HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired®

His Forever Love

Missy Tippens

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In Magnolia, Georgia, local legend says that a couple who holds hands around the "forever" tree will have an unending love.Even so, Bill Wellington held Lindsay Jones's hands around that tree years ago…and then left her behind. He chose the big city, and now he wants to bring his grandmother there. But to his amazement, he finds that Granny has a boyfriend–and a vibrant life.A life that includes Lindsay, Granny's caregiver. Bill never thought he'd want to come home, yet Magnolia clearly has its charms. As does Lindsay, who makes him long for a second chance at forever love.

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“How long do you plan to stay in town for this time? Ten minutes?” Lindsay asked.

Obviously she hadn’t forgiven him for leaving town after high school. Was she upset that he hadn’t said goodbye? Or maybe he was reading too much into her anger. Maybe she just thought she needed to protect his grandmother. “I know I’m not here often, but I do love my grandmother, and I’m here now,” Bill said.

“Where were you when she had the flu last winter or when someone tried to break into her house or when she almost gave her credit card number to a phone scammer? I’m the one who helped her then.”

She sounded hurt that he was trying to exclude her. “I’m sorry. I just thought you might enjoy a little time off.” Plus, I’m not sure my heart can take being around you every day.

MISSY TIPPENS

Born and raised in Kentucky, Missy met her very own hero when she headed off to grad school in Atlanta, Georgia. She promptly fell in love and hasn't left Georgia since. She and her pastor husband have been married twenty-plus years now, and have been blessed with three wonderful children and an assortment of pets. Nowadays, in addition to her writing, she teaches as an adjunct instructor at a local technical college.

Missy is thankful to God that she's been called to write stories of love and faith. After ten years of pursuing her dream of publishing, she made her first sale of a full-length novel to Steeple Hill Books' Love Inspired line. She still pinches herself to see if it really happened!

Missy would love to hear from readers through her Web site, www.missytippens.com, or by e-mail: missytippens@aol.com. For those with no Internet access, you can reach her c/o Steeple Hill Books, 233 Broadway, Suite 1001, New York, NY 10279.

His Forever Love
Missy Tippens

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

—Jeremiah 29:11

To my husband for being my biggest cheerleader
and promoter.
To Belinda Peterson for being a trusted, faithful
friend and sister in Christ.
And, as always, to God for giving me the stories.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my church family for supporting me and loving me. And to the Girls' Night Out Gang (you know who you are!) for helping me stay sane.

Thank you to my kids for allowing Mom to work and for not complaining about eating spaghetti over and over…and over.

I'm so thankful for my critique partner and good friend, Belinda Peterson, for generously and, yes, even cheerfully, reading a zillion versions of this manuscript. And for always being willing to room with me at conferences—snoring and all!

A special thanks to Emily Rodmell and all the wonderful people at Steeple Hill Books for their excellence and their commitment to bringing quality inspirational fiction to the shelves.

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Chapter One

Time flew backward at warp speed for Bill Wellington when the name Lindsay Jones popped up on his cell phone.

Warm summer evenings studying on the front porch swing. Working together on projects.

Holding hands around The Forever Tree.

But then he hurtled back to the present as he realized there could be only one reason why she would call.

Granny.

He snapped opened his cell phone. “Lindsay, is Granny okay?”

“She’s fine. Sorry to scare you.”

He had programmed Lindsay’s number into his phone when Granny hired her as a caregiver, so he’d assumed the worst. Relief nearly brought him to his knees. He waited for Lindsay to say more, but she remained silent. “Lindsay?”

“I’m sorry. I—” She sighed. “Your granny did take a fall, so I wanted to let you know. She has a mild concussion, and they’re going to X-ray her wrist. But the doctor said she’ll be fine.”

Tension raced across his shoulders and ran up the back of his neck. “How did it happen?”

“She fell off the back porch early this morning while taking out the trash.”

Poor Granny. “She’s at the hospital now?”

“Yes. They’ll probably keep her overnight for observation.”

“I’ll head down there as soon as I can get a flight.”

“Oh, you don’t need to do that. I’ll stay with her. And Granny Bea didn’t even want me to bother you.”

She thought he’d be bothered? “No, I want to come check on her. Other than Drake, she’s the only family I have.”

She sighed again. “Do you need a ride from the airport?”

With all the sighs, it made him wonder what she thought of him. Or did she even think of him at all anymore? “No, thanks. I’ll rent a car.”

He closed his phone and clutched it in his palm. Lindsay Jones. Smart, beautiful, kind, funny. Since he’d avoided all the high school reunions, he hadn’t seen her in nearly fifteen years.

A thrill at seeing her surged through him, then immediately plummeted. He hated the thought of heading home to Magnolia, Georgia, for more than a quick weekend. It would mean facing the townspeople he had escaped right after graduation.

It would mean facing Lindsay, as well. The woman he’d been crazy about from the age of ten, with whom he’d fallen in love in high school.

The woman he’d held hands with around The Forever Tree. And had thought he was destined to marry.

Lindsay knew it was all her fault. She was doubting her abilities as a caregiver.

Granny Bea, her eighty-three-year-old employer, had suffered a concussion and a broken wrist. All because Lindsay had tried to do one more favor for her brother. Had tried to squeeze in one last errand.

Now Granny Bea lay in the hospital, her face contorted in pain. Probably wishing she’d never fired the previous certified caregiver.

And worse, Lindsay’d had to call…him….

Shame on me for thinking the call is worse. What’s worse is Granny Bea’s injury.

Lindsay tiptoed into the room. “Granny Bea?”

“Oh, Lindsay, dear, I hate that I went and messed up our workday. I guess I scared you to death.”

"It's all my fault for being late."

"Oh, pish-posh. I was too lazy to go down the steps and leaned too far off the porch."

"How do you feel?"

"I've felt better." She gave a weak laugh. "My wrist hurts worse than anything."

Lindsay steeled herself to tell Granny Bea the good news. "Well, I have a surprise that will perk you up. Bill's coming to check on you."

Bill Wellington, a brilliant physics professor and researcher. Lindsay's former friend.

Granny Bea looked distressed. "Oh, Lindsay. He'll miss his classes."

"I had to let him know."

She pressed a palm to her forehead. "You're right, of course. It'll be wonderful to see him. Thank you, dear."

"Just doing my job." She smiled at Granny Bea as she adjusted the blanket.

Lindsay's best friend Donna Rae rushed into the hospital room. "Are you okay, Bea?"

"Oh, hi, Donna Rae. How'd you get word about my silly fall so fast?"

"Gertie down in the E.R. called Vinny's mom. And she called me. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I wish you all would quit fussing over me."

Lindsay caught her friend's attention, then nodded toward the hallway. "We'll be back in a minute, Granny Bea."

Once outside the room, Lindsay said, "I contacted Bill. He'll be here ASAP."

Donna Rae's face lit up. "So God's at work."

"What?"

"Oh, never mind." With an impish grin, Donna Rae rubbed her hands together. "Maybe something good will come of the accident. Bill will come to town, and you two will finally be together."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"The Forever Tree."

Lindsay groaned. The Forever Tree was a huge, old pecan tree that stood proudly in the park downtown. Donna Rae believed in the town legend that a couple that held hands around the tree would be together forever. Well, just because Donna Rae and her husband were blissfully happy didn't mean it worked. After all, Lindsay held Bill's hands around it, and look how that turned out. "Forget the stupid legend. I'm worried about seeing Bill."

"When was the last time you two talked to each other?"

"We haven't. Not since he deserted me."

Donna Rae rolled her eyes. "He didn't desert you. He went off to college."

"And never once called. Never answered my letter. Never visited."

"And you haven't even talked since Bea hired you?"

"There's never been the need. Until now."

"Well, I'm excited. You're destined to be together."

Lindsay leaned back and thunked her head against the wall. Her friend was way off base. "We were never more than friends, but the thought of seeing him again scares me."

Donna Rae gave a deep, throaty laugh.

"Don't laugh at me. I'm nervous. And just you watch. I'll end up with a migraine before it's all over."

"It'll be fine. I'm sure he'll be glad to see you again."

Yeah, right. He'd missed her friendship so much that he'd ignored her for the last fifteen years. They'd been the best of friends. Or so she thought. But two days after graduation, he'd left town. Just disappeared without so much as a goodbye.

Apparently their friendship meant nothing to him. And that still hurt. She would have to steel herself for his arrival.

That evening, Lindsay watched Granny Bea try to grip a fork and scoop a bite of green beans into her mouth with her right wrist enclosed in a spanking-new cast. The cast was brilliant white except for Lindsay's and Donna Rae's signatures scrawled in a circular pattern around the wrist area like a pair of bracelets.

