



CHAPTER *one*

The engagement ring was stuck—just like her life. Summer glanced toward the heavens and sighed the sigh of love gone awry. Again.

Here she was, thirty-three years old, and still floundering in every part of life that mattered. And so went the mental ramblings of Summer Snow as she continued to twist Elliot's engagement ring on her finger, trying to pull it off. She was impatient with herself for delaying what she knew she should do: follow through and finally let him go. After all, Elliot Whitfield was famous for taking smooth talking to epic levels.

Summer straightened her spine, looked across the table at her fiancé, and said, "Honestly, Elliot, you don't need a wife. What you need is a good PR consultant."

Elliot smoothed a crimp in the linen tablecloth. "You'd think a five-star restaurant could have wrinkle-free linens." He emitted a slow breath that strangled itself into a groan. "Now, no more talk of leaving me, my pearl. You're going to make the perfect senator's wife. You're articulate. You're beautiful. You can hold a smile for hours." He grinned. "With a few tweaks, you could be my Summer Eleanor Roosevelt. And with you by my side, I now have an eight-point lead over my opponent," he added in his pretend British accent, the one he used when he was kidding around. "Come on. You know I'm joking."

"Right." Summer's wry expression made him laugh.

A waiter came by—bristling with pomp—and refilled Elliot's goblet with Pellegrino.

Then he whirled off amidst the live harp music, which floated around them as did the scents of fine cuisine and expensive perfume, and the smell of money.

Elliot turned his attention back to her. "Seriously now, you *will* be part of this noble endeavor to represent the great state of Texas." He raised his hands as if addressing the masses. "It gives me the chills to think about it. I can almost hear the theme music from *Chariots of Fire* revving up in the background. Don't you hear it too?" He tilted his Harvard-educated head to dramatize his point.

No matter how green-eyed and Greek-angled Elliot was or how much he could make her laugh, the hour of reckoning had come. "As much as I care about you," Summer said, "I don't have the chills, and I'm sorry to say that I don't hear the music."

Her fiancé's eyes dimmed, and he placed his hand over his heart as if she'd pierced him through.

"Please, Elliot, anything but that look . . . that Bambi's-mother-has-been-shot-in-the-meadow look."

"Good one," he conceded.

The ring finally loosened its hold on Summer's finger, and it sailed upward and then plopped into Elliot's personal patty of Lone Star-shaped butter. "Sorry." Invariably, when she got nervous, crazy stuff happened. Today it was merely the butter, but if she married Elliot, it would mean embarrassing herself—and Elliot—in front of the media. It could happen. It *would* happen. But that wasn't really the reason she had to give his ring back. She curled up her toes in her high heels. "And I'm sorry I can't be everything you and your voters want me to be. Truly."

He retrieved the diamond ring and wiped it off. "I just want what every man wants, my sweets . . . a woman who looks like you do, and a woman who's also so totally into me that she's willing to

give up her whole life to meet all my needs." Elliot's twinkle was back.

"Cute, but I refuse to be moved this time by your sense of humor *or* your silver tongue."

"Ouch." He squeezed his wedge of lime into his Pellegrino.

A spray of juice hit her eye, which made her twitch for a moment.

Elliot didn't seem to notice, so he bulldozed forth. "You think I'm trying to change you, but I'm not. Well, I just made that *one* tiny demand."

"It's not tiny to me. I can't sell my grandmother's bookshop." Summer ate a spoonful of her lobster bisque, but a droplet escaped and landed on her dress. *Great*. Why was she such a messy eater?

"But how long can you keep her store running when it's making so little money? How far can you take this sentimentality? Your grandmother is retired now, and maybe it's time to retire her shop too." He sat back in his chair, glimmering with enough pomposity to propel him right into the mirrored halls of political life.

Summer wet a napkin and dabbed up the stain on her only spring gown. "Her bookshop was always about making kids happy, not about making a lot of money. You used to think these dreams were admirable."

"I did. And I still do, but being a public servant is serious business. We both need to look successful. *Be* successful. No room for error. You can't even misspell potato in this business without the media jumping on you faster than you can say au gratin." He ran his hand along the silk tie that coordinated perfectly with his navy Armani jacket. "So I just felt that if you sold the shop, you'd have more time for me."

Summer arched her brows at him.

