

12 CRUCIAL QUESTIONS  
to ask about your novel

1. Why am I writing this story?
2. How shall I tell my story and where shall I begin?
3. Shall I edit as I go or write it through? Plot or not?
4. What is my main character's personality type and how does it conflict with my antagonist and/or romantic lead?
5. What is my lead's motivation? My antagonist's motivation? How does backstory play in here?
6. How can I make life for my lead harder? What would my lead never do?
7. Am I telling about my character or is my character showing him/herself?
8. What is my lead's (or my leads') inner struggle(s)? Serious? Shallow? Outside struggle?
9. Am I building my character so his/her emotions make sense?
10. Am I building and maintaining emotional tension?
11. Am I using mood and atmosphere well?
12. How can I add depth/layers to my material?

## How shall I tell my story?

1<sup>st</sup> person singular

1<sup>st</sup> person multiple

3<sup>rd</sup> person singular

3<sup>rd</sup> person multiple

Close 3<sup>rd</sup>

Mixed 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>

Past tense

Present tense

Which serves your story best?

First person:

"I can't eat that! I simply can't! Don't try to force me!" I squeezed my eyes shut and slapped my hand over my mouth. As good as it smelled, breakfast would not sit well in my stomach this morning. Or ever again. Not after....

I felt them eyeing me. So they thought I was over-reacting. So they called me a Drama Queen. I straightened my shoulders, proud. I'd earned that designation by heroically surviving both the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and my wretched relatives.

Traditional Third Person:

"I can't eat that! I simply can't! Don't try to force me!" She squeezed her eyes shut and slapped her hand over her mouth. As good as it smelled, breakfast would not sit well in her stomach this morning. Or ever again.

She saw them eyeing her. They thought she over-reacted. They called her a Drama Queen. She straightened her shoulders, proud. *I earned that designation by heroically surviving both the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and my wretched relatives.*

Close Third:

"I can't eat that! I simply can't! Don't try to force me!" She squeezed her eyes shut and slapped her hand over her mouth. As good as it smelled, breakfast would not sit well in her stomach this morning. Or ever again.

She felt them eyeing her. They thought she over-reacted. They called her a Drama Queen. She straightened her shoulders, proud. She'd earned that designation by heroically surviving both the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and her wretched relatives.

First Person:

"Can you imagine what that could do for my career? It could lead to me having my own show on the Food Network. Me!" Excitement bubbled in me. At long last fate was giving me the break I needed.

"And if it doesn't go well?"

I looked at him **sourly**. *Sure. Encourage me why don't you? That'll win points.*

Traditional third:

"Can you imagine what that could do for my career? It could lead to me having my own show on the Food Network. Me!" Excitement bubbled in her. At long last fate was giving her the break she needed.

"And if it doesn't go well?"

She looked at him sourly. *Sure. Encourage me why don't you. That'll win points.*

Close Third:

"Can you imagine what that could do for my career? It could lead to me having my own show on the Food Network. Me." Excitement bubbled in her. At long last fate was giving her the break she needed.

"And if it doesn't go well?"

She looked at him sourly. *Sure. Encourage her why don't you. That'll win points.*

## Beginnings:

Point of change in hero/heroine's life  
 Begin as far into the story as you can  
 Does your reader need to know this information yet?

1. Jack had never met the dead man on his front porch, and he had no desire for a posthumous friendship.

2. God is dead read the graffiti on the wall. Pastor Rob Powers stared at the words for a long minute. On most days, such a thought was foreign to his thinking, preposterous, even presumptuous. But that was before last night.

"Your son is alive."

James Scott Bell

*Corsets.*

*Royalty.*

*Turkey legs.*

Jenny B. Jones

Seeing the low fuel light on her ancient Toyota sedan wasn't anything new for Layla Watson.

Kristen Ethridge

Barclay Pearce shouldered his way through the mob, invisible.

Roseanna M. White

A ferocious grasp startled Brother Davin awake, even as Brother Gregaraii's husk-dry old voice pleaded, "Davin, help me save them!"

R. J. Larson

Day dawns, the sun's rays harsh on my face, so different than the feeling of warmth they once gave me.

Jill Eileen Smith

"Run, Laurel. Run!"

Vickie McDonough

Gayle Roper 12 Crucial Questions

Joshua Crawford gripped the steering wheel and hoped he could keep his cool when he confronted his mother about her lousy idea to marry the town drunk.

Lynette Eason

"The earl wants to see you in the library, Mr. Whitcombe. At once."

Robin Lee Hatcher

You'd think I'd be involved in my own wedding, wouldn't you?

Trish Perry

J.W. McRae braked and shifted his pickup into Park . He rested his forearms atop the steering wheel, his chest constricting. If he didn't know better he'd think he was having a heart attack.

Deborah Raney

The phone beside his bed woke him at 3:00 a.m. on Monday.

Richard Mabry

Surely that wasn't...

Robin Carroll

The silver and red Cessna Skyhawk broke through gauzy clouds on its descent into the small Esperanza airport, bucking fiercely in the turbulent spring winds that swept across the San Luis Valley.

Louise Gouge

"Blast it." Peering past the useless windshield wipers into the heavy downpour, Jessamy Cosette felt the thud-thud of a flat tire.

Gail Gaymer Martin

Priscilla Latham Grant tugged her collar tight around her ears and let the icy December wind whipping off the Atlantic sweep across her cheeks.

Elizabeth Ludwig

Lexie's father had to pick today of all days to come back from the dead.

Susan Sleeman

Gayle Roper 12 Crucial Questions

Who'd have thought admitting to drawing skills would land her in an early morning rendezvous with a dying man?

Carrie Stuart Parks

Plummeting from the ceiling, the library dome's chandelier exploded into a million crystal shards as it crashed to the floor—the floor polished three days before to a high sheen.

Cathy Gohlke

There was a fine line between having a death wish and having it granted.

Ronie Kendig

The first time Nathaniel saw her, she was perched on the forbidden portion of the Foresthill Bridge, which loomed a dizzying 730 feet above the North fork of the American River.

Kristin Billerbeck

"A hooligan, that's what he is, nothing but a hooligan."

Winnie Griggs

Madeline Farthering gripped her husband's arm a little more tightly as they made their way through the mass of people crowding Waverley Station, certain that if they were separated in this chaos she'd never be able to find him again.

Julianna Deering

No professional athlete wants to face the end of his career, but it's twice as hard when you're in the prime of life from the neck down.

Jerry B Jenkins

Marty followed her husband to the front door, keeping enough distance between them to prevent bumping her knee against the bulky suitcase that hung from his hand.

Kim Vogel Sawyer

Hannah felt the gun pressed to her back the minute she returned the nozzle to the gas pump.

