

DORA HILERS



A HEART'S
Song

Canderhart Dynasty

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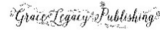
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Contact information: DoraHiers@gmail.com

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Dedication

To those frightened and afraid...

Lean into the Lord. He's a rock, our refuge, and a shelter from
the storms of life.

Ask Him to put a new song in your heart.

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Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.

Sing to the Lord, praise His name;
proclaim His salvation day after day. Declare His glory...

Psalm 96:1-4

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1

THE COMMOTION IN THE coffee shop was drowning out the voices in his head. Between the gurgle and grind of the espresso machine and the laughter and chatter of what seemed like all of Hawley Creek's neighbors greeting one another, he couldn't hear what the heroine was trying to tell the hero in his current manuscript. And if he didn't buckle down and finish this book soon, his publisher might hesitate to offer him another contract. They'd been the only publisher willing to take a chance on him, and he didn't want to let them or his fans down.

Dustin "Dusty" Canderhart spared a quick glance around the space. All the tables were occupied, and the line to order reached the door. There wouldn't be a moment's peace until the place cleared out, and his deadline was approaching fast. Even thirty minutes of writing counted.

There was no way around it. He'd just have to go home.

Home. Where the silence and yawning emptiness threatened to swallow him whole. With both his sister and his father married and the burden of Canderhart Racing lifted from his shoulders now that he'd accepted the silent partnership his father had gifted him, Dusty really wasn't sure where home was anymore.

Two days had passed since Jett and Lexie got married. Forty-eight long hours since he'd caught a glimpse of Oakley Mead, his high school sweetheart. Well, not Oakley. But a woman who could pass for her. Because it wouldn't be Oakley. Not the big-time, award-winning singer/songwriter who'd left their small town right after graduation with a guitar slung over

her shoulder and tears streaming down her eyes, breaking both of their tender teenage hearts.

Back then, he hadn't understood why she'd needed to leave. But now? At the old and wise age of thirty? The constraints of living in a small town and in the spotlight of his family's name, as much as he loved and adored his dad and sister, tightened the invisible noose around his neck.

He could keep up with his family and their business via video conferencing and check in with his agent from anywhere in the world. So, given his newfound freedom, where would he move?

Somewhere in Europe? Maybe. With its precious architecture and history, exploring would keep him busy for years. Or Central America, where the weather was consistently sunny and moderate? Nah. The changing seasons sparked his creativity.

Unlike now. Thinking about this while he was supposed to be writing wasn't getting words on the page.

With a frustrated huff, he saved and closed out his manuscript, shoved the laptop into its sleeve, and looped the case strap over his shoulder. Grabbing his tall cup of iced coffee, he made his way to the exit, nodding and smiling at folks, ignoring the not-so-hushed whispers and pointed fingers.

Until a hand clapped him on the back.

With his shoulder propping the door open, the current scene of his manuscript still playing out in his head, Dusty swiveled to acknowledge the person.

A man sporting a ball cap with his sister's car and number, his long gray hair pulled back into a ponytail, struck up a conversation. "I thought this season was going to be a bust, but you guys really turned it around. If you keep up this winning streak, Canderhart Racing will be in the playoffs again this year. Maybe even steal the championship out from under Bullow's nose. Nothing would make me happier. He's a snotty nosed kid who doesn't deserve to win—"

“Uh, thanks. But all the credit goes to my dad and sister.” And Dusty was okay with that. Totally okay. His father had grown the company to what it was today, a racing empire, and Davy’s prowess both on and off the track would build on that success. Dusty had never been interested in racing cars like his sister. He was so relieved when his father finally recognized that and awarded the day-to-day of Canderhart Racing to Davy and Kavan, letting Dusty off the hook except for their monthly meetings and any urgent business.

Now, if he could only finish this book, the third and final installment in an action-adventure-romance series. Although initially his agent had a hard time shopping around the idea because it didn’t quite fit into a single genre, the publisher who’d finally taken a chance on him was already asking for more of the same after Dusty, or rather his pseudonym Sage Rockford, had hit the bestseller lists with both releases. Maybe now that he was writing full-time, his father would understand how much the craft meant to him, how characters and a story came alive in his head before they ever made it onto a page, and that writing was a viable career as much as racing.

“You’re just being modest. We all know you’re the brains behind Canderhart.”

We all know you’re the brains behind Canderhart? Not only was that statement so far from the truth but also incredibly chauvinistic!

“My sister is just as capable of running Canderhart as my father. Davy and her husband Kavan earned the right to be leaders of the organization.” He hated to be rude, and he certainly didn’t want to jeopardize Davy’s fans. But he refused to stand by while someone tried to undermine her abilities and talents. She deserved his wholehearted support, not just in private but in the public arena too. “Sorry, I really must be going. Hope to see you at the track.” Did he, though? Definitely not for himself. But for Davy’s sake, yes.

Lord, forgive the lie.

Wow. His first prayer. He wasn’t even sure if he’d done it right.

Oh, for Pete's sake! How had this day gotten so far off track? It wasn't even lunchtime yet.

Not allowing himself to dwell on the conversations he'd had with Kavan and his dad lately, deep conversations about faith and end of life, Dusty mashed the door with more force than he intended and stepped all the way outside, anxious to escape the confines of the small space, the darkness of prejudice, chauvinism—whatever one called it these days—and the tendrils of fear unfurling inside him that his family was on a different path than him and that he might be left behind when it truly counted.

“Whoa!” A female voice alerted him too late.

He crashed into her, rather she took the brunt of his computer bag, and something—make that several things—tumbled to the pavement and bounced off his toes. Hard. Closing his eyes at the pain, he counted the hits. One. Two. Three.

Blast these flip flops.

When the pelting stopped, he eased his eyelids up and glanced down at his feet. The sweet fragrance of pears and vanilla teased his nose and tickled his memory as he took in the handful of books scattered across the sidewalk.

Hardback. Of course. No wonder they hurt so much.

“I'm so sorry.” The woman knelt at his feet and began scooping up books. A ball cap covered her head, so that he couldn't see her face. A band corralled her long hair, a beautiful mane of cinnamon.

His gaze landed on the first book she tucked into the crook of her arm. The author's name, Sage Rockford, took up the entire bottom. His second book, so that must mean she'd already read the first.

She must've just come out of the bookstore on the other side of the coffee shop. One of his fans, and he'd just assaulted her right after alienating one of Davy's. Ugh. He barely refrained from palming his face.

Squatting, he joined the woman and reached for the last book. “It’s my fault. I wasn’t paying attention when I walked out. Please. Allow me. And I apologize.”

When he handed it to her, she kept her head ducked, the bill of the cap hiding her face as she took it from him and added it to the top of the stack. She lurched to her feet and turned as if to walk away, waving over a shoulder. “No worries. Thanks.”

Something about her voice. That soft lilt. That melodic—
Oakley!

* * * *

She knew the minute Dusty recognized her.

Just like her songs. Emotions flashed across his face. Disbelief. Longing. Joy. Pain. Anger. Landing back on disbelief and repeating, the pain and anger lessening with each pass.

She’d thought she could pull off the disguise. That she’d blend in like a tourist dressed in shorts and a tank top, a racing cap and sunglasses hiding her hair and face. Didn’t everyone flock to Hawley Creek now to tour the Canderhart Racing Museum?

She should’ve known that Dusty would recognize her. Not that she’d sought him out. Not at all. Her plan was to pop into the bookstore and buy a few books to keep her occupied. She’d only been in her rental on the lake for a handful of days now, and already she was going crazy with nothing to do and nowhere to be. After being on tour for most of the last twelve years, she wasn’t sure how to handle a break from her schedule, and the long days stretched out ahead of her, empty and lonely.

She didn’t realize how much she’d needed the rest. How much stress and worry and fear had stolen from her over the last few months.

A month of hiding out at the rental, her calendar cleared for the next thirty days, should give the paparazzi time to forget about her. By default, that crazy fan who’d been

stalking her and sending weird and awful gifts after every performance.

“Oakley! It was you.” The wonder and awe in his voice stopped her in her tracks.

She turned around, nodded. No point in denying it. When Davy had reached out to Oakley’s manager about playing for her father’s wedding, Oakley hadn’t been able to refuse the gig. Maybe deep down, subconsciously, she’d wanted to see Dusty again.

That was ridiculous! Hadn’t her father, one disastrous marriage, and a few dysfunctional relationships taught her that men weren’t to be trusted?

But seeing Dusty again. The thick dark hair. Eyes the rich color of espresso, tiny lines fanning out from the corners evidence that his smile was still quick and ready. Dimple curves framing a full mouth. Broad shoulders tapering to a trim waist. Long tanned legs sticking out from under short pants.

He’d filled out nicely. A spark of attraction zinged to life, but she dashed cold water over it. She wasn’t here to renew their...friendship.

But he’d always treated her with respect, daresay with love even. Why had she ever thought leaving Hawley Creek would erase what she felt for him? That she could repair the broken parts of herself, find wholeness, in a career?

“Dusty.”

Confusion clouded his beautiful eyes. “Why did you leave so quickly after the wedding? I looked all over for you afterward—”

“I’m sorry. I—”

Understanding hardened his features. “You didn’t want to talk to me. You’re too big a star now for little Hawley Creek.”

Her free arm darted out, her fingers landing softly on his arm before she could think better about it. “Dusty. That’s not it at all.”

He flicked his head toward the hat pulled down low over her face. “Then why the get up?”

How much should she tell him? This was Dusty, her friend from their very first day of freshman year in high school until that friendship transitioned into sweethearts, until she broke his heart right after their graduation. But the years had changed her. Wouldn't they have changed him too?

He still smelled like the same Dusty, a blend of woods and ocean and butterscotch. And if she couldn't trust him, she had no one. Not even her manager.

She blew out a long breath. “A fan. He's crazy. He's been leaving me awful—” she paused over the correct word. They weren't really gifts. Not in the traditional sense. But they were delivered in unusual gift bags and packages. “Surprises. Stalking me and—”

“Say no more.” With a tic pulsing in his jaw, Dusty gripped her elbow, his touch light but urgent as he led her down the sidewalk and toward the parking lot.

When she reached her rental car, she gave her arm a gentle tug, instantly regretting it when he released her. “This is me.”

“Where are you staying?”

“A rental on the lake.”

“The Lazy Days cottage?”

“Yes. How did you know?” Fear clamped her tummy and squeezed her lungs hard, robbing her of breath. Had word already gotten out that she was here?

He chuckled. “We're neighbors. I live just a few doors down. I stayed there for a few months when my place was under renovation. It's nice. Very private.” His nod of approval calmed the dread, but his next words sparked it to life again. “But it's also remote. Did you hire security?”

“No.” She shook her head. “My manager doesn't even know where I am.” She'd gotten in touch with Dusty's sister Davy directly to get the details of the wedding, leaving Skip

totally out of the loop. “I figured the less people that knew, the better.”

“I could see why you’d think that. But you must’ve forgotten how it is in Hawley Creek. Around here, folks look out for each other.”

She hadn’t forgotten. Townsfolk had been wonderful after her mother passed away. Even though she’d been young, only five, she remembered the condolence cards and the visits, the casseroles that filled the fridge. But, as the years passed, they had stood by silently while her alcoholic father beat her during his drinking binges.

“I can’t trust anyone, Dusty.”

“You’re wrong, Oakley. You can trust me. And you can trust the good folks of Hawley Creek.”

She wanted to believe him. Truly. But—

Just then, her stomach roared with hunger. Embarrassed, she draped an arm across her belly to mute it.

Dusty’s eyebrows dipped low, and his dark eyes glimmered with concern. “When was the last time you ate?”

When was the last time she felt like eating? The fear, the anxiety clawed at the lining of her belly until the thought of eating made her sick. “I can’t remember.”

He gave his head a slow nod and tugged her toward a new and shiny truck. “You’re coming with me.”

“Where?” She dug her heels in. “I can’t be seen in a restaurant! Someone will take a photo and plaster it all over social media and—”

“I’m taking you to my place. I know a great cook.”

“A cook?” She cringed. Already two people knew she was in Hawley Creek. Now there would be one more—

“Me, Oakley.”

“You?”

He smiled and opened the door for her. “Don’t sound so surprised.”

She grabbed the handle and pulled herself up. Let the comforting smell fill her lungs. Leather and woods. A hint of the ocean and butterscotch from the candies piled in a cubby on the console.

Dusty. Her first crush. The only guy who’d ever treated her like a princess. If she couldn’t trust him, who could she trust?

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“YOUR PLACE IS BEAUTIFUL.”

“Thanks.” Dusty folded the egg mixture and slid it onto a plate. He’d had to toss the first omelet in the trash bin and make another because he’d been so engrossed in watching Oakley pick up picture frame after picture frame, staring and touching each photo before finally putting it back on the shelf with such care. It was as if every photo took her back in time. She’d lingered over the one of them at Prom, glancing back at him with questions in her beautiful eyes.

But she didn’t voice them. If she had, he wouldn’t be able to explain why he kept a decade-old photo of them front and center on his bookshelf. What kind of freak did that? If he’d known he’d be bringing her home with him today, he would’ve hidden it. But didn’t that make him just as crazy as the fan stalking her?

He shook that thought away as he buttered a couple pieces of toast and scooped a spoon of fresh fruit on the plate. They had history and loads of good memories, too many to bury in a closet or in a box in the attic. When he met someone who finally made him forget about Oakley, he would replace it.

