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Southern Comfort

Theresa Lynn Hall

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by

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Dedication

To my loving husband. Thank you for always
supporting me and believing in me.

1

"Your honor, rehabilitation has worked for my client before. His behavior has been impeccable over the last three months. Alcohol will no longer be a problem for Mr. Sutton. I'm asking you to give my client parole."

Beth McDonald heard the words coming out of her own mouth and couldn't believe what she was saying. Of course alcohol wasn't a problem for the man; he'd been imprisoned for the past three months waiting on a sentence to his DWI charge combined with one count of vehicular manslaughter. The family he hit would never be the same again.

Judge Whitney raised his hand and motioned at the grief stricken family sitting in the courtroom. His white eyebrows clamped together. His glare pierced her. "What about them?"

Beth glanced behind her. She didn't want to look because she'd seen the tear-stained cheeks of grieving families before. They all looked the same. She was calloused. Not because it was her nature to be, but because it was the only way for her to survive in this profession. She'd started out ready to save the world, but somewhere along the way she'd lost herself.

She wanted nothing more than to look those people in the face and tell them she was sorry. Sorry for standing before them and defending the man who

had ripped apart their lives. To have to stand before a judge, pleading for this man's freedom, was almost more than she could stomach.

Pro bono work for the D.A. wasn't what she thought she'd be doing at this point in her life, but she was making the best of it. Or so she'd been telling herself.

"Miss McDonald, are you quite done? Because your argument is a waste of my time. This man only *seems* to be rehabilitated because he can't get alcohol behind bars. And yes, he may have asked God for redemption, but as you well know, there are no free rides in my courtroom. Consequences, Miss McDonald, we all have to pay them." He picked up his gavel. "I've heard all I care to hear this morning. Mr. Sutton will complete his sentence as ordered, without parole."

Two smacks of a gavel echoed throughout the courtroom and reverberated inside her head. She looked up into the icy stare of a large angry man. She paused for a moment to allow him the satisfaction before spending the rest of his life in a prison cell. Besides, that look meant nothing to her; she didn't feel a thing.

Beth walked into her office, threw her briefcase in her chair, and headed back into the hallway. Coffee. She needed lots and lots of coffee.

"How'd it go in court this morning?"

She threw the plastic stir stick in the trash and turned to look James Howard right in his pink-cheeked face. "It went just as I thought it would." She sipped her coffee and made a face. "Did you make this?" She

didn't wait for an answer. "I hate having to defend these people, James. I knew that man wasn't going to get parole. The judge wouldn't even hear his case. I mean, the man almost took out an entire family when he hit that minivan. It was his fifth DWI. The court system should have locked this guy away a long time ago."

She sipped her coffee again and turned to walk down the hall toward her office.

"Not so fast. Come back here."

A chill shot down her back. James had never used that tone with her before. She turned around and shrugged, careful not to spill her coffee. "What?"

"Beth Ann, please." His tone had softened, and he looked at her with a gentleness much like her father used on her when she was in trouble. No one ever called her Beth Ann except for her family and closest friends. James was neither. He was just her boss.

Beth walked into James's office and sat across from a desk that was strewn with paper. He sat opposite from her and leaned back in his leather office chair. A few seconds of silence passed between them. "I'm worried about you."

Her body went numb. She couldn't imagine why anyone in the world would be worried about her, especially her boss. "I don't understand."

James leaned forward. "You don't have that spark, that desire, that drive...that—"

"Ambition?"

"Yeah," he agreed with a nod.

She looked down at the floor. The last six months of her life had been a nightmare. She wasn't sure being a lawyer could ever give her joy again, but here she was, in some small town called Harper, Texas giving it

a shot. Unfortunately, to no avail.

"I'm sorry, James." She looked him in the eyes. "I guess I don't have that spark anymore. I guess I left it behind when I moved here. But I promise you that I'll do my job to the best of my ability. I won't let you down."

James nodded. "I know that. I just don't like it when I see that glazed look in your eyes. It's a scary thing when a lawyer reaches burnout. If you aren't going to protect your client, then you might as well quit."

