

Fall in Love

Five Sweet Tales
of Autumn Romance

First Chapters Preview

Captive at Sea (The Mulvaney Sisters: Claire)

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Collection Cover Design by [Heaven's Touch Designs](#), Delia Latham

eBook Edition August 2018



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Captive at Sea



Mary Manners

Chapter 1

CLAIRE MULVANEY BLEW AT WISPS of hair that clung to her forehead as she tossed water onto the stove top. Of all days to set the boxties on fire, and right before she was about to add a generous dollop of wild blueberries to the mix.

The flames spattered and hissed from a large frying pan, then grew like a lurking monster. Panic bubbled up through her chest. “Mrs. Dinwiddie,” she shouted. “I need—”

“A good dose of common sense. That’s what you need.” A voice, low and distinct, suddenly roared through the kitchen. “For goodness sake, Claire, step back from the flames before they bite you.”

Mindless of the growing flickers that heated her face, she whirled to find not Mrs. Dinwiddie, the matronly chef, but her obstinate nephew, Sean Maguire.

Claire’s pulse, already galloping at breakneck speed, ramped up even further. That always seemed to happen in Sean’s presence, annoying her to no end. She swallowed hard, leveling her gaze to meet brooding, autumn-gray eyes framed by a thick swatch of rich russet hair. “I can handle this.”

“Sure you can. Perfectly. I see that.” He took only a moment to survey the situation before whisking her off her feet and setting her away from the combustion that pushed waves of warmth over her skin. “I thought you knew better than to toss water on grease. The flames are feasting.”

Yes, she knew that. She’d filed away that important rule somewhere in the recesses of her brain, but panic had gotten the best of her.

“You’re right,” she admitted, though the words seared her throat.

Sean Maguire had always been a bit of a know-it-all, albeit a handsome and often charming one. But she wasn't charmed now. Not one little bit.

Perspiration drizzled down the nape of her neck to cling to her collar. She'd carefully matched the silk blouse with her favorite pair of navy slacks that morning for the interview she and her sisters were scheduled to do. Now the fabric was speckled with soot.

Why, oh why had she let her mind wander from the task Mrs. Dinwiddie had entrusted to her? All she had to do was stir the potatoes already set to frying and flip the boxties as they turned a rich golden brown. Now the potatoes were in flames and the boxties charred to black discs.

The kitchen smelled like the inside of an industrial-sized ash tray following a week-long billiard tournament.

Ugh!

Sean stepped between her and the stove, shielding her from the heat. "Let me take a crack at this before you hurt yourself and set the entire restaurant ablaze."

"Go ahead, rub it in." Claire's spine stiffened as she pulled herself to her full height—a slight five feet to his rangy six-plus.

"If you'd rather I didn't..."

Smoke billowed up toward the ceiling. Claire shivered despite the heat as gooseflesh coursed up her arms. Her sisters would never forgive her if she allowed a fire to put them out of business.

"I'd rather you do." She froze in place, horrified, as the flames devoured the air. Any moment smoke alarms would screech, and sprinklers spew. The clientele chatting merrily through breakfast would be forced to evacuate the dining room. Mulvaney's Irish Eatery would headline the noonday news—and not in a good way. "Please, help me. Go ahead, work your magic."

"Okay, then." Sean snatched a gallon-sized canister of baking soda from the prep table and sidestepped to dump it over the sizzling pan. A snowy-white blizzard of powder buried the flames, extinguishing them in a swift *whoosh*. He used the pan's tempered glass lid to squelch any stubborn sputters.

Death came quickly.

“There, that ought to do it.” Sean stepped back from the stove and rubbed his hands together, mighty pleased with himself, as smoke curled around his ears. “Crisis averted.”

Claire bit back a sarcastic retort. Wasn’t he, after all, partly to blame for this disaster? Kind of, sort of...in a roundabout way. Because instead of carefully flipping and stirring as Mrs. Dinwiddie had instructed, Claire had been distracted with thoughts of him and the charter fishing boats he owned with his brother Seth.

Strike that. The two had owned the boats together up until six months ago. Since the horrible accident that claimed Seth’s life, those boats belonged to only Sean. And he was bent on keeping them dry-docked for the rest of eternity.

“I still see a crisis.” She gaped at the blackened food peeking from beneath an avalanche of baking soda fluff. “But thank you. That was close. The potatoes for the Irish skillet...they’re ruined. And the boxties...”

“A minor inconvenience. The food can be replaced.” Sean plucked a plump blackberry from a bowl on the counter and then turned to her. His gaze smoldered. “You, not so much. You could have been hurt, Claire.”

“But I wasn’t.” Claire wrinkled her nose at the acrid odor wafting from the scorched pan and prayed it didn’t drift into the dining room to alarm their guests. “Not a single scrape or scald. I’m just a little warm.”

Standing next to Sean, she would have been warm without the fire. He’d had that effect on her since high school, but she’d be darned if she’d let him in on the secret. Because he was mostly insufferable, especially so the past six months since he’d lost Seth. She figured—fingers crossed—if she waited it out long enough the attraction would fizzle.

Or go up in flames like the boxties.

“What in blazes—no pun intended—were you thinking?” He placed one large hand on her shoulder, used the other to scoop damp hair from her forehead and check for burns. Then he repeated himself, as if she was a bit dense and hadn’t comprehended the first time. “You could have been seriously injured—or worse.”

“But I wasn’t. I said I’m fine.”

“Hmm...” The fact that he questioned her sincerity was evidenced in his stormy gaze.

“And, since you asked, I’ll tell you what I was thinking.” Claire tossed her head, hoping to show confidence she didn’t truly feel. “I was mulling over the fact that people are depending on me for the animal shelter fundraiser. I’m supposed to present my ideas to the committee at four o’clock this afternoon and my plans are still in dry dock, like your boats, because you’re stonewalling.”

“So now this is my fault?”

“If the hook snags...”

“Oh. My. Goodness.” The words were short and clipped. He snatched a broom from the closet and swept furiously at baking soda that had dusted the floor. “You’re a fine one, Claire Mulvaney.”

“Well, you asked. I’m not going to lie to you.”

“Honest to a fault, you are. One of the traits I most admire about you.”

“One of the traits? You mean there are others?”

“More than you know.”

She considered asking him to elaborate, but more pressing matters required attention.

Like the fundraiser. Those poor, sweet animals...puppies and kittens and ancient Bertha Sue, the cuddly Boxer mix who desperately needed a forever family with whom to live out her last days. Not a cold, hard cage.

“So you’ll help me?”

“No.”

“But—”

“No, and that’s final.”

“Nothing is final in life except death.”

As soon as the words tumbled out, Claire regretted them. Sean stilled. His face went ashen.

“I’m sorry.” She touched his arm. “Truly. I should have thought before I spoke. I have an awful habit of jamming my foot in my mouth.”

“Uh huh. Not so much one of your admirable traits,” he

muttered. A heartbeat, two passed before he lifted his gaze to hers. He offered a wry smile that caused the dimple at the cleft of his chin to deepen. “Your nose is dusted with baking soda.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.” He used the pad of his thumb to rub it away. “There. Better.”

“So your boats might come out of—”

“Claire, are the boxties ready?” Claire’s younger sister Erin called from the hallway as she rounded the corner. “The food critic from *Southern Restaurants Today* just...” Her voice faltered as she stepped into the kitchen. “...arrived.”

Erin’s mouth opened wide as a double garage door at rush hour. Her lips, outlined in a swatch of strawberry red, offset sleek black hair that played hide and seek with her shoulders.

“I can explain,” Claire insisted.

“You’d better.”