“Here.” He set the plate on the counter and gestured for her to take a seat at the island while he prepped his plate with the same.

“Thank you.” She picked up the fork and played with her food.

He sat down beside her, circled her hand to still it. “You’re safe here, Oakley.”

Her face practically wilted, and tears glittered on her lashes like dew sparkling from the tips of grass blades after a fresh rain. Her chest lifted with a sigh, and she nodded. “I know.”

“Eat. You’ll feel better. You’ve probably been running on empty for a long time.” He remembered that she used to get anxious about tests and would skip meals because her stomach was too messed up. How long did she go without eating nowadays?

He probably didn’t want to know.

Again, she nodded. This time when her fork clattered against her plate, she brought it up to her mouth with food on it. After swallowing, she chased the first bite with another. “Mmm. This is good.”

“Or you’re just hungry.”

“Starving.” A few more bites, and her plate was empty. She drained the water from the glass and sighed.

“Want more?” He’d be happy to make her a second omelet. Or anything else in his fridge if it meant that she would fill that belly.

She shook her head and chuckled. “If I eat anymore, I will fall asleep for sure.”

Concern wrinkled his brow. She hadn’t eaten in days. When was the last time she’d gotten a good night’s sleep? “Why don’t you go rest on the couch for a bit?”

“Oh, I couldn’t.”

“What’s stopping you?”

She looked taken aback.

“Look. I’m going to clear the dishes. Go rest. When you’re ready, I’ll take you back to the cottage.”

“Are you sure?” Longing transformed her expression, softening the hard edges of worry and stress.

An urge to pick her up and carry her to the sofa, to curl up with her and laze away the day, nearly overwhelmed him. His

voice came out gruff. “Yeah. I’m sure. Make yourself at home.”

Home. Now that he thought about it, as she nodded and wandered back into the family room, his place had never seemed more like home. Her presence chased away the loneliness, warmed the cavernous empty spaces, and whispered peace to his spirit.

Thank You, Lord, for bringing Oakley back home. A second prayer lifted from his heart just as easily as the first and he marveled at how right it felt.

* * * *

You’re just being modest. We all know you’re the brains behind Canderhart.

My sister is just as capable of running Canderhart as my father. Davy and her husband Kavan earned the right to be leaders of the organization.

The conversation she’d overheard between Dusty and the man in the coffee shop played in her head as Oakley drifted in and out of a hazy, wonderful sleep.

When given the opportunity, Dusty hadn’t taken the credit for Canderharts’ success. He’d given it all to his family.

The man was the same as the boy she used to know and love.

And just like that, she knew she could trust him.

Startled at the truth, the haze of sleep disintegrated, and she bolted straight up. Darkness cloaked the windows, and a soft throw fell from her shoulders to puddle in a heap in her lap. Nothing looked familiar, but she was used to that. But where was she?

“Hey. It’s okay, Oakley. You’re safe here.” The familiar deep voice came from nearby and calmed her racing heart immediately.

Dusty.

Footsteps made their way across a thick-piled area rug, and he appeared in front of her. Crouching, he grasped her hands within his bigger ones. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes.” The most delightful and restful sleep in a very long time. Although, judging by the darkness pressing against the glass, she’d slept the day away. Probably kept him from his business.

She rubbed her face. “What time is it?”

Dusty shrugged and twisted his arm to glance at his watch. “Nine o’clock.”

Alarm had her halfway off the couch, but she landed back on her bottom, weak from months of fatigue and fear and likely hunger again. But she was used to that too.

He sank down on the couch next to her.

She cast an anxious glance his way. “I’m so sorry. I’ve kept you away from your work all day.”

“I’m not sorry. You needed the rest. And you didn’t keep me from anything.”

“That’s sweet. But I really should go.”

“Why? You’re safe here. And you probably don’t have anything to eat once you get back to the cottage.”

It was as if he knew there wasn’t anything in the fridge except a carton of milk for coffee. And the pantry was just as empty. She thought she remembered a couple of protein bars and a bag of chocolate covered candies for when she needed a quick jolt of sugar.

Unwilling to be seen in a restaurant, she’d gotten by with a few food deliveries. And it was just so comfortable here.

Tugging the throw to cover her shoulders, she glanced toward the dining area where he’d come from. A laptop was perched on the table, a mug and a pad of paper and pencil beside it. “So, what do you do for work?”

He cleared his throat. Scrubbing the heavy dark stubble tracing his jaw, his gaze tracked back to the table. “I’m a

writer.”

“A writer?” Wow. She’d expected something to do with Canderhart Racing. “That makes sense. Language Arts was always your favorite subject in school.” She chuckled. “I can remember how excited you used to get over writing assignments. When everyone else was groaning, you would pump a fist in the air.”

He laughed. “I’m the one groaning now.”

“You don’t like to write anymore?”

He shook his head. “Oh, I still do. But…deadlines.”

“You had deadlines back then too.”

“Yes.” His expression clouded, and his gaze focused on her. Understanding and compassion sparkled from his dark eyes. “But when you spend your days—years—doing something that you’re not really passionate about and then you try to squeeze in a few hours of creative time at the end of a long day, it makes one feel as if the well might’ve gone dry.”

She nodded. She knew exactly what he meant. When was the last time she’d written one of her own songs? Or played her guitar strictly for enjoyment? Although she loved the idea of her job, singing, the years of touring and sponsor events and everything else related to it, had stripped her of the joy of just making music and robbed her of any flexibility in her schedule. “I hear you. This is the first break I’ve taken since leaving Hawley Creek.”

“In twelve years?”

After mentally calculating the years since graduation, she nodded. Too long. Way too long.

He leaned in. Took her hand again. His expression had morphed from incredulous to intent, pleading even. “Oakley. Don’t let the stalker keep you from living.”

If he only knew. Her life had never been her own. She’d always lived on others’ terms. Starting with her father. Now her label and her manager made all the decisions for her.

She didn't know how to change it. The cycle just kept spinning like a hamster's wheel out of control.

She tugged her hand back. "It's not so easy, Dusty."

"Maybe not. But it'll be worth it. I promise."

"How can you make that promise? You just said your well was dry."

He raked fingers through his hair. "It was. Working for Canderhart Racing took everything out of me. Analyzing pages and pages of spreadsheets and reports. Keeping up with the latest in automobile technology. Schmoozing with potential sponsors." He shook his head, the unhappy memories tipping the corners of his mouth down. "And I was this close" he pinched his thumb and forefinger together "to giving up."

To giving up on his dreams? That would have been tragic. "What happened?"

"My sister's accident."

"Oh." She leaned forward. "I didn't know. She didn't say anything about it when we talked. Is she okay?"

"She's better than okay. Married to the love of her life. And ecstatic to be doing something she loves every day."

Oakley blew out a sigh, a combination of relief and wistfulness.

"All these years, Dad expected me to take over the reins of Canderhart Racing. But the accident and a new relationship woke him up to the fact that Davy and Kavan were the better candidates."

"A new relationship? With his bride you mean?"

"With the Lord. I'm still wrapping my head around it. It's weird. Dad's still the same man but different. Like a much better version of himself even though he's always been a wonderful father. It's hard to describe."

She'd have to take his word for it. Her experience with fathers didn't line up with Dusty's. "Did that hurt you that he

chose your sister and her new husband to take over Canderhart Racing?”

“Not at all. It gave me freedom. Because to be honest, I’m not sure what I would’ve chosen. I didn’t want to disappoint my father. But my heart wasn’t—isn’t—in racing. And he knew that. He’s a good man, my dad, and thankfully, he acted on it. Not everyone has our best interests at heart.”

True. She was still digesting this when he continued. “If he hadn’t, I might’ve made the wrong choice and had to live with it. As it is, I’m just now flexing my creative muscles again, and it’s wonderfully liberating. But I wasted a lot of time on the front end, and now I’m up against a tight deadline.”

So, what she’d suspected was true. She was keeping him from his work. Dropping the throw, she pushed to her feet again. This time, her legs held her. “I should go.”

He followed her to the door, scooping up a key fob and a phone from the kitchen counter on the way. “All right. But we’re going to get you something to eat.”

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3

DUSTY WASN'T KIDDING about getting her something to eat. He'd dropped her off at her car last night and then shown up at the cottage a few minutes later, lugging in several grocery bags.

Oakley stared at the contents in her fridge. So many things to choose from for breakfast. Yogurt. Fresh berries. Eggs. Slices of ham. And for lunch she had her choice of fried chicken and macaroni salad, leftover from last night's late dinner, or a variety of sandwiches. And this didn't even include whatever he'd stowed in her pantry.

She chose the yogurt, weirdly happy about the freedom to choose what she wanted to eat and how she would spend the day stretching in front of her. So different from the last few days when she thought she might go crazy from boredom.

Bizarre.

The scent of coffee brewing filled the kitchen, and she took a long whiff as she dropped a few blackberries on top of the white mound. There. Perfect. And so very thoughtful of Dusty.

When he said that Hawley Creek took care of each other, he'd backed it up with action behind his words. But then, she remembered that he'd always been kind to others. Including her.

She poured a cup of coffee and, balancing the bowl of yogurt on top, wandered out onto the deck. After settling into an Adirondack chair, she propped her bare feet up on a stool and took in her surroundings as she devoured her breakfast.

Trees bordered the cottage on both sides, but the lawn sloped, leading down to a sandy beach. A couple of kayaks rested on the sand. The sun was just skimming the horizon, casting a lavender hue over the lake and shimmering off the waves that lapped against the shore. A gentle breeze kissed her cheeks, and she filled her lungs with the fragrance of fresh air and lake water. Glorious!

She took a sip of coffee, contentment settling over her. Oh, how she needed this. Dusty was right. She could choose to let others continue to control her life. Or maybe it was time to take the reins back herself. Blank out her calendar for more times like this.

Movement off to the left snagged her attention.

Was that a man skulking out of the woods? Walking toward her at a fast clip?

Coffee sloshed over the rim of the cup as she hurriedly abandoned it and lurched to her feet. Gripping the slider handle, she was ready to slip inside and lock the door. Stealing a cursory glance over her shoulder, she caught the man's wave and look of apology as he called out to her.

"Sorry to startle you, ma'am. I'd hoped to avoid that by introducing myself. I'm on the security team for Canderhart Racing. David Hawthorn. Dusty Canderhart asked me to keep an eye on you and your place while you're in Hawley Creek."

She blinked. Not only had Dusty filled her fridge and her belly, but he'd also hired a security detail to protect her? That was far and above neighborly. That bordered on...

What, exactly? Friendship? Love?

Oh, for mercy's sake! She barely refrained from slapping her forehead. There was no way that Dusty the man would still be holding onto those tender teenage feelings after all these years. Would he? What about that prom picture of the two of them? Why had he kept it? And why was it still gracing his bookshelf?

She shrugged off the questions. "Nice to meet you, David. Can I get you some coffee?"

“No, ma’am. Thanks though. I didn’t mean to interrupt your morning. Just wanted you to know that I’d be around in case you need me.”

She nodded. The knowledge that another person knew she was in town should irritate her, but oddly enough it didn’t. She’d taken care of herself all these years, so she didn’t need protecting. But it felt...nice. Comforting even. “Thank you. And please. Call me Oakley.”

“You got it, ma’am. Uh, sorry. Oakley,” he amended. As quietly as he appeared, David slipped back into the foliage and disappeared.

Oakley blew out a relieved breath and sank back down in the chair. She dug her phone out of her pocket and spotted a text message from Dusty. They’d exchanged numbers last night.

Good morning! I hope you slept well last night. Just wanted to give you a heads up that David Hawthorn with Canderhart Racing Security will be keeping an eye on you and your place while you’re in town. I wanted you to have peace of mind while you’re here. Maybe then you’ll feel comfortable coming back. :)

By the end of the long text, she was smiling. She already felt comfortable. As if she’d searched the whole world for something elusive and finally found it in the place where she’d started.

Full circle.

Weird. Because she’d never felt truly at home anywhere. Not even in her brief marriage to Noah.

She tapped out a response. *Slept great even after the long nap at your place. Thanks for the food and for the peace of mind. I just met David.*

A return text came back right away. *Hope he didn’t frighten you. He tends to sneak up on a person.*

She chuckled and took another sip of coffee before responding. *I was debating on whether I could outrun him to your place.*

Not likely.

Hey!

Trust me, Oakley, he's fast. The best at his job. Nobody will get past him.

Dusty's concern and care touched her. *Thank you, Dusty. I know I'll be back. This feels like home. More than any other place I've been.*

* * * *

Dusty stared at the words on the phone screen, joy and wonder spreading through his chest.

Throughout high school, practically from the first day they'd met, Oakley had always talked about leaving Hawley Creek. Always dreamed about hitting it big with her music and having the money to live anywhere. Swore that would *never* be Hawley Creek.

In just over a decade, she'd surely accomplished those dreams. But here she was, back in their small town, even calling it *home*.

What are your plans for the day? He hit send on the text before he could change his mind. His should include cranking out a few thousand words, but he couldn't squash the thought of spending a few hours catching up with her. Bliss.

Sure, she'd broken his heart when she left all those years ago. But he couldn't hold it against her. She'd followed her dreams. Just as he was finally doing now.

No plans. Just enjoying this glorious sunrise and coffee.

Want some company?

