

LUCKY STRIKES

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Chapter ONE

Mama died hard, you should know that.

Nearly died alone, too. Now, most nights, she'd so much as groan, I'd come running, but this was late March, ten days shy of Easter and spring barely a thought, and a dream come and snatched me. I was the princess of a mountain people, and they come right into my bedchamber and asked if I could tame the dragon that was cleaning its teeth with people's bones, and I said sure. The dragon was living at the bottom of a cavern, half in water, and when it looked up with its yellow-purple eyes, I said, *You got some nerve*. That was all it took! The thing slunk away, its spiky tail dragging after. And the mountain people, they started cheering for me, calling for me by name, and that was the rub 'cause it took me a long time to hear the voice on the other side of theirs. Calling my name, too, only drawing it out as far as it could be drawn.

"Melia . . . Meeelia . . ."

I scrambled out of bed, threw open the curtain. Mama was rolled over on her side, staring at me.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"I'm so sorry."

I set down next to her, ran my hand on her brow. It was cold like a pumpkin.

"Sorry for what?" I said.

"Your daddy," she said.

Her eyes were white and sweaty.

"What about him?" I said.

"He's . . ." Her fingers were bent like talons. "Your daddy, he's . . ."

She never finished, but I set there just in case she did. Then I felt something. I felt the bed settle.

You know how a mattress sinks under you when someone climbs in? Only there was no one else there climbing in. Just us two.

I don't know why, but my hand went straight to her hair. And I could feel, beneath the hair, her whole scalp crackling. I think now maybe that was her soul flying off. I'm nearly sure of it because when I looked at the rest of her—her face, her hands—her bare white legs—her eyes—she was empty.

Gone. That's what they always say about dead folks when they don't want to say *dead*. But that's how it was with Mama. Whatever'd been there a second ago, making her eyelids twitch and her breath hitch . . . well, somehow or other it'd slipped away when I wasn't looking. *Gone.*

I rolled her onto her back. Settled her head on her pillow. Combed her hair one last time. Then I left the room.

Janey and Earle was still asleep when I slipped back into bed. I laid there all night, not an ounce of sleep in me now, trying to figure out how to tell them. At dawn, I shook them awake, same as usual. I said, "Guess what? No school today."

Which, looking back, was about the worst way I could've gone about it. 'Cause they got crazy excited. *Is it a holiday? Is tomorrow a holiday? Are we going to miss school all the way clear to Easter?*

I didn't say anything, but there must have been something in my face because Janey spoke up.

"It's Mama, isn't it?"

She's funny that way. Such an odd, dreamy thing you think she's not even part of the world, only she's more in it than anyone.

Well, Earle's face started to crumple, and then the rest of him crumpled, too. Janey set by the stove, wailing and clawing at her head. I tried to think of all the things a grown-up'd say. *She's with God now. . . . She's gone to a better place. . . . We'll meet her on the other side.* They just sounded sour on my tongue. I couldn't even say "She's at peace," 'cause when I thought back on how she'd looked—in that very, very last moment—there weren't a lick of peace in her.

"You got five more minutes to cry," I said. "Ten minutes to eat your oatmeal. Then we got work to do."

I wrapped Mama in her two bedsheets, and me and Earle carried her to the truck. Considering how thin she was, she weighed quite a bit. We laid her in the flatbed, and Earle and Janey climbed in the front with me, and we drove out to the hill overlooking Jenkins Orchard. This was Mama's favorite spot. Back when she was healthy, we'd come here every Sunday afternoon, rain or shine, with

a basket of chicken and corn bread and dried-apple stack cake, and we'd sit and watch the sun set over Mr. Jenkins's silo.

This time, I drove the truck right up to the edge, so close I could hear Earle suck in his breath. We got out, and we were staring down at a hole. Six feet long, three wide, another three or four deep.

"It's magic," said Earle.

"Ain't nothing magic about it," I said. "I dug it myself."

Next to the hole was a pile of dirt, neat as I could make it. Janey tapped it with her shoe. "Must've taken you a month of Sundays, Melia."

"Took me five."

I never told them, but when Mama took sick, I kept coming out here every week. On account of it was just easier to think. After a time, I started bringing a shovel. If you'd asked me what I was going to do with it, I couldn't have told you. Even when I was digging, I never stopped and thought, *This is where we'll put Mama.*

On that fifth Sunday, I looked down, and sure enough, there was a big old hole and but one thing to do with it.

"Here, Earle. Give me a hand."

The boy give a little shudder, but he tucked his head down and set to work. Together we lifted Mama out of the flatbed and laid her in the ground. I pulled the top sheet off her face, and the three of us, we stood there on the lip of the grave, just looking. I don't know for how long. Ten minutes, an hour. All the time, I was thinking it was a mistake. She was taking a breather. Any second, she'd jump up and swear about ten thousand oaths (Mama was gifted that way) and ask us what the hell we were doing.

But she didn't do none of that. She didn't move a grain.

I knelt down by the hole and reached in until I could touch her forehead. Damn, but it was cold.

"She needs a coffin," said Earle.

"We can't afford one."

"Then we ought to say something."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, something holy."

"Well, don't look at me," I said. "When was the last time you saw me in church?"

"I been to Sunday school," said Janey.

"Then give it your best crack," I said.

She tugged on her collar and cast her eyes off.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down. I will fear no evil. Blessed are the poor. Do unto others as you would have them do. He who is without sin. For thine is the kingdom. Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. The Lord is my shepherd. . . ."

She kept going for a good spell, circling, circling. I didn't care. I was looking down into the valley, past the Jenkinses' silo, past the Hammonds' horse farm, all the way to the mountains at the other side. The dogwoods weren't out yet, but the tulip magnolias were just starting. I could hear bees and mockingbirds. A handsaw pushing through green wood. I could see Mrs. Jenkins carrying eggs in her apron and someone way out in the distance cutting hay. And a Studebaker crawling down the mountain road, with a little puff of smoke following. Stupid me, thinking the world would stop just 'cause of us.

I took one last look, then bent down and pulled the sheet over Mama's face.

"Reckon we better fill it up," I said.

Well, they didn't have the heart for it, so I took up the shovel myself. It was a queer business. I couldn't stop thinking she was *feeling* every little clod and pebble. It got so I'd have to stop every couple of minutes and wait. Listen for some faint little cry. *Wait, stop.* But there was nothing.

