



Candice Sue  
PATTERSON

*Silver  
White  
Winters*

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## **Silver White Winters**

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## Dedication

For Mama--your unconditional love, patience, and quiet strength have never failed me. Thanks for being my best friend.

This story would not be possible without Robin Patchen, Pegg Thomas, Kara Hunt, Marge Wiebe, and Jericha Kingston. I love you, girls. I thank you, Jericha, from the bottom of my heart, for sharing your amazing musical and songwriting abilities with me, taking this story to another level.

Thank you, reader, for taking time out of your day to spend with my characters. I appreciate you.



## Praise for Candice Sue Patterson

"Grab a cup of cocoa and settle in, because you won't want to put this down until you reach the end. Another great story from Patterson."

--Robin Patchen, author

"Candice Sue Patterson melts hearts in *Silver White Winters*. Vivid depiction and spirited characters transport us to Appalachia, where love is rekindled amid regret and loss. Ms. Patterson emphasizes trust in times of indecision, warming us with God's peace and forgiveness."

--Jericha Kingston, author





# 1

*Has-been.*

The tabloid headline gouged a pit in Raelynn Rivers's gut as she stared into the sea of faces gathered in the auditorium. Blazing stage lights produced a rivulet of sweat that slithered down the back of her neck. Tears pushed to the surface. A sold-out venue. And not one of them was there to see her.

She gripped the mic. "How y'all doin' tonight?"

A weak stream of voices echoed back.

Her heart beat with the surge of adrenaline and nerves. "I'd like to sing my newest song for y'all tonight, fresh from the studio. It's called 'Cowboy Crush.'"

*And it's terrible.*

She pressed a finger to her ear monitor and nodded at the band. Ty smacked drumsticks over his head then set the beat, contorting his body like a seizure victim. Jace followed on the electric guitar with Lacey chasing his notes on the fiddle.

Raelynn struck a G-chord and belted the lyrics, fingertips speeding along her guitar strings. Instrument and musician became one. She'd perfected stage presence to an art. Her life—not so much.

The chorus ended, and Raelynn scanned the crowd for signs of approval. The blinding lights made it impossible to see farther than the first five rows, but it was obvious by the way the audience was more

engrossed in their private conversations that they weren't the least bit impressed. Rightfully so.

Gone were the days when her fans clapped, danced, and held their cellphones in the air, swaying them in the darkness. Even her stalkers had gotten bored. The tabloids were right for a change. She was a has-been.

A building packed with eleven-thousand people, and she'd never felt more alone.

The steel ball of emotions in her stomach climbed up her throat. Her voice cracked, and Raelynn swallowed the lump to get through the last verse. The beat was way more rock than country, not a trace of the soul-stirring bluegrass that had made her a household name. But ever since she'd lost her ability to write music, she'd been forced to accept whatever pig swill her manager threw in her slop bucket. She had to. It wasn't just her neck in the noose anymore. The band—a faithful group of four men and two women who'd supported her through an abusive relationship and two rounds of rehab—had families to support. Besides, she had a contract to honor, and God knew she couldn't afford the repercussions of reneging.

On the fifth and final song, Raelynn finally captured the audience's attention. "Dreamer of Dreams" was her first number one hit ten years before, selling more singles in the first week than any other country artist. Until Taylor came along anyway. Now, here Raelynn stood, opening for a male-female duo who'd once opened for her. Life sure had a way of kicking a girl while she was down.

Raelynn released the last note and forced a plastic smile. "Does everybody feel that?" She made a display of looking at her feet. "Sugar Creek's risin'. Who's

ready to rock this house?"

Thunder rumbled as the crowd stomped their feet, lifted their arms, and shouted. The stage trembled. She pressed a finger to her ear monitor to quiet the glass-breaking shrieks. The hot lights on her skin, the rush, the intense longing to be back on top swept her in a tidal wave as *Sugar Creek Risin'* took the stage. That was her cue to exit, but she didn't leave. It was too easy to pretend all the mayhem was for her.

A willowy arm wrapped around Raelynn's shoulders. "A big thanks to my good friend here for her dynamite opening." Jenny Creek's sugary Texas drawl poured into the mic. Short, blonde waves framed a flawless oval face and pointed chin. "Let's hear it for Raelynn Rivers."

With her guitar pick clutched between her thumb and forefinger, Raelynn extended her arm to the ceiling. Her cheeks ached from a broad smile she didn't feel inside. The crowd was only going crazy so she'd get off the stage and let the real entertainment begin.

Jenny kissed her cheek and whispered, "Hang in there, baby girl."