Yes! Thanks for not making me beg. Lol

He laughed at her text and swiped a response. *I'll be right there.*

He saved his manuscript. Ignored the twinge of guilt. Writers needed to live, too, right? Besides, he'd been at it for hours already this morning. A little break would do him good. Maybe even give him fresh material for the chapter he was

working on. Doubtful, though, unless Oakley was hunting the Lost Treasures of Druvini.

Chuckling, he texted David, the security detail he'd asked Davy to reassign to Oakley, to alert the man to expect him at the cottage.

Within minutes, he knocked on the door, and Oakley answered almost immediately. As if she'd been looking forward to his visit.

That tidbit warmed his heart.

"Come in." Smiling, she gestured for him to follow her to the kitchen. Giving him ample opportunity to admire her tanned legs, the ever-so-slight sway of her hips, and the cinnamon swish of hair against her back.

Even after all these years, she still made his pulse rocket and the breath catch in his lungs. Old yearnings reignited. To wake up to that gorgeous smile every morning. To kiss those full lips every night. To make babies and watch them grow and blossom into little humans. To do life with her.

He nearly tripped over the edge of an area rug but managed to right himself by grabbing onto the back of a chair, scolding himself for allowing his thoughts to wander down that dead-end road again. Oakley had broken his heart once. Now that he was free to chase his own dreams, he needed to keep his heart off limits and his head in the game. The deadline for his book loomed closer with every day.

The keeping room with two easy chairs butting a stone fireplace adjacent to the expansive kitchen automatically drew his gaze. "This was my favorite spot during my stay here."

"Sit. Please." She waved a hand in that direction, and before sinking into one of the chairs, he turned it to face the kitchen instead of the fireplace.

"How long did it take for your renovations?" She held up a mug, her eyebrows arched. "Coffee?"

"You never need to ask a writer if they want coffee. The answer is always yes. At least this writer." He chuckled. "And to answer your question, the reno took six months."

“Wow. You probably know this place pretty well then.” After filling two mugs, Oakley opened several cabinet doors until she found what she was looking for. A tray.

He smiled. “About as well as my own house. But it was a couple years ago. And, honestly, I didn’t spend much time here. I was at the Canderhart office from sunup to sundown and then I’d stop in at my house to check on progress. This place was mostly just a place to crash.”

She opened the fridge and pulled out a bag of grapes and a container of cheese squares. Setting those on the counter, she moved to the pantry and came out with a box of crackers. “That’s a shame. It’s so beautiful and cozy. But then your place turned out absolutely lovely too.”

He chuckled. “What you saw of it.”

Her hands paused, a cluster of grapes dangling over the tray. A cringe wrinkled her smooth forehead. “I’m sorry. Again.”

“No need to apologize. I’m glad you felt comfortable there.” And safe. He’d do everything he could to ensure her safety.

“Thank you again for David’s services.” Smiling, she resumed adding items to the miniature platter.

“You’re welcome.”

“Want to sit outside? The view is absolutely gorgeous this morning, and it’s not too hot yet.” She loaded the two mugs onto one end of the tray, and he marveled that they fit perfectly.

“Sure.” He rose, replaced the chair to its original position so that she wouldn’t have to do it later, and scooped the tray off the counter while she snatched a couple napkins from a basket.

She scooted ahead of him and opened the door leading to the deck. “Who should I pay?”

“Pay?” He pretended not to know what she was talking about, but that wasn’t hard. Not after catching a whiff of pears

and vanilla. It played well with the wonderful aroma of coffee, and it was everything he could do to tamp down the moan.

“For the security. I know he’s not keeping an eye on the cottage for free.”

That wasn’t the extent of David’s detail. He was assigned to Oakley because the retired military man was the best of the best. Even in his forties, the man worked hard at staying in shape and the top of his game, but he also had a strong work ethic. At eighteen, he’d worked for one of their pit crews until he’d enlisted in the military. When he got out, Dad had rehired him immediately to head their security division. Besides David, his sister had authorized three other personnel to rotate shifts until Oakley left Hawley Creek or the crazed fan was behind bars.

“David’s on Canderhart’s payroll.” He’d instructed his sister to charge the entire security detail against his account, but Davy had argued, giving him the distinct impression that his sister might have arranged Oakley’s visit on the hopes that Dusty and Oakley would reconnect and revive their romance. Just like she and Kavan and their father and Lexie.

He hated to burst her happiness balloon, but it wasn’t likely. Very soon, Oakley would leave Hawley Creek to resume her touring. Singing was her gift, and he would never hold her back. But he’d certainly do everything in his power to ensure that she felt safe during her entire stay. What good was money if he couldn’t use it for the people he loved.

Loved. Past tense. And don’t you forget it, Dusty Canderhart.

Irritated with himself, he set the tray down on the table between a couple low-slung wood chairs.

After they settled in them, Oakley handed him a mug and took one for herself. “So, I forgot to ask you yesterday. What do you write?”

In the process of sipping, he nearly sputtered the hot beverage across the deck. He managed to swallow, followed

by a cough until his eyes watered. Why hadn't he considered how to answer this question if she asked?

She handed him a napkin. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." He cleared his throat. So far, only his agent and his family knew about his pseudonym. Should he tell her? Oakley was accustomed to fame, to being in the public spotlight. Surely, he could trust her with the secret.

"You know that book you bought yesterday?"

"I bought four of them." She popped a grape in her mouth and scrunched her cheeks. It only took a few seconds for her to gasp. "No way! You're Sage Rockford? The Sage Rockford?"

Chuckling, he mimicked her. "You're Oakley Mead? The Oakley Mead?"

She swatted him on the arm. "Get out! Congratulations!"

"Thanks."

"Wow." She settled back in the chair with a look of awe on her face. "You were a great writer in high school. But now? Wow." She nibbled on a cracker, a cheese square on top. "When I read your first book, it seemed so..." Her wide-eyed gaze latched onto him, and he couldn't look away if he tried. But he didn't bother trying. "This is going to sound strange since we haven't seen or talked to each other in years, but it seemed so oddly familiar. I just thought that was what made you such a fabulous writer."

It wasn't strange at all. He'd crafted the heroine after Oakley, so she probably recognized many of her own traits and characteristics.

Like sifting her fingers through the tips of her hair as she was doing now, whenever she was thinking seriously about something and wasn't sure how to express her feelings.

Or how she scooped up her guitar and slung the strap over her head, holding it over her chest whenever she was upset or anxious. Always the day after one of her father's drunken rages. Almost as if the instrument was a security blanket.

Except Sage had replaced the guitar with a satchel, a treasure map tucked inside, so that it covered the heroine's heart. Protected her. Symbolic really. Oakley had been his treasure, and he still cherished the memories of their teenage love in his heart. Even now. Every time he played one of her songs, her silky voice enchanted him all over again, the words, the music tugging at his heart like no other woman had been able to do.

“I could say the same about the lyrics to some of your earlier songs.”

Her eyes widened, and a lump appeared to wriggle down her throat. She jerked her gaze to stare out at the lake. “That's because I wrote them.”

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4

“**YOU DON’T WRITE** all of your songs?” Dusty’s jaw hinged as he twisted to stare at her. Did he realize that she’d written those songs about him? About them?

Oakley’s chest lifted with her huff. She wiped some crumbs off her hands and flicked some off her shorts. “Not anymore.”

“But that was what you loved doing the most.”

“It still is. But, like you said, it takes time and space to be creative. And on the road?” She shook her head. “Next to impossible. Plus, the label exerts more pressure on me to sing, not to create.” That was just an excuse. A flimsy one at that. If she truly wanted, she could insist on carving out time, and they would oblige.

No. She’d put away her song journal after her divorce from Noah. When guilt and doubts overwhelmed her.

Noah had come along at her lowest point. Two years after she left Hawley Creek, and she’d been slapped with rejection after rejection. She’d given it until the end of the week before she planned to give it all up and call Dusty to beg for a second chance and a plane ticket back to Hawley Creek. Noah’s praise, his attention and flattery, had filled all the lonely spaces, and his confidence gave her the boost she’d needed to keep plugging along. Shortly after they hooked up, she hired him as her manager and the label signed her. A year after they were married, she caught him wrapped up in the hotel sheets with the lead singer from their tour.

He’d only been along for the ride, using her until someone with more fame and wealth came along. His second marriage

hadn't lasted either, at least according to her manager. Skip had mentioned it some time ago, likely digging to make sure she didn't plan to rehire her ex-husband. Not a chance.

“Actually, if I'm honest, it was my decision to stop writing.” There. She finally admitted it out loud.

His nod and look of understanding encouraged her to continue.

She couldn't stare into that oh-so-familiar face without breaking down, so she gazed out at the lake. “I missed you. Something fierce. Two years in, and no one was willing to take a chance on this nobody from Hawley Creek.”

“That's not who you are, Oakley. You're not defined by your success.” When his hand landed lightly on hers, and he threaded their fingers together, she glanced down. Swallowed hard. Inhaled courage.

“It was all too much, and I was at the end. Literally. Out of money. Out of hope. Out of options. I nearly called you and begged you to give me a second chance.”

“I would have.”

She scoffed. “Sure. ‘Dusty, I know I broke your heart by leaving, but I'm ready to come home now. Please take me back.’”

He brought their hands up to his mouth and kissed her palm, no hint of humor or mocking in his expression. “My answer would've been yes. Come home, sweetheart.”

She sucked in a breath, regret sinking like a concrete block in her lungs. If only she had plucked up the nerve to call him rather than jumping into a marriage doomed to fail. “I made the wrong choice, Dusty. My first manager, Noah? I married him.”

* * * *

“Married?” Was that squeak his voice?

That didn't fit the picture he'd filed away and locked in his heart all these years. For Oakley to chase her dreams, to accomplish all of them before realizing that Hawley Creek—

that *he*—was home to her. She'd come back, fulfilled and ready to settle down and start a family. With him.

Now to find out that she was married! He'd held onto that hope for over a decade. Foolish, foolish man!

He unthreaded their fingers, ashamed of assuming that she was unattached. "I'm sorry, Oakley. I didn't know. Forgive me for—" He shifted to the edge of the low-slung seat, ready to bolt, to regroup, to hide from the humiliation, but she stopped him with a hand over his forearm.

"I'm divorced, Dusty. We weren't even married a year. I'm surprised you didn't see the news. It was all over the tabloids. A long time ago, though. Right before my twenty-first birthday."

Her twenty-first birthday? So, this was old news. Relief sluiced through him, and he settled back in the chair, shook his head. "I avoid the tabloids."

His family had been the recipient of ugly reporting. When his parents divorced, he'd been too young to read them, but he'd seen the pictures splashed across the front pages standing in the checkout line at the grocery store with his father and sister. His father had admonished them then not to give the papers any power over their lives, and Dusty had heeded that warning.

"I do, too, now."

"What happened?"

"He wasn't you."

He blinked, that news curling around his heart like a warm blanket on a cold night. As he was reaching for her hand again, a glint from off in the distance caught his attention.

He stared in that direction, trying to focus on what he'd seen. Something in the sand a few doors down. There! Another flash.

It could be a bottle laying in the sand, the sun hitting it just right. Or it could be a person laying on the beach, pointing a camera—or worse—at them.

Snatching her hand, he tugged her toward the door.

“What’s wrong?” Panic widened her eyes as he closed and locked the door.

“Maybe nothing. But I’m not taking any chances.” He dug his phone from his pocket and dialed David.

The man answered on the first ring. Rustling sounded in the background, as if he were running. He huffed out, “I’m on it.”

“Did you see it? The glint in the sand? Two doors down? Opposite direction of my place.” Dusty saw Oakley’s mouth gape, but she covered it with a hand.

“Yeah. About the same time as you. Give me a couple minutes to report back. Stay with her.”

“You got it.” Dusty disconnected, quelling the urge to chase after whatever—whoever—was out there. David could handle it, and honestly, he’d rather stay with Oakley. The protective urge warred with rage, that someone thought it was okay to stalk another human, frightening them to the point that they couldn’t live their life.

He held out his arm and Oakley came right to him, planting a palm over his racing heart. Feeling her tremble, he rested a cheek against the top of her head and murmured, “You’re safe, sweetheart. It’s going to be okay.”

Lord, please let it be so. He blinked at the prayer, realizing he didn’t have the power to keep that promise, but he knew One who did. The words rose in his spirit to repeat with more conviction. *Lord, please let it be so. You have the power. You created the universe with just a word, and You keep it going. Please protect Oakley. Keep her safe.*

“**JUST A BOTTLE.**” David held up the empty beer container for their inspection.

Relief swept through him, nearly buckling his knees.
“Thanks, David.” *And thank You, Lord!*

An arm snaked around his back, offering support, and Oakley stood next to him, the top of her head barely reaching his chin. Oh, how he’d missed her!

“Thank you, David. Can I get you some coffee?”

“Sure. That would be great. Thanks.” Unsmiling, David nodded.

Uh oh. Must be something the man wanted to discuss in private.

“Of course.” Oakley reached for the bottle then padded in bare feet to the kitchen.

David waited until she disappeared before speaking in a low tone. “This is what you saw, boss, but—”

“But?” Alarm stiffened Dusty’s spine.

“The shrubs at the end of that property looked a little suspicious.”

“Suspicious how?”

David shook his head, scowling. “Nothing in particular. Just a gut feeling.”

“You’re the best, David. What’s your gut telling you?”

“The bushes looked as if they’d been disturbed. Not as meticulous as the rest of them. But I didn’t find any footprints

or broken limbs. Nothing to track. Either this guy's really good or my instincts are off base."

