

A Christmas Bride
First Chapter Excerpt

Chapter One

Eagle Hill Manor could have served as a backdrop for *Gone with the Wind* except that every one of the grand portico's twelve Doric columns needed a coat of paint. Willow Petersen stood on the front walkway, shading her eyes. The November sun cast sharp shadows across the mansion's dingy facade.

Once the home of a wealthy robber baron, Eagle Hill Manor had been open to the public as an inn for decades. But it had clearly fallen on hard times in the eight years since Willow had last visited. It seemed hard to believe that two years had passed since Shelly had died.

As far as Willow knew, Shelly's mother, Poppy Marchand, still lived here. But why hadn't Mrs. M put up her autumn decorations? Where were the grapevine wreaths with their autumn-gold ribbons? Where were the pots overflowing with purple and gold chrysanthemums? Autumn was one of the inn's busier seasons, with tourists coming from all over the commonwealth to stay at one of Virginia's great old houses and take in the fall foliage along the Skyline Drive.

Willow squared her shoulders and fought down a wave of unease. If Mrs. M had died or moved away, Willow wouldn't have known it; she'd done a bad job of keeping in touch, even before Shelly's death.

She had reached the front door when it opened outward, propelled by a redheaded child who barreled forward and connected with Willow's midsection, knocking her back a step. A sudden, warm mix of relief, nostalgia, and sorrow spilled through Willow like a blessing. She hugged the child to her middle, absorbing a bittersweet mixture of grief and joy. Natalie, her godchild, whom she'd neglected. She clung to the girl's shoulders and hoped time would stand still.

It didn't.

A sharp, utterly male voice shouted from within the inn, "You come back here, Natalie Marie. You're behaving like a brat." Footsteps thumped from beyond the open door, coming in her direction.

The little girl pushed Willow away, then scampered down the steps, her tangled red hair dancing behind her like a fiery contrail. She took off into the woods adjacent to the inn, her pink jacket and purple leggings soon lost to sight.

An instant later, the owner of the voice came roaring through the door. He took the front steps two at a time and then stopped in the middle of the leaf-strewn lawn, looking right and left.

David.

The years had turned his face hard and gaunt, which only underscored his stunning good looks. He'd lost none of his presence, either. He took a breath and started to speak, and then pulled up short.

"Willow? Is that you?" His words came out in a cloud of steam in the chilly November afternoon.

Willow jammed her hands into the pockets of her cashmere coat—a relic from better days. "David." Her voice sounded dry and thin.

He cocked his head a tiny bit, assessing her. She'd gotten used to people doing that, ever since her decision to go public with her accusations of fraud against Restero Corporation, her former employer. Restero hadn't taken her charges lying down. Their PR department had publicly painted Willow as a malcontent, a troublemaker, and even worse in numerous press releases that the *Wall Street Journal* had run almost verbatim. Now people stared at her the way they used to stare at her mother, as if she were slightly crazy.

"What are you doing here?" David asked.

"I live here," she said, balling her hands into fists inside her pockets. "I mean I've moved back to Serenity Farm. With Mom," she added, feeling small and broken.

"Really?"

"Yeah, I know, big surprise. Me coming back to Shenandoah Falls and living with my crazy hippie mother."

"Yes, it is."

"David, I'm so sorry about—" He silenced her with a lift of one eyebrow. As a member of the Lyndon family—one of Virginia's most elite—he'd truly mastered that expression. Her heart almost broke. Once he'd been a good friend, but apparently that was no longer true.

She changed the subject. "Natalie went that way." She pointed to the path leading into the woods. "I'm sure she's hiding out in the secret place."

His censorious stare turned into a bona fide scowl. "How could you possibly know anything about Natalie?"

"I don't," she admitted, the pain sharp. "But I knew her mother." Willow managed to keep her voice controlled despite her emotions.

David turned away and marched off toward the woods, head down, hands swinging. His blue suit and dark wing-tip lace-ups weren't exactly the right attire for tromping through the woods on a cold November day. But hand-tailored suits were the uniform of choice for the male members of the Lyndon family. David wore his well.

Willow turned away, wondering if everyone in town would give her this kind of reception. She could almost hear the whispers going up and down the local grapevine: "Yep, that Willow girl sure is a chip off the old block. The apple didn't fall too far from the Petersen tree. Both of those women are troublemakers."

