

Second
Chances
Heather
Tullis

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Dedication

For Kristi. My oldest friend and confidant.
Here's to finding those silver linings

One

Karissa glanced out the window of her little apartment again and wondered what was keeping her brother and father. The morning was growing old, and she knew it would be late by the time they got everything loaded and reached home.

A U-Haul truck came into view and the driver honked the horn, announcing his arrival. *Must be Hank. Dad would never be so obnoxious.* “It’s about time.” She felt bad as soon as the words escaped her lips. She’d barely slept the night before, staying up until four a.m. to pack the rest of her things, and was a little on edge. She reminded herself to be sweet and grateful that her father and brother were taking the day to help her—doing this alone would have been impossible.

Her son, Paul, raced past her, jetting a spaceship through the air, pushing the button that made the battery-operated engine sounds blare. She grimaced and held herself back so she didn’t snap at him. She was definitely sending the toy with him to his dad’s and she hoped they left it there. Dennis had bought it for their son, after all. He should have to deal with the noise.

Karissa hurried to let her father and brother in, and opened the front door to see Marshal Willmore getting out of the moving van. The surprise hit her like a shockwave. What was he doing here?

Hank’s white 4x4 pulled up right behind the moving van and she could see her brother behind the wheel, but not her dad. She forced herself to smile and wave like she wasn’t bothered by the image of Marsh, loping toward her in a T-shirt and blue jeans, the fabric stretched over his trim, but nicely muscled frame.

Hank joined him on the sidewalk and they approached side-by-side. He enveloped her in a tight hug, easing her stress and fears slightly.

“Hi, it’s good to see you,” she said to her brother, then glanced toward Marsh. “You came to help. Where’s Dad?” She tried to sound upbeat and unbothered by the appearance of the guy who had teased and tormented her alongside her brothers

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while she was growing up.

Marsh's smile was easy and confident. "Your mom wasn't feeling great, so I offered to come so he could stay with her. I'm practically one of the family, anyway."

Hank snorted. "Yeah, you two are just like brother and sister."

Marsh shot Hank a dirty look.

"How's the packing?" Hank asked, as if to shift the discussion, though a smile lingered on his lips.

"Great, almost done. I hope you brought a few tools with you; we still have to tear down the beds." She left off the fact that her soon-to-be ex-husband didn't know a hammer from a screwdriver, but felt that, as the man, the tools should go to him in the divorce. And he wasn't shy about taking what he thought should be his.

"What? You think I'd go anywhere without my stash?" Hank asked. "They're in the truck, of course." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder to the parking lot.

Paul came out of the apartment and threw himself into his uncle's arms, but Karissa quickly ushered everyone inside. It was after eleven and she knew Hank would want to help milk the cows that evening. "There's not too much to move, I hope," she said. "We should easily be able to squeeze it all in the two trucks and my car."

Marsh walked down the hall, peeking into each room as he passed it, then returned to the living room. "You're not kidding. I'm surprised he left you the beds." The irritation in his voice exactly mirrored her own frustration.

Karissa pressed her lips together and turned to the kitchen. Discussing the fact that Dennis had snuck in while she was at work and helped himself to the table and chairs, sofa set, television and entertainment center, half the dishes—including a few heirloom pieces she'd inherited from her grandmother—and all of the movies wasn't going to soften the antagonism in Marsh's voice.

The sound of tires on pavement drew Karissa's eyes back to the parking lot and she frowned at the sight of Dennis's car. He was early. Not that she was complaining.

"I think I'm going to have a chat with him," Hank said, setting Paul on the floor.

"No, you won't. You know you'll just make the situation

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worse.” She put a hand on his chest and was glad when he stopped, though he could easily have gotten around her. “He’s here to pick up Paul for his weekend visit, and he’s done me a favor by coming hours early. Be civil.” She would say to be nice, but didn’t think that word would be in his vocabulary at the moment.

Karissa grabbed the backpack of Paul’s weekend belongings and told Paul to give his uncle a hug goodbye, then went out to meet Dennis.

His mouth was set in a grim line as he eyed the trucks. “I can’t believe you’re taking my son so far away,” he complained as soon as she was close enough to hear.

They’d had this discussion before, so she didn’t respond to his complaint. “You’ll bring him home Sunday night?”

