



Haleigh couldn't count the number of times she'd eaten at the Whites' house during her growing up years. Besides her own friendship with Aubrey, the White and Abbott families had been close.

After taking a quick shower, she dressed in khaki jeans and her favorite mint green, knit top.

She looked in the mirror as she picked up her hairbrush. Maybe she should have her hair in curls for the wedding. She'd always been envious of her friend Katie's curls. But the bob style she'd chosen was easy to care for, and she loved its sleek shine. Besides, it made her look older, and she could use help in that department.

Katie Mann: where was Katie now? Haleigh had lost track of Katie after leaving Greenlawn. Had she let too much time pass to make things right?

The sound of a motor outside the cabin alerted her to Willie's arrival. She grabbed her purse and light jacket, then with one more glance in the mirror, she opened the door just as Willie put up his hand to knock.

For a moment their eyes connected. "Hi," they said simultaneously. Then they laughed.

Haleigh closed the door behind her, twisting the knob to be sure it was locked.

The height of the step into the van presented a challenge to her short legs, and she appreciated the pressure of Willie's hand against her back, giving her a boost. The warmth of his touch spread through her. She settled in and fastened her seat belt as he walked to the other side and got in.

Would Aubrey be home? She'd find out soon enough.

Willie spoke after he turned onto Main Street. "What do you think? Will you be able to work for me?"

Haleigh nodded. "I don't see why not. Thanks for taking the chance on me."

"You're welcome."

He didn't look at her, and she missed his grin. Was he mad at her for something she did at work, or for her confrontation with Tia?

"Would you prefer that I call you Will? Your sign says 'Will White,' and I noticed that some people call you Will."

"I'm afraid people might not take someone called Willie seriously, so I use Will or William professionally. My family and friends usually still call me Willie."

"Which do you prefer?"

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He shrugged. "Well, Halo, I don't mind if you call me 'Willie' as long as you take me seriously."

Was he teasing, or did his words have a double meaning? He pressed his lips together and averted his gaze as though he'd said something he regretted.

"I'll have to see how Will sounds. You've always been Willie."

All conversation died away after that. Her stomach clenched with worry. She shouldn't have come, or she should have driven herself.

When Willie pulled into the Whites' driveway, she started to get out.

"Wait." He came around to open the door for her and took

her hand to help her step down. Letting go, he closed the door behind her and walked silently beside her to the house.

While she greeted his family, he went to shower and change.

“Haleigh, it’s so good to see you.” Mrs. White, Willie’s mother, gave Haleigh a big hug.

Willie’s father took his turn. “It’s good to have my other daughter back.”

Then Jesse, Willie’s younger brother, gave her a hug and whirled her around. “I see you haven’t grown up too much.” He looked down at her petite form from his lofty height, a little taller than Willie.

When she wrinkled her nose at him, he ruffled her hair. She stepped back and smoothed it out before they all gathered around the dining table.

“Aubrey is finishing her on-campus job this week and will be home on Friday.” Mrs. White offered Haleigh the dish of green beans. “Mike will be here sometime next week for the wedding. He has someone special for you to meet. I think you’ll like her.”

“His wife? Mom and Dad said the wedding was beautiful.” Haleigh took the bowl and spooned green beans on her plate. She should have been there, but she’d found ‘reasons’ not to go. A summer job and therapy dog work had given her an excuse to be invisible. She’d seen a few photos of the wedding but hadn’t examined them closely.

Mrs. White nodded. “They’ve been married almost a year now. Maddison’s not from Greenlawn. Mike met her at work.” Mrs. White reached for a framed wedding picture of Mike and his wife that stood on a stand near the table and handed it to her. The smiling bride stirred Haleigh’s memory.

Haleigh had known a Maddison in the therapy dog training program eight years ago, but she couldn’t be the same person, could she? She handed the picture back. “And we always thought Katie ...” Haleigh stopped, afraid she’d let out a long-time secret of the Three Sisters, that Katie Mann had a teen-age crush on Mike White.

This time Willie commented when she blushed. “You know, Mom, Haleigh blushes as easily as ever. I think pink cheeks become her, don’t you?”

Haleigh nudged him with her elbow, happy for his teasing and more relaxed attitude.

“Yeah, cute,” Jesse commented.

Mr. and Mrs. White just smiled.

The teasing and laughter that continued during the remainder of the meal filled her with a comfortable, at-home feeling.

When they got up from the table, Mrs. White announced, “It’s time for girl talk, so shoo!” She flapped her hands. “You men go to the living room. We want to talk in private.”

“You mean I can’t help with the dishes?” Jesse threw his arm across Haleigh’s shoulders.

She laughed and stepped away.

“Aw, can’t I stay?” Willie grasped his mother’s arm.