Sandra Robbins

Gayle Roper 12 Crucial Questions

Aladdin's first memory was of his mother's face, eyes closed, as she lay on her funeral bier.

Melanie Dickerson

*Beware the Delilah, my son. Beware the Jezebel.*

Tamara Leigh

Somewhere on the goat trail known as Highway 95, halfway between Winnemucca and Road's End, known as home, Reba Mae Cahill relished a rare bit of almost joy.  
Janet Chester Bly

Winter Woodard preferred jeans to bridesmaid gowns and the one she was wearing was a doozy.

Lyn Cote

Wars weren't won with caution, and aces weren't made in straight and level flight.

Sarah Sundin

Three years he'd waited, hoped, prayed, and now coming in that carriage would be the results.

Yvonne Lehman

Adria Starr didn't want her mother and little brother to stop breathing the way her father had.

Ann H. Gabhart

I hit send too soon.

Ann Gabhart by accident

Jessica Ames was shopping for salmon when her life shattered for the second time.

Rick Acker

What good was a dead man?

Kathleen Y'Barbo

## Avoidable Errors

She didn't know who was in the conspiracy or how far it went, but she understood she had just provoked it, poked it like a tiger in a pen.

Early in 20th century Brooklyn:

We walked on, absorbing the gentle sunshine of waning summer. August was nearly over, and the weather would soon be getting cooler.

The Kelly house was a vintage three-story brownstone on Clinton Avenue between Willoughby and Myrtle. Its spacious, carefully tended front lawn was bordered with perky daffodils and delicate white lilies. On any other street, the house would have been the jewel of the block, but here it was dwarfed by the newer, palatial mansions....

The man in the hospital bed beside Nick shriveled in the one-size-fits-all hospital gown the nurse had forced on him. His left hand twisted hospital sheet between nervous fingers like an aging toddler with a security blanket.

(He glanced over his shoulder at the rest of the research team who had massed behind him in Room 306 of the university hospital, hovering like a flock of mother hens over one sickly chick.)

Amy, her mother and 8 year old daughter have arrived at a restaurant where renovations have just uncovered bodies when the parking lot collapses into a buried root cellar:

One of the construction workers stepped forward. "There's only two bodies down there and one of them's a real tiny baby."

Amy saw her mother go white. She began to sway unsteadily. "Mom?"

There was a sudden grinding noise and the dump truck suddenly began to roll backward.

"Get back!"

Amy reached for her daughter and her mother. Her mother stumbled. Before she could pull them to safety, someone roughly shoved all of them to the asphalt, out of the path of the runaway truck. A man's large body, lying across her back, partly covered her.

"Stay still," a masculine voice rumbled in her ear.

Gayle Roper 12 Crucial Questions

Voices shouted. Someone screamed. And the truck bounced past, scant inches from where the man had flung them. Amy gripped her daughter's hand, fighting the adrenaline rush of fear.

There was a horrific sound as the truck's rear wheel hit the lip of the (excavation) hole. The truck canted to one side, off balance. The heavy load groaned and shifted. There was a tortured cry of metal as something gave way and gravel began spewing everywhere.

A haze of dust swept over them. The sudden silence that followed was almost painful. The person on top of her pulled away. Amy rolled over and came eye-to-eye with the only man she had ever loved.

"Are you okay?" he asked. An incredulous expression suddenly swept his harsh features as recognition hit him. "Amy?"

"Hello, Jake."

"What are you doing here?"

"Mommy?"

Amy sat up and tugged her daughter to her side. "I was taking my mother and my daughter to lunch."

Feeling sucker-punched, Jake rose to his feet and stared down at the face that had haunted his dreams for nine years.

On the Sunday following the crucifixion, Jesus' tomb was first discovered by a group of woman. On many occasions and in various circumstances numerous witnesses saw Jesus alive after he had been buried: Peter, the other disciples, 500 brethren, those on the road to Emmaus, the Galilean appearances, sightings by more women, and by James, his brother. There were multiple, independent postmortem manifestations.

Fully aware of the multiple flights of stairs she'd been forced up, she threw open the shutters and stared down at the people milling about below, worrying her already ragged fingernails with thoughts of lashing sheets together and scaling the wall.

"What would you have done if you'd found yourself *enceinte*? Or didn't you think about that? Is that a sign of your vaulted maturity?"



## Motivation: WHY?

Why do your characters behave as they do?

### Why do they choose a locale?

#### Shadows on the Sand

I had watched enough TV to know what happened to girls who ran away to the big city, so we ran away to Seaside. We'd heard stories about the place all our lives. When Mom got soggy drunk and no man was around to occupy her, she'd get melancholy, remembering all the halcyon summer days before her father took off and her mother jumped in front of a bus.

"Back when my daddy was working, before we moved to Atlanta, we lived in Camden, New Jersey, and we'd go to Seaside for two weeks every summer." She'd smile and look pretty for a moment. "We'd stay at the Brookburn, this boardinghouse that had one-room apartments with little refrigerators and two burner stoves and I had a cot tucked in a corner. We'd sit on towels on the beach and go in the ocean, which was green, not blue like you see in pictures. Daddy would hold my hands and I'd jump the waves. At night we'd go on the boardwalk and I'd ride the merry-go-round. Once Daddy took me on the Ferris wheel, and you could see out over the ocean all the way to Europe. At least that's what he told me."

Then she'd start to cry and drink until she passed out.

Her stories made me want to live in Seaside, and Lindsay shared that dream.

"Some day, Linds," I'd tell her as we sat in the library, using the free computer and staring at the sites on the Web full of pictures of pretty beaches and glorious sunsets. Whether we looked at the brilliant transparent blue of the Caribbean or the hypothermic opaque green of the Northern Atlantic, the sea tugged at us like the cycles of the moon pulled at it.

"Some day," she'd whisper back, her chair pulled close to mine.

### Why do they act in a certain way?

#### Shadows on the Sand

Greg stood beside his stool, staring at his empty plate lying on the counter. He'd eaten all his eggs and toast like a good little boy, and he didn't even like eggs, no matter how they were prepared. For some reason they caught in his throat, threatening to make him gag. Yet he ate them day after dismal day.

He just couldn't face a cereal bowl. His had been waiting for him when he'd gone back into the house that terrible day, a soggy, bloated presweetened mess floating on soured milk. (p. 44)

He swallowed hard as it hit him that he wanted to matter to Carrie differently and more deeply than anyone else, even her sister or Mary P.

His stomach cramped. That couldn't be right. It couldn't. It would be unfair to Ginny, disloyal, unfaithful.

Which was stupid.

Ginny was dead. Three years dead.

