

# Robin Lee HATCHER

## You're Gonna Love Me

### Prologue

*April*

*Thunder Creek, Idaho*

Nick Chastain heard the sound of horses' hooves and looked up from the irrigation pipes he'd set on the ground. Two horses cantered along the creek bank, too far away for him to see the faces of the riders, but he was certain one was an adult and the other a young girl. Perhaps a mother and daughter.

He was about to return to his work when one of the horses, a big blue roan, flew sideways, twisting in midair. The adult rider parted ways with the saddle. A moment later, the woman hit the ground. The girl gave a shriek of surprise as she reined in her palomino.

Nick waited a few heartbeats, but the woman on the ground didn't move.

The girl slipped from the saddle and hurried toward her. "Gee-Gee Ruth!" she screamed. Still no movement.

Nick took off at a run, his long strides eating up the distance. By the time he reached the pair, both horses had trotted away. He ignored them and focused instead on the scene in front of him. The woman on the ground—older than he'd expected—groaned, but her eyes remained closed.

Nick dropped to his knees opposite the girl. "That was a bad fall." He touched the woman's shoulder. "Ma'am?"

Her eyes fluttered briefly. "I think . . . I need . . . an ambulance."

"Right away." He pulled out his cell phone and punched in 911. As soon as his call was answered, he explained the situation to the dispatcher. But when it came time to give the address or directions, he found himself at a loss. His employer had transferred him from Cheyenne, Wyoming, to Caldwell, Idaho, less than three months before, and this was his first installation job in the small town of Thunder Creek. He didn't even remember the name of the road he'd followed to get to Derek Johnson's farm. He clenched his jaw, hating the forgetfulness that continued to dog him.

Wordlessly the girl held out her hand for the phone, and he passed it to her.

"My name's Alycia Johnson," she said, sounding more grown up than she looked. "It's my great-grandma, Ruth Johnson, who's hurt." There was a pause. "No, my mom and dad aren't here." She looked at Nick. "I think so." Another pause, then she gave detailed driving instructions to the farm.

The wait for the ambulance seemed eternal. At some point, Nick found himself holding the

woman's hand and speaking words of comfort, although he wasn't sure she heard him. Eyes closed, she gasped more than she breathed, obviously in extreme pain.

Nick knew a thing or two about pain. His thirst for adventure used to get him into trouble all the time. His parents and siblings, doctors and therapists, all hoped he'd had his fill of it at last. But there were times . . .

\*\*\*

Grinning all the while, Nick stretched his arm toward the branch above his head. He'd already climbed higher than the last time, and today he planned to go all the way to the top.

From the ground, his brother Jeff yelled, "If Mom catches you up that tree again, you're gonna catch it for sure."

"If you shut up, she'll never know."

"Okay. But don't blame me when you fall and bust your stupid neck."

"I'm not gonna fall."

The words were barely out of Nick's mouth when he felt his right foot start to slip. Just in time his hand closed around the limb overhead. His balance soon restored, he dragged in a breath, then laughed, pleasure pulsing through him. His big brother didn't understand what he was missing, staying down there on the ground. There was something . . . *special* about being up this high, looking down on the world. Well, not the world. But his backyard and the neighboring ones.

"That's high enough, Nick."

He ignored Jeff. He wasn't stopping until he could carve his initials up at the top in that gap between the branches, a spot he could see from the ground. Then he could point to it anytime and brag that he'd done it when nobody thought he could. Then he could—

The loud *crack* barely had time to register in Nick's brain before the limb was gone beneath his feet. He flailed his arms as gravity pulled at him. He tried to grab hold of anything he could. But nothing stopped his hurtle toward earth—although the tree itself slowed the descent as he smacked into one branch after another.

"Nick!"

His brother's shout ringing in his ears, he hit the ground. For a second he thought he was okay and started to grin. That's when the pain shot through him. Turning his head, he saw the bone near his left wrist sticking through his skin, blood pouring through the torn flesh. His smile vanished.

Turned out it was only the first time Nick Chastain would break that same arm.

## Chapter 1

Samantha Winters parked her car in the Caldwell hospital parking lot. Before opening the door, she pressed her forehead against the steering wheel and drew in a couple of deep breaths. She was bone weary after the seven-hour drive from Beaverton, Oregon. She'd stopped only twice, just long enough to refill the tank and use the restroom, and hadn't bothered to eat

anything except the snack foods she'd tossed into the car before leaving home before dawn.

