

FREE
SERIES
PREQUEL
INSIDE

a
Christiansen Family
novel

*It
Had
to be
You*

SUSAN MAY
WARREN

Christy Award-winning author

Praise for Susan May Warren

“A gem of a story, threaded with truth and hope, laughter and romance. Susan May Warren brings the Christiansen family to life, as if they might be my family or yours, with her smooth writing and engaging storytelling.”

RACHEL HAUCK, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE WEDDING DRESS*

“Warren’s new series launch has it all: romance, suspense, and intrigue. It is sure to please her many fans and win her new readers, especially those who enjoy Terri Blackstock.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Warren . . . has crafted an engaging tale of romance, rivalry, and the power of forgiveness.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Warren once again creates a compelling community full of vivid individuals whose anguish and dreams are so real and relatable, readers will long for every character to attain the freedom their hearts desire.”

BOOKLIST

“*Take a Chance on Me* is the first of six books in this new series from prolific author Susan May Warren—and I couldn’t be more excited! I’ve already fallen in love with the Christiansen family . . . and I can’t wait to see how Warren brings true and lasting love into the lives of Darek’s two brothers and three sisters.”

SERENA CHASE, *USA TODAY*

“A compelling story of forgiveness and redemption, *Take a Chance on Me* will have readers taking a chance on each beloved character!”

CBA RETAILERS+RESOURCES

“Warren’s latest is a touching tale of love discovered and the meaning of family.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“Susan May Warren pens a delightful story of heartache and healing in her latest Deep Haven novel, which introduces the Christiansen family and a new series of contemporary romance tales.”

RELZREVIEWZ.COM



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

KAREN KINGSBURY, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“I’m proud of Susie; my friend gets better with every book.”

DEE HENDERSON, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“Warren handles well the many facets of lives intertwined by love, hope, and tragedy.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Warren’s characters are well-developed, and she knows how to create a first-rate contemporary romance.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“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

“An eminently readable story, perfect for book clubs. . . .”

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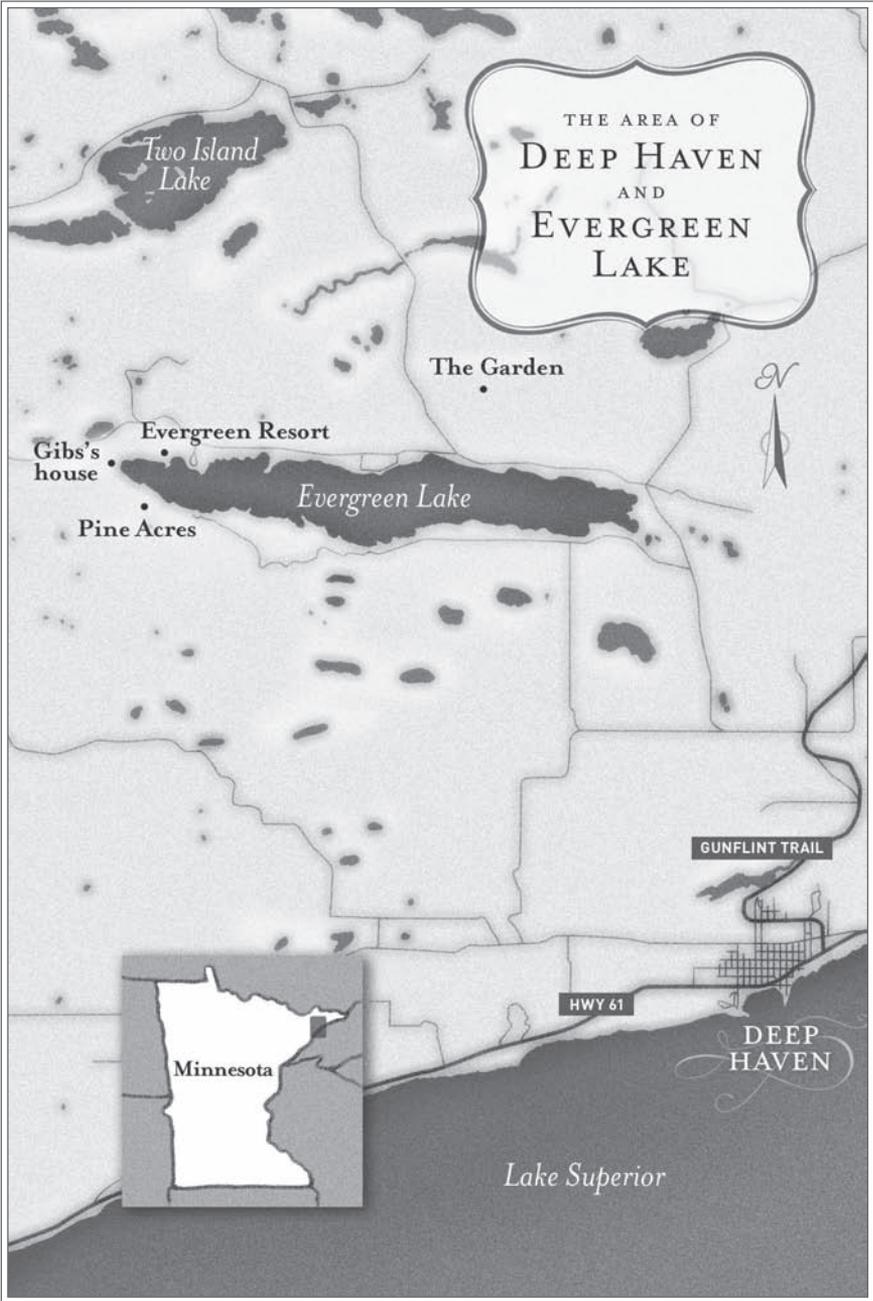
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THE AREA OF
DEEP HAVEN
AND
EVERGREEN LAKE

