



## Chapter One

*The crazy January day it snowed in Rosebud, Alabama*  
Ginger Winters sensed a shift in her soul.

In the distance, peeling church bells clashed with the moan of the wind cutting down Main Street.

"Have you ever?" Ruby-Jane, Ginger's receptionist, best friend, and all-around girl Friday, opened the front door, letting the warmth out and the cold in. "Snow in Rosebud. Two hours from the Florida coast and we have snow." She breathed deep. "Glorious." Then she frowned. "Are those the church bells?"

"For the wedding . . . this weekend." Ginger joined Ruby-Jane by the door, folding her arms, hugging herself. "If you're Bridgett Maynard, even the wedding bells get rehearsed."

Ruby-Jane glanced at Ginger. "I thought they were getting married at her grandparents' plantation."



"They are, but at four o'clock, when the wedding starts at the Magnolia House, the bells of Applewood Church will be ringing."

"Disturbing all of us who didn't get an invite." Ruby-Jane made a face. "It's a sad thing when your friend from kindergarten turns on you in junior high and ignores you the rest of your life."

"Look at it this way. Bridgett dropped you and you found me." Ginger gave her a wide-eyed, isn't-that-grand expression, tapping the appointment book tucked under RJ's arm. "What's up with the day's appointments?"

"Mrs. Davenport pitched a fit but I told her we were moving appointments around since you didn't want anyone driving in this mess. And you know Mrs. Carney wanted you to come out to the house but I told her you weren't driving either."

"Sweet Mrs. Carney."

"Demanding Mrs. Carney."

"Come on, RJ, she's been coming to this very shop, with its various owners, since after the Second World War. She's a beauty shop faithful."

"Either way, she can go a day without you blowing out her hair. Maggie never catered to these blue hairs."

"Because Maggie was one of them. I'm still earning their respect."

"You have their respect. Maggie wouldn't have sold you this shop unless she believed in you. So they *have* to believe in you."

The wind rattled the window and skirted tiny snowflakes

across the threshold. "Brrr, it's cold, Rubes. Shut the door." Ginger crossed the salon. "I think today . . ." She pointed at the walls. "We paint."

"Paint?" Ruby-Jane walked the appointment book back to the reservation desk. "How about this? We lock up, go home, sit in front of the TV, and mourn the fact that *All My Children* is off the air."

"Or, how about we paint?" Ginger motioned to the back room and shoved up her sleeves, a rare move, but since the doors were shut, the shop was closed, and snow was falling, she didn't mind exposing her puckered, relief-map skin. "We can use the old smocks to cover our clothes."

Ruby-Jane had been the first person outside of Mama and Grandpa to ever see the hideous wounds left on her body after the trailer fire.

At the age of twelve, *everything* changed for Ginger Winters. But out of the pain, one good thing emerged: her super-power to see and display the beauty in her friends. Despite her own ugly marring, she was *the* go-to girl in high school for hair and makeup.

It was how she survived. How she found purpose. Her ability took her to amazing places. But now she was back in Rosebud after twelve years, starting a new season with her own shop.

She'd left home to become a known stylist, fleeing her "burn victim" image.

And she'd succeeded, or so she thought, landing top salon jobs in New York, Atlanta, and finally Nashville, traveling the world as personal stylist to country music sensation Tracie Blue.

But the truth remained, even among her success. Ginger was *that* girl, ugly and scarred, forever on the outside looking in.

Face it, some things would never change. If she hoped different, all she had to do was look at her role in her old “friend’s” wedding. The hired help.

Ginger tugged the paint cans from the storage closet. Six months ago, when she returned to Rosebud and signed the papers for the shop, she ran out to Lowe’s and purchased a pinkish-beige paint to roll on the walls, giving the old shop a fresh look and a new smell, adding her touch to the historic downtown storefront.

But Maggie kept a full appointment book and Ginger hit the ground running, with only enough time to paint and decorate her above-shop apartment.

