

Robin Lee HATCHER

Cross My Heart

Prologue

February
Kuna, Idaho

Ben Henning showed his cousin Jessica into the kitchen of the old farmhouse. “I’m not really ready for company,” he told her as he motioned to one of the chairs.

“I can see that.” She smiled as her gaze took in the stacks of boxes in the kitchen, the living room, and down the hallway.

“Want some coffee? It’s fresh made.”

“No, thanks. I don’t plan to stay long. I know you’re busy with moving and all. Besides, I need to get back to Mom’s house before it’s time to feed Hope again. She’s growing so fast, and she’s always hungry.”

Ben settled onto a chair opposite Jessica. “How old is she now?”

“Almost six months.”

“Can’t hardly believe that.”

“Me either.” Jessica leaned toward the tote she’d set on the floor next to her chair. A moment later she drew out a large book. “This is Andrew Henning’s Bible.” She slid it across the table to him. “I brought it for you.”

“For me?” The leather cover was worn and cracked, the outside edges curled. He ran a hand gently over the book that had once belonged to his great-great-grandfather. The man who had owned this house, this farm, from early in the Great Depression until almost the very end of his life.

“For you.” Jessica smiled gently. “Great-Grandpa Andrew . . . Well, I guess he was your great-great-grandfather, wasn’t he? I always forget that since you and I are close to the same age. Anyway, he gave it to my grandmother before he died, with the instructions that she was to keep it until she felt God tell her to pass it along to another family member. Then that person was to do the same whenever the time came. My mom gave it to me after Grandma Frani’s funeral, and now I want you to have it.”

Ben opened the front cover, saw that the first page had been torn then mended with tape. Several pages stuck together when he turned them. He pulled them apart, revealing the Henning family tree. His namesake, Benjamin Tandy Henning, was one of the children listed beneath Andrew’s and Helen’s names. He ran his finger down the list. The change in penmanship told him when someone else had taken over the task of filling in the names of great-grandchildren

and great-great-grandchildren.

“Are you sure you’re ready to give it up?” he asked. “You haven’t had it very long. Your grandmother hasn’t even been gone a year.”

“I’m sure.”

He heard the smile in her answer before he looked up to meet her gaze.

“Ben, when I heard you were moving to the farm to live, I knew God wanted you to have this Bible. I don’t know why, but I believe the Lord’s got something special in mind for both you and this farm.” She leaned toward him. “When my mom gave it to me, she told me to let what I found inside bless me. And it did. What I found helped give me back my faith and restore my hope in the future. And those two changes allowed me to open my heart to love again. I don’t know what’s in store for you, but I believe God wants to encourage you through His word and the notes Grandpa Henning made inside that old Bible. I think God wants you to be blessed by it next.”

Ben’s heart had quickened as Jessica spoke. Just last night, he’d believed God had given him a vision for this property. The vision was nebulous at best, but he trusted it would take shape, that God would reveal more in time. His cousin’s words seemed to confirm it.

“Thanks, Jessica.” He closed the leather cover. “This means a lot to me. More than I can tell you.”

She nodded, and he had the feeling she understood even if he couldn’t put it into words.

Chapter One

August

Sitting in his pickup truck, Ben punched the address of the destination into his iPhone. Once the GPS coordinates were set, he tapped the screen to start the map app. “Proceed to the route, then turn left,” Siri told him.

That much he’d already known. He put the truck in gear and followed the driveway to the road. Turning as commanded, he couldn’t help thinking it would be nice if directions for life were as easy to come by. Just punch in the desired destination, and presto, learn how to get there by proceeding to the route and turning left.

For the past six months, it seemed as if he’d stumbled along, finding his way more by accident than by divine guidance. He’d never lost the belief that God had given him a vision for the farm, but making it happen hadn’t been as easy as he’d expected. Counselors had been reluctant to work with him or promise to refer clients. Horsemen had wanted more than he could afford for the right kind of horses. Insurance companies wanted a small fortune to insure. His banker was dubious about him surviving more than a few months.

