

Another Family Reunion Novel
In The Wisdom of the Ancestors Series
—Book 16—

BITTERSWEET MEMORIES

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Prologue

Vacant, hollow eyes slowly rose toward the sleek, smooth, dark-gray tube draped with a large spray of white lilies, baby's breath, and glossy green trailing ivy. An abundance of other flowers stood sentry, their scents lost in the frigid air. Not a breath escaped that was not labored or silent. Pain so deep that death would be better than life galvanized Jacqueline Connor Mitchell's body.

Nothing was real. Not the flowers, not the platitudes, and not the mass of humanity surrounding her. The icy cold wind did not penetrate her deep despair. It couldn't. Nothing could. She was, for that time, lost to the world.

As lost to the world as the body parts that lay before her in the casket.

"Mmph, mmph, mmph," Sarah Dale uttered while remorsefully shaking her beautiful grey, perfectly-coiffed, full head of hair. She held a wide, blue umbrella over her friend's head and her own. While dabbing a delicate, lacy handkerchief to the corner of her eyes and partially covering

her mouth, she spoke in a whisper to her friend of fifty years. “So young, he was. So vital and so much in love with Jackie.”

Victoria Leake similarly covered her mouth, stuck her arm under her friend’s, and tilted her head toward Sarah. “Patricia Goode said Marvis Trent told her that Deacon and Mary Elizabeth Connor are worried about Jackie. Said she hasn’t accepted Bobby’s death. Poor thing. She hasn’t slept. She looks a fright, doesn’t she? She just got out of the hospital, too. Hasn’t eaten much since she got the news. Said she won’t even cry.”

“I heard the same thing from Luella Jones. You know, she’s second cousin, twice removed, to the Connors—on Deacon Connor’s brother-in-law’s side. Luella said Deacon and Mary Elizabeth think Jackie might not ever be the same. They said Doc Rodgers had to give her a mild sedative so she could come here today.” She paused, again staring at the young woman sitting so taunt and withdrawn on the other side of the casket. “Mmph, mmph, mmph. Makes a body wonder. She was such a pretty girl. Smart as a whip. So full of life. She’s lost too much weight, if you ask me. Now to look at her, you’d think she...” Something caught her eye from the corner of her peripheral vision. Lowering her head nearer to her companion, she whispered, “Isn’t that one of those Chase boys?”

Her friend, Victoria, discretely followed Sarah’s line of vision while narrowing her eyes and squinting through the thickening raindrops. “Well, I’ll be...,” she gasped. “Haven’t seen that boy around these parts since he graduated from Mitchell County High School. Wonder why he’s here? And on a day like today,” she asked. “He was no friend of Bobby Mitchell’s. In fact, weren’t they...?”

“Mmm umph, they sure were,” Sarah interrupted, confirming her friend’s thought. “They were both crazy about Jackie. Mmph, mmph, mmph. Now ain’t that just the shame. Poor Bobby Mitchell ain’t even in the ground yet and here comes that devil Jackson Chase—.”

“Looks good though, don’t he?” Victoria observed.

“Well, what would you expect? All those Chase boys are handsome devils. Take after their old man. Ingram Chase used to cut a fine figure in his day. Still does, if you ask me,” said Sarah.

“Devil is right,” Victoria said, swinging her gaze back toward Jacqueline. “Ain’t nothing but the devil in him to be coming back here now. Poor Jackie don’t need no more misery. She done lost her husband and is fresh outta’ the hospital from losing their baby.” Victoria swung her still keen, but aged eyes to the right of Jackie, to the Mitchell family. State Senator Julius and Norah Barkley Mitchell, Bobby Mitchell’s parents, and grandparents, Alford and Audra Cameron Mitchell, sat together and were clearly more angry than remorseful. Bobby’s twin sister, Rachel, and older brother, Julius Junior, stood under the large, green tent behind their parents. Then she noted that the youngest Mitchell boy, Bryan, stood apart from his parents, grandparents, and siblings. “That child, Jackie’s got misery enough with them Mitchells, ‘cept Bryan,” Victoria continued and derisively sneered. “Misery enough.”

“I heard that them Mitchells are gonna contest Bobby’s will,” said Sarah.

“Sure ‘nough?” Victoria asked in stunned surprise.

“That’s what I heard,” Sarah declared and resolutely sniffed. “Don’t seem right. That boy loved Jackie. Would’ve

had his child, too, if poor Jackie hadn't been so tore down about poor Bobby. It's fittin' he left everything to her, I hear tell. Even his inheritance."

"I do declare," Victoria said with dawning surprise.

