

The Blessed

Chapter 1

Autumn 1843

Isaac Kingston didn't think his Ella would really die. Not actually stop breathing and die. She'd told him she would, but he didn't believe her. At least not soon enough.

A person didn't die because her mother wasn't there to stroke her head. If that could happen, he would have died when he was thirteen, but here he was still breathing while he watched them lower his beautiful Ella down into the ground. Every breath seemed a betrayal of his love. He'd brought her home. He had to. The Fort Smith doctor who bled Ella advised Isaac to wait for her fever to abate before making the trip back to Louisville, but the doctor didn't understand. He wasn't the one being haunted by the memory of Ella looking him right in the eye the day before the fever hit and telling him she'd die if he didn't take her home. It was Isaac who had to live with that memory seared into his soul.

She'd been telling him the same thing every day since they'd left Louisville weeks before, until the words had meant no more than someone mentioning the sun shining or the rain falling outside. Not that he didn't feel bad that she was unhappy. He did. He loved her. So some of the time he tried to kiss away her sadness. Other times he would grab her in his arms and dance her around their tiny boarding house room until she laughed. But there was no laughing once the fever struck, and at last he felt her words might be prophetic.

So he'd given up his westward dream, sold his horse and gun to hire a wagon to take her overland to the Mississippi River and then for the ticket up the river to Louisville. He'd carried her up the steamboat's gangplank before daylight so nobody would know how sick she was and try to stop him from bringing the fever on board. He had been so sure being on the way home would pull her back from the fever. Bring the light back to her eyes. But when he whispered their progress up the river toward Louisville into her ear, her fever-glazed eyes stared at him with no recognition, and it was her mother she called out for.

He told her over and over that he was taking her to her mother. Patiently at first and then angrily. She had to understand how he was giving up everything to do what she wanted, but the words too late whispered through his mind and turned his anger into sorrow. She died before they reached the Ohio River.

Now the preacher Ella's father had gotten to say words over her grave was talking about Ella going home to a better place. The home awaiting all who reached for the Lord with faith and sincerity.

A chill wind blew across the open hole that was swallowing Ella and ruffled the pages of the worn Bible the old man held. His hands trembled as he smoothed down the tissue-thin page and continued to speak the Bible words without looking down to read them. No doubt he had spoken the same verses over hundreds of newly departed souls.

"'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.'" The preacher's voice quavered and sounded properly mournful.

Why couldn't it have been the old preacher who had walked through death's shadow instead of Ella? Isaac's eyes shifted from the preacher to Ella's ancient grandmother. The old woman had to be pushed in a chair everywhere she went and now sat huddled in a black shawl with tears gathering in the deep wrinkles on her cheeks as she stared at the grave of her youngest grandchild. Why couldn't it have been her?

Isaac looked down at the coffin. Why couldn't it have been him?

Spring 1844

Lacey Bishop swept the kitchen floor as though the little bits of dirt she'd tracked in from the back garden were going to sprout legs and crawl up her skirt like field mice gone mad. If skunks could go mad with foaming mouths, why not mice?

Her pa's words warning her about rabid skunks echoed in her head all these years later. Be careful out in the woods, Lacey girl. You never know what you might run up on. Could be something rabid. Something mean.

She'd take her chances out in the woods. It was in kitchens and sitting rooms that folks came to grief. She might only be nineteen, but she'd lived plenty long enough to know that.

She swept the dirt up in a pile and then gave it a push with her broom toward the door, open to the early spring air. It was a good broom. A Shaker broom brought in by Preacher Palmer a couple of weeks before Miss Mona took a turn for the worse last fall.

He'd brought it into the kitchen and handed it to Miss Mona before he went off to do his preacher visiting. Miss Mona acted like she'd gotten some kind of prize as she ran her fingers over the broom straws with something akin to admiration.

"Those Shakers," she'd said in her high, fine voice. "They might have some odd ideas on worshiping, but they do have a way of making the least things better. Things nobody else would bother with improving. Just look at this broom. It's made for sweeping a wide swath. Ten times better than those old round brooms that weren't good for much but sweeping ashes back into a fireplace. I've heard tell that they war against dirt over there in their Harmony Hill village. That they're always sweeping and cleaning something." She looked up at Lacey and then back down at the broom. "One thing sure, a body has to admire their brooms."

