

# Summer's Flame

Wendy Davy

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## *Dedication*

Dedicated to the glory of God.  
Special thanks to Debbie and Kathy for sharing your  
beloved pets with my characters, and to Laura and  
Bruce for sharing your expertise.



## *About the Author*

Wendy Davy is an award-winning, inspirational romance author with several titles available. She uses her active imagination and love of adventure to create faith-based stories of the heart. When not writing, she spends time reading, enjoying her real-life hero, and watching movies. She loves hearing from her readers and can be contacted at [wendy@wendydavy.com](mailto:wendy@wendydavy.com).



## *What People Are Saying*

***Deadly Chase*** ~ 2013 Inspirational Reader's Choice Award Finalist and The Romance Reviews Top Pick:

"*Deadly Chase* was filled with suspense as well as sweet, blissful romance. The chemistry between the two characters was amazing. If you love reading a good romance story with a twist of suspense, then this book is for you." ~ CozyReader, The Romance Reviews

***Reluctant Bridesmaid*** ~ 1st Place Winner in the 2010 San Antonio Romance Authors Merritt Contest and Night Owl Reviews Top Pick:

"*Reluctant Bridesmaid* by Wendy Davy is a charming romance with likable characters and lively dialogue. While the growing romance between Jordan and Tanner is the main focus of the story, the author also focuses on their Christian faith and how the events in their lives have shaped their beliefs and their willingness to depend on God to get them through their troubles." ~ Maria, Night Owl Reviews

***You Can't Hide***

"*You Can't Hide* had me hooked from the very beginning and didn't let me go until the last page was turned. It was like watching an intense movie where you find yourself wringing your hands and taking quick breaths." ~ Sherry, Love 2 Read Novels





*"There is no fear in love.  
But perfect love drives out fear."  
~ 1 John 4:18*

# 1

Summer Cassel plunged the paddle into the water, battling Shenandoah River's powerful current. The recreational kayak sliced across the rippling surface, forging ahead as if it were as eager as Summer to reach the wild blackberry brambles. The plump, ripe fruit would make a delicious cobbler, and she could use the dessert as a catalyst to initiate conversation with the elusive neighbor who had moved into her apartment complex three weeks ago.

With only five units comprising the renovated historic hotel tucked in Virginia's countryside, an official welcoming committee didn't exist, so Summer had taken it upon herself to make Mr. Hawk feel at home at The Meadows, even though she had yet to properly introduce herself. Of course, that wasn't her fault. He'd skirted around her each time they'd crossed paths as if she carried some kind of contagious disease. The only reason she knew the attractive, dark-haired man's name was because of the engraved label her landlord had placed on Mr. Hawk's mailbox. She was sure a fresh, warm blackberry cobbler would open the door to conversation.

But first, she had to harvest the main ingredient.

As she continued her steady strokes, nature invited her into its folds. Thick woodlands masked Summer from sparse homesteads located alongside the river, and blocked the view of the nearby Blue Ridge Mountains. She'd think herself alone in the wilderness, if not for the occasional group of adventure seekers passing by on inner tubes or canoes.

Although the early June temperatures rose to uncomfortable levels, sycamore, river birch, and silver maple trees stretched over the winding waterway, creating ample shade—a true blessing in the midafternoon heat.

Scents of ripe fruit caught on the breeze. Summer scanned the shoreline and found her target, exactly where her landlord had described: after the second bend in the river, ten feet to the left of a towering cypress tree. The brambles stretched above overgrown grass, a mass of thorny tangles overflowing with nourishing fruit.

The river's strong current and rocky terrain made maneuvering to the riverbank a concentrated effort. After avoiding numerous underwater obstacles, Summer managed to beach the kayak and secure a rope to a small tree. She climbed across exposed root systems and fallen branches, and by the time she reached the blackberries, beads of perspiration trickled down her chest and back, soaking her favorite tank top. But it didn't matter. She was about to get her hands dirty, her arms scratched, and expose herself to ticks and various insects. A little sweat was the least of her worries.

She only hoped Aiden Hawk would appreciate her efforts.

Summer plucked a blackberry from the vine and sampled it. Sweet. Ripe. Perfect for her needs. Anticipation fluttered in her belly. She could taste the cobbler already.

One hour and many thorn pricks later, Summer had an overflowing bucket. She returned to the kayak, secured the blackberries, and then shoved away from shore. Using the paddle to steer, she allowed the swift current to carry her toward home as she considered her plan.

