

TRACEY BATEMAN

WIDOW of SAUNDERS CREEK

A NOVEL

TRACEY BATEMAN



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To Pastor Rick Morrow. Your compassion for those who are trapped in Satan's grip inspires me.



PART ONE

The Lord is my Shepherd,

I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside quiet waters.

He restores my soul.

Corrie

An easy spring wind blew through my open Jeep, lifting my hair and ruffling the cloth seat covers as I turned off the interstate and traveled east toward Saunders Creek. It was the last leg of my nine-hour drive from Dallas to the tiny, unassuming Ozarks town that bore my husband's family name.

Towering oaks, full maples, and evergreens hugged the narrow, winding road in a way that even a few months ago might have felt intrusive. But today the trees seemed to embrace me, welcoming me.

Déjà vu came over me, as though the scene before me came out of my own childhood memories instead of recollections of stories my husband told about growing up here.

I wanted him beside me, flashing his Top Gun Maverick grin.

Jarrod had died the way he lived—reckless, but heroic. Saving at least fifty lives in a little Iraqi settlement on the east bank of the Tigris River. Leaving me to pine after him, sick with love for a man who would never hold me again. I couldn't breathe. *God, just take me too*. But every day my eyes opened, air filled my lungs, and I forced myself to go on.

Six months ago, I buried him according to his wishes, in the Saunders family graveyard. After the funeral, my mother demanded that I return home to Dallas to grieve—as though I could just put the last

seven years behind me and move on. Forget the consuming, crazy, once-in-a-lifetime love who had rescued me from her in the first place. Every night since then I had dreamed of my husband's childhood home. A force compelled me to come here, and I couldn't ignore it any longer.

Jarrod was gone, but as I drove my Jeep up the path that led to the two-story farmhouse, I finally understood why I had been so drawn to this place.

I had come here to find the man I loved.



The memory of my husband's funeral returned with an uncomfortable clarity as I navigated the winding road to Saunders Creek.

I barely made it through the service with all my pieces intact. My skin crawled from the unfamiliar embraces. Everyone wanted to hold me. Fat, clammy arms threatened to suffocate me. Muscular arms would have gladly relinquished their strength for my weakness, because that's the way Jarrod's vast, extended family was. Motherly arms, fatherly arms, arms of women who could only imagine how they would feel if it had been their husbands and were thanking God it was mine instead. So many people clawing at me I wanted to tuck in my elbows, jerk my arms upward, and watch everyone scatter. Instead, I soldiered on—a good army widow.

But that had all happened what seemed a lifetime ago, and after spending the winter with my mother in Dallas, I hoped Saunders Creek would still want to embrace me. Still want to gather me in and allow me to live among them like one of their own.

I pulled up to my tumble-down house, relishing the solitude. I'd been smothered in Dallas, forced to mingle with Mother's kind of people, when all I wanted was to stop and catch my breath, to remember how to breathe again.

I owned my pain. Hid it deep inside. I couldn't let anyone see me fall apart. Mother taught me that. I hadn't dared show weakness during

those months in Dallas. I'd kept my tears close and silent. My grief was my own, every tear sacred.

Quiet surrounded me as I slid the Jeep into park and stared at my new home. An old white farmhouse built at an angle to the road. Windows everywhere. The waning sun shone on the front porch, and I pictured how well lit the east side of the house would be in the morning.

On either side of the house, vibrant lilacs bloomed. The wind carried the sweet rose-and-vanilla fragrance from their purple flowers through the open windows of the Jeep. I smiled. Jarrod knew how I loved the smell of lilacs. Perhaps he'd had them planted for me.

I climbed the rickety wooden steps to my rickety wooden door and turned the wobbly knob. Apparently the contractor hadn't bothered to lock it. I didn't blame him. If anyone wanted in, they'd get in about as easy with a lock as without.

Fresh grief splashed over me like ice-cold water as I stepped inside. I looked around my new home, which had once belonged to Jarrod's grandparents, and my stomach tightened until it hurt. Did I actually believe Jarrod would be here? No. I wasn't crazy. But in coming back to this place he had loved so much, the home where he came on weekends and spent most of his summers, I hoped to feel something that my heart recognized.

