

Saving

Dandy James

Shelly Gail Morris



SAVING  
DANDY JAMES



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ZUMAYA EMBRACES



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SAVING DANDY JAMES

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## *Dedicated...*

...to all the women at Blue River Canyon who keep me laughing every day and endure my constant caffeine buzz with sincere understanding.



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# CHAPTER 1

andy gripped the steering wheel as her heart pounded. This did *not* look good.

Why? Why did she decide to run to the market for a silly magazine? She'd seen the dark clouds drifting toward her neck of the woods, and heard the deep rumbling of the storm approaching. In springtime, when the rains were heavy, thick patches of slick mud coated the worn concrete roads—she knew this well.

But with Patsy Cline crooning on the truck's old cassette player she'd sung along, enjoying the beginnings of the downpour. Running into Adele's Mart, the cool rain had felt delightful on her skin. She'd actually giggled.

Nothing was amusing now. Tennessee rains could be dangerous, and as the seven-mile journey home loomed before her, she started to sweat. It seemed like she'd driven directly into a typhoon.

The windshield wipers had little effect as heavy rain pounded the glass. The skies were a deep gray and it was only four o'clock. She bit her lip hard. It had been utterly foolish of her to leave the comfort of home with the impending storm and for such a ridiculous reason. Had she lost her mind completely?

She noticed two red taillights ahead of her in the distance. Thank heavens. She could follow them and hope the driver could see the road a little more clearly and guide her in the right direction.

She sped up, thankful for the coincidence. Although she'd lived here all her life, she'd lost track of exactly where she was, and there were

ravines all along the edges of this tiny two-lane road that led nowhere. And what in the world was such a puny car doing way out here?

Suddenly, lightning flashed. A tree to the left of the road went up in flames, and the tiny car plummeted into a ditch. Dandy stiffened and slammed her foot on the brake. The back of the truck spun around on the slick surface, completely out of control. She kept her foot on the brake and prayed the old piece of shit would just stop.

The tires squealed. A scream burned her ears, and her throat dried out in an instant. Her stomach knotted as terror coursed through her. Finally, the world stopped spinning, and the steering wheel was the only thing she could focus on.

Glancing up, she saw that an oak tree had split in two, although only a few flames now trickled upward as the heavy downpour extinguished the blaze. Her heart shook her chest and she exhaled, struggling to catch her breath. She leaned back in the seat, put the truck into park and began to cry. *Thank you, Lord.*

She closed her eyes then opened them again. Through her tears, she saw the taillights in the ditch beside her. *Oh, my God, the puny car.* Someone was trapped, probably injured. *What should I do?* She had to get down there—and fast.

Inching the truck out of the middle of the road and over onto the far edge of the shoulder, she tried to be calm and think clearly. Thunder boomed. She turned off the engine and stared through the rain at the vehicle in the ditch. What was she going to find?

She'd never been brave, and the sight of blood made her sick, even when it belonged to the livestock. Ben had called her a pathetic coward too many times for her not to believe it.

She wiped the fog off the windshield and looked up and down the winding road. No one was coming. It wasn't a well-traveled road, and especially not on a day like today. It was purely up to her to help whoever was in that car.

She grasped the door handle. This was going to change her. She could feel it. At thirty-eight, Dandy James was finally going to grow up.

She took one final breath and darted out into the storm. Her feet were unsteady as the immense downpour drenched her. Flashes of alabaster lightning lit her way as she headed down the embankment. Suddenly, her feet slipped out from under her, and she fell hard on her backside, sliding right up to the passenger's side of the car.



Ignoring the pain, she stood and confronted a fancy Mercedes. The airbag was inflated, filling up the interior and coating it with white powder. She rushed to the driver's side and pounded on the window. There was a spattering of blood on the glass.

"Hello!" she shouted. "Are you okay?"

There was no movement. She tried to open the door, but it was jammed, so she dashed to the passenger's side, flung the door open and climbed in. There was a man, unconscious, still belted in, his head resting on the airbag as it slowly deflated. Dandy took his face in her hands. He opened his eyes, and despite the darkness, she could see he was struggling for breath.

Leaning over, she placed her mouth on his and started giving him mouth-to-mouth-resuscitation. His emerald eyes were red and swollen, and she could almost feel his agony.

She blew air into his mouth and prayed. After a few minutes, when she pulled her mouth away, he gasped, and she watched with relief as the color returned to his pale face.

"Are ya hurt bad?"

He gripped her hand. "Don't leave me," he whispered, and then his chin slowly sank to his chest and he passed out.

A clap of thunder shook the small car. Dandy felt tears of fright flowing down her cheeks. What was she supposed to do now? She glanced out the window as flashes of lightning lit up the dark countryside. *I should go get help. I should.*

Pain centered in her chest. He'd told her to stay. She did what she was told—always. She studied him. He seemed to be breathing with ease now, but his legs looked crammed up under the steering wheel and she wondered if he was trapped. She turned so her back was toward the windshield and sat on the center console. Blood oozed from his nose. She swallowed the lump in her throat and wiped the blood away with the sleeve of her jean jacket.

She touched his dark hair. It was tousled and slightly long. The strands were soft beneath her fingers. She ran her hand over his cheek. It was smooth, clean-shaven. He was a pampered man, for sure. His neck was thick and muscular. He was wearing a suit and tie. She loosened the tie and the top few buttons of his shirt. She caught a sweet musky scent, unlike anything she'd ever smelled on Ben. If she'd been standing, it would have made her knees weak.

He was good-looking, like one of the celebrities she watched on television or one of the cowboys she saw on the Rodeo Channel, but he looked more like the executive type than the rugged type. She didn't want him to die, not now.

Not ever.

Suddenly, he squeezed her other hand, and she remembered he was still holding on to her. She stared at their entwined fingers. They looked so comfortable and natural that way. She didn't know him at all, but for some reason, she liked him.

She caressed his hand. "Don't die," she cried.

With the rain beating down and her body growing cold, she found herself trying to remember when was the last time anyone had held her hand. Ben didn't hold her hand, never had. They hadn't even made love in many years. She'd given him a son and a farm—her job was done. Perry was eighteen now and probably hadn't held her hand since he was six.

