

Scent of Lilacs

CHAPTER 1

Some days David Brooke didn't know whether to count his blessings or to hide from them.

He'd come home early from the newspaper office since June was settling into the summer of 1964 like an old hen spreading out her wings and plopping down in a puddle of dust for a good rest. The Hollyhill schools were out till September so there weren't any PTA open houses or 4-H Club award meetings to cover. The biggest story he'd been able to dig up for this week's issue had been Omer Carlton's holstein cow having twins, and he'd already been out to take pictures of Omer's little girl Cindy bottle feeding the black and white calves. He'd told Wes to blow up the picture and put it on the front page. Baby animals and a freckle-faced kid ought to move a few dozen extra papers off the store counters this week.

Sometimes it might be nice, or at least interesting, to have some real news to fill up the pages of the Hollyhill Banner, but real news often as not meant something bad happening. So dull and peaceful could be a blessing. For one thing, not having to put in a full Saturday at the newspaper gave him extra time to work on his sermon for Sunday. And he needed to have a good one tomorrow for the Mt. Pleasant Church if he had any hope of them voting him in as interim pastor.

After all, preaching was his first calling. The paper was just a sideline to put meat on the table. He didn't have to worry about the vegetables this time of the year when everybody and his brother was anxious to give away beans, zucchini, and cabbage, much to Jocie's distress.

"Why can't they have an overabundance of strawberries or raspberries?" she'd asked last night when faced with yet another bowl of stewed cabbage.

"In everything give thanks," Aunt Love had told Jocie. "Some children don't have enough to eat."

David had held his breath waiting for the explosion, but Jocie had just mumbled, "I could be just as thankful for strawberries."

Jocie was thirteen, barely out of babyhood to David, but almost grown to Jocie. Aunt Love was seventy-eight, one foot in the grave to Jocie and of an age to demand respect to David. Jocie and Aunt Love co-existed under a David negotiated truce most of the time. It wasn't helping matters that Aunt Love had been misplacing more and more of her mind lately, but she never had any problem pulling out appropriate Bible verses to attempt to whip Jocie into line.

It hadn't changed Jocie's behavior much, but it had improved her Bible study since she kept trying to prove Aunt Love was making up some of the verses. So far Jocie hadn't caught Aunt Love in

anything worse than "Cleanliness is next to Godliness," and Aunt Love said she'd never claimed that was in the Bible, but that plenty of folks might agree it should be.

But now from the shouts -- or dear God, surely that wasn't howls -- beating their way over the sound of the oscillating fan ruffling the papers on the desk in the corner of his bedroom, the truce had ended and active warfare had broken out. David read one more verse from his Bible just in case it might offer a bit of inspirational help before he pushed back from his desk. "Happy is the man who finds wisdom." Even King Solomon couldn't make Jocie and Aunt Love see eye to eye.

By the time David got to the bottom of the stairs the war had escalated. Aunt Love was quoting scripture in a string. Her cat, Sugar, was screeching. Jocie was shouting over the sound of barking. Great tremendous barks that barreled through the screen door and bounced off the wall behind David.

David's spirits sank lower. They didn't have a dog. Jocie had been throwing in a please Lord, send me a dog when she said grace before supper, but David had been hoping the Lord would just hear the thank you for our food and skip over the dog part.

Not because he minded having a dog around the place. He liked dogs, but he could still see Jocie's face after their last dog had run out in front of a car. Jocie had stopped eating, stopped talking, stopped smiling for way too long. David knew it wasn't just Stumpy getting killed that had pierced her heart. It had been just over a month after Adrienne had taken Tabitha and disappeared into the night.

How long ago was that now? It always amazed him that he had to think about it. Surely he'd know how long to the day, hour, and minute that his wife had driven away from Hollyhill and him. He shouldn't have been surprised. She'd warned him plenty of times. But he had been surprised. Worse than surprised. Shocked. Devastated. Lost. Injured. All that and more. Some things couldn't be described with words. Those kind of things clunked you right in the heart and sent you reeling.

And worse she took Tabitha. Tabitha who was still sleeping with a teddy bear by night and begging him to wear lipstick by day. He still didn't know why Adrienne took her. A parting shot perhaps. A way to make sure the wound of her destroying their family had no chance of healing. A man might get over losing a wife, but never losing a daughter.

How long? Tabitha had been thirteen and Jocie was thirteen now. Seven years. Tabitha would be turning twenty on her birthday next month. He wondered if she would have a cake. Tabitha used to love to blow out the candles and make wishes. She said why just one wish. Why not as many wishes as candles? He should have gone after her so he could make sure she had cakes.

David shoved the memories aside and stepped out on the porch. "What in the name of Methuselah is going on out here?"