

JANA RICHARDS

*1ST CHAPTER*

ROMANCE SAMPLERS

MASONVILLE SERIES -  
SMALL TOWN  
ROMANCE

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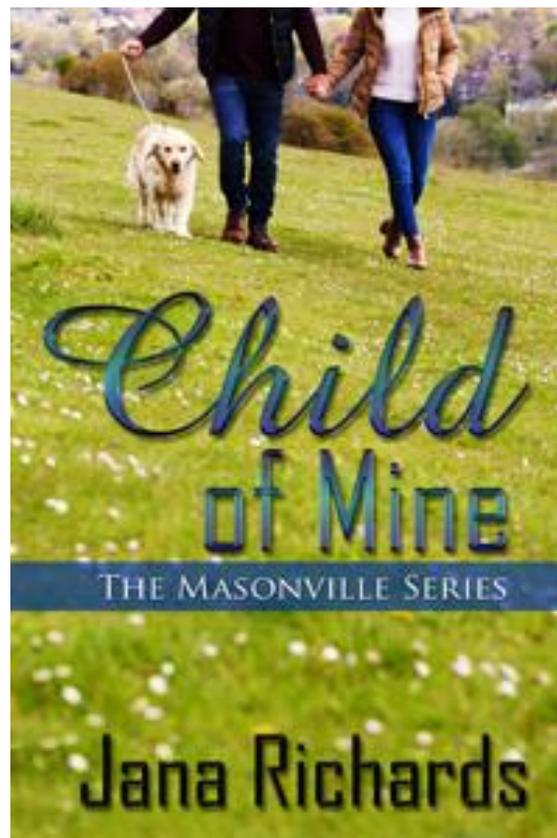
## **CHILD OF MINE**

Book 1, Masonville series

Lauren didn't intend to sleep with her brother-in-law Cole on the day of her husband's funeral. But now that she is pregnant, she's not sorry. Cole's given her a baby, a long-wished-for miracle. He's been her friend forever, though she never told him or anyone else how unhappy her marriage to his cheating brother was. And she's afraid to tell the small town that considered her husband a hero that the baby isn't his.

Cole's been in love with Lauren since he was sixteen. It kills him that everyone believes the baby is his dead brother's. All he wants is to claim the baby, and Lauren, as his own. Though she marries him, will Lauren's heart ever be his?

Lauren must tell the truth or risk losing Cole. Is her newly-discovered love for him greater than her fear of scandal in her hometown?



## Chapter One

*August 1*

Lauren Walsh watched as her husband's coffin was lowered into the grave. The minister's voice sounded far away, as if she were trapped underwater. She struggled to keep from drowning.

"We commit the body of Billy Walsh to the earth: ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Into the smiles of our memories, we lay you down. May you rest in peace and love."

She closed her eyes and squeezed her sister's hand. *It'll be over soon. I can pretend for a few more minutes.*

"Billy lived his life to the fullest. And though he was taken too soon and his passing grieves us immensely, let's rejoice that he lived the life he wanted. Let's remember his spirit and his zest for life, and be happy we knew him."

Anger made her throat burn. They knew nothing about Billy. How could they? For the last five years she'd been lying to them.

Lauren gulped deep, calming breaths. *It's almost over. Don't fall apart now.*

Following the lead of Billy's brother Cole, she tossed the white rose she held into the grave. *White roses for remembrance.* Memories swirled around her like ghosts. So many things she wished she could forget.

Beside her, Cole stood with his head bent, one arm around his weeping mother. Cole's pain was as raw as his mother's, and Lauren's heart ached for him. Whatever differences they'd had, Cole and Billy had been brothers, and blood was thicker than water. She reached for his free hand and squeezed it in silent support. Without looking at her, Cole returned the gesture.

"Lord, let now thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word."

The minister's words signaled the end of the interment ceremony. Lauren

sighed with relief. With one last squeeze, Cole released her hand. Lauren looped her arm through her sister Charlotte's and hung on tight. She didn't know what she would have done without her older sister and the rest of her family these last few hellish days.

Ella Walsh sobbed uncontrollably as Cole led her to the waiting funeral car. She leaned against him, her cries piercing the quiet of the Masonville, North Dakota graveyard. "My Billy, my Billy. He can't be gone. No, no, no!"

Lauren wished she could feel grief. She'd been married to Billy for five years, had known him many years before that. Wasn't a wife who'd just lost her husband supposed to feel grief? But all she had was the guilt of their last conversation weighing on her heart and the anger that made her want to beat her fists against a wall.

The luncheon in the church basement, following the interment, dragged on with excruciating slowness. Lines of people stepped forward to offer their condolences. They were so sorry, they said. It was hard to believe someone as vital and alive as Billy could be dead, they said. They'd followed his hockey career since he was a star on the Masonville peewee team. He'd been on the verge of making the big leagues, they were sure. Such a tragedy that a car crash on a Georgia interstate had ended his life.

Lauren murmured her thanks, choking back screams of frustration. *Don't you know he was never going to make the National Hockey League?* There'd been a chance at one time; he'd had the talent, but not the work ethic. Or the right attitude. He'd been traded from one crummy minor league team to another. From one crummy minor league town to another. She'd worked at whatever job she could find to help support them. And even though it was obvious his hockey dream wouldn't come to fruition, Billy had stubbornly refused to deal with reality.

Finally the luncheon was over, and she and her family could leave. The oppressive August afternoon heat hit her as she stepped from the cool church basement. Anxious to escape, she followed her family to the car. On the short drive to her parents' acreage a few miles outside of Masonville, the car's air conditioner didn't have a chance to cool the interior, and a bead of sweat ran down her back beneath her long-sleeved knit dress. A dress too warm for this weather but the only black one she owned.

She was grateful for the coolness and peace of the house she'd grown up in.

After kicking off her heels at the front door, she curled into a ball on the sofa in the living room. She closed her eyes, needing some quiet and peace to think. And time to figure out where she went from here.

*What am I to do with my life now?*

But the peace didn't last. The doorbell rang, shattering the quiet. Lauren heard her mother greet a couple of neighbors. She stifled a groan. She was expected to receive these guests and accept their condolences. After all, they were only doing what was considered the right thing by small town standards. She pushed to her feet and forced herself to walk to the kitchen.

Widowed elderly sisters Martha and Beatrice were longtime friends and neighbors of her parents, Grace and Robert Saunders. They greeted Lauren with sad, pitying smiles and two casserole dishes. Martha handed her dish to Lauren's mother.

"We didn't think you'd feel much like cooking today, Grace, so we brought some food." The smell of tuna fish casserole filled the kitchen. Martha turned to Lauren and grasped her hands. "We're so sorry for your loss, dear."

"Thank you." The words tasted like dust in her mouth.

"Billy was such a character," Beatrice said with a wistful shake of her head. "I had him in my grade two classroom. You were in the same class, Lauren. He was quite the little Hell raiser. Remember, Martha?"

"Oh, yes, I remember. I had him for grade five. Nearly ripped all my hair out that year. Remember the time he pulled the fire alarm? We evacuated the school and called out the volunteer fire department before we realized it was one of Billy's pranks. I was spitting mad, but he was so angelic-looking, with that sweet smile of his, that I couldn't stay angry with him. He was curious to see what would happen, he said."

That was Billy in a nutshell. He'd do whatever he wanted to do, purely for fun, and would charm away any objections or anger. Lauren was often made to believe she was the one in the wrong, she was the one who was being unreasonable.

Her mother made tea and put a cup in front of her, but her stomach rebelled at the thought of drinking it. The old ladies went on and on about Billy until Lauren was sickened by all the memories. Instead of comforting her, they only succeeded in fueling her anger. Why had he done this to them? Why

had he taken her love and thrown it in her face? And now he was dead, and she didn't even have the satisfaction of telling him how much he'd hurt her.

Sam Miller, one of Billy's childhood friends, swept into the kitchen, his face full of disbelief and anguish. He knelt beside her chair and gripped one of her clammy hands in his.

"I can't believe he's dead. I can't believe I'm not going to see him again. I'm so sorry, Lauren."

"Thank you," she said woodenly. They were the only words she was capable of uttering today.

"He was the best guy, a good friend, and a good husband. Nobody can replace him."

