

“And our spirits shall sorrow no more.”

—“THE SWEET BY AND BY,”

lyrics by S. Fillmore Bennett, 1868



Prologue

The stage lights were down, but then an electric guitar buzzed from the darkened stage, igniting the crowd gathered in the Iowa State Fair grandstand.

Chills multiplied down Beryl's legs as she glanced over her shoulder to a sea of cigarette lighters raised toward the twilight sky.

She leaned against Harlan as he swayed back and forth with his arm around her hips. For the first time since Woodstock, she was at a concert with no intention of getting high-as-a-kite, or leaving with the last man she'd kissed.

Her senses felt heightened by love, in-tune with the frenetic energy around her and the music to come.

Rumor had it that this was the largest concert gathering in fair history. Fans stood shoulder-to-shoulder, cushioned by the heat-infused air.

Whistles pierced the night, followed by cheers and shouts. *Stevie, Lindsay . . . Mick.*

Another guitar lick reverberated in the air with a shrill that hit Beryl in her chest. She cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled from the deepest part of her belly. She wanted to be heard.

Harlan's call for the music bellowed after hers. His warm kiss blessed her ear, then her cheek.

When a drunken fan stumbled against her, sloshing beer against her sweat dampened shirt, Harlan grabbed the man by the shirt.

"Watch what you're doing."

The drunk moved on without a word.

"You all right?" Harlan asked.

"I'm perfect."

Until Harlan Fitzgerald, Beryl had been a wanderer, a traveler, a liberated woman with no visions of picket fences, rocking babies and happily ever after.

Then he came along, a pony-tail lawyer from Des Moines. He rescued her from legal trouble and stole her heart.

"Ladies and Gentlemen—" The announcer's mike screeched, settling the crowd down to a hovering din. "Fleetwood Mac."

Beryl's cheer erupted with the rest as she applauded with her arms in the air. Harlan's chest swelled as he drew a long breath and let go a deep, resonating holler.

The lights came up with the opening run of bars of "You Can Go Your Own Way." The grandstand seemed to move with a life of its own—the crowd swaying and clapping. Jade moved in time with Harlan and the music.

If I could, baby I'd give you my world. . .

Beryl stretched to see over the fans in front of her.

"Jump up," Harlan said, catching her mid-motion and hoisting her to his shoulders.

Lifting her arms, Beryl let them sway freely with Harlan's motion. When

the song ended, she bent forward to kiss his forehead. He was one of the truly good ones.

Harlan pressed something into her hand.

“What’s this?” Beryl lifted the lid of a small black box. “Harlan—”

He helped her slide down from his shoulders. “It’s an engagement ring, to seal our deal. Since you’re not a traditionalist, I figured a *diamond* wouldn’t be your thing—”

Even in the dim light, she could see the blue spark in his eyes.

“An engagement ring, huh?” He looked cute and shy as he tried to explain himself. She grabbed his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. “Very cool.”

“It’s a jade stone. The green matches the flecks in your eyes.” He brushed her fly-away hair from her face, then took the ring and slipped the ring onto her finger. “Will you marry me, Beryl Walker?”

She didn’t have to ponder her answer this time. “Yes, Harlan Fitzgerald. I’ll marry you.”



One

Whisper Hollow, TN

The *October* sun warmed the Blue Umbrella's office. A pool of light washed over Jade's paint-chipped desk and the box of ruby-red invitations shoved against the windowsill.

"Here you go, Liz. Eighty-five dollars for your aunt's antique bread box." Jade pushed the box out of the way so she could grab the check she'd printed for her customer, exposing a solitary, displaced red invitation.

Beryl Hill, Prairie City, Iowa.

"Bless your heart, old Aunt Ginny, for never making friends with the garbage can." Liz Carlton blew a kiss at the check before folding it into her purse. "Jade, I've got plenty more items to consign with you."

"I'm always interested." She patted the small, spry woman on the shoulder. "And don't forget you can sell some of your valuables on eBay."

"On eBay? Goodness, child, I'd have no idea how to—"

"And the county dump." Jade walked her across the bright, polished shop to the front door.

"The county dump? I do believe you don't sound a bit grateful, Jade Fitzgerald. I bring in my precious family treasures for you to sell, sharing the profits with you, and what thanks do I get? A recommendation to the county dump?"

"Liz, I appreciate your business. You know I do. But the Blue Umbrella is looking for timeless pieces, items with a story and a history. Last week you brought in a bag of peeling costume jewelry and some moth-eaten sweaters."

"Those sweaters had a story, Jade. I told you my great-great-granny knitted them by a coal fire."

Jade gently slipped her arm through Liz's. After all, she was a valued client, despite her lack of vintage prowess. "I'm looking for quality, not quantity, Liz. But I do admit"—Jade paused at the door—"your items always come with interesting stories."

Liz opened the door. "You wait and see what I dig up next."

"I'm holding my breath," Jade said with a grin.

Back in her office, Jade dropped to her desk chair, sighing. Liz was entertaining if nothing else.

She surveyed the row of lime-green sticky notes running along the top of her desk. Her to-do list. Her eyes fell on one sticky note, the one with the curled edges where her arm grazed over it:

Mail invitations.

Jade snatched up the note. The gummy adhesive was dotted with dust and lint and no longer adhered to the desk's surface. The lump she felt in her chest every time she moved the note had grown from a pebble to a rock. How much longer could she stall? The wedding was five weeks away.

"Hey, boss, what's up for today?"

Jade glanced up at Lillabeth, her sole and treasured part-time assistant. “You’re early today.”

“Coach rescheduled the team meeting for Friday.” The seventeen-year-old folded herself into the rickety metal chair beside the desk. Her blonde ponytail swished over her shoulder, and a pair of tiger-striped Oakley shades rode atop of her head.

“It’s slow-day Monday. Why don’t you work on the Baker estate inventory?”

“Shouldn’t you have mailed these already?” Lillabeth slipped a wedding invitation from the box.

“You sound like my future mother-in-law.” Jade took the envelope and jammed it back with the others.

“What about that one?” Lillabeth pointed to the banished invite.

“This one is special. Sort of.” Jade tucked it a little farther under the box. “Tell me, what do you think when you hear the word *invitation*?”

“You’re invited, I guess.” Lillabeth shrugged, making a face. “Come to the party. We want to see you.”

“Come and participate? Your presence is requested?” Jade had been thinking about this for a while.

“Pretty much.” The Whisper Hollow basketball star nodded. “Is this a trick question? Do I win a prize for answering right? Money?”

“Money? You’re on the clock; you’re getting paid.” Jade got up and headed toward the storeroom. “Come on. Let me show you the Baker stuff.”

On the opposite side of the shop was the old Five & Dime storeroom, cool and dark with cinder-block walls, cement floor, and a row of random, old calendars hanging on the back wall.

When Jade set up the Blue Umbrella, she left, for posterity’s sake, some of the building’s history. The first calendar was 1914. Then 1920, followed by 1929. There were calendars from 1945 and 1950, 1963 and 1967, 1980 and 1988, 1996 and 2001.

