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# ROBYN CARR

*A Virgin River Novel*

## FORBIDDEN FALLS



*"The Virgin River books are so compelling...I connected instantly with the characters."*

—#1 New York Times bestselling author Debbie Macomber

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**ROBYN CARR**

**FORBIDDEN FALLS**



This book is dedicated to my daughter  
and best friend, Jamie Lynn. Thank you for  
being your wonderful self. I'm so proud of you.

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## One

Recently ordained minister Noah Kincaid was surfing the Internet, killing time, when quite by chance, he happened to find a church being auctioned on eBay—in some little place he'd never heard of—Virgin River. He laughed at the very idea, but was intrigued. He'd been waiting patiently for an assignment to a church of his own and thought it couldn't hurt to take a look at the place himself. If nothing else, it would be a good excuse to get out of town for a day and see something different. He'd heard Northern California was very beautiful.

The first thing that struck him was the overwhelming beauty of the mountains, redwoods and rivers. The town was a little washed out and the church was a wreck, but there was a peacefulness and simplicity there he couldn't dismiss. Or forget. It seemed uncomplicated, fresh.

No one really noticed him in the little town; the local men he'd seen either had hair shorn in military fashion or ponytails and beards, just like the fishermen Noah had worked with over the years. He fit right in—he wore scuffed boots, his jeans were almost white with wear, ripped here and there, his denim shirt was thin on the elbows and frayed around the collar and cuffs. His black hair was too long and curled over his collar; he planned to get it cut the second he was assigned a church of his own. But for now, he fit right in, looking like any other laborer after a hard day's work. He was fit and toned like the local Virgin River men; years of working on a fishing boat and dockside, dragging nets, hauling in tons of fresh catch will do that.

The church had been easy to locate and he hadn't needed a key to get inside—it was boarded up and appeared to have been abandoned for years, but the side door wasn't locked. The place had been stripped bare and filled with years of trash, probably litter from transients who'd taken shelter there at one time or another. Almost all the windows had been broken before being covered over with plywood. But when he got to the sanctuary, he discovered a stunning stained-glass window, boarded from the outside to keep it safe. It had been left untouched.

Afterward, he had driven the neighborhoods in town, which hadn't taken long, had a cup of coffee at the only eating establishment, snapped a few digital pictures and left. When he got back to Seattle he contacted the woman who was auctioning the church on eBay, Hope McCrea. "That church has been boarded up for years," she said in her gravelly voice. "This town has been without religion a long time."

"You sure the town is in need of religion?" Noah asked her.

"Not entirely sure," she answered. "But it could damn sure use some faith. That church needs to be opened up or razed to the ground. An empty church is bad mojo."

Noah couldn't agree more.

Despite being busy at the college where he taught, Noah couldn't get Virgin River, or that church, out of his mind.

He took the idea of buying the church to the presbytery and found they were already well aware of its existence. He showed them his digital pictures and they agreed, there was great potential. Placing a minister there appealed to them; the population was just the right size to build a congregation and it was the only church in town. But the renovation, not to mention the accoutrements, would put the costs too high. There was no way they had the budget. They thanked Noah sincerely and promised him he would get his own church real soon.

What the presbytery didn't know was that Noah had recently come into some money. To him, a small fortune. He was thirty-five and since the age of eighteen had been slaving and studying. While attending the university, he'd worked on boats, docks and in fish markets out of the Port of Seattle. A year ago his mother had passed and, to his surprise, had left him a hefty portion of her inheritance.

So, he offered to lighten the presbytery's financial burden by taking on the renovation costs of the church as a donation if they would see fit to assign him as the pastor. The proposal was an appealing one for the Presbyterian church.

Before closing the deal, Noah called his closest friend, and the man responsible for talking him into the seminary in the first place. George Davenport thought he'd lost his mind. George was a retired Presbyterian minister who had been teaching for the last fifteen years at Seattle Pacific University. "I can think of a thousand ways for you to throw away that money," George had said. "Go to Las Vegas, put it all on red. Or finance your own mission to Mexico. If those people needed a pastor, they'd go looking for one."

"Funny that church is still standing there, useless, like it's waiting for a rebirth. There must be a reason I happened to see it on eBay," Noah said. "I've never looked at eBay before in my life."

After much debate, George conceded, "If it's structurally sound and the price is right, it might work out. You'd get a big tax write-off with the donated renovation cost, and a chance to serve a small, poor congregation in a hick mountain town that doesn't get cell-phone reception. Sounds perfect for you."

"There is no congregation, George," Noah reminded him.

"Then you'll have to gather one, son. If anyone can do it, you can. You were born to do it, and before you get all insulted, I'm not talking about your DNA. I'm talking about pure talent. I've seen the way you sell fish, I always thought there was a message there. Go—it's what you want. Open your doors and your heart and give it all you've got. Besides, you're the only ordained minister I know who has two nickels to rub together."

