



Stay  
with  
me

A Misty River Romance

BECKY WADE

Author of the 2018 Christy Award Book of the Year

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with  
Me

Misty River Romance

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For Rel Mollet, Crissy Loughridge, Amy Watson, and Joy Tiffany.  
Thank you so much for your generous help with this novel.

# Genevieve

JULY 12, EIGHTEEN YEARS AGO  
SAN SALVADOR, EL SALVADOR  
JUNIOR HIGH MISSION TRIP

The hallway floor jolts downward beneath my feet, throwing me off balance. The mesh bags full of soccer balls I'm holding bump against the concrete walls of the basement hallway. "Wh-what?" I gasp. *What's happening?*

The building lurches from side to side more violently.

It's not me that's unstable. It's the earth. Through my tennis shoes and the concrete floor, I can feel movement coming up from deep, deep below.

"Earthquake!" a boy ahead of me shouts as terror clamps my heart.

The ground begins to roll and the lightbulb hanging from the ceiling blinks out.

## CHAPTER ONE

Like Papa Bear in the Goldilocks story, Sam Turner had discovered a strange woman sleeping in the bed of a house he owned.

He stood inside Sugar Maple Farm's small guesthouse, hands on his hips, staring down at her as mid-August sunlight flooded the space through the uncovered windows. Neither the sunlight nor the sound of his entrance just now had woken her.

Was she dead?

A bolt of worry pierced him hard, so he leaned over to make sure he could see the rise and fall of her breathing. He could.

Good. Interruptions to his routine and his solitude weren't part of his plans any day of the week. Discovering a dead woman definitely hadn't been part of this particular Monday morning's plans.

What he had here was a trespasser, very much alive, who'd decided to help herself to his guesthouse.

She'd stretched out on the only piece of furniture in the place: a bed. Back when he'd moved onto this property four years ago, he'd taken this metal headboard and frame out of the main house and stored it here. More recently, he'd added the mattress and box spring set he'd received as a hand-me-down from his dad.

This stranger didn't seem to mind that the mattress was bare. Or that the guesthouse offered nothing but old pine floors and a cold fireplace.

She'd made do by cracking open her suitcase and tossing every item of clothing onto the bed to function as her sheet. She'd cov-

ered her bottom half with a black jacket and slipped her top half into a pink robe. Except she'd turned the robe the wrong way, so that the robe's back covered her front.

Her head rested on a light blue pillow, chin tipped to the side in a way that revealed a pretty profile. The smoothness of her expression communicated deep, worryless dreams. Due to his responsibilities and regrets, Sam couldn't remember sleeping that soundly since he was a kid.

She had prominent cheekbones, a delicate nose, a perfectly shaped mouth. Her hair started out a medium brown color near her scalp then magically, through some kind of dye job he couldn't imagine, started to turn different, lighter blond colors toward the ends. Her hair was big, but she was small. When she stood, he'd bet that hair would fall almost to her waist.

She wore makeup on her flawless skin. Large silver earrings. A ring with three interlocking silver bands, each band set with diamonds.

Had she come straight from a photo shoot to break and enter his guesthouse?

"Hello," he said.

No response.

One of his eyebrows twitched with irritation. "Excuse me," he tried, slightly louder. He didn't want to terrify her by raising his voice or by shaking her shoulder. "Hello?"

Nothing.

"Good morning, Miss?"

Not even an eyelid flickered. Most likely, she'd taken too much of some kind of substance. Sleeping pills, alcohol, drugs?

Sam picked up the huge purse that slumped on the floor beside a pair of tall leather boots. As far as he was concerned, she'd forfeited her right to privacy as soon as she'd become a squatter on his property. Grimly, he squashed a flash of conscience and rummaged past car keys, sunnies, a zippered case, feminine products,

and a cell phone before pulling free her wallet. Within it, he found the usual credit and debit cards, then the thing he'd been looking for—her driver's license.

It read *Genevieve Woodward* next to a picture of her smiling brightly. She'd been born three years after him, which made her thirty. Her height was listed as 5'4" and her weight as 125. Eye color: hazel. Address: Nashville. Which meant, here in the north Georgia mountains, that she was more than a four-hour drive from home.

The last name *Woodward* stirred his recognition. Judson Woodward served as their county's district attorney. Sam had talked with him and his wife, Caroline, a couple of times. They had two adult daughters. Was *this* one of their daughters? If so, why would she have slept at his farm when her parents' house in town was only fifteen minutes away?

