

# *Uncharted Territory*



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Hadley Hoover

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*To my own two-legged and four-legged guys  
—both of whom love me unconditionally.*



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Distinct gratitude to Rose Howard, my “real” North Dakota friend: Thanks for a lifelong friendship no matter how far apart we’ve lived.

Special thanks to all from around the country and closer at hand who read *Miles Apart* and then wrote, e-mailed, or stopped me on the street to ask, “When’s the next one coming out?” You hold the answer in your hands.



# CHAPTER ONE

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Block letters on the front window informed the curious that CATE'S CAFÉ was OPEN MONDAY—SATURDAY 6:00 AM—7:00 PM, but neglected to mention one pertinent detail: the woman who shared her name with her business was also cook, wait-staff, baker, cashier, and daily entertainment. The aroma of this morning's coffee cake gained steadily on the lingering wisps from last night's dinner special as Cate swooped from the kitchen with four plates lining one arm, each reaching its destination with nary a mishap. From a corner table, Victoria Dahlmann watched Cate juggle banter and breakfast with equal ease.

“How long has this place been called *Cate's Café*?” Victoria asked idly as the woman swooped from kitchen-to-table with four plates lining one arm. As usual, Victoria had followed her nose's recommendation and now chased the last crumbs of pecan coffee cake with her fork.

It was more than Cate's considerable culinary skills that made her business flourish in a struggling North Dakota town. Every day, the guarantee of news and gossip pulled a steady stream of regular customers past the cold coffee pots on their own kitchen counters. Victoria eyed the remnants of the cinnamon-streusel topping on the plate as she waited for the answer to her question from the man who shared her table.

“Her dad opened the café and named it after her before she could even walk,” responded Luke Larson. “Why do you ask?”

She shrugged. “Just trying to catch up on the town history I’ve missed out on by moving here so late in the game,” she said and chased a crumb with her fork.

“Prairie Rose believes in keeping its business names plain and honest. Who owns it, what it is. No grandiose promises, no bragging. Just the facts.”

“And that’s why we have Ed’s Garage, Cate’s Café to cover the who-owns it, and Wilson’s Clip and Curl to satisfy the what-it-is!”

“You’re on to us. Oops, since my name is above the entrance to Larson’s Grocery, I had better go run it.”

It was easy for Victoria to understand why *eligible* ran a close second to *nice guy* in anyone’s description of Luke. The plain and simple reason: Luke—compared to most other single men in Prairie Rose—still had his own teeth and hair, and he had a visible means of support. He owned Larson’s Grocery. That covered *eligible*. And *nice* was equally obvious: his eyes said *You are important enough to me to have my full attention* when he talked with anyone and his actions matched.

In the short time—just since June—since Victoria had moved from Minneapolis to Prairie Rose, she had learned the facts about Prairie Rose. Before she had even flipped a single calendar page she realized that a much revered triad sustained physical life in this town: dozens of backyard gardens, this very café, and the grocery store at the opposite end of the block.

“I need to meet the dairy truck. See you at church tomorrow.” Luke stood beside the table, digging around in his pocket for coins to pay for coffee.

“Nah, we’ll meet up before then. I’ll be in to the store later today, Luke. It looks like Old Mother Hubbard’s cupboard at my house.” Victoria flicked a wandering bronze curl back from her face and conducted her own assessment of the unsuspecting man as he moved away. *Hmmm. Good-looking in a PG-rated movie kind of way. Not sure what*

*PG-rated kind of things he'd do, but, hey!* She watched Luke move confidently between the crowded tables.

"Any good sales today at Larson's Grocery?" The query rose as he passed one group of four men.

"Always!" Luke shot back with a wide smile. "Of course, an avowed tightwad like you doesn't admit anything is a 'good sale' unless it's free, right, Harry?" Knowing that Harry would lead the spontaneous laughter at his own expense, Luke made his exit with a chuckle that robbed his words of any maliciousness.

"Well, you set yourself up for that one, Harry," Cate teased. "You better spring for coffee today for your friends here to counter the tightwad label!" Good-natured and accustomed to the ribbing, Harry pulled out his wallet and obliged, but not without the obligatory deep sigh.

During the four months since she had backed the rental truck between the wrought-iron gate posts that marked her driveway, Victoria had slipped easily into the comfortable routines of a small town. Just like the locals, she now paused to chat with friends and acquaintances pushing carts along the grocery store aisles, or stopped to shoot the breeze with neighbors enjoying the evening air from their front porches.

