

# Robin Lee HATCHER



## Keeper of the Stars

### Prologue

*September 30*

An unusually cold wind cut through the Kings Meadow cemetery on the day they laid Penny's brother, Bradley Evan Cartwright, to rest. It felt as if it cut through her heart as well, slicing her in two. She would never again see her little brother's sweet smile. She would never again hear him laugh. She would never again have to be on the alert for one of his practical jokes.

*And I'll never get to tell him I'm sorry for the things I said in anger.*

Seated beside her in the front row of mourners, her dad put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close to his side. It was meant to be a comforting gesture, but it was pointless for him to try. She couldn't be comforted. Not for this.

Reverend Tom Butler ended his graveside prayer with a soft, "Amen." Then he walked over to Penny and her dad, his face schooled into a sympathetic expression, his eyes filled with kindness. "I am so very sorry, Rodney," he said as he took hold of her dad's right hand between both of his own.

Her dad nodded in silence.

Tom repeated his words of condolence to Penny. Like her father, she nodded, her throat too tight to squeeze out a reply.

Chet Leonard, his wife, and sons were next. Leaning down, Chet said, "If I can do anything . . . If you ever need to talk or just be with someone who understands what it means to lose a son . . ." He let his voice trail into silence.

Charlie Regal, Brad's best friend since first grade, came close, looked about to speak, and then shook his head as he turned to walk away.

More people came forward. A few shed tears as they whispered words that Penny no longer heard.

Twelve years ago, pneumonia had taken Penny's mom at the age of forty-five. Despite how ill her mom had been, sixteen-year-old Penny hadn't believed she would die. Perhaps pneumonia still took the lives of those who were frail, like the elderly or little children. But someone in the best of health like her mom had been? How could that happen with all the advances in modern medicine? Charlotte Cartwright's death had rocked the family.

And now Brad . . . Brad, who hadn't even reached his twenty-third birthday. He'd finished

college at the end of last year, a full semester ahead of schedule. He could have had a brilliant future before him for the taking. But he hadn't even bothered to attend his own graduation ceremony. He'd come home for Christmas and, soon after, packed up and headed for Nashville, exchanging an engineering career for a stupid set of drums and a life on the road as part of a band.

*And now he's dead.*

She shivered. Not from the cold but from the emotions that roiled inside of her. Anger. Exasperation. Frustration.

*Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.*

The last of the mourners finally walked toward their cars. The reverend stood at a respectful distance, as if waiting to see if he would be needed.

"Let's go home, Pen," her dad said, his voice breaking at the end.

"Okay."

They rose in unison and turned from the flower-covered coffin. It wasn't a long ways to her dad's truck. They moved slowly, arms entwined, watching the uneven ground before them. They were almost to the truck when someone stepped into their path.

The first thing Penny saw were the toes of a fancy pair of cowboy boots poking out from beneath trousers with a fine crease. She looked up, expecting to see a familiar face, expecting to hear more words of solace. But it wasn't a lifelong friend or neighbor, and when she saw who it was, her breath caught. It couldn't be him. It couldn't be that man. Not here. Not here in Kings Meadow.

"Mr. Cartwright," he said to her dad as he removed a black Stetson from his head. "I'm Trevor Reynolds. I . . . I'm sorry about Brad. He was a good kid."

If her dad was surprised by Trevor's appearance at his son's funeral, it didn't show in his voice. "Thank you."

Trevor's gaze slid to her. "You must be Penny. I—"

She slapped him. Hard.

His eyes widened. His mouth thinned. But he didn't move, didn't make a sound.

"You don't belong here," she said with icy resolve.

For a second Trevor looked as if he might protest, but instead he took a wide step off to the side and allowed father and daughter to pass.

Her dad waited until they arrived at the passenger door of his truck before he said, "You shouldn't have done that, Pen."

She disagreed. She should have done it. She'd wanted to do even more. She'd wanted to haul back and slam Trevor Reynolds as hard as she could with a tight fist. He was the reason her brother was dead, and he deserved to bleed, to feel pain, to—

"Hate and blame won't bring Brad back," her dad added.

