

Need You Now

BETH
WISEMAN



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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To Kelly Long (aka June)

Chapter One

Darlene's chest tightened, and for a few seconds she couldn't move. If ever there was a time to flee, it was now. She put a hand to her chest, held her breath, and eased backward, sliding one socked foot at a time across the wooden floor of her bedroom. She eyed the intruder, wondering why he wasn't moving. Maybe he was dead.

Nearing the door, she stretched her arm behind her, searching for the knob. She turned it quickly, and at the click of the latch, her trespasser rushed toward her. In one movement, she jumped backward, across the threshold and into the den, slamming the door so hard the picture of the kids fell off the wall. She looked down at Chad, Ansley, and Grace staring up through broken glass, then hurried through the den to the kitchen. Her hand trembled as she unplugged her cell phone and pressed the button to call Brad. *Please answer.*

It was tax time, so every CPA at her husband's office was working long hours, and for these last weeks before the April deadline, Brad was hard to reach. She knew she wouldn't hear from him until after eight o'clock tonight. And she couldn't go back in her bedroom. What would she have to live without until then? She looked down. For starters, a shirt. She was later

than usual getting dressed this morning and had just pulled on her jeans when she'd noticed she wasn't alone.

She let out a heavy sigh and rubbed her forehead. Brad answered on the sixth ring.

"Bradley . . ." She only called him by his full name when she needed his full attention.

"What is it, babe?"

She took a deep breath. "There is a *snake* in our bedroom. A big black *snake*." She paused as she put a hand to her chest. "In our *bedroom*."

"How big?"

She'd expected a larger reaction. Maybe her husband didn't hear her. "Big! Very big. Huge, Brad."

He chuckled. "Honey, remember that little snake that got in your greenhouse when we lived on Charter Road in Houston? You said that snake was big too." He chuckled again, and Darlene wanted to smack him through the phone. "It was a tiny little grass snake."

"Brad, you're going to have to trust me. This snake is huge, like five or six feet long." A shiver ran down her spine. "Are you coming home or should I call 9-1-1?"

"What? You can't call 9-1-1 about a snake." His tone changed. "Darlene, don't do that. Round Top is a small town, and we'll be known as the city slickers who called in about a snake."

"Then you need to come home and take care of this." She lifted her chin and fought the tremble in her voice.

Deep breath on the other end of the line. "You know how crazy it is here. I can't leave right now. It's probably just a chicken snake, and they're not poisonous."

"Well, there are no *chickens* in our bedroom, so it doesn't have any business in there."

“Chad can probably get it out when he gets home from school. Maybe with a shovel or something, but tell him to be careful. Even though they’re not venomous, it’d probably still hurt to get bit.”

Darlene sighed. “Our girls are going to freak if they come home to find a snake in the house.” She turned toward a sound in the entryway. “I’ll call you back. There’s someone at the door, and I’m standing here in my bra. I’ll call you back. Love you.” She clicked the phone off, then yelled toward the door, “Just a minute!”

After finding a T-shirt in Ansley’s room, she pulled it over her head as she crossed back through the den toward the front door. This was the first visitor she’d had in the two months since they’d moved from Houston. She peeked around the curtain before she opened the door, realizing that her old city habit would probably linger for a while. Out here in the country, there probably wasn’t much to worry about, but she was relieved to see it was a woman. A tall woman in a cowgirl hat. She pulled the door open.

“Your Longhorns are in my pasture.” The woman twisted her mouth to one side and folded her arms across her chest. “This is the second time they’ve busted the fence and wandered onto my property.”

Darlene thought this cowgirl could have walked straight off the set of any western movie. She was dressed in a long-sleeved denim shirt with her blue jeans tucked into brown boots. She was older than Darlene, possibly midforties, but she was gorgeous with huge brown eyes and blond hair that hung in a ponytail to her waist.

“I’m so sorry.” Darlene shook her head. Brad should have never gotten those Longhorns. Neither she nor Brad knew a thing about cows, but Brad had said a move to the country

should include some Longhorns. Although it didn't make a lick of sense to her. She pushed the door wide. "I'm Darlene."

The woman shifted her weight but didn't offer a greeting in return. Instead, she stared at Darlene's chest. Darlene waited for the woman to lock eyes with her, and when she didn't, Darlene finally looked down. Her cheeks warmed as she sighed.

