

# The Gifted

## Chapter 1

"Sister Jessamine, where on earth are you taking us?" Sister Annie asked as she held on to her cap while ducking under a low-hanging branch.

Jessamine didn't slow her walk as she glanced back at Sister Annie. She liked Sister Annie. She really did. But oh, to be alone in the woods and not always encumbered with a sister to slow her down. She wanted to run free. To swing on a vine if she took the notion. To sit and lean back against a tree trunk and dream up stories about the birds above her head. None of that would be considered proper behavior for a Shaker sister, and Sister Annie did so want to be a proper Shaker. She'd be sure to confess anything she thought improper to Sister Sophrena, no matter which of them committed the supposed sin.

"The best berries are up ahead," Jessamine said. "I can smell them."

"You're not smelling raspberries. That isn't possible," Sister Annie said even as she stopped and lifted her nose a bit to sniff the air.

Jessamine bit the inside of her lip to hide her smile. "My granny could smell squirrels in the trees."

Sister Annie's groan plainly carried up to Jessamine in spite of the rustle of last fall's leaves underfoot. "Is there anything your granny could not do?"

"Stay alive." Jessamine muttered the words under her breath. She wouldn't want Sister Annie to be reporting them.

After all, it had been almost ten years since her granny failed to keep breathing and the old preacher carried Jessamine to the Shaker village. Not bad years. She wouldn't want her Shaker family to think she was ungrateful for the food and shelter they'd given her. Given her druthers, she would have stayed in the cabin in the woods, but a child of ten is rarely given her druthers. Or a girl of near twenty either for that matter. Duties and responsibilities went along with that food on the table and roof over her head.

There were no perfect places this side of heaven. That was something her granny used to tell her, although in Jessamine's mind their cabin in the middle of the woods seemed perfect enough. Of course her granny never said the first thing about the Shakers. She might not have heard about how they aimed to make a perfect place on earth to match the perfection of heaven. A place with no sin of any kind. A place where all lived as brothers and sisters. A place where a girl couldn't run off to

the woods on her own to pick a handful of raspberries and pop them every one in her mouth. At least not without feeling a little guilty about how she might be depriving her sisters and brothers back at the village of a tasty pie.

So far she hadn't found that first handful of raspberries to eat or to put in her pail. And she wasn't being exactly truthful saying she could smell raspberries. She only said that so Sister Annie would keep walking deeper into the woods. The girl's flushed face gave every indication she was ready to turn back. A frown was thundering across her forehead and her mouth was screwed up into a knot not much bigger than an acorn. Any minute now she was going to plant her feet on the path and refuse to go a step farther. And they had to be close to White Oak Springs. They had to be. All Jessamine wanted was a glimpse of the place.

One of the new sisters had built such a word picture inside Jessamine's head of the hotel at White Oak Springs that Jessamine thought it must be a palace set down in the middle of a flower-filled oasis. This sister claimed that in the heat of the day beautiful girls walked across grassy yards with fine parasols to keep the sun off their faces while young men from all around the country sought their favor.

The new sister, who was going on seventeen, sighed with longing as she whispered these stories to Jessamine in the dead of the night with no other ears listening. When Jessamine told her it sounded like the fairy tales her granny used to tell her, Sister Abigail insisted these fairy tales were true. Her stories brought up such fanciful images to Jessamine that she had been overcome with the desire to witness this sight herself. To know if such a fairytale place could be true. Parasols instead of caps. Hair curled and held up with jeweled combs instead of stuck forever out of sight.

Jessamine touched her cap and had the errant thought to yank it off and fling it up in a tree for a squirrel to line his nest. But she did not. Instead she carefully tucked a loose strand of her honey blonde hair out of sight. She didn't really want to be wayward. She merely wanted to see with her own eyes what Sister Abigail had described. Surely there was no sin in simply looking.

White Oak Springs was real. She knew that. The Shakers sold their products to the people there. Springs of water were reputed to bubble up out of the ground with a foul odor, but those who came to the springs held to the notion that taking the water cured a myriad of ailments and revived the health. Sister Sophrena waved that off as ridiculous when Jessamine asked her if such was actually possible. But Jessamine's curiosity was aroused. She had carried many buckets of water from a spring to her granny's cabin, but the water had been naught but water. Cool and pleasant for a truth with a joyful song as it trickled out of the rocks, but all it had ever seemed to cure was thirst.