Clinking silverware and muffled voices drifted from the dining room as the sisters faced off like hockey players at the puck drop.

“It was an accident.” Claire’s excuse sounded lame, even to her.

“Of epic proportions.” A hand went to Erin’s hip.

Claire snatched the broom from Sean’s hands. “I’m going to clean things up, make it right.”

“That’s a given.”

“Just give me fifteen minutes—thirty, tops.”

“We don’t have half an hour. We need the food now.” Erin lifted a melted spatula from the incinerated potatoes and frowned. “This is...Just. Too. Much.”

“I was only trying to help while Mrs. Dinwiddie went to fetch more onions. Oh, she’s going to pinch my ears but good for this. I’ve made a mess of things.”

“Hang on a second.” Sean stepped between them. “Don’t worry about Aunt Lorna. I’ll take care of her. But those boxties...” he motioned toward the charred Irish pancakes. “They’re another matter. Such a shame to see delicious food reduced to ashen discs.”

“Just my point.” Claire used a hot pad to protect her hand as she lifted the pan of boxties from the stove and dumped them into the

sink. “Your aunt has been planning, working, since daybreak this morning to prepare for the critic. She won’t be happy I managed to destroy her creations in the course of a few minutes.”

“Neither will Alana,” Erin put in. “And unless you’re planning to take flight on that broom and make a clean escape, I suggest you put the kitchen back to rights, and quick.”

At Alana’s name, Claire’s gaze shifted to the poem her elder sister had copied, framed, and hung on the wall above the prep counter. She had no need to read the words, as she knew them by heart.

Sisters three, and later, four,
Together bound by grace and lore.

The first headstrong and on a dare,
Will meet a man who captures the air.

The second, magnanimous and carefree,
Will give her heart to one who travels the sea.

The third steps up to lend a hand,
And finds a love who tames the land.

The fourth, when invited to join the team,
Will pair with one who haunts her dreams.

Sisters four, each forever bound,
To a man—a love—destined to be found.

She, Alana, and Claire had spent the better part of a year renovating this abandoned, historic building. Located in the heart of the old city’s downtown business district, the structure had been willed to them by Grandfather Finnian. During the demo process they’d discovered the baffling poem, carefully preserved on a scroll of paper in a red velvet bag tucked behind a plastered wall. Clare had no idea from where the poem came or what it meant, but it was so like Grandfather to pull a surprise or two, even after he was gone. He loved to keep people guessing—especially his trio of granddaughters.

Alana, the eldest of the three sisters, felt there was a mystical power to the words. Who could deny it when, after all, she'd found her true love in pilot Donovan O'Reilly following a birthday dare? A dare Claire had elicited.

The first headstrong and on a dare,
Will meet a man who captures the air.

Both Alana and Erin insisted that Claire was destined to meet her true love next. But a man who traveled the sea? Sure, Sean had a fleet of boats but he took them out on Sunset Lake, a far cry from the sea.

And why had Sean even come to mind when she considered the poem? Good thing he couldn't read her thoughts. He'd laugh her right out of her ridiculously high-heeled navy pumps.

Yet, drawn to the intriguing, poetic words as if Grandfather Finnian recited them himself, Claire pictured his face, weathered from years of construction work in the East Tennessee foothills. His gruff, Irish brogue resonated through her mind.

Chase your dreams, granddaughters. Hound them until they come to life, then feed them faithfully. And love...always love.

Claire certainly wasn't feeling the love now, and from the look on her face, neither was Erin. Trouble brewed, about to boil over. Mrs. Dinwiddie would return soon.

Mulvaney's Irish Eatery might belong to Claire and her sisters, but the kitchen was another matter. It counted not one whit whose name was on the deed. The galley and all that went on within it had to pass muster beneath the watchful eye of Lorna Dinwiddie.

"And I've worked tirelessly to book the feature in *Southern Restaurants Today*." Erin's voice, now high-pitched with the tone that signaled an impending melt-down, drew Claire back. "Their star critic, Craig Newcastle, has been woefully backlogged but he's finally here—seated at the best table in our dining room. To have him here is a dream come true. We've been on a waiting list for months. If things fall through, I think I might drown my sorrows in a truckload of salted caramel fudge swirl."

“I’ll join you in the ice cream buffet,” Claire agreed. “We’ve all had our hearts set on a glowing review. Now, the critic’s chomping at the bit for our Irish skillet and boxties and we’ll have to keep him waiting while I clean up this mess and remake the dishes he requested. It’s going to ruin everything.”

“Put your worries away, ladies. Craig happens to be an acquaintance of mine.” Sean stepped by Claire to prop open the back door. A cool autumn breeze rushed in to help dissipate the cloud of smoke, along with the tension. A rich aroma of Irish stew bubbling merrily in the oven found its way through the odor of blackened pans.

“Oh, he is?” Claire snatched at the words that gave hope.

“Yes. We used to...fish together.” Sean hesitated over the word *fish*, subtly reminding all of them that, although fishing was once his life, he hadn’t cast a line in months. “I’ll go smooth things over.”

“A fishing buddy? Even better.” Claire forgot the kitchen chaos for a moment. “Does Craig have a boat...a fleet of boats? Perhaps he’ll help me with the fundraiser, since you’ve declined to be of any assistance whatsoever.”

“No.”

The word came fast, hard. Was that a bite of jealousy in Sean’s voice, a flash of possessiveness in his eyes?

Confusion drew Claire’s brows together in a frown. “Why not?”

“You don’t want his help.”

“But I do. I’m desperate for any sort of help I can get and you just said—”

“Never mind what I said.” Sean’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. “You don’t understand, Claire.”

“You’re right. I don’t. So explain it to me.”

“Later. We can only tackle one crisis at a time. For now, the potatoes and boxties win out over any fundraiser...or any debate concerning it.”

“I agree,” Erin said.

“I may be outnumbered.” Claire spoke over their bickering. “But I dare you both to tell that to the animals crowded together down at the shelter, hoping to avoid the gallows.”

She thought of yesterday's visit to Winding Ridge Animal Shelter where she volunteered several hours each week and her eyes filled. The black lab mix named Buddy had wailed when she'd returned him to his cage following a walk, and Sally Mae—the long-haired matriarch of the felines—cuddled in her lap, reveling in hard-won attention.

And Bertha Sue...desperately seeking a forever family with those soulful gray eyes.

She'd bring every one of the animals home with her, but the lease she'd signed on her quaint little bungalow disallowed pets of any kind, and Mrs. Westbrook refused to budge.

Sean turned away from her misty eyes and focused on using a dustpan to gather the baking soda he'd swept into a small drift. "You're not fighting fair, Claire."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I suppose right now I have bigger fish to fry than kittens starved for attention and rescue dogs begging for homes. Except I don't have any fish. And neither will anyone else without your help. So the shelter's annual fundraiser will be a disappointing flop, no money will flow, and Buddy and Bertha Sue will stay crowded together with all the others, their food rationed—or worse. Maybe you can ignore their sad eyes peering forlornly through the cage bars as you walk by, as well as the thought of their long, lonely nights. But I certainly can't."

"Claire..." He drew a deep, exasperated sigh as he straightened to face her. "Please, give me a break."

"Give Buddy and Sally Mae a break." She pouted, dishing up her best puppy dog stare. "Mr. Friskies and Rosie...Lola Jane, too."

She'd named them all. Every last animal. Because everyone deserved a name, especially the abandoned.

Sean lifted both hands in an act of surrender.

"Let's call a truce for now. I'll distract Craig Newcastle *and* Aunt Lorna long enough for you to clean up this mess and get some fresh food started." He handed her the dust pan. "So get to work. Concentrate."

