

Chapter One

Hannah Sterling

November 1972

A summons to the principal's office had the same effect on me at twenty-seven as it did when I was seven, and seventeen. Giant bass drums struck and rumbled my insides. Crashing cymbals raced my heart—all as loud and out of step as our high school marching band's rehearsals for the Christmas parade.

I'd grabbed my bag of sophomore essays to grade over the Thanksgiving weekend, desperately hoping to get an early start up the mountain to Aunt Lavinia's, when the order to report to the office crackled over the loudspeaker.

Busses pulled from the school parking lot, the long hand of the clock ticked past four, and all the while the school secretary drummed her nails, eager to leave. At last the principal's door opened. Out strode a grim-faced Mrs. Whitmeyer, mother of Trudy Whitmeyer, the last tenth grade student crushed by my short-tempered venom, and the one I especially regretted humiliating. Mrs. Whitmeyer swept past, ignoring my half smile. I swallowed cardboard.

"Miss Sterling, come in." Mr. Stone, six feet two inches tall, with broad linebacker shoulders that filled his office doorway, dwarfed me as I squeezed past. "Take a seat."

Grown women should not be terrified by school principals. . . . Grown women should not be terrified by school principals. . . . Grown women should—

"You saw Mrs. Whitmeyer."

“Yes. Mr. Stone, I’ll apologize—”

“She’s not the first.” He sat on the front of his desk, two feet from me, arms crossed. “We’ve talked about this before. You assured me you’d get it under control. This isn’t working, Hannah.”

At least he’s still calling me Hannah. “I’m sorry, Mr. Stone. I know I shouldn’t have snapped at Trudy—”

“Or Susan Perry or Mark Granger—all advanced placement students, none of whom are traditionally discipline problems. And that’s just this week—this short week.”

“I know,” I acknowledged.

“If it had happened once, I’d say forget it. Twice? Apologize. But this snapping and ridiculing has gotten to be an ugly habit, not good for the students—not the ones on the receiving end and not those who witness it. I don’t know what’s going on, but it’s got to stop.”

I bit my lip. *I’m turning into my mother—the last thing on God’s green earth I want.* “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again. I promise.”

“I’m not convinced that’s a promise you can keep.”

“I can. I—”

“Hannah, stop.” He walked around his desk and took a seat, then leaned back, considering. “Last year you were voted Forsyth County’s most innovative teacher.”

I moistened my lips. “That meant a great deal to me—truly.” I’d poured out my heart for the kids and parents and they’d responded. I felt wanted, appreciated.

“I know it did.” He softened. “To all of us. But you’ve got to see that something’s changed.”

“I’ll get past it,” I promised, trying to assert confidence I didn’t feel. “By Monday I’ll—”

“Not by Monday. Take some time.”

“I don’t need time. I don’t want time.” The drums in my stomach began to rumble again.

“The day after your mother’s death, you walked back into the classroom.”

“Her funeral wasn’t until the weekend. I didn’t need—”

“Everybody needs time when they lose a parent.”

How could I lose a parent I never had? “We weren’t close.” How many times do I have to explain that?

“You’ve not dealt with it.”

“I don’t—”

“Go home, Hannah. Take some time and figure this out. Grieve. Grief is nothing to be ashamed of. It takes time to process, to figure how to move on. Life goes on—in a different way.”

I’m not grieving because she died. If I’m grieving at all it’s because of what never was—what can never be changed now, what wouldn’t have changed if she’d lived another fifty years.

“I’ll arrange for a long-term substitute.”

“A long-term—No, please, Mr. Stone, I’ll be fine by Monday.”

“Take until the first of the year, then contact me. We’ll talk.”

“The first of the year?” The cymbals crashed and fell to the floor three seconds before my frustration and voice rose. “I don’t need a month—”

“I don’t know what you need, Hannah, but find out. And when you do, when you find again the Hannah Sterling, teacher extraordinaire, who taught here last year, we’ll be glad to have you back.”

It was well past midnight when Aunt Lavinia put the teakettle on for the third time and wrapped her favorite burnt orange and earth brown afghan around my shoulders. “Maybe he’s right. Maybe you do need some time away. That doesn’t mean you have to take it here, sweetie. A trip, somewhere completely different—a vacation, a fresh view—might be just what the doctor ordered.”

“A fresh view.” I pulled the afghan closer, battling irritability. “How can I see anything new if I can’t sort my past?”

