

After
the
Storm

by
Cheryl Okimoto

The Shepherd Series:
Seasons of Change
A Gilded Sky
After the Storm

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So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

2 Corinthians 5:16-19

This book is dedicated my husband, Paul. In spite of his dark past, through the redemption offered by Jesus Christ, he has become a true man of God and he doesn't shy away from using his past to help others grow. He is truly a hero of the faith.

This is the third book in a series of five. While each novel can theoretically be read as a stand alone book, you will enjoy them much more if you read them in order. If you haven't already done so, I strongly recommend you read *Seasons of Change* and *A Gilded Sky* before reading this book.

Chapter 1

Chicago is bitterly cold in March, at least for a Hawaiian. Pete Kalaau shrugged his shoulders in his heavy winter coat, hoping he could find a little more warmth, but the cold wind seemed to cut right through to the very marrow of his bones. The calendar said that it was spring and many Chicagoans seemed to believe that, if the proliferation of light jackets was any indication of their beliefs. ‘Spring’ in Chicago had a whole different meaning than what Pete was used to. In Honolulu, spring signals a gradual ten degree increase in temperature with a decline in rainfall and by the end of April summer would be in full swing.

Here in Chicago, spring meant that it could be twenty degrees in the morning as it was this last Sunday in March, but it could then be seventy degrees by mid afternoon, which was the forecasted high for today. Honolulu didn’t see that much of a temperature differential in a year. Pete didn’t understand how anyone could get used to the bizarre weather in Chicago.

For his first six years with the Grizzlies, Pete had never thought he’d willingly be in Chicago after the season ended. He had always stayed in Hawaii after the Superstar Game, spending the worst of the winter in a place where ‘cold’ was anything below seventy-five degrees. Then Jenni Jeremiah came into his life.

It pained Pete to think about how many years Jenni had spent alone. When she hadn’t been alone, she was even worse off than when she was. With an abusive alcoholic father, it was no wonder that she had a very poor track record when it came to men. Then she had met God in a shelter in Los Angeles almost a year ago. She’d begun to see herself as God’s child, empowering her to begin to defeat the mind-set that contributed to her poor choices. Four months ago, Pete had found Jenni in a church here in Chicago, the same church he was headed to on this cold March morning.

He was headed to this church instead of his home church in Honolulu because Jenni lived in Chicago with her two young daughters, Kara and Ana. Pete loved Jenni and her daughters and he would do whatever it took to convince Jenni that he was a man she could trust, that he would never intentionally hurt her or her daughters. He would even live in Alaska if that’s where Jenni

wanted to live. He hoped to show her that they could both bury their past and find a future together with God as their guide.

As soon as Pete walked through the door of the church, he was hit by one of his greatest allies in his quest.

“Uncle Pete, you made it,” Ana almost leapt into his arms, “and you’re not frozed. Mommy was afraid you frozed.”

“Oh, Uncle Pete is frozen for sure. See,” Pete buried his cold nose against Ana’s warm cheek. She giggled and pulled away, shrugging her shoulders up to her ears. “But some big hugs from my Anastacia will revive me just fine!”

The four year old threw her arms around his neck and hugged him enthusiastically. Then she pulled away again and pointed at Jenni.

“Hugs from Mommy would be better,” she said seriously. “‘Cause Mommy’s bigger and warmer.”

“I think you’re right,” Pete smiled at Jenni who blushed fiercely as the other congregants in the foyer chuckled. “In fact, how about I get hugs all around like we usually do. You think that will help?”

“Mommy hugs are the best,” Ana sighed dramatically, “but I guess you can hug everyone else too.”

“Sometimes it astounds me that you have no blood relation to your Aunty Heather,” Pete said dryly as he set Ana down. “No one does drama better than the two of you.”

Pete got a few hugs on his way to the coat rack, but the service was getting ready to start, so by the time he hung up his coat, only the Jeremiah females and the greeters were still in the foyer.

“Did you hear about Uncle Greg?” Kara said as she finally got her hug from Uncle Pete.

“Which part about Uncle Greg?” Pete replied.

“There’s more than his motorcycle accident?” Jenni asked in surprise. Pete gave her a hug that was much briefer than the one he wanted to give her.

“Yeah. There’s also the part about him getting engaged last night,” Pete grinned as he stepped away from Jenni and picked up Ana again.

“He did?” Jenni’s grin matched his. “That’s great.”

“To Aunty Beth?” Kara asked.

“Who else?” Pete laughed then motioned toward the sanctuary. The prelude had begun. “Shall we go in?”

“Now that I have a hundred questions to distract me from the service, why not?” Jenni said dryly, taking Kara’s hand and preceding Pete and Ana into the sanctuary.

Pete would have known Jenni was distracted even without her comment. She allowed Kara to go into the pew first and she didn’t object when Ana squirmed out of his lap and sat on his right side instead of next to her mother. Since they’d come back to Chicago after Steve and Heather’s wedding at the

beginning of the month, Jenni had permitted Pete to sit with her during the service but always with the girls between them.

