

CROSSING ~ values ~

Carrie Daws



Crossing Values

by
Carrie Daws



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Crossing Values

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And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Ephesians 3:17b–21

Chapter 1

CHARMING TOWN, AMBER GRIFFIN THOUGHT as she kicked a plod of snow and walked past a sign welcoming her to Crossing, Oregon, population 725. Many homes featured broad porches, picket fences, and snowmen of various sizes. As she considered snatching a carrot nose for breakfast, she thought, This is the kind of town where everyone knows everyone and you expect Sheriff Taylor to stroll down Main Street.

Stepping over an abandoned mitten, she paused to watch two girls playing with dolls on the other side of a picture window. Her eyes lingered on the hearth and the fire burning in it. "If only people were as reliable in person as they are on TV," she muttered.

As homes gave way to storefronts, Amber came upon a park that seemed to be the town's center. She walked to the nearest bench, brushed snow off the seat, and eased her frigid muscles onto it. She stomped her feet, her toes aching in response. At least I know they're not frostbitten.

With no good options the night before, Amber had forced her way into a dilapidated cabin a few miles outside of town. The thin mattress and worn quilt she'd found made sleep difficult in the plummeting temperatures, but the walls had kept the snow off of her. She'd slept in worse places.

An old Ford F150 rumbled down the street, blowing its horn at two boys practicing wrap-arounds with their hockey sticks. The boys waved in response just before the truck stopped at the hardware store. As a gray-haired man got out of the truck, Amber noticed a small yellow cross on the tailgate.

Next to the hardware store was a Christmas tree lot with a large sign promising to have trees ready by November 28th. Is that next Friday or Saturday? Amber wondered, trying to think back to when she last knew the date.

Across the street she could see a barber shop, a diner advertising lunch specials, and a two-story lawyer's office with a couple of jeeps parked in front. A woman stepped out of the law office and Amber watched her follow the sidewalk around the square to enter the General Store. Now what kind of legal troubles could that Barbie doll have?

An ice cream shop and the local newspaper sat quietly next to the General Store. Quite a variety in this little area. Maybe someone will let me stock shelves.

Amber forced herself to get up off the bench and cross the street to Micah's Hardware. Rock salt crunched under her shoes as she mounted the steps of the blue storefront. She stepped inside, taking a moment to stomp her feet on the rough welcome mat. As warm air enveloped her, she noticed walls covered in tools. Aisles lined the middle of the old wood floor, all angled to guide people to the front counter. She suddenly realized how quiet the store was and looked to see two men leaning on the counter, staring at her.

"Can I help you?" The man behind the counter straightened as he spoke. His blue jean overalls hung limply around his thin frame, and his light blue shirt echoed the icy color of his eyes.

Amber swallowed hard, balling her fists to help her summon the remnant of courage

left in her. "I'm wondering if you need any help around the store."

"It's a bit slow this time of year. Can't say I really need much help." His eyes narrowed slightly.

Amber nibbled on her bottom lip. Her skin was beginning to prickle in the warm air and her muscles relax. She pushed herself to ask, "Do you know of anyone in town that may be hiring? Just for a few weeks," she quickly added. "I'm not looking for anything permanent."

"If you mean to stay out the winter, I could use some help."

Amber tore her eyes from the tight line of the first man's face to look at the second man. A good seven or eight inches taller than her slight five-foot, two-inch frame, he had the look of working outdoors, with his jeans, work boots, and weathered face, despite a roundness to his midsection. About the same age as the first man, he resembled an older John Walton from the popular television show. Almost trustworthy, she thought.

"I could probably hang around for three or four months, depending on the job."

"My wife and I own a small loggin' business just outside of town," the man continued. "I'd like her to have some company 'round the office while the rest of us are busy elsewhere. Truth be told, she ain't the best at keepin' up with the paperwork, and you'd be takin' a load off my shoulders if you could help with that."

"How far is that from here?" An office job would certainly be better than that last dishwashing job!

"Oh, 'bout ten miles," he said. "Job includes room and board if that's what you're wonderin'. You can stay in our extra room and eat all your meals with us. Your evenin's and weekends would be yours to do with what you want."

Amber hesitated. This sounded too good to be true, and in her experience that only brought trouble.

"You could always try it out for a few days. If it ain't to your likin', then I'll bring you right back here."

Amber shifted her weight from one foot to the other. It's only for a few weeks, and I can leave if it's not what he says. "Okay. I'll give it a try."

"Good. Name's Frank Yager and my truck's parked right out front."

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Frank turned his old Ford into a snow-covered driveway and Amber stared in disbelief. The worn-out truck with the faded paint and squeaky bench seat they were riding on hadn't prepared her for this two-story log cabin.

It looks like a magazine cover! "That's your house?"

"Yeah. Didn't seem like so much when all the kids were little. Seems too big now. Too quiet, I s'pose."

