

RAINBOW
FALLS #3

OPPOSITES
COLLIDE

Can a jaded pastry chef
hide her past and still gain
a fresh start with a man
who despises secrets?

SUSAN ANNE
MASON
REDEEMED
Hearts

Redeemed Hearts

Susan Anne Mason

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Redeemed Hearts

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Dedication

To the amazing ladies at the Seekerville Blog. Your encouragement and support helped make my dream come true. Thanks to you all!

1

Chloe Martin blamed it on the rain.

Her bus from New York had been delayed, and once she arrived in her hometown of Rainbow Falls, North Dakota, their sole taxi cab was otherwise engaged, leaving her to walk into town in her water-logged stilettos, creating new blisters at every step.

She almost wept with relief when she reached McIntyre Street, and the familiar two-story house came into view. The glow of an exterior light illuminated her cousin's rental property. Chloe lugged her suitcases up and paused under the porch roof to swipe water out of her eyes. She took a moment to let her breathing even out and to survey her surroundings. From what she could see, the place hadn't changed much.

Her cousin, Nick, had bought the residence several years ago and renovated it, turning the house into two separate living quarters. Nick now worked as a minister at the community church, but he continued to rent out the apartments. His upstairs tenant had recently moved out, providing Chloe with a temporary, rent-free haven until she could figure out what to do with her now imploded life.

A sharp sting of grief surfaced. If only her mother were still alive, waiting for her. But Mama was gone, and Chloe's childhood home now belonged to a nice couple with a young son and a golden retriever. At least Mama wasn't around to learn of her daughter's

shame.

Chloe turned her focus to the problem at hand. She would need a key to get in. Nick usually kept one under the flowerpot beside the front door; however, she found it stuck in the soggy soil among the still blooming geraniums. She pulled it out and brushed away the dirt.

The crisp autumn breeze chilled her as she struggled to fit the grimy key into the lock. No matter how hard she jiggled, her cold-stiffened fingers could not seem to budge it.

Shivering, Chloe peered through the side window, trying to recall what Nick had told her about the current tenant on the main floor. Would he or she be awake at this late hour? All Chloe wanted was a hot shower, dry clothes, and a soft bed. With no choice but to disturb her new neighbor, she rapped the brass knocker.

"Hello. Is anyone home?" When no one responded, she tried again. "Anyone? Please!"

Maybe he had the TV on or was wearing headphones.

She searched for a doorbell, found one, and jabbed the button. No answer.

Leaning her forehead against the door, she tried to gather the mental fortitude to determine her next course of action. She couldn't use her cellphone to call Nick because the battery had died hours ago. Maybe she'd walk around the back.

Without warning, the door flew inward.

Chloe shrieked, teetered, and then fell right into something firm and warm. The air whooshed out of her lungs.

"Whoa. Steady there." Strong hands grasped her

elbows, supporting her.

"I—I'm sorry." She fisted a hand in his shirt until the world righted. She managed to take a step back and peered through wet strands of hair at the dark-haired man. Strong cheekbones, full lips and a cleft chin made quite an appealing picture—if she'd been in a mood to notice.

"Are you all right?"

"I think so." She frowned at the damp splotches on his chest.

He pointed to the key in the doorknob. "Looks like your key isn't working. Sure you have the right address?"

She attempted to appear confident and trustworthy—a difficult feat when she likely looked like a drowned cat. "Yes. My cousin, Nick Logan, owns this place. He's letting me stay here for a while."

The man's eyebrows shot upward. "Chloe Martin?" Disbelief rang in his voice.

"That's right," she said cautiously. "And who are you?"

Aidan North scrubbed a hand over his jaw. How could this possibly be Nick's little cousin? The last time he'd seen Chloe Martin—close to ten years ago now—she'd been a scrawny teenager with a mouthful of braces, hanging out with his younger sister, Maxi. This woman was no teenager. And definitely not scrawny.

She'd turned into one gorgeous woman. Ropes of dark hair hung over her shoulders. Large brown eyes stared at him, marred only by the slight frown between her thin eyebrows.

"I'm Aidan North," he said. "Maxi's brother."

"Aidan?" She squinted at him in the dim hallway. "I thought you lived in Arizona."

"I did for a while. I'm back home now."

Her eyes widened. "You're Nick's main floor tenant?"

"That's right."

"I guess Nick didn't tell you he's letting me use the upstairs apartment. Unfortunately, the spare key he left wouldn't work."

Aidan frowned. Why hadn't Nick told him to expect Chloe tonight? He pulled the key out of the lock. "Maybe if it wasn't covered in mud..." Aidan lifted his gaze to a saturated Chloe. *Geesh*. He did *not* need this problem tonight. The paperwork for his new youth center was due tomorrow.

