

A
Cord
of
Three

by
Cheryl Okimoto

The Shepherd Series:

Seasons of Change

A Gilded Sky

After the Storm

Always a Sunrise

The Blessed Winter

A Cord of Three

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Again I saw something meaningless under the sun:

There was a man all alone;
he had neither son nor brother.
There was no end to his toil,
yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.
“For whom am I toiling,” he asked,
“and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?”
This too is meaningless—
a miserable business!

Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:
If either of them falls down,
one can help the other up.
But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up.
Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?
Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

This book is dedicated to Cheyanne, Joanna and Roxy.
May you always keep your cord intact. It may fray at
times, but don't let it break. You are blessed to have
each other.

This is the first book of a series that is a follow-on
to The Shepherd Series. This can be read as a stand-
alone novel, but you'll enjoy it more if you meet the
Shepherd Ohana first since they do appear in this book.
I recommend you start with *Seasons of Change* and
read the entire Shepherd Series before starting The
Ohana Project Series.

In the course of this book, you may find some words
that are unfamiliar to you but you can't find them in a
standard dictionary. They're either Hawaii pidgin or
words I made up. I didn't think there were enough to
warrant a "Notes" page in this book, but there were
plenty in the Shepherd Series. I compiled a glossary
from those books and posted it on my website, so if
you're confused about a word, go to
www.cherylokimoto.com/glossary.htm.

Chapter 1

“**D**onkey, would you sit down?” Theodore Bryant scowled at his Irish wolfhound. “You’re makin’ me nervous pacin’ like that.”

The big dog laid her head on Ted’s knee and whined, wagging her tail gently.

“You just came from outside,” Ted frowned at her, “an’ since when do you wanna go out the front door anyway? You always go out the back.”

Donkey whined again, her ears perked enough to give her a pleading look. Ted shook his head and sighed. He didn’t want to get up from where he’d just gotten comfortable on the couch, but Donkey wasn’t going to let him relax now so he would have to maneuver himself back up.

As Ted carefully shifted his stiff leg off the pillow and gently eased it toward the floor, the dog seemed to give him an apologetic smile.

“I’m complainin’ girl, but it isn’t your fault.” Ted grimaced in pain and the dog whined softly. “I knew yesterday that I was overusin’ my leg. Still, it’d be fine if it hadn’t given out when I was standin’ at the top of the porch steps last night. Fallin’ down even a short flight of steps isn’t a good idea for a guy like me. Actually prob’ly not for anyone.”

Donkey was accustomed to Ted’s rambles by now. She’d been the recipient of them for the better part of a year. With no one around but her, Ted had begun to talk to her as if she really understood what he was saying. Sometimes he thought she did understand.

While he rambled, Ted limped to the front door, hoping it wasn’t going to stick today. He shouldn’t have bought an old house, but it had seemed like good therapy at the time, restore an old home and hope that his own soul and body would be restored in the process. Some days it seemed to be working better than others.

The door opened easily and Donkey quickly slipped out onto the front porch. Ted paused to watch her for a moment, breathing deeply of the warm spring air. He had once loved this time of year. It almost made him believe in new beginnings.

As Donkey bounded off the porch there was a sudden rustling in the bushes that guarded the front porch. Ted heard a childish gasp of shock and fear in the vicinity of Donkey’s eager whine.

Ted snarled to himself. He had moved to this Podunk town in mid-Missouri because he wanted to get away from kids. He didn't want to see them or hear them. He didn't like them, didn't want them around reminding him of how much he'd lost. The winter had been a blessed relief from the annoyance of hearing children playing since the neighbor kids had mostly stayed inside their houses. When they had been playing outside in the snow and the cold, he'd been safely barricaded inside his home.

Now he'd obviously been invaded, but why? He didn't think he had anything that would have attracted a kid to his yard. Since he'd moved here last fall, he'd never seen children on either side of him or directly across the street. Sure there were some on the block, but as far as he knew there were no neighbor kids near enough to have seen the dog. Ted was careful to keep Donkey out in the backyard with its high privacy fence so she couldn't be seen by casual observers. Besides, Donkey was too big to attract kids. They were scared of her which had once been a cause for sorrow because she loved children. Now Ted was glad that she was scary looking to the little people.

"If that's a mole or a gopher, you better kill it, girl," Ted growled, hoping to scare the child even more.

"I ain't no mole or gopher mister," a boy's voice whimpered in fear. "Call it off, would ya? Please!"

"It's a gnome, Donkey," Ted snarled like an angry hermit, which was appropriate because he was. "You're supposed to be keepin' this place free of gnomes."

"I ain't no gnome neither."

"With that many negatives, I can't be sure if you confirmed or denied your gnomeness, so you better come out o' those bushes an' show yourself so's I can judge for myself." Ted was almost tempted to smile. Almost. The kid brought back some good memories, but he knew the bad ones were lurking right behind them.