He carried her car keys into the cool morning and unlocked her Volvo XC-40. The compact SUV's interior smelled like the beach, crisp and fresh. He lifted items—a pink sweater, a laptop—as he searched for the substance she'd likely taken last night. A Starbucks travel mug filled one cup holder, hair bands and a lip gloss the other. In the back seat, a bag full of books and notebooks rested on the floor.

No liquor bottles. No drug paraphernalia.

Even so, his instincts were telling him that something was off.

He made a scoffing sound. He didn't need Sherlock's instincts to know something was off. Any ten-year-old kid would know that sleeping on a bare mattress in a stranger's empty house wasn't what sober women did.

He strode back inside. Genevieve hadn't moved.

As he returned her keys to her purse, his attention landed on a metallic silver tin tucked in a side pocket. He pulled it free. Around the size of a box of Altoids, a cursive *G* engraved its top. He flicked the case open. Inside rested at least forty pills.

The pills were round and brown. Some marked with *OP*, others with *20*.

OxyContin.

He frowned as old memories slithered into his mind. Terrible memories that made his body brace and his stomach tighten with grief.

Grief and regret were never far from him.

They walked beside him every day. Laid down with him at night. Waited for chances to punch him in the gut and remind him of his failures.

For seven years, they'd been his two closest companions.

Oxy required a prescription. Either Genevieve had gotten these legally and was taking them for justified medical reasons. Or . . . not. Given where he'd found her, he was leaning toward the latter.

He returned the metal tin to her purse and moved to stand at her bedside.

Oxy. A fashionable suitcase. Successful father. New car. China doll face. A pillow that traveled with her so that she didn't have to lay her precious head on anyone else's pillow.

Genevieve Woodward was messy in ways that had nothing to do with organization, and Sam didn't do mess.

He wanted *nothing* to do with her. In fact, he wanted her far away from him as fast as possible.

"Genevieve," he said.

She didn't stir.

"*Genevieve.*"

Genevieve jerked awake on a yelp that sent her lunging into a seated position. Her heart whacked against her chest wall. Confused and startled, she squinted against the sunshine.

A *man*—an unfamiliar man—stood nearby, staring at her.

Panic vanquished every shred of sleep from her brain.

*Where am I?* She was . . . sitting on a bed in an unfamiliar

room. Automatically, she scrambled away from him until her back clunked against the metal headboard.

The man took two steps back, holding up his palms. “No need to be afraid. My name’s Sam Turner, and you’re inside my guest-house at Sugar Maple Farm.”

*Did he slip me a roofie and kidnap me?* Her thoughts careened against the inside of her skull like horrified marbles. He didn’t look like a kidnapper! But how was she supposed to know what kidnappers looked like?

“As far as I can tell, you broke in, then decided to spend the night.” He spoke with what sounded like a British accent. Moving slowly, he slid his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. “When I saw your car this morning, I came to investigate. You’re not hurt as far as I can tell.”

Perish! *What!* No. She hadn’t broken into this person’s guest-house, then . . . slept here.

Had she?

She’d been driving to her parents’ house last night. She’d been stressed and anxious about the magnitude of her workload. She hadn’t been able to face the prospect of confronting her parents about the letter on top of all that. So she’d pulled over to the side of the road out in the country.

With a pang, she remembered reaching for her tin of pills. She’d reclined the driver’s seat and turned up her car’s sound system, letting hip-hop wash over her. She’d only intended to take a little break and get her head straight before continuing on.

Except . . . She vaguely recalled admiring the way the bronze sunset illuminated a quaint little white cottage set far back from the road. The cottage nestled into a meadow above a pond, hills forming its backdrop. Postcard perfect.

After that, she could only latch on to hazy recollections. Parking before the cottage. Brushing a fingertip over a morning glory vine. Opening a door that squeaked. Oh no . . .

Despite its outward cuteness, she could now see that the cottage's interior—just one large room and a bathroom—was not at all her style. She valued security and comfort. This structure was unprotected except by a doorknob lock, and empty, minus the bed.

Genevieve glanced down. Was the bed covered with . . . a jumble of her own clothing? A particularly colorful bra was on embarrassing display. Her familiar pillow bore her head's indention. She had her robe on backward.

No one but her would know she couldn't sleep unless she slept on her own pillow, so no one but her would have bothered to bring it inside. Also, the fact that she had her robe on backward had her fingerprints all over it. She often slipped this robe on just this way when chilly.

How very, very far she'd fallen.

While not in her right mind, she'd spent the night in a stranger's cottage. She had no one in the world to blame for her stupidity but herself.

In a bid to inject a sense of normalcy into the situation, Genevieve scooted to the edge of the bed and swung her feet to the floor. She still wore yesterday's clothing, including gray socks decorated with the words *I'm complicated, thank you very much*.