She walked into the inn's lobby, where she drank in the familiar setting, comforted by the fact that nothing much had changed since her girlhood. The place still smelled of beeswax and lemon oil, Persian rugs still covered the hardwood floors, and a pair of Queen Anne chairs still sat by the big fireplace in the lobby. But the furniture was dinged and scratched, the rugs threadbare, and the chairs' upholstery faded. The lobby, which should have been busy at this hour with people arriving for high tea, was dark. So was the dining room.

Shelly would be so disappointed.

The thought settled into Willow's mind the way snow sometimes settled on the mountains, a cold thing that made her shiver. That last day of her life, Shelly had traveled to New York to meet with an architect about restoring the inn. She'd lost her life on the train coming home in a tragic derailment, and now, apparently, all those plans had come to nothing.

Willow continued through the familiar spaces, down a private hallway, and stopped in front of the closed door that led to the inn's office. She knocked.

"Come," came the answer she'd been hoping for.

Willow opened the door and found Mrs. M sitting behind an oak desk far too big for her. She wore a pair of half reading glasses that required her to tilt her head up as she looked at her computer screen. Her ever-present pearls and heather-gray twinset were like familiar friends. Her hair may have gone from blond to ash gray, but she still wore it in a pageboy, parted on one side.

“Natalie’s swim bag is all packed and ready to go. It’s on the front table. I know you don’t want my opinion, but—”

She looked up from her computer, surprise unfolding across her like an old-fashioned lady’s fan. “Oh my goodness. You’re not David. Willow. Oh my. Is that you? Good God, it’s been years.” Mrs. M jumped up from the desk and rushed forward with arms extended. An instant later, Willow found herself enveloped in an Estée Lauder hug. The scent left a warm, sugary feeling in its wake.

Mrs. M pushed her back. “Let me look at you,” she said in her Tidewater accent.

Willow struggled to smile. “Mrs. Marchand, I—”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, you’re a grown woman now. Please don’t call me that. It reminds me that Craig has gone and left me behind. Which isn’t all that newsworthy. That man was always in a hurry.”

“I came to pay my respects. Somewhat belatedly for—”

“Oh, hush. There’s no need. I got your letter, remember? And I’ve kept it. It’s a comfort to know Shelly had such a good friend. I’m sorry you were so far away when the accident happened. In China of all places. You have become quite the world traveler, haven’t you?”

“I guess. Not so much now, though.”

Mrs. M waved her hand in dismissal. “No more of that kind of depressing talk. Do you have some time? I was about to go find some ginger snaps and tea. David should be along any moment to pick up Natalie, and then—”

“David has already arrived and made a detour. Into the woods,” Willow said.

Mrs. M’s blue eyes widened. “Detour?”

“I met him on my way in. I stumbled into the middle of a father-daughter disagreement of some kind. Natalie seemed upset and was running away from him and—”

“Oh, good Lord.” Mrs. M bolted through the door. “Natalie,” she shouted, “are you still playing in the library?”

Willow followed Mrs. M down the hall into a sitting room off the lobby that had always been called the library because of the big bookshelf filled with dog-eared paperback novels. The room was deserted except for a redheaded American Girl doll and assorted clothing and accessories scattered over the carpet.

“Natalie, where are you?” Poppy’s voice sounded urgent.

“I told you, Mrs. M. I interrupted an argument or something. She ran off into the woods, and David followed after her. I’m sure she’s headed for the secret place.”

The worry on Mrs. M’s face disappeared. “You remember the secret place?”

“Of course I do. Shelly and I spent hours and hours there with our Barbies, planning elaborate weddings.” And their dreams for the future.

Mrs. M nodded. “Yes, you did. And Natalie knows that place. I showed her the secret path this summer, and I told her that if she ever needed to talk to her mommy, that was the place to do it.” Mrs. M’s voice trembled a little as she continued. “At least that’s where I go when I need to talk to her.”

“Oh, Mrs. M, I’m so sorry. I should have come home sooner. I should have—”

“Nonsense. What happened was an accident. There’s nothing you could have done to stop it. I’m just glad to see you. And now that I know where Natalie is, I think I’ll let her play hide-and-seek with her father. I’m pretty sure he’s forgotten all about the secret place and the hidden path. Maybe if he has to look for it, it will make him late to his mother’s Election Day party, and that will be a few more minutes that Natalie doesn’t have to dance to Pam Lyndon’s tune. Why don’t we go find a pot of tea.”

“But aren’t you worried about—”

“Not in the least,” Mrs. M said with a wave of her hand. “Natalie is eight years old. When you and Shelly were that age, you had the run of the place. Remember?”

Willow remembered. Those were some of the best times of her life.

