

Hidden in Shadow

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Hidden in Shadow

Georgia Florey-Evans

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Beecher City, Illinois

This book is dedicated to the most amazing person I know. My husband has stood by me as we became very young parents, when we moved away from all our family and friends, when one precious little boy was taken before he was barely here—through my struggles and illnesses—with no complaints or concern for himself, he has loved me.

I don't have to imagine the heroes in books or on the screen because I have the real hero sharing my life.

Jeff, we've made it through thirty-six years—raising three semi-normal children, spoiling six remarkable grandchildren, and even surviving the most ridiculous dog in the world. RIP Buddy Ray.

I pray we have at least another thirty-six years together. I love you.

Also by Georgia Florey-Evans

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In Shadow Trilogy

Book 1 – Hidden in Shadow

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Book 2 – Living in Shadow

Book 3 – Staying in Shadow

After watching a movie about stalking, I was curious—horrified, but curious. So, being a retired teacher and perpetual student (still taking online classes), I researched.

Reports vary, but according to the Stalking Resource Center, over seven million* people are victims each year. Add to that the three million cyber-stalker victims reported by the National White Collar Crime Center, and we're talking about a lot of people.

Because the crime is so prevalent and laws confusing, legal agencies often have difficulty deciding whose jurisdiction a case is in.

I wondered what would happen to a stalking victim if the local police department was the only law enforcement involved. So, Holly Morris was born and placed in the relatively small community of Shadow, Illinois. I gave her a healthy, loving family, a couple of really good friends, sense of humor, and extremely strong faith.

Then, one of those good friends refused to sit on the sidelines. Luke Walker, a gentle man with deep beliefs and principles, had a story to tell.

Join both of them as they discover the power of love over evil, and the power of God over everything.

*This does not take into account victims too intimidated to come forward, or those who feel embarrassed or even guilty. Estimates range from 1.5-3 million unreported stalking cases per year.

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Also...

Thank you to

Detective John Niccum for

answering all my questions

about how to break the law, and

promising to back me up if my

million internet searches for

such things as how to

poison somebody
were flagged.

You never know where you'll find a blessing.

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God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Psalm 46:1

The Legend of Shadow

Chapter 1

“Hellllllp Meeee!”

A blood-curdling scream followed the equally distressing plea. Holly Morris promptly dropped her laundry basket and wildly looked around. It wasn't until the sound repeated that she realized its source.

“So, you set up speed dial for me, did you?” Her feet slipped and slid as she hurriedly raced across the freshly mopped dining room floor. She should have known better than to let a fourteen-year-old boy “fix up” her new smartphone.

The screaming had just stopped when she finally managed to extract it from her satchel. She no more than had a good grip on the contraption when the stupid thing took off shaking like a hula dancer and screamed bloody murder again. Her helpful student would be summoned to her office first thing Monday morning.

"Hello?"

"Good morning, Holly. Is this a bad time?" Her mom's voice was a pleasant contrast to ear-splitting shrieks.

"No." She took a deep breath and willed her pounding heart to slow down. "I'm just doing laundry. It's nothing that can't wait."

"Well, I talked to Anita Walker a few minutes ago. Has Luke told you about his new...?" As her mom began a Luke Walker promotion worthy of the most aggressive salesman, Holly gazed out the window and idly contemplated the various shapes of cumulus clouds. One in the east resembled a rooster, and that could be a turtle in front of it.

When she figured her mom should be winding down, Holly shifted her focus away from a bunny-shaped cloud appearing to hop across the horizon and tuned back in to her mother's words.

"... Dad and I want you and Luke to join us for lunch tomorrow."

"I'm sorry, Mom, but we can't. Luke just took over the youth group, and I promised to help him tomorrow. I appreciate the invitation, though."

"Well, then we'll plan on having you both out for grilled steaks next Sunday." Nobody could ever fault Susan Morris for a lack of tenacity.

"Okay. I'll talk to Luke about it tomorrow."

After a few more minutes of idle chitchat, the women said their goodbyes.

Holly ruminated over her mother's mule-headedness as she gathered the towels that had flopped out of the basket when it fell. While her mom knew perfectly well Holly and Luke weren't actually a couple, she persisted in using every opportunity to promote a romance between them. Susan was wasting her time. As much as their relationship meant to Holly, that kind of love was not involved.

Her gaze went to a framed photograph on her desk, and she picked it up. Luke's dad took it in the high school lobby right after their graduation. Richard Walker was a certified goofball, and he said something that had both graduates laughing. With Luke's arm casually draped across her shoulders and her gown hiding extra pounds, it was one of her favorite pictures.

She carefully replaced it before retrieving the basket and making her way back across the open space between the dining and living rooms. As she sat and folded laundry, her eyes wandered back to the picture.

