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The Perfect Match

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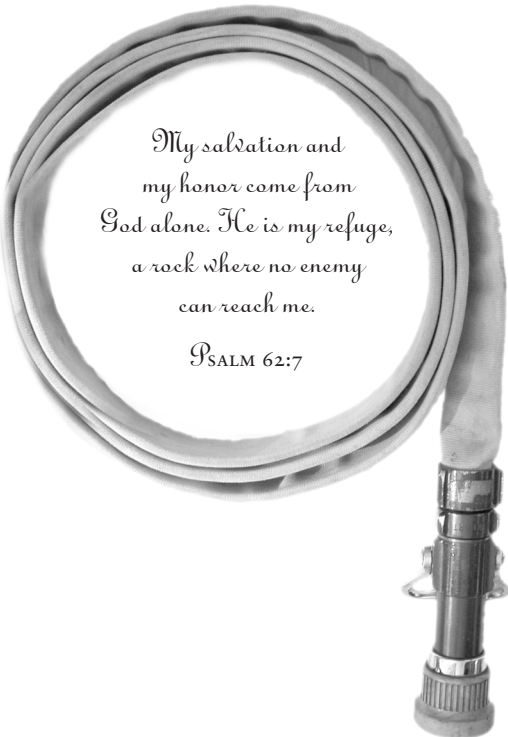
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*My salvation and
my honor come from
God alone. He is my refuge,
a rock where no enemy
can reach me.*

PSALM 62:7



Leo Simmons had made good on his mumbled threats.

Pastor Dan Matthews stared at the pager address, and the taste of condemnation swept through him like poison—down his throat, through his blood, into his bones—and pooled in his soul.

Diving into his turnout gear, Dan tossed his fire helmet onto the front seat and gunned his VW Bug toward Leo Simmons's old log house.

Leo might have set the fire, but just as surely as if Dan had struck the match, he had ignited the explosion that brought Leo to this desperate moment.

Dan should have recognized the gathering heat, the greed, the grief, and not a little small-town shame that had fueled this inferno.

Leo's pastor had failed him.

Dan wrestled his guilt as well as the steering wheel while he floored it around Tenth Street East and screeched to a halt behind firefighter Joe Michaels's green pickup. Deathly images ravaged the night as Dan

got out, buckling his helmet. He hesitated, transfixed at the flames raging through the bottom floor of the Simmonses' two-story log home. They licked out of the broken windows like the tongues of death; black smoke curled around the porch beams and spewed toxic fumes into the fall night. Despite its status as a historical site, the house sat bordered by newer homes—ramblers and bungalows—on the piece of cleared forest that had once been the old Miller homestead.

A clump of onlookers—some in bathrobes, all wearing expressions of horror—pressed against the envelope of danger, aching for a closer look.

Dan's breath came in short gulps. *Please, Lord, let the family be out!*

An explosion shook the ground as another window blew out. Flames and sparks tore the fabric of the night sky. The howl of the fire as it consumed wood and oxygen set Dan's fine neck hairs on end, reviving the analogy of fire being a living entity, needing oxygen and food to survive. It rattled Dan free and sent him running toward the Deep Haven pumper engine. "Mitch!"

"Get back!" Mitch Davis yelled to the gathering gawkers. Attired in his turnout coat, bunker pants, and helmet, the captain wielded his axe like a billy club. "I said get back!"

His gaze settled on Dan before he turned back to the house and shouted commands at the other volunteers. Although Davis hadn't yet been named fire chief to replace the sudden vacancy left by Kermit Halstrom when he suffered a heart attack, the forest ranger had already moved into the position with some arrogance.

Dan raced to old engine two. Two hose lines snaked



out from the truck, and Craig Boberg bent over the hydrant at the end of the block, struggling with the coupling.

The heat blasted from the house like a furnace. As Dan ran to help Joe Michaels, who battled to unhook the fifty-five-foot house ladder from the truck, his eyes began to water. “Is everyone out?”

Despite the fact that Leo had set a fire two years ago that had nearly succeeded in killing Joe’s wife, Mona, Joe wore a gut-wrenching, grim look at the tragedy before him. “The first story was engulfed by the time we got here. We can’t get in.”

