

## NIGHT OF THE HURRICANE

"How much further?" My daughter chanted that question, making it at least a dozen times she had asked since leaving the church parking lot early that morning. Add to that the times each of the other children asked that same question and I knew we'd probably answered it at least once every mile for the last hundred miles, or so it seemed.

"You're turn to answer," Gordon said, flashing me a teasing smile as he looked at me in the rear view mirror.

"We only have about thirty miles to go. A little over half an hour," I quickly translated, knowing that would be the next question.

"I'm hungry, Mom. Can't we stop to eat?" That was my son, Matthew, who's stomach seemed a bottomless pit, in spite of the snacks I'd provided throughout the journey. We left Philadelphia before the first morning light.

"It's still too early for lunch," I replied. "But I do have some fruit to snack on before we go to the aquarium."

I'd had my doubts about bringing a lively bunch of kids to Baltimore's Inner Harbor, but had only myself to blame. I'd been the one to make up the list of places where our church Caravan Group could go for their annual summer field trip. Our group was comprised of very energetic third and fourth graders.

I myself had swayed toward going to Gettysburg, and I knew Gordon had been more interested in the Little League Museum in Williamsport.

When the kids picked Baltimore and the Inner Harbor area, it hadn't seemed much longer to drive. Distance was one of the factors when we planned these annual trips. Any place of significant interest that we could do in one day. We could leave early and return late, but never stayed the night.

I sometimes wondered what was worse, confined in a vehicle with a bunch of exhausted youngsters, or trying to oversee them for an entire night in a hotel. Yet, I knew economics had more to do with it than practicality. Many of our youth came from homes with limited finances, with just a single parent to pay the expense.

That was the case with me. I had two children to pay for whenever we traveled. With twins you get twice everything, expense, worry and. . .

"Mom, thank you for taking us on this trip," I heard my daughter say from her seat behind me.

What was that I'd been thinking? Twice everything. . . . And that included twice the love.

I turned slightly and looked at Jessica Marie and smiled.

"Yeah, Mom, thank's for bringing us on this trip," Matthew said from his seat closer to the rear of the church bus.

"You better thank Mr. Arnold, too" I reminded them. "If he hadn't agreed to drive, you wouldn't be going."

Gordon looked at me again and winked. Okay, I knew I exaggerated. There was no doubting that he and I looked forward to our yearly trip as much as the kids. But this year was special. It was the first year my own two children were old enough to go along. Other years they'd had to settle for spending the day with their grandparents.

That wasn't a bad alternative. My father and Marissa enjoyed any time they had with the twins. In spite of their busy schedules they spent as much time with their grandchildren as they could. My father was manager of a large hotel in center city, and my step-mother worked with the local travel bureau coordinating tours of the city.

She'd at one time worked for a private tour company and often served as hostess on a tour to the Carribean islands. That was how she and my father had first met. It seems so long ago. I'd been in Kindergarten at the time. Spent half my days at school and half at the hotel.

I remember hearing the woman's voice as she discussed a problem with my father. Her tour group was short one room and at the height of the season rooms were impossible to be had at our hotel or any of the many others on the island.

I'd heard my father's soothing voice as he showed her his copy of the reservation, confirming the exact number of rooms he'd had reserved for her group.

I'd peeked around the corner of the doorway expecting an argument, but instead saw the woman smiling graciously. She admitted the missing reservation was one that had been made late, and thought she had delegated that task she had never confirmed that it had actually been done.

Since the oversight had been made, deciding who's fault it was would be of little use. Instead she suggested her room be used for the extra person on her tour. She said she'd be willing to stay any place they could find, even a broom closet.

My eyes grew wide as I tried to envision the well dressed woman talking to my father sleeping in a broom closet. My young mind was trying to figure out exactly how they would squeeze a bed into such a tiny space.

Then to my surprise my father suggested another solution. The woman could stay at our cottage, located next door to the hotel. My father had even offered to sleep in his office if it would make her feel more comfortable.

Of course, I didn't understand the reason for his offer any more than I understood her sleeping in the broom closet. But she said something about his being a honorable man, and the way she said it, I knew it was something very good.

Marissa never slept in the broom closet. Nor did Dad sleep in his office. All I knew was that by the time Marissa's visit was over they had become friends. She left promising to make certain she was on the same tour again.

She was true to her word, visiting often. I didn't mind. Marissa was nice. She treated me very well. When she decided to marry my father and move to the island, I didn't mind. She made Dad happy. And she was like a mother to me.

Eventually she gave birth to two daughters, twins. I was so delighted to be a big sister to Jessica and Marie.

I felt a twinge of pain as the water along the harbor came into view, a reminder of the beloved sisters I'd lost.

Thankfully I could not dwell on those unpleasant memories as the children's enthusiasm filled the air. They were so excited knowing we were at our destination.

