THANKS FOR LOVE

A THANKSGIVING NOVELLA

MAGGIE LYNCH

Windtree Press

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This is for Christy Carlyle, my friend, fellow author, and walking partner. It is our walks that help to keep me healthy, and our friendship that keeps me sane. We discuss our characters, our plots, our writing careers, and share what's going on in our day-to-day lives.

CHAPTER 1

Tom leaned over Sarah's hospital bed and brushed a light kiss across her bald head. She stirred but did not wake. Though she'd been alert when he'd finally found her at Amanda's cabin, the surgery, pain medication, and the need to sleep meant she only woke a few times a day and then only for a few moments. The untreated stab and whip wounds had become infected, causing sepsis.

It was the third morning they'd shared in the hospital. He hadn't left since he'd rode in the ambulance with her after enduring Amanda's insanity. He'd never forgive himself for all he'd done to bring Amanda into their life, both eight years ago and now.

Sarah's eyes fluttered open. She tried to move but groaned. "I feel like I've been run over by a semi." Her gravelly voice was barely a whisper as she struggled to speak.

"You may as well have been. Your body has been through a lot. It will take a while to get back to your energetic self." He paused and squeezed her hand. "Take it slow. You don't have to talk.

She groaned again and barely whispered, "What happened with Amanda?"

Tom clamped his jaw with the memory of everything Sarah had been through—the beatings, the knife cuts, the angry shaving of her

head, the broken ribs—all because Amanda wanted Tom for herself, no matter what Tom wanted.

"She's in jail," he answered between his teeth. "And she's going to stay there a very long time."

"She was so raging, so hurt. I…actually felt sorry for her. Sarah said. "I prayed for her the entire time I was at that cabin."

"And how did that work out for you?" He bit his tongue at the harshness of his words. He didn't want to be angry with Sarah. He was still angry with himself and how his actions eight years ago had put all of this in play. Tom had no prayers for Amanda. In fact, if he had it in his power to send her straight to hell he wouldn't hesitate for even a moment.

"You sound angry," Sarah said.

"Damn right I'm angry. She had no right to think I'd be with her. She had no right to kidnap you and take her twisted feelings of revenge out on you. You could have died. If she needed revenge she should have kidnapped me.

Sarah put her hand over his closed fist. "It's not your fault."

"It is. If I'd never dated her…if I'd never been a scared teenager and left you…I must have done something to make her believe we would stay together."

"That was eight years ago, Tom. You can't be held accountable for something you did as a teenager. She got married. She had children. There was nothing that would make you think she would do this."

He ran his hand through his hair and shook his head. "There were signs. She kept coming on to me and I didn't take it seriously. I am accountable. I regretted dating her eight years ago, and I still regret it now."

"Obviously, she needs help. Killing her own husband …with her children in the house?" Sarah closed her eyes and Tom saw tears trickling down her cheek.

He breathed deeply to calm himself. His anger was not helping Sarah heal. "I'm sorry," he said as he stroked her cheek with a finger. "I didn't mean to get worked up."

Sarah sighed and turned her head toward him. "Something is

definitely wrong with her. Something snapped." She paused and swallowed before continuing. "She was mean in high school but she was never out of control like this," Sarah said, her voice a little stronger. "That's why she needs my prayers. You have to let go, Tom. Don't let what she did eat you up inside. If you do, she'll come between us again, and I don't think I could survive losing you this time."

He shook his head with wonder. Sarah should be the one seeking revenge. He'd never known a woman like her—someone who was already on the road to forgiving Amanda, even after all she'd been through.

"What does that head shake mean?" she asked. "That you won't let go?"

"No, the revenge is that she will be in prison a very long time." He looked toward the corner of the room and his chest tightened. He fought to control his anger. "As for letting go…I can't. I'm no saint. Never have been and never will be."

"I'm not either," Sarah insisted.

He looked back and quirked a brow upward.

"I'm not—not even close. It's just that I've learned, through my own mistakes, that hating takes a lot more energy than I'm willing to give it." She paused and closed her eyes.

He waited, but it was as if this short conversation took all of her energy. She fell asleep again.

Tom leaned in and brushed her lips again. "Sweet dreams, love." He sighed and slipped back in his chair, his eyes closing for just a few minutes.