Lauren snatched her hand away and tucked it into her lap. Her jaw hurt from clenching it. Sam had no idea what kind of husband Billy had been. Like everyone else, he'd only seen the façade she'd created of the happy, doting wife to the charming, athletic husband. It had been easy to deceive everyone in Masonville. She and Billy lived most of the year in the southern cities of the minor hockey league he'd played in, only coming home for holidays and special occasions. She'd maintained the façade till the end, until Billy's last deceit. Even then, she couldn't tell the truth, not even to Charlotte, the person she trusted most in the world. She'd been too ashamed, too humiliated.

The doorbell rang again. Charlotte answered it, and a trio of neighbors came through the door, each carrying more food. The odor of greasy fried chicken assaulted Lauren's senses. The smell and the thought of eating made her want to throw up.

Panic swirled in her gut along with the nausea. She couldn't do this anymore. She couldn't listen to their stories and memories of a Billy they really didn't know.

She pushed away from the table with an abruptness that caused her chair to nearly topple backward, saved only by Sam grabbing it.

"I have to go. I'm sorry, I can't...I need..."

*What do I need?*

She had no idea. She had to get out of this kitchen before she flew into a

million pieces. But everyone was staring at her as if she'd lost her mind.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, edging towards the door. One more step and she could reach the hook where the keys to her mother's ancient Honda Civic were hanging. "I need to go."

"I'll come with you," Charlotte said.

"No!" She forced herself to calm down, needing to dispel the worried look from her sister's face. "I mean, I need to be by myself for a while. I'm fine, Char, really I am. But I'm not good company right now. I have to go."

She didn't wait for Charlotte's reply. Sliding her feet into a pair of her mother's flip-flops, she grabbed the car keys and pushed open the screen door, breaking into a run once she'd cleared the back steps. As her foot hit the gas pedal, she let out a relieved sigh, feeling like she could breathe again.

Lauren sped down the highway with no real idea where she was headed. She rolled down her window, letting the hot prairie wind howl through the car. How she wished the wind could blow away her troubled thoughts. But nothing could help her. Guilt and anger were so tangled with love and betrayal that she didn't know what to feel or think.

*How I could I love Billy and hate him at the same time?*

She needed to say goodbye. That last time she'd spoken to Billy, only days before his death, she'd been so angry, so hurt. They'd argued, and she'd said things she now regretted. She didn't want those ugly words to be the last thing she said to him.

Lauren turned the car around and drove the short distance to the cemetery, parking the Civic behind some trees where it couldn't be seen from the main road. As she got out of the car, she was greeted with the sound of birds singing in the trees and the sweet smell of freshly cut hay in a nearby field. A sense of homecoming washed over her. She'd missed North Dakota so much these past five years.

Grasshoppers jumped in all directions as she walked past the silent headstones to the freshly dug mound of earth where Billy had been laid to rest. She stared at the grave, her head bowed.

"We really made a mess of things, didn't we?"

The only reply was the sound of the wind blowing through the trees. "We both made a lot of mistakes. I lost faith in your dream, and I got tired of the way we were living. But you hurt me, Billy. You cheated and lied, and you hurt me."

Her eyes filled with tears, and she held back a sob. "I was so angry with you. I'm still angry with you. But I never wanted you to die! Why did you have to go and die?"

She drew a deep, shaky breath. "The last time I saw you, we fought and I said some horrible, ugly things to you. I'm sorry for that, Billy. I truly am. But you said some ugly things, too. Maybe someday I'll be able to forgive you for the things you've done, but I'm not sure I'll ever forget."

She stood silent over the grave for a long time. Finally, she looked up and saw the sun hanging low in the western sky. Her family would be worried about her. She wasn't ready to go home yet, but it was time to leave this place. Time to say goodbye.

"Goodbye Billy. I did love you. Once."

As she got back in the Civic and drove away from the cemetery, her emotions swirled in turmoil. Would she ever feel peace again?

Almost without realizing it, Lauren found herself on a back road that led to the secret spot in the pasture that Billy and Cole's father had once owned. The three of them had hung out there as teenagers, and she'd had her first, and only, cigarette there. She laughed out loud at the memory of the coughing fit that had followed her attempt at being cool. She remembered Billy's laughter and the way Cole had pounded her back to help her breathe.

She pulled up to the barbed-wire fence leading to the pasture. Cole's half-ton truck, easily identified by the logo of his veterinary clinic painted on the doors, was parked nearby. She wondered if he was struggling with memories, too.

She eased herself between two rows of barbed wire and followed a well-worn path to the hideout. Perhaps this place wasn't as secret as she'd once believed.

Cole sat on a log, staring into the cold ashes of a recent fire. He wore the same white dress shirt he'd worn to the funeral, his suit jacket lying on the ground next to him. He looked up in surprise as she approached.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Running away." She sat on the log next to his. "I couldn't handle the casserole brigade."

"The what?"

"The endless train of people dropping by with food." She involuntarily shivered. "I can't face all the well-meaning platitudes and condolences right now."

He dipped his head in a nod. "That's the reason I left Mom's apartment. I couldn't take it anymore either."

She was glad he understood. "It looks like this place has been discovered. I guess it's not our little secret anymore."

Cole chuckled and pointed to his left, toward a clump of trees. An old couch had been dragged between the bushes. Beer cans were strewn nearby.

"Apparently not. Tim says kids come out here for bush parties almost every weekend, at least until the weather turns cold. He doesn't mind as long as they stay in this one corner of the pasture and don't wreck his fence."

Lauren searched her mind for the name. In five years she'd lost track of people in Masonville. "Tim?"

"Tim Rodgers. He bought the land from my mom after Dad died and she sold the farm. Did you know Garrett tried to buy it from Tim recently?"

"My brother Garrett? He's never farmed in his life. What would he want with a quarter section of pasture?"

Cole shrugged. "Now that he's out of the military, he says he wants to raise stock for the rodeo. Unfortunately, Tim's son decided he wants to run cattle here so Garrett didn't get the land."

Garrett hadn't shared his plans, or his dreams, with her. She'd missed many events in the lives of her brother and sister in the last five years and she ached with the hurt of it.

Lauren jumped to her feet, too restless to sit. "Do you remember the Halloween Billy TP'd the principal's house? Mr. Schneider nearly had a stroke, he was so mad."

Cole gave a melancholy laugh. "Mostly I remember that Billy talked me into

helping him do the deed. He managed to convince everybody at school that some kids from Bismarck had done it. Only the three of us—you and me and Billy—knew the truth.”

“And then Billy organized a group of us to take the TP out of Mr. Schneider’s trees. Everyone thought he was some kind of hero.”

“Yeah, he got a charge out of that. He enjoyed pulling the wool over everyone’s eyes,” Cole said. “At least the toilet paper didn’t stay in Mr. Schneider’s trees all winter.”

“Yeah.” Billy had been a contradiction, even as a teenager. But she’d only seen his charming side. She’d thought he was wonderful, perfect.

Lauren wrapped her arms around herself as she paced, suddenly feeling cold despite the warm evening. Cole picked up his jacket and stood to place it over her shoulders.

“Is that better?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

She walked around the ring of stones that had contained countless campfires. In her mind’s eye she saw the dead ashes flame to life once more. “I got drunk for the first time here. Do you remember? Billy got hold of a bottle of whiskey from somewhere, and we drank the whole thing. I think I threw up in the trees over there by the couch. As I recall, you held back my hair.”

“I remember,” he said with a chuckle. “You nearly threw up on my shoes. We had to sober you up before we could take you home.”

“I was hung over the next day. I told my mom I had the flu, but she didn’t buy it. She made me scrub toilets and wash floors.”

“My dad used to make me hoe potatoes in the garden whenever I was hung over.” He sighed. “Damn, I miss him.”

Lauren pulled Cole’s jacket a little closer. Billy could be so sweet, so caring. She could almost hear his laugh, see his face. That was the Billy she’d loved, the boy who’d brought her here, just the two of them, and made love to her for the first time. The boy who’d held her and told her he loved her.

That was the Billy she wanted to remember. Not the man he became.

If they hadn't fought that last time, would he still be alive? She'd told him their marriage was over, that she never wanted to see him again. As far as she was concerned, he was dead to her. She was tormented by the thought that their argument had upset him as much as it had her. Had her ugly words caused him to lose his concentration on the road?

