

# Chapter One



PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

MAY 1941

My mother was a beautiful woman, a magnificent and generous woman who loved music and poetry and literature and gardens. She loved to dance, though she only ever did so in the privacy of her room, with me. Her smile, though rare in her last months, brightened the sun. She was a devoted wife and loving mother, however ill-used by her husband. If anyone says differently, they're a liar or misled by my father.

Mama loved lilacs and roses and the call of the whip-poor-will to keep her company in the dead of night—a memory she treasured from her childhood. She once told me that God in His heaven must think we mortals cannot sustain the wonder of such heady fragrance for long; that's why lilacs bloom only in spring and for so short a time. It's the reason roses must have two seasons to spread their blessed gifts. It's why whip-poor-wills don't sing all year long in the North Carolina mountain air.

The fragrance of those flowers filled her room as she squeezed my hand for the last time and closed her eyes.

I didn't want her to go, and yet begging her to stay would have been

selfish. At long last she had a chance to be free. Of course she should take it.

Mama left me with two directives: One, to take care of myself, no matter the cost to my reputation. Two, when I found myself brave enough, I was to hand deliver a ruby ring to her aunt Hyacinth in No Creek, North Carolina—a ruby ring that Mama said she'd taken when she ran off to marry my father. She didn't explain why she'd taken the ring or what she meant by taking care of myself heedless of my reputation, but she made me swear to do both and to never tell my father or my husband. I swore, for she was dying, though I had no idea how I'd ever fulfill such vows.

Gerald no more let me out of his sight than my father had allowed my mother from his.

I'd sewn the ring and Grandaunt Hyacinth's address into the lining of my purse so I'd have them with me always and out of my husband's sight. Gerald was known to rifle through my closet and chest of drawers in search of my diary or some stray clue to my faithlessness, suspicious of my every move as he was. I never gave him cause, but his constant surveillance and recriminations made me feel as if I'd done something soiled and dirty, and that made me jumpy. How soiled and dirty can a woman get going to the market or the library or to church?

It was much the way Mama had lived and I'd been raised, only I'd truly believed that marriage to Gerald, a man ten years my senior who'd seemed so godly and smitten with me, might be different. He might love me, might be glad to share a new life. Seven years had taught me otherwise. Year-round, no matter the heat of summer, I wore long sleeves to cover the evidence of my husband's displeasure and disappointment—the results of his bursts of anger, which were inevitably my fault.

At least now Mama was free of my father and free of worry for me. The temptation to join such freedom was compelling, like the feeling you get when standing too close to the ledge of a high building or leaning beyond a sharp cliff that hangs over the sea. It pulls and pulls. One small step is all it would take. The thing that held me back was not fear of death or even eternity in my condemned state, but fear

that I might not be successful, and then I would be forever at Gerald's mercy, as Mama had been at the mercy of my father—mercy, where there is none.

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Dusk had fallen by the time I'd hung the last dripping tea towel over the rod to dry. Out the church kitchen window I saw that the parking lot sat empty, except for the five elders' cars that stood as soldiers in a row.

At least Gerald wasn't waiting on me.

I wrapped the last slice of Sarah's applesauce cake—her parting gift for Mama's funeral luncheon, made the morning Mama passed.

I wasn't hungry—couldn't eat—but was tempted to light the stove and make a cup of tea, to sit down and savor Sarah's last bit of cake alone in the dark, to remember her and hope she thought of me. *Sarah, how I miss you now!*

Sarah was Mama's longtime housemaid, there before I was born, and the only real friend my father had allowed her. It was as if he didn't see her because she was colored, as if he couldn't imagine Sarah would have a thought or a voice or influence Mama's life in any way. Sarah endured more of my father's tirades than any woman should, all for the sake of loving and caring for Mama to the bitter end.

But the day Mama breathed her last, Sarah vowed she'd not live another night under the same roof with "that man." She'd baked the cake, packed her bag, and left to buy a bus ticket to join her son in Chicago, even before they carried Mama's body out the door.

Her leaving had been a jolt nearly as hard as Mama's death, like earth shifting beneath my feet with nothing but air to grab hold of. Sarah'd been my friend, too—confidante and comfort to me all my growing-up years. Ever present in my parents' kitchen, caring and tender, her warm brown arms held me through crisis after crisis. She'd been a tower of refuge and strength. I wondered what we'd given her. I hoped it was something.

Both women gone in a day. I had to find a way to get on.

