

Prologue

Helen Henry had lived alone most of her adult life. Of course, she'd had Nancy, her daughter, with her for some of that time, but she'd never quite understood how the two of them could be so different. After all, Nancy was her blood and bones, and Nancy's father—who hadn't even known he was going to be a father when he died at Pearl Harbor—had been a lot like Helen. Shy. Serious. Hardworking.

In contrast, Nancy had been a flighty child who needed people in a way Helen never had. Now Helen understood her better, even glowed a little inside when Nancy was visiting, but back then, even though she'd loved her daughter, Helen had been plain overwhelmed. She hadn't expected to ever really look forward to spending time with Nancy and her family, so that was a surprise and a gift. Neither had she expected to fall in love with the young Claiborne family who now shared her house.

Add to that the ladies from the SCC Bee, the church quilting bee. Helen had grown up with women who quilted together. She could still remember sitting on the floor under a quilting frame lowered from the ceiling so that family members and neighbors could gather around it and make shorter work of a long project. But after her family and neighbors had died or dispersed post-war, she had quilted alone. She hadn't expected anything else. Life was different, and she'd had a daughter to see to. There had been no time for friends, for socializing with the new people who moved into old houses, or staying to chat after church.

She guessed she'd just gotten used to being alone.

Then one morning she'd been dragged to the church quilting bee, not a bit glad about it, either. For some reason, since that time, she'd never put her foot down and told them to leave her alone.

That was how she'd gotten herself into this mess.

Cissy Claiborne, who was holding on to Helen's arm, held it a little tighter as they stepped over particularly bumpy ground. The girl had insisted on going for a walk, even pretending she needed the fresh air when they both knew that what Cissy really wanted was for Helen to get a little exercise.

"I guess you don't want to come up with anything real ordinary," Cissy, said, continuing a conversation that had begun a few minutes ago. "The other quilters are expecting you to come up with the best idea, even if they put other ideas forward themselves."

Helen wanted to tell the girl that she didn't need all this hauling and guiding, but she figured Cissy thought she was helping, and she didn't want to hurt her feelings.

She lifted her feet high to show that she still could. "Who knows, the whole bee might be as stubborn as all get out."

Earlier Helen had confessed that she planned to come up with the perfect pattern for next spring's raffle quilt, which would be used to raise money for the church's prison ministry. The quilters would vote their choice of designs, and Helen had to admit she wanted them to vote for hers, whatever it was.

"Everybody thinks they can do a raffle quilt," she said. "I saw one up at the bank a few months ago. Nine patch blocks so stretched out of shape there's not a bed in the

whole world that quilt would cover. And somebody stippled the whole thing in black thread. Looked like a bunch of dying spiders thrown on top."

"Mercy. Did you buy a ticket?"

Helen hated to admit she *had*. Unfortunately, the quilt had been for some cause or other that she'd wanted to support. "I made up a name and phone number," she said. "Just in case my ticket stub got drawn."

When the weather was nice, the way it was today, Cissy always managed to come up with an excuse to get Helen outside. Usually Reese, Cissy and Zeke's five-year-old daughter, came with them, zipping ahead to find stones to throw or sticks to take home and weave through the fence around the vegetable garden. Today the little girl was eating dinner at a friend's house, and Cissy and Helen planned to pick her up after their walk.

"So you're looking for something original, but something quilters in the bee can do with their varying levels of skill," Cissy said.

"You got that right."

"You want a traditional pattern?"

"I thought about houses, maybe everybody using their own fabric stash and imagination with the old-fashioned schoolhouse pattern."

"That would be pretty."

"But a quilt like that? It could be from anywhere. I'd like a quilt that says something about where we live."

"So something about the Shenandoah Valley. Original then."

They stopped at the end of the path. They weren't far from Helen's farmhouse, but neither of them ever got tired of this walk. It was a gentle slope uphill, bordered by trees with foliage that changed with the season. The view at the end was the real reward. The clearing looked over a lush green valley and beyond it to the west, distant mountains. This evening the sky was beginning to turn salmon pink as the sun sank low behind the peaks. Helen knew they'd have to start back in a little while or risk walking home in the dark.

"It's so peaceful here," Cissy said. "When I'm standing here I always feel like whatever's wrong in the world, maybe it's going to be okay."

Helen was feeling unnaturally philosophical tonight. "Like looking at life's ups and downs. Mountains, valleys, mountains, can't have one without the other." She turned to Cissy. "My mother had a pattern she used a time or two. Something about mountains." She considered. "Moon Over Mountain. That was it."

"Maybe there's your idea."

But Helen was thinking ahead. She wanted something with more room for creativity. Her mother's pattern had relied on a circular moon, and she wasn't sure she trusted the new quilters in the bee to stitch a circle that anybody would want to see.

"I'm going to think on this," she said.

"Could you work in the sunset? I mean, behind the mountains, it's so beautiful."

Helen's mind was spinning and suddenly she was aching to get back home to her sewing room. "We'd better go pick up that little girl of yours."

"The prisoners this quilt will help have had a lot of ups and downs in their lives, I bet," Cissy said.

"Brought it on themselves," Helen said, but she softened. "Not always, I expect. And I guess most everybody deserves another chance."

"Sun goes down every single night, but the next morning, there it comes. Back up again. Nothing can keep it from doing what it's supposed to."

Helen took Cissy's arm. "We better get going, or pretty soon we'll be looking at tomorrow's sunrise."

They started down, walking slowly, and Helen didn't speak until they neared the house. "I used to go up to that spot and look at those mountains when I didn't think I could look at one more day. Just me by myself. Back when I was alone, and there was nobody to walk there with."

Cissy moved a little closer as if she understood that Helen was telling her walking with *her* was better, even if she couldn't say it out loud. "I'm glad to be walking there with you now. If it wasn't for you showing me, I wouldn't even know that view was right there waiting."

"Sometimes things work out."

"The quilt's going to work out, too," Cissy said.

"Maybe it will."

Cissy squeezed her arm. "You know what? I'd be willing to bet on it."