She pressed her lips together. Her mother had held her hand four years ago, as she died in the cottage. Yep, that was it—the last time anyone had grasped her hand. Yet, this stranger's touch provided her with a feeling of warmth, like maybe everything would be alright, like maybe people still held one another for support and comfort. She prayed her hand gave him the same assurance.

Suddenly, she heard a crashing sound and turned to see her truck rolling down the hill behind them, landing on its side then flipping over, the wheels spinning.

"What?" the man said, lifting his head. "What happened?"

"My truck," Dandy began. "It just slipped down the embankment 'cause of the mud."

"Shit, my legs," he groaned, squeezing her hand tighter as lightning and thunder cracked the sky.

"What can I do to help you?" she asked, feeling that all-too-familiar uselessness. "I have to get you out."

He turned to her and spoke, his voice soft. "You breathed life into me. You're my angel."

Dandy was stunned. She'd never had a man speak so tenderly to her. His words warmed her, and unconsciously, she squeezed his hand.

He smiled weakly. "There's a cell phone in the briefcase in my trunk. It's coming down too hard right now, but when it eases up, you could get that."

"I'll get it now."

"No. It's too dangerous."

Dandy tilted her head and smiled a bit. "You hush up. You need medical attention pronto." With regret, she released his hand. "How do you get your trunk open?"

"There's a latch on my left, but I think my left arm is broken."

Dandy leaned across him and pressed the button his window down, grateful that the accident hadn't damaged the electrical system. She jumped out, dashed around the car and leaned in the window, located the trunk latch and pulled it. Nothing happened.

The front of the car was at such an awkward slant it was difficult to get back out of the window. Her feet sank into the mud as she took in the man's battered face. The wretched pain on it tore at her heart.

*I have to get him out.*

She leaned in again and fumbled beneath the airbag. Her hands were slippery, and the muscles in her arms tensed as she pulled and yanked at the latch. Her feet were unsteady. She felt clumsy and useless. With horror, she realized the dashboard practically rested on his lap.

His eyes met hers. "It's no use."

She heard the despair in his voice. "Don't worry. Maybe I can pry the trunk open." She straightened and looked around for a stick. All she could see was water, more water and mud. She hurried back around the car and climbed inside. "Can I get into the trunk from here?"

"Not that I know of," he said, turning his head slightly.

She dove into the back seat and checked for a way to gain entrance to the truck, but there wasn't any. She crawled back to the passenger's seat, pulled her jacket off and wiped the rain from his face. The deflated air bag covered the steering wheel. She laid her jacket over it.

"Oh, my legs," he groaned. "I can't stand it. Talk to me. What's your name?"

"Dandy," she murmured.

"That's a nice name. Different."

"When I was born, my daddy saw me in my mama's arms and declared I was a fine and dandy young'un. My mama said she knew right

then that I was meant to be called Dandy.” She pressed her lips together, trying not to think about her father.

The man winced in pain.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to run on.”

He let out a slow moan. “No, you have a lovely voice. I could almost picture that happy scene. I’m pleased to meet you, Dandy. I’m Colin Kessler. How...” He took a slow breath and continued. “How did I get so lucky as to have an angel like you find me?”

“Lucky?” Dandy repeated. “You’ve gotta be kidding. What are you doing out in this neck of the woods?”

“I’m a builder, and my corporation is always looking for scenic spots for new developments and golf courses. An agent contacted us about some land that was going on the market this fall.” He pressed his lips together. “I was just checking out the view.”

“Not a good day for that. Me and my husband own a farm nearby.”

“Were you on your way somewhere important?”

She felt a tinge of embarrassment. “It’s stupid,” she replied, shaking her head.

He grasped her hand again. “Distract me from this misery, or I think I’ll start screaming,” he told her in a shaky voice.

“Oh, you poor thing. I’m so sorry for you.”

“Tell me about yourself, Dandy. Why were you out on such a night?”

“Well...” She paused. “The new *People* magazine comes to Adele’s Mart on Saturdays. I like to pick one up every now and then. Sometimes I get to feeling a little out of touch. I like to read about all the exciting things that happen in the rest of the world.” She gazed at him, and he smiled. “Nothing much ever happens out here.” He coughed a few times, and her heart ached for him. “Let me try and get to the Harrison’s place. I know it’s near.”

His eyes locked on hers with an intense urgency. “Don’t leave me.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, caressing their entwined hands again with her free one. “I need to get help.”

“Don’t go. I need you. I need your voice,” he said in a broken whisper.

Her chin began to quiver. “I’m frightened,” she admitted.

He tried to lean his head back on the head rest, closed his eyes and tightened his fingers around hers. “Me, too. You can’t drive in that.”

“My truck slid down the hill,” she reminded him.

“Oh, yeah. I think I remember that. Well, you most definitely are not going out on foot.”

Dandy exhaled. “I wish I had a cell phone. My son has one.”

“Tell me about your son,” Colin suggested, without opening his eyes.

“Perry’s a good boy, helps Ben a lot.” She racked her brain. They weren’t close. “He travels around competing in rodeos—he wins the blue ribbon in calf-roping almost every time.”

“Do you go with him?”

Dandy shook her head. “Oh, no. They don’t want me around. I’d just be in the way. I stay home and tend to Lilly Bell and the other horses we board. I keep up the yard around the house and do a little gardening.”

“Lilly Bell?” he asked.

“She’s my old mare. A gentle sweetheart.”

“What do you grow in your garden?”

“Tomatoes, peppers, pumpkins and stuff. I make a mean hot salsa.”

“I’d like to try it someday. Will your husband come looking for you?” he asked, sounding hopeful.

“They’re both in Texas right now—another big rodeo. I’m afraid I won’t be missed by anyone. What about you? Will your wife call out the authorities?”

He raised his head and opened his eyes. “I’m up from Chattanooga, and I was planning to stay the night. Bridgett is probably whooping it up with her friends.”

She detected a twinge of sorrow in his voice. A man with such a compassionate voice should be missed, cherished. “Do you have any children?”

