HEART STRINGS

SARAH'S STORY

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This is for Terri Reed, a wonderful author with more than twenty books with Harlequin Love Inspired and Harlequin Suspense Inspired. She has always shared her knowledge, her faith, and her heart with other writers. Through reading her books and getting to know her, she taught me that writing a story with characters who consistently live their faith can provide the best example of living a spirit-filled life.

This is also for Jessa Slade. Thank you for the writing retreats, the ear for discussing character arcs, and for your great analysis of story. Thank you for helping me stay on track and to keep plugging away even when times are hard. You are beautiful and smart, a combination that many would envy. As for me, I simply feel blessed that you are in my life.

CHAPTER 1

TOM PAWLAK AWOKE WITH A JERK. Eyes wide, he peered through the shadows above his bed. Sunlight cast a bright haze through the barn slats. Unwilling to get up, he closed his eyes and rolled away from the light, scrunching the pillow beneath his head.

"Dammit!" He tossed the pillow aside and raised himself to sit on the edge of the bed. Thoughts of Sarah had kept him up all night. Why did Jack have to bring her up last night? He'd been here two years caring for the old man and not once had he mentioned his daughter. But last night, in a drunken stupor, Jack wouldn't shut up about her. The one woman Tom had ever loved. The one woman he should have married.

The one woman who would never speak to him again.

He heard barking outside the door. He reached for his jeans and T-shirt and pulled them on quickly. The jeans were too loose these days. He grabbed his belt and pushed it through the worn loops, tightening it to the last hole. He'd lost about twenty pounds over the last few months. Working Jack's farm along with a job in town had taken a toll on him. He needed a new pair of jeans. Ones that fit. But he didn't even have time to shop.

The barking grew louder, more frantic. Then a man's scream.

Tom rushed outside to find Kip, the border collie, running in circles and barking his head off. Billows of smoke poured out the front windows of the farmhouse.

Jack! He stripped off his shirt and doused it with water. Holding the T-shirt to his nose he threw open the screen door and scanned the living room. No flames. He pushed through the smoke, toward the kitchen. His heart slammed in his chest.

Flames had already climbed the curtains above the sink and were licking along the ceiling. The all-wood structure would go up quickly if he didn't act.

"Jack!" He called as loud as he could between coughing spats. "Jack!" He listened for any sound of a voice.

Fire now engulfed the end wall and baseboards, immediately claiming cardboard boxes, newspaper and other flammable material along the way. Horrified, Tom pressed a hand to his mouth. In the smoky haze, he sprang toward the sink and turned the cold water on full force. The dog's barking now joined with two other dogs outside.

Tom took the sprayer and pointed it at the flames. The water stream barely reached most of it. He had to get the garden hose. But where was Jack?

Wheezing, Tom rushed outside, located the hose and, with quick twists of his hand, cranked it on full blast. He jerked it free of the wheel and ran back into the house, uncoiling the entire length of hose behind him. He doused the living room and then made his way back to the kitchen, spraying until everything in sight was completely soaked. Then he went searching for Jack.

"Jack," he called again, moving through the house and checking each room.

In the back bedroom a dresser had fallen over. He quickly pulled the dresser upright. Jack lay unmoving on the floor.

"Jack? Are you all right?" He kneeled next to him and pressed his hands against his neck checking for a pulse. It was strong. How did this happen? Why was Jack back here and the fire in the kitchen? For that matter why was he even out of bed?

Jack's eyes fluttered open. He looked confused.

"What happened?" Tom asked.

"I needed a drink."

"At six in the morning?"

"I don't care what damn time it is. I needed a drink. I have a right to a drink don't I? Don't give me any back talk. I'm dying. I can have whatever I want."

Tom chuckled with relief. Obviously Jack wasn't hurt. "You've always had whatever you wanted, Jack. If you want to kill yourself, I'm not gonna to stop you. But you're not taking me with you." He squatted behind Jack, wrapped his arms around his chest. Then with one long pull, he lifted him to a standing position. "Can you stand on your own?" He slowly released his hold.

