

INSPIRATIONAL ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

LESA
HENDERSON

SOMEONE TO
WATCH
OVER ME

Someone to
Watch over Me

Lesla Henderson

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Someone to Watch over Me
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Books by Lesa Henderson

Someone to Trust

Someone to Watch over Me

Dedication

To my husband Ken, who along with my heavenly Father, has watched over me for years. I love you more than words can say. To my mom, who when I told her at 13 I wanted to be a writer she believed I could.

Thanks mom! To my three children Brandon, Tiffany and Destiny - you are my greatest accomplishment. To my best friend Vesta, who has been on this journey with me for decades. You've been an encouragement and sounding board with all my stories. I love you buddy! To Angie, I really did get the right baby sister at the hospital. Thanks for believing in me. I love you

BIG!

1

Catlin stared through the rain-splattered windshield as she sped through the night. She was completely and utterly alone now. Her thoughts were not on the dark mountain road ahead, but five hundred miles behind her. She couldn't shake the horrible feeling of guilt for having left him. It hardly mattered that she'd had little choice, or that he'd ordered her to go.

"Put as much distance between you and here as you can. Go find your family."

I'll try. She despised crying, but she was unable to stymie the tears. What if her family didn't want to be found?

Her face throbbed, and she winced at the memory of the crack she'd received across her cheekbone. The salt from the tears stung her split lip. A glance in the review mirror confirmed an ugly bruise had formed. She hoped her cheek wasn't broken.

The bellow of an air horn and blinding bright lights jolted Catlin back to the present. She was headed into the oncoming path of a quickly approaching semi-truck. With a small shriek, Catlin yanked hard on the wheel. The car slid across the wet pavement and off the shoulder. The right tires landed hard in a pothole.

Momentum and imbalance caused the left side to lift off the ground. The vehicle tipped at a sharp angle. "Oh, Lord!" She gasped. With another hard jolt, all four wheels slammed into the ground.

The shoulder smoothed out, and she eased back onto the road. She sucked in deep breaths trying to calm her racing heart. She'd like to think Papa Joe's driving lessons had just kicked in, but she wasn't buying it. More like divine intervention due to some of those prayers he'd prayed over her. She was pretty certain she *should* be upside down in the ditch right now.

Five minutes later, Catlin's heart was still pounding hard as she passed a sign announcing, WELCOME TO THE TOWNSHIP OF CHATLEY, EST. 1887, POPULATION 9,000.

Wump, Wump, Wump! It took a second to realize the sound was coming from her car. The vehicle was pulling to the right. She slowed her speed more and let down the passenger side window. "Great!" Catlin eased off the road and got out in the drizzle. The right front tire was definitely flat.

What time was it? She checked her watch—the blue numbers glowed 10:00 PM in the darkness. And the streets were completely empty.

"I don't think we're in Orlando any more, Toto." Catlin walked back and opened the trunk. One of the things Papa Joe insisted on when she'd learned to drive was how to change a tire.

She hauled out her suitcase and set it on the

ground. She'd crammed as much as she possibly could into it. Under no circumstances was she to go back to the house.

"*Ever.*" Nikko reiterated. His face swam before her, and remembering the look in his eyes when he'd said it had her eyes tearing again. She clamped down hard on her wayward emotions. She'd cried more in the past twelve hours than she had since Mabelle and Papa Joe passed away.

The faces of Papa Joe, Mabelle, and Nikko swam before her eyes. They were so different in appearance and culture but they were three of the people she adored most in the world. Burning anger rose in her throat like acid, she swallowed it back down. She loved God, but she didn't understand this at all. Hiding her anger from Him was pointless. *He knew.*

Catlin lifted the flat rubber mat that hid the compartment for the spare tire. The trunk light revealed the designated hole without a spare tire. A black backpack was nestled in the space. Where had that come from? And what was it doing in her car?

She looked up and down Chatley's Main Street. It was empty, and the surrounding businesses were closed. Still, she used her body to block anyone's view.

She reached in her pocket for her cell phone only to come up empty-handed. She'd ditched it before she'd left the city, as Nikko had told her to do. A lump formed in her throat, and she fought the tears that gathered in her eyes again. There wasn't time for that now.

The hairs on her arms were standing on end. She unzipped the bag and gaped at the bundles of cash. The breath left her body for long seconds before she was able to gulp in air. Catlin zipped up the pack and shoved it away.