Jade planned to add her own, but she wanted to wait for a really cool year.

Though so far, the one she lived now had been fairly stellar. When she moved to Whisper Hollow, a close-knit, small Southern town up the mountain from Chattanooga she'd expected to moonlight for her former boss, writing promotional copy for Smoky Hills Media, but the Blue Umbrella thrived its first year, ending in a lovely shade of financial pink.

Then she met Max—love wrapped in olive-toned skin and hazel eyes, strength and kindness. Yes, this calendar year just might be worthy of the wall.

“Okay, where’s this *famous* Baker inventory?” Lillabeth dropped to the stool in front of the antique-white secretary hutch Jade used as the storeroom desk and jiggled the computer’s mouse. “Odd question about the word *invitation*, Jade.”

“Yet you still answered it.” Jade pushed a crate toward Lilla with her foot. “These are leather-bound, mint condition, first editions.”

“Books? Since when do we take books?” Lillabeth angled to read the gold-imprinted spines while absently launching iTunes, then hunted for QuickBooks in the Mac’s dock.

“Since these are worth money. A friend from college knew the family and hooked me up.” Jade gave her a cheesy thumbs-up. “Jessup Baker was a Tennessee governor, and his wife, Cecelia, earned all kinds of humanitarian awards for establishing reading programs in the hills.”

“Who’s going to read these?” Lillabeth wrinkled her nose as she examined one of the books, the spine creaking, the pages crackling.

“Plenty of people. We just need to figure out how to lure book snobs to Whisper Hollow.”

Lillabeth settled the book on the hutch. “Who don’t you want to invite to your wedding?”

“Someone. So, get to inventorying these and listen for the front doorbell. I’ll be in the office.” Jade paused in the doorway. “The camera is in the file cabinet. Take pictures of the books for the website.”

“I’ll crash your wedding if you didn’t invite me.” Lillabeth started typing in

the production information. “I witnessed your first meeting with Max, right here in the shop. I should get a finder’s fee or something.”

“What is with you and money today?” Jade propped herself against the door frame.

“Nothing.” The girl’s light dimmed.

Jade regarded her for a moment. “Hey, if you need to talk . . .”

“I know.”

On her way back to the office, Jade checked the shop for customers. It was quiet, like last year this time, and she welcomed the reprieve. Gave her time to catch up from the busy summer, scout out new inventory avenues, advertise for new consignment clients. It wasn’t like vintage merchandise came with manufacturer sales reps.

Jade stood by her desk and scanned her sticky note to-do row.

*Call Henna Swift about exhibiting at February’s Country Home Antiquing Festival
in Nashville.*

Upload new images to website.

Call Ilene to pick up her consigned items.

Dress fitting at 2:00 next Monday.

Set appointment for trial wedding hairstyles.

Pick up prescription for Max’s back.

Mail invitations.

She couldn’t get past *Mail invitations*. Not today. She had been ignoring that particular note, despite her future mother-in-law’s constant, “Please mail the invitations.”

Beryl Hill, Prairie City, Iowa.

A snort resounded from under her desk. Jade took her seat to peek underneath, nudging the sleeping dog with her foot. “Wake up, Roscoe, and give me some advice.”

The sprawled-out German shepherd lifted his head, viewing her with his one good eye.

Jade flashed him the red invitation. “Do I invite her to the wedding? What would you do if, say, dogs got married?”

He exhaled, tucked up his paws, closed his eye, and dropped his head back to the floor.

“And after all I’ve done for you!” Jade teased. “Don’t expect me to share my pizza crust next time, buddy.” The threat carried no authority, caused no shiver of trepidation. One wink of his big brown eye, and she’d hand over a whole slice without hesitation.

“Okay, Roscoe, how about this. Heads, I invite her; tails, I don’t.” Jade fished a quarter from the stash she kept in the middle drawer’s paper clips slot. “Lift your head for, well . . . heads. Wag your tail for tails. Here we go.”

Before she settled the quarter on her thumb and forefinger, a squeaky, airy sound emitted from Roscoe’s hindquarters.

“Oh, dog. Phew!” Jade fired her rolling chair across the floor, crashing into the filing cabinet. “Why don’t you tell me how you really feel?”

He snorted.

“I need a soda.” Lillabeth burst in the office, going straight for the quarter stash. “My throat is clogged with book mites.”

“Wait.” Jade rolled back to the desk and slapped her hand over Lillabeth’s as she retreated with fifty cents. “Heads or tails?”

“What?”

“Call it. Quick.” With a flick of her thumb, Jade launched the coin high in the air. “Heads or tails?”

“Heads, no . . . tails. Tails.”

The coin rotated in midair, a silver glint slicing through warm afternoon sunlight, then fell to the floor, landing on its narrow edging with a *ping*, and rolled across the floor. Jade and Lillabeth hunched over and followed it until the quarter hit a crack in the floorboard and disappeared.

“Ack.” Jade dropped to her knees and slapped the floor with her palm,

thunking her forehead against the wood to peer through the dark slit. “Get me a flashlight, Lilla. I want to see if it’s heads or tails.”

“You’ve gone crazy, Jade. What are you trying to decide?”

“If I should dye my hair pink for the wedding.” Jade held up her hand, wiggling her fingers.

“Liar.” Lillabeth snatched the flashlight from the leaning bookshelf and slapped it into Jade’s palm. “Pink’s not vintage.”

“I do have more than one string on my violin, Lilla. I play contemporary now and then.” Shining the round beam through the narrow slit, Jade tried to see how the coin landed, but she couldn’t even find it, let alone discover if it was heads or tails.

“Contemporary, maybe, but not 1999 punk. Too tacky. Dark brown suits you fine.”

Jade sat back with a heavy exhale. “There goes twenty-five cents and the answer to my problem.”

“Is this about the invitation? Jade, you have the answer.” Lillabeth knelt beside her. “In your heart.”

“Don’t you have work to do in the storeroom?” Jade returned the flashlight to the shelf.

“Hey, you asked me. Heads or tails. Remember? I just came in for soda money.” Lillabeth rubbed her two quarters together. “For what it’s worth, I think you should send it. I mean, unless you’re inviting an ex-lover or something. Or an ax murderer.”

“Can I pretend she’s an ax murderer?” Jade plopped to her chair and stared out the window. *The trash guys forgot to empty the Dumpster again.*

“Who is this horrible person?”

“Someone.” Raking her hair back from her face, Jade dug around her soul for a thimble’s worth of emotion that might tell her what to do.

“Ah, the elusive someone.” Lillabeth lowered herself into the rickety metal chair. “Hey, Jade, can I ask you something?”

“Sure. What?” Jade drummed her fingers over the invitation. If she sent it,

the issues of her life she'd carefully dubbed "unusable vintage" would recycle through her heart and resurrect all kinds of ugliness. Liz Carlton's great-great-granny's moth-eaten sweaters had nothing on Jade's tattered past.