Though she had agreed to allow him to court her, Jenni wasn't making it easy for Pete. They'd been back from Honolulu for three weeks now and he hadn't seen her even a dozen times. Even though she let him sit with them in church, she hadn't allowed him even one Sunday dinner with them. At least she took his phone calls, and he had called every day that he didn't see her and the girls. This last week she'd worked every evening since Monday. He hoped that meant that she had more than one day off now.

Pete realized it was time to get his attention back on the service. Steve and he had decided to attend this church because it had good solid, bible-based preaching, but in the last few weeks, he hadn't gotten much out of that solid preaching. As much as he loved Jenni, that wasn't an acceptable situation. He loved God more. Right now God was a whole lot less coy than Jenni, so that relationship seemed easier but Pete knew that was just an illusion.

As usual the pastor gave him something to think about. Since it was Palm Sunday, his sermon text was from the story of the triumphal entry. The message was simple yet powerful.

"Are you willing to be heard with the voices that cry Hosanna?" the pastor challenged them. "Here in church, it's easy because everyone joins in. But what about out there where the world can hear? What about when dissenters want the worship to stop because it offends them? Will you still be willing to shout 'Hosanna'? As we go through the Passion Week and remember our Lord's suffering, I challenge you to examine yourself. See if you're willing to suffer for the God who suffered for you."

Pete was thoughtful as the service ended. He'd already had a good deal of suffering and he knew Jenni had too. But how much of their suffering had been for the Lord and how much had been because of their own sinfulness? Would it be easier or harder to suffer for the Lord?

When they left the church, Pete was grateful that the weather had already warmed noticeably, but it was still cold enough that he was glad to have his coat. Ana and Kara skipped on ahead, knowing that they were going to a restaurant just down the street where Jenni usually took the girls after church. This time, Pete tagged along without asking if he was welcome.

"Do you think you've ever suffered for the Lord, Jenni?" Pete deliberately walked between Jenni and the street as they followed the girls.

"For the Lord?" Jenni repeated the question thoughtfully. "I've heard people make disparaging comments about Christianity and they usually make sure that I know they think I'm a fool for being one, but I don't think I can really consider that to be suffering. How about you?"

"I'm pretty much like you, but I did lose a few so-called friends when I started living my faith. Obviously they weren't worth having as friends, so I

don't think that really counts as suffering. Some of the unsaved guys on the team rib me and Steve about being too good to go drinking and stuff, but that's not suffering either. I wonder if I really could suffer for the Lord."

"I've had enough suffering that I'm pretty sure I *could* suffer for the Lord if I was called to," Jenni said with a sigh, "but I know I don't ever want to have to do it. Really though, does anyone in this country truly suffer for the Lord?"

"I know what you mean, on all counts," Pete picked up Ana as they stopped to wait for the walk light at the street corner.

"You know you don't need to carry her all the time," Jenni changed the subject. "You're going to spoil her."

"I know I don't need to carry her," Pete grinned, "but she's so small that it's a whole lot easier to carry her than to walk and hold her hand. She's not crossing the street without holding onto a bigger person. Isn't that right, Sunshine?"

"Never ever cross the street without you or Mommy or one of my aunties or uncles," Ana pulled on Pete's tie. "You going roller skating with us today Uncle Pete?"

"Roller skating?" Pete was so surprised at the idea that Jenni got a few steps on him when the light changed. "I don't know. I've never roller skated before."

"You haven't?" Kara looked back in surprise. "But you're old! How come you never roller skated?"

"There are no roller skating rinks in Hawaii," Pete shrugged. "I've ice skated but never roller skated. Are they the same?"

"Not hardly," Jenni laughed. "How is it that a Hawaiian can ice skate?"

"There's been an ice rink in Halawa forever," Pete shrugged. "It's pretty popular with the kids. I was never very good, but I went more than once."

"An ice rink but not a roller rink," Jenni said thoughtfully. "I guess that's some of that Hawaii logic that I don't get."

"Don't even try," Pete said dryly. "I don't get it and I grew up with it."

"Are you going with us Uncle Pete?" Kara asked. "It's lots of fun. I'll help you learn."

"With an offer like that, how can I say no?" Pete said. "That is, as long as it's okay with your mom."

"It's okay with me," Jenni looked away not wanting Pete to see how very much it was okay with her. He had made no secret about his feelings for her and she liked him a lot, but she had a multitude of reasons for keeping her distance. High on the list was the fact that she was afraid. Plenty of men in her past had started out nice enough but had ended up ugly. She wanted to believe that Pete, sweet Pete, was different but how did she know for sure? And even if she could trust Pete, there was her past and Mason to consider.

"Do we go together or do I meet you there?" Pete broke into her reverie.

"You can ride with us if you don't mind," Jenni suggested hesitantly. "There's no need for both of us to drive and I already have Ana's seat in my

car. If you don't mind riding in my old Civic, it'll be easier than transferring the stuff to your car."