*What a perfect place to launch my career! No endless staff meetings that accomplish little. Lots of freedom to try new things.* She leaned back in her chair and grinned for no particular reason other than sheer euphoria. *And some of the nicest people on God's green earth.*

Just then, a supposedly red pickup truck—held together more by its coat of rust than by Detroit's ingenuity—pulled up to the curb with much grinding and rattling. Victoria pushed back two chairs in readiness for their next occupants. But before Oscar and Jean had even slammed the truck's doors, Victoria's gaze shifted, snagged by a split-second reflection of sunlight on a door that opened across the street.

A man stepped outside the brick-fronted building and stretched to his full height. Arching his back beneath a polo shirt tucked into jeans

that might well have been spackled on his body, he tilted his head toward the sky.

*Good Lord. That looks exactly like...It can't be...Tell me it isn't true!  
Oh dear God.*

It wasn't prayer, it was panic. It should have been prayer, when the Reverend Victoria Dahlmann's mind skidded to a stop, but it was panic. Sheer, stressful, heart-pounding panic. A dreaded tornado cutting a swath through Prairie Rose right then would have created less havoc in her life than the sight of that one man soaking up the morning sunshine across the street.

Around her, townsfolk chattered and laughed. Inside her, life as she now knew and loved it screeched to a halt.

"Mind if we join you?"

"Huh?" She looked up into the pleasant faces of Oscar and Jean who had every reason to believe that the chairs she had pushed back just seconds earlier were intended for them.

"Mind if we join you?" Jean repeated sweetly.

"No, not at all," Victoria said, and pushed herself back from the table and stood. "In fact, the table is all yours; I have to leave." She jammed her hand into a jeans pocket to pull out a couple of crumpled bills and tossed them on the table. Oscar and Jean looked quizzically at Victoria, then at each other, and shrugged as they sat down cautiously, wondering if they had misinterpreted the unspoken invitation of two chairs pushed away from the table.

Unwilling to look, but incapable of stopping herself, Victoria stole one last desperate glance out the window.

No longer standing and stretching.

He was moving!

In fact he was half-way across the street, homing in on Cate's Café.

Victoria emitted a small wordless sound and made a beeline for Cate at one end of the U-shaped counter. "Cate, I'm heading out your back door, okay?"

Cate's "No problem" hung in the air; her questioner was long gone. Before she could even wonder about that odd retreat, the front door to her café opened again, and she sent a greeting to her latest patron wafting over the din. "Hey, Doc! Here's a spot for you with these old reprobates at this table. Shove around, Gus. Make room for Doctor Alex."

"Two coffees over here, Cate, when you get a minute," Oscar drawled from the corner of the room, and Saturday moved back on track for all the inhabitants of Prairie Rose except one.

Victoria reached her backyard in less than two minutes. She opened the back gate and hung on it until she could catch her breath. The last time she remembered racing like that, she had earned a blue ribbon from her girl scout leader. No one lurked nearby handing out any awards today. *Where is my dog?* "Cino?" she called, adding the familiar two-tone whistle.

No response from the galloping bundle of fur that usually would have been in action at the first squeak of the gate. A laugh and the smell of pipe tobacco pulled Victoria to the side of her house. "Unless Cino's taken up smoking, something fishy is going on," she sputtered as she strode across the lawn.

Seated two-to-a-side at her picnic table, four gray-haired men—only one of whom she knew by name—stared back at her like deer caught in the headlights. A box of doughnuts, a margarine tub containing what looked like powdered sugar, and a thermos formed a line on a green plastic tablecloth. Each man held a steaming coffee mug.

Cino sat with head cocked to one side and with ears at attention, his chin propped on the far end of the table. He allowed his tail to recognize Victoria's presence, clearly torn between unabashed love for his mistress and the enchanting visitors to his domain. "Excuse me?" The words were polite, but Victoria's tone meant business. "Bryce, did I miss an appointment with you and your friends?"

“Hello, Pastor Victoria! You’re back earlier than usual, aren’t you?” Bryce side-stepped her question while he finished swirling his doughnut in the margarine tub. *Yup, powdered sugar.*

The man seated next to Bryce stood up, his legs still between the bench and the table which gave him less than perfect points for posture. “We had planned to be gone before you returned, but you’ve changed your schedule this morning. We’re the ROMEOs. You know Bryce—he picked your back yard—and I’m Richard, and this is Lewis,” a bald man saluted her, “and that talkative fellow is Mitchell.” The pipe smoker nodded in response to his name and puffed without comment.