Mr. Hawk kept odd hours. Sometimes he would disappear for days at a time, but she hoped he'd be in at some point this evening. She only knew of his unconventional routine, of course, because she'd been trying to speak with him and not because stirrings of attraction swamped her each time she caught a glimpse of his tall frame and athletic build. Not to mention his unruly dark hair, his square jaw, and his deep blue eyes...

So, she wasn't immune to a good-looking guy. Big deal. She was human.

Regardless of his appeal, this upcoming meet and greet was strictly about making proper introductions and welcoming him to the building—same as she'd done in the past with other new tenants. He was her neighbor, after all. With his door directly across the hall from hers, they were bound to run into each other from time to time. And it would be awkward if they didn't speak.

Summer made certain the bucket of berries remained steady, and then aimed the kayak toward the river's center as she neared a set of Class II rapids. The fun stretch had her bobbing along for a few minutes until she reached calm waters again.

As snatches of The Meadows came into view, Summer marveled at how well her landlord, Frank Hamilton, had transformed the 1930s hotel into a sleek and modern apartment complex. From the outside, the two-story stone and wood structure looked like a charming cottage complete with a well-maintained wraparound porch. But it was the inside that had solidified Summer's decision to sign the lease and move in last year. She loved the apartment's open floor plan, the French doors leading to a private balcony overlooking the river, and the living room's wood-beamed cathedral ceilings. The place felt like home the moment she'd stepped in the door.

The air conditioning worked great, too. Which reminded her...she was hot, thirsty, her scratches stung, and the perspiration she hadn't minded a while ago had begun to make her skin itch. She swiped aside a rolling sweat bead and paddled toward shore.

It would've been nice if along with all the reconstruction, Frank could've put in a boat ramp beside the dock. When she'd suggested it, he had informed her it was a choice between having hot water heaters in the apartments or a ramp. She liked having hot water. He'd made the right decision.

So, here she was with a nine-foot kayak and a steep shoreline over which she had to haul it. She'd done so before, many times, but each time, she was sure she would pull a muscle. Oh well, steep bank or not, she would accomplish her mission.

The kayak bumped against the shore, and Summer stepped into the cool water. Carefully, she set the bucket of blackberries on land first, then grabbed the kayak and tugged it toward the crest of the hill where the beach met the grass. The boat slid several inches

and teetered on the edge. One more pull should suffice.

Familiar rumblings of a truck pulling into the parking lot at The Meadows broke her concentration. Aiden Hawk drove a black, full-sized, double-cab pickup, and the powerful engine liked to make an announcement each time it arrived.

Summer pictured herself from Mr. Hawk's point of view. She must look a sight with her hair in disarray, her arms stretched to their limits, and her damp clothes plastered to her body. Maybe he would continue inside without giving her a second look, or even a first one.

She spared a glance over her shoulder. No such luck.

His blue-eyed gaze was trained on her. He took a step toward her, concern marring his brow.

Her stomach sank. If he got too close now, she'd scare him away for certain. She needed to get cleaned up before he came within a ten-foot radius. With renewed determination, Summer put every ounce of strength into one last yank. The boat gave way, plopping onto the grass as she fell backward.

Mr. Hawk stilled, waiting as if unsure what to do.

Summer gave a thumbs-up, hoping he'd do what he always did—disappear into The Meadows and make a beeline for his apartment. If he'd only waited a few more minutes to come home, she could've introduced herself properly.

Oh well. Nothing she could do about that now.

"I'm all right." Summer climbed to her knees. "I've got everything under control."

His concerned expression eased, and he ducked his head and busied himself with something inside his vehicle.

Summer relaxed. His touch of concern was nice, but she really would've been embarrassed to have him come too close.

Dottie Carlson emerged from the apartment complex with Patches, her beloved Chihuahua, tucked in her arms. She waved at Aiden Hawk and shuffled toward Summer, her white hair bouncing in the breeze. As Dottie crossed the well-manicured lawn, Patches grew anxious and wiggled out of her arms. He landed with legs already pumping, gaze zeroed in on Summer. Like a slingshot, he surged forward, leaving tufts of grass flying in his wake.

She'd been targeted.

Should've known better than to give him bits of her steak dinner the last time she'd watched him for Dottie. Now, Patches was forever her best friend, with all the rewards.

Summer braced herself, but one could only do so much in preparation for dog kisses.

With less than a yard to spare, Patches leapt into the air and landed on her chest. The eight-pound, rock-solid canine knocked her backward. This was no ordinary Chihuahua. Eager to please and full of affection, Patches licked Summer's face.

