

# HEART'S DESIRE

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*To my husband, Frank, who supports me in my writer's journey and helps  
sell my books, and to my daughters, Heather and Alicia, and son,  
Clifford.*

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Aubrey White searched the crowd of wedding guests seated on the groom's side. A young woman with black hair and an olive complexion, probably Jason's fiancée, sat with the Abbott family. But no Haleigh.

She shook her head.

Surely Haleigh's past friendship with the White family should win out over anger, hurt feelings, or whatever it was that made her avoid her friends for five years.

However, she wouldn't let Haleigh's non-appearance ruin this day. Today, her older brother, Mike, would marry Madison, the love of his life.

As Aubrey walked down the church aisle on her brother Willie's arm, dressed in a mid-calf length bridesmaid's gown of coral lace over crepe and white sandals, her gaze connected with Jeremy Abbott's dark brown eyes. He winked at her and smiled, igniting a spark of warmth that passed through her. She smiled back. Her cheeks grew hot, and she focused forward.

"You have an admirer, I see, Sis." Willie whispered in her ear.

Willie didn't miss much. "Mind your business," she whispered back.

He grinned. He'd probably been looking for Haleigh too. Not

long ago, Aubrey discovered that Willie's affection for their childhood friend ran deeper than friendship, even after five years.

Yesterday afternoon, Aubrey and her family had arrived in Rosemont, Madison's hometown, a four-hour trip from Greenlawn. After the rehearsal and dinner, they'd stayed in a motel.

Tears filled her eyes as Mike and Madison repeated their vows. The ceremony affirmed their love and commitment to each other and to God.

In the front row, her father sat with his arm around her mother. All their lives she and her brothers had a good marriage model before them: their parents.

*Will I ever commit my life to one man, God? Will I ever be cherished as my mother is cherished by my father, and as Mike cherishes Madison?*

Aubrey had kept her relationship with guys casual because she had other priorities, like finishing college and starting a career.

Jeremy was Haleigh's brother, Jason's identical twin, and a friend to Aubrey. His handsome face, firm jaw, brown eyes, and a wave of brown hair across his forehead, kept popping into her mind, making it hard to concentrate on the wedding service.

"Please join me in prayer."

The pastor's words jostled her mind back to the present. She hadn't missed much of the ceremony, had she? She bowed her head as he prayed for God's blessing on Mike and Madison. By the time the prayer ended, she'd turned her attention back to the happy couple as they kissed and stood before their guests as Mr. and Mrs. Michael White.

During the reception at the Rosemont Country Club, despite her best efforts to avoid doing it, Aubrey's eyes found Jeremy frequently. Occasionally she caught his gaze on her. Her stomach flip-flopped. She didn't understand her crazy reaction to her childhood friend.

Grandpa and Grandma White smiled at her from seats at

their table. Grandpa waved her over. He stood as she approached.

“Aubrey, we haven’t talked to you since Christmas.”

She kissed his cheek, the spicy scent of his aftershave triggering happy memories of sitting in his lap, listening to his stories. His eyes still twinkled with mischief.

“I know. It’s been too long.” She used the excuse that the busyness of school and work had replaced the time she used to spend with them.

“Did you have a good semester at school?” Grandma caressed her cheek.

“I did. My GPA is 3.9. I’m waiting now for my student teaching assignment for fall semester. Mom and Dad bought a car for me to use when I go back to school. If it’s not too far, I’ll live in the college dorm and drive back and forth each day.”

“What are your plans after you graduate from Clark University?”

“I’m going to graduate school for my master’s degree. My advisor gave me information about a couple of scholarships. If my student teacher evaluation is good enough, I may have my tuition fully covered the first year and half the second.”

Grandpa grinned. “And I suppose one day we’ll call you Dr. White, and you’ll become a college president.”

She smiled and shrugged. “That’s the plan.”

Someone stepped in beside her, and she breathed in the pleasant scent of a man’s after shave. She took a step to the side and looked up into eyes like pools of chocolate. Again, her stomach flip-flopped, and her lips turned up on their own.

