

A BROKEN KIND *of* BEAUTIFUL

A NOVEL



KATIE GANSHERT

Author of *Wishing on Willows*

A
BROKEN KIND
of BEAUTIFUL

BOOKS BY KATIE GANSHERT

Wishing on Willows
Wildflowers from Winter

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WATERBROOK
P R E S S

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For the broken ones.



Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.

—ISAIAH 43:1



The girl with the haunted eyes reentered his life on the other side of a lowering casket, humidity and the shrill song of cicadas tangling together in the South Carolina heat. Aunt Marilyn pressed trembling fingers against her lips and swayed as if the wet ground had risen up and pitched her forward. Davis Knight tightened his grip beneath his aunt's elbow and looked away from her pain. That's when he saw her—standing like a statue, her waif-like form shrouded in grief.

Ivy Clark. All grown up.

A distant rumble of thunder rolled across the blackened sky, leftover remnants from a tropical storm. A raindrop brushed his ear; another grazed the tip of his nose. Pastor Voss bowed his head. So did everyone else, including Ivy. A slight breeze ruffled wisps of hair around her downturned face and fluttered the butterfly sleeves of her dress. The last time he'd seen her in the flesh, he had just returned to Greenbrier for a short summer stint after completing his freshman year at NYU. Ivy had been twelve going on fifty. Tall and gangly with eyes too large for her face—twin souls the color of honey, staring and deep as if she saw and understood every sadness in the world.

Then she had disappeared, and so did he, in a way. A few years later he began following her career because it was in his interest to follow it, but even with all professional motives stripped bare, he would have followed it anyway.

Pinpricks of sweat beaded along Davis's temples. His sister, Sara, wrapped her arm around his and squeezed. Pastor Voss's prayer ended in time for Ivy Clark to look up and catch him staring. Familiar territory to her, no doubt, given her career. Not so familiar to him.

He would have looked away, but her awareness of his attention triggered an intriguing metamorphosis. It seemed her eyes had learned some tricks over the years. Like how to bat in just the right way. How to dance in invitation. How to swallow the grief that had wrapped around her shoulders moments ago, when she thought nobody watched. She smiled a smile Davis knew well, one he'd seen hundreds of times on a hundred beautiful faces—the type of smile that had lost its allure two years ago.

He glanced down at the grass—thick green blades framing his black loafers—and patted his sister's hand, his own personal reminder of why a woman like Ivy Clark could not be a part of his life. Ivy belonged to a world that took and took and took so subtly and connivingly that a person didn't notice until there was nothing left to give. It was a world he never wanted to be a part of again.

Still, he looked one more time. Ivy stared back, a smirk on her face.



“Now’s not the time to talk about this, Ivy.” Bruce strode through the long grass toward a line of cars parked along the brick path, texting a message into his phone.

The drops of rain turned into a mist that settled over Ivy’s arms, cooling her skin. If only the drizzle could quench her fear. Who was he texting? She lengthened her stride, trailing him like a long evening shadow. “You’re the one doing business.”

“How do you know it’s business?” He dug into his pocket, pulled out his keys, and clicked the button on the remote to unlock the car doors. Two short beeps interrupted a chorus of chirping birds hiding somewhere in the Spanish moss that dripped from gnarled tree limbs overhead.

Ivy rolled her eyes. Only Bruce would lock his car inside a cemetery in Greenbrier, South Carolina. “This isn’t New York City.” The two places existed on opposite poles. “I don’t think any burglars are prowling around waiting to break into your car.”

He stopped in front of the black Lexus with rental plates.

She stopped too. "I need to know, Bruce. It's my future we're talking about here."

"If you were so concerned, you should have kept your mouth shut."

"I made one lousy suggestion. You're telling me O'Banion's getting bent out of shape because of one small—"

"It's not your job to make suggestions, especially not to a photographer like Miles O'Banion."

Ivy's stomach knotted. What would happen if that one slip cost her two years of security? Her twenty-fifth birthday crept closer each day. As hard as she tried, she wasn't getting any younger and people were starting to notice. If she wanted to continue modeling, she needed that contract.