The teen inhaled long and slow, tapping the edge of one quarter against the face of the other. Jade watched her, slipping the invitation onto the desk.

"Must be hard to talk about. Usually I can't get you to shut up." Jade grinned and kicked the air in front of Lillabeth.

"Yeah, well"—big exhale—"let's say you did something you didn't mean to do and the result—"

"Good afternoon, ladies." A svelte, tan June Benson, outfitted for golf, swooshed into the office with a wide smile and grand gestures. "Lillabeth, goodness, how are you? I didn't see your mother on the tennis courts all summer. Here it is fall. Tell her we could use her on the golf course. We're missing a fourth."

"She's into Pilates these days." Lillabeth held up her quarters and motioned she was going back to work.

"Take me with you . . .," Jade called after her, then laughed for June's sake, but the woman was focused on the box of invitations.

"As I suspected. These lovely"—June patted the row of invitations—"unique . . . very red invitations. We can say one thing: the envelope will stand out in the mail. So what do you say we mail them, hm? Time is running out, Jade. Please let me take them. Except your mother's. You can keep that one until you decide."

"I haven't told her yet." Jade wadded up the lime-green sticky note. *Mail invitations.*

"Then call her. Land sakes, you're a grown woman." June collapsed in the metal chair Lillabeth had just vacated, catching herself when it listed to starboard. "What will people think if your mother is not at your wedding?"

"That I'm wise and gutsy."

June straightened the hem of her Madras golf skort. "Or petty and childish."

Roscoe peeked out from under the desk, his eyebrows twitching as he scanned the space between Jade and June. *Ladies, kept it down. Let sleeping dogs lie.*

“If you’d let Max and me get married up on Eventide Ridge at dusk like we wanted—”

“And have my only child married without a proper ceremony?” June propped her hand on the edge of the desk and leaned toward Jade. “No ma’am. And you’d regret it, too, in time. Trust me.”

Jade matched her future mother-in-law’s hard gaze. “Trust me. I wouldn’t.”

“Send the invitation, Jade, because *these*”—June rose, switching her handbag from one shoulder to the next and tucking the box of invitations under her arm—“are going out whether you’re ready or not. I’m sorry, but time is running out. I don’t mean to be so bossy . . . goodness, I can’t imagine what angst exists between you and your mama. Were you abused? Pardon my frankness.”

“No.”

“My granny, bless her soul, used to say, ‘Whatever aught you have against someone isn’t worth sending the Lord Jesus back to the cross.’”

“I don’t know what that means.” Jade faced her computer screen and clicked on an unread e-mail. “But I’m not sending Jesus anywhere.”

“It means Jesus’ love and forgiveness is sufficient of any wrong or violation done to us, Jade. Don’t you think it’s powerful enough for you and your mama? This I do know”—June stood just beyond Jade’s peripheral vision—“you need to forgive your mother for whatever it is that she did to you.” She paused. “Believe me, holding a grudge does nothing but deepen and widen your hurt.”

“I appreciate your input, June, but forgiveness has a twin: forgetting.” Jade waved Mama’s invitation in the air. “Which is what I’m trying to do.”

The only way she figured she’d come close to forgiving was to forget her past, which included her mama.

“I won’t argue with you. You know your own heart better than I do, but I wish you’d reconsider.” June pressed her hand gently on Jade’s shoulder. “See

you at seven? Diamond Joe's, meeting with the wedding planner?" She leaned to peer at Jade's sticky to-do list. "I declare, I don't know how you run a business this way."

"My system works for me." Jade rolled her chair away from the desk, giving June a *good-bye, have a nice afternoon* smile. "See you at seven."

"What's this?" June invaded "the system" and snatched up a sticky note. "A prescription for Max?"

Nosey. Jade took the note from her. "You have my wedding invitations; now you want my sticky notes too?"

"What's wrong with Max?"

"His back is out again, and the doctor called in a prescription to the pharmacy up here. He asked me to pick it up."

"I didn't know he hurt his back. What'd he do?" June snatched the sticky note from Jade, her expression drawn, her tone laced with concern. She seemed a bit ruffled.

"Sneezed wrong or something. It just happened yesterday."

"His back's been a mess since high school football and track. That dang high jump." June stuffed the sticky into her bag. "I've got to run by the pharmacy anyway. I'll pick this up for him. You're so swamped here."

"June, I'm not *that* swamped."

"Well, like I said, I'm on my way to the pharmacy anyway. See you at seven." And June was gone.

Okay, then. Thanks. Despite June's overreaching into Jade and Max's wedding plans, and, well, most everything around Whisper Hollow, the Bensons were good people. Floured with Southern charm and tradition, and deep fried, June and Rebel were Whisper Hollow pillars. Both sets of Max's grandparents were descendants of the town's founders.

Her people, on the other hand . . . a dad she hadn't heard from in years, and a flower child stuck in the dried-up soil of the '60s.

Jade knocked off her clogs and dug her toes into Roscoe's warm, thick fur.

Sweet By and By

He sighed and kissed her ankle with a lick. Her vision of her wedding was a handful of friends and family gathered around as she and Max pledged themselves to each other in a peaceful, solemn, simple ceremony. Jade never imagined she'd find true love again. But Max had captured her heart.

Why should she invite the one woman who could destroy it all?0



Two

Amber hues muted the last of the Iowa blue day as the sun rounded the horizon toward the west, taking with it the last bit of warmth. An icy breeze nipped Beryl's face as she fumbled for her house keys, her arms loaded with mail and groceries, a pack of hungry dogs swirling around her feet, panting and yipping, splashing drool on her shoes.

"Willow?" That girl, where'd she run off to today? "Willloooooow?"

Between the doctor's appointment, the aggravating man in front of her at Prairie City Foods—who paid his fifty-dollar tab in quarters—and the crowding of her daughter's mangy mutts, Beryl was fresh out of straws.

Willow, please suddenly appear. Open the door. Help me inside. Beryl's arms were starting to tremble from balancing her bags. And she craved a cigarette. Her mind's eye pictured the pack she had stashed in the back of the pantry.

Dr. Meadows had demanded she quit, but right now, he could stuff his no-smoking advice. Beryl would smoke him right along with her Virginia Slims.

“Willow!” Stretching to slip her key in to the lock, Beryl’s packages crashed to the gray porch boards. Her key slipped from her fingers.

She swore and kicked at the mail. A slick ad for cheap pizza sailed over the yard. Pepper, the little Jack Russell, bounded after it, yipping and snapping.

The remaining dogs watched with heads tilted and tails wagging. “Yes, she’s one of you,” Beryl said. “Embarrassing, isn’t it?”

Stooping to retrieve her keys, purple and brown spots swirled before her eyes, and she stumbled forward as a ringing sounded in her ears. “Mercy. . .” Beryl drew a deep breath, sitting and propping her back against the kitchen door.

Sooner or later Willow would come along. Not to check on her mother, but to feed her dogs.

