

## Chapter ONE

Sheriff Annalee Crow walked towards the knot of flannel-clad men huddled together on the sagging porch attached to the front of Gunn's Pro Shop. "Good morning, gentlemen," she said, pausing at the foot of the warped wooden stairs. She used the word in the loosest sense; there was absolutely nothing gentle about these men.

The oldest man in the group spat a wad of tobacco juice in her direction, just missing her shoes. The others remained watchful and silent. Every face turned towards her was eerily similar — dark, suspicious eyes gazing at her from beneath lowered brows, acne-pitted skin stretched tight over prominent bones, a smattering of freckles and irregular moles, greasy black hair worn too long in the back. Like many of the other families living in and around the Deep who had scratched out a subsistence for the last two hundred-plus years, the Gunns' genealogy was as tangled and knotted as a discarded fishing net.

*Borderline, and in some cases not so borderline, incest leaves its mark generation after generation,* Annalee thought.

"Morning, Titus," she said to the tobacco spitter, being sure to turn slightly so a beam of sunlight lanced dazzling bright off the sheriff's badge pinned to the front of her brown uniform shirt. The display was a little reminder of her authority, not that she really expected them to respect her. The Gunns respected nothing and no one except their own insular clan. She rested a hand on the thick leather belt slung on her hips, her fingertips close to the grip of her service weapon, a .38 caliber Smith & Wesson that had belonged to her late father, Jefferson Crow, the former sheriff of Daredevil County.

"I heard tell some of your boys got into a scuffle over to Hallelujah Ridge last night." Annalee kept her tone pleasant despite the stony silence. "Something I ought to know about that? Your boys want to tell me their side of the story?"

Titus regarded her a long moment before answering in his high reedy voice, "Ain't nothing we can't handle." He paused, then added grudgingly, "Sheriff."

Annalee did not allow him to intimidate her. She hardened her expression, letting the façade of friendliness slip away. "No matter what you believe to the contrary, old man, this county isn't your private domain. God damn it, the law is the same for everybody, including you. I'm not going to tolerate any more violence between your family and the Skinners. Am I making myself rightly understood? Make no mistake, Titus — the next time your boys go looking for trouble, I'll be giving them all they can handle and then some."

A teenager with a wandering eye sneered at her, baring teeth already nicotine stained. "You? Give us trouble? That's pretty damned funny. Ain't no bitch alive gonna collar us big dogs. Ain't no way, no how."

Murmurs of assent from the others made her stiffen. They were like a pack of wild animals, feral and primed to attack any perceived weakness. In her experience, there was only one way to deal with their kind of antagonism: show no fear. She walked up the steps and stood on the porch facing them. Chips of "haint blue" paint from the flaking underside of the roof crunched underfoot. Her back already ached from her belt's weight, but she would not have traded her weapon, her back-up .22, speed-loaders, and radio for anything short of a Remington 870 shotgun, which she had left in the trunk of her patrol car.

"You want to try some shit with me, boy?" she asked, pitching her voice low and threatening. First rule of dealing with testosterone-poisoned idiots: never be shrill. Men

tuned out a female who sounded like a dentist's drill. "You got the balls, or ain't they dropped yet?"

He flushed and threw her an ugly look. Annalee tensed, anticipating a move, but one of his brothers — she thought it was Dewey — let out a bray of laughter and hit the teenager on the shoulder, almost knocking him sprawling. The other men chuckled while Titus cackled with unrestrained glee.

"Sweet Jesus weepin' on the Cross! Never mind my grandson; you got some balls on *you*, Miz Crow. Big shiny brass ones, if I ain't mistaken," Titus finally croaked, settling the feed store cap more firmly on his balding head.

Annalee made no reply. She kept her attention split, half on Titus, the other on the rest of his boys. If anybody wanted to take the situation to the next level, she was ready.

The smile suddenly vanished from Titus' face. He looked like an Old Testament prophet, filled with a wrathful, dead certain righteousness no power on Earth could shake. "Now I'll tell you something for free, Missy: stay out of the Gunns' business. Them Skinners ain't nothing but heathen peckerwoods and white trash, not worthy of your time."

He started to stomp around her on his bowed legs but stopped and peered into her face. His breath was foul. A thin line of tobacco juice glistened on the side of his bristly chin. "They do say it was curiosity killed the cat," Titus told her, his voice filled with a malevolence that crawled electric on her skin. He continued with a smirk, "Well, I don't know about that, but I'm pretty sure it was curiosity that killed the crow."

