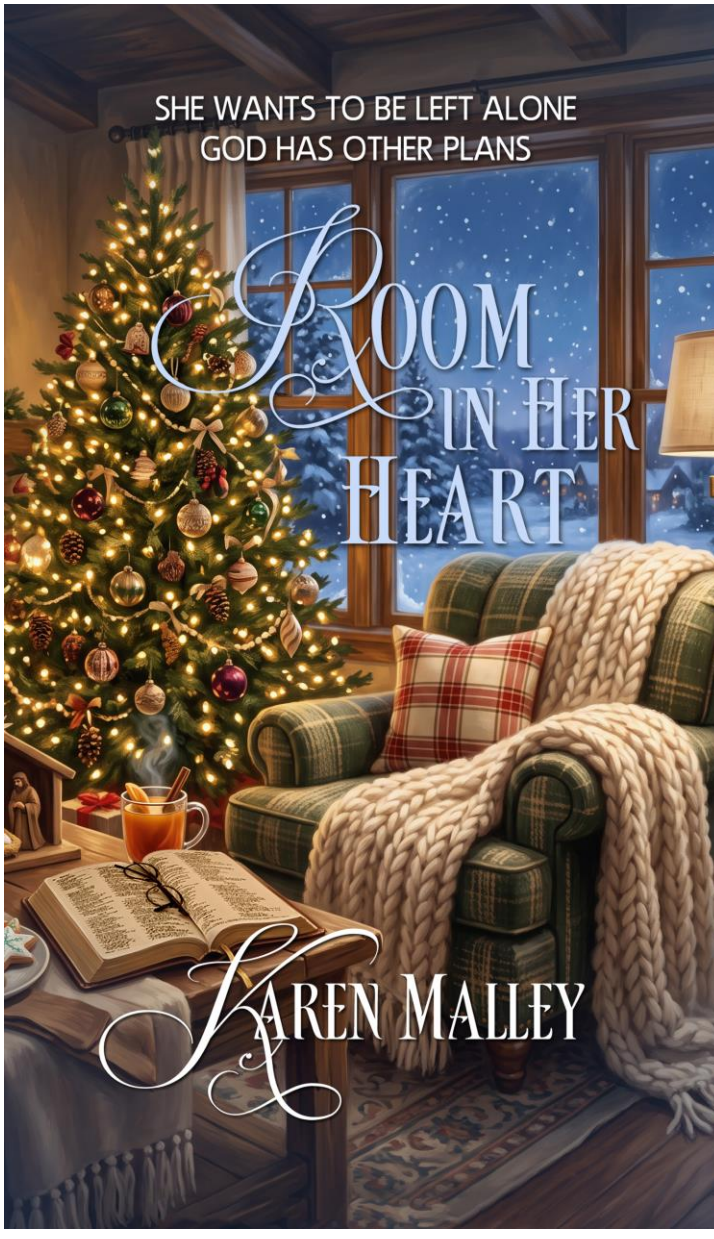

SHE WANTS TO BE LEFT ALONE
GOD HAS OTHER PLANS
Room in Her Heart
Karen Malley

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Dedication

For everyone searching for home: May the light of Christmas remind you that belonging is possible, hope is near, and God always has room.

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Room in Her Heart

CHAPTER 1

Vivian thought she'd seen everything in her seventy-two years of life, but she was wrong.

Dead wrong.

She'd barely stepped into the gleaming foyer of Wedgewood Manor when a man collapsed right in front of her. One minute he was crossing the room, and the next minute, he collapsed on the floor. Directly in her path. Vivian glanced around, but no one else was in sight. *No, no, no*. This was not what she'd signed up for. It was bad enough she had to give up her estate for a minuscule eighteen-hundred-square-foot apartment. But for people to be dropping dead in front of her? Out of the question. How was it possible there were no staff in sight? She called out. "Help! Anyone? Help!"

Seeing no one, Vivian set down her designer bag with a huff and lowered herself to her knees. The cold of the marble seeped through her tailored pants. She pressed her fingers against the man's neck. Oh, dear Lord, the man had no pulse. Well, what else was there to do? Drawing on a recollection from a CPR class she took decades ago, she started chest compressions. One and two and three and four... She counted to twenty, took another glance around the room, praying if there was a God, He'd rescue her from having to give this

stranger mouth to mouth. But no such luck. She lowered her mouth to his and gave two short rescue breaths. Then back to chest compressions.

