



my
Foolish
Heart

Susan May
WARREN



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My Foolish Heart

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Praise for Susan May Warren

“Warren’s characters are well-developed, and she knows how to create a first-rate contemporary romance. Highly recommended for Christian fiction and romance collections.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL ON TYING THE KNOT

“Vibrant characters and vivid language zoom this action-packed romance to the top of the charts. This is a one-sitting read—once you pick it up, you won’t want to put it down.”

ROMANTIC TIMES ON THE PERFECT MATCH

“[*Taming Rafe*] has all the marks of a great romance, including realistic characters, page-turning intrigue, numerous subplots, and a satisfying ending.”

CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES

“Warren surpasses every expectation in [*Taming Rafe*]. The characters are gritty, down-to-earth, and downright dangerous. Warren crafts a journey that’s worth our time and investment many times over.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“If you’re in the mood for a good contemporary cowboy romance with thoughtful undercurrents, then you’ll enjoy Susan May Warren’s *Reclaiming Nick*.”

FAITHFULREADER.COM

“Susan Warren writes with a fresh, new voice and creates characters that will delight her readers.”

KAREN KINGSBURY

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“Warren’s third PJ Sugar novel is filled with humor and mystery. Warren’s ability to weave faith elements seamlessly into the plot elevates the book above others in the genre.”

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PUBLISHERS WEEKLY ON DOUBLE TROUBLE

“PJ’s adventures . . . are hilarious and the resolution of the fast-paced mystery is thoroughly satisfying as well. Think of this series as a more wholesome version of Janet Evanovich’s Stephanie Plum series.”

BOOKLIST ON DOUBLE TROUBLE

“Susan May Warren’s wit, charm, and dead-on characterizations always make me laugh.”

LORI COPELAND

Bestselling author of the Brides of the West series

“Warren does it again with an excellent blend of humor, romance, mystery, and some much-needed spiritual lessons.”

ROMANTIC TIMES ON NOTHING BUT TROUBLE

“Susan May Warren is an extremely gifted storyteller, always keeping her readers in suspense to the end. . . . Warren’s books are guaranteed to entertain, thrill, and inspire. Without question, they fall into the can’t-put-down category.”

D.M.

Amazon.com reader

A decorative rectangular frame with ornate, symmetrical scrollwork at each corner. The frame consists of two parallel lines, with the decorative flourishes extending from the corners of the inner line.

my foolish heart

*To the Cook County Vikings football team—
coaches, staff, and players. You make us proud.*

Acknowledgments

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For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.

PHILIPPIANS 4:13

For Your glory, Lord.

1

FOR TWO HOURS A NIGHT, Monday through Saturday, Isadora Presley became the girl she'd lost.

“Welcome to *My Foolish Heart*, where we believe your perfect love might be right next door. We want to send special greetings out to KDRT in Seattle, brand-new to the Late Night Lovelorn Network. BrokenheartedInBuffalo, you're on the line. Welcome to the program.”

Outside the second-story window of her home studio, the night crackled open with a white flash of light and revealed the scrawny arms of her Japanese plum, cowering under a summer gale. Issy checked the clock. Hopefully the storm would hold off for the rest of her show, another thirty minutes.

And the weather had better clear by tomorrow's annual Deep

Haven Fisherman's Picnic. She couldn't wait to sit on her front porch, watch the midnight fireworks over the harbor as the Elks launched them from the campground, and pretend that life hadn't forgotten her.

Tomorrow, she'd watch the parade from her corner of the block, wave to her classmates on their annual float as they made their way toward Main Street, then linger on the porch listening to the live music drift up from the park. Maybe she'd even be able to hear the cheers from the annual log-rolling competition. She could nearly taste the tangy sweetness of a fish burger—fresh walleye and homemade tartar sauce. Kathy would be pouring coffee in the Java Cup outpost. And just a block away, the crispy, fried-oil tang of donuts nearly had the power to lure her to Lucy's place, World's Best Donuts. She'd stand in the line that invariably twined out the door, around the corner, and past the realty office waiting for a glazed raised.

She'd never, not once in her first twenty-five years, missed Fish Pic. Until two years ago.

She'd missed everything since then. She swallowed down the tightening in her chest.