Two Island Lake

The Garden

Gibs's house
Evergreen Resort
Pine Acres

Evergreen Lake

GUNFLINT TRAIL

HWY 61

DEEP HAVEN

Minnesota

Lake Superior



My dearest Eden,

I suppose, someday, after I have passed, you will dig through my journals and happen upon this letter. I pray that it finds you as amazed at the life God has gifted to you as I was when I discovered a daughter in my arms.

In truth, Eden, I thought you would be a son. In fact, I feared having a daughter because I didn't know how to parent a little girl. Not yet, having only Darek for experience. I quickly discovered not only that you were not Darek, but that having a daughter would become one of my greatest delights. I saw myself in your curiosity, and when, at the tender age of two, you climbed onto my lap holding a book and said, "Read to me, Mommy," I knew you would be special.

While Darek stretched my faith, you, Daughter, taught me to enjoy the journey. I relished the moments when you would wrap your arms around my neck, meet my eyes, and tell me a story. "Mommy, wait until you hear what happened to me today." Whether it was the discovery of a bird's nest in the yard or one of your siblings (probably Casper) digging themselves into trouble, you knew how to rivet me to your every word.

You've always been a storyteller, Eden, but more than that, you can look at someone and find the good in them, something to believe in. And if you can't see it, you simply create it. You give your heart wholly to the ones you love, are

It Had to Be You

fiercely loyal, and don't know how to let them fail. More, you blame yourself when they disappoint you.

This may be your biggest challenge. Because I fear that for all your ability to see the potential in others, you're blind to it in yourself. You see your value only in what you bring to your siblings, your friends, your world, instead of believing in the remarkable woman you are, in the person God created.

For some reason, you believe you are a failure. Only you believe this. And only you can change that belief.

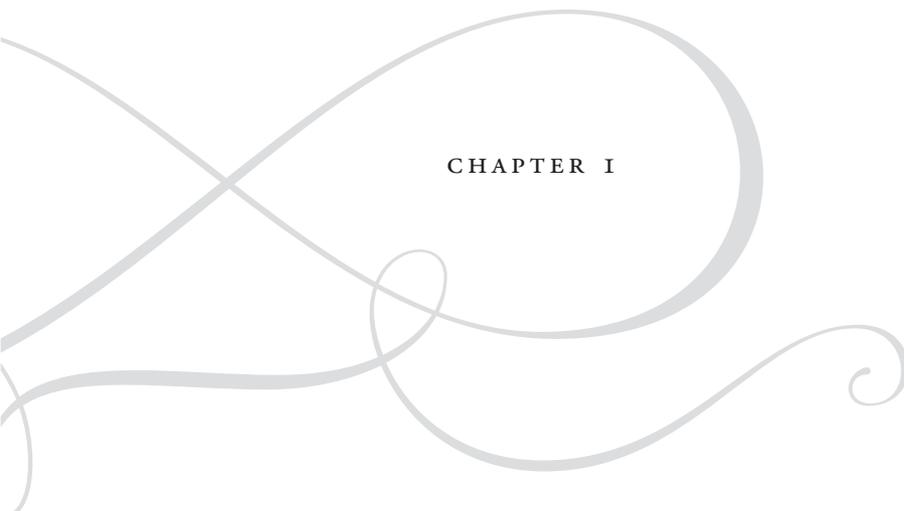
As a child, you would spend your free time buried in a book, hiding in other worlds, other lives. I believe you are still hiding. That it feels easier, perhaps, to believe you aren't as amazing as your siblings. But you don't have to change the world to earn the applause of heaven.

My prayer for you is that you would believe God has a good story for you, too. Because only then will you truly hear the voice of God, telling you what He told me years ago when He put you in my arms:

"I will take delight in her. I will rejoice over her with joyful songs" (Zephaniah 3:17).

I pray you hear the delight of your Savior, Daughter, as we have been delighted with you.

*Always,
Your mother*



CHAPTER I

EDEN CHRISTIANSEN'S CAREER, her love life—even her car battery, for that matter—were frozen stiffer than the late-January cold snap encasing the city of Minneapolis. Icy black snow edged the curbs, and the pavement glistened with salty grit. Breath hung between every conversation.

The blue-mercury windchill blew through the thin-paned windows of Stub and Herbs, a restaurant located a couple blocks from the offices of her old haunt, the *Minnesota Daily* newspaper.

Back then, Eden would wander over for a burger after a week of reporting and find her cohorts gathered around a fresh issue of the paper, newsprint on their fingers, arguing over the editorials and who had landed stories above the fold.

Back then, it was only a matter of time before she found the

It Had to Be You

perfect story to earn herself a real byline. Back then, her career was hot. Her future was hot.

Maybe even *she* was hot.

Now, in a white down parka, a lime-green woolen cap, and a pair of sensible black UGGs, she looked like she might be dressed for dogsledding through the streets of Minneapolis.