A dirty face popped up between the bushes and the porch. A boy with pale blond hair, big blue eyes and freckles peered at Ted through the slats of the rail. He looked to be about nine. Ted glared at the boy and felt like swearing.

This was the kid from down the street, the one whose mother liked to bake and wanted everyone to be happy. The kid was probably as annoying as she was. Thankfully last month she'd finally stopped leaving her brownies on his porch. He didn't miss them or her cheerful greetings that he'd never replied to.

"Well, you don' look like no gnome. You got a name?"

"Gavyn."

"Dang boy, that sounds like a gnome name t' me!" Ted jerked with wary surprise.

"It ain't," the boy frowned at him. "It was my grandpa's name."

"If you got it now, what's he usin'?"

“Grandpa.”

Ted almost laughed. “Whacha doin’ in my yard, boy?”

“I was gonna pick a pretty flower for my mom.” The boy hung his head in shame.

Ted cursed the impulse that had left the flower-laden front yard intact. He should have plowed it all under like he’d been tempted to do last fall when he’d bought the place.

“Sneakin’ ’round like that, you got my dog all excited. That’s not a good thing to do.”

“Is that really a dog?”

“What’d you think she was?”

“It almost looks like a bear.”

“She ain’t a bear, but I am. She likes kids, but I don’t.”

“Why?”

“I don’ know why she likes kids. It’s a mystery t’ me. If I knew why, then I’d figure out a way to put a stop to it.”

“No, not her. Why don’t you like kids?”

“Cause they’re noisy, smelly an’ generally annoying.”

The kid sniffed his shirt. “I don’ smell an’ I was bein’ real quiet.”

“You’re still annoying. Pick your flowers an’ get on home.”

“Kin I play with yer dog, mister?”

“You’ll have t’ get outta those bushes an’ ask her. If it was up t’ me, I’d kick your bu-backside down the street where you b’long, but the dog’s got a mind o’ her own. If she wants t’ play with you, then she’ll play with you.”

“She ain’t gonna bite, is she?”

“I told you she likes kids, didn’ I? I didn’ mean she likes to eat ’em, just lick ’em an’ let ’em climb all over her. I don’ like kids, but that don’ mean I’m gonna lie t’ ’em or hurt ’em.”

The boy stared at Ted doubtfully for a moment then the face disappeared. The bushes rustled again. Donkey whined eagerly and the boy laughed. Gavyn appeared on the sidewalk with his arm around the dog’s neck.

“She said she wants ta play,” Gavyn said seriously. “She gotta name, mister?”

“Donkey.”

“Donkey? That ain’t no name for a dog!”

“Why not?”

“Well ’cause ... ’cause I guess it is a name fer a dog this big.” Gavyn looked thoughtfully at his new friend then back at Ted. “You gotta name, mister?”

“You just call me Mr. Bear so’s you don’ forget that I’m bad t’ be around. When you’re done playin’ with Donkey, you ring the bell ’fore you run off home.” Ted stepped back into the house and slammed the door.

Ted felt the blackness descending, felt his leg giving out. He knew he was going down, no matter how much it was going to hurt. He reached for the armchair, hoping to at least break his fall.

As soon as he hit the ground, the blackness withdrew, partly in response to the blood that was once again bringing oxygen to his brain, partly because the pain was too bright, too intense to allow darkness. Ted lay on the floor and wished he could still cry, but that well had dried up months ago. He didn't want to pray, but he was pretty sure that God was still paying attention to him, even if he was ignoring God. Only God would be that cruel.

The kid was going to be ringing his doorbell way before Ted wanted to face him again, so after about thirty minutes, he began to work his way up. His right leg was done for the day, and maybe tomorrow too, so Ted pulled himself over to and up on the couch. He laid there for about five minutes before the pain abated enough for him to work his way into a sitting position, slumped in the corner of the couch.

That wasn't good enough because if the doorbell rang it would take him much too long to get off the couch and to the door. With another snarl, Ted reached behind the couch and retrieved a cane from an umbrella stand. It was there for times like this. He hated that it was. Of course, other than Donkey, he pretty much hated all that his life was these days. Sometimes he wished he could get far enough from God to end that life, but he hadn't found that place yet.

Ted leaned heavily on the cane as he forced himself to his feet. The pain was intense. If the kid hadn't been outside with Donkey, he would probably have stayed on the couch all night. He would certainly be going down again after Donkey was back in the house, so he may as well make sure everything was ready for the night.

He filled Donkey's food and water dishes since it was already early evening. He made sure the dog door was unhooked and tried to remember if the side gate from the backyard was properly latched. He retrieved his pain meds from the bedroom and set them on the coffee table with a bottle of water. He thought about food, but why bother? He knew he wouldn't be able to choke down anything.

He couldn't sit down but he refused to watch the boy and the dog, so Ted paced in his living room hoping that it would help loosen his leg a little, maybe ease the pain.

