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FINDING STEFANIE



SUSAN MAY
WARREN

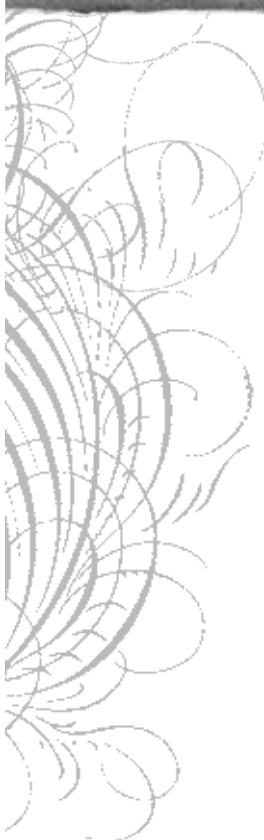
 FINDING STEFANIE



NOBLE
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Finding Stefanie

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For Your glory, Lord



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CHAPTER I

IF SHE COULD, Stefanie Noble would get on her bay quarter horse, Sunny, ride over the chapped, frozen hills of the Silver Buckle Ranch, and disappear into the horizon. Just keep riding. Because it was only on Sunny that the loneliness and the stress would slough off, and she'd hear the wind, the voice of freedom singing in her ears.

After all, with her brother Nick running the Silver Buckle, she couldn't help but wonder if maybe the ranch didn't need her anymore.

Okay, *sometimes* she wondered. But perhaps not at 5 a.m., smack in the middle of calving season.

Singing—that's what she needed. Something other than the sound of a cow in distress. Her ears ached with the noise as the exhaustion of being up all night pressed down against her, into her bones, her cells.

"C'mon, old cow, push," she groaned, bracing her feet against the haunches of a weary Black Angus as she pulled on the chains attached to the hooves of a not-yet-born calf.

“She ain’t gonna give.”

Stefanie glanced behind her. Dutch Johnson, the Silver Buckle’s cow boss, looked as tired as Stefanie felt, his face droopy and covered with white whiskers.

“She’s hip-locked. We’re gonna have to C-section her.” He already wore a pair of blue surgical coveralls.

“I can do this.” Stefanie’s arms shook. “Just give me the puller.”

“Stef—”

“It’s almost out!” Even as she said it, Stefanie could feel the little calf slide toward her, farther out of the birth canal. “I don’t want to lose another cow!”

She refused to let herself feel those words, to remember watching the cow she’d so laboriously raised slip out of life as it bled to death. Stefanie could only blame a month of night calving for her unsteady hands, the way she had perforated the uterus and left a baby without a mother.

“I’m gettin’ Nick.”

“No!” Stefanie twisted, looking at him. “I don’t need Nick. I need the puller. Come over here and lift her leg up, please.”

Dutch said nothing, just handed her a long bar that looked much like the handle of a rake. Then he grabbed the cow’s back leg and lifted it with his tree-limb arms.

Meanwhile, Stefanie affixed the bar across the cow’s haunches, hooked on the chains that connected the calf’s hooves to the puller, and started to turn the crank, applying pressure.

Slowly the calf emerged. The cow let out a long moan as her baby slipped out into the straw. The little calf didn’t move. Afterbirth glistened in its curly black coat.

“C’mon, baby,” Stefanie said, cleaning its face, its mouth. “Breathe.

Please breathe.” She cut the cord, put iodine on it. The calf gasped. “Yes, breathe.” She put her hand on its body and began to rub. In a moment, the calf started to take in air.

Stefanie looked up at Dutch. In the shadows of the barn he looked much older than his forty-seven years. But that’s what all-night doctoring did. She probably looked about eighty-two instead of what some might call a young twenty-four. Most of the time she sure felt eighty-two.

Dutch gave her a half smile. “I’m going to check the other cows, see if they’ve dropped their calves yet.”

Stefanie sat back in the straw, everything inside her shaking. How she longed for, needed, *thirsted* for freedom. Just one day without . . . *everything*. The weather, the calving, the bills . . . all of it gnawed at her, rubbing her raw with the weight of the shackles.

But this was her life, like it or not.

Although recently, for the first time, she’d begun to think . . . maybe not.

