

Thursday evening they buckled the dogs into the CRV, took their respective places as driver and passenger, turned on music, and slowly backed out of the garage. Al Green's "Love and Happiness" filled the car; distracted by the music, they sang along.

When they were about a mile down the road he said, "Did we remember to close the garage door?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "I think so."

"Should we go back and check?" he said.

"We've never had a problem before," she said. "We live in a safe neighborhood."

He said, "The one time we forget to close it..." and trailed off, sentence, each isolated by their own thoughts.

At last she said, "I am pretty sure we closed it. Let's keep going."

So they did.

Adroitly he navigated them through a maze of ascending switchbacks and turns so sharp, she found herself drowsily thinking that a less skilled driver would sure have sent them plummeting to their deaths

When he woke her, they were turning into a drive at the top of the hill marked by a sign, *Cathedral Kennel*.

She had always been a narcoleptic passenger; in fact, that is why she rarely drove. But she'd never gotten used to it, to that feeling that someone or something else was behind the wheel. It frightened her; sometimes she wondered if he regretted it: marrying her when she could not stay awake behind the wheel. Deep down she knew these were her own fears, not his. So she sat up, smoothed her hair into a ponytail, and rummaged through her handbag for some gum. Finding it, she took out two sticks, unwrapped both, popped one piece into his open mouth and one into her own; he turned off the ignition; all the while the two dogs in the backseat remained quiet.

The stunning silence made her wonder what they were thinking, if they were thinking, and what it was they really witnessed from their places in the backseat.

As if on cue, the dogs perked their ears; barks and whines and canine sounds called out to them from a building that stood not too far from where they'd parked.

"I don't know," she said. "All that barking hurts my ears."

He laughed, "You're too attached. That's normal at a kennel."

"Look who's talking," she said and nodded back at his baby, Itsy.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," he said.

"Nonsense," she said, shifting gears. "They're dogs. They'll be fine here."

She then opened the passenger's door, but she did not place her feet on the ground. Instead, she turned back toward the dogs and crooned to them. ”

The husband got out of the car. He reached into the backseat and unbuckled the safety harness of the littlest dog; fur flew from her trembling body. With the sunlight on them, they looked like they were in a miniature duststorm.

The wife glanced at her husband. He closely bent toward their little bundle; whispering something for the dog alone. Whatever he said, it worked. Soon her tail propelled in circles, thumped against the fabric of his morning jacket.

As if she'd been holding her breath too long, his wife exhaled with a tremendous whoosh. She swung her legs out of the car, grasped the handle overhead with her right hand and pulled herself out into the green day. Once out of the vehicle, she rubbed her hands against the thighs of her jeans and let another whoosh of air out through her pursed lips while their remaining ward, sat placidly in the back seat.

Across the yard sat an unremarkable building, but for one feature: a turret and a chimney of stacked stone that rose up in the middle of this otherwise unmemorable squarish space. Then the wind picked up and pushed the smoke into their path; it filled their noses, made their eyes stream.

Mary turned to Harry.

“Can you believe they have a fire going when it's only September?” she asked.

Before he could answer, a screen door slapped open, and a figure stepped out. He was tall, a bit on the thin side and was soon striding across the lawn on what seemed to be very purposeful legs.

Mary nodded. “He must be very busy with the kennels,” she said under her breath, wondering when he'd last had a home-cooked meal; collards, turkey, the works.

Her husband, hearing her, said, “You don't know that.”

The Proprietor approached with his hand outstretched. Behind him, the screen door opened a second time, and a woman in stepped into the sunlight. She had on a white apron and salt and pepper braid roped around her head like a crown. Underneath the apron, she had on a blue t-shirt and jeans. She wiped a hand across her face. Streaks of white flour trailed across the left side of her forehead down her cheek, and fell off at her chin. A little explosion of flour bloomed across her apron.

“They're coming Harry,” Mary whispered, running her tongue over her lips. “Oh, I am not sure. I am not sure of this at all,” she said, a furrow creasing her brow.

“Well get the dog, damn it,” he said, looking into the backseat. “That’s why we came isn’t it? To make sure this place would be alright?” and he raised his hand in greeting to the approaching couple. He then looked back at her.

Something ran between them. Whatever it was, it jolted her awake, and she leaned into the backseat.

“Come now sweet Bitsy,” she said, releasing the second dog from its seatbelt.

Bitsy, dutifully obeying, jumped from the car, found a small plot of grass not too far off, wound around in ever tightening circles, until at last she crouched back and pooped.

