

LORI WICK

*Just Above  
a Whisper*



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## JUST ABOVE A WHISPER

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# *One*

## **Tucker Mills, Massachusetts, 1839**

Maddie Randall, working on a baby's quilt, happened to look out the window in time to see her husband heading toward the house. It was too early for their noon dinner, and there was plenty of weeding to be done in the fields at this time of the year. For a moment she wondered if he might be hurt. He was inside their farmhouse kitchen and calling for her before she had time to worry.

"Maddie?"

"Right here," she answered from the small room off the parlor, the room where she kept her sewing and needlework. Jace appeared in the doorway as she came to her feet.

"Is everything all right?" Maddie asked.

"Yes, sit back down," Jace directed. Knowing that the summer heat was causing swelling in her ankles, he realized that having her feet up was the best thing she could do. "Where's Clara?" he asked after kissing her, checking on the woman who came a few days a week to help Maddie in the house.

"Upstairs, I think."

Jace took the room's only other chair.

"Is something wrong?" Maddie asked, showing her tendency to be a worrier.

"No, I just came from town, and I wanted to talk to you."

Maddie knew a moment of dread but still calmly asked, "Did you stop and see Mr. Muldoon?"

"No," Jace replied, looking surprised. "I told you I wouldn't do that again without telling you first."

"Oh, that's right. I forgot."

"Have you figured it out yet, Maddie?" Jace asked patiently. "Do you know yet why my seeing Pastor Muldoon bothers you?"

"I think I finally do have it figured out. For a long time I was so fearful and upset that I was missing something God had for me, but then you convinced me that all was well. Now, you're not sure. You're asking questions about death and eternity, and I don't know what to think. You were the stable one, and I made you my rock."

"And now I've crumbled," Jace said quietly.

"That's just it!" Maddie exclaimed. "You haven't crumbled! You're not a crying, fearful mess like I was. You're confident that you'll gain answers, and you're willing to search until you do, not caring what anyone says or thinks."

"I care what *you* think. And I'll just keep apologizing for not listening to you sooner. You knew something wasn't right, Maddie, but I didn't see it."

Maddie sighed. They had had this conversation at least six times since she'd told him they were expecting and he'd announced his need to see Mr. Muldoon. Mr. Muldoon was one of the pastors in town, but he wasn't their pastor. At least, not yet. Maddie could tell even that was going to change. Her aunt and uncle attended services at the meetinghouse on the green, and she often went with them. But Mr. Muldoon's congregation was building their own meetinghouse. They had been worshipping together in the Muldoons' parlor and kitchen for years.

"I don't want you to be upset with me," Jace cut into her thoughts. "Or feeling like I've betrayed you."

"I don't feel that way," Maddie said, even as she remembered

that a few weeks ago she did. "I just fear that you're going to go someplace and not take me along."

Jace took her hand. He held it tenderly, as tenderly as his eyes held hers.

"What kind of husband would I be to do that?" he asked, his fingers gently stroking hers. "We're going to stick together, the three of us."

"I know you won't leave me," Maddie cut in.

"I'm not talking about that, Maddie. I'm talking about all of us understanding what God wants and what is required of us."

"How can you be so sure?"

Jace didn't have an answer, but he did feel certain of one thing: After all of Maddie's searching, God would not turn her away. Jace's search for truth was relatively new, but he also believed that God would not reject him.

Maddie's hand slipped from his. She had wanted an answer, and the disappointment on her face told Jace he'd failed. Jace's mind searched for something to say, but he was out of words. He *did* want to go see Mr. Muldoon again but wasn't sure how to broach the idea with his wife. When she picked up her handwork again, he knew that now was not the time.

"Why did you go to town?" Maddie finally asked, her eyes on the tiny squares of fabric in her lap, her voice a bit tight.

Jace smiled very gently before admitting, "I had to see a man about a cradle."

Completely sorry for the things she'd been thinking, Maddie looked up. "Oh, Jace," was all she could manage.

"Don't give up, Maddie," Jace urged. "We can figure this out together."

Not sure if she believed this or not, Maddie didn't say anything, but when Jace reached for her hand again, she did not pull away.



Reese Thackery opened her bedroom door very slowly. She didn't have a large room, or a fancy one, but the door had a lock—something that was important to her. She moved as slowly as she could manage this day because the room had something else: a door that tended to squeak, sounding very loud in the early morning hours.

Mr. Zantow had not had a good night. He was never at his best when drinking, and last night had been worse than usual. Reese always thought about living and working elsewhere at these times, but it wasn't that simple. Reese Thackery was an indentured servant and had been for more than four years. It wasn't slavery, but in a very real sense, Mr. Zantow owned her.