The last report from her cousin Derek was that their grandmother's surgery—performed that morning, twenty-four hours after the fall from the horse—had gone well. Derek expected Gran to be able to leave the hospital tomorrow or the next day.

"But from what I understand," he'd told Samantha a few hours ago, "it's going to be a lengthy recovery. Her right ankle was more or less shattered. Broken in three places. It'll be non-weight-bearing for at least three months. She'll be in a cast and then one of those boots. After three months, they'll put her in a splint—I forget what it's called—and then she'll have to go through physical therapy. Not easy for anybody, but she's seventy-six. As active as she normally is, this is gonna drive her crazy."

"Don't worry about Gran's recovery. I'll stay as long as she needs me. I'm using the vacation days I've saved up over the years, and then I'll be on leave of absence for the rest of the time."

"You shouldn't have to do that, Sam. Between me and Brooklyn and Gran's friends—"

"I *want* to do it. Honest."

What she hadn't told her cousin was that she was glad for an excuse—*any* excuse—to get away from work for a while. And away from Daniel Greyson, her boss. Not to be unkind, but the man was a jerk. He'd made her work life miserable for years. She'd put up with it because . . . Well, because it was easier and less confrontational. Her only other option was to look for new employment, and that thought terrified her. Job security was important to her. She felt *safe* at Whitewater Business Solutions. And above almost anything else, Samantha liked to feel safe.

Drawing one more breath, she straightened and opened the door. She felt ruffled and looked forward to a long soak in a warm bath. But before she could drive on to Thunder Creek, she wanted to see Gran.

The hospital wasn't large and it didn't take long to find her grandmother's room. A nurse was coming through the doorway when Samantha arrived. They exchanged brief nods as they passed each other.

Gran looked up, registered who it was, and smiled. "Sam! What on earth are you doing here?" She held out a hand.

Samantha took it before leaning in to kiss her grandmother. "Didn't Derek tell you I was coming? I had to come after I heard you took up flying. Or was it crashing?"

"Both, it would seem." Gran pressed Samantha's hand against her cheek, eyes closed for a moment. "Oh, it is so good to see you," she said as she opened them again and gazed fondly at Samantha.

"Same here."

"But such a long drive."

"It isn't so bad, Gran. And I wanted to be with you. You're going to need help for a while."

Gran's eyes widened. "You're going to stay with me? You're not here just for the weekend?"

"Nope. I'm here for a few months, according to the doctor."

"Oh, sweetheart. What about your job? I can't ask you to—"

But Samantha was already shaking her head. "You didn't ask. Like I told Derek, I want to be with you. And I've made all the necessary arrangements with my job."

"They'll let you be gone that long?"

Samantha squeezed her grandmother's hand again. "You're stuck with me, Gran. Get used to

it.”

Gran smiled. “Getting used to it won’t be a problem. I promise.” She breathed out on a sigh, then sank deeper into the pillow beneath her head, her burst of energy spent. Samantha saw pain in the crinkles of her grandmother’s face as she closed her eyes and almost instantly drifted off to sleep—aided by drugs, no doubt.

Samantha wouldn’t mind a catnap herself. She pulled a visitor’s chair close to the side of Gran’s bed and settled onto it. Closing her eyes, she drew in a long, deep breath. She was so tired.

Through her weary haze, she heard a male voice ask, “May I come in?”

Startled from near slumber, Samantha straightened and looked toward the drawn curtain in front of the door. “Yes.”

She expected to see a doctor or a hospital technician of some sort. Instead, a man in jeans and denim shirt stepped into view holding a vase of flowers in one hand. He smiled for a moment. But only until his eyes collided with hers. Then the smile was gone.

Samantha barely had time to register this before her world tilted to one side. Ocean-like sounds whirred in her ears as she sucked in a breath. It couldn’t be—

“Sam?” Nick said, his voice filled with matching disbelief.

“Nick . . . What on earth . . .” Her voice strengthened. “What are you doing here?”

He motioned toward the hospital bed. “I came to see Mrs. Johnson.”

“You—” She shook her head, trying to clear her confusion. “Gran? But how do you know —?”

“She’s your grandmother?”

Samantha nodded. They both stood staring for a moment.

“Small world,” Nick finally said. He stood a moment longer, his jaw working, then set the vase of flowers on the nearby counter. “Tell your grandmother I was by. Okay?” A couple of steps and he disappeared beyond the curtain.

