



MARIA MICHAELS
GENESIS

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PEAK PREQUEL

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A Harte's Peak Prequel

Maria Michaels

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Dedication

To my children Tyler, Danielle, and Brandon.
God's greatest gifts to me.

1

The first sound that filtered into Jack Butler's ears was the whimper of Tim Whitman's little boy as he cried out for his father. Something inside Jack shifted, and only then did he relax his grip on the man's neck. A thought began to form but froze immediately as his heart raced ahead.

"Get off him! Now!" Jack heard Sheriff Calhoun's words as though they came out of a wind tunnel. *Get it together, Jack. Snap out of it. Now.*

He knew what he had to do, but men like Tim Whitman didn't help.

Tim's face was contorted in a snarl, and he stared at Jack like a pit bull about to pounce. Jack wanted to warn him that the last man to look at him that way had ended on his stomach in handcuffs, but that was more than a year ago. And he wasn't a U.S. Marshal any longer.

Red faced, Tim rubbed his neck. "Did you see that? He tried to kill me!"

"You're fine," Jack said as he took a slow deep breath the way the doctor in Virginia had recommended. *Deep breaths. As many as it takes. I'll be fine.*

"I'll have your badge, you lunatic!" Tim stumbled, bracing himself against the front door.

The scent of gun powder competed with the strong scent of whiskey. Jack shook his head. The

whiskey scent was happening now, and the gun powder was only a memory. He wasn't in Virginia; he was in California, and Tim didn't have a gun in his hands even though he was a bully. Jack hated a bully.

"Let's all calm down. From where I stood, Tim, you shoved my deputy. That was an assault on my officer." Sheriff Calhoun stood between them and spoke in even, measured tones, one arm extended toward Jack and the other toward Tim.

"Yeah? We'll see if a court of law sees it the same way." Tim threw open the ornate front door of his sprawling mansion and slammed it behind him.

Next time I'll throw the guy on the ground and give him a taste of his own medicine. I'm in trouble anyway.

Jack and Sheriff Calhoun were responding to a disturbance call made by Mrs. Mock, who lived next door to the Whitman family. When they arrived, Tim had shoved Jack. Mistake number one.

Calhoun gave him the thousand-yard stare. "You know, the biggest problem we've had today was you, Jack. Get it together."

"I don't care if he's a big time attorney. He's a mean drunk. I'm not surprised a man who defends rapists and murderers would knock his wife around." When he'd stepped between Tim and his wife, the last thing Jack clearly recalled was being shoved. After that, everything else faded into the pounding of blood in his eardrums as he grabbed Tim by the collar and pushed him up against his front door.

Calhoun glared at Jack. "You let me do the talking now."

Jack took several paces back to stand by the cruiser as Calhoun knocked on the door and spoke with Mrs. Whitman again. She was a petite, dark-haired woman

with frightened eyes. He'd seen those eyes before. Like those of a wounded animal, seeking cover. Behind her, in the shadows, for the first time Jack noticed a teenaged boy standing to her right. And even though the air appeared to be calm for the moment, Jack stayed alert, resting his hand on his Glock. He'd seen these situations turn in an instant. But try telling that to a Sheriff who had ruled a small town where the worst of the criminals were two faced men like Tim Wright. Calhoun believed in the best of everyone, and from the way he smiled as he spoke with Mrs. Whitman they could have been talking about the weather.

It might also take Jack thirty years on the job to have that kind of peace while walking through the messes that people made of their lives, but he hoped not. He didn't have that kind of time, not if he wanted to get back home to Virginia where he belonged.

Calhoun handed her a card, and she glanced behind her before she took it. Another tell-tale sign. The woman was terrified of her husband. She closed the front door, and Calhoun ambled back to the cruiser.

"She said it was her fault, and it won't happen again," Calhoun said.

Jack shook his head. "What a load of—"

"Enough, son. We'll talk about this when we get back to the station."

"Sorry, but I can't apologize. How many times have we been out here? The man is a menace. Not only does he make a mockery out of the justice system, he terrorizes his wife and kids. When he makes it home from his media appearances."

Tim Whitman was a high profile criminal defense attorney probably only interested in making money,

along with a sprinkle or two of fame. Jack had personally witnessed attorneys like Tim defend the indefensible and unravel months of tedious police work.

They drove outside the entryway of the gated community, where the most economically privileged in Harte's Peak resided, and toward downtown and the tiny sheriff's office nestled between the store fronts on Main Street. Not for the first time, he gazed in awe of the tall pine trees surrounding them. Sometimes, if he timed it right, the view could calm him. He breathed in now, as his heartbeat slowed to its normal rhythm.

