

## ***Wedding Ring***

### CHAPTER ONE

After she surrendered to the inevitable and gave up trying to make her grandmother open the front door, Tessa MacRae resigned herself to spending the rest of the sweltering morning in what passed for shade on the front porch. The time wasn't completely wasted. From the vantage point of a creaking old swing, Tessa could observe almost everything she needed to know about her grandmother's world.

First, in an area renowned for its natural splendor, this little corner of the Shenandoah Valley was not holding up its end.

The evaluation was interrupted by the screech of a window being wrenched open just above her.

"You still down there, Missy? I didn't ask you to come, you know, and I sure didn't ask for these!"

At thirty-seven, Tessa, a high school English teacher, hadn't been a "Missy" for a number of years, but this was not the moment to object. A rattling followed Helen Henry's words and suddenly the air was filled, not with much-needed rain, but with balls of paper sliding off the tin roof to the ground below. Tessa tried to count them as they fell. A dozen at least, then after a pithy pause, half a dozen more.

The window above the porch slammed shut again.

Tessa waited, but the paper hailstorm had ended. She got to her feet, picked up and smoothed a wad that had landed on the front steps. Two women and a man, with broad smiles and glowing silver hair stared back at her from a golf course fairway.

"Green Springs Retirement Community," she read out loud. "Because today is the first day of the rest of your life." Crumpling the page in her fist

again she wondered how many similar brochures her mother, Nancy Whitlock, had sent Helen during the past weeks. When nothing else fell from above she returned to the swing, drew her knees up to her chin and got on with her assessment.

On her drive to the small town of Toms Brook, Tessa had been charmed as always by the magnificent blue-green sweep of mountains, the Queen Anne's lace and wild chicory blooming by the roadside, the placid, heat-hypnotized cattle and horses dotting Virginia's hillsides and meadows. But that was a panorama, a rural still life, and unfortunately her grandmother's farm, which was baking under an unrelenting sun, was something else altogether.

The drought that had affected the entire area had been particularly bad here. Corn was *not* going to be knee high by the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, which was only three days away. Several acres of field corn across the road from her grandmother's house looked like Bonsai gardens gone awry, twisted, stunted and shriveling under the sun. Only the dandelions seemed to be holding their own. Unless the area got rain and plenty of it, the corn wouldn't even be knee high by Labor Day.

Then there was the heat. Virginia was no one's idea of a summertime oasis, but Tessa, a native, couldn't remember a hotter July. While waiting for her grandmother to reconsider her options, Tessa had probably sweated away an entire quart of bottled spring water. No air stirred. No bees hummed. The mud daubers who had built a castle under the eaves had pulled up their drawbridge and escaped into the keep. Even the blue jays had declared a truce with the crows and were probably napping side by side under the leafy branches of Helen's twin maples.

The window screeched again. "And take these while you're at it!" Helen shouted. "You think I need your fancy presents?"

The nightgown, then the robe that Tessa had bought her grandmother on Helen's last birthday, floated to the rambling rose that sprawled uncontrolled along trellis and porch railing. They bloomed there in soft shades of violet and pink, as close to real blossoms as the rose had produced in years.

"Or your mother's!" Helen added.

Tessa hoped that Nancy hadn't given Helen a piano or a safe. She was glad when the only thing to flutter past was a garnet red sweater on its way to the holly bush beside the rose.

The window slammed again.

The sweltering Tessa stared stoically out at the Massanutten mountains in the far distance. Neither the Alleghenies nor the Massanutten, which flanked this upper part of the Shenandoah Valley, were simple postcard views. They were touchable, habitable mountains populated for centuries by stalwart homesteaders who had seen their slopes as challenges and the peaceful, flourishing valley in between as their reward. The entire valley was a testament that rural life, idealized and cherished by millions of city dwellers, existed still.

But today life in general seemed to have mysteriously vanished here on Fitch Crossing Road. In all the time Tessa had sat there, sweated there and silently willed her grandmother to throw up her hands and invite her inside, not one car had passed. Once she had turned off Route 11 and headed toward the Shenandoah River, Tessa's small green Toyota had been King of the Road. No tractors, no hay wagons, no horse crazy teenagers passing a lazy summer afternoon.

For all practical purposes Helen seemed to have Fitch Crossing to herself. If her grandmother died in this house—as she fully intended—she might well be a desiccated, mummified corpse before anyone realized she was gone.

The window screeched again. Tessa visualized medieval knights pouring boiling oil from towers on the heads of invaders below. She rested her feet on the ground, her hands on her lap, and made a conscious effort to loosen the kinks in her neck.

"And don't forget this!" Helen said.

If the first paper blitz had resembled hailstones, this one resembled snow. Pastel colored snow. One of the tiny shredded pieces drifted to the porch floor. Tessa could see it was the corner of a check, most likely one of the many her mother had sent—one of the many Helen Henry had never cashed.

She waited for the window to slam once more. When it did she propelled her head back and forth, side to side and tied up her conclusions.

Helen was not taking care of the farm. The Old Stoneburner Place—as it would be called until Doomsday—had never been a showplace. It was a working farm, product of German immigrants who had crosscut timber to build their first dogtrot cabin, cleared fields with the help of mules and multitudes of sons, shivered through mountain-shadowed nights and shuddered under summer skies.