The sudden sob came from deep inside and surprised her with the strength of its emotion. Lauren covered her mouth with her hand, trying to contain the hurt and anguish and raw pain. But now that the tears had started, she couldn't stem the flow. A complicated mixture of grief and anger and guilt poured out of her in wave after wave of agony.

Cole wrapped her in his arms. He held her securely, whispering reassurances.

"It's all right, Lauren. Don't cry. It's going to be okay, sweetheart."

She clung to him, her face buried against his neck. How wonderful to be held, to be touched. It had been so long—

What was she doing? This was Cole, her friend. She pulled away from him. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have anything to apologize for."

She turned away and tried to wipe the tears from her face. After she got her tears under control, she made herself smile at him. "Do you remember the homecoming dance? The time I tripped in my new high heels and sprained my ankle?"

"Of course I do. You couldn't walk, so I carried you from the school gym to Billy's car, and he drove you home. I remember you were a lot heavier than you looked."

She swatted his shoulder, hiccupping laughter mixing with her tears. "Very funny. I was trying to make a point."

He wiped the tears from her cheek with the pad of his thumb, his dark eyes full of tenderness. "So what was your point?"

"You're a good friend. You've always been there every time I've needed you, and here you are again. Thank you."

He stared into her eyes, but said nothing. She couldn't look away. He continued to stroke her cheek with his thumb, the tiny caress acting like a

balm to her battered heart. She placed her hand on his cheek.

“Cole.”

They reached for each other in mutual need. He pulled her against his chest, his mouth descending on hers in a hungry, urgent kiss. She sighed against his mouth, and he brought her closer. *He wants me.* It had been so long since someone had wanted her. Only her.

They shed their clothes in a flurry of restless touches. In minutes, Lauren’s black funeral dress lay on the ground next to Cole’s white dress shirt. He kissed her again, his hands sliding up her ribcage to cup her breasts. She slid impatient hands over his broad shoulders, his muscled back, the curve of his buttocks. His skin was as smooth and hard as glass, but hot to the touch. She wanted more of his heat, more of his touches.

More of everything. She wanted to feel alive again.

His erection pushed against her stomach, and her body shivered with excitement. The evidence of his desire emboldened her.

“You want me,” she whispered.

“Yes.” His voice was rough with need. “Lauren. Beautiful Lauren.”

He held her close and kissed her, and for the first time in a very long time, she felt cherished. Important.

Loved.

Cole lowered her to the ground, the dried grass and leaves forming a bed beneath them. Then he was inside her, filling all her empty spaces. Joy flooded her heart as her climax built. Each thrust brought her closer to fulfillment, to happiness.

Her orgasm came suddenly, shattering her into tiny pieces. Her body shuddered.

“Cole!”

A moment later he reached his own climax. She held him tightly as tears poured down her face and sobs shook her body. She had no idea why she was crying. What they’d shared had been so beautiful, so amazing. There was no need for tears. But still, they kept coming.

Cole’s body tensed. He pulled out of her and stared into her face. In the

fading light, Lauren caught the look of pain in his eyes before he pushed away and began rifling through his clothes.

Her heart sank. *He's sorry he made love to me.*

For a moment she thought she'd be sick. Her stomach roiled and her heart banged against her ribs. Cole avoided her gaze, presenting his back to her as he yanked on his clothes. Lauren swallowed and reached for her own clothing, getting to her feet on unsteady legs.

Had she disgusted him by reaching for him today, of all days? She was afraid she'd lost her best and oldest friend.

Once he was fully dressed, Cole finally looked at her. "We need to go. You should get back to your family."

Lauren nodded, unable to speak. She followed him out of the trees, back to the fence where their vehicles were parked. Cole held the strands of barbed wire apart so she could slip through the fence. Once through, she stumbled toward her mother's car and reached for the door handle.

"Lauren, wait."

She dared a glance. His expression was full of anguish, and her heart clenched. The last thing she'd wanted was to cause him pain.

"What happened here," he began, his voice gruff with emotion, "it was...we made a mistake. We were both grieving, maybe a little out of our minds."

Lauren nodded, desperately holding back her tears. She'd made such a mess of things. Cole must hate her for throwing herself at him the way she had. She hated herself, too.

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

The stupid tears burned behind her eyes, but she held them back. She fumbled blindly for the door handle, needing to get away before she broke down in front of him. As she got behind the wheel and started the car, Cole drove away in a cloud of dust.

Lauren rested her head against the steering wheel and cried. She cried for Billy and the loss of the love she'd thought would last a lifetime. But mostly she cried tears of humiliation. Cole must think she was a terrible, terrible person.

And he'd be absolutely right. What kind of woman makes love to her husband's brother on the day of his funeral?

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Heat level: Sizzling

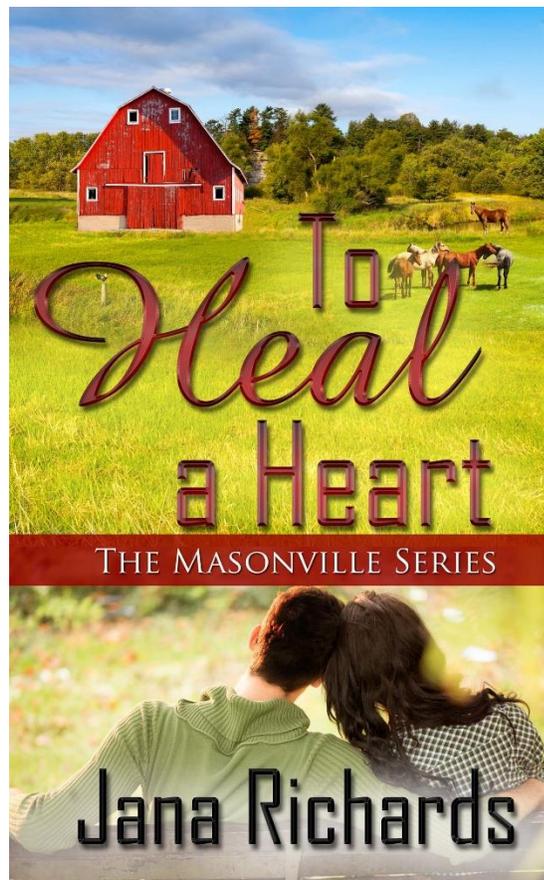
## TO HEAL A HEART

Book 2, Masonville series

Garrett Saunders' world changed two years ago on a road in Afghanistan. Back home, he feels like a stranger. As he struggles to find his place in the world, he meets a horse destined for the slaughterhouse and a woman bent on rescuing the strays of the world, including him.

Blair Greyson moves to Masonville to look after her ailing grandfather and give her rescue horses a home. Right away she butts heads with a surly former Marine. Despite a rocky start, they come to an agreement: Blair will board Garrett's rescue horse and he'll help with repairs around her farm.

Garrett finds purpose working with Blair—and falls in love with her. But she's hiding a secret. Can she forgive herself and accept Garrett's love, or will she let guilt and regret continue to rule her life?



## Chapter One

The acrid smell of smoke and burning fuel hung thick in the air. His lungs burned with the smell, and his head pounded. Blood trickled into his eyes. He couldn't move, couldn't escape the burning vehicle. Noise surrounded him. Men shouted and groaned and screamed in agony.

Hands grabbed him and pulled him free. He cried out at the excruciating pain shooting through his right leg. It was like nothing he'd ever experienced before. He'd once broken his leg, and it was painful, but this agony was a thousand times worse.

*This was bad. This was real bad.*

"Saunders!" Someone shook him hard, making his teeth rattle. "Garrett Saunders! Can you hear me?"

"Yes." His voice was rusty, his throat dry. He forced his eyes to open, to focus. "Where's Tommy and Chris? They okay?"

"Chris is fine. He pulled you out."

"And Tommy?"

No answer. He grabbed a handful of the medic's uniform, his forehead breaking out in sweat and his body shaking as he pushed himself up onto his elbow.

"Where is Tommy Carmichael? Tell me!"

The medic's eyes filled with pity and Garrett knew even before he heard the words. "He didn't make it."

He released his hold on the medic's uniform and fell back against the ground, oblivious now to the medics working on him and the pain in his leg. His best friend was dead.

