

chapter 1

Ms. Regina Howard, our older-than-Moses choir director, had a set of rules we were all supposed to abide by on Sunday morning. Don't chew gum. Pay attention to the sermon. No talking. You know, the usual stuff.

Being the only son of the Reverend Isaiah P. Wynn, I was expected to never break the rules. Ever. Which was why I grew more and more irritated as Tony and the rest of the guys in the choir stand kept whispering to each other. Of course, I hadn't been included in the conversation, even though I was sitting smack dab in the middle of the group.

I tugged on Tony's robe. "Will y'all shut up? Y'all are going to get us in trouble."

“Sorry,” Tony mumbled, although he didn’t look at me. Something in the audience had captured his attention. Whatever it was, it was a lot more interesting than Dad’s sermon. I tried to follow his gaze, but nothing or no one special in the congregation caught my eye.

As soon as the guys quieted down, I leaned closer to Tony. “So what were you looking at so hard?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said, his breath sweet with the scent of a green apple Jolly Rancher.

Tony turned toward my father and pretended to pay attention to the sermon, but truth be told, *I* wasn’t even listening to Dad. To be fair, it was kind of hard to pay attention to something you had already heard the night before. I was Dad’s soul-saving guinea pig.

“Come on, Tony,” I whispered as Dad was about to launch into his final point. “Just tell me what y’all were looking at.”

Tony sighed. “Weren’t you just saying something about how I needed to shut up? Something about getting into trouble?”

“Tony . . .”

He grinned. “Fifth pew. Third one from the aisle,” he said. “The hottie in the black dress.”

Had he forgotten where we were? “Tony, I’m not about to—”

“Hey, you’re the one that asked,” he said. “Don’t look if you don’t want to. But she kind of looks like Jenn, from a distance.”

My gaze raced past the first four pews. Past Delano

Jackson, in a striped shirt that looked three sizes too small. Past Mrs. Luretha Mae Madison, with her big white pillbox hat.

And then I saw her. But she wasn't my ex-girlfriend.

"I can't . . ." I blinked hard, just to make sure I wasn't making a mistake. "I can't believe . . ."

"Okay, so maybe she doesn't look like Jenn," Tony said. "Still, she looks good."

I would have nodded, but I was too busy staring at the girl.

No, not girl. *Woman.*

No, not Jenn. *Maddie.*

Tony nudged me. "You see what she's wearing? Any second now, I bet she's going to bust out of that dress."

I frowned. "Shut up."

"But—"

"I mean it, Tony. Shut up."

He scowled but kept his eyes on Maddie. I wanted to raise my Bible to his face to block his view. She didn't deserve to be gawked at.

Tony did have a point, though. Her dress was awfully formfitting. I didn't realize that she had become so . . . blessed. But then again, I hadn't seen her in over five years.

I turned back to Tony, who was still staring at her. I dug my elbow into his ribs, hard enough for his breathing to stop.

"Do you have to stare at her like that?" I asked.

He rubbed his side. “Don’t blame me. Daniel’s the one that started it.”

I looked past Tony at the other guys in our row of the choir stand, each of their gazes locked onto Maddie. At least for today, the tenor section of the choir had conveniently chosen to ignore the tenth commandment.

Dad ground through his sermon, finally bringing it to a close in his usual thunderous fashion. The entire congregation leapt to their feet and clapped their hands in praise. Well, almost everyone. Maddie stayed firmly in her seat.

After all the announcements had been made and all the collection plates had been passed around, Dad proclaimed his final *amen*. Seconds later, Maddie marched toward the door.

I pried off my white choir robe and dumped it into Tony’s hands. “Hold on to this for me. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“But what about the youth group meeting?”

“Tell Donna to start without me.”

I made my way from the choir stand and sliced through the crowd. Like always, people kept jumping in front of me, wanting to stop and shoot the breeze. I tried to keep my eyes on Maddie but lost her in a sea of pastel-colored dresses and three-button suits.

I pushed my way out of the building. Compared to the glow of the crystal chandeliers in the sanctuary, it seemed almost dark outside. The warm summer air, mixed with the humidity from the previous night’s downpour,

reminded me of the swamps down at Congaree National Park.

I scanned the parking lot until I saw her, her gaze glued to the ground, her arms folded across her body. I didn't know people could move so quickly in high heels.