No wonder her date's attention fell upon the gaggle of under-dressed college girls who pushed through the frosted doors, young and hopeful as they thumbed the screens of their iPhones. They walked up to the long wooden bar and waved to friends seated at a nearby table. Overhead, a flat-screen TV spilled out the news; another showed ESPN highlights.

She should have tried harder to put a little flame into dinner with Russell. What if his out-of-the-blue invitation was the real thing and had nothing at all to do with her brother Owen's recent trade from the Minnesota Wild to the new Blue Ox NHL franchise in St. Paul?

"I really like the blue cheese burger," Eden said, perusing the menu.

Now Russell's attention was on the ESPN coverage of the NHL stats.

Shoot. She closed the menu.

Who was she kidding? This wasn't a real date. She could see right through Russell Hays. Until last week, the mortician had spoken to her three times a week as if she were his personal secretary rather than the obits clerk. Then Owen Christiansen became the new superstar face of the Blue Ox, and out of nowhere, Russell had sent her an e-mail. Not the classiest way to ask for a date, but he'd followed it up with a Starbucks-coffee-and-malted-milk-ball gift basket.

And he wasn't exactly hard on the eyes. Funeral directors should be short, squirrely men with comb-overs and bad polyester suits. But Russell didn't fit that description either.

Tonight he looked like a man who actually meant his words: *I know we haven't really gotten to know each other over the past four years, but would you like to have dinner?* He wore a pedestrian red sweater, but with his brown eyes and short, curly blond hair, he could be a sort of L.L.Bean model. He wasn't a big man—probably slimmer than she and just as tall—but he had wide shoulders, and he'd held the door open for her and crooked his elbow out as if she needed help trekking to the restaurant over the icy parking lot despite her sturdy UGGs.

The thought counted.

However, the sparks stopped there. They'd shared a sum total of four sentences since sitting down, and now—

"Last week's snowstorm sure kept us busy," Russell said over the top of his own menu.

Really? They were going to talk shop?

Fine. She'd play along. At least it would take her mind off the trouble Owen might be finding tonight.

Oh, she'd promised herself she wouldn't think about Owen. Behind the wheel of his new Dodge Charger. Not an expensive car, but Owen's first, and it had gone straight to his 3.1-million-dollar-contract brain.

"My parents said that it would be a banner year for them if they were finished rebuilding their resort," Eden offered.

Russell closed the menu, and his gaze caught on a couple college jocks who sauntered in and took seats on the black leather stools at the bar. One wore a U of MN sweatshirt. Hockey players. Eden could tell by their long hair brushing their collars, the hint

It Had to Be You

of beard, the swagger. Minnesota grew hockey players like pine trees—big, strong, and everywhere.

Russell turned his attention back to her. “Rebuilding?”

“Our resort on Evergreen Lake burned last summer during the wildfires.”

“I’m so sorry.” He fiddled with his watch, a Rolex, gold with a blue face. It looked similar to one that Owen wore, but his had been a Blue Ox signing gift.

“It’s okay. My brother Darek is heading up the rebuild. It’s going to be spectacular: a sauna, a playground, Wi-Fi, and brand-new cabins—all state-of-the-art.”

“Sounds spectacular indeed.” Russell leaned back in the chair, gave her a smile. It touched his eyes. “I didn’t know you were from northern Minnesota.”

He said it as if he meant it. As if he hadn’t scanned the player pages online and picked out every tidbit of information about Owen. Eden cupped her coffee mug, warming her hands. “I went to the University of Minnesota, and I live here, but I go home as often as I can.”

Which, for the last four years, hadn’t been often, with Owen’s junior hockey schedule and then his development years with the Wild’s AHL franchise. He’d finally seen real ice time last year, and she’d acted as the Christiansen family emissary to his games. That, and maybe more, she could admit.

The door opened and another coed strutted in, bringing the chill with her, looking smart and successful, a messenger bag over her shoulder, a golden future ahead of her. Eden glanced at her and then to Russell, expecting his gaze to be on the brunette.

Nope. He was smiling at her. “I’ve been wanting to ask you out since that first day you answered the phone at the obits desk.”

He had?

“I’m sorry it’s taken so long.” He had nice teeth, a warm smile. So he wasn’t a big guy—she liked guys who seemed approachable. Human.

Maybe he wasn’t here trying to score tickets to a Blue Ox game. Eden shrugged her parka off her shoulders.

“When Charlotte mentioned she had hired an obits clerk, I guess I thought it would be some temp girl—”

“I’m a reporter.”

Oh, why had she corrected him? She wanted to snatch it back. In truth, Eden was more a classified sales representative selling line ads, not a reporter. And she was starting to think she never would be, after four years at the obits desk. When she’d taken the job at the *Star Trib*, she’d thought it might be a jumping-off place to opportunities in metro or even features.

But it was just a matter of time. The right story. Someday, she would land on the front page with her own byline, be just as amazing as her siblings.

“Of course. Reporter.” Russell looked uncomfortable now, shifting in his chair. His gaze drifted up to the television over the bar. The news was on—the sports report. No hockey game tonight or she would have had other plans.

“I wrote a couple pieces for the remembrance section last year.”

“I remember,” he said. “Your editor was in Hawaii.”

Yes. Which meant Eden had gotten her big opportunity to follow her gut on a couple of the notices that came across her desk. One led to a two-column article on a World War II veteran. The other on a librarian who’d founded a tiny mobile library.