"It hardly seems fair for us to enjoy a meal when Daisy and Little Bit aren't sure how many meals they have remaining."

“You’ve made your point.” He shot her a look. “And since you’re preparing a fresh batch and sparring with you has caused me to work up an appetite, I’ll take a plate of your delicious boxties—minus the soot, of course.”

About Mary Manners



Where friendships blossom and love blooms...

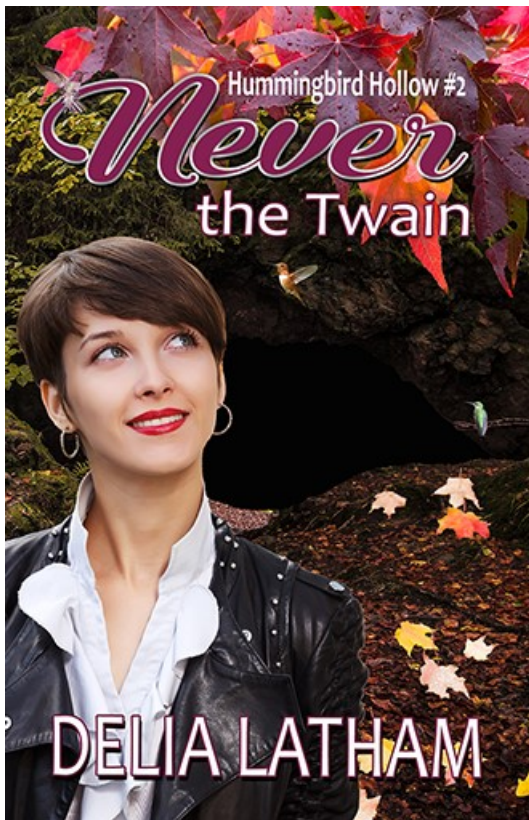
Mary Manners is a country girl at heart who has spent a lifetime sharing her joy of writing. She has two sons, a daughter, and three beautiful grandchildren. She lives in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains of East Tennessee with her husband Tim, their rescue dog Axel, cats Colby and Jax, 13 chickens, and 14 fish.

Mary writes stories full of faith and hope. Her books have earned multiple accolades including two Inspirational Reader's Choice Awards, the Gail Wilson Award of Excellence, the Aspen Gold, the Heart of Excellence, and the National Excellence in Romance Fiction Award.

Mary loves long sunrise runs, Smoky Mountain sunsets, and flavored coffee. She enjoys connecting with reader friends through her website: www.MaryMannersRomance.com.



Never the Twain



Delia Latham

Chapter 1

CASS TOWNSEND STOOD NEXT TO her rental vehicle, unable to move a muscle.

Hummingbird Hollow—where she'd spend the next two weeks—was clearly more than what one could see with the eyes. She'd stepped out of her car maybe three minutes ago, and already, an ever-so-subtle shift had taken place in her heart and soul. Something amazing. A healing. A softening. A loosening of too-tight emotions.

Without a doubt, the beauty of this place went far beyond the lush foliage and beautiful old trees. Most of the latter were currently occupied with changing their attire—shedding the bright, emerald tones of summer and donning the deeper hues of an autumn wardrobe. A surprising number of green leaves still clung to the branches, along with a variety of fall tones, from yellow to orange to that gorgeous shade of purple that manifested itself most beautifully in nature.

A cynical chuckle burst from between her lips. Maybe her parents weren't so far off, and she really did need a break. This kind of fanciful thinking in no way fit her Hollywood persona, which leaned more toward sharp, pointed, even double-edged, in certain circumstances.

She stiffened her back, lifted her chin and strode to the trunk for her luggage. Even if her pushy parents were right, she'd certainly not admit such a thing. Not to them, and not to herself.

They and her thankless therapist friend, Booth Meadows, would never know about her ridiculous reaction to Hummingbird Hollow. The three of them had conducted a sort of needless intervention, in which they'd all but ousted Cass from her office in the business she owned—The Townsend Agency—and shoved her onto the first

plane out of town.

“It’ll be good for you, darling.” Her mother had laid a beautifully manicured hand on Cass’s stiff shoulder. “You need a little peace and quiet. When was the last time you even had a day off? Why, after what you’ve been through, anyone would need a break.”

Cass clenched her jaw. She would *not* talk about Lyn.

She didn’t talk at all, because truth be told, she couldn’t remember her last break from the agency. She didn’t take days off, other than Sundays, which were kind of mandatory, since neither side of her clientele were inclined to be available. Even so, she managed to spend at least one Sunday a month in the office—after Sunday service, of course. The other three she simply worked from home. Some tasks required no input from her clients or the studio executives she wanted to pair them with.

Unable to give her mother a truthful answer that would make her happy, she sat rigid as a stone pillar and refused to look at any of the group of three wannabe rescuers.

“Cassie, honey...” Her eyes stung at the solicitation in her beloved Daddy’s voice, but she blinked back the tears. She would *not* add to her humiliation by crying. “Do this for me, princess. You need a break, and I happen to think Hummingbird Hollow is just the ticket. I had the most amazing breakfast there when we were filming ‘Deep Country.’ The place has some kind of...” He hesitated. “Don’t laugh, but I can only call it magic. During the couple of hours I spent at the bed and breakfast where you’ll be staying, I swear it healed something in my mind. I left feeling like I’d been on a week-long getaway and had slept through half of it. There’s something restful and soothing about the place. I promise you, sweetheart, you’re going to love it.”

That remained to be seen, but she had to admit...Daddy’s comment about healing and magic might’ve been more truth than hyperbole. She’d never admit it to a single soul, but she hoped he’d been dead serious. Knowing such a place existed would be undeniably comforting in a world filled with anything but such wonderful qualities.

Magic might be beyond belief, but healing came from many

sources—all of them originating with God, the Master Healer. Could those sources be at work here in this lovely hollow?

Not that she needed healing. Booth and her parents were wrong about that. They'd be better off to direct their interventions and their prayers elsewhere, for the benefit of someone who really needed help.

Nevertheless, here she was in Hummingbird Hollow.

She lifted her chin, stood frozen for a moment, and then closed the trunk without removing her luggage. For once in her life, she would do something hind side first. Her bags could be dealt with and her reservation claimed *after* she enjoyed a stroll through at least a portion of the fall-colored Eden in which she found herself.

Lodging that also provided convenient parking for his rig hadn't been easy to find—it rarely was.

Ryder Hayes eased his pickup and the horse trailer it hauled into a large clearing to one side of the B&B, just as he'd been directed by a pleasant-voiced woman via cell phone. The twelve-hour drive from his ranch near Bandera, Texas had proven long and tedious, but if things here went as planned, he'd return home with a stunning Arabian horse—a proud addition to the growing stable of equine beauties on his family's dude ranch.

This incredible creature would not be available for guests, who often lacked sensitivity toward his horses—in which case, they were promptly unseated and barred from the stables. He refused to allow even slight mistreatment of his animals. If circumstances allowed him to take the Arabian home, the horse would be his personal mount, untouchable except by himself and his head stableman.

He'd see the animal in the flesh tomorrow, although he didn't doubt the horse was worth every penny of the sizable price his current owner was asking. Ryder had spent an inordinate amount of time gazing at photos of the magnificent creature before setting up this visit and was eager to see the Arabian in person. He'd been so enamored with the photo, he'd come within an inch of buying the animal "sight unseen." But his mother talked him down, in her usual

quiet but profoundly wise manner. After overhearing the conversation between Ryder and his mother, his teenage niece, Mica, had been delighted to show him examples of how something called “Photoshop” could alter the appearance of anyone or anything to make it look ten times better—or worse.

