

CHAPTER ONE

AND SO, IT BEGINS ...

If you walk up Witch hill, which is steep and twisted all the way through, you will come to the top of an old apple orchard. It was once very beautiful, well cared for, full of life and loved as most beautiful things are; but the orchard has been sold to some not-so-nice people.

Now the trees grow wild and gnarled. Old apples lie rotting and abandoned by mice and people alike at their twisted bases and there are plenty of weeds to dig in to. It is very windy on top of the hill and you must walk past the forest of the million eyes. Past that there are two graveyards--one is for young heroes and a much older graveyard next to it is for old souls. There is a path from there that leads through the orchards and you can walk into the middle and look way out over the hill.

Don't go too far or you will come upon the old mad scientist's house. It lay abandoned for years, except for the rows of cages in the back. Stay clear of that. If you keep going, and finish the circle, you will come to my house. This is where our story begins. My family calls it the Westie Ranch.

I am the only Westie there right now, but that's the way I like it. Other dogs are so distracting--sniffing, scratching, growling, peeing on your stuff. I am the only one here who does that. I let the neighbors' dogs know it too--hooligans all.

The worst is that awful orange tabby cat from next door. He doesn't care. Every night at 4:30 in the morning, he comes to my house and pees on the doorstep. He knows I won't annihilate him because my family is sleeping and I

need to keep them happy and safe. That's what Ethan would call an "opportunist." It's a good human word.

Ethan is my best friend. He takes me on walks and feeds me the most. He has some older folks who watch over him and I am responsible for them too; but I mostly hang out with him. We make a great team. He likes to be on the computer all day and half the night and it seems to annoy his parents a bit, but I don't mind. I like it when they are in the same room together and I can watch over them all.

In any case, our story starts on what seemed like any ordinary day. It was November, and the leaves were very bright because of the drought. Fiery colors--orange, yellows and reds framed the white fall sky. The outside animals were scurrying around trying to gather up stores for the coming cold days. There was much buzz about whether the winter would be dry too. I think we were all hoping for snow.

I was hanging by a leaf pile eyeing some annoying chipmunks when Ethan came crashing out of the house. He had a new toy in his hand. He called it a "drone." He was always very excited about his drones and liked to tinker with them for hours on end. I don't mind because I like to sit at his feet by his workbench and wait for any crumbs that might drop from his snacks. I had just enough time to think about popcorn, one of my favorite snacks, when he came running past me, towards the orchard near our house.

"Gus, come on!" He called, running by me in a fury.

"I'm on duty!" I thought and raced to catch up.

We ran up the hill and through some tangled brush, across five rows of apple trees, into the center of one of the orchards. I had to dodge a bit as he kicked old apples in all directions.

Clonk! One landed right on my head but Ethan didn't notice. He was too excited. I was struggling to keep up. We were almost at the spot. There was a clearing where Ethan liked to fly some of his toys from. This drone was quite large, to me anyway. Its wires dangled precariously and it had an odd metallic smell. I tended to steer clear.

"It's got a camera on it!" said Ethan, excitedly. "Check this out Gus. I will be able to see all over the place, across the orchards and beyond. It even has night vision!"

I growled a little to show my hesitant approval. He took the control panel in both his hands and *ZIPPPP!* Up went his toy into the pale autumn sky. He had a phone dangling from around his neck. He would check it periodically and whoop it up. Ethan seemed pretty happy about it; and that made me happy.

"See," he said swapping hands to the control panel. I need to find a way to mount the screen on the control panel so I don't have to ..."

Crash! There was a loud noise of collision as the drone nosedived from the sky. I craned my neck up and was just able to make out a large black shadow that dipped and cried out loudly. It made a wide circle in the air above us. I knew immediately: It was a hawk. Those birds were the bane of my existence. They flew above our yard, always trying to get at our chickens. This one was bigger than the scrawny hawks that I usually saw. I squinted at the sky. It called again. I could just make out a tinkling of bells.

Then the creature circled and landed on the shoulder of a girl human about one hundred paces away from us. She looked over at us then began walking quickly to where we were. I bristled. I could make out her long scruffy hair under a floppy cap. She had on torn leggings and a canvas jacket.

“Hey! I am so sorry! Is your drone okay?” She stopped a few feet ahead of us.

“Yeah. I think so.” Ethan looked down at the fallen beast. Wires and electronic appendages flopped haphazardly on the scratchy earth. He snapped a couple of pieces back together.

Why wasn't he mad at her? I thought. I would get yelled at for sure if I ate one of his toys. I moved in closer, unsure of how I was going to protect him.

“Is that your dog? He is super cute!” I watched her approach and stop a couple of feet in front of us. I blinked my eyes and could not believe it. She was carrying a hawk!

“I’m Eva and this is my bird, Vader.” I eyed the beast reluctantly. Ethan smiled. The large predator sat comfortably on her forearm preening, gloating.

He was pretty amazing: Large and feathered, with a light head and large clawed feet. His eyes were gold and riveting and there were bells tied to his toes. He looked at me with suspicion. I held my ground. The girl had a big leather glove on. She tossed a cloth on her shoulder and he climbed up. Gently, she put a small hood over his head.

Harrumph, Ethan wouldn't dare do that to me ... I mused, my confidence restored.

“I am Ethan O’Connor and this is Gus,” he said, motioning me towards him.

“Wow, that is some bird! Do you live around here?”

“Thanks! Yes, we just moved in.” The wind whistled and she pushed a curl of golden hair behind her ear.

“Wow! Did you move next door to me? I am at 3 Cobblestone Lane.”

“I am at 5! Yes, nice to meet you neighbor!” She leaned in to shake his hand.

“Err, do you go to Hamilton Middle School?” Ethan looked down at his feet and kicked an apple.

“Yes, I just transferred there last month. Seems okay so far but I don’t know anyone yet.”

“Yeah, it’s okay. I can introduce you around ... I never met anyone who had a hawk before!”

“Well, I never met anyone with a drone, so it’s even!” She pulled a dead mouse out of a bag on her side and gave it to the hawk, who gobbled it in one bite.

Ethan’s eyes widened but I could tell he was being his usual casual, cool self.

“I have got to head back and put him away. We hunted enough today.”

“Would you like to come to my house and see my other drones? I probably got some cool footage of the crash.”

“Yeah, that sounds great! Let me drop off Vader. I will meet you there in ten.”

Ethan turned and headed back to the house. The bell of the old church in the town square tolled in the distance. We trod methodically between the rows of apple trees. I knew he was pleased because he was singing with his mouth closed as we went. I guess if Eva was his new friend, then she was mine as well. I wasn't too sure about that bird, but time would tell.