Somehow she held back the tears that burned her throat and eyes. If she started to cry, she feared she would never stop. Tears would mean she was weak, and she had to stay strong. For her dad. For herself.

*For Brad.*

## BRAD

2003

On the day his mom died, Brad climbed his favorite tree and didn't plan on ever coming down. Maybe he would have stayed forever if Penny hadn't come looking for him. She climbed good . . . for a girl.

"You need to come inside, Brad," she said as she settled on a sturdy branch. "Dad's ready to put dinner on the table."

He sniffed, then wiped his tears with his forearm. "I'm not hungry."

"You've gotta come in anyhow."

He stared down at his hands, now resting on his thighs, folded into tight fists. He didn't want to go inside. Every room in the house was filled with memories of his mom, and it hurt too much to think about her.

"Please, buddy."

He heard his tears mirrored in her voice.

"We've gotta stick together now, Brad. We need each other."

"Okay," he whispered at last. "I'll come down."

She looked at him in silence before standing on the branch. Only when her feet touched the ground a short while later did Brad begin his promised descent. Once he was down, Penny put an arm around his shoulders and gave him a quick squeeze.

"It's gonna be all right," she whispered.

He might be just a kid, but he knew his big sister didn't believe that anymore than he did. It wasn't going to be all right. Their mom wasn't ever coming home again. She wasn't ever going to go camping with them in the mountains or riding horseback with them along the river or bake him another birthday cake. She wouldn't ever again cheer for him at a soccer game on the school field or shout with joy when he made it up on water skis during one of their trips up to McCall. He wouldn't ever again see her get all mushy with Dad, the way she'd liked to do in the evening when they were all watching a movie.

Brad and Penny walked toward the front of the house, and when they rounded the corner, he saw that only his dad's truck was parked in the barnyard now. Friends of his parents had been coming by all afternoon, almost the instant word about his mom had gotten out. Some had brought flowers. Some had brought food. Some had just come to say they were sorry. Now, as twilight settled over the valley, the friends were all gone. Gone back to their families and their homes.

Brad had to make himself go inside the house. It felt empty. Haunted almost.

"Dad," Penny called out. "We're back." She kept her arm around Brad's shoulders, urging him toward the kitchen with a gentle pressure.

It was a sad dinner, the only sounds the clicking of knives and forks against plates. Brad didn't taste a bite. Whatever he swallowed might as well have been sawdust.

Maybe nothing would ever taste good again.

## CHAPTER ONE

*November 30*

Trevor Reynolds glanced around the studio apartment, located three blocks from the main drag in Kings Meadow. At one time it had been a detached garage, and the owner hadn't tried to disguise its original purpose from the outside. Inside, the furnishings were simple and spare, but good enough to suit Trevor's purposes for however long he was here. He'd stayed in far worse places in his early years on the road.

"I'll take it," he told the landlord, Harry Adams, a thin, white-haired man with stooped shoulders, a shuffling step, and a ready smile.

"Well, that's great. Great. Are you in town for long, Mr. Reynolds?"

Trevor slipped his wallet from his back pocket. "I'm not sure." He pulled out several bills. "First and last month's rent. Right?"

"Indeed it is." In exchange for the money, the landlord handed him the key to the door.

Trevor walked to the small refrigerator and opened it. The light went on at the back, showing a pristine interior.

"Grocery store's just a few blocks away," Mr. Adams said. "Open until nine."

"What about restaurants?" He closed the refrigerator door and turned toward the landlord again.

The old man chuckled. "Only got two. Got a drive-through a couple blocks over from the Merc. Good burgers and fries. Then there's the Tamarack Grill that you passed on your way into town. That's your sit-down choice. Nice menu, especially since they hired that Nichols fella."

Trevor remembered seeing the Tamarack Grill. That's where he would go now. He'd had his fill of fast food while traveling the two thousand miles from Nashville to Kings Meadow. According the map app on his phone, winter driving conditions had made the trip take three days longer than it should have. And not knowing how many miles he'd be able to travel each day had also made it impossible to book motel reservations in advance. That hadn't mattered as long as he'd been traveling the freeway. Any motel in any town, big or small, had sufficed.