Fat chance. God wasn't done torturing him today. Ted knew that between the pain in his body and the pain in his mind, he wouldn't rest well for many days. For a while he'd gotten to the point where at least he got fitful sleep most nights. Some nights he was even fortunate enough to get dreamless sleep. Those days would take a while to get back to again.

Ted hadn't turned a light on, so it was obvious that the sun was sinking.

That kid should be getting on home before his mother started worrying about him. Ted was reaching for the door to send the kid home when the bell rang. He was surprised by the shock that ran through him.

Oh yeah, it was going to be a really bad night.

Ted jerked the door open and glared at the kid through the screen. “Your parents are gonna be worried ’bout you, boy.”

“There’s just my mom, an’ she told me I could play outside ’til dinnertime,” the boy said defiantly as he opened the screen door for Donkey. As the dog slipped into the house, the boy noticed the cane Ted was using. “Hey, you hurt mister?”

“No.” Ted glared at Gavyn and raised the cane. “I keep this handy. I tol’ you I don’ like kids.”

Gavyn looked doubtfully at him then smiled at Donkey. “I liked playin’ with your dog, Mr. Bear.”

“Don’ tell me. I don’ care,” Ted growled, very bear-like. “Tell her.”

“She liked playin’ with me. Can I come back an’ play with her again?”

Ted glared at him. “Get on home t’ your mother, boy. Don’ bother me again.”

Gavyn’s shoulders slumped as he turned to retrieve the flowers he’d set on the porch rail. Ted saw the boy’s lower lip sticking out, quivering as he turned toward the stairs.

“Check that side gate ’fore you go, boy,” Ted growled. “Make sure it’s closed. You wanna play with the dog again, you go through that gate an’ play in the backyard. The dog has her own door t’ the backyard. Don’ you come t’ the front door ’cause I don’ want you botherin’ me.”

Ted closed the door on the boy’s blinding smile. He laid his head on the door, his shoulders shaking with dry, silent sobs. He hated who he’d become, what he was, what he’d done.

Chapter 2

Michelle Mitchell smiled when she heard Gavyn on the back porch playing with his little sisters. She had certainly made the right call in giving him a little more freedom after his birthday last week. Ten was a big milestone and if she was going to raise a responsible man, she had to give the boy responsibility. She certainly wasn't going to get any help from his father. Frank had taken off with his last fling even before Shay was born four years ago. Shelly had only seen him when he'd come back for the divorce. She didn't expect to hear from him again. That third time, he'd left, Shelly had finally had to accept that Frank not only wasn't going to change, he wasn't remotely repentant, nor did he want to stay married to his wife or care for his children. She'd welcomed the divorce by the time it actually came, but it was hard being a single parent with three children. Thank God she had a church that really believed in taking care of the unfortunates within its rolls.

The screen door opened and Shelly turned with a smile that almost dissolved into tears. Her children stood with nearly identical grins, each of them holding out a small bundle of flowers in their grubby little hands. They held their hands close together so that it looked like one full bouquet.

Shelly knelt down in front of the children, accepting their flowers and their kisses.

"They're beautiful! Where did you get them?" *Oh please God, let it be a legitimate find. I don't want to have to scold Gavyn for doing this.*

"The guy down the street let me pick his flowers!" Gavyn grinned in excitement. "I didn't cross the street or steal nothin'!"

"Which man?" Shelly tried to think of who already had such beautiful flowers. The only house that came to mind was the one that had belonged to her dear old friend Mrs. Jacobson. When she'd passed away last year, her sons had sold her house. The man who bought it was somewhat of a recluse, but Shelly had been delighted to see that he had left the front yard pretty much as it had been. That meant there would be a riot of color on tree, bush and single stalk flowers from the crocuses in March all the way through the mums and azaleas maybe even as late as November.

Mrs. Jacobson had often stopped Gavyn and given him flowers to take home to his mother. Shelly needed to make sure that he had indeed been given permission by the new owner, not just made an assumption based on the past when Mrs. Jacobson had allowed him to pick her flowers.

“You actually talked to our new neighbor?”

“He’s not new Mom,” Gavyn rolled his eyes. “He’s lived there since school started. That’s a long time.”

“But he’s the newest on the block,” Shelly smiled as she rose to find a vase for the flowers, “and as far as I can tell, no one’s actually met him yet.”

She knew the man had rebuffed all her attempts to meet him. Since no one else on the block had done anything but complain about him, she was fairly certain he’d rejected all overtures of friendship from them too.

“I met him today,” Gavyn said proudly. “He’s got a dog named Donkey.”

“That’s a funny name for a dog!” Lori giggled.

“Well, Mr. Bear said I had a funny name too. He said it was a gnome name.”

“His name is Mr. Bear?” Shelly asked.

“No, I don’t think that’s his name,” Gavyn said with a frown. “He just told me ta call him that.”

“Oh? Why would he tell you to call him something like that?”

