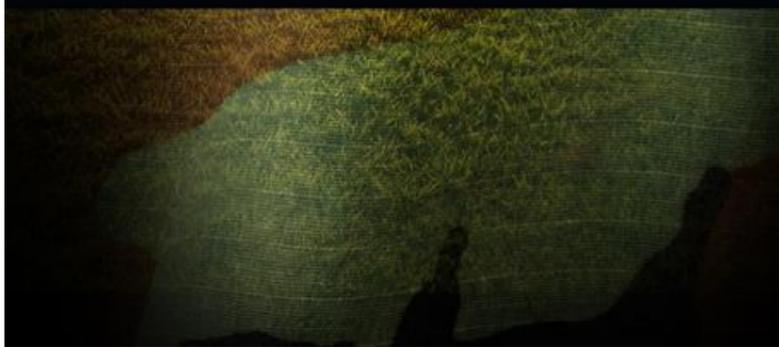




E.A. WEST

Healing IN

HAVEN FALLS



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HEALING IN HAVEN FALLS

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Dedication

To those who have been wounded by war or life—

There is a season for everything,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance

Ecclesiastes 3:1a, 3-4

The Haven Falls Community Center echoed with laughter of happy children and adults. Keith Burke leaned against the wall, wishing he were anywhere else. Why had he let his pastor talk him into coming?

Because Pastor Joe threatened to talk to Mom and Dad about my depression.

His parents couldn't deal with any more. That's why Keith had gone to his pastor in the first place. Seeing a professional counselor was out of the question, since it would mean explaining to his parents why he needed a ride to the appointment. The church was close enough for him to walk.

Of course, if he hadn't lost the sight in one eye, he could probably drive himself wherever he needed to go. But wishing the past hadn't happened changed nothing.

A woman came into the crowded room who didn't look any happier to be here than he was. Keith straightened as he studied her. Shiny black hair brushed the tops of her shoulders, her tan complexion fairly glowed, and she had a figure to die for.

Maybe the pastor had done him a favor by insisting he come.

Keith took a step in her direction and stumbled against an empty chair. A small twinge shot through his right hip as humiliation washed over him. As if he could impress any woman. That had all ended over two years ago, and he no longer had hope of ever getting a date. A friend would be nice, but even that

wasn't likely. Not with the way people looked at him with pity or disdain, or treated him like a pathetic invalid. A man could only take so much before he went postal or became a hermit.

He straightened the chair and headed for the exit. There was no point in staying, and his pride wouldn't have to suffer any more injury if he left now. Pastor Joe should be happy he'd put in an appearance.

"Keith! Wait up!" Joe joined him with long, steady strides. "Leaving already?"

Keith sighed and turned toward the pastor. "Yeah, I didn't see a point to staying any longer."

"You've been here less than twenty minutes." Joe crossed his arms. "That doesn't show me you're willing to fight past the depression and give enjoying life an honest try."

"So, what do you want me to do? Stay here and try to ignore the pitying looks everyone gives me? Pretend I'm just ever so happy to be surrounded by people who have no idea what I've been through?"

"If that's what you want to do, I suppose you could." Joe cast a glance over the room before returning his gaze to Keith. "Or you could relax and have fun. Quit focusing on your misery and look at the good in life."

Keith snorted and looked away. Joe kept telling him to focus on the good in life, but Keith still hadn't figured out where to find it. His gaze landed on the dark-haired woman. She stood close to a side door and looked ready to bolt. Maybe he wasn't the only one forced to be here against his will.

And maybe she was his way to make Joe happy. "OK, Joe, you want me to participate in the evening? Fine. I'll give it one shot, but if it fails as miserably as I

think it will, you're going to let me go home. And you won't tell my parents I've been talking to you. They don't need to know that."

"I'll accept the deal with one minor change. You have to give it a true attempt. You can't just halfheartedly pretend you're trying to enjoy yourself, because we both know that will fail." Joe placed a hand on Keith's shoulder, his gaze softening with sympathy. "But if you give it your best effort, and you honestly can't deal with being here any longer, I won't force you to stay."

"Thanks." It was these rare moments of seeing Joe's compassion that kept Keith talking to the man. Joe wouldn't take any nonsense, and he insisted on pushing people to their limits, but he also knew there were times people had to retreat and regroup before they were ready to be pushed again. "If you'll excuse me, I have an event to pretend to enjoy."

Joe chuckled and lowered his hand. "Pretend long enough and hard enough and you just might surprise yourself by actually having fun."

