

CHAPTER ONE

My name is Josiah Louise Reynolds. I am a beekeeper and a widow. I limp with my left leg and wear a hearing aid tucked beneath my signature red hair worn over my ears. I am known for my sarcastic humor and sleuthing skills. I like to solve puzzles.

I have a farm which borders the Bluegrass Palisades. My beloved house, the Butterfly, hugs a cliff overlooking the Kentucky River. It is a modern cradle-to-the-grave concept house, made of local limestone, wood, concrete, and lots and lots of glass on the backside with a commanding view of the river.

However, I was not in the Butterfly, but at a social event at the stately, elegant mansion next door, which is called the Big House and belongs to Her Ladyship—Lady Elsmere. I was nursing a bourbon neat and sitting on an antique mohair wingback chair, while also nursing my throbbing left leg, when I looked up to see our bejeweled hostess, Lady Elsmere, hobble by and plop herself down in a matching chair next to me.

Lady Elsmere asked, “Aren’t you going in?”

“I don’t need a fortune teller shuffling the cards about my future. I’d rather not know if the next five years are going to be as crappy as the last five years. Why don’t you have your fortune read?”

“I know my future. It’s the grave. It’s getting closer each day as I draw another one of those finite number of breaths I have left.”

“Oh, put a cork in it,” I said, taking a sip of outrageously expensive bourbon filched from June’s private stock. I couldn’t bear the thought of Lady Elsmere, aka June Webster from Monkey’s Eyebrow, Kentucky dying. I wanted June to live forever, or at least until I crossed over to the other side of the River Jordan. How could I go on without that old biddy pestering me every day? I didn’t want to try. I loved her.

“What a way to talk to me. You’re such an ungrateful brat.”

“Quit talking about dying. You’ve been riding this horse for over two months, and the poor creature is running out of steam.”

"I feel death creeping up on me, Josiah. We need to discuss things."

I shot June an irritated look and was going to say something very rude when Franklin, who had just gotten his fortune told, popped out of the library with a grin on his face. "I'm going to be a bride," he gushed.

"Somebody had a good fortune," June said. "Tell us all about it."

Franklin pulled up a chair as someone else in the queue went inside the library. "Madam Lemoire said I was going to be married within the next two years, and it was going to be with someone I already knew. I'm so excited."

"I wouldn't start buying a trousseau yet," I sniggered, taking another sip of my bourbon.

Franklin slapped my knee in aggravation. "Party pooper. Hey, where's your sense of fun? Just sour and dour is all I get from you anymore." He made a face at me. "This is supposed to be a party. Let's have fun!"

June chimed in. "Yes, Josiah. You are putting a damper on my fundraiser. People are staring."

I managed a smile and out of the corner of my mouth, hissed, "My leg hurts. I want to go home to rest."

June hissed back, "You can rest in the grave. Now go work the room, and try not to make too many enemies." She turned to Franklin. "Sweet boy, will you escort me? I feel more secure with someone at my elbow as I greet my guests."

"I get it. You want some arm candy. Can do, Lady Elsmere." Franklin jumped up and offered June his arm.

As they were walking away, I heard Franklin ask June if he could try on her diamond and ruby tiara that she was wearing to which she briskly replied, "NO!"

I chuckled. Some things never change. June and Franklin were right. I was being a party pooper. I got up and mingled with friends, making an effort to look interested listening to their tales of grandchildren, stock options, and doctor appointments. What I wouldn't give for a good discussion on political art in the twentieth century or the symbolism of Kentucky folk art carvings. I checked out the jewelry trunk sale, the silent auction room, and the

Kentucky Derby hat sale. A percentage of the sales went to support retired Thoroughbred horses. It was no secret most owners got rid of their horses after their monetary value expired. Mature mares and stallions were thrown onto the heap, so to speak. Many were sold out of the country and slaughtered for their meat. Both June and I had spoken out against the overbreeding of Thoroughbreds, but to no avail. There was too much money to be made by mating champion studs with broodmares.

June decided to host a charity party raising money for the upkeep of retired horses and put pressure on horse owners to have an effective retirement plan for horses under their care. I had already rescued two racehorses, but I went to the adoption table, signing up to take another one. I had enough land.

"I signed up for one, too," a voice floated over my head.

I put the pen down and turned around. "Good for you," I said, looking up at a tall man with a slight tan, graying blonde hair, regular features, and a deep Southern accent. "What are you going to do with your Thoroughbred?"

"I'm going to ride him for pleasure."