Detaching the hip bar from the cow and the calf, Stefanie watched as the mother turned and slathered her baby with her tongue.

“Good mama,” Stefanie said, standing. Grime, sweat, and even blood had long ago seeped into her pores. She reeked of manure and straw, and her hair hung in strings, having escaped her long, dark ponytail. Stretching, she walked past the other stalls, checking the recent mothers and the two heifers who had yet to give birth. Finally, she opened the barn door and slipped outside, letting the wind shear the exhaustion from her face, her limbs.

Behind her, Clancy, their half-shepherd, half-retriever dog, came up and nudged his wet nose into her palm. She smiled at him and rubbed behind his floppy brown ears.

The thaw had tiptoed in this year, haunting the land, giving the air a faint taste of spring, then shirking back, hiding under a blast of north wind and sleet. The pallor of today's sky, stalwart against the encroaching sun, told her that she'd find no hope in the forecast.

No, hope had long ago forsaken this land. Or perhaps it had only forsaken her.

It had returned for her brother Nick and his wife, Piper, now expecting their first child—a girl. And for Maggy and Cole, co-owners of the Silver Buckle, now that Cole had regained his health. And it had certainly found her twin brother, Rafe, recent National GetRowdy Bull Riding Champion. He had never looked so happy as he had at his celebration party when he asked Kat Breckenridge to marry him. They'd probably live happily ever after in her New York penthouse while helping raise money for Kat's charity.

Meanwhile, Stefanie would sleep in the barn and help birth baby cows.

Stefanie, the ranch hand. For some reason, it wasn't at all who she'd expected to be.

Her own smell, as the wind found her, made her wrinkle her nose. The ranch seemed most forlorn at this time of day, most eerie, old ghosts alive in the creak of the barn doors, the low of laboring cows. Sometimes she nearly expected her father's voice to emerge from a hidden stall, calling her to fetch clean water or help him with a calf. For a long time—*too* long—it had been only herself, Dutch, and Bishop, her father, running the Silver Buckle. Somehow even those years hadn't seemed as lonely as having Nick and Rafe return, seeing their lives hook onto their dreams, watching them turn into the men their father had always hoped they'd be, leaving her sorely behind.

It made a girl wonder—who had Daddy hoped *she'd* be? She'd never asked. She always figured she belonged to the land. To the ranch. But with Nick and Piper having a baby, they'd need to move into the house instead of living in the hunting cabin on the hill. And then where exactly would she belong?

She stared out into the horizon, where the outline of the Bighorns barely etched the gunmetal sky.

The horses nickered from the corral across the yard. In the quarantine pen, she noticed that the new quarter horses had huddled up, their noses together as they fought the wind. She'd put them in the shelter last night, but perhaps the draw of hay had lured them out. She should check on Sunny. He'd had a runny nose—a symptom that in other horses wouldn't register a great deal of concern, but in a horse nearly thirty years old, it made her worry.

The horse barn greeted her with a hospitality she craved as she opened the door. Call her strange, but she loved everything about horses, from their expressive eyes to the smell of their manure—so different from that of cows, pigs, or any other ranch animal.

The Buckle's horses stirred little as she entered. The ranch had a small herd of stock horses for riding, but Nick preferred to take his truck out into the field. Stefanie, however, couldn't surrender the nostalgia of working the ranch by hand, just Sunny and her, compatriots.

Perhaps that was where she belonged . . . with Sunny.

Sunny had been the first horse she'd rescued, right about the time her mother lay dying of breast cancer. Stefanie had bought him with a year's worth of chore money after watching him waste away in the backyard of a house just outside Phillips. She'd ached with his neglect, how his ribs sawed through his tan hide, the razor

bones of his spinelike spears in his back. He could barely walk when she'd led him to the trailer, and it took a full year before he recovered enough for her to start training him. She probably would have lost hope if it hadn't been for his eyes. They all but begged her to notice him. Begged her to care.

That year she'd brought Sunny back to the beautiful gelding he'd been born to be and discovered that she had a talent. A way of understanding an animal that ministered to both their broken places.