“There’s nothing to sort. She’s gone. She made your life—and Joe’s—miserable. You did everything you could to please her from the time you could walk, but it was never enough. Let her go, Hannah, and move on. Don’t let her demons wreck your life.”

“Daddy always said it was the war. Something happened to her and her family during the war, but he’d never tell me what.”

“I don’t know that he knew.”

“He married her in Germany. He must have known something.”

Aunt Lavinia stiffened, like she always did when talking about Mama.

“You were his favorite sister,” I accused. “If he’d told anybody he’d have—”

“As much as it may surprise you, he didn’t confide everything to me. I doubt he knew all of your mother’s past. She certainly never told me.” She poured the steaming water over fresh tea bags. “Ward Beecham’s still trying to get in touch with you. He said you didn’t return his phone call. He’s got to read the will, you know.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

She raised her brows.

“I know. I’ll call him. I just couldn’t stay here after the funeral. And I already know what it says. There’s nothing but the house and land.”

“Well, you’ll have to go see him. It’s his obligation to finalize things, and you need to do that before you can sell the house.”

“Next week.”

“Why your mother used him and not Red Skylar, I’ll never know. Red’s family’s been part of Spring Mountain forever.”

“She probably just liked breaking the mold—or not having an attorney so eager to share his clients’ business.”

Aunt Lavinia ignored me. “Did I tell you that Ernest Ford agreed to take the house on multiple listing? He said he might be able to sell it without you fixing anything up, but you’ll have to clear it out. I talked to Clyde about that. He’s between jobs now. If you let him sell the contents, that would cover his labor. There’s not much there worth anything.”

“I don’t want anything.”

She pushed the cream pitcher my way. “Do you want me to confirm it with Clyde? It’s the quickest way.”

“Sure.” I dropped my spoon to the saucer, startling us both with the clatter.

“We can tell him at dinner tomorrow. He’s got no family, so I invited him and Norma. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Of course not, as long as they don’t ask me how I’m doing since Mama died or how my job’s going or anything personal.” Aunt Lavinia regularly invited her best friend, Norma Mosely, and half the kinless in her church for holiday meals. By tomorrow there would be at least seven more. There was nothing I could do to change that, but I didn’t have to like it.

Aunt Lavinia ignored my sarcasm. “I think Clyde might be a little sweet on you.”

“You’ve been saying that since I was ten.”

“It’s still true. It wouldn’t take much encouragement on your part to light that fire.”

I rolled my eyes. “Please, Aunt Lavinia.”

Aunt Lavinia ignored me and pried the teacup from my fingers. “Now, you’d best get to bed. I’d like to keep my good china in one piece, and I’ve got a date with a turkey at half past five.”

I’d hidden the windup alarm clock in a bureau drawer between bed linens so I couldn’t hear it tick, but that meant the alarm was just as useless. Still, the aromas of roasting rosemary-stuffed turkey and cranberries and apples simmering in

cinnamon and cloves made their way up the stairs, tickling my nose beneath a mountain of quilts, drawing my feet to the bedside rag rug. *I should have been downstairs and helping two hours ago.*

The back porch door slammed, the kitchen door opened, and a “Yoo-hoo!” rang through the house. *Norma, with three pies and a bridal congealed salad. Aunt Lavinia won’t miss me.*

Still, I raced through my hair and makeup, zipped my favorite gray wool skirt, and pulled on a rose knit sweater set and the pearls Daddy’d given me for my sixteenth birthday—the only thing I’d kept to remember him by. Aunt Lavinia believed in dressing for Thanksgiving dinner. It was one of the things I’d always groaned over as a child, but had secretly appreciated. It made the day seem more special.

Another favorite pastime was spying on my aunt whenever she let me sleep over. Anytime things got too tense or loud or silent at home, Aunt Lavinia gave me sanctuary. I must have been five or six when I discovered I could peek through the coarsely cut circle in the floor, the one the black stovepipe shot through to reach the roof. It heated the upstairs bedroom just enough to keep icicles at bay. If I caught the right angle, I could watch Aunt Lavinia working in the kitchen, and learn more than my share of gossip.

