

A PIECE
OF YOU
AND THE
HILLS



HANNAH LINDER

A Piece of You and the Hills

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EVERYTHING SHOULD HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT. Something—anything—should have changed in the last eight years.

But the street looked the same as before. The parking spaces were still crowded with rusty pickups. Hanging lights still glowed into the bluish dusk. The platform was just as teeming as it'd been in high school, and he caught the distinctly sweet aroma of cigar smoke and lavender bushes.

He shouldn't have come.

Heat crawled along the back of his neck, as he rolled up the sleeves of his flannel. The smell of Aunt Avis clung to him. She must have washed his clothes a dozen times, keeping them fresh, in case he ever came back.

He was a fool for not.

For everything.

“Good to see you, Nate.” A hand clapped his shoulder. Old man Pidge, with his bib overalls and his yellow-stained beard. “Fixin’ to do some dancing, are ya?”

“Don’t think so.”

“City done took it out of you, I guess.”

“I guess.”

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Pidge leaned closer, raising his voice over the roaring hum of voices. “Nice funeral yesterday. Avis would have liked it with all them carnations. She used to plant the dern things anywhere she could.”

Nate tried to grin, but his jaw ached. “You better get your banjo. Looks like the band’s about ready.”

Pidge guffawed. “The band waits on me.” But he sauntered off anyway and five minutes later, the caller cleared his throat in the corded microphone.

Couples scampered into squares. *Old Joe Clark* blasted into the evening, accompanied by claps and laughter and the melodic stomping of cowboy boots on wood.

“Now swing your partner twice around and allemande left when you come down.” Motion, colors, noises, then—

Her:

Across the platform, he caught a flash of Janet. Her yellow cotton dress and the glittery jeweled pin below her collar. The honey-brown hair. The smile that stretched her lips, then faltered as her gaze met his.

Panic squelched him. He waved—hesitant, awkward—and she waved back. He remembered too quickly what those fingers felt like.

Brushing his as they worked side-by-side with cold metal and bicycle chains and rubber handlebars. The smell of her hair. Gardenia perfume. Her laugh heightening his senses and the taste of fizzing orange pop from the concrete steps outside *Gerry’s Bicycle Repair Shop*.

He’d known a million times over Janet Owens loved him.

Since fifth grade.

More after they spent summer evenings working together at the shop.

He’d teased her and kissed her sometimes and taken her to the top

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of his uncle's mountain, where the wheat-colored field rippled and she'd told him secrets. He never told her his. He never asked her to the school dances or showed up at her house to visit on the porch swing.

He'd known what would happen if he did.

"See those, Janet?" They'd lain together in the itchy grass, a velvet-black sky above them, with a thousand stars blinking down. "Soon as I graduate, I'm thumbing my way to Washington D.C."

"You still wanna work at NASA?"

"Sure I do."

"Oh."

"Oh." He rolled over on an elbow and faced her. "What's that mean?"

"Nothing. Just thought that was kid stuff. Something you'd outgrow someday."

"You don't outgrow the stars." He'd sighed and flicked a grasshopper off his chest. "I'm gonna learn everything there is 'bout outer space. Someone has to know what's out there. If I stayed in this stinkin' town, I'd end up farming or being a mechanic or something stupid."

"I don't think it's stupid."

"What?"

"Living here." A soft whisper. "I hope I stay here forever. I hope I have lots of kids. And I hope I live in that house outside of town—the one with the blue awning and rose bushes."

She hadn't seen, but he'd rolled his eyes. When he took her home that night, he hadn't kissed her like he wanted to—and he made himself a promise he'd already made a hundred times.

Janet was wonderful.

If things were different, he would have kissed her all the time. Maybe married her too.

But she was part of this town and the life he wanted rid of, just

like Aunt Avis and Uncle Bart. They'd hold him back, if he gave them half a chance.

But he wouldn't.

Now, sweat dampened his palms, as one dance faded into another. He needed to leave. Things were already packed and waiting in his Porsche. Instead, he squeezed his way around the platform and approached her. "Hey Janet." His heart hammered. "I'm headed out, but wanted to say hi."

Her eyes gleamed, brown and flecked with gold. She hugged a child against her. "I'm so sorry about Avis. I wish I could have been there yesterday."

"It was a good service."

"I'm glad."

"She yours?" He motioned to the child, who gaped at him with missing front teeth.

"Yes." Janet beamed. "This is Debbie. Carolyn's around here somewhere too." From behind, Jeb Cooper stepped closer. Tall, gentle Jeb—football star their senior year—always packing around the farmer's almanack with his school books.

"Good to see you, Nate. Why don't you dance?" Jeb grinned. "New one's starting. I'm two left feet out there, but Janet does fine."

Nate knew. They'd danced that last summer, night before he left.

"Oh no, I can't." She blushed and looked away, but Nate tugged her onto the platform anyway. *Sally Goodin'* flooded the night. She smelled of gardenias and a breeze stirred her hair, but the eyes that used to look at him as if he held the world now kept shifting away.

"Nate, I don't think we should."

He wanted to answer, but the past clogged his throat. She hadn't asked him to stay eight years ago. Every time they danced, her eyes had been injured and glassy, evidence of her heartbreak. Maybe his had been broken too.

"I'm sorry." She shook her head again and this time he released

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her. Something clinked. “I have to get back. It was...” Her gaze finally lifted higher, met his eyes for one heart-throbbing second. “It was good seeing you again.”

His chest hollowed in her absence. He took a step back, but something shimmered at his feet. He swept up her pin. Should have returned it, but he tucked it into his pocket instead and ran until he found his car.

He drove with the windows down. Night air cooled his face, made his eyes water like tears. When he swerved his car up the familiar dirt road, he could no longer swallow past the hook snagging his throat.

Fool.

Regret raged through him as he climbed from the Porsche. He hiked the mountain. He waded through knee-high grass until he found the place where they’d once lain.

As if to mock him, the sky was starless tonight.

He fisted grass.

Yanked.

Pulled out a clunk of dirt and thrust it into his pocket with the pin. He should have kissed her that night. He should have sat with her on the porch swing. He should have married her the summer after he graduated, and he should have bought her the house with the blue awning and rose bushes.

In the darkness, he fumbled his way back to his car and swerved away. *Sorry, Janet.* For leaving eight years ago. For keeping the pin tonight. But he’d needed it—a piece of her and the hills.

They were all he had left of home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hannah Linder resides in the beautiful mountains of central West Virginia. Represented by Books & Such, she writes Regency romantic suspense novels filled with passion, secrets, and danger. She is a four-time Selah Award winner, a 2024 Carol Award finalist, and a member of ACFW. Also, Hannah is an international and multi-award-

winning graphic designer who specializes in professional book cover design. She designs for both traditional publishing houses and individual authors, including *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and international bestsellers. She is also a self-portrait photographer of historical fashion. When not writing, she enjoys playing her instruments, painting still life, walking in the rain, square dancing, and sitting on the front porch of her 1800s farmhouse. To follow her journey, visit hannahlinderbooks.com.



