

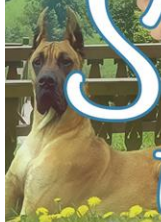
SWEET INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

LESA
HENDERSON



4-STARS * NIGHT OWL REVIEWS

Someone
to Trust



Someone to
Trust

Lesa Henderson

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Someone to Trust
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Dedication

For Ken, the man I trust.

1

Love was in the air as spring announced the impending, jubilant arrival of summer, with melting snow cascading down the mountainside, creating trickles in some places and streams in others. Wildflowers were springing up where the warm sun kissed the ground, while birds, returning from their winter flight south, heralded their arrival home with triumphant chirping.

Megan McCormick was somewhat engrossed in a couple strolling hand-in-hand just ahead of her as she munched on an icing-filled chocolate chip cookie. The cookie was her favorite, fresh from the bakery down the street. But even more than a cookie connoisseur, Megan was an avid people-watcher, and this couple intrigued her. Caught up in each other, they were oblivious to observance.

The young couple must have been affected by the springtime bounty of love, for they stopped every several feet to touch, to whisper or to simply smile into one another's eyes.

Megan gazed at them wistfully. Though the tender scene was one stories were made of, it aroused unwanted memories and caused her heart to ache. She had been in love—*once*. She had been a complete fool. A blind fool. One who should have known better.

Stop it. She regained control of her tortured

thoughts. *You have rehashed this so many times.* She was wiser now and would never be taken advantage of again. Men simply were not to be trusted, and romance was just a story. Trumped-up love for novels that were sold to dreamers who walked around with their heads in the clouds. As for Megan, her feet were now planted firmly on the ground. She held little hope—or desire—of ever being knocked over by a dashing prince on a white steed.

Womp! Megan's bottom hit the pavement. Her packages went sailing. Arms flailed desperately as she tried to catch herself. Her packages scattered everywhere.

A rather large pair of hiking boots was planted beneath the contents of some of those purchases.

Megan's gaze trailed upward, past the long length of a masculine frame and the very broad shoulders, until she was staring into the most incredible, concern-filled, gray eyes she'd ever seen.

"Are you all right?" a deep voice asked.

Everything except her pride.

"I think so," she mumbled as heat rose to her cheeks.

"Are you hurt?"

Certainly! However, she refused to tell him where. Instead, Megan shook her head.

"Here. Let me help you up." Two strong arms hoisted her to her feet.

Flushing, Megan peered into eyes that were now twinkling with amusement. Was he laughing at her? Jaw tilting and back stiffening, Megan huffed. "It is not funny; you really should watch where you're walking." *How dare he laugh at her?*

"You are absolutely right. I beg your pardon." He

sounded sincere enough, but why was he wearing that ridiculous grin?

Resisting the urge to rub her aching bottom, Megan self-consciously ran her fingers across her hair which, except for a few escaping tendrils, was still in a tidy bun. Her sunglasses had slipped down her nose, so she pushed them back up.

"Um, you have icing smeared above your lip and uh...chocolate on your teeth." The brick wall cleared his throat. He was trying not to laugh.

She was wearing that fresh, chocolate chip, icing-filled cookie. Megan looked around for something to wipe her face.

"Here." The brick wall extracted a clean, neatly folded bandana from his pocket. He handed it to her without even a twitch of the lips or a twinkle in the eye.

"Thank you," Megan muttered, as she wiped her mouth.

"Um..." He pointed to the left side of his mouth.

As she did so, he rubbed his nose. "And..."

She rubbed her nose, and then lifted her well-arched eyebrows at him.

"I believe that's it."

Thank goodness. Megan began dusting crumbs from her shirt.

"Oh." She groaned. Scattered packages littered the sidewalk. Why had she chosen to purchase lingerie today?

Wall-with-legs bent over, at the exact moment she did, to help retrieve her stray packages.

Thud!

"Excuse me." He winced.

"Sorry," she muttered, rubbing her forehead. Well,

this was like a slapstick comedy ...and a cliché one, at that.

Megan held up her hand. "I'll get them, thanks."

He walked to the torn bag of dog food, lifted it, and came back to her with the bag balanced effortlessly on a broad shoulder.

