

Chapter 1

“I’ve come to rescue you,” said the wild-looking woman at Beatrice’s front door.

Beatrice, a recently retired art museum curator, gaped at the woman, completely flabbergasted. She certainly didn’t need rescuing. In fact, she’d just brewed a relaxing cup of herbal tea to celebrate the fact that there were only ten more moving boxes to unpack in her new cottage.

Besides, who’d want to be rescued by this woman, even if rescuing were in order? She looked like she needed rescuing herself . . . with her brightly colored, mismatched clothes and disorganized gray braid hanging to her waist. Beatrice made up her mind to briskly and firmly shut the door and try out the new bolts and chains and the alarm system . . . but then the woman held out her hand.

“I’m Meadow. Your next-door neighbor. Welcome to Dappled Hills!”

Beatrice managed a smile and a handshake. She’d wondered who lived in the odd converted barn next to her country cottage. Beatrice’s daughter, Piper, who lived right down the street, had warned her that her neighbor was a little *different*, and she saw exactly what Piper meant.

Now Meadow clutched her arm and pulled her outside. “Come on, Beatrice. You’ll miss it!”

Beatrice pulled back. Wasn’t this how kidnappings happened? How could she possibly be abducted in tiny Dappled Hills, North Carolina, when she’d been safe for so many years in Atlanta?

“I’m sorry, Meadow,” she said with dignity. (She would *not* be a victim!) “But I’m going to have to insist that I stay at home. I just brewed some chamomile tea and need to put my feet up after all the rigorous unpacking I’ve accomplished . . .”

But her words were completely wasted on Meadow, and Beatrice found herself being propelled with surprising strength toward the bright red barn on the spacious property next door. And Meadow wasn’t letting her slide a word in edgewise.

“We’re all practically here,” she said inexplicably. “The unpacking is exactly what I’m rescuing you from. And everything is set out. I have tea, too, but it’s sweet.”

With great relief, Beatrice saw a police car pulling into Meadow’s driveway. Well, at least Dappled Hills had a very responsive police unit. She waved her free arm in what she hoped was an alarmed, help-seeking fashion.

A short, balding man climbed out of the patrol car. He had a tired stoop to his shoulders and a stomach that had seen its share of heavy Southern cooking. “Is there a problem here, ma’am?”

Beatrice blinked as Meadow leaned over and gave the policeman a peck on the lips. “No problem, Ram-say. Except remember that I told you the guild is meeting here this afternoon. So don’t devour our snacks, please. I put some pretzels in a Baggie for you.”

He shook his head wearily. “I was asking if the *other* lady had a problem. Ma’am? Everything all right? Meadow, for pity’s sake! Could you let her go for a minute? You’ve scared her half to death. Is this our new neighbor?”

Beatrice nodded, and the policeman held out his hand. “Ramsay Downey. I’m Dappled Hills’ police chief. Welcome to town. My job is to keep the citizens safe . . . from people like my wife, Meadow.” He gave Meadow a dour look.

Meadow was so singularly focused on propelling Beatrice inside her house—or barn—that she overlooked his jab. “There’s also a sandwich in the fridge for you, Ramsay, besides the pretzels. And I picked some berries today and sugared them—they’re in the fridge, too.” And again she hurried toward the barn, turning around and gesturing at Beatrice. “Come on!”

Beatrice looked helplessly at the policeman. “It’s no use resisting,” he said in a resigned voice. “It’s how we ended up marrying all those years ago. You might as well just follow her. She’s not quite as crazy as she looks,” he added kindly. “And you’ll learn a lot about quilting.”

Beatrice realized she must have seemed completely baffled when he chuckled and said, “She didn’t mention the quilting? She’s even more scattered than usual, then! The quilting guild is meeting this afternoon and she probably wants to introduce you to everyone— that’s all. And maybe give you a kit to complete a block, too, knowing her.”