Nick's horse, Pecos, raised his head to stare at her as she walked to the end of the row of stalls. A beautiful black-and-white Overo paint, Pecos had a wild streak that at one time had seemed exactly fitting for her oldest brother. But Nick had worked his wild streak out of his system. As had Rafe.

She always thought she'd been born without the Noble propensity to rebel and wander. So why did she suddenly feel so restless, so unfit for the life she'd always known?

Stefanie flicked on a light midway through the barn, and it pooled on the dirt floor. Funny, she didn't see Sunny standing in his stall. Coming up to the paddock door, she spotted him lying down fully on his side. As if in distress.

"Sunny." She opened the door and crept in. "What's wrong, pal?" She knelt at his side, her hand splaying across his body.

He didn't raise his head, just opened his eye and looked at her a long moment before closing it.

His breathing, under her hand, was labored.

Oh, Lord, please . . . Stefanie ran her hand down Sunny's neck, over his withers. "It'll be okay," she said softly. Had one of her new horses had a contagious disease? She had quarantined them. Still, perhaps Sunny had just developed a cold.

She got up and retrieved her medical kit. Finding a thermometer, she prepared it and took his temperature.

The reading dried her mouth—105.5.

Sunny began to cough. Then blood dribbled from his mouth into the straw.

Stefanie took one look at the ooze, turned, and ran from the barn. “Dutch!” She bolted across the yard, nearly tripped, then flung herself toward the calving barn. “Dutch!”

He met her at the door, catching her.

Her breath came in gulps of razor-cold air. “It’s Sunny. I think he’s got—the new flu, the one—”

“Calm down,” Dutch said, but he had already started jogging toward the barn. “Call the vet!” he yelled over his shoulder.

Stefanie counted the seconds with her thundering heartbeat as she sprinted inside the house, grabbed the phone, and left a frantic message with the on-call vet’s answering service in Phillips. She didn’t care that she left a muddy trail across her kitchen floor, a bloody handprint on the phone. Her gaze never left the horse barn door. The message delivered, she dropped the phone onto the cradle and ran back outside across the yard.

Dutch met her as she reached the door, a wall that stopped her cold as he grabbed her arms. “No, Stef, you can’t—”

“I have to help him. Let me go!” She yanked out of his grasp.

He stepped in front of her again. “No.”

Stefanie looked up at him, her heart choking off the breath in her throat as she read his grim face. Oh. *Oh*. She gasped for air and grabbed for the barn door, missing it and going down hard into the dirt.

Dutch crouched beside her, his big hand on her arm. "I'm sorry. He was probably gone by the time you left the barn."

Gone? *Gone?*

Oh, Lord, please, oh no . . . Her breaths came fast, one on top of another. She clamped her hand over her mouth as if holding in a scream. Only she didn't have one. Instead a ball of pain scoured her throat, falling down into her belly.

Gone?

She couldn't breathe. Couldn't . . . Stefanie moaned, a sound so mournful it made her hurt clear through. She shook free of Dutch and crawled toward the barn. Somehow she found her feet.

Dutch had left the paddock door open, the light on. She stood there for a moment, staring at Sunny, at his beautiful brown hide, his long eyelashes closed over his eyes. He'd always been a magnificent horse in temperament, in form. He possessed an inner strength that had seeped into her soul.

Now he seemed at peace, as if he might be sleeping.

She edged close and dropped to her knees.

She heard Dutch's heavy steps behind her as she laid her hands on Sunny's body. The breath no longer lifted it, but she still felt the warmth of the life that had run through his veins.

"Stefanie . . ."

Her voice emerged just above a whisper. "Once, near the end with Mom, I couldn't take it anymore. It was right after my thirteenth birthday, and I kept thinking, what if she didn't make it till I was fourteen? Everything hurt inside me. I wanted to leave because I couldn't stand to see her suffer, so I packed a backpack and . . . I left. I walked all the way to Cutter's Rock, where it butts up to the Big K, and stood there on the edge of the ravine. I thought that

maybe, if I threw myself over, perhaps I could fly. I really thought it. Just fling myself over and fly.”

She hiccupped a breath, drawing in another for strength as she opened her eyes. “Sunny found me. I don’t know how he got out of the corral, but as I stood there, ready to jump, he appeared, rubbed his nose into my back as if to say, “Take me with you.” She stroked his mane.

