

A
Gilded
Sky

by
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A Gilded Sky

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This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”

Jeremiah 29:10-14

This book is dedicated to the memory of my grandpa, Gottfried “Buck” Hoehne. He was the first man to show me that being a godly man doesn’t mean you have to grow up! He also showed me that you can be both childlike in your love of life and mature in handling responsibility. I miss you Grandpa.

This is the second 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* before reading this book.

Chapter 1

The sky over the Koolau Mountains was pastel blue and the clouds were tinted pale gold and pink, assuring Greg Shepherd that the sun had risen, even if he couldn't see it. He loved to run on Ala Moana Beach at this time of day. The crowds weren't out yet and the air held an exhilarating quietude that is only found early mornings in the lee of the mountains. The predawn expectancy thinks it's still waiting, yet the light already surrounds, urging toward the joy that surges when the sun first kisses the horizon.

Greg tried to time his morning runs so he could watch the sun finally step over the mountains just before he reached the end of the beach. His swim back up to the Ewa end would then be empowered by the fancy that he was swimming in that special liquid gold that you only get when the sun first truly caresses the water, giving hope to something special in the new day. With the sun at his back on misty mornings, he sometimes even got blessed with a rainbow.

If only his life held such an expectancy, a wonder, a hope for a new day. Instead his life was full of clouds that threatened to block out the sun. The worst of it was that he could see others around him joyfully standing in the sun.

"You know God," Greg looked skyward as he ran down the beach. "I'm trying not to be envious about other people's blessings, especially my family's. But I'd sure like to have a few obvious blessings of my own right now."

There was his brother Luke with his happy family which now included an adorable baby girl, six months old and the delight of the Shepherd ohana. His only sister, Heather, almost exactly two years older than Greg's nearly twenty-eight years, was newly engaged and preparing for her wedding. Though she had last seen Steve yesterday morning in Atlanta, she was eagerly waiting to pick him up at the airport today. Heather's fiancé, who was also Greg's housemate, had needed to make a detour to Chicago for the Grizzlies' ticker tape parade after their big win in the Championship Game on Sunday. Now Steve was returning to Hawaii for the offseason, the highlight of which would be his wedding the first Saturday in March, just over a year since he and Heather had first met.

It looked like Mom was also headed toward romance. Greg couldn't begrudge her the opportunity to find love again with Colonel Joshua Wolfe, Steve's pilot friend. It had been almost two years since his dad had died, about the same amount of time it had taken Dad to discover love a second time around after losing Kalea, his first wife who was Luke, Heather and Greg's mother. Kalea's three children had never seen Mom-Gloria as a stepmother. They loved her every bit as much as they'd loved their first mother and all of them were as delighted with her blossoming romance with the Colonel as they had been when romance had flourished between her and Dad almost twenty years ago.

Even Greg's younger half-brothers had bright futures ahead of them. Tim was almost seventeen and finishing his junior year of high school and Robert, a sophomore, would be sixteen in a few months. They were doing very well in school and with the prospect of actually being able to play football next year rather than just warm the bench, they might even get a shot at college football scholarships. That was something Greg had missed out on.

He had certainly had enough talent to play college ball but he hadn't been able to make the grades in high school. Instead of going to a university on a scholarship, he'd wound up slogging his way through community college, taking seven years to get an associate's degree with barely good enough grades to get him admitted to the bible college almost two years ago.

Greg had been looking at another six years to get his pastoral degree but then Steve asked him to housesit for him while he was on the Mainland, freeing Greg from the need to pay rent. Steve had also probably donated the money to the college for Greg's scholarship. Greg couldn't be sure of it but it was a new scholarship for nontraditional upperclassmen, twenty-five or older, with financial need and a grade point average of two point zero or better. It was almost as if the qualifications had been written for him. He wouldn't be surprised if they had been since he had gotten it just a few months after Steve and Heather started dating.

With the freedom to work less and still live better than he had his entire adult life, Greg went from a quarter-time to a fulltime student. If all went well he would graduate in another year, but all wasn't going well.

First off, he was pretty sure he didn't really want to be a pastor, at least not the kind like Pastor Ryan, the senior pastor at his family's church. He wouldn't mind having a church, preaching, counseling, marrying and burying people, and he wouldn't even mind being a missionary like his parents had been. Lately though, he'd begun getting vague ideas for something else. They weren't ideas that had gelled into something solid enough to see. In fact, they were ideas he wasn't even sure he should be entertaining because they seemed too far out of reach to him, maybe even unrealistic. Those ideas were part of his turmoil this second Tuesday of February.

Then there was school itself. Last October, he'd found himself in the position to financially help Steve's sister Jenni. For the first time in his life, he was able to help someone else and he felt good about it, but it did require him to work more hours again. He didn't resent the time spent, but this semester it had really started to hurt since his schedule had changed and he needed more time to study.

