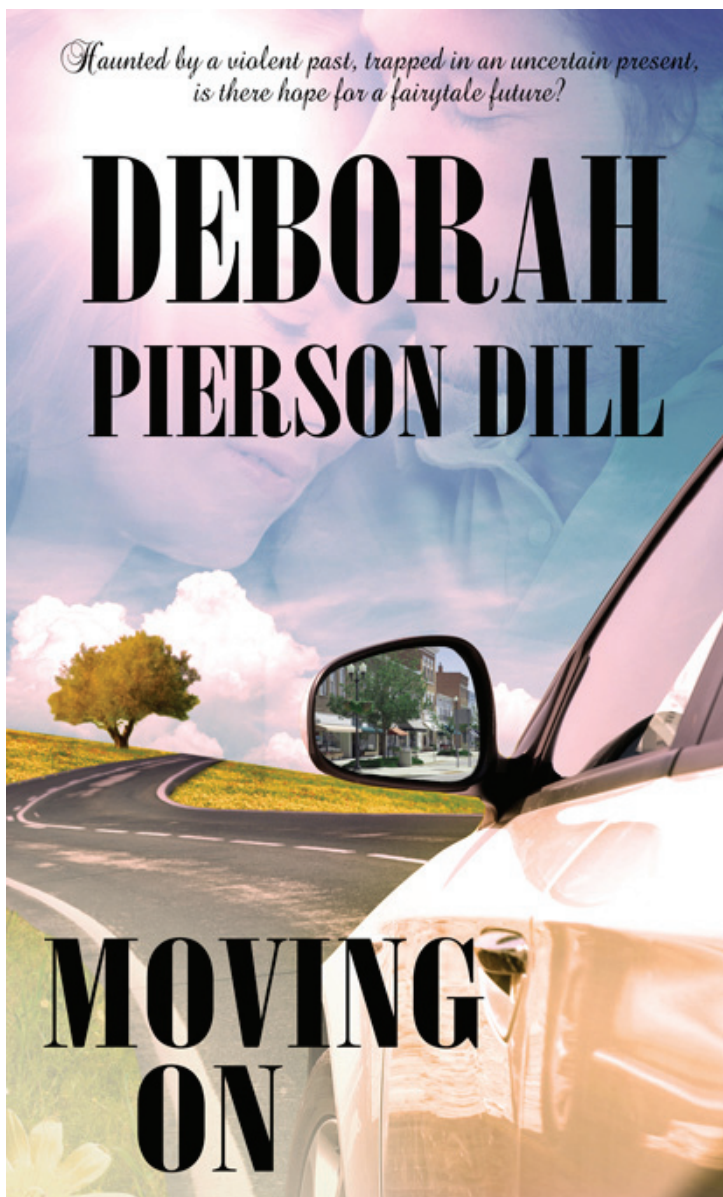


*Haunted by a violent past, trapped in an uncertain present,
is there hope for a fairytale future?*

DEBORAH PIERSON DILL

MOVING
ON



Moving On

Deborah Pierson Dill

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

To the Lord, who placed the heart's desire within me.
And to the family who consistently
encouraged me to pursue it.

Prologue

Bobby sat on the cold, hard steel bench in the holding cell of the Blithe County jail. He rested his elbows on his knees and pressed his balled fists to his forehead, squeezing his eyes shut against the harsh, fluorescent lights overhead. The officer who processed him asked if he was ready to make his phone call, but he wasn't. Who would he call, anyway? Not Audrey. He needed to think. He needed to sit here until the alcoholic fog lifted a little and he could sort out this mess.

What had just happened? What had he done? He had been arrested on charges of DWI and assault—his first arrest on either count, though certainly not his first offense. He unballed his fists and buried his face in his hands. What happened to all his great intentions to change, to stop drinking, to stop pushing Audrey around? He'd been doing so well these past few weeks. What happened this afternoon?

He released a heavy sigh and leaned back against the cinderblock wall, knowing.

The news of the fire at the Rhodes' house had spread quickly. He heard about it on his lunch hour and had fought the urge to drive out and offer help right then. He wanted Audrey to call him, to need him. He expected her to. He spent the rest of the afternoon compulsively checking voicemail to make sure he

hadn't missed her call, getting angrier with each notification of no new messages. She never called. Why would she with Brent there?

