

A circular vignette showing a night sky with a bright sun or moon, clouds, and a bare tree silhouette. The scene is dark with a bright light source on the right, creating a lens flare effect. The tree is on the left, and the sky is filled with stars and clouds.

Love anything, and your heart
will certainly be wrung
and possibly broken.

~ CS Lewis

CHAPTER 1

*Today I walked the woods path
for the first time in months.
The brook is nothing more than
a trickle and some mud . . . like me.*

~Journal

The woman was following her. Madeleine stepped past a bucket of dahlias and just missed the butternut squash—*look as if you're in a hurry*—but the woman was catching up. She wore a police uniform and a helmet of sleek gray hair.

What was her name? Rondell, that was it. Frances Rondell.

The policewoman loomed beside her. “Madeleine! Wonderful to see you again.” She gestured across the Roanoke Farmer’s Market. “Quite a spread, isn’t it? Best in Virginia.”

Madeleine nodded in greeting and summoned up a smile. After all, Frances Rondell had worked with Dad at the station.

The woman was studying her, so she bent to inspect the green apples.

Please don’t tell me what a good friend he was. Don’t tell me you miss him too. Don’t tell me I’m doing fine.

“Heard you got married,” Frances said. “How’s that husband of yours?”

Madeleine took a quivering breath and tried to compose her face.

“Oh, my, did something happen?”

“Brenn died. A year ago. You couldn’t have known.”

“I’m so sorry. . . .” The woman’s gaze shifted to the pyramids of gleaming apples. “I see you’re checking out those Granny Smiths.”

“Yes.”

“I remember the cookies your dad brought to the station. He’d have that big smile of his—always told us you’re the best cook in the world.”

Madeleine’s throat closed up.

Frances didn’t seem to expect a reply. She chose a reddish-black apple and polished it on her sleeve. “These Black Gilliflowers are my favorite for pie. With plenty of cinnamon and nutmeg, mmm! Want to try a few?”

The woman kept talking as she put apples into a paper bag. “Teaching school must keep you on your toes. A little thing like you! How do you handle those kids?”

“Teens are always a challenge.” How could she tell this competent woman that she hadn’t renewed her contract?

“But worthwhile! The right teacher can make such a difference in a kid’s life.” Frances filled another bag with apples, paid the vendor, and handed Madeleine one of the bags. Her eyes softened. “Your dad would be so proud of you.”

Madeleine took the bag, nodded her thanks, and backed away.

“Gotta run!” Frances threw her a hang-in-there smile, and Madeleine hurried in the opposite direction.

She bumped into a table piled with vegetables and made herself stop, trying to ignore her clamoring thoughts.

Just look at those beets—plump little globes, weren’t they? Such an appetizing dark red! And the leafy tops still crisp and green . . .

It was no use. Frances Rondell’s words had opened a locked door in her mind. *Dad*. The kind of person he was. Had been.

Slowly she hoisted a clump of the beets. What . . . what would these be like, pickled with little white onions?

What . . . what would Dad have thought of her husband and the business her mother ran?

She paid for the beets and trudged past glossy bell peppers, tomatoes, and summer squash.

At a table of baked goods, she paused. Something for dessert, that’s what she was supposed to get. Mother had invited George again, the promising young stockbroker. She chose the nearest cake and kept going.

. . . *so proud of you* . . .

She stepped out from under the Market’s awnings and blinked in the fall sunlight.

I’ve got to do something.

The thought tiptoed past before she could examine it and faded while she drove home, only to begin whispering urgently as she pulled into the driveway.

Do something? What?

The kitchen was empty, but a murmur of voices came from the living room. A conference, no doubt. The cousins would be enjoying their discussion about “poor Madeleine.” The pompous voice would be Uncle Ashton’s.

The living room door opened and her mother swept into the room, shaking her blonde curls.

“There you are,” she said. “What happened?”

“Sorry. I ran into someone at the Farmer’s Market.” Better change the subject. “See these apples?” she said quickly. “They’re supposed to be good for pies.”

Wrong subject. She knew it as soon as she spoke.

Her mother looked up from pouring a diet soda. “And who’s going to make a pie around here? Not you, Miss Pastry-Chef wannabe! Nope, not for months and months.”

Madeleine eased the cake out of its bag and set it on the counter. If she could just stay quiet, in a few minutes she’d be safe upstairs.

Her mother’s voice rose. “Pumpkin cake? I told you to get coconut. That’s what George likes. And beets? Why beets, of all things? Really, Madeleine—you’ve got to pull yourself together.”

