

Chapter 1

Bow Creek, North Carolina, 1990

How could he ever tell his wife about Molly? The day God took the matter out of David Wilder's hands began as a chill November morning in the Blue Ridge. By afternoon it had warmed into a rare Indian summer. Standing in hip boots in the rushing Quanasee River, David felt his soul magnify, breaking loose from its familiar constriction. An unfamiliar lightness, something near to ecstasy, lifted him as he floated a stonefly nymph into a quiet eddy where a trout might lurk. The fish didn't matter as much as the wide space of peace, the rustling of the water, the drifting scent of pine and balsam, the rising mist from the autumn hills.

The mystics of old took to the mountains to meditate, and he felt it was in the swirling mists of the mountains that he could feel at one with nature, at one with God. The mountains had helped him keep his faith, in spite of everything.

The moment evaporated in guilt as his mind returned to Tallulah. He loved these delicious hours out here, alone, with

nothing to do but fish. Not that he didn't love his wife, God knew he did. But day in and day out she was there, and when he wasn't with her, he had the flock, always the flock, and now, he had the letter.

Should he have mentioned the letter to Lu? The time never seemed to be right. Lately, after her last radiation treatment in Asheville, someone else was always around, or she felt weak, or she was enjoying a TV show, and he didn't want to spoil her enjoyment . . . or . . . who was he kidding? *He didn't want her to know about Molly.* It was all so long ago. And he thought he had buried that past disaster. Seeing Molly would anguish him, and heaven only knew what Lu would think. She was so quiet, so contained, so gentle. She bore the illness she didn't deserve stoically, not wanting to give him cause for worry. Sometimes he felt as if he'd never really known her.

The lure bobbed on the surface of the Quanasee. The river swirled and gushed, flowing along knee-deep before it tore into foam over rocks further downstream.

The rod bowed; at the tug, David stepped back and let the line out, watching the arc of the rod. He waded downstream, working the fish, and then the trout, a fierce big one, circled back within vision.

His momentary peace was shattered by a hollow hoot and a piping voice from upstream. David guessed a couple of teenagers were fooling around on the rocks. Then a sudden tug on his line nearly pulled the rod out of his hand. He gripped the rod, but the fish lunged downstream. The line went slack.

David reeled in the line and waded back to the bank, cursing silently. He'd let himself be distracted by those kids. Tourists, flatlanders—more and more of them, every year. But he'd been

one of them, once upon a time, a million years ago in a land called Hana Lee.

He settled his rod on the bank, pulled a yellow rope out of the river, and twisted a can of Budweiser from the six-pack on the end. He popped the top and took a long draw. Tallulah, raised Baptist, had been surprised to find a preacher who drank beer right out in the open, neither teetotaler nor closet drunk.

She'd shooed him out of the house today, told him she'd be fine with Nell to keep her company. He hadn't taken a day off like this since the surgery. How could he tell her about the letter? She needed peace in order to heal.

He looked at his reflection in the quiet pool along the bank and felt older than forty-six; both his beard and his dark brown thatch of hair were shot through with gray.

A scream again. Those kids. Then the scream became louder, shriller, more urgent. "Help!" A high girl's voice. "Help! Is anybody there?"

Heart pounding, David jumped up from the bank. That wasn't any ordinary scream, and that voice sounded familiar. One of his church teens? "Here!" he called. "Where are you?" Sound in the hills could ricochet from the rocks.

"Here, here!" Something was desperately wrong.

Now he pegged it as upstream. He sprang to his feet, hustled to the truck, and grabbed a length of sturdy rope from his tool locker. The loop over his shoulder, he raced along the path, vaulting a fallen tree and plunging through rhododendron thickets.

A girl in wet-bottomed jeans and a sweatshirt met him, eyes wide. "Oh, Uncle David. Thank God," she gasped. "Come quick. Please."

What was Tallulah's niece doing out here? "What happened, Clover?"