With growing trepidation, Beatrice approached the barn. There was nothing like having your peaceful afternoon hijacked by a quilting nut. And she had no intention of doing any quilting. She knew a lot about the artistic *merits* of quilts, she could appraise one, and she could tell some of the likely history that went into a particular quilt, but she was happily ignorant of the precise methods of constructing them.

And then all her thoughts left her as she entered the light-filled space of the converted barn. She’d thought it would be dark inside, but skylights scattered through the top of the roof and sides of the barn cheerily illuminated the space. What must have previously been a hayloft now looked like a sleeping loft and sitting area. And the high ceiling—Beatrice stopped and tilted her head back. It soared up like a cathedral, with impressive exposed rafters and posts. There were vibrant-colored quilts, mostly with asymmetrical designs, hanging on the walls and the backs of chairs and any other available surface.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed.

Meadow’s face creased in a smile. “I love it, too.” She then shoved a tall glass of what looked like iced tea into Beatrice’s hands and continued urging her along. Ramsay had pulled his lunch from the fridge and found his little Baggie of pretzels and disappeared. Now Beatrice saw that there were two women across the big, open room. The kitchen, dining room, and living room were all one big area—but it looked like there was a door that might lead to an attached master suite.

On closer inspection, Beatrice realized the women were twins, although they looked a bit like a before-and-after photo. They were probably in their early thirties, but one of the sisters seemed a lot older. She had a beaky nose and stiff militarylike comportment, and wore a long-sleeved floral dress, her thin hair drawn up in a bun. The other sister wore a pretty floral dress and had a much softer look. Fabric and scissors surrounded them, and baskets beside them were filled with quilting supplies and tools.

The softer one spoke to her, beaming. “It’s an amazing house, isn’t it? Except it’s a barn!”

Her sister frowned. “But with no animals,” she said, in the tone of one who demands perfect accuracy.

Meadow put her hands on her generous hips with mock indignation. “No animals, Savannah? What’s Boris, then—chopped liver?”

At the sound of his name, a massive creature bounded up from behind the kitchen counter and bolted across the room. It galloped up and Beatrice flinched as it charged right at them. The quilters nonchalantly continued sewing their blocks. The dog jumped onto Meadow, putting its tremendous paws on both her shoulders. Meadow hugged it, crooning to it softly, then gently pushed him back down.

“What breed *is* Boris, exactly?” asked Beatrice.

Meadow said in a considering voice, “Well, Ramsay and I think he might be part Great Dane, part Newfoundland, and part corgi.”

The minuscule part that was a corgi, thought corgi-owner Beatrice, was clearly cowed by the other genetic components.

Beatrice started as Meadow gave her an impulsive hug. “We’re *thrilled* you could quilt with us this afternoon. More tea?” Meadow automatically refilled Beatrice’s glass without waiting for a reply. Although, thought Beatrice with some irritation, she hadn’t even taken a sip yet.

Meadow’s eyes twinkled at Beatrice from behind her red-framed glasses. “Savannah and I were just saying the other day—Savannah, you remember my saying this, don’t you?—that we really needed another member in the Village Quilters guild.”

Savannah gave a jerking nod as she expertly stitched an appliqué with darting movements.

“And the very next thing I know, you’ve moved in next door, Beatrice! It’s divine intervention.” Meadow beamed at her again as she absently continued filling the others’ glasses with tea . . . even though, thought Beatrice as she squinted across the room, it appeared they’d been drinking water. The other two women didn’t make a peep to stop her.

Beatrice cleared her throat. Really, it was too much. Meeting new people in a new town, being expected to suddenly take up quilting . . . it was all a tremendous adjustment. But she had to admit that the people of Dappled Hills were nothing if not friendly.

Meadow chuckled. “Mercy, but you do look confused. Introductions are in order! Good thing we only have a few members here today. Fewer to boggle your brain with. Although it looks like your brain might not be the boggling type. Of course, you already know me—I’m Meadow Downey, your next-door neighbor and new best friend.” She bowed at Beatrice, eyes glittering.

The plain woman with the stiff comportment gestured a needle at the pretty woman beside her. “We’re the Potter sisters. I’m Savannah and she’s Georgia.” Savannah continued steadily stitching beautiful needlework with her bony fingers.