“Harry, I better pick that up,” Mary said and sped over to Bitsy, poop bag in hand.

Ken Vanstoree, close enough to Mary, said “We don’t stand on ceremony here Mary. Just leave the shit where it fell. We get it when we clear the grounds at day’s end.”

Just behind him, Norris laughed and added, “He’s right. If we picked up poop every time someone went around here, we’d never get anything done besides cleaning up shit storms.”

Harry and Mary both laughed. “Okay, then,” said Mary, and offered her hand to Norris.

“Honey, you will have to do better than that. I am a hugger,” she said and pulled Mary into a tight squeeze. She smelled like apples and wood smoke.

When Ken hugged her, Mary smelled engine fuel on his collar. Smoke clung to his hair.

“We’re both huggers here,” Ken laughed. “We figure we are taking care of your babies, we best cut through the bull and become family real quick.”

With all that awkward energy and enthusiasm that comes with a first meeting, they stood around nodding in vigorous agreement.

Itsy and Bitsy were angling to sit on Ken’s feet, but Norris took that moment to bend down toward them. “Well aren’t they sweet,” said Norris, and the pin that held her braided crown of hair in place slipped out, sending the braiding snaking toward Itsy who pounced.

Mary was horrified, but everybody laughed. So she didn’t say a word.

“Come on,” said Ken, “We will show you the rest of the place.”

Harry and Mary followed. Looking at it, you would never think that it was a kennel. Surrounded with an 8-foot chain link fence, razor wire around the top, security cameras, and motion detecting floodlights, it reminded Harry of his army days.

“Looks like Fort Knox,” Harry joked.

“Thanks,” said Ken. “We aim to keep our clientele safe.”

Built of cinder and steel, meant to withstand any storm, the place was truly a fortress.

Ken opened the kennel doors. Before them lay 20 kennels: 8 on their left, 10 on their right. With the exception of two larger runs, each kennel was 4x8 separated from its neighbor by a roll of metal fencing. The entire place sat on top of a single slab of cement.

“What do you think?” asked Norris from behind them.

Itsy shivered in Harry’s arms. Harry pulled her closer. “It’s okay Itsy, Baby,” he said. “It’s okay.”

“Well, other than Itsy of course,” Norris said; they all laughed.

“It’s beautiful,” said Mary.

Bitsy trotted around, head up, pausing here and there to stick her snout between the metal bars of each run, saying hello to a dog here, licking a dog there. Once she even got down in play mode.

They took in the place. It was clean. In fact, it was spotless. The roof was high; each light fixture was ensconced in a protective metal cage to keep the animals safe. Although there were no windows, there were doors at each end of the building.

Norris said, “We have found that a windowless kennel keeps the dogs calmer.”

“Think of it as a big crate,” added Ken. “And they get plenty of play time- twice a day.”

“Well she really likes it,” said Mary pointing at Bitsy. “Look at Bitsy, Honey. She seems to feel right at home doesn’t she?”

“But look at this one,” he said, “she’s trembling.”

“Oh she’ll be alright,” said Mary hoping her voice sounded with a conviction she did not yet feel. In fact, all she felt was a wave of sorrow. These seemed to be nice people. The dogs that they had kenneled were clearly well cared for, and the place was neat as a pin. Still, a feeling of dread crept in.

Meanwhile, Norris was pausing by each kennel. “You see,” she said, her voice calm, reassuring, “We keep a list of each dog’s name and personality traits as well as any health issues they may have right here, taped to each kennel.” She tapped on a white piece of paper on which information was scrawled in a shaky hand and affixed with industrial tape to the cage before her.

Mary stepped closer. The name on it read Blackie. *Likes long walks and cuddles by the fire. No food allergies. Needs a Xanax twice a day. Playtime with other dogs a must.*

Mary smiled.

Norris said, “You mentioned on the phone your worries about Bitsy. You said she has lots of dietary needs and sometimes gets colitis.”

“Bull’s eye,” Ken added.

“Well, you bring her medicine. I’m assuming you have a prescription on hand in case Bitsy needs it. If not, you call the doctor and ask for metronidazole for her next attack. That way we are prepared.”

This impressed Mary; she never told Norris what medicine Bitsy took. Straightening up from Blackie’s cage, Mary smiled at Norris. Norris smiled back.

“Well, ready to see the rest of the place?” asked Ken.

“Wait one second,” said Harry, rocking back on his heels. “Itsy has never been alone before. And she has never stayed in a cage. We do not even crate her at home.”

