

## Summer of Joy

### CHAPTER 1

The diamond was small. Even smaller than he remembered. David Brooke sat at his desk in his office at the Hollyhill Banner and stared at his mother's ring. Out in the front office Zella was banging on her typewriter and in the back the press was spitting out pages of ads and filler items for the next Banner issue.

The rumble of the press was a good sound. It meant nothing was broken. Praises be, Wes was able to work again and keep the cantankerous thing running. Jocie shouted something to Wes in the backroom over the noise of the press and then laughed. David couldn't hear what she said, but that too was a good sound. Jocie laughing, happy, being herself.

She'd be laughing at him if she caught him staring at the diamond wishing it bigger. He was supposed to be working on his editorial. That was the excuse he'd given for shutting his office door, but he wasn't really worried about the editorial. He could crank out a couple of paragraphs about the new Christmas decorations the city council had finally approved and that had just been hung on the light poles along Main Street. Plastic green wreaths with red berries. At night under the streetlights, they were almost pretty. Then if that wasn't enough words, he could throw in something about the Christmas parade coming up on Saturday.

The parade was supposed to kick off the 1964 Christmas shopping season in Hollyhill. The Main Street merchants were having sales and giving away peppermint sticks and sugar cookies to entice the townspeople to buy from them instead of driving to Grundy or Lexington to shop in the big stores. At least the town had waited until after Thanksgiving to start pushing the gift buying.

Not that everybody had waited. Zella had informed him last week she'd had her shopping done for weeks. Weeks. Then she'd given him that look that made him feel like a goofy ten-year-old and asked, "What are you getting Leigh?"

When he'd stammered something about having plenty of time to go shopping, she'd narrowed her eyes even more and said, "Honestly, David. Sometimes I think you're hopeless. You can't just go out on Christmas Eve and buy Leigh a box of those awful chocolates you have to stick your fingernail in to see if they're even eatable and expect her to be happy. After all, you've been dating for months. If going to church or out to eat at the Family Diner can count as dating."

"We went on a picnic once." David didn't want Zella to forget his one attempt at a romantic outing.

"Right." Zella rolled her eyes at him. "In the cow pasture behind your house. That had to be the highlight of the poor girl's year."

“Tabitha’s baby was due any minute. We had to stay close.”

“And Tabitha’s baby is how old now?”

“Three months next week.”

“Exactly.” Zella glared at him.

“Leigh hasn’t complained. She says she likes walking in the park and watching the Hollyhill Tigers play basketball.”

“And taking Jocelyn shopping or babysitting Stephen Lee. Of course she doesn’t complain. She’s too nice for that. Maybe too nice for her own good. But I tell you, David, she’s a treasure. And it’s time you opened your eyes and saw that. She deserves something especially nice for Christmas. From you.” Zella poked her finger toward his chest.

“You’re right.” Agreeing with Zella was sometimes the quickest way to get her off his case. “I’ll go shopping next week.”

“None of those knit gloves and hat sets. Something romantic.” Zella’s face changed from stern to dreamy as if maybe she was mentally leafing through the last romance novel she’d read for ideas. “Some perfume. Not that cheap stuff, but the kind they have behind the counter at the drugstore. Chanel Number 5 maybe. Or a gold locket. Ooh, that would be even better. Real gold, mind you.”

“How about some gold colored house shoes? Leigh says the floor in her apartment is always cold.” David tried to make a joke.

Zella hadn’t been in a joking mood as she looked at him with disgust. “You are hopeless. I don’t know what Leigh sees in you.”

“Neither do I,” David had agreed.

But Leigh did see something in him, and he was glad. He wanted her to keep seeing something in him in spite of the fact that he was too old for her and hopelessly impaired when it came to being romantic. That was the reason he was staring down at the ring between his thumb and forefinger. He shined the top of the diamond on his sweater sleeve. That made it glisten a little more, but it didn’t make the stone one bit bigger.

David hadn’t thought it looked all that small the last time he’d seen it on his mother’s finger before Gordon Hazelton had closed the casket to take her body to the cemetery six years ago. He’d thought they would bury the ring with her, but later Gordon had handed him his mother’s rings and watch in a small brown envelope and told him not to worry about the bill for the funeral until the next week. As if one more week could make that much difference in how much money David had in the bank.

Money. The Bible said a man wasn’t supposed to worry about money. David had preached sermons on how Christians were supposed to trust the Lord to take care of their needs. And hadn’t Paul told

Timothy in the Bible the love of money was the root of all evil? Not money, but the love of money. Enough money to keep a man and his family out of the poorhouse was a good thing. A blessed thing.

David looked at the stack of bills on the corner of his desk. Hospital and doctor bills for getting Stephen Lee into the world. A bill from Gary's Garage to fix the brakes that had gone out on his car. And then they'd gotten up last week to find a puddle of water in front of the refrigerator. Wilson at the Appliance Center down the street said it was past fixing with no chance for any kind of thirty-dollar patch-up repair. David had let Wilson talk him into a new two-door model instead of waiting and trying to find a used refrigerator. They had to have a way to keep Stephen Lee's milk cold. So somewhere he'd have to find money to pay for that.

