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Who I Am with You

Prologue

Boise, Idaho

"Jessica?" Her mother's voice seemed to come from a great distance. "Darling, what are you doing up here?"

Jessica Mason blinked as she pulled her thoughts from the funeral. Not her grandmother's, the one she'd attended that very morning, but the one that had happened on an icy December afternoon five months earlier. Joe ... Angela ... A large casket beside a much smaller one.

She swallowed the threatening tears, the pain hot in her chest.

The mattress gave as her mother sat beside her on the bed. Then an arm went around her shoulders. "It's hard."

Jessica nodded, knowing her mom truly understood. Understood that it wasn't her grandmother she'd been remembering, although it should have been. Knew but didn't judge. "I loved Grandma Frani so much."

"Of course, you did."

"But I wish I'd gone home after ... after the service. I didn't expect the memories to come flooding back the way they have." She took a long, slow breath and released it, afterward whispering, "Mom, why does it still hurt so much?"

"Why do you think it shouldn't? You lost a husband and a daughter. And five months is not very long ago." Her mother's arm tightened, and then silence filled the room.

At long last Jessica said, "I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry, dear. We can't shut off our feelings whenever we want. They are what they are."

"Oh, Mom."

Again her mother's arm tightened. "There's something your grandmother left for you. Wait here while I get it."

Alone again, Jessica grabbed a tissue and pressed it against her eyes. A few deep breaths helped her feel as if she might gain control of her careening emotions.

Five months. She cupped a hand over her rounded belly, remembering the angry words she and Joe had exchanged the morning he and Angela died. Words she hadn't shared with another soul. Not even her mom. Pain sliced through her, along with guilt. Guilt because if she and Joe hadn't fought, perhaps her husband and daughter would still be alive. Pain because if her husband had lived, he still wouldn't be with her today.

"Here we are." Her mom reentered the room. She sat on the bed beside Jessica, running a hand over the worn cover of the large Bible that now rested on her lap. "Grandma Frani left this for you."

A chill passed through Jessica's heart. A feeling of loneliness, of being set adrift.

"The night before she died, your grandma told me to give this to you after her funeral." Her mom's voice was soft, almost reverent, as she spoke. "This Bible belonged to her father, Andrew Henning. He said it was Mom's until the day God told her to give it to someone else in the family, and then that person was to have it until the day God said to pass it along again. And so on and so on." She slid the Bible from her lap to Jessica's. "My Grandpa Andrew didn't have a lot of money or material possessions to leave as a legacy to his descendants. But he had his faith to share, even with those who would come long after he was gone." She patted the cover of the Bible. "Because it's in here."

"Mom—"

"Let what you find inside bless you, honey. Let it comfort and teach you."

Bitterness burned Jessica's tongue, but she swallowed it because she had to. Because she didn't want her mom to know how far she'd wandered. From God. From His word. From believing or even from hoping.

"Okay, Mom," she whispered at long last. "Okay."

Thursday, October 24, 1929

Kuna, Idaho

Late afternoon sunlight filtered through the windows of the small Methodist church, casting a golden glow over the bride and groom as well as the family and friends who had gathered to witness the exchange of vows between Andrew Henning and Helen Greyson.

Andrew had fallen in love with Helen almost the instant they'd met in late autumn of 1924. She'd been sixteen at the time. Too young for him, he'd told himself, and life too complicated. He'd been nearly twenty and preparing to leave for his first semester of college up in Moscow. He'd had no time for romance. He'd needed to stay focused on one thing—obtaining his degree.

And yet romance had blossomed between them, despite the distance and long absences. Over the next four and a half years, they'd written countless letters to each other. He'd studied and held down a part time job and dreamed of the day she would become his bride.

Today was that day. Five long years after first meeting her.

As he looked at Helen now, he knew there had never been a more beautiful bride. Her dark hair was mostly hidden by the white of her veil, but nothing concealed the rosy blush in her cheeks as she promised to love, honor, and obey him.

How was I lucky enough to win her heart? How did I ever convince her to wait for me?

It amazed him every time he thought about it. He was twenty-four years old, a university graduate—the first in his family to earn a college degree—and recently employed by a bank in Boise. His income was good, and his future seemed bright. Still, Helen could have had her pick of much more successful men, had she wanted to, but she hadn't wanted to. She'd chosen him. She loved him.

He wouldn't ever let her regret that choice. Not ever. When he'd proposed, he promised her a good life, full of all kinds of modern conveniences and luxuries, and he meant to keep those promises. Nothing would keep him from it.

