

CHAPTER ONE

Grandma said a person's defining moment could be found in life's darkest corner. In my case, I found it at the bottom of a river gorge. It was when I'd come face to face with my greatest fear and decided risking my life was better than not finishing what my mom had started.

The journey began weeks ago on an early June morning after several days of rain left everything a muddy mess.

"Ellie Mae." Grandma stopped me halfway out the back door, holding my jacket. "Make sure you bring me those eggs before you head over to the clinic. Yesterday, you left them on a bale of hay, and the cats broke half the lot."

I winced. "Got caught up trimming the goats' hooves. Sorry about that."

The air was cool as I slipped out of our two-story farmhouse and walked down the hill toward the barn. I pushed my arms through the blue zip-up and pulled my hair into a short ponytail, using the band I had placed on my wrist earlier. After chores, Dad and I planned to go into town for breakfast, deliver shoes to a family in need, then visit Mom's grave. Depending on the time, and his mood, I'd ask if he wanted to trek through the mountains to the old weeping willow she'd often gone to when she wrote in her journal.

Talking about Mom was the only thing I had asked for on my eighteenth birthday, a month earlier. And Dad agreed . . . *finally*. I don't know if he thought being an official adult entitled me to know the truth surrounding Mom's death or if he feared I'd never return home from the university if he didn't open up. I'd never made that threat, but I thought it more than once.

Dogs barked. I glanced across the barnyard to Dad's vet clinic. The front door stood ajar—Dad's way of saying he wouldn't be staying out there. Just long enough to feed the boarders and maybe leave a note for Sarah, his office manager.

From out the back, two beagles raced across the kennel to the fence that lined a hillside full of birch and pine. Joining them, a beautiful Irish Setter trotted out—Dad's late afternoon spay.

Chickens fluttered inside the coop, and the goats bleated like they'd been starved for a week. I shoved open the large, sliding barn door. Daisy stepped on the bottom rung of the gate, lifting herself up so her head cleared the top. She let out another wavering bleat. Lulu hopped up beside her and joined in.

"Enough. You're just hearing those noisy hounds. Nothing to worry about." I brushed a hand over her nose and planted a kiss on the short, wiry hair. "One molasses-and-grain breakfast coming up."

Carrying two flakes of hay back with the feed, I didn't dally like normal. I'd give Daisy and Lulu extra attention this evening. Right now, I was anxious to get a move on. But Dad was still in the clinic when I walked to the house, the bottom of my sweatshirt bulging with a dozen eggs. Grandma held open the back door, letting out a sweet apple-and-cinnamon aroma. I inhaled deeply.

"You made turnovers?"

"Just warmed up some I had stashed in the freezer." She smiled, aged dimples forming tracks along each cheek, but her ice-blue eyes didn't flash with the usual spark. Not even with Frank Sinatra crooning in the background. He always pulled a hum and a smile from her, so something was off. Or maybe it was just the day.

"You remember Dad and I are going into town for breakfast, right?"

Her lips folded into a straight line. An apologetic expression that warned me not to get all worked up. I'd seen the look plenty enough to know what it meant.

"Dad changed his mind, didn't he?" I lifted the eggs from my jacket into the kitchen sink, resisting the urge to smash a couple.

"Another animal attack. This time over at the Hansen's." Grandma washed her hands beside me then moved the spigot so water splashed over the eggs.

"What happened?" Concern edged in as I rinsed off the eggs and placed them on a towel, a little hurt that Jeanine hadn't texted me. I could think of a couple reasons she might be avoiding me. The main one centered around her brother, but I thought we'd all moved beyond that.

The oven timer buzzed. Grandma draped the towel over my shoulder. "I have no idea. You'll have to ask your dad." She pulled the sheet of pastries out of the oven. At the same time gravel crunched, the sound of a car rolling down the drive.

Drying my hands, I walked through the house and glanced out the living room window. "Uh-oh. It's Simsy. I better get out there. Who knows what stray she's brought him this time."

Grandma handed me a double-layered napkin with a warm fritter on top. "Good idea. I'm not sure he'll have the patience this morning."

"Or any morning when it comes to her." I lifted the fritter. "Thank you for this. You're the best." I gave her a quick squeeze and hurried out the door, hoping Dad would hold onto his temper. Dorothy Simms, or Simsy, as most people called her, tended to be a little eccentric, but her heart was in the right place. At least that's how I felt.

Two months ago, she'd brought in a baby raccoon and wanted to make sure it was healthy before turning it into a pet. Dad had scolded her and let it loose right then and there. Simsy left madder than a mule chewing on bumblebees and had sworn she was never coming back.

Yet here she was. Like always.

Three bites into the fritter, I entered my dad's office, placing the uneaten portion on his desk next to a week-old invoice. I picked it up and glanced at the customer's name. "Jaxon. Figures."