"I'll take that." She shifted the packages. "Really, I can handle it," she assured him, looping bags on her arm.

He, however, didn't seem very convinced.

"The least I can do is carry it to your car. We don't want you having any more mishaps." He was grinning again.

As much as Megan did not want his help, it appeared she needed it. She knew when to concede. *Sometimes*.

If he was a lunatic bent on doing her harm, he'd already had ample time. More than likely, he was a tourist, because she didn't recall *bumping* into him before. She rolled her eyes.

He was probably vacationing with his wife and kids who were either shopping or waiting for him in one of the popular mountain cabins or chalets. Megan walked a few paces ahead, which was no easy task considering one of his strides equaled two of hers.

"What breed?" his voice filled the space.

"I beg your pardon?"

"What breed of dog do you have?"

"Oh. A Great Dane," she answered.

"Big dog. What's his name?"

"Sir."

"What...is...his...name?" He repeated himself slowly, spacing his words out.

"Sir," she answered again.

“What...is...his...name?” The voice behind her not only slowed but also became louder.

Megan stopped and was nearly bowled over again as he collided into her. She whirled around to find she was only able to speak into his chest, which lost some emphasis. She backed away, looked up, and repeated his actions, slowing her words and talking loudly. “His...name...is...Sir.”

He laughed. “Sir?”

“What else would you call a dog his size?” She raised her brows.

“Good point,” he admitted, flashing straight white teeth. Much to her chagrin, her heart skipped a beat. *Whoa there, girl. You are much too level-headed to be swayed by a handsome face and a great smile. You’ve sworn off men. Especially married ones.*

After unloading the dog food into the back of her SUV, he extended his hand. “I’m Lee Grainger. I do apologize for getting in your way, and hope you’ll not suffer any bruises.”

Ashamed of herself for blaming him, she extended her hand with a humble grin. “I’m Megan.”

His large hand completely swallowed her smaller one. Lee Grainger gently turned her hand over in his palm, revealing mild abrasions mixed with a small amount of gravel.

“You’re hurt. We need to get these cleaned up.”

She shook her head. “No, I’m fine really. I should have been watching where I was going. I’ve learned a lesson about trying to carry too much while eating a cookie. Anyway, I appreciate your help.” She climbed behind the wheel of her vehicle. “I promise to tend to these cuts as soon as I get home.”

“I’m supposed to be in Laurel Ridge a little while;

perhaps we'll *run* into each other again sometime," Lee said, eyes crinkling with mischief.

Smiling at his play on words, Megan waved as she pulled off. When she glanced in her rearview mirror, he was staring after her. *A man with a sense of humor. A rare trait these days.*

~*~

Later that evening, Megan sat on an antique leather sofa wrapped in a well-worn afghan, a gift from her grandmother. Sir's large tan head rested contentedly in her lap, as she sipped hot cocoa, and stared into the fire blazing in the stone fireplace.

Megan had abandoned work at the computer. She was having great difficulty concentrating. She had a deadline for her latest copywriting project, *but* she just couldn't focus. After two hours, she gave a sigh of resignation and opted for a cup of cocoa instead.

"Sir, I think that fall earlier today rattled my brain." At the sound of his name, the animal looked up with understanding brown eyes.

She stroked his head gently; Sir listened with his usual attentiveness.

"I know I swore off men, but what's the chance of meeting someone who will love me? Someone who enjoys the same things I do, solitude, quiet walks, and peaceful nights spent by the fireplace. I'll tell you what the chances are, Sir—they're slim. I'd certainly need to have help from someone else." Megan looked heavenward.

Sir's head turned, his ears perked.

"Why?" Megan responded to Sir's unvoiced question. "Because the person I'd be interested in is

probably enjoying the solitude of a cabin right now, in front of a fire with his golden retriever.”

Her gaze roamed around her home. She admired the openness of the rustic design, which included an ample kitchen and dining area. She loved the oak cabinets with plenty of counter space and a breakfast bar. The floor plan also boasted a great room, which was where she was now seated. Along one wall of the living space was a massive stone fireplace bordered on each side by floor-to-ceiling windows. The rear wall held French doors leading out to a wrap-around porch, which offered a breathtaking view of the surrounding mountains and the valley below.

