exclaimed Shaun, lifting his head. “We’ve got a football player in there for sure.”

Leaning down, Patience kissed him. “I love you Shaun.”

“And I’m thankful for that.”

Epilogue

Misty watched Shaun and Patience leave the church, hand in hand. Pansy was watching too.

“That’s another match for me. We’re tied again.”

“I guess you’re right,” Pansy conceded. “Although they were married to start with. Not much challenge in that.”

“There was more than you think,” Misty argued. “And besides, you could have sent her away and prevented it. Why did you tell Patience where Shaun was?”

“Were you eavesdropping?”

“Maybe a little. Come on, why did you help me?”

“It had nothing to do with you, Misty Green.”

“Then why?”

Pansy blew out her breath in exasperation. “You would have done the same thing. Those two are so in love it’s almost sickening. And besides...”

“Yes?”

“They are married, as I said. It would be a sin to try to keep them from each other.”

“Why Pansy, I believe you have a soft spot in that thing you call a heart, after all.”

“Well, don’t get used to it.”

“Somehow I don’t think I will. Are you going to try to get another match in yet this year?”

“No. You were right. This is a silly contest. Let’s leave it at a tie.”

“A tie is fine. Or we could...”

“Now what crazy idea have you got in your head, Misty.”

“Listen, you’re moving to Florida with Dad. I’m moving out of town with Perry. Before we go, why not collaborate on one great match.”

“Hmmm. I’m listening.”

“I’ve been trying to match up Pastor Isaac for a couple of years now.”

“Oh, that man’s impossible when it comes to romance,” huffed Pansy. “I think he’s gun-shy.”

“But he’d change his mind, if we could find him the right woman.”

“That’s easy enough. I know who he’s had his eye on for some time now.”

Misty’s jaw dropped. “You do? Has he told you?”

Pansy rolled her eyes. “Of course not. But I can tell.”

“Don’t keep me in suspense. Who is it?”

Pansy looked around, as if she were about to divulge a state secret and feared spies would overhear. “It’s Joy.”

Misty stared back at her in disbelief. “Joy? Our organist? But she’s...”

“Hopelessly shy? Unbelievably tongue-tied? A walking mass of social anxiety? I know, but she’s the one. Stranger things have happened.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve seen the way he looks at her when he thinks no one can see him. I’m sure.”

Misty could tell Pansy was intrigued by this idea. Isaac was a challenge, to be sure. And she’d never collaborated with anyone on a match before. It might, just might, be fun.

Misty rested her chin on her hand. “Now how can we set them up?”

“Leave it to me,” Pansy declared. “I’ve got a plan.”

The end of the year is
approaching...
Return to **Orchard Hill** at
Christmas to see if it is Pansy
Parker or Misty Green who wins the
title “Best Matchmaker in Town.”

Finding Joy
An Orchard Hill Romance
November 2008

Shy Joy Harper, the organist for Orchard Hill Community Church, has long been overlooked by Pastor Isaac. Then Pansy Parker announces she’s retiring, and Joy is asked to fill in as secretary. With an unusually large number of weddings coming up and the Christmas holidays looming, Joy and Isaac put in a lot of hours together and he discovers a beautiful and caring woman beneath Joy’s reserved façade. Can he convince her that the only gift he wants for Christmas is her heart?

For more information about upcoming Orchard Hill Romances, visit The Wild Rose Press website or visit the Orchard Hill blog at:

<http://orchardhill.blogspot.com/>

Thank you for purchasing this Wild Rose Press publication. For other wonderful stories of romance, please visit our on-line bookstore at www.thewildrosepress.com.

For questions or more information contact us at info@thewildrosepress.com.

The Wild Rose Press
www.TheWildRosePress.com