

*Chicago, IL*  
*One evening in late April . . .*

## **PROLOGUE**

The well-dressed Asian man closed his flip phone and slid it into the pocket of his perfectly tailored double breasted suit. He stood staring out one of the many windows that lined the wall of the small studio watching the sunset over the Chicago skyline. His dark eyes narrowed as he considered that in some strange way the setting sun was a metaphor for his own predicament.

A noise startled him out of his contemplation. So lost in his own thoughts, he'd forgotten the person he was here to see, the petite artist known to the art world as Peaches.

Peaches smiled and held up the roll of brown wrapping paper. "I was going to wrap it." She pointed at the painted canvas sitting on an easel some distance from them. "But then I realized the paint is still settling. Maybe you should leave it for another day or two."

His dark eyes raked over her tiny form studying her intensely. Such a strange little creature, with that dreadful hair, and those ill-fitting clothes, yet she exhibited a rare talent. And he would know. As a connoisseur of fine art he had an eye for talent. With the proper guidance and cultivation her talent could grow far beyond what she was producing now.

He turned his attention back to the painting he was examining before he was interrupted by the phone call. She had such a unique instinct for lines. His eyes savored

the fine strokes of yellow, beige and brown. The painting embodied all the contentment he'd been robbed of the last few weeks. It was a painting of peace like the dozen others he'd commissioned her to paint for him over the past few years. Peace.

For years he'd search to find on canvas what he could not find in life. He sighed to himself realizing that recent events would no doubt make his relationship with the burgeoning artist impossible to continue. He had to get out of the country right away and probably would not be able to return anytime soon.

"Alright. I'll send someone to pick it up Friday." Even as he muttered the words he knew the chances were slim, if any.

That is why he'd come today in an attempt to pick it up earlier than agreed upon. He'd wanted to collect the painting today so it could be packed along with his other precious possessions. This was one of her best pieces. He did not want to leave it behind. But if the paint was still wet he wasn't willing to take the risk of it being ruined.

"Are the others ready?" He asked, in reference to the three other paintings of his he'd left on previous occasions.

Her eyes widened. "You're taking those as well? You didn't say anything about them on the phone. I was hoping to use those in my next show."

He lowered his eyelids to hide the flare of anger he knew would be reflected there. "I'm afraid that has become impossible. I have to leave the country for a while and I want to take those with me."

She opened her mouth as if to argue but instead gave a brief nod. "Alright, I'll go pack them up."

His phone rang again and he answered it as he watched her pass through the doorway into the other room.

A few seconds later he closed the phone and once again returned it to his jacket pocket. He took several deep breaths fighting to control the rage building in his chest.

It was all falling apart. Now, he knew they would be waiting for him at the airport. His man had failed in his task.

His mind quickly calculated a new strategy as he listened to the crinkling sound of the brown wrapping paper being torn and taped in the next room. Despite the sounds he still glanced over his shoulder to be sure he was alone before he took a small plastic case out of his jacket pocket and removed a miniscule silver dot inside. He lifted the drying canvas from the easel and quickly slid the tiny chip between the wood frame and the canvas cover.

He gently returned the canvas to its upright position and stepped back to take one final look at the painting knowing it would be the last time he would see it for a while. As he ran his blunt fingers over his suit jacket to smooth the lines he was contemplating all the possible outcomes of the next few hours.

He still had every intention of escaping the country without interference. Things rarely did not go according to his plans. But in the unlikely instance that he was caught he would take great satisfaction in knowing that they could prove nothing without the chip. Of course, if he did get away he would return and collect his properly at a later time. After all, the painting was already his, bought and paid for. And he always collected what he was owed.

*Chicago, IL . . .*  
*Three months later . . .*

## CHAPTER ONE

“Sister Wilcox, can I buy another cupcake?” Jayron Mitchell, an incorrigible ten year old smiled brightly. His large brown eyes set in a round, chubby face gave him the appearance of being even younger.

“Of course you can, Jayron.” Angela Wilcox glanced down at the half empty platter on the table in front of her. Sitting in the middle of the large tray were four misshapen, dark brown objects. Each individually wrapped in a slightly scorched paper cupcake holder and smeared with pastel colored icing. Two of the four even had colored sprinkles on top, although the candy did nothing to increase the overall appeal to pedestrians who wandered into the church parking lot browsing the long tables that lined the blacktop in neat rows. The bright red table clothes on every table were covered with baked goods in every variety.