Helen, a Stoneburner by birth, had worked the farm without help from family for almost sixty years. Somehow she had eked out a living and held on to the land despite rising property taxes, managing somehow. Clearly she was not managing anymore.

The farmyard looked neglected. On the way up to the house Tessa had been forced to maneuver ruts in the driveway as deep as the drainage ditches lining it. The day lilies and peonies that had multiplied decades ago to border the ditches were being choked out by weeds and waist-high saplings; the fence around the vegetable garden was sagging and torn.

The house looked neglected, too. There were a thousand farmhouses like it in rural Virginia. Long, deep front porch, tin roof, white clapboard

siding always in need of touching up. A screen door stood between a heavier door and the world outside, welcoming breezes and neighbors.

Today it was a typical farmhouse fast declining. Problems with the exterior were almost too extensive to catalog. And inside? The interior was a mystery, a black hole of gruesome possibilities. All Tessa knew, all *anybody* knew, was what one neighbor had told Tessa's mother.

When recounting that conversation Nancy Henry Whitlock had stamped through the sentences as if she was afraid the end might be out of reach.

"I don't know how Ron Claiborne got my phone number, but he did somehow and that's neither here nor there, I suppose. Then he said—" and Nancy's voice had changed to mimic his: "Ma'am, I'm sorry to say it but your ma's in a bad way. She don't come outside anymore, and she don't let nobody in. But I seen what I seen through her front door. And it like to have stopped my heart. She being the neat. . . well, prissy old woman that she is. You understand what I mean?"

Nancy had paused at that point before she added in her own incredulous voice. "Like he thought maybe I really didn't understand."

Tessa still wasn't sure if her mother had been more aghast at the message or the messenger who had delivered it. A Claiborne? A hard-drinking, fast-living Claiborne tattling on a Henry?

Tessa, of course, had been the first person Nancy called after she hung up on Mr. Claiborne. God forbid that Nancy would look into this or any problem on her own. No, there was a ritual Nancy followed at moments like these. The wringing and fluttering of hands, the public gnashing of teeth, the litanies of "I told you there was a problem," and "If somebody would listen to me once in awhile . . ."

As for the problem itself, neither Nancy nor Tessa really knew the full extent. Helen had refused to allow Nancy or Tessa's father Billy inside the

farmhouse to see what Mr. Claiborne had meant, meeting them at the soda fountain at the Walton and Smoot Pharmacy instead, after Nancy threatened to alert the health department or the sheriff.

According to Nancy Helen had looked unkempt at that meeting, but, of course, Nancy, whose self-grooming sacrament took a full hour of each morning, thought that anyone who hadn't just stepped out of a full-service salon was worse for wear.

Helen had been surly, too, Nancy claimed. That, also, was nothing new. On a good day, people said that Helen was feisty, strong-minded, no-nonsense. Good days were rare. More often she was said to be mean-spirited, difficult, the woman most likely to snatch poor Toto from Dorothy's arms and turn him over to the sheriff.

So the news, at that point, had only been expected. Then, the story had taken a sharp turn. Helen—and this was still hard for Tessa to believe—Helen had admitted that she was slowing down. Under Billy's patient questioning, she had admitted that no, she couldn't keep up as well as before, that no, the house wasn't as clean as it should be, that yes, she wasn't quite sure what to do about it. Helen Stoneburner Henry, a senior Superwoman in a house dress, had admitted that yes, she might possibly, just *might* need a little help.

Of course even though she hadn't been there, Tessa understood exactly what must have triggered the next exchange. While Billy had gently teased the truth from Helen's lips, Nancy had surely quoted county ordinances, conversations with officials at the health department, the nuggets of information Nancy had gleaned in regards to declaring an aging relative incompetent. Then, as a finale, she had probably sung the praises of every retirement community within ten miles of the Richmond city limits.

According to Tessa's father the conversation had ended with Helen's furious denouncement: "You're not moving me to some fancy old folks

home hundreds of miles from here, not while I'm still breathing. And you're not coming inside my house ever again. Not unless you bring that daughter of yours along. At least Tessa has some sense!"

So now Tessa waited, poised for the fun to begin. She was not amused by the irony. She was caught squarely between two women she really didn't want to know any better, forced to spend the remainder of her summer vacation watching them dance and feint like boxers in a ring. On top of that if the inside of the house was anything like the outside, she would be painting and patching all of July and August.

But what did it really matter? What was waiting for her at home in Fairfax? *Who* was waiting for her?

A cloud of dust announced that indeed, there was life on Fitch Road after all. Tessa turned her head to watch the cloud move toward her. In the center was a black sedan, her mother's sleek Mercedes, now coated with Fitch Crossing's gritty charms. The car slowed and the cloud drifted home. Nancy was still going too fast when she turned into the driveway. She narrowly avoided the northern ditch, overcompensated and straightened just in time to avoid the southern.

Tessa didn't move. She felt the remainder of the summer closing in on her. *Life* was closing in on her. She was not strong enough for this, might never be strong enough again. Yet here she was, dutiful daughter, solicitous granddaughter, peacekeeper. Tessa MacRae, high school English teacher, wife of a successful attorney, survivor. She had already been through the worst that life could throw at her. She reminded herself there was nothing that could happen here to rival it.