

[PDF] Almost Home (Chesapeake Diaries, Book 3)

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Author: Mariah Stewart

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Description:

About the Author Mariah Stewart is the award-winning *New York Times* bestselling author of twenty-nine novels of contemporary romance and romantic suspense. A native of Hightstown, New Jersey, she lives with her husband and their dogs amid the rolling hills and Amish farms of southern Chester County, Pennsylvania, where she gardens, reads, and listens to the voices in her head. She is currently working on the next book in her bestselling Chesapeake Diaries series.

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Chapter 1

That's it, right there, ace. The house where I spent my happiest years. Number Twelve River Road."

Wade MacGregor hoisted the squirming child onto his shoulders. Delighted to be released from the car seat where he'd spent way too much time over the past few days, the little boy kicked his feet in the air, wanting down more than he wanted up. "Hasn't changed a whole heck of a lot since then."

Wade studied the exterior of the house for a long moment. "Looks like there have been a few changes in some of the trim color there around the porch. Aunt Berry always likes to keep up with the latest trends. Must always be on the cutting edge, you know?"

He paused momentarily to stare at the fence that ran across the front of the property. He wondered when the fence had been installed, and why. No one had mentioned it in recent phone calls.

Then again, there were things he hadn't mentioned, either.

"Let's go check out the river. See the water?" Wade crossed the broad lawn to the wooden pier in long strides, fully aware that he was procrastinating. "Right down here is where I learned to fish and canoe and row and crab and do all kinds of fun things."

He looked up into the face of the dark-haired cherub whose heels kicked gleefully into his chest.

"Yeah, I suspect you'll be wanting to do those things one day, too. I'll teach you whenever you're ready," Wade told him. "I promised your mama that I'd raise you the best I could. I can't think of any better place for you to spend your summers than right here in St. Dennis, just like I did."

A sleek boat passed by, kicking up some wake as it headed toward the mouth of the New River, where it met the Chesapeake Bay.

"Someday soon, we'll go sailing out there. You'll like that. We'll have to get you a little life jacket first, though," Wade thought for a moment. "Your mama loved the water. That's one thing you'll want to know about her when you get older. She loved to swim and water-ski and dive. Maybe one day you'll want to do those things, too. She wanted to teach you herself, but that's not going to happen now." Wade swallowed the lump that threatened to close his throat. "I know you miss her, buddy. I miss her, too . . ."

Overhead a gull drifted, and attracted by something on the dock, dropped down onto one of the pilings to get a better look. It hopped to the deck, pecked at something solid for a moment, then took flight, the unexpected prize held in its beak. The bird changed direction, and angled back toward the Bay. Wade followed it with his eyes until it disappeared.

"Ring-billed gull," Wade said aloud. "Not to be confused with the herring gull. Someday you'll know the difference. Someday you'll know all the shorebirds."

Figuring he'd gotten about all he was going to get out of his efforts to put off the inevitable, he glanced over his shoulder at the house.

"Well, I guess it's time to face the music." He started back across the lawn. "You ready to meet your aunt Dallas and your cousin Cody and your great-great-aunt Berry?"

The back door opened and a golden retriever sped out, a fluffy white dog on its heels, both barking wildly at the intruders.

"Fleur!" A little boy of six or seven raced after the dogs. "Ally! Stop! Come back!"

The dogs continued to run toward Wade.

"See doggie!" The toddler demanded and struggled to get down. "Wanna see doggie!"

Wade stood stock-still, waiting to see just how close the dogs would come, if they'd continue to bark, and if they'd show signs of real aggression.

"Ally! Fleur!" The boy ran after them and caught up with them when they stopped about ten feet from Wade.

"Hi, Cody," Wade said. "Do you remember me?"

Cody narrowed his eyes and searched Wade's face momentarily before a smile appeared.

"You're my uncle Wade," he said. "You live in Texas."

"Not anymore." Wade gestured to the dogs, who had calmed down a little. "They don't bite, do they?"

"Nah." The boy shook his head. "They just act tough. Mom says they think they're Dobermans or rottweilers or something."

Wade laughed. "Where is your mom?"

