

Epilogue from A SOLDIER'S RETURN, available now
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Humming one of her favorite Christmas songs, Rosa Galvez twisted another string of lights around one of the porch columns. She only had two more to go, then this part of her holiday decorating would be done.

She loved this time of year. Brambleberry House was at its most beautiful at Christmas. The old Victorian was made for the season. Wreaths hung on the front door and in every window and her neighbor Sonia had been busy for the past two weeks hanging lights around the garden. Well, supervising a crew of teenage neighbor boys, anyway, who were earning a little extra change while helping them decorate.

The house would be spectacular when they finished.

She twisted the last of the strand of lights around the column, grateful for her coat against the cool, damp afternoon.

A Christmas tree already gleamed in the window of the first floor apartment and she could see Skye peeking out. The girl waved at Rosa and at Fiona, sprawled out on the porch watching her work, then disappeared from view, back inside where she was baking something with Melissa.

Rosa had to smile, though she felt a little pang in her heart. The house would seem so empty when Skye and her mother moved out, but at least she wouldn't have to worry about that for a few more months. Eli Sanderson and Melissa Fielding planned to marry here at Brambleberry House in April, when the flowers were first beginning to bloom in the gardens. It would be a lovely place to marry. She wanted to think Abigail would have been happy at the romantic turn of events.

Melissa and Eli were already looking at houses and seemed to have found a lovely Craftsman home close to Wendell Sanderson's house.

She was happy for her friend but, oh, she would miss her and Skye. So would Fiona. Who was going to take the Irish setter on runs along the shore? Certainly not Rosa.

She was hanging the last of the lights when a big late-model pickup truck she didn't recognize pulled into the driveway and a tall, serious-looking man climbed out. He stood for a moment, looking up at the house, then walked toward her.

For reasons she couldn't have explained, Rosa tensed.

She hardly ever had the panic attacks and meltdowns that had afflicted her so much after the dark period of her youth, before she had been rescued by Sheriff Daniel Galvez and his wife Lauren, who later adopted her. Those terrible months seemed a lifetime ago. She was a different person now, one who had worked hard to find happiness.

Every once in awhile, she felt as if all the progress she had achieved over the last fifteen was for nothing -- that somewhere deep inside, she would always be a frightened girl, tangled in a situation out of her control.

"May I help you?" she asked, as the man approached the porch.

"I hope so."

Up close, he seemed even more grim than he had appeared when he climbed out of his vehicle. No trace of a smile appeared on his features, only tight control.

"I'm looking for a woman. I'm pretty sure she lives here. Her name is Elizabeth Hamilton."

The name meant nothing to Rosa, who knew all the past tenants going back to the original owner. Still, she felt a stirring of unease.

"I know no one by this name," she said. She was nervous, which was probably the reason that her Spanish accent became more pronounced. "I believe you have the wrong house."

"It's not the wrong house," he said flatly. "I know she's here."

"And I know she is not," Rosa retorted. Like her accent, her unease was becoming more pronounced as well. This man made her nervous, though she couldn't have said why.

She wondered, for one fleeting moment, whether she should pull her phone out and call 911. It was a crazy reaction, she knew. The man wasn't threatening anyone. He was only looking for a woman who did not live there. She could only imagine trying to explain why she had called the police for such a reason to the frustrating but gorgeous new police chief. Wyatt Townsend would look at her with even more suspicion than he usually did.

“Now, I must ask you to leave.”

She saw frustration cross features that she would ordinarily call handsome. Right now, they only looked dangerous.

“Sorry, ma’am, but I’ve come too far to leave now.”

There was a bit of a western twang to his voice, one that seemed similar to those she heard throughout her teenage years, living in Utah.

“The woman you are seeking, this Elizabeth Hamilton, she does not live here.”

He let out a sigh and looked down at the piece of paper. “What about Sonia Davis. Is she here?”

Now her nervousness bloomed into full-on fear. What could he possibly want with their Sonia?

Her neighbor was home. Rosa had seen her come in earlier and make her painstaking way up to her second floor apartment, looking more weary and sore than usual.

She wanted to tell him no. She wanted to tell him to go away and not come back. Some instinct warned Rosa that this man was a threat to her secretive, vulnerable neighbor, who had already been through so very much.

She opened her mouth to lie but closed it again. What if Sonia was expecting him? What if she wanted to see this handsome man in cowboy boots and a worn ranch jacket, who drove a pickup truck that had Idaho license plates and the words Hamilton Construction on the side.

“She lives upstairs.” She couldn’t see any point in lying. He obviously knew Sonia lived here. “If you would like, I can see if she is home. What name should I tell her? And is there a message you would you like me to give her?”

He glanced up, almost as if he could see through the porch ceiling to the floor above. Now the tight expression showed a crack of emotion, something stark and raw. She thought she saw longing, frustration, pain, before his features became closed again.

“Sure. My name is Luke Hamilton. And you can tell this Sonia – whose real name, by the way, is Elizabeth Sinclair Hamilton – that her husband has come to take her home.”

Watch for Luke and Elizabeth’s story, the next book in Haven Point, available this September from HQN.

Rosa Galvez’s story, next up in The Women of Brambleberry House, will be coming soon.