

A Homecoming in Shady Springs

Shady Springs Book Two

Sarah Anne Crouch



Scrivenings
PRESS

Quench your thirst for story.

www.ScriveningsPress.com

Copyright © 2025 by Sarah Anne Crouch

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 978-1-64917-456-7

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-457-4

Editors: Amy R. Anguish and Linda Fulkerson

Cover design by Linda Fulkerson—www.bookmarketinggraphics.com

Scripture quotations are from the ESV Bible® (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

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

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.

*To Michael, my college sweetheart and best friend forever. Life is
better with you by my side.*

AUGUST, FRESHMAN YEAR



No one sent Henry Mullins packages in the mail. Except for his Halloway University acceptance, he hadn't received a letter since the eighth-grade.

Henry did not get packages, of that he was sure. He didn't get boxes of cookies from home or well-wishes from friends and family. So, why did his heart lift when he saw the bright yellow slip of paper inside his mailbox?

Was it possible? Had his parents sent him something for the first day of his first year of college? Definitely not Dad, but maybe Mom. Even if it was just some socks he left behind when he went to school, he'd be happy to receive something from them. Anything to say they missed him or were thinking about him.

"Oh, look. You got a package!" Jason snatched the canary yellow slip from Henry's hands before he even had a chance to read it.

"Shouldn't I be the one to take it to the post office?" Henry tried but failed to grab the paper from his best friend.

"It's highly unlikely they're going to check to make sure it's

really you.” Jason held the slip out of Henry’s reach. “We look so much alike, anyway.”

This was not true. At six feet and four inches, Jason dwarfed Henry and most other people. Henry often wished he had Jason’s height and easy confidence, but he was grateful for the scraps of attention he got from the girls who flocked to his tall friend. Henry was usually able to leverage his good looks and wit to charm young women once they finished fawning over Jason.

“Maybe it’s a care package from home.” Jason winked at him.

Henry allowed a bubble of hope to build for just a moment. What if? No. Mom and Dad had been happy to send him away, and they certainly weren’t missing him. But maybe, just maybe, he was wrong.

Henry shook his head. “Jason, you and I both know it’s more likely that *your* parents sent me something than mine.”

Actually, that did make sense. Jason’s mom had always felt a little sorry for Henry. What if Nancy Jones had sent him a box of something?

“Hey, there, Angie.” Jason draped his lanky frame over the desk of the campus post office.

“Hiya, Jason.” The cute blonde behind the counter fluffed her already quite fluffy hair, and her cheeks grew pink.

“Could you get this package, sweetheart? It’s for my friend.” He dangled the paper above her head.

Angie giggled as she attempted to take the slip before Jason pulled it out of her grasp. Jason handed it to her and winked. Henry rolled his eyes.

Angie turned to the shelves behind her and grabbed a brown box. “Here you go. See ya later.” She wagged her fingers at them.

“Sure thing.” Jason hoisted the package on his shoulders as Henry trailed behind. He always had to work extra hard to catch

up to his giant of a friend. “How about you show me your new digs?”

“They look about the same as everyone else’s.” But Henry led the way to his dorm room anyway. Walking through the student center, Jason said *hello* to about twenty different people, guys and girls.

“Hey, J, wait up.” A lanky man strode over to where Jason and Henry walked. Raymond Williams was Jason’s roommate and fellow athlete. The two friends matched each other in height, but Jason’s fair complexion stood out in contrast to Ray’s dark hair and sepia-toned skin. Their personalities were opposite but complemented each other somehow—Raymond was cool and quiet, Jason energetic and always the life of the party.

“Do you know *everyone* on this campus?” Henry asked.

“You’ll be the same way next year. Trust me.” Jason laughed and nudged him in the ribs, or at least he would have if Henry had been any taller. As it was, Jason’s elbow came to Henry’s shoulder.

Though Henry and Jason had been best friends since junior high, Jason was a year ahead of him. They’d known each other as long as Henry could remember. Shady Springs, Arkansas, was such a tiny town, one couldn’t live there long without knowing everyone and their grandma, as Jason’s older sister always said. But the boys hadn’t had a reason to spend any time together until they both played junior high basketball.

The year before Henry graduated, Jason took a basketball scholarship at Holloway University. Henry visited Jason in his dorm room on campus that fall. He’d had such a good time, he didn’t even mind the terrible ache in his neck from sleeping on the floor. Before Jason, Henry had never gone to church, let alone entertained thoughts of attending a Christian university. Now here he was, a college freshman with an academic scholarship, walking across the Holloway University campus with his best friend.