She might be a lot of things, but a quitter wasn't one of them. She'd known it since that day in third grade when she'd fallen and busted her knee open during a relay race. She could've laid there and bawled like a baby, but instead she got up and limped to the finish line, her knee leaving a trail of blood behind her. One thing she'd never been called was "quitter."

She looked her boss in the eyes and stood. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I know that last word you used."

James smiled. "Good. Let's keep it that way."

Beth climbed into her car, threw her briefcase into the backseat, and laid her head back. It had been a long day. One she was happy to put an end to. The warmth of the seat soothed her achy back, and she felt a moment of serenity—until her phone vibrated in her pocket. She pulled it out and glanced down at the number. Nausea flooded her stomach, and a chill covered her body. She didn't recognize the number, but the area code was New York City. She wouldn't

answer. There was no need to answer. She'd cut all ties with everyone there when she'd left. Right down to her best friend. No one, not one single person in New York would have this number.

Her heart pounded in her chest. She continued to stare at the phone as it vibrated in her hand, each pulse like an electric current shooting up her arm. Finally, the vibrations stopped. Beth fought the urge to cry as one word popped into her head.

Deliverance.

Mr. Sutton wanted the same—only he was going to spend his life in prison contemplating his past mistakes every day. Judge Whitney was right. There were no free rides. There were always consequences, no matter how small the sin.

The phone vibrated once more in her hand, signaling a voice mail had been left. She didn't want to check it. She wouldn't check it. No one in New York needed her, and she didn't need anyone there. Her life was in Texas now, and anything that had happened six months ago was irrelevant. She was starting over.

She pulled out of the parking lot and headed home. She turned on the radio to a country music station and fought hard to keep from reliving old memories. She was in this small town for a reason. Harper, Texas hadn't even shown up on the map and, as far as she knew, the only people who knew about Harper were the people who lived here. She was tired of running. She wanted peace and deliverance from her past. Maybe she was asking for too much. Or maybe she wasn't asking for it the right way. Whatever the case, she just wanted to forget the past.

She drove home fighting a queasy stomach and hoping that her worst fears weren't coming true. The

people who killed Paul would never allow her to live with the knowledge she had about them. Dead or alive, she was nothing to them. Paul had been nothing to them either.

Oh, Paul. She still missed him. She would probably always miss him. Even though she hadn't fallen in love with him in the same way he'd fallen for her, she'd grown close to him, and little by little, Paul Ralston had torn down walls around her heart that she hadn't known existed. Since his death, she'd built even more walls. Not just to protect her heart, but to protect her life. And now, somehow, they had found her. She could tell herself a million times that it was a wrong number, but she'd be lying to herself.

Beth pulled into her driveway and sat in the car for a few minutes before turning off the engine. She realized she'd taken the last few months of peace for granted. Now fear washed over her and left her numb and crippled. Running seemed futile. Somehow they'd always find her, and she knew it.

With only two hours of daylight left, she was glad she'd driven home before dark. She never worked late anymore, not after what had happened in New York. Pulling her cell phone from her purse, she climbed from the car and punched speed dial number two as she walked to her front door.

"Hey, Dianne, how'd the play go?"

Her sister talked about the elementary school play Beth's niece had been in that afternoon, but Beth hardly heard a word her sister said. Mostly, she needed the security of talking to someone while she walked into her house. At least someone would hear her screams if there was an intruder hiding inside. But with Dianne so far away, it wasn't as if she could help

her.

A chill raced down Beth's back as she stepped over the threshold. She flipped the light switch just inside the door and flooded the living room with a fiery glow.

"Beth! Are you listening to me?"

Beth nodded and then answered. "Yeah, sure. I'm sorry, Dianne. I was just coming into my house, and I lost you for a second." She didn't want to tell her sister the truth about her fears. Dianne would only worry about her like she'd always done. As a kid she'd hated it, but as an adult she felt safe having a big sister watching out for her.

She kicked off her shoes and plopped down on the couch.

"Well, do you have an answer or what?"