"Thank you for taking my call, Miss Foolish Heart. I just wanted to say that I listen to your show every night and that it's helped me wait for the perfect man."

BrokenheartedInBuffalo had a high, sweet voice, the kind that might belong to a college coed with straight blonde hair, blue eyes. But the radio could mask age, race, even gender. Truly, when Issy listened to her podcasts, sometimes she didn't recognize her own voice, the way it softened with compassion, turning low and husky as she counseled listeners.

She could almost trick herself into believing she knew what she

was doing. Trick herself into believing that she lived a different life, one beyond the four walls and garden of her home.

"I'm so glad, Brokenhearted. He's out there. What can I do for you tonight?"

"Well, I think I found him. We met a few weeks ago in a karate class, and we've already had three dates—"

"Three? Brokenhearted, I know that you're probably smitten, but three dates isn't enough to know a man is perfect for you. A great relationship takes—"

"Time, trials, and trust. I know."

So Brokenhearted listened regularly. Good, then maybe Issy could slow her down, help her to part the heady rush of the "love fog"—another of her coined terms.

"Then you also know you don't develop that in three dates, although Miss Foolish Heart does advise calling it quits after three if there is no visible ten potential."

"But it feels like it. He's everything I want."

"How do you know that?"

"I have my top-ten list, just like you said. And of course, the big three."

"Big three essentials. Sounds like you know what you're looking for."

"That's just it—he has *most* of them, and I'm wondering if it's essential for him to have all of them. Isn't . . . let's say, seven out of ten enough?"

"You tell me, Brokenhearted—would you settle for a seven romance? Or do you want a ten?"

"What if I don't know what a ten feels like?"

What a ten feels like. Yes, Issy would like to know that too.

"Good question, Brokenhearted. I think it must be different

for everyone. Stay on the line and let's take some calls and see if anyone has a good answer. Or you can hop over to the forum at the *My Foolish Heart* website—I see that Cupid27 has posted a reply. 'Love feels as if nothing can touch you.' Nice, Cupid27. Any other callers?"

She muted Brokenhearted and clicked on another caller. "TruLuv, you're on the air. What does a ten feel like?"

A gravelly, low voice, the two-pack-a-day kind: "It's knowing you have someone to hold on to."

"Great response, TruLuv. Here's hoping you have someone to hold on to." She muted TruLuv. "Go ahead, WindyCity."

"It's knowing you're loved . . . anyway."

Loved, anyway. Oh, she wanted to believe that was possible. "Love that, WindyCity. Anyone else?"

The forum had come to life, replies piling up. On the phone lines, PrideAndPassion723 appeared. Pride called at least once a month, often with a new dilemma, and kept the forum boards lit up with conversations. Issy should probably give the girl a 1-800 number.

She clicked back to Brokenhearted. "Do any of those replies feel like what you feel?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"Miss Foolish Heart suggests you hold out for the ten, Brokenhearted. The perfect one is out there, maybe right next door."

She went to a commercial break, an advertisement for a chocolate bouquet delivery, and pulled off her headphones, massaging her ears.

Outside, the rain hummed against the house, a steady battering with the occasional ping upon the sill, although now and again it roared, the wind rousing in anger. Hopefully she'd

remembered to close the front windows before she went on the air. Lightning strobed again, and this time silver leaves stripped from the tree, splattered on the window. Oh, her bleeding heart just might be lying flat on the ground, after all the work she'd done to nurture it to life.

The commercial ended.

"I see we have *PrideAndPassion* on the line, hopefully with an update to her latest romance. Thanks for coming back, *Pride*. How are you tonight?"

She'd expected tears—or at the very least a mournful cry of how *Pride* had stalked her boyfriend into some restaurant, found him sharing a low-lit moment with some bimbo. *Pride's* escapades had become the backbone of the show, ratings spiking every time she called in.

"I'm engaged!"

Issy nearly didn't recognize her, not with the lift in her voice, the squeal at the end.

"Kyle popped the question! I did it, *Miss Foolish Heart*—I held out for true love, and last night he showed up on my doorstep with a ring!"

"Oh, that's . . . great, *Pride*." Issy battled the shock from her voice. No, not just shock. Even . . . okay, envy.

