

# A HEART'S JOURNEY

The Three Sisters - Book Two

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*To my granddaughters, Caylin, Katiann, Isabelle, Emily, and Aryanna,  
so dear to my heart. Your hearts' journeys have only begun.*

*May the desires of your hearts agree with God's plan for each of you,  
"being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in  
you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." Philippians 1:6 NKJV*

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*M*idnight!  
Haleigh Abbott snuggled under her comforter and closed her eyes. The drive across New York to Greenlawn tomorrow would take five hours. She had to get some sleep!

Hanging her arm over the side of the bed, she met empty space where her fingers should have found warm furriness. Tears sprang into her eyes, and she cuddled her hand against her chest. Sunshine, her loving companion for over seven years, no longer lay on the rug beside her bed.

With the edge of the sheet, she wiped the tears from her face and tried to ease away the pain of missing her pet. Was her dog's death God's punishment for her past mistakes?

She closed her eyes and drifted off.

Sunshine? Barking came from the woods behind the house. Sunshine wouldn't wander away like that. Haleigh ran toward the sound, not caring that branches grabbed her, tore her clothes. She had to find Sunshine!

The woods disappeared and the barking stopped. From the twisted wreck of a car, Leanna Nelson stretched out her hands to Haleigh. "Help me," she screamed.

The face morphed into Aubrey White, her friend's mouth open in a silent scream.

"Nooo!" Haleigh sat up, soaked in sweat, twisted in her sheet. As her breathing slowed and her heartbeat returned to normal, she retrieved her pillow from the floor and lay back. She hadn't had this nightmare for a long time.

She changed into dry pajamas, then curled up on her side and fell back to sleep.



MONDAY MORNING HALEIGH awoke with the sweet scent of lilacs floating in through her open window. A nearly cloudless sky promised good traveling weather. The aftereffects of the nightmare wore away gradually as she dressed. She set her suitcase and backpack in the entryway at the foot of the stairs before joining her parents in the kitchen for breakfast.

"Remember to pick up the key for the Sousas' house at the real estate office. We'll be in Greenlawn late next week for the wedding."

"Yes, Mom." How could she forget when Mom constantly reminded her?

Dad pushed out his chair and stood. "Your pancakes were delicious as usual, dear." He leaned over and kissed Mom.

"You go ahead, Haleigh." Mom lifted the plates from the table and set them next to the sink. "I'll clean up here."

Stepping up behind her mother, Haleigh put her arms around her. Tears threatened to spill from her eyes. "Thanks, Mom."

If Mom turned around, they'd both be crying.

Dad waited for her at the foot of the stairs. "If you can bring down the rest of your things, I'll help you pack them in the car."

Haleigh's stomach tightened at the extra lines in her father's face and his slower than usual movements. With her move and Jeremy's wedding, he had a lot on his mind. She didn't want to consider another possibility.

“I didn’t pack anything too heavy since I’m going to unload the car by myself.” Although stronger than she looked, she didn’t want to spend the next few days with an aching back.

“Wise thinking.”

Excited and nervous, Haleigh didn’t talk much. Dad didn’t say much either. His mind seemed to be elsewhere.

It took half an hour to pack the car with suitcases, boxes, and bedding, everything Haleigh planned to take with her.

As she looked around her room one more time, her eyes fell on Sunshine’s dog bed under the window. She couldn’t bear the finality of putting it in the attic yet.

When Haleigh agreed to return to Greenlawn for the summer, to house-sit the Sousas’ log home, she’d looked forward to exploring all her favorite places with her dog. Would Sunshine have had memories of their hometown? She’d never know.

Pressing her lips together to hold back tears, she descended the stairs for the last time and stepped outside.

Dad grasped her shoulders. “Please call to let us know where you are. Our mechanic checked your car, and you should be fine. But if you have trouble —”

“I know.” Tears welled in her eyes as she gave Dad a farewell hug. “I’ll let you know.”

“Be careful, Haleigh.” Her mother hugged her especially tight.

Haleigh swallowed around the lump in her throat. “I will.” Her stomach clenched as she pulled the key ring from her pocket.

When Dad opened the car door, she slid in behind the wheel and fastened her seatbelt. Resisting the urge to get out of the car and give Mom and Dad one more hug, she rolled down the window.

“I’ll check in with you along the way. I love you.”

Was the sadness in their smiles because she was leaving home, or was it something they weren’t telling her?

She backed out of the driveway, gave another wave, and headed for Greenlawn.