Sweat was coming off every part of me. I threw down the shovel and set there at the edge of the grave. From out of the woods came Janey, carrying a mess of wildflowers. Bedstraw and golden ragwort and wild phlox.

"They look nice," I allowed.

Earle come right after. He'd gone and whittled a couple of sticks and tied them into a cross with a strip of bark.

"Most fitting," I said.

We took some time arranging everything. We never did get it perfect. The dirt was loose, so the cross couldn't help but tilt a little, and the wind took a good share of the phlox blossoms.

"Well, now," I said. "Time to say good-bye."

Janey spoke first. Her voice was clenched like a fist. "Bye, Mama."

Earle, he spoke straight to the ground. "Bye."

I didn't say a thing.

Driving back home, I kept glancing at the other two. Janey was quiet and still. Earle's big jaw was working away, like he was chewing on turkey gristle, and his hands made fists and then unmade them.

"What?" I said.

"We done it all wrong, that's what."

"How do you figure?"

"She should've been buried at church."

"She wouldn't have wanted that. You know that."

"There should've been a preacher," he said. "And hymn singing. That's how God likes it."

"God don't care."

"He does, too. He's going to be pissed off. He ain't gonna let Mama in."

"Then the hell with him," I said. "After all he put her through."

Earle didn't answer.

"Listen now," I said. "Whatever we done wrong with the burying, that ain't on Mama's account."

He looked out the window. "What the hell do *you* know?"

By then we were pulling into the station. I saw a Cadillac V-16 two-door coupe parked by the pump. The driver was standing alongside it, his foot on the running board, a cigarette hanging off his lip.

"Closed!" I called out.

He straightened up, tossed his butt on the ground. Give me a dumbass smile.

"Can't you read?" I said. "We're closed."

"So you are," he said, squinting at the sign in the window. "But now you're not."

"We're closed all day."

"Listen, honey, you think you can make an exception? I just need a gallon to get me to Front Royal."

"Mister, we're closed. If you need gas"—Lord, how it pained me

to say it—"you can try Blevins's Standard Oil, eight miles down the road."

"That's out of my way."

"Best I can do."

He looked at me awhile. Then, out of nowhere, give me a wink. "Listen, sweetie, is your daddy around somewhere? Maybe you can run get him for me."

Now, here's the deal. Any other day, I'd have told him how I felt about being called "sweetie" and how, if he wanted me to fetch my dad, he'd have to tell me who my dad was, and if he wanted to talk to my mom, I'd be glad to take him there, only she wasn't talking so much. I had it all lined up inside me, but it got stuck in my throat somehow, and my eyes was stinging so hard all I could do was go into the station house and lock the door after me.

I waited till I heard him drive away, and then I tried to stand up again, but the tiredness pulled me back down. So I set there, on the damn floor. Dozed off for a spell. Next thing I knew, Janey was standing over me.

"You hungry?" I said.

She nodded.

"Earle, too?"

She nodded.

"Okay, then," I said.

The real poser was what to do with Mama's eating chair. Didn't seem right throwing it away, but it looked awful creepy setting idle by the table. So we just kinda turned it around, and we picked at our Ralston wheat cereal (no milk) and Royal gelatin desserts, and

every so often, we'd raise our heads like we was about to say something, only we forgot what it was.

At last Earle pushed his plate away. "Don't seem right," he said. "Eating when she can't."

"She'd *want* you to," I said. "So you can grow into a big strong feller."

"She won't be around to see," said Earle, lowering his chin to the table.

"Melia," said Janey, "you reckon you miss her more than me?"

"Well, it ain't no pie-eating contest. I reckon we can each miss her our own way. You don't quit loving somebody just on account of they're dead."

Janey stared at the back of that chair for a long while. Then she drew her arms round her.

"Melia," she said, "what're we gonna do?"

"Get to bed, that's what."

"Nooo." She always gives you the kindest look when she thinks you're being a dumbass. "Without Mama."

"Carry on. What choice we got?"

"We gonna starve?" Earle asked in a dull, flat voice.

"What're you talking about? You don't think the station is clearing money? You think—what, we fix people's cars and pump their gas for free?" I give them a nod just to show I meant business. "God didn't make no petroleum trees that I know of. Long as folks got automobiles, they're going to need us, ain't they? And in case you were wondering, there's a plan. Me and Mama worked it all out."

"What?" said Earle.

"Well, I'm gonna run the business 'cause it's what I been doing anyways."

"You can fill a radiator faster than anyone this side of the Blue Ridge," said Janey.

"I suspect you're right. Now, Janey here's gonna learn how to cook and sew and garden, and then, when the time's ready, we're going to get her a husband."

"He can't be more than thirty," said Janey. "And he's got to have his teeth."

"Fine. As for Earle, he's going to college."

"What if I don't want to?"

"What if I don't care? I'm telling you it's been planned. You just got to do your part, that's all."

"When we gonna tell folks?" Janey asked.

"It ain't none of their business."

"But we need to tell 'em. They need to know."

I leaned across the table and glared at her. "You think this here town had any use for Mama when she was alive? How's it going to be any different now?"

"But Mama had friends," said Earle. "Minnie-Cora Harper and Mrs. Bean. And what about Mr. Gallagher?"

"He's gonna be *all* broke up," said Janey.

"When the time's right," I said, "we'll tell them all. I got stuff to take care of first."

Janey made a little tower of gelatin cubes on her plate. Then knocked it down, then built it up again.

"I know why you don't want to tell," she said. "'Cause if they find out, they'll split us up."

See what I mean? She's a silly child, but she'll surprise you.

"I never heard such foolishness," I said.

But Earle was looking mighty ashy. "Is that so, Melia?"

"Course not."

"Hannah Smartt," said Janey.

"Who's Hannah Smartt?" said Earle.

"She was in fourth grade, same as me, and she set in the back, and her hair weren't never combed, 'cause she didn't have no ma. Then she lost her pa, and she didn't have no kin left, so Hannah and her two brothers, they got sent to Lynchburg, and what I heard?" Janey lowered her voice. "They didn't even get sent to the same family. They got split up. *Fos. Ter. Care.*"

I could see Earle's lips forming the words.