Miss Mona had a way of admiring everything, even Lacey. Maybe especially Lacey.

Lacey had lifted the broom away from Miss Mona and took a spin with it around the room. "Is it true those Shakers dance to the Lord the way they say?"

"I've heard it is, but I can't say from seeing it myself. Elwood never thought it would be proper for us to go curious seeking to any of their services, what with him being a sanctified Baptist minister and all. Sadie Rose told me she went once though. Years ago with her father. They took a picnic and ate it out on the Shaker grounds with those strange worship songs of the Shaker people filling the air around them."

"Did she see them dancing?" Lacey stopped her twirling and looked at Miss Mona.

"That she did. She and her sister went and peeked in the door at them. She claimed it was a sight to behold. All those Shaker men and women as alike as peas in a pod, dancing up and back in some kind of strange dos-à-dos. And then all of a sudden she said they started stomping the floor as to how they were killing snakes. Started the whole building to shaking. From the way she tells it, I think it like to scared Sadie Rose to death."

"I didn't think anything could scare Miss Sadie Rose." Sadie Rose was the head deacon's wife at Ebenezer Church, and she had a way of getting things done.

"She's not one to get the trembles over easy," Miss Mona agreed with a laugh. "But Sadie Rose was some younger than even you at the time. And stomping in a church house wasn't exactly something she had ever seen before."

"I can't imagine anybody stomping and dancing in church."

"It is hard to think on and I don't know if they do such anymore. I don't suppose anyone outside their village can know that now, since they've closed down their meetings to outsiders, or so Elwood heard. Somebody told him they were claiming some kind of spiritual revival sent down from their Mother Ann, the one they think was the daughter of God or something akin to that. It all sounds too strange for the likes of me." Miss Mona shook her head at the thought of such an outlandish way to believe. "But you can ask Sadie Rose about that meeting she saw. She'll tell you it made her eyes go wide."

Sadie Rose was Miss Mona's best friend in all the world. Or at least that's what Miss Mona had thought. Lacey took another swipe at the floor, even though there wasn't a speck of dirt left to sweep anywhere. It was Sadie Rose's words she was wanting to sweep out the door and scatter to the wind. The woman had just left. Sadie Rose claimed the church ladies were only trying to help, but it sounded like gossip words to Lacey. The very idea that they could think anything indecent might be going on in the preacher's house.

Lacey had the urge to throw a plate down on the floor to break into a hundred pieces just so she'd have something to sweep again. But that might wake up little Rachel. Plus Preacher Palmer

would notice if they were a plate short. For a minute Lacey thought about going ahead and breaking two of the plates, but then she sighed. It didn't do any good to take out her spite on the dishes.

She propped the broom up in the corner by the back door. She'd take it out later and sweep off the porch to keep things neat the way Miss Mona had taught her. Miss Mona was like the Shakers in that way. She couldn't abide dirt. And now the poor woman was covered over with it. Lacey mashed her mouth together in a tight line to keep the tears from springing up in her eyes. A body couldn't cry forever, but she did miss Miss Mona. Maybe after Rachel woke up from her nap, they could think on what flowers to plant on the grave once the worry of frost was past.

Dear little Rachel. A ray of sunshine in a dark house. Lacey went to the doorway between the kitchen and the sitting room and leaned against the door facing to watch Rachel's chest rise and fall. The child liked to climb up on the daybed and sleep where Miss Mona had spent most of her days the last three years before the Lord had called her home. Sudden like, or so it seemed to Lacey, even though Miss Mona had been afflicted for years with a kind of wasting sickness that made her prone to trembles and weakness.

Miss Mona said they'd tried to find a way to rid her of the weakness when it first came on her, but nothing any of the doctors did ever helped. Finally Preacher Palmer said it must be the Lord testing them to see if they were faithful and they'd have to try to pray down a cure.