“No. Go!” His mother pushed his hand away and pointed.

Chuckling as they went, the brothers followed their father out of the dining room.

“Thank you for inviting me for dinner. It’s like coming home.” Haleigh removed the plates from the table and carried them into the kitchen. “The food was delicious.”

“Willie nearly begged to have you over. But it seems natural to have you here. Aubrey will be glad to see you.” Mrs. White put leftovers into storage dishes.

Having her over for dinner was Willie’s idea? “Willie told me Aubrey would be glad. I wasn’t sure.”

Mrs. White set an empty bowl in the sink. “Haleigh, I won’t pry, but if you need someone to talk to, woman to woman, I have good listening ears. I don’t have as much opportunity to hand out advice since my children are adults now.”

“My mom says the same thing.” She placed the plates in the dishwasher. Even her own mother didn’t know all that happened when the Three Sisters broke up.

“So, how did things go at Floral Creations today?”

“I think well. His flowers are beautiful, and he obviously loves his work. You must be proud of him.” Haleigh found places for a couple of bowls.

Mrs. White opened the refrigerator and put away containers of leftovers. “You didn’t know, but there was a time we thought we were losing Willie. During high school, he really questioned God and his faith.”

Haleigh paused with a serving bowl in her hand. “Willie always seemed so stable, so sure. Always ... Willie.”

“I’m glad you didn’t have to see him then. It wasn’t open rebellion, but a kind of apathy. He was like a lost soul looking for direction.” She closed the refrigerator door. “We’re not sure what triggered it, maybe his sister’s accident, but he had a rough time for a while.”

“What happened? He seems okay now.”

“We had a revival one weekend at church. The messages on God’s faithfulness and our commitment really struck a chord with him. He’s been pretty focused ever since.”

“Is he seeing anyone special?” She moved dishes around in the dishwasher, her back to the older woman.

Willie’s mother hesitated. “I’m not sure.”

“Oh.” What was Mrs. White not saying? Tia? Were Willie and Tia more than just employer and employee? It really wasn’t her business.

Haleigh checked the counters and table to make sure she hadn’t missed any dishes and then closed the dishwasher door. “There, that’s about it.” She washed her hands and dried them.

“Thanks so much for your help. My guys help me in the kitchen, but it’s nice to have another woman around the house for a change.”

“You’re welcome.”

Mrs. White turned on the dishwasher then snapped off the light as they left the kitchen.

Willie and Jesse had set up the Monopoly board on the

coffee table. Jesse grinned. "Are you up for a challenge, Haleigh? Mom, Dad, how about it?"

Soon they were all intent on the game. Haleigh, ahead at one point, sat back to relax, keeping her eyes on the board. "So, Jesse, what are your plans?"

"Military. I've joined the Air Force. I go sometime in the fall." Jesse almost upset the Monopoly board when he spread out his arms like wings. "I attended college for two years and have an associate's degree in Criminal Justice, but I've always wanted to join the Air Force. Dad let me get a pilot's license. Want to come with me?" He grinned at her.

She shouldn't be surprised at his choice. Jesse's energy needed to be channeled in a beneficial way. But the thought of another big change made her stomach clench.

"Maybe to be in charge of a flying dog unit?"

Everyone laughed at her quip, and her stomach relaxed.

"Willie told us about your dog. We're so sorry." Mr. White pushed the Monopoly board back into position.

"When I went home for spring break, she was grumpy and touchy, not at all like herself. I took her to see the vet, and he said it was cancer." Her voice wobbled. "When I had her put down, it hurt almost as much as when Gram died."

Willie handed her the box of tissues.

"I'm surprised Aubrey didn't tell us." Jesse groaned as he landed on Park Place, owned by Haleigh.

"I haven't talked to Jeremy since graduation. I'm sure they've been busy." And talking about Sunshine hurt too much. Probably Mom or Dad had told Jason and Jeremy by now. "Pay up, Jess." She held out her hand. With another moan, Jesse counted out the rent payment and laid it in her hand.

First Mrs. White, then Mr. White, then Haleigh went bankrupt. The game ended with a fierce competition between the brothers.

"Hah, big brother, I beat you but good," Jesse gloated.

Willie took his ribbing with a grin. "Next time."

As Willie drove her home that evening, Haleigh laid her head back against the van seat, contented. Even though she'd isolated herself from them for six years, the Whites had welcomed her into their home and hearts.

Willie pulled up in front of the log home in a matter of minutes. He switched off the ignition and turned toward Haleigh, his left arm resting on the steering wheel.

"It was fun, Willie, uh, Will." Haleigh grimaced and Willie laughed. "Your family has always been special to me."