So it wasn’t riveting, life-changing news. *Your articles belong in*

It Had to Be You

Ladies' Home Journal, *not on the front page*. The metro editor's words still stung a year later.

"I remember that piece you did on Mr. McFarland," Russell went on. "The family had it framed at their father's funeral."

"I just took your information and rewrote it. It's not really reporting. But I won't be in obits forever. You'll see."

In her pocket, Eden's phone vibrated. She fished it out in time to see Owen's number moved to missed calls. She noted two previous ones and frowned.

"Everything okay?"

She nodded but put the phone on the table. "Owen's at a private birthday bash for one of the Blue Ox players tonight. I'm not sure why he's calling me."

"Do you need to go?"

"Of course not. He's a big boy."

"Whose birthday is it?"

"Jace Jacobsen, the team captain." Also known as the team troublemaker and Owen's idol. She had a secret hunch that Owen's eagerness to join the Blue Ox had something to do with skating with his childhood hero.

She considered Russell for a moment. "I got an invitation . . . I guess we can go if you want."

He stared at her for a second; then a half smile hitched up his face. "No . . ."

She didn't mean to let out an audible sigh, but there it was, and along with it died more of her suspicions that he might be just like every other man she'd dated in the past year.

Truth was, she could wear a bag over her face, shuffle around in burlap, and she'd still have a lineup of dates. But a real relationship with a man who might like her? Listen to her? Really see her,

instead of walking by her in a crowd? Choose her over hockey? Right. One mention of Owen and she knew what her date wanted: box seats.

But maybe Russell was different.

“Unless you want to go,” he finished.

She forced a smile. Shook her head.

“You know, you should try to get a job as a sports reporter. With your connections, you could get exclusives with the Blue Ox.”

“Yeah, our sports guy would like that. What—I’m going to walk into the locker room after the game, interview the players as they peel off their gear? No thanks.”

A frown touched his eyes.

“Sorry.” Maybe it wasn’t all Owen’s fault she couldn’t get beyond date number one. She simply walked into every relationship with her dukes up. No wonder she spent most nights alone, reading or writing in her journal.

Her phone vibrated again. She glanced at it, then at Russell.

“Take it,” he said.

Eden answered. Heard music, then yelling. “Hello?”

Nothing. She raised her voice. “Owen?”

More music, then, “Eden, is this you?”

She could barely make out the voice. “Yeah!” Oops, she was yelling on her side.

“It’s Kalen. I . . . I shouldn’t be calling, but I think you need to get over here.”

Kalen Boomer, the Blue Ox goalie. As young and talented as Owen, and the other blond, blue-eyed star of the team. “What? Why do you have Owen’s phone?”

“He’s had a little too much to drink.”

It Had to Be You

What kind of prank were they pulling on her? “Very funny, Kalen. Ha-ha.” She was pulling the phone away to hang up when she heard it.

Singing. A warped version of Elvis, loud and boisterous and . . . Oh no. She put the phone to her ear. “Seriously?”

“He won’t listen to us. Maybe if you come down here, you can get him home.”

“I’ll be right there.” She pressed End.

“What’s the matter?” Russell said.

She shook her head, still staring at her phone. For three years Owen had managed to keep his nose clean, show up early for practice, and become a stellar rookie player. Now, two months into his new contract, she almost didn’t recognize her kid brother. It seemed that Owen’s fame had rushed straight to his naive, small-town head.

“Can I drive you somewhere?” Russell had leaned forward, his kind brown eyes full of concern.

She took a breath. “Would you mind driving me to Sammy’s Bar and Grill in St. Paul?”

“Sure.” He reached for his leather jacket.

Eden led the way out to the parking lot, the wind not touching the anger heating her cheeks. What if Owen got in trouble or drove drunk? His name would appear on the front pages—or at least the police reports—and destroy everything he’d worked for.

Russell opened the door for her, and she climbed into his Nissan Pathfinder, hitting the seat heater button as he got in and started the car. “Thank you.”

“It’s no problem.”

“It’s that stupid Jace Jacobsen,” Eden said, staring out the window. “He’s a bad influence on Owen. Almost since Owen could lace up his skates, he’s wanted to be like J-Hammer.”

“And why not? The guy is a beast on the ice,” Russell said, turning onto the highway. “And he didn’t get his reputation for nothing. In his rookie season, he got in a fight with a legend and flattened him. And when he joined the Blue Ox three years ago, he launched the franchise. There’s a reason he’s the captain—he totally intimidates the other team, and with him on the ice, players know to back off. Last season alone he had 310 penalty minutes. You should be glad he’s there to protect Owen from dirty hits.”

“Are you a Blue Ox fan?”

“I live in Minnesota,” Russell said. “I also root for the Wild, the Vikings, the Timberwolves, the Gophers, the Bulldogs, and the Twins.”

“Right,” she said. “Of course. I’m probably overreacting about Owen.”

“J-Hammer’s rep isn’t just on the ice, and we all know it. He’s dated more supermodels than a man has a right to, and last year, he made *Hockey Today’s* twenty-five most eligible bachelors.”

If you liked scars and the dark expression of a man who lived for violence. At least he had all his teeth. Still, she wasn’t impressed by the so-called team captain, and the last thing she wanted was Owen turning out like J-Hammer Jacobsen.

Except what was she going to do? Drag Owen home by his ear? He wasn’t ten; he didn’t need her babysitting him.

Or did he?