"You're not going to insist that I drive just because I'm the guy, are you?" Pete asked cautiously.

"No," Jenni said in surprise. She had expected him to want to drive, but she certainly wasn't going to insist. She liked driving.

"Good, because I think I'll be a whole lot more comfortable on the passenger side," Pete sighed in relief. "Last time I tried to drive a Civic, I felt trapped by the steering wheel. I don't know how Greg does it."

"Greg drives a Civic like mine?"

"No, it's older, more of a hatchback than a two-door."

"Speaking of Greg," Jenni asked as she walked through the restaurant door that Pete held open for her. "How did you hear so quickly that he's engaged?"

"He called me," Pete replied then gave their information to the hostess. It would be about ten minutes before they were seated.

"Why did he call you?" Jenni asked as they sat in the waiting area.

"Because he's one of my two best friends."

"Best friend? But I thought Steve and Heather only met last year, how did Greg get to be your best friend so quickly?"

"It took about a week for Greg to become my best friend," Pete smiled sadly, "but that was years ago. Two years before I met Steve. I was a sophomore in college."

"I didn't know that," Jenni frowned. "If Greg's your best friend and Steve's been hanging out with you in Hawaii for the offseason for what, five years, then how did they not meet before?"

"It's a long story," Pete sighed, "better saved for another day."

"So Greg called you last night?" Jenni understood stories that needed to wait for another day. She had a few of those herself.

"Last night Hawaii time," Pete gave a snort of disgust. "Four in the morning our time."

"And you're still friends?" Jenni asked dryly.

"Barely, but yeah, we're still friends," Pete laughed. "It's the risk you take when you want to be friends with a guy who's time challenged. He can never remember the time difference, but he at least remembered that after midnight is morning in Chicago. He almost called at ten Hawaii time."

"I'm surprised Steve didn't call me," Jenni said.

"Did *you* forget the time difference?" Pete grinned at Jenni. "They're barely awake in Hawaii. Steve's probably otherwise occupied right now."

Jenni blushed, glad that the hostess appeared to seat them. It was only eleven-thirty. Since Chicago was on Daylight Savings Time already, that meant it was six-thirty in Hawaii. Steve and his bride were probably not thinking about her or Greg yet!

“You’ll be getting a call from Beth or Greg sometime this afternoon,” Pete said after they placed their orders.

“How do you know?”

“You shouldn’t have let Ana name that poor mutt Flower,” Pete sadly nodded at Ana.

“First off, he’s not a mutt,” Jenni rolled her eyes. “He’s a purebred Rottweiler. Second, what does that have to do with a call from Hawaii?”

“Well, Ana loves flowers so much that they want her to be flower girl,” Pete grinned.

“Maybe they want her to be flower girl because they don’t have a girl young enough in their family.”

“First off,” Pete rolled his eyes in imitation of Jenni. “You *are* in their family. Second, Danny loves Ana.”

“I love Danny too,” Ana piped up. “Can I be the flower girl again Mommy? I already have the dress.”

“But you’ll get a new dress for this wedding,” Pete smiled at her.

“Can we afford that?” Ana whispered. Jenni blushed with embarrassment.

“And ones for Mommy and Kara too,” Pete whispered back.

“Can we really Mommy?” Ana frowned at Jenni.

“Yes, I think we can,” Jenni smiled at her daughter.

“Then I can be flower girl?”

“If Uncle Pete is right and Uncle Greg asks, yes, Ana, you can be flower girl,” Jenni said.

“Uncle Pete’s right,” Pete said smugly. “They’re planning on the second Saturday in June, down in Missouri.”

“Kara will be out of school already,” Jenni said thoughtfully, “but I’m not sure I’ll be able to take off work again so soon.”

“Why not Jenni?” Pete shook his head. “Why you wanna be so stubborn?”

“Not now Pete,” Jenni said firmly. “Kara why don’t you tell Uncle Pete about your science project?”

Pete gave Kara his attention and let Jenni off the hook, for now. They would talk about it later, even if she did get angry. She could keep him at arm’s length if she wanted, but Steve was a different story. She was his only blood relative and she steadfastly refused to let him help her. After playing professional football for eight years, Steve was worth millions. He could help Jenni and never notice a drop in his bank account, but Jenni refused his help. Pete knew it hurt Steve to watch Jenni struggle to make ends meet. Someday she was going to have to face the fact that refusing Steve’s help was selfish.

Chapter 2

Greg had been fighting the pull of pain for a while now. He wanted to stay in the dreams of Beth – wisps of her golden hair fluttering in the breeze, her silver eyes shining with joy and her rich red lips saying “Yes.” But the pain kept interrupting her kiss and he couldn’t find a position where he could get comfortable enough to stay in his dreams.

He was curled up on his left side, burrowed under the blanket to ward off the morning chill. Somehow a fly had gotten into his room and was tickling his exposed ear. He woke just enough to stop himself from swatting at it with his injured right arm. Instead he turned his head and buried his face in his pillow. He heard a giggle.