Holly and Luke started kindergarten together, and as part of a small class of only thirty-four students, it seemed natural for the two "farm kids" to bond. Then, as they grew, Luke was just there. He was well-liked, and his friendship helped her through some teenage-induced rough patches. Being a plain, slightly overweight, young woman wasn't easy.

It would have been natural to assume they would grow apart while they were in college. After all, she went all the way to Massachusetts, and Luke stayed put, content to attend a school within driving distance. Even so, when she came home for breaks and holidays, there he'd be. And after graduation, when he bought his retiring grandparents' farm, and she was hired as the guidance

counselor for Shadow High School, there he was again.

The sun's rays made it through the picture window and shone on a strawberry-print dish towel in the basket. The sight reminded her of a day not long after she moved back to Shadow. It was the evening Luke took her on their first post-college "date," for want of a better word, and would have made a good sitcom episode.

After a long day of school, she could barely wait to shed her dress and heels in favor of her favorite jeans, faded T-shirt, and bare feet. She had just taken her hair out of its customary twist and was about to give it a much-needed brushing when the doorbell rang. It was all she could do not to shut the door in Luke's face when she found him standing there, amazingly handsome in a pair of khakis and polo shirt.

"I was going to take you out for dinner, but maybe I'm underdressed." His dark green eyes sparkled with mischief.

"Ha, ha." She opened the door farther. "Come in. It will just take me a minute to change clothes."

His expression sobered. "If you're too tired, we can have a pizza delivered."

She was tempted for a moment before good manners kicked in. After working in his fields all day, Luke took the time to get cleaned up. The least she could do was slip into a decent top and pair of slacks. "I'll get ready. Come on in."

Luke laughed all through dinner and continued even after they were on their way home.

"Guess you didn't need to change clothes," he said, taking his eyes off the road long enough to wink.

"Be quiet." Holly stopped scrubbing her pants leg and hesitantly lifted the cloth. Somehow, she wasn't surprised to see an abstract painting of salad dressing and strawberry juice still proudly on display.

"You still have some red stuff between your eyes." The car swerved as Luke reached over and ran his finger across her forehead. "You know, if you wanted a bite of my pie, all you had to do was ask. There was no need to launch a strawberry."

"I did not launch that strawberry on purpose, and you know it, Lucas Ryan Walker." She leaned toward him. "I didn't do any of this intentionally, so stop teasing me."

"Okay." He nodded. "The salad dressing was practically overflowing before you even picked the bottle up. And, the spaghetti was greasy, so it slid right off the fork onto your lap—three times. And, then I tempted you with—"

"Enough!" Holly fought to keep her smile at bay. "You're not exactly Mr. Clean."

"Hey." His smile disappeared. "Fine, Cruella. Not another word."

"Thank you."

"But, next time, just ask for a doggy bag instead of wearing the leftovers home."

After that, they fell into a routine which had now lasted nearly six years. They spent every Friday evening together, and on Wednesdays, he gave her a lift to Bible study. They developed a habit of sitting together at Sunday morning worship, as well, and usually did something for lunch afterward.

Their relationship was unconventional by most people's standards, however; because in no way were they actually dating. They were simply good friends who enjoyed spending time together. Why, Luke had never tried to kiss her, and she didn't know how she'd respond if he did. In fact, other than behavior mandated by gentlemanly manners, he didn't even touch her.

Of course, their shared social life wouldn't last forever. Luke was a charming man with exemplary values. Tall and extremely well-built, with thick, brown hair and a perpetual five o'clock shadow his mother disliked, he was very attractive. The man would have no difficulty finding a girlfriend. She figured if a woman he wanted to date ever came along, he'd let Holly know. The same went for her meeting somebody. Until then, they'd just keep things the way they were. It worked.

She about jumped out of her skin when her phone screamed again. That thing was going to be the death of her yet. She reached across the sofa and picked up the annoying piece of technology.

"Hello."

Her voice was met with silence.

"Hello." Great. Yet another dropped call. Why had she shelled out big bucks for a new smartphone, when she'd apparently be better off with tin cans and kite string?

Then she heard a whisper, so quiet she had to be imagining it—"My Holly." Soft, male laughter filled her ear before the line went dead.

The phone landed on the sofa and bounced between cushions. This couldn't be happening. Please, God, not again.

She took a deep breath. Tears welled in her eyes for a moment before she resolutely blinked them away. Okay. That wasn't a dropped call. The laughter was real. The words—she could explain the words. Her imagination formed them from meaningless sounds.

The stack of hand towels joined the washcloths on the floor as she abruptly stood. It was a prank call. That's all.