But he should have known things would be different up here in these mountains. Kings Meadow didn't have a motel, and the bed-and-breakfast he'd stopped at earlier hadn't any available rooms until tomorrow. It was a good thing he'd grabbed a local newspaper when he stopped for gas as he rolled into town. The paper was where he'd seen the advertisement for this apartment. The rent was fair—cheap, actually—and he didn't need anything fancy.

A yawn overtook him, a reminder that he'd been on the road since four o'clock that morning. A moment later his stomach growled. He'd pushed himself hard, determined to reach Kings Meadow while it was still daylight, and hadn't eaten a meal since breakfast. That had been somewhere in Utah. All he wanted now was a decent meal and a good night's sleep. Tomorrow would be soon enough to stock the cupboards, get settled into his new living quarters, and figure out what he was supposed to do next.

"Well," the landlord said, intruding on Trevor's thoughts, "you give a holler if you need anything. And you're always welcome to use my phone if you need it."

“I’ve got one.” He patted his pocket.

“If you mean a cell phone, those gadgets don’t work much in these parts. Mountains too high and too close, and no company’s bothered to bring in one of them tower thingies. If you want to talk to folks, you’re gonna have to get yourself a regular phone. Landlines, I think they call ’em.”

Trevor remembered now. The day of the funeral, he’d tried to use his mobile phone. There hadn’t been any reception. Not until he’d gotten close to Boise again had service resumed. But he’d figured it was a temporary problem. Hadn’t considered it was an on-going issue. He’d known he was coming to a small town. He hadn’t figured on it being so backward it wouldn’t have cell phone service.

*Just as well. You don’t need to hear from anybody who’d know your number anyway.*

“Thanks, Mr. Adams. You’ve been a big help.”

If the landlord felt as if he’d been dismissed—which he had—he didn’t show it. Just smiled again and told Trevor to enjoy his dinner. Then he shuffled out of the studio apartment and along the snowy pathway to the main house.

Hunching his shoulders against the cold, Trevor hurried out to his truck and grabbed his duffle bag and guitar case from the backseat. Several more trips emptied the pickup bed of the tarp-covered boxes holding the remainder of his possessions. At least the possessions he’d considered important enough to bring with him. More boxes and all of his furniture were in a storage unit in Nashville. When he went back to Tennessee, he’d be glad for them.

With hunger becoming a more demanding sensation in his gut, he left the collection of belongings in the center of the room, grabbed his truck keys, and headed out the door. He drove the three blocks to Main Street, then followed it west until the restaurant’s sign came into view. The parking lot on the side of the building had six or seven cars in it. That was probably a rush of customers for Kings Meadow.

He pulled into the first open space and got out, glad he wouldn’t have to walk far in the bitter wind. Even gladder that he wouldn’t have to sleep in his truck—which had seemed a real possibility—even for just one night.

The warm interior of the Tamarack Grill was a welcome relief. He stopped next to the sign that told him to wait to be seated. He didn’t have to stand there long. A young woman, carrying laminated menus in the crook of her left arm, came toward him, a smile on her lips. Her gaze slowly traveled the length of him before meeting his eyes again.

“Welcome to the Tamarack Grill. Just one tonight?”

“Just one.”

Her smile broadened.

Not to be vain, but he knew that look.

“Right this way.” She led him to a table close to an open fireplace made of stones.

Trevor removed his Stetson and put it on the seat of one chair, then sat on the other, his right shoulder toward the fire.

“May I bring you something to drink?” the waitress asked as she set a menu on the table before him.

“Diet Coke, with lemon.”

“I’ll be right back.” Still smiling, she departed.

Trevor's gaze took in the other tables in the room. Two families with young kids. A middle-aged woman eating by herself. Several couples of various ages. Off to the far right was the bar area. Three men sat on stools, sipping beverages and watching news on a television up high on the wall. Until a couple of months ago, that's where Trevor would have started a meal. Sitting at the bar, knocking back a Jack and Coke.

No more. The night of the accident, he'd had a wake-up call. He'd been living recklessly for years, in all kinds of ways. He could have easily died that night, but he'd been given a second chance. Brad Cartwright hadn't been that lucky.