His eyes met hers. "How about Friday? Aubrey will be home, and we all want you to come over."

Haleigh dropped her gaze. "Are you sure Aubrey will really want to see me?"

Without answering, he got out of the van and came around to open Haleigh's door. She tried to think of something to say as they walked up to the front door, an uncomfortable silence between them. When she found the key in her purse, Willie took it from her and unlocked the door, then handed it back to her. He leaned against the door frame, only inches from her.

"I know I tease, Haleigh, but do you think I'm a liar?"

It took a lot to ruffle Willie's feelings. Her question had obviously done it. "I-I'm sorry, Willie. I didn't mean to imply you lied."

"Apology accepted. You will come on Friday?"

Haleigh nodded and fumbled to open the door.

"See you tomorrow, Halo." Willie walked back to the van and left.

How could she have ruined an otherwise perfect evening? She hadn't intended to hurt Willie's feelings.

Why did what happened six years ago still affect her so much? Willie had once said she should get on with her life. Did Mom and Dad encourage her to return to Greenlawn because they knew she had unfinished business here?

Sleep didn't come easily that night. She missed her dog. For an hour she tossed and turned in bed, then got up to get a drink

of water and gaze through the kitchen window into the shadows of the back yard. Would she ever make up for her mistakes?



ON THURSDAY AND FRIDAY, Haleigh and Tia ran the shop while Willie and Jesse worked on their first landscaping project at a new home on the outskirts of Greenlawn. Nearly the entire population of Greenlawn must have stopped in on those two days, swamping Floral Creations with business. They barely had time to eat lunch. Because Sunday was Mother's Day, Willie had asked both her and Tia to plan on working all day Saturday.

Haleigh stood beside the counter, tempted to put her head down for a nap, when Mr. Evans, the groundskeeper at the Senior Home, came in on Friday afternoon. Haleigh had always liked the old man and his wife. She greeted him with a smile. "Hello, Mr. Evans."

"Well, well, if it isn't little Haleigh Abbott, all grown up." His smile made his eyes crinkle. "The wife and I were talking about you just the other day, wondering what you were doing. Are you still taking your dog around?"

Haleigh shook her head. "No, Mr. Evans, I don't have Sunshine anymore. She died."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. You made quite a pair. It's like losing a family member when you lose a pet."

Nodding, she bit her lip to keep from crying.

He tapped his fingers on the counter. "Now, I'm needing some potted plants for the Home. Used to grow my own, you know, but these old bones protest at times now. I see you have some nice annuals for the flower beds too."

She and Gram had often admired Mr. Evans's flowers at the Senior Home. "We have some lovely fuchsias and petunias in hanging baskets that will be just right, Mr. Evans. Here, let me show you." She led him into the greenhouse.

"So, you're working for young Will now? As I remember, your



grandmother had a real green thumb, could grow just about anything.”

“Yes, Gram missed working with her flowers after her stroke. She taught me a lot, so when Willie ... ah, Will found out I needed a job, he offered me this one.”

Mr. Evans examined the baskets of flowers and chose eight, along with six flats of annuals. “These are quite nice. Your young man has established quite a reputation for himself. Has people coming from all over.”

Why did Mr. Evans call Willie her young man? Haleigh pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “Will has always loved growing flowers, so I’m not surprised. He’s not my young man, though. We’re just friends.”

They each carried two hanging baskets to the counter. “Here you go. Tia, will you take care of Mr. Evans? I’ll bring the rest of the baskets.”

After he paid Tia, Haleigh helped him load his purchases into the back of his truck.

“These are going to look nice. Will you put them around the circular walk in back?” She listened as he explained his plans.

As he drove away, Tia snickered. “You know Mr. Evans?”

“Yes, my grandmother lived in the Senior Home for a while. Since she couldn’t grow her own anymore, she always appreciated Mr. Evans’s flowers. Mrs. Evans worked as activities director there, and she helped me get into the therapy program with my dog.”

“He’s a funny old man, but I enjoy his visits. He comes in often.” Tia brushed her bangs away from her forehead. “I think the amount we’ve sold over the last couple of days will please Will.” She paused, running her hand along the back counter where Haleigh busied herself with an arrangement ordered for late afternoon. “You’ve known Will for a long time.”

“Will’s sister Aubrey, another girl, and I were best friends in elementary school. Our families all attended Greenlawn

Community Church together, and we spent a lot of time together. Aubrey's brothers are like brothers to me."

It was true. She still thought of them that way. Willie and Jesse both welcomed her back, almost as though she'd imagined her six years of self-exile.

"Oh." Tia examined her nails. "I just wondered."

What if she could go back and live her life over? Would she make the same foolish mistakes? And would she be back in Greenlawn after college, wondering what she should do with the rest of her life?