

MEET ME

at the

STARLIGHT

a novel

RACHEL HAUCK

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
Minneapolis, Minnesota
BethanyHouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hauck, Rachel, author.

Title: Meet me at the starlight / Rachel Hauck.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023049983 | ISBN 9780764240980 (paperback) | ISBN 9780764243042 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493446490 (e-book)

Subjects: LCGFT: Christian fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3608.A866 M44 2024 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20231103

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023049983>

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Cover design by Faceout Studio, Jeff Miller

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

For Robbi and Trudy

TUESDAY

JUNE 1932

SEA BLUE BEACH, FLORIDA

The sight of the Starlight just on the edge of her kitchen window eased her lingering regret over her fight with Leroy last week.

Even though she deserved an answer, she hated his pained expression as she called him a scallywag, declaring how he'd let her and their boys down. *"I've never been more disappointed. Where do you go each week? Tell me now."*

More disappointed? Those words were not true. Tuesday Knight had been disappointed plenty in her life. Leroy was least of them all.

Still, after three years of his clandestine activity, she had a right to know, didn't she? He must work hard at whatever he was getting up to because he brought home cash, enough to pay the grocer and keep the lights on. And in these lean times, that was saying something.

Ever since the Crash and the Depression sat down on everyone, Leroy Knight had changed. Her hero, her knight in shining armor,

a Great War soldier with chest full of medals, had become *way* too friendly with the Memphis and Chicago gangsters passing through their beloved Sea Blue Beach.

Wiping her hands on a stained dish towel, she stepped onto the porch and into the humid evening heat of Florida summer. At six o'clock, the day remained summery bright, with a bit of the Starlight's neon light in its ribbons.

"It's been too long since I visited you with my skates." She'd been speaking to the rink as a friend ever since she was a girl. Shoot, the rink was her *family* before Lee and the boys.

The Starlight gave her comfort. Skating helped her think through things. And she needed to *roll* her way through this turmoil with Leroy.

"Why can't I know where you go every week? I'm your wife, the mother of your sons. Is that too much to ask?"

"Well it is, Tooz, so drop it. I'm here now, aren't I?" He'd pulled a few greenbacks from his pocket. *"This ought to square our account with Old Man Biggs at the grocery store. There's a bit more here to stock up on what you need."*

"I won't touch a penny of that until you tell me where it came from. 'Cause if it's blood money or from running booze—"

"It ain't blood money. Holy shamoly, Tooz, can't a man provide for his family without the third degree?"

That's when he'd left without a by-your-leave. Since they didn't have a phone, he couldn't call. And Leroy was not one for writing letters. So she had no idea if he'd return home as usual this Friday.

"Beg pardon, Tooz." She glanced around to see Drunk Dirk, as everyone called him, coming up the shell-and-sand driveway.

"Dirk. What can I do you for?"

Not much older than Leroy, Dirk was also a Great War veteran who played the Wurlitzer at the Starlight. It was a darn shame his reputation, lovely wife and two sons, along with his touted musical ability, was eclipsed by his drunkenness. Lord only knew where he got the hooch in the first place. Sea Blue Beach was a dry town.

“I’s just wondering if Lee was around. You seen him lately?”

“Sure haven’t.” Giving Dirk the once-over, she wondered if it was her husband supplying Dirk’s habit. Another second passed before she pointed to the kitchen’s screen door. “Care for some dinner?”

“Naw, naw, Tooz, but thanky. I got a hankering for . . . something else.” He sloughed off without another word, tripping as he entered the street, turning left, then right toward the Starlight.

That’s it, Drunk Dirk, get to the Starlight. That’ll soothe your soul. Maybe help you to stop drinking. Besides, the evening session started in an hour, and Dirk was scheduled to play.

Back in the warm kitchen, Tuesday removed the pork and beans from the old potbelly, which glowed with burning logs and turned the whole house into an oven. She set the table and stirred up a pitcher of iced tea, using the last bit of ice from the icebox. She’d have to make up a list, send Leroy Junior to Biggs tomorrow.

Speaking of LJ, where was he? And Dupree? Her old dinner bell had blown away during some storm or another. Back out on the porch, she looked toward the horizon for signs of her boys, thirteen and eleven, respectively. They’d probably lost track of time.

Well, she’d wait. Tuesday sat on the old stone step and faced the beautiful, beautiful Starlight—she would love that place till the day she died—and wondered if Dirk had made it to the organ.