"You can't keep an owl as a pet!" Dad's voice boomed through the wall.

I tossed the paper on the desk and raced into the room next door. "You have an owl?" I grinned at Simsy, who was sitting in a chair across from the exam table, but frowned when I saw Dad's face. Eyebrows drawn over fiery green eyes and a tight mouth, he looked like a weather-worn lumberjack who'd just broken his last axe handle.

"Not for long, if your daddy has his way." Simsy blew a strand of salt-and-pepper hair out of her face. The rest was wrapped tightly in a bun at the nape of her neck. The baby was only about the size of Dad's hand and still sported some gray fuzz between brownish feathers. It barely squawked as Dad set it back in the cage.

"It's against the law, Dorothy." Dad fixed his gaze on me. "Ellie, I want you to take it over to the bird sanctuary. Rebecca will know what to do with him." He placed his gloves on the table next to the cage.

"We're kind of busy today. Maybe Simsy would like to take it over."

His nostrils flared. "I'd rather you do it."

"I can't. The brakes on the Jeep need fixed, remember?" I intended every ounce of venom lacing my tone. He wasn't ditching me without a fight. He made a promise.

“God in Heaven above, Neil, what’s happened to your manners?” Simsy stood and grabbed the cage. “Besides the owl, I’ll be sure Rebecca gets an earful. Ellie Mae, good luck at college. I’m sorry to say you won’t be seeing me out here anymore.”

I scowled at Dad for being rude and followed Simsy out the door. “Here, let me help you with that.” I took the cage. “Don’t mind him. You remember today’s the anniversary of Mom’s death?”

“Course I remember, and I’m sorry for that.” She opened the backseat door on her oversized Buick. “Don’t know why I thought we could share a civil conversation.”

I tightened my hold on the cage. “Maybe just come by without an animal sometime. Visit.”

“I’d be as welcome as a tick on a dog’s ear.”

“Don’t know if you don’t try.”

“*Hmpf!*”

Unsure what to say, I nodded at the owl. “Dad’ll call the game warden if you don’t take him straight over to the Rescue. Why don’t you let us do it? Then you won’t risk getting a fine. And you can go over to visit the owl whenever you want.”

The lines in her face softened. “I hadn’t thought about a fine.”

“Dad means business when it comes to wild birds. A couple weeks ago, I brought home a hawk with an injured wing. Scratched the heck out of me. I thought I earned the right to nurse it back to health.” I jerked a thumb toward the office. “But he said no and threatened to call the warden if I kept it.” This was only a half truth. I knew as well as Dad that the bird needed to be at the Rescue, but it didn’t keep me from wishing I could have held onto it for a few days. And it didn’t keep Dad from sharing the consequences if I followed through on my desire.

“*Tsk.*” Ms. Simms shook her head and closed the back door. “What you have to put up with.”

“He’s right, though. Rebecca has the equipment and facilities. She knows what she’s doing.”

Simsy plopped behind the wheel, reached across the front seat, and produced a cherry pie. “Here, you and your grandmother share this. Although you might give your daddy a piece to try and sweeten him up. Just be sure and tell him I didn’t make it for *him*. Oh, and I wanted to tell you the boys are coming home this weekend. They’ll be at church on Sunday. If you wanted to sit with us at the potluck, you’d be welcome.”

I held the cage with one hand and took the pie in my other as my mind raced then stopped at the faint memory from last week’s church announcements. “The church’s anniversary potluck. Right. Sure. I’ll be there, and I’ll tell Dad and Grandma. Can’t wait to see them.”

With that, Simsy pulled the door shut and let gravel fly as she tore down the driveway.

I set the cage beside Dad’s truck and carried the pie into the clinic, not sure whether to laugh at Simsy or be mad at Dad’s rudeness.

“So, what’s going on?” I dropped the pie in the middle of his desk.

“Nothing.” He grabbed his blue University of Kentucky windbreaker off a hook by the door and slipped it on.

“That’s a lie. We’re spending the day together, aren’t we?”

Dad let out a sigh. “I can’t. I have an emergency over at Hansen’s, and then I guess I need to drop off the bird at Rebecca’s. You did get it from her, didn’t you?”

I nodded once. “I’ll go with you. We’ll still have time to do everything else. Including this.” I held up the overdue bill. “Jaxon Reid. We can tag team. It might even be fun.”

“I’m writing that off. Stay away from Jaxon.”

“Since when are you writing it off? He’ll think he’s won if you do. Reason he bullies people is because everyone tiptoes around him. I’ve heard you say it yourself, so why are you enabling him this time?”

Dad grabbed the tranquilizer gun off the top of a cabinet. “That’s a discussion for another day.” He walked out the clinic door. “Lock up and make sure the closed sign is visible.”

