

Chasing Dreams

A Chandler Sisters Novel

Deborah Raney

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Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. . . . Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans . . . in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

James 1:16–18, 27

CHAPTER 1

May

OH, BROTHER . . .” JOANNA CHANDLER SHIFTED the bag of groceries she was carrying and unlooped a pretty little tin can filled with flowers from the front door of the cottage. A May basket—no doubt Quinn Mitchell’s doing. The man had it bad for her sister. And if not for the fact that Phylicia was so deliriously happy these days, the two lovebirds would be getting on Jo’s last nerve. This romance had been in high gear for a week now, ever since the night Phee and Quinn stayed up till the wee hours “defining the relationship.” Though Phee denied it, Quinn claimed *she’d* proposed to *him* that night.

Jo unlocked the door, propped the May basket on the mantel where her older sister would see it, and deposited the groceries on the kitchen table. “Britt? You home?” There was no sign of her younger sister inside.

She went down the short hallway and peeked into Britt’s room. Melvin, the spoiled black-and-white tuxedo cat they’d

inherited from their mom, looked up from his spot on the bed and yawned. But all was quiet in the house. Did she dare to hope her younger sister was at a job interview?

Jo went back to her car and carried in two more loads of groceries from the trunk. With any luck, one of her sisters would be home in time to help put all this stuff away. Graduation at the local university was less than two weeks away, and not only was the cottage booked for a four-day weekend, but they'd promised breakfast all four days. For five guests.

This was their first official Airbnb rental, and it would take all three of them working overtime to get the place ready for guests. At least they could stay in one of the cabins across the lane this time instead of camping out in the woods like they'd done after a semi-disastrous accidental booking that had led to Phylicia's unofficial engagement.

Jo pulled a jug of coffee creamer from a bag and stuck it in the fridge, begrudgingly grateful that Britt hadn't yet found a job. The bulk of the hostess duties would fall to Britt, since Phee would be working overtime at the flower shop, thanks to the perfect storm that May Day, Mother's Day, and graduations created for the floral industry.

Jo peered out the tiny kitchen window, loving the dappled view of the woods behind the cottage. She'd be lucky to get the weekend off since her boss and his wife had just returned from a ten-day whirlwind tour of Europe. The entire law office was scrambling to get caught up.

Glancing through the archway that led to the combined living and dining room, Jo smiled at Quinn's primitive tin-can bouquet on the mantel. It looked like something a kindergartner had fashioned. He'd used picture wire to form a handle around the tomato can with a pretty label, then filled the can with wildflowers. Jo recognized tickseed, purple prairie clover, and chicory—all flowers that grew wild along Poplar Brook Road.

The back door slammed and Britt blew in, singing something from *Beauty and the Beast* at the top of her lungs.

“Hey, where’d you come from?” Joanna peeked through the doorway off the hall that led to the cottage’s two bedrooms and the back door.

The singing stopped abruptly. “Oh. I didn’t know you were home.” Her cheeks rosy, Britt slipped out of her Crocs and went to the kitchen sink. She scrubbed her hands and tried to blow aside honey-brown bangs that were plastered to her forehead with sweat.

“Where did you think all these groceries came from?” Jo pointed to the grocery bags crowding the kitchen table.

Her sister shrugged. “I didn’t notice them. I was working in the garden.”

“Um . . . We have a garden?”

Britt shot her a smug grin. “We do now. The start of one at least. In the yard behind the cabin.”

“Cool. What did you plant?”

“Flowers. Plants Plus still has flats on sale in Cape, so I figured I’d take advantage. Petunias and coleus and begonias. Oh, and a couple of tomato plants. But mostly begonias.” Drying her hands, she tossed her head toward the wooded backyard. “I’ll plant a few of them behind the cottage. It’s too shady there for anything else.”

“Well, good for you.” Jo bit her tongue, wondering how much that trip to the nursery had set them back. She and her sisters had bought the property with its three cottages free and clear, thanks to the inheritance their mother had left them. They were living in this cottage, but the funds they’d each contributed to for renovating the two smaller cabins was dwindling at an alarming rate.

And Britt still hadn’t found a job. Not that she’d looked that hard.

“There’s another load of groceries to carry in.”

“I’ll get them.” Britt started through the living room then paused by the fireplace. “A May basket? Where did that come from?”

“Unless you have a boyfriend I don’t know about, I’m guessing they’re from Quinn.”

“Aww. How adorable.”