Jack took an uneasy step forward then turned. "I'm fine. Damn dresser never was reliable."

"What happened?" Tom scooted the dresser back against the wall. "How did the fire start?"

"I was lookin' for my whisky. As I reached for it, my fat belly hit the stove and it turned on a burner. The flame caught my shirt. I took off my shirt and threw it on the stove. I turned off the burner, but by then my shirt was goin' like gangbusters and it caught the curtain. So I grabbed the whiskey, came back here, closed the door, and prepared to die."

Tom's fists clenched. Yes, Jack was dying and it sure didn't make him any nicer.

"Did you consider that by the time the fire got to you the whole house would be gone?" he asked, his breath barely escaping between clenched teeth. "Did you consider the barn would have burned and I would have died too?"

Jack closed his eyes.

"Look at me, dammit!"

Jack opened his eyes and stared past Tom.

"It's one thing you deciding to kill yourself. You made that decision when you kept drinking." Tom pointed his finger at Jack. "But don't make that decision for me. I'm not ready to die."

Jack sighed long and loud. “Dammit, Tom. I can’t even die properly. What the hell am I supposed to do?”

“You’re going to take it like a man,” Tom snapped. “It’s not pretty and it’s only going to get worse, but I refuse to let you hurry it along by giving up or killing everyone else around you.”

Tom shook his head. It had been a bad night all around, and the morning wasn’t shaping up to be any better. He’d have to spend most of this week fixing the kitchen and living room. And that would take money--money neither of them had, but there was no way he would let Jack die in complete squalor with no one he knew nearby.

"I still don't get how the dresser fell on you.” Tom scanned the room and noticed clothes were strewn from the door to the window. “Were you looking for something?"

"Yeah." Jack yanked open the bottom drawer and the dresser teetered.

Tom quickly righted it. “I’ll have to nail the backboard to the wall so it won’t tip again.”

"I wanted that damn document Lizzie left me. The one that says this house belongs to Sarah. Figured if I was gonna die, at least Sarah could see she got the house."

"A burned-down house, Jack. What good would that be? You could've asked me, you know. I would've gotten it for you."

"Sure you would, but you wouldn’t get me my drink. I can't stand that look you give me every time I wanna drink. Like I'm the devil or something."

Jack held back a long sigh. Long ago he’d decided not to try to stop Jack from drinking. But every time he handed a bottle to Jack he knew he was helping him die faster.

Resigned, Tom said, "You're not the devil, Jack. But it’s drinking that got you to this point. Would it really hurt to wait till afternoon to have a drink?"

"I'm dying, dammit. I'm not going to change my ways now. I’m no hypocrite; I’m an alcoholic. So what? There's no way in hell I'm goin’ to heaven; so I might as well go out enjoying my whisky." Jack sat on

the edge of the bed and poured himself a glass of whiskey from the large bottle on the nightstand. Then he crawled back in bed and took a long drink. "Now leave me to my vices. You're livin' here free, go make yourself useful. If I'm awake around noon I'll join you for lunch. Now get out."

Tom shook his head as he turned and walked toward the door. He wasn't exactly sure why he'd volunteered to help care for Jack. It's not like Jack had asked for help; and he definitely never voiced any appreciation. Tom closed the door solidly behind him and headed back to the kitchen to start the clean up and repairs.

As he eyed the slurry of ash and paper on the counters and the floor, Tom couldn't help laughing at himself. Karma was biting him on the ass. No doubt about it. This was definitely payback for Sarah. All that talk last night, Jack's request to get Sarah back here before he died, and Tom's subsequent dreams were telling him something. Something he didn't really want to face.

He knew why he stayed on and cared for Jack. Jack helped him and his mom when they needed it most. When his mother was in the final stages of ALS, two years ago, Jack had taken pity on them. He'd come around a lot and actually helped take care of his mom when Tom had work in town.