“Go away Heather,” he grumbled, “or I’ll beat you senseless.”

“Then let me get out of your way,” Beth laughed softly.

Greg snaked his left arm toward her voice and closed his hand over a soft, warm wrist. He pulled Beth to him.

“You I’ll kiss senseless,” he said with a sleepy grin.

“That won’t take long,” Heather said dryly. “She’s already there and so am I. I can’t believe I let her come down here with me.”

“Why did you come down?” Greg’s kiss was brief, but sweet enough to leave Beth breathless if not senseless.

“I’ll beat you both senseless if you don’t stop that.” Heather pulled Beth away from Greg. “We came down to see if you were planning to go to church.”

“Church?” Greg frowned, not just because Heather had taken Beth away but also because he didn’t understand her question.

“It’s Sunday, Greg,” Beth laughed softly.

“It is?” Greg furrowed his brow. “It is. It’s Sunday!”

“So, are you going to church?” Heather asked with exaggerated patience.

“I think I need coffee and a shower before I’ll know if I’m up to it,” Greg sighed ruefully. He loved their church and rarely missed a Sunday, but if he wasn’t going to feel better than he did now, it would be a miserable experience today.

“The shower you’ll have to take care of yourself,” Heather said dryly, “but we brought coffee for you.”

“You did?” Greg sat up quickly and reached for the coffee, ignoring the pain that flared from his right shoulder to his ankle. He coveted the cup in Heather’s hand, but it was out of his reach and she just stood at the side of the bed staring at him with a stunned expression. Beth was also staring at him in shock. Greg looked down, trying to figure out what they were staring at. His bruises. The bed covers had fallen away when he sat up and the bruises on his right side shone forth in all their multicolored glory.

“It looks worse than it feels,” Greg shrugged his left shoulder. “Except my shoulder of course. Can I have my coffee?”

“Oh Greg,” Heather groaned, “how can you stand it?”

“I pretty much have to Boss,” Greg said dryly. “It’s not like I can undo getting hit by that SUV. May I *please* have my coffee now?”

“I can’t believe you’ve been bruised like this since Tuesday and I’m just now seeing it,” Beth scolded.

“But you both saw me on Thursday without my shirt,” Greg sighed in frustration. He really wanted that coffee before it got cold. He scooted closer to the edge of the bed. “How could you not know how much I was bruised?”

“You had your sling on,” Beth smiled shyly. “Besides, I was a little distracted.”

“I guess it must be healing,” Heather pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Bruises do look worse before they look better.”

“Exactly.” Greg scooted closer to his coffee. Only his injured leg kept him from getting there quickly. It occurred to him that if the crazy women were that worried about the bruises on his torso, what would they do if they saw his leg? It would be best if he could keep it covered by the blanket until after they left. “Quit your fussin’ and give me my coffee!”

“Rather demanding, aren’t you?” Heather grinned slyly, taking a step back from the bed.

“Woman, you invaded my room and woke me from some really sweet dreams.” Greg looked sideways at Beth with a mischievous grin, letting her know the dreams had been about her. He scooted a little closer to the edge of the king-sized bed. He would go after that coffee if he had to, even if it did mean revealing his bruised and abraded leg. “Besides, I’m sick. I think I have the right to demand the fragrant brew that will make me feel better.”

“It does smell heavenly, doesn’t it?” Heather smelled deeply from the mug instead of offering it to Greg.

That was the last straw. Greg was close enough to the edge of the bed. He threw back the covers, planted his left foot on the ground and pulled himself out of the bed, half-dragging his injured right leg. Before Heather could step back, he grabbed her left wrist and pulled her close.

“May I *please* have my coffee?” he allowed just enough pain in his grimace to make sure his sister knew how desperate he was.

“Give him his coffee Heather,” Beth said, trying not to look at her scantily clad fiancé.

Heather relented and gave Greg the mug. He sank back on the bed with a sigh of relief, carefully sipping the still hot drink.

“Do you always wear shorts to bed Little Big Man?” Heather asked with a cheeky grin. “Seems to me the other day you were –”

“I do since my bedroom has become Grand Central Station,” Greg said dryly, interrupting Heather before she could reveal that he’d been wearing only his underwear when she and Mom had invaded his room last Thursday morning.

“Good call,” Steve said as he walked into the room. “Why are you two still down here harassing this poor man? Breakfast is almost ready.”

“Your wife’s the one harassing me,” Greg smiled at Beth. “Tiger’s good. She can stay.”

“No one’s staying,” Steve said firmly. “You’re going to take your shower. If you’re not up in ten minutes, I’m the one coming down to see if you need any help.”

“Sounds like a plan Boss Man,” Greg agreed. “What’s for breakfast? You aren’t going to make me eat mush again, are you?”

“Only if you can’t make it up the stairs on your own.” Steve shooed the women toward the door. “But it isn’t mush. It’s Cream of Wheat. Way better than oatmeal if you ask me.”