A couple of the beans fell down the front of Granny Bea's hospital gown.

"Here, I'll help you," Lindsay said.

"I might as well learn to do it on my own. I'll have the thing for weeks."

"I can help today. You're sore and tired."

Granny Bea harrumphed, but leaned back against her pillow, relenting. "I hate being laid up. What about the community center?"

"Mr. Kennedy and the others covered for us today. You'll be able to go back to work in a couple of days, looking like one of the kids." She smiled at the woman she took care of who was also her friend and coworker. "I know you'll impress Dylan."

"Yes. I'll have to tell him I fell out of a tree or something a bit exciting."

"Mr. Kennedy will sure want to fuss over you."

"Oh, don't even mention his name or you'll get my ire up."

"He's been crazy about you for two years. You should see him mope when you're not at the center."

Granny Bea shook her casted arm. "That man is too young for me. If he hovers, I'll bop him in the head with this thing."

"Granny Bea has a boyfriend," Lindsay sang.

"I may have to test it out on your head first."

Lindsay laughed, then scooped up a bite of beans, held it out to Granny Bea, and watched as she ate it.

A man cleared his throat in the doorway, then rapped on the door. "Granny?"

She'd know that voice anywhere. Had she really thought she could prepare for this moment?

She was afraid to turn around. Afraid of the hurt that might still show on her face even after so many years.

"Bill, honey, you're here!" Granny Bea called. "Come in."

Lindsay pasted a half-smile on her face, then swiveled around to see him.

Oh, my. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. She absolutely could not believe this was Bill Wellington. Tall, skinny, nerdy, bookworm Bill had been transformed during his years away.

Tall. Yes, he was still tall. But that's where the similarities ended. He had filled out. And had turned into an attractive man. How could that have happened?

He hurried to his granny's side, then hugged her. "How are you feeling?" He was so careful, so concerned, that it gave Lindsay's heartstrings a big, ol' yank.

"I'm fine, son."

He looked up from Granny Bea and smiled in Lindsay's direction. "Hi, Lindsay."

After several seconds of staring at this near stranger, she realized she hadn't acknowledged his greeting. "Oh, hi. Good to see you again. Wow. You're all grown-up." Way to go, Lindsay. Stating the obvious.

"Yes, fifteen years have a way of doing that. But you look exactly the same. I would have recognized you anywhere."

And she couldn't have picked him out of a police lineup if her life depended on it. His dark brown, shaggy hair was now short and layered and looked as if it had lightened in the sun. His gaunt, pale face was now tanned, angular, masculine. And his beanpole body was now muscle-bound.

"Broken wrist, huh?" He touched Granny Bea's cast. Then he craned his neck, trying to read the signatures. Once he completed reading the circle of permanent marker, he smiled at Lindsay.

Her traitorous heart galloped underneath her rib cage. Stop it! I will not let my heart race over this man. This supposed friend.

"Lindsay, I appreciate you bringing her to the hospital. I'm sure you're worn out. I'll stay with her tonight."

She bristled. He'd marched in and was going to try to take over Granny Bea's care.

He's her grandson. He has every right to.

Still, it made her mad that he lived his life way up there in Boston and barely ever spent time with his granny.

"I can stay," she said. "I imagine you're tired from traveling."

"I dozed a little on the flight. Go on home. I'll call you if she needs anything."

"He's right, dear. You've been here all day."

What could she do? "Okay. I'll come back tomorrow morning with some fresh clothes for her."

"Thanks." He started to hold out a hand, as if he were going to shake her hand, but then the gesture ended up as a little wave. A somewhat dorky wave, more like the Bill she remembered.

She was comforted by the fact that he was still Bill. Yet that little wave reminded her of the friend she'd lost.

Bill wasn't sure he'd be able to catch his breath until Lindsay was gone. He had to get a grip or she might think she needed to rush him down to the E.R.

Her eyes were still as violet-blue, her hair as deep red, thick and smooth as it had been when she was eighteen.

He was a complete sap. A thirty-three-year-old acting like a lovesick teenager.

He walked to the other side of Granny's bed, putting distance between him and Lindsay. She's only a woman like any other. Nothing special. Just happens to have been blessed with gorgeous eyes and hair. And just happens to be the girl I fell in love with ages ago.

"Well, Granny Bea, I'll see you bright and early." Lindsay kissed Granny's head. "Make Bill take good care of you."

"Thanks for everything, dear. Get some rest, and we'll see you tomorrow."

Lindsay smiled fondly at Granny, which didn't help his composure a bit. She stepped toward the door. "Good night." She made brief eye contact with Bill, but then turned and left.

"So you fell off the porch while taking out the trash?" he asked.

She huffed. "Yes. Silly on my part."

"I thought you hired Lindsay to help with that."

"I did. But she was running late this morning—had to get the boys at the last minute."

"The boys?"

"Her nephews. Her brother Gregory is divorced and has sole custody. Lindsay's like a mother to his boys and keeps them a good bit. She was about to take them to day care this morning, then she and I were going to go to work."

"Work?"

"At the community center. They hired her as director, and I'm working as her assistant."

"You mean you're volunteering?"

"At first I was. Now I'm hired." She grinned, and looked so proud. "My first job outside the home—at age eighty-three."

His granny working? But her home was her life. She'd always been there for him and his brother Drake after his parents died, moving them in with her—cooking, cleaning, helping with homework, chauffeuring them to lessons and Drake to sports practices.

"Why would you get a job now? You don't need the money."

"That's a silly question. I love it! It gives me a reason to get out of bed each day."

Had Granny been depressed? Had she been lonely? "You won't be able to work with that cast."

"Oh, I don't think this'll stop me."

"Well, I want to talk with the doctor tomorrow. There's always the concussion to consider."

She waved away his concerns. "You should go to the house for the night, son. Don't try to sleep here."

He looked around the room and spotted a chair. "I bet that folds out into a recliner. I'll be fine here."

She smiled at him, and her lower lip quivered. "I'm so happy to see you, baby. It's nice to have you home. Even if I had to break my arm to get you here." She patted his cheek. "I'm teasing."

It was the truth, though. He'd been away for too long. And whenever he did visit, it was a brief thirty-six-hour stay. He usually flew in on a Friday night, spent Saturday at Granny's, maybe took her out to eat in Athens, then flew out early Sunday morning. He tried to avoid the townspeople. He had never fit in here.

Maybe he should hang around for a couple of days. To make sure she would be okay with her right arm out of commission. But if she could fall off her own porch doing something as simple as carrying out the trash, he suspected she might be getting too feeble to live alone. "I'm glad to be home. I'd like to stay until I make sure you're okay on your own."

"Oh, good. We'll break out of this joint tomorrow and have a nice time together. You, me and Lindsay."

Lindsay? Why would she say that? Sure, they worked together some. But Granny wouldn't need her while he was there.

A nurse stuck her head in the door as she knocked. "Mrs. Wellington, how about getting up before my shift's over? I imagine you're ready to go to sleep for a little while." She looked at Bill. "And if you're staying, we'll get your chair fixed up with a blanket and pillow."

"Thanks."

As the nurse helped Granny out of bed, Bill excused himself to wait in the hallway. But before he left, he noticed what a hard time they had getting Granny out of bed, then how slowly she moved. She'd definitely aged a lot since the last time he'd been home. And a broken wrist would make getting around even harder.

He had to wonder how much longer she'd be able to live on her own. He would watch her closely the next few days.

You, me and Lindsay.

Chapter Two

Bill helped Granny in the front door of her house. She seemed worn out from the short trip home from the hospital, and leaned heavily on his arm.

"Help me into my chair. I think I'll rest a bit."

The sight of her recliner caused a pang in his gut. So many memories of sitting with her in that chair, her rocking him when he was young, then sharing the chair side-by-side, squeezed in together, when he thought he was too old for rocking.

He closed his eyes and let the familiar smells wash over him. Home. At least it was home as far as he could remember. Though he had memories of his mom and dad, they had always traveled extensively, so Granny had been the stability in his life.

Lindsay, who'd insisted on following them home, slipped in the front door, put a blanket over Granny's lap, then pulled a TV tray in front of her. Once she'd turned on the television, she put the remote on the table. "Here you go. Have a nice nap."

He motioned to her to join him in the kitchen. "You know, Lindsay, while I'm here, Granny won't really need your help."

"And how long do you plan to stay this time? Ten minutes?"