“Yes. And you’ll bring him back out to me for my next visit.” It was more of a reminder than anything, as if her move was designed to deprive him of his son instead of her admitting that she needed a little help from her family. Her work hours as an emergency dispatcher were too irregular to depend on child care. Dennis’ eyes flicked to the apartment.

Karissa glanced behind her and saw Hank standing in the doorway, deep scowl lines between his eyes. She could keep him from talking to Dennis, but she supposed keeping him from shooting intimidating glances was too much to ask. She returned her gaze to Dennis. “Bring him to me before eight so I can get him in bed. He has school starting Monday morning.” And she had a new job.

“Yeah.” His face turned to smiles as the sound of Paul’s feet pounded down the walk toward them.

“Daddy!” Paul launched himself into Dennis’s arms and was cradled close.

This man may have torn her world in two when he announced he had gotten another woman pregnant and was choosing her over his wife, but there was no doubt that he adored his son. Karissa tried to just be glad that he still cared about Paul, even if he’d stopped loving her.

“Did you bring back the dishes?” she asked him.

“You’ll get them when the divorce finalizes,” he said, coolly.

“Right.” *Stubborn jerk.* She gave her son a hug and kiss goodbye and said she’d see him in a few days, then turned back to

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the apartment, fighting to keep the sadness, anger, and exhaustion under wraps.

Marsh came out of the apartment, heading for her as Dennis led Paul away. "You okay?"

"Fine." Though she wasn't. She sucked in a cleansing breath, fighting for self-control. "I said not to come out."

"Settle down, Kar. I'm just grabbing some tools to take apart those beds." He gave her shoulder a quick squeeze as he passed.

She gritted her teeth and wished he had never come. It was bad enough having Hank see her like this without dealing with Marsh as well. She forced a smile as she walked back into her echoing apartment.

If she could just hold on for a few more hours, she'd be alone and on the road home again.

Home, that elusive place she'd been trying to create for herself and Dennis, and had failed utterly.



They stopped to gas up at a convenience store down the street, and Marsh watched every move Karissa made. She was unhappy. Or maybe it was the exhaustion she'd used as an excuse for the temper he saw flash in her eyes from time to time. She hadn't blown up at them, though, and that worried him.

Karissa had always been feisty and more than ready to stand up for herself. This woman had been worn down by circumstances.

She went inside, and Marsh leaned against the moving van, his gaze still following her.

"Rein it in, buddy," Hank said. "I don't think she's even remotely ready to think about another relationship."

Marsh pulled his gaze away from her. "Yeah, I'm getting that feeling. What did that jerk do to her? How long has she been like this? It's like she's a totally different person."

Hank scowled. "If I'd had any idea how unhappy she was...I just want to pound that guy."

"Get in line."

Hank sent him a sidelong glance with a hint of smile on his face. "I don't think she was overjoyed to see you."

Marsh nodded. "She just needs a little time to remember why

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she had a crush on me when she was a kid.”

Hank snorted. “Dude, that was all in your head. Wishful thinking. She thinks you’re a pain.” He pulled the gas nozzle out of the tank and hung it up. “Oh, wait a minute, you are a pain.”

“You’re very funny.” He gave his best friend an annoyed scowl, but his eyes had already returned to the store, where Karissa was emerging with a tall soda.

Moving too fast with that one would definitely be a mistake, but that meant he had time to ease her into friendship first—which would be good for both of them.

He’d let the chances pass him by when they were teens, knowing their three-year age difference would bring her daddy’s shotgun out if he’d asked her out. Though they’d ended up going in different directions, she’d always been the one who got away.

This time he wouldn’t let her slip through his fingers. He believed in second chances.

Two

Karissa was drooping when they pulled up at her parents' place late that afternoon. She shouldn't have been driving when she was so tired, but she was, so she had cranked up the music for the last half-hour of windy roads and sang off-key at the top of her lungs.

Maybe it was a good thing her son was staying with Dennis that weekend. This way at least he hadn't been subjected to her singing. The music helped her stay alert, though, and they pulled into her parents' farm, which was on an unusually flat piece of land in the foothills of the Colorado Rockies. She parked next to Hank's truck and sighed at the thought of unloading everything tonight.

Marsh pulled the moving van over to the barn, where they would store the things she and Paul could do without for the next while. She hoped the tom cat they'd kept around was still active and catching mice, or her sheets and towels might take a serious beating before she needed them again.