Red Ace Potentilla bushes covered the landscaping around the deck that extended the full length of the house. Smoke curled out of the chimney near the back of the house, casting a slight haze on darkening skies. Noble firs towered over the home's back corners,

and an Oregon maple stood bare of leaves in the front yard.

Frank drove into the middle bay of a three-car garage. Amber stepped out of the truck, chilly air hitting her as she noticed a lavish Grand Cherokee beside her and a black Camry behind Frank. She glanced out the open garage door and looked warily at the snow.

A warm bed is worth giving this man and his job a try, she reminded herself.

Frank motioned Amber forward and reached to take her faded backpack from her. "How 'bout we get you settled in? I'll get you introduced to my wife, Faye, and Peter if he's inside. He's our younger son."

Amber nodded, beginning to move forward, and then halted just past the front of the truck. A medium-sized Australian Shepherd barred her pathway. It growled then barked a warning. Amber didn't move. Not again!

"Sassy! Get on with ya now!" Frank came up to Amber's side. Amber remained frozen in place.

A door opened behind the dog. "Dad?"

"Peter, get Sassy for us, will ya?"

Peter bent down to grab the dog's collar, talking gently into its dark brown ear. The dog remained watchful but obediently sat upon Peter's command.

"Sorry 'bout that, Amber. Let's get you properly introduced and then Sassy'll let you be. She loves people but is a bit careful 'round strangers."

Amber barely nodded, her eyes fixed on the dog. Running doesn't do any good. She'll catch me.

"This is our son, Peter Yager." Frank motioned to her, her backpack dangling from his hand. "Amber's gonna be stayin' with us for a bit, helpin' your mom out at the office."

Peter commanded the dog to stay then stood to offer his hand to Amber. "It's nice to meet you." Amber gingerly took his hand for a quick shake. Just an inch or two taller than his father, Peter looked to be in his late twenties. His jeans and tan sweater with a white T-shirt peeking out of the top didn't show any hint of a potbelly like Frank's. But still they were clearly related, sharing the same straight nose, angular jaw, and easy grin.

"As soon as Sassy knows you're welcome here, she'll leave you alone," said Peter.

Again Amber nodded, darting a look at him then refocusing on the dog.

Frank led the way up two steps into a mudroom. Amber watched Sassy bound past him and jump through a dog door into the house before she followed Frank. Peter closed the garage behind them before asking, "May I take your coat, Amber?"

She eyed him carefully before silently removing her coat and handing it to him. He hung it on a post next to several down-filled winter coats and wool-lined hats. Frank sat down on one of two long benches lining the room and began to untie his shoes.

"Faye likes for us to take our outside shoes off before we go inside. I try to 'bide her wishes. She's got more time to make those pies of hers if she don't have so much cleanin' up to do!" Frank winked a sparkling eye at her and Peter grinned.

"It's not like Momma doesn't look for excuses to bake as it is, Dad."

"True 'nough. But there's no sense in makin' a mess that'll keep her out of the kitchen."

Amber sat down to remove her worn boots while the two men patiently waited for her.

Good thing the truck warmed up my fingers, she thought as she fumbled with the laces.

"Peter! Was that your dad?" A door to Amber's left popped open and an older woman appeared. "Oh, goodness! Who do we have here?"

"Love, this here's Amber. Amber, my wife, Faye."

"So that's what Sassy was excited about!" said Faye. "It's so nice to meet you."

Amber stood, trying to avoid the wet spots on the rubber floor. Faye reminded her of a sweet grandmother, slightly plump and full of joy. As she smiled broadly, each part of her face seemed to participate, from her dancing eyes to her dimpled cheeks. Does she seriously react like this to every stranger?

"You must stay for dinner. I have a big pot of beef stew that's been simmerin' all afternoon. It's simply too much for the three of us and I won't have so much left over that we're forced to eat it all the way to Thanksgiving." Faye reached for Amber's hand and Amber reminded herself not to stiffen as Faye gently led her into the house.

"Now what brings you to Crossin', Amber?" said Faye. "We don't see many new people stopping through this part of Oregon, you know."

Faye walked Amber through a kitchen smelling of fresh bread. As they passed a set of circular stairs, Faye guided Amber around an overstuffed leather couch facing a wall of windows. The two women sat down, the spectacular view of the Cascade Mountains dimming in comparison to the blaze in the fireplace to Amber's right.

Wouldn't it be nice to sit by that fire! thought Amber.

"I ran into Amber at Micah's lookin' for work." Frank sat down in a matching leather chair to Amber's right, closest to the fire. "I was thinkin' she could help out at the office, maybe keep you some company here when Pete and I are down at the mill or in the shop."

"Oh, wonderful! Have you worked in an office before, dear?" Faye looked at Amber expectantly, pushing up the sleeves on her sweatshirt.