A raw ache burned in his chest whenever he thought about Brad. Logically, Trevor knew the accident hadn't been his fault. He'd been asleep in the backseat. Brad had been at the wheel. But all the same, it felt like his fault.

*And I'm not the only one who feels it's my fault.*

In his mind—for what seemed the thousandth time—he saw the fury in Penny Cartwright's eyes at the moment she'd slapped him on the day of the funeral. He touched his cheek, as if he could still feel the sting of the blow.

The waitress returned with his drink. "Are you ready to order?"

He hadn't looked at the menu yet, but a quick glance found something that would do. He pointed to it, chose the two sides that came with the meal, then handed her the menu. "Thanks."

She gave him another of her ready smiles before walking away, and for a split second he considered asking her what time her shift ended. But no. Pretty girls weren't why he'd come to Kings Meadow. He was here to keep a promise to a dying friend—and hopefully straighten out his life in the process.

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Penny turned the dead bolt in the entrance door of the library. Then she leaned her forehead against the cold glass, closing her eyes and forcing herself to draw a deep breath. Some days it felt as if she had to force herself to breathe, force herself to go on living.

*Stop it! Stop it now!*

Stiffening her spine, she turned away from the door and walked to the office behind the checkout counter, where she retrieved her purse from the bottom drawer of her desk. A glance at the clock on the wall told her she was running late. Dad would have dinner waiting for her.

*Maybe I shouldn't have returned to work this soon.*

Perhaps not. But she hadn't had a choice. Not really. She'd used up all of her paid time off—both bereavement and vacation time—and she and Dad needed her paycheck. Their finances had already been stretched thin by the staggering cost of an unexpected funeral—

*No. Stop. Don't think about it.*

Lifting her head and straightening her shoulders, she left the office, turning off the light as she passed through the doorway. She went to the back door of the library, where she switched off all but the security lights that softly illuminated the building whenever the library was closed. Then she went outside, locking the door behind her.

Blowing snow stung Penny's cheeks as she hurried to her parked car. She started the engine to let it warm—wouldn't it be wonderful to have one of those cars that started with a press of a

button on a key fob?—then grabbed the scraper so she could clean the snow and frost off her windshield. Trying not to let her teeth chatter, she worked as fast as possible, making a complete circle around the vehicle. At last she slipped behind the wheel with a breathy, “Ooooh.”

The drive to the Cartwright ranch took about twenty minutes on the snow-packed roads. It wasn’t a big spread—not like the Leonard operation at the north end of the valley—but it was big enough to fulfill her dad’s boyhood dream of being a cattle rancher. Most years he turned a small profit from the sale of his calves. He earned the rest of his income from the work he did as a carpenter. Good enough in the summer. Scarce in the winter months. And these days, due to some health issues, he struggled with his daily chores.

Penny’s return to Kings Meadow after getting her master’s degree was supposed to have been temporary. Only until Brad graduated from college. Her brother could have worked as an engineer in Boise with an easy commute to and from the ranch. Their dad would have had the help he needed, and Brad would have had a career he could have grown in. That had been the plan. But since when did life go as planned? *Temporary* had become four years, and here she was, living at home at the age of twenty-eight. The best thing to come out of her return to Kings Meadow was her job as the director of the district library. Anywhere else, she wouldn’t have had a prayer of such a position at her age. Too young, they would have said. Too little experience. They would have been right on both counts. But this was Kings Meadow, where she was known, where her father was known. And besides, there hadn’t been an abundance of applicants for the position.

She should be thankful for it. She *was* thankful for it. If only she didn’t feel so unhappy, reminded at every turn of the loved ones who were gone forever. If only . . .

Lights from the house twinkled at her in the darkness. She slowed the car as she approached the driveway. The tires slid a little, but with four-wheel drive she was able to pull out of the slide and make the turn safely. The hard-packed snow beneath the tires bumped her around until she reached the concrete floor of the garage. Snow fell in earnest as she hurried toward the front door.

Inside the house, she called, “Dad, I’m home.”

He poked his head out of the kitchen. “Good timing. Food’s ready to go on the table.”

“Give me a second to change and wash up, and I’ll be right there.”

“Is it still snowing?”