From her small room that sat to the rear of the house, Reese made her way quietly into the kitchen, only to be startled by the sight of Mr. Zantow by the fire.

"Good morning," the servant said when she found her voice, wanting to laugh at how quiet she'd been, thinking him still asleep.

"Good morning, Reese," he said tiredly. His eyes closed as he balanced himself with a hand to the mantel. "Is there coffee?"

"I'll put it on right now."

Reese glanced his way when he moved slowly to the table and took a seat. It wasn't a large kitchen, so for her it was an invasion of space, but she kept to her task, casting occasional glances in his direction. Clearly he had a headache, and that seemed to be all that was on his mind.

Breakfast preparations began as soon as the coffee was on, and twice Reese forgot herself and began to hum. Humming was something she did as she worked. It was a natural part of her, but she knew that now was not the time. Even without looking behind her, she was certain that Mr. Zantow was not feeling better.

When the coffee was ready, she took him a cup and asked if he wanted cream.

"I want you to run an errand," he said, not having heard her question. "Go see Mrs. Greenlowe. Tell her I'll be late today."

"All right," she agreed with quiet relief. "Do you need anything else?"

"No, and don't hurry," he told her, thinking she was much too cheerful this morning.

Forgetting about breakfast for the moment and going down the back hall in order to leave by that door, Reese exited without further word. She walked past the fenced-in kitchen garden, overflowing with fruits and vegetables, and made her way onto the street.

Mr. Zantow worked with wood. He could turn his hand to any task that dealt with wood and end up with perfection. Right now he was repairing a porch for Mrs. Greenlowe. Reese knew it would last for at least 50 years when he was done. He never went to a job intoxicated, and his work was known around town as the best. He didn't work steadily in the winter, but come spring and summer, he was never without a task. He had a small workshop at the back of his property where he made furniture, but that work was sporadic, and he usually only turned out a few pieces each winter.

This past winter had been the exception. He'd had steady work making pews for the new meetinghouse in town. They weren't quite finished, but it wouldn't take long if he could keep his head. He also had a recent request for a cradle, all of which pleased Reese. She found that when Mr. Zantow was busy, he did less drinking. In fact, he was an easy man to work for until he got a little too deep into his cups. Unfortunately that happened every weekend and now some weeknights.

"Hello, Reese," Alison Muldoon called as Reese passed her house.

"Hello, Alison," she called in return, heading that way.

"Are you shopping this morning?" Alison asked. She was married to Reese's pastor, Douglas Muldoon.

"No, just running an errand and taking my time about it."

"How is Mr. Zantow this morning?"

"Not at his best." Reese's expression, which was almost

comical, said more than her words. "He sent me to tell Mrs. Greenlowe that he'll be late, and he doesn't want me to hurry back."

Alison's head tipped with interest. "How will you know when to return?"

Reese smiled. "I'll just force these long legs to walk slowly. If he's still not feeling well when I return, I'll find something quiet to do."

Alison returned the smile and invited her to stop and talk if she found herself at loose ends. She watched Reese go on her way, utterly captivated with the tall redhead.

Reese had come to them only six months past, having had a close call with Mr. Zantow and wanting to speak about it. Douglas had talked to her for more than three hours. Alison had joined them as much as time allowed. After hearing all that Douglas had to say about Jesus Christ, Reese confessed Him as her Savior. The months that followed had proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that her heart had been real.

Reese Thackery was remarkably humble and thirsty for knowledge of the Scriptures. She came with questions every week, never arguing but listening to each answer with a keen intelligence. And she never seemed to run out of energy. Joining the Muldoons for Sunday dinner when she was able, she never tired of the discussions they had or the concepts Douglas introduced to her. Alison thought she was one of the best things to happen to their small church family in a long time.

And to their own family. Reese was always swift to lend a hand with a meal or cleanup, and the Muldoon children adored her. She was good with the baby too, and he was less than six months old.

Alison shook herself from these mental wanderings and went back indoors. Her husband and five children would be looking for breakfast.





"Mrs. Greenlowe," Reese called out as she knocked, not sure if she would hear. "Mrs. Greenlowe, it's Reese."

The door took some time in opening.

"Come in, Reese," Mrs. Greenlowe invited when she saw the younger woman's face. "I want you to do something for me."

Not surprised by this request, Reese entered. She had learned never to be surprised by Mrs. Greenlowe, who was always busy with a project of some type.

"Do you see that tin on the top shelf?" The woman had taken her to the kitchen and now pointed to a high shelf.

"Yes, do you want it?"

"Please."