"She's in the house. She didn't say you were coming today." Cody pointed to Austin, who was trying to wiggle out of Wade's grasp to get to the ground. "Who's that?"

"Cody, this is Austin." Wade lifted the toddler in an arc over his head and placed him on his feet on the grass. "He's your cousin."

"Hi, Austin." Cody knelt down in front of Austin, who pointed a chubby finger at the dogs, who approached cautiously, wagging their tails. "Austin, this is Ally. She's Aunt Berry's dog. And this one"—he pointed to the white dog—"is Fleur. She's mine."

"Here, doggie!" Austin chortled as the golden retriever drew closer.

Cody glanced up at Wade. "My mom didn't tell me I had a little cousin."

"Your mom doesn't know."

"Boy, will she be surprised." Cody commanded the dogs to sit, then led Austin to them.

"Boy, will she ever," Wade muttered.

A woman started around the side of the house, her pale blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, her dark glasses obscuring half her face.

"Cody, who are you talking—" she began, then stopped in her tracks. "Wade?"

"Hey, Dallas." Wade walked to meet his sister as she started toward him. "We were just on our way up to the house when Cody and his furry friends came out to greet us."

"You stinker! You didn't tell us you were coming home this week!" Dallas MacGregor wrapped her arms around him and hugged tightly. "You're looking good, kiddo."

"You're looking even better." Wade hugged her in return and spun her halfway around before setting her down. "St. Dennis agrees with you."

"Why didn't you let us know you were coming? And what's with the trailer?" She pointed to the drive, where Wade's Jeep sat with a trailer hooked up to the back. "You hauling your beer in there? Expanding your business to the Chesapeake?"

"Actually, I closed the business. I sold the equipment and the building."

Dallas's jaw dropped. When she recovered, she asked, "What happened? Your brewery was doing so well. All those awards you won . . . I thought you were really solid."

"We were. It's a long story, Dallas."

Wade looked away. He'd been dreading this conversation for weeks. He'd been so proud of KenneMac, the brewery he'd started from scratch with his best friend from college. He'd hated closing it down, but hated the idea of selling it even more. The company name—that had been his and Robin's. His brewing secrets had taken him years to perfect. KenneMac Brews had been the best part of his life for the past eight years. Giving it up was one thing. Selling it—allowing someone else to become KenneMac Brews—well, that just wasn't going to happen.

But then again, even giving up the brewery wasn't the worst thing that had happened over the past few months.

The back door opened and a woman of indeterminable age stepped out onto the porch.

"Dallas, who's that you're talking to? And what's that thing parked in my driveway?" Hands on her hips, Beryl Eberle—once known internationally as screen star Beryl Townsend—paused, appearing to study the scene. "Is that Wade?"

"Yes, Aunt Berry. It's me." Wade's smile was genuine. He adored his great-aunt. She'd been the indulgent grandmother he hadn't known and Auntie Mame all in one. He counted the years he'd lived with her as some of the best of his life.

She came down the porch steps, holding on, he noticed, to the railing all the way. She was always so spry, so clever and lively, he often forgot that she'd turned eighty-one on her last birthday and had another approaching. He quickened his step so that she wouldn't have to walk across the entire yard to greet him.

"You are a sight for these old eyes, Wade MacGregor." She hugged him fiercely. "How dare you stay away for so long."

"What was I thinking?" He embraced her gently.

"I'll be damned if I know." She stood back and held him at arm's length. "You look more and more like your father every year. And I don't mind saying that Ned was the best-looking young man I ever—"

“Stop feeding his ego with that stuff,” Dallas admonished. “He’s already got a big head.”

“What is that thing in the driveway?” Berry asked again.

“It’s a trailer,” he explained. “Holds all my worldly goods.”

“Does this mean you’ve come home? That you’re staying?” Berry, clearly joyful at the very thought, grabbed Wade’s hand and gave it a squeeze.

“I’m not staying, Aunt Berry,” he said softly. “I’m just passing through St. Dennis on my way to Connecticut. I’m going to be working for another brewery.”

“What happened to your brewery?”&rd...

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