So Noah inked the deal with the presbytery and hoped his mother wasn't spinning in her grave. Truth be told, she'd always quietly supported him when, years back, he had been determined as hell to run away from the ministry. She had good reason. Noah's father was a powerful, semifamous televangelist—and a cold, controlling man. Noah had run away while his mother could not.

If someone had told Noah seventeen years ago, when he fled his father's house at the age of eighteen, that he would one day be a preacher himself, he'd have laughed in their face. Yet here he was. And he wanted that church. That wreck of a church in that peaceful, uncomplicated mountain town.

Several weeks later Noah was in his fifteen-year-old RV, which would be his

home for a good long time, towing his twenty-year-old faded-blue Ford truck. En route to Northern California, he called George's office, placing the call from his cell phone before the signal was lost in the mountains and tall trees. "I'm on my way into Virgin River, George."

"Well, boy—how does it feel?" George asked with a deep chuckle in his voice. "Like you pulled off the sweetheart deal of the century, or like you'll be dead broke and out in the street before you know what hit you?"

Noah laughed. "Not sure. I'll be tapped out by the time the church is presentable. If I can't drum up a congregation, I could be back in Seattle throwing fish before you know it," he said, referring to an old job of his working the fish market on Seattle's downtown wharf. He'd literally thrown large fish across the market. It had been like theater and it was where George had discovered him. "I'll get started on the improvements right away and trust the presbytery won't leave me out in the cold if no one shows up to services. I mean, if you can't trust the church..."

That comment was answered with George's hearty laughter. "They're the last ones I'd trust. Those Presbyterians think too much! I know I wasn't keen on this idea at first, Noah, but I wish you well," George said. "I'm proud of you for taking a chance."

"Thanks, George. I'll keep in touch."

"Noah," George said soberly. "Good luck, son. I hope you find what you're looking for."

It was the first of July when Noah rattled into Virgin River and pulled right up to the church. Parked there was a big old Suburban with the wheels jacked up and covered with mud. Standing beside it was a tiny old woman with wiry white hair and big glasses, a cigarette hanging from her lips. She wore great big tennis shoes that didn't look as if they'd ever been white and, although it was summer, she had on a jacket with torn pockets. When he parked and got out of his RV, she tossed the cigarette to the ground and stomped it out. One of Virgin River's stunning beauties, he thought wryly.

"Reverend Kincaid, I presume?" she said.

From the look on her face, Noah assumed she was expecting someone a bit more refined. Maybe someone who dressed in khakis and a crisp white button-down? Shiny loafers? Neatly trimmed hair? Clean shaven at least? His hair was shaggy, his whiskers itchy, and he had a healthy bit of motor oil on his jeans, a result of a stop a hundred miles back when he'd had to work on the RV. "Mrs. McCrea," he answered, putting out his hand.

She shook it briefly, then put the keys in his palm. "Welcome. Would you like a tour?"

"Do I need keys?" he asked. "The building wasn't locked the last time I was here. I looked it over pretty thoroughly."

"You've *seen* it?" she asked, clearly startled.

"Sure did. I took a run down here before placing a bid on behalf of the Presbyterian church. The door wasn't locked so I helped myself. All the presbytery really needed from you was the engineer's report on the building's structural competence. I gave them lots of pictures."

She pushed her oversize glasses up on her nose. "What are you, a minister or some kind of secret agent?"

He grinned at her. “Did you think the presbytery bought it on faith?”

“I guess I didn’t see any other possibility. Well, if you’re all set, let’s go in to Jack’s—it’s time for my drink. Doctor’s orders. I’ll front you one.”

“Did the doctor order the smokes, too?” he asked with a smile.

“You’re damn straight, sonny. Don’t start on me.”

“I gotta meet this doctor,” Noah muttered, following her.

Hope stopped abruptly, looked at him over her shoulder as she adjusted her jacket and said, “He’s dead.” And with that she turned and stomped into Jack’s bar.

Noah had only been in town a couple of days before the need for cleaning supplies sent him in the direction of Fortuna. The narrow, winding mountain roads led him toward the freeway, and he marveled that he had managed to get his RV to Virgin River at all, especially while towing his truck. He wasn’t quite halfway to Fortuna before he had his first lesson in how dramatically different mountain life was from life in the city, the campus and the Seattle wharf.

He spied a motionless animal by the side of the road and by pure coincidence there was a wide space on the shoulder just ahead. He pulled over and got out of his truck. When he was within a few feet, he realized it was a dog; perhaps some family pet. He went closer. Flies were buzzing around the animal and some of its fur looked shiny with blood, but Noah detected a slight movement. He crouched near the dog, whose eyes were open and tongue hanging out of its parted mouth. The animal was breathing, but clearly near death. The condition of the poor beast tore at his heart.