After four cycles of this, a cry sounded across the foyer. "Mr. McLaughlin! What happened?" A woman raced across the room. Judging by the quality of her shoes (which was all Vivian could see from her current angle), this was not likely to be a resident. No one who could afford to live in this place would wear shoes like that–unless they'd lost a bet.

She glanced up at the woman. "He collapsed right in front of me."

The woman crouched beside Vivian, her red face coming into view. "Did you call 911?"

"No, I've been a bit preoccupied saving his life." Vivian's arms ached. "I'd be happy to call if you'd be so kind as to take over."

"Of course, of course."

Vivian attempted to rise, but found herself unable to do so. Her knees ached and her arms wobbled like noodles after so much exertion. She gave up and sat on the floor. This was unthinkable. She fumbled in her bag for her phone, dialed 911, and explained the situation.

Within minutes, the previously silent foyer was a bustle of activity. Two paramedics tended to Mr. McLaughlin while the staff member helped her to her feet. Still unsteady, she sank onto a nearby sofa. After the paramedics stabilized Mr. McLaughlin, they carted him off to the hospital, leaving Vivian alone with the staff member and the dozen or so residents who had gawked at the scene.

The staff member took a seat adjacent to Vivian. “I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Rhonda, the activities director. Thank you so much for taking care of Mr. McLaughlin. I’m not sure whether you heard the paramedic, but he said your quick thinking saved his life.”

Vivian tamped down the rising emotion. It hadn’t been so long ago when she had been in that position herself. Perhaps it was fate, or karma, or something, but she supposed she owed it to the universe to pay it forward. “I’m glad to hear it. I’m Vivian Flint. This is my first day here.” She peered at Rhonda. “Does this sort of thing happen often?”

Rhonda fanned herself. “Goodness, no. Wedgewood Manor is a wonderful place. It’s simply unfortunate timing.”

“I see.” Vivian pursed her lips. “I believe I’ll go check out my apartment now before someone else collapses in front of me. They told me everything would be unpacked by now.”

She rose with all the dignity she could muster and strode down the hallway to the elevator. When she reached the door marked # 216, a voice rang out behind her.

“Howdy, neighbor!”

Vivian turned and took in the sight of the woman in front of her. Permed gray curls, a floral print blouse tucked into elastic-waisted pastel pants, a cardigan sweater, and a pearl necklace completed the ensemble. Could this woman be any more like the stereotypical grandmother? Vivian sighed and shook the woman’s

extended hand. A whiff of cinnamon sugar filled the air. She even smelled like a stereotypical grandmother. "Hello."

The woman beamed at Vivian. "I'm Estelle. I've lived here for six years now, and I'm part of the unofficial welcome committee. Welcome to Wedgewood Manor. You must be Vivian."

Vivian blinked. "How do you know my name?" She was renowned in certain circles, but there was no way this Estelle ran in those circles.

Estelle waved a hand. "Oh, I make a point of learning everything that goes on here. Especially when it comes to my neighbors. She pointed to the door across the hall. That's me."

Great. So, every time she exited her suite, she'd likely run into this woman. Vivian pasted on a smile. "It's lovely to meet you. But since the last of my things has been unpacked, I'd like to acclimate to my new space."

Estelle beamed. "What a wonderful idea. I'd love to see how you've decorated the place."

Vivian stared at Estelle, momentarily speechless. How could Estelle interpret that as an invitation? What was she getting herself into? Unable to find a polite way to remove herself from the situation, she unlocked her door and ushered Estelle into her new apartment.

Estelle gushed at everything, from the grandfather clock in the entryway to Vivian's hand-curated art collection. "Your apartment is simply marvelous. I'm always amazed at how different all the apartments look, considering they all have the same layout."

Vivian resisted rolling her eyes. “Well, that makes sense, given how very different the residents all are.” She and Estelle were perfect examples of those differences. “But now I’m ready to rest.”

Estelle leaned in as if colluding on a secret. “You don’t need to tell me twice. At our age, a little nap does wonders.”

