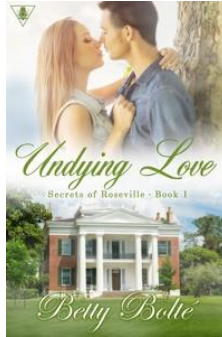


Undying Love **by Betty Bolté**



Excerpt

Chapter 1

Meredith Reed stared at the plantation home she'd inherited from a grandmother she hadn't seen in years. A pair of ancient live oaks, the inspiration for the Twin Oaks name, guarded either side of the sprawling two-story brick dwelling, providing shade and funneling cool air through the house. Sunlight filtered through the Spanish moss draped on the massive limbs. Meredith raised one hand to shield the glare as she scanned the façade. The architect in her appreciated the symmetry of the Greek Revival style as well as the quality workmanship of the brickwork.

“It really hasn't changed. Not much.”

She studied the once-elegant antebellum house, its wide front steps missing a brick here and there, its six elaborate Corinthian columns and intricately carved woodwork surrounding the double doors. The property description listed ten bedrooms, four bathrooms dating from the early twentieth century, a gourmet kitchen, two parlors, an upstairs ballroom, and several outbuildings.

“It's a real treasure.” The estate lawyer, Max Chandler, who had driven her out to the four-hundred-acre property, had barely spoken during the entire trip except to relay pertinent details of the surprise inheritance, including the fact she had also inherited her grandmother's sizable and diversified investment account.

She'd have preferred to drive her own car, especially since he drove one of those redneck pickup trucks. Sitting in a vehicle with an attractive man set her teeth on edge. Worrying about what might happen tensed every muscle in her body. He also didn't need to know how edgy being with him made her, as if her skin burned the closer he drew. But he'd insisted until she ungraciously relented. She picked her fights, and that one wasn't worth the effort. The rolling Tennessee countryside had flowed past the window, immense fields dotted with horses and cows. Green shoots poked through the tilled earth in rows, reaching for the early spring sunshine. She'd noticed her surroundings automatically, but none of the hauntingly familiar sights held her interest. Once she no longer sat in the unfamiliar truck, her tense muscles eased, and she drew a deep breath as she studied the building.

Why on earth had her grandmother, whom she hadn't seen in nearly ten years, chosen her to receive the grandiose house that stood for everything she would never have? The family she *could* never have? Pain combined with a deep-seated longing blossomed in her chest. Three front steps led up to a brick porch with its immense white columns announcing to passersby that the building was more than a house. Unlike the small, boxy ranchers and nondescript houses they'd passed on the drive to the plantation, this structure cried out for a large family. Her parents had often carried her and her sister Paulette from Memphis to visit Grandma when she was a child. Back when love and laughter echoed through the many rooms. A great blue heron fished in the two-acre lake in front of the house, where they had once splashed and played. The huge yard, graced with several shade trees—the site of barbecues and softball games, with the extended family arguing over who potentially cheated or whooping with glee when a good shot was made—now stood silent, accusing her of neglect and indifference.

So be it. She stiffened her spine. She would not wallow in self-pity nor give in to the temptation to hug her arms around her waist and cry. She squinted at the glare from the windows nestled into the brick walls, noting the ivy climbing up one front corner. Willy would want her to move on, build a new life, but she couldn't. Not yet. Even after a year, the grief and anger stewed in her brain, sizzled in her veins, and throbbed in her heart.

“Shall we go inside?” Max leaned his tall frame against the hood of the green F-150 pickup, arms folded, his curiosity evident in his expression.

The color of his eyes as he waited for her response reminded her of the crystal blue of glacier ice, and that thought evoked the bittersweet memory of her and Willy on their honeymoon trip to Alaska. The glorious clear sky that day had created a perfect backdrop to the pod of whales they watched blowing. She heard again the cry of eagles as they soared majestically above the surrounding mountains. The trip of her life with the love of her life. Back when they had their entire lives stretching before them, full of promise and hope. The weight of her wedding band drew her attention for a moment. She refused to remove it and lose the last connection she had with her husband.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, breaking the spell of Max's intent gaze. She fished the contraption out and glanced at the screen before answering. “Hey Buddy, what's up?”

“Just letting you know the Murphy job is put to bed.” Her boss's brusque, businesslike voice helped her focus, steady her breathing.

