

A Wedding on Lilac Lane

A Moonlight Bay novel

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CHAPTER ONE

Dylan Killough couldn't decide what to make of Ella McMillan. She stood on the stage with a fiddle tucked under her chin as she played a mournful accompaniment to "Molly Malone." A crown of green carnations encircled her brow, and her feather earrings floated on the air as she played. With each stroke of her bow, another lock of unruly auburn hair tumbled out of the messy knot at the top of her head.

She looked as if she'd stepped out of an Irish fairy tale. But the boho dress and feathered earrings suggested that she reliably voted the Democrat line, if she voted at all.

"I do love listening to your daughter play the fiddle," Dad said, beaming at Brenda McMillan, Ella's mother and Dad's current girlfriend.

The whole Dad-Brenda thing unsettled Dylan even though it shouldn't have. Dad had been a widower for decades. He should have a girlfriend, even if he was in his fifties. But maybe not Brenda. Dylan didn't like Brenda much.

Or her daughter, who had arrived around the holidays, moved into Brenda's beach house out at Paradise Beach, and evidently had no plans to actually work for a living or leave any time soon. Since Dylan and his father shared a house, Dad had recently resorted to sneaking away in the afternoons or taking long weekends with Brenda on the mainland.

Dad had never brought her home for an overnight. Thank goodness. The mornings after in the kitchen they shared might get really awkward.

His father was acting like a sex-crazed teenager, and it was thoroughly embarrassing. The geriatric set in Magnolia Harbor, many of whom were patients in Dylan's family practice, seemed to regard Brenda and Dad's romance as the juiciest topic du jour. And they thought nothing about asking Dylan for details, which he forthrightly refused to supply.

Dylan took a sip of his Guinness and glanced at his cell phone, checking the score for the NCAA First Four game being played in Dayton. Clemson, his alma mater, was down by two points.

He would much rather be home lounging on the sofa watching the ball game. But no, Dad had made his presence at this dinner mandatory because Ella was subbing for Connor O'Neal at the yacht club's annual St. Patrick's Day bash. Connor, one of Dylan's patients, was down with a late-season case of the flu, which had been bad timing for a guy who made a living playing Irish music.

"Well, that wraps up our first set of the night," Jason Tighe said in his broad South Carolina drawl. "Y'all drink up now. We'll be back in fifteen."

"I miss Connor's Irish accent," Dylan said.

Brenda and Dad turned toward him with twin frowns, although Brenda's was way more intimidating.

"What?" Dylan cast his gaze from Brenda to his father. "I love the way Jason sings, but he sounds like a good ole boy from Georgia when he talks."

Brenda gave Dad one of those glances, where she rolled her eyes. Brenda didn't like Dylan much either. They didn't have a mutual admiration society going. He also resented the way Brenda made him feel whenever the three of them were together: Exactly like a fifth wheel, or a party pooper, or something like that. Maybe he should excuse himself now that Ella had finished her first set. The club was playing the game on the TV above the bar, which was across the room.

But before he could make an escape, Ella arrived at the table and took the empty chair to his right. If he got up the minute she sat down, he'd never hear the end of it. So he hunkered down, glanced at the score on his phone, and took a deep, calming breath.

Which was filled with Ella's scent. Damn. The woman even smelled like a hippie. What was that aroma? Sandalwood? Patchouli?

She probably burned incense when no one was looking. Or used essential oils or some such thing. The aroma tickled his nose and not entirely in an I'm-about-to-sneeze way either. With her hair all tumbling down, and wearing that green velvet dress, which belonged on the set of *Game of Thrones*, she was attractive. If you had a thing for free-spirited musicians.

"You're a better fiddler than Connor," Dad said, sucking up to Brenda's daughter. Who, in truth, was a pretty good fiddler, but Dylan didn't want to admit it.

"Thanks," Ella said in a high, piping voice, as she glanced at her mother. Something passed between them in that glance. A family in-joke he would probably never get.

The conversation stalled for a moment as Dad turned toward Brenda. The two of them appeared a little nervous now that Dylan thought about it. And right then, just before Brenda opened her mouth, an overwhelming sense of dread seized him.

It was as if a freight train were speeding right at him, the headlight cutting through the fog, but he couldn't move himself out of its path.

"I guess it's now or never," Brenda said under her breath, then reached for Dad's hand. She gave Ella and Dylan a forthright look out of her dark gray eyes.

"Jim and I have been talking things through, and we've decided to get married. We want both of you to plan the engagement party."

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Ella struggled to draw breath. She wasn't surprised that Jim and Mom were tying the knot, but she was incredibly disappointed that Mom had chosen this moment to announce the happy news.

So typical of her. Not that Ella wanted to be the center of attention, but hell, she'd been learning songs like mad, practicing until her fingers hurt for this fill-in gig with Sackweed, Connor O'Neal's Irish band. She wanted to shine tonight. She wanted to prove to Mom that there was value in playing something other than a violin concerto or sonata written by some long-dead composer.

She'd been excited that Jim and his son would be coming to hear her play, but now it turned out that this gig had been a convenient excuse to get the "family" together. Not that the four of them felt like a family.

