

and lies Shelly on it. Within a few moments the hay is stained with blood. Shelly has a bad chest wound.

"Peggy?" The child's voice is no more than a faint echo. "No - mother - there's a letter addressed to her in my purse. Get it - take it to her. Promise - Promise - - -"

Peggy's voice is broken with sobs. "Shhhh! Don't try to talk, dear." You saved my life, Shelly. If you hadn't tried to help me, I would be the one lying there."

Shelly doesn't hear her for she has lost consciousness.

Above the thunder and roaring wind, Peggy hears the faint cry of a wailing siren. It comes nearer and nearer until it stops in front of the barn.

"How did you ever find us?" She asks the officer that is placing Shelly on a stretcher. "How did you know we were here?"

"The convicts -" he shouts above the sounds of the storm. "One of them told us - before he died."

"Before he - -died?" Peggy doesn't understand. "How - where?"

"You see, the gas attendant took the license number of your car and we were looking for it. We spotted it down the road a piece and took

up the chase. They ran off a hill up ahead. Well, they're both dead now. But Jake Mahoney - he was doing time for armed robbery - he lived long enough to tell us what happened and that you were here. He told us the girl was dead - but he was wrong. She's still breathing. We'll get both of you to the hospital."

Peggy rests on the ride to the hospital. A turmoil of questions tug at her thoughts. "Why? Why did this have to happen to me?" She cries quietly into her pillow until the sedative they gave her relaxes her enough so that she falls into a deep sleep.

Much later, from her hospital bed, she smiles up at her adoring husband. Carl's anxiety smother's his face. "Peggy. Peggy. Thank God you're all right."

She hugs him to her breast and tears of relief are spilled over the blanket.

"The girl. Oh, Carl, is the girl all right? She saved my life, you know?" Peggy raises up on her elbow and discovers that she is too weak to sit up.

Carl gently helps her to lie back down. "I don't know, dear. I just don't know what her condition is. She's in the operating room now. The

hospital called me and I got here as fast as I could. I thought that you had been - -" He puts his head down to cover the overflow of tears.

"Her purse!" Peggy remembers her request. "Carl, please get her purse from the nurse. I promised to get in touch with her mother. Please, Carl, hurry."

Peggy watches anxiously as Carl returns with the girl's shoulder strap purse. "Here, darling, is this what you want?"

Peggy fumbles through it and finds an envelope at the bottom. She takes it out and reads it. "What? I don't understand. What can this mean?" she takes a letter from the envelope and skims through it. Suddenly, she bursts into tears and uncontrolled sobs issue from her throat.

Carl is shocked. "What is it, Peggy? For God's sake - what's wrong?" He takes the envelope from her and reads the name and address on the front of it. "Mrs. Margaret Wilson - 22 Winter Way - Chicago, Illinois. Why - that's you. Why is this girl carrying a letter addressed to you, Peggy?"

"She's mine, Carl. She's my baby daughter that I gave away so long ago. Somehow she found me. She was adopted out. I was so young, Carl. My family thought it was a disgrace - but I loved the boy. They made me give my baby away. I didn't want to. They made me.

"I know that you'll hate me now - but I want to see her. I have to talk to her. Oh, Carl, she has to live. She has to. It's my baby in that operating room. I can't lose her - not again. Tell them - Carl. Please tell them it's my daughter and I want the best doctor they got. Please, Carl. You can leave me then if you want to - but please tell them it's my daughter."

Her confession pours from her like a tumbling waterfall.

Carl stands with head bowed. "Why didn't you tell me before, Peggy? Why didn't you tell me?" A painful look is cast at her.

Peggy still sobs. "I was afraid, Carl. Don't you understand that. I was afraid of losing you. I know how much kids mean to you. I couldn't tell you before but that's the reason I can't have any children. When she was born, the butchers that delivered her ruined me. I'll never bear any other children, Carl - but that girl in that operating room - -- she's mine. Oh God, please don't take her from me again."

Carl gently pats her shoulder. "Let me see what I can do. You just relax. Oh - do you mind if I take this with me? I might need it." He takes the letter from her clenched hands and slowly walks to the door.

God was listening to Peggy's prayers because Shelly lived. The bullet had scraped her lung but did no permanent damage. Peggy is allowed to visit her in a wheel chair. The doctors, however, forbid her to tell her that she is her real mother. They fear the shock might be too much for her just now.

"Shelly? Can you hear me? It's Peggy, honey." She brushes a few strands of stray hair from her forehead.

"Peggy? Is that you? Where am I? What happened?" Shelly's voice is barely audible.

"Shhhh- don't tire yourself out." We have all the time in the world for talk later. You just rest now and get better." She kisses her forehead as the nurse arrives to take her back to her own bed.

For the next few days, Peggy is flooded with mixed emotions. Why hasn't Carl returned? And why doesn't he answer his phone? Even his co-workers don't know where he is. They had been under the assumption he was with her at the hospital. Was the merciful God who returned her daughter - now going to make her pay a price and take her husband from her? But he said he understood - Still and all - why didn't she hear from him?"

As the days stretch into a week, Peggy is very worried. She has come to accept the fact that Carl did not return because he could not forgive her - but why didn't he call and tell her? At least she would know then that he was all right. The doctor decided that it was okay to tell Shelly that she had found her mother in a bizarre way. Today was to be the day.

As the morning sun dips its golden rays on the fresh clean sheets, Peggy applies fresh make up. She wants to look her best when she breaks the news to Shelly. As she stares into the mirror, a familiar face smiles back at her. "Carl? Carl? Is it really you?" She whirls around and runs crying into his arms. "Oh, Darling - I thought - you had gone - I thought - -"

"Hey, what's this? No tears. I apologize, Peggy, for not calling you. I had to think things out. I also had to check out the story about your "new" daughter. It turns out that she is your daughter. I went back to Ohio and got proof. I checked with the neighbors where she was living. It seems that her adoptive mother was killed in a car wreck. Her Dad started drinking pretty heavy after that and the girl was left more or less on her own. Poor kid. Apparently she's had it pretty tough.

I checked at the adoption center and they had a break in about the time she disappeared. Apparently, she got what information she needed there in the files to trace you to Chicago. She went to a lot of trouble to find you, Peggy."

Through muffled sobs, she answers "Oh, Carl. My poor baby. But what about you? I love you too. If you don't want me to take her - I won't. It's unfair to you. I mean just out of the blue - spring a grown up daughter on you. I - I understand - if you'll just let me see her once more before we go home. I'll set it up with the hospital to put her in a good home - then, we can move and she won't be able to find us - -"

"Hold on." Carl answers. "What kind of a heel do you think I am?"
"You'll do no such thing. I came here today to take my family home with me. My wife and my daughter. I know that I'll like Shelly - she's part of you - so how could I help but love her? Come on, slow poke, get your face on - so we can go to our daughter."

"Oh Carl, I think I'm going to faint. I'm so happy." Carl holds onto his wife as they walk down the hospital corridor together.

"There is one thing I'm going to be film about" Carl stops her before they open the door to Shelly's room "From now on - you'll pick up no more hitch hikers. And there'll be no more hitchhiking for our girl in there."

Peggy smiles up at him and shakes his hand - "It's a deal. No more hitchhiking - for either one of your girls."

The end