Twenty-seven was too old to be eavesdropping, but when Norma hissed, “Why don’t you tell her? She’s a right to know,” my ears perked. I sat cross-legged on the floor and squinted until I saw Aunt Lavinia shushing her. But Norma protested, “She can’t hear me; she’s not even up yet. I’m just saying—”

“I know what you’re saying, but it would only bring her more grief. She’s had a lifetime of that woman’s cold heart. No matter how bad things were between Joe and Lieselotte, he was a good provider and a good father and I’m not about to shame him now.”

“He’s been dead eleven years. There’s no shame for him—only credit due. I don’t know another man who’d do what he did for that woman.”

“It would break her heart. I won’t do it.”

“What if she finds something telling in the house? There’s bound to be something from Lieselotte’s past.” Norma snapped a dishtowel open and plucked a pot from the drainer. “That could open up a whole new can of worms, and when she finds out you knew and never told her . . .”

“Clyde Dillard’s going to clean out the house, burn everything he can’t sell. That’ll be the end of it.”

“She’s not going through it herself? Not even curious?” Norma sniffed. “I don’t know. It seems like an awfully big gamble. All it takes is a little math.”

Thirteen squeezed around Aunt Lavinia’s table built for eight. Despite the cheerful banter, I barely touched her lavish Thanksgiving dinner. Norma teased that I seemed off my feed. I stared back, doing my best to bite my tongue. She flushed and turned away. I wouldn’t confess that I’d eavesdropped, but I couldn’t pretend what they’d said made no difference.

After the meal, Aunt Lavinia sliced the pumpkin pies. I cut the mincemeat and apple. Clyde grabbed two half gallons of ice cream from the freezer, and Norma carried trays into the dining room.

“I haven’t eaten this much since last Thanksgiving at your table, Mrs. Mayfield.” Clyde heaped dollops of vanilla ice cream over too-big slices of pie. “I’m much obliged.”

“We love having you, Clyde. You and that strong arm just keep dipping that vanilla.”

“Yes, ma’am. And I’ll get busy over to the house first thing tomorrow. I know you want to get it on the market before Christmas.” He glanced at me, his face as red as the cranberry chutney.

“That’ll be wonderful.” Aunt Lavinia patted his shoulder. “The sooner, the better.”

“About that . . .” I wiped the stickiness of the last pie slice on a tea towel. “Let’s hold off on clearing out the house. I want to think about it some more.”

Aunt Lavinia straightened, and from the corner of my eye I caught Norma’s sideways glance as she set down the empty pie tray.

“But, honey, we settled that last night. Clyde has some free time now. And, just think, if you could sell the house before the end of the year, you’d have all that money to do whatever you want. There’s no need to wait.” Aunt Lavinia spoke a little too brightly.

“You mean, in case the school won’t take me back?”

“I didn’t mean that. Of course they’ll take you back. They’re lucky to have you. But, Hannah, honey, you don’t want that old house. It’s best to let it go.”

“Whose best? Yours? Mine? My dead parents’?”

Aunt Lavinia’s color rose and she smiled, flustered, at Clyde, who glanced uncertainly between the two of us.

Aunt Lavinia didn’t deserve that after how good she’d been to me, all my life. But I couldn’t get past the idea that she knew something about Mama and Daddy and hadn’t told me—something that even Norma knew and thought might be important. If there was something in the house that might help me reconcile my relationship with my dead mother or at least help me understand her and move forward, that would be worth any amount of embarrassment.

I picked up Norma’s second tray and headed for the dining room. “I want to go through the house on my own, Clyde. I’ll let you know soon what I want to do about the contents—but it won’t be tomorrow.”

The company gone and the dishes finished, Aunt Lavinia shoved the clean turkey roaster to the back of the pantry for another year and turned on me. “I don’t understand you. You wanted nothing to do with that old house. You couldn’t wait to get away after high school, and you hated coming back last summer to nurse your mother. Have you forgotten?”

“It was just after she died in her room—right there—that I didn’t want to go back.” I spread the fourth wet tea towel on the rack to dry. “I couldn’t go back.

But now, before I let it go forever, I'm thinking I should go through things—things Mama never let me see. No telling what I'll find.”

“Wallowing in that old house will just make you miserable.

Couldn't Aunt Lavinia understand that I needed Mama—no matter that she hadn't needed, maybe hadn't even wanted me? “You sound like one of your soap operas.”