Pepper returned with the pizza ad, wrinkled and frayed, sticking out both sides of her jaw. She dropped it on Beryl’s lap.

“Thank you, Pepper. Now, if you could, please open the door.”

The dog sat, panting, grinning. Beryl lifted her hand to brush the pooch’s head. The wind had swept away the warmth of the afternoon and a fall chill seeped beneath her skin, but Beryl couldn’t motivate her old, tired bones to move. When did fifty-nine start to feel like a hundred and nine?

“Beryl, what the heck?”

Willow stood on the bottom step eating a red apple, her T-shirt askew and her hair tousled. Next to her stood Lincoln, Beryl’s occasional handyman. A long, yellow piece of straw stuck out from the side of his head, and he was smiling to beat the band.

Darn it, Willow. Leave the help alone.

“Your stupid dogs knocked me over.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” Willow wedged the apple between her teeth and offered her mother a hand. Lincoln steadied Beryl once she got on her feet.

“I did. But you were”—she looked at Lincoln as she unlocked the kitchen door—“*busy*. How about teaching your canines a few manners?”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Willow took a final bite of her apple and tossed it into the yard. “Read to them from Emily Post tonight or something.”

“Oh, please, not Emily Post.” Beryl gathered her purse and one of the grocery bags. Every joint ached. “Bring in the mail and groceries for me, Willow, please. Lincoln, how about seeing to the busted porch screens I’ve already paid you to repair? Maybe I can enjoy a few nights of fall before winter drives me inside.”

“I’m on it right now, Mrs. Hill.”

In the boxy, warm kitchen, Beryl dropped her things to the red cracked-ice Formica chrome table, an antique from her childhood, and snatched up the teakettle. She hankered for a hot cup of sweet tea. Then a cigarette. Yes sir, tea and a cigarette.

Still outside on the porch, Willow laughed low to the rhythm of shuffling feet. Lincoln responded with a deep, muffled tone.

“I’m not paying you to make out with Willow, Linc.” Beryl stuck the kettle under the faucet and cranked the water.

“Leave him alone. He’s not robbing your paid time.” Willow dropped her armload of packages to the kitchen table. The canned beans tumbled from the plastic sack and rolled to the edge.

“Willow, please don’t ding the table.” Beryl fired up the gas burner. She could still see Paps’s face the night he brought the table home to surprise Mother. The summer of ’56. Or was it ’57? Elvis had been on the *Steve Allen Show* that night.

“I didn’t ding the table.” Willow stacked cans in the center. “I’m going to help Lincoln.”

“He don’t need your kind of help. I want my screens fixed.” Beryl fired up the burner under the kettle, thinking she’d best put the groceries away while she had the energy. Sliding the mail away from the table’s edge, she reached for the bean cans. “It’s not like me to tell you who to be with, Willow, but at least let him take you to dinner first.”

“Dinner? This is a fling, Mama. No big deal.” Willow swung open the pantry doors, searching. “If I let him take me on a date, he might start thinking I’m his girlfriend.”

“Heaven forbid. Does Linc know it’s just a fling?” Beryl shoved Willow aside and set the cans on the middle shelf, then turned to the table for the bread, spaghetti, cereal, and two-liter of pop.

Willow shrugged, taking the pop bottle from her mother and setting it on the pantry floor. “If he doesn’t, he will soon enough.”

“Do what you will, but be honest.” Beryl retrieved her favorite teacup—a gold-rimmed Lennox with holly leaves—from the cupboard then stared out the window by the sink, waiting for the water to boil.

Tank Victor’s harvested field ran along the hem of the fading-green backyard like a coffee-colored skirt.

This view always took her back to the summer of ’67. She’d been standing by the same field when Mother agreed to let her spend the summer in San Francisco with her college-age cousin, Carolyn. Mother’s reluctant yes dropped Beryl into the heart of the summer of love, an inaugural member of the counterculture that permanently inked her life.

“You miss it?” Willow fell against the counter next to Beryl, peeling cellophane away from a Twinkie.

“Depends. Miss what?”

“Farming.”

“No, not really. I’m not sure you can call three seasons of corn planting ‘farming.’ I did like driving the tractor. Actually, I was thinking about my first summer in California.”

“The year of the hippie. Paps had to drive out to San Francisco to bring you home for your senior year.” Willow stuffed half the Twinkie in her mouth and tossed the wrapper in the bin under the sink.

“So you’ve heard the story. Sorry to bore you.” Beryl glanced over. “How can you eat those things?”

“You were an original wild child, weren’t you, Beryl?” Willow munched on the second half of the Twinkie, dusting her hands against her jeans.

“Not wild. Free. Different from Mother and Paps. They were so square-thinking and backward.”

“Compared to you, maybe, but it doesn’t mean they were wrong, Beryl.”

“I thought you were going to help Lincoln.” Beryl reached for the ceramic blue canister and lifted the lid for an English breakfast tea bag.

“You told me to leave him alone.”

“I said don’t bother him while he’s working for me. Otherwise, what you do is your business.”

“I called you at work today.” Willow didn’t leave but propped her backside against the counter and picked at the jagged edge of her broken thumbnail. “They said you were on leave or something.”

Nosey little girl. “I’m taking some vacation, getting some things done that I needed done.” Beryl scooped sugar into her teacup, two teaspoons tonight instead of one—hot tea was no good unless it was sweet—and resituated the ancient art deco napkin holder Mother owned when Eisenhower was a mere general out of the way.

“Like?” Willow opened the kitchen’s junk drawer and picked around the pens, pencils, bread ties, glue, safety pins, and what all.

She was fishing in the pond of none-of-her-business. “I’m a senior teamster, Willow, and your mother, even if you do call me Beryl, and I don’t have to answer to you.” The kettle started a slow steam. “What are you looking for in that drawer?”

“A nail file.”

Beryl stepped beside Willow and dug to the back of the junk. “Here.” She cut the air with a well-worn but sufficient emery board. “Ask Lincoln to chop some wood before he goes home tonight. I might like a fire.” Lately, she’d craved the simple, homey things she once found confining and antiquated.

“Yeah, okay.” Willow filed her nail and dropped the board back into the

drawer, then reached for the mail. “Is everything okay, Beryl? You seem edgy these days. More than usual.”

“I’m fine.” Beryl snapped off the burner under the kettle and filled her cup. “Can’t a woman take a few days off without the third degree? My stars—”

“Whoa, she *actually* sent it.”

“Whoa, what?” Beryl stirred as she carried her cup to the table, her rattled nerves calming. She didn’t want Willow to know. Not just yet. There was time.

Standing by the table, Willow stared at a ridiculously red envelope. “Good for her.”

“Good for who, girl? What are you yammering about? Is that a Christmas card already? It’s only the first of October.”

“Uh, I’m going to see if Lincoln is ready for dinner.” Willow tossed the envelope to the table. It landed in front of Beryl.

