

MISTY WILLOW · BOOK THREE

WHAT *Hope*
REMEMBERS

A NOVEL

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Johnnie Alexander, *What Hope Remembers*
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For Carol Anne and Joy

My treasured friends in the Sunland

For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel,
“In returning and rest you shall be saved;
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.”

Isaiah 30:15

— 1 —

The June sun beat on Gabe Kendall's bare head and tapped into his childhood memories of the horse farm. He leaned his arms on the weathered fence and let his mind bask in the remembrance of long summer days under tranquil blue skies.

The pastures, lush and green. The paddock with its packed dirt circuit. The stables, once alive with the soft snuffles of contented horses and the familiar smells of oiled leather, fresh hay, and honest sweat.

Except for the glow of memory, nothing was the same.

The horse barn, the machine shed, even the nearby house were smaller than he remembered. Perhaps a consequence of seeing his uncle's place for the first time with grown-up eyes. Or maybe his imagination had tricked him into thinking everything about the place was bigger. God knew he'd experienced too many nights when the only way he could lull himself to sleep was to conjure up happier times.

That long-ago summer, the summer after Mom's last illness, he'd cut hay, filled the silo with the yellow kernels of newly harvested corn, and ridden horseback every chance he got. When the chores were done, he dozed beneath the old sycamore back by the

pond. And he prayed for a return to *before*. The same prayer he wanted to pray now.

Not that it would do any good.

Praying wouldn't erase the cracked paint on the fence and the buildings, the clumps of weeds overtaking the grass. Wouldn't transform the land into the paradise he remembered. Ugly facts taunted him with their stark reality.

A forlorn air hung over the place, heavy with regret and heartache. But the silent emptiness wasn't because of his adult perspective or the glow of childhood memory.

Whisper Lane Stables might be a thriving business if Rusty were still alive. Except then he'd know how low Gabe had fallen . . .

His muscles tensed at the *thwack* of the house's screen door, and he jerked toward the noise. Aunt Tess strode toward him, and he breathed out the adrenaline pulsing through his body. His fisted hands slowly opened, and he swiped his palms against his jeans.

"It's not how you remembered." Tess stood next to him and stared into the distance. Her jet black hair, plaited into one thick braid that nearly reached her waist and evidence of her great-grandmother's Native American heritage, held streaks of gray that hadn't been there before.

"I should have been here." Gabe put his arm around her, pulling her into a sideways hug and breathing in her familiar scent. Charlie cologne. At least one thing hadn't changed.

"You're here now." Her voice caught, but she quickly regained control. "I'd have visited you. If you'd let me."

"I couldn't."

"You're too full of pride. Just like your uncle."

"I miss him."

"So do I." She flashed a smile. "But it's nice having you here again. Just like old times."

He pressed his lips together and slowly inhaled. In the past several years, he'd steeled himself against showing weakness, but

a few kind words from his uncle's widow could turn him into a blubbering idiot if he wasn't careful.

Time to change the subject.

"See you still have the old pickup." He nodded toward the dusty two-tone Ford F-150 parked beside the detached garage. The once-vivid red had faded, and the tan sides hadn't fared much better. The dent where Gabe had accidentally hit a fence post still marred the rust-spotted fender. But hey, he'd only been twelve at the time.

"I kept it for you," Tess said.

"You should have sold it."

"Wasn't mine to sell. Besides, it's not worth much to anyone but you and me."

"Rusty taught me to drive in that heap."

"I remember. Your mom wasn't too happy."

"She sure gave me a tongue-lashing," Gabe said. "But I overheard her telling Dad about it later. They were laughing."

"She could never stay mad at you for long." Tess gazed up at him, then squeezed his arm. "Look at you. So like Rusty when he was your age."

"Except he never disgraced the family."

"Neither have you."

Gabe snorted. "You haven't talked to my dad lately, have you?"

She looked away for a moment, then turned toward him again, a warm smile brightening her face. "Come inside, and we'll get you settled. I have a batch of snickerdoodles cooling on the counter. Are those still your favorite cookies?"

"Anything you bake is my favorite."

"Let's go, then."

"Would it be okay if I didn't take you up on that offer right away?"

"Is something wrong?"

"It's been a while since I've been on a horse." He trusted her to understand that the longing inside him ran deeper than his need

to be in a saddle again. He craved the freedom, the solitude, of a long ride in fresh air and sunshine.

Her concern changed to empathy, and she pointed toward one of the pens. “Take Daisy. It’ll do her good to stretch her legs.”

“You’re still naming horses after flowers?”

“Only that line. She was Marigold’s last foal.” Sadness flickered in Tess’s dark eyes. “Looks just like her. Same sweet disposition too.”

“I remember Marigold. What happened to her?”

“I sold her.”

“Without telling me?” he asked, then wished he hadn’t. The answer, any answer, only added another loss to his pile of guilt.