A tremor ran through Chloe's frame, and her teeth chattered.

Aidan's chivalrous instincts kicked in. *So much for paperwork*. "Come on. You need to get dry." He lugged her two enormous suitcases inside and closed the door. "Let me get you a towel and a hot drink."

"Th-Thank you, but no. I just want to go upstairs." Exhaustion lined her features.

"OK. I'll carry your bags."

"Thank you."

Aidan grabbed the soggy cases—that weighed slightly less than a small pickup—and followed Chloe up the narrow staircase. Droplets fell from her jacket, leaving tiny puddles. How on earth did she walk in those shoes? No wonder she was limping.

She stopped on the upper landing. "You don't have a key for this door, do you?"

He set one suitcase down and pulled the key from

his pocket. He wiped it off and attempted to slide by her. "Sorry. Just let me reach around..."

His hand brushed her arm. The spike in his pulse made his fingers clumsy. When the door creaked open, the musty smell of an unused room wafted out. He turned on the lights and deposited the bags inside.

"You'll have to air the place out. Nick hasn't had a tenant for a few weeks." He flicked more lights on and found the bathroom, glad to discover it was supplied with essentials. He grabbed a towel off the hook and returned to the living room. "Here. You should probably get into something dry."

"Thanks." Shivering, she took the towel and grabbed one of her cases.

The scent of wet clothes and fruity shampoo drifted by him.

Aidan let out a slow breath. Tension remained coiled in every muscle, giving him the distinct impression that his life had just taken an unexpected—and unwelcome—twist.

Chloe closed the bedroom door and leaned against it with an inward groan.

Aidan North. The guy she'd both adored and loathed, as only a teenage girl could do. Her cheeks heated at the memories. She'd always dropped things or knocked into furniture around him. Tonight, she hadn't recognized him—though something about him had seemed familiar. The voice, deeper now, could still send a thrill through her.

And she'd made a fool of herself—again!

Chloe unzipped one of the suitcases and rifled

through the damp clothes for some dry jeans and a sweatshirt. She longed for a hot shower, but it could wait. A sigh of relief escaped as she slipped off her heels and sank her toes into the throw rug by the bed. She changed, hung her wet things in the bathroom, and grabbed a towel for her hair.

Maybe Aidan would be gone. But she found him standing at the counter in the galley kitchen, kettle in hand. A crop of dark, wavy hair skimmed his high forehead, highlighting a straight nose and strong jaw line. His toned physique and muscled forearms were very different from the thin, wiry frame she remembered. Maxi's bookish brother had turned into a hunk.

"What are you doing?"

He looked up. "Making you a cup of tea. The last tenant left some teabags in the cupboard. Hope you don't mind it black."

She looped the towel around her neck and accepted the cup, trying to be gracious. "Thanks. You didn't have to do this."

"Are you kidding? Nick would have my hide if I didn't help. Maxi too."

Chloe smiled. "Wouldn't want to engage the wrath of Maxi. How is she, by the way? We haven't talked much since the baby arrived." *Safe topic. Keep it neutral.*

His eyes softened. "Never better. Little Ben is the light of her life."

Envy took hold of Chloe's heart, but she smothered it. No use wishing for something she didn't deserve. "I'm glad Maxi's happy." She sipped the tea, relishing the warmth. "I don't mean to be rude, but if I don't sit down, my feet will explode." She hoped he'd

take the hint and leave.

Instead he followed her into the cozy living room.

She scanned the taupe walls, mahogany fireplace, and comfy furniture. Nothing had changed since her sister had lived here five years earlier. Chloe sank into the overstuffed green sofa and raised her feet onto the plush cushions with a sigh. She might never budge again.

Aidan snapped on two brass lamps, giving the room a warm glow. His eyes narrowed as he crouched and raised her foot. "You've got a bunch of blisters. How far did you walk?"

She snatched her foot away, her pulse zigzagging. "From the bus stop."

"You walked all that way in those ridiculous shoes?"

She stiffened at his tone. "They're not ridiculous. And unlike New York, there aren't cabs waiting at every corner."

"Why didn't you call Nick?"

"Because he's got two toddlers and a pregnant wife at home. He didn't need to rescue me."

Aidan muttered something about stubborn women and disappeared down the hallway. The clatter of cupboard doors opening and closing sounded. A few seconds later, he reappeared with a box of bandages and a cloth. He sat down in front of her and lifted one of her feet onto his lap.

"What do you think you're doing?" She attempted to pull free, but he tightened his grip.

"I'm a vice-principal, remember? I'm used to dealing with stubborn adolescents."

Annoyed, she crossed her arms. "I'm not an adolescent, in case you haven't noticed."

He looked up from his ministrations. "Oh, I've noticed, believe me."

A streak of heat rushed to her cheeks. The perfect scathing reply escaped her frazzled brain.

