

## One

There was no baby.

Sharonetta "Shay" Taylor bit down on her lower lip and tried to stifle her tears. She didn't want her husband to know how much she wanted another child, or the level of devastation she felt because she wasn't pregnant. It seemed disappointment and loss had permanently attached themselves to her and Marvin, and she didn't want to burden him with yet another negative to add to the list. Soon the tide would turn for them. She was sure of it.

"You're going to cry yourself dry, baby."

Shay's heart quickened at Marvin's whispered words. She'd deliberately turned her face to the passenger window of their five-year-old Altima so her husband wouldn't see the tears that had filled her eyes without warning.

"Are you going to be all right?" he asked when she didn't answer.

Shay wiped at her tears and, taking great gulps of air, turned in her husband's direction. "I'll be fine," she said, hoping her voice sounded stronger than she felt.

Apparently it didn't, because Marvin took one hand off the steering wheel, reached across the gear shift console, and hugged her to him. "You've been saying that since we left Atlanta," he said, a bright smile splitting his deep chocolate face. "Somehow I don't have much faith in the words. You aren't having second thoughts, are you?"

Knowing she couldn't give in to the despair she felt, Shay brushed her hand across the short curls that covered her head and sat up straighter, her back flush against the blue upholstered bucket seat. Marvin had wrongly assumed her tears were because of their move, and she wasn't going to correct him. "No second thoughts," she said.

His eyes back on the unfolding two-lane county highway, Marvin squeezed her bare shoulder in an affectionate gesture that made her want to cuddle up close to him and weep out all of her heartache. "But I bet you're missing CeCe and Anna Mae, aren't you?"

Oh, how she missed her two dearest friends, CeCe Williams—now Mrs. Nate Richardson—and Anna Mae Wilson. If they were here now, she'd be able to talk to them about the baby—or rather, about the *no baby*. They'd understand, and they'd support her as they always had. "You know I miss them," she said, trying once again to shake off the melancholy thoughts. "Don't you miss Nate and Stuart?"

"Not yet," Marvin said, the shrug of his broad shoulders causing the denim of his light blue shirt to stretch tight across his chest. His masculine frame filled his side of the car. "I guess I'm too excited about what's ahead to miss them yet." He flashed her a grin. "Besides, it's only been a week since we've seen them."

The warmth of his grin calmed Shay's insides, and she smiled back at him. "I know. It's just that so much of our lives took place in Atlanta, in our house, at Genesis House."

Marvin placed both hands on the steering wheel, his eyes straight ahead, his fingers holding tightly. Shay felt the tension emanate from him. "Not all of it was good, Shay," he said, his voice thick, contemplative. "We needed the change. We have to believe that everything that happened leading up to now happened for a reason."

"I know you're right," she said, thinking again of their losses and disappointments. First, losing Marvin Jr. Then, stepping down from their positions at Genesis House. Shay mentally

chastised herself. She wasn't going to dwell on that now. The past was best left in the past.

"I know I'm right," Marvin said, his fingers a bit more relaxed on the steering wheel. "Besides, we're not leaving forever, and we're not going so far away that we can't keep in touch; Odessa, Mississippi isn't that far from Atlanta. I like Stuart's idea of all of us getting together at least once a year. We're not going to lose touch with them, sweetheart."

Shay sniffled for what she hoped was the last time. "I know, I know. You're right, but I still miss them. Are you sure you aren't just being macho?"

Marvin tilted his head down to her. "No, I'm not being macho. Instead of thinking about what we're leaving behind, I'm focusing on what's ahead and how blessed we are to be on a new adventure. It's been a long time since we've shared an adventure."

Shay knew Marvin was right. It was as though their lives had stopped four years ago with the death of their six-year-old son. After losing him, they had seemed to lose interest in everything else that was important to them. Their marriage had withered because of their inattention and, at their lowest point, Marvin had walked out on her. The ministry they'd shared couldn't be postponed long enough for them to pick up the pieces of their broken marriage or their broken lives, and they'd ended up resigning from work they'd felt they were called to do. But she and Marvin were back together now, and God was giving them another shot at a ministry and—soon, she prayed—another shot at a family.