“Dinner? He just started working.” Beryl slid the chair away from the table and angled to sit down, reading her name inked in gold across the front of the plush linen envelope. “And wouldn’t that be like a *date*?” Lincoln’s music drifted through the house as the front door squeaked open.

The kitchen light faded as evening hour shoved the sun westward around the curve of the earth and Beryl inspected the suspicious letter. Sipping her tea, she turned the invitation over. *Jade Fitzgerald*. Her fingers let go. *Don’t it just figure*.

“Well? Aren’t you going to open it?” Willow appeared in the doorway.

“She’s getting married, isn’t she?” Beryl gripped her teacup to steady her trembling hands.

“November fourteenth.” Willow opened the silverware drawer before sitting in the red-ice-and-chrome chair across from Beryl. She slit open the invitation with a butter knife.

“Haven’t heard from her in three years, and the first I do, it’s this.” Beryl slid the invitation free and stared at the embossed script.

“Last I looked, your dialing finger wasn’t broken.”

Jade Freedom Fitzgerald and Maxwell Charles Benson along with Mr. and Mrs. Rebel Benson . . .

“Have you met him?”

“At Christmas.”

“And?” Beryl didn’t expect to read her name on the invitation, so the sting of disappointment surprised her.

“He’s great, sweet, charming, good-looking. Seems to really love Jade.” Beryl’s youngest child shuffled the salt and pepper shakers between her hands. “He’s a lawyer.”

Beryl peered up from the five-by-seven card. “You’re kidding.”

“His family’s firm has been around, like, seventy years. Full of Southern charm and good-ol’-boy power.”

“So she found a man like her father after all. My efforts wasted.” Beryl clicked her tongue against her teeth.

“Some effort,” Willow scoffed. “All two ounces of it.”

Let her be. She had a right to speak her mind. Even if she had no idea what she was talking about.

. . . cordially invite you to stand in witness as they exchange marriage vows Saturday, November 14, 6:00 p.m. First Baptist Congregation Church, Whisper Hollow, Tennessee. Black tie required.

“Fancy wedding, I see. Black tie.” Beryl tucked the heavy card back into the envelope and laid it on the table with a pat of her palm. “How long have you known?”

“Six months. I’m her maid of honor.”

“Does she really want me to come?”

Willow shrugged. “She mailed it, didn’t she?”

“Someone did.” Probably not Jade, if history was any indication. Beryl sipped from her teacup. “Were you going to go without telling me?”

“No . . . well, actually . . .” Willow eased back, hooking her elbows over the top

of her chair. “If she didn’t tell you, yes. I’ve never understood what’s between you two, and I’m not going to get in the middle.”

“She’s never said?”

“Neither have you.”

Beryl set her cup in the saucer and pushed it away. The tea had already cooled beyond her liking. “Why don’t you and Lincoln run down to the Dairy Queen for dinner? Bring me a small chocolate shake.”

“That’s it? All you have to say?” Willow rose from the table, sliding the chair underneath. “Bring me a chocolate shake?”

“Remember, a small shake. A medium is too much.” She got up and headed for the kitchen staircase. “Do you need money?”

“No, no. . .” Willow patted her jeans pockets. “Beryl, you okay?”

“I thought you wanted to go to dinner. Get going.” Beryl climbed the back staircase to her room as Willow’s, “Dinner break, cowboy,” resounded through the house.

Gripping the faded quilt draped over her bed, Beryl knelt to the floor and peered between the dust bunnies and storage bins for the old sewing box stuffed with pictures, old memories rising, etching the fiber of her soul.



Des Moines, March 1980

A slice of yellow light from the hospital hall fell over Beryl as her room door eased open.

“Is it safe?” Harlan’s angular face peered around the door.

Beryl smiled, trying to shift upright, but her body wouldn’t cooperate, exhausted from ten hours of labor. She slumped down on the pillow as Harlan tiptoed across the tile to her bed. His kiss was warm.

“Did you see her?”

“Yep, all bundled in pink and sleeping.” He sat on the edge of the bed and gripped Beryl’s hand. “Six hours old and still an ugly little fart.”

“She looks like you.” Beryl squeezed his fingers. “How’s Aiden?”

“Already spoiled. Your Paps has him holding up one finger telling everyone, ‘I one. I one.’”

“Tell Paps to bring him by, please.” Beryl sighed. “So what’s with the suit coat, lawyer Fitzgerald? You didn’t have to go to court today, did you?”

“No, I wore it to hide this . . .” Pulling aside his suit jacket, Harlan revealed a Dairy Queen cup. “Contraband.”

“A chocolate shake.” Beryl pushed herself up from her pillow. “Now I remember why I married you.” She drew a long, cold, sweet taste. The best, absolute best. Harlan *and* the shake.

He laughed. “Keep that in mind, will you? Listen, I couldn’t stop them, but your mom has a crew of women from her church dropping off dinners and diapers and offers to clean.”

“She’s determined to get us *saved*—one way or another.”

“Christmas is coming in nine months. We’ll make our church appearance then.”

Beryl grinned, chewing on the tip of her straw. “Harlan, how’d savvy people like you and me end up with two babies in two years?”

He drew a deep, long kiss from her lips. “Darling, if I have to tell you—”

“You know what I mean.” She tapped his nose with the white straw. “I was breastfeeding—”

“No regrets, Beryl.”

“Never. How could there be?” By the time she realized she was pregnant, it was too late to consider another option. And her wide-eyed, towheaded son, who fit perfectly in the cradle of her chest and brushed her chin with his fingers when he nursed, had awakened her maternal desires. “I’m just wondering how we’re going to manage. The apartment is so cramped—”

“Maybe we don’t have to worry about the apartment anymore.” Harlan brushed her hair back from her forehead.

“Uh-oh, what?” She wrapped her lips around the straw, and a chocolate chill hit the warm middle of her tongue. Beryl shifted carefully to face her

husband. Oh, she was still so sore. “Did Family Aid lose more funding? Did you lose your job? We can’t move in with my parents, Harlan. We can’t.”

“I quit,” he said, without flinching or a second of hesitation.

Beryl’s mouth dropped open, and she lowered the cold cup to her lap.

“I took the job with Bernstein & Lowe . . . as a junior partner.”

“A for-profit firm? Harlan, no, I won’t let you. We can stay in the apartment. It’s not that cramped. How can you abandon your work, your principles, for corporate hypocrisy? What about the job with the ACLU?” Passion flooded her weary muscles.

“I still plan to use the law to help the poor and discriminated. Bernstein & Lowe require so many pro bono cases a year. But I’ll earn four times what I made at Family Aid. And that’s just the beginning. Next year it’ll be eight times, including bonuses. I can do more to help people this way.”

Was this her Harlan Fitzgerald or a stranger? “How could you do this without talking to me?”

“The offer came today.” He paced to the edge of her bed, hands in his slacks pockets. “They called and asked me to meet with them. Beryl, I’d be a fool to pass on this. I’ve not changed; I’ve grown smarter. Time to consider our future as well as the rest of the world’s.”