“Savannah, Georgia,” murmured Beatrice weakly. “Our mama just adored the city,” said Georgia. “It was all moonlight and magnolias to her.” “Mama,” repeated Savannah gruffly, and both women’s eyes grew misty.

Meadow, apparently accustomed to these emotional displays, pulled tissues from a nearby box and dropped them neatly in the sisters’ laps as the doorbell rang. “This’ll be Posy Beck,” she said. “And she’s the final quilter I’m expecting today.”

The door opened to reveal a tiny, bespectacled, older woman with wide blue eyes and a gentle smile who greeted the other ladies warmly. She settled on the sofa next to Georgia and pulled strips of cloth from her tote bag. “You’re Piper’s mama?” she asked with a smile as she pulled on a fluffy cardigan, despite the warmth of

the room. Beatrice nodded, and Posy said, “I absolutely love your daughter. She didn’t mention you were a quilter. I own Posy’s Patchwork Cottage right in the middle of town. I’d love for you to pop by to visit.”

Beatrice shifted uneasily. “No, actually. I’m really *not* a quilter, Posy. That is, I worked on a group quilt once about twenty years ago.” She winced at memories of stabbing herself with the needle, her crooked stitches, and the huge knots she’d left on the back of the quilt. “I’ve *researched* quilts. I’ve set up quilt *exhibits*. I’ve even appraised some quilts. But actual quilting?” She shook her head.

Meadow snapped her fingers. “That’s right! Piper told me you were a museum curator in Atlanta. We’ve got a Southern folk art expert right here in our midst, ladies! And don’t worry. It won’t take you *any* time to get into quilting again. It’s just like riding a horse. Or a bike,” she said with an absentminded frown, as if she knew she was mixing that up somehow. She poured a tall glass of tea for Posy, who smiled fondly at her.

“What I’m actually a lot more interested in is what you’re all working on,” she said.

Georgia beamed at her. “Savannah and I are making a quilt together since we’ve already finished our blocks for the bee tomorrow. What do you think?”

Beatrice moved closer. The rich, earthy colors of fall made up the quilt—and she saw it was actually autumn themed . . . with a medallion of apples and pumpkins and black cats appliquéd onto the center of the vibrant plaid background. “Beautiful,” she proclaimed, softly. “Absolutely beautiful. It looks like a quilt to curl up in on a cold night. With a mug of hot chocolate.”

Savannah’s sharp features turned a mottled red at her praise. She continued briskly stitching. “We do work well together. Don’t we, Georgia?” she said in a voice that brooked no argument. “Although I usually favor geometric patterns, Georgia had her heart set on doing this one as soon as she saw the pattern. And it was her turn to pick.”

Georgia tittered. “We do work well together, despite our different approaches. Poor Savannah is struggling to adjust to living with me—still. And it’s been almost a year now since I’ve invaded her kingdom.”

“Georgia is divorced,” said Meadow in a stage whisper that Beatrice supposed Meadow thought quiet.

Georgia continued, “Savannah is ultraorganized and I’m an organizational disaster, so our living together has been like *The Odd Couple*. She’s got a thread organizer with thread divided by color. Then she has this huge plastic wall unit with drawers of fabric organized by manufacturer or season. And my stuff is pretty much a ragbag of fabrics and threads. I’ve got blocks and tops and fabrics scattered everywhere. But when we make a quilt, we’re in perfect harmony.”

“I can tell,” said Beatrice, still studying the quilt. Then she glimpsed a notebook at Savannah’s feet.

Savannah saw Beatrice looking at the notebook and said, “I’ll admit that organization has its advantages. I put together this quilting bag and everyone has copied it. Except for Georgia, of course. She takes a more loosey-goosey approach to quilting supplies.” She bobbed her head at Beatrice to pick up (and, Beatrice guessed, admire) the notebook. It is very cleverly arranged, thought Beatrice as she flipped through the plastic sleeves. A spot for notions of every kind. Each plastic pouch was attached to the notebook by Velcro so you could just carry the tools you needed. Ingenious. “What are these?” asked Beatrice, holding up a pouch of what looked like pizza cutters.