I bit my lip. Thoroughbreds, trained as racers, did not make good pleasure horses. They were called hot bloods for a reason as their temperaments were rather feisty, but I guessed this man would learn it on his own.

The genteel gent held out his hand. "My name is Rutherford Robert Lee."

I shook it. "Let me guess. You are from the Deep South."

He laughed. "How could you tell? Was it my name or my accent that gave me away? I hail from Louisiana."

"My name is Josiah Reynolds. I'm Kentucky born and bred."

"Your accent isn't Kentucky."

"I'm from northern Kentucky. We have a more midwestern accent."

"Nice to meet you, Josiah from Kentucky."

"Rutherford Robert Lee from Louisiana, what brings you here?"

Lee smiled, showing off a gap-toothed grin. "I'm looking to get into the Standardbred business."

"Trotters?"

"Pacers."

I wasn't versed enough in the difference between trotters and pacers as they were the same to me, so I changed the subject. "Are you investing into a syndicate?"

"I am going into business alone."

"Oh, my, you are ambitious, Mr. Lee."

"Call me Rudy. All my friends do."

"Okay, Rudy. What does going into business 'alone' mean?"

"I'm going to buy my own farm here and pull up stakes from Louisiana. Too many hurricanes for me."

"You know Kentucky is known for its tornadoes in the spring."

"I'd rather face a thundercloud which passes by in seconds than a hurricane that lasts for hours."

"Tornadoes are a little more treacherous than that, but have it your own way." I thought for a moment. "You know, Mr. Lee."

"Rudy."

"Yes, Rudy, sorry. Instead of buying a horse farm, why don't you lease one? That way, if things don't turn out the way you plan, you won't be stuck with the property or the taxes."

"Hmm. Never thought of that. You got a farm in mind, Josiah from Caintuck?"

"I know of a farm on the northwest side of Lexington. Closer to Versailles on old Frankfort Pike. Barns and paddocks have been renovated. Great pastures with lots of clean water. A stream runs through the entire farm. Sturdy fences."

"Does it have a training track?"

“Yes, but it hasn’t been renovated yet. It’s still clogged with weeds, but the farm next door has one, and I’m sure they would let you use it.”

“Would I have to transport the horses with a trailer to the farm next door? That’s a lot of trouble. There’s a lot of equipment needed for harness racing, not to mention the sulky. I’d like to harness the horse to the sulky and walk him over to the track to train.”

“If there is not an adjacent gate between the two properties, I’m sure one can be installed. I can’t vouch for the length of the course, though. I know Thoroughbred and Standardbred courses are different. The farm is owned by Hunter Wickliffe, and he has been looking for a leasee. In fact, his brother, Franklin, is escorting Lady Elsmere about.” I swung my head around looking for them.

“Is there a house on the farm?”

“Yes, Wickliffe Manor, but it is occupied by Hunter Wickliffe. I think only the pastures and the barns are available.”

“Is Mr. Wickliffe here today?”

“It’s Dr. Wickliffe.” I turned back. “He is out of town on business, but he’ll be back next week. Let me get you Franklin for further information. I don’t know all of the details.” I started to search for Franklin, but Rudy grabbed my arm.

I glared angrily at the big paw encircling my wrist.

Rudy pulled back immediately. “Forgive me for my rudeness, but I came here to enjoy myself. Not talk business.”

I guess my face displayed the negativity I was feeling because Rudy continued, “Josiah, I’m so sorry. I seem to have made a bad first impression. Can we start over, please?”

“I understand. Please excuse me, Mr. Lee. I see someone I know.” I walked away. Was I making a big deal out of nothing? Probably, but I don’t like men putting their hands on me, especially after what happened to me in the past. There was no need of Rudy Lee to grab my arm.

Perhaps if I had been more assertive with men from my youth, I wouldn’t have had a husband cheat me out of money or a deranged cop pull me off a cliff. Those two things make me a little testy concerning the male gender. My

rule of thumb is if a man says the sky is blue, better stick your head out a window and see for yourself. Not that a woman can't be an utter nightmare, but I've rarely had a woman point a gun at me. Oh, wait a minute. I have had women point guns at me. Scratch that. Let's say the entire human race is full of manure and leave it at that.

Most of the guests were herded out to the paddocks to view retired racehorses who needed a home. June made an impassioned plea that horse owners need to be responsible, instead of using horses up and then throwing them away like garbage. She made a good case the world was watching how the racing business treated horses, and the inhumane treatment in the horse business world would no longer be tolerated by the public if the sport of kings was to last.