"Oh, this is my daughter's shirt." *Don't Bug Me!* was scrolled across the white T-shirt in red, and beneath the writing was a hideous picture of a giant roach. Darlene couldn't stand the shirt, but twelve-year-old Ansley loved it. "Do you want to come in?" She stepped back.

"No. I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to round up your Longhorns and head them back to your pasture. I'll temporarily repair the fence." The woman turned to leave, and it was then that Darlene saw a horse tethered to the fence that divided their property. She stifled a smile. This woman really was a cowgirl.

"Know anything about snakes?" Darlene eased onto the front porch, sidestepping a board she knew was loose. The porch was on their list of things to repair on her grandparents' old homestead.

"What?" The woman turned around as she held a hand underneath the rim of her hat, blocking the afternoon sun.

"I have a snake in my bedroom." Darlene shrugged. "Just wondering if you had any . . . any experience with something like that?" She padded down two porch steps in her socks. "I'm not sure I got your name?"

"Layla." She gave a quick wave before she turned to leave again. Darlene sighed. Clearly the woman wasn't interested in being friends. Or helping with the snake. Darlene watched her walk to her horse and put a foot in the stirrup. Then she paused and twisted her body to face Darlene. "What kind of snake?"

Hopeful, Darlene edged down another step. “A big black one.”

Layla put her foot back on the ground and walked across the grass toward the porch. Darlene couldn’t believe how graceful the tall blonde was, how out of sync her beauty was in comparison to what she was wearing.

“Only thing you really have to worry about around here are copperheads.” She tipped back the rim of her hat. “Was it a copperhead?”

At five foot two, Darlene felt instantly inferior to this tall, gorgeous, horse-riding, snake-slaying blonde. She wasn’t about to say that she couldn’t tell one snake from the other. “I don’t think so.”

“All I’ve got is a .22 with me.” Layla pointed back to her horse, and Darlene saw a long gun in a holster. “But a .22 will blow a hole through your floor,” Layla added. A surreal feeling washed over Darlene. She thought about their previous home in a Houston subdivision, and a woman with a gun on a horse wasn’t a sight they would’ve seen.

“Do you have a pellet gun?” She stopped in front of Darlene on the steps. Darlene was pretty sure that was *all* they had—Chad’s BB gun.

“Yeah, I think so.”

Five minutes later, Darlene pushed open the door to her bedroom and watched Layla enter the scene of the invasion. The bed was piled with clean clothes, but at least it was made up. The vacuum was in the middle of the room instead of in the closet under the stairs. It wasn’t the way she wanted a stranger to see her bedroom, but it could have been worse.

Layla got down on her knees and looked under the bed. From the threshold, Darlene did a mental scan of what was under there. Boxes of photos, a flowery hatbox that had belonged to

her grandmother, an old red suitcase stuffed with baby keepsakes from when the kids were young—and a lot of dust.

“There he is.” Layla leaned her chest to the floor and positioned Chad’s BB gun. Darlene braced herself, then squeezed her eyes closed as two pops echoed underneath the bed. A minute later, Layla dragged the snake out with the tip of the gun. “Just a chicken snake.”

Darlene stepped out of the room, giving Layla plenty of room to haul the snake out. Big, black, ugly. And now dead. Blood dripped all the way to the front door. Layla carried the snake to the fence and laid it across the timber, its yellow underside facing the sky.

“Belly up should bring rain.” Layla was quickly up on her horse. “Tell your husband that I’m patching the fence up, but he really needs some new cross planks.”

“I will. And thank you so much for killing that snake. Do you and your husband want to come for dinner tonight? I’d like to do something for you.”

“I’m not married. And I can’t come to dinner tonight. Thanks, though.” She gave the horse a little kick in the flank, then eased through a gate that divided her acreage from Brad and Darlene’s. She closed it behind her from atop her horse and headed toward the large house on top of the sloping hillside. Coming from town, the spacious estate was fully visible from the road, and Darlene’s youngest daughter called it the “mansion on the hill.” The rest of the family took to calling it that too.