"How are Grady and Connor?" she asked as he began to nod off.

He smiled and moved back toward the bed, clasping her hand. "They're doing fine at the Rodgers' farm. I've called them every day to talk to them. They have a lot of questions about why you are in the hospital and if they can come see you."

Her forehead wrinkled. He wasn't sure if it was in concentration or in pain. "What have you told them so far?"

Tom's breath caught. He'd struggled with that question himself. He

hadn't told them much, just enough to help them not worry. He hoped.

He drew his fingers up her arm to her throat, lightly caressing the bottom of her throat to her shoulder, alternating between the back of his hand and his fingertips. His fingers skimmed over the healing whip wounds along her clavicle. He wanted to kiss each one and have it heal as easily as a child's scraped knee.

"Tom?"

He swallowed hard, concentrating not to let any anger into his voice. "I told them we found their mommy, but that she is very sick and needed lots of help and they wouldn't see her for a very long time."

An audible breath escaped her lips. "That's good." She groaned as she shifted her weight a little to her side, so she could look directly at him. "And what have you told them about me?"

His caresses moved to her cheek; the cheek that was still black and blue from the punches she'd endured. "I told them you were hurt and had to go to the hospital and that you would be here at least a week. I told them that, when you are feeling better, I'll bring you back to the farm and they could come back to live with us."

"I want to see them," Sarah pronounced.

He shook his head. She seemed so fragile. "I don't think that's a good idea. If Connor and Grady see you like this they are going to ask a lot of questions about what happened. What will you say?"

Sarah took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I don't know what yet, but I also know that children can make up a lot worse things in their head about what is going on. Their mother left them. Their father was murdered while they were in the house. I'm sure they're thinking that we will leave them too or die." She placed a palm over his wrist. "I just want them to know I'm here for them. I want them to know that we will go back to being a family as soon as possible. I want them to know they are loved and we think of them as our children too."

"I want that too, Sarah. But…"

"How to reassure them without telling them their mother did this

to me," she finished his thought for him. She closed her eyes again. "Why does it have to be so hard? It's not fair for two little boys to be saddled with all this hurt."

"It's not fair for you to take it all on yourself, either." He traced circles across the back of her hand.

"I'm not. It's just that…"

"You want to put this all behind you and move forward."

She sighed and then slowly nodded. "Come up here." She patted the bed in front of her.

He chuckled. "I don't think there's room for both of us."

"There is." She grunted as she tried to maneuver toward the railing on the opposite side.

He stood. "Hold on. Don't hurt yourself even more by trying to move so much."

She pushed against the bed and locked her lips in concentration as she scooted another couple inches, then rested. "I have to move. They make me walk every day, you know." She grunted again and scooted herself one more time. When she'd backed up against the opposite railing, she patted the bed again. "Come on now. Make all this work worth my while."

He gingerly maneuvered his way onto his side and stretched out on the bed, inching his arm beneath her pillow. He stayed as close to the edge as possible so as not to put any pressure from his body on her.

"Closer," she said. "Don't make me have to move back toward you."

He scooted closer and Sarah angled her body and nestled her head into his neck. "Closer," she said again.

He snuggled in until they touched from chest to toes. He couldn't help but put an arm across her with a soft embrace. Then he angled his head above her and kissed her. At first it was soft and nurturing. But then she returned his kisses with a demand that surprised him.

He responded in kind, barely able to contain his own urgency. "I love you, Sarah Cosgrave."

"I know." She sighed again, and turned her cheek toward the bed.

Her eyes closed and almost immediately he heard the even breathing of sleep.

Tom didn't dare move. He watched her chest rise and fall with every breath. Three days ago he wasn't sure she would ever breathe on her own again. During surgery, they said she went into cardiac arrest from the entire trauma she'd suffered—from what Amanda did and from the surgery. Since then he'd spent every moment they let him at her bedside.

He wanted her back at home. He wanted them married. He wanted the four of them to be a family again…but not before she was ready and stronger. The farm was a long way from a trauma center; and more than anything else, he just wanted her whole and healthy again.