He had to know, as she and everyone in Sea Blue Beach, that no town in all of America, maybe the world, had a skating rink as grand and lovely as the Starlight. After all, it was built by a prince—Prince Rein Titus Alexander Blue, or Prince Blue as they called him—from faraway Lauchtenland, a tiny North Sea nation.

Tuesday hoped to go there one day, see where Prince Blue had lived before he crashed on their North Florida shore. He’d built the Starlight on the very spot, on the bedrock that held everything together—the sand and shells, the dirt and grass, trees, maybe even the Gulf itself. Certainly all of Sea Blue Beach.

“Ma, Ma.” LJ, tall and lanky, sprinted down the driveway. Trailing behind was Dupree, pumping his still-short legs to keep up.

“Can we skate tonight at the Starlight? Mr. Hoboth ain’t there, but Burt says we can skate for free if we help clean up.”

“That was kind of him.”

Jud Hoboth, along with Burt, had managed the rink ever since Prince Blue left to command a Laughtenland regiment during the Great War. Hoboth was a nice man, if not temperamental, with one foot out the door, always talking about adventures out west or down Mexico way. But what would happen to the Starlight if he just took off?

“Go on inside, wash your hands. Dinner’s on.”

“Can we go, huh? All the kids are going tonight.”

“When have I ever said no to the Starlight? I might go too.”

The house rattled as the boys ran up the stairs and fought to be first at minuscule bathroom sink. When they came down, their faces were washed, their hair combed and slicked back, and their shirts soaking wet.

Tuesday loved her boys.

She served them bowls of pork and beans, corn bread slathered in butter, and cold milk. “What’d y’all do today?”

In the summer, she let them tear all over God’s green earth after morning chores. Growing boys needed to use up their energy. They came home to dinner stained, filthy, and full of stories, then scampered back outside until dark. Then it was bath time, followed by popcorn and their radio program, Jack Benny or Eddie Cantor, ever since baseball banned broadcast of their games.

“We went fishing on the beach,” LJ said, dipping his corn bread in his bowl.

“We helped Cap’n Tatum unload a fresh haul.” Dup gulped down his milk. “He gave us fifty cents, so we went to Biggs for candy. Got a milkshake at Alderman’s too.” He handed Tuesday his bowl for seconds.

“Then we got up a game of kickball with the fellas,” LJ said. “We lost, thanks to Dup.”

“Did not.”

“Did so.”

Tuesday returned Dup’s bowl, steamy and full. “I thought two young men in this house wanted to go to the Starlight tonight.”

That shut them up. Worked every time. The forty-five-year-old rink was loved by the entire Knight family. Even Leroy.

“I’m going to skate on a racing team when I get bigger,” Dup said.

“Ah, you’re not fast enough.” LJ reached around and yanked Dup’s hat from his head. “You’re at the table.”

“I am too fast enough. Take it back. Ma—”

“You’ll be fast when you need to be.” Tuesday gave LJ a side glance. *Be nice.*

When they finished eating and the boys had washed the dishes—which always included flinging Super Suds at each other—Tuesday said, “Get your skates. Bring mine as well.”

It had been a splurge, more than they could afford, to buy everyone Richardson boot skates for Christmas. But last year Leroy played the big shot, telling Tuesday to order whatever she wanted from the skate catalog. He brought home a money order from the bank, and she put the whole kit and caboodle in the mail the day after Halloween. The skates arrived a week before Christmas. Lordy, how the boys shouted when they unwrapped their boxes.

While Tuesday loved her skates—which she’d not trade for anything—she remained a bit vexed that she still cooked on a wood-burning stove. Sakes alive, it was 1932, and no matter how many hints she dropped to Leroy, he never clued in. She might just have to take matters into her own hands. Or flat out say, *Lee, I need a new stove.* But he was stubborn. Sometimes the more a body wanted something from him, the more he resisted.

While the boys thumped around upstairs, Tuesday got to work on tomorrow morning’s bread, then hurried to freshen up.

“Can we get some popcorn, Ma?” Dup dropped into his usual seat at the table, clutching his skates.

“Don’t see why not.” Tuesday set the dough aside, then reached

for the cannister on the pantry's top shelf. "Maybe a soda pop too." The can contained the fun money she earned from helping Mr. Hoboth at the rink. "I can hear Dirk firing up the organ as we speak." She took her pocketbook off the hook by the door and stuffed two dollars inside. "LJ, what are you doing?" She called up the stairs. "Get a move on. Don't forget to bring my skates. Dup, go see what your brother is doing."