Bruce ran his hand down his face. "It's your job to keep your mouth closed and work for the camera. That's what you get paid for. Nobody cares about your opinions."

"So I've been told."

"Then why didn't you listen?"

A small group of women dressed in black stopped conversing. Bruce painted on a smile and gave them a polite wave. He leaned close to Ivy and spoke from the corner of his mouth, his smile unwavering. "We're not talking about this here. Let's show a little respect."

Her muscles coiled. Respect? James didn't deserve her respect. She didn't care how touching the eulogy, how beautiful the flowers, or how crowded the funeral. Why should she care about losing a man who never wanted her in the first place? Why should his unspoken *I love you* echo in her mind? She refused to pretend her father's death had any bearing on her life. Because it didn't. She wouldn't let it. She gathered her mounting anger and stuffed it in the empty place inside her chest.

Bruce opened the passenger-side door. "Get in the car."

She folded her arms. "If you know something, as my agent, you have no right to keep it from me."

"I don't know anything. And when I find out, we can discuss it back in New York."

"Why did Annalise tell me I lost the contract?"

"Because Annalise feeds off gossip, or haven't you figured that out yet?"

Despite the stagnant heat, a chill crept across Ivy's skin. As her friend, Annalise wouldn't have pulled this out of thin air. It had to have some substance. She gripped her elbows, as if the harder her fingers dug into flesh, the less any of this would matter. "Gossip always starts with a seed of truth."

"Look, either get in the car or I'm leaving you here. Your choice."

Ivy looked over her shoulder at the rows of polished tombstones. Her throat tightened. She hugged her arms and stepped closer to the car. "I want to go to the airport."

"We're going to the luncheon."

"Why?"

"He was my brother and your father. We're not leaving now."

"He was hardly my father." The emptiness expanded, carving her out like a pumpkin-turned-jack-o-lantern. She was nothing but a shell. A beautiful, empty shell.

An SUV pulled out from behind them. An engine rumbled in front. Except for a few stragglers in the distance lingering over her father's grave, the cemetery cleared.

Bruce drummed his fingers on the top of the car.

"I'm not going to sit in that house, eat cucumber sandwiches, and pretend to care that he's gone."

"You don't have a choice." Bruce opened the door wider.

Her shoulders sagged. Ivy slid into the passenger side, pulled the seat belt across her body, snapped it into place, and stared straight ahead. Why had she said anything to O'Banion? So what if he wanted to keep her in the same overdone pose? She shouldn't have said a word. If there was one mistake to avoid in her world, it was wounding the pride of a notoriously prideful photographer.

Bruce's door opened. He got inside and set his phone in the cup holder. As soon as he started the ignition, the phone vibrated, rattling loose change in the console. He swept up the device and held it against his ear. "Bruce Olsen."

Nothing but the unintelligible chatter of a female voice from the other end.

A muscle pulsed in Bruce's jaw. He scratched his chin and looked out the window, hiding his expression. "I'll be back tomorrow. Could we meet then and talk this over?" He clicked his seat belt into place and nodded. Another long pause. More unintelligible chatter. A sigh from her uncle. "I understand. Thanks for getting back to me."

He hit the End button and started the car.

Ivy pressed her fingers against her sweat-dampened palms.

Bruce pulled out onto the brick street and steered toward the iron gate. "It seems Ms. Reynolds wants a fresh face for her cosmetic line." He flipped on the radio. Bon Jovi's "You Give Love a Bad Name" blasted Ivy's ears. "Sorry, kid. They're not renewing your contract."



The sound of chattering guests and clinking plates swirled around Davis as he leaned against a door frame, unable to erase the sorrowful image of Ivy Clark standing over her father's grave. The first time she entered his life, he had been the one who had just buried his father—the one who had stared in disbelief as the ground swallowed up the man who gave him life—right before moving with his mom and sister across the country to Greenbrier, South Carolina. Away from his friends in Telluride and everything he knew at the impressionable age of sixteen. And what had gripped him about this mysterious wisp of a girl moving silently about his aunt's house were her haunted eyes.

She, too, had been taken from all that was familiar and plunked into a world where she didn't belong. Her prison, however, would only last a month each summer. His, it had seemed, would last forever.