The bible classes weren't hard for him. He loved to learn, especially about God, and he quickly understood what he heard. He could write papers all semester, as long as he had a computer and plenty of time. Unfortunately this semester he'd started leadership and pastoral classes too and they were destroying him. His Tuesday morning leadership class with the killer quizzes was particularly difficult.

They weren't simple little one page quizzes like in his bible classes. These were two and three pages with questions over manini things that he wasn't even sure how to apply to life. Multiple choice questions with answers that were bewilderingly similar. Fill-in-the-blank questions that made his brain short out. Spaces to write entire bible verses, word for word with no margin for error. He had those verses in his head but he couldn't get them down on the paper fast enough. They were supposed to do the quizzes in ten minutes, fifteen at the max. He was always the last one done and he had failed the first two quizzes. The quizzes made up one-quarter of the total grade. The midterm and final would probably be exactly like the quizzes only much longer. They were each one-quarter of the grade also, so Greg knew he was in trouble, but he had to take this class. It was required for every degree the college offered.

Not only did he have this nightmare class to look forward to, but he also would have to see Beth Harrison today. She bothered him in ways he didn't want to think about, not the least was her apparent aversion to him.

Greg had first met Beth at the new student orientation two summers ago. The only reason he even noticed her was because she was one of only three nontraditional students among the forty-some new ones, the only other one transferring in credits. She was coming in as a sophomore, Greg as a junior. All the other students were freshmen.

When he'd tried to talk to her, Beth had shut him down with monosyllabic answers, finally fleeing to the restroom. Greg had let it go at the time but when he'd seen her in his classes, he'd made tentative efforts to get to know her. He hadn't gotten far because she had no trespassing signs all over her.

In addition to her don't-talk-to-me attitude, Beth wore baggy jeans and oversize t-shirts with an old baggy sweatshirt for when the air conditioning got too cold. They were don't-look-at-me clothes. Her thick mousy brown hair was cut to her shoulders with no style and she often used it to screen her face. She always sat in the second row from the front on the far left, almost hugging the wall. She was never late but not really early either. She came in about five

minutes before class started, sat down and opened a textbook. Always. On breaks, she either put her nose back in her textbook or fled to the restroom. In their first year at the college, Greg probably hadn't exchanged more than a dozen words with Beth, but he had seen her.

In spite of her determined efforts to remain unnoticed, Greg saw glimpses of the woman hiding in plain sight. She didn't say much in class, but what she did say was thoughtful and well spoken. Though she didn't take care of her hair and dressed to be unimpressive, she couldn't hide the fact that she was very pretty, even without makeup. She tried to project a tough attitude but more than once Greg had seen her helping another student with academic problems. He'd even seen her comforting a weeping freshman girl in the lobby one day. The more he saw of her, the more he wanted to know her but she wouldn't give him the time of day. That aroused his interest even more.

Since Beth had been a fulltime student their first year and he'd only picked up thirteen credits, they were both juniors this year. Last fall Beth was in all his classes except one and they were also assigned to the same chapel team so they had needed to talk more. Greg had started getting more serious about pursuing her because the more he got to know her, the more he liked and admired her. Beth was not only very intelligent, she was also creative and had great ideas for chapel. They'd been required to take active roles in the chapel. He'd chosen to man the computer for the graphics and to everyone's surprise, Beth had joined the worship team as both vocalist and guitarist. She was excellent on both, but she still kept to the background. She had continued to carefully limit her conversations with him to only chapel related things even as he became more persistent in his efforts to talk to her.

Their first and only real conversation had come at a time when he was anxious. His sister Heather was sinking into depression after she had been shot and Steve had broken up with her because he was afraid of losing her. Greg saw his life-long friend slipping away from him and didn't know what to do for her. He had prayed for help.

That day, for the first time Beth had come late to class. In doing so she had fated herself to sit next to Greg who always sat in the back of the class and just happened to have no one sharing his table that day, also a first.

Greg had seen Beth as an answer to his prayer, since she was a woman and was likely to understand what was going on in Heather's head. He had tried to ask if Beth would give him some advice and in the process had made a fool of himself when every thought seemed to come out wrong. He'd even suggested his sister wasn't a girl! But Beth had agreed to talk to him during lunch. She'd given him some sage advice which he'd applied. It worked and Heather began to resume her life again.

Beth had given him the advice the week before the Thanksgiving break. By the time he returned to school and saw her in his Tuesday morning class,

Heather and Steve were back together again and working out their differences. Greg knew that Beth's advice was only part of the solution, but he was so happy for Heather that when Beth stopped to ask him how his sister was, he'd jumped to his feet and given her an enthusiastic hug.

"She's great," he'd said in excitement. "You were so right about getting her back into her routines. She did laundry even before Steve came on Friday. They worked out their problems and they're back together. Thank you!"

"Uh, that's great," Beth had turned pale and pushed him away then she went to hide in her usual spot. She hadn't spoken two words to him since then, not during the last three weeks of last semester, nor in the first three of this one.

