



GOSSAMER FALLS

NEVER FALL AGAIN

LYNN H. BLACKBURN

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a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan
RevellBooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Blackburn, Lynn Huggins, author.
Title: Never fall again / Lynn H. Blackburn.
Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2024. | Series: Gossamer Falls ; 1
Identifiers: LCCN 2023031284 | ISBN 9780800745363 (paperback) | ISBN 9780800745585 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493444724 (ebook)
Subjects: LCGFT: Christian fiction. | Romance fiction. | Novels.
Classification: LCC PS3602.L325285 N48 2024 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20230713
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023031284>

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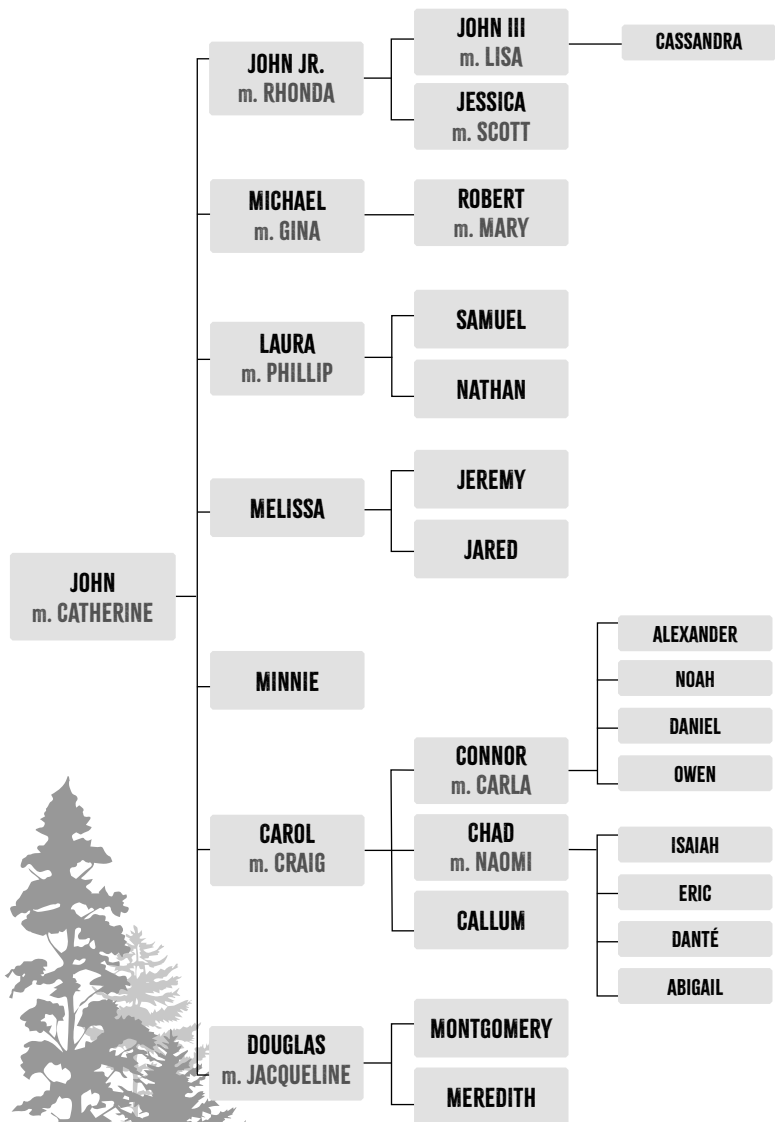
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24 25 26 27 28 29 30 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Sandra Blackburn,
my extraordinary mother-in-law, for loving me like
your own and for living a life that is a beautiful
example of the hope we have in Christ.

And in memory of Gary Blackburn,
my father-in-law, who packed a lifetime of love
and laughter into far too few years.



THE QUINN FAMILY



Landry Hutton didn't believe dreams came true anymore. She'd had dreams a long time ago. They'd nearly destroyed her. Still might.