"More time to devote to this gallant effort. We'd be a team. Don't you see? A force to be reckoned with, you and me. Hey, some women would see sharing my life as a dazzling adventure." Elliot set

the diamond ring in the middle of the table and slid it back toward Summer as if it were an addendum to a contract. "I mean I'm being flexible for you."

"How?"

"Well, I'm overlooking the fact that you don't have a college education. That's going to make a difference. It's expected of a senator's wife, but that's okay."

"I *am* sorry, but what I chose to do with my time back then when I had the chance to go was more important."

"Yes, that was noble of you, actually, what you did for your parents, but—"

"But?" When it came to political life, she guessed that doing the decent thing didn't weigh in as heavily as doing what looked right. "Why were you ever attracted to me in the first place if you knew I wasn't going to make a suitable wife?"

"Because I found you irresistible. I couldn't help myself. I guess I was letting my heart rule over my common sense."

"Well, I do appreciate the honesty." Summer slid the ring right back to him. "Look, Elliot, you should let your common sense win this time . . . for both of our sakes. Okay?"

"You're truly cruel."

"I'm cruel?" Summer teased him with a smile.

Elliot grinned and then stared at her as if seeing her for the first time. "You really are an incurable romantic, aren't you? Just a child, really," he murmured.

"You're right. I was a child to think I loved you enough to make this work." Summer picked up her beaded bag from the table—the one she'd fished out of a cardboard box at a garage sale.

"My jewel, sit down. Please. People are watching." Panic flashed across his fine features.

"I'm sitting back down, but only because the hem of my dress is caught under the leg of my chair."

"I'm just saying, if you're going to be the wife of a—"

“But I’m not going to be the wife of a senator. We’re no longer engaged.” Why was it that the people who were the best talkers were the worst listeners? Then she lifted the chair, freed the hem of her dress, and rose.

As Summer stepped away from the table, Elliot reached over and latched onto her wrist. “I honestly can’t live without you.”

“And this is honestly going to put a crimp in your agenda. Right?”

He sighed. “Yes, that too.”

“I’m sorry. Truly.” Summer leaned down and planted a tender kiss on his cheek.

“What if I can’t win the election without you? Don’t you see? I doubt my constituents will fancy the idea of my fiancée dumping me for another man.”

“You don’t have to worry. There’s no other man.”

“There’s always another man.” Elliot stared at what was left of his vichyssoise. He always did love cold soup. “My prediction?” He looked up at her. “Before another week is over, your heart will already be attached to another man.”

“How can that be?”

Elliot pressed a kiss to Summer’s hand as if it were made of hand-blown glass. “While we were sitting here, you didn’t see the dozen or so men who were glancing your way. Because no man can resist you. Eyes the color of sapphires, auburn hair, and that graceful way of yours. All that is missing, Summer, is your crown. And I could have bought you a thousand of them.”

Everything sounded like a speech. “Ah, well. Such is life.” At that moment Summer realized how it was she’d fallen for Elliot. She’d been so hungry for attention she’d gobbled up his every word, even though it was mostly baloney. She had to admit, though, it was the best gourmet baloney she’d ever eaten. “I wouldn’t worry about the bad press over this. Your speech writers are good at putting a spin on things. They’ll remind everyone how faithful you were and

how I was the ungrateful one, the disloyal fiancée. That should quiet my exit.”

“So this is goodbye then? Really?”

Poor Elliot. He really couldn't imagine a world where people said no to him. “I pray your life goes well.” Summer leaned down and whispered, “I may even vote for you.”

“But where will you go without me?”

“I have no idea.”

Summer walked away as the waiter arrived with a big question mark on his face, which looked very similar to the one scrawled all over her life. Mist stung her eyes then, not because of regret but because saying goodbye was always hard, even when it was right.

Partway out the restaurant Summer paused and looked back at Elliot to make sure he'd be all right. Elliot readjusted the small American flag pin on his lapel and then dug into his next course. He was even eating with his fork upside down like a Brit, so that meant he was in a pretty good mood and had already moved on. *Boy, that was quick.* But this was good, really. Now she wouldn't have to worry that she'd hurt him. And Elliot's parents would be relieved about the breakup rather than disappointed, since after first blush, they too had sensed she wasn't cut out to be the wife of a senator.