"Listen, missy," I said. "You think I'd let 'em try such a thing? Anybody with eyes can see I'm the nearest thing to a mama as you brats is likely to get. Who's feeding and dressing you? Putting you to bed every night?"

"That don't count," said Earle. "You're not a grown-up."

"Oh, yeah?"

And to prove my point, I sent them right to bed. Oh, they made me tell them a story about Abdullah the Merman, but when they asked for more, I told them what I always told them.

"Show's over, folks. Come back tomorrow."

I tapped down their eyelids, and I set there until I heard their breathing. Then I walked over to the window.

The moon was fierce that night. I could see the shape of the leaves on the elm tree and the tire swings moving in the breeze.

Go home, why don't you?

That's what Doc Whitworth'd told Mama after he'd sprung the news on her. *Go home, Brenda. Get things squared away. Make your peace.*

Well, whatever she made, it weren't peace.

Fos. Ter. Care.

I closed my eyes and listened to the crickets. Then I felt a tug on my trousers. It was Janey. Skinny as a goddamned muskrat in her newly mended gray shift and half asleep in the moonlight.

"Come to bed," she said.

"I ain't tired," I said. (Though I was, I purely was.)

"You need your sleep," she said. "Ain't no man going to marry you with them nasty ol' coon rings under your eyes."

"Maybe I don't want no man to marry me."

Janey didn't answer right off. But when she was pulling the sheets back over her, she said, "Wanting's got nothing to do with nothing."

Chapter TWO

I woke up when the sun did. Eyes blazing, hair heavy on my head. Janey was breathing into my neck, Earle's knee was gouging my hip. I laid there, waiting for the dark to peel away.

"Let's get this carnival on the road," I said to myself.

I fried up the last of the eggs, and then I rolled the kids out of bed. They each dragged a blanket to the table. Earle just stared at his plate.

"So help me," I said, "you make me throw that out, I'm gonna kill you."

"What'd you pack for lunch?" he asked.

"Apple butter sandwiches." And when he give me that scowl, I said, "Excuse *me*, Daddy Warbucks. Filet mignon'll be here tomorrow. You don't like my lunches, why don't you trade 'em?"

"He already does," said Janey.

It was a hair past seven when I shooed them out of the house.

There was a hard wind coming down the mountain, right in their faces. They stood rocking in it.

"Listen now. Not a word. It's a day like any other."

"Then why aren't you open yet?" Earle asked.

"'Cause I got business in town, and that's the last nosy-ass question you get."

I give them each a light little kick in the butt. It's what I do every morning, and when they were littler, that kick would send him laughing up the hill—halfway to school. Today, they was like a pair of jennies in harness. I watched them just to the point where they disappeared around the bend, and then I called after them.

"Watch out for cars!"

It's a queer town, Walnut Ridge. Some half a century back, the citizens got a little cash in their pockets and a couple stars in their eyes and figured they was going to be the next big deal in Warren County—bigger than Front Royal, even. So they went and built themselves a main street. 'Course they couldn't run it but the two blocks before it reached the nearest cliff, but they was so keen on their prospects they decided to call it *First* Street. As in first of many to come.

Well, fate had other plans for Walnut Ridge, and it turned into one of those places that just straggles along. Most of the townfolk just bled back into the mountains till about ten years ago, when they was coaxed back down with the promise of digging soapstone. Company made a bunch of ugly houses for 'em—raw clapboard with tin roofs, each looking like the next. But the Depression took care of the soapstone company, and today the quarry's closed, and folks are back to straggling.

Carpentry, masonry, Civilian Conservation Corps, whatever'll answer. There's some work to be had building Skyline Drive, and there's talk of a rayon plant in a couple years, but that's talk.

First Street, though, is still there in all its glory. Walkways on both sides. A five-and-ten-cent store. A drugstore. A Primitive Baptist church. There's an empty tobacco warehouse that some rich old lady was trying to turn into a temple for the arts, but that never took, and right there at the end of the street, before it drops off the cliff, is a white farmhouse with green shutters.

It's an old house, built before the War Between the States, and it don't look like it's been painted since. The planters are rotting in the window boxes, and the grass in the front yard is losing ground to the weeds, but it's mostly clean and well tended, and it has the best view of the valley. I used to think if a pot of gold was to drop from the sky (it wouldn't have to be a big pot), maybe this was the house I'd want for myself.

Only I would've had to live there all alone. Wake up that way, go to bed that way. And before I moved in, I'd have had to get rid of the birdbath 'cause if a bird can't find itself some water, it's got no business being a bird. But the part that *really* would've had to go was the tiny slat bench in the front yard under the elm tree.

It wasn't the bench I minded, it was the two white plaster kids sitting on it. From a distance, they looked close enough to the real thing to make you wonder who'd been keeping 'em out of the sun. It was only closer you saw the lie of it, and that was when the heebie-jeebies kicked in. 'Cause it was like some terrible enchantment held them on that bench.

So the stone children, they would've had to go.

To speak true, I hadn't come down yet on the door knocker. It was a little fancy for my tastes, but I liked the way it rested in your hand, and on that particular morning, I made sure to hold it a space before I let it drop.

The door swung open, and there was Mina Gallagher, looking like she was already bracing for me. Thin and pinched, with a mouth always folding in and brown eyes always pushing out. Her fingers ran to the collar of her dress.

"Morning," she said.

"Is Mr. Gallagher there?"

"It's not even eight."

"Yeah, I know."

She give me a good look-over.

"Chester," she said. He didn't answer. "Chester!"

"Yes?"

"Visitor." She looked at me a spell longer. "Won't you come inside?"

Chester was already jogging down the staircase in an old wool bathrobe. I could see patches of electrical tape on the soles of his slippers.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"I was just going to ask Melia if she cared for some coffee."

"No, thank you."

"Well, then," said Mina Gallagher, "I'll leave you to it."

She followed the straightest line to the kitchen.

"This is a surprise," said Chester.

"Reckon so."

He looked down at his hand, found a lit pipe in it. "Do you mind if I . . ."

"Nope."

He took a drag. Jammed his free hand into the pocket of his robe.

"Here you are," he said.

"Yep."

"Like you said you'd be."

After a day's practice, I weren't no better at telling the news. All I could do was stand there like a fool on the cracked parquet tile.

"She's gone," he said.