Keith shook his head and walked away, doing his best to avoid limping. If he stayed here long enough, he might have to beg a ride home from someone so he didn't get stopped for public intoxication again. Thanks to passing a breathalyzer and having a senator for an uncle, that time, he'd been released without being charged with anything and all record of the stop had been destroyed. He could probably get off again, especially since he didn't drink, but he didn't want to go through the hassle or the humiliation.

Coming here was a mistake. Autumn Reger knew she didn't belong. She should leave before she ruined the night for everyone. Going home wasn't an option, however, since her grandparents expected her to be gone at least a couple of hours. The park might be a possibility, or she could just walk through town until enough time passed to go home. Anything had to be better than standing here.

"Excuse me. Are you waiting for someone?"

The rich male voice made her look up. A tall, brown-haired guy stood beside her. Her heart thudded as she met his gorgeous hazel eyes, but only one was focused on her. His right eye wasn't focused on anything. Had he been in some kind of accident?

She realized she hadn't answered him. "Uh, no. I'm not waiting for anyone. In fact, I was thinking about leaving."

"Oh." The guy actually looked disappointed. "I don't suppose I could talk you into hanging out a little longer, could I?"

Was he just hitting on her, or did he have a more sinister motive? *God, give me courage.* "Why?"

He sighed and ran his hand through his short hair then glanced toward the opposite side of the room. "My pastor is insisting I spend a little longer attempting to have fun. You look like you want to be here as much as I do, so I was kind of hoping we could pretend to enjoy this thing together. If you don't want to, I understand. By talking to you, I've put forth enough effort to make my pastor happy...I hope."

Curiosity and confusion overtook Autumn's doubt. "I assume there's a story that makes sense."

He sighed again and lowered his gaze. "Yeah, but it's pretty long and not exactly cheerful." He raised his

head to look at her again. "I'm sure you noticed I'm not good at this whole socializing thing. Can we start over and pretend I haven't made a complete idiot of myself?"

Autumn couldn't keep a tiny smile from escaping. This guy's fumbling attempts at small talk reminded her too much of herself. She took pity on him and indicated a small empty table nearby. "You want to sit down and talk for a little while to make your pastor happy? I'm Autumn Reger."

He looked relieved as he nodded. "Keith Burke. And, yes, sitting down would be great."

He motioned Autumn ahead. When she reached the table, she turned in time to see him stumble into a man walking by. Keith apologized. Head down, he limped, slightly off balance, to the table. Once they were seated, Autumn crossed her arms on the table top and leaned forward.

"I didn't smell any alcohol on you, so I doubt you're drunk. Are you high?" Maybe she came across as confrontational, but she didn't care. After her last boyfriend, she had every right to be suspicious of anyone who couldn't walk a straight line.

"No, I'm not high. I don't drink and I don't use drugs." The irritation faded and he sighed. "It's neurological. When I'm tired or stressed, it's harder to walk normally."

Compassion and guilt washed over her. How could she have mistaken a disability for substance abuse? "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry, it's just...I've had some bad experiences I'm still trying to deal with."

"You and me both." Keith met her gaze with a wry smile. "We're really lousy at small talk, aren't we?"

"Looks that way." Autumn gazed at people

enjoying themselves. "So, have you lived in Haven Falls long?"

"All of my life, except for a brief stint in the Marines. I've been back home for about a year and a half. What about you?"

"I moved in with my grandparents here ten months ago. I grew up in Winchester and then drifted around, messing up after high school graduation. Moving in with my grandparents was my attempt to escape the mess."

"Since this seems to be our night to discuss personal topics with strangers, I have to ask. Why did you come tonight? Assuming I guessed right and you don't want to be here."

Autumn sighed and traced a scratch in the tabletop. She'd agreed to talk to him, and something made her believe he'd understand. "My grandparents. They're so worried about me. When I told them I was coming to this thing, they smiled. As much as I don't want to be here, I have to do it for them."

She glanced up in time to see Keith nod. "I can understand that. I know I mentioned my pastor, but the real reason I'm here is my parents. They're already worried enough about me. My pastor was threatening to talk to them about me, but he won't say anything to them if I make a real attempt to participate in this community fun night."

"Depression?" She hated the thought of anyone going through it.

"Yeah, among other things." Keith ran his hand through his hair, leaving it tousled in a most attractive manner. "Can we change topics? This one's not making it easy to hang out here long enough to make Joe happy."

“Uh...” She racked her brain, searching for a non-threatening subject. “How about favorites?”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Favorites?”

“Yeah, you know, like favorite movie, favorite food, favorite music.”

“Oh, I got it.” He tapped his fingertips against the table. “Let’s see. Favorite movie would have to be *Prince Caspian*. I loved the *Chronicles of Narnia* books when I was a kid, and *Prince Caspian* has always been my favorite.”