Holly paced her living room floor and grasped hold of the idea. That's exactly what it was—a prank. Summer break began in eight weeks, and the students were amped. Since she was responsible for quite a bit of discipline, it made sense they would choose her to torment.

She knelt and resolutely gathered the dropped laundry. Now, she was thinking clearly. This was not her apartment in Tullen, Massachusetts. She was safe and sound in her hometown of Shadow, Illinois.

The pieces of terry cloth landed right back on the floor when her phone emitted yet another agonizing howl. All right. This was ridiculous. It was time to show her students another side of Miss Morris.

"Listen, young man, you are breaking the law. I have caller ID, and after I speak to your father, I may very well contact the sheriff." It was too bad she hadn't gotten around to following the one

hundred-step directions to activate the application; she would really know who this was.

"You must not have checked it this time, because it's me." A rightfully puzzled Tessa Lincoln was on the phone.

The wind went right out of Holly's sails. Here, she used her "mean" voice and everything. "Oh. I thought you were a student playing a prank."

"Which one? I'll fix him." Tessa had been Holly's defender since their teenage years.

"I don't know." She could compile a list of possibilities, but it would probably end up being a copy of the school roster. No halo-wearing teenagers attended Shadow High School.

"But you said you had him on caller ID."

"I know, but I don't have it set up on this new phone." She picked up a handful of linen and slammed it on the sofa. "I thought maybe he'd mess up and give himself away."

"Wait a minute." Tessa's voice was filled with suspicion. "You had a supposed prank call? It's not—"

"No." She kicked the half-empty basket with uncalled for vehemence, turning it on its side. "There's no way. I'm sure it was just some kids."

"But Holly, if it is, you need to—"

"It's not." Her voice came out harsher than she intended. As she finally picked up the basket and dumped its remaining contents on the floor, she managed to calm down. "It just can't be." If only she felt the conviction as strongly as it sounded in her voice.

"Holly—"

"It was just one call." Holly's determination grew.

"The whole mess started with just one call." As Holly's college roommate, Tessa shared every moment of the nightmarish experience. "I went along with you when you asked me not to tell anybody, but I won't help you pretend it didn't happen at all."

Holly swept folded towels and washcloths off the sofa and dropped to her knees, the lone survivor of a towel-filled tornado. "I'm not pretending anything, Tess. I just refuse to let myself be afraid of something as ridiculous as a prank call."

It was probably just as well that Holly couldn't understand what the other woman mumbled before Tessa spoke again. "Okay. Will you promise me one thing, though?"

"If I can." She knew her friend too well to blindly agree.

"Promise me if you get even one more 'prank call,' you'll talk to Mitch. Tell him everything."

Talk to the Shadow County sheriff. Holly stifled a snort. Law enforcement was so helpful before. I'm sorry, Miss Morris, but we simply don't have enough information to take any further action. However, should physical contact be made or a confrontation occur, you give us a call, and we'll be there. Right. And Holly would sit up in her coffin and thank them profusely.

Tessa must have read her mind. "It won't be like Tullen, Holly. We're talking about Mitch, and you know he'll help. You can trust him."

There was probably nothing to worry about, anyway. "Okay."

"Good." Tessa's voice was filled with relief.

"So, what did you call about, Tess?" Her friend wasn't one to make unnecessary calls. She'd be right beside Holly in the "Bring the Telegraph Back" march.

"Oh." Tessa must have needed to shift gears in her thinking. "Have you seen your mail yet?"

"It's too early." She glanced at a clock and was surprised to see it was nearly eleven. "Will doesn't deliver here until around eleven-thirty on Saturdays. Why?"

"I'm sure you'll get the same thing I did." Tessa started speaking faster, a sure indication she was excited. "Jennifer Ewing and Rob Sanders are hosting a ten-year class reunion right here in town, at the high school." The sound of papers shuffling brought a smile to Holly's face. Her friend was the math teacher at Shadow High and had to be the most disorganized person on the planet. "It got me thinking about our classmates. You know, I always thought Sarah Hart would move back and take over her parents' furniture store. And I can't believe Clay Richmond isn't here. He'd have his choice of running an insurance agency or working in real estate."

At the mention of Clay Richmond, Holly developed goose bumps. He was, by far, the most popular boy in their class. With his swoon-worthy blond hair and blue eyes, nearly every girl in the entire high school pined for him. It shamed her to think she was one of them. Of course, he would never give more than a passing glance to somebody like plain Jane, Holly Morris. A man who chose a woman for her looks wasn't the kind of guy she wanted to be with anyway.

"So, I take it you're going to this reunion."

The paper noises stopped. "So are you. We'll go together, or Luke will bring you. Just think how some of those women like Lucy Phillips will feel when they see how you look now."