“Hello, Mr. and Mrs. White. It’s good to see you.” Jeremy’s voice sent a shiver down her spine.

“Well, well.” Grandpa White shook Jeremy’s hand. His eyes shifted from Jeremy to Aubrey, and his lips twitched. “You’re an Abbott—Jason or Jeremy?”

Aubrey knew the brothers well enough to tell the difference. Although they were identical in physical appearance, she saw

subtle differences in body movements and facial expressions. Jason had a more competitive, out-going personality than Jeremy. Jeremy, the more sensitive twin, liked competition, but he didn't have to win.

Jeremy grinned. "I'm Jeremy, Mr. White. Jason is sitting over there with his fiancée, Carmella." He pointed across the room.

As she waited for Grandpa's response, Aubrey held her breath, imagining the wheels in her grandfather's head spinning. His humor was legendary.

"Fiancée, eh? It seems as though the marriage bug has bitten both our families." He looked directly at Jeremy, his lips twitching. "When are you getting hitched?"

"Huh!" Aubrey gasped. Heat rose in her face. Did Grandpa think she and Jeremy were ... had plans? Well, they did, but not together.

Jeremy opened his mouth, then closed it and licked his lips. Red crept up the back of his neck. "I'm working on it. These things take time, you know."

With a guffaw, Grandpa slapped Jeremy's arm. Grandma smiled and shook her head.

Aubrey pretended to smooth a wrinkle out of her dress. She didn't want Grandpa or Jeremy to get the idea she wanted to get married. Not to Jeremy. Not to any man. At least not for a long time.

Yet, she couldn't deny her attraction to this grown-up Jeremy in his dark blue, pinstriped suit, blue shirt, and blue-and-brown tie. He must be six feet tall now. She'd last seen Jeremy two years ago.

The old man chuckled and waved them away. "You young people go on. You don't want to waste all your time talking to us old people."

"It's not wasted time, Grandpa." Aubrey bent and kissed her grandfather's cheek, then her grandmother's. "I don't get to see you much anymore."

She avoided Jeremy's eyes as they turned away.





HAD Aubrey's grandfather read his mind? During the wedding, and now at the reception, Jeremy could hardly take his eyes off her.

"Want to go for a walk, Aubrey?" He cleared his throat. "It's a beautiful day."

"You know, that sounds wonderful." She nodded and ran her fingers through her shiny blond hair that cascaded down her back but avoided looking directly at him. "I'm getting a little stiff from all the sitting."

As they moved toward the back door of the reception hall, Jeremy thought he detected a slight limp as she walked beside him. "Does your hip still bother you?"

Aubrey didn't respond. Had the question offended her? He opened the door and allowed her to precede him.

As soon as the door clicked shut behind them, she giggled.

"Aubrey?"

She walked a few more steps, turned toward him, and burst into laughter, then placed her fingers over her mouth, and the laughter diminished into giggles. "My grandfather gets away with saying such outrageous things." She laughed again. "I'm sorry, Jeremy. I hope he didn't embarrass you too much."

"No." Jeremy smiled.

Her blue eyes sparkled, and her golden hair glistened in the sun.

"Well, maybe a little," he confessed. "I only pointed out Jason and his fiancée."

"He probably would have found a way to tease, no matter what you said. You know my brothers come by their sense of humor genetically, especially Jesse."

"I know." Jeremy chuckled.

A rose garden lay before them, with smooth stone walkways and white benches. A gazebo stood across the lawn, at the other end of a stone path. When Jeremy indicated that direction with

his hand, Aubrey looped her arm through his. His breath caught, and a surge of pleasure passed through him at her touch.

“These stones might be a little rough for walking in heels.” She raised one sandal-clad foot.

He remembered her as independent and competitive, so her request for assistance surprised him.

For many years, he’d thought of Aubrey as another sister, just as Haleigh thought of Aubrey’s brothers as hers. They still texted or messaged occasionally, and he and his brother sent her a card for her birthday every year.

