

Swept Away
by Laura Hilton and Cindy Loven

Sara Jane Morgan gasped for breath, scanning the crowded pathways. Everyone showed up for the Heritage Festival, which was good for the artists and vendors, but bad for her. Especially considering . . .

No. She couldn't voice her concerns. At least not yet. But losing a loved one in this mob would cause anyone to panic. This was why mothers kept their toddlers locked securely in strollers and older children attached to harnesses with straps.

But one couldn't exactly fasten a grandmother to a leash. And Sara Jane, being a grown woman, shouldn't be having a panic attack.

She pulled in a shaking breath and forced herself to calm down. She could handle this. Stepping to the side of the paved walkway, she let a woman pushing a double stroller pass, then a man driving a motorized wheelchair. She feigned interest in the open-air tent beside her. A display of corn cob dolls. People still made them?

Well, this was the Appalachians. There were tourists here from all over the country who expected to find mountain handcrafts for sale.

She merged into the crowd and peeked into the next tent, making sure to get a look at the people inside. This one showcased CDs and DVDs by Appalachian musicians—or rather, one particular group. Pretending to shop while scanning the customers, she lifted a case off the rack by the entrance and looked at the picture. Banjos, played by guys in overalls. She put it back.

Another booth held pocketknives, hunting, fishing, and utility knives. Grandma wouldn't be here. Mostly men anyway. She moved on.

The tent next to it held screen-printed t-shirts . . .

Panic filled her again. Grandma had wandered further than she expected. How long had she been missing before Sara Jane realized she'd gotten lost? She pushed her way past a few people holding a conversation in the middle of the sidewalk. She caught a glimpse of a uniformed Boy Scout. Weren't they supposed to help people? He disappeared into the throng before she caught up to him.

Sara Jane went on to the next display. Oh. Wow. Brightly colored quilts. This was where she would have expected to find Grandma. She loved to quilt and belonged to the Christian Women's group at church. But Grandma wasn't with the women oohing and ahing over the quilts.

Maybe. A gray-haired woman stood off to the back, head bowed as she studied the stitching. No, she wasn't Grandma. Her hair was a different cut, and she wore a green t-shirt and a blue jean skirt. Sara Jane would come back and check this tent again later, in case Grandma made her way here.

The next tent was completely enclosed; the canvas doors tied open with twine. Sara Jane poked her head in, ready to rush on. The tent was void of people except for two, a man and Grandma.

Expelling a breath she hadn't realized she held, Sara Jane grasped the edge of the tent door, and forced herself to look around.

Grandma was in here. With brooms. Whoever knew there were so many ways to make a broom?

The man behind the table looked as bushy as his wares. His shaggy brown beard hung down to his collar, and a rumpled button-up shirt draped over his blue jeans. His hair was almost as long as his beard. He looked up as she entered. His eyes reminded her of dark chocolate.

Grandma stood beside the scruffy-looking man, holding a piece of paper, saying words Sara Jane couldn't catch due to the sudden rush of blood in her ears. She turned. "Oh, there you are, Sara Jane. I hired Andrew to do some odd jobs around my house since I'm thinking of selling. Doesn't he have the cutest business card?" She held out the cardstock.

Sara Jane took it and gave it a cursory glance. *Starving artist/pay the bills handyman* in bold, colorful print topped the card. Andrew Stevenson. Followed by a phone number, and a picture of a bright red tool box. She handed it back to Grandma. "Adorable."

The adjective didn't apply to the owner of the card.

"Grandma, don't you think you'd rather hire someone we actually know to do the repairs?"

"Sara Jane! I raised you to treat people better."

Drew Stevenson tried to control his grin as the older woman tore into the younger one.

Rude or not, he couldn't tear his gaze away from Sara Jane. She was . . . stunning. But so not his type. A woman like her would never look twice at a man like him. Not as if he'd want her to.

She had long dark hair, the color of espresso coffee. He couldn't see her eyes, hidden behind sunglasses, but he imagined they'd be brown, like her hair. Or maybe hazel. She wore tailored jeans, undoubtedly designer, the type with a permanent crease up the front middle of the leg. A fitted blouse in a shade of a pinkish-orange reminded him of peaches. The top two or three buttons were unhooked, giving a tantalizing glimpse of . . .