Whose was it?

Was it stolen?

Did Nikko know about it?

He had to have known.

What was she supposed to do with it? Was the money real?

A temperature of thirty degrees and the drizzling rain finally penetrated her cold skin. She climbed into the driver's seat, locked the doors, and started the engine. The heater warmed the cab, and she shivered, wondering what to do next.

In most small towns a service station wouldn't be open this late. She probably wouldn't get help until morning, especially since she needed to purchase a spare. Sleeping in her car probably wasn't a good idea either.

Why hadn't she stopped and purchased a burner phone? *Because I'm terrified, running on adrenaline, and trying to put as much distance between me and the city as possible.* She didn't dare ask how much worse it could get, lest she find out.

Her nerves were frayed and her head pounded, her heartbeat throbbed in her temples. Her hands were still shaking. Her stomach growled. The last meal she'd eaten was with Nikko at a mom-and-pop place that

cooked burgers and served them fresh and hot. That was before he'd gotten the phone call...before...

Catlin closed her eyes and forced away the memory. She covered her face as she rocked back and forth. She no longer felt hungry. She probably needed to force something into her stomach anyway.

Perhaps there was a diner or something still open farther up the street, where she could grab a bite, use a phone, maybe get a taxi to a hotel—*would they have that here?*

If there wasn't anyone who could help her, she would be relegated to walking back and sleeping in the car. She shivered at the thought. She'd slept in a car on multiple occasions growing up, when escaping her mother's parties and boyfriends. It had been scary for a young girl, but not as frightening as the alternative. "Been there done that, hate the T-shirt." Catlin turned off the ignition and opened the car door.

Should she take her overstuffed suitcase and the backpack with her? Her years in a rougher section of Orlando made her street smart and suspicious of everyone. It would be hard to run or fight with baggage. *No*, she would only carry *her* backpack, which held a camera, a drawing pad and pencils, her wallet, a small tube of lip gloss, and mascara. A small knife, hidden inside her shirt, hung on a chain around her neck. That safety measure Nikko had taught her. Most didn't expect such a weapon from a woman.

Catlin got back into her car, moved it a few feet, and parked it beneath a street light in front of a two-

story brick building with a large metal sign in front. The sign proclaimed Main Street Methodist Church was on the National Register of Historic Places and was established in 1892. This didn't look like a place where carjackings or break-ins went down. Catlin gazed with a renewed sense of confidence at the beautiful stained glass windows in the church, before heading up the street in search of an open diner or coffee house.

She would find a place to stay for the night, and she'd need to get a ride back to the car to get her suitcase and the other backpack. The tire could wait until morning.

Twenty minutes later, after wandering through Chatley's Historic District and past charming but closed shops and cafés that lined the old brick street, she finally made her way to what appeared to be the other side of town. She didn't see anyone during her journey. The entire town was completely locked up. Her hopes of finding help or food were dropping with the temperature. Her teeth began to chatter as she shivered against the rain, her hoodie doing little to keep out the cold.

2

Shivering uncontrollably, Catlin finally happened upon a huge two-story Victorian house, sitting off the road like the grand dame of the old town. The sign in front read CHATLEY BED & BREAKFAST INN, HOME OF VERA'S OLD-FASHIONED FAMILY CUISINE.

In spite of the late hour, it was well lit. Catlin made her way up the winding tree-lined drive. Her booted feet felt like two frozen blocks of ice. She hoped someone would let her in, if only for a reprieve from the wind, the cold, and the drizzle.

The wide verandah welcomed her with a string of Edison bulb lights, porch swings, and rocking chairs with fat cushions. Chimineas and small fire pits were spread around for warmth. If one of them had been lit, she would have collapsed in front of it and not moved. However, she approached the solid oak and oval glass door and rang the bell.

And waited.

Voices came from within, laughter, and then footsteps. Finally, the door was pulled open by an older, attractive, dark-haired petite woman. "Yes, how can I help you?" She smiled, kindly but with obvious concern.

Catlin must look like a drowned cat. Her face flushed with embarrassment. "I-um-my car broke down. I mean it didn't break down, I have a flat tire. And I tried to change it but..." her teeth chattered.