In comparison to their run-down farmhouse, Darlene supposed it was a mansion. Both homes were probably built in the late 1800s, but Layla’s was completely restored, at least on the outside, with fresh yellow paint and white trim. A split-rail, cedar fence surrounded the yard, and toward the back of the property, a bright-red barn lit up the hayfield not far from a

good-sized pond. A massive iron gate—that stayed closed most of the time—welcomed visitors down a long, winding driveway. And there were lots of livestock—mostly Longhorns and horses. If the wind was blowing just right, sometimes Darlene could hear faint music coming from the house.

She was hoping maybe she could be friends with Layla, even though she wasn't sure she had anything in common with her. Just the same, Darlene was going to pay her a visit. Maybe take her a basket of baked goodies, a thank-you for killing that snake.



Brad adjusted the phone against his ear and listened to Darlene's details about her snake ordeal, then she ended the conversation the way she always did. "Who do you love?"

"You, baby."

It was their *thing*. Nearly twenty years ago, at a bistro in Houston, Brad wanted to tell Darlene that he loved her—for the first time—and he was a nervous wreck, wondering if she felt the same way. He'd kept fumbling around, and the words just wouldn't come. Maybe she'd seen it in his eyes, but she'd reached over, touched his hand, and smiled. Then in a soft whisper, she'd asked, "Who do you love?" His answer had rolled off his tongue with ease. "You, baby." Then she'd told him that she loved him too, and the who-do-you-love question stuck. Darlene asked him all the time. He knew it wasn't because she was insecure; it was just a fond recollection for both of them. That night at the bistro, Brad had known he was going to marry Darlene.

He flipped his phone shut and maneuvered through the Houston traffic toward home. He was glad that he wouldn't

have to deal with a snake when he got there, but he was amused at Darlene's description of the tall, blond cowgirl who shot it with Chad's BB gun.

He had four tax returns to work on tonight after dinner. All these extra billable hours were bound to pay off. He needed the extra income if he was going to make all the renovations to the farm that he and Darlene had discussed. Brad wanted to give her the financial freedom to make their home everything she dreamed it could be. Cliff Hodges had been dangling the word *partner* in front of him for almost two years, and Brad was sure he was getting close to having his name on the door.

If they hadn't been in such a rush to move from Houston, Brad was sure they could have held out and gotten more for their house. As it turned out, they'd barely broken even, and just getting the farmhouse in semi-livable shape had taken a chunk of their savings. Buying out Darlene's brother for his share of the homestead had put a strain on their finances too, but it was worth it if Darlene was happy. She'd talked about restoring her grandparents' farm for years. The original plan had been to fix the place up over time so they could use it as a weekend getaway. But then they'd decided to make the move as soon as they could, even if the house wasn't in tip-top shape.

Forty-five minutes from his office, he'd cleared the bustle of the city, and the six-lane freeway narrowed to two lanes on either side of a median filled with bluebonnets and Indian paintbrushes. Nothing like spring in Texas to calm his mind after crunching numbers all day long, but leaving the office so late to head west put the setting sun directly in his face. He flipped his visor down, glad that the exit for Highway 36 was only a few miles away. Once he turned, he'd get a break from the blinding rays. Then he'd pass through the little towns of Sealy and Bellville before winding down one-lane roads to the

peaceful countryside of Round Top. It was a long commute, almost an hour and a half each way, but it was worth it when he pulled into his driveway. Small-town living was better for all of them. Especially Chad.

Brad could still recall the night Chad came stumbling into the house—drunk. His seventeen-year-old son had been running around with a rebellious group of friends in Houston. And sometimes Chad's glassy eyes had suggested more than just alcohol abuse. Brad shook his head to clear the recollections, knowing he would continue to pray that his son would make better choices now that he had some distance from his old buddies.

Brad felt like a blessed man. He'd been married to his high school sweetheart for nearly twenty years, and he had three amazing children. He wanted to spend his life being the best husband and father he could be. There wasn't a day that went by that he didn't thank the Lord for the life he'd been given, and it was Brad's job to take care of his family.



Darlene finished setting the table. She regretted that her mother couldn't see her enjoying her grandmother's dining room set. Darlene had been surprised to find the oak table and chairs still in the house when they'd moved in. The antiques had been dusty and in dire need of cleaning, but they were just as sturdy as ever. She could remember many meals with her parents and grandparents in this house, at this table.

