

Unclaimed Legacy

by Deborah Heal

Chapter One

Abby managed to get her mascara on without smudging it. It was not an easy task, knowing that if she glanced at the other reflection in the mirror she'd see Merri's sorrowful eyes staring back at her. At least she wouldn't have to spend any time on her hair. Whatever she did, it dried in a mass of brown curls.

She smoothed on a bit of lip gloss and then, trying not to feel guilty, smiled encouragingly at the pudgy eleven-year-old beside her. "Come on, Merri, it's just a lunch date. I'll be home before you know it. And while I'm gone you'll get to spend some time with your mom."

Merri sat on the edge of the tub and morosely petted Kit Kat, her chocolate-colored cat. "But this is just the beginning. I'll never see you again now that you're going out with John."

Abby was glad Merri wanted her around. It was a big improvement from her first two weeks at the old house in Miles Station. Thankfully, the troubled girl had finally begun to accept her help and her friendship.

"I don't know if I'll keep 'going out' with John. It depends. Besides, I'm your tutor; I can't go away. You'll be seeing me all summer."

"What do you mean, 'it depends'?"

"Depends on if he turns out like the last guy I dated."

"The one who wasn't interested in your personality?"

"Yeah, that one. But as for John... well, so far so good. He's already earned a star in that department."

"A star?"

Abby blushed. "Well...see, whenever I meet a guy I'm interested in going out with, I imagine a chart for him labeled Possible Marriage Material. Then I give him imaginary stars for things I like about him."

"Like being tall and handsome?"

"He is that. But, I'm looking for character qualities." Abby gathered the last of her things and zipped her toiletry case. "Like I always say, beauty is more than skin deep."

Merri continued to pet Kit Kat thoughtfully and Abby wondered if she should stay and expand on the topic. She had already determined that her service project for Ambassador College included much more than tutoring Merri in academic subjects.

But John would be there any minute. She put her arm around Merri's shoulder and said, "We'll talk more when I get back."

Merri's mother Pat Randall poked her head past the door and said, "He's here. You didn't tell me he had a vintage Mustang."

When Abby got downstairs she saw that John was dressed in khakis and a shirt that made his eyes look even bluer than usual. And then, even before she got close, she picked up the scent of the killer cologne he always wore.

"You clean up nice," he said with a grin.

"Hi." She mentally grimaced, just thinking about the last time he had seen her—wearing cobwebs in her hair and old paint-stained jeans. This time she was dressed better, in tan capris and a white camp shirt, but the circumstances were just as awkward. Merri, still sulking, was watching every move she and John made, and Pat was hovering like she was her mother instead of her employer, which was ironic, of course, since she spent so little time with Merri, her actual daughter.

"So, John Roberts," Pat said, "what are you majoring in?"

"I'm in the pre-law program at the University of Illinois in Chicago."

"Do you have a summer job?"

"I work at the Tropical Frost in Brighton," he answered.

"That's...nice."

"He forgot to mention that he owns it." Abby glanced at her watch and adjusted the purse straps that were already digging into her shoulder.

Pat seemed to be assessing John's height. "I bet you played basketball in high school."

"No, I'm not much into contact sports. But I did run track for a couple of years."

Abby moved a little closer to the front door. John didn't seem to get the hint. Her stomach growled and she wondered where they were going to eat.

Pat's expression was serious, like it was her responsibility to screen for terrorists, serial killers, or other generally un-American guys. Maybe Pat was practicing for Merri's dating debut. But at age twenty, Abby was out of practice with parental inquisitions. Her own parents hadn't been so intense when she went on her first date in eighth grade with Jimmy Gale. Of course his mom had driven them to the junior high and stayed to chaperone at the annual St. Patrick's Day dance. But still.

"What are your hobbies?" Pat continued relentlessly.

Abby glanced over to see if John was getting annoyed. But he was still smiling as if he enjoyed getting the third degree.

"I love reading—"

"What kind of books?"

“Mostly sci-fi. And I love music.” Pat opened her mouth and John quickly added “Classic rock.”

“Who’s your favorite Beatle?”

“Paul.” John blinked and darted a glance at Abby.

She smiled and nodded her head encouragingly. Pat folded her arms over her chest and frowned.

“I also restore vintage cars with my dad,” John continued. “Oh, and I like theatre. I’ll be in my college’s production of My Fair Lady this fall.”

Pat let her arms fall to her side and Abby wondered if that was a sign John had passed her test. She smiled and mentally assigned a star for patience to John’s imaginary chart.

“So, where are you taking Abby?”

“We’re going to see a few things in Alton and then have lunch at Genevieve’s.”