Yes, Elliot Whitfield would be fine. He'd most likely succeed in everything he touched, and maybe even someday he'd be nominated for the presidency. Summer could already see the red, white, and blue placards—Whitfield for President. And as far as finding a wife, half of the women at their church would be eager to marry the name and the hair and the entitlements that came with him. And well, the other half of the women were already married. Summer didn't linger there, since Elliot was right, people were watching.

Minutes later Summer settled into her car, relieved they'd come in separate vehicles. Her old Chevy was much more comfortable than the hard seats in Elliot's coupe. In fact, her whole life suddenly

felt more comfortable—more real—like in *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Maybe she really was an incurable romantic.

Summer pulled down the rearview mirror and gave herself an assessing gaze. Her hair had blown up in the Houston humidity like an umbrella suddenly popping open. Even though it wasn't summer yet, the heat was already creeping in. But beyond her rowdy hair, she looked more than a little off. There was something else playing in her expression. Was it a glint of regret that went beyond the breakup?

She let the window roll down as she turned her attention to the swirling firmament. The slightest puff of air tickled her cheek, and a pleasant but unfamiliar fragrance came in on the breeze. *Lord, when will I ever hear the music? God, do You still love me after all my wrong turns and semi-disastrous choices?*

She opened her beaded purse and pulled out a trinket she'd kept for many years—a wooden carving of two tiny robins in a nest. The gift had been from Martin, a childhood friend. He'd said the pair of birds were created especially for her and said they were really two friends that could never be parted, for their wings were carved as one.

Such a beautiful sentiment.

What had ever become of Martin? Summer gazed up at the stars—at the beauty and the breathless wonder of it all—and wondered what Martin was up to this very moment.



CHAPTER

two

Summer closed her fingers around the tiny carved birds. Turning the page of life would be scary. That is, turning the engine on and driving away. But where would she go? Home? Fine, but after that? It would take care of the logistics, her movements from point A to point B, but what would happen to her insides—her heart? Would she just muddle through with life until there was none of it left to fritter away? But why did she always feel that if she weren't in a meaningful relationship about to tie the knot then she was squandering her time? That she was idling instead of setting forth on some worthy and adventurous endeavor?

Not a healthy mindset.

Summer turned on the engine, and then turned it off, not feeling quite ready to see what was on the next page. In a novel it was easy to read chapter after chapter. And no matter how bleak the plot, there was sweet safety in the cozy armchair, that hot cup of chamomile tea, that yawn that said it was time to set the story aside and go to bed.

But in real life, well, there was no safety in trying to make one's way in love. Or in one's career. Or anything for that matter. Oh, the perils of being earthbound. The fears of choice. The doubts and dangers of every crossroad's moment.

Life suddenly didn't feel as decisive and confident as it had minutes before, when she had sashayed away from Elliot's table, chin up, knowing she had done a right and noble thing.

All the past disasters in love came back to her in one big haunting tidal wave—the painful words, the lonely feelings, and the empty seat when dining out. And she'd be forced to go back to the singles' group at church instead of the young marrieds and soon-to-be-marrieds. When she walked back into church, she might as well wear one of those sandwich board signs, proclaiming to the world that Summer Snow was officially a mess. Would men bolt from her, thinking she would be on the hunt again? Would women flee because they might worry that her singleness was like an incurable disease? And catching?

Summer rolled up the window and pressed her head against the glass. Maybe she'd make use of the tear ducts that God had given her. That thought seemed to give her permission to let go of her emotions, and so her eyes pooled with tears until they spilled over. She swiped them away and slapped her hands against the steering wheel.

With every breakup she experienced, the more it rubbed a little more of the shine off the silver until the whole of life appeared tarnished if not a hunk of bare, rusty metal.

Summer stuck a few tissues over her mouth and let out a scream. The muffled holler did nothing to ease her confusion and sadness. She glanced around, hoping no one had seen or heard her outburst. She laughed then. Right in the midst of the tears. Maybe she *was* a little nuts.

After much pondering, the lone word "twilight" slipped from her lips. For a long time she'd been living in a sort of half-light—that strange twilight hour when one couldn't see things clearly, especially a road. But then all her roads seemed to lead to a dead end.

Summer turned the key, and her granny came to mind. She looked at her watch. Seven-thirty. Still not too late to drop by. Her house wasn't far away. Maybe she'd stay just for a few minutes so she could get her bearings.

