

## CHAPTER ONE



Cold marine clouds cast a dark rainshadow over Seattle. I got out of the car and gazed west. Nothing but a frigid, Pacific ocean lay beyond me. I felt as though I were standing at the edge of the world. Had I really decided to do this? One more step, and I wouldn't be able to turn back.

The wind had been blowing so hard earlier in the day that it rained sideways. I'd only been driving for a few months, and was too nervous to drive Dad's car during the storm. I was over two hours late.

"Dad's going to kill me for taking his car!" I slumped against the wet hood, and squeezed my eyes shut. My mind endlessly revved: Why did Mom die? Why did Granddad have a sick heart? Why did Dad move so far away from our home in Savannah? Why was I torn between two people who wanted opposite things?

"Mom," I sighed. "I wish you were here to help." At least the agonizing whispering was over — doctors, shrinks, nurses, neighbors, coaches, teachers, relatives, friends; they all spoke in a hush like I was fragile or something. I had wanted to yell and hit

and break things.

I looked up at the towering nursing home looming behind pale-gray fog, and lifted Mom's good-luck charm from underneath my collar. The jade stone was no bigger than a thumbnail, an oval shape worn smooth with time. I swiped it from her jewelry box the day of her funeral. I didn't like the dainty chain, so I tied the stone onto an old leather boot string. She believed it kept her safe. If only it had.

It wasn't bringing me good luck either, but at least I kept a memory of her close. The thought of Mom made the inside corners of my eyes ache. I pressed hard with my thumbs to ease the pain. A swell surged deep in my gut; I held my breath, and stopped it before it reached the back of my throat. I hated feeling like this all the time!

"Why? Why?" I kicked the front tire hard with my boot heel over and over. I stopped when Hobble whined from inside the car. I opened the door and she scooted across the backseat on her hindquarters and her one front leg.

"It's okay, girl." I rubbed her head and spoke to her in a low soothing tone. She thumped her hind paws, wobbling back and forth like a hungry penguin. I lifted her chin with the palm of my hand. Her soft fur felt warm, and her rich brown eyes seemed mellow with understanding. "I'm going inside to get Granddad; no dogs allowed, you'll have to stay."

Her tail swished, and she cocked her head as if she perfectly understood. I smiled. She always made me feel better.

Once inside the nursing home, my wet soles squished and squeaked on the sterile floor. Every step left puddle prints. I kept the car keys clutched tight in my fist for a fast getaway.

My legs felt wobbly, but I tried to walk smoothly toward the check-in desk. I wasn't sure if it was good or bad that I recognized the woman on duty. She greeted me with a smile. "Well hello there, Tripp. Visiting your grandpa again? He's lucky to have such an attentive grandson. You only have a few minutes, though. Visiting hours are almost over."

I nodded and smiled, but my smile must have looked as odd

as it felt, because she peered closer at me. “Are you all right?”

I shrugged and fumbled for words. “It’s the rain. I don’t like driving in it.”

She chuckled. “You’ll get used to it here. Go on up and tell your grandpa I said hi.”

I nodded and headed for the stairs. I wanted to keep moving, not stand in an elevator, feeling trapped. How were we supposed to get back out of here? They wouldn’t just let Granddad walk out.

Inside the stairwell, the soaked soles of my boots echoed up the steps. I wanted to turn back, but I forced myself to keep going. When I reached Granddad’s floor, I eased the hallway door open and peered both ways down the hall. Not a nurse in sight. I crept to Granddad’s door, careful not to make a single sound. The door was cracked open. I paused, took a deep breath, and looked inside.

Granddad sat in his chair, staring out the window with his back to the door. The room’s fluorescent light reflected his face in the wet windowpane. His hand covered his mouth, like he was holding in words he wanted to say.

I eased inside the room and quietly closed the door. “Made it this far.”

“Tripp!” Granddad twisted around. “You’re later than an Italian train!”

I took three quick steps and paused at Granddad’s bed, clutching the car keys. “It’s been storming like mad. I couldn’t even see past the end of the driveway.” I still couldn’t believe that I actually stole Dad’s car. I sat down on the edge of the mattress next to Granddad’s tote bag, trying to keep my hands steady.

Granddad rose slowly, as if his knees had rusted a little while waiting for me. “Well, you’re here.” He cleared his throat with a rough cough. “Better late than never. We still have time to make it out during the second shift-change.” He grinned; his eyes crinkled. “I knew you would come!”

“Dad’s going to freak out when he sees The Bird’s missing!” The teeth of the car keys chewed into my clasped fist. “He keeps

that car spotless. He even cleans the tough-to-reach spots with a toothbrush!" The Bird was Dad's prize possession — a 1962 black Thunderbird with a pearl-white convertible hardtop.

"Not so loud." Granddad stiffened his neck. He shuffled over to the door and clicked the lock to the right. "That nosey nurse will hear you." He strained to get a better view of the alarm clock on his dresser. "She'll be finishing up with Mrs. Pew's medicine soon and flapping those big feet of hers down the hallway any minute."

"I can't do this." I stood erect, trying to make myself taller than Granddad.

Granddad placed his palms flat on my shoulders and pressed me back down on the mattress. "Sure you can, Tripp."

"I just turned sixteen. I promised Dad I wouldn't drive on the interstate without an adult in the car."

"I just turned eighty-seven, and I promised myself I wouldn't die in this joint! You'll do fine on the interstate. And I'm old enough to qualify as two adults in the car." He rubbed his bristly white beard. "By the way, The Bird's still mine. It's not your dad's. He just acts like it is. It's the only possession I still hold the title on."

