

A man wearing a large, light-brown cowboy hat and an orange long-sleeved shirt is playing an acoustic guitar. He is looking down at the instrument with a slight smile. The background shows a ranch setting with a wooden fence, green trees, and mountains under a blue sky with some clouds.

WHEN THE PRODIGAL RETURNS  
HE INHERITS MORE THAN  
HE BARGAINED FOR.

*Grace* AND THE  
*Rancher*

MARY ALFORD

# Grace and the Rancher

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## **Grace and the Rancher**

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## *Dedication*

To anyone in need of a second chance at love. This one's for you.





# 1

Grace Bradford cast a worried glance out the storefront window as snow continued to fall. "It's really coming down out there."

Martha McDougal, the store owner, stopped to watch the winter wonderland unfolding outside. "The storm seems to be moving in earlier than was expected. I don't like it. Let's give it another hour, and if we don't have any customers, we'll close up shop. I sure don't want you to get stuck down here."

Grace smiled at her friend's consideration. When she'd first arrived in town eight months ago, widowed, injured, flat broke, and desperate to find a job and rebuild her life, Martha had accepted her. Grace had been such a wounded soul back then. Still, Martha hadn't asked a single question. She'd simply given Grace a job and invited her to the small church on the edge of town. Grace had found a home.

"We had a delivery yesterday, thank goodness, so there's plenty of food on hand. Derek put some of the stuff away during his shift yesterday, but I don't expect him to be in today. Since I doubt we'll have a customer, you might as well stock a few items. But I'm serious, Grace. If no one comes in soon, go home. When you get ready to leave, just lock up and go. I think I'll head out before the storm shuts down the pass outside of town, and I can't get home to Ed."

Grace walked Martha to the door. "That's a good

idea. You have a lot farther to go than I do, and Ed will be worried. Be careful. I'll call you when I'm leaving."

"All right, hon. I'll talk to you soon." Martha hugged Grace then forced the door open against the blustering wind and slipped into the increasing snowstorm.

Once Grace was certain Martha's car would start, she closed the door and went to the back of the store. She brought out boxes of dry goods while keeping a close eye on the weather. By the end of the hour, she'd managed to shelve most of the stock. She turned up the radio and listened to the local weather report.

"Most of the roads leading into town have closed already or will be closing soon. If you don't have to be out today, then we suggest you stay home. We're expecting up to three feet of fresh snow with the storm clearing out sometime tomorrow. This one's going to be a bugger, folks."

It was time definitely to call it quits. She picked up the items she needed, left a check in the register, and then called Martha. "I'm heading out now. I have everything put away. If I'm able, I'll come in tomorrow to make up my time."

"Are you sure you don't want to wait out the storm at the store?" Martha asked. "It's really coming down here. I've barely made it home."

Although the thought was tempting, Grace just wanted to get home. Her dog, Lizzy, would be anxious in this weather. "Thanks, but I'll be OK, and it's only a few miles. I'll see you soon." She carried out her groceries then turned off the lights and locked up. But the farther she drove up Delaney Mountain, the more doubts she had. Maybe she should have stayed in town.

Grace blew out a frightened sigh, and her breath chilled the air as she clutched the steering wheel. Her palms grew sweaty as the SUV slipped and slid on the icy road.

She slowed to a crawl as ice and snow began to accumulate on the windshield, destroying visibility. She strained to see, her gaze locked on the road ahead, as the storm continued to intensify.

She remembered another terrifying time less than a year earlier. The day her promising career had ended with the death of her husband. To the world, she and Nick had been one of Nashville's up-and-coming couples. Grace knew nothing was further from the truth. That night more than her career had perished. Everything she believed to be real about her marriage and her husband died along with Nick.

Just let go. Let God take it...

*Father, please, help me let go of the hurt...*

Even today—even right now when she knew she should be focusing on the road and the weather—letting go was a next-to-impossible task.

