

Orchard of Hope

CHAPTER 1

Jocie panted a little as she pedaled her bike up Locust Hill. The hill wasn't really all that steep, but it was long and had two curves. Jocie stood up and worked the pedals. For a minute she thought she was going to make it to the top, but then the chain slipped on the old bike and the left pedal spun loose away from her foot.

"Piece of junk," Jocie muttered as she hopped off the bike and began pushing it. She could practically see Aunt Love frowning and quoting some Scripture at her. Maybe something like *In all things, give thanks* That had to be one of Aunt Love's favorites.

And she was right. Jocie was grateful Matt McDermott, the head deacon at Mt. Pleasant Church, had dug around in his barn and found the old bike for her. It was rusty, but she could paint it. She'd been able to knock the biggest dents out of the fenders. And it wasn't all that much trouble to pump up the tires whenever she needed to ride it. She and her dad had already patched the inner tubes a couple of times, but the tubes were old and kept springing new leaks.

At least the chain hadn't come off its cogs the way it did sometimes. She definitely didn't have time to be prizing it back in place. She was already late. She didn't have a watch, but even before the twelve o'clock siren went off a couple of miles away in Hollyhill, she knew it was high noon. Her shadow was crawling along right beneath her. She should have called her father at the newspaper office before she left the house.

The sun beat down on the road until the blacktop practically burned her feet through her tennis shoes, but she didn't let the heat slow her down. She pushed the bike faster.

Still, thankful or not, she missed her old bike. She could pedal to the top of the hill on it. Not that it had been new or anything. But that bike was gone with the wind. Her father had found one of the wheels, crumpled and bent with the spokes sticking out in all directions, but that was all that had ever shown up. The tornado had blown it away to Jupiter along with Clay's Creek Church.

Of course, people were still showing up at the newspaper office to get their pictures in the Banner holding the back of a hymn book, the splintered plank off a pew, a Sunday School chair, or whatever bit of the church building they'd found in their fields. Zella, who manned the reception desk at the paper, had printed out a sign last Monday saying, "No more church fragment pictures needed," but Jocie's dad had made her take it off the door. He said community relations were worth a little film and newspaper ink. Besides folks still seemed interested in where the pieces of the church had ended up. Somebody came in nearly every day to ask if anybody had found the collection plates. As if they'd be full of money or something.

It was funny how some things had survived the storm and some hadn't. Wes's motorcycle had ended up on its handlebars, but with hardly a dent. Not that Wes could ride it. Zella said she didn't see how he'd ever ride it again, but Jocie knew he would. His leg would heal, was healing. Jocie prayed about it everyday, and the Lord answered prayer. She knew that without a doubt after this summer with Tabitha coming home from California and Zeb waiting with his funny dog grin every time she went out of the house and Wes living through the tree falling on him. And her father being her father.

As Aunt Love was always saying, O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good. Psalm somewhere, Jocie was sure. Aunt Love would know exactly where. She had hundreds of verses on file in her head. Lately she'd even done better remembering other things. The beans hadn't been too salty or the biscuits burned past eating for weeks. Of course Tabitha and Jocie had been trying to be Aunt Love's backup memory on taking things out of the oven or off the stove before the smoke started rolling.

That was about all Tabitha helped with. Not that Jocie had expected her to help rearrange the living room that morning so they could put up the cot for Wes. Tabitha couldn't very well push furniture here or there now that she was so obviously expecting a baby. She spent most of her time sitting right in front of the electric fan chewing on ice.

Jocie was beginning to understand why her own mother had hated being in the family way. Nobody in their right mind would volunteer for that nine month tour of duty. Tossing your breakfast every day for months, looking like you'd been wrung out like an old dishrag, ankles as puffy as old Mrs. Johnson's at church, groaning every time you stood up, having to keep hold of your belly all the time for fear something might fall out. But the really weird part of it all was that, in spite of every miserable thing, Tabitha was practically glowing she was so happy.

Maybe once Wes was home he could help Jocie make sense of some of it. She and Wes hadn't gotten to talk, not really talk, for days. Another reason Jocie was having to practically run up the hill pushing her bike. She had to get to town in time to go with her father to pick up Wes at the hospital. She had to be the one to tell him they had everything ready for him at the house and how much they wanted him to stay there until he got well enough to hop back up the steps to his own rooms over the newspaper office.