She sighed. "No, sis. I can't come to Kansas to visit you and Wayne this weekend. And please, don't keep trying to find men to fix me up."

"Why not? You have to settle down sooner or later."

Dianne had no idea what Beth was running from, and she could never tell her. Settling down wasn't an option, or even in her near future. After a long pause she said, "Dianne, I have to go."

"Oh, Beth, I'm sorry. I can tell I've upset you."

"No, it's OK. I'm just really tired and I want to relax, OK?"

Dianne reluctantly hung up, and Beth walked to the bedroom and threw herself onto the bed. Her life was a mess. Running had gotten her nowhere. Somehow, she had to get her life back.

She closed her eyes. It was time. Like it or not, she had to get help. Tomorrow she'd finally do what she'd

been putting off for six months. She didn't care if she lived to regret it. Just so long as she lived.

Sheriff Fischer walked into his office, hung his white straw cowboy hat on a hook by the door, and then shut the blinds. He sat behind his desk and pulled out a bottle of aspirin from the top drawer. Without bothering for water, he popped them into his mouth and chewed them up. The aftertaste was hardly noticeable after the brief encounter he'd just had with the editor of the local newspaper. That ordeal had left a far worse taste in his mouth. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't keep his life low-key. Everyone wanted to know every detail of his whereabouts every second of the day. He guessed he could understand it since it had only been a year since the town was devastated by the past sheriff. But one thing people needed to learn about Sheriff Clint Fischer was that he wasn't a thief.

Clint pulled his cell phone from the clip at his waist and checked to see if he'd missed any calls. He always kept it on vibrate, and more than once he'd found himself too preoccupied to notice the tingle at his belt. He laid it on his desk, relieved that no one needed him for a change.

He leaned back in his chair, and a knock echoed through his office. Clint sighed. "Come in," he grumbled.

The door to his office opened. A woman walked in carrying a briefcase and wearing dark glasses. He stood and offered his hand. "Sheriff Fischer," he said, reaching out to shake her hand.

She pulled off her sunglasses before taking his hand in hers. He noticed the tiredness in her dark, brown eyes, but they were the most beautiful eyes he'd ever seen. Soft red curls framed her face and fell to her shoulders in long cascades of flowing coppery satin. Something made him think the color wasn't her own, but it was stunning on her just the same. He gulped hard as he tried to deny the heat rising inside him. Her small waist, accentuated by a thin leather belt around a gray straight skirt, made him wonder if she ever ate. He tried not to think about that, and focused on the fact that she looked far too serious, and shook his hand a little too tightly. Whatever the reason for her visit, she was one uneasy lady.

"Beth McDonald," she said, loosening her grip slightly before dropping her arm to her side.

He motioned for her to sit. "What can I do for you?"

She swallowed hard and clutched the briefcase in her lap. "Sheriff Fischer, I don't really know if coming here was the right thing to do. But I don't really know what else to do. I can't turn to my family, so I guess you're it."

Clint swiped both hands slowly down his face and let out a sigh. His gut told him that she wasn't just some drama queen looking for attention. This was a serious woman. He looked at her from across the desk and noticed her eyes shift to the floor. "What do you do for a living, and are you in some kind of trouble?" he asked, though he knew by her briefcase and her attire that she was a professional woman.

"I'm a lawyer. I do pro bono work for the D.A. And yes, I guess you could say I'm in some sort of trouble."

"Oh, so *you're* Beth McDonald." He'd heard her name around since he'd taken over as sheriff. He'd also heard that she was a great attorney. What he hadn't heard was how beautiful she was.

"Uh...yes."

"I didn't mean that in a bad way. It's just that I've heard mention of you since I became the sheriff. You're good at what you do. I've heard a lot of good things about you—professionally, that is."

"Of course."

He sensed her anxiety. "I'm sorry. Please, tell me what you're here for." She uncrossed her legs and crossed them again, sending his pulse racing as the fabric of her skirt tightened around her legs. He quickly averted his gaze, making a deliberate attempt to concentrate on what she was saying.