"You poor dear, come in here out of the cold." The woman offered in a soft southern drawl, opening the door wider.

Catlin crossed the threshold into the warmth of a wide foyer and stepped back in time. She seemed out of place in such genteel surroundings, with the posh wallpaper and the fine draperies that hung from ceiling to floor. Her scuffed boots were a stark contrast to the polished oak floors that still held their original luster and beauty. An antique desk doubled as a reception stand.

"I'm Vera, the owner of this Inn. I—" She stared at Catlin's face. "You're hurt. You were in an accident? We should get that looked at."

"No!" Catlin's voice was shrill even to her own ears, "No. I'm fine, really. It's nothing. It happened earlier. I have a flat tire, and I don't have a spare. Look, I appreciate you letting me in. I know it's late. If I could just use your phone and maybe call for a ride to take me to a hotel or..."

"Aunt Vera?" A gravelly masculine voice was followed by its owner. "Uncle Thomas and I were wondering if you—" He stopped and stared at Catlin.

Catlin was rooted to the spot, shivering. The man was powerfully built. Close to six foot tall, the fabric of the lightweight hoodie strained against his biceps,

chest and broad shoulders. His sandy-blond hair was cut short. His square jaw was covered with a scruffy beard which was slightly darker than his hair. The man was a composite of lumber jack, biker, and something else, maybe ex-military. The urge to pull out her pencils and draw him was almost overwhelming.

He crossed the foyer towards her and scarcely made a sound on the wood floors, in spite of a slight limp. He positioned himself between his aunt and Catlin.

The hairs on the back of her neck bristled. Did he think she was a threat? She glanced at her clothes. Before she'd left Orlando, she'd changed out of her blood-soaked clothes. Now she wore Nikko's sweatshirt—which swam on her— a pair of torn jeans, and black lace up boots. Her favorite hoodie covered everything. She was accustomed to being misjudged, but it still struck a nerve. He was a bit intimidating—probably capable of snapping her like a twig. But as Nikko often lectured, she never knew when to back down.

“I didn't realize we had a guest arriving tonight.” He said it with a smile, but his grey eyes narrowed a bit.

“We don—”

“I'm not. I just need to use the phone. I have a flat tire. And no spare.”

“No phone either?”

His aunt placed her hand on his arm.

“Look, I'm sorry. I'll just go back to my car and

wait until morning." Catlin started towards the door. She was exhausted and she didn't need this right now. If they wouldn't help, she'd be fine on her own.

"You'll do no such thing." Vera said softly, and then whispered sternly. "Cameron!"

Catlin turned back towards them.

"I apologize for my nephew's behavior. He's a bit protective...and suspicious. I'm afraid it comes with the job." Vera shot him a mind-your-manners look.

He smiled, leaned over, and kissed his aunt on top of her head.

"Are you a cop or something?" A knot was forming in her stomach.

"Or something." His grey eyes had also softened a bit, though he still studied her intently.

Catlin felt like a treed cat being watched by a Rottweiler. The knot tightened, and a wave of nausea rolled inside. Her chilled face and hands tingled as warmth enveloped her. She wouldn't stay around and find out what his *something* meant. She'd just get a ride back to her car, or walk, sleep there, and get on the road as soon as possible in the morning.

~*~

Cameron recognized a woman in trouble when he saw one. She fidgeted with her jacket zipper, unconsciously sliding it up and down. Her hands were shaking. Either she was the cause of it or running from it. *Maybe both*. She'd drawn up to full height, which couldn't be much more than five feet, and angled her

chin defiantly at him like a cat poised to swat. *More like a kitten.*

Even with the short tresses of hair plastered to her forehead and the swelling bruise on her cheek, she was beautiful. The clear, alabaster skin was contrasted by the ebony color of her hair. The edgy style perfectly highlighted her bone structure, framing her face with its pert nose and full lips. Her eyes, expressive and captivating, were hazel green and held a challenge.

He'd been taught a valuable and painful lesson on being drawn in by beauty. He bore the marks in his body. Women could be devious and dangerous creatures.

Her skin appeared clammy. Was she on drugs? He inched closer. Their gazes were locked in an invisible battle. And then her eyes rolled back as she swayed on her feet. He caught her just as she sagged forward, and the tug on his broken ribs made him wince.

"Oh, my goodness!" Aunt Vera exclaimed.

