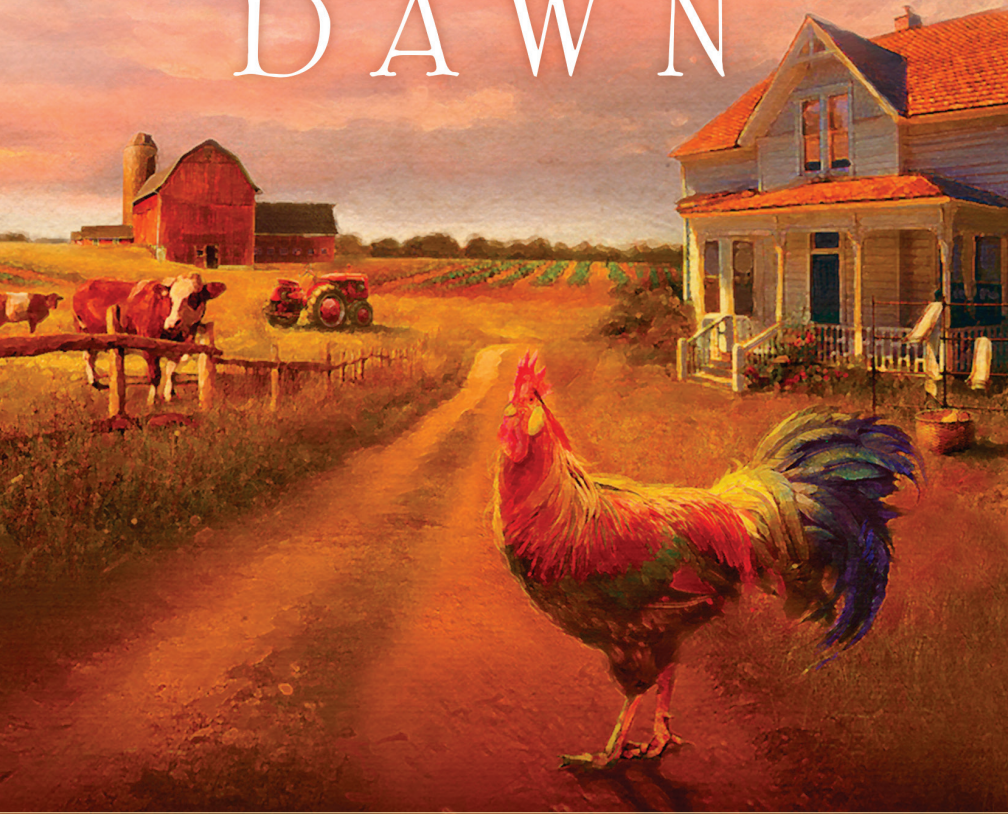


HOME TO HEATH



**SNEAK  
PEEK!**

BEFORE  
*the*  
DAWN



CAROLYNE AARSEN

## Chapter One

So this is where we're living?" Sam eased his lanky body out of the back seat of the truck as he stared at the farmhouse, silhouetted against the blue Nebraska sky. As he tugged the earbuds out of his ears, his face, partially hidden by the hood of his sweatshirt, showed his bewilderment.

Charlotte tried not to let the tone of her grandson's voice disappoint her. She knew that his attitude was part grief, part separation anxiety, and part sixteen-year-old boy.

"This is Heather Creek Farm. Named after the creek we crossed over a ways back. This is where your grandfather grew up."

Charlotte kept her voice upbeat and her lips formed a smile as she tucked her short hair back behind her ear. Your mother too, she silently added. Toby stood beside her, staring up as if wondering where Charlotte had been. The dog's tail wagged slowly, a brown and black plume, as she licked Charlotte's hand.

"This looks like a set from an old TV show," Emily, her fourteen-year-old granddaughter, said. Her long hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail that hung askew from sleeping in the car. Her eyes blinked as they adjusted to the light.

"Are we finally there?" Christopher's sleepy voice drifted out from the back of the truck.

Still clinging to the Spider-Man backpack that had been his constant companion for the past week, the boy clambered out of the vehicle and reached for his sister's hand.

His close-cropped hair glinted in the afternoon sun as he yawned. He looked as bewildered as his siblings sounded.

Emily sighed. "If you want to call being out in the boonies, there, then yes." Emily's voice was quiet, but her words carried.

"Hey. They have a dog." Christopher crouched down and reached out to Toby, but Toby ignored him, her brown eyes still fixed on Charlotte.

Charlotte patted the dog absently, glancing over at her husband. Though she wasn't that conversant in teen-speak, she was fluent in reading Bob's body language. The way he was yanking the suitcases out of the back of the vehicle clearly showed how unhappy he was with his grandchildren's reactions.

Charlotte wanted to explain, to defend. The children had just endured a long flight from the West Coast to America's heartland, then a tiring drive through the country to get to a farm they had never visited in their lives. Bob hadn't spent a week with the children like she had. He'd had to return to the farm after the funeral in San Diego, while Charlotte had stayed to deal with the aftermath of their daughter's death.

On top of dealing with guardianship issues, Denise's will, the insurance, and all the legalities that sidelined her own sorrow, Charlotte also had witnessed, firsthand, the children's grief in a way that Bob, during his brief visit for the funeral, hadn't. Denise's children barely knew their own grandparents or their family here in Bedford. Of course they would be confused, bewildered, and disoriented.

Charlotte turned away from the emotions of the people behind her and let her eyes drink in the familiar sight of the farmhouse. The white clapboard building had been Bob's home all his life and her home for the past forty-five years. It stood solid, as it had for almost a century, edged by poplar trees. The pale green of newly budded leaves misted their branches under the achingly blue sky. A few geese honked overhead, the neat arrow of their formation pointing to a new season and a new cycle of life.