She'd already told him as much a dozen times, but it would be different when the nurse was rolling him out of the hospital. He might decide Aunt Love was too old, Tabitha too expectant, Jocie's dad too busy, and Jocie too young to take care of him. He might decide he was a bother and look for a way to go back to Jupiter, the planet or Jupiter, the town in Indiana or Ohio or wherever he'd come from before he'd shown up at the newspaper office back when Jocie was just a little kid. Jocie couldn't let that happen even if she had to stay home every other day from school. She had to take care of Wes. She was the reason he had been in that church yard with the church and trees flying over their heads. It was her fault that he needed somebody to take care of him.

A couple of cars eased past her, and Jocie thought about ditching her bike and flagging one of the drivers down to hitch a ride. But she was nearly to the top of the hill and it was mostly downhill the rest of the way to Hollyhill.

Her dad would wait for her or come looking for her if she didn't show up when he thought she should. He'd been paying more attention to where she was ever since the tornado had swept through their lives. Of course that could be because she was always underfoot, going with him to see Wes or at the newspaper office helping get out the Banner. About the only times she wasn't close enough for him to yell at her if he needed something was when he was taking Tabitha to the doctor over in Grundy or he was down at the courthouse talking to Leigh Jacobson.

Aunt Love said Jocie's father and Leigh were sparking even if they hadn't really gone out anywhere except to church or to see Wes at the hospital. And Leigh did show up regular as clockwork to help fold the Banner on printing night every week now. That was okay with Jocie. Leigh always brought brownies.

Jocie wasn't saying a stepmother prayer the way she had the sister prayer "please let Tabitha come home" and the dog prayer "please let me have a dog." She'd asked her dad if she should and he'd said to leave that prayer up to him.

At the top of the hill Jocie paused long enough to wipe the sweat off her forehead with her shirt tail before she got up on the bike seat. She glanced back at the rear tire to be sure it still had enough air in it. She really did need some new inner tubes. Then she took off down the hill happy to feel the breeze on her face even if the sun was still roasting the top of her head.

Up ahead of her she spotted another bike. It wasn't one of the little kids from the houses along the road. This kid was big, bigger than Jocie. Maybe not a kid at all. But still no one Jocie recognized at least from the back. It was pretty uncommon seeing somebody in Hollyhill she didn't recognize. It was even more uncommon to see a stranger riding a bike to town. She generally knew everything about any new family that moved into the neighborhood long before the bikes were ever unloaded.

She started pedaling faster, curiosity making her forget the heat and how thirsty she was. Worse she forgot that the old bike didn't handle speed very well. The chain started clacking. Jocie braked, but it was too late. The chain had already slipped off the cogs and the pedals were useless. She was free wheeling down the hill.

She still might have been okay if the bike up ahead of her hadn't been passing by the Sawyer's house. Butch, the Sawyer's big German Shepherd, lunged off the porch toward the road. Butch never let any bike pass his house unchallenged and the thing to do was either pedal as fast as possible to get by with no bite marks or walk by because as soon as your feet were on the ground instead of on pedals, Butch turned into a big pussy cat.

The person on the bike in front of Jocie obviously didn't know that. He slowed his bike down to keep an eye on the dog. He practically stopped right in front of Jocie as if he hadn't even noticed her barreling down the hill toward him.

"Watch out!" Jocie yelled.

The boy looked over his shoulder and pushed hard on the pedals to get out of the way. The dog was barking and nipping at his front wheel. Jocie tried to swerve around them but Butch jumped in front

of her. Without thinking, she laid the bike down rather than hit the dog. The dog jumped sideways and banged into the other bike's rear wheel. They all ended in a heap in the ditch. Butch quit barking and jumped on top of Jocie and started licking her face. The only pain she felt was where the dog's front paw was digging into her shoulder, so maybe nothing was broken.

Jocie pushed Butch back and peeked around the big dog to look at the boy on the other side of the spinning bike wheels. She'd been right about him being a stranger. He looked about fifteen or sixteen with curly black hair cut close to his head and angry dark brown eyes staring at her out of his black face. Blood was trickling down out of a nasty scrape on his forehead.

"Are you okay?" Jocie asked. She was glad the bikes were between them.