“Stefanie—”

“Go away, Dutch. Just . . . go.” Stefanie ran her hands over Sunny’s side. Such a strong animal. How could he be gone so quickly?

Slowly, she climbed over him, lying alongside his back, her head on his neck. Tangling her hands into his mane, she closed her eyes, breathing in his smell, remembering the hours, probably collective years she’d seated herself across his back, trusting him. Talking to him as his ears cocked back, listening.

“I wish I could go with you,” she whispered. She turned her head into his neck, letting the sobs rack her body.



The invincible Lincoln Cash—as his press agent called him—had survived jumping out of airplanes, rolling from fiery car crashes, leaping from stampeding horses, and falling from sky-soaring buildings. He’d even weathered bad lines and an occasional tabloid scandal. So it seemed particularly ironic to him that he could be taken out by a button.

Just a simple, pearly tuxedo button, no bigger than his fingernail, one down from his collar, sewn into his designer shirt. He should have ripped it off, made it a part of the scene, but instead he’d fumbled with it as his director, Dex Graves, and beautiful

Elise Fontaine looked on with a host of other grips, makeup artists, camera people, and extras.

Watching his career crash into smithereens.

He broke out in a sweat as he tried to open his shirt, and even before Dex called, “Cut,” Lincoln knew the charade was over. As silence descended on the closed set, thirty people staring at him, he released the infuriating button and watched his hand shake.

For once, Elise had nothing to say. She sat, her dress up past her knees, her blonde hair tumbled down to her shoulders, and looked at his hand in horror.

The horror that thickened with each thump of his heart.

Lincoln blew out a breath and ran his hand through his hair, then went to shove the offending extremity into his tuxedo pants pocket—only he didn’t have a pocket in this costume. So instead, he simply walked off the set and didn’t stop until he got into his trailer and locked the door.

He paced in the confined space. He’d had the trailer outfitted with all the comforts of home—two televisions, wireless Internet, a fully stocked fridge with freshly catered food every day. Despite its state-of-the-art gadgetry, the trailer also helped him escape to the hills of Montana, with the dark leather sofa, the panorama picture of the property he’d recently purchased, the lineup of Louis L’Amour Westerns on the bookshelf.

His hand had stopped shaking, and he stared at it, frustrated. Maybe he should quit now, while still at the top of his game.

“*Lewis, where are you?*” The voice traveled from the places he’d fought to hide it, crept out, and crawled over him. “*Don’t you know I’ll find you?*” Old, rancid fear prickled Lincoln’s skin; he was ten years old again, skinny and weak.

He'd escaped that life. And never looked back.

He grabbed a towel and brought it to his sticky forehead before he realized he'd be wiping off his makeup. His hand twitched again, and he dropped the towel, grabbing his wrist, holding it still. Pinpricks of a limb just emerging from sleep encased his hand and he tried to shake them away.

Nothing.

Something had to be wrong with him. Dreadfully wrong. To make matters worse, today he'd had to pause, blink, and fight to scrape up the words he'd memorized last night. His short-term memory had never been stellar, but recently it lobbied to expose him.

"Lewis, I'm going to find you."

Banging at the door made him jump.

He opened it, half expecting to see Elise in all her diva glory. She'd been feeding the press juicy nontruths about their so-called torrid backstage relationship and doing her best to make them come true over the past three months. And he would have to be an ice block not to notice her long, tanned legs and perfect curves. But ever since his body had begun to short-circuit on him, fear had driven from him any desire to let someone close enough to discover that he was . . . what?

Lincoln hadn't the faintest idea why he felt as if his body were walking through sludge, always a second or two behind his brain's commands.

Dex, bless him, stood at the door, his baseball hat backward, a slight sweat filming his forehead, to match the tenor of Lincoln's pulse. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," Lincoln snapped.

Thankfully, Dex didn't take it personally. Round and rough around the edges, with hair that looked more like a string mop and enough padding around his waist to evidence his propensity to linger over dinner, usually brainstorming a scene, Dex personified a man who lived for films. He was always rethinking a scene, reshooting with new angles, always reviewing the dailies. He'd known Lincoln since he'd been a fresh-off-the-street extra, had plucked him out of the crowd, shined him up, and made him into a star. Lincoln would do just about anything for Dex—and did, most of the time. Including Dex's crazy stunts that nearly got him killed.