That wasn't a situation Greg intended to let slide but he didn't know how to alter it. He'd been praying about it, but Beth had managed to block his every attempt to talk to her. She was almost as adept at maneuvering as his soon-to-be-brother-in-law, the superstar defensive end who never let anything get past him on the field. Unless Steve was distracted. But how was he supposed to distract Beth, especially when he was distracted by this wretched class?

The leadership class was making it hard for him to think of anything but it. He'd chosen to run and swim this morning before going to class because he hoped it would relax him enough to take his mind off his problems and get it fully operational before the quiz at nine.

But the sun barely winked at him before the clouds slammed shut and the curtain of rain descended. It wasn't a heavy rain, just the typical light rain, almost a mist at times, but there were no breaks in the clouds to allow the sun to give him a glimpse of a rainbow, so the rain was depressing this morning. Instead of swimming in liquid gold, he was slogging through dull swells that seemed to pull the light from him.

By the time Greg made it to class he was in a foul mood, very rare for him. He sat in his usual spot at the back of the room, took out his notes to study and ignored everyone around him.

Chapter 2

Beth Harrison hated to be late. In fact, to the best of her recollection she had never been late for anything in her life until about four years ago. Since then, she'd been late more times than she cared to admit. Most of the time it wasn't for anything important, but this was the second time she'd been late for class and she didn't like that, especially thinking about what had happened the other time. She'd ended up sitting next to Greg Shepherd and making a very bad judgment call. She couldn't help herself. He had been so pitiful that she had relaxed too much and gotten comfortable being with him.

"You're a girl," Greg had blurted out with delight when she sat down next to him. The shocked horror in his eyes had immediately alleviated the apprehension his words should have caused her. He'd tried to explain and had gone from bad to worse.

Beth had no interest in any man, but the fact that this glib, self-assured, extremely attractive man was flustered by mousy little Beth Harrison touched her in a way that awakened a sense of fun that she'd long since buried. She'd not only talked to him but she'd also had lunch with him, letting him buy without even thinking about it.

Then Greg had surprised her with that hug.

It wasn't like she was unused to hugs. They lived in a very kissy, huggy culture, especially in the church. Since she'd grown up with lots of hugs and other kind physical touches, she accepted the hugs pretty easily, even if she wasn't completely comfortable with the ones from the guys. Knowing they were just out of Christian friendship, she didn't shrink from them anymore.

But then Greg hugged her!

When Greg had hugged her that Tuesday after Thanksgiving, it was a very personal hug, not at all like the after-worship quick Christian greetings that were so common. There had been such joy and exuberance in that hug and it was all directed at her, specifically to her. Greg had hugged her because he felt joy over her. He delighted in her presence, in her friendship and he had hugged her with that delight. It had felt so good but she knew it was very wrong.

Beth needed no man in her life, certainly not this joyful man bounding through life with the childlike wonder of a three year old. She had watched carefully and kept her distance ever since. She had no intention of letting Greg Shepherd get close to her. He was much too dangerous.

Beth slipped into the room just as the professor started his typical cheerful greeting. She saw two chairs open, her normal seat, second row from the front on the left side, and the one next to Greg in the back row right next to the door.

“Ah, just in time,” the professor said with annoying enthusiasm. Everyone turned to see who had entered in the nick of time. Everyone but Greg who remained hunched over his table.

Interesting! The man with the curiosity of a child wasn't curious.

Beth told herself that she sat next to him only because she didn't want to further distract the class by making her way to her regular seat. The professor had already started his opening instructions, so sitting by Greg had nothing to do with her concern over his lack of curiosity.

Greg didn't look up when she sat down, didn't even twitch from his intense perusal of last week's notes. Beth watched him out of the corner of her eye. It occurred to her that she hadn't seen that typical Greg exuberance for quite some time. He still put on a good front, but there was a hollow ring to it. Something was bothering the big man.

It really wasn't her business, so she forced her thoughts down and listened carefully to the professor. Still, she couldn't help but notice that Greg was intently focused on his notes while the professor finished up his usual pre-quiz announcements.

“Okay, quiz time,” Pastor Jeff announced as if he was offering shave ice. “Clear off your tables and grab your pens.”

The students groaned almost in unison as they slowly shuffled their papers together to comply. Pastor Jeff's quizzes were legendary. All the students worried about them, studying furiously before each class.

The man beside her wasn't worried, he was distraught. He gripped his pen in a white-knuckled fist as he stared down at the table, waiting for the quiz to be passed to him. His left leg was doing a nervous dance under the table.

Beth tried to catch Greg's eye as she passed his quiz to him, but he didn't look up. He just stared at the paper for a few seconds then hunched over the table, his head propped in his left hand.

Beth flew through the quiz quickly then went back to check her answers, changing very little. With nothing to do until it was time to exchange papers and grade the quiz, she watched Greg without being too obvious. His leg had stopped bouncing but his left hand was now fisted in his thick dark hair. It seemed like every muscle in his body was tense. He was sweating in spite of the too cool air conditioning.