Aunt Love had told David not to worry about Christmas, that a new refrigerator could be all their gifts. But naturally enough, Tabitha wanted to buy her baby something and Jocie at fourteen might have outgrown believing in Santa Claus, but she hadn't outgrown Christmas presents under the tree on Christmas morning. He doubted Leigh had either. She might say she had if he asked her. She'd say that awful box of chocolates or those gold house shoes would be perfect. She was that kind of woman.

That was why he wanted to surprise her with a ring. Surprise everybody, he supposed. Nobody thought he'd be ready to plunge into an engagement yet. He wasn't sure he was ready. They'd only been dating a few months. She claimed to have had her eyes on him longer than that, but David hadn't been paying attention. He'd been resigned to living out life alone after Adrienne had left him years ago. Of course he'd already been living life alone before she left. They'd never had any kind of real marriage of the mind or soul.

Now if indeed the Lord was giving David a second chance at love and a happy marriage, he didn't want to drag his feet and let Leigh slip away. For weeks he'd been praying about it every morning on his prayer walks. He'd asked the Lord if it was right for a man into his forties with two daughters, a just born grandson and an elderly going senile aunt to ask a young woman like Leigh to share his life and take on those kind of responsibilities.

The Lord hadn't made things easy for David by saying yes, it's okay or no, it's not. Or maybe David was afraid to listen too closely in case it was an answer he didn't want to hear. He wanted to climb up the stairs to Leigh's apartment and have her throw open the door and give him that smile that made him feel like a teenager again. He wanted to smell the fresh apple scent of her shampoo when she leaned her head on his shoulder while they watched some stupid show on television. He wanted her beside him for the rest of his life. He loved her. He hadn't told her that yet, but he was going to just as soon as he figured out how and when.

So he'd driven all the way to Grundy to go to a jewelry store there. He couldn't very well walk up the street to the Jewelry Center on Main and ask Rollin Caruthers about engagement rings. The news would be all over Holly County before the hour was gone. And he wanted to be the one to give Leigh the news, not some guy off the street leaning on the counter in the County Clerk's office where she worked.

It had been a long time since he'd been in a jewelry store to buy anything. He'd had his watch repaired by Rollin, but he hadn't looked at any prices. Rings had gone up since he'd bought Adrienne the one she'd picked out after he came home from the war. He'd had more money then with his accumulated soldier's pay and his mother supplying room and board for Adrienne and Tabitha. He'd hoped the ring would make Adrienne happy, but he'd never been able to do anything to accomplish that.

That diamond had been twice, maybe three times as big as the one in his mother's ring. Adrienne had stopped wearing it after a couple of years. She said it didn't fit right and that she would get it sized sometime. That had never happened, but she had taken the ring with her when she left Hollyhill and him behind. She'd probably hocked it first thing. Tabitha might know, but what difference did it make now? That ring had never meant anything.

David wanted the ring he bought now to mean something, but the clerk in the Grundy jewelry store had sized him up on sight. A middle-aged man without much money in his pockets. "We have payment plans," the clerk had suggested when David asked him the price of one of the rings. "You'd have to be approved for credit, of course."

"I didn't ask about a credit application. I asked how much this ring cost." David stared straight at the man until he had to uncurl his upper lip and give David some prices. All of them completely out of David's range.

"And is this ring for your own fiancée?" the clerk asked as if he was having a hard time believing any woman would be interested in marrying David.

"A man usually buys an engagement ring for his own fiancée," David answered.

"That is the customary practice." The man slid his glass case shut, locked it, and dropped the key in his pocket almost as if daring David to ask for another price. "Perhaps I could make a suggestion. Many of our older couples come in together to allow the lady to choose her own ring." The corners of the man's mouth curled up in another fake smile as he looked at David and went on. "After all, we're not exactly teenagers, are we? We don't have to get carried away by the moment."

David had stared down at the rings in the case a moment longer before saying, "You could be right." He didn't get the man's name. He didn't want the man's name. As he'd driven back to Hollyhill, he wondered if he could call Rollin Caruthers and arrange for him to show him some rings in the back room where nobody could see David ring shopping.

But that wouldn't solve the not enough money part of the problem. He could wait, try to save up some money before Valentine's Day or whenever, but he didn't want to wait. His mother would be glad he took her ring out of the envelope and put it to use. She'd have liked Leigh. The diamond wasn't big, but it was a diamond. And it had symbolized a good marriage for his mother and father. He could get it reset. Not in that store in Grundy. That snooty clerk would probably whip out a magnifying glass to see if he could locate the diamond. No, he'd just have to swear Rollin to secrecy.

Jocie knocked on his door and called, "Hey, Dad. You got that editorial ready?"

David jumped as if he'd been caught napping. He tried to drop the ring down into his shirt pocket, but missed. The ring hit the floor and bounced. He dove under his desk after it as Jocie pushed open the door. His chair crashed into the wall and his shoulder banged against the side of the desk. A fat file of newspaper clippings slid off onto the floor, scattering papers everywhere. Then somehow his foot got tangled up in the telephone cord, and the telephone knocked his coffee cup over on its way off the desk. Coffee started dripping down onto his legs. At least it wasn't too hot.

“Oh my gosh!” Jocie said. “Are we having an earthquake?”