



“*H*ow’s the knee, Goldie?” Jeremy Abbott grinned at her over Mom’s shoulder.

She smiled back. He and Jason had nicknamed the Three Sisters Goldie, Red, and Beanie. He had called her Goldie at Mike’s wedding. Except for Jeremy, no one had called her that since the Abbotts moved away five years ago.

Butterflies activated in her stomach. “Jeremy? How ...? What are you doing here?” She sat up.

“Well, that’s a nice welcome. I came all this way to see you because I heard you got hurt, and that’s the greeting I get?” He sounded indignant, and he placed one hand on his hip, but the corners of his mouth twitched.

“I didn’t mean it that way.” She pulled her braid across her shoulder. “It’s just that I didn’t expect you. Why ... how did you get here so soon?”

“Mom messaging. You know, your mom called my mom.”

Mom left the room with a smile on her face.

“I stopped to get this for you. If there were blue roses, I would’ve bought one.” He stepped close and handed her a white bud vase containing a pink rose with baby’s breath and a fern

stem. "Your brother will have quite a place when he gets finished."

"I know." She detected the pleasant scent of his after shave. "I'm proud of Willie. He's worked hard." She buried her nose in the rose. "Thank you. This is pretty." Holding the vase and hoping not to spill the water, she attempted to turn to face him.

"Here, let me help you." Jeremy took the vase from Aubrey's hand and placed it on the end table beside her.

His fingers brushed hers. Her fingers tingled.

He pushed over the hassock and placed the pillow under her knee. His touch sent electricity through her.

Heat rose in Aubrey's face with Jeremy's eyes focused on her bare legs. The shorts had been her choice this morning because they didn't rub against her injury. Now she wished she'd worn her jean skirt, which came to just below her knees.

Red crept up his neck and into his cheeks. He backed away quickly.

"Thank you." She licked her lips. Her leg still tingled from his touch, as she tried to relax and ignore the new sensations the grown-up version of her old friend stirred in her.

"So, what happened?" He sat in a chair across from her and placed one knee over the other.

"I fell at work and cut my knee. But I guess you know that already."

"Looks like quite a bruise as well." He nodded and gestured toward her knee with his hand. "Did you trip on something, or did someone knock you down?"

She leaned forward to shift the pillow under her knee. "I'm not sure. We were extremely busy, and I was rushing around. No one pushed me." She shoved back the memory of Derek Hall's mocking face and words, refusing to give Derek credit for this accident.

"One second I carried a tray of dirty dishes, and the next I hit the floor. I'm not usually that clumsy. My knee landed on broken glass. So here I am, on the couch with stitches and

unable to work.” She grabbed another throw pillow and hugged it. She had to stop whining.



JEREMY BIT his lip to keep from smiling at the frustration in her voice. Aubrey didn't like to have her plans interrupted.

“That’s why I’m here, to cheer you up. Here’s a card from my family.” He stood and stepped forward.

“Didn’t you have to work today?” She took the blue envelope he held out. “You said in your last email you had Vacation Bible School next week.” She read the card with a smile and slid it back into the envelope.

“VBS is next week. About a hundred kids have pre-registered. It’s mostly organized, but I brought my laptop so I can do a little work.” He stretched his legs in front of him. “I had an interview with my advisor at seminary this morning. And since that’s closer to Greenlawn than Wellsburg is, I thought I’d visit. I like coming back to Greenlawn and don’t get much opportunity to do it.”

“It’s nice to see you. My phone got smashed when I fell, and I forgot to bring my laptop downstairs, so I’ve been out of communication with the world. I didn’t know how much I depended on the phone. I’m glad you came.”

His heart warmed at her welcoming words. “I’m thankful your injury wasn’t more serious. Not like the other time.”

“Right. I’ve had a few moments of *déjà vu* since yesterday. But this time it’s just a few stitches and a day out of work without weeks of pain and therapy.”

“Are you kids ready for some lunch?” Mrs. White spoke from the kitchen doorway.

“Sure am.” Jeremy broke his gaze with Aubrey and looked at her mother. “I had breakfast rather early this morning.”

“Is it lunchtime already?” Aubrey peered at her watch. “I guess I slept the morning away, didn’t I? If you’ll excuse me, I’ll

be right back.” She swung her legs to the floor and pushed herself up, then straightened her right knee as she put weight on it.

Although tempted to do so, Jeremy didn’t offer to help her stand. “I’ll be here. Wouldn’t want to miss lunch.”

She favored her knee as she crossed the room and headed down the hall to the bathroom. He joined Mrs. White in the kitchen, where she set out cold cuts and cheese.

“Aubrey never did like being told she couldn’t do something, but I’m glad the doctor and Mr. Duncan told her to stay home today.” She pulled a tray of ice cubes from the refrigerator freezer. “He’s a thoughtful boss. She likes working for him.”

