



# Chapter One

## Defiance, Texas 1977

It had been thirty roller-coaster years since Daisy Marie Chance forced fourteen-year-old Jed Pepper to fall in love with her. He'd obliged her, dizzied at the thought ever since. It had been that long before Jed could walk through the ruins of Crooked Creek Church, a butterfly flitting a prophecy he never could believe, even today. It was Daisy's singsong words that gave the butterfly its bewitching manner, those same words that strangled him with newfound love. For years, he wished he'd had an Instamatic camera to capture the moment he fell for Daisy, but then entropy would've had its way, fading and creasing Daisy's face until she'd have looked like an overloved newspaper recipe, wrinkled and unreadable.

Thing was, he could always read Daisy's face. Even then. She'd looked at him square in the eyes that day in 1977, in the exact same spot he stood now, and declared, "Your family ain't normal, Jed." And because lies came easy to him, he'd thought, of course my family's normal. Anyone with eyes could see that. Daisy said a lot of words, being a thirteen-year-old girl and all, but these didn't make much sense.

Thirty years later they did. They screamed the truth through the empty field where the church used to creak in the wind.

For a hesitant moment, enshrined in the ruins of his childhood, Jed was fourteen again. Filled to the brim with testosterone and pestered by an orange and black tormenter and Daisy's oh-so-true words.

"Your family ain't normal, Jed."

He watched the butterfly loop above the organ, never landing, like it had a thing against church music. Or maybe dust.

He sat on a rickety pew.

"Jed?"

He clasped his hands around his ears, hoping Daisy's words would run away. He hummed "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

She put her nose right in front of his. He felt her breathing, smelled her Juicy Fruit breath. "You in there?"

He swatted the air between them, hoping she'd disappear. "Yeah. Quit bothering me." He looked at his watch. Six fifteen. Time to go.

"But your face." Daisy sat down a Bible's throw away.

Jed touched his swollen eye. "Yeah? So? What about it?"

“It looks like it hurts.” Daisy scooted closer. She reached her arm his direction.

He inched away.

“The truth, Jed. How’d you get that shiner?”

He watched the butterfly. “I was stupid. Ran my face into a corner.” Thirty seconds had ticked. The watch clicked like a stopwatch, pestering him.

“Faces don’t mess with corners, Jed.”

“Mine did. Chasing Sissy around the house. She said it wasn’t fair because I was bigger. She tied a bandana around my head. I ran after her blind.” Another well-told lie, almost as good as Hap’s stories from the pulpit. Six sixteen. Time to go.

Daisy shook her head. Her long blonde braid whipped back and forth like a tire swing over a swimming hole. She hated bangs, something her mom, Miss Emory, knew, but hacked away at them a few weeks ago anyway, leaving them a crooked mess. Daisy still steamed about it, but her only protest was two yellow clips with smiling daisies pulling the jagged bangs away from her forehead.

“I love you, you know.”

Jed’s face warmed. “Would you quit that please? There’s no room for talk like that.”

“Why not? This is church, right? Aren’t you supposed to say love in church? Besides, you know what street I live on.”

Jed rolled his eyes. “Love Street.”

“That’s right.”

“I don’t see how that makes any difference”

“It makes every difference. It’s destiny, what street you live on.” Daisy turned away from Jed, pulled her braid to her mouth. She bit its stubbled end and groaned like she was gritting teeth. Her angry noise.

The monarch flew in circles in front of Daisy, as if it were trying to lift her mood by dancing on air. It lit upon the pew between the two of them, wings folded up toward the ceiling in prayer.

Daisy bent near the monarch, but the butterfly didn’t flinch. “It means something, sure enough,” she whispered.

“What’s gotten into you? It’s tired, that’s all. And it happened to sit down right there.” Jed pointed his finger at the motionless butterfly.

With one tentative hop, the monarch left the dusty pew for Jed’s dirt-stained fingernail. It seemed to study his face while the sun shone through its papery wings. It flapped once and then flew clear away, out one of the abandoned church’s broken stained glass.

They sat in pew four listening to doves calling each other.

Jed checked his watch. Nearly twenty after.

“It’s a sign. Jed Pepper, you’re going to change the world. You’ve been chosen.”

“You’re frustrating.” Jed stood.

“Am not.”

“Are too.” Jed scatted the air with a wave of his hand, as if doing that would erase the words Daisy spoke, an aerial Etch-a-Sketch.

He walked Crooked Creek Church’s middle aisle backwards, like a sinner unrepentant, while Daisy chattered away. Part of him wanted to leave her behind for good, but another part wanted to listen to her forever and a year. He’d welcome her words to fill the silence of his home.

“Hey Jed?”

“Now what?”

“You be careful.”

“I will.”

“Promise?”

“Did anyone ever tell you you’re a pest?”

“Mama does. Every single day. Should I add you to the list?” Her voice got that empty sound whenever she spoke of Miss Emory—a longing for something her mama couldn’t or wouldn’t give her.

He considered his answer. Daisy’s mama scatted her like she was an interrupting fruit fly half the time. He didn’t want to treat her the same. “No, never mind. Forget I said it.”

“I’m a good forgetter.” She smiled.

He couldn’t help but smile in return. “I gotta go.” If he ran, he’d make it.

Daisy stepped out into the aisle, hands on hips. “I’m going to marry you someday. You wait and see.”

Jed rolled his eyes. Girls.

“I’m going to put on a long white dress and you’re going to wear a fine suit. We’re going to tend birds. I can’t live without ‘em.”

A dove shot through an open window, looping frantically through the church, flying crazy-winged out where it came from in a fluttering of wings against window pane. For a moment, everything was silent. Dead quiet.

“God’s been here,” Daisy whispered, looking haunted-eyed at Jed.

He looked away.

She tapped him on the shoulder. “And when we’re married, we’re going to have six kids—all girls. Want to know their names?” This time her eyes spelled mischief.

“Not hardly.”

“Petunia, Hollyhock, Primrose, Begonia, Dahlia, and Buttercup.”

Jed leaned against the back pew, eyeing the door of escape. “Sounds more like a garden than a batch of kids.” He knew he should leave, but Daisy held some sort of annoying girl spell over him.

“Very funny.”

“I need to head home.” Jed turned. He untied the back door, hitched closed with baling twine. He’d come in the side way, through a low window, and was going to leave proper this time. Besides, it was the closest way to escape Daisy’s sentences. Next thing, she’d be talking about perfume or how smooth babies’ skin was or going on about the butterfly’s hidden meaning. Anyone knew he wouldn’t change the world. Not today at least. He’d be happy to make it through one day.

Daisy followed him. “You going to leave me here alone? I traipsed all the way from town to come here.”

“It’s not like we don’t meet here every single day. You’ll be fine. How many times have you walked home from here? A thousand? Two?”

“It’s a long walk.”

“For crying out loud, Daisy, this is Defiance, Texas. There’s nothing to be afraid of. Besides, you’ve got God’s eye for protection.”

She looked away, didn’t say a word while seconds ticked away. She took a deep breath, then let it out. “You’ll regret it.” The western sun shone through the church’s broken-out windows brightening the left side of Daisy’s face. She looked almost like an angel, that is, if angels had braided hair and prattled on and on.

“See you later,” he called over his shoulder.

Jed shut the church’s back door, knowing Daisy preferred crawling out of the church like a fugitive. Ever since she read a book about Anne who holed up from Nazis, she’d taken to hiding and sneaking. He tied a rope around the doorknob and a piece of wood sticking out from the doorframe, securing the door.

He faced his world in that moment, let its significance and fury sink into his heart. Would he change the world? Hard to say.