*Have I been dragged down a hole with a small girl named Alice? Should I be calling 911 right about now?*

“You must not know about us, being fairly new to town like you are. ROMEO stands for Retired Old Men Eating Out,” Richard offered in explanation. “We’re very sorry to have disturbed you. Usually we meet earlier, but some of us had scheduling problems today. We’ll be out of here in no time.”

His words were a bugle-call to action to the other three men. The tub of powdered sugar disappeared into the nearly empty carton of doughnuts. Bryce whisked away the thermos, cups and tablecloth into a box beside him. Each leaving a friendly pat on Cino’s head, the men headed for the gate. Victoria stood alone with her now disconsolate dog in her own backyard.

She stared at the picnic table incredulously, wondering for a moment if she could possibly have imagined the whole scene. Bewildered and tense, she headed for the back porch swing. “*What was that* about, Cino? You broke about six rules as far as I can tell,” she said and flicked a tell-tale clump of powdered sugar off his muzzle. He flopped down beside her, sighing loudly.

Then she noticed a Mason jar of mums beside her back door—out of the way of traffic, but strategically placed where she was sure to see them. This was curious, but coming after the shock of seeing *him* on

Main Street followed by finding a geriatric men's group in her back yard, a jar of flowers on her back porch hardly registered on her scale of strange events.

\* \* \*

"Champion dog, indeed," Victoria muttered under her breath. Her mood was anything but Sunday-best. The mental image of her dog at full alert with his front legs hooked on the top rung of the wrought iron fence was all too vivid as she strode across the lawn. Despite his obstinate oblivion to her explicit commands, she had run out of time to discipline him properly in the few minutes she had grabbed at home between comings and goings on the busiest morning of her week.

The church bell beckoned her with more authority than she possessed in dealing with Cino. A minister couldn't keep an entire congregation waiting just because her canine housemate had turned unexpectedly and inexplicably willful. "Yesterday he welcomes total strangers into our yard, and today he decides he's top dog," she moaned.

Part of Victoria's problem was that she was exhausted. She had not slept well. Why not admit it? She hadn't done much of anything well all day Saturday. From the time she hit the alley behind the café and zeroed in on her own back door, she hadn't known a minute's peace. And now she was more than a little jittery from consuming twice as much coffee as usual in a futile attempt to counter very little sleep.

*Hang it all, anyway.*

Throughout the opening rituals of the service order, she could hear muted excited barks muted by the thick walls and she grimaced, wishing she'd had the time and energy to drag those 125 independent furl-clad pounds across the lawn and lock each and every stubborn one of them securely behind the kitchen door with the dog-door blocked off. Her jutting chin was the only clue that the confrontation was not over as she began her pastoral duties before her stoic North Dakota parish.

The organ's majestic notes caressed the arches of the sanctuary and subtly began to stroke her frazzled nerves. Victoria smoothed the ministerial robe that whispered around her ankles, and forced a few measured breaths to relax her body. She then rose from the high-backed platform chair.

As she ascended the four carpeted steps leading to an intricately carved oak pulpit, thoughts of the rebellious dog and her sleepless night were replaced by the needs of her congregation and the purpose for them all being there. She whispered a quick prayer for all, like herself, whose private worlds distracted them today.

An uncommon restless tension hummed during the final seating of latecomers and now continued with craned necks and whispered confidences. Victoria had been so preoccupied initially that she had only subconsciously noticed the people's agitated state. Looking out over the normally unflappable crowd, she was propelled up to full speed with them.

He was here.

Victoria bit her lip and wished she could go home. *Ho-boy, this caps the weekend. Two males royally messing up my life—one canine, one human. And that's not counting the four trespassers!* Swallowing hard, she turned pages in the oversized pulpit Bible and reverted to her old grade school habit of marking the spot with her index finger.

This was her second run of today's sermon. Two hours earlier, eighteen miles away, the smaller Indian Hills congregation had heard it first. That was Victoria's only hope of making sense now with such a visitor's eyes riveted on her face.

The final piece in the summer's puzzle fell firmly into place and filled in the rest of the picture. No doubt about it: The man who had stretched in Saturday's sunshine was the same man who had been the topic of endless morning discussions up and down Main Street for the past four months.

His flesh-and-blood identity confirmed the reason Victoria's heart beat so erratically just when she needed to be calm and professional.

Walking down the aisle, he staked a claim on the aisle next to Widow O'Dell who didn't shift her ancient bones so much as an inch in the fifth row on the left when her seatmate smiled at her. If anything, she moved a fraction closer on the pew she had guarded like a homesteader for over forty years of Sunday mornings.