By the time his shift at the feed store ended, he'd been so mad he wasn't thinking straight anymore. He drove back to his mother's house and delved into the case of beer in her fridge without giving a single thought to what he was doing. It had been his brother, Tommy, who tossed the match onto the fumes in his soul.

"You just gonna let it go?" Tommy had taunted him. *"You know, I drove by there earlier. It looked like half the town was out there, with Brent Thomason taking charge. You just planning on letting him have her? After all the years you spent with her, are you just gonna sit by and let him take your place?"*

Bobby raised a hand and dragged it across his chin. It hadn't taken much at that point to rile him. The alcohol had done its work, like always.

"God, I'm...." He let the whispered words trail off. *I'm what?*

Worthless?

Useless?

Detestable?

Yes. He was all those things. He had never disputed that fact. And he tried so hard, but he couldn't seem to break free from his old man's way of living. It shouldn't be so hard. He had decided to change, and now it should just be a matter of doing it. So why couldn't he?

Countless times as a kid he'd cried himself to sleep after a beating, vowing that he would not turn into his father. That if he ever had a family, children, he would never lay a finger on them in anger. They would never

have a reason to fear or hate him. All he ever aspired to be was the exact opposite of his father. Yet he turned out just like him, and no amount of effort on his part could ever change that.

“God, please....” He pressed his head back against the cold, cinderblock wall and looked heavenward, desperation nearly driving him onto his knees.

He had never been a praying man. He’d never seen the point. There was no way God would ever listen to him or take an interest. Not after all the vile things he’d done. But the simple phrase slipped out before he could lend a thought to it. And now that it was out there he couldn’t help feeling a tiny whisper of hope. Maybe something could change. Maybe it wasn’t too late.

“Please, God...” He ventured to reach out again. “Help me.”

He knew he’d be spending tonight in here, and he’d most likely face an arraignment tomorrow with a court-appointed attorney at his side. But that wasn’t what he petitioned God about now. Tomorrow he would plead guilty because he was. Hopefully, the judge would give him a fine or probation, or maybe both. His brother had been through this enough times that he knew what to expect.

But he was guilty of so much more than the charges landing him here tonight. And his heart and soul pled guilty to all of it, crying out now for forgiveness and healing even though it was the last thing he deserved.

1

Lubbock, Texas
2½ years later

“Boy, it’s really comin’ down out there.” Fully under the safety of Mrs. McDaniel’s covered front porch, Meagan Layne set her toddler down and collapsed her umbrella.

Mrs. McDaniel pushed the storm door open and stepped aside. “Well, y’all come on in.”

“I’m sorry we’re late.” Meagan urged her son across the threshold, maneuvering him gently past his sudden fascination with a small hole in one of the planks beneath his feet. “The phone rings, and I just can’t not answer it.”

Had she known the caller would be Michael somebody-or-other from blah-blah collection agency wanting to work out a payment schedule for the credit cards her ex-husband ran up and then filed for bankruptcy on, she would have had no problem letting it ring. A defeated sigh slipped out before she could stop it. She should have let it ring. No one but debt collectors called her before eight a.m. anyway. But that information wouldn’t interest Mrs. McDaniel.

“Oh, it’s all right, hon.”

Meagan went down on one knee and unbuttoned Jay’s little yellow rain slicker. He grinned sweetly as he

let the jacket slide down his arms and onto the floor, then he broke out into song.

"A, B, C, D, E, F, G,...R, F, Q, T, T, G, G,...A, C, G,...X, Y, Z."

"Yea! Good singing!" Meagan smiled and broke into applause when he finished.

Thankfully, Mrs. McDaniel followed suit. It was getting harder and harder to work up any enthusiasm for the alphabet song, especially since she'd caught herself humming it in the shower first thing this morning.

"Hon, would you like a hot cup of coffee before you have to go out again?"

Meagan stood, crossing to hang Jay's jacket on the coat rack by the door. She glanced at her watch and shook her head. "Thank you, but I can't. If I leave right this minute I'll get to the salon just in the nick of time for my eight-thirty appointment. I really should get going."

"Meagan..."

Her heart sank at the wary tone of Mrs. McDaniel's voice. If there was one thing life had taught her to do well these last few years it was detect bad news before it surfaced. Not that right now was a great example of keen intuition. Between the strain in Mrs. McDaniel's voice and the look of distress on her face...well, it didn't take any amount of extra sensory perception to know that whatever she was about to say wouldn't be good news.

"Hon, you know how much I love you and little Jay."