“Maybe it is, but I’d rather have Spam, rice and eggs than either one.”

“You make it upstairs on your own this morning and you will,” Steve said cheerfully as he closed the bedroom door.

Ten minutes later Steve went back down to find Greg trying to bandage his leg. A good deal of his right leg had been abraded when the SUV had run the red light and hit his motorcycle. Between the impact with the vehicle and contact with the pavement, only his safety gear had saved him from much more serious damage than what he had received. But it was bad enough that he had to be careful to avoid infection, especially with the wound on his thigh.

“Do you know how hard it is to bandage a wound with one hand?” Greg sat on the bathroom counter looking mournfully at Steve. “Especially when it’s the wrong hand? Why couldn’t I have dislocated my left shoulder?”

“That’s what your friends are for.” Steve rescued the gauze and scissors from Greg. “Maybe we need to get one of those baby monitors so you can call for help.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll pass,” Greg said dryly. “I don’t plan to be this helpless for long enough to need it.”

“How’s the arm?”

“Better. I can use it a little, just not for long, and I don’t have much range of motion yet.”

“It sure looks ugly.”

“That’s what the ladies told me.”

“What about your leg? Did they go nuts over it?”

“Nope. You came down before they could.”

“Lucky you,” Steve grinned as he finished attending to Greg’s leg. “You going to church?”

“I would hate to miss it, but ...,” Greg sighed and shook his head. “Between concern over my accident and delight over my engagement, I may end up getting killed with kindness.”

“I know what you mean. How about if Luke and I run interference for you?”

“That’ll help, and I’ll be smarter than I was on Friday when the Colonel took me to the doctor’s office. I’ll take a pain pill with me, just in case.”

“But first let’s see if you can make it up the stairs on your own and eat a decent breakfast.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

It was a plan that worked for the most part, especially since Greg’s younger brothers Tim and Robert helped with the interference. From the time he stepped out of Beth’s car, Greg was surrounded by family who didn’t hesitate to let people know they needed to be careful around him. His biggest problem was his nephews, especially five year old Jeremy who wanted to climb on Uncle Greg like he usually did. For the first time since he’d found out she had done it, Greg was glad Beth had left her three year old son in Missouri during spring break. As hard as it was for Jeremy, it would have been harder for Danny since Greg had become a daily fixture in his life and Greg had never shied away from roughhousing with him. It would be almost impossible for Danny to not hurt Greg.

Chapter 3

Pete was seriously questioning the wisdom of roller skating with the girls. He knew he was in superb physical shape. He was a world class athlete, a middle linebacker for the Chicago Grizzlies with five appearances in the Superstar Game and a win in the Championship Game not even two months ago. But the little squirts at the rink were skating circles around him. Literally!

The only thing that kept him out on the rink was Jenni's obvious delight. He couldn't remember ever seeing her laugh so much and with such joy. Part of her pleasure had to be directly related to the fact that though he'd fallen more times than he could count, she hadn't gone down once. She was skating close enough to him that by rights she should have fallen at least once when he did, but she was very good on skates.

"You've been doin' this for a long time," Pete complained to the woman skating gracefully beside him, adding insult to injury by skating backwards.

"Only since I was Ana's age," Jenni grinned wickedly. "Mom used to take Steve and me skating in Junction City or Salina. It was one of our favorite Sunday afternoon outings, winter and summer."

"Why'm I havin' such a hard time?"

"You're too tense." Jenni touched his left bicep. Rock hard. She slid her hand down his arm and slipped her hand in his, drawing gentle circles on the back of his hand with her thumb. "You need to relax. Don't worry about falling."

"But it hurts when I fall." Pete wasn't sure if her touch was helping or making him more tense, but he wasn't about to tell her to let go.

"Does it hurt when you tackle someone in a football game?"

"Not that I notice."

"Why don't you notice?"

"Because I'm playing the game. That's part of it."

"If you worried about getting hurt when you tackle, could you still do it?"

"If I worried about getting hurt, I couldn't even tackle you, darlin'," Pete said dryly. "Are you saying that's why I keep falling?"

"Yes. The trick to roller skating is to forget about falling and to enjoy the rhythm of the motion."

Pete didn't think his feet had any rhythm right now.

"Don't look down," Jenni scolded. "Look up. Look at me."

"That I can do," Pete smiled softly. Jenni blushed and her eyelashes fluttered toward her cheeks. "Hey, I thought you weren't supposed to look down."

"I'm not looking down," Jenni's blush deepened. "I'm skating with my eyes closed."

"Show off."

"You're not complaining are you?" Jenni's eyes opened wide with shock.

"Of course I am," Pete frowned. "Why not?"

"*You* complain about someone showing off," Jenni giggled. "Get real Sweet Pea."

"How do I show off?" Pete asked indignantly.

"For starters how about that t-shirt you're wearing," Jenni's eyes raked over his muscular torso. "It's so tight, you might as well not wear one at all."