"I trust you. Do you think we need to beef up security?"

"Not yet." The head of Canderhart Security shook his head. "Wait until we have something tangible to go on."

"Okay. Your call. Just say the word."

David nodded and slipped out the front door just as Oakley appeared with the requested cup of coffee.

Her eyebrows shot up to the middle of her forehead. "He left?"

"Yeah. Sorry."

She glanced down at the cup in her hand. Shrugged. "I was surprised when he took me up on the offer. Yesterday, he refused. Most of the time, I don't even know he's out there."

"That's what makes him so good at his job."

He really should go, but he was reluctant to leave Oakley after David's report. What if someone had been hanging out in the bushes? If so, they were long gone now, and he didn't want to alarm Oakley. "Want to go back outside?"

She scrunched her face as if considering it. "You know, if you don't mind, I think I'm going to pull out my guitar and play a bit."

He smiled. "Not at all. Want some company?"

She nudged him with a shoulder. "Don't you have a book to finish, Sage?"

The name sounded odd coming from her lips. "Yes, but—"

"No buts. I can't wait to read it. Me and your millions of fans. I do *not* want to be the reason the book doesn't release on time." She twisted her expression into one of mock horror.

He chuckled and headed for the door, pleased to hear her soft footfalls behind him. When he reached it, he turned around and reached for her hands, lacing them together with his. "Have dinner with me?"

“Okay. But only if you promise to call it off if you’re knee deep in a scene.”

“I promise.” That wasn’t hard. He’d just make sure to set an alarm to give him plenty of notice. But already an idea for the next scene was percolating, and he knew he’d have to get to his computer soon or it would evaporate.

Her face softened with her smile. “See you soon.”

“Can’t wait.” He curled his hands around her shoulders and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. Smiled at her tiny exhale of contentment.

Maybe if he could help her see that she was safe here, she’d finally stop running. Suddenly Hawley Creek didn’t seem so lonely anymore, and he couldn’t imagine living anywhere else.

* * * *

Oakley poured iced tea into a glass then, with her forearms resting against the kitchen island, tapped out a text. *Thank you!*

You’re welcome. Davy’s response was almost immediate chased by a follow up. *For what?*

For inviting me to play at your dad’s wedding. I needed a reason to come back to Hawley Creek.

You mean Dusty wasn’t enough reason? Lol

Oh, he was. But Oakley just didn’t know how to bridge all the years that separated them, how to repair the damage from her leaving. Or even if it could be repaired.

But it looked as if Dusty was willing. And after he left this morning, she dug her song journal from the folds at the bottom of her suitcase, grabbed a pencil and her guitar, and started testing the lyrics to a new song. Her first in nearly ten years. She still had a way to go, but she suspected it would be a hit.

Another text pinged. *I’m glad you’re back. Even if it’s just for a month.*

Just for a month. The words struck Oakley, the force almost physical, and she dropped down onto one of the chairs in the keeping room.

Did she want it to be longer? Could she stay in the small town? Make it her home? She hadn't stayed in one place long enough to call home. Now that her father had passed away, the bad memories would fade with time. There was an international airport within a forty-minute drive to take her anywhere. Folks in Hawley Creek gave the Canderharts privacy and shielded them from the public's eye as much as possible. Maybe they would be willing to accept her into their fold and do the same for her. Would that be a huge ask?

Probably. Especially since she hadn't exactly kept her feelings back then a secret. That she was only biding her time until graduation when she could finally escape the small town. And, if Dusty's initial reaction to seeing her was any indication, would they believe that she thought herself too big for Hawley Creek?

That couldn't be further from the truth.

She was a fraud. Making a literal fortune off someone else's labor when she should be writing and singing her own songs. Noah had been her first manager, the first to suggest that she not waste time writing. When her next manager had suggested the same, followed up by her third, she saw the handwriting on the wall. A decade later, she'd accepted it as the way it would be.

Maybe it was time to veer off this current road and take a different path. Succeed or fail based on her own merits, on her own terms.

To live life again.

Maybe—no, not maybe. She could! For the first time in her thirty years, she could carve out her own path. Starting with the song taking shape in her journal. She had enough contacts in the industry and her name alone would give her traction.

An idea rooted and blossomed in the space of a few beats.
What would she need?

Startup funds. Check.

Industry contacts. Check.

Time. A few weeks ago, Skip had emailed the latest renewal contracts for him and the label. With all the pressure he'd been exerting lately, that likely meant she was a free agent now. She'd need to review her current contract for clauses and expiration and her upcoming gigs just to be on the safe side.

A recording studio. All she needed was the right property and a few modifications, and she could literally walk into another room and work versus flying across the country. A door leading to the studio from outside would also allow her to expand, inviting other "nobodys" like her to bloom and grow, to choose their own path rather than being ushered onto the same highway as the countless others who'd gone before them. Above all else, that alone brought a smile and cemented her idea into a plan.

A crash course in business. Dusty and Davy had grown up in the family business. Maybe they could give her a crash course, talk her through this before she made any rash decisions.

But it didn't feel rash. It felt right. As if she'd finally come home.

Lord, is this Your doing? She tested the prayer on her lips, looking up toward the ceiling, not seeing anything, and yet feeling the warmth spread through her chest. *Did You guide me back to Hawley Creek?*

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6

SOMETHING WAS DIFFERENT.

Dusty recognized the shift in the atmosphere almost as soon as Oakley opened the door. “Hey.”

“Hey, back!” Oakley tugged his arm, pulled him inside, and closed the door.

Was she still frightened from this morning’s incident? Her bright smile and excited countenance belied fear and anxiety. On the contrary, she looked rested, content even.

He held up the bag and cardboard container. He’d taken a chance with dinner tonight, going with their favorite high school hangout. Did she still enjoy the simple things? Or had success changed her?

“Get out!” After spotting the name on the outside of the satchel, she snatched it from his hand and uncrumpled the paper to peer inside. When she lifted her face, her smile had morphed into a grin as she took in the name on the cups.

“Woody’s?” she squealed and twirled around the living room.

He nodded, his heart soaring at the obvious joy she got from either reliving their memories or from the food. He wasn’t sure which, but he hoped it might be a little of both.

But it answered the question that kept him tossing and turning in bed last night. So, she hadn’t changed that much. Underneath that façade of fame and all the prestigious awards she’d amassed over the years, she was still the same Oakley.

She whirled around and headed for the kitchen, calling to him over her shoulder. “What are you waiting for? Let’s eat!”

Trailing her, he stowed the shakes in the freezer while she scrounged up some plates and transferred the burgers and fries.

“You want to try outside again?” she asked.

His eyebrows lifted. He glanced at the glass door. Already the sun was slipping past the horizon, and darkness would take over. “Will you feel safe enough to eat if we do?”

She hiked that cute little chin of hers. “I’ve been outside all afternoon.”

“You have?” As hard as he tried, shock still slipped out in his voice as he opened the door for her.

“Working on a song.” She breezed past him, giving him a good whiff of pears and vanilla, her long strands of hair tickling his arm.

He held his breath and hung onto the door. Didn’t release it until she moved further outside and sank down in a chair, and he had a minute to regain his balance, the intensity of longing, of belonging, of how right it felt to be with her again nearly buckling his legs.

Finally, he tested his limbs with a step then another. *Get it together, Canderhart. You’re not a kid anymore, and you haven’t seen Oakley in over a decade. Take it slow or you’ll scare her worse than that crazy fan, and she might never come back to Hawley Creek.*

He joined her and set his plate down on his lap. “That’s wonderful. No wonder you look so rested. You had a chance to flex those creative muscles, do something you love again.”

“Yes, it was wonderful.” She took a bite from the burger and closed her eyes. Moaned. “Just like this burger.”

They ate in silence. When she finally popped the last fry in her mouth, she closed her eyes once again. When they opened, tears glistened on her lashes as her gaze settled on him.

“Thank you for this.”

Joy unfurled in his chest. Hope took root, its tendrils aiming deep. Oh, how he missed her. He didn't realize that he'd been waiting for her to come back until spotting her at his dad's wedding.

He reached for her hand and brought it to his lips. Kissed the soft skin. "You're welcome. I know it's not much, definitely not what you're used to—"

"It's exactly what I need." Her voice, her eyes were soft.

As if she was speaking in subtexts. That *he* was exactly what she needed. Was he reading too much into it? Probably his writer's imagination taking him to places he had no business going.

"Everything. This trip back to Hawley Creek. This cottage. The lake." She swept an arm across the vastness in front of them.

The sun had finally slipped over the water, and the moon was rising, casting the ripples that lapped along the shoreline in silver.

Her voice quieted as she continued. "The peace and quiet and space. The memories." Her eyes jerked to collide with and hold his. "Seeing you again."

No. That wasn't his imagination.

He got to his feet and held out his hand. She took it. When his fingers curled around her waist and his feet shuffled them across the deck to their favorite song, one that she'd written and sang to him often, needing no words or sound, she didn't miss a beat. Her arms coiled around his neck, and he rested his cheek against the top of her head, filling his lungs with the clean scent of her shampoo, his heart expanding until he thought it might burst from his chest.

"I feel the same." But what did they do about it? She was only in town for a month.

* * * *

Should she tell him what she'd decided? That she planned to open a recording studio here. There were a lot of details to iron

out before she could claim Hawley Creek as home again. Like reviewing her current contracts. Making a clean break from her manager and label. Finding a place here and then a contractor to make it work.

Maybe it was best if she kept that tidbit tucked away for later. Just enjoy the moment and the man.

Dusty must've taken a shower before he came over. The ends of his thick hair were still damp against her arms, and his scent drifted up her nose. Ocean and woods, soap and butterscotch. Familiar. Comforting. Rekindling that spark to flutter in her chest as he guided them expertly to the words of the song that only played in their heads and hearts.

“Why didn't you ask me to stay?” The question left her lips before she could yank it back.

His sigh blew against her hair, full of regret but laden even more with a heavy truth. His hands shifted from her waist to curl around her back and tug her closer. “We were young. You were itching to leave Hawley Creek to chase your dreams, maybe even more to escape your father. If I'd asked you to stay, you would have ended up resenting me for holding you back. And look at what you've achieved. The world wouldn't be as bright or as beautiful without your music, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart. When was the last time someone had called her that and meant it? Someone who'd treated her like a princess. Dusty. He'd been the last, the only one. Every other man had wanted something from her. They'd taken, not given, leaving her empty. Robbed of creativity.

His honesty refreshed her. His words lifted her up, encouraged her. And already the lyrics to the song she'd worked on this afternoon were churning in her head again.

He'd let her go. Not because he didn't love her. But because he did.

And he was right. If she'd stayed, they would've married, no doubt. But she would've always wondered.

She had no doubts now. No reservations. Only a love that she'd locked up tight and buried deep. Coming back to

Hawley Creek, seeing Dusty again, had unlocked it, exposed it to the light.

She pressed her lips to his neck. “Thank you for that.”

He nodded. His feet kept their shuffle going. “You never really talked about your father much. But I always figured he played into your desire to leave too.”

The mention of her father was like a bucket of cold water splashed against her face. She jerked back, stumbled out of his hold, and walked over to rest her arms against the railing, the decades old memories assaulting her afresh.

He appeared next to her, apology etching lines from his dark eyes. “I’m sorry, Oakley. I didn’t mean to reopen old wounds.”

She took a deep breath, her lungs expanding with the fresh scent of the lake. A timely reminder that her father no longer had the power to hurt her. That every day was a new beginning, a chance to start fresh, a clean slate. “You know all those days I claimed to be sick?”

With his forearms draped against the rail next to hers, looking straight ahead and refusing to meet his gaze or she’d chicken out, she felt his nod more than saw it. “He used to beat me.”

His gasp sounded right before his arm curled around her back, his touch incredibly gentle and soothing, but he didn’t try to twist her around to face him. He must’ve realized that she couldn’t continue with the story if she saw the sympathy shimmering from his eyes or heard it in his voice.

She swallowed hard. Gazed out at the darkness shrouding the lake. She could trust him. And if they had any hopes of reviving something so precious, so treasured, didn’t he deserve to know the secret she’d kept from him, from the rest of Hawley Creek? The one her father had warned her never to tell?

But Michael Mead was dead. The evil man had no control over her life anymore. “During his drinking binges.”

“Oakley, sweetheart. I never knew.”

“That’s because he always made sure that I could hide the bruising with clothes.”

A whiff of butterscotch floated in the air around them, evidence of his huff, a mixture of anger and pain. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“And what would you have done?”

“I’m not sure.” He raked fingers through his hair. “I was a kid. But my father would’ve known what to do.”

“I was a kid too. It was all I knew.” Until she left town, and blessed relief, the physical beatings had ended. But the mental ones...they just replaced them. Guilt. Doubt. A sense that she must’ve deserved them.

And then this crazy fan. Leaving her such awful notes and gifts, making her wonder if she’d done something to deserve them too.

Gentle hands framed her cheeks, and he nudged her around to look at him. Finally, she lifted her eyes to meet his.

“Nobody will ever hurt you like that again, sweetheart. I promise. Nobody.”

DUSTY Poured his third cup of coffee for the morning and swiveled to stare at the laptop he'd left on the dining room table since Oakley's visit. He'd gotten more chapters written while watching her sleep, so he'd left it there.

This morning, not so much, the secret she'd unloaded on him last night still making his stomach churn and sweat bead up on his forehead.