But now, as he scanned the crowd, Davis knew that Greenbrier was not the prison he had made it out to be. In fact, it had become just the opposite—a sanctuary. Sure, it had some thorns, but they were tolerable. If only he had realized this as a teenager, perhaps he wouldn't have been so eager to escape.

Across the entry in the great room, Grandma Eleanor leaned against Grandfather's arm and cooled herself with a handheld, rose-patterned fan. She chatted with Mom and her husband, Mike—a high school math teacher with a paunch and an expanding bald patch on the crown of his head. Much to his grandparents' chagrin, Davis's mother met Mike on an Internet dating site, married him two years ago, and moved to his house in West Virginia, escaping the reach of Grandfather's indomitable thumb.

Grandfather met Davis's stare. He wasn't sure what Grandfather hated more—Davis's first career as a fashion photographer or his current one as a church maintenance man. Not in the mood to discuss his professional future at a funeral, he looked away, shifting his attention from the chandelier hanging over the dining room table to the art decorating the foyer walls before catching sight of his sister. She stood on the landing of the wide staircase with one arm extended in front of her, fingertips grazing the frame of a water-colored fresco Marilyn purchased several years ago, her posture etched with such longing Davis could feel her ache.

He frowned and moved toward her when Aunt Marilyn descended the stairs. With a ghost of a smile and red-rimmed eyes, she took Sara's elbow, whispered something in her ear, and guided her down the rest of the steps.

Davis walked to the north-facing wall instead, covered in arched windows that opened to a manicured front lawn spotted with azaleas and shaded by a large oak. A line of cars wound down the long drive and spilled onto the cul-de-sac. He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the cool glass.

"She sure is a beauty."

His attention perked.

"Someone said she was on the cover of *Vanity Fair*." This voice belonged to somebody different, slightly younger, and not quite so southern.

"And *InStyle*," the first voice whispered, loud enough for Davis to hear.

"Is she really James's daughter?"

"Can't you see the resemblance? Those eyes. Her hair. She's the spitting image."

"But James and Marilyn celebrated their thirtieth wedding anniversary last spring. That girl doesn't look a day over twenty." A pregnant pause followed the statement, saturated with so much subtext Davis could practically hear their churning thoughts. "You mean Marilyn stayed married to him after such a scandal?"

“Bless her heart, the poor thing must have loved him.”

“Well, he couldn’t have been all bad. I heard he donated a lot of money to the county hospital.”

“I don’t care how much money he donated. If my George unzipped his pants for another woman, he’d be out of the house quicker than that.” Fingers snapped.

His own dug into the frame of the window.

“She could never have kids of her own, you know. Such a shame. And then to find out about this girl. News like that would have sent me straight to the grave. I wouldn’t have been able to forgive him.”

Enough gossip for one funeral luncheon.

Davis stepped out of the shadow cast by the heavy velvet curtains and cleared his throat. Trudy Piper, daughter of Pastor Voss and wife to Cal—the owner of a local bar and grill—stood face to face with someone Davis didn’t recognize. Likely an out-of-town guest. The two women blanched, then strained their eyes and tightened their lips into appropriate funeral expressions.

“Davis.” Trudy clasped her hands. “I’m so sorry for your family’s loss. It’s a shame for James to have passed so young.”

“The cancer took him fast,” the other woman added.

Trudy gave him a hug, the floral scent of her perfume overpowering, and the pair melted into the crowd in the dining area. He watched them go, his jaw clenched. Pastor Voss had two grown daughters. Trudy was the younger of the two and, much to the pastor’s chagrin, the town gossipmonger. Aunt Marilyn didn’t need a woman like that gossiping behind her back. She had enough to deal with. He turned around and set his palm against the window frame, then straightened to his full height.

Ivy Clark was in Marilyn’s front yard, sitting on a white bench with one sinewy leg crossed over the other. Shaded beneath the oak, her toffee-colored hair fell in long waves past her shoulders as she stared off toward the street. He noted the elegance of her neck, the angle of her body. Except for

her bouncing foot, she invoked an almost ethereal stillness, one that had him leaning closer to the window. There was a story there—hidden beneath her frame and her posture—and it begged to be captured.