He sat on the bottommost stair. "Sorry. I should have . . . do you want any—"

"Coffee? Your wife already asked."

"She did, didn't she?"

He stared for a while at his pipe, not really seeing it.

"When did it happen?" he asked.

"Night before last."

"Ah. Okay. So you—I mean, I'm guessing there'll be a funeral."

"Already done. No offense, Chester, it was a private affair. Family only."

"Of course."

I give his knee a little nudge with mine. He slid over on the stair till there was room for the two of us.

"Thank you for telling me," he said.

"Well. You being her lawyer and all."

His mouth turned up at the corners.

"Last time I saw her, she fired me."

"She weren't in her right head."

"Oh, I think she was. It was me who wasn't." He stared at his pipe. "The will. You'll want to see the will."

"Seen it."

"Well, you know how it goes then. The—the service station, that's held in trust with the bank. Me being the trustee. Till such time as you gain your maturity."

"Yep."

"Of course, there are sundry possessions. The pie safe. The ring. There's a—there's a wedding dress, I think."

He took off his glasses. Pressed a thumb against each eye. "Sorry, Melia."

"It's okay. I got a day's start on you."

He put his glasses back on. "The first time I ever saw your mama, she was in these bib overalls. Covered head-to-I-don't-know-what, jamming her face in some carburetor. I wasn't even sure she was a woman till she says 'Scuse me in that—that *voice* of hers. She comes back, oh, twenty-four seconds later, and there wasn't a speck on her. She looked like Venus in her half shell."

"It was a gift," I said.

"And I'm standing there, all at sea, and she says—you know what she says?"

I knew, but I let him go.

"She says, 'You any good at this lawyering business?' And I say, 'Well, if I'm not, we'll find something else.'"

His chuckle come out like a sigh.

"Melia," he said. "I want you to know there wasn't—"

"I know."

"I mean, I'm a married—"

"Chester, I *know*. She knew, too."

"That she did."

"So you're in the clear."

"Is that what I am?"

From the kitchen came the sound of something having its life cleaned out of it. A counter, probably.

"Listen," I said. "I gotta get back. There's one thing I need to ask you."

"Certainly."

"Did you ever ask Mama who was going to look after us? Once she was gone?"

"Did I *ask*? Only about a million times. I said, 'This isn't just you, Brenda, you've got to think about your kids. They're going to need a guardian.' And you know what she said?"

"'Keep your pants on. I'll figure it out.'"

"Exactly."

"Only she didn't."

He looked at me.

"You mustn't think badly of her, Melia. I just think it came on faster than she was expecting. Folks like her—so *alive*—I think it's hard for them to think the living can end."

It was so quiet in that damned house. Nothing to listen to but the ticking of the grandfather clock and the squeak of Mina Gallagher's dishrags.

"I can't lose Janey and Earle," I said.

"You won't."

"Oh? You gonna tell me Virginia law says something different than I think it says? Last I heard, orphaned kids become wards of the state. Did I get that wrong?"

His eyes went sidling off.

"Chester, I can live on the bum if I have to. I can dig ditches, I can lay trestles, but I won't see those kids turned over to some thin-lipped Christians with birch rods. I won't."

"Y'all must have kin," he said weakly.

"Mama's people are all gone."

"Janey and Earle? They've got a father somewhere."

"If you call the Moundsville prison somewhere, then yes, they do."

Through the cloud of pipe smoke, he squinted at me. "What about you, Melia? Someone had to be the father of you, right?"

"You tell me who," I said, "and we'll both know."

Your daddy. He's . . .

Chester tapped the stem of his pipe against his chest. "What if someone were to adopt you? All three of you."

I folded my arms across my chest, give him a hard stare.

"And just who's gonna do that?"

There come another squeak from the kitchen.

"Jesus, Chester. You know folks in this town ain't got the time of day for us. You really see any of 'em fighting over who gets to keep us?"

"Then what do you want me to do, Melia? I mean, I could try to roust up some money."

"You ain't got much more than us, Chester."

"Then what?"

"Don't do nothing, don't say nothing. Not till I got everything worked out."

And when his face started to trouble, I said, "Chester, this is probably the easiest thing anyone'll ask you to do all day."

"You're asking me to help perpetrate a fraud."

"Oh, yeah?"

"I mean, as a friend of the family, it's one thing. As a lawyer—as a bank director—I'm sworn on oath to—"

He stopped. Rocked his face back toward the ceiling. "Jesus, will you listen to me? No wonder she fired me."

"All I need's a few days," I said.

"One condition," he said.

"What?"

"Hire me back."

"Don't be dumb. I can't do no hiring."

"Sure you can. Just repeat after me. *I, Melia Hoyle. Well, go on.*"

"*I, Melia Hoyle . . .*"

"*Hereby name Chester Gallagher . . .*"

"*Hereby name Chester Gallagher . . .*"

"*To be my attorney.*"

"To be my attorney."

"*I will pay him what you would pay a dog.*"

"I will . . ." I couldn't help it, I started laughing. "We can't even pay a dog," I said. "But you're welcome to our scraps."

"Wouldn't have it any other way."

He put out his hand, and we shook on it.

"Well," he said. "Being that I am now bound by attorney-client privilege, I cannot possibly divulge any information without your express consent. So help me God and the state of Virginia."

Just the barest trace of a smile on him, and then it was gone.

"Doesn't seem right," he said. "Girl like you taking on all this."

"I ain't no girl, Chester. Oh, and hey, there's one other thing. I need you to get us a death certificate."

"Out of thin air, you mean."

I shrugged. "It's what I hire you for, ain't it?"

Chapter THREE

It was near eight in the morning by the time I got back to the station. Just in time for the trucks to start piling off Highway 55. Regular as the sun, these fellers. All through the night, they ride the mountains, living on tobacco and coffee and maybe chasing it with a little whiskey. Then they crowd in a few hours past dawn. Eyes sagging, faces mashed in. Legs dragging after. The only dream they got left is to make Pittsburgh or Philly or Baltimore before the light goes. So you give 'em a little coffee, and they flop in one of the Adirondack chairs under the general-store awning, doze for a bit. Then they spring up, good as new.