She'd lived with a maniac, and Dusty never knew it! How could he have been so stupid? How could he have missed all the signs? She'd called out sick from school so often, blaming it on female issues, that everyone, including him, had accepted it at face value.

Now to learn that she'd been hiding bruises!

Huffing at himself, he stomped outside. Maybe some fresh air would clear his head, would help him get back into his story. Only a few days remained before the first draft was due to his publisher, and his agent always demanded a first look before sending it on. After pounding out a few chapters over the last few days, Dusty was close to wrapping up the story, but not today. Not with his head a jumbled mess and his heart tied up in knots.

He sank down in a chair and took a long breath then exhaled, repeating the process until his body relaxed. The golden orb dangled over the smooth surface of the lake and warmed his face as he lifted it to the sky. *Lord...*

Words evaded him. Not good for a writer.

He tried again. *Lord, I'm totally out of my element here. I don't know what to do. I don't know how to erase all the pain that Oakley's endured, or even if it can be. Not by me, anyway. But Dad and Kavan seem to think that You can do all things. Kavan told me that You took his pain and sorrow over losing Davy and made something good out of it. I'm asking You to do that for Oakley, Lord. Create something beautiful from her ashes. And Lord? I need You too. Forgive me for thinking that I could do life on my own. For ignoring You. For failing her.*

He took a sip of coffee and felt his spine and muscles relax another fraction. The water lapped against the shoreline, the soft slaps against the sand like music. It struck Dusty that the sun came up every morning, the stars sparkled against an inky black sky every night, and that he—Dusty—didn't do a single thing to make that happen. Creation was like a finely tuned orchestra, each element doing its part without any prodding from humans.

Only God.

The passage from a Psalm that he'd tried to memorize earlier this morning emerged from his mouth. "Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, praise His name; proclaim His salvation day after day. Declare His glory..." That's all he could remember.

Lord, give Oakley and me a new song to sing.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. He dug it out. Smiled at Oakley's beautiful face on his screen.

He connected the call. "Good morning, sweetheart."

"He knows I'm here!" The fear in her voice propelled him from his seat.

Taking the stairs off the deck two at a time, he skipped the final two and landed hard on the sidewalk. "Who?" But he already knew the answer.

"He left a note and another gift at the front door. David's here now."

"I'm on my way." He took off at a sprint down the beach. Within a handful of minutes, his lungs heaving, he knocked on

her back door.

David let him in, regret pinching his expression, his casual attire of sneakers, running shorts, and a sweat slicked T-shirt evidence that it was his day off. “Hey, boss.”

“What happened?” he demanded. He held out an arm, and Oakley came right to him. She fit against him perfectly.

“Shift change. Clem’s wife went into labor. He had to leave a few minutes before Dawkins got here. Maybe five at most.” David rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m sor—”

Glancing down at the woman at his side, Dusty cut him off. “The important thing is Oakley is safe.” His pulse still rocketed from adrenaline, and his gut felt as if loaded down with gravel. What kind of person got their kicks out of frightening a woman? Scaring them until they lost their sense of security, keeping them barricaded inside their homes as well as inside their heads.

And Oakley had suffered all of this on her own!

Not anymore! His arm tightened around her, and he kissed the top of her head. “It’s going to be okay, sweetheart.”

David flicked his head toward the kitchen, and Dusty gave a single nod. When the man turned around, Dusty didn’t follow immediately.

“Thank you for coming.” Her murmur was nearly swallowed up by the cotton of his shirt.

“Hey.” He nudged her chin up until their eyes locked. Hers were bloodshot and puffy with fear. “You’re not alone, sweetheart. I promise we’ll get through this together.”

She nodded.

“Are you up to talking this through with me and David?” He understood David’s silent request to talk privately, to spare her another rehash of something that was probably ugly and frightening, but this was Oakley. She was strong, and he wanted to give her the option.

Her heavy sigh lifted her chest and her lips quivered as she appeared to be considering. Finally, she hiked her chin. “Yes.”

“That’s my girl.” With his arm still wrapped around her, he led her toward the kitchen. Just outside the entry, he leaned in close to voice his next question. “Would you feel safer at my house? I have a security system and we can shift the security detail down there.” And he would be there. Not that he was better equipped to protect her than the best in the business—he didn’t even own a gun—but another set of eyes had to help, right? Plus, unlike the other men, his heart was invested.

Her jaw clamped. She folded arms over her chest. “I’m not going to let him win.”

“It’s not a matter of letting him win. It’s about keeping you safe, sweetheart.” Now was not the time for her to be stubborn.

Or maybe it was. Her reaction was exactly how his current heroine would respond to a threat. With courage. Grit. Resolve.

He nodded. “Okay then. I can work from here just as easily as my house.”

Her arms dropped to hang at her sides. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I know. But I meant what I said. You’re not alone, sweetheart. Not this time.” He brushed her temple with his thumb, swept some hair back from her face. Refusing to allow regret a stronghold in his thoughts, he focused on the here and now.

The beautiful face staring up at him. The doubt clouding her eyes. And with good reason. The men in her life had let her down, including him.

He was determined not to let her down now. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you back then. But, I promise, sweetheart, I’m here for you now. Let me help. Please.” If she didn’t say yes, he’d be camping out in his car in her driveway for the duration of her visit.

She must’ve seen or heard the serious note in his voice and in his expression because she finally consented. “Okay. But I

don't want to make it any harder for you to write. I'll come to your place if the offer still stands."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'll pack while you and David talk." She pivoted and headed toward the main bedroom, her shoulders drooping with resignation and surrender.

Lord, please help me keep that promise!

* * * *

"He's a crazy lunatic." Dusty's voice came out loud in the eerily silent kitchen.

David had left the small box propped on the table, and Dusty stood next to him, staring at the contents inside.

A five by seven photo of Oakley, walking along a sidewalk, holding a floppy hat over her head. From this angle, it appeared as if she was looking straight at the camera. Fear and worry and stress lined her face.

"Either this guy was fairly close, or he used an expensive camera," David said.

"Yeah." But that wasn't the first thing that struck Dusty. No, that would be the blade stabbing through her chest area and into a potato.

And the threatening note. That's what really got to him. *You're mine, Oakley Mead. Not his. Never his. Mine. Just remember that.*

"What kind of sick person does this?" Poor Oakley. How many gifts like this had she gotten? And what had been the last one? What gift or words sent her running back to the single place she'd vowed never to return?

He scrubbed a hand over his face. "We need to contact the police."

"Already done, boss. Did that while you were in there talking with Oakley. How is she holding up?"

"Determined not to let this dude win. And I can't blame her. But she agreed to move to my place, so we'll need to

transfer everyone over there.”

Skepticism etched lines around David’s mouth.

“What?”

“Is that wise, boss?”

“Wiser than letting someone like this,” Dusty jerked his head toward the box, “get close to her again. Whoever did this was brazen enough to show up on her doorstep!”

Fear for Oakley clawed at him again, but he stomped it down. After all she had endured in her thirty years, *alone*, it was about time that someone stood up for her. He refused to allow someone to torment her like this.

Today that someone was him. But, as Oakley rolled a suitcase into the kitchen and their eyes met, it struck him that he wanted that job forever.

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DUSTY WAS STILL sitting at the table, his fingers tapping rapidly across the keyboard, his head bent over his laptop. Every so often, he paused and rubbed his face or got up and walked into the kitchen to refill his cup with coffee.

Oakley's smile dimmed, and her fingers paused their plucking of the guitar strings. It was because of her that he was behind on his book.

But it sure felt nice not to be alone, even if they were both in separate places inside his house.

Over the last few weeks, she'd had this eerie feeling that someone was watching her. She couldn't pinpoint any particular day or incident. Just a sense.

After today's gift, it was no longer just a feeling but a fact.

The police had come and taken the box away, thank goodness. Hopefully Hawley Creek's department could do more than the last one and the one before that, which was nothing. But she wasn't holding out much hope that the small department would have the resources necessary to find her stalker.

Suddenly restless, she set the guitar down and, after stretching her back, wandered into the kitchen and washed her hands. "Okay if I make us something for dinner?"

His head popped up. Hair he'd ruffled with his fingers during his thinking spells stood up, calling out to her fingers to thread through the thick strands, to smooth down those spikes. "I didn't realize what time it was. I'll help." He closed the lid to the laptop and shoved back from the table.

“Please. Don’t stop on account of me.” She already felt bad enough.

He came to her, took the towel from her hands, and tossed it on the counter. Coiling his long arms around her back, he pulled her against his chest and pressed a soft kiss against her hair. “No worries, sweetheart. I’ll get the book done.”

Longing fluttered to life in her chest. For more evenings like this. This closeness. This sense of belonging, of rightness in his embrace.

But, at thirty years old and with a failed marriage in her past, she wasn’t sure her rusty organ was working properly.

She pulled back, managed a smile. “Are you close to finishing?”

“I made good progress today. Probably because you’re here with me, and I’m not worried about you being all alone in that big old cottage. So, thank you.”

“Is that your nice way of saying thanks for not being so stubborn and choosing to stay here?” she teased.

“Something like that.” Chuckling, he opened the fridge and riffled through some of the contents. “What do you feel like? Nachos? Salad? Chicken? Or, if you’d prefer, we can order something in.”

“Nachos sound wonderful. I eat out so much that I never pass up a home cooked meal. But I can get them ready if you ___”

“Can we work together?”

“I’d like that.” More than anything. More than the thrill of hammering out a new song. More than the applause at the end of a performance. More than awards and accolades.

He nodded, his lips curving up at the edges. “Me too.”

They stood like that, both beaming at each other like silly teenagers, until the fridge alarm blared from being open too long. He cleared his throat and dug out the ingredients for the nachos.

“Can you grab the jar of cheese and bag of chips from the pantry?” He dumped the package of hamburger meat into a skillet and snatched a spatula from a drawer.

“Of course.” She opened the door to what she assumed was a pantry. Her jaw hinged.

“What’s wrong?”

“This is the biggest pantry I’ve ever seen. And it’s full. I thought bachelors were notorious for having empty cupboards.”

He chuckled. “That may be true for some single men but eating here is definitely more convenient. And less destructive to my day. Like I’m sure what happens with you whenever you venture out, crowds seem to gather.”

“It’s like someone spots you on the street and then puts the word out to all their friends.”

“Exactly. But I do enjoy meeting my dad or sister for a meal. Usually, we arrange it for around eleven and at a place that accommodates breakfast and lunch to avoid the crowds.”

“That’s smart.” Oakley found the chips and cheese. She set the packages on the counter and then looked around for whatever else needed to be done.

Chop tomatoes and lettuce. Get a spoon for the sour cream.

She located the silverware drawer and set the utensil in the plastic container. Next, tomatoes. “Cutting board?”

He flicked his head in the general direction. “Lower cabinet next to the fridge.”

She passed behind him, putting a hand to his spine so that he didn’t back up, and caught a whiff of butterscotch and a trace of the ocean. Oh, yeah. She could definitely get used to this dance in the kitchen every night.

She dug out a rectangular shaped board and selected a knife from a block on the counter. The light pinged off the steel blade, and her breath caught, a vivid picture of the latest gift startling her.

The knife thudded against the wood floor, barely missing her toes. But she couldn't have moved if she tried.

Dusty swiveled from the stove and took in the situation. He tugged her against his chest. His soothing voice ruffled her hair while he rubbed circles along her back. "Hey, it's okay. You're safe, sweetheart."

He held her until the shaking stopped and she finally caught a decent breath, then bent over, scooped up the knife, and rinsed it under the faucet. "Leave it. I can cut the tomatoes."

"No." She shook off the fear. She refused to give this deranged person any more control over her life. "I've got it."

After washing the bright red tomatoes, she started slicing and dicing, so intent on avoiding her fingers and purging the memory of that knife in the picture of her that she didn't realize that Dusty had set his phone on the counter until she heard her voice belting out a familiar song.

Her hand paused, and she lifted the knife off the cutting board. "You added me to your playlist?"

"Added you?" He scoffed. "Sweetheart, I only have one playlist, and it's all you."

Contentment spread through her chest and settled deep in her spirit. She tore her eyes away from his gorgeous brown orbs and turned back to the tomatoes, tears dotting her lashes. *Lord, I believe this is Your doing. You've kept me safe. You led me home. To Hawley Creek. To Dusty. Thank You for protecting me, for showing me the way, for breaking the chains that have been holding me back. I need You, Lord. Please don't ever leave me.*

* * * *

"Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, praise His name; proclaim His salvation day after day. Declare His glory..." Dusty mashed a palm against his forehead. Why couldn't he remember the rest of the verse?

Especially when he was sitting outside on the deck, watching the sky morph from black to lavender to gold as the

day broke, sipping coffee, his Bible open on his lap.

The heavens declare His glory... The words to another verse popped up in his head, mingling with the other. This morning's stunner of a sunrise declared His glory so perfectly even without words.

His gaze soaked it all in. The expansive sky. The hushed stillness of the lake. The dewdrops from heaven that clung to the tips of the grass. As if every element of nature understood that verse and gave God their best.

Lord, I want to do the same, to declare Your glory with everything in me, to give You my best.

"That's beautiful." The husky voice startled him.

He glanced up to see Oakley standing in the doorway, cradling a mug in both hands, squinting against the sun. A beam speared her, bouncing off her frame and casting her in a golden glow. She must've already showered because her wet hair was pulled up and wound in a knot on top of her head. Her shorts showed off tan, shapely legs. Her tank top clung to her form and revealed a neck that looked like pure silk.