He'd find a way to bring Grady and Connor in tomorrow. Together they would find a way to tell them enough to be truthful, but not more than they could understand. He knew how easily a child could feel betrayed when they weren't told the truth and found out later. But he also knew how easily a child's sense of who they were was formed by memories of their parents.

It was a complicated path that Sarah requested. But she was right. Connor and Grady were now family and they all needed to find a way to heal together.

"Thank you, Lord, for holding Sarah," he whispered. He closed his eyes and a feeling of peace calmed him. His breathing slowed and soon sleep came too.

CHAPTER 2

Sarah sat on the edge of the hospital bed taking deep breaths before trying to change into pajamas. No way was she going to greet the boys in an ugly hospital gown that exposed her backside. She planned to go on a walk with them to prove she was doing well and assuage any concerns.

She took in a deep breath and then let it out as she lifted a foot into the royal blue pajama bottom. A pain immediately shot to her groin. The whip cuts on her thighs had been especially deep there and infected. There were several layers of stitching. As the wounds healed they also tightened. Right now it felt as if she was pulling all those stitches apart, one by one, as she raised and lowered her leg.

She took another deep breath and then lifted the other leg. "Woo!" A breath rushed out at the end. That leg was a little easier. Clasping her fingers around the edge of the v-necked tee shirt, she pulled it into her lap. The white and pink stars on the blue background made her smile. She could get the boys talking about star constellations with this. She easily slid the oversized top over her head and past her bandaged ribs.

Wobbling as she stood, Sarah grasped the walker next to the bed and slowly stood straight.

"Well, well. Look at you!" Theresa's smiling face peered around the corner of the door. "Okay if I come in?"

Sarah nodded. "Good timing. I need to decide what to do about my hair."

"What hair?" Theresa asked with a laugh. "Just tell the boys you decided to leave boring Sweetwater Canyon and join a raucous punk band."

Sarah rolled her eyes. "Yeah, sure. They'll believe that." She pushed the walker toward the bathroom. "Need to look in the mirror and see how bad it is, so I can create a reasonable story for the boys."

She opened the door and the light automatically came on. She gasped. "I feel like a bald Bride of Frankenstein." She turned her head from side to side. "It seems to look worse now than it did when they first unwrapped the bandage from my head."

Theresa put an arm around Sarah's waist. "You were drugged then, sweetie. Believe me, it's better. Not as red."

Sarah's shoulders drooped. "I shouldn't have insisted that Tom bring them here. All I'll do is scare them."

Theresa looked in the mirror and then turned to look Sarah in the eyes. "We will *not* let that happen. I brought some help." She scooted toward the door to the room and yelled into the hall, "Come on in."

In the mirror reflection, Sarah saw Kat and Michele march past with several bulging shopping bags. Michele was first into the bathroom and stepped to Sarah's side, gingerly hugging her. Then Kat appeared as well.

"Where? What?" Sarah sputtered.

"Tom called to tell us he was bringing the boys by. We knew you would feel pretty self-conscious, so we brought the makeover team. So, how about you come back to the bed and sit up and we'll all decide how you want to look."

Kat peeked from behind Michele. "It's not as bad as you think."

Sarah rolled her eyes.

"Okay, it is as bad as you think, but wait till you see what we brought."

Sarah heard a rustle in the room, but couldn't see anything.

"Stop the chit-chat and get in here." Rachel's lilting brogue caught Sarah's attention. "We don't have a lot of time. To get you even close to being as good looking as me, we need to start now."

Sarah smiled and scooted her walker back into the room. She gasped at the assortment of items spread across the foot of the bed—multiple scarves with different colors and patterns, hats from subdued to outrageous, and a variety of clothing.

Rachel reached into one more bag and pulled out two wigs, both close to Sarah's original golden-brown hair color. "Do you want the cute short page boy or the long sexy Lady Godiva?"

Sarah chuckled as a grateful tear escaped. "You guys are the best." She wobbled a bit as she pushed toward the bed.

Theresa stepped in to steady her with a strong arm. "Let's get you settled. This makeover stuff is exhausting."

Kat quickly took the walker and moved it out of the way as Theresa helped lift Sarah's legs back onto the bed.

"Exhausting for us," Rachel joked. "You're just going to sit there and be waited on like a queen."