But even as they tear east, they remember those ten minutes they spent at Brenda's Oasis. All those whiskery men with their big sunburned arms—I couldn't tell 'em apart at first, but then I started remembering things about them. Dutch was the one singed off his eyebrows when his rig caught fire near Altoona. Elmer lost half his

ear in a bar fight in Kansas City. Glenmont had the anaconda tattoo on his neck. Joe Bob was the feller with the moon face who set in his truck and sobbed on the steering wheel. (His wife left him for an encyclopedia salesman from Wheeling.)

Then there was the fearsomest one of all. Six foot four, three hundred pounds. Big ol' white scar down the left side of his face. Arms the size of my body, feet like manhole covers, black hair running from his neck to the tips of his fingers. A mouthful of rotten teeth. He came barreling down the hill one morning—all the way from Oak Ridge without a rest—and, before he even stopped his rig, he leaned out the window and roared (at nobody to speak of), "Fix the goddamn rattle!"

Then he staggered off to grab a coffee and take a piss, and when he came back, I was slamming down the hood.

"The choke in your carburetor is stuck," I said.

"So unstick it."

"I did."

He glared at me. Then he jumped in the cab, turned on the engine, and set there, listening.

"What's your name?"

"Melia."

"Where'd you learn about engines?"

"My mama. She's in the back if you want me to—"

"I don't wanna. You're the one who works on this truck from here on in. Got it?"

As he was pulling away, he leaned out his window one more time and said, "Name's Warner."

Now, I'd never call Warner my angel, but when some trucker's

telling me to run get my daddy, Warner's been known to grab the guy by the nap of his shirt—one hand is all it takes—and hoist him straight to the sky. And when that poor sap is seven feet off the ground, Warner says, in the sweetest voice he's got, "You let this little lady do what she needs to do, all right?"

Mama used to worry I didn't have me enough friends, but I always told her I had the morning shift.

And they were there that morning in late March, when I most needed them. Merle. Trevor. Joe Bob. Oh, they knew Mama hadn't been round for a coon's age, but they never asked me what was going on. They just asked me to fill their tank or check their oil or figure out where that trail of black smoke was coming from.

The hours rolled by, and then it was cold, hard noon. Everyone gone. A good three or four hours before the late-afternoon shift would start pouring in from the east. I used to welcome the peace, but today, Mama was swirling round in my brain. Her duck boots. The little mole just under her lip. That smell of hers, like blackberries.

If you'd have held a gun to my head, I'd have said what I missed most was Mama's laugh. Which was crazy 'cause it was the most embarrassing laugh a mother could have. It was a whole crazy *parade*—snorts, grunts, screeches. It could go on for minutes, and every soul from a mile round would be staring, wondering how a body could make such sounds.

I set behind the counter, chewing on beef jerky, sipping ginger beer, flipping through *Photoplays*. Somewhere toward three in the afternoon, I heard a squeal. A truck was rolling past me—a flatbed, loaded with coal—making that hard right on Totten. Its rear tires

slipped a little on the gravel, the truck give a shudder, the back gate popped open, and a man come rolling out.

He landed hard, in a puff of dust, and started rolling toward me, but me, I was running the other way—chasing that truck down the hill.

"Hey, wait!" I called. "Hey, mister! You left something!"

But the truck kept going. And such was my state of mind that, by the time I give up the chase, I plumb forgot about the feller who'd fallen out. It wasn't till I got back to the station that I found a heap of mud and hair, a cotton shirt, and a pair of torn-up trousers planted squarely in the path to pump number two.

With a growl of frustration, I jogged over to him. Somewhere in the tangle, I found a mouth. I put my ear to it and waited till a little tickle of air straggled out.

Alive. Which didn't make him any less of a pain in my ass. Or any easier to drag. Every pound of his was pulling against every one of mine. I stood up to catch my breath. Just as I was reaching down again, another pair of hands come out of nowhere.

"Jesus," I muttered.

"Just trying to help, Melia."

"I got it."

To speak true, I was glad for the help. But once we'd curled the fella round the pump, I looked up and saw a Dudley I never seen before. Some kinda bullshit aviator's hat on his head. Shiny leather shoes. More leather on his shins. Fancy balloon pants—I don't know what you call 'em—the kind rich people ride horses in. And a jacket, military-like, cut to the waist.

"Holy God," I said.

A creek of red was washing out his cheeks as another voice come bellowing after us.

"Don't he look smart!"

I turned my head real slow. Harley Blevins lay due west of me. Leaning against his butternut Chevrolet Eagle. Tipping his straw boater.

"What you're *looking* at, Miss Melia? Why, that there's the future."

"He looks like the top of a cake."

"You ain't seeing it. Dudley there, he's an aeroplane pilot or Buck Rogers or something. It's how I got all my attendants gussied up."

"They pump gas in that?"

"Sure they do! You know, Melia, public servants like us, we can't just expect to totter out no more in big ol' greasy overalls. Nasty *rag* hangin' out our pockets. Standard Oil wants its employees to take their work serious. Ain't that right, Dudley?"

"Yes, sir."

"Aw, but listen to me. I ain't come to lecture you, girl. I only stopped 'cause my little chariot here is famished. Gimme a buck's worth, will you?"

I swear I could hear Mama whispering in my ear. *Smile, honey. Smile them all the way to hell.*

So I did. And when I cleaned the windshield, I did it extra hard, and the only thing that ruined it was Dudley hanging back a few feet.

"You ain't much of a spy," I muttered.

"I ain't spying."

"Your uncle is."

"Melia!" called Harley Blevins. "Get me a Coke, too, will you?"

I walked back into the store and pulled a bottle from the ice-box, uncapped it, and brought it out. Harley Blevins made a big show of taking out his money, peeling each bill from its neighbor.

"Word to the wise, Melia. Next big wind, that sign of yours gonna come right down."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Funny old thing. Looks like a tombstone."

In fact, it was. Mama got it cheap off a Harpers Ferry stonemason, painted it herself.

"I can order you a new one," said Harley Blevins.

"We'll get by."

"Makes an old feller sad, thinking how many challenges you and your mama got on your horizon. Now, don't mistake me, independent operators has got their place, but here's what I've always said, Melia. When a person's driving down the road for a spell, he wants to see a station looks just like what he left. Makes him feel like he ain't gone so far after all. Like he's still in the same by-God country. Yes, *sir*, you drive down State Fifty-Five, you see *one* brand, *one* sign, *one* uniform every step of the way. Till you get here." His eyes give a little swell. "Say, you got a match, Melia?"