“Yeah, well, I have a sneaking suspicion that bouquet came straight off our property.”

“Oh, so what. I think it’s sweet.” Britt hugged herself.

“Phee will think so too.” Jo shook her head but laughed. She couldn’t wait to give her future brother-in-law a hard time about gathering Phee’s bouquet from the Chandler sisters’ property. Still, she had to give the man credit: a flower-shop bouquet would never have stolen her sister’s heart the way these hand-picked wildflowers would.

Jo’s smile faded as a twinge of jealousy pricked. She was truly happy for Phylicia. Her older sister would turn thirty in a few weeks, and Jo was glad Phee had found love before that ominous over-thirty stigma descended on her. But now—Jo cringed at the thought—all eyes would be on *her*, waiting to see if the second Chandler sister would find her man before she was “over the hill.” Stupid small-town gossip.

Joanna stifled a sigh. She shouldn’t care. She wasn’t even twenty-seven yet! But soon enough twenty-eight would be nipping at her heels, and *that* felt so far up the proverbial hill, she could almost *touch* the top.

The ominous thoughts settled heavier inside her than she would have liked. She watched storm clouds building across the cove beyond the cabins, and the light inside the house gradually faded, as if someone had turned a dimmer switch. Jo walked through the rooms, turning on lamps and flicking light switches as she went.

She and Britt worked together to put groceries away, growling as they collided in the tiny kitchen. This cottage could feel a bit claustrophobic when all three of them were home, but when Jo was here by herself, she loved the place and secretly hoped she’d end up claiming this one as her own after the two smaller cabins were finished. Of course with Phee getting

married sometime soon, she'd probably get dibs on the larger cottage. Unless she and Quinn moved into the house he was building.

But now wasn't the time to think about that. They had less than two weeks to get this place ready for their first official guests, at which time they would all be sleeping on the hardwood floor of an unfinished two-bedroom cabin that still reeked of paint, sawdust, and refinishing fumes.

Her phone trilled from its charger in her bedroom, and she raced down the hall to get it.

Her boss. Trent almost never called her at home, but when he did, it was to ask her to come back in to work. She wanted to pretend she hadn't seen his call, but the truth was, she could use the overtime pay. And tonight, she didn't really have a good excuse anyway. She pressed Accept. "Hi, Trent."

"Hey, Joanna. Sorry to bother you at home, but we've got a bit of an emergency here. Could you come in for a couple of hours?"

She glanced at the clock on her nightstand. "What time were you thinking?"

"Right now, actually. The sooner the better." Something in Trent's voice gave her pause.

"Oh. Okay. Yes. I guess I can come in. Is this—"

The line went dead. Now *that* was the Trenton Pritchert she knew. Never give anyone a chance to argue or even ask questions. At least she hadn't changed out of her work clothes. She blew out a sigh and went to the kitchen to find Britt.

"I've got to go back in to work."

"You just got home."

"Tell me about it." She grabbed her purse and fished her keys out of its depths. "I might be late. Don't worry about me."

"Never do," Britt deadpanned.

"Liar." Her baby sister was a consummate worrywart. Or at least had become one since the onset of their mother's three-year battle with pancreatic cancer. It had been more than five

months now since they'd lost Mom—almost half a year—and sometimes it still seemed the grief was as fresh as it had been that dark day last fall.

Pushing away the image of her mom lying in the hospital bed at home, eyes sunken and complexion ashen, she closed the door behind her and climbed into her car. She'd purposefully parked in the shade but now—looking at the windshield—she realized the cooler interior came at the expense of a deluge of bird droppings. *Shoot!* Quinn had warned her not to park under the trees once spring came.

But driving beneath the leafy canopy that rambled out to Poplar Brook Road, she couldn't muster one regret that they'd bought this idyllic property. It had been hard work and brought with it some difficult adjustments, especially where her sisters were concerned. But she loved this place as much as if she'd grown up here. And she had ideas about what their little investment venture could become—even if her sisters didn't quite share her enthusiasm.

She drove through the carwash at the edge of town before heading for the law office where she'd worked the past three years. She'd just started law school at Columbia when Mom was diagnosed. And though her career had been sidelined, she was grateful she'd found a job in the legal field as Trenton Pritchert's administrative assistant. If nothing else, when she finally was able to return to law school, she'd be going in with a more realistic picture of what an attorney did all day.

Pulling into the parking lot of the business complex, Jo was surprised to see Trent's SUV in the front lot. Even more surprising, Cinda, Trent's wife, had parked her ten-year-old—but pristine—Saab beside him. That was odd. They both had reserved covered parking near the back entrance.