“That’s good.” He paused with his hand on the back of a chair. “Thank you for letting me come, Mrs. White. It’s a little easier to be able to stop here before going back to Wellsburg.”

She handed him the tray of ice cubes, and he placed several in each glass.

“I don’t get back here often enough.” He refilled the tray with water and returned it to the freezer.

“You know you’re welcome any time. I’m sure Aubrey’s glad for your company. It’s quiet here during the day.” She looked the table over. “I think everything’s ready.”

Aubrey entered the kitchen. “Mom, did you know Jeremy was coming?” She put her hand against the doorway and counter as she made her way to the chair Jeremy pulled out for her. “Thank you.”

“Yes, Aubrey.” Her mother smiled and nodded. “He called and asked if it would be all right.”

“And you didn’t warn me? Mom!”

“If you remember, we had some excitement here yesterday. I planned to tell you, but it slipped my mind.”

“Don’t you like surprises, Aubrey?” Jeremy sat in the chair across from her.

She shook her head “No.” Then she looked at him and tilted her head. “Yeah, I guess they’re okay sometimes.”

The softness in her blue eyes nearly took his breath away.

Mrs. White didn't indicate she noticed. She asked Jeremy to give thanks for the food, and they began to eat.

Having lunch with Aubrey and her mother was a lot more fun than eating alone in a fast-food restaurant. He tried to keep his mind on their conversation. Everything about this young woman interested him. She was the same person he'd known all his life, so what sparked his interest in her now?

If he didn't have two years of seminary ahead, and she didn't have at least two additional years of school for her masters' degree, he'd like to court her and see where it led.

When they finished eating, Jeremy collected their dishes from the table and placed them in the dishwasher.

"You didn't have to do that, Jeremy, but thank you anyway." Aubrey's mother busied herself with putting away the remaining food.

"I don't mind. My mother expects Jason and me to help out at home."

"Your mother has taught you well. I expect my boys to help in the kitchen."

A smile played on Aubrey's lips. "You and Mrs. Abbott always said men should know how to cook, clean the house, and mend clothes because they might have to do it for themselves one day."

"Yes, Elizabeth and I share a lot of like ideas."

A girls' day out when they were kids had meant that Jeremy, Jason, and Aubrey's brothers had been left in charge of meal preparation and clean-up while Aubrey and Haleigh, and maybe Katie, went shopping or to a church event with their mothers.

He closed the dishwasher and faced Aubrey. A walk would be easy exercise for her, and knowing her as he did, she needed something to do. And besides, he wanted to see the neighborhood and the house where he'd lived.

"Do you feel up to a walk?"

“I think I’d like that, although I may not be able to go far. I’m going stir crazy.” She rose from her chair.

“I could carry you...on my back. Like when we were kids.”

Mrs. White pushed out her cheek with her tongue, and Aubrey blushed.

“Just teasing.” The heat rose in his face again. Her curves reminded him they were kids no longer. “Let’s go for that walk.”

As Aubrey made her way to the front door, she used the wall to keep her balance. He followed, pulled the door shut behind them, and bumped into her when she stopped abruptly at the top of the steps.

“I’m sorry.” He stepped to her side. “Are you in pain?”

“I actually feel better when I move.” She grimaced as she held the top of the railing. “It’s the steps.”

He offered her his arm, and she looped her arm through it. The sensation of her soft skin on his arm sent a shock wave through him, and his muscles tensed. His heart thudded.

“Thanks. This is much easier.”

“Glad to help.” That she was willing to accept his help doubled the pleasure.

The shade of the trees along the sidewalk gave relief from the heat of the sun as they strolled. Sunglasses shielded their eyes from the glare, but Jeremy regretted he couldn’t see her blue eyes. Her long blond hair, pulled back into a braid, gave off the scent of peaches.

Aubrey sighed. “I hope I can go back to work tomorrow. Hillside is so busy right now, Mr. Duncan suggested I might try for a few hours. The cut looks clean and is healing, so I want to go.”

“I guess you’re ready to get back into action, but maybe you shouldn’t carry any heavy trays.” Jeremy tried to gauge her comfort. “We don’t want you to fall again.”

“I know. Mr. Duncan said I can sit behind the cash register.” She slowed her pace.

“Your mother said I’m welcome to stay overnight.” He

shortened his stride when her steps lagged. "I have to leave early tomorrow morning."

"Good." She paused and looked up at him. "I mean, good that you can stay."

He raised his eyebrows. "I'm glad you clarified that. I thought maybe you didn't want me here."

She smiled and looked away. Did that mean she did or didn't want him to stay? Aubrey followed his lead without resisting when Jeremy directed their steps toward the Abbott's former home around the block.

The neighborhood where he'd lived for his first seventeen years brought a rush of memories. "I always feel like I'm coming home whenever I return to Greenlawn." Jeremy waved to a neighbor in his yard.