I stuffed the invoice in my back pocket and pulled the door shut behind me. “I’m coming with you. Why the gun?”

“Animal attack at Hansen’s. And you’re not coming.” He placed the owl in the backseat of his truck and paused, looking apologetic for the first time. “I’ll be home in time for the surgery.”

I couldn’t let him bail on me again, so I pushed. “You might need help at Hansen’s. What kind of attack? Were the livestock hurt?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll call if I need you. He nodded toward the dog run. “Take care of the animals.” Then in the space of a heartbeat, he closed the door, backed up, and turned around. I watched as he left our property and disappeared down the road.

He wouldn’t call. Just like past years, he’d spend the day somewhere else. The attack was probably an excuse to make a quick getaway. I used to try and find him. I went to Mom’s grave, the willow tree, the hills behind the pasture where Mom and Dad often went on walks. I never figured out where he went, and when I asked, he always said, “Nowhere in particular.”

The past couple years, between school, work, and helping others, I hadn’t dwelt on Mom much. But ever since my birthday, when Dad gave me one of her journals, I’d been thinking more about my treks through the hills with her, the stories and singing, her lessons on tracking and botany. The memories, combined with not knowing the truth of what happened to her, left a hole in my heart the size of Mammoth Cave. Dad needed to answer my questions, help fill in the gaps before I left home, but more and more I sensed him pulling away.

I retrieved the pie and marched into the house, allowing the screen door to slam behind me. “Dad bailed.”

Grandma took the pie out of my hands, set it aside, and gave me a long and firm squeeze. “I’m sorry it didn’t work out, but don’t let it spoil your memory of her.” She pulled back and brushed fallen hair out of my eyes. “You look more like her every day, you know that?”

My chest tightened, and I struggled to swallow. Mom and I shared the same dark hair and eyes that stemmed from her Cherokee heritage—Cherokee as far as anyone knew. “Do you think I remind him of her? Is that why he leaves every year?”

“Sweetie, he’s trying his best. Emotions creep up, and he doesn’t know how to cope.”

“He knows how to shut me out.” A hot tear burned the corner of my eye. I blinked fast to keep it from falling and stormed out of the house.

CHAPTER TWO

We'd lived on Dillard Hollow my whole life. The rutted gravel road ran past our place, turned, and went dead on straight into Hush Briar. The little town, nestled between two mountains, was pretty far off the beaten path and didn't offer much in the way of entertainment, but it was enough for me.

Atop the four-wheeler, I swerved around a mud puddle at the end of an abandoned coal mine road and came upon Johnny and Bessie Stroh's property. Bessie picked cherries from atop a wooden stepladder that sat half cockeyed in the wet ground.

She waved and hollered, "Hi, Ellie Mae. Fine morning, ain't it?"

I slowed to a crawl. "Best one yet," I called back but felt the nice day was wasted on me.

"Tell your daddy Missy's getting along real good with those stitches."

"I will. You take care." I sped up. It'd been Bessie's small collie that crossed paths with Jaxon Reid's rottweiler and nearly lost her life. And there was Jaxon, blaming the little dog for leaving the yard when his own had jumped out of a moving truck. Just thinking about his arrogant excuse made my insides boil. And I couldn't believe Dad wanted to write it off.

Dad would be mad that I confronted Jaxon, but right now, I didn't much care. Good people were being taken advantage of, and I wasn't about to stand by and do nothing. I just needed to be careful not to ruffle too many of Jaxon's feathers.

Jaxon used to work in the coal mines before they closed a few years back. Now, he operated a tow truck for his cousin and hung out at Willie's Tavern between runs. Only one of the two restaurants in town, Willie's opened early enough to capitalize on the brunch crowd. And sure enough, Jaxon's truck sat at the edge of the lot. I parked the four-wheeler facing the wrecker and climbed off, never pausing, unwilling to lose my nerve.

I unzipped my blue hoodie and yanked the two halves of my short ponytail in opposite directions to tighten it. A few stray hairs still fell across my face, so I tucked them behind one ear as I hauled open the bar's front door.

The place was dark and dank, and the smell of scrambled eggs blended with the aroma of stale smoke still embedded in the ceiling beams and wooden floor even though no one could smoke inside anymore. Fox News blared from a flat screen near the ceiling on one wall. Two men sat at the bar eating plates of eggs while they talked to Big Travis—bartender and the owner's son. A few others dotted the place.

I tossed Travis a wave and beelined toward a table in the back corner where Jaxon sat, playing cards with the McGraff brothers.

At ten in the morning? Not the scenario I had hoped for.