I tucked the wrapped cake in my purse and snapped it shut.

Funeral luncheons at our church lasted for hours and always took their toll on emotions stretched taut, on toes and arches crammed into Sunday heels, but at last I was done. As long as I'd thought of it as *a* funeral luncheon and not *my mother's* funeral luncheon, I could keep my frozen smile in place, set one foot in front of the other as a good elder's wife should.

Deliberately, I untied my apron and hung it on the hook in the church pantry, flicked off the light switch, and locked the kitchen door. Somehow, those little finalities and the enormity of the dark and empty community room opened the floodgates I'd kept shut. I closed my eyes, leaned against the locked door, and let the tears course over my cheeks. There was no one to hear or see.

Except for the elders' meeting going on upstairs, the church was deserted. Gerald would expect me to wait for him in the car. But it was cold and I had no key to start the engine or heater. Neither Gerald nor my father believed in women driving automobiles, so why would I need a key?

The thought of going home with Gerald after this horrendous day made my stomach swell into my throat. There'd be no end of ridicule about the tears I'd choked back during the service. I could hear him now: *"We're not to sorrow as others who have no hope. Your lack of faith and self-control sets a poor example. The wife of an elder should mark a standard, behave above reproach."*

If only the elders' meeting could go on long and distract him. They were discussing the church's position in light of Great Britain's pleas to our government for help in its fight against Germany. *Should the church publicly state its disapproval of America providing Britain with implements of war? Should the women of the church be allowed to contribute to the "Bundles for Britain"—contributions of clothing, knit items, medical supplies, staples and cash for the hospitals and families that had been bombed out? Would that be helping the poor or risk appearing that the church approved of war efforts and therefore of war?* Gerald held strong views that as followers of Christ, we were not to enter into the activities of the world, regardless of the war's moral implications or the needs of

others. If the meeting didn't go according to his liking, there would be the devil to pay at home.

*Just a moment in a quiet place. Alone.* That was all I wanted. *The sanctuary.* Not that I believed God would listen if I prayed there or anywhere. I loved Him, longed for Him to love me, but knew that He could not. I was too sinful, beyond loving. That message came repeatedly through Gerald's and Father's disapproval. But just now, for only a moment to be quiet, to be still and alone—surely God would grant me that. I climbed the stairs and slipped into the dusky sanctuary, taking a seat halfway up the aisle nearest a window.

I lay down on the pew, closed my eyes, and pulled my feet into a fetal curl. Just for a moment.

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The steady drone of voices coming from the back of the church woke me—that, and the light that poured from the vestibule into the darkened sanctuary. I squinted, was about to sit up, when I recognized the two voices. I lay back down, in the shadows.

"God's been merciful to free you, Brother Shepherd." Gerald's smirk came through loud and clear.

"Marriage is for life. I endured till death parted us." Was that a smile in my father's voice?

"And now it's done."

"Yes," Father sighed, "now it's done. And life goes on."

"Cleanly, I suppose. You're lucky."

"Blessed."

"And your debts?" Gerald asked. "You'll inherit Rosemary's property."

"Apparently not. At least not what I'd imagined and she'd led me to believe." I heard my father's exasperation. "It was not in Rosemary's name as we'd both supposed."

"You're sure?"

"I spoke with her aunt, though I'll have someone investigate to make certain."

"Well, now. That is a disappointment. It would have been a nice reward, paid those embarrassing debts."

"You needn't concern yourself. There are other means."

"Still, based on what I saw as a member of the family, I can't help but wonder if more than God helped Rosemary's end along."

"That's scandalous. Don't repeat it."

"I wouldn't want to, of course. . . ." My husband hesitated. "But I might need incentive." There was a long moment of silence while his words sank in.

"What do you want, Gerald?"

"I don't need money. Nothing so coarse." Gerald waited another long moment. "The thing is, your daughter's not . . . stable. I believe you'll agree."

"Lilliana's emotional like her mother."

"An emotionally unstable young woman in my estimation. She's also physically healthy and liable to live a long while."

"As I said, marriage is for life. The elders would never agree to divorce, if that's what you're getting at."

"Yes, marriage is for life. Unless . . . it's not." My husband's measured words sent chills up my spine.

"The church permits one cause for divorce. You have no case."

"Not adultery . . . but instability, leading to insanity, is cause for divorce by Pennsylvania law."

"Not by the laws of God or the church."