At times, Grace still woke up in the middle of the night and could feel the car crashing into the tree, could feel the excruciating pain of the steering wheel slamming into her throat as it damaged her vocal cords. She couldn't scream or cry out for help.

Grace shoved aside those dark thoughts and scrubbed a hand over weary eyes. She leaned forward. She could barely see the hood, much less the road. The conditions were worsening by the minute, and she had no idea how much farther the vehicle would go. She eased down on the gas pedal, and the tires spun, spewing icy debris against the underside of the SUV.

The vehicle jerked forward as the tires caught.

Grace whispered a thankful prayer. The road continued its upward climb as it snaked around the side of the mountain. Her heartbeat pounded a frantic rhythm as she reached another ninety degree bend. To her right was a sheer drop off. She wouldn't survive the fall if the SUV went over.

Grace gently nudged the steering wheel, at odds with her terror. She had almost reached another treacherous turn when the vehicle slid closer to the edge. She panicked and jerked the wheel in the opposite direction. The vehicle skated backward some twenty feet. The tires lost their tenuous grip and slithered closer to the drop-off.

She floored the gas and the vehicle jerked forward, swerved sideways, and headed straight for the overhang. Grace screamed and tried to turn the wheel but it was useless.

The Jeep didn't react to anything. She had lost control. She closed her eyes. She didn't want to die. Not when she'd just started to live again. "Please, Lord, no." Grace barely got the words out before the Jeep hurled itself head first over the side of the mountain.

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Kyle Delaney was a quarter of a mile away from the turnoff to the ranch when he spotted the tracks. Someone else had been up here on the mountain recently. In these conditions? Who would risk slipping off Delaney Mountain? *He* had no choice. He was coming home. *Home*. The words stuck in his throat.

It had been more than a year since he'd returned, and as far as he remembered, there were only two or

three houses further up the mountain, and most locals wouldn't be caught out in this weather. They knew better.

Kyle squinted to focus on the road. He was dead tired after the horrendous drive from Denver. The flight from Austin had been plagued with delays. He just wanted to get to the ranch, grab a shower, and sleep for days.

He peered through the windshield and sucked in a breath. Was that smoke? Dark tendrils stood out against the snow falling about twenty feet ahead. Even though it was still technically morning, the storm had made the surroundings a dark, dreary gray. Perhaps he was wrong. Kyle braked hard, grabbed his flashlight, and hopped from the SUV. Driving snow and sleet slapped at his face as he trudged through the drifts to the edge of the mountain. A battered-looking vehicle had lodged itself against a tree. The accident must have just happened. In these temperatures, it wouldn't take long for hypothermia to set in. Kyle slipped and slid his way down the side of the mountain. A woman listing sideways against the seatbelt, was just regaining consciousness. How long had she been here?

He pried open the door. "Are you OK?"

Her gaze darted to him. She was terrified.

"Nick. He's still in there. You have to save him."

"Who's Nick?" Kyle's senses clanged with alarm. He could see the entire interior of the Jeep. No one else was in the vehicle. Perhaps they'd been thrown from it upon impact?

She closed her eyes for a second and then focused on him. She shook her head. "No, I'm sorry. I thought..." She didn't finish, but tears gathered in her eyes.

She was obviously suffering from shock.

The crumpled hood continued to pour out a thin ribbon of smoke. He needed to get her to safety before the Jeep caught on fire. "Come on let's get you out of here."

She fumbled with the seatbelt and then planted her booted feet in the snow.

What if something was broken? As urgent as it was to get her safely away from the wreck, he needed to make sure she wasn't injured. He stopped her. "Hang on a second. I want to make sure you're not hurt. It looks as if you hit the tree pretty hard."

She flinched.

Kyle did a quick preliminary check of her limbs, but everything appeared to be fine. He held out his hand to help her out.

She pulled away. "I can't leave. I have groceries in the back. Perishables. Lizzy's food..."

