



my stubborn heart

a novel

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prologue

There once was a girl who'd been praying for a husband since the fourth grade. Over the years she'd prayed for his health, his happiness, his protection, and—okay—sometimes for his good looks. She'd prayed that she would meet him when she was meant to.

Except that she hadn't.

She'd been avidly expecting and watching for him all this time, from the fourth grade straight up to the age of thirty-one. And though she tried hard to be positive, the truth was that she'd grown tired of waiting. Tired of dating. Tired of breaking off just two bananas from the bunch at the grocery store. Tired of the singles group at church. Tired of living alone.

Worse, she was beginning to doubt that her nameless, faceless husband existed at all. Maybe, late at night in her kid bed, her college bed, her adult single woman bed, she'd been praying for someone who wasn't coming. Ever.

Perhaps her husband had run in front of a bus as a child. What did God do in that situation? Swap in an understudy? Or maybe she'd missed her husband during the bustle of her college years, never knowing that the shy guy from physics class was *the one*. Or perhaps, right from the start, God had never intended for her to marry.

Or maybe, just maybe—and this was the hope she still clung to despite the evidence to the contrary—her husband was still on his way.



There once was a mother who'd been praying double hard for her son ever since he'd stopped praying for himself.

From earliest childhood, he'd been extraordinary—a perfect, miraculous blend of athletic ability and focused determination. She and her husband had supported and loved him, but never expected of him what he'd made of himself. How could it even have entered her mind to dream a dream that big? She'd watched with a mixture of sentimental pride and stunned surprise as he'd climbed up every level of the sport of hockey.

By the age of eighteen he was playing professionally. From there, at what she'd thought would be the pinnacle, his star had only continued to rise. He'd been photographed for grocery store magazines. He'd moved into a house surrounded by a wall of security. He'd married a beautiful girl in a grand wedding ceremony filled with the flashes of cameras, wedding planners, and peach-colored roses.

Her son had accomplished it all. The height of success in his career. National fame. Wealth. Personal happiness with his wife.

And then it had all come apart, crashing and rolling out of reach like a handful of spilled marbles. His wife had been diagnosed with cancer and nothing—not money, not the best doctors—had been able to save her. When she'd died, he'd walked away from his sport, from the big house with the wall, from the fame.

In the years since, he'd retreated inside himself to a place where none of his family or friends could reach him. So his mother prayed. She prayed that God wouldn't forget about him, this son

of hers, who'd gained and lost the world in just a third of his lifetime. She prayed that God would send someone who could find him and save him from his prison of grief. And she prayed that maybe, somehow, in time, his heart would soften and he'd find love again.



Funny thing about prayers. God hears them. But you just never know if, when, or how He's going to answer them.

chapter one

Kate Donovan entered the town of Redbud, Pennsylvania, for the first time driving a car packed with her seventy-six-year-old grandmother, a comprehensive set of encyclopedias on American antiques, three sacks of nonperishable groceries, and enough pink luggage to give Mary Kay fits of jealousy. It was the end of their three-day car trip from Dallas but only the beginning of their big adventure together.

“Look at this town.” Gran lowered the passenger window. “Look at it! Just try to tell me this isn’t the sweetest town you’ve ever seen.” The afternoon breeze blew into the car, mussing Gran’s stylishly short white hair and sending Kate’s long red ponytail flying. “Didn’t I tell you it was sweet?”

“You did. And it is.” Quaint brick buildings holding shops and restaurants lined Main Street. Kate spotted one adorable B&B and then a painted wooden sign advertising another. The trees dotting the edge of the sidewalk grew above and across the street, forming a tunnel of branches. Gran pointed left and right, telling Kate who’d owned this building when she’d been young, how that one had been a candy store in 1940, and how so-and-so had burned this one to the ground with a cigarette butt.

Before Kate could manage a single good look at anything, the glossy storefronts ended and neighborhoods began.

“Oh, Kate,” Gran said, “we’re almost there!”

After the endless highways, the endless sitting, and the endless fast food, Kate was finally going to see Chapel Bluff. The house where Gran had been raised had belonged to their family since it was built in 1820. Kate had heard stories of it and its generations of occupants since infancy.

“Take a right here, sweetie.”

Kate turned right and followed the lane as it climbed. Charmingly boxy homes with doors painted red and green and black sat back from the road on lots of an acre or more each. The plots grew bigger still until the houses disappeared and countryside took over.

“It’s beautiful here,” Kate said.

“It is, isn’t it?”

Kate punched a button and the sunroof slid open. The air seemed fresher here, clearer. Leaves, bronzed by the Saturday afternoon sunlight, waved and chattered at them from their branches.

“This is it,” Gran said with hushed anticipation. She motioned toward the shady private drive on their left. “Just here.”

