



A DAZZLE *of* DIAMONDS

LIZ JOHNSON

The logo consists of a stylized, black, serif letter 'R' above the word 'Revell' in a black, serif font.

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For my sweet readers.

Your letters and messages inspire
and encourage me.

May you always search for God
as for hidden treasure.

If you call out for insight
and raise your voice for understanding,
if you seek it like silver
and search for it as for hidden treasures,
then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.

Proverbs 2:3–5

ONE

Penelope Jean Hunter loved every wedding she'd ever been to. Except her own.

Oh, it wasn't the colorful tulips in every bouquet and centerpiece or the peach and lavender bridesmaid dresses. They were sunny and bright and perfect for spring nuptials in Georgia.

It wasn't the chocolate ganache cake with raspberry filling. That had been sublime. She would know—she'd eaten half of the top layer in one sitting. In the middle of her living room floor. Surrounded by the fluffy tulle of her gorgeous dress.

It had been perfect. It had all been exactly as she'd pictured it as a child.

Her wedding had been pure magic. All except for one thing—or, rather, one man. The groom.

Who hadn't bothered to show up.

Who now stood in the entrance to her office beside the prettiest woman Penelope had ever seen.

“Hello.” The woman rushed forward, her smile broad and her eyes filled with the unmistakable glow of a soon-to-be

bride. “I’m Emmaline Adams. We spoke on the phone.” Emmaline reached out her hand, and Penelope had no choice but to shake it, even though her gaze never left the man trailing behind.

Emmaline followed the direction of her eyes and pointed with her chin. “This is my fiancé, Winston St. Cloud.”

Oh, no need for introductions. The only problem was Penelope didn’t know if Emmaline was supposed to know that. She didn’t know how much Winston had told Emmaline about their past, about the previous wedding he helped plan.

All right, that wasn’t entirely fair. He hadn’t done a single thing to help plan that wedding.

Penelope couldn’t read his face beyond the surprise written across his raised eyebrows and unblinking eyes. He clearly hadn’t known he would run into her here. And she had no desire to reveal their history thirty seconds after meeting the poor bride.

Well, she did *want* to say just what she thought of Winston. But that was no way to keep a job she loved. Just because *her* wedding had been an unmitigated disaster didn’t mean she would ever do anything to jeopardize other marriages she helped launch.

“Winston.” She nodded in his direction, but she couldn’t force herself to reach out to shake his hand. He didn’t seem to mind, as rigid as a statue.

Emmaline’s smile dimmed, in fragments first and then all at once. “Do you . . . ?”

Penelope put on her very best smile and ushered the other woman deeper into the office. “We used to be friends. A while ago.” Three years, one month, and four days, to be exact. Not that she was keeping count. And technically, she’d seen

him three days after that. He'd wanted to apologize. She'd wanted to shove his grandmother's two-carat diamond ring up his nose. But that's not what Southern ladies did. So she'd pulled the rock off her finger and thrown it at him.

And now Emmaline Adams was wearing it.

Eyes closed, Penelope took a deep breath. She could be civil. More than that, she could be professional. She was completely over Winston St. Cloud. She rarely thought of him anymore. Except in those fleeting moments when she wondered if she'd missed her last chance.

Her smile still pasted in place, she opened her eyes just as Winston opened his mouth.

"How have you been?" His voice was still deep, but it held a note of uncertainty.

"Fine. Great, really. Everything's going really well." She stood up a little straighter. That had sounded pretty believable.

Good. It was the truth.

"I didn't know you worked here."

Her eyes darted around her office before it clicked that he meant he hadn't known she worked at the Savannah River Hall. "I'm sure you didn't." What else could she say? He wouldn't have sought her out. He wouldn't have come looking for her. She'd started as the event manager at the Hall after their would-have-been wedding.

Shaking off every memory and trace of bitterness, Penelope looked directly at Emmaline. "So . . . let me show you around."

Emmaline nodded eagerly, grabbing Winston's hand. She was either unaware of the strain in their interaction or willing to overlook it. Penelope would too.

Waving her hand toward the door from her office, she ushered them into the event space. “This is such a unique venue—right on River Street and in the heart of Savannah’s history.” She marched down the short hallway that connected her office to the venue and then stepped out of the way as she swung the door open.