Sarah laughed again. Rachel always helped her not take life too seriously. Who would have known they would really become friends when they were so different.

"How far up do you want to sit?" Theresa asked, as she pressed the button to raise the head of the bed.

"Stop," Sarah said when she'd reached a comfortable angle. "A little up on the knees too, please."

When Sarah finally settled, Rachel minced over with the wigs. "What's your choice? Return to your long locks or a whole new look?"

Sarah looked from one to the other. Neither felt right. Though her hair had been practically to her waist before Amanda shaved it all off, she didn't want to return to the past.

"I think no wig," she finally said. "I don't want to scare the boys, but I don't want to be something I'm not either. It's going to take a long time to get my hair past the pixie stage."

"Good choice," Kat said. "Personally, I always thought a colorful

scarf was the best way to go. You know kind of drape it across your head and then around your neck. It's all the style right now."

Kat fingered several different colors at the foot of the bed. She held up a cobalt-blue scarf with a subtle white, cloud pattern and handed it to Sarah. "Feel this. It is soooooo soft you'll want to sleep with it."

Sarah caressed the fabric with her fingertips. "Oh yes. I see what you mean. It's like brushed cotton or flannel."

"No wait," Kat said, now holding up a pastel blue scarf with multiple ocean colors. "Now this one is soft, lightweight, and won't highlight any dark patches." She draped it across Sarah's head and then around her neck. She held up a mirror. "See? It covers that bruise on your cheek and the lighter color evens out your skin tones."

Rachel stepped forward with a bottle in one hand. With the other hand she moved the scarf off Sarah's head and loosened it from around her neck. "I think this is just the right color, but your skin still needs a little help." She tapped out a bit from the bottle onto a fingertip and blended it all over Sarah's face. "This toner will even your skin tone, and then I'll add a little blush to make you look not quite as pale."

"Not too much," Sarah said. "You know I don't really wear much makeup."

Rachel brushed along her cheekbones with a light pink tone. "No worries. Just trying to put a little color back to make you look alive."

"And let's get rid of the astronomical pajama look," Theresa said. "You can be comfortable without looking bed-ridden or child-like."

"I thought it would be fun for the boys," Sarah countered.

"They want a mommy right now, not a playmate," Theresa said. She held up a navy drawstring pant. "These are comfy without being too tight." Then she put a long-sleeved, light blue mock-turtle top on top of the pants. "With the scarf Kat suggested, I think this outfit is comfy without being formal."

Sarah fingered the fabric of both the pants and the top. They were as soft as the scarf. "It's wonderful," she whispered, barely able to hold back from sobbing with gratefulness. Between all that had

happened and her worry about the boys, she was overwhelmed and seemed to be more emotional than usual. "Thank you. Thanks for everything."

She looked at her band mates—her best friends. Everyone was silent for moment. They were gathered around her bed, not in pity but in complete support. She was so blessed.

"Mmm…hmmm." Rachel cleared her throat, breaking the silence. "These clothes aren't going to jump on you on their own. Do you want help or privacy?"

"Though I love these, and I'll keep them for another day, I'm sticking with what I have on," Sarah said. "I put in a lot of effort to get these on. The pants are plain but comfy. Yes the top has stars, but it makes me smile and I still think at least Grady will get a kick out of it. Besides the beautiful scarf covers most of it anyway."

Theresa lightly patted Sarah's thigh. "You would know the boys best."

Rachel added a few more touches of makeup. Kat primped with the scarf, and Michele brought her a soft, slippered shoe to wear when she was walking.

"Alright everyone, step away." Theresa put her hand on the curtain. "Let's go for the full reveal."

The other women giggled and moved away from the bed.

"Yes, Ma'am," Rachel saluted.

"Shall I play some intro music?" Kat asked. Though she had no instruments with her she made boom box sounds and Michele and Sarah started singing the Jeopardy tune. "Do do do do do do do."

Theresa stood near the bed. "Are you ready? Can I help you to stand?"

"If you can move my feet that will help a lot." Sarah said.

After some grunts and groans, Theresa slowly opened the curtain.

"Well?" Sarah asked. She stood beside the bed, one hand resting on the mattress to keep her balance. She was fully dressed head-to-toe, including a soft slipper shoe.