Obviously, she hadn't forgiven him for leaving town after high school. Or maybe he was reading too much into her anger. Maybe she just thought she needed to protect Granny. "I know I'm not here often, but I do love my grandmother."

"Where were you when she had the flu last winter or when someone tried to break into her house one night? I'm the one who helped her then. And I'm the one who was here to keep her from giving out her credit card number in a phone scam."

She sounded hurt that he had tried to exclude her. "I'm sorry. I just thought you might enjoy a little time off." Plus, I'm not sure I can be around you every day.

She slumped into a chair at the table. "No. I'm sorry for jumping down your throat. I'm worried about her and don't want to be shut out while she's recovering."

"That's fine. I'm sure I can use your help."

"Thank you." She stood and reached for the back door. "Well, I guess I need to go check out back. I think we left a mess of trash after her fall."

While Lindsay was outside, the seriousness of Granny's situation hit Bill. She'd been ill with the flu. And had had someone try to break in and someone else try to rip her off. She was old and vulnerable. Probably needed someone with her around the clock.

Maybe the fall would turn out to be for the good. It helped him face what he'd always known —at some point he and Granny would reverse roles, and he would become the caregiver.

The time had come for him to move Granny to live with him.

He took a deep breath. When he blew it out, he felt lighter, happier. It would be nice to have Granny nearby. Nice to have a family.

When Lindsay came in from tidying up the backyard, Bill blindsided her with the most ridiculous request. "Are you crazy?" she asked.

He stepped back as if she'd breathed fire on him. If only she could.

"I'm simply asking for your help," he said.

"No. There's your answer. I won't help you tell your poor granny that she has to quit her new job, sell her beloved home, leave all her lifelong friends, and move up where it snows all the time."

"It doesn't snow all the time."

Of course. Mr. Brain missed the point entirely. “Your grandmother does fine on her own. Whatever feebleness you thought you saw was due to her fall. She’s probably bruised, sore. And for your information, the flu and scam artists hang out in Boston, too.”

“So I’m assuming I can’t count on you to help me break the news?”

She gave him a look that said get a clue.

He turned and went toward the living room. Lindsay wanted to escape. She couldn’t stand having to witness what he was about to do. But maybe she and Granny could change his mind.

She followed him, but paused before entering, listening.

Bill mumbled soft words she couldn’t decipher.

Granny laughed. Cackled, actually. “I’m not getting feeble, son. I just took a fall. And look, I didn’t break. Well, except for the wrist.”

As Lindsay walked in, Bill said, “You’re getting to an age where you may need some help.”

“Lindsay gives me all the help I need. Which is mainly a ride around town. I’m not driving much anymore.”

Lindsay took her place beside Granny Bea. “She’s insisted on keeping her license and car, but I don’t let her drive. So don’t worry about that.”

“It’s for an emergency,” Granny Bea added.

Bill looked from Granny Bea to her, then back. “I’ve been thinking about this move off and on for a few years. At one time, I even checked out an adult day-care facility near my office. You would have activities during the day, then I would be home with you at night.”

“I have plenty of activities here. Lindsay and I coordinate trips for the seniors’ group at church. And we work three days a week at the community center—all those precious, needy kids, plus a few old codgers who are lonely and come to volunteer. They keep me young. I couldn’t give that up.”

“Well, looks like that’s two votes against one.” Lindsay held up two fingers on one hand and one finger on the other. “I guess Granny Bea will be staying here.”

Apparently, Bill didn’t appreciate her scorekeeping. He didn’t crack a smile, and she could practically see the cogs working in his mind.

He could think all he wanted. She wasn’t budging.

As Granny began to nod off, Bill walked through the house, noting the condition of each room. Carpet needed replacing. When they’d driven up, he’d noticed the roof was on its last leg.

They had a good bit of work ahead of them if they were going to sell the house. Not to mention the accumulation of belongings from over fifty years in the house.

Lindsay followed him through the rooms, watching his every move. “What are you doing?” she finally asked.

“I’m certain Granny will come around to the idea of moving in with me. I’m noting repairs that need to be done before putting the house on the market.”

“Your grandmother is fine. Give her time to recover before you make any drastic decisions.”

“It’s not just the fall. She’s vulnerable here all alone.”

“Just promise me you won’t make a knee-jerk decision.”

“I never do that.”

She nodded. She knew he took a scientific approach to life. At least he used to. “Well, I guess I’ll go throw something together for dinner.”

“You don’t have to do that. I can take over from here.”

“Cooking her meals is part of my job.”

Three times he’d hired someone to help Granny, and she’d fired every one of them. And now she’d hired Lindsay herself. “Okay. Well, let me know if you need any help.”

She eyed him warily. “You can cook?”

He smiled. “According to my coworkers, I’m a great cook. Granny taught me.”

"Hmm. I'll holler if I need you." She headed toward the kitchen with one quick glance over her shoulder. As if she didn't trust him.

It was no wonder she didn't trust him. Cooking. Or otherwise. He'd left town fifteen years ago without any warning.

But he'd been crazy about her. He'd been her lab partner and study partner for years, while silently wishing for more. Then during their senior year, despite the fact that she was dating Joey Peck, he'd decided it was time to tell her how he felt about her.

He'd resisted all along because he was such a joke at school. He was sure she wouldn't even consider dating the school's number-one geek. But as graduation approached, he sensed a new relationship forming. She seemed more confident, more sure of who she was and where she was going.

And maybe it had been wishful thinking, but he thought he'd detected a flash of attraction one night while they studied for finals side by side on Granny's porch swing.

So he'd gone out and bought her an angel figurine for her collection. It had a plaque that said I Love You. His hands had shaken as he paid for it, then wrapped it up. He'd sent Granny and his brother to the movie that night, and invited Lindsay over. He waited in the swing with the wrapped gift.

She'd shown up squealing, flashing a microscopic diamond on her left ring finger. The thing seemed to wink at him when the stone caught the rays of the setting sun and flashed with each movement as she snatched up the gift, then tore off the wrapping paper.

When she first saw the angel, she froze in place.

He'd sat silently. In shock. Grieving. Mortified.

Then she'd smiled at him, but he could see the question in her eyes.

Because he couldn't stand for her to know the truth, he told her she was the best friend a guy could ever have.

She'd shown relief, then had chatted about the wedding plans over dinner.

It was the longest night of his life.

The next day he loaded his car to the roof and informed Granny he was going to move to Boston early. He left and never looked back. He couldn't bear to do otherwise.

He shook his head and himself back to the present. No, Lindsay probably shouldn't trust him. He'd told her she was important to him then abandoned her. He'd taken the cowardly way out when he'd left town. And he'd felt terrible about not answering her phone call and letter. But he'd gone into self-protect mode. He'd had to.

Now he was back in Magnolia and had already upset her. No wonder she looked at him askance.

Once he'd unpacked, Bill found Granny snoozing in her chair in front of the blaring TV. He turned the volume down, and as he did so, she stirred.

"Wh—what's wrong?" she asked groggily.

He couldn't help but laugh. She'd slept through the cacophony of the evening news, but woke when the room got quiet.

"It's me, Granny."

"Oh, Bill, honey, I'm so glad you're still here." She lurched forward a couple of times trying to stand, but couldn't get out of her chair. He took her arm and helped pull her up, then hugged her, relishing the familiar fragrance of her hair and her face powder.

He held her away from him to get a good look. "How are your head and arm feeling?"

"Both fine. No pain at all."

"Good. Lindsay's making dinner. Are you hungry?"

"Starving."

"So, how many days a week does she come?"

"She stays with me on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the days we're not working at the community center. Plus, she's always checked on me on the weekends anyway."

"I'm glad you've had someone to take care of you. But I think we really do need to talk about moving you to Boston."

She looked around the room and appeared to retreat to her own world. A smile lit her face. "I won't ever be ready to leave this place, son, even though I do realize sometimes we have to do things we don't want to do. Of course, it's not time yet. I'll let you know when it is."

"I'm sorry, Granny. With the fall and all, and the fact that you've already needed Lindsay's help, I think it may be time now."

With eyebrows drawn together, she tilted her head back to look him in the eye. "Could you ever see yourself moving here to live?"

He'd like to spare her feelings, but had to be honest. "No. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. You have your life, and I wouldn't try to drag you back here if you didn't want it."

"You know it's not that I wouldn't want to be with you."

"I know, dear. But I hate that you never felt at home in Magnolia."

Granny had tried so hard to make them happy, but neither he nor Drake had ever adjusted very well after they'd come to live with her. "Yeah. I'm sorry."

"Excuse me," Lindsay said from the doorway. "Dinner is ready."