Somehow, even the suggestion they were the same age was offensive. Sure, Vivian was over 70 now, but she certainly hadn’t progressed to the elastic pants stage. Nor would she ever. She nearly shuddered.

Mercifully, Estelle said her goodbyes and left Vivian in peace. Vivian sank onto her Italian leather sofa and closed her eyes. A year ago, the idea of living in a place like this was unthinkable. The unstoppable Vivian Flint retiring and living in a senior center? All it took was one heart attack to change the trajectory of her life. The board lost faith in her, and her doctor insisted living alone at her estate was no longer an option. So here she was, destined to live out the rest of her days with the likes of Estelle. If God existed, He surely had a twisted sense of humor.

Suddenly everything caught up with her. The move, losing her career, her independence, and the adrenaline rush of saving a man’s life. Her? Vivian Flint. A lifesaver? A company-saver, sure, but a life? Who would’ve thought she had it in her? A tiny ray of hope lit inside her. She’d never admit it to anyone, but maybe this place wouldn’t be so bad after all. If she could avoid Estelle, anyway.

Vivian opened her eyes. The change in the lighting

confirmed she had fallen asleep. No wonder, given the exertion of the day. She moved toward the balcony and stepped outside. The air was cool, but not cold, atypical for mid-November. A few muted orange and brown leaves still hung on the trees surrounding the building. She wouldn't spend much time on this balcony until spring, but for now, a bit of fresh air would do her good. Daylight was waning, a sure sign the end of the year was approaching. She glanced at her watch. Nearly 5:00. Perhaps she'd venture down to the dining room. The apartment had a full kitchen, but she had no inclination to cook for herself. Not for what she was paying for this place. No, she'd avail herself of what she was told was the best food at a senior living center on the East Coast.

She changed into a clean, unrumpled pantsuit, washed her face, and drew a comb through her short, sleek, white hair. After reapplying her makeup, she drew in a breath. "OK, Vivian. You can do this. You can handle shareholder meetings and press conferences. The dining room at Wedgewood Manor should be a piece of cake." She told herself that, but somehow, it felt like being the new girl in high school all over again.

She entered the dining room and glanced around, suddenly aware the women at the table to her right were gawking at her. *What on earth?*

"Are you Vivian?"

Had her reputation preceded her? Vivian turned toward the questioner. "I am. And you are?"

The woman beamed at her. "Mabel Carruthers.

Please, join us. This is Dottie Framer." She gestured to her dining companion, who smiled at her.

"We're so grateful to you. We heard you saved Doc." Mabel pulled out the chair next to her.

Vivian raised her eyebrows, but took the proffered seat. "The gentleman who collapsed?"

"Oh, yes. Such a shame." Dottie fanned herself with her hand. "We all love Doc. It would be devastating if something had happened to him. He's our most eligible bachelor, and you had your lips on his on your very first day."

If Vivian were prone to blushing, that last statement would've done her in. Fortunately, she wasn't susceptible to such nonsense. "I assure you, there was nothing romantic about that encounter."

Mabel laid a hand on Vivian's arm. "Don't mind Dottie. She's jealous. She's been trying to get Doc's attention for months."

Vivian shook her head. "Are there many people looking for relationships in this place? Not something I would've expected at this age."

Dottie clucked her tongue. "Now, dear, we're old, not dead. I think most of us are interested in companionship."

Mabel grinned at Dottie. "Simon would like more than companionship with you."

Dottie waved her hand at Mabel. "Simon is only a friend."

Vivian gazed at each of the women in turn. Friends. Not something she had time for in the past. But her close encounter with death had changed

something within her. When she lay in the hospital room, no one but nurses and doctors checked up on her. Sure, she'd had a gorgeous basket of flowers from her leadership team at TechWave, but not a single visitor. She'd had too much time to think during those long nights in the hospital. Premonitions of her funeral without a single attendee filled her nightmares. What had she done with her life?

She turned her attention back to the women, who were studying their menus while bantering with one another.

Dottie addressed her. "You must try the salmon. It's delicious."

"Nonsense." Mabel told her. "The chicken piccata is their specialty. But either way, you'll want to try their bread pudding for dessert. It's simply divine."

Vivian pretended to study the menu, but her mind spun. She closed her menu, and two pairs of eyes fixed upon her.

Vivian blinked. "What?"