Ella snatched up a glass of water and took a big gulp. She never drank alcohol when she was performing because only a tiny bit of booze buzzed her head. But right now, sitting here with Jim's uptight son beside her, she could have used a bracing shot of Jack. She put her water glass down and glanced at Dylan.

He'd certainly dressed for a yacht club party in khakis, white shirt, navy jacket, and bow tie. Come to think of it, she'd never seen Dylan wear any other kind of tie. To say he dressed conservatively was to understate the point by a mile.

He clearly wasn't happy about Mom's announcement. A muscle pulsed in his jaw, and his fingers closed into a white-knuckled fist.

What was his problem? Did the medical doctor resent being asked to plan a party? Or was it more sinister than that? She watched him watch her mother.

Oh, yeah. More sinister. Dylan didn't like Mom.

Ella's irritation with her mother evaporated, replaced with a strong need to defend her. How dare Dylan give her mother a judgmental look like that?

"So?" Jim asked, his bright blue eyes hopeful as he captured her gaze.

Damn. She didn't want to disappoint Jim. She liked him. A lot. He was kind and generous, and he made Mom laugh. He was, in fact, the best thing that had ever happened to Mom.

"I think it's great," Ella said. "Congratulations, you guys."

"You're okay with this?" Mom asked.

"Of course I am. I'm so happy for you. Jim's terrific."

This earned her a smile. She'd actually made Mom happy. Wonder of wonders. Sometimes figuring out how to make Mom happy was a challenge.

Jim turned toward his son, who was staring down at his cell phone, more interested in the Clemson basketball game than anything else. The guy had been glued to his iPhone all night.

"What about you?" Jim asked.

Dylan looked up but didn't make eye contact with anyone. "Are you guys sure about this?"

Wow. Nothing like blurting out your feelings without regard for anyone's emotions. Was Dylan always like that? If so, he and Mom were going to have a rough relationship. Mom believed in the old saying that, if you didn't have something nice to say, you said nothing at all. Of course, Mom had never applied that rule of comportment to herself when it came to critiquing Ella's violin performances.

Jim laughed, pulling Ella from her sour thoughts. “We’re sure. I know you don’t have much party planning experience, but we’re confident you can handle this.” Jim was a master at defusing conflict. But it didn’t quite work this time.

“Dad.” Dylan invested that word with a boatload of irritation. Her soon-to-be stepbrother was not a happy camper, but he was going to learn that speaking out loud about his negative feelings would not endear him to Mom. Mom was giving him the frown of death, which suggested that the scene was about to get ugly if Ella didn’t head Dylan off at the pass.

“What kind of party do you want? Where were you thinking of getting married? How many people? Sit-down dinner or buffet? Music? Mom, I need details,” she said in a rush.

Mom’s frown evaporated like dew on a summer’s day. Whew. “We talked to Ashley Scott about getting married in her garden in May.”

“We actually booked a date,” Jim added. “May twenty-second.”

“And we wanted to keep the wedding to the family only, but since Jim is such a prominent member of the community—”

“We thought maybe an engagement party would be in order,” Jim said, finishing Mom’s sentence.

It was cute. And she was warming to the idea, sort of. But one glance in Dylan’s direction told her she was the only one. Her soon-to-be stepbrother was not down with the program.

Whoa. That was a thought. Did she want a brother?

Not really.

“You know,” Dylan finally said, “it might be best if you kept things small. I mean it’s not as if…” His voice faded out the minute Jim turned his intense blue eyes in his son’s direction.

Wow. Who knew Jim could silence Dylan with a mere look. Jim's cred went up by a factor of ten.

Ella jumped in, continuing in her gung ho tone. "So, um, did you have an idea of how big you wanted your party to be?"

"We need to put together a guest list," Jim said. "Maybe a hundred people."

"Wow. I guess with a big guest list like that, we'll have some trouble finding a venue," she said.

Dylan slumped back in his chair and might have rolled his somewhat attractive blue eyes. Oh boy, this was her lucky day. She could just see the fun times ahead planning this party with him.

"We were thinking maybe the reception hall at Grace Church," Jim said.

"We were?" Mom's tone suggested that Jim had been thinking about the church and had failed to communicate with his bride-to-be. Not good.

"It's a big room, Brenda," Jim said.

"Right. But that's its main attraction. It's big and empty and kind of boring."

"Well, maybe we could rent out Rafferty's for an evening."

Dylan sat up in his chair. "Dad, have you any idea how much that would cost?"

"Some. But, you know, you only get married twice." Jim lifted a half-full glass of green beer.

Dylan glowered.

Just then, Jason waved in Ella's direction, signaling the start the second set of the night, and she'd never been so happy that a break was over. "Look, I gotta go to work. Can we talk about this tomorrow?"

“Of course. We wanted to tell you two tonight since we’re all together,” Mom said.

“And, honey, the violin sounds wonderful.”

Something warm spilled into Ella’s core. Mom hadn’t failed to notice all the hard work she’d done over the last few weeks. She might even have enjoyed the unusual praise were it not for the grumpy stare Dylan Killough aimed in her direction.