“That's good news. I left it ready to close out.”

Buddy coughed and cleared his throat. “I only had to smooth out the final walk-through.”

A chill spread through her at his words and the tone of his voice. “What do you mean? It was all set up and ready to rock and roll.”

“Don't worry about it. I took care of it.”

She bet. Like he always did. With the end result a mess she had to sort back out again.

A flash of blue in an upstairs window drew her attention, and she peered at the pane. Blinked away the lingering image. An illusion. A pair of turkey buzzards spiraling high above reflected off the window, wings outstretched so that the tips of their feathers stood out against the sky. Bringing home memories of how she used to pretend to be dead to lure them in, and then jump up and scatter them on the breeze. Memories she couldn't afford to resurrect. Her stay in the rural community of Magnolia Grove, Tennessee, would last no more than a month, maybe two, tops. She could survive that long.

“Fine. I'll follow up with her when I get back to Maryland.”

Meredith ended the call and slipped her phone back into her pocket as Max pushed off from

his spot near the front of the truck.

“What is it you do again?” Max aimed mirrored sunglasses in her direction.

“I’m an architect.” She slid her purse strap more securely onto her shoulder. She snatched the manila folder off the hood of the vehicle, a file Max had handed to her at his office. Inside were copies of the legal papers he’d reviewed with her across his massive mahogany desk. “Why?”

“Your grandmother said you were the perfect heir for this property.” He let his gaze drift away from her to scan the hundreds of acres of fields and trees, across the lake, and on to the various outbuildings surrounding the plantation house.

A circle of trees nearly hid the old gazebo from view, but they couldn’t stop the surge of memories of afternoons spent with her sister playing under its roof. Glimpses of white painted boards and black wrought-iron trim appeared through the dense branches and limbs sprouting with new growth.

Meredith dropped her attention to the folder, severing the thread of the past, and turned a page without reading it. Why did Max care what she did? She slanted a questioning glance his way. “I enjoy designing beautiful yet useful buildings.”

“Listen, I hate to rush this,” Max said, his words clipped, “but I have a client to meet in an hour. Let me show you around.” He indicated for her to lead up the steps.

Bristling at his tone, Meredith pinned him with a stare. “Look, you don’t need to. It’s been a while, true, but I have been here before. I know the layout. We can go.” Then she wouldn’t have to go inside and relive the happy, carefree days of her childhood through the weary eyes of an adult while Max watched.

He shook his head, his dark chocolate hair touched with gray sweeping his collar, watching her. “Things have changed. You may be surprised by what you find inside.” He tapped a hand against one thigh and cocked his head to gaze at her for a long moment. “Either way, you should take stock of what you’ve inherited.”

He didn’t appear much like a lawyer, truth be told. Didn’t lawyers wear prescription glasses and look nerdy? Not that she believed in stereotypes, but all that studying must make their eyes weak. Max was the other end of the spectrum. Perhaps her grandmother had a need for eye candy when she chose him as her estate planner.

He was delicious to contemplate, that’s for sure. Probably a couple inches taller than a cornstalk with a soccer player’s physique, Max could double for a cover model. She appreciated his classic good looks, straight nose, and strong jaw. Dressed in khakis and a deep red polo shirt, he seemed more ready for a round of golf than a client meeting. He represented the unattainable type of man for her. The kind embodying something too smart, too handsome, too *much* for her taste. Even if she were in the market for a man, which she was not. None of that mattered since she would be staying in the area for a short while. Despite her hard shell of indifference to the opposite sex, she couldn’t help a moment of succumbing to the temptation of drinking her fill of his appearance. But only for an instant. If she let her guard down, her personal destruction would soon follow.

“I don’t want to keep you, is all.” Meredith waved a hand at the vehicle. “I’m a big girl. Take me to my car. I’ll come back on my own.”

“Actually, your grandmother made it clear she wanted me to show you around when you claimed the place,” he replied. “She wanted to be sure you appreciate the extent of the inheritance and had an opportunity to see how much work is needed to put it to rights. So, if you’ll follow me?” He nipped up the steps, obviously expecting her to concede the point.

“And Grandma always gets her way.” With a sigh, Meredith shadowed him through the white

double doors into the chilly front hall. She stopped inside the doorway to look around. The sickly smell of mildew hit her senses like a wrecking ball, bringing tears that smarted the corners of her eyes. Crossing the threshold was like stepping back in time to another era. "It's exactly like I remember. Well, except for the smell."

