

MISTY WILLOW · BOOK ONE

WHERE SHE  
*Belongs*  
A NOVEL

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Johnnie Alexander, *Where She Belongs*  
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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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To Hebe

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*my sister, friend, and alpaca-wrangling buddy*

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My prayer is that God brings us all into spacious places.

He brought me out into a spacious place;  
he rescued me because he delighted in me.

I will be glad and rejoice in your love . . .  
You have not given me into the hands of the enemy  
but have set my feet in a spacious place.

Psalms 18:19; 31:7–8 NIV

In an upstairs room as neglected as all the others, AJ Sullivan flicked the grime from a broad fireplace mantel, then rubbed his fingers on his jeans. Mahogany. Whoever built this place had used the best materials. But more than 150 years later, no one cared.

Except some woman who was about to free him from this millstone.

Pulling her letter from his pocket, he walked across the pitted wood floor to the bay windows. Sunlight filtered through tall, narrow shutters hanging askew on their hinges. He gingerly opened one, and a spider scooted across the marble sill. Through the unwashed glass, dust motes danced in the sun's beam.

He didn't need the light to read the letter. Shelby Kincaid's emotional plea to buy the house scraped an ache he'd thought was buried. When he'd shown the letter to his grandmother, her agitated response had plucked at his heart as desperately as her arthritic fingers had plucked at his shirt sleeve.

He scratched his arm, barely aware of the gesture as Gran's words echoed in his mind. *Find a way. Bring peace to the past.*

Tires crunched on gravel, and a motor accelerated a few seconds then idled. He peered through the angled bay window. A

slender woman stood by a beige sedan near the end of the drive. Though she was too far away to make out her features, there was something pensive about the way she stared at the house. Chestnut hair blew across her cheek, and she gracefully tucked it behind her ear.

She had to be Shelby Kincaid—the woman who so desperately wanted this forsaken place. He hadn't expected to meet her until their afternoon appointment to sign the papers at Richard Grayson's office.

After a moment, Shelby slid into the driver's seat and drove at a snail's pace toward the house. She steered the car around the lane's deep ruts and parked near the porch behind his Jeep Cherokee.

As she emerged from the car, sunshine reflected the golden highlights in her shoulder-length hair. A frown puckered her delicate features as she gazed at the house. When she looked upward, AJ's pulse quickened, and he stepped back from the window.

She'd be coming into the house any moment, and here he was feeling as awkward as one of his freshman students on a first date. Time to pretend to be Cary Grant, Gran's favorite movie star.

He tucked the letter into his pocket and bounded down the stairs. One of the thick exterior doors stood ajar, just as he'd left it when he entered the house. He stepped onto the decrepit porch. Shelby, wearing boot-cut jeans and a V-neck sweater, stood on the bottom step, fiddling with her watch.

"Hey, there," he said. "You must be Shelby Kincaid."

She jumped, her startled green eyes softening as she faced him and exhaled.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you. I'm—"

"My hero." She flashed an excited smile and extended her hand. "I'm so glad you're here. The place is quite a mess, isn't it?"

"Not surprising." As he took her hand, a long-forgotten warmth charged through him. "It's been empty more than a decade."

She flushed and quickly withdrew her hand. "Ever since the Sullivans stole it."

"Stole it?" He took off his Ohio State ball cap and tapped it

against his leg, unsure whether to be amused or insulted. “You’re kidding, right?”

“This house was built by my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather.” She grinned at the repetition and lightly caressed the wooden porch railing. The splintered white paint chipped beneath her fingers. “I just have a hard time understanding . . . I mean, what kind of person takes a family’s home and leaves it empty year after year?”

AJ had never given a thought to how his grandfather acquired the Lassiter farm. After inheriting it, AJ had cared even less. Still, the old man must have had his reasons. “A shrewd businessman?” he asked.

“There’s nothing shrewd about letting a perfectly good house go to ruin.”

Good point. “A man with a grudge?”

“Against my grandfather?” Shelby seemed to drift into the past, her eyes tender in memory. “There was no finer man. I don’t think he had any enemies.”

“It’s a mystery then.” She didn’t need to know that Granddad had enjoyed his grudges. Or that the old man collected enemies like trophies. AJ leaned against the porch railing and grinned. “Anyway, you’re here now, taking the old homestead back from the evil Sullivans.”

Shelby’s eyes brightened with anticipation. “That’s right. In just a few hours, the farm will be mine. Back in the family where it belongs.”

“Do you plan to live here?”

“Absolutely. How long do you think it will be before we can move in?”

“I have no idea.”

“I suppose all the wiring will have to be replaced. Have you checked it out?”

He pointed at his chest. “Me? Why would I do that?”