But this was the first step toward the answer to a prayer she hadn't known to pray. And, oh, how she'd prayed. For safety. For a future. But never for this. She hadn't dared ask for it. Hadn't imagined it was possible. Over the last three years, she'd kept her head down and worked hard. Despite the tears and the occasional meltdown, she'd persevered. And now, somehow, she found herself here.

She took several slow breaths and stared through the windshield at the building ahead of her. Could she do this? Should she do this? Was it too soon?

Was she truly safe here?

Those were the wrong questions. She couldn't hide from the correct question. How much longer would she let the past keep her in a stranglehold? She'd been given an opportunity to make their future stable and beautiful.

And the first step was to place this fragile slip of an idea in

front of a man she'd never met and ask if he could turn it into something real.

Landry had been putting this off for six months. Would still be putting it off if Bronwyn hadn't promised her Callum Shaw was the man for the job. "You don't have to interview fifteen contractors," she'd said. "He'll tell you the truth about what will work. He won't take advantage of you. He's safe. He's a gentleman. He's great with kids. He loves his family. I trust him completely. You can too."

If anyone but Bronwyn Pierce had said those things, Landry would have smiled and resisted the urge to tell them no one could be trusted. But they'd been friends for longer than most people realized, and their friendship had been forged in a crucible of pain that had left them bonded for life. Bronwyn knew where Landry's skeletons were hidden and how important it was for them to stay that way.

Bronwyn didn't trust many people outside the Pierce family. In fact, she didn't trust many people *within* the Pierce family. But Callum Shaw had made her short list. It was high praise and had given Landry the push she needed to make the phone call. That and the fact that Bronwyn stood across from her, eyes flashing, and refused to leave until she dialed the number.

Landry was unprepared for the woman on the other end of the phone to say that Mr. Shaw had time this afternoon. She dropped everything and rushed over. Maybe it was for the best. She had no time to continue overthinking this, and instead of coming alone, she had her best girl with her. "Eliza?" Landry turned around to make eye contact with her five-year-old daughter.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Remember what we talked about?"

"Best behavior." Eliza's tone sounded like expecting good behavior was a doomed effort.

“I know you’re tired, but Mr. Shaw had a cancellation in his schedule, and I couldn’t pass up the chance to talk to him today. After we leave, we’ll get pizza and have our movie night. Okay, doodlebug?”

Eliza grinned. “Okay.” She waited for Landry to open her door, then climbed from the back of the car. She squinted at the sign beside the door as they walked. “S-P-Q.” She spoke each letter one at a time. “What’s the next word?”

“SPQ Construction. Established 1982.” Landry squeezed Eliza’s hand, then pulled open the heavy wooden door and looked around. The business may have been established in the eighties, but the decor was what she’d taken to calling “modern mountain chic.”

No one decorated this way in Arizona. The desert had its own beauty, and that aesthetic would always be a part of her soul. But the mountains of North Carolina made for a soothing palette, and the person who decorated the offices of SPQ Construction embraced it. Walls of the palest blue. Large prints of local vistas. And in the corner— “Oh!”

“Mommy!” Eliza darted past her and paused at the edge of a flowing water feature that took up an entire side of the room. “It’s Gossamer Falls!”

“I think it is.” Someone had created a replica of the waterfall for which the town was named. The lacy cascade originated one foot from the ceiling, then ran down a water-smoothed rock face and into a river that flowed along one wall until it disappeared into the far corner.

Eliza trailed a fingertip in the river and grinned. “Can we put one of these in our new house?”

A gentle laugh came from the other side of the room. “The Shaw brothers nearly lost their collective minds on that project and have sworn a solemn oath never to re-create it.” The woman behind the reception desk widened her eyes at Eliza. “But I know

for a fact that Cal has been itching to make a smaller version. And he has a soft spot for beautiful ladies such as yourself. If you ask him, he might be able to get an exception granted.”