As he began to work on her feet, any objection she had melted away. With the last bandage in place, he patted her foot, and set it back on the couch.

She let out a contented sigh. It had been a long time since anyone had taken care of her. "Thank you. That feels much better."

"You're welcome." He settled into the couch and flung his arm over the back. "So what brings you home? I thought you had a great job in some swanky New York restaurant."

Tension seeped back into her body. "I'm here to help Nick and Lily until they can hire a nanny."

"You're not here for long then?"

Did he sound disappointed or relieved?

She gave a non-committal shrug. "We'll have to see how it goes."

Before he could interrogate her further, she countered with questions of her own. "What about you? Last I heard, you were teaching in Arizona."

Wariness flickered in his gray eyes, but his voice remained even. "There was an opening at Rainbow High for vice-principal. I applied and got the job."

"That's quite the career advancement for someone your age." A grudging respect wormed its way through her resentment.

"It helped that the principal has known me a long time." He gave a lop-sided grin. "Mr. Jenkins was my math teacher in twelfth grade. If anyone told me he'd be my boss one day, I never would have believed it."

"I'll bet." The warmth of the tea and the easing of

the pain in her feet allowed Chloe to relax. A yawn escaped before she could hide it.

"I should let you get some rest." Aidan rose. "If you need a ride to Nick's tomorrow, I can run you over. I leave for work around seven thirty." He studied her, an unreadable expression on his face. "It's good to have you back, Chloe."

She attempted to rise, but he held up a hand.

"No need to get up. I'll see myself out." The glow of the lamp created a halo effect around his head.

"OK. Thanks...for everything."

"My pleasure." A teasing smile created a dimple in one cheek. "It's not every day I get bowled over by a beautiful woman." He winked and disappeared out the door.

Chloe sat open-mouthed trying to wrap her head around the fact that Aidan North thought she was beautiful.

2

Though she would have loved to laze in bed, Chloe rose early the next morning, knowing her sister needed her. She showered and dressed, then fastened her treasured gold locket around her neck—the one Lily had given her when she'd left for college.

Her sister had come into her life after the two of them had grown up in different adoptive families. When Lily arrived in Rainbow Falls looking for Chloe, Lily had met and fallen in love with Nick. Nick took one look at Lily and he'd been a goner.

Chloe caressed the filigree etching in the locket. Inside, a small black and white photo of their biological mother held a place of honor. On the other side, Chloe had added a picture of her adoptive mother, Sonia Martin, who'd passed away two years earlier. Chloe liked to envision both of her mothers watching over her from heaven. She closed the lid with a soft click. What would these good women think of the mess she'd made of her life?

Chloe brushed her hair and twisted it into a tidy ponytail. The sight of the ugly burn mark on her left arm made her grimace—a souvenir from her last night at the restaurant.

No point in dwelling on the past. She needed a new plan for her life. Her original dream of opening a bakery—a dream sidetracked by her ill-fated romance—still hovered in her mind. Perhaps there was

a way to make it a reality. Maybe even here in Rainbow Falls.

But all that would have to wait until Lily's situation improved. Nick and Lily were the only family she had left. Chloe could put her own plans on hold until they no longer needed her.

As much as she hated to deal with Aidan North again, her battered feet couldn't take the walk to Lily's. She grabbed her purse and jacket and headed down to his main-floor apartment.

Aidan answered her knock right away, looking very professional in a dark gray suit, crisp white shirt, and silver tie. Chloe didn't remember vice-principals ever looking *this* good.

She gave a bright smile. "I'm here to take you up on your offer of a ride—if it's still OK."

"Sure. Come in. I'm almost ready." He took a swig from a mug and waved her in.

The aroma of coffee filled his apartment, making Chloe's mouth water. Where was a good café when you needed one?

"Help yourself to some coffee," Aidan said and vanished down the hall.

In his surprisingly tidy kitchen, she found a mug, poured the coffee, and added cream. She wandered out to admire the living room with its large stone fireplace and built-in bookcases. His personal touches—a few magazines, his laptop on the table, the trendy artwork on the walls—gave the room a cozy, lived-in feel.

"Ready?" Aidan reappeared with a briefcase in hand.

"Sure. Just let me rinse this cup." Several minutes later, buckled into Aidan's sports car, Chloe stole a glance at him.

He drove with quiet confidence, his eyes shaded by mirrored sunglasses. As if sensing her gaze, he turned toward her. "It's nice what you're doing to help your sister. How long do you think it'll take to find a suitable nanny?"

"Hopefully not long."

"What about your job? Are you taking vacation time?" Aidan pushed his glasses up on his head. Sunlight gleamed off his perfectly groomed dark hair and flecks of gold flashed in his gray eyes.