"Appearances aren't what matter, Tess."

"I know, I know." Tessa's exasperated sigh was a little dramatic. "But you have to admit you've come a long way from the high school Holly Morris. You were always pretty, but after you lost weight and learned how to fix your hair and wear makeup, you blossomed."

She had to admit most of her classmates would be surprised. Not that their opinions really mattered, but it might feel good to see their reactions. "When is it?"

"Oh, it's not for a month." Unsurprisingly, the excitement had disappeared from Tessa's voice. Patience was not one of her virtues. "I guess they want to give the people who'll travel plenty of notice."

"I'll mark my calendar." Of course, to do that, she'd have to get up off the floor. "I'd better go, Tess. I have another load of laundry coming out of the dryer in fifteen minutes, and I still haven't folded this one." In fact, she'd flopped the towels around so much they probably needed a second washing.

"I need to get busy, too. I have three classes worth of homework assignments to grade, and if

writing skills were the only necessary qualification, there would be a ton of doctors in my classes. Scribbles, I tell you."

"Okay. I'll see you at church in the morning."

"Yeah." There was a brief pause. "Don't forget your promise about the phone call, Holly."

Amid the normalcy of their conversation, she had put the unpleasant phone call and horrible memories it instilled completely out of her mind. Nevertheless, she promised. "I'll remember."

"Okay. Bye."

Holly looked around her at the haphazard spiral of towels and washcloths and decided the floor was as good of a place as any to sit and fold the poor, mistreated things.

A class reunion. It was difficult to imagine seeing all the people she attended school and graduated with. Tyler Brady and Sally Young were voted class sweethearts during senior year. Did they even see each other anymore? And what happened to tiny Kim Feldhake? She was so petite her mom had to alter a graduation gown before Kim could wear it. And, Tom Dwer and Kevin Tripp—those two were always in trouble, with Tom being the brains—although not very efficient ones since they were constantly getting caught—and Kevin the brawn. She couldn't remember hearing Kevin speak more than two or three words at a time.

She pictured other classmates as she once more folded laundry. Each of them was bound to have changed during the past ten years.

And as for the identity of her caller, she'd just listen at school. Whoever phoned wouldn't be happy unless he could brag about it.

There was nothing in Shadow to worry about.

Was there?

Chapter 2

"Hey, Clarence, whatta you say? Ready to go in and get some food in our stomachs?" Luke Walker patted the scruffy neck on his five-year-old, Heinz Fifty-seven dog. The large, multi-hued mutt's floppy ears went back as he nuzzled his owner's hand.

Clarence didn't know he wasn't a full-blooded show dog, and he frequently turned up his nose at lesser animals. Luke was accustomed to receiving dirty looks from other pet owners in the vet's waiting room.

Luke's mom, Anita, still had fits about Clarence living in the house, even though Luke had kept him inside since the day he rescued the rambunctious puppy from the pound. She said he was too big and hairy for a house dog. Luke figured she knew he wasn't going to kick his dog out at this stage of the game, so maybe she just felt it was her maternal obligation to object. Besides, as Luke kept

reminding his mom, every farmer needed a good watchdog. Of course, should anybody ever break in, that's most likely what Clarence would do—watch. He was a chummy animal unless he was around Holly.

If Holly came out to spend an afternoon, Clarence was never more than a few feet from her. And when Luke's dad started to give her a friendly hug one day, Clarence immediately inserted himself between them, growling ferociously at Richard. Naturally, Luke's mom made the most of the opportunity and suggested perhaps Holly would benefit from Clarence's presence in her home. Well aware of Anita's ongoing campaign to remove the dog from her son's house, Holly politely declined. She doubted her small abode would suit a dog Clarence's size. Besides, he was a farm dog.

Holly. Her radiant smile—the brilliance of a sunrise. And he could see his dreams come true in those perfectly shaped eyes the color of chestnuts. Holly was always pretty, but when she let her long, silken locks of dark chocolate fall tantalizingly over her shoulders and down her back, her beauty took his breath away.

What was he going to do about her? He had been in love with Holly Morris since they were in high school, and she never considered him as anything more than a friend. From her perspective, she was doing him a favor when she chose his furniture and decorated his house, but he intended for it to feel like home to her. Scratch that. He wanted it to be home to her.

"I'm a big chicken, huh, Clarence?" His dog looked at him and appeared to nod his head. Or maybe he was excited because he saw his dog food. Luke chuckled as he poured some in Clarence's dish. He picked up the bright orange bowl to fill it with fresh water. "It's not like I haven't thought about kissing her. Many times. It just seems like every time I work up the gumption, she says something about us being friends. At least if we're friends, I get to see her." He set the water bowl beside Clarence's food and then went to the refrigerator and pulled out the fixings for a sandwich.