Jaxon alone didn't bother me too much because I could hold my temper around him, but Rodney and Todd McGraff brought out my worst. The twins were two years older than me and lived with their uncle out on Southbend Road. Old man Josiah took them in after their momma ran off with a truck driver passing through town. While those boys turned over stones looking for trouble, their uncle believed his wayward nephews were better than no family at all. Guess it shouldn't have surprised me to find them hanging out with Jaxon.

Rodney mumbled to his brother and cast a resentful glare my way. I swallowed an equally resentful scowl and allowed my dislike for Rodney to fuel my courage. Jaxon glanced over his shoulder, and a slow smile split his face. All three looked a wreck, like they'd been up all night. On the other hand, this might be just another Wednesday for them.

I walked over and slapped the vet bill down on the scarred wooden table in front of Jaxon.

He fell back into his chair. "What's this?"

I straightened my shoulders and spoke businesslike, careful to keep my sarcasm hidden. "Cost for damages from when your dog attacked the Stroh's collie."

Jaxon scratched his head and exchanged a look with Rodney, who turned and spit into a tin can on the table.

"Hard to believe, but me and the boys here was just talking about you."

Hard to believe was right. It'd been months since I'd so much as nodded a head their way. I narrowed my eyes, unwilling to appear intimidated or show that I cared a wit what they'd been talking about. "I didn't come for small talk, Jaxon. Just to bring you the bill."

"I have a question for you first."

On the surface, when he washed his ash blond hair and combed it halfway decent, Jaxon looked all right. Same with the scruffy mustache and beard. All he needed to do was give it an even trim. But when he smiled, decent-looking morphed into creepy. Brown stains from the chaw outlined his teeth and accentuated those missing on his left upper side.

I folded my arms, my only invitation. Glasses clanked. I looked behind me and caught Travis watching as he dried the dishes from the other side of the bar. He and his dad co-owned the place and were decent guys who listened to as much gossip as any beautician and kept a close eye out for potential trouble. Wish I could say I knew this from hearsay, but I'd spent my fair share of time in this place trying to rescue my former boyfriend from the dufus sitting on the other side of the table spitting tobacco like some beady-eyed grasshopper. At least my bartender-friend wouldn't run off and tell my dad he saw me talking to Jaxon.

"You hear about them animal tracks out on Hansen's land? Behind the pasture leading up into the forest?" Jaxon jabbed at the chaw in his lower lip with his tongue and stared at my face.

"No." While a million questions scorched a trail through my mind, I didn't trust a word out of Jaxon's mouth. I pointed to the bill. "Pay up. I want to get out of here."

Jaxon pulled out his wallet and tossed three twenties on the bill. On top of the money, he placed a padlock, the shackle twisted until it had snapped.

"What's this?"

"Came from Hansen's, and I believe it has to do with the animal attack your daddy's investigating right now. Only it weren't no attack. Cows went missing completely."

"How do you know what my dad's doing?" I glanced around the table, hating that these guys possibly knew more about my dad's whereabouts than I did. Rodney's thumbs moved across the screen of his phone while his brother watched the news.

"When I have an interest in something, I make it my business to know what's going on."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “What kind of animal could even do this?” I picked up the lock and shoved the money in my jean’s pocket before he had an opportunity to change his mind.

“Exactly. Instead, ask yourself what kind of *creature* could do this? Could leave footprints the length of my forearm in Hansen’s back pasture and carry off a couple of his cows?”

I frowned. A blanket of cold fell over me. The past zoomed to forefront of my mind, bringing with it a head rush of embarrassing memories filled with pain and ridicule. Jaxon’s words faded in and out as if he were speaking through a tunnel.

“You know what I’m saying. Your momma used to study and track all kinds of wild animals ’round these parts.”

He was lying. Just like everyone else had been lying when they gossiped about my mom and spread false rumors. I swallowed, sucked in a deep breath, and focused on the lock, forcing my nerves to settle and my vision to clear. I wouldn’t let him shake me or let on that he knew something I didn’t. “So?”

“So, you go on and have a look at those tracks. Ask your daddy about ’em. By the way, tell him I’d like to have a word. It’s been a while.”

Outside the overdue bill, what business did Jaxon have with Dad? The two never shared the same space, and besides the nosey undercurrents of the town, I didn’t believe Jaxon knew much about my mom. But his eyes carried an arrogant sheen, a confidence that meant I stood in the wake of secrets.

I fixed my gaze on Rodney because my good sense had abandoned me when I left home that morning and because a piece of me desperately needed to reject Jaxon’s implications. “Maybe you should be asking these two what they know about the missing livestock, animal attacks, and whatever tracks you’re talking about.”

Rodney looked up from his phone. “You got a point in making that kind of statement?”

“You seem fixated on tearing up other people’s property. I wouldn’t put it past you to pull a hoax or steal someone’s cows.”