“Good. I’m an old-fashioned grandmother. I think the term these days is ‘free-range granny.’ A child needs some space to roam, if you ask me. And it’s the least I can do for Natalie, since her other grandmother would like to keep her on a very short leash.”

Willow followed Mrs. M into the big, professional kitchen, which was empty of the usual cooks and helpers. Mrs. M busied herself with the kettle and a box of store-bought ginger snaps. She laid out a tray with a vintage china teapot and several mismatched English teacups. One of the saucers had a tiny chip—something Mrs. M would never have tolerated back in the day.

“Let’s sit in the solarium,” Mrs. M said, picking up the tea tray.

The solarium was a tiny bit cool on this November day. Once upon a time, the windows had provided a view of the Blue Ridge Mountains, but the azaleas in the flower beds outside had grown wild and leggy and now obscured the view on all sides.

They settled themselves on a couple of wicker rocking chairs. Mrs. M poured, and the spicy scent of Earl Grey filled the air.

“When did the inn close its doors?” Willow asked.

Mrs. M picked up her saucer and leaned back into the rocking chair. “Not very long ago. In September.”

“Was business that bad?”

Mrs. M rocked back in her chair. “Time marches on, and I couldn’t keep up with things like I used to. To be honest, I thought my innkeeping days were over when Craig and I sold the inn to Shelly. But then Craig and Shelly passed, and I ended up back here trying to do it all. It’s time to hand the place off to someone else.”

“But Shelly had so many plans. I mean, we had lunch not long before the accident, and all Shelly talked about was restoring the inn. Whatever happened to her plans?”

“I’m afraid her plans died with her.” Mrs. M put her cup and saucer down on the table. When she spoke again, her tone was sad and nostalgic. “Willow, I know Shelly had big dreams of restoring the inn, but she was never going to put them into action. David never wanted to be an innkeeper. And sooner or later, Shelly would have had to make a choice between her marriage and the inn. I’m sure she would have chosen her marriage. She loved David very much.”

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David tramped through the woods, going around in circles yelling Natalie’s name. His daughter was being her worst willful self, but after twenty minutes of searching to no avail, a deep worry overtook him.

What if something terrible had happened to her? Maybe she'd fallen down and hit her head. Or maybe some intruder had kidnapped her. David reached for his cell phone and was poised to dial 911 when footsteps through the leaf litter sounded behind him.

He turned, hoping Natalie had come to her senses.

No such luck. Willow Petersen came striding down the path in her black coat, her blond hair all tucked up in a businesslike hairdo. "Poppy sent me to find you, in case you've forgotten the way to the secret place."

Annoyance and resentment prickled along his skin. How the hell did Willow Petersen know anything about Natalie and her secret hiding places? Willow had met Natalie exactly one time, on the day of his daughter's christening a little more than eight years ago. For all of Natalie's short life, Willow had been too busy with her career to give a crap about her goddaughter.

After Shelly's death, he would have expected Willow to make an effort to show up. But there had been nothing. Nothing at all.

He wanted to tell her off. He wanted to read her the riot act for missing Shelly's funeral on that cold December day. He wanted to scream at her because it seemed so damn unfair that Shelly wasn't here anymore.

But he had more discipline than that. So he swallowed down his anger and said, "You have a firm grasp of the obvious." Then he gave Willow his implacable, bulldog scowl—the one he'd regularly used to intimidate people as chairman of the Jefferson County Council. It bounced right off her.

“Come on, I’ll show you the secret path.” She swished past him and headed down the main path a few strides. He followed as she took a left turn off the main footpath and onto a muddy rut that was most definitely not a regular path.

After a short walk, they emerged from the woods into a small clearing near Morgan Avenue. The meadow looked neglected, as if it hadn’t been mowed in some time. The wild grass had grown knee high, and even now, the first week of November, yellow and white wildflowers bloomed everywhere.

Off to the left a few paces stood the tumbled-down limestone church that was known as Laurel Chapel. No one had worshipped there in almost a century, and its sanctuary was now open to the sky, its arched windows broken. Beside it stood the oldest cemetery in town, where a few of David’s forebears had been buried. The graveyard was ringed by a dry stone wall that was in good repair. St. Luke’s, the Episcopal church in town, took care of the cemetery. Laurel Chapel had once been the Episcopalians’ place of worship before they built the big church in town a hundred years ago. The congregation had sold the land up here, along with the old church building, as a means of raising the funds for their much grander place of worship. In the years since, the building had fallen to ruins.