“Alton?” Merri looked imploringly at Abby. “I’d sure like to see what Alton looks like in modern times.”

Abby put an arm around Merri’s shoulder and said, “I’ll tell you all about it when I get back.”

“And when will that be?” Pat said.

“We should be back by 3:00.” John checked his watch. “Make that 3:30 or 4:00.” At last, he opened the door and said, “Well, we’ll be going now.”

Pat’s cell phone rang and she flipped it open, holding up a hand to signal for them to wait. “That’s great,” she said into the phone. “I’ll meet you in about twenty minutes.”

Merri’s face went from sullen to outraged in .002 seconds. “Mom, you promised we’d do something fun.”

“It won’t take me long to show my clients the house,” Pat said, closing her phone. “You can wait in the office for me, Merrideth.”

Abby understood Pat’s need to get her fledgling real estate business off the ground, but she also knew Merri needed her mother’s attention, especially since her father was so distant—both geographically and emotionally. She wondered again, if she should stay home with her. Maybe it wasn’t even ethical to begin a relationship while she was on a tutoring job.

“But, Mom . . .” Merri wailed.

“Why don’t you come with us?” John said, darting a look at Abby.

Abby’s mouth dropped open and she scrutinized his face. No guy she knew willingly hung around kids, especially not bratty pre-teens, and never on a date. She checked closely for signs of martyrdom, but John was actually looking excited at the prospect.

“Could I?” Merri said.

“If you’re sure it’s all right,” Pat said, looking relieved.

“Sure,” John said.

Merri turned to see Abby's reaction. "Another star?" she asked, grinning knowingly.

Abby's eyes grew wide in alarm and she put her arm around Merri and leaned in close. "We won't mention the stars, Brat," she whispered. "Will we?"

But it was true. In her imagination, she added a big star for kindness to children.

John was a knowledgeable guide. He had grown up in nearby Brighton, but explained that everyone went to Alton for shopping and entertainment. "I guess it doesn't seem like much to you two since you're used to Chicago."

"Well, it's a lot more interesting than Miles Station," Merri said.

"But you'd have to admit Miles Station was pretty interesting in the 1850s," Abby said.

John looked puzzled for a moment, but then they reached College Avenue and he pulled the car over and stopped. "Come on. I want you to meet one of our famous sons." He led them to a bronze statue of a tall, thin man leaning on a cane. "Abby and Merri, meet Mr. Wadlow."

"What's he famous for?" Merri asked.

John stood next to the statue. "Take a guess," he said, stretching as tall as he could.

After reading the plaque beside it, Abby looked up in amazement. "Merri, this statue is life-size. Robert Wadlow was 8 feet 11 inches tall, the tallest man ever recorded."

"They have a lot of stuff about him in the little museum across the street, but I think they're closed right now."

After saying goodbye to the so-called "Gentle Giant," John offered to take them to the mall, but Abby wasn't interested and Merri apparently had enough discretion not to offer suggestions for someone else's date.

"I'd like to see the older parts of town," Abby said. She turned to look at Merri in the back seat, who nodded her head in confirmation that it was time to tell John. "We want to see if it looks familiar," she said carefully.

"That's where we're going," he said. "Genevieve's is downtown and—wait a minute. I thought you were both new to the area."

Abby looked again at Merri. "I know you're going to have a hard time believing this," she began.

"And the computer hasn't been working right so we couldn't show you," Merri explained.

"We were going to wait until it's fixed, but we've been having trouble with customer service."

"And since we're in Alton we can't resist seeing if we recognize . . ."

"You're familiar with Alton?" John inserted into the volley of comments.

“At least, Alton in 1858,” Merri said.

John’s eyes were darting from Abby beside him to Merri in the backseat. He looked so confused Abby had to swallow a laugh. “There’s a stop light, John,” Abby said, pointing to the intersection they were about to slide through. “You see, when Merri’s dad sent her the new computer—”

“He was just trying to buy me off since he never spends time with me after the divorce.”

“And there was this program on it called Beautiful House.” Abby paused to gauge John’s expression. “Maybe you’d better pull off and stop somewhere. You seem to be having trouble concentrating.”

John ignored the suggestion, so she continued. “And one night when we were fooling around with it, something really weird happened.”

“Abby tried to talk to customer support, but they thought she was just kidding with them.”

“We could see Merri’s house in Miles Station,” Abby continued.

“Only instead of being run down and crummy, it was brand new,” Merri added.

“And then we met Colonel Miles, well not actually met of course—”

“He’s the man who built the house.”

“In 1846.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute,” John said. He flipped his right turn signal on, moved across two lanes of traffic, and then pulled into the Quick Trip and parked. “This is a joke, right?”

