

Wellington Grove Preview

Prologue

Magnolia Grove Plantation

July 1867

Ten-year-old Virginia Hamilton sat in a carriage by her mother as Sambo, an ex-slave, drove their small carriage into the long, winding carriageway and stopped in front of a big beautiful plantation home. They'd had to leave their farmhouse in Bellwood, Virginia, because her mother could not afford to pay the taxes on it after Virginia's father had died in the War Between the States. They lived in it as long as they could, but her father's nephew would be living in their home now, and Ginny – as she preferred to be called – and her mother, Catherine, had been invited to live at Magnolia Grove Plantation.

The home was a three-story brick home with double porticos across the front and a big ornate pineapple way up on top of the roof. The house was surrounded by tall magnolia and oak trees, and the James River could be seen behind the house. It looked like a nice place to live, but Ginny felt reticent about moving to a new home with people she didn't know.

The home was owned by Jonas Chambers, the brother-in-law of Ginny's cousin, Ethan Wellington. Ethan had been married to Jonas' sister, Madeline, but they were no longer married, and Madeline was also currently living here with her brother.

“Are you sure this is the right thing to do, Mother?”

Her mother looked over at her nervously. She wore a pretty yellow dress and matching bonnet, one of her best, as she'd said she wanted to make a good first impression. Ginny herself wore a dress of light blue, which went well with her blue eyes. Both of them had light blonde hair, pinned up neatly.

“Yes, Ginny. I know this will be difficult for you, but this is where we must live now. If it doesn't work out here, we can always go live with Aunt Clarissa, but let's try it here first, all right? It wasn't too far up the road from Wellington to get here, was it? We'll still be close to family.”

“All right.”

Sambo opened the door for them to descend onto the stepping stone and then onto an oyster shell path that led to the portico. The air was hot and moist, and the scent of magnolia, jasmine, and boxwood filled their nostrils.

Three people came out of the house to greet them. The brown-haired lady was introduced as Madeline, and Ginny thought she was beautiful with brown hair, green eyes, and dressed in a simple dark blue dress. The fair-haired gentleman was introduced as Jonas, Madeline's brother. He seemed quite taken with her mother and her mother with him. Ginny wasn't quite sure how she felt about that.

The other gentleman took Ginny's breath away. He had brown hair that curled around his ears and neck, deep blue eyes below full eyebrows, long sideburns, a full cropped beard, and a beautiful smile. He wore a cowboy hat and casual clothing of dark trousers and a light-colored shirt without vest or coat. When it was her turn to greet him, he took her hand and brought it to his lips, his mustache tickling her hand. She felt herself blush at his smile and greeting.

“Hello, young Virginia. So nice to make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise, Mr...”

“William Brown, at your service.” He did a deep bow and tipped his hat, grinning playfully.

She was at once smitten.

Yet it soon became apparent that he was smitten with Madeline.

Chapter One

Six years later

April 1873

Ginny tried on yet another dress while her mother tried to help her find just what she was looking for. They were upstairs in her bedchamber, going through all her dresses.

“Mother, I can’t find anything suitable,” Ginny said, as she threw a pale yellow dress down on the bed, exasperated. With that color on, her golden hair would disappear.

“Maybe if I knew what you were looking for? A certain color? We could go to the fabric shop in Williamsburg and see what material they have, and I could make you a new dress.”

Ginny was getting ready to turn sixteen, old enough to marry, and was having her cotillion ball in early May, two weeks away. She wanted to look perfect, not only for her ball but also for William, who was coming home. Her heart fluttered at the thought of him.

William had been a hired hand who came to this plantation before she did, nearly six years ago. He’d had his eye on Madeline while he was living here back then, even asked her to marry him when he found out she was carrying a child. The child actually belonged to Madeline’s husband, Ethan, and yet William offered to take care of her and call the baby his, to save her from social embarrassment at having a baby out of wedlock. That was the kind of man he was...an honorable one. But after Madeline re-married Ethan and moved back to Wellington Cross Plantation, William left. He had somehow managed to save enough money to go to college to become a doctor.

Ginny had thought he was ever so handsome back then when she was only 10 years old. He and Jonas had taught her to ride a horse, and William had also taught her how to train horses. She imagined he thought of her only as the child she had been, while he was well into his 20’s. Now that she was turning 16, she would have to wear something special to make him notice her, make him realize that she had grown up while he was away.

She hoped he didn’t bring a woman home with him. He had not mentioned anyone in his letters of correspondence with the family, but one could never be sure with matters like this. Sudden engagements were not unheard of.

“I want something special,” she said, in answer to her mother’s question. “Something a lady would wear. Something that makes me look grown up.”