The attraction he felt for her now had sparked when their eyes met as Aubrey walked down the aisle at the church.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t answer your question. Grandpa set me off.” She giggled again. “I don’t have a lot of trouble with my hip, but I have to stay active. Sometimes, when I sit for long periods, it gets stiff.”

“It must be hard sitting for classes at college.”

“Not usually. Walking between classes and being on the track team keep me limber.”

“You don’t play basketball anymore?” An athlete himself, he’d admired her athletic skill in high school. He understood her grief after the accident, when her friend Leanna Nelson died and she lost the hope of a scholarship for college.

She shook her head. “No. I gave that up, although the doctor said I could try playing again during my senior year. I enjoyed basketball, but it wasn’t my whole life.” She took a deep breath. “It wasn’t as much fun without Leanna. Being on the university track team helps me stay in shape and be competitive. How about you? Are you still playing sports?”

“I played soccer in the fall and did track in the spring during college. I tried to concentrate on my studies. Now that I’m going to graduate school, my sporting days are over, although I want to keep in shape.”

“I heard both you and Jason had been accepted at seminary. Are you planning to be a pastor?”

"I feel the Lord's calling me to preach and be a pastor, and seminary will give me good preparation."

"My roommate, Christina, dated a seminary student for a while. He was a nice guy."

Jeremy tipped his head. "Does going to seminary make me a nice guy too?"

"You're a nice guy anyway." Her eyes met his as she blushed and bit her lip.

Loving her response, given without hesitation, he swiped his hand across his mouth, but the grin remained.

As he leaned toward her ear, a soft, sweet, peach fragrance invaded his senses. He patted her hand. "I like you too, Goldie." He used his childhood name for her.

Her lips turned up at the corners.

"By the way, you look quite lovely today." Aubrey had always been a pretty girl, and she'd become a beautiful young woman.

She stole a quick glance at him and murmured, "Thank you, Jeremy."

They stopped with the gazebo before them.

"Do you want to sit here for a while?" He wasn't quite ready to relinquish her back to the wedding crowd.

"Maybe we'd better return to the reception. Grandpa might get more ideas."

"Would it really bother you if he did?"

She peered at him then shook her head. "No, I don't think so." She raised her chin. "I think I'm tough enough to take his teasing. I've had years of practice."

"That's for sure."

As the only girl in the family with three brothers, she'd learned to stand up for herself.

Several other wedding guests, including Jason and Carmella, exited and stood on the stone patio. Children ran around in the grass. A small group of older adults stood by the door.

"Jason's fiancée is very nice." Aubrey waved to the couple. "I think she and Jason will be happy." Laying her free hand on his

arm, she stopped him. “I wonder how you feel about your twin being married.”

He inhaled her peach fragrance as her nearness and direct gaze jumbled his thoughts. A coherent response escaped him until he lowered his eyes and rearranged his thoughts.

“At first, I was jealous. Jason is my best friend as well as my twin. But Jason is happy, and Carmella is good for him. I think I can honestly say I’m glad for them. He’s going to a different seminary than me, and I think it will be harder having him so far away than having him married.”

With his twin planning to marry in August, Jeremy sometimes felt as though he was losing his best friend. In his heart, though, he knew he’d never lose his brother. As adults, their relationship had already undergone changes that weren’t unexpected or totally unwelcomed.

The door of the reception hall opened. Aubrey gestured with her hand. “Look, Mike and Madison are coming out for a photo shoot.” The photographer followed the newlyweds.

Jeremy and Aubrey stopped, standing a little to the side and behind the photographer. Aubrey withdrew her hand from his arm, her attention on her brother and his wife.

“The rose garden is a perfect background for wedding photos. The photographer took pictures of the wedding party and families at the church. I wonder why they didn’t plan to take at least some of them here.” She rubbed her hip where a pocket might be located. “I wish I had my phone with me, to take some pictures.”