They cut off the highway, toward downtown St. Paul, and Russell drove like he knew the way. Sammy’s was a sports bar located on University, near the arena where the Blue Ox played and practiced. As Russell parked his car, she spotted Owen’s Charger in the lot across the street.

“Thanks, Russell,” she said as she climbed out.

It Had to Be You

“Do you need any help?” he asked, and she tested his words for sincerity. Not that he didn’t want to help her, but maybe . . . Oh, see, she read into everything.

He was a nice guy. And she’d blown this entire date. “I’m just going to get him and drive him home. We’ll be fine.”

Russell didn’t protest, only nodded. “Sorry about this.”

“You’re sorry? I’m the one who is sorry. I’ll make it up to you. Maybe get us a couple tickets to a game.”

He shrugged. “Can I call you again?”

“Yes, please.”

The cold swirled around her legs and up the back of her jacket as she stood there letting a perfectly good date drive away. She swallowed, regret like a boulder in her throat. This was a bad idea—the last person Owen would want to see was his big sister.

It didn’t matter. Apparently tonight someone had to watch his back, and that’s what sisters did. Eden turned up her collar and marched across the street.

Sammy’s Bar and Grill hosted one of the largest collections of hockey paraphernalia in Minnesota. The pub had been an old shipping warehouse, its grand windows now lit up with neon beer signs. Inside the brick-and-mortar interior, promo posters, signed pictures, goalie equipment, and framed team sweaters plastered the walls. Flat screens hung from the ceiling and were tucked into every nook, televising games from around the nation.

The owner, Sam Newton, had played eight seasons as a Minnesota Wild defenseman before being sidelined by a hip injury. Now he lived out the action from behind the long oak bar.

As Eden entered, the sweaty heat and raucous noise flooded over her. The odors of too much cologne, fried foods, and chaos tightened her stomach. Bodies pushed against each other, and she

heard the chanting even as she stood at the entrance and looked over the crowd.

“Fight! Fight!”

Perfect. She plowed through the onlookers, ignoring the protests, dreading what she heard—the familiar sounds of men hitting each other, laughing, huffing as they tumbled onto the floor.

She reached the edge of the brawl and there he was. Owen, power forward for the St. Paul Blue Ox, with a button ripped off his shirt, his long hair over his face, his nose bleeding, writhing as right wing Maxwell Sharpe caught him in a headlock.

“Tap out!” Max yelled.

Oh no. Eden watched as Owen flipped him over, broke free, and found his feet, his eyes too bright.

“Eden!” Kalen caught her arm. “We have to get him out of here.” He wore a black Blue Ox T-shirt, a plastic lei around his neck. And he had cut his hair into what looked like a Mohawk. Nice.

“Where are his keys?”

“Jace took them. He’s at the bar. I’ll get Owen’s coat.”

She turned and found the hulking form of Jace “J-Hammer” Jacobsen sitting at the bar.

Someone, probably the Blue Ox PR department, had tamed the beast, at least for tonight, dressing him up like a gentleman in a pair of black wool pants and a silver dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up over his strong, sculpted forearms. Up close, she could admit that—for others—he possessed a raw-edged, almost-dangerous allure that might have the ability to steal a girl’s breath. Maybe *Hockey Today* magazine hadn’t been completely wrong about putting him in its lineup. His dark, curly hair fell in tangles behind his ears, as if groomed by a fierce wind, and he’d close-trimmed

It Had to Be You

his dark beard. His fitted dress shirt only accentuated all his cut muscle and brawn, but she knew he had the finesse of a skater, smooth and liquid on blades. And his eyes—blue as ice—yes, they could look right through a gal, send a shiver through her.

But Eden was immune to Mr. J-Trouble and his apparently lethal smile. Because she wasn't a rink bunny, wasn't a crazed fan. Wasn't dazzled by the star power of one of hockey's top enforcers. She was family, thank you, here for one reason only.

Owen.

Yes, Eden was made of ice, and Trouble hadn't a prayer of thawing her anger. She marched up to Jace. "Nice birthday bash. If Owen gets in trouble and kicked back down to the AHL, it's on you."

"Hey!" Jace turned, looking backhanded.

But she didn't plan on listening to his lame excuses. "You're the team captain. Who else is supposed to watch Owen's back?"

He rebounded fast. "Are you kidding me? You're not his mother or his trainer. He's just blowing off steam. Trust me. Your brother can watch his own back."

"Really? This is watching his own back?" She gestured at Owen, who had grabbed an eager girl, begun to slow dance. If that's what she could call it. "Who gave him alcohol, anyway?"

"Seriously?"

"He's underage. He doesn't turn twenty-one for three months."

Jace raised a brow at that.

"Yeah, that's right. And if he makes the papers—"

But Jace's eyes tracked past her, to the door.

Eden followed his gaze. And the terrible roaring of anger inside stopped on the burly image of Ramsey Butler, Blue Ox manager, sliding into a booth.

Kalen appeared with Owen's coat. "You distract Butler, Eden, and we'll get Owen out the back."

She gaped at him. "*Distract* him? How?"

Jace slid off the stool, towering nearly a foot over her. "Flirt with him or something."

Flirt—oh, for crying out loud. "Fine. Get Owen to his car, but don't let him drive." She shrugged out of her coat and draped it over the chair. Flirt. Right . . . But what choice did she have? As long as this was the one and only time. Besides, truth was, she would do anything to protect Owen's future.