Leaving one space between her and the Saab, Jo pressed the lock button on her key fob and hurried into the building. The downstairs lobby echoed with emptiness on this Monday night after business hours.

Clutching the hem of her skirt, she took the stairs two at a time, her footfalls echoing in the concrete space. She reached the third floor out of breath, growing more concerned by the minute. Something felt . . . off.

As she opened the door to Trent's office suite a woman's wailing, an eerie keening, carried down the plush carpeted hallway, sending chills up Joanna's spine.

CHAPTER 2

JOANNA'S STOMACH LURCHED AND SHE stopped, paralyzed. Against her will, painful memories dragged her back to a moment she'd never wanted to revisit. The hopeless wails coming from Trent's office sounded exactly like Britt's cries the day they learned that their mother's cancer was terminal.

Though she knew Britt was safe at home, the desperate sobs, so like her sister's, compelled Jo to move forward. To make sure it wasn't actually Britt in Trent's office. But whoever it was . . . Her heart ached as her imagination took over. And instinct told her that nothing she'd learned in her months of studying law would fix whatever was wrong in that office down the hall.

Trent's door stood open. She tiptoed forward to see him sitting at his desk, eyes wide, one hand clutching his cheek as if he'd been struck, the other pressed hard on the desktop with fingers splayed, as if any moment he might push himself to standing. Cinda sat on the edge of a chair in front of the desk, her arms awkwardly embracing a waif-like woman. It was hard to tell with a curtain of thick black hair shielding the side of the woman's face, but Jo guessed her to be in her late twenties, maybe early thirties.

No one seemed to notice Jo standing in the doorway. The young woman's wailing turned to babbling, the slightest hint of a Spanish accent slipping through. Yet, as garbled and high-pitched as the woman's words were, Jo still understood her.

"What will happen to him then? I can't possibly come up with that much. Not in time." The woman took in a shuddering breath. "I *have* no time. Isn't there *something* you can do? Anything? Luke said you could help me."

Cinda spoke softly, flipping her platinum blond hair over one shoulder. "Maria, I'm sorry. It's not the money. We simply can't take on any more clients right now. With our limited staff, we're barely keeping our heads above water as it is."

"Then tell me where I can go. Who *can* help. Luke promised you could help." Another quivering breath.

Trent pulled his hand away from his cheek and for the first time Joanna noticed he was bleeding from a gash across his right cheek. He opened a desk drawer and extracted a plain notepad. "I . . . I can send you some names. If you'll write down your email address . . ."

Heart pounding, Joanna hurried to the restroom across the hallway and grabbed a handful of paper towels from the decorative basket on the counter.

Returning to the office, she walked to the far side of Trent's desk and, trying to be unobtrusive, slid the stack of folded towels to him.

He flinched as if she'd struck him. Jo didn't think she'd ever seen her boss so ruffled. Trent swabbed at his cheek, then folded a section of the toweling and pressed it to his cheek. Cinda continued speaking quietly to Maria, attempting to calm her.

Trent motioned Jo closer. "I'm going to need you to drive her home. Or to the hospital, if she doesn't settle down."

"What's going on?" Jo mouthed.

"I'll explain later. She's sick," he whispered. "Cancer. She's trying to find a guardian for her kid."

Jo nodded. She recognized the pallor of cancer all too

well, and she steadied herself against the desk as memories of Mom's battle flooded in.

"Where is your son now?" Cinda asked, one hand on Maria's shoulder. Jo had never known her boss's wife to be so nurturing—unless it was with her two bichon frise pups.

"My Mateo, he is with his big brother."

"Wait . . . You didn't mention that you have two children. Is your older son still living at home?" Cinda looked puzzled.

And Joanna was growing more perplexed by the minute. Why would Maria have come to Pritchert & Pritchert in the first place? The firm was known for business real estate and estate planning. Joanna couldn't remember them ever taking on a family law case. Not to mention they had a reputation for being one of the more elite—meaning expensive—law firms in Cape Girardeau. Pritchert & Pritchert was *not* who you came to if money was an issue, and judging by this young woman's ranting, that was *the* issue.

"No. You don't understand. Mateo is my only son."

Cinda shook her head. "But you said he was with—"

"No, no . . . I mean the program. Big Brothers and Big Sisters. He's with his Big . . . his mentor." The first hint of a smile came to Maria's face. But it faded just as quickly. "Don't you ever take cases pro bono? Couldn't you make an exception? I am desperate, Mrs. Pritchert."