As she climbed out of the car, Karissa looked at the weathered farm house with its gabled second-story and fading green paint. The warm feeling of home stole into her as the breeze carried the faint scent of hay and manure toward her. It wasn't necessarily a pretty scent, but it was what she'd grown up with, and in the dry, cool fall evening, the smell was mild.

The front door opened and her parents rushed out to give her hugs. She met them halfway and reveled in their embraces.

"How was the drive? Sorry I didn't make it," her father said. Robert Carver was the epitome of a farmer: leather-faced, lean, and wearing boots, jeans, a T-shirt, and a cowboy hat to keep off the sun. His voice was rough with emotion.

"It's fine. I hope Mom is feeling better." She looked over his shoulder at the tiny woman who didn't look strong enough to carry full gallons of milk from the grocery store, never mind the fifty-pound bags of chicken feed, horse supplements, and other heavy lifting she did on a regular basis. Beth Carver was proof

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that you should never underestimate a Carver woman.

Today she was decked out in a long-sleeved shirt, gardening gloves, and a large-brimmed straw hat. Despite her protective clothing, her nose and cheeks were pink. “Your father’s a worry wart,” Beth said. “I would have been fine here by myself. Let’s get you unloaded and settled in.”

They managed to empty Karissa’s car and Hank’s truck in record time. Karissa helped the men unload the van into the barn—much faster than trying to figure out how to pack everything into the van in the first place—while Beth set out some dinner.

When they came back inside, Karissa glanced at the clock and knew the guys would barely have time to eat before the evening milking—the cows instinctively seemed to know when it was nearing five and got restless when they had to wait an extra half an hour. Of course, if she were standing around with a full udder, she might get anxious for relief as well.

Beth laid a spread of honey ham, mashed potatoes, lightly steamed carrots from her garden, and homemade rolls, still hot from the oven. It was heaven, but Karissa thought she would have to be careful not to let too much weight pile on if her mom still cooked like this on a regular basis. She wasn’t exactly an active teenager anymore, and her metabolism had slowed considerably.

Karissa felt her tension loosen and slip away as her father talked about what was happening on the farm, Marsh inserted stories from teaching at the high school, and Hank discussed the latest project he was working on at the engineering firm. It was good to be home, better than she’d expected, once she allowed herself to let go and accept it. The only thing missing was Hank’s twin, Bo, but he was still in Afghanistan where he was serving in the Army.

Still, an undercurrent of tension ran through the room, something Karissa couldn’t put her finger on.

“So, Hank, I haven’t heard anything about Shanny. I thought she’d be here tonight.” Karissa looked at her brother and saw him glance at his plate. Last she’d heard, things were getting serious between the two of them, but Hank didn’t brighten at the mention of his girlfriend.

He played with the food left on his plate, pushing a couple of carrots around in the gravy with his spoon. His lips turned down

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in a frown, his brow furrowing. “Yeah, well, you won’t be seeing her around here.”

With the definite feeling that she had stuck her foot in it, Karissa wasn’t sure whether she should pretend that she wasn’t horribly curious, or if he would tolerate her asking a little more. She looked him in the eye and felt slapped by the hard, cold look there. She returned her gaze to her food without asking another word.

The silence stretched for a long moment before Hank filled it. “She decided Juniper Ridge wasn’t where she wanted to spend the rest of her life.” He stood and walked to the kitchen in the next room.

Karissa looked at her parents as they heard the sound of the refrigerator open and close. They looked as surprised as she was.

She decided a change of topic was in order. “I know this isn’t convenient for you, that we’re going to be in your hair and causing problems for a while.” Karissa stood as well and picked up the pitcher of milk along with her dirty dishes.

Robert latched onto her arm as she walked by and held on until she met his gaze. “There’s nothing to be sorry for. We’re glad to be here for you, and happy to help,” he said.

She smiled her acceptance, and he nodded slightly before releasing her.

When she reached the kitchen, Marsh on her heels, Karissa heard her parents talking in low tones, their voices fervent, worried. It made her ache all the more knowing her parents were concerned about her, about the mess she’d made of her life. She resolved to get things under control as quickly as possible. She’d be strong and prove she could stand alone, that she could do it without help. For a little while, though, she would need to lean on them.

The last thing Karissa wanted was to be a burden to her parents. Sure, they weren’t terribly old, but they weren’t exactly spring chickens either. Robert was almost sixty, and Beth had just turned fifty. They should be enjoying a fun outing with their grandchildren—then send them on home again—not playing full-time grandparent.