As she stood and wrestled out of her wrong-way robe, it occurred to her that normalcy and this situation were mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, her pride commanded her to save face.

"I'm Genevieve Woodward." She extended her hand.

Guardedly, he shook it. He did not reply.

"Well then." Her mouth felt like cotton and dizziness sloshed inside her, but she drew herself tall. Smoothing the turquoise print blouse she'd paired with skinny jeans, she angled her head up because Sam was so much taller than she was. "Just so you know, I don't usually sleep in homes that don't belong to me." She glued a smile to her lips.

Instead of smiling back, he considered her with frank seriousness.

He had a fantastic body. Army green T-shirt, jeans, weather-beaten lace-up work boots. He kept his short brown hair shaved on the sides. His nose was a fraction too long, his eyes creased in a way that made them look melancholy. His teeth were straight, but not orthodontically straight. His faintly imperfect masculine features added up to an undeniably appealing face.

People usually responded well to her. But Sam's pale green eyes, which struck a contrast against his slightly olive skin tone, transmitted no warmth whatsoever.

"Care to tell me why you slept here?" he asked.

"I . . ." She worked to invent a fairy tale he'd believe. "I was on my way to my parents' house in Misty River last night. I'd been on the road for hours and was tired. Scary tired. So tired I couldn't keep my head up."

He said nothing.

"So I pulled over. Near here, I guess." She gestured toward the road.

"And?"

"I didn't want to fall asleep at the wheel and injure anyone, so I decided to grab a quick rest."

"In a vacant building?"

"Yes." She tucked her hair behind her ears. "I'm very sorry. Obviously, I was so sleepy that I wasn't thinking clearly."

"The box of pills I found in your purse didn't have anything to do with it?"

Shock immobilized her. "You . . . looked through my purse?"

"Yes. I couldn't wake you and wanted to know what I was dealing with."

Her purse was private. She couldn't say that to him, however. For one thing, she was too polite to do so. For another, he'd simply respond by saying that his cottage was private, too. "My doctor prescribed those pills for pain."

"What kind of pain?"

She knelt and pulled up the hem of her jeans to reveal the scar marking her outer right ankle. “Ankle surgery pain.”

“How long ago did you bust up your ankle?”

A blush bloomed on her cheeks. “A while.”

“How long is a while?”

She straightened. “A year.”

“And you’re still taking OxyContin for pain?”

“I am, yes.” Only one other person knew about her pills. And now, him. He knew.

He regarded her the way a teacher would a student who’d just told him she’d been too busy riding unicorns to finish her homework.

This was mortifying! How could this purse-snooping man with the alluring face and zero sympathy have uncovered her secret so suddenly and so thoroughly?

“Is your father the DA?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Do he and your mom know?”

She flinched. *My parents*. Heaven help her, they’d been expecting her to arrive last night and were probably frantic with worry. She was a terrible, *terrible* human being. She yanked her phone from her purse and saw that she had twelve missed calls and twenty-three text messages.

Thrusting her phone into her back pocket, she began tossing armloads of clothing into her suitcase. “Are you asking if my parents know that I slept here last night? Because unfortunately, the answer’s no.”

“I’m asking if they know about your prescription drug habit.”

She stilled momentarily, then resumed packing with even more gusto. “I don’t have a prescription drug habit.” She zipped the suitcase and wedged her feet into her boots.

“What kind of work do you do, Genevieve?”

“I’m an author and speaker.”

“An author of what?”

She stuck her pillow under her arm and faced him. “Bible studies.”

His brows lifted.

“I apologize for sleeping in your cottage last night,” she said.  
“I’m more than happy to pay you to cover any expenses.”

“Don’t bother.”

“Alrighty, then! Um. Thank you.”

He simply glared.

She rushed toward her Volvo carrying her belongings. His footfalls followed as far as the cottage’s porch. She heaved everything into her trunk, then hurried around to the driver’s seat, desperate to escape Sam Turner’s knowing stare.

## Luke

The sudden darkness steals my view of the shaking basement. My heart thunders almost as loud as the building rumbles. *Earthquake*. A few minutes ago, our youth pastor asked some of us to put away the sports equipment we used today at camp. I know where it's stored, so I'm in front. I'm leading them—responsible for them. And now I have to find my brother, Ethan, and get him and the rest of the kids out of this hallway into the room ahead, where it's safer.

I reach back into nothingness. I reach farther and connect with someone's arm. I drag the person forward into the central room where the basement's two hallways meet. There are pillars here. Arches. Two thin windows set high at sidewalk level. Their light reveals Ben's face.

"What do we do?" he screams, his eyes round.

"You wait here. I'll get the others." I plunge back into the hallway.