"No." Amber nibbled on her bottom lip.

"Well, that's all right. Sometimes the best way to learn is to dive in with both feet. I bet you pick up on most of it quickly. None of it's really that complicated."

Amber nodded, then looked down at her hands.

"Do you know anything about logging, Amber?"

She jumped at Peter's voice. He'd sat down on the arm of the chair to her left.

"No," she said as she shifted uncomfortably on the lush couch. She eyed the dog sitting quietly on the floor at Peter's feet.

"Don't worry your pretty head about that," said Faye. "I didn't either when Frank brought us out here. Born and raised in the city, I was, and didn't know a thing about living in the middle of nowhere."

"I told Amber she could stay upstairs and eat with us too. I figure there's no sense in her tryin' to find a place in town when we got plenty here."

"Oh, Amber! Of course you must stay here." Faye gently squeezed her hand as Amber forced a smile. "We have a room that's hardly used, and quite honestly some female company would be nice. You can help me keep the men 'round here in order."

Frank snorted. "I'll grant you'll like the female company plenty. But you, love, need

little help in keepin' the men 'round here in order." Frank grinned broadly. "Don't let her fool you one bit, Amber. Most the men 'round here would walk to town in a blizzard if Faye asked it of 'em."

Amber heard Peter chuckle but he kept quiet.

"Oh, really, Frank. A blizzard?"

Amber looked from Faye to Frank and back again. She noticed Faye's eyes sparkling in response to Frank's grin. The banter sounds playful, but . . .

"Very near to it, love. And you know it."

Faye turned to face Amber again. "Don't you believe but about every other word he says. Tell you what. Peter, take Amber upstairs and show her where the guest room is. And please make sure there's plenty of towels in that bathroom. Frank, you go get yourself cleaned up while I finish the biscuits and we'll all meet at the table for dinner. Okay?"

Chapter 2

PETER LED AMBER UP THE circular staircase, Sassy keeping beside him. At the top, he turned to the right and opened a door into a spacious bedroom with its own sitting area overlooking the same mountains that could be seen from the couch downstairs. Peter hadn't entered the room since they'd moved his sister Brittney to Portland. He'd forgotten how the springtime look with purple and white pansies contrasted against the harsh winter scene outside the windows.

Peter set Amber's backpack down on the bed and turned to look at her. She seemed a bit shell-shocked. Her red flannel shirt accented gold flecks in her brown eyes, but her long brown hair fell lifeless from her side part, showing no trace of the bounce he was used to seeing in Brittney's auburn hair.

"This was my sister's room. Hopefully all the purple doesn't bother you. It's always been her favorite color."

"It's fine."

Not much more than a whisper, thought Peter. He pointed out the door back toward the stairs they'd just climbed. "The bathroom is that open door right at the top of the stairs. Towels and all are on the shelves by the tub. I normally run before breakfast and shower after, so it's all yours before 8:00 a.m."

"Okay."

"If you need anything, just ask. Mom normally keeps all kinds of things on hand for visitors."

"Thanks."

Another one-word sentence. She certainly doesn't make conversation easy. "Well, I'll let you get settled." He took a couple steps toward the door. "Brittney may have left a few clothes in one of the drawers or the closet. She likes to keep some things here in case she needs them when she comes down. Feel free to push them aside. She won't mind."

Amber just nodded at him and mumbled something that sounded like "thank you." Standing motionless just inside the door by the dresser, she wouldn't quite look at him but was keeping a close watch on Sassy's movements. Peter called Sassy to him and directed her out the door.

"Do dogs bother you, Amber?"

"Huh?"

"Sass, go find Momma." Peter watched Sassy look back at Amber then obediently head out the door. He turned in time to see Amber relax slightly. "If dogs bother you, we can keep Sassy away. She tends to follow me, but she can stay downstairs with Mom and Dad if that would make you more comfortable."

"It's okay."

Amber's face was very expressive, but he'd only seen discomfort, fear, and uncertainty. "Let me know if you change your mind. It's not a problem to keep her downstairs."

Her hollow-sounding "okay" stuck with him as he walked downstairs. All her replies sounded empty. Something is wrong here, Lord. Halfway down the stairs, Peter was impressed with a mental picture of a young puppy, whimpering and bleeding. God, are You telling me she's badly hurt?

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"Oh, Amber. Good timin'!" Faye carried a towel-covered basket to the table set for four people.

"Here, Amber." Peter held out a chair for her near the French doors leading out to a deck swept mostly clean of snow. He watched her glance toward the fireplace then warily eye a reclining Sassy before crossing toward him. As she sat down, he gently pushed her chair forward then walked over to help his mom carry the pot of beef stew from the kitchen.

"Hmmm. Smells great, love!" Frank walked into the dining room and kissed his wife on the cheek.

"Thank you, dear. Amber, do you like ice in your water or would you rather have some juice?"