Then the two long-time stylists who had worked for Maggie retired. And ten-hour days turned to fifteen until Ginger hired Michele and Casey, part-time stylists and full-time moms.

Painting had to wait.

“Can we at least order lunch?” Ruby-Jane tugged open the doors of the supply closet, the long-handle roller brushes toppling down on her. With a sigh, she collected them, setting them against the wall.

“Yes, pizza. On me.”

“Ah, I love you, Ginger Winters. You’re speaking my language.”

Kneeling beside the paint can, Ginger pried off the lid and filled the paint trays, then moved to the shop and dragged the styling stations toward the center, covering the

old hardwood floor around the perimeter with paper and visqueen.

"Have to admit, I love this old shop," RJ said, pausing between the shop and the back room.

"Me too." Ginger raised her gaze, glancing about the timeworn, much-loved room. "Don't you wish these walls could talk?"

Ruby-Jane laughed. "Yes, because I'd like to hear some of the old stories. No, because talking walls would really freak me out." She eyed Ginger, pointing. "But one day these walls will tell *our* stories."

"Can we go back to talking walls freaking you out?" Ginger laughed with a huff as she pulled the last station away from the wall. "I don't want any stories going around about me."

She'd heard them already. *Freak. Ugly. She gives me the creeps.*

"I think the walls will tell lovely stories: *Ginger Winters made women feel good about themselves.*"

She smiled at Ruby-Jane, the eternal optimist. "Okay, then I can go with the talking walls. Okay . . . painting. Shoo wee, this is a big wall. Let's do the right side first. Then, as time allows, we'll finish the rest. With the right side done, we'll be more motivated to get the rest done."

"You're the boss."

Adjusting the scarf around her neck, Ginger smoothed her hair over her right shoulder, further covering herself. While she had the courage to shove up her sleeve and expose her scarred arm, she wasn't brazen enough to expose her neck and the horrible skin graft debacle.

Two infections and three surgeries later, Mama had given up on doctors and decided to “leave well enough alone.”

Ginger had cried herself to sleep at night, her hand pressed over the most hideous wrinkled, puckered skin patch at the base of her neck.

She knew then she’d never be beautiful.

“You can have a social life if you want,” RJ said, helping her with the last station.

“Who said I wanted one?” Ginger headed for the store-room. “Let’s get painting.”

Five minutes later, their rollers thick with paint, Ginger and Ruby-Jane covered the wall with fresh color, their beloved country tunes filling the air pockets with twang.

“You ready?” RJ said. “For this weekend? One bride, seven bridesmaids, two mothers, three grandmothers—”

“Yep. Just a walk in the park, Kazansky.”

“I still can’t believe she didn’t invite me. We were good friends until high school.”

“Maybe because you dated Eric for awhile after they broke up.”

“Well, there’s that.” *Sigh*. After graduation, when Bridgett and Eric went their separate ways, Ruby-Jane was more than eager to be the new future Mrs. Eric James.

“As for dropping you in high school, I don’t know, but her loss was my gain.” There were no truer words in this moment. With an exhale, Ginger relaxed into the repeating motion of rolling on paint.

The shop was warm and merry with the occasional ting of crystalline flakes pinging against the glass.

"Well, that's true, but I like to think we'd have become friends anyway."

Ginger glanced over at her tall, lithe friend. "You can come to the wedding as my assistant."

"And flaunt my shame in front of everyone as the help of the help? No thanks."

Ginger laughed. "Good point. You can get Victor Reynolds to take you to a romantic dinner instead."

"Ha! Haven't heard from him in weeks."

Ginger lowered her paint roller. "Really? Why didn't you say something?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . I'm twenty-nine, divorced, living in my hometown with my parents, in my old bedroom, and when all is said and done, I can't keep the interest of Victor Reynolds." Ruby-Jane's expression soured. "Victor Reynolds . . . who couldn't get a date to save his life in high school."

"You and me . . ." Ginger rolled paint against the wall. "The single sisters in solidarity."