Just then, an old truck pulled up and parked behind Noah’s vehicle and a man got out. Noah took him for a farmer or rancher; he wore jeans, boots, a cowboy hat, and walked with a hitch that suggested a sore back. “Got a problem there, bud?” the man asked.

Noah looked at him over his shoulder. “Dog,” he said. “Hit by a car, I guess. And a while ago. But it’s alive.”

The rancher crouched and took a closer look. “Hmmp,” he grunted. He stood. “Okay then. I’ll take care of it.”

Noah waved away the flies and gave the dog’s head and neck a stroke. “Easy now—help’s on the way.” He was still stroking the dog’s neck when the man’s boots came into view beside him, as well as the business end of a rifle, aimed at the dog’s chest. “Might want to move back, son,” the man said.

“Hey!” Noah shouted, pushing the rifle away. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to put that poor creature out of its misery,” the man said in a tone that indicated he found the question ludicrous. “What else you gonna do?”

“Take it to a vet,” Noah said, standing. “Maybe it can be helped!”

“Buddy, look at that dog. It’s emaciated, pretty much starved. That animal was half-dead before a car hit it. Wouldn’t be right to leave it to lie here, dying.” He aimed again.

Again Noah pushed the rifle away. “Where’s the nearest vet?” he asked. “I’ll take it. If the vet can’t help it, he can euthanize the dog without blowing it apart.”

The rancher scratched his chin and shook his head. “Nathaniel Jensen is off 36, just this side of Fortuna, but he’s a large-animal vet. He’s got dogs, though. If he can’t

help, he can give you the name of someone who can. Or put it down for you. But, buddy, that dog isn't going to make it to the vet."

"How do I get there?" Noah asked.

"Turn left off 36 on Waycliff Road. You'll see a sign for Jensen Stables and Vet Clinic, and Dr. Jensen. It's only a few minutes down the hill." He shook his head again. "This could all be over in thirty seconds."

Noah ignored him and went back to his truck, opening the passenger door. He returned to the animal and lifted it into his arms, which is when he discovered it was a female. The blood was dried and didn't soil him, but flies buzzed around the injury and he was pretty sure he'd end up with maggots on his clothes. He was about halfway to his truck when the rancher said, "Good luck there, buddy."

"Yeah," Noah grumbled. "Thanks."

Dr. Nathaniel Jensen proved to be a friendly guy just a little younger than Noah and he was far more helpful than the old rancher had been. He looked the dog over for about sixty seconds before he said, "This looks like it could be Lucy. Her owner was a local rancher, killed in an accident up north, near Redding, months ago now. He was hauling a gelding; killed him and the horse. They never found his dog, a border collie. She might've been thrown and injured. Or maybe she got scared and bolted. Oh, man, if this is Lucy, I bet she was trying to find her way home."

"Does she have family who will take care of her?"

"That's the thing—old Silas was a widower. He had one daughter and she married a serviceman, moved away more than twenty years ago. Silas's ranch and stable sold immediately. The remaining animals—horses and dogs—were sold or placed. I don't think the daughter was even back here for the sale. I could call around, see if anyone knows where she is. But that could take time old Lucy doesn't have. She didn't take on any of her father's other animals. And we don't even know if this is—"

"*Old Lucy?*" Noah asked.

"I didn't mean it like that. She's not that old. Three or four, maybe. Silas had a pack of ranch dogs. Herders. But Lucy was a favorite and went everywhere with him. She's a mess."

"Can you do anything for her?"

"Listen, I can start an IV, treat her for a possible head injury, find the source of bleeding, clean her up, sedate her if she needs it, run some antibiotics, transfuse her if necessary—but you're looking at a big expense that Silas's only daughter might not be willing to pick up. People around here—farmers and ranchers—most of 'em aren't real sentimental about their dogs. They wouldn't spend more than the animal's worth."

"I'm beginning to understand that," Noah said, pulling out his wallet. He extracted a credit card and said, "I don't have a phone yet—I just got here and there's no reception for the cell. I'll call in or stop by. Just do what you can do."

"Nothing wrong with just letting her go, Noah," he said gently. "As banged up as she is, that's what most people would do. Even if she pulls through, there's no guarantee she'll be much of a dog."

He stroked the dog's head and thought, *No guarantee any of us will be much of anything, but we still try.* "Be sure to give her something good for pain, all right? I

don't want her to be in pain while you see what can be done.”

“You sure about this?” Nathaniel asked.

Noah smiled at him. “I'll give you a call tomorrow afternoon. And thanks.”