He wondered who Lizzy was until he spotted the dog food. Or perhaps Lizzy was someone else, and this woman was delivering her groceries. "I'll come back for them. My vehicle's just up the top of the mountain. Let's get you warm first."

She hesitated but finally took his hand and got out.

The path he'd skidded down was drifting over with snow. Going up would be a whole lot harder. He sucked in an icy breath and held her hand tighter. "Hang onto my hand, and whatever you do, don't let go. Getting back up will be a nightmare."

And it was an almost impossible task. For every handful of steps they took forward, they ended up sliding backward for half of them.

The bitter cold air burned his chest with every breath, and he could barely see his hand in front of

him. He squinted through the onslaught of winter mix until he spotted the SUV where he'd left it. Once they reached the top of the mountain, Kyle drew in a couple lungfuls of air, willing his pumping heart to steady its beats. His legs were actually shaking from the strain of keeping them both upright on the nearly vertical, slippery path.

"Over there," he said and pointed to his vehicle. He braced against the wind and blocked it from her with his own body as they made their way to the SUV. With her safely inside, he got behind the wheel and cranked the heater as high as it would go.

She shivered uncontrollably.

He reached behind the seat and grabbed one of the blankets he'd picked up in Denver with other emergency supplies when he'd prepared for the trip back.

"Thanks." She tugged it closer to her body and gave him a smile.

He lost his equilibrium. Despite her pale face and nearly blue lips, she was a very pretty woman. He cleared his throat. What had gotten into him? He'd been through a rollercoaster ride of a year. His emotions were all messed up. He didn't usually feel attraction for just looks, although that certainly helped. Still, she was the first woman he'd noticed in a long time, and it threw him.

"You stay in here where it's warm. I'll be right back. I'll just go grab your groceries."

She nodded, and her shivering subsided as heat blasted from the vents.

Kyle got out and mused his way down to her SUV. His reaction to her annoyed him. He was coming home to make the ranch profitable again. He had his

work cut out because he had no idea what condition the ranch was in. He didn't need an emotional entanglement cluttering his thoughts and taking time away from his goal.

He half slid down to the wreck. Groceries were scattered all over. He checked the back and the front. After digging a couple of cans from beneath the driver's seat, he finally had everything gathered into the shopping bags.

Trekking back up the hill was a lot easier than the first time, despite the load of groceries. He slipped a bit here and there, but his boots managed to grip in a few places.

He opened the back door of his SUV, startling her. It only took a few seconds to tuck the bags away.

Her glance took in everything, and she shivered. "Thank you," she said and gazed at him once more.

She had the most telling, and haunting, green eyes he'd ever seen. He recognized the look all too well. He'd been there. He probably wore the same emotional scars in his own eyes for those who could discern such a thing.

Kyle looked away. "It's no problem. My place is just a little ways up from here. We can wait out the storm from there. It may take a while for a tow truck to get your Jeep unstuck. It's not a good day to be caught out in the elements. Did you get lost?" He slowly eased down on the gas, and the SUV begrudgingly moved forward.

"No... I live up here. My place is up at the top of the mountain." She stared straight ahead.

She was a local? He thought he knew everyone in town. Still, he'd been away from Delaney Mountain for a while. Obviously, some things had changed during

that time.

"I see," he managed when he realized she was waiting for him to say something. "Well, it looks like we're neighbors then. My name is Kyle Delaney, by the way. I own the place up here on the right." He held out his hand, and she took it.

"Grace Bradford."

He didn't recognize the name. Did she have family here or had she just moved here alone? No wedding ring. Of course, that didn't mean one wasn't married.

"So you're new to Delaney Mountain?" He mentally groaned at his own awkward question.

She smiled just as he glanced at her, and his heart did another little flip. Her smile lit up her face.

"I guess you could say that. I've lived here about eight months now."

She must have moved in shortly after he'd left for Austin.