She looked like a mortician in her black pants and white blouse, but maybe Butler wouldn't notice. She still had game, right? After all, tonight she'd had a date.

Maybe she was hotter than she thought. Eden put a little sashay into her walk, feeling stupid, but making her way to the booth. "Hello there, Mr. Butler. Nice to see you tonight."

In his midforties, Butler had his own reputation to manage—the kind that traded players midseason and fired those who embarrassed the newborn franchise. Eden managed not to look behind her as she stood at the booth, blocking his view of Owen. She added a smile, propped a hand on her hip. Tried to look . . . flirty.

He looked up from where he perused the menu. "I'll take an appetizer basket of curly fries and a Guinness on tap."

She stilled. "Huh?"

"And what are your specials?"

So much for flirting. She glanced at the chalkboard over the bar. "Uh, fish-and-chips and a cheddar bratwurst?"

"I'll just have the bacon cheeseburger."

"Good choice. How do you want that done?" Now she glanced

It Had to Be You

back and saw Kalen with his arm over Owen, directing him through the kitchen entrance.

“Rare. And bring out some of Sam’s special mayo sauce.”

“You got it.”

She quick-walked to the bar, grabbed her parka, and stepped out into the frigid cold.

Jace stood over Owen, barring him from opening his car door. Owen put up a meager fight, then let Kalen maneuver him to the passenger seat and buckle him in.

Eden shook her head and held out her hand. Jace set the keys in it.

She closed her hand around them. “I know I should say thanks, but frankly, you should do better. You’re some *captain*. Is this how you take care of your players? Or maybe this is what you want—for them to all turn out like *you*.” Then she opened the door and climbed in, ignoring Jace’s glare. “Owen, what were you—?”

Owen turned to her, wearing a green expression. And then his double-mushroom-and-Swiss cheeseburger, curly fries, and about a fifth of whiskey mixed with the sweet syrup of Coke landed on her lap.

“Thanks for coming to get me, Sis.”



The Blue Ox should never have named him captain when they signed him. Not with his reputation, and not with his career sinking into a slow, deep freeze.

Jace sat at the end of the bar in a darkened corner near the kitchen, counting the seconds on his Rolex, waiting until the last of the rink bunnies threw in the towel and headed home.

Alone.

They sat at the far end of the bar, a trio of danger—blonde, redhead, brunette. He knew the blonde, the one wearing a white jacket with fur at the neck, unzipped enough to show exactly what he might be turning down. Haylee. She worked for the local ESPN outfit and seemed to possess a sort of hockey radar that put her at every private Blue Ox shindig. She cut a glance his direction and he looked away.

No thank you. The society page could find other fodder for gossip—especially with the flock of good-looking rookies in search of some new fans.

Not only that, but he'd given up any hope of a real relationship with a woman, the kind who might see past the headlines, the limelight, to the truth inside.

No woman wanted to stick around for that.

Hockey players were trouble. He'd started to believe that his rookie year, and Owen Christiansen fed every stereotype. Still, Owen could handle himself despite tonight's debacle. He almost felt sorry for the kid after facing his sister in the parking lot.

Eden Christiansen. He'd heard her name a few times in the locker room, seen her hovering after practice. Pretty, with her blonde hair. Not tall, a little curvy. Okay, so he'd noticed her more than once, entertained the thought of talking to her. However, after today, he'd keep his distance from Owen's personal bodyguard and overprotective representative of the Christiansen clan.

Except she had probably saved them all from a scandalous front-page appearance.

Still, he hadn't deserved the parting shot. He'd stared into those green eyes, ripe with fury, and for a second he'd felt punched, right in his solar plexus. He didn't have a hope of defending himself

It Had to Be You

against the likes of Eden Christiansen. Not with her opinion of him already cemented.

At the end of the bar, Haylee slid off her stool and started toward him, her hands tucked into her pockets, her hips swaying.

His head hammered right behind his eyes, his pulse beating in his throat. Oh, this wouldn't be pretty.

"Take this. I'll get rid of Haylee." Sam set a coffee cup in front of him, rich with the smell of leaves and twigs. "It's Holy Tea. Good for migraines. Try it." He slid a couple of tablets across the counter too, then rounded the bar, intercepting Haylee. He wasn't a big guy like Jace, but everyone loved Sam Newton. It probably had something to do with his nine-year-old princess, Maddy, who had surely inherited her father's smile. But the girlie grace had been all Mia.

Jace had half expected Maddy to appear tonight for his party, but that wouldn't be appropriate for a little girl. Besides, with the frigid cold, she needed to be safe at home, tucked into bed.

Jace watched out of the corner of his eye as his best friend worked his magic and herded Haylee and her girlfriends out the door.

A different night, a different birthday, and Jace could easily imagine a much more exciting ending to this bash. Exciting, but not necessarily satisfying.

And wasn't that, really, the epitaph of his entire career? His entire life? Exciting, but not satisfying.

He swallowed the pain relievers and sipped them down with the tea. It tasted like tree bark, but he expected that.

Sam came back around the bar, began to clean up the napkins and dirty glasses. "You should be at home with a cold compress."

Jace nested his face in his hands, rubbing at the tension around his temples. "And miss all this fun?"

“Right. I know this was the last thing you wanted to do.” Sam received a tray of glasses and other debris from Nellie. “You can punch out, Nell. Thanks for staying.”