The next day, Noah learned that Lucy had a few cracked ribs, a couple of lacerations and scrapes, was malnourished and infested with ticks and maggots, and had a systemic infection. She might recover, Dr. Jensen said, but her condition was poor. If she did get stronger, Dr. Jensen insisted she should be spayed. So on top of everything else, poor Lucy was going to have a hysterectomy. He gave Nathaniel Jensen the phone number for the bar next door to the church, in case something came up. It turned out Doc Jensen knew the owner, Jack.

Noah soon discovered that Virgin River's Communication Central was located right next door to the church—at Jack's Bar. Jack was a very nice guy who seemed to know everyone and everything. He quizzed Noah briefly about his denomination, education, what plans he had for the church, and that was all it took for the entire town to be informed. Noah had expected some rude jokes and at the very least some good-natured ribbing about being the pastor who bought an old church on eBay, and he hadn't been disappointed. But it also seemed the people in town were relieved to learn he was an ordained minister, since he looked pretty much like an out-of-work lumberjack; all the thin white scars on his hands and forearms from work on the boats and docks undoubtedly set him up as a man who did hard, physical labor.

Noah explained that the building officially belonged to the church but that it would be governed by a group of church elders once they were functional and had a congregation. Ownership would hopefully, in time, pass to the congregants, as they amassed and grew and gathered the funds to support it. His plans? “How about a low-key, friendly place for people to gather, support each other, worship together?” Noah had answered. “No revivals or animal sacrifices till we're all better acquainted.” And then he had grinned.

Not only did Jack give him good press, which Noah appreciated, but in short order Jack began to feel like a friend. Noah checked in daily at Jack's, usually having at least a cup of coffee, and through Jack he met many of the locals. And Jack's phone was the hotline to the veterinarian. “Nate called in, Noah,” Jack reported. “That dog of yours is still hanging in there. Doing better.”

“She worth more than my truck yet?” Noah asked.

Jack laughed. “I saw that old truck, Noah. I suspect she was worth more than that when you scraped her off the road.”

“Funny,” Noah said. “That truck gets me where I'm going. Most of the time.”

Jack's partner and cook, known as Preacher, invited Noah to jump on their satellite wireless-Internet connection so Noah could use his laptop for e-mails and research on the Net, but cautioned him against buying anything else Hope McCrea might be selling.

When he wasn't cleaning out the church or getting himself settled in town, every other day Noah visited Lucy at Jensen's Stables and Vet Clinic. Since the weather was warm, Nate was keeping her in an empty stall and Noah would spend an hour or so just sitting on the ground beside her, talking to her, petting her. By the time she'd been there a week it was apparent she was going to pull through. After ten days she was walking around, if slowly. “Don't show me the bill,” Noah said to Nate Jensen during

one of his visits. “I don’t want to cry in front of you.”

There was no parsonage for Noah to call home, but he was comfortable in the RV and he had the truck for getting around the mountains. He did a little door-knocking, letting the folks know he was new to town and planned to get that church going. He had hoped some volunteers would materialize to help with the cleanup, but he refrained from asking and so far no one had offered. People seemed extremely friendly, but Noah thought they might be holding off a little to see what kind of minister he stacked up to be. There was a good chance he wasn’t what they were looking for at all, but only time would tell.

He’d collected enough cakes and cookies for a bake sale. The women in town had been dropping by, bearing sweets and welcoming him to the neighborhood. Even though Noah had a scary-powerful sweet tooth, he was getting a little tired of feasting on desserts. He even gave a passing thought to holding a bake sale.

Another thing Noah did was visit the nearest hospital—Valley Hospital. He called on the sick and bereaved. Preaching might be his job, but bringing comfort was his calling.

Since there was no hospital chaplain, they relied on the local clergy to visit, so Noah just asked a hospital volunteer to point him toward anyone who might need a friendly visit. She looked him up and down doubtfully; he was dressed as usual in his jeans, boots and flannel shirt...He wore the T-shirt without holes. If he hadn’t had a Bible in his hand, he had the impression the volunteer would have seriously questioned him. Clearly, the pastors hereabouts must spruce up a bit before visiting the patients.

His first client was an elderly man, a real sourpuss, who eyed the Bible and said, “I ain’t in the mood.”

Noah laughed. “Since I can’t fit the Bible in my pocket, why don’t you tell me what you’d like to do. Talk, tell jokes, watch some TV?”

“Where you from, boy?” the old man asked.

“I’m from Ohio originally, most recently from—”

“No! I mean, what religion you from!”

“Oh. Presbyterian.”

“I ain’t been in a church in fifty years or more.”

“You don’t say,” Noah replied.

“But when I was, it sure as hell wasn’t Presbyterian!”

“I see.”