Our first stop was the Baltimore Aquarium. Later after a picnic lunch we visited a real submarine and caught an outdoor show. It was there someone suggested the children might like to tour a real Coast Guard ship, docked at the harbor. They gave us directions to where it was being opened for tours that weekend.

The kids were so excited as they hurried across the gang plank that led to the Coast Guard ship. Soon they were greeted by an officer of the ship and I could see my daughter's eyes

turn into dark saucers as she noted the officer was a woman. I could almost read her mind, but didn't have to as she hurried to my side.

"See her Mom!" she chanted, so loudly I knew everyone, including the female officer had to hear her. "You're right. A woman can be anything she wants to be. Even the Captain of her own ship."

The woman laughed as she walked toward us, looking down at my daughter with a smile. "I'm not Captain yet, Sweetheart," she said. "But maybe someday."

The officer then looked at me more seriously. "I'm glad to hear you're teaching her there are lots of openings for women in our world today," she noted. "As long as she's willing to put in a lot of hard work to achieve her dreams, whatever they may be."

I understood hard work to achieve dreams. I'd had a lot of that to get through my studies while pregnant with twins. Even more after graduating with a teaching degree only to learn there was a certain amount of bias toward a single mother as a teacher, especially one with twins.

Some of that bias was based on the school administration's fear I'd lose a lot of time whenever one of my children was sick. Still others, I knew, frowned upon a mother who had never been married teaching young children. I knew they feared I'd set a bad example.

To my surprise my chance came through my own church. They were opening a Christian School and needed qualified teachers. They knew my situation and, though they didn't approve of my mistakes, they never judged me for them. What they did judge me on was the way I was living my life at that time.

I smiled at the woman, who I had no doubt had worked just as hard to achieve her dreams.

"It's my hope that by the time she has to face those challenges, she'll have every opportunity her brother has," I said. At that very moment my other child came running to our side.

"They say they'll break us into groups and take us to see the whole ship!" Matthew said in excitement. "Can I go in Joey's group?"

"Yes, you may, go in Joey's group," I tried to subtly correct, then watched my son cheer before rushing off to join his friends. I turned back to the woman officer and smiled.

"I take it that's your son," she noted. "They look close to the same age, or are they twins?"

"Twins." I nodded with a smile.

"They run in my family, too," the officer said as she glanced at the rest of the group of children. "So, how about the other half of the dynamic duo comes with me and we'll form a second group?"

Jessica Marie was beaming as she joined the woman. I decided to join the third group of children, since there were two of the more bashful members of our class in that one. It had been a big step for them to join us, I didn't want them to feel abandoned by their adult supervisors.

Though my intentions had been honorable, those intentions were lost as we stood at the bridge of the ship waiting our turn to meet the Captain. There was something so frighteningly familiar about the tall man, though I could only see him from an unclear angle. I might have almost thought it was Eric.

Then he turned, and I felt as though all the blood drained from my body, yet as I felt the swift thump of my heart, I knew I hadn't died. My eyes had not been playing tricks on me.

The man who was saying good-bye to each of the children in the previous group, was indeed who he seemed to be. Little did Eric know that the boy he now shook hands with, was actually his own son.

As the group before our's left the Captain looked up to greet us. I knew there was no escape. Suddenly his eyes locked with mine and in that instant I knew he recognized me too.

"Hello Andy," he said in the same deep familiar voice I remembered. "Welcome to my ship."

"I always wondered. . ." I spoke my thoughts then hesitated, suddenly afraid. Now, after all these years, was not the time to let him know I'd actually thought about him often. Especially the reason why he would always be impossible to forget.

"It looks like life has been good to you," I said instead, knowing it sounded cliché, but what does one say when they run into the man they once loved. Especially the father of their children. Children he didn't even know existed.

"Yes, very good," he replied. "I suppose it's safe to assume you are the teacher you always wanted to be."

I smiled shakily. "This is a group from my church," I replied. "I also teach school."

"Very good," he said simply. "I suppose I should get on with my tour. Will you be in Baltimore long?"

"We're leaving as soon as we finish here," I replied quickly. "We have a long trip home."

"Then the probability of meeting again. . ." he started, then paused..

"Slim to none," I finished for him, and I could see by the chill that entered his dark eyes that he got my message loud and clear.

The excitement and wonder of the day had lost much of its charm as I finished the tour. By the time we were all settled back on the bus I felt the first signs of a headache, and more than a little guilt.

That guilt was only made worse as the children chattered on and on about their visit to the Coast Guard ship. Especially my son, who was impressed with the ship's Captain. Eric apparently scored a real hit when he'd allowed my son to wear his hat.

I was ready to scream or cry, I still wasn't certain which, by the time the kids settled down, some dozing, some just out of things to say.