So he’d made the long drive, and here he was in Arkansas.

For now, he was focused on food, a shower and a bed—in that order. His active lifestyle allowed for a bare minimum of down time. The drive here from Hayes-E Daze Ranch had proved far too confining for his admittedly free spirit, and torture on a body unused to so many sedentary hours.

Come to think of it, he needed to move around a little, even before getting something in his stomach. This gorgeous place called out for folks to wander through it, to admire its lush beauty. A walk would do him good.

He approached the old home, not even trying to stop a wry grin at the cutesy, painted sign hanging over the polished oak doors. Inn the Hollow. Clever. Had the current owner given the place its name, or had she inherited it with the property? He passed by the double doors and rounded a corner, headed for the woods behind the house.

A woman owned the place—Toni Littlebird, according to her online listing. Her name hinted at Native American ancestry, and now that he stood on her land, he sensed the rightness of that assumption. This place belonged in the hands of someone tied to its very roots. Someone who would treat it as a living, breathing entity, to be honored, respected, and loved. Never ignored. Never abused. Always appreciated as a treasure, because even on first sight, Ryder knew that’s what it was.

He crossed a garden area that vibrated with color. Pansies lifted their funny faces to the sun along a lengthy flower bed. Chrysanthemums stood straight and majestic behind the smaller blooms.

By the time he stepped into the shadowed forest, he’d recognized bright purple beautyberries, a huge cluster of gorgeous oak leaf hydrangea loaded with red blossoms, pink and white dahlias in large half barrels, orange gerbera daisies that made him think of

his mom...and at least half a dozen species he'd never seen before. He'd keep an eye out for someone with a very green thumb once he got settled inside, so he could compliment them on this unbelievable garden.

Another thing. What was up with the hummingbirds? They flitted and whizzed and buzzed around the various blooms and bushes in droves. He'd never seen anything like it, but it sure 'nuff made a pretty picture.

All of which he appreciated, but as he stepped into the forest, Ryder stopped to lift his face upward and pull in a deep, contented breath. *This* was peace. This alone made the long drive worthwhile.

Careful to stay on the path, which appeared at least somewhat well-traveled, he meandered through the woods, breathing in the sweet peace of nature, breathing out the weariness, frustration and exhaustion of a long day on the road.

Something about nature always calmed his spirit. How did people exist in big, crowded towns? Forced to live within a network of jam-packed freeways, stacked floors of cement parking spaces, neon light, rampant crime and every other nuisance that came along with city life, his heart would shrivel, his spirit wither. He'd die, and be happy to do so, rather than survive under those conditions.

But this...here in this forest...this he could get used to in a heartbeat. These surroundings provided natural therapy, from the inside out. No one who lived in Hummingbird Hollow should ever pay out a dime to a psychiatrist. A walk in these woods could cure whatever ailed a body, mind, or spirit.

“Hey, wait! Stop! Psst!”

Ryder halted. Had he imagined that hissing whisper? A quick glance around revealed not a soul.

“Over here!”

A mass of bushes on the right side of the path shook as if caught in a sudden gust—despite the absolute lack of any kind of breeze. Ryder narrowed his gaze and cocked his head toward the dancing shrubbery.

“Talkin’ plants kinda give me the shivers. Just sayin’...”

“I’m not a plant, you big lunk!” A tiny hand appeared from

within the leaves and branches and beckoned him closer. “Get in here before that thing eats you.”

Ryder’s attempt to keep a straight face failed abysmally. He shook his head and reached in above the flailing hand, parted the rustling bushes and peered inside.

“Well, whaddaya know?” he drawled. “Who’d’a thunk this type of greenery produced cute little sprites?”

A tiny woman with short black hair that hugged her head like a shiny cap glared up from within the shrub. Dove-gray eyes flashed miniscule daggers his way, even though genuine terror shadowed their depths.

“I am not a sprite! And you...well, you’d best get your wannabe cowboy hind side in here with me before that bear comes back and eats us both.”

A bear? Not a chance—not this close to the inn. Still, the sprite was mighty pretty. He’d play along.

He eased into the bush and squatted beside the petite shrub-dweller.

“So you think you saw a bear, huh?” He whispered, since she seemed to think speaking aloud would bring one a-runnin’.

The poison dart she shot with precise aim would’ve downed a lesser man.

“No, genius, I don’t think any such thing. I *know* I saw a bear. A big, black one.”

“Hmmm. Well, I suppose there might be a few black bears in the Ozarks, but seriously, sweetheart, it’d be pretty surprisin’ to find one this close to a place where people move in and out and around ever’ day. Big and scary as they are, bears do tend to avoid humans when they can.”

She laid one hand on his forearm and squeezed hard.

“Ouch! You got a big ol’ grip for such a little wisp of a thing.”

A layer of ice coated her gaze, and her fingers clawed deeper into his skin.

“You listen up, *cowboy*.” Venom spewed from the word like sweat from his Appaloosa, Creature, when the animal gave his big head a mighty shake after a hard ride. “First, I am neither a sprite

nor your sweetheart. My name is Cass. Use it, or don't talk to me at all. Secondly, I'm of sound mind and perfect eyesight. I know what a bear looks like, and I know what I saw, so stop patronizing me, or take yourself and your cowboy boots right back out on the trail. Maybe you're as tough as you think you are. Maybe you can wrangle with a bear and come out on top." She released his arm, but not his gaze. One eyebrow rose up under her wispy bangs. "Or maybe not."

Ryder went still. He'd insulted her, and he sure hadn't meant to. Judging by her clipped and hurried manner of speaking, she wasn't from Arkansas or Texas. A quick glance at her attire—quality fabrics, simple but superior lines, ultra-fashionable—he'd guess she hailed from somewhere in California. He tucked aside his curiosity as to how a fancy Cali girl wound up hiding in a bit of shrubbery in the Ozark Mountains, because however she'd come to be right here, right now, she'd clearly taken offense at his Texas cowhand lingo, which came as natural as breathing to him.

Colloquial habits aside, though, she was right. He'd been condescending, for no better reason than that she wasn't much bigger than a child—smaller than some he'd seen. He was a big man and had been known to tease his younger siblings to tears. But he'd been taught better than to disrespect a lady.

"Cass. I'm Ryder, and I am sincerely sorry, ma'am. You surprised me, hidin' out in these woods and...well, you aren't big as a minute. I got a little carried away with the funnin'. Please forgive me."

She regarded him beneath perfect, wing-shaped eyebrows. Those light eyes of hers bored right into his soul, and he squirmed like a wiggle worm on a fishin' hook. *Easy, lady, there are things in there I'd shore like to keep under wraps, if you don't mind.*

Finally, one corner of her full lips lifted, and Ryder released the breath he hadn't known he held.

"All right then, Ryder. Maybe I'm a little touchy when I'm scared. So if we're past all that, how do you propose we get back to the inn without becoming dinner for a large black bear?"

About Delia Latham



Writing Heaven's touch into earthly tales, **Delia Latham** puts her characters through the fire of earthly trials to bring them out victorious by the hand of God, His heavenly messengers, and good, old-fashioned love. You'll always find a touch of the divine in her tales of sweet romance.

Delia and her husband Johnny live in East Texas, where their pampered Pomeranian, Kona, kindly allows them to share her home. The author enjoys multiple life roles as wife, mother, grandmother, sister and friend, but above all, she loves being a princess daughter to the King of kings. She admits to a lifelong, mostly unbattled Dr. Pepper addiction, and loves hearing from her readers.