Max nodded. "Mrs. O'Connell prided herself on ensuring any necessary repairs matched the original decor and architecture. But as time went on, she wasn't able to keep up with the issues of an old, historic home. A few repairs will be necessary. Your talents, skills, and expertise are why she left Twin Oaks to you instead of your father. You know, so you can ensure the repairs are appropriate to its original grandeur."

Dark wood floors reached throughout the plantation house. The stairs rose slowly from the left, boasting dark wood treads with white painted fronts, up to a wraparound loft. A cherry table sheltered against the wall beneath the stairs, showcasing a dainty crystal lamp centered on a lace doily. She smiled, spying the small door standing invitingly ajar, leading to the games closet tucked under the stairs. A colorful rug invited guests to cross the space toward the ladies parlor on the right or the double parlor on the left. In days gone by, the gentlemen would have adjourned to the larger retreat after dinner to smoke and drink. Farther down the hall leading from the foyer, light spilled onto the wood floors from the windows in the back rooms. A chill settled on her shoulders. The back room on the right had been her grandmother's sewing room—her favorite spot in the entire house—and the room in which she'd died, according to Max. Meredith shook off the thought and focused instead on the condition of the house.

She moseyed into the parlor, noting the dusty, cobwebby, overstuffed chairs and dark wood furniture. Faded and peeling, the rose-patterned wallpaper competed with the brocade drapes for attention. Above the rose marble fireplace, she spotted the relief carving of the Irish Claddagh: two hands reaching toward the center where a heart wore a royal crown. Her grandmother loved to tell stories about the Claddagh, representing bonds of love, friendship, and loyalty. She inhaled, smelling dust and cold ashes from the fireplace mingled briefly with a faint yet familiar scent she couldn't place. She mentally shook her head. No matter.

Scanning the room, Meredith let her gaze touch each piece of antique furniture, each grimy objet d'art, each vase of tired silk flowers. The dismal scene before her contrasted sharply with how everything once shone with loving attention. She had started debating selling the property before she even packed her suitcase, tucked Grizabella into her cat carrier, and started her car to make the two-day drive through Roseville and back to Magnolia Grove. Back to her past. She couldn't stay. Tennessee would never be home again. She could call an auction company to handle selling off everything, from furniture to furnishings and the property itself. That would be the easiest route. A shiver of horror set her teeth chattering. What difference did it make if the floors were dusty or the furniture saggy? If cobwebs draped over everything like Spanish moss?

Meredith wandered through the rest of the house, Max following silently. Her tour of the upper floors was cursory at best. She avoided the attic entirely, not prepared to open that door to the past. Max's silence suited her. She didn't want to talk about her plans with anyone. Others wouldn't agree with them, for one thing. They didn't understand the hurt and anger deep inside her. Hell, she didn't totally understand it. She surveyed the interior, pondering what she'd need to do to put this past firmly behind her once and for all. Her quick survey revealed an endless list of repairs needed to make it livable let alone to restore it to its prime. Best to make it sellable and move on. She glanced at Max when he stopped beside her in the kitchen, his spicy aftershave helping to obscure the odors of the old house.

"I'll stay here until I can make the necessary arrangements." Meredith refrained from touching

the white ceramic counter dotted with green mold. Outside the window, the backyard extended for about five acres before opening up to a large—perhaps two hundred acre—meadow beyond. A separate two-car garage was tucked at the end of the driveway near the small caretaker's cottage, out of sight from the front of the property, to ensure its curbside appearance remained faithful to that of the nineteenth-century expectations. Primordial oaks and maples, ones she and Paulette used to monkey in, provided shady oases across the expanse. Two giant magnolia trees stood sentinel at the back, where she knew they marked the entrance to the O'Connell family cemetery nearly hidden at the edge of the open area. She leaned slightly to the left. *There*. The grave stones, some drunken with age, were clearly visible and surrounded by a black wrought-iron fence and gateway. The arch above the gate announced the family name in wide, rounded letters. From here she could discern the weary steps leading up to the ancient gazebo, the gingerbread trim drooping over the entrance to the shadowy inner space.