“A most marvelous invention for quilters: rotary cutters. I don’t think I can even remember life without them—I’ve blocked it all out! It’s revolutionized cutting fabric,” said Posy. “Beatrice, you just put your ruler where you want to cut and then the rotary cutter slices right through it.”

The women settled into small talk about their families and neighbors. There was an air of camaraderie in the room that felt very genuine. This feeling of *belonging* wasn’t something that Beatrice had come across very often, aside from her work at the museum. Even there she’d frequently worked alone, just her and the art. She hid a smile as Savannah suddenly dispelled the harmony by hissing, “Georgia! Watch your stitches!”

Georgia frowned ferociously at her appliqué as if to scold it into submission.

Beatrice said, “Posy, your quilt is gorgeous. Of course, I wouldn’t expect anything less from a quilt-shop owner.” Her quilt was a celestial riot of whimsical suns and moons and stars scattered on an inky background.

Savannah stopped stitching at the mention of the quilt shop. “Posy, tell us what you’ve found out about the shop. Did Judith back off on raising the rent?” She reached over and rescued a pricey-looking pair of scissors that Georgia had absently picked up, and stowed them safely back beside her.

Posy shook her head, looking down at her quilt. “No, she’s planning to go ahead with it. I honestly don’t know what I’m going to do. I just never imagined that Judith would try to force me out of the Patchwork Cottage.”

Beatrice frowned. “Your landlady? Surely that doesn’t make sense. She’d have to find another tenant for the space.”

“Miss Judith has *plans*.” Meadow said with a sniff. Her indignant tone made Boris growl menacingly at the unknown threat. “She’s got some fancy women’s boutique idea in her head, and apparently there’s someone interested in the space. Judith is adamant she can get more rent.” She snorted.

Georgia’s face clouded over. “But she’s a quilter, too! Why would she want the Patchwork Cottage to close?

Where would we get all our supplies? Where would she get hers?” Her voice was tight with worry. “I don’t want to have to worry over getting supplies online—it’s just not the same as running the fabric through my fingers and seeing all the colors in person.”

“Everything will work out fine,” Savannah said, fiercely stabbing her needle into her fabric. “Judith is temporarily insane—that’s all. She’ll soon come to her senses and realize that Dappled Hills isn’t the right place for a designer boutique. It’s the perfect place for a quilt shop.”

“Judith is a sister quilter, but she makes me mad enough to spit sometimes,” Meadow said. “She’s forever making little digs at me. And I don’t think she likes Boris,” she added in a scandalized tone, reaching out to give the dog a sympathetic rub.

Beatrice strained to hear Georgia’s quiet voice. “She’s only making digs at you because she wanted to be the beekeeper.”

Meadow explained to Beatrice, “That’s what we call the president of the quilting bee.”

Savannah frowned. “She’s sniped at Georgia, and me, too. Although I guess that anyone who loves quilting as much as Judith does can’t be all bad, right?”

“No one is *all* bad,” Posy said with certainty. “When I have a chance to sit down and really talk to her about the shop and what I think it means to all of us, I’m positive she’ll reconsider raising the rent.”

Savannah looked cross. “We’re quilting, ladies. This is our time to relax. Let’s move on to a nicer subject.”

“Yes! Let’s move on,” Meadow said enthusiastically. “And we all should be eating! I knew there was something I was forgetting. Snacks make everything in life better.” In a flash, Meadow was back with a huge platter full of food. “Pimento cheese–stuffed celery, sweet Vidalia onion dip and spicy fried pickles.” She beamed at the happy murmur from the quilters. Beatrice wasn’t sure what to make of the offerings. It was the kind of food that could either be very good or very bad.