He’d been frustrated by the number of times he’d thought a door was opening only to have it slam in his face. If this was really God’s plan, shouldn’t it come together smoothly? When he’d said as much to Grandpa Grant last night, the older man had laughed and told Ben he had a lot to learn. Not exactly what he’d wanted to hear.

Ben hadn’t admitted to Grandpa Grant—his mentor, his advisor, his favorite person in the

world—that he also believed the Harmony Barn, as he was calling this new endeavor, could be more than just a service to help others. It might be a way for him to finally make amends for what he'd done to his best friend. Maybe the next time Ben tried to reach out to Craig, he wouldn't be shut down. Ben owed the guy, and he wanted to help. If only he'd get the chance—

Siri broke into those darker thoughts, telling him to turn left once again. When he reached the intersection, he did so.

The main roads in this rural county of southwestern Idaho were laid out in perfect square miles. Although the roads might undulate with the rise and fall of the landscape, they ran straight as an arrow, with few exceptions. On Ben's right he passed cornfields that he guessed would be harvested before much longer. Whatever once grew in the field on his left had already been harvested and plowed under. He wondered if Ashley Showalter lived on a farm like one of these.

He hadn't called her in advance of this visit. Maybe he should have made an appointment, but he'd been too excited when the second person in two days had told him Ashley was someone he should talk to about the horses. Perhaps the reason he hadn't called her first was because he didn't want to risk another closed door. He wanted the chance to look her in the eyes and convince her that she should help him.

* * *

Sweat trickled along Ashley's spine and down the sides of her face as she carried a board up the ladder. She would rather be inside sipping a cold beverage than outside in this intense August heat. But she expected another horse to arrive today and wanted the new shelter finished before the truck and trailer pulled into her driveway.

The crunch of gravel warned her it might be too late to finish. She looked up, but the silver truck coming slowly toward the shed wasn't pulling a trailer. Great. The last thing she wanted right now was an interruption.

The truck stopped, the door opened, and a man got out, followed by a yellow lab. Ashley was about to shout a warning about her own dogs, but the driver moved to the back of the truck and lowered the tailgate. An instant later the lab jumped into the bed and lay down in the shade cast by the nearest tree.

She watched as the man—thirtyish, tall, blond, and impossibly good looking—headed for the door of her house without a glance in her direction. Before he reached it, she called to him. "Nobody's in there."

He stopped and turned at the sound of her voice.

Not waiting for him to answer, she went down the ladder. By the time she reached the ground, he was approaching her.

He removed his sunglasses, squinting his blue eyes against the bright sun, and gave her a brief smile. "Are you Ashley Showalter?"

"I am."

"I'm Ben Henning." He offered his hand.

She acknowledged his introduction with a nod, then shook his hand.

"I was told you might be able to help me."

"Are you looking to buy a horse?"

"Yes and no." He shrugged and smiled again.

Ashley raised her eyebrows, awaiting a better explanation.

“I can probably afford to buy one horse now, if the price is right. But I’m in need of more than one. Or will be eventually.”

What exactly did that mean, she wondered.

“I own a farm outside of Kuna.” Ben Henning stuck his fingertips in the back pockets of his jeans. “My grandpa raised alfalfa hay on it, and I leased that out this summer. But now I’d like to put the place to use in a different way. I plan to open an equine therapy barn.”

Ashley felt a quickening in her chest. She couldn’t help it. She believed in equine therapy. Being around horses healed a person’s spirit. She knew that firsthand. “Do you know anything about horses, Mr. Henning?”

“Call me Ben, please. As for horses, I’m no rodeo cowboy—” He grinned, showing he wasn’t offended by the tone of her question. “But I know the front end of a horse from the back end, and I can saddle and ride one without help.”

She relaxed slightly. “Let’s go sit in the shade.”

“I’d like that, Miss Showalter.”

“Ashley.”

“Ashley,” he echoed.

Something about the way he said her name made her insides shiver. The timbre of his voice was like warm honey. And she wasn’t happy with her reaction. Good-looking men with plenty of charm were off limits. Once burned, twice shy, as the old saying went. And she’d been burned, so all the more reason to stick to business.