Once upon a time, she'd dreamed of finding the perfect man, dreamed of standing on the sidewalk at the Fisherman's Picnic with Lucy, hoping they might be asked to dance under the milky starlight of the August sky. But who had the courage to dance with the football coach's daughter? And as for Lucy, she simply couldn't put her courage together to say yes. Sweet, shy Lucy, she'd used up her courage on one boy.

It only took Lucy's broken heart their senior year to cement

the truth: a girl had to have standards. She had to wait for the perfect love.

Issy had come up with the list then, refined it in college. A good, solid top-ten list, and most important, the big three must-have attributes in a man besides his Christian faith—*compassionate*, *responsible*, and *self-sacrificing*—the super evaluator that told her if she should say yes to a first date.

If any came around. Because she certainly couldn't go out looking for dates, could she?

"Oh, Pride, are you sure?" Silence on the other end. She hadn't exactly meant it to come out with that edge, almost disapproving. "I . . . just mean, is he a ten?"

"I'm tired of waiting for a ten, Miss Foolish Heart. I'm twenty-six years old and I want to get married. I don't want to be an old maid."

Twenty-six. Issy remembered twenty-six, a whole year ago. She'd celebrated her birthday with a jelly-filled bismark that Lucy brought over, and they'd sung ABBA at the top of their lungs.

And as a finale, Issy ventured out to her front steps. Waved to Cindy Myers next door, who happened to be out getting her mail.

Yes, a red-letter day, for sure.

"You're so young, Pride. Twenty-six isn't old."

"It feels old when everyone around you is getting married. I'm ready, and he asked, so I said yes."

Issy drew in a breath. "That's wonderful. We're all happy for you, right, forum?"

The forum, however, lit up with a vivid conversation about settling for anything less than a ten. See? Not a foolish heart among them.

"Good, because . . . I want you to come to the wedding, Miss

Foolish Heart. It's because of you that I found Kyle, and I want you to be there to celebrate with us."

Issy gave a slight chuckle over the air. High and short, it was a ripple of sound that resembled fear. Perfect. "I . . . Thank you for the kind offer, Pride, but—"

"You don't understand. This is going to be a huge wedding. I know we're not supposed to reveal our names on the air, but I am so grateful for your help that you need to know—my father is Gerard O'Grady."

"The governor of California?" Former actor-turned-billionaire-turned-politician?

"Yes." A giggle followed her voice. "We're already planning the wedding—it'll be at our estate in Napa Valley. I want you there, in the front row, with my parents. You've just helped me so much."

"Oh, uh, Pride—"

"Lauren. I'm Lauren O'Grady."

"Okay, Lauren. I'm so sorry, but I can't come."

"Why not?"

Why not? Because every time Issy ventured a block from her house, the world closed in and cut off her breathing? Because she couldn't erase from her brain the smell of her mother's burning flesh, her screams, the feel of hot blood on her hands? Because every time she even thought about getting into a car, she saw dots, broke out in a sweat?

Most of all, because she was still years away from breaking free of the panic attacks that held her hostage.

"Our station's policy is—"

"I'm sure my father could get your station to agree. Please, please don't say no. Just think about it. I'll send you an invitation."

And then she clicked off.

Seconds of dead air passed before Issy found the right voice. “Remember to visit the forum at the *My Foolish Heart* website. This is Miss Foolish Heart saying, your perfect love might be right next door.” She disconnected just as Karen Carpenter’s “Close to You” signaled the close of her show.

Yeah, sure. Once upon a time, she’d actually believed her tagline.

Once upon a time, she’d actually believed in Happily Ever After.

The next show came on—*The Bean*, a late-night sports show out of Chicago that scooped up the scores from the games around the nation. She had no control over what shows surrounded hers and was just glad that she had the right to control some of the ad content.

Stopping by the bathroom, she closed the window, grabbed a towel, and threw it on the subway tile floor, stepping on it with her bare foot. She paused by her parents’ bedroom—it hadn’t seen fresh air for two years, but she still opened the door, let her eyes graze the four-poster double bed, the Queen Anne bureau and dresser, the window that overlooked the garden.