"We'll be right there, dear. Can you stay?"

"I can't today." She looked at Bill. "I usually cook for my dad and brother's family."

"Gregory?"

"Yes. He and his two children live across the street from Dad."

"What about Richard?" Bill suspected Lindsay's other brother no longer lived in Magnolia.

"He manages a hotel in Atlanta."

"I'm sorry to hear about Gregory's divorce."

She snapped a dish towel and folded it somewhat violently. "It was a bad scene. She deserted them all. For a rich lawyer in Atlanta."

"That girl was trouble from the start," Granny said.

"What she did to those babies is criminal," Lindsay said, her face red in anger. "I'll go put the bread in the oven." She left the room quickly.

Granny sighed. "Lindsay suffered terrible migraines through the whole ordeal. But Hunter and Chase have suffered the most. Not to mention poor Gregory."

"Maybe he'll find the right woman next time." But how could he be sure? How could anyone be sure? "Shall we go eat?" he asked Granny, holding out his arm for her.

"I'd love to, kind sir." She winked at him, and his heart swelled. It would be so nice to have her live with him. He'd missed her.

As Granny Bea and Bill walked into the kitchen, Lindsay flinched, thinking he would hit his head on the door frame. Luckily, the older house had taller ceilings. And it seemed he ducked out of habit even if he didn't need to.

"How tall are you now, anyway?" she asked before she thought about it.

"Six-foot-six-and-a-half."

"You weren't that tall in high school."

"No. I grew a few inches in college, and put on about fifty pounds over the years."

She didn't doubt it. He had been way too skinny in high school. And now he was…well…just right.

Refusing to think about how handsome he was, she set about putting the food on the table. "Y'all have a seat."

"May I help?" he offered.

"No, it's all ready." In her experience, anytime a man tried to help in the kitchen, it ended in disaster.

Once she had everything on the table, Granny Bea reached for her hand. "Stay for a few minutes, dear. Sit and talk with us."

She never could turn Granny Bea down. "Okay. For a minute." Before she could sit in the chair next to Granny Bea, Bill jumped up and pulled it out for her.

She hesitated, then laughed. "Sorry. Growing up with two brothers makes me a little nervous when my chair is pulled out for me."

He nodded. "Ah, the old yank-the-chair-out-from-under-you trick. I had that happen to me in school many times."

She was sorry she had brought it up when she noticed the haunted look on his face. Kids in Magnolia had been awful to him.

He nicely pushed her chair in for her. "Thank you." A small, gentlemanly gesture, but very nice for a woman who never had time for dating anymore.

"Can you ladies help me make a list of the repairs that need to be made around here? When I came in, I noticed the roof is in bad shape."

Lindsay knew his interest wasn't because he cared about the condition of the house. He was already moving on with his plan to sell it. "Nothing's urgent. Maybe you can get the roof done on this visit and save the rest for another time."

"The carpet in the bedrooms is shot," Granny Bea said. "I've even had Lindsay take me to look at some samples, but couldn't decide what to do."

Granny Bea didn't get it. She thought he was interested in helping her. Helping move her out the door was more like it.

Bill looked from one of them to the other. "We'll have to get right on it. I'll make some calls tomorrow."

"He's going to be here a few days, Lindsay," Granny Bea said, then patted his hand. "You did say you can stay a few days, Bill?"

"Yes. But I need to check in with my office first."

So they had a few days to change his mind. Once he saw Granny get back to normal, he would have to back down.

Lindsay ran her fingernail in a groove scratched into the table's finish. "So, Dr. Wellington. I hear you're teaching physics at the university. Very impressive."

He waved off the compliment as if embarrassed. "Not nearly as glamorous as it sounds."

"And doing research, too?"

"Yes, particle physics. We've been doing neutrino oscillation studies, and we've also begun work trying to come up with ways to detect dark matter. In fact, I've applied for a grant. I hope to hear something soon."

"Good luck on the grant. Sounds interesting."

"Yes, it's—" His golden-brown eyes sparkled. "Never mind. I would tell you more, but you would probably want to go jump off a bridge. I have that effect on people."

She smiled at his self-deprecating humor. The guy was truly sweet. She'd managed to forget that fact over the years. Her stomach fluttered, and she couldn't pull her gaze away from his. She wanted to ask him what physical principle made him so hypnotic.

She jumped up from the table. "I would love to hear more later. But it's time to pick up the boys." She turned to Granny Bea. "I'll stop by to see how you're feeling in the morning." She waved as she hurried out.

She and Granny needed a plan. And they needed it fast. Tomorrow morning, they could put their heads together and strategize. With the two of them together, Bill wouldn't stand a chance.

The next morning, Lindsay rushed to move herself and her nephews out the door of Gregory's house so she could stop at Granny Bea's on the way to the center. Normally unflappable Lindsay was totally flapped. The boys always did that to her. At least until she got to the breaking point. Then the boys seemed to sense they were on her very last nerve and would back down.

She was within an inch of that point.

She jammed her hands on her hips. "If you don't behave, I won't take you to the movie this weekend."

They continued to chase each other around the coffee table, but glanced her way as if testing the waters. They were nervous.

"One. Two…"

They darted to opposite ends of the couch to find their shoes.

"Two and a half…"

"I'm weady!" Chase jumped up with his shoes on the wrong feet. "I beat Hunter. I win!"

"No you didn't. You got 'em backwards." Hunter smirked at his little brother. "So I win."

"…Three. Grab your book bags and head out the door right now." Lindsay pointed.

They weren't bad boys. They just needed a little firmness for a change. Her poor brother still couldn't get a handle on that fact. He was trying to make up for their mother deserting them. At four and five years old, all they knew was that they wanted someone to love them. Gregory loved them like crazy, but sometimes didn't know how to show it. He owned his own business and worked all the time to provide for his family.

She grabbed her purse and locked the door behind them. "Okay. March. To the car. I'll drop you at day care and your daddy will pick you up." She glanced at her watch. "I'll barely make it to Granny Bea's on time."

"I hate day care. Ith for babies," Chase said with his chubby four-year-old cheeks causing a slight lisp.

"You are a baby. So shut up," his brother said.

As Lindsay buckled them into their booster seats, she pointed at Hunter. "We don't say 'shut up' in this family. And if you aren't nice to each other—"

"You won't take us to the movie," Hunter finished for her. "We know."

The little sweethearts folded their hands in their laps and settled.

When they arrived at the Jolly-time Day Care Center, she hurried them inside and gave them a quick kiss.

Chase grabbed tightly around her neck and wouldn't let go. "I wuv you, Aunt Windsay."

She hugged him back, enjoying the smell of baby shampoo and little boy. "I love you, too, baby." He wiggled out of her clutches and ran off.

A pang of regret gave her heart a squeeze. Though she was usually content in her singlehood, there were times when she wished more than anything that she had a husband and kids of her own. But apparently, that wasn't in God's plan.

She was fine on her own, though. Plus, the boys needed her.

When she arrived at Granny Bea's house, she was relieved to find her sitting on the front porch swing. Time for a quick private talk.

"Good morning, Granny Bea."

"Mornin', dear. Have a seat and swing a bit."

"We need to form a plan," she whispered as she dropped into the swing, then looked around for evidence of Bill's presence.

"He's in the kitchen cooking breakfast," Granny Bea whispered back. "Why are we talking so quietly?"

"So he won't hear us figuring out how to get him to let you stay here."

"Aha. Well, I think I can get him to cooperate. Or else I'll turn him over my knee." She laughed.

Granny Bea didn't understand how serious Bill was. "He seems determined, so we have to fight. Plan A is we show him how involved you are at the community center."

"I think you're right. And we also show him how well you and I do together."

Lindsay sat up straighter, excited that this might actually work. "Yeah. We're a team. Then maybe he won't worry that you're alone."

"I'll drag him to every activity at the center so he'll see how important my position is."

Lindsay nodded. "See if you can manage coming in for a while today, if you feel up to it."

"I feel perfectly fine. And the doctor didn't say I had to limit my activity."

"Okay. We have a plan." She held out her hand to Granny Bea to shake on it. With the cast, they had to shake fingers.

Bill walked outside as they did so. "What's going on?"

"I just dropped by to check on Granny Bea." Lindsay hopped up. "I'm heading to the center now."

"How about some biscuits and bacon first?"

Mmm. Biscuits were her favorite, and she hadn't had time to eat while feeding Hunter and Chase. "Thanks, but I don't have time."

"They're world-famous biscuits. Well, Boston-famous anyway."

Lindsay raised an eyebrow.