"Whoa!" Kat said. "You look hot. I mean for you."

"Kat!" Theresa scolded.

"I mean hotter than usual. Wait, I mean…you know…okay, I'll just shut up before my foot is totally buried in my mouth up to the knee."

Sarah could barely stay upright she was trying not to laugh at Kat's distress. "I know what you mean, Kat. I'm not someone who usually dresses to impress. I'm happiest in easy jeans, no makeup, and a bit messy."

"But you've always been hot underneath," Kat added, shifting from one foot to the other.

"Obviously," Rachel said. "She didn't get the bad boy of Broken Bow without something going for her." She walked over to Sarah and whispered in her ear. "I suggest you are not standing when Tom returns. Because he won't be able to stop himself from jumpin' your bones and that could be awkward with the boys around."

Sarah felt her cheeks warm. "Rachel, you know we've never…"

"Sure you haven't," she responded with an exaggerated wink.

Michele stepped up. "I think you look absolutely lovely. Modestly sophisticated casual. The boys will feel very reassured."

"Is that even a thing?" Sarah asked.

"Um, no," Rachel pronounced. "But it is an apt description of how you look and it fits you."

Sarah backed up to the bed and plopped on the edge. "I appreciate everything you all have done. Thank you! Now I don't have to worry about scaring the boys."

Theresa plumped the pillows. "You look beat. Can I help you get your feet back into the bed?"

Sarah nodded. She was really tired. Who knew that getting dressed could be so exhausting? "I'd like to get a little sleep before Tom gets back."

"Of course," they all echoed.

Kat folded the scarves they'd brought and opened one of the drawers in the wardrobe along the back wall. "I'm putting these in here, just so you have a choice another day."

Rachel pulled together the makeup kit and stored it in the bathroom. Then each of her band mates came up and gave her a hug, along with words about getting well and calling if she needed something.

She nodded and thanked them. "How long are ya'll staying in Oklahoma?"

"At least six weeks," Theresa said. "Michele and David set up some gigs for us and we wanted to be sure we could stick around to see you safe back at the farm."

"And I can help babysit, if you need," Kat offered.

"And any one of us can help with some basic chores, grocery shopping, whatever you need while you're recovering."

"Noel and Claire are flying in this weekend," Rachel added. "Claire is going to do a duet with me as part of our Saturday gig. She also wanted to meet the boys. She remembers how confused she was when her parents had problems. I think she could be a great example for them."

All Sarah could do was nod. Her heart was filled with the generosity of her friends. It was hard to even imagine being back at the farm right now. But it really was where she wanted to be.

Sarah waved goodbye to her friends and settled back into the pillows. She closed her eyes, and counted her many blessings. "Thank you, Father, for my friends in Sweetwater Canyon. And for Tom's abiding love. Please be with me when Grady and Connor come to visit today. Help me to say the right things. Help me to be realistic with them, as well as confident. Help us all to embrace each other and to be steadfast as we grow into the new family we will make together."

CHAPTER 3

Tom had a firm hold on each of the boy's hands. Grady on his left and Connor on the right were practically pulling him through the hospital corridor to visit Sarah. Tom still wasn't one hundred percent convinced this was the right thing to do. But he'd learned that Sarah was strong-willed and she was usually right when it came to people's needs.

As they turned the corner toward Sarah's room, Tom stopped and pulled the boys to him. "Grady. Connor. I need to tell you something before we go in."

"What?" They both asked, barely able to stand still.

"We already know everything," Connor, the oldest, said. "We know she's sick, we know not to bounce on the bed and all that stuff. We remember."

"Yeah, we 'member," Grady echoed in his four-year-old voice. "Don't worry. We careful."

"Also, she may look a little funny," Tom said. "Like a little red or black and blue."

Connor's eyes opened wide. "Did she get in a fight? Did someone try to hurt her like Daddy? Did someone try to kill her?"

"No!" Grady said. "*No*! No one kill Miss Sarah. No!"

This was exactly why Tom had been afraid of telling the boys anything about Sarah's injuries. He'd handled this part badly.

"Grady?"

Tom looked up at the voice. There was Sarah, standing in the hall with her walker. A vision in blue. She was covered from head to toe, but she didn't look really hurt. None of her scars showed. How did she do it?