Most of the donations had been made by the members of the Starlight Baptist Church Women’s Committee, of which Angie was a member. Some had been donated from a local bakery in support of their efforts to raise funds to pay off their church’s outstanding debts.

Many church members stopped to chat with Angie. Having been a member of the church for several years she knew almost everyone on a first name basis. But the strange looks and not so subtle inquiries her baked goods received wasn’t anything Angie was not use to. She knew what people thought of her cooking skills—or lack thereof.

Out of the batter for four dozen cupcakes she'd originally started with, almost half of them had survived the baking process intact, and after scraping off the too burnt parts and covering them in icing most of those had been good enough to bring. Considering she'd never tried cupcakes before Angie knew that for her fifty percent wasn't half-bad.

Several members of the Women's Committee had, of course, tried to talk her out of participating in the bake sale. But Angela was determined to do her part to help ease the church's troubled situation. And in her own way, maybe lift a little of the burden off the wide and capable shoulders of their new pastor.

And despite their lack of appeal her cupcakes were selling much better than she'd expected. Much better than anyone expected. Thanks to the children they were almost completely gone. They seemed to love her confectionery creation. Several of them coming back for seconds, and even thirds. But Jayron was by far her best customer.

"Which one would you like?" She asked the boy who had yet to look at the tray. His complete attention still focused on her face.

Continuing to stare up at the woman with dreamy eyes, Jayron smiled widely. "It doesn't matter."

Angie gently scooped up one of the lopsided balls, placed it on a napkin and handed it over. Jayron handed her the one-dollar bill crumpled in his sweaty fist, then turned and dashed away at top speed.

Angela watched him disappear into the fellowship hall connected to the back of the larger sanctuary before tucking the dollar in the small canister sitting on the table.

"That's the fifth cupcake he's bought today." She said with a sigh, casting a smug glance at her fellow tablemate's trays of treats which were still almost full.

The two women who shared the long table with Angie stood with identical expressions of dumbfounded wonder on their twin faces. Sisters Verdall and Constance Thurman's baking skills were legendary as was their taste for juicy gossip.

Everyone knew they were the best bakers in the church. They had been called upon to produce desserts for everything from the Evans wedding ten years ago to Deacon Jefferson's retirement party last month. Yet today, the day of the church's first ever bake sale, a day that should have *showcased* their particular talent, the laws of nature seem to be in some kind of tailspin.

Angela knew they were confounded—truth be told—no one was more surprised by her success than she was. She had heard all the jokes, even the one about her being able to burn water. Even now she could still hear the slight snickering coming from the twin's end of the table when she'd arrived earlier that morning and set up her display.

But despite all her past failures, today she'd proved them all wrong, especially the ones who said she was beyond hopeless. And she couldn't fight the feeling of validation that filled her chest. Her Aunt Tilde always said if you practiced something long enough you couldn't help but get better at it.

"The children just can't seem to get enough of my cupcakes." Angie said, unable to keep from gloating.

"Yes, I've noticed that." Verdell said with confusion written all over her face. "I wonder why."

Angie's eyes widened at the blatant insult. "What do you mean why?! Because they taste good!"

Realizing her slip, Verdell's eyes widened in response. "Of course—I mean, I just wondered why cupcakes are the only thing they are buying."

The twins had sold very little of their combined trays of apple turnovers, chocolate chip cookies and peach cobbler.

"Sister Wilcox."

Angela felt a tug on her sleeve.

"Can I buy a cupcake?"

Angie turned to see little Kiana Russell standing at her side. The pretty little girl smiled.

"Of course you can." With a knowing smirk at her tablemates Angela bent toward the child. She smiled and gave the eight-year-old a small kiss on her forehead. "Do you know which one you want?"

"The green one." Kiana pointed to the tray.

The child paid for her cupcake and walked away soon disappearing into the fellowship hall just as Jayron had done earlier.

Angie watched the girl curiously. "Is anything set up in the fellowship hall?" She asked the twins. "I thought all the tables were out here."

"Not that I know of." Verdell answered, easing closer to get a better look at Angie's two remaining cupcakes. "Why do you ask?"

"I notice the children keep going in there."

Verdell reached in her blue jean skirt pocket and pulled out a small handkerchief. "Probably just trying to escape from this heat." She said, dappling lightly at her moist neck.

At the other end of the table Constance glanced down at her tray of perfectly browned apple turnovers, bracing her hands on her wide hips in consideration. "I can't believe I've only sold two of my apple turnovers. Everybody loves my turnovers."

