



DORA HIERS

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in the
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Dedication

To Jesus, my Savior, my Lord.
Thank you for the ultimate gift: Love.

Praise

Journey's End:

"I loved *Journey's End*. The book pulls you in and keeps you turning pages with a smile on your face. If you like faith-filled, fun-loving, fast-paced romance, this is the book for you!" ~ Susan Tuttle

Journey's Edge:

"Mixed in with the action, lies a heart-warming romance, which leaves the main characters in your mind after the last page is turned. A breathless whirlwind that leaves you doubting the HEA you know is coming." ~ Clare Revell

When Truth Whispers:

"They were larger than life characters, and the chemistry between them was electric. I loved it!"
~Sherry Kuhn

You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand. ~Psalms 16:11

1

Conner Weddington navigated the tow truck through the chaos that littered Highway 15, the only major road running north and south through Evergreen Peak, Colorado. Cars tipped, hood first, into the ditches on both sides of the road, and some were just plain stuck where they stopped, unable to go any further because of the slick ice and blinding snowfall.

Idiots.

Didn't they know that ice was best enjoyed in the rink, and not on the highway? What was so all-fired important that these people had to be out on the roads and not safely ensconced in warm houses?

And now he had to be out in it. Working.

Maybe he was the stupid one. Digging thoughtless clods out of a killer snowstorm wasn't exactly how he'd pictured his first day on the job. Not that he ever imagined he'd be back in Evergreen Peak. Or camping out in his father's house while he sifted through fifty years' worth of...junk.

Conner snorted and then ground his teeth while his boot hovered just above the brake. The truck cruised along on its own speed. With the heat blasting his face, he scanned the vehicles for the dark blue

compact the auto club had called him to rescue. It wasn't easy to make out colors through the wet, heavy snowflakes that reduced his visibility not much farther than the truck's massive hood, virtually blinding him. He leaned forward, studying the car off to the right.

There. That had to be her.

He assessed the situation before maneuvering the big truck onto the side of the road, babied it to a stop, and stomped out. "Not too smart driving in this mess," he muttered, the fierce wind stealing his words as soon as they escaped his mouth, but he didn't care.

"You're right. I'm so sorry, but I couldn't leave work until my last student was picked up. And now I'm afraid I won't be able to pick up my niece from daycare." Worry came through loud and clear in her voice.

He hadn't seen her get out of the car, but he didn't regret his words. He glanced at the tiny slip of a woman. The top of her head probably didn't reach his chest. With arms hugging her chest and teeth clacking together, the heavy jacket apparently did little to prevent the arctic wind from chilling her bones. His gaze landed briefly on her face. She reminded him of...

The frigid air he sucked in burned all the way to his lungs. Chaney Mitchum? No. That couldn't be her. *God, You wouldn't do that to me, would You?*

His gaze devoured the hair that cascaded over her shoulders in waves below the cherry red beret, before moving on to her eyes. Long lashes lifted from pink cheeks to reveal wide jade jewels. The oddly familiar puffiness rimmed the bottom lashes.

His jaw dropped, and his stomach plunged to his steel-toed boots. It had to be her. And he sure wasn't thrilled about Chaney seeing him like this. He'd only

planned to light in this town long enough to pack up his stuff and take care of business before heading back out, leaving a "For Sale" sign in his dad's yard.

Ironic that his old partner would be practically the first person he'd run into. Not that Evergreen Peak was that big. He'd just hoped to...what? Blend in with the tourists? He gave his head a little shake. He should have known better.

So Chaney Mitchum was a teacher now, and an aunt. He tucked that knowledge away and rubbed greasy, grimy hands down his cargo pants, turning his back on her to hoist the shovel out of the bed. Digging out her car was the best option. He didn't relish the idea of rubbing shoulders with her all the way into town. She'd ask too many questions. Questions he wasn't ready to answer.

"You're going to shovel it out? Not tow it?" she asked, as if she doubted his decision.

Well, she wouldn't be the first.

"We'll give it a try. Might work." He firmed his jaw and got busy shoveling around the back end, farthest away from her. Maybe she wouldn't recognize him. He wasn't the guy she'd known back in high school, and definitely not wearing the same glamorous uniform.

Boots crunched through the snow, coming to a stop behind him.

He should have known. He huffed, but not from effort.