“Don’t encourage her!” Landry left Eliza by the waterfall and walked toward the woman. The desk she approached was fifteen feet long, with a slight curve. When she got closer, she saw that the top was made from a massive slice of a tree, varnished to a high shine with a vein of blue running in a lightning pattern throughout. She’d seen this type of woodwork in a few of the shops in Gossamer Falls, but always on a smaller scale. Vases, bowls, bookmarks. This desk was a work of art, and Landry couldn’t stop herself from running her hands along the glossy surface.

Her eyes met those of the woman on the other side. “This is amazing.”

A soft smile split her face. “Cal does beautiful work. He nearly gave his mother a heart attack when he started electrocuting the lumber, but he has quite a gift. You must be Landry Hutton. I’m Carla Shaw.”

“Nice to meet you.”

They shook hands, and Carla pressed a button on what must have been some type of intercom device and said, “Callum?”

“Carla?” The voice was deep, and that one word was infused with humor. Landry had the distinct impression there was a joke between them that she wasn’t privy to.

“Ms. Hutton is here to see you.”

“Send her back.”

Carla stood. “I’ll walk with you. It’s a bit of a maze to Cal’s office.”

Landry and Eliza trailed behind her. The walls held framed photos of homes ranging from modest starter homes to extravagant estates. Each with a plaque underneath that listed the construction dates.

They passed several offices before they reached an open door.

“Maisy. Stay.” That same deep voice from the intercom floated to the hallway.

“Oooh! A dog!” Eliza dashed into the room.

Her little sprite was fast and already halfway across the office before Landry realized what was happening. “Eliza, wait!” Fortunately, she stopped at Landry’s words.

“I know, Mommy. Never touch a dog without permission. I just want to see.”

Eliza turned her big brown eyes toward the man who had come around his desk and knelt beside a dog now quivering with excitement.

The man—Callum Shaw, she assumed—met her daughter’s eyes and said, “Your mom’s right. You can’t ever rush at a dog, even dogs as gentle as this big baby. But if it’s okay with your mom . . .”

His eyes, which were as blue as the Carolina sky, now met hers. There was humor and gentleness. And shadows. Something dark flitted across his gaze. But then he blinked and it was gone.

Landry nodded her permission, and he turned all his attention back to her daughter. “This is Maisy. She’s a golden retriever. She’s three years old. She loves long walks in the woods, sunbathing, peanut butter, and belly rubs.” He demonstrated the belly rub. Maisy melted under his touch, and Eliza crept closer. “You can pet her. Maisy doesn’t bite my friends.”

Eliza dropped to her knees beside Callum and held out her hand toward Maisy’s nose.

Maisy took a quick sniff and rewarded Eliza’s good behavior with a lick. Callum stayed where he was until it was clear to everyone that Eliza and Maisy were set, then he rose to his feet and extended a hand. “Ms. Hutton.”

“Landry. Please.”

“Landry. A pleasure.”

Landry kept the contact brief. “Sorry, my hands are rough.” She turned them palms up. “Hazards of the job.”

Why had she said that? What did it matter if her hands were a bit on the crispy side? She didn’t have to prove anything to this man. Embarrassment crept across her and burst through her pores, heating her neck and face, and now she had no idea what to do with her hands. Should she put them down? Tuck them behind her back?

Callum glanced at her hands and turned his own up. “Same here.” He heaved a dramatic sigh. “It’s to my eternal despair that I’ll never land that hand modeling contract I’ve always hoped for.”

His easy humor made it automatic to tease him back. “Well, there’s always ditch digging.”

“Good point. If this construction gig doesn’t work out, I’ll have something to fall back on.” Callum turned his attention to Eliza. “And I gather your name is Eliza?”

She giggled with the abandon unique to happy children. “That’s right, but sometimes Mommy calls me Liza or ZaZa, but never Lizzy because that’s too close to Landry, and it gets confusing.”

Landry tried to keep a straight face as Eliza parroted what she’d heard Landry say too many times to count.