Grady and Connor pulled at him. "Miss Sarah. Miss Sarah," Connor yelled. "Are you okay, Miss Sarah?"

Tom walked toward her, still hanging on tight to stop the boys from rushing her or pushing her over. When they reached her, Grady slipped out of his hand and wrapped his arms around Sarah's legs. "You're not killed, Miss Sarah. I'm glad you're not killed."

Sarah chuckled. "No, Grady, I'm not dead. I'm just recovering from some surgery."

Connor stood close to her but didn't hug her. He stubbed his toe in the ground. "You're not a zombie either."

"Come here, Connor." She wrapped her arm around his small shoulders. "I hope I don't look like a zombie. I tried very hard to look pretty today."

He hugged her tight. Tom stepped behind her for support and whispered in her ear. "You are a miracle, Sarah. How did you manage this?"

She smiled broadly. "The Sweetwater Canyon fairies can do magic." She tried to turn toward her room again, but the boys held tight to her legs.

"Boys?" She patted each of their heads. "I think I'm going to fall over because I've walked too much today. Can we go back in my room, and Mr. Tom can help me get back into bed? Then I can talk and answer all of your questions. Okay?"

They both nodded but didn't let go of her.

"She can't walk with you hugging her," Tom said. "Connor, you're the oldest. You get on that side." He pointed to the right. When Connor moved and took Sarah's right hand, Tom moved to her left

and supported her with a firm arm. He felt her sag a little as she took on his support.

"What about me?" Grady asked. "I wanna help, too."

Sarah pointed to the door to her room. "If you would go in there and crawl up on the bed that would help. Make it good and warm so when I get in it I'm not cold. Okay?"

Grady raced away and Tom, Connor, and Sarah slowly moved back into the room. They found Grady snuggled up on the raised head part, and moving his legs back and forth.

"When my feet are cold in bed, this is what I do to make it warm," Grady said. "You try it, Miss Sarah. I think it's warm now."

"Thank you, Grady."

Tom helped Sarah to sit and then slowly raised her legs back onto the bed. He watched her grimace, but she didn't groan as she settled back in.

Sarah put an arm around Grady. "Thank you, it feels just right." She patted the side of the bed. "Connor, would you sit here please and keep the other side of the bed warm?"

Connor eagerly climbed up and she drew him into her side.

"Mr. Tom, would you pull the blanket over my feet and raise the foot of the bed a little?"

Tom complied, then pulled the chair he'd been sleeping in for three nights up to the bed's edge and gently laid a hand on her blanketed thigh. "We're all here now," he said. "One big happy family."

Sarah's eyes sparkled with unshed tears and he stood slightly to embrace her and the two boys. "All here," she echoed. "Thank you."

After only a few seconds, Grady pointed to Sarah's shirt. "Are those stars?"

"Yes," she said. Happy she'd stood up and decided to keep the shirt on. "Where do you think these stars are in the sky?"

"Right over our house?" Grady asked.

"That's exactly right, and when I get home we are going to sit outside and look at the stars and see what kinds of pictures they make. Do you know there is a picture of a warrior, and flying hourse, and a bow and arrow, and many things in the sky?

Grady's eyes widened. "Really? You aren't making this up."

"I know. I know." Connor said. "In school it's called consta… consta…lations."

"That's right," Sarah squeezed him against her side a little more. "Constellations."

Connor shifted a bit away from her. "Miss Sarah, can I ask you something?"

"Of course," she said.

"How come you have to be in the hospital? What happened to you?"

Tom braced himself for what she might say.

"Well, I kind of got caught up in a situation I couldn't control. And things happened that made me hurt. I got some cuts on parts of my body, like when you get rope burns on the tire swing but worse. So, I had to come to the hospital and get all fixed up."

Connor cocked his head to one side. "I don't see any cuts."

"I covered them up pretty good," she said. "But the worst part is I had to have all my hair shaved off."

"Really?" Grady asked. "Does that mean you have cancer?"

"No. I don't have cancer," Sarah replied. "It will start growing back really soon."

Connor swallowed. "Can we see or will it hurt too much."

"I can show you, if you don't think it will scare you."