"Thank you for coming out in this."

He didn't turn around, just kept heaving snow out from around the car and tossing it towards the ditch.

"Yeah. No problem." If it had been anybody else, it would have been. But Chaney? Definitely not. He

owed her at least this much. So much more, truthfully, but—

With the shovel in midair, he twisted his head over a shoulder and stole another look. She hadn't changed. She was still as breathtakingly beautiful as ever. He finished digging out the worst of it and turned back around, extending a palm to collect the key.

"I must have only been driving ten miles an hour. I tried so careful not to get stuck." Chaney's teeth were still chattering as she pressed the key in his palm. This time, she glanced full on at his face. Her brows arched, and then narrowed, her head tilting to the side just a bit, studying him.

He gulped, flicking his head towards the disabled car. "No worries. It doesn't look too bad. I think we'll have you out of here..." his voice faded at her gasp.

Her jaw dropped, her gloved hand fluttered to hover in front of her mouth, and shock registered in her green eyes.

So stunning, they'd always brought to mind a grassy meadow in spring.

"Conner?" Her voice came out barely above a whisper, and if it hadn't been for the wind switching directions, he'd never have heard it. "Conner Weddington?"

She'd been expecting him for a couple of weeks. But not today. Not here and not—a wet snowflake landed on her eyelid, and she blinked—definitely not during the worst storm of the decade, and when the only thing on her mind was getting to her niece and

hugging her tight.

“Yeah. It’s me.” Conner shuffled those seriously long legs of his; his movement on the icy shoulder as graceful as it had been in the rink all those years ago. He tugged off his gloves and turned to toss them in the bed of the truck.

Was he trying to avoid her? As if! She almost chuckled. Not that avoiding her was even remotely possible in a town the size of Evergreen Peak, even if the tourists outnumbered the residents in the wintertime.

He turned back around and stuffed his hands deep in his cargo pants, mute. His lips pressed into a thin line, that look of stubbornness she remembered all too well firming his jaw.

Yeah. Well, she had a lot to say, or ask, rather. Starting with why he had disappeared right after Christmas break of his senior year. Sure, she got that his mom had just passed away, and that he’d been drowning in sorrow. But just when their hopes and dreams were taking flight, the countdown to the winter Olympics dwindling to days, how could he have deserted her?

“Seriously? You weren’t even going to let me know you were back in town?” She gave her head a little shake, and snowflakes tumbled from her hat and hair. Oh, that she could shake off all her memories of their skating days as easily. But they still haunted her dreams, and it didn’t help that he was standing in front of her now, still looking as infuriatingly delicious as he did back in high school.

Only those powerful shoulders had bulked up even more, and the muscles rippled just as clearly under the cargo work pants he wore now. Cobalt blue

eyes burned with the same intensity, but the angles of his face seemed harder, more rugged. Not in an angry or violent way. Almost as if it were a mask to cover up...pain.

Whatever. She didn't have time for a walk down memory lane. She had more important things to consider. Like getting to the daycare to pick up her niece before the storm worsened, or finally getting a hold of her mother to see if she could reach Annabelle. She held out her hand for the car key.

Conner's hands didn't budge from his pockets.

She took a step towards him. Her boot lost traction, and her arms flailed as her legs slid out from under her. She was going down.

An arm curled around her waist and tugged her to a stable, standing position, nestled close to him. Too close. With her palm flattened against his chest, she could feel the accelerated beat of his heart, and a stiff gust of air blew his scent, something citrusy and woodsy, and oh, too wonderful, her way. Could she help it if her nose lifted to inhale more of him?

"A little rusty out on the ice, Chaney?" His deep voice rumbled just over her head, more than a little amusement in his tone.

This was not good. She should be worried about getting out of here, not remembering how good, how right, it felt to be snuggled against his solid chest. "No. I do just fine in the rink on my skates, thank you very much." She pushed away from him, abandoning the warmth of his chest.

"You look as graceful as ever." His lips had fanned out, and his tone had transitioned to teasing, but were those sapphire eyes glowing with appreciation? And maybe something else? Or was that just wishful

thinking on her part?

"Thanks. I think." She gave him a playful swat. Probably with all the force of a gnat, considering the firmness of his arm.