The professor asked if anyone needed more time. Greg's hand shot up.

“Okay, you have two more minutes,” Pastor Jeff cheerfully conceded a little more time.

From the way Greg’s leg started bouncing again Beth knew it wasn’t going to be enough for him. When Pastor Jeff finally called time and instructed them to trade papers with their table mates, Beth was shocked to see Greg’s paper. He hadn’t come close to finishing the bible passage they were supposed to write nor had he answered all the questions. Many of the answers he did have were vigorously crossed out and rewritten, showing the confusion he’d felt. His handwriting was almost childlike with its too large, awkward letters written with way too much pressure. She began to suspect she knew what was going on with the big man.

Greg hadn’t looked up, even when they traded papers, just slid his over and taken hers. He looked at the paper he was supposed to grade and saw her name. His head shot up and he stared at her, his dusky skin paling. She saw the stunned dismay in his eyes before he looked down again.

Compassion for him flared in Beth and this time she didn’t attempt to tamp it down. As they graded the papers, she sorrowed over how many times she had to check wrong answers for him. She noticed that he turned the pages woodenly and when she missed one of the multiple choice questions he didn’t mark it wrong.

“I missed that one,” Beth leaned over and placed her finger on the one that was wrong. Greg sighed heavily and placed a check mark next to her finger.

When it came time to write the grades at the top of the paper, Beth sadly wrote fifty-two on Greg’s paper, then leaned over and prompted him to write ninety-eight on hers. She pushed his paper across the table to him, but he deliberately placed her paper on top of it. Clearly he didn’t want his paper back, probably not ever.

Beth strongly suspected that Greg heard virtually nothing of the lecture for the rest of that hour. He turned the pages of his notes late, as if realizing she had turned hers then following her lead. He didn’t look up, never looked her way. He seemed ready to bolt.

Greg proved her assessment. As soon as Pastor Jeff announced the ten minute break, he shot from the room.

Beth knew he was going somewhere to hide. He probably wasn’t planning to return to class. She followed quickly, keeping him in sight even though his long legs carried him much faster than she could go without running. Greg turned a corner and Beth knew he was heading to a little used exit that opened up into a small courtyard. She followed quickly, checking once to make sure no one else was watching.

GREG BURST THROUGH the door and hunched over with a groan of pain, grabbing his hair in tightly clenched fists.

Oh God! Why did it have to be her? Why did she have to see my humiliation? Why couldn't she have sat up front where she belongs?

Suddenly the door opened behind him. Greg whirled to see who had followed him. He stumbled back and slumped against the wall when he saw that it was Beth. He closed his eyes and hung his head, willing her away.

“You have a learning disability,” she spoke matter-of-factly and yet compassionately.

His eyes snapped open and he glared at her.

“Why don't you go back to avoiding me like a good little mouse?” he growled.

“My brother Kyle has a learning disability,” she spoke calmly in spite of the surprise that flared in her eyes at his harsh tone.

“So what?” Greg knew he sounded like a jerk, but he couldn't dredge up the desire to care right now. He would prefer that this beautiful woman with her cool gray eyes were anywhere but here, watching his humiliation.

“So I helped my brother and I can help you.” Beth was still calm in spite of his obvious resentment at her intrusion.

“Why would you help me? You don't even like me,” Greg said with narrowed eyes.

Beth studied him for a moment, coolly assessing him and his question.

“I don't dislike you,” she finally said. “I hardly even know you.”

“And that's the way you want it to be, so why don't you just go back to class and leave me alone?” Greg snapped.

She stared at him again, obviously thinking over her words. She was a cool one, unlike the Shepherds who tended to speak passionately and think later.

“I can't leave you alone because you need my help,” Beth said simply.

“I don't want your help.” Greg swallowed hard and shoved his hands in his pockets, staring at a point over Beth's head.

“Yes, you do,” Beth laughed softly. Greg looked back at her, shocked by her bold declaration, especially when he realized he really did want her help because that meant she would have to spend time with him. She stepped closer and Greg saw determination flare in her eyes. “You're here because you're pursuing a dream and that class stands in your way. I can help you get your dream.”

“You —” Greg quickly locked his jaws on his thought, refusing to let it out, surprised by its sudden intensity. *You are my dream.* Beth took his reaction as assent to her help.

“We need to get back to class now but meet me here after,” she said in a tone that brooked no argument. “Bring your lunch.”

She spun on her heel and walked to the door. Holding it open, she looked at him expectantly. He sighed and pushed away from the wall. Instead of going through the door, he grasped it at the top and with his free hand motioned for

her to precede him. She stepped through the door then looked back over her shoulder to make sure he was following. Greg shook his head slightly as he followed, letting the door swing shut behind him. She sure was one feisty little mouse.

When they got back to the classroom, the professor had returned their quizzes. Greg didn't want to touch his but Beth was watching, so he pulled it toward him and slowly turned it over. Slashed in red across the top of the paper was a summons, "See me after class." Greg hung his head in shame.