She glanced past Verdell at Angie's diminishing tray and then her eyes met her sisters. Verdall hunched her shoulders to convey her own bewilderment.

Another young boy, Brian Bender, slowly approached the table. He glanced longingly at the appealing plate of chocolate chip cookies licking his lips.

Just when Connie was certain she was about to make a sale he moved farther down the table focusing his attention on Angie's two remaining cupcakes.

"Sister Wilcox, can I buy those?" He said pointing at the plate even as he looked back over his shoulder at the tray of cookies.

"Sure, Brian," Angie said, her brows slightly crinkled. "But wouldn't you rather a cookie?" His desire was written plainly in his eyes.

He shook his head determinedly. "Not yet. First I need the cupcakes."

*Need.* Angie cocked her head to the side looking at the six-year-old. "Are you sure?" She asked, even as she wrapped her two final cupcakes in a napkin and handed them over.

He smiled brightly and handed over the two dollars. "Yep, thanks!" With a wave, he took off toward the fellowship hall.

Angie bit her bottom lip trying to understand why a child who so obviously wanted a cookie would spend his two dollars on cupcakes. She glanced at Connie and Verdall who had their heads together whispering urgently.

“If I had known they would go so quickly I would’ve fixed more.” Angie said brightly, collecting her empty trays and money canister.

The sisters whispering became frantic as Angie realized neither was listening to her, they were too busy arguing. Finally, Connie spun to face her with a strange expression in her eyes.

“My sister wants to know if you would be willing to share your cupcake recipe.” Connie glared at Verdell who stood beside her nodding in agreement.

Angie smiled widely, a beautiful hundred-watt smile filled with pride. No one had ever asked her to share a recipe. “I would be delighted.”

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Brian Bender entered the fellowship hall. He followed the long, narrow path that ran along the back of the church until he came to the stairwell leading to the second level where the business offices were.

He climbed the stairs, and went to the end of the hall which led back to the front of the building and knocked on the large oak wood door.

“Come in.” A masculine voice called from the other side.

Brian eagerly entered the room barely noticing a second man leaning against the desk with his arms crossed over his chest. He headed straight for the one standing in front of the window that overlooked the parking lot.

Brian’s head was just barely high enough to see out the window to the busy courtyard below where the bake sale was being held.

“I did what you asked Pastor Campbell.” He extended his little hand, and grinned as the man placed four single dollar bills on his palm.

“And you did a great job, Brian. Thank you.”

The youngster’s chest lifted with pride in a job well done. “No problem. It was easy.” His grin faded slightly when he remembered the contents of his other hand.

“Umm, . . . do I have to eat these?” He held up the napkin of cupcakes.

Gabriel Campbell tried to hide a smile. “No, just leave it on the desk with the others.”

“Great!” He darted across the room and dropped his package on the desk beside the other man, never noticing the trail of crumbs he left in his wake. “I’m going to get some of Sister Thurman’s cookies before they are all gone.”

“Brian—if Sis. Wilcox ask just tell her you gave your cupcakes to a friend.”

Brian paused at the door. “I know, Pastor Campbell. I gave them to you.”

“Brian, wait—”

But it was too late. The door slammed shut on his words and seconds later Gabe heard light feet thumping down the stairs.

“It’s your own fault if you get caught.” The other man, who until then had been quiet finally spoke from across the room. “Using those kids to do your dirty work.”

“I had to.” Gabe said, with a sheepish glance at his old friend, James Cruise. “No one else would’ve bought them. She would’ve been crushed.” Gabe tucked his hands in the pockets of his slacks and turned back toward the window looking down on the parking lot where the tall, slender, dark beauty that haunted his dreams was in deep discussion with Verdell and Constance Thurman.

“A twenty-five dollar tray of cupcakes just cost you fifty bucks.” James said.

“It was worth it.” Gabe smiled suddenly. “I think she’s giving out the recipe.”

“I guess so,” James snorted. “Those other ladies probably think she’s part Keebler elf considering how quickly those cupcakes sold.”

Gabe watched as Verdell leaned closer and whispered something, and Angie laughed. Gabe could almost hear it. He loved her laughter. It was as sultry as her speaking voice and as genuine as the woman.

“She deserves her moment in the sun like everyone else.”

“A moment bought and paid for by you.”

Gabe glanced at his friend. James was stalling. The instant realization came from years of friendship. Gabe knew that whatever James wanted to tell him it wouldn’t be good. Reluctant to take his eyes off Angie Wilcox, Gabe took a deep breath and turned to face the other man.