Merri frowned at Abby. “I told you we should have waited to show him.”

“You’re saying you went back in time to 1846?” John said.

“No, silly,” Merri said. “We weren’t there the year the house was built. We found that date from the library.”

“Oh,” he said. “I thought you were trying to tell me—”

“We were there in 1858,” Abby interrupted. “But I’d have to say it was a virtual trip only. I mean, Charlotte never saw us or knew we were there.”

“Who’s Charlotte?” John asked desperately.

“Colonel Miles’ daughter. We got to know her quite well,” Merri said.

“As I was saying—try to concentrate, John—no one knew we were there, and as far as I know we never changed the course of history.”

John closed his eyes, put his head on the steering wheel, and began mumbling.

“Beautiful House is sort of like my brother’s architecture software,” Abby continued. “We could zoom in and control the view of the Miles’ house. We could follow Charlotte, inside or out, and feel and experience what she did, go where she went. Like, for instance, when she got on the train and went to Alton for the Lincoln-Douglas debate.”

Abby's voice trailed off when she saw John shaking. "What's wrong?" She put a comforting hand on his arm.

But then he lifted his head from the steering wheel and she saw he was laughing.

Abby quickly withdrew her hand. "We can prove it," she said indignantly. "Take us down to the old part of town."

John continued to laugh and Abby thought how satisfying it would be to hit him with her purse. Really hard. Her roommate Kate had laughed her head off too when she had tried to explain the program to her. She had continued to believe Abby was trying to play an elaborate practical joke on her. Abby snorted her displeasure and crossed her arms tightly across her chest. She'd have to make a new column on the chart for check marks instead of stars. She'd be adding a big black check mark for mocking or disbelieving or. . . something.

Still grinning, John restarted the car. "Let's go eat lunch."

As they got closer to the old part of town, the streets began to get narrow and steep. And then Abby saw the river and a tugboat pushing a barge upstream.

"Is that the Mississippi?" Merri said.

"That's right, squirt." When they reached the bottom of the hill, John pointed to a huge grain silo that stood near the river. "Do you see that red line painted up there? That's how high the river rose in the great flood of 1993. Whole houses were washed away."

"You're kidding."

"No. They don't call it the Mighty Mississippi for nothing. Alton has always been an important port on the Mississippi River. St. Louis is just across from us."

John turned left onto Broadway. "Many of the buildings here date from the early 1800s. Most of the businesses have moved out onto the new parkway. Now, downtown is mostly for antique hunters and tourists."

Abby wished she could explore some of the old buildings—better yet, do a little time-surfing in them. Who knew what stories they had to tell? Interspersed with them, other buildings, some plain and some outright ugly and obviously lacking the same character and soul, had been built where previous old buildings had given up the ghost in years past.

John parked the car in front of River Bend Pottery and they got out of the car. "Come on," he said. "Genevieve's is just up ahead."

A man carrying a little walnut table came out of an antique store as they walked past. John and Merri paused to admire the paintings in the window of an art gallery, but Abby's eye was drawn to the restaurant next door called My Just Desserts.

“Oh, look, you guys,” she said. “Peanut butter pie. I’m trying not to stare, but I think that man in there’s eating peanut butter pie.” Abby’s stomach rumbled and she felt her face turn red.

John laughed. “Don’t worry. You’ll eat soon.”

Genevieve’s was a combination gift shop and tea room swarming with visitors. The hostess took their names and suggested they might enjoy browsing in the gift shop while they waited for a table. Abby looked longingly at a tray of salads and sandwiches that a waitress carried past but obediently followed John and Merri to the gift shop.

It was crowded there too. They eased past three over-dressed women who were oohing and ahing over a display of peach-scented potpourri.

Merri sneezed three times in quick succession. “Wow,” she said, rubbing her eyes. “That’s strong stuff.”

“Wow is right,” Abby said. She wondered if customers ever freaked out from the sensory overload. Vases of silk flowers in every hue sat among calico tea cozies, beaded handbags, miniature Beatrix Potter books, along with innumerable other girly treasures. Overhead, garlands of yellow forsythia, each bud with its own tiny white light, cast a warm glow.

John held up a turquoise T-shirt emblazoned with sequins spelling the words Grandma’s Are Just Antique Little Girls. “My mom’s birthday is in a couple of weeks. Do you think she’d like this?”

Not if she’s sane, Abby thought. Or understands the rudiments of punctuation. But she was saved from having to come up with a kind reply when the “Robertson party of three” was summoned over the loudspeaker. Following the hostess, they made their way to the dining room, which unsurprisingly was another estrogen-powered extravaganza. The walls were papered with pink roses and each of the round tables was covered in a different floral print skirt, dripping with cream lace.