Annalee froze. She knew Titus was referring to her father. Jefferson Crow had been murdered six months ago, his body found dumped on a deer trail in the four-thousand square miles of old growth forest called Malinger Deep. The case remained open, the killer unknown; the investigation had gone cold due to a lack of evidence and an absence of leads. The only thing Annalee knew for certain was that her father had been investigating something in the Deep, some secret he had kept from her. Now Titus seemed to be hinting that the Gunns had been involved in the murder. A white-hot explosion of fury drew her lips back from her teeth in a snarl, but she retained enough presence of mind to not draw her weapon.

"If I find out you or any of yours killed my kin," Annalee said, forcing the words to come out controlled through her rage, "they'll pay, by God. They'll pay in full." At that moment, she was less a representative of law enforcement than a hill woman with blood-feud bred in her bones, taken in with her mother's milk, learned on her daddy's knee.

"Would that payment be by God's law or man's?" Not waiting for her reply, Titus touched a gnarled finger to the brim of his cap. "Good day, Sheriff. When you're next in Lingerville, do drop by the house and make your polites."

He swaggered his bowlegged way off the porch, followed by the rest of his boys. They piled into a pair of Superman blue pick-up trucks and tore off down the gravel road, kicking up a thick veil of orange, iron-tinged dust that hung in the air, scarcely stirred by the breeze whispering through the cottonwoods.

Annalee watched them go and blew out a breath, shaking her head. The swell of anger she felt was tinged with grief and the sadness that never completely went away. She missed her father every day and often found herself turning to ask him a question or make an observation, only to remember he was buried in the Holy Mount of Jesus Cemetery next to her mother.

As the engine noises lessened in the distance, she heard the hum of the Coca-Cola vending machine behind her, and a mockingbird perched on top of an electricity pole beside the shop, warbling an ever-shifting pattern of stolen songs. Annalee closed her eyes against a stab of loss, thinking about her father, the strongest and best man she had

ever known. *So many memories...* She had always been close to him, especially after her mama died.

The sudden, unexpected male voice that boomed behind her made Annalee nearly jump out of her skin.

"You get far with them assholes?" the man asked.

Annalee turned around to see her chief deputy smiling down at her from his superior height. Noah Whitlock was related to the Skinners on his mother's side; he had his maternal family's almond-shaped brown eyes, thick blond hair, and wide toothy smile.

Annalee uncurled her fingers from the gun butt, her heartbeat slowly returning to normal. "Do I need to put a bell on you?" she asked. "Jesus, Noah, learn to make some noise when you walk and quit that pussyfooting around. You scared the ever lovin' crap out of me."

"Sorry." Noah did not sound the least repentant. "So how'd it go with Titus?"

"Well, not quite as bad as a poke in the eye with a sharp stick, but it was a near thing," Annalee said. "You?"

"I had the talk with Uncle Ezra this morning. He's a lot more reasonable once he's had a few cups of coffee and some of Aunt Rachael's sawmill gravy."

"What'd he have to say?" Annalee knew Ezra Skinner's three oldest sons had gotten into a tussle with some of the Gunns at Hallelujah Ridge near Ogee. She had heard about the altercation from Junior Tishamingo, who lived near the site. Last night, he had called the office to complain about the noise, and a late-shift deputy was dispatched to deal with the nuisance. There were no serious injuries so no arrests had been made, but an official report had been filed. Annalee had come out to the Pro Shop that morning to issue a caution to the Gunns, while Noah had done the same for the Skinners.

"Luke, Matthew, and Mark are fine, just some bruises and a fat lip," Noah said. "It was the Gunns that started it, you know, but Uncle Ezra don't want to press no charges."

"Of course he doesn't," Annalee said in disgust. There was no question in her mind that the Gunns had started that fight. The whole family loved nothing better than stirring up trouble and strife, but it was damned difficult to do anything about it if nobody pressed charges against them. "How the hell am I supposed to keep the peace around here when them stubborn sons-of-bitches won't let me?"

"No idea. Don't ask me, Sheriff...I'm just the hired help around here."

She reached around and slapped his arm lightly in reproof. "You're more than that and you know it. What was the fight about, anyway?"

A corner of Noah's mouth quirked in a not-quite smile. "The usual crap teenage boys fight about when they're plumb full up with puberty and contrariness — somebody talks trash, somebody else takes offense, somebody stirs the pot, tempers run high, and blam! Next thing you know, there's fists flying, bloody noses, and bruises. If I was Junior Tishamingo last night, I'd've turned the hose on every one of them idjits." He hitched at his utility belt and changed the subject. "You want to help me eat some breakfast at Old Lady Magee's diner?"

"You didn't have sawmill gravy with Ezra?"

"He was feeling none too sociable," Noah replied mournfully.

"Yeah, sure, why not?" Annalee shrugged. "Old Lady Magee makes the best buttermilk biscuits in the county, bar none, and her nephew just made a fresh batch of sausages. Maybe she's got some of her special hashbrown casserole, too." Her mouth was beginning to water in anticipation of the kind of meal that would make her doctor purse his lips and deliver a lecture on cholesterol and saturated fat, had he known.