His lungs refused to cooperate.

"May I join you?"

Somehow, he scrounged up his voice. "Please."

She sat down, curling those long legs underneath her, and sipped from the mug. "I can see why you bought this property. This view is worth waking up early."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Like a bear all snuggled up in its den for winter. Just like the other day. I'm beginning to think it must be this house." Her gaze lifted to connect with his, and a pretty pink blossomed across her cheeks. She cleared her throat, but it only deepened the huskiness. "Or just being with you."

His chest expanded with love. He reached for her hand and threaded their fingers together. "I love you, Oakley Mead. I've never stopped. Time. Distance. None of it mattered. It's as if I

was just biding time, waiting for you to come back, and I didn't realize it until I saw you at Dad and Lexie's wedding."

She swiped a finger across the lashes of both eyes. Her lips trembled with emotion. "I love you, too, Dusty. All my young life I couldn't wait to escape Hawley Creek. But when this crazy fan started leaving these awful presents, I couldn't wait to come back. I believe the Lord led me back, Dusty. To Hawley Creek. To you."

He kissed the inside of her palm, and they sat in silence for a few moments, soaking in each other's presence, no words necessary, sipping coffee and singing a silent song of praise to their Creator.

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OAKLEY ERASED THE clanging note and jotted down the one that fit better. She dropped the pencil on top of her journal and strummed through the measure again. Yeah. Definitely better.

The door leading to the back deck opened, and Dusty stepped outside. To give him a quiet space to write, she'd brought her guitar and notebook outside. Besides, after glimpsing the sunrise with him this morning, she couldn't imagine a more inspiring spot to create.

She'd been right. She'd wrapped up one song and was working on a second. If she kept up this pace, she'd have an entire album soon.

"I'm in the mood for an iced coffee. Can I make you one?" She lifted the strap over her head and leaned the guitar against the back wall of the house.

Dusty offered a hand to help her up, but then he kept it locked inside his bigger one, his serious look launching a frazzle of worry to wiggle up her spine. "David just called. They caught him."

"What?" Her legs wilted underneath her. Good thing he tightened his hold on her, or she would've landed in a heap on the deck.

"The police are on their way. But David thought you might want a glimpse of who's been torturing you."

The image of the knife stabbed through her photo was bad enough. The last thing she needed was to put a face to the man

who'd made her life miserable the last few months. The nightmares would never end.

She wagged her head back and forth. "I don't need to see ___"

The doorbell chimed twice. Dusty had warned her that was David's way of announcing himself. Her gaze shot to the back door, her nerves on high alert.

"Trust me, sweetheart. Everything's going to be all right. You can get on with your life now." Dusty squeezed her back but then released her.

Why did that sound a lot like he was saying goodbye? A pain stabbed her heart at the very thought.

Where was the peace, the joy, from this morning? The contentment from mere minutes ago? *Lord, I need You! Don't leave me now! Please!*

The door opened. David walked out on the deck, towing a man behind him, his hands apparently shackled behind his back.

Oakley jerked her gaze to the wood planks of the deck. Did she want this man's face to haunt her day and night?

She breathed deep then forced the air from her lungs. Repeated it. Once. Twice. Three times.

She would never be fully free to live her life until she faced this, head on.

Oakley dug deep, but the courage to lift her gaze didn't come from her. She didn't have enough. It wasn't her strength.

What? No way! Shock hinged her jaw and swelled her eyes with tears. Her hand flew up to cover her mouth, muffling her voice. "Noah?"

Her ex-husband was behind this craziness?

She swallowed hard, anger surging to replace the disbelief. All these months. Terrorizing her. Making her afraid to live in her own skin. Making her afraid to live, period.

She stomped toward the man she'd called husband for almost a year. Would've socked him good if it weren't for Dusty hauling her back against his chest and whispering something against her ear. She couldn't hear what he said, but the familiar fragrance, the blend of butterscotch, ocean, and woods, pulled her out of her rage.

Breathing hard, she blew out the toxic poison banking in her lungs and then refilled them with fresh air, the words she'd heard Dusty proclaim this morning rising to her lips. "Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, praise His name..."

"That's right, sweetheart. That's right. Sing a new song. Don't let him steal your joy." Dusty encouraged her with another squeeze around her shoulders.

"Dusty, David. I guess you already knew this is my former manager and—"

"Husband," Noah inserted, smirking.

Bristling, she corrected, "*Ex*-husband."

Noah's gaze turned cold and dark, and suddenly it all made sense. Sometime before all this started, Skip had mentioned that Noah and Lena had divorced. It hadn't surprised her, so that little tidbit had just faded into oblivion.

"You thought your little *gifts* would frighten me into coming back to you?"

"It should've worked. But instead, you ran back here. To him." Noah's head jerked toward Dusty, hatred spilling from his coal black eyes and shimmering off his stiff posture in invisible waves. Even with arms twisted behind his back and shackled wrists, he rushed at Dusty.

Dusty didn't back down. No. Her hero growled and tugged her behind him, his stance low and wide, like a football linebacker, his sole intent to protect her, to prevent Noah from getting anywhere near her. Keeping his promise.

David caught the man's arms from behind and twisted, jerking her ex-husband to a hard stop and invoking a yelp of pain from Noah. "I'm not sure where you think you're going,

but I can assure you that it isn't anywhere close to these two.” David's jaw clamped tight as he dragged Noah toward the door.

Sirens blared, sounding nearer until they finally stopped. Within seconds, uniformed officers swarmed the deck, and Noah was taken into custody. A police officer stayed behind to get her statement, and Dusty hovered nearby, never letting her lose sight of him.

He was a man of his word. He'd put himself in danger to protect her. She could trust him with her life and with her heart.

* * * *

Dusty thought they'd never leave.

Finally, it was just the two of them left on the deck.

The late afternoon had given way to evening. When darkness began to descend, bringing a cool breeze with it, Dusty had turned on the overhead light.

A glance at Oakley, at the purple hollows above her cheeks, the weary droop to her shoulders, and he knew she was beat. But it would probably be a long time before she slept tonight.

Using his phone app, he adjusted the lighting so that only the dimmer party bulbs lit up the space and her sweet voice came through his phone speaker. He set it down on the side table and held out his arms. “Come here.”

She came without hesitation, pressing her cheek and palm over his heart.

He held her, offering comfort and space to grieve, if she needed it. When she didn't appear to, he led her to the chair, dropped down first and then pulled her down onto his lap and adjusted the soft throw over her.

She settled back against him, tucking his arms around her waist. “It's finally over.”

“You can rest easy now, sweetheart.” He hoped she'd fall asleep in his arms. After Noah rushed at her tonight, the fear—

the rage—that had surged through his body at the thought of someone hurting her again, he couldn't imagine letting her go right now.

“Yeah,” she murmured. “I'm home.”

“I like the sound of that.” He nudged his nose against her neck. Couldn't resist stealing a kiss while he was so close.

“And I like your kisses.”

He sucked in a loud breath at her flirting, the longing reigniting a fire to rage inside him. He had to ask, hated to ask, afraid of her answer. As much as he complained about their small town, he didn't think he could bring himself to leave his dad and sister. But he knew he couldn't let Oakley go again. She was part of him, a piece of his whole, and he'd follow wherever her career took them. “Do you think Hawley Creek could ever be your home again?”

“I know so.”

He shifted so that he could see her face. “You know so?”

Her smile was bright, her expression glowing with peace and contentment. “I'd already made up my mind. I was just waiting for the right time to tell you.”

His heart exploded with joy, and his mouth split into a loopy grin. “Now seems good.” Better than good. Perfect. *Thank You, Lord!*

“I thought so.” Her grin sparkled with mischief. “Now, how about another one of those kisses?”

His palm cupped her cheek, and his mouth slanted over hers. His lips took their time getting reacquainted with hers, and he poured himself into it, offering his love, his heart, his commitment.

When he finally pulled back, a tiny moan escaped her throat.

He couldn't resist teasing her. And maybe he just needed a little confirmation that she was truly here, that this wasn't just a wonderful dream. “How was that?”

Her lashes remained closed, but she lifted her face and set her full red lips into a fake pout. “I’m not sure. I need a redo to give you a more definitive answer.”

He chuckled and nibbled at her earlobe. “You little minx. You don’t know what you do to me.”

“Oh, I think I have an idea. About the same as your kisses do to m—”

The door opened, and a tiny herd of footsteps thundered across the deck but stopped abruptly. “Dusty, David just called. What on—oh!”

Dusty groaned. He rarely saw his sister and brother-in-law outside of the shop. Of course, they’d show up at the worst possible time. But maybe it was for the best after Oakley’s longest of days.

He leaned in. Dragged in another lungful of vanilla and sweetness to last him. “I owe you a redo. And don’t think you’ll get out of it.”

“Get out of it?” She pulled back, mock horror wrinkling that cute button nose. “I’m counting on it.”

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“RACE YOU TO the other side!” Oakley didn’t wait for him to respond. Shoot. She didn’t even wait for him to wrangle his long legs into the kayak before she shoved off the bank with her paddle, getting a good two lengths or better head start on him.

He chuckled, not worried about catching up to her. He could overtake her in no time. Not that he would.

He enjoyed the view from behind far too much.

A cap kept the late afternoon sun out of her eyes and held her ponytail of cinnamon hair in place, allowing the long mane to swish from side to side. With every row, muscles rippled in her shoulders and across her bare back, both exposed by the hot pink halter top. But what really sped up his pulse were the surreptitious glances over her shoulder to check on his progress and the carefree giggle when she saw that he was closing in on her.

Nah. He’d bring up the rear and be happy to do it. But why hadn’t he bought a two-seated kayak?

Because he wanted her to have the freedom to go out on the lake whenever she chose. Even if a deadline kept him glued to his laptop and their schedules didn’t always align.

His paddle sliced through the water in long easy strokes, first one side and then the other. Summer was winding down, and soon, autumn colors would explode all around them. He couldn’t wait for Oakley to see the grand display of God’s majesty on the lake.

It had been a month since Noah's arrest. Oakley had rented the cottage until the end of the year. She hadn't renewed her contracts with either her manager or her label and was determined to find a place in Hawley Creek to accommodate her own recording studio. So far, she hadn't viewed any properties that would work.

That's because there were so few properties available on the lake. And the perfect location was right under her nose. Or, literally, her kayak's.

And, today, in just a few minutes, she would understand why she thought the Lord was silent on the issue when all along He'd been working out the details. She loved Dusty's house. His property was large enough to accommodate a substantial addition and the mixed-use zoning was already in place for whenever Oakley wanted to take her business to the next level, but it had taken time to meet with the attorney and architect to make sure they had all the bases covered before he offered it as a viable option. *Thank You, Lord. For loving us. For caring about all the little details in our lives as well as the big ones.*

He paused rowing for a beat to pat his pocket. The tiny jeweler's box was still there. Although he trusted his sister to manage things at his house while they'd played beach volleyball with some friends on the opposite side of the lake, he felt better knowing the ring was in his possession. And Davy had texted right before they took off that everything was set. Blanket. Blueprints. Champagne and goblets. Photographer.

Time to get the best party of his life started.

He grinned and sped up, coming up alongside his beloved.

"What took you so long, slowpoke?" she teased, right before hurling half of the lake onto his hair and shirt.

The coolness against his warm skin felt great, but she probably wouldn't appreciate pictures of their special moment drenched to the bone, so he didn't retaliate. Not yet, anyway. There would be plenty of time for horseplay after he proposed. The rest of their lives.

He flicked his head, though, slinging the excess water her way.

Giggling, she turned away from him, holding her wooden stick as a shield.

When he eased ahead of her, he heard her sputter. “Wait! That’s not fair!”

“Like taking off before I was even in my kayak was fair?” He laughed over his shoulder, savoring the view from the front now. A direct sunbeam glinted off her hat and shimmered off the water, framing her as if she was an angel. His angel. His soon-to-be-wife, he hoped with everything in him.

If they didn’t get to the other side soon, he couldn’t guarantee he wouldn’t propose right here in the middle of the lake.

“You snooze you lose, hotshot.” Another giggle erupted, and the oars dug into the lake with a frantic speed.

He hadn’t realized he’d stopped rowing again. But it was just as well. Let her beat him to the other side. He still considered it a win.

* * * *

Something was up.

Dusty was acting weird, a loopy grin splitting his face. And he never let her win without putting up a valiant effort. Who was she kidding? He always won no matter how much of a head start she eked out by cheating. All in fun, of course.

But she gave it all she had, and her kayak beat his by a measly inch or so. She raised the paddle over her head, the muscles in her shoulders and arms crying out with relief. “Wooahoo! The winner!”

He only laughed as he untangled those beautiful muscular legs, his movements as graceful as a panther, and waded through the water to tug her vessel onto the beach. He also held it steady and offered a hand while she clambered out instead of chuckling while she slid out and rolled onto the sand.

Yeah. Something was definitely up.

She thumped him on the chest. “What are you up to, hotshot?” Her high school nickname for him fit. Especially after he’d turned in his latest book seconds before the deadline, and his first and second books were still sitting on every bestseller’s list. His publisher was begging for more.

He grabbed her hand and kissed the sensitive spot on her palm, sending a trill of pleasure to race up her limbs and her pulse to rocket. Her chest lifted with a contented sigh.

