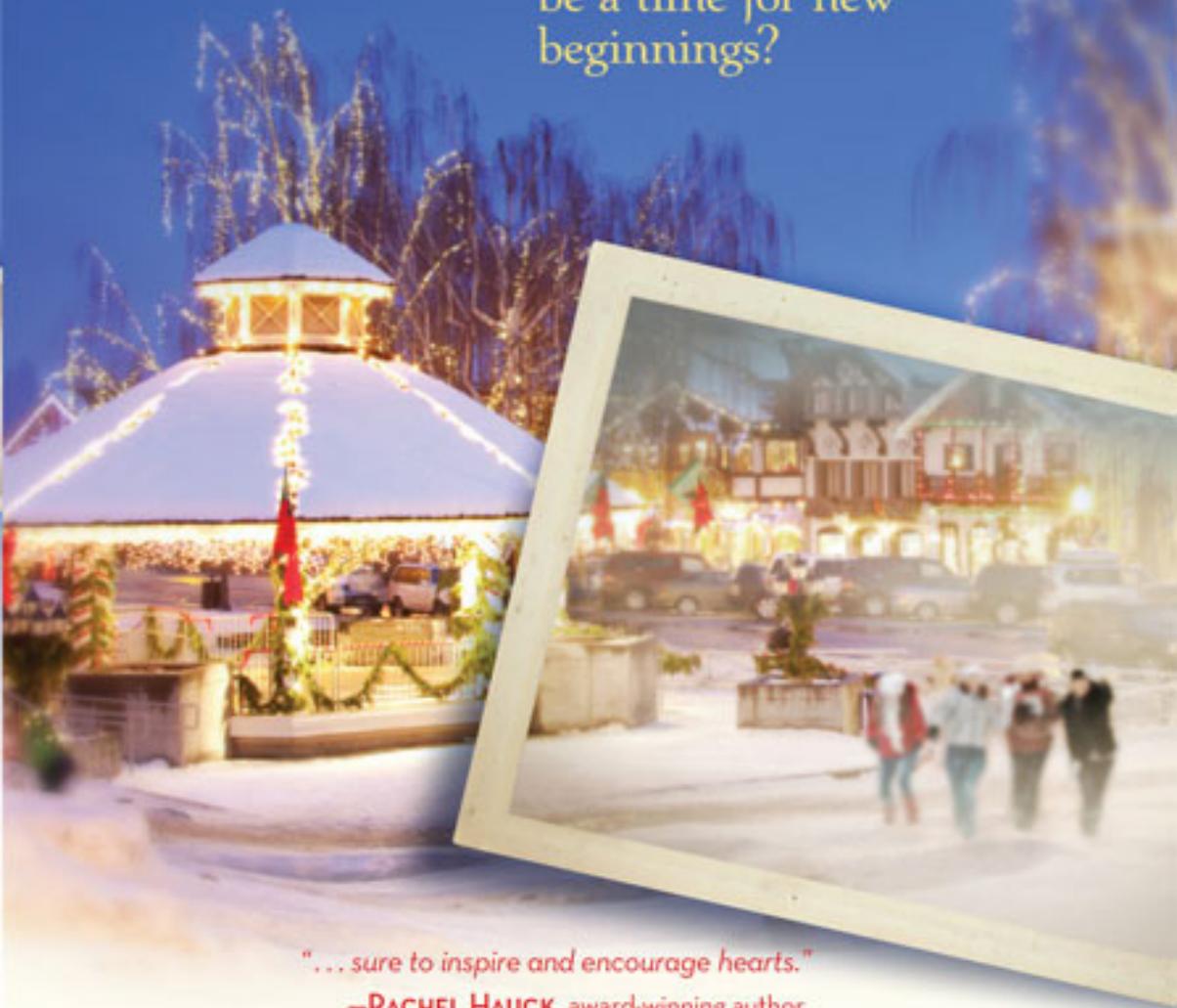


A Sweethaven CHRISTMAS

Will this special season
be a time for new
beginnings?



"... sure to inspire and encourage hearts."

—RACHEL HAUCK, award-winning author

COURTNEY WALSH

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A Sweethaven Christmas

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DEDICATION

For Adam.
Me and you.



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During the writing and editing of this book, our family moved across the country for the second time in two years. Perhaps I'm weepier because of it, but it's left me with so much gratitude and taught me that there are so many good people out there. People who make it possible for you to pack up and move away and still get done the things they know are important to you. People who all play a part in making this dream come true. I hope one day I can return the favor.