"We now commit the body of Robert Layton Mitchell into your hands, Lord," the minister concluded as the casket began its descent into the grave. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

As the wind whipped up, the icy rain intensified. Mourners moved around Jacqueline Connor Mitchell and her family whispering their condolences, patting her hand or her shoulder, breaking down and crying into their handkerchiefs. Still, Jackie didn't hear their words, feel their presence or acknowledge their shared grief. Not even the gun-metal, gray tube containing her husband's remains captured her attention as it lowered out of sight. Nothing about it said her Bobby, her husband, her lover, her best friend, her protector, the love of her life lay at rest covered with a white, spiky spray of flowers. Her Bobby had just gone away on a business trip three weeks ago. He was taking a group of teachers on a tour of West Africa. He would be gone from her for only three weeks. Then he would be back home to share in their happiness. He couldn't have been on that jet that crashed in Jakarta; the result of a terrorist attack.

The flight she should have been on instead of him.

He insisted he go in her place because of her delicate condition. The baby they planned so carefully for over the three years of their marriage would have been born in the fall.

"*We're pregnant!*" Bobby had shouted over and over again at the top of his lungs while whirling her around, cradled

in his strong arms. They tried so hard to get pregnant, but Bobby's sperm wasn't strong enough. They tried alternative methods of conception and, finally, their hopes and dreams came true.

The memory was still painfully fresh in her mind, the way she giggled blissfully at his glee while clutching him around the neck and wildly kissing his handsome face. He sobered, his hazel-green eyes tearing enough to shine. The way he lowered his head, skimming his mouth over hers. *"I love you so much, Jackie. Sometimes I can't believe I deserve to be this happy,"* he said. *"I am so blessed you love me. Now, as if any person deserves to be made happier, you're giving us a baby to love."* Tears did form in his eyes and trail down his strong cheeks. Unashamed of his emotions he smiled at her before taking her mouth again.

Her heart swelled and overflowed with love. The way he smiled at her before taking her mouth again made her wet with need. Their tongues slowly, deliciously, sensuously dancing together until moans characteristic of their shared need to mate heralded another love feast. With her still in his arms, he had carried her to their bed.

Much later, naked and sprawled sideways across their bed, still moist from their exuberant love play, they savored the thrill of lying in each other's arms touching and caressing. Kissing and fondling. Whispering of the happiness they shared.

"Honey, let me take your group to Africa," he said. *"It will be too hot there for you. We've finally got a precious little Mitchell growing here."* She could never forget any of it. The way he reverently kissed her abdomen and how she acquiesced after

thinking about their baby's welfare. They worked so hard over the past three years to get pregnant, and besides, there was plenty for her to do in their office while he was away.

Mitchell Travel and Tours was growing and flourishing in predominately affluent Mitchell County, Maryland. All of the time, hard work, sweat equity, and money she and Bobby invested in their small, but expanding company was finally paying off. They had a competent young staff of college graduates like themselves, a growing client list, and regulars who spread the word that the travel agency provided high-quality, personalized service at reasonable rates.

Then the best part. She and Bobby had each other working side-by-side every day together.

Despite his parents' and grandparents' objections, Bobby married her and, instead of following his father and grandfather into the political arena, she and Bobby opened the travel agency. That caused another terrible rift between Bobby and his family, but she and Bobby were a team to be reckoned with. A united front. It was the two of them against the world.

Bobby handled the day-to-day operations of the business and finances, and she handled the tour packages. Many nights they left their office so tired they didn't have the energy to eat, yet they always had the strength to make love to each other for hours on end.

That's what Jackie thought of now. How they made love to each other the last night they were together. The night she had confirmed the growth of their baby nestled in her womb. Now even that small life was gone. The shock and grief of Bobby's untimely and tragic death caused her body to spontaneously

about the only living thing that was the symbol of their love for each other.

So nothing around her was real to her anymore. If she felt anything, it was otherworldly, out of sorts. Not even of herself. The sedative didn't leave her any sense of her surroundings; of the here and now.

Not even the vicious sting of the slap across her face snapped her back into focus. Her father jumped to his feet to shield her while her mother wrapped her arms around her. Her younger sister, Leigh Ann, and brother, Daniel, formed a human barrier to protect her.

"You bitch! You tramp!" Norah Barkley Mitchell shrieked. *"You killed him! You killed my baby! You're nothing but a filthy, low-life, dirty slut!"*

Someone pulled the distraught, older woman away as she screamed vile epithets at Jacqueline, her daughter-in-law, Bobby's beautiful, young widow. When the minister admonished her for her behavior, Norah hauled off and slapped him so hard he lost his footing and tumbled backward into the open grave on top of the casket.

Pandemonium ensued. Photographers captured the encounter amid a blizzard of flashing camera lights as did some of the mourners on cellphones. Others hovered around Jackie, aghast at the tremulously horrifying display of grief from Bobby's mother at the gravesite. Yet, even that spectacle didn't pierce Jacqueline's deep despair. She remembered only how Bobby made love to her and how he would again when her life ended and she joined him.