Of course, she knew her granny would see her splotchy cheeks and red-rimmed eyes and insist she stay the night. Granny had the best guest bedroom of any house she'd ever been to—with enough pillows piled mile-high on the bed to soften at least a few blows of the weary traveler.

The next day would be Saturday. There was help at the bookshop. Amelia Landers was there, faithful as always, and just as much in love with kids and books as she herself was and enough to make Summer feel at ease to let her run the shop. It would be nice to take the day off. Except for Sundays, she mostly worked. It was a shame the Once Upon a Time Bookshop didn't make more money for her to live on, but the last thing she wanted to do was close the store that Granny had spent the bulk of her life building. Or closing down the one place that had changed the lives of countless children through the decades, including her own.

Summer pulled out of the parking lot, already feeling a mite better, thinking of Granny's soft things—her mattresses, her chocolate chip muffins, and her hugs. They were the best. Yes, when one was at Granny's house, it was always a muffin-top experience.

She goosed the gas pedal on her jalopy, trying to get to Granny's just a little faster. After pulling up to her stone house—which was quaint in every way with its arched windows and gingerbread cuteness—Summer made haste getting to the front entrance.

She tapped on the front door. Nothing. She rang the bell. No answer. Could she be ill? Granny did suffer from a few heart problems but nothing too serious. In general, Granny was as sturdy as the live oaks that lined her yard.

Maybe she was out back. Summer headed around the side path to the backyard and looked up to the upper open balcony. "Granny? You up there?"

"Is that you, little love?" Granny yoo-hooed down to her.

"It's me, Granny."

"Come on up."

Summer grabbed the bulk of her evening gown into her hand and hoofed it up the spiral metal steps to the balcony.

Granny Snow met her with a big hug. "Oh sweet child, what a surprise tonight. I didn't expect you. I knew you were on a date with that fancy boyfriend of yours. Oh, and how pretty you look, just like a fairy princess in that turquoise evening dress."

"And you look pretty too."

"With my hair looking like a dust broom?"

"No, your snow white hair befits your namesake, and you look huggable in that dress."

"Sounds like a big fib to me, but thank you." Granny pulled her away from the edge of the stairs and looked at her face more closely. "You don't look so chipper. What happened? Did Elliot ask you to coordinate your hairstyle with his?"

Summer snorted.

"I'm sorry. That wasn't funny." Granny rubbed her back. "It was mean."

"Not really that mean." She grinned. "It's a lot truer than it should be. I think Elliot would do anything. And I mean *anything* short of illegal, to win that election."

"Including making you his puppet?"

"Yes."

Granny motioned for her to sit down on one of the chaise lounges chairs. "It's sad to think that a man would marry a woman who was never meant for him."

"Yeah, it is sad. And yes, I guess he would." They both sat down and rested back on the chaise lounges chairs as they always did, getting comfortable with each other like soft comfy shoes. "I broke it off tonight, Granny. It's over between us."

"Oh? Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Maybe." They both stared up at the night sky until Summer said, "My friends at church will think I'm foolish to walk away from the chance to be a senator's wife."

“Do you think you’re foolish?”

“I don’t right now,” Summer said, “but I might in the morning.”

Granny smiled. “I do think Elliot loves you. In his own way. And you could have been a fine senator’s wife. You could have done some good in Texas. But you would have strained to live the life he wanted from you. And knowing your level of loyalty to folks, you would have even sacrificed your health to do it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this a few months ago?” Summer held up her hand. “Never mind that. I know. I wasn’t listening. No matter what you would have said, I would have followed my own path. I only saw the glow of Elliot, and he’s quite the beacon, isn’t he?”

“You could light a city with the flashes that young man could put off.”

Summer laughed. “Yeah. Isn’t that the truth?” Bits and pieces of Elliot’s speeches came to her—as well as his lofty dreams and his amazing perseverance. But also she remembered his arrogant pontifications as well as his scoldings. And, of course, there was his schmooze. Elliot took schmooze to a new level. He could talk the spots right off a leopard, as her granny liked to say. He could smile his way into the good graces of almost anyone, even some of his opponents. Elliot was an ambassador of goodwill, yes, absolutely. But he was also the headmaster of charm. And Summer had always had trouble figuring out which mode he was in, since those two qualities were often as close as a neck and neck election.