Noah grinned. "I live in hope, my hand to God."

The dry breeze freshened and caught a long strand of Annalee's mouse-brown hair, whipping it against her eyes, making them sting. Cursing under her breath, she re-pinned the wayward lock and wondered, not for the first time, if she ought to just get the whole mess cut off, but her father had often complimented her long hair, saying it made her resemble her mother. She had not had the length more than trimmed since she was seventeen, sitting in the kitchen before Mama's funeral, a towel tied around her neck and Great-Aunt Myrtle snipping at her hair while she tried not to cry. Another gust of wind drew her mind back to the present.

Sniffing the air, Annalee detected the faintest hint of ozone she reckoned was distant lightning. "Smells like rain's headed our way from over the hill," she commented.

"Also smells a lot like blood," Noah added under his breath. When Annalee glared at him, he shrugged in his turn. "The Skinners protect their own, Sheriff. You know that. They're not going to let you do it for them. You're not family."

"I know it all too well," Annalee said, "but the last thing we need is an all-out war."

There had been a Skinner in her class at the J.D. Knowles High School in Brightbrook, a shy girl whose thick mop of blond hair had hidden most of her face except her eyes, almond-shaped and brown as dying leaves in autumn. *What was her name?* Annalee asked herself, sliding behind the steering wheel of the patrol car. The Skinner girl had gotten teased by some of the meaner natured kids until a mysterious incident in the showers after gym class. Annalee couldn't recall the details — she had been taken ill that day and stayed at home — but whatever happened, no one bothered the Skinner girl again.

*Come to think of it, she thought as Noah settled into the passenger side seat, that girl was always hovering around the fringes. Never speaking, just watching, staying close. Always had her eyes on me. Didn't bother me much, though. Least she was quiet. Lou Ella. That's her name! No, no, not quite right. Close, but no cigar. Damn it, can't remember shit no more.*

She was about to ask Noah for the girl's name when she was interrupted by a squawk from the radio.

"Sheriff, we have a report of a D.B. at Yellow Jacket Pond." The call was slightly fuzzed by static, but Annalee recognized the husky, cigarette-laced voice of Minnie Lee Hawkins, the day-shift dispatcher. A mental image of its owner supplied the voice with cat's-eye glasses, floral smocks, and hennaed hair teased as high as gravity and industrial-strength hairspray allowed.

"Acknowledged, Dispatch," Noah replied into the handset. "This is Charlie One-Oh-One, we are underway. Has the M.E.'s office been notified?"

"Copy, Charlie One-Oh-One. M.E. and CSU are en route to scene."

"Copy, Dispatch. Out."

"So much for breakfast and probably lunch, too." Annalee sighed. Ignoring her stomach's growl, she started the engine and gave the car some gas, fighting the steering wheel's tendency to pull to the left. She had tried to requisition more four-wheel drives from the State, which would have been far more practical on the dirt trails that were masquerading as roads, but Daredevil County was barely a blip on the budgetary radar. The morons who monitored the bottom line had decided that one SUV was enough for her office — one SUV to be shared amongst herself and all her deputies in a backwoods county where paved roads were the exception rather than the rule. She snorted. It was far more important for the governor to have a fully tricked-out helicopter so he could ferry his hunting and fishing friends around in the season. *That asshole won't be getting my vote again, she decided.* Annalee viciously wrenched at the wheel, her wrists feeling

the strain as the patrol car bumped through a pothole that left her wincing in sympathy for the chassis. The Motor Pool boys were going to skin her alive, since they had recently realigned the damned thing.

Yellow Jacket Pond was about a half-mile from Hallelujah Ridge, which was in turn ten miles from Lingerville and Gunn's Pro Shop. The last three miles, Annalee was able to turn off the switchback gravel road onto the smooth blacktop of Route 82. She could have sworn the car sighed in relief. Beside her, Noah let go of the "oh-shit" strap and relaxed.

They were the first people at the scene apart from a red-faced teenager, Buddy Nowland, whose expression screamed guilt. It was not long before Annalee found a half-stick of short-fuse dynamite in a Ziploc bag under the thwart of an old rowboat, a fixture at the pond, abandoned years ago and available for anyone's use. The explosive, as well as the fish floating belly-up on the water's surface, told her what the idiot child had been doing.

In her opinion, it was unnecessary to call in the Bomb Squad. The dynamite was stable and the date stamped on the side indicated it had been manufactured in 2002. She would make sure the explosive was disposed of properly after she finished her business here.

"Don't you know what kind of trouble you can get into with that stuff?" Annalee asked, noting the cell phone sticking out of Buddy's shirt pocket — she supposed it was the source of the 911 call.