That wasn't the case for my companion. "A penny for your thoughts," Gordon said as he looked at me through his rear view mirror. "Though I'd say from the look of it, they may be much more costly. What's wrong Andrea?"

I forced a smile, and knew immediately even the darkness wasn't hiding anything from this man who was such a good friend. Still, I didn't dare tell Gordon what was really wrong. There was no one I could tell. Except maybe. . .

I pushed that from my mind. I'd prayed about my decisions ten years ago before I'd made them. Now was not the time to second guesses.

"Andrea?" Gordon repeated.

I realized he was still waiting for an answer.

"I have another of my headaches," I replied and knew that was certainly no lie.

"You want me to stop so you can take something for it?"

"I think I still have a bottle of water in the cooler behind my seat," I replied, turning to look. "I'll get that and take a few aspirins."

I was thankful for the diversion to break from Gordon's view. He saw too much. Maybe because he cared too much.

Though he was a dear friend, I didn't reciprocate those feelings. I knew he still hoped. And there were times I wondered why I couldn't love him.

Then today I got my answer. – Eric was the reason. I had never closed that part of my life. Glancing toward my children before I turned to face the front, I knew I never could.

I thought about Eric often during the next few days. Especially since both my children seemed to constantly bring up the subject of the Coast Guard ship. My daughter was still quite impressed with the female First Officer. All my son talked about was the ship's Captain.

Several times I caught myself wondering just what Matthew would say if he learned that the man he'd so quickly idolized was in reality his father. The man, I'd explained, had disappeared before I could tell him he was going to be a father; but that I'd felt certain would have loved both his children had he known of their existence.

I knew my son all too well. I knew exactly what his answer would be. That we hadn't lost touch any longer. Yes, Matthew would remind me that I now knew exactly how I could find their father.

If I wanted to.

Yet, how could I after waiting ten years?

How does one begin a conversation like that? "Eric, do you remember that night ten years ago?"

Or, maybe, "You know that night when everything seemed to start so right and ended so wrong?"

Perhaps, "By any chance do you recall that one selfish moment when we thought we had it all, only to lose so much more because of it?"

I had more than one migraine during the week that followed our trip. I knew they were caused by stress. I'd had them for years. I started getting them ten years ago. Right after the night my sisters died.

Thankfully, through the years I had them less often as I came to terms with what had happened. I was thankful I had a family who loved me and stood by me in spite of what I'd done. They never once blamed me.

I couldn't help but wonder how Eric had fared? He seemed to be doing fine. He looked good. Yet, I couldn't help but wonder if his road had been any easier than mine. I doubted it had. I'd have been willing to bet his being in the Coast Guard had a lot to do with what happened that night.

We'd been friends for two years. He'd worked on the yacht of Maxwell Strong, a board member of the hotel chain where my father worked. Maxwell and his family made many trips to the island. It was one of their favorite places.

Eric had no real family life. The Strongs were more like a family to him than his own had been. He'd been in foster care most of his teen years after his mother had remarried. He hadn't gotten along with his step father. He'd hardly known his natural father, but the memories he had weren't pleasant ones.

As soon as he turned seventeen he'd petitioned the court to become an emancipated adult. He worked as a handyman around the shop at a yacht club during the day. At night he'd been working part time as a waiter in the club's restaurant. That was how he'd met the Strongs. Eventually Maxwell Strong took him under his wing and asked him to come work for him on his yacht.

Eric thought he'd been hired only because of his skills and knowledge of the yacht and its engines, as well as his versatility to be able to help serve the many guests who traveled with the Strongs.

I suspected it was more because Eric could be a companion for their only son Matthew. The boy had just entered his teens when Eric was hired, yet it was easy to see he looked up to him. Eric was working hard to make something of himself, not only working for the family, but also trying to educate himself by reading book, upon book, upon book, almost always on a nautical subject.

Maxwell wasn't the only one who saw something special in Eric. I, too, had grown to look forward to his visits. Then at the end of one visit, when it was time to say good-bye, he kissed me, and I realized he felt the same about me. We stayed in touch with letters.

Then came that summer right after my graduation. The Strongs came for an extended visit. It gave Eric and I much more time to be together, though rarely alone. My twin sisters Jessica and Marie were almost always with us. As was Matthew, who had become almost as much a champion for the girls as Eric was to me.

I guess we all wanted to grow up too fast that summer. The kids were constantly complaining they didn't need Eric and I to watch them. Eric and I, too, would have relished some time alone.

As their vacation was drawing near an end, my father, Marissa and the Strongs were planning a special night out. Jessica, Marie and Matthew insisted they wanted to go to a movie with a group of other youth, a mixture of island residents and regular hotel guests.

Eric and I figured as long as they were with a group there should be nothing wrong with them going to the movie without us. We made arrangements to meet them after the movie at an ice cream shop not far from the theater.