“I was born Catholic!”

“No kidding?” Noah said. “Well, let’s see.” He dug around in the pocket of his jeans. He pulled out a rosary. He dangled it. “You have any use for this?”

“What the Sam Hill is a Presbyterian fella doing with one of those? You using those now?”

“No, we’re still sticking to the basics, but I’m a pretty all-purpose preacher. You want it?”

“I won’t use it,” he said defiantly. “You can leave it, but I won’t use it.”

“Sure,” Noah said. “So, what’s that you got on TV?”

“*Andy Griffith*,” he answered.

“All *right!* I love that show. You ever see that one when Barney had the

motorcycle with the sidecar?” Noah moved into the room and took the chair beside the old man’s bed, draping the rosary across his arthritic hands.

“I seen it. You see the one where he locks himself in the cell?”

“Didn’t he do that every few weeks?” Noah asked with a smirk. “How about when Aunt Bea accidentally got drunk? You see that one?”

“Otis, the town drunk, now there’s a character,” the old fella said.

It took a while, but he learned this man was Salvatore Salentino, Sal for short. They went over their favorite episodes for a while, then Sal needed assistance to the bathroom, then he wanted to talk about his old truck, which he missed like crazy since being put in a nursing home. Next, he spoke about his grown daughter who’d moved out of the mountains and rarely came back. Then he got onto how much he hated computers. Finally, he asked Noah if he’d be back this way anytime soon because he was returning to the nursing home in a couple of days. “I could stop by there if you’d like me to, Sal,” Noah said.

“Can if you want,” the old fella said. “But don’t get the idea you’re going to turn me into some goddamn Presbyterian!”

Noah smiled and said, “Good grief, no. I just haven’t had anyone to watch Andy with in a long time.”

There wasn’t much to salvage in the old church. The pews had been removed, the appliances in the church kitchen ripped out, the pulpit, altar and baptistery gone, not an accessory in sight—all sold off when the church had closed its doors. There was, however, that incredible stained-glass window at the front of the church. It was an amazing, valuable work of art.

The first thing Noah had done when beginning the cleanup was borrow a ladder from Jack and tear the plywood off the outside of the church. The daylight revealed a far larger and more beautiful stained-glass window than he imagined a poor church could afford, and he was surprised it hadn’t been removed and sold or transported to another church. When he stared up at it, it gave him a feeling of purpose, of belonging. It was an image of Jesus, white robed, arms spread, palms out and accessible. On his shoulder was a dove. At his feet a lamb, a rabbit, a fawn. In the setting sun the light caught the eyes of Christ and created a beam of light that shone down into the church; a path of light in which he could see the dust motes dancing. He had no prie-dieu kneeler, but he would stand in front of that beautiful creation, hands deep in his pockets, staring up at the image and repeat the most beautiful prayer he knew. The prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi. *Lord, make me an instrument of your peace...*

By his third week in Virgin River, Lucy had been released into Noah’s care. Dr. Nathaniel Jensen gave him Lucy’s bill, and Noah folded it in half, stuffed it in the pocket of his Levi’s and refused to look at it until he had Lucy home. When he looked at the statement, he grabbed his heart. “Really, I should be able to drive you,” he said to the dog. Lucy licked his hand. “Remind me to keep my eyes on the road when I’m driving through the mountains,” he said.

Lucy was still a long way from being a frisky pup—she was on a special recovery

diet, along with vitamins and antibiotics. She was a black-and-white border collie, maybe a bit of something else in the mix, and she had the most beautiful, large brown eyes that could look very pathetic and sad. Noah purchased a soft dog bed that he carried from the RV to the church office to accommodate her lingering aches and pains. Preacher agreed to fix a special chicken-and-rice meal for her twice a day, since Noah's cooking facilities were a bit restricted in the RV. Lucy could manage the three steps up to the bar porch, where she took many of her meals, but she had a terrible struggle getting up the stairs to the church office. Noah usually ended up carrying her.

What with the community outreach, caring for Lucy and the slow progress on the church cleanup, Noah realized he was going to need some help. So, once the phone line was installed, he advertised for a pastor's assistant. He fielded many more calls than he expected, but once he'd answered a few questions about hours, pay and benefits, most of the callers said "they'd get back to him." The duties weren't typical—there would be cleaning and painting, as well as setting up an office—and he guessed the callers found the work too hard. He made appointments for three women who hadn't bothered to ask questions. With Lucy settled on her pallet beside the old desk that had been left behind, he prepared to interview the first round of candidates.

The first was Selma Hatchet, a portly woman of sixty who walked with a three-pronged cane. "You the pastor?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, rising. "Pleasure to meet you, ma'am. Please, have a seat," he said, indicating the chair that faced his desk. When they were both seated, they proceeded to visit a bit. The lady had raised a family and a couple of grandkids for her working daughter, done a great deal of volunteer work, and had been quite involved in the Grace Valley Presbyterian Church for the past twenty years.