Mabel was the first to speak. "Tell us your story."

"I beg your pardon?"

"We want to learn all about you," Dottie said. "All we know so far is it's your first day and you saved Doc."

"Maybe I could go last. Could someone else start?"

Mabel nodded. "Sure. I've been here for two years. My husband, Ralph, lives in the memory care unit, so I got a place here to be near him. I love the walking trails around here, and I love to read." She gestured to Dottie. "Your turn."

Dottie set down her mug. “My Donald passed seventeen years ago. Lung cancer. I was doing well on my own, but my kids insisted I needed something more in my life, so they set me up here about a year ago. I love the trips into the city and the art classes. There’s always something going on here.”

The two women turned to Vivian. It must be her turn now. “I had a heart attack this year, and my doctor didn’t want me to live alone any longer, so here I am.”

“How long ago did your husband die?” Mabel’s voice was kind.

“What? No husband. I never had a husband.” The women gazed at her. Was that pity in their eyes? “I was too busy with my work to bother with a husband. And it seems you aren’t any better off, since you don’t have them anymore, anyway.”

Mabel pushed her water glass back from the edge of the table. “Even though Ralph doesn’t realize I’m there most of the time, he still has good days. I wouldn’t trade my years with him for the world.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean any offense.”

Mabel tut-tutted. “None taken.”

Vivian blew out a breath. Fitting in here would be harder than she thought.

~*~

Jo grabbed her books from her locker and stuffed them into her backpack. As she turned to head out,

Hailey approached. "Are you going to the senior center today?"

Jo nodded. "Yeah. I want to get my graduation project finished this year so I can put it on my college applications."

Hailey hitched her backpack higher on her shoulder. "Are you sure you want to hang out with old people? I'm helping at the food bank, sorting donations in the warehouse and putting together meal kits."

"That will be great, too, but I want to work directly with someone. I figure I can help some nice old lady figure out how to use her cell phone. Maybe teach her how to text her grandkids or something. I'm sure there are a lot of lonely people there."

Hailey shrugged. "If you say so. Enjoy." She gave a little wave and headed down the hallway.

Jo closed her locker and zipped up her backpack. Thirty minutes later, she stood at the front desk at Wedgewood Manor. A woman with 'Shannon' on her nametag set down her phone and smiled at her. "How can I help you?"

"I'm here to visit Judith Robinson."

Shannon frowned. "I'm sorry, what is this about?"

"I'm here for my graduation project. High school students are matched with seniors." Jo checked her sheet again. "I was assigned Judith Robinson. I was told she would be a good partner."

Shannon's brows knit together. "I'm sure she would've been. But Judith's daughter moved out of state, so Judith transferred to another facility to be closer to her."

Great. Now what would she do? Jo sent up a silent prayer. *OK, God. I was sure you wanted me to be here to make a difference for Judith. But now what?*

Shannon brightened. "A new resident with no close family arrived yesterday. I'll match you up with her."

Jo shrugged. "Fine with me. What's her name?"

Shannon came around the desk. "Vivian Flint. I saw her in the library a few minutes ago. I'll introduce you."

Jo followed Shannon through the expansive lobby. Everything gleamed as if it had been polished five minutes ago. The floral arrangements were larger than the ones on the altar at church. Suddenly Jo became conscious of her appearance. Her jeans were worn at the knees and her sneakers had seen better days. Even her sweatshirt was faded. But all they could afford was secondhand clothing. Still, Shannon didn't seem to mind. Jo shrugged off the concern. This lady would be so happy for company she wouldn't care about Jo's clothes.

Shannon guided her to a pair of wingback chairs. In one chair sat a prim and proper woman, her white hair immaculately styled, and her tailored clothes ironed to a crisp. Jo glanced at the title of the book in her lap, expecting some kind of historical fiction novel, but it read *Invent, Iterate, Win*. It looked like something a high-powered executive would read. Weird.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Flint." Shannon's voice took on a singsong quality. "You have a visitor today."

Ms. Flint glanced from Shannon to Jo, raking her

gaze from her face to her sneakers. "I think you've mistaken me for someone else. This street urchin must be someone else's grandchild."

Street urchin? Seriously? Jo stepped forward. "No, actually, I'm here to visit you."