She swirled the straw against the thick drink, shaking her head. “It feels cheap, as if we’ve surrendered. Given into The Man—”

“I put a bid in on the farmhouse. Looks like they’re going to accept.”

Beryl stopped stirring. “The one on Highway 117?”

“The rambling two-story you love with the wraparound porch and twenty acres. Two miles from your folks, I know, that’s the downside, but you can farm, grow your own garden. . . Shoot, create your own Prairie City commune for all I care. As long as I have my own bathroom.” He held his palms wide, grinning at his simple concession. “Beryl, two months ago the house was a pipe dream. This job makes it a reality. What good are dreams if they have no chance of coming true?”

“Don’t paint your sold-out soul pretty colors and tell me it’s a rainbow.” She pinched her lips together, trying not to smile, resisting the sweeping tide of his enthusiasm. “You gave up your principles, *our* principles, about money and *things*. We’re now a part of the world’s problems. Another rat in the maze, grubbing for money and power.”

“A house isn’t a *thing*, Beryl. It’s a necessity. Isn’t this the very issue we fight for? The right of every person, no matter race or creed, to have a house, a little slice of the American dream? Now it’s our turn. If we can’t succeed, how can we encourage others?” He gestured toward the window and looked out. “There’s a whole world out there, baby, with all kinds of possibilities. Look at it this way: Bernstein & Lowe sold out when they hired me, a ponytail lawyer with a fierce record on social justice.”

“But now you’re the establishment, the other side, the type of people we loathed and protested.”

“You’re looking at it wrong, Beryl.” Harlan came back to her bed and the light behind his eyes was like a hundred Christmas trees. “Don’t you see? Hiring me affirms all we’ve stood for, Beryl. We’ve made a difference. And will continue to persuade society. One day, one person, one case at a time.”

His broad smile defused the last of her resolve. “You do this to me . . . win me over with your reasoned speeches and charm.” Beryl rested against her pillow.

“It’s why you married me.” He kissed her hand, then reached for the shake, taking a long, smiling sip.

“It’s one of the hundred reasons why I married you.”

From the moment she met him—in a Des Moines jail, arrested for a slaughterhouse protest and sit-in—she wanted him to be more than her lawyer. Her lover, certainly. But her husband? His out-of-the-blue proposal shocked her. She’d never had visions of white picket fences and jolly family dinners, and Beryl took the better part of a week to say yes.

But Harlan’s dashing manner had hooked her heart. The night he’d gently pressed her for an answer, she knew she belonged to him. Everything in her

detested the idea of institutionalized marriage, but she ached to *be* with him, to be his heartbeat, his missing rib.

“Your dad’s already offered to help buy some hens and a noisy rooster, a couple of cows and a pig or two . . . if they’re not too stinky. Come on, Beryl sweetheart, what do you say? It’s good for us. Good for our future. Our values haven’t changed. If anything, we’re sinking them deeper into the soil.”

The door creaked open, and a nurse peeked inside. “Feeding time, Mrs. Fitzgerald.”

Harlan tucked the chocolate shake underneath his jacket as the nurse rolled in the bassinette. Beryl plumped the pillow behind her back, snickering at him. Big-time lawyer hiding a frozen treat from an LPN.

A second nurse rolled in the bassinette for the mother sharing Beryl’s room. “Feeding time, Mrs. Ainsworth.”

The woman grouched and rolled onto her side, away from her blue bundled child. “I told you, I’m not nursing this one. Keep him in the nursery, please. I want to sleep.”

“It’s her seventh one, and we got a pool going to see if she’s even going to remember to take him home,” Beryl’s nurse whispered as she passed over a pink bundle. “I’ll be back for her in an hour or so.”

“Jade Freedom Fitzgerald, how are you liking the world so far?” Harlan asked, shoving his thick finger into her tiny grip.

“She’s getting prettier by the minute, Harlan.” Beryl smoothed the tuft of brown hair trying to spring up from Jade’s crown.

“Looking more and more like her mom.” He peered at her. “Still want to name her for a gemstone?”

“I am. Why not my girl. When she’s older, I’ll give her the ring you gave me. We’re going to be the best of friends, aren’t we, little Jade-o?”



Three

Jade spotted Max waiting for her between the stone columns of the First Baptist Congregation portico. His smile reminded her why she endured his mother, let her have her way for their wedding. Love.

“The shop busy today?” He winced as he leaned to kiss her.

“Tourist bus with vintage shoppers from Atlanta.” She curled into him, drawing her sweater tight against the evening’s dewy chill. “The shop’s a mess, but the cash register is happy and full.”

“That’s my smart entrepreneur.” Max slung his arm around her shoulders as they headed for the giant sanctuary doors, leaning against her. “I love how you make old things new, babe.”

“Someone has to. . . Your back is still bothering you?” Jade grabbed the wrist of his arm draped over her shoulder. “Aren’t the meds helping?”

“Meds?” Max winced as he reached to open the sanctuary door. “I’ve been waiting for you to hand them over. The pharmacy said they got picked up two days ago.”

“Talk to your mama. She came by the shop to hijack the invitations, got nosey with my sticky notes, and took the one about going by the pharmacy. Didn’t she give them to you?”

His jaw tightened. “I’ll talk to her.”

“It’s okay, isn’t it? For her to pick up the prescription?” Jade paused in the foyer. He was agitated. “She seemed so intent on helping.”

“Haven’t you met June ‘The Helper’ Benson, Jade?” Max motioned for her to go inside the sanctuary. “You’re going to have to learn to stand up to her.”

“It’s a prescription, Max.” Jade tried to see his eyes as they walked down the aisle toward the church offices. “Everything okay, honey? Bad day? Run-in with a judge in the courthouse halls?”

“Everything’s fine. Except for the occasional shooting pain down my leg.” Max tried to straighten his back, air whistling through his teeth as he did. “And my meddling mother.”

“Meddling? Okay, what’s up? Do you want me to just call your mom? We can meet her—”

“I’ve got to go by the house tonight, anyway.” Max leaned against the office door.

“Evening, folks.” Reverend Girden emerged, his long and lean runner’s build moving in graceful synchronization. He watched Max carefully. “Max, what’s with your back?”

“Whisper Hollow High versus East Ridge, playoffs, fall of ’90.” Max eased forward to shake the reverend’s hand. “You remember my fiancée, Jade.”

“I do. Nice to see you again.” Reverend Girden stood aside for Max and Jade to enter his office. “Ah, yes. The old East Ridge game. If I recall, you ran for ninety-five yards, Max.”

“And *sooo* gone are the glory days.” Max winced.

The men reminisced for a few minutes, exchanging football battle stories, then recounting the fourth-quarter tackle that sent Max to the ER.

Jade hung onto Max's fingers, listening, loving stories that deepened her understanding of the man she loved.

Besides, it took her mind off being behind the reverend's closed office door, from treading on holy territory—churches and ministers, God and holiness. The whole deal made her uncomfortable and threatened her sense of worth.