"Mrs. Hatchet, this position will evolve into secretarial work, but right now it's going to be a very physical job. I not only need help organizing an office and library, but scrubbing, painting, spackling and probably a lot of heavy lifting. It might not be what you're looking for."

She stiffened and lifted her chin. "I want to do the Lord's work," she said tightly. "I'll willingly carry any load the Lord entrusts me with."

Noah briefly wondered if Mrs. Hatchet thought he had workmen's comp for when she threw out her back or took a tumble off a ladder. "Well, that's admirable, but in this case the Lord's work is going to be dirty, messy and the only praying will probably be for Bengay."

He saw her to the door with a promise to be in touch.

The next applicant looked physically better suited to the hard work ahead and she was more than willing to pitch in, no matter how difficult or dirty the work. Rachael Nagel was in her midforties, a rancher's wife who'd done her share of lifting and hauling, but she was a little scary. She had that pinched look of disapproval and began questioning him before he could get a word in edgewise. "You're not going to be one of those liberal preachers, are you?"

*Liberal* was just about his middle name. Noah's father was all about fire and brimstone, hell and damnation, and was probably the main reason Noah was not. "Um, I've been considered liberal by some, conservative by others. Tell me, Mrs. Nagel, do you by chance play the piano or organ?"

"Never had time for anything frivolous with a ranch to run, but I raised seven

children with a firm hand. I can make sure the doctrine of the church is followed to the letter.”

“What a wonderful gift,” he said. “I’ll be in touch.”

“You oughtn’t keep a dog like that in the church,” she pointed out. “You’re gonna end up with problems.”

“And where do you suggest I keep her?” he asked.

“Since you don’t have land, you could get an outdoor kennel. Or tie it to a tree.”

Noah knew right then Mrs. Nagel wouldn’t work out.

His third applicant was Ellie Baldwin. Noah was sitting behind his desk when she walked into his ramshackle office. He paused before managing to get to his feet to greet her. She looked young, early twenties at best. And tall—almost six feet—without her shoes and hair. Most of that six feet was legs, which were sticking a long way out of a short flouncy skirt, her feet slipped into high-heeled sandals. She had very big hair, a ton of coppery curls that were streaked with gold and that fell to her shoulders and down her back. Not only was her yellow sweater tight and revealing, but a little bit of her purple bra was showing at the low décolletage...on purpose. This was a look he’d been seeing for a while—this showing of the bra, a push-up bra no less. He couldn’t deny it was a lovely sight, but he didn’t usually see this immodest style in a church.

She had a crinkled-up piece of newspaper in her hand. “I’m looking for Reverend Kincaid,” she said.

“I’m Noah Kincaid. How do you do?”

“You’re—”

“The pastor. And you must be Miss Baldwin.”

Her eyelashes were thick with black liner and mascara, her cheeks rouged, her lips red and glossy, her nails long and painted blue with sparkles, and a glance down those long legs revealed the polish on her toes matched her fingertips. She smiled at him when she came into the room. Then she turned away abruptly to take the gum out of her mouth, though he couldn’t tell where it went. But the image of her smile was immediately tattooed on his mind—it was beautiful. Also hopeful. But what was she thinking, coming to a job interview in a small-town church dressed all honky-tonk? And he thought, *Aw, Jesus. Why me?*

He stuck out his hand, hoping a wad of gum wouldn’t be left in it. “How are you?”

“Fine, thanks,” she said. “Have you filled the job yet?”

“I have a couple of promising applicants. But let’s talk about the job,” he said. He had a twinge of guilt—no way could he, a single minister of thirty-five, hire someone like this. People would never understand. Or worse, they’d assume they *did* understand. This interview was going to be a waste of time.

“Awww, is that your dog?” she asked, smiling down at Lucy.

“Meet Lucy,” he said. At the sound of her name, she lifted her head.

“Is she really old? She looks very tired.”

“She’s recovering from a bad accident. I found her by the side of the road and, presto, I became her new owner,” he said. “The job,” he went on, “isn’t limited to office work. As you can see, there’s a lot of renovation and repair going on here. This church won’t be ready for a congregation until some very heavy and very dirty work

gets done. A couple of months' worth, at least."

She nodded. "Right," she said. "Fine."

His eyebrows lifted. "If you don't mind me saying so, you look kind of fragile for that kind of work."

She laughed and her whole face brightened. "Is that so? Well, this fragile girl has cleaned up a lot of dumps and lifted more than her share of heavy stuff, Your Reverence."

He cleared his throat. "It's Noah. Please. I'm not the pope."