"See, Clarence, if I tell her how I really feel, it's liable to scare her off." Luke slathered two slices of bread with mayonnaise. "And then she wouldn't go anywhere with me."

Clarence looked up from devouring his food and snorted.

"Well, she wouldn't." Luke finished making his sandwiches. "She'd stop going to church with me and letting me take her out every Friday. I bet she'd even stop going to Bible study with me." He pulled a bag of chips from the cabinet. "Let alone come out here to spend a Sunday afternoon. Then, you'd never get to see her either. How do you feel about that?"

He sat at the table and began to eat his lunch. In Holly's eyes, they weren't even dating, so there was no way he could ask for any kind of commitment. He was ready now, though. It had taken over four years to get the farm on its feet, but it was earning a steady profit. He could provide a comfortable, stable home for a wife. If he could just get the woman he loved to marry him.

"You home, Son?" Richard Walker's voice came from the back door.

"In here, Dad!" Why wasn't his father spending Saturday afternoon out in the fields?

"Got any more of that stuff?" Richard eagerly eyed Luke's lunch as he walked into the kitchen.

"Yes I do, but Mom will kill both of us if she finds out you're eating bologna and chips. You know what the doctor said."

Richard walked to the cabinet and took out a glass. "Guess I'll settle for some tea then." He pulled the pitcher Luke kept brewed sweet tea in from the refrigerator.

Tea wouldn't fill an empty stomach. "I can probably find something healthier." Luke started to stand.

"No." His dad waved him back down. "I already ate lunch." He scrunched his nose in disgust. "If you can call a bowl of rabbit food with little pieces of chicken tossed in lunch."

Luke hid a smile by taking a bite of his sandwich. His dad's insurance company made him go in for a complete physical. The poor guy's cholesterol was through the roof, so he was placed on a restricted diet. Doc Tindell didn't have to worry about Richard following his instructions; Anita strictly enforced them. They didn't even keep "unhealthy" food in their house anymore.

"Been in the fields?" Luke asked between bites.

Richard ran a hand over his graying buzz cut. "Just came in to eat. Then your mom sent me over here."

That was odd. "What's going on a phone call wouldn't have worked?"

"I have something to give you." An enigmatic smile appeared as he dug into his jean's pocket.

Luke's curiosity was piqued. His birthday had been less than two months ago, and there was no other special occasion he knew of. He finished off his second sandwich and waited.

"Your grandparents mailed this up to me a while back. They told me to give it to you when I thought it was time." The corners of his mouth quirked upward. "Your mom informed me I think it's time."

Both his father and grandpa were jokesters, so it was hard telling what his dad was holding. Luke was probably being set up for a knee-slapper.

"What is it?" This wouldn't be the first time he was the butt of one of their jokes. It took nearly a solid week with no sleep for ten-year-old Luke to discover the masks on raccoons did not turn white at night. And yet another to determine owls didn't yell "who?" and "you" back and forth between them.

"We-ell." It was obvious the older man intended to draw out the suspense as long as he could. "Remember how your Grandpa and Grandma Walker eloped?"

"Great-Grandpa Simmons thought Grandpa was worthless." Heaven knew Luke had heard that particular refrain many, many times. "He climbed a ladder to Grandma's room, and they ran off to get married." And Grandpa didn't know his britches were split until the preacher told him after the vows. "What does that have to do with what you're giving me?"

"After Mom and Pop were married, her father had a change of heart. Suddenly, my dad could do no wrong."

"Grandpa told me that before." Okay. His grandparents had told their son to bore Luke to death. "I still don't understand, Dad."

Richard's eyes twinkled as he continued at his own pace. "What you don't know is my grandpa

Simmons gave my mom and dad a present. Something very special that had been in the Simmons family for at least four generations.”

And now for the punchline. It was probably a family handkerchief—used, of course.

“He gave them this.” Luke’s dad held out his hand and opened it. There, lay the most delicate ring Luke had ever seen.

“Take it.” His father’s voice was soft now.

It was so dainty, Luke was almost afraid to pick it up. Then, it looked even more fragile grasped between his thumb and finger. Upon close examination, he could see the band was comprised of tiny, interweaving threads of silver, giving it a lace-like appearance. The stone was unusual. It was cut with facets like a diamond, but instead of being clear, every color of the rainbow seemed to sparkle in it.

“What is this?” He held it toward his dad. “It’s not a diamond, but it looks valuable.”

Richard shrugged. “Nobody knows. I suppose you could take it to a jeweler and find out, but I guess none of our ancestors ever cared enough to do that. What it represents is more important.”

Luke understood. “Family and love.”

“Exactly.” His father stood.