Harte's Peak had turned out to be the perfect place to hide. He'd read that in the 1950s a small group of communists intent on overthrowing the government had holed up in a cabin in Harte's Peak while on the run from the FBI. An interesting bit of trivia he'd found hidden in a small book about the history of the town. The small resort town prided itself on its reputation as being the gateway to the Sierras and the town's lake was a majestic beauty. Only a fifteen-mile drive away in the nearby town of Pinecrest stood one of the top ranked ski resorts in the country.

Right or wrong, he'd wound up here after taking a leave from the U.S. Marshals service six months ago.

"'A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.' Proverbs 29:11. Have you ever heard that before, Jack?" Calhoun interrupted his thoughts.

Not again. Calhoun was a religious man who gave Jack a Bible his first week on the job. "I can't say that I have, but then again, I'm no altar boy."

Religion was fine for some people, but it was a crutch he didn't need. So he lost his temper every now

and then, but at home in Virginia, no one had ever faulted him for getting a bit hotheaded at times. If the sheriff had walked in his shoes for one day, he would have bet money he'd now be using that Bible as a paperweight.

"You can say that again. Listen, this tough guy façade will only get you so far. I understand your frustration, but you need to let the system work."

Oh, that was a rich one. Let the system work. Well, he'd tried that over the last ten years, and so far, he couldn't see that the system did much but serve as a revolving door. "And in the meantime what are we supposed to do? Should I have let him punch his wife right in front of us?"

Calhoun shook his head. "I'm not saying that, but maybe there was something you could have done between that and nearly strangling the man."

He'd done no such thing, but recognized this was yet another battle he would not win. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "You're right. It won't happen again."

"No, it won't." Calhoun said. "I'll make sure of that, son."

"That sounds ominous."

"It's not. I've been praying for you. And I won't stop until you've forgiven yourself."

Jack tensed. He didn't like when Calhoun brought up forgiveness. Calhoun was one of only two people in town who knew Jack's past—all of it. And by now he should realize forgiveness wouldn't happen anytime soon, so Calhoun might just wear out his knees.

"Son, if you don't think I wanted to do the same to Whitman, then you don't know me. It's just that I've learned over the years how to hold my temper. I

couldn't have done it without the help of the good Lord." He patted the Bible he kept on the dashboard of his cruiser.

Jack did not want to hear the religious stuff, but he also didn't want to offend Calhoun. The man ran a youth group, and it didn't hurt that he looked a little like Santa Claus with his hefty build and white beard. Everybody in town loved him. He probably couldn't help the fact that he had a ridiculously sunny and rather unrealistic disposition.

But then again, Calhoun hadn't seen the things Jack had. Calhoun didn't have to live with the memories that made their way into Jack's dreams every night. "You're not going to ask me to go to church again, are you?"

"Well, that's a standing offer. Any time you're ready, the Lord will be there."

Jack sighed. In some ways, that's what he was afraid of the most. He had a lot of good to do to make up for what he'd done, and today probably hadn't helped his accounting in heaven.

Jack pulled into the driveway of his rented home on Twain Harte Drive. The mature elm trees in desperate need of pruning lined the cul-de-sac, and an abundance of cars were parked on the street of Harte's Peak's oldest middle class neighborhood. It turned out that the modest cottage was the only place he could find that would accept a month to month lease.

After today's incident, Calhoun had sent him home early and ordered him to get some rest. *Rest. What a joke.* He did need a nap, hopefully followed by a

good night's sleep, though he doubted he would get either.

What he definitely didn't need was what he witnessed as he shut his truck off. A figure, pressed against the front window of his neighbor's house two doors down, clearly pushing the window open from the outside.

Entering through the front window in broad daylight. Great. Will this day never end?

From the brand name skateboarding shoes and the matching logo t-shirt, the intruder could be a kid, and that was the last thing he wanted to deal with right now. Kids were unpredictable, dangerous. But no way would an intruder get away with a B&E. Not in his neighborhood. The people on this street couldn't have much, so what was this kid after? Probably a TV set or the latest PlayStation.

He approached the front of his neighbor's house, hand resting on his weapon just in case the uniform wasn't enough to send the kid running. He'd let this one go as long as the kid didn't make it in the house, no harm done. Things were different in Harte's Peak, not like back home in Virginia. This was a small community and even the kids were normally well behaved. Just his luck to run into a troublemaker.

It didn't help that he wasn't even sure who lived in the house or if they were at home, since he'd made it a point not to meet any of his neighbors.

A few words indicating that he lived next door should send the kid running and that would be the end of it. He'd go inside, grab a soda, and stare at the empty walls, maybe watch the game until it was time for his next shift. The work was what he lived for nowadays. It kept him grounded, rooted. As long as he

had work, he had a reason to stay alive.