"You sure you're okay?" Dex said, pushing his bulk into the trailer. "Were you out late last night?"

Lincoln hadn't been out late, with anyone, for months. No, last night he'd been locked in his trailer, trying to figure out how to rebuild his life should it all come crashing down around him. How to take care of Alyssa and how to not be a has-been at the age of thirty.

No wonder he looked rough today, according to his makeup artist.

"No," Lincoln said, moving aside for Dex to sit on the leather sofa. "I was working on the script."

"I'd rather you get your rest. I have people to prompt you, you know. I don't know why you push yourself so hard, Linc."

Because he wanted to be known as a professional in the industry? Because he needed this gig more than anyone really knew, and he had to have his game on each and every minute? Because he, better than anyone, knew that fate could turn on him?

Lincoln stared out the window of his air-conditioned trailer at

the grips delivering messages and supplies to the various costumers and set designers. “You know why.”

Dex was perhaps the only person who knew about his crimes and about the person Lincoln had left behind.

“Listen, I don’t know what’s wrong, but you know you can tell me, huh?” Dex said.

Tell Dex that sometimes, when Lincoln got up, the room spun and he found himself face-first on the carpet? Tell Dex that occasionally his vision cut out or got fuzzy around the edges? Tell Dex that the thought of doing his own stunt in the next scene—the one where he was supposed to bail out of a car before it launched off a pier into the ocean—had him cold with fear?

“Please tell me that you’re not, uh . . . nervous about your love scene with Elise.” Dex gave him a look.

Lincoln answered with a dry smile, but yes. His previous scripts hadn’t contained nearly as much skin as this movie—a thriller about a Miami high roller. How he longed for a good Western, where he might strap on a six-shooter, jump on a horse, and chase after the bad guys.

Then again, maybe the people who ran his career knew he needed fast cars and lots of brawls to keep the momentum of his career at a decent clip. If someone got too close, they might actually see that really, he didn’t know a thing about acting.

“I’ll find you, Lewis.”

“No, c’mon, of course it’s no big deal, Dex.” Lincoln laughed and shook his head. “Kissing Elise? I think I can handle it.”

“You know, it wouldn’t hurt your press to be seen with Elise Fontaine on your arm. She’s the next big thing, and I’m fairly sure she has a thing for you.”

Maybe, but lately Lincoln had a hard time stomaching the life he'd found so enticing at nineteen. Ten years did that, he supposed. "I'm sure it would." He didn't bother to hide his opinion in his tone. Elise and her flock of paparazzi were the last thing he needed right now.

Dex sighed. "I was thinking that after this, maybe you should take a break. Go somewhere. Go to your new place in Montana. Have you even set foot on the property since you bought it from John?"

Lincoln shook his head. He had met author John Kincaid last summer while taking location shots for the film based on a book Kincaid had written. Lincoln had fallen in love with the land, the smells, the wide-open spaces that allowed him to think, and when Kincaid's ranch came up for sale, he'd bought it on a whim.

"Then maybe it's time." Dex stood. "Let's get through this scene and the final action shot, and then we'll talk about you taking a hiatus." He slapped Lincoln on the shoulder and opened the door. "Five minutes, pal."

"I'll be right out." Lincoln closed the door behind Dex and let out another long breath, surprised that he'd been holding it. *Get ahold of yourself.* He closed his eyes, tried to center on that place inside him that helped him crawl out of his skin and into the psyche of his character. *Be Barklay Hamilton, multimillionaire, cigarette-boat racer, winner. Be a champion.*

Lincoln needed a drink. Opening the fridge, he took out a glass bottle of energy drink, set it on the counter, and unscrewed the top. His hand had stopped shaking. But he never knew for how long.

"Lewis—"

No. He shrugged the voice away, refusing to listen.

He wasn't Lewis, hadn't been for a decade—more, even. He was

Lincoln Cash—superstar, Oscar nominee, winner of the Golden Globe. He was a winner. A man the people respected. A hero.