Garrett Saunders woke with a start, gasping for air. He scrambled to get his bearings, to remember that he was in his childhood bedroom in his parents' house in rural North Dakota, on a farm a couple of miles outside the small town of Masonville. Afghanistan was far away, and only existed in his nightmares.

Nightmares were something he was well acquainted with. They'd dogged him since the Humvee he'd been a passenger in encountered a suicide bomber almost two years ago. Twenty-two months and two days, to be

exact. He'd been told that although the Humvee had been retrofitted with armor plating and other modifications to make it safer, the explosion had been so strong no amount of armor could have protected them. The explosion had taken his best friend's life, part of his right leg, and much of his peace of mind.

Garrett pushed himself to a sitting position and scrubbed a hand over his face. Though bone weary, there was no point trying to get back to sleep. Bitter experience had taught him that.

He grabbed his prosthesis from where it rested against the bedside table and set it on the bed beside him. He'd had to learn patience putting it on, something that hadn't come easily to him. If he didn't use an appropriate thickness of cotton sock liner beneath the silicone liner and the prosthesis itself, the prosthesis wouldn't be snug enough. His stump would slip and move inside the device, which was uncomfortable, and more importantly, unstable. He'd also discovered that if he didn't properly line up the silicone liner that went inside the prosthesis, it wouldn't fit the way it should and he'd have to start the whole procedure all over again. Sometimes it took him several tries to get it right.

He swung his legs to the side of the twin bed he'd slept in since he was nine and sat on the edge. Sighing, he blew out a breath.

*Please God. Give me patience.*

He opened a drawer in the bedside table and grabbed a handful of cotton. He rolled one cotton sock liner over his stump and then another. He turned the silicone liner inside out, placed it at the end of his stump, and carefully rolled it over the cotton socks. Finally, he pushed his stump into the prosthesis and stood, taking a few tentative test steps. His stump sat comfortably inside the prosthesis and everything lined up perfectly. Garrett marveled at getting it right the first time.

It wasn't so bad, really. Sure, he missed all the sports he used to play, but there were still plenty of things he could do, like walk. And breathe. Tommy couldn't do that anymore.

The night was hot, with no cool breeze coming in through the screened window. The clock radio on the table flashed three twenty-four a.m.

*I need a drink.*

Not bothering to put on a shirt, he left his room wearing only his boxer shorts. He navigated the stairs of the old two-story farmhouse with the help

of the handrail. His physical therapist at the VA hospital had recommended using a cane for stability and balance, but he'd be damned if he'd use an implement meant for an old man.

Or a cripple.

Moving as quietly as possible so as not to wake his parents, he made his way to the kitchen. Opening the fridge door, he stood in front of the appliance for a moment and enjoyed the coolness before reaching in to grab a can of beer. He pulled back the tab and tipped the can to his lips. The cool liquid quenched his parched throat, and he drained the can in a few gulps.

He set the empty can on the counter, then stared at the closed refrigerator. Damn, he wanted another. Hell, he wanted another six. Anything to take the edge off and help him sleep.

Help him forget.

But his mother kept a close eye on the number of beers he drank. She worried about him, fussed over him, drove him crazy. He loved his mother, loved both of his parents fiercely, but their concern was suffocating him.

Now that his military career was over, he needed to find his own place, and a new life. He was thirty-one years old. He shouldn't need to rely on his parents as much as he did.

*You can't hide out here on the farm forever.*

Garrett pushed the thought from his mind. He wasn't hiding out. He was working on it. Hadn't he put in an offer on his neighbor's farm? If he'd been able to purchase Everett Branson's place, he would have had a couple of thousand acres of land and his own house. Not that he had any idea what to do with that land. Or with the rest of his life. But at least he would have had the solitude he needed to figure it out.

His plans had been thwarted by Everett's sudden decision to take the farm off the market. Simply one more disappointment in a bitter couple of years.

*If I'd really wanted to farm, I would have stayed in North Dakota and taken over the farm from Dad instead of joining the marines at eighteen. Now the land is gone.*

Garrett pounded his fist against the counter in frustration, then immediately regretted his outburst. He held his breath and listened, hoping he hadn't woken his parents. When everything remained silent, he breathed a relieved sigh.

After Garrett joined the marines, his father Robert sold the land, believing his son wasn't ever coming back to North Dakota. And until his Humvee met that suicide bomber, Garrett had had no intention of coming home. But right now, it would have been nice to have the land to fall back on.

It didn't matter if farming wasn't his first occupational choice. His first choice was gone, and he had to do *something* with his life or go crazy. Without his leg or a college degree, his other options were limited. He'd find some land somewhere else. Someday. Even if he didn't know what the hell to do with it.

Quietly, he made his way back up the stairs to his room. He carefully closed his bedroom door before making his way to the locked trunk on the floor of his closet. Opening the combination lock from memory, he rummaged under old uniforms and ten years' worth of memories until he found the bottle of bourbon he'd hidden there.

He made himself comfortable on the bed and stared at the crescent moon through the open window while he drank. The chirping of crickets helped to sooth his restless brain until the Jack Daniels worked its magic and carried him away.

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The next morning a headache pounded, and the inside of Garrett's dry mouth tasted like mothballs. He ignored the evidence of his hangover and slammed shut the gate that trapped a frightened, struggling horse inside a chute. He'd promised his brother-in-law, Cole Walsh, that he'd help him this morning at the horse auction, and he never went back on a promise.

Well, almost never.

Cole, a veterinarian, had been hired to examine the horses up for auction to ensure they were healthy enough to either be sold to new owners, or enter the food chain. Garrett pushed away the distasteful thought of these beautiful, frightened animals being turned into dog food.

While the horse was pinned securely inside the chute, Cole ran his hand over its flanks. He'd explained earlier he was looking for any obvious tumors, hernias, or signs of disease. As Garrett watched, Cole checked the horse's legs and hooves and listened to its heartbeat and stomach sounds with his stethoscope. Removing the earpieces, he turned to Garrett. "This one's ready for auction."

Garrett nodded grimly, then opened the front end of the chute. The horse ran into the next enclosed pen, probably relieved to have escaped the tight confines of the chute. He was glad the horse didn't know what was coming next.

Handlers in the first paddock separated a gray gelding from the rest of the herd and forced it into Cole's chute. Once it was inside, Garrett closed the gate behind it, trapping it. The gelding snorted and tossed its head, making its displeasure known. Garrett stroked its neck and spoke in his calmest voice. "Hey, buddy. It'll all be over soon."

The gelding's ears perked at the sound of his voice, and it immediately quieted. One eye locked on him, and in that moment, Garrett's world narrowed to this barn and this horse. As the horse gazed deeply into his eyes, acceptance and empathy flowed between them. The horse understood his frustration and anger, and the gelding's fear shot through Garrett's body like a launched rocket.

He staggered back a step. *I must still be drunk.*

The gelding tossed his head, struggling once more to be free. Garrett stroked its neck, hoping to calm it long enough for Cole to finish his examination. He didn't blame the horse for resisting its confinement. He understood what it meant to be trapped, to have no place to go. He understood fear.

Panic rose in his throat, threatening to choke him. He couldn't permit this animal to die.

"I want to buy this horse."

Cole pulled the stethoscope from his ears. "What?"

Garrett cleared his throat. "I'm buying this horse."

"This is not a good example of great horseflesh."

"I don't care. This is the one I want."

Cole ran his hands along the gelding's bony flanks. "I think he might have been a nice working quarter horse at one time, but that's a few years in the past. He's emaciated and there could be an underlying cause aside from being denied food. He's got some welts, too. Makes me think he was abused. And he's at least fifteen years old, possibly older. If you really want a horse, we can find something better."

Garrett stared into the horse's eye once more, unable to look away. The gelding needed him, and he had the frightening suspicion he needed the gelding. They were both a little beat up, but still proud.

"I don't want anything better. I want this horse."

"Where are you going to keep him? Your folks don't have a fenced paddock or a barn. It's not like he's a dog you can keep in your room."

Garrett thought fast. "He can stay in Dad's garage."

Cole shook his head. "You've got to be realistic. You'll have to find someone willing to board him. And feed him."

"I'll figure something out." He didn't have a clue who'd be willing to board the horse for him, or how much that would cost. Garrett only saw he had to do it.