Turning her head briefly, she watched Noah wade out into the pond to get a look at the naked body floating facedown among the dead fish and water weeds. The corpse's pallid skin had a definite greenish tinge to it. Annalee hoped Noah had the sense not to disturb the floater if it was too ripe. She did not want to have to drag the pond for internal organs if the body burst, and besides, a dismembered corpse would tick off the county medical examiner no end.

"Damn it, Buddy, you could get classified as a terrorist suspect!" Annalee went on.

"It was just a little fun, Sheriff," Buddy said, cringing.

She resisted the impulse to slap the boy upside that thick-as-a-brick head and raise a knot a calf could suck on. He was seventeen years old and thought he was immortal. Cause and effect were foreign concepts to a hormone-addled mind. Annalee shuddered to think what could have happened. *The velocity of detonation is greater than a thousand yards per second, she thought, and he'd have been right on top of the explosion, right at Ground Zero. Christ! We'd have been taking two dead bodies out of that pond, one in pieces you could fit in a matchbox. Closed casket funeral for sure, damn it.*

"Dynamiting fish is illegal, Buddy," she said, summoning her most authoritative tone. "Possessing dynamite without a license is very illegal. I could call the Feds and they'd throw your sorry ass in prison. Do you want your poor mama to have to visit you in Edgewater Correctional? Maybe them Federal boys or Homeland Security decide you're a terrorist and you get sent to Guantanamo Bay, which ain't no vacation spot, believe me. You ain't gonna be fishing out there in Cuba, son. That there's stone-cold hard time. You want to squat in a cell with terrorists for five years or better, no contact with family? No? Then tell me, where'd the explosives come from? Who gave the dynamite to you? Where did you buy it?"

He still looked sullen. Annalee prodded him with a finger. "Go on, son. Tell the truth and shame the devil. That's the only thing you can do. The water in Shit Creek's rising and you're about over your head."

Buddy said nothing. He crossed his arms over his chest and shuffled his feet.

She tried again. "Somebody sell the stuff to you? One of them illegal fireworks vendors, maybe? Give me a name, a location. I give you my word the D.A. will grant you immunity from prosecution in exchange for your testimony." She waited for an answer. It was after July Fourth but there were fireworks sellers who slipped over the state line almost every weekend in summer, hawking their cheap, volatile, overseas-manufactured merchandise at flea markets, gun shows, and other places. Sometimes they had dynamite, too, obtainable if one knew the right questions to ask and had the money to pay for it.

"Not from a fireworks guy. Got the stuff from Papaw," Buddy finally mumbled.

Annalee hid her surprise. Obadiah Nowland was a stubborn old coot and a hell of a character, a dirt farming survivalist who probably had enough weapons cached in his private concrete bunker to subdue a small Latin American dictatorship. However, he was also a die-hard advocate of gun responsibility. Obadiah would have never given dynamite to an inexperienced youngster, especially his only grandson, on whom he doted.

"You mean you took it without your Grandpa Nowland's permission," Annalee stated flatly. It was the only explanation that made sense.

Buddy's flush deepened. "Don't tell on me," he whined. "Daddy'll have a cow."

"And Grandpa Nowland will probably have triplets, one after the other." Annalee turned when she heard a sloshing sound. Noah was wading back to shore without the body in tow. His expression was grim. She called out to him, "Hey, what's the news, Deputy? Got an I.D. on the D.B.?"

Noah did not answer at once but kept walking toward her. He had taken off his utility belt, shoes, and socks prior to wading into the pond; his tan uniform trousers were wet to mid-thigh and sticking to his legs. He brushed past a clump of sweet flags growing in a fringe near the pond's edge, his bare feet squelching through the wet clay mud. The sun picked out reddish highlights in his blond hair but also cast his eyes into shadow. An oddity of the light hollowed his cheeks in deepest shade as well, lending his face a disquieting skull-like aspect.

Premonition made the skin on the back of her neck prickle. *Something wicked this way comes.* Annalee listened to her instincts. She said to Buddy, "Go sit in the patrol car, son." The boy opened his mouth, and she added quickly, "Don't make me tell you twice."

Once Buddy was safely in the backseat of the patrol car, out of possible harm's way, Annalee shut the door and switched her attention to Noah. "Well? Who is it?" Her gut clenched in anticipation of bad news.

"It's Reverend Lassiter."

"Oh, God save us." Annalee pushed her bangs back from her sweaty forehead and wished she had not gotten out of bed that morning. The fallout from this was going to be nasty; she could feel it in her bones. "That's all we need. You know, I really hoped he'd run off to Tijuana with the offering money and the church secretary. Please tell me he got drunk, accidentally fell in the pond, and drowned."

"No such luck." Noah's frown deepened. "He was shot in the throat."