Her parents joined her, their arms full, and Karissa returned to the dining room for the last of the dinner items. She scooped up the tub of butter, knife, and loaf of bread and brought them to the

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kitchen. Beth was loading the dishwasher, Robert covering the leftovers, and Karissa had to stop for a moment and watch the way her parents worked in tandem, a perfect unit in synch. She'd seldom seen her father work in the kitchen when she was growing up, since he worked so many hours on the farm, but now he acted as though it were an everyday occurrence. Karissa wondered when that had happened.

Robert shot Karissa an anxious look, then turned and put the food in the fridge. When her mother glanced at her, a look of concern in her eyes, Karissa knew there was something they wanted to say. Something more that hadn't been broached yet, and it was important. She put away the food in her hands, then turned to face them, leaning back against the cupboard behind her. "What's going on?"

Robert ran a hand over his chin, and she heard the light scrape of a day's beard growth rasp across his calluses. "Let's go back to the dining room. There's something more we need to discuss." He looked at the guys as well, including them in the conversation.

His words, and the serious tone of voice, put Karissa more on edge as everyone sat around the table again. She looked from one parent to the other, then back again. "What is it?"

Her mother's smile was wan, and definitely forced, when she began to speak. "I've been feeling ill for a while now. Like I had the flu a lot. Unexplainable fevers. Stomach cramping. I finally went to the doctor last month and he ran a bunch of tests." She looked up at her husband when he took her hand. "It's lupus."

Karissa felt like someone had just reached into her chest and pulled out her heart. "What? What does that mean?" She'd heard of the disease but had never known anyone who had it. How could her parents possibly help her care for her son if her mother was sick? How could Karissa deal with day-to-day life if she lost her mother? She quickly shunted that thought to the background, unable to deal with it.

"It means medications, testing, taking it easier than she's used to," Robert said. "She has to be covered up to protect her skin from the sun, and there are potential heart issues and osteoporosis we need to guard against."

Karissa looked at Hank and saw the surprise on his face. "They didn't tell you, either?"

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“I knew she was sick, but I didn’t know the details.” He glanced at his parents. “How long have you known?”

“We got the test results a couple days ago. We’ve been pretty sure about it for a little longer. We wanted to tell you together after the results were official.”

“And Bo?”

“He called last night,” Beth said. “You know how he seems to have a sixth sense about these things. He just knew something was wrong.”

That sounded like Bo, all right. Karissa couldn’t help but smile, even though she felt her insides tightening like a vise. “And I’m bringing Paul here and asking for your help when you’re having problems. I’m sorry. I can find somewhere else soon.”

“No. There will be days that I’ll need to take it easy, but it’ll be fine,” Beth reassured her. “If I have a bad day when you’re not here, I’ll call Mary down the street and have her watch him for a few hours. We’ll work it out, honey.”

Tears clogged Karissa’s throat and worry filled her heart. “Okay, and when I’m not at work, I’m here for you.”

“I know it, dear.”

A few minutes passed as they discussed what was coming up. Marsh didn’t say anything during the conversation but paid attention to everything the others said. As much as Karissa wished it was different, he’d been an accepted part of her family since he was still in Cub Scouts and was terrorizing den leaders with her twin brothers.

Soon her father stood from the table. “We’d best get on with the milking. Those cows won’t take care of themselves.”

Hank rose as well and joined him out the back door. Karissa took the moment to escape into the front yard. The sun had already set behind the mountains, but twilight was long on the east side of the Rockies, and half-light surrounded her. She just needed a few minutes to let it all go and not have people watching her, feeling bad that she felt bad.

When the storm door slapped, indicating that someone had followed her out, she wiped at the tears starting to escape from her eyes and glanced back to see Marsh leaning against the porch column.

“Hey. That was quite a bombshell. Wasn’t it?” He studied her face, then slowly approached her, his hands in his pockets. “You

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gonna be all right?”

She sucked in a breath. “Yeah. I just need a good night’s sleep, some time to settle in and get a handle on how this affects Mom and the rest of us. I just, I need her, Marsh.” *Especially now.*

“I know.” He touched her shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

The last person she wanted to have a tender moment with was Marsh, even though she appreciated the gesture. She sucked in a deep breath and shifted away from him. “Thanks. I ought to get back and put away some of my things.”