"Water is fine."

"I'll get it, Mom. You sit down."

"Oh, thank you, Peter."

Peter filled two glasses with ice water, carrying one to Amber before sitting across from her with his own.

"Okay, let's thank God for this," Frank said, bowing his head and clasping his hands together in front of him.

"Thank You, Father, for the food You've giv'n us and for the added blessing of a new friend. Help us be the blessing You mean us to be and let us enjoy each other in the time we have. Amen."

Peter grabbed the bowl of salad and piled some on his plate before passing it to his mom.

"Where are you from, Amber?" Faye asked as she passed biscuits around.

"California."

"Does your family live down there?"

Amber shrugged in response to Faye's question. "I don't know."

Peter stopped mid-bite and looked earnestly at Amber. She doesn't know if her family lives in California? His mind reeled. He watched as Amber pulled off a small piece of her biscuit and dipped it into her stew.

Peter met his mother's eyes then glanced at his father. This conversation needs a new direction. Quickly. "How was Micah today, Dad?"

Peter watched Amber close her eyes and breathe deeply.

"Makin' it through."

"Peter, will you please hand me the honey?" said Faye.

"He's havin' a tough time, 'course, but he's still openin' up the store every day," said

Frank.

"Did you mention coming out to dinner to him?" asked Faye.

"Yeah. He said maybe in a couple weeks. Oops." Some beef stew dropped onto the red tablecloth embroidered with white snowflakes. "Sorry 'bout that, love. Micah said he'd call the office when the saw blades are in. You can prob'ly corner him into a day then." Frank winked lovingly at his wife.

Peter knew that Faye could talk anyone into dinner when she set her mind to it. Micah would be over to eat at least once before Christmas, if not for Thanksgiving as well.

Amber's probably lost in all this local talk. "Micah lost his wife this past summer," Peter said to her. "The weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas were her favorite time of year, so Mom's worried Micah is taking the season hard."

Amber nodded in acknowledgement but remained silent.

"Well, he's not called about a tree and Allie said he hardly leaves the house except to go to the store."

Peter continued gently. "Yes, Mom, I know. But I think Micah's entitled to a bit of a hard Christmas. Imagine how different this year must be for him."

"That doesn't mean we have to leave him sitting at home every night, Peter. He can mourn his loss, but we can't let him sit and mope all Christmas. God is still good, even when He takes things we love away."

Peter ate silently for a few moments. I understand what Mom's saying, God, but would I act any different from Micah? How long would it take me to move on? How do you show hope in the eternal in the midst of the pain of the temporal?

"Speakin' of God's goodness, did you hear that Chad and Amy are expectin' again?"

"Oh, Frank! How wonderful! When did you find out?"

"Chad stopped me before I headed into town earlier. Hand me another biscuit, son."

Peter held the basket out to his dad. He started to offer one to Amber when he noticed she still had about half of a biscuit. She took a tentative bite of stew from her half-full bowl.

"Hmm. These have to be the finest biscuits you've made in a while, love." Frank ripped his bread into pieces and added it to his stew. "Chad said Amy's been a might ill. And little Joshua's caught himself the flu."

"Oh, goodness. I'll make a batch of chicken noodle soup for them. Peter, will you have time to deliver it to them tomorrow if I get it done first thing in the morning?"

Peter thought about his schedule while chewing. Fridays were normally pretty light for him, but with Thanksgiving the next week and trees needed on the Christmas tree lot the day after, his days were busier. "I'll be heading into Portland tomorrow night. I'll leave here around 5:00 and I can drop it off on my way. Will that be soon enough?"

"I'll call Amy and let her know to expect you," said Faye. "Are you going to be late tomorrow?"

Peter rinsed down a bite with a gulp of water and considered his mom's question. He knew she didn't particularly care for his weekly trips to the city but she tried hard not to interfere. "I don't think I'll be too late, Mom. Stephanie and I have a dinner reservation at the restaurant in her building at 6:30 but no plans after that."

"Well, tell her we said hello when you see her. I expect she's got plans for Thanksgiving next week."

"Yeah. She's committed to working at the parade in the morning, then a benefit later that night. It sounded like she'd be pretty well tied up all day."

"Did ya mention the party in December to her?" said Frank.

"Yeah, Dad. She said she'd check her schedule but I'm pretty sure she's coming." Why does it always feel like I'm making excuses for her?

"Are you going to have a chance to see your sister before next week?" said Frank.

"I don't think so, Dad. What do you need Brittney for?"

"Just lookin' for some ice cream for Thanksgivin' is all."

Faye put her napkin down and looked at her husband. "Frank, really. Don't bother Brittney. I can get some at the grocery store."

"It's not the good stuff," said Frank.

"It's the same brand," said Faye.

Frank grunted as he wiped his bowl with a piece of biscuit.