Amazingly enough, the look on Sadie O'Dell's age-lined face wasn't one of tight-lipped vengeance against the squatter. While she would have withered any other interloper into fearful retreat with one piercing glance, she appeared to admire this man's nerve in usurping her site.

Despite the widow's widespread fame as seamstress, she made no effort to limit her undisguised approval to his wardrobe selections for his first religious excursion in Prairie Rose. He actually looked quite comfortable in the tailored tan suit, a crisp mauve linen shirt without a visible wrinkle, and wonder-of-wonders: a diagonally striped burgundy and blue tie. For someone whose coloring practically shouted "Scandinavian!" the entire gentlemanly ensemble certainly boasted appropriate choices for his occupation despite a physique that prompted thoughts of basketball courts and cheering fans.

Behind Victoria, the choir's rustling robes snatched her back to the present; she managed a jagged breath. "Our special thanks to this morning's readers from the youth group. It is especially fitting to have young voices read today's text. Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, is a grown man with a dangerous job, fishing on that unpredictable Sea of Galilee. But in Matthew's Gospel, we see him respond to life with an enthusiasm that is all too often characteristic only of the young..."

The brick walls of the century-old church held the mid-September morning's warmth at bay, but trickles of perspiration threatened to betray Victoria's placid demeanor. It was bad enough to have arrived back in Prairie Rose late Friday night after eight days away, and be counting on Saturday to regain all her energy in anticipation of Sunday.

And it sure didn't help to discover her pride and joy, Cino, barking at God-only-knows-what beyond the fence when she rolled back into town this morning after the first service at Indian Hills.

But the more disconcerting realization came each time during the flawless eighteen-minute homily that her eyes swept to the West side of the sanctuary, the unfaltering gaze of Prairie Rose's other newcomer rocked her trusted reserve. He had arrived during her absence. Even before that, he had released a whirling frenzy of joy in town when he announced his impending arrival with a tasteful quarter-page advertisement in the weekly newspaper.

At least a Doctor Alexander Johanson had done so in early July.

She didn't know any Doctor Alexander Johanson.

She knew Zan Johanson. Oh Lordy, did she ever know him. And Zan Johanson knew her in ways altogether too familiar for the woman in clerical robes to even think about, especially when standing in the pulpit with a task at-hand.

Yesterday, the sight of him through the café window had knocked the wind plumb out of her sails, but his appearance on Victoria's turf this morning sank the whole wretched boat. Somehow during her Saturday ruminations she had doubted—no, she never even suspected—that he would bother with church. *No-no-no, not the Zan Johanson I knew.*

Finally, she completed the last point on her sermon outline and sank into the chair out of the congregation's view. The choir rose behind her to lead the closing anthem.

"Oh God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, be Thou our guide while life shall last, and our eternal home," they sang. *Ain't that the truth.* The lines of that centuries-old hymn were suddenly more than words on a page—they were a crucial lifeline for Victoria.

Familiar routines pulled her through the next quarter hour: the walk to the back of the sanctuary, pausing there to pronounce the benediction; the flurry of greetings from these kind and amiable people who had taken a chance on her, their first woman minister.

Then, like the Red Sea parted for Moses, the wall of people split in two and all lanky six-feet-one-inch of him moved toward her with outstretched hand. “Thank you, Reverend Dahlmann, for the sermon. You’ve given me a challenge for the week.”

It didn’t take one nickel’s worth of that costly knowledge gained in three years of Seminary classes for Victoria to interpret his seemingly innocuous murmuring. She knew that this visitor whose left-cheek dimple sign-posted every smile was not referring to her exhortation to step out in faith like Peter. It was all she could do to hold back an unprofessional snort. Instead, she lifted her hand to meet his and said evenly, “Thank you, Doctor Johanson.”

Voices formed a humming cocoon around them. “Just Alex.” *Straight blonde spun-silk hair. Strong, confident hands.* Coming from lips she found impossible to ignore, his next words jolted her. “May I invite you for brunch? My place. Across the street. End of the block.”

Victoria dropped her eyes to their still-clasped hands and moistened her chalk-dry lips. “Uh...” *No, say no, Victoria.* “Yes, I could do that.” *You idiot. You certifiable idiot.*

“Great! I’ll let you finish here,” he glanced at the people milling around them, “and see you soon.” He released her hand with a lingering and possibly imagined squeeze. Sunlight enveloped him as he passed through the church door. There was not one drop of saliva left in her mouth when she turned to the next person in line.