Once they were seated on chairs under the covered patio, Ashley gave him her attention. “Tell me why you want to open an equine therapy barn.”

Leaning forward at the waist, forearms resting on his knees, Ben cleared his throat. His expression grew serious. “Do you believe in God, Miss Showalter?”

“Do I—” She drew back in surprise. That had definitely come out of the blue. But Ben waited, watching her. Finally, she said, “Yes, I . . . I do.”

“Well, the short answer to your question is God told me that’s what I’m supposed to do with the farm. Make it a place where spirits get healed and hope gets restored through the use of horses.” He spoke with certainty, a new intensity in his eyes.

“Okay. I like the sound of that. But what makes you so sure . . . God wants you to do it?”

“That’s hard to explain. It’s just something I feel. In here.” He tapped his chest with one hand. “My grandpa would say it was knowing that you know that you know.” His smile returned.

“*Knowing that you know that you know.*” It must be nice to be so sure of something. She nodded, encouraging him to continue.

Obliging her, he said, “A number of years ago, I was in counseling myself, and it was recommended that I participate in an equine therapy program. To tell you the truth, I thought it sounded hokey. But by the time I was done with six weeks in the program, I’d changed my mind. It did help me, being with the horses. I don’t even understand why. All I know is it helped. I was better because of spending time with Blacky.” He chuckled softly as he straightened on the chair. “That was the gelding’s name. Anyway, when I inherited my grandfather’s farm, I wasn’t sure what I would do with it. I’m not a farmer myself. My mom thinks I should sell it.”

A shadow passed over his face, and he fell silent.

Feeling a strange need to distract him from whatever had made him frown, she asked,

“How large is the farm?”

“Forty acres.”

“Wow.” What she could do with forty acres. It made her pulse race just to think about it. But she didn’t have anyone who would leave her that kind of legacy, and her job as a clerk in a retail store would never earn her enough that she could buy such a place. She was lucky to have her small house and two acres.

“I’m not going to sell the farm,” he said emphatically. “I’m going to do something good with it. I don’t expect to make a living from it. At least not at the beginning. Maybe never. But if a few hours in the evening or on a weekend could help a kid or a vet or . . . or a guy like me, anybody who’s struggling . . .” He let the words drift into silence, his hands absently rubbing the arms of his chair.

She wondered what he meant by “a guy like me.” Until that moment, he’d looked so confident and put together. Why had he needed equine therapy? Was he somebody who’d struggled?

“Sorry. I guess I got carried away. It’s just that I want this to work out.”

“No. You shouldn’t apologize for having a passion for something. Especially something that could help others.”

“Thanks.” With a slight smile of acknowledgment, he leaned back in his chair.

“But I’m not sure why you came to see me.”

“I guess I didn’t explain that part well, did I? I was told that you know just about everybody around the valley who’s involved with horses, including in the rescue network. It seems to me maybe we could help each other. I’ve done lots of research this summer. I know there are different kinds of therapy programs. The one I participated in was in a remote location in the mountains and had a narrow focus. I’ve visited one that caters more to kids and adults with disabilities and focuses on riding.” He leaned forward, the excitement back in his eyes. “Then there are the places that take in abused horses and ask nothing of them except to let at-risk kids spend time with them, love them, even.”

“Broken horses,” she whispered, “helping broken people.”

“That’s it.” He pointed at her. “That’s it exactly. Broken horses helping broken people. A couple of different people suggested you might be the person I should talk to to help with finding the right horses for my program.” He glanced toward the lean-to shelter. “They said your space is limited, so you take in a horse, get it past the crisis, and then find a home for it. Well, I’ve got lots of space, and I’d like the Harmony Barn to be a permanent home for any rescued horses we acquire.”

Her pulse began to race.

“Of course, if we provide a riding program too—and I want to do that—then all the horses can’t be abused. Many of the clients will have disabilities of one kind or another, so I’ll have to have saddle horses that are well trained and gentle. Perhaps we can buy them. Perhaps we can lease them.” He leaned forward again, and his gaze intensified. “Would you be willing to help me find the right horses for our purposes?”

