

Chapter One

Monday, September 28, 2015, morning

A cell phone text alert chimed—to most people, a sound as ordinary as breathing.

Jake Witherspoon rested a bouquet of sweetheart roses on his worktable. Had to be his life partner, Jon “Shug” Presley. Few people had his personal cell phone number.

Across the room, Jolene Waters, his partner in business, glanced up from a towering pile of invoices. Her fiery hair stuck out in comical tufts. Reminded Jake of a banty rooster.

He wiped moisture from his hands onto a Dragonfly Florist apron and picked up the phone.

Could be Hattie, but she’d already phoned him this morning and besides, rarely texted. Could be Elvina, with yet another question about the sunroom she was adding onto her house.

He picked up the phone. Not Shug’s number. Or Hattie’s. Or Elvina’s. Or anyone in his limited directory list.

hi babe your hot what u doin

God knows, Shug would never write *you’re* incorrectly. Wouldn’t chop words to skeletons either, or stoop to lazy text-English. And jumping Judas on a pogo stick, didn’t anyone use punctuation these days? Couldn’t imagine Elvina Houston calling anyone *hot*, especially not someone forty years her junior, and gay.

Best to stop the idiot on the other side of that *babe* before they embarrassed themselves for something beyond poor language skills, or heaven forbid, sent some naked selfie.

“Wrong number,” he dictated to the device.

I think you said wrong number. Is that correct? the female automaton answered.

“Yes.”

Okay. I'll send that now.

Freaking amazing, this technology stuff. Jake lifted one corner of his lips. His best heart-friend Hattie called the lopsided smile his “signature Jakey grin.”

“What’d you say?” Jolene said.

“Sorry, hon. Didn’t mean to interrupt you.” He thought about sharing the *babe* text with her, but she had her paper-pusher face on. Thank God for her. He detested the business end of things. Jolene was such an organization freak, she barely had to break a sweat come tax time. Left to his own, he would sooner pitch the papers into a shoe box and let the accountant sort it out.

He laid the phone down on the worktable. No time for some stranger’s tomfoolery. Not with three festivals and the holidays looming. People tended to die around this time of year . . . those casket drapes and funeral sprays. And it wasn’t only the kinfolk of the dearly departed clamoring for his services. Christmas brides with their momzillas demanded attention. And end of year parties? Not complete without flowers. Oh heavens no.

Shouldn’t grouse about having a successful business, especially in a place the size of Chattahoochee. A town with two stoplights. And a state mental hospital on the main drag that accounted for the majority of the population. He could be back in New York, living in a cramped one-room. Or in an alley. Or dead.

A shadow fell across the flowers on his worktable. Jake froze. He looked toward the front door.

A man. A giant. Peering through the glass, his beefy face a black, undefined mass outlined by two large cupped hands.

Jake took a couple of steps back, tucked himself behind the threshold leading to the storeroom.

“What are you doing?” Jolene asked.

Jake looked away from the entrance to Jolene’s desk. She watched him with a combination of *you’re on my last nerve* and *do I need to worry about you?* When he shifted his gaze back, the man was gone.

“Nothing.” Maybe one day he could spot a stranger and not think he was going to be beaten senseless.

He moved to the worktable. Beneath the clump of roses, plumosa fanned out like a verdigris fern spider web. The baby-blanket pink rose petals drew him in. If he could only spare the time, Jake could stare at a single bud until he fell inside it, lost in the intricacy of color and form. Safe.

Beauty shifted his thoughts from his overreaction to that large man. And from the pain he lived with—for a moment. His damaged left leg throbbed, a hateful heartbeat. Jake shook it. Sometimes that helped the muscles relax.

There should be a phone app for pain management. Those tech geeks had one for everything else. It would come in handy right about now, with PiddieFest weekend coming.

Too bad Hattie’s late Aunt Piddie hadn’t lived to witness these new smartphones. It would’ve assisted her with the latest gossip. Of course, Elvina had put one of the first generation cell phones into the casket with Piddie, at the viewing, before Piddie’s earthly body was turned to ash and crumbles of bone. Wonder if that phone got turned to ash as well . . .