Greg still got the sweats whenever he thought about that day. And he had suspected nothing. He should have. He should have!

"You've got me blocked in," Ginny had said, her voice rushed. "I've got to get the kids to school."

He pulled his keys from his pocket with no shiver of premonition and tossed them to her. She caught them, grinned, and blew him a kiss. As she and the kids went chattering out of the house, he took a bite of his Cap'n Crunch, savoring the taste, when his world exploded in a fireball.

There were no screams, at least not from Ginny and the kids. Just his own anguished cries. Just the shrill shouts of the neighbors and the shriek of the sirens of the first responders. And the mocking whispers of flames writhing and dancing in the bright morning sunshine. (p. 123)

"I've changed my mind. I'd like a bowl of cereal. You've got those little boxes, don't you?"

"Frosted Flakes, corn flakes, Raisin Bran, and Froot Loops." I had a terrible thought as I recited the choices. If he started eating cereal, he wouldn't need the café. He could pour a bowl at home, and I wouldn't see him every day.

"Frosted Flakes." He nodded for emphasis. "It's a milestone."

"Okay." A milestone? "Coming right up." (p. 245)

### **Why do they think and/or act strangely?**

#### **Spring Rain**

He felt safe burrowed in the dunes, even from the ocean. The ocean gave him the creeps. It kept moving all the time. Big waves, little waves, high tide, low tide. It was too much like a living thing for him, like a scary alien or something in one of those space shows on TV. And it was gray-green, not clear and sparkly like a pool. He liked pools. No surprises. With the ocean you couldn't see what was waiting to get you. He'd seen *Jaws* lots of times and all the other deep sea creature movies. He knew what lived there, and he knew you never saw any of them until they grabbed you. No way was he going in it.

He scrunched deeper in the sand and sighed, content. He didn't have to worry about anyone sneaking up behind him here in his hiding place.

His brother used to like to sneak up behind him when he was a little kid.

"Hey, twerp!" he'd yell as he grabbed him around the neck. And squeezed.

The first time Stanley grabbed him like that, he'd wet his pants. He'd been so scared!

He told his father, but the old man just said, "That's your problem. You take care of it."

"But, Dad," he sniffed.

The old man climbed out of his chair and leaned over him, both fists clenched. "Don't snivel! Do you hear me? Don't ever snivel! I can't stand crybabies!" He raised his hand.

Holding his sore throat, he'd escaped and never complained to his father again. Stanley had snuck up on him for years.

### **Why are they pushed to be/do evil?**

#### **Shadows on the Sand**

Those cold Maine nights when he'd been a kid had been agony.

"Can't we put more wood in the stove, Pop?" he'd asked as a young boy.

"What's your problem?" Pop would retort. "Can't you deal with a little chill? Put on another layer."

Somehow "a little chill" seemed a gross understatement when there was rime forming on the inside of the windows across the room.

"That wood supply's got to last the entire winter, Harl. I ain't cutting any more, not in snow like we got."

"We could buy a couple of cords," he suggested once when he was about seven. He'd heard one of the kids at school talk about buying wood, and he'd been amazed that people did something so sensible.

"We ain't spending what little we got on what's out there for the taking," Pop snarled. Trouble was, Pop wasn't taking so Harl dragged fallen logs home through the thigh-deep snow and did his best to split them.

"Watchin' you with that ax is better'n watching TV," Pop said. "Ain't laughed so hard in years."

Harl bit his tongue to keep from suggesting yet again that Pop apply for a job at the lumber mill in town. Pop's anger and the sharp blows he rained on Harl for what he called disrespect were powerful deterrents. It wasn't until Harl was an adult that he understood that Pop couldn't handle a time clock and a regular job. He just wasn't smart enough, and his heavy drinking didn't help. Doing summer maintenance at the Happy Days Campground was all he could manage, and that was done on his own unpredictable schedule.

Pop kept him home from school when the snow got deep, and Harl didn't even have those few hours of warmth provided by the old hissing and groaning radiators in Moosehead Elementary.

"This room is always so hot," his teacher complained.

Harl smiled and slid his desk closer to the radiator.

"You are a waster of resources, Harl," Pop constantly growled at him when he returned from foraging in the woods with a fresh supply of downed limbs and rotting logs. "You are a weakling, a wimp, and no son of mine. For generations we Evanses have been strong, men of character. What's a little chill to us? You make me ashamed."

Then they were even. Pop's laziness and inability to cope with life shamed Harl.

"I don't want to freeze to death in my own house," Harl said. "Talk about stupid."

"Don't you call me stupid!" Pop's fist came up.

"I'm not! I'm saying freezing is stupid."

"You just don't unnerstand your heritage and the ways we Evanses become men."

For once Pop was right. Harl couldn't equate chilblains with manliness, so he kept chopping wood and building roaring fires.

Early in the winter of his sophomore year, he cut a hole in the upstairs hall and installed a grate to let the heat rise. Pop nearly had a cardiac when he found what Harl had done.

"You put that floor back," he ordered.

Harl had expected this reaction. "Can't. I burned it."

Blind with rage, Pop swung.

The old man had been using the same move for years, and Harl dodged it with ease. He grabbed his father by the shirt front.

"Swing at me again," Harl said in a low, tight voice, "and I'll hit back."

Pop's face turn red and his teeth drew back in a snarl, but he didn't strike out again. Instead he left the house and didn't return that night.

The next day when Harl came home from school, a piece of plywood was nailed over the grate. Harl ripped it free, chopped it up, and fed it to the wood stove, stoking the fire hotter and hotter.

Pop, weary from his night at the taproom in town and groggy with drink, had fallen asleep. Even Harl's curses and the thumps of the wood bumping as he dragged it down the stairs hadn't wakened him.

There would never be a better time.

Harl fed the fire until it was a small inferno. He stepped back, leaving the door of the stove open as someone might if they wanted extra heat, watching, waiting. One coal leaped out, then two, then more and more, all pulsing a fierce red and fiery gold, sizzling, smoldering on the wood floor. When the floor exploded in flames, he smiled.

He took his father's bank card and all the money the old man had in his wallet. He then stood in the frigid air and watched the house and Pop go up in the crackling, soaring flames, for once not feeling the bite of the cold due to the warm satisfaction flooding him at the success of his vengeance.

When he was certain nothing would save the old place or the old man, he drove Pop's car to the nearest ATM and took out as much money as possible. He tossed the card in a nearby Dumpster so he wouldn't be tempted to use it again and give the police something to trace. He headed south, toward warmth even in January, and never looked back.