"Should I take it off?" Pete said innocently, tugging Jenni a little closer to him.

"No!" Jenni said with wide eyes, easily pushing back from him. "See that's just what I mean. Show off."

"I think it's in our nature to show off," Pete smiled and canted his head to one side. "Especially when we're courting."

"But I ...," Jenni looked away. She faltered and her hand in Pete's jerked a little.

With the sudden change in the smooth glide they'd managed for a lap and a half, Pete felt a surge of panic. He squeezed Jenni's hand too tightly and abruptly pulled her toward him, instinctively trying to use her to remain upright. Her skate clinked against his and she staggered. Pete clutched at Jenni convulsively as he lost control of his skates. She saw regret and fear flash in his eyes as he went down, pulling her with him. His right knee hit first but then he rolled onto his back and Jenni fell on top of him. Her eyes danced with delight.

"You're going to cause an earthquake if you keep falling like that big guy," Jenni laughed, obviously enjoying herself.

"You think this is funny!" Pete was surprised. "I could have hurt you, pulling you down like that."

"You did," Jenni grinned happily, "and that's part of the fun of roller skating."

Pete frowned as Jenni smoothly rose to her feet. "Fun? Getting hurt is fun?"

Jenni's laugh rang out even in the noisy rink. Pete glowered as he awkwardly managed to get to his feet.

"Don't you have fun playing football?" Jenni quirked her left eyebrow with a smug smile. Pete tried to hold onto his scowl.

"That's different!"

"It always is," Jenni rolled her eyes.

“You okay Uncle Pete?” Ana glided to a graceful stop next to Pete, concern shining in her dark blue eyes.

“Yeah Sunshine, I think I am. But this is harder than you make it look.”

“Keep trying Uncle Pete,” Kara patted his arm as she too slid to a graceful halt beside him. “You’ll get the hang of it. Come on Ana, let’s get outta here before he falls again.”

“Why did I never notice before how much of a brat she is?” Pete grumbled as Kara skated smoothly away with her little sister. They were both show-offs too.

“You never noticed because she isn’t.” Jenni linked her right arm through his left and gently turned Pete back into the parade of skaters. “She’s pure sweetness like her mother.”

“Normally I would agree with you,” Pete grumbled, trying to concentrate on staying upright. He was surprised that he rather resented Jenni’s easy glide. “But right now I think you’re a brat too!”

“Relax Sweet Pea,” Jenni smiled up at him. “Don’t concentrate so hard. Enjoy the music.”

“I’d enjoy it more if I was sitting at one of those tables,” Pete nodded toward the snack bar area as he lumbered slowly by, disgruntled by the kids whipping past him.

“You make it through the next song without falling and I’ll let you reward yourself by buying us sodas,” Jenni promised.

“And nachos?” Pete asked hopefully.

“And nachos,” Jenni agreed with a laugh.

“When’s the next song?”

“When this one is over.”

“Will it be over soon?”

“When it gets to the end, it’ll be over,” Jenni laughed at Pete’s questions. Her laughter died when she looked up and saw his strained smile. “Aren’t you having fun? This is supposed to be fun you know.”

Pete sighed heavily and looked across the rink. Why wasn’t he having fun? As he watched, two boys tripped over each other and fell. It had to hurt, but they were giggling so hard that they couldn’t get up. They were having so much fun. In fact, everyone seemed to be having fun but him.

He was worried but it really couldn’t be about the physical pain of falling. As Jenni had already pointed out, his chosen career proved that pain didn’t bother him so much. Was it his dignity? Had he always been concerned about looking like a fool?

“No Jenni, I haven’t been having fun,” Pete looked down with a sad smile. “I want to but I’m not sure I really know how to.”

“But I’ve seen you have fun,” Jenni furrowed her brow.

“I think you’ve mostly seen me enjoying other people having fun. I need serious help to have fun like you guys do so easily.”

Jenni thought about it. Pete really didn't get goofy. He never instigated anything though he easily and even sometimes willingly followed Steve and Greg.

"You're not afraid of hurting your body," she said in surprise. "You're afraid of wounding your dignity!"

"I guess it was drilled into me when I was a kid," Pete smiled ruefully.

"But your parents seem so cool."

"They do now," Pete said sadly, "but they weren't always."

"Oh Pete, I didn't know," Jenni said sympathetically.

"Not now Jenni," Pete carefully reached across his body to squeeze her hand with his free one. "Right now you need to show me how to have fun out here."

"Oh Sweet Pea," Jenni sighed, "how many times do I need to tell you -?"

"Relax. Enjoy the music," Pete grinned. "Okay I get it. I'll one-up you and I'll enjoy the company too."

Jenni looked away. "Maybe I should let you skate on your own for a while."

"But I'll have more fun with you."

The deejay resolved the issue by announcing a couples' skate for the next song.

"Now you have to stay with me," Pete grinned.

"We can go get those sodas and nachos," Jenni suggested.

"Nope. You said that first I've got to make it through this song without falling. I need a partner to do that. The deejay just said so."