Dan’s thoughts closed around Leo’s family—Cindy, the baby, the boys—and he fought the grip of terror. Through the darkness, the haze of smoke and tears, he saw that the fire hadn’t yet consumed the second floor, although the toxic fumes rising through the house may have already asphyxiated Leo’s sleeping family.

“The second story!” He seized the end of the ladder. Joe read his mind. He hustled to the far end of the house and propped the ladder against the porch roof. Dan jumped on it nearly before Joe had a chance to secure it.

Dan heard screams as the crowd reacted to his courage.

Or stupidity. He’d left his SCBA gear beside the engine, totally abandoning every scrap of training. Firefighting 101: Don’t go into a burning house without equipment, namely, a mask, breathing apparatus, and an axe. Safety first. But Dan’s well-thought-out actions hadn’t netted any outstanding successes over the past fifteen years, and now wasn’t the time to ponder the choices.

It would be so much easier if he didn’t have to go

through life with hindsight flogging his every step. A preacher who spent less time conjuring up past scenarios might have spotted the psychotic signs in Leo's demeanor, taken seriously Leo's morbid self-depreciation and moans of "Cindy would be better off if . . ." Instead of following Leo down to the local pub to listen to his problems, gently hoping to befriend the man, a true man of the cloth would have hauled Leo out, forced coffee down his gullet, and shaken him clear of his downward spiral.

Then again, with the way Dan's words rolled off his congregation of late, he could have beat the man over the head with a hefty King James Bible and still not made an impact. The thought sent a shudder through him when he dived into the burning house to rescue Leo's family.

Jumping onto the roof, he felt profoundly grateful for the steel-toed, insulated boots that let him walk over what seemed like live coals. He had an uneasy sense that little time remained until the place exploded into a torch that would light up half the North Shore. He hoped someone had already dispatched the St. Francis Township fire crew.

But by the time they arrived, the Simmons place would be a carbonized smudge on the landscape. Dan prayed the scars wouldn't include the two boys and their little sister. His eyes burning, he staggered toward the window. Black pressed against the window . . . smoke or simply the fragments of night? He couldn't remember who slept in this room, but he hoped he'd find someone alive.

A second before he cracked his elbow into the glass pane, his firefighting science kicked in. If toxic fumes

had gathered in the ceiling, raising the temperature in the room to a combustion point, the sudden inflow of oxygen would ignite a back draft that would blow him clear off the roof.

And kill whoever was inside.

He yanked his arm back. “Mitch!”

Mitch had already climbed halfway up the ladder.

“Your axe!”

Mitch barreled past him and sent the axe in hard—over his head, near the soffits of the house, next to the ceiling. Dan felt the house tremble with the blow. Three more quick blows and the room purged smoke, a stream of black, toxic fumes.

“Now!” Dan yelled.

Mitch sent the end of his axe handle into the top half of the window and cleared it in less than five seconds.

Dan gulped clean air and dived in. The smoke invaded his nose, burned his eyes, suffocating with its grip. He hadn’t even worn a handkerchief, and air evaporated in his lungs. Dropping to his knees, he scabbled around the room, feeling a rocking chair, a dresser, then—oh no, a crib? Crawling up it like a prisoner begging for escape, he climbed over the edge and made his way around the bed.

A soft form. He dug his fingers into the clothing and hauled the baby over the edge, not gently, into his arms. Baby Angelica. He wanted to howl.

“C’mon!” Mitch’s voice turned him around as he fell back to his knees, clutched the baby to his chest, and scrambled out. His lungs burned, now begging for air. He passed her over into Mitch’s arms as black swam through his brain.

And then hands grabbed his jacket, dragged him over the window frame into the night. Joe called out to him, yanking him to semiconsciousness as someone dangled him over the roof. His hands slapped at air, and he managed to find three ladder rungs before landing on the ground, curling over and coughing out the poison in his body.

“She needs oxygen!” A woman’s voice broke through the haze—he couldn’t place it. It didn’t sound like Anne, their volunteer EMT.

Joe crouched next to him. “Dan, you okay?”

“The . . . boys . . .” He coughed hard, feeling as if his lungs might expel from his chest.

Joe clamped him on the shoulder, squeezed.

Dan turned back to the house. Flames shot from the window of baby Angelica’s room. “They’re . . . in the back!” Struggling to his feet, he sprinted around the house, pinpointed the room. Black windows, no flames. “Joe, get the ladder!”