## Plotting

### The name of the game is **CONFLICT**

1. Conflict - trouble upon trouble, problem upon problem. Escalation! Crank it up!
3. Climbing steps; tide coming in; taking the fences
4. Stein in *ONWRITING* says, "Don't let the character overcome an immediate danger without facing an even greater danger."
5. This danger may be literal physical threat from a literal enemy as in a mystery or quest novel. The danger may be escalating family/interpersonal conflicts, nothing physical in the dangers.
6. Long term conflict - carries through the whole novel and not resolved until the end
7. Short term conflict - part of the long term problem but some of them can be resolved
8. Have your character do something he or she would never do.  
p.215 in *Lost and Found*

### Author or Character Explanation

1. Annie was as natural as they come. She rarely used makeup, cut her own hair and loved her three Great Danes to distraction.

#### Character revealed through actions:

2. Annie pulled her hair back and stuck it in a rubber band. She licked her hand and tried to plaster the stray curls back with spit. Giving up, she pulled the scissors out of the medicine cabinet and snipped off the offending hair. She turned the faucet on and pushed two of the three Great Danes away.

"You've got water of your own. This is for me."

They sat and stared at her while she washed her face and brushed her teeth. She left the water running as she pulled on her jeans and sweatshirt, and they both drank happily. The third dog preferred the toilet.

1. Merry was aware of Curt staring at her. Her curly brown hair was cut in a short bouncy style. She was wearing gray wool slacks, a jade sweater and a navy blazer, a professional but casual outfit just right for a reporter conducting an interview. She had an endearing, gaptoothed smile that made the corners of her blue eyes crinkle.

"What?" she said, nervous under his gaze. "What?"

#### Character revealed through description:

2. Merry was aware of Curt staring at her. She knew something was wrong. Her hands went to the too-curly hair with the hated perm, but it bounced above her collar as it should. She sucked discreetly at the gap between her teeth. She hadn't eaten anything since she'd brushed a couple of hours ago, but she always worried about a repeat of the fiasco with the spinach salad eight years ago. She looked down at her gray slacks, jade sweater and navy blazer, but Snowball hadn't hung his silky winter coat on her.

"What?" she asked, nervous under his gaze. "What?"

1. Rose had what people considered the typical redhead's temper as those who crossed her learned to their regret. She however saw her quick anger as a sign of strength, a proof that she was unwilling to put up with incompetence and carelessness. Whenever her green eyes sparked, all wise people fled. All but Paul.

Character revealed through **dialogue**:

2. Paul watched Rose's face flush as she read Andrea's report. When she looked up, her narrowed eyes shot green fire. She shoved the paper at him. "Look at this. Just look!" Paul scanned the report, then looked calmly at Rose. "I take it you have a problem with the work?" She blinked. "You don't?" "Not enough to attack the person who prepared it." Rose's back stiffened. "I'm not going to attack her." He raised an eyebrow. "I can't stand incompetence." Rose grabbed the paper from him. "Look at this carelessness!" Her forefinger stabbed the paper. "She has to learn to do things right." "Agreed." Paul took the paper back. "But not through intimidation and accusation. Through encouragement and education." He smiled with all the charm he could muster. "I'll take care of the situation." As he turned away, he noted with satisfaction that she was so angry she vibrated.

1. Sixteen year old Jenn was very upset and embarrassed about losing her temper in front of several people. She felt like a lowly worm.

Character revealed through **thought**:

2. Jenn had never felt so ugly. What was the point of taking all that time to make herself look good, to make certain her hair was just right, her makeup perfect, her outfit the latest, her nails just so, when inside she was vile and just plain nasty? Derrick hated her. Aunt Cassandra hated her. The new guest guy hated her. And she couldn't blame them. She saw the looks on each of their faces as clearly as if they were still with her. Derrick's angry, accusing face. Aunt Cassandra's hurt, sad face. The new guest guy's look of disbelief and disdain. A worm. That's what she was, a worthless, crawl on your belly worm.

Author or Character Explanation  
Multiple Examples of same thing

Basic but telling sentence:

Janie was so short she always sat on the edge of a seat so her feet touched the ground.

Showing the same thing:

Janie sat forward in the chair, her hands resting lightly in her lap. If her feet actually touched the ground and she looked at ease, maybe no one would detect her anxiety and uncertainty. Maybe she'd get the job.

Janie slid into the passenger seat of Mac's Beetle. The car might be that strange neon green, but she didn't care. It, like all cars, allowed her the rare luxury of setting her feet comfortably on the floor.

Janie realized she was swinging her legs back and forth, back and forth, making the entire pew quake. She knew everyone in the row must think she couldn't keep still because she was under deep conviction. She sighed. The woes of a fidgeter. She slid forward until her toes touched the ground and forced herself to sit still. She might have a terrible backache from sitting unsupported, but they'd all know she and the Lord were right with each other.

Janie looked with longing at the strappy sandals with the ties that wrapped up the leg. Gillian wore them and looked as elegant as any runway model. She wore them and looked as squat as Miss Piggy.

Janie headed for the wooden rocker before anyone could offer her a seat on the deep, cushy sofa. She knew that if she sat on the inviting couch, her legs would stick straight out. She'd look like a brunette Barbie bent at the middle, minus the gorgeous face and bosom, of course.

"It's amazing," Tom said. "When you sit beside me, you'd think we were similar in height. Then we stand and you shrink to below my shoulder. I can't decide whether you're an adult or a Munchkin."

Janie tilted her head, staring down her nose at him even from below his shoulder. "If you can't decide something that basic, then forget what might have been a fine friendship." She sniffed. "Tall, indecisive men."

Tom watched her stalk away. *An adult, definitely an adult.* He grinned.

## SHOWING INNER PROBLEMS

Anyone can write, "Mandy was unsure of herself. She had a hard time making decisions and always wanted to please her husband."

### Mandy's POV:

Mandy stood in the closet staring at her clothes. What should she wear? What would the other women wear? She reached for the black dress, then hesitated. Too depressing to say nothing of too tight. But the red was too bright. She was sure of that. Unless bright was good. Was bright good?

She groaned. She might as well be in junior high for all the sense she had of occasion.

*Lord, some day can I grow up?* It would be pure heaven to be sure of herself, to not second guess every decision. Then she could tell Jonathan she wasn't going.

### Her friend's POV:

"Mandy, stop it! You'll be fine." Angie looked at her best friend. "And stop picking off all your carefully applied nail polish. Manicures are too expensive to waste." Mandy had a heart of gold, but she was so busy trying to please that she was eating herself alive. "Just tell Jonathan no." Fat chance she'd ever do that.

"I can't. He said it was important I be there."

### Mandy's POV:

Mandy watched Jonathan smile and lean in to kiss the cheek of the newest young lawyer to join the firm. Emily. Pretty, of course. They were all pretty around here. It was a firm requirement as was that aura of self-confidence that haloed Emily.