Contact this author at any of the following locations:

[Website](#)

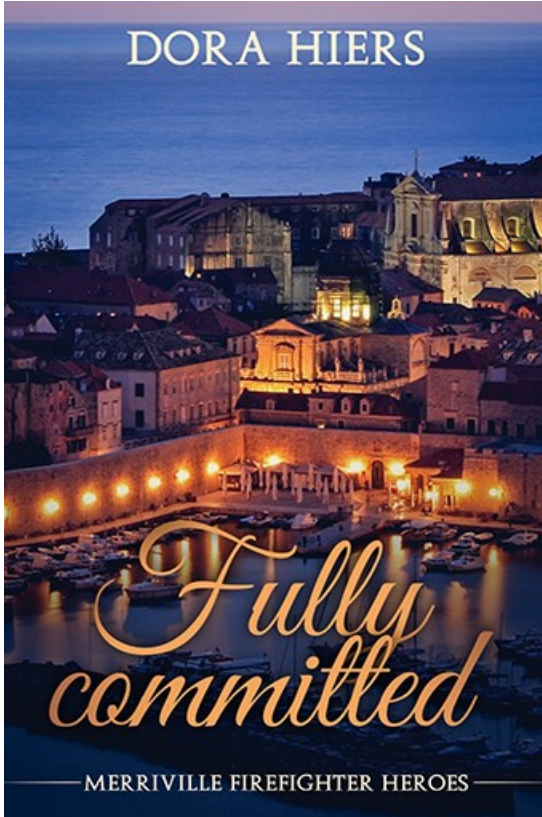
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Fully Committed



Dora Hiers

Chapter 1

IT COULDN'T BE HER.

Firefighter Rand Tenneson blinked and stumbled over the rug at the emergency room entrance. His lungs failed as his throat worked to swallow a heavy lump of...excitement? Shock. Denial. Hope. Chased by a tinge of anger. But he tamped down the emotional cocktail. Because that's what SEALs did.

Ex-SEALs.

He refocused on the target, but his legs refused to move forward—or flee—as the glass doors swooshed closed behind him and Bear.

Could it?

Bryanna?

Ten years changed a person. Not just the outer shell, but also the spirit.

Like him. He'd left Merriville before sunrise the day after high school graduation. Deeply in love, riding the bus out of town on hopes and dreams. He'd returned...well, different.

But not her. She'd grown into a woman far more beautiful than the girl he left behind. Her thick mane of ginger-colored hair was pulled back in a ponytail, smooth and wavy. Still that porcelain, doll-like complexion. Long dark lashes highlighted startlingly clear blue eyes.

Blue eyes that widened then shuttered in a heartbeat. Did she recognize him?

Probably not. He wore his hair much shorter than high school and muscles now popped out of what had once been a scrawny teenage frame. Besides that, she wouldn't expect to see him in a firefighter uniform.

"Wake up." Bear elbowed him.

He grunted and angled to face the group, unable to dredge up his

customary clown grin. “Oh, sorry. Hey, Cammie.”

The social worker acknowledged him with a nod and a smile.

“You look like you just saw a ghost,” Bear teased.

“Feels like it,” Rand shook his head. Maybe pulling a forty-eight hadn’t been such a good idea. Too many calls and not enough sleep. But he hadn’t been able to refuse Montgomery’s request to cover his shift yesterday. Not with the guy’s mother knocking on death’s door.

He massaged the back of his neck and stared at his boots, refusing to give in to the urge to glance toward the receptionist’s desk again. A hallucination. That’s all. Nothing a few hours of uninterrupted sleep wouldn’t cure.

“Thanks, guys, for taking such good care of Jayden. I better go check on him now. I foresee a long night of reports ahead.” Cammie hustled away, but angled over a shoulder at the doorway, her gaze lingering on the captain.

He caught his boss staring back. How long before Captain Keegan Madison realized he was in love with the social worker?

“Hey. What’s wrong with you two tonight?” Bear chided, giving him and Cap a less-than-gentle shove against the shoulders.

If any other man shoved Rand like that, they’d be on the floor. But Bear? He got a pass. These two guys had kept him alive during their SEAL tenure, had his back even now as firefighters. They were brothers. For life. And they deserved the truth.

“I swear that woman over there—” He flicked his head toward the reception area.

A woman with gray hair and black frames perched on her nose sat behind the desk, peering at a computer monitor. Alone. Surprise jolted him.

“She’s gone...” His voice withered and died. Along with that tiny bud of hope that had heightened into a full-grown spruce pine in the space of minutes.

“Your ghost?” Keegan asked.

“Yeah.” He swallowed hard, blinked. Rubbed the grit from the back of his eyeballs. “I’d swear it was Bryanna.” Pressing his fingers to the back of his neck, he blew out an unsteady breath. “Probably just a look-alike with the same unique color of hair. Or maybe I just

need about twelve hours of sleep.”

Saying her name out loud resurrected a kaleidoscope of memories. Dredged up the last email from her.

Dearest Rand,

I hope you're doing well and staying safe. No, make that, alive. He was doing his best. Kissed the engagement ring he hadn't been able to give her yet and said a prayer for that very thing every chance he got.

This waiting every day for word from you is killing me. It was killing her? Seriously, sugar? As if he didn't fire up his laptop the minute he got back from a mission, hoping for a sweet message from her.

I can't do it anymore. I'm so sorry, Rand. What? Can't do what...exactly?

Stay safe. Always remember that I loved you with all my heart. Loved? As in past tense?

Yours always, Bryanna

That's it? She was breaking up with him? A Dear Rand email?

Yeah. He'd memorized every single word, even tried to read between the lines. Scoured his email like a madman after that, scanning through her past communications for any red flags, hoping for another email saying she'd had second thoughts or that it was all a mistake. But the months turned into years, and...nothing.

Bear cleared his throat. “Well, that explains the clown here. What about you, Cap?”

He wasn't offended at Bear calling him a clown. On their volunteer days he dressed the part for the kids here in the hospital. The painted-on smile had become a permanent fixture.

“Me?” Cap asked. “Just tired of seeing defenseless little ones hurt like this.”

Cap referred to the boy used as a punching bag by his mother's latest boyfriend. He'd driven the rescue truck so the medics could work on the kid en route to the emergency room, and Bear and Rand had followed in the engine. “Hey, barring any calls, you guys mind if we stick around to find out if Jayden's going to be all right?”

“Nope. Just waiting for you to suggest it.” Rand folded his arms

over his chest. His gaze anchored on the vacant reception desk, determination tightening every nerve in his body. “I’ll be over there. Waiting for that ghost to come back.”

Head bent, Bryanna studied the notes outside her patient’s room. But the words only blurred, scrambling like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle until they formed the image of her high school sweetheart.

When had he come back to Merriville? And why was he wearing a firefighter uniform?

“Bryanna.”

Only two people ever pronounced her name with an extended “ahh” in the middle. And one of them was dead.

That left...Rand.

So he’d recognized her? She’d tried so hard to be inconspicuous, to disappear at the first opportunity. Apparently, not quickly enough.

His voice sounded different, deeper. Not the warm baritone she remembered.

Her head twitched with the need to see him again. To lose herself in those soulful honey-kissed eyes. The same eyes as—

No!

She could not—would not—let him find out!

She filled her lungs. Took her time looking up, dread spiraling up and down her spine. Until her gaze latched on to a pair of blue eyes framed by glasses.

Not him!

Relief wilted her shoulders, the exhale almost buckling her legs. “Yes?”

“It was you. Rand was right.”

“Rand?” Her voice scratched out the name.

“The guy you ditched while he was away serving our country, fighting for his very life. One of my best friends.”