Haleigh took three deep cleansing breaths. As the youngest Abbott and the only girl, she had to prove she could make it on her own. And, somehow, she had to figure out how to make up for her mistakes. The Sousas' offer opened the way for her to finally put the past behind her so she could move ahead with her life.

Glad for light traffic on the highway, she loosened the tightness in her shoulders and her grip on the steering wheel. She stopped once for a rest stop, once for lunch, and once for gas, checking in with her parents by phone each time.

In midafternoon, she turned off the highway onto Main Street in Greenlawn. She rolled down the car window and drew in a breath of fresh spring air.

"Welcome home," she whispered to herself. Had she really been away six years?

Somewhere along Main Street should be a florist shop and greenhouse. Yes, there, Floral Creations, something new since she'd lived here. After parking in front of the shop, Haleigh remained in her car as she read the rest of the sign, 'Flowers and Landscaping by Will White.' She wanted a geranium for her grandmother's grave but wasn't sure she could face Willie yet.

She stepped out of her car and pulled the lower edge of her T-shirt over her hips. Taking a deep breath, she headed for the shop door.

A bell over the door jingled when she opened it. The scent of damp earth and flowers greeted her. Haleigh glanced around and slowly let out her breath, relieved and disappointed at the same time. No Willie.

A young woman about her age, with short, dark hair, waited on a customer at the cash register. Haleigh spotted the greenhouse and browsed through the potted plants. She found two perfect, bright pink geraniums, her grandmother's favorite, among the many beautiful flowers.



Haleigh set the plants on the counter and pulled her wallet from her purse.

“Is this everything?” The clerk tapped the register keys.

“Yes, thank you. You have so many beautiful flowers, it was hard to choose.”

Nodding as Haleigh gave her money, the clerk made change and handed it back. “A lot of people say that.”

“Well, thank you.” Haleigh lifted the pots and looked around once more before heading out the door. The floor on the front passenger side of her car was the only place she could find to set the flowers.

She turned into the driveway of Rose Hill Cemetery. Following the bumpy drive, she pulled to the side near Gram’s gravestone and parked, then removed her sunglasses and laid them on the passenger seat. Other than a few more gravestones and the fresh flowers left at loved ones’ graves, Rose Hill Cemetery looked the same.

With her water bottle tucked under her arm, she grabbed the potted geraniums and Gram’s old trowel from the corner of the car trunk.

As she approached her grandmother’s grave, a cardinal greeted her with a cheery hello, and the spring-scented air filled her with peace. She wasn’t sure why a cemetery would make her feel this way, except maybe it brought her closer to Gram.

Kneeling before the gravestone, she brushed away some specks of dirt and rested her hand on top of the stone as she read the inscription

*Amanda Abbott ... Always in our hearts*

After digging a hole on either side of the gravestone, she placed the geraniums gently in them and replaced the soil, patting it firmly around the plants. She poured the water from her bottle on the ground around the flowers and rubbed her hands together to get rid of the grime.

“Yuk! I have dirt under my nails now. I should have remembered gloves,” she muttered.

Sitting on the grass, Haleigh focused on the gravestone. “I still miss you, Gram. You were the best.”

She wrapped her arms around her bent knees and rested her chin on top. Haleigh and Gram had a special relationship from the time Haleigh was small. She’d learned so much from Gram, and Gram had encouraged her to get Sunshine.

After her stroke, Gram had insisted on moving into the Senior Home instead of living with Haleigh’s family. Haleigh visited her there often. Because Gram knew the names of most of the residents in the home, so did Haleigh.

They talked about everything, from flowers and gardens to Haleigh’s friends, school, and dogs. Gram helped Haleigh train Sunshine and had died shortly before the Abbott family left Greenlawn six years ago. Her death left a big, empty space inside Haleigh, alongside the hole left by the breakup of her friendship with Aubrey and Katie.

Gram had often reminded Haleigh that God had a special purpose and plan for her.

“Yeah, right, Gram. What does God want me to do?”

“Haleigh Abbott, is that you?” A masculine voice behind her startled her.

Haleigh cringed. Had he heard her talking to herself?

A glance over her shoulder confirmed his identity. Auburn hair, brown eyes, that grin – Willie White. He was taller, with broader shoulders than she remembered. Her heart fluttered.

“Hey, Willie.” She pushed herself up and self-consciously brushed off her jeans. She caught herself before she hugged him and held out her hand instead. Too late she remembered the dirt.

“Hmm, your hand is dirty.” He examined the hand he held between his own.

The contact sent a current up her arm. “I brought some

flowers for Gram.” She pointed with her free hand while tugging to extract her other from Willie’s.