Soft notes filled the speakers. Pete thought he recognized the song.

"Come on Jenni, they're playing our song," he said softly.

"This is our song?" Jenni whispered, recognizing the melody too. "I didn't know we had one."

"We do now, and it's a classic," Pete smiled. Starship began to sing "Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now."

"They play a lot of classic rock at skating rinks," Jenni sounded a little breathless. "It's easy to skate to."

"I see that," Pete felt a little breathless too as the lights dimmed. The energy that had just moments before pulsed all around them fled before the gentle strobe of the disco ball and the soft throb of Starship's love song.

Just as Jenni had promised, when Pete began to relax and enjoy the music his worries fled. He found the rhythm of a smooth, sure stride. When he no longer concentrated on keeping his feet under him but instead focused on the woman beside him, he discovered it was much easier to roller skate than he had thought. Soon he was matching Jenni stride for stride. As the music swelled, so did his heart.

Jenni knew Pete was truly relaxing and enjoying the couples' skate, but she was still surprised when he began to sing softly with the song. His voice was surprisingly good, but even if it hadn't been, she still would have melted when he sang about being glad that he'd found her. She knew it wasn't just

a song for him. She wished her heart and head matched his as well as their gliding strides matched.

As the song drew to a close, Jenni stuffed down her feelings and smiled mischievously at Pete. “You’re doing quite well Sweet Pea. We might make an athlete of you after all.”

Pete threw back his head and laughed.

“Too late I fear,” he grinned. “How about that snack you promised?”

Jenni nodded toward the poles being set up on the rink.

“Good timing. Looks like they’re going to do the limbo now.”

“That’s one thing I’ll never do,” Pete said emphatically, motioning for Jenni to precede him from the rink.

“I think that tomorrow I’m going to ache worse than after a game,” Pete said as they left the snack bar with their food, “but thanks for inviting me. I truly am having fun.”

They sat across from each other in a booth.

“You really had to protect your dignity when you were growing up?” Jenni asked.

“I wouldn’t put it that way exactly,” Pete smiled ruefully. “Bachan, Dad’s grandma, was very Japanese, first generation American. She still held to the old ways of proper behavior especially when in public. She drilled it into my grandma who drilled it into Dad and he drilled it into me.”

“So you didn’t get to be a kid?” That was something Jenni understood.

“It’s not so much that. I got to play, especially athletic stuff like surfing, swimming, baseball and football, but I was always aware that I must do my best, be ichiban, number one. That doesn’t leave a lot of room for being silly or just having fun for fun’s sake.”

“You do know that you can be good at something even if you put having fun first?” Jenni leaned earnestly toward him. “I’ve never skated for anything but fun.”

“Here I know that,” Pete tapped his forehead, “but I guess I never even thought about putting it into practice before I met Greg.”

“Does he do anything that’s *not* for fun?” Jenni laughed wryly.

“More than most people suspect,” Pete’s sigh hinted at a mystery that intrigued Jenni, “but he did show me the joy of the Lord.”

“I thought Steve was the one who led you to the Lord.”

“He was. Poor Greg spent two years showing me the truth, but I wouldn’t give up until I heard it from Steve.”

“When I discovered that Steve was a solid Christian, I started paying more attention to the religious stuff, but it still took years for me to take that last step,” Jenni toyed with her straw. “Why do you think that is?”

“Probably our childhood. It’s hard to see the truth of God the Father’s love when the father you know doesn’t show love for you.”

“Your dad was more than just hard on you, wasn’t he?”

Pete frowned down at the almost empty plate of nachos.

“Come on Pete. This is me you’re talking to,” Jenni frowned. “You know how bad my father was. If you really want to ... what you claim to want, you can’t hide the truth from me.”

Pete stared seriously at her for a long moment. Jenni was certain that Pete already knew about her and Steve’s father. He had beaten Steve mercilessly for years before he began to molest her. She had run away from home not just to escape the abuse but because she had known that Steve was becoming aware of what was happening to her. Though more than a year younger than Jenni, Steve still would have died to defend her, especially since he had learned to ignore the pain of his own physical abuse. Once he had figured out what was going on, he would have assaulted their father with a fearless unconcern for his own body.

“My father didn’t beat me much,” Pete leaned toward her and spoke softly, “and it was never as serious as what Steve got. It was my mom he abused the most. Especially when she objected to his other women.”

Jenni couldn’t hide her shock. That was not something she had expected to hear.

“But your parents seem to be so much in love!”

“They are now,” Pete’s smile was genuine even though his eyes shone with tears. “They both got saved before I did. God and years of counseling have made them both very different people than they were when I was growing up.”

“You’re so blessed,” Jenni blinked back tears.

“So are you Jenni,” Pete covered her hand with his. “Don’t go there. Don’t think about ‘what if.’ Stick with the ‘what now.’”