Eyes burning with salty tears she refused to shed, she squinted. Her hand covered her mouth and she swallowed back the surging vomit. Rand had been her best friend, too. Much more than that. And it wasn’t as if she’d *wanted* to break up that way. She hadn’t wanted

to break up at all.

“Stay away from him.” The man shook his head, his mouth set in a rigid line. “He’s not over you—though I cannot imagine why after your cold, heartless goodbye email. I don’t want to see him hurt again. Especially not by a woman who didn’t have the decency to break up with him face to face.”

He turned to leave, but she stopped him.

She held his glare, released her grip on his forearm. “I didn’t mean to hurt him.” Hurt him? She’d loved him with every fiber of her being. Still did. Even Kramer knew it when he’d proposed. But she’d grown to love Kramer, too. He’d been good to her. Too good.

The man’s jaw dropped. He looked at her as if she’d just landed from another planet. “Seriously?”

Didn’t he realize that the truth might’ve gotten Rand killed? *Hurt* was infinitely better than the alternative. And she’d made the best choice for—

“Lady, I don’t think I appreciate your definition of hurt. So, like I said. Stay away from him.”

Seeing Rand again had unearthed powerful emotions best left buried, and this conversation churned her stomach. Waves of nausea swelled. Her limp legs wobbled, and the dam of tears building up behind her eyes threatened to break loose. How could she possibly finish out her shift? But asking for time off was not an option. Not after only three days. She needed this job, had waited years for an open position in Cherrydale Children’s Hospital.

She’d just have to gut it out.

Her temple pulsated as if keeping time with a sledge hammer. She pressed fingertips to the side of her head and tried to focus on the nameplate on his chest. “No worries there, uh...”

“Captain. *Captain* Madison.” Rand’s friend tugged at his jacket, revealing the stripes on his fire uniform. “Like I said—”

“Yeah. I got it the first time.” A single tear tracked down her hot cheek. She gave it an angry swipe, knowing the others weren’t far behind. “Trust me, *Captain* Madison, I have no plans to reconnect with Rand in any way.”

Not tonight. Not tomorrow. Not ever!

She'd obliterated that option a decade ago. When life had gotten dark and scary, and Rand wasn't around to hold her, to lean in and reassure her that everything would be all right. How could he, when he'd chosen the SEALs for a career? When would he *ever* be there?

Kramer had found her that night. Camped out in front of a bonfire, years of *Blushing Bride* magazines going up in smoke, her expensive camera melting into a heap of ashes. The night she'd burned her career aspirations and her dreams of becoming Mrs. Rand Tenneson.

Kramer had been the one to wrap an arm around her and hold her tightly against his chest. He'd been the one to slide a ring on her finger and make her his wife, to give her daughter his name.

He'd promised to be there for her, always and forever. But even Kramer hadn't been able to keep his promise. At least he'd tried.

Yeah. She had no intention of seeking out her old flame. Especially not after how her heart betrayed her, stuttering and sputtering when Rand walked through that emergency room door, like the first set of fireworks just warming up for a show.

She dropped the chart in the slot. It clunked at the bottom, the sound hollow and empty.

Like men and their promises. Hollow and empty.

She hustled away, only stealing a glance back at the far end of the corridor.

The hall was clear. Now to erase the image of the too-handsome firefighter.

About Dora Hiers



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. When she takes a break from cranking out [heart racing, God-gracing romances](#), Dora adores reading, chowing down on her hubby's lip-smacking, home-smoked ribs, and sipping coffee on a mountain cabin deck. 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 make their home in North Carolina, but with a world full of amazing places to explore, that's only a landing point.

Connect with Dora through her [website](#)

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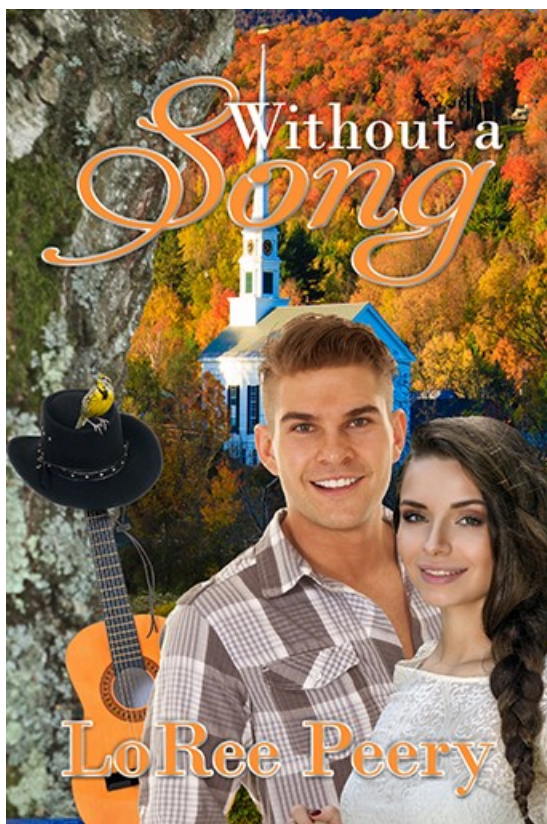
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Keep up with Dora's NEW RELEASES by clicking the gold "[Follow](#)" button under Dora's Amazon photo.

Dora Hiers also writes stories minus a distinct faith element but still sprinkled with hope and grace and second chances using her pen name, [Tori Kayson](#). Clean and wholesome romance. No sex scenes, no cursing, no need to hide the books from your kids or grandkiddos. But definitely a tad more heat than most Christian books. Check out *Sweet Romance that Sizzles* by [Tori Kayson](#).



Without a Song



Lo Ree Peery

Chapter 1

RONI HADN'T ATTENDED A CHURCH service since Jim's funeral six months earlier. She wiggled, crossed and uncrossed her ankles. Young men weren't supposed to die and leave women alone to raise three-year-old daughters. With Ivy in Sunday preschool, Roni studied the church she'd attended as a girl.

She raised her head and took in the stained glass. The picture of Jesus with his arm enfolding a lamb drew a frown rather than calm her heart. She closed her eyes. *You should smile inside. Jim rests in the arms of Jesus now.* Roni opened her eyes. Gilded rays of sunlight graced the Lord's head with a majestic aura. Her soul softened.

Caring people made her uncomfortable because they didn't know what to say about her loss other than how sorry they were, or what a shame, or other useless words. None of it mattered. She missed Jim every time she looked into the eyes her daughter had inherited from her father.

Nights were the worst.

Pastor Pullman took the stage. His greeting yanked her out of her thoughts. "Joy to all of God's people, this good morning. What a glorious day for us to meet in this place. We have a special treat today. Our own song-writing country boy, Dawson Bennett, is recently home from Nashville, and here with us. Please welcome him. Dawson will sing one of his own songs to begin our worship."

Dressed in a lavender shirt with pearl buttons, dark denim jeans and cowboy boots, long-haired Dawson leaped over two steps to stand at the mic positioned in front of a stool. "Thank you. I feel as though I should say y'all, but you'd laugh at me."

Chitters and chuckles spread through the congregation.

Roni remained serious. She'd dated Wayne Bennett, Dawson's older brother, in high school. Pleasant memories, except she'd always wondered about the boys' home life without a mother.

Dawson balanced on the stool, lowered the mic stand and positioned his guitar on one leg. “Have you ever considered how the songs might have sounded, the ones mentioned at various Psalm headings? I thumbed through my Bible one day looking for inspiration. At the beginning of Psalm 56, it reads, ‘To the tune of *A Dove on Distant Oak Trees*.’ Are you as curious as me about that tune? It was no doubt played on a lyre or a harp with twice the strings.”

