
Chapter 1

Not wanting to wake him, Lily gave her husband, Henry, a gentle kiss just before leaving their apartment and stepping into the main kitchen of the house. She had just taken her first sip of coffee when Sophie joined her.

"Law, child. What you doin' up this time of the mornin'? It's your first day of vacation. I figured you be sleepin' late."

Sophie laughed. "No way! I've been dreaming of being back here at The Landing since last summer. I don't want to waste any of it sleeping."

Lily smiled at Miss Annie's great-granddaughter. Everyone had been surprised nearly two years ago when Annie's daughter, given up at birth, had found Annie and contacted her. Annie herself had been the most surprised and delighted to meet her daughter, granddaughter and, of course, Sophie, her great-granddaughter. All these women looked nearly identical and Sophie, at age fourteen, already showed signs of great beauty. Her thick, curly dark hair was pulled back from her face. And her dark, almost black, eyes snapped with happy excitement at being back on The Landing.

"Two weeks went by so fast last summer. But now, getting to

spend the whole summer here! I'm just too excited to sleep anyway."

"I 'preciate the company," Lily told her. "You want some juice? I can start you some breakfast in a minute."

"Can I have some coffee? I don't want anything to eat yet."

"Your mama let you drink coffee?" Lily asked suspiciously.

"Sometimes," Sophie hedged.

Lily laughed and poured her a cup, letting her doctor it the way she wanted.

"Miss Lily, can... *may* I ask you some questions?"

"Sure can. What y'all want to know, honey?" Lily sat at the island next to Sophie.

"I guess I should have learned all this last summer but I felt funny asking too many questions. Everyone at The Landing is 'family'," she said, using air quotes. "But *is* anyone? I mean Greatmom and Cassie and Sue talk about being sisters, but they aren't really, are they?"

"Well, yes and no," Lily told her. "They ain't got the same mama and daddy. But they got the bond of sisters. They all met when they wasn't much older than y'all are now. Them women been through a lot together and that makes 'em family."

"Sounds good to me," Sophie agreed. "Now I know you and Mr. Henry live here in Greatmom and Granddad's house, but in your own little apartment."

"That's right. We got our own kitchen, livin' room and bedroom, nice big bathroom and even our own laundry," Lily bragged, pointing to the door at the far end of the kitchen. "They wanted me to live here when they first bought this house and hired me to look after everybody," Lily confirmed.

"You work at all three houses, right?"

"I do. I look after Miss Annie and Mr. Andy and Missy and Miss Priss and their menfolk, too."

Sophie grinned. "Why do you call Cassie and Sue, 'Missy' and 'Miss Priss'?"

"Oh, it just seem to suit 'em. They can be rascals, you know." Not able to picture the old women as rascals, Sophie laughed.

"You wait and see," Lily told her.

"Okay. Back to my questions. Cassie and Tom live in the next house downriver, then Ryan and Allie and Christian are in the next house, right? And Ryan is Cassie and Tom's son."

"Right," Lily nodded.

"But," Sophie asked hesitantly, "is Ryan adopted? I thought I heard something about that last summer but I didn't want to ask."

"He is." Lily nodded. "But they didn't 'dopt him until he was growed-up. 'Fore that he was just the boy who mowed their yard. But they all got real close and when somethin' happened 'tween him and his daddy, Missy and Mr. Tom decided to 'dopt him.

"Allie was 'bout sixteen when Missy and Mr. Tom moved here and when Ryan started coming to work in their yard, him and Allie fell in love."

"Well, that's romantic, falling in love with the boy next door. Where are Allie's parents? I never met them."

"They livin' in England right now for her daddy's work. But 'fore they left, they sold the house to Allie and Ryan. Now that baby Christian's here, they come visit as much as they can."

"Doesn't Allie have a brother who plays for the Charlotte Hornets? Isn't his name Drew? I love basketball! I want to meet him this summer. Does he ever come here?"

"Him and Jackson are mighty busy. So they're not here as much as we wish they were."

"Who's Jackson?"

"Jackson's Henry's boy. He and Drew got together when me and Henry got married."

"They're a couple?" Sophie asked, seeming somewhat startled.

For the first time, Lily felt uncomfortable. No one living at The Landing gave Drew and Jackson being a couple a second

thought, but this was a young girl. Not having any idea how the child had been raised or her feelings along these lines, Lily wasn't sure exactly what to say. So she just nodded. Finally, she asked, "That bother you?"

Sophie looked solemn. "You mean because they're a bi-racial couple?"

Now it was Lily's turn to be startled. "No. I meant ... I thought 'cause..."

Sophie let Lily fumble around for a moment longer before she began laughing. "Lily, you're so funny! Black, white, gay, straight—nobody cares about those things anymore. I like being bi-racial, it makes me feel special. My best friend is black and her moms are a bi-racial lesbian couple. It all seems normal to me."

Lily laughed along with Sophie. "Well, that's the way we all feel 'round here," Lily told her, wishing she could agree with the child that *no one* cared about those things anymore.

"Okay, I just have a couple more questions. Still going down-river, the house after Allie and Ryan's is Sue and Steve's house. And then the last one belongs to Jenny and Cal. Did they ever get their house finished or are they still living in the cabin?"

"They got a real nice house built. Finest sittin' porch I ever saw. They took their time buildin' too. Cal's daddy and his brothers did a lot o' the work. But they been in it for a couple months now," Lily told the girl.

"Cal's the sheriff, isn't he?"

"He is. He the youngest sheriff they ever 'lected 'round these parts. He only in his early thirties."

That didn't sound very young to Sophie, but she didn't say that. "Okay, last question—for the moment—I know Jenny calls Cassie 'Mom' but Cassie's not her real mom, is she?"

Lily laughed again. "That's another one of them yes and no questions. Jenny's real mama ain't a very nice person. She real ugly to Jenny when she was growin' up. Didn't want her to marry Cal. It was a real mess for a while and Jenny don't have no more

to do with 'em. And though it was a long time ago, Missy's mama and daddy was the same way. So she understand Jenny pretty well and they kinda 'dopted one another. Jenny calls Missy 'Mom' and I know Missy love her like a daughter."

"That's cool." Sophie sat thinking. "So everybody on The Landing is family—but not many are really blood kin, right?"

Lily smiled as she thought. "I guess they ain't much at that. Course, you got baby Christian and his mama and daddy, Allie and her brother Drew. And you and Miss Annie, of course."

"You mean I'm part of The Landing family too?" Sophie asked, feeling pleased.

Lily smiled and put her hand on Sophie's shiny hair. "Oh, child, you better know it."