He approached the house with slow, sure steps and watched the kid hang one leg over the windowsill, oblivious to his approach. Not exactly a professional. This might be the kid's first foray into stealing.

"Can I help you?" he asked the kid in his deepest and loudest tone.

The kid startled, and when she turned her face to him, he realized it was a teenaged girl. She squealed her surprise, lost her balance, and promptly fell inside through the window.

Super. Officially breaking and entering—or more like breaking and falling. He edged to the window, looked down at the display, and assessed that she wasn't hurt. He didn't see any bleeding or scratches, but she lay splayed across the floor in a heap, her dark brown hair forming a cloud around her head.

"Are you OK, kid?" He pushed down the panic in his voice. *Please. No more kids hurt on my watch.*

"I'm fine! And I didn't do anything wrong." She pushed hair out of her equally dark brown eyes. Raised her chin, defiant. Nice. So it was his fault he'd caught her in the act.

"Except breaking and entering." He took a deep breath in and let it out.

"What did you say?" The kid seemed confused. Maybe she had a concussion.

"Get up. I'll take you to the station, and we can call your parents." The last thing he wanted to do was be responsible for this kid, but she'd committed a crime right in front of his eyes, and he couldn't let her go now. Knowing Sheriff Calhoun and his bleeding heart ways, he'd probably just give the girl a stern lecture.

"My parents? Why? Are you nuts?"

"No, but maybe you are. Then again, you probably didn't realize a cop lives in this neighborhood. You picked the wrong house, kid." His voice sounded strained in his ears. The breathing exercises weren't working. Again. He just wanted to get away from here and go back in his house where he could breathe. Why did this kid have to pick his neighborhood?

"I live here, you nerd." She almost spat the words out, scrambling to her feet.

He was supposed to believe that. "The front door is a better place to come in if you live here. And you can come out the front door now. I'm guessing the owners aren't home."

"You don't believe me. Gee, what a shock."

"Why should I?" In his experience, best relegated to the deep recesses of his mind, kids rarely told the truth. He used to believe them as much as he believed anyone else, until he'd been burned.

"I can call my mother. She'll tell you." Her defiance continued, unabated. This kid was a piece of work.

"You better do that." He would have to talk to the kid's mother anyway. Might as well have her come to him, and then they could all three drive to the station. He'd let Calhoun decide what to do with the kid.

The girl reached inside her jeans pocket for a cell phone. He watched as she pushed buttons and sighed with exasperation.

"No luck?"

"She never remembers to turn her phone off silent."

Jack shrugged. He'd bet this kid had a million excuses, and maybe there was no mother coming at all.

One year ago, Maggie Bradshaw could only operate her own coffeemaker, but now she churned out one drink after another. Espressos, lattés, and chai to plain drip, and she had the recipes memorized. Not that she poured coffee from a pot often, but when she had an order like that, she stopped for a moment and took a deep breath.

Her favorites were the iced drinks, and during afternoon lulls she experimented with flavors and mixes. Vera Carrington, her boss and the owner of The Bean, loved Maggie's creativity and even encouraged it. She even named one of the drinks that Maggie had concocted after her: Maggie's Marvelous Mysterious Mocha. It contained the secret ingredients—specialty chocolate mixed with just a hint of cherry.

"Taste this." Maggie handed Vera a small sample of her newest blend, a mixture of coconut and hazelnut.

Vera stopped sweeping the floor. "Yum, you've done it again. Put that one on the menu, too."

"It's not quite ready. There's something missing, but I'll figure it out. I just need to play around some more with the flavors."

The doorbell dinged announcing a new customer had walked in.

"Well, not now. Lover Boy is here again and there's no way I'm dealing with him today." Vera turned her back.

Ryan Colton was by far Harte's Peak most eligible bachelor, and one of Vera's biggest fans. On the other hand, also a big fan of every woman. And with his

rugged good looks, it was no wonder most women were part of the I Want to Date Ryan Fan Club. Not Vera, though. A mystery Maggie could still not crack.

"The usual, Ryan?" Maggie made preparations for a double espresso.

"Please don't tell me I'm that predictable, or I'll have to change my order," Ryan said as he fiddled with the straws and seemed to ignore Vera.

Vera did a good job of ignoring him as well, staying near the back. They'd nearly made ignoring each other a spectator sport.

Vera, whose dating life was practically a *Who's Who* in Harte's County, had somehow decided that Ryan was off limits to her. Go figure.

"Here you go, Ryan." She slid him the espresso with a tentative smile. She didn't like playing this silly game. These two needed to realize they were crazy about each other and get over it.

"Are you girls obeying the speed limit like you promised you would?" Ryan asked with a boyish smile.