In her early forties, Nellie wore her years around her eyes. The rest of her looked about twenty-five and still reliving the eighties, in her tight black T-shirt and painted-on jeans, her bottle-red hair piled onto her head. She untied her apron and walked by Jace, squeezing his shoulder. “Happy birthday, J.”

Bar glasses clinked together as Sam loaded the dishwasher. He moved the tables back into place from Owen’s tussle, then grabbed a rag off the counter to wipe tabletops before putting up the chairs.

“We both know this party had nothing to do with me. Nothing. It was simply a PR gimmick to stir ticket sales. And a subtle reminder that the only thing I am to them is a name. As long as I drop my gloves and can hit harder than the other guy, I’m still an asset.”

“Wow, I thought this was a birthday party, not a pity party,” Sam said.

Jace winced. So maybe Sam had a point. He had a life many men would envy. Things could be worse—he could have Sam’s problems.

“Sorry. I hate all these PR appearances. I’m a hockey player, or at least, I was. Until everyone started worrying about my head.”

“Apparently it’s not as hard as we all thought.”

Jace laughed, then looked up at Sam when he didn’t. Oh. He’d thought the man was kidding.

“It’s not a laughing matter, Jace. One more concussion and your career is over. Maybe even your life. It’s not worth it. You should have taken this opportunity to announce your retirement.”

Jace stared at Sam. “I don’t have anything else.”

It Had to Be You

“That’s not true.”

“Really?” The migraine more than anger made his voice sharp. “I’ve been playing hockey since I was six. Professionally since I turned eighteen. It’s all I have, especially after—”

“Jace.” Sam’s voice quieted. “I’m just saying that you’re only thirty-two. And you’re at the end of your contract. You need to face the truth that the Blue Ox might not renew it.”

Thanks, Sam.

“Life isn’t over, friend. At your age, I was getting married. Starting a family.”

And look how that turned out. But Jace didn’t say it.

“I know. Sorry. It’s just this headache.” In fact, Jace might be bleeding from his ears, the pain nearly able to send him to his knees. He needed to climb into bed with that cold pack Sam suggested. “I don’t think your Holy Tea is working.”

“Get outta here. I can handle this.”

“No. You need to get home to Maddy.”

“Maddy’s sleeping upstairs.”

He frowned at Sam.

Sam lifted a shoulder. “The police finally arrived with the eviction notice. I cleaned up the apartment over the bar—it’s actually really nice.”

Nice? Jace had sacked out upstairs a few times, back in the day, and *nice* seemed a stretch, with the rusty toilet and tub, the stench of the sewer bleeding through the sink, giving the tiny apartment the odor of vagrancy. Sam probably slept on the dilapidated pull-out in the tiny living room. He couldn’t even imagine Maddy’s four-poster bed crammed into the dingy bedroom.

“Dude, when did this happen? Where was I?”

“I didn’t tell you, Jace. You’ve helped so much, and I’m grateful

for it. But the truth is, I gotta figure this out on my own.” His eyes tracked past Jace. “What are you doing up?”

Jace’s gaze followed Sam’s and landed on Maddy, hidden in the shadows just inside the hallway to the bathrooms. She emerged, her golden-brown hair falling from two haphazard braids, one of the flannel sleeves of her purple nightgown pulled over her hand, the lacy edge of the cuff gnawed into a frazzled mess. She held her other hand behind her back.

“I wanted to wish Uncle J. a happy birthday,” Maddy said softly.

As Sam took a deep, shuddering breath, Jace could nearly read his mind, cataloging the odors, the bacteria, the chill seeping through the room.

In two long strides, Jace scooped her up, her body the size of a six-year-old’s, at best. “Thank you, sweetie.” He noticed her bare feet and imagined they might be ice cubes as he set her on the counter. He picked up his jacket and draped it around her.

Sam came around the bar. “Maddy—”

“I made you a card.” She produced the card from behind her back, a piece of green construction paper folded in half. On the front, she’d written, *Happy Birth—*

Jace took the card and opened it. Inside, it said, *Day!* On the opposite page, she’d drawn a hockey player: black skates, an over-size blue jersey, a black helmet, stick, and puck. Brown hair curled out from the player’s helmet. “Is this me?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Are you sure? This guy is better-lookin’ than me.”

She giggled.

“That’s true.” Sam looked over his shoulder. “C’mon, Maddy, you need to go back to bed.” He reached for his daughter, and she went into his arms.

It Had to Be You

“My stomach hurts.”

“Again?” He pushed her hair away from her face, gave her a kiss on the forehead.

Jace frowned at him, but Sam shook his head, dismissing the question in his eyes.

“Thanks for the card, Maddy,” Jace said, playing along. He kissed Maddy on the cheek. “You go back to bed, and I’ll make sure you get some rink-side tickets soon.”

“Really?”

Sam glared at Jace. “Maybe.”

Well, maybe Sam was right. A professional hockey game might not be the right environment for a nine-year-old girl. Especially one on antirejection meds.

And seeing him up close, fists flying as he slammed his opponent into the glass, might be the last thing her delicate heart needed.

“I’d better get her back to bed.” Sam handed Jace his coat.

“I’ll close up.”

“No—”

“Sam,” Jace said quietly, using one of Sam’s signature voices.

Sam drew in a breath, and in it, Jace saw a glimpse of the worry, the fear, the stress. “Thanks.”

“Happy birthday, Uncle Jace.” Maddy slid her arms around her daddy’s neck, laying her head on his shoulder.