Jay wandered over to a large toy box on the other side of the room and removed its contents piece by piece, tossing them out as if looking for something in

particular. Her shoulders sagged and a lump rose to her throat. But she tried to smile when she turned back to Mrs. McDaniel.

"Ray and I...we've decided to move back to east Texas."

Meagan almost gasped. "What?" OK, maybe her powers of deduction weren't so great after all. This news was *way* worse than she'd expected.

"Well, you know, that's where we grew up, and both our mothers still live out there, and neither one is in very good health these days. It'll be closer to all the kids and grandkids. Now that we're both retired, it just doesn't make any sense for us to go on living way out here when our whole family lives in east Texas."

Meagan closed her eyes and nodded, though the feeling of being punched right in the gut lingered. "Of course. Yes, of course. It'll be much better for you to live closer to all your folks."

"I'm just so sorry to be leaving you and Jay in a bind. I know things have been hard on you since...well, since..." Mrs. McDaniel let her voice trail off as she shook her head. "But..."

Meagan opened her eyes again, took Mrs. McDaniel's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, forcing a smile past the rising ache in the back of her throat. "You should live closer to your grandchildren. They need you."

"I'm so sorry, hon."

"Do you know when you'll be leaving?"

Mrs. McDaniel shook her head, her eyes misting over. "Ray drove out to Beaumont yesterday to make some arrangements. We don't know for sure. As soon as possible. Maybe a month or so."

Meagan drew in a deep breath and let it out again,

then glanced at her watch. "I should go. I'm late. Jay, can you come over here and say bye-bye to your Mama?"

"No," came the sing-song-y little reply from the toy box.

Tears stung her eyes. Jay felt so comfortable here. Mrs. McDaniel had kept him since he was three months old. This was like a second home. "OK. Then I'll see you later."

"OK. Bye, Mama."

Jay had learned to sit up, and crawl here. He'd taken his first steps here. All while she'd been at work. How would she ever find somebody else she trusted so completely to care for her son?

Mrs. McDaniel followed her to the front door. "Have a good day, hon."

Meagan choked back a bitter laugh at the customary farewell and waved as she put the umbrella back up and ran for the car.

It took three tries before the engine finally turned over, and she started to the salon. She glanced at her watch as she pulled away from the curb. Her appointment this morning was a regular. He'd been coming to her every month for about a year now, and he'd never shown the slightest trace of irritability or impatience. Of course, she'd never been late. Maybe he'd cut her a little slack. Tears welled and spilled, further blurring her view out the windshield. It'd sure be nice if *somebody* would.

"OK, God. I know you're in control," Meagan whispered, her voice shaky. "I know nothing that's happened lately comes as a surprise to you. But it's managed to catch me a little off guard. I can't take Jay to work with me. And with the debt collectors calling

every other day, I've got to have a job."

Maybe she should file for bankruptcy, too. That would get the collectors to stop calling. But why should she have to do that over debts that didn't even belong to her in the first place? She should have known better than to trust Kevin with credit cards that still had her name on them. When she realized divorce was unavoidable, she thought she was being smart in insisting they close all their joint credit accounts. By then it was too late. The damage had been done, the charges amassed. And although Kevin had sworn he'd accept sole responsibility for the accounts in the divorce settlement, he never did.

Meagan tightened her grip on the steering wheel and took a deep breath as the windshield wipers struggled frantically to keep pace with the rain coming down. "Just make it through today. Tomorrow will take care of itself. I can make it through today."

And why couldn't she? She'd made it through yesterday and the day before that, and the week, and the month, and the year before that. God had taken care of her. His grace had been sufficient. Life hadn't been easy, but she'd been content. Another deep breath and she'd about convinced herself that a bright side waited just around the corner up ahead. It had to.

She touched her brake to take the turn. Then her headlights dimmed and went out. So did the radio. She managed to coast into a parking space after the engine died, but there on the sidewalk in front of her stood a two-hour meter. And it was five blocks from the salon, and, of course, the rain would probably continue like this all day.

Why couldn't it just rain here? Just a slow, steady, day-long rain. The kind of soaking that made you want to stay in bed all morning and just sleep. Bobby Kerr leaned forward, displaced and a little disquieted by a deafening clap of thunder that sounded like it was right overhead. He was no stranger to thunderstorms. But West Texas storms were the worst. Nowhere else could the sky go months with not a cloud and then, suddenly, from nowhere, a storm so violent it could frighten a grown man. Not that he was scared.

