

Chapter One



Earth to Hannah. Come in, Hannah.”

Startled, Hannah Prentiss set down the cleaning cloth and raised her head to find her best friend, Lacy Minyard, watching her closely. “I’m sorry. Did I miss something?”

Lacy nodded to the long folding table erected in the middle of the yard. “Nope. Everything looks absolutely amazing. The sandwiches. The salad. Your special peach lemonade, and those *cookies!* Are you trying to fatten us all up?”

Hannah gestured toward the hustle and bustle that was their church group. “Everyone is working so hard to get this place cleaned up for Miriam that it only seemed right to give them a proper thank-you meal. It’s easy enough when you own a restaurant.”

Closing the gap between them with two long strides, Lacy commanded the cloth from Hannah’s hand. “Hold still. You’ve got a smudge of soot on your cheek.” She gave it a quick rub. “And now you don’t.”

“Thanks.”

“Of course. I suspect you’ll do the same for me at some point before we call it quits for the day.”

Hannah took the cloth from Lacy and tossed it into the bag at her feet. “Every time I walk through Miriam’s front door, I praise God that she was at her son’s place in Cave City when the fire broke out. If she hadn’t been...” She stopped, drew in a breath, and held up

her hands. “Miriam is fine. That’s all that matters. And the house—well, we’re making progress, right?”

“We are.” Lacy hooked her thumb in the direction of the yard. “Are we ready to call everyone to the table?”

Hannah took a mental inventory of every place setting, every food platter, every waiting cup. When she was satisfied all was ready, she nodded to her friend.

Soon, after hands were washed and a blessing shared over the meal, a dozen members of their church women’s group pulled folding chairs up to the table and began to eat, the exhaustion from the morning’s work blanketing them in a rare silence. Occasionally, a pocket of conversation sprang up, but it didn’t last long against the pull of the food as they worked to refuel their bodies.

“Hannah, this salad is amazing,” said Connie Sanchez, the church secretary.

The round of nodding that accompanied Connie’s words continued as Vera Bowman commented on the deliciousness of the sandwiches.

“If you haven’t found your way to Hannah’s restaurant yet, I can assure you that this”—Lacy motioned to the food around them—“is just a preview of what the Hot Spot has to offer.”

More nods made their way around the table until Vera cleared her throat and took the conversational baton again. “I have to say, I was a little skeptical about a restaurant coming into the old firehouse, but you made it work, Hannah,” she said. “My kids love your food, and I like knowing they’re eating things that were grown and raised in and around Blackberry Valley.”

“Thank you.”

"I imagine you've had quite a lot of culture shock though," Connie said, eyeing Hannah across the top of her lemonade.

Hannah set her cup down. "You mean after working in Los Angeles?" At Connie's answering nod, she continued. "I mean, sure, LA and Blackberry Valley are very, *very* different. And the restaurants I worked in there were more high-end than the Hot Spot is, but high-end doesn't mean better, and I wanted to come home. To Blackberry Valley."

"And I'm so glad you did," Lacy said, resting her hand on Hannah's and giving it a squeeze. "Having you back in Kentucky these last few months has been such a blessing."

"For me too." Returning her friend's smile, Hannah pushed away from the table. "God led me home at exactly the right time."

The sound of tires against gravel drew her attention to the driveway and the navy blue sedan slowly making its way toward the one-story home. A glance into the passenger seat showed the reason they were all there.

"Miriam's here," Hannah said. She, Lacy, and a handful of others rose to their feet. "I was hoping we'd have everything done before she came."

"Miriam Spencer may be lovable, but she's also as stubborn as the day is long," Connie said. "She's no more capable of staying away than her son is of telling her no."

It was hard not to smile at the accuracy of Connie's words. It was even harder not to smile when Miriam opened the door and got out before her son could make his way around the car.

"Goodness, how long have you all been here?" Miriam asked, her sharp gaze darting from the women walking toward her, to the table, and then to her beloved home of nearly sixty years.

Connie stepped forward. “We got here shortly after sunrise.”

“Sunrise?” Miriam shot an accusatory glare at her son, Tom. “Why didn’t you wake me and bring me over sooner?”

“Because you need your sleep.” Hannah sidled up beside the eighty-five-year-old and planted a kiss on her wrinkled cheek. “And we wanted to surprise you by getting everything cleaned up before you returned.”

Leaning against the open car door, Miriam pointed the end of her cane first at the house and then the women. “It’s *my* house that caught on fire.”

“Yes, but Ecclesiastes chapter four, verse nine, says two are better than one because together they can work more effectively,” Hannah reminded her. She gestured at the women assembled around them. “So we came, twelve strong. We plan to get right back to work after lunch.”

Miriam lowered her chin and eyed Hannah over the top of her glasses. “And who’s running your new restaurant while you’re here?”

“I closed for the day.”

“You closed a new restaurant for an entire day?” Miriam repeated, drawing back.

“Yes, but that’s okay. Tuesdays tend to be slow anyway.”

“And your staff is okay missing a day’s pay?”

“I’m still paying them.”

“You haven’t been open long enough to be giving paid days off,” Miriam scolded.

“It’s one day, and I’ll make it work. Being here, doing this, is more important. Truly.”

Rolling her eyes, Miriam turned her attention to Connie. “And who’s at the church office right now?”

Connie patted her pocket. "I've forwarded all calls to my cell."

"And you?" Miriam shifted her focus to Lacy. "Who's looking after those chickens of yours?"

Lacy swapped grins with Hannah. "My chickens are fine, Miriam."