Sister Abigail claimed the Springs were to the west or maybe the south. Then she had pointed due north. The sister completely lacked a sense of direction, but Jessamine had teased a few bits of information from other sisters as they fashioned hats and neckerchiefs that might be taken to the Springs to sell. She was sure she and Sister Annie were going in the right direction, but she had no clue as to how far away it might be. Perhaps too far for Sister Annie's patience. Especially with no berries to show for their long walk.

"You're going to get us so lost not even Elder Joseph will be able to find us, Sister Jessamine." Sister Annie stopped walking.

"We're not lost, Sister Annie. I promise." Jessamine looked back at her. "I have a keen sense of direction and will have no problem at all finding our way back to the village."

"I guess you can smell your way." Sister Annie jerked her handkerchief out of her apron pocket to wipe the sweat from her broad forehead. The poor girl's hair was straggling down out of her cap and her face was red, and not all from the heat, as she glared at Jessamine. "I don't know why Sister Sophrena insisted I come with you. She knows I hate traipsing after you in the woods."

"She knows you'll come back." Jessamine reluctantly turned to walk back to Annie.

"Yea, where else would we go? The village is our home, and I think we should begin in that direction right away. It's obvious you have no more idea where a berry patch is than I do." Annie held up her empty pail. "We have yet to pick the first berry. Sister Sophrena will not be pleased to see us return with empty buckets after being gone so many hours."

"A good patch is just up ahead." Jessamine looked back at the faint trace of a path she'd been following. Through the trees she thought she could catch sight of more light. That had to mean a road or some kind of clearing. Perhaps the grounds of the Springs itself. She imagined the colors of the parasols spinning overtop the pretty girls' heads. Or perhaps they would be bright white just like the caps she and Sister Annie wore. "Only a little farther."

Sister Annie grabbed Jessamine's arm as she started to turn away. "I'm not going another step away from the village. Not one step."

"Then perhaps you can rest here while I go find the berries." Jessamine flashed her best smile at Sister Annie, but it did nothing to make the other girl's frown fade or to get her to loosen her grip on Jessamine's sleeve.

"Nay, we are both turning back. We can find a different path back through the woods and perhaps find a few cups of berries to prove we were using our time wisely instead of doing no more than ruining our dresses."

Jessamine looked behind her. The light through the trees seemed even brighter and more inviting. She could be that close to seeing those parasols and ruffled dresses, to gazing out on a real, live fairy tale. She wasn't exactly yearning to be part of it. She just wanted to see it. The thought of the parasols pulled at her like an invisible thread.

The very word entranced her. Parasols. She thought of telling Sister Annie that. Letting the word roll off her tongue and then making up a story about a frog making his home under a parasol caught by the wind and blown into the woods. A beautiful princess would discover the parasol and find the frog. One kiss and they'd live happily ever after. And the princess would love parasols and the frog-turned-prince would nearly croak every time he saw one.

"Whatever are you smiling about, Sister Jessamine? This is no time for smiles and frivolity. We are lost in the woods."

"Nay, Sister Annie. We're not lost." Jessamine swallowed her smile.

"Well, perhaps not, but we aren't where we should be. It could be we have strayed off our Shaker property."

"That could be," Jessamine agreed. The Shakers owned many acres, but they had been walking a good way. "Why don't we go on a little ways? I think there may be a road up ahead where walking will be easier."

"A road!" Sister Annie's eyes flew open wide as she glanced around. "You think we are that near those of the world? Oh, my heavenly days, Sister Jessamine. What possessed you to lead us into the world? What will we do if we meet some worldly man intent on sin?"

"Men in the world can't be that different from the brothers we see each day." Jessamine tried to make her words sound sure. In fact she had no idea what men were like in the world. Before coming to the Shakers, the only man she'd spoken one word to was the old preacher who had shown up now and again at her granny's cabin toting provisions. Sugar, flour, some pieces of cloth and thread, a tin of coffee beans.