“Well don’t you worry about that,” Norris said, laying a hand on Harry’s arm, smiling up at him. “We will reserve the special end kennel meant for two, and your girls can be together.”

“It always works out,” said Ken, nodding.

Mary and Harry paused to look at the kennel the owners had indicated. It seemed quite small from where they were standing.

“What if Bitsy bullies Itsy?” Harry said.

His wife shook her head. “She won’t do that.” But Mary was not so sure. How could she know? Bitsy was twice Itsy’s size, and she hadn’t been with them all that long. She was a rescue.

She’d been so sick when they got her: kennel cough, worms, mange, broken teeth, and there were still days when she couldn’t control her bladder.

Mary thought back to the first few months after they had Bitsy. She started off acting frightened of Harry; at first she’d cowered when he was within three feet of her. Then she moved to a phase where she tucked her tail under and cried but let him nearer. They were making progress. Each day, Bitsy let Harry closer and allowed Mary to massage a bit more of her body. First her head, then her neck, then her front haunches; the day Mary reached Bitsy’s back legs, she knew something was horribly wrong. Bitsy cried out. When Mary tried again, she found that beneath the fur of her hind legs, the skin oozed and bubbled like a horrendous burn.

It all happened so quickly; Mary checked Bitsy every day.

Those blisters and burns had not been there 12 hours ago.

They rushed Bitsy to the Emergency Vet. Bitsy ended up in ICU for two weeks. The vet didn’t even believe them at first, said Bitsy’s flesh looked like raw hamburger meat, said someone must’ve done it to her.

Rage at such an accusation first left Mary speechless. Harry opened his mouth to speak, but Mary flew into a fit of action. “How dare you?” she said. “You mean to tell me, you think we took in a rescue on death’s door, subjected our other dog to all her illnesses, then purposely

burned her? What kind of monster do you think we are? We would *never* hurt her. We rescued her, so she could finally have a home, a safe life, so she could be loved, not burned. You must have seen this on other animals. There are answers other than the one you present.”

Mary thought of her own skin, the way it flared and broke into a hive of rashes during ragweed season.

“Think again,” she said. “Figure it out,” she said. That’s why we pay you.”

And she was right. It was an infection. As Mary had insisted, it was an infection that worked like a flesh eating disease. The vet never could explain it, but he apologized. Harry thought perhaps past trauma triggered it, some memory of something that had happened at that time one summer, and this felt right to Mary. They forgave the Vet. What else was there to do?

Bitsy pulled through. She always pulled through. Each day new parts of her personality emerged. She was full of energy, so much so that she sometimes ran Itsy over; Bitsy just didn’t quite know her own size yet, nor did she know her own place in the pack. And just this month she’d fallen completely for Harry, nudging him for nightly back and belly rubs. They’d come so far together. Flashes of memory raced through the Mallards’ minds as they followed the Vanstorees.

Ken held open the kennel door for everyone. The door was white; affixed to it was a Statue of Liberty Calendar and a schedule for the workers. Everything seemed perfectly choreographed; the kennel owners and employees clearly worked well together.

“This here’s the playing area for the little dogs,” said Ken, pointing toward a fenced in yard that was the size of a baseball diamond. “And out there is the big dog play area.” He nodded his head to a second fenced in area that was the size of a high school soccer field.

“Nice,” said Mary.

“Indeed,” said Harry.

An airplane cut through the sky overhead, and they all paused to watch it in flight.

“I know we have been able to fly for years,” said Mary, “but watching those metal birds hurtle through the air never ceases to amaze me.”

Norris put an arm around her new client. “Wouldn’t you know it? I think the same exact thing when I hear them overhead. Come on into the house now. I will give you the required paperwork, and we will see your two sweet girls back here in three weeks. Drop off is between 12 and 2. Pick up is 9 to 11 or 3 to 4. We don’t take anyone in between those times because the dogs have their schedules, and so do we.”

Harry, backing away from the open door, said, "Itsy is getting anxious; why don't I take the girls to the car Mary, while you get the paperwork? Nice to meet you both," and he shook hands with the Vanstorees.

"Likewise," said Ken.

As they crossed the threshold, Mary asked. "Norris, do you call this *Cathedral Kennel* because of the shape of the house?"

Norris smiled. "You know, folks rarely ask me how it got its name. My great grand pappy was a preacher, and the religion didn't really stick with my mother. When she lost a baby in childbirth, she lost her faith in a God. But I still believe there is something. We like to think of the kennel as a sanctuary; we looked high and low for the right place to start our business. When we saw that turret peaking up into the sky from the highest place in this part of town, we just knew."