“Two girls. Megan is fourteen and Celia is seventeen.”

“Little girls are so precious.”

“Just one son?” Colin asked.

She took a slow, deep breath and thought hard about her answer. Colin was a stranger to these parts.

“No. A long time ago...” She stopped mid-sentence, rubbed her forehead and changed direction. “It’s been a joy raising Perry. When I had him it was the best day of my life. Three days after he was born, I spiked a temperature of one hundred and five degrees and had to be

rushed to Grady General for an emergency hysterectomy. I'd always dreamed of a house full of children. That was the worst day of my life." She gave a little snort. "And believe me the Worst Day of My Life Award had a lot of competition.

"I think Doc Wallace caused the infection. He was three sheets to the wind when he delivered Perry. Anyhow, what's done is done."

Colin caressed her fingers. "I'm so sorry."

Dandy was wholeheartedly embarrassed. "Oh, I don't know why I gave you that whole sob story. It must be this storm. It's thrown me for a loop."

"You have every right to be upset about that. You should have sued the pants off that guy. What did your husband do? Wasn't he furious?"

"He and Doc go way back. He'd never admit his good buddy did anything wrong. It would be my fault before his."

"You didn't deserve..." He broke off, and his eyes began to flutter. He fell gently forward onto the steering wheel to rest on her jacket.

Tears choked Dandy, and she sobbed uncontrollably. She released his hand, crossed her arms over her stomach and rocked back and forth. He'd fainted.

"Oh, Jesus," she cried. *He has to be okay. He's so kind and considerate, and he asks thoughtful questions. Why am I telling him my life story? Why am I burdening him with old painful memories? He's a stranger, yet it doesn't feel that way. Am I that desperate for companionship? What the hell is wrong with me? And how—how—am I ever going to get us out of this nightmare?*

## CHAPTER 2

After weeping for what seemed like an eternity, Dandy forced herself to stop. Ben always said crying was for losers and fools. She cried a lot, sometimes for no reason at all. Simple television shows reduced her to tears, and even a glowing sunset could bring on sobs. She was unsure if it was sensitivity...or the sadness that never quite left her.

The ferocity of the rain slowed just a bit. She concentrated on Colin's breathing. The interior of the car grew darker by the second. She struggled to study his profile in the dim light and grasped his right hand again. He was warm. That was good, wasn't it? Again she moved onto the center console to be closer to him. She wanted to touch him, and began stroking his forehead gently.

He let out a soft sigh, and his eyes slowly opened.

Dandy's face was only inches from his. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to wake you." She started to move back to the seat.

"No, stay," he said, releasing her hand, and slid his arm around her waist. She leaned toward him and combed his hair back with her fingers, longing to provide comfort as he suffered.

"I want to help you. What can I do? Is there any way I can pry you out?"

He nuzzled his face into her arm. "I don't think so. I know my left arm is broken and my left shoulder may be dislocated. And my legs..." He groaned.

“Oh, Jesus!” she cried. She couldn’t even imagine the pain he must be suffering. She could feel his breath warm on her neck. This was no time to fall apart. “Can you move them? Can you feel them?”

He let out a sharp cry. “I...I think I’m moving my toes. But my legs are immobile, trapped, probably broken.” Lightning lit up the interior of the car. He pulled her close. “Your body warms me.”

She threw both of her arms around his neck. “This can’t be happening!”

“If I die, tell my girls I love them,” he pleaded.

Dandy felt a chill rise up her spine. “Don’t talk that way. You’re going to be fine.”

“I haven’t set a good example for my daughters.” His chin rose, and his eyes filled with moisture. “You’re my angel. You’ll tell them for me. Won’t you?”

His words stabbed her heart. She wanted to kiss him and beg him not to speak of last wishes and dying.

“Colin, just relax. Put your head on my shoulder and sleep. I know you’re in a lot of pain. This rain is going to stop sooner or later, and when it does I’m going to go get help. I’ll make sure you’re taken to Vanderbilt. The best doctors are there—no local yokel will get a-hold of you. You’re going to be fine, darlin.”

She sounded reassuring, but she didn’t feel that way.

His lips parted, but no words came out. She eased his head onto her left breast..

“Sleep. Things will be better when you wake up.”

“I’m sorry for a lot of things,” he whispered.

“Aren’t we all,” Dandy said, trying to keep an even tone as panic erupted inside her. If he was losing blood, getting all riled up would be the worst thing he could do. “I don’t have much to talk about. If I tell you a little story, will you relax?”

His rested his head on her chest and exhaled. “I want to hear your voice, in any capacity.”

“Alrighty. No one knows it, but I write fairy tales sometimes. I started writing them for my little girl, to tell them to her someday. It made me feel like we were together. I daydreamed for years and years about holding her in my arms and telling her my little stories. It brought me some peace.”



He gazed up at her, his green eyes narrowed. She paused and wiped the moisture from her eyes.

“Anyhow, I never got to share them with her. It wasn’t meant to be. Perry was only interested in cowboys and Indians, wolf legends and stuff like that. I’ve never told my stories to a living soul. They’re probably stupid as all get out.”

“I’d like to hear your tales,” Colin said, relaxing on her shoulder.

“It might distract you from your suffering for a spell.” She took a deep breath. “Once upon a time there was a tiny fairy named Rinka. She was the tiniest, sweetest, most sincere fairy in all the Floating Daffodil Tribe. She gave off a soft lavender glow wherever she flew.

“Rinka loved adventure, and too often left the comforts of her soft flower home searching for excitement. One afternoon as she explored, she came upon children playing in a schoolyard. Since no one could see her but other fairies, fireflies and butterflies, she decided to investigate.

“She soared over the children, enjoying their laughter, dancing in their games, weaving through their arms and legs, having the time of her life, until a tiny handicapped child named Melissa spoke directly to her, and Rinka’s teeny world changed forever.”



Dandy leaned forward and gazed through the windshield and up at the onyx sky. She could see stars now. Hours had passed, and the rain had finally stopped. Colin had fallen asleep about thirty minutes into Rinka’s dilemma.