Roni gave herself an inner slap. How long had it been since she turned to her favorite book of the Bible, the Psalms? Had she ever in her life paid attention to the subtitles?

“A dove on oaks made me think of home. The coo of a dove is pleasant, but the trill of a meadowlark from a distant fencepost takes me right to the surrounding grasslands of my youth.”

He scanned the congregation, passed Roni, and came back to her with a smile and narrowing of the eyebrows. Did he recognize her?

She waited uncountable heartbeats as they made eye contact.

Finally, he looked beyond her as his gaze finished roaming the room.

“The landscape of this place in northeast Nebraska is my home on earth. But I look ahead to my eternal home in heaven.” He strummed a chord and his focus turned inward. “I titled this one ‘Call of the Meadowlark.’”

Dawson’s melodious voice raised the hairs on Roni’s arms in reaction to his low register. The longing in his lyrics reached her soul. His phrases accented wait, trust, and hope. Edgy and smooth at the same time, his musical story evolved.

The last chord vibrated in the silence.

Delayed clapping erupted.

Pastor Pullman shook Dawson’s free hand, his other hand encircling the younger man’s upper arm. “Thank you. You’ve blessed us.” Pastor turned his attention to those in the pews. “It should no longer amaze me, but it still does, the way the Holy Spirit reaches more than one person at a time with the same ideas. Dawson’s song is a perfect segue to the message I prepared this morning on trust. But first, the choir will lead us into our first song

of worship.”

Roni choked up and could sing few words of “Heaven is My Home.” She braced her hands on the back of the pew in front and listened. At the end of each refrain, Dawson’s pure baritone rang out from two rows in front of her.

She swung her braid over her shoulder as the congregation took their seats, closed out the elder’s announcements, and stirred only when a couple from the choir loft slid past her to take their seats.

“As I mentioned earlier, I want to focus this morning on the word ‘trust.’ Depending on the version you prefer, the Bible refers to trust over and over.” Pastor Pullman paused. “According to my internet browser, trust is mentioned in the Bible one hundred twenty-seven times.”

Roni slid her gaze to Dawson where he sat slanted in the pew ahead and to her right. He brought up one knee, smoothed a lock of light-brown, blondish-tinted hair behind his ear, and shot a glance back at her.

His slow smile and deep brown eyes said he knew exactly who she was.

She nodded and turned back to the sermon.

“We all have trials and tribulations. We all have a tendency to wonder and worry about the uncertainty of tomorrow.” Pastor waved a hand to the stained glass on either side of the room. “Take a look at these pictures in colored glass. Peer into the eyes of our Lord. Accept His outstretched arms. Rest in Him. Trust Him with whatever weighs on your heart. Please open your Bibles to the middle. Find the Psalms.”

Pages turned. The riffling sound drew a comforting response within her heart.

“You should be used to this by now, but stick something in the Psalms to save that spot and go further back to Second Samuel. Find chapter twenty-two, verse three. ‘My God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation. He is my stronghold, my refuge and my savior.’” Pastor looked out over his flock. “I want you to read this again, every day this week. How can we not trust our great Savior who promises that we have refuge in

Him?”

Roni turned to every verse Pastor asked them to find in Psalms. Psalm 7:1, *LORD my God, I take refuge in you; save and deliver me from all who pursue me.* Psalm 9:10, *Those who know your name trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you.* Psalm 16:1, *Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge.*

Through the remainder of the service, her hurting heart cried out its pain. Jim had always held her hand in church. He'd balance the Bible on his leg while she turned the pages with her free hand.

The hole in her heart gaped wide open. *Forgive me. I do trust You, Jesus. It's so hard at times. Be patient with me. Show me the way to trust You with my future as I face it without my husband.*

About LoRee Peery



Christian romance author **LOREE PEERY** writes to feel alive, as a way of contributing, and to pass forward the hope of rescue from sin. She writes of redeeming grace with a sense of place. LoRee clings to I John 5:4 and prays her family sees that faith. She has authored novellas and novels published by Pelican Book Group. Her desire for readers, the same as for her characters, is to discover where they fit in this life journey to best work out the Lord's life plan. She is who she is by the grace of God: Christian, country girl, wife, mother, grandmother, sister, friend, and author. She's been a reader since before kindergarten.

A lifetime challenge came to fruition through the publication of [TOUCHES of TIME](#) a multi-genre story based on her father's unsolved homicide. LoRee writes fiction that hopefully appeals to adult readers who enjoy stories written from a Christian perspective, focusing on the romance. These include novels and novellas for women and men in the Contemporary, Romance, Historical, Fantasy (time travel), and Mystery/Suspense categories.

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Autumn Loves



Tanya Stowe

Chapter 1

RYLIE THORNTON TOOK A DEEP, deep breath and inhaled the scent of her pumpkin latte. She'd let it cool while she finished icing the pumpkin bread in the back of the store. Now her drink would be just right. She eased back into the old-fashioned wooden chair and took her first sip. The sweet, creamy flavor flowed over her tongue.

Perfect. She hadn't lost her touch for creating the best specialty coffees in Columbia, California.

Smiling, she stared out the front window, enjoying this moment of quiet. It had been a busy day in the Thornton Country Kitchen. In fact, it had been a busy summer. Smack dab in the middle of old-town Columbia, the Thornton Family Store was a popular gathering place for the locals as well as tourists. Visitors anxious to see living history embodied in one of the few surviving boomtowns of the California gold rush flocked to the town year after year and stopped to sample fresh fruits and specialties from the Thornton family farms. Even now, as the family made the switch from summer strawberries, peaches and vegetables to fall apples and pumpkins, the flow of traffic into the store had not let up.

Rylie breathed a prayer of gratitude. Being busy helped her not to remember...to not think about what she'd lost. Two years without Jason. She closed her eyes.

After she lost her husband in a car accident, she hadn't wanted to live. If only she could have crawled into that hole with him...but she couldn't. She had to live for her three sons, Jason's gift to her. Her boys and this store kept her going. Since the day she and Jason had married their plan had been to take the family store on Columbia's streets and turn it into a specialty shop.

For years the family had sold fresh produce and home-canned goods from their farm in a simple building on the boardwalk. But it

was Jason and Rylie who took over the store, purchased the antique display cases and filled them with Rylie's baked goods.

She smiled, remembering how when they were first married they practically slept in the store, stripping and refinishing the wood floors, working into the wee hours of the morning when there were no customers. Jordan, their oldest son, had been born the week Rylie's commercial-size oven arrived.

A year later, Rylie found replicas of old-fashioned wood tables and chairs and they rented the store next door so they could expand. Now they'd have places for their customers to sit and enjoy their tasty treats. Jason's dad had worried about the expense so Jason came up with the idea to keep the store open all year long to provide seasonal goodies. He added an espresso machine to their soft serve machine and Rylie became a barista...one of the best in the area. She practiced her skills at home awaiting the birth of their second son Jeremy.

Jason's brothers worried about how much of their produce went to the store instead of to retailers where they made the bulk of their money. So Jason, being the brilliant man he was, thought of a new idea. He and Rylie started the pumpkin patch. The new undertaking provided produce for all of their winter recipes. In addition, Jason created a maze out of hay bales complete with wagon rides through the farm to show the growing process. Every year local schools made a field trip out to the Thornton Pumpkin Patch to learn about farming. Jason added a baking contest and live bands and The Patch soon became a county event, drawing visitors to the area long after the normal tourist season ended.