"I'm sorry we can't do something more active. Remember the hikes the youth group used to take to the fire tower? I'd love to be able to do that today. I feel useless just sitting around,"

"You're not sitting around. We're taking a walk." A dog barked at them from the window of a house. "I don't think I'll ever move back to Greenlawn to live, but I'll always look forward to visiting." Especially if Aubrey was here.

"Greenlawn has always been home to me, but I'm not planning to live here forever." Her shaded eyes turned his way. "I don't expect to apply for a teaching position here or live here after graduation, although my family is still here. After I get my doctorate, it'll be time for me to see the world. I'm looking forward to seeing where God takes me."

Would he and Aubrey see the world together? His heart galloped with *what if* while his mind said, *Whoa!*

They paused in front of Jeremy's former home.

"Look, they've kept up Gram's flower beds." Some of the flowers looked the same. "I'm glad. And they still have a swing in the apple tree." He breathed in the scent of newly mown grass. "I wonder if they've made any changes inside. I wish I could go in and look around."

“I come by here from time to time just to look at the flowers and remember.” Aubrey let go of his arm and grasped the fence, leaving his arm empty and cold. “Haleigh, Katie, and I spent many hours on the swing. I’ve met the family who lives here, but I don’t know them well.” She leaned against the fence. “I don’t think I can make it much farther, Jeremy.”

He flexed his biceps. “Remember, I can take you on my back.”

“You goof.” She laughed, her cheeks turning pink. “I don’t think so. I’m not sure you could do it now anyway, with my bum knee.”

They sauntered on around the block in the direction of Aubrey’s house, her hand resting in his elbow.

“We had a lot of fun when we were kids.”

“Yeah.” He looked over his shoulder at his childhood home. “Lots of great memories.”

The walk back didn’t last long enough.

“There’s shade in the back yard, Jeremy, Let’s go there instead of going inside.”

“Good idea.” He liked Aubrey’s mother, but he preferred private time with Aubrey.

They headed around the side of the house.

“I think I’m walking into a page from *Better Homes and Gardens!*” He stopped and whistled. “Is all this Willie’s work?” Before him lay a beautifully landscaped yard of flowers, shrubs, and a vegetable garden. “My grandmother would love to see this.”

“Yes, isn’t it beautiful? Willie adds something every year. He needs his own place.”

Mindful of her wounded leg, he helped her settle comfortably in the chaise lounge in the shade of the sugar maple near the patio. He lowered himself to the cool grass, where he could be close to Aubrey.

“Are you coming to Jason’s wedding next month?” He pulled a blade of grass and placed it between his front teeth, appreciating



the coolness of the shade and the grass under him as he leaned back on his elbows.

She removed her sunglasses and laid them in her lap. He tucked his into his shirt pocket.

"I've asked for the time off, but since I'd have to take more than one day, I doubt I'll get it. A lot of others have requested that weekend."

"Oh." He threw the piece of grass on the ground and tried to mask his disappointment. "I'd hoped to see you again this summer. You'll be missed, you know."

Her blue eyes met his gaze. He could hardly breathe.

"I'll miss being there." She pulled her braid over her shoulder and looked away. "My parents plan to go, and probably Willie and Jesse."

"School will start a couple of weeks after the wedding." He sat up. "I was impressed with the seminary grounds at Clark. I'm glad I chose to attend there, although it will be strange not to have Jason there too."

"Clark?" Aubrey frowned. "You're attending seminary at Clark University?"

Was he in trouble? If she were standing, she'd probably have her hands on her hips. "Yes. Didn't I tell you that?"

She shook her head. "No, you only said seminary."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I guess I just assumed you knew."

"And I would know because...?"

"Well." He had to think quickly. "Mom messaging. I figured my mom told your mom, who told you." His lips twitched, hoping to ease away the irritation he heard in her voice.

She looked away and sighed before answering him. "I'm sorry I'm such a grouch, Jeremy. I guess I'm just surprised."

"You really don't like surprises, do you?" He crisscrossed his legs in front of him.

"No, not usually. I like to be first to know what's going on. But it depends on how I'm surprised."

"Maybe we can get together, eat together sometimes." Or go

on dates. Despite internal warnings, he daydreamed about spending time with her. “That should be easy, seeing we’ll be on different parts of the same campus.”

“That would be great, but I’ll be student teaching this semester.” She twirled the end of her braid. “I’ll have a forty-five-minute commute.”

“Oh, you know where you’ll be teaching?”

“At White Mountain Elementary School. I’ll be with first grade, then change to fourth. I’ll be on campus on weekends. Maybe we can run together. I won’t be able to do cross-country during fall semester, so running with you might be just the thing.”

“We’ll work something out.” Maybe he shouldn’t be trying so hard. Neither one of them could afford an entanglement right now.

“Aubrey White, what in the world have you done to yourself?”

The familiar voice snagged his attention.