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And, of course, my Heavenly Father, Who has blessed, challenged and taught me so much. I am constantly learning and praying You order every step. Thank You for Your *redeeming grace*.

Christmas waves a magic wand over this world and, behold,
everything is softer and more beautiful.

—NORMAN VINCENT PEALE



Lila

“Why is that woman staring over here?” Lila shifted in the tall-backed linen-covered chair and nodded toward a blonde woman at the bar. Normally, Lila attributed the stares of other women to jealousy, but with her expanding stomach, she felt more self-conscious than usual. She hadn’t begun to show, but she felt bloated and puffy.

Tom shrugged. “Maybe she thinks you’re glowing.” He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “Because you are.”

Lila met his eyes and smiled, letting a hand fall to her belly.

“You *are* especially beautiful right now, Lila,” Campbell said from across the table.

The three of them and Luke sat at The Grotto waiting for Mama and Daddy so they could finally start their Thanksgiving dinner. Lila hadn’t seen her parents in weeks, and she’d been reluctant to agree to spending Thanksgiving with them, but Mama had insisted.

“We are your family, dear,” she’d said. “And when that baby comes, you’re going to be so overwhelmed and exhausted you’re going to need us. Don’t make me your enemy now.”

Lila’s jaw tightened. Hadn’t Mama always been something of an enemy?

“Do you always eat out on Thanksgiving?” Campbell sipped her water from a sparkly crystal glass. She’d accepted Tom’s invitation

to dinner, even though she and Luke had had plans to spend the evening at Adele's Thanksgiving feast. So much less formal—more relaxed. Lila fought back her jealousy.

Lila forced a smile. "Mama insisted that this year neither of us needed the stress of cooking."

And what Mama says goes.

Before Lila's smile faded, she spotted her mother entering the restaurant. As always, Cilla Adler was the picture of Southern beauty. She'd obviously been to the salon, and her black cocktail dress hugged her curves in just the right places. Lila pulled her hand away from her stomach, suddenly even more self-conscious.

Daddy entered a few moments later, and Lila noticed the tension on both their faces. Most likely they'd had one of their fights in the car—probably the reason they were twenty minutes late.

But Mama never offered explanations or apologies.

Would Lila be the same kind of mother as Mama?

Lila stood as her mother approached, but as soon as she spotted her daughter, Mama's eyes widened. "You're already so huge!"

Lila's shoulders slumped and she felt Tom's body as he stood beside her. He wrapped a protective arm around her, and Lila forced herself to smile. "That's good, Mama. It means the baby is growing." But at only three months along, Lila knew any excess weight she'd put on had been the result of eating too many carbs to ward off morning sickness—not the result of a growing fetus.

"Oh dear, you better be careful. I wore my regular clothes until I was eight months along with you." Mama laughed. "At this rate, by the end you'll be wearing the curtains."

Tom squeezed Lila's shoulder and she bit her lip to keep from crying. She'd gotten more emotional with this pregnancy. And

perhaps that had been an excuse to eat a little more than usual. Lila had never had to worry about her weight before, but this baby had her feeling like a whale already. How would she feel three months from now? And three months after that?

Mama turned her attention to Campbell, and Lila cringed. Mama could use Lila as a punching bag, but not Suzanne's daughter. Her mother smiled and extended a hand toward the girl.

"You must be Tom's . . . Campbell."

Campbell stood and shook her hand. Lila recognized the intimidation in her eyes. "It's nice to officially meet you, Mrs. Adler."

"Please, call me Cilla. We're practically family. Though I can't believe Lila's gotten over this whole thing so quickly." She turned her attention to Luke as Campbell's face went pale. Lila caught Campbell's eyes and mouthed the words "I'm sorry." Mama went on. "Where is your father? He got tied up talking to someone, I'm sure."

Lila followed Mama's gaze toward the entrance to the restaurant, where she spotted Daddy talking to the same woman who'd been staring at her earlier.

"Who is that?" Lila said.

Mama turned back to the table. She pressed her lips together and Lila could see her jaw tensing.

"Mama, who is that woman?"

Mama sipped her water and shook her head. "I don't know," she said.

Lila glanced back at Daddy, who now stood in the entryway of the restaurant alone. When he looked up, he met her eyes and put on a smile, but Lila knew something was wrong.

Daddy moved toward the table. As he sat down next to Mama, she stiffened at his touch. Lila glanced at Tom, who sipped his water, careful not to make eye contact with anyone.