Autumn nodded. “Good one. My favorite movie is Disney’s *Cinderella*. I keep hoping I’ll meet my prince, but I haven’t had any luck so far.” Why had she added that? She laughed, a little self-conscious.

“That’s too bad. Pretty woman like you should be surrounded by princes.”

She stared at him. He thought she was pretty? Warmth flowed through her like honey, but it didn’t drown her anxiety over the thought of a man being interested in her.

He cleared his throat and looked down. “Sorry. I guess I should think before speaking, huh?”

“Maybe, but I think I’m overreacting.” Autumn sighed. Just when she thought she was doing better, her fear got in the way. *Help, Father!* “You’re not the only one who isn’t good at the whole socializing thing.”

Keith chuckled and met her gaze. “We make a great pair. Neither of us is good at socializing, yet we’re attempting it, anyway.”

A guy at the other end of the room announced dancing.

Keith raised his eyebrows. “What do you say? Want to give up on talking and dance?”

“Um, what about your...problem?”

He waved a hand as if to dispel the thought. “That just makes it more interesting.”

Dancing with him was appealing to a degree that surprised her, but she wasn't sure how well it would work with his balance issues. “It sounds fun, but I don't know.”

He stood and held out his hand. “Come on. I haven't danced with anyone in longer than I want to think about, and you look like you're graceful.”

Pleasure roamed through her at the statement. She took his hand, a little surprised at the strength in his grasp as he helped her to her feet. Apparently, his neurological problems didn't affect his muscles. It definitely didn't affect his natural charm or his ability to attract her. The longer she spent with him, the more thankful she was she'd come.

They joined several other couples, teens, and children in a large empty area of floor as the amateur DJ put on a fast-paced country song. Everyone started dancing in a variety of styles, including line dancing.

Autumn glanced at Keith, unsure of his preferred style. Since he was the one who had trouble walking straight, she planned to follow his lead.

He glanced at the line dancers. “Do you know any line dancing?”

“Uh, no.” She wasn't a fan of country music, but she wasn't going to mention that right now.

Keith grinned and pulled her toward the line. “Perfect.”

“What?”

“I don't know how to line dance either. Since my balance is messed up and neither of us knows what we're doing, this should be a lot of fun.”

Autumn shook her head and a smile escaped. This guy was nuts, but in a cool kind of way. And her instincts said he was a good guy. Maybe she'd finally found someone who could be her friend. For a depressed guy, he sure knew how to cheer up a girl.

He placed her next to the last person in the line and stepped up beside her. As the line dancers continued to move in almost perfect synchronization, Autumn and Keith tried to copy their steps and failed miserably. Keith's lack of balance had him bumping into her, which made her stumble into the woman on her other side. Autumn had to admit they both probably appeared to be drunk, and they were definitely getting a lot of strange looks, but she'd never had more fun dancing. The line dancers moved away from Autumn and Keith, and the others on the floor gave them a wide berth as well.

Keith grabbed Autumn and started doing a poor imitation of swing dancing that came nowhere close to matching the rhythm of the music. He met her gaze and winked. "What do you think? Am I a great dancer or what?"

She couldn't help it; she had to laugh. "I think I'll go with 'or what.'"

He chuckled, the sound lifting her spirits. "You're just jealous of my impeccable technique."

"You got me. I've always wanted to be an expert at the 'or what' style of dance."

"I'll be sure you get all the lessons you want." He looked across the room and nodded. "Good, my pastor is watching, which means he knows I'm trying to enjoy myself."

Autumn looked in the same direction and spotted a man with graying hair watching them with a smile.

She turned back to Keith and found his gaze on her again. A little shiver raced down her spine. "Would you believe I'm actually having fun?"

"Only if you'd believe I am." He glanced at his pastor again. "I guess Joe was right. Putting forth effort to enjoy myself actually works."

"Of course it does...with the right company, anyway." Her breath caught in her throat. Was she actually flirting with him? It felt so natural, so right, but she scolded herself for letting her guard down; that always got her into trouble.

They continued their failing attempt at dancing as the first song ended and a fairly new pop song started. At the end of it, Keith released a breath and met Autumn's gaze. "What do you say we get out of here and go get a cup of coffee? I think I've had enough dancing for one night."

She had a feeling he was getting tired. But regardless of the reason, the chance to spend more time with him appealed to her. "You mean at the place down the street? Sure."

"Awesome." He took her hand and led her on a wavering path to his pastor. "Did I put forth enough effort?"

"That depends." The older man lifted an eyebrow. "Did it work?"