Gravel crunched as Kate maneuvered her Explorer upward along the road. The forest cleared and she suddenly got her first sweeping view of the house.

“Chapel Bluff,” Gran said reverently.

Chapel Bluff. Kate released a whistling breath of appreciation and promptly fell in love with it.

Though the drive continued on to what looked like a barn, Kate stopped next to the house and killed the engine. The two of them sat in silence, simply staring.

The three-story house had been constructed of brown and beige stone. A white door covered by a little pointed portico sat

squarely in the center, flanked on either side and above by gleaming windows trimmed with white paint and black shutters. Recessed from the middle section of the house, two wings jutted outward. Both were built of the same stone and graced with the same glinting windows. Two dormer windows and no less than three brick chimneys marked the slate roofline.

It looked like something straight out of the English countryside. All it needed was hedgerows and climbing roses.

It would have been one of the prettiest houses Kate had ever seen, except that it had a scruffy, abandoned air about it. There were no flowers, no bikes propped out front, no flags, hay bales with scarecrows on top, or wreaths. Just slightly weedy planting beds, drawn curtains, and the lonely sound of crickets.

Kate gazed past the house to the barn, and then to what appeared to be a small clapboard chapel in the distance. All three buildings stood on a wide meadow. Where the meadow ended, the forest began, rising hill upon hill into the distance. And all of it, as far as the eye could see, Gran always said, was Chapel Bluff land.

It was more, really, than a house on a big chunk of property. It was too rambling and old to be just a house. An estate, maybe.

“Thank you, Kate.” Gran’s voice wavered, and Kate turned to see her grandmother smiling tearfully at her. “For coming with me. It means so much to me.”

Kate leaned over and hugged her. “I’m glad I could bring you. Glad to be here.”

They clambered out of the car and were greeted by a cool mid-September breeze. Gran struck out ahead of Kate, the hem of her long shirt fluttering. Today Gran had on a black turtleneck, black matte jersey pants, and a wine-colored Asian print shirt. She’d accented the outfit with four bracelets, two enormous rings, one necklace of burgundy stones, and her rectangular rimless glasses.

They paused on the porch while Gran fumbled the key into the lock and attempted to turn it.

Nothing.

Kate tried. Gran tried again. Kate tried and finally, after some serious arm wrestling, got the bolt to unclick. The door swung inward with a rusty squeak.

The smell hit Kate first. Mothballs, must, and stale air.

The dimness hit second. She squinted and made her way inside behind Gran. In the murky light she could just make out heavy pieces of furniture, art, and accessories all so unbelievably retro that it would have been funny if it hadn't been so tacky. "Whoa," Kate said. "I thought you were half kidding about the furniture."

"No. It's been exactly like this since 1955, when Mother had it redecorated."

They moved around the room opening curtains, letting in light. "Matt brought people out to fix the pipes and make sure the heat's working," Gran said. "The electricity *should* be on." Experimentally, she turned the knob of a lamp, and amazingly it switched on. "Ah, good." Hands on her hips, Gran looked about her. "Velma recommended a housekeeper who came by yesterday. The poor woman probably had a fit when she saw the place."

Kate had taken a three-month leave of absence from her job as a social worker to help Gran renovate Chapel Bluff. Now that she was getting her first good look at the place, she supposed she should feel overwhelmed at the thought of three straight months of work fixing up this *Leave It to Beaver* time capsule. But instead, as she took in the hideous brown carpet, the ugly maroon sofas, and the dingy beige wallpaper, something like delight rose inside her. This house was begging for help. *Begging*. More than any house on any HGTV makeover show she'd ever watched. Three months off work to renovate the place? Heaven.

Her fascination grew as Gran took her on a tour of the bottom floor, which held a mammoth den in one wing and an office in the other. A door set at the back of the living room issued them into the dining room, which had picturesque low ceilings, exposed beams, and a long fireplace. A short hallway from there led to an airy kitchen with windows on three sides. Clearly, the kitchen had originally been built as a separate structure from the main house, then joined later by the hallway.

Like the rest of the house, the floor in the kitchen was wide-planked pine, marked with time and wear. And though the outdated curtains and wallpaper had to go, the bright red '50s-style oven and refrigerator were quirky but cheery. White tiles stretched across the countertops, and a terrific French butcher block sat in the center of the room.

“The kitchen’s actually pretty cute,” Kate remarked.

“I agree. It’s the best of the lot. Matt got the appliances working for us.”

Kate opened the fridge and, sure enough, cold air rushed out.

“He’s a gem, that boy,” Gran said, “and even though I haven’t see him since he was knee high . . . C’mon, sweetie, let me show you the upstairs.” They made their way back to the living room and up the staircase.

“. . . Even though you haven’t seen him since he was knee high,” Kate prompted.