“You’ll see,” was all he said before lacing their fingers together and leading her to—

Wait. Was that a blanket on the lawn? A picnic basket. Something else she couldn’t identify.

This man! He was so thoughtful, so romantic, a treasured gift from God.

He stopped on the square patch of material and pulled her against his chest.

She coiled her arms around his back and pressed her cheek over his heart, the smile always coming easy at hearing the rapid thud and inhaling the familiar woodsy and butterscotch scent. “I love you, Dusty.”

“I love you, sweetheart,” he murmured against her hair. “Are you happy here?”

She gazed up at him, unleashing all the love in her heart to shine from her eyes, her face. “Deliriously. This is home.”

“I want it to be.” He dropped to one knee and took hold of her hands.

She held her breath. Was he about to—

“I want this to be our home. But more than that I want *us* to be home. They say home is where your heart is, and my heart has always belonged to you. So, wherever you decide you’d like to land, I want to be with you. Holding your hand. Walking through life together. Will you marry me, Oakley?”

“Yes.” She tugged him back up to face her. Didn’t realize that tears were sliding down her cheeks until he swiped them away with his thumbs.

“Are those happy tears?” Concern wrinkled his forehead.

“The happiest.” She sniffled even harder when he flipped open the lid to a tiny velvet box, and a diamond solitaire sparkled up at her.

Her hand flew up to cover her gasp. “Oh! It’s stunning!”

He slid the band over her finger, and it fit as if it was made just for her. *He* fit. As if he was made just for her. *Thank You, Lord!*

Their kiss was cut short by applause and the sound of a cork popping. She opened her eyes to find Davy and her husband, and Jett and Lexie and the twins rushing toward them, grins all around.

Yeah. Her beloved had been up to something all right.

She smiled and got swallowed up in hugs and congratulations and talk of wedding gowns and cakes and possible dates.

It wasn’t until everyone said their goodbyes that Dusty scooped up a roll of paper, she still had no idea what it was, and threaded their fingers together. “It’s too dark out here. Come with me.”

She’d go anywhere with him. They landed on the back deck, and with a flick of an app on his phone, the overhead lights came on.

He unrolled the paper on the table.

“What is it?”

“Home. If you like it. If not, we’ll find something else.”

What? She flattened her palms against the table and leaned down to peer at the drawing. Her eyes widened when she realized that it was his home but with an addition about half the size of the original house. Exactly as she’d imagined but never dreamed to broach the topic.

She gasped and whirled to face him, her jaw dangling. A hundred questions whirred through her brain, but she couldn't focus on one. Not with him being so close, with those dark as espresso eyes shining with love and hope and promises, with his butterscotch breath blowing invisible kisses against her lips.

“Your studio, sweetheart. With its own entrance from outside. Parking to accommodate a few cars, but once you decide to expand, it's capable of adding—”

She cupped his jaws with her palms. “It's perfect.”

Just like him. And the same for the Lord's timing. Over the last month, she'd gotten to know Him more, realized how much He loved her and how He'd taken the ugly pieces of her life to create something beautiful.

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Epilogue

WHITE WISTERIA DANGLED from the massive trees on either side of the arch. White boxes flanked each of the three aisles, bursting with flowers of the same color. Thick cushions gave the wooden benches a pop of color and a soft seat for guests. Just off the back deck of the house a tent of see-through gauzy material provided shade from the late afternoon sun for the handful of rustic wooden tables. A simple yet elegant cluster of Baby's Breath and white roses in the midst of lush greenery perched on snowy runners, giving ample space for the white china place settings and gold silverware.

He'd thought it might be overkill, but he was wrong. It was stunning. Awe inspiring. Like waking up to a surprise winter wonderland when the forecast hadn't called for snow.

Dusty watched as the ushers, Oscar and Olivia, his new stepsiblings, sixteen-year-old foster twins that his father and Lexie had adopted on their wedding day, guided the last of the guests to their seats. Then the twins returned to escort Lexie to the front row.

His stepmother looked radiant, and Dusty's father wore a constant grin nowadays. Too bad it took the pair five years to hook up, but Dusty figured that the Lord's timing was perfect. Five years ago wasn't the right time for them. Same for him and Oakley.

The trio sat down. Oscar gave him a thumbs up.

His cue.

Willing his legs to walk and not run, Dusty took his place under the arch and looked out over the small gathering of guests. Neither he nor Oakley wanted a lavish public affair.

Rather, they'd opted for an intimate ceremony with family and friends to celebrate their special day.

His brother-in-law fell into place beside him and gave Dusty an elbow to the side. "You ready for this?"

Ready? To link his life with his high school sweetheart's? The only woman who'd ever captured his heart. He'd waited over a decade for this day. Thankfully Oakley had only made him wait two weeks since their engagement. He'd offered to wait longer, if a mite reluctantly, for her to do whatever it was that brides liked to do, but it appeared as if she was just as anxious as him to start their new life together.

He grinned, his chest leaping with anticipation and excitement, not a single ounce of fear or what ifs bouncing around in his head. Only joy and gratitude that the day had finally arrived. "Oh, yeah. I'm ready."

Kavan laughed. "You've been single for a long time, buddy. Think you can handle married life?"

Just then, the music started, a song that Oakley wrote and recorded specifically for their special day, and Davy started up the aisle in a dress the same striking blue as the tuxes, although even Dusty had to admit that his sister looked a lot better in that strapless getup than they did in their garb.

Kavan's jaw hinged, and his gaze never strayed from his wife. A loopy grin split his face when Davy popped a kiss on his mouth before taking her place on the other side of the preacher.

Dusty chuckled and gave his brother-in-law a return jab to the ribcage. "'Bout the same as you, I'd guess."

But then the recording ended, and Dusty's gaze snapped to the end of the white runner.

The music picked up again, although live this time, coming from one of Oakley's friends perched on a stool off to the side, plucking the strings of a guitar.

Oakley appeared, her hand looped through the crook of his father's arm. His family was hers now, the only family she had, and she claimed them all as blessings. Dusty thought so,

too, and hoped that they would grow their own family along with Davy and Kavan, who, smitten with the twins, had announced their intention to foster kids.

With her arm looped through Jett's, his beloved walked up the aisle toward him, singing a new song, one she hadn't shared with him until today. Now. This moment. The joining of their lives together.

Lyrics of truth, faith, hope, and love. Of coming home. Of singing a new song.

It reminded him of the passage from Psalms. Dusty still hadn't memorized the rest of it, but he would. Even so, he figured the words he remembered fit today and the rest of their lives perfectly. Just like Oakley's song.

Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, praise His name; proclaim His salvation day after day. Declare His glory...

When his beloved finally made it to him, when the last note faded from her lips and the guitar went silent, tears stung his eyes and his chest felt as if it might burst open to expose his heart, overflowing with love. His father kissed her cheek and then joined Lexie and the twins in the front row.

His bride handed off the beautiful bouquet of white roses and greenery to Davy and turned to him, taking his hands, and smiling up at him.

"I love you, Oakley soon-to-be Canderhart." His voice came out hoarse.

"I love you, too, husband." Cupping his jaw with her palms, she thumbed away the tears he hadn't realized tracked down his cheeks with a tender touch and smile.

The preacher cleared his throat, leaned in, and whispered, "Not quite yet, you two lovebirds. You ready to make it official?"

They both nodded and pivoted to face him, drawing chuckles from either side of them and from his family in the front row. He thought he also heard a few snuffles to match his own.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today...”

Lord, thank You for this second chance with Oakley, for giving us a new song. Help us to sing it, to praise You with everything in us, to proclaim Your salvation and to declare Your glory every day for the rest of our lives. Because You're worthy. You are our hearts' song.

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SNEAK PEEK!

A Christmas Reckoning



“THANKS FOR THE heads up, Captain.”

Hudson Tanner glanced down at the business card in his fingers. *Captain, Investigative Services Division, Hope Creek Police Department*. If the upcoming promotion went his way, soon his new cards would read Deputy Police Chief.

He handed it to the receptionist behind the desk at Christmas Inn. “If you see anything or anyone out of the ordinary, please call immediately. Don’t second guess yourself.”

Unlike him. He’d been so close to catching the arsonist targeting small businesses in their city on that last fire. But this promotion was really messing with his head. If only he’d followed through on that hunch instead of sifting through more data, searching for a solid connection between the fires, they might’ve caught the guilty party. But he’d been reluctant to sound the alarm based on a gut feeling. What if his hunch was off base? But it wasn’t. As a result of his indecisiveness, another business went up in flames and the arsonist continued to terrorize Hope Creek.

Maybe that was just confirmation that he shouldn’t get the Deputy Chief’s job.

He barely contained his frustrated growl as a foursome wandered out of the Inn’s Sugar Plum dining room, each holding a cup and finalizing their plans for the evening. The tantalizing scents of eggnog and cloves drifted up his nose, reminding him that he’d skipped lunch.

A holiday tune played softly in the background, competing with the growing chatter from the conversation area as more guests gathered closer to the dinner hour.

Hope Creek was known for celebrating Christmas year-round. If they didn't get a lead on the arsonist, tourists would stop coming here. Why would anyone drive all the way here only to see empty plots with huge piles of charred remains?

And declining tourist numbers signaled possible budget cuts and layoffs. If that was the case, would the department even fill the deputy chief's position? Knowing the current city council, they'd likely vote to freeze all promotions and new hires during their next meeting. And if they followed through on that, who knew what changes would take place within the police department before they opened it up again.

Hudson was quite sure that his brother Dawson, the youngest of the triplets and a volunteer firefighter for the city, would agree with him. They'd both worked every fire together, five of them so far, each one starting around zero three hundred hours. Kason, on the other hand, their middle brother and worship pastor at Hope Creek Community Church, would chide them for being insensitive and remind them that, thankfully, no one had been hurt up to this point. Just buildings that could be replaced.

Hudson huffed out a silent plea. *Forgive me, Lord. Help us to catch this arsonist before someone gets hurt—*

The receptionist's voice interrupted his prayer. "I'll do that. And I'll be sure to pass this news along to the manager."

He nodded, tacking on a smile that probably looked more like a wince, and pivoted. He still had several businesses left to canvas before he could even hope to grab a quick bite on his way back to the station.

Movement by the massive fireplace on the far wall snagged his attention. Half a dozen women were clustered in a circle, hugging, chattering, and giggling as if catching up on a decade of conversations.

Wait! Was that—?

He blinked and gave his head a firm shake before jabbing a thumb and forefinger against the innermost edges of his eyes, hoping to clear the fog from his vision along with his brain.

A woman stood with her back to the giant Christmas tree, the tip nearly skimming the tall ceiling. Hundreds of lights twirled around the branches of the generous fir to dance off her long golden hair. The glow of the cozy fire from the massive stone fireplace combined with the chandelier and the festive ornaments to rim her eyes in a beautiful sapphire and cast her irises in a nearly translucent and captivating shade of jade.

No! It couldn't be Waverly, could it? His high school sweetheart had left for New York City right after graduation, her heart set on bigger and better than a tiny town tucked in the foothills of the Tennessee mountains and a boyfriend whose only aspirations were to join the police department. What would a big-time artist like her be doing back in Hope Creek?

As if! This was just his overactive imagination playing tricks on him. Or was he simply dreaming? He'd been working long days, sometimes not going home at all, existing on lukewarm coffee as he pored over hundreds of pages of notes and reviewed what scant evidence they had collected, hoping to discover a clue to the next target while squeezing in prep for the upcoming chief's assessment and reviving himself with cold showers in the locker room.

He must be half asleep on his feet because he couldn't drag his gaze away from the ladies, following their progress as they headed toward the back. To the heated patio? Or maybe the garden? Always beautiful and decorated for Christmas no matter the season, the tiered waterfall was a popular spot for photos, especially with a fresh coat of snow on the ground like now.

Raking his fingers through his hair, he blew out a breath. Should he follow them? A closer glimpse might set his mind at ease. Maybe then he could sleep tonight.

Ha! With memories of Waverly dancing through his head? Not hardly.

"Captain?" The receptionist's voice commanded his attention.

He swiveled around, disappointment swamping him.
“Yes?”

She waved a phone in the air. “Don’t forget this.”

Was that his phone? He scraped a palm over the heavy stubble on his cheeks. He made it a point of always shoving his phone back in his pocket after taking a call or checking a text for this very reason. He really was losing it.

“Thanks.” He took it from her. When he turned around, the ladies were gone. Now he’d never know for sure if that was Waverly.

So much for getting a good night’s sleep tonight.

* * * *

“Thank you so much for including me in your special day.”
Waverly Parks hugged her longest and dearest friend.

“Are you kidding?” With a scoff Karla pulled back and held Waverly at arm’s length, her expression one of disbelief. “Girlfriend, I’m just so amazed that you agreed to come back to our rinky-dink town. I only asked you to do our hair because I thought that might provide an extra incentive to drag you away from vibrant and exciting New York City. Besides that, you’re the only person who’s ever been able to tame my wild hair.”

Rinky-dink? Vibrant? Exciting? She’d probably used those exact words to Karla at their high school graduation. But now? Fourteen years later?

Rinky-dink looked wonderful. So peaceful and beautiful with the recent snowfall coating the grass in the garden and sparkling like diamonds from the branches. Quiet even with every room occupied and wedding preparations in full swing at the Inn. And the excitement of New York City had dulled a long time ago.