He reached up and, with a flick of his fingers, opened the button. See, that wasn't so hard. Dex was probably right—he was just tired and needed a vacation.

Lincoln opened the door and stepped out into the sunshine of the lot. The sun baked the pavement, heat radiating into his dress shoes. Cables snaked along the parking lot leading toward the hotel they'd rented for this scene. How he'd rather be on a soundstage, but no, Dex loved to shoot on location. And this location had to be Miami in March. Thousands of spring breakers lined the set, hoping to ogle him. He waved to his fans as he took a swig of his drink.

The dizziness hit like a bullet. One second he stood vertical, a picture of health. The next he was sprawled on the pavement, the bottle shattered, his body twitching in an all-out seizure.

And he couldn't even scream.



Gideon North begged fate to be gentle with him, to forgive and, just this once, give him a break. Not that he deserved it, but if fate operated on an as-needed basis, he should be at the top of the list.

Especially driving on fumes, an ugly sky in his rearview mirror, with two kid sisters who looked at him as if he might be the bogeyman.

They would be a family again—didn't they see that? Even Macey didn't seem to understand—yet not only was she old enough at fifteen to comprehend responsibility, she'd also been the one to spring this crazy idea. Maybe she hadn't believed that he'd take

her suggestion seriously. Maybe her letters had simply been dreams scrawled in desperation. Maybe she believed that he'd abandon her again, the last in a painful line of liars.

But Gideon refused to believe that one drop of his father's blood might be in him, and he'd proven it by doing everything Macey had begged of him. Not only that, but he'd gotten them out of Rapid City, out of the shelter, out of the cycle of foster homes, street living, and hunger.

Gideon turned off the highway and headed west. He glanced at the gas gauge, gripped the wheel of the old Impala wagon he'd boosted, and scanned the darkening land for shelter. He supposed they could sleep in the car, but the way the wind had kicked up, throwing frozen tumbleweeds across the road, he'd prefer shelter. And a fire. And something nourishing in their stomachs.

At least for Haley. . . . He glanced in the rearview mirror at the way she curled into a tiny grubby ball inside a red Goodwill winter jacket two sizes too large for her. One of her pigtails had fallen out, lending her a forlorn, lopsided look. And her eyes screamed hunger. But she didn't speak. Hadn't spoken one word since they left the shelter.

Yep, he was the bogeyman.

"We're going to be okay," he said, because it seemed like the right thing to say. Now that he was eighteen and out of the detention center, wasn't it his responsibility to care for his sisters?

He refused to hear his father's mockery behind his thoughts. Yes, he was going to take care of them. Build them all a place to live. A safe place where they didn't have to hide at night. Where their world wasn't punctuated by cries or people yelling. By Haley's tears.

Gideon's hands, cold as they were, whitened on the steering wheel. His sweatshirt would make poor insulation tonight. He had given his jacket to Macey—she hadn't thought beyond her backpack and shoes when she'd seen him drive up to the emergency foster shelter. She'd just grabbed Haley and run.

Haley had finally stopped crying when they hit the Montana border.

Things would change now, for all of them. He'd make them change.

"Where are we going?" Macey said or rather mumbled into the collar of his jacket. "I'm hungry."

"I know that," he snapped.

She flinched, then glared at him.

Gideon clenched his jaw, wishing that had come out differently. He wouldn't be like their father—*wouldn't*.

"I'll stop soon," he said, now softer. He'd turned off the highway five miles back, following a sign for a town, hoping for a McDonald's. But as he slowed, those hopes were dashed by the sight of the one-horse rinky-dink spot on the map they'd limped into. A couple of feed stores, a tire shop, a bar, and an old diner that looked like the throwaway back end of a train.

He pulled up just beyond the lights that splashed against the sidewalk. "Stay here," he said, putting the car into park. "I'll be right back."

In the backseat, Haley sat up, her eyes huge. But still, she said nothing.

Macey, too, watched him.

"I'll be right back," he repeated.

Macey gave a stiff nod.

The aroma of hamburgers and french fries made Gideon's empty stomach knot as he shut the door. A trail along the back of the diner led to a row of trash cans and a trailer home. He stood there, staring at the dark windows of the trailer, then at the diner.