Dan rushed back to the front of the house, desperation filling him. Jordan and Jeffrey were only eight and six. The memory of their round eyes on him Sundays as he taught the children’s sermon, their smiles in the face of personal sorrow had nurtured his own hope. He gripped the ladder, began to muscle it from the porch.

“No, Dan!” Joe grabbed him, dug his fingers into his turnout coat. “No!”

“Yes, Joe.” Dan growled and wrenched free. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he heard common sense shouting as he ran with the ladder and bumped it up next to the back. Still, no flames.

He flew up the rungs. This time he didn’t stop to vent



the soffits. Adrenaline pumped into his veins, and he swung his elbow high and hard. Pain splintered through his arm while smoke roared out the opening.

He sensed the flashover two seconds before it ignited. The hiccup of time, a sudden gulp of air, as if the flame took a breath, then—

The window exploded out with the force of a land mine. Dan fell off the ladder and landed on the ground in a blinding flash of agony. His breath whooshed out, and blackness crashed over him. *So this is death.*

Somewhere on the back side of consciousness, he heard screams.

“Breathe!” A female voice, this time harsh and angry. He tried to obey, but the pain clamping his left shoulder fought him. “Breathe!” Forcing himself to inhale, he moaned in anguish.

“There you go.”

He felt hands on him, feminine and strong, cupping the back of his neck, unbuckling his helmet, easing his head to the ground. “Stay still.” The voice gentled, as if tempered by relief. A cool touch on his forehead brushed back his hair. “You’re lucky you didn’t land clear in Canada.”

He wanted to smile but couldn’t push past the grief that squeezed his chest. He’d killed those boys. Not only had he failed Leo, he’d failed the man’s family.

His throat burned, probably from the smoke he’d inhaled. Somehow he screwed his eyes open. Through a watery haze, he watched the inferno engulf the house, flames four stories high climbing into the night, frothing black smoke. Shingles exploded off the roof; red-hot cinders and ash fell like snow around him. He

tried to raise himself on his elbows and earned a fresh burst of torture. His left arm felt like a noodle at his side, and the pain nearly turned him cross-eyed.

Then he saw her, the woman who had dragged him from the house. She had turned to watch the fire, a frown on her fine-boned face. She wore two short, stubby braids and had flipped up the collar on her jean jacket, like he had on his fire coat. Almost absent-mindedly, she had her hand curled around his lapel, the other pointing to some unknown sight in the flames.

A short and spunky angel. He had to wonder from where she'd materialized. She seemed to be transfixed by the fire, and something about her profile, her clenched jaw, the way she stared at the blaze with a defined sorrow nearly broke his heart. She shouldn't be here to see this. He had the sudden, overwhelming urge to cover her eyes and shield her from the horror.

She looked at him. Eyes as blue as a northern Minnesota sky speared through him with the power to pin him to the ground. "I gotta get you away from the flames. Brace yourself. This is going to hurt." She stood, clutched his coat around the collar, and tugged.

Okay, she hid serious muscles somewhere inside that lean body. He nearly roared with pain as she propelled him back, away from the shower of ash, the mist of water and smoke. She didn't even grunt.

"Who are you?" he asked in a voice that sounded like he gargled with gravel.

She knelt beside him again, pressed two fingers to his neck, feeling his pulse. "I'll go get you a stretcher," she said, not looking in his eyes.

He reached up and grabbed her wrist. “Wait . . . are you a dream?”

Ellie

Ellie Karlson had seen men fly out of the sky before, but never had it wrenched her heart out from between her ribs. The way this fireman had looked at her left her feeling raw and way too tender, as if he'd hit a line drive straight to the soft tissue of her heart.

She attributed it to the fact that she'd nearly lost her first firefighter—before her watch even began. At least she'd found out his name—Dan. She'd have to look up his file and figure out how many years he'd been fighting fire. He'd shown the courage of a veteran but the panic of a probie—a first-year rookie.

Ellie stopped her pacing, leaned into the hospital wall, and touched her head to the cool paint. The quiet in the ER ward pressed against her, tinder to every cell in her body that wanted to howl in frustration. Fire she could face. The somber tones of sorrow . . . she could not. The smells of antiseptic and new carpet added to the simmer of the postfire adrenaline that never left her veins without a fight. She should go back to her hotel, do about a hundred sit-ups, or even hop on her bike for a very early morning ride.