A small hand squeezed his gently then Beth took the paper from him and put it in his folder. She put her hand on his arm and tugged slightly. He looked at her with sad eyes.

"Don't worry about it," she smiled. "Tell him the truth."

Greg just frowned and shook his head.

"Why not?"

He didn't answer, just deliberately faced the front where Pastor Jeff was getting ready to start the second half of the class.

BETH WAS THE one who didn't comprehend much in the next hour. She alternated between a subtle perusal of the man next to her and berating herself for committing to help him.

She knew it wasn't wise to work in close proximity to him. She sensed a core of integrity in him that assured her she would never, ever have to fear him, but that was small comfort to someone with so many secrets. He seemed the kind of guy who would intuitively know she had hidden pain. He wouldn't rest until he ferreted it all out and tried to fix it, but her pain couldn't be fixed, her secrets couldn't be revealed.

She would have to try to convince Greg to report his learning disability to the academic dean. The college was required by law to provide him the help he needed so that he could learn in spite of his disability, but Beth knew that Greg was unlikely at this point to freely admit to his problem. If he had wanted to, he would have done it when he first enrolled. She would have to tread lightly or he would back out of letting her help him. She hadn't missed the fact that he hadn't actually agreed to her help.

Beth really wanted Greg to succeed in this class and eventually get his degree. He was going to make a fine pastor someday. There was a rare compassion in that oversized frame. A lifetime ago, she would have gladly allowed herself to fall in love with such a man, to work beside him to build his church, but now it was no longer a possibility. Now she would be working alone for the rest of her days.

Beth glanced over at Greg and saw how carefully he paid attention to the professor. She suspected that he fully grasped everything he heard, that he filed it away carefully and could recall it in an instant. But for some reason, when

he sat down and looked at the questions on paper with the clock ticking away, his brain wouldn't function properly.

Beth looked down at Greg's hands, laying relaxed on the table now. They were such large, strong hands, yet she couldn't imagine that they would ever hurt anyone. He exuded peace and gentleness, when he wasn't stressing over a quiz. She could imagine how people must respond to his comfort when he took their hands in his and looked at them with those compassionate dark chocolate eyes.

Beth shivered thinking about it and suddenly those eyes were looking at her with concern. She carefully controlled her blush and reached for her sweatshirt, as if the air conditioning were the reason for her chicken skin, not her wayward thoughts. Greg suddenly got up and went to the back to adjust the thermostat. She wanted to scream.

What had she gotten herself into? Why had she done it? How was she going to get through this without getting her heart broken and maybe breaking his in the process?

Chapter 3

When class was over, Greg gathered up his things and frowned, running a hand through his hair. Beth put her hand on his shoulder as she stood.

“Don’t worry,” she said softly, calmly. “You will not fail another quiz, I promise. I’ll wait for you in the courtyard.”

Greg watched her walk away, feeling confused. The woman hadn’t so much as looked at him in almost three months and now she was bullying him into letting her help him. He suddenly wished he had more than one sister. Maybe he’d understand women better if he did.

As much as he wanted to spend time with Beth, Greg wasn’t sure if he wanted to let her help him. She’d already guessed his one secret, so he wasn’t worried about that anymore but what if she guessed the other, the one where he was already half in love with her. Maybe more after today.

Beth was beautiful, for all her off-putting attitude and dress. She seemed so small to Greg. She barely hit five and a half feet if that. He would bet that under those baggy clothes she had a very petite frame. Her small hands gave her away. When he’d stood over her in the courtyard, trying not to look into those eyes flashing like swords at battle, he had noticed that the brown of her mousy brown hair probably wasn’t natural since she had roots that seemed to be a rich, pure gold. Why would anyone hide such gorgeous hair?

Obviously she had secrets. She exuded pain, though she hid it well from most people. He’d just seen too much of it in his life, especially in the past year when he met Steve’s sister Jenni and then watched Heather as she went through great physical and emotional pain. Beth had been hurt, badly, and he wanted to find whomever had done it to her and beat him senseless. How was he going to help Beth see that he wasn’t the kind of guy who would ever hurt her? At least not intentionally. He’d seen Luke and Nalani enough to know that guys have a tendency to do stupid things and hurt women’s feelings but he’d also seen his brother learn from his mistakes and make it up to his wife.

Greg harbored no illusions about his right to have a family of his own. He had no way to support a family and no prospects for a change in that, but if Beth would let him, he knew he could help her with whatever caused her pain,

help her heal and move on with her life. How was he going to convince her of that?

And how was he going to convince the professor that he didn't need to worry about his grades? The man was coming down the aisle now. Greg started to rise, then thought better of it. He didn't want to tower over the professor as they talked. Pastor Jeff was a short Japanese man, at least a foot shorter than Greg's six foot five and Greg always felt awkward when they stood and talked. Maybe Pastor Jeff did too because he pulled out the chair Beth had recently vacated and perched on it, frowning thoughtfully at Greg.