"We *want* to be here," Vera said, and the others echoed agreement. "To help get you back into your house."

"Helping me is fine. Doing it without me isn't." Miriam planted the end of her cane on the ground and shoved her car door closed. "So let's get to it, shall we?"

The group made its way to the house, stopping en route to pick up the cleaning supplies and brooms they'd left beside the front door at lunchtime. Connie and her group of five broke right toward the kitchen, Vera and her helpers made a beeline for the primary bedroom, and Hannah and Lacy led Miriam and Tom into the living room.

"We've made a lot of headway on the smell in here, and we've pulled up the floorboards closest to the fireplace, as you can see." Hannah crossed the remaining scorched floorboards and retrieved the pry bar she'd left in the corner. "If we can get the rest of these up by the end of the day, the men can come and put in a new floor on Saturday."

Miriam gazed around the room, tsking softly beneath her breath.

"It's all fixable," Hannah said soothingly. "Even the guest room with all of its damage. Really. And you're safe and sound. That's all that matters."

"That's what I keep telling her," Tom chimed in.

"I don't know if I have the strength to pull up floorboards," Miriam murmured.

“You don’t have to. Lacy and I have this covered. Right, Lacy?”

“Right.” Lacy pointed at the stack of books they’d made that morning. “But if you could inspect those and rid them of any soot, Miriam, that would be helpful.”

Miriam’s gaze skirted to the books. “I can do that.”

“Perfect.”

When the elderly woman was settled in a folding chair on the other side of the room, Hannah, Lacy, and Tom got to the business of pulling up the rest of the floor. Board by board, they made their way from the fireplace to the center of the room, setting some aside and discarding others out in the yard.

It was slow, tedious work as they stood, crouched, and stood, again and again as the June sun made its way across the sky, trading the noon hour for the afternoon, and then the afternoon for the early evening.

Rolling her shoulders in an attempt to work out a growing kink, Hannah took a moment to survey what was left and weigh it against the chores she knew still faced Lacy at her farm. An hour’s work, maybe, if they continued the course. Two hours if she took over from this point by herself.

“Lacy?”

Her friend wiped a bead of sweat from her face. “What’s up?”

“Go home. I’ll take it from here.”

“I can’t do that,” Lacy protested.

“You still have farm chores to take care of. Go.”

Lacy pulled her phone from her pocket and consulted the screen. “Are you sure? Because I could do those and come right back.”

"I've got it. Really."

Lacy put her pry bar down and stood. "I'll clean up from lunch before I leave."

"Vera already took care of that," Tom said from the corner of the room where he was working.

"See?" Hannah waved toward the door. "All that's left are the horses."

"The horses and that corner of the room," Lacy said, pointing at the section behind Hannah.

"I've got it," Hannah repeated, smiling. "We can finish up."

In an effort to prove her words, Hannah crouched down, worked to hook the pry bar between the board she'd most recently dislodged and the loose one beside it, and pulled. Her gaze fell on a small wooden compartment cast in shadows. "Whoa. What's this?" she said as she leaned closer.

"What's what?" Lacy and Tom asked in unison.

She reached inside and ran her fingers along the intact wooden box. "It looks like a hiding place of some kind."

The thump of Miriam's cane was followed by her voice on the other side of Hannah. "A hiding place?"

"Yes, look." Pointing to the box, Hannah glanced at her elderly friend. "You don't know about this?"

"No. And I've lived here for nearly sixty years. Tom?"

"I had no idea."

Hannah handed him the pry bar and addressed Miriam again. "The lid isn't on right—it's crooked. Do you want me to look inside?"

"I think you'd better."

Hannah pushed aside the compartment's lid and reached inside the dusty box, her fingertips grazing paper before landing on something round and hard and—

She closed her hand around the object and drew it out. When the object was revealed, they all gasped.

“Whoa,” Hannah murmured at the sight of an exquisite ruby brooch, its large gem sparkling in the early evening rays slanting in from the open window.

“It's magnificent,” Miriam said in a raspy voice.

Tom squatted beside Hannah. “I don't understand. How could something like this be hidden under a floorboard in a house my mom has owned for longer than I've been alive—yet none of us knew it was here?”

Hannah heard the question, even registered it on some level, but her focus was on the brooch. A brooch that sparkled in the sun.

“I don't know how I *couldn't* know,” Miriam said, shaking her head. “It's my house. Before now, I would have said I knew everything about this place.”

“You never had a reason to pull up the floor, Mom,” Tom pointed out.

Hannah looked from the polished jewel in her hand to the dusty box in which it had been hidden, her gaze landing on the other item she'd felt. Tom reached inside and pulled it out. “Is that a flyer of some kind?” she asked.

“I think so.” Holding it to the side, he blew dust off the paper. “Put there as a cushion to protect the brooch, I'd guess.”

Hannah watched Tom carefully smooth out the page to reveal an advertisement for what appeared to be classic cars and then

returned her full attention to the ruby brooch as she rose to her feet. "I wonder how long this has been here."

"Based on the dust and the fact that Mom's lived here for almost sixty years, I'd say a long time." Tom balled up the flyer and tossed it in a nearby trash can. "A *very* long time."

"If you're right, and this was here before Miriam moved in, someone has come back to it since," Hannah said.

Miriam eyed Hannah. "How can you know that, dear?"

Hannah held out her hand and opened her fingers to reveal the brooch. "Look at it. Look at the way it shines."

Miriam gasped again. "You're right. It's been freshly polished!"