“Come on, *please*.” She hurried ahead, words tumbling out. “Crossing the river up there at the flat rocks. Looked easy. Foot slid—right out from under him—he went in.”

“In the water? Who is it?”

She didn’t tell him. “He grabbed—tree.” She skidded on wet leaves and steadied herself. “Don’t know how long—he can hang on.”

David knew the drop was about twelve feet or so, not too bad, but the water was icy and jagged rocks lurked beneath the black water of the pool below. He gave a silent prayer for skill and strength, for courage, and for Riley Clyde’s safety.

Panting, they climbed the steep path to the top of the falls, dodging low-hanging rhododendron and mountain laurel, churning through the thick layer of forest floor. From the highway that ran near the creek, a truck sputtered and a car whined, making their way up the mountain road.

David and Clover reached the clearing. Here, the river and the big flat rocks looked inviting and safe—a dangerous illusion. And there was the big fallen trunk of an oak, its roots clinging tenuously to the opposite bank, for the bank had washed away near the roots. The boy, soaked to the skin, his wet hair matted to his head, was hanging onto a limb and trying to get a foothold on the tree itself so he could work his way back to the bank.

The fallen oak swayed with his weight. The boy was Riley Clyde Summers, a seventeen-year-old troublemaker that Clover’s grandmother wouldn’t like her keeping company with. She’d just turned fifteen.

“Hang on, Riley!” he yelled.

One of the boy’s hands slipped; he grabbed a curving branch. He gritted his teeth, trying not to show fright. But his wide eyes looked desperate.

David weighed his options. He could wade out among the slippery rocks himself and extend a hand, or throw a rope. But one false move, one panicky move, and they might both go over. Riley Clyde was closer to the opposite bank. David could make his way across the stream and try to reach him from there. Going for ranger rescue wasn't an option. The tree looked too treacherous. Any moment it might tear loose and plunge below, taking the boy with it.

David would be putting himself in danger, and his wife needed him now more than ever. But he would never forgive himself if he made the safer choice and the boy died. That would be another death on his conscience.

"I'm heading upstream where there's a shallower point to ford," he told the girl. "Then I'm going back to him. You stay here and keep his spirits up." He looked back at her. "Stay calm and you'll help him more."

"R.C.," he heard her call over the rushing water. "Hold tight. He's going across to help you."

David strode uphill about a hundred feet to a point where, in the fading orange late-afternoon light, he could see pebbles on the sandy bottom. He waded across and pushed his way through dried brier canes and underbrush, slogging as fast as he could with the cumbersome boots.

Finally, he emerged at the point where the tree had fallen. Riley Clyde was trying to swing one leg over and haul himself up on top of the log.

"Don't move," David called. "You're rocking the tree."

With each sway of the tree a little more dirt fell from the roots, loosening a shower of rocks and pebbles into the water below.

"I can get it," the boy said. He swung the leg again. The tree creaked ominously.

“Stop, dammit,” David yelled. He lashed the rope he’d brought around a sturdy river birch and tied the other end to his belt. He edged out along the sandy spit behind the tree as far as he could and reached out. Not far enough.

“Let go, push, and catch my hand.”

The boy swayed there, paralyzed, watching David’s outstretched arm.

The tree creaked, and David felt sweat break out on his brow. His breath came shallowly. If he failed—if he failed—but he couldn’t fail. He steeled himself.

“Son,” said David firmly. “You’re going to have to jump. I’m here to catch you.” He *had* to catch him. He prayed for the strength to catch him.

Dark hair plastered to his head, the kid worked his hands down the limb. The water rushed, hissing. The sun was going down and it was getting colder. David was close enough to smell fearful sweat, and he didn’t know how long Riley Clyde could hang on. Showing off for the girl got him into this.

“Let go,” he called. “Let go!”