"This was the third quiz that you failed, Greg. That's three for three," the professor jumped right into it. "I'm not sure you should be in this class."

"But I have to take this class," Greg paled at the man's words. "It's required."

"Yes, I know, but maybe you need to take it in a semester when you have fewer classes," he said. "Have you been studying enough?"

"Not really," Greg prayed that God would forgive his small lie. He decided to follow it up with a truth. "But Beth has offered to help me study better."

"Beth Harrison?" Pastor Jeff was surprised. "She's doing very well in this class. If she'll help you I'm sure you'll do well too, but I didn't realize you were friends."

Neither did I, Greg thought wryly. He couldn't think of anything appropriate to say to the professor so he just shrugged.

"We'll see what happens in the next few weeks," Pastor Jeff conceded. "How are you doing in your other classes?"

"No complaints from the professors," Greg shrugged. No quizzes were as hard as Pastor Jeff's and while he wasn't getting an A in any other class, neither was he failing anything else.

"Okay then," Pastor Jeff stood and gathered up his things. "I'll be expecting some improvement next week."

Greg sighed heavily when the professor left him alone in the classroom. Now he was committed to working with Beth. He wasn't sure if that was good or bad. He briefly contemplated not returning to the courtyard but then he remembered the fire flashing in those silver eyes. She would hunt him down and run him through if he stood her up. He went on reluctant feet.

BETH PACED THE courtyard wondering if Greg was going to stand her up. If he did, she would find him and Well, she wasn't sure what she would do, but he wouldn't like it. She was going out on a limb here and while Greg might not realize that, he'd better appreciate her offer to help.

She looked at her watch again, surprised to see that the minute hand hadn't ticked up to the top of the hour. It felt like so much time had already passed but it wasn't even ten minutes. What was her problem?

The door opened and she saw the answer to that question standing humbly, shyly even, in the doorway. He was well over six foot tall and probably weighed more than two hundred pounds, mostly muscle, but his deep brown eyes were so gentle, so sad. Between those eyes and his thick dark hair mussed up from the beating he'd given it earlier, he looked like a three year old who didn't want to go to bed even though he was tired.

"Did you tell Pastor Jeff?" Beth asked immediately, hoping for a reprieve.

"No," Greg frowned and stepped out into the courtyard, letting the door swing shut behind him.

"Why not?" Beth stamped her foot. Greg looked at her in surprise. Beth shoved down her own surprise. She didn't know where that had come from. She never displayed her emotions so childishly. "Have you already been tested? Do you know for sure that you have a learning disability?"

"Yes." Greg flopped down on one of the chairs, his long legs sprawled in front of him and his right arm draped on the small table. He stared at his feet. "I was tested at the community college. It's a type of dyslexia, combined with a visual cognitive disconnect. Even when I can read things, I don't put it in my memory banks as well as when I hear it. And if I've only read it, I can't retrieve it very well."

"I'll bet time limits make it worse, don't they?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"A good guess based on what I saw today and what my brother used to go through," Beth sighed, stepped over Greg's legs and dropped into the chair across from him. She dug her lunch out of her backpack and looked expectantly at Greg. He shrugged.

"I didn't bring lunch today."

"Don't you usually?"

"Have you been spying on me?"

"Spying on you?" Beth rolled her eyes. "By this time you're usually sitting in the lounge making everyone laugh or think. It's kind of hard to miss you."

Greg wasn't sure what to say about that so he didn't say anything. Sometimes it was best to keep his mouth shut.

"Here, you can share my sandwich."

"That's okay, I'll get something later."

"Don't be pigheaded!" Beth put half her sandwich on a napkin and pushed it toward him then opened her bag of chips and set it between them.

Greg shrugged and reached for his backpack. He pulled out two cold cans of diet cola and set one before her as he sat properly at the table to join her for lunch. "I stopped at the machine on the way here."

"How did you know I wanted diet cola?" Greg looked sheepish. "*You* have been spying on *me*."

“I wasn’t ...” Greg felt the heat rising up his neck. He couldn’t honestly deny it as she had. No way was she as noticeable as he was. He had to be deliberately watching her to know anything about her.

Beth wasn’t sure what to think about that. Mr. Personality had been watching the mouse? She decided to get them back on the right track. “Why won’t you tell the school about your learning disability?”

“Because I don’t want to.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” she scolded him. “This is something that you obviously can’t do by yourself or we wouldn’t be sitting here having this conversation. You need some help.”

“And you offered it,” Greg shrugged. “I’m accepting.”

“But it’ll be so much easier if the school helps you,” Beth urged. “They can give you better support. All I can do is help you figure out work-arounds.”

“I don’t want a handout from the school,” Greg said firmly. “I already got that with the scholarship.”

“That’s too silly,” Beth fumed. “You’ll take a handout from me but not from the school.”

“You didn’t offer a handout,” Greg said. “You offered a hand up.”

“What’s the difference?” Beth snapped.

“Pity.”

“Excuse me?”

“Someone who gives a handout pities someone who’s weaker.”

