



Virginia Autumn

by Sara Mitchell

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Stillwaters Resort Hotel and Spa May 1895

Leah paused in her hike up a hillside, needing to catch her breath. She'd left the walking path choked with fashionably dressed guests and rambunctious children, all of them strolling along as though they owned the path, if not the whole place. Though the resort was designed to provide guests an atmosphere of isolation and serenity, at the height of the season it was difficult to find a quiet spot despite the careful layout.

Wryly Leah admitted they had as much right to be there as she did, possibly more so since they had had to pay the exorbitant rates Benjamin charged them.

Sighing, she brushed off bits of bark and a dead leaf clinging to her sleeve, then dabbed perspiration from her temples and upper lip. At least she had finally escaped from the smothering scrutiny of her family. Their concern was well meaning but still annoying. Despite her obvious health after the brush with death, they persisted in mollycoddling her like an invalid.

Brush with death... If only they knew. But of course they couldn't, because she wasn't Meredith, spewing her feelings about with abandon. Or even Garnet, who for all her independent ways was able to share her needs and insecurities. Doggedly Leah resumed her climb, slipping often despite her hiking boots because there was no trail, only earth and leaves, crumbled pieces of limestone, and an occasional patch of soft green moss, a variety she regrettably couldn't identify. She had no idea where she was going, but she could still hear voices on the path below her, so she wasn't worried about becoming lost.

Lost.

She had come to Stillwaters for a spot of soul-searching, to excise the melancholy of these past months. Until the conversation with her father, Leah had not grasped the bloody nature of the

battle. Bloody for her at least, from the knowledge that even when she'd been a child, Jacob had been disappointed in her.

Head bent, lost in her dismal musings, she paid scant attention to her surroundings until she all but plowed into a man. Leah grabbed the slender trunk of a nearby sapling to steady herself. Her gaze traveled from his worn hiking boots up to his face. She supposed she should have been surprised, but uppermost in her mind as she and Cade stared at each other was a sense of inevitability.

"It's time to have a talk," he said.

"I thought you were in Clifton Forge, with Benjamin."

A grimace of pain unexpectedly shadowed his face. "I was. We returned an hour ago." He paused, his hand idly stroking the trunk of the black gum he'd been leaning against when Leah almost ran into him. "I've been wondering for the past two days if God used Ben to get my attention, about a lot of things. But mostly – about you."

Leah took a deep breath. "Let's not mince words. It isn't necessary with me. You've no need to worry I'll chase after you like all those other ladies you've fought off through the years. Don't look so astonished. Meredith teases you about it, doesn't she? She's tossed excerpts of your life at me ever since she and Benjamin married, though lately she's tried hard – for Meredith – to be more subtle about it. Until this week, nothing she ever told me changed my initial impression of you."

She paused. It was more awkward than she had expected, with Cade actually standing there. In a war of words she might win. But on every other level, Leah could not wiggle out from under her ineptitude.

Cade, however, would *not* be privy to that weakness. Leah hauled herself farther up the hill above him until they were eye to eye and plunged in. "Over the past week I've come to better understand you, and my opinion has changed. You're an honorable man. I might not quite agree with everything you believe, but I have come to ... to admire you, and the depth of your faith, very much. I can see, even if you don't, that the feelings you expressed toward me were generated from your kindness. Your compassion and decency."

For some reason the words didn't want to come out. She passed her tongue around her dry lips and cleared her throat. "Doubtless you feel trapped at the moment by that very decency. So let me assure you, again, that I have completely discounted everything you said in the heat of the moment. I'm under no illusions about myself" – the image of a dried flower bulb was forever burned into her brain—"and release you from any lingering obligations you might feel toward me."

A muscle jumped at the corner of Cade's mouth. Mildly puzzled, Leah stopped, searching his face. He hadn't moved, and certainly there was nothing alarming about his casual pose. And yet...

"Are you finished?" he asked then, in a lazy, almost amused drawl.

Leah nodded, frowning a little. "I'm sorry that I've been deliberately avoiding you, but I needed to analyze the matter. Formulate my thoughts. It's been difficult, as you might imagine, with Meredith and Benjamin and my father—Cade! What are you *doing*?"

He had scooped her completely off her feet, settling her high against his chest. "You might want to wrap your arms around my neck. Otherwise I'll have to sling you over my shoulder like a sack of grain."

"Put me down!" She squirmed, outraged.

"Not a chance." He gave her a look that shut her mouth and stilled her squirming, though her heartbeat accelerated to a gallop. "I've had a rough couple of days, what with Ben informing me that I use my faith as a shield to protect me from living, and your thinking I use it for protection against feminine wiles."

"I wasn't criticizing—"

He squeezed her, and his head lowered until their noses almost brushed. His eyes, Leah noted dizzily, were the same vivid green as a patch of moss she'd trod upon earlier. "Be quiet," he murmured, with a softness that sparked tingles from the nape of her neck to her toes. "Be still, and be quiet. In a few moments, we'll discover together what happens when I lay aside that shield."

He ascended the hill with a swiftness that belied the steepness of the climb and Leah's weight, then plunged down the other side, into dense woods that enfolded them in graveyard silence.



"Mr. Walker, I apologize for persuading your staff to break the rules. But I've an unusual request."