"Aunt Vera, do you think you can remove her backpack so I can lay her down?"

Aunt Vera removed the backpack.

Cameron lifted her, groaning under his breath as his ribs creaked. He followed Aunt Vera into the sitting room and placed the young woman on the couch.

"What on earth?" Uncle Thomas said as he walked into the room.

Aunt Vera filled him in.

Cameron checked their guest's pulse which was slightly elevated. He lifted her eyelids and checked her

pupils for dilation, they looked fine. Her skin was clammy. That could be a result of dehydration or hypoglycemia...or drug use. He sat her up. "Uncle Thomas, help me get this jacket off, Aunt Vera, please get me a cool, damp cloth."

A black chain hung around her neck, and Cameron gently pulled it up. A small black tactical knife in a sheath dangled. He tilted her head and removed the chain. "I don't think she'll be needing this while she's here." Cameron slipped it into his pocket just as Aunt Vera returned with the damp cloth. Cameron placed the cloth on the woman's forehead, and then on her neck.

She moaned and her eyes fluttered open.

"Do you think we should call rescue?" Uncle Thomas inquired.

"No!" The woman managed hoarsely and shook her head.

"Are you sure dear, I think—"

"I just suddenly felt overheated and um...nauseous...it's been a really long day...I'll be fine."

Aunt Vera frowned.

"Are you on drugs or taking any medication?" Cameron cut straight to the chase.

"No." Her lips thinned into a tight line, and her arched brows pinched together.

"Are you pregnant?" She didn't like that question any better.

"No! Not that it's any of your business."

"I'm just trying to rule out possible causes."

She shoved her sleeves up her arms. "See, no track marks. Would you like to take a blood test or a urine sample for other drugs? What about a pregnancy test?" She sat up. "If you'll please move, I'll just go."

Cameron's body blocked her path. He hesitated and then stood. He had no reason to keep her here. She'd done nothing wrong.

She got to her feet. A second later, she plopped back onto the couch.

Cameron sat, placed his hand behind her head, and gently pushed her forehead to her knees.

"What are you doing?"

"Keeping you from passing out again."

"I won't pass out!" The exasperation quickly changed to a moan. "I'm going to be sick..."

Cameron grabbed the damp cloth and placed it on the back of her neck.

Aunt Vera retrieved a garbage can from behind the antique desk and placed it in front of the woman.

Cameron let go, and she dry heaved into the bin. She wiped her mouth with the damp cloth.

Uncle Thomas placed a bottle of water in her hand.

She drank half the contents and then sat back on the couch with eyes closed. Her hands were shaking.

"When's the last time you ate?" Cameron asked.

"Around noon..."—her voice was hoarse as she hesitated—"Yesterday."

He looked at his watch, it was 11:00 PM. "Nothing

to drink either?"

She shook her head. " A couple of coffees. And an energy drink. I've been on the road."

"You poor thing. No wonder you're passing out...and with the accident, too."

Cameron didn't bother correcting his aunt. The bruise on the woman's face looked as if she'd been backhanded by someone wearing a ring. Most likely a man, judging by the size of the hand mark and the fresh cut on her cheek. A long, purple and red welt circled one side of her neck Cameron noticed as he removed the chain. Some kind of strap?

"You rest right there, I'll get you something to eat." Aunt Vera motioned for Uncle Thomas to follow.

"Some juice, and maybe some peanut butter and crackers to get her insulin back up," Cameron suggested.

"No. Really, I don't want to be a bother. If I could just please use the phone to call for a ride..." She sat up, although she didn't appear to have much fight left.

"You won't find a taxi in these parts." Compassion surfaced as well as anger towards whoever had left those ugly marks on her body. "This is a bed and breakfast. I believe there may be a room available."

Captivating hazel-green eyes filled with suspicion as she stared at him.

He tucked away cynical judgment and extended his hand, "I'm Cameron Grainger. And you are?"

She hesitated a brief second before placing her small hand in his, "Kit."

Someone to Watch over Me

"Does Kit stand for something else?"

She shook her head. "No...just Kit."

"Do you have a last name, Kit?"

She narrowed her eyes, some of her feistiness returning. "Is this an interrogation?"

"No. We just like to know who our guests are."

"Oh..." She paused a beat. "O'Hara. Kit O'Hara."