"I know that," she scoffed. "I was being funny."

"Ah. And so you were," he admitted. "So, not only do I need an office set up and some appointment, phone, and calendar management, but also help with moving furniture, painting, cleaning, et cetera."

"Got it," she said.

He leaned forward. "Ms. Baldwin, why do you want this job?"

"Isn't it a good job?" she asked. "There wasn't much to the ad, but it sounded like a decent job in a decent line of work."

"Sure. And you're drawn to this line of work because...?"

"I need a change. Something a little more secure. Less stressful."

"And your last or current job is...was...?"

"Dancer. The hours don't work for me. I have kids. They're with my ex right now, but I'd like a job I can do while they're in school. Y'know?"

"But do you have secretarial experience?"

"For when we're done plastering and painting and moving furniture? Sure. A lot. I have a list of previous jobs," she said, pulling a pretty tattered, folded piece of paper out of her purse.

He glanced at it. He didn't see dancer on there but, without asking, he suspected he knew what kind of dancer. Just the way she was dressed, decidedly not churchy, suggested way too much. But, she had also worked for a real estate broker, a property manager and a "Lawyer?" he asked, surprised.

"Uh-huh. Nice guy. I did a real good job for him. You can call him—he'll tell you. He said he'd write me a letter of recommendation anytime I ask."

"And you left that job because...?"

She looked away a bit uncomfortably. "He liked my work, I promise. But his wife wasn't real crazy about me. But call him!" she said, looking back at him. "I did a good job there."

The girl had worked everywhere. Everything from a loading dock to a convenience store. "How could you do all this stuff?" Noah asked, perplexed.

"Two jobs," she shrugged. "Office work during the day, for the experience and benefits. Then a second job, part-time, at night and on weekends. I worked at a convenience store at night till it got held up, then I cleaned business offices with a cleaning crew. I have a lot of experience."

"Loading dock?" he asked, glancing up from her résumé.

"For a big retailer. It was kind of temporary, till I could get a job that didn't break all my nails." And she smiled at him. "I don't think there's anything you could throw at me that I haven't done."

"Great," he said. "Can I keep this?"

She looked a little panicked. “Could you just copy down stuff? Names and numbers or whatever you want? I had to go to some trouble to make that up and I only have the one copy.”

“Of course,” Noah said.

“I should probably get copies,” she said. “I don’t have a computer, myself. A friend helped me do that up.”

“No problem,” he said. And he made a point of copying some things off the page, though he had no intention of following up. When he looked up at her again, it was difficult not to notice that chest. He couldn’t escape the feeling those boobs were going to poke his eyes out. “Tell me something—any chance you play the piano or organ?”

“Organ? No. But my grandma taught me the piano, and hymns were her favorite. I could manage, probably. If I had time for a little practice. It’s been a while.”

“Church hymns?”

She grinned. “It’s what I grew up on, believe it or not.”

“Really?” Noah said, intrigued. Then he found himself just staring at her for a long, mesmerizing moment. “Um,” he started, collecting himself, “where do you live, Ms. Baldwin?”

She leaned forward, and her boobs nearly fell out of that tight sweater. He could feel his eyes bulge and his hands itch with temptation. “Ellie is fine,” she said. “I mean, if I don’t have to call you Your Reverence, you can call me Ellie. I have a place in Eureka right now, but I’d like to get my kids out of there. I’d like to move them someplace small and friendly where they can grow up safe, you know?”

“Do you mind me asking, how old are your kids?”

“Danielle is eight and Trevor is four.” She smiled proudly. “They’re amazing. Beautiful and smart and... Well,” she said, straightening. “Of course I’d think that. They’re also very healthy. I shouldn’t be missing work because they’re sick or anything.”

He was speechless. “You don’t look old enough to—” He stopped himself. It was none of his business.

“I started the family too young, I know that. But I’m sure glad I have them.”

After a moment of silence he said, “Yes. Absolutely. Well, listen, you have some very good qualifications here. Can I get back to you?”

Her face fell. “Yeah,” she said. “Sure.” And then she stood. “I wish you’d take it kind of serious. I need the job. I’ve looked everywhere for a job I can do while my kids are in school and it’s hell, you know? Sorry—you probably don’t say hell...”

He felt a smile tug at his lips. He almost said, *Hell if I don’t*.

“Really, I could do just about anything,” she said. “I’m a very hard worker.”

“You’re very qualified,” he said with a nod. “I’ll be in touch.” He stuck out his hand.

Eyes downcast, Ellie took it limply. “Thanks,” she said, looking totally disheartened.