He glanced away. He had no right to look. Her husband . . . he scanned her hand. Not married. Her boyfriend wouldn't appreciate another man ogling his girl.

Her gaze skittered over his brooms with a dismissive look, the same one she'd bestowed upon him. As if he weren't worthy of consideration—either as a broom maker or a man. His passion and art deserved some appreciation. Irritation ate at him. His hand tightened around the handle of the broom closest to him.

"Sorry, Grandma, and you too, Mr. uh . . . sir, but I don't think . . ."

He ranked so low on her importance scale she didn't remember his name. Oh. That hurt. He clenched his jaw. He refused to think of the time he asked a woman out and she laughed in his face, as if he'd been telling a joke.

The older woman stiffened. "I don't care what you think. It's my decision, Sara Jane. My house. And my right to . . ."

Drew straightened his spine and turned away from them, rearranging a display as he tried not to listen to the animated conversation. It wasn't too hard when other people drifted into the tent.

"Oooh, look at these brooms! Isn't this a cute little one? What's it used for?"

He looked at the middle-aged woman in front of him. "It's called a turkey wing broom. It's used for brushing off counter tops and tables, or other surfaces."

"It's so cute. How much do you charge for it? Do you do custom orders? I like pink, and try to keep everything as pink as possible around my house."

He worked his mouth a second before he found his voice. "Pink. Yes, ma'am, I do custom orders." But pink? "It'd be slightly more expensive, though."

"Oh, it's okay." The woman whipped a pink cell phone out of her pocket. "Let me take a picture of you with this broom. You look like a real mountain man."

Sara Jane's mouth dried even as tears burned her eyes. Grandma intended to sell her house? Since when? She'd never mentioned it, in all the conversations they'd had recently.

Putting the Appalachian-style log cabin Grandpa had built Grandma as a new bride aside, how could Grandma think of hiring someone who looked like this man? Didn't he own a razor? He looked as if he came straight out of the wilderness, like a John the Baptist wannabe. Maybe he ate locusts and honey.

Her stomach clenched. By the looks of him, he could be a mass murderer, with the beard to keep people from recognizing his picture on the most wanted list. She peered at him again. He looked familiar. He'd probably been on a recent episode of *America's Most Wanted*.

He did make nice-looking brooms, assuming he'd actually done the work, but it didn't matter in the least. She couldn't allow Grandma to hire him.

Besides, Grandma kept hiring incompetent people, like the last one Sara Jane discovered stuffing sterling silver candleholders in his toolbox.

Maybe if she changed the subject . . . Sara Jane gently took her grandmother by the elbow and steered her further away from the table. "You scared me out of my skin, taking off like that. What were you thinking?"

Grandma frowned and shook her head. "I didn't take off. You were the one who wasn't paying attention. You obviously didn't hear me when I said I wanted to see what else was out there. Not everyone is interested in looking at books about Daniel Boone and forts and what types of Indians were native to these hills."

Okay, that'd been about the time Grandma had gone missing.

"I didn't know you were thinking of selling your house. We'll discuss it later. If you need a handyman, why don't you hire your nice neighbor, Charlie Jones, to work on the house for you? We don't know this man."

Grandma made an unfeminine snort and rolled her eyes. "I don't need a babysitter. Have you ever considered you're smothering me?"

Sara Jane gasped. Smothering? How could Grandma think she was?

"Besides, Charlie Jones can't work on my house. He died a year ago." Grandma folded her arms and stared Sara Jane down.

Sara Jane tried hard not to sigh. Her handy excuse to get Grandma away from the John the Baptist impersonator disappeared and made her look foolish in the process. And since when did Grandma get so argumentative? It had to be something to do with old age. She'd read something about it in a magazine article somewhere.

"Grandma . . ."

"Sara Jane, I like this young man and I intend to hire him. It's my house and my decision. And that's final." Grandma punctuated it with a decisive nod. "He'll be there Monday at eight."