Emmaline’s mouth dropped open as she walked into the cavernous room that had been decorated for the next day’s event. “This is . . . so much bigger than the pictures. Winston, look.”

He nodded.

Penelope strolled in behind them, waiting for him to say something. When he didn’t, she pointed out a few of her favorite features of the room. “We can customize décor to your theme, like the Hollywood letters across the front, or we can do something gentle and feminine. The cement floors can be dressed up or down, and we have all the furniture pieces you’ll need—up to twenty round tables, plus a dance floor. If you can get Winston out on it, that is.” She chomped into her bottom lip and shook her head quickly. She should not have said that.

Emmaline’s eyebrows rose, but a sweet smile danced across her lips. “Oh, we’re taking lessons.”

Of course they were. Winston had refused to take even a single foxtrot class with her when she’d asked. She’d missed that and a dozen other warning signs that he didn’t truly love her. At least not in the way he loved Emmaline. That was more than clear as he squeezed his fiancée’s hand and stared into her eyes.

The phone in her pocket rang, and Penelope snatched it free. Anabelle Haywood, president of the Ladies’ Histori-

cal League of Savannah. Who was just about to confirm a weeklong charity event at the Hall.

Penelope gave Emmaline a brief smile. “Take your time and look around. I’ll be just a moment.”

Emmaline nodded as she sashayed farther into the room, and Penelope scooted back toward her office. “Mrs. Haywood. How can I help you?”

“Well, I heard the most awful rumor today, and I just had to call and see if there was an ounce of truth to it.”

Penelope’s stomach lurched, and she leaned against the ancient brick wall, her throat dry in a split second. “Why, I’m not sure what you mean.”

“It’s about that man—your friend, the one running for sheriff.”

“Tucker?” That didn’t make any sense. There weren’t any rumors floating around town about him. In fact, he was actively sequestering himself to keep any from sprouting up. Work, home, and campaign events only. Especially after he accidentally got his name on the ballot for the special election in the first place.

Anabelle tsked. “Do you have more than one friend running for office?”

Penelope scrambled for a response. “No, of course not. I’m just . . . well, I’m surprised. What is it you’ve heard?”

“You know that I’m not one to gossip.”

That was not entirely true. By the end of their first encounter, Penelope had learned all sorts of things she’d never wanted to know about the self-proclaimed caretakers of Savannah’s history, the women of the Ladies’ League.

Sure enough, Anabelle required no push to continue. “But there’s been some talk about your friend Tucker’s family.”

“His family?” Tucker was the only child of a well-respected doctor and a beloved elementary schoolteacher. They’d both retired in the last year. And she would know if Tucker’s relationship status changed.

“Yes.” The word came out a near hiss. “Apparently they were involved in . . . well . . . some traitorous acts.”

“Excuse me?” The words popped out much louder than she’d anticipated, and she peeked over her shoulder to make sure Emmaline and Winston were still otherwise engaged. They were spinning slowly in the center of the dance floor.

Please, Lord, let them find another venue.

“Well, they certainly had some plans for that treasure.”

She bit her tongue to keep from repeating that last word, but she couldn’t find a response. What treasure? She’d know if the Westbrooks were hiding a treasure. After living next door for most of her childhood and twenty-five years of friendship, they were nearly family.

“And you know the good ladies of the League can’t be affiliated with anything like that.”

“Of course not. But . . .” Anabelle had made a jump that Penelope couldn’t follow. There wasn’t a connection between Tucker and the Ladies’ League, except . . .

“I’d hate to have to find another location for our event. But with all this nonsense with Tucker and you being on his campaign committee . . . well, I’m sure you understand my predicament.”

A heavy silence more than implied the threat in her words. If Penelope didn’t fix this—whatever it was—she would lose a client, an event, and probably her professional reputation.

“I’ll take care of it.”

“See that you do, dear. Quickly.”

“Yes, ma’am.” That was the only appropriate response when she’d been scolded at twelve, and not much had changed in more than twenty years.

Anabelle ended the call, and Penelope could only stare at the screen of her phone as it dimmed and then went to sleep. It provided no answers and no clear direction, and for a moment she couldn’t formulate her next steps. She needed a plan, a checklist.