“At first it was too hard to write about. And later, well, I guess by then it was old news.” She pressed her lips into a tight smile. “Are you riding back to the Hearth?”

“Not today.” Probably not ever. The stone fireplace, all that remained of a nameless pioneer’s cabin, was best left alone. “Does that land on the north side of Glade Creek still belong to you?”

“For now. I lease it to one of the locals for his Angus herd. Which reminds me. I have this thing to go to tonight.”

“What thing?”

“An appreciation reception at the old Misty Willow homestead.”

“Appreciation for what?”

“It’s been named to the National Register of Historic Places. I’m on the committee that put together the application. We’re also planning a huge celebration in a couple of weeks.”

Something niggled at Gabe’s memory. A scandal of some sort. “Do the Sullivans still own that place?”

“No. And yes.” She chuckled. “Promise you’ll go with me, and I’ll catch you up on the local news after your ride.”

“You’ve got a date.” He headed for the tack room for a saddle, then turned and jogged backward. “I don’t have to wear a tie, do I?”

“You are so like your uncle.”

He'd always wanted to be. If only his life hadn't taken a different turn.



So this was the place.

Amy Somers clambered on top of the rustic picnic table and drank from her sports bottle. Normally she didn't care for the taste of the vitamin-enriched water, but the long hike from the cottage had made her thirsty.

The sun glinted on the creek's broad surface, and long-stemmed cattails gathered in clumps along the bank. Wild daisies, purple clover, and Queen Anne's lace rose from the grassy field. The ancient willow balanced on the edge of the creek, its elegant fronds dipping their ends into the sparkling water.

Family picnics took place here. Burgers and hot dogs, potato salad and baked beans, followed by exhilarating games of tag, mostly futile attempts to catch fish, and restful catnaps.

At least that was what she'd been told. She'd never been here before today.

Not because she hadn't been invited. Staying away had simply been easier.

She sipped more water, then propped her slightly pink arms across her knees. Sunburn. Another joy of country living. A summer-scented breeze momentarily cooled her skin, and she added sunscreen to her mental shopping list.

The same breeze lifted the willow's fronds so they appeared to dance beside the creek.

The misty willow. The engagement tree.

First AJ and then Brett had proposed to their respective brides in this quiet, peaceful, bug-ridden place. Her cousin, she understood. Like Gran, AJ preferred the rural community over the hustle and bustle of life in the big city.

But her brother had her flummoxed. About ten months ago,

Brett had been honored as one of Columbus's up-and-coming young professionals. His thriving business, inherited from their grandfather, was poised to become a major regional development firm. His future seemed golden.

Until he turned his back on all of it—the lucrative investment opportunities, his luxury apartment, Monday nights with the guys—and settled into a four-bedroom ranch down the road from the cottage. True, it had the most elegant upgrades of any ranch-style house in Glade County. Amy made sure of that, steering her sister-in-law to only the finest granite countertops, deluxe appliances, and high-end cabinetry during the rehab.

But it was still a house in the middle of nowhere among people who weren't like the Somerses. People who didn't know the difference between a dessert spoon and a soup spoon. Who'd rather have barbecue and beer than filet mignon and a fine wine.

She swiped angrily at the tears that unexpectedly dampened her cheeks.

Brett and AJ were the only family she had, and now she'd lost them. They'd fallen in love, married, and lived within two miles of each other.

They thought she'd moved from Columbus to be closer to them. One big happy family. Didn't they know her at all?

The truth . . . She could hardly bear to face the truth herself, let alone tell her brother and cousin. She'd already had her fill of their pity.

Enough!

She scooted off the picnic table, suddenly anxious to do what she'd come to do—find the plaques Brett and AJ had hung on the engagement tree. To trace the initials engraved into its trunk, the initials of couples who believed in “till death do us part.”

To wallow in the pain of being left alone. Abandoned again.

But instead of slipping between the willow's draping fronds, she veered toward the creek and plopped onto the bank. She picked

a white daisy from a nearby clump and twirled its rough stem between her finger and thumb.

He loves me. He loves me not.

No need to pull the satiny petals from the golden center. She had no *he*.

She tossed the daisy in the creek. It drifted with the gentle current, floating lazily, carelessly.

Once it disappeared behind a partially submerged boulder, Amy rose, then hesitated as the sound of a welcoming nicker came from across the creek. A buckskin horse ambled toward the bank, and the rider lifted his hand in a friendly wave.

Amy took several steps backward, her gaze never wavering from the intruder and his horse. Another foot or so and he would be trespassing. Though there was little she could do about that.

Besides, she had no idea what arrangements AJ had with the neighbors. For all she knew, this guy was allowed to come and go as he pleased. The stranger reached her side of the creek, then dismounted. He ambled toward her, allowing plenty of slack in the reins, while the mare nibbled at the lush grass near the shore.