The first floor was completed by a small bedroom and bathroom. The second story held a loft area where Megan’s desk was set up, although more times than not she worked at the table on the main floor. Just beyond the loft was a large master bedroom with a fireplace and a bathroom of its own.

Her perusal lingered on the oak floors she had stripped and refinished. It had been a backbreaking task that seemed to take forever, but she had been so proud when the job was finally completed.

Megan purchased the log cabin on a whim, as a twenty-fifth birthday present to herself. She had happened upon the place accidentally while visiting Cindy, an old high school girlfriend. She had come up for a couple of weeks in the summer and fallen completely in love with the area as well as the cabin. After some careful consideration, she decided the cabin would be a wise investment. Not only would it provide her a regular vacation spot so she wouldn’t always have to stay with Cindy and her husband, but she could also use it as rental property for the many

tourists who frequented the Smoky Mountains. Because it was less than a half-day's drive from Atlanta, she could also use it for weekend getaways.

However, shortly after the purchase, she'd left the city and life she had known. She moved into the two-bedroom cabin, nestled on the side of the mountain, and had one of the most incredible views in all of Laurel Ridge, the fulfillment of all her secret longings.

Sir whined, jumped up, and went to the front door.

"OK, OK." Megan said, getting up to retrieve his leash. "But, you've got to make it quick; it's chilly tonight."

Sir wagged his tail, his cropped ears perking up.

He was the first dog she had ever owned. He, too, was purchased on a whim, within two weeks of her moving into the cabin. She had no regrets about either choice. Determined to change her circumstances, she had decided to stop dreaming about things she longed to do and actually do them. Megan made a fresh start eighteen months earlier and she refused to look back.

"Come on, boy," she said to her large, loyal roommate when she had the leash secured on Sir's collar and the door open. "How about that walk?"

The dog's excited response nearly yanked her off the front porch. Sir bounded down the steps on a mission.

2

The next morning Megan arose early. Though it was early spring and the mornings were still chilly, she walked out on her back porch with her usual cup of vanilla-flavored coffee. The sun was just making its ascent over the mountains, creating a pale lavender hue and stretching its red and pink fingers across the sky as far as the eye could see. It was another glorious sunrise.

The trees were glistening with dew, and from the perfect position Megan's cabin was nestled in, she was able to see for miles. She closed her eyes for a moment and breathed in the crisp, clean mountain air, reopening her eyes to smile contentedly. She never tired of this view, or of these mountains. Heaven on earth.

A thought intruded. *The only thing that would make it more perfect was someone to share it with.* She shook her head. She didn't need anyone. Megan McCormick was self-reliant. She was finished with love. She was completely happy in her new life. Nothing was missing.

Not entirely complete. That inner voice was as gentle as it was consistent.

Cindy had mentioned meeting new friends, and due to her gentle urging, Megan began to attend

church with her friend.

Daniel Phillips, Pastor Dan, to his congregants, was the minister. He would say the voice she was hearing was the Heavenly Father.

Megan had not thought much about God in her life, but no one could view the majesty of these mountains and believe they'd just evolved. The scene acknowledged the artistry in its entire splendor—creation by a Higher Power.

She still had questions, though. Did the Heavenly Father care for her as an individual? This was the debate between her and the kind man who was responsible for looking over the flock in Laurel Ridge. Pastor Dan and his lovely wife, Penny, took Megan under their wings. They tried, unceasingly, to show her the love of the Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus.

Their efforts, as well as those of Cindy and her husband, Alan, were certainly causing Megan to rethink her stance. She was reexamining many things in her life, of late. Sometimes, she felt more confused than ever. At other times, she felt as if she were standing on the precipice of one of these mountains she loved so much and was about to step off into something unknown, something larger than her world had ever been. She didn't know for sure whether it was revelation, understanding, forgiveness, or perhaps something else.

Megan had entertained the idea of opening up to Pastor Dan by sharing with him the events of her childhood and even the most recent trauma she'd suffered. However, she hesitated; sharing her recent foolhardiness would be humiliating. To have someone else look at her with a condescending manner would be too much.