Abby had trouble seeing John over the centerpiece—an oversized tea pot filled with pink silk hydrangeas. She studied the menu of salads and sandwiches, all of which seemed to feature raspberries. But it was hard to think in the unrelenting pink of the room. The conversational buzz didn’t help. The majority of their fellow diners were women over forty, and the majority of them wore dresses in floral prints much like that of the table cloths. They all seemed to be enjoying their fruity salads and sandwiches. Obviously, something was wrong with her, Abby thought, because she had the urge to run into the street screaming for a hamburger.

But then John peeked over the hydrangeas and smiled proudly at her. “I hope you like it. Mom said this would be a good place.”

Abby’s heart melted and she forgot she was annoyed with John. Would this star fall under romantic or considerate?

Of course it couldn't get too romantic with Merri there, even though she was good as gold and didn't say much while they ate and tried to carry on a conversation over the centerpiece. But then Merri's phone warbled and she squealed. "It's a text from Mom. She says Dad is coming down to see me tomorrow!"

The women at the table next to them looked annoyed and Abby mentally cringed. But then she thought, tough luck, ladies. She was just relieved that Merri was so much happier.

"Merri's been wanting to go to Chicago to visit her dad, but her mom hasn't been able to take her," Abby explained. She couldn't tell him with Merri there that Pat had been stalling because she didn't want Merri to be around her father's criminal activities, or that it was the reason she had taken Merri and begun a new life in Miles Station in the first place.

"He wants me to pick out a place to go for lunch and I get to choose something fun to do afterwards. What should I say?"

"Well," John said. "There's the Brown Cow. They have really good burgers and steaks."

Abby nodded her head in wholehearted agreement. "That sounds good. I bet he'd like that."

Merri's thumbs were a blur as she texted her mom. "Okay, but what should we do after lunch?"

"Let's go." John tucked cash into the leather check folder the waitress had laid on the table. Then he stood and pulled Abby's chair out. "We'll think of something."

When they stepped outside, Abby pointed to an old brick three-story building across the street. "Isn't that City Hall?"

"I think that's it." Merri started to cross the street, but John held her arm just before she would have stepped in front of a motorcycle.

"It used to be. Now it's the Alton History Museum," John said. "You'd probably like it since you're so keen on the past."

"Keen? Does anyone use that word anymore?" Abby said, laughing.

"Hey, I like retro words."

A Closed sign hung on the door, but Abby and Merri shaded their eyes and blatantly stared through the window. "There's a big picture on the wall," Merri said. "Look, Abby, do you see it?"

"That's it. See, John, there's Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas shaking hands."

"Remember how goofy Lincoln looked, Abby?"

"Yes, but he was passionate about preventing the expansion of slavery, even if his voice was all twangy and weird," Abby said. "We need to come back when the museum is open."

"Do you mean the re-enactment?" John said. "They hold it every October."

“That’s right. It was October 16th, 1858. There were chairs set up in front, but most people stood. Hundreds of people were here. They came from miles around.”

“It was a really big deal to them,” Merri said.

“The band marched along Front Street and then up Henry Street past the hotel where the speakers were staying. Lincoln’s son Todd was marching along with the other cadets from the Alton Military Academy.”

“Listen,” John said. “Enough, already. I’m impressed that you two have studied a lot of history this summer.”

Abby sighed when she saw the expression on John’s face. “Oh, never mind. Just take us home, John. When we get the computer fixed, I’ll show you.”

John walked Abby to the front door, which although it was polite, was not very romantic since Merri was also there and didn’t seem to be in any hurry to leave.

“Don’t the trellises look nice?” Merri said. John had helped install them on the sides of the porch, and the honeysuckle their neighbor Mrs. Arnold had contributed was already starting to bloom. Indeed, the porch was looking good, the perfect place to say goodbye.

“Merri, your mom will be wondering why we’re late,” Abby hinted.

“Maybe John can help us fix the computer.”

“Not this time,” he said.

Then Merri suddenly seemed to realize that it was time for her to go. “Oh, right. See you,” she said and tripped over the threshold in her haste to get inside the door.

And then finally, Abby was alone with John and it started to seem like a real date.

“Thanks, I had a good time.”

John smiled and her stomach fluttered. “Me too, Abby.”

She felt herself blushing and knew there was not one thing she could do but wait it out. What? Was she fifteen again? She was startled to find she couldn’t maintain eye contact with him either. But when she glanced away she saw his hands, and that was almost as nerve-wracking as looking into his blue eyes. She remembered how strong and capable his hands had been when he helped her with the trellis last week—and how gentle with Merri’s little friend Michael when the bullies teased him.