"They were nice," Norris said to Ken as they watch the Mallards drive away. Ken nodded as he watched their car maneuver around the last visible turn in the cul-de-sac.

"They seemed nice," said Mary to Harry, once the kennel disappeared from view.

"Mhm," Harry answered, eyes momentarily on the rearview mirror.

"No, what did you think?" asked Mary. Itsy whimpered in the backseat of the car while Bitsy tucked her head into her shoulder and promptly fell asleep.

"You're okay," Mary said. Feeling an irrational need to reach her, she twisted back and stretched her left hand out for Itsy. Her neck, craning over her left shoulder, reached its limit while her shoulder burned with the effort. It was no use; both of them restrained as they were in their seat belt and harness.

"Is she gonna cry like that the whole way?" asked Harry, taking the turns like a racecar driver, both hands on the wheel, eyes fastened to the road, car hugging the mountainside.

"Now Itsy," Mary crooned, "you're okay."

He took another curve, and the road unwound before them. Itsy's whimpers turned to cries.

"I can't have that the whole way," he said.

"Well neither can I," she answered "There's nothing for it but to get her out of her seat, and that means I take off my seatbelt. You hate the way the car pings when I do that."

"Fine," he said. "Just do it. Get it over with."

She unbuckled her seatbelt and stretched her arms out for the dog, but Itsy was buckled in too. Undoing her harness from where Mary sat was no small thing.

"What is it?" he said as the car pinged its seatbelt unbuckled alert.

“I can’t reach her,” she said.

“Well,” he said, and a siren shrieked out just a curve below them. “Jesus” Harry said as an ambulance barreled toward them.

“I hope they’re okay,” Mary said.

“Who?” Harry said, pulling over in order to give the ambulance as much room as possible in the narrow road.

“The people in the ambulance,” said Mary, still struggling to free Itsy from her harness.

Harry pulled back onto the road.

As Harry took a sharp turn, Itsy backed away from her, nearly tumbling onto the floor. Mary cursed softly before saying, “Come girl,” she said, and roughly pulled the dog over the seat onto her lap.

“There, now. There,” she said.

At last Itsy settled onto her lap, so Mary’s thoughts turned to their impending journey. Bitsy slept on in the backseat, while Harry concentrated on the road.

They did not say another word.

When they pulled into the garage, Harry turned to his wife. “I don’t know. I am just not so sure that Itsy is cut out for kennel life,” he said. “It may traumatize her. She may never be the same.”

“She will be there with her sister. Bitsy knows how to be in a crowd of hounds. Bitsy will look after her sister,” she said.

She hadn’t sounded this sure of a thing in a good while, so he closed his mouth and opened the door to their home.

Five days later Bitsy had an episode of colitis. Harry heard her cry around 2 am and got to her crate just as Bitsy exploded.

Ten days later Itsy got into Mary’s chocolate.

Fourteen days later Harry and Mary sat down. “Is this a good idea?”

“We’ve already booked them. We cannot be tied down by our dogs,” Harry said.

“We have to try or we will never know,” Mary said with Itsy, curled in his lap.

The next day Mary and Harry packed for their upcoming getaway. “We could bring them with us,” Mary said as they counted out underwear, t-shirts, and socks.

“No,” Harry answered. “They will just be in the way.”

Then the phone rang.

“Are you going to get that?” said Mary.

Harry looked at her. “Well, I guess I am if you’re not.”



This went on for several moments. Then the phone fell silent.

“Well, that solved it,” said Harry.

Then the phone started up again.

“Oh, I’ll get it,” said Mary and racing downstairs, she reached the phone just before it fell silent.

“What are you doing?” the voice on the other end asked.

It was Mary’s sister, Francis.

Mary sighed. “Packing. In two days we go to New Jersey to visit Mom and Dad.”

“Well, you better turn on the television,” she said. “Go turn it on. Then call me back.”

“What channel?” said Mary.

“Any channel,” said Francis and the phone-clicked silent.

“Who was it?” said Harry.

“Francis,” Mary called back. “She said we better turn on the TV.”

“Why? What’s on?” said Harry.

“She didn’t say,” Mary answered.

“Well then how are you supposed to know what channel?” he said.

“She said any channel,” Mary answered, picking up the television remote.

“Well?” Harry said. “What is it?”

“Mary?” Harry called. “Mary?” From the top of the landing, he heard Bitsy whining by the front door. Harry raced down the stairs. Mary, before the television, stood transfixed.