“Good. You’ll have chance to decide what you’ll do with such a lovely property.” He regarded her and appeared to wrestle with what to say next. After a pause he said, “I envy you, Mrs. Reed. I realize it needs a bit of work, but this is a wonderful place. Both peaceful and historic. I wish I could afford such a home as you’ve been given.”

Meredith turned and gaped at him, wondering if he was joking. He wasn't. “Peaceful? Have you heard crickets in the summer? Or roosters? God, the roosters crowing all day drive me insane.” She wouldn't listen to him go all sentimental on her. Restoring the property was not her agenda. “Shall we go? I have to take care of a few matters, and I'd like to put the wheels in motion.” Meredith shook off the glower Max gave her at the abrupt change in conversation. She headed for the front door.

Once outside, she sauntered toward the truck, hearing Max close the door and lock it. She didn't look back as she reached the truck and stepped up and inside. Only then did she permit herself to scrutinize the home—no, the *house*—she'd inherited. Above the front porch, a set of French doors opened onto a balcony with a black wrought-iron railing. Not even a chair occupied the space. With such an old house, she doubted that the balcony floor could support any weight. She had an image of ladies in hoop skirts and men in Confederate uniforms dancing inside the open French doors in the upstairs ballroom, and shook the daydream from her head. She scanned the rest of the area. Over the decades the expanse between the main house and the separate kitchen behind it had been closed in to form one building where at one time there stood two.

Max joined her in the vehicle and drove for a time in silence, the only sound the symphonic muzak oozing from the stereo. She felt the weight of his assessment. Even after he returned his attention to the winding road before them, she sensed his appraisal, weighing her words and actions and the silences between them.

“I assume you'll go through with the application your grandmother had me submit.” Max shot her a glance and then focused on navigating the streets of Roseville. “Right?”

Outside the car's window, the quaint town square slipped past. Roseville had been established early in the nineteenth century and served as the county seat of government. The stately brick courthouse with its white clock tower stood in the center of the square surrounded by a hodgepodge of antiques stores, diners, boutiques, and a two-screen movie theater. A woman holding the hand of a child skipping along the sidewalk hurried toward the Hideaway. The popular restaurant once housed the old jail. Eating in the former jail cell with her parents had been a highlight once upon a time. Shoving away the sharp stab of nostalgia, she refused to allow the past to influence her future.

“What application?” Did the man have to speak in riddles? Keeping her eyes averted, the

young family held her attention as she waited for his answer.

“To have the plantation added to the National Register of Historic Places.” Max turned on his indicator and waited for the light to change.

“No.”

“No?”

“That’s what I said.” Was he hard of hearing too?

“It’s already in the system.” He cut her a glance and focused on the traffic. “Why don’t you want it to be listed?”

“I have other plans for the property.” She looked at him, observed the frown pull down between his brows. “It is mine to use or sell as I choose. No strings attached?”

He steered the car onto Market Street. “I’d assumed you’d want to honor your grandmother’s intent and keep the house in the family. Or at least, appreciate the need to preserve the area’s history for future generations.”

“You know what they say about assuming things.” Meredith held on to the vinyl seatbelt strap to relieve the discomfort of its biting into her shoulder. “And, to be clear, I never said what I intend to do with it.”

“But you don’t want to have official protection for the structures, to keep them as testimony to the history of this area?” Max eased the car into a parking spot in front of the old house that served as his office.

A white sign hung on a matching post beneath a spreading maple tree growing next to the sidewalk. The building was home to Estate Planning Attorneys, specializing in historic preservation law, with five attorneys listed. She spotted Max’s name—James M. Chandler—second from the bottom. Not a ranking member of the firm. Good to know.

“I haven’t decided exactly what I’ll do, but I will over the next week or so.” Electing to keep her own counsel, she opened her door and stepped out into the soft morning air. Max followed suit, studying her over the roof of the pickup. The sound of tires on asphalt joined with the thump of music blaring from radios in passing cars. She should say something. “I’ll collect Grizabella from your secretary and head back out to settle in for the duration.”

“You make it sound like you’re preparing for a siege.” Max chuckled and closed his door, and then met her in front of the vehicle. “I put my card in the folder I gave you earlier. Call me if you need anything.”

“I doubt that will be necessary.” She extended her hand and met his curious gaze, steeling herself from any memories attempting to assert themselves. “I appreciate all you’ve done for my grandmother and for me.”