"Campus-famous? I'm serious, though. They're the best, even if I do say so myself."

"Maybe another time." She waved as she walked toward her car, her stomach growling.

Bill probably had the mistaken notion that Granny Bea sat around her house all the time waiting for his visits, that she had no life of her own beyond him and Drake. He pictured her wasting away on her own—lonely, decrepit. Maybe if he saw evidence of Granny's vitality, he would get beyond his limited imaginings.

Maybe if Mr. Kennedy pursued Granny Bea more than ever, Bill would realize she had a life of her own. Besides, Mr. Kennedy was only seventy-four years old. A youngster who could take care of her if she ever needed help.

Lindsay practically rubbed her hands together in delight. She would speak to Granny Bea's suitor as soon as he arrived to volunteer that day. And he would be there. He hadn't missed a day since Granny Bea began working.

"Bill, honey, I need a ride to work today."

His grandmother hadn't been home from the hospital for a full twenty-four hours. "You should be recovering, Granny."

"My doctor didn't place any limitations on me, and other than the bother of the cast, I feel perfectly normal."

What could he do? Perhaps call on her maternal instincts? "How about staying home to visit with me today?"

"You're right. I don't want to miss the chance to visit with you. So you're coming with me." She grabbed her purse and headed out the front door. "Come on, son. I'm already late."

So much for spending the morning making phone calls about the house. He patted his pocket to make sure he had his cell phone. He could make calls from the community center.

As they drove toward the town square, he caught Granny staring at him. "What?"

"It's so nice to have you here. I'm tickled that everyone at the center will get to meet you. You'll be a good role model for the little ones."

"I still can't believe you're working there. How old are the kids?"

"Age three and up."

"Do Gregory's boys come?"

"No, they're in full-time day care. The three-and four-year-olds only come in the mornings. In the afternoons, we have the after-school children. And senior citizens from the church come in the morning to socialize and to serve as volunteers to help with the children."

He couldn't believe his Granny hadn't mentioned this. "Did you get started with the church group?"

"I'm actually the one who started the senior volunteer program. And I've applied for a grant to help fund a lunch program for the preschoolers."

As he pulled into a parking place, he gaped at his grandmother. "You're kidding."

"Maybe I should be offended," she said with a smile.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I'm truly impressed."

"Maybe we'll both receive our grants." She patted his cheek. "Now come help me out of the car."

He hurried around to open her door and give her a hand. Then she led the way inside. This new Granny was such a surprise. A nice surprise. Maybe he had Lindsay to thank for Granny's newfound happiness and fulfillment.

As soon as they walked in, a dapperly dressed elderly gentleman hurried over to them. "Bea! Oh, Bea, are you okay? I heard you broke your wrist." His face flamed red all the way to the top of his balding head.

She shooed at him as if he were a bothersome fly. "I'm perfectly fine, Mr. Kennedy." Then she brushed past him.

Bill choked back a chuckle. The poor guy. Reminded him of how he felt his freshman year of high school whenever he had tried to make conversation with Lindsay. He'd followed her around like a lost puppy dog waiting for her to notice him, and when she had, he'd invariably made dumb, nonsensical comments.

The woman herself was leaning over a child at a small table, pointing to something the child was drawing with a crayon. Her deep red hair that used to hang all the way down her back now swung just below her chin, curving toward her face. She pushed it behind her ear as she smiled at the child.

He inhaled deeply to try to catch his breath. How could she still affect him so? Maybe he and Mr. Kennedy had a bit more in common than he first thought.

He turned to the man, who seemed engrossed in Granny's every move. "Hi, Mr. Kennedy. I'm Bill Wellington, Bea's grandson."

"Oh, Bea talks about you all the time. You and your brother. I'm glad to finally meet you."

"She insisted on working today, even after being in the hospital yesterday."

"Stubborn woman. Believe me, I know."

Bill swiped his hand over his mouth to keep from laughing at the frustration in the man's voice. Then a sobering thought hit him. He would be taking Granny away from a man who obviously had a crush on her.

At least Granny didn't seem to care for Mr. Kennedy.

"Bill, come meet the children," Granny called from a low table across the room.

She introduced him to each child sitting around the table. One little boy seemed especially attached to Granny. He clung to her leg as she handed out papers.

"And this is Dylan. He's my helper today."

"I got to sign her cast," Dylan told him proudly.

"Oh, let me see." Bill checked out his scribbled name in purple marker. "Nice job."

Granny ruffled the boy's hair. "Dylan, why don't you sit down and work the puzzle with the rest of the children."

"Okay, Granny Bea." He slid into a small wooden chair and began to connect the dots on the page. His tongue hung out of the corner of his mouth as he concentrated.

Granny beamed at Bill. "This is what I look forward to three days a week."

Lindsay approached. “Granny Bea, now that the kids are busy, could you go ahead and start the bingo game for our adults?”

“Sure thing. Be back in a jiffy.” She hurried to the other side of the room, full of more energy than ever before.

“How long do the little ones stay?” he asked Lindsay.

“We feed them lunch, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches donated from our church right now. But your grandmother has applied for a federal grant for funding for a fuller meal.”

“She mentioned that. When do the older kids get here?”

“After school, around three o’clock. We feed them a snack, help with homework, then play educational games.”

“And the center is open three days a week?”

She reached over to pick up a crayon Dylan had dropped, then patted him on the back. “So far. We hope to move to five days a week in the next year or so. It was a small program we started as a ministry at the church one day a week, but we’re working with the county to get it fully funded. They’re already providing the building.”

“Impressive.”

“Your granny has had a lot to do with the success of the program. We really need her.” She stared at him as if in challenge. She appeared very determined.

So was he. “I understand.”

Granny walked up. “So, Bill, what do you think of our little community center?”

“It’s amazing what you’ve all done. Kudos to both of you.”

“Bea?” Mr. Kennedy tapped her on the shoulder.

She huffed as if irritated. “Yes?”

“Would you go out to dinner with me this evening?”

Granny slapped a hand to her chest. “Why, Mr. Kennedy, you can’t fraternize with the staff.”

“I didn’t ask you to fraternize. I only asked you to dinner.”

Obviously flustered, she sputtered, “I can’t do anything tonight. I have company.”

“Well, that’s the problem. I hear Bill may be moving you up to Boston, and I can’t bear to see you go.” He tugged on his bow tie, which left it slightly crooked.

Bill arched his brows at Lindsay. Seemed she’d been talking to Granny’s…not-quite-boyfriend.

“That’s none of your concern, sir.” Granny marched away and sat on a small chair at the table with the children.

A dejected Mr. Kennedy left the center.

“Nice try, Lindsay.”

“What do you mean?”

“If moving Granny to Boston is best for her, then that’s what I need to do. You can’t try to sway my decision by manipulating a poor old man who has a crush on her.”

She made no comment, but her face reddened. With her creamy, clear complexion, even the slightest blush had always sent streaks of red along her cheeks and down her neck. If the embarrassment or nervousness continued, she’d end up with hives on her neck and chest.

Never mind her scheming. He had work to do. “I’m going back to Granny’s to make some calls. You know, if Granny’s well enough to work, then she won’t need you helping her as much while I’m here. Why don’t you take tomorrow off?”

“I don’t mind coming—we have our routine, you know.”

“Enjoy a paid day off. Granny and I could use some time together.”

She frowned. “But she doesn’t pay me for weekends. I like to visit.”

That made it a little more difficult to keep her away. And truly, it wasn’t as if he didn’t want her around. He just didn’t want her meddling. “No, I insist you take a break from the extra responsibility. Rest. Get caught up at home.”

“Okay. I can take a hint.”

His own face burned, probably as red as hers. “What time this afternoon should I come back to pick up Granny?”

“I can bring her home when we leave at six.”

“She works the whole day?”

“It’s only three days a week. And she gets a break between one and three o’clock.”

“Does she go home to rest?”

“No, she usually hangs out here with me.”

“Helping you work?”

“You know, you should probably talk to your grandmother about her work schedule. I need to get back to the kids.” She walked away in a huff.

Of course, he had been somewhat accusatory. But he needed to make sure Lindsay wasn’t overworking Granny.

Past experience told him Lindsay wouldn’t do that. But he couldn’t let ancient memories sway decisions he needed to make in the present.

Chapter Three

The next morning, Lindsay reflected on how she had nearly messed up by pushing Mr. Kennedy on Granny Bea. The poor man hadn't felt comfortable asking Bea out yet, so Lindsay had pretty much begged him to. Now Bill was on to them. She'd have to be more subtle.