Or maybe she could find a piano and pound out a few rounds of Chopin's Fifth. Something other than this mindless, useless pacing. She noticed a man and a woman sitting huddled against the wall across from the firefighter's room. Maybe praying. Ellie was a woman of action, and praying only seemed to slow her down. Besides, God knew her thoughts, didn't He?

She shot another glance at the man and remembered seeing him at the fire, helping the less-than-brilliant victim in the next room. Fatigue etched into the lines on his sooty face, layered his burnished brown hair. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, fiddling with the buckle on his helmet. A woman, whom Ellie assumed was his wife, rested her head against his shoulder, her blonde hair flayed out, her eyes closed. He'd shed his turnout coat onto an adjacent vinyl chair, but even his flannel shirt looked dirty. He was probably some lumberjack down from the north woods.

A nurse, blonde pigtailed belying her starched appearance, charged down the hall in their direction, shot a sympathetic look at the couple on the chairs, then entered the man's room. Ellie caught a glimpse of a white-coated doctor blocking her view before the door closed.

She might have to tackle the nurse when the woman exited. Ellie blinked back the sight, right behind her eyes, of fireman Dan flying off the roof, his arms flailing against the backdrop of flame and ash. It still caught her breath in her throat. He'd landed practically at her feet with a gut-tightening *thwunk* and an outcry of pain that echoed through the chambers of her soul.

And then he'd looked at her like she was some sort of heavenly being—or at least an earthly dream come true. He must have jarred a few brain cells loose. She'd never been anyone's dream. Ever. Their worst nightmare, however, oh yes. She'd been called that more times than she could count. This fireman definitely wasn't the hottest spark in the fire. Fifteen years of scrabbling for respect in the very masculine world of firefighting told Ellie *no one*

considered her a dream come true when she stepped over the firehouse threshold.

But she didn't care. She wasn't in town to win the firemen's affection. Respect, obedience, and loyalty, though, yes. And pacing outside this wounded firefighter's hospital room seemed a good way to seed a reputation that said she cared about her men.

Since when had she started lying to herself? The black, scuffed tread she'd worn on the floor wasn't only about gaining a foothold of respect. Something about this firefighter tugged at the soft, hidden places in her heart. Setting aside his smoky gray eyes and his bravado in the face of tragedy told her he wasn't an ordinary soul . . . then again, none of the rank-and-file firemen who deliberately threw themselves between life and death could be called ordinary. Still, something about this Jakey's gutsy determination told her he would be a man to count on in a fire.

She had to meet him face-to-face, away from the raging adrenaline and confusion of a conflagration. And, truth be told, she did like hearing his crazy, pain-filled words. Even if they'd die the second she introduced herself.

The door to his room opened. The nurse strode out.

Ellie was hot on her tail. "Is he going to be okay?" Her voice sounded exactly like the person she'd become. Hard. Demanding. Blunt. She wanted to cringe, then decided that she might need to build her reputation in this town on those merits.

The nurse stopped, turned. Her blue eyes considered Ellie with the slightest edging of sympathy. "Who are you?"

"Concerned bystander." Ellie offered a slight smile. It wasn't exactly a lie, but dodging the truth always made her feel grimy.

“The doctor will be out soon. But, yes, I think our pastor will be out in time to preach on Sunday.”

Pastor? Ellie’s mouth opened, and she knew she looked like an idiot standing there, turning pale, as the nurse walked away. This wide-shouldered, face-death-with-a-roar fireman was a pastor?

Of course. She should have guessed it.

In a flash of memory, she saw another man—no, a *boy*—his ponytail flying, careening over the rutted dirt of a fire camp on a pair of roller skis while attached to the bumper of a convertible VW Bug by a water-ski line. His laughter still echoed in the canyons of her heart.

Oh, Seth.

Why was it that all the heart-stopping, real-life heroes in her life belonged to God? That realization doused the tiny flame of hope that had ignited deep inside.

She resumed her pacing, meeting the gazes of the huddled couple as she stalked by. The hall clock ticked out the next ten minutes in merciless eternal seconds. Ellie nearly flattened the doctor when he emerged, tucking his pen into his jacket. He stopped in front of the couple and shook the lumberjack’s hand, a smile on his face.