He lunged forward and grabbed one of the boy’s hands, prying it from the log. The rope seemed to slip, and David’s heart went to his throat. How did that happen? Then he realized that the knot had tightened, and now he had Riley Clyde’s hand. The other hand shifted to a side branch.

“I’ve got you,” said David. “Let go.”

He knew the kid didn’t want to miss with the girl standing there. David grabbed the boy’s hand, leaned backward, and heaved with all his weight. Both of Riley Clyde’s hands slipped loose and the boy landed in the water, gasping with the cold. David splashed back on his rear as he’d planned and got a firm footing on the

bottom. He pulled Riley Clyde to him, now shivering and shuddering.

They still had to make their way to the bank. David's boots felt like concrete overshoes, but he waded, supporting Riley Clyde, and at last they reached solid earth, where Clover was waiting for them.

She fell on Riley Clyde and hugged him, and together they sank to the ground. Just then the tree let go of the bank in a crackling rush and disappeared over the falls. It landed with a deep, rumbling splash in the pool below.

Thank you, Lord.

"You two need to get out of those wet clothes," said David, feeling his own cold-soaked jeans. "Can I take you anywhere? Let your folks know you're okay?"

The girl looked sheepish. "Our folks don't know we're here."

"I can get back by myself," Riley Clyde said sullenly. "My truck's parked up a little ways."

"Could you please take me home, Uncle David?" Clover said. "Mama Hattie'll kill me if she knew I was . . . was out here."

David saw the situation clearly. Riley Clyde Summers got up, straightened, and extended his hand. "Thanks, Preacher," he said. "I 'preciate you saving my damn fool hide."

David didn't feel like smiling. He wanted to smack the boy upside the head and pound some common sense into him. But where was the compassion he ought to have felt? The understanding? It had vanished the moment he'd been plummeted into the past, as the headstrong young man he used to be. "It's okay," he said.

He needed to get back to Lu and the quietness of his hillside house. Back to the David he was now.

David gathered his fishing gear, and he and Clover walked back to his truck in the half-darkness, reaching it just as night fell, black

velvet all around him. Driving back to Clover's grandmother's house, he remembered what it was like to be boy and girl, wanting to be alone in the woods together, taking foolish chances. It could have been him. It could have been him, once upon a time.

His knuckles whitened on the wheel.



Hattie Holley was standing on the porch when David pulled up in front of their tidy cabin, old but kept as clean and neat as an oiled shotgun.

Clover hesitated.

"Better get it over with," David said, not unkindly. "Want me to come in with you?"

Clover shook her head and slid hesitantly out of the truck.

"Clover Holley, you get in this house right now," David's mother-in-law said. "I was expecting you home two hours ago." She frowned. "Who's that? David?"

Clover ran into the house and Hattie strode up to David's window. "What happened? Edison dropped her off at the soda shop and she said one of her friends would bring her home."

"Hattie, don't be too tough on her. I think she learned a lesson today."

Hattie propped her hands on her hips. "What're you talking about, David Wilder?"

David sighed. "She and Riley Clyde Summers were at Quanasee Falls and he was showing off. Almost went over. If I hadn't been there fishing and heard her call for help, he might have drowned."

"Or broken his fool neck," Hattie said. "I'm going to get Edison to tell that boy to stay away from Clover. Put some fear into him."

“Hattie, that’ll just make it worse. Teenagers love to rebel. It’s part of their journey.”

“Long as they come out of it in one piece,” Hattie huffed. “I’m training her up in the way she should grow.” She paused. “How’s my Tallulah today?”

“About the same,” David said. “She practically shoved me out the door. Told me she’d be okay with Nell there. Guess I’d better get on back.”

“She’s a good woman, Nell is,” Hattie said. “But she sure did pick a doozy this last time, that Taggart.”

David laughed. “I tried to talk her out of marrying him. I wasn’t surprised when she’d had enough.”

Hattie snorted and was just about to say something when Clover burst through the front door. “Uncle David! Miss Nell is on the phone looking for you. Says come quick!”