“He said it would remind me that he don’t like kids.”

“Doesn’t, Gavie,” Shelly corrected him absently. “He doesn’t like kids.”

“Yeah, he said he don’t like kids but I think he does ’cause he let me play with his dog an’ pick his flowers.”

“What kinda dog does he got?” Shay asked eagerly.

“A great big one! As big as a house.”

“Don’t exaggerate, dear,” Shelly set her bouquet on the table. “Was it a nice dog?”

“Donkey’s way cool. I’m gonna see if Mr. Bear’ll let Joey go with me ta play with her.”

“That would be nice.”

“He’s got a cane, Mom.”

“A cane? You mean like to help you walk?”

“Yeah. He said it was ta keep kids from gettin’ too close ta him, but I think he got hurt.”

Shelly was taken aback by that. “I think maybe I need to meet your Mr. Bear before you play in his yard again.”

“Aw, Mom! I ain’t a baby no more.”

“You *aren’t* a baby *any* more,” Shelly corrected him calmly. “If you want me to treat you like the young man you are, then you should talk like a young man.”

“I’m not a baby anymore, Mom,” Gavyn said carefully. “I know that Mr. Bear is okay.”

“But you want to take Joey with you,” Shelly explained, “and then Lori’s going to beg to go too. Eventually even Shay’s going to be eager to meet your Donkey. It would be best if I check out Mr. Bear for them, don’t you think?”

“I guess,” Gavyn sighed, “but you better hurry. I promised Donkey I’d come over tomorrow an’ bring Joey since he’s supposed ta come play all day.”

“Yessir, Sir Gavyn!” Shelly gave her son a big smile and a mock salute. “How about right after breakfast tomorrow morning?”

“Okay!”

“Now, run and get washed up, all three of you. We’re having spaghetti for dinner.”

Shelly’s smile faded when her children disappeared down the short hall to the main bathroom. She was certainly going to have a word with Mr. Bear. No mean old man was going to threaten her son with a cane.

IT WAS A little after eight-thirty on Saturday morning when Shelly opened the gate that she’d come through so many times in the nine years she’d lived on Meramec Lane. The yard wasn’t as well cared for as last spring, but it was still beautiful. Shelly enjoyed the flowers, allowing her feet to drag as she took in their beauty. It was much too nice a day to have to start it by confronting a grumpy old man, but she’d promised Gavyn.

She wished she had more information about this man, but he was a regular hermit. No one even knew his name. Apparently he didn’t get any mail, personal or bills, at the house, just the same junk mail everyone else in Owensville got. More than once during the winter Shelly had seen him drive out in his oversized pickup truck, but he’d always had on dark glasses with his collar up and his hat pulled down low, as if he were extremely cold or hiding from someone. It was shocking to Shelly to realize that after six months of living half a block away, she had a neighbor whom she wouldn’t recognize if she met him in the grocery store.

Shelly stepped up on the porch and took a deep breath. Just before she pressed the doorbell, she thought she heard an eager whine on the other side of the door.

The bell pealed through the house. For a long moment, nothing happened. Then a deep voice growled, “Get off me you worthless mutt. I heard it.”

Shelly waited, but no other sound emanated from the house. She pressed the bell again.

“I heard ya the first time,” the voice was a little louder. “If I’da wanted t’ come t’ the door, I’da called out.”

“Mr. Bear,” Shelly called firmly. “I’m Gavyn’s mother. I would like to talk to you please.”

The voice swore, cutting off abruptly as if he realized she could still hear him. “I knew you’d bring trouble t’ my door, you walkin’ rug. I shoulda taken

you t' the pound the first time you asked t' play with a kid."

Shelly heard strange noises on the other side of the door. Maybe it was that cane Gavyn had mentioned. The door abruptly swung open and Shelly took a quick step back in surprise, her hands clutching the aluminum pan of coffee cake a little closer to her body.

This was no old man, even if he did walk with a cane. He couldn't have been much more than thirty. He probably topped six feet by an inch or two. His broad shoulders gave evidence of the fact that he'd probably once been a big man, but his face was gaunt and she could almost count the ribs that peeked out from his unbuttoned shirt. His hip bones stuck out above the waistband of his jeans. His dark brown hair was sleep tousled, he had a two or three day growth of beard and he was still barefoot. The pain in his intense blue eyes was echoed in his pinched lips and the white-knuckled grip on the cane.

"What'd the boy do t' bring you t' my door at this godawful time a day?" the man growled.

Shelly just stared at him for a moment. She had met this man before, a couple of times in the grocery store and once at the library with Shay back in January. He'd pretty much ignored her and the librarian, but he'd been so sweet to Shay. She'd been talking excitedly about finding a book about horses, but Shelly didn't have much time that day. She had to find some books for her own research and get home before it was time for Gavyn and Lori to get off the school bus. She'd promised to look for books for Shay if she behaved and they had enough time.