But, apparently, it was all good. Posy leaned over and said in a confiding way, “Meadow is the most fantastic cook. Everything on that platter is to die for! But make sure you try her pimento cheese. It’s creamy-looking, but has a real kick to it with the jalapenos. I think she has a little cream cheese in there, and I’m completely nuts over creamy cheese. And now, Beatrice, tell us a little about you. I want to learn more about our new quilting friend.” Her eyes twinkled at Beatrice as she filled a small plate with fried pickles and celery.

Beatrice fiddled with her napkin and cleared her throat. “Well, let’s see.” She thought for a moment. “Actually, there’s nothing really interesting to share.” They stared at her in disbelief. “There really isn’t.” It was sad, but true. Her life in recent years had revolved around work.

“Except that she just moved in yesterday and she’s already a member of the Village Quilters!” bubbled Meadow. “I’ve waited for someone to move into that cottage next to me for ages. Ages! It’s sat empty, and I kept thinking it was going to become a crack house or something else really dire.”

Posy gave a tinkling laugh. “A crack house? In Dappled Hills? It was more likely to be turned into an art gallery or a church or a charming coffee shop.” Posy was practically consumed by the huge polka-dotted pillows on Meadow’s sofa and hard to see.

“Or something. Or maybe the house would get rented out to a college student who’d have wild keg parties and stagger drunkenly through my yard. Instead, I’m *blessed* with a lovely older lady who quilts. What could be better?”

Beatrice opened her mouth to refute her quilting (and possibly her loveliness), but decided it was futile.

Posy said, “Shouldn’t you amend the *older lady*, Meadow? If *she*’s older, and she must only be in her early sixties, then what am I?”

“Simply sensational, Posy. Didn’t you know seventy is the new sixty? As for Beatrice, I’m going to try desperately to get over the fact that she has pretty hair that apparently doesn’t even have to be dyed!” Meadow peered closely at Beatrice’s chin-length soft bob, and Beatrice resisted the urge to put a protective hand on it. “That light blond, almost silver, sort of platinum color is way too natural-looking to come from a bottle. Life sure isn’t always fair, is it?” Meadow sadly lifted her own gray braid and stared reproachfully at it.

“I do have some highlights put in,” said Beatrice, feeling almost guilty.

“It’s the perfect hairstyle for your heart-shaped face,” said Posy with a sweet smile. “I bet it’s a low-fuss style, too. I have to go to the beauty parlor to get my wash and set every week.”

“It’s pretty easy to take care of. I didn’t have a lot of time when I was working to worry over my hair, so I chose something simple,” said Beatrice.

The prettier sister, Georgia, said timidly, “Savannah, Beatrice’s hair is the style I was thinking would look good on you. You have a heart-shaped face, too.”

Anything would look a lot better than the severe bun that Savannah sported. Savannah’s heavy brows lifted. “You know perfectly well that I’m not preoccupied with my appearance, Georgia. Although I think Beatrice looks very nice. I’m sure Beatrice was used to attending exciting events in Atlanta, where it was important for her to look stylish.”

“I hope Dappled Hills won’t be too boring for you, Beatrice,” said Georgia shyly. “There’s not nearly as much going on. But sometimes there’s an amateur night at the theater—that’s usually a lot of fun. Well, the *singing* isn’t as much fun, but I love some of the skits, and the local barber does a stand-up routine that’s always hilarious. So there *are* things to do here.”

“Sometimes,” said Savannah in a repressive voice.

Looking more cheerful, Meadow added, “Oh, and since Beatrice just happens to be a folk-art expert, she’ll have to give a talk at one of our programs. That’ll take care of one of them, anyway. I have the dickens of a time trying to plan and schedule those.”

This was territory Beatrice felt a little more comfortable with. “I’m sure I could manage that, Meadow. Folk art wasn’t my only focus, but I did get to arrange some wonderful exhibits at the museum.”

“And so you left a big career behind to come to Dappled Hills?” Savannah asked. “And look after Piper, I guess.” Her voice implied that looking after people was the most understandable motive of all.