“Even so, I’ll tell you two things I know about Matt Jarreau.” Gran gained the second-story landing and regarded Kate with twinkling eyes. “He’s single. And he’s a hunk.”

Kate laughed. “You think he’s a hunk based on what you remember of him from twenty years ago?”

“Twenty-five. And also the phone conversations we’ve had about the work he’ll be doing for us. I could tell by his voice.”

“I don’t know, Gran. Casey Kasem has a good voice.”

“No, I’m sure of it. We’re the luckiest two women in this town, because I’m telling you, and mark my words, our contractor is a hunk.”



Kate woke the next morning beneath a mound of quilts. She snuggled down deeper, flexed her toes, and for long minutes simply lay there, luxuriating. Chapel Bluff, like all houses, had its own kind of hum. She listened to the creaks and the muffled bumps of the plumbing and furnace. She smelled old wood in the air and Bounty fabric softener on her sheets.

Kate had picked the third-floor attic bedroom for herself, and through the four dormer windows, two on her right and two on her left, she could see slices of treetops and morning sky. Birds circling and chirping.

As she considered the honey-colored wooden ceiling beams above her, the peeling white wall paint, and the curly brass bed frame, a rush of gratitude filled her chest. She’d needed a break from her rut, from her loneliness, from her job, and God had known. He’d given her three months and this beautiful, beautiful old house.

She showered in a second-story bathroom the color of an avocado, and made her way downstairs. Gran was nowhere to be seen, but in the kitchen she discovered freshly baked apple-cinnamon muffins and coffee. She took her time over breakfast before refilling her coffee mug, pouring one for Gran, and taking both mugs outside.

Kate found her grandmother exactly where she’d known she’d be, on her knees in one of the front flower beds. She wore a turtle-neck under her gardening overalls, gloves, plastic magenta clogs, and a straw hat with dangling purple ribbons.

“Morning, Gran.”

The hat tilted upward, exposing a wide smile. “Morning! Is that more coffee?”

“I thought you might like another cup.”

“Thank you.” She pushed to her feet, peeled off the gloves, and accepted the mug.

Minutes later, they were still standing together discussing Gran’s plans for the garden when a white truck turned onto their driveway. It was a Ford Super Duty, a few years old and slightly dusty.

“That’ll be Matt now,” Gran said, waving and making her way forward.

Kate shielded her eyes and watched the driver park, then walk toward them across the lawn. She moved to follow Gran, then slowed.

He wore jeans, scuffed work boots, and a brown and blue flannel shirt that hung open over a white T-shirt. His battered UNC baseball hat was pulled so low that shade slanted across his face.

Uh-oh for her, because Gran had been right.

He was a hunk.

Not only that, but something deep inside her almost seemed to—to *recognize* him. Which was ridiculous. Kate faltered and stopped.

Gran greeted the man with her trademark affection, hugging him, exclaiming, and smiling. “Kate.” Gran drew him over to her. “This is Matt Jarreau. Matt, my granddaughter Kate Donovan.”

“Nice to meet you,” Kate said.

“You too.”

“Thank you so much,” Gran said to him, “for taking care of the electrical issues and the plumbing and all the rest so that we could move right in.”

“Sure.”

“We’ve certainly got a lot of work ahead of us, don’t we?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Is it still all right with you to begin by painting the bedrooms where Kate and I are staying? We’d so like to enjoy those rooms during the renovation. . . .”

Gran’s voice went on, but Kate hardly heard. Matt had a fascinating face. Hard, handsome, and grave. A clean jawline and a firm, serious mouth. His nose looked like it had been broken and expertly reset, and faint scars marked the skin below his bottom lip and above an eyebrow. He had dark brown hair, slightly overlong so that it curled out from under the back of his hat.

What took Kate’s breath away, though, were his eyes. They were dark, dark, dark, almost liquid brown. Thoughtful, long-lashed, shielded, and somehow . . . somehow wounded. All the more startling for being set in such a masculine face.

She studied those eyes as he spoke to her grandmother and she thought, *Tragedy*.

The conversation between Matt and Gran continued. She stood there feeling vaguely idiotic, holding her coffee mug and finding it hard to look away from him. It was as if something within her had been sleeping and now—the longer she was near him—the more it was waking, becoming alert, jangling. That something seemed to be saying, *It’s you*.

Finally.

I’ve been waiting.

For you.

Which was crazy. Crazy! Yet her heart, as if it knew something her brain didn’t, executed an awkward double beat, and then started pounding anyway.

“. . . Kate and I have already picked out the paint colors for our

rooms,” Gran was saying, “but we didn’t know how much you’d need and so we haven’t purchased it yet.”

“I’ll get it for you,” he replied.

“Oh, would you? That would be wonderful.” Gran led the way up the front walk. “Come on inside, and I’ll get the paint swatches.”