Halfway up the stairs, she answered, “Yes. Looks like the storm will last awhile.”

In her room, Penny changed out of her work clothes and into a comfortable pair of jeans and a sky-blue cable-knit sweater. Her shoes she replaced with sheepskin-lined slippers, appropriate for the winter weather. Then she went into the bathroom, where she freed her hair from the clasp that kept it away from her face while at work, followed by a quick wash of her hands.

When she entered the dining room a few minutes later, her dad was setting a casserole dish in the center of the table. Shepherd’s pie. Again. It was her father’s go-to recipe when he couldn’t think of anything else to make. She rounded the table and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks for cooking dinner on the nights I work late.”

“I’m glad to do it, Pen. You shouldn’t have to work all day and then come home to cook supper when all I’d be doing is sitting around, waiting for you.”

She wanted to ask if his back was better today, but he despised the question. Her dad still did a lot of work around the place, even when the pain was bad.

If only her brother had come home . . .

“Let’s eat,” her dad said.

Penny took her usual spot at the table and averted her eyes from the two empty chairs. She tried to look only at the serving dishes and at her father. Anywhere else was rife with emotional danger.

Her dad said the blessing before sliding the casserole dish closer to her. “Careful. It’s hot.”

She stuck the serving spoon into the meat-and-vegetable dish and scooped out a small serving.

“You need to eat more than that, Penny.”

“This is plenty, Dad. Honest.”

“Not enough to keep a bird alive.”

Missing tugged at Penny’s heart. How often had her mom said those very same words to her?

“How was it to be back at the library?”

“Okay.” She shrugged. “How was your day?”

“Okay,” he answered with the smallest of smiles.

*What a pair of liars we are.*

Penny brought a bite of the casserole to her mouth, blew on it, and then ate it. Her taste buds tried to tell her the food had flavor, but it still seemed bland upon her tongue. Somehow she managed to swallow and take the next bite.

“It’ll get better, Pen.”

She kept her gaze on her plate. “It’s good.”

“I wasn’t talking about the food.”

Tears welled. *I know*, she mouthed, looking up at last.

She’d learned that going through the grief process took as long as it took. Not one day more or one day less. And it was different for each person. There were no quick fixes, no magic words to make the pain of missing go away any faster.

The difference this time—between when she’d lost her mom and when she’d lost her brother—was the anger. Tears weren’t enough for her this time. Grief wasn’t enough. A broken heart wasn’t enough. Bitter anger had formed a knot in her gut—a knot that showed no signs of easing. She was angry at Brad for being so foolish, for not returning to Kings Meadow when he was supposed to. Angry at Trevor Reynolds for enticing Brad to a life on the road, for making her brother forget that he was the kind of person who kept his promises. And, if she was honest, angry at God for taking away another member of her family.

Some days it felt as if the anger would eat her up from the inside out.

Some days she wished it would.

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That night, while seated in the large, overstuffed chair in the corner of his bedroom, Rodney closed his eyes. Before his wife passed away, the couple had been in the habit of praying



together in this same corner before retiring. There had been two chairs back then. Now there was need for only one, and even after a dozen years he missed the feel of Charlotte's hand in his as they prayed at the end of a day.

He drew in a long breath and released it slowly. "How do I help her, Lord?"

Even before Brad's death Rodney had been concerned for his daughter. Penny seemed to have forgotten how to enjoy life. She worried over him. She worried over money. She worried over what tomorrow would bring. And now she was angry too. She tried not to let him see it, but she never succeeded.

"What happened to my bright, shiny Penny?" he whispered.

In his mind he saw the laughing, happy, confident child she had been. Riding beside him in the truck, chattering away about what had happened that day at school. Showing her little brother how to skip rocks across the surface of the river. Camping in the mountains with the family. She'd been fearless back then, perhaps because she'd had such trust in God. That trust seemed to have been snuffed out on the night her brother died.

His heart ached at the thought. For as long as he lived he would miss his son, the same way he continued to miss his wife. But there was comfort in knowing Brad had loved the Lord and was with Him now.

"But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren," he quoted aloud, "'about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.'"

*Penny needs hope, Lord. She needs Your hope. Show me how to help her find it.*

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