She chewed on her lower lip. He probably thought she was ridiculous, telling him silly stories while he suffered. Maybe he wouldn’t remember anything at all. Was it too much to hope for? Maybe the pain would wipe away his memories of their frightening ordeal together. At least, at this point, she felt like he was not going to die. God had decided he could wait another day for Colin Kessler.

She felt an odd connection as she looked at him. She always took an instant liking to kittens and puppies or any creatures that needed her. This was probably just the same situation. She’d never had feelings for a man before, except Perry, and even they had become distant. He’d be graduating from high school soon, and if they weren’t discussing a meal, they had little to talk about. Men were scary and pushy and had always treated her disrespectfully.

She thought that Colin was somehow different—and, oh, so beautiful. It was deeply odd to find him so enchanting.

“Colin,” she whispered, “let me go get help now. I won’t go without your blessing.”

His head moved, and he made a short coughing sound. “My life has been a joke. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I haven’t been the kind of person I should have been.” His eyes met hers. “Will you forgive me?”

“I’m just Dandy, plain and simple, no one at all. I need to get to the Harrisons’ and call for an ambulance.”

“I want to die. I do,” he cried. “Fucking take me to heaven or hell. I can’t do this anymore.” He bit his lip, and even in the darkness, she could see blood trickle down his chin. “Where’s my laptop? I didn’t organize that foreclosure. Where’s Jenkins? Is Phil here? It was unethical to fire him. Did I miss the meeting?”

A knot formed in Dandy’s stomach.

“It was Bridgett’s idea,” he bellowed. “I never wanted to sleep with those women. They’re just a bunch of bored, sex-starved, bitchy housewives.”

Dandy perched on the center console and brought his hand to her mouth and kissed it. “You’re in Grady, Tennessee, and you’re hurt. I have to get to a phone. I have to leave you just for a minute.”

“No!” he shouted, clawing at her.

“Yes,” she insisted, shifting back toward the door, trying to be strong, stronger than she’d ever been before. “I don’t want to leave you, but it’s for *you*. I have to get help.” She opened the car door.

“Don’t leave me. I love you. You’re good and pure. I can see that.”

She climbed out, her feet sinking into the thick mud. *If he knew the truth about me, he’d never say those precious things.*

“Colin...” She leaned in. “I’ll be right back. I promise you.”

“What about Rinka?” he shouted. “You can’t lock her away forever.”

Dandy was taken aback. “Please. Close your eyes and relax—you’re going to hurt yourself even worse. I’ll be back.” She closed the door, and closed her ears to his yelling.

She took in her surroundings. Nothing looked familiar. *All my damned life in the same crappy town, and when I need to know where I am, I don’t.*

She rushed up the hill, slowed as her feet sank into the wet muck. As she reached the top, she saw lights up the road in the distance. Harrison's Homestead.

She took off her mud-covered shoes and started running. As the thick clouds disbursed, a silver moon lit her way as she raced down the deserted road. The cool air soothed her mind and brought her soul strength. The moisture in it filled her lungs as she reached the Harrisons' gravel drive and dashed up to the house. She stumbled onto the porch and pounded her fists on the wooden door.

Joe Harrison opened it, gun in hand. "What in tarnation...?"

"Call an ambulance," Dandy screamed. "A man's run off the road down there..." She pointed. "...at the curve over yonder. He's hurt bad, trapped. Call the fire department, too." Her report made, she took off again back toward Colin. He was delirious, and he needed her like no one had ever needed her. She wouldn't let him down.

Her bare feet pounded the uneven pavement, and all she could think about was seeing him pulled from that death trap of a car and his pain relieved. When she reached the scene of the accident, she slid down the hill and flung the passenger-side door open.

"Help is on the way," she shouted. "Joe is calling an ambulance." There was no response. She leaned toward him. "Are you okay? Can you hear me? Colin?"

His eyes were closed, and he didn't react. She kissed him on the cheek once and then again and again, his soft flesh tender against her lips.

"You can't die. I have a feeling about you. You're a good man, a *real* man, with a soul and feelings you aren't afraid to share. I want to know everything about you. I *have* to know you." The sound of approaching sirens filled her heart with joy and relief. "Hold on, Colin, honey. Jesus is coming."

## CHAPTER 3

Willy Morgan, chief for the Grady County Volunteer Fire Department, forced Dandy to stand on top of the embankment away from the vehicle. The old coot hung out at Beefy's Barbecue 24/7—what did he really know about cutting sheet metal and safely prying an injured man out of a car? Louise said all he ever did was sleep.

She hated the thought of Colin's life being in his hands, even if he *was* delegating.

It seemed like the sound of the immense saw had burned her ears for hours. A medical team from Grady General was down there, too, tending to Colin's injuries. *God, please let him be alright. He's my friend. I promise to find out what's causing his heart pain. I promise to get out of the house more. I promise not to be afraid to live. I know you'll protect me. Please let him be okay.*

Just as she finished her silent prayer, a team of men rushed down the hill with a stretcher. *Yes!*

Her breath quickened, and her heart pounded in her cold body. She crossed her arms over her waistline and tried to stop shivering.

Then, as if all her prayers had been answered, she saw Colin lying on the stretcher in the same instant the first rays of the sun peeked over the horizon. They carefully carried him up the hill. There were fluids going into his right arm and an oxygen mask over his mouth and nose.

She raced to his side. "Colin, can you hear me?"

His eyes fluttered then opened. Dandy felt the sunlight on her tired face.

“You,” he breathed in a soft whisper. “You look just like I pictured you—lovely. You saved my life.”

“We have to go,” the paramedic said. “We need to get him to Grady General.”

“No,” Dandy shouted. “You take him directly to Vanderbilt. He can’t be healed with duct tape and an aspirin. Get him to Nashville.”

The paramedic looked to his right as Willy approached.

“She says we should transport him directly downtown.”

Willy shot Dandy a glance. “She don’t know shit. Get movin’ to General.”

She placed her hand on Colin’s chest. “He wants to go to Nashville, to Vanderbilt. Don’t you, Colin?”