Samantha couldn’t move at first. Her legs failed to obey the command from her brain. But a few heartbeats later, she rushed out of the room and down the corridor, catching up with him right outside the automatic doors.

“Nick!”

He stopped, seemed to wait as she struggled for words, then finally turned. She gripped her hands together, holding them close to her waist. “I . . . I never expected to see you again. Certainly not here.”

He shrugged. The gesture hurt. It seemed to say he didn’t care what she’d expected. And he probably didn’t. He’d never bothered to answer the apologies she’d sent to him over two years ago.

She drew a breath and lifted her chin. “Why did you come to see my grandmother?”

“I was there yesterday when the horse threw her. I was the one who called for the ambulance and stayed with her, along with Alycia.”

“*You* were there.” Her confusion returned.

“I’m putting in a new irrigation system for Derek Johnson. I guess he’s her grandson.” His eyes filled with realization. “So that would make Derek your . . . ?”

“Cousin.”

“Ah.” He nodded.

Samantha and Nick had dated for close to eight months. Naturally during that time she’d told him about her mother and stepdad who lived back east and that she had a grandmother and cousin living in Idaho. But had she bothered to mention the name of the little town of Thunder Creek? Doubtful. And even if she had, would he have remembered it? Also, doubtful. She’d teased him once that he had selective hearing. He hadn’t found it funny.

She shook her head again, trying to focus on a more immediate question: why was a university professor from Oregon installing an irrigation system on an organic farm in Idaho? Her cousin’s farm, of all places.

Without an answer that made sense to her, her thoughts spiraled backward again. Nick had been in her thoughts often since their painful parting. There had been nights she’d dreamed of running into him again, of being able to look him in the eyes and tell him she was sorry for what she’d said on that last night they were together. Not long after their argument, she’d e-mailed him. She’d called too. He’d never answered, so she’d left messages. All had gone unanswered. And still she’d wanted to see him.

Now here he was, just as she’d dreamed of. But the expression on his face told her he didn’t want her to say another word. She took a step back, an old pain tightening her chest. “Well. It was good to see you, Nick.” The words tasted like sawdust on her tongue.

“Yeah. Same here.”

Taking a quick breath, she turned and hurried back through the hospital doors.

\*\*\*

After more than two years since his accident, Nick had grown used to blanks in his memory, to confusion threatening to swallow him whole. It wasn’t as bad now as it had been early on, but it could be bad enough. Seeing Samantha Winters had thrown him for an unexpected loop. He felt out of touch with reality, not quite sure what was real and what he’d imagined as a result of the traumatic brain injury he’d been living with.

“Here?” he muttered to himself as he yanked open the truck door and slid behind the wheel. “Her grandmother had to live *here*?”

Settling himself, he lifted his gaze toward the entrance. He avoided hospitals whenever he could. He’d been a patient in one or another for too many months to want to return, even to visit someone else. But, as crazy as it sounded, he’d needed to see Ruth Johnson—a stranger to him until yesterday—to make sure she was doing all right. The last time he’d glimpsed her, the woman had been in a lot of pain.

And now it turned out Ruth was Samantha’s grandmother. What were the odds? Astronomical. No wonder he was having a hard time making sense of it.

He rubbed his forehead with the fingertips of one hand as he took a breath and tried to reason things through. Samantha’s mother and stepdad lived in New England. He remembered that for certain. He also remembered her mentioning that her grandmother lived in Idaho. In fact, when Brett Masters had asked him to move to Caldwell to become the lead foreman for the southwest Idaho branch of Masters & Sons Irrigation Systems, Nick had thought of Samantha, remembering sitting across from her at dinner on their first date, listening as she told him about

her family and her job and her interests.

She'd been the prettiest woman he'd ever seen. Still was. But then, he'd always been a sucker for girls with red hair and green eyes. But there'd been more to the attraction than her looks. He'd liked the honey-warm tone of her voice. He'd liked the sound of her laughter. He'd liked that she loved music from the seventies and movies from the forties and fifties. He wasn't crazy about any of that, but he'd found the discovery endearing in her. All that remained clear in his mind, unimpaired by his accident.

Another thing he remembered: Samantha had wanted to change him, to tie him down, to hold him back, to restrain him. They'd fought about it. Broken up over it. He'd said something cruel to her, too, although he couldn't remember exactly what. But he did remember he'd later wished he'd chosen his words better.