His skates clattered to the floor, and he started yelling before he left the kitchen, "LJ, Ma says hurry up."

Now where was her lipstick? Caught in the torn lining of her purse, that's where. Tuesday leaned toward the windowpane, using it as a mirror, when she heard, "Am I invited too?"

She whirled around to see Leroy at the door, his broad shoulders filling the frame. He gave her a sheepish grin, hat in his hand. Fifteen years together, and he still made her knees weak.

"Lee, what are you doing here? It's only Wednesday." She capped her lipstick and ran into his arms. "About the other day . . . I didn't mean what I said."

"Sure you did, and I deserved it." He pressed his lips to hers, drawing all the blood in her veins to her heart. "I'm sorry, Tooz. I didn't mean to pop off and leave without a word."

"I'm sorry too, and I'm so glad you're home." She brushed aside his dark bangs and searched his blue eyes. Too handsome for anyone's good, she'd fallen in love with him the moment he asked her to skate.

He'd just returned from the war, and her friends whispered, "*He's trouble.*" But Tuesday Morrow did *not* care. If he was trouble, let her sink in deep. Beneath his cotton shirt beat the heart of a warrior.

"The boys and I took a run near here." He released her as he gazed toward the stove and tossed his hat onto the table. "I thought I'd pop in to see my favorite gal. My beautiful wife."

"Well, my *boys* and I were about to go skating." She took a step back. She hated that he referred to his crew as "the boys."

LJ and Dupree were his boys. The others were junior thugs of some sort.

“Don’t start, Tooz.” He opened the icebox. “Can you heat up some supper?”

“Why don’t you come with us and buy a hot dog?”

He frowned. “All I ever eat is diner fare. I’d like some home cooking.”

“Home cooking? You think I made pot roast and potatoes, with an apple pie for dessert? We live on beans, corn bread, sourdough bread, eggs, cereal, and milk, Lee. If you want a bowl of beans, stir up the stove and grab a pot. And if you’re tired of diner fare, well, that’s all on you.” Tuesday braced for his reply, but the boys—their boys—clambered down the stairs and into the kitchen.

“Pa!” LJ dropped his skates and fell against him. Dup clung to Lee’s arm. “You’re home. Golly gumdrops. Can you skate with us?”

LJ poised for a dash upstairs to retrieve Lee’s Richardson skates, the ones he’d worn only once in the last six months.

“Um, well, I suppose.” He glanced at Tuesday, longing in his eyes for something besides dinner, which made her burn through and through, wanting him more than the Starlight. At least for now. He tipped his head toward the ceiling. *Can’t we . . . ?*

“Get your father’s skates, LJ,” Tuesday said. Lee would just have to wait. “We’ll have a much-needed family outing.”

LJ retrieved his pa’s skates, then shot out the door after Dupree and raced down the drive to Sea Blue Way and the Starlight.

Tuesday was about to follow when Leroy spun her around for a kiss, moving his warm lips from hers down to her collarbone.

She refused to surrender, no matter how much she wanted to take his hand and head up the stairs. “The boys will expect us.”

“Tooz, don’t punish me.”

“Punish you? Why would I when it means punishing myself? But your boys—your *sons*—need time with you. Now let’s go so’s you can put your skating talent on display.”

He sighed and searched her eyes. “Look, I don’t want to open the can of worms again, but I want you to know this is not the life I dreamed for us.”

“Well, we have that in common.” Tuesday clung to her skates. The stove fire had died, but the kitchen seemed warmer than ever. “Just what did you dream for us? And why aren’t you doing it?”

“I sort of am, I reckon. Don’t you see? I’m setting us up, giving LJ and Dupree a better future. You think I can buy you nice things, like those skates you’re holding onto for dear life, or send the boys to college by working on a fishing vessel? Or breaking my back logging? I was a soldier, Tooz. A fighter. I earned medals. Do you see me clerking at the bank or stocking shelves for Biggs?” He pointed to water stains on the ceiling and the tired wallpaper curling away from the corners. “This place . . . it’s a dump and I aim to find a way to change our station.”

“How? By doing what? Where does a soldier go for a job? Don’t tell me you’re back in the army.”

“I tried the army,” he said softly. “They thanked me for my service but didn’t have anything for a man my age.”