But there was nothing, unless you counted dust motes and stale air. And a deep sense of disappointment.

My furniture had arrived and had been placed in some sort of order, rather than thrown into the house for me to deal with. Boxes stretched along the hallway, politely moved to the side. Jarrod's cousin Eli had unlocked for the movers, and this was his way of welcoming me, I assumed. I appreciated the order more than I could say.

The scarred wooden floor groaned beneath my weight as I walked slowly into the kitchen and dropped my purse onto the kitchen table. My gaze fell on the trifolded flag the officer had handed me during Jarrod's military funeral. I stopped short and stared. I hadn't wanted it that day. I was so grief-stricken, so angry, that I left it on the chair at the cemetery. My mother and I had left directly after the funeral. We hadn't come back to this house, and I couldn't imagine how it had turned up on my kitchen table.

I stared at the red, white, and blue symbol of death and felt nothing but cold rage. What did I care about the American flag anymore? My pride at the sound of the national anthem or the president's voice beseeching, "God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America" died six months ago with my husband. I would never again lay my palm reverently across my heart and recite the pledge. That day, I hated the "purple mountain majesties" and "sea to shining sea" as much as I had once loved my country. I would have crawled on top of Jarrod's coffin and let the dirt tumble over me as willingly as he had tackled a twelve-year-old zealot and carried him to an abandoned building before they both exploded into a million pieces.

The images haunted me.

I yanked my thoughts back before they could spiral into a dark place I might not be able to escape. There were suitcases and a couple of boxes to bring in anyway. I went back to the Jeep and started unloading, glad that the furniture had all been sent ahead so I didn't have to deal with getting it here.

If he had not died, he would have been home by now, out of the military, and ready to put down roots here.

Jarrod and I had lived in military housing, but we were planning to give up our quarters and move to this very house before word came that Jarrod wouldn't be coming home. Our plan was to fix up this house, which his grandparents had left him, but our contractor had barely begun the massive renovations when Jarrod died. I didn't have the heart or strength to continue with the plans alone until two months ago, when I decided I couldn't stay in Dallas, dying inside a little more each day while I put on a happy face for my mother. Work resumed on the roof and structural issues. Inside, the plumbing had been fixed, but not much else, and I'd considered waiting a few more months to move. But night after night, dream after dream, Jarrod seemed to be drawing me here. How could I stay away?

Besides, mid-May seemed like a good time to move. Perhaps the beauty of nature's rebirth would somehow speak to my soul and help me make sense of the pain I couldn't escape.

After my last trip from the Jeep, I dropped, exhausted, into a kitchen chair and kicked off my flip-flops. The flag stared back at me, and I made a mental note to stuff it in a closet the next day. My phone trilled. I fished it from my purse and smiled at a text message from my sister, Lola. "Did you find your birthday present yet? Look in your pink duffel bag."

My birthday wasn't actually for a couple of weeks, but that wouldn't stop me from taking an early present. Curiosity overcame fatigue, and I padded barefoot into the living room, where I'd dropped most of my things.

I didn't have to dig around. A box sat on top of my clothes, along with a card. I unwrapped a huge bottle of brandy. I couldn't resist a smile. My city-girl sister had been joking for a month that I'd have to be drunk to actually live in "the boonies."

"Got it," I texted back. "Thanks."

"No problem. Try not to drink it all in one night. You're going to be there a long time. You'll need it."

I wouldn't, of course. I'd never been a drinker. The gift was an expensive joke. And it made me laugh the way only Lola could manage now that Jarrod was gone.

As the sun shifted, preparing its descent, the house began giving up light. The loneliness set in, and I blamed Jarrod for that. He should be here. My emotions ran the gamut these days, vacillating between grief, love, numbness, and finally, though not as often lately, anger. I didn't want to be angry. I wanted to idealize him the way everyone else did, but he'd gone off to save the world and left me to die of grief.