“Oh, Piper does fine on her own, I think. She’s always been such an independent child. I was simply ready to retire. I’d been thinking about slowing down for a while. And I thought it would be a nice change to move to a small town—and be near Piper, of course. I didn’t realize I’d be directly across the street from her, but it was the perfect cottage. I fell in love with it as soon as I saw it.”

Meadow pursed her lips and gave Beatrice a considering look. “I’ve had a brilliant idea. My son Ash is here from California, visiting me this week. He’s absolutely gorgeous,” she said, completely seriously, “and a real *gentleman*. I’ll introduce Piper to Ash at the quilting bee—which is tomorrow! Let me call him. He was working on his laptop when I left. Oh, shoot! No, I remember . . . he’s gone to lunch with an old friend from high school. But I’ll bring him to the bee for sure. And you’ll need to come with Piper, Beatrice. Being independent is *fine*, of course, but it’s even better to have a soul mate. Tomorrow is the first day of the rest of her life!”

Beatrice was beginning to long for her little stone cottage and the soft gingham sofa in her tiny living room. She could read her new book, *Whispers of Summer*, to the dulcet sounds of her corgi snoring. Somehow she’d pictured her retirement in quieter terms than quilting guilds and bees and quirky neighbors pulling her into a swarm of social activity.

There was a knock at the door and Meadow popped up again like a jack-in-the-box, bouncing toward the front door, Boris dutifully giving a guard-dog-bark in a deep, growling, hellhound way.

Posy smiled. “Dear Meadow and darling Boris. So much energy!”

Beatrice’s daughter, Piper, was at the door, looking pretty as always with her dark hair in a pixie cut, her cute figure, and her gray eyes that matched Beatrice’s. Piper hugged Meadow. “When I saw Mama wasn’t home, I guessed you might have invited her over. Thanks for taking care of her for me. Did you know that if people

don't drag Mama out of the house, then she'd happily spend hours poring over dusty antiques or tomes on Early American furniture?" She gave Beatrice an unrepentant grin and a fleeting kiss on the cheek.

"We'll have to set Mama up with some quilting supplies," said Piper to Posy. "Or she can do some blocks for the bee. I finished mine, so I'm all set for tomorrow."

"Oh!" said Meadow with a start. "That reminds me that I need to get us set for our next project." She attempted to look official and businesslike, but the effect was somewhat ruined by the fact that she had picked up the water pitcher to refill Beatrice's tea and was now gesturing so much that the tea sloshed over the sides. "Y'all, this time I want us each to do a very personal quilt. Not one from a pattern book. I'd like each of us to come up with a block that shows something particularly meaningful for us and incorporate it in symbols on our blocks. Everyone in the group will create a 12.5-inch-by-2.5-inch block so that it will finish to 12-inch-by-12-inch when sewn together. I'll get in touch with the ladies who didn't make it today. I've got the background for the blocks, to unify the look and show we're working on a theme."

Frowning, Savannah said, "And we'll auction it off? Who is going to want something that's so personal, Meadow? It doesn't seem like it would be an interesting quilt for anybody but us."

"They'll *love* it, Savannah! They'll absolutely love it because it'll be the coolest quilt around." Savannah still looked unhappy. "You just need to give it a go. I know you're practically married to your geometric designs. But life isn't just about Dutchman's Puzzles or Pieced Stars. You need to color outside the lines a little bit."

"Some of us need to color a little *inside* the lines," said Savannah, with a cross nod at the crazy quilts scattered through Meadow's house.

Meadow either didn't hear Savannah or chose to ignore her. "I've already officially invited your mama to the bee tomorrow," said Meadow to Piper. She turned and gave Beatrice an exaggerated wink to show she still had matchmaking on the brain. "Beatrice, it'll be the best way for you to get up to speed with what's going on with quilting today."

Beatrice stood up to leave. She was having visions of a fully booked calendar, courtesy of Meadow, if she didn't escape. "Thanks so much for the tea and sandwiches. Really lovely to meet all of you. Of course we'll come to the bee tomorrow."

She heard Meadow calling after her and chortling as she left. "Be there or be *square*! Get it? Square!"