He chuckled, but then his face took on a serious expression. "Better than I would do, I'm sure. I haven't stepped a skate in the rink since I left." His arm fell to his side, her car keys jangling from his fingertips, and his chin dipped to his chest while his boot kicked tiny dimples in the ice. He sighed, and then lifted his chin, his mournful gaze immobilizing her. "Let me see if I can get the car out of this mess now." He shuffled to the driver's side of her disabled car, a depressing droop to his shoulders.

That broke her heart more than Annabelle letting loose with those pathetic crocodile tears. She couldn't reconcile the loneliness that seeped from his eyes with the way his dazzling blue eyes had always glimmered with excitement, with hopes and dreams. Or the dejected slant of his shoulders now with his majestic posture in the rink. What had happened to him in the years he'd been away?

His fingers latched onto the door handle of her car, and he twisted back to look at her. "You might want to move behind the truck. Safer that way, just in case this little gal doesn't cooperate." He flicked his head towards the tow truck, and then disappeared inside the car.

She followed his directions, moving gingerly across the icy mixture, and parked herself behind the truck. Her phone vibrated in her pocket. She tugged it out.

I have Annabelle. We're home. No worries. Be safe!

Thank God, her mother had gotten her message.

She typed out a response. *OK. May be a while yet. Car stuck. Tow truck working to get it out.* She would tell Carole about Conner later, and now she could put her worry over Annabelle to rest. She tucked the phone back in her pocket and took a deep, cleansing breath.

The engine cranked to life, the sound breaking through the wind's awful howl, dragging snowy white crystals off the ground to swirl around her legs. She tucked some flyaway hair behind an ear and wrapped her coat tighter, shivering as she peered around the edge of the giant tow truck.

Could he dislodge her car or would he have to hook it up? If he hooked it up to the tow truck, she'd have to ride with him all the way back to town. She'd get her answers then. She wasn't sure what to pray for, that he'd—

Tires crunched through the snow as he eased the car forward, back, and then drove the car right out of its stronghold as if doing so didn't require any special effort on his part.

Just like his skating. He'd always been a natural on the ice, and together they'd skated in perfect precision. She'd never been able to achieve that poetic elegance on ice with any other partner. Conner was responsible for offering her a fleeting glimpse of what they could accomplish, and then the stabbing pain as she watched the Olympics on television instead of from the sidelines; the hopes and dreams slipping from her grasp quicker than she'd slid into this mess.

She blew out a sigh. So much for getting answers. He'd probably vanish from her life as quickly as he'd reappeared.

He left the engine running and stepped over to her, his heavy brows and stubble flaked with snow.

“Looks like you’re good to go.”

Her fingers itched to brush off the flakes, but instead she clapped, the sound muffled by her gloves. “My hero.” Again. Not that she’d ever divulged that pathetic childhood crush to him, and she surely didn’t plan to share it now. But, if the ache in her chest and the frantic flutter of her heart was any indication, maybe it hadn’t been so childish.

A lump bobbed along his throat. “Where you headed?”

“Home.”

“Still the same address?”

“Yeah.” Everything was still the same, including how she felt about him. But yet...she was different. She made her living off the ice now, instead of making dreams, and precious little Annabelle depended on her. She didn’t have time or energy for much else.

“How about if I lead the way? You can follow in my tracks.”

He was doing it again. Cradling her heart in his tender palms.

“OK.” God help her, but she would follow him anywhere.

Didn’t he know that?

2

Conner slid the key into the lock of the skating rink and pushed the heavy door open, a dusty bag holding his gear slung over his shoulder. He still couldn't believe he was here, or that he was actually considering getting out on the ice again. A sharp sensation stabbed at him, almost as if a knife plunged into his chest, and he stopped just inside the door to catch his breath.

As if finding his old skates tucked all the way in the back of his closet hadn't been sign enough, Mr. Long, er, Pete, the same owner of the rink, had offered him free skating whenever. Pete had brought his truck in for service and mentioned the idea, zest lighting the old guy's face, but Conner had just shrugged it off, claiming he was only in town temporarily. But then when the old guy came back in to pick up his truck, he'd dangled the rink's key in front of Conner's face. How could Conner resist such a generous offer? The only negative? Sharing the ice with a teacher and the students she worked with before and after school.

Pete had only chuckled, dismissing it with a wave of his hand and a mischievous glint shining from faded eyes.