“Thanks, kid.”

Jace finished putting up the chairs, then swept and mopped, his migraine subsiding a little in the quiet activity. He finally shut off the lights and locked the door, stepping out into the frigid night.

Happy birthday.

He trekked through a puddle of streetlights into the blackness of the parking lot, hitting his key fob to unlock the doors of his Nissan GT-R. He let the seat warm for a moment before pulling out onto the deserted, icy streets toward his loft in the Lowry Building.

He parked in the heated underground garage and used his key to access the penthouse level.

Maybe the tea had worked—the pain had died to a small, tight knot at the front of his head. Still, after toeing off his shoes in the entryway and shrugging free of his leather jacket, he headed down the dark cherrywood floor to the kitchen, where he dug around in his freezer for a gel pack, then set it on the black granite countertop while he unearthed a kitchen towel.

Wrapping the pack in the towel, he wandered toward the window of his rooftop terrace, now laden with snow, and traced where the impending sunrise had just begun to turn the night to silver. It cast a pallor over his white leather furniture and turned his glass kitchen table into a shiny skating rink.

The place smelled of white oleander, evidence that his house-keeping team had come and gone. He'd have clean sheets and towels in the master, the place freshly dusted, his sinkful of dishes sanitized and neatly replaced. And a stack of dinners waiting in his Sub-Zero freezer.

Dinners for one. Not that he didn't like to cook, but Graham, his agent, insisted that he have something easy when he came home from practice to keep his mind on the game, away from worry.

But really, what else did he have to worry about?

The thought found tentacles, wrapped around his heart. Why hadn't Sam told him he'd finally lost the house? And what about Maddy's upset stomach? Could be something she ate. Or . . .

It Had to Be You

Jace pressed the cold pack to his forehead. Closed his eyes. Hated the thought of sleep, despite his fatigue.

If Owen gets in trouble and kicked back down to the AHL, it's on you.

He winced, not sure how Eden Christiansen and her venom had found their way back into his head. He could still picture her standing there, dressed like a snowman in her white parka, that long blonde hair spilling out of her hat, green eyes simmering with fury. Her words had sparked something inside, and for a second, he'd been angry enough to tell her off.

But what could he say? Because she was right. Owen *was* headed for trouble. And if he didn't stop it, or try, the kid would turn out just like his hero, Jace Jacobsen.

And Jace didn't wish that tragedy on anyone.

He turned away from the window, climbed the stairs to his bedroom, and flopped down on top of the covers, the cold pack draped over his forehead, his eyes.

Maybe, just tonight, God would let him drift into dark, dreamless oblivion and forget, for a few hours, the man he'd somehow become.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I AM IN A SEASON OF LETTING GO. First, my oldest son trotted off to college; then my beautiful daughter had the nerve to leave me. And just this year, my third child packed up his car and drove away.

I can admit the recent leaving might have been the most difficult. Oh, I cried buckets of tears over the first two, but with the college-going of my middle son also went the evenings of sitting in the football stands, watching him score touchdowns. I've logged thousands of hours in the car and in bleachers, back and forth to football and basketball games and to track meets. More than that, I gave my heart to my athlete, helping him through injury, defeats, and even victories. I've earned the title of jock mom. Thankfully, I still have one football player at home to root for.

Letting go has caused me to wonder, however, *How much of my identity have I put into my children's successes? Their losses?*

I am the first to admit that my darlings have made mistakes. Not life-altering ones, but serious enough that I've had to choose whether to get involved or to stand back and let life deal with them. Consequences are always powerful enforcers . . . but how

It Had to Be You

far should you let your children fail? In sports, you learn you can't score the touchdowns for your kids or make baskets for them. But I admit I've been known to run down the bleachers, trying to keep up with my track star as he crosses the finish line, just to urge him on.

It pains me to see my children make mistakes. But without mistakes, they won't learn. And some of my best lessons have come from the mistakes I've made.

As I settled in to write this story, I was in a season of struggling to find the balance between stepping in and letting go—letting them fail. And I realized that their failures were neither my fault nor my responsibility to fix. If I truly wanted to support my kids, I needed to guide them toward their heavenly Father, so He could meet their needs.

Frankly, in letting go, I'm learning that God can meet my needs, too.

As I took a look at failure and letting go, I also began to wonder about the other side of it. A life redeemed. Can God take failure and turn it to victory? The Bible shows us over and over that He can and He does. And when He does, we find ourselves uniquely equipped for the next season in our lives. If we start seeing failure not as an end, but as a part of the journey, then suddenly our lives become not about regret, but about gratitude.

In fact, the story idea for *It Had to Be You* was birthed by this concept: what if God could take your regrets and redeem them? Hudson Peterson's track meet story actually happened. I was at a track meet, standing on the sideline watching this poor young man crumble as he realized his failures. The memory haunted me and I wondered, *What if? What if it destroyed him? How could he come back?*

Susan May Warren

Grace. We come back by reaching out to Jesus. By letting Him redeem our failures.

I am letting go. But I'm also holding on to my heavenly Father, who is at the helm of my children's lives—and my own. And thankfully He will never let go.

Thank you for reading *It Had to Be You!* I hope you are enjoying the Christiansen family as much as I am. Stay tuned for Grace Christiansen's story in *When I Fall in Love*. Here's a hint: you'll see our friend Max Sharpe again!

In His grace,
Susan May Warren