He stole another sideways look.

She wore a simple knit cap pulled over her ears. Her shoulder length golden brown hair was a startling contradiction to the white coat she wore. Her cheeks were flushed from the cold. Her green eyes sparkled with amusement. She'd obviously thought his question as awkward as he did.

She was pretty. He hadn't thought about another woman in such a way since Renee. He'd done everything wrong in that relationship. He'd spent too much time chasing his career, arranging weekend get-togethers, and drinking, both with his coworkers and without them, until finally Renee walked out on him and their future.

After he'd gotten sober, he'd decided he wouldn't put another woman through the curse of the Delaney

men again. Love just wasn't in the cards for him. Kyle let go of those painful memories with difficulty. Dwelling on past mistakes didn't do any good. With God's help, Kyle was learning to keep his focus on the present and move toward the future.

Still, there was something about this woman that bothered him. Since he'd first seen her, really. She looked familiar. But they'd never met before. He would remember those green eyes. He was certain.

Kyle turned onto the drive leading up the ranch and swallowed back the lump in his throat. The last time he'd been here it was dark and heartbreaking. Thanks to God, he'd made it home in time to spend a couple of good weeks with his father before he'd died. The funeral had been one of the hardest times in Kyle's life. He'd hated having to say good-bye to his father when it felt as if he'd just gotten to know the real Ellis Delaney.

Kyle rounded the bend. The house came into view. The last time he'd seen his father alive, his dad had been sitting on that very porch a few days before he passed away. The weathered log house brought tears to Kyle's eyes. He owed his dad more than this. He should've fixed the roof last summer. According to his longtime friend and contractor, Ryan Winters, the damage inside had been extensive, especially in the great room.

"I've driven by this place every day for almost a year now, and I've always wondered about the occupants." Grace turned sideways in her seat, her eyes on him. "Have you lived here long?"

Memories, both good and bad, washed over him. "Not really," he said in a voice he barely recognized. "I grew up here, but then...I moved away when I went to

the university. This is the first time I've been back in almost a year."

She touched his arm. "I'm sorry about your father."

He tensed. She was new to town. His father had died before she arrived. How did she know he'd lost his father?

"I work at the grocery in town. People talk," she added.

He nodded. "Right. I'd almost forgotten how small towns are. Thank you," he managed. "Let's get you inside."

Kyle shoved open the door against the howling wind and went around to her side. "Watch your step. It's pretty slippery out here."

Grace took the hand he offered and got out.

They stepped onto the front porch. One of the steps was loose. The porch railing had rotted in several places. Guilt tore at his heart. He should have come home sooner. If he were being honest, he'd been delaying the trip for months. Facing the place again without his father's presence, well, it was hard. He was almost grateful that he didn't have to do it alone. Grace was here with him. Was she a sign from God?

## 2

Grace stepped inside Kyle's home. The place appeared empty, not of furnishings, but there was a forlorn air. Dust covered both antique and rustic pieces in every room. Plastic drop cloths protected the furniture in the great room where a leak—now patched—had done a great deal of damage still.

"Sorry about the mess," he said as he shoved aside some boxes. "The house has been empty for a while. Today's the first day I've been back in...months."

The pain in Kyle's eyes was clear. He was one of the wounded ones. Her heart went out to him.

"Yes, I know." Grace could feel the flush rising. When people came through the grocery store and learned where Grace lived, they'd talked of Kyle and his father. She was ashamed to admit she'd listened to gossip, and she struggled to find something to say to fill the awkward silence. "When I first moved here you can't imagine how many rumors there were about me." She'd been careful to keep her past buried and so grateful that very few people in the small town knew about her life in Nashville. She caught him staring at her almost as if...

"You know you look familiar. Have we met before?"

Grace's smile froze in place. Her heart beat a crazy rhythm. Did he know? It was impossible surely.