Pull herself together? She could hardly pull herself out of bed in the morning.

“If teaching school’s too hard, try something else.” Mother tasted her soda and made a face. “It wouldn’t hurt you to take a little interest in my business.”

Madeleine’s hands went cold, and she resisted the urge to rub them together like a character out of Dickens.

Instead, she warmed them at a tiny flame of rebellion. “Your business? The one where you filch quite a few dollars from unsuspecting people?”

“You have it all wrong. They get a nice letter telling them about the information packet—”

“—and asking for \$24.99.”

“But they get something in return.”

Madeleine stacked cans of pineapple in the cupboard. She’d seen too many of those hopeful, hand-written letters. Indignation sharpened her voice. “All they get for their money is advice on how to set up a scam like yours.”

“I don’t see it that way.” Her mother thumped her glass down onto the counter. “My goodness, we’re critical today, aren’t we? It’s perfectly legal. If they don’t act on the information I send, it’s not my fault.”

A soft voice wafted from the doorway. “Sylvia, don’t be too hard on her.”

Naturally, Cousin Willa would intervene. And then she’d mention her favorite, George. True, he might be an improvement on Henry the Dull and Francis the Smooth, but the guy didn’t have an original thought in his head.

Willa edged closer. “Madeleine dear, we think—Vera and I—that rather than join the business, it would be much more sensible for you to marry George. He’s a fine young man, so very handsome, and he has excellent prospects.”

Behind her, white-haired Cousin Vera was nodding, but Uncle Ashton stepped past them both.

“I can’t say I agree.” He threw a sharp glance at the cousins and spoke to Madeleine in his I-AM-THE-DOCTOR voice. “You’re not ready for another marriage, but it’s time for you to buck up. Get moving. That’s what I tell my patients, and they always thank me.”

He smoothed back his silver mane, as if preparing to accept yet another accolade. “I just became a partner in your mother’s business, and I’ll be managing it for her. I could use some assistance.”

Madeleine shook her head, trying to think of a safe way to say she’d rather starve.

The benevolence leaked out of his smile. “If you can’t handle your overly sensitive scruples, perhaps you should get out and find yourself a job. At least teaching was something useful.”

“Useful,” her mother said. “Keep that word in mind. The way you’ve been moping around here makes me sick. Thirty-three years old! We’re going to have to—”

Madeleine’s cell phone rang, and her mother gave it an irritated glance. “It’s that New York aunt of yours, isn’t it? Call her back. We’ve got to get this settled.”

Madeleine’s fingers tightened on the phone, but she let it ring. The wilderness lectures would come next.

Her mother frowned. “I wish she’d stop filling your mind with tales about that monstrosity she inherited, way out there in the wilderness. It’s not a suitable occupation for you.”

“That’s right,” Cousin Willa said, with Vera nodding behind her. “We are all dreadfully concerned about you, dearie. And we’re your *family*. We’d miss you terribly if you went away to bury yourself in such a wild place.”

Of course Uncle Ashton had an opinion. “The next thing you know, your aunt will be off taking pictures in Alaska or someplace, and you’ll be left alone. With those natives, those Pineys.”

Madeleine opened the bag of apples and placed them, one by one, in a fluted white dish. Black Gilliflowers. They sent up a faint fragrance, something like pears. This shiny one—Frances Rondell had polished it for her. She cradled it in both hands.

“Madeleine!” Her mother again. “That project’s going to be another dead end, like working at Hillary’s antique store. And all those art courses you took! Are you listening?”

“I’m listening, Mother.” In a moment of clarity, she saw herself as George’s wife, discussing stock averages or the latest game won by their local team, the Hokies. She’d go shopping every day and to the beauty salon once a week, and in the evenings she would stuff envelopes.

. . . so proud of you . . .

She held onto the apple and turned to face them. “No,” she said. “I will not help with the business. And I will not marry George. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going upstairs so I can talk to Aunt Lin.”

Shocked silence met her words, but she left the kitchen with her head up. They could have another conference.

As soon as she reached her bedroom, she returned her aunt’s call. “Hi, Aunt Lin.”

“I’m so glad you called back. Is this a good time?”

“This is fine.” She never knew when her lively aunt would phone, and talking to her was always a treat.

“My Great Adventure. The Pine Barrens house, you know?”

“Right.” The best thing about the last few weeks had been her aunt’s enthusiastic e-mails.

“I feel like I’ve inherited a castle filled with treasures. In disguise.” Her aunt’s laugh was rueful. “I just moved in, and I need your help more than ever. Ready for adventure?”