“What makes you think I don’t pity you?”

“Tiger, I don’t think you have a pity bone in your body,” Greg said dryly.

Beth was at a loss, unsure about what to do with that statement. Had she really gotten that hard?

“I thought I was a mouse,” she finally squeaked out, very mouse-like.

“I was wrong,” Greg said softly. “Way wrong.”

Had she really become pitiless? Beth didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. She did neither. She dug her folder out of her book bag and pulled out the quiz. She cleared her throat and jumped in without preamble.

“Philippians 2 –”

Before she could even finish citing the verse numbers, Greg recited the entire passage, not just the verses they were responsible for this week. He was perfect. A verse from John, again perfect. Galatians, perfect. Corinthians, perfect. Pastor Jeff hadn’t required them to memorize any but the Philippians passage.

While they shared her lunch, Beth went through every question on the quiz. Greg answered every one without hesitation. Every answer was correct.

“One hundred percent.” Beth folded her hands and laid them on the quiz. “Greg, you need to tell the academic dean about your learning disability. Let someone read the quizzes to you. You should have an A in this class, not an F.”

“I don’t care about getting an A,” Greg frowned, shifting away from her, back to the sprawl he’d taken up before their lunch. “I just want to get a C and keep my scholarship.”

“You are so frustrating,” Beth rubbed her left temple and glared at him.

“Best defense is a good offense,” Greg muttered, smiling slightly.

Beth wanted to be angry. She really did. The man was utterly infuriating. He called her a little mouse and a pitiless tiger, then declared that she was frustrating. She should stomp out in a rage. Instead she snickered.

Greg looked at her sideways without raising his head, reminding her of her little brother when he wasn’t sure if he was being cute or getting in trouble.

She laughed, free and easy like she used to laugh at her little brother. It felt good to laugh like that again.

Suddenly Greg was looking at her in a way no man had ever looked at her before. It was a look of honest, sweet adoration, like she used to see her dad give her mom. It sobered her immediately.

“You should laugh more often,” Greg said earnestly. “It’s like the sun shining through the rain, so full of life and joy.”

No man had ever had Beth at a loss for words so many times in one day. She cast about quickly for something. “How do you get by in your other classes?”

“Mostly Cs with a couple of Bs,” Greg accepted her redirection.

“But how do you do it?”

“The quizzes are simpler, and I have plenty time for the papers.”

“What about the reading?”

“Some of it I just take the time and read it aloud,” Greg smiled a happy, secret smile that spoke of love. Beth was surprised to feel a stab of envy. “My sister reads some of the textbooks to me.”

“Does your sister know about your learning disability?”

“No! No one does but you and one friend. There’s also a couple people at the community college but they’ve probably long ago forgotten about me.”

Beth doubted that. “How do you get Heather to read to you if she doesn’t know about your learning disability?”

“She’s always loved to read to me,” Greg shrugged. “She did it when she first started to read, before I even dreamt about going to school. When I had trouble reading after I started school, she would often sit down and read to me. I understood it much better when I went back and read it for myself later. Since Heather’s really interested in learning more about the bible, she’s been happy to read to me. But I guess that’s about to end.”

“Why’s that?”

“Steve’s coming home today.”

“Ah. Her fiancé,” Beth sighed dreamily thinking of Steve’s proposal in the stadium after the Championship Game. It had made the news and was still being talked about.

“I gather you saw the proposal,” Greg smiled.

“That was so romantic, but it must be hard to have your life played out in public that way.”

“It’s their own fault,” Greg laughed. “He was the MVP of the Championship Game and he got down on one knee without checking to see if there were still cameras in the stadium.”

“After he boldly announced his intention,” Beth giggled.

“Yeah, that was a classic,” Greg shook his head with a smile, remembering Steve’s unexpected answer to the reporters’ “What are you going to do now?” question. “But none of us were really surprised. Personally, I thought the post-game show overshadowed the game itself.”

“Oh, my goodness,” Beth said, leaning across the table. “You’re a romantic! How does a big macho guy get to be a romantic?”

“Why do women always assume that masculinity and romance are oxymorons?” Greg complained.

“They usually are,” Beth insisted. “How did you avoid the curse?”

“My sister loved to read to me, remember? That included the romances that she discovered when she was still a pre-teen,” Greg blushed and shrugged. “I easily process what I hear.”

“Please tell me they weren’t ... you know,” Beth shrugged and blushed too.

“The trashy kind with the macho man on the cover?” Greg laughed. “No they were the Christian ones, like Grace Livingstone Hill. A little melodramatic, but very wholesome. It made it kind of hard to date when the girls expected to be mauled and I wanted to open doors for them.”

“I know what you mean,” Beth sighed. “It was so disgusting in high school listening to the locker room talk.”

“The girls did it too?” Greg was genuinely surprised.

“Probably worse than the guys,” Beth rolled her eyes. “Many times I felt like washing out my mind with soap after leaving gym class. Did you date much?”