Just one more time. Because he had to. Just . . .

He took a deep breath, then crept toward the trailer.

Small towns were easy—people here trusted each other, and he justified himself with the argument that people who left their doors open deserved a lesson on safety. He went inside and looked around.

The owner had milk. And bread and cheese, a jar of mayonnaise, and a box of cereal. All this he scooped into a plastic bag he found on the counter. Shadows pushed into the ancient trailer, over the fraying green sofa, the faux plants, the tattered La-Z-Boy in the corner.

Memory rushed at him, and for a second he was back at Meadow Park, watching television while his mother propped Haley on one hip and fried hot dogs on the stove. Macey was playing with her Barbie dolls on the kitchen table. In Gideon's memory, his mother turned to him and smiled, and something caught in his chest, a vise so tight he couldn't breathe.

Hurry.

He swept the memory away and went to the bedroom, ripping the blankets off the bed. Grabbing two pillows, he shoved everything under his arm.

He was in the car again in under five minutes, cramming everything into the backseat on top of Haley. Then he climbed in and pulled away, easy, as if his heart weren't churning in his chest.

Macey's face had gone hard. She turned away from him, staring out the window.

Gideon said nothing and kept driving, keeping an eye on the gas gauge. The town ended in less than thirty seconds, just past the trailer park, and he followed the road, winding back into the hills, the valleys, the cover he needed to build a new life for them.

He passed miles of barbed wire fencing and dirt driveways that led to tiny box homes with feeble light showing from the windows. He guessed the black humps against the darkening horizon had to be cows or maybe bulls. Here and there the tattered outline of trees edged a hill, boulders lumping in washes.

He would have missed the house entirely if it hadn't been for Macey, who spotted the For Sale sign tangled in the barbed wire fence. She saw it flash against the headlights and said simply, "Hey."

For one short summer he and Macey had made a game of living in vacant for-sale houses. It had been safer than roosting on the streets. Now an old, feeble hope stirred inside him. He turned in to the drive and threaded his way across the land, happening upon the dark compound of a ranch. His headlights skimmed open cattle pens, a vacant barn. The growth of weeds around the front steps evidenced that the house hadn't been lived in for months.

Gideon pulled up and put the car in park but kept it running. "Stay here."

Macey sat up, and for the first time he saw fear flash across her face. She nodded.

He got out, kept the car door open, and sneaked toward the house. The front step gave a predictable groan as he mounted it, and he stopped, his pulse rushing in his ears.

Nothing gave reply but the wind, needling through his sweat-shirt and threadbare jeans.

He tried the door. The handle didn't turn. But whoever owned the house had the same blind faith as the inhabitants in town, and the nearest window opened with the smallest effort. He climbed inside.

Gideon landed in a kitchen, barren except for a sink and empty counters, dark and smelling of cold, dust, and neglect. His tennis shoes scuffed on the floor as he went through the small house. An aged shag rug ran into the living room and back to three tiny bedrooms. Foolishly he tried the light, but of course, the electricity had been turned off.

Still, it would do. More than do.

He unlocked the front door and returned to the car. "We'll stay here," he said.

"For how long?" Macey asked, turning to look at Haley.

He followed her gaze, seeing the same question in Haley's blue eyes. How many different beds had his seven-year-old sister slept in during the three years he'd been in jail?

"I don't know. Let's just get out and get warm." He grabbed his loot from the trailer and led the way into the house. "Make Haley a bed," he said to Macey, thrusting the blankets at her. He glanced at the fireplace. "I'm going to see what I can do to get us warm."

Macey went into the dark family room, but Haley hung back, staring up at Gideon. She swallowed, and he had the strongest urge to bend down, put his arms around her, and tell her that it would be okay.

But despite their great luck—the bedding, the food, the car, the house, the absence of flashing red lights and sirens in their wake—and regardless of how much he begged and bargained and even sacrificed, Gideon wasn't sure if fate would be that kind.

☞ A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR ☞

Writing this book couldn't have come at a more difficult time. I'm not sure why, but I always seem to back myself into my schedule, turning around just in time to see it crashing down over me like a wave. If I'm well-balanced, I keep my feet and can ride the wave to shore. However, often the wave knocks me over, and I'm left scraping the ocean bottom, wedging sand in my teeth and gasping for air when I surface.