“Wait, Dad.” Luke rose to his feet. “Why are Grandpa and Grandma giving this to me instead of Ellie or Lucy?” Either of his cousins would love the ring. “And what did you mean about it being time?”

A knowing smile appeared on the older man’s face. “Your grandparents love Holly. They’ll expect to see that ring on her finger the next time they visit.”

“But, Dad—”

“You’ve been dating for several years, and in love with her a lot longer than that. Don’t you think you’ve waited long enough?”

Maybe he could talk to somebody besides Clarence about his predicament.

“I would ask Holly to marry me in a heartbeat, but she doesn’t see me as more than a friend. If I let on how I really feel about her, she’s going to end everything.” Even saying the words made him sad. “And I’d rather have her in my life as a friend than not at all.”

“Have you prayed?” Richard asked solemnly.

“Fervently.” He figured the good Lord was probably tired of hearing his sob story, but he kept praying anyway.

His dad’s hand felt warm when he placed it on Luke’s shoulder. “Well, then, if God means for the two of you to be together, it’ll work out. And I don’t think he’d put it in your heart so strongly if it wasn’t meant to be.”

"I hope you're right, Dad." He looked at the ring, already picturing it on Holly's slender finger. "I really hope you're right."

Chapter 3

"Whether we're looking at that homeless person standing on the corner asking for food or money; or a man in a three-piece suit stepping out of a luxury car, who do we see? Who do we really see? If we see them as we are supposed to, we'll see God's children, no better or worse than you or me. I pray as we leave church this morning, we'll remember that. Amen."

Pastor Rollins sat behind the lectern as the pianist began to play. Holly looked at the hymnal Luke was holding for them to share, but her mind was still on the sermon. Her job was sometimes challenging. It was difficult when kids like Billy Andrews strutted into her office, all bluster and attitude. She needed to look past the exterior to the uncertain young man behind it, a fourteen-year-old with no idea whether his mom would be sober when he got home from school.

The boy didn't even have his dad to depend on. Cliff Andrews was overseas in the military, on some kind of extended mission with no leave. Instead of finding strength and being there for her children, Gina Andrews chose to lose her worries in alcohol. There were a few times when, had Billy's paternal grandmother not stepped in to take care of him and his younger sister, the children would have been placed in a foster home. Holly had nothing against the system, but familial custody was much better.

"You okay?" Luke whispered loudly as he looked at her with concern on his face.

She tried to smile as she silently nodded. It was too bad Billy wasn't in their church youth group. Luke would be an excellent role model for the teenager.

Luke's eyes searched hers for a moment before he resumed singing. She focused on the words and joined in.

After forcing herself to pay attention to the service, the rest passed quickly. She soon found herself in front of Luke on their way out of the building.

"Good morning, Holly." A bright smile accompanied the pastor's hearty handshake. "I hear you and Luke have a big day planned."

"You know me. I'll use any excuse to spend a day at the preserve."

The minister looked over Holly's head at Luke. "And, I'm sure you're every bit as anxious."

Luke answered him. "I just hope I haven't taken on more than I can handle, Pastor. These teenagers need somebody to lead them on the right path and keep it interesting enough they want to stay there."

Pastor Rollins' smile didn't dim as he responded. "And that's exactly why you're the fellow for the

job. You see that need.”

Holly glanced at Luke as she finally reclaimed her hand and gave him his turn with the minister. She couldn't keep the smile from her face as she saw the tell-tale redness creeping up toward the brown hair resting on Luke's neck. If he weren't so darkly tanned from spending most of his time outdoors, he'd undoubtedly be as red as a Christmas ornament about now. And with his green eyes, he could really get into the season. A giggle escaped before she could stop it.

“What's so funny?” Luke took her arm and led her out into the sunshine.

“Nothing.” She smiled brightly as she fought laughter. He would not be flattered by a comparison to holiday decor.

“Well, I hope you can keep that attitude after we're with the kids for a couple of hours. You know the Chambers boy can be a handful, and in case you didn't notice, Amy Brock isn't exactly dressed appropriately for a fourteen-year-old.” Luke's hand felt warm against her back as they walked farther out on the sidewalk.

She thought about the young lady's home situation. “I'm not sure Amy has any other kind of clothes to wear. Her mother provides a wardrobe designed for more...mature females.” And much too sophisticated for Holly's taste.

They both stopped talking as the young lady in question walked by. Amy's dress was cut very low and way too short, and if her heels weren't at least four inches, Holly would yodel the Doxology next Sunday. Appreciative glances from too many males, both young and old, followed her.

Luke dropped his hand from Holly's back and stepped around to face her. “I understand what you're saying.” With a skeptical lift of his brow, he crossed his arms. “But don't tell me the boys won't get in a dither over that.”