The temptation was to lean toward him too. The temptation was to get so caught up in his ideas and enthusiasm that she forgot to be careful. She resisted it, answering with caution, “I can’t say right now. I’d have to see your setup. And I’d want to talk to whatever vet you plan to work with.”

For an instant, she saw disappointment in his eyes, and she wondered if he might try to say more in order to convince her. But at last he nodded. “Fair enough. I can arrange to show you around the farm any day next week. You figure out the best day and time for you, and I’ll make it happen.” His gaze shifted to the shelter a second time. “I interrupted your work. Would you like a hand with that before I go?”

“No, thanks. I’m good.” She answered more out of habit than anything. She was used to doing things on her own and had a serious independent streak.

Ben got to his feet. “Well, then, I’ll leave you to it.” He took a card from his wallet and placed it on the table next to her chair. “Call me when you know your schedule.”

“I’ll do it.” Picking up the card, she rose too.

He paused, eyeing her, then suddenly grinned. “Thanks for listening to my ideas.”

“Glad to,” she answered, realizing it was true.

* * *

Thanksgiving welled up inside of Ben as he drove back to the farm. He’d seen the spark of interest in Ashley Showalter’s eyes. She might not have agreed right then, but his gut told him he would hear from her before the week was out. “Thank You, God,” he said aloud, beginning to grin like a fool. “Thanks for the open door. Finally, an open door.”

The good feeling didn’t last. It was chased away by the memory of his mom calling him stupid for holding onto such valuable land instead of selling it.

Ben couldn’t remember a time when things had been good between him and his mom. Not even when he was a little kid. She’d resented him too much. He’d ruined her plans, she’d told him a thousand times. Pregnant at sixteen and a mom at seventeen, Wendy Henning hadn’t married the boy who’d fathered Ben. Had she even known who the father was? He’d often wondered, but she’d never said. He only knew she blamed having a kid for every problem in her life, past and present. Probably future too.

Any stability experienced during Ben’s childhood had been because of his grandparents, especially his grandfather. Their farm had been a safe haven for him. He’d loved it there as a kid. He loved it there now. But he’d never in his wildest dreams expected Grandpa Grant to give him the farm.

“Sell it,” his mom had shouted at him over the phone that morning. “Do you know what that land is worth?” When he’d repeated the same thing he’d said to her for months, that he wasn’t going to sell, that’s when she’d called him stupid—for the umpteenth time—and hung up. It was a scene they’d been playing out for months.

Ben had done plenty of dumb things in his life. Keeping the farm wasn’t one of them. He knew that in the deepest part of his soul.

He slowed the truck and turned onto his property, seeing it through the haze of happier memories. He’d spent countless weekends here in his boyhood. And years ago, after his stint in juvie, Ben had lived with his grandparents for a while. That time had given him the roots he’d needed later—too many years later, sadly—to get his life back on track. He could never thank God enough for what he’d found on this farm.

The house was small by anybody’s standards. A small kitchen, small living room, small bath, and three small bedrooms on the ground level with an attic room above. His great-

grandfather, for whom Ben was named, along with his two brothers, Oscar and Andy, had used that attic bedroom during the thirties and forties. In the decades since, the kitchen had been modernized, and the house was now heated by natural gas rather than wood or coal. And yet whenever Ben stepped through the door, he felt transported back in time. It seemed to him he could hear the voices of his ancestors who'd lived there, even those he'd never known.

He parked the truck beneath the carport, but instead of going into the house, he strode toward the barn. Dusty, his yellow lab, followed close at his heels. There were no horses or cows in the barn or nearby pens or pasture, no chickens in the coop. There hadn't been any livestock on the farm since a good five years before his grandfather gave him the place, and Ben looked forward to watching the barnyard come to life again. Horses for the therapy sessions, of course. Maybe a cat or two for the barn and even some chickens in the coop again.

Dusty trotted off, exploring, and when he returned, there was a large stick in his mouth. Ben took the stick and gave it a good throw. The dog raced after it, mindless of the heat of the day. Ben, on the other hand, was ready for a cold drink in the air-conditioned living room.

"Come on, boy. It's too hot to play fetch."

