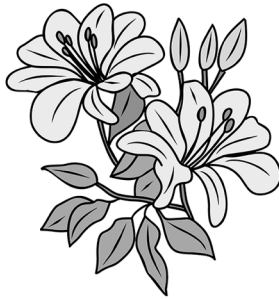


FOREVER *Free*

FOREVER SERIES  BOOK 4



HOPE TOLER DOUGHERTY



Scrivening's
PRESS

Quench your thirst for story.
www.ScriveningsPress.com

Copyright © 2024 by Hope Toler Dougherty

Published by Scrivenings Press LLC
15 Lucky Lane
Morrilton, Arkansas 72110
<https://ScriveningsPress.com>

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy or recording— without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Paperback ISBN 978-1-64917-360-7

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-361-4

Editors: Elena Hill and Linda Fulkerson

Cover by www.bookmarketinggraphics.com.

All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

Lyrics quoted from “Great is Thy Faithfulness,” written by Thomas Chisholm in 1923, are in the public domain.

NO AI TRAINING: Without in any way limiting the author’s [and publisher’s] exclusive rights under copyright, any use of this publication to “train” generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to generate text is expressly prohibited. The author reserves all rights to license uses of this work for generative AI training and development of machine learning language models.

*Dedicated to the farmers who, through hard work,
determination, and the grace of God, feed us.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the following people for helping me bring Heath's story to life:

Susan Capps Chappell—Your knowledge and expertise in flowers and gardening helped me flesh out this story, but your lifetime friendship is the best part.

Amber Aycock—Your tips regarding growing a cut flower business were invaluable. Thank you!

Tiffany Bracco—I appreciate your suggestions on plot and hyphenated words so much. Thank you for your time and insights.

Heather Greer—Thank you for the hour or so we spent brainstorming on the porch at Ridgecrest. I appreciate your helpful questions and thoughts on Heath's background.

The Scrivenings Press Team—Linda Fulkerson, Elena Hill, and all the staff and authors. I love being part of this family!

Readers—Thank you for reading my stories, praying for me, and cheerleading in person or on social media. Your encouragement always makes me smile.

Kevin, Anna, Hattie, Lane, and Quinn—I'm gobsmacked and grateful I get to go through life with you. Your prayers are imperative, and your enthusiasm is the extra scoop of cappuccino crunch ice cream.

Praise God from Whom all blessings flow for this tremendous journey.

CHAPTER 1



“*Y*ou haven’t put this on clearance yet?” Phoebe Sinclair pointed to a dusty rain gauge, her finger still showing stains from this morning’s weeding.

“What?” Cliff Hendrix, the fifth generation to run the dry-goods-slash-hardware store, glared up from his ledger, which rested on top of an oak counter burnished to a noble patina. “That rain gauge?” He stuck the nub of a pencil behind his ear. “Not hardly.”

“We haven’t had measurable rain in over a month. Seems like you’d want to move some merchandise.” She chuckled. The weak sound dried up in her throat. The dry spell wasn’t hurting crops yet, but making plans to irrigate might be necessary if rain didn’t happen in the next couple of weeks.

“Funny as ever, Phoebe. We just got ’em in the other day. We ain’t putting ’em on sale.”

“Well, if we don’t get rain soon, you won’t be able to give them away.”

“What is it you came in for? I got other customers.” Cliff nodded toward the next aisle over. She caught a glance of a tall man moving away from the front of the store.

“I need a hundred and twenty pounds of lime.”

“Okay.” He punched the round keys, and numbers popped to attention in the window of the decades-old cash register.

Two other people with sundry items had lined up behind her.

“Drive around back, and we’ll load it for you.” Cliff tore off the receipt and handed it to her.

“Thanks. But you know I can load it myself.”

“I know you can, but it’s part of our service-with-a-smile program. Hey, Heath. Can you go round back and get three bags of lime for this girl? Shorthanded today.”