Tears blinded me as I pulled the bottle from the box. I'd always felt a little superior to people who used alcohol to numb their pain, but now I decided to join their ranks. What did it matter? There was no one to care what I did.

After rummaging through the boxes, I found my dishes and pulled out a glass. I rinsed it out and poured a drink for myself. I downed it without taking a breath. My throat burned, but I barely noticed as I poured another and downed it too. I wandered out to the porch and settled down on the rickety porch swing. I had no idea how long it would take the alcohol to affect my brain, but I was ready for it.

I wanted to be numb and dizzy. Anything to stop the images of

Jarrod's last few minutes on this earth. I turned sideways and stretched out on the porch swing, crossed my ankles along the wobbly armrest, and looked up at the rusted chains. I decided it was a good thing I wasn't very big because from the looks of the chain, a good hard yank would pull the whole swing down.

I poured another glass, then set the bottle on the porch. Staring out across the tree-laden hills, I raised the tumbler to my lips. I sipped the contents, despising every sweet, fiery drop that landed on my tongue. But as the warmth spread from my throat and moved through my body, I began to relax.

I could smell the creek beyond the tree line, and I breathed in deeply. The brandy slid straight from my empty stomach into my bloodstream, and my head started to spin a little. I liked catching a buzz. It made the trees greener. The birds sang a little louder, and the tree frogs chirped in better rhythm. And the more I drank, the better the brandy tasted.

I had to laugh a little at my circumstances. I, a debutante raised in Highland Park—the Beverly Hills of Dallas—was living in a dilapidated one-hundred-fifty-year-old home. My greatest joy in the past six months had been the look on Mother's face when she saw the house before the funeral. "Oh my dear Lord," she'd said, over and over. Her dismay was like Mozart to my ears.

As much as Mom hated it, I loved my new home. The house had sat empty since Jarrod's grandma passed on years earlier. Jarrod inherited fifty acres and the house two years ago when his father decided he'd like to go ahead and pass it on rather than wait until his death for Jarrod to move back home. Apparently, his grandmother had made it clear in

her will that Jarrod should eventually end up with the home place—that's what the family called the part of the land with the house. From the moment I caught sight of the old two-story, I felt a kinship with the broken structure. It reminded me of *The Waltons*, and we had hoped to fix it up and fill the rooms with children. Mine and Jarrod's. I started the renovations while he was overseas. He suggested I contact his cousin Eli to do the work but that I make my own choices about how to fix it up. I wanted to surprise Jarrod with the changes. I fantasized about picking him up at the airport and bringing him home to a beautiful, renovated house he would love.

What a cosmic joke.

But despite the insinuations I'd heard, I had no intentions of signing it back over to the family now that Jarrod was dead. The house sat empty, getting more and more run-down, for years before we started renovations, so I saw no reason to give it up if I had the means and desire to restore the place.

"Stupid Jarrod," I said to the sky, hoping he was up there somewhere listening. "You should have run away when you saw the kid had a bomb strapped on him." I raised the glass in the air, not as a salute, but so I could show him I was getting loaded for the first time in my life and it was his fault. "You think you're such a hero, sitting up there"—I leaned over the side of the swing and looked down at the porch—"or down there while everyone cries over you and talks about that stupid baby fox you saved when you were ten." My words were beginning to slur a bit, and the tears were stinging my nose. "Well, congratulations, my darling. You saved the world and left me alone. And don't you dare tell me to stop throwing myself a pity party, because I have one

coming!" I downed the rest of the glass. It was burning less now with each tumbler.

I tried to negotiate the bottle, but it slipped from my hands, spilling half its contents onto the porch. The liquid made a winding trail through the cracks on the wooden porch. "Now look what you made me do," I sobbed. I sat up, my head spinning and swaying, feeling as crazy as I sounded. I lay back down and curled into the fetal position, using my arms as a pillow. I shut my eyes against the dizziness. The tears kept coming, bursting through my closed lids like water through cracks in Table Rock Dam.

I would never see him again. Jarrod, the hero of my heart, was gone, and he was never coming back.

"You jerk," I whispered through tears. "They gave you a medal."