He gave his head a slow shake before turning the key in the ignition and driving out of the hospital parking lot, headed for home. Since February, that had been a two-bedroom month-to-month rental located a few miles west of Caldwell. Built around the time of the Great Depression, the place needed lots of work. But that was one of the reasons the rent was cheap, which suited Nick's bank account. And he had no need for anything more. His life these days was simple and uncomplicated. He got up in the morning, ate breakfast, went to work, laid pipe or whatever the job called for, completed paperwork, checked inventory, came home, ate dinner, played with his dog, and relaxed or took a bike ride before bedtime. The next day he did it all over again.

Again, simple and uncomplicated, as it needed to be at this point in his recovery. He certainly didn't need—

He broke off his thoughts before they could drift in the direction of Samantha again.

Nick's rental property was surrounded on three sides by cornfields belonging to his landlord. In April there wasn't much but dirt to look at in those fields. But that would soon change. The tall trees on the west side of the house were already a deep green, and flowers planted by a previous tenant bloomed in a bright array of colors near the driveway and country road.

As he pulled his truck up near the house, his border collie, Boomer, greeted him with excited barks. Nick got out of the truck and strode to the kennel, releasing the dog. "Hey, boy. How you doing?"

Boomer received a few pats, then took off in search of a ball or a Frisbee, eager for some exercise. Nick waited, not in any great hurry to go inside in this fine weather. Besides, his Sunday afternoons were for kicking back, and that included playing with the dog he'd adopted from the shelter soon after relocating to Idaho. The two had become pals from day one, and Boomer went with Nick almost everywhere.

The dog returned. Nick took the ball and threw it as hard and as far as he could. Boomer flew after it, ears flat, mouth open. Nick laughed as he watched. His brother Peter—second of the four Chastain brothers—had told him having a dog around would be good for him. Turned out Peter was right.

"For a change," he said, grinning. Maybe he would call Peter and tell him.

Boomer came barreling back with the ball. Nick threw it again, this time in the opposite direction, and the dog sailed after it, wind in his face, excitement in his eyes. The thrill of the chase. The boundless energy. Nick didn't know whether to laugh or cry when he realized he

envied his dog.

“That used to be me,” he said to Boomer upon the dog’s return, ruffling his ears as he spoke.

Gads, he missed it. He missed going as fast as he could, going as high as he could, dropping as far as he could. He missed the stormy ocean tossing his boat around like a toy. He missed the icy river water. He missed climbing the sheer face of a mountain. He missed his old life, the one he’d been told couldn’t be his again.

“Promise me you’ll be careful,” his mom had said to him again and again since the accident that almost killed him.

He’d promised her. But could he keep that promise without going insane?

“Come on,” he said to Boomer. “Let’s get us something to eat.”

His kitchen was the kind Nick’s mom would call a postage stamp. Room enough for a small refrigerator in one corner, an electric stove in another, and about two feet of counter space on each side of the double sink. Part of one wall was taken up by the back door. The refrigerator and stove were separated by an archway leading into a narrow dining room and the connected living room.

In no time at all, Nick had mixed kibble with canned food for Boomer, then made himself a grilled-cheese sandwich and a tossed salad with his favorite dressing. The dog gobbled up his food before Nick could sit down at the table to eat his own, then settled a short distance away, eyes watchful, in case Nick dropped something good.

“You’re a bottomless pit, boy.”

Boomer swept his tail back and forth in response, not the least bit insulted.

That brought a smile back to Nick.

All things considered, he had a good life. Very different from the one he’d had before the accident, but a good one. God had done more than heal his body. The Lord had begun to heal his emotions and adjust his attitude too. Still a long way to go, he had to admit, but they were working on it, him and God. Including that persistent desire to go faster, higher, farther, and to the devil with his doctors’ warnings. He was learning to be grateful for what he had rather than resenting what he’d lost. Not lessons that came easy, but he was getting there. Moving to southwest Idaho had helped a lot. He was free from those who put pressure on him, whether intentional or not. He was living alone, standing on his own two feet, making his own decisions. He didn’t need someone else to take care of him. He felt like a man again, instead of a helpless kid.

All in all, Nick had no reason to complain.

## You’re Gonna Love Me by Robin Lee Hatcher

[www.robinleehatcher.com](http://www.robinleehatcher.com)