Unfortunately, they didn't have enough time. Shelly had been explaining that they had to go now, but that she would bring Shay back tomorrow as soon as the library opened. Suddenly a large hand had offered three books to Shay.

"Here you go, sugar plum," he'd said.

Shay had taken the books with a radiant smile, pressing them to her chest and offering a very enthusiastic thank you to the man's already retreating back.

"Best thanks is that you enjoy them." The man had turned his head and glanced at Shay over his shoulder. He'd winked at the little girl then walked out of the library without a backward glance.

Suddenly Shelly seriously doubted she'd seen this man wink. That was not the face of a man who knew how to wink!

Shelly heard an eager whine again and looked down, but not very far down. "Oh my goodness! Gavyn didn't exaggerate. She is as big as a house."

"As a dog house maybe. She's only two an' a half feet an' a hundred pounds. Kinda small for a wolfhound." He growled angrily. No this man wouldn't have given Shay a friendly wink. He'd probably had something in his eye.

"She's small?" Shelly asked in surprise. To her the dog looked like Clifford the Big Red Dog. If she stood on her hind legs, she would probably be as tall as her master.

“Did you come over here just t’ see how big Donkey is?” the man growled again. “She’ll never hurt Gavyn. No child on this block’ll be hurt as long as she’s alive.”

“I’m sure,” Shelly looked up in surprise.

“Why’d you come?” The man was gripping his door with the same intensity he used to grip the cane.

“My son wants to play with your dog,” Shelly lifted her chin a little. “I make it a point to meet my son’s playmates’ ... parents.”

“Well, you met me. Good-bye.” He started to swing the door closed.

“Wait!” Shelly snatched the screen door open and put her hand up to stop the door. She refused to be deterred by his angry glare. “I don’t want to just *see* you. I want to meet you. Gavyn was a little fuzzy about what you would do with that cane.”

“He was scared? Good.” The man sighed heavily. “He can play with the dog but I want him to leave me alone.”

“No, he wasn’t scared.” The man frowned at her. “Look, why don’t we sit down and talk. I won’t stay long.”

“No!” He glared at her furiously. “I don’t want you in my house.”

“Then you come out on the porch. I’m not leaving until I talk to you. Gavyn wants to bring a friend to play with your Donkey.”

He snarled angrily for a moment then abruptly let go of the door, turning toward where she knew the kitchen was.

“Oh hell! I haven’t even had my coffee yet.” The man limped away painfully, leaning heavily on the cane.

Shelly’s heart broke to see a man in such intense pain. She almost relented, but it was important and she’d promised Gavyn. When the man disappeared into the kitchen, she looked around the living room. It had been bright and cheerful when Mrs. Jacobson lived here, but now it was a dreary cheerless room. The drapes were pulled to firmly shut out the light. The chair and couch matched but didn’t sit as if they were supposed to be used for people to visit. The chair was placed close to the door with its back to the couch. There was a blanket and pillow on the couch. The coffee table in front of the couch held a prescription bottle, a water bottle, a book and a remote control. The remote was apparently for both the television and the DVD player. The book looked like a western.

Shelly didn’t want to make Mr. Bear walk back into the living room after he got his coffee, so she followed him to the kitchen. This room was also stark. A small table with two chairs took up just a small part of the spacious room. On the counter sat a microwave and a coffee pot. A squirt bottle of hand soap was on the edge of the sink which was flanked by a small dish drainer on the stainless steel sink’s built in drain board. There was no other evidence in the room that anyone occupied this house.

The man's hand trembled as he tried to put coffee grounds in the filter he'd placed in the coffee maker. Half the scoop of grounds spilled onto the counter. The man swore softly through clenched teeth and leaned his head against the upper cabinet.

Shelly put her coffee cake on the table and moved quickly to the man's side.

"Let me help you please," she said calmly. "Sit down and tell me where things are."

He glared down at her. "You'd be a hell of a lot nicer if you just left."

"Sorry, Mr. Bear, but that can't happen. I made a promise."

He turned abruptly and almost fell into the closest chair, obviously assuming she could figure out the coffee maker.

She could. She quickly made six cups of coffee, guessing that he would consume more than a cup or two. The bag of coffee was cool to the touch, so she assumed he kept it in the refrigerator.

Shelly was shocked to see that the refrigerator was as barren as the rest of the room. There was an egg carton, a quart of milk, half a loaf of bread, a tub of margarine, half a stick of butter, a jar of mayonnaise, a bottle of mustard and a handful of apples in the fruit drawer.

"I'm not poor, so don't get your bleedin' heart drippin' all over m' floor," the man growled.

Shelly looked at him in surprise. He sat with his head in his hands, his elbows on the table, his right leg stretched out stiffly.

"Where are your coffee cups?" Shelly asked, deliberately being pleasant.

"In the cupboard." He didn't lift his head from his hands. "Root around 'til you find what you want. You're just dyin' to see if the cupboards are as bare as the rest of the house."