Kate and Matt followed Gran into the house. He was over six feet tall and moved like an athlete. She could sense his coordination and strength. She’d bet money that he had some serious muscle, and that the straight fall of his shirt hid a washboard stomach.

“Can I get you something to drink, Matt?” Gran motioned to the kitchen. “We have coffee.”

“I’m fine. Thanks.”

“A muffin?”

“No. Thank you.”

“All right, then. Here are the swatches.” She swept them off the coffee table and handed them over with the musical click of bracelets. “Do you need to go up and have a look at our bedrooms?”

“I’ve already measured them so I know how much I’ll need.”

“Oh, good.” Gran crossed her arms, tucking her coffee cup into an elbow. “So tell us about yourself, Matt.”

“Not much to tell.” Even at that innocuous question, Kate could sense him retreating.

“I remember you coming over here to play as a boy. Your parents were just about Mother and Daddy’s closest neighbors. Have you lived in town all your life?”

“I lived in New York a while.”

“Oh, did you? Manhattan is such an interesting place. . . .”

As Gran chatted about a recent trip she’d taken to New York, Kate watched Matt move smoothly to the door and take hold of the handle.

In Kate's experience, men as hot looking as he was had an ego to match. But Matt seemed strangely guarded, almost introverted. He hadn't smiled, he'd answered all Gran's questions politely but with few words, and he'd used his posture and expression like a shield.

"Have you been back in Redbud long?" Gran asked him.

"A couple of years. I'd best be going." He opened the door and walked off the front porch.

"Certainly. We'll see you later." Gran waved cheerfully.

They stood watching until his truck pulled out of sight.

"I told you he was a hunk," Gran said.

"You were right."

They made their way to the kitchen and went to work cleaning up breakfast. "I get the feeling that something happened to him," Kate said.

Gran washed off plates and slotted them into the relic of a dishwasher. "To Matt?"

"Yes. Something . . ." Kate stilled, a dish towel dangling from her shoulder. "Something terrible."

"What gives you that impression?"

"I'm not sure. I just know."

"You do?"

"I could see it in his eyes."

Gran stopped, her wet hands dripping water into the sink, and studied Kate shrewdly. "You were unusually quiet around him."

"I was dumbfounded by him! I couldn't think of a thing to say."

"Well, as previously noted, he is a *very* nice-looking young man."

To say the least. Matt Jarreau was in-your-face, big-screen, major-league handsome. But there was something more about him than his mere handsomeness . . . something intangible, that

had her by the throat. Her stomach *still* felt fluttery. Which was not good for her. Not. Good. She'd sworn off the really good-looking ones. Absolutely couldn't go there again.

They resumed their cleaning.

"I'm an excellent matchmaker," Gran stated. "Very subtle."

"Oh yes. You were very subtle when you threw me together with Barry Markman at the Fourth of July picnic."

"It's just that his grandmother and I are such close friends. We'd hoped . . . Well, how was I to know he had bad breath?"

"Listen, *no one* is going to make any romantic overtures toward Matt Jarreau."

"Why?"

"He's way out of my league."

"No!"

"Yes." She was ordinary. A thirty-one-year-old redheaded virgin with asthma and genetics that didn't include either hips or boobs. "Even if by some chance he did want to ask me out, I no longer date guys that look like that. I decided a couple of years ago to save myself the anguish." Everyone knew—and her own experience had confirmed—that good-looking men were usually taken, emotionally unavailable, or narcissists. "Okay?"

"Okay," Gran sighed.

With a pang of dread, Kate imagined Gran cornering Matt at every turn, begging him to take her poor, forlorn granddaughter on a date.

"Gran, I'm serious."

"I am, too," she answered. "You know I'd never do anything to embarrass you."

Kate could think of dozens of times when Gran had, nevertheless, done exactly that.

Gran dropped two dirty knives into the dishwasher. "However,

I do think you and I need to invite him to dinner. Single men don't eat well. He probably hasn't had a home-cooked meal in weeks. His mother and father live in Florida now, you know."

"Inviting him to dinner is fine."

"Good. Then that's settled." Gran rinsed out the sink and dried her hands. "What's on the agenda today?"

"Today we've got to start sorting through everything. We need to decide what to sell at the garage sale, what to sell on eBay, what to toss, and what to keep."

"And tomorrow?"

"Hmm." She wasn't going to nurture a single romantic feeling toward Matt and yet . . . she was painfully curious about him. She wanted—it surprised her how much she wanted—to get to know him, to find out what had made him so sad, and hopefully to establish a friendship so that she'd have some company her own age over the coming weeks.

Everyone who knew her knew she had a wide streak of stubbornness running through her. When something got into her head and took root, she couldn't get it out. And Matt Jarreau had gotten into her head and taken root. He didn't know it yet, but she was going to find out his secrets and they were going to be friends. "Tomorrow I'm going to help Matt paint."