"Mrs. Carlton?" The owner of the resort hotel stood on the threshold of the entrance to their personal living rooms, dressed to perfection in his silk waistcoat and gray-striped trousers. Above the standing collar his handsome face was blank with astonishment. Beneath her veil

Fiona's lips curved upward in a slight smile. She knew she had disconcerted him. Not only had she tracked him down in his private quarters – strictly forbidden to guests – but she had gained the cooperation of his personal assistant to accomplish her purpose.

“I promised Mr. Hawes I would only take a moment of your time. After he heard the nature of my request, he was gracious enough to escort me here.”

“And discreet enough to leave,” Mr. Walker murmured, glancing down the empty hallway. “Come in, then. Tell me how I can assist you.” Concern flickered through a pair of fine blue eyes. “Has a guest, or another staff member, been troubling you?”

“Not at all.” She walked passed him in to the foyer, into a suite of rooms that might have graced a mansion instead of the fourth floors of a hotel. “I’m afraid it’s more the opposite.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I was the one who was unforgivably rude to one of your guests. A Mr. Sinclair. Your father-in-law?” Even softened by the veil’s gauzy fabric, Benjamin Walker’s utter mystification was obvious. “Not recently,” she clarified. “This occurred back in June, shortly after I arrived. He was... kind to me.”

She was impatient with herself because nerves had made her clumsy, “I—well, ever since then I’ve been troubled by my response to him. I’m leaving in an hour and was hoping to secure Mr. Sinclair’s address from Mrs. Walker before I departed.”

“Mrs. Carlton, you’re distressing yourself over nothing.” His voice was gentle, the blue gaze surprisingly kind for a man of his status. “Jacob mentioned meeting you on a few occasions, while he was strolling the grounds, but to my knowledge he was not offended in any way.”

So. He had spoken about her to his family, but she could only thank the Lord that Mr. Sinclair had for whatever reason not mentioned the debacle of their middle-of-the-night encounter. Plain as paint, Benjamin Walker thought her overly sensitive for manifesting “distress.” Fiona wasn’t about to tell him she hoped Jacob Sinclair lived across the Atlantic, in Scotland, so she could vanquish her conscience and return to Richmond after penning a brief note of apology. She would also thank him for his discretion about their unpleasant encounter. “I still feel compelled to contact him,” she murmured, “and convey a formal apology.”

Mr. Walker studied her in silence, then inclined his head. “I’ll write down his address. Please come in.”

“Thank you, Mr. Walker.”

“Let me fetch my wife. She’s bathing our son.” He grinned. “I’m sure she’d much prefer chatting with you. Sam’s a handful all the time, but bath time... well, let’s say he delights in more

than—” He broke off in midsentence, “Mrs. Carlton? What is it? Are you ill?” He stepped toward her, but stopped when Fiona shook her head.

“I beg your pardon,” she managed after a moment. “Thank you for your gracious offer, but I’ve very little time. The stage…”

“Of course.” A frown gathered on his forehead. “I’ll only be a moment. You prefer to wait here?” Fiona nodded, marginally relaxing at last. “Very well.” After a final searching look Mr. Walker strode through an open doorway off to his left, returning shortly with a piece of crisp linen stationary.

Instead of handing it to her, he folded it in half, then tapped it against his palm. “Mrs. Carlton, it’s plain that you’re troubled about something, and equally plain that you’d rather I pretend not to notice. Under any other circumstances, especially when you’re a guest in my hotel, I’d honor your wishes.”

Ah, well. She should have known he wouldn’t let the matter rest. His mother had been the same. Ever polite, but quietly relentless. “But since I’ve barged into your private quarters requesting your father-in-law’s address, you feel circumstances warrant your… intervention, shall we say?”

“Not entirely.” Slowly he extended the folded sheet of paper. “I’m not worried about your intentions concerning Jacob Sinclair.”

“Well, thank you.” Fiona took the stationery, glancing down at the neatly printed address, and her heart gave a queer little bump. Woodstock, Virginia. Practically on the way home, with little inconvenience other than an added night spent in a ladies’ hotel. Conflicting emotions tangled about her thumping heart.

Fiona had anticipated the dread and the reluctance. What confused and, yes, alarmed her, was the relief. The flicker of anticipation at the thought of seeing Jacob Sinclair again.

“I’m concerned about you,” Mr. Walker admitted then, pulling her attention back to him.

“Don’t worry about me,” Fiona responded on a sigh. “God does provide the strength one needs, Mr. Walker.” And every now and then, He also provided a message unmistakable even for the most reluctant soul. “Suffering has been a part of the human condition since Eve gave birth to her first two sons. I’ve often wondered which of them she grieved for the most, since both ultimately were lost to her.”

What would he say, she wondered, if she told him that she was going to visit his father-in-law in person, instead of writing a brief note of apology?

The look on his face prompted her to lay a consoling hand on his forearm, an unprecedented gesture for her. He was so *young*, she thought, her heart breaking a little inside because such an observation on her part underscored her own advancing age. She would never have another child

of her own. Never. *God, oh God... help me remember that I'm only growing closer to joyful reunion with You, and my son.*

"I'll leave you to your family," she managed, moving toward the door. "You have a beautiful wife. And your little boy... I've seen him a time or two. He's precious. I pray he will be able to grow into a man as fine as his father. Thank you, again, for Mr. Sinclair's address."

"Mrs. Carlton—"

"I really must go." Back straight, she waited for him to open the door.

All the way back down the corridor, she could feel his gaze burning through her spine like the searing point of a hot poker.

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