"Are you always so rude?" Shelly was still pleasant.

"Are you always so Pollyannaish?" He was still rude.

"Pretty much." Shelly smiled even though she knew he couldn't see it. She always felt better when she smiled.

"Ditto. So when you fall in love, don't go whinin' to your friends about me bein' a jerk. You know it up-front."

Shelly stared at him in shock, not sure what to make of that comment. He didn't seem the kind of man to make jokes, but surely he wasn't serious!

"If I'm going to root around in your cabinets and fall in love with you, I think we should be properly introduced. I'm Shelly Mitchell."

The man sat silently for a long time. "Theodore Bryant."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Theodore Bryant."

"If you want me to keep being pleasant, you sure as hell better get me a cup of coffee."

Shelly peered at him carefully. She didn't see even a hint that he was making a joke. She almost giggled, but she was afraid he had been pleasant so

far. She didn't want to see him get angrier or ruder, so she went in search of the dishes. She found coffee cups right above the coffee maker, but that cupboard held no sugar nor were there plates or flatware.

As Shelly searched the cabinets for what she needed to serve her coffee cake, she discovered that they were very bare except for a surprising array of spices. What kind of man had twenty or more different spices but nothing to put them in?

By the time the coffee was done brewing, Shelly had everything she needed to serve coffee cake with the coffee. Ted ignored the food but grabbed the coffee almost greedily. He sipped carefully and sighed in relief. He drank half the cup of coffee before he acknowledged Shelly.

"Thank you, Ms. Mitchell," he said grudgingly. "It's good."

"Please call me Shelly."

"We aren't gonna be bosom buddies," he glared at her.

"Well if I'm going to be falling in love with you, you may as well call me Shelly," she said serenely. "It won't make you less of a jerk."

He stared at her and she thought he almost smiled. Instead he snarled and drank more of his coffee. Shelly picked up her fork and calmly began to eat the coffee cake. Ted picked up his fork and started to massacre his piece.

"Do you normally not eat much or is it hard for you to go to the store?" Shelly asked casually.

"I grew up in a small town, Miss Shelly," Ted glared at her again. "I know what you're thinkin'. I don't need any do-gooder settin' up a Take-Care-of-Ted crusade. I woulda stayed home if I'da wanted that."

"But you're obviously not taking care of yourself." She met his glare with a calm smile.

"I usually do better," Ted grumbled down at the rapidly crumbling coffee cake. "I've had a bad couple of days."

He picked up his coffee cup and set it down abruptly when he realized it was empty already. Shelly popped out of her chair and grabbed the coffee pot.

"Look, Shelly Mitchell, don't go bein' nice to me." Ted frowned up at her as she poured him more coffee. "I'm not a people person. I especially don't like cute, cuddly little brunettes of the feminine persuasion, no matter how big and pretty their brown eyes are. Don't expect to tame this Beast no matter how beautiful you are, Belle."

Shelly stared at him in surprise. "Why Mr. Bryant, you should be careful! It almost sounds like a poet lingers in that gruff exterior."

She had thought the man was already full of pain, but suddenly fresh, raw pain burst across his face. He quickly dropped toward the table, cradling his head on his arms.

"Please go. Your son's safe here and so's any child he brings with him. Just keep 'em away from me."

“Ted?” Shelly said hesitantly, reaching out to touch his shoulder.

He flinched away from her touch and flung his right arm out as if to push her away. With his face still buried in his left arm, he didn’t see what he was doing. The cup and plate with all their contents went sailing off the table.

Shelly was stunned. She was deeply touched by the man who shook with sobs though no tears fell, but she knew she couldn’t do anything for him. However, she could clean up the mess that would be painful on more than one level for the broken man to deal with.

It wasn’t hard to find the cleaning supplies she needed to put the kitchen in order, then she covered the remaining coffee cake and put it in the barren refrigerator. When she was done, she washed her dishes and put them away then poured a fresh cup of coffee for Ted, setting it safely away from any flinging arms but well within reach of a deliberate attempt to take hold of it.

Shelly turned at the kitchen door, looking back at Ted. He no longer sobbed, but he hadn’t raised his head either.

“I don’t know what you’re running from, Ted Bryant, but I know God is part of it. You should know that he’s impossible to run from. He loves you and he wants you to love him too. He’s pursuing you. You may as well give up and let him love you. He’ll help you make sense out of your life.”

Ted didn’t respond in any way, but Shelly knew he’d heard. With a puzzled frown, she turned to the door. She would be praying for this man for a long time.

Chapter 3

Ted sat at the table long after the woman left. Shortly after the door closed behind his unwanted visitor, he pulled the coffee cup over to cradle it next to his cheek. After a few minutes, he slowly sat up and drank from the cup.

The woman had shocked him, but he knew she hadn't intended to hurt him. She was much too sweet to ever intentionally hurt anyone.