Girl. Uh-huh. She scowled at the insulting clerk. Who happens to own her own business, BTW.

Bless his heart.

A movement in the aisle caught her eye as the tall customer headed for the swinging doors at the back of the store. Heath Daniels? She craned her neck to get a better look. Maybe. She’d last seen him at his sister’s wedding two weeks ago. Her heart did a little jump at the memory of him in a tux.

Get a grip, silly heart. He’s so not into you.

Heath disappeared behind the doors. Poor guy. He came in to buy his own stuff, not be called into service for another customer. She picked up speed to move her truck around back.



HEATH DANIELS LET OUT a breath and dropped a nozzle back into the bin as he headed for the small warehouse behind the store. *Just because I worked here during that bad time when I didn’t know which end was up, you don’t get to—*

No, I guess you do, Cliff. You did me a good deed then, and sure, I can help you, but this girl. She spells trouble with a capital T.

A scene from his sister’s wedding—this Phoebe person bossing everyone around the venue—flashed in his mind. He

shook his head. Just keep your nose down, load the bags, and let her get on her way. He grabbed the first sack.

“Hey. It *is* you. I wondered when Cliff said, ‘Heath,’ because you don’t hear that name every day. How’ve you been doing?” Phoebe moved closer to the stacked bags and to Heath too. “I guess the honeymooners are back. Did they have a fun trip?”

Wonderful. Small talk with this girl. “Ahh—”

She tilted her head. “I’m Phoebe. Phoebe Sinclair. I arranged the flowers for Josie’s wedding, remember?”

“I remember you.” He pulled a bag off the top and shoved it on his shoulder with one motion.

She made a face similar to ones he’d seen Josie make when she was irritated with him. “Well, how’s Josie doing?”

“Fine.” He walked past her to her two-tone Ford pickup and dropped the bag into the truck bed. Turning around, he ran smack into the shorter woman hefting another bag. “Hey, I can get these loaded for you.”

“No problem. I’m picking up rude vibes from Cliff’s help, so I can do it myself.” She grunted as she let the bag fall in beside the first one.

“What do you mean? I’m helping you, if you’ll let me.”

“Just not one for common courtesy small talk, are you? I really am interested in how Josie’s doing. She was my first wedding customer, and I enjoyed getting to know her.” Her clipped tone belied her wish for common courtesy. indicated maybe she really didn’t like the person she was talking to.

Perfect. Better that way.

“Yeah. I remember.” Nodding, she cocked an eyebrow. “You were the one who gave push-back about almost everything, even the boutonnieres. I thought Ches might have something to say ’cause he was nervous about having the wedding at his uncle’s farm, but it was you. You almost made Josie cry. It’s coming back to me now.” She headed back to the warehouse.

“I did not.” He followed faster and beat her to the bags of lime, swooping another onto his shoulder.

“You did too.”

He snorted and moved past her toward her truck.

“Josie knew exactly what she and Ches wanted, and you questioned everything.”

“I had Josie’s best interest in mind. You just said it was your first wedding. I didn’t want her to be disappointed.”

“She told me what she wanted. Simple. Tasteful. Beautiful. And that’s what she got. Ches gave me a tip, BTW.”

Great. She speaks in acronyms.

He dropped the last bag on top of the other two and ground his molars. Taking a deep breath, he turned toward her. “I apologize. I—” He stopped. He couldn’t tell her the main reason he’d ignored most of the manners his mother had drilled into him, so he offered the next one. “Today hasn’t gone like I’d wanted. My problem. Not yours. My mother would say I know how to act, but I didn’t.” *There. Now please let me go get my stuff done.*

She nodded. “All of us have tough days. I’m sorry.” She stuck out her hand. “Friends?”

He glanced at her hand, grabbed a breath, dusted his palm against his jeans, and closed his hand around hers. Her eyes flew to his, but he dropped his gaze along with his hand.

“Bye, Phoebe.”

He felt the weight of her hand in his all the way back inside the store.