Davis stepped away from the window and wove through the crowd. He plated a sandwich from the dining table and walked out into the humidity. If Ivy noticed him coming, she didn't look up. Not even when he sat beside her on the bench, holding up the sandwich as an offering. "Hungry?"

She traced lazy circles around her kneecap. "Not much of an appetite at the moment, thanks."

He set the plate down on the grass.

She leaned back on her palms. "Do you stare at women at funerals as a rule or should I be flattered?"

It took him a while, but he found it. In her irises. A barely there pulse of the girl he remembered from way back when, before the world had its way with them both. It kept him on the bench when everything else begged him to leave. "You don't remember me, do you?"

She shifted away and looked him in the eyes.

He decided to help her out. "Marilyn's nephew?"

"Davis Knight, you don't say." She tipped her chin. "So what does that make us—cousins?"

"Stepcousins, I guess." If there was such a thing.

"And here I thought I was running out of family." She looked him full in the face, her expression bored or maybe challenging. Like she dared him to entertain her.

"You're a lot different than I remember."

She raised her eyebrows. "And just how much do you remember, Dave?"

"You were sad a lot."

"Well, there wasn't much to be happy about back then. And I'm not a little girl anymore." One corner of her mouth quirked into a private grin. "But I think you noticed that all on your own."

Of course he'd noticed. Any man would. "I've followed your career."

“Oh yeah?” She leaned so close her shoulder brushed against his. “Are you a fan? You want me to sign something?”

The woman in front of him bore no resemblance to the one he’d watched out the window. That woman had looked lonely. This one wielded seduction like a weapon. So which was the real Ivy Clark? “It’s hot out. You should come inside.”

“I’ll pass.”

“So you’re just going to sit out here the whole time?”

She slipped her phone from her purse and checked the display.

“Are you waiting for someone?”

“A cab.”

“In Greenbrier? I didn’t know they existed.” The island town might boast twenty thousand, but something about its slow-moving pace made it feel half that size.

“Apparently they only have one. It’s taking a long time.”

“Where are you going?”

“The airport.”

“Already?”

“Why the twenty questions, Dave?”

Why indeed? He nudged the plate with his shoe. A red ant scuttled toward the bread as silence settled between them every bit as pronounced as the humid air. A swallow filled the void with song.

Ivy sighed. “I never hear the word ‘escape’ without a quicker blood...”

He cocked his head. “Emily Dickinson?”

“You know it?”

The surprise in her question matched his own. She was as unlikely a candidate as he to quote poetry. “I had an English lit professor who was in love with Ms. Dickinson. That’s what he called her too—*Mzz Dickinson*. I think her postmortem status truly depressed him.”

A genuine smile tugged at her lips, but before it could take full form, she looked down and fiddled with the charm bracelet around her wrist. “If

you really must know, Dave, I'm running away. Do you know what that's like?"

"Unfortunately."

She raised an eyebrow, like she didn't believe for a minute somebody like him would have anything to run away from.

"It's something I did for a long time," he admitted, wondering, even as he did, why he was opening up to her.

"Oh yeah? And how did it work out for you?"

Sadness spread its fingers and lay a heavy hand over his chest. "Not well."

A cab grumbled down the cul-de-sac and stopped behind the line of parked cars crowding the driveway. Ivy stood. He joined her. In her high heels, she came almost level with his six-foot-two frame. He wasn't used to looking a woman in the eye, especially not on his feet. "Good luck," he said.

"With what?"

"Stopping. We all have to sooner or later."

Something broken flickered in her eyes but disappeared before the lethargic shutter in his mind could capture it. She leaned forward and brushed her lips against his cheek, her breath minty and warm. "Happy mourning."

She pulled her purse over her shoulder and sauntered to the cab.



Taking a temporary respite from the condolences, Marilyn Olsen clasped the cross on her necklace, sliding it back and forth along the silver chain, watching as Ivy slid into the backseat of the yellow taxi.

Marilyn's house was full of people—if not mourning, at least acknowledging James's end—yet from the moment she caught sight of Ivy at the funeral, her thoughts ceased being about her late husband. Some might think that callous, but in truth, Marilyn did not dread widowhood as many women might. Her good-bye to James was not one of holding on and

clinging tighter; it was more akin to slowly stopping after a long, grueling race. The flood of emotion she felt now was all about the girl riding away in the backseat of a cab.