"Something like that." She wasn't ready to talk about her job or the real reason she'd come home.

Aidan turned into Nick's driveway and shifted into park.

"Uh, thanks for the ride. I appreciate it." Chloe jumped out, in case he was about to question her further. When she reached the porch steps and looked back, Aidan was still in the driveway.

She'd avoided his curiosity; however, she doubted Lily and Nick would let the matter go as easily.

Chloe walked in without knocking and followed the voices to the kitchen.

Nick juggled one girl on his shoulder and the other on his hip, his blond hair standing up in messy tufts. An upended box of cereal lay on the kitchen table with a trail spilled across the floor. "Chloe." The relief in his voice would have been comical if not for the lines of exhaustion around his eyes. "Thank goodness you're here."

A surge of love crashed over her. How she'd missed this man—her champion, her defender, her

surrogate older brother. "Hey, cuz. You look like you could use some help." She kissed his cheek and plucked her younger niece, Laura, off his shoulder. "Hi, sweetheart. I'm your Aunt Chloe."

The one-year-old stared at her with big, blue eyes.

Three-year-old Annabelle, however, bounced on her father's hip. "Auntie Chlo."

"Hello, Miss Annabelle." Chloe smacked a loud kiss on her cheek. "Are you being a good girl?"

Annabelle twirled a dark curl around one finger and nodded.

"Of course you are. Why don't you help Daddy sweep up the cereal while I say hi to your mommy?"

"Mommy's sick." The large brown eyes went wide.

"I know, but she'll get better soon. And then you'll have a new baby in the family."

"Don't want a baby." Her perfect little lips pouted.

"The B-word is a no-no around here." Nick chuckled.

"I see." Chloe hid a grin as she plopped Laura into the high chair and handed her a sippy cup. "After I come down, we'll play with your toys."

"And Daddy can get some work done." Nick set Annabelle on the floor and opened the broom closet. "Lily's not in the best of moods. Having you here should perk her up."

"Let's hope so." But as Chloe mounted the staircase, the thought of telling her sister about her ordeal in New York made the coffee curdle in her stomach. With Lily and the unborn baby's health in the balance, Chloe could not dump her problems on her sister.

As for Nick... Her heart stilled. How could she

confess her transgressions to her devout cousin, minister of the town's most popular church? Could he ever forgive her?

Could God?

She paused outside the master bedroom and took a deep breath before knocking on the door.

"Come in." The grumpy voice did not match the invitation.

Chloe forced her lips into a smile and opened the door.

Lily sat propped against pillows, her belly a curved mound under the quilt. Her dark hair, so similar to Chloe's, poofed out around her.

"Hey, sis. How are you feeling?" Chloe's heart swelled.

A huge smile transformed Lily's face from grumpy to radiant. "Chloe. You're home."

"Yes, I am." Chloe gathered her into a warm hug.

Lily held her tight and when she finally released her, tears leaked from her brown eyes.

Alarm raced through Chloe. Lily wasn't supposed to be upset. "Hey, it can't be that bad."

"You try being confined to bed with two girls who need their mommy."

Chloe grabbed a tissue from a box on the nightstand and plopped down beside Lily. "It must be frustrating."

"It is." Lily sniffed and took the tissue. "Annabelle doesn't understand why Mommy won't do things with her anymore. It breaks my heart to disappoint her."

"I'm sure the doctor wouldn't confine you to bed if it wasn't necessary. What exactly is the problem?"

"My blood pressure has gone crazy. Doc's worried about a stroke."

A stroke? Chloe's hand stilled. "Well, then you need to focus on your health and that baby's. Better to miss a couple of months now, than to miss their whole lives."

"I know." Lily blew her nose. "But I can't help going stir crazy. And the hormones are making me cranky."

Chloe looked around. Heavy drapes darkened the dreary room.

"No wonder you're feeling gloomy. Let's get some light in here." She threw back the curtains, and sunshine streamed in, immediately brightening the space. "That's better. Maybe we can set you up on the couch downstairs for a while this afternoon. Give you a change of scenery."

Through her tears, Lily managed a smile. "I'm so glad you're here. How did you get time off work?"

Chloe straightened the covers, not meeting Lily's gaze. "Paul understands that family issues come up." That part was true. Paul Decourcy, her boss and owner of *Oliver's Emporium*, believed in the importance of family.

"And what about Richard?"

There it was—the same stabbing pain every time someone mentioned his name. She exhaled slowly. "Richard and I broke up."

"Oh, honey. I'm so sorry. What happened?"

Chloe shivered, remembering their last encounter. Wounds too fresh and raw choked her. "I can't talk about it yet. I'm sorry..."

"Sure. I understand."

But the hurt expression on Lily's face filled Chloe with guilt.

How could she ever tell her sister the truth?