“Did Holly tell you about the steak dinner next Sunday?” Susan Morris, with Holly's dad, Tony, beside her, grasped Luke's arm.

“No.” Luke uncrossed his arms, and his frown was replaced by a broad smile. “But if Tony's grilling steak, I'm there.”

Holly probably ground some enamel off her teeth over her mother's ecstasy. It was too bad Susan couldn't date Luke.

“Plan on coming right after church.” Susan let go of Luke's arm and smiled at her daughter. “Why don't you let Luke drive you? There's no sense in using two vehicles, is there? Gas being so high.”

“Mom, Luke always drives me when we go someplace.” She actually had to point that out? What was her mother up to now?

“You know, it's senseless for Luke to bring you all the way back to town.” Susan was trying to look innocent but wasn't quite pulling it off. “Why don't you plan on staying at the farm, and your dad will drive you home first thing Monday morning? Your room is still ready.”

Oh. If Susan Morris couldn't marry her daughter off, she'd keep her at home. Holly's dad had finally put his foot down and told his wife their daughter was an adult. He even co-signed the loan for her house.

"I don't mind bringing Holly back to town." Luke seemed to sense her discontent. "If I ask nicely enough, I may even get her to go for ice cream with me after we're back."

Of course, that more than appeased Susan. In her eyes, they would be extending their "date."

"Susie-Q, we need to go if we're going to speak to the Lincolns. You said you needed to ask Teresa about a recipe, and I wanted to run some ideas about pasturing the dairy cows past Max." Tony caught his daughter's eye and winked. Why couldn't her mom be more supportive, like her dad?

"We'll see you next week then." Susan turned and walked beside her husband to where Tessa's parents stood.

"I brought work duds for this afternoon." Luke indicated the dress shirt and slacks he was wearing. "It'll only take me a few minutes to change. Maybe you can catch Tessa while I'm gone."

She had just turned to find her friend when Mitch Landon's twin sister, Melissa, appeared in front of her.

"Did you get your invitation?" Missy practically bubbled over with enthusiasm.

It seemed Tessa had a kindred spirit. "If you mean for our class reunion, then, yes, it came yesterday."

"Isn't it exciting?" Melissa pushed her long, auburn hair back off her shoulders. "I haven't seen most of our classmates since graduation. Aren't you curious how they turned out?" A mischievous grin appeared. "I think it would be funny if Miss Perfect Lucy Phillips has to wear spandex to zip her jeans."

"Melissa." Holly had to fight the smile she felt rising as she pictured the most attractive female student in their class wearing a support garment. "We're supposed to see others through God's Eyes. Weren't you listening to Pastor Rollins?"

"Sure." Missy's smile didn't diminish. "Who says I can't still see her in a girdle?"

"You're hopeless. You know that, don't you?" She liked Missy. Although not close in school, since college they had developed a strong friendship. Maybe it was because they both chose to stay in Shadow. Guidance counselors and accountants were employable just about anywhere, but Shadow was home.

"Thank heavens, Joe doesn't think so." Melissa had been dating Joe Willis for nearly two years. "I think he's about ready to pop the question. Mitch saw him at the jewelry store in Pattinton last week. I can't imagine any other reason for Joe to be at a jewelry store, can you?"

Actually, she could imagine many other reasons for Joe to be at a jewelry store. His watch may need repairs; he could be picking something up for his parents. It was hard telling. She found herself unsure what to say, though. Holly didn't want to hurt her friend, but she had no desire to help set her up for a tremendous disappointment. "What makes you think he'd be getting ready to propose now? It's not Valentine's Day or anything."

"Next Saturday is our anniversary. We'll have been dating for exactly two years. I think it's the perfect time for a proposal, don't you?"

"It would be romantic." Joe had better have something planned for next Saturday, or he was going

to have a very upset girlfriend on his hands. "Are you helping at the nature preserve this afternoon?"

Missy wrinkled her nose. "No way. I'm not going to hang around and bait hooks or walk on trails. Worms are disgusting, and I get poison ivy if I so much as look at it."

If that were the case, marrying a man who would soon be the sole owner of a nature preserve might result in some interesting situations. "I'm helping Luke. I guess it'll just be the three of us." She had hoped Melissa would be there. Holly was comfortable enough with Luke and Joe, but the presence of another female would be nice.

"So, when is Luke going to pop the question?" Missy's eyes sparkled. "You two have been an item for what? Six years?"

What was going on? "Luke and I are just good friends. You know that."

"Sorry, but I don't buy it."

Something occurred to Holly. "Have you been talking to my mom?"

"Nope." Missy focused her gaze on something behind Holly. "I just don't think you two would be together so much if you weren't in love. That's all."