Rylie missed the first grand opening of The Patch because she was busy delivering their youngest son Jude. As they grew all three boys helped in the store. Staying with their mother they learned about people. From their father, they learned a deep, abiding affection for the land. The boys worked side by side plowing and planting with Jason...until a patch of black ice and a car accident took their dad from them...and the light from Rylie's life.

Several large, burnt-orange maple leaves skittered across the front windows. Golden cottonwood leaves trailed behind them.

Rylie sighed. She loved autumn but it brought bittersweet memories along with the good ones.

Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. The scripture from Mathew 5:4 had been her armor against despair...and it was true. She had been comforted by her sons, supported by Jason's parents and brothers and their families...and she had the store and her work. She was determined to keep Jason's brilliant work and legacy from fading. All of that had kept her grounded, willing to move forward. But lately she'd begun to wonder if she wasn't missing something...some elemental part of herself. A spark...a light. She couldn't remember the girl she'd been before Jason. He made the world brighter, bigger and somehow she felt less, smaller now that he was gone.

She'd turned thirty-two her last birthday. Did every woman heading into middle age feel this way? She certainly felt old. Tired and worn. Torn down by grief. She did everything she could to combat it. But still...why couldn't she remember who she used to be? What was it about her that made a man like Jason fall in love with her in the first place?

A noise at the back door caught her attention. She took a deep breath and pulled in all of her thoughts and loose feelings, preparing to meet the boys. Her best friend and employee, Ruth Bellario, had picked them up from school so Rylie could take this little break.

Ruthie was eight years older than Rylie. Her friend's high school-aged daughter was long past the need to be picked up, so Ruthie enjoyed grabbing the boys. She said it brought back good memories. Rylie was thankful for the help. Her boys, at eleven, nine and eight, were rambunctious these days...sometimes more than she could handle. They needed their father. She sucked in air, forcing that thought to the back of her mind.

Jude her youngest came barreling into the dining room.

"Mommy...mom." He quickly corrected himself and glanced back to make sure his older brothers hadn't heard his slip-up. Mommy was just fine with Rylie, but the older boys would tease Jude mercilessly if they heard what they called his "baby talk."

Did they have to make him grow up so fast? Couldn't she enjoy

him just a little longer?

Forcing those bittersweet thoughts away, she grabbed his sweaty, jacket-clad body and gave him a hug, backpack and all. He leaned into her for a bare moment before he pushed away. “Jordy wants to know if we can have a piece of pumpkin bread.”

She pushed the black curly hair—just like his dad’s—off his forehead. “Tell Jordan if he has a question he needs to ask me himself.” She touched her youngest son’s nose. “You are not his messenger boy.”

“OK, but can we?”

“Of course. I made a pan just for us.”

“With pumpkin frosting?”

“What do you think?”

Jude grinned and ran back to the kitchen, shouting, “She said yes.”

Rylie smiled and raised her voice. “Grab a milk and bring your snack in here so we can talk. Ruthie, can I fix you a latte?”

Her friend poked her head around the corner. “Bless you! I’ll be there as soon as I make sure these mongrels wash their hands.”

Smiling, Rylie prepared her famous drink. By the time she’d finished her family had gathered at the small table. As she settled down next to her best friend and her healthy sons, she chastised herself for the gloomy earlier thoughts.

Count your blessings, foolish woman.

More maple leaves blew across the front window. Jude jerked to his feet and almost dropped his slice of pumpkin bread. “I want some of those for a class project.”

Rylie grabbed his arm. “Leaves are not in short supply out there. I think you have time to finish eating before you go chasing them.”

“I like the gold ones better anyway.” Jeremy, the middle brother, had the same dark curly hair and brown eyes...and didn’t miss many opportunities to put his younger brother in his place.

“It’s my project. I’ll use the leaves I want.” Jude’s words were almost indecipherable around the pumpkin bread in his mouth.

Before she could caution him to not talk with his mouth full, Jordan rolled his eyes. “Don’t be dorks. Use both kinds of leaves.

Teachers like it when you do more.”

Rylie exchanged a quick glance and a smile with Ruthie. Jordan was filling his new status as a junior high student to the fullest...and didn't miss a chance to remind his brothers. She held her breath, expecting more arguments when he said, “I'll help you pick out some leaves.”

“Cool. Thanks.”

“I'll help, too.” The last thing Jeremy wanted was to be left out. And just like that any arguments or disagreements were forgotten. Rylie relaxed into her seat. No wonder she had trouble keeping up. Their moods were like lightening...and they said girls were more emotional. Whoever said that must not have had boys!

She sipped her latte and hid her bemusement. “Mmmm...this sure tastes good.”

“Course.” Jeremy grinned. “You love everything pumpkin.”

“She loves everything autumn,” Jordan corrected.

“Yeah.” Jude nodded. “Tell us your Autumn Loves, Momm...”

He almost slipped again and Rylie spoke quickly to cover up his error. She started the game they'd played since they were little.

“There are too many things I love about autumn. So many I can't name them.”

Jude grinned. “Start with us.”

Somehow she and Jason had managed it so that all of their children were born in the fall. Truly not planned but it worked out that way. “Yep. I could start with my little Autumn Loves.”

Jordan's eyebrows raised, and she corrected herself. “My ‘not so little anymore’ Autumn Loves.”

Rolling his eyes, the middle-schooler shoved the last bite of pumpkin bread into his mouth. “You love pumpkin bread.”

“Pumpkin lattes,” Ruthie piped in, holding up her mug as she joined the game.

“Pumpkin pies.” Jeremy punched the air with his fist.

“Hay rides through the pumpkin patch,” Jordan said.

“Corn stalks and hay bales.”

“Pretty autumn leaves,” Jude said with a grin.

“A break from the summer heat with crisp autumn air.” Ruthie

was really getting into the game by adding her own favorite autumn love.

Rylie smiled and lifted her mug for another sip. Just then a man walked by the large shop window and she halted. Light blue dress shirt, unbuttoned at the neck with the sleeves rolled up. Black slacks and black frame glasses gripped in his hand. Dark hair with a touch of gray at the temples. Chiseled features and a slight roman nose. Strong lips and a close-shaved beard and mustache. So handsome he looked like he should be on the pages of a magazine, not walking down the uneven boardwalk of Columbia.

He stopped and pulled open the door to her store. Rylie's heart did a stutter jump.

"Oh, my goodness!" Ruthie leapt to her feet. "Micah! You're early. I didn't expect you until this evening." She hurried across the room and threw her arms around the man.

Micah—Ruthie's brother—the world-famous heart surgeon who never got a break from his practice in San Jose. The one who was visiting his sister for the first time in five years. No wonder he didn't look like he belonged in Columbia...he didn't. He was too high powered and way too handsome for Rylie's little town.

"I ran into a problem at my office..." He frowned. A deep furrow creased the place between his brows and brought an obvious sad memory to mind. "An unexpected cancellation..."

Rylie got the feeling there was a lot more involved with that cancellation than Micah was saying. But he seemed to push the thought away and grasped his sister's hands. "I couldn't wait to get away so I just left and...here I am."

Ruthie hugged him again. "I'm so glad. Let me introduce you to Rylie and her boys."

Her best friend turned to make the introductions. Micah Haden fixed his oh-so-gorgeous, dark-eyed, brooding gaze on Rylie. Her stomach dropped and the flutter of a thousand butterflies settled in the spot where it used to be.

About Tanya Stowe



Tanya Stowe is an author of Christian Fiction with an unexpected edge. She fills her stories with the unusual...mysteries and exotic adventures, even a murder or two. No matter where Tanya takes you...on a trip to foreign lands or a suspenseful journey filled with danger...be prepared for the extraordinary.

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