Guilt weighed heavily that she fell for a man like J.T. She should have recognized the signs. She should have seen he was not at all what he proclaimed. He was too much like her father, and she should have spotted the similarities.

Megan blamed herself for her blindness, but she blamed J.T. for his lies and for misleading her. She blamed her father for her inability to trust and for his betrayal of her and her mother. Two men whom she loved had betrayed her; she now hated them both. Megan shook her head before her thoughts became too melancholy.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. The scripture in Philippians was a gentle reminder to her heart.

“I know. I’ve heard Pastor Dan quote that scripture,” she spoke aloud to the wind. “I am trying to do that. It’s just so hard when...when I feel so much anger. All of this just makes me hurt. I want to put it behind me. I want to be happy; I just don’t know how.” Megan shook her head. “Great, now I’m talking to myself.” She looked into the heavens. “I hope You’re listening.” Megan gave the view one last appraisal before walking back inside.

She headed to her computer, took a seat and opened the laptop to begin her work for the day. As she began typing her latest project, she couldn’t help smiling. Instead of a suit and heels, she sat in a comfortable pair of jeans and slippers. She had replaced the ninth floor of a stuffy office building with her kitchen table and given up a view of brick and

glass accompanied by the sound of traffic below for sky and mountains serenaded by birds. She chuckled as she resisted the urge to pinch herself just to make sure it wasn't all a dream.

When Megan left the prestigious marketing and advertising firm of Adams and Gilmore, everyone had thought she was insane. She was a successful copywriter with great potential for various promotions, perhaps even an eventual partnership. But, following the fiasco with J.T., she had not cared.

The city felt as if it was closing in on her. She would go crazy if she continued without a change. She had some money in savings and was more than willing to take a risk. If she was as good as everyone said, she could go into business for herself. If the clients liked her work, they would follow her. Throwing caution to the wind, Megan bought her cabin, acquired Sir, and moved to where she was happy. Reflecting on her loyal clients, Megan set to work with a purpose.

The phone rang.

Megan looked down at the Caller I.D. Curiosity warred with surprise. Her old boss from Adams and Gilmore. "Hello?"

"Hello, Megan, this is Stanley Adams."

"Hi, Mr. Adams, how are you?" Megan was sure the astonishment was evident in her voice.

"Doing just wonderful. And yourself?"

"I'm great."

"How's country life treating you these days?"

"Wonderful. How's everything there?" Megan inquired.

"Oh, busier than ever. You know how it is."

"Mr. Adams, I know you didn't call just to chat. What's up?" she asked, deciding to cut through the rest

of the pleasantries.

“Straight to the point.” He laughed. “I want you to come back to the firm. We’ve got some really big accounts and need your expertise on them.”

“I don’t think—”

Stanley cut her off. “Hear me out. I want to make you managing director with a promise of partnership in two years.”

Managing director. With the bonuses that came with that position, her salary would double. For a moment, Megan silently pondered what those funds could mean, but as she did, she glanced outside at the mountains resting majestically behind her cabin.

You are home.

“I’m very flattered, Mr. Adams. I really do appreciate it but I’m declining your offer.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, I am, but thanks for the call.” Her hand was shaking as she put the phone down. Was she crazy? She’d just turned down a promotion, a very generous salary, and a future partnership.

Whatever is right.

Doubts were silenced. God’s hand was at work in her own life.

Yes, there had been a few lean months. But now, business was good and there was no lack of work. She was getting referrals, as well as repeat business, increasing her income substantially from her days with Adams and Gilmore.

“Yep, Sir, the sky’s the limit. I don’t need Adams and Gilmore to make it in this world.”

As she got back to work, she smiled, hoping the doubts would stay at bay.

~*~

Sir whined.

Megan had stopped working only once, to eat a sandwich and drink a diet soda before going right back to her project. She'd been at it for several hours.

Sir whined a second time.

"OK, boy. Just one more second." She hit the final keys to save her work, and closed the computer. "Tomorrow, I'll edit it and send it off." Megan stood and stretched. She'd been sitting too long.

"How about I go with you, Sir?" she asked the Dane. "I think I could use a good walk about now."

Sir wagged his tail, his ears perking up at the sound of the leash.