"Well, you're wrong." She would just put a stop to this before it got started. "Luke and I are only friends. Friends. You can ask him. He'll tell you."

"He'll tell her what?" Luke's voice came from behind Holly, startling her.

Now, with Luke right there, even the mention of them being more than friends was embarrassing. "Nothing. Are you ready? I still need to stop at home and change clothes."

For just a moment, it looked like he was going to press on, but he didn't. "Okay. Let's get this show on the road."

"Yes. Let's do." Holly ignored Missy's smug smile and set off beside Luke as they headed for his vehicle. Her friend's vehicle.

Chapter 4

Luke yawned as he pulled his Jeep into the garage. The day had gone better than he expected. Of course, just as he predicted, the boys had their eyes glued on Amy Brock when they should have been watching their fishing lines. Even the modest clothes Holly brought for the girl to change into failed to make a difference. He honestly thought they were going to run out of bait way too soon since the boys kept letting their hooks get cleaned off.

And, if he didn't know Joe Willis was seriously involved with Missy Landon, he might have been jealous. When Ronnie Chambers pulled his pole back to cast, the hook caught Joe's cap and flung it

into the pond. Instead of being upset or scolding Ronnie for being careless, Joe stomped to the edge of the dock and yelled at the worm. "Your head is not big enough for my hat! Give it back, you little wiggler!" Everybody was in stitches, but Luke only had eyes for Holly. Laughter and a smile increased her beauty.

He stood back as he opened the door so Clarence could come out for his nightly romp. As Luke turned to watch his dog, a movement off to his right and down by the machine shed caught his eye. He let the door close and headed that direction.

"Somebody out here?" He wasn't certain, but his impression was of something too tall for an animal. "Who's there?"

Luke stopped in front of the machine shed. Something didn't seem right. He moved closer. That was it. The door, which he kept locked more for safety than security, stood ajar by a couple of inches. "Who's there?" he repeated, pulling the door the rest of the way open.

Clarence appeared, a barking mass of fur, just as something, somebody, rammed into Luke. Because he wasn't prepared, he lost his footing and went down hard. Luke tried to grab the other guy's leg, but his hand hit empty air. Before he could get back on his feet, the figure disappeared into the northern tree line, Clarence yipping in hot pursuit.

Luke's first instinct was to chase his attacker down, but common sense told him it would be a waste of time. Whoever it was ran too fast; he was long gone. And he may not have been alone. Luke was around six-two and well-muscled from hard physical labor, but he wasn't strong enough to take on a group of men. Or weapons.

"Let's see what he was up to." Clarence reappeared, breathing hard. Even in the aftermath, Luke couldn't help but be surprised by his dog's courage. He slowly pulled the door open and reached in to hit the light switch.

"Oh, no." Somebody had been in there all right. And they used way more than the two cans of spray paint Luke saw lying on the ground. Obscene language was painted on nearly every surface of the building, and his equipment. Even the glass on the cab of his tractor had writing on it. Who would do something like this?

He pulled the phone out of his pocket and dialed. His buddy Mitch Landon picked up on the second ring.

"Sheriff Landon here."

"Mitch, this is Luke. I had a break-in and some vandalism out here in my machine shed this evening.

"You okay, Luke?"

"Yeah. I don't think anything is missing or damaged, but I figure I'll need a police report for insurance. Somebody emptied more than one can of spray paint in here."

"Did you see anything suspicious?" Luke could tell Mitch was already in motion as he spoke.

"You could say that." Clarence's front feet landed on Luke's chest, and a rough tongue slathered across his nose. "Knock it off, Clarence." Luke shoved the dog's face away.

"Beg your pardon?" *

CHRISTIAN ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

A reunion, a stalker, and a vengeful man—what's a woman to do? If that woman is Holly Morris, she relies on her faith, friends, and a dog named Clarence.

After six years of peace, Holly's college stalker has returned with a vengeance. If she doesn't remember she belongs to him, somebody is going to be hurt. To add to her fun life, the man she helps turn in for child abuse blames her for everything, and he's going to get even—threatening to "finish her off." With a reunion of students who barely looked at chubby girl, Holly Morris, coming up, she's about at the end of her rope. It's a good thing the Lord has provided a support system to keep her from falling.

Luke Walker has loved Holly as long as he can remember. He protected her from bullies in school, and he'll protect her from the monsters after her now—even while dealing with threats and vandalism on his farm. Nobody is going to scare him away from Holly. When he lets his beloved Heinz 57 dog, Clarence, spend nights as her watchdog, everybody feels better. The amiable giant has always gone into killer mode when he thought anyone was too close to Holly.

Join Holly and Luke as they discover the depth of friendship and love—and that God's love is stronger than any evil.

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