So, she would do what Bill had insisted she do. She would stay away. Only for today, though.

She cleaned an already clean house. Washed two small loads of laundry. Ate frozen waffles heated in the toaster. Sipped a cup of coffee. Read the newspaper and clipped coupons. Watered the front-porch flowerpots full of begonias and impatiens. Swept dirt off the sidewalk.

And the clock on the mantel said ten o'clock.

A.m.

How would she spend a whole day without visiting Granny Bea or without taking care of Hunter and Chase? There weren't any activities at church that day. Her dad was working in his yard.

Maybe she could visit Donna Rae. See if she could help her around the house for a while. She must have a ton of work to do with that houseful of kids.

She pulled a pound cake out of the freezer to take to them. She always made two so she'd have an extra on hand to give away. Today seemed like a good occasion.

When she arrived, Vinny's car was gone. But he usually showed houses on Saturday, so she wasn't surprised.

She walked in the front door without knocking. They hadn't knocked on each other's doors for twenty years, if ever. "Hello."

"In here," Donna Rae called from the kitchen. She was elbow-deep in dishwashing suds. "Oh, hey, Lindsay. What brings you by?"

"I come bearing sweets." She set the cake on the counter.

"Oh, I hope it's a chocolate pound cake."

"Not chocolate. Sour cream."

"Yummy. I've been craving chocolate, though." She bit her lip and wouldn't look at Lindsay.

No way. "You're kidding, aren't you? A late April Fools' Day joke?"

"April Fools' was a month ago."

"So you're not kidding. You're pregnant? Again?"

She smiled a radiant smile. "Yes, number five, and I'm thrilled. So don't look so shocked and disappointed."

She held up her hands in surrender. "Hey, I'm happy if you're happy. That's all that matters." She hugged her friend and tried to be genuinely happy. But sometimes she battled the green-eyed monster.

"Don't tell anyone yet. We want to wait a few more weeks, then tell our family."

"Okay. Are you sick yet?"

"No. And maybe, God willing, I won't be this time."

Lindsay practically snorted. "Yeah, right."

"On to better subjects. Has Bill asked you out yet?"

She did snort a laugh that time. "Are you kidding? He arrived, spent about five minutes with Granny Bea, then decided that she needs to move up there to live with him."

"Well, you've always said he needs to be thinking more about taking care of her."

"I meant for him to move home to do so."

"Can you blame the guy? He has this illustrious career up there. Why would he move back to Magnolia?"

"You have a point. I guess he'll have to trust us to watch over her."

Donna Rae looked away as she slowly dried her hands on a dish towel. “You could help him take care of her. Up there in Boston—one of the places you’ve always wanted to visit, if you recall.”

“Don’t tell me you have pregnancy mush-brain already. This is a record. It’s hitting in the first trimester.”

Donna Rae turned and grabbed Lindsay’s hands, serious all of a sudden. “I have a feeling about this. I’ve always had a strong sense that you two were meant for each other.”

Scary, because whenever Donna Rae had strong “senses,” she was almost always right. Maybe it came from being such a prayer warrior—always in close contact with God. “Why didn’t you ever mention it before?”

“I didn’t want to say anything before it was God’s timing for you two. But ever since you said his name yesterday, I’ve had chills up my back when I think of it.”

“Well, stop it. Your ideas about The Forever Tree and this chill-bump thing, they’re worrying me. Because there’s no way I could ever move up there. I can’t leave Chase and Hunter. They need me.”

Donna Rae sighed, then shook her head. “I know. I guess God will figure it all out if it’s in His plan.”

Plan, my foot. The only important plan at the moment was the one that would keep Granny Bea in Magnolia. “Come on. Let’s go find something to do.”

Donna Rae cackled. “Find something to do?” She snatched a piece of paper from under a magnet on her refrigerator door. “Here’s my ‘Honey Do List.’ Go for it.”

Lindsay took the mile-long list and decided to number the items to prioritize them. When she finished, number one on the list was fix the dripping showerhead in kids’ bathroom. She’d done that at her own house, so she headed outside to Vinny’s workshop to see if he had the right tools. As she tromped back through the kitchen toward the stairs, Donna Rae hollered, “Thanks, honey!”

Cute. Real cute. But at least she had something to occupy her for a few hours.

Bill wanted to throttle Granny. He was beginning to think he’d been totally mistaken. The woman was obviously capable of ordering him around as she went about her daily housework. Maybe she was okay on her own after all.

He glanced at the hastily scrawled directions Granny had given him. He pulled into Donna Rae’s driveway, and Lindsay sat on the front steps, looking perturbed. She didn’t seem any happier once she climbed in his car.

“I’m sorry Granny interrupted what you were doing.”

“It’s okay. I was only helping Donna Rae around the house—doing a little plumbing work. The next item on the list was dusting the ceiling fans, so I guess I should thank you.”

He tried not to smile at the vision of her under a sink with a wrench. “Granny was insistent that you help me pick out the carpet. I guess she doesn’t trust my judgment.”

“We’ve looked at samples before, so she knows I have an idea of what she likes.”

“I called and tried to arrange a day for Arnie’s Carpets to come. They weren’t very helpful. Didn’t have anything open until two weeks out. As it is, I’m afraid I’ll be here a week.”

He thought Lindsay grinned, but then she turned toward the car window as she spoke. “I imagine Molly made the appointment. She might be able to work you in sooner if I’m with you today.”

“No favors for outsiders, huh?”

“You know small towns.”

Boy, did he. That was the reason he’d stayed in Boston. “I told Granny I’d rather call someone in Athens, but she wouldn’t hear of it. She’ll only do business here in town. Said Arnie has done her carpet for thirty years.”

“Your Granny is definitely loyal.” She pointed. “There it is. Pull in the parking lot on the left.”

They parked, then walked in the store. A little bell jingled to announce their presence.

"I'll be right with you," called the voice he'd heard earlier on the phone.

"Why don't you let me talk to Molly. She's in my quilting group," Lindsay said.

He didn't want her thinking he was still a helpless nerd. "I can do this on my own, Lindsay."

She shook her head.

"But thanks, anyway."

She held her hand out as if offering him the store. "Fine. Do it your way." She meandered to nearby sample books and started to flip through one.

A moment later, an attractive young woman came from the back. "Hi. Can I help you?"

"My name's Bill Wellington. I called earlier."

"The man from over in Windy Hollow?"

"No, I'm from Boston."

"Boston, Georgia? Is there such a place?"

"No, ma'am. Boston, Massachusetts."

"Ah," she said as if solving a mystery. "You didn't mention that earlier."

"I'm here to pick out some carpet for my grandmother. We scheduled an appointment for a couple of weeks out, but I was hoping we could get it installed sooner."

Her face screwed up as if she was confused. "So it's for your grandmother?"

"Yes. She lives here in Magnolia. On Main Street. Her name is Bea Wellington."

"Well, why didn't you say so sooner? Arnie can probably get out there late next week for her."

"Thank you." But it grated on him that an outsider could have such a hard time getting service.

She pointed to the showroom. "Take a look and let me know if you have any questions."

A few minutes later, as he and Lindsay searched the many books, Molly reappeared. "Oh, hi, Lindsay. When did you get here?"

"I came in with Bill. We're old friends."

"Hey, I saw you dropping off Hunter and Chase the other morning. They've grown so much and look so much like their daddy—all handsome and cute." She practically twittered.

It appeared she was very interested in Lindsay's brother.

"Yes, they're sweet boys. And they're like my own now."

Molly's smile dimmed a bit. He detected some animosity, at least from Lindsay's side.

"I think I've found some carpet that will work nicely." He pointed to a commercial grade, low-pile carpet in a neutral color. "It's inexpensive since we'll be selling Granny's house."

Molly gasped. "She's selling her house? No way."

"No way is right," Lindsay said. "She'll sell someday, of course. But I'd rather her buy something nice for now. Something she can enjoy in her old age." She glared a final warning at him as she flipped open a sample book and pointed to a plush carpet in a pale shade of green—Granny's favorite color.

"Fine. We'll compromise. Molly, we'll have the plush carpet but in a neutral beige color that will sell well." He pointed to a color in Lindsay's book called Wheat.

For a second, he thought he saw tears in Lindsay's eyes. But it had to have been the lighting, because the next time she glared at him, they were gone.

Molly looked from him, to Lindsay, then back to him. Apparently, she decided he was the decision maker in the situation, because she wrote up the order. He checked to make sure she'd written Wheat instead of Thicket. She had. But she didn't look comfortable doing it.

"Okay. We have you set for next Thursday for the carpet installation. Someone will be out to measure on Monday."

