



EMERALD WINDOWS

By Terri Blackstock

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Chapter One

THE WINDOWS OF HAYDEN'S landmark church—St. Mary's—were caked with dust, and from outside Brooke Martin could see web-shaped cracks that had already been evident seven years earlier when she'd last seen the place.

It surprised her that the congregation of Hayden Bible Church—usually much tighter with their purse strings than they were with their gossip—had decided to allocate funds to buy the building and renovate it. It surprised her even more that they had hired her to design the stained-glass windows that would replace the broken-out glass.

There had been a time when the people of Hayden, Missouri, wouldn't have hired her to mop their floors. Apparently, things had changed. And it was about time.

She left her car and walked around the building to the small employee parking lot in the rear, skirted by pine trees and one sprawling oak that shaded the pavement from the early spring sun. Only one car occupied a space there—a 1980 Buick with a rusty back fender and a dent in the driver's door. She stopped at the sight of it, and for a split second gave serious thought to running back to her own car and out of Hayden in the time it would take to say “not again . . .”

Her hands began to tremble, and she dropped her portfolio to her side. Inhaling deeply, she let her troubled gaze drift to the church door. Anger swelled migraine—like in her temples. Had crucial details been left out of this job offer?

A March breeze whispered through her hair, as if trying to calm her, and she paused at the door and told herself that it wasn't facing Nick Marcello now that bothered her so. It was that she hadn't faced him before. She had simply run away. But what else could she have done? With the

town rejoicing over the juiciest piece of gossip they'd ever scavenged, she had gotten out of town as fast as she could, hoping to spare her family any more shame.

But this time, Brooke reminded herself with a grim lift of her chin, she had made a pact with herself. She had vowed that when she came back to take this job, she would face the town with dignity and integrity, and then, by creating a work of art that would send them all reeling, she would redeem herself. She had assumed that process would involve facing Nick Marcello again. She just hadn't expected to do it so soon.

She opened the door and stepped into the musty old sanctuary.

The door creaked behind her, then slammed with an echoing thud. She stood quietly for a moment, listening, looking.

"Deliveries go back here!"

That familiar voice came from just inside the darkened corridor at the back, and she forced herself to move. Stepping over a beam on the old wood floor and around a dusty pew lying on its back, she made her way to the only doorway with light. She saw him standing at a table, bent over a blueprint, studying it intently.

He seemed younger than he had when she was in high school. But maybe it was just that she was older. She recalled the dress shirts and ties he'd always worn, the freshly pressed trousers, the shiny loafers. Now he wore an old flannel shirt, paint-stained jeans, and tennis shoes.

"No delivery," she said. "Just me."

He looked up, then slowly straightened. "Brooke."

Brooke tried to smile, but the effort was too much for her. "I . . . I didn't know you would be here. Pastor Anderson said—"

"If you'd known, you wouldn't have come." He crossed the room, still keeping distance between them. "That's why I asked him to call for me."

"He should have told me."

He nodded, as if he'd already given that a lot of thought. "I'm in charge of artistic development in the renovation," he said. "But to be perfectly honest, that consists mainly of those windows. I'm going to be helping you design them. The church is counting on them being a new point of interest in the sanctuary.

I'm counting on them being a masterpiece."

Brooke set her jaw and walked to the table, processing the information that changed everything. "I don't know, Mr. Marcello."

“Brooke, I haven’t taught in seven years, and you’re still calling me Mr. Marcello? It’s Nick, okay? Say it. Nick.”

She looked down at her feet. “Okay, I don’t know, Nick.”

Nick stepped toward her, and reluctantly, she brought her eyes up to his. “You don’t know what, Brooke?” he asked. “If you can create a masterpiece, or if you can work with me?”

“Both. It’s nice seeing you. But I can’t stay.”

She turned and walked back into the darkness of the corridor, down the hall, and back into the old sanctuary.

Nick followed. “Look, I didn’t hire you for this job because of any of that mess. I hired you because you’re talented. I’ve kept up with your work since you left.”

She kept walking “I saw the windows in the church you did in Columbia. And the door you did at that restaurant in Kansas City.” She stopped, her hand on the door. “You’re doing well, but you could do so much more. My decision to hire you was a business decision; I needed someone with your talent.”

Turning back, Brooke looked up at the old broken glass that skirted the circumference of the ceiling. “I’ve never done anything of this caliber, though.”

“You’ve done plenty of this caliber,” he said. “Maybe just not this size.”

She regarded him with questioning—almost suspicious—eyes. It wasn’t often that she was recognized as an artist. Most people viewed her as an interior decorator of sorts, someone who added life to dull rooms.

“I’ve always wanted to work with you,” Nick said quietly.

“Ever since you were in high school and I saw the talent you had. I know we could do something really amazing with these windows.”

“This is the first time I’ve been back to Hayden since—” She glanced up at him, steadied her voice. “Since I graduated. The gossip has had seven years to die down. I don’t know if I can stand to have it start back up again.”

Nick crossed his arms, and she saw him stiffen visibly, as if the subject was growing tedious. “Brooke, seven years can heal a lot of wounds. It’s past time to move on.”

She loathed the fact that her own wounds had not healed. “I need time to think about this,” she said.

He turned away from her, slid his fingers into his front pockets and seemed to consider the wood grain on the dirty pew in front of him. “How much time do you need?” he asked. “I wanted to get started this week. It’ll take months to do this job right, and we haven’t got a day to waste.”

Brooke looked up at the windows again. She had pinned so many hopes on them. A job like this could establish her as a serious stained-glass artist. Her boss and mentor, Mr. Gonzales, had encouraged her to take this job, even though it meant she would be out of the shop for months. He was close to retirement. When he closed the shop she’d worked in since graduating from college, she would have to open her own or work for someone else. These windows might mean the difference between being on her own and being under someone else’s thumb.

Coming back to Hayden had been hard enough. She had rolled into town, bracing herself for the debilitating reminders of what had driven her away. Working with her old art teacher would only open those wounds. “I don’t know,” she said again.

“Maybe I can give you an answer tomorrow.”

Nick looked at her for a moment, then shrugged. “All right.”

She started back to the door.

“Brooke?” His voice resonated in the old, dusty sanctuary.

Brooke turned around and saw that the tension in his expression was gone. “Uh-huh?”

“It was good to see you.”

“Yeah,” she said. “It was good to see you too, Nick.”

And that was exactly why she couldn’t take the job.

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