She still missed her grandparents—and her parents. Dad had been gone almost six years, and two years had passed since her mother's death. Her parents had started their family late in life, both of them in their late thirties when she was born, and

Dale was born two years after Darlene. She was glad her brother hadn't wanted the farm. It had been a struggle to buy him out, but no regrets. Someday, they too would have a "mansion on the hill," like Layla's. She cast her eyes downward, frowning at the worn-out wooden floors. She'd be glad when they could afford to cover the original planking with new hardwood.

Thinking of Layla brought a smile to her face as she mashed steaming potatoes in a pot on the stove. She couldn't help but wonder what the tall blonde was doing all alone on that estate. Darlene had never even been on a horse or owned a pair of cowgirl boots. Several of her friends back in Houston sported high-dollar, pointy-toed boots, but they didn't particularly appeal to Darlene. Her friend Gina had told her it was un-Texan not to own a pair of boots.

She missed Gina. They'd been friends since their daughters had started Girl Scouts together, but after Gina's divorce, they'd drifted apart. Gina's interests had changed from Girl Scout and PTO meetings to going out with new single friends.

She left the dining room and went back to the kitchen, glad that the aroma of dinner covered up the dingy old-house smell that lingered, despite her best efforts to conceal it with air fresheners.

"Mom! Mom!" Ansley burst into the kitchen with the kind of enthusiasm that could mean either celebration or disaster; with Ansley you never knew. At twelve, she was the youngest and the most dramatic in the family.

Darlene gave the potatoes a final stir before she turned to face her. "What is it, Ansley?"

"Guess what?" Ansley rocked back and forth from heel to toe, and Darlene could tell by the grin on her daughter's face that the news was good. "I did it. Straight Cs and above!"

Darlene brought her hands to her chest and held her breath

for a moment, smiling. When Ansley was in grade school, early testing indicated she was going to struggle, and Darlene and Brad knew she was a bit slower than other kids her age.

Not so thrilling was what Brad had promised Ansley if she received a report card without any failing grades. "Sweetie, that's great. I'm so proud of you." She hugged her daughter, knowing it was highly unlikely Ansley wouldn't remember her father's promise. Ansley eased out of the hug.

"I know they scare you, Mom, but having some chickens and roosters will be so much fun! We'll be like real farmers, and every day after school, I'll go get the eggs." Ansley's dark hair brushed against her straightened shoulders, and her big brown eyes twinkled. "Think how much money you'll save on eggs!"

Darlene bit her bottom lip as she recalled the chickens her grandparents used to keep on this very same farm. And one very mean rooster. Eight dollars in savings per month was hardly going to be worth it, but a promise was a promise. She'd told Brad before they'd left Houston not to offer such a reward, but Darlene had put it out of her mind. At the time, it seemed a stretch for Ansley to hit the goal and make all Cs.

"Maybe just have laying chickens. You don't need a rooster." Darlene walked to the refrigerator and pulled out a tub of butter.

"Mom . . ."

Darlene set the butter on the table and raised a brow in time to see Ansley rolling her eyes.

"Even I know we can't have baby chicks without a rooster." Ansley folded her arms across her chest.

Darlene grinned. "I know you know that, but how many chickens are you hoping to have?" She recalled that on some of her visits to her grandparents' house, if the wind blew just

right, she could smell the chicken coop from the front yard, even though the pens were well over fifty yards away, back next to the barn. When they'd first moved in, Brad had fixed up the old coops as an incentive for Ansley to pull her grades up. Sitting on the porch swing with Brad late in the evenings had become a regular thing, and smelly chickens would be an unwelcome distraction.

"Not too many," Ansley said as she pulled a glass from the cabinet and filled it with water.

One was too many in Darlene's opinion, but it was a well-deserved reward. Darlene gave a lot of the credit to the school here. Much to her children's horror, there were only 240 students in grades kindergarten through twelve in the Round Top/Carmine School District, but Darlene felt like they were getting a better education and more one-on-one attention. Darlene had been on the verge of homeschooling Ansley before they left Houston, but Ansley threw such a fit that Darlene had discarded the idea.

Ansley chugged the water, then put the glass in the sink. "I can't wait 'til Daddy gets home."

Darlene smiled. Her youngest was always a breath of fresh air, full of energy, and the tomboy in the family.