Eric and I went for a walk along the beach. We were near the marina when it started to rain, so Eric suggested we go to the yacht. I'd been on it before, but never alone with Eric.

I guess with no buffers between us and the thought of having to say good-bye again, one thing led to another. Eric had told me he loved me, but that he wanted me to finish college before we let our relationship go too far.

But we were alone and in love. In one of the most romantic settings in the world.

It took us a little while to realize the gentle rocking of the yacht had turned more fierce. Always responsible, Eric quickly made certain everything was secure on the yacht before we went to meet the kids. He loaned me a rain coat and got one for himself before we raced through the pelting rain.

When we arrived at the ice cream parlor we noticed one thing right away. It was far too empty for the number of kids who were supposed to be with my sisters and Matthew that evening.

Recognizing one of the youth I asked about Jessica and Marie. I could see by the girl's expression she didn't want to get my sisters in trouble. I persisted, promising I wasn't going to yell at them, or tell my parents, if they had decided to sneak into the later movie which I knew was rated for older audiences.

Unfortunately it wasn't a risqué movie that had enticed my sisters and Matthew. The three had apparently never gone to the movie. They had decided to go swimming at the cove.

The cove was a beautiful spot, located at a more secluded part of the island, only approachable by water. Eric had taken us there once as a group. But that had been during the day. The weather had been lovely.

I looked at Eric and saw his concern. The storm was far worse than anyone had predicted. There had been a tropical storm warning earlier, but the last we'd heard the storm was turning away from the island.

We hadn't heard the more recent weather update that said that tropical storm had been upgraded and was turning back toward the island.

"Go tell your folks and the Strongs," Eric ordered. "I'll check at the marina and see if anyone saw them."

"Check my father's boat," I said, feeling a lump rising in my throat. My father's boat was too small to be out in these conditions.

Eric nodded. "If they did go out, I'll take the yacht and start looking for them," he said.

"Maybe you should wait," I started, but saw Eric looking at the sky and shaking his head.

"We can't waste any time. If I don't find them at the cove I'll radio for the Coast Guard."

"Be careful!" I shouted then watched as Eric headed in the direction of the marina before I turned and headed toward the hotel.

In the end Eric hadn't found them. Even the Coast Guard couldn't find them. It was two days before debris from my father's boat was washed to shore in a remote part of the island. Their three young bodies were found a few days later.

Though Eric and I saw each other after that night, we didn't speak. His express said more than words. I could tell he was as grief stricken as I was. I knew he was nagged by the same guilt I was feeling.

Yet during the entire ordeal not one person laid any blame on us. They didn't have to. We knew it was our fault. If we hadn't have selfishly wanted some stolen moments alone, the three kids we cared about would still have been alive.

Days after the night that changed all our lives, the Strongs and Eric flew home. They left their yacht docked at the marina, but in the end they never returned to our beautiful island. I learned they eventually put the yacht up for sale.

I didn't see Eric again after that, nor heard from him. But I thought of him often. After all, I had two special reasons to remember him.

I hadn't realized I was pregnant until months after I'd started my first semester of college. For weeks I'd attributed my queasy stomach to the stress of everything that had happened. It was several weeks later before I finally faced the reality that my symptoms all pointed to one thing. I took a pregnancy test while still at school.

When it showed positive I cried. Not because I didn't want children, rather because they couldn't have come at a worse time in my life. And because I'd always dreamed when I had children, I'd provide them with the traditional values with which I'd been raised.

Though my mother had died while I was only a toddler, my father had done his best to raise me with a fairly normal life. As normal as can be with a father who manages a huge hotel in an island paradise.

Until Marissa came into our lives I never realized our wonderful life could be get even better. Though I had never called her mother, she really was the mother I never had. But at her insistence, I was to always remember I had another Mom in Heaven. A mother who gave me life and loved me very much during the few short years we'd been together.

Marissa brought another thing to our lives, her deep faith. Before he knew Marissa, my father's idea of being a Christian was listening to my prayers each night before I went to sleep, and attending church every Christmas and Easter. Though he sent me to Church School, he'd always been too busy with the hotel to attend services himself.

All that changed with Marissa, who led by example. She never preached to Dad. Instead she faithfully joined me each Sunday when I attended Church School and had me sit with her as we stayed for church. To my amazement, my father soon started attending with us.

I hadn't realized how deep their faith, until the death of my sisters. Still more, when I finally returned home at the end of my first semester to tell them I was expecting, and that I fully intended to raise my baby alone.

Marissa and Dad were not in the least judgmental, but they did sit down with me to discuss my choice. Then they surprised me by announcing there was absolutely no chance I'd be raising my baby alone – they fully intended to help me as much as I needed. After the girl's died Dad has asked to be transferred to a hotel in another city when an opening came up. After learning of my pregnancy, and my desire to continue attending college, he more specifically requested a hotel closer to my campus so I could commute.