Ignoring the rain puddles, I hightailed it through the parking lot, mud splattering across my wingtips. I caught up with her just as she reached the edge of the lot.

“Maddie?”

She stopped and turned around. Her eyes narrowed for a second, then relaxed. “Joshua Wynn?” Her lips stretched into a smile. “I *thought* that was you up there in the choir.”

I nodded. “What are you doing back in South Carolina?”

“It's a long story,” she said as she enveloped me in a bear hug. “Let's just say I needed a break.”

I wrapped my arms around her; my fingers froze for a half second as they grazed her bra strap. I took in her scent—her familiar vanilla practically hidden by a coffee smell. “I almost didn't recognize you,” I said.

She pulled away. “I look that different, huh?”

Heat shot to my face. “Well . . . I didn't mean . . .”

“It's okay. I know I've changed a lot.” She looked me up and down. “But then again, so have you.”

My tie felt like a noose around my neck. “I must have finally put on a few pounds.” I moved closer to her to allow people to pass by. “Wow. Maddie, I can't believe—”

“Call me Madeline. I go by my full name now.”

“Madeline.” I liked the way the word felt on my

tongue. “I guess that sounds a lot more mature than Maddie.”

“Like I said before, I’ve changed a lot. I’m not the little girl I used to be.”

I took in her face. Some things about her were still the same: freckled cheeks; round brown eyes; full, pouty lips. But her hair, which had once reached past her shoulders, was now short and wavy. And those pouty lips were lined in purple lipstick. Not a neon purple, but more like a dark, blue-black mix. Like the color of blackberries.

“I love your hair, but I can’t believe you cut it.” I wanted to touch her again, to make sure she was really standing in front of me. “It used to be so long.”

“Thanks. Mom and Dad hate it.” She began picking at her fingernails—her nail polish matched her lipstick. “It was their bright idea to send me down here for the summer. They must think Conway is too podunk for me to get into any real trouble.”

“Conway isn’t that small,” I said. “I know it’s nowhere near as big as Norfolk, but—”

“Please. Conway doesn’t deserve to be mentioned in the same breath as Norfolk. I mean, you guys only have one bookstore. What kind of town only has one bookstore?”

“But Maddie—er, Madeline—we have plenty of bookstores.”

“Christian ones don’t count.”

I laughed. One thing that definitely hadn’t changed was her personality. She was still as stubborn as a lazy bulldog on a hot summer day.

She began to back away. “It was good catching up with you, Joshua, but I’ve got to get out of here. I need to get some studying in before I go to work.”

“No . . . wait.” I stepped toward her. “Can’t you stick around for a while? I’d love to talk for a few minutes . . . to catch up.”

I had so many questions. So much to talk about.

Like:

Why did you come to church dressed like that? Your parents would have a heart attack if they could see you.

Like:

Why are you back in Conway, if you hate it so much?

Like:

Why did you stop writing me? You promised, remember?

Madeline shook her head. “I don’t know, Joshua. I should really get going—”

“I have a youth group meeting, but it’ll only last a few minutes.” My voice sounded airy and rushed. “Better yet, why don’t you come to the meeting with me?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Her eyes cut toward the building, then back at me. “I’m not really into organized religion.”

She took a step backward. This time, I didn’t follow.

“I mean, I believe in God and all. I just don’t believe in the whole church thing anymore. Only reason I’m here now is because . . . well, let’s just say that according to Dad, it’s part of my penance.” She placed her hands on her hips and jutted her chest out even farther. “I figured if he

was going to force me to come to church, I was going to wear something that people would remember. What do you think?”

It took everything in my power not to let my gaze fall to her chest. “That’s not funny, Madeline.”

“Who said I was joking?” She nodded toward the church. “You should head to your meeting. You don’t want to be late.”

And then, just as suddenly as she had reappeared into my life, she vanished. I would have thought it was all a dream, except for the coffee-and-vanilla scent that lingered in the air.

* * *

“The sermon was okay, but I think I could have made it stronger. I just didn’t get the reaction I wanted from the congregation. Maybe if I had focused a little more on Paul’s plight.”

Dad had been talking nonstop since we sat down for dinner, but I was too busy staring at the mound of roast beef on my plate to pay attention.