Rodney stood, the chair clattering against the wall behind him. “You accusing me, after you vandalized *my* property?”

“Maybe. How could an animal do this?” I held up the lock. “Who else would stoop to such a low kind of entertainment?”

I’m not sure who burned with more hatred. So much anger ran through me that I welcomed another confrontation with Rodney. Except I didn’t have my shotgun this time, or a car, and antagonizing a bully, even in the middle of the day, was about as stupid as trying to catch a badger with my bare hands.

“Settle down, Ellie Mae.” Jaxon took a sip of coffee. “I can vouch for Rodney’s whereabouts last night. He’s not Hansen’s thief. Rodney, sit down.”

“How do you know all of this?”

Jaxon picked up his cards and nodded for the boys to do the same. “The hills have eyes,” he said hauntingly and laughed.

To accuse Jaxon of lying was not the same as yanking Rodney’s tail. Older, smarter, and related to a crooked sheriff over in Breathitt County, Jaxon operated on motive. And that scared me a little. I turned to leave, but Jaxon caught my arm. “Don’t forget to talk to your daddy. Your momma wasn’t as crazy as people said. Go take a look at them tracks.” I glanced around. Travis watched openly as he wiped down the bar, but everyone else ignored us.

I pulled my arm away and left. Outside, I squinted against the sunshine. No way was I telling Dad I'd talked to Jaxon. I intended to put the money in the safe, swear Sarah into silence, and spend the rest of the day mowing the barnyard in solitude.

"Hey, Ellie Mae."

I glanced across the parking lot as I hefted one leg over the four-wheeler. JT strode toward me in full police uniform. His real name was Justin T. Long, and his daddy was the reverend at the Methodist church we attended. He was a few years older than me. Early as I could remember, folks called him Pokey. Not because he was slow or anything, but he was ramrod thin and his bones were sorta pokey at the joints. I don't think he minded being called Pokey, but it felt a little offensive, so I stuck with JT. We got along real well, but others had been mean to him in school. Even though he took it all in stride, I knew he'd wanted nothing more than to become a cop so he could hold those bullies, or others like them, accountable.

"Hey, JT, what's up?"

He stopped next to the four-wheeler, hooked his thumbs over his belt, and hem-hawed. I tipped my head in question.

"What were you doing in Willie's?" he blurted out, nodding his head toward the coal-stained building.

"Why?"

"You got nothing in your hands like you might've ordered food. You didn't go with anyone, and you weren't in there long enough to eat in. I heard tell you might be looking for trouble." He tipped back on his heels and smiled like he'd caught me in the act of something disorderly. Not out of arrogance or spite, but more like a friends-don't-let-friends-start-fights sort of smile.

I dropped my shoulders and growled. "Grandma sent you to check up on me, didn't she?"

"We all know what today is, and we know what happens when your temper gets riled. She called Doc, worried you might do something stupid again. He called me. You know I can't fudge over another one of your tantrums." The smile broke through. Such a cute smile I never could get angry at him.

"No one said you had to."

"You want to go to jail? A judge will only allow so many warnings."

"How'd you know I would be at Willie's?"

"Where else do you go when you're looking for a fight?"

That's the trouble with a small town. Everyone knew everyone else's business. I pulled at a tear in my jeans. "For your information, I went in there to talk to Jaxon Reid about a vet bill. According to what he said, seems like you should be looking for an animal thief instead of following me around town."

"And for your information, I knew McGraff was in there, and you still have a bone to pick."

"Do not."

He snorted. "Whatever you say."

"Hey, did Mr. Hansen or my dad call you?"

He furrowed a brow and turned dead serious. "We talked not too long ago. Why?"

"Because I know someone caused trouble for Mr. Hansen. My guess is it's those nim-wits sitting inside."

"You mean McGraff's. Why them?"

"Who knows why they do what they do. Attention. Boredom. Sociopathic tendencies."

He snorted. "Suppose'n you leave the speculation to us."

"Fine, but do you know anything about those tracks out on Hansen's land?" I put Jaxon's words to the test. See if they held any weight.

He pursed his lips. "Never mind those tracks. There ain't no truth to 'em. Leave 'em be, you hear?"

"I hear, but Dad said there was an animal attack, and Jaxon said cows were stolen. Which is it?"

JT grimaced, like speaking to me was going to cost him more than he wanted to spend. I snorted back at him. "Your look says it all. How is it Jaxon knows so much about what's going on and finds it important to include me?"

JT shook his head. "I'm not sure what's going on. Just steer clear of Hansen's place . . . and Reid . . . and McGraffs. In fact, why don't you just go on home so we know you aren't part of the trouble."

I glared at him. Trouble? How was holding people accountable or expecting the truth trouble? Frustrated and feeling like an outsider, I left him staring after me, a cloud of gravel-smoke in my wake.

