Maine

1934



Chapter One

The first person I saved was a dog.

My mother thought he was dead, but he was too young to die, just born, still wet and glossy, beautiful really, but not breathing.

"Take him away," she said, sliding him into my cupped hands.

Her voice was cold. Perhaps that was why it shook a little.

But I knew her better than that.

Maisie, curved around her three living pups as they poked blindly toward her milk, watched me with aching eyes.

I could feel how much she hurt, too.

"What should I do with him?" I asked.

"Bury him far beyond the well." My mother turned to tidy the bedding straw. It was as red as Christmas. We'd all had a hard night. But it had been hardest for the last of the pups. The one in my hands.

I cradled him close against my chest as if I had two hearts but only one of them beating, then carried him away from the woodshed, into the pale spill of morning light. Past the cabin, toward the well and a grave waiting beyond it.

But then I stopped.

Looked back.

And there, on the cabin's broad granite step: a wooden pail brimming with cold water, waiting to be useful.

I didn't know what was about to happen, but a little flicker in my chest flamed at the sight of that water full of green and blue from the tree, the sky overhead. Calm. Simple. It spoke to me with a voice louder than my mother's as she stood at the door of the woodshed, bloody straw bundled in her arms, and said, "Go on then, Ellie."

But I didn't go on then.

The flicker, the flame, the voice all tugged me toward the bucket, where I plunged the baby dog deep into the cold, cold water and held him there until I felt him suddenly lurch and struggle.

"Ellie! What are you doing?" my mother said, dropping the straw and rushing toward me.

But she stopped and stared when I lifted the dripping, squirming pup and pulled him back against my chest.

"He's not dead," I said, smiling. "Not dead at all."

Which made my mother smile, too, for just a moment.

"Then he's yours," she said, turning back for the straw. "See that you keep him that way."

I didn't know if she meant that I should keep him alive or keep him mine, but I intended to do both.

I sat on the step and dried the pup on my shirttail, roughing up his slick pelt, which made him breathe harder—which made me breathe harder, too, a series of sighs, as if we'd both been starved for air.

Then I took him back to Maisie, who lifted her head and watched as I wedged him between the other pups and showed him the teat meant for him.

When Maisie laid her head back down again, she sighed, too.

The pups all looked mostly the same. Dark. Perfect. One of them had a white forepaw. Another was bigger than the rest. Another, some color in his coat. And my boy had some brindle, too, and a white tip to his tail, as if it were a brush he'd dipped in paint. So that set him apart.

But I didn't need a marker.

I was sure that I would know him again in an instant. And I was sure that he would know me.

"I'll have to think of a name for you," I told him as he began to gulp down his new life.

And I did just that all through my morning chores.

While I pulled winter grass from the potato patch, I decided against *Shadow* (though he was dark and it suited him).

I thought of *Possum* (because he hadn't really been dead, not really) as I bundled the grass and set it aside for the cows.

I considered *Boy* (which he was) and *Beauty* (which he also was) as I weeded early spinach come up from autumn seed.

I thought about *Tipper* (for that white tip) as I bundled kindling.

And finally—while I stowed the wood in the bin by the big kitchen stove—chose *Quiet.*

My little brother, Samuel, said, "I like that," as we ate a breakfast of dried blueberries, fire-black potatoes, and milk still udder-warm. "It's a heartbeat name."

My mother said, "A what?"

"A heartbeat name. You know: two parts. *Ba-bum. Ba-bum.*"

And *I* liked *that.*

Esther said, "Quiet's a dumb name." But she was my big sister and thought everything I did was dumb. "He'll wander off somewhere and you'll go yelling 'Quiet!' at the top of your lungs." She shook her head. "Dumb."

But I disagreed, though I did think that Quiet was an odd name. Which was all right with me.

I myself was odd in many ways, and I liked other things that were odd. Questions worth answering. Like the ones that would soon lead me to Star Peak, to a boy who could make a knife sing, to a hag named Cate, and the other *else*s I came to know during that strange time. Some of them good. Some of them bad. All of them tied to the flame that burned more brightly than ever on the day when Quiet was born.