“I know you didn’t drive all the way from Detroit just to scold me about spending too much money on a bake sale, James. Whatever you found in your audit can’t be any worse than what my imagination has already come up with. Just spit it out.”

James stared at his friend for a long moment before reaching behind him to pick up the thick file he’d brought with him. “The church is facing a bankruptcy.”

Gabe braced his weight against the windowsill. This is exactly what he’d feared. Some part of him had known it was coming but to actually hear it said out loud was still painful.

“I thought you said your brother, Julian, was some kind of financial wizard.”

“He is.” James nodded. “But the situation is worse than I thought. You need a *huge* infusion of cash, and considering this . . .” he gestured to the room around them, “is

all you have for collateral . . . ” he shook his head. “It doesn’t leave you with a lot of alternatives.”

“Well, hopefully we’ll make some money off this bake sale, and despite the protest of the elders we are having an auction in a couple of weeks that I expect will bring in quite a bit—”

“Gabe—you don’t understand. This is far beyond anything that can be fixed with bake sales and auctions.”

Gabe dropped his head in defeat, having already made his decision of what he would have to do in this event. “Okay. I’ll refinance my townhouse—”

“Hold it right there!” James suddenly stood straight up stretching to his full six feet, and pointing an accusing finger at his friend. “I knew you were going to try something stupid like that. You can’t just sink all your own personal assets into this church.”

Despite the circumstances Gabe smiled to himself. Only an old friend would dare to call Gabe Campbell, the respected minister and pastor of Starlight Baptist Church, stupid. Someone who knew him long before God was any part of his life, let alone, the most important part.

James Cruise knew the old Gabe Campbell well. And Gabe was certain that knowledge was the reason he was so determined to help now.

When Gabe had come to Starlight as an associate minister almost a year ago the congregation had accepted him right away. Being such a small church they weren’t typically sought after by the more ambitious young ministers.

Their only clergy consisted of their elderly pastor and two aging deacons. The only administrative staff was the pastor's elderly wife who acted as both treasurer and secretary.

For a talented, young minister seeking notoriety and prestige Starlight Baptist was the last place they would look to find it. But for one particularly talented, young minister who sought only peace and a chance to serve God with all his heart Starlight seemed like a welcoming oasis in the desert.

It hadn't taken Gabe long to become attached to the wise, older minister who took him under his wing like a son and protégé. And given the precarious state of his health, Rev. Ralph Littlejohn was perfectly happy to give over more and more responsibility to the younger man. Being the only associate minister Gabe learned everything he could, knowing there was a chance he would inherit the position sometime in the distant future.

But the distant future arrived suddenly with the heart attack and death of Pastor Littlejohn followed within a month by the death of Lillian Littlejohn, the pastor's wife.

Many members saw the two deaths so close together as proof that their last pastor and his wife were indeed soul mates destined to be together in this life and the next. But, the two deaths so close together also left the church with little leadership and no administrative support.

As soon as the funeral was over and without seeking any outside candidates the deacons approached Gabe with the blessing of the congregation and offered him the position of pastor. He accepted.

It had only taken Gabe a cursory look at the accounting ledgers to see that Starlight was in financial trouble. A more detailed look had revealed poor bookkeeping,

and may unpaid debts. And after intense scrutiny, Gabe had come to the conclusion that the task of record keeping had at some point become too much for the aging Mrs. Littlejohn. For whatever reasons, instead of passing on the task, she'd simply kept silent. Gabe couldn't afford that luxury.

Instead, he was completely honest with the church regarding their financial troubles. He'd announced it during a business meeting a couple of weeks ago. As he knew they would the congregation had stepped up right away offering the idea of a bake sale and auction to help raise funds.

On his own, Gabe quietly contacted an old friend from Detroit who also happened to be a partner in Cruise Corporation, one of the top financial consulting firms in the country. He was determined to protect his predecessors good name.

After all, Chicago was a big city but in many ways a small town and in it Rev. Littlejohn had been well respected and well admired, and over his fifty years as a minister he had left a legacy of good works and community service that Gabe would not allow to be tainted by the church's dire financial straits at the moment of his untimely death.

When he called, he had hoped James could find a quick and discreet answer to their problem, but from the look in his friend's eyes Gabe knew there was no such solution forthcoming.

He folded his arms over his chest. "So, what are you recommending?"