Shay cast a sidewise glance at her husband, wondering how he was really doing. She couldn't always tell with Marvin. He was a master at keeping his feelings bottled up inside, and she had to work hard to keep him from withdrawing and suffering in silence and solitude. It was a tough line for her to walk. She didn't want to nag him to death, but neither did she want him to hide himself from her. She loved him—all of him—and she wanted to share his hurts and his successes. She studied him a moment longer. Then, feeling confident that he was okay, she leaned over and pressed a kiss against his smoothly shaven jaw.

"What's that for?" he asked, glancing briefly in her direction.

"Because I love you," she said simply.

He smiled and, taking her hand, placed it over his heart. "You'd better, because I'm not going anywhere. You're stuck with me for life."

Shay accepted his words for the truth they were and finally allowed her cares to recede. She noticed that the lonesome highway they'd traveled for the last two hours was giving way to a more peopled area. A Wal-Mart shopping center, with a chain pizza restaurant; a video rental store; and a Chinese restaurant seemed to have sprung up out of the woods. A new-looking Chevron service station sat across the street from the shopping center. A bright yellow banner heralding its grand opening flapped in the early spring breeze.

"Feeling better now?" Marvin asked, taking his eyes off the road for a second to inquire.

"Getting there," she said, taking in the *Welcome to Odessa* sign that signaled entry into the town they would now call home.

"Good, because we're getting there too, to our new home."

"How close are we?" Shay asked as they drove down what she thought was the main street and through the small town that was built around a center square, where the courthouse was located. Stores and shops—locally owned, not chains—seemed to run about one to two blocks deep on each of the four sides of Courthouse Square.

When they stopped at the first traffic light, Marvin picked up the GPS from the dash and pressed one of its buttons. One thing Shay had learned over the years was to refrain from offering navigation advice when Marvin was at the wheel. In their relationship, he drove and navigated. It made for a much smoother trip, not to mention a much happier marriage. "It looks like we make a left at the next light and drive for about a mile." He put the GPS back on the dash. "Not far."

Frame houses with dirt yards and large overhanging oak trees lined the street onto which Marvin turned. Children at play and

cars in need of repair dotted the yards. As they crossed a narrow bridge—for a creek, not a river—Shay recognized a change in the neighborhood. Big oak trees still dominated the landscape, but rich, green yards replaced the dirt yards, and larger, better-maintained frame houses replaced the smaller structures they'd passed earlier.

"Is that it?" she asked a few minutes later. Up ahead on the left she saw two men and a woman scurrying around in the side yard of a single-story, olive green country home. Four wooden rocking chairs sat on the banistered porch that extended across the front of the house. About six or seven steps led up to the porch.

Marvin nodded. "That's it."

"Are we early?" she asked, hating to think they'd gotten here ahead of time and thus before their hosts were ready for them. She watched as the larger man and the woman hurried around the back of the house, while the other man stood waiting as they drove up the graveled drive.

"I don't think we're early," Marvin said as he eased the car into the driveway. "Hey, there's Daniel."

A smile spread across Shay's face as Marvin's old college roommate rushed toward their car. She was out of the car and in Daniel's arms as soon as Marvin brought the car to a full stop. "Daniel, it's so good to see you again," she said, stepping out of his bear hug.

"You, too, Miss Shay." Daniel spread her arms wide and looked her over. "You're lookin' good, lady."

"Hey," Marvin called, coming around from the driver's side of the car to join them. He closed the passenger door that Shay, in her haste, had left open. Then he said to Daniel, "Stop flirting with my wife."

Daniel turned and embraced Marvin with the same bear hug he'd given Shay. The two men were about the same size, though Shay thought her Marvin was probably an inch or two taller than Daniel, who was much lighter in complexion than her dark brown-skinned husband. Both men had at one time sported a mustache, but Marvin had shaved his, while Daniel still wore one. Both men

wore faded jeans, attesting to their preference for comfort over style. Seeing them together like this brought back memories of the close relationship they'd shared over the years. At one time, she and Marvin and Daniel and his then fiancée had been planning back-to-back weddings.

"Marvin, man," Daniel said, "it's so good to see you, to see both of you. Come on, let me introduce you to Greg and Vickie, your impromptu welcoming committee."

"Are we early?" Shay asked, her previous concern revived.

Daniel shook his head. "Let's just say we had a slight communication problem."

Daniel's words and ominous tone made Shay think he wanted to say more, but she couldn't follow up because she was distracted by words coming from the back of the house.

"It's not going to work," came a woman's anxious voice.

"Yes, it will," a deep, reassuring male voice said.