"Sure."

"I been meaning to ask how your mama's doing."

"Still a little poorly."

"That's too bad."

"She'll come round."

"Course she will. Only I gotta tell you, Melia, seeing as

nobody's laid eyes on her since I don't know when, everybody's fearing the worst. *Hoping* the best, of course."

Smile them all to hell.

"She's okay, Mr. Blevins. I'll tell her you asked, though."

"But seeing you struggle like this. Goddamn if it don't make an old feller's heart crack a little."

"We're A-okay, Mr. Blevins."

"Well, you tell your mama anytime she wants to come and talk business with ol' Harley, she just has to say the word, you hear?"

"I'll tell her."

"Say now, Dudley, what do you say we—hang on a minute! I near forgot what I come here to tell you. We're cutting prices again."

This time, I couldn't even smile.

"Times being how they are. So many of our fellow Americans out of work. Nine cents a gallon, that's the least we can do, huh?"

He tipped his hat.

"Now listen, Melia, you gotta promise me you'll take care of that sign. Being an old man, I worry."

He give me one last wave as the Chevrolet Eagle pulled away, but I weren't even seeing him no more. No, sir, I was running the figures. Brenda's Oasis was already running five dollars behind every week, and that was with me pumping the gas and running the store and doing near everything there was to do. We wasn't just in debt to Standard Oil, we was in debt to the egg man and the milkman and the iceman. Most Mondays, there weren't nothing on the dinner table but what was left on the store shelves. If we was to drop our gas price another cent a gallon—and what the hell choice did we have—we'd lose forty more dollars every week.

Which would mean an end to living. And Harley Blevins knew that as well as he knew his own name.

Here's something else you'll learn about me. I don't cry, mostly. Instead, I rolled myself a cigarette, and I went and stood on the edge of the road, watching the cars go by. I took a harder drag, then a harder.

From behind me I heard a moan. I looked back and saw that old bum, curled up against pump number two.

I went to the well. Filled a bucket and carried it over. I had an idea of drenching him in one fast pour, but there was a meanness in me just then, so I did it bit by bit. A squirt in the eye, a squirt in the nose. When I was done pouring, I dropped the pail in his middle. He jerked straight up.

"Sleep well?" I said.

He give his head a mongrel shake. Run his tongue round his lips. Then he dropped his head between his legs and threw up.

Chapter FOUR

He got up real slow, the puke still hanging in strands from his chin.
"Your ride went thataway," I said. "They got a few miles on you by now."

He didn't seem to hear me.

"Look, mister. Either buy something or move along."

"Would you . . ." He paused to slap some life back in his legs.

"Would you have a cigarette by any chance?"

It was deep and dark, his voice, like something calling from the bottom of a well.

"Five cents a pack," I said.

"Ah . . . I know I've . . . got a few coins here. . . ."

He shoved his hands into his dungarees, but there weren't no pockets left, so his hands ended up at his knees.

"Jesus, don't clean out your bank, mister. Here."

I pried the cigarette off my lip and offered it to him.

"Very kind of you," he said.

He took a puff. Watched me roll myself another.

"Delicate fingers," he said.

Well, here we come to the greatest mystery of them all. Why didn't I just send that feller on his way?

In the two years we'd been in Walnut Ridge, I'd seen dozens of hoboes stagger on by, looking for a bite or a nickel or a smoke. Fellas as bad off as this one or worse, and they was gone from my thoughts as soon as I saw the back of 'em. So you'll ask me—one day you'll ask me—what was it about this one?

And I'm not even sure I can tell you. Maybe it was his eyes. They was blue like the veins on the underside of your arm, but one was lazy and dawdled away while you was looking at it, so you didn't know whether to follow that one or stick with the eye that weren't going nowheres. It was almost like two different fellers watching you.

"You don't sound like you're from around these parts," I said.

"My people were from Maryland. Cumberland."

"That's where my mama's people were from."

"That so?" he said, politely.

We smoked in quiet.

"So that where you're coming from?" I asked. "Cumberland?"

He shook his head.

"That where you're bound?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"Where *are* you bound?"

"Oh." He give the cig a twirl between his fingers. "I hear the

Shenandoah Valley's lovely this time of year. Had it in mind to do some apple picking in the fall. Come winter, I'll make for Tennessee or Florida. World's my oyster."

"So you ain't going nowhere."

"I beg to differ."

It so happened I was looking over his shoulder just then. Looking at our sign. Which, if you was to believe Harley Blevins, was ready to come down in the next gale.

"You got a trade, mister?"

He shrugged. "I suppose I can hammer things together well enough. Woodwork. Tinsmithing. Threshing. Tobacco planting. Cotton picking."

"What else you got?"

"Uh, cow and goat milking. Whitewashing. Tutoring. Shoe repair. Trout fishing. Harmonica and recorder. Beginning Latin. Elocution. Deportment. Shakespearean soliloquies. Waltz instruction . . ."

"Wait. Shakespeare."

"Never mind that."

"Like, you read his plays? Out loud?"

"Sure I do."

"From memory?"

"Naturally."

"Why would you go and do that?"

"You raise a good point. I was an actor once." He spread out his arms in their ragged cotton sleeves. "'Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.'"

"That ain't Shakespeare."

"No, ma'am." A crinkle of surprise around his eyes. "It is not."

From down the road came a two-door Chevy roadster, black like a hearse, front fender dangling to one side. I watched it slow down when our station come into view, go through all those little stops and starts that cars do—*the courtship*, Mama used to call it. It kept going.

"An actor," I said. "Like on the stage?"

"For a time."

"Did folks, like, pay to see you?"

"Sometimes. I played Casca to Charles Coburn's Brutus."

"Who's Charles Coburn?"

"It was in Chicago. At the Athenaeum. Would you mind not doing that?"

"What?"

"Staring. I'm not so accustomed to it as I was."

"I was just thinking you're not as old as I thought."

"Thank you."

"I mean, your beard's all gray, but on top, you're mostly black. No more 'n fifty, I'd guess. Fifty-two?"

He didn't answer. I dropped my cig on the ground, mashed it under my boot.

"That acting stuff," I said. "Is it something you can pick up again?"

"Pick up?"