Jo was afraid she was going to start wailing again.

"Mrs. Castillo . . . Maria." Trent came from behind his desk and scooted a chair beside Maria, opposite Cinda. "As my wife told you, it isn't a matter of payment. And even if we had the staff to take on more work, this simply isn't the kind of legal work we do." He looked up and motioned Joanna over.

"This is my administrative assistant, Joanna Chandler. Jo is going to drive you back home, and we will email you a list of other attorneys who—"

"No. No, that won't work." She pushed away the notepad he'd given her. "I don't have an email address."

“I really think you should be in touch with DFS.” Cinda rose and went to shuffle through a rack of pamphlets near the door. “Joanna, could you find me the numbers for the Division of Family Services?”

Jo started toward the bank of mahogany file cabinets opposite the large windows overlooking the Mississippi.

“No!” Maria practically screamed at her.

Jo stopped in her tracks, looking from Trent to Cinda. But they ignored her, their attention on Maria.

The woman wrung her hands and snarled. “Don’t you understand? I am not dealing with the State. They took my friend’s kids away from her. Connie hasn’t seen them since.”

“This is different.” Cinda’s smile looked forced. “DFS can help you work out care for your son. A plan. And you would be the one to have a say in where he . . . is placed.”

“Have you not heard one word I’ve said?” Maria bared her teeth and lashed out, arms flailing.

From where she stood, Jo could only see the woman’s profile, but there was rage in her posture. Jo thought she understood the scratches on Trent’s cheek now. Involuntarily, she took a step back. Trent wanted her to transport this woman? What if Maria went berserk on *her* while she was driving her home?

Trent rose to his full six feet two inches. “This conversation is over. I am sorry for your misfortune, Mrs. Castillo. I truly am. But we have explained again and again that we aren’t able to help you. You come in here and attack us”—he touched his cheek gingerly—“and expect us to offer our services to you free? We would have every right to prosecute you for battery.”

Maria’s eyes grew round, and she gripped the sides of her chair looking as though she might faint.

“No.” Cinda patted Maria’s knee as if she were a frightened child. “My husband isn’t saying we would *do* that. Just that we would be within our rights if we did. We want you to go home and enjoy whatever time you have left with your son.”

With a final pat on Maria's back, Cinda rose. Joanna cringed at the dismissive gesture.

But Maria Castillo dug her heels into the carpet and gripped the arms of her chair. "I am not leaving until you promise you will help my son. And no DFS!"

Trent's jaw tensed. "Joanna, please call the police."

Maria turned her glare on Jo. "Go ahead! Call them! What do I care?"

Joanna had never called the police in her life. They employed a security guard, and her boss had threatened a client or two with removal. But never had the police become involved. She looked at her boss, as if he might change his mind.

But Trent waved a hand. "Go. Call them. Tell them to come and remove this woman."

Cinda murmured something Jo couldn't understand, but she didn't wait to see if Cinda could change her husband's mind. She ran from the room and to her own office down the hall. Her hands trembled as she dialed 911. Her voice wavered as she explained to the dispatcher what was going on.

"And will someone be there to let the officers into the building?" The dispatcher's voice was maddeningly dispassionate.

"Yes, I'll let them in. Tell them to come to the back parking lot." She hung up the desk phone and started to go back down the hall to Trent's office, but thinking better of it, she went straight to the staircase. A twinge of guilt nipped at her, knowing that her foremost thought was not to let Trent change his mind about having the woman removed from the building. Because if the police came, Jo wouldn't have to be the one to drive the volatile Mrs. Castillo home.

The more she thought about it, the angrier she became. Had Trent only called her in to play taxi for the woman? He and Cinda had two perfectly good vehicles, both in the parking lot this very moment. Why couldn't *they* take her home? Or get an Uber ride? Carting irate clients—or worse, rejected clients—around town was not in her job description. Not even close.

She reached the bottom of the wide staircase and crossed the lobby to the back outside entrance.

What a night! Wait till she told her sisters. This would one-up her little sister's story of the cops making an after-midnight run when Melvin knocked over a vase and Britt thought someone was breaking in to the house.

She heard tires on the pavement and looked up to see two police cruisers enter the parking lot, emergency lights strobing. Catching her reflection in the plate-glass windows, Jo realized she was smiling at the remembrance of Britt's fiasco. She sobered immediately. It would not be good to have to explain to Cape Girardeau law enforcement what she found so funny about this situation.