“That’s why I hired you . . .” Her brow furrowed. “You’re not the contractor?”

“High school history teacher. And assistant football coach. Varsity.”

“AJ Sullivan.” She practically spat his name as she wrapped her arms around her stomach.

“Guilty.”

“Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“Personal day.”

“What are you doing here?”

“It’s been awhile. Thought I should see what I’m signing away.”

“This house doesn’t mean anything to you, does it?”

Only a reminder of Granddad’s unrelenting anger. A legacy he wished he could forget.

He spread his hands in a placating gesture. “What happened in the past doesn’t matter. I don’t want this place; you do. After we sign the papers, it’s as good as yours.”

“Why didn’t you take care of it?” Her voice was a raw whisper.

Gazing into her eyes, dull with tension, he struggled to come up with an answer. The truth would pain her, but anything less seemed dishonorable.

AJ twisted to face the road as a dusty white pickup turned into the lane. Saved by the contractor.

“You hired Nate Jeffers. Good choice.”

“You know him?”

“His son’s my best running back.” AJ jumped over the broken steps, then turned and offered Shelby his hand. After a moment’s hesitation, she took it and stepped warily over the split boards.

The contractor greeted them, clipboard in hand, and smiled broadly as AJ made introductions.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Mr. Jeffers,” Shelby said. “You come highly recommended.”

“Glad to hear it. I talked to your uncle Richard just a few minutes ago. He said to tell you he couldn’t get away from the bank right now, but he’ll see you in his office this afternoon.”

“Thanks for letting me know.”

Nate scanned the exterior of the house, craning his neck upward to see the aged widow's walk above the porch roof. "The old Lassiter homestead. I can't tell you how honored I am to work on this place. I moseyed about the place yesterday. Shall we go inside?"

"Could you give me a moment first?" Shelby asked.

"Take your time. Coach and I can walk around the outside." He strolled to the corner of the porch and knelt by the foundation.

AJ faced Shelby. "Are you all right?"

"Fine."

"I saw a spider upstairs," he said lightly, but she averted her gaze. The Cary Grant charm didn't seem to be working.

"Please tell me." She stared at the ground, her voice so low he leaned closer to hear her. "Why didn't you take care of the house?"

"I kept the yard mowed." Only because he had to.

Her mouth twisted, and she briefly closed her eyes before pinning him with her gaze. "It's all a joke to you."

Apparently he wasn't getting out of this one. He jammed his hands into his pockets. "This place was my punishment."

"I don't understand."

"I do." But his transgressions and Granddad's vengeance belonged in the past too. Locked away and buried. He tapped her elbow and gave her a brief smile. "Be careful in there."

Before she could answer, he jogged to where Nate was disappearing around the corner of the house.



Finally alone.

And perplexed. How could anyone think of this magnificent place as a punishment?

Shelby took a few steps backward and squinted against April's pale sun. The abandoned brick house, elegantly situated beside massive oaks, would soon be hers. Just as she'd always dreamed.

At the end of the porch, tangled vines held a splintered trellis in

place. A weathered swing hung crookedly from a length of rusted chain. If the interior looked anything like this . . . She gazed back toward the road.

The pungent smell of freshly cut grass filled her nostrils. AJ Sullivan had kept the place mowed all right, including Nanna's prized irises. A grassy carpet covered the ground where the colorful blossoms once flourished.

Shelby closed her eyes for a moment, breathing deeply as she tried to imagine the fragrance of the obliterated flower garden. But the sweet fragrances of lilacs, honeysuckles, and peonies that once heralded spring had faded long ago.

Unlike her dreams.

Treasured childhood memories of playing tag on the long rectangular yard, of catching fireflies in mason jars, flitted through her mind, swift and intense.

Solitary snatches of ordinary moments frozen by loss.

Shelby gingerly stepped across the splintered stairs and onto the porch. To cross the threshold into the house was to cross the threshold into a new chapter of her life.

A chapter in a place where Gary had never been, where memories of their early years together didn't taunt her.

One of the thick double doors stood ajar, and she gave it a little push. With a soft creak it swung backward, and Shelby entered her grandparents' home for the first time in fourteen years.

The realization that she could divide her life almost exactly in half pierced through the tough scab shielding her heart. Those *before* days, her golden childhood and early teen years, warmed her spirit with their light; the *after* . . . She pushed the thought away. She had come back to create a new *after*. To give her daughters the legacy that once belonged to her.

Dirt spotted the pine floors of the long hallway, and she could see AJ's telltale footprints. She kicked at the closest one with her shoe before entering the room to her right.

The parlor, Nanna had called it, laughing at her own preten-

tiousness. Cobwebs formed lacy valances in the upper corners of the window alcove. More spiders. Ugh.