The phone chimed. Another text.

Wont you bad

What the hell? He clenched his teeth. Somebody playing a joke? It wasn’t funny. He keyed in the answer this time. No need to really aggravate Jolene.

He resumed arranging the roses and plumosa. And ruminating. Floral design came so easy after so many years, his mind could go off on tangents while his hands stayed on task. Where had he been before some weirdo *wonted* him bad? Ah, yes. Piddie’s ashes. Jake pushed aside the image of those crumbly “cremains”—what a bizarre term.

He'd rather remember Piddie Davis Longman as she had been in life: the matriarch with her signature lavender beehive hairdo. That lifted both corners of his lips. Oh, how he wished he could talk, actually talk, to Piddie, hear her voice.

Jake snugged flowers into place, spun the dish around. Tilted his head to check for symmetry.

So much had changed since his elderly friend left for her "great beyond." Not just cell phones. Everything nowadays morphed at blue-hot speed. Jake struggled to keep up.

Somewhere in the little frame house on Morgan Avenue that Piddie had bequeathed to Jake, a storage box held a growing slush pile of outdated tablets, phones, and laptops. Wouldn't it be lovely to push *delete* for that. Except for Shug's first mobile phone, a flip-top brick that reminded Jake of an overstuffed Star Trek communicator. That one, he'd keep.

Note to self: find that box and recycle some of them. When you have time. Right.

He turned his head toward the rear of the shop. Could store a box or two back there.

Jake reached for another bloom then paused. Perhaps he could slip a few canisters of Shug's festive decorations into the donation pile, too.

"Christmas. Lord help me through it," Jake mumbled under his breath.

Jolene shot him the stink-eye. "Tell me you aren't already stressing about the holidays."

"You don't live with Shug." Jake took a deep breath, let it out. He stood, arms akimbo, glaring at the floral arrangement as if *it* were somehow responsible for the eight Christmas trees waiting to take over the house. And that didn't count the two new ones Shug had bought on closeout, end of last year, one meant to hang upside-down from the ceiling.

Except for the soft click of computer keys, the shop grew quiet, until Jolene started to hum.

Jake threw up his hands. "Tell *me* that's not *Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer*."

She glanced up from the monitor. "Huh? Yeah. Suppose it was. Hey, blame yourself. You brought it up."

As if she needed encouragement. Jolene was known to hum carols in July.

“You used to like Christmas,” she said without looking away from the laptop.

“Still do. But the last couple of years, the commercial muckey-mucks have worn me out.” He stopped long enough to catch a breath. “Every year, they cram fah-la-lah down everyone’s throat earlier and earlier. I won’t be surprised if people start to order jack-o’-lanterns filled with poinsettias.”

She chuckled. “But your yard is always the talk of town, with all of the lights.”

“That it not *my* doing.”

“Can’t be that bad, Jake.”

Jake shoved a rose into the arrangement so hard the stem bent. “Crap.” This time of year brought out the cussing man in him.

He couldn’t tamp down the mounting rant. “Blow-up figurines will wheeze to life on our front lawn. Small wonder we don’t torch a transformer.” He whirled the arrangement, stabbed in another rose. This one didn’t break under pressure. But he might.

Like Hattie’s goofy, optimistic self, he adored the fall. Pumpkins, baskets of russet and golden mums, cinnamon-scented everything. Bring them on. Thanksgiving? Also grand, with lavish Southern dishes shared with the people he called his heart-family.

“Of course, we’ll still have a live evergreen. Why miss the opportunity to scatter my gleaming hardwood floors with spiked needles that poke through even my thickest socks?”

Jolene pushed back from the desk and crossed her arms.

Elvis, Shug’s Pomeranian, used to eat the dang needles then yak up the sludge later. Jake’s chest felt heavy. God, he’d miss that old dog’s green puke this year. He truly would.