“Lee, I’m sorry.” Tuesday pressed her hand on his. “Just so you know, I love this house. I gave birth to our sons in this house.”

“Never mind the army. You wouldn’t have wanted the army life anyway, Tooz. Can you see yourself leaving Sea Blue Beach or the Starlight?” Lee leaned out the door and gazed toward the changing horizon. “Don’t you want to move across the street to one of the new cottages they’re building on the beach? Three bedrooms, two baths, a sunroom, solid wood floors, and a roof that don’t let in the rain. How about new furniture and a bed that don’t creak when we . . .” Her man blushed. Sure enough.

“Not if it means you leaving every week to do God only knows what. Lee, I don’t want much in life. I’m the unwanted child of an unmarried sixteen-year-old girl who was so delirious with pain that she named me Tuesday ’cause she thought the midwife asked what day it was.”

“I still want to know why a midwife would ask a laboring mama to tell her the day of the week.”

“I’d love to ask more than that, but since I’ve never even met her. . . .” Every now and then, if she spoke of her mama, the tears bubbled up. And she resented it. Margie Lou was a rebel who wanted nothing to do with her family or her newborn daughter. “Then Mamaw and Gramps raised me as a cousin, though everyone knew I was Margie Lou’s daughter. I looked just like her. Then Gramps died, and Mamaw sold up and moved to Tampa with Aunt Marcy, leaving me here all by myself at fifteen.” She gripped his shirt. “But you know all of this. You know this town and our family are everything to me. I want our boys to come home to a loving mother *and* father every night. But lately, they only have me.”

“I want everything you want and more.” He hooked a strong arm around her. “I *am* your family, Tooz, and I’m doing my job to provide and make a better life. Dream a little with me, will you?”

“You know what I’m dreaming, Lee?”

“Tell me.”

“That I wake up one day to find an electric stove and refrigerator right here in this kitchen.”

“Golly mo, Tooz, you dream of appliances?”

“I’m more practical these days. It’s 1932, and I cook on an ol’ potbelly and keep our food in an icebox.” He laughed and hugged her close. “But, Leroy Knight, hear me now, I don’t mind none of it if it means you hang your hat on that hook”—she pointed to the largest nail by the door—“every evening.”

“One day, I promise, Tooz. I’ll be home. We just got to get through this government mess. Ol’ FDR and his henchman Hoover has messed us up something fierce, but—Oh, wait, I got a surprise for you. How could I forget? It’s the reason I’m home. Shoot fire, your kisses got me all confused.”

“Oh hush, now what are you talking about?”

“When I proposed, I promised one day I’d buy you the biggest, brightest diamond to wear on your finger.”

“How could I forget? My warrior is also a big talker.” She didn’t want him to buy her a ring if it meant him running all over who-knows-where, but oh, wouldn’t it be lovely to have a symbol of belonging? A sensation she’d never had growing up. Until Mamaw left and Prince Blue took her in, gave her a room at the Starlight along with a job.

“I mean to keep that promise, Tuesday. But for now, I wondered if this would do.” Lee stepped onto the porch and took a rolled document from his worn travel bag and tossed it to the old, scarred table. “Read it.” He puffed up like he’d done something extraordinary.

Tuesday set her skates on the floor and reached for a parchment-like document. “It’s a deed . . . to the Starlight.” She peered up at him. “Lee, what is this? I don’t understand.”

“I got you the Starlight, Tooz.”

“You . . . you *bought* the Starlight?” She scanned the ornate deed with gilded edges and calligraphed inscriptions.

Prince Rein Titus Alexander Blue, of the House of Blue, to Miss Tuesday Morrow, on this day, the twelfth of June 1916 AD.

The prince’s titled signature, in his lovely penmanship, stretched across the bottom of the parchment.

“It’s signed by the prince.”

“Yeah, ain’t that something? Anyway, I’d heard Hoboth decided to scratch his itch to see the world. You know running a skating rink weren’t his idea of a good time.” Leroy shrugged, leaving Tuesday to figure out the rest of her husband’s noble deed.

“Goodness, I figured he’d leave one day, but we were just talking last week about how Mrs. Elkins made me the most delicious silk cake for my birthday. He said, ‘How old are you now?’ I said thirty-two, and he got this smarmy expression and said he had something to do.” She read the parchment again. “Leroy Knight, you best not be joshing me. This doesn’t look like a county deed. And my married name isn’t on it.”