And when she'd died, it was Jack who'd help pay for the funeral; and it was Jack who went with Tom to spread her ashes along the Mountain Fork River. When the landlord came and kicked Tom out of the shack he'd grown up in, Jack offered him a place in the barn in exchange for help around the farm.

Two years since his mom died. Two years he'd been living in that barn for free. Yup, Tom owed Jack. The least he could do was make him comfortable in his final months. The doctors said his liver was poisoning him and it wouldn't be long before it got the job done.

Jack wanted to see Sarah one last time and Tom had promised he would get her out here. Problem was no one knew where Sarah was now. The last address Jack had was three years old and evidently she didn't live there anymore.

All Jack knew was that she lived in Oregon and played guitar in a band named something Canyon. And he wasn't even sure of that.

Tom did know one thing for sure: she'd hate seeing him again. Though Jack had forgiven him, he doubted Sarah ever could.

CHAPTER 2

SARAH PUT DOWN HER PEN and scanned the chords she'd written. She turned sidewise from the kitchen counter, retuned her guitar, then plucked the chord changes once more. Something wasn't right. The G to E minor chord worked well in the beginning section, but the transition to the chorus section didn't resolve right. She tried C to E minor, and then C to G to D. It sounded good, but not right. She scratched the chords above the lyric and hummed it the way she had envisioned it.

I close my eyes to draw you near.
Teach me, Lord, to simply hear.
Lead me through the muddy dark.
Help me mend this broken heart.

B7! That was it. First D, then B7 as it rose, then back to E minor to resolve it. She scratched out the previous sequence and wrote in the new changes. This was her first original song with Sweetwater Canyon and she wanted it to be perfect.

A burst of the swinging door nearly slammed into Sarah's back.

"Oops. Sorry. Didn't see you there." Kat opened the fridge and

stared at the interior. "It's got to be close to lunch time, don't you think?"

"It's always meal time for you. Where are the others? Have Rachel and Michele arrived?"

Kat pulled out a carton of orange juice and some type of onion dip. She made a big deal of closing the refrigerator and then pouring a bunch of pretzels into a bowl on the counter.

"I'm not *always* hungry, just most of the time. I can't help it. I'm a teenager. We're supposed to eat."

"That looks real tasty," Sarah said, though she couldn't help wrinkling her nose. How did orange juice and pretzels go together? She loved Kat and her mother, Theresa. But she'd never understand teenagers eating habits. She was sure that when she was a teenager she ate better than this.

When Sarah left Broken Bow, Oklahoma and arrived in Oregon seven years ago, Sweetwater Canyon was just forming as a band. It was Theresa who saw Sarah playing at a local farmers market and invited her to join them. At that time, they had Rachel on fiddle and a bass player named Kelly. Kat had always been on accordion and Theresa played guitar, mandolin, and banjo. When Sarah showed up, Theresa was really happy to find another guitar player so she didn't have to play hers as much.

Sweetwater Canyon was more than a band of musicians. It was her family. She'd left Oklahoma not really knowing where she wanted to end up. She'd packed everything she owned and headed west until she'd driven out the pain from home. She knew nothing about Portland, but she'd trusted that God would lead her to a better situation. And He had. Sweetwater Canyon became a family that stuck together even in really tough times, and never gave up or abandoned each other.

Though she and Rachel hadn't immediately hit it off, Sarah had grown to love her like an older sister. They still disagreed on lots of things, but they respected each other. When Michele took over for Kelly, Sarah felt that she was the sister she never had. And Theresa and Kat were the kindest souls she'd ever met.

Sarah smiled and stood. Yes, she was very blessed.

Kat cocked her head to one side. "Something good?"

Sarah rounded the kitchen peninsula and gave Kat a hug. "Yeah, I love it here. I'm just happy you're part of my life—you, your mother and the whole band." She grabbed a pretzel and took a bite. "I even love you and your crazy orange juice and pretzel snacking."

"You okay?" Kat asked. "I mean I know I'm cute and all, but this huggie stuff all of a sudden has me worried."

Sarah waved the song sheet at her. "I'm finished. My first original song and all is right with the world."