Without having to fully extend her arm, Reese retrieved the tin and handed it to Mrs. Greenlowe. As Reese stood there, the other woman opened the tin. Reese thought she was beyond surprise, but when the open tin revealed a pile of bank notes, her brows went up. Mrs. Greenlowe looked up and smiled, her eyes glinting with mischief.

"You won't tell anyone about my stash, will you, Reese?"

"No, ma'am." Reese grinned in return.

"You're a good girl, Reese." Having stuffed two notes into the pocket of her apron, Mrs. Greenlowe handed the tin back so Reese could replace it. "I don't trust banks, you know. Now, where's Zantow this morning?"

"He sent me to tell you he'd be a bit late."

"I don't trust men either," she proclaimed. "But Zantow does good work, and I'm willing to wait." She began to turn away but whipped back around. "Don't you tell him I said that!"

"I won't," Reese agreed, a small laugh escaping her.

"Come on," she turned once again. "Have some breakfast with me."

Reese fell to helping in the kitchen, laying the table, and putting the tea on. She did these things to the sound of Mrs. Greenlowe's voice. That lady had opinions on many issues, and Reese quietly heard her out.

"Your father didn't do right by you." This was the issue on Mrs. Greenlowe's mind as they finally sat at the table. "He had no business including you in the deal when he indentured himself."

Reese silently agreed but knew there was no point in commenting.

"Would you like me to pray?" Reese spoke for the first time in several minutes.

"Go ahead, Reese," Mrs. Greenlowe agreed quietly, respectfully bowing her head.

"Heavenly Father, I thank You for this food and for this day. Please bless Mrs. Greenlowe, and help Mr. Zantow to feel better. I pray in the name of Your Son. Amen."

"You didn't ask for a blessing on yourself," Mrs. Greenlowe commented immediately.

"I did earlier today," Reese replied cheerfully.

"You can't do it more than once?"

"I can," Reese clarified. "I just didn't this time."

"You're a good girl, Reese," her hostess commented again, bending over her plate to eat. Mrs. Greenlowe had always believed Reese to be a good girl for not rebelling against her circumstances. Reese didn't agree with her but knew that an explanation right now would fall on deaf ears. Reese hadn't rebelled, but neither did she think the label "good" fit her very well.

"What will keep you busy today?" Mrs. Greenlowe asked.

"I've got to get out into the garden. I'll be picking and putting up all week."

"Well, don't feel like you have to linger, but tell Zantow I want him here."

Reese was almost done, so there was no need to rush. She thanked Mrs. Greenlowe for breakfast and made her way back to the house. She knew a moment of relief to see that Mr. Zantow was just getting ready to head out.

He had no instructions for her, so Reese went about her business, more than happy to have the house and yard to herself.

Without further delay, she put on an old apron and went to work.



About 24 hours later, Douglas Muldoon exited the new meetinghouse, his son Martin beside him, and shut the door in their wake. They were still short two pews, but that didn't matter. They had met using chairs for a long time, and even though the room didn't look done without that last row, the pews they had would hold them.

His 17-year-old daughter Hillary had volunteered to clean the new building, along with a few of the other young ladies from the church family, and all was looking to be in order for their first Sunday.

Douglas was pleased, but he knew he would also miss the meetings they had held at the house for so many years. It had been a good time of hospitality, with great growth and fellowship.

"You look sad," Martin said.

"I'm not, Marty. I was just thinking about some things."

"Was it what we had for dinner? 'Cause I didn't like it either."

Douglas wanted to scold him for not being thankful, but all he could do was laugh.

"What didn't you like exactly?" he finally managed.

"Tomato pie. I thought it was going to be pumpkin or apple."

"Pumpkins and apples are not in season right now," Douglas said reasonably. "And you saw the cake your sister Hillary made. Did you really think your mother was going to serve a dessert in the middle of the meal?"

"Well, I hoped she would."

Douglas laughed again. Martin was six and as honest as the day was long. At times he needed to be reminded to be thankful, but he was refreshingly forthcoming, and right now Douglas didn't have the heart to get after him.

"Did you eat some of the tomato pie?"

"Yes, a small piece."

"And once you realized it wasn't dessert, did you enjoy it?"

The face he gave Douglas told he wanted to say yes but couldn't manage.

Douglas fought the laughter this time, but he did smile. With a gentle hand to his son's small shoulder, he simply steered him in the direction of home.



Jace had let a few days pass. In fact, it was already Saturday evening. His questions were almost constantly on his mind, but he didn't allow his wife to know this. He wanted to make sure she felt comfortable and cared for right now. That concerned him more than his questions for Douglas Muldoon, but if he wasn't careful, Maddie would never believe that.

"How are you feeling?" Jace asked after evening tea, having noticed that Maddie had not been very hungry.