"Strangely enough, yeah." Keith glanced at Autumn, a warm light in his eyes making him even more attractive, then he returned his gaze to the pastor. "I'm going to head out."

"Introduce me to your new friend before you go."

"This is Autumn Reger. Autumn, my pastor, Joe Huber."

Joe held out his hand with a friendly smile. "Hello,

Autumn, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you, too." She shook his hand. There was something about him that put her instantly at ease. Maybe she'd rethink her negative stance on church attendance. Joe seemed much more accepting than the pastor at her grandparents' church.

He darted a glance at her left hand, which Keith still held. "Am I correct to assume the two of you intend to leave together?"

OK, so maybe he was a little nosier than she'd like, but he seemed fatherly to Keith. "Uh, yeah. We've both had enough community fun for one night."

Keith broke in as his pastor's gaze took on a concerned shadow. "What she means is, we're ready to get out of here and have fun in a quieter place. Like the coffee shop."

Joe's expression cleared and a knowing smile lifted the corners of his mouth. "Well, don't let me stop you. I hope you both have a wonderful evening."

"Thank you." Autumn wondered at his excitement, but then she remembered why they were talking to Joe in the first place. Maybe Keith had been farther down the road of depression than she'd been—and she'd been pretty far down.

"Keith, I'll see you at church in the morning." Joe turned to Autumn. "And will I see you there as well? It's Haven Falls Community Chapel."

"I'll think about it."

Keith tensed beside her, and she hoped it hadn't been the wrong answer. But she hadn't been to church in months, not since her grandparents' pastor had implied he doubted the sincerity of her Christianity because she'd made such a disaster of her life. Yes, she'd messed up big time, but she'd come back to God

to find Him waiting with open arms. She didn't plan on leaving the security of His presence again, but she was still apprehensive about church attendance.

Joe nodded wisely. "Well, we'd love to have you any time you want to join us."

Autumn managed a smile as Keith excused them. Her mood took a nosedive at the thought of having to choose between trying to make a guy happy—which had played a huge role in the mess she'd created before moving in with her grandparents—or sticking with her avoidance of church.

Why hadn't he considered that she might not be a Christian? Keith sighed as they strolled down the sidewalk. It wouldn't be the first time a pretty face had deceived him, but Autumn was the first woman he'd had an interest in *and talked to* since he came home. Not that he was surprised. The only surprising part of the whole situation was that she'd talked to him, danced with him, and agreed to have coffee with him. And he was enjoying every second of her company. Too bad it couldn't go anywhere.

The toe of his right sneaker caught an uneven crack in the sidewalk, knocking him completely off-balance, and he prepared for a face plant. An open hand slammed into his chest as he pitched forward, stopping his fall. Autumn helped him regain his balance and looked at him with concern.

"Are you OK?"

"I'm fine." Except for the embarrassment burning like a grass fire. "Tripping is something I do remarkably often." He met her gaze and managed a

small smile, even though his heart ached. He had a feeling he'd have a chance with her if he asked her out, but if she didn't share his beliefs it would be pointless. "Usually, I don't have anyone to catch me, though. Thanks."

"No problem."

As they continued, he stumbled again. Maybe he should dig out his cane and start using it. He stopped walking and swayed a little, hating what he needed to say. "Look, maybe we should just skip the coffee for tonight. I'm sure you can tell my balance is getting worse, and I'm not sure how much longer I can go without falling over completely."

Her delicate eyebrows drew together in concern and—was that disappointment? "Are you sure? I can help you stay on your feet if that's the only reason you don't want to get coffee."

She wanted to spend more time with him? His traitorous heart quickened its pace, and he struggled to rein in his hope. *She's not a church girl. That means nothing beyond friendship.* But it didn't stop him from enjoying the evening with a beautiful woman who didn't seem to mind his balance issues. "If you're sure you don't mind, I would enjoy spending more time with you."

Her smile brightened the evening gloom as she slipped an arm around his waist. "I wouldn't have offered if I minded."

A twinge in his side caused him to shy away from her hand. She let her arm fall from him, her face twisted in confusion. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing really. You just found a sensitive scar." The remorse that washed over her face before she lowered her head shocked him. It wasn't as if she'd

purposely tried to hurt him. Could it be that she cared? The thought brought joy and pain as he realized he was beginning to care about her as well. But Biblical teaching prevented him from more than friendship. He put his hand under her chin and nudged her to look at him. "Hey, it's OK. It doesn't hurt. It just feels a little weird."

She blinked away the moisture filling her eyes. "Are you sure?"

He chuckled and let his hand drop. "Of course I'm sure. Would it make you feel better to see that you didn't do me any harm?"

"Um..."