"Well, I would suggest you sell the building, and lease—"

"No!" Gabe's head starting shaking back and forth as soon as he heard the words "No—there is no way I'm selling the building, the Littlejohn's sacrifices everything to

buy this building, and within a year of taking over you expect me to just throw it all away?”

“Gabe, you’ve got to listen to reason. The building is the only *real* asset the church has. Sale the building with the stipulation of leasing. This way, you gain the profit of the sale—ready capital you can use to pay off your debt but without having to relocate.”

“And what happens when the new landlord decides to evict us?”

“We’ll make sure that the leasing option is iron clad. Trust me, we’ve got terrific lawyers. You won’t be evicted. This kind of thing is done all the time.”

Gabe’s gold-green eyes narrowed on his friend’s face. “What else you got?”

James pursed his lips in frustration. “You are one stubborn man, you know that?”

“Considering you’ve been repeating that statement as long as I’ve known you how could I not know. Now, what are our other options?”

James tossed the file on the desk and ran both his hands over his face. “You’re going to like this idea even less.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Ask your father for a loan.”

Gabe tilted his head giving his friend a strange look. His mouth opened to form words but nothing came out. He shook his head hard trying to be certain this was not all just some sort of strange nightmare.

Once he was certain he was awake and James had indeed said what he’d said. He finally responded. “Have you lost your mind?!”

James shook his head sadly. “Desperate times call for desperate measures.”

“I’ll never be that desperate.”

“I beg to differ, my friend. You’re already there.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I’m dead serious.”

“Do you honestly expect me to pay this church’s debts in blood money?”

“No. I expect you to listen to reason. Sell the church and lease it back. But you asked for other alternatives to that—so I gave you one!”

Gabe turned back toward the window staring down at the group of women beginning to wrap up their pastries and pack the leftovers in their cars. The congregation was doing their part. Now, it was time for him to do his.

“I appreciate your help, James, but neither of those choices is acceptable.”

“Gabe, I know what you are thinking, but if you sink all your money into this place and it still goes under . . . you go with it.”

Gabe released a deep sigh full of frustration. “So that’s it, huh? Those are my choices. Lose the church or lose my soul.”

“Lose your soul? Come on, man. Don’t you think that’s a bit harsh? Comparing your ole’ man to the devil?”

Gabe’s shoulders slumped slightly feeling the weight of all his new responsibilities weighing him down. “He makes his money selling blood diamonds mined on the backs of his own people.” Gabe turned slightly and looked directly into his friend’s eyes. “There is no comparison. They are one in the same.”

## CHAPTER TWO

As Angie was helping to fold up the red table clothes the current president of the Women's Committee, Sister Sabrina Medley, approached her table.

Watching her approach Angie was once again taken aback by how the young woman always looked so put together. On what was arguably the hottest day of the summer so far ,when everyone else was struggling to stay cool and perspiring through their clothes, she still looked fresh and dry.

Sabrina stopped at the other end of the table discussing the upcoming auction with Verdell and Connie. As Sabrina stood slightly turned away Angie subtly observed her. Even at twenty-eight, Sabrina had a sort of fresh faced innocence that did not seem to conflict with her voluptuous shape.

Angie frowned down at the table cloth she was folding thinking of the long thin arms and legs that had been the bane of her existence. Gangly, lanky, awkward, those were the words she'd heard used to describe her through most of her childhood.

By the time she was seventeen Angie had come to realize she would never have the desirable round hips and full breast that most of the women in her family possessed. That natural sensuality that men loved, the type of sensuality women like Sabrina Medley oozed with little effort.

Sabrina's long, dark hair hung in a single braid over her left shoulder. She wore a lightweight, sleeveless, pink summer dress that fit her petite body in a way that made her look both appealing and practical. Neat.

Angie considered her own appearance. Her mid-length jet-black hair which started the day bone straight, and carefully styled was now twisted and attached with a large, black clip to the back of her head and thanks to the heat and sweat, her expensive perm was showing signs of *reverting*.

Knowing she would be outside on her feet all day, Angie had dressed for comfort in a pair of bland Khaki shorts, and a sleeveless dark green shell. She tried not to think about the dampness she felt on her lower back where her blouse was sticking. She doubted any article of clothing would have the nerve to stick to Sabrina Medley.

Having finished with the twins, Sabrina moved toward Angie with her polished smile firmly in place. “Sis. Wilcox, I have you down as donating a piece of artwork for the auction on the fifteenth. Were you still planning to do that?” She lifted a perfectly arched brow in a questioning expression.