Faye scooted her chair back and stood, grabbing her dishes and walking toward the sink.

Peter followed his mom to the sink with his own dishes. "I can drive by the creamery tomorrow, Dad, but I think they'll be closed."

"Don't worry about it, son." His eyes twinkled as he looked across the room at Faye. "I'm sure I can survive on whatever your mom brings home."

Peter chuckled. His dad's wink told him that Brittney would be getting a phone call before Thursday. "How 'bout I get some more wood brought in, then we finish up that game of chess from last night?"

"Sounds good. I think I figured me a way to get you on the defense."

Peter chuckled. As he called Sassy to his side and headed to the mudroom he said, "All right. I'll meet you in the living room."

Chapter 3

AFTER DINNER, AMBER SAT NEAR the hearth and soaked up the fire's heat, struggling to remain awake as she listened to the conversation. Still full from the bit of stew she'd managed to eat, she'd turned down Faye's steaming blueberry cobbler with vanilla ice cream. Peter and Frank played chess for about an hour before Faye caught Amber nodding off and sent her to bed.

She gratefully said goodnight to the family and made her way upstairs. As she entered her room, she found the bedside light turned on, the bed covers neatly turned down, and a book on her pillow. A note attached to the front of the book said,

Just in case you like to read.

We're glad you're here, Amber.

Faye

Amber removed the note and looked at the front cover. Two Minute Devotions? Great. Just what I need. All my problems solved in two minutes or less. She tossed the book onto the bedside table.



The next morning Amber glimpsed how important religion was to them. Behind the circular staircase was a room filled with bookshelves. Amber had never before seen so many books in one home. She cautiously approached the area, getting close enough to scan the titles and authors. Some names she recognized, like Billy Graham. One whole shelf of different Bibles? Why would three people want so many Bibles?

As she continued browsing the room, she came to a small table beside a beautifully etched wooden rocker. On the table was a box of tissues and a worn, blue leather Bible. In the lower right corner of the front cover, Amber read stamped in gold letters: "To My Beloved." She reached out to carefully touch the letters, lost in the few good memories she had.

"You are welcome to read any of the books in here anytime you like."

Amber jumped at Peter's voice and snatched her hand back from the Bible as she turned to face him. How long has he been watching?

"We each have our favorites, but most of them are pretty good. Do you have someone you like read?" Still dressed in jogging clothes and tennis shoes, Peter wiped a bead of sweat from his temple as he waited for her response.

"No." I wish I could read enough books to be able to choose a favorite!

"Well, then, what's your favorite kind of book to read?"

Kind of book? Amber stared blankly at Peter, not sure how to answer his question.

"Do you like fiction, history, poetry?"

Amber shifted uneasily from one foot to another. A guy with a library in his house couldn't possibly understand a lack of books. "I just read whatever I find laying around."

"We have several fiction books over here." Peter walked to the bookshelf by the large bay window at the front of the house. "Mom likes Beverly Lewis, although Dee Henderson can have a little more action in her books if you like that." He had pulled one off the shelf and held it out to her.

Amber hesitated then moved to take it from him. "Thanks." Maybe if I look interested in the book, he'll leave me alone. Problem was, not only did Peter leave like she hoped, his presence left with him.

What is it about him that gets to me? Come on, girl! You can't be getting attached to these people. They aren't worth the cost.

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At least the family didn't make a huge deal over church. Saturday afternoon, curled up in the chair closest to the fire to read the book she'd taken from Peter the day before, Frank interrupted her when he came in to add a log to the fire.

"Enjoyin' the book?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes." Why do people always get chatty when you're reading?

"Which one ya got?"

Amber flipped to the front cover and showed him the title. "Peter said it was a good action book."

"As I recall, there's a whole series of 'em in there. Peter seemed to like 'em well enough but I'm thinkin' I only read a couple. But then I ain't much into fiction. You help yourself to any of those books. That's what they're there for."

"Thank you." Amber opened the book, eager to get back to the story.

Frank walked to the end of the couch and looked back at her. "I don't know how exactly you feel 'bout this, but we attend church services on Sunday mornin's. You're always welcome to join us. We leave 'bout nine."

Amber wasn't quite sure how to respond. Church folks never seemed to like her and she'd never found much use for them. But after giving me a job and a place to sleep, how do I tell him no?

Thankfully, Frank didn't really seem to expect an answer. He was already heading toward the garage.

Faye was just as easy Sunday morning over breakfast. Amber came downstairs to the smell of fresh muffins. She breathed deeply as she approached the kitchen. "That smells really good," she said.

"Why, thank you, Amber. Have a seat on one of those bar stools there while I get the butter and jellies." Faye handed Amber a basket overflowing with large muffins still warm from the oven. "Hot muffins just sounded so good this morning, and they make for a quick cleanup before church. Would you like some milk or some juice?"