Reverend Girden reminded her of her granny's preacher back in Iowa—soft and unassuming, but with a laserlike gaze.

“How are things at Benson Law, Max?”

“Busy, really busy. Named best law firm in the southeast by a couple of trades and associations.”

“Means you can charge more now, right?” The reverend sat behind his desk, motioning for Max and Jade to take the frame and leather chairs across from him.

A nervous twitter hit Jade. For the first time since learning of this meeting, she considered the implications. The reverend wanted to *meet* with them.

Next to her, Max didn't appear tense or anxious. He'd moved from talking football with the holy man to golf and his new graphite clubs.

The reverend's office was masculine and dark, with only a single floor lamp lit behind the desk. The walls were lined with bookshelves, double-stacked with books. Jade imagined it impossible for one man to read so many.

But the room was hot. The books and heavy furniture sucked up all light and air. Digging her fingernails into the wood tip of the leather arm, Jade's heart rate spiked. Why did the walls choose now to close in on her? Maybe she shouldn't be here, chatting with God's representative about marrying marvelous Max. She didn't deserve him. At all. Breathing deep, Jade glanced at the exit. Could she make a run for it? But the door was closed. Her pulse drummed in her ears. *Trapped*. If she ran, she just might never come back.

Max was standing now, his hands wrapped around an invisible golf club. Would he understand if she bolted? Or be embarrassed? Think she was crazy?

The reverend watched Max go through the elements of his swing, chin in hand, humming.

Breathe, Jade. Breathe. She focused on the reverend's credenza and his arrangement of pictures. A mountaintop scene of blue sky and white peaks freed her thoughts from the claustrophobic space of her mind.

"Is that your family?" she blurted. Max snapped his gaze from the imaginary golf tee.

The reverend did a double-take between Jade and the pictures to his back. "Oh, those, yes, my wife and children." He pointed to the frame on the left. "The rest are the grandkids."

So the reverend was a regular man, a family man.

Max lowered his arms and took his seat. "Guess we didn't come here to talk about golf." He winced. "My back is really unhappy with me now."

"Sorry, Jade," the reverend said.

"No, no, it's okay." If that was the worst that happened . . . Jade relaxed her shoulders. The room opened up. The air circulated, and her heart ceased to throb.

"So how are the wedding plans coming along?" The reverend folded his hands on top of his cluttered oak desk.

"Good, good." Max shifted his position, stretching his left leg. "Jade?"

"I'm a two-witnesses-and-justice-of-the-peace kind of girl. Max's mom has done most of the planning."

"You're marrying a wise woman, Max." Reverend Girden gave her a knowing smile.

"I don't know how I deserve her."

No, it's me. I'm the lucky one.

"Haven't seen you two at church lately." The reverend got right to business.

“No, I guess we’ve . . .” Max shifted carefully again with a side peek at Jade. What? She didn’t have an excuse. “Uh, we’ve been busy.”

“My wife, Darnell, raves about your shop, Jade. She bought an antique grandfather clock from you.”

“I remember. One of my first big spenders.”

“And me on a minister’s salary.” He chuckled. “Darnell captured my heart the first time I saw her, and I’ve found it hard to deny her anything ever since. She’s a good woman.”

“I fell in love the first time I walked into the Blue Umbrella.” Max cupped his hand over Jade’s. “That old Five & Dime where I used to buy jawbreakers and ice cream now had the most beautiful woman.”

“But I wasn’t for sale.”

The reverend rocked back in his chair, fingers clasped over his middle.

“I had to ask her to dinner to get her to even look my way.” Max grinned at her.

Jade’s eyes watered. If he only knew. The night he pushed open the Blue Umbrella’s front door and asked her to dinner, the brittle bandages wrapped around her scared heart finally began to fall away.

“What about you, Jade? Was it love at first sight?” The reverend peered at her.

“Me?” She tightened her fingers around the tip of Max’s. “He was standing in front of Sugar Plumbs, holding a tall coffee and telling stories that made Mae Plumb belly laugh.”

“Love is a wonderful thing . . . a wonderful thing. And weddings . . .” The reverend searched through his desk drawers. “Ah, here.” He held up a compact black binder. “Weddings are my favorite part of the job.”

“Better than funerals,” Jade said, running her moist palm over her jeans.

“Not always.” Reverend Girden flipped open the notebook. “We had a parishioner pass about four or five years ago of cancer. Never saw such grace and peace on a person. On hard days, I’d stop by her place just for a bit of sunshine. Even

in her pain, she reflected the light of Jesus. During her funeral, for about a good thirty seconds, I was physically jealous. Mrs. Dover stood in the full, unveiled presence of Jesus. And I was stuck on earth.”

Full, unveiled presence of Jesus? What was he talking about? Jade ached to ask, but when he looked at her, the flutter in her chest stole her voice and tugged her gaze to her shoes.

“This is my marrying book,” he said, patting the cover, “with different ceremony and wording options.”

“I don’t think we want anything fancy, do we, Jade?” Max slid forward slowly, a pinch in his expression, angling to see the book.

“I just want us to be honest and sincere in what we pledge.” Once, she’d fiercely loved a boy who promised his love *forever*. But his *forever* only lasted six months.

“Whatever you think is best, Reverend,” Max said.

The reverend jotted a note. “How are you two doing otherwise? Getting along all right? Weddings can be trying on a relationship.”

“We’re doing well.” Max squeezed her hand. “What do you think?”

“I think November fourteenth can’t come soon enough.” Allowing a stranger, a holy man, to probe into their relationship made Jade uncomfortable.

“Have you talked finances? Who does which chores? Where to spend holidays?”

“Max can do the finances,” Jade offered. “I have my fill with the shop.”

“We seem to have a good routine.” Max shrugged. “When we’re at her house, she cooks and I clean. At my place, I cook and she falls asleep on the couch.”

The reverend laughed.

“I’m close to my brother and sister, but” —Jade glanced at Max, squeezing his fingers—“holidays aren’t a big deal in my family. The Bensons’ home seems to be a nice place for holidays.”

The reverend rolled out his bottom lip—*I see*—and jotted a note. “What

about children? Believe it nor not, a lot of couples get married without talking about children. How many and when?”

Jade drew her hand away from Max’s and sat stiff-backed against her chair. *Is this where it all hit the fan?* She tightened her jaw and chest, dug in her heels, and leaned against her soul’s closet door.

“We’ve discussed children as they relate to the big picture,” Max said, “but without details. I’d like children anytime, really. I’m thirty-six . . . Jade?”

“Sure.” She tipped her head. *Anytime.*

“Do you have children from past relationships? Max, I know you don’t, but Jade? Any ex-husbands, fiancés?”

“No. None.” How was this any of his business?

“You two have discussed past relationships, hurts, and pains?” Reverend Girden’s fire-blue gaze burned through her.

Jade felt exposed, and as if her Secret roll-on was completely letting her down.

“We’ve talked. Some.” Max rubbed his hands together, resting forward with his forearms on his thighs.