For once, she left the door cracked, then descended the stairs. Front door locked, yes; the parlor windows shut.

Light sparked again across the night, brachials of white that spliced the blackness. It flickered long enough to illuminate the tiny library across the street and the recycle bin on its side, rolling as the wind kicked it down the sidewalk. A half block away, and down the hill toward town, the hanging stoplight suspended above the highway swayed. The storm had turned the intersection into a four-way stop, the red light blinking, bloody upon the glassy pavement.

She pulled a knit afghan off the sofa and wrapped it around herself, letting the fraying edges drag down the wooden floor to the

kitchen. Here, she switched on the light. It bathed the kitchen—the spray of white hydrangeas in a milk glass vase on the round white-and-black table, the black marble countertops, the black-and-white checked floor. Part retro, part contemporary—her mother’s eclectic taste.

Thunder shook the house again, lifting the fine hairs on the back of her neck. How she hated storms.

She snaked a hand out from the blanket, turned on the burner under the teakettle. She’d left the last donut from her daily Lucy delivery upstairs in her office. Her gaze flicked to the index card pasted to the cupboard. *“If God is for us, who can ever be against us?”* Indeed. But what if God wasn’t exactly for you? Still, she wasn’t going to ignore help where she might get it.

Another gust of wind, and something tumbled across her back porch—oh no, not her geraniums. Then, banging on her back door. The glass shuddered.

Why her mother had elected to change out the perfectly good solid oak doors for one solid pane of glass never made sense to her.

The kettle whistled. She turned the flame off, reached for a mug—

A howl, and no, that wasn’t the wind. It sounded . . . wounded. Even afraid.

She swallowed her heart back into her chest. She knew that kind of howl. Especially on a night like this.

Tucking her hand into her blanket, Issy moved to the door, then locked it. She turned off the kitchen light and peered out into the darkness.

No glowing eyes peering back at her, no snaggletoothed monster groping at her window. She flipped on the outside light. It bathed the cedar porch, the cushions of her faded teak furniture

blowing in the wind, held only by their flimsy ties. Her potted geraniums lay toppled, black earth muddy and smeared across the porch, and at the bottom of the steps, the storm had flattened her bleeding heart bush.

At the very least, she should cover her mother's prized Pilgrim roses.

Issy dumped the afghan in a chair, rolled up her pant legs, grabbed a Windbreaker hanging in the closet near the door, and pulled the hood over her head.

Unbolting the door, she eased out into the rain. The air had a cool, slick breath, and it raised gooseflesh on her arms. The deluge had stirred to life the Scotch of her white pine, a grizzled sentry in the far corner, its shaggy arms gesturing danger.

But who would hurt her here, in her backyard? Not only that, but her father had built the Titanic of all fences, with sturdy pine boards that hemmed her in, kept the world out, with the exception of Lucy, who used it as a shortcut on her way to town.

It wasn't like Issy actually locked the gate. Okay, sometimes. Okay, always. But Lucy had a key to the gate as well as the house, so it didn't really matter.

Splashing down the stairs, she dashed across the wet flagstones, past her dripping variegated hosta, the verbena, the hydrangea bush, too many of the buds stripped. The rugosa, too, lay in waste.

She wouldn't look. Not until tomorrow. Sometimes it worked better that way, to focus on what she could save. On what she still had.

Reaching the shed, she dialed the combination and opened it. She grabbed the plastic neatly folded on the rack by the door, scooped up two bricks, and dashed back to the porch. Rain

couldn't quite smatter the roses here, under the overhang. Still, just in case . . . she weighted one end of the plastic with the bricks on the porch, then unfolded it over the flowers. Grabbing stones from the edging of her bed, she secured the tarp, then ran back to the shed for another pair of weights.

The howl tore through the rain again, reverberating through her. She froze, her heart in her mouth.

Something moved. Over by the end of the porch.

The sky chose then to crack open and pour out its rage in a grawl that lifted her feet from the earth.

And not only hers.

Whatever it was—she got only a glimpse—it came straight at her, like she might be prey. She screamed, dropped the bricks, and sprinted for the porch. Her foot slipped on the slick wood and she fell, hard. Her chin cracked against the wood, and then the animal pounced.