The chain groaned above me as the swing moved forward, then back, as though someone were pushing from behind. My eyes popped open, and I glanced, half-fearfully, around. There was no wind. Not even the slightest breeze. And drunk as I was, I knew I hadn't moved the swing.

"Jarrod?" I whispered. Had he somehow found a way to come back to me? If he wanted to be with me as a whisper of wind, a shiver up my spine, I'd take him any way I could get him. I sat up, my heart racing with fear, anticipation, excitement. The remnants of twilight were gone, and nothing was left except the stars and moon. It was so dark I could barely see the white railing in front of the swing. I hadn't even bothered to turn on a light earlier, so there was no glow through the windows. Only the sounds of the tree frogs and crickets broke up the quiet of the hill on which the farmhouse sat.

"Jarrod?" My voice shook and echoed so loudly in my ears it sounded like I was speaking through a bullhorn. "It would be just like you to break all the rules and come back to me. I'm freaking out a little bit, and to be honest, the brandy has me really drunk. If it's you, make the swing move again."

I held my breath, waiting for...something. "Jarrod?"

Still nothing. I had never felt so utterly alone in my entire life. "Aw, Jarrod," I whispered, my throat choking with tears again. "For a minute there, I thought you were really back."

The rusty chains began to creak, and slowly, the swing moved back and forth. My heart lurched and I smiled—the first real smile to touch my lips in weeks. The songs of the night insects became a lullaby. I didn't open my eyes, but I knew if I did, Jarrod would be sitting at the end of the swing, cradling my feet in his lap and swinging me to sleep.

Eli

I thought for a second she might be dead. Curled up in the swing, a strand of honey-blond hair stuck to her face, her skin so white it was almost pasty.

She moaned and moved. I set down my coffee thermos, released the breath I'd been holding, and leaned against the porch rail, trying to decide whether to rouse her or let her wake on her own.

The gentleman in me wanted to lift her and carry her inside. She was shivering and shouldn't be lying there in the dewy, cool spring morning. She wore a pair of black exercise pants and a thin, long-sleeved shirt that might have been plenty warm for her to wear inside the house but didn't cut it out here. What was she thinking?

She moaned again and moved.

I knew there was an afghan on the rocking chair in the living room, so I went inside and got it. When I stepped back onto the porch, she was sitting up. She didn't act embarrassed when she saw me.

"So, you're the one I heard walking around," she said, her voice strained. "I thought it might be Jarrod."

My heart went out to her. "You'll be looking for him for a while. My mom said after Dad died she heard him in every room and saw him 'round every corner for months."

Corrie's eyes widened. "Does she still see him?"

I shook my head. "No. She never really did. She just wasn't ready to let him go, so her mind played little tricks on her."

"Oh."

She shivered and reached for the afghan. "For me, right?"

I handed it over. "You looked cold."

"I am. Thanks." She settled it around her shoulders as I leaned back against the railing again.

Corrie pressed slender fingertips to her temple. I could only imagine the way her head must be pounding. Her gaze found my coffee thermos next to me, and blue eyes flickered with interest. I lifted the container, unscrewed the top, and poured her some. She blushed, which I admit I found appealing, though I had no business thinking any such thing of my cousin's widow. She took the steamy mug I offered. "Was I that obvious?"

"It's okay. You need it more than I do." She smelled sour. The bottle of brandy sitting on the porch next to her feet was half empty. And unless I missed my guess, this girl wasn't a regular drinker. She took a sip and made a face. Then sipped again.

"You don't like it?"

Corrie's cheeks dimpled. "I don't usually drink coffee without sugar."

"I'll try to remember that."

Corrie took another sip and stared down the hill at the fog above the tree line. I couldn't imagine what she was thinking, and I wouldn't intrude to ask, so I kept my mouth shut and left her alone with her thoughts.

I searched for small-talk topics and was just about to ask her about her trip the day before when she spoke up first.

"Do you believe in ghosts, Eli?"