"I mean, if you ain't done it in a while, does it come right back?"

"The old lines, you mean?"

"No. The *doing* of it."

He give me the saddest smile then. Flicked a hunk of ash on the

ground. "Child," he said, "I never stopped doing it. What's your name?"

"Melia."

"It's been a pleasure meeting you, *Meel-ya*. However, you don't appear to be in the business of theatrical booking, so"—he stubbed his butt on the pier—"I'd best be on my way. I do thank you for your kindness."

"You ain't got nowhere to be."

"I have many places to be. I only said no one was expecting me at any of them."

"In my book, that's the same thing. Now listen up, mister."

I fastened my two eyes on his one good one.

"For now, you can stay in the room over the store. We can feed you three squares a day. You don't need to pump gas or nothing, but I wouldn't be put out if you helped around the place. We got a sight of fixing needs to be done."

"I don't understand. Are you—"

"And there'll be no funny business, you hear? None of the handsy stuff you old fellers go for. I won't stand it. And there's one thing I'm real particular about. You can't be drinking."

"I don't recall ever—"

"Don't pull that act, I can smell it on your clothes. Now, I don't know what troubles you got—I got 'em, too—but I can't be dragging you out of ditches in the middle of the night. I can't have Earle doing it, neither."

"Earle? Who the hell is—"

"Now just *stand* there, will you, and let me get a look at you."

He didn't lift a finger when I started tugging on him.

"You can keep the shoes," I said. "The rest of the clothes has got to go."

"Go," he said.

"Well, not right off. We'll have to find you some new ones first. You're an inch or two taller than Chester, but he might have something that'll fit. Till then, we'll just give your duds a good scrub. Janey's a whiz with the washboard."

"Janey . . ."

"You'll need a bath before another day's out. We got a tub out back with soap. And *Jesus Christ*, have we got to shave off that beard! Shouldn't take me but a couple minutes. When I'm done, you won't be an old man no more."

He was standing just where I left him when I come back with the comb.

"Maybe you remember this," I said.

He winced as the teeth dug into his roots. "Goddamn it, girl. . . ."

"Look, I know you just fell off a coal truck, but you don't got to *look* that way. Lord only knows what critters and cooties you got living up here. Well, never mind, that's a little better. Now let's wash you up."

The still eye was calm. "What in heaven's name are you talking about?"

"Janey and Earle gonna be here any minute, that's what I'm talking about."

"What's that got to do with—"

"Oh, hush up, will you? The well's over there. Get going."

I found a clean rag propping up a corner of the cash register.

Every swipe I took at his face, he got a year younger. I'd about scrubbed the dirt from under his fingers when I saw Earle and Janey, tumbling down the hill like a pair of old barrels. Earle had a bruise on his brow, and Janey had some kind of dandelion chain around her neck—weeds was gems to her. Any other day, they'd have dropped their satchels at my feet and started right in with the whole newsreel 'bout Miss Hyde and her willow branch and Johnny Sack smoking ginseng over by the quarry and what a frog looks like after it's been cut open and is it true warts come from the devil. But not today.

"Who's that?" Janey asked.

"He stinks like a polecat," Earle whispered.

I give the boy a smack. "Show some respect now."

"How come?"

"How *come*?"

I reached my hand over and rested it on the man's shoulder.

"This here's our daddy," I said.

Chapter FIVE

You'll know it soon enough. That feeling you get after you send some words into the world and there's no taking 'em back, so they kinda *spin* there in front of you. That's how it was now. Me and Janey and Earle—and that stranger, gray as fieldstone—all just watching the words spin.

Earle's satchel dropped straight off his shoulder.

"That ain't funny, Melia."

"Do I look like I'm funning?"

"Then you gotta be crazy," said Janey. "Our daddy's in jail."

"No, this here's *my* daddy. Which means he belongs to *all* of us."

Earle's eyes got real small. "You never told us you had a daddy."

"Never come up."

"Sure it did."

"Either one of you ask me straight out?"

Earle thought on that.

"Mama always said you was dropped on her front porch one morning. Along with a pint of buttermilk."

"She told me you come right out of her forehead," said Janey. "Like a wart."

"Jesus, she was pulling your leg, that's all. I got a daddy just like you, only he ain't a felon."

"Well, if he's our daddy," said Earle, "what in Sam Hill's he doing here?"

"Why, soon as he heard the bad news, he come a-running, didn't he?"

"And who told him 'bout it?"

"Me, that's who. Wrote him a letter."

Janey got quiet, thinking about that letter and all the distance it must have traveled. But Earle come up to that stranger like he was ready to crawl right up his shirt.

"He don't *look* like you," said Earle.

"Shows what you know."

"If he's kin, he should look like kin."

"That's just 'cause you ain't seen him smile yet."

I hadn't myself.

"Go on, mister," I said. "Go on, Mister Daddy. Give your babies a smile."

His lips shook a little, but they couldn't get a mind to leave each other, so I had to pull them apart myself. And there they stuck.

It wasn't what you'd rightly call a smile. When I tried to fix my own mouth the same way, it felt downright unnatural.

"See?" I said. "Don't we look like blood?"

"I'm pondering," said Earle.

"Neither one of you's much for smiling," allowed Janey.

"Well, there you go. Third degree's over. Now I believe y'all got some chores and homework to do, less you talked Benito Mussolini into doing it for you."

But now it was Janey's turn to dig in.

"If he's our daddy, where's he been all this time?"

"Traveling, that's where."

"How come he never come round to see us?"

"Business, that's how come. Keeps him on the road."

"How come you do all his talking for him?" said Earle. "Some-one run off with his tongue?"

I was all set to hush both of them children but good, only—I can't explain it—the gumption went out of me. All I could do was stare at that poor varmint and wait for something to happen.

And now him and his good eye and his crazy eye and every other part of him had gone someplace where *nobody* could follow. Then, from the deep dark cave of his mouth, a little peep of tongue come crawling out.

"I'll be," whispered Janey.

"Happy?" I said.

"He still don't look glad to see us," said Earle.

"Sakes, he just got here! Traveling day and night, all weathers. Lord *knows* how many buses and whatnot."

"He ever been on a train?" Earle asked.

"Prob'ly a good dozen in the last day, ain't that right, Daddy? And now he's all wrung out, poor thing, so if you don't mind, Mister and Miss Nosybird, I'm gonna take him to his room and get him settled."