“Howdy,” he said with an exaggerated twang. She waited for the expected appraising look, idly wondering what form it would take. The quick up-and-down or the lingering once-over?

But his eyes, shaded by the brim of a well-worn Stetson, never left her face. Not knowing whether to be intrigued or insulted, she maintained the poker face she’d perfected during her lobbying career and did her own appraisal. Light brown hair, worn a little too long, poked from beneath the beige hat. A tan tee fit tight against muscles used to exercise. Despite the summer heat, he wore jeans and low-cut work boots.

Handsome enough for a lark, perhaps even for a night on the town. If he let her choose his wardrobe.

His lips curled as she finished her inspection. The slight smile was like a spark to her temper’s short fuse.

“You’re trespassing.”

“Am I?”

“As soon as you crossed to this side of the creek.”

“I’m Gabe Kendall. Maybe you know my aunt. Tess Marshall.”

He can’t be.

Amy stared at him, then blinked and looked away. Even though the stables were located across the road from the cottage, she hadn’t allowed herself to indulge in those memories. Now they hovered at the edge of her mind.

She took another step backward.

“Are you all right?” His voice held genuine concern, but Amy didn’t want his sympathy. Or to renew their acquaintance. That would only lead to an awkward walk down memory lane.

She slid onto the edge of the picnic table’s seat and took a sip of water. “Just a little tired. The hike back here was longer than I expected.”

He scanned the horizon, first one direction then the other. “You live at the Sullivan hideaway?”

“If you mean the cottage, yes. I moved in earlier this week.”

“My uncle Rusty always called it the hideaway. Said if you didn’t know it was there, you wouldn’t know it was there.”

“Isn’t that true of anything?”

“It was his strange sense of humor. Guess you had to have known him.”

I did know him.

Rusty and Tess were characters in her canopy world, a secluded place where people didn’t break dishes and throw sharpened words at each other. A place where parents didn’t promise to be back soon but never came home.

After the plane accident, she’d wrapped her canopy world of too few happy moments and pushed it to a place so deep inside of her that even months of her recent therapy hadn’t touched it.

“Are you married to . . . what’s his name? Goes by initials, doesn’t he? Last I knew, he lived in the hideaway.”

“You mean AJ? He’s my cousin.”

The stranger’s gaze deepened and his mouth slightly opened. Amy could almost see the wheels in his mind turning as he looked for any resemblance to the girl she used to be.

“I remember you. We—”

“I doubt it.” Amy turned her head and stared, unseeing, at the surrounding fields. Moving to the cottage had been a mistake. In her haste to escape from the present, she’d never expected that living here would push her into the past.

“You’re Amy.”

Still avoiding his gaze, she bit the inside of her mouth, pressing her teeth into the tender flesh. Physical pain she could handle. But not the anguish churning inside.

If only she’d had other options. Though the truth was, she had hoped to find the same peace here that Gran had found. Despite her protests of hating the country, Amy wanted to be near Brett so he wouldn’t forget the little sister he’d promised never to leave. And she wanted to be near Jonah.

Never had she expected to run into Gabe Kendall.

He stepped into her peripheral vision and tilted his head to catch her gaze. “You’re Amy Somers.”

“I am.” *Only because it’s too late to be anyone else.*

“We rode together sometimes. When you took lessons from my aunt.”

His words floated along the breeze between them as the memories slipped from the canopy into her consciousness. She glanced at the buckskin. With her creamy coat and black stockings, her ebony mane and tail, the mare could be Marigold. But that was impossible. Too many years had gone by. Too many to indulge in a childhood crush.

“I don’t remember you,” she said, her tone clipped and even.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.” He gave a sheepish shrug. She’d have found it endearing if her heart wasn’t made of stone.

She stood, pushing away from the table and the nostalgic scent of horse sweat and leather. “I should be going. It was nice meeting you.” *Again.*

“Do you want to ride?” he asked hurriedly.

“Excuse me?”

“You said you were tired. Daisy and I can take you back to the hide—the cottage.”

Panic gripped her throat, and she clutched the neckline of her top.

“I’ll walk alongside if that’s what’s got your rope in a tangle. Though it looks to me like you could use a good gallop. May be just the thing to set the world right again.”

She grasped the table edge and dug her fingernails into the wood. “You know nothing about me,” she finally said. Her voice rasped with harshness.

“Maybe I should take my own advice, then.” He tipped his hat and gathered the reins. With a fluidity that took Amy’s breath away, he was astride the mare. Daisy took a few steps forward, and Amy shrank against the table.

“You’re not afraid of Daisy, are you?” The concern in his voice also shone in his eyes. “She’s as gentle as they come.”

“I’m not afraid of anything,” Amy retorted. But her voice wavered, and her breath seemed to strangle in her throat.

He held his gaze steady, and it took all her practiced skill not to wither into a heap. But he couldn’t know she cared anything about what he said or what he thought. Nor could she show weakness. That only led to pain.