Mandy felt her shoulders rolling in, her head dropping. But it was the smile Jonathan gave Emily that pushed tears to the surface. Once upon a time he'd smiled at her like that. Once upon a time he'd needed her.

### Jonathan's POV:

Jonathan stepped back from pecking Emily's cheek, enjoying the subtle scent she wore. Beautiful, but she scared him to death, Oh, her ambition was carefully cloaked behind a smile and pleasant manner, Still he had no doubt she'd trample any of them in her rush to be partner.

He glanced over at Mandy standing quietly by the couch. He grinned at her and she smiled hesitantly back. He knew she hated parties like this, but he needed to come and so he needed her to come. She gave him balance. Maybe someday she'd believe him. He walked to her side, his most comfortable place in the world.

Anyone can write, "Rickard was a workaholic who ignored his family."

### Richard's POV:

"Good night, Richard," Simms called as he flicked off the light in the office across the hall. "Think you'll go home before midnight?"

Richard glanced at his watch. 6:30. Like Simms wasn't working late too. Of course, Simms was single.

Audra probably had dinner on the table, and he still had two hours of work to finish before he left. He sighed and sipped his cold coffee. When was the last time he ate with his family on a weeknight? Or on a weekend, come to think of it. He shrugged and turned to his computer.

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Audra stared at Richard, mouth hanging open in amazement. "A week at the shore? Richard, how wonderful! A family vacation."

Richard glanced away, suddenly interested in the picture on the wall. He hated that grateful look of hers more than he could say. He always thought of a lonely cocker spaniel finally getting petted.

"Oh." Her voice became tight, her disappointment obvious. "You're not coming with us, are you? You're staying home to work." She said work like it was a curse word.

He thrust out his chin. "It's my job that's making your vacation possible. I'd think you'd be appreciative, not critical." He stalked from the room, hugging his pique possessively, ignoring the soft tap of guilt.

\*\*\*\*

"But Dad, you promised you'd come!"

Richard sighed. He knew he shouldn't have answered the phone.

"I'm sorry, Nicky. Something came up at work."

"Something always comes up, doesn't it?"

Richard was astonished to hear the animosity in his son's voice. What had he ever done but work hard to provide so Nicky could go to all the sports camps that made him good enough to play in the state championships?

"Watch the tone there, guy."

Nicky made a sound like a snort. "Don't worry. I'll never ask you to come to anything again."

Now ask yourself: What would make Mandy stand up for herself? What would make Richard come to his senses? And how will you get them there in reasonable increments?

### Building Emotions

Anyone can write:

"Get out of my house! I don't ever want to see your face again."

The trick is in the build-up to the final blow-up, the development of resentment, bitterness, all the emotions that come first.

\*\*\*\*\*

Jenna watched as Maggie came into the room. She was smiling as usual, that oh-so-sweet smile that ate at Jenna's nerve endings like a dog's sharp teeth mauled a bone. Jenna suppressed a shudder as everyone turned to Maggie like they hadn't seen her for years instead of one day.

"Maggie," they all gushed. "We've been waiting for you. How are you? You look beautiful!"

Jenna stood in her corner, mouth clamped shut. No one had welcomed her like that, asked her how she was. No one had told her she was beautiful.

Jenna stared at Bob. She could feel her jaw tighten and her eyes narrow. "What did you say?"

Bob blinked at her tone. "I said Maggie got a call from Woodward and Jones that she got the job she was interviewing for."

The pulse in Jenna's temple throbbed. That was her job! She was the one they liked!

"I'm taking her out for dinner tonight to celebrate." He grinned in anticipation.

"But -" she began as he turned and left the room. "But I'm the one you like," she whispered to the empty doorway, a rising panic blooming. She was going to lose again.

Jenna sat in the darkened room, staring out the window at the light by the drive across the street, the light left on to welcome Maggie home. Always, always it was Maggie. Maggie the Usurper. Maggie the Thief, taking, taking, always taking what was rightfully Jenna's. Maggie won the Cutest Baby contest at the Fourth of July parade the year they were both one. She won Little Miss Patriot the year they were four. She won Bobby MacKamey in third grade and Barry Townsend in sixth. She was Prom Queen and Homecoming Queen and won a full scholarship to college. She passed her LSats and breezed into law school, made Law Review and passed the bar on her first try. Now she had Woodward and Jones. Now she had Bob.

At this point it would be fine for Jenna to scream at Maggie, "Get out of my house." We have a context out of which the anger flows.

## Building To That Emotional Peak

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

## Creating Tension And Suspense In Your Fiction

**Tension:** worry, anxiety, stress, strain apprehension. It's what keeps the reader reading!

### **Goal #1 - Create Tension and Suspense**

Kinds of Suspense

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

How to Create Suspense

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### **Goal #2 - Sustain Tension and Suspense**

- 1.
- 2.

### **THROWING AWAY TENSION - sample 1**

Jake ran into the grocery store and looked for the kid. There were so many aisles that he felt he'd never find him. When he reached the farthest aisle, he turned around and searched the whole store again. Once he thought he saw the kid back around meats, but he was gone when Jake got there.

#### **DEVELOPING TENSION if the store scene or the kid is important**

Jake raced into the grocery store and skidded to a stop. Even so, he just missed stepping on a three-year-old running away from her mother.

How would he ever find the kid in all this chaos?

He looked down Produce, searching among the young mothers in jeans and the working women in heels for a skinny kid in a red sweat suit. Not there.

Suddenly he saw a flash of red back in Meats. He charged down the cereal aisle, weaving around the shopping carts like a running back evading tacklers on the way to the goal line. He only bumped into one person. Unfortunately she bounced off him into a display of raisin bran.

He stepped on one of the toppled boxes. As he slid and crashed to the floor, he saw the kid streak out the back door.

So much for a quick collar.

### **THROWING AWAY TENSION - sample 2**

Certain she was about to die, Nell O'Connor braced herself. Falling headfirst into a busy Chicago street was not the way she would have chosen to go, but it seemed about to happen. Just then a strong, vise-like grip on her arm halted her plummet. With the wail of the car horn, she found herself back on the curb, shaken but safe.

#### **RECLAIMING THE MOMENT because almost dying is always important**

Certain she was about to die, Nell O'Connor braced herself. Falling headfirst into a busy Chicago street was not the way she would have chosen to go. All she'd done was try to dodge an old lady with bulging shopping bags in both hands. As she sidestepped, her foot had come down on something, and her ankle had twisted, throwing her toward the street.

She grabbed for a handhold to stop her fall and found only air.

Oh, God, help! she screamed silently.