Cole gave him a hard look. "If you're sure—"

"I'm sure."

"Okay. We'll separate him from the rest and tell the auctioneer. Maybe we can borrow someone's horse trailer to get him home."

Garrett nodded in relief. Then inwardly groaned. He'd never cared for a horse before. He hadn't ridden since he was a kid, and even then, not much. What the hell was he doing?

He stroked the broad white stripe that ran from the gelding's forehead to his nose. He was doing what he was meant to do.

\*\*\*\*

Blair Greyson sped down the gravel road, glad the farm was only about two miles from her workplace in Masonville. She wouldn't make a great impression if she was late on her second day of work at the Masonville Veterinary Clinic.

Her grandfather had wanted to talk, so she'd spent a few extra moments listening to one of his stories and making sure he downed his heart medication. So now she was breaking the speed limit on the gravel road. And hoping a police officer with a radar gun wasn't lurking around the next bend.

Up ahead, something approached her on the road. She slowed her truck. Not a vehicle, but some kind of animal. As Blair grew closer, she saw it was a

horse with a dappled gray coat and a white stripe on its forehead. A rope dangled from its bridle.

Blair thought about continuing on her way. It was only her second day of work, and she didn't want to be late. But she couldn't abandon the animal to its fate. Obviously, it had escaped from wherever it belonged. She couldn't in good conscience leave the animal on the road. What if it got hit by a vehicle? They weren't far from the Interstate. Blair didn't want to think about what might happen if the horse wandered onto the main highway.

With a sigh, she stopped her truck and turned off the ignition before getting out.

The horse grazed on the new grass on the side of the road. Blair approached cautiously, letting the horse smell her. He lifted his head, ears twitching, but didn't run.

"Hey, big guy," she said softly. "What are you doing here?" Fortunately, he didn't seem alarmed by her presence. Perhaps, at one time, he'd been someone's pet and was used to people. But as she got closer, she saw exposed ribs and healed abrasions. If the horse had been cared for at one time, that was no longer the case. Anger grew in her chest. How could someone treat a beautiful, sentient creature so cruelly?

The horse allowed Blair to come close enough to grab the rope. Now what did she do? She had no horse trailer with her. Did she walk the horse the mile to her farm and put it in the corral with her own two rescue horses?

She groaned as she stroked the horse's neck. She was going to be very late for her second day of work.

Another truck approached, plumes of dust billowing behind it. With any luck, this was the owner looking for his horse.

Blair straightened her shoulders. If it was, he'd better be prepared to have a strip taken off him.

The truck stopped in front of hers. A man got out and walked across the road to where she and the gray horse stood. Blair lifted her chin. "Does this horse belong to you?"

"Yeah, I—"

"You should be ashamed of yourself." She swept out her free hand, indicating the hip bone protruding from the horse's flanks. "Look at this animal. He's been starved."

"I know, but—"

"There's no excuse for it." Nothing angered her more than the mistreatment of an animal. "And look at all his sores and welts. He needs veterinary attention."

Unsmiling, the man crossed his arms over his broad chest. "I plan to get him looked at right away."

"Good. Make sure you do." Should she believe him? He was big and mean-looking. A scruffy beard covered his jawline, and his hair was disheveled, as if he'd just rolled out of bed. Worse, she smelled alcohol on his breath, even in the distance between them. Yet somehow, there was something familiar about him.

He reached out one large hand, palm up. "I'll take him home."

Blair clutched the rope against her chest. "How do you plan to do that? You don't have a horse trailer."

"I'll walk him."

"What about your truck?"

He shrugged. "It's not going anywhere."

All kinds of questions trembled on her tongue. Was he equipped to look after this horse? Did he have other horses in this kind of shape? Who was he and why did she feel she'd met him before?

She looked at his hand. The fingers were blunt, and there was a scar running across the palm, bisecting the lifeline. Reluctantly, she handed him the rope.

"I swear, if I hear of this animal being maltreated or neglected, I'll make you sorry."

His eyes narrowed, chocolate brown turning stormy black in a heartbeat. Blair backed up a step. It suddenly occurred to her that she was alone on a deserted road with this man. Should she be afraid?

*Probably.*

He dipped his head in a mocking nod, his lips turning up in a sneer. Blair noted the dimple in what could be a handsome face if he wasn't so scruffy. And angry.

"Duly noted."

With that he led the horse down the road in the direction he'd come. Blair watched, heart racing. He had a limp, she noticed. She wondered what had happened to him.

She pressed her lips together. It was none of her business. Her only concern was for the horse. With any luck, she'd never see this man again.

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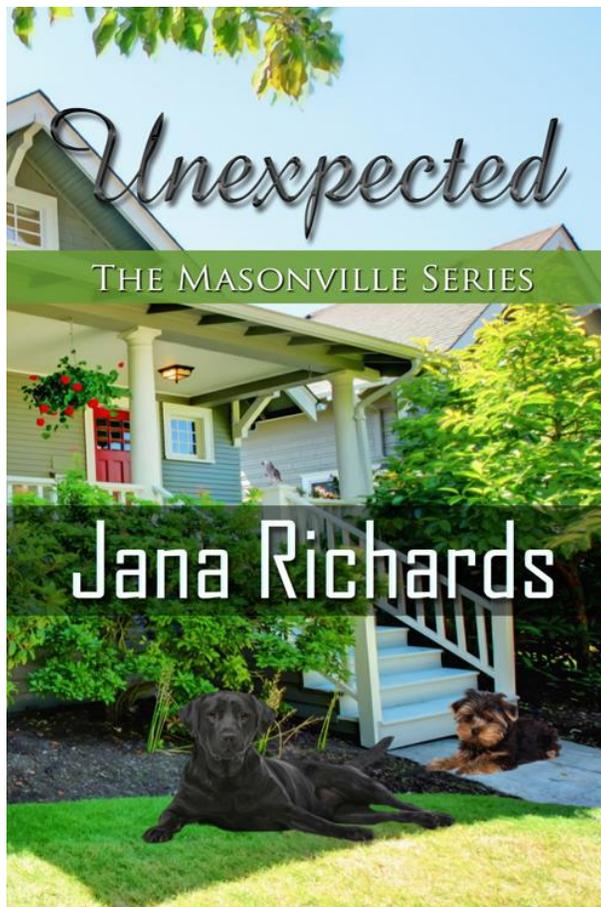
## Unexpected

Book 3, Masonville series

Single dad Ben Greyson wants only to retain custody of his two stepdaughters. A dysfunctional childhood has made family the most important thing in his life. When his late wife's parents sue for custody, a desperate Ben is left with two choices – run away with his girls or marry his next-door neighbor.

Jamie Garven wants to be a mother. She's intrigued by her handsome new neighbor and falls in love with his little girls. Then Ben is faced with losing his children, and Jamie agrees to marry him for a chance at motherhood. They're determined to show the world, and the girls' grandparents, two loving parents.

Their marriage of convenience turns into unexpected love. But Ben interprets Jamie's efforts to save their family as betrayal—they could lose everything, including each other.



## Chapter One

Ben Greyson froze as he stepped out onto his back porch. Where were his children? A minute ago, both girls were playing in the yard. Horrific scenarios sizzled through his imagination—they ran away, they were lured out of the yard by a predator.

Their grandparents made good on their threat to take them away.

*Calm down. Don't panic.* The Doyles wouldn't swoop in and steal them away without warning. Despite the problems between him and his former in-laws, they'd go the legal route.

And Masonville, North Dakota was a small town. Nothing bad happened in small towns.

Except when it did.

Ben hurried down the porch stairs. "Bella! Sophie! Where are you?"

He checked around the side of the house in case they were teasing him with a game of hide-and-seek. When they weren't there, he hurried to the storage shed at the back of the lot and unlatched it. In the fading October light, he could just make out the new rake he'd bought a week ago when they'd moved into the house. But there were no small blonde girls in puffy jackets, the youngest wearing her favorite glow-in-the-dark sparkly pink sneakers.

"Bella! Sophie!"

He couldn't lose anyone else he loved.

He struggled to focus, to push past the panic. They couldn't have gone far. They'd been playing outside alone for less than ten minutes while he made supper. They had to be nearby.

But they hadn't lived here long, and it was beginning to get dark. Maybe they were lost and afraid.