## Two

While Ellie made her own way out of his office and the church, Noah stayed behind his desk. He hadn't really expected to immediately find someone he could hire, anyway. In fact, he thought the search would probably be long and difficult. But the last thing he'd expected was to interview someone who could do the job, and do it in a push-up bra and short skirt. *Whoa*, he thought. He was actually having a reaction. He shifted in his chair to get comfortable, trying to ignore his body's response. Nature was a practical joker.

Reflecting on the past several weeks and remembering Ellie's dejected posture as she left the interview got Noah thinking. When his wife, Merry, died a few years ago, the grief bit hard and the adjustment was terrible; marriage really worked for him and the loss was devastating. Merry's death left him a thirty-year-old widower, just about the last thing he ever envisioned for himself. For a year he felt like a pebble banging around inside an empty tin can and then, with George's encouragement, he headed for the seminary.

Noah had nurtured a lifelong aversion to the ministry because of his father whom he considered a mean-spirited hypocrite. Jasper Kincaid was a semifamous preacher who had his own cable television mission in Columbus, Ohio. Big-time church, big-time money, big-time fame and power. But Jasper had treated his wife and son with indifference, and that was on a good day. They were too often the objects of his anger and recriminations. No way was Noah ever going to follow in those footsteps.

"Stop judging how everyone else treats their faith and study your own," George had counseled. "It took a bloody ton of it to get where you are today."

Indeed. While still a teenager, Noah had fled his Ohio roots and headed for the Pacific Northwest. He worked as a laborer anywhere he could get work, but fell in love with the fishing industry, with the ocean and the livelihood it offered. While he worked, he also studied—sometimes as a part-time student, sometimes full-time.

His mother, too loyal and kindhearted to ever defy his father, stayed in touch and even visited. She wanted to give him money to assist with his education, but Noah refused. His mom met Merry only once and, for the first time in his life, Noah saw his mother weep with happiness that Noah should find a young woman so full of love and joy. Only two years later, his mother came, alone, to Merry's funeral.

Noah and his father had spoken only once in the past seventeen years and that was at his mother's funeral a year ago. He had no desire to reconcile with Jasper. He considered it a matter of survival.

Noah had been at his desk about an hour, trying to write up a schedule for himself but doing nothing but thinking and remembering, when he looked at his watch. Three o'clock. There wouldn't be a crowd at Jack's at this time of day and he thought maybe a cup of coffee was in order. He gave Lucy a pat on the head and promised to be back

soon.

When he walked into the bar, he was surprised to see Ellie Baldwin seated at a table not far from the empty hearth. A cup of coffee sat in front of her, her hands were folded in her lap and she gazed out the window. Instead of looking brassy and sexy, she looked a little lost. Noah lifted a hand in her direction, but she was deep in thought and didn't even notice him. So he went up to the bar.

"Hey, Noah," Jack said.

"What's she doing here?" Noah asked.

Jack shrugged. "Disappointed, I think. But what are you gonna do?" Jack put a mug in front of Noah and poured coffee without being asked.

"Disappointed?" Noah asked.

"She said she didn't get the job."

"I said I'd get back to her about that," Noah said.

"Maybe that's not what she heard, Noah."

"Hmm." He took a sip of coffee. "How about two slices of pie, right over there."

"Sure thing," Jack said.

Noah migrated to Ellie's table. He stood there until she looked up at him. Oh, man, he was in trouble. Her eyes were red rimmed and wet, her mascara a little smeared. *Grant that I may not so much seek to be understood as to understand.* "You mind if I join you?" he asked.

She straightened and her eyes immediately cleared and narrowed. She was one tough customer. "Knock yourself out," she said coolly.

He pulled out a chair and set his coffee cup in front of him. "You seem upset, Ellie. Was it something I said?"

"It was something you didn't say," she replied.

"Oh? What was that?"

"You're hired," she said.

"I thought I should give all the applicants a fair shot."

"Are you kidding me? I sat in my car outside waiting for my turn. I saw the other applicants—all two of them. One could barely get up the stairs; not a good bet for moving furniture. The other one had such a mean schnobble, she could break glass with her face."

"Schnobble?" he asked.

"What my grandma used to call a sourpuss. Now, *that's* a church lady, all right—if you're looking for one as mean as a junkyard dog."

He laughed before he could reel it in. "Who knew you were checking out the competition." Jack brought the pie, put it in front of them and got the heck out of there. Noah lifted a fork. "Pretty accurate, too. But I told you I'd get in touch."

"If you do, it'll be to say I didn't get the job."

He was quiet a moment, then he said, "Have some pie. Nobody makes pie like Preacher."

"Preacher? You made the pie?"

"No, the cook—he goes by the nickname Preacher. That could lead to problems." He nodded toward the plate. "Try it."

"Thanks," she said. "I'm not hungry."

"Give it a chance, you'll be amazed. And between bites, tell me why I don't get