The street rose inexorably toward her. She watched, horrified, as a yellow taxi bore down on her. The driver looked both disbelieving and terrified as he pushed on his screeching brakes. She knew just how he felt.

Wasn't your life supposed to flash before you at times like this? All she could think was that her new suit was going to be ruined by the grime and dirt of the city street. And the blood.

As she closed her eyes so she wouldn't see the cab hit her, a strong, vise-like grip on her arm halted her plummet and yanked her unceremoniously out of harm's way. With the squeal of brakes and the blaring of the taxi's horn ringing in her ears, she found herself back on the sidewalk.

She might be sitting in a very unladylike position, but she was safe.

### ***MISPLACING EMPHASIS***

Claire rolled down her window to enjoy the glorious weather. The wind whispered of freedom and exciting unknowns as it joyously tied her chestnut hair in knots.

Azaleas fired the hedges while white and pink dogwoods limned the edges of the greening woods. Mrs. Barto's tulips made the displays at Gerald's Gardens look listless, and the fragrance of the lilacs drifted gently on the spring warmth.

Sunday afternoon was Claire's favorite time of the week. Work was put aside for the day, and worship had already been accomplished. Time stretched before her like a golden strand, waiting for her footsteps. She stretched contentedly as she approached the old Jordan place.

Suddenly a car rounded the corner in her lane, forcing her off the road. She slammed into the big beech and passed out momentarily. When she came to, she was staring into the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. She blinked, backed the car onto the road and continued on her way.

Lambs frolicked at their mothers' sides as she passed the Norton farm, and a foal nuzzled its mother in the adjoining field. Claire breathed deeply. Even the manure smelled wonderful today.

### ***EMPHASIZING THE IMPORTANT***

Claire rolled down the window and let the wind whisper **to her** of freedom and exciting unknowns. Azaleas fired the hedges, Mrs. Barto's tulips shamed the pompous display's at Gerald's Gardens, and the scent of lilacs drifted gently on the spring warmth.

Claire stretched. She loved Sunday afternoons, golden strands of time awaiting her footprints.

Suddenly a car rounded the corner immediately ahead of her and careened into her lane. For a fraction of a second, Claire froze. Cars as instruments of death weren't part of her Sunday plans.

She jammed her foot on the brakes at the same time she wrenched the steering wheel to the right in an attempt to avoid certain collision. The tires screamed as she skidded toward the curb. The sun reflected off the windshield of the oncoming car, momentary blinding her. One hand came up automatically to shield her eyes.

She hit the curb with her speed barely diminished, and the impact wrenched the wheel from her hand. **She lost complete control of the car.**

She watched with horror as the great beech on the edge of the Jordan property opened its arms and swallowed her. The impact was far worse than she'd ever imagined as she slammed against the seatbelt and exploding airbag. The double force on her chest drove the air from her lungs, and she blacked out for a few seconds. At least she thought it was only a few seconds.

"Tell me you're not dead!" a horrified voice pleaded, pulling her back to a world where ribbons of pain unfurled in her head, neck and chest. "Please!"

"I'm not dead," she tried to say, but only a cracked whisper emerged. She lifted a shaky hand toward her head. "Dead can't hurt this much."

"Don't move!" A large hand captured hers. "I called 911 and help's coming."

## Mood and Atmosphere

### Mood: the dominant emotional environment of our story

1. I drove down Stateside Boulevard slowly because the traffic was heavy. I followed a red car with four kids in the back seat. The smallest two turned and smiled shyly at me. I smiled back and waved. They were overcome with embarrassment, and I didn't see them again for two blocks. Then their bright smiles again lit my day.
2. I was forced to crawl down Stateside Boulevard because every driver in the city chose today to go where I was going. The car ahead of me was full of snot-nosed kids who kept staring at me. I scowled at them and made a face. They turned around fast enough. I couldn't decide which I was grinding the most, my gears or my teeth.

### Atmosphere: the creating of emotion through physical surroundings

1. It was almost night, and I walked quickly down the middle of the road. The trees on the verge were bent and distorted like gnarled, alien creatures, and bats plunged and swooped beneath them, making me flinch. The night noises blared discordantly, and there was no moon to lighten the pressing darkness. I rubbed my sweaty palms on my jeans and kept my eyes focused straight ahead on the premise that if I saw no one lurking behind a tree, then there was no one there.
2. I swung my arms as I walked, savoring the last magic moments before full dark. Overhead some bats wheeled and dived with abandon, and at my feet crickets played their thunderous, joyous symphony. Honeysuckle draped the hedgerows, filling the evening's softness with its glorious scent. I searched for the moon but found instead the Milky Way. I stopped counting when I reached a hundred zillion stars

## LAYERING

1. Layering is
2. Layering adds
3. Layering is
4. Layering is done
5. Layering is information about:
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.
  - d.
6. Layering is NOT
7. Layering is \_\_\_\_\_, not \_\_\_\_\_.

### Examples of **Layering**

#### **Layering in Plot: Summer Shadows**

##### **Basic Scene:**

The light was red, and Abby slowed. A little girl about the same age Abby's daughter would have been had she lived skipped up to the opposite corner. She checked the light, saw it was green, and started across the road.

At the same time, a car rushed down the cross road, trying to make the light. The little girl never had a chance.

##### **Layered Scene: physical details, emotional details**

The light at Thirty-Fourth Street was red, and Abby slowed. A little girl in pink overalls skipped up to the opposite corner, her stride awkward as she worked to hone her new skill. Her ponytail was caught back in a pink scrunchie the same shade as her overalls, and her hair bounced with every skip. Her mouth moved, and she was obviously singing to herself.

*What a cutie! Just like Maddie in a few years.*

No, she caught herself. Just like Maddie would look right now. She always forgot that Maddie wouldn't be two any more. Three long years had passed. She would be five, just about the age of the pixie in pink. The barb of bereavement twisted in her heart and her vision blurred.

The little girl on the corner looked at the stop light, saw she had the green signal, looked both ways as an extra precaution, and started across Central Avenue, skipping and singing.

At the same time a car roared down Thirty-Fourth Street, trying to make the light before it went red.

"Idiot," Abby muttered. At the last minute the car flicked on a left turn signal and squealed around the corner onto Central.

Abby screamed a warning, but the little girl in pink never had a chance.

#### **Layering in Character - Spring Rain**

##### **Basic Scene:**

He felt safe hiding in the dunes. No one could sneak up behind him here, no one could scare him, not the ocean, not even Stanley.