Then he leaned in closer, and his cologne, an intoxicating blend of something citrus and spicy, went right to her brain and she actually felt faint. He was going to kiss her, and she was going to faint right there on Pat and Merri’s front porch. She took a breath and closed her eyes.

Nothing.

Abby opened her eyes and saw that he was looking at his watch. And frowning. “Well,” he said, “it’s 4:00. I’ve got to go.”

“Oh. Of course.” Abby felt stupid. How could she have gotten it so wrong?

“Well, you know when you own your own business you’ve got to keep early hours.”

“Oh.”

“See you tomorrow at church?”

“Okay.”

She watched as he hurried back to his blue Mustang and continued watching as he drove away down Miles Station Road toward Brighton. She waved, but he didn’t look back.

Abby sat down on the porch step and wondered where it had started to go wrong. After a while, she took her phone out of her purse and smiled when she saw there were five missed calls from her roommate Kate. Had it been anyone else, she would have been concerned that there was some dire emergency, but since it was Kate, she knew it was just impatience to hear all the nitty-gritty details of her date.

“Okay, give,” Kate said right off.

“Hi, to you too, Kate.”

“Oh well, hi, then. You know I’m dying to know how it went, so don’t think you’re going to torture me with this.”

“It was nice. He took me to a fancy-schmancy tea room for lunch.”

“That’s so romantic.”

“Yeah, well, I’m still hungry. Merri, too. She almost asked him to pull through McDonald’s on the way home, but I wouldn’t—.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute. Back up there, girlfriend. Are you telling me the chubster—I mean youngster—went with you? On your date with tall, dark, and handsome?”

“Hey, don’t call her that. Her name’s Merri.”

“Well, excuse me. You called her that. Chubster, brat, slug, couch potato.”

“Yeah...well...I shouldn’t have. She’s got issues, but she’s working through them.”

“Okay, Merri, then. I guess it wasn’t much of a date with her along. No wonder you sound all frowny.”

“I’m not frowny! Well, all right, I am now, but that’s because you’re being so annoying.”

“Tell Auntie Kate all about it. What’s wrong?”

“It’s just that I thought John had such potential. He already has ten stars, and counting. But it got all weird and he rushed off. Right when I actually thought he was going to kiss me.”

“Did you ever think it might be because Merri was there?” Kate’s laughter made her even more annoyed.

“Don’t be an idiot, Kate. Merri went in the house and there was plenty of opportunity, but he left like I had a contagious disease or something.”

“But isn’t that a nice change from the last guy who couldn’t keep his paws off you long enough to carry on a simple conversation? And maybe next time, when Merri isn’t tagging along...”

“Yes, but...well...if you must know, I think the real reason is...John thinks I’m crazy.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re the sanest person I—wait a minute. You didn’t tell him about all that time travel hocus pocus, did you? You did, didn’t you?”

“It’s not hocus pocus. I tried to tell you, we really—”

“Okay, a joke, then. But, Abby, some people just aren’t going to think it’s funny when you keep on like that.”

“Oh, never mind,” Abby sighed. “When I get the computer fixed, I’ll show you. You and John both. You are still coming down for a visit, aren’t you?”

“I will as soon as I can get untangled from some things here. I can’t wait to meet John—and the new improved Merri.”

“Good. Maybe you can help me get a read on him,” Abby said, and then muttered after she hung up, “And I’ll introduce you to Charlotte and Abraham Lincoln too.”

Merri was waiting for her when she opened the front door and Abby wondered if she had been spying out the window.

“Did he kiss you?” Merri demanded.

“Merri!” Pat said.

“Let’s just say you won’t have to worry about not seeing much of me this summer, Merri,” Abby said and then described John’s odd departure.

“What’s the matter with that boy?” Pat said. “Why, any red-blooded guy would want to kiss you . . .” Pat’s eyes widened. “He did say he likes theatre. I bet that’s it. He’s . . .” She nodded toward Merri and lowered her voice. “You know... of another persuasion.”

“Mom, you don’t have to talk in code,” Merri said. “I’m not stupid.”

“Why would he take me on a date if he’s gay?”

“Some gay guys like to use a girlfriend as cover,” Pat said. “I saw it on TV. And he’s too nice. I mean, what guy wants to take a kid along on a date?”

“I’m sure that’s not true, Pat.” But then picture of John sitting so at ease among the crowd of women in the flowery tea room popped unbidden into her head.

So, either she was crazy or he was gay—or, hey, maybe both.