“No! Get away!” But it didn't maul her, didn't even stop. Just scrambled toward the door.

The pane of glass waterfalled onto the floor as the beast careened into her kitchen. Issy froze as the animal—huge and hairy—skidded across the linoleum.

It came to a stop, then lay there, whining.

A dog. A huge dog, with a face only a mother could love, eyes filled with terror, wet and muddy from its jowls down.

“Nice doggy . . . nice . . .”

Lightning must have illuminated her, and the animal simply panicked. It turned and shot off through her house. Toenails scratching her polished wood floors.

“Come back!”

In the front parlor, a crash—not the spider plant!

The dog emerged back out into the hall and shot up the stairs.

“No! C'mere, boy!” Issy's bare feet stopped her at the threshold. The glass glistened like ice on the floor. Perfect. “Don't break anything!”

She darted off the porch, around the path of the garden, opened the gate, and ran through the slippery grass to the front of the house.

Thumper the rabbit still hid the key, and now she retrieved it and inserted it into the door.

The squeal of rubber against wet pavement came from her memory—or perhaps she only hoped it did. Then a crash, the splintering of metal, the shattering of glass.

She turned. *No.*

Under the bloody glow of the blinking stoplight, a sedan had T-boned a minivan. Already, gas burned the air.

Her hand went to her face, to the raised memory on her forehead, and she shook her head as if to clear away the images.

She should call 911. But she could only back into her house.

She shut the door and palmed her hands against it, the cool wood comforting. *Just . . . breathe. Just . . .*

Her breath tumbled over her, and she felt the whimper before it bubbled out.

God, please . . . What was her verse? “*If God is for us*” . . . No . . . no, the one Rachele had given her. “*God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power—*”

She heard shouts and closed her eyes, pressed her hand to her chest, heat pouring through her.

Just breathe.

Issy slid to the floor.

You're safe. Don't panic. Just breathe.



Caleb Knight had been in Deep Haven less than three hours and God had given him his first opportunity to be a hero.

“How many people in there?” The petroleum odor of the asphalt poured through him as he laid his cheek against the ground, peering into the overturned Caravan. The driver hung upside down, his belt securing him. A laceration separated his eyebrow, dripping blood into his scalp, his skin white and pasty. He opened his mouth, but nothing emerged.

Already the rain plastered Caleb’s T-shirt to his body, his jeans turning to paste, stiffening his movements. Good thing he’d finished moving in the last of his boxes and fallen asleep fully clothed in a heap on the sofa or he’d never have reached the accident so fast.

But that crash, practically right outside his front door, could have woken the dead.

“Sir, look at me. Who else is with you?” Getting the victim talking and focused aided in preventing shock.

“My wife . . . my . . .”

Good, the man could speak. Shining his flashlight, Caleb located a woman, unconscious—at least he hoped just unconscious—hanging upside down and bleeding from a wound in her scalp. In the seat behind her hung a toddler still strapped in her car seat. He guessed the child was about three years old and when he flicked his light over her, she jerked, then screamed.

The driver—probably the father—came to life. He clawed at his belt. “Jamie!”

Caleb grabbed his hand. “I’ll get her! Let’s get you free.” Glass glittered in the frame of the door like teeth, so Caleb shucked off his shirt, wrapped it around his hand, and broke the shards free

before he reached in past the man, searching for his belt buckle. “Put your arms around me—I’ll try to catch you, but brace yourself.” He unlatched the buckle. The man slumped against him. Caleb hooked his hands around his shoulders and backed out, pulling the man with him.

Thank You, God—he didn’t fall.

The toddler’s screams tore at Caleb as he hobbled away, the man’s arm latched over his shoulder.

“My daughter—my wife!”

“I’ll get them. Stay here.”

He set the man on the curb, then glanced down the darkened road, dead and eerie this time of night. Where were the police? Across the street, the other car had begun to flame. He ran over to it, found the driver—a young man the size of a has-been linebacker who reeked like he’d taken the pub home with him—slumped at the wheel. Caleb pressed two fingers to his carotid artery but found no pulse.

The flames flickered under the hood, stabbing out like blades around the edges. He tried the door once. It wouldn’t move, so he left it.

Where was the fire department?