“We certainly can add that to our leadership meeting agenda this week, Luke. Good idea.” *Why did I say yes to his invitation?*

“Yes, I had a great time in the mountains, but it’s good to be back.” *Why? Why me? Why now?*

“Thank you, Mrs. Martin. I’m glad you’re enjoying this series of sermons.” *As soon as I get home, I’ll call and excuse myself, plead a headache.*

“Have a great first year of college, Sherry! Will we see you at Thanksgiving? Wonderful!” *Yeah, right! Like a doctor’s going to buy that hackneyed excuse!*

“The christening for the newest Guddman is coming up quickly! Isn’t she growing fast?” *If I don’t go, he’ll back off and life will be able to regain...Dream on, Kiddo; it’s unlikely your life will ever be normal again.* Groaning inwardly, she bent to admire a child’s Sunday School artwork.

Finally. She closed the door behind the last parishioner and leaned against the wall in the back of the now-quiet sanctuary. *What an hour! Actually, what a whollop the last twenty-four hours have aimed straight at me.* Gravitating to the fifth pew, she lowered herself to the very spot where today’s visitor had sat.

What had he seen? The pulpit gleaming from years of tender care? *Yeah, right.* The light streaming through the stained glass window of The Good Shepherd? *Not likely, since his eyes stayed glued on me.*

Why had he come? Out of curiosity? *Step right up, folks! Come see a clergywoman in action!* Or more likely, to win points with townfolk by attending services of worship? *I, for one, am not buying this religious camouflage donned by the new doctor.*

Victoria pursed her lips and scratched a senseless pattern on the pew cushion with a peach-tipped fingernail. Two congregations, the Prairie Rose Community Church and the rural Indian Hills United Church, had called her at the beginning of the summer as their shared minister. Seminary and her internships had prepared her well for the demands of such a position in an isolated place.

Prepared? Sure, except for forward young doctor’s invitations—that disruptive man whose eyes said more than his lips.

Cino’s voice was again heard throughout the land. Victoria sighed as reality yanked her world back into focus. The squeak of the opening church door brought to life the waiting hunk of tri-colored fur. Victoria grinned at her three-year-old Bernese Mountain Dog who waited all a-twitter by the fence near the church’s back entrance. “Hold on, Buddy!” She quickly covered the space between them. “Yes, yes, I’ve missed you, too.” Opening the gate, she gave the hand signal that brought Cino from his air-borne-with-delight leap to a heel position; they moved back

toward the church together. "I'm not quite done over here, yet, but you can come visit. Is that what you wanted?"

As she opened the door again, and Cino padded in beside her and claimed his favorite spot on the rug, she unzipped the robe and let it shimmer farther down her arms. In the small attached restroom, Victoria tugged a comb through her burnished copper hair and assessed her reflection in the mirror.

The peach linen dress showed seat-belt wrinkles added during the trip back from Indian Hills. Her makeup subtly attempted to offset the ungovernable curly bronze frame her hair formed for her face. And, despite her faithful care to wear a straw hat all summer, a few stray freckles were now stubborn reminders of her first gardening experience. She wrinkled her nose playfully at her reflection and turned off the light.

Back in the office, she quickly filed away her sermon notes, jotted several calendar notations from conversations of the morning, and pattered around watering the plants. Soon there was nothing left to do but go.

Victoria squinted in the bright sun, facing her home. Cino flopped next to her, one huge paw affectionately pinning her foot in place as they surveyed their house together.

Surrounded by a vast lawn with stately old cottonwood, elm, and pine trees, the residence usually overwhelmed her. Two stories high with a full rough-finished basement, impressive dormer windows on both front and back sides of the roof, five bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a family-sized kitchen complete with a walk-in pantry were daunting enough. But when you added a formal dining room, the old-fashioned parlor, and an enchanting screened porch that wrapped around three sides, it provided far too much dwelling for a single minister and her four-legged friend. Locals called it The Rectory, even though decades had passed since anyone living beneath the ten-foot ceilings had answered to such a formal title as "Rector."

Several minutes of exposure to the noon heat ended her reverie and she moved to open the gate into the yard. “Go inside, Cino. It’s too hot for you out here.” She pulled a thistle out of his white vest before bending to give him a hug and savor his responding nuzzle. “Take care of the house until I get back. And no more barking, you hear?”

With a sigh, the dog sat at her feet offering his best depressed-pooch impression. She shook her head ruefully, pointing toward the house. “Your pity-me efforts are in vain. Sorry.” Cino dragged his feet toward his dog-door, mirroring his mistress’ reluctance in crossing the street to the waiting Doctor Alexander Johanson.