"Ugh, so depressing. At least you have a life calling. A skill." Ruby-Jane loaded her roller with paint. "You can take an ordinary woman and make her extraordinarily beautiful."

"I love what I do." Ginger glanced around the shop. "And I want to make this the best place in the county for hair, makeup, and all things beautiful. Next year, I hope to have an esthetician on staff."

She stepped back to admire the beige-pink covering the dull yellow wall. Beautiful. She loved it.

Making things—women—beautiful was her calling, *her* duty

in life. She channeled every ounce of her heart and soul into her work because the truth was, she could *never* do it for herself.

And this weekend Ginger would play her role as a behind-the-scenes stylist, or as Tracie Blue called her, "the beauty-maker," for the Alabama society wedding of the year, if not the decade.

Socialite Bridgett Maynard was marrying the governor's son, Eric James. A pair of Rosebud High sweethearts, the beautiful people, united under their umbrellas of success and wealth.

While Ginger was looking forward to working with Bridgett, she did not look forward to the weekend. She'd have to live among *them* at the old plantation.

"Well, if anyone can make this place a success, it's you, Ginger. Last time I saw Mrs. Henderson, she was still smiling over how you styled her hair."

"Grandpa was the first to tell me I could see the beauty in everyone else." She saw it that day Mrs. Henderson sat in her chair, with her wilting, over-dyed, over-permed hair. "I believed him. He'd buy me a new baby doll every month because I'd cut the hair off the old one. Right down to their plastic scalps." Ginger's heart laughed. "Mama would get mad. 'Daddy, stop wasting your money. She's just going to destroy this one.' And he'd say, 'She's becoming who she's meant to be.'" Ginger added paint to her roller and started a slow roll along the wall, the blue sparkle of her grandpa's eyes making her warm and sentimental.

She missed Gramps, a stable force in her trailer park life, always making her feel safe. Especially when Daddy left. And again after the fire.



Then came Tom Wells. Ginger shook his name free from her thoughts. He didn't deserve any part of her memories. Handsome high school boy who disappeared on her and broke her heart.

She'd pushed him out of her mind until she moved back to Rosebud. Until Bridgett walked into the shop three months ago, begging Ginger to be her wedding stylist, and the boxed memories of her youth in Rosebud, of her high school days, busted out.

"Can I ask you something?" Ruby-Jane said, pressing the last bit of paint in her brush against the wall. "Why did you leave Tracie Blue? Really. Not because Maggie called you about this place."

"It was time."

"Did something happen? It wasn't because of your scars—"

"Nope."

"Because that would be crazy, you know. You were on the road with her for three years. Your scars weren't a factor."

Oh, but they were.

Tears blurred Ginger's eyes as she covered the old wall with a thick swath of paint. Goodbye old. Hello new. She hated lying to RJ, but talking about her departure from Tracie Blue sliced through the wounds no one could really see.

*Ugly.* That's what one tabloid called her. She'd found an article on the Internet one day last year naming the ugliest stylists to the stars. And Ginger Winters was number one.

Where they found that odd picture of her with her neck exposed, she'd never know.

Ginger swallowed a rise of bitter bile, inhaling, wrestling to shove the accusation out of her mind.

Yet she wasn't sure how to get it out of her heart. The words formed wounds and scars beneath her skin, creating tentacles of shame no long sleeves or colorful scarves could cover.

Ginger stepped back once again to admire her portion of the wall. "What do you think?"

"I like it," Ruby-Jane said. "A lot."

"Me too." The shop was starting to really feel like hers.

The top-of-the-hour news came on the radio. Ginger peeked at the wall clock. Eleven. "Hungry? Let's order lunch from Antony's," she said, cradling the brush handle against her shoulder, tugging her phone from her jeans pocket. "I'm thinking a large cheese pizza."

"You're singing my song. Oh, order some cheese bread too." Ruby-Jane stepped back, inspecting her work. "Love this color, Ginger. The shop is going to look amazing."