He looked at the flowers but didn’t release her hand. “Ah, pink geraniums, her favorite. If you’d bought them at my greenhouse, I’d have given you a discount.” He turned his gaze to her face.

Her face warmed. “I did buy them at your place, but you weren’t in. Your flowers are beautiful.”

During middle school and high school, Willie could have played several sports, like his older brother, Mike. He played on the basketball team during the winter, but his passion became gardening. “Good for the environment,” he said. He experimented with organically grown vegetables, as well as growing all kinds of flowers and his butterfly garden.

He nodded. “Thank you. Next time I’ll make sure you get a discount.”

She waited for him to tease her about blushing, but he didn’t.

“I opened the greenhouse a year ago. I have a degree in horticulture and business management, and I worked for a nursery for a couple years to get the experience. Now, here I am, a successful entrepreneur.” Willie tipped his head up, looked down his nose at her. Finally, he released her hand and pretended to grasp lapels on a suit jacket that wasn’t there.

Laughing at his pose, she clutched her hand, which felt strangely cold. “Good for you.” He always knew what he wanted and found a way to get it.

Lowering her eyes, she dug the ground with the toe of her shoe, not knowing what else to say.

He stuffed his hands in his pockets. “What took you so long to come back, Halo? I missed you.”

Her eyes met Willie’s, then she looked away.

Why hadn’t she returned sooner? Fear. Guilt. After his sister’s accident, the Abbott family left Greenlawn, and Haleigh refused to talk to Willie. She never communicated with anyone in Greenlawn, and she always managed to find excuses not to

visit when her family did: a school activity, her dog, the therapy program. Her parents never forced her to come.

Haleigh turned and ambled toward her car. Willie fell into step beside her.

“You know I just graduated from college.” She put her hands in her pockets. “Before that, it was high school and I was busy with Sunshine.”

Willie nodded at her weak excuses, his gaze burning through her.

She could have visited with her parents, or at least written. She sighed. “Sometimes coming back is a long journey.” Six years. Haleigh pushed back the urge to explain. “I’m glad Aubrey and Jeremy chose May for their wedding. It’s my favorite month. Mom and Dad sent me here to get the house ready for the family. I’ll be house-sitting the Sousas’ log home for the summer, and we’ll all stay there for the wedding.” She was babbling.

“How is Sunshine? Is she with you?” Willie looked toward her car.

Haleigh’s throat tightened and she stopped. “Sunshine had an inoperable tumor. I had her put down last week.” Her voice broke, and Willie squeezed her shoulder, sending a zing down her spine. She wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand. “It was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do.”

“I’m so sorry. I know what that dog meant to you.” Willie chuckled. “Whoever heard of naming a black dog Sunshine?”

Haleigh sniffled, and her chin went up. “I think it was a good name. She was like sunshine, always cheering people up. You know how the people in the Senior Home responded to her.”

Willie grinned and nodded.

“Oh, you!” She swatted the air between them and smiled. “You did that on purpose.”

His grin broadened. “I’m glad I still know how to make you smile.”

“Remember when you said you thought I should get a pot-bellied pig?”

"Yeah, I tried to convince my mom to let me have one, but she emphatically said, 'No!' Then you reminded me that my flowers might be in danger from a pig rooting around."

They laughed. How good to laugh with Willie again.

"And I got Sunshine, and Gram helped me train her." She gestured back toward Gram's gravestone. "I miss her."

"She was a special lady. Everyone's grandma. And a real inspiration for me to become a florist."

"Even after her stroke, when she lived at the Senior Home, she loved life." Haleigh watched a gray squirrel scamper up a tree. "Seeing her so frail and in a wheelchair, I didn't understand how she could be so happy."

"I know," he said.

Next to Aubrey and Katie, Willie had been her best friend in Greenlawn. She ran out of things to say, at least about the subjects she cared to discuss.

"So, Halo, you're here." He kicked at a stone in the path. "What are your plans?"

Haleigh shrugged. "For now, I need a job. I have school loans to pay, and I owe my dad for the car."

"Aubrey's glad you're in the wedding."

"Is she really?" She had talked briefly to Aubrey on the phone and had agreed to be a bridesmaid for Jeremy's sake.

"Why not? You're her friend, as well as being the sister of her future husband."

"Friend in the past tense."

"I don't think she sees it that way." He shook his head. "Even though Aubrey and Katie both had other friends and followed other interests, I don't think either one of them wanted to lose you as their friend."

Haleigh shrugged and continued walking. Long ago, she'd suspected the truth of what Willie said, even before she decided to return to Greenlawn.

"Well, here's my car, such as it is." She held out her hand toward the dark red, older model Toyota. "What do you think?"