“I even have to put up with a rosy-cheeked Santa toilet lid cover. Hell of a place to rest my own butt cheeks while I put on socks.”

Jolene's lips twitched into a grin. "Sounds like *someone* needs a vacation."

"Where would I possibly fit in a vacation?" Oops. That sounded more harsh than he intended.

"Maybe it's time to shift some of your responsibilities."

He huffed out a breath. "Right. Like some fool would volunteer." Who besides him could pull off two huge events in less than three weeks? "I've already handed over the fall carnival to a committee."

The text alert sounded. *Seriously?* He snatched up the phone.

Got to have u

You moron! **Wrong number.**

Jolene groped for the pencil she'd stashed behind one ear. "My, aren't you Mister Popularity today?" She made check marks on several invoices.

He scowled. "Hardly."

Jake slipped the phone into his apron pocket and picked up his pace on the Welcome Baby basket. He filled in the blank spots with fern, and pink and white sweet peas. The sweet peas—real name lathyrus—added for their color and enchanting scent, fresh, but not overpowering. No baby's breath fronds. So common.

He turned to take the finished arrangement to the wheeled delivery cart. The text chime chirped again. He set the basket down, palmed the phone. Another one? His heart fluttered.

You cute.

Different number. Same bad grammar. At least this one had a period at the end, and a capital letter at the start.

Jake thumbed in the reply. "People really should double-check before they hit send," he said.

“Don’t ya know it.” Jolene nodded without looking up. “I hate those robocalls, too. I even went to that Do Not Call website, registered my number. Fat good it did. I get solicitation calls most every day. Especially political.”

“Tis the pre-election season.” Jake frowned. “Politicians. And they say *gays* are a threat to society.”

Jake selected a cane from a long line of hooks, one of eight fall-themed walking aides. If he was going to limp the rest of his life, might as well make a fashion statement. Elvina—head of Chattahoochee’s little-ole-lady hotline and the social engine of the Triple C Day Spa and Salon—had this one created especially for him. Carved wooden handle, fall leaves shellacked onto the shaft. Tacky enough to charm. Sturdy enough to help him balance.

Since the hate crime that had nearly cost Jake his life, he had amassed two hundred and twenty-eight walking canes, if Hattie’s last tally could be trusted. Sister-girl tended to exaggerate. She was one to talk, with her fifty million refrigerator magnets. And those rocks both she and her sister collected.

Should get rid of some of his canes, but couldn’t. Each reminded him of a few more steps away from that horrible night in ’99. The night two teenaged cousins, Marshall and Matthew Thurgood, wrecked this shop. Then one of them wrecked him.

“I’m heading out for a couple of deliveries.” He loaded the rolling cart. “And I have to make a quick stop by Elvina’s house, talk with Bobby before he installs the sunroom windows.”

“Oh, joy. Better you than me. That guy can be so prickly.”

“Get past the redneck bluster, and he’s not a bad sort.” *Besides, I adore Hattie and her family, so Bobby comes with the package.*

Jolene tapped figures into the laptop.

“Want something from Mary-E’s while I’m out?” he asked. Hattie and Bobby’s middle sister Mary-Esther owned and operated the Wild Rose Diner a couple of blocks down.

“I would really, really like a muffaletta.” Jolene twisted her lips. “Nah. Better not. I brought a salad from home. I can barely squeeze into my pants now.”

“Okay, Joe-gee. Ding me if you change your mind.” Jake pushed the cart toward the back door.

The phone chimed. Jake paused by the rear entrance, at the same spot where his blood had pooled that awful evening over fifteen years ago, painted over when Hattie and a handful of his townspeople had cleaned and repaired the damage to his West Washington Street shop.

Unknown caller.

This time, the downy fuzz on his nape prickled when he read the words.

Looking at u

Bobby Davis used a rubber mallet to tap a board into place. He switched to a hammer for the nails. This part of being a handyman was easy. Dealing with women like Elvina Houston, not so much.