"Not unless the insanity might lead to adultery or justifiably strong suspicion of adultery."

"You're reaching."

"I need witnesses. It would be best to have her institutionalized—avoid scandal and guarantee me appropriate sympathy. The kind of sympathy I saw exhibited for you today."

"You'll never find 'witnesses' to such a lie. Lilliana's well-thought-of, well-liked. And she's already gone to the police about your . . . heavy hand. No one would believe it."

"That was unfortunate and might be a stumbling block, unless someone else brings the allegation of her instability and the suspicion of

promiscuity. Someone who's known her a long time. Someone respected in the community who can testify in court and intimate the possibility of more than indiscreet behavior."

I heard the pew creak as my father sank into it. "She's my daughter. You can't be serious."

"Never more. I have friends in high places who are willing to be influenced for you or against."

"This is blackmail. You can't force me, and you can't prove anything. I may have been firm with Rosemary—she tried my patience—but I didn't kill her."

"Reputations are easier to ruin than incarcerations are to achieve, I grant. You value your eldership, your standing in the church and in the community. I imagine you're counting on both in plotting your future. I've noticed your roving eye."

"Pastor Harding severely reprimanded Lillian for airing your dirty laundry before unbelievers. That's precisely what you'd be doing based on lies."

"I should never have married a child."

"She'd turned sixteen when the agreement was made. Seventeen when you married. That may be child enough, but you wanted her then and I agreed. You can't plead that she's a child now."

"I won't need to, not if I produce witnesses to testify against her."

"There's another woman. Is that it?"

Gerald hesitated. "The point is, I'm still a young enough man and I don't want to wait until your daughter dies an old woman to get on with my life, any more than you wanted to wait for Rosemary's demise. I need the church's blessing to remarry. Anything less is untenable."

A minute passed. No more. "Let me think about it . . . if there is a way to proceed."

"Lillian's grief for her mother weighs her down unnaturally. Now is convenient—and timely. Don't wait too long."

Tense and barely breathing, I willed my father to take up for me, say how ludicrous, how unfair this scheme was, but there was no more. Finally footsteps echoed down the aisle and through the doorway. The vestibule light disappeared, and the outer church door closed. The

engines of two cars started; then came the sound of gravel spewing as they pulled from the parking lot.

I lay in the hard pew a long time, fearing to get up and find a way home and fearing not to.

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When at last I walked out of the church and into the empty parking lot, I stood beneath a streetlamp. Barely shielded by shrubbery, I counted the money in my purse. One dollar and fifty-eight cents left over from the purchase of groceries. Eighty dollars given into my keeping that day by a well-to-do parishioner as a donation toward my mother's funeral—which I was instructed to give to my father. I'd not been entrusted with so much money in my life—not in my father's house and certainly not in my husband's.

It was pitch-black beyond the streetlamp—a mile and a half to Gerald and home. But I dared not go home. There was no way to pretend I hadn't heard; one look at my face and Gerald would know that I'd discovered his plans. What he might do, I could imagine.

I couldn't take sanctuary in my father's house or in the house of any one of the church members. It wouldn't be fair to draw anyone else into the mess of my marriage—the stink of my “dirty laundry”—and whom dared I trust? Who wouldn't be afraid of the disapproval or discipline of the church elders or even of their own husbands?

When I'd run to my father for help four months after I'd married, he'd shaken his head and expressed disappointment in me. *“Perfect love casts out fear, Lilliana. Your fear of Gerald proves that you lack love for him—and worse, for God. God is love, and without love, without forgiveness in your heart, you cannot hope your Father in heaven will forgive you.”*

The time Gerald had beaten me black-and-blue and I'd run to the police, they'd told me, “All men knock their wives around a little from time to time. Don't worry. Go home. He'll settle down.” My husband had threatened to kill me if I ever told another soul about his outbursts—kill me and then himself.

No, I couldn't go home.

In the opposite direction lay the center of the city and the Philadelphia train station. Eighty dollars. I wondered how far it could send me.

There was only one person, other than Sarah, whom my mother had trusted with the secret shame of her marriage—the year I was five and we ran away together. I fingered the lining of my purse and the shape of Grandaunt Hyacinth's ruby ring . . . a sort of secret friend, a talisman of comfort. Thinking of it so had seemed silly and perhaps childish at the time of my mother's directive—as if I'd ever have an opportunity to deliver it. Now it was a lifeline . . . I hoped.