##### **Layered Scene: backstory and emotional detail**

He felt safe burrowed in the dunes, even from the ocean. The ocean gave him the creeps. It kept moving all the time. Big waves, little waves, high tide, low tide. It was too much like a living thing for him, like a scary alien or something in one of those space shows on TV. And it was gray-green, not clear and sparkly like a pool. He liked pools. No

## Gayle Roper 12 Crucial Questions

surprises. With the ocean you couldn't see what was waiting to get you. He'd seen *Jaws* lots of times and all the other deep sea creature movies. He knew what lived there, and he knew you never saw any of them until they grabbed you. No way was he going in it.

He scrunched deeper in the sand and sighed, content. He didn't have to worry about anyone sneaking up behind him here in his hiding place.

His brother used to like to sneak up behind him when he was a little kid.

"Hey, twerp!" he'd yell as he grabbed him around the neck. And squeezed.

The first time Stanley grabbed him like that, he'd wet his pants. He'd been so scared!

He told his father, but the old man just said, "That's your problem. You take care of it."

"But, Dad," he sniffed.

The old man climbed out of his chair and leaned over him, both fists clenched. "Don't snivel! Do you hear me? Don't ever snivel! I can't stand crybabies!" He raised his hand.

Holding his sore throat, he'd escaped and never complained to his father again. Stanley had snuck up on him for years.

### Layering in Character - Summer Shadows

#### Basic Scene:

"Have you had dinner yet?"

She looked surprised. "No."

"Follow me and I'll take you to the best seafood place in Seaside."

The next hour passed quickly as they ate and talked about myriad things—favorite colors, the Phillies, family circumstances, which of them had visited the most states, and why they were both in Seaside for the summer.

"It's my new beginning," Abby told him. "I finally am my own person."

The longer he was with her and the more she told him, the more burdensome the weight of his secret became.

#### Layered Scene: personality revealed through thought and dialogue

"Have you had dinner yet?"

She looked surprised. "No."

"Follow me and I'll take you to the best seafood place in Seaside. It's a hole in the wall that the tourists usually miss."

She hesitated a minute. "All right." It wasn't until after they were seated and given menus that she informed him she didn't like seafood.

"What?" He couldn't imagine anything sadder.

She placed her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands. "Except shrimp cocktail, and then only because the sauce drowns the taste of the shrimp. I think that's what I'll have."

"Sounds good." He turned back to the menu which offered so many tantalizing choices that he couldn't make up his mind. "Do you see anything you want for the main course?"

"Shrimp cocktail."

"But that's an appetizer."

She nodded, then replied reasonably, "But where does it say it can't be a main course too? Margery Russell and Dorothy Petty would have selected it as a main course." She turned to their waitress. "A Caesar salad and a shrimp cocktail. Please serve the shrimp and salad together as my main course."

"I know I'm going to regret this," Marsh said as their waitress hurried off with their order, "but who are Margery Russell and Dorothy Petty?"

Abby grinned. "Margery Russell was an English woman who took over her husband's import/export business after he died around 1300. When some Spanish pirates robbed one of her ships, she robbed two of theirs. Dorothy Petty was a preacher's daughter who lived during the Renaissance and sold insurance. She was one of the most honest and successful insurance agents in London."

"And what do they have to do with you ordering shrimp cocktail?"

"Nothing. But they have a lot to do with coloring outside the lines. Ordering an appetizer as an entrée is my small scribble outside the lines."

Fascinating. "And it's important to color outside the lines?"

Suddenly she looked very serious. "I must or I'll die. I've been confined to inside the lines my whole life. I've got to draw my own pictures!"

Marsh had heard that same intensity, even desperation, in her comments a couple of other times today. "How did you feel confined?"

She played with her silver for a few minutes, and he thought she wasn't going to answer. He couldn't blame her. She didn't know him, and he'd asked a very pointed question, one he wasn't certain he wanted anyone to ask him. Suddenly his secret life weighed on him more heavily than ever. What did it say about you if you did color outside the lines but went to great lengths to conceal those bold strokes of color?

## Layering in Character - Summer Shadows

### Basic Scene:

Hannah MacDonald walked to the car with Len. She stood beside him as he put the luggage in the car.

"You sure?" he asked.

"I don't think there's a choice, do you? We have to do something to save her."

Len nodded and kissed her goodbye. He climbed in the car, turned the key, put the car in reverse, and began to move when a red sports car came roaring into the drive behind him.

Hannah glared at Marsh as he climbed out of the little car.

**Layered Scene: complex personality developed**

Hannah MacDonald walked to the car with Len. It was time to go home, back to Scranton, but she had a plan, a plan that Len had agreed to. Her heart beat against her ribs like a wild bird against the bars of a cage as she thought of carrying it out, but she was certain she was doing the right thing.

*Help it work, Lord. Help it work.*

Len put the luggage in the car, then turned to her. "You're sure?"

Hannah nodded. "We have to do something before it's too late."

"She's not going to appreciate it."

"Maybe not today, but she will later." Hannah spoke with confidence. "If there's one thing I know, it's Abby's heart."

"You're a good woman, Hannah MacDonald," Len said as he leaned in and kissed her. "I think I'll keep you."

Hannah wrapped her arms around his middle, resting her head on his chest. "Like you could get rid of me."

They stood quietly, holding each other, until a red sports car pulled into the parking area, surprising them as it screeched to a stop inches from Len's bumper, blocking his car in the drive. Marsh climbed out of the driver's seat, a huge smile creasing his face.

*A boy and his toy, Hannah thought. A rude, crude boy and a flashy, trashy toy. Oh, dear Father, protect Abby from him!*

**Layering in Theme: Summer Shadows****Basic Scene:**

Abby walked along the beach, watching the waves with their ceaseless ebb and flow. The power and the secrets locked in the water were testament to God's great power. *Since You're so powerful, Lord, why all the pain? Why did I lose Sam and Maddie? Why will I never walk without limping? Help me understand!*

**Layered scene: add depth to spiritual issues**

She walked along the beach until her hip complained too much for her to ignore. She moved to the edge of the dry sand and sat. She closed her eyes and listened to the sounds of the breakers. She picked up a handful of sand and let it slide through her fingers. Endless waves, countless grains of sand. She looked up at the sky, limitless and beyond comprehension.

God was so obvious, yet all the questions she tried to contain, the uncertainties and doubts about His care, about life, about pain, about Maddie and Sam washed over her once again, threatening to sweep her into what she'd come to call the Sea of Heresy, a place where good little Christians who doubted were swamped and drowned.

