

Chapter 1

Be careful not to forget the covenant of the Lord your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the Lord your God has forbidden. Deuteronomy 4:23

Year 1996

Before her world imploded, Shade slept, her back nestled into Stan's chest. A snort inches from her ear jerked her from sleep. She rolled over and gazed at the man lying next to her. He slept, his mouth relaxed. Cupping her hand on his cheek, her eyes lingered. He didn't stir. She lay motionless, savoring the cool summer breeze wafting in through the open window as the flimsy horizontal blinds rapped against the pane.

As darkness surrendered to dawn, she tiptoed into the kitchen and skimmed the recipe she'd chosen for the Holy Grace Baked Goods Auction. In a life filled with simple pleasures, today was her favorite day of the year.

Inside the cramped kitchen of her modest home in rural Michigan, Shade admired her latest culinary creation—raspberry and white chocolate cheesecake with a shortbread crust. After placing the cake on a decorative platter, she added a dusting of confectioners' sugar.

Stanley's looming presence cast a shadow in the room. He embraced her from behind and nuzzled her neck with his clean-shaven chin. A whiff of menthol from the Aqua Velva after-shave filled her nostrils, leaving her woozy.

"My wife is the best darned baker in Emmet County. Everyone knows my Shady's donation will bring in the highest bid, just like last year's peaches and cream pie." His fingers tugged on her apron strings, and he slipped her smock over her shoulders.

"Darling," she said, "I've already showered. We need to leave in thirty minutes."

Stan's lips puckered in that special way of his. "This will only take ten. You know what the Bible says about honoring your man's needs."

Ten minutes turned out to be five, at best. After showering again, she gathered her thick, chestnut brown hair into a traditional bun. As she dabbed a hint of gloss on her lips, Stan squeezed into the bathroom behind her, frowning.

"Why are you putting that stuff on? It makes you look older."

"It's only tinted lip gloss. You know me better than that."

After patting him on the back, she retreated to the bedroom to change. Dolefully, she removed the new dress from the closet. Stan had purchased the button-down, short-sleeved frock at Kmart while shopping for WD-40. He claimed he'd spotted it on a seventy percent-off rack, and it screamed "Shady" to him as he wandered by the flashing blue strobe light. Embellished with a brown and gold pineapple print, the polyester material sagged from her shoulders in generous folds, dipping well below her knees.

Biting her lower lip, she assessed her image in the mirror. She couldn't hurt his feelings, but she wished he would allow her to buy more fashionable clothing and wear a touch of makeup. At thirty-five, she had the face and figure of a woman in her twenties, but her garments added layers of frump.

Since their first day of marriage, Stan insisted on choosing her wardrobe—right down to her underwear. While her clothes looked like garage sale cast-offs, her undergarments—well those were another story. When the monthly Frederick's of Hollywood catalog arrived, he pored over every page circling a selection of risqué bras and panties before phoning in his order. And Shade appreciated having something new to wear—something that brought pleasure to Stan.

After donning her thick-lens eyeglasses, which magnified her ocean-blue eyes to the size of the frame, she packed up her cheesecake.

“I’ll pull out the car and meet you in front,” he said.

As they drove along the country road that led to Holy Grace, Stan broke the silence.

“Have you heard from Addy?”

“I called and left a message asking if we could take Tyler to the picnic. I never heard back. You know how she feels about church-related events. She’s afraid we’re brainwashing our grandchild. She thinks we’re on the lunatic fringe of Christianity.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? She’s just ungrateful. And who is she to talk—living with that drug-addict thug, Jaime? And *we’re* the lunatics?”

Slumping in her seat, Shade reflected on Addy’s wayward lifestyle. Every day she prayed for Addy and Tyler, but nothing changed. When Addy had brought Tyler over a few weeks before, she appeared disheveled and lethargic. The tank top she tried to wear kept slipping off her frail, bony shoulder. Her once flawless complexion was now pale and drawn, her eyes lifeless and sunken. Plastered against her head, her jet-black hair looked like it had gone for a dip in Crisco. And there was that strange odor emanating from her body. Burnt plastic?

Despite her anxiety, Shade reveled in the time she got to spend with her grandson, though. The adorable two-year-old had stolen her heart.

“Why don’t you let him live here with us until you get your life straightened out?” Shade had asked when Addy came to pick up Tyler.