"I'm brave," Connor said. "I can handle it, but if it's really bad I'm not sure about Grady."

Grady looked up at Sarah. "I'm brave too!"

"Okay. I'm going to take off my scarf. Are you ready?"

Both boys nodded, but their eyes grew wide as they watched her every movement.

Sarah slowly pushed back the scarf from the top of her head. "Do you see the redness there?"

"I see it," Connor looked at her. "Does it hurt real bad?"

"No, it's getting all better," she said.

"I wanna see more," Grady reached toward the scarf himself.

Tom reached out and stayed Grady's hand. "We have to be gentle. If we accidentally scratch her it might hurt."

Sarah pushed the scarf back until her scraped, bald head showed on its own. The two boys just stared.

"Mr. Tom," Grady said. "Please kiss it and make it better. Miss Sarah did that for me once and it really helped. But she can't kiss herself."

Sarah smiled and looked up at Tom. "That's a good idea, Grady. Mr. Tom, will you kiss it and make it better?"

Tom stood and leaned over. First he kissed her forehead. Then he kissed her on top of her head. "Are you feeling better?" he asked.

"Yes, I am," Sarah answered.

"Do it some more," Grady demanded. "It's a really big ouch." He pointed to the side of her head. "Kiss it there." Tom obeyed. Then Grady pointed to the other side. "Kiss it there." Again Tom obeyed.

Then Grady stood up and looked at everything. "I don't know if you have enough kisses, Mr. Tom. This is a lot."

Sarah burst out with laughter. "I think Mr. Tom has enough kisses, but I'm already feeling better so he can stop now."

Connor stared at her, his head down and his lips in a pout like he was about to cry.

She squeezed him toward her and nuzzled the top of his head. "I'm thinking I could get a part in a monster movie, what do you think?"

"I don't know."

"A zombie," Grady shouted and then laughed. "You could be a zombie and walk around like this." He held his arms in front of him and let his tongue hang to one side.

Tom couldn't help but chuckle.

"No, " Connor looked up and clenched his jaw. "Miss Sarah is too pretty for a zombie."

"Well, thank you, Connor," Sarah touched her head to his.

Connor's mouth again turned to a pout and his lips trembled slightly.

"Hmmm…it seems to me like you have some more questions. Is that right?"

"I don't know." Connor stared at the end of the bed.

"You don't know what?" Sarah asked.

"I don't know how this could happen. Who did this to you? Was it the bad man who killed my Daddy? Did he find you and hurt you?"

Tom stared at her and shook his head.

Sarah pulled Connor back into her side. "It was a person who really needed help, but didn't know how to ask for it. And I was there. Do you know how sometimes you get really mad and you really want to hit something?"

Connor nodded.

"And if you do hit somebody, you feel really bad and can't hardly remember what you were so mad about?"

"That happened once when I was little," Connor said. "I was really mad at Grady because he took one of my toys and I hit him. And he started crying. And then I felt really bad. I was scared, because I didn't want to hurt Grady, I just wanted my toy."

"That's kind of what happened to me," Sarah said. "A person got really mad at me because they couldn't get what they wanted."

"Is…that person going to get mad at me and Grady? Is she__I mean, could that person hurt us too? Connor asked.

"No," Tom said. "That person is in jail and will be there for a very long time."

Connor let out a breath. "Good." Then he relaxed against Sarah again. A few minutes later he heard Grady's little snores against Sarah's other side.

"Mr. Tom?" Connor whispered. "Are you and Miss Sarah going to be our mommy and daddy now? I don't want to go back to school without a mommy and daddy," he said. "I don't think our mommy really wants us anyway."

Tom looked at Sarah again. All he could think about was all the complications. How did she do it? How did she keep moving ahead in faith when everything around her was a storm?

"You know how much we love both of you, right?" Sarah said. "You know we will all be living on the farm again, just like a family. Even if

we aren't officially your mommy and daddy, it doesn't change how much we love you."

Connor nodded.

"We have special permission to be your guardians," Tom continued for her. "Do you know what guardian means?"

"Yes, you explained that before. It means you take care of us." Connor sighed. "Okay. I guess that's okay…but…"

Tom waited for what followed but nothing more came out. "But what? What's really wrong, Connor?"