With her perpetual sunshine she reminded him of his sister Rikki. Even after tragedy struck their family, she didn't lose her sunshine. Oh she'd grieved as much as any of the rest of them, maybe even more, but she had faced the grief head-on. She'd railed at God for allowing the tragedy and rejected every offer of comfort, driving away the fools with their shallow platitudes. But after a month or so, she began to talk to God instead of yell at him. She mended fences with her family and friends and she'd started to smile again. When she'd started to laugh again, Ted had fled. He still had trouble breathing and his sister could laugh. It was unbearable.

He didn't understand how she did it, but then again she didn't carry the guilt he carried. With nothing to be forgiven for except one small lapse of judgment, it didn't take much for her to move on again. He, on the other hand, carried more than enough guilt for the rest of this lifetime.

About fifteen minutes after the woman left, Donkey suddenly sat up from where she'd been lying under the table. She listened carefully with her ears perked, her head cocked to one side. She bounded to her feet, gave his hand an apologetic doggy kiss and bolted through her door. Ted heard boyish cries of joy.

When his cup was empty, Ted stood slowly and carefully, testing his leg. Once he loosened it up a little more, it was going to be bearable today. At least as okay as he could expect considering the circumstances. He poured himself another cup of coffee and paced in the kitchen as he drank it, occasionally watching the two boys in the backyard with the dog.

The old fort that someone had put in the yard had proved impossible to remove without getting a professional crew in, so Ted had left it. Now he supposed he would never get the neighborhood kids out of his yard. Between

the dog and the fort, nothing short of physical violence would keep them from visiting.

In spite of what he'd intimated to Gavyn yesterday, it wasn't in him to intentionally hurt a child. He could do more than enough damage unintentionally. That's why he needed to keep them away from him.

After Ted polished off the coffee, he cleaned up the pot and set his kitchen in order. His leg was going to be good enough that he could make a long overdue run into Jefferson City. He usually went on Fridays, but last week he hadn't been in the mood and yesterday it had been out of the question.

He'd been six kinds of a fool to go up on the roof on Thursday. Sure manual labor was good physical therapy, but his leg wasn't ready for all the bending, squatting and kneeling he'd needed to do to take care of the missing and loose shingles. He'd gotten safely down the ladder from the roof, then when his leg had suddenly given out, he'd fallen down the five steps of the back porch. It had been a day marked stupid, in all caps and italics. He would pay for it for a long time too.

Adding insult to injury, if he hadn't been hurting he wouldn't have been home yesterday when the boy came to steal his flowers. Then he wouldn't have been invaded by Gavyn of the gamine grin and Miss Shelly with her curves in all the right places. In his other life, she would have started him dreaming, but he didn't deserve dreams anymore, only nightmares. He had plenty of those.

Ted took a quick shower then dressed to go out. He was glad that he hadn't been wearing his usual sleepwear, shorts and maybe a t-shirt, when the delectable Miss Shelly had shown up. She'd been moved enough by his crippledness, if she'd seen his scars she probably would have already been back with a casserole dish, and had ones lined up for the next week. Her church friends – there had to be church friends, she was too genuine to be an unbeliever. Her church friends would have descended on him like a tornado sweeping across the plains.

Ted frowned at himself in the mirror. The ravages of this morning were still etched upon his face. It was a good thing he hadn't shaved in four days. He covered the upper half of his face with his ball cap and sunglasses then stepped out onto the back porch. His whistle brought the dog galloping with two laughing boys trailing behind her.

"You brought another gnome," Ted said flatly, sadly. Gavyn grinned up at him and Ted was tempted to smile in return. Glad for the dark glasses, Ted deepened his frown. Sadly that only broadened the boy's grin.

"Donkey likes ta play with Joey too, Mr. Bear," Gavyn said happily.

"Joey, huh? Well least you got a boy's name 'stead of a gnome name." Both boys grinned broadly. Ted frowned harder. "You might wanna lose that diminutive, boy, or you're gonna be pushin' thirty an' they'll still be usin' it. Get at it now an' by the time you graduate high school, you might be just 'Joe.'

Trust me, you don't wanna hear someone call out 'Joey!' when you're gettin' that diploma."

"Good idea Mr. Bear!" Joe had big brown eyes and they looked at Ted with eager adoration. It was the dog's fault. Ted curled the left side of his mouth in a snarl. Both boys giggled. Ted glared.

"So I shouldn't let Mom call me Gavie?"

"Good God no!" Ted stepped back in horror, raising his hands in a defensive posture. "She don't wanna handle that gnome name she saddled you with, you make her call you 'Gav.' Don't ever let her call you 'Gavie!'"

Ted shuddered in horror. Both boys grinned.

He needed to get out of here.

"Listen, Joe an' Gav," Ted said. "I gotta go out for a while. Gotta go to Jeff City an' I'm gonna be gone 'til maybe mid afternoon. I ain't got a dog sitter lined up, so Donkey's gotta go with me." She stayed by herself most of the few times he left the house, but he didn't feel the need to mention that to the boys.

