

TALL, DARK, AND  
DETERMINED



# TALL, DARK, AND DETERMINED



HUSBANDS FOR HIRE—BOOK 2



*Kelly Eileen Hake*



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For more information about Kelly Eileen Hake, please access the author's website at the following Internet address: [www.kellyeileenhake.com](http://www.kellyeileenhake.com)

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## DEDICATION

*As always, my books are dedicated to my Lord,  
who gives me words and patience when I have neither.  
But this particular story is for my fellow capable, take-charge  
women—and the men strong enough to love us anyway.*





## ONE



*Colorado Territory, June 1887*

**D**ead men told no tales, but jailbirds sang aplenty. Chase Dunstan knew Braden Lyman, victim of a mine collapse, couldn't be telling anything. Problem was, no one else gave details about the accident, leaving too many questions about how—and why—those men died. The property sold with ungodly haste.

Only a need for answers brought him to the jailbird, a man foolish enough to miss their rendezvous four days and three counties back. Getting thrown in a cell didn't excuse failure.

"What did you find out?" Chase waited while his quarry paced the small room, still not responding. He waited while the other man drank a dipperful of water and almost choked. A dry throat and slippery nerves made anything hard to swallow, and the man before him dealt lies thick enough to block a bison.

But Chase knew what all good trackers knew; waiting was the longest part of the hunt. So he tested his patience against his fellow man instead of an animal until Robert Kane faltered.

"You're not going to like it." When Kane finally spoke, Chase didn't so much as shift on the hard wooden seat he'd chosen.

“That much, I can tell you plain and simple.”

“That much, I already knew when I found you in a cell.” Chase allowed a thin thread of amusement to reel in his prey.

“And left me here to rot.” Kane kicked the wall to vent his frustration and regroup. “You could’ve posted bail, us being brother-in-laws ’n’ all.” His grumble died out when he looked up and caught Chase’s unblinking gaze. Robert Kane possessed no shame—but he boasted some degree of self-preservation.

“Your brother’s marriage makes you no relation of mine.” *If the scriptures say a man leaves his mother to cleave to his wife, surely that includes his no-account half brother.* Chase eyed Kane. “He was a good man, so for both your sakes, I hope you found some information worth my time.”

He made no direct mention of his sister. Laura had seen enough hardship at the hands of their own family without allowing Kane’s oily thoughts anywhere near her. There were worse reasons to send Kane to Colorado than to keep him away, but only one better. Details about the death of Laura’s husband—and the mine collapse to kill him—hadn’t been forthcoming.

The settlement the mining outfit gave Laura to make up for the loss of her husband wouldn’t last a year. Chase would have taken the matter to Lyman, the partner he’d dealt with when working as a guide for that same outfit early on, but Lyman went down in the collapse, too. Chase’s suspicions deepened when the surviving partner sold the town in record time and vanished.

Since then the only mention of Hope Falls came through a ludicrous ad folded and still tucked in his back pocket:

*Wanted:*

*3 men, ages 24–35.*

*Must be God-fearing, healthy, hardworking single men  
with minimum of 3 years logging experience.*

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*Object: Marriage and joint ownership of sawmill.*

*Reply to the Hope Falls, Colorado, postmaster by May 17.*

The thing must serve as some sort of code. But if the mining company was involved and covering something up, they might recognize him. Chase Dunstan couldn't go poking around Hope Falls. But Robert Kane held the anonymity and logging background to head out there and look for answers.

Kane also had the bone-deep idiocy to botch it.

"If the information's good enough, will you get me out of this cell?" No longer pretending any sort of kinship, Kane began bargaining for freedom he didn't deserve. "Because I don't have to tell you anything, Dunstan. As long as I'm behind these bars, it doesn't matter to me what happens in the world beyond them."

"You're bartering with what already belongs to me." It wasn't a question. Chase didn't ask questions he already knew the answers to unless trying to appear unthreatening.

"You don't have the information; it doesn't belong to you." Kane spread his hands in offering. "It's simple business."