He closed his eyes and lifted the oxygen mask. “Do whatever she says.” He groaned slightly. “She makes all the decisions for me until I’m able. I trust her with my life.”

The paramedic’s eyes met Dandy’s. “Alrighty. Has he been tested for HIV?”

“I dunno.” Her shoulders rose and fell.

“I’ll get a sample on the way. Let’s go. We’ve got to make good time. You’re coming, right?”

“Oh, yes,” Dandy blurted without a second thought.

Willy grabbed her arm. “You’re givin’ Grady General a bad name again. What are you doin’ out here? Where’s Ben? He know you’re with this feller?”

“Ben’s in Texas. This nice man was doing a survey of the area and had an accident.”

“What’s he want with you?”

Dandy ran a hand through her long, tangled hair. “Willy, I have to go.”

“What about the horses?”

“Hoover will be by to check on them.”

She climbed into the ambulance behind the stretcher and scooted to Colin’s side as they shut the door behind her. His cheeks rose into a slight smile, and she smiled in return.

“You rest. You’re going to be alright,” she said, tucking a tan blanket close to his body.

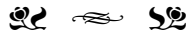
He blinked several times, and then his drowsy eyes closed.

She slumped over him, relieved yet still concerned. She longed to bawl like a baby, but she wouldn't break down in front of everyone. She had to be strong.

The ordeal was finally over, but she knew another one would more than likely ensue. Willy was probably on the phone right now, ringing up Ben in Texas. Grady women weren't allowed to socialize with anyone outside the city limits unless they were kin. And they certainly were not allowed to bad-mouth the local hospital and go into the city with strangers under any circumstances.

Ben would probably be furious with her for leaving the farm on such a night. Sometimes, his wrath was more than she could bear. She'd have a heap of explaining to do.

She looked down and beheld Colin's face, and all her thoughts of repercussions disappeared. He was worth it. Being by his side was the right thing to do. She'd watch over him until he was in the clear. It was worth whatever pain came her way. She couldn't leave him.



Dandy paced the waiting room, her neck sore from the naps she'd taken on the small couch. The aroma of hazelnut coffee filled the air. Nurses and doctors raced in all directions. It was morning, and everyone was milling around, busy with their duties and morning routines. She felt invisible, useless.

She'd washed her face, hands and chest off in a bathroom sink, but she knew she still looked a fright. Thankfully, a nurse had given her a pair of flip-flops, but her toes were still muddy. Colin would probably tell her to go jump in the river when he got a good look at her.

He'd been in there for so long she'd begun to wonder if the only part of him that wasn't damaged was his right hand, the one he'd used to hold hers.

She recalled with clarity the warm feel of his powerful grip, then became embarrassed by her silly thoughts. She was so needy, so pitiful. The seclusion of the farm sometimes felt like a prison with walls of open space and sunshine.

She sat down. Most people would adore a life as at-ease as hers. She should appreciate all the blessings she'd been given. A stab of guilt ached in her stomach, and raw grief overwhelmed her. *My life is good,*

*peaceful. Folks leave me be—it's what I always wanted. What's wrong with me?*

“Dear, let me get you something. He’s gonna be alright—he was wearing his seatbelt, and the airbag saved him from too much harm. Don’t you worry about a thing.”

Dandy looked up to see an African-American nurse smiling down at her. The woman was older than most of the young gals fluttering around; her dark hair sprouted gray streaks near her temples. Her shoulders were broad, and her wide-rimmed glasses didn’t conceal the sympathy in her eyes.

She sat down and put her arm around Dandy’s shoulders.

“I’m Mabel Dayton. I hear you’re from Grady. I used to work at Grady General a long, long time ago. There’s a lot of nice folks in those parts,” she added, peeking over her glasses. “And a lot of backwoods weirdos, too.” She laughed. “But I cherish my memories of Grady—I was given many blessings there. Honey, you look like you could use somethin’ to eat and a hot cup of coffee.”

“I’m fine, really,” Dandy managed.

“No, I insist, and I’m the boss around here. Come with me.” She rose.

Dandy stood as well. “What if he comes out?”

“They gonna want to keep him under observation for a good while yet, make sure nothing’s bleeding they didn’t see.” She wound her arm through Dandy’s and began walking. “What’s your name?”

“Dandy. Dandy James.”

“Hmmm,” Mabel said, her eyes growing wide and then returning to their normal shape. “A long, long time ago, I met a Ben James in the emergency room at Grady General. Any relation to you?” She led her down the hallway.

Dandy stiffened. “No,” she lied.

“Good thing. He was a real son of a bitch. A card player, I think. He came in with a stab wound, screaming and carrying on. I had to clean him up, and let me tell you, it was quite a chore. They took him to county lockup when I got finished with him.”

They entered the cafeteria, and Mabel guided Dandy through the food line, filling a plate with scrambled eggs, sausage, grits and biscuits. She put it on the hospital account and guided her to a seat.

Dandy stared at the heaping plate of food, and the spicy scent of the sausage tickled her nose.

“Go ahead, I know your starvin’. A skinny little thing like you needs to get some nourishment.” Mabel sat down beside her. “You want to be coherent when your friend wakes up, don’t you?”

Colin. Dandy thought about seeing him and what she would say. Maybe she would just say goodbye—farewell forever. Her stomach churned with bitterness. Was it wrong to want a friend? Her sister was the only one close to her, and Paula lived so very far away. She sighed, lifted the fork and began eating. The hot food felt good in her mouth and stomach and warmed her soul. After a few moments, her mood lightened. Everyone needed friends, even rich builders.

Mabel laughed as she watched Dandy eat hungrily. “What church do you go to, hon?”

Dandy stopped chewing and swallowed. “I haven’t been to church since I was fifteen.”

“Really,” Mabel said, surprised. “After fifteen years you’d had enough?”

“No,” Dandy answered, but didn’t want to elaborate.

“Well, I agree that sittin’ in a room listenin’ to a preacher doesn’t make you a good Christian. I just remembered that most of the social activities in Grady centered around the church. I went to the First Methodist on Main.”

Dandy felt as if a hand had tightened around her throat. Her family had attended that church. *What if Mabel knows all about me? What if she knew my father, or Aldo Jackson?* Her mouth felt suddenly dry. She flashed Mabel a half-smile.