“We’re not having this conversation again. What makes you think you can raise him any better than I can? He has a home, and Jaime loves him. Yeah, I’m not the ideal daughter you hoped for, but I’m not a bad mother.” She threw up her arms. “Just mind your own business and

be grateful you get to see him at all.” In a flurry, Addy scooped up Tyler and stormed out the door.

“Bye-bye, Gamma,” Tyler said, waving.

Shade drew in her lips and followed them to the car. “Thanks for bringing him over today,” she said, handing Addy a paper bag. “We made cookies. These are for you.”

“Thanks.” Addy snatched the bag out of Shade’s hand and drove off without another word.

Shade never shared the unpleasant details of Addy’s behavior with Stan. He got too worked up when it came to their daughter.

Their Ford Probe rolled into the parking lot, as church members ambled about, setting up the auction table. Blanche Buford, the church gossip, made a beeline to Shade and Stan. Shade tried to make a quick escape, but failed.

“Shade,” said Blanche, eyeing her from head to toe. “Don’t you look delightful today. Let me guess. You made a pineapple-upside-down cake for the auction this year.”

Shade’s face burned hot as she looked down, pushing her eyeglasses against the bridge of her nose. Oblivious to the backhanded compliment, Stan swelled with pride.

“Actually, I made a cheesecake this year. Speaking of which, I’d better get this over to the auction table.” She hurried off before the next round of insults could devour her dignity.

“Hey, you two,” Pastor Dave called. “I’ve been looking for you. Stan, do you mind leading us in prayer after the auction? I’d like our church elders to have a more prominent role in the summer picnic.”

“I’d be happy to,” Stan replied.

While Shade arranged her dessert on the auction table, Mary Crosby came over and gave her a hug.

“It’s so good to see you,” Mary said.

“And you, too,” said Shade, smiling. Despite their thirty-year age difference, Mary was her dearest friend. Being in Mary’s presence brought her comfort, like warm apple pie on a chilly fall day. Sunlight danced over Mary’s cheerful face, igniting her auburn hair and illuminating her mismatched eyes, one pale green, the other dark brown.

“And your cheesecake looks delicious. You know all the women are intimidated by your baking skills.”

“Well, they shouldn’t be,” said Shade as redness crept across her cheeks. “There are so many talented bakers in our church.”

“But not like you. Baking is your special gift.”

As if she were about to launch into a Broadway melody, Blanche swaggered to the front of the crowd and gripped the microphone. “Attention everyone. It’s my great pleasure to lead the auction bidding today. But first, I’d like to thank our bakers. The money raised will go to our mission team in Haiti. So, let’s give a hearty round of applause to all our Betty Crocker wannabes.”

When her cheesecake came up for bid, Shade’s stomach coiled as waves of anxiety ripped through her body. Chewing her bottom lip, she tried blending into the crowd. Stan came to her side, his thick arm wrapped around her waist. Her tension eased.

“I bid thirty dollars,” said one woman.

“Forty dollars,” came the next bid.

Other bids followed until the final offer came in at a record-breaking sixty-three dollars.

Stan swept her off the ground, smothering her face with kisses. “Honey, you outdid yourself this year. I told you everyone knows you’re the best baker in town.”

Her hand flew to her mouth. She couldn’t imagine anyone paying that much for her cheesecake. A swell of pride crept in if only for a second.

Pastor Dave nodded to Stan.

Stan stepped in front of the large crowd and bowed his head. “Dear Lord. We are so grateful for this blessed family of believers who’ve gathered today to enjoy fellowship and to raise money for a worthy cause.”

With a surge in her heart, Shade was held captive by the sound of her husband’s baritone voice reverberating through the crowd.

“And we thank the hands that prepared the baked goods for the auction today and for those who brought a dish to pass for our...” Stan paused, all the color draining from his contorted face. Then he stumbled onto the baked goods auction table, knocking Blanche Buford’s triple-chocolate-mousse torte onto the lawn.

Stan’s large form lay lifeless on the grass amid a cluster of smashed fruit pies and overturned layer cakes. His white, short-sleeved shirt bloomed with blobs of blueberry and strawberry filling. A lone cherry stuck to his vanilla-white forehead, like the topping on an ice-cream sundae.

Pandemonium arose as the crowd rushed to help. “Someone call an ambulance!”

At the age of fifty-six, Stanley Lane departed this world. Her beloved husband, the man she idolized and had never spent a night apart from, slipped away forever, enveloping Shade in a dreadful darkness that seeped into her pores. There were no other emotions. Once again, abandoned, she descended into the emptiness she had become all too familiar with as a young, lost child.