They had tactfully asked about the baby's father, and I admitted it was Eric. I cried when I told them my child had been conceived the night Jessica and Maria had died.

In spite of that confession, Marissa and Dad swallowed their own tears and rallied in support of me. Still, they were curious whether Eric knew.

I sadly admitted I had tried to contact him through the Strongs only to find out he was no longer working for them and that they had no idea where he was. Unlike my own parents, they had placed the blame for the accident on Eric and me.

Which only made me feel even more sad for Eric, knowing had to face his grief and guilt alonge.

It was Marissa who insisted I get better medical care than the cursory care I'd received prior to my visit home. She was with me the day I was first examined. Her expression grew concerned as she watched the doctor's face when he listened to the fetal heartbeat, only to order an ultra sound.

Marissa's expression grew from worried to excited as they conducted the test and she watched the screen. I had no idea what she was excited about.

Obviously Marissa recognized what the technician saw: I was carrying twins. Though they couldn't confirm their gender, they knew for certain I was expecting more than one child.

Marissa stayed while Dad finalized everything for the move north. She had agreed to be my birth coach and she took that role seriously.

I was fortunately able to finish my second semester. – Talk about timing. I went into labor only a few days after taking my last final.

When I ended up having one girl and one boy I named them after the three whose death came the same night as their conception. It wasn't meant as a reminder of the tragedy, rather a tribute to the three youths.

The next few years weren't easy, but I thankfully had my family's love and support. It may have taken a little longer to get my degree than I'd first thought, but when I did, all four of my beloved family were there to share the moment.

The years just kept passing, each one more swiftly than the one before. It got so I hardly thought about the night of the accident, the ones who had died, or the one who had left me with two wonderful gifts.

Seeing Eric so unexpectedly had brought it all back to me. I spent days going through the same guilt I'd first felt when I tried to decide whether I should tell him he was going to be a father. At least then, the decision to keep it from him was forced upon me.

Now it was different. I knew where he was.

It didn't help that for the next few weeks all I heard about was the Coast Guard ship, the Captain and, of course, the female First Officer.

I prayed hard about it, wanting to make the right decision for everyone, especially my children. But if there was one thing I've learned a long time ago about God and his answers to prayers, it's that He always has one of three answers to our requests: "Yes,"; "No,"; or, "Not yet."

Many times I wished God could be just a little more explicit with his answers, because I was getting no closer to an answer to the question that plagued me.

As we all got busy with a new school year, it was easier to push thoughts of Eric from my mind while I waited for that moment of revelation, when God gave me his answer.

Maybe that was just a cop out. I should have realized the guilt I was feeling was part of God's answer.

So when He finally answered, it was in a very big way. And His message was very explicit. "It's time!"

I had walked with my children to their class one morning, only to be stopped by their teacher. Their third grade teacher, Mrs. Brown, was so delighted with my children's contribution to the school's career day.

This was an annual event at the school. Each class invited someone to speak about a particular job. Mrs. Brown always coordinated it, making certain there were no duplications. Each year it seemed the children tried to find a job that was more interesting or unusual than the previous years.

It was a given that a teacher was among the choices, but as long as it wasn't I who was asked, I concerned myself with my own classes's choice. Most often it was a parent who was asked to speak.

I half expected Mrs. Brown to tell me her class had chosen to have a teacher and that my children were supposed to have asked ask me. For their sakes I was prepared to pretend that they had, and knew that night I'd have another talk with them about responsibility.

"The students are certainly going to enjoy having someone visit from the Coast Guard," Mrs. Brown said, shocking me with the revelation.

I felt myself grow weak. Yet, quickly told myself this could still work out. My daughter had been very impressed with the ship's female officer. All hope died as Mrs. Brown continued.

"It's too bad the First Mate, or First Officer, or whatever they call her, couldn't make it, though. It would have been such an example for our young ladies," Mrs. Brown continued, then she smiled brightly proving not all had been lost. "Imagine actually having the Captain offer to come in her place."

Yes, imagine. – I was afraid too.

I was going to have to talk to my children about confiding in me more. Then again, maybe the long over due talk might really be about my confiding in them more.

In the end, I did what was always my way – nothing. Oh, I started to tell them several times, but after telling them so long that I had no idea where their father was, it was difficult to come up with the words to tell them that was no longer true.

I'd always assured them he would have loved them very much had he known about them. I wondered how Eric would feel when I told him?

It turned out I didn't have to tell him. He had seen the children's names on the letter to his First Officer. He did the math.

"I think you and I need to have a long overdue talk," he said coldly as he stood before me on the day of the event. He looked so handsome in his formal white uniform. "First I need to know, am I right?"