"I was searching online for new light fixtures last night and . . . Hey, Anthony, this is Ginger down at *Ginger Snips*. Good, good, how are you? Yes, please . . . a large cheese . . . thin crust, yep . . . and an order of cheese bread. No, for Ruby-Jane . . . I know, she's a carb addict."

"I am not."

"Sure, one of us will come down to get it." Hanging up, Ginger slipped her phone back into her pocket. "Let's just take the money from petty cash."

As the words left her lips, the bells hanging from the front door clattered against the glass as a customer pushed in.

Glancing around, she rested her roller on the paint tray. Ginger sucked in a breath. *Tom Wells Jr.*

Her skin flamed as she adjusted the dark orange scarf

tighter around her neck. She'd rather face Tracie Blue's paparazzi than Tom Wells.

"Well, look who it is. My, my, Tom Wells Jr." Ruby-Jane crossed over and gave him a big hug. "What brings you to town? Ginger, look what the cat dragged in." RJ sort of shoved Tom further into the shop.

"I see."

"Ruby-Jane, hey, good to see you. Ginger . . . it-it's been a long time." He ran his hand over his long, wavy hair as his blue gaze flipped from Ruby-Jane to Ginger who wobbled, powerless in his presence. "Are y'all open? Is Maggie around? I was hoping for a quick haircut."

Ruby-Jane smiled, patting him on the shoulder. "Good ole Maggie Boyd retired." She shoved him forward again, indicating behind his back that Ginger should *talk* to him.

"So Maggie finally took that trip to Ireland? I wondered why the sign said Ginger Snips."

"S-she's in Ireland as we speak. I-I own this place now." Ginger's voice faded, weak under the thunder of her heartbeat. She reached for her brush handle and faced the wall. *Get a hold of yourself. Remember what he did to you.* If she had any gumption at all, she'd roll him with paint.

"Remember we studied calculus together, Ginger?"

"I remember." She cut him a glance, trying so hard to be cool, but Tom Wells, with those blue eyes and mammoth shoulders, was standing in *her* shop.

Ruby-Jane stepped around him, still communicating to Ginger with glances and expressions. "It's been a long time, Tom. Since you left town our senior year. What brings you back?"

"Yeah it's been awhile. I-I'm back . . . for the wedding. Bridgett and Eric's." He seemed reserved, almost shy. Definitely a lot more humble. "I'm the best man."

Ginger pressed the roller brush against the wall. What? He was one of Eric's groomsmen? She'd be around him all weekend?

"I hear it's going to be the wedding of the decade." Ruby-Jane flicked her hand toward Ginger. "She's the stylist for the whole shebang."

"Really?" Despite his expression, Tom sounded impressed. "Not surprised. You were always good with hair, if I remember right." He brushed his hand over his thick hair again, glancing around. "As you can see, I'm in desperate need of a haircut. But looks like you're not open."

His smile darn near skewered Ginger to the wall. *Simmer down, he's just passing through . . . do not feel for him.*

"Sorry but we're painting today. You can go to the new shopping plaza south of town if you need a cut."

"The roads are horrible," Tom said, stepping close enough for his subtle fragrance to slip beneath the paint fumes and settle on her. "Big backup on Highway 21."

"You know how it is in the South," Ruby-Jane said. "We can't drive in a rainstorm, let alone ice or snow."

Tom laughed, shaking his head. "Very true." He raised his gaze to Ginger. "So is it possible to get a cut here? This is the only time I—"

"Absolutely." Ruby-Jane set her paintbrush down and kicked the visqueen aside, leading Tom to a chair across the room. "Ginger, does this station work?" She mouthed some

sort of pinched-lipped command, gesturing toward Tom. "You ready?"

It was then Ginger noticed her arm, peeking out from under the cloak, her scars exposed. And he'd been looking right at her. Could the floor just open up and swallow her whole? She lowered her brush to the tray and tugged her sleeve down, stretching it to the tips of her fingers.