This was not the same Maddie Smith I knew five years ago. What had happened to the thirteen-year-old girl, all skin and bones? The girl I used to play hide-and-seek with behind the church? The girl with the blackberry-stained lips who promised we’d always be friends?

I’ll tell you what had happened—she’d grown up.

“Joshua?” Dad leaned closer to me. “You awake? I was asking your opinion on the sermon.”

I turned toward him. “I liked it,” I said. “Everyone was

probably anxious to get home. Game four of the NBA Finals comes on this afternoon.”

Dad ran his fingers through his hair. His temples had turned white long ago, and now the rest of his hair was following suit. “That’s what’s wrong with our people. Too busy watching MTV and ESPN to pray and learn the word.”

“Isaiah, there’s nothing wrong with enjoying music or sports.” Mom dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a cloth napkin. “Or maybe you’ve forgotten about those golf clubs collecting dust in the garage.”

Dad smiled. With all the clubs, clothes, and training videos he had collected over the years, you’d think he was an avid golf player. But he was so busy with church business, he only made it out to the golf course a few times a year, usually when some big-shot preacher was visiting. Of course, that didn’t stop Dad from buying himself a new golf toy every year for his birthday. This year’s present, a custom-made sand wedge, hadn’t even made it out of its box.

“Lily, I like sports—and yes, golf is a real sport—as much as anyone else, but we’re not in the business of creating the next Tiger Woods or Michael Jordan. We’re in the business of saving souls.” He glanced at me. “Unfortunately, too many of our members forget that.”

Even though Dad hadn’t said it, I knew he was thinking about the boys’ basketball team that the church had sponsored this past spring. The team he grudgingly decided to support, at the request of a few of the more

influential members of the congregation. The team that had lost every game of the season.

Dad sliced himself another piece of roast beef. “Sorry I wasn’t able to sit in on the youth group meeting. How did it go?”

I peered at him out of the corner of my eye. “Some of the girls brought up the idea of a praise-dance ministry again.”

Dad paused from eating but didn’t look up from his plate. “You’d think with all the events you kids are planning for the Youth Revival, and with the upcoming retreat, you wouldn’t need any other activities.”

“But the Youth Revival only happens once a year, and we’re just going to plain old Savannah for our retreat,” I said. “The girls want something more—”

“Joshua, we’ve had this conversation before. The last thing I want is a bunch of hormonal sixteen-year-old girls gyrating in my sanctuary.” He finally looked up from his plate. “The last thing *God* wants is a bunch of girls gyrating in *His* sanctuary.”

I knew Dad was a preacher and all, but the way he talked sometimes, you’d think he knew God better than any other person on the planet. “Dad, gyrating isn’t exactly what I’d call it. Plus, the girls think it’ll be a good way to get other youth involved, especially since we weren’t able to get enough girls to sign up for the basketball league.”

“And what do you think?”

I think we should try it, I wanted to say. But I didn’t

say it, because it wouldn't have done any good. Senior Pastor Wynn had already made up his mind.

I sighed. "I think we should focus on getting more youth to join the choir instead," I mumbled, feeling like Judas.

Mom fingered the string of shiny white pearls around her neck. "I couldn't help but notice you talking to some girl in the parking lot after church. She looked familiar, but I couldn't quite place her."

I was curious how Mom had seen us, when she was parked on the opposite side of where Madeline and I were talking. But being the good Christian boy that I was, I didn't mention this.

"I was talking to Madeline Smith."

Mom's eyes widened. "That was Maddie? She looks so . . . mature."

I frowned. "It's been five years since she's been back home. She's grown a little."

Mom stared off into space, a blank look on her face. "Little Maddie Smith," she said. "She used to be such a sweet girl—could quote the Bible better than most adults." Mom turned back to me. "I know y'all used to keep in touch. When's the last time you heard from her?"

I thought about all my unanswered letters. "It's been a while."

"Well, maybe that's for the best, because she certainly doesn't look like the girl I remember." Mom waved her fork in the air. "What was she thinking, wearing a dress like that to church? She should be ashamed of herself."

I tightened my grip on my knife. “Nowadays, girls wear stuff like that all the time.”

“She’s not just any girl,” Mom said. “She’s a preacher’s daughter. There are some things she just can’t do.”