It *wasn't* funny. And she was thankful she hadn't been here to witness Maria Castillo's attack on her boss. It was bad enough seeing the young woman's distress.

Three officers emerged from the cruisers and strode toward the building. Joanna met them at the door and held it open.

The oldest of the three stopped long enough to ask her, "Are you the one who called about the Pritchert situation?"

"Yes, sir. Trent and Cinda—the Pritcherts—are both upstairs." She pointed toward the elevators.

"Is anyone in any immediate danger?"

"I don't think so. The woman . . . Maria Castillo . . . wants them to represent her and Trent refused."

The officer repeated the woman's name and wrote something on a notepad.

"She's . . . distraught." Jo told the older officer about the scratches on Trent's face. "I don't know the details. It's just that they can't get her to leave."

"All right, ma'am. We'll take it from here." He asked her about the layout of the building, then caught up with the other two officers waiting by the staircase. He pushed the button to

summon the elevator, while the others took the stairs two at a time.

“Do I need to come up with you?”

“No, ma’am. You stay right here. And lock the outside doors until we come back down.”

Ten minutes crept by. Joanna paced in front of the windows overlooking the front parking lot. Traffic in the side street slowed as drivers gawked at the strobing cruisers angled in the back lot. Jo strained to hear what was going on upstairs. But only the buzz of a fluorescent light overhead disturbed the silence.

Finally the elevator dinged opened, and the two younger officers emerged with Maria between them, her hands cuffed behind her back. Her long dark hair fell over her forehead, and she looked so thin and pale, Jo worried the poor woman might collapse. Jo supposed the officers had no choice but to remove Maria forcibly, but Jo’s heart went out to her.

Trent had said she had cancer. Jo saw other signs now in her hollowed eyes and gaunt frame—the way Mom had looked near the end. How much time did this young woman have? Probably not much, given how desperate she seemed to find help for her son.

The sun was low in the sky now, and Jo watched as they placed Maria in a cruiser, an officer guiding her head beneath the car’s frame, then closing the door. Jo turned to go back upstairs, but the elevator door slid open, and Trent and Cinda stepped into the lobby, followed by the older officer.

Trent turned and shook the officer’s hand. The policeman left the building and drove off, leaving the parking lot dark and still beyond the plate glass.

Joanna turned to the couple. “Are you guys okay?”

“We’re fine.” Trent ran a hand over his short, curly hair. “Man, what a night.”

“Some welcome home, huh?” Jo felt awkward with them,

not sure what had transpired while she was down here waiting in the lobby. “So, what happens now?”

“I don’t know.” Cinda took in a deep breath and released it slowly. “And thank goodness, it’s not our responsibility. I wasn’t sure how this night was going to turn out.”

At times, Cinda had seemed genuinely concerned when she spoke with Maria in the office. But it was all an act, and it bothered Jo that she could be so cold and uncaring now. Of course, Cinda had watched the woman attack Trent. Jo supposed her own compassion would have been tempered, too, if she were in Cinda’s shoes.

Trent waved a hand toward the parking lot. “You go on home, Jo. I’m sorry you had to get mixed up in this.”

“I didn’t do any work though. Was there something else you called about?”

Cinda gave a humorless laugh. “No, we just wanted you to take that nutjob home so we could finish up the Wilson Estates paperwork tonight. We did *not* have time for this tonight.”

Jo must have looked befuddled because Trent quickly added, “We never would have involved you had we known she was going to go postal on us.”

“Trent . . .” Cinda touched his sleeve. “*Postal* might be a little strong.”

He swiped a hand over his cheek as if he disagreed.

“Will they tow her car?” Jo scanned the parking lot beyond the windows for an unfamiliar car, but only their three vehicles remained. “Wait . . . How did she get here in the first place?”

Trent came to the window and followed her line of sight to the mostly empty lot. “Didn’t she say someone dropped her off?” he asked Cinda.

“I don’t remember. And I don’t want to. Let’s get out of here. We can come in early tomorrow.”

Trent jangled his keys, then put an arm around his wife. “You go on home, Jo. We’ll lock the door behind you. We may still have to give a statement.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Cinda scavenged for something in her purse. “*I’m* going home.”

“I hope you guys can get some sleep after all the excitement.”

Cinda didn’t acknowledge her, still digging in her purse.

“Thanks for coming in, Jo.” Trent went to open the door. He held it for Jo.