The question took me aback. I didn't like talking about spirits. The house held memories I'd just as soon forget. Too much family folklore that whispered of visitations and dreams and slamming doors. But she had asked an honest question. And she didn't seem spooked, which encouraged me. "You mean like if someone dies they don't leave until they get their unfinished business wrapped up?"

She nodded and took another sip.

"No. I don't." I had no evidence from the Bible or from reality that supported the existence of the dearly departed.

"Then how do you explain haunted houses? And ghost hunters on TV?"

I had my own theory about ghost hunters but kept that to myself. "I don't claim to have all the answers," I said slowly, gathering my thoughts. "But I imagine if there is an entity in a house and it's not an angel, it's probably a demon."

Corrie's expression dropped.

I frowned. "Is everything okay?" I asked. "The house isn't—"

She shook her head. "No. Just thinking about Jarrod. Wondering if he's thinking about me."

"He'd be an idiot not to."

She gave a short laugh. "He could be idiotic at times. Like blowing himself to kingdom come."

Her words startled me. "Most people think he's a hero for that."

A shrug lifted her shoulder, and the blanket slid down over the thin shirt. Absently, she pulled it back up, keeping her gaze fixed on the horizon. "I guess a lot of Iraqi families are glad he was so heroic."

"But you don't see it that way?"

"It was heroic. I see that. But when a man has a wife waiting for him, I think he should consider the cost to her before he makes a choice like that." She pursed her lips, then spoke again. "If he'd been shot instead of sacrificing himself, I might feel a little differently."

I knew she spoke from a place of deep grief and not from a rational mind. She had to go through the process. Clearly she was in was the angry stage of grief, and I didn't begrudge her feelings. I stood. "I best get busy."

"What were you planning to start on today?"

"The upstairs bathroom." That one had flooded several times, and the whole thing needed to be gutted. The floor had to be pulled up and replaced. It would take awhile to finish. "Unless you would prefer I take off a few days to give you some space and quiet time?"

She shook her head. "No matter how long we wait, I'll never be ready to let him go, so there's no reason for you to delay your work on my account. Let's just get on with it."

Once more, my heart went out to her. She was working through anger, grief, and acceptance. "All right. I'll plan to work on the upstairs bathroom, then."

"Before you get started on that, can I ask a favor?"

I stared into her pixie face and nodded. "What do you need?"

"Could you secure the swing better? I think you'll need new chains. It's just that I don't want to press my luck on this thing, and I'd like to enjoy the spring weather on the porch."

"Not a problem. I'll have to run into town and pick up some supplies at the hardware store. But that shouldn't take too long."

Her face lit up and she smiled at me, flashing those dimples and blue eyes. My heart responded to the sweetness of her face, and I smiled back.

The thermos at my feet slammed over, jerking my attention away from Corrie's pretty face. I picked it up and handed it to Corrie. "You need this more than I do," I said. "I'll grab a cup at McDonald's."

"You sure?"

"Yep."

"It's strange that it fell over like that."

I smiled at the way her furrowed brow wrinkled her nose. "The porch is slanted," I said, although the tilt wasn't pronounced enough to make the thermos fall without a nudge or a gust of wind.

But given our ghost discussion, I didn't want to spook her. "I'll be rebuilding the porch soon."

"Sounds good, Eli." She stood up, wrapped in the afghan like an Indian princess, then wobbled. Even with my gimpy leg, I got to her before she tilted backward. I grabbed on to her, feeling her tiny bones. "Steady," I said. "You might want to take it slowly until you get your sea legs."

She let out a soft sigh and pulled back, pushing her palm against my chest. "Thank you, Eli. I should never have touched that brandy. I'm paying for it now."

I chuckled, keeping my hands on her forearms to make sure she stayed steady before I let her go. "I'm sure you are."

She gave me a wobbly attempt at a smile. "Thanks, Eli. And thanks for going into town for the chains. I know it will derail your plans."

I grinned. "You're the boss."

As I drove slowly around the sharp curves and steep declines down the road toward town, my mind drifted back to Corrie's question: "Do you believe in ghosts?"

I heaved a sigh. Are we doing this again, God?