Chapter 1

Hope Springs, Idaho

The drive through Hope Springs took Ridley Chesterfield all of about a minute or so, even at only fifteen miles per hour. Downtown consisted of a few small retail shops, including a grocery store, and a large local government building that appeared to house the post office, the mayor's office, and the police station. Off the main drag, he caught sight of a couple of school buildings, as well as a town park. No traffic lights. No parking meters. A slice of Mayberry RFD.

His mom had told him the town had charm. He would have to trust her on that.

After arriving at the log house a short while later, he unlocked the front door and stepped inside. The air was cool, the room cloaked in shadows. Rather than reaching for the light switch, he stepped over to the nearest window and opened the blinds, letting daylight spill into the sparsely furnished room.

His mom and stepfather—they currently lived and worked in Arizona—had purchased this property a couple of months before. Located in a remote mountain valley north of Boise, it was to be their vacation home until they retired from their respective jobs a decade or so from now. Then they planned to live in Hope Springs year round.

Ironic, wasn't it? A man without hope taking refuge in a town with that name. A laugh devoid of humor escaped his throat.

His mom had told him the two-story house had a similar charm as the town, and he supposed she was right about that. But it also needed work, both inside and out, and for that he was thankful. The more things he had to do to keep himself busy, the better. And the more physical the labor, the better. Anything to keep him from dwelling on the circumstances that had brought him there. The less he thought about that, also the better.

“Whatever is true,” he reminded himself aloud, “whatever is honorable, whatever is right, dwell on these things.”

Easier said than done. For the past few weeks, he'd waffled between regret and rage, between the need to justify himself and the desire to beat himself up for his own stupidity and blind trust. Dwelling on what was true, honorable, right, and whatever else that verse in Philippians said was a whole lot harder than he'd imagined.

Clenching his jaw, he did his best to shut off his thoughts altogether. Instead, he concentrated

on a tour of the house.

The lower level had a large great room with vaulted ceilings and a stone fireplace, a spacious kitchen and dining area, a bathroom with a soaking tub, and a master bedroom. Upstairs, he found an open area set up as a small library with bookshelves and two comfortable chairs. A window provided a spectacular view of the northern end of the valley. On either side of the library was a bedroom. And finally, there was another bathroom, this one with a shower but no tub.

"Use the master bedroom," his mom had told him. "We don't have our vacation planned until the end of August."

Now that he was inside the house, he knew he wouldn't follow her instructions. It wouldn't feel right. No, he would take one of the upstairs rooms. That way, if he was still in residence come the end of August—

Ridley closed his eyes and drew in a slow breath. Better not to put a timetable on anything. Next month. Next year. Who knew how long it would be before he was left alone to find new employment? Surely the news-mongers and Internet trolls would turn their attention elsewhere before too long—he was a small fish in a big pond—but that didn't mean his troubles with the campaign wouldn't follow him around when it came to finding a job.

With a grunt, he headed down the stairs and went outside to retrieve his things from the car. Suitcases and duffle bags had been packed in a hurry. He hadn't cared about organization once he'd made his decision to leave Boise. Hopefully, he would manage to find his toothbrush before bedtime.

Lucky for him, his mom and stepfather had furnished the house shortly after buying it, complete with sheets and blankets for the beds and all the necessary dishes, utensils, and appliances for the kitchen. All Ridley needed to do was make a quick trip into Hope Springs for some grocery items to stock the fridge and pantry, and he would be set.

"Might as well get that over with." He dropped the last duffle bag on the floor of his new bedroom.

He headed back outside, car keys in hand and a baseball cap pulled low on his forehead.

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Jessica Mason had fallen in love with Hope Springs the moment she'd seen it a decade ago. She and Joe had moved to the small mountain town a few weeks after their wedding, happily settling into their fixer-upper on several acres of land. In no time at all, they had become a part of the community. Jessica hadn't even minded those times when Joe traveled for work. She'd been busy with making their house a home as well as becoming involved in their church and the local

community. She'd made friends with a number of young wives. Her days had been full—and ever more so after the birth of Angela. Her life had been everything she'd dreamed it should be.

But Joe hadn't been as happy as Jessica. When that had changed, she didn't know for certain. She felt she should be able to pinpoint the moment he'd stopped loving her, but she couldn't.

Shoving away the painful memories, Jessica entered the grocery store on the eastern edge of Hope Springs, her shopping list in hand. She never took her time or browsed as she once had. She shopped quickly and went straight home. After the accident, it had been instinctive. She hadn't been able to bear the words of condolence she'd heard over and over again. Now, it was habit. Her mom had told her more than once that it wasn't healthy to isolate herself. Maybe not, but Jessica preferred it that way. It was less painful. Besides, when she was with people, she had to pretend too much. She had to lie too often. It was better to spend her days creating in her studio, working at her computer, and running her online shop where she sold her crafts and paintings. Better to be alone than to be reminded of all she'd lost.