“Our pasts don’t matter much to us, Reverend,” Jade said with a rise of confidence.

“Right,” Max said. “We consider our relationship a clean slate. Who she was with before me doesn’t matter.”

So he *was* listening that evening she rambled on about her life beginning the day she met him and the past being more of an anchor than a revelator. It sounded so wise and philosophical, but the dozing Max merely muttered, “Mm-hm,” from a subconscious state of twilight.

“Interesting.” The reverend rocked back and forth in his seat. “So Jade doesn’t know you’ve been engaged, Max?”

“Well, yes, she knows about Rice, yes.” Max rubbed his thumb over hers. “Kind of hard to hide it since Rice grew up here . . . but Jade knows that relationship is ancient history now.”

“How about you, Jade?”

“You mean besides grade-school crushes?” Jade laughed, flipping her hair away from her face, shrugging with her palms open. “I’ve been waiting all my life for Max.”

Max stretched across his chair and kissed her cheek. “Thanks for finding me.”

“I understand where you two are coming from, and I’ve seen cases where couples talk too much about their past loves and experiences, but communication is the key to a strong relationship. If I had a dollar for every couple who could solve their problems with honest, open conversation, I’d be sailing my yacht in the Caribbean. Don’t be too cautious with this past thing.” He shook his head, searching under the papers of his desk. “Hidden things have a way of coming to light. Ah, here it is.” He flashed a gold pen.

“I’m confident in our relationship and communication, Reverend,” Max said confidently.

“Good, good.” The reverend shuffled through the papers again. “I’m not usually this disorganized. Here we go.” He held up a printout this time. “Your wedding is on the fourteenth; all set, ready to go. Just one thing—Max, I’m sure you’re aware of the church’s desire to unite men and women in marriage who are of the same faith.”

Max tipped his head to one side and scratched behind his ear. “Y-yes.”

“Jade, do you have a certificate of baptism confirming you’ve accepted the tenets of the Christian faith?”

“Certificate?” Once again, her Secret roll-on was breaking down.

“Yes. Or a letter from your pastor confirming your profession of faith.”

“Reverend, just take her word. Jade’s a good woman.” Max patted her arm. Made her feel like the old gray mare.

“What’s the name of your home church, Jade?” Reverend Girden scribbled on the found paper with his found gold pen.

“Um, it was, um, my granny’s church. Prairie City United Methodist in Iowa.”

The reverend gazed at her from under his brow. “Have you been baptized, Jade? Made a profession of faith?”

“Formally? No. But I do believe in God, Reverend.”

“I see.” He closed his marrying book. “We don’t like to unite people merely because they are spiritual or believe in God, but because they have the common foundation of a profession of faith in Jesus Christ.”

“Reverend.” Max rose to his feet. “Where are you going with this?”

“Max, I know you’ve professed faith in Jesus Christ as a boy, but I’d like to know where Jade stands before I unite you two in the covenant of marriage before God and the congregation. Certainly, you understand faith is an essential part of a successful marriage.”

“Jade can believe whatever she wants.” Max maneuvered around to the back of the chair, bending slightly forward until he could square away his back. His pain didn’t seem to hinder his defense abilities. “I’m not demanding she convert.”

For a long, hard moment, no one spoke. Jade perspired and shot Max a dozen mental messages. *Let’s go.*

“I’m not trying to be the bad guy here, Max.” Reverend Girden flipped open his Bible and handed it to Jade. “I just want Jade to know Jesus loves her. He has a destiny for her. Read verse seventeen. Yeah, there, Psalm 139.”

Her voice didn’t engage at first, a swell of emotion crashing over her. Clearing her voice, shifting in her chair, Jade blinked her eyes clear. “‘How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them!’” She lopped the book closed.

“You’re always on His mind, Jade.”

She nodded, a cold trickle running down her cheek, dropping from the edge of her chin.

“Reverend.” Max white-knuckled the back of his chair. “We’re less than five weeks away from the wedding. I don’t want you or anyone coercing Jade into a belief system just so we can get married in the church.”

Reverend Girden rose, shoulders taut as he towered over his desk. “I can’t ask her to make vows before God if she doesn’t believe.” He tapped his gold pen against the desk absently. “I need to know where she stands. Perhaps you’d be happier with a civil ceremony. Judge Anders does a fine job.

“I told you, I believe in God.” Jade shot to her feet. “I do, Reverend. I attended church with my granny, attended Sunday school.” She lifted a medallion from beneath the ridge of her sweater. “My Paps gave me these praying hands so I’d remember Jesus prayed for me.”

“Jade, can you tell me what’s in your heart? Do you know God is glad over you?”

The reverend didn’t get it. God would never want her. Not if He was truly good. He couldn’t possibly. Inviting her in would darken the splendor of His beauty.

“What’s in my heart? That I love Maxwell Benson. That I want to spend my life with him. I can’t believe how lucky I am to have found him.”

Max wrapped her in his arms, kissing her cheek.

“Why not take a few classes with me, Jade. Be sure of your salvation?”

“Jade, no, you’re not required.” Max shoved her chair aside and opened the door. “The Bensons founded this church. Paid to have the west wing addition, and I believe we can be married here if we want.”

“Max, wait, there is a requirement for a religious ceremony—”

Down the main sanctuary aisle, his footsteps echoing, and out to the parking lot, Max fumed. He aimed his key fob at the Mercedes like a light saber.

“Max, calm down.” A sour taste swirled in her throat. “I don’t mind taking classes if—”

“He’s got some nerve.” Max fired up the engine.

“For what? The reverend seems to think marriage is more than pomp and circumstance. Why can’t he ask his questions?”

“Because he challenged our integrity.”

“And you challenged his. Call it even.” Streetlights fell over Jade’s legs as

Max turned out of the parking lot, heading toward Main Street. “He’s a man of the cloth. Wouldn’t you check a new client’s credentials, or make sure a new attorney actually passed the bar?”

“It’s not the same.” Max stopped at the four-way, gunned the gas, then fired across the small intersection.

“Not to you and me, maybe, but to him.”

“Don’t defend Reverend Girden, Jade. Are you hungry?”

“A civil ceremony is fine. I have a frozen pizza at home.”

“I know, I know, but the Bensons and Mom’s family, the Carpenters, have been members of First Baptist Congregation since 1890-something. It would feel cheap to not include God somehow. I’m okay with your faith. Why can’t he be?”

“What you told him about me made me love you more.” Her eyes welled up.

“All true, babe. I love you. Guess that’s why it bothers me he’s making such an issue of whether you profess faith in Jesus Christ or not.” One of Whisper Hollow’s two traffic lights caught Max with a red at Divine Drive and Cherish Hill. As they waited for green, Max turned to Jade and pressed his lips to her forehead. “I think I’m addicted to you.”

Jade settled into the plush leather seat as the light turned green and Max eased toward the Blue Umbrella. She hung Max’s confession in the secret room of her heart, and she’d visit there on the hard, blue days.

He loved her, and she was counting on him.