She heard the lock turn behind her as she walked to her car. She unlocked the door and slid behind the wheel. But the minute she turned the key in the ignition, her legs turned to rubber. She drove slowly out of the parking lot so Trent wouldn’t worry about her. But her hands were trembling so violently, she turned off on a side street and parked at the curb for a few minutes until she felt safe to drive.

CHAPTER 3

ARE YOU SERIOUS? SHE SCRATCHED his face?” Britt’s eyes were as round as the eggs she was frying. “I bet that went over well.”

“Well, I didn’t actually witness that part. Trent was already bleeding like a stuck pig when I got there.” An exaggeration, admittedly, but it wasn’t often Joanna had both her sisters’ rapt attention the way she did now, and she was going to milk her story for all it was worth.

“Aren’t you a little nervous to go back to work?” Phylicia’s brow wrinkled.

“A little, I guess. Especially if they let this woman go free.”

“Do you think the Pritcherts will press charges?” Britt popped half a bagel in the toaster. “Anybody want the other half?”

Phee declined.

Jo shook her head too. “I’ve kind of lost my appetite just thinking about last night. I was shaking so hard, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to drive home.” Her sisters had both been out when she’d returned to the cottage last night, and after calling Ginger, her closest friend and former roommate, to tell her what had

happened, she'd collapsed into bed and slept till an hour ago. So, her sisters were only now hearing about her ordeal.

"You should have called me!" Phee scooted Jo aside with one hip and tossed her yogurt cup in the trash can under the sink.

Jo growled good-naturedly. "This kitchen was not made for three women!"

"Hey, it's all yours." Phee held up her hands. "I'm out of here. I'll probably work late tonight. Mary wants to get some stuff up on social media in time for Mother's Day flower orders, and I told her I'd help her set up an Instagram account. Then I'm having dinner with Quinn."

"Oh, big surprise." Jo rolled her eyes, then looked through the dining room to the mantel. "Did you get your May basket?"

Phee glowed. "Wasn't that the sweetest?"

"It was pretty sweet," Jo admitted. She glanced at the clock and gave a little gasp. "I'm already late!"

"What else is new? But hey, you be careful, okay?" Phee gave her a stern look.

"Yes, Mother."

"Well, excuse me for caring about you."

"Just kidding."

"Bye, Britt," they chimed in unison, gathering their jackets and bags.

"I'll be working in the cabin today." Britt trailed after them. "I'm going to wash windows so we can hang curtains this weekend."

"Take Melvin with you." Jo shot her little sister an impish look. "In case . . . you know . . ."

Phee barely held in her laughter. They'd seen a mouse in that cabin the first time they looked at the property, and Britt had freaked out. Well, they all had, much to Quinn's amusement.

"Don't you worry. Melvin's coming with me. But if there's still a mouse in that cabin after all the sawing and hammering

and painting that's been going on over there for the last couple of weeks, then he deserves to live out his days right there."

"Wow, you've sure changed your tune." Still laughing, Phee headed out the door for her car.

Jo laughed, too, but Britt was right. The cabin had a new roof, and the interior had been transformed into a clean white slate. They'd even given the ceilings a coat of fresh white paint, making the place look twice as big as it had when they first toured the three houses on the property. The two bedrooms had new carpet, and the floors in the main part of the cabin had been sanded and stained.

They would start on the second cabin once they replenished their renovation fund. Of course, everything had cost more than they expected, but they hadn't gone in debt . . . at least not yet.

Jo had no regrets for buying the property with her sisters. She didn't think Phylicia or Britt regretted it either. And once the cabins were both finished, they'd have better potential income from renting them out through Airbnb. Jo grabbed her keys from the hook near the front door. "I'd better get a move on. See you tonight."

"Seriously, Jo. Be careful. I don't like the sound of that woman."

Jo glanced back to meet her little sister's gaze, touched by her concern. "I don't think she intended to hurt anyone. She was just desperate."

"Well, you know what they say: Desperate people do desperate things."

"I'll be careful." But as Jo drove into town, she couldn't get the phrase out of her head.



The office looked like it did on any normal day. No indication that last night's disturbance had ever happened. Jo put her purse

in the desk drawer, smoothed the skirt of her dress, and slipped on her headset, ready to answer the phones and respond to email.