"Patches. Mind your manners," Dottie admonished, but a smile adorned her wrinkled features.

"It's OK." Summer wrapped her arms around him and accepted the greeting. In the condition she was in, what harm could a little dog spittle do? She laughed as Patches continued to welcome her home as if she'd been gone for weeks.

"You've been feeding him people food again, haven't you?" Dottie's hands found her ample hips.

"Who, me?" She feigned innocence. "Maybe a little. Besides, you never said he couldn't have leftovers."

Dottie's smile widened. "Well, he's all I have left to spoil. Might as well do it right."

Summer eased Patches from her lap and stood. She attempted to brush the fur off her tank top, but errant strands stuck to the damp material and added to her already unkempt appearance.

Self-conscious, Summer allowed her gaze to stray toward the parking lot.

Aiden Hawk stood alongside his truck, looking her way. His features relaxed with a grin.

Then, their gazes met.

He straightened, tucked hands into pockets, and then turned and hurried into the building. But not before she caught sight of the pink staining his cheeks. Or had she imagined his reaction? A strong, virile man like that wouldn't blush. She must be seeing things.

Shaking her head, Summer took up the kayak's rope, dragged the boat into the storage shed and secured the door. Dusting her hands, she returned her attention to Dottie. "I'm making a cobbler to welcome Mr. Hawk to The Meadows."

"Oh, he will like that. He has a sweet tooth. Not that you could tell by looking at him." Dottie kept an eye on Patches and when he got too close to the water, called the dog back.

"How do you know he likes sweets? He doesn't talk."

Dottie retrieved Patches. "Aiden talks plenty. Just not to you."

"Hold on. Wait." Summer wanted answers. "What do you mean?"

Dottie ran her fingers through her dog's fur. "He's quite friendly, actually. He helps me carry groceries from the car. Holds the door open for me. You know, all the stuff gentlemen do. And in town, most all the folks know and like him."

"That's...interesting." What else could she say? Apparently, Aiden Hawk was a mystery only to her. But not for long. She scooped up the bucket of blackberries. "I'm going inside to get started on the cobbler. Did you need me to watch Patches for you tonight?" There had to be some reason Dottie had ventured into the afternoon heat.

"That would be wonderful. I'm going to Glade Springs Volunteer Fire Department for a couple rounds of bingo with Frank. You know how Patches gets lonely when I leave him for too long." Dottie tucked him closer under her arm and nuzzled his fur. "Don't you, sweetheart?"

Patches looked up with adoring eyes.

"I still say Patches isn't a Chihuahua. He's too relaxed. And loving." And Patches had never tried to nip her heels like others of the breed.

"Oh, he is a purebred, dear. He's got papers. He's just one of a kind." Dottie's love for the animal shone through her eyes and her voice. "I'll bring him to your apartment." She checked her watch. "In about an hour. If that's OK?"

"That's fine. That'll give me time to take a shower and make the cobbler." Summer headed toward the building as a sense of urgency mounted. If she had any hopes of officially meeting Aiden Hawk, she had to do it quick before he disappeared again.

~\*~



Aiden rushed into his apartment, turned, and placed both hands on the mahogany door, slamming it shut. Resting his forehead against the cool wood, he contemplated knocking some sense into his own brain. What was he thinking? He'd been presented with yet another opportunity—probably the best one yet—to meet the beautiful woman residing in apartment 2A, and he'd blown it.

He shouldn't have hesitated. He'd known she could handle the kayak from seeing her use it before, but he'd been close enough to help her this time. Why hadn't he stepped forward as he would've with any other woman wrestling a heavy load?

Because she wasn't any other woman. She was Summer Cassel.

The sweet-looking, doe-eyed brunette had flustered him from the first moment he'd laid eyes on her. If only he could approach her as he did a burning building—with confidence and unyielding determination. But no, a sudden shy streak had blindsided him, claiming his common sense. He should've introduced himself from the beginning. Now their chance encounters were becoming awkward.

Today, with Dottie standing alongside Summer as a buffer, he could've come up with any number of things to say to either or both of them. The weather had been great. He could've talked about that. Then again, talking about the weather in summer—to Summer—would've been a disaster. It was probably better that his face had heated with a blush, making him turn away and saving him from an even more embarrassing encounter.

The guys at the station would get such a kick out of this if they ever found out about it. He'd told only

one person about his interest in his neighbor. Captain Warren knew all the specifics. Aiden trusted the man with his life. Of course, he trusted the other firefighters with his life, too. But Captain Warren was the only one Aiden trusted with his secrets.