"Milk, please."

"You know, you are always welcome to join us for church."

Amber's stomach turned. "I appreciate that." Not wanting to make eye contact with Faye, she busied herself adding some butter to her strawberry muffin.

Faye sat down beside her, placing a glass of milk near her plate. "You know, I didn't always like church." She patted Amber's knee before continuing. "In fact, I didn't really start going regular until just before Frank and I got married. It was important to him, you see, but I'd never had much use for it. It just wasn't important to my parents when I was growing up."

Amber listened attentively but still couldn't bring herself to look Faye in the eyes.

"Amber, what I'm trying to say is that it's okay if you don't want to go with us this morning. Many people have been hurt by church-goin' folks. Others just don't see a need to go to services. Whatever your reasons, if you ever change your mind, just know that you're welcome. Okay?"

Amber looked at Faye for just a moment, unsure what to say. "Thank you."

"Now then, if you'd like to do some laundry, just help yourself. The washer and dryer are right back through that door." Faye pointed to a door just to the right of the sink. "And I'll ask Peter to stoke up the fire real good so you can sit and read in the living room if you'd like. You just make yourself at home."

As Faye rambled on about when she thought they'd be back and various plans for the week, Amber's mind continued to wrestle with the same question she'd had from the start: Is this family for real? Her thoughts circled around the family, analyzing their behaviors and possible hidden motives. Hope continually fought to spring to life, but in her experience people just weren't kind. Kindness always had strings attached and the only way to survive was to figure out what the person really wanted before you got emotionally tied. It was easier to walk away with the person's dark side exposed. It's easier to walk away....

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As Amber lay in bed Monday morning and reviewed her weekend, she continued to struggle to find any ulterior motives. The family seemed genuinely nice. Faye had really made soup for the family who was sick and Peter had really left with it the next evening. The few employees she'd met on Friday all seemed pleasant and showed affection for Faye and admiration for Frank. And the family had left without her for church on Sunday morning without a hint of condemnation.

Peter unnerved her, though. He easily stood eight or nine inches taller than her short stature and at least sixty pounds heavier. He obviously ran consistently and his arms boasted muscles used to working in the Oregon forest. His hair was slightly darker than her own brown locks and his mouth always seemed ready to smile. But his eyes were what caught her breath. She'd always considered her eyes to be boring and expressionless, mousy brown like her hair, but his blue eyes pierced through her until she felt like she was standing emotionally naked in front of him. How much does he really see?

At least Sassy usually gave her a reason to avoid him. She and the dog had come to a

wary alliance, at least on Amber's part. Amber preferred it if the dog kept her distance but Sassy seemed to like her. Figures. The one I most fear is the one who wants to stick closest.

Amber rolled over and looked at the clock. 7:24. She gave a stretch before getting out of bed. If she got moving she could get done in the shower and back to her own room before Peter came upstairs.

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Thanksgiving was important to Faye. Amber struggled to keep up as they went through the grocery store with a list that seemed long enough to feed a dozen families. If she understood right, this was going to be her first major gathering at the Yager home. Peter's older brother, Logan, and his wife, Heather, would be coming along with their three children, as well as his younger sister, Brittney, and Frank's dad, whom everyone called Pops. Faye also called to invite Chad, who was like Frank's son, along with his wife and their two boys, plus Micah and his son Andy and Andy's wife, Allie.

I wish I'd showed up a week later! She sighed quietly as Faye put some green beans into the cart and looked over her list. Maybe I'll finally learn what these people are all about. Family tends to bring out darker sides.

"Oh, Amber!" Faye said. "I forgot the marshmallows. Will you please go back and get some? I need a bag of the little ones—Frank likes them baked over the sweet potatoes. And I also need a bag of the big ones for cooking over the fire later in the evening. Thank you!"

Amber dutifully went back through the store looking for marshmallows, sighing as she tried to remember where she had seen them. Later in the evening? Didn't she say Brittney and Pops would be there by 9:00 a.m. for cinnamon rolls? It sounds like people will be filling the house all day! Ugh!

Lost in her thoughts, she almost ran straight into Peter. "Oh!" She tried to back up quickly while Peter reached to steady her. "Sorry."

"Dad sent the cavalry. He thought you might need backup to get all of Mom's Thanksgiving purchases home."

Amber grinned as she thought back to the two full grocery carts she'd just left with Faye and their Camry's back seat full of mums. "I was beginning to wonder how we'd fit everything into her car."

"You look lost. Did Mom send you back for something?" Peter's eyes sparkled.

"Marshmallows. She said the little ones for sweet potatoes and the big ones for roasting over a fire."

"Ah, yes," Peter nodded. "Dad's sweet tooth and Logan's kids." Peter began leading the way to an aisle near the produce with all the baking supplies. "The only way Dad will touch a sweet potato is if it is smothered in marshmallows. And Logan's kids will think something is horribly wrong if there are no s'mores Thanksgiving afternoon."

