



*K*atie arrived back in Greenlawn on Monday morning, her brain and notebook filled with useful ideas for the church drama program. She called her mother.

“I’m home, Mom. I had a good visit with Grandma, and she sends her love. The conference was spectacular. I can’t wait to use some of the ideas they presented.”

“I can tell you’re excited. I’m glad you can use your talent for drama in church.” Mom had been happy when Katie chose a nursing career over acting, but she affirmed Katie’s love for drama.

Should she tell her mother about her date with Nathan West? It would trigger Dad’s ire if Mom told him, and she probably would. Katie finished her call without mentioning Nathan or the date.

Recalling her father’s reaction to her pregnancy, she laid her hand over her heart.

“How could you do this, Katie?” Her father’s furious, accusing words had struck her like hammer blows. “What will my clients and the law community think?”

Her busy lawyer father didn’t have much time for her back

then. He cared more about his standing in the community and his reputation in the courtroom than about his own daughter. They'd stopped going to church as a family. Mom and Dad argued often and worked a lot. Katie spent too much time as a latchkey kid.

One day she invited Nathan into the house when her parents were both at work, a mistake she'd always regret, and one she never repeated. She'd failed her father and her mother, her friends, and God.

The first time she ever saw her father cry was the day she gave her baby away. After that, he took more time for Mom and her, and they became a real family again.

Although an adult now and living on her own, she couldn't risk Dad's anger if he knew she'd agreed to a date with Nathan.

She didn't tell anyone about it, not even Haleigh.

Should she call Nathan and cancel the date? Going out with him might encourage him to think she wanted a relationship with him even though she'd told him *no*. Was it fair to Nathan?



WHEN THE DAY nurse called in with a family emergency on Friday, Katie agreed to work on her day off. She entered the common room at the Senior Home, and her breath caught. Jackson Stone, seated beside Mary Davis, an elderly resident, looked up. He stood as their eyes connected. She took a deep breath and tried to calm the butterflies in her stomach, determined to maintain a professional demeanor.

"Have you met David's grandson Jackson, Miss Mann?" Mary rested her hand on Jackson's arm.

Jackson's face brightened with a smile, and he stepped toward her. "Katie Mann, I didn't know you worked here."

His smile sent a tingle to her toes. Katie had turned down several dates with him during college. None of her college friends, including Jackson, knew about the baby. She didn't talk

about him, and she didn't want to answer questions. She chose group activities with male and female friends rather than personal dates. She hadn't seen Jackson since graduation, and she hadn't thought about him at all.

"Hello, Jackson." His hazel eyes, short, wavy, brown hair, and a smile that lit up his face made her heart race double-time. She tried to remain cool as she handed Mary a small cup containing pills and some water from the tray she carried. "What brings you to Greenlawn?"

"I'm here to visit my grandfather."

"Your grandfather?" She frowned, then smiled. "Oh, Mary said you're David Stone's grandson!" She looked around. "Where is he, by the way?"

Mary's eyes moved from her to Jackson and back. "I see you've met."

"I had the pleasure of meeting Katie in college, and Grandpa went to his room to get some pictures to show us." His face beamed as he turned back to her. "If you have time, maybe you'd like to see them."

"I'm on duty. I'm sorry, I don't have time right now." She'd like many moments to spend with Jackson just then. "But I'll be back to give David his meds."

"I'm disappointed, Katie. I thought you'd come back to see me, but I've been usurped by my grandfather." His wink brought warmth to her face, and the tray she held trembled slightly. Mary watched them, a glint in her eyes and a grin on her lips.

Katie bit her lip to keep from laughing as she moved away.

She worked her way through the group of residents who sat in the common room—some putting together jigsaw puzzles, some playing board games, some watching television, and some just sitting, looking lonely. She had a kind word for each of them, stopping to give an occasional hug or a pat on the shoulder. It was important for them to have someone acknowledge them, and she loved watching their faces brighten.

Several aides circulated among the residents, handing out

drinks. A family with children visited with one woman, and the children interacted with all the residents seated nearby. How they all enjoyed children's visits.



JACKSON SAW SAD, lonely faces light up at Katie's words or touch. Her bright hair lay in a braid down her back, her green eyes sparkled, and her complexion glowed. During college, Jackson had been puzzled by the wall this vibrant young woman put up when he tried to get close to her. Now he had another chance to get to know her better.

"I've known Katie for as long as I've been here." Mary's voice startled him back to awareness. "She used to come with her friends when my friend, Amanda, lived here."

"She really connects with the residents." The more he knew about Katie, the more he wanted to know. She seemed different today, more relaxed and open than she'd ever been with him before. In fact, if he read her correctly, she invited his attention.

"Her mother's a nurse, and her father's a lawyer. Although she used to visit Amanda Abbott, I hadn't seen her for several years. A few months ago, she showed up here as a nurse. And a good one too. She brightens everyone's day."

He could see that. He couldn't pull his eyes away.

"Why don't you ask her out?"

His head swiveled toward the elderly woman. "What?" Warmth crept up his neck to his ears. Had his attraction for Katie been that obvious? "I-I'm not sure I should. And I'm not sure she would go, even if I asked."

Mary tipped her head and gestured with her hand. "She's single, doesn't wear anyone's ring, and she's pretty. I can tell you want to do it, Jackson. I'm just giving you a nudge in the right direction."

Jackson shook his head and groaned. The old woman chuckled.

His grandfather returned and said, "What's the joke? What did I miss?" He sat down in a chair next to Mary, propped his cane against the table, and laid a scrapbook on the surface.

"I'm just giving Jackson some advice about his love life, David." Mary winked at Jackson.