He heard a car motor idle, then shut off, followed by the slam of a door. In a moment, he watched Jake Witherspoon trundle across the side lawn. Little dude even walked with a swish. An accomplishment, given that bum leg of his.

“’bout time you got here, Fruit Loop,” Bobby called out through the opening where one of the sunroom windows should be, would be, if Elvina wasn’t being such a flaming pain in the ass.

“Beginning to wonder if I needed to send out the pansy posse.”

“Good to see you, too, Scarlet-neck O-Hairy.”

Bobby watched Jake decide which pile of construction debris to gimp around on his way into the sunroom. “Nice *Gone with the Wind* reference, Jake.” Every time Bobby thought he’d come up with a dang good jab, the little dude-ette topped him.

Jake cocked his head, winked. “You inched up a notch, Bobby Davis. Didn’t know you could read, much less would catch the literary Scarlett O’Hara twist.”

“What you get for jumping to conclusions, I reckon.” Dang, it was a book *and* a movie? Bobby spotted a nail head jutting from one crossbeam and used his hammer to tap it in. “I’m actually thrilled to see you.”

Jake rapped sawdust from his leather loafers with the tip of his cane. “Suppose there’s a first time for everything.” He flashed white teeth. Bobby considered making a comment about him laying off the bleaching products, but lost enthusiasm. The back and forth might go on for a while, if Bobby didn’t nip it. The two had been known to swap quippy insults until folks wished they really didn’t like each other enough to bother.

Sometimes, Bobby inwardly cringed, thinking back to how he used to mistreat his sister’s best friend in school. They called it bullying now, had support groups, talked about it on TV. Not like back in the day when everyone figured it to be a natural part of becoming a man. Hanging with his gaggle of goofballs, he threw out *faggot* and *fairy* and *pansy*, and other coarse jargon he could no longer call to mind.

Now, a lifetime later, he and Jake exchanged verbal punches without bothering to put on the padded gloves. But it was different. Somehow.

“What’s up with the theatrics, Brother Bubba?” Jake asked. “I’m a busy little bee-queen, so please *do* try to give me the abridged version.”

Bobby sifted his thinning hair through his fingers. “Elvina is driving me to—” He stopped himself before saying *drink*. Sobriety was hard-won. He couldn’t bring himself to use it as a joke. He tipped his head toward one window casing. “Standard size, right? You’d think this wouldn’t call for heavy thought, much less a consult with a dang decorator.”

“Wait.” Jake held up a stop hand. “I thought ’Vina had settled on double-hung. I spent endless hours poring over pictures, explaining windows until I wished homo sapiens had never moved from caves.”

“She’s been online, researching. Now, she wonders if jalousies might be more fitting, given this,” Bobby punctuated his words with fingered air quotes, “1940s bungalow style of house.”

Jake closed his eyes and let out a sigh so exaggerated, Bobby wondered if his entire body might fizzle onto the cement subflooring.

“I know. I know.” Bobby slipped the hammer shaft into his weathered leather tool belt. “I tried to reason with her. Told her the double-hung would be much easier to keep clean, not to mention more energy efficient. But you know how Elvina gets.”

Jake’s cell phone chimed a chirpy little ditty. Probably some show tune. Jake glanced at it and bit his lip. Dude’s features usually looked happy-go-lucky, even when the circles under his eyes said he hadn’t slept in a month of Sundays, but not today. It was beyond Bobby how Jake could keep going full-tilt, given his insomnia. Guess anyone who’d been beaten nearly to damn death might have trouble closing his eyes for long.

Bobby understood the vigilance that kept Jake up nights. That was the kind Bobby had to hold onto to keep himself from walking into a liquor shop, or even down the beer aisle at the Stop-N-Rob convenience store. He had once heard one of the mental patients use the word *lurkies* for the fears that stalk a person.

Lower your guard and the lurkies’ll get you.

The text alert sounded. Again? Bobby geared up to get on Jake for being the popular little cheerleader girl.

The look on Jake’s face stopped him.