

## *Christmas, Alabama*

Rachel Prudhomme absorbed more truth through the lens of her camera than words, true or not, could speak. Eyes didn't lie. Expressions caught off guard didn't lie.

The bride wore an exquisite white, off-the-shoulder beaded gown, and the groom, a sharply-tailored black tux. Their smiles were radiant. The wedding party smiled, and their families, despite a few obvious squabbles, smiled too.

But something was off. It wasn't obvious, and Rachel might have missed it had she not zoomed in on her subjects—the bride and groom—through the viewfinder. They weren't the dreamy, happy couple they appeared to be. There was a tightness around the eyes and mouth of the groom. A sadness behind the smile of the bride.

Yet, everyone was participating in this expensive and very public lie, and all were smiling their way through the photos and poses. Or maybe it wasn't quite a lie, but more of an imbalance. Vows were made and cake was cut amidst the flowers and music. The band played and the guests danced. Maybe nobody knew anything was amiss, or if they did, they pretended they didn't.

Rachel had learned the hard way that this was none of her concern. Maybe they'd had a fight over the cost of the wedding, or the destination of the honeymoon. Or, perhaps he'd waited too long to propose. Whatever was at play here, weddings brought out the stress and inner beast in everyone, all while they smiled and played the parts of the happiest people on the planet for their families and friends. The photos were the key to remembrance. This was a Thanksgiving wedding. The food was heavy, harvest fare. The flowers were deep shades of crimson, linen and champagne, and golds. The greenery was heavy and dark. The autumnal tones, spicy cinnamon candles, combined with the cool temperature outside set the stage for rich, lasting memories.

So, Rachel would do her job to cement the memories for this couple, hopefully, a lifetime's worth. The stress, the fight, or whatever had happened prior to the ceremony wouldn't carry through when they looked at their wedding photos in ten years if Rachel did her job well. The photos made the re-remembering pure perfection.

"Hey, Rach, could we get a shot of Grandma Jean with the garter on her leg?" the bride asked, her smile bright.

The alcohol was clearly doing its job now. "Sure." Rachel followed the bride to where the elderly lady was perched on the best man's knee, skirt hiked. "Okay, Grandma Jean. Show us some leg!"

Everyone laughed, and all was well. Rachel wondered for a moment if she'd imagined the earlier angst. Not likely, but she continued snapping photos until the "happy" couple was tucked into the getaway car and celebrated out the drive.

Rachel took a few more shots of lingering guests who asked to have their picture taken, and then, after they finally trickled out the door, she took refuge in the large, renovated kitchen of The Evangeline House, the most popular venue in Ministry, Alabama for all the goings-on in town.

"That one lasted a while. I thought we were going to have to shoo them like flies out the door," Miss Maureen, the owner said. She was sipping tea on a barstool, her sensible black flats kicked off on the floor.

"Once the bar was shut down and the band packed up, you'd have thought they might have gotten the message," Rachel said.

Miss Maureen laughed. "You never know how late weddings will go. It often depends how young the crowd is and how much alcohol they consume. Did you get some good shots?"

Rachel nodded. "They were all very photogenic. No major catastrophes."

"They were out-of-towners from Huntsville, so I don't know the family. They seemed pleased with everything. Paid their bill, said thank you, and left."

"Seems like there was something underlying with that couple, don't you think?" Rachel asked.

Miss Maureen laughed. "Oh, honey, I've been doing this for more years than I can count, and there's always more there than meets the eye. I quit trying to figure people out ages ago. I'll leave that up to your sister."

Rachel smiled. Her sister, Sabine, was the town's clinical therapist, and she was continuously booked up. "Must be hard knowing all the town's secrets."

"She bears it well, all things considered. So, how are you settling in here? Are the people of Ministry treating you well?" Miss Maureen had a shrewd and sharp eye.

Rachel had put her feet up on a chair, feeling comfortable here in this place with this woman who was her sister's mother-in-law. Sabine had married Miss Maureen's son, Ben, who was now the mayor of Ministry, last year. Rachel had moved here to be near her mother and sister after some chaotic years flitting around as a freelance photographer.

"I'm doing pretty well; thanks for asking. It's not exactly an open society here. So, I expect it will take some time to feel like a native."

Miss Maureen laughed. "A native? The best you can expect as a lovely single woman is open hostility from the other single women and their mommas until you find a man and get yourself off the market."

Rachel snorted. "Yeah. I've noticed. There aren't a lot of unattached men around here that have all the desired qualities." Like a decent job and most of their teeth.

"So, the race is on when one does come along. Better be careful not to get caught in the fray when it happens." Miss Maureen rolled her eyes. "Those women will be on him like a pack of rabid dawgs, I tell you."