Henry smiled as he scanned the scene outdoors. The front lawn, a wide expanse of green grass and tall oak trees framed on four sides by red brick buildings, was one of the places he loved most at Halloway. Despite the heat, and the fact no one was allowed to wear shorts until later that evening or on the weekends, the morning was beautiful. Dappled sunlight filtered through the trees. Alone or in pairs, students sat on the white swings dotting the grass. Water gurgled happily from the fountain at the far end of the lawn.

He led his friends to a red brick dormitory and through a long hallway of linoleum. "Home sweet home." Henry flicked the light switch in his cinder block box of a bedroom and let Jason inside.

"Cool." Raymond and Jason smiled and nodded politely.

It wasn't much. A bed with sheets and an old quilt, a shelf full of textbooks, a Shady Springs High School coffee mug full of pens and pencils, and a hand-me-down typewriter on the built-in desk against the wall.

"Nice curtains." Raymond gestured to the dusty blue valances hanging from the two windows in the room.

"Frank's mom bought those." Henry's roommate had been embarrassed by his parents and all the fuss they made. Henry brushed off Frank's discomfort nonchalantly, but not before he'd charmed Mr. and Mrs. Thomas into taking them both out for dinner.

"Let's see what's in this thing." Jason plopped the package onto Henry's bed and swiped his keys across the tape on top. "Ooh." He grabbed something small from inside.

"It's ... very ... pink." Henry gaped in confusion at the contents of the box. Pink tissue paper was wrapped around several small parcels. A pink card rested at the top of the pile. And pink confetti was sprinkled over the top.

Henry's gaze shot up, suddenly aware of Jason and Raymond watching him. His face must have turned the exact

color of the inside of the package. He shook his head in disbelief.

Jason rummaged through. “There’s candy and cookies. Some pencils. Here’s a note.” He opened the bubble gum colored card. “Uh-oh.”

Henry yanked the paper from Jason’s hands. “Let me see that.” His stomach dropped. Henry spun the package around and looked at the name on the top. He groaned. “This isn’t my mail.”

“Yeah. I figured as much.” Jason barked out a laugh.

Raymond snickered, one side of his mouth upturned. “Oh, man.”

“How did this happen?” He turned to the others in confusion.

“Remember in orientation when they talked about campus mail?” Jason asked.

“Sort of ...”

“Well, you have a box buddy. Someone who shares your mailbox.”

“Why?”

Jason shrugged. “Growing enrollment, I guess. They have too many students and not enough mailboxes.” He waved his hands, gesturing around the room. “Decided to spend money on air conditioning instead of adding more boxes.”

“So, this girl and I share a mailbox. And I accidentally got her mail.”

“I’m sure this sort of thing happens all the time. It’s no big deal.” He pulled the card back out of the box. “Besides, it looks like she’s a really great girl.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think this is a care package from her church. They all signed the card. *We miss you—Hope you’re having a great time. Come home to visit soon ...* Sounds like they really like her.” Jason chewed loudly.

“What are you chewing on?”

“Nothing.” He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing.

Henry slapped himself in the forehead. “Did you just eat her candy?”

“I took it out before I knew it wasn’t yours. It’s not like she’ll ever find out.”

Henry shook his head. “No more stealing from my box buddy. I’m going to need to do a lot of sweet-talking to get out of this.”

“Yeah,” said Raymond. “You’ve gotta share a mailbox with her for four years. Assuming you pass your classes.”

At the mention of class, Henry’s pulse raced. “Oh, no. It’s almost time for Bible.”

“Better get a move on, kid. We’ll watch your stuff for you.”

“Not a chance.” Henry grabbed the package. “I’m taking this back to the mailroom. There’s no way I’m leaving you in here with all that candy.” He gestured to Raymond and shoved Jason out of the room, then locked the door. “Walk me to class?”

“No, sorry. I’m going in the opposite direction. See you in the cafeteria at lunch. Noon.” Jason pointed finger guns at Henry and took off beside Ray, their long legs carrying them twice as fast as normal-sized humans.

Henry sighed. “Now I’ve just got to get to class on time and figure out how to get this package back to ... Catherine Hodges. Whoever that is.”