

Prologue

Kentucky

The buzzing in her head slowed to a dull hum. Her vision began to clear. A small whimper escaped her bruised mouth. Horror flooded her mind as she stood trembling in the middle of the bedroom floor. She barely noticed the heat from the fireplace scorching the back of her legs through the thin material of her nightgown. Still as a statue with her back to the dying fire, she turned her head to the left and tried to focus her eyes. Pain seared through the right side of her face. Choking fear rose as memory flooded back. Suzanne gasped for breath, desperately trying to see through the darkness. Where was he?

Early morning fog swirled around the small Kentucky cabin, absorbing the ragged moaning from within. Her heart pounded in her chest. She took a small breath and tried to still the trembling overwhelming her. A confused frown wrinkled her forehead when she realized she was holding on to something. She looked down. In horror, she stared at the heavy brass poker clutched in her left hand. A thick dark substance slowly dripped off the curved metal tip. Hot bile rose in her throat. The poker slid from her numb fingers, clanging onto the wooden floor. The noise echoed the dreaded reality of crossing a line she often dreamed of but had never dared to cross. She looked down. Was he really dead?

Her knees buckled, and she crumbled, landing next to the body lying lifeless at her feet. Lifting her hands toward the light of the fire, she saw what her mind could not accept. Blood dripped from her fingers. Dark splotches smeared the front of her torn gown. Why was she bleeding? No, it wasn't her blood.

Stark awareness hammered through her fog of confusion. His blood. It pooled thick under his head, spreading across the old pine floorboards like dark crimson varnish. Yet strangely, seeing the blood brought a sinister sense of relief. An anguished groan

escaped her torn mouth. She touched her swollen lip. How many times before? She'd lost count through the years of abuse.

She looked at his body. So still...finally, so still. He couldn't hurt her ever again.

Her head fell forward. Long blond hair, the color of summer wheat, fell across her breast. The room began to fade as unconsciousness swept her into blessed darkness. Mountain mist whispered around the cabin. Time ticked slowly by on the bedside table.

Opening her eyes, she focused on the clock that faintly illuminated the room—it showed 5:15 a.m. Shadows cast by the dying firelight danced across the cabin walls. She struggled to sit up. Her whole body hurt. Why was she on the floor?

Her hand felt something hard, and she realized it was Caleb's black Bible lying next to her. Something dark and sticky smeared the leather cover. She shivered when she remembered that he'd used the heavy book to beat her. Deep agonizing shame slammed into her soul. Covering her face with her hands, she rocked back and forth, tears streaming down her face. In the darkness of the room, she whispered, "Oh my God, what have I done? What have I done?"

Carrying a flashlight, Suzanne's sister Darcie walked across the clearing beneath the pines. The light cast a muted glow in the early morning fog. Something didn't seem quite right. She shuddered as she walked up the wooden steps of her sister's cabin, crossed the wide porch, and knocked on the door. No one answered.

Waiting a few moments, she breathed in the fresh, cool mountain air and wrapped her shawl tighter around her shoulders. Though it was the last week of May, the mountain remained cold at dawn. She let out a sigh. Checking on her younger sister turned into a weekly, if not daily, routine. The tranquil setting of the small log cabin beneath the tall trees belied the lives lived within.

She glanced around the porch and smiled at the many pots of red geraniums. Her sister loved flowers. A small concession to brighten an otherwise difficult existence, an existence their father signed with the devil—a devil dressed like a preacher.

Darcie looked at her watch. It read 6:30 a.m. Why was the house so dark? She strained to hear some movement from within. Hearing nothing, Darcie slowly pushed open the heavy oak-paneled door and walked inside. Standing quietly in the living room, she wondered where Pastor Caleb might be. She certainly didn't want to run into him uninvited.

"Sis, it's me, Darcie. Where are you?"

An uncomfortable silence greeted her. Usually, at this time of morning, country gospel music softly played on the radio, and the smell of coffee brewing filled the air. Suzanne was a person who followed rituals and habits. She grew up always doing what she was told, never wanting to cause any trouble. But this morning something was definitely off.

Darcie tiptoed across the braided rug in the living room, past Pastor Caleb's study. No light shone underneath the closed door. With a sigh of relief, she walked toward the kitchen. Reaching through the doorway, she flicked on the light. Her sister kept an immaculate house. Not a dirty dish anywhere. In the middle of the small wooden kitchen table sat a bouquet of mountain wildflowers in a blue ceramic bowl. Her heart felt heavy when she saw the bowl, a wedding gift to her sister for a wedding that should never have taken place. A marriage straight out of hell. Darcie gritted her teeth. Many times in the past, she wanted to confront Caleb, but Suzanne feared it would only make things worse.

Suddenly, her ear caught the sound of a muffled cry. It sounded almost like a small child. She felt a knot in the pit of her stomach. Fear gripped her heart. The sound came from the hallway. She walked past the bathroom and then on to the nursery, her shoes making a light patter on the old hardwood floors. Darcie paused at the nursery door and listened. Nothing. She laid a trembling hand on the closed door, remembering the baby that had never come. Again, she heard the crying. It came from further down the hall.

Her feet felt heavy as she continued, and she stopped in front of Suzanne's bedroom door.

She noticed that a strange metallic smell hung in the air. What in the world? She frowned. Slowly turning the knob, Darcie gently pushed open the door. She swept the room with the flashlight. Her hand went to her mouth to stifle a scream. Nothing prepared her for the devastation staring up at her from the bedroom floor.

The sight of her brother-in-law's lifeless body cradled in the arms of her sister quickly turned from one of horror to heartbreak. She didn't need to ask. She knew what went on in this cabin behind closed doors. Darcie stepped into the room and knelt. Gently, she took Caleb's body from Suzanne and laid him on the floor. She turned and gathered Suzanne into her arms, hugging her close. Her sister's small body trembled as her cries filled the room with agonizing pain. Speaking softly, rocking her back and forth, Darcie said, "We'll fix this, sweetheart. We'll fix this. Don't you worry, none. We'll fix this."

Outside the cabin, untethered by the broken lives within, the fog traveled on down the mountain.