The gesture, so small and incidental annoyed Angie. In fact, just about everything about Sabrina Medley annoyed Angie. And for the life of her she couldn’t understand why. The younger woman was at least five-years her junior, and had never said or did anything to her personally. But still . . . there was something about that screamed out to Angie on an instinctual level. And Angie Wilcox was a woman who listened to her instincts.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I’m picking it up this weekend.”

“Very good.” Sabrina nodded and made a note on her clipboard.

Angie twisted her mouth as she put the folded tablecloth on the table, and picked up the next crumbled one. Something about that “very good” felt extremely condescending.

“Do you have any idea what the value is?”

Angie shrugged. “Not really. A friend of mine is the artist, she’s really good, but I don’t know anything about pricing artwork.”

Sabrina smiled encouragingly. “It just so happens I’m an art major.”

*Of course you are.* Angie forced a smile. “Oh, really?” She had a feeling that if she’d said she was bringing a piece of pottery, Sabrina would’ve announced she was a world famous sculptor. She just had this air about her of super competence. And Angie realized that was the thing she found the *most* annoying.

“I can’t wait to see it.” Sabrina said with a final smile, and then waved as she headed across the lot to the next donor on her list.

Angie shook off the feeling of melancholy Sabrina Medley always left in her wake. It was such a strange feeling, to just not like someone for no apparent reason. Typically, Angie was a very accepting and outgoing person who got along with almost everyone she met.

As a female contractor, Angie had learned to master her people skills long ago. So many times she’d walked onto a job site where she had to supervise twenty or more men who all felt she did not belong there. Mastering the art of putting people at ease became as essential a tool as her cordless DeWalt drill. And she had to learn to do it with the least amount of fuss. After all, when you have a job that is fifty thousand dollars over budget and three months behind schedule, you didn’t have a lot of time to waste coddling grown men.

So why was it she could not seem to get past the inexplicable feeling of resentment she felt whenever in the company of Sabrina Medley?

She shook her head again in confusion, placing the second folded tablecloth on the table and picking up the third. One day, she was going to have to stop and really consider why she did not like that woman.

Folding the third tablecloth in half, Angie felt a tingling sensation run up her spine and forced herself not to turn in immediate response. It wasn't like she didn't know what the sensation was about, or where it was coming from. She'd felt it a hundred times or more, whenever *he* came into close contact with her or where she was, she would get an instant sense of awareness. A feeling so intense it was almost as if he'd reached out and touched her, even if he were across the room.

She took a deep breath and tried to ignore the strange feeling. After all, the last thing she needed in her life was *Gabe Campbell*. Like so many times before, she said a little, silent prayer that the sensation it would go away as quickly as it came. As usual, God chose to ignore this particular prayer. Instead, the feeling intensified until she did not think she could stand it, and suddenly that soft, velvety voice spoke from just over her shoulder.

"Ladies, I would like to thank you all for participating in the bake sale today." He spoke to the table at large, but was standing so close to Angie she could feel his warm breath on her neck.

"Of course, Reverend, always willing to do our part." Verdell piped up with a large teathy grin. Angie glanced up and caught Connie's attention fully focused on her face.

Angie knew what she was thinking. It was the same thing most of the church was thinking. Rev. Campbell paid way too much attention to her. Stood too close, touched her

too often. She consciously, eased forward a little, trying to discreetly put some distance between them.

Didn't the man know how his action would be perceived? Didn't he understand that he had to be above reproach? Angie knew she was going to have to talk to him, before he ruined his own reputation.

She felt his warm fingers lightly grip her elbow, and forced herself not to pull away. Any sudden moves would be like chum in shark water to the Thurman sisters.

"Sister Wilcox, I see your cupcakes were a big hit."

Angie couldn't stop herself from glowing with pride when she turned to face him. For some reason, it meant something that he'd noticed her success.

"Yes, it seems that the children loved them." When her eyes fully focused on his face, her breath caught in her throat. *Stop it! Don't look at me like that! Don't you realize these gossips are just waiting for you to take a misstep!*

His thick brows crinkled slightly. "Is something wrong, Sister Wilcox?"

Angie only then realized she was frowning. She straightened her face, and forced herself to look away from his mesmerizing gold-green eyes.

"No," She shook her head, and gestured at the sky. "Just the heat."

When she'd turned to face him, the motion had pulled her elbow out of his light hold. But now, he lifted her hand in his, and shifted his body so he could look at her face.