Fifteen minutes later, Ben sat on the sofa, a glass of cold diet soda in his hand. As he sipped the drink, his thoughts returned to Ashley Showalter. He didn't know what he'd expected, but it hadn't been the woman who'd stepped down from that ladder upon his arrival. Her light-brown hair had been caught in a ponytail, but enough strands had pulled loose to give her a delightfully disheveled appearance. Her face had glistened with perspiration. Slender as a reed, she hadn't looked strong enough to carry boards up a ladder or to hammer those same boards together into a shelter. Apparently looks were deceiving.

He sure hoped she would call him soon, because something inside of him said she *was* the right person to help him make the Harmony Barn happen.

Monday, Sept 4, 1939

Andrew Henning was in the Kuna Feed and Seed when he learned Britain and France had declared war on Germany. He'd been expecting other nations to declare war ever since the Nazis had invaded Poland three days earlier, but when he heard it, it still caught him by surprise.

"Mr. Finkel warned us this'd happen," Andrew's oldest son said. Sixteen and several inches taller than his father, Ben wore a conflicted expression, a cross between righteous anger and anticipation. "When the Nazis marched into Austria, he said it wouldn't end there. And then they took Czechoslovakia, and nobody did anything to stop them. Mr. Finkel told us the Nazis wouldn't stop until they overran everything."

"You're right. He warned us."

The Finkels had purchased the property across from the Henning farm three years earlier. Jewish immigrants from Germany, Hirsch and Ira Finkel had often expressed their concerns for what Hitler meant to do in Europe. And it had been happening as the Finkels predicted, step by step.

Ben lowered his voice. "Will America join England and France? Will we go to war, too, Dad? We can't stay out of it now."

"I don't know. I don't know." He reached out, intending to ruffle Ben's hair, the same as he'd done for years. Then he thought better of it and placed his hand on the boy's shoulder instead. Ben was approaching manhood at a rapid rate. If America went to war, he would soon

be of age to serve in the military, and given his personality, he would be among the first to volunteer.

“Dad?”

“Hmm?”

“Is there any chance I could go to college?”

The sudden change of topic caused Andrew to frown in confusion, especially this particular topic. From the time Ben had come to live with Andrew and Helen at age nine, the boy had struggled with his schooling. The primary cause was disinterest, not because he wasn't smart enough to excel. And now he wanted to go to college?

Ben's expression was determined. “I want to be a pilot, and I found out yesterday the Army Air Corps Training Center requires a couple of years of college or three years of technical education before a guy can join. I'm gonna have to do one or the other.”

Andrew felt his stomach sink when he heard the words *Army Air Corps*. He knew exactly what his son would want to do once he became a pilot. And despite the many politicians who preached isolationism, Andrew didn't think Americans could remain aloof to what was happening in Europe. His neighbors had made him aware of too much to believe it. He'd read a quote by an Irish statesman that said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men should do nothing.” It was a phrase that kept running through his mind lately. Would he want America to continue to do nothing? Even if doing something meant risking his son?

“Dad?”

He gave his head a shake. “Sorry, Ben. I was thinking of something else. Army Air Corps, huh? Becoming a pilot. You caught me by surprise.” He cleared his throat as he tried to focus his thoughts. “College is expensive, and you know we don't have much extra cash, even with the economy improving. You'd have to bring up your grades if you want to go to college, and you'll have to get a job. Not just now but while you're in college. That means going to classes, doing your studies, and holding down work at the same time. It'll be tough. You'll have to want it bad.”

“I do want it bad.”

“You'll have to be willing to stick with it, no matter what.”

“I will.”

Andrew believed him. Ben had always been tenacious. In addition, he'd always been protective of others, especially his younger siblings. He cared about people, and he was a boy who kept his word. Boy? No, he wasn't a boy any longer. Not really.

Andrew released a breath. “Then we'll try to figure out how to make it happen. No promises, but we'll do our level best.”

“Thanks, Dad. I'll do my part too. I promise.”

Silently, Andrew prayed that he wasn't making a bad decision. One that would cost his son his life.

Cross My Heart by Robin Lee Hatcher

June 2019

www.robinleehatcher.com