Her mother gave her a concerned motherly look like she knew her daughter was growing up and yet she wasn’t ready for her to, but then she left the room, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “I have an idea.”

Ginny followed her down the hall to her mother’s bedchamber on the river side of the house. She watched as Catherine rummaged through a wardrobe of dresses and pulled one out.

“Now, I know you’d want your own dress, maybe in a different color to set off your blue eyes, but this is a very grown-up style, the latest fashion. Jonas spent more money on me than he should have for my birthday.”

She held up a dress, which Ginny took and held in front of her and walked over to look in the long mirror, trying to imagine herself wearing the dress, which was deep burgundy with a tight-fitting bodice and white lace around the edges, and short lacy sleeves, which hung slightly off the shoulder. The bottom skirt had burgundy and white stripes in the front only with a burgundy cut-away on each side that draped down to touch the floor. A big burgundy bow sat atop a bustle at the waist in back. She could imagine herself in

maybe a pale blue to match her eyes, and tried to imagine William seeing her for the first time as a woman, not a little girl. "It's beautiful," she exclaimed, still entranced in her thoughts.

Loud footsteps were heard approaching the room from the stairs and then coming down the hallway as Ginny was still deep in thought. Her mother walked out into the hall to see who it was, expecting to see Fanny, their housemaid and cook.

"William! How are you? I didn't expect you for a fortnight," her mother said.

Ginny felt the color drain from her face, and she turned around quickly towards the door, dropping her mother's dress on the floor. Her hand flew to her mouth in shock, and then she touched her hair. She quickly glanced back at the mirror to see how she looked. Instead of elegant and proper, she looked soiled and disheveled, having just been out that morning riding her tan horse, Buttercup and then cleaning her stall in the stables. How could she face William looking like this?

"I'm terribly sorry to barge upstairs like this, but I couldn't find Jonah," Ginny heard William say.

"Oh, he went to town with Sambo. Virginia, come say hello to William," her mother called to her. Her mother appeared in the doorway, and Ginny was dumbstruck. She looked over her mother's shoulder at William, who peeked in at her. His expression changed, but Ginny couldn't read his thoughts. She thought he was probably appalled by her appearance.

"Yes, of course," Ginny said. She joined her mother in the hall, trying to brush some of the dirt off of her skirt on the way there.

"Ginny? Is that you?" William said. "Little Ginny who loved to ride horses and play in the stables?"

"Mr. Brown, s-so nice to see you," Ginny barely managed to say. Her breathing became difficult. William never looked more handsome. Gone was the cowboy hat that he used to wear while working outside with the horses. Gone was the red bandana that he wore around his neck to wipe sweat off while working in the fields. Gone was the beard and mustache that had covered much of his lower face. Instead, Ginny observed hair that was dark and slicked back, reaching his collar in the back with neatly trimmed sideburns that stopped at the bottom of his ears, and smooth soft-looking skin around beautiful lips. She gasped and quickly turned her eyes up towards his. Her legs didn't want to move, and she barely made it through the doorway to greet him properly.

William picked up her hand and kissed it softly. "Looks like you're still playing in the stables," he said, smiling as he brushed his hand across her cheek. It lingered there for a moment, a long moment in which Ginny could feel her body tingle all the way down to her toes.

"I apologize for my appearance," she said, thinking he was probably trying to wipe dirt off her cheek.

Catherine cleared her throat. "How was Williamsburg? Did you get your doctorate?"

William turned his attention to the older of the two ladies. "Not quite yet. I was released to start on my clinic work. I've come back to Charles City County to serve with Doc Parsons for the next two years," he said.

"A town that bears your own name must have felt extremely satisfying," Ginny said, trying to sound grown-up. "Was there much time for socializing?" She was still wondering if he'd found another woman to love, hoping he had not, but then scorned herself for being nosy.

William looked back at Ginny curiously. "Why yes. Yes, there was plenty of entertaining to be had. Feels good to be back here, though. Nothing like the peaceful feel of Magnolia Grove." He smiled. "And nothing in Williamsburg can compare to your mother's cooking."

"Oh, you're too kind," Catherine said, blushing. "Come, I'll have Fanny get you something to refresh yourself."

She led William down the hall towards the stairs, and Ginny watched them go.

"Perhaps later you can show me what you can do on a horse these days, Ginny," he called back.

“Y-yes, I’ll do just that.” She felt silly for being so nervous, but her plans to leave him stunned at seeing her all grown up were ruined, at least for a first impression. After they disappeared down the staircase, she quickly moved down the hall back to her own bedchamber to wash her face, fix her hair, and put on a decent dress. She was determined that their next encounter would not be as awkward as the first one.