"OK, boy." She soothed his excitement. "Now look, we can only do this if you promise not to yank me off one of these cliffs. You got that?"

Sir's response was to look at her innocently, as if to say, "Who me?"

"I know it would never be intentional," she assured him as he pulled her out the door, "but sometimes you get ahead of yourself and you just don't know your own strength."

Megan followed Sir to the path they generally walked. Continued use had caused it to be well worn and relatively safe. Though it was a beautiful walk, it was also a pretty strenuous workout with uneven ground, twists, turns, and drop-offs. Sir, in his exuberance, tended to make it even more challenging.

When Megan and Sir returned forty-five minutes later, she was soaked with sweat and Sir was panting. Megan was sporting red scratches on her arms and face, as well as some leaves in her hair.

“How many times have I said it’s *not* necessary to chase the squirrels when I’m with you?” she asked as she rolled her eyes at the dog.

Sir gave her a shamed stare, which somehow lost a bit of its sincerity when he reached up with his huge tongue and gave her arm a long apologetic lick.

Megan released an exasperated sigh, let them into the cabin, and glanced at the clock. She would have just enough time to shower, change and make it to the church fellowship dinner.

Megan emerged thirty minutes later in a long-sleeved, soft linen dress that buttoned up the front and swirled softly around her ankles. Hopping, she slipped her feet into open-toed mules.

She stopped to check in the mirror one last time. The light foundation had not done much to hide the red welts lining her left cheek or the light sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Thick chestnut hair, which usually hung straight to the middle of her back, was now knotted securely at the nape of her neck. Wide, thickly-lashed, amber eyes were set beneath long, naturally-arched brows. She crinkled the nose that rested above slightly full lips that covered straight white teeth, the result of two years of braces she’d hated wearing. Satisfied she looked fine, she grabbed her leather handbag, shot out the door, and down the porch steps.

3

Megan wheeled into the Grace Community Fellowship parking lot thirty minutes late. She'd forgotten to bring a dish for the fellowship dinner so she had driven into Laurel Ridge to the local deli. While the staff was already putting things away, they were kind as she picked a vegetable tray and some macaroni salad.

Megan calmed her breathing and entered the side door of the church social hall. Everyone was already seated and eating. A bit of nervousness returned. She hesitated as they all paused and called out a warm greeting.

Penny, Pastor Dan's wife, rose and relieved Megan of her dishes. "You go ahead and make yourself a plate, Megan; I'll take care of these."

"Thanks, Penny, but why don't you finish eating while I put these on the table. I shouldn't have been late."

"Don't be silly," Penny said with a smile. "I don't mind a bit. I need the exercise. I've been trying to lose this extra weight I've been carrying since the twins were born." She smoothed a hand down over her hip. "It's been five years and you'd think as busy as they keep me the weight would just fall off."

Megan handed the items to Penny, and prepared

her plate before looking around for a place to sit. Cindy and Alan Wolff were seated at a table with Mrs. Martin and a man with dark hair, whose back was to her. Since their table was full and they were deep in conversation, Megan simply nodded and smiled at Cindy as she found a place to sit at another table.

As Megan enjoyed her meal, she occasionally joined in on the playful banter of the people at her table. They swapped stories of mutual family and friends, as well as sharing prayer requests for different needs and situations. Reports of thanksgiving for what God was doing in their lives were included in the conversation. The congregation of Grace Community Fellowship was like a tightly knit family. They had been very welcoming toward Megan, taking her in and treating her as one of their own.

Cindy came to her table. "I was hoping to get to spend some time with you. I wanted to introduce you to someone, but we've got to go. The babysitter just called and the baby is crying and running a fever."

"Oh, don't worry; you go ahead and check on Katie. I hope it's nothing serious," Megan was crazy about Cindy and Alan's nine-month-old daughter.

"I don't think it is. She's cutting more teeth and has been quite irritable. She probably just wants her mommy. If you get a chance, come by the clinic this week, so we can have our girls' lunch," she invited, before rushing off.

Cindy worked three days a week in her husband's thriving animal hospital, Wolff Veterinary Clinic, a name that usually brought a chuckle from people. Alan would just smile and say God knew he wanted to be a veterinarian, which was why he'd been born with the last name of Wolff.