Jackson wished he could leave before he made a complete fool of himself. He caught Katie's eye as she headed back their way with his grandfather's medication. Her smile left him nearly breathless, and his insides vibrated with a nervous tremor.

"If it's about that young, red-headed nurse, Mary, I applaud you. She's a real keeper."

Jackson looked at his grandfather. "What makes you think she'd be interested in me, Grandpa?" Grandpa may be old, but he didn't miss anything.

His grandfather looked from him to the approaching nurse. He opened the scrapbook and said loudly enough for Katie to hear, "Why don't you ask her for a date."

Heat rushed into his face. True, he'd never know if he didn't ask, but what if he asked and she refused?

"Here's your medicine, David." Katie handed the old man a small paper cup with pills and another with water. He downed the pills quickly and handed both cups back to her.

Tongue-tied, Jackson remained quiet. If he spoke, he'd stutter or say something stupid. He felt like a seventh-grader whose *friends* had embarrassed him in front of a girl he liked. It wouldn't matter if he didn't care so much. When she turned questioning eyes toward him, he just shrugged.

The sparkle in Katie's eyes dimmed, and her posture stiffened. If he could only find the right words.

"Do you remember when this picture was taken, Jackson?" his grandfather asked. "You must have been twelve or thirteen."

His thoughts distracted from Katie, Jackson looked at the photograph his grandfather pointed to and nodded. "Yes, we went to the Grand Canyon." He tried to sound interested. It had been a great vacation. "And rode donkeys."

“That was the last year my dear wife could travel, Mary. My son’s family went with us.”

“My husband and I always wanted to go.” Mary sighed. “But we never got there.”

“Well, I have work to do. I’ll see you later.” Katie turned.

Grandpa raised his hand as Katie walked away. Mary nodded, and Jackson managed to squeak out, “Okay.” He wanted to ask her for that date, but Katie’s expression no longer invited attention.

As the nurse disappeared into the hallway, he tuned out the old people and paced slowly with his hands in his pockets. He’d missed his chance, but he wanted to try again. If he left now, maybe he could find her.

He stopped pacing and spoke to his grandfather. “I think I’ll go now, Grandpa. It was good to see you, and you, too, Mrs. Davis.” He bent to hug the old man, and he gently squeezed the hand the woman offered.

Grandpa looked up, surprised. “You’re going already, Jackson? You usually stay longer. I thought you’d look through this photo album with us.”

Jackson shook his head. “I know, but I’ll do it next time. I have some things to do.” When his grandfather started to get up, he put his hand on the old man’s shoulder. “No, you don’t have to get up. I’ll try to get back to visit you soon. Dad said to tell you he’d be here next week.”

“All right, son. Take it easy.”

“Sure, Grandpa.” Guilt stabbed Jackson when he saw disappointment on his grandfather’s face. He loved the old man, and they’d always been close. “Like two peas in a pod,” his grandmother used to say. Jackson didn’t tell him he hoped for a chance to speak with Katie.

Katie stood in the doorway of one of the rooms down the hall, talking to the occupant. He watched her from a distance, her voice and laughter sounding like music to him, and his belly wobbled. Instead of waiting to speak to her, he turned and

escaped out the door and to his dark blue SUV. Leaning back against the seat, he took a deep breath and blew it out.

A water main break had closed school today, so he came to visit Grandpa and discovered Katie Mann. Jackson's gift for teaching and building relationships with his middle school students didn't carry over into building a relationship with Katie. She'd refused to date him before, and he'd messed up his opportunity to ask her again.

As he drove down Main Street, he passed Floral Creations. Maybe he could send Katie a bouquet of flowers. He shook his head. Too soon. He didn't know her home address anyway, and having a bouquet sent to her at work was too public for their relationship, which they didn't have—yet.

Since it was close to noon, he stopped at Hillside Diner for lunch. They had good food, and he needed a little time to work out a plan.



KATIE STAYED busy and tried to avoid thinking about Jackson Stone. She didn't know a lot about him, and she'd misread his interest.

If Jackson had asked her out, she would have ... what? Refused him? Maybe, maybe not. On the other hand, Jackson's interest may have been sincere, and she had shut him out too soon.

Why would she choose to go out with Nathan when so far she'd refused to go out with anyone else? She sighed. Maybe she was just tired of being alone all the time. Was she being fair to Nathan by making him think she wanted a second chance with him? She still had time to cancel their date.

Foolishly opening herself to be hurt by another guy, she kept herself busy so she wouldn't dwell on that hurt.

"Jackson said he knew you in college?"

Her fingers paused over the keyboard, and she looked up

from the computer screen into the twinkling eyes of David Stone. He leaned against the counter.

Katie nodded. "I had some English and history classes with him. The nursing program required summer school, so we finished earlier than the others, but I graduated with him. I still had to take state tests to get licensed, and that took a lot of studying."

"Did you pass at the top of your class?"

"I did okay." She shrugged and smiled. "And now I'm working here."

"And I, for one, am glad you are, Nurse Katie."

"Why, thank you, sir." Such a sweet man. She envisioned Jackson looking just like him in forty or fifty years. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"No, I'm headed back to my room for a while to read. Your shift is about over, and I wanted to say good night before you left."

She chuckled. "It's a little early for *goodnight*, but sweet dreams, David."

"And the same to you, Nurse Katie." He winked as he turned away and headed down the hall.

Resting her chin in her palm, she watched him. What a special man. She loved him like her own grandfather. And Jackson was like him in so many ways.

She left when the next shift nurse came in. Time to get ready for her date with Nathan. Too late to cancel now.