The spring of 2007 hit me like a tidal wave. I was homeschooling three of my children in fourth, sixth, and ninth grades. I had speaking engagements every weekend for three months, and I was trying to write Stefanie Noble's story. I thought I might lose my mind.

My husband sensed that I was overwhelmed—perhaps because of the way I mumbled in my sleep—and he came to me with a plan. He would cook supper. Every night. For three months. Maybe some of you have husbands who cook. Mine is a fabulous cook, but I'm the primary chef in the family. And when you're feeding a family of six, four of whom are men, you have to cook a lot. I could have cried at his feet with relief.

But his generosity didn't stop there. Not only did he cook—he cleaned, carpooled, fixed my car, and occasionally brought supper up to my office. And he prayed for me.

He was God's gift of strength to me.

So much of the time, heroes in stories are alpha males, able to leap

tall buildings and swim through hurricane waters to save their heroines. However, in today's world women are strong and often don't need that kind of hero. Stefanie Noble was one of these. A woman accustomed to working with animals, she knew how to handle herself. But she needed someone who would stand beside her, believe in her, and encourage her. She needed a different kind of hero.

I have a good friend who is one of the strongest women I know. She is beautiful and poised, talented and wise. She's raising three children, two of my favorite teenagers and a delightful toddler. From the outside, one would never know her challenges—namely, her wonderful toddler has Down syndrome and needs extra eyes on him as he explores his world. And her husband had MS. From her demeanor and smile, people might think her life was easy. I know differently. I also know how much she has loved her husband, and how she appreciated that when he couldn't be physically strong, he was strong in ways she needed him to be.

Watching my friend in her struggles made me wonder what it would be like to be someone strong—like action hero Lincoln Cash—then have your body betray you. I wondered how he might feel and if he could see God using him to be heroic in a different way.

I love strong heroes, but I love strength of character in a man more. Especially when he surrenders his heart to the One who gives strength. This is the theme I brought to *Finding Stefanie*.

Lincoln also helps Stefanie see her world and herself through new eyes. As a mother, I remember those early days when I'd look up from my daily routines—helping with homework, doing laundry, cooking supper—and wonder, how did I get here? Last time I looked, I was newly married and about to conquer the world as a super missionary. Did I blink?

I'm sure my friend wonders this also. How did she get here, with so much on her shoulders?

I know that she wouldn't trade her life for anything. Neither would I. But I know what it feels like to be discontent, believing there is something more. Like when I was living in Siberia, without heat, chasing down roaches. Or when we were homeless for four months and lived in our garage. I have come to believe that contentment is a mind-set, a submission to all God is doing in my life. His call is for me to be obedient to the life He's given me and to embrace it with a tender heart—no matter what the circumstance. When I do, He has a way of making me see it with new eyes. Life doesn't always turn out the way we expect. But it can still be good. Very good.

My friend taught me that too. And those are the lessons I wrote into this book.

"Fill my cup, Lord. . . . Come and quench this thirsting of my soul. Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more. Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole!"

God can fill your cup with strength, contentment, and wholeness. I pray that today you find Him your hero in every way.

Thank you for journeying with me through the Noble Legacy!

God Bless,

Susan May Warren

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



SUSAN MAY WARREN recently returned home after serving for eight years with her husband and four children as missionaries in Khabarovsk, Far East Russia. Now writing full-time as her husband runs a lodge on Lake Superior in northern Minnesota, she and her family enjoy hiking and canoeing and being involved in their local church.

Susan holds a BA in mass communications from the University of Minnesota and is a multipublished author of novellas and novels with Tyndale, including *Happily Ever After*, the American Christian Romance Writers' 2003 Book of the Year and a 2003 Christy Award finalist. Other books in the series include *Tying the Knot* and *The Perfect Match*, the 2004 American Christian Fiction Writers' Book of the Year. *Flee the Night*, *Escape to Morning*, and *Expect the Sunrise* comprise her romantic-adventure, search-and-rescue series.

Finding Stefanie is the sequel to *Reclaiming Nick* and *Taming Rafe* and the third book in Susan's new romantic series.

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