“I talk to God every day,” she said coolly. “That’ll have to do.”

Mabel took her glasses off. “I haven’t been back to Grady in twenty-three years. I needed a little change of scenery and headed for the big city of Nashville.” She chuckled softly. “But Grady was good to me, that’s a fact.” She put her glasses back on and studied Dandy. “You’ve got lovely blue eyes, round as a half-dollar.” She lightly touched Dandy’s cheek. “You look like you’ve been through quite an ordeal.”

Dandy took a spoonful of grits and realized her right sleeve had blood splattered on it. She glanced downward. Her jeans were coated in mud.



“Don’t fret about it, girl. The ambulance driver said you were a real hero.” She placed her hand on Dandy’s arm. “I want to help you. There’s a nice little dress shop just around the corner—Be Lovely Boutique. Why don’t you go buy somethin’ comfortable. And there’s a hair salon just down from that. Get yourself gussied up and put it on my accounts. They know me at both places.”

“Oh, I couldn’t,” Dandy said, placing her fork on the plate. “You’ve been so nice already.”

“You’ll pay me back. I can tell you’re good for it.”

Tucking her hair behind her ears, Dandy thought about her appearance. She was probably tracking dirt through the fancy hospital and leaving a smear of it on each seat she sat in. She wasn’t just strolling around the porch, feeding dogs or sweeping. For the first time since she was a young girl, she really wanted to look decent.

Her eyes met Mabel’s, and she saw the sincerity in the woman’s chubby-cheeked smile.

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“And you’re sure Colin won’t be awake for a while?”

“Even after he gets in recovery it will be much, much later, probably this evenin’. Take your time. Enjoy a day out in the city.” She held out a twenty-dollar bill. “Take this, too. I know you left your things in your overturned vehicle.”

A cheerful smile came to Dandy’s lips, yet she couldn’t help but wonder why Mabel was taking such an interest in her.

“That sounds heavenly.”

Mabel rose. “Then it’s all settled. You primp a little, getcha one of those pricey mocha drinks and buy some new duds.”

“There’s a Tennessee National Bank in town, so I should be able to get some money. I use the branch in Grady.” She touched Mabel on the elbow. “Thanks for your kindness.”

“It’s nothin’. Now, you get movin’”

Dandy dashed toward the elevator. How terrific was this? Mabel was a dear, a real sweetheart. As the elevator reached the lower floor and she stepped off, she wondered again if Mabel had recognized her. What if she’d known Dandy’s mother? Emma Sue Murphy had attended the First Methodist on Main and was friends with practically everyone south of Kentucky. She’d always been hosting ladies’ lunches,

baby and bridal showers and local fundraisers—that was, until life had gone awry, until the whole world had turned completely upside-down.

The warm sunshine greeted her as she stepped outside. What did it all matter right now? Mabel had been kind to her, and maybe the gossip about her past had died.

She saw the hair salon Mabel had mentioned and rushed over. A small, thin man wearing a purple silk blouse approached her as she entered.

“Good day, I’m Vincent.” He paused, taking in her appearance. “Doll, did you come from the hospital? Have you been in an accident?”

“Well, sort of. I’m waiting for a friend to get out of surgery. Can I get my hair washed?”

“Washed?” he repeated, running his hands down her long copper hair. “I can make you a goddess. Look at those high cheekbones and full lips. You need some layering around your stunning face. It would accent the fabulous indigo of your eyes. And a few light-blond highlights around the front would off set the red. You, my dear, are the kind of project I adore.”

She tilted her head sideways. “I’m no spring chicken.”

He waved his hand. “You’re as young as you feel, sweet thang.”

She exhaled. “I don’t feel so young anymore.”

“Well, girlfriend, I’ll work on the outside, and you work on the inside. And when I’m done you’re going to look and feel twenty.”

She covered her mouth with her hand and giggled. “Okay.”



As Dandy left the salon an hour later a novel, unexpected feeling filled her heart. It had been unsettling watching six inches of her hair fall to the floor, but now she had a fluffy, silky look, her hair coming just to the top of her shoulders. She almost felt attractive.

In all of her life, she had never experienced such pampering, such adoration. Vincent was a hoot. He’d given her blond highlights around her face, plucked her eyebrows and applied dark-brown mascara to her long pale lashes. He gave her tips on makeup and on combing and drying her hair. He genuinely seemed to care about her appearance and took pride in making her knowledgeable in the latest beauty techniques. He made her laugh out loud as he provided explicit instructions on what not to do with styling products and cosmetics.

The whole experience had made her feel pampered, like this day was not a part of her real life. Gratifying experiences only happened to other women, not her, not Dandy James from Grady, Tennessee.

She gazed up and down the busy street as shoppers rushed by with their packages and chatted with their friends. A man just a few doors down strummed a guitar. What would it be like to have girlfriends and acquaintances that Ben didn't choose? Maybe she could become friends with Colin and his wife. Maybe she could invite Bridgett out for tea one afternoon. Maybe Bridgett read Oprah's Book Club picks, and they could discuss them. Maybe she watched *Days of Our Lives*.

A cardinal flew past and perched on a ledge nearby. It looked out of place amongst the brick buildings and neon signs. Maybe she would fly away and never see Colin again. The thought was almost painful.

The bird flew down to the ground, located a few crumbs and soared out of sight. She unclenched her hands and recalled the dried mud on her jeans. It was time to get some clothes.

Vincent had insisted she look for a cocoa-colored linen dress with a V-neckline and straw lace-up sandals—a rather specific order, especially for a non-clotheshorse like her. Still, he really seemed to know his stuff, so she'd give it a try.

A cool breeze floated through her hair as she walked, and her spirit felt a moment of contentment. She turned the corner and saw the Be Lovely Boutique. A mannequin in the window wore the exact outfit Vincent had described. She laughed, then thought how funny it was to be chuckling, alone here in the middle of the sidewalk in downtown Music City. *Oh, well.* She rushed inside.