I stood up again. "Dad's going to ground me for life. He's never even let me take The Bird out on my own. I don't know what he'll do! He's acting so crazy lately."

Granddad silenced me with a stiff finger and pushed me back down. "There's nobody else to help me. You're the only one — hate to drag you into this, son. I know it's not right, but who else could help?"

Granddad sat down next to me. "Tom has put us in a terrible predicament. I should have never given him power of attorney. I knew it was a big mistake when I signed that paper. I was just so beaten down at the time with your mom's illness and all." He squinted at the clock. "What time is it?"

"Three-thirty sharp."

Granddad nodded. "When we get to Georgia..."

I jumped up. "I can't go to Georgia!" I walked around in a

circle like a trapped animal. "I've got to get Dad's car back before he gets home from work. I've made a terrible mistake. I've got to clean it! I'll never get it clean..."

Granddad stood too, put his hand over my mouth, and pushed me back onto the mattress.

In the hallway, someone cleared a throat. Granddad frowned, cocked his head toward his door. I heard rubber squeak, footsteps walking away.

A sly grin slid across Granddad's face. "She'll be back with my medicine soon." His voice sped up. "The nurses are very busy during shift-change. That's when we'll make a run for it!"

I rolled my neck back and forth, trying to loosen what felt like gravel packed at the top of my spine. I shoved myself off the mattress, too quickly. My head felt foggy, and my stomach quivered. I stepped over to the window, and pressed my palms flat on the cold glass. Tiny streams of rainwater trickled down the windowpane.

Granddad's strong hands squeezed my neck and shoulders. I could see his angled jaw in the glass. I rubbed my chin. The nurse always said I looked just like a younger version of Granddad. Maybe I did? I sure didn't look like Dad.

"You've never let me down," Granddad said. "We've always been together." His raspy voice strained, and his words seemed to just poke past the back of his throat. "When you were born, you came out all blotched up red, wrinkled, and screaming. Tom looked pale as a white fish when he first saw you. He could barely find his feet; much less pick you up. You didn't cry a lick, once I had you. You grabbed onto my shirt and held on for dear life. I laughed and took you right to your mom."

I twisted away from Granddad. A sharp pain pierced my eye sockets and I pressed my thumbs firm in the corners by my nose.

"What's wrong?" Granddad asked. "Don't you want to go back to Georgia?"

"I miss home as much as you do." I took a deep breath and turned to face him. "I miss everything about Savannah."

“What’s holding you back?” Granddad glanced at the clock again.

“For one, Dad’s going to ground me for life for taking The Bird! For two, I’m worried about you. I’m no nurse, I can’t take care of you out there if your heart acts up.”

Granddad shook his head. He pushed his glasses further back on his nose, walked over, and picked up the clock. He held it upside down and shook it as if he could rewind some extra time.

A lump rose in my throat. “I hate feeling like this,” I said. “I wish there was a way I could help you without taking Dad’s car.”

Granddad held the clock to his face. He raised a finger to silence me. “She should be ‘bout twenty paces away. Stay low. If she unlocks the door and peeks in, don’t let her see you in the reflection of the window.”

The sound of footsteps grew louder, ending in a rap, rap, rap on his door. I lay on the floor and scooted underneath the bed.

“Leave it outside.” Granddad cleared his gruff throat. “I’m not decent!”

A loud moan came from next door. It sounded like someone was really in pain. The footsteps hurried away. Granddad leaned his best ear toward the door. He waited a few seconds, nodded his head, and said, “All clear!”

I crawled out, jumped up, and wobbled with weak sea legs. I shifted my feet back and forth and steadied my footing.

Granddad eased the door open, stuck his foot out, and slid a tray inside. The door clicked when it closed. He didn’t bother to pick up a bottle of pills off the tray.

“How come you haven’t finished your owl carving?” I grabbed a chiseled piece of wood from the nightstand. It was about six inches high and as round as the thickest part of a baseball bat. The wings were tucked tight to the body.

Granddad rubbed his palm up his cheek like he was trying to choose from a series of complicated choices. “I want to finish it.” He straightened his back and stood taller. “Have to finish it, but can’t get it done in here. I can’t get my heart into it among

strangers. I need to be on the open road with Hobble and you.” He shook his head and looked at the clock. “Are you with me or not?”

I looked toward the window. Sunrays broke through the clouds outside and streamed into the room. I eased closer to the glass. I heard him step closer, too. I could sense that he was almost touching my back. He said, “I need you, Tripp.”

I stared at my boot tips and lifted Mom’s good-luck charm from under my collar.

“My time’s running out,” Granddad said. “I need to know, are you going to help me or not?”

I twisted around to face him. “I can’t believe we’re really going to do this!”

Granddad’s eyes sparkled. “Did you pack the list of supplies I gave you?”

“Road Atlas, green army blanket, one change of clothes, two flashlights, five pounds of salami, four loaves of white bread, one large jar of yellow mustard, all of your carving tools, and of course, Hobble!”

“You make a fine first mate,” Granddad said. “It’s shift-change on the money!” He opened the nightstand drawer and stuffed the clock inside. Next, he carefully placed his owl carving into his tote bag.

Granddad slowly opened his door and peered outside. “It’s show time,” he said. “You ready?”

I nodded and grabbed his pills off the tray on my way out the door.