Trent and Cinda were across the hall in his office with some guy. Younger than Pritchert & Pritchert's usual client—and good looking as all get out, at least what she could see of him from the reception room. Dark curly hair like Trent's, a strong jaw that already wore a five o'clock shadow—and wore it well—and broad shoulders beneath a button-down shirt. For a minute she wondered if he might be one of Trent's brothers, but though Jo couldn't make out the conversation, their voices carried the low businesslike tones of a typical client conference. It didn't seem like Trent or Cinda knew the man, and Jo had never seen him in the office before.

She didn't know how long he'd been here, and there was no appointment on the calendar. Her boss sometimes scheduled last minute meetings without adding them to the calendar Jo had access to, but she thought he would have said something last night if he'd known he had an early consultation. Probably just forgot in all the excitement of last night. Or maybe this was *about* last night.

By the time the man emerged from the office twenty minutes later, two other clients were waiting in the reception room. Jo hated when the schedule got backed up this early. It threw the whole day off.

The man caught her eye and gave a polite smile. "I need to make another appointment. Mr. Pritchert said I should talk to Joanna."

"Yes, that's me. How soon do you need to come back in?"

"As soon as possible."

Joanna scrolled through the appointment calendar, frowning. "He could see you two weeks from Friday. May 19. Right after lunch . . . say, one p.m. Will that work?"

The man bit his lower lip. "You don't have anything sooner?"

"I'm sorry, no. I can put you on a waiting list, in case we have a cancellation."

"Yes, please do. It's Lukas Blaine. Lukas with a *k*. Middle initial *P*. . . if that matters." He spelled his surname for her.

Jo took down his information. Blaine. Apparently not Trent's brother. What business did he have with Pritchert & Pritchert? Probably handling paperwork for an aging parent, or more likely grandparent. She guessed him to be about her age, early thirties at most.

"So, were you here for the . . . whole police thing last night?"

She looked up at him, trying not to show her surprise. "How did you . . . know about that?" She probably shouldn't have asked. Trent and Cinda were both extremely cautious about confidentiality and security, and there hadn't been anyone else in the office last night. She was pretty sure even the janitor had left for the night by the time the police arrived.

"I . . . I'm a friend of Maria's. Maria Castillo?"

"Oh. I see. I'm sorry." Was that why he was here? His conversation with Trent and Cinda had seemed too calm to have been about last night.

"Sorry? Why?"

"Oh . . . Just for what happened. That she's ill."

"So, you were here when she came in to talk to Trent?"

"I was, but . . . I'm really not at liberty to discuss it."

That made him smile. "I understand. I'm sorry I said anything. I hope you didn't get . . . hurt."

"Oh, no. Nothing like that."

"Okay. Good." He took a step toward the elevator, then turned back to her desk. "Do you have a card? An appointment card, I mean. I'm afraid I'll forget."

"Sure. Let me get you one." She opened a drawer and pulled a card from the stack. She printed his appointment date on it in careful block letters, then slid it across the desk to him.

"Thank you." He tucked the card in his shirt pocket and

gave her that smile again. “I appreciate it. You’ll call me if there’s an opening before the nineteenth?”

She tapped the reservation book. “You’re on the list. Have a nice day.” It was all Jo could do to restrain herself from asking him about Maria. But she wouldn’t cross that professional line. Watching him stand with his back to her, waiting for the elevator, she wondered again what his relationship was to Maria Castillo. With his thick, almost black hair, he could have been Latino like Maria. But his complexion was much lighter than Maria’s, even given how her illness had grayed her skin. And Jo had noticed that Lukas Blaine’s eyes were gray, a paler shade that—under the fluorescent lights of the office—seemed to have gold flecks.

The elevator arrived and he stepped on. When he turned to press the button, Jo was embarrassed to be caught staring at him. She wiped damp palms on the emerald green fabric of her dress.

He gave a little wave across the hall as if he appreciated her appraisal. She nodded briefly and busied herself with the papers on her desk, willing the elevator doors to hurry up and close.

Thankfully, her phone rang from her purse just then. She retrieved it and checked the display. “Hey, Phee. What’s up?”

“How would you like to be a wedding planner?”

The elevator door closed and with a sigh of relief, she turned her attention to her sister. “Wedding planner? What do you mean?”

“We just set a date.” A little squeal escaped her sister.

“Are you serious? You and Quinn?”

“Of course, me and Quinn. Who else would I mean?”

“So, you really *did* propose to him.”

“Cut it out, Jo. It was mutual. But we’re doing this. We’re really doing this. Quinn doesn’t want to wait. And neither do I. Mark June 24 on your calendar.”

She opened her mouth, but nothing would come out.