Even though Miss Mona was a mighty praying woman, no cure ever came down. She claimed not to be put off by that. She said the Lord answered prayers in lots of different ways, and maybe Lacey coming to be with her was the Lord's way of blessing her instead of removing the affliction. When Lacey didn't understand how Miss Mona could not be perturbed by the Lord's indifference to her suffering, Miss Mona opened up her Bible. She helped Lacey find the Scripture where Paul wrote about his own affliction, and how, although the Lord didn't remove it from him the way Paul asked, he did give him the strength to bear up under it.

"The Lord sent me you, Lacey dear. Without the trembles I'm afflicted with, there'd have been no reason for Elwood to fetch you home to help me. The Lord blesses us in many wondrous ways," Miss Mona had said.

Lacey looked up straight at Miss Mona that day. "So you're saying your trembles is a blessing." She didn't bother to hide the doubt in her voice even with her finger still on the Bible page Miss Mona had asked her to read.

"In a way. You're a gift for sure." Miss Mona smiled at her. "So though I might be hard pressed to look favorably on my weak spells, I do look very favorably on you."

"Following that trail of thinking, I'd have to think my pa marrying up with the Widow Jackson and bringing her home after my ma died was a blessing, seeing as how it led to me being here." Lacey stared at Miss Mona without smiling back.

"It did lead to you coming here."

"The Widow Jackson wasn't never any kind of blessing." Lacey shut the Bible with a firm snap as if she needed to be sure Paul's affliction stayed inside and didn't leak out on them. They didn't have need of more of those kinds of blessing gifts.

"Reverence the Lord's Word," Miss Mona said mildly. That was one of the many good things about Miss Mona. She never got too bothered by anything Lacey said or did.

"Sorry." Lacey stroked the Bible's black cover as though to make amends. "But I've told you how the widow treated me and Junie. She nigh on killed Junie that day she hit her with a skillet. Poor Junie had a knot on her head big as a hen's egg, and two black eyes. That woman was no blessing."

"But the Lord made good come of it." Miss Mona raised her eyes up to the ceiling and spoke in her prayer voice. Without even taking the first peek at the Bible page, Miss Mona could quote Scripture and not get one word out of place. "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God."

She brought her eyes back down to Lacey as she went on. "That goose egg opened your father's eyes and made him take note of what was happening. That's how come him to take Junie back to Virginia to live with your mother's sister, and you know how good your little sister's been doing there from the letters you get from time to time."

"But he didn't take me." Lacey hated the way her voice got all whiny when she said that. She hadn't even wanted to go to Virginia. Not really. And her father had done what he could to protect her from the widow after that. Something Miss Mona gently prodded her to remember.

"Now you know it took some soul searching for your father to give you both up. And you've told me how you were better at keeping out of the way of your stepmother."

Miss Mona always referred to the Widow Jackson as Lacey's stepmother, but Lacey never put any word about "mother" toward her. She supposed the woman had stopped being a widow or a Jackson the day Lacey's pa married her and she was a mother now too. She'd been in the family way when she talked Lacey's pa into farming Lacey out with the preacher. The last Lacey heard, they had three boys. Her brothers, but she'd never laid eyes on them. Her pa and the widow had moved to the western part of the state before the last boy was born.

When they decided on moving, her pa came to the preacher's house to tell Lacey goodbye, but he hadn't brought even the oldest boy along. Too young for church or visiting, he said. He'd have taken Lacey home with him then. Claimed the widow had had a change of heart. Lacey saw through that easy enough. The only change in the widow's thinking was in how much work there was to do. She needed somebody to chase after those boys.

Even if she'd wanted to give the widow another chance, she wouldn't have left Miss Mona. She'd been with her for nigh on two years by then. Miss Mona treated her like a treasured daughter, teaching her to read and to sew and to sing. Lacey had chores to do, right enough. She had to make sure there was food on the table for the preacher, but Preacher Palmer wasn't particular about what

he ate. More than particular about a lot of things, but food never seemed to interest him much. Miss Mona said he was too involved thinking on spiritual matters to worry with how the potatoes were cooked. Lacey thought it wasn't just holiness he was thinking on then, and she was knowing it now that Miss Mona wasn't there to be between his eyes and Lacey. Something that busybody Sadie Rose had surely noticed too.