David knew this place, but he’d never walked here from the inn before. He’d always come by car and parked in the gravel lot adjacent to the ruins of the church. Hikers seeking access to the Appalachian Trail frequently parked there, especially in the spring when the mountain laurel bloomed.

The laurel had been in bloom that day, long ago, when Shelly had brought him up here full of ideas and plans for their wedding. She’d wanted to put up a tent on this meadow and hold the reception at her parents’ inn.

That wasn't possible, of course. The guest list for their wedding included senators, governors, and the vice president. The meadow by Laurel Chapel wasn't anywhere close to secure enough for a guest list like that. So they'd been married in Washington, DC, with the Secret Service in attendance.

"I know for a fact Shelly brought you here," Willow said as if reading his mind. "I'm surprised you didn't know about the hidden path. The old chapel always was Shelly's secret place."

He didn't respond. What could he say? He should have known this. Instead, he walked past her toward the church and through the empty doorway into the nave. Leaves lay in clumps across the stone floor where once the pews, altar, and pulpit had stood.

"Natalie, are you hiding in here?" he asked.

A little whimper from the corner of the sanctuary was his answer. He moved forward through the gloom and found his daughter sitting in a pile of leaves. She hugged her knees with a pair of grubby hands, and her head rested on dirty leggings.

The pull of muscles across his shoulders eased at the sight of her. He lived in perpetual fear of losing her. He wanted to pull her into his arms and spoil her. But what kind of father would that make him? She needed discipline.

"Natalie," he said in his sternest voice, "I won't tolerate this kind of behavior from you. What were you thinking, running away from me? You could have been injured or worse."

His daughter looked up at him, her chin wobbling while defiance sparked in her deep brown eyes.

"Sweetheart, I know you're disappointed about your swimming time trials, but it's Election Day, and Grandmother's party is important. Not just to her, but to me. Didn't I explain

last night that there will be important people at this party that I have to be nice to because I'm thinking about being a congressman? Those people want to meet you too."

"I don't want to meet them."

Of course she didn't. But that didn't change things. Like it or not, Natalie would grow up as a congressman's daughter, like he'd grown up as a senator's son.

"Sweetie, we talked about this, remember? When I was growing up, there were lots of times when I had to do things that I didn't want to do because Grandfather is a senator. But I did as I was told. Because I am a Lyndon, and Lyndons make sacrifices."

Natalie wiped her nose on the sleeve of her jacket, and he almost corrected her before he remembered that he didn't have a handkerchief with him today because he hadn't been to the laundry in more than a week.

He became acutely aware of his failings as a parent. Natalie did that to him. Often.

"I don't want to go. I want to beat Meghan in breaststroke. She's always telling everyone she's faster than I am."

"I'm sorry. But there will be another set of time trials next month, and swimming competition doesn't start until the spring. Election Day comes once a year. Besides, you don't want to make Grandmother unhappy, do you? You know how unpleasant that can be."

Natalie's mouth thinned like Shelly's used to whenever they argued about Mother. But this time Mother was right. David needed to be at her barbeque this evening because he was planning a run for Congress next year. Important donors and political consultants would be in attendance, and they all wanted to meet Natalie. Like it or not, she was the candidate's daughter, and the two of them were a package deal.

He folded his arms across his chest. "Do you want a time-out?"

She gave him a mutinous scowl.

“Do you? Because it can be arranged. Honestly, Natalie, I just don’t know what I’m going to do with you. I don’t like this attitude you’ve suddenly developed.”

The quiver in her lower lip intensified. *Damn*. He hated it when she cried.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked, fully expecting her to either burst into tears, give him the eight-year-old death stare, or pitch a tantrum.

She opted for a version of the death stare, complete with big tears that spilled down her cheeks, leaving dirty tracks on her face. “Yes, Daddy,” she said in a forlorn voice as she stood. His heart wrenched when she hung her head and started walking toward the door.

He turned and found Willow Peterson standing behind him, her hands on her hips, her gaze sharp and unforgiving.

“You don’t get to judge me,” he barked. “I have a career too.”

She lifted one shoulder and blinked. “I’m not judging you, David. I was just wondering if it’s true what Mrs. M said—that you’re planning to sell the inn because you’re going to run for Congress.”

“I never promised Shelly I would keep the inn. And I wish to God Almighty she had listened to me. Because if she’d listened, she would have given up those silly plans of hers. And if she’d given up those plans, she’d never have gone to New York to meet with an architect. And if she’d never gone to New York, she would be alive today.”

And with that he stepped around his wife’s so-called best friend and left the ruined chapel behind.