"Thank you," he said.

The clerk looked to Lindsay. "I'm sorry about the green, Lindsay."

"It's not your fault, Molly." She walked out the door of the store.

He found her outside in his rental car. He opened his mouth and nearly said he was sorry, but then forced it shut. He felt awful, though.

He really did need to get over the guilt of leaving Lindsay so long ago. He couldn't allow it to color his decisions.

No, he wouldn't apologize. She had no right to keep interfering. Granny was his family, after all.

As he turned the car toward Donna Rae's house, he remembered Granny's orders. He sighed.

"What's wrong?"

"Granny gave me strict instructions to take you out for lunch."

"No, thanks. I have leftovers at home."

"She'll fuss at me."

"She would, wouldn't she?" She laughed. "Well, why don't we stop and pick up something from Minnie's to take home for all of us to eat."

"Minnie's still in business?" Minnie's Meat and Three. It had become his favorite restaurant once he hit a growth spurt in eighth grade and couldn't ever seem to eat enough. The growth spurt continued all the way through high school.

"She's still open. I'm sure she'd love to see you."

He hadn't had Minnie's fried chicken in fifteen years. And he'd like to see her, too. "Good idea. My mouth's watering just thinking about the chicken."

As they walked in the restaurant, there was a perceptible hush, a lull in the conversation.

Lindsay realized that most people, even if they knew who he was, wouldn't recognize him. Some wouldn't even remember him.

He was so smart and good-looking. She couldn't help but wonder why he'd never married. Maybe he'd never found someone to share his passion for physics. He'd loved the subject from the time he was old enough to read—in kindergarten, according to Granny Bea. When he'd moved to town the summer after fourth grade, Lindsay often found him outside, perched in the mimosa tree, reading thick nonfiction books about atomic particles that he'd checked out from the library.

He touched her elbow and guided her to a table, acting as if they weren't the center of attention. She was afraid their appearance together might become a topic for gossip.

When they sat, he whispered, "I can't believe I decided to come here. Too many people. All staring."

"Many probably don't recognize you. They'll assume I've got a boyfriend from out of town."

"Should I stand and state my name, tell them we're not a couple? Then ask them to quit staring?" His golden-brown eyes sparked with warmth.

"Maybe once your novelty wears off, you'll have some peace."

"My novelty will never wear off. I've always been considered an oddball."

"Well, I'll be," Minnie said in her deep, husky, smoker's voice as she approached the table. "My best customer has finally come home."

"Ms. Minnie, so good to see you." He stood and hugged her, dwarfing her small frame.

"Mercy, look at you, child. You grew up into the rafters and finally put some meat on your bones."

"It was your chicken, Ms. Minnie. If it hadn't been for you, I would have been blown away by a good strong wind."

"Well, I'll make sure you get all your favorites today." She smiled at Lindsay. "Hey, Lindsay. Your regular?"

"I can't resist. And a plate for Granny Bea, as well, please. Everything to go."

Minnie hurried toward the kitchen, whistling "I'll Fly Away."

They sat in silence. She ran her finger over a split in the laminated menu. "I know you visit your granny. How come I haven't seen you in so many years?"

"I've actually flown her up to visit me more often than I've come here. And my rare trips home have been very brief." He darted a glance into her eyes, then looked away, toward the front door. "I guess we haven't run into each other."

She couldn't shake the feeling he'd avoided her.

"Well, maybe you'll see some old friends this time."

"I'm only here for Granny. But it's nice to see Minnie."

Would he have ever come to see her? "You'll have to go visit Pastor Eddie. He'd love to see you."

Minnie set two glasses of syrupy-thick sweet iced tea on the table. "On the house while you wait." She tapped Bill on the shoulder. "So, sugar, what brings you to town after all this time?"

"Granny took a fall. Broke her wrist."

"Bill Wellington, shame on you. You shouldn't wait for a crisis to make you come home," Minnie said.

"I apologize. I've been in town, but haven't made it over to the restaurant."

"I forgive you. This time." Minnie shook her finger at him. "No excuses from now on."

"He won't be able to resist your chicken now that he'll have another taste," Lindsay said.

"See," Ms. Minnie said almost like a frog croaking. "You can't resist the people who care about you."

Lindsay laughed at the sounds Minnie managed to make, as well as the look on Bill's face. Something inside fluttered. She felt…well…happy. It was almost as if she and Bill were spending time together as friends once again.

"So how long are ya staying, sugar?"

"Actually, I won't be here but a few days," he said, blowing the friendly little vision out of Lindsay's mind. "I have to get back to my classes to prepare for finals."

"Well, you be sure to stop by next time." Minnie patted him on the shoulder and walked away.

Lindsay sipped her tea. "I'm sure my family will want to see you while you're here."

"I'd like that." He stretched his arms across the back of the booth, which emphasized how large he was. "You know, I'll be glad to help you with your nephews anytime you need it, Lindsay."

"Okay." Her heart squeezed. She forced herself to look him in the eye with a smile on her face. "Thank you."

"You've been a good friend to Granny. It's the least I can do."

Yeah. A good friend to Granny. Not a word about what good friends they'd been years ago. Not a word about wanting to be her friend now. She clamped her teeth together so she could resist the urge to blurt out that he should head on back to Boston and leave them alone.

She could kick herself for letting a bit of hope creep up on her.

When they arrived back at Granny's with lunch, Lindsay, who'd been quiet the whole way home, said, "I'll help you carry this in, then I'll take mine home to eat."

He knew it was the right thing to do. The smart thing. But as she reached for her sack of food, he pulled it away from her. "Why don't you stay and eat with us?"

"I need to get home. I need to…well, I—"

As he was about to accuse her of making excuses, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. A haze. Behind the house.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Is that smoke?"

She didn't answer. She took off running toward the house.

He closed the gap and beat her through the front door. He bounded to the kitchen where smoke filled the air. It rolled in plumes from a pan on the stove, the acrid smell choking him. He grabbed the handle of the pot and ran out the back door with it.

"I've got the garden hose," Lindsay said from beside the back steps as she turned the water on. She unrolled the hose and pulled it over to spray the singed food.

"I'll find Granny," he said as he rushed back in the door. He called for her over and over, but no answer. She was nowhere in the house.

He found Lindsay holding her nose as she stared into the pan. “I think it was green beans.”

“The stove was set on high. She must have put them on to cook quickly, then left them. She’s not in the house.”

“I’m sure she walked over to Sandra’s.”

He wouldn’t quit worrying until he actually saw her. “I’ll be back. Can you see if you can figure out what I did with the food from Minnie’s? I have no idea where I put it down.”

She grinned. “It might be up on the roof.”

He grinned in return. “Maybe we can have green beans for lunch, then.”

She burst out laughing. “I’ll find it. Go check on Granny Bea.”

He paused for a moment. He couldn’t resist smiling. She looked so young, like she had when he’d been so crazy about her. She was the first to break the connection as she turned to go back inside.

He walked next door to Sandra’s back entrance. The tight clench in his jaw eased when he heard Granny’s voice through the screen door. She was fine.

He knocked. “Hi, ladies.”

“Oh, come in, Bill,” Sandra said as she jumped out of her chair and hurried over to greet him. She gave him a fierce hug. “I’m so glad you’re home to see your granny. And staying for a few days no less.”

“Hi, Miss Sandra. It’s good to be here.”

“Come join us, son,” Granny said from the far side of the kitchen table.

“I can’t stay. Granny, we just got home and found your pot of beans burning.”

“Oh, no.” She tried to get up from the low-sitting chair.

He grasped her arm and helped pull her up. “It’s okay. We took the pan outside and Lindsay sprayed water on it.”

“Did it damage my kitchen?”

“Once it airs out, it’ll be fine.”

“Oh, dear. Let’s go see.”

They said goodbye to Sandra and walked back to Granny’s house. Lindsay stood on the back porch with the meals from Minnie’s set out on the picnic table. Hers included.

“You found it?” he asked.

“Yes, slung to the side of the front door. It sloshed around a bit, but it’s still edible.” She gestured to the table with a smirk on her face.

Too bad he couldn’t enjoy the meal with her. Unfortunately, Granny’s food fiasco only strengthened his resolve that she needed to live with him to be safe.

They ate a nice meal, but beneath the pleasant chatter lay what he knew they needed to discuss. When they had a lull in the conversation, he said, “Granny, we need to talk about the kitchen incident.”

“It was a simple mistake,” Lindsay said. “An accident that could happen to anyone.”