But first, she needed to know what *nonsense* Tucker had landed in.

“I really love it!”

Penelope jumped, pulled from Tucker’s nonsense back to Emmaline and Winston, who were thinking about starting the rest of their lives in this very room.

Forcing a smile, Penelope turned toward them. “I’m so glad you like it.”

“We have one more venue to look at later this week. We’ll have at least two hundred guests, so we might need more space. But I’ll call you as soon as we decide.”

With a brief nod, Penelope pressed her hand to her stomach. She tried to smile, but it wasn’t easy to cover the war within. She needed to fill the Hall for the summer. She also needed to keep her sanity, and having Winston close for the next few months was not conducive to that.

This day was not going as planned. First Winston’s return and then Tucker’s mess.

Tackle the first thing first.

That was her motto when the lists got too long. And the first thing she had to do was make sure her job was secure. Then she’d figure out how to keep Winston out of her space and off her mind this summer.



Tucker Westbrook glared at the newspaper on his office desk and growled low in the back of his throat.

“You okay in there, boss?” Betty Sue Templeton sang her question but made no move to get up from her desk in the front office to check on him.

“Have you seen the newspaper today?”

“Yes, sir. Did you forget to tell me something?”

No. Yes. Mostly no. “Maybe.”

“That’s a pretty big picture of you in the paper for a ‘maybe,’ boss.”

Yeah. He knew it too. The headline also seemed twice as big as all the others on the op-ed page. Maybe that was just because his name jumped out from the print. Or maybe it was because he couldn’t stop staring at the black-and-white picture of himself. It was his official work photo, the one on his company’s website, and about four years old—pre-beard. But it was unmistakably him. And the question below the image couldn’t be missed.

A TRAITOR ON THE BALLOT?

The good people of Savannah could forgive a lot, but Confederate traitors? Well, that was asking too much. Even 150 years after the war had ended.

“Good morning, Penny. He’s in his office.” Betty Sue’s greeting was warm as always, but Penelope Jean’s response was little more than a mumbled grunt. “Boss, you have a visitor.”

By the time Betty Sue’s voice reached his office, so had PJ. A decidedly scowling and cranky PJ, her nose red and her arms crossed. “You didn’t answer your phone last night.”

“Good morning to you too.”

She sighed and shuffled across his office, dodging a couple stacks of file folders on the floor and sliding into one of the empty chairs on the other side of his desk. “I’m sorry. How was your day?”

Somewhere between not great and terrible. But given the frown that had replaced her usual toothy smile, it was possible hers had been worse. “How was yours?”

She frowned harder than before, wrinkling the corners of her lips. “Terrible . . . and confusing.”

“All right. I’ll bite. What was so terrible?”

“Winston came into the Hall yesterday.”

The words were a punch to his gut. He’d been relieved to see that selfish jellyfish slink out of their lives. He’d hated that PJ had been hurt, but he’d never thought Winston worthy of her particular brand of verve and humor.

“He came to see you?”

She shook her head, the corner of her eye twitching as she ran her fingers through the end of her long brown ponytail. “He came in with his new fiancée. He’s helping to plan *their* wedding.”

Tucker’s mouth slowly dropped open, and he leaned his elbows on the overloaded desk before him. He tried to find a response, but there was none. What was he supposed to say when the guy who had broken his best friend’s heart casually strolled back into her life? He could think of a few choice words, but they were all ones he didn’t let his staff use on the job.

PJ waved her hand through the air like it didn’t matter. “They’re thinking about having their reception at the Hall at the end of August.”

“This August?” It seemed an insignificant detail, but it was the only thing he could latch on to.

“Yes. This August. As in three months from now. As in, if they decide on the Hall, I’m going to have to put in extra hours to get all the details in place in time.”

Tucker pushed himself from behind his desk and walked around to meet her. Tugging on her arm, he pulled her up and into a tight hug. “I’m sorry. This stinks.”

“I know.” Her words carried a slight tremor, and he could visualize the quiver in her full lower lip without even seeing it.

“Can you convince them to have it elsewhere?”

She nodded into his chest. “I’m going to try.”