"Are you feeling light headed? Come inside, I'll get you a bottle of water."

Angie could almost feel Connie Thurman's beady eyes boring into her back. "No, I'm fine. Thank you, Reverend." *The man is his own worse enemy.*

She pulled her hand from his, quickly walked around to the other side of the table and began fidgeting with the table clothes stacking, un-stacking, then re-stacking them.

“Are you donating anything to the auction?” She asked, trying to find some common topic to turn his attention away from her.

Gabe stared at her busy fingers for several seconds. His eyes moved up her bare arms to her face and then over to Verdell and Connie. He sighed, as if finally realizing how his actions would be seen.

“Yes. Several pieces of jewelry.” He tucked his hands in his pockets.

*And keep them there.* “Are these pieces you made?” She asked, and instantly regretted the question, when she saw the way Connie and Verdell’s attention honed in on her.

They did not know he made jewelry, or that he wanted to open his own jewelry store. This was not information that he had made public knowledge. No, he’d shared that information with only Angie when she’d invited him to dinner a few weeks ago. An invitation she was now beginning to think was a mistake.

Ever since that innocently shared meal he’d begun exerting some sort of passive-aggressive, possessiveness. A possessiveness that had not gone unnoticed by the congregation.

Had the dinner invitation been extended to their previous Pastor, Rev. Littlejohn, no one would’ve thought anything of it. After thirty years over his flock, the fatherly minister’s reputation had been far above questioning. But no one would mistake Gabe Campbell for Pastor Littlejohn.

First of all, he was too young, Angie guess mid thirties, maybe a year or two older than herself. And good looking—gorgeous actually . . . everything from his creamy caramel skin to his stunning hazel-green eyes to those perfect heart shaped lips that spread to reveal the most beautiful smile in the world.

No, Gabe Campbell was nothing at all like Pastor Littlejohn. And Angie knew that the sensations he caused just being near her was nothing resembling fatherly affection. Which was all the more reason she had to keep her distance.

He was new to the church and although the congregation respected him, Angie knew from personal experience how tentative that respect really was. The vote to offer him the position of Pastor had been almost unanimous, but it was a leap of faith and they all knew it. He may turn out to be as wonderful a pastor as Rev. Littlejohn ever was and then again they did not really know much about him.

Angie personally believed that Gabe Campbell had the potential to live up to their greatest expectations and then some. He was bright, compassionate and so obviously touched by God. His sermons were uplifting, insightful and inspiring.

There was no doubt in her mind that divine intervention had guided him to them and that he was where he was supposed to be. And she knew in her heart that the church had made the right decision in making him the new pastor.

But, despite all his wonderful qualities and the bright future she saw for him at Starlight in the past few weeks she had become painfully aware that beneath it all there was a man. A man who seem to have some kind of designs on her. And since she was certain that Gabe Campbell was not the lecherous sort that could only leave one other intention. One she had no desire to fulfill.

Connie's voice cut through her private thoughts. "Rev. Campbell, I didn't know you made jewelry."

"Yes." He said solemnly. "I come from a long line of jewelers."

Angie wondered at his tone. When he'd spoken to her regarding his jewelry, he'd been full to brimming with enthusiasm over the idea of opening his own store one day. But now, listening to him speak to Connie he seemed almost reluctant to elaborate on it.

Before Connie could comment farther, Rev. Campbell lifted a hand. "Excuse me Ladies, it seems Sister Medley needs me." With one final glance at Angie he turned and walked away.

Angie watched him cross the parking lot where Sabrina was meeting him half way. Sabrina held up her clipboard and adamantly pointed something out to him. Angie felt her jaw clench tight as his handsome face spread in a wide smile of approval. He nodded in agreement with whatever she was showing him.

Angie wanted nothing more than to take that clip board and bop Sabrina over the head with it. Surprised by her own violent imaginings she quickly gathered up empty platter and the folded table clothes preparing to leave.

As she turned she realized Connie had been watching her reaction the whole time. "I've got to get going." She said with a smile, and started to walk away.

But Connie neatly blocked her path. "What do you think of Rev. Campbell?" Her dark brown eyes narrowed on Angie's face like a hawk spotting prey.

"Connie, . . ." Angie heard the warning in Verdell's voice as she attempted to call her sister off.

Angie knew that Connie Thurman had no idea just how close she was to becoming the outlet for her unexpected anger. So, holding her temper in check, she pasted on a smile.

“I think we made a good choice for pastor. Why, do you have a problem with him?”