Ms. Flint's pencil-thin eyebrows raised. "Whatever for? Certainly Wedgewood Manor doesn't allow soliciting."

Shannon patted Ms. Flint's hand. "Of course we don't, dear. I'm sure you two will do fine together. I need to get back to the front desk." She made a beeline out of the room.

Jo sucked in a deep breath. Oh boy. This was not going the way she'd planned. "I'm here to get to know you. Several studies show the benefits of teens and seniors interacting."

If it were possible, Ms. Flint's eyebrows shot up even further. "Is that so? And what, pray tell, am I supposed to gain from this interaction?"

Jo recited what she'd read. "Reduced depression and loneliness, improvements in health, cognition, and a sense of purpose."

Ms. Flint closed her book and leaned forward, the corner of her lips tilting upward, as if she were trying not to smile. "So you think I'm a depressed, lonely soul with no sense of purpose, and you'll come here and do jigsaw puzzles with me and my world will be full of rainbows and unicorns?"

If Jo could turn invisible and disappear from this room, she would. But she had a job to do. And for some reason, God wanted her here with Ms. Flint. She

sent up another silent prayer for the right words. This woman was sharp and would see in a second if she was giving her a line, so she went with the truth. "No. I don't think that. It's clear you are really smart. But people are meant to be in relationships, and sometimes people who live in senior living facilities don't have many visitors. This program is a way to provide connections, especially with someone younger."

Ms. Flint's eyebrows returned to their normal height, but now they drew together. "What exactly is the program?"

Now this she could answer. "In order to graduate from high school, every student must complete forty hours of community service. There are several choices, but one of them is to volunteer to spend time with a senior."

"And how are the seniors chosen?"

Jo lowered her eyes. "The ones with no close family are the most likely to benefit."

Ms. Flint was silent for a few moments. Jo shifted from foot to foot, unsure whether she'd be invited to stay. Finally, Ms. Flint spoke. "Of all the things you could choose, you decided to spend time with an old lady. Why?"

Jo hesitated, but God prompted her to be honest. "Because I felt God was calling me to. I think He wants us to get to know one another."

Ms. Flint's eyes bored into Jo's but her expression was unreadable. Jo stared back, unblinking. It seemed this woman was used to intimidating people, but Jo wasn't about to back down now. If God wanted her in

Ms. Flint's life, she would do her best to obey Him.

Ms. Flint blinked. "Well, for heaven's sake, if you're going to be spending time with me, you should at least sit down."

Jo let out a breath and perched on the chair opposite her. "Thank you."

"So, do you have a name?"

"It's Jo."

Ms. Flint's lips pressed into a tight line. "That's a boy's name."

"It's short for Joanna, but I'm not really a Joanna type. I'm more of a Jo."

"Is that right?" Ms. Flint paused for a moment. "So, Joanna, what did you expect we would do in this forty hours we're spending together?"

Jo unzipped her sweatshirt and slid it off. "I could teach you how to use your cell phone."

Ms. Flint let out a laugh. "Do you seriously think I can't use a phone? How old do you think I am?"

Jo's face heated. "There are a lot of useful apps you could try. Or I could show you how to set up an email account..."

Ms. Flint leveled her gaze at Jo. "Please tell me you're joking."

"I, uh..."

"Get out your phone."

Jo blinked. "What?"

Ms. Flint narrowed her eyes. "You heard me. Get out your phone."

Jo slid her phone from her back pocket.

"Type Vivian Flint into Google, and tell me what it

says."

Jo blinked. "You want me to Google you?"

Ms. Flint nodded.

Jo obeyed and read the first entry silently.

"Out loud, please."

"Vivian Flint, the founding CEO of TechWave, Inc. Born in 19 –"

Ms. Flint held up her hand. "You can skip the year. Go on."

Jo continued. "As a pioneer for women in the tech world, Ms. Flint led the development of several widely adopted productivity apps. Under her leadership, TechWave's products reached hundreds of millions of users globally. Her innovations paved the way for the use of AI in common applications. Following a recent heart attack, Ms. Flint stepped down as CEO, but her legacy lives on. TechWave's stock continues to soar."

Jo stared at Ms. Flint, and then back at the photo accompanying the article. It was clearly the same woman. She'd just volunteered to help a tech genius use her cell phone.