He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and snapped pictures of the bride and groom, then turned and focused on Jason and Carmella. They smiled when they saw him and posed with their arms around each other.

The photographer’s camera whirred. Mike and Madison kissed.

What would it be like to kiss Aubrey? Better not go there. He wanted to reserve his kisses for the woman he married.

He swung his phone to focus on his companion. "Aubrey." He captured her sparkling eyes and beautiful smile when she looked his way. Then he snapped a picture of the two of them side-by-side. He wanted to hold on to this moment.

"I'll send you my photos."

"Thanks." She brushed wisps of hair back from her temple with her fingertips. "I'm glad you came today. I miss the times the Abbotts and Whites spent together when you lived in Greenlawn. I'm sorry that Haleigh didn't come."

"Me too." Jeremy pocketed his phone and looked toward his brother. "It doesn't seem right that an Abbott should miss a White event, or vice versa. But she had her excuses, something to do with her dog. We tried our best, but you know Haleigh's stubborn streak."

"I do, but this one has been particularly long."

Jeremy worried about his sister. He and Jason had laughed with her, teased her, protected her, and picked on her and her friends as big brothers were expected to do. They'd always been a close-knit family. Underneath a happy exterior, Haleigh had encased her wound in a box, and she refused to allow it to heal. At least that's how Jeremy saw it.

The laughter and screams of the children drew his attention. The girls in dresses and the boys in dress pants, shirts, and ties played tag. Some of the watchful adults cautioned them to be careful.

He turned his attention back to Aubrey. "What are you doing this summer?"

"I'm working at the Hillside Diner in Greenlawn. I would have worked today, but Mr. Duncan knew it was my brother's wedding and made sure I had the entire weekend off. How about you—do you have a summer job?"

"I'm an intern at our church in Wellsburg. The church has a scholarship fund, and Jase and I are both benefitting from it. Plus, they're paying me to work this summer."

Aubrey gazed at him, her blue eyes framed by dark lashes. He broke eye contact and brushed hair off his forehead.

“I’m working with the kids: VBS, Kids’ Club, field trips, things like that. Even in our small town, a lot of kids don’t attend church. Many of them live in troubled homes. We want to provide support for them and a safe place where they can have fun and learn about Jesus.”

When the playing children screamed with laughter, both he and Aubrey turned their heads. The children’s game evoked memories of the childhood games he used to play.

“It’s been a while since I played tag.” Aubrey looked at him. “I wanted to go to Haiti with a missions team from Clark, but when Mike planned his wedding, I couldn’t go. Maybe next year. I have to make some money this summer if I want to finish my senior year without borrowing more.”

“The seminary recommends short-term missions experience for its pastoral students, so I’ll probably go somewhere within the next couple of years.” How much more interesting a trip like that might be if Aubrey went as well.

Whoa! His imagination galloped far ahead of reality. He wanted to give his best to preparing for his calling without distractions. He had two years of seminary to complete before committing himself to a serious relationship. Unlike his twin, he planned to wait.

“Will you be working during the school year?”

“When I’m on campus I will.”

He detected faint freckles crossing the bridge of her nose. “What do you mean?”

“I’ll be student teaching for the fall semester. So, depending on where I’m assigned, I probably won’t have much time. During the spring semester I’ll be working in the admissions office for the university. I’ve been doing that for several semesters, on work-study.”

As she talked, he watched her face, memorizing the details:

her blue eyes with dark lashes, the shape of her nose, the curve of her cheek, her full lips.

Was it Mike's wedding, or Jason's engagement, or God nudging him to think of a future with her? Today, for the first time, he saw his childhood friend with new eyes.

He didn't want to move too fast into a relationship, but it wouldn't hurt to talk on the phone, text, or email occasionally as friends. They'd done that since the Abbotts moved away from Greenlawn anyway.

"Goldie, let's keep in touch this summer."

"I'd like that." Her smile sent another spark through him. "We're friends on Facebook, and you have my phone number. And I have yours."

"That will be great! And I already know where you live."