He shook his head and ran a hand down his face as his thoughts continued to wander. Most of the men and women he worked alongside had families. Children. Spouses. Summer's image came to mind.

"Yeah, keep dreaming," he chastised himself, his musings echoing across the hardwood floor. He'd have to get an area rug. He was tired of the empty sounds. Although he'd fully furnished the place, it still seemed too big for one person. Spending his time helping others in need had once been enough, but lately...nothing filled the growing ache in his soul.

Aiden sighed, strode across the room, and opened the French doors leading onto the balcony. Fresh air was what he needed. And if Summer was still outside, maybe he could work up the courage to offer a hello. An initial greeting from the second story wasn't ideal, but at least it was something. Each day that passed without speaking to her became a missed opportunity. He stepped onto the wide balcony, scanned the yard below. She was gone.

Disappointment and a little bit of relief flowed. The mixed emotions wore on him. He really needed to get this over with or risk forming a stomach ulcer.

Before he could think it through and change his mind, he re-entered his apartment, yanked open his front door, and forced his legs to carry him across the hall to apartment 2A. Fisting his hand, he knocked three times.

The resounding thumps mirrored his thundering

heart. Seconds passed as he stared at the solid wood door. No noises of any kind seeped through. No shadow passed on the other side of the peephole. The paneled door stayed shut.

Summer might have gone out. But her small blue SUV was still parked in the driveway.

Most likely, she was avoiding him. At this point, he wouldn't blame her. More than once, he'd treated her like she had cooties. And the time he'd ducked back into his apartment as she'd come out of her door, well, that was just sad. He hadn't meant to be unfriendly. He'd panicked.

But he wouldn't this time. He gathered his courage, knocked on the door again, and waited.

Nothing happened.

*Great.* Now he'd have to work up the nerve again some other time. Raking fingers through his hair, he once again sought the solace of his apartment.

## 2

Summer stepped out of the shower, picked up a towel, and dried off. Human again, she set about getting dressed. She'd been told the fitted lavender sundress complemented her eyes, so after deliberating between three outfits, she chose the dress.

She carefully applied makeup, dried her hair, and then glanced in the mirror, turning one way and then the next. The rigorous kayaking trips she'd been taking had paid off. The ten pounds she'd lost in the past few months had given her a trim waistline, and she loved the look. Now, if she could gather the courage to donate the clothes that were now too big for her...

She eyed the jeans she had placed on the shelf, up high and out of the way. One day she'd let go of them, but for now, she'd play it safe and keep them. There were some risks she wasn't yet ready to take. Summer paused. Who was she kidding? She didn't take risks at all, and she liked it that way. Less chance of getting hurt.

Summer headed for the kitchen. The clock on the microwave showed she'd spent forty minutes getting cleaned up. Her heart skipped a beat. If she didn't hurry, Aiden Hawk could complete another vanishing act.

Rushing, she plunked the blackberries into a colander, rinsed them with cold water, and set them aside to drain. Next, she dug in the cabinet for sugar. But how much was she supposed to use? One cup or

two? And the butter? A half stick or a whole? She didn't want to take a chance, so she shuffled through a drawer for her recipe.

Sifting past masking tape, screwdrivers, and old coupons, Summer made a mental note to organize her things soon. Finally, she gave up.

She retrieved her cellphone and brought up Riley's number. By the time her sister answered, Summer's tension had skyrocketed. "Riley, it's me. I figured out a way to finally meet that neighbor I've been telling you about, Aiden Hawk. He's home tonight. Or at least I think he still is. I need Grandma's cobbler recipe ASAP before he takes off again." She set the sugar on the granite countertop.

"I need a lot of things, too." Riley's voice came across clear and precise. "My car wouldn't start this morning. Zack got caught stealing from the convenience store again, and my boss says if I don't go on the next business trip, I'll be fired."

Well, that put things into perspective. Guilt stung, as it always did when it came to Riley. "I'm sorry."

Riley let out a long sigh. "No. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to download my problems on you. I'm . . . handling things." Handling things was what Riley did best. As a recent widow and a single mother to a teenager, she had no other choice.

"If you need me, I can come back and live with you again. Just say the word."

"You spent six months with us. I couldn't ask you to give up more of your life. Besides, Zack and I have to find our new normal. We have to figure out how to be a family again."

A family without a father. Without a husband. Summer understood Riley's unspoken words.