I didn't have to ask him what he was talking about. I swallowed the lump in my throat so I could speak, feeling tears burn my eyes.

"Yes, we do need to talk," I replied hoarsely, wanting to say more. "But it's not what you think. . ." I added. He stiffened, squared his shoulders, his hands clenched into fists at his side, then turning he left my classroom giving me no chance to say more..

I wanted to beg him not to jump to conclusions. To plead with him not to hurt the children. But he was gone. I rubbed my temples as the headache I'd had grew worse. I knew that morning I really wasn't fit to be at school, but also knew nothing short of hospitalization or death would have kept me away.

I was both thankful and distressed that most of our day was centered around the assembly where each speaker told a little about their job, and later after joining the youth for lunch in the cafeteria, the students were again given time to visit with each speaker who had set up a display in the gymnasium.

I found Eric after lunch while my first grade class was still out for recess. The older grades had still not arrived at the display area.

"Eric, I'd like to invite you to dinner with us tonight," I said. "But I'd like you to agree not to talk about anything private until after Jessica Marie and Matthew are safely asleep."

"In spite of what you seem to think, and your almost gracious invitation, I would do nothing to traumatize *our* children," he said, emphasizing the word that was key to the entire problem.

I felt rightfully chastised. There was nothing I could say for myself. At least not there. Not then. Maybe not ever.

"Will you please come to dinner?" I tired again with more sincerity. "The kids need an opportunity to get to know you."

"I couldn't agree more." He nodded. "Better late than never."

Unfortunately by that evening my headache had grown into a full blown migraine. I excused myself to go prepare dinner, leaving Eric alone with the kids in the living room. I was in agony as I took tablets that I knew weren't strong enough to battle the condition. Yet, I knew I couldn't take those that would. Not if I wanted to keep my wits about me. Oh and I knew I needed my wits about me.

I could hear Matthew as he tried to explain to Eric about my headaches. Obviously I wasn't hiding my pain very well.

"She usually has to lay down in a dark room when she gets them," Matthew explained. "But she doesn't get them too often. Not like when we were little." I didn't hear Eric's reply as it was spoken far more softly.

"I was thinking it might be fun to order a pizza for dinner," Eric said from the doorway, surprising me when he entered the kitchen. "Then you can take some time to rest till it's delivered."

He had spoken the words almost kindly. I looked up at him, determined not to cry. A person could have frozen from the cold gaze that met mine.

"I have to get back to my ship tomorrow," he continued. "I don't want any excuses to prevent our saying everything that needs to be said tonight. I come back I want to know everything is settled by the time I come back."

I nodded my agreement, pointing to the magnet on the refrigerator. "That's the number for the pizza place," I said, before reaching for my purse. "Let me give you the money."

"I'll pay for it," he snapped. "Since it's an overdue privilege."

I didn't even bother to pretend that his words didn't bother me. I knew it didn't matter. My shoulders sagged as I trudged from the room, stopping only long enough to give him one questioning look.

"Don't worry, I won't say anything." He knew what was on my mind. "At least not yet."

I was thankful for small favors, though I knew I didn't deserve them.

Right then my only concern was my children and doing what was right for them. And to do that I needed to get the upper hand on my headache. Later, much later, after Eric was gone, I could give in to the weakness that was bearing down on me.

My daughter awakened me. I was surprised to see that she was already wearing her night clothes.

"Captain Moran said he would listen to us read our devotions before we go to sleep," Jessica Marie explained. "But I told him you always do that."

I glanced at my bedside clock and realized I had been asleep for several hours. I sat up and forced a smile for my daughter.

"Actually, I bet he'd enjoy listening to your devotions," I said. "I'll be right out and join you."

As I reentered the living room I heard my children explain that the book they used contained a devotion for each day of the year. I knew God was again working as they read the topic for that evening's devotion – *forgiveness*.

I watched Eric's expression as he intently watched our children take turns reading the devotion and accompanying scripture. Then he turned his gaze to me and I saw the brightness of tears glistening in his dark eyes.

Just as quickly he turned back to the children when they asked him what he felt about the subject.

He looked at each of them, then at me, his eye brows raised, hesitating only a moment before answering.

"I believe it means we all stumble and make mistakes," he said, choosing words they would understand, yet I wondered if there was a message for me. "For this reason it is not for us to judge one another's mistakes, no matter how much they may hurt us."

"That's right?" Matthew said

I watched Eric's expression seem almost relieved that he had gotten his son's approval.

"But it means something else, too," Jessica Marie chimed in, not to be excluded. "Do you know that, too?"

Eric thought again, then turned to me. "Maybe your mother can help me with this one," he suggested.

I held his intense gaze as I answered. "I think it means that one of our biggest faults, as humans, is our inability to forgive," I said. "And that we need to go to the One who offers all forgiveness and ask Him for help forgiving someone when we can't do it alone."