She frowned a little. "Why do you ask?"

"You just didn't eat much. I hoped you weren't feeling sick."

Maddie hesitated. Jace watched her, wondering what he'd missed.

"I had a craving," she quietly admitted.

Not knowing what to say, Jace didn't comment.

"I was very hungry for pie."

"Well, we had that pie you served after dinner. Did you have some of that?"

"I ate the rest of it," she confessed. "Almost a whole pie. That's why I didn't want tea."

Jace's hand had come up to cover his upper lip, but that didn't hide the laughter in his eyes. Maddie glanced his way, but she didn't want to smile, so she looked swiftly away.

"You think I'm a pig, don't you?"

"No, I'm just glad you're not sick. I did wonder, however, why you didn't offer me anything sweet with tea. You always do."

"I have some cookies."

"It's all right. I'm fine."

Maddie heard the amusement in his voice but still wouldn't look at him. She knew that he watched her, but she couldn't stand to return his gaze.

"Maddie," Jace called to her and was ignored. "Madalyn," he tried, but she would have none of it.

She heard him move and knew that he would be beside her in a moment. She was on the sofa in the parlor, and he sat down, his arm sliding along the back until it brought him very close.

"Mrs. Randall," he whispered coaxingly.

This time she smiled and let him pull her head to his shoulder.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you too," Maddie replied, never tired of saying it or hearing it.

Jace held her close, truly glad she wasn't sick but also debating the question in his mind about services in the morning. He forced himself to push it aside. He wanted to attend where Mr. Muldoon taught, but something stopped him from mentioning it to his wife. He held her as well as his tongue, hoping there would be an opportunity the following week.



Reese sat on the floor of her dark bedroom, her back against the door, and listened to Mr. Zantow bang around in the kitchen. It was late, and he'd just arrived back from the tavern. She knew the lock on her door worked, but when he was especially loud, she felt better blocking the door with her body as well.

She didn't want Sunday to end this way. Mr. Zantow usually

did most of his drinking on Saturday nights, but lately he'd added Sunday as well. Reese gave her head a little shake and remembered the nice time they'd had in the new meetinghouse that morning. Douglas had taught about faithfulness, and Reese had learned some surprising truths. She was glad no one made a big deal of the new building. It had been fun to see it done and to smell the freshly cut wood, but for the most part it was business as usual.

"Reese!" Mr. Zantow suddenly shouted, but Reese knew enough not to come out.

Mr. Zantow shouted one more time, but this time with less volume. Reese thought he might be wandering away, and she relaxed some. Debating whether she wanted to go to bed or sleep right where she was, Reese deliberately shifted her mind back to the sermon and what Douglas might tell them next week.



Maddie could hardly believe she was there, and with her husband beside her. She had watched this meetinghouse being built but had made herself not think about the pastor and the conversations they'd shared in the past. Now her own spouse had an interest that made hers look tame. He had questions and was determined to find answers.

Jace had asked Maddie midweek to think about going to the new meetinghouse with him and she'd agreed, but not until last night had she finally asked him why he was so urgent. His face and voice a mixture of humility and excitement, Jace had revealed everything.

"It's the baby," he had said softly. "I've never felt so excited and frightened at the same time. This is what I've dreamed. Almost from the moment I met you, I wanted this: a life with you, in our own home, and with children. Now that it's happening, I find I don't have all the answers. I can see this little

person looking up to us and asking questions, and we can't tell him a thing."

"Do you remember when you asked me about what our children might believe?"

"I remember."

"I said that they would believe what we believe."

Maddie watched her husband grow speechless. She waited, but he was still quiet.

"Jace, what is it?"

"I don't know what I believe, Maddie. I'm not sure of anything. I can hardly think of anything else, it has me so bothered."

Maddie could have chosen to be angry, but she remembered how patient he'd been with her in the past. And in truth, she still had her own unanswered questions. They weren't made more urgent by the baby's arrival, but at night she was still inclined to fall asleep with her mind unsettled and confused. It wasn't at all restful.

"Are you all right?" Jace suddenly took her hand and bent toward her.

Maddie nodded, glad they were in one of the back pews. She felt as though everyone had stared at them, and many people had looked when they came in, but the faces had been smiling, and Maddie remembered the one other time she'd met with this church family. Her sister-in-law had been with her, and everyone had been extremely kind and welcoming.

A moment later, Douglas Muldoon was up front, smiling and welcoming the congregation. Maddie's apprehension melted away in the next few minutes. Indeed she might have been alone in the room. She hung on every word spoken and listened carefully to the verses read and songs sung.

She didn't want to talk right now—she might miss something—but just as soon as the service was over, she would thank her husband for bringing her along.