No sweat. Just so long as they didn't laugh at him when he slipped and fell on his sorry behind. He forced his rebellious legs to move farther into the rink, and slowed when voices echoed and blades slashed

through ice. The cool air settled over him and he closed his eyes, breathing in the oddly comfortable scents of sweat, musty locker rooms, and leftover concession stand goodies.

One voice registered. His lids bolted up, and his heart stuttered. No. It couldn't be, could it? Was Chaney the teacher that Pete had warned him about? No wonder the old guy had chuckled.

Conner peered out onto the ice.

Yeah. There was no mistaking Chaney. One long leg stretched straight up in the air, her arms and torso achieving a perfectly balanced posture, as she glided across the rink with unmatched grace, demonstrating a routine to her students, one of whom couldn't be more than a couple of years old.

Wow! Even now, after all these years, watching her on the ice dredged up powerful feelings probably best left buried. His chest lifted with a sigh. *God, is this Your doing again? You can stop throwing us together anytime now. I'm just here to clear out the junk from Dad's house then I'll be moving on. Remember? That was our deal. With all the memories, it's too painful to stay here.*

He dragged his gaze away from Chaney and tamped down the dreams that threatened to eat him alive. Steering clear of the parents hanging out in the same section of seats where his mother had always waited, he plopped down on a vacant bench and dropped his bag to the floor with a huff. He was here now. Might as well get on with it. He couldn't exactly hand back the key to Mr., er, Pete, and tell the old guy he hadn't used it, could he?

He laced his skates and made his way to the entry point onto the ice. A startled gasp caught his attention. He gave a half-hearted wave in Chaney's direction and

skated through the opening, sticking to the fringe, away from the class.

"Let's try that routine once more, and then we'll wrap up today's session," Chaney instructed her students, her voice a little shaky.

Had he rattled her with his presence? He stole a glance her way. She was bent over, stretching the little one's miniature arms out in the proper position and helping her maintain a precarious balance. Even so, he couldn't escape the feeling that Chaney's watchful gaze followed him all the way around the rink as he warmed up.

"You're doing great, Melanie." Chaney's voice floated to him. "Awesome, Mark."

He rounded the angle, shuttering his lids. He didn't need his eyes open to navigate the curves. Not when the distance from one end of the rink to the other came as natural as tinkering inside the engine of a car now. He picked up speed, savoring the cool breeze kissing his cheeks, the memories of skating with Chaney nestled against his side bubbling up to tantalize him, as real as if she actually skated next to him. His arms reached out, heavy with the weight of a decade's worth of dreams and pent-up longing, but his fingertips landed on...nothing.

How many times did he circle the rink before she called an end to her class? Two? Three? Long enough that regret over his too-impulsive decision years ago kept stabbing him in the chest. Where would they be now had he stayed? Would they have achieved their aspirations, on the ice and off? Had her dreams of a lifelong partner ever included him?

He'd loved her from the minute he took her in his arms for the first time, when she'd gazed up at him,

her face flush with excitement and vulnerable with trust. But she'd been so young, and he'd been so...messed up.

When he finally lifted his lids, most of the students had disappeared. Only one remained on the ice. The adorable tyke with long, nutmeg-colored hair pulled back into a ponytail, one hand gripping Chaney's in a tight latch, her round eyes, as big as the biscuits he'd devoured for breakfast, staring at him.

Was Chaney waiting for him? He glided over to them, careful to stop a few feet away, still not sure that he wouldn't make a fool of himself on the paper-thin blades. "Pete told me I'd be sharing the rink with a class, but he didn't mention that you were the teacher," he said.

"I didn't expect an audience," she said, her gaze dropping to the little girl at her side.

"I'm sorry. I hope I didn't disrupt your class." His gaze skittered from Chaney to the girl, and then back to Chaney.

Chaney shook her head. "No. It's OK. I was just surprised. That's all."

In the blaring light of the rink, Chaney was even prettier than he remembered, yet the same with her high, ivory-pure cheekbones, beautifully arched brows, and bow-shaped lips. In a similar band as the little girl's, Chaney's nutmeg colored hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

He used to rest his cheek against her head just to feel those silky strands tickle his jaw, to breathe in her soothing scent—vanilla mingled with spicy citrus and flowers. That hadn't been part of the routine, but their coach never complained because they got so many compliments about their chemistry on the ice. Maybe