“He’s a lucky one, Joe,” the doc said. “Just a few minor burns and a dislocated shoulder.”

Ellie nosed up to the group and didn’t flinch at the doctor’s hard look. “Just checking on him,” she said. “Can I see him?”

“Well, I guess—,” the doctor started.

Ellie didn’t wait. She barged into Dan’s room.

Even with his arm in a sling, his right cheek blistered and swollen, and shadows etched under his eyes, he still had the ability to stop her dead in her tracks. Maybe it



was that tousled, dark brown hair or perhaps those lazy gray eyes that latched onto her with more than a little interest. Her disobedient heart did a tiny jig when he gave her a lopsided smile.

“So,” he said, “are you a dream?”

Oh, she could be in big, big trouble. For a second, she wanted to pull up a chair, dive into his friendship, and delay the inevitable. He seemed to have the unsettling ability to wheedle past her defenses and find her lonely places. She feared Dan the Pastor might have the power to make a girl chuck her life goals, unpack her suitcase, and paint her name on a mailbox. Solid, wise, and just a little bit of a rapsallion. A man who respected her, who thought she might be, indeed, a dream come true.

Except she couldn't be that girl. Not with a bevy of promises pushing against her, keeping her on the run.

Besides, once she told him the truth, the antagonism would begin. She knew too well—the shock, the disapproval, and finally the cold wall that would come with her announcement.

If she hoped to etch a toehold of respect in this backwoods community, it would have to start at this hero's bedside.

“No. I'm a very real and slightly angry reality, fireman. What were you doing on that roof?” She crossed her arms, neatly shielding her heart, and watched his smile vanish.

“Excuse me?”

“You risked your life and the lives of your fellow firemen. Thankfully, no one was behind you, but by not waiting to vent that room, you could have killed my entire crew.”

“Your what—wait . . . just who *are* you?” He

frowned, and somehow it only added to the wounded-hero effect.

She took a deep breath. “Ellie Karlson. Interim fire chief.”

His mouth opened for the shock phase. She debated smiling, but she’d need all her stoic arsenal for phase two. . . .

“No way. You can’t be—I mean, a firefighter has to be—”

“A shapely version of a man? A knuckle dragger in high heels?” She arched one eyebrow. “Have hairy fists and dangling nose hair?”

He looked properly chagrined, and she knew she’d hit the bull’s-eye. Why did men always think that a woman doing a job that required courage, strength, and stamina had to be built like a tank? Still, now that she’d doused him with the cleansing reality, she should add some painkiller to the wound. Perhaps it would ward off phase three—the big chill.

“I’m not what many people expect. But I assure you, I know what I’m doing.” She sat in the chair beside the bed, reached out, and touched his slung arm. “And, for the record, I was impressed by your dedication. We’re about saving lives, and you risked your life for that family. Next time, take a partner and your axe and SCBA gear.”

He stared at her with a potent mix of horror and disbelief. O-kay, so maybe he’d hit the ground harder than she thought. “It could have been much worse,” she offered. “Be thankful you lived through it.”

“Too bad the little boys didn’t.” When he clenched his jaw, she thought she saw tears glaze his eyes.

“But you saved them,” she said, confused.

His gaze shot back to her.



“Yes. When you vented the fire, flames ran to the oxygen. The fireball that knocked you off the ladder kept the fire from tracking to the other side of the house. They found the boys and their mother in an upstairs bedroom.”

“Are they—?”

She had the wild desire to run her hand along that whiskered jaw that seemed one shave away from his respectable position of town pastor.

Suddenly, painfully, he reminded her of a man now dancing through heaven.

Ellie clasped her hands firmly in her lap. “They’re in intensive care . . . but . . . well, it doesn’t look good.” She tried to soften the blow by gentling her voice. She never had adapted well to this aspect of her job.

He nodded, as if he expected the news, and again looked away. “It’s all my fault, you know.”

She frowned, not clear at his words, noticing how he’d bunched the covers in his right fist. “Yes. But it worked. Not a technique I’d employ, but hindsight is sometimes the best vision, especially in firefighting.”