“So what was confusing about yesterday?” He almost didn’t ask. He couldn’t handle it if she confessed to being conflicted about her feelings for Winston. It had been bad enough watching that jerk crush her spirit once. Tucker would rather spend another summer in the Middle East than see her go through that again.

She wiggled out of his embrace and looked him in the face. “I got a weird phone call. About you, actually.”

“Me?”

“Anabelle Haywood, from the Ladies’ League. She said you’re in some—and I quote—‘nonsense.’”

His stomach sank, and he couldn’t keep his face from folding. “Have you seen today’s paper?”

With a hard shake of her head, she shot him a look that said he should know better. “Only retirees read the actual newspaper. Well, retirees and you. I wait for Instagram and Facebook and *Southern Weddings* to tell me what I need to know. Why?”

He couldn’t hold back an eye roll. “Nice. Way to be an

informed citizen. Don't you know there's an election coming up?"

She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes—a scowl fully implied. She'd been shooting him the same look since he'd stolen her after-school snack in the third grade. "Hey, I'm just helping you plan your campaign events. I'm not your political advisor or campaign manager."

All the same, he nodded toward the desk and the open paper atop the reports from the night before.

She leaned over his desk, snatched up the local newspaper, and scanned the headlines. Her eyebrows drew tight, and the tip of her nose wrinkled as her eyes darted back and forth. When she looked up, fire filled her eyes. "What is this supposed to mean?"

"What do you think it means?"

"I think Buddy Jepson is trying to discredit you just to win the election."

The letter was unsigned, but that didn't mean Buddy's prints weren't all over it.

Tucker crossed his arms as he strolled across the room. Leaning his hip against the windowsill, he stared across the square. Outside, the city was rumbling to life, vendors already setting up for the City Market and praying toward the overcast sky that the rain would hold off until night.

When PJ heaved a short breath, he glanced back over his shoulder. "No *just* about it. He wants to win, all right, and he'll do anything to make it happen."

"But how can he accuse your family of being part of some hundred-year-old conspiracy without proof?" She waved the newspaper. "He can't do that."

"Hundred-and-fifty-five-year-old conspiracy."

She rolled her eyes, her heels clicking across the wood floor, and smacked the paper against his shoulder. “I’m being serious.”

“I am too. But it doesn’t make any difference. The writer says he has proof that names my family among smugglers and thieves.”

“But . . .” Her face turned red, her fist wrinkling his black-and-white picture at her side. “But what about the Marines? I mean, everyone knows you served two tours in the Middle East.” She waved her hand around his office. “And you provide security for half the businesses this side of Abercorn Street. Plus this is just in the op-ed section. No one would believe this . . . this . . . *nonsense*.” Her voice rose with every word, until he could hear Betty Sue stirring in the outer office.

Her steam gone, PJ dropped her chin and gazed up at him through black lashes. “They wouldn’t believe it. Would they?”

Her question went down like bad catfish and limp potatoes, yet he had no choice but to swallow it. He’d faced worse than Buddy Jepson before. And he wasn’t afraid to stand up for what he believed.

The problem was, there was no winning this fight.

Tilting his head back, he stared at the exposed ventilation duct that ran the length of the room and let out a slow breath. “Anabelle Haywood called you about it yesterday?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then half the city knew before the newspaper even ran the op-ed.”

She leaned toward him, reaching out like it was her turn to hold him, but then she pulled back. “Will anybody care? I mean, really? Maybe this will all blow over in a week.”

“And maybe Mrs. Haywood will cancel her Fort Pulaski Remembrance Picnic this year.” Yeah, that wasn’t going to happen. Not after thirty-plus years of hoop-skirted Southern belles serving sweet tea and cherry punch to a packed audience, with Anabelle Haywood holding court at the entrance.

PJ rolled her lip beneath her teeth, her gaze targeted somewhere near his feet, her hands still balled into fists at her sides.

Maybe he was the one who needed to be comforted, but he wanted more than anything to pull her into his arms, take a deep breath of her citrus shampoo, and know that everything was going to be all right. Because it always had been that way. As long as they were together, they’d been able to conquer the world. Even when he was halfway around the world, she’d known to tuck gummy worms and caramels into his care packages. And she’d never sent one without a handwritten note. It was never long or boring, just a reminder she was there. They would get through it together.