A half-mile from home, I paused at the abandoned coal mine road that meandered up the mountainside on the south side of Hansen land. I pulled the lock out of my pocket and examined the twisted steel. No animal or man could do this without a tool. I wouldn't put it past the McGraff's to try and pull off a prank. Maybe they convinced Jaxon to yank my tail. See if I'd squawk. But it didn't figure in with Dad blowing me off and rushing over to Hansen's first thing this morning. That, along with JT's warning to stay away, fired up my curiosity. Just who was prowling around up there on our neighbor's land, and what did they hope to accomplish?

As much as I believed those tracks had nothing to do with my mom and was simply Jaxon running his mouth, I needed to see them for myself. Just so I could comfortably tuck the childhood rumors back where they belonged. But I couldn't go now, not when Mr. Hansen might see me. Later, after dinner. I'd slip away without Dad knowing.

CHAPTER THREE

Words from Sinatra's "The Way You Look Tonight" drifted into the kitchen from the living room. Grandma turned from the stove, where fried chicken sizzled in the large cast-iron skillet and reached for a platter on the adjacent counter. Her quick frown and blue eyes flashed a reprimand.

"Ellie Mae, don't ya think a nice skirt and blouse would be more appropriate?"

I knew she wanted the evening to be special. Every year, she made an amazing meal, attempted a nice atmosphere, and convinced me to be respectful of Dad's need to avoid the topic of Mom. Most years, she pulled off a pleasant evening, but tonight, she'd fallen flat by inviting Doc and his grandson out.

I faced her, five plates in hand. "This is my best flannel." I spun in a circle, showing off the yellow-and-gray plaid. "I even tucked it in."

"And why the ponytail? Your hair isn't long enough for it."

"It's out of my face. I like it that way. Besides, I'm just being myself." I opened a drawer and piled silverware on top of the plates. "I'm not about to change my appearance for some city boy passing through, and Doc wouldn't recognize me if he saw me in anything else."

She turned back to the stove. "One of these days, a boy will come along, and you'll want to look nice for him."

Even though she had pulled up her silver hair into the usual bun, I noted the floral skirt and navy-blue blouse under the apron. Had she dressed up for Doc? I sensed something brewing between those two, but she'd swatted me down like a pesky fly the one time I asked.

"This isn't that boy, Grandma. Trust me. He ain't my type. I don't understand why you had to go and invite them to supper."

"Because it's neighborly. And what is your type?" She forked a piece of chicken onto the plate.

Good question. Only boy who'd caught my eye had turned to drugs and since left the state. I crossed the hardwood floors into the adjoining dining room but could still see Grandma through the doorway. "Someone normal who enjoys simple living, but not too simple, if you know what I mean. Book smart but outdoorsy."

"Careful expecting too much. You might end up a lonely old woman."

"Are you lonely?"

Grandma gripped the skillet with both hands and drained most of the oil into a small silver bowl then set the pan back on the burner. "No, but I'm not old either." She winked. "My life became extra important after your momma passed away. Being here with you and your daddy is the only place I want to be."

I went back into the kitchen, opened the cupboard on the right side of the sink, and pulled out five glasses. "I'm glad you're here because it sure isn't where Dad wants to be. At least not today." I held a glass under the spigot and filled it with water.

Grandma dropped a spoonful of butter in the chicken drippings. It sizzled as she used the back of the spoon and smashed pieces of crispy chicken. My stomach growled, the aroma drifting around us.

"Sweetie, he's trying his best. Emotions creep up, and he doesn't know how to cope."

"He knows how to shut me out."

"He's not the only one who has trouble expressing their feelings. Now promise me you'll be civil tonight. Especially toward Ethan's grandson."

"Oh, please. I'll bet he isn't interested in anything more than throwing a ball down a football field."

"Careful assuming too much when you haven't even met him." Her gaze drilled mine before she turned back to the skillet and sprinkled two large spoonfuls of flour over the melted butter.

I carried three glasses of water into the dining room and returned for the other two. "Doesn't take much to form an opinion. If this grandson cares about Doc then where's he been this past year? More than likely he wants a vacation from the rest of his spoiled family and is using his grandpa to get it."

Last night, when Grandma mentioned Doc was picking Jake up at the airport, my first thought had been what kind of person waits until after they're needed to show up? I saw Doc cry when none of his family came to Gertie's funeral. I sat with Doc and kept him company the days after. Maybe I had missed some important tidbit of information, but I didn't think so, because I only remembered thinking how selfish they all must be.

Grandma added milk to the skillet and quickly whisked it. "Well, mind your manners tonight. The day's been rough enough as is. I'm hoping to lighten the mood, have some good food, enjoyable conversation, and end the day well. Sound okay to you?"

