

## Prologue

Maylene put one hand atop the stone for support; pulling herself up from the soil got harder every year. Her knees had been problem enough, but of late the arthritis had started settling in her hips. She brushed the soil from her hands and from her skirt and pulled a small bottle from her pocket. Carefully avoiding the green shoots of the tulip bulbs she'd planted, Maylene tilted the bottle over the earth.

“Here you go, dear,” she whispered. “It’s not the shine we used to sip, but it’s what I have to share.”

She stroked the top of the stone. No grass clippings had collected there; no spiders’ silk stretched from the top. She was careful of the smallest detail.

“Do you remember those days? Back porch, sunshine, and mason jars”—she paused at the remembered sweetness—“we were so foolish then ... thinking there was a big ol’ world out there to conquer.”

Pete, for his part, wasn’t likely to reply: those who were properly buried and minded didn’t speak.

She made the rest of her rounds through Sweet Rest Cemetery, stopping to clean debris from stones, pour a bit of drink onto the ground, and say her words. Sweet Rest was the last of the cemeteries on the week’s schedule, but she didn’t shortchange the residents.

For a small town, Claysville had a high number of graveyards and cemeteries. By law, everyone ever born within town limits had to be buried here; consequently, the town had more deceased residents than living ones. Maylene wondered sometimes what would happen if the living knew of the bargain the town founders had made, but every time she’d broached the topic

with Charles, she'd been rebuffed. Some battles weren't ones she could win—no matter how much she wanted them.

*Or how much damn sense they make.*

She glanced at the darkening sky. It was past time to be back home. She did her duty well enough that there hadn't been visitors in almost a full decade, but she still went home by sundown. A lifetime of habit didn't wane even when it seemed like it should.

*Or not.*

Maylene had only just tucked her flask into her front dress pocket when she saw the girl. She was too thin, concave stomach showing under her ripped T-shirt. Her feet were bare, and her jeans had holes in the knees. A smudge of dirt outlined her left cheek like badly applied rouge. Eyeliner was smudged under her eyes like she'd fallen asleep with her makeup still on. The girl walked through the well-manicured cemetery, not staying on the paths, but crossing through the grass until she stood in front of one of the older family mausoleums beside Maylene.

"I wasn't expecting you," Maylene murmured.

The girl's arms jutted out at awkward angles, not quite hands-on-hips-belligerent but not relaxed either, as if they weren't all the way under the girl's control. "I came to find you."

"I didn't know. If I'd known ..."

"It doesn't matter now." The girl's attention was unwavering. "This is where *you* are."

"It is, at that." Maylene busied herself gathering up her gardening shears and watering can. She'd finished with the scrub brushes and already piled up most of her supplies. The bottles clinked as she tossed the watering can into her wheelbarrow.

The girl looked sad. Her soil-dark eyes were clouded over by tears that she hadn't been able to shed. "I came to find you."

“I couldn’t have known.” Maylene reached out and plucked a leaf from the girl’s hair.

“Doesn’t matter.” She lifted a dirty hand, fingernails flashing chipped red polish, but she didn’t seem to know what to do with her outstretched fingers. Little-girl fears warred with teen bravado in her expression. Bravado won. “I’m here now.”

“All right, then.” Maylene walked down the path toward one of the gates. She pulled the old key from her handbag, twisted it in the lock, and pushed open the gate. It creaked just a bit. *Might want to mention that to Liam, she reminded herself. He never can remember without a nagging.*

“Do you have pizza?” The girl’s voice was soft in the air. “And chocolate drink? I like those chocolate drinks.”

“I’m sure I have something I can fix.” Maylene heard her own voice quiver. She was getting too old for surprises. Finding the girl here—*in this state*—was a few steps past a surprise. She shouldn’t be here. Her parents shouldn’t have let her roam; someone should have contacted Maylene before it got to this point. There were laws in Claysville.

*Laws kept in place for just this reason.*

They stepped through the gate onto the sidewalk. Outside the boundaries of Sweet Rest, the world wasn’t nearly so tidy. The sidewalk had cracked, and from within those gaps spindly weeds were sprouting.

“Step on a crack, break your mama’s back,” the girl whispered and then stomped her bare foot on the broken cement. She smiled at Maylene and added, “The bigger the crack, the worse it’ll hurt her.”

“That part doesn’t rhyme,” Maylene pointed out.

“It doesn’t, does it?” She tilted her head for a moment and then said, “The bigger the *break*, the worse the *ache*. That works.”

She swung her arms loosely as they walked, out of time with their steps, out of normal rhythm. Her steps were steady, but the pattern was erratic. Her feet came down on the sidewalk with such force that the broken cement tore at her bare feet.

Silently, Maylene pushed her wheelbarrow down the sidewalk until they came to the end of her driveway. She stopped, and with one hand, she pulled her flask out of her pocket and emptied it; with the other hand, she reached inside the postbox. In the back—folded up, stamped, and addressed—was an envelope. Her fingers trembled, but Maylene sealed the flask inside the envelope, slipped it inside the box, and raised the red flag to signal the carrier to take away the package. If she didn’t come back to retrieve it in the morning, it would go to Rebekkah. Maylene put her hand on the side of the battered box for a moment, wishing that she’d had the courage to tell Rebekkah the things she needed to know before now.

“I’m hungry, Miss Maylene,” the girl urged.

“I’m sorry,” Maylene whispered. “Let me get you something warm to eat. Let me—”

“It’s okay. You’re going to save me, Miss Maylene.” The girl gave her a genuine look of happiness. “I know it. I knew that if I found you everything would be okay.”