"Business finished when I saved your backside from that posse stringing you up for fraud. Try again." He stood up.

"The past doesn't concern me. Right now I need to know—"

"You can stay out of reach behind those iron bars. Or I can get you out and show you firsthand my opinion of men who fail me. Either way, you'll tell me what I want to know. Your only choice, Kane"—Chase leaned forward—"is how."

"All right, all right." Kane glanced at the bars as though afraid they might vanish. "Can't blame a man for trying."

Yes he could, but Chase didn't waste the breath.

"The mine collapsed—you can see where it used to be, how the mountain sort of fell in on itself and crumpled." Words started pouring from the prisoner—and lucky for Kane, they were true

so far. Chase had circled close enough to confirm the collapse for himself just after hearing about the tragedy.

“And the ad that got your hackles raised?” Kane started to get to the good stuff. “Sure enough, there were four women running that town. They dangled the line that three of ’em wanted husbands to keep control over the loggers.”

“Four women run the town?” Chase ran the pertinent detail to ground. “The ad made it seem as though three owned it.” *If any of them do, and it’s not some elaborate hoax.*

“Four. Claimed that together, with the one’s fiancé, they’d bought up the town and wanted to convert it to a sawmill. They chose a site and cleared it, brought in an engineer, interviewed everyone, and divided them into work teams. It’s just like the ad said, Dunstan.” Kane smirked. “Those women weren’t ladies—no lady puts out an ad like that, and no man with half a brain would believe it. Course, most of those loggers didn’t own half a brain, so they were fooled into hoping for pretty wives in the wild. Could almost see why—the gals meant business.”

*But what kind?* Chase kept the question to himself and asked another. “Who’s the fiancé—the man they claim owns Hope Falls?”

“Don’t remember.” Kane looked chagrined—or at least as chagrined as he could look, which meant he looked afraid of displeasing Chase. “But he was in bad shape—bedridden. The man giving orders went by Creed, if that helps. He arrived after most of us, and it looked like he only knew one of the women.”

“No.” Chase didn’t know any men by the name of Creed, which was too distinctive to forget. Then, too, any man planning on being front and center running the town would have established his status from the start. Some truth ran through the old saying men were dogs—when it came to dominance, neither animal left room for questions. “The name of the fiancé. Now.”

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“I can’t remember.” Kane started talking fast. “Adam? Brian? Something like that. He was fiancé to one of the Thompson sisters and brother to the girl I had my eye on.”

“Word is you had more than your eye on her, and you got caught.” Chase cast a glance around. “Was she a widow?”

“No, a miss.” Kane scowled. “Now there was a girl who didn’t belong in the backwoods, Chase. All done up in bows and fluff, looking like a lady when she wasn’t, putting on airs as though she owned the place. The type to lead a man on but kick up a fuss when he got close—she’s the reason I’m stuck here.”

“Her name.” Not a question; a command.

“Lacey, though I doubt it was real.” Kane looked ready to go off on another long-winded speech about the temptress.

“Surname, you fool. She should share it with her brother.”

“Lyman.”

Chase sucked in a sharp breath at the answer like a hound drawing in scent for the hunt. “The brother’s name. Braden?”

Kane snapped his fingers. “Yep. That’s it. Stuck in the doctor’s bed.”

“Why?” Chase had to be sure.

“Mine collapse, they said.” Kane hadn’t known any names going in, so whatever he came up with wouldn’t be half-truths drawn from his own twisted conclusions.

Chase narrowed his eyes as he left the jailhouse. A rangy wolfhound abandoned its post in the shade to lope alongside him. There could be no doubt—Braden Lyman lived. This gave rise to a slew of new questions. Was the one man in Miracle Mining whom Chase had trusted involved in its collapse? Did the real Braden Lyman still own Hope Falls? And if both answers were yes—*why?*

Because despite what Kane told him, Chase knew one thing: *an attempt to conceal a sabotaged mine is still more likely than three good women advertising for husbands in the wilds of Colorado.*



Hope Falls, Colorado Territory, 1887

*So this is how it feels to be wrong.*

Lacey Lyman abandoned the laws of ladykind to gnaw on her nails. Of course she'd been wrong before—one didn't reach the advanced age of eighteen without a few token mistakes. But this wasn't always-talking-too-much wrong or even clashing-bonnet-and-dress wrong. She shuddered at the last one, but it still didn't come close to the current situation. No. *This* counted as nothing less than best-start-swooning wrong.