Hang on to what? Raelynn was threadbare. This dreamer of dreams had traded one life for another, and now neither existed. Blinking back despair, Raelynn exited stage left before the bodyguards carried her off, determined to make it behind the locked door of her dressing room before she crumbled to pieces.

Her band members filled the hallway, packing away instruments and stacking equipment.

Ty patted her tense shoulders with a tattooed hand. "Good job tonight."

If there was one thing she hated more than anything, it was being patronized. Or treated like a

head case.

Jace raked his fingers through his spikey blond hair and murmured a similar compliment.

Raelynn slipped the guitar strap over her arm and handed her guitar to Ty, injecting her cheeks with another artificial smile. "Thanks, guys. A few more shows like this, and we'll be back in the game."

Maybe she could turn the fib into a song, "Liar on a Hot-Wire." Or had someone done that one already?

With a wave to her backup singers, Raelynn headed for her dressing room. The *click* of her dark, leather boots echoed through the empty hallway, void of screaming fans who'd won backstage passes on the radio or had found a way to sneak in a back door. No paparazzi with flashing cameras. No admirers offering to keep her warm tonight. Just her and her turquoise, western-style sundress swishing around her knees. A few more steps and she could fall into a sleep-induced euphoria.

Raelynn entered her dressing room, leaned her back against the closed door, and let the tears fall. In the past, her rooms had been like stepping into an oasis with colorful flowers and invigorating smells, gifts from adoring fans and fellow artists stacked around the room. Tonight, one lonely vase of orange roses and sweet peas waited on her dressing table, overpowered by a dank odor. She knew who they were from without even looking at the card.

Two knocks beat against her back. She groaned quietly and opened the door. Jay, in all his manager façade, leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest, attempting to look...sexy? "Good job tonight."

Oh, brother. "They hated it." Raelynn stalked to

the mirror to erase the mascara streaks under her eyes.

“Your performance was stellar.”

“I’m talking about the new song. Next, you’ll have me singing country rap.”

“Hey, it works for—”

“Not happening.” She swiped a tissue beneath her eyes. “I’ve ruined it, Jay. I had it all, and I let the fame—the business—consume me. A few bad decisions, and I’m back at the beginning. I can count the number of loyal fans on one hand. If you give me another rotten song like ‘Cowboy Crush,’ we’ll all be flipping burgers.”

The girl in the mirror was a lost cause. She shoved her makeup bag with her elbow, revealing the magazine underneath. She’d forgotten she’d left it there. The tabloid headline jumped off the page and slapped her in the face. Her fingers curled around the edge of the dressing table, her knuckles turning white. How did “America’s Sweetheart” become America’s joke?

Jay came up behind her and put his hands on her waist. “You shouldn’t read those. They’re never true.”

“Until now.” Raelynn licked a salty tear that pooled into the corner of her mouth.

Jay kissed the back of her head. His gray eyes caught hers in the mirror. “Have you tried writing again?”

A familiar ache throbbed in the piece of her heart where dreams once thrived and she closed her eyes against the pain. “I can’t write anymore. It’s gone.”

He turned her around and hooked a finger beneath her chin, lifting it until she had no choice but to look at him. His charcoal suit brought out the touch of silver at his temples and made his eyes stand out.

“What we need to do is show the world you’re ready for a comeback.” He thumbed away the wetness on her cheek. “You’ve made some mistakes, but you’re ready for a second chance.” Jay weaved his fingers into the hair at her nape and tilted his face closer.

Before his lips could touch hers, she broke away. Jay was handsome and all, but he was old enough to be her father. She’d noticed his forward behavior ever since her last trip to rehab, the same time Kate had left him, but he’d never been this bold. As special as Jay was to her, she’d never see him as anything more than her manager. She shivered. “How do you suggest I prove myself?”

Jay rubbed a palm across the back of his neck, his face red. “Reinvent your image.” He sank onto the makeup chair. “How do you feel about acting? WorldFilm is remaking *White Christmas*. The director owes me a favor. I can get you an audition.”

Raelynn picked up the pair of yoga pants she’d worn during rehearsal and threw them into her suitcase to avoid eye contact. “The best way to bury my career is to try and mimic other stars who’ve gone that route. Besides, you’ve seen me dance. It’s worse than a drunken rooster on speed.”

A corner of his mouth curled. “A drunken rooster?”

“Trust me, it’s not pretty.” She’d witnessed a flock of wasted chickens the day she and Lane had stumbled upon Old Man Jenkins’s still in the woods when they were ten. Even drunk, the flock’s feet kept better rhythm than she could ever hope for. How the birds got into that moonshine, she’d never know. The memory of Lane wrenched her chest.

“*The Sound of Music* worked for Carrie.”

She rummaged in her bag for a sweatshirt. "Carrie's career isn't in the toilet. No thanks."