But this was uncharted territory.

Dropping his chin to his chest, he sighed. “I’m going to figure out how to fix this.”

“What? The election?”

Lifting one shoulder, he turned his gaze back to the buzzing market just opening for business. “There’s no coming back from an accusation like this.” She opened her mouth, but he held up a finger. “People here still care about the Civil War. They may know that the outcome was best for our country, that it put an end to a terrible wrong. But they care. They love this city and this state, and their history. They brag about being the only city Sherman didn’t burn in his march to the sea. They can trace their lineage back to

soldiers who fought for this city, for the Confederacy. So can I. So can you, for that matter. Whether it's right or wrong, this city thrives on Southern pride."

"We could, you know, *fix* it."

He reached for something to throw at her, but her face broke into a wide smile before he could find anything he was willing to lose.

"Kidding, kidding." She held up her hands and laughed it off. "No election tampering, I promise. But maybe there's another way. Maybe your family was really smuggling to support the South."

"Well, that would be great. One way, the majority of the town—including the wealthy donors I need to finance my campaign—refuses to support me because they think my ancestors were traitors. The other way, transplants—who don't give a lick about Southern pride but still vote—find out my family was going above and beyond to break the law, and my entire security platform is called into question. I'm having a hard time seeing how either way is going to lead to a win."

"Is it too late to back out?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger and squeezed his eyes closed. If only. If only he hadn't let Buddy Jepson get him all riled up at Maribella's—in front of a reporter. He should have just gotten his cup of coffee and chocolate croissant and walked out. But no. He couldn't let Buddy jaw on and on about how no one needed to rush to make changes in their county.

Tucker knew the truth because he'd installed a new security camera at the county jail and had immediately seen how an updated system would improve security for guards and

detainees alike. And the whole city had seen how woefully understaffed the sheriff's department was in the aftermath of Hurricane Lorenzo the year before. The department had done their best, but Tucker had some plans that would make them more efficient until he could convince the county to hire more deputies. The county needed to make some changes for the sake of its residents and local businesses. Buddy might not care about them, but Tucker sure did.

He'd told Buddy as much in the middle of the coffee shop. And his words had ended up in the newspaper nearly verbatim. Before Tucker knew it, he'd landed on the special election ballot—about ten years ahead of schedule.

“If I back out now, I doubt this community will give me another chance.” He didn't have to tell PJ that wearing a sheriff's badge had always been a dream.

“All right then. Can't back out of the race. Can't afford to be branded a traitor or a thief. You're just going to have to prove you're not.” She whipped the article back in front of her face. Silence hung for a long moment except for the crinkling paper. “It has come to the attention of this local resident that the long line of Westbrooks may not have been as loyal to the great state of Georgia and the good people of Savannah as one would hope, especially when one of those Westbrooks is running for sheriff.” She let out a disbelieving puff, and he could practically see her rolling her eyes behind the newsprint. “*Local resident*, my eye.”

PJ straightened the paper and started reading again. “A recently discovered letter from a high-ranking officer during the height of the war proves the Westbrooks were involved in undermining the Southern cause . . . ’ Blah, blah, blah . . . ’ It suggests a missing treasure, one smuggled and stolen by

the Westbrooks to support Grant and his men, that may not have reached its intended recipient.”

His heart slammed against his ribs, and he shoved himself off the wall, staring hard at her even as she droned on, reading those insipid lies.

When she finally dropped the paper, her blue eyes were bigger than usual and filled with pity. “This is ridiculous.”

“Is it?”

“Of course it is. I mean, you can’t prove a negative. What are you going to do?”

A grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Well, if there’s a treasure out there, let’s find it.”

Her arms fell limply to her sides. “A what?”

“You read it. There was a treasure that was supposedly lost. If we can find that, maybe we can find the truth. And if we know the truth—what my family was really involved in—then at least we know what we’re fighting.”

“Okay.” She nodded slowly, thoughtfully. He could practically see her mentally constructing her list. “The only person I know who knows anything about finding a lost treasure is Carter Hale at the maritime museum. Want me to call him?”

Tucker didn’t even pause to consider. He couldn’t fight what he didn’t know. But if he didn’t fight, he was bound to fail.

“Do it.”