Creed, the man they trusted enough to make head of operations, had just dangled another logger by his suspenders in some sort of fit over a single coin then rushed out of the kitchen. Normally, that would be odd. Just now, it was ungentlemanly to abandon ladies in such alarming circumstances.

An all-out brawl was taking place beyond the swinging doors of the kitchen, where twenty or so loggers pummeled each other. Some defended the honor of whichever woman caught their eye, some tried to prove their masculinity, and a small cowardly number simply defended themselves. But there was no escaping the fact that, to a man, they clashed in competition over herself and the three friends she'd talked into coming West. The rain hadn't stopped in hours, so they didn't even take their fight outside the diner like somewhat civilized mountain men.

Even worse, it was *all her fault*.

"Oh, hush." Evie jabbed her with an elbow, although that might have been an accident. The newly built storeroom Lacey dragged them all into hadn't been made to house four women amid its shelves. "It's not *all* your fault, and you know it."

Lacey shot her friend a sharp look before realizing Evie

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couldn't see it. In addition to space, the storeroom also lacked a lit lantern. Nor did it share the warmth of the stove, which had made the kitchen much more inviting until a pair of loggers came flying in from the fight and hadn't gone back.

"Then whose fault is it?" she demanded, stung by the way her friend emphasized *all* as though, indeed, Lacey bore the lion's share of guilt. *If Evie thinks I'm to blame, she could at least show the decency to be agreeable about it!*

A jumble of answers bounced around the tiny space all at once, but Lacey caught who'd said what in an instant. They'd been through too much not to know each other's voices and the thoughts of their hearts by now. Tangled together, they went: "Creed!" The loudest burst from Evie, who'd been fighting the rugged stranger for weeks—mostly because she was fighting an attraction to him. About an hour ago, Evie ran out into the rain, distressed over a callous comment made by one of the men. Creed followed, but obviously failed since Evie came back alone.

"Braden!" The most vehement came from Cora Thompson. Evie's sister and fiancée to Lacey's own brother, Cora had every right to blame Braden. He'd convinced them to invest in a Colorado mining town then destroyed everything by falling victim to its collapse. But when word of his miraculous survival surprised them in Charleston, Cora didn't think twice. They all moved to Hope Falls only to hear Braden denounce them as fools.

Lacey brightened at the fact that if it weren't for Braden, none of them would be here at all. Truly, it was all her brother's fault. The world made sense once more, and—

"All of us!" The longest and fairest answer came from Naomi Higgins. Her elder by nine years, Lacey's cousin observed, "We all invested in Hope Falls as a mining town, and nobody forced us to come here when things changed."

Three women shifted uncomfortably in tight quarters.

*Kelly Eileen Hake*

Whether Cora and Evie moved to ease a sense of shame, Lacey couldn't be sure. But she suspected they, like herself, found the quiet truth in Naomi's answer too compelling to ignore.

Except. . . a sort of needling sensation in her chest wouldn't let Lacey accept Naomi's answer. She wanted to. Oh how she wanted to, but Lacey had a gift most people never suspected. Not an astounding talent. She simply. . . remembered things. If she heard them or read them, Lacey could repeat them years later. Not precisely word for word, but with surprising accuracy.

Surprising because, when she most needed to, she couldn't pay attention. Life offered so much. Color and sound, textures and tales, sparkles and sensations forever calling her away from the moment. . . So people never imagined Lacey could *remember*.

But she did, and right now Lacey was remembering a conversation from when they'd still believed Braden dead. Mere weeks past, it seemed a lifetime ago.