The rain slickened the pavement, more so for him, but he scrambled back to the passenger side of the Caravan. He’d done a few vehicle extractions while in Iraq, but then he’d had tools, of course. He leaned in but the woman’s girth wouldn’t allow him access. He slid his hand across her belly, trying to find the buckle and—

Pregnant. The woman was pregnant. *Oh, God, please . . .*

Behind them, the toddler’s frantic howls ate at him. “C’mon!” He stifled a word, even as he tried once more to reach the

woman's belt. When he yanked his arm back, his hand came away wet, sticky.

Blood.

Caleb pressed his fingers to the woman's carotid artery. Yes, a pulse. For now. "Ma'am, wake up."

"It's on fire—the van's on fire!" The voice of the panicked father raked him out of the passenger window. The gasoline from the other car bled a lethal trail to the Caravan, and eye-biting smoke blew into the window on the driver's side.

Caleb tried the back passenger door, fought with it. Nothing. He put his weight into it. They'd need Jaws . . .

The child's cries turned hysterical and galvanized him. He turned his back to the van, then, with everything inside him, put his elbow through the window.

Pain spiked up his arm, but he whirled around, sliding over the shattered glass. Flames had already begun to devour the seats, the ceiling fabric, churning acrid smoke into the cab. The toddler thrashed in her seat. He unlatched the first thing he saw—the buckle holding the seat. Catching the car seat, he dragged it out behind him, the toddler still strapped inside.

The father struggled to his feet, and Caleb practically shoved the child into his arms. "Get back!"

"My wife—she's pregnant—"

Now—*finally*—sirens. Only the man's wife didn't have time, not with the flames moving swiftly across the ceiling.

God, please don't let her burn! Caleb dove inside again, this time shoving himself against the woman, fighting for a handhold on the buckle. He touched it. It sizzled on his skin, but he depressed it.

The woman fell hard against him. He backed out of the

window, grabbed her shoulders. He needed more leverage. He would have braced his foot against the vehicle, but of course, he couldn't do that—not and keep his balance.

You have to get used to the fact that you can't do the things you could before.

Collin's voice in his brain only strengthened Caleb's grip on the woman. He pulled her through the window, but her belly scraped against the frame, imprisoning her.

She roused fast, hard, her eyes on his. "I'm burning—I'm burning!"

Burning.

No, he wouldn't go there.

He found his medic's tone, the one he'd honed in Iraq. "I'll get you out." Preserve life in the living. Yes, *that* voice he'd listen to.

A fire engine pulled up, firefighters swarming onto the scene.

She gripped his upper arms, her eyes wide. "Don't leave me—pull me out! Pull me out!"

He forced her body through the window even as she screamed.

Then water. He heard it more than felt it, the rush killing the fire, spitting into the Caravan, drenching him as he slipped, hit the ground.

He nearly cried out as his knee twisted. He struggled to push the woman away, wrenching his leg even more out of whack.

"We have survivors over here!"

He pushed up, lifting himself onto his good knee. Turned to the woman.

An EMT knelt beside her, her blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. "We need a stretcher over here!" She glanced at Caleb, at the way he held himself, probably at the angry rumpled skin up his rib cage, his arm and shoulder. "Where are you injured, sir?"

He didn't even know where to begin to answer, but that wasn't really her question. "I wasn't in the accident. I'm fine."

Confusion swept across her face; then she turned away, gesturing at two firemen who appeared with a litter to carry the woman to the curb.

Caleb made it to his feet and followed them, limping.

The EMT gave him another stray glance. "You sure you're okay, sir?"

"What took you guys so long?" Behind him, water had killed the fire, the generator for the Jaws of Life growling into the night as it gnawed open the door of the dead driver.

She frowned at him. "We're volunteers. Seven minutes isn't a terrible response time, considering that most of us were in our pajamas. You got a complaint, talk to the chief."

She gestured to a firefighter, the one with the white hat, and Caleb took a breath, hobbled over to the man. One look told him that *volunteer* was the operative word. Paunchy, with a day's beard growth and tired eyes, the man looked like someone had dragged him out of his feather bed, where he'd been hibernating.

He glanced at Caleb. "You okay, sir?"