“I’ve had a grand total of two quasi dates my whole life,” Greg shook his head, “and one of them was with you in November.”

“That’s one more than I ever had,” Beth said wryly, trying not to smile as she remembered that quasi date. “I think I scared the guys in high school.”

“That’s not surprising,” Greg said. “Let me guess, you were a straight-A student and you exuded self-confidence?”

“Not very attractive to a teenaged boy, huh?”

“Not to most teenagers, no, but to a real man ...,” Greg shrugged one shoulder and smiled softly. “So what happened when you graduated?”

“I went in the Army to get money for college and all the guys were jerks,” Beth said shortly.

“My sister says the same thing,” Greg said, “but I’ll bet there were plenty of guys who felt the same way about the women in the Army.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Logic, Tiger,” Greg looked askance at her curt tone. “If you and I went through high school with similar negative feelings about the opposite sex, it only makes sense that there were others, both girls and guys, in the military who are like us too.”

“Maybe, but I didn’t find them,” Beth frowned. “We should get back to the reason for us being together today.”

“What’s that?” Greg asked softly.

“You and your quizzes,” Beth said shortly, trying not to blush again.

“Oh that,” Greg said vaguely. “Yeah I guess we should.”

“How do you study for the quizzes?”

“Study for the quizzes?”

“Focus Greg. Focus.”

“Um, I ... I do flash cards and stuff like that.”

“That’s the first thing you’re going to have to change,” Beth said firmly.

“Why? What’s wrong with that?”

“What’s wrong with that is that it’s not the way you’re going to have to give the information back to the professor,” Beth explained patiently. “You need to study in the same way you’re going to be quizzed.”

“You want me to write!” Greg was astonished. “With pen on paper?”

“Is there any other way?”

“Yeah, the computer. That’s how I do my papers.”

“But that’s not how you take your quizzes. If you study in the same way you’re going to be quizzed, it’ll relieve your stress before and during the quiz.”

“And increase it for the rest of the week.” Greg’s look was perilously close to a pout.

“Not nearly as much as you think,” Beth laughed at him, “and it’ll get better each week.”

“Explain how I’m supposed to do this.”

“Put all that stuff you have on flashcards in a mock quiz,” Beth said. “You can even type it on the computer. Then print it out and start taking the quiz, two or three times a day if you can.”

“I see the logic in that,” Greg frowned at her, “but not the fun.”

“Does learning have to be fun?”

“No, but it sure helps.”

“Then laugh while you’re doing it,” Beth said wryly.

“I’ve got a better idea,” Greg smile softly and leaned across the table. “I’ll just imagine you laughing.”

“I need to go,” Beth dropped her eyes and fought the blush that threatened once again. Goodness, she was having a hard time today. What was it about this man that affected her so much? She wasn’t, absolutely was not, interested

in a relationship with any man. She was not going to fall for Greg, no matter how much time she spent with him.

GREG WALKED OUT with Beth when she insisted that she had to leave or she would be late for an appointment. As they neared the door to the parking lot, his pocket began to sing “The Pirates Who Don’t Do Anything.”

Beth looked at him with a smile and a raised eyebrow.

“My sister,” Greg shrugged as he fished out his phone. “It’s kind of our theme song.”

He flipped open his phone. “Hey Boss!”

“He’s gonna be an hour late!” Heather wailed, dispensing with a greeting.

“Woman,” Greg laughed quietly, “if you can’t wait an hour to see the man, how are you gonna wait almost four weeks to marry him?”

Beth smiled at that, pointed to her watch then waved as she backed out the door. Greg waved back, inwardly scowling at his sister’s timing. He should have let it go to voice mail.

“Come hang out with me?” Heather begged.

“You’re pathetic,” Greg laughed. “Are you already at the airport?”

“Yes.”

“Well parking fees aren’t a problem for your beloved, though you might want to make sure he has something smaller than a fifty. A problem which I don’t have, by the way.”

“I know that’s not one of your worries, Little Big Man,” Heather sighed. “Right now I just need company or I’m gonna start babbling to strangers.”

“We can’t have that.” Greg rolled his eyes at the thought of where Heather’s babbles could go. “Rather than park and spend money I don’t have, how about I pick you up and we go to the coffee shop off Paiea? Then I can take you back when Steve calls after he lands.”

Greg stepped out of the building and headed for his car, glad he’d brought it instead of the motorcycle.

“You would do that for me? You’re so sweet, Little Big Man!”

“Not sweet, boss,” Greg groaned into the phone even though he smiled because he saw Beth driving toward him through the parking lot. “Anything but sweet, please.”

“Okay, you’re a darling,” Heather laughed, well aware of his aversion to being “sweet.”

“Marginally better,” Greg grinned, waving at Beth. She didn’t see him.

“Just come rescue me and you can be anything you want.”

“I’m already there,” Greg flipped his phone shut and stared as Beth drove by, oblivious to his presence. He couldn’t believe his eyes.

She had a toddler car seat in her backseat.