“It’s a pleasure, Ms. Eliza.” Callum pressed a hand to his chest. “I’m Cal Shaw. I’ll answer to Callum, but not LumLum because”—he dropped his voice to a stage whisper—“that’s just not dignified.”

Eliza’s laughter filled the room. Bronwyn hadn’t been wrong about Cal Shaw. He was very good with children. Even now, he kept his attention on Eliza. “Are you good here with Maisy while your mom and I talk?”

“Yes, sir.”

Cal grabbed a legal pad and pen from his desk and took the

chair opposite the one he directed Landry to sit in. From their seats, they could both see Eliza and Maisy.

She waited for him to start the conversation, but maybe she was supposed to go first?

“She’s a beau—”

“Land—”

They both stopped talking, and his smile seemed genuine as he nodded to her. “Please. Go ahead.”

“I was going to say your dog is beautiful.” She willed her body to stop flushing scarlet, but it refused to cooperate. She didn’t have to see herself to know that her face, neck, chest, and even her feet were on fire. This was why she did best behind the walls of The Haven. She could interact with the patrons there with minimal difficulty. But put her out in public, and she became a tongue-tied, socially inept disaster.

Cal’s grin held mischief, and he leaned toward her. “If all goes as planned, she’ll be pregnant soon. I bet Eliza would love a puppy for Christmas.” His voice was cajoling and teasing, but at least he had the good sense to keep it too low for Eliza to hear.

He winked in a way that was friendly and not flirtatious, and Landry understood why Bronwyn liked him so much. He leaned back and in a normal voice said, “I gathered from your conversation with Carla that you’re going to build nearby.”

“Yes. I have three acres on the edge of Pierce land.” She watched him carefully as she spoke and was unsurprised when his grip tightened on the pen at her words.

“How long have you lived in Gossamer Falls?”

“Long enough to know the Pierce and Quinn families don’t get along. And long enough to know SPQ stands for Shaw, Pierce, Quinn Construction, but your father and uncle bought out the Pierce in question two decades ago. And while your last name is Shaw, your mother is a Quinn.”

“That saves me some potential awkwardness.” Cal’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Because I’m afraid if you’re building on Pierce land, they may object to having us as the contractor.”

“No. They won’t. The land is mine now. And Bronwyn Pierce told me to call you. She insisted and told me if anyone in the family gets their shorts in a wad over it, she’ll take care of it.”

Cal studied her for a long moment.

She couldn’t stand the silence. “I gathered that you and Bronwyn are friends.”

This time the smile was genuine. “Bronwyn and I grew up together. I have two cousins, Meredith and Mo, and the four of us were in the same grade and did everything together. The family drama made things difficult at times, but we’ve remained good friends.”

“She’s mentioned Meredith and Mo. Said the four of you were like a small gang as kids.”

Cal laughed. “It’s true. We were terrors, but our pranks were mostly directed at soft targets.” He tapped his pen on the legal pad. “Where exactly is this land?”

“It’s on the far edge of Bronwyn’s land. There’s a right-of-way to a state road, so that’s not an issue. Bronwyn’s land is on three sides—she carved out a three-acre spot for me. There’s a river on the fourth side. I’m not sure who owns the property on the opposite side of the river.”

Cal dropped the legal pad, sat back in his chair, and ran his hands through his hair. “I do.”

“You know who owns it?”

“Yes.” A huff. Several shakes of his head. “I do.”

A deep thrill of foreboding shot through her. He’d been easy and light since they walked in. Even her mention of the Pierces garnered only a small amount of tension. But well-controlled . . . something . . . radiated from him. She didn’t think he was angry. But he wasn’t happy. “Is it a secret or something? Is it owned by a

terrible person? I don't think Bronwyn would have sold me land that wasn't safe, but—"

"Landry."

She reined in her babbling. "Yes?"

Cal leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "I'm trying to tell you who owns the land across the river from yours."

She wanted to scream at him to spit it out already when he looked at her and pointed to himself.

"*I* do."