"No, I'm not—I want to know why it took you guys seven minutes to get here."

The man pursed his lips and turned away to supervise the removal of the other victim. "Joe, what do you see?"

The firefighter turned, appearing undone by the accident. "It's Zach Miller." He shook his head.

What looked like real pain flashed across the chief's face. He faced Caleb again. "Are you new in town?"

His question swiped the anger from Caleb. "Uh . . . yeah. I'm the new football coach. Just got here tonight."

The chief stared at him, his eyes narrowing for a second. “Then you should probably know that kid in the car was one of the best defensive tackles in the state a couple years back. And now all his parents and the town are going to remember about him is that he died nearly killing three people.”

Caleb had no words for that.

An officer wearing a rain slicker sidled up to them. “Pastor, you want me to talk to the parents?”

The chief shook his head. “I know Marci and Greg. I’ll tell them.”

Pastor? Caleb gave the man a long look. He could appreciate a preacher who ministered with action as well as words.

Caleb turned, watching the EMTs trundle the woman, now sedated, into the ambulance, the lights splashing red and yellow across the nightmare. “I’m sorry about the kid.” He didn’t look at the pastor.

“I hate this intersection. In the winter, or whenever it rains, that hill is like a sheet of ice. It’s killed more people than I want to think about.” The chief blew out a breath. “Listen—you probably saved that whole family tonight. But if you have a complaint, feel free to get involved. Come down to the station, join the crew.” He took off a glove and held out his hand. “Dan Matthews.”

Caleb met his grip, nonplussed by the chief’s offer. Maybe the darkness hid him more than he suspected. “Caleb Knight.”

“Nice to meet you, Coach.”

Coach. Yes, that had a ring to it Caleb craved. “I would love to, but . . .” That part of his life was over, despite his desire to save lives, to invest in people. “I don’t think so.”

“Shame. We could use someone with your instincts.”

Caleb backed away to the curb.

The blonde EMT shut the back of the rig. “You should get that leg looked at.”

Yeah, he should do that.

But frankly, he spent way too much time looking at his leg. Or perhaps trying not to. That was the battle, wasn't it?

The rain began to slack as he limped home. He hadn't realized how smack in the center of town he lived—on the corner a half block up the hill from the highway intersection, with a view of the lake, and within walking distance to the library, grocery store, gas station, and coffee shop. And on the other side of the highway, a quaint downtown that overlooked Lake Superior.

Maybe here he could find a new life. A fresh start. A place where people saw Caleb Knight, not his scars.

The porch light sprayed over the backyard of the house next door, although the lights upstairs had switched off since he'd moved the last box in.

Maybe the neighbor, too, had voices in his head that kept him thrashing away the night hours.

Your life is different now, but you'll get used to it.

There's no shame.

You're a hero for your country.

Your disability can be a good thing, if you let it.

Yeah, sure it could. Although it had opened his eyes to God's grace, to second chances, and set his focus on being the man he should have been. The man he would be.

But it didn't make it any easier to sleep. Not when the sounds and smells of the desert, the taste of fear and his own tinny blood, could crawl back to haunt him. Hence his addiction to late-night talk shows. They filled his brain with sounds that couldn't hurt.

Hopefully he could get an Internet connection, pick up *The Bean*.

Caleb steadied himself on the porch rail as he climbed the steps. He stopped to rest, to breathe deep. He had to get inside before someone saw him.

Then again, it had to be close to midnight. Who would see the new football coach limping to his house?

He opened his door and went inside.

Closing it, he braced himself on the side table. Ten more steps. He could do ten more steps.

No . . . he couldn't, not with the heat in his leg nearly making him howl. He turned around, leaned his back against the door, and collapsed to the floor. Fighting with his cuff, he tried to pull up his pant leg. Shoot, he couldn't get at it . . .

So he unbuckled his belt and peeled down his jeans. Then, with hands that shook, he reached down and rolled off the elastic sock that connected his transtibial amputation to his artificial leg.

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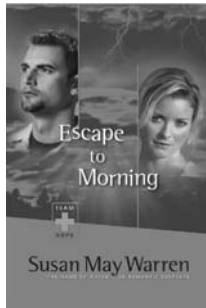
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