Tom Wells . . . in *her* shop. In her chair . . . waiting for her to touch his hair. The very notion made her feel like she might fly apart.

"Listen, if Ginger doesn't want to—" He tried to get up, but Ruby-Jane shoved him back down.

"She does. She'll be right with you. Ginger, can you show me where we keep the petty cash? I'll run and get the pizza." RJ snatched her by the arm and led her to the back room.

"What is wrong with you?" RJ, who knew perfectly well where the petty cash was located, took a painting of a pasture off the wall, revealing the safe, and spun the dial. "Tom Wells . . . hello!" She reached in for the petty cash bag. "If he's not better looking than he was in high school, I'll eat the pizza and the box. And sweet. He seems so sweet. How unfair, you know? Men get better-looking with age and women just *sag*."

"What's wrong with me?" Ginger kept her voice low but intense. "I'll tell you what's wrong with me. He was the only guy I've ever loved, who ever paid one lick of attention to me, and he dumped me before our first date."

Ruby-Jane took out a twenty, then closed up the money bag in the safe. "His family *mooved*, remember?" She slipped from her paint cloak, dropping it over the back of a chair.

"But he didn't tell me he was leaving. How hard is it to pick up the phone. 'Uh, Ging, can't make it. Dad says we're moving.' Then afterward, he never called or e-mailed."

"So go in there and botch his haircut if you want, get him back for it. But girlie-girl," Ruby-Jane wiggled her eyebrows, "it's Tom Wells. *The* Tom Wells. Besides, that was twelve years ago. Don't tell me you still hold a grudge."

Tom Wells, a two-named brand which meant gorgeous, athletic, smoldering, knee-weakening, kissable—

Ginger grabbed RJ. "Don't leave me alone with him. Stay here. I'll be done in ten minutes."

"Forget it. The pizza will be cold." RJ smirked and walked around Ginger into the shop. "Say Tom, we ordered too much pizza. Want to hang around for a slice?"

*Note to self: fire Ruby-Jane.*

The front door bells rang out as RJ left, waving at Ginger through the glass. *No worry, RJ. What goes around comes around.*

"Ginger," Tom said, rising from the chair. "I'm not going to force you to cut my hair."

Their eyes locked for a moment and her pulse throbbed in her throat. From the corner of her eye, she could see the small white swirl of snow drifting over them. Even if she turned him out, she'd have to see him at the wedding. Might as well cut his hair, then she could ignore him this weekend.

"It's fine." She motioned toward the wash bowls, removing the cloak she wore for painting and tying on a clean *Ginger Snips* apron. "Take the one on the right."

Tom situated himself in the black chair as Ginger rested his head against the bowl.

"H-how are you?" he said as she sprayed his head with warm water.

"Good." She hesitated, then raked her fingers through his luscious hair. In high school, she'd daydreamed of cutting Tom's dark, heavy locks. Then when Mr. Bickle paired them as calculus study partners, she darn near thought she'd died and gone to heaven.

The fragrance of his cologne subtly floated through her senses and she exhaled, trying to rein in her adrenaline, but one touch of his soft curls and her veins became a highway for her desires.

*This is nothing. Just another client . . . just another client.*

Ginger peeked at Tom's face, a best-of composite from the Hollywood's Golden Age leading men. Cary Grant's sophistication with Gregory Peck's smolder all tied together with Jimmy Stewart's lovable, everyday man.

*Steady . . .* She pumped a palmful of shampoo and lathered his hair, catching her reflection in one of the mirrors.

Her scarf had slipped, exposing her frightful scar, which beamed red with her embarrassment. Ginger pinched the scarf back into place before Tom could look up and see her.

She'd never get used to it. Never. The ugliness. The memory of the fire, of the day she realized she was marked for life. Of lying in bed, tears slipping down her cheeks and knowing no one would ever want her. Even at twelve, the truth trumpeted through her mind.

*No one . . . no one . . . no one . . .*