“I'd arranged everything—just like you asked me to, let me remind you. You—”

“I need some time, Aunt Lavinia. My career as a teacher is over if I don't get my act together. And I can't get on with my future if I don't settle things with Mama—once and for all. Running away from home resolved nothing. Coming back to nurse her last summer didn't redeem our years of misery. She barely spoke to me the whole time, except to say things out of her head. Crazy, raving things as if she was fighting someone, and other times whispering and then pleading, begging for something not to happen. Once she screamed, and I had no idea what any of it meant. All things that made absolutely no sense, at least as far as anything I ever knew about her. But that's it. I never knew her, not really. Going through her things is the only thing I haven't tried. I'm going to live in the house—alone.”

“Please don't do this to yourself. Let God close that door.”

“God never opened the door, Aunt Lavina. I don't see what reason He'd have to close it.”

“Leave it alone, Hannah. You don't want to dig up things that can hurt you.”

“What, you believe in ghosts now?”

“There are ghosts and then there are ghosts.” She peered at me over her glasses.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means leave the past alone. What you don’t know can’t haunt you.”

“Then tell me. What is it you and Norma were talking about this morning—‘do the math,’ or whatever?”

Aunt Lavina paled and turned grim in one go. “Still listening at keyholes?” she quipped defensively. “I’d have thought you’d outgrown that.”

I stared her down.

Aunt Lavinia pulled off her dirty bib apron and tossed it toward the washer, then pushed her fists into her hips. “I will say that I did not always treat your mother as kindly as I could have . . . as I should have. But she didn’t do right by you or your daddy from the get-go. Joe would tell you to let sleeping dogs lie and get on with your life. Even Lieselotte would have wanted that.”

“What ‘math’?”

But Aunt Lavinia simply closed her eyes, threw up her hand, and headed for the door.

“Why did they move to the mountain in the first place?”

She stopped, shook her head, as if I’d asked a wearisome question, but turned to face me. “You know that Henry and I settled here because his family was here. What you probably don’t know is that he’d joined up out in Oklahoma because he was going to college out there. That’s why he and Joe ended up in the same unit

once the war started. Henry and I met through Joe—you know that. When Joe came back from Germany there was just no reason for him to stay in Oklahoma.”

“But all your family was there—all Daddy’s. I never understood why Mama and Daddy followed you out here.”

Aunt Lavinia wouldn’t meet my eye. “Joe and I always got along—the closest of the siblings, and I guess he thought your mama might be more accepted here than out there where so many families had lost boys from their unit.”

“Why wouldn’t people accept Mama in Oklahoma?”

Aunt Lavinia sighed again, this time exasperated. “The war changed the way people treated foreigners. The war changed everything.”

“I know about the U.S. internment camps during the war. But the war was over by the time she got here, and it’s not like she was German or Japanese. She was Austrian. They were victims of the war—people we fought to liberate.”

“So she said.”

“What? You think Mama wasn’t Austrian? C’mon, Aunt Lavinia. She’d have no reason to lie about that. And she certainly sounded Austrian.”

But Aunt Lavinia had turned again and taken off, down the hallway for her favorite fireside chair and footstool.

“This isn’t about me,” She pulled off her shoes, rubbed her arches, and lifted her feet to the ottoman. “It was a different time, and you’re too young to understand.” She massaged her temples, as if to relieve an ache lodged there.

“Leave sleeping dogs lie, Hannah. That’s all I’m going to say.”

“But what if I find something that tells me who my mother was—I mean, who she was really?”

“I don’t believe anything or anyone could explain that woman.”

“Nobody’s born so closed off, Aunt Lavinia. I need to know if that was her own warped nature or if something happened to her. . . or if it was because of me.” That confession cost me everything, though I turned away, fussing with the afghan on the sofa, so Aunt Lavinia could not read my face.

“It wasn’t you, sweetie.” She shook her head. “What if you find it was because of something she did? Something neither she nor you can ever reconcile? A lot of bad things went on in the war. You just never know. Besides, she couldn’t love herself; how could she love another person?”

I sat heavily on the sofa, swinging my legs up to lie down and stare at the ceiling. “She never loved Daddy; that’s for certain. I hated that—for both of them. I think part of him wanted to love her, but he wasn’t good at it. He could be soft with me but awfully hard on her. But she must have felt something for him, sometime. They married. They had me.” I couldn’t keep the hope from my voice, or my glance from her eyes, just in case she knew something, anything.

But Aunt Lavinia closed her eyes and turned away. “I don’t believe your mother ever loved another soul.”