Her reflection wearing the stylish dress was enough to make her blush from head to toe. She wasn't such a scag after all, and she wasn't "pale as flour," like Ben always said. The bronzer Vincent had used gave her a healthy glow, and she had plenty left over to use at home.

The boutique was pleased to put her purchases on Mabel's account and toss her mud-stained clothes in a drawstring bag. She'd always been told that city folks were rude and unfriendly, but so far she'd found them all to be pleasant and caring.

When she left the store, she spotted a pay phone. Ben might be hunting her down, or Perry might have called to tell her how he'd done

in the competition. She needed to get in touch with them, and she found herself surprised by her reluctance to do so.

Ben could ruin her lightheartedness in a second flat.

She wrapped her arms around her waist. There would be hell to pay if he thought she was sneaking around or being deceitful. She trudged to the phone and dialed Perry's cell.

"Hey, Mom."

"How y'all doin'?"

"Goin' good. Placed first in the calf-ropin' again."

"That's wonderful." She paused. "I'm so proud of you, Perry."

"We just got done eatin' at O'Riley's. Ain't no place like it in Tennessee."

"When do you think y'all will be home?"

"Daddy wants to get on the road soon. Here he is."

Dandy wished it would take them a week to return—a month. It felt good, being free.

"Willy said the truck is totaled," Ben began. "What the hell happened?"

She'd guessed right—that damn Willy had run at the mouth already. She exhaled.

"We had a bad storm."

"Who was the man in the Mercedes?"

"A builder comin' to look at property."

"Oh." He cleared his throat a few times. "Willy didn't tell me that. So, how did you get to helpin' him?"

"The roads were bad. I had an accident. He had an accident. That's all."

"Where are you now?"

Dandy knew she had to choose her words carefully. "They took us downtown. Col—" She had to keep it simple. "They wanted to make sure we were okay. I'm gonna rent a car and get home soon."

"Tallulah's gonna be hungry."

Dandy exhaled. That dog was always hungry. Who cared.

"I gotta run. Drive home safe."

"See you in a couple o' days."

"Alright," she said dryly and hung up. The explanation was over. Thank goodness he hadn't asked her why she was out cavorting around

during a storm. He'd be spitting mad if he knew she on her way to buy a Hollywood gossip rag. Well, what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

But there were no secrets in Grady. Everyone knew everything and dredged it up whenever convenient. She squeezed her eyes shut then opened them again. She had to see Colin. Leaving was not an option.

Everything about their meeting and his voice and his eyes brought her an odd sense of belonging and peace. There was no explaining it. The feeling urged her forward, on her own for the first time in her life, and it made her feel a speck stronger inside. Following her heart was another first in her dutiful life.

She noticed a Tennessee National Bank near a Starbucks at the end of the street and rushed to it. She spent the first of every month at the branch in Grady with her financial planner, Andy Smart, paying bills, taxes and depositing the checks from the folks who boarded horses. Alberta Haywood had worked at the Grady branch before she transferred to the downtown Nashville branch as an assistant to the vice-president. If she was there, she'd know Dandy in an instant and hopefully assist her in accessing her account. She crossed her fingers and hoped for a tad more luck.



Back in the waiting room, Dandy crossed her legs. It didn't seem to be a busy afternoon. There was just one bored-looking teenager sharing a long couch with her. The smell of lemon cleanser filled the soft-blue-painted room. There was a television in the corner giving tips on eating healthy and taking medications properly. Although she'd only been back an hour or so, it was beginning to feel like days had passed, and her resolve to stay there was starting to wane. Would Colin remember her? Was he really as kind as she remembered? Where was his wife?

She dangled the car keys above her knee. Good old Alberta Haywood had helped her get some cash and had given her a ride to a rent-a-car service just down the road from the bank. She'd yakked and yakked about her first husband Owen, who'd died of colon cancer. All Dandy had to do was explain a thing or two about the accident. Alberta seriously enjoyed the sound of her own voice. What a relief.

"Shut *up*."

Dandy looked to her left as the teenager beside her shrieked into a cell phone.

“Shut *up!*” the girl yelled again. “This is serious. This is mega-drama—not exactly what I wanted, but close. I really wanted to piss Garvey off for dating that bimbo. Duane was the man to do it. You’re the only one I can trust, you know, but I’m going to have to fess up soon. I can’t keep that kind of secret forever. My mom’s gonna freak.”

A gorgeous blond woman sauntered into the room.

“Get off that phone,” she ordered. She wore tight black pants and a zebra-striped print shirt. Her breasts were large, like a television star’s boobs, Dandy thought. She carried herself with a confident air. Her scarlet lips were full and pouty. Dandy tried not to stare, but she couldn’t help herself.

“Deb, I’ll call ya back in a few,” the teenager said and shoved the cell phone into her purse.

“Move over. You’re sister’s getting some coffee. Jesus, I’m tired.”

“Maybe you’re too old to stay out all night,” the girl said in a mocking tone.

Mabel emerged through the doors from the recovery area. “Mr. Kessler is awake and doing well.”

Dandy rose as did the woman and teenager. A younger girl carrying a tray of coffees rounded the corner.

“What? Is Daddy okay?”

Mabel smiled. “He is.”

Dandy suddenly realized that the woman and girls were Colin’s family. She rushed to the blonde and threw her arms around her neck.

“Oh, Mrs. Kessler...Bridgett...it’s so nice to finally meet you.”

The woman’s eyes widened, and Dandy sensed her confusion.

“I was there when your husband’s car fell into the ditch. It was awful. He was in so much pain. I’m so relieved he’s going to be alright.”

The woman stepped away and turned to Mabel. “What the hell is going on?”

“You remember,” Mabel said. “I told you a kindly country gal came to your husband’s rescue. This is her. This is Dandy.”

“Oh. Well, thank you, dear,” Bridgett said, patting Dandy on the hand and turning away quickly. “Can I see my husband now?”

“He’s very weak. You can go in one at a time.” Mabel crossed her arms over her stomach. “The doctor is just taking a few vitals, and then he’ll be out to talk to y’all.”

Dandy took a few steps backward and sat down. The girls were staring at her like the outsider she was. Mabel winked at her and strode purposefully to the nurse's station.