"I'm not sure."

"Trust me" came the male voice again, this time with a tinge of teasing in the tone.

Shay lifted her eyes in question to Daniel. He sighed and, with a broad smile, beckoned them. Casting a glance at Marvin, Shay followed Daniel to the back of the house. She was surprised and a bit overwhelmed by what she saw: a beautiful, honey-complexioned woman impeccably dressed in a pale yellow skirted outfit more suited for a formal dinner party than a backyard, and a bear of a man over six feet tall and weighing a good deal more than Marvin's two hundred pounds. Oddly, the woman made more of an impact on her than the man did. Standing before this stunning beauty, Shay felt every one of the extra fifteen pounds she carried on her five-foot-six-inch frame. She didn't even want to think about how she looked in her now rumpled sundress when compared to this fantastically unwrinkled young woman.

"Vic, Greg," Daniel called to them, gaining their attention. "The Taylors have arrived. I want you to meet them."

The woman flashed Shay a smile so pure and honest that Shay ceased her comparisons and opened her heart.

"Welcome," Vic said brightly and warmly. "I'm Vickie Thompson. I'm chairing the welcome committee. So nice to meet both of you."

Shay moved forward into the woman's welcoming embrace. "Nice to meet you too, Vickie. I'm Shay, and this is my husband, Marvin."

Vickie extended her manicured hand to Marvin. "Nice to meet you."

"And this is Greg Dawson," Daniel said. "He's the chair of our deacon board and all-around everything man."

The man's warm smile matched Vickie's. "Welcome, folks," he said, stuffing a white handkerchief into the pocket of his green coveralls. "We're mighty glad to have you. Daniel here has told us a lot about you, Shay," he said with a slight nod to her. Then he acknowledged Marvin the same way. "We were trying to get everything all set up for your welcome cookout tomorrow afternoon," Greg explained, opening his arms to the expansive backyard that butted against an open pasture. A white Ford pickup truck loaded with redwood picnic tables was parked next to what looked to be a recently poured concrete patio. "As you can see, we haven't quite finished yet."

"It's a mess," Vickie said. "That Bo—"

"All right, Vic." Daniel tousled her shoulder-length hair as if she were a preteen. "We'll take care of it."

"But Daniel," she began, her light brown eyes flashing concern, "you're the pastor. You can't let him—"

Daniel winked at Shay and Marvin. "Yes, I can," he said, cutting Vickie off. "Why don't you show Shay the house and help her get started unpacking all those boxes the delivery guys left yesterday? The menfolk will take care of the outside problems."

Shay saw the rolling of Vickie's eyes at Daniel's comment and had to stifle a giggle. A quick glance at Marvin showed he was doing the same. Shay didn't have to be told that Daniel and Vickie had known each other for a long time. They bickered like brother

and sister. "I'd love to see the inside of the house," she said in an effort to keep peace.

Vickie opened her mouth to say something, but Daniel again cut her off, this time by giving her a light shove in Shay's direction. "Shay wants to see the house."

Vickie's eyes shot daggers at Daniel, but she held her tongue. "Come on, Shay," she said. Then she muttered something about men that Shay couldn't quite make out; probably it was best she couldn't. With a last glance at her now grinning husband, Shay followed Vickie into the house. Odessa already felt like home.

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Deacon Greg's beeper went off as soon as the women turned the corner toward the front of the house. He looked at the number. "I expected this call. I'm gonna have to leave it to you boys." He extended his surprisingly smooth hand to Marvin. "Nice meeting you and the missus. I'll see you both tomorrow afternoon."

"A beeper?" Marvin asked as he watched the deacon leave. Coveralls and a beeper didn't go together in his mind.

Daniel grinned. "Don't judge the book by its cover. Deac is also one of Odessa's best physicians." He clapped Marvin on the back. "Let's get to moving these tables."

"Small towns," Marvin murmured as he followed his friend to the truck. His plans for the future had never included living in a small town, much less a small town in Mississippi, but here he was. And to top it all off, he was glad to be here.

Daniel chuckled. "Not quite Atlanta, huh?" He dropped the tailgate and then he hopped up on the back of the truck. "It'll take some getting used to, but you and Shay are going to love it here."

Marvin cleared his throat as he reached for the table Daniel handed to him. "I know I've told you this before, Daniel, but I want you to know how much Shay and I appreciate your giving us this opportunity."