Chapter Two

Quiet's grandmother, a sweet dog named Capricorn, had started her life as I had started mine—in a town where my father was a tailor and my mother a music teacher, before the stock market crash that made almost everyone poor and sent us to live on Echo Mountain.

"But who crashed?" I had asked my father when our own lives began to spin toward disaster.

My father told me that too many people had gambled with their money and then panicked when it looked like they might lose it . . . which, in fact, made them lose even more, and made them poor, and us along with them.

"I don't understand." I remember looking up at him, expecting a better explanation than that. "Did we gamble with our money?"

He shook his head.

"Then why did we lose ours, too?"

"Not ours, right off. But people who have no money don't pay a tailor to make their clothes, and they don't buy new clothes when the ones they have will do."

My father was more than a fine tailor. His clothes fit us like second skins. And the vines and flowers he stitched into his hems and cuffs were more than beautiful. They were like signatures. Like signatures on paintings.

"But Mother is a teacher," I said. "Do you mean that people are too poor now for school?"

He shook his head again. "No, I don't mean that. Quite the contrary. More music right now would do everyone a world of good. But I'm afraid music is one of the first things to go when a school is in trouble. And we're not the only ones leaving. Half the town has gone away, moved in with kin, or just . . . moved. To live on the road, in the rough, looking for work. Which means not so many children in the school anymore. And no need for all the teachers they once had."

No need for my mother.

And so we lost his shop first. And then our house. And then the life we'd always known.

Which was when I understood the other name that people used when they talked about the crash. The Depression, they called it. The Great Depression. Which meant something dreadful and dark.

I didn't need my father to tell me that. It was in my mother's face. My sister's face. Somewhere more distant than that, in my father's eyes, but there all the same.

We took Capricorn with us when we left town, though we didn't know how we'd feed ourselves, let alone a dog.

When we arrived at our little portion of mountain, we tied up

our new cows, piled our belongings under a canvas to save them from the weather, and lived in a crooked tent while we built our cabin.

Poor Capricorn was baffled by our new life in the woods. She had always been happiest under the kitchen table while we ate or at the foot of a bed or in the garden we'd had before the crash. But we had no kitchen anymore, no kitchen table, no garden to give her comfort, so we took her into the tent each night, where she managed to give *us* some comfort instead.

It was Capricorn who growled warnings in the night when a bear came close, sending my father out with a torch to scare it away.

It was Capricorn who trembled and cried so hard when thunder came that we all felt brave in comparison.

And it was Capricorn who brought me the strangest gift I'd ever received: a tiny lamb, carved out of wood, tied with a bit of twine to her collar.

"What's that?" I said when she came through the trees one morning, already skinny, learning to hunt for the first time in her life, much as my father was. But she had a choice between field mice or bean soup, so hunt she did.

I untied the little lamb and held it up to the light.

"Where did you get this?" I looked her in the eye, but she had nothing to say.

I peered into the trees all around me but saw only my father, cutting popple. Esther, gathering firewood. My mother, lugging a pail of water up from the brook, Samuel clinging to her skirt.

No one else.

We had come to know the other four families that settled nearby. They were all good, solid, hard-boiled Mainers who saved bits of string and sucked the marrow from their soup bones. None of them would have dulled their knives with such whimsy.

But Capricorn would not have let just anyone get close enough to tie something to her collar, so I judged that one of those people must have carved this little gift and sent it home with her. Who else?

Perhaps they had hoped that Samuel would find it.

But I knew he would lose it in the mud.

And it felt like it was meant to be mine.

So I stashed it in the toe of a church shoe I was unlikely ever to wear again. And told no one.

If anyone was going to unravel its mystery, I wanted it to be me.



Chapter Three

We spent our first spring on Echo Mountain damp and dirty and tired, as hungry as the animals that crept from their burrows after months of winter fasting.

Building a cabin was our work, our play, our church and school. The other families helped us with the heaviest parts, just as we helped them, but most of it we did ourselves, and so slowly that at times I thought we would never again have a roof over our heads.

Samuel was too small to help much, except by making us laugh and love him, which was plenty. Sometimes that's all a person needs to do: be who they are.

Esther and my mother worked as hard as they could, their soft town hands ruined, their hair a mess, and they cried at night when we lay down to sleep. They seemed to blame the mountain itself for what people had done.