Her art hadn’t taken off like she’d hoped, like her agent had practically guaranteed. The few pieces she’d sold surely hadn’t generated enough to pay the bills. Not with the high cost of living in New York. If not for her bridal hairstyling business, booming by most standards, she couldn’t have

stayed there this long. But with the landlord's recent notice that the rent for her studio apartment was going up another couple hundred dollars a month sitting on her kitchen counter, she only had a few days to decide what to do.

Staying in the three hundred square foot apartment wasn't an option. Not with that huge rent hike. But where would she go? She was already living in the cheapest area of the city in a decrepit, mouse-infested building. Good thing her grandmother wasn't still alive. The woman would be sick with worry about her.

Waverly was just so tired. Tired of working with blissful brides and their demanding mothers every weekend. Tired of juggling the bills, worrying about which one to pay first and which one could wait until the next paycheck. Tired of wondering if she'd made the right choice in leaving Hope Creek and the only man she'd ever loved. Tired of...blaming God.

All that fretting drained her creative spirit. When was the last time she'd felt energized or inspired to work on a new painting?

She glanced around at her surroundings. The gazebo lit with thousands of twinkly lights. The garden awash with a fresh snowfall. The lanterns glowing on the bridge that crossed Jingle Bell Creek. The gentle gurgle of water as it trickled down the waterfall. Everything was so fresh and pure, and an urge to capture it on canvas nearly swept her off her feet.

With a week until the actual wedding, she could squeeze in time to paint here. She'd brought everything with her, hair and art supplies, all stowed in the trunk of her car.

"New York couldn't possibly keep me away from the happiest day of your life." Waverly meant every word.

They'd been best friends since elementary school. After Waverly's parents were killed in a car crash during her freshman year of high school, Karla's family had invited Waverly to stay with them until the court decided her future. Granny Dot offered to take her in, but the court took forever to grant the eighty-year-old woman custody. With all the hospital

stays and stints in a rehab facility and finally Granny Dot's passing in Waverly's senior year, Waverly had spent about as much time living with her grandmother as Karla's family.

Karla's family had been so gracious, but Waverly knew she couldn't depend on them forever. So, when the agent had contacted her after seeing her work in an online school showing, she'd fallen for the man's promises, the lure of life in the big city.

But nothing there had turned out like she'd hoped.

She'd brought everything of value with her to Hope Creek. Maybe because she'd suspected she might not return to New York. Why bother making the long trip back? It wasn't as if the galleries were blowing up her phone or email with invitations to show her paintings. She could just as easily do bridal hairstyles here or in neighboring North Carolina or Virginia and might even make enough money to live in a decent apartment. Although that would probably mean giving up on her dream.

"I hope you're not upset that I chose Olivia to be my maid of honor." Karla tilted her head to study Waverly's reaction.

"Not at all." Although they'd kept in contact all these years, distance and secrets had frayed their tight bond. She'd led Karla to believe that New York was a fabulous place to live. And it was. Just not for her.

Remorse struck her. "I'm so sorry that I haven't been a good friend lately. It's just—"

Karla waved away Waverly's apology. "I get it. You don't have to apologize, girlfriend. Life gets busy, and I'm sure even more so in such a big city." Karla scanned the landscape, her gaze critical and contemplative. "You were right to move away, Wave. I'm sure it was the best thing for your career. Not much happening here in Hope Creek. Oh, except for our arsonist."

Her pulse stuttered. "Arsonist?"

"Yeah. He—or she—has torched five properties so far."

"Ouch."

“Oh, there’s Daniel finally. Excuse me, will you?” Karla took a step then whirled back around. “You are coming to dinner tonight, right?”

“That’s so sweet of you, Karla, but I think I’ll just grab something from the kitchen and go to bed early. It was a long drive, and I still need to unload my things from the car.”

Karla scrunched her cheeks, looking hesitant to let Waverly off the hook. “Are you sure?”

She gave her friend a firm nod and flashed a weak smile. “Absolutely. I’ll catch up with you in the morning.”

“Perfect! Massages tomorrow.” Karla grinned and practically jogged to meet her intended. When she reached Daniel, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. Her fiancé coiled an arm around her back and led them back into the Inn.

Waverly’s smile faded into a heavy sigh. What would it be like to walk through life’s valleys and mountains with that special someone?

She’d had that once. And ruined it.

What was Hudson doing now? Likely her high school sweetheart was happily married with three adorable kids. He would make the perfect husband and father. He’d craved a family so badly, but she’d chosen her career over him.

Look where that got her. Full circle back to Hope Creek. Without a successful career, home, or a family. And her faith? She’d wandered away from that too.

Lord, forgive me for walking away from You. For putting my will above Yours. For putting my art before You. For ignoring You all these years.

The prayer whispered up from the deepest part of her soul. She hadn’t spoken to God in years...since she’d left Hope Creek.

She blew out another sigh and glanced toward the parking lot, fatigue and exhaustion from the long drive and the mixed emotions of being back in Hope Creek weighing heavy on her

legs and her heart. Even though her car was parked in the first row near the reception circle, it seemed miles away.

Just like God.

Two tykes played with a luggage cart in the drive through area. The girl climbed onto the cart, and the boy, who couldn't be older than four, pushed the cart as if he were a racecar driver, weaving from left to right and picking up speed as he raced down the hilly lot. The parents, preoccupied with discussing which items to bring into the Inn, were unaware that their children were dangerously close to crashing. And it wouldn't be pretty.

A car swung into the lane, heading straight toward the kids. Then another car turned into the lot from the opposite direction. Both drivers appeared to be cognizant of each other but not the children.

“Oh, no!” She didn't realize she'd said the words aloud until a uniformed officer twisted to look over his shoulder and quickly assessed the situation.

“Stop!” Waving at both kids and the nearest oncoming car, he took off running toward the children and the runaway cart, but he was a good distance away and even though he ran like the wind, he still had too much ground to make up. Same for the parents. She was closer, and if she cut through the median, she could head them off.

She sprinted toward them, but her legs felt weighted with lead and her brain foggy. She reached them about the same time as the officer, and, like a sweeper, the man reached out both arms and mowed them all onto the snow-covered grass.

The cars slowed down, apparently aware now of the narrowly averted collision. The parents came running toward them, huffing and out of breath as they untangled their giggling kids from the cart. The little girl begged her brother to “do it again” while the parents let the kids hop on the cart again and admonished them for wandering away.

“Wandering away?” The officer's deep voice rumbled with disbelief, the oddly familiar bass tone tickling her ear and

sparking something inside her chest to life. “Don’t they know that those half pints could’ve been crushed by either car? If you hadn’t alerted me—”

“You’re the hero! You saved all of us. If not for you, that car probably would’ve mowed over the kids. I wasn’t fast enough.” Snow seeped through her clothes, and with his arm still pinning her to the ground, every nerve in her body responded to his nearness. Even her nose got in on the action, leaning closer to drag in a lungful of the clean and woody fragrance clinging to his uniform.

With a palm planted against the ground, he heaved himself up and bent over to give her a hand up. His bloodshot eyes rounded, wider than if he’d seen a ghost, and his voice wobbled as much as his hand. “Waverly?”

Hudson Tanner. The man she’d tried for years to forget was standing right here in front of her, looking more handsome and filled out than she remembered, his navy uniform crisp and sharp, the belt around his trim waist holding a weapon and a radio and who knew what else, the badge on one side of his shirt shiny and bright, the nameplate on the other confirming his identity.

Captain Hudson Tanner.

[I want to read more of *A Christmas Reckoning!*](#)

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BONUS PREVIEW!

Summer's Reunion



MANNIX TOMLINSON stood on the beach. Gauzy fabric twisted around the rafters of the gazebo overhead, held in place with flowers and ties. Even so, the material billowed with every whisper of an early summer breeze to wrap around his cream-colored pant legs.

He stifled a groan. When was the last time he'd worn beige dress pants? Huh. Never?

Disentangling himself, he shifted farther away from the pillar, stepping in place until his brown dress shoes found firm footing in the loose sand. Fighting the urge to rip the unfamiliar tie from around his neck, he settled for loosening the knot. Just enough to stop the choking feeling. Still, sweat trickled down the middle of his back.

Next to him, Gramps waited patiently for his beautiful bride to begin the march down the short aisle. Just two months past his seventy-ninth birthday, the old fool was getting married again.

Mannix shook his head, barely restraining an eye roll.

His only living grandparent elbowed him in the gut, grinning like a lovestruck teen. "I'm the luckiest man in the world."

"I'm happy for you, Gramps." And he was.

Joseph Tomlinson Senior deserved to find happiness and someone to share his life. He hadn't asked to be saddled with three strapping grandsons after the tragic accident that stole his son, daughter-in-law and granddaughter, but he'd stepped up to the plate. Now that Mannix and his brothers all had lives of their own, maybe Gramps could finally concentrate on his.

Gramps would debate that. Especially since all three of his grandsons were single.

His gaze skidded to the front row of the small gathering. Trip, his brawny sixteen-year-old nephew, sat scrunched between Mannix's younger brothers. Trace, the middle one and Trip's father, and Gentry, the youngest at thirty-two, but only three years separated all three. Somehow, Gramps had managed to track down their youngest sibling in Southeast Asia—who knew where—and convinced the prodigal to come back home for the wedding.

Small and tight, these guys were all he had now. Well, plus Ellie, Gramps's soon-to-be wife.

Soft music played as a young girl tossed rose petals on the white runner. The breeze tickled his cheeks, and he allowed his eyelids to shutter. If only Gramps had waited until after the wedding to issue reassignments at the company, he wouldn't have missed last night's rehearsal. Wouldn't be dead on his feet now.

Another solid jab to the gut, and his eyelids jerked up. "Sorry. But it's all your fault, you know."

"My fault you can't stay awake for the biggest day of my life?" Gramps scowled at him.

"I was up all night getting up to speed on the vacation rental side for a staff meeting tomorrow." He filled his lungs with mountain air, fresh and crisp with a healthy hint of lake water. "There. All better. Sorry, Gramps."

Finished with her job, the flower girl ran to her mother. The woman, a friend of Ellie's, enveloped the girl in a hug before pulling the child onto her lap.

Sweet kid. He hoped to have a couple someday. Funny how the older he got the more his attitude toward children changed. His attitude in general. Such a shame that he'd wasted all those years letting bitterness rot his soul. If he hadn't been so insistent on not starting a family, maybe then Rowan—

The music shifted, dragging his attention toward the beautiful woman standing at the end of the aisle.

Wait. That wasn't Ellie.

He blinked, blaming his lack of sleep for the hallucination. Jaw hinged, he closed his eyes and gave his head a little shake then slowly lifted his eyelids.

She stood motionless, a sunbeam spotlighting the waves of golden hair and shimmering from her caramel eyes.

Rowan?

He scrubbed a hand over his whiskered cheeks, wishing now he'd taken the time to shave the scruff this morning. But Rowan had always liked his beard.

“Surprised?” Gramps chuckled.

The thick lump finally made its way down his throat, but his legs were on the verge of buckling. “You knew?”

“You would’ve, too, if you’d come to the rehearsal last night.”

Mannix ignored his grandfather’s smug tone and pointed look, too focused on the woman now walking slowly down the aisle straight toward him. His breath banked in his lungs. She was just as breathtakingly beautiful as their wedding day fifteen years ago.

How could he have ever signed the divorce papers and let her walk away?

Love it? [Read it here!](#)

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About the Author



DORA HIERS believes that a person should love what they do or choose to do something else. She's doing exactly what makes her heart sing and considers every day a gift. Besides writing, Dora adores long walks, lazy afternoons in her hammock with a great book, and evening binges of Hallmark movies. Life's too short to be stuck in traffic, to drink bad coffee, or to read books with a sad ending. Dora and her real-life hero, a retired fire chief, call North Carolina home, but with a world full of amazing places to explore, that's only a landing point.

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Books by Dora Hiers

Autumn Hearts in Apple Blossom Flats

[*Autumn's Rescue*](#)

Autumn's Majesty, coming soon

Autumn's Serenade, coming soon

Canderhart Dynasty

[*A Heart's Worth*](#)

[*A Heart's Praise*](#)

[*A Heart's Song*](#)

Tanner Triplets/Love at Christmas Inn

[*A Christmas Reckoning*](#)

[*A Christmas Restoration*](#)

[*A Christmas Reset*](#)

Second Chance Summers

[*Summer's Salvation*](#)

[*Summer's Song*](#)

[*Summer's Strength*](#)

Potter's House Series Three/Reunion Ridge

[*Heart's Secret*](#)

[*Heart's Ransom*](#)

[*Heart's Treasure*](#)

[*Heart's Delight*](#)

Potter's House Series Two

Her Cowboy Forever

Her Christmas Cowboy

Her Covert Cowboy

Tomlinson Brothers

Summer's Reunion

Summer's Redemption

Summer's Return

Merriville Firefighter Heroes

Kissing Santa Nic

Fully Involved

Fully Committed

Fully Surrendered

Love's Time

A Time to Heal

A Time to Build

A Time to Embrace

Marshals with Heart

A Marshal's Secret

A Marshal's Promise

A Marshal's Embrace

Cider Lake

His Valentine Promise

Her Valentine Vet

Flurries of Christmas Hope

Christmas on Mistletoe Mountain

Wishes on Mistletoe Mountain

Kester Ranch Cowboys

Roping the Cowboy

Roping the Marshal

Roping the Daddy

Small Town Summers

Her Small Town Firefighter

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