With his heart racing, Ben ran toward the gate that opened to the front yard. It swung free, the wind gently blowing it back and forth on its hinges. He'd latched it earlier, he was sure. He'd lived in big cities all his life and was meticulous about locking doors and securing gates.

On the front sidewalk, Ben looked up and down both ways. No sign of the girls. Panic bubbled up his throat, his stomach clenching in fear and indecision. Where should he go? What should he do?

He heard a sharp whistle and an anxious female voice. "Sammy! Rex! Get back here!"

A woman emerged from the back yard of the house next door and ran to the sidewalk, ponytail bobbing.

"Have you seen a couple of dogs? A black lab and a small brown terrier?"

Ben shook his head. "No, no dogs. I'm looking for my girls. They were playing in our back yard, and now they're gone."

She pointed at his house. "Are you the ones who just moved in next door?"

"Yeah." He checked the sidewalk both ways once again, not in the mood for a neighborly chat. "I've got to find my kids."

"Maybe they're with my dogs. The gate to my back yard was wide open, and—"

"You left your gate open? My kids must have run after your dogs. What kind of irresponsible idiot are you?" Ben gave his fear full reign, pointing an accusing finger at her. "Because of you and your damn dogs, I can't find my girls. If something happens to them—"

She pushed away his hand. "Hey. Hold on a moment, buddy. I closed that gate before I let the dogs out into the yard. What if your girls opened my *closed* gate to get into my yard, and the dogs ran out? Maybe you should consider that."

Ben focused his attention on the woman. She was tall and slim, with brownish hair pulled back into a ponytail. He got a sense of light-colored eyes assessing his character and finding him lacking. He knew he was being a jerk, but he didn't care.

"Supposing your theory is correct, where would your dogs go if they got loose?"

"I doubt they'd go far. We usually walk to the school yard and then over to the park. We could check there."

Ben hesitated. Should he trust this woman, this stranger? Or should he get in his car and patrol the streets?

Or call the police? *Dear God, don't let it come to that.*

She offered a tentative smile. "We'll find them. I promise."

Something in her smile calmed him and helped him focus. Her dogs were his only clue. What choice did he have but to follow her?

"Fine. Lead the way."

\*\*\*\*

Jamie Garven puffed out a breath, doing a skip-run-step to keep up with her new neighbor. She stole a glance at him. Tall, dark blond hair, ridiculously good-looking. Something about him looked familiar, but she couldn't put her finger on it. In his elegant three-piece suit, he looked like he should be on Wall Street instead of Main Street in Masonville. Most of the guys she knew dressed far more casually.

And most of the guys she knew weren't nearly as rude.

She struggled to keep up, regretting her decision to give up her gym membership. Despite the exertion, she wouldn't ask her hot new neighbor to slow down. He was obviously anxious to find his kids. If she had children, she'd feel exactly the same way.

*But I don't have any children and likely never will.*

The thought provoked the usual stab of pain, but right now, she needed to focus on finding her dogs and Hot Neighbor's children. No time for wallowing in self-pity. She'd wallowed enough the last few years.

They reached the school, and he suddenly stopped, indecision and frustration etched on his handsome face. "Where do we go now?"

Jamie caught her breath before speaking. "The play structures are on the other side of the school. If they're not there, we'll go to the park. It's only a couple of blocks from here."

He hurried off, and Jamie ran to keep up with him. She was breathing so hard she almost missed the sound of dogs barking. Once they rounded the corner of the school, Jamie saw two little girls throwing sticks her dogs Sammy and Rex dutifully fetched. They dropped them at the girls' feet, tongues lolling and bodies poised for another throw. Jamie whistled for the dogs and when they came to her, she attached their leashes to their collars and held them firmly.

"Isabella! Sophia! What are you doing here?" Hot Neighbor ran to the little girls and dropped to his knees to hug them, oblivious to the dirt messing up

his fancy suit. Jamie blew out a sigh of relief. Thank goodness everyone was safe.

"We're playing with the puppies, Daddy!" The smaller of the two girls flashed her father an adorable smile. "Aren't they cute?"

"Yeah, very cute. But did you ask permission to leave our yard?"

Her smile faded. "No."

He held her small face between his hands. "You know you're not supposed to wander off. I couldn't find you, and I was worried."

The older girl wrapped her arm around his shoulders. "We're sorry, Daddy. We forgot."

"Did you go into our neighbor's yard?"

The little one laid her head on her father's shoulder. The older one looked up at her father, her voice pleading. "We wanted to play with the dogs in their yard, but when we opened the gate, they ran away. So we followed them because we didn't want them to get lost."

When he glanced at her, Jamie arched a brow and sent Hot Neighbor an *I told you so* stare. His return expression was unapologetic. He turned his attention back to his children, his voice gentle but firm.

"What if the dogs, or you, ran out into the street and were hit by a car? You have to promise me you'll never leave our yard again without asking my permission first. And you're never to walk into a neighbor's yard on your own."

Both girls began to cry. Jamie's heart broke at their tears.

"You can visit Rex and Sammy any time, as long as you ask me first. And as long as the gate stays closed." The words were out of her mouth before she had a chance to think them through.

All three turned to stare at her, Hot Neighbor with a raised, imperious eyebrow. "And as long as *I* say it's okay."

Lifting her chin, she glared back at him. "Of course."

*Controlling ass.* She'd met his kind before. Hell, she'd been married to his kind.

Jamie sighed, knowing she should cut him some slack. He'd been worried about his kids, after all.

She pulled on her dogs' leashes, preparing to head home. In the future, she'd steer clear of her new neighbor, remaining polite but distant. She didn't need the aggravation.

"What's your name?"

Jamie glanced up at the sound of the child's voice. Her gaze connected with the older girl's. She considered walking away and pretending she hadn't heard the question, but it seemed like a rotten way to treat a child. She focused on the girl, not letting her gaze drift over to her father.

"I'm Jamie. What's your name?"

"I'm Bella, and this is my little sister Sophie."

"Nice to meet you." Jamie scratched her Lab's ears. "This is Sammy, and the smaller guy here is Rex. They live with me, and so do my angel fish and my bird Hector."

The smaller girl lifted her head from her father's shoulder. "You have a bird?"

"I do. Hector is an African Grey Parrot. He's a cool guy, and he even talks."

"Birds can't talk."

"Some can. Hector definitely does."

Sophie's eyes widened. "What does he say?"

"My name, the dogs' names. All kinds of things."

"Can I see him?"

Jamie met Hot Neighbor's unsmiling gaze. "Sometime, if your dad says it's okay, you can meet Hector."

Sophie turned to her father. "Can we go now, Daddy? I want to hear Hector talk."

"No, we can't. Right now, we're heading home, and you two are going to be grounded for leaving the yard without permission."

She hung her head. "Sorry, Daddy."

He laid a gentle hand on her head. "I know you are, Sophie. Just don't do it again. My heart couldn't take it."

He wrapped his arms around both girls. Jamie watched, uncomfortable to be intruding on such a private moment. Something about the tender way this big man held these two tiny girls hit her square in the solar plexus.

Not every man behaved like her ex.

She cleared her throat. "I should get Rex and Sammy home. It was nice meeting you, Bella and Sophie. I'll see you around."

Her neighbor rose quickly and extended his hand. "Thank you for helping me find the girls. I'm Ben Greyson, by the way."

"Jamie Garven." She accepted his handshake. Again she had the sensation she'd seen him before. In the lights illuminating the playground, she could see his eyes were a mixture of green and brown and were framed by long, thick lashes. This close to him, she noticed the dimple in his cheek for the first time and caught the scent of a delectable men's cologne. For a moment, Jamie's heart wobbled like a washing machine with an uneven load.

Or a hormonal teenager with her first crush.

The embarrassing thought made Jamie tug on her hand. He released it immediately, and she forced herself to smile politely.

"It was nice meeting all of you. Goodnight."

Once she and the dogs rounded the school and were out of sight, Jamie urged them into a run. They raced all the way home. As if the hounds of Hell were on their tails.

Or perhaps her own unsettling thoughts were chasing her. Jamie stifled a groan. She was being ridiculous. She'd been momentarily dazzled by a pretty face. Any red-blooded woman with a pulse would have reacted the same way.