Kyle must have noticed something wrong. "I'm

sure I'm mistaken. Of course, I would remember if we'd met before. Maybe you just look like someone else. That happens a lot," he added as if trying to make her feel more comfortable. "Make yourself at home. I'll go get your things and bring them inside."

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The minute the words were out, Kyle realized he'd hit a nerve. All color drained from her face. Why would someone as young as Grace move to a small town like Delaney in the first place? Most young people left the moment they graduated from high school. Very few came back.

Before his father passed, he'd told Kyle during one of their long talks that the average age in this town was seventy. Delaney Mountain needed a fresh infusion of youth, and Kyle needed to fulfill his father's dying wish.

Kyle grabbed the groceries and headed back inside.

Grace hadn't budged. She turned and smiled at him. There was something almost sad about it. As if life had left an indelible mark on her.

"Thanks for bringing them in...and thanks for saving me. I can't imagine how long it would have been before someone else come along. I was very blessed that you found me."

Blessed. The word hung uncomfortably between them.

She glanced around the room, taking in the place. Her gaze returned to him, and she caught him watching her. Heat crept up his neck. "I'll just stick the cold items in the fridge. Do you want me to call

Murphy's and see if he can pull you out once the weather clears?"

Pete Murphy had gone to school with Kyle. Pete had taken over his family's towing business when he'd graduated high school. With this storm, though, Pete would probably be busy for some time to come.

"No, I'll do it." She took out her cellphone and dialed the number. When someone answered, she turned away and spoke briefly. The conversation lasted only minutes, and then she faced him again. "Pete said it'll be a couple of hours before he can get me out. I hope I'm not keeping you from anything important." Her brow knitted together in concern.

He shook his head. She needed his help, and his father would be proud that he was finally looking beyond himself to another's needs. "Nothing at all. I'm actually grateful for the company." This was a difficult day and Grace being here would take his mind off the past.

Kyle could almost picture his dad's compassionate smile, so unlike the man he'd come to hate growing up. In his later years, Ellis Delaney had been a changed man. He'd be thrilled to know some of the things he'd preached had sunk in past the self-destructive haze Kyle had been bent on keeping since his eighteenth birthday.

"Runs in the family," his father used to say. In his younger days, his dad had been a hard-core drunk, and Kyle and his brother, David, had followed right along in the old man's footsteps. Yet, during the last few years of life, Ellis Delaney had turned his life around. He'd found God and made it his mission to make amends to his boys. He'd lost the battle with David, who had left home and all but disappeared.

Ellis and Kyle's attempts at locating David were futile. But Ellis talked to Kyle relentlessly, passionately; and slowly, Kyle and he had come to a truce. Initially Kyle had been uneasy, but Ellis had wholeheartedly thrown himself into the redemption of his son. At least his dad had lived long enough to see Kyle's life changed.

Kyle wished for his dad's guidance. Instead, he'd relied on the worn-out Bible his father left for him. Ellis had marked all the right passages to bring Kyle to this point. Even in death, Ellis was guiding him. Kyle really wanted to have those long talks with his dad again. He shook himself mentally and switched gears. He had a guest. "Are you hungry? My friend Ryan stopped by a few days ago and stocked the kitchen. I could make us something."

"I...I wouldn't want to put you out."

"You wouldn't be. It's no problem. It would be nice to share a meal. I hate eating alone."

She smiled her relief. "Thanks. That would be nice."

"Good. I saw a couple of steaks in the fridge and there are some potatoes. How does steak and a baked potato sound?"

"Wonderful. I'm starved." She nodded enthusiastically and grinned just as her stomach rumbled.

He actually laughed. Over the months since his dad's death, he could count on one hand the number of times he'd laughed.

Kyle took out a skillet and placed it on the stove. Then he grabbed two steaks from the fridge. Amongst the spices lined up on a shelf, he found some steak seasoning. "This looks good."

"It is." Grace smiled. "We have a running order