He met her words with his own frown, making her pulse race. *Calm down*, she thought. She’d been surrounded by burly hero types her entire life, starting with her father’s fire buddies to her brother’s chums to her own fire-crew cronies. This guy wasn’t any different than every other Jakey. She would just have to get used to those mesmerizing eyes and intriguing smile. Besides, he was probably married . . . but where was his wife? Her gaze flickered down to his hand, now strapped to his chest. No ring.

That could mean nothing. Plenty of firemen took off their rings before a fire. The metal attracted heat. Still,

any wife in her right mind would be pacing the corridors with worry, if not standing at the foot of his bed, directing traffic.

She would.

“So, let me get this straight,” he said in a voice that sounded slightly . . . angry? “You’re Deep Haven’s new fire chief?”

Perhaps he hadn’t jostled any brain cells in that fall—how could he with his brain packed in an outer case of granite? Hadn’t he heard a word she’d said?

“As I live and breathe. I heard the fire on my scanner and hustled over, hoping I could help.” She refused to sound apologetic.

He gave her a look—sad, disgusted, horrified—that sucked her back in time and made her feel like the rebellious teenager who’d hitchhiked to Colorado to keep up with her big brother.

It raised her ire like static electricity. Oh, please—they didn’t live in the dark ages. Women had been fighting fires on crews for over a hundred years starting with Molly Williams in 1818. Cro-Magnon man needed to enter the twenty-first century.

“Help?” he said in a one-word, caveman grunt.

Maybe she should simplify things, speak slowly, use small words . . . “Listen, bub, I’m here to fight fires and to keep you out of trouble.”

Yes, he’d definitely just emerged from the big thaw, for Mr. Tall, Dark, and Neanderthal looked at her with a chauvinistic gleam in his eye and in a low growl tossed aside one hundred years of women’s rights.

“Over my dead body.”



In my author's note in *Tying the Knot*, I wrote of my journey to understanding the depth of God's grace and how embracing that gave me the courage to surrender my future to God, including committing to return to the mission field in Russia, if He chose. Indeed, on New Year's Eve 2002 we decided to return, and by the time March rolled around, I had filled containers with supplies and even felt an excitement building for the next term. I knew in my heart that God had good things planned.

I just didn't expect how He would accomplish them.

Over our plans to return hovered the increasing threat of changing visa laws, continued violence, and our children's emotional needs for security. We knew that life might be difficult, but we clung with tenacity to our plans. Even when missionaries began to be ousted from the country, we gritted our teeth and said, "We will return!"

Perhaps that is why it felt like a knife to the chest

when God said no. He slammed one door after another to our return and miraculously opened the door to a new chapter of our lives in northern Minnesota, in a tiny town where we'd always dreamed of living. We stumbled toward this new opportunity like confused children, looking back over our shoulders asking, "Are You sure?" But God put peace in our hearts, confirming His plans. More than that, He gave us a place to live where we could dig roots, heal, and recharge. He sent us to our very own Deep Haven.

However, it was in this peaceful place that questions began to simmer in my soul. I'd been a missionary, either in training or on the field, for fifteen years. My life plans had been to be a career missionary. Now what? Did my fifteen years of sacrifice etch any foothold in the kingdom of God? Did I still matter to God if I didn't live my life on the cutting edge of evangelism, my life poured out for that one purpose?

Again, God spoke to me through writing. *Yes, He said. You matter. Your life matters, your sacrifices matter, your dreams matter. Because you are My beloved child. And your dreams of making a difference in your world will be accomplished through Me, as you abide, one day at a time, in My love. For apart from Me you can do nothing.*

Like Ellie, I've surrendered loved ones and precious moments for the sake of a goal. Like Dan, I've looked back, wondering if I made an impact, wrestling with past choices or how I could have served better. And through writing *The Perfect Match*, God showed me that only by turning my eyes on Him and letting Him feed me is there any hope of bearing fruit.

The Perfect Match 

I hope this thought encourages you. Life with Christ bears fruit, whether you serve in full-time missions proclaiming the gospel overseas or full-time missions wiping runny toddler noses in the middle of Iowa. And this fruit, my friends, is eternal.

Thank you for reading *The Perfect Match*. I'm blessed that you would spend time in Deep Haven with me. May you find the joy and hope of abiding in Christ, and may the truth of His love for you radically impact your life.

In His Grace,

Susan May Warren