"Cool. We going to try it today?"

"That's the idea." She couldn't help grinning. Finally, she felt she could really contribute to the band. She'd been with them for seven years and had never had the confidence to write her own music. It had taken her that long to put the past behind her. Now that she'd finished this one, she knew there were more inside waiting to get out.

"Hey, where's the baby?" Rachel said from somewhere outside the kitchen.

"He's not a baby anymore," Michele answered as the two of them came through the door. "He's four now and in pre-school. In fact, he's really excited about kindergarten next year."

Theresa came in last. "Orange juice at 7pm, Kat?"

"I was hungry." Kat pointed to the pretzels and dip. "I'll share."

Theresa rolled her eyes. "It's a wonder you are still so thin. You just had dinner an hour ago."

"Really? Was it that long ago?" Kat opened the pantry. "I better get something else to take to the rehearsal then. I'll be starving after the first song."

Everyone talked at once, checking in with each other, catching up with the news, making plans. Sarah smiled. Yes, this was definitely her family.

Sarah's phone vibrated in her pocket. She turned her back and gingerly held it up to see the number. Her father. She shook with disbelief. When was the last time he called? Two years? Three? They

weren't exactly on the best of speaking terms. She took a deep breath and let it out.

"Excuse me," she said into the cacophony of voices. "I need to take this." She left the kitchen and retreated to a quiet corner of the living room and accepted the call.

"Hello." She tried not to let the fear in her voice be heard.

A moment of silence made her wonder if she'd misread the number. It wasn't that she didn't want to speak with her father. It was that she didn't know what to say.

"Hello? Is this Sarah Cosgrave?"A male voice. Unfamiliar. Definitely not her father.

"Yes, may I help you?"

"Sarah?" She heard a deep breath, as if whatever was coming would be difficult. "This is Tom. Tom Pawlak."

The name sucked the moisture from her mouth, stilling any reply from her tongue. Sarah's chest constricted. She couldn't breathe. She sank into a chair before her legs betrayed her.

"I know it's been a long time." Tom said. "Are you sitting down?"

It was just a phone call. Why was he calling on her father's phone?

She cleared her throat. "Yes, I remember you Tom." She felt that sounded official, as if it didn't matter. Of course it mattered. He was the one and only man she had ever trusted. He was the one and only man she'd ever let close to her. The one who betrayed her trust in men … forever.

"I'll just get to it then. I'm sorry to deliver this over the phone. I've been trying to locate you for the past three months. I'm afraid that your father is dying. I don't know how much longer he has. The doctors say three months, I think it's shorter. He wants you to come, Sarah. I suggest you make it soon."

Her racing heart skipped a beat, like the wheels of a bicycle hanging in the air as it hit a large bump then crashed to the ground. She waited for the numbness to dissipate and the weight of the usual pain to wash over her. But it didn't come.

She should feel something. Something other than this cold void. What was wrong with her? Maybe she needed time to process. She

guessed she owed it to him; but she wasn't sure she wanted to be there at all. Her father had never been there for her.

When she'd left Broken Bow, she swore she'd never return. She swore she'd never put herself in a position to be hurt again—by her father or Tom Pawlak.

"Sarah?"

She looked up to the ceiling and counted the wooden beams that spanned the breadth of the living room. Those beams held up this house—Theresa and Kat's house. The house she now considered her real home. A home built on a foundation of love and trust.

How was it that the two men who betrayed her were now bound together in this way? Why was Tom Pawlack the one to call her? What had happened in her absence?

Sarah vacillated. She really didn't want to go. She really didn't want to face her past. She'd run away for good reason and found a home with Sweetwater Canyon. Did she have to leave the one safe place she loved?

She closed her eyes in resignation. "Thank you for notifying me, Tom. I appreciate you taking the time to locate me. However, this is not a good time for me to go to Broken Bow."

"Wait, Sarah, I—I'm—afraid there's more. Something about your mother."