That time couldn't come too soon.

Jackson Chase stood in the pouring, icy February rain that was quickly turning to sleet and freezing on the ground and observed the spectacle. He heard the murmurs that rippled through the crowd around the gravesite when he arrived. It didn't matter to him what people said or thought of him. He'd long ago insulated himself against their wagging tongues.

Oh, yes, he gave them much to talk about in his youth. Many of the families now huddled together at Bobby Mitchell's gravesite forbid their daughters to fraternize with him or his two brothers back in the day. Some of the young girls heeded their parents' warnings, far more did not. Jackson and his older brother, Elias, followed in their father's footsteps bedding more than a few of the high-society debutantes with careless disdain before crossing the path of Jacqueline Connor.

She was the only one he wanted to keep—but he had lost her. Sent her running into the waiting arms of rich, pretty boy Bobby Mitchell. Throughout the intervening years, Jackson never stopped loving Jackie. Now he wanted her back and he would stop at nothing to have her. He would allow her time to grieve for Bobby and hold off telling her his intentions. His plan was to give something back that she lost many years before and take back what he felt still belonged to him. He realized she would have to come to him though. Jackie was a proud, independent woman now, but he remembered her intimately in their youth. Yes, she would freely come to him. He would make sure of it and then he would have her. His woman.

Looking at her now in her drab, grey suit, her cinnamon-colored skin looked drawn and ashen. Her naturally thick, long, auburn hair was listlessly pulled back in a ponytail at

the nape of her neck. Her once luminous eyes, the color of sun tea, were vacuous and remote without even a spark of life showing through. Her once voluptuous body was far too slender. He could see past the façade, the shroud, to a time when she glowed only for him.

Jackie was energetic: captain of the cheerleading squad, a straight-A student, a member of the Student Council and Yearbook Committee, and the most popular and beautiful girl in the county at age fifteen. She was smart, a member of the high school Debate Team, a Dean's list scholar, and the sexiest dancer in the high school Drama Club.

Bobby Mitchell, two years her senior, was captain of the football team and a heavy hitter on the baseball team. He was in most of the same elite high school clubs as Jackie and was a good student as well. She and Bobby Mitchell were both voted Most Likely to Succeed in their respective graduating classes and, by all accounts, lived up to the superlative. They remained sweethearts all through their years at the University of Maryland and married within a month of Jackie's graduation from college and Bobby earning his MBA.

Many times after Bobby graduated from high school and went to college, Jackson knew he made the one-hundred-mile trip some days just to pick Jackie up from school in his red, convertible sports car. The Z was a graduation gift from his parents, and he proudly squired Jackie around in it every chance he got. He had driven it the night of his prom and two years later for Jackie's prom.

Jackson asked Jackie to be his prom date, but she scowled at him, turned on her heels, and marched away. That behavior was typical of her where he was concerned—and Jackson

knew the genesis. He was so hurt by her disdain, he didn't even attend the prom. Instead, he tortured himself and sat on his bike outside and watched Bobby escort Jackie as her date. She looked radiantly happy and beautiful in her form-fitting gown. He hated the tears that slid down his face, but he couldn't turn away.

Still, back in high school, he didn't understand why she left him and turned to Bobby Mitchell. He convinced himself it was because Bobby was rich, from a prominent family, and very popular. Jackson knew better now, but at the time her disregard for him, for their friendship, for what they once shared, blindly angered him. He didn't come from the right side of the tracks. His parentage was spotty at best. His father, Ingram Chase, a self-employed handyman, *Mr. Fix It*, his trade name, was too often caught, literally, with his pants down by some woman's lover or husband. His mother, Ruthy Mae, drank herself into an early grave.

Rumor had it that Ingram Chase and Norah Barkley Mitchell were lovers before and after her high-society marriage to Senator Mitchell. Out of spite, Ingram married the once very beautiful and vivacious Ruthy Mae Jones, Norah's best friend. Each time the Senator got Norah pregnant, Ingram did the same to Ruthy Mae; playing a silly tit for tat game. After their respective marriages, Norah and Ingram were said to have picked up again and carried on an affair to this very day. Jackson and his two brothers knew that their mother's, Ruthy Mae's, alcoholism was a result of their father's infidelity. For that, Jackson and his brothers would never forgive Ingram Chase. To them, he no longer existed.

No, Jackson's youth was not the stuff of fairy tales, but he was no longer a randy teenager who rode a stripped-down

motorcycle, ran with a rowdy crowd, and got into mischief by thinking with his little head. It was a wonder he never got another girl pregnant...at least none that he was aware of. Now he was a man, a very wealthy one who knew what he wanted and went after it—and on this stark, freezing cold and wet day, he was prepared to go after what he needed.

Jacqueline Connor Mitchell.