I skewed up a corner of my mouth. Having fun and entertaining someone I had no intention of even talking to would only slow my efforts to get over to Hansen's. I looked into Grandma's pleading eyes. "I'll try to behave."

The front screen door opened and fell shut, bringing laughter and talk into the house.

"Perfect timing." Grandma poured the gravy into a small pitcher and motioned for me to help carry the chicken, potatoes, and biscuits, while she brought the gravy and turnip greens. Not the healthiest meal but all of our favorite comfort foods. I loved her so much for it.

I sucked in a deep breath and entered the dining room, ordering myself to not make a scene and ruin the evening for Grandma. Besides, there was a tiny speck in the corner of my mind that was curious about this boy who'd decided to show up out of nowhere.

As soon as I placed the food on the table, my gaze went straight to Doc's grandson. Hard to miss him when his body consumed almost as much of the dining room as my dad's. He was taller than Doc by an inch or two and made my five-seven feel short. Brown hair combed neatly to one side, he'd tucked a gray T-shirt with a big, faded, orange T logo into worn jeans. Typical jock.

Doc introduced us. Jake held out his hand, blue eyes scanning my face and clothes as he quietly sniffed and produced a half-smile. Was he smirking at me? What, did he think I was one of those girls who prattled on and on acting silly for attention or just a simple piece of mountain trash? I sidestepped his hand and wrapped Doc in a hug.

Ethan Dillard, also known as Doc, was my surrogate grandpa. The Dillards were a long line of outstanding doctors who served more out of a love for people, and the Hush Briar community, than for money. Dillard Hollow had been named for Doc's great-granddaddy, and folks out this way respected the whole lot of 'em. Long as I could remember, his belly'd hung over his pants, and he'd had a full head of silvery-white hair. Recently, he'd lost weight and his hair had thinned, but Grandma said he looked a lot like he did when he was younger.

Always around for important events, Doc kept up on my schooling and even helped me out with a project on occasion. When I was younger, I'd spill every sad detail about the arguments I'd had with kids at school or with Dad when we didn't see eye to eye. After he listened, Doc never failed to reassure me the rain would pass and the sun would shine again. He'd been there to clean up scrapes or dry tears as often as Grandma and my parents. I used to think he did it for all the kids in Hush Briar until around age eight when Jeanine set me straight. She said Doc liked me best because my dad was a doctor, too. Maybe. He and Dad had become pretty good friends over the years.

After he turned off the music, Dad settled at the end of the table and pulled out my chair. We locked eyes for several seconds, and I saw the apology, as if he wanted to explain. In past years, I would offer a grim smile to let him know we were good, but today, my resolve lay smothered under a mountain of half-truths. I wasn't waiting another year to dig for details.

I jerked the chair from his grasp and pulled it out for myself. He hadn't come home until the afternoon spay, and then afterward, locked himself in his office, not even giving me a chance to ask about the animal attack.

I sat down and pulled the padlock out of my front pocket so it wouldn't jab me. And so it'd be handy if an opportunity presented itself. I slipped it under my leg. Jake sat next to me and Doc across from him, next to Grandma.

Dad said grace, but the tone of his voice sounded sad. His movements were tense, and he squinted like he had a terrible headache. His blond hair was a mess, and he'd failed to shave. Regret chiseled at my anger. This happened every year. I didn't want to be mad. I wanted Dad to understand me, spend time with me, talk to me about Mom. Not about school, or work, or our crazy wildlife projects. I fought the burn behind my eyes. I loved him, but this year, I wouldn't relent. I couldn't, or nothing would change.

I kept quiet, glancing off and on at Jake. His manners were impeccable as he conversed with Dad about the vet business and asked Grandma about her garden and volunteer work down at the mission. Come to find out, he volunteered for the Red Cross Disaster Relief and was planning to follow in Doc's footsteps to study pre-med at the University of Kentucky.

To avoid gagging over so much perfectionism, I passed a glare between Jake and Doc. "So, how long had you two been planning Jake's pre-college visit to Hush Briar? And how long is he staying?" I directed my last words at Jake as if they were a punch to his side. He ignored my insult by stuffing another jam-laced biscuit into his mouth.

Doc stared at me, weighing his words like always. "He's spending the summer here. Let's just say it's been a work in progress."

I picked up my glass and mumbled, "A top secret work in pro—"

"Ellie's attending the University of Kentucky to study medicine as well," Dad said, and I choked.

"Veterinary medicine." I coughed. "Not quite the same thing."

"Only a couple years difference in the amount of schooling."

“While studying entirely different species,” I swiped a napkin across my mouth and placed it in my lap next to the lock.

“Hey, don’t sell yourself short. Every human has two hundred and six bones—”

“Here we go.” Doc rolled his eyes and grinned at Jake.