"S'mores?"

"Mmm. Chocolate, roasted marshmallow, graham cracker. Sound familiar?"

"No. This is a popular treat around here?" Amber's mouth was watering at the idea of such a concoction. Her mind held a faint memory of roasted marshmallows. Surely chocolate would just make it better.

Peter stopped in front of the stock of marshmallows and stared at Amber. "You've never had a s'more? Your family must not have been into camping."

"Uh, no." Amber started to add more. Part of her longed to trust Peter, but history hadn't been kind. Thankfully Peter didn't seem to notice.

"Well, then, you are in for a treat! If your appetite for Mom's fudge pie last night is any indication, you're gonna love s'mores!"

Chapter 4

"OKAY, MOM," PETER SAID AS he closed the trunk of his mom's black Camry. "That's the last bag. Now you go get in my Jeep with Amber and head on home. I've got to stop over at Micah's then I'll be right behind you."

"Are you sure you don't mind, Peter? I can take the car home."

"I know you can, Mom, but I'd prefer you drive the Jeep. The fresh snow makes a couple of those turns on the road home tricky and the Jeep has better traction."

"All right, then. Please don't be long. I want to get these groceries unloaded and organized so I can start working on the desserts."

"Yes, ma'am. I should only be at Micah's about five minutes."

Peter watched his mom get into the driver's seat of his Jeep. As they pulled out, he saw Amber look his way but jerk back as soon as they made eye contact.

Father, I don't know about this girl you sent us, Peter prayed. She frustrates me! Just when I think she's going to trust me with some bit of information, she clams up again. What was that look over the marshmallows about?

Nothing. Apparently God was keeping His information as close as Amber was keeping her thoughts.

Peter breathed in deeply as he got into his mother's car and turned toward Micah's Hardware. Jesus, we need help with her. Did I hand her the right book to read the other morning? She seems to enjoy it. But is it making a difference? Father, don't let her leave us farther from You than she was when she arrived. Use us to draw her in.

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"Hey, Micah!"

"Peter! Good to see you." Micah put down the screwdrivers he was organizing and stood to his full six-foot height to shake Peter's hand.

"Got some new stock in?" Peter raised his eyebrows slightly and nodded toward the screwdrivers Micah had just been sorting.

"Nah. Chad was just in here with Josh and Caleb. Those two boys love these tools and I didn't have the heart to get after them today."

"Things going okay with Amy?" Peter was suddenly concerned. He'd meant to ask Chad yesterday how Amy and the boys were, but the day got away from him in the wood shop and he'd never gone down to the logging garage to find him.

"Oh, yeah. She's still got some morning sickness, but Chad says things are better now that Joshua's back to normal. Thankfully Caleb never caught it."

"Good. Hey, Amber said you called to tell us the blades for the band saw were in."

"Sure are. I figured you'd be in to get them today or tomorrow, so I put them right back here." Micah walked behind the front counter and opened a cabinet. "How's that girl working out?"

"She's quiet. Definitely been hurt. But she picks things up fast and does whatever Mom asks her to do."

"Sometimes I wonder at your dad and how he takes in every wounded creature he finds." Micah stood and placed the new blades on the counter.

"Well, sometimes Jesus went to the sick and sometimes they came to Him. Dad's always figured that God knew where he was and where he planned to be. All he had to do was keep his heart ready to minister and God would provide the opportunities."

"I hope this time works out for you guys."

Peter grabbed the package of blades, quickly asking God for wisdom. "You know, Micah, people can be tough to love. Despite our best efforts, sometimes they choose to walk away from those that can most help." Peter looked intently into Micah's eyes. "But even when people make the worst possible decisions, God still considers them worth the effort to love."

Micah firmed his jaw. His eyes watered slightly as the quiet throughout the store expanded for a long moment. As he quietly nodded, Micah said, "You tell that mother of yours that I'll be seeing her for Thanksgiving."

"I will, Micah. See you Thursday."

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"Things should turn out nicely this year."

Peter could see how pleased his mom was. She loved having people over, but parties were her specialty.

"Amber, dear, you start putting all the baking supplies on the table so we can organize them by recipe. I'll work on getting all the cold stuff put into the refrigerator and, Peter, will you please work on putting everything else away for me?"

It was only Monday afternoon, but by tomorrow night, Peter knew the house would be filled with the smells of Thanksgiving desserts.

"Oh, Peter, will you plug in the extra fridge so it's cold and ready for me to use tomorrow, please?"

"Already done, Mom. I plugged it in before I headed into town this morning."

"Wonderful! Now, help me think where everyone's going to sit. Let's see. My last count included thirteen adults and five children. We'll use the high chair for Megan, which leaves us with two two-year-olds and two four-year-olds. If we put the other two chairs at the dining room table, that will seat eight of us."