“Oh my God,” said Harry. “Is that the Twin Towers?”

“Yes,” Mary whispered. “They’re on fire.”

Harry said, “They’ll be able to put it out. Everything will be okay.”

They watched in stunned silence, neither attending to Bitsy.

Bitsy came over and nosed her mother’s knee when Mary said, “Dear God that airplane is going to crash into the Twin Towers.”

Harry and Mary stood before the television; their hands found each other’s. Mary put her free hand on Bitsy head; she quieted.

Then Mary gasped. “Oh my God Harry.”

“What is it?” he said.

“What about my brother?” she said. “He’s there. In the city, right there on Wall Street. It’s a work day,” Mary’s hand trembled in his.

Letting go, she reached for the phone, just as it began to ring.

“Did you turn it on?” asked Francis.

“Yes,” said Mary. “What’s happening?”

“We’re being attacked,” Francis answered. “They think it is a terrorist attack. I am going to try to call our brother. You try our Uncle. They are both in the thick of it.”

“Okay,” said Mary.

When she put the phone down, she looked at Harry. “I can’t remember Uncle Joe’s number,” she said, her legs buckling beneath her.

Harry stepped in and dialed. All circuits busy.

The towers fell in slow motion.

The day had started blue skies, 70 degrees, and a perfect day to be alive.

Now the television announcer said, “It will be more than we can bear.”

Now the images showed people jumping from the Twin Towers, bodies falling, and ash, and fire.

Now there were scenes of people streaming through the ash-darkened streets, many without clothes, others burned, all covered in ash. While the buildings continued their inevitable implosion, every able firemen ran into the Towers.

News reporters came on.

President Bush came on the screen. He said, “We won’t tolerate terrorism.”

Mayor Giuliani flashed across screens. He echoed Bush’s sentiments while the people continued to jump for their lives and the towers burned on.

Harry dialed Uncle Joe’s number over and over. All he got was a busy signal.

The newscasters said, “Be patient folks. We know you are trying to get to your loved ones.”

They showed lines of people walking together over the bridges: covered as they were, one human was indistinguishable from the next. . Reporters said pay phones were the rare commodity of the hour because all the cell phone lines were overloaded. People stood twenty and thirty deep patiently waiting their turn.

Somewhere around 3 o’clock the house phone rang. It was Francis. “Nobody’s heard from John, and no one has gotten through to Joe.”

“Dear God,” What will we do?” asked Mary. “The newsman said that too many people are trying to get through, so no one is. The lines are burned up.”

Francis said, “Keep calling. I will do the same. Love you.”

“Love you,” and the phone clicked.

Standing, Harry said, “Your family needs us. We better leave for your mother’s now. Let’s just put what we’ve packed into the car and go.”

“Okay,” said Mary. “The girls will have to go with us; will you give them both some Dramamine, so they sleep? Bitsy gets carsick anyway. It will help.”

“Sure thing,” said Harry.

“Are we forgetting anything?” said Mary. “Work. We will call on the way.”

The drive was 13 hours. It was thirteen hours of driving. 13 hours of news reporters droning on and on, updates, lists of the dead, the survivors. 13 hours of frantic phone calls to family members and friends. This nightmare was real. For once she did not fall asleep in the passenger’s seat.

Still, she had no idea how they even got to New Jersey. It almost felt like everything had come to a complete standstill while someone or something erased her memory, struck her dumb. Days and hours lapped each other; it was all a sickeningly confused jumble of time and travel.

In 17 hours Mary’s cell phone started to ring again. It rang and rang and rang. Mary finally got to it.

“Where are you?” the voice on the other end said. “You were supposed to be here for drop off.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” said Mary, and the connection was lost. and Bitsy, who had been asleep by Mary’s feet, woke up, and leaned a head on Mary’s knee.

“Who was it?” asked Harry from her mother’s kitchen.

“I have no idea,” said Mary.

“Well look at the number,” said Harry.

“I did,” said Mary. It is no one I recognize.”

“Is it work?” asked Harry.

“No,” said Mary.

“Did they leave a message?” asked Harry.

“They did not,” said Mary.

Days passed.

Ash settled.

The death count rose.

Was it possible that the country was falling all around them? It seemed everyone was tied to this attack in some way. Odd, isn’t it? Mary thought to herself, that it takes disaster to bring people together again?

Francis stepped into the living room behind Harry. “Mary, do you think that you and I could talk about possibilities? Mom and Dad are both finally sleeping.”