"Megan, hand me a cup of coffee. I hope it's scalding," Bridgett said.

The double doors opened again, and a medium-build, balding man wearing teal scrubs emerged.

"The Kessler family?" he asked.

Bridgett held a hand up, and he joined them.

"I'm pleased to tell you that Mr. Kessler is doing quite well. Though he sustained a good many minor cuts and bruises, no major organs were damaged. The ankle was a clean break, and his left knee was only dislocated, fortunately. Everything's set, and he should heal up nicely. He'll be in casts for about six weeks. After that, we'll see how the bones are knitting and get him started on physical therapy."

"Will he be able to play tennis again?" Bridgett asked.

The doctor rubbed his forehead. "Not for a substantial amount of time. He needs to heal completely and not run the risk of re-injuring that knee."

"Oh," Bridgett said, annoyance in her voice. "Can he come home today? We need to get back to Chattanooga."

"Absolutely not. He's going to need to stay here at least a week."

"Shit," Bridgett said.

The doctor looked at the two girls. "He wants to see Dandy first."

All eyes turned to her. She felt the blood rush to her face. The doctor scrutinized the tableau and quickly concluded which woman was "Dandy."

"You come on in." He held a hand out to her.

Bridgett's hands moved to her hips. Dandy felt a familiar contempt emanating from her, and suddenly wanted to run away, back to her farm, back to her lonely haven.

"Come on, or he's going to be out again," the doctor insisted.

She rose and took small steps toward him. He grabbed her hand and pulled her through the doors and down the sterile hallway.

"Doll, I didn't want to say anything, but Mr. Kessler has been asking for you constantly—the moment before I put him under and the second he woke up. He's been through a long, intense procedure. I didn't want to cause any problems out there, but the patient comes first."

Using his free hand, the doctor pushed open the door to Recovery Room 217, and there he was—Colin.

She crossed slowly to his bedside. His smooth, tanned face looked relaxed and pain-free. Gladness filled her soul. His thick brown hair was tousled over his forehead, and his lips were parted slightly as he took long, deep breaths. He was more beautiful than the morning sun inching over the horizon and illuminating the water on Cumberland Pond. It was her favorite place in the world, and yet it paled in comparison to the splendor she saw in Colin's face.

A small drop of moisture lay near his left eyebrow and she reached to wipe it away. As she touched his warm skin, his eyes fluttered and then opened. They were like polished jade, and his pleasure was evident as a smile tipped the corners of his mouth.

"You're here," he whispered. "I'm so glad. I was afraid you weren't real, but a figment of my imagination, an angel sent down from heaven."

"I couldn't leave. I had to see you again."

He lifted his hand, and she wound her fingers through his.

The doctor cleared his throat. "I'm gonna go now." He pushed a chair behind her. "Keep it calm. The nurse will be stopping by in a few."

Dandy couldn't look away from Colin, just sat down. She vaguely heard the door close as he caressed her hand with his thumb.

"I'm so glad you're alright. Can I get you anything?" she asked. "Do you need anything at all?"

"I need for you to come closer," he said, pulling her toward him. "I need you close to my heart."

She buried her face against his throat. He embraced her, his touch giving her an overwhelming feeling of joy. Her arm rested over his chest, and warmth unlike anything she had ever felt before melted her heart. She couldn't speak as she clung to him, and he held her so tightly.

When he began caressing her hair, she placed a light kiss on his neck. She knew it was wrong, knew it was terrible, but she couldn't help herself. Uncontainable feelings of pure adoration flooded through her, and she was powerless to make them cease.

Suddenly, he grasped her head and tipped it back, and his mouth covered hers hungrily. The heady sensation his kiss caused made her feel dizzy as her body burned. She parted her lips as he demanded all of



her, and she was shocked by the need she felt for him. The kiss was urgent and exploratory and suddenly frightening.

She turned her mouth away, and he groaned and kissed her cheek and her ear then seared a hot path down her neck.

“We can’t,” she breathed. “It’s not right.”

“I love you, Dandy James,” he said softly in her ear. “I knew it the minute I saw you standing in the rain, leaning into my car.”

She pulled her body erect, away from the only man she knew she would ever love, the only man who had ever whispered such tender words to her.

“You don’t even know me. I’m a mess. I always have been.” Tears stung her eyes. “This isn’t the real me, and things have happened in my life. I’m no angel. When you get better, you’ll see that.”

He reached for her. “Please, I love you just the way you are. God knows, I’m not perfect. I accept you and whatever it is that haunts you.”

Dandy wanted to dive into his arms again and relish his hot affection, but he was not hers to enjoy. Another woman—and his children—waited patiently just down the hallway.

She forced herself to resist what she needed so desperately. It was confusing, being so close to him and hearing his declaration of love. But the fact remained he was not her husband.

She struggled with what to say. Colin’s arm returned to his side.

“Don’t go,” he begged.

“I’ve gotta get home and check on things. I’ll come back tomorrow.”

“Promise me.”

She nodded, feeling he could almost read her jumbled thoughts. “I promise.”

Bridgett burst into the room.

“Hey, honey.” She raced to Colin’s side and kissed him on the cheek. “I was beginning to get worried.” She shot Dandy an annoyed look. “Megan, Celia and I have been waiting forever.”

The girls came in, and Dandy stepped away from the bed as they hugged their father.

“I really must get going now,” she said. “Mr. Kessler, I’m so glad you’re going to be alright. You gave me quite a scare.”

“I’m a new man,” Colin said, his gaze intense.

“You don’t look so new to me,” Celia said, tucking her blond hair behind her ears. “And you said *I* was the bad driver in the family.”

“It was a big storm,” Colin told her.

“That it was.” Dandy laughed slightly. “Well, you-all have a nice day. I gotta get.” She moved toward the door then gazed back at Colin one last time. His eyes bored into hers, and his grin slowly disappeared. “Bye now.” She closed the door.

As she walked down the long, quiet hallway, she touched her lips. She had never, ever been kissed like that before. She longed for more and hated herself for it. Colin Kessler was not hers to love! Period.

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