I watched Eric as he nodded.

"We always pray when we're finished with our devotions," Matthew explained. "We all take a turn."

It looked to me like Eric was actually nervous about this. As I recalled from our youth, he had no deep spirituality, no religious background. I realized that was more of what I should

have been sharing with him at that time. Instead, it had been stolen moments sharing fun in the sun and sand.

"Would you start and let me conclude?" Eric said. "If that is all right with you." He looked to the children who nodded their approval.

I spoke the words that were heavy on my heart as I asked God for the ability to forgive other's but also the ability to forgive myself for things I had done wrong. And I asked Him for the strength and guidance needed to correct my wrong doings.

The children gave a brief addition about forgiving friends who had talked mean, or for pushing into line in the lunch room. And I had to hide my smile when they also asked that they be forgiven for talking mean to others, and pushing into line in the lunch room.

Eric's prayer was far more simple. He simply asked for understanding and peaceful beginnings.

The children may not have understood the underlying meaning of his prayer, but I did.

Our conversation started with small talk as Eric and I waited to make certain the children were asleep before starting our real conversation. After about a half hour I got up to check on them. I was surprised when I felt him standing behind me as I glanced into each of their rooms.

We were silent till we were safely back in the living room. "Would you like some coffee?" I asked.

"Actually, that would be nice," he replied. "I haven't been sleeping well and have a feeling I'll be awake again tonight."

I nodded. What could I say? That it was the same with me. Of course it was. I knew we both were facing the same fear from totally opposite directions. How to tell the children without hurting them?

"Did you ever try to reach me?" Eric finally asked the first question. I was thankful he was giving me the benefit of a doubt.

"Yes, I called the Strongs once I realized I was pregnant," I said. "I wasn't intending to make you marry me, or pay child support, or anything. I just felt you should know."

"Make me marry you, or pay child support," he repeated. "Is that how you thought I'd see it?"

"I had no idea," I replied. "I hadn't heard from you after you left."

He frowned, lowering his head a moment, but when he looked up I could see regret in his eyes. "I was trying to protect you," he nearly whispered. "I felt I was being honorable by forgetting my own needs and letting you get on with your life, without me as a reminder of what had happened. And I knew I'd be a reminder because of what we were doing when those kids were killed. They were our responsibility.

"Yet, how was I to know you were going to have a constant reminder anyway," he continued, glancing in the direction of the twin's rooms. "You must have felt abandoned. I suppose in your shoes, I would have."

I shook my head and smiled. "No, I didn't. Because I couldn't walk in your shoes any more than you in mine. I had a wonderful loving family who were there to offer their love and guidance and support. I was never alone," I said hesitantly, then finally said what was in my heart.

"I thought of you often at first, feeling sorry for all that you were missing. Wishing you could have been a part of it. I felt as though I'd abandoned you. Though I knew I'd tried to find you, I also knew that, maybe, I hadn't tried hard enough."

He frowned, shaking his head. "Actually, I'd spent too much time trying to abandon myself," Eric admitted. "You wouldn't have found me. Then one day I had a little too much to drink and nearly got into a tussle with a guy. A big, strong guy. I always seemed to pick that kind. A shrink would probably say because subconsciously I wanted to take a beating to punish myself."

"What happened?"

Eric's eyes lit with humor. "He told me if I won the fight he'd give me five hundred dollars and I could buy all the beer I wanted. But that if he won, I would sign up for the Coast Guard."

I made a face, imagining his pain when he lost that fight. "Did he hurt you bad?"

Eric puffed out his chest. "Nope, it was a draw, more or less."

"A draw? But you obviously enlisted."

"Yeah, and he gave me five hundred dollars, too." He nodded, growing more sober. "Actually I learned later he was a recruiter and the money was a sign up bonus."

"You mean a recruiter did that," I exclaimed in disbelief. "That seems like drastic measures to get people to enlist. Not to mention highly unethical."

"Not really. I swung, he ducked, then I passed out. When I sobered up he was there. He asked me what I was so angry about. I told him, and then he told me what the Coast Guard could do to help me. I've never regretted it. Until now."

"Now?"

Eric nodded. "Because now at the most important time in my life I have to go back on duty," he said. "What I really want to do is have the chance to get to know my children. And, I realize we can't just spring this on them. They need to get to know me, too. Unfortunately, tomorrow I'm due back."

I realized now that he knew he had children, he didn't want to waste any more time. I also knew he was too honorable a man to compromise what was best for them.

"Then maybe we need to pray for an answer," I said softly, surprising myself by my boldness. "It seems God answered several of my prayers recently." I told Eric how I'd prayed for guidance, and how I believed after hearing his story, that God felt we needed the time apart.