He wanted to ask her if she’d ever left something cooking on high then walked next door, but it would be hurtful to Granny. “I know accidents happen, but this could have turned out tragically. What if Granny had gone to take a nap? What if we hadn’t arrived when we did?”

“It’s the first time it’s ever happened,” Granny said. “I am more forgetful these days, but I’m not usually that bad. I put the beans on and wouldn’t have forgotten, but Sandra called and needed two eggs for a recipe.”

“And I bet you got sidetracked talking,” Lindsay said. “Could happen to anyone.”

“Yes. It won’t happen again. I promise I’ll turn burners off before leaving the house again.”

He wouldn’t push, but he would go ahead and make a call to the adult day-care center near the university. He hated to move Granny against her wishes. But maybe she’d come around soon.

“I see your brain working,” Lindsay said. She speared him with an intense look. “Don’t make any rash decisions. You’ll see that she’s fine here in Magnolia.”

He wouldn't accomplish anything with Lindsay interfering. She would only keep Granny stirred up. "Lindsay, this is between Granny and me. I think maybe you need to leave."

She jerked back as if he'd slapped her. Then hurt flashed across her face. "Oh. Well." She stood and jerkily put her lunch trash in the bag. She smiled at Granny, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"Lindsay…" He didn't know what to say.

Granny patted her hand. "He didn't mean it, dear. Sit back down."

"No. I should go. I—" Her voice wobbled. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow at church, Granny Bea." She hurried into the house.

He'd hurt her. He hadn't wanted to, but it was his responsibility to protect Granny.

No matter what it took.

Lindsay made it to the front of the house, seeking refuge in her car. She was determined not to cry until she closed herself inside.

Her car wasn't there. What on earth?

It's at Donna Rae's house. Bill had picked her up.

She would have to walk to Dad's, then have him drive her to Donna Rae's.

How could Bill have asked her to leave? How dare he imply that she didn't know what was good for Granny Bea?

She stormed out of the driveway, walking toward her dad's house. She was too angry to face Bill at the moment. Maybe tomorrow.

Tomorrow. Sunday. Church. Oh, brother. Bill would probably show up there and she would have to face him in front of everyone in her family.

She would have to prepare so she wouldn't spout off something she'd regret. And she'd also have to come up with a new plan. Apparently, showing him Granny in action wasn't going to work.

Chapter Four

The next morning, Bill sat on the front porch swing with a cup of coffee, enjoying the cool, fresh air. His legs were so long, it was nearly impossible to actually swing, so he simply pushed back and forth with his feet flat on the ground.

He set the cup aside to send a text message to one of his graduate assistants. Granny had actually fallen at an opportune time as far as classes went. The students had a weeklong reading period before finals. His assistants could field any questions from them. But the research was another thing. They were at a pretty critical point, and he needed to be there.

The roofers would be out on Monday. The carpet installed on Thursday. Maybe that would be enough improvement to put the house on the market. They could pack the necessities for Granny to move over the weekend. Then they could get everything else once the house sold.

The screen door opened. Granny stuck her head out. “You better get moving, son.”

“For what?”

“Church services.”

“I’ll take you whenever you’re ready.”

“But you’re not dressed for church.”

No. He hadn’t attended in ages. Not since moving away. Not since he’d had Granny around to force him to go. “I won’t be going today.”

“So, you still haven’t let go of the past?” She came all the way outside and sat beside him on the swing.

“You know I can’t really put it in words, Granny. I just don’t think God cares about us like you think He does. How could He, if He let my parents die on the way back from doing His work?”

“I won’t pester you. But I wish you’d go with me. I think you’d enjoy visiting with everyone.”

Granny hadn’t seen how the youth group kids used to tease him. How he’d never felt a part of their clique. Other than Pastor Eddie, there really wasn’t anyone he’d like to see again. “I’ll drive you when you’re ready.”

She patted his hand. “Okay. I’ll be out soon.”

True to her word, she came through the door about ten minutes later. He drove her to the little church he’d grown up in. He pulled up out front, helped her out, then hoping he didn’t run into anyone, he walked her to the front door of the sanctuary.

Once she walked in, he hurried to the car, and he sat there a few minutes, watching couples and families walk inside together. A few elderly singles, as well. No one seemed to notice him. It was like being on the outside looking in all over again.

Moving to Boston and staying there had been a good decision. He would be glad to return home. With Granny.

As soon as possible.

As he turned to look over his shoulder to pull away, he spotted Lindsay’s car turning into the parking lot.

Lindsay’s car. He’d last seen it at Donna Rae’s house.

Oh, no. He’d totally forgotten to take her back there after lunch yesterday. Now he felt even worse. Not only had he asked her to leave Granny’s house, but he’d also left her stranded with no way to get home.

When it was time to pick up Granny, Bill pulled out front once again. He slouched in the seat as folks began to drift through the door, shaking hands with the pastor. He hated that he’d sunk so low as to skulk outside the church building. He sure hoped Granny would hurry and hop in so they could go back to the house.

As the stream of people slowed to a trickle, she finally stepped outside to greet Pastor Eddie. Bill climbed out to open her door, planning to wave to the man if he saw him. While Bill stood with the passenger door open, Granny motioned to someone to follow her. The next thing he knew, Lindsay and a crowd followed Granny down the steps.

It had to be the Jones family. He recognized Lindsay's dad, Harry, though he had aged a good deal. Gregory looked pretty much the same. Gregory waved.

Too late. Bill couldn't escape.

"Good to see you again, Bill," Harry said while shaking his hand.

Gregory, who looked a bit frazzled from trying to keep two young boys by his side, also shook his hand. Gregory introduced Chase and Hunter, then the boys ran off screeching.

"I hope you'll come have lunch with us," Harry said. "Lindsay cooks up a nice roast every Sunday. And my other boy, Richard, will be in town this afternoon."

"We'd love to," Granny said.

He couldn't believe his grandmother had agreed to go. She had to know Harry was just being polite. They might not have enough food for two more. "Oh, we don't want to barge in," he added.

"Not barging at all." Harry slapped him on the back. "We always have plenty." He looked to Lindsay for confirmation.

"Yes, plenty," she said without looking directly at him.

Great. She didn't want him there any more than he wanted to be there. "No, thanks. I think we'll—"

"Lindsay," Granny said, interrupting his refusal, "I found a bag of fabric that you left at my house. It's in Bill's backseat. Why don't you grab it now before we forget."

Sure enough, a plastic bag rested on the seat.

"Oh, thank you." She walked past him to the back passenger door and opened it.

She smelled so nice, all tropical and sweet. And her hair looked soft and touchable as it swung forward while she leaned across the seat. But she had acted so prickly since he arrived. He truly wished they could be on better terms.

His grandmother jolted him back to reality when she pinched his arm to get his attention, then opened her eyes wide, giving him a look that said you better do what I say. "Bill, I'd really like to go eat at the Joneses' today."

"Well, I guess if that's what you want to do…"

"Good," Harry said. "We'll see you at the house."

As Bill helped Granny into the car, Pastor Eddie walked up. "So nice to see you again, Billy boy."

Bill had forgotten about the nickname. He smiled. Pastor Eddie was one of the good memories. "Thanks. It's nice to be here with Granny."

"Well, I'll let you get to your lunch. I just wanted to say hi. I hope you'll join us for the service next week if you're still here."

"Thanks." He knew it was noncommittal, but it was the best he could do. He didn't have time to debate faith issues at the moment.

He had a family gathering to attend at the Joneses'.

When they reached Harry's house, Lindsay welcomed them in. "Richard arrived right before we did. He's looking forward to seeing you."

He and Richard met up in the dining room. It was strange to see him since Richard had been only sixteen when Bill moved away. He was definitely a grown man now. Taller than his dad and brother. And looking exactly like photos of his blond-haired, blue-eyed mother.

They all settled at the table, Harry said a blessing, and then they passed the serving dishes. Somehow, they managed to have enough food for everyone. When it was time for dessert, Lindsay

shooed the little boys outside with chocolate chip cookies in hand. Then she made coffee and served chocolate cake for the adults. She'd refused his help throughout the meal, but finally relented and let him pour the coffee.

She was extremely stubborn when it came to asking for help. It seemed she thrived on being in charge of the family, a task that had come to her at too early an age after her mother's death.

"So, Richard, I hear you're in Atlanta now," he said to her brother.

"Yes, but I'm looking to move home in the next year or so. I'm tired of the hotel business."

"What do you plan to do once you get here?"

"He's finally going to pursue his dream," Lindsay said as she smiled at her brother. She looked like a proud parent.

"I plan to open a bed-and-breakfast."

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