Peter paused in organizing the can goods to look critically at the dining area. "What if we turned the table sideways, then added the folded table to the other side, doubling the width of the dining table? It might be a little tight around the wall and glass doors, but we should be able to fit ten or eleven around there plus the highchair. If we lay a blanket on the floor over by the staircase, Logan and I can have a picnic with the kids."

"Can you bring those wooden chairs up from the office Wednesday afternoon?"

"Sure. I can—"

"Oh! Peter!" Faye shut the freezer with a quick slam and walked over to the dining table where Amber was diligently organizing sugar, chocolate, and berries. "Do you think we can fit two of those folded tables here?"

Peter walked over and eyed the space. "Probably, Mom. What are you thinking?"

"Allie just bought a table like ours for organizing the end of year tax paperwork. If we brought the bench up from the shop for the little ones..."

"Hmm. Just might work, Mom. The back legs on that bench need tightening up, but I should be able to get to that before Thursday."

"Wonderful!" Faye gave Amber a quick squeeze. "This is just wonderful! In just three short days our home will be full of all my favorite people!"

Peter couldn't help but watch Amber during his mother's outburst of excitement. She certainly wasn't returning the loving embrace but she also didn't seem as tense as she had the first couple of days.

Good, thought Peter as he went back to sorting non-perishables for the pantry. Someone in this family seems to be making her feel at ease!

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Peter breathed deeply as he shut the door behind him. In many ways, the wood shop was his sanctuary. He loved the smell of the wood as he worked with it. In his youth he had marveled at the trees God created: the Douglas fir, regally stretching into the sky and perfect for beams and trusses; the western red cedar, beautiful both in nature and in paneling for homes; the red alder, gorgeous in the autumn and precious as a carved toy in the hands of a child. So much variety, Father, in height and in purpose. Thank You for the trees and for the love You gave me for them.

Peter walked over to the old bench he'd moved down from outside the logging office. Six feet long, the white oak wood had been rubbed smooth with years of use.

So much laughter has been shared on this bench, so much counsel given, Father. Help us to continue to use this wood for Your glory. Peter lifted the bench onto the worktable so he could check out the leg joints. He grabbed some wood glue and a screwdriver off nearby shelves.

Let this bench be a gathering place for many more years, as men take time to sit together and share their lives. Let it be not only a place where men come together, but a place where men are drawn closer to You.

Peter set the bench aside to dry and walked over to his project area. His mother's Christmas present was coming along nicely. He'd been working for the last few weeks on something she could sit on while enjoying her favorite spot down at the river. It was inspired by the rough-looking log furniture but with a smooth back for his mom's comfort and big enough for his dad to join her.

Peter grabbed his small chisel and carefully began working on the verse he was carving into the back: The LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession, from Deuteronomy 14:2.

Father, as she rests on this bench, cement this verse into my mother's heart. Use her

to teach others this same truth. Never let her fall into the thinking that she is too old to be useful but continue to guard her mind and clearly show her the part of Your plan that You want her to fulfill. Protect her so that she may be free from further pain and grant her supernatural wisdom so that she would give the women You bring her godly counsel.

At this Peter thought of Amber and paused in his work. She's a tough one, Father.

Yes. Peter could almost hear the Holy Spirit responding back to him.

There must be hope for You to have brought her here.

Of course.

But what do we do? How do we reach her? I can see slight differences in the way she responds to Mom, but she's got such thick walls up.

Love her.

Love her. Peter sighed. I know that's always the answer. But how do we love her?

Whatever happened caused deep wounds.

Yes.

How do we fix wounds we can't see and she won't talk about?

Love her.

Peter paused in his work. His eyes focused on the words from Deuteronomy: treasured possession. How do we convince Amber that she is one of Your treasured possessions?

Silence.

Peter sighed. "Perfect," Peter muttered as he rose from the bench. Love. So simple, yet so complicated. "It's a great time for You to get quiet on me." Peter looked heavenward, not really expecting a reply. Usually the silence meant the answer was staring him in the face. He just had to figure it out.

Chapter 5

FAYE WATCHED OUT THE DINING room window as Peter locked up the wood shop and headed toward the river. She'd found him lost in thought more than once in the last few days. Deep in thought. Or in prayer. She wasn't sure which. But it wasn't quite like him. He was definitely puzzling over something. "That's not the path he normally walks, Lord. In fact.... Hmm. Now isn't that interesting." Peter hadn't followed that path in several months. "Very interesting."

Coming Soon! Ryan's Crossing

WHEN RYAN TRAVELS TO AMBER'S wedding, the life he thought was under control begins to unravel. Can he forgive Amber for leaving him? What does he do with the dark haired beauty that's soon to be his sister-in-law? Could God really have a better plan in mind than the paramedic certification he's worked so hard to earn?

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