“Jo? Hello? Are you there?”

“June? As in next month June?”

Phee giggled. "That's the one."

"Are you *crazy*? I just saw you an hour ago, Phee. How did you manage to set a wedding date between the time I drove out of the driveway and"—she glanced at the clock above the elevator—"10:17 a.m.?"

"Coffee break." That girlish giggle again. "Quinn stopped by the flower shop while I was on my break and . . . one thing led to another and ta-da!" Phee was a different person since she and Quinn had declared their love.

Jo wasn't sure she liked this giddy version of her older sister. She quickly amended the thought. She was just jealous. Jealous her sister had found what Jo had always dreamed about. And what she'd thought she had with Ben.

Ben. She tried so hard not to let his name enter her thoughts. But rarely was she successful. She and Ben Harven had dated for almost a year before he'd shown his true colors. When Mom started going downhill, Ben couldn't handle losing Jo's undivided attention. And apparently he didn't like being around "sick people."

Jo had been embarrassed and furious and heartbroken. Mostly heartbroken. And yet, she was glad his betrayal had shown her the selfish, petty side of him before things grew any more serious between them.

"Jo? You still there?"

"Phee . . . Sorry. I . . . I'm still trying to wrap my head around this."

"Well, get to wrapping, sister. I already talked to Dad and he's coming back. To walk me down the aisle."

"Oh, Phee. I'm so happy for you."

She wondered how Dad felt about Phee's announcement. Only a few weeks ago, just months after Mom's death, they'd learned that Mom had been married before and that it was quite possible, likely even, that Dad wasn't actually Phylicia's birth father. And to Jo's surprise, Phee and Dad both seemed content not to probe the issue any deeper.

Jo wasn't sure she could have left the unknown alone if it had been her whose paternity was in question. Especially with the health issues Mom had dealt with. Of course, they *knew* Mom's health history—and at her insistence, they'd all had regular checkups with an oncologist.

"Thanks, sis. I'm so happy I'm almost . . . scared to let myself believe this is happening."

"Oh, Phee . . . Nobody deserves this more than you do. And I really *am* happy for you, but . . . *June*? That's only six weeks away."

"Actually, almost seven."

"You do know that wedding invitations are supposed to go out six weeks *minimum* before the event."

"Then we've got our work cut out for us this weekend, don't we?"

"Phee! You are flat-out crazy, woman!"

"Don't worry. We're doing everything simple—and cheap. Just a quiet ceremony and a cake reception. I don't care about a big wedding. Especially without Mom."

"I get that." She'd had that very thought when she imagined her own wedding . . . however far in the future that might be. It wouldn't be the same without Mom to share their joy. And with Dad there alone.

She blew out a sigh, scrambling to fathom how they'd ever pull off a wedding—even a simple one—in six weeks. "I guess you've got the flowers covered."

"Yes. I haven't told Mary yet, but that poor woman has been waiting seven years for me to get married so she can do my flowers. I'm pretty sure she'll say yes."

Joanna gave a humorless laugh. "Okay, so the flowers are taken care of. Have you reserved a church?" Since they'd started hanging out with Quinn, the four of them had gone back and forth between the Chandler family's church in Langhorne and Quinn's community church in Cape Girardeau. A wedding would probably make Phee have to choose a church home.

Not for the first time, Jo worried about how Phee's marriage would affect their plans for the property—the Airbnb enterprise she and her sisters had named The Cottages on Poplar Brook Road and that the three of them had planned to run together.

“Funny you should ask.” The mysterious note in Phee's voice made Joanna nervous.

“Funny why?”

“Quinn and I thought maybe we could get married outdoors. Up in the clearing. After all, it's where I proposed.” Phee laughed at the running joke that she'd been the one to propose to Quinn. But she sounded absolutely gleeful.

“You can't be serious, Phee. There *is* no clearing. Have you been up there lately? It would take a Bush Hog and a small army with machetes to clear enough space for a wedding *party*, let alone a bunch of guests.” She looked at the calendar on the office wall beside her, its squares filled with appointments. And that wasn't even her personal social calendar. *Oh, who are you kidding, Joanna Chandler. You have no social life.*

“Not a bunch of guests.” Phee's voice pulled her back. “I told you we want a small wedding. Very simple.”

“Well, there would be nothing simple about getting that clearing ready for a wedding.”

But even as she spoke the words, Jo knew that no matter what it took, there would, indeed, be a wedding in that clearing. And they had barely six weeks to pull it off.