"I think I agree." Eric nodded. "I wouldn't have been much of a father then. But I think I've come a long way."

"I always thought you were pretty special, but you underestimated yourself."

"Not any more," he replied without conceit. "I have learned a lot about myself in the last ten years. Most of all that I don't want to be alone. It's just that up until now, I thought my family was all aboard my ship. Now I have a real family on shore."

Eric and I prayed together that night. It was awkward at first since it was something we'd never done together, but God still heard us.

I know that because several days later when Eric was back in port, he called to tell me he'd decided to request a transfer to recruiting. "Maybe I can do something for another kid that a recruiter did for me," he explained.

"I just hope you don't have to risk a punch to do it," I teased, happy that we had ended up comfortable enough with one another that we could tease.

"I also want to be a positive influence on my children," he said. "I do want to be part of their lives. As much a part as you'll let me be."

I didn't doubt that he would be. But I wasn't certain what he meant by the last part. If he was asking for partial custody, I had to do a lot of thinking and praying about it. Then, as if reading my mind, he continued.

"They have recruiting stations where you are," he said. "I'd like to put down roots close to the children and spend time getting to know them, and their mother, better."

"Neither of us are the same people we were ten years ago," I agreed.

"At least we know we can be friends."

"When I first saw you the day you came to the school I was afraid that could never be."

"We can chalk that up to another answered prayer," he noted. "The devotion that evening was like an arrow straight into my soul."

We have since told the twins Eric is their father. It was easier than I thought it would be. Probably since they already suspected something was going on.

"So that's why you moved here!" Matthew said with a mixture of elation and surprise. "We had it figured wrong."

"Yeah, we thought maybe you and Mom were sorta like dating or something," Jessica Marie explained. "That was the only reason we could figure that you moved here all of a sudden."

"We wanted your father to get to know you better," I explained. "And we couldn't do that with him living on a ship or a base that was hours and hours from here."

We had been in the park when we told them. We'd been walking and enjoying the view. We'd stopped to have our talk, then afterward started walking again. Only it seemed our children were lagging behind, whispering.

Finally it was Matthew who approached the subject, while his sister merely stood there with a knowing look in her eyes.

"You know Mom, that talk you had with us," he said. "The one about a man and woman loving each other and out of that love creating a baby."

I felt my cheeks burn from that memory. It was after their Kindergarten teacher had given birth. It had raised not only questions about where babies came from, but renewed questions about their own father.

"Yeah, Mom, you said our father and you thought you loved each other, but your love wasn't strong enough," Jessica Marie said. "But you did say you loved each other."

"Yes, we did," Eric replied for me. "So where is this leading?"

"Well, Mom said it was because you were both too young to really know all the things you needed to know about love."

Eric nodded. "That's right. We had to do a lot of growing up."

I suspected I knew where this was leading and I didn't want to put Eric on the spot. It was normal for children to automatically think their parents should be together. I knew it was worse for children of divorced couples, having known what it was like to live together. My children had not had that.

"Guys, when people grow up they change in a lot of ways."

"And in a lot of ways they don't," Eric interrupted.

I looked up as his dark gaze captured mine.

"I think you should know everything there is to know by now," Jessica Marie persisted.

"Yeah, you're both grown up now," Matthew agreed.

"I think they're right," Eric said. "What do you think?"

I swallowed hard. Afraid to think.

"Your mother is speechless," Eric said. "Maybe that's because we need more time alone for me to ask the right question."

The kids looked at one another and smiled, then Matthew, the bottomless pit glanced toward a nearby ice cream vendor.

"We could go over there and get a cone," he suggested. "So you can be alone."

Jessica Marie merely giggled, a knowing giggle that told me she knew far more than I thought she should.

"I think I'm going to have to explain a few things to them soon," I said, trying to neutralize the moment.

"We're going to have to explain a few things," Eric corrected.

"I'm sorry, old habits die hard."

"Well I'll take delight in killing that one," he said. "From now on we're going to be a team."

"Yes, parents should be a team," I agreed.

"And married."

"And. . ." He had neatly returned to the subject I feared. "Oh Eric, I know you want to do what you think is right for the children. But. . ."

"Sweetheart, if you think I'm doing this because I think it's right for the children, then you remember very little about me," he said, taking my hand. "I learned that lesson from my own parents.

"Parents don't belong together just because of their children," he continued. "If we get it straight we belong together because of their love for one another and are rewarded with children in the process. Somehow we received the reward even though we managed to lose each other. But we're lucky enough to have found one another again. And I for one don't ever want to lose you again."

"But marriage?"

"Yes, as in you becoming my bride," he said. "I always knew I was only going to fall in love once. It's forever whether you say yes or not. So, what will it be."

My answer was yes. To the cheers of two nine year olds with chocolate covered smiles..