"We kin dog sit, Mr. Bear," Joe said eagerly.

"What she need while you's gone, Mr. Bear?" Gavyn was just as eager.

"Just someone to make sure no one messes with her. She's too trustin'." She wasn't unless the person was trustworthy, another fact he would keep from the boys. "But y'all gotta go home an' get lunch an' I ain't gonna be back by then."

"We won't be gone long, Mr. Bear," Gavyn said eagerly.

"We'll come right back an' watch Donkey fer ya," Joe agreed.

"You promise not to leave her alone more 'n an hour?"

"We won't!"

"Hey, Mr. Bear, kin I bring my sister after lunch? She wants ta meet Donkey."

And so it goes, Ted sighed. "She got a gnome name too?"

"Her name's Lori."

"That's a regular kinda name. I guess it'll be okay, if your mom says yes too. But no more'n one new kid a day, ya hear? Don't you go gettin' Donkey all wound up or I'll padlock that gate an' put her in a dog run, you got it?"

"Yes Mr. Bear." The boys looked at him with serious eyes.

Good, they did get it. This was no joke.

"One other thing, boys. You know your folks' phone numbers?"

"Yeah!" they chorused.

"Well, let's hear 'em. Prove it!"

Joe rattled off his then Gavyn jumped right in.

"Good," he pointed to the patio table on the back porch where he'd put his cordless handset. "There's a phone. Anything starts to go south, you call right off, okay?"

“Sure Mr. Bear!”

“Now get on outta here. I gotta hit the road.”

Ted turned back to the house without a backward glance. The boys would be safe, playing in his backyard with Donkey. He knew their parents needed to give them the freedom to grow. In Owensville, Missouri, it was probably a very safe thing to do. If he didn't have his history, it wouldn't give him a moment's pause. But he did have his history and he was going to feel a lot better knowing the annoying little gnomes had freedom to grow and a protector they thought they were protecting. Just as long as they stayed out of his hair.

SHELLY HEARD THE boys' voices well before she heard their step at the back door. The sun was high overhead, so it was time for lunch. They were home on time even though their excited chatter assured her that it had been hard to leave the delightful Donkey behind. She could understand that. Unlike her master, the dog seemed to enjoy being with people.

“Mom, we're dog sittin' so we can't stay long. Gotta get back ta work!”

“Dog sitting? Where's Te-, um, Mr. Bear?”

“He said he was goin' into Jeff City an' he had ta take the dog lessen we was gonna dog sit.” Joey told her with very grown up importance. She would have to tread carefully or risk breaking their hearts.

“What if -?”

“He made sure we knew our folks' numbers, Mom, an' he gave us his phone.” Gavyn rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Come on Joe, let's wash our hands so's we can eat an' get back 'fore Donkey misses us too much.”

Shelly wondered about the “Joe” part of that. Gavyn had always called his best friend “Joey.” She let it go because she needed to get the girls up to the table too.

After they prayed, Gavyn dug into his sandwich with great gusto. After about three bites, which consumed a good half of the sandwich, he took a big drink of milk and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

“Kin Lori come with us when we go back ta play with Donkey, Mom?”

Lori turned pleading eyes to her.

“Please?” Joe begged. “Mr. Bear said it was okay.”

Shelly looked thoughtfully at the children. They didn't have to cross any streets and they did have a phone available. “I guess it'll be okay, Gavie.”

“Please Mom! Don' call me that.”

“Why not? I've always called you Gavie.”

“That was okay when I was just a kid, Mom, but I'm gonna be a man soon. You gotta quit callin' me that.”

“Mr. Bear said we don' want people still usin' deminytives when we're pushin' thirty, so we may's well start now gettin' people ta stop,” Joe told her importantly.

“Oh he did?” Shelly smiled to herself at the thought of someone calling the irritable man “Teddy.” He would surely know how hard it was to drop a childish nickname like that.

“Kin I go too?” Shay asked eagerly.

“Mr. Bear said no more’n one new person a day,” Joe gave her a sad smile.

“An’ he was real serious ’bout that, not like when he says he don’ like kids,” Gavyn said.

“Doesn’t, Gavyn,” Shelly corrected gently. “He doesn’t like kids.”

“But he do like kids, Miss Shelly,” Joe said with eager eyes, “an’ he’s real cool.”

“But I don’ think he likes that he likes kids,” Gavyn looked at his mom with wide, serious eyes. “We should pray for him, Mom.”

“Yes we should, Gavie, um, Gavyn.”

“You can call me Gav, Mom. That’s a man’s name. It’s better than a gnome name.”

Shelly stared at her son in surprise. She was certainly going to have to pay their strange neighbor another visit. The rude hurting man she’d met this morning didn’t jibe with the picture Gavyn was painting.