“But Mom—”

“Your mother’s right, Joshua. I noticed her during my sermon, and I agree, what she wore was inappropriate.” Dad’s deep voice rang throughout the dining room. “Her father says she’s been quite the problem child over the past few years.”

I took a quick sip of water to wash away the dry, chalky taste in my throat. “Did you know she was back in town?”

He nodded. “Her father told me she’d be spending the summer with her aunt Gwendolyn. I made a few calls and was able to get her a job down at Yvonne Brockington’s coffee shop.”

That explained the coffee smell.

“I would have said something earlier, but first I wanted to see if she’d actually come to service,” he said. “Greg warned me that she’d probably be more interested in making a scene than recommitting herself to her faith.”

I pushed around a few grains of rice with my fork. “Do you know what happened to her? She’s so . . . different now.”

Dad swallowed the last of his roast beef. “Supposedly she got involved with some boy at that fancy boarding school her father sent her to, and things went downhill from there. She got accepted to Brown—even got a partial scholarship—but Greg refused to pay the rest of her

tuition.” Dad pushed his empty plate away from him. “According to Greg, he wasn’t about to spend his hard-earned money on Maddie’s schooling just to have her prancing around campus, wasting his money on tight skirts and black lipstick.”

“Her dress wasn’t that tight,” I said. “And her lipstick is purple, not black.”

“Purple, black, blue—it doesn’t really matter,” Mom said. “It breaks my heart every time I talk to Greg or Paulette—that girl seems to cause them more grief than any parent should have to bear.” Mom shook her head. “We just have to keep praying for Maddie and hope she eventually gets all this nonsense out of her system.”

Mom returned to eating her salad, but Dad just stared at me. “Maybe we should do more than just pray for her,” he said.

“You want me to speak to her?” Mom asked. “I can probably find some time next—”

“Actually, I think Joshua should talk to her.”

You would have thought I was born mute, as speechless as I was right then.

Mom placed her fork on her plate. “Isaiah, don’t you think I’d be better suited to talk to her? I’ve been counseling young women for quite a few years.”

“She and Joshua used to be best friends,” Dad said. “If anyone could get through to her, he could. Maybe he could stop by the coffee shop one day and strike up a conversation.”

Yeah, I could do that. I’d be happy to do that.

“And then what is he supposed to do? Tie her up and beat her over the head with a Bible?” Mom’s voice was a controlled shout. “Joshua’s only seventeen, Isaiah. He’s not—”

“Joshua’s a good kid, Lily. It’ll take a lot more than a simple conversation to sway him off his path.” Dad rose from the table. “I’ve got to run. I’ve got a meeting at the church in less than an hour, and I still have to finish preparing my notes. We can talk about this more tonight.”

Mom watched Dad disappear down the hallway, the frown on her face deepening as each second passed. “I think I’m finished with dinner,” she said after a few moments. “You want anything else to eat?”

I looked at the mountain of meat sitting on my plate. “Thanks, but I’m okay.”

Mom rose from her chair but didn’t move away from the table. “I know you want to impress your father, but you don’t have to talk to Madeline if you don’t want to. He’s putting you in an uncomfortable situation.”

“Really, I don’t mind.” I did my best to keep my voice cool and calm, to try to hide the fireworks popping off in my chest.

“Maybe I should rephrase that. *I* don’t want you seeing Madeline.” Mom squeezed the back of her chair, her fingers disappearing in its plush cream cushioning. “Madeline used to be one of the smartest, sweetest girls I knew, but that was a long time ago. There’s no telling what type of person she is now.”

I stared at Mom’s hands, wondering if they would leave

a permanent imprint in the chair. “I just want to talk to her,” I said. “We’re Christians. It’s our job to help people, right?”

She released her grip on the chair, then picked up her half-full plate. “That sounds like something your father would say.” She headed toward the kitchen but paused at the doorway. “Fine, go talk to the girl if you want to. But remember—you can’t save people who don’t want to be saved.”

A few seconds later, I heard glasses clinking in the sink and the rush of water from the faucet. I plopped my elbows onto the table and buried my head in my hands.

I probably should have been thinking about what I was going to say to Madeline—how I was going to lead her back to the path of the righteous—but all I could do was think about her lips. Their color. Their . . . taste.

I had no doubt that Madeline Smith needed saving. I just wasn’t quite sure if I was interested in being her savior.