"What about my mother?" She struggled to keep her voice from shaking. Her mother died when she was just a little girl, eight years old. Her father had always had whisky around. But it was her mother's death that gave him the excuse to drink from sun up until he finally crashed for the night. And she was left to fend for herself. To try to run the farm. There were neighbors who helped for the first year, but then they gave up too. They didn't see that helping did any good.

"It's the house." Tom let out a big breath. "The house belonged to your mother, Sarah, not your father. It was always yours. Your father would have given you the deed after you graduated high school…if you hadn't run away."

Sarah waited in the uneasy silence. She didn't care about the

house. She'd left all that behind. A tear traced down her cheek. Why was she crying? She didn't care about anyone in Broken Bow anymore. She owed her father nothing. She owed Tom nothing.

She knew what her faith said. Honor your father. Even if he never loved her. Why did it have to be so hard to follow that commandment?

"Please, Sarah. Please come home. He needs you. That's all I can say."

"But I don't need *him*!" she shouted into the phone.

"You know you have no choice," Tom said, his tone coaxing. "I know you. You won't turn away from this."

The dam burst and Sarah shook with the bottled up anger she'd never been able to shove back at him. The unkept promises. The betrayal. Breaking her heart.

She paced the room, each step revving her anger higher until she was stomping. "You do *not* know me, Tom Pawlak. You never did and you never will. Don't tell me I have no choice. I'm not under my father's thumb or yours anymore. I don't have to come. What did he ever do for me except drink, carouse, and pretend to mourn my mother's death? I don't owe him anything. And you, of all people, have no right to judge me."

A long silence made her wonder if Tom had hung up during her tirade.

"I accept that." Tom said, in a whisper. "I deserve that. But it's been seven years. You have every right to hate me, but not your father. There were good times before your mother's death. I remember you talking about them. You can at least honor those memories with him."

She couldn't speak. She clutched the phone so hard that her entire arm ached.

"He's dying," Tom continued, his voice urgent. "Whatever he's done, you need to say goodbye. If you don't, you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

She couldn't rustle up any compassion but she knew Tom was right. Though the lack of love her father showed her after her mother's death still stung, he did not deserve to die alone. She would follow

the commandment to honor her father. She would care for him and pray for him in his last hours. And she would do everything possible to avoid Tom Pawlak.

There was no commandment about honoring ex-jerk-boyfriends.

She gathered her courage to speak. "Thank you for your call, Tom." She stood and straightened her spine and made sure her voice sounded definitive and assertive. "Please, let my father know I'll be there in two days."

"Thank you." Tom's voice sounded tired. "Let me know your itinerary and I'll pick you up at the airport."

"I'll make my own arrangements. I can take care of myself." There was absolutely no way she was going to spend two hours with him on the drive from the airport to the farm. "I'll take the shuttle."

"Sarah …" She listened to the long pause before he spoke again. "I know I deserve your scorn, but we have to work together to make your father's last days the best possible. What happened between you and me was a mistake, and I take full responsibility. But it was also a long time ago. I was young and scared and stupid. Please let me help you now. Let me pick you up from the airport. I can tell you all the circumstances around your father's care on the trip back to your father's house."

"What circumstances? I already know about the drinking. I lived it. Remember? I always knew it would kill him."

"It's best that I tell you everything after you arrived."

"No. Tell me now."

Silence.

"What are you afraid to tell me? What's worse than him dying? There is nothing you can tell me about his life that is any worse than I already know."

Silence.

"Tom?"

"I'm the one who is caring for your father. I'm living here with him now."

Sarah sucked in a breath. How could this be? Tom was not a responsible person. He couldn't be trusted. What had he done to

weasel his way into her father's life in his last days? When Sarah had left home, even her father said he'd shoot Tom Pawlak if he ever stepped on his property again.

"Sarah?"

"Give me a minute. I'm trying to take it all in." She swallowed hard. "I … don't understand. What do you mean, exactly, when you say 'taking care of him'? If he's dying, why isn't hospice there? Or a home nurse or something?"