*I'd never have survived these past three years without You. I know that, and I know You must love me. The Bible says so. But I don't understand why You let such unloving and hurtful things happen. I believe in You, Lord. I do. But please, Father, help my unbelief. Don't let me drown.*

She stared at the horizon, her eyes unfocused, her mind in freefall as questions tumbled. How far away was the horizon? Was it always the same distance if you looked out to sea, or did the distance vary from vantage point to vantage point? And the waves. She watched them foam and froth. Why did they advance, then recede? Why didn't the ocean keep coming and inundate the land? She knew there were answers in the pull of the moon and the rotation of the earth, but why did the earth rotate and the moon pull at the sea to begin with? Why was the sand here on the Jersey shore so soft? And how did the Gulf Stream that warmed these waters come to be?

*Lord, while I wonder about the unanswerable questions of life on one hand, I see Your might on the other. So with all that power, why?*

Not unexpectedly there was no answer.

### **Examples of Layering with SENTIMENT: Autumn Dreams**

#### **Grows out of the story**

The red garbage truck stopped, and the cab window rolled down. Cass smiled her first genuine smile of the day as she looked at the driver. "Did you come to wish me happy birthday, Clooney?"

"Not me, darlin'," the man said as he rested an elbow on the window ledge. "You might just expect a present."

"You mean you haven't anything in your stash of ill-gotten goods that you'd be willing to share?"

"Lean times is all I can say."

Cass grinned, not believing a word from this man she'd known since forever. Clooney was a Seaside celebrity of sorts, a decorated and disillusioned Vietnam vet who refused to use his keen mind in any pattern that could be perceived as conformity to the system. He searched the beaches all year long with his metal detector, and there wasn't a Seaside kid who hadn't trailed after him, fascinated. There also wasn't a kid who hadn't gotten one of the treasures he dug up. Cass still had the key ring with the silver butterfly medallion and five keys Clooney had given her the year she was fourteen, all legs, bosom, broad shoulders, and self-consciousness.

She had gone with the brothers and their friends to the Twelfth Street beach one July Saturday. She was there because her mother made the boys bring her. She was the price for them to have use of the car. Unfortunately the brothers weren't happy they'd

been forced to bring her, so she sat on her beach towel slightly apart from the rowdy guys.

Clooney saw her, huddled over a book, constantly trying to pull her bathing suit neckline up to her collar bone. She still remembered making believe she didn't feel conspicuous and failing spectacularly. Then Clooney knelt beside her and held out the key chain and medallion.

"This is for you, Cassandra," he said loudly enough for the brothers to hear. "One of these days you'll be that beautiful butterfly." He tapped the embossed wings, ignoring the brothers when they began to hoot. To them beautiful and Cass were not analogous, and sadly she agreed with them. Clooney rattled the dangling pieces of metal. "And these are magic keys."

She looked at the butterfly medallion, so pretty and shiny, so perfect. She would emerge from a chrysalis and become like that? She knew an impossible dream when she heard one, yet a little prickle of hope made her heart jump.

"What do the keys open?" she asked, her voice breathy.

"Ah." Clooney closed her hand over the treasure. "That's for you to find out." And he walked off, swinging his detector in arcs over the sand, stopping every so often to use a child's red plastic spade to dig a hole.

Cass walked to the water's edge, holding the medallion so tightly it hurt, listening to the melodic jingling of her magic keys. She looked skyward as the wavelets washed around her ankles and her feet sank into the soft sand.

*God, can You make me a butterfly? Oh, please God, if You can, do it! Please!*

Even today Cass could taste the desperation in the young Cassandra's prayer. Well, she might not have become the butterfly, but thankfully she hadn't remained the caterpillar either. Maybe she was a moth, solid and self-sufficient, if not butterfly beautiful.

\*\*\*\*

Cass tells Dan the story, then finds the key and medallion. She shows it to him.

She held out her hand. The silver medallion was smaller than she remembered. In her mind it had assumed the proportions of a large doughnut. In reality it favored a silver dollar.

Dan studied it, his finger tracing the butterfly. "Well, you certainly fulfilled Clooney's prophecy," he said in a matter of fact voice. "In fact, you surpassed it. You are more beautiful than any butterfly could hope to be." He raised his eyes and smiled at her.

\*\*\*\*

The front doorbell rang and Cass hurried to answer. She found a delivery man from Seaside Flowers holding a vase filled with a dozen of the most beautiful red roses she'd ever seen. She took the vase and, eyes sparkling, spun around to see Dan smiling at her.

"From you?" She scarcely dared believe it.

"Why don't you read the card?"

She set the vase on the desk and pulled out the card tucked among the deep green leaves. "Putting on the Ritz for your birthday. Love, Jenn, Jared, Brenna, Mike and Dan, the SeaSong clan."

Maybe not just from him, but close enough. She leaned in and breathed deeply.

\*\*\*\*

Finally the cake and ice cream were gone, the coffee drunk. All that remained were six sated people. Then Dan rose.

He looked down the table at Cass, and she felt she'd never be able to look away. She wasn't exactly sure how he had done it, but in the short time she'd known him, he had become the most important person in her life. Her hand went to her heart as if to protect it.

"Cass." Dan said her name and stopped. He just looked at her, and the air between them vibrated. On either side of the table the kids grinned and rolled their eyes, but Cass didn't care. At this moment there was only Dan.

He blinked and cleared his throat. "Cass, I appreciate you for many reasons, some as substantial as your great legs, your beautiful hair, and your enchanting eyes."

Cass blinked. Wow. The kids giggled.

"But what I appreciate most is that you have generously offered yourself, your home, and your family to me in the most difficult time in my life. I was lost, but you found me and took me home with you. You have made these uncertain days a joy and reminded me that the Father does know what He's doing. I could not ask for more, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

He reached into his suit jacket's inside pocket. "And now." He pulled out a slim, padded, ruby colored box with a gold string wrapped around it and tied in a bow. He held it toward her. "Happy birthday, Cassie. From all of us."

Cass watched as Jared took the box and passed it to Jenn who passed it to her. She looked down the table at Dan who looked so handsome in his navy pinstripe suit, so Mr. CEO. He might say, "From all of us," but Cass knew better.

"Open it," Jenn ordered. "Come on, Aunt Cassandra."

Cass's fingers shook only slightly as she slid the string off and lifted the lid. Inside on a bed of ivory satin lay a bracelet, a golden chain with one small, exquisitely etched charm attached: a butterfly, wings spread for soaring. Dangling next to the butterfly was a tiny key.

The swell of joy Cass felt made speech all but impossible. She held the bracelet up for everyone to see. Dimly she heard Jenn say, "Very pretty butterfly, but what's with the little key?"

She didn't answer. She wrapped the gold chain about her wrist and with Jenn's help fastened it. She held her hand out so everyone could see. Then she lowered her hands to her lap and closed her hand around the little butterfly, feeling it warm in her hand. She looked at Dan who looked back with a tiny half smile. He dropped one lid in a wink.

It was the best birthday she'd ever had.