During the draining, hectic week she spent with her grandchildren in San Diego, Charlotte had longed for a quiet moment when she could allow her heavy grief some space to be released. She knew this would only come to her here, at Heather Creek Farm.

She had so hoped that the farm would be a place of healing and hope for her grandchildren too.

A light breeze teased at her hair again, and as she tucked the errant strand back behind her ears, she sent up a frantic prayer.

Please, Lord, help these children to find a space here. Help them to get over Denise's death.

She turned back to the children, a forced smile in place as she added another prayer.

Help me to get over Denise's death.

"So, here we are," she said.

"I'm hungry," Christopher said, his voice still hoarse with sleep.

Emily took Christopher's hand and gave him a tender look that encouraged Charlotte. The children truly cared for each other.

"I'm sure we can find something to feed you." Charlotte gave

him an encouraging smile and was rewarded with a shy smile in return. "What would you all like to eat?"

"I'm not hungry." Emily's languid stare slid over her new surroundings as she toyed with a blonde strand of hair, just as her mother used to do.

Oh, Lord, how could you do this to us? To those children?

How could you take away their mother? Our daughter?

Even as the questions resonated through her mind, Charlotte struggled to silence them. She had no right to question God. The only things she could do now were pray for strength, bring these children into her life, and deal with the reality of this cobbled-together family.

"But it's been such a long drive from the airport," Charlotte said, trying to catch her granddaughter's eye.

Emily was looking in the direction of the barn. "You got horses too?"

"They're your Uncle Pete's."

She tried not to let her anger with her youngest son spill into her voice. He had said he would be home when she and Bob came from the airport with his niece and nephews, but neither he nor his truck were to be seen.

Because he'd had to stay home and take care of the farm, Pete hadn't been able to come for the funeral, so she had assumed he would be waiting when they arrived.

"Some of them are trained for riding. I'm sure he can take you out if you want." Charlotte latched onto the faint note of interest in Emily's voice, remembering the worn books she had on her bookshelf back in their apartment in San Diego.

"Emily just reads about horses. She doesn't know squat about riding." Sam offered this information in the same



cynical voice he'd been using all week. "None of us know anything about horseback riding. Or farming." His words faded into the open air, lost in the space that separated grandson from grandparents.

A new silence surrounded them, heavy with questions and sorrow.

Charlotte knew he spoke from his own pain. She wished she knew the right words to ease it away, or the right way to usher these children from one life into another. But she could barely cope with her own emotions.

Dear Lord, please help me to forget my own sorrow, Charlotte prayed, squeezing her hands tight as if trying to contain the pain that had been her constant companion since the phone call.

"Your daughter . . . fatal accident . . . car totaled . . ." The words that had shattered her world would jump into her mind whenever she let her guard down.

She took a quick breath and started walking toward the house. They needed to keep moving, stay active.

"Let's get the suitcases and boxes inside," she said over her shoulder. "Emily, Sam, Christopher, can you help your grandfather bring your things into the house, please?"

The only sounds she heard behind her were a shuffling of feet and the muffled rumble of suitcase wheels bumping up the cracked and broken walkway. Toby jogged alongside Charlotte until they got to the house, dropped onto the porch, and lay down, watching as everyone filed past her.

"This, of course, is the kitchen." Charlotte looked around, trying to see the familiar lines of this room through their eyes.

Wooden cupboards, painted a buttery yellow, had been new fifty years ago, but now Charlotte could see how old-fashioned

the wooden knobs were. Until now, she had never noticed all the places on the Formica where countless knives had cut countless loaves of bread.

To her right, the heavy oak table, its top scarred from years of use, dominated the center of the dining area.

Charlotte guessed the stack of envelopes on the table were mostly sympathy cards, sent by people in the community.

She bit her lip against a fresh wave of grief. For the sake of the children, she had to stay on top of her own emotions. She could see dishes piled in the aged porcelain sink and on the worn counter. She guessed Bob and Pete hadn't spent much time cleaning up after themselves while she was gone.

Though she itched to tidy up and restore order to her house, she had to ignore the mess for now.

"Would you like some milk and cookies?" Charlotte whisked open the faded green curtains above the sink as she walked toward the large cookie jar squatting at one end of the counter.

Christopher's eyes lit up, then he glanced upward at his sister, who shook her head. "No. I'm not hungry anymore."

Charlotte lifted the lid and looked inside. Just as well that Christopher had changed his mind. Only a few cookie crumbs resided on the bottom of the jar. Pete had been indulging.

"Well, let me show you your rooms." She replaced the lid and kept her voice brisk, businesslike. "I'm sure you're tired."

She picked up one of the suitcases that Bob had brought into the kitchen and led the way past the pantry and down the hallway to the stairs.

While she was in San Diego, she had given precise and detailed instructions to Bob and Pete on which quilts she wanted on which beds and which furniture to take out of storage for

each room. On the flight home, and then on the drive, she had imagined the children in each of the rooms.

But now, as the worn carpeting on the stairs muffled the children's footsteps behind her, Charlotte wasn't so sure.

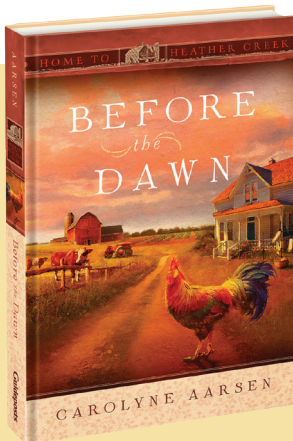
Now that they were actually here, all she could think about was that these children were hers and Bob's. All theirs.

The thought created a rush of anticipation. New adventures with these precious children awaited them, new experiences.

For the first time since Denise's funeral, she felt a fragment of hope.

*To be continued...*

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