Lord, my heart...

Sometimes obedience could feel like trudging through the mud, each acquiescent footstep weighted with resistance. That's how it was with James. Marilyn didn't want to forgive him, but who was she to ignore the words God continued to place in the palms of her outstretched hands whenever she prayed? *Absolve. Pardon. Exonerate.* Their crisp, sharpened edges left no room for misinterpretation.

Other times, though, obedience was unavoidable.

During her dark years, when James started drifting away and infertility defined her days, Marilyn took on the morbid habit of reading labor and delivery books. One author described the act of pushing like a train barreling forward at full speed. The doctor says push and the woman in labor doesn't have to think twice. Her body takes over her will, bearing down with a fierceness that is nearly impossible to thwart.

As a woman who had never experienced such a phenomenon, Marilyn couldn't fathom what that might feel like. Until she saw her—an eight-year-old girl with a Cinderella backpack who kept looking at James with a mixture of timidity and admiration. Only he never looked back. He didn't acknowledge her at all. And as Marilyn beheld this girl standing in their foyer for the first time, taking in all the ways Ivy resembled James but not her, she could hear the whisper...

Love this one.

It was as if God had shouted in a holy voice, "Push!"

She couldn't have stopped it if she tried.

"Marilyn." The greeting sounded so much like James that for one illogical second she thought it actually belonged to him.

Pressing the silver cross into the hollow of her clavicle, she turned around. "Bruce." His name escaped on an exhale. What James and his

younger brother lacked in closeness, they more than made up for in resemblance. Looking up at him now brought on an eerie sense of *déjà vu*.

He reached out and squeezed her elbow—as close to affection as the two had ever come. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“And yours,” she said.

“Yes, well.” He slid his hands into the pockets of his trousers, his attention not quite meeting hers. “I didn’t know the cancer would take him so quickly. If I’d known...”

Marilyn let the unfinished sentiment fade into the chatter around them. She might have offered something comforting. *Nobody imagined he would go so fast. Or James knew you loved him.* But in truth, she didn’t have the energy to offer Bruce placations. Her concentration returned to the white bench where Ivy had been. Davis sat there now, elbows on his knees, playing with a sandwich he’d picked up from the plate between his feet. “How’s Ivy doing?”

“Hanging in there, I think.”

“I see her on those makeup commercials from time to time.”

“Unfortunately, she won’t be on them anymore.”

Marilyn looked at her brother-in-law. “What do you mean?”

“Reynolds has decided not to renew Ivy’s contract. They want a younger face.”

“What will she do?”

Bruce puffed up his cheeks and released a long breath. “I’m sure she’ll figure something out. Ivy always does. I know you had your doubts, but the kid’s had quite a run. A lot better than most.”

The words smarted. How could Bruce be so shrewd in business, yet so obtuse in other areas of life? Yes, Marilyn had had her doubts, but they were never in Ivy.

“Speaking of our girl, have you seen her?”

“She left in a cab just now.” Marilyn spoke the words to the glass.

Bruce stepped closer, following her line of vision. “She left?”

The disapproval in his tone raised her hackles. Of all the things he could care about, it was this? Never mind the fact that Ivy was barely fourteen when Bruce invited her into a world built on empty promises. Never mind the fact that he saw nothing wrong with exploiting a hurting girl's God-given beauty.

"I'm really sorry, Marilyn. I didn't think she'd call a cab."

"She's not a prisoner, Bruce."

Isn't she?

The question might as well have been another one of God's holy shouts. Just because the bars weren't visible didn't mean Ivy wasn't a prisoner. They'd only grown stronger, more resilient in the ten years since she had last walked out of Marilyn's life. Still, the whispered words that wrecked her all those years ago echoed in the deepest part of her heart. The place where mothers were made.



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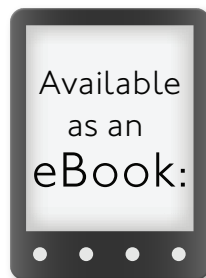
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