"You live in a storybook land, my sister," Sister Annie said. "Men of the world have not the love our brethren back at the village have. Or the peaceful hearts. They see something they want. They take it. You have been long with the Believers and so have an innocent mind, but I have only been here in the peace of the village a short while. I know what those of the world are like. I am not long from their sinful ways."

"Surely not all men are thus," Jessamine said.

"Not all, but who can know which sort of man we might stumble upon here in this wild place with no recourse but flight." Sister Annie's eyes narrowed on Jessamine. "You truly have no idea of how a girl with your looks might tempt the devil to rise in a man. Eyes the blue of cornflowers and straw-colored hair."

Sister Annie's words put warmth in Jessamine's cheeks that the walk had not. "It is not the beauty on the outside that matters, but that on the inside." Even her granny had told her that before she came to live with the Shakers. Now Sister Sophrena told her the same over and over.

"True enough," Sister Annie agreed. "But the outside beauty is what tempts men to sin often as not."

"How do you know so much about men and what makes them sin?"

"I am not the innocent you are, my sister. My father ran a tavern before he passed last year and my mother and I came to join the Believers. Trust me, I know." Sister Annie's mouth tightened. "More than you might want to imagine."

"But I just want a peek out at the world. Sister Abigail told me about this place called White Oak Springs. Have you ever seen a parasol, Sister Annie?"

"A parasol?" The other girl twisted her mouth to the side as her frown was edged off her face by the beginnings of a smile. She shook her head in disbelief. "You have led us on this wild-goose chase for berries because you want to see a parasol? Sister Sophrena will never believe this."

Jessamine smiled a bit hesitantly. "They sound so pretty. Parasols." She let the word roll off her tongue. "Don't you think so?"

Sister Annie laughed out loud as she stepped closer to Jessamine and put her arm around her waist. "Come, my sister. I will draw a picture of one for you when we get back to the village."

"But we aren't allowed to draw pictures unless a spirit directs our hands." Jessamine began walking back down the path. She was so sure the Springs might be just on the other side of those trees, and a picture of a parasol wouldn't be the same as seeing one twirling in the hands of a girl who might be a princess.

"For information purposes, I'm sure Sister Sophrena will allow it."

Jessamine sighed and surrendered her feet to the will of Sister Annie. Her guardian appointed by Sister Sophrena. She peered back over her shoulders. "Is White Oak Springs close?"

"I couldn't say, since I have almost no idea of where we are, but I think it is much farther away. At least another hour's walk. And we are not going there no matter how many raspberries you might smell."

"But the raspberries would make a delicious pie."

"Then smell some back this way. I will not be swayed. We are not going one step farther away from the village and certainly not one step nearer that den of iniquity." Sister Annie's frown returned. "I have heard plenty of stories about that place. Men and women of leisure with nothing to do but court trouble. Worse even than a tavern where men are often intent on wrongdoing. Such is not our way, Sister Jessamine. The Shaker way is to give our hands to work and our hearts to God."

At times, Jessamine was amazed at Sister Annie's acceptance of the Shaker way. She had a much tighter grip on how to be a proper Shaker after only a few months at the village than Jessamine did after years.

"Yea, it is true," Jessamine agreed quietly. "It was foolish of me to want to glimpse such a place of the world. I will confess my wrong thinking to Sister Sophrena."

"Trust me, Sister. The world is not a place for the likes of an innocent lamb like you. We are safe with our sisters and brethren." Sister Annie grasped Jessamine's hand with affection. "Come, let us leave this place of possible dire consequence and go home."

Disappointment welled up inside Jessamine and a tear slid out of the corner of her eye. Thankfully Sister Annie had turned away and didn't note her foolishness. But what dire consequences could possibly come from seeing a parasol bright against the sunshine?

A sudden boom made Jessamine jump. The color drained from Sister Annie's face as she spun around to clutch Jessamine's arm.

"Gunfire! Oh, dear Mother Ann in heaven, keep us safe," Sister Annie cried as something came crashing through the trees.