"He didn't want strangers in his house. He wanted someone who would understand him, his choices. I've been taking care of the farm. I'm also his caregiver."

Dread walked up her spine and circled her chest, squeezing so hard she was certain her heart would stop beating.

"How long?"

"I've lived here for two years," he said again. "I've been his caregiver for one year."

How did she not know? When was the last time she'd spoken with her father? She searched her memory. When was the last time she'd called? Or written a letter? Dear Lord, the last recollection she had was sending her annual Christmas letter two years ago. Or was it three? She hadn't sent one last year because Sweetwater Canyon did so many holiday gigs that time got away from her. The year before, she couldn't really remember what she was doing around Christmas time two years ago. Her father never wrote or sent a card. She was always the one reaching out. How did she let so much time go by?

"If you are living in the house, where am I to stay? There are only two bedrooms."

"I'm not in your bedroom," he said in a voice she could barely hear. "I built a small room in one side of the barn. Things have changed a bit since you were last here."

Sarah's mind kept circling around her past life, one that she now feared could destroy whatever happiness she had made in Oregon. She pulled into a hunch and clenched the phone even harder.

"I have to go now, Tom." Her voice strained to get sounds out. "I'll let you know when I have plans made." She debated whether or not to

ask for his email. She really didn't want him to have hers. Then she realized how petty that sounded. After all, she would be seeing him face-to-face very soon. "Please send me your email address. I'm at SarahC19@gmail."

"Thank you, Sarah." His gravelly voice sounded as if he'd been talking for hours. "I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news. I'm truly glad you're coming home. I'll see you soon."

She heard the click as he disconnected the phone. She stared into nothingness. She welcomed the numbness now. The void enclosed her, keeping the fear out. She finally felt something. And it was awful.

MICHELE SAT on the sofa clasping Sarah's hand. Theresa was on her other side, fussing with a cup of tea and exhorting her to drink. Rachel and Kat sat opposite the sofa in the two club chairs.

"I'll take care of the tickets," Michele offered. "I'm good at finding flights."

"And don't you worry about us," Theresa said, patting her hand. "We'll be just fine, and we can talk on the phone every week if you want."

"Or even every day," Kat said. "If I were in your shoes I would want to call home every day."

Sarah managed a wry smile. "Thank you, Kat. I might need to call more often."

"We can take turns, so you can always have the phone on and be with one of us. Maybe not when you're asleep, I guess you don't want that. Or in the bathroom. That would be a big yuck."

Sarah held up her hand. "I don't need 24/7. But thanks for the thought, Kat."

"So, this guy who was such a jerk to you" Rachel said. "Is he at least good looking?"

Leave it to Rachel to go directly to the lets-look-for-the-sex possibilities. Though, since the court trial and her marriage, she'd calmed down a bit.

"Yes, he's the jerk. As for what he looks like, I don't know," Sarah said. "I haven't seen him in seven years."

"What about seven years ago, then?" Kat pushed.

"I guess," Sarah said. "I mean he wasn't exactly ugly."

"At least you have that, then." Kat twisted a strand of hair around one finger. "I mean I know you hate him, but maybe he has changed. Maybe…you know…you two can get back together or something."

"That is *not* going to happen." Sarah smiled to take the sting out of her angry retort. At seventeen, Kat still believed in fairy-tale love. Though she'd experienced betrayal herself, she still maintained a trust in men and relationships that Sarah didn't understand.

Sarah turned to Theresa. "I really don't know how long I'll be gone. The doctors said three months, but Tom believes things will move quickly. If you need to get another guitarist, I completely understand. I know that spring is the time we always start touring."

Theresa patted Sarah's hand again. "We are *not* going to get another guitarist. If a gig comes up and you're still gone, I'll pick up your guitar part. You just take as long as you need. When you're ready to come back, we'll be here waiting for you. There is *always* a place for you in the band."

Sarah's eyes moistened. When God brought Theresa to her, it was the best gift in the world. While she was with her father, and facing demons from the past, she would cling to the promise of coming home to her Sweetwater Canyon family.