The hair on his forearms prickled just before a flash of lightning lit the dark morning sky outside. The lights flickered off, then back on, and another crashing peal of thunder drowned out every other noise for a second or two.

Bobby braced his elbows on his knees, and stole a glance at the cover of a magazine. He glanced around the room, really not wanting to pick the thing up. But just under the huge, boldface type promising thinner thighs in thirty days, was a smaller blurb about saving twenty-five dollars or more a week on groceries. Financially speaking, he did all right. But twenty-five dollars was twenty-five dollars.

A quick glance at his watch told him it was nearly eight forty-five. Meagan never kept him waiting. Even when his appointment fell later in the day and she'd had several other customers before him, she was usually ready for him right on time. But this kind of weather could sure slow a person down.

More thunder rattled the plate glass window. Suddenly it didn't seem quite so solid. He was just about to move away from it when he noticed a figure outside hurrying down the sidewalk toward the salon. He rose to open the door as Meagan struggled to get

her umbrella collapsed and inside.

"Bobby, I am so sorry I'm late." The apology came out in a breathless rush. Her face was flushed, probably from the chilly, soggy morning air. She briskly rubbed hands together, then pushed damp hair behind her ears and propped the dripping umbrella against a wall.

"Um..." Bobby blinked and forced himself to look away. He'd always thought Meagan was a pretty girl. But today she looked... She looked beautiful. He glanced back at her. "No problem."

Yep. She looked gorgeous. And there was something uncomfortably intimate about seeing her like this—so early in the morning, with her hair damp like she'd just gotten out of the shower. Something compelled him to glance away again as she slipped her raincoat off and hung it on a peg in the wall.

"Well, come right on back. Oooh—" She brushed past him, so close she almost touched him, so close that he could smell her perfume, then she reached for the magazine on the bench. "Twenty-five dollars a week, huh?"

Meagan tossed the magazine back onto the bench and turned to lead him back to her chair.

Bobby cleared his throat as he followed. "Yeah, it probably involves clipping coupons."

Her laugh sounded cynical. "And who really has time for that?"

"I'd just as soon pay twenty-five extra dollars a week."

Meagan's gaze met and held his in the mirror. He knew he should probably look away, but the way she regarded him now...as if she was really seeing him. For the first time in the year he'd been coming to her for a

haircut, she didn't just glance at him for the purpose of identification, her gaze didn't automatically and unwaveringly attach itself to his hair. She really saw him. She smiled softly, then turned and quickly shoved her purse and lunch bag into a drawer. When she turned back to face him she held a cape.

"Did you have to walk this morning?" Bobby's voice faltered, and he cleared his throat. Then he climbed into the chair and let her spread the cape and fasten it around his neck.

"Yes. My car died a few blocks down the street." She misted his hair with a spray bottle and then ran a comb through it. "Just the usual this morning?"

Bobby nodded. "Any idea what's wrong with it?"

Again, her laugh sounded cynical and not at all like her. "Probably something very expensive."

She fell silent—also unlike her. He wouldn't call her a talker, necessarily. But she always chatted pleasantly enough to pass the time quickly. Usually she asked about his job, and had a knack for remembering what they'd talked about last time.

He caught a glimpse of her in the mirror as she turned the chair to get a better angle for his cut.

Was she crying?

He shifted a little in the chair as the silence grew more awkward. Should he say something? Maybe he should ask her what was wrong. But why should she tell him what bothered her? She didn't know him very well, and if she did, she'd know better than to confide in him.

No. From what he could tell, she was a pleasant, sweet, normally happy woman. Better for her if he didn't get involved.

Ask her if she's all right.

More than two years had passed since Bobby had become a Christian. This new lifestyle had required strength and discipline he'd never had to employ before. It had been a huge adjustment. But God's prompting had become increasingly familiar, and he knew that's what he felt now. As sure as he was that he shouldn't get involved in this woman's life, he felt the Lord leading him to do so, anyway. He took a deep breath and glanced up at her again.

No trace of tears now. Maybe she'd recovered. Maybe he shouldn't bring it up and upset her all over again. Maybe he'd just imagined the whole thing.

Ask her.

Bobby cleared his throat. "Um. You sure seem quiet today. Everything OK?"

Her glance met his in the mirror for the briefest second before she returned her attention to her work. She nodded and gave him another soft smile. "Yeah. My day just got off to a rough start. You know how it is."