She thought about the snake and realized Ansley probably wouldn't have freaked out after all. She heard Brad's car rolling up the gravel driveway, and moments later, the front screen door slammed and Ansley yelled, "Daddy! Guess what!"



An hour later, everyone was gathered at the dinner table except Chad. After about ten minutes, he finally sauntered into the room, slid into his chair, and folded his hands for prayer.

"It's your turn to offer the blessing, Chad." Darlene bowed her head.

"Thank You, Lord, for the many blessings You've given us, for this food, the roof over our head, and Your love. And, God . . ." Chad paused with a sigh. Darlene opened one eye and held her breath. More often than not, Chad's prayers included appeals for something outside the realm of what should be requested at the dinner table. Like the time he'd asked for God to help his parents see their way to buying him a better car. Darlene closed her eye, let out her breath, and listened.

"Could you heal Mr. Blackstone's cancer and bring him back to school? He's a good guy." Darlene's insides warmed, but then Chad continued, "Our substitute stinks. Amen."

"Chad!" Darlene sat taller, then cut her eyes at Brad, who shouldn't have been smiling.

"No, Mom. I mean, *really*. He stinks. He doesn't smell good." Chad scooped out a large spoonful of potatoes. "And he's like a hundred or something."

"Even more reason you shouldn't speak badly about him. Respect your elders, remember?" Darlene passed the meat loaf to Chad, who was shoveling potatoes like he hadn't eaten in a month of Sundays.

"Grace, how was your day?" Brad passed their older daughter a plate of rolls.

"It was okay."

Grace rarely complained, but Darlene knew she wasn't happy about the move from Houston. Mostly because of the boy she'd left behind.

Ansley turned her head to Darlene, grunted, then frowned. "Mom, why are you wearing my shirt?"

Darlene looked down at the big roach. "Oh, I had to borrow it earlier. I sort of couldn't go in my room for a while."

Darlene told the full-length version of the snake story that she'd shortened for Brad on the phone.

"I've seen that woman," Chad said. "And she's *hot*."

"She's old like Mom, Chad! That's gross." Ansley squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, then shook her head.

Darlene took a bite of roll. At thirty-eight, when had she become *old* in her children's eyes? "I believe Layla is several years older than I am, Chad."

Her son shrugged. "Whatever. She's still—"

"Chad, that's enough." Brad looked in Chad's direction, and Darlene was glad to see him step in since it seemed like she was the one who always disciplined the children. Brad, on the other hand—well, he promised chickens.

They were all quiet for a few moments before Chad spoke up again.

"Did you know Layla drives a tractor? I've seen her out in the pasture on the way to school." He shook his head. "Seems weird for a woman." He laughed as he looked to his left at Ansley. "Can you picture Mom out on a tractor plowing the fields?"

Ansley laughed. "No, I can't."

"Don't underestimate your mom. You never know what she might do." Brad reached for another roll as he winked at Darlene.

Darlene smiled. She found herself thinking, yet again, that this was a good move for them. They all needed this fresh start. None of the kids had been particularly happy at first, but they were coming around.

"Can I be excused?" Grace put her napkin in her lap and scooted her chair back.

Darlene knew meat loaf wasn't Grace's favorite. "Whose night is it to help with dishes?"

Grace and Ansley both pointed at Chad.

“Okay,” Darlene said to Grace. “You can be excused.”

Darlene watched Grace leave the table. Her middle child was tiny like Darlene, and she was the only one in the family who inherited Darlene’s blond hair and blue eyes. And her features were as perfect as a porcelain doll’s, complete with a flawless ivory complexion. She looked like a little princess. Chad and Ansley had their father’s dark hair and eyes—and his height. Darlene loved her children equally, proud of them all, but sometimes it was hard not to favor Grace just a little bit, especially since they’d come so close to losing her as an infant. Grace had come into the world nine weeks premature, a surprise to everyone, including Darlene’s doctor, since Darlene had delivered Chad at full term with no complications just two years earlier. Grace struggled those first few weeks with underdeveloped lungs and severe jaundice, and twice they were told to prepare themselves for the worst. But their Grace was a fighter, and as her sixteenth birthday approached, Darlene silently thanked God for the millionth time for His grace.

There’d been issues and struggles with both Chad and Ansley from time to time—mostly with Chad. But Grace had never given them one bit of trouble.