“My pleasure.” He engulfed her hand with his larger one.

Never had the touch of a hand ignited such a warm buzz against her skin. Did he feel the same jolt of electricity that zinged through her? He peered at her, probing her expression. When his gaze landed on her mouth, she inhaled sharply, lips parting involuntarily. *Damn.* That did not happen. She would not permit anything to distract her. She pressed her lips together and ended the contact between them. She had no time for complications in her life. No interest in another man.

“Um í is the grocery still off the square on College?” She took a step backward, putting distance between them, away from whatever vibes he radiated.

Max smiled, a slow, sensual movement that implied they shared a secret. “Edna’s? Yep, it’s still there.”

She nodded and strode up the sidewalk toward the office door, careful to step over the eruption of concrete under pressure from a tree root threatening to trip her. “I’ll get Grizabella, stop at the

store for essentials, and then head back to the house.ö

Max strode in front of her and opened the door, waiting. She slipped past him, avoiding both touching him and looking at him. She smelled cinnamon and apples as she scanned the homey reception area. More of that instrumental music similar to the compositions she'd heard in Max's truck made her think of happier days with her husband. The antique furniture, flowered wallpaper, and apple pie combined to make the law office feel surreal. If it weren't for the laptops and printers scattered among the vases of flowers and stacks of files, she'd feel like she were visiting someone's home. The secretary, Sue Grimwood, approached her with a smile on her maroon-painted lips and two cups of coffee in hand. The woman had welcomed her warmly when she first arrived to meet with Max, sharing that she loved old homes and had three children and a grandson all in the space of minutes. If Meredith was planning to stay, which she wasn't, Sue could become a good friend.

öNo cream with two sugars, and black.ö Sue handed Meredith one cup and Max the other, and then tucked her hair behind both ears, making her appear like an eager teenager. öSo, ready to move in?ö

Meredith shrugged lightly. öFor a while anyway. Thanks for remembering.ö She lifted the cup in salute and took a sip. Hot and sweet. Perfect.

öHas Griz been any trouble?ö Meredith cradled the steaming cup between her hands. The cat carrier sat where she'd left it, but the top door stood open. She looked around, searching for the feline. öWhere is she?ö

öShe's fine.ö Sue gestured with a manicured hand to the elegant settee situated in the bay window, sunlight streaming in to highlight the calico snuggled there. öI took pity on her and let her out.ö

öThanks for keeping her for me.ö Meredith took a long gulp of coffee and set the mug on the desk. öI should be going.ö

öFirst,ö Max said, ölet me give you a copy of that application so you'dl at least know what's been put into motion. You'dl want one for your records, I'm sure.ö

Sue nodded her head rapidly, silky hair escaping from behind her ears to bob frantically about her chin. öYou know what Max always says. That beautiful old plantation really ought to be preserved for future generations to enjoy and learn from. You're fortunate to own such a splendid property.ö

öYes, it is beautiful.ö Meredith didn't have the heart to burst the woman's bubble of excitement. She had a vague but clearing idea of her path forward. Once she decided for sure, then she'd stick to it. That was how she'd built a solid reputation and she intended to maintain it. Max folded his arms, waiting, his expression guarded. She should at least pretend to care. She shrugged. öFine, but make it quick.ö

Max motioned for her to follow him and then strode to his office. öI expect we'dl hear one way or the other in a few weeks.ö

She stopped beside him. His desk, an expanse of highly polished wood, reflected not only the late morning sunshine but the apparent extreme orderliness of Max's mind. Or perhaps Sue's. The inbox matched the desk and contained a pile of folders, stacked with military precision. Not the haphazard mishmash of Meredith's desk at home, but with the corners aligned and the tabs all pointing in the same direction. Pens and pencils stood at attention in separate wood cups, likely, Meredith thought with a grin, to prevent them from mingling after hours and multiplying like rabbits. Mixing the two just wasn't done in polite society.

öWorking with the National Register is never easy.ö She fingered a gold-tipped pen, angling it against the flow of the others in the cup to see if Max would notice. She stifled a conspiratorial

grin at her little rebellious act. Iøve managed to avoid working with them any more than absolutely necessary.ö

öWe have plenty of time, though. Right?ö Max glanced at her and then back to the folder on the desk. One manicured finger, the nail clean and blunt-tipped, toyed with the edge of the manila stock, capturing Meredith's gaze.