He nodded. Silence engulfed them again.

Only one other customer had braved the weather this morning. An older man sat at a station on the other side of the salon, having a quiet conversation with the woman cutting his hair. Bobby could see them in the mirror. But all he could hear was the snipping sound of the scissors as Meagan worked on him, and then the electric buzz of the trimmer she used for the final touches.

"How's that look?" She handed him the hand mirror and turned the chair so he could get a look from every angle.

"Looks great. And so fast."

She smiled and unsnapped the cape, lifting it away

from him and shaking it out gently. "I thought I'd try to make up a little time since I was late getting here."

"Well, you did good. Thanks." He stood and pulled his wallet from his back jeans pocket. He took out enough cash to cover the cost of the cut plus a good tip, then he folded the money and handed it to her. Her fingers brushed his hand as she took it from him, and without pausing to think about the impulse he closed his hand around hers. "Meagan, is there anything I can do to help?"

Tears welled in her eyes and began to spill freely. She withdrew her hand and turned to reach for a tissue from her station.

"Not unless you can fix cars." She tried to lighten the mood with a little laugh. But the effort was as transparent as the big window in the front of the shop through which he could see the storm clouds. This involved more than a broken down car. But since she brought it up, and if it would help...

"Well, I'm no mechanic." He grinned, seeking and holding her gaze with his own. "But I've been known to fix a few basic problems. I could have a look. If it's simple enough, I might possibly be able to fix it for you."

"No, Bobby." She sounded mortified. "I was just kidding. I couldn't ask you to do that. It's pouring down rain outside, and you're already running late because of me."

"When's your lunch break?" Bobby stuffed his wallet back into his pocket. "If the rain lets up I'd be glad to come by and have a look. If not then, then after work."

"Really?" She smiled. "You'd really have a look at it? 'Cause I think maybe it's just the battery. But if you

have jumper cables then maybe we could get it started, and I could go get it taken care of."

Her suddenly lifted spirit gratified him completely, and he returned her smile. "Just tell me when to come back."

"I'm taking lunch at one today."

"Then I'll see you at one."

She beamed. "Thank you so much, Bobby."

He turned to leave and made it as far as the front door before he turned back to glance at her again. He always turned back to have one last look at her before he left. Ordinarily she'd have already brought out the broom and started sweeping up by now. But today she stood next to her chair, still clutching the money he'd pressed into her hand, watching him go. She smiled at him again before he left.

How many years had it been since he'd done something that made a woman happy? He couldn't remember. Maybe he never had.

Jumper cables stretched from the engine of Bobby's truck to her car, and Meagan watched from the sidewalk as he tried again to start it. She could see his hand turning the key in the ignition, but the engine made no response. The car was completely dead. Bobby shook his head and got out.

"I don't think it's your battery." His mouth set into a grim line.

"What do you think it is?"

He shrugged. "You'll have to get it looked at by someone who really knows what they're doing. But, from what you described, I'd guess it's the alternator."

He held her keys out.

Taking them, she almost winced at his words. "That sounds expensive."

"It'll definitely cost you more than a new battery." He walked around to the front of the car to unfasten the jumper cables. "Wasn't much help, was I?"

"You were, Bobby. It was so good of you to come out here and at least give it a try. Thank you."

"Wish I could have done more. I wish we could have done this at lunch like we'd planned. This time of day everyone's gonna be closing up. It'll be tomorrow before anyone can even look at it." He put down both hoods.

"I guess we can't control the weather." Meagan watched his hands as he rolled the cables up and stuffed them back into their case. His long-sleeved, denim shirt made it difficult for her to tell much about his build, but he seemed lean and strong, like a man who had worked hard at an outdoorsy kind of job all his life. Ranch work, or construction by the look of him, or something like that. Her gaze slid up his arm, across the hard, broad span of his shoulders, then up to his tanned face. He had dark brown hair—a warm, rich shade that many women were willing to pay big bucks to have chemically created on their own heads—with just the faint beginnings of gray at the temples, as well as in his short goatee, which he never let her trim. And his eyes. His eyes were light brown, warm and liquid, like caramel sauce. She'd always been a sucker for brown-eyed boys. How had she missed his?

"You gonna be OK?" When he spoke his voice sounded faint and distant.

Meagan blinked and looked away. "Um, yeah." How could she not have noticed this man before