The sisters exchanged a look. Harry sat down on the green suede couch as the sisters reached each other.

“Of course, Of course,” they said together.

Then Mary’s phone rang.

Harry startled. Gently pushing Itsy off his lap, he looked for his wife’s phone. He could hear it, but he could not see it. It rang and rang, but by the time he found it, he was too late. It fell silent.

The next time Mary’s phone rang, Harry was ready.

“Who is this?” he said. Someone breathed on the other end of the line. A voice seemed to crackle through, but the words were too garbled. “I can’t hear you. Speak up.”

The line went dead.

Mary and Francis huddled on the massive sea green couch, weeping.

“Who was that?” asked Mary.

Harry said, “It was no one.”

On the following Monday, Mary had used up all her sick days. Harry had used up all of his and even called in a few favors. They had to face the facts. They had to leave her parents waiting. They had to returned to their lives, their jobs.

Shell-shocked, they went through the motions of their days.

“I feel like I am underwater,” Mary told Francis on the phone.

“Well, that’s because you are,” she said. “We all are.”

“Did you talk to Mother today?”

“She’s not answering.”

“I’ll get Harry to try later. She always picks up for him.”

When Harry got home, he found Mary sitting at their kitchen table. Itsy was asleep in her lap, and Bitsy lay by her side.

“How’s my wife? He asked.

“That number called again today. When I answered, I thought someone was there, but the connection broke,” she said, head wearily resting in her right hand.

“Let me see your phone,” he said. “Enough is enough.”

“What will you do?” she asked.

“I will tell you what I will do. I am going to call them and give them a piece of my mind,” he said and dialed. The phone rang and rang and rang. Outside the sun dipped past the

horizon. Soon it would be dark enough to see the stars. Mary touched Harry's temples. He put her face in his hands. They stayed like that for a while. No one saying anything. Finally, she took her hand away.

"I've been praying," she said. "I almost thought I had forgotten what praying was, but it came right back to me when I closed my eyes and said, 'God, please help my family. Please help our country make sense of all of this.' Please show us how to heal. Maybe if you prayed too?"

"Oh, I have already prayed," he said. "I prayed this morning, 3 am, when I couldn't sleep. Come to think of it, it seems like all I been doing is praying."

"That's good," she said, and he knew what she meant. They weren't alone. They were in this together. No matter how bad it got, they'd let each other in.

With all that was going on Mary felt understood, and this was a small good thing. "I don't know what I did to deserve you," she said. "I am so lucky."

"Well I don't know about all that," he said. "What would you like for dinner?"

"I am not sure," she said. "Nothing really has a taste to it."

They waited. Days passed. Weeks went by. Though they didn't feel better exactly, they felt like they were slowly waking up.

When Ash Wednesday arrived, he asked her, "Would you like to go to church? I mean, for your brother? Your family?"

She smiled. "That is a good idea. It would mean a lot." She usually went alone arriving just as mass began, sitting in the back row.

When he found her in their bedroom staring into space, he helped her into the stockings she'd laid out beside her. He zipped her into a grey dress with cap sleeves, one she'd always really liked, and then he gently turned her toward the bathroom.

"Go brush your teeth," he said. "Comb your hair. We can do this."

So she did.

There was one thing about church she had yet to warm to: the greeting. She went for quiet. She went for fellowship, but truthfully, she wanted it on her terms.

Yet there it was again, the Priest said, "Welcome to St. Francis of Assisi Church where no one is a stranger. Please, before we continue, let's take a moment, turn to our neighbors, and share a sign of welcome."

She laid her head on Harry's shoulder, whispering, "Do I have to? I think I want to leave."

He smiled into her hair. "You'll feel better once you do." So she stood up and turned to greet the neighbors behind her.

When she looked into their eyes, recognition jolted through her. She knew these people. He turned, hand outstretched, to welcome the people behind him, and as he recognized them, everything flooded back to him.

He felt horrible.

Mary immediately reached toward Norris Vanstoree.

“I am so sorry,” said Mary, arms extended.

“We didn’t know it was you calling,” said Harry looking into the faded eyes of Ken Vanstoree.

And Norris and Ken, new lines tracing their faces said, “We lost loved ones too and just wanted you to know the kennel was closed,” and they stepped into the Mallards’ outstretched arms.

*Amazing Grace* started up on the organ. Around them, folks greeted their neighbors. Light streamed through the stained glass windows of the church and cast rays upon the parishioners. The air smelled of incense. Harry picked up a hymnal as Mary took his free hand.