Willy's hands sprang into her mind, his long fingers and wide palms calloused and capable. How many times had those fingers clasped her own, squeezing gently to share a joke or convey his feelings? She'd watched Willy work magic with those hands, creating a work of art from bushes and flowers and rocks. They'd joined forces once they married, she designing the homes, the developments, and other buildings, and he designing the artistic landscapes to enhance the overall appearance. Walking through his gardens was like exploring a fairy world, complete with blossoms and lighting and winding paths. Water features, such as reflecting ponds and waterfalls, attracted a variety of birds to add life to the scene. Willy's designs had won multiple awards over the past decade, and she'd been proud to be his wife.

They'd built a good life together, filled with love and promise. Their love had brought a deep abiding happiness into her world. Until the attack stole everything from her.

* * * *

Paulette O'Connell drew up to the curb and killed the engine. The pale spring sky provided a backdrop to the house she'd shared with Johnny for the last four years. Across the street, the bungalow sat dark and empty, a for-sale sign swinging in the early morning Indiana breeze. She clutched the steering wheel, wishing she felt something akin to the sadness or grief she ought to feel at the end of this once oh-so-promising relationship.

She'd fallen in love with the tall, sandy-haired man with the quick smile. He liked to joke and chat about anything and nothing. He seemed to be the perfect man for her. Only somehow she hadn't noticed Johnny's lack of willingness to share his feelings with her. His inability to actually care about most everything. Or, at least on the surface, he showed no signs of possessing a flicker of emotion, good or bad, about anything. Including her. Even when she finally had had enough and told him she held no ill will toward him but she couldn't live with him any longer. He'd blinked and nodded, as though she'd told him the mail had arrived. Then he'd gone on about his plans to move, alone, to his dream job in Alaska.

Her car held the entire sum of her possessions, crammed into two good-sized boxes and a pillowcase. When she'd thrown her things together two days ago, she didn't think through her actions. She'd crashed on a former coworker's couch while she contemplated her situation. She no longer had a home, a man, or even a job after the house she'd been assigned to decorate had been completed. The firm she'd worked for told her they had to cut back on staff, and she'd been the last one hired. Time to face the awful truth. She had one last place she could go, one person she could descend upon who couldn't refuse her. And after all the sacrifices she'd made, surely her sister, Meredith, owed her. Even though Paulette had tapped her before to get her out of a scrape here and there, they were still siblings. Sisters looked out for each other, right? It was no matter that they hadn't actually seen each other in years or talked on the phone in many months.

Paulette laid a hand on her abdomen for a moment, her resolve slipping as she envisioned the murky path ahead. She'd been astonished when her parents had informed her of not only Grandma's death but also the contents of her will. No surprise that all Paulette got was a small trust she couldn't even touch for five years. Her Grandma made no bones about her belief that Paulette didn't know how to handle money. Which may well be true, but it still hurt. Given that

Meredith now owned the plantation, she definitely had the room as well as the means to provide a home for Paulette. There was enough space in the old place that they could go for weeks without ever seeing one another should push come to shove. If only Paulette could manage to stop the impulse to argue with her, perhaps they could coexist in relative peace. Maybe.

She turned the key and slipped the car into gear. Pulling away from the curb, she glanced at the once-welcoming house for the last time. The flowers and bushes she and Johnny had carefully planted when they first moved in were beginning to bud in anticipation of spring. White lacy sheers hung at the windows bordered by green shutters. Her dream home, or so she'd thought. She choked back a sob. Such a forlorn hope, after all.

Johnny had already left for his new job in Ketchikan, one of the tipping points that told her he didn't truly care about her and what she wanted in life or, for that matter, in their relationship. She'd argued against his taking the job, hating the idea of living where it snowed and stayed cold the majority of the year. She'd tried to convince him to look for a different position in the South, where the climate was warmer on average than the north. Hell, Indiana had been difficult enough for her, with the gray skies and cold, windy winters. She longed for the sun like a cactus longs for rain. He'd ignored her, told her she was being selfish, and continued making the arrangements necessary for his move.

Now it was her turn. Driving faster, she merged onto I-65 southbound and headed for her new home.