Was this woman the latest of Daddy's conquests? Lila had long given up the hope that he would change his meandering ways, but how dare he flaunt it in front of them in public.

The waitress arrived and presented the menu—a classic Thanksgiving spread that Lila felt certain she could devour in one sitting. She'd refrain, of course, under Mama's watchful eye. They listened and then Lila spotted the blonde woman back in her seat at the bar.

The woman couldn't have been much older than Lila. She might even be younger. Had Daddy really stooped that low? If the woman didn't know he was married with a family and a soon-to-be grandchild, she knew now. Or maybe she'd come to expose the sordid affair. Could she be pregnant with Daddy's child—making the baby Lila's half sister—and she'd come to claim her fortune?

Whatever the reason, the whole idea of it made Lila's stomach turn.

"This is such a lovely place," Campbell said. Poor girl. She had no idea what she'd agreed to when she said she'd join them for the afternoon.

Mama smiled. "One of our favorite restaurants." She looked over at the woman on the bar stool. The woman's eyebrows rose, then she looked away.

Lila's throat went dry and she took another drink of water. It had always been like this. None of them talking about what was really going on. Pretending they were a perfect family, the epitome of Southern grace. But Lila had looked the other way for

too long. Something about being pregnant had made her tired of pretending. She didn't want to bring a child into this kind of environment.

"Daddy, who's that lady?"

Victor Adler coughed. He wiped his mouth with his napkin and shook his head. "I'm not sure," he said. "She stopped me in the entryway looking for directions."

Mama lifted her chin.

"To where?" Lila stared at Daddy until he met her eyes. Behind him, she could see the woman walking in their direction, but Lila kept her eyes focused on Daddy. The woman drew nearer.

Finally, Daddy said, "Lila, she's no one important. No one you'd know."

The woman stopped and her face fell.

"Maybe you should tell her that." Lila glanced up at the woman behind Daddy.

As his words registered, the woman's demeanor changed, her eyes searching for understanding at the revelation that to Victor Adler, she meant nothing.

Daddy followed Lila's eyes to the woman's and then his jaw went slack. He stood and faced her. "I'm sorry—I didn't mean . . ."

The woman held up a hand. She shook her head and ran out, leaving Daddy standing alone, anxiety etched on his face.

Mama placed her napkin on her plate. "I'm sorry I can't stay for dinner. Lila, see that your father finds his way home." She stood, placed her purse on her shoulder and walked out.

Lila sat for a long moment, waiting for Daddy to say something—anything—to make sense of what had just happened. When he stayed silent she stood. "How could you, Daddy?"

His gaze remained downward.

“I’m sorry, Campbell, Luke, it looks like dinner is canceled.” Lila picked up her purse and glanced at her father. “You can ask your girlfriend for a ride home.”

Memories of all the years Daddy had chosen other women over Mama—and her—rushed back as Lila walked away. She spotted the restroom and ducked inside, hoping Tom would get the car and take care of Campbell and Luke.

She reminded herself that this wasn’t her problem anymore. She’d married a man nothing like Daddy, despite her mother’s best efforts to put them in the same category.

“Tom is no better than your father,” she’d told Lila the last time they spoke. “He betrayed you and kept a secret from you for years. How does that make him a good man?” Lila couldn’t deny she’d been betrayed. Earlier in the year, she’d learned that before she and Tom had married over twenty years ago, he’d had a brief relationship with her dear friend Suzanne, leading to the birth of their daughter Campbell. Learning about Campbell had devastated Lila, but it had also led to something completely unexpected—a strengthening of her and Tom’s relationship.

Lila bent over the sink and splashed cold water on her cheeks. She glanced in the mirror and saw her red eyes fill with tears.

After all these years, something like this shouldn’t upset her this much. It must be the hormones.

She turned the water off and the door to the stall opened. The blonde woman met her eyes in the mirror, and Lila’s breath caught in her throat.

The woman looked away as she walked toward the sinks. “I didn’t mean to . . .”

“To what? Rub it in my mother’s face that Daddy’s still unfaithful after all these years?”

The woman's eyes widened and confusion spread across her face.

"Never mind. This was a bad idea."

Lila put a hand on the woman's arm. "What are you doing here? What do you want?"

"I'm sorry I came. I just . . ." The woman stared at Lila for a full five seconds and then pushed past her and disappeared behind the slowly closing bathroom door.

Lila stood, unmoving, trying to make sense of what had just happened. In all the years of her father stepping out on Mama, none of the women had ever approached him in public like this. What made this woman different?

She had a feeling her father had a lot of explaining to do.