“Karissa, this isn’t cancer or a failing organ or anything, you know. It’s going to be hard, but she’s still going to be here for you. Be glad that you’ll be here for her too. Maybe you were supposed to move home now to make things easier for her around the farm.”

“Right, because a preschooler isn’t stressful at all.”

His low chuckle shivered down her spine in an annoyingly good way. “You’ll be fine. Just take it a day at a time, and it’ll all work out. I better go lend a hand with those cows. Your brother’s gotten all soft riding the desk at the firm.”

“So says the school teacher.”

“Hey, I’ve got to stay in shape—basketball season starts soon, and if I don’t run with the guys, they’ll slack off.”

That made her smile, but she kept her back to him as she listened to his footsteps retreat toward the milking shed. She didn’t know if she could handle her life getting any more flipped upside down than it was now.

Three

Life on the farm hadn't changed much since Karissa was a teen. The last hay cutting was weeks in the past, and everything was battened down for winter—which came early in the Rockies, even in the foothills. The cows still needed twice-daily milking; the chickens needed fresh food and water in the morning and egg collection in the afternoon. And, despite the fact that Hank and Marsh both lived in town, they spent a lot of their weekend helping with farm chores.

Karissa stuck close to the house, keeping an eye on her mother, and preparing the place for her son's arrival. Having raised three children, her parents didn't have a lot of breakables, but there were still a few things she wanted out of reach of her son's curious fingers.

Karissa was kneading biscuit dough when Hank and Marsh came into the kitchen Sunday evening. She'd heard a truck pull up a while earlier and peeked out the window in time to see them get out of Hank's truck and turn toward the barn. It was apparently standard procedure for Hank to take care of the livestock before dinner, but they seemed to have finished up faster than usual. "Are the cows milked already?" She eyed the tall metal milk jug Hank carried.

"Yeah, Dad started on them before we got here." Hank slid open the pantry door, where the milk would sit and separate in the artificially-cooled space until morning. The rest of the milk would go straight to the local processor, but this jug would be skimmed for cream in the morning for the family's use.

"Don't you look domestic?" Marsh leaned one hip against the table and surveyed Karissa's flour-streaked face and hands.

"Once in a while." She pulled out the rolling pin and began to flatten the dough. "Mom's taking a break—because I threatened to tie her to the bed if she didn't. She looked tired. Dinner's in the oven; these'll be done in twenty minutes."

Hank came out of the pantry and slid the door closed behind him.

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“And, since you boys are already finished with the livestock,” she continued with an innocent smile, “you can get the eggs. I haven’t had a chance to get out there for the last of them.”

“Don’t you know it’s not good manners to send dinner guests out to get their hands pecked by those vermin?” Hank asked. The chickens had always seemed to hate him, even when he tried to avoid the occupied nests.

“If you were a bit gentler, they wouldn’t peck you. But you’re right; you handle the chickens and I’ll have Marsh set the table.”

Hank grumbled and went outside. Marsh grinned as he turned toward Karissa, who was opening a cupboard door. “You don’t need to tell me where things are. If I haven’t figured it out after all these years, I’ve been blind and deaf. Besides, your mom keeps telling me I’m like one of her sons.”

Using a Mason jar ring to press out circles of dough, Karissa kept her eyes averted from Marsh’s. “That she does. In which case, you can go help him with the chickens if you’d like.”

“No, I’d rather stay here. Just five places for dinner?”

“Yes.” She listened to him move around the room, setting out plates and glasses, knives and forks, and napkins while she finished the biscuits and popped them in the oven to bake. She pulled the potatoes from the sink, where she had set the pressure cooker to cool when they were done, and prepared to mash them as Marsh pulled a clear glass pitcher from the cupboard and a tray of ice cubes from the freezer.

“Paul not back yet?” he asked.

Karissa’s eyes went to the clock, and she noted it was nearly six. “No, not yet.” Not that she was surprised. There was still another hour until the designated time when Dennis was supposed to have Paul back.

“It must be hard having him go away.”

Karissa’s chest tightened but she kept her voice even. “It can be. But his dad loves him, and Sheryl seems competent.” It took everything in her not to say what she really thought of a woman who would knowingly go out with a married man. But the betrayal was Dennis’s, not Sheryl’s, so Karissa fought to keep her voice even.

“I imagine that makes things harder in a lot of ways.” Marsh’s voice came from right behind her now, and he set his hand on the counter beside her.

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