Jay lowered his voice and blew out a frustrated breath. "There aren't any in there."

No sweatshirt? She lowered the bag and frowned at the disapproval on Jay's face.

Oh. Raelynn froze, her body hot with shame. Jay thought she was looking for pills. She staggered and dropped onto a fake-leather ottoman. Why shouldn't he think that? That's the behavior she'd given him for the past five years. If she couldn't convince her manager she'd changed, no wonder she hadn't convinced America.

"I was looking for my sweatshirt." She tried for nonchalant by unzipping her boots and toeing them off.

"You left it on the bus." Jay rubbed the bridge of his nose. "What about a new film? I've secured a script from Gold Crown Studios for a Christmas movie called *Bright Copper Kettles*. Tristan Roberts just signed a contract for the brooding coppersmith. You could play opposite him as the quirky, talkative heroine."

Raelynn dropped her head and winced. How would "The Sexiest Man Alive" feel about playing opposite a washed-up singer? "I'll think about it."

Right now, all she wanted was a bubble bath and a bed.

Jay's long legs stretched in front of him, crossing at the ankles. "We could get away while you consider it. Lay on the beach in Cancun. Ski in Aspen. Ride roller coasters in an amusement park, whatever you want. It might do you good to get away. Clear your head. Give us time to come up with a solid plan."

A vacation with Jay? Though Mexico and

Colorado were both tempting, her soul craved the foggy mountains of Appalachia. West Virginia. Home.

Besides, she couldn't lead Jay on. He'd been her closest ally for eleven years now. He deserved better than false affection, but she didn't want to hurt him either. The mid-life crisis thing had shredded his ego, making him, in some ways, as vulnerable as her. "Jay, I—"

Her cellphone rang. Grateful for the distraction, she pulled it from her suitcase and looked at the screen. *Mama*. Raelynn hadn't been home for three years, and before then, it had only been for a few days at a time. Hungry to feel Mama's arms around her, she touched the green button on her phone and held it to her ear, steadying her voice. "Hey, Mama."

"Raelynn?" Mama's tone sounded eerie, foreign. "I need you to come home." Sobs filled the other end of the line.

Raelynn's stomach soured. "What's wrong?"

"There's been an accident at the mines. Your daddy and Billy are trapped inside."

~\*~

"Get them out of there!" Lane Ryan rounded the oak desk, knocking Victor Franko's nameplate to the plush carpet, and jabbed his finger at Victor's chest. Something Lane doubted any man had done to the CEO of Hudson Coal, much less in headquarters. But the men trapped were in Lane's charge, and if the company didn't come up with a rescue mission in the next ten seconds, he might tear someone's face off. And Victor's was convenient.

Air whistled past Victor's teeth as he pressed his

palms flat against the desk and dropped his head. "Calm down, Lane. We're doing everything we can."

Twelve lives were in jeopardy—more if the methane gas exploded—and he wanted Lane to *calm down*? The tips of his fingers prickled. Lane unclenched his fist, flooding his whole arm with the numbness. He opened and closed his hand, trying to regain feeling. He ground his jaw. Not now. Not when there were lives to save. "What exactly are you doing?"

Victor plunked down into his leather chair, tie crooked, hair gel sectioned in spots where he'd run his fat fingers through it. "We've stocked two safety chambers with enough air, food, and water to last five days."

"Five days? They've already been down there twenty-four hours. Yesterday's methane levels were two percent. If it reaches five, the whole mine will turn into an atomic bomb. Get them out."

Lane clenched his molars until they threatened to crack. He should be down there with his men. Yes, it was a blessing he wasn't, but right now, he failed to see the comfort. Maybe if he'd been at work yesterday instead of letting the specialists test him like a lab rat, he'd have seen the danger and evacuated everyone before the chamber collapsed.

Victor rubbed his forehead. "The crew's placing the location system as we speak. Once we locate where they are, we'll begin drilling immediately. In the meantime, we're doing our best to release some of the methane. Until then—"

"You should've pumped out the methane before we started mining the coal deposit. I've filed three complaints in the last six months for issues endangering my team."

“To be fair, the methane levels aren’t hazardous. And we’re still investigating those issues.”

“Who are you tryin’ to fool?”

Victor stood and crossed his arms over his large gut. “Raise your voice again and you’ll find yourself suspended from the rescue team.”

Lane shook his head, drawing a breath. He couldn’t risk that. Flattening his lips to control his tongue, Lane stalked to the door, yanked it open, and marched out.

Truth was Victor cared about his employees, the community. He’d worked with Lane to implement concepts for protecting the environment and controlling and containing coal waste. He’d even used Lane’s idea for an employee incentive plan.