Summer heaved a sigh. “Oh, Granny, I keep picking all the wrong guys. I mean they’re all men of God, but they never seem to be the *right* ones. Not for me anyway. Something’s always missing.”

Granny looked over at her. “And what do you think that is?”

She thought, then said, “Well, it’s like they see me, but not the real me. They’re looking right past that. I guess they think I’m attractive. But I’m hoping there is more to me than the way I look.”

“There always was. Always will be, little love.”

Summer placed her hand over her heart, wishing she could heal the brokenness with just a touch. “What’s wrong with me, Granny? Except that I’m not like other women. I don’t fit in, and I never have.”

Granny looked at her then. Really looked at her the way that Summer loved—like she was being understood as well as being seen. “Do you remember one time when you asked some of the school girls over for a slumber party, and that very night we had an ice storm?”

“How could I forget?” Summer said. “Ice storms are rare in Houston.”

Granny smiled and rolled her head back and forth as if allowing the whole scene to unfold. “Well, those little gals were all upset the next morning because the roads were slippery, and I wouldn’t drive them to the mall to buy some trinkets . . . trinkets those girls would have thrown away by the end of the month. But you?”

“What about me, Granny?”

“Well, you looked at all of them curiously and said, ‘Can’t you see it?’ But they couldn’t see anything. Just the cold, cold wetness of the day that kept them from the mall. But you saw splendor in that day. You said we were covered in this silvery white wedding veil, and as the breeze blew through the trees it rained diamonds on the grass. Those are your words, not mine. That’s the difference, my little love. You’re a woman who looks beyond the cold to see a miracle.”

“That’s sweet. I can’t believe you remembered all that. But I never felt that way.”

“Oh?”

Summer grinned. “I never could flip my ponytail like the other girls. Or ride horses. Or do cartwheels. Or giggle without sounding horsey. Or have smooth hair that didn’t turn into a ball of frizz-fuzz like a dandelion gone to seed.”

Granny laughed.

“Those high school girls did have a way about them.”

“It was called arrogance.” Granny winked at her. “You just need to find a man who sees the miracle too. He’s out there. And by the way, if you don’t mind me saying so, his name might be Martin.”

“Martin Langtree?” Summer remembered the tiny wooden birds she’d left on the dash of the car. What a coincidence that they would both think about Martin at the same time. Or perhaps that word didn’t allow for the stirring hand of providence.

“That’s the one.”

A tingling rush swept through Summer. “I can’t believe you remembered him right now at this moment.”

“I do remember him, much more than you know.”

Summer leaned forward. “What do you mean, Granny? You have another story coming on, don’t you? I can always tell.”

“I do have a story. Before I explain myself, I want to share something with you.”

“Oh?” Whenever her granny wanted to share something it was always a time for surprise. “What amazing thing have you been up to?”

“Be right back.” Granny went inside for a moment and then came back out with a small copper-bottom sauce pan. And two spoons.

“What do you have there? Something delicious?” Summer swung her legs around and rose up to see inside the pan.

“Creamy, decadent, homemade chocolate. *The* best fondue.” Granny handed her a spoon.

“Ohhh. That sounds good.” Summer waved her spoon around, ready to taste.

“Careful of your pretty dress.” Granny wiggled her eyebrows. “But why not have a big bite.”

“I can smell the calories.” But since she had no intention of arguing with Granny on matters of chocolate, Summer took the pan in hand, dipped her spoon into the thick goo and took a big gloppy

bite. "Oh wow," she mumbled with her mouth full. "Wicked stuff." She licked her lips and then took another bite. "Swoon worthy."

"Indeed."

"I mean, I can feel all the butterfat being slathered onto my hips, and somehow I don't care. It's *that* good, Granny."

"I've been perfecting it over the last few days. I've been eating my weight in chocolate. I've been dipping everything in these little vats of sweetness. Strawberries. Cheese. My protein bars. My blood pressure medicine. My—"

"What?"

"Kidding about that last one."

"But you've always been so health conscious with your eating. What's up?"

"Well, I've been trying to find the right time and the right way to tell you."

"Tell me what?" Summer took another bite of the chocolate and licked on the spoon some more, but when Granny didn't answer her, she looked at her again, this time studying her face. "Granny? Tell me what?"

"Well, little love . . . the doctors have some not so good news for me."

"And what is that?"

"They tell me I'm dying."