Dad took a quick sip and set his glass down. “Animals are all different. Cows, two hundred seven. Cats, over two hundred and thirty. And dogs, three hundred and nineteen.”

Doc picked up his water. “But you don’t have all the variables of the human psyche.”

“Then you haven’t met Dorothy Simms. Isn’t that right, Ellie?”

I stuck my fork into a chicken thigh, tore off a chunk of meat, and shoved it in my mouth.

Dad went on. “She brought in an owlet this morning. Wanted to raise it. Keep it as a mouser for the barn.”

I jerked my gaze up. “Owls make good mousers.”

“But not good pets. How’d you get the owl from her anyway?”

I lifted a shoulder. “Told her you’d call the warden, and she’d be fined. Just like you did me.”

His forkful of greens paused midair. “Thought we were on the same page about that hawk.”

We were. I knew as well as Dad that the injured hawk I found a couple weeks ago needed to recover at the Raptor Rescue, but reality hadn’t kept me from wishing I could’ve held onto her for a few days.

Poor Simsy. She loved animals. Dad needed to realize other people had feelings even if he didn’t. “The owl was just an excuse to come over. Today’s probably hard on her, too.”

He swallowed the greens. “She has her boys.”

I lifted my chin in acknowledgement, but not wanting to lose sight of my goal, I slipped the padlock onto the table. “This came from Hansen’s. What happened over there?”

The room fell silent except for the tick of the mantle clock in the living room. Dad looked at the lock then my face. “Where did you get that?”

“Doesn’t matter. What did this?”

“We’ll talk about it later.”

“No.”

“Let me see that.” Doc stretched an arm across the table. I placed it in his hand, noting Jake’s curious stare.

Dad scowled. I scowled back. *Why did you bail on me today?* I willed him to read my mind.

“Same thieves, you think?”

Dad cleared his throat and looked at Doc. “Maybe. Hansen lost a couple cows.”

I sat up a little straighter, capitalizing on the opportunity. “You see any tracks from an animal that might have dragged them off?”

“No possible way for that to happen.” He said it with as much indifference as if I’d suggested a porcupine took them.

“I heard there might be some tracks out there. Bear or something.”

“Where’d you hear that?” Dad cast a glance at Grandma, who tightened her mouth and looked apologetic.

What sort of exchange was that? Had he told Grandma to keep an eye on me today? Was that why she’d called Doc, and then had Doc call JT?

I sat in the midst of a conspiratorial group, and still, I hated that I'd put Grandma in a tough spot. If she knew about my confrontation with Jaxon and Rodney, she'd take it personally, as if she'd somehow failed in the mothering department. Just like she did when I shot out Rodney's tires. She'd cried for two days, fearing I would go to jail because she hadn't talked better sense into me when it came to boys.

For Grandma's sake, I backed off. "Down at the mission yesterday when I was sorting through the shoes . . . someone mentioned bears were in the area. I assumed—"

"Not a bear. These footprints were a hoax. Checked them out myself." Dad's eyes drilled mine, a warning that if I didn't change the topic, I'd be asked to leave. But if the prints were hoaxed, what did it matter?

"Right," I relented. "A hoax. Makes sense." Except his reaction didn't make sense. And what about Jaxon's comment? *Your momma wasn't crazy. Go look at those tracks.*

Grandma stood, capturing everyone's attention. "I have apple turnovers. Who wants one?"

Doc pushed his chair back. "Always have room for your turnovers. I'll help with the coffee."

Jake grinned. "I think those turnovers might be why we came. He's been talking them up ever since she invited us out."

Dad chuckled as if all was right with the world and began peppering Jake with questions about hurricane relief efforts still happening around New Orleans.

Once dessert and coffee had been served, I took mine out on the front porch, allowing the screen door to slap shut behind me. Air was chillier than usual, but I'd take it over the heat and humidity soon to roll in. I sat on the porch swing, folded one leg up under me, and pushed with the other. A few frogs sang as the sun began to set on the opposite side of the house.

How would I get over to Hansen's without a confrontation? Could take the truck or four-wheeler, but Mr. Hansen wasn't likely to let me snoop around. Too far to walk. But I had to go, see what Jaxon was talking about and why Dad was acting so antagonistic. I didn't believe Mom was one of those Bigfoot researchers like some people had said. She never talked about mythological creatures or strayed away from practical science. But I also didn't know everything about her. She had secrets. Ones that Dad wouldn't share. Possibly ones that got her killed.

I took a sip of Dad's favorite instant decaf. Almost too gross to drink, but hot and totally smothered by apple-cinnamon heaven as I bit into Grandma's crispy pastry. The screen door opened. Jake slowly stuck out his head like I might snap it off if he weren't careful.

"Mind if I join you?"