Ashes, a partially burnt newspaper, and trash littered the hearth. She knelt beside it, pushing at the debris with a stick. The fireplace was smaller than she remembered, and not nearly as grand. She pushed aside the niggling disappointment. It only needed a good cleaning. Along with everything else.

She went through an arched doorway to Grandpa's old study, then opened the door to the space under the stairs. The secret place. Smiling to herself, she gently jumped up and down. The solid hickory floor didn't give anything away. She doubted either AJ or Nate Jeffers knew about the room hiding beneath this closet and the study.

Returning to the hall, Shelby carefully climbed the broad stairs to the upper story and entered the room where she'd stayed during summer vacations and holidays. The pink floral wallpaper she and Nanna had selected hung in ragged strips. They'd had so much fun choosing the pattern and matching material for the curtains and bedding. The hours she had spent within these four walls, dreaming dreams derailed by circumstances she didn't understand.

Not then. Not now.

Pushing aside the brittle window shade, she gazed through the cracked glass at the abandoned shed and the neglected patch where the kitchen garden once thrived.

She did not look at the barn.

One end of the window shade and rod fell, and she startled as the hardware skittered across the bare floor. With a sheepish smile, she laid it on the sill, then wandered back to the landing. Running her hand along the wide banister, she smiled at the temptation to slide down it. Why not? Her parents weren't around to say no.

She lifted a leg to straddle the banister, then heard voices outside the front double doors. Walking sedately down the stairs, she joined the men on the porch.

Nate doffed his hat. "Good news, Miz Kincaid. The foundation is solid. This house may be old, but it was well built."

“Grandpa always said so.” Shelby smiled with pride. “How long will it take to upgrade the wiring and plumbing?”

“How soon do you want to move in?”

“As soon as possible after school is out. In about six or seven weeks.”

“Are you a teacher too?” AJ asked.

Shelby shook her head. “I have a first grader. And a three-year-old.”

“You’re married?”

As AJ’s brown eyes flitted to her left hand, she self-consciously folded it into her waist. It’d been over a year since Gary’s death, but she still wore her wedding band. More for her daughters’ sakes than her own.

“I was.” Ignoring the curiosity written all over AJ’s face, she focused on Nate. “Will that give you enough time?”

“Not sure about that,” Nate said. “First thing we need to figure is how to get rid of the critters in the attic.”

“What critters?” Shelby’s voice raised an octave.

“Pigeons, for sure. Probably bats.”

“Mice have been in the kitchen,” AJ said.

Shelby involuntarily shivered. She should have known spiders wouldn’t be her only unwanted guests. “Any suggestions?”

“Let me do some thinkin’ on it. Right now, I want to go over a few other things with you.” Using the pickup’s hood as a makeshift desk, Nate reviewed his notes with Shelby. “I’ll need to take this back to the office to make some estimates. Usually, that would take a week or so, but given your time frame, I’ll work on it this evening.”

“That would be great. Thank you.”

“If you’d like, I can come back in the morning and check out the attic. Nine o’clock too early?”

“I’ll be here.”

“All right then.” Nate stuck his pen in his pocket and faced AJ. “Coach, you could have knocked me over with a feather when I heard you were selling this place. Bet your grandfather’s just a-churnin’ in his grave.”

“No doubt.” AJ paused, his eyes darkening to an even deeper shade. “But it’s what Gran wanted me to do.”

“Miss Joyanna’s a fine lady. How’s she doing?”

“She’s been better.”

“Tell her we’re praying for her.” Nate dug keys from his pocket and opened his truck door. “I’ll be going now. See you in the morning, Miz Kincaid.” He waved as he backed up, then drove down the lane, dust flying up from behind his tires.

“Your grandmother is ill?” Shelby studied AJ’s profile as he avoided her gaze.

He nodded, his jaw as rigid as stone.

“I’m sorry.”

He nodded again, then faced her and seemed to force a smile. “How about going into town for lunch? My treat.”

“With you? No.”

“This may surprise you,” he said, a teasing lilt in his voice, “but I’m not my grandfather.”

Shelby gazed at the broken swing. “Uncle Richard told me you’ve owned this house about five or six years.”

“Six.”

“What exactly did you do different than your grandfather?”

A wounded frown replaced AJ’s amiable smile, and his eyes brimmed with pain. Regret gripped Shelby’s heart. She’d meant the words to sting a little, but not to cut.

She opened her mouth to apologize, but he turned on his heel and headed toward his Jeep before she could say a word. Opening the driver’s door, he glared at her over the roof.

“See you at the signing.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“I think you did.” He disappeared into the Jeep and started the ignition.

As the vehicle bounced down the lane, Shelby’s heart jolted. It was as if she were fourteen again, as lonely and abandoned as the house behind her.