Her uncertainty was cute. He lifted the hem of his T-shirt to reveal the mass of scar tissue on his right side, beginning just below his ribs and disappearing below the waistband of his loose-fitting jeans. "It's from burns. No one can explain to me why it's still sensitive to touch, but it is sometimes."

Her eyes widened and he released his shirt, letting it fall back into place.

"Wha-what happened?" A becoming flush crept into her cheeks. "If you want to tell me, I mean. You don't have to."

"It's fine. Let's go get that cup of coffee, and I'll probably tell you more than you ever wanted to know."

Her grin let him know she'd caught his reference to their first awkward conversation. She moved to his right side and slid her arm around his waist, avoiding the sensitive spot by resting her hand on his left side. "OK, let's go."

She was voluntarily helping him and acting as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

How long had it been since a woman had done that? Autumn's arm around him felt so good, so right. And with her support, he was able to walk almost normally.

God wouldn't tease him by bringing a woman this wonderful into his life and not make her a Christian. Would He?

Autumn sat across the table from Keith and listened to his story of a roadside bomb in Afghanistan, the fire in his Humvee, and the extended hospital stay to treat his injuries. His gaze took on a faraway look, and she wondered if he was seeing what he described. She could vividly remember several of the events that had led to her moving in with her grandparents. Her relationship with her parents was still strained, even though they'd told her eight or nine months ago that they'd forgiven her.

She brought her attention back to Keith when he reached for his mug and took a sip of the steaming coffee. "So, now you know why I have balance issues. In addition to the traumatic brain injury, I'm blind in my right eye, have the scar I showed you and some others, and my right hip bothers me sometimes."

"Wow." Somehow, her problems no longer seemed quite so bad. "I'm impressed that you came through all of that."

"Yeah, apparently the doctors and my parents were worried about whether I'd ever regain consciousness when they first transported me back to the States." He ran a hand through his hair and sighed, something he seemed to do whenever he thought too much. "I don't remember anything from the moment

that bomb went off to waking up in the hospital two weeks later. Most of what I know is what others have told me about it."

He looked so sad that she considered going around the table to give him a hug. She didn't want to come on too strong, however, especially since his interest in her had cooled after the conversation with his pastor. She settled for a sympathetic expression instead. "I don't know whether that would be a blessing, since you don't remember what happened, or if it's a curse because of the gap in your memory."

"Honestly, I think it's a blessing. I have enough nightmares without remembering it." He took another sip of coffee and drew in a deep breath. "So, what's your story?"

She wrapped her fingers around her own mug, suddenly feeling cold at the thought of telling him, even though she doubted he'd look at her any differently. He seemed so kind and accepting that she wished he was still interested in her. It hurt to think that something she'd said to his pastor had killed any chance she had with Keith. She took a calming breath and spoke softly. "Well, I graduated from high school and left home, against my parents' wishes and advice. A string of bad choices about where to go, who to befriend, and what to do led me to Ray, my last boyfriend. He was heavily involved with drugs, which I didn't know until it was too late. When I realized all the people dropping by our apartment weren't actually his friends and that his seemingly endless supply of money was illegally obtained, I left and went to the police. It took a lot longer than I expected to get through all the interviews, trial stuff, and Ray's sentencing. But once it was finally over and the

prosecutor assured me I was free to move on with my life, I called my grandparents, and they invited me to live with them. Since my parents and I parted on such bad terms, I figured that was my best chance at straightening out.”

She took a drink of her coffee, sweetened with a spoonful of sugar, and shoved the surfacing memories back in the box she kept them locked in. Talking about it with indifference was difficult enough; if she allowed herself to remember the hurt, betrayal, fear, and remorse, she’d never make it through the conversation.

“No wonder you were so cautious with me at first.” Keith reached across the table and touched her hand. “It makes perfect sense, now.”

The warmth in his fingers chipped away at the wall she’d built around her heart. Was it possible she really had found a good guy instead of a creep? *Slow down, Autumn. Just because he goes to church and you have a good feeling about him doesn’t mean you need to get involved.* “Yeah, I pretty effectively ruined my life for three years, but thankfully, God was waiting for me when I came to my senses.”

A smile warmed Keith’s gaze and he stroked the back of her hand, sending tingles racing up her arm. He was still interested. Her heart tripped with the realization, and she struggled to focus on his words. “God’s good about that. It’s only by His grace that I’ve made it this far.”

His pastor’s invitation floated through her mind. Should she risk going to church? She had a feeling Keith would like it, but she wasn’t sure she had the strength to do it. “Tell me about your church. I, um, didn’t get along well at my grandparents’ church, and I’m not sure—”