She was here for one reason only, but the minute she'd set eyes on the town's sheriff, it was hard to stay focused. His broad shoulders and handsome smile were totally unexpected. Not to mention the dark green eyes that kept watching her. Reminding herself again why she was there, she cleared her head of any attraction she had for the sheriff and refocused her thoughts.

This was the first time she'd told anyone about her life in New York. Her throat tightened, and she struggled to swallow. No matter how hard this was, she had to do it. She needed someone to know the truth in case she ended up like Paul. She couldn't stand the thought of her family wondering for the rest of their lives what happened to her.

She cleared her throat. "Let me start with the beginning. You've heard of the Clean Water Act, right?"

He nodded. She wanted a response but reminded herself that they weren't in a courtroom, and a nod was good enough.

"There are some hefty fines for corporations that don't comply. But compliance comes with a big price tag also. Some companies have been known to go to great lengths to get around cleaning up their discharge water. It's cheaper than doing what's necessary, and they think if they can pass inspection, or forge the documentation, then they're OK. The problem is that those who are in violation can be sent to prison. That means executives, the people who work for them, and anyone who knows about it and doesn't report it. It's a serious crime, and the fines can be in the millions of dollars."

She stopped for a second and watched the sheriff's face. He appeared to be very interested, but the last couple of glances he'd made at his watch made her think she was wasting his time. He looked up and held her gaze as if he'd sensed her pause was meant for him.

"Go on," he said, leaning back in his chair.

"My boyfriend worked for one of these companies. He was the COO of Stanford Industries. He knew of illegal dumping and was asked by board members, and the CEO, to ignore it. Paul tried to tell them it was a bad idea. After a few years, he realized that if they were caught, he'd go down with them. He told me everything and was going to make an anonymous report, but he said he had to quit first."

"And what happened? Did he make the report?"

Beth shook her head. She hadn't talked to anyone about this and saying the words was harder than she thought. "No," she whispered.

"Then, what happened?"

"He died."

2

Beth took a sharp breath and steadied herself for telling the sheriff the horrible details. This man did something to her that she'd never felt before. Sure, she'd been around plenty of good-looking men, but there was something about the sheriff that was different. She fought to reorganize her thoughts as she wiped her sweaty palms on her skirt and looked the man in his deep, emerald eyes. "Have you ever heard what happens to a body under water?"

"Seen, not heard. It's ghastly. Why? Did Paul drown?"

"No, he wasn't taking a swim. He was killed and dumped in the river. The very river Stanford Industries has been polluting for years."

"Do the police have any suspects?"

She shook her head. "No, but I do. And now they're after me."

Clint's eyes widened. "How do you know?"

"My cell phone. I changed my service, my number, got a new phone, everything. I left New York without telling anyone, well except for my employer. But he only knows I left the city. No one there knows where I am, my phone number, nothing. I didn't tell a soul. I was afraid of this, and I thought I'd outsmarted them."

"How do you know it's *them*? Did you answer?"

"The area code was New York and no, I didn't. I thought there was a voice mail but it was silent when I listened to it."

"What's your outgoing message?"

Beth shook her head. "No, I'm not that stupid. It doesn't say my name; it only says 'please leave a message.'"

"Good. But they could've recognized your voice."

She shook her head. "No, I never formally met anyone he worked with."

"You're sure of that?"

"Absolutely."

Clint leaned back in his chair, and she knew exactly what he was about to say.

"This one phone call isn't enough to give me a reason for pulling one of my deputies and having him watch over you. I just can't see any reason for it right now, and honestly, I don't know if I can afford it. Most of what I'm hearing is very circumstantial at this point. All I know is that you're afraid, and I can understand your reasons. I just don't have anything to prove that someone is after you."

"I knew that's what you were going to say."

"Really? Then why did you come here?"

"Because I always knew they'd find me, and I knew I couldn't outrun them forever. When they do kill me, my family will know what happened to me. I needed someone to know, someone I could trust."

"And that's me."

Beth nodded. "Yeah, you're a lawman. You're supposed to protect people, right?"

"Yes, but how can I protect you if I don't know what or whom I am protecting you from? You're not making this easy. I need names. I need faces, details,

anything you know that could help.”