"Get him washed," mumbled Earle.

Before I could say a thing, Janey caught him in the ribs. The very next second, she was dragging her big brother toward the house, and I was hauling the stranger into the store. It's on account of we're women, I guess, we didn't need to plan it.

"That's some grip you got," the stranger said.

My fingers had left white marks around his wrist.

"I'll go without a fight," he said.

Sure enough, he followed me past the counter and all the way to the back of the store to where the steps were, and when I started climbing, I could hear his feet, soft behind. His breath, too. I waited on the landing till he caught up. Then I pushed open the door.

Mama used to call the place our guest suite but only when she was putting it over on somebody. Do not be fooled! It was merely a bare room—sixteen by twelve, maybe—with a single sash window that never opened but a crack and a tick mattress full of straw and corn shucks.

As I remember, on that particular day, there was an apple box in the corner. This box was empty except for some bottles of liniment, a Spanish-language dictionary, and the 1912 Spotsylvania County criminal code.

This was the one room that could break Mama's will. Anywhere else, she'd have gone in with a broom and a rag and some vinegar and a burlap sack, and she'd have made it bend. But every time she come up here, she'd take one look and say, "Next week."

The stranger took a few totters around the room—polite-like. Then he bent to read the cross-stitched sampler hanging by the window.

"Cheer up. It might be worse."

He stood up and give his jaw a scratch.

"I'll take their word for it."

He spun in a slow half circle and, before I knew it, started tipping back. The wall caught him, but it was a near thing.

"You want some water, mister?"

"Just need a moment."

I closed the door after me.

"Listen," I said, "I ain't gonna sugar it for you. Room's hotter than damnation in the summer. Colder than an Eskimo's ass in the winter. Tolerable nice in spring, but you can't keep the window open too long or you'll get all fumey from the gas."

He didn't say nothing.

"That bucket over yonder," I said. "You can use it for your business. Saves going to the privy. The other bucket is where you can burn your charcoal. Being as there ain't no fireplace."

His mouth was forming words now, but I couldn't make 'em out.

"Listen now," I said. "This ain't nothing you can't walk away from. Ain't no one here holding you captive."

He walked toward the little rhododendron-root table in the corner. Which was the one thing in that room that seemed made for something better. In a nice house, it would've had a family Bible sitting on it or a couple of old tintypes in a silver frame. Would've been waxed once a week. Here it was all on its lonesome, thick with grease and soot.

"Maybe you can tell me," he said, "what kind of mess I've gotten into."

"It ain't no mess. Least it don't have to be."

He set himself on the mattress. A puff of dust flew up.

"Go on," he said.

"My mama's name was Brenda Hoyle, and she got belly trouble in January, and one thing led to another, and she went *over*."

Weird how it all came flooding back. Mama clawing herself so fierce she'd have blood on her hands. Or laying back in her sheets (wet with piss because we never could get her the bucket in time) and staring the bejesus out of the ceiling.

"Point *is*," I said, "I ain't old enough to be in charge of them two children. Which is the goddamned stupidest thing I ever heard, but that's the state of Virginia for you. So what I'm proposing is—well, it's a *business* arrangement, that's all. Say some folks from the county come out here and they say, *Whoa, now, where be the father to these here children?* Why, all you got to do is step up and say, *That's me. I am the feller in question.* Then these selfsame folks, they go away and leave us alone. It's a romp in the clover when you come right down to it."

"Oh, sure," he said.

"Well, it ain't hard."

"It's against the law."

"Yeah?" I hocked a fleck of tobacco spit onto the floor. "Then I ain't got time for your damned law. 'Cause that *law's* what's going to split the three of us up. So if you're feared of a pack of old spinsters—"

"Could be a hell of a lot more than spinsters. Could be a sheriff."

"If you're so feared, then why don't you just catch the next coal truck heading west?"

He looked down at his fingers. Long spindly things.

"I'm not your father," he said. "I'm not anybody's father."

"That don't matter. You just gotta *be* here when the spinsters come a-knockin'. Like, just pretend I'm, what's his face, Coburn? And we're in this play together, and I got lines, and you got lines, and we fool 'em into thinking it's all true."

"What about your brother and sister? Are we going to fool them, too?"

"They'll think what I tell 'em to think."

Though just then I was recalling the look on Janey's face as she hustled Earle into the house. An *old* look.

"Like I said before, mister. If you got someplace else to be . . ."

He was quiet.

"Hell," I said. "You ain't got a bindle on you. Bet you ain't even got a toothbrush. Less it's in one of them holes you call pockets. Here I am offering you food and a bed and a roof over your head. I call that a square deal."

Quieter still. I could've busted a head on that quiet.

"Well, goddamn it, mister, what's it gonna be? You in or out?"

His eyes went straggling around the room again till they found that little rhododendron table.

"It won't work," he said.

"Well, if it don't, it's on me. And you don't need to bother yourself about the sheriff or nothing. If things go south, I'll tell 'em it was my idea."

"Not sure they'll believe you."

"Sure they will. I got witnesses to my bad character."

He come very near to smiling.

"So we got us a deal?" I said.

"We got us something, all right."

I tossed him a packet of Lucky Strikes as I was walking to the door. And a book of matches.

"We don't got no ashtray," I said. "But you can use the bucket."

"I thank you."

"Listen, mister." I give my forehead a scratch. "Maybe you should tell me what your name is."

"Name?"

"Seeing as I should know it, probably."

"It's Hiram. Hiram Watts."

I let the sound of it settle in my ears.

"Well," I said, "reckon you can hold on to that. I mean, it ain't like you and Mama got hitched or nothing."

"In fact, no."

"Keeping it simple is all."

"Of course."

"So make yourself at home, Hiram Watts. There's food down in the store if you're hungry. If you're just fixing to sleep, that's okey, too."

He ran his fingers round the rim of that root table. Once, twice.

"All right," he whispered.

I closed the door after me.

Now I was all set to go back downstairs, but instead I sat down on the floor and leaned my head against the door. A minute or two later, I heard his voice on the other side.

"Thanks for the smokes."

Even then I stayed. Till I heard his snoring. Which was 'bout as high as his speaking voice was deep.

Hiram, I said to myself. *Hiram Watts*.