Something in Angie’s eyes must’ve warned Connie that she was not in a mood to be toyed with. “Me? No, no, I just think it’s strange that a man like that is still sin—”

Angie pushed passed the other woman, and waved airily in Verdell’s direction. “See you tomorrow.” She hurried across the parking lot to her pick up truck.

She lifted the seat forward she put her load on the back seat, but when she stood to get in the truck she felt the sensation again.

She turned and found that Gabe had followed her. She anxiously peered over his wide shoulders trying to see the reaction of the others in the parking lot. Just as she suspected almost everyone was watching them.

“Angie, I was hoping to speak to you before you left.” Gabe’s complete attention was centered on her.

Hearing him use her given name, she decided now was as good a time as any to have their talk.

“Rev. Campbell.” She took a deep breath. “I think we need to discuss your behavior.”

His eyebrows rose and a wide smile came across his face. “My behavior?”

She frowned in response wondering what he found so amusing. “Yes, your behavior. To start with, your blatant um, . . .”

At that moment, Angie was really wishing she'd waited until she had some time to work on the wording of this particular conversation. "Well—quite frankly, your undue attention."

His smile faded slightly, and his hazel-green eyes twinkled with something resembling determination. "That's where we disagree. I think it *is* due, long overdue."

Angie lowered her eyes to focus on his neat tie knot, knowing she did not stand a chance against those beautiful eyes of his. "Rev. Campbell, surely you must realize—"

"Gabe."

"Her eyes shot up to his. "What?"

His smile returned. "My name is Gabe."

"See—this is the problem. You are the pastor now, you can't keep flirting with me like this!" Her eyes widened, realizing she'd blurted out far more than she intended.

Instead of the instant denial, any self-respecting man in his position would've offered up, he said, "Why?"

"Because!"

He chuckled. "Sorry, beautiful, you gotta do better than that."

"Because," she hissed through her teeth, "if you *do not* stop flirting with me, your reputation will be ruined."

For the first time, his expression reflected something resembling concern. "How so?"

"Right now half the Women's Committee is watching us and soon the gossip will follow. And before you know it you'll be known as some kind of *pulpit player*."

He chuckled again. "A pulpit player?"

“You know what I mean. The kind of minister that preys on his female congregation.”

He was silent for so long Angie thought that maybe she’d finally gotten through to him.

“Is that what you think of me, Angie?”

“No! Not me—they!” She made a low hand gesture.

He briefly glanced over his shoulder. “They’ll have to make up their own minds about me as time progresses. But you . . . you’re something all together different.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” He winked. “But, I’m glad you are.”

Angie sighed in frustration knowing defeat when she saw it. “What did you want to speak to me about?”

“Dinner.”

Her mouth pulled into a thin line. If he wouldn’t do anything to protect himself, then it was obviously up to her. “I don’t think that is such a good idea.”

He frowned and shoved his hands into his pockets. “Hmmm, sorry to hear that. I was really looking forward to your chicken and dumplings again. Being a single man, I don’t get too many home cooked meals.”

Angie’s eyes widened in surprise. “You really liked my chicken and dumplings?”

His eyes focused on her face, and she swore she could see every single green fleck in the clear gold background. “It was like nothing I’ve ever experienced.”

Angie was absolutely torn. It was so rare that she found anything who actually enjoyed her cooking. The temptation to say yes was almost overwhelming.

And that peach cobbler, um, um, um.” He shook his head in appreciation.

She finally decided his reputation was his business. If he didn’t care, why should she? “Well, . . . since you don’t get home cooked meals that often—”

“Almost never.”

“How about this Monday?”

“Perfect. What time?”

“Sevenish?”

He smiled his beautiful smile. “Wonderful. I’ll see you at seven on Monday. I can’t wait.” With that he turned and walked back toward the assembly of people.

As she climbed into her truck, and pulled out of the church’s parking lot Angie replayed the entire parking lot conversation over in her head. At some point over the past few weeks she’d convinced herself not to have dinner alone with Gabe again. Because it seemed to her that one single dinner had come to symbolize some kind of turning point in their relationship.

When she’d arrived earlier for the bake sale he’d told herself to control the situation and make sure the congregation did not get the wrong idea anymore than they already had.

She’d try to stay out of his reach, and she’d expressly told him what she thought of the whole situation and yet despite her resolve, she was now planning to have dinner with him again the following Monday. And although she couldn’t help the feeling of excitement coursing through her she also couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d just been handled.