Every shrieking storm reminded them of the day my mother had lost her job: the last goodbyes to the students she'd come to think of as her own children.

Every coyote that howled us awake reminded them of the day my father had closed his shop, his face like a wet stone, everyone too poor now for his beautiful clothes, for the ivy he embroidered through every hem and cuff.

And every long, gray rain that found its way into our sad tent reminded them of how we had lost our house. Sold nearly everything we owned. Took what little was left. And went looking for a way to survive until the world tipped back to well.

But I didn't blame the mountain. It was, after all, what saved us.

For the first few weeks, we lived on a watery soup of beans and salt.

We ate rabbit when my father could kill one, but he was a slow and clumsy hunter in those early days, and the rabbits of Echo Mountain were fast and clever, so we were far more likely to eat turtle when we could.

But neither my mother nor Esther ever took to possum, which was easy to catch but greasy and gamey and tasted like whatever the possum itself had eaten. A hungry possum will eat almost anything. But a hungry person will, too, so possum we ate when possum we had.

It was hard. All of it. Especially for my mother and my sister, who lived in a brew of fear and exhaustion, lonely for the life they'd left behind.

My first spring on the mountain was a kinder season.

Like my father, I loved the woods. From the start, the two of us were happy with our unmapped life. The constant brightness of

the birds. The moon, beautiful in its bruises. The breeze that set the trees shimmering in the sun, fresh and joyful. And the work we did together to build ourselves a home.

For every difficulty, there had been some kind of good work we could do. So we'd done it.

But this bond with my father and the wilderness itself made a rift between me and my mother—and my sister especially—who both seemed to think I had somehow betrayed them by being happy when they were not.

Nothing about life on Echo Mountain was harder for me than that rift: the idea that I should be sorry for being different. And I made up my mind early on that I might miss my mother, miss my sister, and be lonely, but I would not be sorry for what set me apart.

I loved the mountain. And I loved what it kindled in me. And that was that.

But it wasn't easy.

If I needed another reason to love where I was, I got one on a morning in May when the whole world hummed and the air was sweet with the first of the lilac.

I found it in the pocket of my jacket, which I'd hung from a tree branch and forgotten.

My father had made that jacket in his shop before the crash, stitched it with spring flowers, carved the buttons from hardwood, made it with plenty of room for me to grow. And I wore it whenever

I could, through work and weather and mess, while Esther and my mother kept theirs packed in brown paper, safe from harm, and scolded me for every new rip and stain.

When I plucked my jacket from the branch and slipped it back on, I found in the pocket a perfectly carved snowdrop sprouted from a bulb, so fine and delicate that I lifted it to my nose, expecting a whiff of meadow.

This time, I didn't turn to search the woods around me.

This time, I let my eyes look past the carving and into the trees.

And there, just in that thicket there: a face.

Framed by leaves, as if it were part plant itself.

And then gone.

I blinked. Looked harder.

"Hello!" I called, but no one answered.

So I slipped the snowdrop back in my pocket and spent the rest of the day wondering about that face. Those eyes. Watching me.

After that, I looked more closely at the faces of the others on that mountainside, peering at them thoughtfully until more than one said, "Is there something in my teeth?" Or, "My wife has an old pair of glasses that might suit you."

But none of the faces looked like the one I had seen. They were all too old. And none of them had enough . . . loneliness in them. So I went on as before, working hard, learning so much every day that I thought I might pop like corn in a kettle, and watching the woods to see who might be watching me.

When the first room was done, we moved out of the tent and into the cabin.

I remember: It was June and we were no longer cold except at the very darkest part of night.

For me, that was enough.

But my mother and Esther made my father put a bolt on the cabin door, so they could lock us in each night and sleep, finally, in peace. Dry. Safe. A thick wall between them and the wilderness.

By the time our first mountain winter came, we had a snug, safe home with four good rooms—one for us children, one for our parents, one for our kitchen, and one for everything else. A root cellar for what we'd grown the whole summer long. A place where we could start again. The know-how to make our way in this new world. And, for some of us, the blessing of knowing that we were blessed.

But that was before my father's accident changed everything.