Anyway, there was likely a Mrs. Ben Greyson somewhere in the picture. Men who looked like him generally weren't single.

And men who looked like her hot new neighbor didn't give plain women like her a second glance.

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## **Strong Enough**

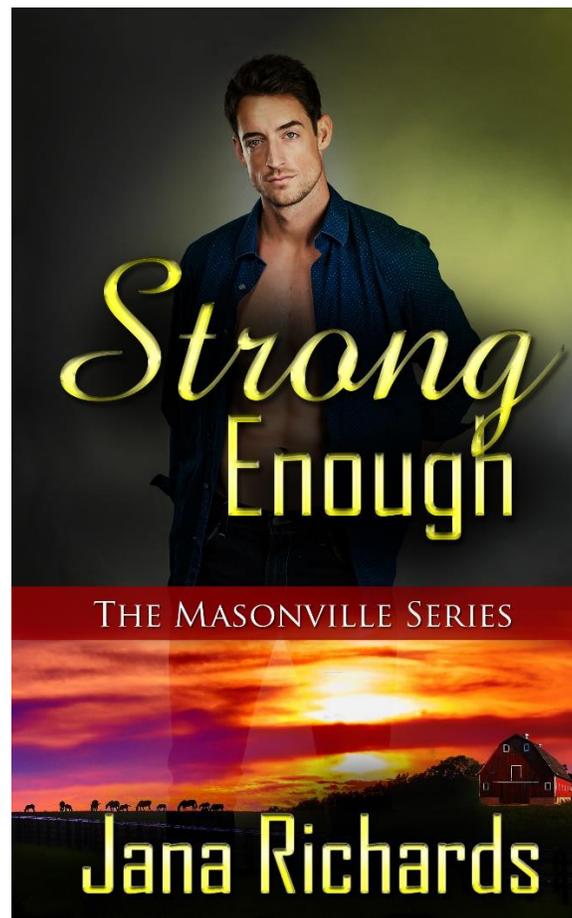
Book 4, Masonville series

*Love can make you stronger, if you let it.*

Charlotte Saunders has a full life—a rewarding career as a nurse, meaningful volunteer work at a dog shelter, and family, friends and pets she adores. But no matter how hard she tries, she can't forget the horrible event that's haunted her for ten years.

A survivor of childhood sexual abuse, Damon Greyson now helps others who have suffered trauma. His experience and intuition alert him to trouble in Charlotte's past, and he wants to help her, if only she'd let him.

As they work together to help veterans suffering from PTSD and neglected dogs needing loving homes, their feelings for each other deepen. But when the trauma from Charlotte's past roars back to life, both are forced to confront their painful histories—or die trying.



## Chapter One

The incessant ringing of his phone woke Damon Greyson from a deep sleep. He groped blindly for the annoying device, trying to silence it before it woke everyone in the house. Finally, he got his hands on it.

"Hello?"

"Damon...Damon, son, you need to be careful... please."

"Dad?" He hadn't spoken to his father in months.

"Son, be careful." Peter Greyson's voice was a whisper. "She's planning something."

"She? You mean Mother?" Damon sat up, now completely awake.

"I've heard Victoria talking to someone, saying your name. I don't know who."

Damon rubbed his forehead. Was Peter drunk? He didn't sound drunk, though God knew he often was.

"Why are you telling me this? Why call in the middle of the night?"

"Because she watches me. I have to be careful."

He made it sound like Victoria was holding him prisoner. What the hell was going on? Damon hardened his heart. Why should he care? Peter did nothing while unspeakable things were done to Damon in childhood. He'd never tried to protect him then, so why should Damon care what happened to the man now? Peter had been too drunk most of the time to be a real father to him and his siblings. He saved his rare sober periods for his work as a state senator in the Minnesota legislature.

Damon pushed a tired hand through his hair. As a counselor, he knew alcoholism was a disease, not a character flaw. But when the chaos of the disease happened close to home, finding empathy was difficult.

"I'll be careful. Watch out for yourself, too. Okay?"

"I will. I'll call you again if I learn something." The line went dead. Damon checked the time on his phone. Three-thirty-five a.m. He set his phone on the night table once more and hung his head. Every time he believed his childhood nightmare was over, something dragged him back in.

He wouldn't let it happen this time. He couldn't.

Damon swung his legs over the side of the bed. Despite the time, he was far too keyed up to go back to sleep. He dressed and straightened his bedcovers, then quietly descended the stairs of his sister's farmhouse. Blair had inherited the farm and everything in it from their grandfather, and in typical, generous Blair fashion, she had opened her home to him while he waited for renovations to be completed on his own home.

He walked across the dark farmyard to the barn where he'd set up a heavy bag in one of the empty stalls. After wrapping his hands and shoving them into his boxing gloves, he took out his frustrations on the bag, pounding it over and over until he was exhausted. And then he hit it some more.

He'd be damned if he let his mother take away the peace he'd worked so hard for.

\*\*\*\*

The next afternoon, Damon made his way across the Masonville, North Dakota elementary school grounds, looking for his brother Ben among the many other adults assembled there. His five-year-old niece Sophie was playing her first ever tee-ball game today, and Damon wanted to be there to witness the momentous occasion.

Apparently, Sophie's game wasn't the only one scheduled today. Kids a few years older than Sophie were warming up for their own games. They fielded grounders and tossed balls to each other on two of the softball diamonds on the school grounds. He headed toward the third diamond, the one nearest the school, and saw adults chatting amiably as they set up folding chairs behind the backstop in preparation to watch the game.

And then it started, as it often did when he found himself in a public place. The hypervigilance, the suspicion. He scanned the crowd, trying to decipher the reason every adult male was in attendance. *That man standing off to the side by himself. Is he a parent? Had he seen him before? Are those kids playing by themselves on the playground equipment being supervised by their parents? Is the coach standing too close to that group of children as he talks to them? Did that touch on the shoulder look normal?*

*Stop! Everything's fine.* He had to constantly remind himself that not every adult meant harm to a defenseless child. But the eight-year-old boy inside him who'd been on the receiving end of sexual abuse didn't always believe it.

Finally, he spotted Ben standing behind his wife's folding chair. Damon joined them, leaning over to kiss his sister-in-law's cheek.

"How are you, Jamie?"

She rubbed the rounded bump of her pregnant belly. "I'm great. How about you? How are the renovations on your building coming along?"

Damon straightened and shrugged. "It's slow going. At this rate, it'll be months before we can open our veterans' retreat."

When Damon inherited a large, three-story building in downtown Masonville from his grandfather, Everett Branson, his first thought had been to turn it into something useful. As an army veteran and now a professional counselor, he understood the high toll of operational injuries, more commonly known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. His plan was to turn the second and third floors of his building into living quarters for veterans and himself, with space for group counseling sessions and recreational activities. He'd teamed up with his sister Blair on the farm. There, veterans would help care for Blair's rescue horses and, in doing so, receive some healing themselves.

But none of that work could happen if the damn renovations didn't get done. Damon bit back his frustration.

"What is it this time?" Ben asked.

"A plugged sewer line. We may have to dig up the street in front of the building to replace the line. If we do, it'll cost thousands of dollars."

"If you need help with money, let me know," Ben said.

It was typical of his big brother to look after everyone in his life. Like him and Blair, Ben had received an inheritance from Granddad Everett. His consisted of a house in Masonville, a partnership in a law firm, and cash to secure the futures of his stepdaughters. Damon nodded to make him happy, but he'd never take money from him. Ben was starting a new life with Jamie, and they were about to have a baby. Soon he'd have three kids to care for. For the first time, Ben was truly happy, and Damon didn't want to cause him even one second of worry.

"Where's Bella?" he asked.

"She's over at the playground with a friend." When Damon turned in the direction of the playground to search for her, Ben put a hand on his shoulder. "We can see her from here. She's fine, Damon."

He nodded again, though he wasn't exactly reassured. Ben was a protective father, but he had no idea what could happen to an unattended child, the horrible things—

*Stop.* Damon made himself take a breath.

He considered telling Ben about the phone call he'd received from their father, Peter. The strange call had haunted him, nibbling on the edges of his peace of mind, ever since he'd received it. He had no idea what it meant that Victoria was talking about him. For all he knew, Peter could be making the whole thing up. He decided to keep the conversation to himself. Ben didn't need the aggravation.