“OK, I’ll gather it up and bring it to you.” Beth leaned forward and picked up a plaque on the edge of the sheriff’s desk. There was a verse engraved on it that read, *Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight. Proverbs 3:5-6*

She set the plaque down. “Do you really believe that?”

The sheriff shot her a puzzled look. “Don’t you?”

Beth shrugged. She used to believe in a lot more things. Now...well, now life was teaching her that nothing is as simple as just saying you believe that everything will turn out OK. If God was so good, then why did He let those psychopaths kill Paul? If God was watching out for her, then why was she getting these phone calls from New York? Too many questions with too few answers. What she did know was based on facts. Everything was drawn out in black and white for her now. She didn’t have the energy to believe in something that may or may not save her life. She needed assurance and she needed certainty. She needed to know if the sheriff was going to help her or not. “Look, I was raised in church, so I know what you’re getting at. But what I believe, or don’t believe, doesn’t matter right now.”

He nodded, and she noticed the corners of his mouth twisted in a slight grin. He raked a hand through his dark brown hair. Tiny wrinkles formed in the corners of his dark jade eyes.

“I see. So it’s OK for you to ask me that question, but I’m not supposed to ask you. Just remember, I didn’t take offense when you asked me.”

“Sheriff, I didn’t take offense. I just don’t see the

relevance.”

“Fair enough. But I’ll answer your question anyway. The answer is yes. Yes, I do believe that verse, and I try to remind myself every day that I have to trust God. I couldn’t do this job if I didn’t.”

Beth sat quietly. This man was hard to read, but she liked his honesty. “Then do you think you can help me?”

“I’ll try. But tell me something. Isn’t there an investigation into Paul’s murder? Were you brought in for questioning?”

“No one has talked to me. Not a single phone call. I don’t understand it, either. I reported Paul missing on a Tuesday afternoon, and his body didn’t turn up until two weeks later on a Saturday. Some kids were riding dirt bikes down by the river and saw his body floating in the water near the bank.”

“What did the autopsy report say?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see it. Soon after that, I left town and I was too afraid to go back.”

The sheriff stood up and extended a hand. “I’ll make some phone calls, and I’ll see what’s going on. I’ll give you a call as soon as I know something.”

Beth stood and shook his hand. “Thank you. I really appreciate this. I’m trying to stay calm, but something tells me they’ll find me here. I just have that sick feeling.”

As she walked from his office, she glanced back and held the sheriff’s gaze for a second. Maybe the man was right. Maybe she needed to learn to trust in something. He had definitely done *something* to make her want to trust in him. She wanted to deny the attraction, but a feeling deep inside told her this man wasn’t like anyone she’d ever met. Those mysterious

green eyes had sucked her in. But, no matter what, she'd do everything in her power to fight it. She had to focus on staying safe and staying alive. Relationships didn't fit well into the plans for saving her life.

Beth stepped out of the building into blinding sunlight. She reached for her sunglasses in her briefcase and felt the vibrations from her cell phone buzzing inside her jacket pocket. She jerked it out. Before flipping open the phone, she glanced at the caller ID. Nausea gripped her stomach. She turned and ran back into the sheriff's office.

Without waiting for his secretary to acknowledge her, she flew through the sheriff's door and handed him the phone. "They're calling again."

She laid the now silent phone on his desk.

He looked up at her, his brows furrowed with what appeared to be confusion. "Sit down," he said firmly, motioning toward the wooden chairs in front of his desk.

She sat, trembling with fear and anxiety.

"Miss McDonald, are you OK?" His tone and his gaze had softened. "You seem to be coming apart at the seams."

He was right. That was a good way of summing it up. She was unraveling. "No, I'm not. I'm scared to death. What do I do? Do I answer? Do I change my number?"

"You calm down and you relax, OK." He picked up the phone. "No voice mail. Let's call the number from my cell phone. It will come up as a private call on the ID. I'll see who answers."

"Thank you, Sheriff." She leaned back into the chair and sighed.

"Call me Clint," he said as he punched in the