In the produce department she was looking at the tomatoes when another cart bumped into hers.

"Oh. Sorry."

She glanced up. The stranger was tall and broad-shouldered, well-developed biceps straining the sleeves of his T-shirt, but his baseball cap and dark glasses hid his eyes. "It's all right," she said, thankful it wasn't someone she knew.

He gave her a quick nod before moving on.

Jessica reached for another tomato, then looked over her shoulder in time to see the man fill a plastic bag with plums. He didn't check for soft spots or to see if they were too green or too ripe. He simply loaded the bag, not seeming to care about quality.

Men. She returned her attention to the tomatoes.

It took her about fifteen minutes to finish her shopping, pay for her groceries, and get her few bags into the back of her SUV. Once upon a time, she'd loved to discover new recipes and shop for the ingredients. She used to spend hours in the kitchen, cooking to please her husband. These days, she cared little about what she ate. For the baby's sake, she tried to eat healthy, but she preferred whatever was quick and simple. She had no one to please, no one to impress.

Once home and everything put away, she tried to immerse herself in her latest art project, but she couldn't seem to concentrate on it. Giving up, she went outside to weed her flowerbeds.

She was nearly finished when a familiar but unexpected sound reached her ears. She straightened, resting on her heels, and looked toward the neighboring property. The log house—about an acre away from her own—had stood empty for almost two years. Then, in early April, the For Sale sign had come down. She'd wondered who bought it, but the house had continued to stand empty. Until now.

A man, wearing Levis and a white T-shirt, wielded an ax with expertise, chopping the logs that had been long ago stacked near the shed and covered with a tarp. A good neighbor would have crossed the acre that separated them to say hello and introduce herself. A good neighbor might have taken over a plate of fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies. But Jessica had forgotten how to be a good neighbor.

She stood, at the same time removing her gardening gloves, and went back inside.

Monday, November 11, 1929

Boise, Idaho

Andrew stood outside the bank's entrance, a cold wind blowing through his coat and another through his soul. When he'd kissed Helen goodbye that morning, he'd been employed. Now he wasn't. They'd used most of his savings for their honeymoon to the Oregon coast. It hadn't seemed extravagant at the time. Now he wished they'd been more prudent.

He pulled his coat collar up around his neck as he turned and began to follow the sidewalk in the direction of his automobile.

"I'll find another job," he whispered as he walked.

How difficult could it be? Certainly what happened in the stock market a few weeks earlier had shaken financial institutions throughout the country, but it wouldn't last. And besides, he didn't *have* to work for a bank. His degree qualified him for many positions in industry or even in local or state government. He had the promise of good recommendations even if his work experience was limited. He would find another job soon enough.

Although his thoughts were meant to bolster his self-confidence, he dreaded telling his wife of less than three weeks that he was now unexpectedly unemployed.

He frowned and his footsteps slowed. As a bank employee, he'd been aware of the recession hitting the country earlier in the year, but he hadn't thought it would last. He hadn't thought it would worsen. He hadn't expected a crash or that men would throw themselves out of tall buildings over it. Certainly he hadn't expected that any of it would affect him personally. How wrong he'd been.

Another blast of cold air struck him, and he hurried on.

The drive home didn't take long. Andrew parked his Model T Ford in a space off the alley and walked to the rear of the large home, then went down the ten steps to the basement apartment he'd rented shortly before his wedding day. Since returning from their honeymoon, Helen had been happily making their little place as attractive as possible. There was the living room with its cold, tiled floor, an eating nook, a kitchen one could barely turn around in, a bathroom just large enough for the sink, toilet, and shower stall, plus one bedroom. Helen moved furniture on an almost daily basis, fussing over this and that while making lists of things she wanted to purchase when possible. In fact, she was pushing the sofa to a new location when he opened the door and stepped inside.

"Helen."

She gasped and whirled around. Her hand went to her throat as she let out a breath. "Andrew. For heaven's sake. You startled me. What are you doing home at this hour?"

He removed his hat and hung it on the rack near the door. His coat followed it.

"Andrew?"

He met her gaze again. "I'm afraid I have some bad news."

"Bad news?"

"Helen, I've lost my position at the bank."

Her face paled. "But why?"

As he walked across the room, he wondered if his bride ever looked at the newspaper. Then again, he always read the newspaper, and he'd still been caught off-guard.

"Andrew?"

He took hold of her shoulders. "The bank must take cost-savings measures because of what happened in the stock market. Cutting back on employees is where they started. I was among those they let go today." He drew her close. "Don't worry. They've promised me an excellent recommendation. I'll find another position soon."

God, don't let that be a lie.

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