"But, I don't want to call you Mr. Tom and Miss Sarah anymore." Connor said.

"What do you want to call us?" Sarah asked.

"I can't tell you because I don't think you want me to say it. Also, I don't know how to explain it right."

"We can take our time," Tom said. "You try to explain it and we will see if we can help."

Connor crawled off the bed and stood next to Tom. He opened his mouth and then closed it again. "It's too hard."

"No matter what you say, we love you," Sarah said. "There is nothing you can say that will make us stop loving you. We will always be here for you, Connor."

He paced back and forth near the bed, his lower lip quivering. "If I …" He shook his head. "I can't say it." He paced some more. "I want…" Tom saw his eyes water and Connor swallowed several times. He didn't know what to do. What was so scary for him to ask?

"Connor, come here," Sarah said. "Give me your hand."

Connor did what she asked and she squeezed his hand.

"Now, close your eyes. Remember when I told you that you can tell God anything?"

Connor nodded.

"I want you to keep your eyes closed and talk to God right now. You can talk out loud or you can talk to him in your mind. You choose. You tell him what is so hard to tell us. Even if you can't explain it, God will understand. Okay?"

Connor nodded again. Then he knelt beside the hospital bed.

"Dear God. Miss Sarah said I could talk to you. I want to believe you can hear me, but I'm not sure. I have a problem and I don't know how to talk to Mr. Tom and Miss Sarah about it." He let out a big breath.

"I know they love me, but they don't really want to be my mommy and daddy. But the problem is I really want Mr. Tom to my daddy now because I don't have a daddy. I know Miss Sarah says he's in heaven now but I don't hear him talking to me and I want a daddy who talks to me. And I love Mr. Tom and I think he could be my daddy who talks to me. But he doesn't want me to call him daddy, and I don't know what to do."

Connor started crying softly. "And I don't know if I love my mommy anymore. I think she hurt my Daddy, but I can't tell anyone because I don't know for sure. But that is what the sheriff thinks even though he didn't tell me. And no one wants to tell me the truth and I don't know what to do."

Connor buried his face into the side of the bed as he sobbed. "I'm only seven." He choked out the words. "I need a daddy and a mommy, but no one really wants me. God, please help me."

"Tom!" Sarah cried softly.

Tom gathered Connor into his arms and climbed onto the side of the bed so that both he and Sarah could hold him.

"God hears you, Connor, whenever you talk to him. I try to talk out my questions too. One of the things Miss Sarah and I have talked about is doing the right thing for you and your brother."

Connor lifted tear filled eyes to Tom. "Really? What did you talk about?"

"Sarah kissed him on the forehead. "We talked about how much we love you and Grady and how we want to take care of you in the best way possible."

"I'll never replace your Dad," Tom said. "He was a great man who loved you very much. But I would be happy to be your second dad, if you'll have me. And I'd be ecstatic if you call me Daddy. I want to be your daddy more than anything in the world."

Sarah patted Connor's back as she let her own tears flow along

with his. "Father, thank you for listening to Connor. Thank you for bringing Connor and Grady into our lives. Help me to be the best mother for both of these boys. Lead us all in the way of light. Guide us through the darkness and the complications yet to come."

Then Sarah started whispering and Tom could no longer hear her prayer. All he knew is that he couldn't let down these boys. He looked to each of them with tears in their eyes as the clung to him and Sarah. His chest clenched at how they had struggled, all they'd been through. He drew in a shaky breath and wondered if he could be even half the father Henry was. He never thought he'd be a father so quickly or have an instant family. But he would make this work. He could never let these boys face their future alone or be adopted to someone they didn't know.

Sarah finished her silent prayer and squeezed his hand. "Amen."

He let out the trapped breath he'd held. With Sarah at his side he knew could face this challenge. Just a few months ago, he never thought Sarah would ever love him again. He didn't have her faith. He didn't know if he believed in her God. But he believed in love—the kind of love and perseverance Sarah had shown through all her trials.

If Sarah could love these boys and be willing to make this a family, he could too. Better than could, he *would* make this their family.

Tom shook his head in amazement at how quickly things had changed in the past month. With the boys now needing a mommy and a daddy, he and Sarah needed to get married as soon as possible and officially adopt them.