He strolled around the car. “Nice.” He opened the door for her. Haleigh smiled and slid in behind the steering wheel. She laid the trowel on the floor and her empty water bottle on the seat.

“Thanks. Dad and I decided it would do for now. The engine is clean, and the upholstery still looks nice. It will get me safely where I need to go.” She reached into the glove compartment for a couple of hand towelette packets and offered him one. “Can I give you a ride anywhere?”

Willie cleaned his hands, then he leaned toward Haleigh and wiped the end of her nose. “You had a streak of dirt.”

Heat rose in her face. She tucked both used towelettes into the trash bag.

“You’re looking for a job?” He shut the car door and leaned against it.

She slipped on her sunglasses before looking at him. “That’s one of my goals for the summer.”

“You need work, and I need reliable help. I have a few landscaping jobs lined up, and I need someone to take over in the shop for me when I’m not there. And I’ve signed on for a missions trip in the fall and will be gone for about a month.”

Fear tightened her chest. “I don’t know, Willie. I’m not sure I can do that.”

Willie folded his arms. “Why not? You’re a responsible person, and you know a lot about flowers, thanks to your grandmother.”

“But you know how hard it is for me to meet strangers.” Sunshine couldn’t help her now. “What if I don’t say the right thing, or I give them the wrong change?” And what if someone comes in who remembers the teenage Haleigh?

“Tia will run the cash register, so she’ll handle the money most of the time. Just supervise the shop and help the customers, maybe answer a few phone calls. Piece of cake.” Willie grinned at her. “If I didn’t already have a commitment, we could discuss this over dinner tonight.”

She couldn't think of any more excuses, and she really needed a job. She liked flowers, and working for Willie wouldn't be so bad, would it?

"Well ..."

"That's great, Halo!" Willie slapped his hand against the car door. "Come to the shop in the morning to fill out your application. Mother's Day is Sunday. You can begin right away."

"Willie, you're impossible!" Once again, he'd gotten his way.

He grinned. "I know." He looked so proud, she had to laugh.

"I'm not sure I'll be staying in Greenlawn."

"Well, let's call it a summer job, until the end of August. Then we'll see from there."

"All right." Haleigh started her car. "Do you need a ride?" She held her breath, wishing she hadn't asked again.

"No, thanks. I'm walking today. Rain check?"

When Haleigh nodded, he pushed himself away from the car and walked toward the cemetery entrance. He skipped a step or two.

He'd been a good friend when she lived in Greenlawn. After the Three Sisters broke up and Gram died, Willie tried to help her get past her anger, sadness, and lostness, but she'd shut him out.

How interesting she met Willie first on her return to Greenlawn. Had he come to the cemetery because he knew she was coming and suspected she would come here first?

She rubbed her hand, feeling the warmth of his grasp. Dinner out with him would have been nice. On second thought, maybe not. She shifted her car into drive.

An old friend, this grownup, more mature Willie caused the stirring of unfamiliar feelings within her.



LIGHTHEARTED AND LIGHT-FOOTED, Willie skipped a few times on the way out of the cemetery. He couldn't help it. Haleigh had

come back!

Perhaps he was crazy. When she left Greenlawn and refused to write, talk on the phone, or visit, he thought he'd lost her forever. Her rejection hurt, after all they'd shared. They were young, teenagers back then, but he could've helped her if she'd let him.

His mother had mentioned that Haleigh planned to arrive today. He knew she'd want to visit her grandmother's grave and hoped she'd be at the cemetery when he took his afternoon break. He had to find her.

Seeing her sitting by her grandmother's headstone had nearly stolen his breath away. She welcomed him with her dark brown eyes framed by thick lashes and her smile. Her brown hair, cut shorter than she used to wear it, framed her oval face and slightly pointed chin. She talked to him, almost hugged him.

He couldn't resist teasing her about the dirt on her hands. Gardeners had a thing for dirt.

Even before she moved away six years ago, his feelings for Haleigh reached deeper than friendship. She'd remained in his heart, in a spot reserved just for her. Would she ever see him as more than a friend?

What had kept her away? He saw through her excuses. Would the truth make her run again?

Why did she come back now? Jeremy had told him that she kept something from the past boxed away so she didn't have to deal with it. Aubrey and Jeremy's wedding and house-sitting for the Sousas this summer gave her a perfect opportunity to let go of the past.

With his education behind him and his business established, perhaps God was giving him another chance to win her heart.

Or not. She promised to remain in Greenlawn only for the summer.

He needed God's wisdom. The walk back to Floral Creations gave him time to think and pray.