Jenni stared into Pete’s warm brown eyes and felt the pull of ‘what now’ with him. Back in Honolulu Pete had told her he was coming back to Chicago to court her. He wanted to marry her, even with all the things he knew about her past. Would he still want to if he knew the rest? She feared the answer to that, so she pulled back from the ‘what now’ question.

“Ana and Kara are still in the limbo,” she said instead.

“They are?” Surprised, Pete looked back toward the rink. The long line of dozens of kids had dwindled to just seven. Ana and Kara were indeed still in the line and the bar was incredibly close to the ground. Pete doubted he could get his chest under it even if he laid flat on the ground. He shifted his body more toward the rink but didn’t let go of Jenni’s hand.

Jenni couldn’t ignore the warmth of Pete’s hand as she watched her daughters battle it out with the other kids. Three of the older kids dropped out that round, two more when the bar was dropped another inch. Jenni remembered when Steve used to cheer her while she laid as flat as her girls did now. She had seen them do this before. Knowing that Kara couldn’t go under if they dropped the bar again, together the girls slid sideways under the bar,

hardly more than an inch from either the ground or the bar. As they cleared the bar, they rose gracefully to their very short full heights. Taking each other's hands, they refused to go again. Pete and Jenni applauded with the rest of the skating crowd.

"Do they always tie?" Pete asked as they watched the girls skate over to get their prizes.

"Whenever they're the last two left, yes," Jenni smiled proudly as the girls skated toward her. "Every now and then one of them misses for one reason or another and drops out first. One or the other, or both, usually wins, but I'm sure Kara will be losing more often. She's getting pretty big."

"We got coupons for t-shirts again, Mom," Kara said with a sigh as she skated up to them. "I guess you better get giant size ones for Uncle Pete since we already have all they've got here."

"You've won more than once or twice, huh?" Pete tweaked Ana's nose as she tried to peek over the edge of the rink wall.

"Like a bazillion times," Ana said cheerfully.

"I've told you a million times not to exaggerate dear," Jenni grinned as she took the coupons that Kara held out.

"When you behave Mom, we will too," her eldest daughter rolled her eyes. "We're gonna do red light, green light now."

"They've come here quite a bit, haven't they?" Pete watched the girls skate away. His smile was much more of a daddy's smile than a kalabash uncle.

Lord, Pete loves me and he loves the girls. They love him and I think I do too. What's wrong with me that I can't let go of my fears? Jenni put a smile back on her face as Pete turned to her again. The smile died with Pete's question.

"Why don't you let Steve help you Jenni?"

"So we're back to that," Jenni sighed. "Why?"

"Because I don't think you know how much it hurts Steve."

"Hurts Steve? How?"

"He has all this money and you insist upon struggling just to get by rather than letting him help you."

"I'm not struggling Pete."

"Why do you wanna play games Jenni?" Pete growled. "You don't get paid enough to have anything left over after you pay your bills."

"I don't have that many bills," Jenni glared back at him. "I don't have any debt. No car loan, no credit cards."

"But your rent -?"

"Is very reasonable."

"How reasonable?" Pete challenged.

When Jenni told him and assured him that the utilities were included, Pete was shocked. Rent wasn't that reasonable anywhere in Chicago especially in their neighborhood.

“How did you find this place?”

“I didn’t find it,” Jenni sighed. “Heather and her brothers did.”

“Luke and Greg?” Pete suspected something fishy was going on.

“Well it wasn’t Tim and Robert who came last October and helped me move to Chicago,” Jenni gave an exasperated huff. “Can we let this go? If I need help, I’ll take it. I’ll even ask for it. Right now I don’t need help and I like being able to take care of myself for the first time in my life.”

Pete strongly suspected that Jenni wasn’t taking care of herself as much as she thought she was, but he wasn’t about to tell her. Steve was going to want to have a serious discussion with his wife and her brothers. Pete let Jenni guide the conversation to inconsequential things, but when the deejay announced a speed skate, he encouraged Jenni to go for it. As soon as she was on the rink, he looked at the time and did a quick calculation. Just after four meant that it was past eleven in Hawaii. Steve’s ohana was probably home already since church was over around ten-thirty. Pete found a relatively quiet corner, pulled out his phone and found Steve’s number.

“I just heard something very interesting Steve,” he said without preamble.

“Do tell.”

“You know what Jenni’s rent is?”

“No.”

Pete told him, “Utilities included.”

“No way. Not anywhere in Chicago for that nice a place, much less in that neighborhood.”

“That’s what I’m thinking.”

“How’d she get that kind of deal?”

“She didn’t.”

“No riddles Pete.”

“Okay. Heather, Luke and Greg found the place for her.”

“Oh they did, did they?” Steve growled.

“My thoughts exactly.”

“I think I need to have a discussion with them.”

“You’re still thinking like me, brah.”

“Thanks for the call Pete.”

“No prob.”

Steve disconnected the call and grabbed his wife by the wrist.

“You and you,” he pointed at Greg and Luke. “Come now.”

Steve was practically dragging Heather as he stormed into the house, his puzzled brothers-in-law following.