I moseyed into the kitchen where the catering staff was running about filling empty trays with bite-sized eclairs, lemon tarts, and poppy seed muffins. I grabbed a flute of champagne and some éclairs only to steal away to the main foyer where I plopped down in the mohair wingback chair by the library again. Since everyone was outside, I could enjoy my booty without someone interrupting me while I chewed on an éclair.

Suddenly, the door to the library flew open. Rudy stumbled into the foyer, mopping his sweating forehead with a silk handkerchief and grabbing his left arm while looking confused. I recognized the signs of angina and jumped up. "Rudy, take my seat. Do you have any pills?"

"In my pocket."

I rummaged through his coat pockets, finding a small bottle of nitroglycerine. After putting a small white pill under his tongue, I handed him a bottle of water from a table. "Feel better?"

"Yes, thank you." He wiped his brow again.

"There are several doctors here. Let me get one."

"Not necessary. Nothing they can do."

"I'm going to call an ambulance."

Rudy grabbed my hand.

Why was he always grabbing me? I shook him loose.

Seeing my chagrin at his touching me again, Rudy smiled as he loosened his tie. "I keep making the same mistakes with you."

"I don't like being touched by strangers."

"Obviously."

"Can we discuss my foibles later? You need medical attention."

Rudy shook his head. "Nothing anyone can fix. That's why I'm here. To spend my last days living my fantasy. I've always loved Standardbreds and harness racing."

"May I sit with you until you feel better?"

"I would like nothing better, Josiah."

I unbuttoned his shirt collar.

Rudy kidded, "Josiah, we haven't even had dinner yet, and you start taking liberties with me."

"I have experience with people having cardiac episodes."

"How did you know I had heart disease?"

I thought that an odd question. Perhaps Rudy was confused. "I think the nitroglycerine tablets were a clue. Also, my husband had it. I recognized the look."

"Sorry for your loss."

"I'm not. He was a skunk."

Rudy tried to chuckle, but winced instead.

"I think you need to go to an emergency room and get checked out."

He shook his head. "Your help has been enough. As soon as I get my wind back, I'm going home to rest."

"Did you come with a plus one?"

"I came alone."

"I'll get one of Charles' grandsons to drive you home. I'll follow so I can bring him back."

"Who is Charles?"

"Lady Elsmere's heir." I looked around. "He must be outside with the guests on the patio. I'll fetch him. You shouldn't drive home by yourself."

"I'll call a cab. I don't want anyone to bother with this. I'll pick up my car tomorrow."

As luck would have it, Franklin wandered into the foyer wearing June's diamond tiara.

"Franklin, just the person I wanted to see."

"Yeeessss?"

"This is Rudy Lee. He is feeling a bit under the weather. I was wondering if you could drive him home now."

Franklin scrunched up his nose. I could tell he didn't want to leave the party.

I hurried to add, "Mr. Lee is looking for a horse farm to lease. He's interested in pacers."

"Ah, Standardbreds. Nice breed." Franklin's face lit up. "My brother has a farm and is looking for someone to lease it. Perhaps I could show it to you."

"Maybe later this week. I'm not feeling up to it right now."

"Surely. My brother is out-of-town currently, but I could set something up. Never hurts to look, eh?"

I swiped June's tiara off Franklin's head. "I'm sure Lady Elsmere will be looking for this." It was an unspoken rule that we always addressed June as Lady Elsmere in public.

Franklin grimaced. "Shoot, Josiah. You always spoil my fun. I wish Lady Elsmere would just give it to me. She knows I love it."

“Where in the world would you wear it?”

Franklin waved my concerns away about the tiara and said to Rudy, “I’ll tell the valet to get my car. It will just be just a moment or two.” He rushed off to gather his car while I helped Rudy to his feet.

As Rudy and I slowly walked to the front portico where Franklin’s car would be waiting, I asked, “Do you know what set off this episode?”

“I went to see the fortune teller. I thought it would be a bit of fun.”

“Is that what threw you into a tizzy?”

Rudy turned toward me. “She said I was going to murder someone, and then be murdered myself. I usually don’t give credence to such nonsense, but she knew so much about me—details about my personal life most people don’t know. She completely threw me. When she predicted the murders, my chest started to tighten. I knew I needed to get away from her, but I was having trouble breathing. Ugly things kept spilling from her mouth, so I fled. I feel discombobulated even now.” He glanced furtively at the library door and shuddered.

“Wow! That’s a bummer. Fortune tellers at parties usually give out happy fortunes. Whom are you supposed to kill?”

With absolute sincerity, Rudy said, “You!”