Sophie's tee-ball game began, and conversation between the adults ended. One kid sat cross-legged in right field and made a bouquet with the dandelions surrounding him. The girl on second base stood on the bag and picked her nose. Damon grinned and shook his head. *Should be an interesting game.*

Sophie came to bat. A coach set the ball on top of the tee and stepped away in the nick of time as Sophie swung her bat with all the might she could muster. To everyone's surprise, the bat connected with the ball. The ball rolled past the infield as several players on the opposing side swarmed toward it. Sophie stood immobile, the bat still in her hands.

"Go, Sophie!" Jamie yelled.

"Run!" Ben clapped. "Run!"

Sophie took off toward first base, taking the bat with her. Through a series of overthrows and players not being where they were supposed to be, she rounded the bases. Reaching home, she jumped triumphantly on the home plate, tossing her bat to the ground at last.

"Yay, Sophie!" Jamie jumped to her feet, her arms stretched over her head. "Did you see that?"

Ben clapped madly. "She was amazing!"

Damon laughed at the proud parents. "She's a regular Babe Ruth."

The next couple of innings weren't nearly as exciting, and Damon's attention wandered. He saw two adults approach the playground where eight-year-old Bella was playing with a friend. He touched Ben's arm.

"I'm going to say hi to Bella."

Ben looked toward the playground. "Okay. You coming back?"

"I'll be back later to congratulate Sophie on her home run."

Damon headed toward the playground, his eyes on the two adults, a man and a woman. As he got closer, he saw that they had a small child with them, maybe two or three years old, and they were trying to convince him to go down the slide. The boy wanted nothing to do with the slide and clung to his mother's leg. Damon relaxed. Just a couple of parents minding their own business. No threat here.

"Uncle Damon!" Bella raced over to him. "Can you push us on the swings?"

"Sure."

The girls hopped on the swings, and Damon pushed them high enough to give them a thrill, but not so high that they were out of control. Their excited giggles made him smile.

"Hey, look at you being the cool uncle."

Damon turned at the sound of the familiar female voice. Charlotte Saunders stood a few feet away from the playground equipment, holding the leashes of her two dogs. In one glance he took in her smile, the long blonde hair pulled into a ponytail, and the gorgeous legs that went on forever. He couldn't help but stare.

"You might want to be careful, Damon." Charlotte's gaze was on something behind him.

He turned and ducked in time to avoid being brained by an incoming swing. *That's what I get for staring.* After giving each child one more push, he stepped away from the swings.

"I'll be over here talking to Charlotte, Bella. I'll be back to give you a couple more pushes before I go back to Sophie's game."

"Okay, Uncle Damon."

Damon joined Charlotte on the grass surrounding the play equipment. Her beagle Daisy sat obediently at her feet, while the younger River, a Shepherd/Lab cross of some kind, strained at the leash to continue their walk.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"It's going good. We had our last fittings for our bridesmaid dresses today."

Charlotte's brother Garrett was marrying Damon's sister Blair, and Damon and Charlotte were paired in the bridal party. "I look forward to seeing them. Only ten days to the big day. Have you been practicing your dance steps? No pressure, but I don't want you to embarrass me."

"I haven't been practicing, but I did buy steel-toed high heels to protect my feet."

Damon put his hand over his heart. "Ouch. You wound me, Charlotte. I've been told I'm very light on my feet."

She grinned. "As long as you're light on *my* feet."

He grinned back. "Don't worry. We'll shuffle around the floor for the obligatory bridal dance, and then your feet are safe from me."

"Sounds like a plan." She lowered her gaze as she stroked Daisy. "Garrett and Blair are good together. I haven't seen Garrett this happy in a very long time."

Damon heard the wistfulness in her voice. "I feel the same about Blair. I think she's truly happy for the first time in her life. She finally has the home she's always wanted."

Charlotte lifted her head and smiled, but there was a forced quality to it. "I'm glad they found each other."

He was usually pretty good at reading people, but Charlotte Saunders held her cards close to her heart. He wondered, not for the first time since he'd moved to Masonville and gotten to know her again, what was going on inside that beautiful head of hers. She was no longer the open girl he used to know. What secrets was she hiding?

He leaned over to scratch Daisy's head. River came close for his share of attention, and Damon obliged with some scratches behind his ears.

"You're not fooling me, Damon Greyson. You're an old softy when it comes to dogs. So it totally baffles me why you won't include them in your veterans' retreat." Charlotte gave her dogs a command, and they obediently sat.

Damon grinned at the irritation in her voice. They'd sparred over this question almost from the moment Damon announced his plans for the veterans' retreat using Blair's rescue horses for equine therapy. He'd decided long ago there would be a place for dogs in his program, but he hadn't yet told Charlotte. It was too much fun getting a rise out of her.

Or maybe, if he was honest with himself, he wanted to keep their relationship light. He was afraid to feel too much for her, like he had as a teenager, back when he and his siblings spent summers at their grandparents' farm and Charlotte Saunders lived just down the road.

"I've told you before, Charlotte. We're emphasizing equine therapy."

Her hazel eyes flashed. "And I've told you not everyone is comfortable with horses. They're big and scary. Some people might like the comfort of a dog, an animal they can play with and love and even take to bed with them. I sleep with my dogs every night."

At the mention of her bed, Damon allowed his imagination a moment to go on a wild, erotic ride. Lately he'd found himself having more and more erotic thoughts, with Charlotte Saunders in the starring role. But he'd never act on those thoughts, knowing she didn't have the same feelings for him. Besides, Charlotte was his future brother-in-law's sister, and he didn't want any awkwardness between him and Charlotte to affect his relationship with Garrett.

Also, he sensed a vulnerability in Charlotte he didn't yet understand and wouldn't exploit. Something had changed since they were teenagers. So he contented himself with light banter and teasing.

Charlotte's face flushed. "You know what I mean. Dogs can give support and comfort anywhere, not just in the barn."

"I'll admit dogs have some advantages."

"And?" she prompted.

"And I'll think about it."

Charlotte made a sound of frustration. "Dammit, Damon, you make me crazy." To Damon's surprise her mouth twisted as if she were struggling to hold back tears. "If you knew how many unwanted dogs are languishing at the shelter in Bismarck right now, if you knew how many were euthanized..."

She didn't finish. She looked away and pulled on the dogs' leashes. "I should go."

Damon grasped her elbow. "Charlotte, wait. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. I think there'll be a place for dogs at the retreat. But I don't know yet what their role will be or how many we can use. Maybe we can figure it out together."

She lifted her head and her eyes met Damon's. He had the feeling she held back her tears by sheer will. He certainly had no wish to make her cry and felt like an ass for teasing her. He'd misjudged how much this meant to her.

"Do you mean it?" There was more than a touch of suspicion in her voice.

"I mean it."

She looked away. "I'm sorry. I hate women who use tears to get what they want. It's just that yesterday the shelter had to put down three dogs. There was this one old dog, Shep..." She shook her head, unable to finish.

He squeezed her elbow before letting her go. "I'm sorry."

She nodded, and again Damon sensed her vulnerability. Charlotte tried to give off an aura of strength. She was the caregiving nurse, the person others looked to for help. But who helped Charlotte?

After a few breaths, she straightened her shoulders and faced him, her composure once more back in place. "How long do you think it will be?"

"You mean until the retreat is up and running?" When she nodded, he blew out a breath. "I don't know. My building's in worse shape than I first thought."

"If there's anything I can do to speed up the process, let me know."

"You know anything about unplugging sewer lines?"

She made a face. "You're on your own, Greyson."

*Don't I know it.* "Hey, you asked. From now on, I'll only request your help when it comes to dogs."

She chuckled. "Good plan."

This time Charlotte's smile was genuine, and for a moment Damon couldn't breathe. He found himself wondering what it would be like to have the full force of her smile directed at him and to know there was real affection for him behind the smile. The longing he experienced at that thought shocked him.

Better not to allow such notions to take root. Despite all the work he'd done over the years to overcome the harm done to him in the past, he still had questions. Would it ever be possible for him to have a normal, loving, long-term sexual relationship with a woman? The longest relationship he'd had lasted six months.

Maybe he'd always be damaged goods.

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