As the exit neared, Lane’s left leg weakened. *Please, God, not today.* He slowed his steps, determined to persevere. *“I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”* The verse had become his mantra.

Wind lashed at his chest, fighting his unzipped hooded sweatshirt. Gaze trained on the asphalt, Lane stomped to his truck. The Bible said God could move mountains and Lane believed. *Please, move this one and get those men home alive.*

The truck’s tires squealed out of the parking lot as Lane turned the vehicle onto the street and sped to the mines. He shifted gears, his body and mind on autopilot. Fall colors scaled the mountains, blurring past his window. He’d never felt so helpless. At least not since...no, he wouldn’t dredge *her* from his memory today. But knowing her dad and brother were trapped down there made it inevitable.

A spot of orange flashed in his side mirror then disappeared as a sporty ragtop flew past him and

swerved back into his lane. Before his brain could react, the car was a pin dot in the distance. His speedometer read sixty-eight. In a fifty. He shook his head. Didn't see cars like that in Eve Hollow every day.

Two miles later, Lane braked at the gate and flashed his clearance at the armed guards. People lined the fenced perimeter. He recognized some faces of family members and friends of the trapped men. One guard took Lane's I.D. and barked into his walkie-talkie, waiting for permission to let Lane in. Only the rescue team was permitted through the gates until further notice.

Elbow propped on the window ledge, Lane spied the orange convertible parked on the grass like the property was nothing more than a rest area. As a slim brunette stepped out of the vehicle, recognition stole the breath from his lungs. She tugged on a brown leather jacket he doubted would fit a toddler and pulled her hair free of the collar. Long waves fell down her back. She shut the door and smoothed her hands over jeans as tight as his throat. And he was suffocating.

"Here you are, sir." The stone-faced guard blocked Lane's view and held out his I.D. "You're to report to Joe Allen. Victor will be here shortly."

Lane took his badge. "Thanks."

The guard backed away. Before Lane had a chance to kick himself for being a complete idiot, the gorgeous woman walked toward the crowd at the fence.

*Rae.* His childhood partner-in-crime, former best friend, and ex-fiancée. The woman who'd deserted him for fame and fortune.

## 2

Raelynn pulled from Mama's embrace and stared into her dark eyes, deep-set from a strong nose and chin, remnants of her Cherokee heritage. The skin around her mouth and temples had deepened with age. Hair as black as the coal in these mountains spilled out of Mama's blue knit cap. Daddy always said Mama was the most beautiful woman in all of Appalachia. Raelynn agreed.

A small group of protesters interrupted their reunion, chanting, "Stop raping the mountains" and "Bring back the union."

She and Mama stood on the outskirts of the crowd, away from the news reporters, activist groups, and weeping women.

Mama cupped Raelynn's cheek. "My little robin."

The nickname took Raelynn back to a time when life was simple—standing in front of the window, the morning sun cloaking her with warmth, singing as Mama cooked pancakes and eggs. Raelynn closed her eyes, wanting to stay in the past. But when she opened them, the warm, fuzzy memories disappeared. The very mountains that had provided their livelihood, now threatened to take her Daddy's and brother's lives.

And she wouldn't have a chance to say goodbye, tell them how much she loved them. Why hadn't she come home before now? Called more? How could

home be so comforting and terrifying at the same time? Raelynn shivered against the wind sweeping through the hollow. "What can I do?"

Mama raised her chin. "Pray."

The way of life here. Pray you'll see a next meal. Pray you'll survive the winter. Pray your husband returns from work every night. That was one of the reasons she'd left. She didn't want to live her life in fear. Wake up in twenty years with ten kids and resent Lane for what could've been. She'd wanted to discover the possibilities beyond those mountains. Had to see the Pacific Ocean.

She'd ridden that Ferris wheel of dreams full circle and now wondered what a life with Lane could've been. A pipe dream her foolish heart had entertained every night in rehab as she lay in the dark, trying to ignore how terrified she was. Lane was probably married with six kids by now. Raelynn's heart throbbed in the dark corner she'd sealed off long ago.

Mama pulled a tissue from her coat pocket and dabbed beneath her eyes. "It'll be OK, robin. God'll get 'em out. I feel it."

Raelynn didn't doubt they'd get out. But when they did, would they be alive? She swallowed past the knot in her throat. "How's Jackie?"

Mama sniffed. "Resting in the county hospital. The stress of this sent her into contractions, and she needs to carry the babies at least another month. The medicine stopped the labor, but Doc Snider threatened to restrain her if she didn't quit trying to escape. I told her there's nothin' she can do here anyway, but you know how stubborn Jackie is."

Raelynn didn't know. She'd only met Billy's wife once, and it wasn't at their wedding. Raelynn had been