Maggie noticed that Vera threw him a look but didn't respond. They both knew he meant Vera, who accumulated a speeding ticket every other week.

"Obeying the speed limit is what I do." Maggie put a hand to her chest. "And I'm good at it."

"You make my day," Ryan said.

The phone rang, and Vera rushed to get it. "Maggie, get over here," she called out.

But the phone couldn't possibly be for her. Lexi always called the cellphone, and who else could it be? Strolling toward the back where the phone was located, Maggie smiled. "Finally ready to talk to him?"

"I'm serious. It's Lexi, and she sounds upset." Vera

handed her the phone. Maggie fished inside her apron for the cellphone she kept near for emergencies. There were three missed calls on it from Lexi. Maggie had forgotten to take the phone off silent. Again.

"Mom, some stupid cop wants to arrest me." Lexi's voice sounded small and tiny over the phone.

"What? Where are you?"

"I'm at home. Only he doesn't believe me."

A number of questions popped in Maggie's head, like why Lexi hadn't walked to the café after school as she usually did, but there would be time for that later. "I'll be right there."

Maggie hung up the phone, and grabbed her purse and keys. "Vera, I have to go. Lexi is—"

"Go! Tell me about it later."

Maggie ran past Ryan, hopped in her vehicle, and prayed it would start on the first try this time. She had to get home immediately, because there obviously had to be some mistake. Of course, she would just straighten this out, and they would laugh about it later. For all the trouble she'd caused in the past year, Lexi had never become acquainted with law enforcement.

What could she have done at their own home to cause the police to come after her?

Please, God. I need You now. It's just You and me. Why is this happening?

Maybe she really wasn't cut out to be a mother because the evidence so far was that she had failed.

Since their move to Harte's Peak, Lexi's behavior had gone from bad to worse, with rolling eyes and loud sighs a new way of communication. Just last week her algebra teacher caught her cheating on a test. The two of them should be able to get through this difficult time. Lexi was hurting and acting out. Maggie knew

that, but she had no idea how to help her.

Lexi had pulled away from 'those church kids,' as she called them, as if she knew she didn't belong. It was a constant struggle every Sunday to get her out the door and to church on time, and any attempt at affection toward Lexi left Maggie feeling like she'd hugged a cactus.

If only Matt were here. He'd know what to do. But Matt was never coming home again, and they'd both have to get used to that.

2

According to his watch, Jack had waited five minutes, which his constricted chest made seem more like five hours, when a silver SUV peeled into the driveway and a petite woman emerged, panic etched on every angle of her porcelain-like face. Long, wild strawberry blonde hair fell in waves around her face, and her eyes were the color of the pine trees that covered the mountains of Harte's Peak. He'd heard the kid tell her mother to come without giving her any directions, so this appeared to be a huge misunderstanding.

"What happened?" The woman asked and jarred him out of his daydream.

"Is this your daughter?" He pointed to the kid, who now sat on the porch with anger blazing in her eyes.

"Yes, this is my daughter Lexi. I'm Maggie Bradshaw. What on earth happened?" She was out of breath.

Jack had scared her for no good reason. "Officer Jack Butler. There's been a mistake. I saw your daughter climbing through the front window, and I assumed she was breaking and entering." He couldn't shake the feeling that he was almost as relieved as she was that it was all a big mistake.

"You know you're supposed to meet me at the cafe after school." Maggie glanced at her daughter.

"I'm tired of being treated like a baby. I want to come home and do my homework, not sit at the cafe so you can keep your eye on me. If you would leave me a key, this wouldn't have happened." The kid pouted.

"I'm so sorry, Officer. It won't happen again," Maggie said.

"I'm the one who's sorry. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions but..." He felt like an idiot, but he was doing his job. He wasn't a mind reader, and he hadn't exactly been at the top of his game. No, not for some time.

"That's right!" Lexi interrupted.

"Lexi, he was just trying to help." Maggie defended him, and his mind briefly flashed back to Virginia and the parent of another teen. If that parent had helped law enforcement, her kid would be fine today. *Stop it, Butler. It's your fault. Don't blame anyone else.*

"Well, now will you leave me a key so I can stop looking like a criminal?" Lexi stood and put her hands on her hips.

"You and I will talk about that. Later." Maggie shot her daughter a pleading look and then turned her attention back to him. "Thanks for watching over our neighborhood. You never know. It could have been a real burglar."

Exactly. "I live two doors down." He hooked his thumb in the direction of his house.

He didn't know why he thought it was important that she realize that. He usually liked to keep a low profile and had managed to avoid his neighbors so far. Let someone know a cop lived next door and suddenly every minor neighborhood issue was a matter for law enforcement. But he also didn't want Maggie to think